

# A Study of Intercultural Communicative Competence in ELT

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## Abstract

The ultimate goals of the teaching of culture in ELT are knowledge, attitudes and skills which are important components of ICC. This paper studies ICC from several perspectives, such as the concept of ICC, the teaching of ICC, the relationship between communicative and ICC and the assessment of ICC. Although ICC teaching also has its own difficulties, cultural knowledge, skills and attitudes are all suggested to be important aspects of the teaching of culture in ELT.

## Keywords

Culture, ELT, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Assessment

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## 1. Introduction

Language and culture are interdependent and they are widely believed to be inseparable (Kramersch, 2015). Jiang holds the view that “language and culture make a living organism; language is flesh, and culture is blood. Without culture, language would be dead; without language, culture would have no shape” (Jiang, 2000). It seems that the relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted.

Not many people doubt the importance of communicative competence in ELT, and it is widely believed to be the ultimate aim of ELT in many countries in the world (Harper, 2020). For most learners, the main purpose of learning English is also to communicate by speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, language and culture are closely related. Successful communication also requires Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), but it is often called a hidden curriculum in ELT because its significance is still not acknowledged. Byram & Wagner (2018), Harper (2020) all list goals of English teaching in their

works. They all encourage interaction, an awareness of cultural issues and a positive attitude towards other societies. This paper will study the concept, teaching and assessment of ICC to encourage the teaching of ICC, which is more or less ignored in ELT.

## 2. The Concept of ICC

The concept associated with the term “ICC” has been defined by scholars all over the world in recent decades (Byram & Masuhara, 2013). There seems to be no agreed definition of the term up to the present.

Byram (1995) summarizes ICC in ELT as *savoir-être* (attitudes), *savoir* (knowledge), *savoir-comprendre* (skills to interpret and relate), *savoir-s’engager* (critical cultural awareness) and *savoir-faire* (ability to interact and discover). Byram defines cultural knowledge as “knowledge about social groups and their cultures in one’s own country, and similar knowledge of the interlocutor’s country on the one hand; knowledge of the processes of interaction at individual and societal levels, on the other hand” (Byram, 1997). For learners of English, the interlocutors can be people all over the world because of their lingua franca nature. Therefore, while dealing with English teaching, the knowledge in this definition can firstly refer to different cultures and languages between people of different countries or even people of different social groups in the same country. Second, English is a global language. People use English to communicate with other people of different cultures. These cultures are not confined to any one country, such as America or Britain. Third, it might be possible for some people to focus on the cultures of some countries that they often deal with. For example, if a person works in a small company with colleagues from India, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia only, then that person can pay special attention to their cultural knowledge. This may help when they communicate in their daily working life.

On the basis of Byram’s *savoirs* theory, Sercu (2005) summarizes the concept of ICC as knowledge, skills and attitudes. Knowledge in his definition refers to a specific culture and general culture, knowledge of self and others, and knowledge about the language and its relationship with culture. Skills mainly refer to the ability to interpret, relate, discover, interact and acquire knowledge and to strategies to direct one’s own learning. Attitudes mainly refer to the attitude towards relativizing self and valuing others and a critical engagement with the foreign culture under consideration and one’s own. Sercu’s definition not only covers most aspects of Byram’s definition, it also strongly stresses the role of home culture or local culture.

The definition given above has attracted great attention and has been quoted by many scholars (Harper, 2020; Ahmed, 2022) worldwide. Although other definitions of ICC have also been voiced, almost all the definitions contain the three aspects outlined above. As Fantini (2000) suggests, the three principle themes stay the same. Fantini (2000) himself describes ICC in a different way with a variety of traits, in at least five dimensions, which may be viewed as a develop-

mental process. The traits include respect, empathy, flexibility, patience, interest, curiosity, openness, motivation, a sense of humour, tolerance of ambiguity and a willingness to suspend judgment, among others. The five dimensions are awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge and proficiency in the host tongue. This is a developmental process because once it has begun, ICC development is an on-going and lengthy, often lifelong, process (Fantini, 2000). Fantini's explanation is detailed and clear but also complex. The point he makes in his definition sounds very important, which is that there are degrees of ICC during the lengthy process, and it may take one's whole life to develop ICC to a certain degree. It helps people to realize that degrees of ICC exist and that ICC requires a long learning process.

To summarize their concepts of ICC, a person with a high degree of ICC is someone who:

- 1) has other cultural knowledge and is also fully aware of her/his own culture;
- 2) has insight into the relationship between cultures;
- 3) has the skill to mediate between cultures and interpret culture;
- 4) has the ability to learn new cultural knowledge fast, enabling rapid, successful interaction in an unfamiliar cultural situation; and
- 5) is able to integrate all the knowledge and skills to act appropriately in an intercultural situation.

