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Enhancing Intercultural Competency among International Graduate Students: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how internationalization-at-home efforts and a cultural partner program (CPP) support intercultural competence (ICC) among international graduate students. Guided by Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence, the study employed qualitative content analysis of open-ended survey responses collected between 2015 and 2018 from 171 international graduate students at a university in the southeastern United States. Participants reflected on semester-long interactions with domestic peer partners. The findings revealed several factors that supported ICC development, including perceived personal growth, social support, and greater confidence in navigating cultural and language barriers. However, notable challenges remained, including heavy workloads, language gaps, graduate-specific scheduling constraints, and limited reciprocal engagement from partners, pointing to reciprocity as a boundary condition for the model's cyclical progression. Peer partnerships supported emotional and social adjustment but should be embedded within broader institutional support structures.

Keywords: intercultural competence, international graduate students, internationalization-at-home, qualitative content analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

International student enrollment in U.S. higher education has grown steadily in recent years, with the 2022/23 academic year marking the fastest growth rate in more than 40 years (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2025). The majority come from Asia, particularly China and India, and pursue degrees in STEM fields. The steady growth of international education is largely attributed to higher education institutions' promotion of global and intercultural development (Ilie, 2019). This increasing intercultural and global exposure enables individuals to develop stronger communication skills (Gutiérrez-Santiuste & Ritacco-Real, 2023), fostering positive employability competencies and forming networks and relationships in a new country (Sisavath, 2021).

Despite the benefits of international education, international students encounter numerous barriers during their transition to the host country. Navigating unfamiliar norms, communication styles, and classroom expectations often leads to culture shock, homesickness, and a sense of isolation (Wong & Hyde, 2024). Language barriers further exacerbate these difficulties, limiting classroom participation and restricting opportunities to build meaningful peer networks (Andrade, 2006). Universities play a central role in fostering intercultural competence (ICC) by creating inclusive environments and implementing intentional interventions that promote intercultural engagement (Hanley & Chankseliani, 2026). The present study addresses this aspect by examining the integration and intercultural experiences of international graduate students within the framework of Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of ICC.

ICC Definition and Theoretical Framework

ICC is defined as "the ability to effectively and appropriately communicate in intercultural situations based on knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). The model views ICC as an evolving process shaped by attitudes, knowledge, and skills—each contributing to both internal (e.g., adaptability, self-awareness) and external (e.g., effective communication, social integration) outcomes. Additionally, ICC is considered a cyclical, iterative process that resonates with the lived experiences of international students, who often encounter evolving expectations and social norms throughout their academic journeys. By integrating both cognitive understanding (of academic norms) and active engagement (through campus programs), the model provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing international students' growth and adjustment. Although ICC poses complex and ambiguous concepts, Deardorff's Process Model of ICC consolidates the core elements of ICC development into one cohesive, expert-informed model (Deardorff, 2009).

Significance of ICC

Through ICC, international students navigate transitions more smoothly, bridging the gaps between their distinct cultural background and their host country or institution (Hanley & Chankseliani, 2026). For example, Nilsson (2019) found that intercultural communication can help students reduce stress and loneliness by fostering social relationships. The social connectedness of friendships and community integration not only improves students' overall well-being but also contributes to their academic and professional trajectories. International students with limited ICC are more likely to experience isolation, discrimination, prejudice, and racial or ethnic labeling (Halpern et al., 2022). Some international students rely solely on co-national communities for emotional support, which inadvertently limits intercultural engagement, language development, and full academic integration (Zhou et al., 2008).

Contributions of International Students

International students' contributions to the co-construction of knowledge are significant, as they introduce alternative epistemologies and learning approaches that challenge common Western frameworks and models (Deuchar, 2022). The presence of international students on campus enables others to gain

firsthand exposure to alternative norms, values, and traditions, encouraging perspective-taking and challenging ethnocentric assumptions (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013), thereby enhancing intercultural competence for both international and domestic populations. International student populations also make significant economic contributions. International students contributed $43.8 billion to the U.S. economy and supported 378,175 jobs during the 2023-2024 academic year, serving as a vital source of economic growth (IIE, 2025). According to Bound et al. (2021), 18% of all master's degrees and 13% of all doctoral degrees awarded by U.S. institutions are awarded to international students, underscoring the impact of internationalization at home (IaH) efforts in supporting economic growth at both the institutional and national levels.

How IaH Fosters Intercultural Competence

IaH refers to a "purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 13). In the current study, IaH is conceptualized as a bridge connecting international students' transitional needs with intentional intercultural interactions within the host institution, particularly through structured cultural partner or buddy-style initiatives. Buddy programs, a peer-to-peer matching initiative pairing a local/experienced individual with a newcomer from a different cultural or linguistic background, support international students academically, socially, and professionally (Patel et al., 2024) and provide intercultural communication training (Vaccarino & Li, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Buddy programs have emerged as a common intercultural intervention, delivered through both face-to-face and virtual formats (Breaden et al., 2023; Nilsson, 2019). Jacobi (2021) conducted a semester-long, semi-structured qualitative study with 21 pairs of international and domestic undergraduate students in the United States to assess the quality of their attitudes toward intercultural communication. The interaction program was integrated into a communication course curriculum and required participants to complete four 30-minute semi-structured interaction tasks over one semester. Interaction tasks were designed to support relationship-building and included guided questions to help participants get to know each other and explore their cultural similarities and differences. The international students in this study showed significant gains in English confidence and reconsidered cultural norms, such as classroom behaviors, after the program.

