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# Intercultural Communicative Competence of Chinese Language Learners in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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## Abstract

This study explores gaps in research on intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) students, particularly in Africa. Focusing on 70 CFL students in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the study used the Intercultural Communicative Competence Scale to examine correlations between ICC and factors such as age, sex, Chinese language proficiency, duration of study, and overseas experience. Findings from correlation and regression analyses show that Chinese language proficiency and study duration are key factors in ICC development, with age also playing a role. However, sex and overseas experience had no significant effects when controlling for other variables. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting factors shaping ICC in African contexts and offers practical insights for improving CFL education.

**Keywords:** Africa; Chinese as a foreign language; Confucius Institute; Democratic Republic of the Congo; intercultural communication; intercultural communicative competence

## 1. Introduction

In the context of multiculturalism, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become the overall orientation of language education in the context of globalisation (Gu 2015; Gong et al. 2022; Gong et al. 2018). Fantini (2006) defines ICC as a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself. Several factors can affect ICC, including sex, age, language proficiency, study duration, and overseas experience (Aldrich 2024; Cui 2016; Fantini 2020; Zhang 2024). Despite global research, ICC studies in African education remain limited (Björk and Webb 2017; Howard et al. 2023; Lwanga-Lumu 2020; Wu and Marek 2018).

China's growing ties with Africa have led to the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) in 41 nations, training over 1.4 million students (Liang and Xu 2018; Gong et al. 2018). Economic collaboration with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) highlights the need for intercultural communication (IC) and Chinese proficiency (Kabemba 2016). The CI at the Diplomatic Academy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, established in August 2018, seeks to foster deeper cultural and linguistic understanding by providing a platform for Chinese language learning and cultural exchange (Wang 2018).

Although some scholars have studied the ICC of teachers and students in the context of CI (Burduşel 2014; Cao 2021; Fernández-Álvarez et al. 2022), research on the development of ICC among Chinese learners in Africa, especially those in the DRC, remains scarce. There are even fewer studies investigating Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in Africa itself; most studies focus on African students studying in China (Xu 2023) or conduct comparative studies between China and Africa (Qi and Lemmer 2014). CFL learners' age, sex, language proficiency, duration of study, and overseas experience influence ICC development. Research by Huang (2023) highlights the role of sex in language learning, suggesting that females tend to perform better owing to their socialisation and learning styles, which align more closely with traditional teaching methods. Chen and Zhang (2024) emphasise the influence of age, noting that compensatory strategies differ across age groups, with younger learners often displaying more adaptive learning strategies, while older learners rely more on compensatory techniques. Li et al. (2021) further argue that higher language proficiency correlates with the use of more sophisticated learning strategies, which in turn enhances ICC development. Additionally, Ullah et al. (2024) found that overseas experience increases students' confidence and willingness to communicate, as international exposure fosters authentic intercultural interactions that are crucial for developing ICC. Nevertheless, limited research exists on how these factors influence CFL teaching and learning within the African context, highlighting a significant gap in the literature.

Therefore, this study employed the Intercultural Communicative Competence Scale (ICCS) to examine the ICC of 70 CFL students in the DRC. The article begins by providing a concise overview of ICC and CFL within the African context. It then details

the materials and methods used, including the instrumentation, participants, data collection procedures, and analysis techniques. The findings and discussion section then explores how key factors such as language proficiency, duration of study, overseas experience, sex, and age can influence the development of ICC. The article concludes with a brief summary of the key findings.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence in Africa

The literature on ICC has expanded significantly over the past two decades, particularly in foreign language education. Foreign language curricula now emphasise cultivating ICC in the target language (Byram and Parmenter 2012; Sercu 2006). Several studies have identified factors influencing ICC, including sex, age (Aldrich 2024; Kobach and Weaver 2012; Wagner and Byram 2017; Zhang 2024), language proficiency (Byram 1997; Deardorff 2006), overseas experience (Heinzmann et al. 2015) and the duration of study (Kim 2001).

