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Intercultural Communicative Competence
How to get there



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Introduction

Students who start learning a foreign language and with it culture, bring with them ‘cultural baggage’ from their own language and culture. While this knowledge might be helpful, it does not add to one’s competence when dealing with intercultural encounters. Obviously, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is much more. Factors that might influence one’s intercultural competence range from the widest social-cultural context: standards in one’s own country, perspectives to the foreign word (Neuner 1994, 2003), over general factors of socialization (family, peers, school, the media), to individual factors (gender, social status, knowledge, motivation, experience with the target culture and language). All these elements simply prove that the concept of intercultural competence is a complex one, nuanced and challenging for both instruction and assessment.

Even though intercultural competence is a complex concept, with many attitudinal elements, this does not mean that it should be excluded from language teaching or left to students to pick up if they can or will during foreign language classes. Quite the contrary! Since culture is already present in language teaching material, and it is used to contextualize language, both learners and teachers should use and analyse it actively, with a conscious effort to develop intercultural competence.

While materials for teaching English as a foreign or second language abound, not much attention is given to intercultural elements in those materials, and “many, if not most, of these materials make implicit assumptions about the beliefs and values of the teachers and learners” (Hadfield, 2013: i). Teachers have long been aware of the importance culture plays in language instruction but have also showed a certain

level of wariness when it comes to incorporating those (inter)cultural elements into language teaching. Sometimes, the reasons are just practical – syllabi focus heavily on language skills, vocabulary, and grammar, so culture remains a filler or an aside in a language lesson. Teachers sometimes do not feel comfortable when they have to deal with “concepts and data of the social sciences” so they “rely too heavily on literature to teach culture” (Seelye, 1975: 15). Even when culture is introduced, the research shows that that techniques used do not lead to the development of the affective or behavioural skills in students (Korhonen 2004, Kovalainen 2005, Planken et al. 2004).

Becoming interculturally competent

The exploration of cultural elements and how they dictate our behaviour and language use asks of learners to pay attention not just to the surface level of culture – if we follow the metaphor of the culture iceberg – but the murkier waters of deeper culture. The understanding of WHY certain things are the way they are, or WHY certain attitudes and beliefs exist demands asking questions that are usually overlooked or have answers that are taken for granted. In order to become interculturally competent, learners will have to make a conscious effort to take a different perspective, and try to walk in another person’s shoes. Reflecting on and exploring situations where different cultures interact are as important and valuable as being in another culture. Learners do not develop interculturality by simply being in a different culture. They develop it and become aware of it through reflection, analysis and discussion of things they would usually take at their face value. Interculturality will not be developed by simply being in a different culture – learners will build it and become aware of it through reflection, analysis and discussion of things usually taken at their face value.

Fighting ethnocentrism

While becoming more intercultural competent, learners will also be able to see their own culture as one of many possible worldviews and frameworks. It is expected that if one is not familiar with different practices or different ways to respond to a problem or do a particular task, then one uses one's "own culture as the anchor for assessing other cultures" (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2010: 44), that is, takes an ethnocentric view. This response is ethnocentric – it proposes one's own culture as a model according to which everything else should be measured – but at the same time, it is a universal human reaction found in all known societies. Individuals grow up with it, for the most part being unconscious of it. Ethnocentrism encourages the solidarity of the in-group, as solidarity and the belief in the unity strengthen the idea of loyalty to comrades and, in turn, preserves the basis for superiority, while it discourages cooperation outside of the group.

While applying one's cultural framework is a natural response, it is the most detrimental factor for intercultural communication. Learners need to be taught that each culture possesses its own patterns which members of that culture use to effortlessly and instinctively navigate everyday life. However, if a person enters an intercultural encounter with the expectations of seeing their own cultural patterns played out, these expectations will most probably not be met, and will (again, most probably) lead to dissatisfaction, stereotyping or even anger. Cultural patterns should be seen as context-dependent, as applicable to a particular culture, and varied across cultures. One's ability to manage cultural differences will bring about successful intercultural interactions (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2010). The book will provide a variety of examples that provide opportunity for learners to consider the effects of their own perceptions of new and different events and people, and in that way prevent stereotyping and ethnocentrism. There are a number of questions in the book that ask students to scrutinize and analyse their own culture to become more

aware of different values and beliefs that influence their daily practices.

