



Framing Intercultural Reflection in the Language Classroom

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Intercultural (communicative) competence (ICC), defined as the ability to communicate and behave appropriately and effectively across cultural contexts (Deardorff, 2006), is widely recognized as an essential component of language learning. However, because ICC resists standardized, objective measurement (Deardorff, 2011, 2021; Byram, 1997), educational institutions have historically struggled to incorporate it meaningfully into instructional programs (2015, 2023). This paper demonstrates how ICC can nevertheless be incorporated into curricula in a structured and transparent way through the use of SMART—specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound—learning objectives, helping to make intercultural engagement visible without reducing it to simplistic metrics. To illustrate this approach, we draw on a classroom implementation of the cross-cultural simulation game BARNGA, in which learners experience and analyze the consequences of differing unspoken rules. By aligning the activity with SMART objectives, we show how instructors can help students engage in key ICC processes, such as articulating underlying assumptions and practicing perspective-taking, in and through the target language. This structured approach offers a clear, pedagogically grounded way to embed ICC into language learning while meeting curricular demands for clarity and accountability.

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INTRODUCTION

Intercultural (communicative) competence (ICC), conceptualized by Deardorff (2006) as a combination of internal shifts in perspective and the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively across cultures, develops through context-dependent experiences that shape attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Because of this complexity, ICC remains notoriously difficult to assess through standardized, objective measures (Deardorff, 2011, 2021; Byram, 1997). Yet in an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to navigate cultural difference is more essential than ever—particularly for language learners. This tension poses a challenge for institutions like the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), which prioritize cultural learning while also depending on objective, measurable outcomes to ensure grading consistency and accountability. How can such institutions meaningfully incorporate ICC activities into their curricula if the learning they foster cannot be reliably measured?

One practical solution is to shift the focus from *assessing* ICC to *documenting and supporting student engagement* with foundational ICC concepts, such as perspective-taking, flexibility, and awareness of unspoken assumptions (Dervin, 2014; Deardorff, 2006). Indeed, this paper demonstrates how ICC can be effectively embedded into language curricula through the use of SMART—specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound—learning objectives. Rather than serving as assessments, SMART objectives function as a pedagogical tool that transforms intercultural engagement into observable classroom practices, helping instructors guide reflection and learners recognize their own growth. To illustrate this approach, we first review key frameworks of ICC, then show how SMART objectives can be applied to intercultural learning, and finally present a classroom implementation of the simulation game BARNGA. Together, these elements highlight how ICC can be integrated into curricula in a structured and transparent way, even when direct measurement remains challenging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have developed several influential frameworks to conceptualize ICC. As mentioned above, Deardorff (2006, 2021, 2023) emphasizes that ICC develops through a dynamic process, beginning with *attitudes* such as respect, openness, curiosity, and tolerance for ambiguity. These attitudes shape the learner’s ability to acquire *knowledge* (including cultural self-awareness, sociolinguistic awareness, and deep understanding of cultures) and to practice *skills* such as listening, observing, interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, and relating. From this foundation, learners may achieve *internal outcomes*—flexibility, empathy, and shifts in perspective—that in turn enable *external outcomes* such as behaving and communicating appropriately across cultural contexts. Deardorff underscores that ICC is never “finished”; it is an iterative process of continuous growth.

Byram (1997, 2008) offers a complementary framework that identifies five overlapping areas of competence, the *savoirs*. These include the *attitudes (savoir être)* of curiosity, openness, and readiness to suspend assumptions about self and other; *knowledge (savoirs)* of social groups,



practices, and interactional processes; *skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre)*, such as explaining and contextualizing cultural phenomena; *skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire)* that allow one to acquire new cultural knowledge in real-time interactions; and *critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager)*, or the ability to evaluate different perspectives and practices on the basis of explicit criteria. Importantly, Byram stresses that evidence of intercultural communicative competence is difficult to isolate in learner interactions, as it often cuts across multiple *savoirs*. This has led to greater emphasis on reflective practice and subjectively graded, performance-based assessment, where learners demonstrate intercultural engagement through application, analysis, and self-awareness (Byram et al., 2017).

