

# Using Byram's Savoirs to Ensure the Incorporation of Intercultural Communicative Competence into Language Teaching

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## Abstract

*Although the term "intercultural communicative competence" (ICC) is often used in academic literature, studies indicate that the ICC element is often not included in the actual teaching practices of tertiary institutions. Due to the lack of ICC instruction across the curriculum, foreign language (FL) courses seem to stand out as logical sites for instruction in ICC. FL instructors, however, are not necessarily trained in matters of ICC, and the standard default method of acquiring ICC outside the language class (i.e., study abroad) is clearly not available to all students. In a global society, ICC is relevant for all students. This paper uses Byram's 1997 savoirs (i.e., competences desirable of the "intercultural speaker") as a starting point to provide evidence of tried and tested FL teaching practices that reveal ways in which ICC instruction may be incorporated into FL courses even in academic environments in which direct intercultural contact is unlikely. While recognizing the obstacles of teaching ICC in such environments, the study reveals that the inclusion of ICC is not only possible but necessary in them.*

*Keywords: competences, critical cultural awareness, foreign language teaching, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural speaker*

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## 1. Introduction

The term *intercultural communicative competence* (ICC) is now quite prevalent in academic literature, with a simple Google Scholar search producing some 290,000 results. Proposals have been made concerning what needs to be included in intercultural communication courses (e.g., Díaz & Moore, 2018; Gudykunst et al., 1991; Holliday, 2018), and textbooks related to the matter may easily be

found (e.g., Jackson, 2014; Samovar et al., 2017; Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019). Calls have been made for the inclusion of ICC across the university curriculum (e.g., Perry & Southwell, 2011; Plough, 2016). Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) define the term *intercultural communicative competence* as the “ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality” (p. 10). In spite of the widespread use of the term, its application in academic settings has been called into question. Snow (2015) notes that most students never take courses related to ICC. Deardorff (2011), using the context of the United States, notes that “fewer than 10 percent of undergraduates take a course in international relations” (p. 69). Bennet and Salonen (2007) find that *culture* is more often “addressed” in curriculum plans than it is actually “incorporated” into coursework (p. 47).

Since students may or may not take specific courses in intercultural communication or international relations, the task of providing ICC seems to fall on the language teacher, who may or may not be prepared to take on the task. Byram (1997) and Snow (2015) note that language education, by its very nature, prepares students to interact with people from other cultures and therefore stands as the ideal location for instruction related to ICC. But integrating ICC into the language classroom may stand as a tall order for language teachers accustomed to a pure language approach as such instructors are usually not usually trained in matters regarding ICC (Byram & Kramsch, 2008; Snow, 2015). The order may necessitate a change in language teachers’ beliefs regarding their role in the education process (see Byram & Wagner, 2018; Sercu, 2006). Specifically, it may necessitate a move from the traditional teaching of culture facts to the teaching of skills that “are necessary to make sense out of the facts” (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey 2002, p. 27; see also Perry & Southwell, 2011), and it may require the adoption of a view that ICC instruction is not somehow separate from the task of language instruction (Kearney, 2010).

In response to the call for language instructors to take the lead in promoting ICC, and in response to the realization that these instructors are not necessarily trained to teach ICC, this paper provides evidence from previous studies to reveal practical applications of Byram’s *savoirs* (i.e., roughly translated from the French as *competences*) in the foreign language (FL) classroom. These *savoirs*, first presented in Byram (1997) as a model to describe competences sought in the process of becoming an *intercultural speaker*, are succinctly summarized by Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002):

- **intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*):** curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own.
- **knowledge (*savoirs*):** of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in one’s interlocutor’s country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.
- **skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*):** ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own.
- **skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*):** ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge.
- **critical cultural awareness (*savoir s’engager*):** ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries (pp. 12-13).

As the building of intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills leads to the final *savoir*, *critical cultural awareness* (see Gómez Rodríguez, 2015), the paper will focus on ways in which the practical application of teaching/learning methods may contribute to that final goal.

Following Coperías Aguilar (2002) and Huber (2012), the paper takes the stance that ICC is now relevant to all tertiary students, not just to those who plan to live or study abroad. Coperías Aguilar (2002) notes that ICC may be necessary for some “indirectly” (p. 100). The widespread availability of

social media provides a clear testament to the likely need of ICC even for those who do not leave home as they almost inevitably experience other cultures through internationally shared content. Huber (2012), in the introduction to a document written for the Council of Europe, argues that “we all need to develop intercultural competence” in order to be able “to address the root causes of some of the most virulent problems of today’s societies in the form of misunderstandings across cultural, socio-cultural, ethnic and other lines” (p. 5). Given the almost universal need of ICC, and given the fact that many students do not have opportunities for extensive travel, the paper will present evidence of useful teaching/learning practices that do not automatically assume direct contact of students with speakers of other cultures. Hence, the paper seeks to answer the following research question:

- What teaching/learning practices employed in foreign language courses may aid in developing intercultural competence in learners who may be unable to have direct contact with speakers of other cultures?

