



Integrating Cultural Competence into Army Special Operations Forces Basic Language Training

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The Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) Basic Special Operations Language Training (BSOLT) program has demonstrated strong outcomes in language proficiency development, with students exceeding established standards by 43% at the 2/2 level and higher and achieving a 100% pass rate at the 1+/1+ level in FY 2025 (Language, Regional Education, and Culture Directorate, 2025). However, global ARSOF missions require language training that integrates cultural competence to mirror complex mission realities. This action research examines the effectiveness of cultural interventions in extensive language training in the ARSOF context and highlights potential challenges of conducting action research in such settings. In this study, a cross-cultural competence (3C) intervention was implemented with two groups of students, with one of those groups also receiving an intervention related to intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Data include pre- and post-intervention Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) surveys to measure changes in 3C, open-ended surveys to explore students' perceptions of the intervention, and observations of differences in implementation. Data shows that the group receiving only the 3C intervention showed a decline in 3C scores, as measured by the IDI. This group also expressed that the 3C intervention did not align with their language training, whereas the



group receiving both the 3C and ICC interventions showed an increase in 3C and expressed positive attitudes towards both cultural interventions, including increased self-efficacy in intercultural communication and mission readiness. This finding emphasizes that superficial instruction of culture-general models in language training might be detrimental, while a dynamic approach that integrates culture-general and culture-specific elements and promotes active cultural meaning-making can substantially enhance 3C.

Keywords: *Cross-Cultural Competence; Intercultural Communicative Competence; Basic Language Training; Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOFF); Action Research*

BACKGROUND

This action research paper first seeks to understand the effectiveness of implementing specific cultural “interventions” within the Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOFF) Basic Special Operations Language Training (BSOLT). BSOLT is an intensive program administered in support of the Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture (LREC) guidance from the Department of Defense (DoD Instructions 5160.70, 2016, and 3126.01C, 2023) that support partner-force-centric, culturally embedded missions. Second, it seeks to serve as an example of the potential difficulties encountered when executing action research within these respective programs.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) established two important proficiency benchmarks and performance indicators for the teaching and learning of foreign languages (NCSSFL & ACTFL, 2021). The first proficiency benchmark and performance indicator was communication, focusing on interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational modes of communication. The second, which is the focus of this action research, was intercultural communicative competence (ICC). ICC can generally be defined as “the ability to communicate in another language and behave appropriately in that culture” (NCSSFL & ACTFL, 2021, p. 2). The establishment of ICC as a primary benchmark and performance indicator within ACTFL demonstrates the importance of ICC in language learning. However, despite the increased emphasis, the field of foreign language education (FLE) continues to struggle to integrate ICC into classroom practices. Hennebry (2014) states that it “has been argued that culture is the marginalized sister of language” (p. 135). Studies indicate that teachers generally hold positive attitudes towards cultivating ICC within language instruction; however, in practice, ICC receives limited prioritization compared to proficiency benchmark of communication, with a primary focus on grammar and vocabulary (Griffith & Lim, 2024; Sercu, 2006; Young & Sachdev, 2011).

The challenge of incorporating ICC is further compounded by reductive and static conceptualization of culture within FLE (Byram, 2021). Culture, within FLE, and within education in general, is often reduced to the transmission of cultural facts, products, and behavioral norms, such as food, festivals, and appropriate ways of greeting and interacting with others (see Gao, 2020). This common interpretation of culture ignores the deeper meaning of culture that focuses



on underlying values and belief systems that drive those outward symbols and behaviors (Byram et al., 2002; Deardorff, 2009). Due, in part, to this interpretation, culture is seen as separate from language and that taking time to teach cultural knowledge is taking time away from teaching language (Biebricher et al., 2019; Gao, 2020). The primary source of this tension is the debate over the cognitive and social orientations of FLE. FLE tends to focus on cognitive orientation, which focuses on ACTFL's first proficiency benchmark and performance indicator, and views language learning as a universal cognitive process emphasizing linguistic functions, memory, and grammar rules. However, this largely ignores the culture-general aspects of intercultural communication, a social-oriented perspective at the heart of cross-cultural competence (3C) treating intercultural interactions as a dynamic social practice through which culture influences meaning, negotiation, and interpretation (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). 3C is defined as "a culture-general skill set that includes awareness of one's 'self' in the context of culture, an open mind towards and appreciation of diversity, and the ability to apply 'culture analytical models' to any region" (Watson, 2007, p. 2). ICC focuses on communication and differs from 3C in that it "takes into account language teaching and focuses on [communicating] in a foreign language" (López-Rocha, 2016, p. 107). 3C, however, refers to the broader set of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that enable individuals to act effectively and appropriately across cultural contexts regardless of the language used. Greater ICC helps learners understand the cultural meanings embedded in communication, allowing them to interact more appropriately and effectively. Greater 3C helps learners to act in culturally appropriate ways within that target language and culture or others.

