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Investigating the Connection between Intercultural Communication Competence and Willingness to Communicate: A Case of Vietnamese EFL English Majors

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Abstract. The global working environment demands understanding international affairs and the potential labour force; therefore, it necessitates possessing intercultural communication competencies. Built on the existing findings on this aspect worldwide, this study investigates whether EFL learners' experiences in communicating with foreigners impact their intercultural communication competence (ICC) and willingness to communicate (WTC) among Vietnamese English students. The study was based on a survey of 109 participants at a university in HCM, Vietnam; the collected data were then analysed and interpreted. It has been found that there is an impact on students' ICC experiences and their knowledge of WTC. These findings, to some extent, consolidate other research and clarify the need to facilitate EFL learners with expertise in intercultural communication.

Keywords. Intercultural communication; Intercultural competence; willing to communicate

Introduction

The preeminence of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in global economic, political, and intellectual domains has significantly transformed the objectives of language instruction worldwide (Jenkins, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2001). Successful English instruction is no longer limited to enhancing grammar or linguistic proficiency; instead, it now emphasises the development of communicative competence, which enables learners to function effectively across diverse cultural contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980). Consequently, contemporary EFL instruction prioritises two fundamental constructs: intercultural competence (IC), which enables learners to interact appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations (Deardorff, 2006), and willingness to communicate (WTC), which reflects learners' readiness to engage in communication using a second language (L2) (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Intercultural competence, also known as intercultural communicative competence (ICC), is defined by scholars as the capacity to interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from various cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Deardorff's (2006) process model emphasises intercultural competence as a synthesis of attitudes (respect, openness), knowledge/comprehension, and abilities (interpreting, relating), which eventually contribute to both internal and external outcomes. The concept of willingness to communicate,

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developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998), is defined as "a readiness to enter into a discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (p. 547). This concept has shown superior predictive capability for actual L2 usage compared to motivation or anxiety in isolation.

In Asian EFL contexts, the relationship between these two constructs is particularly salient. Learners frequently demonstrate significant grammatical proficiency yet exhibit a limited behavioural inclination towards spontaneous communication (Feng et al., 2024). Vietnam, in particular, presents a unique context. In a global and multicultural work environment, employees need professional knowledge, specialised skills, and effective cross-cultural communication to enhance their overall capacity. Vietnam's labour market is dynamic, and employees must adjust to diverse workplace settings. Therefore, possessing intercultural communication competence is essential. Thu Dau Mot University, under pressure, introduces students to intercultural communication through various course modules within the English language programme. Students participate in intercultural communication courses and internship excursions, during which they interact with peers in multicultural settings. However, whether they actually possess this ability is still uncertain, and their willingness to communicate depends on multiple factors.

To improve students' employability after graduation and examine whether they possess intercultural communication potential—along with whether this competence influences their willingness to communicate—this initiative becomes important, requiring recommendations for enhancements that maximise students' capacity. To explore the extent to which these factors influence students' competence, this study aims to investigate how students' prior communication experiences affect their intercultural communication competence (ICC) and how ICC, in turn, impacts their willingness to communicate (WTC). Specifically, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do communication experiences influence students' ICC and WTC?
2. Which components of their ICC affect their WTC?

Literature review

Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) refers to an individual's ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness (Fantini, 2006; Byram, 1997). Byram's seminal model (1997) is still the most widely used theoretical basis for ICC. It lists four important parts: **knowledge**, **skills**, **attitudes**, and **critical cultural awareness**. Subsequent research confirms that these components interact dynamically, forming a holistic competence rather than independent traits (Dombi, 2020; Mahmud & Wong, 2016).

Knowledge refers to understanding one's own and others' cultural systems, worldviews, and communicative conventions. It enables individuals to interpret meaning and avoid ethnocentric judgements (Byram, 1997; Xian & Li, 2024). In EFL contexts, knowledge encompasses familiarity with both the target language and native cultural frameworks, thereby shaping learners' global perspectives (Huynh et al., 2024).

Skills encompass the ability to interpret and relate cultural meanings and engage in appropriate communicative behaviours. These include empathy, adaptability, and effective use of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies (Fantini, 2006; Mahmud & Wong, 2016). Research indicates that being able to communicate effectively with people from other cultures enhances learners' confidence and reduces their anxiety (Ilyas, 2021).

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Attitudes involve openness, curiosity, and respect for cultural diversity. A positive intercultural attitude encourages learners to suspend judgement, appreciate difference, and engage constructively with culturally dissimilar others (Byram, 1997). Attitudes also provide the motivational basis for acquiring knowledge and developing skills (Aguiar et al., 2020).

Awareness, sometimes referred to as consciousness or reflection, is the metacognitive component that allows individuals to evaluate and adapt their communicative behaviours according to cultural contexts (Fantini, 2007; Zhang et al., 2025; and Dusi et al., 2014). Awareness develops through direct intercultural encounters and self-reflection on one's cultural identity, biases, and assumptions. It enables ethical, respectful engagement in global communication.

