

Intercultural Competences and Language Assessment: Reflections from Foreign Language Teachers

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Abstract

In recent years, intercultural competence (IC) has gained prominence in foreign language (FL) education, reflecting broader societal shifts toward global interconnectedness and the need for culturally responsive pedagogy. This article investigates how FL teachers in Denmark conceptualize, teach, and assess IC within the existing framework of national curricula that emphasize global citizenship and intercultural understanding. Based on analyses of the national FL curricula and data from the *Teachers' Literacy in Language Testing and Assessment* (LiSE) project (2020–2022), which included a nationwide survey and follow-up interviews with English, French, German, and Spanish teachers, the study explores the cognitive and practical dimensions of teachers' engagement with IC. Findings reveal a strong commitment among educators to fostering students' intercultural awareness, yet highlight persistent challenges in aligning instructional practices with assessment strategies due to limited guidance and consensus on evaluating ICC. The article discusses these tensions and offers implications for enhancing language assessment literacy and supporting the integration of IC in FL education.

Keywords: intercultural competence; intercultural communicative competence; assessment; language and culture

Introduction

Within the field of foreign language (FL) education, intercultural competence (IC) has undergone a great deal of transformation in recent years, mirroring broader societal changes in global communication, education, and cultural exchange. The growing emphasis on

Kling, Joyce, and Slobodanka Dimova. 2026. 'Intercultural Competences and Language Assessment: Reflections from Foreign Language Teachers.' *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 25(1): 152–180. <https://doi.org/10.35360/njes.v25i1.63690>. Copyright (c) 2026 Joyce Kling <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8491-4701>, Slobodanka Dimova <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0017-6255>. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

internationalism has prompted a shift in educational planning, positioning language teaching to address global challenges and cultivate global citizenship (Byram 2018; Risager 2021). From this perspective, language education has become a platform for students to view both the world and their own cultural context through new, more critical lenses, and the development of IC, i.e., intercultural understanding and appropriate adaptation to pluricultural contexts, has emerged as a central objective in many educational settings (Brandt 2024).

IC is often integrated into FL teaching through sociocultural theory. More specifically, the social context in which English as a foreign language is used requires multilingual students to use multiple resources to think and act in a way that will lead to successful communication (Byram, Holms, and Savvides 2013). Over the past couple of decades, the integration of dedicated focus on IC, and more specifically, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), i.e., appropriate linguistics and pragmatic strategies, into FL instruction has gained prominence, aligning with the goals established by frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2020). Still, while the inclusion of IC is now a recognized element of FL communicative competence, it remains unclear how to assess it. In Denmark, this shift toward linking FL education with global problem-solving is reflected in national curricula, where intercultural contact and understanding are emphasized as core goals at both primary and lower secondary levels. However, despite the growing recognition, aligning student assessment with curricular goals and learning outcomes continues to pose a significant challenge.

This article explores how FL teachers in Denmark perceive and approach teaching and assessment of students' IC. Based on analysis of Danish national FL curricula and data from the *Teachers' Literacy in Language Testing and Assessment (LiSE)*¹ project (2020–2022), we examine the cognitive and practical dimensions of teachers' engagement with IC. The LiSE project aimed to enhance language assessment literacy through a national needs assessment, which included a broad nation-wide

¹ Teachers' literacy in language testing and assessment (*Læreres literacitet i sprogtestning og evaluering*) (LiSE): <https://cip.ku.dk/english/projects-and-collaborations/teachers-literacy-in-language-testing-and-assessment/>

survey and follow-up interviews with teachers of English, as well as other modern languages of French, German, and Spanish, across primary and secondary education. While the broader project addressed multiple facets of language assessment, in this article, we focus specifically on how teachers conceptualize, teach, and assess IC in the FL classroom. We explore the tension between teachers' desire to help students develop intercultural competence and the lack of consensus on assessing this aspect of foreign language learning. Given the special status of English in Denmark, a language that is widely present in different communicative settings and serves as a lingua franca, there was an expectation that IC would be treated differently than in the cases of other modern foreign languages. Therefore, we included these three languages for comparison purposes.

We begin with an overview of current definitions and understandings of teaching and assessing IC. We then present the inclusion and descriptions of IC and the related construct intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the Danish national curricula documents for both English and other modern FLs across educational levels. Next, drawing on interview data from teachers across the country, we present reflections on teaching and assessment related to intercultural elements. Lastly, we discuss these findings and future implications for L2 teaching and learning context.

Definitions of intercultural competence

Various theoretical approaches have shaped the understanding of IC emphasizing different elements of intercultural engagement. Overall, IC has been accepted in the literature as the 'ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's knowledge, skills, and attitudes' (Deardorff 2006: 249). Within FL education literature, several frameworks have been influential in its application (Byram 1997; Deardorff 2006; Jensen 2013; Liddicoat and Scarino 2013; Risager 2007).

One of the most influential models within IC that focuses specifically on skills and strategies for successful interaction is Byram's *Intercultural Communicative Competence* (ICC) model (1997). Byram's model involves individuals with different social identities sharing a common understanding and interacting as people with multiple identities, essentially qualities of a competent intercultural speaker (Hoff 2020). This

model highlights five key dimensions (*savoirs*) necessary for effective intercultural interactions, including attitudes (e.g., curiosity and openness), knowledge of social groups and cultural practices, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Byram's emphasis on ethical reflection and political awareness distinguishes his model, particularly in the context of FL education.

Expanding Byram's model of ICC, Risager (2007) proposes a broader, transnational framework that incorporates both measurable competences and learners' individual cultural-linguistic resources. Her model comprises ten interrelated elements, including linguistic skills, cultural knowledge, translation, discourse analysis, ethnographic methods, and critical cultural awareness, emphasizing how language use both reflects and constructs cultural meaning. Additionally, Risager challenges the traditional nation-bound view of culture in language education; instead she conceptualizes culture as fluid, hybrid, and shaped by global dynamics. She positions ICC as a process of identity negotiation and critical engagement with cultural diversity. Furthermore, she critiques conventional assessment practices for their narrow focus on linguistic accuracy, advocating for more holistic, formative approaches that assess learners' intercultural awareness, ethical positioning, and reflective capacities.

Deardorff (2006) defines IC as effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations. Often used in international education and intercultural training, her *Process Model* views IC as an interplay of personal and interpersonal elements, categorized under knowledge, skills, attitudes, and internal and external attributes. Her model centers on the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contexts, supported by attitudes (respect, openness), knowledge and skills (observation, evaluation), and both internal (e.g., empathy, adaptability) and external outcomes (e.g., appropriate behavior). IC learning is a cyclical transition from knowledge through attitudes and skills to intrinsic and extrinsic changes. As such, Deardorff advocates for using both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess IC.

Offering a broader, holistic perspective, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) define IC not as a set of competencies, but as a dialogic and interpretive process involving the capacity to make meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Central to their model is reflexivity, where individuals

critically reflect on their own cultural background while bridging understanding between different cultural perspectives. Their approach emphasizes the co-construction of meaning and the dynamic nature of intercultural encounters. Rather than viewing competence as a fixed set of skills, they frame it as an evolving process of engagement and understanding. Thus, they approach assessment of IC (and explicit ICC) as a qualitative, cyclical process. They argue that assessment should involve conceptualizing, eliciting, judging, and validating intercultural learning in ways that reflect its complexity and context-dependence (Liddicoat and Scarino 2020).

Notable in the Scandinavian context is Jensen's (2013) model that offers a critical and practice-oriented perspective on IC. This model contains three interrelated dimensions: cognitive (knowledge of cultural norms and power structures), affective (empathy, openness, emotional reflexivity), and communicative/action-oriented (the ability to act and negotiate meaning across cultures). Drawing on poststructuralist and postcolonial theory, Jensen emphasizes the constructed and power-laden nature of culture, advocating for a non-essentialist and context-sensitive approach. Her model is especially suited for professionals, (e.g., educators, social workers, and healthcare providers) working in multiethnic societies.

Although the range of models demonstrates the variety of interpretations of this construct, they all involve how people meet and cooperate across social, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, and the skills they must possess for these encounters to succeed. There is a consensus that IC is a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics supporting effective and appropriate interactions in different cultural contexts (Bennet 2008). While the models differ in emphasis and focus, inclusion of intercultural elements under the umbrella of language instruction aligns with the sociocultural theory of language teaching.

It is also important to note that over the last decade there has also been a shift from focusing primarily on IC to accentuating *intercultural understanding*. Intercultural understanding, often considered a foundational element of IC, refers to an

awareness of and respect for diverse (linguistic) behaviors, beliefs, and values in different linguistic and cultural communities, particularly awareness of how assumptions about social relationships, social categorizations, and power interface

with speakers' judgments about language use in context. (McConachy and Liddicoat 2021)

Intercultural understanding emphasizes empathy, perspective-taking, and the ability to see the world through others' cultural lenses, particularly in response to critiques of earlier models like Byram's ICC model. Interculture understanding has developed in response to researchers increasing contention that FL teaching and assessment of IC models place too much emphasis on fixed cultural facts and measurable skills, while neglecting the dynamic, relational, and interpretive aspects of intercultural interactions that are shaped by context and mutual understanding (Liddicoat and Scarino 2020). Intercultural understanding is frequently used in educational settings, particularly in curricula that aim to foster global citizenship and mutual respect among students from diverse backgrounds (Brandt 2024).

Assessment of intercultural communicative competence

Given the challenges of assessing IC arising from the multifaceted characteristics of the construct, Fantini (2012) recommends an on-going multimethod assessment approach that helps follow students' development of this competence over time. According to Fantini, communicative competence in the target language represents the fundament for development of ICC, and therefore, should be assessed separately through existing language assessment methods. The other components of the IC construct, characteristics (attributes), areas (relationships, communication, and collaboration), and domains (knowledge, attitudes/affect, skills, and awareness) are different in nature, and therefore difficult to measure through traditional assessment methods; instead, they require longitudinal assessment through observation and self-reporting.

Considering that in upper secondary FL education the focus tends to rest on both development of language skills, as well as understanding and analysis of literary texts, Schat, van der Knaap, and de Graaff (2021) introduce the term *intercultural literary competence*. They define this term by adding intended learning objectives related to text understanding and interpretation alongside the five dimensions of intercultural competence in Byram's model (1997) (Schat, van der Knaap, Ewout, and de Graaff 2021). The instrument for assessment of intercultural literary competence

they propose is based on a self-reported questionnaire based on attitudinal and can-do statements.

