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THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE FLUENCY AND CONFIDENCE AMONG EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: In the context of English as a lingua franca, successful communication increasingly depends on not only native-like accuracy but also speakers' ability to negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries. While intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been widely discussed in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research, its role in shaping learners' oral fluency and confidence remains underexplored and theoretically fragmented. This paper addresses this gap by examining how ICC functions as a mediating mechanism that links linguistic performance with psychological readiness in EFL speaking. It argues that ICC supports oral fluency by fostering interactional adaptability and pragmatic awareness and enhances speaking confidence by mitigating anxiety and promoting tolerance for ambiguity. Importantly, this paper contends that ICC should be reconceptualised not merely as a cultural dimension of language learning, but as a dynamic mediator that enables a reciprocal relationship between fluency development and confidence building. The discussion culminates in an integrative conceptual model illustrating the cyclical interplay among ICC, fluency and confidence. The paper concludes by highlighting pedagogical implications for EFL contexts such as Vietnam, where limited authentic exposure heightens the need for interculturally informed speaking instruction.

Keywords: communicative competence, intercultural communicative competence, fluency, confidence, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

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VAI TRÒ CỦA NĂNG LỰC GIAO TIẾP LIÊN VĂN HÓA TRONG SỰ TRÔI CHẢY VÀ TỰ TIN CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT NGOẠI NGỮ

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Tóm tắt: Trong bối cảnh tiếng Anh là ngôn ngữ chung, giao tiếp thành công ngày càng phụ thuộc không chỉ vào độ chuẩn xác giống người bản xứ mà còn vào khả năng đàm phán ý nghĩa vượt qua ranh giới văn hóa của người nói. Dù năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa đã được thảo luận rộng rãi trong nghiên cứu về tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ, vai trò của nó trong việc định hình độ trôi chảy khi nói và sự tự tin của người học vẫn chưa được khai thác triệt để và còn phân mảnh về mặt lý luận. Bài viết này lấp đầy khoảng trống đó bằng cách xem xét cách năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa hoạt động như một cơ chế trung gian liên kết năng lực ngôn ngữ với sự chuẩn bị tâm lý trong việc nói tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ. Nghiên cứu lập luận rằng năng lực này hỗ trợ độ trôi chảy khi nói thông qua việc thúc đẩy khả năng thích ứng trong tương tác và nhận thức ngữ dụng, đồng thời củng cố sự tự tin khi nói bằng cách giảm bớt nỗi lo âu và nâng cao khả năng chịu đựng tính mơ hồ. Quan trọng hơn, bài viết đề xuất tái định hình năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa không chỉ đơn thuần là một chiều văn hóa trong việc học ngoại ngữ, mà là một yếu tố trung gian năng động tạo ra mối quan hệ tương hỗ giữa việc phát triển độ trôi chảy và xây dựng sự tự tin. Phần thảo luận kết thúc bằng một mô hình khái niệm tích hợp minh họa sự tương tác tuần hoàn giữa năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa, độ trôi chảy và sự tự tin. Cuối cùng, bài viết nhấn mạnh các hàm ý sư phạm đối với các bối cảnh tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ như Việt Nam, nơi việc thiếu hụt môi trường tiếp xúc thực tế làm tăng nhu cầu về các phương pháp hướng dẫn kỹ năng nói mang tính liên văn hóa.

Từ khoá: năng lực giao tiếp, năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa, sự trôi chảy, sự tự tin, tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ

1. Introduction

English today plays a role of being a lingua franca for people speaking various languages, where it acts as the major tool of communication between them (Mauranen, 2003). This new approach to English is different from the previous one as, unlike those which used to concentrate only on native-speaker grammatical norms, current practice requires more flexibility, adaptability, and communication in practice rather than on rules (Seidlhofer, 2005; Berns, 2009). As a result, the learner must consider the English language a means for interacting in the real world rather than simply learning from textbooks. However, conventional English classes are often characterized by an excessive use of textbooks as well as an over-reliance on native-speaker norms that do not correlate with actual language use (Jenkins, 2012).

Interacting within the international environment does not only require knowledge of linguistic items and grammatical rules, but it also implies having intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The latter refers to the skills allowing individuals to appropriately comprehend, adapt and interact with people of other cultures (Omar, 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). Despite its significance, students often have difficulties in using their skills within

conversations in the real world. Due to various psychological barriers, such as speaking anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and the fear of making mistakes, learners often refrain from talking (Jiménez, 2015). In addition, due to teacher-centered classes where the emphasis is put on grammatical correctness rather than interaction itself, it becomes difficult for learners to transfer their classroom knowledge to practice (Mohammed, 2018; Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2014). For example, in educational environments such as Vietnam, although students are usually positive about cultural diversity, they cannot adapt their behavioral and awareness aspects while interacting with members of another culture (Nguyen, 2011; Vu & Dinh, 2022).

Although there have been many studies on language acquisition and cultural awareness, some gaps can still be found. Most studies examine the separate relationship between intercultural competence and speaking anxiety without much focus on the direct effect of certain intercultural competencies on the level of speaking fluency and confidence simultaneously. In addition, current studies are mainly conducted by surveys, interviews and tests only once in time, overlooking the daily changes and adaptation of learners within the course of a conversation (Luu, 2026a; Luu, 2026b). Moreover, there are not enough practical approaches for the incorporation of cultural awareness and speaking ability in teaching English as a foreign language (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008; Vu & Dinh, 2022).

In order to fill these gaps, the current research analyzes the link between intercultural communicative competence, fluency, and students' confidence of those who learn English. Since this research shifts the attention from the attempt to speak like a native speaker to effective cross-cultural communication, it seeks to provide practical recommendations for developing a curriculum and delivering classroom instruction. The research is guided by two primary questions:

1. *How does the integration of ICC components impact the development of oral fluency among EFL learners?*
2. *To what extent can heightened intercultural awareness mitigate speaking anxiety and bolster learner confidence in communicative contexts?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

In the context of globalization, the education of the English language is transformed itself from native speaker model to a pluralistic model that emphasizes intercultural speaker as a role model (Alptekin, 2002). ICC is seen as a complicated concept that goes beyond linguistic competencies and involves the transfer of meaning through various and different understanding of cultures (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). In addition to that, the key components of ICC, which include international perspectives, intercultural experiences, and other-oriented communication strategies, are the main requirements for effective communication (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). Nevertheless, there is a gap between these instructional goals and actual class settings, insofar as ICC is rarely incorporated into any curriculums or evaluation systems (Young & Sachdev, 2011).

The complexity of ICC is based on the triadic nature of the construct including cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects (Chen & Starosta, 1996). To handle the natural uneasiness and unfamiliarity associated with intercultural communication experiences, students need to develop unique skills required for handling culture clash (Nguyen, 2011). The inner ability to handle communication barriers turns into adaptive and motivated behavior (Huang,

2014). ICC acts as an efficient agent of change that, along with language competence, creates sufficient critical consciousness required for enhancing the educational process (Fantini, 2020). In an EFL environment and especially in multilingual classrooms, ICC is perceived as a vital tool for both teachers and students (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022).

2.2. Fluency

Fluency of speech is multi-dimensional and goes beyond just speed or automaticity, rather working as a collective accomplishment by the interlocutors (McCarthy, 2009). Speech fluency requires rapid exchanges and turn taking, along with the usage of interactive speech markers that help in communicating between the speakers (McCarthy, 2009). In addition, scaffolding and pauses have a vital role in interaction, a process often neglected in monologue measures (Sato, 2014).

The combination of cognitive processes, first language (L1) transfer, and exposure to the language accounts for the developmental factors that affect second language (L2) fluency acquisition, with the impact of the mother tongue decreasing as competence increases (Derwing et al., 2009). The explanation of these factors becomes more straightforward in the context of a three-step model that clearly distinguishes between cognitive fluency (speed of thought process), utterance fluency (measurable time-related elements including speed and pauses), and perceived fluency (subjective assessment of the speaker's fluency by the listener) (Kirk, 2014; Segalowitz, 2010). Therefore, fluency is usually assessed in terms of temporal aspects impacting listeners' perceptions of effective communication (Huang & Gráf, 2020; Segalowitz, 2010).