Despite extensive research on ICC, gaps remain in its application in the African context. Some studies on ICC in Africa focus on the region as part of a sample, rather than the primary focus. For example, Howard et al. (2023) showed that international virtual teamwork improved transversal skills and ICC among students from the United States, South Africa, and Russia. Wu and Marek (2018) found that culture-focused online learning communities, supported by technology, helped students from Taiwan and South Africa develop ICC. Some studies have also explored ICC in non-educational contexts. Abugre (2017) emphasised that ICC is crucial for the successful adaptation and job performance of Western expatriates in sub-Saharan Africa. Samou (2022) conducted a study in Sierra Leone which highlighted the benefits of ICC for local staff and the need for further improvement. Both mission members and local staff rated the team's ICC as average based on the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale and surveys. However, in the research on ICC in the context of African education, almost no scholars have touched on the factors influencing ICC. Björk et al. (2017) introduced the “Reel Life” approach, in which film clips are used to stimulate intercultural conversations. This method enables teachers from different cultural backgrounds to share knowledge and enhance their ICC. Abraham and von Brömssen (2018) highlighted that short-term field studies significantly impact student teachers' perceptions and conditions in culturally different settings like South Africa, enhancing their intercultural learning and professional development. From a socio-cognitive perspective, Lwanga-Lumu (2020) argued that in South Africa, understanding the affective and sociolinguistic elements and ecological and ideological factors grounded in the Ubuntu philosophy is crucial for ICC and learning.

While these studies provide valuable insights into ICC in African educational contexts, they often focus on pedagogical methods or broader intercultural interactions rather than systematically examining the factors shaping ICC. Existing research tends to

incorporate Africa as part of a comparative framework rather than centring on the region's unique socio-cultural and linguistic dynamics. Consequently, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific influences on ICC among students in Africa, particularly in relation to their language learning experiences, exposure to intercultural training, and contextual challenges. Addressing these gaps will contribute to a more nuanced and region-specific perspective on ICC development.

## **2.2 Chinese as a Foreign Language Teaching in Africa**

China's global rise has accelerated the expansion of CFL. Over 60 nations now offer Chinese language instruction, and 170 countries have Chinese language majors, with an estimated 100 million speakers globally (Liu 2017). In Africa, China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative and the China-Africa Cooperation Forum have fostered stronger ties, establishing CIs in 41 African countries, training over 1.4 million students (Liang and Xu 2018).

The teaching of CFL has gained growing significance globally (Ma et al. 2017). Despite extensive literature on Western and Asian learners, research on CFL for African students remains scarce (Xu 2022). Research on CFL in Africa is limited, with most studies focusing on African students in China (Qi and Lemmer 2014; Xu 2023). For instance, Xu (2023) investigated how African students' motivation and linguistic beliefs to learn Chinese are influenced by the political and economic connection between Africa and China. In their investigation of the idea of linguistic capital among 15 self-funded African students from six nations, Xu et al. (2022) underlined the importance of studying South-South migration and revealed their attempts to acquire Chinese linguistic capital in order to improve their employability and social standing. Additionally, Xu et al. (2023) analysed how 59 young Africans engaged in Chinese language practices both in and out of the classroom, highlighting their language entrepreneurship and agency in achieving desired language outcomes. There are also comparative studies in China and Africa. For example, Qi and Lemmer (2014) examined the experiences of full-time CFL students in China and South Africa, and found that despite different sociolinguistic environments, students shared similar affective experiences and academic challenges.

ICC has increasingly become a central goal in foreign language education, reflecting its crucial role in enhancing effective communication across cultures. Bi (1998) argues that cultivating ICC should be a primary aim of second language teaching, emphasising that language learning extends beyond proficiency to include ICC. Liu (2005) supports the notion that ICC should guide CFL teaching practices. Although the importance of ICC within the theoretical framework of teaching CFL is widely acknowledged (Bi 1998; Liu 2005; Zu 2015), there is a notable lack of research addressing this topic in the African context.

