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Interpretive Accountability in University English Education
Integrating Intercultural Inquiry and Mediation

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Abstract

How can teachers connect intercultural interpretation with communicative decisions and assess the relationship? This critical conceptual review specifies interpretive accountability as a task-design principle for university English education. A purposive synthesis connects intercultural communicative competence, situated understandings of culture, intercultural pragmatics, mediation and assessment. The proposal traces contextual evidence through communicative choice to consequential meaning and a bounded assessment judgement. Its contribution is an inspectable arrangement of established concerns rather than an independent competence construct. Two constructed tasks within a proposed university academic communication workshop examine procedural explanation and reasoned disagreement. Contrasting response profiles show why meaning preservation and audience adaptation require separate feedback. A five-activity sequence is accompanied by a proposed 100-minute implementation plan, while a teacher calibration protocol specifies how descriptor usability and disagreement could be

investigated. No learner or teacher data are reported, and neither descriptor separability nor instructional effectiveness has been established. The framework offers a bounded specification for formative task design and identifies the evidence needed to evaluate its practical value.

Keywords: intercultural language education, interpretive accountability, pragmatic agency, mediation, Global Englishes, formative assessment

1. Introduction

Culture becomes an educational problem when knowing about people is treated as equivalent to understanding an encounter with them. A learner may recognise a custom yet misinterpret an unanswered message, reproduce a courteous formula yet conceal a necessary objection, or simplify institutional information while changing what its recipient is entitled to do. These difficulties concern the relationship between linguistic choices, participants' expectations and the authority to define appropriate conduct. An intercultural orientation to English language education must explain how learners can investigate that relationship and act on what they learn.

This problem has a substantial intellectual history. Atkinson (1999) questioned the treatment of culture within TESOL, and Holliday (1999) challenged the explanatory priority of national and ethnic categories. Byram's (1997, 2021) account of intercultural communicative competence connected language learning with interpretation, inquiry and critical cultural awareness. Such scholarship established a richer educational purpose than the transmission of facts about a target society. Nevertheless, endorsing that purpose does not determine how a teacher should distinguish a defensible interpretation from an attractive generalisation, or assess an adaptation that is fluent but changes another person's position.

This article addresses three questions. First, how can culture be conceptualised so that patterned expectations, institutional constraints and individual agency remain distinguishable? Second, how can intercultural inquiry inform pragmatic choices and mediation without making conformity the sole criterion of success? Third, what evidence can support claims about learning when performances involve peers, teachers or digital assistance?

We propose interpretive accountability as a principle for connecting these questions. An interpretation is accountable when its grounds can be identified, its implications for a communicative choice explained, and its consequences reconsidered in relation to relevant sources and participants. A warrant is the reason linking evidence to judgement: a documented deadline can justify presenting a request as urgent; nationality alone cannot establish that its wording is disrespectful. Accountability here concerns the quality and revisability of that connection. It does not mean obedience to institutional authority, compulsory self-disclosure or agreement with an assessor.

The contribution is a task-design specification within university academic communication workshops. It links an interpretation, its evidential grounds, a consequential textual choice and the limits of an assessment inference. Two constructed tasks, a formative matrix and a timed teaching plan make that linkage inspectable. The proposal does not posit a competence independent of existing intercultural and assessment constructs.

2. Conceptual Review Design and Analytical Method

2.1 Design and Evidential Scope

The article uses a critical conceptual review combining theoretical synthesis with pedagogical specification. Following Jaakkola's (2020) emphasis on an explicit design for conceptual research, sources are assigned different analytical roles: defining a construct, challenging an assumption, illustrating a process, or delimiting an assessment claim. The purpose is to develop and examine a coherent relationship among concepts, rather than estimate an intervention effect or establish exhaustive coverage of a field.

Five strands inform the synthesis: conceptions of culture; intercultural education and criticality; pragmatic agency and multilingual English use; mediation and assessment; and digitally supported communication. Foundational scholarship is retained where it establishes a necessary distinction. Research published through 2026 is used to reconsider those distinctions under contemporary conditions. Recency therefore informs the review without substituting for theoretical relevance or evidential quality.

