

“About Intercultural Communicative Competence: A Construct”

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About Intercultural Communicative Competence

Contact with other languages and cultures provides an excellent opportunity to foster the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC, or intercultural competence, for short). Once intercultural contact has begun, ICC development generally evolves as an on-going and lengthy process, occasionally with periods of regression or stagnation, but more commonly with positive results and no end point. Different individuals bring differing goals and motivations to the intercultural experience that result in varying levels of competence. Some wish to achieve native-like behavior in the host culture; others may be content simply to gain acceptance; and for still others, mere survival may be adequate.

Generally, the more deeply one enters into a second language-culture (LC2), or "linguaculture", the greater the effects on one's native linguaculture (LC1). As a result, individuals often modify their initial perspectives of the world (or "worldview"). A willingness to truly engage in the new culture during a cross-cultural sojourn, promotes both transcendence and transformation of one's original mode of perceiving, knowing, and expressing about the world and interacting within it. Developing intercultural competencies aids this process.

But what exactly is intercultural competence? Although this term is in wide use today, there is no clear consensus about what it is. Some researchers stress global knowledge, others emphasize sensitivity, and still others point to certain skills. The characterization of ICC presented below, based on a survey of the literature, suggests that it is more complex than any one of these views.

A Brief Definition

One definition of ICC is that it is the complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself. Whereas “effective” usually reflects one’s own view of one’s performance in the LC2 (i.e., an “etic” or outsider’s view of the host culture); “appropriate” relates to how one’s performance is perceived by one’s hosts (i.e., an “emic” or insider’s view). These perceptions often differ, yet they are instructive when compared and contrasted because they arise from differing cultural approaches to the same situation.

The Components of ICC

As a complex phenomenon, ICC encompasses multiple components. These include:

- a variety of traits and characteristics
- three areas or domains
- four dimensions
- proficiency in the host language
- varying levels of attainment throughout a longitudinal and developmental process.

Traits and Characteristics – It is useful to distinguish traits (i.e., innate personal qualities) from acquired characteristics developed later in life that are related to one’s cultural and situational context – a sort of “nature vs. nurture” distinction. This distinction is particularly important in training and educational programs because it poses the question: which abilities form part of an individual’s intrinsic personality and

which can be developed or modified through training and educational efforts? Commonly cited traits and/or characteristics of ICC include: flexibility, humor, patience, openness, interest, curiosity, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and suspending judgment, among others.

Three Areas or Domains – ICC involves ability in three areas or domains (which, curiously, are just as important in one’s own native LC1 as well). These are:

- the ability to establish and maintain relationships
- the ability to communicate with minimal loss or distortion
- the ability to collaborate in order to accomplish something of mutual interest or need.

Four Dimensions – ICC also has four dimensions:

- knowledge
- (positive) attitudes/affect
- skills, and
- awareness.

Of these, awareness is central and especially critical to cross-cultural development. It is enhanced through reflection and introspection in which both the individual’s LC1 and the LC2 are contrasted and compared. Awareness differs from knowledge in that it is always about the “self” vis-à-vis all else in the world (other things, other people, other thoughts, etc.) and ultimately helps to clarify what is deepest and most relevant to one’s identity. Awareness is furthered through developments in knowledge, positive attitudes, and skills, and in turn also furthers their development.

Proficiency in the Host Language – The ability to communicate in the host language greatly enhances ICC development in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Grappling with another language confronts how one perceives, conceptualizes, and expresses oneself; and, in the process, fosters the development of alternative communication strategies *on someone else’s terms*. This humbling and challenging process often facilitates transcending and transforming how one understands the world. Lack of a second language – even at a minimal level – constrains one to continue to think about the world and act within it, only in one’s native system, and deprives the individual of one of the most valuable aspects of the intercultural experience.

Developmental Levels – ICC normally evolves over a lengthy and continuing process, occasionally with moments of stagnation and even regression. Much of what happens depends on the strength of one’s individual motivation (instrumental vs. integrative) vis-à-vis the host culture. For this reason, establishing benchmarks can help to monitor and measure one’s progress. Several levels (related to FEIL programs) are posited that help mark one’s journey along the way. These are:

- Level I: Educational Traveler – e.g., participants in short-term exchange programs (1-2 months)
- Level II: Sojourner – participants engaged in extended cultural immersion, e.g., internships of longer duration, including service programs (3-9 months)
- Level III: Professional – appropriate for individuals working in intercultural or multicultural contexts; e.g., staff employed in international institutions or organizations like FEIL and its MOs
- Level IV: Intercultural/Multicultural Specialist – appropriate for trainers and educators engaged in training, educating, consulting, or advising multinational students

Other levels may be added or substituted as useful, as well as other terms such as: basic, intermediate, advanced, native-like.

