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Exploring Intercultural Communicative Competence and Intercultural Communicative Apprehension Development among Korean-Speaking Learners of English

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This study investigates the levels of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and intercultural communication apprehension (ICA) among Korean-speaking university students learning English (KSLs), and explores their interrelationship. Given inconsistent and contradictory findings in previous literature, this study further examines whether ICC and ICA vary according to demographic variables such as gender, academic year, and disciplinary background. Using previously validated Likert-scale instruments, data were collected from 71 KSLs enrolled in various departments. ICC was measured through six subdomains: Knowledge of self, Knowledge of others, Attitudes, Intercultural communicative skills, Intercultural cognitive skills, and Awareness. ICA was assessed separately using a dedicated scale focused on anxiety and avoidance in intercultural interactions. The findings revealed no significant differences in ICC or ICA based on demographic variables, suggesting that these characteristics alone may not be sufficient predictors. Among the ICC subdomains, Intercultural Communicative Skills showed the strongest correlation with overall ICC scores, underscoring the importance of communication performance in intercultural settings. While ICA exhibited wider variability than ICC, its sources remain unclear and require further investigation. These results highlight the need to go beyond surface-level demographics when designing intercultural education programs. Implications for curriculum design and future research are discussed.

[intercultural communicative competence (ICC)/intercultural communication apprehension (ICA)/ELF/World Englishes/Korean-speaking learners of English (KSLs)]

I. INTRODUCTION

Individuals with high intercultural communicative competence (ICC) possess the ability to transfer and adapt their existing communication strategies to new cultural contexts, facilitating effective mutual communication (Honen-Delmar & Rega, 2023). This competence is especially crucial in the context of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), where interactions frequently occur between non-native speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In these contexts, successful communication depends more on mutual understanding and adaptability than on strict adherence to native-speaker norms of English. Studies suggest that ELF users benefit from flexible language use, including code-switching, accommodation strategies, and pragmatic awareness, rather than rigidly following prescriptive grammatical rules (Jenkins, 2015). Thus, ICC enables individuals to navigate linguistic and cultural diversity effectively, fostering meaningful intercultural interactions.

Conversely, individuals with high intercultural communicative apprehension (ICA) experience heightened anxiety about cross-cultural communication, which can hinder their ability to engage in meaningful dialogue. ICA has been associated with communication avoidance and lower confidence in intercultural exchanges. At the same time, willingness to communicate (WTC) is influenced not only by ICA (Chau et al., 2024; Wang & Cionea, 2024) but also by ICC, as individuals with higher ICC tend to exhibit greater confidence and adaptability in intercultural interactions. Research indicates that language learners who fear making mistakes or facing cultural misunderstandings are more likely to withdraw from conversations, limiting their exposure to authentic communication opportunities (Horwitz, 2001). In ELF settings, where linguistic variation is the norm (Seidlhofer, 2011), high ICA may pose challenges, as the ability to embrace diverse accents, idiomatic expressions, and communication styles is critical for effective interaction. Therefore, effective communication in ELF contexts may be better facilitated when individuals exhibit lower levels of ICA and higher levels of ICC, as these factors contribute to greater adaptability and confidence in intercultural interactions.

This study aims to investigate the extent of ICC and ICA among Korean-speaking learners of English (KSLs) at the university level. While many studies suggest that individual differences, such as prior intercultural exposure, gender, and language proficiency, significantly influence ICC or ICA (Chau et al., 2024; Park, 2013; Wang & Yu, 2008), other research has found mixed or limited results in ICC or ICA levels across demographic factors, which include study duration, language backgrounds, and teaching experience (Hatakeyama, 2024; Hwang et al., 2024; Safa & Tofighi, 2022; Wang & Yu, 2008). This calls into question the assumption that certain background characteristics inherently contribute to higher ICC or lower ICA. In addition, although the importance of these two constructs has been acknowledged, research in Korea has predominantly focused on ICC or its sub-factor