To exemplify this tension, this action research study focuses on a specific case study within the ARSOF LREC program that examines the divide between cognitive and social orientations, and seeks to effectively teach both ICC and 3C in the BSOLT curriculum. ARSOF soldiers must build rapport, gain trust, and maintain relationships with foreign partners to accomplish global missions in high-stakes environments (Department of the Army, 2025; Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014). Their mission requires not only language proficiency but also integrated intercultural effectiveness (i.e., 3C) grounded in ICC. Early on, an Army research report on the ICC requirements for Special Forces teams suggested language training should play a vital role in providing both culture-specific knowledge and "culture-related abilities" such as empathy, adaptability, and tolerance for ambiguity (Russell et al., 1995, p. 3). Two decades later, the *ARSOF NEXT: Return to First Principles* (US Army, 2015) publication reaffirmed that ARSOF LREC training should incorporate ICC/3C along with language training. At the policy level, this emphasis became even more explicit: The Department of Defense (DoD) instruction 5160.70 (2016) mandates the integration of two, and if possible, all three LREC competencies—language, regional expertise, and cultural competence. Complementing this directive, DoD instruction 3126.01C (2023) further reinforces the operational necessity of cultural competence. However, an internal ARSOF LREC program review concluded that BSOLT still primarily focuses on the cognitive aspect of FLE and largely ignores the social orientation—"curricula are focused on building language skills and unsystematically introduce tidbits of information in the form of culture facts that are not contextualized in terms of ARSOF mission demands" (Duran et al., 2018, p. 11).



To address this gap, in 2018, BSOLT implemented a pilot Spanish curriculum program integrating the 12 competencies of Adaptive Readiness for Culture (ARC) listed in the DoD instruction 5160.70 (2016). However, this initiative was discontinued. No debrief report exists, and anecdotal evidence from those involved in the Spanish language pilot study suggests it failed for several reasons. First, the 12 competencies are prescriptive and not descriptive, providing no methodology on how they might be taught, which therefore made it too difficult for language practitioners to adopt these effectively into the curriculum. Second, teachers weren't fully trained to teach the aspects of cross-cultural competence implied by ARC. Research consistently shows that foreign language (FL) educators tend to teach culture as transmission of knowledge and facts of the target culture (Gong et al, 2018; Griffith & Lim, 2024) a set of traits (culture-specific), such as the visible aspects of culture, as opposed to culture as a dynamic meaning-making process (culture-general). As intercultural scholars have noted, when culture is framed primarily as a set of traits rather than a dynamic process of interpretation, reflection, and critical engagement, implementation in language classrooms becomes particularly challenging (Byram et al., 2002; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). However, a number of studies indicate that FL instructors are generally unprepared for teaching language in an intercultural and dynamic way (Petosi & Karras, 2020; Wang et al., 2023). This second reason is mirrored in the findings of this action research, which will be elaborated on in the discussion section, namely the dilemma of teaching culture-general vs. teaching culture-specific principles across various instructors with differing backgrounds (Kramersch, 2013; Lemmons, 2015; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Third, the ARC initiative in BSOLT failed because of curricular choices made as a result of its standalone final assessment instrument, the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), which does not specifically measure cultural knowledge or competence and offers only limited insight into learners' intercultural development. Although at the ILR 1-2 levels, the OPI does include culturally situated role-play tasks, its primary evaluation criteria remain linguistic: communicative functions, grammatical control, and lexical range. Consequently, at the end of BSOLT, the OPI provides relatively little information about learners' cultural understanding or their ability to navigate broader social and intercultural contexts. With the OPI as the standalone assessment for success, there is no incentive to incorporate aspects of culture-general. Conversely, a disincentive to focus on culture might be perceived if instructors believe that time spent on culture comes at the cost of time spent on language proficiency. While BSOLT effectively cultivates language proficiency (Language, Regional Education, and Culture Directorate, 2025), developing ICC and 3C is essential to mirror the complex communicative realities of ARSOF missions worldwide.

This action research aims to explore effective methods for integrating cultural competence into BSOLT, with the goal of enhancing learners' ICC to align with ARSOF missions without compromising (and hopefully improving) language proficiency outcomes. The study consists of two methods: an ICC-focused intervention and a 3C-focused intervention. For the ICC-focused intervention, a set of ICC-integrative materials comprised of 17 lessons is implemented alongside the core curriculum. Each lesson's material encompasses a mission-oriented scenario, sample dialogue in the target language, vocabulary lists, grammar notes, cultural notes, and applied practice tasks. A performance-based approach was adopted to implement these materials,



requiring students to perform tasks with language accuracy and cultural appropriateness for simulated real-world interactions. The 3C-focused intervention consisted of six lectures, with the first delivered in-person and the remaining five through video recordings. Students watched the videos and engaged in discussions with their language instructors.

The research questions guiding this action study were:

1. Does integrating cultural competence training (both culture-general and culture-specific interventions) into BSOLT enhance intercultural development within foreign language classes?
2. How do students perceive the integration of these two cultural interventions and their language proficiency development?

ACTION PLAN

Context

The study was conducted within the ARSOF LREC BSOLT program. Within BSOLT, class sizes range from two to six, depending on mission needs. Each instructor is responsible for one small group of students, allowing for intensive and personalized instruction. Instructors teach six hours per day, four to five days per week, depending on the training calendar. The final OPI assessment is evaluated according to the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale, which ranges from 0 to 5 with “plus” (“+”) designations between levels 0 and 4 to indicate sub-levels of proficiency. To graduate from BSOLT and complete the military Qualification Course, learners must achieve a minimum rating of ILR 1+ in both speaking and participatory listening, measured by the OPI. This level reflects proficiency beyond the basic survival abilities of ILR 1 and enables learners to perform many ILR 2 tasks. However, recurring individualized deficiencies prevent them from demonstrating the consistency required for an ILR 2 rating. Learners at the ILR 1+ level can generally handle routine social interactions and basic professional exchanges, though their linguistic control, range, and sociolinguistic awareness remain limited (ILR, n.d.).

The study was conducted during a six-month instructional cycle of BSOLT in 2025. A total of ten students participated in this study, with six studying Chinese Mandarin (referred to as the Chinese group for this article) and four studying Russian. The students were originally divided into three groups: two students of Chinese were in the control group which received no intervention; four Russian students received only the 3C-focused intervention; and four students of Chinese received both the ICC-focused and 3C-focused interventions. Each group had a different instructor. However, due to a staff shortage during the training, the two Chinese classes were combined into one after four months. This adjustment left two groups remaining for the study: the 3C-focused intervention group of four Russian students and a 3C- and ICC-focused intervention group of four Chinese students.



Actions Taken

3C-focused Intervention

The 3C-focused intervention was composed of six lectures specifically designed for ARSOF to foster cultural competence and cultural introspection. The lectures were prepared by a professor at the US Air Force Academy (USAFA) who specializes in teaching 3C to US Air Force Foreign Area Officers (FAO) and USAFA study abroad participants. The lectures catered to the ARSOF mission but generally followed the same instruction recently published in a West Point Press volume on LREC (Lemmons & Schell, 2025). The 3C lectures were taught as *culture-general* 3C, meaning that lectures were not specific to the students' target language culture. Students were taught in this manner so that they might implement the topics covered in the lectures across the various cultures in which they might operate. The six lecture topics included in the 3C intervention are summarized in Table 1. This method of instruction has shown to be an effective means of presenting 3C material both in-person (Lemmons, 2023), and as a recorded asynchronous course (Lemmons & Schell, 2025) in the past. Both studies showed a significant increase in student intercultural competence after participating in a similar course. The lectures were recorded in such a fashion as to elicit engagement from the students and facilitate prompts by the instructor/facilitator who played the recorded lectures.

Table 1
Topics of the Intentional 3C Lectures

Lecture #	Title
1	What Is Culture?
2	Plausibility Structure and Cognitive Dissonance
3	My Plausibility Structure
4	Iceberg Model and Introspection
5	Culture Shock
6	Overcoming Barriers and Conclusion

In an effort to establish rapport with the students, the first lecture was delivered in person to the students at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. The remaining five lectures, ranging from 30 to 50 minutes in length, were provided via pre-recorded video lectures, which BSOLT language faculty from Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) incorporated into class every four to five weeks. Before each lecture, faculty conducted pre-viewing discussions to activate prior knowledge. While watching the videos, faculty also paused at key moments to clarify ideas, explain cultural nuances, and compare target cultures with students' own experiences. When the videos were shorter than 50 minutes, they were followed by a discussion led by the faculty to connect the lecture to class-specific cultural contexts. For both Chinese and Russian groups, the videos were shown during the last hour of Fridays or after module assessments.

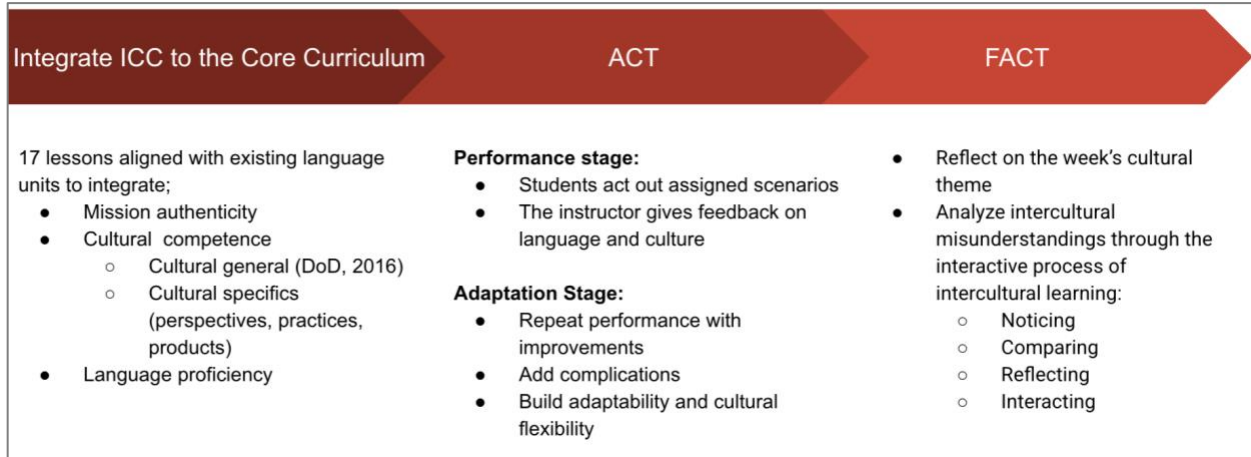


ICC-focused Intervention

The ICC-focused intervention included three parts: Integrating ICC into the current core curriculum, ACT classes, and FACT classes¹, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

ICC Intervention Flowchart



Integrating ICC into the Current Core Curriculum. The ICC-focused intervention was implemented using a set of ICC-integrated materials consisting of 17 lessons. Each lesson began with a mission-oriented scenario. The scenarios highlighted operational authenticity, general cultural competency, specific cultural products, practices, and perspectives, as well as communication competence. For example, one scenario titled “Visiting a Taiwanese Counterpart’s House” situates learning in a realistic social setting:

“Scenario: Having recently joined the Taiwan team, you've quickly become acquainted with your Taiwanese counterpart, Captain Wang. After a week of collaboration, he extends an invitation to his home for a weekend lunch. Captain Wang lives with his wife and child, along with his mother—a traditional family arrangement in Chinese culture. You are now at the dining room table. Lunch is about to start.”

All ICC-focused materials are designed to fit within the language core curriculum. For instance, this scenario is introduced directly after students receive the “Chinese Food” lesson from the core curriculum, in order to “translate” the curriculum into an authentic communicative context. Table 2 demonstrates the rationale and target objectives that guided the design of the lesson containing the above scenario:

¹ ACT (“ACTing”) classes involve performative intercultural practice and FACT (fact-based) classes involve explicit cultural explanations and reflection (Yu, 2020).

**Table 2**

Example of Rationale and Objectives for Designing ICC-integrative Materials

Target Area	Rationale and Objectives
Operational Authenticity	Interaction reflects a realistic social situation that ARSOF members may encounter during partner-nation engagement or liaison assignments. The importance of cultural understanding in fostering rapport, trust, and long-term cooperation extends beyond formal settings.
Intercultural Effectiveness	Cultural general (DoD, 2016):
	Coping with cultural surprises Taking perspective of others Diplomatic mindset
	Cultural specifics:
	<i>Perspectives:</i> Hierarchy, face, filial piety <i>Practices:</i> Waiting for the elders to eat first Responding appropriately when the host serves food or pours drinks Avoiding declining directly <i>Products:</i> Shared family meal Signature dishes and drinks
Communicative Competence	Sufficient linguistic proficiency to engage in small talk in a lunch party Using an indirect communication style to show politeness

After the scenario, an example dialogue was provided to demonstrate the desired level of linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness. Vocabulary lists, grammar notes, and cultural notes were provided to assist students' independent study before the class.

Instruction through the ACT/FACT Model of the Performed Culture Approach. The Performed Culture Approach (PCA) is a pedagogical framework that integrates language proficiency and cultural appropriateness to develop learners' ICC and enable effective, appropriate communication with members of the target-language community (Yu, 2020). By utilizing performance as the basic unit for both teaching and learning, the instructor situated intercultural communications within specific social contexts, integrating "language and culture as a unitary whole" (Wang & Jia, 2022, p. 4). The PCA utilizes two types of classes: ACT classes and FACT classes. In the ACT classes, the instructor provided context through the five key elements of a performance: time, location, roles, audience, and script, as exemplified in Table 3. Students also communicated in the target language while performing culturally appropriate behaviors. The FACT lessons were designed to allow students to use English when needed, focusing on declarative knowledge and bridging the language–culture gap to foster cognitive understanding (Christensen & Warnick, 2006).



