The Evolution of Intercultural Communicative Competence: Conceptualisations, Critiques and Consequences for 21st Century Classroom Practice

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Abstract

This article discusses intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as a present-day theoretical and practical concern. Byram's (1997) model of ICC serves as a point of departure for the discussion since this is a theoretical construct which has had considerable impact on curriculum development and teaching materials in a number of countries over the past two decades. However, several theoretical criticisms have been directed at the model in recent years, and Byram's own theoretical stance has evolved since the model was introduced. The aim of the article is to provide insight into how these recent perspectives lay the foundation for a state-of-the-art understanding of ICC. First, the article provides an overview of key issues which have been raised in critiques of Byram's model. It considers the merits of such evaluations and shows how some of this criticism has been met by Byram's later work. Second, the article deliberates how reconceptualisations and alternative voices in the academic discourse have illuminated aspects of intercultural communication on which Byram's model is unclear. In connection with this discussion of theoretical matters, some practical implications for teaching and learning are considered. The article concludes by pointing to the need for a new theoretical model which is suited to serve as a comprehensive guideline for intercultural teaching and learning in the 21st century classroom.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, critiques, reconceptualisations, pedagogical implications, language education

Introduction

An important aim of intercultural education research is to provide a foundation for innovative and adequate pedagogical approaches in the classroom. This necessitates a critical evaluation of the theoretical constructs which inform our research and serve as an orienting basis for teaching and learning. In this context of intercultural education, Byram's highly influential model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (1997) has become an object of increased scrutiny over the course of the past decade. This model has been particularly prominent within the field of foreign language

(FL) education, having had an impact on curricular design and teaching materials in a number of countries. An important reason for this is that it was developed in relation to the Council of Europe's (CoE) project to construct the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (2001) in the late 1990s. Moreover, the model of ICC was one of the existing competence schemes providing a basis for the development of the conceptual model which underpins the recent *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC) (2018) (cf. CoE, 2016). While the impact of Byram's model has been most significant in Europe, it can also be traced in other parts of the world, first and foremost in South and East Asia, Australia, and the U.S.A. (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2015).

Despite such impact, a number of theoretical criticisms have been directed at the model of ICC in recent years. Such critiques focus on diverse aspects of intercultural communication and have a basis in different theoretical traditions. Furthermore, Byram's own theoretical stance and application of the model have evolved. Consequently, critiques of this model must be considered in the context of other critical voices as well as Byram's more recent output if one is to gain a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of ICC as a present-day theoretical and practical concern. On that premise, the present article[i] provides an overview of the key issues which have been raised in critiques of Byram's model. It considers the merits of such evaluations and provides insight into how some of this criticism has been met by Byram's later work. Moreover, the article deliberates how reconceptualisations and alternative research perspectives have illuminated aspects of intercultural communication which are not clearly reflected in Byram's model. Parallel to this discussion of theoretical matters, some practical implications for teaching and learning are considered. Accordingly, the article addresses the following questions: How do critiques and reconceptualisations of Byram's model lay the foundation for a state-of-the-art understanding of ICC, and what consequences does this have for pedagogical approaches in the 21st century language classroom?

Byram's model of ICC

When the concept of ICC was introduced by Byram in 1997, it challenged the notion of communicative competence (CC), which was prevalent in FL education at the time. Capturing the factors involved in intercultural communication, ICC included an aspect of CC which Byram found lacking in previous theoretical conceptions concerned with the ability to use language appropriately according to context and purpose (e.g., Canale & Swain, 1980; Halliday, 1975; Hymes, 1972; van Ek, 1986). His argument was that such efforts, through their emphasis on the ideal native speaker, had created a target which was impossible for the FL learner to achieve. Furthermore, they "ignor[ed] the significance of the social identities and cultural competence of the learner in any intercultural interaction" (Byram, 1997, p. 8). Accordingly, Byram set out to develop a new conceptual model that would capture the qualities of a competent *intercultural speaker*. He described these qualities as a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and disposition to act:

> *Savoir:* knowledge of self and other; of interaction; individual and societal.
> *Savoir être:* attitudes; relativizing self, valuing other.
> *Savoir comprendre:* skills of interpreting and relating
> *Savoir apprendre/faire:* skills of discovering and/or interacting.
> *Savoir s'engager:* political education, critical cultural awareness (adapted from Byram, 1997, p. 34) [ii].

The knowledge component (*savoir*) of Byram's (1997) model of ICC concerns the intercultural speaker's insight into "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" (p. 51). Skills

of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) comprise the ability to "interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it, and relate it to documents from one's own" (p. 52). Skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*) involve 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" (p. 52). Attitudes (*savoir être*) pertain to "curiosity and openness" as well as a "readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (p. 50). The final component, education (*savoir s'engager*), concerns the ability to "evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (p. 53). In sum, Byram argues, these interlinked competences may not only help the intercultural speaker to achieve effective exchange of information but also to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships based on mutual respect and understanding (pp. 32–33).

During the past decade, the notion of *savoir s'engager* has been further developed in the context of Byram's work on intercultural citizenship education (ICE) (see e.g., Byram, 2008, 2012; Byram, Golubeva, Han & Wagner, 2017). ICE emphasises values like democratic culture, the rule of law and human rights ideals as a defense against racism, extremism, and intolerance in society. In this way, Byram's work on intercultural citizenship highlights the political dimension of intercultural education and expands upon the civic action aspect of his model.

Apart from this accentuation of *savoir s'engager*, the model itself has remained more or less unchanged since it was introduced over twenty years ago, and it continues to influence both research and pedagogical practice to this day. In addition to being regularly featured in literature reviews (e.g., Perry & Southwell, 2011; Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009; Wilberschied, 2015), the model has been used as the theoretical basis for numerous empirical studies on classroom practice and teaching materials (e.g., Ayon, 2016; Benavides, 2019; Burwitz-Meltzer, 2003; Forsman, 2006; Hoff, 2013). Scholars have also relied on Byram's model and the concept of the intercultural speaker as a starting point for new conceptualisations (e.g., Helm & Guth, 2010; Hoff, 2016; Porto, 2013; Ros i Solé, 2013). Such reconceptualisations are, first and foremost, a testament to the prevailing impact of Byram's ideas. However, they also bring to light some limitations of the original model, as will be elaborated upon in the subsequent section.

Issues of critique and alternative perspectives

Critiques of Byram's model have mainly revolved around the claims that it represents an instrumental, performance-based approach to intercultural teaching and learning and that it does not adequately encompass the complexities which govern 21st century intercultural communication (e.g., Dervin, 2010, 2016; Hoff, 2014; Matsuo, 2012, 2016; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018b; Ros i Solé, 2013). While these may seem like two separate issues, they are interlinked in the sense that they reflect an understanding of ICC which emphasises the ability to explore multiple, changing and conflicting facets of interculturality. In this regard, alternative voices in the academic discourse have shed light on a number of relevant issues, such as

- why the concepts of culture and identity must be problematised
- why conflictual dimensions of intercultural encounters must be captured in a more nuanced manner
- why more varied communication contexts must be taken into account
- why discourses on interculturality must be "de-centred"
- why assessing ICC is problematic.

With different aspects of Byram's model as a point of departure for the discussion, the following sub-sections will draw on recent theoretical perspectives in intercultural education research to provide insight into these matters, in addition to considering how this research can inform pedagogical approaches which promote learners' ability to navigate the challenges of intercultural communication in our contemporary world.

The need to problematise the concepts of "culture" and "identity"

One consequence of 21st century societal developments is that our experiences of culture and identity have become increasingly pluralised and complicated (Asararatnam, 2007; Kramsch, 2011; Wahyudi, 2016). In this connection, it has been claimed that Byram's model is tied to a rather static and simplified notion of national culture, thereby misrepresenting contemporary patterns of life and restricting the roles multilingual and multicultural individuals are allowed to adopt in the language learning experience.

This critique stems from the tendency in Byram (1997) to associate culture with the word "country" in the description of *saviors* and objectives. The "culture" of a particular nation tends to be referred to in the singular, and associated with a particular "perspective," also in the singular. Critical scholars have argued that this engenders the interpretation that culture within a nation is coherent, homogeneous, and a representation of fixed values and beliefs (Dervin, 2016). This assumption is associated with an essentialist view of culture, which entails seeing people as defined and constrained by the nation in which they live (Benhabib, 2002; Holliday, 2011). This can be contrasted with a non-essentialist perspective which regards culture as complex, dynamic, and boundless. Similarly, identity is seen as unstable and co-constructed: How one identifies oneself and how one is identified by others varies according to situation and context (Brubaker & Cooper, 2001; van Maele & Messelink, 2019). According to this view, recognising the complexity of individuals is crucial (Holliday, 2011). A practical consequence of the non-essentialist approach is thus that the intricate interplay between various identity markers beyond nationality (e.g., gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, race, social class, education, and political and professional affiliation) must be taken into account as a basis for understanding in intercultural encounters (Illman & Nynäs, 2017; Risager, 2018).

Whilst acknowledging that the widespread references to culture in the singular form in the description of ICC model components and objectives might be seen as downplaying diversity and complexity, it should be noted that Byram (1997) does incorporate references to diversity within national cultures, including the experiences of minority groups within the dominant, national culture (e.g., *savoir être*, p. 58). The model, thus, incorporates some recognition of the fact that present-day societies are increasingly pluralistic and multicultural. In this context, regional variations and a range of social distinctions are specifically mentioned as relevant issues for consideration (*savoir*, pp. 59–60). In other words, different sub-cultures within the nation are recognised, but the notion that there can be internal heterogeneity within such groups (Benhabib, 2002; CoE, 2018; Phillips, 2007) is not as apparent. Similarly, while references to social and regional identities (*savoir*; Byram, 1997, p. 60) to some degree contradict the interpretation that the model represents cultural identity as a singular phenomenon, the complex intersectionality of individuals' identities is not mentioned as a relevant issue of concern.

Another aspect which cannot be said to be clearly reflected in Byram's model is the non-essentialist view that culture is dynamic and fluid, in the sense that it can change, intermingle, and cut across national frontiers (Holliday, 2011; Risager, 2006, 2007). Matsuo (2012) claims that the equation of culture with nation is both "theoretically insufficient" and "out of tune and step with the zeitgeist," because it does not encompass "new connections, new patterns of life" which have emerged in "the era of rapidly advancing globalization" (p. 4). Some have gone so far as to claim that the widespread

migration and mobility in today's world have made it challenging for anyone to pinpoint their cultural identity/affiliation (e.g., Asaratnam, 2007). However, it should also be pointed out that there are still many people in the world who do not have the benefit of mobility. Accordingly, cultural identity is not as complex for them as for those individuals who are highly mobile and thereby have the luxury of enjoying a wide variety of cultural and identity resources (e.g., Western elites). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge how transnational flows of cultures and languages (Risager, 2006, 2007) affect how individuals perceive themselves. In this context, Ros i Solé (2013) proposes that the ideal of the intercultural speaker be replaced by a cosmopolitan speaker who "seeks to create a new cultural identity for the individual who 'dwells' in a variety of languages and cultures" (p. 336). Moreover, the consequence of transcultural flows of languages and cultures is not only that more multifaceted learner identities must be recognised, but also that conceptualisations of ICC must provide a basis for a dynamic and realistic understanding of the language-culture nexus (see Section 3.3 for a further deliberation of this matter).

