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Review of *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence: Revisited*



KAREN RISAGER

Roskilde University, Denmark
risager@ruc.dk

Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence: Revisited by Michael Byram, Multilingual Matters, 2021, 200pp., \$89.95 (Hardback) \$27.95 (Paperback), \$15 (eBook). ISBN 9781800410237.

This monograph is a revisited version of Michael Byram's classic from 1997: *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* (Multilingual Matters). It presents the same framework and basic ideas as the 1997 book but adds a wealth of extra reflections and precisions, especially as regards moral relativism and human rights, mediation, intercultural citizenship, and teachers' ethical responsibilities.

It is a second edition, but not in the sense of a text that is rewritten altogether. It should rather be seen as part of a conversation that has been going on since the publication of the first edition. In the years after 1997, the first edition quickly became very popular and often got an authoritative status among teachers and doctoral students in the field of language education around the world. Naturally, it also provoked criticisms and misunderstandings, and the revisited edition includes Byram's responses to these discussions. Sometimes the response takes the form of precisions, sometimes it takes the form of further elaborations that emphasize and explain the lasting importance of aspects of the framework, not least the moral and ethical dimensions of language education in all its different contexts.

The book is not a handbook on the field of language education, which is even more diverse and complex today than it was in the 1990s. As Byram writes on p. 10: "I have resisted the temptation to engage with the many developments that have happened since 1997 except where they are directly relevant." Thus, the book maintains the framework and basic ideas of the 1997 book: It is characterized by the same overall structure, including chapter organisation, and it presents the model of intercultural communicative competence in largely the same graphic form (p. 62). But some

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sections of the chapters, as well as the specific components of the model, have been partly rewritten and refined. The book can of course be read without knowledge of the first edition.

In the Introduction, Byram begins by stating that the purpose of the book is “to explore the issues that arise if we wish to teach and assess a person’s ability to relate to and communicate with people who speak a different language and live in a different cultural context” (p. 1). In this phrase, “we” is the teacher. The primary perspective in the book is that of the *teacher*, and behind him or her: the educational system and professionals in the field of language teaching, including Byram himself. In the same phrase, “a person” is the *learner*, who is both an object of teaching and assessing and an intended subject of relating to and communicating. It is an *individual* learner, not a collective learner, as for example, a whole class or a whole team. The primary interest in the book is to lay out the general principles that should guide the teacher in helping the individual language learner to develop a set of abilities, or in other words, a complex competence. Note that “to relate” is mentioned before “communicate.” This is linked to what is at the centre of Byram’s concern: Language teaching (as well as other subject areas) should be oriented towards *education*, towards personal development, including a strengthened sense of oneself in relation to others. This is a position associated with liberal education, a (mainly Western) philosophy of education that focuses on the development of the free and independent citizen having a strong sense of values.

The last part of the phrase directs the reader’s attention to *differences*, with regard to languages as well as cultural contexts. Indirectly, Byram here says that he is interested in the learner’s relation to otherness – people speaking other languages, people living in other cultural contexts (abroad or in the same country). In the subsequent sections of the Introduction, he emphasizes that he wants language teaching to educate learners to be open to experiencing and analysing other ways of life and, as a consequence, their own. He says that he wants learners to resemble “sojourners” rather than “tourists.”

In Chapter 1 *Defining and describing intercultural communicative competence*, Byram positions himself in relation to theories of linguistic and non-verbal communication, and intergroup and cross-cultural communication. He discusses issues of power relations in communication, noting that most countries are multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual. This section is important because it helps to clarify his stance on national culture in foreign language teaching, which has been misinterpreted based on text in the 1997 edition.

In Chapter 2 *A model for intercultural communicative competence*, he lays out and explains his complex model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (p. 62, see Figure 1), consisting of a section on “intercultural competence” (relevant for all people irrespective of language) and three sections on communicative/language competences: “linguistic competence,” “sociolinguistic competence” and “discourse competence.”