Table 3
Example Five Elements of a Performance

Element	Example
Time	A weekend lunch following a week of collaboration with Taiwanese counterparts
Location	Taiwanese counterpart's family dining room
Roles	American soldier and Taiwanese counterpart
Audience	Other American soldiers, Taiwanese counterpart's family
Script	<p>Captain Wang: 大卫，来，你坐这儿。你喝什么？ David, come, sit here. What would you like to drink?</p> <p>David: 随便，喝什么都行。Anything's fine; I'll have whatever you're having.</p> <p>Captain Wang: 那尝尝台湾的高山茶吧。快开始吃吧！ Then try some Taiwanese high-mountain tea. Let's start eating!</p> <p>David: 阿姨先吃。Auntie, you eat first.</p> <p>Captain Wang: 你尝尝这道菜，这是“臭豆腐”。你一定没吃过。Try this dish. It's called "stinky tofu." I bet you've never had it before.</p> <p>David: 哇，闻起来真的很臭，但是吃起来味道还不错。是阿姨做的吗？Wow, it really smells strong, but it tastes surprisingly good! Did your mom make it?</p> <p>Captain Wang: 臭豆腐是买的，其他菜是我妈妈做的。The stinky tofu is store-bought, but the other dishes are my mom's cooking.</p> <p>David: 阿姨的手艺真好。Your mom's cooking is amazing!</p> <p>Captain Wang: 哎呀，就是家常菜。对了，我们下个星期什么时候开会？Oh, it's just simple home-style food. By the way, when's our meeting next week?</p> <p>David: 时间和活动都在电邮里。我会发给你。The time and activities are all in the email. I'll send it to you.</p>

Guest-host relationship:

- Follow the host's convenience (culture-specific)
- Take perspectives of others (culture-general)

- Hierarchy and filial piety (culture-specific)
- Take perspectives of others (culture-general)

- Giving face by balancing honesty with politeness (culture-specific)
- Managing attitudes towards culture (culture-general)

- Giving face by complimenting (culture-specific)

- Saving face by avoiding saying "no" directly (culture-specific)
- Diplomatic Mindset (culture-general)



This material serves as self-study homework content. Students review the scenario, dialogue, and accompanying cultural notes before class to become familiar with the communicative context, relevant language forms, and culturally appropriate behaviors associated with the situation. The example dialogue is intended to model one possible way of interacting appropriately in the given context and serves as a foundation for subsequent classroom practice and application.

Since the students had already previewed the ICC material required for their performance, the instructor showed a background picture to set the scene for the scenario. The instructor assigned roles to two students, who performed the scenario from the memory. Longer dialogues were divided into sections to reduce cognitive load for performance. For example, the above dialogue was divided into three sections: pre-meal interaction, trying the food and expressing appreciation, and discussing business during the meal. After students demonstrated their ability to navigate the scenario, the instructor introduced contextual complications to enhance adaptability and flexibility in intercultural communication. For example, the American soldier was allergic to seafood, did not want to drink tea, or felt uncomfortable when served a chicken feet dish.

The ACT lessons were conducted in an immersive environment, focusing on performance and procedural knowledge. Students learned through enactment—performing scenes with linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness. By engaging in manageable performances from memory, students built their second cultural worldview by compiling stories about the target culture (Walker & Noda, 2000).

The FACT lessons were conducted during the last hour on Fridays, when the 3C lecture was not scheduled. Each FACT lesson was designed to highlight a cultural theme that emerged from the ACT classes (e.g., in the example from Table 3, themes include giving and saving face and respecting social hierarchy). Each lesson began with students recalling the cultural theme from that week's ACT class. This was followed by an analysis of cultural misunderstandings using guiding questions that promoted the interactive process of intercultural learning—namely noticing, comparing, reflecting, and interacting (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Table 4 presents an example of cultural misunderstanding analysis.



Table 4

Example: Cultural Misunderstanding Analysis—Theme is Face (面子, Mianzi)

Scenario	
<p>Captain Smith had recently arrived in a Chinese-speaking target region for his first overseas assignment. During a multinational humanitarian assistance exercise, he worked closely with local counterparts to coordinate the logistics and transportation of relief supplies.</p> <p>At the conclusion of the exercise, personnel from both sides gathered for an after-action review meeting. During the discussion, a colonel from the counterpart force publicly praised Captain Smith for his professionalism and contributions to the mission. The colonel stated that Smith's efforts had been instrumental to the success of the operation and expressed appreciation on behalf of the counterpart unit.</p> <p>Captain Smith felt somewhat uncomfortable. As a newly assigned officer, he believed that many of the key decisions had been made by more experienced personnel and that the operation's success was the result of a collective effort. Unsure how to respond, he briefly thanked the colonel and attempted to redirect the recognition to the rest of his team.</p>	
Questions	
Noticing	Why did the colonel from the counterpart force praise Captain Smith in front of all personnel? What Chinese cultural perspectives are at play?
Comparing	How would such an incident be comprehended in American culture?
Reflecting	Why does Captain Smith feel uncomfortable?
Interacting	If you were Captain Smith, how would you respond to the praise in front of their leader (in Chinese)?