ICC is influenced by several critical variables, for example, sex, as studies have shown that female students tend to display higher intercultural empathy and cultural sensitivity

than males, even in diverse national contexts. Research by Solhaug and Kristensen (2019) demonstrates that female students in Norway and Denmark exhibited substantially higher levels of intercultural empathy and awareness than their male counterparts. Similarly, Zhang (2024) found that Chinese female students reported higher scores in positive cultural orientation, an essential component of ICC, particularly when intercultural experiences were limited. Language proficiency is another critical variable, as highlighted by Fantini (2009) and supported by Sarwar and Wahad (2016), linking English proficiency and ICC among international postgraduate students in Malaysia. Language proficiency serves as a fundamental tool for interaction, facilitating both the expression and understanding of cultural nuances (Hismanoglu 2011). Furthermore, Lysiuchenko et al. (2021) established a direct correlation between language proficiency and ICC, indicating that greater proficiency enables deeper cultural and sociolinguistic engagement. Similarly, overseas experience has been consistently linked to improved ICC. Studies such as those by Hismanoglu (2011), Huang (2021), and Jackson (2011) demonstrate that overseas experiences markedly improved ICC levels. Saricoban and Oz (2014) reported strong correlations between studying abroad and increased ICC among pre-service English teachers in Turkey. The duration of language study also correlates with ICC, as extended engagement allows learners to deepen their cultural understanding and linguistic competence. Guo (2015) demonstrated that study duration is pivotal for developing both language acquisition and ICC. This finding is supported by multiple studies (Hismanoglu 2011; Jung 2002; Williams 2005) which indicate that extended study periods correlate with higher ICC. Lastly, age influences ICC, with older learners often benefiting from accumulated life experiences, critical thinking, and maturity, which enhance their capacity to navigate complex intercultural dynamics (Aldrich 2024; Wagner et al. 2017).

While these factors are widely studied globally, their application in African educational settings, especially among CFL learners, remains under-researched. Existing research on ICC in Africa is limited and often focuses on the region as part of a comparative sample (Howard et al. 2023; Wu and Marek 2018) or non-educational purposes, such as expatriate adaptation (Abugre 2017; Samou 2022). Similarly, research on CFL education in Africa predominantly focuses on African students studying in China, resulting in a significant gap in understanding the experiences of CFL learners within the African context (Xu et al. 2022, 2023). Despite the growing importance of ICC in foreign language education, only a few studies have systematically explored the factors influencing ICC among African learners, particularly in regions like the DRC.

Given these gaps, this study investigated key factors influencing ICC development among CFL learners in the DRC. This research sought to contribute to a deeper understanding of how sex, language proficiency, overseas experience, duration of study, and age shape ICC in African educational settings. By addressing these variables, this study will advance the theoretical and practical application of ICC in an under-researched region.

This study proposes the following hypotheses aimed at examining key factors that may influence ICC among CFL students in the DRC:

H1: CFL female students in the DRC have higher ICC than males.

H2: CFL students in the DRC with high Chinese proficiency have higher ICC than those with low Chinese proficiency.

H3: CFL students in the DRC with overseas experience have higher ICC than those without overseas experience.

H4: CFL students in the DRC who have studied Chinese for a long duration have higher ICC than those who have studied Chinese for a short duration.

H5: Older CFL students in the DRC have higher ICC than younger students.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1 Instrumentation

This study employed a quantitative research methodology. The ICC of CFL students in the DRC was measured by means of a survey. The quantitative research method was chosen because it provides objective, reliable, and comparable data (Creswell 2017), which are essential for determining the relationships between key factors. The survey was administered in French as it is the official language of the DRC. The French version of the survey was translated from the original English version by two bilingual translators using the back-translation method and was verified by an authoritative translator to ensure the accuracy of the translation (Brislin 1970). The survey consisted of two parts, one covering students' personal information, such as age, sex, nationality, Chinese proficiency, study duration, and overseas experience. It is noteworthy that in this study, Chinese language proficiency refers to the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), "an international standardised test of Chinese language proficiency, assesses non-native Chinese speakers' abilities in using the Chinese language in their daily, academic and professional lives" (Chinese Testing International 2024). HSK has six levels, with students' test scores used to assess their proficiency. Overseas experience refers to the time spent traveling, living, working, or studying in a country different from one's home country (Earley and Ang 2004).