2.3. Confidence

The basic understanding of confidence in communications comes from the theory of communication apprehension (CA), which is described as a fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated interaction (McCroskey, 1982). CA is a multidimensional concept influenced by both individual factors and situational factors, such as formality of the situation, novelty, and social visibility (McCroskey, 1982). A high level of CA, or reticence, may cause serious anxiety, resulting in poor academic outcomes and self-perception (Miller & Edmunds, 1995).

However, communication confidence comes out in the form of high willingness to communicate (WTC) accompanied by low nervousness during the language tasks (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The negative relationship between CA and WTC suggests that perceptions of communication skills are consistent with actual behavior (Muftah, 2023; Rubin et al., 1997). It also means that confidence plays the roles of both a predictor and the product of successful communicative episodes (Muftah, 2023). In the case of L2, confidence becomes more difficult due to the fear of being negatively evaluated, introversion, and differences between teachers' and students' belief systems (Noor et al., 2015). Therefore, communication confidence can be described as a state rather than an innate trait which is formed situationally, interpersonally, and psychologically (Shahbaz et al., 2016).

2.4. Theoretical Perspectives Linking Intercultural Communicative Competence, Fluency and Confidence

Relationships among ICC, fluency, and confidence can be explained using intersecting theoretical approaches, highlighting various aspects of communicative development. According to the sociocultural theory (SCT), language acquisition involves socially mediated activities when meaning becomes the result of collaborative actions rather than individual thinking processes (Vygotsky, 1978). In terms of SCT, fluency increases because learners

become involved in the discussion and solve communication issues collaboratively. ICC contributes to this process by providing learners with information on different pragmatic conventions and culturally grounded expectations that reduce the risk of communication failures. Still, SCT provides a good explanation of how social interaction helps develop fluency, but it lacks a more thorough understanding of learners' emotional preparedness.

The psychological component of language learning has received more attention in the theories of communicative competence and WTC. Communicative competence theory highlights the importance of using a language not only grammatically but also socially and interculturally (Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2007). While ICC does not directly address fluency, it allows speakers to choose interactional strategies such as turn-taking, repair and pragmatics. However, most theories of communicative competence take for granted the willingness of learners and shed no light on building confidence.

One of the weaknesses of the approach to motivation is its inability to describe how long-term emotional involvement can be sustained through the entire interaction process. The WTC model helps to overcome this problem by conceptualizing communication readiness in terms of three factors: capacity, anxiety, and perceived skill (MacIntyre et al., 1998). ICC acts as an intervening variable which lessens situational ambiguity and enhances perceived control over the interaction process.

Positive psychology is not about reducing anxiety but creating positive emotions that include enjoyment, curiosity, and resilience (Dörnyei, 2009; Oxford, 2016). The inquisitive learner, who wants to learn another culture, has a more satisfying communication experience. This creates more confidence not only in WTC states but also outside the WTC framework. Combining these theories gives a good background for analyzing how linguistic, strategic, and emotional dimensions converge.

Table 1

Theoretical Perspectives on ICC, Fluency and Confidence

Framework	Core idea	Role of ICC in fluency	Role of ICC in confidence
Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)	Language development is mediated by interaction.	Minimises communication breakdowns and encourages meaningful negotiation.	Scaffolding normalises risk-taking, reducing anxiety
Communicative Competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2007)	Linguistic, sociolinguistic and intercultural components are all part of competence.	Allows for more fluid communication, pragmatic appropriateness and flexible tactics.	Increases self-perceived communicative adequacy, lowering apprehension
Willingness to Communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998)	Competence, motivation and anxiety all influence readiness to participate.	Regular participation helps with fluency practice.	ICC reduces uncertainty, boosts self-efficacy and lowers anxiety
Positive Psychology in SLA (Dörnyei, 2009; Oxford, 2016; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012)	Learning and performance are driven by emotions and enjoyment.	Curiosity about other cultures encourages flow and long-term engagement.	Positive engagement enhances resilience and confidence

2.5. Previous Research Insights

ICC functions as a mediating catalyst rather than a peripheral talent. While interactional scaffolding, strategic adaptation and emotional mediation each provide unique methods, they all work together to incorporate ICC into the verbal and affective domains of EFL performance. Practically, ICC necessitates the use of soft skills to ensure appropriateness in cross-cultural contexts (Waugh, 2013). Furthermore, personality factors such as emotional resilience and perceptual acuity do not directly contribute to pragmatic knowledge, but rather promote the social contact required for the development of intercultural abilities (Taguchi et al. 2016).