As noted above, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) emphasize that IC is not a fixed set of skills but a dynamic, context-dependent process that unfolds through interaction and reflection. Based on this viewpoint, they argue that assessing intercultural understanding in language education requires a shift away from traditional, standardized frameworks (e.g., CEFR scales) toward more nuanced, qualitative approaches. In other words, assessment should be embedded within the learning process itself, rather than treated as a separate or final stage (Liddicoat and Scarino 2020). They recommend viewing assessment as a cyclical and interpretive process, comprising stages of conceptualizing, eliciting, judging, and validating, that captures the evolving nature of learners' intercultural development. This approach calls for assessments that are contextualized, multilingual, and responsive to learners' diverse experiences and linguistic repertoires. Rather than focusing solely on factual cultural knowledge or linguistic accuracy, assessments should aim to capture learners' ability to navigate between languages and cultures, engage in reflective thinking, and demonstrate intercultural awareness in authentic communicative situations.

Teacher cognition and intercultural communication

Teacher cognition (TC) research explores the beliefs, knowledge, and self-reflections that shape teachers' pedagogical decisions and classroom practices. It encompasses teachers' planning, teaching, and assessment, as well as their attitudes toward students, learning, and their own professional performance (Borg 2015). Central to this field is the recognition that what teachers believe and what they do in practice may not always align (Henriksen et al. 2020). These beliefs are dynamic and influenced by personal experiences, professional training, and contextual factors such as class size, student diversity, curriculum demands, and assessment frameworks. Since the 1990s, studies in language teacher cognition have expanded significantly, focusing on areas such as grammar instruction, pronunciation, error correction, feedback, multilingualism, and teacher identity (Henriksen et al. 2020). However, there is a paucity of research specifically addressing teacher cognition in relation to teaching and evaluation of ICC at in FL education in primary and upper secondary school levels.

TC research in these areas highlights that teachers' beliefs, awareness, and training significantly shape how IC is understood, taught, and assessed in FL classrooms. The studies emphasize the need for systematic IC training and professional development to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to foster intercultural competence in students (Zhang, Su, and Lütge 2024). However, findings show a persistent disconnect between teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices. Studies by Sercu et al. (2005) and Risager (1998) find no consistent relationship between teachers' perceptions of IC and how they implement it in the classroom. Sercu et al. (2005) identified two teacher profiles: those favorably and those unfavorably disposed toward integrating IC. Yet they noted that even supportive teachers often struggled to translate their beliefs into pedagogical action. The findings suggest that while many teachers are moving toward an IC-oriented approach, they often fall short of the comprehensive knowledge, skills, and attitudes expected of IC-competent educators. Similarly, Aleksandrowicz-Pędich et al. (2003) find that although European FL teachers acknowledged the importance of working with students on developing IC and their ICC, few had received systematic training in the area. Most lacked a clear understanding of how to incorporate ICC into their teaching. In terms of aim, Zhang, Su, and Lütge (2024) find that pre-service teachers of English and German in China differ in their approaches to teaching ICC: English teachers emphasized intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness, while German teachers focused more on language proficiency and cultural knowledge. These differences were shaped by personal experiences such as study abroad and language exposure, highlighting how individual and contextual factors influence teacher cognition across language specializations.

English in the Danish education system

English as a subject in Danish education is introduced as an obligatory subject in second grade, when students are seven years old, and is given throughout elementary, lower secondary, and the first years of upper secondary education as an obligatory subject. Elementary and lower secondary education is obligatory and lasts 10 years (0–9th grade), with the possibility to take the optional 10th grade.

English is so well-ingrained in the educational system that, in the high school contexts, it is no longer viewed as a foreign language subject but a

subject that focuses on history, literature, and culture in English-speaking countries. This is the case especially with the three-year upper secondary education that is university preparatory, also known as *gymnasium* (stx), where English is offered at B level (two years) or A level (three years). In addition to stx, there are other three-year general education types of upper secondary schools, such as higher commercial examination program (hhx) and higher technical examination program (htx). Students also have the option of taking a two-year higher preparatory examination program (hf), which builds on 10th grade and provides access to universities under limited conditions. Currently, the upper secondary education is undergoing a reform, where a new two-year program (epx) will be introduced in 2030, which will be university preparatory but more practice-oriented than stx (UVM 2025). With the reform, 10th grade and hf will be discontinued, while it remains unclear whether htx and hhx will remain.

The curricula for the subject English have not been systematically aligned with the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020), but there is an expectation that students graduating from obligatory education (9th grade) are at level B1, while those who have English B (stx, hhx, htx) are at B2 level and those who have English A are at C1 level. In addition to the focus on language proficiency and textual analysis, IC has also been part of the English curricula at different educational levels. Therefore, the current study focuses on examining the presence of IC in FL curricula and FL teachers' conceptualizations and operationalizations of IC in their assessment practices in order to improve our understanding of the IC construct and operationalization.