As we have seen, the representation of culture and identity in Byram's model suffers from certain inconsistencies and simplifications. Byram himself seems to acknowledge this, as the focus on national culture and singular identity is significantly toned down in later publications, and he explicitly warns against reductionist interpretations (Byram et al., 2017; Byram & Wagner 2018; Porto, Houghton & Byram, 2017). However, scholars are not unanimous regarding *how* to navigate increasingly complex perceptions of these concepts. For example, it has been proposed that researchers and practitioners stop "thinking in terms of national/ethnic boundaries or even in terms of cultural taxonomies" (Arasaratnam, 2007, p. 71). While this would serve to counter differentialist bias (i.e., the assumption that people from different cultures are inherently different, cf. Dervin, 2010, 2016) and stereotypical views, it might simultaneously cause an indifference to discourses of discrimination, power relations, and the ways in which the contextual realities of different social worlds influence interaction between individuals (Manathunga, 2017; Zotzmann, 2017). Some scholars therefore find that the combination of essentialist and non-essentialist perspectives provides a broader basis for intercultural understanding (Greek, 2008; van Maele & Messelink, 2019). From a pedagogical standpoint, it may also be valuable, as Byram and Wagner (2018) suggest, to simplify before adding complexity (p. 102). Moreover, Dervin (2016) concedes that it may be impossible to escape essentialism completely, despite the best of intentions. He suggests that it is important to recognise that one cannot access [interculturality's] complexity but one can navigate, like Sisyphus rolling his boulder up a hill, between the 'simple' and the 'complex'" (p. 81). This entails a willingness to "tolerate uncertainty and to deal with it constructively" (CoE, 2018, p. 45). In other words, while problematising culture and identity involves exploring multiple, even contradictory, facets of these concepts, the ability to recognise one's own limitations in this endeavour may be of equal importance.

Let us consider a specific example which illustrates how such deliberations can take place in the classroom. Learners may explore how notions of culture and identity play a role in informing responses to The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Supporters of the movement have been met by the counterargument that "all lives matter," which is indeed valid from a human rights and equality perspective. As this argument does not single out the rights of a specific group at the expense of others, it avoids an "us" vs "them" dichotomy and thereby brings to light universal aspects of the human condition. From a different perspective, it could also be argued that this claim ignores the oppression that members of the black population have endured and continue to suffer, thus serving to uphold white hegemony, either as a deliberate strategy or due to a lack of understanding of historical and current power structures in society. Consequently, an awareness of various group identities as well as the way in which oppressive forces contribute to shaping such identities is required. However, while nationality, ethnicity and skin colour may have an impact on how people react to the movement, they are not definitive factors, and neither are other markers of identity. Indeed, the rationale behind people's

responses is varied and may be highly personal, illustrating the fact that "everybody is diverse regardless of their origins, skin colour, social background and so on" (Dervin, 2016, p. 80). Accordingly, classroom work on the BLM movement can only promote a nuanced understanding of how notions of culture and identity affect people's perspectives if a range of different responses are taken into account, viable reasons for these varying responses are contemplated, and possible limitations of one's own ability to establish an absolute "truth" are recognised. Relevant questions to consider in this regard would for instance be: To what degree are the classroom participants' responses similar or different? What might be the explanation for such similarities or differences? How might their reactions differ from an American individual in general, and an African American in particular?[iii] Would it even be possible to make assumptions about other people's responses? What speaks for and against this possibility? Through a multifaceted consideration of such questions, learners can be helped to navigate simple and complex aspects of culture and identity.

The need to recognise conflictual dimensions of intercultural communication

The next issue of contention concerns how to deal with notions of tension in intercultural communication. This is a particularly pressing issue due to the fact that the manifold and unpredictable nature of 21st century interactions make intercultural encounters more prone to conflict (Stadler, 2020). Furthermore, we have seen an increased level of political polarisation as well as extremism and xenophobia in society in recent years (CoE, 2010, 2016). Byram's model of ICC does to some extent acknowledge conflict as a natural part of intercultural encounters. This is particularly evident in *savoir s'engager*, which involves the intercultural speaker's critical evaluation of both his own and others' perspectives (see Byram, 1997, pp. 63–64, 101). Nevertheless, as noted in Hoff (2014), the recurrent emphasis on the intercultural speaker's mediating role in all components of the model suggests that his ultimate aim is to establish a "harmonious fusion of opposing worldviews" (p. 511) by negotiating agreement and mutual understanding (also see Ferri, 2016). However, scholars have in recent years questioned whether harmony and agreement represent a realistic, or even constructive, goal in intercultural communication.

This scepticism can partly be linked to the fragmentation and pluralism which characterise many of today's societies. Iversen (2014) argues that such diversity makes it unreasonable to define a platform of shared values on which everyone can agree, and he has coined the term "community of disagreement" (my translation of the original Norwegian term *uenighetsfellesskap*) as a basis for a new way of thinking about interaction and society. Indeed, it can be valuable to acknowledge that conflict and disagreement may facilitate "meaningful communicative situations in which the participants are deeply engaged, thus contributing to a higher level of honesty and involvement" (Hoff, 2014, p. 514) in intercultural exchanges as well as in learning contexts. In this connection it is worth noting that the acceptance of diversity and respect for differences are central objectives of democratic citizenship and human rights education, as specified in the competence model which provides a foundation for the RFCDC (CoE, 2018, Vol. I, p. 38). Along the same lines, this framework emphasises the tolerance of ambiguity, which is described as comprising, among other aspects, "acknowledgement that there can be multiple perspectives on and interpretations of any given situation or issue" (p. 45).

