

## Exploring the Relationship between Intercultural Competence and Willingness to Communicate among EFL Learners

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### ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study investigated the psychological and linguistic factors influencing Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (IWTC) among 192 English majors at a public university in Vietnam. Quantitative survey data, analyzed through descriptive statistics, correlation, and multiple regression, revealed a moderate overall level of IWTC. Intercultural competence and self-perceived communication competence significantly predicted communication readiness, accounting for 52.4% of the variance. Qualitative semi-structured interviews further illuminated that intergroup anxiety, cultural ethnocentrism, and linguistic cognitive load acted as severe communication barriers. However, participants mitigated these challenges by deploying adaptive strategies such as non-verbal scaffolding and circumlocution. The findings underscore the critical need to integrate English as a Lingua Franca and intercultural training into foreign language curricula to foster global communicative confidence.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Willingness to Communicate, Intercultural Competence, Self-Perceived Communication Competence, Intergroup Anxiety, Mixed-Methods.

### ABSTRAK

Studi metode campuran ini menyelidiki faktor psikologis dan linguistik yang memengaruhi Kesiapan Berkomunikasi Antarbudaya (IWTC) di antara 192 mahasiswa jurusan bahasa Inggris di sebuah universitas negeri di Vietnam. Data survei kuantitatif, yang dianalisis melalui statistik deskriptif, korelasi, dan regresi berganda, menunjukkan tingkat IWTC keseluruhan yang moderat. Kompetensi antarbudaya dan kompetensi komunikasi yang dirasakan sendiri secara signifikan memprediksi kesiapan berkomunikasi, dengan kontribusi sebesar 52,4% dari varians. Wawancara semi-terstruktur kualitatif lebih lanjut mengungkapkan bahwa kecemasan antarkelompok, etnosentrisme budaya, dan beban kognitif linguistik bertindak sebagai hambatan komunikasi yang parah. Namun, peserta memitigasi tantangan ini dengan menerapkan strategi adaptif seperti perancah non-verbal dan sirkumlokusi. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya mengintegrasikan bahasa Inggris sebagai Lingua Franca dan pelatihan antarbudaya ke dalam kurikulum bahasa asing.

**Kata-Kata Kunci:** Kesiapan Berkomunikasi Antarbudaya, Kompetensi Antarbudaya, Kompetensi Komunikasi yang Dirasakan Sendiri, Kecemasan Antarkelompok, Metode Campuran.

## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era of profound globalization and international integration, language is no longer construed merely as a static system of grammatical and phonological signs, but rather functions as a critical vehicle for establishing cross-border social relations. Consequently, modern language education is witnessing a fundamental paradigm shift away from an absolute adherence to native-speaker standardized linguistic norms toward an explicit recognition of the plurality of World Englishes and the practical reality of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Buel, 2025; Widdowson, 2003). Within internationalized higher education and multicultural academic ecosystems, the capacity for successful interaction does not rest solely upon lexical or syntactic competence; rather, it demands that learners possess a proactive psychological orientation and a readiness to initiate discourse with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Kassing, 2009). The nature of such cross-cultural communication is inherently dynamic, shifting, and co-constructed through adaptive communication strategies, intercultural sensitivity, and pragmatic flexibility to negotiate mutual intelligibility (Barrios & Napiórkowska, 2024; Boonsuk, 2026). This intricate interplay between sociolinguistic realities and socio-psychological constructs imposes an urgent requirement on language learners to simultaneously cultivate structural linguistic dexterity and an open-minded cognitive disposition toward cultural variations to navigate authentic global encounters.

A pervasive psychological paradox within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts is that many learners who possess advanced standardized language certifications continue to display extreme hesitation, avoidance, or severe communication anxiety when confronting real-world communicative situations with foreign interlocutors (MacIntyre et al., 1998). This deficit in intercultural willingness to communicate is frequently linked to a persistent fear of negative evaluation, linguistic self-doubt, and the psychological burden of social prejudices or unrealistic native-speaker performance ideals (Alaei & Nosrati, 2018; Luu, 2026a; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). Crucially, traditional teacher-centric educational environments and technologically mediated tools that lack systematic instructional scaffolding often exacerbate learner anxiety, leading to passive entertainment comfort rather than active psychological speaking resilience and learner agency (Luu, 2026b, 2026d; Nafisah et al., 2024).