2.2 Identification and Use of Sources

Targeted public scholarly searches and bibliographic checks were completed on 19 October 2026. Topic searches were followed by exact-title, author and DOI searches, with consultation of journal and publisher records, official documents, university repositories and publicly available author manuscripts. Selection was purposive: sources were retained when they directly informed one of the five strands or provided a substantive challenge to the proposed synthesis. Appendix A records representative searches and the distinction between full-text consultation, abstract-based use and conceptual background drawn from book previews.

The full-text analysis draws on the practical account of intercultural education by Byram et al. (2002), McConachy's (2019) classroom analysis, Baker's (2022) transcultural argument, Liddicoat's (2024) discussion of critical reflection, and Scarino et al.'s (2025) treatment of assessment. These sources allow the contribution to be located against existing accounts of agency, interpretation and evidence. Research syntheses and digital studies inform narrower claims appropriate to their designs. An abstract can support a statement about its reported scope or findings, but not an independent appraisal of unobserved procedures.

2.3 From Literature Tensions to Design Requirements

This conceptual inquiry proceeds through four methodological operations rather than empirical data analysis. The analytical procedure has four operations. First, the review identifies tensions concerning the unit of cultural explanation, the authority of communicative norms and the interpretation of performance. Second, it compares what the selected perspectives already explain, including their overlaps. Third, it translates unresolved task-design decisions into requirements for inquiry, mediation and assessment. Fourth, constructed cases examine whether those requirements distinguish plausible success from failure. The cases function as analytical probes, not demonstrations of learner outcomes.

One trace illustrates the procedure. Situated accounts of culture caution against explaining conduct through group membership; intercultural pragmatics makes the grounds of

interpersonal judgement an object of reflection. Together, these positions require a task to separate a participant's expectation from an established procedural condition. In the orientation case below, familiarity with contacting a lecturer does not establish permission to change an appointment. The resulting design requirement is to check the relevant procedure while investigating why each participant interprets the contact differently. The assessment consequence is to examine contextual interpretation, the authority of the evidence consulted and the preservation of the approval condition. An annotated source, a revised guide and a brief explanation make these links inspectable.

There was no empirical corpus, independent screening exercise or reliability calculation. The analysis is evaluated through the coherence of its conceptual relationships, the transparency of its evidential limits and its treatment of counterexamples. Table 1 locates the proposal against its closest intellectual resources; the final column identifies the present article's design response, rather than claiming that earlier scholarship lacks the concern altogether.

Table 1 Established contributions and the present design specification

Resource	Established contribution	Specification developed here
Intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997, 2021; Byram et al., 2002)	Interpretation, inquiry, multiple identities and critical evaluation belong within language education.	Connect a stated interpretation to a particular choice and an inspectable basis for feedback.
Situated and transcultural perspectives (Holliday, 1999; Baker, 2022)	Cultural relevance emerges through activity and cannot be assumed from national membership.	Require a bounded account of which expectations matter and what would alter that account.
Intercultural pragmatics and critical reflection (McConachy, 2019; Liddicoat, 2024)	Learners can examine the assumptions behind evaluations and exercise agency over language choices.	Trace that reasoning through a consequential revision, recording the support used.
Mediation (Council of Europe, 2020)	Making meaning accessible involves texts, concepts and communication across repertoires.	Examine audience usefulness and the preservation of consequential meanings separately.
Intercultural assessment (Scarino, 2009; Scarino et al., 2025)	Performance, interpretation and reflection offer complementary evidence, including evidence not anticipated by fixed criteria.	Use a task-specific profile with room for additional evidence and explicit limits on generalisation.

3. Culture as Situated Practice and Contested Interpretation

3.1 From Cultural Description to An Explanation of An Encounter

Culture is understood here as socially produced meanings, expectations and practices through which people organise and interpret activity. This working definition recognises continuity without making group membership determine conduct. Participants can recognise a convention yet disagree about its value or relevance. Cultural analysis therefore asks how an expectation becomes consequential in a particular encounter, and how participants understand their own position within it.

Holliday's (1999) small-culture perspective redirects attention towards the practices emerging within social activity. A seminar, project group or professional network can develop expectations that do not map neatly onto nationality. Its educational value would be lost if the department simply replaced the nation as a supposedly uniform cultural unit. The relevant move is towards investigating practices and relationships, including variation within a setting. Risager's (2007) transnational orientation and Baker's (2015) work on English as a lingua franca similarly unsettle the idea of a language enclosed within a single national culture.