From a pedagogical perspective, this involves striving towards establishing communities of disagreement in the classroom and regarding notions of conflict and dissent as potentially beneficial conditions for intercultural learning processes rather than as barriers to communication (cf. Hoff, 2014). The promotion of *dialogue* is essential in such regard, as this mode of classroom interaction recruits the different subjectivities of the learners and lays the groundwork for the formation of personal values and respect for different perspectives and opinions (Thyberg, 2012; Tornberg, 2004). This is not to say that the classroom be understood as a "free-for-all" zone or that all viewpoints be uncritically accepted,

as this might serve to reinforce rather than counter discriminatory and prejudiced views. It does mean, however, that classroom participants must risk being exposed to opinions that they perceive as deeply unreasonable and to which "a natural reaction may be to respond with judgement, distress or even censorship" (Hoff, 2018, p. 80). If sensitive intercultural issues are to be dealt with in a constructive and nuanced manner in educational settings, they must be brought out in the open rather than being glossed over. Empirical studies indicate that learners rely on a wide spectrum of strategies for resolving the instabilities which arise due to conflict in classroom discussions (Johannessen, 2018; Thyberg, 2012). Nevertheless, for this type of dialogue to become a "paradoxical, irreducible confrontation that may change one in the process," (Kramsch, 1993, p. 231) it is essential to ensure that problematic statements are countered, omissions are addressed, and interesting observations are elaborated upon (Hoff, 2017). Accordingly, the teacher's attentiveness both to what is said as well as what is *not* said by the classroom participants is crucial.

Indeed, conflict is not necessarily an explicit aspect of intercultural communication – or classroom discourse – in the sense that it is expressed through a difference of opinions; it may also be of a more elusive character. In order to explore such implicit tensions, we must first recognise communication as co-constructed and dynamic (Borghetti, 2017; Ferri, 2016; Illman & Nynäs, 2017). A consequence of this bilaterality is that successful communication can never be guaranteed despite the intercultural speaker's best efforts. Intriguingly, while Byram (1997) acknowledges the power native speakers may exercise over foreign speakers (p. 21), the model itself reflects the notion that the competent intercultural speaker is able to determine the outcome of communication by applying a set of communicative tools and strategies (Ferri, 2016). Such a focus on establishing efficient communication may ignore the wide range of conditions which can affect the eventual "success" of the interaction (Rathje, 2007). Accordingly, the very premise of the model, i.e., the intercultural speaker's willingness to adjust own behaviour and attitudes, leads to an imbalance of power in the encounter due to the fact that the interlocutor may not be similarly inclined (Hoff, 2018). Such imbalance cannot necessarily be rectified by the intercultural speaker's knowledge of both cultures, as suggested by Byram (1997, p. 21). Alternatively, the intercultural speaker may be so intent on establishing successful communication that he, in an effort to please the other, steers clear of conflict by not being entirely truthful. In other words, both the intercultural speaker and his interlocutor are vulnerable to manipulative behaviour (see Rathje, 2007, pp. 256–257). This also means that seemingly harmonious communication may mask implicit notions of conflict such as half-truths or internal confusion, indecisiveness, or a lack of motivation (Dervin, 2016). Hence, neither the intercultural speaker's words nor those of his interlocutor can be taken at face value.

Kramsch (2011) provides further insight into this matter. She argues that the traditional understanding of ICC as the ability to mediate between different cultural points of view, does not adequately reflect the fact that "the self that is engaged in intercultural communication is a symbolic self that is constituted by symbolic systems like language as well as by systems of thought and their symbolic power" (p. 354). Kramsch proposes that the development of "symbolic competence" be regarded as an integral aspect of intercultural teaching and learning. She points out that learners need the ability to "interpret what is meant by what is said, to understand how people use symbolic systems to construct new meanings, and to imagine how the other languages they know might influence the way they think, speak and write" (Kramsch, 2012). Thus, engaging in intercultural dialogue or dealing with intercultural matters in a pedagogical context requires an awareness of discourse as symbolic representation ("what words say and what they reveal about the mind"), symbolic action ("what words can do and what they reveal about intentions"), and symbolic power ("what words index and what they reveal about intentions") (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2015, slide #13). Such awareness relies on an exploration of how we reconstruct reality by representing, changing, and doing things with words.

In practical terms, this means that learners must be prompted to look beyond the surface of utterances. This is, for example, relevant when discussing harmful language use. The RFCDC (CoE, 2018) proposes that behaving appropriately in intercultural situations may involve taking a principled stance against hate speech directed at certain cultural and social groups. However, in this context it may not only be relevant to develop "knowledge of human rights as well as linguistic and communicative skills" (p. 34) to be able to formulate an effective response, as suggested by the CoE. Equally important is the learners' consideration of how words may consciously or unwittingly reproduce a viewpoint or an attitude, as well as how the decision to refrain from using certain words or using them in a new context may also say something about the interlocutor's intentions. For instance, the "N-word" is a highly sensitive and controversial term which carries connotations of racism and oppression, but which can also frequently be heard in rap songs by black hip hop artists. If learners are to gain an understanding of the mechanisms at play here, symbolic dimensions of the word must be examined. Learners may be encouraged to ponder such questions as: How does the meaning of the word shift according to context and who the word is used by and about? What makes it possible for people to use the word in such different ways? Who are allowed or not allowed to use the word, and why? What can this tell us about power dynamics between people? [iv] The deliberation of such matters may enhance learners' understanding of how the term embodies tensions between various discourses as well as present and past identities. Furthermore, it may raise their awareness of how language can be used as vehicle to exclude and include individuals from different groups as well as to manipulate notions of culture and identity, thereby challenging not only prior meanings but also power structures in society.

The need to take into account more varied communication contexts

When the concept of the intercultural speaker was introduced over two decades ago, it was associated with the ability to communicate effectively with native speakers of a given target language (Baker, 2011). While the development of such competence is recognised as a lifelong process in Byram (1997), the FL classroom and fieldwork in the form of organised visits abroad are highlighted as particularly suitable arenas for learning (pp. 65–69). Byram's model thus "presuppose[s] a physical type of mobility" (Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018b, p. 16) and its primary focus is on real-time, face to face interaction in the physical world. This has led scholars to address the need to consider how the intercultural dimension manifests itself in a wider range of communication contexts than those explicitly captured by Byram's model.

