

*The Intercultural Speaker: transforming the language learning  
experience*

**El hablante intercultural: transformando la experiencia de  
aprendizaje de idiomas**

MSc. Karol Viviana Cubero-Vásquez, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7043-4694>

*kcubero@gmail.com*

National University of Costa Rica. Liberia, Costa Rica

**Abstract**

There is an urgent need for transformational instruction to equip future graduates and future citizens with practical skills and competencies that help them cope with the present and future demands of these constantly changing and challenging times. Universities are called upon not only to train a workforce of professionals but also to educate active, mindful citizens aware of the world they live in, able to respond to local and global problems successfully. As inhabitants of a shared planet, this approach needs much more attention to foster these ways of thinking and competences, especially in the context of daily and constant intercultural encounters. Enhancing in students an intercultural outlook allows significant opportunities for building a better world, one framed in mutual understanding, empathy, and appreciation. This theoretical reflection (essay) intends to introduce the discussion on the need to promote the global linguistic objective of promoting language learners in the process of becoming intercultural speakers. In the specific context of language teaching, such goals can be promoted while working on crucial learning notions to empower students' acquisition of foreign language knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness to interrelate in today's multicultural, interconnected world aiming at transforming learners in intercultural speakers.

**Keywords:** Intercultural speaker – foreign language learning - learning experience.

**Resumen**

Existe una necesidad urgente que medie una instrucción de aprendizaje transformadora que dote a los futuros graduandos y ciudadanos de habilidades y competencias prácticas que les ayuden a hacer frente a las demandas presentes y futuras en tiempos de constantes cambios y desafíos. Las universidades están llamadas no sólo a formar

profesionales, sino también a educar ciudadanos activos y conscientes del mundo que les rodea, capaces de responder con éxito a los problemas locales y globales. Como habitantes de un mismo planeta, este propósito educativo necesita mucha más atención para fomentar nuevas formas de pensar y desarrollar competencias, que sean atinentes al contexto de intercambios y encuentros interculturales los que resultan ser una constante. Potenciar en los alumnos una perspectiva intercultural ofrece importantes oportunidades para construir mejores sociedades, enmarcadas en el entendimiento mutuo, la empatía y el aprecio a la diversidad. Esta reflexión teórica (ensayo) pretende aportar en la discusión sobre la necesidad de promover el objetivo lingüístico global de promover en aprendientes de idiomas el proceso hacia convertirse en hablantes interculturales. En el caso específico de la enseñanza de idiomas, estas metas educativas pueden promoverse al tiempo que se trabajan objetivos de aprendizaje lingüísticos pero además potenciar la adquisición por parte de los alumnos de conocimientos, habilidades, actitudes y conciencia crítica cultural de la lengua extranjera para interrelacionarse en el mundo intercultural e interconectado de hoy, con el objetivo fundamental de transformar a los alumnos en hablantes interculturales.

**Palabras clave:** Hablante intercultural - aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras - experiencia de aprendizaje.

### **Introduction**

In the context of a pandemic, nations and individuals have faced a disruptive threat that has unfolded a kind of fragility unknown to many of us. Unfortunately, it has revealed how certain countries have failed in dealing with global issues. These difficult times are provoking fundamental and unexpected changes in the way life is conducted. The lessons taught are many, but an important one openly points toward the requirement to enable learners with critical skills and competences to maximize a vision for international-intercultural collaboration, appreciative, supportive, and empathetic views to support between communities, countries, and cultures in order to fulfill a compromise of human survival and coexistence. Fundamentally, learners must get trained in critical competences to face present and future challenges. Therefore, there is a need to foster or reinforce healthy and effective dialogic practices in a framework of open disposition to help and learn from one another, globally or locally. Education in its social role must

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guarantee an ongoing, transformational process through mechanisms that ensure progress and foster innovation to cope with the world's demands by educating citizens with tools to better react, engage and construct future societies.

Without a doubt, curriculum review and innovation need to be a habitual practice to facilitate a quality of education that leads learners to develop knowledge, competences, and skills to better communicate, collaborate, and interact in these changing times. Acknowledging the need for transformational instruction is crucial to equip future graduates and future citizens with practical skills and competencies, considering that actual times content and knowledge is as far as a *click* in which the difference or significance will be marked on the kind of treatment, process, analysis, and reflection done with it. This needs to be explicitly addressed through a constant variation of classroom activities and by adopting teaching notions that take the learning experience to a new level. Universities are called upon not only to train a workforce of professionals but also to educate active, mindful citizens aware of the plurality of views and, above all, able to respond successfully to local and global problems. As inhabitants of a shared planet, this approach needs much more attention to enhance an intercultural outlook that allows more opportunities to build a better world, framed in mutual understanding, empathy, and appreciation. Fostering these particular ways of thinking, skills, and competences can play a fundamental role in shaping the future that the next generations will inherit, especially in the context of daily and constant intercultural encounters.