Assessing Intercultural Competence

Because ICC is a fairly recent notion, the term is sometimes used with varying meanings; or, it may be referred to by other labels such as: global competence, international competence, multicultural competence, and so forth. The term and definition used here, however, purposely employ the words “competence” and “performance.” In one view, “competence” is abstract and cannot be witnessed directly; consequently, it must be inferred by observing how one performs. Hence, competence and performance are interrelated – one being abstract and the other observable. In this view, then, one infers competence by observing and monitoring performance, rather than by talking about it only in abstraction.

Moreover, the criteria on which intercultural competence is sometimes identified, monitored, and assessed, are not always clear or consistent. To increase clarity and consistency, a pilot assessment tool was developed. It is known as the Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC), presented in a “YOGA” format, an acronym that stands for “Your Objectives, Guidelines, and Assessment.” The form is designed for use as a guide before, during, and after an intercultural sojourn by helping to track multiple aspects of one’s developing intercultural competence. It helps in three ways: 1) first, to establish and then critically examine intercultural objectives, 2) to serve as a guide during the intercultural sojourn, and 3) to provide a tool for assessment at various stages of the process as well as at the end. As such, this assessment approach is normative, formative, as well as summative.

Background and Rationale

Foreign language and intercultural training and education programs normally prescribe some manner of assessing participant performance/competence in a variety of academic and professional areas. However, educators often overlook or undervalue this area of intercultural competence. Valuing and evaluating ICC development is consistent with recent trends in higher education to address the competencies necessary for our global age that go beyond academic and professional ones. The AIC form helps to do just that by shifting the focus from teaching to learning, from input to outcome, and from evaluation to development. Moreover, it engages learners as partners in the teaching-learning process, it stresses outcomes, and it is consistent with co-constructive educational thinking.

The AIC Form evolved in various stages over a number of years. First, a Task Force at the School for International Training collected empirical observations. These were then checked against a review of the intercultural literature. And, finally, the items were crosschecked against various other approaches to ICC assessment and piloted.

To date, the AIC form has been used primarily as a tool to enhance the educational process. Additional piloting in field situations, however, will continue to strengthen the instrument’s validity, allow users to consider their own individual profiles, and permit establishment of group norms as more results are compiled from significant numbers of participants. This approach is used to learn first what we consider important outcomes, before finalizing and validating the instrument’s statistical reliability. The instrument will eventually reflect widely agreed-upon outcomes rather than one that tests only part of ICC or leads down a different path (the “tail wagging the dog” syndrome). Eventually, the accumulated data may result establishing norms for ICC attainment by participants in future programs.

Finally, a few additional thoughts about the construct of this tool: Although this form is about assessing developmental levels of ICC, its completion is based on both observations and performance. It is not about what participants *think* they might do in a given situation, but *what is actually done and observed* – by the participants themselves and by others. This corresponds to the differences between *professed intentions* (what one thinks or says one might do in a given situation) and *expressed behaviors* (what one actually does). Abstract notions about competence are substantiated by observed behaviors.

Secondly, it is unlikely that most sojourners will attain “native-like” behaviors, nor might they desire to do so. (This is especially true of adults; less so of younger individuals). The intercultural experience allows but does not demand native-like competence, recognizing that individual choices are both complex and personal. Nonetheless, it will help each person to clarify how far he or she is willing to go and why, and the consequences of their decisions. Often, the result is a clarification of those values most central to each person and their own identity. Yet, it would seem that a minimal expectation for all who embark on an intercultural sojourn must be understanding and tolerance of the host culture (and that, at the very least, allows the participant to stay), whereas not everyone may also develop similar levels of respect and appreciation.

For More Information

For more information about ICC, consult these websites:

- http://www.pucp.edu.pe/cmp/docs/nafta_hs.pdf
- www.sit.edu/publications (see SIT Occasional Papers Series, Inaugural Issue, pps 25-42)
- www.wiche.edu (click on publications and see Working Paper No. 11, “Globalization and . . . “

