Creating an Interculturally Competent Classroom
by Heather Smyser

As instructors, our goal is to help our learners succeed. We work at honing our teaching practice and improving outcomes for our learners. Yet, despite our best efforts and often without our realizing, our classrooms and the interactions between all present in them are sometimes reflections of the larger macrocultures in which we operate. Particularly in these challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic and of systemic racism becoming more apparent to privileged communities, when macrocultures can be especially harmful to some students, how do we recognize when we are doing this, and how do we stop? One tool to help is to work toward creating an interculturally competent classroom (ICCC).

Interculturally Competent Classrooms

An ICCC is a transformative environment that effectively blends TESOL's 6 Principles® (TESOL International Association, 2018) and Gay's (2018) components of culturally responsive teaching with insights gained by careful introspection into one's own teaching experiences. The result of this process is a learning environment that is more responsive to and inclusive of both learners' needs and the educational expectations placed on them by external factors, such as the educational context where the teaching occurs and even the target culture(s) we are preparing our learners for.

Much like yoga, designing and implementing an ICCC is a practice rather than an end state. It is an ongoing journey of understanding our learners, ourselves, how we are privileged, and external factors that affect classroom interactions. In this article, I share the path I take toward implementing an ICCC. My practice has evolved as I have become more aware of my own implicit biases and will continue to evolve as new situations help me identify cultural blinders for the first time or in new ways. Following are three major tenets based on the aforementioned 6 Principles, Gay (2018), and personal experience that have guided my journey to being more culturally responsive as an instructor:

1. Know your learners.
2. Learn about yourself and develop your own intercultural competence.
3. Bridge the gap between your learners, yourself, and your curriculum to create conditions for learning.

My goal is that, by sharing my own journey rather than speaking in purely academic terms, I can better show how implementing an ICCC is an evolutionary process that can help all of us become aware of our own biases and privilege regardless of teaching context.

1. Know Your Learners

Who are my learners? This simple question (based on Principle 1 of TESOL's 6 Principles, 2018) can be examined in layers, with each layer revealing ever deeper constructs of culture and identity:

- Where are my learners from?
- Why do they want or need to learn English?
- What are their first languages?
- Which cultures do they belong to and identify with?
- What do they expect to see in a typical language lesson?
- What kind of relationship do they expect between themselves and each other?
- What kind of relationship do they expect between themselves and me?
- What kind of relationship do I expect between my students and me?
- How do they define knowledge?
- How do I define knowledge?
- How do they expect knowledge to be shared?

With each new question, I uncover another thread of the tapestry that represents each of my learners and my own assumptions.

Though my view of these tapestries may perpetually remain at least partially obscured because of how hard it is to identify deep-seated cultural practices, understanding who my learners are and what they need is an essential step in exemplary language teaching (TESOL International Association, 2018; Gay, 2010). Over my years teaching English as a second language, I have noticed many ties between my learners even though they may range from being newly resettled refugees to military students:

- The majority of my learners come from collectivist cultures.
- Several come from non-Western educational traditions that operationalize education very differently from my own.
- Some have arrived with limited or interrupted formal education but a wealth of practical, hands-on experiences.
- Some expect me to share personal information with them to build community in the classroom.

DeCapua and Marshall (2011) clarify these ties and how they manifest themselves in the classroom; these ties often form the starting point for instruction. However, as I get to know each student and class better, I am better able to tailor instruction to meet their needs, both educational and individual.

2. Learn About Yourself and Develop Your Own Intercultural Competence (Gay's component: become culturally competent)

In the ongoing process of coming to know my learners, I have found merely learning about them to be insufficient. Gay (2018) prescribes becoming culturally competent: I must also learn about myself and apply the same questions to myself that I used to only apply to them. For example:

- What do I expect to see in the classroom?
- What behaviors I expect of learners?
- What types of activities do I think will help my students grasp a new concept?
- How do I measure success?
- What do I think constitutes knowledge?

Without this introspection, I find myself expecting my learners to adhere to implicit cultural models of schooling and education based on my own educational models and the expectations of the programs I teach in (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Gay, 2018), with the result that my classroom has been and continues to be culturally insensitive.

Applying Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence to myself, which includes applying his ideas of developing critical cultural awareness, staying curious, working on skills of discovery and interpreting, and increasing knowledge has helped me to become aware of areas in which I need to grow as a teacher and a person, thereby helping to foster a classroom that is more interculturally competent. Some of the following aspects of my own cultural upbringing, when unrecognized, have contributed to my classroom's cultural insensitivity:

- I come from an individualistic culture where individual accountability is a cornerstone of education.
- I have understood education to mean classifying information into abstract categories.
- I have viewed the written word as king of communication.
- I come from a tradition where personal information is only shared in rare instances in the classroom or the workplace.

By working on myself and combining those insights with what I know of my learners, I can begin to bridge our cultures in the classroom.