Willingness to Communicate

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) WTC is viewed not as a static personality trait but as a contextual and fluid construct. MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) heuristic model positions WTC at the apex of a pyramid of influences, immediately determined by state self-confidence—a combination of perceived communicative competence and a lack of communication apprehension—and the desire to communicate. This model emphasises WTC as both a stable trait and a context-dependent state, indicating that learners' willingness to communicate varies depending on their social environment, interlocutors, and familiarity with the topic (Cameron, 2013). Studies consistently demonstrate a positive correlation between perceived competence and WTC (MacIntyre & Ayers-Glassey, 2020). Learners' readiness to speak increases when they feel linguistically and communicatively prepared. In the field of second or foreign language (L2) learning, WTC was extended by MacIntyre et al. (1998) as a multidimensional construct reflecting learners' intention to initiate communication in the target language, influenced by psychological, linguistic, and situational factors. WTC is now regarded as a key predictor of L2 communicative performance and successful language acquisition (Geng & Wang, 2022).

Factors Influencing WTC in EFL Contexts

Recent empirical evidence corroborates the multidimensional characteristics of WTC. Psychological factors—such as self-efficacy, perceived communicative competence, and L2 anxiety—are consistent predictors (Leeming et al., 2024; Amalia et al., 2024). Leeming et al. (2024) found that both speaking self-efficacy and perceived competence significantly influenced learners' task-based oral performance, with willingness to communicate (WTC) acting as a mediating variable. Similarly, Amalia et al. (2024) identified motivation, learner agency, classroom environment, and communication confidence as dominant predictors of WTC in Indonesian EFL learners.

Sociocultural and contextual dimensions also shape learners' communicative readiness. A study on Vietnamese EFL students reported that WTC was at a moderate level overall, constrained by both individual factors (confidence and proficiency) and contextual ones (classroom climate and teacher approach) (Duyen, 2023). Similarly, Hu and Wang (2023) demonstrated that teachers' immediate behaviours—including verbal and nonverbal proximity—significantly enhanced learners' WTC and engagement, accounting for nearly 89% of the variance in WTC.

Affective and motivational constructs also play key roles. Research across multiple contexts indicates that motivation, enjoyment, and positive attitudes toward communication enhance learners' WTC, whereas communication apprehension or large class sizes may hinder it (Ebn Abbasi & Nushi, 2022). Yang and Lian (2023) found that WTC mediates the relationship

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between self-efficacy and pragmatic language production, positioning it as a crucial mechanism linking psychological traits to communicative output.

WTC in the Vietnamese EFL Context

Although global research on WTC has expanded, studies in Vietnam remain limited. Vietnamese EFL learners often exhibit moderate WTC levels due to limited authentic exposure, teacher-centred pedagogy, and a fear of losing face in public communication (Duyen, 2023). These findings align with Asian cultural communication norms that emphasise collectivism and avoid negative evaluations (Peng, 2014). Nevertheless, as Vietnamese education policies increasingly promote communicative English teaching, WTC has become a pedagogical priority, especially for English majors preparing for intercultural interaction.

Previous studies

A growing number of studies in the last decade have investigated the relationship between ICC and WTC in foreign/second language contexts, especially among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

Various studies support a positive relationship between IC and WTC, particularly in foreign language education. Yashima (2002) and Peng & Woodrow (2010) found that learners with higher IC tend to demonstrate stronger motivation, confidence, and lower anxiety—factors that directly enhance their WTC. Specifically, positive intercultural attitudes reduce fear of negative evaluation, intercultural knowledge increases communicative self-efficacy, and skills in interpreting and relating help manage uncertainty in intercultural interactions. Awareness and appropriate behaviour further translate understanding into confident action, making learners more likely to engage in authentic communication.

Dombi (2021) suggested that ICC interacts with factors such as communication apprehension, motivation, and self-perceived communicative competence—variables closely related to WTC—but does not report direct statistical linkages between ICC and WTC, focusing instead on broader models of communicative adaptation. Another quantitative study indicated that EFL learners with higher ICC scores tended to report greater use of communication techniques and greater willingness to engage in communication, although the authors note the limitation of using self-reported measures and a lack of behavioural observation to reinforce these findings (Darmajanti et al., 2022)

Peng (2024) consolidates twenty years of research on willingness to communicate (WTC) in second language contexts. Peng identifies *social psychological, cultural, dynamic, and ecological perspectives* on WTC, but notes that direct empirical connections between WTC and intercultural competence constructs remain limited and underdeveloped in mainstream WTC research. Aladini (2025) reported that intercultural competence enabled learners to navigate cultural differences, while WTC supported confidence in using English and sustained motivation during language learning activities. This study's findings suggest a mutually reinforcing relationship; however, its cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation and calls for longitudinal research to investigate how ICC and WTC develop over time. A study of Chinese international students in Malaysia found that collectivist cultural norms and concerns about "face" affected their willingness to communicate in English. This illustrates how the broader cultural context influences learners' preferences for communicating in a second language (L2) settings. While informative about sociocultural influences, this research did not directly measure ICC, highlighting a gap in studies that simultaneously model ICC and WTC (Tianyu & Wahid, 2025).