Consider a student's silence after critical feedback. It might indicate uncertainty about the claim, difficulty gaining the floor, concern about assessment, disagreement or a wish to respond privately. An expectation about respect may matter, but the observer needs evidence connecting it to this student and this exchange. A participant's explanation, the preceding turns and the allocation of speaking rights may help distinguish possibilities. The pedagogical question is consequently not which cultural label fits the silence, but what could make one interpretation better supported than another.

This distinction also directs close linguistic analysis. An imperative, modal verb or apology can be identified in a text; its interpersonal force requires attention to roles, prior interaction and anticipated consequences. An imperative can implement an agreed procedure, while an apparently optional formulation can function as an instruction from someone with evaluative authority. Learners need to examine both the expression and the relationship in which it operates. Treating grammar and cultural interpretation as separate curricular domains obscures that connection.

3.2 Representation, Authority and Responsibility

Descriptions of cultural difference also distribute authority. Holliday (2010) treats cultural description as a potentially political act: naming a group's supposed characteristics can influence whose conduct is recognised as reasonable. Replacing an unfavourable stereotype with a flattering one does not solve this problem. Either can restrict the identities and intentions available to an individual. In the classroom, a teacher's explanation should therefore remain distinguishable from the participant's own account and from evidence in the task.

Flores and Rosa (2015) further challenge the assumption that judgements of linguistic appropriateness respond only to linguistic forms. Their analysis of raciolinguistic ideologies draws attention to how speakers are perceived and positioned. The implication developed here is that accommodation cannot be assigned exclusively to the less powerful participant. A

recipient may need to clarify an instruction or reconsider an expectation; an institution may need to make a procedure more accessible. Learners should be able to identify these responsibilities without having to claim authority over every aspect of the encounter.

3.3 Global Englishes and the Resources for Action

Global Englishes expands the range of users and practices relevant to English education. Galloway (2025) examines the possibilities and difficulties of an umbrella term that connects related fields without eliminating their differences. Cook's (1999) earlier critique of the native-speaker endpoint supplies a complementary educational argument: language learners need not be conceptualised solely through their distance from a monolingual ideal. Together, these positions encourage scrutiny of which communicative resources a course privileges and why.

4. Intercultural Competence, Pragmatic Agency and Mediation

4.1 Established Educational Purposes and A More Specific Design Problem

Byram's (1997, 2021) framework makes attitudes, knowledge, interpretation, discovery, interaction and critical cultural awareness relevant to language education. It would be inaccurate to treat this tradition as simply a static account of national differences. Byram et al. (2002) explicitly foreground complex social identities, decentring and the intercultural speaker, rather than requiring learners to acquire a supposedly ideal native identity. Byram and Feng (2004) also locate culture learning within broader educational and scholarly concerns. The present argument builds on these purposes by specifying how they can inform decisions within a bounded task.

There are also limits to what education should demand from learners. Borghetti (2017) questions the ethical and educational grounds for assessing intercultural competence, particularly where assessments concern affective dispositions and context-dependent relationships. Dervin's (2023) reflexive orientation similarly keeps the assumptions attached to interculturality open to scrutiny. These challenges support a bounded approach: evaluate how a learner interprets and responds to a task, while avoiding global judgements about cultural worth, moral openness or identity. Informed disagreement can be evidence of learning when its grounds and consequences are examined.

4.2 Intercultural Pragmatics and Informed Choice

Pragmatic agency refers here to the capacity to make informed communicative choices within constraints. It includes following a convention, seeking clarification, proposing an alternative or declining an expectation. Assessment relationships, proficiency and access to information affect which choices are practicable. Agency cannot consequently be equated with unrestricted freedom, habitual resistance or successful imitation of a preferred speaker.

McConachy's (2017) account of intercultural pragmatics connects language use with reflection on cultural assumptions. The later classroom analysis (McConachy, 2019) makes that relationship concrete through extracts from a course involving four intermediate learners in Tokyo. Discussions of thanking and customer-service interaction show participants exploring the assumptions behind interpersonal evaluations. The analytic focus extends beyond

identifying a conventional expression to examining why conduct appears appropriate, surprising or problematic. These are illustrative interactions, not evidence that one teaching sequence reliably produces a general competence. They nevertheless show why learner justifications are themselves a substantive object of language education.

Instructional evidence supplies a different perspective. Ren et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis covers 29 primary studies and reports a positive overall effect of second-language pragmatics instruction. Explicit instruction has a larger estimated effect than implicit instruction, but the difference is not statistically significant. Outcomes also depend on assessment format, with written discourse-completion tasks producing the largest measured gains. Most included research concerns speech acts. The synthesis therefore supports purposeful instruction while leaving open how far measured improvement extends to relational judgement, agency or spontaneous interaction.

4.3 Mediation, Accessibility and Consequential Meaning

The CEFR Companion Volume distinguishes mediation of texts, concepts and communication, extending the concept beyond translation between named languages (Council of Europe, 2020). This offers a curricular basis for explaining unfamiliar procedures, coordinating understanding and making a position accessible across repertoires. Situated mediation is used here for such activity within a specified encounter. It may occur within English, across Arabic and English, or through verbal and other semiotic resources.

Mediation introduces a consequential tension. An adaptation may become easier to read while changing an obligation, erasing uncertainty or attributing a position that its source does not express. Conversely, an accurate explanation can remain unusable because its audience cannot identify the relevant action. The proposed distinction between meaning preservation and audience adaptation makes both problems visible. Preservation concerns consequential commitments, conditions and positions, not literal equivalence; adaptation concerns whether the recipient can use the explanation for the stated purpose.

This distinction is particularly useful for source-based tasks, but its scope must be controlled. In collaborative meaning-making, there may be no stable original to preserve. Participants instead negotiate an emerging understanding, and accountability involves representing their positions fairly, identifying additions and retaining unresolved disagreement where necessary. Mediation should not imply that a teacher or institution possesses an uncontested final meaning. The source, the participant and the relevant procedure each have authority of a particular kind and scope.

5. Digital Encounters and Assisted Communication

5.1 Virtual Exchange and Pedagogical Mediation

A shared product can organise exchange around a communicative problem. Partners might revise an orientation guide or explain different assessment procedures to a defined audience. Clarification then has an identifiable purpose, and disagreement can lead to a visible change in the product. The process becomes intercultural when participants examine how their own

experiences and attributed expectations affect interpretation. Merely exchanging national facts or completing a group document would not establish this relationship.

5.2 Generative AI and Interpretive Authority

Generative AI can produce an authoritative-sounding cultural explanation or a polished reformulation without supplying testimony from the people represented. UNESCO's guidance foregrounds human agency and linguistic and cultural diversity in educational use (Miao & Holmes, 2023). For intercultural inquiry, the practical question is what evidential status an output can reasonably have. It may be material to analyse, but it cannot establish what a particular participant believes or what an institution permits.

One activity is to compare a source with alternative revisions and identify changes in certainty, responsibility or the force of a request. A generated apology might imply an admission absent from the original; a concise summary might omit a condition. Learners can reconstruct a version for a defined audience and justify the changes. The specifically intercultural inquiry concerns why a revision presents a form as more appropriate, whose expectations it assumes and whether those expectations fit the intended relationship. Fluency by itself settles none of these questions.

6. A framework for intercultural inquiry and mediation

6.1 The Relationship among Evidence, Choice and Consequence

The proposed framework comprises contextualising, comparing, investigating, mediating and reflecting. These activities are recursive: drafting may expose an unanswered question, and a recipient's response may challenge the original interpretation. The framework specifies a relationship among evidence, decision and consequence rather than a fixed developmental sequence. The communicative purpose determines how much inquiry is proportionate and which choices require explanation.

Table 2 translates those questions into a design aid. Its final column identifies possible evidence, not obligatory paperwork for every lesson. A short task may examine one uncertain requirement, one clarification and one revision. A longer unit may include several sources, interaction with a reader and an unfamiliar follow-up task. In either case, the learner should have a reason to move from interpretation to communicative action.