Byram emphasizes that the model is not a model of learning but a model of teaching – a basis for planning teaching and assessment. The model of intercultural competence covers both Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes, and the central educational component Critical Cultural Awareness. It should be noted that in his comments to the various components, Byram starts with Attitudes although one would, in the context of the Latin script, start on the left-hand side with Knowledge. This prioritization of the Attitudes component is probably an indication of his central focus on attitudes/values. He writes himself: “There is a logical priority that appropriate attitudes are needed before other competences can be learned, but it is also possible that attitudes will develop as skills are taught” (p. 59). The chapter ends with a coda on moral relativism, pluralism and human rights, in which Byram discusses the possibility of defining a place between universalism on the one hand and

relativism on the other. He argues for *values pluralism* (E. Berlin), a recognition that there is a vast variety of values in the world but that there is also a (not static) core of values that are to some degree similar across the world, in the sense of exhibiting family resemblance. According to Byram, it could be values such as “human rights” or “democracy” in all their various interpretations.

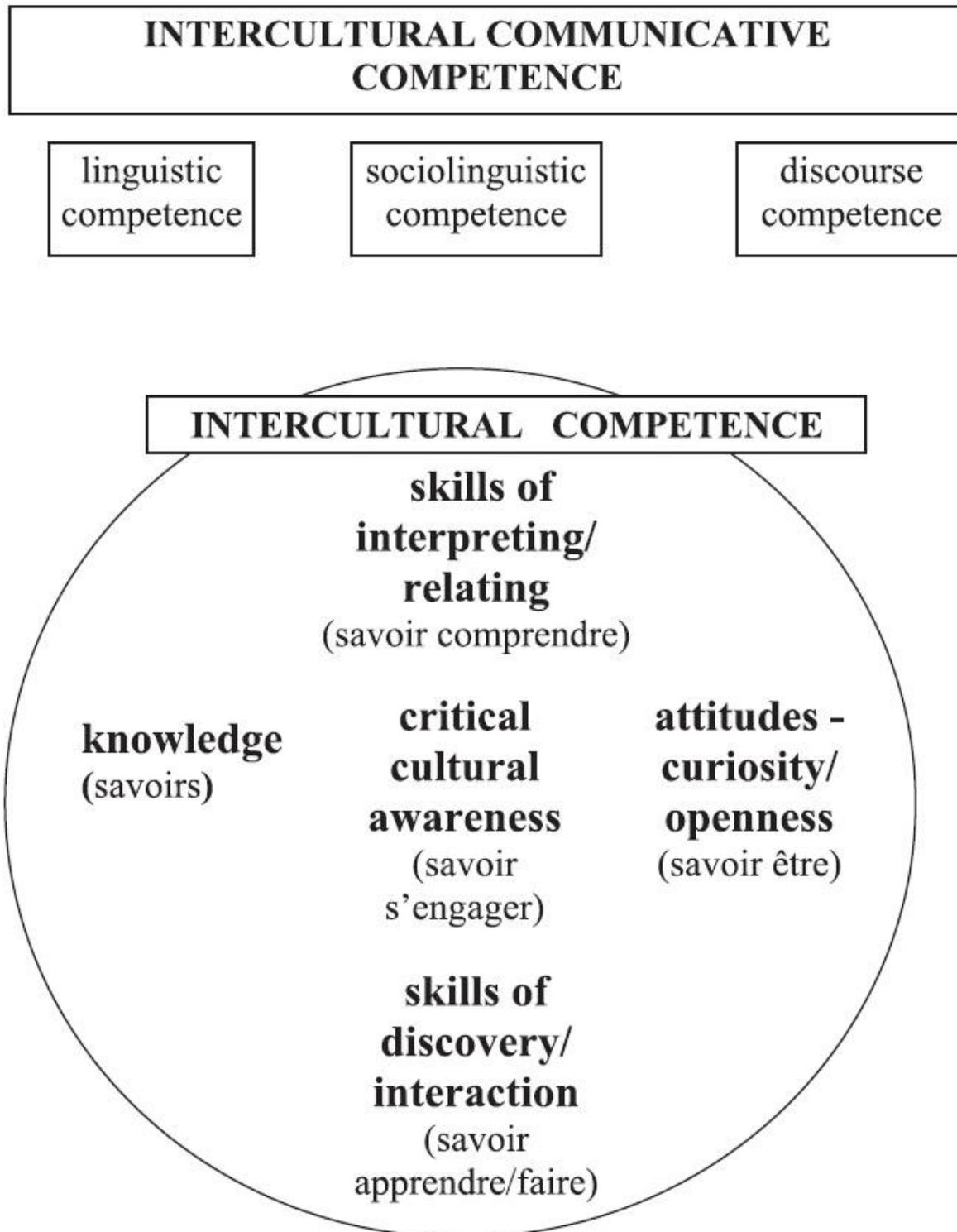


Figure 1 *Intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence* (Byram, 2021, p. 62, reproduced with permission from Multilingual Matters.)

Chapter 3 *Objectives for teaching, learning and assessment* contains overviews of objectives in relation to the five components of intercultural communicative competence. The objectives are qualitative and should be seen as educational objectives, not proficiency objectives. Byram says about this: “I propose ... to ignore the constraints of defining objectives always in behavioural terms externally observable and always measurable” (p. 84). Among the Knowledge objectives, he includes Symbolic Competence (C. Kramsch). He writes about this that the intercultural speaker “knows how different languages position their speakers in different symbolic spaces; how languages evoke historic cultural memories; how language performance can create alternative realities” (p. 87). Byram also stresses that intercultural competence may be acquired in the classroom, or via fieldwork, or as independent learning. In the end, there is a coda on mediation, in which it is emphasized that the language learner – the intercultural speaker – has an important role as a mediator, and this goes far beyond such bilingual activities as translation and interpreting.

In Chapter 4 *Curriculum issues*, Byram discusses issues of progression, including the question whether it is possible to define a threshold level of ICC. He suggests that this can only be done in relation to the specific context. After some examples of curriculum planning in different parts of the world, there is a coda on intercultural citizenship and the teacher’s ethical responsibilities. Byram discusses the concept of “political engagement” and suggests that when learners are or become politically engaged, they “develop their own ideas, beliefs and commitments, become involved in public life and practice politics, and may therefore challenge authority” (p. 123).