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Global research indicates a conceptual and empirical relationship between ICC and WTC, identifying intercultural awareness, confidence, and sociocultural adaptability as significant predictors of communicative engagement in L2 contexts (Peng, 2024; Aladini, 2025). However, most studies treat ICC and WTC separately or examine them alongside other constructs without directly modelling their interaction (e.g., mediation or moderation roles). The scarcity of longitudinal designs limits understanding of developmental trajectories linking ICC growth to increased WTC.

In Vietnam, research on ICC and WTC is primarily descriptive or pedagogical rather than analytical, and explicit connections between ICC and WTC remain underexplored. Recent evidence from Vietnamese EFL contexts also shows that students with greater intercultural exposure and competence display higher enjoyment and readiness to communicate in English (Nguyen, 2022). Thus, ICC serves as a psychological and behavioural catalyst that shapes learners' willingness to use English in diverse communicative settings, reinforcing the view that developing intercultural competence is essential for promoting active communication among EFL students. Several studies focus on the development and teaching of ICC among Vietnamese learners without directly measuring WTC, such as evaluations of intercultural training programmes that improved ICC components (knowledge, skills, attitudes) but did not assess WTC outcomes. Ngoc et al. (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study of intercultural training at a Vietnamese university, indicating improvements in students' ICC; however, the study lacked data on whether this translates into greater readiness to communicate in intercultural tasks.

In general, while there is growing interest in ICC development, a notable gap exists in empirical studies that explicitly link ICC and WTC using validated instruments and inferential statistics. Existing Vietnamese research tends to focus on the effects of ICC curricula or general communicative willingness in English, without adequately capturing intercultural components. Moreover, the above research papers did not mention whether realistic experiences in contact with foreigners in English demonstrate any impact on shaping students' ICC. These gaps justify the present study's focus on exploring how contact experiences with foreigners shape ICC and, in turn, influence WTC, contributing needed empirical evidence to both global and Vietnamese research landscapes.

Methodology

Theoretical framework and research design

The paper aims to investigate the influences of students' experiences in communicating with foreigners on the formation of their ICC and then examine the impacts of the ICC components on their willingness to communicate. ICC refers to the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, grounded in one's attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness (Deardorff, 2006). It represents a multidimensional capacity that enables people to understand cultural differences, adapt their behaviour, and achieve meaningful communication outcomes in diverse contexts (Fantini, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). The four-element model conceptualises ICC as comprising attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness/behavior. *Attitudes*—including openness, curiosity, respect, and tolerance for ambiguity—are the motivational base of intercultural competence, prompting engagement with cultural differences (Deardorff, 2006). *Knowledge* involves understanding cultural systems, values, and communication norms that shape perception and interaction (Fantini, 2006). *Skills* refer to the ability to observe, interpret, relate, and interact effectively across cultures through empathy and adaptability (Spitzberg &

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Changnon, 2009). Finally, *awareness and behaviour* represent the integration of attitudes, knowledge, and skills into flexible, contextually appropriate actions in intercultural encounters (Aguiar et al., 2020). Together, these four dimensions form a developmental process in which intercultural learning transforms perception into practice, making it a key competency for learners in globalised EFL contexts where cultural interaction and communication intersect (Nguyen, 2022). The correlation was modelled in Figure 1, and the related hypotheses were established as follows:

