

## **“Exploring Multicultural Competence: Defining, Developing & Monitoring”**

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Today, the effects of globalization are increasingly obvious. More people around the world now have both direct and indirect contact than ever before. This situation presents new opportunities and new challenges for educators working with American students going abroad as well as international students in the U.S. In both cases, we are especially well positioned to help students maximize the benefits of an intercultural experience.

For this to happen, however, we need to be clear about our professional goal: to prepare students for positive intercultural participation through effective communication. This means that students need not only the ability to make themselves understood but also to be accepted behaviorally and interactionally, especially since "acceptance" by people of another culture is more often strained by offending behaviors than incorrect grammar. This insight, in fact, led to the development of the field of intercultural communication some 50 years ago. Today, we need to rethink not only our goal, but also how we design and implement language and intercultural communication preparation as well as how we assist students during an intercultural sojourn. We need to consider carefully how we conceptualize, develop, and monitor the abilities that lead to intercultural competence.

### **About Intercultural Communicative Competence**

What exactly is intercultural competence? Although the term is in wide use, little consensus exists about what it is. Some stress global knowledge, others emphasize sensitivity, and still others point to certain skills. The definition and characterization of ICC presented here, however, suggests a more complex phenomenon than any one of these views.

Briefly defined, ICC is a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself. Whereas “effective” relates to one’s own view of one’s performance in the LC2 (i.e., an “etic” or an 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). Although these perceptions often differ, it is instructive to compare and contrast them because they arise from differing cultural views regarding the same phenomenon.

### **The Components of ICC**

As a complex phenomenon, ICC encompasses multiple components which include: 1) a variety of characteristics, 2) three areas or domains, 3) four dimensions, 4) proficiency in the host language, and 5) varying levels of attainment throughout a longitudinal and developmental process.

Characteristics – It is useful to distinguish traits (i.e., innate personal qualities) from those 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 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 further developed or modified through training and educational efforts? Commonly cited characteristics of ICC include: flexibility, humor, patience, openness, interest, curiosity, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and suspending judgments, among others.

Three Areas or Domains – ICC involves ability in three areas or domains (which, not surprisingly, are just as relevant to success 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 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 enhanced through developments in knowledge, positive attitudes, and skills while it in turn also furthers their development.

Proficiency in the Host Language – An ability to communicate in the host language greatly enhances the development of ICC in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Grappling with another language confronts how one perceives, conceptualizes, and expresses oneself; and, in the process, it permits the possibility of developing alternative communication strategies *on someone else's terms*. This humbling and challenging process 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 therefore deprives the individual of one of the most valuable aspects of the intercultural experience.

Developmental Levels – ICC normally develops over a lengthy and continuing process, occasionally with moments of stagnation and even regression. Much depends on the strength of one’s individual motivation (instrumental vs. integrative) with regards to the host culture. For this reason, establishing benchmarks can help to monitor and measure one’s progress. Several levels may be posited to help mark one's journey along the way; for example:

- 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 civic 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 (akin to those used in the ACTFL Proficiency Scale).

### **Assessing Intercultural Competence**

Because ICC is a fairly recent notion, the term is often used with varying meanings; or, it is 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.” This form is intended for use as a guide before, during, and after an intercultural sojourn by helping to monitor the development of the multiple aspects of one’s intercultural competence. It can assist 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 an assessment tool for use at various stages of the process as well as at the end. As such, the assessment approach is normative, formative, as well as summative.

### **Background and Rationale**

Foreign language and intercultural training and educational programs normally prescribe some manner of assessing participant performance/competence in a variety of academic and professional areas. However, educators often overlook or undervalue the most important area – the development of intercultural competence (ICC). Valuing and evaluating ICC development is consistent with trends in higher education to include competencies for our global age that go beyond the academic and professional. This form helps to do just that. It does so by shifting the focus from teaching to learning, from input to outcome, and from evaluation to development. Moreover, it engages the learner as partner in the teaching-learning process, consistent with co-constructive educational approaches.

The AIC Form was compiled in various stages over several years. First, a Task Force at the SIT Graduate Institute collected empirical observations. These observations were then checked against a review of the intercultural literature. And, finally, the items contained in the Form were crosschecked against various other ICC assessment tools.

To date, the Form has been used primarily as a tool to enhance the educational process. Additional use in field situations, however, will continue to strengthen the instrument’s validity, allow users to consider their own individual profiles, and permit the establishment of group norms as additional results are compiled from larger 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 will result in 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 observation 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 responds to 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 anticipated that few sojourners 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 behavior, 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 to their identity. Yet, a minimal expectation for all who embark on an intercultural sojourn, it would seem, must be understanding and tolerance of the host culture (that will, at the very least, allow the participant to be able to stay), whereas not everyone may also develop similar levels of respect and appreciation.

### **Additional Comments**

An important aspect when using this form during the program is the two-way assessment, involving the learner plus one or more external evaluators. Other evaluators, in addition to program staff, may include a peer, a native of the host language-culture, or others. Of these, the host native's perspective is especially instructive because it provides the "emic" in addition to an "etic" viewpoint, which invariably differ. When using a host native evaluator, it is often necessary to translate the form into the host language. For best results, each person using the form will ideally complete it in his or her own native tongue.

It is not unusual that the sojourner's competence may be perceived differently by each person completing the form. This is not important. What is important, however, is that the differing perspectives be used to stimulate dialog, reflection, and learning, and to identify strategies that will maximize further development. This is also the reason for developing together the action plan for the participant's future work at the end of each assessment session.

Finally, keep in mind that despite a lengthy form, intercultural competence will not be achieved by simply checking off a list of discrete items. The checklist, no matter how comprehensive, serves only as a guide. Other means of monitoring the intercultural process are important and encouraged (e.g., journals, portfolios, etc.) and other assessment strategies that include discrete/global and direct/indirect indicators in varying combinations. This is especially true in areas of awareness and attitudes, which are often more challenging to evaluate than the more traditional areas of knowledge and skills. In the end, monitoring intercultural communicative competence requires multiple ways of assessment, ways that are aligned with the definition and components of the complex phenomenon which is intercultural communicative competence.

### **For More Information**

For information about Intercultural Competence, the research, and the AIC Form, consult these websites:

- [www.experiment.org/resource.html](http://www.experiment.org/resource.html)
- [www.sit.edu/graduate/7803.htm](http://www.sit.edu/graduate/7803.htm)
- [www.wiche.edu](http://www.wiche.edu) (click on publications and see Working Paper No. 11, “Globalization and . . . “