

Intercultural Teaching Competence (ITC)

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“Intercultural teaching competence (ITC) is the ability of instructors to interact with students in a way that supports the learning of students who are linguistically and culturally different from the instructor or from each other and that is effective and appropriate in the context of teaching (Fantini, 2009). ITC includes the ability to communicate with minimal loss or distortion (Fantini, 2009), meaning that students receive and understand the messages and meaning that the instructor intends to communicate to them. It is a set of skills that allows TAs to establish meaningful relationships with students, peers, and faculty and enables TAs and their students to work together to achieve common learning goals (Fantini 2009; Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009). ITC enables TAs to bridge cultural and linguistic differences in the classroom as well as to communicate successfully across disciplinary cultures (Dimitrov, 2012).

The concept of Intercultural Teaching Competence was developed by combining existing concepts from two distinct research literatures. ITC combines elements of intercultural competence models (Chagnon, 2009; Deardorff, 2006) and work in the intercultural communication literature on interculturally competent teaching (Bennett, 2011; Deardorff, 2009) with research in the fields of educational development and educational psychology on effective teacher behaviours (Brookfield 1995; Murray, 1997), teaching assistant competencies (Shannon, Twale, & Moore, 1998; Smith, 2001), and inclusive teaching (Ouellett, 2005).

Intercultural Teaching Competence is similar to general intercultural competence in the sense that it has attitudinal components (e.g., tolerance for ambiguity, openness to difference) as well as knowledge components (e.g., knowledge of cultural differences in classroom interactions) and behavioural components (e.g., the ability to use culturally appropriate feedback strategies; Deardorff, 2006). ITC goes beyond general intercultural competence models in that it identifies specific teacher skills, behaviours, and teaching approaches that facilitate learning in the context of the culturally diverse classroom. The existing literature on interculturally competent teaching has focused primarily on social science classrooms (Deardorff, 2009) where instructors facilitate discussions about identity involving topics such as race, privilege, class, and equity (e.g., in history, sociology, or political science courses). In this article, we examine ITC across all disciplines and also explore the skills that TAs need in diverse labs, tutorials, and classrooms in engineering, science, medical sciences, and other disciplines outside the social sciences. Based on the synthesis of the two research literatures above,

The skills of an interculturally competent teacher include the ability to:

1. **Model and encourage perspective taking** in their classroom. For example, recognize when students approach global issues from monocultural perspectives, and encourage students to consider the same issue from a variety of perspectives by asking questions and expressing a diversity of opinions in class (Bennett & Bennett 2004; Bond, Qian, & Huang, 2003).
2. **Model and encourage non-judgemental approaches** to discussing cultural, social, or other types of difference. For example, encourage students to first *describe* and *interpret* cultural differences in gender roles or health-care practices before *evaluating* them (Bennett, 2011; Harlap, 2008).
3. **Facilitate discussion among students with a variety of communication styles.** For example, recognize differences in turn taking; manage interruptions; and perceive and comprehend high-context and low-context, as well as circular and linear contributions from students (Hall, 1986; Wieland, 1991).
4. **Model tolerance for ambiguity** when students with a variety of learning and communication styles contribute to class discussions, and help learners deal with uncertainty. For example, rephrase circular contributions for linear learners, demonstrate patience with longer or high-context comments in class, and validate student responses (Bennett, 2011; Paige, 1993, 1996).
5. **Create an inclusive learning environment that recognizes the barriers students face in participating.** For example, in some students' home cultures, women may only speak when the men are finished talking, or students only contribute when they are called upon to do so (Eland, 2001).
6. **Expect and accept difference, and appreciate differences in the relationships between teachers and learners across cultures.** Such differences may include: differing expectations regarding the amount of power distance between teachers and students; or differing expectations with respect to learner initiative (Cryer & Okorochoa, 1999; Dimitrov, 2009), as well as differences in students' orientation to rules and rule following (Nisbett, 2004).
7. **Provide feedback across cultures in a variety of ways.** Effective facilitators adjust their feedback style to the needs of learners and recognize the way feedback is offered and received in the learners' cultures or learning styles (Laroche, 2003).
8. **Tailor messages to audiences with different levels of linguistic ability** and limit the use of jargon and colloquialisms that may interfere with a given audience's understanding, especially in interdisciplinary contexts (Cushner & Mahon, 2009).
9. **Explain unspoken assumptions of one's own culture and discipline** to students from different cultural backgrounds, and mentor them during their transition to Canadian academia. For example, articulate the value of academic integrity and highlight cultural differences in citation and referencing, or create assignments that take into account the

discomfort that students from Confucian educational cultures experience when asked to critique the ideas of others (Watkins & Biggs, 1999).

10. **Design assessments that recognize and validate** cultural differences in writing and communication styles, such as the use of inductive or deductive logic and circular rather than linear reasoning in student essays (Eland, 2001; Fox, 1994).
11. **Identify risk factors for particular types of learners.** Examples of risk factors are loss of face, loss of group identity, conflict avoidance, and risk of self-disclosure related to culture, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic background (Bennett, 2011; Paige, 1993).
12. **Create opportunities for interaction among learners** that allow them to learn from each other, share different perspectives, and share the wealth of cultural knowledge they bring to class (Arkoudis et al., 2013).
13. **Develop an awareness of one's own culture and cultural identity,** how these are perceived by cultural others, and how they influence cross-cultural interactions—for example, the potential influence of a perceptual lens created by one's sexual orientation, race/whiteness, privileged socio-economic status, or ability to speak a dominant language (Harlap, 2008, J. Bennett, 2011).