Intercultural pragmatics at the discourse level deals with the way interlocutors handle their communication during the actual process (Cogo & House, 2017). Also, interactional competence is the primary feature that is defined as the shared power of interaction management through turn-taking and various repair strategies (Young, 2019). As a result, intercultural communication is considered as a collaborative effort rather than an individual characteristic. The importance of self-efficacy in intercultural communication is highlighted in recent studies as well. High self-efficacy, which is often the result of transformative experiences such as studying abroad, is found to be a strong correlate of overall intercultural development (Kabir & Sponseller, 2020; Peifer et al., 2023).

However, the majority of researchers look at the ICC components such as knowledge, skills, and attitudes separately (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), whereas the fluency issue is completely restricted to psycholinguistic processing (Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018; Segalowitz, 2010) and the measure of confidence is equated with language anxiety and WTC (Dewaele, 2011; MacIntyre et al., 1998). There is a considerable paucity of theoretical synthesis linking ICC to fluency and confidence as twin outcomes. Additionally, ICC not being capable of being fluent and confident addresses the interplay between these two dimensions and the function of intercultural competence in the process of cultivating them simultaneously (Arasaratnam, 2009). The gap is most glaring in contexts like Vietnam, where non-immersion learning implies lack of real-world intercultural exposure for learners. Thus, a new, comprehensive model is needed that provides a systematic explanation of the relationship between ICC, fluency and confidence.

Existing studies, however, still regard ICC, fluency and confidence as independent constructs, with fluency frequently limit to psycholinguistic processing and confidence merely equated to anxiety or WTC. One area that requires more research is the way that ICC affects both communication skills and emotional preparedness in the case of EFL speaking.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts an integrative critical literature review and conceptual synthesis approach. No empirical data are collected or statistically tested. Instead, existing theoretical and empirical literature is critically reviewed to examine possible connections between ICC, oral fluency, and communication confidence among EFL learners. An integrative review is appropriate for synthesizing research informed by different theoretical perspectives (Torraco, 2005), following Snyder's (2019) emphasis on transparent literature selection and synthesis.

The study treats ICC, oral fluency, and communication confidence as distinct constructs. ICC is mainly informed by Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006), while oral fluency follows Segalowitz's (2010) view of efficient L2 speech production, and communication

confidence draws on MacIntyre et al. (1998). Rather than assuming a direct relationship among these constructs, the synthesis examines how ICC may support spoken interaction through cultural interpretation, interactional adaptation, meaning negotiation, misunderstanding management, and tolerance of uncertainty. The resulting framework is conditional rather than linear, with linguistic proficiency, anxiety, interactional context, and communicative opportunities potentially shaping these relationships.

3.2. Scope and Selection Criteria

The review covers literature from 1970 to 2025, with earlier seminal works retained where they provide key theoretical foundations. Searches are conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, supplemented by reference-list searches. The main search terms combined ICC, EFL/L2 communication, oral fluency, confidence, speaking anxiety, and willingness to communicate. Search terms are adapted to each database.

Studies are included when they address ICC or related intercultural concepts in relation to L2/EFL spoken communication, fluency, confidence, or anxiety. Both theoretical and empirical studies are considered. Studies focusing only on written language, cultural knowledge without a communicative dimension, or general academic confidence are excluded. Publication year is not treated as a quality criterion; seminal sources are retained for theoretical grounding, while recent studies are used to reflect current EFL research.