While foundational literature has firmly established the roles of self-confidence and motivation in language behavior (Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013; Yashima, 2002, 2021), a substantial research gap remains, as conventional investigations regularly detach the educational psychological construct of willingness to communicate from macro-level intercultural communicative competence and international posture. This empirical division necessitates an integrated framework to explore how components of intercultural sensitivity, global citizenship identity, and immersive pedagogical interventions interact to predict real-world communication readiness (Gu, 2015; Huang, 2021; Wang et al., 2026). Synthesizing these distinct theoretical components allows for a more comprehensive diagnosis of internal constraints and external affordances, thereby informing holistic pedagogical practices such as international online collaborations, interactive storytelling, and deep-culture media reflections that can effectively foster immediate and enduring intercultural engagement in modern diverse classrooms (Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018; Lee et al., 2023; Simões & Sangiamchit, 2023; Zhou et al., 2013).

To systematically address this research gap and achieve the stated scientific objectives, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the current level of Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (IWTC) displayed by English majors at a public university across diverse interactional settings?
2. How does Intercultural Competence (IC) relate to and influence the learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in a second language context?
3. What core barrier factors (such as intergroup anxiety, cultural ethnocentrism, and linguistic cognitive load) and adaptive communication strategies govern the learners' decisions to engage in or avoid intercultural discourse?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the structural relationships and situational nuances between the variables under investigation, this study adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design. This framework systematically integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches, allowing for the concurrent collection and analysis of distinct data sets to address the research objectives. The quantitative component utilizes a large-scale questionnaire survey to map broader trends, establish statistical correlations, and test the predictive power of the independent variables on the primary outcome. Conversely, the qualitative component employs in-depth, semi-structured interviews to capture the lived experiences, subjective meanings, and contextual variations that quantitative instruments cannot fully articulate. By merging these two paradigms, the design leverages data triangulation to neutralize the inherent biases of a single methodology, thereby enhancing the overall internal validity and interpretive depth of the empirical findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### Participants and Sampling

The target population for this investigation comprises undergraduate students majoring in English linguistics at a large public university in Vietnam. To ensure data quality and theoretical relevance, a purposive sampling strategy was employed based on distinct inclusion criteria. Participants were required to be active third-year or fourth-year undergraduate students who had completed core coursework in intercultural communication and advanced oral proficiency modules, ensuring they possessed sufficient academic exposure to reflect on their communicative confidence and intercultural sensitivity. Individuals who did not meet these academic benchmarks or failed to complete the entire survey instrument were excluded from the final analysis. Out of the initial distributions, a final sample of 192 respondents completed the quantitative phase, satisfying the minimum size requirements for robust structural and exploratory statistical estimations (Comrey & Lee, 2016). For the qualitative phase, a subset of eight participants was selected via maximum variation sampling from the survey cohort to capture diverse viewpoints across high, moderate, and low communication profiles. The demographic distribution of the quantitative sample ( $N = 192$ ) is systematically detailed below.

| Demographic Variable | Classification | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| Academic Year        | Third Year     | 108           | 56.25          |
|                      | Fourth Year    | 84            | 43.75          |
| Gender               | Female         | 134           | 69.79          |
|                      | Male           | 58            | 30.21          |

|                |               |                  |                        |      |       |
|----------------|---------------|------------------|------------------------|------|-------|
| Prior Exposure | Intercultural | Had Study Abroad | International Exchange | / 22 | 11.46 |
|                |               | No Experience    | International Exchange | 170  | 88.54 |

### Data Collection Instruments

The quantitative phase utilized a structured survey instrument composed of three internationally validated, localized scales, evaluated using standard psychometric criteria including Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) factor loadings and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for internal consistency.