One specific subject in which such goals can be promoted is the foreign or second language classroom. Language educators in the twenty-first century are called upon to empower students' acquisition of foreign language knowledge, skills, attitudes, and cultural awareness to interrelate in today's multicultural, interconnected world while transforming learners into intercultural speakers. Guiding them through that process seems to be a suitable path to facilitate foreign language learning and promote a lifelong learning process during which a profound change in students' perceptions of life can occur, enhancing the capacity to expand on their world views. The recognition of this fundamental task is pivotal, and the issue has captivated the interest of many leading language educators and researchers in exploring its potential in the language classroom.

## Development

### *The intercultural speaker versus the native speaker in foreign language learning*

There is an agreement in the foreign language teaching community on the need to educate foreign language learners to become intercultural speakers who can manage both linguistic and intercultural complexities when communicating with culturally different interlocutors. Byram (2008) describes an intercultural speaker as someone who is able to take an “external” perspective on oneself while interacting with others. Foreign language users must become optimal intercultural citizens in a world of ever-expanding and ever-mixing diversities as part of their communicative ability (Byram et al., 2002).

Language learners should maintain appropriate and effective communication practices with culturally diverse native or foreign/second-language speakers in both face-to-face and virtual scenarios. Such an understanding of cultures would prepare individuals to operate globally in accordance with contemporary and expected worldwide developments while significantly benefiting learners from a social, economic, and personal standpoint. The challenges that have emerged in the language classroom should be addressed by revisiting and updating English language instruction. It is imperative to constantly revise the curriculum to ensure it is in tune with the real world. In that sense, educators as agents of change can facilitate novel practices to mediate an active, experiential, and collaborative learning experience. Meaningful possibilities may arise when using the target language as a vehicle to negotiate varied, intercultural, contextualized, real-life content as opportunities for educating competent, functioning intercultural speakers.

In that sense, Byram’s (1997) primary concerns in the matter is devoted to the notion and role of the native speaker in the foreign language context. His criticism has received sufficient support over recent years because he unveils the dangers that such a notion implicates learners’ process of acquiring a foreign or second language and how it might affect their language acquisition and identities. Byram visualizes the pressure students of a foreign /second language are exposed to when forced to master the target language to the extent of a native speaker, which only portrays a threatening, unfair, and discouraging learning scenario.

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The dangers the native speaker model poses around learners' identity is not minor. When learners are persuaded to restrain one's language to perfectly master another in an attempt to integrate members of a particular linguistic community may undoubtedly cause discomfort and emotional unrest. Kramsch (2001) warned that such a thing should not happen. She believed in a smooth process that she calls a third culture, which means learners can access language, knowledge, and behavior from the cultures constituting their identity and make choices if and how they incorporate the new culture into their identity (Kramsch, 2001).

To Byram (1997), "the native speaker standard model focuses on the achievement of native-like proficiency and assimilation into the new culture without considering the learner's experiences, values, and beliefs a mistaken aim, as the learner would be almost linguistically schizophrenic, renouncing to a familiar native language and what is attached to it for another one" (pp. 11-12).

The native speaker performance has put higher stress levels and frustration over learners, hindering many of a confident and friendly learning environment to acquire the language. Thus, favoring the high filter, which inhibits production. It has also proven to create an emotional imbalance that potentially lowers the learner's self-esteem and even possibly drives the refusal of their social and cultural identity. In that regard, Cook (1999) described, "the prominence of the native speaker in language teaching has created an unattainable goal for second/foreign language learners" (p. 185)

Given the elusive model of the native speaker, Byram and Zárate (1994) proposed a parallel to the idea of "the native speaker," a language learner should be offered the opportunities and resources to become an "intercultural speaker." Byram et al. (2002) originally introduced the idea of the intercultural speaker to describe the ability "to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity" (p. 9). Byram (1997) referred to the intercultural speaker as people that get involved in intercultural communication and interaction able to use the encounter with an interlocutor from a foreign culture to 'discover other perspectives on interpretation' (savoir être), to "establish relationships of similarity and difference between them" (savoir

apprendre/faire) and to “mediate” between them (savoir comprendre) (Byram, 1997, pp. 58, 62).

Learners of a foreign language will encounter more typical situations where they have to use tools to help them recognize and understand diverse, multicultural relationships to make sense of distinctive attitudes and behaviors.