Table 2

Search and Selection Framework

Analytical domain	Representative search terms	Selection focus
ICC	intercultural communicative competence OR intercultural competence	Definitions, dimensions, and models of ICC
Spoken communication	L2 communication OR EFL speaking OR oral communication	ICC and spoken interaction
Fluency	oral fluency OR speaking fluency OR L2 fluency	Nature and measurement of spoken fluency
Confidence	L2 confidence OR communication confidence OR speaking confidence	Confidence in L2 communication
Related mechanisms	willingness to communicate OR speaking anxiety OR communication apprehension	Psychological conditions surrounding communication
Intercultural interaction	intercultural communication OR English as a lingua franca	Communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries

* *Note. Search terms are used as related concepts rather than interchangeable constructs. Final inclusion depends on their relevance to the conceptual focus of the study.*

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The literature is screened in two stages. Titles and abstracts are first reviewed for relevance, followed by full-text assessment against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Duplicate records are removed, and reasons for full-text exclusion are documented to support transparent selection. PRISMA 2020 is used only as a reporting guide rather than as evidence that the review constitutes a systematic review (Page et al., 2021). The quality of the literature is assessed

according to the type of evidence. Conceptual studies are evaluated for conceptual clarity, theoretical coherence, and relevance, while empirical studies are assessed in terms of research design, sample, measures, analysis, and the alignment between evidence and claims. This distinction allows studies with different methodological purposes to contribute to the synthesis without treating conceptual arguments as empirical evidence.

Relevant information is recorded in an extraction matrix covering theoretical foundations, construct definitions, research context, methodology, main evidence, identified relationships, limitations, and relevance to the proposed framework. Particular attention is given to whether studies suggested direct, indirect, conditional, or conceptual relationships. Evidence that challenges the proposed relationship is also retained, especially where linguistic proficiency, anxiety, or limited interactional opportunities appear to constrain the role of ICC. This helps reduce confirmation bias and distinguish conceptual connections from causal claims.

The selected literature is analyzed through conceptual coding, cross-study comparison, examination of contradictory evidence, and theoretical synthesis. Recurring concepts include intercultural knowledge, openness, interactional adaptation, critical cultural awareness, anxiety, confidence, WTC, and fluency. The synthesis then examines how these concepts may connect ICC with oral fluency and communication confidence, while considering linguistic proficiency, anxiety, task demands, and interactional context as possible conditions. Byram (1997), Deardorff (2006), MacIntyre et al. (1998), and Segalowitz (2010) provide complementary theoretical foundations for ICC, intercultural development, L2 confidence, and fluency. The resulting framework is therefore a theory-driven proposition for future empirical testing, rather than a causal model.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. *Intercultural Communicative Competence as a Catalyst for Oral Fluency*

The findings suggest that ICC relates to oral fluency mainly through interactional processes rather than speech production itself. ICC does not directly increase speech rate, reduce pauses, or improve lexical access, which are more closely associated with linguistic proficiency, processing, task demands, and fluency strategies (Biria & Jouybar, 2016; Ghasemi & Mozaheb, 2021; Rezai & Okhovat, 2016; Tavakoli, 2011). Its contribution lies in helping learners interpret cultural differences, adjust their responses, and manage misunderstanding during interaction (Sercu, 2002; Ruiz & Spínola, 2019). This extends previous fluency research, which has largely examined linguistic and task-based factors such as repetition, information-gap activities, and explicit fluency strategies (Ghasemi & Mozaheb, 2021; Ortiz Neira, 2019; Tavakoli, 2011). From this perspective, ICC and fluency address different aspects of speaking: ICC supports the management of interaction, whereas linguistic resources support the production of speech.

This distinction also challenges the assumption that fluent communication is equivalent to approximating native-speaker norms. Alptekin (2002) and Piątkowska (2015) argue for a view of English that prioritizes effective international communication rather than native-like performance. Meaning negotiation and repair are therefore relevant to fluency because learners may need to maintain interaction even when cultural or pragmatic expectations differ (Kecskés & Dinh, 2025). At the same time, ICC should not be treated as sufficient for fluent speaking. Song (2020) and Wang et al. (2025) indicate that language proficiency and contextual conditions continue to shape intercultural and linguistic development. The present synthesis therefore supports a conditional relationship, ICC may help learners use their existing linguistic

resources more effectively, but it cannot compensate for limited language proficiency or insufficient opportunities for spoken interaction.