This study adopted the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC) (IMICC) developed by Arasaratnam et al. (2010) to evaluate ICC. This model was selected for addressing cultural bias and offering intercultural universality, making it suitable for assessing ICC among CFL students in the DRC. The IMICC framework identifies five key elements—motivation, empathy, global attitudes, interactive engagement, and experience/training—covering the cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of ICC (Arasaratnam 2006). Unlike traditional neutral-objective

approaches, this model offers a multicultural perspective aligned with the study's objectives. The study utilised the Intercultural Communicative Competence Scale (ICCS), developed by Arasaratnam (2009), a validated instrument quantifying the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of ICC. The ICCS provides a standardised framework for quantifying ICC, ensuring statistically robust results. The ICCS consists of 10 items—three for the cognitive dimension (Q1–3), four for the affective dimension (Q4–7), and three for the behavioural dimension (Q8–10). Sample items include statements like “I often find it difficult to differentiate between similar cultures (e.g., Asians, Europeans, Africans)” and “I feel that people from other cultures have many valuable things to teach me.” Responses are rated on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (strong disagreement) to 7 (strong agreement). The original ICCS had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.77, indicating good internal consistency (Arasaratnam 2009). In this study, Cronbach's alpha for the instrument was 0.95, demonstrating excellent reliability.

The study assessed ICC across cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions, aligning with the IMICC framework's comprehensive approach. Table 1 displays the outcomes of the reliability analysis for every dimension.

**Table 1:** Cronbach's reliability analysis

Scale	N of items	N of sample	Cronbach's alpha coefficient
ICC	10	65	0.951
Cognitive Dimension	3	65	0.891
Emotional Dimension	4	65	0.803
Behavioural Dimension	3	65	0.888

The sample size of all three dimensions was 65. The cognitive dimension scale has three items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.891), the affective scale has four items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.803), and the behavioural scale has three items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.888). With all values exceeding 0.8, these scales demonstrate internal consistency and dependability across the behavioural, affective, and cognitive dimensions (Taber 2017). The internal consistency of these scales is confirmed by Cronbach's alpha values, validating their use in assessing ICC. The ICCS with 10 items and a sample size of 65, has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.951, confirming its high internal consistency and reliability in measuring ICC.

Validity was verified using Bartlett's test and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test (Table 2). The table shows the KMO value of 0.869, exceeding 0.8. The study data were ideal for information extraction.



**Table 2:** KMO and Bartlett's test

KMO value		0.869
	Approximate chi-square	1330.159
Bartlett's test of sphericity	<i>df</i>	45
	<i>p</i> value	0.000

### 3.2 Participants

This study was conducted at the CI at the Diplomatic Academy of the DRC, the country's first and only institute. The institute was chosen for its pivotal role in promoting cultural exchanges between China and the DRC and as a primary platform for Congolese learners of Chinese (Wang 2018). To address ethical concerns related to the authors' affiliations, measures were implemented to ensure impartiality and research integrity. The authors' role was limited to co-ordination, with no influence over participants, minimising power dynamics. Participation was voluntary, with assurances that it would not affect academic standing or institutional relationships. Informed consent documents provided clear information about the study's purpose, emphasised voluntariness, and guaranteed the right to withdraw. To protect participants, data collection was anonymous, and ethical approval ensured adherence to research guidelines, mitigating conflicts of interest. The 70 students enrolled in the CI were invited to participate in the survey. All the respondents were of Congolese nationality. Table 3 summarises the profile of the participants. Table 4 describes the means and variances.

**Table 3:** Participants' basic characteristics (N = 65)

Characteristic	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Female	23	35.38
	Male	42	64.62
Age	≤ 20	27	41.54
	20–29	26	40.00
	30–39	9	13.85
	≥ 40	3	4.62
Chinese language proficiency	1	24	36.92
	2	28	43.08
	3	5	7.69
	4	8	12.31
Duration of learning Chinese (months)	≤ 3	6	9.23
	3–6	20	30.77
	6–9	21	32.31

Characteristic	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Overseas experience	9–12	4	6.15
	≥ 12	14	21.54
	Yes	22	33.85
	No	43	66.15

**Table 4:** Mean and standardised values of age, duration of learning Chinese, and Chinese language proficiency

Name	Sample size	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Median
Age	65	14	56	24.292	8.932	22.000
Duration of learning Chinese (months)	65	1	30	8.415	7.508	6.000
Chinese language proficiency (HSK)	65	1	4	2.308	1.103	3.000

The participants ranged in age from 14 to 54 years ( $M = 24$ ) and had studied Chinese for between 1 and 30 months ( $M = 8$ ). Chinese proficiency, assessed via the HSK test, ranged from levels 1 to 4 ( $M = 2$ ).