Who is the book for?

For all the stated reasons, the book has been designed with the aim of helping learners become better acquainted with intercultural elements and helping teachers more easily introduce these topics into the classroom. While the book is geared towards adolescent and adult learners, some activities are quite appropriate for and adaptable to younger learners and learners who have lower language proficiency. The material can be used for both in-class and independent work, but would greatly benefit from a discussion as many activities ask for reflection and analysis.

As each unit begins with a critical incident that is mainly focused on the interaction with the members of Anglophone cultures, there is a certain culture-specific slant to these exercises. However, the follow-up material, explanations, and further reading provide a wider perspective so that students can start their own exploration and might begin to put together a jigsaw puzzle of culture.

Although it has been proven that study-abroad programs (Bender, Cushner & Mahon 2002, Deardorff 2004, Norris & Watanabe 2007, Ruben & Kealey 1979, Sinicrope, Wright & Lopatto 2009,) can have a positive influence on the development of intercultural communicative competence and sensitivity in general, research also suggests that structured practice and guided instruction make a significant impact on learners' views and attitudes. In an attempt to provide more critical thinking and reflection, this book may serve as an important source for study-abroad preparation.

For learners: how to navigate the book

The material compiled here has a two-fold purpose. Firstly, critical incidents and their explanations offer ‘food for thought’, as a basis for the reflection on one’s own culture, its patterns and how certain events and expectations play out in another culture. Secondly, theoretical explanations are added to broaden the discussion on culture and provide learners with the terminology and basic concepts that appear in intercultural communication.

There are twenty units which all have a similar structure. Each unit opens with a critical incident, an episode where there is some sort of a misunderstanding or miscommunication. Each incident is followed by four explanations which clarifies possible reasons for reactions and misunderstandings. Sometimes more than one answer would be correct, and sometimes an additional explanation could be added. All these instances should be used as points for further discussion and exploration. The incidents provide a discussion topic, followed by additional information and activities for learners to further explore a particular topic. The critical incidents are sequenced from simpler to more complex; however, some points are repeated and illustrated with different examples. Following these are different activities in the form of quizzes, multiple choice activities or reflection questions – how deeply these are explored will depend on the teaching and learning context and time constraints. Wherever it was possible, further suggestions for study are included, in the form of literature or films.

In addition to these units, there is more interculturally-related material presented in separate chapters, such as social structure and theory behind the Sapir-Wharf hypothesis, for example. The material can be combined with any other unit as it provides more discussion question as well as a closer look at topics that are inseparably linked to ICC. Finally, there is a separate section on additional reading. Here, the topics that usually first come to mind when we talk about culture,

such as food, customs, language, are explored in greater detail and beyond their surface level. It has been shown that discussing these visible and tangible elements of culture without referring to hidden, deep levels of culture leads to generalisation and stereotyping. This section, therefore, includes discussion questions and provides opportunities for a deeper analysis.

Appendix 1 contains suggested explanations for each of the critical incidents. Appendix 2 has answers to the quizzes and additional activities. In order to maximize the full learning potential, it is advised that information in the appendices is consulted after the discussion and analysis of the critical incidents and the other assignments have been completed.

There are three ‘symbols’ used in the book. This one  shows that reflection questions follow. When learners are asked to explain their learning beyond the book and the classroom (e.g., research an issue, conduct a survey or do an analysis that would take a bit more time than the usual classroom time would allow), this symbol is used:  . Finally, the additional material and suggestions for further work are marked with  . I wish you happy exploring!