Method

Although there has been increased awareness of the need for teaching that includes IC, it is difficult to determine how to adapt evaluation of students in relation to intercultural learning in teaching materials and learning objectives. Therefore, it is important to examine 1) how the constructs of IC or ICC are defined in the curricula for the subject of English and the other foreign languages and 2) how teachers operationalize the constructs in their teaching and evaluation. Therefore, our study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What terms associated with the construct *intercultural competence* are present in the Danish national FL curricula (at primary, secondary, and upper secondary school levels)? How frequently are these terms used across the FL curricula?
2. How do FL teachers in Denmark conceptualize IC?
3. What are FL teachers' reported IC assessment practices?

To address these challenges, we collected a corpus of the curricula for the foreign languages and interview data from language teachers (328,161 words; 382,296 tokens). The corpus analysis consisted of identifying the variety and the frequency of intercultural concepts that occur in the foreign language curricular documents. In terms of variety, we used the KWIC (keyword in context) functionality in Sketch Engine to identify the use of different terms associated with IC and selected the following phrases: 1) intercultural competence, 2) intercultural communicative competence, 3) intercultural understanding, and 4) intercultural contact. In relation to frequency, we identified the prevalence of intercultural references across the foreign languages and the educational levels. To obtain a comparative perspective of the conceptualizations of IC in English and the other foreign languages in the analysis, we included the 14 curricular documents about English, French, and German as foreign language subjects in elementary and secondary education (curricula, common goals, teaching guides, and exam guides) and the 26 curricular documents about the same language subjects and Spanish² in upper secondary education (curricula and teaching guides).

² Spanish is not offered in primary/lower secondary education.

Table 1. Language teachers interview for the LiSE project

Teacher	Gender	School	Level	Language
GA1	F	GA	upper secondary	German
GA2	M	GA	upper secondary	German
GA3	M	GA	upper secondary	German
GA4	F	GA	upper secondary	English
GA5	F	GA	upper secondary	English
GB1	F	GB	upper secondary	German
GB2	F	GB	upper secondary	German
GB3	F	GB	upper secondary	Spanish
GB4	F	GB	upper secondary	Spanish
GB5	F	GB	upper secondary	French
GB6	F	GB	upper secondary	French
GB7	F	GB	upper secondary	English
GB8	F	GB	upper secondary	English
GC1	F	GC	upper secondary	German
GC2	F	GC	upper secondary	Spanish
GC3	F	GC	upper secondary	German
GD1	F	GD	upper secondary	French & English
GD	F	GD	upper secondary	Spanish & English
GD3	F	GD	upper secondary	Spanish & German
GC4	F	GD	upper secondary	German
FA1	F	FA	primary/lower secondary	German
FA2	F	FA	primary/lower secondary	German & English
FB1	M	FB	primary/lower secondary	English
FC1	F	FC	primary/lower secondary	English
FC2	F	FC	primary/lower secondary	French
FD1	F	FD	primary/lower secondary	French
FE1	F	FE	primary/lower secondary	French
FF1	F	FF	primary/lower secondary	French
FF2	F	FF	primary/lower secondary	English

We then collected interview data from 29 language teachers of English, French, German, and Spanish across all levels of education in Denmark. The interviews were conducted as part of the larger LiSE project. The teachers are a small subset of the respondents to a nationwide survey (n=560), who volunteered to participate in a follow-up interview. Interviews were conducted with nine primary/secondary school teachers from six schools and 20 upper secondary school teachers from four different schools (see Table 1).

The schools, located all over the country, participated in LiSE on a voluntary basis. In semi-structured interviews conducted by five LiSE team members (experienced language teachers), the FL teachers were asked about their educational background, training in language assessment, language and acquisition perspectives (Ladegaard and Bjerre 2007), cultural perspectives, and considerations regarding the evaluation of students' linguistic and intercultural competences.

These interviews included a series of open-ended questions about the teachers' educational backgrounds, language assessment training, reflections on students' language competencies and assessments, as well as focused questions on intercultural competence and assessment. For the purposes of this article, we focused specifically on the latter, i.e., *What do your students need to know to show their intercultural competences?* Each interview was conducted in Danish by two LiSE members and lasted approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were held and recorded on Zoom and then transcribed verbatim (Poldan 1995), independently reviewed by each LiSE member and thematically coded (Byrne 2022). Once overarching themes were collaboratively defined and named, these were then analyzed by at least two members of the LiSE team. Direct quotations have been translated into English by the authors.

Results and analysis

To provide a link between the teachers' conceptualizations and assessment practices related to the construct of intercultural communicative competence, we begin with a presentation of the variety and the frequency of intercultural concepts that we identified in the foreign language curricular documents. While our focus is on English education, we include findings from the other modern foreign for comparison.

IC in foreign language curricula at primary and lower secondary education level in Denmark

Both the teaching guides and the learning objectives (i.e., the Danish Common Goals) in the Danish FL curricula at primary and lower secondary school level include direct references to intercultural competence or references to cultural understanding and cultural encounter (see Table 2). Similar to the curricula for the other foreign language subjects (French and German), the curriculum for the subject English is based on the premise that students should develop not only their linguistic competence in a foreign language, but also their ability to become language users who build bridges across different cultures and languages and understand the constant changes in language and culture (Byram 2020). Therefore, students' understanding of society and culture is represented as a core competence that interacts with competences related to oral and written communication (UVM 2024).

