Culture, Power, and English Language Teaching: Rethinking Intercultural Communicative Competence through Critical Discourse Analysis

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DOI : https://doi.org/10.30983/mj.v4i2.10714

Submission: February 18, 2026	*Revised: May 30, 2026*	*Published: June 30, 2026*

Abstract

This study critically examines the implementation of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in junior high school English language teaching, exploring how culture and power are discursively embedded in classroom practices. Grounded in Michael Byram's (1997, 2008) intercultural framework and informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study adopts a qualitative design drawing on classroom interactions, teaching materials, and teacher narratives. The analysis reveals that ICC is largely reduced to *savoirs*, or factual knowledge about English-speaking cultures, while attitudinal, interpretive, and critical dimensions receive limited pedagogical attention. Cultural learning is commonly presented as static and decontextualized, reinforcing dominant cultural representations of English and constraining opportunities for critical reflection. Although communicative activities are incorporated, *savoir apprendre/faire* is enacted mainly as a controlled performance rather than an exploratory intercultural engagement. One of the most important points in Byram's ICC model, "savoir s'engager," is, in fact, almost entirely absent from classroom discourse, resulting in a perspective that is detached from ethical and critical discourse, as if it were merely instrumental in intercultural learning. This study argues that the application of the ICC in English language learning in the classroom can reflect broader critical assumptions, namely, the positioning of English as a global language that carries a specific ideology. To realize the transformative potential of ICC, English language instruction in junior high school must go beyond merely conveying cultural knowledge; it must also explore intercultural meanings in a reflective, critical, and ethically engaged manner.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence; English Language Teaching; Critical Discourse Analysis; Culture and Power

1. Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) in junior high schools is often framed as a pedagogical project focused on developing students' communicative abilities for future academic and professional participation. However, such a framing conceals a more complex reality: ELT operates as a powerful cultural and ideological apparatus through which particular ways of knowing, being, and valuing are legitimized, while others are marginalized. As scholars in critical applied linguistics have long argued, language education is never neutral; it is deeply embedded in historical trajectories of power, coloniality, and global inequality (Pennycook, 2017). In contemporary educational discourse, English is frequently positioned as a "global skill," a neutral medium for international communication, and a gateway to modernity.

The concept of *Intercultural Communicative Competence* (ICC), most influentially articulated by Byram (1997), emerged as a response to the limitations of communicative competence models that privileged native-speaker norms and linguistic accuracy. Byram reconceptualized language learners

as *intercultural speakers*—individuals capable of mediating between cultures, reflecting critically on cultural practices, and engaging ethically with difference. Central to this model is the idea that language learning is inseparable from cultural learning and that intercultural competence involves not only knowledge and skills but also attitudes and critical awareness. Despite its critical potential, ICC has often been pedagogically domesticated. In many classroom applications, ICC is reduced to learning about cultural facts or practicing polite communicative behaviors, detached from questions of power, ideology, and inequality.

The consequence of 21st-century societal developments is that our experiences of culture and identity have become increasingly pluralized and complicated (Asararatnam, 2007; Kramsch, 2011; Wahyudi, 2016). In this connection, it has been claimed that Byram's model is tied to a rather static and simplified notion of national culture, thereby misrepresenting contemporary patterns of life and restricting the roles that multilingual and multicultural individuals are allowed to adopt in the language-learning experience. This critique stems from Byram's (1997) tendency to conflate culture with the term "country" when describing saviors and objectives. The "culture" of a particular nation tends to be referred to in the singular and associated with a particular "perspective," also in the singular. Critical scholars have argued that this engenders the interpretation that culture within a nation is coherent, homogeneous, and represents fixed values and beliefs (Dervin, 2016). This assumption is associated with an essentialist view of culture, which entails seeing people as defined and constrained by the nation in which they live (Benhabib, 2002; Holliday, 2011).

Culture is treated as a stable object of knowledge rather than a contested social practice. As Kubota (2016) argues, such approaches risk transforming ICC into a discourse of tolerance that leaves structural hierarchies intact. This limitation is particularly visible in junior high school ELT, where curricular pressures, assessment regimes, and age-related assumptions about learners often constrain critical engagement. While official curricula may emphasize intercultural understanding, classroom practices frequently prioritize measurable, testable linguistic outcomes. Consequently, ICC tends to function as an aspirational discourse rather than a lived pedagogical reality.