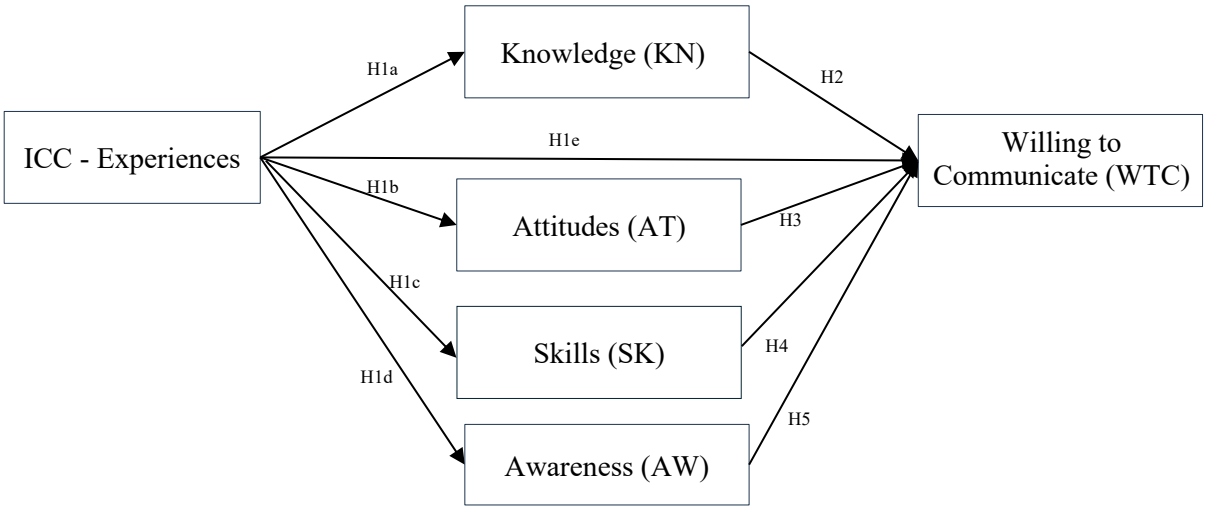

Figure 1. Research model

The research employed a quantitative method, and the model poses the following hypotheses.
H1a-H1d indicate the influence of realistic experiences in communicating with foreigners on the formation of ICC components.
H1f indicates the relation between realistic experiences in communicating with foreigners and willingness to communicate.
H2 indicates the relation between cultural knowledge and willingness to communicate.
H3 indicates the relation between cultural attitudes and willingness to communicate.
H4 indicates the relation between cultural skills and willingness to communicate.
H5 indicates the relation between cultural awareness and willingness to communicate.

Sampling and participants

Table 1 describes the characteristics of respondents. They are students of English at a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, including students from various academic years. Most of them are seniors (36.7%), while the number of other academic-year students is approximately similar, ranging from 18.3% to 20.2% and 24.8%, equivalent to juniors, first-year students, and sophomores, respectively. It also reveals that 87.2% of the respondents have experience in having conversations with foreigners.

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Table 1. Respondents' demographic characteristics (N = 109)

Variable	Level	Counts	Proportion (%)
Gender	Female	73	67
	Male	35	32.1
	Prefer not to say	1	0.9
Academic Year	Freshman	22	20.2
	Junior	20	18.3
	Senior	40	36.7
	Sophomore	27	24.8
ICC Experiences	No	14	12.8
	Yes	95	87.2

Instruments

Based on the research models, a survey with three sections was designed. Firstly, democratic information and background were collected. Section two included items for investigating ICC components – knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness – and the last section focused on items for exploring WTC. The survey's construct and validity were assessed through tests in SmartPLS3 and are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

As shown in Table 2, the measurement model demonstrates satisfactory reliability and convergent validity for all constructs. Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.706 to 0.908, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, thereby indicating acceptable internal consistency. Similarly, composite reliability (CR) values range from 0.836 to 0.931, confirming strong construct reliability. The rho_A coefficients also meet recommended standards, further supporting the stability of the constructs. In addition, all constructs exhibit average variance extracted (AVE) values above 0.50 (ranging from 0.630 to 0.776), suggesting that each latent variable explains more than half of the variance of its indicators and thus demonstrates adequate convergent validity. The construct *ICC_Experiences*, operationalised as a single-item measure, naturally reports perfect reliability values and was retained due to its conceptual importance in capturing learners' authentic intercultural contact experiences.

Table 2. Construct reliability and validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	(AVE)
Attitudes	0.842	0.865	0.904	0.759
Awareness	0.706	0.71	0.836	0.63
ICC_Experiences	1	1	1	1
Knowledge	0.889	0.936	0.922	0.747
Skills	0.856	0.859	0.912	0.776
Willingness to communicate	0.908	0.908	0.931	0.731

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Table 3 presents the outer loadings of all measurement items. All indicators load firmly on their respective constructs, with standardised loadings ranging from 0.737 to 0.913, well above the recommended minimum of 0.70. Specifically, items measuring *attitudes, awareness, knowledge, skills, and willingness to communicate* exhibit consistently high loadings, indicating that the indicators reliably represent their underlying constructs. No cross-loadings of concern were observed; therefore, no items were removed from the model. Collectively, these results confirm that the measurement model meets established criteria for reliability and convergent validity, providing a robust foundation for subsequent evaluation of the structural model and hypothesis testing.

Table 3. Outer loadings

	Attitudes	Awareness	ICC_ Experiences	Knowledge	Skills	Willingness to communicate
AT1	0.853					
AT2	0.908					
AT3	0.852					
AW1		0.848				
AW2		0.793				
AW3		0.737				
ICC_CONVER			1			
KN1				0.913		
KN2				0.836		
KN3				0.843		
KN4				0.863		
SK1					0.896	
SK2					0.886	
SK3					0.86	
WTC1						0.907
WTC2						0.873
WTC3						0.85
WTC4						0.839
WTC5						0.801

Data collection and data analysis methods

The survey was designed in Google Forms and delivered to participants within 2 weeks via Zalo groups (chat groups with students). The collected data were analyzed using SmartPLS3 tests. The construct and validity of the instrument were tested using Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, composite reliability, and average variation extracted (AVE) to ensure the model fit of the research design. Additionally, correlations of the main factors in the research design were tested via the path coefficient. All of these analyses were the background for the hypotheses being solved in the research.

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Results

Assessment of statistical assumptions

In *Table 4*, the descriptive statistics indicate that students generally reported high levels of intercultural communication competence and a willingness to engage in communication. The mean scores of all observed variables ranged from 3.917 to 4.422, suggesting strong agreement with the questionnaire items. Standard deviations were relatively low (0.723–0.991), indicating consistent responses across participants. All items exhibited negative Skewness (–0.592 to –1.311), reflecting a tendency toward higher response categories. Kurtosis values ranged from –0.677 to 2.223, which falls within the acceptable threshold for normal distribution. These results confirm that the data meet the assumptions for subsequent parametric statistical analyses.