First of all, it is important to take into account the diversified speakership of many languages and the increasing use of languages as a *lingua franca* between individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As noted by Baker (2011), theoretical conceptions which focus on native speaker communities as the main points of reference are not adequate for describing communicative practices in which language is used as a *lingua franca* between people who do not have that language as their mother tongue. Such practices necessitate a reconsideration of the relationship between language and culture. Whereas the view that culture is a "feature of language itself" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 8) lay the foundation for culture to become an integrated aspect of language education three decades ago, Risager's (2006, 2007) seminal work has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of this interrelationship. She points out that language and culture are constantly disconnected and reconnected as languages and languacultures spread across cultural contexts and discourse communities. Consequently, internationalised *lingua franca* practices do not involve "our culture/their culture" dichotomies but take on new forms and meanings which are neither attributable to any one culture nor are they culturally neutral (Phipps & Guilherme, 2005).

Byram and Wagner (2018) admit that this has "major implications for teachers and the concept of intercultural competence" in the sense that "learners' own imported connotations and linguistic

practices do not need to be modified to those of a 'native speaker' in quite the same way as in the past" (pp. 143–144). In line with this shift in stance, Baker (2011) has introduced a model of intercultural awareness (ICA), the top level of which involves the speaker's ability to "mediate between different emergent culturally and contextually grounded communication modes and frames of reference" (p. 203) in global *lingua franca* contexts. In practice, this means that learners must be given the opportunity to rehearse such mediation by negotiating alternative interpretations of phenomena which may carry diverse and competing connotations. For example, the seemingly simple word "tea" might bring associations to different varieties of Asian tea culture or the British custom of afternoon tea, or it can be understood as an alternative term for 'supper' (associated with social background), as a hot or cold beverage, as an expression of hipster culture, etc. The collaborative deliberation of such diverse interpretations might even create new associations, thereby giving rise to the learners' understanding of the fluidity of cultural references in intercultural communication.

Second, the concept of *literacy* has provided a foundation for new conceptualisations of ICC which focus on communication contexts beyond the physical world. Whereas literacy was originally understood as the ability to decode and encode script, additional dimensions of agency, communication, and learning have gradually come to be associated with the concept (Ørevik, 2018). It has thereby been redefined as "the ability to identify, understand, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" (UNESCO, 2004, p. 13). In this connection, it should be noted that encounters with *text* are to some extent incorporated in Byram's model, for instance through the objective that the intercultural speaker be able to "interpret a document […] from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own" (*savoir comprendre*, Byram, 1997, p. 52). Furthermore, the intercultural speaker has recently been referred to as "someone who can 'read' texts of all kinds […] in a critical and comparative mode […]" (Porto et al., 2017). However, the model of ICC does not reflect the view that the reading of FL texts can be regarded as a form of intercultural communication in its own right, nor does it provide insight into what distinguishes processes of text interpretation from real-time communication. As noted in Hoff (2016), the written word invites the reader into a more deliberate and reflective style of communication and thereby provides unique opportunities for multifaceted scrutiny.

This makes it pertinent to shift focus away from the qualities of the intercultural speaker to those of the intercultural *reader*. Whereas the role of literature as a medium for intercultural explorations has been theorised since the 1990s (e.g., Bredella, 2006; Kramsch, 1993; MacDonald, Dasli & Ibrahim, 2009; Narancic-Kovac & Kaltenbacher, 2006), few attempts have been made to conceptualise the intercultural dimensions of "literary literacy"[v] (Lütge, 2012). Porto's (2013) Model of Intercultural Understanding, which has provided the foundation for a collaborative project with Byram (Porto & Byram, 2017), is notable because it is suited to illuminate the fluid and inconsistent nature of readers' cultural understanding in encounters with text. However, the components of this model do not clearly capture the role of literary analysis in this endeavour. The Model of the Intercultural Reader (MIR) (Hoff, 2016) is a recent theoretical construct which explicitly takes such matters into account by including the reader's consideration of the *effects* of different narrative styles and structures as well as of various cultural/social/historical subject positions. It thereby incorporates symbolic dimensions of the text interpretation process and draws attention to implicit notions of conflict (cf. Section 3.2) in the reader – text relationship. Moreover, the MIR opens up scope for more expansive intercultural explorations than those involving the perspectives of individual readers and the text. This model illustrates how the text interpretation process may operate at three interlinked levels of communication, comprising the intercultural reader's engagement with the multiple voices of the FL text (level 1), other readers (level 2), and other texts (level 3). In an educational context, level 2 can not only be involved by exploring the views of the different classroom participants but also by investigating other contemporary and prior readers' interpretations in the form of book reviews (to be found in newspapers,

magazines, podcasts, or similar) or alternative versions of the text (e.g., graphic novels and film adaptations). Furthermore, level 3 can be drawn into play by eliciting the learners' previous knowledge of similar texts (in terms of e.g., plot, theme, allusions or parody) across a range of different genres and media. Teachers may thus promote their understanding of how representations of culture are constantly manipulated, reframed and recontextualised. Furthermore, empirical research indicates that young readers of literature tend to recognise intertextual connections involving multimodal, digital texts (Hoff, 2017, 2019). Accordingly, such practices can potentially also contribute to bridging the gap between literature and "new" media in the language classroom (cf. Habegger-Conti, 2015).

