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Intercultural Communicative Competence in English Language Education: A Critical Synthesis of Models and Assessment Approaches

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Abstract: The growing use of English across multilingual and multicultural settings has made the relationship between language proficiency and intercultural understanding a central concern for language education. Communicative success can no longer be described solely in terms of grammatical accuracy or fluency: speakers must also interpret culturally situated meanings, manage differences in expectations, and negotiate understanding with interlocutors whose experiences may differ from their own. This article critically examines three influential perspectives on intercultural communicative competence (ICC)—Byram's educational model, Deardorff's developmental framework, and Baker's account of intercultural awareness in English as a lingua franca—and considers what each contributes to curriculum design and assessment. than competing universal prescriptions.
Keywords: intercultural communicative competence; English language education; intercultural awareness; assessment; English as a lingua franca; critical cultural awareness.

The international role of English has altered the educational meaning of communicative competence. In many settings, English is used not between members of one speech community but among people who bring different linguistic repertoires, cultural histories, professional practices, and expectations to an encounter. The relevant question for language education is therefore not simply whether learners can produce accurate sentences. It is whether they can make meaning with others, recognise when an interpretation is uncertain, and respond constructively when assumptions or communicative conventions do not coincide.

This shift does not make linguistic knowledge less important. Rather, it places linguistic resources within a wider account of communication. A learner may use grammatically accurate language yet misread an indirect refusal, interpret silence as agreement, or overlook the effect of status and context on turn-taking. Equally, a learner with limited grammatical control may demonstrate considerable intercultural sensitivity by asking for clarification, checking an interpretation, or adapting a message to sustain mutual understanding. Such examples show why linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence should be related in curriculum design but not collapsed into a single construct.

Byram's model helped establish this broader educational agenda by connecting language learning with attitudes, knowledge, interpretative and relational skills, and critical cultural awareness[1] Deardorff's work subsequently framed intercultural competence as a developmental process in which attitudes and knowledge support internal shifts and, in turn, more appropriate and effective external behaviour[2].

A further development has been the recognition that English is routinely used as a lingua franca by speakers who do not necessarily identify with traditionally defined English-speaking cultures. This challenges teaching practices that present one national variety or cultural group as the sole reference point for appropriate communication. Baker's work on intercultural awareness, for example, draws attention to the negotiated and emergent character of cultural meaning in English-mediated interaction.[3]The present article offers a critical synthesis of these perspectives and of selected assessment approaches. Its purpose is not to claim that one model can be applied unchanged in every educational setting. Instead, it examines the assumptions behind influential frameworks, identifies their practical strengths and limitations, and considers how a context-

[1]Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. Multilingual Matters.

[2] Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. Journal of Studies in International Education, 10(3), 241–266.

[3]Baker, W. (2011). Intercultural awareness: Modelling an understanding of cultures in intercultural communication through English as a lingua franca. Language and Intercultural Communication, 11(3), 197–214.

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sensitive approach might be developed for English language education. The analysis is conceptual and based on published scholarship and policy frameworks.

ICC is commonly understood as the capacity to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. The two terms in this definition matter. Effectiveness concerns whether participants can achieve a communicative purpose; appropriateness concerns whether their conduct is responsive to the social and contextual expectations of the interaction. Neither can be judged independently of the people involved, the purpose of the exchange, the medium, or the power relations that shape participation.

It is useful to distinguish ICC from the broader term intercultural competence. Intercultural competence may refer to functioning across cultural settings in professional, civic, or educational life. ICC places particular emphasis on the communicative resources through which participants interpret, express, and negotiate meaning. In language education, this includes pragmatic choices, interactional strategies, the ability to ask for clarification, and the capacity to recognise that a first interpretation may not be the only plausible one.

A further conceptual difficulty is the tendency to treat culture as a stable package of national characteristics. Such an approach can turn cultural learning into the memorisation of generalisations: members of one country are said to communicate in a particular way, while members of another are assigned a contrasting style. This is pedagogically risky. Individuals participate in multiple communities and identities, and differences within a society may be as significant as differences between societies. Cultural knowledge is therefore most useful when it supports inquiry and interpretation rather than prediction.

For analytical purposes, ICC can be discussed through four overlapping dimensions: (a) cognitive resources, including knowledge of social practices and contextual conventions; (b) affective orientations, such as openness, curiosity, and willingness to tolerate uncertainty; (c) interactional and behavioural resources, including clarification, adaptation, and negotiation; and (d) critical reflection, through which learners examine their own assumptions and the representations of others. These dimensions are not a universally validated scale. They are a practical synthesis for organising the discussion that follows.

Byram's framework remains influential because it gives language teachers a structured account of what intercultural learning may involve. Its five savoirs connect attitudes of openness and curiosity (savoir être), knowledge of social groups and interactional processes (savoirs), skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre), skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire), and critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager).[4] The model's particular contribution is to make critical evaluation part of language education: learners are not merely asked to appreciate difference but to examine practices and perspectives, including those of their own society, using explicit criteria.

The framework also has limitations in implementation. Some of its most important outcomes—openness, decentring, or critical awareness—are not easily observable in a single classroom task. A learner's written reflection may suggest a thoughtful position, while their conduct in a pressured interaction may reveal a different pattern. Teachers therefore need to avoid turning the five dimensions into a checklist that implies a linear or uniform progression. The model is most productive when used to design varied learning opportunities and to guide reflective judgement.Deardorff's process and pyramid models foreground the relationship between attitudes, knowledge, skills, internal outcomes, and external outcomes. Respect, openness, and curiosity form an important starting point; these support cultural self-awareness, knowledge of other perspectives, and skills such as listening, observing, interpreting, analysing, evaluating, and relating. The framework then distinguishes internal outcomes—such as adaptability and empathy—from external outcomes expressed in communication that is effective and appropriate in a given context.[5]

The developmental emphasis is valuable because it resists the idea that intercultural competence is acquired once and for all. It is better understood as a capacity that is refined through experience, reflection, and further interaction. Yet the model also raises a measurement problem: internal changes cannot be inferred reliably from a single successful performance, and external behaviour may be constrained by language proficiency, institutional hierarchy, anxiety, or the communicative setting. Assessment should therefore gather evidence over time and make the conditions of performance visible.

[4] Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. Multilingual Matters.
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Baker's contribution is especially relevant to English as a lingua franca. It shifts attention away from the assumption that English communication should reproduce the norms of a single national culture. Intercultural awareness instead concerns the ability to recognise how cultural meanings are made relevant, interpreted, and negotiated in particular encounters[6]. This perspective is compatible with the realities of international higher education, where English may be used by participants who share neither a first language nor a common cultural reference point.The strength of this approach is its attention to interaction and fluidity. Its challenge is pedagogical translation: if culture is dynamic and meanings are negotiated, teachers still need to identify what learners should practise and what assessors should observe. The answer is not to abandon criteria, but to define them in terms of processes—checking understanding, responding to evidence, explaining one's interpretation, and revising it when appropriate—rather than conformity to a presumed national norm.

The three frameworks answer related but different questions. Byram offers a pedagogical account of the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical awareness that language education can foster. Deardorff explains how attitudinal and cognitive resources may develop into internal and external outcomes. Baker foregrounds the situated negotiation of meaning in multilingual English use. Their differences should not be treated as defects: each makes visible a dimension that the others address less directly.For curriculum design, the combined implication is that ICC should not be reduced either to factual lessons about countries or to a generic celebration of diversity. Learners need opportunities to interpret texts and events, examine their own assumptions, engage in interaction where meanings are uncertain, and reflect on how communication unfolds. A model is useful when it informs these decisions; it becomes less useful when its terminology is reproduced in course documents without changing classroom practice.

Assessment is difficult because ICC is multidimensional, contextual, and partly internal. A test that asks learners to identify cultural facts may measure knowledge but cannot establish whether they can respond sensitively in an unfamiliar interaction. Conversely, a successful role-play may reflect rehearsed language rather than a durable ability to interpret cultural difference. No single instrument can therefore provide a complete account of ICC.Questionnaires are attractive because they are relatively economical and can be administered to large groups. They can help learners articulate confidence, attitudes, perceived strengths, and areas for development. However, self-report measures capture learners' perceptions of their competence, not necessarily their demonstrated ability. Responses may be influenced by social desirability, limited self-awareness, differing interpretations of questionnaire items, or unfamiliarity with the situations described.