Table 4. Descriptive results (mean value, standard deviation, Kurtosis, Skewness) (N=109)

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Minimum	Maximum
AT1	4.266	0.777	-0.625	-0.677	2	5
AT2	4.422	0.737	-1.142	0.826	2	5
AT3	4.339	0.723	-0.917	0.586	2	5
KN1	4.211	0.84	-0.991	1.029	1	5
KN2	4.229	0.899	-1.251	1.736	1	5
KN3	4.339	0.796	-1.252	1.964	1	5
KN4	4.339	0.76	-0.791	-0.379	2	5
SK1	4.11	0.936	-0.982	0.516	1	5
SK2	4	0.892	-0.876	1.021	1	5
SK3	4.239	0.744	-0.83	0.613	2	5
AW1	4.046	0.875	-0.765	0.447	1	5
AW2	4.073	0.857	-0.591	-0.387	2	5
AW3	4.358	0.788	-1.311	2.223	1	5
WTC1	3.982	0.972	-0.827	0.34	1	5
WTC2	4.018	0.991	-0.794	0.126	1	5
WTC3	4.119	0.93	-0.804	0.049	1	5
WTC4	3.917	0.963	-0.592	-0.287	1	5
WTC5	4.147	0.901	-0.915	0.485	1	5

Assessment of the measurement model

The confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that the proposed measurement model achieved a substantially better fit than the baseline model ($\chi^2 = 252.831$, df = 125, $p < .001$), using the DWLS (Diagonally Weighted Least Squares) estimator with robust standard errors. All observed indicators loaded significantly on their respective latent constructs, with standardised estimates exceeding acceptable thresholds and z-values ranging from 11.133 to 23.264 ($p < .001$), indicating strong convergent validity. Reliability analysis showed satisfactory to excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.710 to 0.886 across the four ICC components and willingness to communicate. Moreover, the latent mean scores of all constructs exceeded 4.0, indicating that students demonstrated high levels of intercultural competence and a willingness to engage in communication. The observed ICC experience variable also recorded a very high mean score ($M = 4.486$, $p < .001$), indicating frequent engagement in intercultural interactions (Table 5a-b)

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Table 5a. Chi-square test

Model	X^2	df	P
Baseline model	4133.143	153	
Factor model	252.831	125	< .001

Note. The estimator is DWLS. The test statistic is scaled and shifted. The standard error method is robust. sem.

Table 5b. Confirmatory factor analysis result

Factors	Indicators	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p
Interdependent variables							
Attitudes (Factor 1)	AT3	0.841	4.376	1	0		
	AT1			0.946	0.053	17.924	< .001
	AT2			1.062	0.057	18.784	< .001
Knowledge (Factor 2)	KN2	0.886	4.28	1	0		
	KN1			1.083	0.064	16.889	< .001
	KN3			0.972	0.057	17.115	< .001
	KN4			0.983	0.053	18.541	< .001
Skills (Factor 3)	SK1	0.852	4.116	1	0		
	SK2			1.049	0.056	18.673	< .001
	SK3			1.127	0.056	20.131	< .001
Awareness (Factor 5)	AW1	0.71	4.159	1	0		
	AW2			0.919	0.083	11.133	< .001
	AW3			1.148	0.102	11.288	< .001
Dependent variables							
Willing to communicate (Factor 4)	WTC4	0.08	4.037	1	0		
	WTC5			1.003	0.051	19.784	< .001
	WTC2			1.055	0.05	21.315	< .001
	WTC1			1.081	0.052	20.82	< .001
	WTC3			1.021	0.044	23.264	< .001
Observed variable							
ICC Experiences	ICC CONVER		4.486				< .001

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As shown in Table 6a-b, the factor variance estimates revealed that all five latent constructs exhibited significant variability ($p < .001$), with variance values ranging from 0.529 to 0.760, indicating adequate dispersion across participants. The confidence intervals did not include zero, confirming the statistical stability of all constructs. Furthermore, the factor covariance analysis showed that all inter-factor relationships were positive and statistically significant ($p < .001$), with covariance estimates ranging from 0.419 to 0.604. These results indicate moderate to strong associations among the latent variables, suggesting that the components of intercultural communication competence are closely related to one another and to willingness to communicate, while still maintaining acceptable discriminant validity.

Table 6a. Factor variances

Factor	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower	Upper
Factor 1	0.760	0.066	11.555	< .001	0.631	0.889
Factor 2	0.759	0.062	12.200	< .001	0.637	0.881
Factor 3	0.691	0.053	12.993	< .001	0.587	0.795
Factor 4	0.719	0.049	14.646	< .001	0.623	0.816
Factor 5	0.529	0.069	7.672	< .001	0.394	0.664

