

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Week 12:

Intercultural Competence and Ethical Communication

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Learning Outcomes

By the end of the class, learners should be able to:

- Explain intercultural competence as knowledge, attitude, skill and ethical judgement.
- Differentiate competence from cultural stereotyping or memorising customs.
- Use cultural intelligence to plan and adapt communication across contexts.
- Identify ethical risks in intercultural interaction, especially exclusion and unequal power.
- Apply responsible communication practices in face-to-face and digital spaces.

Lesson Focus

The lesson moves from self-awareness to ethical action.

- What intercultural competence means and why it matters.
- How cultural intelligence helps people adapt across cultures.
- How sensitivity, empathy and humility support inclusion.
- How ethics guides speech, listening, representation and conflict.
- How responsible communication can be practised in global teams and communities.

**Skill → Care →
Action**

What is Intercultural Competence?

A working definition for this class:

- The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds.
- It includes knowledge of culture, awareness of self, motivation to engage and flexible behaviour.
- It is not a fixed trait; it grows through reflection, practice and feedback.
- It must be judged ethically: competent communication should not exploit, silence or stereotype others.

**Effective +
Appropriate +
Ethical**

*

Core Dimensions of Competence

A balanced communicator develops four connected capacities.

Awareness

I notice assumptions before I judge.

Knowledge

I learn context, history and norms.

Skill

I adapt listening, language and behaviour.

Ethics

I protect dignity, voice and fairness.

**Competence =
effective +
appropriate +
ethical**

Effectiveness alone is not enough. Communication can achieve goals while still harming dignity, inclusion or trust.

Competence is not the same as “knowing cultures”

Avoid reducing people to checklists of customs.

Danger of stereotypes

Culture guides behaviour, but individuals differ by age, gender, class, religion, profession, language, migration history and personal experience.

Context matters

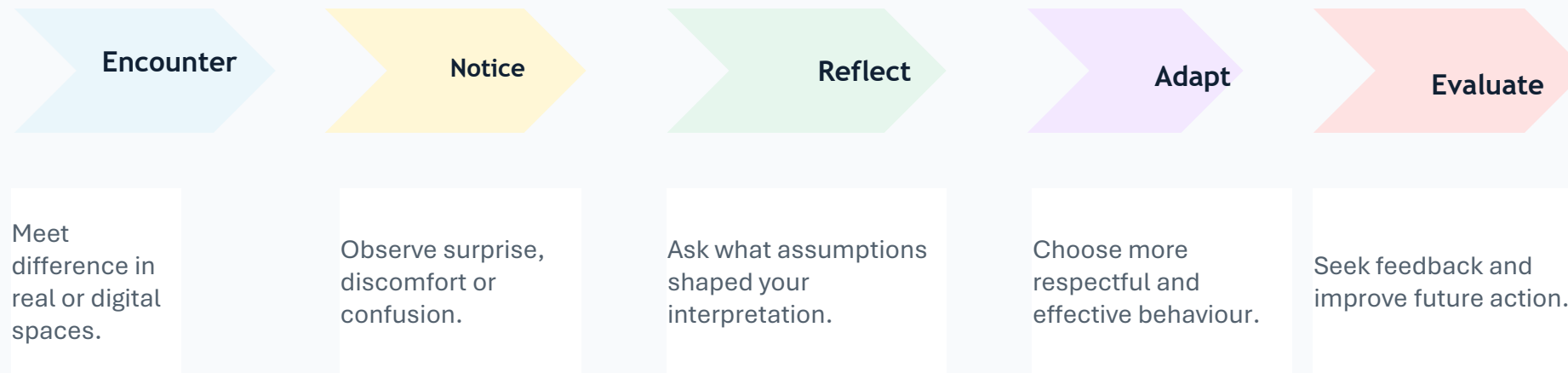
The same behaviour may mean different things depending on the relationship, setting, power, history and medium of communication.

Humility matters

Competence begins with the admission that we may misunderstand and need to ask, listen and revise our assumptions.

Competence as a learning cycle

Growth happens through repeated practice, not one-time exposure.



