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Testing intercultural competence in (International) English: Some basic questions and suggested answers

Abstract: The testing of intercultural competence has long been regarded as the field of psychometric test procedures, which claim to analyse an individual's personality by specifying and quantifying personality traits with the help of self-answer questionnaires and the statistical evaluation of these. The underlying assumption is that what is analysed and described as a candidate's personality can be treated as an indicator of that same person's practical performance in intercultural encounters. From the point of view of a test constructor for language competence, all intercultural tests of this type raise basic questions concerning their construct and predictive validity.

Against this background, this article firstly examines the shortcomings of personality-based tests of intercultural competence. Secondly, based on relevant parts of the CEFR as well as on the work of numerous contributors to the international debate, a practicable construct of intercultural communicative competence is suggested. Special attention is paid to the concept of politeness in intercultural encounters and the role of English as a lingua franca (ELF). Thirdly, a basic outline of a criterion-based test of intercultural competence in English is provided. The test procedures on which this article draws have been extensively piloted and are part of a training package including test specifications, course materials and teacher-training material.

Keywords: CEFR, ELF (English as lingua franca), culture, intercultural competence, psychometrics, personality, politeness

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1 The state of the art?

The choice of tests in the field of intercultural training and assessment is greater perhaps than one would wish for. On the website of SIETAR¹ a list of 53 test names can be found which may perhaps serve as an initial orientation. In view of such an abundance, choosing the “leaders of the trade” may be an appropriate way of reducing complexity, since a certain level of face validity may be assumed on the grounds of their widespread acceptance both in academic and corporate contexts. Reliable figures concerning the numbers of tests administered globally are, unfortunately, not available, but there is some evidence that the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI; Figure 1) is probably the global number one. On a European level the Test of Intercultural Sensitivity (TIS; Figure 2) and The International Profiler (TIP; Figure 3) seem to be leading at the moment.² All three tests

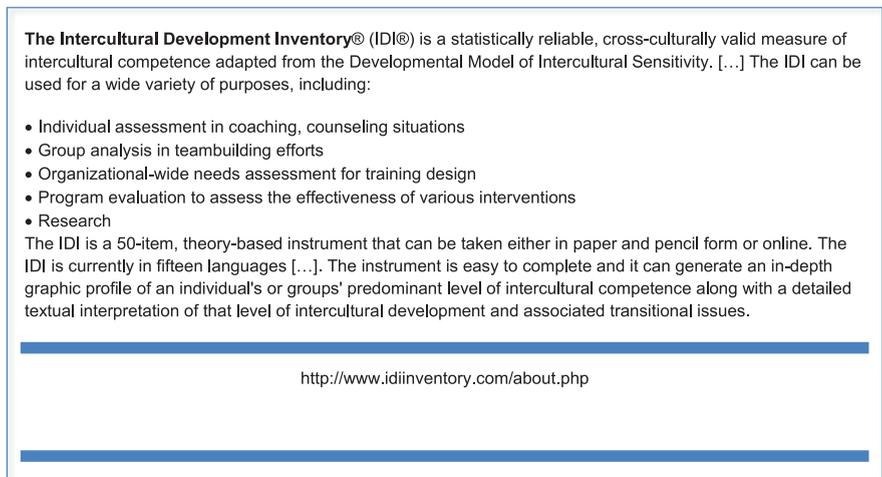


Fig. 1

¹ SIETAR = Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research, <http://www.sietar-europa.org/SIETARproject/Assessments&instruments.html#Topic26> (20 June 2013).

² Both ICUnet.AG and WorldWork offer two more tests each – the Inventory for Intercultural Development (I4ID) and the Intercultural Preference Tool (IPT), the International Preference Indicator (IPI) and the International Trust in Teams (ITTI). Since they follow principally the same line these tests will be disregarded in what follows. <http://www.icunet.ag/en/solutions/intercultural-services/potential-analysis/index.htm> (accessed 20 June 2013); <http://www.worldwork.biz/legacy/www/docs3/tip.html> (accessed 20 June 2013).

The Test of Intercultural Sensitivity (TIS®) measures personality traits. This construct is described by seven characteristics, all of which play a major role in integration in foreign cultures and have influence on success and satisfaction during international work. Based on the participant's answers, the certified psychologists at ICUnet.AG generate a 12-page expert opinion. This report also explains the theoretical foundation of the diagnostic instrument and contains a diagram illustrating the participant's profile.

<http://www.icunet.ag/en/solutions/intercultural-services/potential-analysis/index.htm>

Fig. 2

The International Profiler (TIP) is a tool to facilitate international business relationships. It helps anybody working with partners from other cultures to build effective international links, taking into account their particular role and context. The emphasis is on personal development and raising cultural awareness. The feedback report, linked to the Development Resources Manual, enables an individual to plan and implement a practical development plan to become more effective at working with people from different cultural backgrounds. Key Features

- A web based psychometric questionnaire and feedback process
- Develops an individual's ability to operate effectively in unfamiliar cultural contexts
- Based on the International Competency Framework which is derived from extensive multicultural research and practical experience of international managers
- Measures the emphasis and energy an individual gives to 10 competencies, with 22 associated skills, attitudes and knowledge areas
- Comprehensive Developmental Resources Manual for individuals and trainers
- Available in English, French, German, Italian, Polish and Spanish
- Provides 17 points towards International Coach Federation CCEUs

<http://www.worldwork.biz/legacy/www/docs3/tip.html>

Fig. 3

provide extensive descriptions of the test rationale plus sample items and sample assessments, so the choice of these three seems justifiable as representative of the majority of test procedures for intercultural competence available today.

The 53 tests listed give rise to three basic questions:

- a. What precisely does each of them test and how is this done?
- b. How valid are they in terms of construct validity and predictive validity?
- c. To what extent are they based on a practicable definition of intercultural competence?

Using the IDI, TIP and TIS as examples, I will try to answer these questions in what follows.

1.1 What precisely does each of these tests test and how is it done?

The theoretical constructs on which IDI, TIS and TIP – representing the predominant type of psychometric tests with an intercultural focus – are based are indicated by the test criteria shown in Figure 4.

All three tests use self-answer questionnaires, complemented in some cases by interviews. A candidate responds to 50 (IDI), 67 (TIS) or 80 items (TIP) and marks to what extent he/she agrees or disagrees with the statements presented. The types of question or statement used in the questionnaires may be illustrated by the following example from IDI: “I believe that verbal and non-verbal behaviour vary across cultures and that all forms of such behaviour are worthy of respect.” One item representing the questions or statements used by TIS is this: “In choosing my personal aims I prefer to be cautious rather than take risks.”

TEST CRITERIA USED BY

INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT INVENTORY (IDI)	TEST of INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY (TIS)	THE INTERNATIONAL PROFILER (TIP)
Denial Defense/Reversal Minimization Acceptance Adaptation Integration	Flexibility Self-Reflection Emotional Stability Communication Ambiguity Tolerance Willingness to Learn Openness Social Desirability	Openness: New Thinking / Welcoming Strangers / Acceptance Flexibility: Flexible Behaviour / Flexible Judgement/Learning Languages Personal Autonomy: Inner Purpose / Focus on Goals Emotional Strength: Resilience / Coping / Spirit of Adventure Perceptiveness: Attuned / Reflected Awareness Listening Orientation: Active Listening Transparency: Clarity of Communication / Exposing Intentions Cultural Knowledge: Information Gathering/Valuing Differences Influencing: Rapport / Range of Styles / Sensitivity to Context Synergy: Creating New Alternatives

Fig. 4

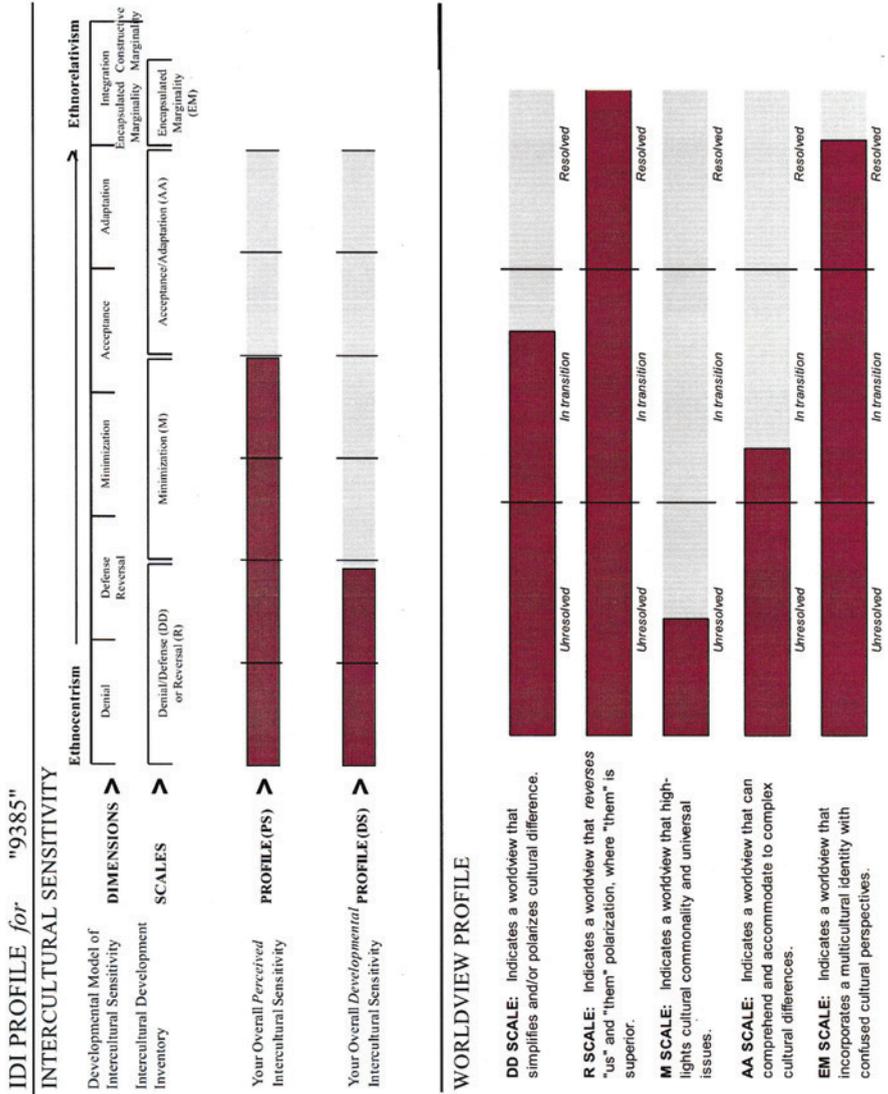


Fig. 5

Depending on the answers given – ranging from “fully agree” to “fully disagree” on a multiple-point scale – a personal profile is produced to document the candidate’s position with respect to each of the criteria applied. A personality profile of this sort would be presented in the form of a diagram like the one provided by IDI (Figure 5).

A sample profile produced by the TIS would be different only in the choice of criteria and layout (Figure 6).

A sample profile produced by the TIP (Figure 7) would be different again only in the choice of criteria and layout. The underlying claim, however, i.e. to present a valid representation of a candidate’s personality by evaluating the candidate’s answers, is the same with all three.³

While the use of self-answer questionnaires is common to all three tests (as it is to almost all other tests on the SIETAR list), there are some interesting differences in the choice of criteria. Bennett and Hammer (IDI) base their test procedures on an assumed six-step process of acculturation (recently expanded to eight steps), which expatriates would ideally go through in a foreign environment. TIS and TIP on the other hand use criteria like “emotional stability”, “openness”,

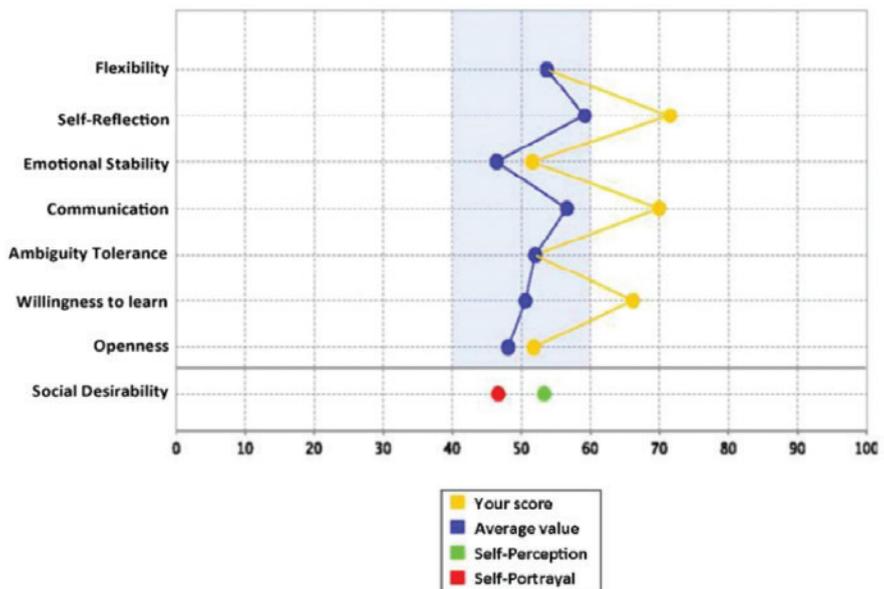


Fig. 6

³ A great number of critical questions concerning the use of questionnaires in intercultural surveys have been asked over the last 20 years (see Haas 2007, 2009).

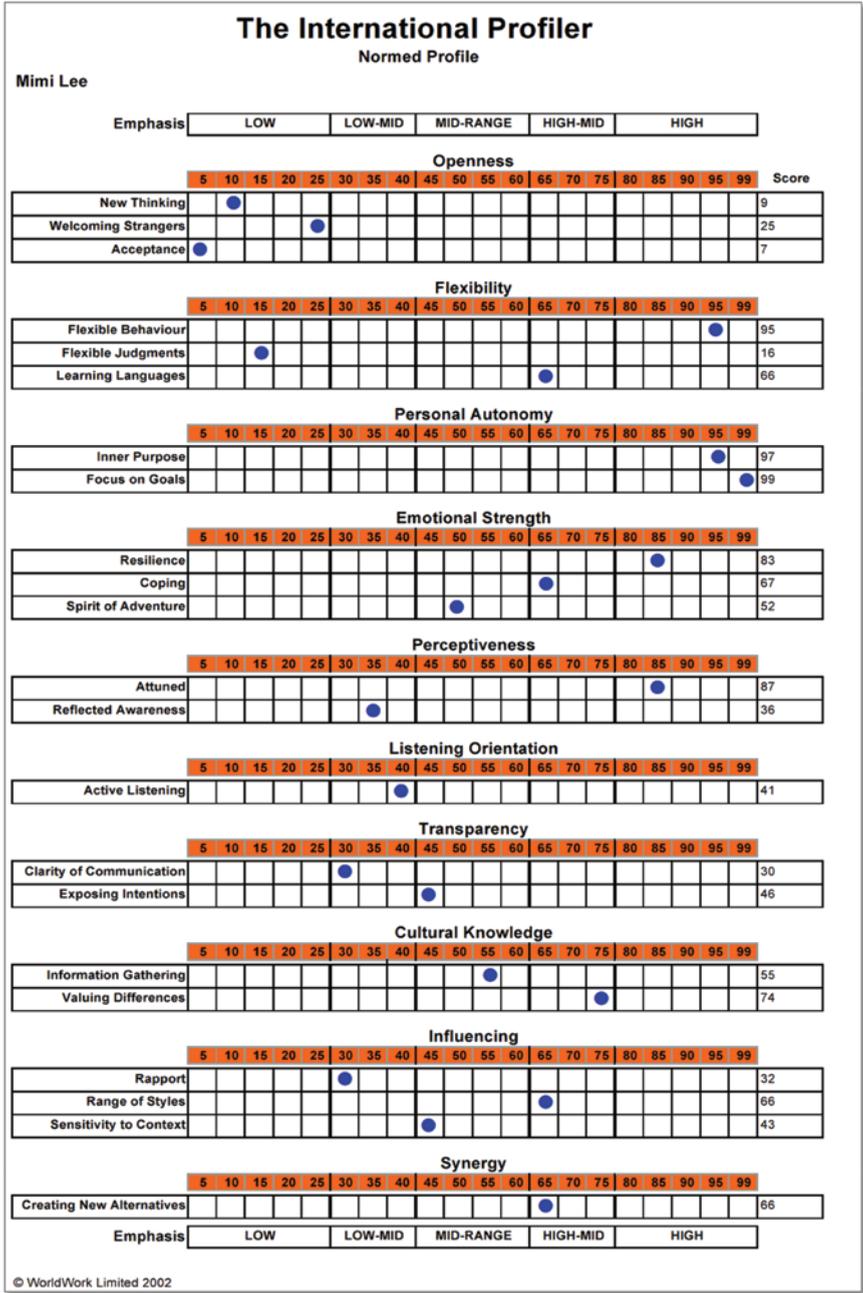


Fig. 7

“emotional strength”, “perceptiveness”, “reflected awareness”, “spirit of adventure” etc. for defining intercultural competence, i.e. psychological features which supposedly indicate a candidate’s ability to deal with intercultural encounters effectively. It may be asked whether features like these do not qualify a person for jobs in any context, i.e. both for intra-cultural and inter-cultural encounters, and to what extent they are actually indicative of truly and solely intercultural competence. “Learning languages” and “clarity of communication” on the other hand, two sub-criteria used by the TIP, come somewhat as a surprise since they relate to communicative competence. Both seem strangely unconnected with the underlying personality construct, as actual communication does not otherwise seem to play a role.

1.2 How valid are these tests in terms of construct validity and predictive validity?

The first question concerning *construct validity* is whether the choice of criteria and the theoretical construct these criteria relate to are based on academic consensus of any sort. Unfortunately, none of the criteria used in the three tests (and in almost all tests on the SIETAR list; Figure 8) can be seen as enjoying that kind of support. This may seem astonishing to anyone unfamiliar with the practice of psychological testing or unaware of the fact that this has been a point of criticism for a long time. The criticism was made clear among others by Harald Meyer,

A short selection of criteria of intercultural competence as used by tests on the SIETAR list:

*Tolerance of Ambiguity, Ambiguitätstoleranz,
Openness, Behavioural Flexibility,
(problemorientierte) Flexibilität,
Stress-Resistance, Emotional Intelligence,
Intelligence, Reflexionsfähigkeit,
Emotional Resilience, Emotionale Stabilität,
Inner-referenced vs. outer-referenced,
Flexibility and Openness, Perceptual Acuity,
Personal Autonomy, Focus on Goals,
Inner Purpose, Reflected Awareness*

...

Fig. 8

himself a dedicated psychometrician, who ten years ago deplored a “confused muddle of content”:

Die Konstruktion eines psychometrischen Tests beginnt mit der Aufzählung empirisch erhebbarer Phänomene, in denen sich die Eigenschaft und ihre Ausprägungsgrade mehr oder weniger verdeckt äußern. Theorien, persönliche Überzeugungen und Voreingenommenheit spielen bei dieser Aufzählung eine Rolle. Um diese subjektiven Einflüsse auszuschalten, müsste die Entscheidung darüber, welche Phänomene als Indikatoren einer bestimmten Eigenschaft anerkannt werden, auf dem Konsens derer beruhen, die sich wissenschaftlich mit dieser Eigenschaft befassen. Von diesem Konsens ist die Psychologie weit entfernt. Das psychologietypische Inhaltswirrwarr, selbst bei so zentralen Eigenschaften wie Intelligenz, Attraktion, Kompetenz usw., ist die zwangsläufige Folge. (Meyer 2004: 16–17)⁴

What Meyer is doing is nothing less than questioning the construct validity of psychological tests in general. For some sort of academic consensus concerning the theoretical framework is essential for establishing the construct validity of a test. In the absence of this, the construct validity of psychometric tests of the type we are discussing is clearly deficient (McNamara 2004: 8–9, 47–48; Mader 2011: 13–32). It may be interesting to note that construct validity is nevertheless claimed by most test constructors in the field of psychology. What is sometimes overlooked, however, is that the methods used to establish construct validity in this field differ from established practices in other areas of testing. A test constructor in the field of materials testing (e.g. in the aerospace industry) will establish common ground with co-experts firstly on the *intention* of the test, secondly by defining the *properties* of the *specified material* to be tested, the *methods* to be used and the *measurement* to be applied. A constructor of language tests, to choose another example, will start by answering similar questions to relate the theoretical construct to established linguistic theories and/or theories of communication, be they theories of functional grammar, speech act theory, discourse analysis or the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001). The field of psychological testing is different. Here it has

4 “The construction of a psychometric test begins with the compilation of a list of empirically verifiable phenomena which exhibit, more or less concealed, the property concerned and its characteristics. Theoretical assumptions, personal bias and convictions play an important role in this. To avoid succumbing to subjective factors such as these, the decision on which phenomena should be recognised as indicating a certain property should be based on the consensus of those dealing with the property methodically and scientifically. Academic psychology has a long way to go to reach this consensus. The confused muddle of contents typical for academic psychology and observable even with basic properties like intelligence, attraction, competence etc. will necessarily follow” (Meyer 2004: 16–17, author’s translation).

been common practice for many years to relate a test's *findings* to the findings of prior tests which appear to apply similar terminology. So, for example, the construct validity of IDI was established by comparing the findings with those of a version of the Worldmindedness Scale (Sampson and Smith 1957) and the Social Anxiety Scale (Stephan and Stephan 1985).⁵ No mention is made of the fact that the construct in each of the tests used as reference was equally unsupported by academic consensus. Nor is there any mention of the fact that in other test areas construct validity is established using methods of a different sort.⁶ Bearing this in mind, the test construct used by psychological tests is illustrated in Figure 9.⁷ A personality profile is deduced from the answers, declaring the candidate suitable or otherwise for intercultural assignments. Communicative competence and/or communicative behaviour is not tested and not scored.

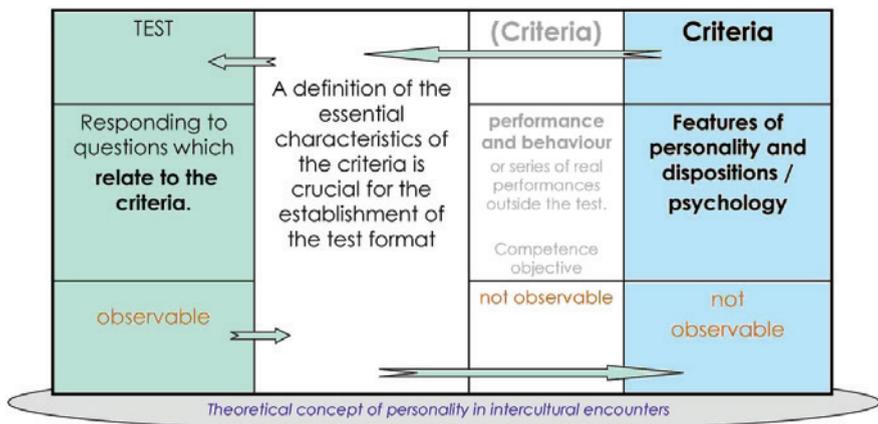


Fig. 9

⁵ Hammer et al. (2003). See also Fay (1996, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2006) and Matsumot and Wang (2013).

⁶ No documentation of construct validity for the TIS is available. There is, however, a brief statement on validity in documentation published by WorldWork in 2006: "WorldWork is currently seeking opportunities to carry out full validity tests, and will be pleased to work with any organisation willing to provide the necessary facilities to enable this to take place. Some 1600 people have completed the questionnaire, and feedback has been provided to all of those people. From the experience of providing this we can say that the instrument has good face validity and people typically 'own' the information contained in the feedback profile, and recognise its relevance to working internationally." http://www.worldwork.biz/legacy/www/downloads/Technical_Issues_02_06.pdf (accessed 20 June 2013).

⁷ This is an adaptation of a similar diagram in McNamara (2004: 8).

The doubts raised by tests based on “personal bias and convictions” (Meyer 2004) may reach a climax when it becomes apparent that no less than 6586 psychometric tests were listed as being available in the German-speaking parts of Europe in 2013.⁸ Psychometricians are not always unaware of the worrying state of their art, but few have spoken or written about this. One exception occurred in 2007 when a group of renowned US professors of personnel psychology, corporate management and neuroscience joined together to publish a sweeping verdict on the *predictive validity* of personality tests as a whole. Based on their experience they came to the conclusion that “There is considerable evidence to suggest that when predictive validation studies are conducted with actual job applicants where independent criterion measures are collected, observed (uncorrected) validity is very low and often close to zero. This is a consistent and uncontroversial conclusion” (Morgeson et al. 2007: 1046). In other words, no empirical evidence exists to assume that a significant relationship can be found between a candidate’s performance in a personality test of the kind we are looking at and his/her performance outside the test situation. If this comes as a surprise, the surprise may subside when we look at the third question we asked.

1.3 To what extent do psychometric tests relate to a practicable definition of intercultural competence?

It may be helpful to clarify key terms first, i.e. *competence*, *culture* and *intercultural competence*. A competence, to quote a definition suggested by the OECD,

is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual’s knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating. (OECD 2003)

Thus the term *competence* includes knowledge, attitudes and skills, and makes sense only in relation to a particular context (no one can or will be competent in everything). Competence as a hybrid quality is, strictly speaking, not observable. All we can do is draw conclusions based on observable performance. For example, the professional competence of a bus driver cannot be assessed by the use

⁸ Leibniz-Zentrum für psychologische Information und Dokumentation, Universität Trier (Hg.): Verzeichnis der Testverfahren, 20., aktualisierte Auflage. Stand August 2013 http://www.zpid.de/pub/tests/verz_teil1.pdf (accessed 08 February 2014).

Personality “... is the study of phenomena that occur in interpersonal situations, in configurations made up of two or more people all but one of whom may be more or less completely illusory.” Sullivan, H.S. (1964). *The Fusion of Psychiatry and Social Science*. 33

of self-answer questionnaires. A valid and reliable assessment of that person's competence will include practical performance, a check of cognitive knowledge, and perhaps an evaluation of his/her overall appearance (dress, hairstyle etc. in relation to what in a given context is considered “normal” or “acceptable”).

Personality profiles, on the other hand, mostly avoid the term *competence* and claim to analyse an individual's *personality* instead. They do this by specifying and quantifying personality traits with the help of self-answer questionnaires and the statistical evaluation of these. The underlying assumption is that what is analysed and described as a candidate's personality can be treated as an indicator of that same person's practical performance in intercultural encounters. That this is not necessarily so has been argued by a great many contributors to personality theory over the last fifty years. In fact unrevealed and undiscussed, controversial schools of personality theory are presented as self-evident theoretical constructs. No mention is made of differing approaches which, for example, focus on processes of personality development and its underlying factors (Friedman and Schustack 2001: Chapters 15–32; Pervin 2003: Chapters 12–13.; Schultz and Schultz 2005: Chapters 11–15; Crowne 2007: Chapters 12–15; Omoniyi and White 2006).⁹ In marked contrast to this, we suggest focusing on a person's competence instead, i.e. on a hybrid of knowledge, personality and skills (in a specific context) to be acquired by a person over time and through practice. Depending on a variety of factors (such as the interlocutors, situation, impact of culture, personal fitness etc.) it may be summoned up by the individual at any given moment to a varying degree.

⁹ Cf. in particular the six positions suggested by Omoniyi and White (2006: 2): (1) identity is not fixed, (2) identity is constructed and may vary, (3) contexts are moderated by social variables and are expressed through language, (4) identity is salient in every communicative context, (5) identity informs social relationships and communicative exchanges, and (6) more than one identity may be articulated equating an interactive system of identities management.

“Personality is like love: everyone agrees it exists, but disagrees on what it is.” Cattell, Raymond B. (1973): Personality Pinned Down. In: *Psychology Today*, 7 (July), 41.

Culture is the second key term to be discussed. Static and reified concepts of culture, for instance those equating nation states with cultures, have serious shortcomings and may even encourage interculturally inappropriate behaviour. Instead, a definition coined by the British anthropologist Brian Street may prove helpful in our context. Based on a constructivist view, he sees culture as a process of collective meaning-making, building on language and interaction. It is for this reason that he suggests as a definition “Culture is a verb” (Street 1993: 25).¹⁰ Similarly, linked to culture, language may be described as a process of collective meaning-making, rather than as a system of linguistic rules. Thus only by understanding a) *competence* as a hybrid quality with practical performance and context as indispensable aspects and b) *culture* as a process of meaning-making can we understand c) *intercultural competence* as a process of meaning-making via communication and interaction across cultures. Based on this approach intercultural competence may be illustrated as in Figure 10.

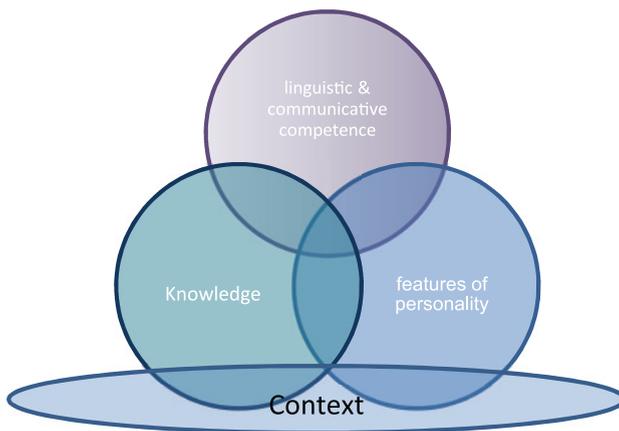


Fig. 10

¹⁰ See also Ochs (2005), Mader & Camerer (2012).

2 The testing of intercultural competence

2.1 Focus on performance

If culture is seen as a process of meaning-making, then the connection between language and culture is the key to both the training and the testing of intercultural competence. It is true that language competence and intercultural competence are not the same, yet it is hard to imagine anyone being interculturally competent and yet refraining from communication altogether. Obviously, a valid test of intercultural competence should reflect the hybrid features indicated above in processes of practical communication, i.e. by demonstrating knowledge, personality and communicative skills in observable performance. Perhaps this may seem difficult to achieve, yet defining test criteria, procedures of simulation and demonstration, and practicable rating procedures is the second indispensable step (i.e. after defining the construct) for any test of intercultural competence that aspires to a satisfactory degree of validity.

Focussing on practical communication skills in intercultural encounters is supported by what scholars like Wenger (1998, 2000, 2008), Seidlhofer (2001, 2003, 2007, 2011), Prodromou (2008) etc. have come to call temporary “communities of practice”. Similarly Edgar Schein (2010), pioneer of corporate culture analysis, speaks of “cultural islands” to indicate that it is a person’s ability to

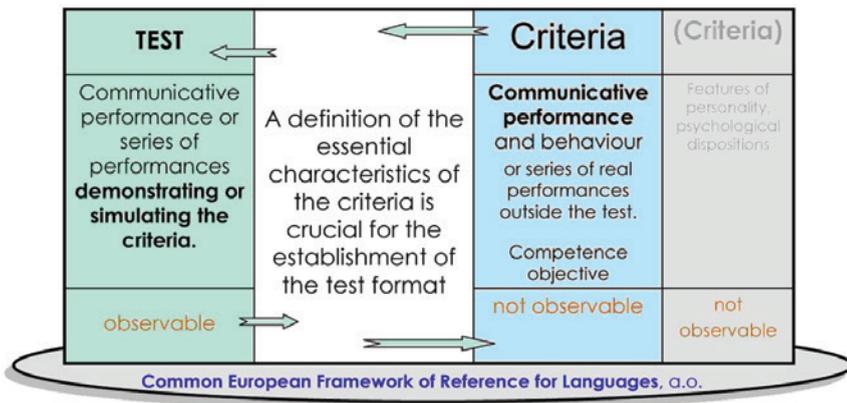


Fig. 11

establish mutually acceptable ways of getting on with others through communication and interaction which must be considered as the key to success in a variety of intercultural encounters.

Any test of proficiency in intercultural communication should allow forecasts to be made of communicative behaviour in a variety of intercultural encounters. To achieve this goal, a test construct like the one shown in Figure 11 may be helpful.

2.2 Eight criteria of intercultural communicative competence

Based on relevant parts of the CEFR¹¹ as well as the work of Meierkord (1996), Beneke (1998, 2000), Byram (1997, 2000, 2006), Müller-Jacquier (1999, 2000), Gnutzmann and Intemann (2005), Wolf and Polzenhagen (2006) and others, the following criteria for intercultural competence can be defined. These describe the characteristics of an interculturally competent person in such a way to allow them to be used as test criteria as well as for the development of a test format, valid items, and a practicable marking system. The following eight criteria are designed to relate to the active use of language in intercultural encounters and to be used for standardised, objective testing procedures:

<p>1 <i>Knowledge</i> about institutions, processes of socialisation and other specifics in one's own and in one or more target countries.</p>	<p>This includes <i>country specific knowledge of one's own as well as other cultures</i> one may have to deal with. As well as being able to use appropriate discourse conventions it is also important for the success of intercultural communication that the interlocutors appear interested in and informed about the other's culture. This may range from so-called "hard facts" to typical patterns of behaviour as well as information on local literature, music and art. This criterion focuses on the awareness of the necessity of acquiring a basic amount of this type of information. It is by no means necessary to possess comprehensive information on all aspects of any one culture.</p>
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¹¹ The CEFR has been criticised for maintaining a purely native-speaker perspective and disregarding the function of English as a global lingua franca (e.g. Seidlhofer 2011: 184–185). While this criticism correctly points out one of the shortcomings of the CEFR in its present form, this shortcoming does not outbalance the numerous advantages provided by the CEFR's detailed descriptions of communicative competences as a whole. For a detailed appraisal of the CEFR in the context of intercultural competence see Camerer and Mader (2011).

- 2 *Knowledge* of the causes and processes of misunderstanding between members of different cultures. This implies *awareness of and familiarity with the particularities of one's own as well as the other culture(s)*. Examples of potential critical cultural distinctions are notions of time, hierarchy, space etc. Examples of potential critical discourse functions are refusing, rejecting, contradicting, instructing, criticising, disagreeing, making and receiving compliments, complaining and dealing with complaints. One's own personal and culturally-influenced *discourse strategies* as well as those of the other culture should be the focus of critical appraisal.
- 3 *Ability* to engage with differences in a relationship of equality (including the ability to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment). This includes the ability to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment. The most important feature of this criterion is the ability to *express oneself non-judgementally* on culturally significant phenomena.
- 4 *Ability* to engage with politeness conventions and communication and interaction conventions (verbal and non-verbal). *Politeness is the key feature of intercultural communication* and means more than simply following rules of etiquette. It is concerned with the building of positive relationships, particularly in first and second encounters, as it is often in these encounters that the ground is laid for the nature of the relationship and its medium- or long-term success or failure. The ability to interact with the necessary degree of politeness in intercultural encounters is not easy to acquire, as politeness conventions differ so greatly from culture to culture. It is important therefore to have some knowledge of the existing conventions as well as be aware of possible signals and reactions which may signify confusion, irritation or even anger and be able to deal with these in an appropriate way.
- 5 *Ability* to use essential conventions of *oral* communication and to recognise changes in register. This follows closely the criterion described above. Use of inappropriate register in communication is one of the most frequent causes of intercultural misunderstandings and of breakdowns in communication. This ability requires *familiarity with conventions of communication which may be appropriate or inappropriate* with interlocutors from different cultures.
- 6 *Ability* to use essential conventions of *written* communication and to recognise changes in register. Examples of these are forms of address, directness/indirectness, face-saving strategies etc. This applies equally to written communication, with the important difference that spontaneous repair strategies cannot be used. This makes proof-reading for possible contraventions of polite discourse conventions extremely important for written intercultural communication.

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|---|---|---|
| 7 | Ability to elicit the concepts and values of documents or events (i.e. meta-communication). | It may be necessary, especially when the encounter is threatening to become critical, to discuss the particular discourse and other conventions prevailing in order to ascertain what these are and to reach agreement on which conventions are appropriate and acceptable in the particular encounter. This must be done without any appearance of superiority or arrogance on either side and should not lead to embarrassment for either party. <i>Meta-communicative discourse strategies</i> have not yet been the focus of training, although <i>the mastery of these may be crucial for the building of a positive relationship</i> . The importance of this criterion is not reduced by the fact that in so-called “high-context” cultures attempts at meta-communication may be implicitly rejected. |
| 8 | Ability to mediate between conflicting interpretations of phenomena. | Mediation is mentioned in the CEFR, but some of what is said seems inconsistent, as in some places in the CEFR mediation means translation/ interpretation, in others the central meaning is that of mediation in intercultural contexts, i.e. “ <i>interpreting a cultural phenomenon in relation to another culture</i> ”. It is this last sense we have used as the basis for the curriculum and test in intercultural communicative competence. |
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All the abilities mentioned require language competence to at least a minimal degree. It would therefore seem that evaluation of intercultural communicative competence only makes sense above a certain level of linguistic competence. Using the relevant CEFR descriptors as well as our own practical training experience and test piloting, we have set this minimum level at level B1 of the CEFR. The overriding aim of our training programme is to prepare learners to use their linguistic abilities in intercultural encounters in such a way that their communicative behaviour corresponds to these criteria as far as possible. The criterion-based test shows how far this goal has been achieved.

The combination of knowledge and abilities reflects the hybrid character of intercultural competence as indicated by the three overlapping circles in Figure 12. Personality traits cannot be tested, but may be observed – if at all – in the context of a candidate’s utterances, e.g. in openly judgmental observations. Utterances of a clearly judgmental (i.e. negative) character would be seen as indicating a lack of intercultural competence and would lead to a candidate failing the test.

3 What are mistakes?

There is widespread agreement that the number of intercultural encounters in which English is not the native language of any of the interlocutors, is greater than those in which native speakers take any part at all. The range of varieties of

English used worldwide is evolving constantly and defies attempts at standardisation.¹² Interlocutors involved in international encounters may sometimes be successful in establishing a temporary *community of practice*, as Wenger (1998, 2000, 2008) and others have called it. Of particular note, however, is the fact that it is probably a language with no cultural roots which is used by all or some of the interlocutors. This assumption has led to the mistaken, but often encountered, belief that communication in English will be successful, provided all parties speak it “well”. This is by no means the case. In fact, it may be the very use of English which leads to misunderstandings through the concealment of discourse differences by the use of a language which is the native language of no-one involved. A standard variety of English, understood by all its users, probably exists only in five areas: aerospace industries, international transport, hotels, conferences, and academic discourse (Thomas 1991; Verduijn 2004). Outside these fields, hidden culturally based and mutually incomprehensible communicative patterns form the background to the communication. This state of affairs makes it imperative for both researchers and trainers to “focus less on broad constructs like ‘culture’ and more on the everyday concrete actions through which culture is produced” (Scollon et al. 2012: xviii). Native varieties of English will therefore be suitable only for communicating with interlocutors from UK, US, Australia and other environments where English is used as a native language. A native-speaker variety would, however, not necessarily be suitable for intercultural encounters, where native speakers of English are not present or only a minority.

The concept of “correctness” to be applied in a test of intercultural competence in English would therefore be based on empirical studies, which indicate which mistakes in intercultural communication cause serious misunderstandings and which are less important and can be more or less ignored (Jenkins 2007; Seidlhofer 2011). Based on these, we suggest distinguishing, in the rating of both oral and written production, between three kinds of mistakes, which can be exemplified as follows:

1. Noticeable but meaning clear (*Last year I go to Spain on business*)
2. Misunderstanding possible but not inevitable (*I will do a Spanish course next year*)
3. Misunderstanding not noticed (*You must finish this report today*)

12 Cf. Beneke (2000); Camerer (2007, 2009); Camerer and Mader (2012); Crystal (1997); Graddol (2006); Jenkins (2007); Kirkpatrick (2007); Kirkpatrick and Sussex (2012); Mader and Camerer (2010); Matsuda (2012); Mauranen and Ranta (2009); Meierkord (1996); Phan Le Ha (2008); Prodromou (2008); Seidlhofer (2001, 2003, 2007, 2011); Sharifian (2009); Smith (1983); Wolf and Polzenhagen (2006).

In intercultural encounters mistakes of the third type are critical, whereas those of types 1 and 2 may remain unnoticed or will be forgiven in most cases. This concept of weighting mistakes does not imply that in teaching International English “anything goes”. Teaching linguistically correct English will remain important in written communication, particularly in teaching formal correspondence such as job applications and the like. However, we have no doubt that when rating intercultural use of International English, *politeness comes before grammar*. How mistakes in intercultural communication can be identified and judged can thus be summarized by applying three main criteria:

- *comprehensibility* in writing and speaking
- *appropriateness* of register
- *politeness* in terms of relationship building.

4 Politeness in intercultural encounters

Politeness is not inherent in language. In fact it is often the case that polite language can be used to express impoliteness. It may also be understood as a sign of coldness, arrogance and rejection. Equally, impolite language may signal a trustful relationship, as in cases of “ritual insults”. And lastly, polite language may be misinterpreted. In fact, politeness is much more than language. For in the same way that communication may be seen as a collective process of meaning-making, so may politeness be described as a process of relationship-building via communication. It is important to note that politeness involves a great variety of elements, among them

- discourse conventions
- body language
- rules of etiquette
- taboo topics
- taboo actions
- face-saving conventions
- language conventions
- positive politeness
- negative politeness
- ...

In real life encounters these connect with factors such as

- social distance (age, gender, status, kinship, education, profession, in-group/out-group, ...)
- power relations (hierarchy, host/visitor, teacher/student ...)

- the absolute ranking of face-threatening acts (from minor flaw to serious insult).

Establishing and maintaining positive relationships in intercultural situations is, in fact, a demanding challenge, as it combines aspects of knowledge, personality and awareness, and – most of all – practical communication skills (Figure 12). Unsurprisingly, this process bears a resemblance to the diagram used above to illustrate intercultural competence (cf. Figure 10).

Politeness is more than using “please” and “thank you” (although these too may be helpful) but connects with effective intercultural communication skills as suggested above, i.e. it is a combination of knowledge, personality and communicative skills – all these in relation to specific contexts.¹³ A valid test of intercultural communicative competence should address this by providing specified scenarios and situations allowing a candidate to demonstrate a polite attitude through active communication.

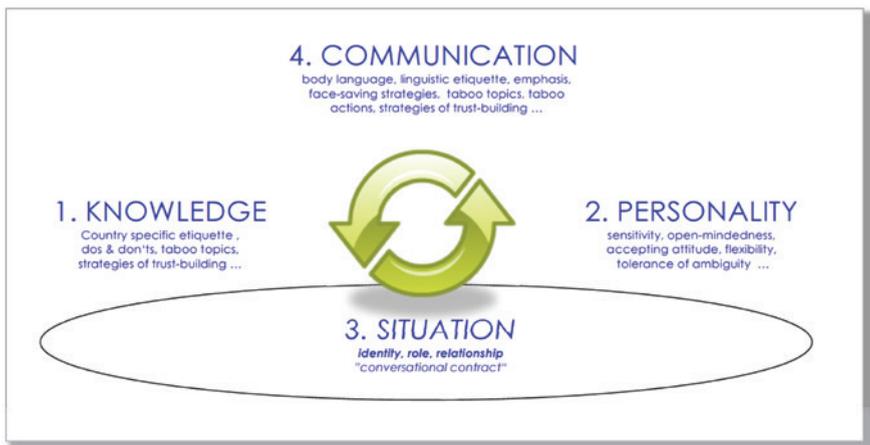


Fig. 12

¹³ For a more detailed discussion of politeness in intercultural encounters, see Camerer and Mader (2012, Chapter 5); also Bargiela-Chiappine and Kádár (2011).

5 The ICE test as an example

Every test of communicative competence represents a compromise governed by rules, for which several possibilities may exist. All of these various possibilities for the realisation of a test construct require the following:

- a widely accepted description of the competences tested
- a plausible selection of partial competences
- an operational definition of criteria for marking performance
- and standardised testing and scoring procedures.

The development of the test format should be based on the principle of as much authentic communication as possible and as much standardisation as necessary to ensure objective evaluation. The format described below takes into consideration the testable elements of intercultural communicative competence, including cognitive aspects as well as communicative ability, without entirely ignoring the (non-testable) features of personality.

To demonstrate one way of achieving this goal, a brief outline of the Test of Intercultural Competence in English – ICE will be given. This test has been piloted extensively and has been in practical use for several years. It consists of a written part and an oral part, which evaluate speaking, writing, reading and listening in intercultural encounters. Observable and assessable communicative competence is in the foreground. Theoretical intercultural knowledge is not tested and only awarded importance insofar as it contributes to successful practical intercultural communication.

The test is provided at two levels which relate solely to a candidate's linguistic competence. ICE Level 1 targets candidates with linguistic skills at CEFR level B1; ICE Level 2 aims at candidates with linguistic skills at CEFR level B2 and above. Successful intercultural competence does not principally depend on a high level of linguistic competence as the specific partial competences which make a linguistically competent speaker into an interculturally competent speaker are only partly dependent on linguistic knowledge and ability. While B1 is set as a minimum level, it can be assumed that users at B2 or higher have a greater range of discourse strategies at their disposal and may well be more confident in identifying differences in register or in using meta-communicative strategies. The piloting of the test¹⁴ showed, however, that learners with a relatively restricted

14 The ICE test at levels 1 and 2 was trialled and statistically evaluated in 2008 with a group of 375 students from Hochschule München (Munich University of Applied Sciences), Fremdspracheninstitut der Landeshauptstadt München (Munich Municipal Foreign Language Institute), Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft des Saarlandes (Saarland University of Applied Sciences),

linguistic repertoire were able, through repeated use of a small number of strategies, to communicate successfully in intercultural encounters. As well as this, we were able to establish that users at higher levels of linguistic competence did not necessarily demonstrate a significantly higher level of intercultural communicative competence – perhaps unsurprisingly, since the criteria of intercultural communicative competence, as outlined above, rate linguistic competence only as secondary.

The variety of English used in the test is based on

- a. Anglo-American English (“mid-Atlantic”)
- b. International English (ELF)

In both varieties, politeness conventions, discourse strategies and behaviour are considered more important than any conventional understanding of linguistic correctness. Linguistic correctness is not of course completely irrelevant, but will no longer form the basis for the definition of which mistakes are important. What will become increasingly unimportant are decidedly regional varieties of language, or varieties used by certain social groups, the use of which can often lead to misunderstanding and confusion in intercultural encounters. Basically, it is those varieties of English, in terms of linguistic properties, which could be used more or less universally (i.e. in all regional and social groups) which should be taught, omitting any highly specific varieties.¹⁵

Taking account of the eight criteria of intercultural competence proposed above, a format for a test of intercultural competence can be designed as shown

Max-Weber-Berufskolleg (Vocational Training School) Düsseldorf, and Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg (Bonn University of Applied Sciences). The decision on the final test format was made after the trialling. Taking into account the findings of the item analysis and ongoing expert discussions, a limited number of alterations was introduced in 2013, among them 5 listening comprehension items of a new type. The ICE-Test Manuals (2nd edition) in English and German are available as free downloads at <http://www.elc-consult.com/49601/home.html>.