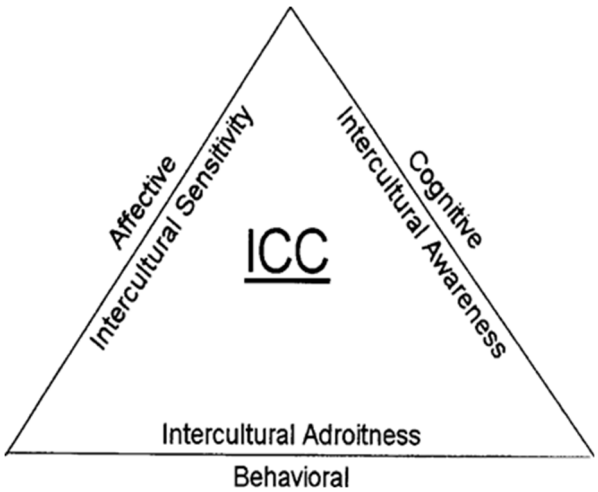
(intercultural sensitivity), with comparatively less attention given to ICA. For example, ICC has frequently been regarded as a latent outcome of various educational interventions (e.g., Chang, 2017; Lee, 2020; Park, 2013; Shin & Jeon, 2018), whereas ICA has received comparatively less attention in this regard. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the levels of both ICC and ICA among KSLs, as well as the influence of individual differences on these competencies. More critically, it examines the relationship between ICC and ICA, under the premise that individuals with higher ICC are likely to experience lower levels of apprehension in intercultural communication. Exploring this inverse relationship within an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) context can offer nuanced insights into how cognitive and affective domains of intercultural communication interact, thereby informing more targeted and effective pedagogical strategies for both language and intercultural education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Conceptualization of ICC and ICA

ICC is defined as the ability of an individual with intercultural competence to understand both their own and others' cultural norms, acknowledge and respect cultural differences, and even express positive emotions toward those differences, while also behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural interactions (Chen, 2014). In the triangular model of ICC (Chen & Starosta, 1996), the three sides of the triangular model represent the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of ICC.

FIGURE 1
A Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (Chen, 2014, p. 19)



As shown in Figure 1, intercultural communication competence (ICC) can be understood as consisting of three interrelated aspects. The COGNITIVE ASPECT refers to knowledge structures and cultural awareness that enable individuals to interpret intercultural messages appropriately. The AFFECTIVE ASPECT encompasses openness, empathy, and attitudes toward people from different cultural backgrounds. Finally, the BEHAVIORAL ASPECT includes both verbal and non-verbal skills that facilitate effective communication across cultures. Together, these three dimensions illustrate the multifaceted nature of ICC.

Scholars generally agree that all three dimensions are essential components of ICC. However, some researchers suggest that even if an individual possesses competence in one dimension, they are likely to develop abilities in the other dimensions as well (Feng & Cionea, 2024; Peng et al., 2015). This framework has been applied in various academic disciplines, demonstrating its interdisciplinary relevance. For instance, Byram (1997) explored ICC in the context of foreign language education, emphasizing intercultural citizenship education as a means to develop global communicative competence. More recently, a textbook analysis of Korea's middle school English curriculum (Yook & Kim, 2024) revealed a persistent gap between policy and practice, with overemphasis on native-speaker norms and insufficient support for intercultural attitudes—further underscoring the importance of embedding ICC meaningfully in language education. Beyond language education, ICC has also been studied in relation to social media, business/management, religion, and engineering, highlighting its broad applicability.

The concept of ICA, on the other hand, is grounded in communication apprehension theory, which was initially developed to explain general anxiety in communicative contexts. Unlike general communication apprehension, ICA is context-specific, meaning that an individual may feel confident in interactions within their own cultural group but experience significant anxiety when engaging with those from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds. As defined by Neuliep and McCroskey (1997), ICA refers to "the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated interaction with people of different groups, especially cultural and ethnic and/or racial groups" (p. 145). ICA is particularly relevant in discussions of ICC, as high levels of intercultural apprehension can hinder effective communication and engagement in intercultural settings (Chau et al., 2024; Feng & Cionea, 2024; Giles & Watson, 2008). While ICC focuses on the positive competencies needed for effective intercultural communication, ICA specifically measures the negative, apprehensive emotional aspects of these interactions. Given this, fostering high ICC and low ICA is particularly important in ELF contexts, where individuals frequently interact with speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Since ELF communication requires adaptability, confidence, and openness to different perspectives, reducing ICA while enhancing ICC can facilitate more effective and meaningful intercultural interactions.

2. Individual Differences in ICC and ICA

Many studies suggest that individual differences, such as prior intercultural exposure, gender, and language proficiency, significantly influence ICC and ICA. Chau et al. (2024) found that students with greater prior exposure to intercultural experiences tend to exhibit higher ICC and lower ICA, as they are more accustomed to engaging with diverse cultural perspectives. Similarly, multicultural contact experience has also been explored as a factor, with some studies indicating that it enhances cross-cultural understanding and reduces biases (Park, 2013). Disciplinary background has also been identified as a factor influencing ICC development. Wang and Yu (2008) examined ICC levels among non-English major students in Chinese universities, finding inconsistent ICC growth patterns across different student groups. These findings collectively suggest that individual background characteristics play a significant role in shaping ICC and ICA, influencing how individuals engage in intercultural interactions.