Lu et al. (2025) explored the relationship between intercultural contact and intercultural communication competence among 57 Chinese international students (undergraduate and graduate) at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom, using a mixed-methods approach. The data analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between intercultural communication and ICC, highlighting the need to improve domestic cultural knowledge and cognitive skills. However, this study did not explicitly state whether they engaged in direct student pairings and interactions. Lu et al. (2025) found that indirect intercultural contact, like media use and cultural events, is more common than face-to-face interaction with native speakers. This matters because the measure of indirect intercultural contact primarily involves passive exposure rather than active intercultural engagement. Thus, comparisons should be made with caution, as ICC development likely differs between passive exposure and active intercultural engagement.

Nilsson (2019) examined how international students in Sweden (with no information on participants' degree levels) perceived the Program's effectiveness as a tool for social integration. International students were placed in buddy groups to support social engagement among domestic Swedish buddies, with 16-18 buddy groups (30 international students and 6-8 domestic students) within the program. A mixed-methods approach was used to analyze the collected data. Results showed that students perceived the buddy program as a "door-opener" supporting broader campus involvement, with gains in cultural awareness, adaptability, and cross-cultural communication skills.

Dong et al. (2022) examined the impact of the Cultural Partner Program (CPP) on transition outcomes for 171 incoming graduate-level international students at a southeastern American university using an experimental research design. Experimental group participants were paired with one domestic graduate-level student and engaged in a semester-long intercultural interaction. The results of this study concluded that CPP positively impacts several outcomes (e.g., interaction enjoyment, self-esteem, stress, perceived social support, social and academic integration, and attitudes toward seeking professional help), further emphasizing the importance of intercultural interactions for enhancing transition outcomes and ICC development.

In addition to the face-to-face interactions, Higgins (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study examining the effectiveness of an eight-week virtual exchange program designed to improve English language skills and ICC among 10 undergraduate students (five from Thailand and five from Japan). The program featured a structured series of synchronous video-call discussions and asynchronous message exchanges focused on cultural topics. Quantitative results showed significant increases in students' self-rated ICC scores and overall improvements across four key dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and actions. Additionally, qualitative data identified four main themes of growth: expanded cultural knowledge, increased confidence in English communication, the formation of global friendships, and appreciation of English varieties. However, Higgins (2024) did not address the well-documented limitations of self-rated ICC measures, including vulnerability to social desirability bias and a Dunning-Kruger-type effect in cross-cultural self-assessment whereby individuals with limited intercultural exposure may overestimate their own competence (Coutinho et al., 2020; Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

Breaden et al. (2023) highlighted that Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) has become an increasingly common strategy for distance internationalization. Domestic students were from Australia; the countries of origin of international participants were not stated. OIE activities included co-curricular language exchanges and curricular units on language, culture, and communication. The study drew on qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with six undergraduate students (five domestic; one international) and a focus group with three students (two domestic and one international postgraduate). The study demonstrated that OIE supported the development of culturally adaptive communication, learning, and adjustment skills, reinforcing the relationship between IaH and ICC development.

These studies collectively identify several key concepts influencing ICC development through peer partnerships. Peer support consistently serves as a core mechanism, with Nilsson (2019) and Dong et al. (2022) emphasizing perceived social support and community integration as significant benefits of structured collaborations. Language confidence is also well supported, as reported by Jacobi (2021) and Higgins (2024), who found improvements in English communication confidence following sustained peer engagement. Although less explicitly stated, a sense of belonging is implied in findings such as Dong et al.'s (2022) outcomes related to social and academic integration and Nilsson's (2019) description of the buddy program as a "door opener" to greater campus involvement.

Research Gaps

Although the above studies shed light on intercultural interaction and development, they have limitations. First, the existing literature on intercultural programs has disproportionately focused on undergraduate students. This gap also appears in recent research on international graduate students' sense of belonging, which notes that most studies of international students have focused on undergraduates (Paik & Braxton, 2026). Of the six studies reviewed, the majority focused on undergraduate populations or the match between undergraduates and graduates, leaving international graduate students' intercultural experiences, including the unique demands of graduate-level workload and their need for institutional support beyond peer partnerships, critically underrepresented. Second, some intercultural programs grouped undergraduates with graduate students. Weir (2020) highlighted the importance of proper pairing in intercultural programs to reduce the age and life-experience gap between undergraduate and graduate students. Third, existing quantitative approaches, including Dong et al.'s (2022) study, cannot fully capture

international students' lived intercultural experiences. Thus, a qualitative understanding of intercultural experiences and ICC development among graduate-level international students is needed.

Purpose of the Current Study

Informed by the existing literature on both graduate and undergraduate intercultural programs as supports for ICC development, the present study aims to understand international graduate students' ICC development during transition experiences using a qualitative approach. Guided by Deardorff's Model of Intercultural Competence, the present study poses the research questions as follows: (1) How do international graduate students describe and experience the Cultural Partner Program as supporting their ICC development? (2) How do the core tenets of Deardorff's Process Model of ICC (attitudes, knowledge, skills, internal outcomes, and external outcomes) function as facilitators or barriers to ICC development and transition outcomes among international graduate students?