The cycle turns mistakes into learning instead of defensiveness.

Self-awareness as the starting point

Before interpreting another culture, examine your own cultural lens.

- What communication styles feel “normal” to me?
- Which languages, accents or behaviours do I unconsciously treat as more credible?
- How do my social location and institutional position affect how others experience me?
- What assumptions do I carry about politeness, time, leadership, gender, age or authority?
- Where have I misunderstood someone because I assumed my norm was universal?

**My lens is
not
neutral**

2. What is Cultural Intelligence?

Cultural Intelligence, or CQ, focuses on functioning across cultural contexts.

- CQ Drive: interest, confidence and motivation to engage across cultures.
- CQ Knowledge: understanding cultural systems, values and communication patterns.
- CQ Strategy: planning, monitoring and revising interpretations during interaction.
- CQ Action: adapting verbal and nonverbal behaviour without becoming inauthentic.
- CQ is practical: it links awareness to behaviour.

The four-part CQ model

Each part supports the others.

Drive

Curiosity, resilience and willingness to stay engaged even when interaction feels uncertain or uncomfortable.

Knowledge

Learning about values, social systems, power distance, communication norms and histories of contact.

Strategy + Action

Checking assumptions, planning communication, adjusting language, pace, examples, gestures and participation methods.

CQ Drive: motivation to engage

Motivation affects whether we avoid difference or learn from it.

- Approach unfamiliar cultures with curiosity rather than fear.
- Prepare emotionally for ambiguity and possible mistakes.
- Recognise that discomfort is not proof that the other person is wrong .
- Sustain respectful engagement even when communication is slow.
- Develop confidence through practice and feedback.

**Curiosity
over
avoidance**

CQ Knowledge: learning responsibly

Knowledge should deepen context, not create rigid boxes.

- Study history, language, religion, economy, media and institutions shaping a community.
- Look for variation within cultures rather than assuming everyone is the same.
- Avoid treating cultural summaries as instructions for judging individuals.
- Ask informed questions and be willing to be corrected.
- Use multiple sources, including local voices and lived experience.

**Context
before
conclusion**

CQ Strategy: thinking while communicating

Strategic communicators monitor interpretation in real time.

- Pause before reacting to unfamiliar behaviour.
- Ask: What else could this mean in this context?
- Check whether power differences may limit what others feel free to say.
- Rephrase, clarify and confirm meaning without embarrassing the other person.
- Reflect after the encounter: What worked? What should change?

**Pause
Check
Revise**

CQ Action: adapting behaviour

Adaptation is respectful adjustment, not mimicry or performance.

- Use language that is clear, inclusive and accessible.
- Adjust pace, examples, turn-taking and directness where appropriate.
- Observe nonverbal norms while avoiding caricature.
- Invite participation through multiple channels: voice, chat, notes or small groups.
- Remain authentic while showing respect for the communication situation.



**Flexible
behaviour**

3. Intercultural Sensitivity

Sensitivity is the ability to perceive, respect and respond to cultural difference.

- It begins by recognising that one's own cultural perspective is partial.
- It grows when people move from judging difference to understanding it contextually.
- It requires emotional regulation: surprise should not become contempt.
- It is demonstrated through respectful questions, careful listening and adaptive response.
- It supports inclusion because people feel seen rather than merely tolerated.

**Notice
without
judging**

From ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism

A simplified pathway of intercultural sensitivity development.



Aim: not perfection, but greater awareness and flexibility.

Empathy in intercultural communication

Empathy is disciplined perspective-taking.

- It asks: How might this situation feel and make sense from the other person's position?
- It does not require agreement with every belief or action.
- It requires listening to what people say about themselves, not projecting our story onto them.
- It includes emotional empathy and cognitive empathy.
- It becomes ethical when it leads to fairer treatment and reduced harm.

Empathy, sympathy and pity

These are not the same.

Empathy

Trying to understand another person's experience from their standpoint while respecting their agency.

Sympathy

Feeling concern for someone, but often from one's own standpoint.