Predetermined “correct” answers were intentionally not provided, as intercultural interpretation and cultural reasoning rarely lend themselves to a single authoritative explanation. Instead, the activity was designed to encourage students to consider multiple contextual, relational, and cultural factors when interpreting the interaction. In practice, students frequently generated thoughtful and plausible interpretations that differed from the instructor’s initial assumptions, reflecting the interpretive and dialogic nature of intercultural learning.

More importantly, the instructional goal was not for students to memorize fixed cultural rules specific to Chinese Mandarin-speaking societies, but rather to develop broader ICC applicable to future military contexts. For example, in this lesson, students connected the cultural concept of *face* to the conduct of after-action reviews (AARs) in Asian contexts. One student with operational experience in Asia noted that he was often unable to elicit direct “areas for improvement” during formal AARs, but later received more candid feedback privately from his partners. Through discussions such as these, students were encouraged to connect cultural perspectives to real-world military interactions and consider how communication strategies may need to be adapted across cultural contexts.

Together, the ACT and FACT classes provided a complementary balance: ACT classes offered an immersive environment where students learned inductively, whereas FACT classes offered



opportunities to explicitly develop a second-culture worldview and apply the target language to mission-oriented intercultural communication in dynamic contexts.

Data Collection

Data collected included a pre- and post-course survey that measured students' 3C, an open-ended survey of students' feedback on the 3C and ICC interventions, and teacher observations. Three groups were originally part of this research experiment with a total of ten students: two students in the Chinese control group, four students in the Chinese experiment group involving both ICC and 3C interventions, and four students in the Russian group involved in the 3C-only intervention. Four months into the 6-month program, the Chinese control group, for reasons outside of this experiment's control, was merged into the Chinese experiment group. For this reason, those two students no longer served as a control group and were therefore removed from the statistical analysis of the survey.

3C was measured using the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). The IDI is a 50-question survey that has proven to be statistically reliable and valid (Hammer et al., 2003). The IDI has become the gold standard for measuring 3C pre- and post-cultural training/experiences/interventions. For this study, the IDI was used to measure the effect of ICC and 3C training on students' 3C in the context of language instruction.

The five-question open-ended survey (See Appendix A) was conducted at the end of the course, allowing students to provide anonymous written feedback about the respective interventions. The first three questions were derived from Byram's ICC model (2021): 1. Attitudes (Curiosity and Openness), 2. Knowledge (Understanding of Self and Others), 3. Skills (Interpreting and Responding Appropriately). Question 4 was aimed at understanding the impact of ICC activities, and question 5 was used for overall feedback and mission effectiveness.

The qualitative method of inductive content analysis (Vears & Gillam, 2022) was used to discern themes and overall opinions from the open-ended survey for both the Russian and Chinese groups. Although classroom observations were not originally planned as a formal data source, one faculty member expressed interest in examining how the 3C-interventions were enacted in practice. As a result, she conducted informal observations of the same intervention sessions in both the Russian and Chinese Mandarin classes. Notes were taken to document instructional strategies, teacher-student interaction, and student response to the cultural components of the lessons. While those notes were not systematic across all sections, they provided contextual insights that helped triangulate findings from the IDI and open-ended survey data. Therefore, observation notes are included as a supplementary data source to support interpretation of the primary data.



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3C Findings

The Russian group received only the 3C intervention. On the pre-course IDI assessment, the students' average score was 90.75. In the post-course IDI, the average score was 84.25, a decrease of 6.5 points. The Chinese group received both the 3C and ICC interventions. The Chinese group had an average pre-course IDI score of 101.25 and an average post-course score of 110.75, an increase of 9.5 points. The two groups had too small a population to run a paired sample t-test to determine if the mean difference between the two sets of paired data was statistically significant. The IDI publishes statistically significant levels for individuals taking pre- and post-tests to measure for change. The standard error of measurement for the IDI is 3.66, which means that if an individual takes the IDI twice within a short period of time with no specific interventions, then their score would be +/- 3.66 from their original score. This means that a difference in score of more than 3.66 is statistically significant (IDI, 2025), showing that the Chinese group significantly improved their 3C, and the Russian group showed a statistically significant decrease in 3C as measured by the IDI.