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

This study was part of a larger project aimed at enhancing intercultural competence among first-year graduate students. The sample for this study consisted of 171 international graduate students from 27 countries, recruited in a public university in the southeastern United States between 2015 and 2018. Eligibility criteria required participants to be first-year graduate students and willing to engage in 4–6 intercultural meetings with their domestic peers during the fall semester. The mean age of the participants is 25.38, with an SD of 3.50. Most students are from China (43.3%), followed by India (13.5%) and South Korea (9.4%). About half of the participants reported their academic disciplines, with 40 academic disciplines represented. The discipline of "Statistics" was the most frequent (17%), followed by "Computer Science" (10.7%) and "Sport Management" and "Civil and Environmental Engineering" (5.4%), respectively. Around 30% of participants reported no previous intercultural experience, 65.5% reported having had one, and the rest did not provide information. This study draws on the same Cultural Partner Program examined by Dong et al. (2022), who reported quantitative outcomes for the same cohort; the present study offers a qualitative analysis of ICC development.

Procedures

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the authors' institution. The participants were recruited via a listserv for first-year international students, with assistance from the University's Center for Global Engagement. Prospective participants were informed about the study's benefits and risks. A participant in the program was paired up with one domestic graduate-level student at the same university and engaged in a semester-long intercultural interaction. These international participants and their domestic cultural partners attended an orientation workshop at the start of the fall semester. The orientation provided basic training on cross-cultural interactions and addressed questions about the program. Participants were expected to meet their cultural partners four to six times throughout the semester. Participants were recommended to engage in cross-cultural activities, such as cultural, social, sports, and academic events on campus or in the community.

All participants were asked to complete two online surveys: one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end. The post-surveys included open-ended questions that prompted reflection on intercultural experiences, perceived support from partners, and challenges encountered during both partner interactions and the broader academic transition. The following are the open-ended questions to which participants responded in the post survey and analyzed for the purpose of the current study: How much do you feel your cultural partner has helped with your transition? What challenges have you encountered with your cultural partner? What challenges have you experienced regarding your transition during this semester

at your university? Approximately 90-95% of participants answered the open-ended questions and provided analyzable responses.

Data Analysis

We employed a qualitative content analysis approach to systematically examine participants' intercultural experiences and their influence on the transition process. Content analysis enables the systematic categorization and interpretation of communication data, particularly for the study of understudied phenomena (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kondracki et al., 2002). The open-ended survey responses served as the primary data for analysis. The coding unit was a meaningful segment of text—a phrase, sentence, or group of sentences—that conveyed a distinct idea or experience relevant to participants' intercultural interactions and transitions.

Trustworthiness

We used multiple strategies to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Trustworthiness refers to the degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and methodological processes used to ensure validity and reliability (Shenton, 2004). We engaged in reflexivity by identifying and reflecting on our personal assumptions and potential biases before analysis. For example, we reflected on biases and assumptions about international students and their transition before beginning the content analysis, which helped us remain objective and avoid imposing personal values during coding.

The research team included individuals with varying levels of experience in qualitative research. The first author is an Asian American faculty member with rich experience in qualitative research. The other four co-authors are graduate students at the same institution as the first author. Three are international students (two from China and one from Panama), and one is Asian American. The first author provided training in content analysis (e.g., a discussion of the analytic approach, a review of code definitions, and a collaborative examination of coding decisions) to other team members, thereby supporting consistency in coding practices. This collaborative approach facilitated analyst triangulation, thereby enhancing internal validity and reducing the influence of selective perception (Patton, 2001; Shenton, 2004).

Team members first reviewed the open-ended responses multiple times to become familiar with the data and identify preliminary patterns. During initial coding, coders assigned descriptive codes to meaningful segments of participants' responses while remaining attentive to concepts emerging directly from the data. Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence served as a sensitizing framework rather than a rigid set of predetermined categories. Specifically, the model sensitized the research team to four broad dimensions—attitudes (e.g., openness and curiosity), knowledge (e.g., cultural self-awareness), skills (e.g., listening and adaptability), and desired outcomes (e.g., effective communication and social integration)—while allowing additional codes and patterns to emerge from participants' responses.

Following initial review and coding, the research team developed a preliminary codebook (see supplementary material) based on recurring patterns in the data and relevant literature on intercultural competence. The codebook was iteratively refined to clarify the meaning and boundaries of codes and promote consistent application across coders. After training and development of the preliminary codebook, team members independently coded the data. Initial independent agreement among coders was around 85%. Coding discrepancies were discussed by the research team, with coders returning to the original responses and considering the definitions and boundaries of relevant codes. Codes and their definitions were consequently revised, merged, or refined as appropriate, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion until full consensus was reached, resulting in 100% agreement after reconciliation.