Table 2 Instructional activities and their evidential relationships

Activity	Guiding question	Communicative work	Evidence for feedback
Contextualising	Which roles, expectations and constraints matter?	Separate known conditions from assumptions about self and others.	A bounded account of the encounter.

Activity	Guiding question	Communicative work	Evidence for feedback
Comparing	Which alternatives change the meaning?	Examine wording, perspectives and possible interpretations.	An annotated comparison linked to the purpose.
Investigating	What could confirm or revise the interpretation?	Check a source, seek clarification and consider its authority.	A record of what was checked and remains uncertain.
Mediating	What should the audience understand or be able to do?	Adapt meaning or coordinate understanding without misrepresenting positions.	A usable response with consequential distinctions intact.
Reflecting	Why was this choice made, and what followed?	Explain a revision and distinguish intended from observed effects.	A commentary linked to evidence and decisions.

6.2 Contextualising, Comparing and Investigating

Contextualisation begins with an encounter sufficiently bounded for inquiry. Students identify purposes, roles, medium, relevant procedures and their own initial expectations. They distinguish what a text states from what they infer and what remains unknown. Comparison then examines plausible alternatives: two requests may seek the same outcome while differing in entitlement, justification or the proposed next step. Similarities also matter; a task organised exclusively around difference can exaggerate distance between participants who share practical concerns.

The teacher can initially hold audience and purpose constant while varying one consequential feature. Phrases such as ‘This wording could imply…’ and ‘This interpretation is supported by…’ help learners express qualified judgements. Investigation then tests those judgements against an appropriate source. An official procedure may establish a requirement, while a participant can clarify a personal preference. Neither should be used to answer the other kind of question. Conflicting evidence may warrant a provisional response rather than a definitive cultural explanation.

6.3 Mediating, Reflecting and Revising

Mediation converts an improved interpretation into action. A guide might need to distinguish eligibility from approval; a response might need to explain disagreement without denying the recipient’s legitimate concern. A reader’s question can reveal whether the distinction is usable. Returning to inquiry at this point demonstrates monitoring when it addresses an actual information gap. It should not be treated as failure to complete a sequence in the prescribed order.

6.4 Proposed Classroom Time and Sequencing

A first implementation can use the orientation task alone in two 50-minute lessons. This is a planning estimate, not an observed feasibility result. In Lesson 1, allocate 5 minutes to the audience and source brief, 10 to contextualising, 10 to comparing the original and alternative explanations, 15 to investigating the policy and identifying unresolved interpersonal assumptions, and 10 to an initial mediated draft. In Lesson 2, allocate 10 minutes to a peer reader identifying the required action and approval condition, 15 to revision, 10 to a short reflection on one consequential choice, 10 to teacher-led comparison of the three profiles in Section 8.2, and 5 to an independent exit response using a changed condition.

The teacher prepares one short policy, an audience brief and three response samples; learners submit an annotated source, an initial and revised response, and a commentary of approximately 80–100 words or a brief oral equivalent. Feedback can focus on meaning preservation and audience adaptation before extending to all five dimensions. The reviewer-response task can replace the orientation task in a later cycle; it is not an additional requirement within the 100 minutes. Record preparation, feedback time and unfinished work in a pilot before claiming the allocation is feasible.

7. Worked Analyses in University English Education

7.1 Purpose and Status of the Illustrations

Both illustrations belong to one proposed university academic communication workshop for students able to read short procedural texts and draft a reasoned English response. One task concerns explaining an appointment procedure; the other concerns responding to evaluative feedback. They are alternatives within the same teaching unit, rather than evidence from different educational populations.

All policies, comments, participant histories and responses below are constructed analytical examples. They are not student work, observed interactions or guidance from any named institution. No Saudi-specific explanatory or effectiveness claim is made. The bounded setting is a proposed university workshop; actual task suitability must be established locally.

7.2 An Orientation Guide and Competing Expectations of Institutional Access

In the first case, a student mentor in the workshop helps a visiting student interpret this invented policy: ‘Students may request an alternative appointment where a timetable clash is documented. Approval depends on staff availability. Submit the request through the course office before the appointment.’ The mentor drafts a guide: ‘If your timetable clashes, you can change your appointment. Tell the teacher before it starts.’

The two students initially understand accessibility differently. The mentor has previously received helpful advice by approaching a lecturer and assumes that personal contact will reassure the visitor. The visitor’s earlier institution required requests to pass through an administrative office, so approaching a lecturer appears to risk bypassing the procedure. The mentor initially interprets this hesitation as unnecessary distance; the visitor interprets the suggestion as reliance on personal favour. These are situated interpretations of prior experience,

not properties assigned to either student's nationality.

The guide contains three consequential distortions. It changes permission to request into permission to change, removes the conditions concerning documentation and availability, and redirects the request to the teacher. A grammatical or politeness-based appraisal could miss these errors because the text is concise and accessible. A procedural check identifies them, but the intercultural inquiry goes further: it examines why the mentor equates reassurance with personal contact and why the visitor equates procedural access with avoidance of that contact. Each has treated a familiar institutional experience as a sufficiently general guide to the present encounter.

Contextualisation separates three questions: who can provide advice, where the request must be submitted and who can authorise a change. Investigation establishes that the policy specifies a submission route and conditional approval; it does not establish whether informal advice is welcomed or discouraged. The available evidence therefore supports correcting the guide while leaving that interpersonal question open. A learner who confidently declares personal contact either inappropriate or compulsory would exceed the source in a different direction.

A possible revision reads: 'If you have a documented timetable clash, you may ask for another appointment. Send the request through the course office before your current appointment. Approval depends on staff availability, so submitting a request does not mean that a new time has been agreed.' An accompanying explanation might state: 'I had assumed that speaking to a lecturer was the easiest route because it had helped me before. The procedure requires submission through the office. I can explain that route without assuming that your hesitation means you prefer distant relationships.'

The revision preserves conditions and clarifies the next action. Its commentary explains how the mentor reconsidered the visitor's hesitation. This links source-based revision with inquiry into an attributed expectation; neither nationality nor a presumed cultural preference supplies the warrant.

Two counterexamples clarify the criteria. A fully accurate guide prefaced by 'Visitors do not understand how things work here' would preserve procedural meaning while constructing an unwarranted deficit. A friendly explanation encouraging the visitor to ignore the office would recognise the desire for reassurance while misrepresenting access. Interpretive accountability requires scrutiny of both the source and the positioning of participants. The institution also has a responsibility: repeated uncertainty about the same distinction may indicate that its information needs revision. Faithfully explaining a procedure does not entail endorsing its design.

7.3 Academic Disagreement, Expertise and Linguistic Legitimacy

The second case concerns an English-language research-writing workshop. A reviewer asks the writer of a hypothetical observational study to replace 'is associated with' by 'causes', describing the current wording as insufficiently decisive and suggesting that it reflects 'non-native hesitation'. The writer has previously learnt to treat evaluators' recommendations as authoritative and initially interprets disagreement as unprofessional. A peer, drawing on a different research-training experience, interprets qualification as disciplinary precision. The

workshop brief requires a reasoned response to each comment, without requiring acceptance of every suggestion.

The intercultural difficulty concerns competing understandings of legitimate expertise and authorial identity. The reviewer's attribution turns a methodological qualification into an alleged linguistic deficiency. The writer's initial deference gives that attribution additional authority, while the peer's experience provides an alternative interpretation. None of these positions can be explained adequately by a national etiquette rule. Their relevance emerges through the participants' accounts, the disciplinary task and the evaluative relationship.

A response such as 'Thank you; we have strengthened the conclusion as requested' accommodates the reviewer while changing the claim's evidential status. Conversely, dismissing the entire comment because its attribution is problematic could overlook a legitimate need for clearer prose. Comparison therefore separates two issues: the clarity of the conclusion and the strength of the inference. Investigation establishes that the hypothetical design supports an association and supplies no additional basis for the requested causal wording. The genre brief, rather than the writer's assumption about deference, establishes the need for a reasoned response.

A possible reply is: 'Thank you for highlighting the need for a clearer conclusion. The design supports an association, so causal wording would exceed the evidence. We have revised the paragraph to express the relationship more directly while retaining this qualification.' The final sentence belongs to the invented scenario in which that revision has been made. The reply acknowledges an actionable concern, states the constraint and preserves disagreement. It does not concede that linguistic background explains the original wording.