4.2. Mitigating Anxiety and Bolstering Confidence Through Intercultural Communicative Competence

The findings indicate that intercultural awareness may reduce speaking anxiety by making unfamiliar interactions more predictable, rather than by removing anxiety itself. When learners recognize that misunderstanding can result from different cultural expectations, they may be less likely to interpret every communication problem as personal linguistic failure. This interpretation is consistent with Douglas and Rosvold (2018), who associate intercultural competence with the management of negative affect in culturally diverse communication, and with Logan et al. (2015), who show that perceived threat and low predictability are relevant to intergroup anxiety. However, anxiety is not determined by intercultural awareness alone. Language proficiency, previous experience, situational demands, and learner characteristics can also influence anxiety (Tang et al., 2024; Jiang & Wu, 2026).

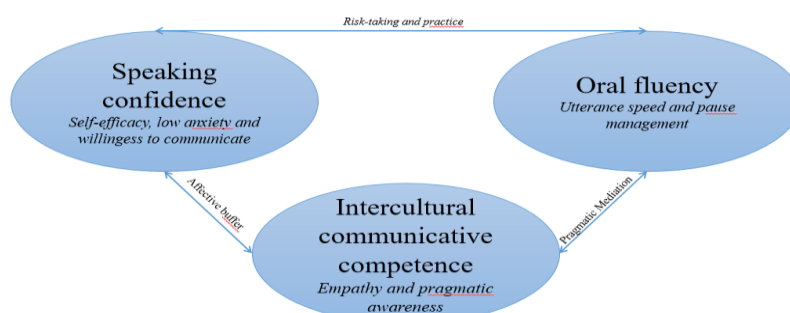
The relationship between ICC and confidence is similarly reciprocal rather than one-directional. Positive cultural attitudes, the ideal L2 self, and metacognitive resources are associated with ICC and learners' perceived communicative competence (Kanat-Mutluoğlu, 2016; Ghasemi et al., 2020). Intercultural empathy and tolerance of ambiguity may also help learners remain engaged when communication is uncertain (Broome, 1991; Calloway-Thomas et al., 2017; Dai & Chen, 2015). Yet confidence can also encourage learners to participate, giving them more opportunities to develop intercultural experience. Thus, the findings do not support a simple ICC → reduced anxiety → increased confidence pathway. Instead, ICC, anxiety, confidence, and communicative experience appear to influence one another under different linguistic and contextual conditions.

4.3. The Synergistic Interplay: An Integrative Model

The connection between ICC, fluency and confidence is not linear but cyclical. Confidence is the psychological factor that predisposes one to take risks, which in turn is the condition for practicing spontaneous speech and developing fluency (Alvarez, 2024; Vacalares, 2023). Fluency plays the most important role in this upward spiral, guaranteeing that the risks taken are both pedagogically sound and interactionally effective (Lăpădat et al., 2024).

Based on the interaction between cultures, the learner's fluency of the learner improves and the success achieved is a further reinforcement of the self-confidence of the learner thus creating a self-sustained loop of communicative development (Mootosamy & Aryadoust, 2024). When true exposure is limited, ICC offers the essential cultural and psychological resources to bridge the gap between language knowledge and real-world performance (Wang et al., 2025). Therefore, ICC should be regarded as the primary mediator that converges linguistic proficiency with psychological comfort.

The visual representation in Figure 1 shows that the suggested model regards ICC as a mediating catalyst that not only activates but also sustains the upward spiral of communicative competence. ICC is the affective buffer (anxiety reduction) that supports speaking confidence and subsequently, the risk-taking that is needed for the increase of oral fluency. Meanwhile, ICC's pragmatic resources make sure that the higher fluency is still interactively effective and culturally appropriate. The interaction among the three dimensions indicates that an all-encompassing integration of intercultural and linguistic factors is necessary for developing EFL performance in non-immersion contexts.

