

# The intercultural communicative competence of young children in a bilingual education setting

## Summary of MA thesis results

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### **Introduction**

One of the ways in which intercultural communicative competence (ICC) can be defined is as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). This ability has been increasingly valued, as more and more people come in contact with different cultures, as part of their jobs, studies, or everyday life. The teaching of ICC has also begun to be incorporated into some language classes. In today’s world, particularly with widely spoken languages such as English, the goal of learning a language is rarely to communicate with a specific group of people (e.g. British people), but rather to communicate with many different kinds of people in various situations. However, the vast majority of research and initiatives related to ICC have been conducted with adults in mind. The findings and theories of ICC in adults cannot be directly applied to children as they presume a certain level of cognitive, emotional, and social development, but that does not mean that ICC is a concept entirely irrelevant to children. Gerlich, Kersten, Kersten, Massler and Wippermann (2010), in their longitudinal study of nine preschools in Belgium, Germany and Sweden, found that children aged three to six do exhibit skills, knowledge, and attitudes related to ICC.

The aim of the thesis was to find out whether those skills, knowledge and attitudes were also present in the context of bilingual primary education in the Netherlands in children aged four to six. Testing the ICC components discovered by Gerlich et al. (2010) on a similar population allowed to improve the conceptualization of ICC in young children in a bilingual education setting. The following two research questions were addressed:

1. Which positive and negative behaviours related to intercultural communicative competence can be observed in the children, and in what contexts?
2. To what extent can previous findings on intercultural communicative competence in young children be used as a framework to assess the attitude, knowledge and skills that can be observed as a child develops their intercultural communicative competence?

### **Methodology**

The participants were twenty grade 1 and 2 children from an international school that is a part of the bilingual primary education pilot. The children came from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and most of them spoke another language at home instead of, or in addition to, Dutch. The children were spoken to in English 30 % of the school time by a native speaker.

An observation form containing the categories related to ICC discovered by Gerlich et al. (2010) was created. The categories and their definitions are shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

*Table 1.* Categories of ICC attitude found by Gerlich et al. (2010, p. 152).

Category	Definition
fear / rejection	children cry, flinch, avoid contact, yell or show other signs of discomfort when exposed to manifestations of cultural difference; children refuse contact with certain persons, languages, objects or actions related to another culture
judgmental statement	children utter phrases which express disrespect for or negative assumptions about another culture; children laugh about utterances, actions, beliefs or habits of persons from a different culture in a disrespectful way
tolerance / acceptance	children show openness or a welcoming reaction toward persons, objects and actions from a different culture; children respect rules of an intercultural situation
hesitation	children seem to avoid or seem cautious or shy towards persons from a different cultural background, their actions or objects associated with them, but they do not show signs of rejection
regret	children express sadness or disappointment about certain conditions associated with an intercultural situation
interest	children appear curious or want to gain knowledge about other persons, objects and actions that are connected to a different culture
no interest	children appear disinterested in displayed objects, themes or other newly introduced features
motivation for contact	children appear eager to become involved or to be in contact with L2 teachers or with children from different cultural backgrounds
motivation for language	children appear willing to learn the L2 spoken in preschool context or other languages; children show appreciation for language skills

*Table 2.* Categories of ICC knowledge found by Gerlich et al. (2010, p. 153).

Category	Definition
factual knowledge	children utter, reproduce, or recount facts relating to national or ethnic culture, identity, habits, rules, etc.
language knowledge	children utter, reproduce, recount words or phrases in a language which is not their L1; or in their L1, if L1 is not the majority language nor the target L2 of the preschool
lack of knowledge	children appear to have a deficit in factual knowledge on culture-related issues or language knowledge; this does not necessarily include a negative connotation or interpretation
meta-linguistic knowledge / meta-communication	children utter assumptions or factual knowledge about language, language construction, or communication; children talk about different languages and/or about communication strategies

Table 3. Categories of ICC skills found by Gerlich et al. (2010, p. 154).