Pity

Looking down on someone as helpless or inferior; this can reinforce unequal power.

Inclusion and belonging

Inclusion is more than inviting diverse people into the room.

- Diversity asks who is present; inclusion asks whose voice matters.
- Belonging asks whether people can participate without hiding key parts of themselves.
- Inclusive communication reduces barriers created by language, status, disability, gender, race, religion and digital access.
- It uses clear norms, equitable turn-taking and respectful disagreement.
- It measures success by participation, trust and dignity.



Presence ≠ Voice

Diversity: visible and invisible

Responsible communicators avoid assuming identity from appearance.

- Visible differences may include dress, skin colour, age or disability markers.
- Invisible differences may include religion, language background, nationality, class, trauma, neurodiversity or migration status.
- Intersectionality reminds us that people experience multiple identities together.
- No person should be forced to represent an entire group.
- Ask for preferences; do not demand personal disclosure.

**Do not make one
person a
spokesperson**

Bias, stereotypes and microaggressions

Small acts can accumulate into exclusion.

- Bias may be explicit or unconscious, individual or institutional.
- Stereotypes simplify groups and often ignore individual agency.
- Microaggressions are everyday comments or behaviours that communicate disrespect or exclusion.
- Good intentions do not erase harmful impact.
- Repair requires listening, apology, changed behaviour and, where needed, structural adjustment.



Impact matters

Why ethics belongs in intercultural competence

Competence without ethics can become manipulation.

- A communicator may be highly persuasive yet unfair, extractive or disrespectful.
- Ethics asks whether communication protects dignity, truthfulness, voice and justice.
- Intercultural settings often involve unequal power: language, race, class, citizenship, expertise or institutional authority.
- Ethical communication slows down judgement and considers consequences.
- The goal is not only to be understood, but to communicate responsibly.

**Skill is not
enough**

Three ethical anchors

Use these when rules are unclear or cultures differ.

Dignity

Treat people as full human beings with agency, history, voice and complexity.

Fairness

Consider who benefits, who is burdened and whose perspective is missing.

Accountability

Accept responsibility for impact, correction and repair when communication causes harm.

Universalism and cultural relativism

Ethical judgement often sits between two tensions.

- Universalism stresses shared human dignity and rights across societies.
- Cultural relativism warns against judging others only by one's own cultural standards.
- The challenge is to respect cultural differences without excusing harm or domination.
- Responsible communicators ask: Whose rights, safety and voice are affected?
- Ethical dialogue requires humility and moral courage.

**Respect
+ Rights**

Language, power and representation

Words can include, exclude, dignify or diminish.

- Use names, titles and pronouns respectfully where known.
- Avoid exoticising communities as strange, backward or merely colourful.
- Represent people as agents, not only victims or problems.
- Be careful with humour, idioms and metaphors that may not travel well.
- When communicating about groups, include voices from those groups.

Responsible listening

Listening is an ethical act, not just a technique.

- Give attention without rushing to correct, defend or compare.
- Listen for meaning, emotion, context and what may be difficult to say openly.
- Notice whose speech is interrupted, doubted or translated through stereotypes.
- Reflect back the meaning before disagreeing.
- Protect confidentiality when people share personal cultural experiences.



**Listen to
understand**

Digital intercultural ethics

Online spaces increase reach and risk.

- Messages travel across cultural contexts faster than explanations can follow.
- Screens reduce some social cues and may intensify misunderstanding.
- Screenshots, recordings and forwards create privacy and consent issues.
- Humour, sarcasm and memes can reproduce stereotypes or humiliation.
- Responsible digital communication considers audience, permanence and harm.

Global citizenship in communication

Global citizenship links intercultural competence to responsibility.

- It recognises that our words, media choices and institutional actions affect people beyond our immediate group.
- It values human dignity, sustainability, justice and peaceful coexistence.
- It does not erase national or local identities; it expands responsibility across borders.
- It asks communicators to challenge exclusion and misinformation.
- It turns empathy into participation and ethical action.

**Belonging
beyond borders**

Ethical global mobility

Mobility includes travel, migration, study abroad, remote work and digital collaboration.