Indeed, scholars have addressed the need to include other forms of cultural expression than script-based text in our perception of what intercultural communication is and can be (Chen, 2012). In this regard, another limitation of Byram's model has been identified: It is based on the affordances of the technology which was available in the 90s[vi] (Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018b). Since then, new technologies like the internet and social media have had a considerable impact on how communication can take place. First of all, Web 2.0 has facilitated distant connections which were previously unavailable (Thorne, 2010). Furthermore, cultural content is increasingly communicated through a combination of different semiotic modes (e.g., image, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving images and 3D objects) which make up integrated meaning-making ensembles (Kress, 2010; Skulstad, 2018). Accordingly, multimodality adds layers of meaning – and potential misunderstanding – to the intercultural encounter (Benavides, 2019). Moreover, Kramsch (2009) points out that our online self can differ from the one we employ in face-to-face interactions, which means that computer-mediated communication (CMC) not only involves grappling with "various symbolic forms, but also the degree of reality or hyperreality they represent" (p. 177). In other words, meaning-making is even more problematic in online contexts.

As a result of such developments, the concept of literacy has been expanded to comprise multiple skills related to the interpretation of different sign systems and media, and there is thus a need to regard the promotion of "multiliteracies" (The New London Group, 1996) as an integrated aspect of intercultural teaching and learning (Porto et al., 2017). Byram's model has recently been used in this context, for example, as a framework for a telecollaboration learning project at a Lebanese English-speaking university (Ayan, 2016) and as a tool to analyse multimodal teaching materials (Benavides, 2019). However, a number of scholars have found that the affordances and challenges of CMC necessitate new conceptualisations of ICC (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009; Thorne, 2010). One such effort has been made by Helm and Guth (2010), who have adapted Byram's model to an online language learning context, adding new literacy competences that can enable learners to take critical responsibility as active citizens in a globalised digital world. Furthermore, Orsini-Jones and Lee (2018a) discuss the challenges which the online blurring of written and oral language poses to students and propose that "cyberpragmatics" be regarded as an integrated component of ICC.

What the above-mentioned theorisations have in common is that they focus on competences related to distinct forms of intercultural communication, be it *lingua franca* interactions, engagement with literature, or various types of digital and/or multimodal communication. In an educational perspective, however, there may lie a particular pedagogical potential in looking *across* diverse communication contexts. For instance, classroom participants may reflect on such issues as: What distinguishes the reading of script-based texts from interacting with multimodal texts and how does this affect the ways in which cultural content is construed? In which ways can classroom discussions about FL literature teach us something about how fluid cultural references can be negotiated in *lingua franca* communication? What distinguishes online interaction from face-to-face dialogue, and how does this affect processes of meaning-making? By considering such matters, learners may not only develop competences related to diverse contexts but also an ability to discover new connections and layers of meaning in the interface between different forms of intercultural communication.

The need to de-centre discourses on interculturality

An important aim for the intercultural speaker is to be able to identify ethnocentric perspectives and to recognise the effects thereof, as detailed in Byram's (1997) description of learning objectives related to *savoir comprendre* (p. 52). Furthermore, *savoir s'engager* involves the ability to identify and evaluate ideological perspectives (pp. 63–64). Through his work on intercultural citizenship, Byram (2008) has labelled the latter "the most educationally significant of the *saviors*" due to the fact that it "opens up the questions of educational philosophy and traditions that differ from one country to the next" (p. 236). It is somewhat of a paradox, then, that his model has been criticised for reflecting a Western theoretical and cultural bias. Such critique must be understood in relation to the geographical and historical context out of which the model emerged as well as more general trends in the academic community.

One of the motivating factors behind what has been called the "intercultural shift" (Hoff, 2018) in language teaching and learning in the 1990s, was that the CoE had an ambition for education to contribute to increased dialogue and cooperation among members of different national cultures within the European Union (Kramsch, 2006). This goal had its roots in humanistic *Bildung* ideals. Originating from Western philosophical and educational thought, the concept of *Bildung* has come to be associated with the development of personal identity, moral values, critical thinking, and democratic citizenship (Hoff, 2014). Such ideals are also reflected in Byram's model, for example, through its emphasis on Kantian rationality as well as the way in which it places the individual at the centre of the world (Matsuo, 2012; Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009). However, as the model has gained popularity beyond Europe, it is frequently used today in educational contexts that do not match these ideologies (cf. Kramsch & Whiteside, 2015). Because the model can be said to downplay notions of conflict and disagreement (Ferri, 2016; Hoff, 2014; cf. Section 3.2), this is somewhat problematic. In fact, the model has been criticised for being normative and for representing ICC as a matter of applying a general set of principles like democracy and human rights as a "universal standard for resolving misunderstanding or conflicts" (Matsuo, 2016, p. 8). Based on this interpretation, it can be argued that the model leaves the door open for culturalist approaches in intercultural education despite incorporating the intercultural speaker's ability to explore ethnocentric perspectives. Indeed, empirical studies of FL textbooks have revealed a proclivity to represent European/Western contexts and values as if they were universally valid in addition to undervaluing power relations in the world, for instance by excluding certain dimensions of society such as the harsh realities of colonialism and imperialism (Lund, 2007; Risager, 2018). Along the same lines, scholars have pointed to what they perceive as Eurocentric discourses in the new RFCDC (CoE, 2018) (Simpson & Dervin, 2019).

However, it would be unfair to trace such apparent predilection back to Byram's model alone. It is, in fact, indicative of a more general trend in international scholarship on language and communication which has marginalised non-Western discourses (Shi-xu, 2007). To rectify this imbalance, Shi-xu (2007) claims that "new, locally grounded and globally minded perspectives and techniques must be reconstructed in order to make proper sense of culturally different, 'other' discourses" (p. 3). In an attempt to move beyond culturalist, self-centred assumptions in intercultural education research and practice, scholars have proposed a "critical turn" (Dasli & Diaz, 2017). Efforts of this nature rely on an awareness that approaches to interculturality can never be neutral; they are "always based on particular assumptions and shaped by epistemological, ontological, normative and political commitments" (Zotzmann, 2016, p. 238; see also Holliday, 2011). Embracing a critical intercultural perspective thus involves taking a self-reflexive stance. The idea that intercultural learning requires de-centring from one's own perspective is, of course, not innovative in itself; this notion lies at the very core of Byram's model (see e.g., Forsman, 2006). However, proponents of the critical turn take

the idea of de-centring one step further by emphasising the need to incorporate ideas from the "periphery" in conceptions of intercultural competence and questioning the very terms, concepts and, notions that we use to discuss interculturality (Dasli & Diaz, 2017; Holliday, 2011; Li & Dervin, 2018; Miike, 2010). This type of de-centring thus has a different theoretical and ideological meaning than what is implied in Byram's model. It is, however, to a certain degree reflected in some of his later work. For instance, a recent editorial piece written by Byram in collaboration with other scholars (Porto et al., 2017) acknowledges that there are predicaments associated with relying on human rights as a universal framework for ICE and that there is a need for "more discussion about the ethical, theoretical, practical and other issues" (p. 11) involved in this endeavour.

