


Chapter 8

The Role of Intercultural Competence in English Language Teaching: A Synthesis of Contemporary Theories

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the integration of Intercultural Competence (IC) into English Language Teaching (ELT) as a transformative response to global citizenship imperatives. While English has become a conduit for intercultural communication, traditional ELT often overlooks the ethical, affective, and reflective dimensions essential for navigating cultural diversity. Drawing on theoretical models such as Byram's five savoirs, Deardorff's Pyramid Model, and Kramsch's symbolic competence, the chapter critiques Western-centric approaches and proposes pedagogies rooted in local epistemologies, including Ubuntu and Southeast Asian communal values. Practical strategies ranging from virtual exchanges to intercultural storytelling—are discussed alongside challenges in assessment and teacher training. The chapter argues for systemic alignment across policy, curriculum, and classroom practice to embed IC meaningfully into ESL education, thereby cultivating learners who are not only linguistically proficient but also ethically engaged global citizens.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly interconnected world, English has emerged not only as a global language of communication but also as a conduit for intercultural exchange (Sultana, 2023; Tagliatalata, 2024). As English language learners engage with diverse speakers from across the globe, the ability to communicate effectively requires more than grammatical accuracy or lexical fluency it demands (Galante, 2015). This competence encompasses the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to navigate cultural diversity with empathy, openness, and critical awareness.

IC has gained significant attention in both educational policy and scholarly discourse (Arystanbayeva, 2024; Gui & Kew, 2023; Suharni et al., 2024). Numerous theoretical models have been developed to conceptualize its dimensions, and its relevance is widely acknowledged in language education (Galante, 2015). However, while the theory of IC has evolved substantially, its practical integration into ELT remains inconsistent and underdeveloped (Rachmatika & Izzah, 2024). Many classroom practices still prioritize standardized testing, native speaker norms, or surface-level cultural content such as festivals or food, rather than fostering meaningful intercultural engagement.

This gap is particularly concerning given the broader educational imperatives of the 21st century. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 calls for education that promotes global citizenship, sustainable development, human rights, and appreciation for cultural diversity. In this context, IC is no longer optional; it is a fundamental capacity that learners must develop in order to participate ethically and effectively in a global society. Classrooms have become sites of cultural intersection, where students bring with them varied identities, worldviews, and communicative styles (Pholying, 2025). English teachers, therefore, face the dual challenge of developing linguistic proficiency while also cultivating learners' intercultural sensitivity and reflective thinking.

This chapter aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice by exploring how IC can be meaningfully embedded into English language education (Spathopoulou & Pitychoutis, 2025). Drawing from established models as well as critical perspectives, it outlines pedagogical strategies, assessment approaches, and teacher training frameworks that support IC development. The chapter also examines the tensions and opportunities that arise when applying IC in multicultural classrooms, particularly in non-Western contexts. Through a combination of theoretical synthesis and classroom-based reflection, the goal is to equip educators, researchers, and policymakers with insights that inform both local practice and global aspirations.

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