As coding progressed, the research team repeatedly revisited the data, compared coded segments, and examined relationships among codes. Related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories representing barriers and facilitators of intercultural interactions. Codes were merged or refined until further review did not yield meaningful new categorizations (Berg & Lune, 2012). During final theme development, the research team examined the thematic categories against the full dataset to ensure they

adequately represented participants' experiences. The resulting themes were then considered in relation to Deardorff's (2006) dimensions of intercultural competence to clarify how participants' attitudes, knowledge, skills, and desired outcomes were reflected in their transition experiences. Throughout this process, analytic memos, team discussions, and reflexive journaling documented coding decisions, emerging themes, alternative interpretations, and revisions to the analytic framework, thereby enhancing reliability and validity through an audit trail of the analysis

RESULTS

Barriers to Transition and Intercultural Engagement

Cultural Barriers

The culture shock and cultural adjustment that come with integrating into a foreign country often pose cultural barriers for international populations. Thirty-six participants reported culture as a barrier. A male Indian participant, majoring in computer science and writing about cultural exposure, said, *"Explaining concepts related to my country and culture was sometimes difficult because she was never exposed to those practices…"* One female Mexican student said: "*Some of the biggest challenges I have experienced in general here in the States are related to social interaction. ……And that's something I find challenging with Americans who don't spend time together just for the sake of it as often as we do, from my point of view."* The lack of commonality in intercultural interactions may stem from differences between the collectivistic and individualistic attitudes of international students and their partners. Another potential reason is fear of stepping out of one's comfort zone, which requires openness, eagerness to learn, and respect for different cultures. The absence of these attitudes can serve as a barrier to their understanding of the world from others' perspectives.

Lack of Reciprocal Engagement

For buddy programs to facilitate ICC, both international and domestic students must approach intercultural interactions with openness and cultural humility. Eight participants reported experiencing a lack of support from their intercultural partners during their transition. No significant differences (e.g., in country of origin and academic discipline) were found between this subsample and the full sample. One male Chinese student said, "*I don't think we helped each other for the transition process,"* while another was more negative. They said: *"But at the end of the semester, she asked my background information for her final paper through messenger which was funny and rude. I feel she was not sincere so I kind of developed a negative attitude toward her."* Successful intercultural interactions require all parties to demonstrate sincere, engaging attitudes (e.g., openness and cultural humility). The absence of these attitudes from any of the parties, due to various reasons (e.g., language barrier, time constraints) may reduce their communication efforts and intercultural engagement.

Language Barriers

When transitioning to a new culture, including an unfamiliar language, international students often struggle with communication and language barriers. Thirty-seven participants identified the language barrier as the primary challenge in their intercultural interactions. Often, international students may struggle to communicate in their host countries and fear being misunderstood. A male Nigerian student majored in electrical engineering stated, "*The biggest challenge was to properly communicate my thoughts in English. For the first time, I felt I couldn't express my thoughts precisely, so I think it was hard for both of us to understand each other correctly,"* emphasizing how knowledge gaps contribute to fear of being misunderstood and pose barriers to connection between intercultural partners. One response from a Chinese female participant who majored in biostatistics stated: "…*the first one must be how to communicate with*

the native Americans fluently. Due to poor listening and writing, I'm always in trouble with group work and daily communications. but I can get over these difficulties gradually." Some international students feel their sociolinguistic knowledge is inadequate to engage with their domestic peers, thereby dampening their efforts to communicate and relate to their domestic peers.

Time & Scheduling Constraints

With the rigor and demands of graduate degrees, graduate students often have very hectic schedules and day-to-day routines. Twenty-four participants reported having insufficient time or conflicting schedules with their intercultural partners. For example, one male student from Turkey said, *"Scheduling is challenging because both of us are graduate students. Due to the position of a graduate student, we always felt that we were busy."* In other words, there was not enough time to schedule formal meetings regularly. Another male student from China said, "*...but we couldn't manage the time that we were both free.*" It can be incredibly difficult for two busy graduate students to make time for each other without prioritizing intercultural interactions and their cultural partners. The time and scheduling constraints suggest that these students may lack relevant knowledge of the host nations' and institutions' higher education systems (e.g., teaching and learning styles and academic expectations) and the necessary academic skills, such as reading, writing, and class communication. All these challenges may cost them extra time on academic work and leave limited room for intercultural interactions.

Academic Barriers

Education systems and academic policies differ from country to country, making academic adjustments challenging for international students. Twenty-three participants reported academics as a barrier. One male participant from Bangladesh, noting the difference in the education system, wrote: "*The education system as such is completely different, and getting used to grad school and the work given was a little difficult."* Similarly, another female Chinese student thought the education system in the U.S. is too demanding and wrote, "*I would say the amount of work. My graduate courses are much more demanding than the ones I took at my previous university,"* emphasizing how even academic differences, along with cultural differences, create greater challenges for international students. These academic barriers highlight the significance of culture-specific knowledge of graduate education in the host nation and of one's abilities to listen, understand, analyze, and interpret academic content and material for international students, especially at the graduate level.

Support System Gaps

Moving away from one's home and familiar support system may leave international students in their host countries and host institutions feeling lonely. Sixteen participants indicated that the absence of a support system was a barrier to their transition. One male student from India reported that it was difficult to get around without proper transportation. They wrote: "*Without car, transportation is really difficult here. Using the city bus is not safe and okay every time. (Especially for grocery shopping). 2. Finding an apartment was not easy. 3. I really needed a person who knows everything/everywhere around campus who can teach/help me at the beginning of the semester."* The added stressors of financial responsibility and being away from home create more barriers for international students. The absence of a support system adds an additional layer of difficulty in navigating a new cultural environment. This may lead them to doubt their own intercultural abilities and be less effective in intercultural communication, such as shunning help when needed.