Culture is...

Many authors and researchers have offered their definitions of culture. In 1952, for example, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn compiled a list of 164 definitions of "culture". Here's what some other authors have said:

Culture ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Tyler 1870: 1; cited by Avruch 1998: 6

The culture concept to which I adhere denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.

Clifford Geertz (1973: 24, 1979: 89)

Culture is a verb.

Scollon et al. (2012: 5)

Culture is the totality of communication practices and systems of meaning.

Schirato and Yell (2000: 1)

Culture is a collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another

Hofstede (1994: 5)

Culture is the membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting.

Kramsch (1998: 127)

Culture is a social cement of all human relationships: it is the medium in

which we move and breathe and have our being.

Scovel (1994: 205)

Culture is the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next.

Matsumoto (1996: 16)

Culture is to society what memory is to individuals.

Triandis (1995:4)

Adapted from Spencer-Oatey (2012)



I

1. Which definitions or parts of definitions do you feel are the most useful? Why?
2. Are there any aspects that you disagree with?
3. Provide your own definition of culture.

II

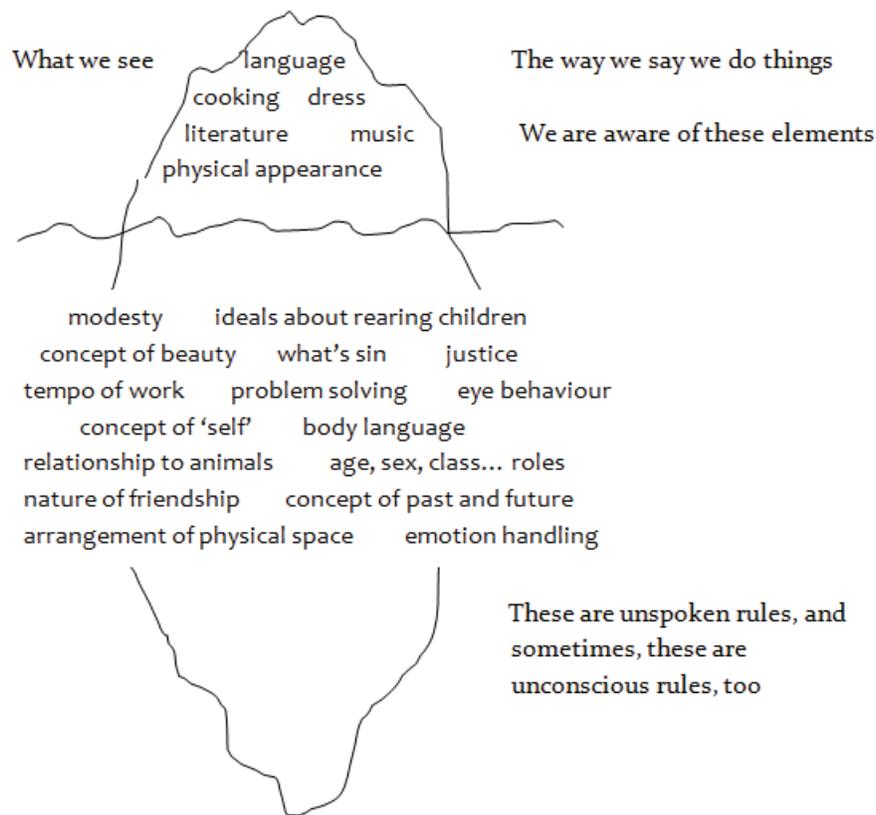
1. Is culture best defined from a national perspective?
2. What might be some limitations to such a definition?
3. What smaller groupings are part of a larger national culture?
4. How do members of those groupings show their membership?
5. What is the difference between thinking about culture as a 'salad bowl' as opposed to a 'melting pot'?

