

The "High-Recognition, Shallow-Cognition" Paradox: International Communication Competence among Chinese Foreign Language Majors and Implications for Curriculum Reform

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Abstract

With the implementation of China's "telling China's story well" strategy and the emphasis on international communication capacity building articulated at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, foreign language majors in Chinese universities have been positioned as a crucial reserve force for the nation's external publicity and international communication. However, systematic empirical evidence on the actual state of these students' international communication competence (ICC) remains limited. This study employs a mixed-methods design integrating a nationwide questionnaire survey (N = 194), semi-structured interviews (N = 11), and a comparative analysis of undergraduate curricula at nine leading Chinese universities to diagnose current gaps and propose targeted interventions. The findings reveal a distinctive "high-recognition, shallow-cognition" paradox: while students demonstrate remarkably strong value-level endorsement of international communication as a national mission, their substantive grasp of related policy frameworks, theoretical knowledge, and practical methods remains notably underdeveloped. Nearly half of the sampled students had never participated in any international communication practice, with particularly scarce opportunities for lower-grade students. Curriculum analysis further confirms that credits dedicated to international-communication-related courses remain consistently low across institutional types, revealing a structural mismatch between learner demand and institutional supply. Drawing on these findings, this study proposes a five-dimensional reform framework—value leadership, curriculum restructuring, platform construction, faculty upgrading, and evaluation reform—and introduces the International Communication Competence Indicator System (ICCIS), a four-dimension, twelve-indicator, thirty-observation-point instrument for diagnostic assessment and curriculum design.

Keywords

International communication competence; foreign language education; curriculum reform; telling China's story well; mixed-methods research; competence evaluation.

1. Introduction

The rapid reconfiguration of global discourse power and the accelerating pace of cross-cultural communication have placed unprecedented demands on national capacities for international communication. In the Chinese context, the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (2022) explicitly identified "strengthening international communication capacity building and comprehensively enhancing international communication effectiveness" as a strategic priority, and the Opinions on Strengthening and Improving International Communication Work in the New Era (2021) further translated this strategic intent into

concrete institutional commitments (Shi & Sheng, 2020; Zhang & Pang, 2022). Within this policy landscape, foreign language majors in higher education are widely regarded as a foundational reserve force for the nation's long-term international communication capacity. Yet the question of whether, and to what extent, these students are actually being cultivated to meet such strategic demands remains surprisingly under-examined in the empirical literature. Existing scholarship has concentrated on three threads: macro-level policy analysis (Hu & Li, 2019; Jiang, 2021), translation-oriented discussions of "external publicity translation" (Huang, 2004; Zhu, 2018), and pedagogical reflection on cross-cultural elements in foreign language curricula (Sun, 2016; Wen, 2021). What remains noticeably absent is a student-centered empirical portrait of the current state of competence grounded in first-hand data. As a consequence, reforms aimed at the "new liberal arts" and "great foreign languages" paradigms (Cai, 2022; Wu, 2019) often proceed without robust diagnostic evidence on what students actually know and where key bottlenecks lie.

This study seeks to address this gap through a mixed-methods investigation guided by three interrelated research questions:

(1) What is the current state of international communication competence (ICC) among Chinese foreign language majors, in terms of policy awareness, perceived competence dimensions, and practical engagement?

(2) What structural mismatches exist between student-side competence demands and institution-side curricular provision?

(3) Based on the empirical diagnosis, what targeted reform pathways and evaluation tools can be constructed to enhance the cultivation of ICC in foreign language education?

Our main empirical contribution is the identification of what we term the "high-recognition, shallow-cognition paradox"—a systematic gap between students' strong value-level commitment to international communication and their relatively underdeveloped policy, theoretical, and practical competence. Our main theoretical-methodological contribution is the construction of the International Communication Competence Indicator System (ICCIS), a four-dimension, twelve-indicator, thirty-observation-point framework designed to translate abstract notions of ICC into operational diagnostic and instructional tools.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1. From "External Publicity" to "International Communication": Conceptual Evolution

The Chinese notion of waixuan (外宣, literally "external publicity") has evolved substantially over the past four decades. Early conceptualizations framed it narrowly as the translation and dissemination of official information to foreign audiences (Duan, 1988; Shen, 2004). As global communication environments became more multidirectional and digitally mediated, scholars began to reframe waixuan as "international communication" (guoji chuanbo), emphasizing audience-centered persuasion, discursive construction, and strategic narrative management (Huang, 2004; Shi & Sheng, 2020). The most recent conceptual iteration, consolidated under the umbrella phrase "telling China's story well" (jiang hao Zhongguo gushi), treats international communication competence as a composite capacity spanning language, culture, media literacy, and political discernment (Zhang & Pang, 2022; Zhou, 2022).

2.2. Intercultural and Communicative Competence: Established Frameworks

International communication competence shares deep conceptual affinities with several well-established competence frameworks in applied linguistics and intercultural communication. Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence model identifies attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness as the four constitutive dimensions of

competent intercultural interaction. Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence further emphasizes a developmental loop linking personal attributes, knowledge acquisition, skill development, and outcome realization. These frameworks provide foundational scaffolding for conceptualizing ICC, yet they do not directly address the distinctive political and strategic dimensions embedded in China's "telling China's story" framing, where individual communicative competence intersects with collective national narrative responsibility.

2.3. Foreign Language Education Reform in China

Contemporary Chinese foreign language education is undergoing a significant reorientation. The Guidelines for Undergraduate Programs in Foreign Languages and Literature (Ministry of Education, 2020) has foregrounded cross-cultural competence, critical thinking, and research capacities as core graduate attributes. The "new liberal arts" initiative has further encouraged interdisciplinary integration and the cultivation of discursive capacities beyond traditional linguistic proficiency (Cai, 2022; Sun, 2022; Wu, 2019). Nevertheless, empirical evaluations of how these curricular aspirations translate into cultivated student competence remain sparse, and the specific question of ICC development has not been systematically addressed.

2.4. Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

Synthesizing the reviewed literature, this study proposes a four-dimensional conceptual framework for ICC among foreign language majors, comprising linguistic, cultural, media, and political dimensions. The linguistic dimension refers to the capacity to translate, interpret, and construct discourse across languages; the cultural dimension denotes the ability to articulate Chinese cultural content in ways that are intelligible and resonant to foreign audiences; the media dimension captures the competence to operate strategically in multimodal and digital communication ecosystems; and the political dimension addresses sensitivity to policy contexts, ethical boundaries, and narrative responsibility. This four-dimensional framework informs both our empirical diagnosis and the subsequent construction of the ICCIS evaluation instrument.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), integrating three complementary data strands: (a) a large-scale questionnaire survey capturing students' subjective competence perceptions and experiences; (b) semi-structured interviews providing interpretive depth on the mechanisms behind quantitative patterns; and (c) a structured comparative analysis of undergraduate curricula offered by leading Chinese universities, illuminating the institutional-supply dimension of the phenomenon. Triangulation across these three strands allows the study to move beyond one-sided diagnoses based solely on student self-report or institutional documents.

3.2. Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire consisted of nineteen items organized into five thematic blocks: demographic information, conceptualization and self-assessment of ICC, participation in international communication practice, perceived educational needs, and attitudinal endorsement. Likert-type scales (1–5) and multiple-choice items were combined to accommodate different construct types. A pilot test with twenty students informed several item revisions before full deployment. The finalized questionnaire was distributed through online platforms across multiple university networks, yielding 194 valid responses from students enrolled in foreign language programs at language-focused, comprehensive, and science-and-

engineering-oriented universities. Among respondents, 87.6% identified as female and 12.4% as male; the sample was distributed across undergraduate years one through four (87.2% combined) and master's-level students (12.9%). Reliability analyses indicated acceptable internal consistency of the principal attitudinal scales.

3.3. Semi-Structured Interviews

Eleven interviews were conducted with a purposively selected set of informants, comprising eight students across different grade levels and institutional types, two foreign language faculty members, and one industry practitioner working in international media. Interviews lasted between thirty and fifty-two minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed with informant consent. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, which were then cross-validated against questionnaire findings. Four core themes emerged and guided the subsequent interpretive framing: cognitive gap, competence imbalance, practical predicament, and needs mismatch.

3.4. Comparative Curriculum Analysis

A comparative analysis was conducted of the publicly available undergraduate foreign language curricula at nine representative Chinese universities: Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University, and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (language-focused); Peking University, Fudan University, and Wuhan University (comprehensive); and Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Huazhong University of Science and Technology (science-and-engineering-oriented). For each institution, we identified courses whose titles explicitly referenced international communication, cross-cultural communication, external-publicity translation, or Chinese cultural outreach. Credit loads, proportional shares of total program credits, and thematic coverage were tabulated for comparative analysis.

4. Results

4.1. The "High-Recognition, Shallow-Cognition" Paradox

The most striking pattern emerging from the survey is a pronounced divergence between students' value-level commitment to international communication and their substantive policy-level cognition. On the attitudinal items, respondents expressed strong agreement with the propositions that "university students should actively undertake the responsibility of international communication" (mean = 4.27, SD = 0.82) and that "international communication competence is a core competitiveness for foreign language talents in the new era" (mean = 4.17, SD = 0.86). By contrast, on the cognitive items measuring familiarity with specific policy frameworks, the picture is noticeably weaker: self-reported familiarity with the Belt and Road cultural exchange initiative averaged 3.37 (SD = 0.92), while familiarity with international communication capacity building averaged 3.24 (SD = 0.95). Only 13.4% of students indicated that they were "very familiar" with international communication capacity building, while roughly seventy percent of respondents rated their familiarity at the middle of the scale or below. This gap of approximately one standard deviation between recognition and cognition represents a substantial and consistently observed structural tension.

Interview evidence deepens this finding. One first-year student (A1) captured the pattern with striking clarity: "We hear 'telling China's story well' all the time, but exactly what to tell, how to tell it, to whom, and why this way—no one has systematically taught us. It seems to be assumed that we should already know." A faculty interviewee (B1) offered a complementary perspective: "Students endorse the general direction, but when you ask them what the 20th Congress report specifically said about international communication, very few can articulate it. Even we, as teachers, are still digesting these policy messages." These statements illustrate that the

recognition–cognition gap is not a matter of individual motivation but reflects a systemic transmission breakdown between strategic directives and classroom practice.

4.2. Competence Self-Assessment: A Uniformly Felt Need for Enhancement

When asked to evaluate the extent to which various competence dimensions "needed to be strengthened" on a five-point scale (1 = not needed at all, 5 = urgently needed), students produced remarkably uniform responses, with all eight dimensions clustering between 3.97 and 4.10. Table 1 presents the detailed results.

Table 1. Self-Assessed Need for Enhancement across Eight Competence Dimensions (N = 194)

Competence Dimension	Mean	SD
Language transformation and expression	4.10	0.90
International communication theory and practice	4.08	0.91
Cultural knowledge and multidisciplinary integration	4.07	0.90
Empirical investigation and case analysis	4.04	0.96
Innovation and adaptability	4.04	1.03
New media communication and public opinion	4.03	0.96
Intercultural understanding and communication	3.98	0.97
Proactive communication and information sensitivity	3.97	0.96

Two observations warrant emphasis. First, the uniformly high means (all above 3.97) indicate that students feel substantially under-prepared across the full spectrum of competence dimensions. Second, the top three most urgently felt needs—language transformation, international communication theory, and cultural knowledge with multidisciplinary integration—span the linguistic, political, and cultural dimensions of the framework, suggesting that the perceived gap is not confined to any single domain but extends systemically across the competence structure.

4.3. Participation in International Communication Practice

Practical engagement emerged as a particularly acute weakness. Of the 194 respondents, 45.4% reported having never participated in any form of international communication practice. Cross-tabulation by grade level revealed a marked upward trend: the non-participation rate was 53.0% among first-year students but fell to 28.0% among juniors; participation rates climbed from 47.0% in the first year to 72.0% by the third year. A chi-square test on the cross-tabulation approached but did not quite reach conventional significance ($\chi^2 = 8.56$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.073$), indicating a meaningful but not statistically decisive association between grade level and participation. Crucially, even in the final year of undergraduate study, 30.0% of students had not yet engaged in any international communication practice, suggesting that structural under-provision of practical opportunities extends across the entire undergraduate trajectory rather than being confined to early years.

Among students who did participate, the most commonly reported activities were cultural exchange events (38.1%), volunteer work in foreign affairs (32.5%), social media operations (29.9%), and coursework with an international communication component (27.8%). More systemic engagements such as international academic conferences were rarer (19.6%). When asked about difficulties encountered in practice, the most frequently cited challenges were balancing "China's story" with internationally accessible expression (38.7%), navigating misunderstandings arising from cultural differences (35.1%), and the absence of systematic external-publicity training (26.8%). These responses indicate that even when opportunities materialize, students often lack the scaffolding to convert them into competence development.

4.4. Student Needs and Demand Concentration

Students articulated sharply concentrated demands for institutional support. The highest-frequency requests were "more practical opportunities" (71.6%), "additional international exchange programs" (60.8%), "strengthened faculty capacity" (58.2%), and "increased course quantity and quality" (55.2%). With respect to specific new curricular modules, students most strongly endorsed "regional and country-specific discourse analysis" (69.6%), "AI-assisted translation practice" (67.0%), "international communication ethics and regulation" (61.3%), and "non-verbal symbolic communication design" (49.5%). These demand patterns are notable for two reasons. First, they indicate a pronounced practical and technologically-aware orientation among contemporary students, consistent with global trends in communication pedagogy. Second, they align remarkably closely with the direction of national strategy on international communication, suggesting that students' intuitive sense of what is needed is well-calibrated to larger policy aims.

4.5. Curriculum Supply: A Structural Mismatch

The comparative curriculum analysis provides the institutional-supply counterpart to student-side findings. Across the nine sampled institutions, the share of total program credits devoted to international-communication-related coursework is consistently modest. Table 2 summarizes the findings.

Table 2. International-Communication-Related Courses across Nine Chinese Universities

Institution Type	University	Total Credits	IC Courses	IC Credits	Credit Share
Language-focused	Beijing Foreign Studies University	156	2	3	1.92%
Language-focused	Shanghai International Studies University	160	2	4	2.50%
Language-focused	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies	158	2	4	2.53%
Comprehensive	Peking University	139	1	2	1.44%
Comprehensive	Fudan University	150	1	2	1.33%
Comprehensive	Wuhan University	160	1	2	1.25%
STEM-oriented	Tsinghua University	154	1	2	1.30%
STEM-oriented	Shanghai Jiao Tong University	160	1	2	1.25%
STEM-oriented	Huazhong University of Science and Technology	153	1	2	1.31%

Three patterns emerge. First, language-focused institutions (credit shares ranging from 1.92% to 2.53%) consistently offer more international-communication-related coursework than comprehensive (1.25% to 1.44%) or science-and-engineering-oriented (1.25% to 1.31%) institutions. Second, regardless of institutional type, the credit share never exceeds three percent of total program credits, suggesting that international communication remains a peripheral component of foreign language curricula across the sector. Third, the upper bound set by language-focused institutions is itself modest relative to the strength of student demand documented in the survey, implying that even the best-resourced programs are not adequately meeting expressed learner needs.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpreting the "High-Recognition, Shallow-Cognition" Paradox

The paradox warrants careful interpretation. Rather than treating the gap as a transient artefact of curricular lag, we read it as a symptom of a deeper disjunction between value-level socialization and competence-level cultivation. Chinese university students routinely encounter international communication as a rhetorical frame in policy and media discourse, which fosters strong value-level commitment. Yet translating this commitment into structured knowledge—what policies prescribe, how international discourse operates, which methods produce effective cross-cultural communication—requires deliberate curricular design, which our evidence suggests is largely absent.

This interpretation is consistent with ANOVA results showing no statistically significant differences in policy familiarity across grade levels ($F(4,189) = 1.55, p = 0.190$): the cognitive gap is not alleviated by longer exposure to the undergraduate curriculum, indicating that the missing element is not time but structured instructional content. The finding has important implications for reform priorities: addressing the paradox cannot rely solely on awareness campaigns or incremental exhortation, but requires systematic curricular restructuring that builds substantive knowledge and method scaffolding.

5.2. The Low-Grade Practice Gap and Its Implications

The very high non-participation rate among first-year students (53.0%) merits particular attention. While conventional wisdom suggests that professional engagement is appropriate only in later years, the cumulative nature of competence development argues for earlier exposure, particularly for skills—such as intercultural adaptation and discursive strategy—that develop primarily through situated practice. The fact that 30.0% of seniors still report no experience with international communication practice suggests the supply-side gap extends throughout the undergraduate trajectory, requiring reforms that both extend opportunities into earlier years and intensify them in later years.

5.3. Demand-Supply Mismatch and Its Structural Sources

The striking alignment between student demand—regional discourse analysis, AI-assisted translation, international communication ethics—and current strategic priorities is a noteworthy finding: students are not resisting reform but actively seeking it. The bottleneck lies on the supply side. Low credit shares across all institution types indicate that even when demand aligns with policy priorities, institutional responses remain modest. Overcoming this mismatch will require mechanisms beyond individual faculty initiative, including program-level curricular redesign and the development of new course modules targeting emerging competence areas.