¹⁵ Cf. Bargiela-Chiappini et al. (2007). Part II of this interesting study provides an extensive overview of empirical research in the field of business discourse and frequently makes the point that much of the teaching material for Business English in use today does not reflect the language used in real business life. Cf. also the CEFR’s descriptors for *sociolinguistic appropriateness* at B1: “Can perform and respond to a wide range of language functions, using their most common exponents in a neutral register. Is aware of the salient politeness conventions and acts appropriately. Is aware of, and looks out for signs of, the most significant differences between the customs, usages, attitudes, values and beliefs prevalent in the community concerned and those of his or her own” (Council of Europe 2001: 122). While the first sentence mentions purely linguistic features, the second and third sentences address pragmatic aspects of communication at level B1, which may be crucial for success or otherwise in a great variety of intercultural encounters.

in Figure 13. The underlying concept of International English (ELF) is expressed in particular in the rating criteria for subtest 6 as specified in the ICE Test Manual (Figure 14). The rating criteria for the oral test again reflect the underlying concept of International English as specified in the ICE Test Manual (Figure 15). For each of the skills and their respective rating bands, specified descriptors are available. Linguistic correctness ranks last and is only taken into account if understanding and/or politeness is affected.

Both the ICE training concept and the test procedures outlined above have been extensively piloted and are part of a training package which includes test specifications, extensive course materials and teacher-training courses. All these

TEST FORMAT — WRITTEN PARTS (Levels 1 & 2)				
Time	Part	Item-Type	No of items	Rating criteria
10 min.	1	Critical Incidents	10	cf. pp. 19 & 30
10 min.	2	Listening Comprehension	10	cf. pp. 20 & 31
10 min	3	Structured Responses	10	cf. pp. 21 & 32
10 min	4	Proof Reading	10	cf. pp. 22 & 33
10 min	5	Country Specifics	30	cf. pp. 23 & 34
10 min	6	Written Production	1	cf. pp. 24 & 35
60 min				

TEST FORMAT — ORAL PARTS (Levels 1 & 2)				
Time	Part	Task-type	What is tested?	Rating criteria
15 Min. preparation time				
5 min.	1	Dialogue on personal background and international / intercultural experience	Building Rapport	
5 min.	2	Discussion of input (text, picture, diagram etc.)	Ability to discuss aspects affecting culture-bound behaviour and intercultural communication and to reflect on one's own culture and experience	a. Communication b. Intercultural competence c. Language
5 min.	3	Discussion of critical incident or text	Ability to discuss critical incidents and to give realistic explanations and pragmatic suggestions	cf. pp. 27-29 & pp. 37-39 & p. 40
15(+15) min.				

Fig. 13

RATING CRITERIA WRITTEN PRODUCTION

Criteria	Points
<p>The email is appropriate in all respects, i.e. it would not cause any offence, irritation, confusion or misunderstanding.</p> <p>and</p> <p>The language is appropriate for the level concerned (B1 or B2).</p> <p>and</p> <p>There are no or very few mistakes and none which affect understanding.</p>	10
<p>The email would not cause any offence, irritation or misunderstanding, but one part of the message is missing or inappropriate.</p> <p>and/or</p> <p>The language is below the level concerned (B1 or B2).</p> <p>and/or</p> <p>There are several language mistakes, none of which affect understanding of the main message.</p>	6
<p>The email may cause offence, irritation, confusion or misunderstanding as parts are missing and/or inappropriate.</p>	4
<p>The message is expressed in such a way as to cause offence, irritation or confusion.</p> <p>and/or</p> <p>There are so many mistakes that not even the main message can be understood.</p> <p>and/or</p> <p>Nothing has been written.</p>	0

Fig. 14

RATING CRITERIA ORAL TEST		
Criteria		Points
1. Communication	Contributing to interaction	6/4/2/0
	Involving other interlocutors	6/4/2/0
	Use of polite discourse conventions	6/4/2/0
2. Intercultural competence	Expression of non-judgemental attitude*	8/4/0
	Evidence of knowledge of intercultural theory	8/4/0
3. Language	Linguistic appropriateness	6/4/0
TOTAL		< 40

Fig. 15

have been developed and applied in a great number of courses in recent years. Based on item analysis and practical experience, both the test format, item types and individual items are revised continuously.¹⁶

Figure 16 provides a sample task sheet as used in the oral parts of the test.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework for teaching and testing intercultural competence in English, the pedagogical implications and practical teaching examples, see Camerer and Mader (2012).

TEST OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH — ORAL TEST

LEVEL 1

PART 1

In intercultural communication it is important to initiate and maintain contact and build rapport.

Start a conversation with your partner. Talk about the following:

- Your experiences with other cultures, both in your own country and when travelling.
- What was unusual for you.
- What you found difficult about intercultural communication.
- What was easy when communicating with people from different cultures.
- In what way these experiences may have influenced your feelings about other cultures.

PART 2

The picture on the right was taken from a French bank's advertisement.

*What is it trying to say?
What do you think about it?*

Discuss this with your partner.



PART 3

A German manager working in the US subsidiary of an insurance company was pleased to find that he had an excellent secretary. After yet another piece of work had been finished long before the deadline he went up to her, patted her on the shoulder and said, "Pat, thanks again. It really is such a help that you are here." She complained to his boss.

Robert Gibson, Intercultural Business Communication, Fachsprache Englisch, 2000

- Can you explain this incident?
- How can intercultural knowledge and competence help to deal with incidents like this?
- What should people do when things like this happen?
- Has anything like this ever happened to you?
- Can you imagine something like this happening in your culture?

Discuss these questions and your answers with your partner.

Fig. 16

6 Conclusion

Language test developers are accustomed to starting with the construct and criteria and developing a test with these in mind. After examining the wide range of intercultural tests available it seemed clear that any test based on a construct of personality, while ignoring the candidate's practical communicative performance, would be insufficient because of its manifest lack of construct validity. For language testers, it therefore seemed logical to find the relevant statements and descriptors in the CEFR and use these to approach the question of how language competence and intercultural competence go together and where differences may lie.

Using a criterion-based test format and the elements belonging to this – syllabus, material and test as well as train-the-trainer courses – it can be assumed that the example of training and testing intercultural competence in International English, as outlined above, provides a valid and practicable method which may be transferable to other languages. The performance-based approach to training and testing can replace both the purely cognitive and the psychological approaches to the training of intercultural competence which are still in use. Furthermore it is to be hoped that it will replace a great number of psychological tests that have found acceptance in corporate and academic contexts up to now.¹⁷

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¹⁷ I would like to thank Judith Mader for valuable suggestions concerning both the contents and form of this essay.

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Bionote

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