Table 6b. Factor Covariances

			Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower	Upper
Factor 1	↔	Factor 2	0.604	0.050	12.096	< .001	0.506	0.702
Factor 1	↔	Factor 3	0.435	0.064	6.844	< .001	0.310	0.559
Factor 1	↔	Factor 4	0.427	0.058	7.311	< .001	0.313	0.542
Factor 1	↔	Factor 5	0.523	0.059	8.942	< .001	0.409	0.638
Factor 2	↔	Factor 3	0.428	0.059	7.226	< .001	0.312	0.544
Factor 2	↔	Factor 4	0.467	0.053	8.837	< .001	0.363	0.570
Factor 2	↔	Factor 5	0.527	0.058	9.115	< .001	0.414	0.640
Factor 3	↔	Factor 4	0.553	0.048	11.539	< .001	0.459	0.647
Factor 3	↔	Factor 5	0.448	0.054	8.232	< .001	0.342	0.555
Factor 4	↔	Factor 5	0.419	0.049	8.632	< .001	0.324	0.514

Structural model assessment

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The structural model results revealed that ICC experiences had a significant positive effect on awareness (β = 0.352, p = .001) and willingness to communicate (β = 0.176, p = .026), but no significant direct effects on attitudes, knowledge, or skills. Among the ICC components, knowledge significantly predicted willingness to communicate (β = 0.252, p = .029), while skills emerged as the strongest predictor of willingness to communicate (β = 0.507, p < .001). In contrast, attitudes and awareness had no significant effect on willingness to communicate. These findings indicate that students' practical communicative skills and intercultural knowledge play a more critical role in shaping their willingness to communicate than affective or awareness-related factors. Overall, the results provide strong empirical support for the central role of behavioural competence in intercultural communication (Figure 2).

The path analysis results revealed that intercultural communication skills (β = 0.507, p < .001), intercultural knowledge (β = 0.252, p = .033), and prior intercultural experiences (β = 0.176, p = .033) significantly predicted students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in English. Among these, skills had the most potent effect, indicating that learners who can interpret, relate to, and interact effectively across cultures are more confident and ready to initiate communication. In contrast, attitudes (β = 0.030, p = .781) and awareness (β = 0.013, p = .92) showed no significant direct impact on WTC, suggesting that positive disposition and cultural awareness alone may not directly translate into communicative engagement without sufficient skills and practice. Furthermore, ICC experiences were found to significantly enhance awareness (β = 0.352, p = .001) but had weaker effects on attitudes, knowledge, and skills. In short, the model confirms that intercultural competence—particularly skills and knowledge—plays a central role in fostering WTC among Vietnamese EFL learners. (Table 7)

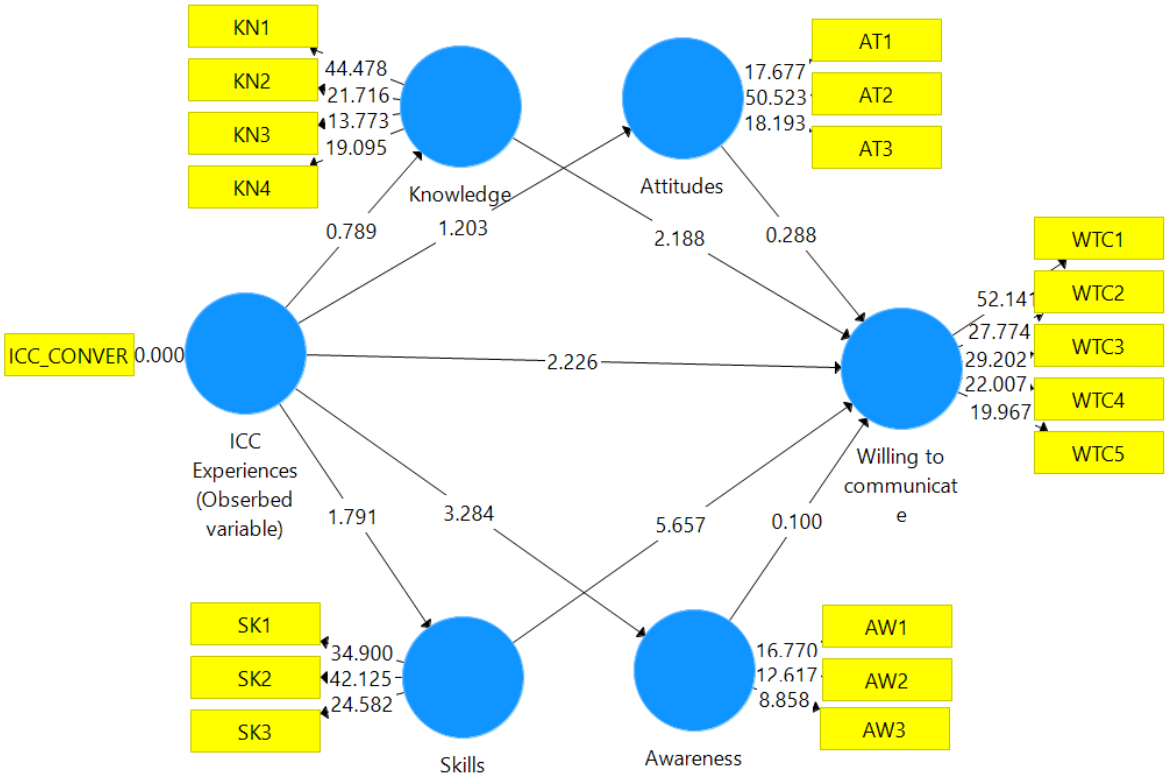

Figure 2. Measurement model assessment

Table 7. Path coefficients in the research model and the results of the significance tests