A useful metaphor for culture is an iceberg, because the deeper level of tradition, values and beliefs are usually hidden from our conscious interactions. It is exactly these underlying sets of beliefs and values that are responsible for people's reactions and thinking.

E.T. Hall was among the first ones to offer this analogy to explain the

'hidden' culture. The metaphor is quite appropriate, because, attitudes and values are not consciously called on each time we have to make a decision or act in a situation. There's always context, rules that we have been raised into that silently guide our everyday actions. The rich basis of unspoken rules, taboos and values has always been around to help us in encounters in our own culture.

Cultural Iceberg model



However, if we think of what is visible at the first glance when we encounter a new culture, it's not that much – mostly the appearance, dress, behaviour, some customs and artefacts. We might talk about

the norms of that new culture, but we are usually unaware of WHY things are the way they are. The culture that we see on the surface stems from individual beliefs, values, expectations and attitudes, which, in turn are rooted in deep assumptions. If we judge a member of a culture only by what we see (which is only a tenth of the whole person, that is, the person's culture) there may be problems and misunderstandings. This happens because we use the whole of OUR culture iceberg to pass judgments on only a small portion of a person, on only what we see. We do it all the time in our culture, we use the basis of the iceberg to help us understand the behaviour of the members of our culture. As we share the basis with other members of our culture, we usually understand their actions – we know to what values and beliefs to ascribe them. But, the basis of another culture is most probably quite different from our own. If we are to understand people from another culture, we have to use the basis of THEIR iceberg. Therefore, it is only when we are aware of the 'deep' culture that we can say that we know a culture.



Use this model to analyse and understand how a behaviour that you witnessed in a culture different from your own relates to deep culture, 'hidden' assumptions and values.

Try to analyse culture the other way around: pick a different deep assumption or value, and work out how it explains the behaviour that you observed.

That being said, it is very difficult to 'box in' a culture. It is always composed on individuals, and it is always **constructed** in interaction among people. We usually say that we **are** from a particular culture, and usually connect that with our nationality or ethnicity. But, we can

ask ourselves, can we 'have' a culture (Piller, 2007)? What other elements play an important role in making up a culture? Apart from artefacts, which are tangible, everything else that we believe we 'have' in our culture is actually a tacit agreement, a construct, shared beliefs that we put into practice. Consequently, the slight change of setting will influence how these elements are combined and what particular beliefs and norms are brought into play.

Unit 1

AIMS

- introduce the concept of proxemics and how it influences our daily lives
- see the importance of culture for the construction of one's identity

Meeting new people

At an informal party there is a group of Americans who are in Serbia on a study program. Milan is trying to get to know one of them, Matthew, a bit better. Milan is an easy-going sociable guy, and has no problems starting a conversation. They exchange a few questions, about their home towns, age, girlfriends, but Milan has problems staying close to Matthew. Every time he gets closer, Matthew takes a few steps back. Why might this be?

- a) Milan and the Serbs in general are too inquisitive, he asks a lot of questions, and Matthew doesn't feel comfortable.
- b) Milan stands too close to Matthew and that makes Matthew uneasy.
- c) Matthew is still new to Serbia, he doesn't know if he should trust Milan.
- d) Americans are reserved and do not make friends easily, so Mathew sees Milan as rude and pushy.

E.T. Hall (1959) researched the use of space, its conceptualisation and organisation to such an extent that he even named the theory and ideas about space "proxemics"

I Different types of space:

1. What is a usual distance at which you stand when you talk to:

- your friends; family; teachers; people you meet for the first time?
2. Think about how flats in your country are organized - how is space used?
 3. Think about queuing - what can we learn about the personal space from the way people wait in line in different countries?