### 3. The Relationship between Communicative Competence and ICC

As discussed above, ICC is agreed by many people to be the ultimate aim of the teaching and learning of culture. Its significance in ELT will also be investigated through its relationship with communicative competence.

Not many people doubt the importance of communicative competence in ELT, and it is widely believed to be the ultimate aim of ELT in many countries in the world. However, given that language is in culture and culture is in language and that language teaching is also the teaching of culture, intercultural competence and communicative competence are inseparable. Successful communication also requires intercultural competence. Communicative competence alone is not sufficient anymore. As Sercu suggests:

Communicative competence refers to a person's ability to act in a foreign language in a linguistically, socio-linguistically and pragmatically appropriate way. Intercultural communicative competence, then, builds on communicative competence and enlarges it to incorporate intercultural competence (Sercu, 2005).

According to Byram (1995), grammatical competence or linguistic competence mainly refers to the ability to use linguistic knowledge to communicate. The term sociolinguistic competence refers to the ability to use language to express oneself and respond properly. Strategic competence or pragmatic compe-

tence refers to the ability to be aware of and to repair the situation when communication becomes stuck and the ability to enhance the effectiveness of communication. None of these three aspects can be understood without any cultural influences. Grammar embeds culture; sociolinguistic competence certainly cannot be restricted to the communication between people of the same language background. The response, therefore, has to be culturally proper. The ability to repair communication also requires intercultural competence because communication often becomes stuck for cultural reasons rather than linguistic reasons. The ability refers to skills and attitudes, and not just to knowledge (Byram & Wagner, 2018). It is hard to say whether ICC is built on communicative competence, but they are definitely bound together and develop together. Byram suggests that “Intercultural competence together with learners’ linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence form intercultural communicative competence (ICC)” (Byram, 1997).

In short, communicative competence could be considered to be the goal of English teaching, and English communication is in fact intercultural communication. As a result, ICC is surely an indispensable part of and a goal of ELT.

#### 4. ICC Teaching

ICC training seems to be becoming a popular subject nowadays. Many people (Corbett, 2003; Gilmore, 2019) have produced books and papers suggesting approaches to ICC training. Neuliep (2006) suggests a variety of activities to be used in intercultural training. They recommend that lecture/discussions, self-assessment instruments, case studies, and simulation role-plays and videos should be used in cross-cultural training programmes (Neuliep, 2006). Although when they study intercultural training, they look at the training as a separate programme rather than a part of ELT, the approaches they suggest may all be integrated into ELT in practice. As Corbett (2003) shows, in ELT, “the classroom activities adopted in an intercultural approach do not very often stray from those activities familiar from much communicative teaching and learning: role-play, simulation, project work, debates and questionnaires, with attendant reading, listening and viewing tasks” (p. 210). Therefore, the teaching of ICC seems quite applicable in ELT if the activities are available. In other words, the teaching of ICC needs to be conducted through activities because it involves skills and attitude training and development which cannot be carried out by lecturing alone. Since ICC is a part of ELT, it needs to be integrated into the teaching process, so the activities may need to be a part of the speaking, listening, reading and writing activities in ELT.

Activities that are often used in ELT such as discussions/debates, role-plays and presentations can all be used to teach ICC if they are designed for that purpose, because “intercultural tasks, like communicative tasks allow for a range of settings: from individual work, pair work and group work to whole-class activities” (Corbett, 2003). Presentation and discussions/debates can be used for cultural knowledge learning and reviewing. In discussions, the trainer presents and

discusses the similarities and differences between cultures, and this format is easy to organize in a college classroom context. Role-play can be used for skills and attitudes training and can also strengthen knowledge learning. Role-play exercises typically have trainees actually engaging in intercultural communication.

The problem is whether the activities put learners into an intercultural scenario and encourage cultural comparison and studies. Practicing normal language expressions such as "... how are you?", "... I am fine"; thank you may not play an effective role in ICC training. Consequently, a critical incident approach is strongly recommended by many people in ELT. According to Wright (1995), critical incidents were first used in a cross-cultural context in the 1960s. "Critical incidents are short descriptions of contexts in which there is a problem arising from cultural differences between the interacting parties, or where there is a problem of intercultural adjustment" (Korhonen, 2010). This approach allows trainees to indirectly observe intercultural communication and empathize with the people involved. For example, the cultural incidents used on the ESLGO website illustrate the need for knowledge, skills and attitudes in an intercultural situation, as is demonstrated by the following example.

Korean:

You are a Korean language teacher who lived in the Philippines for two years and then moved to Japan, where you lived for five years. You have just returned to the Philippines for a new teaching position and an old Filipino friend meets you at the airport. After you greet your friend (you bowed and then shook hands), your friend seems to get angry. You are not sure why your friend is angry, but you need to find out (ESLGO website).