Figure 1*An Integrative Model***4.4. Discussion**

The findings suggest a conditional relationship between ICC and oral fluency rather than a direct effect. ICC does not itself increase speech rate, reduce pauses, or provide learners with linguistic resources. These aspects remain closely related to language proficiency, processing, task conditions, and fluency strategies (Biria & Jouybar, 2016; Ghasemi & Mozaheb, 2021; Rezai & Okhovat, 2016; Tavakoli, 2011). Its potential contribution is more interactional. Cultural interpretation, adaptation, meaning negotiation, and repair may help learners respond when communication does not proceed as expected (Sercu, 2002; Ruiz & Spínola, 2019; Kecskés & Dinh, 2025). This extends previous fluency research by suggesting that successful oral communication involves not only how smoothly learners produce speech but also how effectively they manage interaction across cultural differences.

A similar pattern appears in the relationship between ICC, anxiety, and confidence. Intercultural awareness may reduce uncertainty about unfamiliar communicative behaviour, but it should not be treated as a means of eliminating speaking anxiety. Perceived threat and predictability can influence intercultural anxiety (Logan et al., 2015), while language proficiency, learning experience, and L2 self-related factors may also shape anxiety and ICC (Tang et al., 2024). Likewise, confidence may support participation, but participation itself can provide opportunities for developing ICC and communicative experience. Previous research linking positive cultural attitudes, the ideal L2 self, and ICC supports this more reciprocal interpretation (Kanat-Mutluoğlu, 2016; Ghasemi et al., 2020). The relationship is therefore better understood as dynamic and context-dependent than as a simple ICC → lower anxiety → higher confidence sequence.

These findings also clarify the position of the proposed integrative model. ICC should not be treated as an independent factor that automatically produces better speaking outcomes. Rather, it may connect learners' existing linguistic resources with the interactional and affective demands of communication. A learner may have sufficient language knowledge but hesitate to speak because of anxiety, or speak confidently while lacking the pragmatic resources needed to manage cultural differences. Similarly, ICC cannot compensate for limited linguistic proficiency or limited opportunities for interaction. The model therefore represents a theory-driven proposition, consistent with the distinction between ICC, fluency, and confidence in the present study, rather than an empirically established causal model.

The findings are also consistent with the view that English communication should not be evaluated only against native-speaker norms. Alptekin (2002) and Piątkowska (2015) emphasize communicative effectiveness in contexts where English is used across linguistic and

cultural boundaries. From this perspective, interactional success includes the ability to clarify meaning, respond to differences, and repair misunderstanding, not simply produce speech with fewer pauses. However, this broader view should not weaken the importance of linguistic development. The contribution of ICC is therefore complementary; it may help learners use their linguistic knowledge more effectively in intercultural interaction, while vocabulary, grammar, processing ability, and speaking practice remain necessary for fluency development.

For EFL teaching, the findings support greater integration of intercultural work into speaking activities rather than treating culture as separate background knowledge. Speaking tasks can include situations involving differences in politeness, disagreement, turn-taking, or indirectness and require learners to interpret, respond, clarify, and reflect. Such activities can develop ICC while maintaining a clear focus on oral production. At the same time, teachers should continue to provide explicit practice in vocabulary, grammar, fluency strategies, and spontaneous speech because ICC does not replace these linguistic resources. This integrated approach is consistent with the practice-oriented view of ICC that is proposed by Ruiz and Spínola (2019).

For research, the proposed relationships require empirical testing. Longitudinal or mixed-method studies combine measures of ICC and anxiety or confidence with recorded speaking tasks to examine changes in speech rate, pausing, repair, and interactional performance. Interviews or observations further show how learners interpret and manage intercultural differences during actual communication. Such designs help distinguish perceived improvement from changes in observable speaking behaviour and clarify whether particular ICC components are more closely related to fluency, anxiety, or confidence.

5. Concluding

This study suggests that ICC may contribute to EFL speaking not through a direct effect on fluency or anxiety, but through processes such as cultural interpretation, interactional adaptation, meaning negotiation, and management of uncertainty. Its relationship with oral fluency, speaking anxiety, and confidence is therefore better viewed as conditional and interconnected with linguistic proficiency, communicative experience, and interactional context. The proposed model offers a theoretical account of these relationships rather than causal evidence, and its main implication is that ICC should complement rather than replace language and speaking instruction.

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