Facilitators of Transition and Intercultural Learning

Perceived Support and Belonging

A core element of the CPP is offering social support to international graduate students as they transition. Nineteen participants reported experiences with their cultural partners and described the support they perceived. Some students found support through conversation and shared discussions, while others found mutual understanding and comfort. One female participant from Brazil who majored in economics said: "*We talked it over when we hung out together, which made me feel better.*" International students often struggle with loneliness and isolation; however, the CPP helped them feel a sense of belonging and safety in their host countries. A male participant from South Korea, who majored in music, wrote: "*I feel very comfortable being with her, and especially, she could quickly understand my feelings, opinions, and my culture too."* Cultural exchanges help international students feel valued and that their contributions matter. For example, another female participant from Lebanon, who majored in special education, indicated that their cultural partner was interested in supporting them, saying, "…*can feel that she tried her best to interact with us :-)."* The perceived support from domestic counterparts (e.g., being respectful, open, and empathetic) seemed to help the international students become more confident, foster a sense of internal belonging, and see things from others' perspectives.

Navigating Cultural and Language Barriers

Navigating a new language, a new country, and a new institution simultaneously can be incredibly overwhelming and lead to culture shock. Fifteen participants reported that, despite encountering language and cultural barriers in the new environment, their partners helped them overcome these barriers and improve their sociolinguistic skills. One female Colombian student who majored in higher education reported, "*Meantime, the communication process helps me practice my oral English as well."*

One Turkish student who majored in electrical engineering noted increased cultural knowledge and confidence: "*I think chatting with my cultural partner let me to know more about U.S.A and give me confidence to talk with native speakers." Besides language proficiency*, a cultural partner's diverse life experiences, such as living abroad or traveling, can foster open-mindedness and respect for different people and cultures. One South Korean female student majored in Geography wrote "*She had a diverse experience from her previous experience including life changing events and traveling and that's what makes her to be very open-minded to different people and cultures."* All these responses highlight that engaging in CPP helps international students gain sociolinguistic skills. Their perceived enhancement of these skills also helped the students feel more confident and be more flexible and adaptable in the new environment.

Positive Experience and Growth

Intercultural exchanges facilitate positive cultural growth experiences among participants. Sixty-four participants reported a positive, enjoyable experience with the cultural exchange. Three key themes emerge from their responses. First, participants described personal growth influenced by their partners. One female student from India who majored in computer science said: "…my *partner is very positive and enthusiastic about life, has arranged a lot of things in daily life to prepare for a bright future. I have been influenced by all those qualities and behaviors, which then pushed me to positively cope with my difficulties".*

Second, participants valued the cross-cultural connection formed. Cultural exchanges expand one's worldview and cultural perspectives, fostering greater openness and curiosity towards other cultures. One male student from China majored in mechanical engineering stated, "*My cultural partners are really nice people. They helped me to know better how nice people can be, no matter where they are from. I feel lucky to have met my cultural partners, and I enjoyed each time hanging out together with them*."

Third, mutual respect and accommodation greatly advanced intercultural experiences among participants. One female student from China who majored in statistics stated: "*So we all have this awareness in mind and are willing to discuss and make adjustment for each other. And finally, we ended up having enjoyed hanging out very much*." These positive experiences and growth reported by the participants indicated enhanced internal self-awareness, as they put themselves in each other's shoes and appreciated each other's perspectives. These internal outcomes encouraged more effective and engaging intercultural communication and interaction. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1

Themes of Facilitators and Barriers of Intercultural Competence

Themes	Theme alignment with Deardorff's model	Total response for each theme*	Percentage	Sample quote
Cultural Barriers	Attitudes & Knowledge	36	21.1%	*Explaining concepts related to my country and culture was sometimes difficult because she was never exposed to those practices…*
Lack of Reciprocal Engagement	Attitudes & External Outcomes	8	4.7%	*…I feel she was not sincere so I kind of developed a negative attitude toward her*
Language Barriers	Knowledge & Skills	37	21.6%	*The biggest challenge was to properly communicate my thoughts in English. For the first time, I felt I couldn't express my thoughts precisely, so I think it was some hard for both of us to understand each other correctly.*
Time & Scheduling Constraints	Knowledge & Skills	24	14.0%	*Scheduling is challenging because both of us are graduate students. Due to the position of a graduate student, we always felt that we were busy.*
Academic Barriers	Knowledge & Skills	23	13.5%	*The education system as such is completely different, and getting used to grad school and the work given was a little difficult.*
Support System Gaps	External Outcomes	16	9.4%	*I really needed a person who knows everything/everywhere around campus who can teach/help me at the beginning of the semester*

Perceived Support and Belonging	Attitudes, & Internal Outcomes	19	11.1%	*I feel very comfortable being with her, and especially, she could quickly understand my feelings, opinions, and my culture too.*
Navigating Cultural and Language Barriers	Skills, & Internal Outcomes	15	8.8%	*She had a diverse experience from her previous experience including life changing events and traveling and that's what makes her to be very open-minded to different people and cultures.*
Positive Experience and Growth	Internal & External Outcomes	64	37.4%	*My cultural partners are really nice people. They helped me to know better how nice people can be, no matter where they are from. I feel lucky to have met my cultural partners, and I enjoyed each time hanging out together with them.*

Note. Percentages are based on the full sample (N = 171). Counts are mutually inclusive, meaning some open-ended responses can be coded into more than one theme. As a result, counts exceed the total number of participants, and percentages sum to more than 100%.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored how the participants perceived CPP as supporting their transition and the development of intercultural skills at a U.S. southeastern university. Structured peer partnerships supported students' adjustment through intercultural relationships, though participants also identified significant obstacles, including language barriers, cultural differences, time constraints, and academic demands. These findings are consistent with previous research among undergraduate populations and contribute to IaH research by examining international graduate students' perceptions of barriers and facilitators in intercultural interactions through the lens of Deardorff's (2006) model.

