

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE TO ESL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Intercultural competence has become an important dimension of English language education as learners increasingly communicate across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. However, integrating intercultural competence into ESL teaching presents several pedagogical challenges. This article examines key difficulties associated with teaching intercultural competence, focusing particularly on the complexity of culture, the risk of reducing culture to factual knowledge, ethnocentric attitudes and stereotypes, and the preparation of teachers to address intercultural issues in the classroom. Drawing on established research in intercultural language education and UNESCO's guidelines on intercultural education, the article argues that effective intercultural teaching requires more than transmitting information about other cultures. It should encourage learners to examine their own cultural perspectives, interpret alternative viewpoints, develop empathy, and engage appropriately with cultural differences. The discussion highlights the need for language teaching practices that integrate linguistic and intercultural development rather than treating culture as an additional or separate component of ESL instruction.

Key words: Intercultural competence, ESL students, intercultural communication, language teaching, cultural awareness, ethnocentrism, stereotypes, teacher preparation, intercultural education

Introduction

The increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of contemporary societies has strengthened the role of intercultural competence in language education. Learning English increasingly involves communication with people who may have different cultural backgrounds, values, expectations, and ways of interpreting social

interaction. Consequently, successful English language education cannot be limited to the development of grammatical and lexical knowledge. Byram (1997) conceptualizes intercultural communicative competence as involving not only knowledge of cultures but also attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of interaction, and critical cultural awareness. From this perspective, language learners need to develop the ability to understand perspectives different from their own while also reflecting critically on their own cultural assumptions.

The importance of this broader educational perspective is also reflected in UNESCO's *Guidelines on Intercultural Education*. UNESCO (2006) identifies respect for learners' cultural identities and the development of cultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills that enable participation and mutual understanding as central principles of intercultural education. The guidelines further emphasize curriculum development, teaching materials, teaching methods, and teacher training as important means of implementing intercultural education. Thus, the inclusion of intercultural competence in English language teaching requires more than adding information about different countries or customs to existing lessons. It requires teachers to create learning conditions in which students can engage with cultural differences and develop the knowledge and attitudes necessary for meaningful interaction.

Despite its recognized importance, however, teaching intercultural competence remains challenging in practice. Teachers may need to address culturally diverse perspectives without reducing cultures to fixed categories or reinforcing stereotypes, while learners may also encounter ideas that challenge assumptions acquired through their previous socialization. Recent research by Nemouchi and Byram (2026) illustrates this difficulty through university-level intercultural language teaching in Algeria, where classroom discussions revealed potential tensions between learners' existing values and values associated with particular approaches to intercultural competence. Such findings demonstrate that intercultural teaching is not a neutral transmission of cultural information; it can involve questioning learners' established perspectives and requires teachers to

manage disagreement and different value positions carefully. Therefore, this article examines the principal challenges of teaching intercultural competence to ESL students, with particular attention to the complexity of culture, ethnocentrism and stereotypes, teachers' roles, and the selection of appropriate teaching practices and materials.

Existing Challenges in Teaching Intercultural Competence

One of the fundamental challenges in teaching intercultural competence is the difficulty of defining and presenting culture in a way that goes beyond factual information about particular countries or social groups. In English language teaching, culture has traditionally been approached through knowledge of customs, traditions, values, and everyday practices. Although such knowledge can provide useful background for learners, it does not necessarily prepare them to interpret unfamiliar perspectives or negotiate meaning during actual intercultural encounters. Larzén-Östermark's (2008) empirical study of English teachers identified three orientations towards culture teaching: cognitive, action-related, and affective. While the cognitive orientation views culture primarily as factual knowledge, the action-related orientation emphasizes the social and sociolinguistic skills needed for intercultural communication, and the affective orientation encourages learners to reconsider their own cultural perspectives and develop empathy and respect for others. ([Tandfonline](#))

This distinction reveals an important pedagogical difficulty: information about another culture is considerably easier to transmit than the attitudes and interpretive skills required for intercultural competence. Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence similarly emphasizes that effective intercultural communication involves knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Therefore, simply adding cultural information to an ESL syllabus may not be sufficient to develop learners' intercultural competence. Teachers need to create opportunities for students to compare perspectives, question assumptions, interpret unfamiliar behaviour, and reflect on their own cultural positioning. This shift from transmitting cultural facts

towards developing critical and interactive abilities represents one of the central challenges of intercultural language education.

Another significant challenge is the risk of ethnocentrism and stereotyping when cultural differences are introduced in the ESL classroom. Learners may interpret unfamiliar behaviours, beliefs, or communication practices through the norms of their own culture and consequently perceive alternative practices as inappropriate, unusual, or inferior. Such interpretations can limit genuine intercultural understanding because cultures are not homogeneous systems in which all members share identical values and behaviours. Intercultural teaching therefore requires learners to question their own assumptions as well as examine other cultural perspectives. This is closely related to Byram's concept of critical cultural awareness, which requires learners to evaluate cultural practices and perspectives rather than simply accept or reject them according to predetermined standards (Byram, 1997). More recent research also demonstrates that intercultural competence may challenge values acquired through socialisation, creating difficult questions for teachers concerning how to address differences while maintaining respect for learners' own cultural backgrounds (Nemouchi & Byram, 2026). Consequently, teachers must avoid presenting cultures as fixed categories and should instead encourage comparison, reflection, dialogue, and recognition of internal diversity. This makes intercultural competence particularly challenging to teach because the objective is not to replace learners' existing cultural perspectives with those of another culture, but to develop their ability to critically examine perspectives and communicate appropriately across cultural differences.

A further challenge concerns teachers' preparation for integrating intercultural competence into ESL instruction. Effective intercultural teaching requires teachers to move beyond traditional language-teaching practices and to understand how culture influences communication, identity, values, and learners' interpretations of other perspectives. However, teacher education does not always provide sufficient preparation for this responsibility. Larzén-Östermark (2009), for example, found that cultural aspects received relatively limited attention in both language and

pedagogical studies within the teacher education context examined. The study also indicated that traditional cultural content, such as literature and factual knowledge about cultural realities, received greater emphasis than strategies for integrating language and culture. This creates a practical difficulty for teachers who may recognize the importance of intercultural competence but lack appropriate pedagogical tools for developing it systematically. In addition, teachers themselves may have different cultural experiences and assumptions, which can influence the selection and interpretation of classroom content. Therefore, teacher preparation should include not only knowledge about different cultures but also opportunities for teachers to develop their own intercultural awareness, critically examine their assumptions, and learn how to facilitate discussion of culturally sensitive issues. Without such preparation, intercultural education may remain an additional classroom topic rather than becoming an integrated dimension of language teaching.

Conclusion

Teaching intercultural competence in ESL contexts is a complex process that extends beyond the transmission of information about different cultures. The discussion has shown that several challenges can limit its effective implementation, including the difficulty of presenting culture without reducing it to fixed categories, the persistence of ethnocentrism and stereotypes, and insufficient preparation of teachers for addressing intercultural issues. These challenges demonstrate that intercultural competence should not be treated as an additional topic in the language classroom but as an integral dimension of language learning.

Effective intercultural teaching requires learners to develop not only cultural knowledge but also the ability to interpret different perspectives, question their own assumptions, communicate respectfully, and respond appropriately to cultural differences. In this respect, language education has an important role in preparing learners for communication in culturally diverse environments. Byram and Wagner (2018) emphasize that contemporary language teaching should prepare learners for

interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds by developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes rather than focusing exclusively on linguistic competence.

Therefore, teachers need to create classroom environments in which cultural differences can be explored through dialogue, comparison, reflection, and critical thinking. Teacher education should likewise provide future and practicing teachers with opportunities to develop their own intercultural awareness and appropriate pedagogical strategies. As emphasized in the UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education (2006), intercultural education requires attention to curriculum, teaching materials, teaching methods, and teacher preparation. Ultimately, the successful development of intercultural competence depends on integrating these elements into everyday ESL practice. Such an approach can help learners become not only more effective users of English but also more open, reflective, and responsible participants in intercultural communication.

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