However, other research has produced mixed or inconclusive results regarding the impact of demographic factors on ICC and ICA. While longer exposure to intercultural education theoretically allows students to develop greater ICC, some studies suggest that mere exposure without structured engagement does not necessarily translate to improved competence. For example, multicultural contact experience has also been explored as a factor, with a study indicating that study duration—the length of time students spends engaging with Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture by Council of Europe—has been investigated as a potential predictor of ICC, yet findings have been inconsistent (Hatakeyama, 2024). Similarly, Hwang et al. (2024) examined the impact of language backgrounds on ICC development and found that while multilingual individuals often demonstrate higher ICC, the effect varies depending on how actively individuals engage in intercultural exchanges rather than just their linguistic background. Also, Safa and Tofighi (2022) examined the impact of teaching experience on ICC development and found no significant differences based on the amount of teaching experience. Their findings suggest that simply having more teaching experience does not necessarily lead to higher levels of ICC, highlighting the need for structured intercultural training regardless of experience level. This suggests that language background alone is not a consistent predictor of ICC development and that other factors, such as media exposure, social interactions, and structured learning environments, may be more influential. Considering the conflicting findings in prior research, it is essential to further investigate how these patterns manifest among KSLs. Identifying the specific factors influencing ICC development and ICA reduction among KSLs can help educators design targeted interventions that address their unique challenges in intercultural communication.

3. Educational Approach to ICC and ICA

Recognizing the importance of ICC and ICA, these concepts have been widely incorporated into educational settings. Numerous studies have demonstrated that various educational approaches have been effective in enhancing ICC or alleviating ICA, showing that integrating intercultural learning experiences into language education can foster students' confidence in intercultural interactions while reducing apprehension. For instance, Hwang et al. (2024) investigated the role of out-of-class intercultural engagement, demonstrating that both media consumption and interpersonal interactions contribute to ICC development, with media playing a particularly significant role. Their findings suggest that exposure to intercultural content, whether through direct interaction or digital platforms, can shape students' attitudes and abilities in intercultural communication. Other studies have explored structured interventions designed to enhance ICC while mitigating ICA. Chau et al. (2024) examined the effects of online collaborative learning, revealing that students who engaged in guided intercultural exchanges experienced significant ICC growth and ICA reduction. Similarly, Peng et al., (2015) conducted a comprehensive evaluation of ICC among Chinese college students, emphasizing the importance of intercultural awareness, knowledge, and communication skills as key components of ICC. Lee (2020) discusses the Cross-Cultural Distance Learning program, which connected Korean and Japanese students through digital platforms, allowing them to engage in authentic intercultural exchanges and experience diverse communicative styles, developing their ICC over time. Based on the authors' experiences as Korean faculty in Canada, Shin and Jeon (2018) highlighted the role of experiential learning in helping teachers develop their own intercultural understanding. A case study of Korean teacher candidates in a short-term community-based service-learning program in Canada illustrates how such experiences enhance their ability to foster intercultural competence in students. The study ultimately argues that linguistic and cultural diversity must be a core component of English teacher education in South Korea’s increasingly diverse EFL classrooms. Also, Yu and Yu (2024) highlighted the role of “Cross-Cultural Management” courses in enhancing ICC. Their study finds that students who participate in simulated group projects, self-assessments, and reflective essays demonstrate significant improvement in the knowledge dimension of cultural intelligence, an indirect measure of ICC. Furthermore, qualitative findings suggest that such courses increase students' awareness, interest, and motivation for intercultural communication. However, the study also notes that a lack of work experience makes it challenging for students to apply classroom learning to real-world business contexts. These findings emphasize the importance of structured experiential learning and instructor guidance in helping students transfer intercultural knowledge to professional settings.

Additionally, emphasize that role-playing, simulated intercultural dialogues, and

multilingual classroom interactions are effective tools for developing ICC without requiring study abroad experiences. DeWitt et al. (2022) discuss the use of virtual reality-based role-playing scenarios to enhance intercultural competence in Mandarin as a Foreign Language education. The study emphasizes that role-playing allows students to immerse themselves in intercultural interactions, which helps develop empathy, adaptability, and effective communication strategies in real-life settings. Similarly, Chau et al. (2024) highlighted the use of simulated intercultural communication activities in online learning settings to enhance students' ICC while reducing ICA. Their study demonstrates that exposure to various simulated communication tasks enables learners to practice navigating intercultural interactions in a controlled environment, thereby improving their competence. Furthermore, Hwang et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of multilingual environments in developing ICC. Their study finds that students who engage in multilingual interactions, whether in person or through digital communication, develop stronger cultural awareness and communicative flexibility. The research also suggests that exposure to diverse linguistic resources fosters intercultural engagement, leading to enhanced ICC and reduced ICA. These findings collectively highlight the effectiveness of digital collaboration, project-based learning, and simulated cultural immersion as structured and accessible approaches to developing ICC and alleviating ICA in educational settings. By incorporating these methods into curricula, educators can create inclusive learning environments that equip students with the skills and confidence needed to engage successfully in ICC.