### 3.3 Data Collection

The survey, administered in December 2023 in Kinshasa, was paper-based. The researchers explained the study's purpose and obtained informed consent. Students voluntarily completed the survey within a 20-minute timeframe. Of the 70 distributed questionnaires, 65 were deemed valid, yielding a return rate of 92.85%. Five questionnaires were excluded: three because of incomplete responses, one because the respondent did not meet the age eligibility criteria, and another because the respondent was not of Congolese nationality.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS 27. Items were re-scored for reversed pairs, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.951 (Table 1) and a KMO value of 0.869 (Table 2), indicating strong reliability and validity. Gender differences in ICC and its dimensions were assessed using t-tests. Pearson's correlation was used to analyse relationships between ICC dimensions and individual factors (age, Chinese language proficiency, duration of learning Chinese, and overseas experience). For the purposes of the linear regression analysis, the dependent variable was ICC, the independent factors were Chinese language proficiency, duration of learning Chinese, and overseas experience, and the control variables were sex and age.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the statistical results testing the research hypotheses and discusses them in relation to existing literature. Pearson's correlation, t-tests, and linear regression models were used to analyse how sex, age, Chinese proficiency, study duration, and overseas experience affected ICC among the participants, who were CFL students in the DRC. The discussion integrates the study's findings with relevant research to provide a nuanced understanding of how various factors contributed to or hindered the development of ICC among the participants. Each hypothesis is addressed in subsequent subsections, comparing results with existing studies and offering practical insights for enhancing ICC in CFL contexts.

### 4.1 Sex and CFL Students' ICC in the DRC

To test the hypothesis (H1) that female CFL students in the DRC have higher ICC than males, both an independent sample t-test (Table 5) and a regression analysis (Table 7) were conducted. The t-tests showed statistically significant sex differences in ICC, with female students ( $M = 53.05$ ,  $SD = 12.37$ ) scoring higher than males ( $M = 39.63$ ,  $SD = 15.98$ ),  $t(63) = -3.785$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , across behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Females scored higher in the emotional dimension ( $M = 5.12$ ,  $SD = 1.21$  vs.  $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ,  $t = -4.071$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , suggesting that females have stronger emotional resilience and empathy in intercultural interactions. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that females tend to exhibit greater empathy and emotional awareness, which are closely associated with ICC (Kobach and Weaver 2012; Solhaug and Kristensen 2019; Zhang 2024).

However, the regression analysis controlling for age, Chinese language proficiency, duration of Chinese learning, and overseas experience found sex statistically insignificant ( $B = 0.665$ ,  $p = 0.365$ ). These results suggest that while sex differences are evident in bivariate analyses, other factors, such as duration of study and proficiency, may have a stronger influence on ICC in a multivariate context. Other factors appear to have a stronger influence on ICC, which may overshadow the role of sex in a more complex multivariate analysis (Tajeddin et al. 2022). Saricoban and Oz (2014) similarly found no statistically significant sex differences among L2 learners.

In conclusion, H1 holds when no other factors are considered. These findings suggest that sex may play a secondary role in ICC development when broader factors are considered. Future research should investigate sex differences in ICC using larger samples and mixed methods to explore how cultural and societal norms mediate these dynamics (Saricoban and Oz 2014).

**Table 5:** Independent t-test results

	Sex M (SD)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Male ( <i>n</i> = 24)	Female ( <i>n</i> = 41)		
Intercultural communicative competence	39.63 (15.98)	53.05 (12.37)	-3.785	0.000**
Behavioural dimension	4.75 (1.58)	5.94 (1.18)	-3.206	0.003**
Emotional dimension	3.65 (1.70)	5.12 (1.21)	-4.071	0.000**
Cognitive dimension	3.60 (1.57)	4.91 (1.45)	-3.414	0.001**