Accordingly, the intercultural speaker ideal reconstructs the far conceptualized view of communication to recalculate its role and extends. The effective speaker needs to rely upon it as a mechanism for the further strategic improvement of knowledge, skills, intercultural criticality, behaviors, and a general understanding of cultures and one’s own as part of a requirement to cohabiting in this complex interconnected, and multicultural world.

Therefore, striving towards the intercultural speaker can be considered advantageous since it would be making a significant change in the learners and their integral education as well as in their process of foreign or second language learning and acquisition. The whole idea empowers both language learners and educators in significant ways adjudicating language education a much more profound role relevant to a constructive inclusive society.

According to Byram (1997), an intercultural speaker needs to be aware of how two people can resolve misunderstandings between them to be mindful of their interlocutors’ identities. He expanded on arguing:

A learner with the ability to see and manage the relationships between themselves and their own cultural beliefs, behaviors, and meanings, as expressed in a foreign language, and those of their interlocutors, described in the same language—or even a combination of languages—which may be the interlocutors’ native language or not. (p. 12)

Henceforth, the intercultural speaker is a worth taking purpose for language learners and language educators to pursuit in the teaching-learning process. Intercultural speakers combine linguistic, affective, cognitive, and behavioral components to perform successfully and appropriately with culturally diverse people. In his model’s vision, Byram (1997) embraced a replacement of the native speaker praised ideal goal. Instead, he proposes the attainable goal of the intercultural speaker. The goal and achievement of IC competence are dynamic in nature due to their core constructs.

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Byram (1997) described this intercultural speaker as “the more desirable outcome in language education” (p. 12). A learner with the ability to effectively self-reflect, learn, interact, mediate in different contexts. According to Byram (2020), “A learner able to manage relationships between own beliefs, values, behaviors, and meanings, as expressed in a foreign language, and those of their interlocutors” (p. 46).

This concept of the intercultural speaker entails the promotion of a conscious language learner which objective is not at all monolingualistic but holistic, seeking to get learners involved in a much more profound learning experience that can lead them to become more receptive toward different life modes and to the process of learning a foreign language. Enhancing confidence and triggering interest in intercultural content entails a much more dynamic feature with the vision that it is a lifelong learning process linked to becoming a functional intercultural speaker, which is a lifelong activity.

In this manner, the intercultural speaker can develop and show abilities to interact with others, accept other perspectives and perceptions of the world, mediate between different perspectives while being conscious of their evaluations toward difference (Byram, 2002).

According to Byram and Fleming (1998), “This intercultural speaker is able to establish a relationship between their own and other cultures, to mediate, explain, and accept differences conscious of how humanity beneath from it” (p. 8). Learning about foreign cultures opens doors and foreign modes into their own contexts to either learn, enhance, appreciate, reflect, understand, or empathized. Byram and Fleming (1998) also stress the autonomy that language and culture education offers in preparing learners to become intercultural speakers as those with “knowledge of one or more cultures and social identities, able to discover and relate to new people from other contexts” (p. 9).

As several experts point out, it is a complex goal. It implies the interface of linguistic and cultural assets to deal with challenging communication. Since the intercultural speaker’s competence and the native speaker does not match linguistically or culturally. Becoming an intercultural speaker is more complex and demanding since it is a dynamic concept with a fixed final goal (Jaeger, 2001 p.53).

Shifting to the intercultural speaker should not in any way diminish the criteria of linguistic competence and language proficiency expected of the language learner. A proficient language user is believed to be someone whose language skills go beyond pure linguistic and sociocultural knowledge. A successful interaction depends on the ability to conjoint elements brought into the situation; knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, skills, and language(s) to negotiate meanings.

Byram (1997) detailed intercultural speaker's requirements regarding attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness. Byram suggested that these requirements should be carefully intertwined.



**Table 1: Intercultural speaker competencies proposed by Byram**

<p><b>Attitudes</b></p> <p><i>The intercultural speaker:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-is concerned with the other’s experience of daily life.</li> <li>- does not assume that unfamiliar phenomena can only be assimilated through their own cultural understanding.</li> <li>- actively seeks the other’s perspective</li> <li>- copes with different kinds of otherness.</li> <li>- takes into consideration the expectation the others may have about appropriate behavior from foreigners.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Knowledge</b></p> <p><i>The intercultural speaker knows about:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-events, individuals and diverse interpretations of events, national memory, political and economic factors of each country.</li> <li>- means of contacts usage to facilitate partnerships across frontiers</li> <li>-the events and symbols markers of native identity.</li> <li>-the national memory of one’s country and of others</li> <li>-perceptions of regions, language varieties, and landmarks of significance and how others perceive these.</li> <li>-education systems, religions, institutions where individuals acquire a national identity</li> <li>-about the social distinction’s dominant in the native and target cultures.</li> <li>-the level of formality in the language and nonverbal behavior of interaction.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Intercultural Speaker</b></p>	
<p><b>Skills of interpreting and relating</b></p> <p><i>The intercultural speaker can:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-read a document or event, analyzing its origins, meanings, and values that arise from a national or ethnocentric perspective.</li> <li>-identify causes of misunderstanding or connotations.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Critical cultural awareness</b></p> <p><i>The intercultural speaker is aware of:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a variety of systematic approaches to place a document or event in context.</li> <li>- their own ideological perspectives and values and assesses documents or events with explicit reference to.</li> </ul>

