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Title:

Redefinition of intercultural communication competence: Navigating towards an inclusive framework for coexistence in maritime education in Turkey

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To cite this article:

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Abstract

Maritime education and training serve as a fundamental pillar of the global maritime sector through the cultivation of competent professionals equipped to manage the evolving and increasingly intricate challenges of modern maritime operations. Given the continuing conceptual confusion surrounding the definition of intercultural communication competence (ICC), it was aimed with this study to trace the conceptual framework of ICC drawing on the perspectives of learners-students as future intercultural mediators and speakers from Maritime Higher Vocational School in Turkey. As a qualitative research method, a case study design was employed. Participants, selected through criterion sampling, consisted of students enrolled in an associate degree program of Maritime Transportation and Management, and Ship Machinery Management. Data obtained from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using content analysis. So, ICC was framed as a political initiative to promote intercultural dialogue, collaboration, and coexistence among diverse cultures, thereby fostering peaceful unity in navigating multicultural contexts. Therefore, preparing future navigators for their expected roles as intercultural speakers, mediators and negotiators is of paramount importance. Consequently, by reframing ICC as a tool for inclusive coexistence, potential challenges related to its implementation require meticulous consideration within the prevailing power dynamics, and warrant further examination.

Introduction

Maritime Education and Training (MET) constitutes a fundamental pillar of the global maritime sector through the cultivation of competent professionals equipped to effectively manage the evolving and increasingly complex challenges of modern maritime operations. It is an undeniable fact that today's globalization process necessitates the cultivation of the capacity for coexistence through intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding across diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, fostering intercultural communication competence (ICC) among students through Maritime Education and Training is of vital importance in navigating these diverse cultural contexts.

However, the definitional framework of ICC generally remains far conceptual consensus, as cited Deardorff (2015a, 2015b). Therefore, the term 'intercultural communication competence' has been subject to extensive scholarly debate, resulting in a plurality of definitions across the literature. One widely cited definition is "knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self" (Byram 1997, p. 34). Heyward (2002) describes intercultural competence as the 'understandings, competencies, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for successful cross-cultural engagement' (p. 10). Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, and Colby (2000, as cited in Leask, 2015, p. 62) describe it as "the culture-specific and culture general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures". In his formulation, Leclercq (2002) defines interculturality as follows: "Interculturality may be defined as the set of process through which relations between different cultures are constructed. The aim is to enable groups and individuals who belong to such cultures within a single society or geopolitical entity to forge links based on equity and mutual respect." (Leclercq, 2002, p.9). Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Model (1997) includes five components, commonly referred to as the 'savoirs', as cited below (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) (Figure 1):

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"Intercultural Attitudes(savoir-être): curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own.

Knowledge (savoirs): of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.

Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir-comprendre): ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own.

Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir-apprendre/faire): ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.

Critical cultural awareness/political education (savoir-s'engager): an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries."
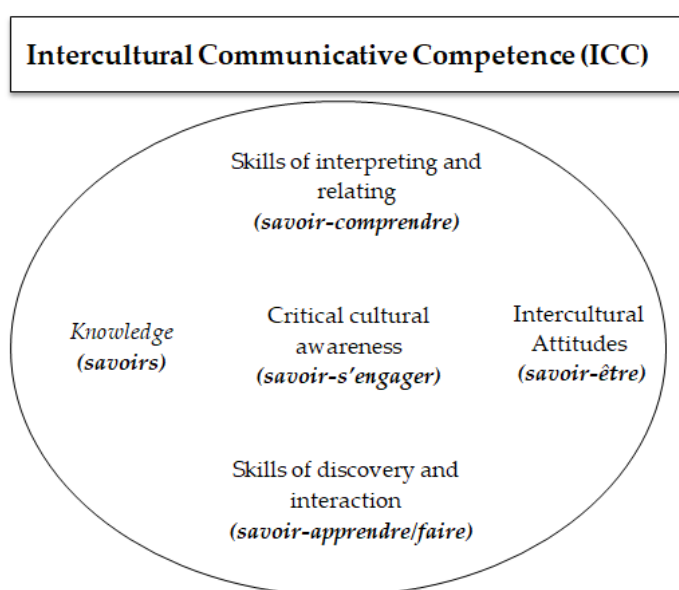
Fig. 1. Components of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997).

Method

Research Design

In this study, a case study design (Yin, 1994), was employed as one of the qualitative research method designs as the definitional framework of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) was analyzed within a single unit of analysis.

Participants

The study group was determined through criterion sampling (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.28) and comprised learners-students enrolled in a two-year associate degree program where ICC is incorporated into the university's mission and vision in the context of higher education in Turkey.

Aligned with this criterion, the distribution of students enrolled in Maritime Higher Vocational School (MHVS) programs was as follows, based on data from the Higher Education Information System (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK], n.d.): the Department of Ship Machinery Management had 21 students (Female: 29%; Male: 71%; n=17) and the Maritime Transportation and Management Program had 20 students (Female: 30%; Male: 70%; n=17).

Data Collection Tool

As the aim of the research was to explore the definitional and conceptual framework of ICC among students enrolled in a Maritime Higher Vocational School in higher education contexts, rather than to establish a consensus on its definition, data were collected during the 2022-2023 academic year using semi-structured interviews.

Analysis of Data

The data obtained from the research were analyzed, based on the ICC model of Byram (1997), using inductive and deductive content analysis in order to reveal the underlying concepts and relationships between them through coding (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2013, p. 259).

Validity and Reliability

The themes and sub-themes arising from conceptual definitions were determined with experts from various disciplines, using the reliability formula proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) (Reliability = Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement)), and the inter-coder agreement rate was found to be 90%.

Results

In this section, findings regarding the Departments of Maritime Transportation and Management Program (MTM), and Ship Machinery Management Department (SMM) at Maritime Higher Vocational School (MHVS) are outlined below (Table 1).

Table 1.

Frequency and Percentage of Themes Emerged from Content Analysis.

Theme	Category	Codes	f	%
1) « Savoir »	1.1.Cultural Transfer	The transmission across cultures; intercultural values; cultural wealth	2	6%
2)« savoir-être »	2.1. Cultural segregation	Cultural segregation tendencies; perceptions, taboos, and differentiating factors; cultural distinctions based on religion, race, political views, skin color, or other such criteria; anti-discrimination	7	20%
	2.2. Alterity	Interacting without exclusion or othering; alienation	2	6%
	2.3. Polarization	Adopting divisive positions; take sides; cultural partisanship	2	6%
	2.4. Intercultural respect	Maintaining respect		
	2.5. Living together	Coexisting under a single framework; harmoniously	3	9%
	2.6. Global equality	Equality regardless of one's race, religion, or other affiliations	2	6%
3)« savoir-comprendre »	3.1. Intercultural linking	Intercultural connection	2	6%
4)« savoir-apprendre/faire »	4.1. Intercultural dialogue	Dialogue, communication, relations and exchange within cultural contexts	11	32%
5)« savoir-s'engager »	5.1. Intercultural consensus	Interact, cooperate, and negotiate without alienation; common ground; third space	3	9%
		TOTAL	**34**	**100%**

As shown in Table 1, nearly half of the students agreed on the definition of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in the context of fostering intercultural dialogue (32%) and promoting inclusion without cultural segregation (20%) in order to enhance the understanding of living together (9%) and to achieve intercultural consensus (9%). In this regard, these students underscored the key concepts associated with ICC, such as cultural transfer (6%), alterity (6%), polarization (6%), intercultural respect (6%), living together (6%), global equality (6%), intercultural linking (6%).

According to the students at Maritime Higher Vocational School (MHVS), ICC was defined as the outcome of bilateral or multilateral intercultural relations arising from the reciprocal interdependence of nations, states, and societies with diverse cultural backgrounds across economic, political and military arenas, as cited in the following remarks of a student from Maritime Transportation and Management Program: *"It is a concept that emerges as a result of the mutual dependency of culturally diverse nations, states, and countries across economic, political, military domains, manifesting in both bilateral and multilateral interactions."* (Maritime Transportation and Management Program (MTM), Associate Degree 2nd year) So, it was defined as an intercultural transfer, as cited in the following student remark: *"The exchange of values and cultural wealth across different cultures."* (Ship Machinery Management Department (SMM), Associate Degree 1st year).

In this regard, the ability to foster intercultural interaction was regarded as an intrinsic human virtue, transcending all forms of discrimination: *"[…] I strive to cultivate communication competence simply by virtue of being human, independent of religion, race, political views, or skin color. Interculturalism does not discriminate based on these factors, and everyone should have the opportunity to benefit from one another's culture."* (MTM, 2nd year)

Interculturalism, which extends beyond the passive acceptance of multiculturalism, was conceptualized as a political initiative that promotes dialogue and interaction among cultures: *"Interculturalism is a political movement that fosters dialogue among cultures and counters tendencies toward cultural separation. Instead of simply acknowledging the coexistence of multiple cultures within a society, interculturalism actively promotes dialogue and interaction among them."* (MTM, 1st year)

It was therefore regarded as a breakthrough, aiming to remove divisive factors in order to enhance intercultural dialogue: *"It is a movement that seeks to facilitate relationships, dialogue, and interaction among cultures by transcending widely accepted assumptions, perceptions, taboos, and divisive elements that distinguish them from one another."* (MTM, 2nd year) It was regarded as an approach that seeks to mitigate opposition and polarization in a non-discriminatory manner, countering bias by promoting communication and unity among different cultures: *"A perspective that promotes communication rooted in unity while opposing bias against different cultures."* (MTM, 2nd year)

So, it referred to an approach that transcends cultural distinctions and enables the coexistence of diverse cultures within a common social framework: *"It is a concept that removes the distinctions between cultures and enables all cultures to live under one roof."* (MTM, 2nd year) Therefore, this ICC was articulated through the metaphor of passengers aboard the same ship, underscoring the sustainability of shared life rooted in mutual respect: *"Citizens of diverse countries collaborating on the same ship maintain their coexistence by participating in interactions founded on mutual respect."* (MTM, 2nd year) ICC was therefore defined as the capacity to comprehend diverse cultures without promoting cultural segregation: *"Interculturalism is the ability of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds to interact and coexist without alienation."* (Emre, 1st year), highlighting the principle of equality irrespective of race, religion, or other differences, as follows: *"The principle of equality independent of race, religion, or other distinguishing characteristics."* (SMM, 2nd year).

Discussion

Consequently, as reported by the students of the Maritime Higher Vocational School, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) represented an intrinsic human virtue and a practical framework for fostering dialogue, collaboration, and mutual respect among culturally diverse groups, thereby promoting peaceful coexistence and unity in navigating diverse cultural contexts. Moving beyond the mere acknowledgment of multiculturalism, it embodied both bilateral and multilateral interactions, enabling individuals and communities to sustain an intercultural engagement across economic, political, and social contexts without promoting cultural segregation. Thus, it was framed as a political initiative that facilitates mutual understanding and coexistence among diverse cultures within an egalitarian framework, without resorting to othering or exclusion in a common area conceptualized as contact zones.

In this context, Bhabha's (1994) notion of 'third space' is recurrently invoked as a site of negotiation: "And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves." (p.39) As a bridge-building process, a number of studies (Yetiş and Kurt, 2016; Elliot, Baumfield, and Reid, 2016; Schorch, 2013; Kramsch and Uryu, 2012; Ikas and Wagner, 2008; Bretag, 2006) placed particular emphasis on the role of intercultural speakers, mediators and negotiators. According to a recent study by Pazaver and Kitada (2025, pp. 404-405), communication skills and cross-cultural skills were positioned among the top ten 21st century skills in a scoping review of maritime education and training (MET). Therefore, educating future navigators for their expected roles as

intercultural speakers, mediators and negotiators is of vital importance.

However, Yercan and Bolat (2025, p. 343) particularly drew the attention to the fact that "[…] the maritime sector today is undergoing substantial transformation driven by digitalisation, automation, decarbonisation, and shifting socio-economic dynamics." Echoing this perspective, Pazaver and Kitada (2025, p. 398) assert that "By extension, maritime education and training (MET) should consider the position of the seafarer and associated skills needed to succeed in roles influenced by evolving technological advancements and increasing automation." (Pazaver and Kitada, 2025, p.398)

In this regard, the present study signals a significant shift in MET by foregrounding future navigators not just as technical operators but as intercultural speakers, and thereby as mediators and negotiators. So, when ICC is reframed as a tool for inclusive coexistence, potential challenges related to its implementation require careful consideration within existing power dynamics, and call for further examination in future research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethical Approval

Ethical Approval for the current study was granted from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee, with the ethical assessment decision dated 15 November 2022 and protocol number 22/032.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Authors' Contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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