\*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$

#### 4.2 Chinese Language Proficiency and CFL Students' ICC in the DRC

H2 proposed that students with higher Chinese language proficiency would exhibit greater ICC. Pearson's correlation (Table 6) and regression analysis (Table 7) were used to test this hypothesis. Pearson's correlation was used to measure the strength and direction of the relationship between Chinese language proficiency and ICC, while linear regression assessed the predictive power, controlling for other variables. Pearson's correlation showed a statistically significant positive correlation between Chinese language proficiency and ICC ( $r = 0.508, p = 0.001$ ). This suggests that students with higher levels of Chinese language proficiency generally exhibit better ICC. Moreover, Chinese language proficiency correlated positively with the behavioural ( $r = 0.425$ ), emotional ( $r = 0.458$ ), and cognitive dimensions ( $r = 0.614$ , all  $p = 0.001$ ). These results suggest that language proficiency contributes comprehensively to ICC development, impacting students' behaviours, emotions, and cognitive understanding in intercultural contexts. Regression analysis confirmed language proficiency as a strong ICC predictor ( $B = 1.922, p = 0.001$ ). This is a statistically significant predictor ( $p < 0.01$ ). Higher Chinese language proficiency significantly increases ICC ( $B = 1.922$ ). After controlling for other variables, Chinese language proficiency remained a strong positive predictor of ICC.

These results strongly support H2, suggesting that higher Chinese language proficiency leads to greater ICC. These findings are consistent with existing literature, emphasising the role of language proficiency in enhancing an individual's ability to navigate intercultural interactions (Byram 1997; Fantini 2009). The strong positive correlations across all three dimensions of ICC (behavioural, emotional, and cognitive) indicate that language proficiency plays a comprehensive role in ICC. Language proficiency not only provides learners with the linguistic tools needed for communication but also enables them to develop a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances embedded in the target language (Sarwari and Wahab 2016).

Given the significant impact of Chinese language proficiency on ICC, language educators should prioritise the development of comprehensive language programmes that integrate intercultural training to enhance students' ICC. Such programmes can provide students with both the language skills and cultural understanding needed for effective communication in diverse settings (López-Rocha 2016). By embedding intercultural training into language curricula, educators can create a more holistic approach to fostering ICC, ensuring that students not only learn the language but also develop the cultural competencies required to thrive in intercultural environments.

### **4.3 Overseas Experience and CFL Students' ICC in the DRC**

H3 posited that CFL students in the DRC with overseas experience have higher ICC than those without such experience. Pearson's correlation (Table 6) and regression analysis (Table 7) were used to test this hypothesis. Correlation analysis showed overseas experience positively correlates with ICC ( $r = 0.475$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). The effect size was smaller than Chinese language proficiency and duration of study. In contrast, the regression analysis, controlling for other factors, found overseas experience did not identify overseas experience as a significant predictor of ICC ( $B = -0.072$ ,  $p = 0.770$ ). This result indicates that overseas experience alone does not explain ICC variations when other factors are controlled for.

These findings partially support H3. While the correlation analysis highlights a relationship between overseas experience and ICC, the lack of statistical significance in the regression model underscores that this relationship is not straightforward and may depend on other contributing factors. This nuanced finding aligns with existing literature. For instance, Kim (2001) emphasises the importance of cultural immersion for developing ICC, while Deardorff (2006) argue that the quality and depth of the overseas experience, rather than the experience itself, are critical. Fantini (2009) further highlights that factors such as the nature of intercultural interactions and the degree of cultural engagement significantly influence the development of ICC.

The findings suggest that simply providing students with overseas experiences may not be sufficient to develop their ICC. Instead, it is essential to ensure that these experiences are structured and meaningful, allowing for deep engagement with the host culture (Heinzmann et al. 2015). This could involve facilitating interactions with local communities, encouraging reflective practices, and integrating intercultural training into the learning process (Jaiswal et al. 2024). By doing so, educators can better prepare students to navigate the complexities of ICC effectively. In conclusion, while the analysis reveals that overseas experience correlates with higher ICC, it is not a standalone predictor when other variables are controlled for. This finding highlights the importance of considering the interplay of multiple factors, such as language proficiency and study duration, in designing programmes aimed at developing ICC. Future research should explore how the quality and type of overseas experiences contribute to ICC, offering a more comprehensive understanding of effective strategies for intercultural education.