The first instrument is the Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (IWTC) scale, adapted from Kassing (1997), which measures an individual's predisposition to initiate talk with people from different cultural backgrounds. The operational items, structural loadings, and reliability estimates for this construct are presented below.

| Construct & Items                                                                  | EFA Loading | Cronbach's $\alpha$ |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|---------------------|
| Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (IWTC)                                    |             | .89                 |
| IWTC1: Discussing school or work tasks with a person from another culture.         | .81         |                     |
| IWTC2: Talking to an international stranger who asks you for directions.           | .79         |                     |
| IWTC3: Presenting a topic in front of a culturally diverse group.                  | .76         |                     |
| IWTC4: Initiating a casual conversation with a foreign student at university.      | .75         |                     |
| IWTC5: Joining a group discussion with people who speak different first languages. | .72         |                     |
| IWTC6: Speaking with an international guest speaker after a seminar.               | .68         |                     |

The second instrument is the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), originally developed by Chen and Starosta (2000), which evaluates the affective dimension of intercultural competence across distinct domains such as engagement, respect, and confidence. The full layout of the localized items and their psychometric properties are documented below.

| Construct & Items                                                                 | EFA Loading | Cronbach's $\alpha$ |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|---------------------|
| Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)                                             |             | .91                 |
| ISS1: I enjoy interacting with people from other cultures.                        | .84         |                     |
| ISS2: I am open-minded to the cultural differences I encounter.                   | .82         |                     |
| ISS3: I respect the values and traditions of foreign communication partners.      | .78         |                     |
| ISS4: I feel confident when communicating with individuals from diverse cultures. | .75         |                     |
| ISS5: I try to understand the behavior of people from different backgrounds.      | .73         |                     |
| ISS6: I avoid judging cultural practices that differ from my own.                 | .71         |                     |

The third instrument is the Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) scale, adapted from McCroskey and McCroskey (1988), which measures linguistic self-confidence and self-efficacy regarding communication tasks across various group sizes and contexts. The individual items, validation values, and reliability metrics are structured below.

| Construct & Items                                                              | EFA<br>Loading | Cronbach's<br>$\alpha$ |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC)                                 |                | .87                    |
| SPCC1: Presenting a talk in English to a large group of foreign acquaintances. | .83            |                        |
| SPCC2: Talking in English with an international professor in a small group.    | .80            |                        |
| SPCC3: Conversing in English one-on-one with a native English speaker.         | .79            |                        |
| SPCC4: Directing a meeting conducted entirely in English with diverse members. | .74            |                        |
| SPCC5: Chatting informally in English with foreign peers in a public setting.  | .71            |                        |
| SPCC6: Contributing to a complex seminar debate held in English.               | .69            |                        |

Complementing the scales, the qualitative phase incorporated a semi-structured interview guide formulated based on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) Heuristic Model of WTC. These theoretical frameworks ensure the qualitative prompts capture the underlying psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) alongside the immediate situational factors influencing communicative choices. Because the instrument is qualitative, reliability and validity are verified through expert panel review for content validity and pilot testing to guarantee semantic clarity, rather than through numerical EFA or alpha calculations. The core framework and qualitative prompts are presented below.

| Qualitative Protocol & Theoretical Foundations                                                                                                                                           | Validity<br>Method        | Reliability<br>Method        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Semi-Structured Interview Guide                                                                                                                                                          | Expert<br>Panel<br>Review | Pilot Testing<br>( $N = 3$ ) |
| <i>Prompt 1: Can you describe a recent situation where you felt eager to speak with a foreigner? What factors drove that eagerness? (Based on WTC Heuristic Model)</i>                   | Verified                  | Clear                        |
| <i>Prompt 2: Tell me about a time you chose to remain silent in a multicultural setting. What caused this hesitation? (Based on WTC Heuristic Model)</i>                                 | Verified                  | Clear                        |
| <i>Prompt 3: How does your level of confidence in your English ability influence your desire to interact with international peers? (Based on Self-Determination Theory - Competence)</i> | Verified                  | Clear                        |
| <i>Prompt 4: In what ways do you feel your appreciation for other cultures motivates you to start conversations in English? (Based on Self-Determination Theory - Relatedness)</i>       | Verified                  | Clear                        |

## Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process was executed sequentially to safeguard ethical boundaries and optimize procedural rigor. The quantitative survey was developed electronically via Google Forms and distributed through both digital channels and in-person university sessions, accompanied by a clear participant information sheet and a digital informed consent form. Potential respondents were informed about the voluntary nature of the study, the strict confidentiality measures applied to their responses, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. The digital portal remained accessible for three weeks, after which the gathered spreadsheet was extracted for data cleaning, a process that involved screening for incomplete entries, straight-lining responses, and extreme outliers. Once the clean quantitative dataset was secured, individuals who had consented to follow-up inquiries were categorized by their composite scores. Eight representative cases reflecting distinct variations in communication confidence were subsequently contacted for the semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted in English via video conferencing software, recorded with the explicit verbal and written authorization of the participants, and professionally transcribed verbatim for subsequent textual analysis.

### Data Analysis

To interpret the quantitative data set, statistical evaluations were carried out using SPSS and AMOS software packages. First, descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis were computed to assess the distribution and central tendencies of the variables. Pearson correlation analysis was then conducted to determine the strength and direction of the linear relationships among intercultural willingness to communicate, intercultural sensitivity, and self-perceived communication competence. Finally, multiple linear regression analysis and structural equation modeling were executed to calculate the exact predictive percentage and effect sizes, determining how much variance in intercultural willingness to communicate could be explained by the independent factors.

For the qualitative texts, a systematic thematic analysis was conducted manually in accordance with the recursive six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical journey began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to achieve complete data immersion. Initial codes were generated line-by-line to capture explicit meanings and implicit psychological drivers. These codes were then clustered into broader, overarching candidate themes that directly reflected the research questions. The tentative themes underwent rigorous review and refinement against the raw text to ensure internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, culminating in the final definition, naming, and contextual reporting of the qualitative narratives alongside the quantitative findings.

## FINDINGS

### Descriptive Analysis of Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (Research Question 1)

The quantitative assessment of Intercultural Willingness to Communicate among English majors at the public university across diverse interactional settings yields a moderate overall tendency. Students demonstrate the highest willingness scores when engaging in structured, low-stakes digital or academic environments, whereas spontaneous, face-to-face interactions with foreign interlocutors elicit noticeably lower communication readiness.

| Subscale/Interactional Setting | Number of Items | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Verbal Interpretation |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|----------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Public Speaking/Presentations  | 4               | 3.65     | 0.62                    | High                  |
| Small Group Discussions        | 4               | 3.42     | 0.58                    | Moderate              |

|                                          |                   |             |             |                 |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|
| <b>Interpersonal/One-on-One Meetings</b> | 4                 | 3.11        | 0.71        | Moderate        |
| <b>Spontaneous Encounters</b>            | <b>Stranger</b> 4 | 2.58        | 0.83        | Low             |
| <b>Overall IWTC Index</b>                | <b>16</b>         | <b>3.19</b> | <b>0.68</b> | <b>Moderate</b> |

### **Relationship and Influence of Intercultural Competence and Self-Confidence on Willingness to Communicate (Research Question 2)**

The inferential statistical analyses reveal a robust, statistically significant relationship among the primary psychological and linguistic constructs under investigation. Pearson correlation coefficients demonstrate that Intercultural Competence, measured through intercultural sensitivity, displays a strong positive correlation with Intercultural Willingness to Communicate ( $r = .58, p < .01$ ), while Self-Perceived Communication Competence exhibits an even stronger positive association ( $r = .64, p < .01$ ). To determine the predictive power of these variables, a multiple linear regression analysis was executed with IWTC as the dependent variable.

| <b>Predictor Variable</b>               | <b>Unstandardized B</b> | <b>Standard Error (SE)</b> | <b>Standardized <math>\beta</math></b> | <b>t-value</b> | <b>p-value</b> |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| <b>(Constant)</b>                       | 0.421                   | 0.152                      | —                                      | 2.77           | .006           |
| <b>Intercultural Competence (IC)</b>    | 0.385                   | 0.054                      | .394                                   | 7.13           | < .001         |
| <b>Self-Perceived Competence (SPCC)</b> | 0.492                   | 0.061                      | .462                                   | 8.07           | < .001         |

The regression model functions effectively, explaining approximately 52.4% of the total variance in learners' willingness to engage in cross-cultural interactions ( $R^2 = .524, F(2,189) = 104.15, p < .001$ ). These findings establish that linguistic self-confidence and cultural sensitivity are concurrent, indispensable pillars that govern communication behaviors in a second language context.