In practical terms, classroom work can contribute to de-centring discourses on interculturality by problematising fundamental concepts like democracy and human rights and considering how these concepts can be understood in different ways by different people in different parts of the world (Goody, 2006; Li & Dervin, 2018). This might advance into a deliberation of whether it would be possible to reach universal and "objective" definitions of such concepts, and whether this aim would even be worth striving towards. Moreover, classroom participants could be prompted to evaluate the perspectives which are represented in teaching materials and to ponder how this representation affects their understanding of given curricular topics (Risager, 2017). Relevant questions for both teachers and learners to consider in this context would for instance be: Which cultural assumptions and ideologies underlie different reports of historical events and news items that are brought into the classroom? In which ways does this influence their understanding of and response to said event/news item? Which alternative representations and perspectives could be worth seeking out in order to achieve a more nuanced understanding?

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that a critical approach to ICC not only involves looking beyond the surface of the words and actions of the other but also of oneself. As noted by Byram (2008), such self-scrutiny involves raising questions about "one's own culturally-determined assumptions and about the society in which one lives" (p. 31). Accordingly, it would be relevant to explore possible limitations in the way in which democracy and human rights are, and have been, upheld by institutions and individuals in the classroom participants' own cultures. Furthermore, both teachers and learners must be willing to examine their own feelings, reactions and motivations from a critical distance. In this connection, it is particularly relevant to note that the expression of tolerant attitudes may be based on a rather limited understanding of intercultural issues, even if it is genuinely intended. For instance, it may be perfectly possible to empathise with individuals from diverse parts of world, yet at the same time maintain a stereotypical or ethnocentric outlook. The process of critically examining one's own bias and motivations may therefore be deeply disconcerting, because it requires a willingness to uncover potentially unpleasant truths about oneself. Taking a critical pedagogical approach is thus inevitably demanding for everyone involved. It is nevertheless important to recognise that such efforts may provide a basis for authentic, meaningful, and potentially transformative learning processes in the classroom.

The need to reconsider whether ICC can and should be assessed

A final point of contention is whether ICC can and should be assessed. Byram's model is accompanied by a comprehensive set of objectives which might be used by teachers as criteria for assessing FL learners' ICC. During the past two decades, testing and standardisation have become an increasing focus in all school subjects and levels of education (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Fenner, 2017; Tornberg, 2013). A recent example of this is the aforementioned RFCDC (CoE, 2018), which presents a set of descriptors intended to be used as a basis for assessing different levels of democratic and intercultural competence. However, scholars have also questioned whether it is desirable, or even possible, for

teachers to assess such competence.

Whereas aspects related to intercultural knowledge and skills may not pose any particular problems in such respect, the learners' attitudes constitute a more delicate issue. Not only will the assessor's "political will and ethical honesty" (Byram, 2008, p. 222) be of utmost importance in this connection; it can also be questioned whether passing judgement on individuals' personal qualities is at all opportune from an ethical standpoint (Borghetti, 2017). Moreover, the fluid, dynamic and unstable nature of ICC itself brings about practical challenges in terms of assessment. First of all, underlying issues such as shyness and low self-esteem may affect learners' intercultural "performance" in face-to-face interactions (Borghetti, 2017; cf. Rathje, 2007), which means that a lack-lustre achievement in an assessment situation will not necessarily reflect the depth of an individual's intercultural understanding. Furthermore, as discussed in previous sub-sections, ambivalence and contradictions are natural aspects of any individual's outlook. An empirical study by Porto (2014) provides insight into this matter by showing how students move in and out of different stages of intercultural understanding during the reading of a FL text. This also means that ICC might not only reveal itself in various forms over the course of one or several teaching sessions but also at a later stage in other circumstances than what has been planned or foreseen by the teacher (Hoff, 2013, 2018). Therefore, it may not be sufficient for educators to look for evidence of certain behaviours and attitudes over time rather than in isolated situations, as suggested by the RFDCD (CoE, 2018, Vol. I).

Barring such ethical and practical challenges, the question of assessment is ultimately linked to how researchers and policy makers perceive the aims and purposes of education. A number of scholars, Byram included, have proposed that ICC be understood as an inseparable aspect of *Bildung* (Bohlin, 2013; Byram, 2010; Fenner, 2017; Hoff, 2014). According to the *Bildung* tradition in education, the purpose of education is not only to equip young individuals with knowledge and skills which can be tested but also to foster personal growth (Hoff, 2014). For this to occur, the teaching and learning must affect the pupils at a profound and personal level (Klafki, 1996). However, as Borghetti (2017) notes, it is relatively easy to exhibit changes in surface behaviour without being affected at a deeper, internal level. As previously discussed, the expression of tolerant attitudes may hide a number of underlying issues like the learners' will to please the teacher, or their lack of self-awareness of own bias and motivations. Accordingly, if classroom participants are primarily concerned with eliciting and producing evidence of competent behaviour and acceptable attitudes, "implicit" notions of conflict (cf. Section 3.2) in the learners' intercultural outlook will remain unresolved, thereby relegating intercultural learning to a superficial process rather than serving as a catalyst for in-depth understanding and personal growth (Hoff, 2014, 2018). Assessing ICC can, therefore, be counterproductive to promoting *Bildung*.