Attitudes

Some participants reported positive experiences, consistent with previous research indicating that buddy programs facilitate social integration and intercultural development (Breaden et al., 2023; Nilsson, 2019). The present findings suggest that, for this cohort, growth in adaptability and self-awareness emerges from participants' perceived support and sense of belonging through intercultural interactions, rather than from structured classroom activities alone, thereby demonstrating the attitudinal facets of Deardorff's (2006) model. These intercultural connections address a gap in the authenticity of intercultural partnerships noted by Breaden et al. (2023). Moreover, attitudes did not exhibit uniform facilitation. Cultural disparity and limited prior exposure to one another's backgrounds surfaced as impediments to ongoing engagement. Additionally, navigating unfamiliar social norms rendered well-meaning partnerships more complex (Rodriguez et al., 2024). These findings demonstrate that cultural differences persist as formidable obstacles even within programs designed specifically to foster understanding, particularly when partners lack prior exposure to each other's native cultures.

Lack of reciprocity was a significant theme, with some interactions described as one-sided or insincere; several international participants noted feeling their partners were unengaged, transactional, or unreliable. These findings align with those of Oddone Paolucci et al. (2021), who found that ill-defined mentoring roles and competing demands among graduate students can undermine the interpersonal connections that peer partnerships depend on. A similar breakdown occurred in Gao's (2026) study of international doctoral students when the matched conversation partner stopped responding and the program offered no follow-up, leaving the student without support. The present findings suggest that structure alone may be insufficient when partners lack genuine commitment or cultural humility: formal and involuntary pairings do not always produce trust, shared goals, or sustained communication that reciprocity requires – all of which are essential for ICC development (Deardorff, 2006). Additionally, the structural pressures of graduate study leave little time for the genuine relational investment that meaningful intercultural exchange demands (Dong et al., 2022). Consequently, there is a clear need for more intentional matching, pre-program training, and accountability mechanisms to foster positive, engaging intercultural attitudes.

Knowledge

Participants highlighted significant challenges rooted in knowledge gaps, including language barriers and academic barriers. Consistent with prior research, language ability remains an essential factor in establishing successful intercultural friendships and social integration (Oduwaye et al., 2023). The current study reveals the intensity of these challenges at the graduate level, where academic discourse demands exceed conversational proficiency, and these students may need to compensate by spending extra time on their academic work. These will leave them less time to engage in intercultural interactions. Gao (2026) found that international doctoral students with communication anxiety sometimes avoided in-person interactions, limiting language practice. Simultaneously, engaging with domestic students is instrumental in helping participants acquire the cultural knowledge needed to address these knowledge gaps. Consistent with Lu et al.'s (2025) findings, sustained engagement with native speakers supports the acquisition of cultural knowledge that eases navigation of the new environment. However, international students may be caught in a dilemma: they need more time for their academic work due to language and academic barriers, leaving less or no time for intercultural interaction, which is crucial for their language improvement and academic and professional success.

Skills

Time and scheduling constraints were identified as barriers to participation in meetings aimed at increasing intercultural competence, with both partners busy and "sacrificing" time to join the intercultural interactions. These demands differ significantly from those of undergraduate studies (Jacobi, 2021), in which time constraints are less frequently cited. For many graduate students, the competing pressures of coursework, research, assistantships, and part-time employment create structural obstacles to sustained engagement in co-curricular initiatives (Swanson et al., 2022). Similarly, Paik and Braxton (2026) reported that international graduate students experienced academic, financial, and immigration-related pressures that limited their social participation in a campus environment where programming focused primarily on undergraduates. Given that many participants in the present study reported scheduling conflicts as a primary barrier, this suggests a clear need for graduate-specific programmatic adaptations.

Academic barriers also emerged as a significant challenge, with participants reporting that graduate-level coursework was structurally different and substantially more demanding than previous educational experiences. These findings align with Trice & Yoo (2007), who identified that varying teaching styles, academic expectations, and classroom roles create a steep learning curve for international students, suggesting that the challenges of transition are systemic rather than personal and that institutional effort must extend beyond CPP. Alongside these barriers, participants also reported gains in communicative skills, such as increased confidence in English communication, suggesting that sustained interaction can still support incremental skill development despite structural constraints.