This distinction is important when interpreting quantitative findings. A high self-rating may indicate confidence or a positive orientation, both of which can matter educationally, but it should not be presented as direct evidence of effective intercultural performance. Reviews of intercultural competence measurement have accordingly called attention to the variety of instruments and the need to examine what each instrument actually measures.[7]

Performance tasks provide a more direct view of how learners act in specified situations. Role-plays, case discussions, collaborative problem-solving, and analysis of recorded interactions can reveal whether learners seek clarification, acknowledge alternative interpretations, manage disagreement, and adapt their language to the communicative purpose. A useful task might ask students to respond to a misunderstanding in an international project group, explain the possible interpretations, and propose a way to restore shared understanding.

Such tasks are not free from limitations. Performance may be affected by anxiety, familiarity with the scenario, group dynamics, and general language proficiency. Rubrics should therefore separate linguistic accuracy from interactional and intercultural dimensions, while recognising that the dimensions can influence one another.Portfolios can document development across a course rather than capture a single moment. They may contain reflective essays, analyses of intercultural incidents, project records, and revised interpretations of texts or interactions. Their value lies in making learning visible over time. However, reflective writing should not be graded according to whether a student expresses the attitudes the assessor expects. More

[6]Baker, W. (2011). Intercultural awareness: Modelling an understanding of cultures in intercultural communication through English as a lingua franca. Language and Intercultural Communication, 11(3), 197–214.
[7]Chen, X., &Gabrenya, W. K., Jr. (2021). In search of cross-cultural competence: A comprehensive review of five measurement instruments. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 82, 37–55.

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defensible criteria include the quality of evidence, recognition of competing perspectives, willingness to reconsider an initial interpretation, and clarity about the limits of one's own knowledge.

Digital exchanges and scenario-based tasks extend the range of possible assessment contexts. Online collaboration, virtual exchange, and moderated discussion can expose learners to different interactional styles and communicative expectations. The CEFR Companion Volume provides relevant descriptors for mediation, online interaction, and plurilingual/pluricultural competence, helping educators connect classroom assessment with broader communicative activity.[8] Such descriptors should be adapted to the course context rather than applied mechanically.

The analysis suggests several principles for curriculum and assessment. First, intercultural learning should be integrated into ordinary language work: reading, speaking, listening, and writing tasks can all include interpretation of perspective, audience, context, and communicative purpose. Second, teaching materials should represent English as a language used across diverse settings and should avoid presenting national cultures as internally uniform. Third, learners should work with authentic or carefully designed cases in which the appropriate response is not immediately obvious. Fourth, assessment should combine self-reflection with observed performance and, where possible, peer feedback.

Teacher development is equally important. Educators need to facilitate disagreement without stereotyping participants, distinguish evidence from generalisation, and help students examine how power and identity shape communication. They also need assessment literacy: a rubric should describe observable evidence and should not claim to measure a learner's entire intercultural identity. In this way, ICC becomes a defensible educational aim rather than an imprecise label attached to a course.

Intercultural communicative competence is an essential dimension of English language education in a world where English is used across diverse linguistic and cultural settings. The models considered here offer complementary insights: Byram foregrounds critical cultural awareness and the educational dimensions of intercultural learning; Deardorff explains its developmental character; and Baker highlights the situated negotiation of meaning in English as a lingua franca. Their synthesis supports an approach that connects language learning with interpretation, interaction, and critical reflection.

The assessment of ICC should not rely on a single questionnaire or isolated performance. Self-report can contribute evidence about learners' perceptions, while performance tasks, portfolios, observation, and reflective analysis can illuminate different aspects of development. Future research should test context-sensitive combinations of these methods and report clearly what each instrument measures. For educational practice, the central conclusion is straightforward: intercultural competence should be embedded in theaims, learning activities, and assessment of English language programmes, not treated as an optional supplement to linguistic instruction.

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