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Hypothesis	Paths	β-values	STDEV	t-values	P values	Remarks
H1a	ICC Experiences (Observed variable) -> Attitudes	0.129	0.107	1.203	0.23	Non supported
H1b	ICC Experiences (Observed variable) -> Awareness	0.352	0.107	3.284	0.001	**Supported**
H1c	ICC Experiences (Observed variable) -> Knowledge	0.083	0.106	0.789	0.43	Non supported
H1d	ICC Experiences (Observed variable) -> Skills	0.178	0.099	1.791	0.074	Non supported
H1e	ICC Experiences (Observed variable) -> Willing to communicate	0.176	0.079	2.226	0.026	**Supported**
H2	Knowledge -> Willing to communicate	0.252	0.115	2.188	0.029	**Supported**
H3	Attitudes -> Willing to communicate	0.03	0.103	0.288	0.774	Non supported
H4	Skills -> Willing to communicate	0.507	0.09	5.657	0	**Supported**
H5	Awareness -> Willing to communicate	0.013	0.125	0.1	0.92	Non supported

Discussion and pedagogical implications

This study investigated the relationships between realistic intercultural communication experiences, the components of intercultural communication competence (ICC), and willingness to communicate (WTC) among Vietnamese EFL students using a quantitative structural model. The discussion below interprets the findings for each hypothesis group in light of the structural model (Figure 2) and the path coefficients reported in Table 7.

Effects of ICC experiences on ICC components (H1a–H1d)

Hypotheses H1a–H1d examined whether realistic experiences in communicating with foreigners influenced the four components of ICC: *attitudes, awareness, knowledge, and skills.* Among these paths, only H1b (ICC Experiences → Awareness) was supported (β = 0.352, p = .001). This finding suggests that direct intercultural contact plays a crucial role in enhancing learners' reflective awareness of cultural differences, such as sensitivity to values, norms, and perspectives in intercultural encounters. This result aligns with findings from recent empirical and review studies, which show that real-world contact—whether through study abroad, virtual exchanges, or local encounters—promotes reflective intercultural awareness rather than immediate mastery of knowledge or skills (Yashima, 2002; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Deardorff's process/pyramid model likewise argues that attitudes and experiences often stimulate internal outcomes (e.g., reflection, perspective-taking) before external behavioural competence fully emerges (Deardorff, 2006). Contemporary intervention studies also report that intercultural immersion or structured contact reliably raises learners' sensitivity to cultural difference and reflexive awareness, particularly when combined with guided reflection (Ramstrand et al., 2024). In short, experiential learning often yields metacognitive and affective gains (awareness) more quickly than it produces concrete skill improvements—unless paired with deliberate practice and feedback.

In contrast, H1a (*Experiences → Attitudes*) and H1c (*Experiences → Knowledge*) were not supported. Although students reported frequent intercultural contact, this exposure alone did not significantly alter their cultural attitudes or expand their cultural knowledge in an

explicit manner. This finding suggests that attitudes and knowledge may be more strongly shaped by formal instruction, guided reflection, and explicit cultural learning, rather than by experience alone. Similar observations have been reported in EFL contexts where intercultural exposure is informal and lacks pedagogical scaffolding.

The path from ICC *Experiences* to *Skills* (H1d) was marginal but not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.178$, $p = .074$). This indicates that while experience may contribute to skill development, communication skills require systematic practice, feedback, and instruction to become robust predictors. Mere exposure to a language without structured skill training may not be sufficient to produce measurable gains in intercultural communicative skills.

In summary, these findings indicate that intercultural experience primarily fosters awareness, rather than directly shaping attitudes, knowledge, or skills, supporting a developmental view of ICC in which awareness precedes other competence components.

Direct Effect of ICC experiences on WTC (H1e)

Hypothesis H1e, which proposed a direct relationship between ICC experiences and willingness to communicate, was supported ($\beta = 0.176$, $p = .026$). This result demonstrates that students who have more frequent or meaningful intercultural interactions are more willing to engage in English communication, regardless of the mediating ICC components. This finding aligns with research that conceptualises WTC as a dynamic attribute influenced by situational familiarity and prior communicative success (Dewaele, 2018; Yashima, 2002). Studies in EFL settings have shown that learners who have had positive or repeated contact with international interlocutors display higher momentary and trait WTC, as exposure reduces uncertainty and bolsters situational confidence (Kruk, 2021). Practically, then, providing authentic opportunities to interact—even low-stakes, scaffolded ones—can increase students' willingness to communicate before full competence is achieved.