<p>- use their explanations of misunderstanding to help interlocutors overcome diverging viewpoints.</p> <p><b>Skills of discovery and interaction</b></p> <p>Use various questioning techniques to elicit allusions, connotations, and assumptions of a document or event to establish links among them.</p> <p>-can share meanings and values from documents or events particular of the culture of their interlocutor.</p> <p>-use their knowledge of conventions of verbal and nonverbal communication to arrange agreements.</p> <p>-can use sources to understand historical, political, economic, and social relationships among cultures.</p>	<p>- possible conflicts between one's own and other ideologies to establish communal criteria for evaluating documents or events.</p> <p>-strategies to negotiate agreement and acceptance of difference.</p>
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Source. (Bryam, 1997, pp. 57-64).

**Table 2: Resources to progress on instructing intercultural speakers**

Resource	Description
Movie	Outsourced (2006). Provides rich content to lead students into an intercultural reflection and analysis.
Movie	Pursuit of Happiness (2006). Provides content related to the idea of happiness and hard work in the North American culture.
Song	What a Wonderful World by Louis Armstrong. The song explores the beauty of the world and its multicultural nuances.
Song	Imagine by John Lennon. The song presents the need to change perspectives around the idea of kindness, acceptance, and empathy towards others.
App	The Cultural Me App. Presents content about art and culture linked to language learning tasks. The app offers articles and information on varied themes that can be used to reinforce intercultural input.
App	CultureGPS App. Offers useful information and comparisons among cultural dimensions model by Geert Hofstede.

Source: the author

Promoting language learners to become intercultural speaker must be understood as a continuous permanent process where teachers commit to this urgent and necessary goal. Thus, teachers must explicitly explain students the objective and purpose of

attaining such a goal. The resources and tools that language educators can use are many, there are plenty of authentic resources available online and printed that serve the purpose of facilitating culture specific and culture general tasks. Learning tasks and activities can be planned based on students own culture so that they have a platform to reflect over other people's culture. Those kinds of tasks can lead the reflection and the spark on students their interest to a lifelong learning towards becoming intercultural speakers. Rethinking the foreign language instruction means to consider other forms of mediating and facilitating the language learning experience integrally and holistically, giving them the strategies, the content, the information, and the means to process, compare culture material. Enabling students to become intercultural speakers depends on a set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge to develop these key components. Adopting and instructing on intercultural strategies is fundamental when seeking to engage in meaningful and fruitful intercultural negotiation and interactions.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In a complex world, intercultural speakers serve as mediating agents or negotiators who can interact with speakers of other languages on equal terms, aware of their own identity (Byram et al., 2002). This can be accomplished by centering language learners as multicompetent rather than deficient native speakers (Cook, 1999).

In other words, this view shift gives the learner a central role in the learning process, enhancing a humanistic and participant learner role as cultural ambassadors. In the process of becoming intercultural speakers, learners or individuals transform their mindsets, critically evaluating their own practices, products, and cultural beliefs. Thus, learners who become 'intercultural speakers' become successful in communicating information and developing healthy relationships with people of other languages and cultures (Byram, 2002) by using their knowledge, attitudes, and skills to interact interculturally, identifying and mediating misunderstandings.

The idea of the intercultural speaker invites language educators and learners to embark on an intercultural, collaborative, creative, contextualized comprehensive framework in foreign language mediation. Byram's intercultural arguments, notions, and objectives around the intercultural component in language teaching have represented a starting point to ensure a shift in how language teaching can lead students to learn and acquire

the language and foster critical skills, attitudes, and knowledge. Abandoning the view of the native speaker as an ideal goal in foreign language learning can be a game-changer in the foreign or second language classroom. The pursuit of instructing and educating intercultural speakers might have profound implications in the way interactions and engagements are held in generations to come. Such a goal can be explicitly reached by introducing in the classroom resources and activities to induce students to reflect on intercultural issues while explaining the reasons behind its significance in becoming ambassadors of their culture(s) while progressing in becoming intercultural speakers

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