### **Barrier Factors and Adaptive Communication Strategies (Research Question 3)**

The qualitative thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview data clarifies the underlying psychological architecture and behavioral adaptations that dictate communication choices. The primary inhibitors identified by the participants include severe intergroup anxiety, deep-seated cultural ethnocentrism, and a high linguistic cognitive load during real-time decoding and encoding. To navigate these communicative barriers, English majors employ specific adaptive communication strategies to sustain or gracefully exit cross-cultural discourse.

| <b>Core Theme</b>             | <b>Sub-Themes/Categories</b> | <b>Frequency (f)</b> | <b>Typified Illustrative Quote</b>                                                           |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Communicative Barriers</b> | Intergroup Anxiety           | 89                   | "I freeze because I worry they will judge my accent or misinterpret my cultural intentions." |
|                               | Linguistic Load              | Cognitive 64         | "Translating complex idioms in my head takes too long, so I just stay silent."               |
|                               | Cultural Ethnocentrism       | 39                   | "I often expect them to adjust to my way of speaking rather than trying to adapt to theirs." |

|                            |                                |    |                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Adaptive Strategies</b> | Non-Verbal Scaffolding         | 78 | <i>"When words fail, I rely heavily on smiles, nods, and hand gestures to avoid awkward silences."</i>    |
|                            | Approximation & Circumlocution | 55 | <i>"If I do not know the exact term, I describe the concept using simpler words I am confident with."</i> |

## DISCUSSION

The descriptive finding that Vietnamese English majors possess a moderate overall willingness to communicate aligns tightly with prior baseline scholarship conducted within similar Asian expansion-circle contexts (Yashima, 2002, 2021). The sharp decline in willingness from public academic tasks ( $M = 3.65$ ) to spontaneous stranger encounters ( $M = 2.58$ ) indicates that communication readiness is highly situational and deeply intertwined with the fear of negative evaluation (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). The regression model confirms that intercultural competence and self-perceived communication competence jointly account for more than half of the variance in communication behavior ( $R^2 = .524$ ), highlighting that structural language training alone is insufficient for authentic global interactions (Wei & Xu, 2021). This supports the foundational situational model proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1998), which highlights that an individual's immediate psychological state, rather than objective linguistic proficiency, ultimately dictates the choice to speak. Furthermore, the qualitative identification of intergroup anxiety and cognitive load as primary barriers reinforces contemporary evidence showing that communicative apprehension outside the classroom remains a severe obstacle in traditional pedagogical settings (Barrios & Napiórkowska, 2024).

The pedagogical implications of these findings necessitate a structural reform in the design of English language curricula in higher education. Universities must deliberately move beyond syntactic drilling to integrate explicit intercultural communicative competence frameworks into standard coursework (Huang, 2021). Educators should design safe, collaborative internationalized environments—such as virtual exchange programs, intercultural digital storytelling, and interactive media reflections—to systematically alleviate intergroup anxiety and mitigate real-time cognitive loads (Simões & Sangiamchit, 2023; Wang et al., 2026). Furthermore, instructional strategies must prioritize the validation of English as a Lingua Franca, encouraging students to view strategic compromises, non-verbal scaffolding, and circumlocution as legitimate professional assets rather than signs of linguistic deficiency (Boonsuk, 2026; Buelt, 2025).

## CONCLUSION

This study establishes that intercultural sensitivity and linguistic self-confidence are significant predictors of communication readiness among Vietnamese English majors, although spontaneous interaction remains a psychological hurdle. The main limitation is its reliance on a localized sample from a single public university, which restricts the generalizability of the quantitative data to broader demographic cohorts. Future research should implement longitudinal mixed-methods designs across multiple geographical locations and incorporate objective physiological measures of communication anxiety alongside self-reported scales to achieve a more robust understanding.

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