#### 4.4 Learning Duration and CFL Students' ICC in the DRC

H4 proposed that students who have studied Chinese for a longer duration would have higher ICC than those who have studied for a short duration. To test this, Pearson's correlation (Table 6) and regression analysis (Table 7) were conducted. The Pearson's correlation showed a strong positive correlation between the duration of Chinese study and ICC ( $r = 0.902$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). This indicates that longer Chinese study duration significantly enhances ICC. Furthermore, study duration correlated strongly with all the ICC dimensions: behavioural ( $r = 0.880$ ), emotional ( $r = 0.891$ ), and cognitive ( $r = 0.875$ , all  $p = 0.001$ ). These findings confirm that extended Chinese language study fosters comprehensive ICC development. The regression analysis further confirmed that the duration of studying Chinese was a significant ICC predictor ( $B = 2.954$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). The large B coefficient (2.954) indicates that study duration strongly impacts ICC. The  $p$ -value ( $< 0.01$ ) confirms statistical significance. This means that even when controlling for other variables, the study duration remained the strongest ICC predictor.

These results strongly support H4, indicating a positive relationship between the duration of Chinese language study and the development of ICC, with longer study periods correlating with higher levels of ICC. The findings highlight that the development of ICC is a long-term process (Byram et al. 2014), and sustained exposure to language learning enhances students' ability to navigate intercultural interactions effectively. This aligns with previous research that emphasises the importance of sustained language learning in fostering ICC (Byram 1997; Deardorff 2006).

The findings highlight the importance of sustained language education for developing ICC. Language programmes should be designed to offer long-term, continuous exposure to both linguistic and cultural content (Kuo and Lai 2006; Lee and Song 2019). Short-term or superficial language courses may not provide enough depth for students to develop a meaningful level of ICC. Therefore, educators should prioritise programmes that integrate language learning with cultural immersion over an extended period.

#### 4.5 Age and CFL Students' ICC in the DRC

H5 proposed that older students would have higher ICC than younger students. To test this, Pearson's correlation (Table 6) and regression analysis (Table 7) were conducted. The Pearson's correlation results showed a positive correlation between age and ICC ( $r = 0.354$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ), with older students scoring higher. The regression analysis confirmed that age significantly impacts ICC ( $B = 0.122$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ). The findings confirm H5. Age was positively correlated with the behavioural ( $r = 0.324$ ), emotional ( $r = 0.304$ ), and cognitive ( $r = 0.422$ , all  $p < 0.05$ ) dimensions. Age significantly impacts ICC but less than Chinese language proficiency and learning duration.

This finding suggests that H5 is confirmed. This outcome aligns with existing literature that emphasises the role of maturity and life experience in developing ICC (Aldrich

2024; Genkova et al. 2021; Wagner and Byram 2017). Older learners often have more exposure to diverse cultures and social interactions, which can enhance their ability to understand and engage with different cultural contexts (Aldrich 2024). As highlighted by Wagner and Byram (2017), older learners are typically more adept at critical thinking and self-reflection, skills that are essential for navigating complex intercultural interactions.

To better support learners of different age groups, language programmes should adopt strategies that leverage the strengths and address the challenges associated with age-related differences. For older students ( $\geq 20$  years), curricula should include cultural immersion and native speaker interactions to leverage maturity and life experience. Research indicates that experiential learning significantly enhances ICC by allowing learners to engage directly with cultural contexts (Deardorff 2006; Kolb 2015). Additionally, reflective practices, like journaling or group discussions, deepen intercultural understanding and critical thinking (Byram 1997). For younger students ( $\leq 20$  years), interactive learning fosters curiosity and openness (Chen and Zhang 2024). Utilising technology, such as virtual exchanges with Chinese peers, can also provide younger learners with valuable intercultural experiences that are both engaging and educational (Barrett 2018). Tailored approaches create effective frameworks for cultivating ICC in CFL students.