Similarly, Fosher and Mackenzie (2023), in the *Culture General Guidebook: Globally Applicable Concepts and Skills for Military Professionals*, argue that culture general education—that is, education centered on transferable intercultural concepts and analytic skills rather than country-specific facts—should move beyond static cultural information toward frameworks that can be applied across operational contexts (pp. 5–12). Their guide includes discussion of teaching tools and classroom activities designed to foster perspective-taking, critical inquiry, and reflection—processes closely aligned with broader ICC frameworks. This emphasis on developing culture general capability within military education aligns with broader analyses of U.S. military cross-cultural training programs over the past two decades (see Abbe, 2021).

Taken together, these frameworks—from foundational ICC models to recent military scholarship on culture general competence—highlight both the richness and the elusiveness of intercultural development. They show that intercultural growth involves well-defined attitudes, knowledge, and skills, but also reveal why standardized testing struggles to capture it: ICC is developmental, context-dependent, and expressed indirectly through reflection and interaction. This creates an opening for pedagogical approaches that do not attempt to measure ICC reductively, but instead focus on documenting and supporting student engagement with ICC processes.

Simulation-based tasks, such as BARNGA, provide a powerful context for this kind of engagement. By intentionally creating moments of confusion, negotiation, and perspective-shifting, BARNGA elicits the very dispositions and skills described by Deardorff and Byram—curiosity, openness, interpreting, relating, and critical awareness—in an experiential, language-rich environment. Our paper builds on this insight by showing how SMART learning objectives can be used to structure and track student engagement with these intercultural processes, making them more visible for both learners and instructors while maintaining the complexity and authenticity of ICC.

SMART Learning Objectives

SMART learning objectives offer a structured and transparent way to guide instruction and encourage purposeful reflection. While they are not designed as formal assessments of ICC, they serve as a valuable pedagogical tool by making student thinking visible and providing a framework for facilitating, observing, and discussing intercultural learning in the classroom.

The SMART framework originated in the field of management, when Doran (1981) proposed it as a practical method for setting goals that were clear, actionable, and attainable. Since then, the



concept has been widely adopted across disciplines, including education, where it has proven useful in designing precise learning objectives that link instructional activities to observable outcomes. In language education, SMART objectives help educators articulate expectations in ways that are both transparent to learners and aligned with curricular goals.

When applied to intercultural learning, SMART objectives enable instructors to foreground specific aspects of ICC—such as perspective-taking or recognition of unspoken assumptions—in ways that can be meaningfully practiced and reflected upon within classroom activities. In this sense, they help to transform complex and often abstract dimensions of intercultural communicative competence into concrete opportunities for engagement, providing not only clarity for teachers but also scaffolding for students.

A CLASSROOM ACTIVITY BUILT AROUND BARNGA

To illustrate this approach, we draw on a classroom activity centered on BARNGA, a cross-cultural simulation game created by Sivasailam Thiagarajan (for more information, see [here](#)). This game provides a powerful context for learners to confront and reflect on hidden normative assumptions. In BARNGA, small groups of learners learn to play a simple card game in silence, unaware that each group has been taught slightly different rules. As learners rotate tables and begin playing with new group members, confusion and mild conflict arise. The disorienting experience mirrors real-world intercultural encounters, where unspoken assumptions and differing norms often produce tension and misunderstanding.

In our implementation, the activity unfolds in three stages, spanning two fifty-minute instructional periods:

1. **Silent gameplay** under conflicting rule sets (35 minutes);
2. A **structured written reflection in the target language** immediately following the game, in which learners describe their reactions and begin to analyze what led to their confusion (20 minutes);
3. A **guided oral discussion in the target language**, where students explore themes such as responding to rule violations, recognizing assumptions, and understanding how communication may break down when shared norms are lacking (45 minutes).

