

# Intercultural communicative competence [1]

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## Introduction

Why are you teaching English? There are lots of 'right' answers to this question, but many teachers answer that they are teaching English for the purpose of communication with people of other cultures. This is commendable. But in order to communicate with other people, is it enough just to master English grammar, vocabulary and colloquial phrases? The latest research says 'no'. In this series of three articles, other competences necessary for intercultural competence will be described and the practicalities of including these competences in foreign language education in Japan will be discussed.

## Recent research

Throughout Europe, recent research in foreign language education has focused on intercultural aspects. The concept of communicative competence has been transformed into the concept of 'intercultural communicative competence' (ICC). This concept is being incorporated into the work of the Council of Europe (a transnational body which provides education policy guidelines for member states), and is perhaps most clearly described in English in a book entitled *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*, which was written by an advisor to the Council of Europe committee on foreign language education, Mike Byram (1997).

Basically, ICC requires that students acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and critical cultural awareness necessary to communicate intercultural. In this article, the first two elements, knowledge and skills, will be briefly introduced:

## Knowledge

There are two types of knowledge required for ICC. The first is knowledge about social groups and cultures in one's own country and in the countries of one's interlocutors. In a case like Japan where the foreign language is English, this means that students need to acquire a broad knowledge of many different countries and cultures, since English is an international language used all over the world.

Not all this knowledge needs to come from foreign language classes, of course. Such knowledge is also gained from social studies classes, the media, friends and family and so on. However, material treated in foreign language classes should help to develop this knowledge, and students should be encouraged to relate this knowledge to knowledge of their own culture.

The second type of knowledge is knowledge of the processes of interaction at societal and individual levels. This knowledge is essential for ICC; if students speak perfect grammatically correct English but have no knowledge of the processes of interaction, then communication will be a failure.

## Skills

Byram divides skills into two categories. The first is the "ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own" (Byram 1997: 52). The second is the "ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (ibid). Both sets of skills obviously require the development of language competence. In addition, though, skills of analysis and interpretation are necessary, as are skills of relating between different cultures, and the ability to put all this knowledge and skill into practice in real situations.

## Conclusion

In the next article, the other two competences, attitudes and critical cultural awareness, will be discussed. In the third article, implications of ICC for Japanese foreign language education will be examined. In the meantime, I hope that this brief article provides some 'food for thought' on intercultural communicative competence.

## References

Byram, M. (1997) *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters