



# Defining IC in EAL Contexts

**Intercultural Competence (IC)** refers to the ability to communicate, relate, and work effectively and appropriately across cultural differences. It involves curiosity, self-awareness, empathy, and the willingness to engage with unfamiliar perspectives without judgment. IC is not about mastering other cultures—it's about learning to listen, reflect, and adapt with respect.

**Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)** builds on this by combining language learning with cultural awareness. In EAL classrooms, ICC means supporting learners not only in acquiring English, but also in developing the skills to navigate diverse social and cultural contexts where the language is used.

This includes:

- *understanding how language and culture shape meaning*
- *interpreting gestures, tone, or silence across contexts*
- *reflecting on one's own cultural assumptions and communication style*
- *learning to manage misunderstandings or discomfort in intercultural interactions*

The skills people can develop to build ICC include:

### **1** Noticing

*Paying attention to language, behaviour, context, and interaction patterns—both in oneself and in others.*

### **2** Curiosity

*Showing interest in other perspectives, experiences, and cultural practices without assuming or judging.*

### **3** Deep listening

*Listening beyond words—attending to tone, body language, silence, and emotional cues*

### **4** Perspective-taking

*Trying to understand how someone from another background might interpret a situation differently.*

### **5** Self-awareness

*Recognizing one's own cultural assumptions, communication habits, and possible biases.*

### **6** Flexibility and adaptation

*Being willing to adjust communication styles when interacting across differences.*

### **7** Managing ambiguity

*Staying open and patient when things feel unfamiliar, unclear, or uncomfortable.*

### **8** Interpreting cultural cues

*Noticing and interpreting gestures, tone, formality, or silence across cultural contexts.*

### **9** Repairing misunderstandings

*Clarifying, checking in, restating, or asking questions when communication breaks down.*

In short, ICC helps learners use language meaningfully in real-world, cross-cultural settings, not just to communicate, but to connect.

# The Developmental Nature of Intercultural Competence (IC)

Intercultural competence is not something a person either has or does not have. It develops over time, through lived experience, reflection, and relational learning. Like language acquisition, it is a process rather than a final product—shaped by context, history, and relationship.

Learners do not enter the classroom as empty vessels. Nor do instructors enter as neutral or culture-free guides. All participants bring with them histories, values, identities, and ways of making sense of the world. Many learners already possess well-developed intercultural capacities—such as curiosity, noticing, adaptability, empathy, or perspective-taking—even if they do not name these skills as “intercultural competence.”

For many newcomers, intercultural learning has not been abstract or theoretical. It has been lived. Learners may have navigated multiple cultural contexts, survived displacement, crossed borders, raised families across languages, or learned to move between social systems that carry unequal power. These experiences often cultivate deep intercultural awareness long before learners encounter formal IC frameworks.

Education level or English proficiency does not determine intercultural competence. In fact, dominant educational systems sometimes fail to recognize or value the intercultural knowledge learners already carry—particularly when that knowledge has been developed outside Western academic contexts. This resource intentionally resists deficit-based assumptions that equate language proficiency with cultural or intellectual readiness.

Intercultural learning is developmental and non-linear. Learners (and instructors) move through shifting stages of awareness—from noticing surface-level cultural differences to engaging more deeply with questions of identity, power, belonging, and positionality. Some enter with openness and curiosity; others with discomfort, uncertainty, or resistance shaped by prior experiences. All of these entry points are valid. What matters is not where someone begins, but how we create conditions for growth—through trust, dialogue, and opportunities to engage difference with care.

This resource embraces the understanding that everyone is on their own intercultural learning journey. There is no expectation of perfection, neutrality, or “getting it right.” Instead, intercultural growth often involves movement from:

*assumption to inquiry*

*reaction to reflection*

*stereotype to complexity*

*judgment to curiosity*

In EAL classrooms, this means creating spaces where learners and instructors can take risks, make mistakes, ask questions, share stories, and examine how language, culture, power, and identity shape our interactions. Intercultural competence develops not through mastery, but through ongoing, relational engagement with others—and with ourselves.

# Understanding Intercultural Competence from Indigenous Worldviews

When considered from the lens of Indigenous worldviews, intercultural competence is a set of skills that are practiced in relationships rooted in accountability, humility, ethical responsibility, and story. This view places less emphasis on “understanding other cultures” and more on how we listen, how we show up, and how we remain responsible to one another across difference.

Intercultural competence, from many Indigenous perspectives, is the ongoing practice of entering relationships with humility, ethical responsibility, and deep listening. It asks us to recognize how our histories position us in relation to one another; to create ethical spaces where multiple ways of knowing can stand together; to honour story as a source of wisdom; and to be accountable to the people, lands, and relationships that shape our shared world.

Indigenous perspectives emphasize the following interconnected principles:

**1**

### Ethical Relationality

*(After Dwayne Donald)*

Intercultural encounters are shaped by the histories, responsibilities, and worldviews each person carries. Ethical relationality invites us to see ourselves as historic beings, positioned in relation to others, and responsible for how we enter and sustain those relationships.

**2**

### Creating Ethical Space

*(After Willie Ermine)*

Intercultural engagement requires a shared space where multiple worldviews can meet without domination. Ethical space asks us to pause, suspend judgment, and hold open a zone of respect, humility, and mutual responsibility.

**3**

### Story as Foundation

*(After Elder Albert Marshall; Jo-ann Archibald; Margaret Kovach)*

Story is a primary mode of teaching, learning, and relationship. Deep listening to story — not to respond or fix, but to understand — forms the ethical basis for intercultural engagement. Through story, we learn to see the world through more than one lens.

**4**

### Relational Accountability

*(After Shawn Wilson)*

Knowledge is relational. We are accountable not only to the people we interact with, but also to land, community, ancestors, language, and the more-than-human world. Intercultural competence means honouring these relationships and acting with integrity toward them.

**5**

### Humility and Non-Closure

Intercultural learning does not seek to eliminate tension or difference. Instead, it asks us to be comfortable with ambiguity, complexity, and non-closure. Humility means accepting that understanding unfolds over time, and that relationships cannot be reduced to fixed categories.

**6**

### Grounding in Place

*(After Battiste, Simpson, Kimmerer)*

Intercultural relationships happen somewhere. Competence includes recognizing the histories, treaties, languages, and responsibilities tied to the land we stand on, and understanding how place shapes our lives, stories, and obligations.

### **Ethical Relationality**

Donald, D. (2009). *Forts, colonial frontiers, and ethical relationality*. *First Nations Perspectives*, 2(1), 1–40.

### **Ethical Space**

Ermine, W. (2007). *The ethical space of engagement*. *Indigenous Law Journal*, 6(1), 193–203.

### **Two-Eyed Seeing & Story**

Marshall, A., Marshall, M., & Bartlett, C. (2012). *Two-Eyed Seeing in knowledge sharing: A conversation*. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 36(1), 15–24.

Marshall, A. Mi'kmaw Elder. *Teaching on Two-Eyed Seeing*, The Practice of Two-Eyed Seeing workshop, Antigonish Public Library, Nova Scotia, November 29, 2025.

### **Story as Pedagogy**

Archibald, J. (2008). *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*. UBC Press.

Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous Methodologies*. University of Toronto Press.

### **Relational Accountability**

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood Publishing.

### **Land, Responsibility, and Relationality**

Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Purich Publishing.

Simpson, L. B. (2011). *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*. Arbeiter Ring Publishing.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions.

# The Role of Narrative in Building Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is rooted in relationship, ethical engagement, and the ability to see and honour perspectives other than our own. Story, especially personal story, is one of the most powerful tools we have for cultivating these capacities.

When learners share their stories, they are not only practicing language; they are making visible the values, memories, identities, and experiences that shape how they understand the world. When we listen to others' stories, we practice empathy, humility, and presence. Through this process, narrative becomes a bridge between lived experience and intercultural understanding.

In EAL classrooms, narrative allows us to:



## **Practice deep listening**

*Receiving a story fully without interrupting, correcting, or anticipating*



## **Strengthen noticing**

*Attending to emotion, experience, values, and difference with care and curiosity*



## **Foster curiosity**

*Asking respectful questions that open up, rather than close down, meaning*



**Develop reflective awareness**

*Noticing our own responses, assumptions, and emotional reactions*



**expand or shift perspectives**

*seeing how another person's story challenges or widens our own understanding*



**explore identity and belonging**

*in meaningful, authentic ways*



**build trust and relational safety across difference**



**invite learners to speak from who they are**



**surface cultural norms, communication styles, and assumptions**

*without stereotyping or essentializing*

Narrative métissage extends this work further by weaving stories together—placing voices side by side so that patterns, contradictions, tensions, and connections can emerge. Learners not only encounter other perspectives; they actively interpret and braid them together.