Previous studies have suggested that factors such as discipline, gender, and academic year play important roles in shaping students' ICC and ICA. For example, Wang and Yu (2008) found significant disciplinary differences in ICC levels, while Park (2013) reported gender-related variations in intercultural sensitivity. Academic year has also been associated with different levels of intercultural exposure and communication anxiety, reflecting the cumulative impact of educational experiences (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Kim & Kim, 2016). However, relatively few studies have examined these factors simultaneously within the Korean university context. Given these gaps in the literature, a comparative analysis of ICC and ICA levels among Korean university students across disciplines, gender, and academic year is necessary to develop a clearer understanding of how intercultural communication competence and apprehension manifest in this context. Therefore, drawing on prior research, this study seeks to examine the relationships between ICC and ICA in KSLs and explore how demographic factors influence these constructs. This research aims to provide empirical insights into the development of ICC and the mitigation of ICA among KSLs, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of intercultural education and training programs. In the current study, the extent of ICC and ICA is explored among KSLs with diverse academic backgrounds and biological genders, addressing the following research questions:

1. In what ways do ICC and ICA levels vary with respect to academic discipline, gender, and academic year among Korean-speaking learners of English (KSLs)?
2. What is the nature of the relationship between ICC and ICA, and how does it influence the communicative engagement of KSLs in intercultural contexts?

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

A total of 71 KSLs took part in this study. As presented in Table 1, participants were recruited on a voluntary basis from a range of academic departments at a university in South Korea. The largest group was from the English Language and Literature and English Education departments (n = 30, 42.3%), followed by the Tourism & English Interpretation and Translation Convergence department (n = 29, 40.8%). The remaining participants came from other humanities and social sciences disciplines, such as Business Administration, Education, and Tourism Management (n = 12, 16.9%). This departmental representation is important for examining intercultural communication competency, as students from this area of studies are often exposed to diverse cultures and communication practices (Safa & Tofighi, 2022). In terms of academic year, *lowerclassmen* (Freshmen and Sophomores) accounted for 41 students (57.8%), while upperclassmen (Juniors and Seniors) comprised 30 students (42.2%). Regarding gender distribution, 43 were female (60.6%) and 28 were male (39.4%). These diverse students from different departments, academic stages, and gender backgrounds, offer a comprehensive view on intercultural communication competency among university students in Korea.

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	N (%)
Field of Study	
English Language and Literature (28); English Education (2)	30(42.3)
Tourism & English Interpretation and Translation Convergence	29(40.8)
(Else) Administration (1); Business Administration (2); Chinese Language and Literature (1) German Language and Literature (1); History (1) Tourism Management (3); Education (3)	12(16.9)
Academic Year	
Lowerclassmen	41(57.8)
Upperclassmen	30(42.2)
Gender	
Female	43(60.6)
Male	28(39.4)
Total	71(100)

2. Procedure

The survey was conducted in the fall semester of 2024 with students from three different course sections. Participants were given 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire, which was administered via Google Forms through a QR code. Prior to beginning the survey, students were instructed to respond honestly, and an incentive was provided upon completion to encourage participation.

3. Measurement

To measure ICC and ICA, this study utilized previously validated 5-point Likert scale questionnaires, which have demonstrated strong reliability and validity in multiple studies. For ICC, the study adopted the questionnaire developed by Wu et al. (2013) and applied by Peng et al. (2015), which showed high reliability ($\propto$ = .934). This instrument consists of 28 items categorized into six constructs: Knowledge of self; Knowledge of others; Attitudes; Intercultural communicative skills; Intercultural cognitive skills; Awareness. Example items include: "understanding native social norms (knowledge of self)," "understanding foreign knowledge of history (knowledge of others)," "willingness to respect foreigners' lifestyles and customs (attitudes)," "the skill of treating foreigners politely (intercultural communicative skills)," "the skill of learning how to manage cultural conflicts (intercultural cognitive skills)," "realizing the differences in cultural identity when communicating with foreigners (awareness),"

TABLE 2
Reliability of Questionnaires

Scale	# of items	Cronbach's α
Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)	28	.934
1 Knowledge of self	3	.607
2 Knowledge of others	7	.852
3 Attitudes	3	.889
4 Intercultural communicative skills	9	.841
5 Intercultural cognitive skills	3	.737
6 Awareness	3	.815
Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA)	14	.946

For ICA, the study employed the Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA) developed by Neuliep and McCroskey (1997), which includes 14 items measuring communication-related anxiety in intercultural interactions ($\propto$ = .946). Example items include: "I am tense and nervous while interacting with people from different ethnic/racial groups," "I have no fear of speaking up in a conversation with a person from a different ethnic/racial group," and "Communicating with people from different ethnic/racial

groups makes me feel uncomfortable." The reliability of each questionnaire and constructs included are shown as in Table 2.