Open-ended Survey Findings

The open-ended survey results show that the two groups stand in stark contrast to one another. For the Russian group, one theme noticed in the responses from Question 1 was that students perceived the 3C lectures as having low utility, preferring practical language instruction, with respondent #1 stating "I've learned more about the culture from talking to my teacher..." Similarly, a theme noticed from Question 2 was skepticism toward the theory-heavy lectures on 3C, with one respondent stating, "to be honest, some guy speaking in theory had no effect on how I view culture." One theme noticed from Question 3 responses was that there was little perceived application of 3C, and that only the lecture on high vs low cultural context was somewhat helpful. One theme observed in the responses to Question 4 was that the "opportunity cost" of teaching 3C was too high, with one respondent even stating that the 3C "power point presentations hindered my language learning process." Lastly, a theme from Question 5 suggested the 3C lectures needed to be translated into the target language culture being studied and that they were too theoretical and abstract to be useful. Respondent #3 stated "I think that understanding other cultures is a critical part of the ARSOF mission. Unfortunately, the lectures didn't feel applicable to our future needs." Overall, the Russian group perceived 3C as a hindrance to their language learning and was too theoretical when not applied to their target language culture.

For the Chinese group, who received both 3C and ICC interventions, one theme noted in the responses to Question 1 was that these interventions gave them confidence and more willingness to engage, i.e., the feeling of being more able to transfer language skills to real life interactions. Respondent #5, for example, stated that "I now feel more confident and excited to interact with Chinese speakers, both in and outside the classroom." For Question 2 responses reflected a



theme of perspective-taking and adaptability with respondent #6 stating “by understanding these cultural characteristics I have been able to look into my own culture and understand how my world understanding is unique in its own way.” From Question 3, one observed theme was personal behavioral shifts and a greater awareness of culture with respondent #8 calling 3C/ICC, “extremely helpful. I can't imagine I would understand much at all about communication/culture strategy without the... activities. Not only am I more aware of critical behaviors in building personal relationships but military/professional as well.” One theme observed from Question 4 noted that cultural understanding had been enhanced from understanding the meaning and values that underpin behaviors. In this regard, respondent #5 stated that “understanding the ‘why’ behind expressions made them easier to remember and use appropriately.” From Question 5, one observed theme pertained to strong mission relevance and professional growth with respondent #5 stating that “overall, the 3C/ICC component was a vital part of my growth as a language learner and Special Forces soldier.” Overall, the Chinese students stated that 3C and ICC enhanced their language learning and that the cultural aspects improved confidence, language retention, appropriate usage, and mission readiness.

DISCUSSION

For the Russian group, 3C was taught in a “culture general” manner, i.e., not specific to any one culture but rather focused on the foundational principles of cross-cultural competence. The experiment was set up in such a way to measure the effectiveness of teaching 3C only versus teaching 3C in conjunction with ICC. In reviewing the findings above, an obvious distinction was found between the Russian and Chinese groups. According to the open-ended survey results, the Russian group felt that the time spent on 3C lectures came at the detriment of their language learning. The Chinese group expressed the opposite sentiment, stating that 3C principles (culture-general) combined with ICC (culture-specific) had a dramatic positive effect on how confident they felt learning their target language. This same sentiment is also reflected in their 3C score change as measured by the IDI. The Russian group decreased by 6.5 points, while the Chinese group increased by 9.5 points. In contrasting the responses between the two groups, it is apparent that the Russian group felt that the lessons on 3C were too far removed from the language curriculum, too abstract, and took time away from learning basic language skills. In contrast, the Chinese group, through 3C and ICC integration, learned language not as separate from culture, but as a part of culture, stating that this level of understanding gave them greater confidence in their ability to communicate in Mandarin Chinese.

As evidenced by the classroom observations conducted by the faculty member mentioned above, the significant discrepancies in the IDI results and survey responses may be partly explained by learners’ affective responses and the differing instructional approaches. The observations showed the Russian group experienced the 3C training in a more static, lecture-heavy format, where students read PowerPoint slides aloud in English before responding to discussion prompts. When no one volunteered to respond, the teacher supplied the answers, resulting in a subdued and disengaged classroom atmosphere. The recorded lectures were not used in the manner in which they were intended in that the instructor did not facilitate follow-up discussions and at



times dismissed them because they did not pertain to aspects of Russian culture specifically. This was at no fault of the instructor. As mentioned above, FL educators often teach culture-specific aspects but do not have the background/training to teach culture-general/3C models. Respondent #3 from the Russian group provides further context stating, “the majority of the cultural understanding I got from this course came from the teacher telling stories about how life was in Russia, the 3C studies were not very useful.” The ability of instructors to incorporate culture-general 3C principles into the FL classroom was not one of the original questions driving this action research but became obvious as we analyzed the data.