Through this weaving, intercultural learning becomes felt, embodied, and relational, not only what is cognitively understood. Story opens the door to seeing each other more fully—and to practicing intercultural competence not as an abstract theory, but as a lived, shared, relational practice.

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# Intercultural Competence Skills Strengthened Through Narrative Métissage

A quick-reference guide for instructors

IC Skill	What It Looks Like in Narrative Métissage	Why It Matters
<i>Deep Listening</i>	Listening without interrupting, correcting, or preparing a response; staying present through stillness and silence; letting the story settle before speaking.	Builds empathy, patience, and respect; supports ethical relationality and decolonial forms of engagement.
<i>Noticing</i>	Attending to emotion, values, tone, themes, and contrasts in stories; noticing difference and similarity without judgement.	Strengthens awareness of cultural patterns, assumptions, and the complexity of lived experience.
<i>Curiosity</i>	Asking open, respectful questions (“Can you tell me more about...?”); wondering with, not interrogating.	Encourages intercultural openness and humility; avoids stereotype-based assumptions.
<i>Perspective-Taking</i>	Seeing how another person’s experience challenges or widens one’s own worldview; holding multiple truths at once.	Supports Two-Eyed Seeing, ethical relationality, and the capacity to live with complexity and non-closure.

IC Skill	What It Looks Like in Narrative Métissage	Why It Matters
<i>Reflection</i>	Noticing one’s own emotional responses; considering why something resonates, surprises, or unsettles; connecting story to self.	Fosters self-awareness, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding grounded in relationship.
<i>Relational Accountability</i>	Recognizing that stories create responsibility: to listen well, respond with care, and honour boundaries and consent.	Aligns with Indigenous worldviews of respect, reciprocity, and ethical relationship-making.
<i>Humility</i>	Accepting that we do not know everything; suspending judgment; letting ourselves be changed by what we learn.	Counters colonial patterns of certainty and control; opens space for ethical engagement.
<i>Comfort with Ambiguity</i>	Sitting with differences, tensions, and unanswered questions without rushing to fix or resolve them.	Builds the capacity to navigate intercultural encounters with patience and relational care.

### Instructor Tip

Narrative métissage strengthens intercultural competence by using cultural stories and facts to practice the dispositions, relational ethics, and reflective habits that make intercultural engagement meaningful.

# Linking Intercultural Competence to Anti-Racism and Decolonization

Intercultural competence is sometimes framed as the ability to communicate respectfully across cultural difference. While respect matters, this framing is incomplete. In justice-oriented education, intercultural learning can be expanded beyond politeness or surface-level “cultural awareness.” In EAL contexts—where learners are often navigating systemic barriers associated with race, language, and migration status beyond the classroom—intercultural competence is closely connected to questions of anti-racism and decolonization.

Anti-racism focuses attention on the systems and structures that advantage some groups while marginalizing others. Decolonization invites critical reflection on how colonial histories and logics continue to shape whose knowledge, language, and ways of being are centered—and whose are overlooked, erased, or treated as deficits. Both perspectives shift the focus from individual intention to broader patterns of power, positioning, and responsibility within learning environments.

When intercultural competence is approached in relation to anti-racism and decolonization, it can involve practices such as:

- examining how power, privilege, and racialization influence communication and classroom dynamics
- recognizing racism and colonization as ongoing conditions rather than solely historical events
- creating space for learners' lived experiences without placing expectations on them to educate others
- valuing Indigenous, migrant, and global knowledge systems alongside English language instruction
- supporting learners as they navigate—and, at times, question—the norms of dominant culture, rather than framing adaptation as the sole goal

From this perspective, intercultural competence becomes less about helping learners “fit in” and more about developing awareness of how difference, power, and belonging operate in everyday interactions. It offers a way to notice inequity as it arises, to respond with care, and to consider how learning spaces might be shaped differently.

When grounded in humility, relationship, and reflection, intercultural competence can serve as an entry point into anti-racist and decolonizing practice. It provides educators and learners with shared language and orientation for examining power, engaging difference, and imagining more equitable ways of teaching, relating, and learning together.