Once finishing data collection, mean scores were calculated separately for each of the six constructs of ICC to assess students' intercultural competence in different dimensions. For ICA, on the other hand, since seven items contained negative wording, these were reverse-coded before calculating the final mean score to ensure accurate interpretation of apprehension levels.

The processed data were then analyzed to examine the relationship between ICC and ICA among participant groups. For comparisons by gender and academic year, each group contained more than 30 participants, allowing the assumption of normality based on the Central Limit Theorem. In addition, Levene's test for equality of variances showed no significant differences (p-values ranging from .260 to .998 for academic year and .161 to .669 for gender), indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met. Therefore, independent samples t-tests were conducted for these two variables. However, for the field of study variable, each subgroup had fewer than 30 participants. As a result, a non-parametric approach was adopted. Specifically, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to compare ICC and ICA levels across majors, as it does not assume normality and is appropriate for small, uneven group sizes.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Differences in ICC and ICA Levels by Academic Discipline, Gender, and Academic Year

To address the first research question, ICC and ICA levels were compared across demographic features. Table 3 shows that there are no statistically significant differences in ICC mean scores based on field of study, academic year, or gender, indicating that participants exhibited similar levels of ICC regardless of these characteristics. Furthermore, ICC consisted of six sub-factors, yet no significant differences were found among participant groups in any of these areas. This reinforces the idea that ICC develops consistently across diverse demographic groups, independent of academic background or personal characteristics. This finding implies that ICC development may not be significantly influenced by these demographic characteristics, possibly due to shared educational experiences, exposure to intercultural contexts, or similar levels of engagement in intercultural communication.

The findings of this study reinforce the notion that ICC develops consistently across diverse demographic groups, regardless of academic background or personal characteristics.

This aligns with prior research suggesting that ICC is a multidimensional construct in which the development of one component often leads to growth in others (Feng & Cionea, 2024; Peng et al., 2015). The generally consistent ICC levels observed in this study indicate that ICC is not solely determined by demographic characteristics but is instead influenced by broader educational and experiential factors (Hatakeyama, 2024; Hwang et al., 2024).

The overall ICC mean of 3.62 suggests that KSLs demonstrate a moderate to high level of ICC. However, an examination of sub-factors reveals that "Knowledge of Others" (ICC2) had the lowest mean score (3.29), indicating that KSL learners may feel less confident in their ability to understand and interpret different cultural perspectives. This finding aligns with prior studies suggesting that cultural awareness and knowledge of diverse perspectives are often underdeveloped among language learners unless explicitly emphasized in instruction (Byram, 1997; Yu & Yu, 2024). These results suggest that while learners may be developing general intercultural skills, they may still struggle with deeper cultural comprehension and perspective-taking. Structured interventions, such as cross-cultural engagement projects or experiential learning programs, may be necessary to enhance learners' ability to interpret diverse perspectives effectively (Shin & Jeon, 2018).

TABLE 3
ICC Mean Comparison by Demographic Features

Variables	Sub-Scale	*M* ± *SD*	*t* or χ^2	*p*
Field of Study	English Language & Literature, English Education	3.8 ± 0.62	0.682	.711
	Tourism English	3.8 ± 0.56		
	Humanities & Social Sciences	3.5 ± 0.61		
Academic Year	Lowerclassmen	3.6 ± 0.47	0.097	.923
	Upperclassmen	3.6 ± 0.44		
Gender	Female	3.7 ± 0.48	-1.048	.298
	Male	3.5 ± 0.43		

Regarding ICA, it is important to note that higher ICA scores indicate lower anxiety, as the survey items were either phrased positively (e.g., "Generally, I am comfortable interacting with a group of people from different ethnic racial groups.") or reverse-coded for negatively worded items (e.g., "I am tense and nervous while interacting with people from different ethnic/racial groups."). Thus, higher scores reflect greater confidence and ease in intercultural interactions rather than increased apprehension.

As shown in Table 4, the ICA results also showed no statistically significant differences based on field of study, academic year, or gender. Although minor variations were observed, none were substantial enough to indicate meaningful differences between groups. This suggests that, across different demographic groups, participants generally experienced similar levels of comfort in intercultural interactions.

However, the lack of statistically significant change in ICA observed in this study

highlights a persistent challenge in intercultural education: intercultural apprehension is not easily mitigated through short-term interventions. Drawing on Neuliep and McCroskey's (1997) framework, ICA is understood as a form of context-specific communication anxiety that arises particularly in cross-cultural interactions, rather than in general communicative situations. This specificity suggests that ICA may endure even when individuals begin to acquire intercultural knowledge or display attitudinal openness.

In light of this, several studies have emphasized that long-term, structured intercultural engagement is essential for the meaningful reduction of ICA. For instance, Chau et al. (2024) found that guided and sustained online intercultural collaboration—as opposed to brief exchanges—significantly reduced students' anxiety in intercultural communication. Similarly, Hwang et al. (2024) argue that regular engagement in multilingual, multicultural environments foster a sense of communicative ease over time, helping students move beyond surface-level comfort to genuine confidence in intercultural encounters. These studies collectively underscore that simply increasing exposure to diversity may be insufficient unless supported by structured facilitation, reflection, and emotional reinforcement.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while short-term programs may foster aspects of ICC such as cultural awareness or knowledge of others, ICA reduction likely demands repeated, emotionally safe, and reflective opportunities for engagement. In the context of ELF, where interactions are marked by variability in accent, idiomatic use, and discourse norms, confidence and low apprehension are especially vital for communicative success. Thus, intercultural education must not only target knowledge transmission but also address learners' affective needs, particularly in anxiety-inducing intercultural settings.

TABLE 4
ICA Mean Comparison by Demographic Features

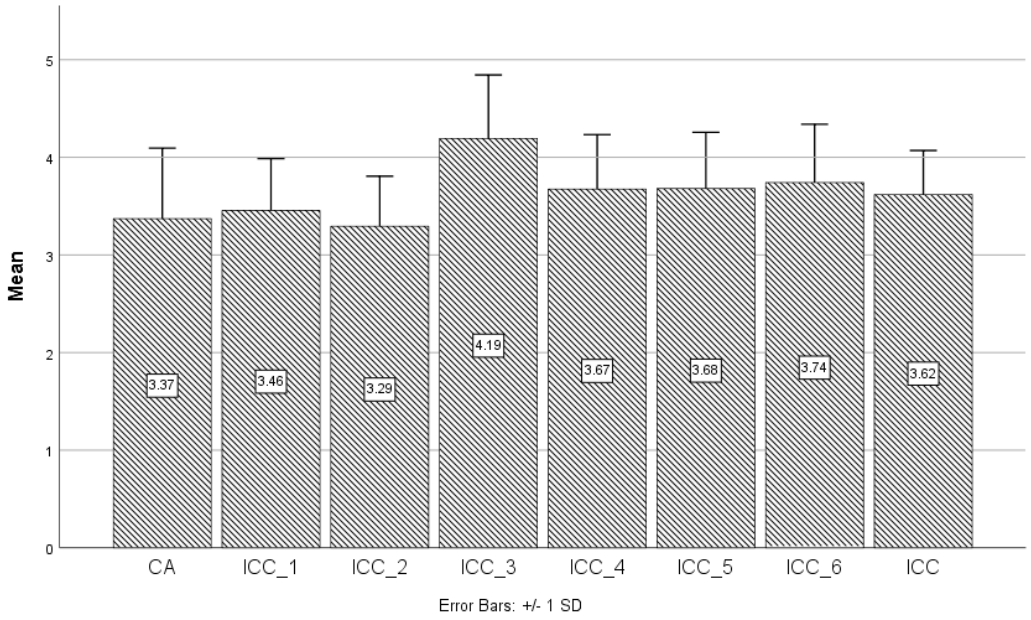
Variables	Sub-Scale	*M* ± *SD*	*t* or χ^2	*p*
Field of Study	English Language & Literature, English Education	3.5 ± 0.85	2.286	.329
	Tourism English	3.2 ± 0.61		
	Humanities & Social Sciences	3.5 ± 0.58		
Academic Year	Lowerclassmen	3.6 ± 0.47	-1.199	.235
	Upperclassmen	3.6 ± 0.44		
Gender	Female	3.3 ± 0.69	0.672	.504
	Male	3.4 ± 0.78		

Since no significant differences were found across participant characteristics, the overall means of ICC, its sub-factors, and ICA were compared as in Figure 2. The results revealed that the overall ICC mean was 3.62, indicating a moderate to high level of ICC among KSLs. Among the six ICC sub-factors, Attitudes (ICC_3) had the highest mean score (4.19), suggesting that KSLs exhibited a strong willingness to engage with and appreciate cultural diversity. In contrast, Knowledge of others (ICC_2) had the lowest mean (3.29), indicating

that KSLs relatively lacked confidence in their ability to understand and interpret different cultural perspectives. Additionally, other ICC sub-factors showed relatively balanced scores, reflecting a well-rounded yet slightly varied development. The mean ICA score was 3.37, a moderate level of intercultural communication confidence rather than apprehension. Since all ICA items were either positively framed, or reverse-coded in the analysis, a higher score indicates greater ease and willingness to engage in intercultural communication. The findings indicate a generally consistent level of ICC and ICA among KSLs.