Students use the target language not only to recount and reflect on their experience, but also to engage with key intercultural themes such as navigating misunderstanding, responding to difference, and interpreting others' behavior—all while using communicative functions appropriate to their proficiency level. These may include describing cause and effect, making comparisons, listing reasons for something, expressing uncertainty, or hypothesizing about others' intentions. To support this work, the activity should be introduced to the students at the culmination of a unit where relevant communicative functions (e.g., comparing and contrasting) and accompanying linguistic structures (“is different from”, “the same as yours/mine”) have been taught and practiced. It is important to remember that even the most basic communicative



functions can support a conceptually rich engagement with ideas at the heart of ICC—for instance, articulating different perspectives and exploring one’s own assumptions—without the necessary use of complex linguistic structures. Lower-proficiency students may say, for example, “I was confused because the rules were different,” “My rules were not the same,” or “Maybe I was wrong.” Mid-proficiency students might say, “I thought they made a mistake, but actually, their rules were different,” or “It seemed like they broke the rules on purpose.” Higher-proficiency students might say, “I assumed we all had the same understanding of the rules, which caused some tension when we started playing together,” or “This experience reminded me how easily misunderstandings can arise when assumptions aren’t shared.” At all levels, students are using the target language to analyze a shared experience from different perspectives—a core goal of intercultural communication.

To guide this instructional sequence, we use SMART objectives, grounded in Deardorff’s (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence:

- *After completing the simulation, students will be able to describe in writing one assumption they made during the game that was not shared by others (Skills: interpreting and relating; Attitudes: openness).*
- *At the end of the class period, students will be able to explain in simple spoken language how the confusion in the game reflects real-world intercultural challenges (Knowledge: of cultural self-awareness and communication styles).*

Finally, to evaluate how well students are engaging with intercultural concepts during the activity, teachers may use a simple rubric (Figure 1). The rubric is not intended to measure ICC as a fixed trait but rather to provide instructors with observable indicators of growth in areas such as perspective-taking, recognition of assumptions, use of specific examples, and application of target-language functions.



Figure 1
Rubric for Tracking Student Reflections on BARNGA

Criteria	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Perspective-taking	Shows little awareness of others' perspectives; responses are self-focused	Acknowledges others' perspectives but without detail	Identifies and contrasts perspectives with some explanation	Consistently interprets situations from multiple perspectives with some nuanced analysis
Recognition of assumptions	Does not identify assumptions or confuses them with rules	Identifies at least one assumption but without linking to outcomes	Clearly identifies unspoken assumptions and connects them to misunderstandings	Insightfully analyzes how assumptions shape interactions and outcomes
Use of examples	Provides vague or general statements (e.g., 'It was confusing')	Gives one simple example with limited explanation	Provides specific examples that clarify sources of confusion or conflict	Uses multiple, detailed examples to illustrate points and deepen analysis
Language functions	Limited use of target language; relies on single words or memorized phrases	Uses simple structures (e.g., 'I was confused,' 'The rules were different')	Employs a range of functions such as cause-effect, comparison, or hypothesis	Uses varied and complex functions fluently to analyze and reflect (e.g., hypothesizing, contrasting perspectives)

When filling out this rubric, it is important that linguistic competence and ICC not be conflated. For example, even while their language remains simple, learners at lower proficiency levels can still demonstrate advanced intercultural awareness, as shown in the sample student responses discussed previously (“my rules were not the same”).

CONCLUSION

By embedding SMART objectives into a carefully structured, language- and reflection- rich activity, BARNGA becomes more than a classroom game: it functions as a vehicle for both communicative practice and intercultural inquiry, creating conditions for key ICC concepts—such as perspective-taking, recognition of assumptions, and flexibility in face of unexpected differences—to surface in authentic classroom interactions. This activity also demonstrates that intercultural learning does not need to be separated from linguistic development. The same classroom task can simultaneously support communicative growth and intercultural insight. For institutions like DLIFLC, this offers a concrete model for embedding ICC as a developmental process alongside existing curricular goals without sacrificing clarity or accountability, with SMART objectives providing a practical bridge between the complexities of intercultural growth and the accountability requirements of outcomes-based education.



Authors

Anjel Tozcu has a Ph.D. in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching from the University of Arizona. Her research interests include CALL, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, intercultural competence, and bilingualism. She has presented at national and international conferences. Prior to retiring from DLIFLC in 2025, Dr. Tozcu served in many roles across the Institute.

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