Category	Definition
verbal communication strategy	children use verbal utterances to react to or interact with their chosen interlocutor/s from another culture, for example by choosing the adequate language, or by adapting their own language to the interlocutor's abilities
nonverbal communication strategy	children use mime and body language to react to or interact with their interlocutor/s
lack of communication strategy	children appear to lack a verbal or nonverbal strategy to interact with their interlocutor/s, which results in unsuccessful communication
negative strategy of communication	children use a successful strategy of communication to fulfil their intention, but the children's intention is to stop communication rather than to enhance it, e.g. by excluding other children
skill of discovery	children use a successful strategy to acquire knowledge or gather information, for example by asking questions
deduction / transfer	children combine factual and/or unconscious knowledge to establish interrelations between facts of which they had previously been unaware
mediation / translation	children use a successful strategy to solve a misunderstanding or a dysfunction in communication between individuals of different cultural background, for example by mediating, translating or explaining
guidance	children successfully use a strategy to include another individual from a different cultural background into a group, an activity, or to introduce him or her to certain knowledge; this strategy is not restricted to dysfunctional communication, and it usually includes other strategies, such as the skill to mediate and translate

The children were observed during four short school days. Part of each of these days was a 45-minute exchange with the international department, during which a few children from the international department came to the classroom to play with the children in the Dutch department. Each situation in which children exhibited behavior related to ICC was noted down and assigned to one of the categories found by Gerlich et al. (2010) (or was assigned a new category in case none of the above ones were appropriate). Such situations were usually intercultural encounters during which children engaged in interaction with people from a culture other than their own.

## Results

### *Children's ICC*

Table 4 shows the frequency with which each category was observed. Table 5 shows three new skills categories that were identified during the observations. It is important to bear in mind that while frequency can be indicative of what types of behavior or common or uncommon in the children, it cannot be a direct measure of which aspects of ICC are more or less developed. This is because the data were collected through observation, and the frequency of categories can be linked to the context and opportunities for certain behaviours. For example, language knowledge can be observed whenever a child speaks in a foreign language, while factual knowledge is likely to be observed less often, depending on when such knowledge is needed.

Table 3. Frequency of occurrence of ICC categories.

<b>Attitude</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Knowledge</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Skills</b>	<b>#</b>
Fear/rejection	1	Factual knowledge	1	Verbal communication strategy	85
Judgmental statement	0	Language knowledge	85	Non-verbal communication strategy	12
Tolerance/acceptance	68	Lack of knowledge	18	Lack of communication strategy	1
Hesitation	7	Meta-linguistic knowledge/meta-communication	14	Negative strategy of exclusion	0
Regret	0			Skill of discovery	10
Interest	2			Deduction/transfer	0
No interest	0			Translation/mediation	6
Motivation for language	2			Guidance	0
Motivation for contact	46				

Table 4. Extra ICC categories observed in the study.

<b>Skills</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Inappropriate language choice	16	Children address someone in a language that they know the other person does not speak
Bilingual interaction	9	Children are capable of operating two languages in an interaction, e.g. switching between languages depending on the addressee in a multiparty interaction
Linguistic resourcefulness	5	Children use strategies aimed at achieving successful communication despite limited language knowledge e.g. describing the referent of a word when they do not know the word itself

The most widespread attitude among the children was that of tolerance and acceptance. Negative attitudes such as fear/rejection, judgment, regret, and no interest were observed rarely or not at all. The children often initiated interaction with the researcher, not only tolerating her presence, but also deliberately seeking contact with her. Despite the children frequently seeking out intercultural contact, the attitude of hesitation was not uncommon, especially during the exchange with the international department. With regards to this exchange, we cannot be sure

whether the children's hesitation was directly related to the fact that they had to engage in intercultural encounters, or to the fact that they had to interact with someone new – quite possibly it was a combination of both factors.

Relatively little could be said about children's factual knowledge of cultures based on the observations. There were indications that children confuse the concepts of nationality and languages that someone speaks (i.e. thinking that speaking English means that one "is English"), but also that these concepts are relevant to them and that they are trying to make sense of them by asking questions. For example, one child asked the researcher questions like "Are you English or Dutch?" or "Are you from Turkey?". Those questions were particularly interesting, in that the responses were restricted, indicating that she thought of possible answers before asking the questions. They suggest that the child is trying to make sense of culture-related concepts such as countries and languages, and that she is trying to build an understanding of the multicultural environment that she is a part of.

Children's knowledge of English was sufficient to make communication possible, but it was not as extensive as their knowledge of Dutch (both for L1 and L2 children). They often used strategies to overcome gaps in their language knowledge, such as communicating non-verbally, being creative with their limited linguistic repertoire, and trying to communicate in a different language (Dutch). The extent of children's meta-linguistic knowledge included knowledge about which languages they and other people speak, and knowledge of which languages they should speak in which situations.

The children showed various skills related to intercultural communication, many of which were quite sophisticated and cognitively demanding. They found ways of communicating despite often limited language knowledge, and as such, unsuccessful communication was rare, and lack of communication strategy occurred only once. On several occasions, some children even facilitated communication between other children and their interlocutors, by translating words into Dutch, or by communicating messages on behalf of another child.