The consistency in ICC and ICA levels among KSL learners supports the idea that intercultural competence is not a singular ability but a combination of various interconnected skills (Feng & Cionea, 2024; Peng et al., 2015). This perspective underscores the importance of integrating multiple components of ICC—including awareness, knowledge, and communicative skills—into educational interventions.

FIGURE 2
Mean Comparison among Variables



As presented in Figure 2, the demographic comparisons revealed generally consistent ICC and ICA levels across academic discipline, gender, and academic year. While students demonstrated relatively high scores in attitudinal aspects of ICC, their knowledge of others remained comparatively weaker. These findings highlight the need for ELF-based intercultural education to reinforce cognitive dimensions of ICC while building on students' positive attitudes. This summary provides a basis for transitioning to the analysis of RQ2 in

the following subsection.

2. Relationship between Intercultural Competence and Communication Apprehension among KSLs

To answer the second research question, correlation analysis was carried out to present the relationships among ICC, its six sub-factors (ICC1-ICC6), and ICA. As shown in Table 5, the overall ICC score showed strong positive correlations with all six sub-factors (ranging from .670 to .897, $p < .01$), indicating that each sub-component contributes significantly to the overall ICC construct.

Among the sub-factors, ICC4 (Intercultural Communicative Skills) exhibited the highest correlation with ICC ($r = .897$, $p < .01$), suggesting that communicative skills play a crucial role in shaping overall intercultural competence. The inter-correlations among sub-factors were also significant, with ICC4 (Intercultural Communicative Skills) and ICC 5 (Intercultural Cognitive Skills) displaying the strongest relationship ($r = .767$, $p < .01$). ICC5 (Intercultural Cognitive Skills) and ICC6 (Awareness) displaying a strong relationship ($r = .717$, $p < .01$). These findings reinforce the idea that ICC is a multi-dimensional construct, where different aspects of competence work together to influence intercultural ability in general.

TABLE 5
Correlation between ICC and ICA

	ICC	ICC1	ICC2	ICC3	ICC4	ICC5	ICC6	ICA
ICC	1	.670**	.747**	.777**	.897**	.782**	.838**	.416**
ICC1		1	.519**	.462**	.458**	.424**	.595**	.304**
ICC2			1	.492**	.488**	.354**	.553**	.290*
ICC3				1	.658**	.547**	.616**	.320**
ICC4					1	.767**	.680**	.345**
ICC5						1	.717**	.371**
ICC6							1	.838**
ICA								1

Note. ICC1 = Knowledge of self; ICC2 = Knowledge of others; ICC3 = Attitudes; ICC4 = Intercultural communicative skills; ICC5 = Intercultural cognitive skills; ICC6 = Awareness
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

This strong correlation between Intercultural Communicative Skills (ICC4) and overall ICC ($r = .897$, $p < .01$) aligns with prior research emphasizing the central role of communication skills in intercultural competence development (DeWitt et al., 2022; Lee, 2020). Since communicative competence enables individuals to bridge cultural gaps and engage in effective intercultural interactions, enhancing students' communicative skills may be one of the most effective ways to strengthen overall ICC. This supports previous findings

that simulated intercultural communication tasks, role-playing, and multilingual classroom interactions can significantly enhance ICC (Chau et al., 2024; Hwang et al., 2024).

In examining the relationship between ICC and ICA, a moderately positive correlation was found (r = .416, p < .01). Given that students with higher ICC tend to report greater confidence in intercultural communication, this suggests that individuals with greater intercultural competence tend to feel more confident and less anxious in intercultural settings. Since the ICA scale was scored positively (i.e., higher scores indicate lower apprehension), this result suggests that individuals who perceive themselves as interculturally competent are also more comfortable engaging in cross-cultural interactions. Among the ICC sub-factors, ICC6 (Awareness) shows the strongest correlation with ICA (r = .838, p < .01), indicating that students who are more aware of cultural differences tend to experience lower apprehension. This suggests that cultural awareness may be a key factor in reducing communication anxiety, as greater awareness might foster more adaptability and confidence in intercultural settings. Other ICC sub-factors also show significant but weaker correlations with ICA, with ICC2 (Knowledge of Others) showing the lowest correlation (r = .290, p < .05) and ICC5 (Intercultural Cognitive Skills) displaying a slightly higher correlation (r = .371, p < .01).

This suggests that cultural awareness may be a critical factor in reducing ICA. This is consistent with research indicating that greater awareness of cultural differences fosters adaptability and confidence in intercultural settings (Giles & Watson, 2008; Peng et al., 2015). Given that ICA is rooted in communication apprehension theory (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997), these findings reinforce the need for explicit strategies to reduce anxiety and enhance self-efficacy in intercultural interactions. Educational interventions incorporating self-assessments, reflective essays, and experiential learning programs have been shown to be effective in boosting ICC while mitigating ICA (Peng et al., 2015; Yu & Yu, 2024). Taken together, these results highlight that while previous studies have emphasized the general role of cultural awareness in ICC development, this study extends the discussion by demonstrating how such factors manifest specifically among KSLs in ELF contexts. By identifying both strengths (e.g., positive attitudes) and weaknesses (e.g., limited knowledge of others) across demographic groups, the findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of ICC and ICA. This underscores the importance of targeted pedagogical interventions in ELF-oriented higher education settings, thereby clarifying the unique contribution of this study to literature.

V. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to assess the levels of ICC and ICA among KSLs and to examine the

interrelationships between ICC and ICA. In doing so, it addressed a critical gap in the literature by providing a comparative analysis of ICC and ICA levels across different academic disciplines, gender, and academic years. Prior research has established that ICC is a multidimensional construct (Feng & Cionea, 2024; Peng et al., 2015), yet the extent to which individual differences shape ICC and ICA remain inconclusive (Hatakeyama, 2024; Hwang et al., 2024). The current study contributes to this ongoing discourse by empirically examining the degree to which demographic factors influence ICC and ICA among Korean university students.

The findings indicate that ICC develops consistently across diverse demographic groups, suggesting that it may not be solely dependent on traditional individual difference variables such as academic background or gender. Instead, external factors such as prior intercultural exposure and language proficiency emerged as stronger predictors of ICA. Furthermore, while KSL learners demonstrated a moderate to high level of ICC, Knowledge of Others (ICC2) was identified as the weakest sub-factor, suggesting a relative lack of confidence in understanding diverse cultural perspectives. This finding highlights a critical area for educational intervention, particularly in enhancing learners' cross-cultural interpretative skills.

In exploring the second research question, this study confirmed that Intercultural Communicative Skills (ICC4) exhibited the strongest correlation with overall ICC ($r = .897$, $p < .01$), reinforcing the crucial role of communicative abilities in shaping ICC development. Furthermore, Awareness (ICC6) showed the strongest relationship with ICA ($r = .838$, $p < .01$), suggesting that heightened awareness of cultural differences plays a key role in mitigating communication anxiety—a finding that aligns with Neuliep & McCroskey's (1997) framework and subsequent studies (Chau et al., 2024). These results underscore the interdependent nature of ICC and ICA, where the development of one can contribute to the alleviation of the other. Educationally, this suggests that fostering ICC is not just about skill acquisition, but also about reducing fear and hesitation in multicultural settings. In line with previous studies (DeWitt et al., 2022; Hwang et al., 2024), strategies such as role-playing, multilingual group work, and simulated intercultural scenarios should be further incorporated into ELF-oriented language education.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that future research should address. First, while it explored ICC and ICA among Korean university students, the findings may not be generalized to other cultural or linguistic contexts. Future studies should incorporate a more diverse sample of ELF learners to examine whether similar patterns emerge across different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Second, this study primarily relied on quantitative survey data, which, while useful for identifying trends, does not capture the nuanced experiences of learners in intercultural settings. Future research should adopt qualitative methods, such as interviews or discourse analysis, to provide deeper insight

into the lived experiences of learners navigating intercultural communication challenges. At the same time, the findings also carry pedagogical implications for ELF-oriented intercultural education. Specifically, the strong association observed between cultural awareness (ICC6) and lower ICA levels suggests that instructional design should prioritize activities that build learners' awareness of cultural diversity while reducing communication-related anxiety. Reflection-based learning tasks, awareness-raising exercises, and simulated intercultural experiences could be integrated into language curricula to help students not only enhance their intercultural skills but also develop the emotional readiness needed to communicate effectively across cultures.

In sum, this study provides empirical evidence of the dynamic relationship between ICC and ICA, rather than attributing differences solely to demographic characteristics, highlighting how communicative competence and cultural awareness jointly shape learners' readiness for intercultural engagement. By focusing on both skill and affect, this study points to the importance of targeted, experience-based pedagogy in cultivating not just multilingual proficiency, but also emotionally resilient, globally competent individuals. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how ICC and ICA manifest among KSLs and offer valuable insights for enhancing intercultural education and training programs.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Levels: Tertiary

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