Internal Outcomes

Participants' accounts also point to internal outcomes consistent with Deardorff's model, in which the accumulation of attitudes, knowledge, and skills is expected to translate into shifts in internal states, such as adaptability and self-awareness. The majority of participants described their overall experience with their cultural partner as positive and enjoyable, framing it as a source of personal growth rather than a purely transactional exchange, consistent with the model's assumption that external engagement feeds inward change. Notably, this internalization did not require fully resolving external barriers. Some participants who continued to struggle with language difficulties nonetheless reframed these struggles as challenges to be gradually overcome rather than fixed obstacles, suggesting an emerging sense of self-efficacy in navigating ongoing cultural and language difficulties. Although some participants develop internal outcomes such as growth, resilience, and self-efficacy, not all readily adapt to the demands of international higher education. Personal attitudes, skill sets, and knowledge play integral roles in shaping participants' internal outcomes in intercultural partner programs.

External Outcomes

Participants reported that support from their cultural partners bolstered their intercultural communication through conversation, attunement, and shared understanding, aligning with Rodriguez et al. (2024) on the importance of interpersonal connections among international students. Furthermore, those peer partnerships helped mitigate isolation and discrimination, making them feel valued and culturally understood, thereby facilitating their effective intercultural interaction (Halpern et al., 2022; Wong & Hyde, 2024). Crucially, while existing studies often focus on institutional support, the present findings emphasize peer-to-peer relationships as key providers of the emotional stability required for cultural and academic adaptation. Beyond programmatic challenges, a critical theme emerged: the lack of support systems and socio-economic needs, including transportation, housing, and financial strain. These findings align with Pinarbasi (2023) and Wei (2025) on the multidimensional demands of sociocultural adaptation. While peer partnerships can provide social and emotional "cushions", they are not equipped to resolve these systemic and structural obstacles. This extends Nilsson (2019)'s research, which shows that cultural partner programs exist within a larger, precarious ecosystem and require a comprehensive institutional response.

Theoretical Synthesis: Iterative Progression through the Model

Deardorff's (2006) model conceptualizes ICC development as a cyclical and iterative process, in which attitudes, knowledge, and skills continuously inform and reshape one another over time. The semester-long structure of the CPP offers a partial window into this iterative dimension: several participants described a trajectory in which early attitudes of openness or curiosity appeared to give way to incremental gains in knowledge and skill, such as growing confidence in English communication or greater comfort navigating unfamiliar social norms. This pattern is broadly consistent with the model's assumption that movement through its components compounds over time rather than occurring in a single step.

The findings indicate that this iterative process is neither consistent nor guaranteed. Participants reporting a lack of reciprocal engagement, such as one-sided transactional or insincere interactions, did not exhibit the same pattern. Their accounts suggest that the cycle may stall without sustained mutual investment; initial openness may not yield the knowledge and skill gains anticipated by the model. This highlights a boundary for Deardorff's model when applied to time-limited, structurally imposed partnerships. The model's iterative nature assumes a baseline level of reciprocity that cannot be presumed solely from a formal arrangement. In the absence of reciprocity, as in this sample, the cycle may be interrupted or incomplete within a single semester, emphasizing the importance of intentional matching and accountability mechanisms.

Temporal Context and Post-Pandemic Considerations

Building on this theoretical account of the model's iterative process, it is worth considering how a pandemic-era replication might reshape both the pace and completeness of that progression. Structural barriers in graduate education, such as time constraints and workload, likely persist or worsen amid post-pandemic enrollment pressures and funding models. The pandemic expedited the adoption of virtual and hybrid intercultural exchange formats (e.g., Breaden et al., 2023; Higgins, 2024), thereby reshaping institutional support infrastructure. Additionally, it coincided with documented increases in anti-Asian sentiment and other forms of discrimination affecting international students (Rodriguez et al., 2024). Post-pandemic developments in visa policies and a resurgence in international enrollment to record levels further distinguish the current landscape from that of 2015-2018. As a result, findings from the current study may not be entirely generalizable to today's international graduate student population without further investigation.

Limitations

Despite its contributions to the understanding of ICC development among graduate-level international students, this study has several limitations. First, the study relied on self-reported survey data, which may have been influenced by participants' tendencies toward social desirability. Participants may have provided responses they believed were socially acceptable or culturally aware, rather than responses that accurately reflected their genuine experiences and perceptions. Second, participation in the study was voluntary; self-selection bias may have occurred, with participants already interested in intercultural engagement more likely to participate. These individuals may have entered the program with greater cultural openness or prior international experience, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings to the wider student population. Relatedly, because participants were recruited from a single public university in the southeastern United States, these findings are not generalizable beyond institutions with similar demographic and regional characteristics; replication at institutions with distinct institutional types, sizes, or regional contexts is needed before broader claims can be made.

Third, the timing of data collection may have affected the quality of responses. Surveys administered at the beginning and end of the fall semester may have coincided with periods of heightened stress or competing demands. At the start of the semester, participants may have been preoccupied with adjusting to new cultural and academic responsibilities, whereas at the end of the semester, they may have experienced pressures related to final examinations, homesickness, or other commitments. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Fourth, this study examined ICC development exclusively from the perspective of international graduate students; the domestic cultural partners' own experiences, motivations, and perceptions were not directly assessed. Because Deardorff's (2006) model is inherently relational and the present findings emphasize reciprocity and co-constructive learning, this represents a material limitation. Claims regarding "mutual growth" and partners' engagement rest entirely on international students' accounts of their partners' behavior and attitudes, which may not fully capture domestic partners' own experiences or intentions. Lastly, data were collected between 2015 and 2018, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This event fundamentally transformed international students' access to peer interactions, mental health support, and visa stability. Therefore, the findings should be regarded as a pre-pandemic baseline rather than a reflection of current conditions.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Practice