In contrast to the Russian group, the instructor of the Chinese group had a background in ICC and was more able to incorporate 3C principles via ICC, i.e., more able to teach culture-general models in conjunction with culture-specifics. Additionally, the Chinese group exhibited an emotionally engaging learning environment, where personalized prompts, role-plays, and reflective tasks connected to the students’ first culture and therefore reflected a more dynamic approach to teaching and learning culture. These findings support the argument that intercultural competence should be actively developed through dynamic practices which allow learners to construct cultural meanings, rather than through passive transmission of cultural-specific knowledge (Kramsch, 2013; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

The elimination from the control group can serve as an example of the difficulties encountered during action research within these respective programs. This project was originally a pilot study to explore whether or not these interventions merited further scrutiny in a larger experiment with more participants. While it was not the intention to publish these data with such a small n , halfway through the research project, priorities surrounding this program shifted and the focus on teaching culture seemed to fall out of favor. As a result, the two Chinese groups were combined, eliminating our control group. After reviewing the initial data and identifying the significant findings, we decided to publish despite the small n . Due to unforeseen administrative constraints and the fact that this study might not be continued in the future, we provide these data as a baseline for other researchers. Other difficulties encountered were the government shutdown in late 2025, which kept us from accessing the OPI results in a timely manner, which could have provided a significant data point in the context of this study.

As described above, a major limitation to this study is the small n . To reiterate, despite the small n we hope that this research can serve as a baseline for future research. Other limitations include the fact that there is no pre-course language evaluation which could allow us to measure the effect of cultural interventions on language acquisition before and after the interventions. Additionally, future studies should be conducted within the same language to allow more valid comparisons between control and intervention groups.

CONCLUSION

The two questions driving this research were first, does integrating cultural competence training (both culture-general and culture-specific interventions) into BSOLT enhance intercultural



development within foreign language classes and second, how do students perceive the integration of these two cultural interventions and their language proficiency development? The findings suggest that merely incorporating culture into language to “check a box” may have a detrimental effect, as demonstrated by the participants in the Russian group whose IDI scores (3C) decreased and who described their cultural instruction as hindering their language instruction. However, the group that purposefully and conspicuously tied culture-general and culture-specific knowledge to language in a participatory and dynamic manner showed a significant increase in 3C scores and reported a greater confidence in their ability to communicate in the foreign language. Furthermore, this research highlighted the consistent teaching dilemma of incorporating cultural competency training into military language programs. While policies emphasize the importance of transferable and adaptive culture-general competencies, classroom operationalization appeared to be anchored in cultural specifics. This tension does not reflect the lack of commitment of instructors but rather foregrounds the structural gap between policy-level expectations and pedagogical preparation. Without explicit training on how to operationalize culture-general competencies through language training, 3C risks being perceived as abstract and disconnected from language training.

Although explicit pedagogical training on integrating 3C into language instruction is important, it alone does not explain the variation in classroom enactment. Future studies should also investigate instructors’ attitudes about the value and relevance of cultural competence integration, alongside institutional constraints, such as limited instructional time and assessment washback, to better understand the cognitive and structural factors shaping the teaching dilemma.

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Statement on the Use of Generative AI

I, Tong Sun, used generative AI tools (ChatGPT) to support the editing stage of my writing. The AI's influence was minimal, limited to correcting grammar, spelling, formatting, and APA style, and occasionally suggesting alternative phrasing to reduce redundancy or clarify meaning. It did not generate or alter the original content or ideas. I critically evaluated all AI-generated suggestions and incorporated only those that improved readability or accuracy. The core ideas, analysis, and synthesis of literature are entirely my own. <https://chatgpt.com/share/691cb50d-c7c0-8000-82ae-05eed487ddd4>

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APPENDIX A

Open-Ended Survey Questions

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1. How have the 3C/ICC activities in this course influenced your curiosity, openness, or willingness to engage with people from the target culture (Chinese or Russian)? Can you describe a specific moment or activity that made you more open to learning about or interacting with that culture?
 2. Think about what you have learned from the 3C/ICC activities about the values, beliefs, or everyday practices of the target culture, and list the top three that impacted you the most. How has this knowledge affected the way you think about your own cultural background or assumptions?
 3. How have the 3C/ICC activities helped you interpret culturally unfamiliar behaviors and respond in ways that are appropriate in the target culture? Can you share an example of how your perspective or communication strategy changed as a result?
 4. In what ways did the 3C/ICC activities enhance or hinder your language learning process in this course?
 5. How relevant were the 3C/ICC activities to your future mission or professional role? What aspects of these activities were most helpful, and what suggestions do you have for improving the intercultural component of the basic language program?
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