Table 2: Frequency of intercultural references in primary and lower secondary language curricula and exams

Language	Curriculum		Exam		Terms	
	Years 1-9	Year 10	Year 9	Year 10	Years 1-9	Year 10
English	38	7	0	0	• intercultural contact • intercultural communication • intercultural competence	• intercultural competence • intercultural understanding • intercultural contact
French	28	2	0	0	• intercultural competence • intercultural communicative competence • intercultural understanding	• intercultural understanding
German	22	2	0	0	• intercultural understanding	• intercultural understanding

In the subject booklets (*Faghæfter*³) for each of the three subjects, there are definitions about culture and intercultural competence, as well as various suggestions for activities that allow teachers to provide the relevant contexts and communicative situations that enhance students' development of this competence. Whereas in the English curriculum the central term used to introduce and define the construct of intercultural competence is *intercultural contact*, the French and German curricula introduce this construct through the concept of *intercultural understanding*.

All curricula place IC under competences associated with culture and society and suggest that competence development starts with students' awareness of cultural differences and curiosity, leading to their ability to communicate appropriately within particular cultural situations. For instance, the English curriculum provides concrete descriptions of the intercultural contact and skills students should obtain during their elementary school level (Grades 1–4 and 5–7) and lower secondary school level (Grades 8–9). According to these descriptions, while in the first grades the students are expected to meet new cultures through texts and gain ability to describe their own cultural experiences, in Grades 5–7, students should develop curiosity about other cultures and become aware of the role of language, norms, and values in intercultural communication, and in the final grades, they become capable of reflecting about culture and cultural practices in order to overcome stereotyping and conflicts arising from cultural misunderstanding.

The teaching guides (*Undervisningsvejledninger*) for all three subjects draw on Byram's model (1997) to introduce the five elements of ICC (UVM 2024a, 2024b, 2022). The teaching guides for German and French relate intercultural understanding to ICC, thus relating the communicative (linguistic, pragmatic, strategic) and the intercultural competences. The teaching guide for English does not mention the term 'intercultural communicative competence' but introduces the three dimensions of Jensen's (2013) IC model, which, alongside knowledge and emotions, includes reference to communication skills needed to express intercultural sensitivity.

³ The subject booklet (*Faghæfter*) consists of the Common Objectives (*Fælles mål*), the curriculum (*læseplan*) and the guidelines for the subject (*Vejledning for faget*).

The exam guides for English, like the other foreign languages, do not include direct references to intercultural competence in the exam description or the assessment criteria. However, they underline that assessment should elicit students' ability to apply their knowledge of cultural and social conditions in the countries where the language is used. Moreover, oral and written performance-based tasks across all languages are conceptualized as fictive cultural encounters in which the students use their speaking and writing skills to present their thoughts and experience to interlocutors/audience from the target culture (UVM 2024a). For example, in the case of English, the students are given text and pictures *with information about culture and social conditions in English-speaking countries* in the test presentation for free written presentation, which they use when answering the assignment. In the oral examination, the students are required to 'use sources about conditions in English-speaking countries within the area of their presentation' (UVM 2024a: 5). But what these cultural encounters entail can be freely interpreted, and how is assessed is up to the individual teacher. Similar statements can be found in the subject booklets for French and German (UVM 2024b; UVM 2022).

Overall, the English curriculum pays equal attention to IC as the curricula of the other foreign languages. It is embedded in the curricular goals related to society and culture, which is one of the main curricular areas, together with oral and written communicative competence. Therefore, references to concepts related to IC permeate each document in the subject booklet for English, thus creating a link between the curricula, the learning goals, the teaching guides, and the exam guides. Although references to IC are found also in the curricula for the subjects English across the different school types at upper secondary education level, they are not as frequent and tend to be associated with text interpretation.

IC in foreign language curricula at upper secondary education level in Denmark

Unlike the foreign language curricula at elementary and lower secondary educational level, which contain definitions and examples of multiple terms associated with IC, the foreign language curricula (*Læreplaner*) for the upper secondary education include only references to ICC without specific definitions or operationalizations (see Table 3). In fact, the curricula for English at A and B level do not even mention interculturality, while the curricula for French and German just mention that these subjects

are dual-focused academic knowledge subjects comprised of skills subject matter and intercultural subject matter (UVM 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). In all three, the students are to work with the historical, cultural, and social conditions in the countries where the language is used.

Table 3: Frequency of intercultural references in upper secondary language curricula and exams

Language	Level	Curriculum	Exam	Term
English	A stx	0	0	• intercultural communicative competence
	B stx	0	0	• intercultural communicative competence
	A htx	1	0	• intercultural communicative competence
	B htx	1	0	• intercultural communicative competence
	A hhx	1	N/A	• intercultural communicative competence
	B hf	0	0	• intercultural communicative competence
French	Beginning A	4	7	• intercultural competence • intercultural communicative competence • intercultural understanding
	Continuing A	4	7	• intercultural competence • intercultural communicative competence • intercultural understanding
	Continuing B	4	4	• intercultural competence • intercultural communicative competence • intercultural understanding
German	Beginning A	2	0	• intercultural communicative competence • intercultural understanding
	Continuing A	2	0	• intercultural communicative competence • intercultural understanding
	Continuing B	2	0	• intercultural communicative competence • intercultural understanding

The guidelines for subjects, on the other hand, provide definitions of the ICC construct to varying degrees. In the guides for the subject English across all different upper secondary schools, ICC is mentioned under the section on communicative competence stating, ‘there is a focus on intercultural communicative competence, i.e. students must also master socio-cultural and intercultural aspects of a given language’ (UVM 2023a:

8). Compared to English, where the term lacks definition and elaboration, the guides for the subjects German, French, and Italian contain sections dedicated to defining the construct. The guides for German (beginner A, continuing A, and continuing B), underline that ICC relates to students' development of cultural awareness and intercultural understanding of other languages and cultures and is based on dialog, curiosity, exchange and reflection (c.f. UVM 2024c, 2023b). It adds that language proficiency and cultural knowledge are important tools in the acquisition of ICC, enabling students to take their place as democratic citizens in a globalized and changing knowledge society that is in constant change (UVM 2024c: 7). The guides for the subjects French (beginning A, continuing A, and continuing B) and Italian (beginning A), on the other hand, operationalize the construct providing a concrete list of knowledge and skills that it consists of, such as: 1) skills and knowledge of how to communicate in daily situations; 2) pragmatic skills, e.g., politeness; 3) ability to engage in open-minded dialogues with others; 4) mastery of linguistic skills in the target language; and 5) ability to participate in dialogues in order to understand other peoples' perspectives (UVM, 2024c: 16).

When it comes to the exam guides, ICC is mentioned in the guiding information regarding continuing assessment, but most guides lack references to this competence in the assessment criteria. The only exam guides that include IC in the formal assessment criteria are those for French. Here, the guides refer to the curricula and the subject guides for more information about its operationalization.

In sum, IC lacks the same level of attention in the English curricula as in those for other foreign languages and is considerably less present than in the curriculum for English in elementary and lower secondary education. Although IC is introduced under the section related to communicative competence, the assessment of this construct is associated more with the subject matter, such as text analysis and interpretation, rather than with language skills.

Teacher's reflections

In their interview responses, the English teachers and modern foreign language teachers shared similar reflections, however these differed by educational level. Analysis of the data revealed two main themes related to the conceptualization and assessment of IC: 1) *implicit inclusion* of IC in assessment through content and contextualized language and 2) IC as

fact-based knowledge. While implicit inclusion was more prevalent among upper secondary teachers, IC as a fact-based knowledge was more present among elementary/lower secondary teachers. These diverging conceptualizations can be linked to the differences in the curricular goals between the two educational levels, i.e., while primary/lower secondary FL education focuses on general communication, upper secondary FL education focuses on historical and cultural perspectives on literary and non-literary texts. In the following subsections, we present FL teachers' IC conceptualizations and assessment practices in relation to the two main themes.

Implicit inclusion

The first theme evident from the upper secondary school teachers' responses focuses on assessment of IC as part of regular instruction. While the teachers recognized the curricular focus on IC, they did not directly assess it. They did not conceptualize IC as a separate competence that could be assessed in isolation but as a competence integrated into instruction with focus on elements of language and literature. Therefore, they reported that they assessed IC implicitly when they assessed students' understanding of fiction and non-fiction texts. For example, an English teacher noted how assessment of student production in an experimental content and language integrated learning program (noted as *innovative courses*) provided opportunities to assess their students:

We've just done an innovation course with math and English, where someone investigates why so many Hispanics in Florida vote for Trump, when they vote for Biden in California, and they look at statistics in math, but they read articles from news media and newspapers over in English. And then I assess whether the product that comes out is professional. And cultural understanding and historical understanding are always part of the subjects. So I think they are assessed on these at the same time. (GD4-eng/fr)

In comparison with the English teacher, a Spanish teacher mentioned that she introduces many examples of intercultural focus in Spanish teaching, especially in the final year of upper secondary school, since there is a direct requirement for intercultural competencies in the most advanced

level FL courses. She expects her students to be able to reflect on Spanish conditions and Spanish culture with both a small and capital C.

And then they can see that, well, it's completely different from how we behave in Denmark, for example. But they have to be able to assimilate that and be able to talk about it so that we can get a little discussion out of it. A little conversation out of it, so you can find out that they have understood this. (GC2-sp)

Interculturality is implicit and in some cases necessary to bring forward for understanding and content comprehension. In the English class, for example, the focus on literary analysis at the upper secondary school level drives perceptions regarding both instruction and assessment of IC. One English teacher emphasized: 'It's clear that all literature you read is an expression of a cultural approach. We talk about that' (GA4-eng). However, IC does not become an isolated element for assessment: 'But I can have a slightly strained relationship with such application-oriented and intercultural perspectives. Not that I don't talk about it, but just not as a separate subject and not something I assess in that way' (GA4-eng). Though assessment for this knowledge often takes place during oral exams, it can also be part of a written assignment. A Spanish teacher noted, 'If I do a test on it, then it could be a written assignment. I could do a written assignment where I kind of went in and focused on [...] this particular topic' (GC2-sp).

Several upper secondary FL teachers thought that IC develops unconsciously when students acquire the pragmatics of language and are exposed to particular cultural topics such as historical and literary texts and videos. For some, intercultural competencies form the basis of all language teaching and are therefore part of everything that goes on in the classroom. For example, one teacher who teaches both English and French stated:

Well, I think that in a language subject, it kind of goes without saying. Because we're constantly talking about something that takes place somewhere other than right here at home in Denmark. ... I don't think it can be avoided that it's just part of it, you know. When we work with it and when we talk about what it's really about, and how is... how is it different from something we know.

