

Chapter 2

Bridging Cultures: Evaluating Intercultural Competence in Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to provide educators, researchers, and policy makers with an in-depth exploration of diverse methods for evaluating intercultural competence in foreign language learners. Through the discussion of some common theoretical models of intercultural competence and relevant assessment approaches, the chapter focuses on case studies and examples from Intercultural Communication courses in eight foreign languages at Eastland University (a pseudonym) – a prestigious Vietnamese university. The analysis indicates that assessing intercultural competence necessitates understanding its multifaceted nature, adopting a theoretical model to align teaching, learning and assessing activities, and recognizing the limitations of traditional methods. By employing innovative strategies such as mixed methods approaches, technology-mediated simulations, and longitudinal evaluations, educators can more effectively gauge students' intercultural skills and foster their development as culturally competent global citizens.

INTRODUCTION

In our increasingly interconnected world, the ability to thrive in a diverse cultural environment has become a critical skill, and this cannot be achieved without intercultural competence (IC). Employers increasingly value employees who possess a heightened awareness of cultural subtleties and excel in cross-cultural commu-

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nication, and this proficiency becomes even more crucial for graduates of foreign language bachelor programs and professionals working in relevant fields (Achieng, 2023; Stier, 2006).

The importance of IC has received notable attention across diverse academic disciplines, ranging from business and management studies (e.g., Moran et al., 2009), communication studies (e.g., Gudykunst & Kim, 2003), linguistics (e.g. Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009), pedagogy and teacher training (e.g., Cushner & Mahon, 2009), as well as psychology (e.g., Thomas, 2011). In striving to foster IC among learners and enhance it for professionals, many initiatives have been developed to design foreign language and cultural instruction aimed at equipping learners with IC (Sercu, 2004; Achieng, 2023; Oberste-Berghaus, 2024).

This growing emphasis on developing IC raises critical questions about how effectively it can be measured, highlighting the need for robust assessment frameworks to evaluate it. However, assessing the acquisition or improvement in IC poses considerable challenges. Abrams (2020) claims that the difficulties may stem from the lack of consensus on definitions, local context dependence, and unsuitability for classroom assessment. This aligns with Liddicoat and Scarino's (2010) suggestion that the absence of standardized and validated assessment tools specifically designed to measure IC leads to the use of general measures, which may fail to accurately capture the construct. In Vietnamese education contexts, most recent studies have explored the recognition of IC and the development of IC among students at different levels (Gómez-Parra & Hà, 2021; Vu, 2023); however, there appears to be a lack of research on IC assessment.

This chapter delves into various methods available for evaluating IC in foreign language learners, offering an exploration that goes beyond traditional assessment approaches. The chapter first revisits different definitions of IC that highlight its multidimensional and dynamic nature based on common theoretical frameworks, which is the most important conceptual consideration before moving to designing an assessment method. Then, the discussion centers on challenges in assessing IC and some well-known models for assessing IC to overcome these challenges. Subsequently, from such analyses, I introduce the case of a Vietnamese university known as Eastland University (a pseudonym) which has offered an “Intercultural Communication” course delivered in eight foreign language undergraduate programs. I analyze the case with examples to elaborate on the models and theories discussed, propose alternative assessment approaches, and conclude with a discussion of the ethical implications of assessing intercultural competence, including cultural sensitivity, bias, and fairness.

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