Filipino:

You are picking your Korean friend up at the airport. You used to be great friends, but you haven't seen him in five years so you expect a warm welcome. However, when your friend arrives all you get is a cold bow and a quick handshake. You were expecting an embrace and then a little chat with your friend's arm around your shoulders. You would like to find out why your friend is acting so coldly. It may be a cultural conflict but then again, it may not be; your friend did live in the Philippines for two years (ESLGO website).

This is an example that requires intercultural competence, which is not just knowledge but also skills and attitudes. To solve the conflict in the example, both parties need to explain what they find unusual about the other's behaviour and each needs to realize the other's cultural perceptions and be aware of the changes and likely reasons for them. To be able to explain and to be willing to explain is a key skill of intercultural communication, as is the ability to realize others' cultural perceptions and how they may contrast with their own. Each person also needs the right attitude about how people greet each other in the other's culture and, in this case, in a relevant third culture (Japan). The guidance for such a

discussion or role-play is also very important. It needs to lead learners to ICC learning. For example the guiding questions given in this activity are as follows:

- 1) Both people explain what they find unusual about the other's behaviour.
- 2) Each person realizes the other's cultural perceptions.
- 3) Each person learns how the problem would be handled in the other's culture.
- 4) Together, the two people develop conflict solutions. (ESLGO website)

This sets up a process for skills and attitudes training and it encourages learners to learn how to deal with cultural conflicts. If this kind of activity is designed and used in the teaching materials for speaking, listening, and even reading and writing activities, ICC training and development are more likely to be embedded in English teaching and learning. To conclude, ICC can be taught in ELT, but it requires attention so that the activities or even the content of the teaching material are designed with ICC in mind.

## 5. The Assessment of ICC

If ICC is very important in ELT, its assessment also needs exploring. Listening, speaking, reading and writing are all tested all over the world through all kinds of testing systems. If ICC is going to become a part of ELT, its assessment will also become an issue. The assessment of ICC has not been specified in the curriculums, but some commentators have suggested that it should be considered in the future (Chen & Wang, 2018).

Some intercultural specialists have worked on the design of ICC assessment since 1976. Ruben (1976) identifies seven elements and creates a general model for intercultural communication competence. His Intercultural Behavioural Assessment Indices (IBAI) is an instrument to measure ICC.

Chen (1991) finds that Ruben's instrument is mostly reliable. He further examined the seven elements of IBAI by conducting a survey among 149 foreign students enrolled in a large midwest university in the United States and 129 Americans identified by the foreign student subjects as persons who knew them well. The foreign students were asked to complete five questionnaires to measure the above-mentioned elements that are related to communication competence. Ruben used the 31-item general disclosure scale which proved to be a reliable instrument for measuring ICC. Chen also observed there are disadvantages as well, in that the instrument is too lengthy and imprecise.

Although the IBAI system has been proved to be generally reliable by Chen, in fact Chen and Ruben suggest that the assessment of ICC be carried out by some Americans or maybe other native speakers. The method which they propose is to ask native speakers to assess the ICC of international students. This seems to be a good idea because, sometimes, people themselves cannot assess their own ICC; also, because ICC shows interaction with others, very often, the interlocutor is the best choice to carry out the assessment. On the other hand, this method also reveals its limitation: being able to communicate with Americans does not mean

being able to communicate in English with all the people who use English as a Lingua Franca. This method can only persuade people to give priority to American culture and ignore the fact that English is used internationally. Furthermore, as observed by [Chen \(1991\)](#), the method is too lengthy and imprecise.

A YOGA form designed by the School of International Training has been recommended by Fantini:

The term “YOGA” stands for “Your Objectives, Guidelines, and Assessment” form. This form may be used as a self-evaluation guide. It is designed to help you examine the development of your intercultural communicative competence. This pilot form should help you to critically examine your intercultural objectives, serve as guidelines while undergoing an intercultural experience, and provide an assessment tool at various stages of intercultural development ([Fantini, 1995](#)).

The form has five parts: awareness, attitude, skills, knowledge and language proficiency. Each part incorporates assessment content at four levels. Fantini also mentions that it is useful to have a native of the host culture to rate as well. This will provide learners with not only their own perspective, but that of their hosts as well. However, the YOGA form is mainly used for self-assessment. As mentioned above, one may not know exactly about one’s ICC. For example, one criterion in level one of the skill section is “I use models appropriate to the culture and I avoid offending my hosts with my behavior, dress, etc. ([Fantini, 1995](#)).” Very often, one does not know what is appropriate and one cannot realize the offence until a few years later. Sometimes, only the interlocutor can feel the offence and the reasons for being offended immediately or soon after the moment. Consequently, many questions in this method are difficult to answer and their reliability is questionable.