II Take a look at the British take on queuing on the eve of the 2012 Olympic Games in London:

The British like to think they stand in line with **patience** and humour. At Wimbledon, the January sales, women's toilets in the theatre, queuing has almost become the point rather than merely a **means to an end**. No matter how dull the wait, the British keep on queuing. Joe Moran, a cultural historian and author of *Queuing for Beginners*, says that the idea that the British are good at queuing arose after World War II. It was a reaction to a time when shortages led to arguments and police were often called to disperse crowds. The Hungarian-born satirist George Mikes helped create the **myth**, writing in 1946: "An Englishman, even if he is alone, forms an **orderly** queue of one." But Moran says there is little real evidence that the British are particularly good queuers. They like the thought because it feeds into their self-image of pragmatism and **politeness**. The lesson for any visitor perhaps is to be aware that the British think they are good at queueing. So if you want to get ahead, try to do it subtly.

Taken from <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18983558>

Consider the words in bold – how do they reflect the stereotypes about the British?

What kind of 'queuers' are people from your culture? What does that tell us about habits or values in the culture?

III

I am...

Complete the statement 'I am a(n)' rather quickly in the spaces provided – use only nouns and do not think too long about your answers as no answers are right or wrong!

I am a(n)	I am a(n)
I am a(n)	I am a(n)
I am a(n)	I am a(n)
I am a(n).....	I am a(n)
I am a(n)	I am a(n)

When you have finished, divide your responses according to the categories you are able to recognize.

How many items represent individual traits (singer, dancer, student, for instance)?

How many items represent collective affiliations (member of a choir or dance company, for example)?

How would you feel if some of these are taken away from your?

Compare your responses with those of others in your class. Discuss the relative number of individualistic versus collective references on your list.

Recognizing and exploring different items can help you gain a clearer picture of the image you have of yourself.

Adapted from Cushner (2005)

IV

Who am I?

Let's continue thinking about culture. If you are to define a typical member of your culture in just 3 to 5 adjectives, what would you say?

.....

Now, how about you? Using again 3 to 5 adjectives, define yourself.

.....

Are there any overlaps?

Are these two 'portraits' similar or quite distinct? Why is this so?

V

One of the key features of culture is the cause-and-effect relationship between people's assumptions, values, and beliefs (the invisible side of culture) and their behavior (the visible side). This relationship is at the heart of culture, which is to say that there can be no real understanding of culture if this relationship is not likewise understood.

Below is a list of ten values or beliefs on the left side and ten behaviours on the right. Match each value or belief with a behavior which someone who holds that value is likely to exhibit.

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1. Being direct | ___ Use of understatement |
| 2. Centrality of family | ___ Asking people to call you by your first name |
| 3. Fatalism | ___ Taking off from work to attend the funeral of a cousin |
| 4. Saving face* | ___ Not asking for help from the person next to you on an exam |
| 5. Respect for age | ___ Disagreeing openly with someone at a meeting |
| 6. Informality | ___ Not laying off an older worker whose performance is weak |
| 7. Deference to authority | ___ At a meeting, agreeing with a suggestion you think is wrong |

8. Being indirect ___ Inviting the teaboy** to eat lunch with you in your office
9. Self-reliance ___ Asking the boss's opinion of something you're the expert on
10. Egalitarianism ___ Accepting, without question, that something cannot be changed

Adapted from Storti (1999)

*"To save face" describes the lengths that an individual may go to in order to preserve their established position in society, taking action to ensure that one is not thought badly of by their peers, and at the same time preserve the harmony of relationships.

** a teaboy is a colloquial term for an entry-level office job, similar to a 'McJob', a low-paying, low-prestige dead-end job that requires few skills



More on proxemics in E.T.Hall (1959). *Silent Language*. Doubleday.
More on the issues of identity in Hetain Patel: *Who am I? Think again*,
TED Global Talk, filmed June 2013

Unit 2

AIM

- understand the importance of non-verbal behaviour
- understand E.T. Hall's concept of high and low context cultures

First encounters

Marija, an international student at a US college, is meeting with an American student to work on a project about world cultures. Marija meets Julie after class, and they try to get to know each other better and to schedule a next meeting. However, Julie does not stop staring at Marija directly in the eyes, and it makes Marija feel uncomfortable. She starts wondering if she has something on her forehead. She expects this to stop after a while, but during the whole conversation it's the same. Why might this be?