3. Bridge the Gap Between Your Learners, Yourself, and Your Curriculum to Create Conditions for Learning

This tenet is based on Gay's (2018) component of establishing a supportive learning environment and on Principle #2 of TESOL's 6 Principles (2018), "Create conditions for language learning." Knowledge of my learners and myself alone is insufficient for developing plans to meet my learners' needs. My classroom does not exist alone in space. It is influenced and shaped by both the educational culture(s) in which I teach and the target culture(s) toward which I teach. Figure 1 shows some of these complex interactions between my learners, myself, and forces external to the classroom.
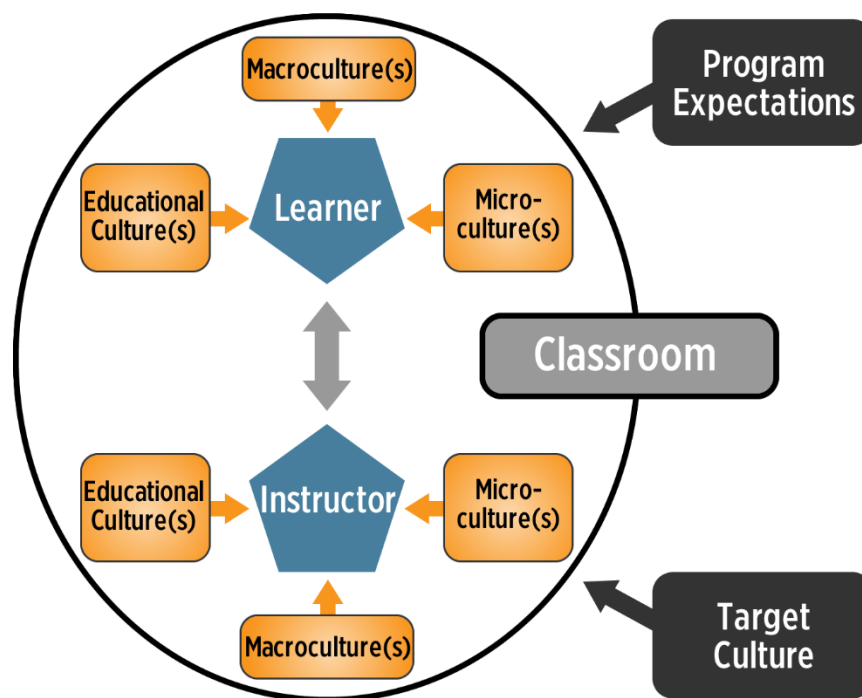
Figure 1. Interactions among factors affecting classroom dynamics.

Recognizing the complex interplay of all of these factors and how they impact the classroom dynamic is an ongoing effort that shapes my daily practice and helps me address my learners' needs in ways that are more responsive to my learners. One skill that has greatly aided my ability to recognize these factors has been to listen closely to my students. For me, listening extends beyond the obvious action of hearing what students say and listening to what is left unsaid.

Listening closely also means observing student interactions and behaviors and carefully integrating what I have learned about my students into classroom activities in such a way that gives students space to act in ways that are culturally appropriate for them while potentially learning new cultural expectations. When planning lessons, I ask myself if what I have planned respects students' cultures and allows them to draw on their experiences to learn something new.

How to Implement an ICCC

Implementing an ICCC has been and continues to be a journey consisting of improving my teaching and reflecting on myself, a process full of discovery. Unfortunately, I have yet to find a manual or formula that tells me what to do when faced with one set of circumstances or another.

That said, I have, I have included a checklist (Appendix; .pdf) that can be used while lesson planning. This checklist has been heavily influenced by the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). Using this checklist can help facilitate a more culturally responsive classroom by raising awareness of our own cultural expectations, thus facilitating cocreation of knowledge in the classroom. I recommend using the checklist for each group of

learners you teach. Using it has helped me create more opportunities for transformative learning to arise and has helped my teaching practice move towards my goal of creating a true ICCC.

We instructors may never become fully aware of our own privilege and cultural biases, no matter how hard we try to uncover them. Nevertheless, the difficulty of overcoming the hurdles these biases place on our teaching should not stop us from working toward a more culturally responsive classroom—making this effort every time we enter the classroom is one of the most powerful actions we can take as allies in the fight for equity, and especially in these difficult times. Achieving a true ICCC might well be impossible, but the practice of working toward an ICCC results in subtle changes in the classroom over time. With each change, the potential increases for the classroom to become a truly transformative space for learners and instructors alike.

References

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Checklist for Developing an Interculturally Competent Classroom

Knowing My Learners

I know. . .

_____ what kinds of culture (e.g., individualistic, collectivistic) my learners are most familiar with.

_____ what kind of relationship my learners expect me to have with them.

_____ what kind of relationship my learners expect to have with each other.

_____ what education is like in their home cultures.

_____ what a normal learning day in the classroom is like in their home cultures.

_____ how learners expect to show they have mastered material.

Knowing Myself

I know. . .

_____ what kind of culture (e.g., individualistic, collectivistic) I am most familiar with.

_____ what kind of relationship I expect my learners to have with me.

_____ what kind of relationship I expect my learners to have with each other.

_____ what I expect education to look like based on my own educational experiences.

_____ what I expect a normal class period or teaching day to look like.

_____ what evidence I look for to see if learners have mastered the material.

Knowing My Program's Expectations

I know. . .

_____ what kind of educational culture my program expects.

_____ what kind of relationship my program expects me to have with my learners.

_____ what kind of relationship my program expects my learners to have with each other.

_____ what my program's expectations are for the course(s) I teach.

_____ what kind(s) of teaching approach(es) my program expects me to use.

_____ what evidence my program uses to evaluate student success.

_____ what types of assessments my program uses to evaluate student mastery of content.

Designing My Curriculum

In my lessons, I have included. . .

_____ a range of activities that balance my students' classroom expectations with my own and those of my program.

_____ different options for students to choose from to show they have mastered the material.

_____ opportunities for exchanges of information that allow students to meet their need for relationship building.

_____ a range of activities that reflect the different views of education present in the classroom.

_____ conversations with students about their expectations for the classroom, themselves, each other, and me.

_____ space to discuss cultural issues as they arise.