It may thus be beneficial for educators to heed Eisner's (2004) advice to place "a greater focus on becoming than on being," to assign "greater priority to valuing than to measuring," and to consider "the quality of the journey as more educationally significant than the speed at which the destination is reached" (p. 10). Even though Eisner addresses issues pertaining to education in general rather than intercultural language teaching and learning specifically, the background context of his proposal is the same: The conflicts, complexities, and ambiguities of our 21st century world pose certain novel challenges which require a reconsideration of pedagogical practices. Taking a critical approach to assessment practices in intercultural education may be crucial in this regard.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Like any theoretical construct, the model of ICC is a product of its time, and, as the preceding discussion has demonstrated, Byram has adjusted his stance on several issues over the years. We have also seen that there may be reason to modify some of the critique which has been aimed at the model.

In particular, this construct cannot be held solely responsible for how the concept of ICC has been (mis-)interpreted by policy makers, textbook authors and practitioners over the past two decades. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the model remains influential to this day, and it is thus important for stakeholders to be aware of its limitations as a guideline for 21ˢᵗ century intercultural language teaching and learning. Since the model itself remains largely unchanged, a familiarity with Byram's more recent output as well as alternative voices in the academic discourse is imperative if it is to be applied in a satisfactory manner. While the present article by no means has presented an exhaustive overview of new and relevant theoretical research in this regard, it has provided insight into some central issues which have implications for how ICC can and should be understood as a present-day educational concern. The purpose of the article has thus not been to discredit the valuable contributions of Byram's model to the field of intercultural language education, but to draw attention to aspects on which this model is unclear or outdated, and to illuminate how new research perspectives can contribute to the development of more comprehensive and nuanced approaches to ICC in today's language classroom.

The article has argued that a precondition for navigating the complexities of intercultural communication is the classroom participants' willingness to explore such concepts as culture and identity or the intricate relationship between language and culture in a multifaceted and analytical manner. Furthermore, efforts to examine both explicit and implicit notions of conflict may provide a basis for learning processes in which the different subjectivities of the classroom are recruited and in which the dynamic and co-constructed nature of such interactions are recognised. As we have seen, this also entails looking beyond the surface of actions and words and taking a self-reflexive stance. By prompting learners to scrutinise their own biases and motivations and to question mainstream ideas and generally accepted "truths" about interculturality, classroom practices may open up room for new insights and behaviours among the learners in addition to facilitating new ways of speaking about interculturality. The importance of exploring communication contexts beyond the physical world has also been addressed, as this can enable the development of multiliteracies to become an integrated aspect of intercultural language teaching and learning. Finally, we have seen that the fluid, unstable, and contradictory nature of ICC necessitates in-depth learning processes which affect learners at a profound, personal level. In this respect, the article has argued that teachers' primary aim should be to create opportunities for such learning to take place in the classroom rather than to judge the outcome of the process, as the latter may reduce intercultural learning to a matter of producing "correct" attitudes and behaviour at a surface level.

Although some examples of learner activities and topics for classroom discussion have been considered in light of these concerns, it has been beyond the scope of the present article to explore such matters in depth. There is a need for further investigations of the pedagogical implications of dealing with issues of interculturality in today's language classroom. A particular matter of concern in this respect is the fact that the practical examples discussed here may assume Western educational models as the norm, as they describe a classroom environment that is perhaps not easy to find in other parts of the world. Similarly, it should be noted that the suggested topics for classroom discussion have been included for illustrative purposes, and it is important for educators to consider relevant examples in local contexts.

Furthermore, for pedagogical purposes, it is pertinent to note that one of the advantages of Byram's model is that it is concrete and, for the most part, coherent. In contrast, the alternative research perspectives which have been discussed here are more intangible due to the fact that they revolve around the complexities, ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions which govern intercultural communication. While previous sections have pointed to a number of recent (re-)conceptualisations, such constructs also have certain limitations as a guideline for educational practice, in the sense that

they focus on particular learner identities, distinct aspects of intercultural learning, and/or specific communication contexts. Accordingly, there may still be a need for yet another model of ICC which synthesises the ideas which have been addressed in the present article. Such a construct would

- allow for in-depth and nuanced explorations of multiple facets of culture and identity as well as the language-culture nexus
- provide a framework for the examination of both explicit and implicit notions of conflict
- allow for explorations of how the intercultural dimension manifests itself in and across a wide range of communication contexts, both in and beyond the physical world
- incorporate marginalised theoretical perspectives and open up for learning processes which can contribute to de-centring discourses on interculturality
- emphasise the conditions which would enable such learning processes to take place rather than how outcomes may be assessed.

Further work is needed in order to translate such general principles into more concrete descriptors which are suited to serve as a comprehensive guideline for intercultural teaching and learning in the 21st century language classroom.

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[i] Segments from Part I of my PhD thesis (Hoff, 2019) have been modified and further developed for this article.

[ii] In addition to these components, ICC also consists of communicative competence, comprising linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competences (see Byram, 1997, pp. 72-73). However, Byram's work concentrates on the components which are represented here.

[iii] This question might be seen as contrasting "black" and "white" without explicitly saying so. The aim for the classroom discussion would thus be both to counter any biased preconceptions in this respect and to challenge assumptions about these groups sharing a single perspective.

[iv] See Hoff (2013, 2016) for in-depth discussions of practical examples related to the use of the problematic N-word in different fictional texts.

[v] See Hoff (2019) for a discussion of a selection of conceptual reading models which incorporate an intercultural dimension.

[vi] Byram (1997) recognises that "electronic mail, fax, or video-conferencing" can bring "immediate communication into the classroom" (p. 67).