**Table 6:** Pearson's correlation

		<b>Intercultural communicative competence</b>	<b>Behavioural dimension</b>	<b>Emotional dimension</b>	<b>Cognitive dimension</b>
age	Correlation coefficient	0.354**	0.324**	0.304*	0.422**
	<i>p</i> value	0.004	0.008	0.014	0.001
	sample size	65	65	65	65
Chinese language proficiency	Correlation coefficient	0.508**	0.425**	0.458**	0.614**
	<i>p</i> value	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001
	sample size	65	65	65	65
Duration of learning Chinese	Correlation coefficient	0.902**	0.880**	0.891**	0.875**
	<i>p</i> value	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001
	sample size	65	65	65	65
Overseas experience	Correlation coefficient	0.475**	0.436**	0.433**	0.530**

	<b>Intercultural communicative competence</b>	<b>Behavioural dimension</b>	<b>Emotional dimension</b>	<b>Cognitive dimension</b>
<i>p</i> value	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001
sample size	65	65	65	65

\*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table 7:** Linear regression analysis results ( $n = 64^1$ )

	<b>Unstandardised coefficient</b>		<b>Standardised coefficient</b>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<b>Collinearity diagnosis</b>	
	<i>B</i>	<b>standard error</b>	<i>Beta</i>			<b>VIF</b>	<b>Tolerance</b>
Constant	3.517	1.429	-	2.462	0.017*	-	-
Sex	0.665	0.728	0.022	0.913	0.365	1.377	0.762
Age	0.122	0.045	0.070	2.716	0.009**	1.534	0.652
Chinese language proficiency	1.922	0.443	0.129	4.334	0.000**	2.071	0.483
Duration of learning Chinese	2.954	0.094	0.884	31.546	0.000**	1.831	0.546
Overseas experience	-0.072	0.244	-0.009	-0.294	0.770	1.951	0.512
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.975						
Adjust <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.973						
<i>F</i>	$F(5,58) = 454.871, p = 0.000$						

Dependent variable: intercultural communicative competence

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the key factors influencing ICC among CFL students in the DRC. By examining various dimensions such as language proficiency, duration of learning, age, sex, and overseas experience, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how these elements contribute to the development of ICC in the African context.

The results indicate that hypotheses two, four, and five are valid, emphasising the importance of Chinese language proficiency, duration of language learning, and age as key factors in developing ICC. Specifically, language proficiency emerges as a critical

<sup>1</sup> One case was removed as an outlier.



factor, consistent with existing research that highlights the strong correlation between language proficiency and enhanced ICC (Byram 1997; Fantini 2009). Additionally, the duration of learning Chinese plays a significant role (Byram 1997; Deardorff 2006). Age also significantly affects ICC development, aligning with the research of Wagner et al. (2017), and Aldrich (2024), which suggests that older learners tend to exhibit higher levels of ICC. Sandal et al. (2019) attribute this to the greater life experience and understanding of cultural dynamics that older adults possess, contributing to their enhanced ICC. This supports the study's findings that older students demonstrated stronger ICC than the younger students. Interestingly, sex and overseas experience have no significant effect when other variables are considered. Although research suggests that females generally possess greater empathy, which is closely linked to ICC (Kobach and Weaver 2012; Zhang 2024), their higher ICC loses significance when other factors, such as language proficiency and age, are controlled for. Similarly, while overseas experience is often positively correlated with ICC (Deardorff 2006; Fantini 2009; Kim 2001), it no longer remains a significant factor in the regression model once other variables are accounted for. These results highlight the complexity of ICC development and suggest that educators should prioritise long-term language learning and structured cultural exposure over more superficial interventions like short-term overseas programmes. By enhancing language proficiency and extending the duration of language learning, educators can better foster the skills necessary for effective IC.

This study is not without limitations. Data collection was restricted to Kinshasa, the capital city of the DRC, and the relatively small sample size may limit the generalisability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, beyond the five influencing factors discussed, other variables such as bilingualism or multilingualism, cognition, and motivation may also play a significant role in ICC (Babao and Adiatma 2023; Gong et al. 2022; Ping and Ping 2024; Taylor and Simard 1972). Despite these constraints, this study lays an important foundation for future studies on ICC in Africa and highlights the role of CFL in fostering ICC. Future research would benefit from broader data collection across diverse regions and the exploration of additional variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ICC development.

In summary, this study highlights the key factors influencing ICC among CFL students in the DRC, emphasising the importance of language proficiency, learning duration, and age. While limited by its geographic scope and sample size, it provides a foundation for future research to explore broader contexts and additional variables. By addressing these gaps, future studies can further refine strategies to enhance ICC, preparing learners to thrive in a globally connected world.

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