Before going into the investigation and analysis of such practices, however, the paper first provides a more detailed overview of the concepts of *ICC* and the *intercultural speaker* as related to FL courses.

## **2. The Concepts of *Intercultural Communicative Competence* and the *Intercultural Speaker* as Related to Foreign Language Teaching**

The notion of the *intercultural speaker* (i.e., the speaker possessing skills of ICC) stands as a reaction against the previously held notion that the *ideal native speaker* should be the model for FL learners. As Byram (1997) points out, the native speaker ideal is almost certain to lead to failure for most FL learners, who by definition do not grow up in bilingual communities. Perhaps more importantly, it ignores “the social identities of the learner in any intercultural interaction” and thus would not be an ideal goal even if it could be reached (p. 8). Since many languages (most particularly English) are quite frequently used by non-native speakers, there would seem to be no reason for such speakers to modify their own “imported connotations and linguistic practices” to suit the native speaker ideal (Byram & Wagner, 2018, pp. 143-144). FL learners, then, need to be encouraged to analyze not just the language being learned but also their identities as learners of the language (Byram, 2012). Ultimately, the ideal language learner (i.e., the *intercultural speaker*) is one who takes into account his/her own cultural identity as well as the cultural identity of his/her interlocutor in an effort to create a relationship that is positive for both parties.

Although, as mentioned above, the *intercultural speaker* is one who possesses the skills of ICC, no clear indication is given in relevant literature as to when a learner may actually be considered an *intercultural speaker*. Byram himself seems to be intentionally vague on this matter, stating that the term may be applied to “someone who has some or all of the five *savoirs* of intercultural competence to some degree” (Byram, 2009, p. 327, italics as in original). This vagueness highlights the idea that becoming an *intercultural speaker* is an ongoing process. Behind this vagueness is the notion that some *savoirs* will be more easily attainable in some contexts than in others. The skill of *discovery* (i.e., part of the fourth *savoir*) “may be operated in the individual’s own time, but equally it may be part of social interaction” (Byram, 1997, p. 37). Clearly, the learner with more opportunities to engage in social interaction with people from other cultures has an advantage in acquiring this skill. Hence, due to contextual differences among learners, the *savoirs* may be acquired at different rates and to different degrees, and the acquisition of the *savoirs* may not appear in a particular order but instead may reveal some overlap. It may thus be surmised that *critical cultural awareness* (i.e., the culmination of the other four *savoirs*) is a relative concept taking on slightly different formations depending on learners’ circumstances.

## **3. Practical Applications of Byram’s *Savoirs* in the Foreign Language Class**

As stated previously, the aim of this paper is to provide practical applications of Byram’s *savoirs* in the FL classroom, with a particular focus on cases in which no direct contact with people from other

cultures is necessary. In doing so, the paper will categorize classroom practices according to whether they most develop attitudes, knowledge, or skills (i.e., the three areas that the *savoirs* seek to develop). It should be acknowledged, however, that particular practices may be said to develop learners' ICC in more than one area.

### 3.1. Attitudes: (1) questioning one's own values, (2) suspending judgment on others' values

#### 3.1.1 The Critical Incident Exercise

As presented by Snow (2015), the *critical incident exercise* (CIE) is essentially a story concerning well-intentioned people from different cultures who encounter some sort of confusion. The story is followed by either a set of multiple-choice questions (a close-ended CIE) or one general question (an open-ended CIE), with the questions or question being designed to lead learners to consider possible explanations for the confusing situation. A sample open-ended CIE is provided below:

**situation:** Xiao Li has become friends with a group of Western students at his school in China, and one day they invite him to go out to a bar at a Western-style hotel. Xiao Li willingly accepts the invitation. When they first get to the bar, some of the students talk to Xiao Li, asking him what he thinks of the fancy hotel and bar. However, soon they begin talking just to each other, making jokes Xiao Li doesn't understand and speaking English so quickly that Xiao Li can't follow the conversation. For a long time Xiao Li just sits there silently. Finally, Xiao Li tells the group he needs to get back to school and then leaves.

**question:** Why didn't the Western students make more of an effort to include Xiao Li in their conversation? (Be sure to explain the behavior of the Western students, rather than why Xiao Li had trouble understanding.)

**task:** Come up with at least five possible explanations (Snow, 2015, p. 290).

In discussing their opinions on such situations, students are led to become aware of intercultural communication problems and think carefully about them instead of relying on spontaneous judgments. They are encouraged to consider various possible explanations for the problem and therefore to become aware of "factors which may negatively impact the interpretation process" (Snow, 2015, p. 295). Ultimately, they must decide whether to give the benefit of the doubt. In discussing the CIE given above, students need to decide whether the Western students were simply rude and inconsiderate or whether some other factors may have influenced their behaviors.

By repeatedly going through the process described above with different CIEs, students should begin to reflect on their own values and at the same time avoid making harsh judgments of others without carefully considering possible reasons for the others' behavior. Hence, the use of tasks such as CIEs, while allowing learners useful speaking practice, also help them develop open-minded, reflective attitudes toward intercultural encounters.

#### 3.1.2 Digital Photograph-Mediated Tasks

Kusumaningputri and Widodo (2018) describe a seven-week project in which Indonesian students analyzed digital photos of cultural topics (e.g., social interaction, parents, food) of their own culture, of an Anglophone culture, and of a foreign, non-Anglophone culture. Through discussion, the students and the instructor agreed to engage in four tasks:

- **observation:** choosing a cultural topic and finding relevant photos
- **describing:** presenting and describing their photos to the class
- **comparing and contrasting:** identifying and presenting similarities and differences in the photos to the class

- **evaluating:** Evaluating the photos according to guiding questions (e.g., questions concerning social roles presented, discourses involved, institutional values presented)

While engaging in these four tasks, students participated in class discussions with their peers and their instructor and received feedback on their work “geared to mediate intercultural understanding of the ideas, values, and beliefs covertly or overtly embedded in the photographs” (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018, p. 53). The authors show that, during the process, learners progressed from an ethnocentric mindset (i.e., assuming that their own practices were superior) to a much more ethnorelative mindset (i.e., realizing that similar values and goals were revealed in the three represented cultures but with some variations). For example, at first, a Western teacher was viewed as being impolite because she wore a T-shirt in class whereas an Indonesian teacher was more formally dressed and considered polite. Later, students commented that both had the same goal of helping the younger generation prepare for the future.

Though the classroom practice described by Kusumaningputri and Widodo (2018) differs greatly from that described by Snow (2015) in terms of instructional technique, the similarities in terms of results are clear. In both cases, students are led to look beyond their initial, value-laden judgments of others and to reconsider their own pre-established views in order to arrive at a more impartial position. In short, the two different practices, by leading learners to look closely at others and at themselves, provide them with useful tools of critical cultural awareness.

### **3.2 Knowledge: (1) about one's own and other social groups, (2) about processes of interaction**

#### **3.2.1 Narrative Possibilities for Cultural Immersion**

After critiquing the tendency in the language-teaching profession of viewing *cultural immersion* as something that occurs only in study-abroad contexts, Kearney (2010) presents the possibility of creating such immersion within the FL classroom through the use of narratives. She suggests that a “well-designed and well-implemented narrative approach to cultural immersion” allows learners to explore the world through the eyes of others by “taking on unfamiliar perspectives” and detaching themselves from the cultural orientation with which they are intuitively familiar (p. 334). To create this immersive environment, Kearney (2010) argues, it is necessary to make use of a variety of texts of all types (e.g., audio, video, gesture) that reveal the wide range of sometimes contradictory perspectives present in the target culture. Implicit in this argument is a movement away from a trend of focusing on the dominant culture of a region or country (see, for example, Hofstede et al., 2010; Samovar et al., 2017).

Kearney (2010) points out, however, that the immersive environment calls not just for students' interpretation of the meanings of the target culture but also for their creation of their own narratives in which they grapple with their own changing identities as language learners. Hence, students engage in a creative writing process in which they adopt the point of view of a character from the target culture—in this case, a French person experiencing World War II. One iteration of the practice led some students to ask the question “What would I have done?” (Kearney, 2010, p. 335), a question which suggests a clear recognition of their different social identities and an ability to relate their identities to that of the French character.

#### **3.2.2 Language and Culture through Film**

Without specifically mentioning the term *immersion*, Tognozzi (2010) also seems to create an immersive atmosphere in Italian courses with her combined use of film clips, role play, composition assignments, oral presentations, and reflective self-assessment. In presenting two course projects designed for different levels of Italian proficiency (i.e., less advanced and advanced) in US-based FL courses, she provides steps for promoting target culture awareness through an analysis of interaction styles shown in movie clips, an analysis of target-culture elements shown in the clips, and pre- and post-surveys which allow students to compare their pre-project views with their post-project views. Oral

presentations followed by reflective written compositions serve to give learners the opportunity to research a particular cultural element shown in a clip.

Tognozzi (2010) provides rather detailed procedures concerning the implementation of the two projects. The procedures for the less-advanced students (i.e., Project One) will be given in abbreviated form here, and differences between Project One and Project Two will be explained afterwards.

#### **Project One (less advanced students)**

- Have students complete a pre-project survey in which they indicate what they know/feel about the culture elements to be addressed during the project.
- Provide background information for the movie clip (which should be no more than two minutes).
- Have students watch the clip without sound, paying attention to non-verbal clues and making predictions concerning clip content based on these clues.
- Have students listen to the clip again, this time with volume. Check students' predictions and highlight words from the clip that students have understood.
- Provide students with a transcript and a transcript annotation guide dealing with such matters as intonation, emphasis, and linking. Have students, while watching the clip a few more times, annotate the transcript.
- Provide teacher-annotated script for students to check their own work.
- Have students, in pairs, practice the scene from the film clip and then perform for the class.
- Have students watch a video recording of their performance and self-assess their work.
- Have students write a composition and prepare a presentation on one culture element presented in the clip.
- Have students complete the post-project survey (actually the same as the pre-project survey) in order to discover how their views regarding Italian culture have changed as a result of the project.

The second project (i.e., the one for more advanced students) differs from the first in that students, instead of performing the dialogue shown in the film clip, create their own dialogue based on the viewing of the clip without sound. Hence, the second project calls for more creativity in the target language than the first.

The two teaching practices highlighted in this subsection share the quality of allowing students to practice the skill of considering phenomena, at least temporarily, from the point of view of others. Students do not simply learn about the target culture; they need to work to place themselves in it in a figurative sense. One would suppose that this figurative cultural immersion increases the awareness that one's own cultural position is only one of many and that others are equally valid. One would also suppose that, in trying to identify with members of the target culture, students are naturally led to reflect on their own culture in terms of the degree to which it differs from or resembles the target culture. Hence, the knowledge gained from the two practices would seem clearly to contribute to the learners' development of critical cultural awareness, with the practice presented in Tognozzi (2010) no doubt being of greater help in developing specific skills concerning processes of interaction.

### **3.3 Skills: (1) interpreting and relating, (2) discovery and interaction**

#### **3.3.1 Deep Culture through Literature**

Gómez Rodríguez (2015) reacts to the tendency of FL courses to focus on the teaching of *surface culture*—that is, teaching which focuses on such observable elements as “celebrations, tourist places, geographical sites, national symbols, food and famous people” (p. 45). He argues that such teaching tends to present the target culture in “deifying and idealistic terms” that are “safe and celebratory notions of diverse societies” (p. 45). In response to such teaching, he notes that a focus on more

controversial issues related to the target culture—that is, issues of *deep culture*—is more appropriate for true intercultural understanding. Through a study of American short stories addressing such matters as gender inequality, social class struggles, loss of cultural identity, and racism and discrimination, he seeks to lead Colombian university students to reflect on these deeper issues as they relate to both the target and the local culture.

The basic structure of Gómez Rodríguez' course is as follows:

- **group work:** Having read the assigned story and answered guiding questions given by the instructor, students work in small groups to discuss “their personal and critical opinions about the topics related to deep culture” (p. 49). Afterwards, group conclusions are shared with the whole class.
- **small group presentations:** Students provide arguments based on an assigned story, present their own analyses of the arguments, and elicit their classmates' reactions to the arguments.
- **short written responses:** After discussing a story in small groups and listening to small group presentations, students reflect on their takeaways from the analysis in short response papers.

Gómez Rodríguez (2015) shows that, in completing these tasks, students do indeed critically analyze the issues presented and do indeed make connections between the stories and their own Colombian cultural reality. In data provided from one instantiation of the course, students readily identified problems of social class discrimination at school in the story “Shame” and noted that, in Colombia, people from lower social classes are often unable to attend school. And students related the imposition of Western culture on Native American groups in the story “Lullaby” to a similar imposition on Colombian indigenous groups and to the imposition of American culture on Colombia as a whole. Hence, the teaching practice appears to reveal a clear application of the skills of interpreting and relating and, in doing so, a critical cultural awareness of both the target culture and the home culture.

