



Measuring Intercultural Competence: Ideas for Teachers

by [Christina Kitson](#)

As the world becomes more globalized and as the population of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students grows in U.S. classrooms, students are expected to gain some basic competencies. All students need to gain communicative competence, which focuses on linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies. These competencies are all focused on use of the language, appropriacy of response, creating conversation and longer chunks of language, and fixing language issues and misunderstandings. Another type of competency that is important is intercultural competency (ICC).

Defining Intercultural Competency

When we think about intercultural competence, we first have to think about culture. Culture has a broad definition but in regards to language, Kramsch (1993) claimed that

culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them. (p. 1)

What is ICC? To understand ICC we need to move beyond culture; ICC focuses on effective and appropriate communication with someone with cultural differences. ICC has many definitions; following are just a few. ICC has been defined as

- “a concept that seems to be transparent, universally accepted, understood and (ab)used, but which has received many differing definitions inside and outside academia” (Dervin, 2010, p. 2).
- “[individuals’] ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 10).
- “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247–248).

- “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world” (Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009, p. 9).

Because there are many definitions, it is important to think about what your goals are in striving for ICC and to develop or agree upon a definition if you are working with others. No matter what definition of ICC we use, these three parts are usually included:

1. **Attitudes:** This deals with the amount of openness and curiosity a learner shows. There needs to be a level of mutual respect and an interest and willingness to discover new things.
2. **Knowledge:** This deals with a learner’s understanding of their own culture as well as other cultures. This includes an aspect of sociolinguistic awareness in that the learner needs to understand the basics of local language and cues. The last point in this section is the idea of globalization and how it influences our understanding.
3. **Skills:** This deals with internal skills (listening, observing, and evaluating), efforts to minimize ethnocentrism, being able to analyze (interpreting and relating), and making connections using comparative techniques. Critical thinking is a big part of this category and involves seeing the world from a different viewpoint and examining one’s own viewpoint more closely.

Intercultural Communication: Outcomes

Once you have a definition of ICC, you need to identify what you are specifically looking for. There may be a specific aspect of ICC that you want to measure, such as one of the objectives in Table 1. Once you know the specific purpose and how it fits into your curriculum, you can work on finding the right task to fit your context.

Internal vs External Outcomes

To develop ICC in your curriculum, you need to understand that there are two major outcomes. The first are the internal outcomes. These are focused on being more flexible, understanding, adaptable, and moving away from an ethnocentric view. These are difficult to observe but can be self-reported. Then there are external outcomes, which are focused on observable behavior and communication. These can be identified by an outside observer and can indicate the move to being an interculturally competent individual. When it comes to assessing ICC, internal outcomes will be hard to measure outside of self-report. The external measures are the elements that we can assess more easily in the classroom through observation and interaction.

Fostering Intercultural Communication

To promote and foster ICC in the classroom, we need to provide many resources to our students, scaffold and build their knowledge through the learning process, and teach them how to learn on

their own. “Intercultural competence is not permanent, ‘for life’, and its practice and learning never end” (Dervin, 2010, p. 15).

We can always add more activities that engage the students in discussion, interactive talk, and questioning. We need to provide feedback and explanation of concepts and systems that may be unfamiliar, but let the students guide the discussion. As teachers, we can create tools that allow students to show their ability to understand the concept and analyze information. A key step is to acknowledge that this is a process that requires input, noticing, reflection, experimentation, and some form of output, and that it is a process that works as a cycle.

Intercultural Communication Assessment Ideas

Table 1 provides many excellent formative assessment opportunities and techniques that allow for ICC-related revision and reflection. Each task and assessment could be used alone or combined with other measures. You could use multiple projects and ideas from this list and have students complete an ICC portfolio at the end of the semester to show what they have learned. The portfolio could have its own reflection and rubric to grade overall understanding in a summative way.

Table 1. Assessment Ideas

| Task | Objective | Assessment |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Cultural Autobiography | Develop a personal record of noticing own cultural awareness and changes in thinking. | Reflective journal: Specific criteria and rubric, portfolio |
| Interviews | Recognize and explain cultural differences through social interaction. | Interview notes and synopsis paper/presentation |
| Comparing Texts | Explain understanding of target culture and one’s own culture (perhaps historically). | Comparison paper, group/individual presentation, portfolio; in-class work observed by teacher |
| Classroom Informal Discussion | Demonstrate language and fluency in target language or based on content. | Teacher observation, individual participation |
| Analysis of Cultural Products | Examine cultural artifacts to increase awareness in target culture and one’s own culture. | Graphic organizer for the different cultures, presentation, paper, digital project, portfolio |
| Translating | Developing language understanding, development of linguistic understanding and fluency; awareness of variation in language. | Translation project, translation exam, translation paper, translation presentation, in-class work |

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|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| Cultural Adaptions | Constructing a project that shows an understanding of culture and register. | Group presentations with cultural register shifts (e.g., Friends in Japan...how would it be different) |
| Target Culture Collaboration | Demonstrate target culture awareness, negotiation of meaning, interpersonal exchange. | Email collaboration with representatives of target culture, turn in excerpts from emails and paper, <i>Second Life</i> (Sims) |
| Cultural Knowledge | Define and recall taught materials of culture, linguistics, and cultural comparisons. | Test that has multiple-choice, short answer, and essay items; in class discussion evaluated through observation and questioning; papers; projects |
| Instructions | Explain the difference between cultural approaches to instructions and make comparisons between cultures. | In-class work observed by teacher, group/individual presentations, paper |

The Importance of Reflective Thinking

A major goal is to get the learners thinking about their own understanding and how they have changed over the course. A prompt might ask them to describe how they applied a new understanding. What specific differences and similarities did they notice about themselves and their classmates as they completed the activity? What did they learn from their own expectations, assumptions, values, beliefs, and classmates' language?

Another idea might be to have students explain why what they did this time was better than what they did before. Get them to think about why they used to do what they did, why and how they learned a better way, and why this new way is better.

Once they are aware of their new understanding, they can think about how they will apply that understanding in the future. How will this new understanding impact future interactions?

Some Assessment Concerns

There are some very basic concerns about assessing ICC. The first is that not everyone is in agreement about assessment because of the difficulty in accurately and objectively measuring ICC (Dervin, 2010; Sercu, 2004). Another concern is that assessing ICC may equate to someone (or a system) declaring what "intercultural attitudes learners should develop" and that learners can "be punished for not having particular desired personality traits" (Sercu, 2004, p. 78). If we establish a "right" way of thinking, who gets to decide what is right? Can someone that is "wrong" be punished through grades?

To avoid this, it is best to view ICC as a continuum in which we are trying to improve understanding of the world—not dictate how one has to believe or view things.

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