This examines how culture and interculturality are discursively constructed in junior high school English classrooms and how these constructions shape the possibilities for developing *critical cultural awareness* (*savoir s'engager*). By doing so, the article seeks to reposition ICC not as a supplementary skill, but as a critical educational project central to language teaching in culturally diverse societies.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research orientation informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Rather than approaching discourse as merely linguistic data, CDA conceptualizes language as social practice—an arena where meanings are negotiated, identities are constructed, and power relations are enacted (Fairclough, 2015). In the context of English language teaching, this perspective enables an examination of how pedagogical discourses influence learners' understandings of culture, self, and others.

The research was conducted as a case study in a public junior high school in Semarang, where English is taught as a compulsory subject. The choice of a case study design reflects a commitment to contextualized understanding. Instead of seeking generalizable findings, the study aims to illuminate how interculturality is constructed and constrained within a particular institutional and sociocultural setting. The focal participants included an English teacher and an eighth-grade class. The teacher, with over a decade of teaching experience, played a central role in mediating

curriculum expectations, instructional materials, and classroom interaction. The students represented diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, reflecting the heterogeneity typical of junior high schools. Their perspectives were crucial for understanding how intercultural discourses were interpreted and internalized.

Data were generated through prolonged classroom observation, analysis of pedagogical texts, and semi-structured interviews with both teachers and students. Classroom observations focused not only on what was taught but also on how cultural meanings were negotiated in interaction. Teaching materials were examined as institutional texts that embody curricular ideologies. Interviews were treated as discursive events in which participants articulated beliefs, assumptions, and positionalities regarding English and culture. Data analysis was iterative and theory-driven. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, texts and interactions were analyzed at the textual, discursive, and social levels. Byram's ICC framework served as an analytical lens, particularly regarding the dimensions of savoir être (attitudes), savoirs (knowledge), savoir comprendre (skills of interpretation and relating), *savoir apprendre/faire* (skills of discovery and interaction), and *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness). This enabled an examination not only of whether intercultural elements were present, but also of how they were framed, limited, or expanded within classroom discourse.

3. Results and Discussion

Savoirs and the Reduction of Culture to Static Knowledge

The analysis reveals that cultural learning in junior high school English language teaching is overwhelmingly dominated by *savoirs*, understood as factual knowledge about English-speaking cultures. Cultural content is primarily delivered through textbooks, reading passages, and teacher explanations that emphasize tangible cultural products such as food, festivals, daily routines, and school life in Anglophone countries. This approach reflects a traditional and essentialist conception of culture as a fixed body of information rather than a dynamic and contested system of meanings (Byram, 1997).

From the perspective of Byram's ICC model, *savoirs* constitute only one dimension of intercultural competence and must be integrated with attitudes, skills, and critical awareness. However, classroom discourse positions *savoirs* as the core—and often sole—indicator of intercultural learning. Students are evaluated based on their ability to recall cultural facts rather than their capacity to interpret or critically engage with cultural meanings. This pedagogical orientation aligns with what Sercu et al. (2005) identify as a "knowledge-based" approach to intercultural education, which prioritizes content transmission over reflexive engagement.

The privileging of factual knowledge is closely linked to curricular and institutional constraints. In junior high schools, teachers operate under assessment-driven systems that reward measurable outcomes. Cultural knowledge is easier to assess than intercultural attitudes or critical reflection, which can lead to a limited implementation of ICC. As a result, culture becomes another examinable topic rather than a lens through which students interrogate social realities. Critically, the selection of cultural content is not neutral. Textbooks disproportionately represent Western, middle-class, and Anglophone lifestyles, implicitly constructing them as normative and globally relevant. Local cultural practices, when included, are often framed as supplementary or illustrative rather than epistemologically central. This asymmetry reflects broader power relations in English

language education, where English is positioned as a carrier of prestigious global culture (Pennycook, 1998).

Byram (1997) cautions that *savoirs* without reflexivity risk reinforcing stereotypes. When cultural facts are presented without contextualization or critique, students may internalize simplified and idealized images of English-speaking societies. Such representations obscure internal diversity, social conflict, and historical complexity, thereby depoliticizing culture. Moreover, the static presentation of culture limits students' engagement with their own identities. Cultural knowledge is often treated as "out there," belonging to others, rather than something students actively engage with in their daily lives. This reinforces a dichotomy between "target culture" and "local culture," positioning learners as outsiders to English-mediated cultural spaces.

From a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective, this pedagogical pattern functions ideologically by naturalizing dominant cultural narratives. As Fairclough (2015) argues, discourse that presents particular meanings as common sense contributes to the reproduction of power relations. In this case, ELT discourse normalizes the cultural authority of English-speaking contexts while marginalizing alternative voices. Importantly, junior high school students are at a stage of development in which cultural meanings significantly influence identity formation. Limiting intercultural learning to factual *savoirs* deprives students of opportunities to reflect on how language, culture, and power intersect in their own lives. Even simplified critical questions, such as whose culture is represented or why English is the global language.

Thus, while *savoirs* are visibly present in ELT practices, they operate within a constrained epistemological framework. Culture is reduced to content rather than treated as a site of meaning-making, negotiation, and struggle. This finding underscores the need to reposition *savoirs* as an entry point to deeper intercultural inquiry rather than as an end in itself.

The Marginalization of Savoir Être and Savoir Comprendre: ICC without Reflexivity

Beyond cultural knowledge, Byram (1997) emphasizes *savoir être*—attitudes of curiosity, openness, and willingness to suspend judgment—as foundational to intercultural competence. However, the findings indicate that such attitudes are largely marginalized in junior high school ELT. Classroom discourse prioritizes linguistic accuracy, behavioral conformity, and correct answers, leaving little space for emotional engagement or critical questioning.

Students are rarely encouraged to express curiosity about cultural differences or to reflect on their own assumptions. Instead, cultural content is framed as something to be accepted rather than explored. This pedagogical stance discourages the development of *savoir être*, as students learn to reproduce sanctioned knowledge rather than engage dialogically with difference (Byram, 2008). Closely related to this issue is the underdevelopment of *savoir comprendre*, defined as the ability to interpret and relate cultural practices and perspectives. While differences between cultures are acknowledged, they are treated descriptively rather than analytically. For example, differences in communication styles are presented as simple contrasts ("They do this, we do that") without exploring underlying values or social contexts. Byram (1997) argues that *savoir comprendre* enables learners to mediate between cultures by examining how meanings are constructed. Its absence in classroom practice results in superficial comparisons that risk reinforcing stereotypes rather than dismantling them. Students may recognize differences, but they are not equipped to understand their complexity.

From a CDA perspective, the lack of interpretive engagement is ideologically significant. Fairclough (2015) notes that avoiding interpretation functions to stabilize dominant meanings. In

ELT classrooms, this results in cultural representations being treated as neutral truths rather than contested discourses shaped by power. Furthermore, the absence of *savoir comprendre* limits students' ability to relate cultural content to their own lived experiences. Cultural learning remains external and abstract, disconnected from students' social realities. This undermines the dialogic nature of intercultural learning envisioned by Byram, where meaning emerges through comparison and reflection.

The marginalization of attitudinal and interpretive dimensions is often justified by assumptions about students' cognitive readiness. However, research suggests that young learners are capable of engaging in reflective and ethical discussions when appropriately scaffolded (Dervin, 2016). Excluding these dimensions reflects not pedagogical necessity but ideological caution. Importantly, junior high school learners are at a critical stage of identity formation. Language classrooms play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of self and others. Without *savoir être* and *savoir comprendre*, ICC becomes an exercise in cultural recognition rather than intercultural transformation.

Thus, the findings suggest that ICC implementation remains incomplete. Cultural differences are acknowledged but not thoroughly examined; attitudes are assumed rather than cultivated. This selective adoption of Byram's framework risks reducing ICC to a technical competence devoid of ethical depth.

Savoir Apprendre/Faire: Intercultural Skills as Controlled Performance

The data indicate that *savoir apprendre/faire*—skills of discovery and interaction—are partially present in junior high school ELT, particularly through communicative activities such as role-plays and dialogues. These activities are often framed as opportunities for intercultural practice. However, closer analysis reveals that they are highly scripted and norm-oriented. Rather than encouraging students to explore cultural meanings through inquiry, tasks prescribe appropriate linguistic forms and behaviors. This contradicts Byram's (1997) emphasis on discovery and interaction as open-ended processes involving uncertainty and negotiation. Intercultural interaction is often framed as a performance rather than an exploration.

Students are positioned as learners who must adapt to imagined norms of English-speaking contexts. This reinforces a deficit view of learners and aligns with Norton's (2013) description of identity regulation in language education. Students learn how to behave "correctly" rather than how to engage critically. From a CDA perspective, such practices function as disciplinary mechanisms. They regulate what counts as acceptable communication and marginalize alternative ways of speaking or meaning-making (Foucault, 1977). Intercultural competence can become a form of compliance with dominant norms rather than a dialogic engagement. Moreover, *savoir apprendre* involves the ability to acquire new cultural knowledge independently. However, classroom practices rarely model strategies for questioning sources, seeking multiple perspectives, or reflecting on intercultural encounters. Students are not taught how to learn interculturally beyond the classroom.