So I think we do that in a conversation, continuously. (GD4-eng/fr)

She went on to explain that while it is important to include this in discussions, assessment is difficult since some people are drawn more to these types of topics and have more of an interest:

So it's also something to do with your... what shall we say... level of abstraction in one way or another. What are you able to... bring something up, look beyond yourself, so... So that... but that... Yes, some people are better at that, but I also think it has something to do with... where their interest lies, right. (GD4-eng/fr)

While most FL teachers from upper secondary schools emphasized the implicitness of IC in their teaching and assessment practices, most elementary and lower secondary teachers conceptualized IC not as a competence but fact-based knowledge.

Fact-based knowledge

Comments from FL teachers across languages at both the upper secondary school and primary school levels also suggested that some teachers conceptualized IC as a fact-based knowledge. Therefore, in the assessment practices they reported, some of them avoided assessing IC, and some of them assessed explicitly their students' factual knowledge.

Some FL teachers avoided assessing IC because they distinguished between cultural knowledge and communicative competence and or because it is not an explicit element on the national exam. They described IC as something that develops unconsciously when students acquire the pragmatics of language and are exposed to particular cultural topics such as historical and literary texts and videos. For example, an upper secondary school English teacher responded:

I actually never thought about evaluating it (cultural understanding). I mean separately. ... Yes. I actually think primarily in terms of language. If you have to think about evaluation, I primarily think about language and text work. But maybe also in a broader sense. Yes, so you can put it into the context in which it is now. But it stays. That's because I also think

that it's very knowledge-based, and of course we need to be able to do it, but I just think that it's often a framework for something you're doing... so I've never actually thought about it separately. (GA5-eng)

Likewise, this German upper secondary school teacher stated that she did not assess ICC because it is not part of the exam and because she viewed it as knowledge-based, not as competence.

We have a large part of the subject that is also cultural understanding, and there is not much of that in our exams.' ... It's also more about understanding the historical contexts and gaining an insight into it. So it's not really exam-oriented, but it is anyway, because I think it's... or maybe it's not exam-oriented, but it's definitely at the core of, of, of, of the purposes we have with the subject, right. It's not something I do just for the fun of it. But of course, it's not something they can redeem when they come to the exam. (GB1-gr)

Assessing IC as an isolated competence is also seen to be at odds with holistic assessment for a comprehensive grade. Instead, aspects of IC are reviewed in students' reflective work related to text analysis or literary interpretation. Here an English teacher explains that she assesses these types of response as part of text comprehension:

I haven't had that as a separate area, because uh... well, it, it, it, it, it's like... well, when they say that the exam... that it's an overall assessment or something like that. So it's very much connected, you could say it's very much connected to the understanding of a given text. (GD8-eng)

At the primary school level, teachers provided critical perspectives about IC. One of these French teachers explicitly noted that they did not actually know how she would assess her students, particularly since she found the focus at this level to be superficial:

I can see from the students whether they are interested in meeting students from France, for example, and getting in touch with them

and so. Some are in contact with them in their free time, and some are not so interested. But I don't know, because we're also a school with a lot of students who come from different families, i.e., with different ethnic origins, and yes... I don't think it's something we address in everyday life. And I don't know how to assess my students in terms of how competent they are. Well, I actually think they are. But I don't know how to assess it.
... I'm not so much interested in them learning about Paris and the Eiffel Tower and so on. (FF1-fr)

and

But it's difficult to assess, I think. Uh... It's often something that arises in a conversation, or because you present them with something where they have to think about something in relation to themselves and their own family or their own everyday life or. Mhm. ... (FD1-fr)

While some teachers avoided assessing IC as a separate (sub)skill, other primary/lower secondary school FL teachers stated that they assessed IC as explicit academic content and fact-based knowledge. For example, teachers mentioned that, as suggested by the curricular documents, they taught and assessed target culture historical highlights, literature, or social topics through multimodal input such as literary texts or new articles, YouTube videos, and/or films. These are used as receptive input for the students' productive written and oral assignments, where students have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of specific content and factual knowledge. One English teacher struggled with discussions beyond identifying cultural markers but acknowledges difficulties in how to evaluate the students' reflections:

And we've looked... and we've compared India both with Denmark, but also with some other English-speaking countries. So the fact that they suddenly get a sense that there are still some similarities, but also some differences in culture and so on... It uh... Yes, but how to assess it. I find that difficult. Just like that very specifically. (FF2-eng)

The same approach appears in other FL classrooms:

And then you could say that now we've... now we had French, where we had about a Francophone country. And it had to include a national dish and flag, and there had to be... they also had to include part of the national anthem. So that was part of the assignment. But not... well, I... I don't consciously think about it, I would say... And then you can say, well, they've got something in there, but then... I think it depends on the texts. (FC1-fr/ger)

Thus, we see that from this perspective, cultural understanding is taught and assessed as a passive understanding of cultural phenomena and facts.