[Byram \(1997\)](#) lists detailed ICC teaching, learning and assessment objectives from the four *savoir* dimensions referred to earlier. He suggests that the assessment of ICC should address those four aspects. Byram states that assessing levels of *savoir* is less problematic. He thinks that it is possible to quantify the knowledge retained from a course or the knowledge acquired at a given point. Deep learning should be assessed through techniques such as essay writing. He also suggests that it is almost impossible to measure precisely someone’s *savoir comprendre*. The learners might be assessed on the “frequency of success, documented over time, since the complexity of the mediation process militates against the possibility of assessing *savoir comprendre* on one occasion only” ([Byram, 1997](#)). In terms of *savoir faire* and part of *savoir s’engager*, [Byram \(1997\)](#) writes that “there is no guarantee that success on one occasion means success on a later occasion which might be more complex” ([Byram, 1997](#)). He suggests that the assessment of *savoir faire* should be done through an analysis of performance by the learners themselves retrospectively. *Savoir apprendre* is parallel to *savoir comprendre*. It can be assessed in terms of the degree of comprehensiveness of the learner’s explanation and interpretation. The assessor

should decide which references are crucial to understanding and which are complementary.

It can be seen from Byram's suggestions that ICC is an ambiguous concept, because it is related to people's skills and attitudes which can be ambiguous and difficult to describe. The assessment of it therefore is very difficult. It requires a long observing period and much effort. It is not easily possible to assess someone's ICC by using multiple-choice questions and short-answer questions, so it is also impossible to give a definite mark to a learner in this assessment. All the above reasons make the assessment very difficult in ELT. However, the purpose of assessment is only to encourage learning. As Byram says:

When assessment recognizes all aspects of ICC, even if they cannot be quantified and reduced to a single score, then the learner can see their efforts rewarded, and the teacher and curriculum planner can give full attention to the whole phenomenon of ICC rather than only that which can be represented statistically (Byram, 1997).

If any conclusion can be drawn, it is that the assessment of ICC is not the same as the assessment of linguistic competence, which has clear marking criteria. It is something much more complex. The purpose of this assessment is to stimulate people to learn ICC and pay attention to it in the process of language teaching and learning. In terms of assessing methodology, there are many choices and, very often, one choice or even a combination of some methods may not work. ICC assessment may need to be conducted in various ways. Approaches to assessment should consider direct and indirect indicators, quantitative and qualitative information, and discrete and global information. They may include self-evaluation and peer evaluation, as well as staff evaluation of participants (Fantini, 2000). No matter what the method is, the process of developing assessment methods is significant because it encourages the development of ICC in foreign-language teaching. However, a wrong assessment can also cause a misunderstanding of ICC. Therefore, the assessment of ICC needs to be approached with careful design and research.

## 6. Conclusion

As discussed above, ICC is one of the ultimate goals of the teaching of culture and ELT. In this solution, the ownership of culture does not matter. The point is the teaching and learning of knowledge, attitudes and skills. However, there are many difficulties in ICC teaching.

First, although ICC can be taught and integrated into ELT, it needs a group of experts who are able to design materials for ICC training and a group of teachers who understand what ICC is and are able to teach ICC. However, most language teachers are not trained in the area of cultural studies. Aarup et al. (1995) suggest that most language teachers rely totally on their student's cognitive skills and ability to acquire, preserve and transfer the information presented into use-



ful knowledge of the foreign culture. Their comments show teacher's fear when facing the requirement of teaching culture in their classes: they are afraid of not knowing enough about the foreign culture, so the teaching of culture is often ignored by teachers, intentionally or not. To solve this problem, more training and well-designed teaching material is needed. Byram also says that "The first and most obvious problem is how to construct curriculums that can be taught by ordinary teachers or ordinary students and at the same time reflect clearly the basis or underlying principles of various fields of inquiry" (Byram, 1989). To summarize, trained teachers and experts in this area are still needed in ELT.

Second, although culture is very important in language learning and teaching, the linguistic part has always been the focus. It is not possible to spend the majority of the time teaching culture, so cultural studies that can be conducted in English classes are limited. Third, it is hard to teach attitudes and skills. Although certain degrees of success can be achieved from the discussion, role-play and activities that can put learners into an intercultural situation, the activities that focus on intercultural competence sometimes require special design and teacher's and student's full awareness. Finally, all three aspects of ICC are difficult to assess. Teaching, learning and assessment seem to be a whole unit in ELT. Assessment encourages teaching and learning, but the assessment of ICC still needs more exploration.

Although ICC teaching is difficult, it is still the ultimate goal of the teaching of culture and one of the objectives of ELT. Its significance outweighs its difficulties, so many scholars all over the world are seeking ways to improve ICC teaching and assessment.

The training of ICC is suggested to be part of ELT, and teachers should be fully aware of the importance and master the skills of teaching it. Changes need to be made to the "lip-service" situation and explore ways to make intercultural communication a part of language teaching in practice but not in principle.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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