- Enter new spaces as a learner, not a consumer of culture.
- Respect local knowledge, labour, environment and community boundaries.
- Avoid extracting stories, images or experiences without consent.
- Notice privileges linked to passports, language, wealth, race, class or institutional status.
- Ask how your presence can contribute rather than merely benefit you.

**Move
responsibly**

Communicating in global teams

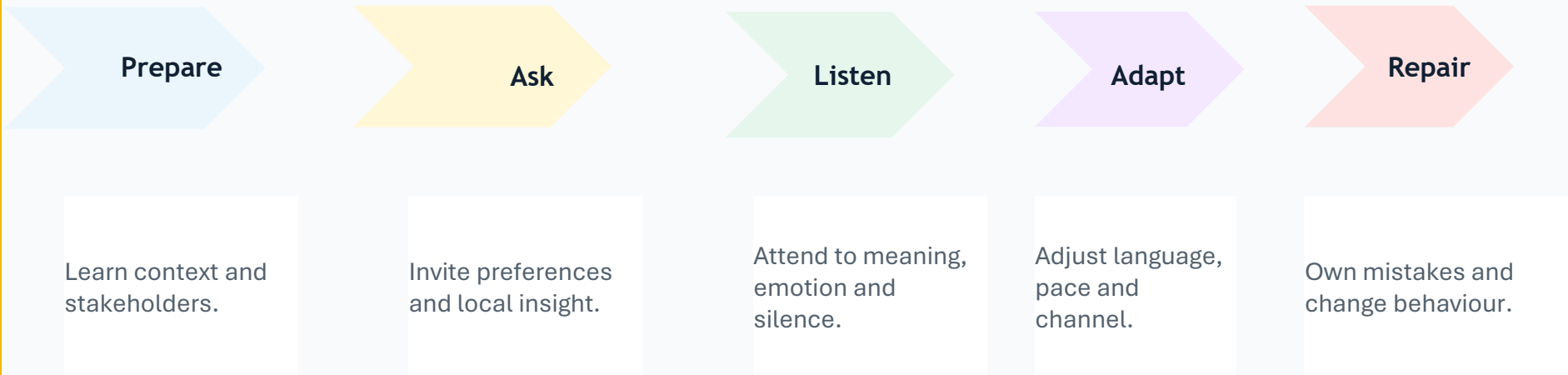
Global teams need explicit norms because assumptions differ.

- Agree on meeting times with awareness of time zones and caregiving responsibilities.
- Clarify expectations for deadlines, feedback, decision-making and disagreement.
- Use plain language and avoid unnecessary slang or idioms.
- Rotate facilitation and create multiple ways to contribute.
- Document decisions so participation does not depend only on live speech.

**Make norms
visible**

Responsible communication toolkit

A practical sequence for cross-cultural situations.



Use the toolkit before, during and after intercultural encounters.

Handling ethical disagreement

Respect does not mean avoiding difficult issues.

- Separate people's dignity from disagreement with ideas or practices
- Name harms carefully and with evidence rather than contempt.
- Ask who is most affected and whether they are part of the conversation.
- Seek shared principles before debating solutions.
- When necessary, set boundaries against hate speech, harassment or dehumanisation.

**Respectful
courage**

Self-Audit: Am I communicating responsibly?

Use these questions after an intercultural interaction.

- Did I listen before interpreting?
- Did I check assumptions rather than rely on stereotypes?
- Did my language include or exclude?
- Did power differences affect who could speak freely?
- Did I repair harm or defensiveness when misunderstanding occurred?
- What will I do differently next time?

**Reflect • Learn •
Improve**

Summary

- Intercultural competence combines effectiveness, appropriateness and ethical responsibility.
- Cultural intelligence helps us prepare, interpret, adapt and learn across cultures.
- Empathy and sensitivity help us notice difference without stereotyping or othering.
- Inclusion asks whose voices, needs and barriers are being considered.
- Responsible communication protects dignity, fairness and accountability in local and global spaces.

References

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▶ Thank you