In Chapter 5 *Assessment*, Byram notes that assessment may be useful for tracing learners’ progress, and he emphasizes that assessment is not limited to testing. The chapter describes various ways of assessing the objectives of each of the five components of intercultural competence, including the use of portfolios.

I find this book highly useful and thought-provoking as regards the ethical dimensions of language learning. As already said, it basically retains the frame of thinking from 1997 and does not take up discussions of the many other developments of the field since then. But it has a very clear critical message that is relevant to all (foreign and second) language teaching and assessment: language learners are human beings and should have the opportunity to develop as independent and critical citizens in a culturally and linguistically diverse world.

One can characterize the position of the book with reference to the points of critique focused on. Byram is explicitly critical of instrumental approaches to (language) teaching and learning. He warns of focusing only on measurable skills and proficiency. Without saying so directly, he is in opposition to neoliberal approaches to language teaching. He is also critical of prejudice and stereotypical thinking, as well as of inequality at large, which finds expression in his emphasis on human rights and democracy (in its many interpretations). At the centre of the book is the interest in *values*, so the orientation of the book is much more towards philosophical than sociological issues. There are very few references to more sociologically oriented approaches today, such as critical discourse analysis, poststructuralism, semiotic analysis, studies of sexism and racism, post- and decolonial studies.

The book is highly recommendable because of its clear message as stated above. It is also very well structured and easily accessible, and it can be used as a reference work or stepping-stone for planning and reflection in the field of language teaching and assessment. I do welcome this book with its positive approach and strong conviction of the educational importance of learning.

Author biodata

Karen Risager is Professor Emerita in Intercultural Studies at Roskilde University, Denmark. She has published widely on the relationships between language and culture in a transnational and global perspective, and on the consequences for the intercultural learning of the global citizen. A special focus has been the geopolitical role of textbooks for various languages and used in various contexts. Among her publications are *Language and Culture: Global Flows and Local Complexity* (2006); *Language and Culture Pedagogy: From a National to a Transnational Paradigm* (2007); *Representations of the World in Language Textbooks* (2018).