### 3.3.2 Deep Culture through Video Games

Like Gómez Rodríguez (2015), Shliakhovchuk (2018) seeks to promote ICC through an analysis of deep culture elements. His method, however, stands somewhat outside the conventional modes of classroom teaching: He uses video games along with traditional classroom instruction to achieve results. Noting the popularity of video games with younger generations, and focusing on the genre of *serious games* that addresses “complex and contentious issues like war, migration, poverty, homelessness, prejudice, discrimination” (p. 10326), the author sees the inclusion of serious games in the FL classroom as an ideal way of creating interest while at the same time providing critical instruction. Since the player is “put into the shoes of a game's protagonist” (p. 10327), he/she is allowed to experience, albeit virtually, the problems of, for example, an immigrant at the US-Mexico border, an overworked cotton-picker in Uzbekistan, or the trials and travails of a rural worker in Haiti. The experience, the author suggests, may “foster empathy, raise awareness,” and create a hope of “making social change” (p. 10326). Games for specific ICC purposes are provided in the study.

After emphasizing that the use of video games for the teaching of ICC must be integrated into an instructional curriculum and not form the curriculum, Shliakhovchuk (2018) provides some tips for the use of games for instruction in ICC, tips which are provided in abbreviated form here:

- **pre-video game activities:** The instructor elicits from the students what they already know about the topic addressed in the game, shows video-game teasers to allow students to compare their knowledge to that addressed in the game, and perhaps provides an introductory lecture on the topic. If students are to play the game outside of class, the instructor demonstrates the game-playing method or provides instructions for the game.
- **in-class video gameplay activities:** If the game is to be played in class, the instructor decides which part of the game is relevant to course material. He/she monitors students' progress through the game and elicits their rationale concerning decisions made in an effort to lead students to apply instructional material.

- **post-video gameplay activities:** The instructor carries out a debriefing discussion in which he/she elicits connections between the game and real life. The instructor asks students to complete a writing assignment in which they reflect on their real-life learning from the game.

Such tips, along with the rationale behind the use of games for instructional purposes, provide convincing arguments concerning ways in which video games may serve as a useful supplement to instruction that strives to lead students to discover other cultural realities and to relate those realities, however different, to their own through careful reflection.

In recent years, long after the presentation of the *savoirs* in 1997, Byram has tended to argue for the development of ICC through the teaching of *intercultural citizenship* (see Byram, 2018; Byram & Wagner, 2018). Such an approach naturally encourages FL teachers to involve learners in the analysis of “significant issues in their own and other countries,” issues with which they may “become directly engaged” (Byram & Wagner, 2018, p. 146). Though the authors of the two teaching practices presented in this subsection do not make reference to Byram’s later work, they clearly reveal the goal of promoting ICC through a focus on important, actionable issues. In both cases, the analysis of deep culture issues would seem to lead learners to look beyond the superficial presentation of culture commonly found in FL materials (see Pulverness & Tomlinson, 2013).

#### 4. Conclusion

The prevalence of social media and the prevalence of international travel make the teaching of ICC necessary for all university students—regardless of whether or not they actually travel abroad. Due to the widespread nature of FL study in tertiary institutions, whether as a requirement or as a course for personal growth, it is reasonable that the FL course would be saddled with the task of including ICC even in situations in which no direct contact with representatives of other cultures is feasible. In response to this task, the present paper has sought to provide evidence of tried and tested FL teaching practices that promote the acquisition of the various *savoirs* and ultimately to the culminating *savoir*; *critical cultural awareness*. By focusing specifically on practices which do not require direct contact with representatives of other cultures, it has sought to move the inclusion of ICC in FL teaching from a theoretical level to the level of practical application, with the latter being that which is of greater concern to daily FL practitioners such as the author of the present paper. Granted, the practices discussed here do not comprise an exhaustive list, yet they lend themselves to diverse teaching styles and to diverse teaching environments. All FL instructors are not inclined toward the use of video games in class; all FL instructors are not inclined toward the inclusion of literature in class; institutions vary in the availability of resources. Ellis (2010) notes the following: “Teachers, of course, cannot wait until researchers have solved all their problems...” (p. 37). In acknowledging the validity of Ellis’ claim, this paper has sought to provide a practical menu suitable for a hugely diverse range of FL instructors teaching in a hugely diverse range of settings—all saddled with the task of including ICC in language courses.

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*John Harper*

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