6. The International Communication Competence Indicator System (ICCIS)

To translate the diagnostic findings into actionable assessment and instructional design, this study constructs the International Communication Competence Indicator System (ICCIS), a structured instrument with four first-level dimensions, twelve second-level indicators, and thirty third-level observation points. Table 3 presents the overall architecture.

Table 3. International Communication Competence Indicator System (ICCIS)

Dimension (Weight)	Second-Level Indicators	Representative Observation Points
Linguistic (25%)	External-publicity translation; Oral expression; Discourse construction	Translation of political texts; translation of cultural texts; interpreting skills; multimodal expression; narrative organization; rhetorical deployment
Cultural (25%)	Chinese-cultural articulation; Intercultural understanding; Cultural adaptation	Identification and explanation of cultural symbols; cross-cultural expression of Chinese values; understanding of target culture; identification of cultural differences; cultural-conflict mediation; cultural-discount mitigation
Media (25%)	New-media production; International communication patterns; Audience analysis	Short-video and graphic content production; platform-specific communication patterns; overseas social media operations; audience profiling; effectiveness evaluation; communication ethics awareness
Political (25%)	Policy literacy; Position sensitivity; Communication ethics	Comprehension of international communication policy frameworks; recognition of sensitive issues; balance between national position and individual voice; ethical bottom lines; authenticity and responsibility

The ICCIS draws on three theoretical and empirical sources: the intercultural competence frameworks of Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006), the political-strategic dimensions articulated in Chinese international communication policy, and the empirical gaps identified in our diagnostic findings. Each second-level indicator targets a specific weakness documented in the survey and interview evidence. For example, the "discourse construction" indicator within the linguistic dimension responds to students' observed difficulty in balancing China's story with internationally accessible expression, while the "cultural adaptation" indicator operationalizes responses to the cultural-discount challenge.

The equal-weight design reflects the absence of decisive empirical evidence favoring any single dimension and the pedagogical value of signaling balanced development. Institutional adopters may adjust second-level weights to reflect local priorities.

The ICCIS is intended to function in four application contexts: (a) diagnostic assessment to identify gaps in individual learners; (b) reverse-design of curricula to ensure coverage of all four dimensions; (c) longitudinal tracking of student development across the undergraduate trajectory; and (d) a research tool for future studies seeking to quantify ICC development under specified instructional interventions.

7. Implications and Recommendations

Drawing on the diagnostic findings and the ICCIS framework, we propose a five-dimensional reform agenda. First, value leadership: international communication awareness should be embedded in foreign language curricula through narrative modules, case libraries, and policy-learning activities that translate value commitment into structured knowledge. Second,

curriculum restructuring: a "language + culture + communication + technology" integrated architecture is needed, with emerging modules such as regional discourse analysis, AI-assisted translation, and new-media international communication. Third, platform construction: multi-stakeholder partnerships among universities, media organizations, and enterprises can create sustained practical opportunities, with deliberate extension into earlier undergraduate years. Fourth, faculty upgrading: dual-capacity teachers combining academic training with industry experience, supported by overseas residencies, industry-expert co-teaching, and research-teaching integration. Fifth, evaluation reform: the ICCIS provides an instrument for aligning assessment with the integrated competence structure, moving beyond examination-centered evaluation toward portfolio-based, process-oriented, multi-stakeholder assessment.

8. Conclusion

This study offers, to our knowledge, the first systematic empirical diagnosis of international communication competence among Chinese foreign language majors grounded in a three-strand mixed-methods design. Our central finding—the "high-recognition, shallow-cognition paradox"—captures a distinctive structural tension in which strong value commitment coexists with underdeveloped substantive competence. This tension is not a matter of individual motivation but reflects a systemic disjunction between strategic directives and their curricular translation. The accompanying diagnostic findings on low practical participation, uniformly felt competence gaps, and structural demand-supply mismatch further sharpen the diagnosis and point toward concrete reform pathways.

The study's contribution is both empirical and instrumental. Empirically, it offers a data-grounded portrait of a population whose development is critical to national international communication capacity. Instrumentally, the ICCIS provides an operational framework for translating diagnostic insight into curricular design and assessment. Limitations include a sample leaning toward female and first-year respondents, reliance on publicly available program outlines rather than syllabus-level examination, and the need for large-scale psychometric validation of the ICCIS. Future research may pursue cross-regional comparisons, longitudinal trajectory studies, and experimental curricular interventions. In a global environment where the stakes of international communication continue to rise, the cultivation of capable, reflective, and ethically grounded communicators merits sustained empirical attention.

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