This limitation is often attributed to curricular constraints; however, it reflects a deeper ideological resistance to uncertainty. Dewey (1938) argues that meaningful learning involves inquiry and doubt. When ELT avoids uncertainty, it undermines the transformative potential of ICC. Thus, *savoir apprendre/faire* is present in form but constrained in function. Skills are developed procedurally but not critically, limiting students' agency as intercultural learners.

The Absence of Savoir S'Engager: Depoliticizing ICC

The most significant finding is the near-total absence of *savoir s'engager*, or critical cultural awareness. Byram (1997) identifies this dimension as the ethical and political core of ICC, enabling learners to evaluate cultural practices in terms of principles such as equality and justice. In the observed classrooms, cultural representations are rarely problematized. English-speaking cultures are presented as neutral and desirable, while issues of inequality, linguistic dominance, or cultural marginalization are absent. This silence reflects what Kubota (2016) critiques as the depoliticization of intercultural education. Without *savoir s'engager*, ICC becomes an apolitical competence focused on tolerance rather than critique. Students may learn to recognize differences, but they are not encouraged to question whose interests are served by dominant cultural narratives. Byram (2008) argues that ICC should contribute to intercultural citizenship. However, current practices fall short of this goal. The ethical dimension of the ICC is sidelined in favor of safe, neutral content. Critically, even at the junior high school level, simplified discussions of fairness, representation, and voice are pedagogically feasible. Avoiding such discussions reflects ideological caution rather than developmental necessity. Reclaiming *savoir s'engager* requires reimagining ELT as a site of ethical inquiry. ICC should empower students to reflect on power relations embedded in language and culture. Ultimately, without this dimension, ICC risks becoming a symbolic label rather than a transformative educational project.

The discussion section illustrates how the author interprets the results in light of existing knowledge and explains the new understanding of the problem that emerges from considering them. The discussion must connect with the Introduction so it tells how your study contributes to the body of knowledge and society.

4. Conclusion

The findings reveal that ICC in junior high school ELT is predominantly reduced to *savoirs*, or factual knowledge about English-speaking cultures. Culture is presented as static, decontextualized information that can be transmitted, memorized, and assessed. While cultural knowledge is not inherently problematic, its dominance when detached from attitudes, interpretive skills, and ethical evaluation risks reproducing essentialist and hierarchical views of culture. More critically, the discussion highlights the systematic marginalization of *savoir-être and savoir-comprendre*. Learners are rarely encouraged to cultivate curiosity, openness, or reflexivity toward cultural difference, nor are they guided to interpret and relate cultural practices to their own social realities. Intercultural learning remains descriptive rather than interpretive, reinforcing superficial tolerance rather than meaningful understanding. From a critical discourse perspective, this pedagogical pattern contributes to the naturalization of dominant cultural representations embedded in English language teaching materials. Although elements of *savoir apprendre/faire* are evident in communicative activities, these skills are largely operationalized as controlled performances rather than as exploratory or inquiry-based practices. Intercultural interaction is framed as conformity to imagined norms of English use, positioning students as adapters to dominant cultural expectations rather than as active intercultural agents. The most significant limitation identified in this study is the near absence of *savoir s'engager*, or critical cultural awareness. Cultural content is rarely problematized, and issues of power, inequality, linguistic dominance, and representation are largely silenced. Consequently, ICC is depoliticized and reframed as a neutral competence focused on

tolerance and harmony rather than critique and ethical engagement. Taken together, these findings suggest that ICC in junior high school ELT is not absent, but selectively appropriated.

The dominance of *savoirs* and the marginalization of critical and reflexive dimensions reflect institutional constraints, assessment regimes, and ideological assumptions about English as a value-free global language. In this sense, ICC functions more as a symbolic discourse than as a genuinely critical pedagogical project. In conclusion, rethinking ICC through a critical discourse lens reveals that the challenge lies not merely in including cultural content, but in transforming the epistemological and ideological foundations of English language teaching. For ICC to fulfill its promise, junior high school ELT must move beyond the transmission of cultural knowledge toward the cultivation of critical, reflective, and ethically engaged intercultural speakers.

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