The occurrence of the category of verbal communication was very wide spread. Because of that, it was not a very informative measure of the children's ICC, as it became clear very early on that all children could, and did, communicate verbally in English (and Dutch, in case of the children who do not speak it at home). Therefore, the specific kinds of strategies that children used during intercultural communication were examined, and the three new categories, shown in Table 5, emerged. These are briefly discussed in the next three paragraphs.

Something that occurred quite a few times during intercultural communication was children addressing someone in the "wrong" language, specifically addressing people in Dutch instead of English. In all of the instances, the children had been told that the person does not speak Dutch and that they should talk in English, and in many cases the children had talked in English to the person before. A closer analysis revealed two possible reasons for using the "wrong" language – 1) using it accidentally, for example when addressing an English-speaking person right after addressing a Dutch-speaking person, 2) using Dutch in case gaps in knowledge of English, since often the interlocutor, despite not being fully proficient in Dutch, might understand some Dutch words or phrases.

The skill of bilingual interaction occurred when children used two languages, Dutch and English, in a multiparty encounter consisting of Dutch and English speakers. Often, children

switched back and forth between languages depending on who they were addressing. Other times, the language that children used to address everyone, or nobody in particular, was English, and Dutch was only used when addressing specific people with whom they usually speak Dutch.

Linguistic resourcefulness occurred when children managed to overcome gaps in their language knowledge, by for example explaining or describing objects/concepts instead of naming them. An example of this category is transcribed below.

Child: (*says something in Dutch*)

Researcher: What?

C: And then we drove that thing what has air in it, and it's (*makes hand gestures and imitates cannon sounds*) pushed the balls out of there and it shoot soft balls on the children.

In this situation, the child told the researcher that another child was drawing a cannon that they saw on a school trip. Despite not knowing what to call it in English, he managed to describe, while also using gestures and sounds.

#### *Suitability of the categories in describing children's ICC*

On the whole, most of the categories found by Gerlich et al. (2010) were found to sufficiently describe the different aspects of the children's developing ICC. However, a few modifications were suggested, which are believed to strengthen the framework. Firstly, as already discussed, three additional categories related to verbal communication were created: 'bilingual interaction', 'linguistic resourcefulness', and 'inappropriate language choice'. Ideally, the category of inappropriate language choice would be divided into several categories, depending on what it indicates (e.g. 'accidental inappropriate language choice' and 'strategic inappropriate language choice'). However, it was often difficult to tell the reason for using the 'wrong' language.

The attitude categories were the most difficult to observe, and many of the situations in which attitudes were displayed were ambiguous. However, that is likely due to attitude being a latent construct, rather than due to the irrelevance or inappropriateness of any of the categories found by Gerlich et al. (2010). Tolerance/acceptance was a particularly problematic category, as it was broad, not easily quantifiable, and often overlapped with other categories. One thing that could be done in order to improve the framework is to specify this category and how it is manifested. Gerlich et al. (2010) include two aspects of tolerance/acceptance in their definition: "children show openness or a welcoming reaction towards persons, objects and actions from a different culture", and "children respect rules of an intercultural situation". Although these two are likely to often overlap, it could be beneficial to make them into separate categories. The former would describe children's acceptance and tolerance of cultural differences, while the latter would describe children's acceptance of having to adapt the way they communicate with persons from other cultures, for example by using a different language, or by being patient when communication takes longer and is more difficult due to linguistic/cultural barriers.

#### *Observation as ICC data collection/assessment method*

The main weaknesses of the observation method were that it was time consuming, and that many observed situations were ambiguous and subject to interpretation. However, it is important to

keep in mind that most existing methods of assessing ICC are longitudinal, and that no method can give a completely clear-cut and objective assessment of one's ICC. Apart from the two weaknesses, which are likely to be present in other methods of assessment as well, the observation method was found to be rather effective. However, despite its general effectiveness, it was not an effective method of assessing all aspects of ICC.

The observation method was found to be most successful for the assessment of skills, particularly skills related to interaction. Skills were exhibited often when children interacted with persons from other cultures, and their occurrences were rather unambiguous. However, skills such as skill of discovery or deduction/transfer do not occur spontaneously very often, since children may simply not need them. Rather than waiting for them to occur, these could be elicited through games/exercises in which, for example, children need to solve a problem or gain information, and it can be observed which skills they use in order to do so.

