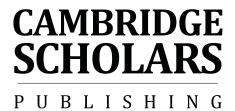How Interculturally Competent am I?
An Introductory Thesis Writing Course for International Students

How Interculturally Competent am I?
An Introductory Thesis Writing Course for International Students

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P U B L I S H I N G

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTE TO THE TEACHER

This textbook was developed for the benefit of international students in their penultimate year of study who are planning to write a graduation thesis in English related to intercultural communication in their final year with little or no prior knowledge of the subject, or of thesis-writing itself. While many such books tend to provide general advice with illustrative examples, this book aims to help students to develop their thesis-writing skills *through experiential learning* by conducting a research project based on a diary study, and reporting on it in a mini-thesis, the length of which has been left to the teacher's discretion.

This textbook introduces students to two competing models of intercultural competence that reflect differing and sometimes conflicting views rooted in North American and European research traditions, which makes them suitable for training students in the critical analysis and evaluation skills needed in thesis-writing. In the early stages of the course, students are encouraged to study the models before using them as frameworks to structure reflections on their own intercultural competence. Having analysed similarities and differences between the two models, students are then encouraged to critically evaluate the models by selecting and rejecting categories, and adding any of their own, with reasons. In this process, students write a series of six structured diary entries in response to different kinds of intercultural experience that ultimately allows them to draw conclusions about not only their current level of intercultural competence, within the terms they have chosen to define it, but also about the standards they tend to apply in practice.

This textbook was developed in classroom research project that was conducted during a Thesis Writing course, and includes extracts from students' work with their consent. More broadly, it results from my own research into the development of intercultural pedagogy and in particular from my first co-edited book (Tsai & Houghton, 2010), which explored the process of becoming intercultural. Since many extracts from that book have been included in this textbook to illustrate some of the teaching points, Tsai & Houghton (2010) can be used as an accompanying handbook for extensive reading, although it is not necessary as this textbook stands alone.

1. WHAT IS A THESIS?

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Overview

- A typical task plan and the main parts of a thesis
- MINI-THESIS: PROJECT OVERVIEW
- The cover page and the table of contents
- Defining intercultural communication and possible research questions

</div>

Task 1

What are the basic differences between a paragraph, an essay and a thesis? Complete the sentences below.

1. A paragraph is a g…………….. of sentences
2. An essay is group of p…………….
3. A thesis is basically a l…………….. essay that reports on a r…………….. project

Task 2

Read the paragraph about planning a research project, adapted from Swetnam and Swetnam (2009), and fill in the spaces using words or phrases from the box. Then, summarise the steps followed when making a research plan in the flowchart below. The first step has been added for you.

collected	access	research questions	approach
theme	instruments	analysed	

Generally speaking, the first step in planning a research project is to choose a research (**1…………….**) by reading the academic literature. Once a focus has been established, specific objectives and (**2…………….**) can be set. After that, practical matters such as where the study will be conducted need to be decided. A general research (**3…………….**) can then be decided. A qualitative or quantitative approach may be taken, for example. If the study is to be conducted in an outside institution such as a school or a hospital, (**4…………….**) needs to be organised and permission needs to be given before deciding who exactly will take part in the study. Once the sample has been defined, specific research techniques and (**5…………….**) can be developed for data-gathering purposes. Data then need to be (**6…………….**) and when that has been completed, the investigation can be closed. Data then need to be sorted, studied, (**7…………….**), interpreted and discussed before conclusions are drawn and the final thesis is written.

Flowchart: Key steps in planning a research project

Read the academic literature and choose a research theme

Task 3

The main parts of a thesis are listed below. What kinds of information should you put in each section? Match the thesis sections listed on the left to the section descriptions listed on the right in the table below.

	Thesis Section		Section Description
1	Introduction	A	You provide extra supporting information not needed in the main thesis such as interview or questionnaire data
2	Literature Analysis	B	You describe how you designed and conducted the research project to gather data to help you answer your research question.
3	Research Methods	C	You discuss the results by making links back with the academic literature giving your opinion. You answer the research question clearly
4	Data Analysis	D	You describe how you analysed the data you gathered.
5	Results	E	You present the research question and explain why it is interesting and important.
6	Discussion	F	You provide a list of the sources you used (e.g. books, journals, internet sources etc.)
7	Conclusion	G	You analytically review what other people have already written about the topic to show your research question has not already been answered.
8	References	H	You present the results of data analysis objectively perhaps using charts and tables to help the reader understand easily
9	Appendices	I	You summarise the thesis and its main conclusions perhaps identifying the limitations of the project and possibilities for future research.

Task 4: Mini-Thesis Overview

Read the passage and answer the seven questions below.

In this course, you will conduct a research project related to intercultural communication to help you develop research skills. You will write up your research in a mini-thesis. The purpose of the project, adapted from Holmes & O'Neill (2010), is to help you to learn about and assess your own intercultural competence by interviewing an English speaker from another culture, who we will call your cultural other. Usually researchers set their own research questions based upon a preliminary reading of the academic literature but in this case, the research questions are given and you must investigate them consistently throughout the project, answering them clearly at end of your mini-thesis. Your research questions are as follows:

- To what extent am I interculturally competent in my communication?
- How do I assess my intercultural competence (i.e. what are my standards?)

You will investigate these questions by keeping a diary before, during and after the interview with your cultural other. You will analyse the data using categories you develop based on the literature analysis, which will help you to determine and review your intercultural competence and your standards. Once you have analysed and interpreted the diary data, you will discuss your findings and draw some conclusions.

1.   What is the purpose of the project?

2.   On whose research is this project based?

3.   What kind of person will you have to interview?

4.   How many research questions are there?

5.   How will you investigate them?

6.   How will you analyse the data?

7.   Having analysed and interpreted your diary data, what two things do you have to do at the end of the mini-thesis?

Task 5

The cover page of your thesis should contain your name, the title of your mini-thesis and your student number. After the cover page, you need to present the Table of Contents. Look at the three examples below. Which one do you think gives the reader the clearest overview of the contents of the thesis, and why?

Example 1

Example 2

Example 3

Task 6

What is intercultural communication?

Intercultural communication is communication between people from different cultures.

Discuss the simple definition of intercultural communication in the box with your group. Do you think it is easy to understand? Do you think it is satisfactory?

Task 7

Read the list of possible research questions below. Find two that do *not* focus on intercultural *communication*? Rewrite them in the spaces given underneath the table to make them focus clearly on intercultural communication.

1	What kinds of intercultural skills do Libyan people need?
2	Why do Japanese speakers need few words to communicate while English speakers need many?
3	What are some cultural differences in non-verbal communication?
4	How does communication differ in different cultures when people meet for the first time?
5	How does staple food differ round the world?
6	What are some cultural differences in eating habits?
7	How interculturally competent am I?

1. ....

2. ....

Task 8

What interests you about intercultural communication? Make a list of possible research questions below.

1	
2	
3	
4	

Task 9

Review this unit independently.

Note down any new words, phrases, expressions and sentence patterns you find in the box.

Task 10

Write a paragraph describing intercultural communication in the box below, and then compare it with your partner.

What is intercultural communication?

2. WHAT IS CULTURE?

Overview

- Defining key terms
- Breaking a definition down into parts
- Illustrating points by giving examples

Task 1

What does the term 'culture' mean to you? Write a definition in the box below without checking the dictionary. Then, discuss your definition with your group. Did everyone write the same definition or not?

What is culture?

Task 2

People often define terms in different ways, which means that when you use a term, other people may not understand it in the same way as you. This means that you have to define the key terms you use in your thesis carefully and clearly to help readers to understand exactly what you mean when you use them. And you should use the terms consistently yourself throughout the thesis to avoid causing confusion. What is culture? Read and complete the sentences below using the passage in the box beneath to help you to define the term 'culture' clearly by breaking its definition down into parts.

1. Culture is l………………
2. Culture is a set of shared i………………
3. Culture involves b………………, values, n………………, and social practices
4. Culture affects b………………
5. Culture involves a relatively l……………… group of people

Culture

Definitions of *culture* are numerous. In 1952, Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn published a book with more than 200 pages devoted to different definitions of the term. Since then, many other scholars have offered additional definitions and approaches. Our concern in this book is with the link between culture and communication. Consequently, our definition of *culture* is one that allows us to investigate how culture contributes to human symbolic processes.

Defining Culture for the Study of Communication

Our goal in presenting a particular definition of culture is to explain the important link between culture and communication. However, we emphasise that the way we define culture is not the "right" or the "best" way. Rather, it is a definition that is useful for our purposes of helping you to understand the crucial link between culture and communication as you set out to improve your intercultural competence.

Culture is a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people.

(adapted from Lustig & Koester, 2010: 25)

Task 3

In Lustig & Koester's (2010) definition of culture above, you can see how a complex definition can be broken down into parts. Defining each part of a definition clearly can help to clarify the definition as a whole. Read the five paragraphs about different aspects of culture below and complete the sentences beneath.

---

1. Culture is Learned

       People learn about their culture through interactions with parents, other family members, friends and even strangers who are part of the culture. Culture is learned from the people you interact with as you are socialized. Culture is also taught by the explanations people receive for the natural and human events around them. Because our specific interest is in the relationship between culture and interpersonal communication, we focus on how cultures provide their members with a set of interpretations that they then use as filters to make sense of messages and experiences.

                                                     (adapted from Lustig & Koester, 2010)

---

1.   How do people learn about their culture?

2.   What do Lustig & Koester focus on in their definition of culture?

---

2. Culture is a Set of Shared Interpretations

       Shared interpretations establish the very important link between communication and culture. Cultures exist in the minds of people, not just in external or tangible objects or behaviours. Integral to our discussion of communication is an emphasis on symbols as the means by which all communication takes place. The meanings of symbols exist in the minds of individual communicators; when those symbolic ideas are shared with others, they form the basis of culture.

                                                     (adapted from Lustig & Koester, 2010)

---

1.   What connects communication and culture?

2.   Where do cultures reside?

3.   By what means does communication take place?

4.   What forms the basis of shared culture?

---

3. Culture involves Beliefs, Values, Norms, and Social Practices

      Beliefs refer to the basic understanding of a group of people about what the world is like or what is true or false. Values refer to what a group of people defines as good and bad, or what it regards as important. Norms refer to rules for appropriate behaviour, which provide the expectations people have of one another and themselves. Social practices are the predictable behaviour patterns that members of a culture typically follow. Taken together, the shared beliefs, values, norms and social practices provide a "way of life" for the members of the culture.

<div align="right">(adapted from Lustig & Koester, 2010)</div>

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1.   What are beliefs?

2.   What are values?

3.   What are norms?

4.   What are social practices?

---

4. Culture Affects Behaviour

      Shared beliefs, values, norms and social practices affect the behaviours of large groups of people. In other words, the social practices that characterize a culture give people guidelines about what things mean, what is important, and what should or should not be done. Thus, culture establishes predictability in human interactions. Cultural differences are evident in the varying ways in which people conduct their everyday activities, as people "perform" their culture.

<div align="right">(adapted from Lustig & Koester, 2010)</div>

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1.   What do shared beliefs, values, norms and social practices affect?

2.   How does culture establish predictability in human interaction?

3.   Where can we see cultural differences?

---

5. Culture Involves Large Groups of People

      Although some people might want to use the term *culture* to refer to the bonds that develop among the people in a small group, we prefer to distinguish between the broad-based, culturally shared beliefs, values, norms and social practices that people bring to their interactions, and unique expectations and experiences that arise as a result of particular intercultural relationships that develop. Consequently, we will restrict the use of the term *culture* to much larger, societal levels of organization.

                  (adapted from Lustig & Koester, 2010)

---

1.   Might some people use the term *culture* to refer to bonds between people in a small group?

2.   What do Lustig & Koester limit their use of the term *culture* to?

Task 4

Read and discuss Lustig & Koester's definition of culture again in the light of the paragraphs above. Answer the questions below.

> Culture is a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people.
>
>   (Lustig & Koester, 2010: 25)

1.   Give an example of a belief and how it can affect people's behaviour.

2.   Give an example of a value and how it can affect people's behaviour.

3.   Give an example of norm and how it can affect people's behaviour.

4.   Give an example of a social practice and how it can affect people's behaviour.

Task 5

Using Lustig & Koester's (2010) definition of culture, expand the definition by describing each part of the definition concisely in the box below. Use the paragraphs above to help you.

What is culture?

Task 6

Review this unit independently. Note down any new words, phrases, expressions and sentence patterns you find in the box below.

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3. WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE (IC)?

Overview

♦ Exploring variation in the definition of key terms
♦ Using a model as a framework for self-reflection
♦ Analysing student reflections on their IC within the BASIC model
♦ MINI-THESIS: DIARY ENTRY 1

Task 1

Check the meaning of the words in the table and underline them in the passage below. Then, answer the questions beneath.

	English word	Translation into your language
1	cognitive	
2	affective	
3	operational	
4	motivation	
5	knowledge	
6	skills	
7	triadic	
8	system	
9	perspective	
10	interaction	

The Triadic Model of and Criteria for Intercultural Competence

What is culture? This question has been asked again and again and numerous answers have been offered from various perspectives. For Edward Hall (1976), who believes that a society is organised through shared experience of its members, culture is information, and thus is communication. He asserts: "any culture is primarily a system for creating, sending, storing, and processing information" (Hall 1998, 53). Interaction between cultures, from this perspective, is communication between different man-made systems, or meaning systems. This view has great impact on intercultural studies. Based on this notion of culture, interaction between cultures is often referred to as intercultural communication, and the competence for successfully carrying it out therefore as intercultural communication competence or intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997; Gudykunst 1998; Kim 2001). These two terms are sometimes used interchangeably with IC, but in some cases, communicative competence is used with an implication of explicit emphasis on linguistic competence, or perhaps more accurately, having the linguistic aspect being addressed more explicitly in the process of the competence development (Byram 1997; Johnson 2003).

What makes it challenging to communicate between systems is that every system is unique not only in terms of communicating meaning, but also in terms of setting boundaries to separate its members from those of others (Bochner 1982; Ting-Toomey 1999). Communication across cultures therefore means that one has to be able to overcome both cognitive and emotional barriers so as to function effectively in an intercultural context. Cognitively, it is necessary for people to be able to recognise and deal with new rules of social interaction or different social conventions, and psychologically, it requires the attitude to face up to uncertainty and anxiety induced by unfamiliar circumstances and challenges to self-identities (Argyle 1982; Gudykunst 1998; Stephan and Stephan 2002).

Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) stated that to be interculturally competent, one needs to produce behaviours that are both appropriate to the context and effective in terms of fulfilling the intended objectives of the interactants. Based on their studies on intercultural behaviours, they proposed a triadic model of intercultural competence, in which they presented three elements that are thought to be fundamental to successful communication: *motivation*, *knowledge,* and *skills*, also known as *affective*, *cognitive*, and *operational* capabilities (Kim 2001). This model has been well adopted and has had great impact on competence studies (Wiseman 2002).

Guo (2010: 27-28)

1.   From Edward Hall's perspective, what is interaction between cultures?

2.   What two terms are sometimes used interchangeably with IC?

3.   What does the use of the term *communicative competence* sometimes imply?

4.   What barriers need to be overcome in intercultural communication?

5.   According to Spitzberg and Cupach (1984), what do interculturally competent people need to be able to produce?

6.   What are the three components of their triadic model of IC?

Task 2

Read the list of eight components of the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC) based on work conducted by Koester & Olebe (1988) and Olebe & Koester (1989) in the box (see Lustig & Koester, 2010: 73). Match each component with its description, and complete the table below. The first letter has been given in each case. Also, tick (✓) the grey box on the right if you think you have that skill.

task role behaviour	interaction posture
display of respect	empathy
orientation to knowledge	interaction management
relational role behaviour	tolerance for ambiguity

1	D	The ability to show respect and positive regard for another person	
2	O	The terms people use to explain themselves and the world around them	
3	E	The capacity to behave as though you understand the world as others do	
4	I	Skill in regulating conversation	
5	T	Behaviours that involve the initiation of ideas related to group problem-solving activities	
6	R	Behaviours associated with interpersonal harmony and mediation	
7	T	The ability to react to new and ambiguous situations with little visible discomfort	
8	I	The ability to respond to others in descriptive, non-evaluative and non-judgmental ways	

Task 3

What does intercultural competence mean within the framework of the BASIC model? Write a paragraph summarising the model in the box below.

Task 4

In the passages below, two Japanese students reflect on their IC using the categories in the BASIC model as a frame of reference. However, one student reflects more on her experience of *intercultural* communication, while the other reflects more on her experience of communication more generally. Also, one student writes in paragraph form, while the other writes in list form. Read the passages to find out who does what, and complete the sentences below.

1. (………………) reflects more on her experience of *intercultural* communication. She writes in (………………) form.
2. (………………) reflects more on her experience of communication more generally. She writes in (………………) form.

Naomi

1.   Display of respect

Q. As you communicate, can you show respect for the other person?

Yes, I can. When I show respect for the other person, I behave myself and I speak clearly while watching the eyes of the partner, and I try not to be rude.

2.   Orientation to knowledge

Q. Can you find out what the other person knows and does not know?

Yes, I can. I can find out what other person knows and does not know by listening to their responses, like "Huh.", "Oh!" or "What do you mean?" But when there are no responses, I cannot find out.

3.   Empathy

Q. Can you show that you appreciate the person's point of view?

Yes, I think I can show that I appreciate the person's point of view. When people talk, they emphasize the point of the conversation naturally. As a result, we react by expressing feelings by crying, getting angry and laughing etc. That is how we can show appreciation for the person's point of view, I think.

4.   Interaction management

Q. Can you manage the conversation well? (E.g. Opening a conversation)

No, I cannot manage the conversation very well. Though I'm good at listening to conversation, I'm poor at talking so I don't dominate or control a conversation so often.

5.   Task role behavior

Q. Can you suggest ideas when working to solve a problem or perform a task?

No, I cannot suggest ideas when working to solve a problem or perform a task very well. But I try to think about whether there are any good solutions and methods, and sometimes, my idea may be adopted.

6.   Relational role behaviors

Q. Can you develop a good personal relationship?

Yes, I can develop a good personal relationship, I think. When I associate with a person, communication is important to me. Our understanding of each other deepens by talking and we can develop a good relationship that way, I guess.

7.   Tolerance for ambiguity

Q. Can you respond well when there is uncertainty in conversations/situations?

No, I can't. I cannot respond well when there is uncertainty in conversations because I can't stop a conversation and ask about something I am uncertain about. So, I sometimes just listen to a conversation without understanding its contents.

8.   Interaction posture

Q. Can you speak in a non-judgmental way (even if you're shocked/surprised by what the person says)?

Yes, I can speak in a non-judgmental way, I think. Because there are different ways of thinking and different customs, I think it's rude to react to them excessively. For example, in some cultures, people may eat things we don't, but I think it is rude to criticize that.

Midori

I would like to write about my own IC for each of the eight components with examples.

Firstly, I would like to write about display of respect. We (Japanese) use *keigo* [honorific language] when we talk with older people. However, in English, when I talk with professors, I sometimes worry about whether I seem rude or not. To display my respect, I have tried to look at the speaker's eyes when listening to them.

Secondly, regarding orientation to knowledge, it is natural that we have different values and cultures so, of course, our knowledge is different. Our values sometimes clashed. I work with a Nepali and an Indian at a restaurant. We often clash but I try to accept their values, and they also accept mine.

Thirdly, about empathy, it is difficult for us to appreciate another person's point of view. It is especially difficult when the person has a very different point of view. It also connects with interaction posture. I think that it is important to understand the other person's point of view. If we can, we might be able to learn about new ways of thinking about the value.

Next, with regard to interaction management, I work at an American hamburger shop too. The manager is an American, so few customers are Japanese. At first, I was so nervous when I talked to them, and I couldn't catch what they were saying. Then, I tried hard to understand and to ask them questions. Moreover, when I heard words that I didn't know while talking with them, I tried to ask them what they meant. In that way, I found I could manage the conversations well.

Regarding task role behaviour, professors sometimes ask us to make groups and hold group discussions. When friends we know well are in the group, it is easy to suggest ideas. But when we face people we don't know so well, it is harder to express our opinions, so I try very hard to express my opinion in groups. I don't think it is good to be silent when we should be discussing something.

Next, with regard to relational role behaviour, I would like to write about me and my friend from Malaysia. We met for the first time two years ago. Of course, I didn't know about her. And she couldn't speak English well at that time. I spoke to her in a class when we had to find a partner. At that time, we started communicating. It was hard for me to teach her about contents of the classes. She didn't understand most of them, so I taught her in English. Then, we developed a good friendship. I think that it is important to help people to develop a good personal relationship.

Next, I would like to write about tolerance for ambiguity. When I talk with foreigners, I often have trouble understanding their words because they use a lot of slang but I don't know what it means, so I always ask them to explain at times like that. To respond well when there is uncertainty in conversation, I try to ask the meanings of the words they use if I cannot understand. I think that it can help us develop the conversation.

Finally, regarding interaction posture, I always try to speak in a non-judgmental way. When I face people who have a different way of thinking, I'm sometimes surprised so I ask them why they think that way. I can learn about another way of thinking by doing that, so I don't think that we should reject different opinions just because they differ from ours.

Task 5

Review Naomi and Midori's descriptions of their IC again. Identify similarities and differences between them. Complete the table below.

	Similarities	Differences
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		