

# Intercultural communication

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Intercultural communication (IC) can be defined as communication where cultural and linguistic differences are perceived as relevant to the interaction by the participants or researchers involved (Zhu 2019; Baker 2022). In IC, participants make use of and negotiate between different cultural resources and languages in interaction, including intersecting cultural identities, communities, references, and meanings (eg nationality, ethnicity, class, profession, gender, sexuality), at a range of scales from the local, to the national, and the global. Due to its focus on linguistic and cultural practices, language learning is inevitably an intercultural process, whether or not it is explicitly recognized in teaching. The intercultural dimensions of language learning become particularly important when the focus is on developing learners' communicative competence since that communication is typically intercultural. Indeed, the idea of culture as part of language teaching has a long history. In the nineteenth century, languages were learnt primarily through works of literature to gain a better understanding of the culture of the target language community (Risager 2007). In the twentieth century, there was an emphasis on learning languages as a means of communicating across national cultural borders, often for economic or political advantage (Jenkins 2015). The rapid increase in globalization at the end of the previous century and during the first decades of this century has seen a focus on learning languages for global connections and intercultural communication. This has been particularly true of English and ELT due to the role that the expansion of English language use has played in the processes of globalization (Moran Panero 2018).

IC perspectives are at times used interchangeably with cross-cultural (CC) perspectives, and there are overlaps between them. However, a broad (and somewhat simplified) distinction can be made between IC and earlier CC perspectives that have been prevalent in ELT (Scollon et al. 2012; Baker 2022). In CC approaches, communicative practices of different groups are frequently compared at the national scale with differences identified, for instance comparing different greetings in Chinese and English. This has been criticized for presenting stereotyped and essentialist characterizations of culture through reducing individuals to representations of a national

culture (Holliday 2011). In contrast, IC approaches investigate instances of *interaction* between individuals at a range of cultural levels (Scollon et al. 2012). This is a crucial distinction because people in intercultural interactions typically communicate differently to how they would in intracultural (shared culture) scenarios (Scollon et al. 2012). For example, English people may shake hands when meeting someone for the first time in a formal situation, and in a similar situation Thai people place their hands, palms together, in front of their face and bow their head in a *wai*. However, when a Thai person meets an English person, neither will expect a *wai* or a handshake: each realizes that their interlocutor may not be familiar with their greeting norms. Thus, a CC comparison would be unhelpful for predicting the flexibility that is usual in actual instances of intercultural communication. Nevertheless, even within IC perspectives the ‘who’, ‘how’, and ‘why’ of culture needs to be critically investigated to avoid stereotyping others. This includes acknowledging cultural groupings beyond the nation, such as ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality, and profession (Scollon et al. 2012). Most recently, transcultural communication (TC) has been proposed as a new direction in IC understanding. TC recognizes the complex ways languages, cultures, identities, and communities come together in highly diverse contemporary social settings where boundaries between languages and cultures are not easily distinguished. This includes multilingual and multicultural urban centres, international business and academia, and global social networking platforms (Baker and Ishikawa 2021).

In relation to language teaching, one important insight from IC research has been that the competence needed to interact across and through cultural and linguistic borders will be an intercultural competence rather than the linguistic competence of an idealized ‘native speaker’. This has led to a core concept in language teaching, communicative competence, being expanded through the addition of intercultural dimensions. The most well-known model of this is Byram’s (1997, 2021) intercultural communicative competence (ICC). ICC takes key features of communicative competence (linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence) and incorporates intercultural elements. These include skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, knowledge (of own and other cultures, as well as IC), attitudes of curiosity and openness, and critical cultural awareness (Byram 2021: 62). ICC has been hugely influential in language teaching as a way of systematically incorporating intercultural dimensions into language teaching, assessment, and curricula (McConachy et al. 2022). However, there are concerns that Byram’s conception of ICC is too focused on the national scale and does not sufficiently recognize that other cultural groupings (discussed above) may be equally or more relevant (Holliday 2011; Baker 2022). Most significant to discussions of English and ELT is that ICC, especially in the earlier versions (Byram 1997: 114) that have been most influential in ELT, does not account for languages used as a lingua franca where no native speaker communities or cultures are present, as is the case in most English interactions globally (Baker and Ishikawa 2021).

Intercultural awareness (ICA) represents a further expansion of IC in language teaching that builds on ICC but is specifically focused on the global use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in diverse settings

in which there are often no native speakers present (although native English speakers can, of course, also engage in IC through ELF, they are present in much smaller numbers and so are not the focus). ICA is, thus, of direct relevance to ELT due to its focus on English and ‘non-native’ multilingual English users. ICA is defined as an ‘understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of understanding can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in communication’ (Baker 2022: 42). It is divided into three levels: starting from a basic understanding of culture at a simplistic and stereotyped level; to cultural awareness, similar to ICC; then the final level of intercultural or transcultural awareness in which the relationship between language, culture, and communication is approached as complex and emergent, not necessarily linked to any single community (Baker 2022). In terms of teaching practices, IC-related materials and classroom activities can be tailored to the learners based on their level of ICA and the ICA levels can also be used as a framework to document progress (Baker 2022).

At present, the extent to which ICC, ICA, or other intercultural elements are incorporated into ELT classroom practices is debatable. Culture and the intercultural are often tacked on as a ‘fifth skill’ (Kramsch 1993: 1) to be addressed only when other aspects of language and communication have been covered. Evidence suggests that teachers typically fail to teach culture or IC in a systematic or in-depth way (Young and Sachdev 2011). This is not surprising given the restricted time and resources many ELT teachers face and that few assessments include aspects of IC. Additionally, teaching materials frequently cover culture and the intercultural in a simplistic and stereotyped manner (Gray 2010). Furthermore, intercultural dimensions are often not part of pre-service teacher education.

Nonetheless, there are now decades’ worth of research and theory suggesting a wide variety of approaches to applying IC in language classrooms (Risager 2007; Baker 2022 among many others). Shared features of these approaches include expanding communicative competence to incorporate ICC and ICA, and linked to this, replacing the native speaker with an intercultural speaker/citizen model as more appropriate and achievable for L2 learners (discussed above). Intercultural language education also involves a critical approach to language, culture, and identity that encourages learners to question taken-for-granted assumptions about national cultures, identities, languages, and the connections between them. In relation to English, rather than just Anglophone varieties and cultures, this entails recognizing its global role as a *multilingua franca* for intercultural and transcultural communication in diverse cultural settings. This also means centring on the cultures, and related needs and goals, of local teachers and learners, rather than imposing external teaching approaches and materials. IC is increasingly part of in-service teacher education, particularly at postgraduate levels in university courses. IC is also more frequently appearing in language teaching policy documents in diverse settings, including the United States, Europe and Southeast and East Asia (Baker and Ishikawa 2021). All these factors combined underscore the growing importance of IC in ELT and

the need to incorporate it more deeply and systematically into teacher education, teaching materials, classroom practices, and assessment.

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