Observation was not found to be an effective way of assessing knowledge. It is recommended to assess language knowledge separately from other aspects of ICC. This is because language knowledge is a multidimensional construct in its own, and it deserves to be inspected separately in order to get a full picture of a child's foreign language development. The issue with factual knowledge, on the other hand, was that it rarely occurred spontaneously. It is advised to design games or activities in order to elicit children's factual knowledge. Factual knowledge is very easy to elicit, for example just by asking questions.

Attitude was quite difficult to assess through observations, not because it rarely occurred, but because it was the most ambiguous and least direct aspect of ICC. The relationship between children's behaviour and their underlying attitude was often unclear. However, it is not certain whether there are any other age-appropriate methods that would be better for the assessment of attitude. Assessment of children's attitude using this method is challenging, however there are several things that can be done in order to make it easier and more effective. The most important consideration is to keep in mind the context in which attitudes are displayed. This includes the immediate context of the encounter and its surroundings, as well as information about the children. The demands of the situation in which attitude is displayed should also be considered, instead of simply observing which attitude categories occur or not. For example, it may be easier for a child to be tolerant/accepting in some situations than others

### *ICC during exchange with the international department*

Several studies on ICC in adults found that individuals benefit from intercultural contact, but only during structured encounters (e.g. through group work at university) under the supervision of a teacher. The exchange with the international department represented such a situation, and therefore the ICC of children was observed during the exchange, to see whether it indeed seems beneficial, and whether the structure of the exchange could be improved.

It was found that despite being put in small play groups by the teacher, the children from the two departments often did not initiate interaction with one another, or when they did, it was mostly very brief. One possible reason for that could be that the encounters were not structured enough. The children were put in different groups depending on what they wanted to do (e.g. draw, play with building blocks). Many of the games did not require extensive interaction, especially not verbal interaction, and the children seemed quite comfortable with silence and lack

of interaction. Perhaps more structure and teacher's directions would benefit the children, for example if they had to perform tasks in which they need to collaborate with other children.

However, other observations indicated that more structured encounters would not necessarily be the best or only solution to increase children's benefit from intercultural encounters. The teacher reported that an open door exchange (not observed in this study), during which children could freely go to different classrooms and play with different children, resulted in more interaction with children from the international department. Similarly, the quantity and quality of contact between the children and the researcher, which was unstructured, were higher than between the children during the exchange. This indicates that it is not simply a question of structured versus unstructured contact, but that there may be other factors that contribute to how beneficial intercultural contact is for children.

While the open door exchange was not observed and therefore not much could be said about it, there are several possible factors that could explain why children's interactions with the researcher were more effective. First of all, the children got to know her during the time of the observations more than they could get to know children from the international department, as different children came to their classroom each week, for only 45 minutes. The fact that the children did not know each other likely contributed to the low amount of interaction. Furthermore, during such a short period of time, the children were unable to form relationships with each other, while forming cross-cultural friendships was shown by Holmes and O'Neill (2012) to be an important part of developing ICC. Another explanation for the higher quality and quantity of contact between the children and the researcher could be that she initiated interaction with them more often than the children from the international department, indicating that perhaps the children were not necessarily "better" at interacting with her, but that she facilitated it for them.

## **Conclusion**

The results were mostly in line with those of Gerlich et al. (2010), confirming the finding that young children in a bilingual education setting exhibit skills, attitudes, and knowledge associated with ICC. This means that ICC is a concept relevant to individuals as young as 3-6 years old, and there should be more studies examining it in detail, instead of focusing only on ICC in adults. The thesis contributed to establishing a framework of ICC in young children in bilingual education, by evaluating the ICC categories specified by Gerlich et al. (2010), as well as discovering several new categories. It also employed and evaluated an assessment method that can be used with young children, which was found to be largely effective. Finally, it expanded the research on the role of interaction on the development of ICC to a new setting and population, providing possible new insights about the role of structured and unstructured interactions.

Based on the findings, some recommendations could be given to teachers and others involved in bilingual primary education who wish to facilitate the development of children's ICC:

- Becoming familiar with the categories of ICC found in this study and in Gerlich et al. (2010) could raise the teacher's awareness of how ICC might manifest in young children, as well as give them a general idea about the ICC level in children in their classroom.
- If teachers wish to assess ICC, it is best to use a combination of methods. Observation is an effective method for some aspects of ICC, but others might be assessed better through asking the children questions or designing games or activities.

- Contextual information, such as information about the child, need to be taken account when assessing ICC, especially when assessing attitude.
- If the teacher wants to organize activities during which children can interact with peers from different cultures, it might be useful to experiment with different set-ups to see which one seems to result in the best quantity and quality of intercultural contact.