The results of the present study hold implications for practice for several stakeholders: professors, the international office, and the university system, with special emphasis on helping professionals. Considering the intellectual, cultural, and economic contributions of international students, host institutions

can encourage intercultural interventions through orientation programs, student mentoring/buddy programs, faculty support, and campus-wide activities that support cross-cultural interactions and the cultivation of ICC, while adapting IaH efforts to meet the rigorous needs and scheduling demands of graduate student populations. Given barriers such as reciprocity and scheduling identified in this study, adaptations could include matching partners by interests or availability, clearer expectations and accountability, and graduate-student-specific scheduling, such as asynchronous options or academic credit. The development of ICC, brought about through IaH efforts, requires support and a call to action for campuses across the nation to endorse the creation and facilitation of such programs.

Through a commitment to internationalization, universities, professors, global (or international) offices, international student advisors, and the helping professions can support international graduate students in overcoming barriers that may hinder their transition experiences. Pre-program training in cultural humility for domestic partners may further strengthen this commitment by helping ensure that both partners approach the relationship with openness and mutual respect. International students' language proficiency levels often significantly affect their ability to transition into their host countries, creating another barrier for them to overcome. The helping professions may find new ways to support international students, with a specialized focus on addressing language barriers across student advising, counseling, and mentorship. For example, a host institution may offer weekly language courses or a translator during advising sessions to support international students' language proficiency development, underscoring the need for institutional efforts to extend beyond buddy programs.

Institutional efforts must extend beyond cultural partner programs to include systemic curricular adjustments that integrate global perspectives and accommodate diverse traditions. Such efforts need improved coordination among international offices, graduate schools, departments, advising units, and support services to embed cultural partner programs within broader institutional support rather than as standalone interventions. Support and commitment to IaH efforts may be demonstrated through the following actionable steps: 1) Given that participants cited scheduling conflicts, CPPs for graduate students should offer asynchronous interaction options such as online journal entries and screen for scheduling compatibility prior to partner matching. 2) Because many participants reported support system gaps (e.g., transportation, housing), CPPs should include a resource navigation checklist for partners to review together. 3) As participants also experienced one-sided partnerships, programs should implement intentional interventions at the start of CPPs to support rapport and bonding between partners.

Implications for Research

The findings of this study have several implications for research. First, future research may consider extending intercultural interaction programs from one semester to multiple semesters, enabling examination of the program's longer-term impacts on transition outcomes for international graduate students. Allowing for longer-term intercultural interactions will not only yield more impactful results for intercultural partners but may also make intercultural exchanges feel more organic and less "forced". With international graduate students enduring significant pressures and culture shock from the moment they set foot in their host countries, the transition shock, paired with "forced" interactions, may unintentionally create greater stress and resistance to intercultural exchanges. Particularly when considering the transition of international students whose living environment in their country of origin varies dramatically from that of their host institutions (e.g., from large cities in their country of origin to rural host institutions), culture shock may take significantly longer to subside. More organic intercultural exchanges, paired with longer-term interaction opportunities, will not only yield more impactful research results but also enable intercultural partners to develop their connections at their own pace.

Second, future research may explore differences in transition experiences among international graduate students enrolled in different areas of study. For example, some international students from countries such as China and India may be more inclined to pursue graduate careers in STEM and Business, increasing the likelihood that a given participant will have more peers or professors with a similar cultural background. Although this cultural familiarity may provide comfort during the transition, it may hinder true

intercultural growth and the development of intercultural competence. Researchers may mitigate this cultural familiarity by intentionally matching intercultural partners and implementing accountability mechanisms to support intercultural growth rather than cultural comfort. Additionally, pre-intercultural program training may be implemented in future studies to ensure proper orientation and preparedness among intercultural participants.

Third, future research may obtain in-depth, nuanced cross-cultural insights through semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview may allow interviewers to follow up on ambiguous interviewee responses, thereby increasing clarity across the qualitative data in the study. This structure may also support behavioral observations by interviewers, increasing the reliability and validity of the study's findings and allowing for more organic observations- mitigating the "forced" nature of overly structured buddy programs. Fourth, given the numerous time-consuming demands and responsibilities of graduate students, future research may benefit from virtual intercultural programs that, in the post-COVID reality, enable greater flexibility and accessibility for international student populations. Lastly, future research may consider studying CPP through other theoretical frameworks, such as the Contact Theory framework, to examine the lack of reciprocal engagement between cultural partners and to further explore critical perspectives on ICC. Furthermore, Holliday (2011) and Kubota and Takeda (2021) argue that mainstream frameworks often rely on Western norms and are shaped by neoliberal and ideological influences, which may not fit the lived experiences of non-Western participants. Future research may recognize that participants' expressions of intercultural competence may be culturally grounded rather than universally applicable.

CONCLUSION

International graduate-level students described their cultural partnerships as contributing to their own ICC development and worldview expansion. Exposure to differing cultures, norms, values, and beliefs was associated with a reported deeper sense of intercultural understanding and a greater openness and cultural curiosity. The present study shows that students benefited from engaging in intercultural interactions. Given the reported intercultural barriers, future research must build on these findings, paving the way for graduate international student populations to continue impacting the world at individual, institutional, and national levels.

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