Effects of ICC components on WTC (H2–H5)

Hypotheses H2–H5 examined the predictive power of individual ICC components on WTC. H2 (*Knowledge → WTC*) was supported ($\beta = 0.252$, $p = .029$), indicating that students who possess greater cultural knowledge are more willing to communicate. Cultural knowledge likely reduces uncertainty and misunderstanding in intercultural encounters, thereby increasing learners' confidence to engage in communication. H4 (*Skills → WTC*) was also supported and emerged as the strongest path in the entire model ($\beta = 0.507$, $p < .001$). This finding highlights the central role of practical communicative skills in determining WTC. Learners who feel capable of managing conversations, negotiating meaning, and responding appropriately across cultures are significantly more willing to engage in communication. This result strongly supports models of WTC that emphasise perceived communicative competence and behavioural control as key determinants of communication initiation. In contrast, H3 (*Attitudes → WTC*) and H5 (*Awareness → WTC*) were not supported. Although students generally held positive attitudes and high awareness, these affective and reflective dimensions did not translate into actual communicative behaviour. This suggests that positive orientations alone are insufficient to trigger communication unless learners also possess the skills and knowledge needed to act. These findings reinforce the argument that attitudes and awareness function as foundational but indirect components of ICC, which require mediation through behavioural competence to influence WTC. The findings align with contemporary studies that emphasize competence as a practical enactment; learners exhibit an increased willingness to communicate when they perceive themselves as capable of navigating interactions, negotiating meaning, and interpreting socio-pragmatic cues in intercultural settings (Peng, 2024). Intervention studies also indicate that targeted practice (e.g., task-based interaction, pragmatic training, drama/role-

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play) significantly increases WTC by strengthening functional skills and self-efficacy (Yashima, 2002). Conversely, awareness—though essential for sensitivity and ethical engagement—does not automatically generate the procedural fluency or confidence necessary for speaking. This echoes research showing that attitudinal gains need to be translated into practice-oriented training before behavioural outcomes follow (Ramstrand, 2024).

Why did attitudes and awareness fail to predict WTC? Two complementary explanations help account for the null effects of attitudes and awareness on WTC. First, both constructs may be necessary but not sufficient: positive attitudes and heightened awareness create a receptive psychological milieu but require knowledge and skill to be transformed into action (Deardorff, 2006; Gutierrez-Santiuste et al., 2023). Second, measurement and contextual dynamics matter: in contexts where learners possess generally favourable attitudes and high levels of awareness (as in this sample), restricted variance in these variables reduces their predictive power, leaving skill and knowledge differences to explain behavioural variance (Dewaele, 2018; Zadorozhnyy, 2023). In other words, if everyone is already positively disposed and aware, the decisive differences will be in who can do the communicative work.

An integrated interpretation of the structural Model

Taken together, the pattern of results suggests a two-stage process in which (1) experience builds awareness and situational comfort, and (2) skills and knowledge enable the conversion of readiness into communicative action. This complements the processual models of ICC (Deardorff, 2006; Duyen, 2023) by specifying which components serve as developmental precursors and which function as proximal drivers of behaviour. It also clarifies tensions in the WTC literature, as MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model emphasises affective and situational variables, whereas more recent work has argued for the centrality of communicative competence and perceived capacity (Peng, 2024; Zadorozhnyy, 2023). This research integrates these viewpoints by demonstrating that both situational experience and perceived ability are significant, albeit in different capacities. The result means that while intercultural experiences directly increase WTC and strongly enhance awareness, skills, and knowledge, they are the primary mechanisms through which ICC translates into communicative action. Attitudes and awareness, although essential for intercultural sensitivity, do not independently motivate learners to engage in language use.

In terms of novelty, this pattern supports a behavior-oriented interpretation of the ICC, in which communicative competence is realised not through positive dispositions alone but through learners' perceived ability to perform effectively in intercultural interactions. The findings also suggest that awareness serves as a developmental precursor, whereas skills function as the immediate trigger of willingness.

Pedagogical and theoretical implications.

The findings imply that EFL programs should move beyond raising cultural awareness and positive attitudes to emphasise skill-based intercultural training, including interactional strategies, pragmatic competence, and real-world communicative practices. Moreover, only structured reflection and explicit instruction can maximise the impact of intercultural exposure, despite its value.

Theoretically, this study contributes to ICC–WTC research by empirically demonstrating that not all ICC components exert equal influence on WTC, and by clarifying the distinct roles of experience, awareness, and skills in shaping communicative readiness in an EFL context.

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Conclusion and limitations

This study contributes to ICC–WTC research by empirically distinguishing the developmental (awareness) and behavioural (skills, knowledge) roles of ICC components. The data indicate that intercultural experiences foster awareness and directly increase WTC, but skills and knowledge are the decisive mechanisms that convert willingness into communicative action. For EFL educators, the practical takeaway is clear – to raise learners' willingness to communicate, provide both authentic intercultural opportunities and rigorous, skill-based communicative training.

Limitations and avenues for future research

While the results hold theoretical and practical significance, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference; longitudinal or experience-sampling designs could better capture how experience, competence, and WTC dynamically interact over time. Second, future studies should examine mediated pathways, such as experience → awareness → skills → WTC, or use larger and more diverse samples to test general ability across cultural contexts. Finally, qualitative work could elucidate the micro-processes by which experience becomes skill; for example, which types of reflection or feedback are most effective, or which would have strong curriculum implications.

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