Discussion

The findings from our study highlight the variation in the reported practices FL teachers in Denmark utilize when engaging with the teaching and assessment of IC, revealing distinct differences between upper secondary and primary/lower secondary school contexts, which tend to be governed by the curricular foci and requirements. In upper secondary school, several FL teachers reported alignment of their instructional practices with curricular expectations by emphasizing academic text production grounded in historical and cultural content. This approach resonates with Schat, van der Knaap, and de Graaff's (2020) notion of *intercultural literary competence*, where literature and cultural narratives serve as vehicles for developing students' intercultural understanding. However, despite this alignment, many teachers expressed difficulty interpreting the role of IC due to the vagueness of curricular documents. This ambiguity often results in a disconnect between theoretical discussions of IC and their practical classroom applications, leading to an implicit rather than explicit integration of IC in teaching. The findings highlight the need for clearer definitions and guidance on IC in upper secondary curricula to support both instruction and assessment.

Likewise, consistent with existing literature (e.g., Byram, Holmes, and Savides, 2013) teachers acknowledged that certain dimensions of IC, particularly those involving attitudes, empathy, and critical cultural reflection, are not easily captured through traditional assessment methods. This reinforces the argument for a continuous, formative focus on IC within classroom practices rather than relying solely on summative

evaluations. Notably, communication as a component of IC was largely absent in teachers' responses, suggesting that IC is still predominantly understood through a cultural knowledge lens, rather than as a dynamic, communicative competence. In primary /lower secondary school, the FL teachers demonstrated an awareness of the importance of cultural encounters in language learning. However, several still approach culture from a factual, knowledge-based perspective, focusing on information about the target culture rather than fostering intercultural dialogue or reflection, which are at the center of IC.

While the national curricula for primary and lower secondary levels emphasize curiosity and awareness of cultural diversity, these goals are too general to inform assessment practices. As a result, teachers tend to avoid assessing IC, viewing it as an ongoing process rather than a discrete learning outcome. This avoidance reflects a broader challenge: IC is difficult to operationalize in ways that allow for reliable and valid assessment, particularly when it involves subjective, attitudinal, and reflective dimensions. The findings thus align with Risager and Svarstad's (2020) observation that the assessment of intercultural competences is a complex and controversial endeavor. They argue that the expectations placed on teachers may appear unrealistic, given that the development of ICC is inherently a lifelong process. This perspective helps explain why many teachers in our study hesitate to assess ICC directly, instead treating it as an implicit outcome of language exposure and cultural comparison. The tension between curricular ambitions and practice becomes particularly evident when teachers are expected to assess subjective, attitudinal, and reflective competencies that can be seen as personal, context-dependent, and evolving over time.

Interestingly, the study found that differences in IC conceptualizations and assessment practices were more pronounced between educational levels than between language subjects. This suggests that institutional and curricular directives at different levels of education play a more significant role in shaping teachers' approaches to IC than the specific language being taught. Overall, the findings point to a need for greater coherence between curricular goals, teacher training, and assessment practices related to IC. Supporting teachers in translating abstract curricular aims into concrete pedagogical and evaluative strategies is essential for fostering meaningful intercultural learning across all levels of FL education. Across levels, IC is often understood more as cultural understanding than as a

communicative or dialogic competence. This narrow interpretation limits the potential of IC to foster critical engagement with cultural diversity, as advocated by Liddicoat (2024), who emphasizes the importance of reflection and the development of learners as plurilingual individuals capable of navigating diverse cultural contexts. Lastly, the findings also support Liddicoat and Scarino's (2020) call for enhanced teacher assessment literacy. Teachers need support in making informed, interpretive judgments about students' intercultural learning, particularly judgments that acknowledge the subjective and situated nature of IC. This requires moving beyond conventional notions of objectivity in assessment and embracing more context-sensitive and formative approaches.

Conclusions

Our findings reinforce longstanding concerns in language education research regarding the assessment of IC (Byram 1997, 2020; Liddicoat 2024; Liddicoat and Scarino 2020). While IC is increasingly recognized as a core component of FL education, current assessment practices remain anchored in traditional models that inadequately capture the complexity of intercultural learning. For instance, English exams in upper secondary education focus on grammar analysis and analysis of literary works and understanding of topics related to the United States' and the United Kingdom's history and culture, as indicated in the curricular documents.

Despite the status of English as a lingua franca for communication in academic and non-academic contexts, the English curricula and English teachers' reflections on assessment did not suggest an increased attention to IC. While the prevalence of IC terms and concepts in elementary and lower secondary school FL curricula did not differ much across the FLs, IC references were much less frequent in the English curricula than those of the other FLs in upper secondary education.

To move forward, there is a pressing need for greater coherence between curricular goals, teacher training, and assessment practices. This includes developing systematic, multidimensional assessment tools that encompass both cognitive and attitudinal aspects of IC, and equipping teachers with the pedagogical and evaluative skills necessary to implement them. Without such alignment, IC risks remaining a peripheral element of language education, acknowledged in theory but underdeveloped in practice. Ultimately, fostering meaningful intercultural learning requires not only curricular reform but also a reconceptualization of assessment

that values reflection, dialogue, and the lived experiences of learners as they engage with cultural diversity in and beyond the classroom.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the LiSE Project members: Elsebeth Bechmann, Danielle Eychenne, Vivien Lee Jensen, Dea Jespersen, and Catherine Watson. This project was funded by the Danish National Centre for Foreign Languages (NCFF).

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