- a) This is the way Americans show respect to foreigners.
- b) Julie wants to intimidate Marija because she is foreign.
- c) A direct eye-contact is common in the States.
- d) Marija thinks Julie is making passes at her, and therefore feels uncomfortable.



1. How much is eye contact important in overall body language?
2. Are you aware of its importance for your culture?
3. Are facial expressions universal? What reasons or evidence can you find for your opinion?
4. In what way can studying the intercultural aspects of nonverbal behavior help you in discovering and dealing with your own ethnocentrism? What evidence can you provide?

5. How do you understand the statement “Nonverbal communication is rule-governed”?

 Watch a foreign film or a series and look for examples of differences in proxemics, touch, and facial expressions. Compare these with proxemics, the use of gestures and facial expressions, in Serbia. What can you conclude?

There are six facial expressions that are universal recognized: joy, sadness, surprise, fear, contempt/disgust, and

Body Language Quiz

1. According to psychologist Albert Mehrabian, of the total meaning of a spoken message,
_____ percent comes from the actual meaning of the words.
_____ percent comes from the way you say the words (tone, emphasis, etc.).
_____ percent comes from facial expressions and other nonverbal communication.
2. True or False: A smile is one of the few forms of nonverbal expression that has the same meaning all over the world.
3. Try to guess what percentage of time two negotiators from the following countries maintain eye contact during a typical negotiating session.
Two Japanese: _____ percent
Two Americans: _____ percent
Two Brazilians: _____ percent
4. True or False: Counting on one’s fingers, from 1 to 10, is a universal nonverbal gesture.

5. In the following cities, try to guess how many times in one hour a typical couple in a café touches each other:

San Juan _____

Paris _____

London _____

6. Worldwide, researchers have found approximately how many distinct units of nonverbal communication?

a. 250

b. 500

c. 750

d. 1,000

High and low-context cultures

Many authors have focused on the context and its importance for communication, but E.T. Hall is often referred to as the first one to offer the category of context as ‘the information that surrounds an event’ (Hall & Hall, 1990: 6). He noticed that for some cultures, a lot of what someone wants to communicate is already ‘in the person’ and very little is explicitly said. Such cultures are high-context cultures, as meaning is more in contexts – social and power roles, relationships, and non-verbal means – pauses or tone of voice. For example, the members of a closely-knit group would probably rely on the history of their relationships, common knowledge, in-group jokes when communicating, and therefore not much has to be said. On the other hand, in low-context cultures, people rely on explicit verbal message – they either don’t have or don’t want to have common ground. So a lot depends on the clarity and precision of communication and very little is left for the context.

These communication styles are, of course, influenced by many factors such as identity, personality traits, interactional goals, individual situations, etc. However, we can still assume that a number of difficulties might arise when people from a high- and low- context

cultures meet. The intentions might be misunderstood; honesty and accountability might be at stake. What one sees as directness and openness, another will understand as rudeness and destruction of 'face'. Therefore, when trying to understand the message, one should be aware of all the contextual cues, but not losing sight of individual styles of speakers.



More on non-verbal behaviour in:

Albert Mehrabian (1971). *Silent Messages*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc.

Julius Fast (1982). *Body Language*. London/ Sydney: Pan Books.

Carol Kinsey Goman (2008). *The nonverbal advantage*. San Francisco: Berett-Koehler Publishing, Inc.

American TV series *Lie to Me*, loosely based on Dr. Paul Ekman (and the Ekman Group), is about the researcher and author best known for furthering the understanding of nonverbal behaviour, encompassing facial expressions and gestures. Even though the series is a cinematographic adaptation of the real research, it might give an interesting insight into the exploration of non-verbal behaviour.