The writer's reflection might explain why acknowledgement was retained while the requested inference was declined, and how the initial equation of expertise with unquestionable authority changed. The writer could also decide to raise the reviewer's attribution with an editor; the framework does not prescribe confrontation or silence. Assessment should examine the reasons, available options and likely consequences of the chosen response. A formulaic display of resistance would be no more adequate than unexamined compliance.

8. Assessment, Validity and Equitable Interpretation

8.1 A Bounded Claim about Performance

Scarino (2009) connects intercultural assessment with communicative performance and meta-awareness. Scarino et al. (2025) develop an expanded account of evidence and caution that predetermined criteria may miss the distinctive, evolving interpretations learners produce. Kane's (2013) argument-based approach adds a complementary requirement: interpretations and uses of performance need explicit inferences and supporting assumptions. Applied here, a successful guide supports a judgement about that guide under its production conditions; a claim about adaptable capability requires evidence beyond one successful product.

A small formative portfolio can contain an initial interpretation, the relevant source or clarification, the communicative response and a focused explanation of a revision. These items

belong to one task, allowing the assessor to inspect their relationship. Linguistic intelligibility and control should also receive feedback, but fluent English should not automatically be treated as contextual insight. The distinction is analytical: inadequate linguistic resources can still limit the learner's ability to enact an otherwise defensible decision.

Table 3 provides author-developed descriptors for formative feedback. Its columns describe task evidence, not validated developmental stages or CEFR levels. Meaning preservation concerns commitments, conditions and represented positions. Audience adaptation concerns whether the identified recipient can find and use the relevant information, including whether the text positions that recipient through unsupported assumptions. An assessor should retain an additional-evidence note for defensible interpretations outside the profile.

Table 3 Proposed formative assessment matrix

Dimension	Emerging evidence	Developing evidence	More accomplished evidence
Contextual interpretation	Uses unsupported labels or leaves expectations unspecified.	Identifies relevant roles and perspectives, with untested assumptions.	Supports an interpretation, examines personal assumptions and considers alternatives.
Inquiry	Accepts an account without checking its basis.	Consults relevant information but only partly evaluates its authority.	Uses evidence of appropriate scope to revise or qualify the account.
Meaning preservation	Alters consequential conditions, claims or participant positions.	Retains central meanings but leaves qualifications unclear.	Preserves consequential distinctions and identifies explanatory additions.
Audience adaptation	Gives information without addressing the identified need.	Makes useful changes, although barriers or unsupported assumptions remain.	Produces a usable response and justifies how it positions and assists the audience.
Critical reflection	Offers impressions unconnected to the work.	Explains a concrete revision with some supporting evidence.	Connects evidence, choice and consequence, distinguishing observed from anticipated effects.

8.2 Judgement, Calibration and Unexpected Evidence

Separating preservation from adaptation prevents one strength from concealing another weakness. The initial orientation guide merits recognition for brevity but corrective feedback

for changing the approval condition. The accurate yet condescending alternative demonstrates a different problem. The proposed matrix is therefore initially a profile, rather than a total score in which a serious distortion could disappear within an average. Any later aggregation would require a justification appropriate to the task and the consequences of the decision.

The following contrast is an author-generated descriptor stress test, not teacher calibration. Using the invented appointment policy in Section 7.2, Sample A states: "If your timetable clashes, you can change your appointment. Tell the teacher before it starts." Its clear next step merits developing audience-adaptation evidence, but its altered entitlement and route indicate emerging meaning-preservation evidence. Sample B reproduces the policy accurately but adds: "Visitors do not understand how things work here; work out which office this means yourself." It preserves the conditions but provides emerging audience-adaptation evidence because its positioning is unsupported and its direction is unhelpful. Sample C uses the revision in Section 7.2, retains the approval condition and identifies the submission route. It offers more accomplished evidence on both dimensions for the stated audience, although actual usability still requires a recipient response. These deliberately contrasting profiles show that the criteria need not move together by definition; they do not show that teachers can distinguish them reliably.

8.3 Fairness and the Role of Assistance

The form of an assessment affects who can display the intended reasoning. Extended reflective prose may privilege familiarity with academic self-commentary; live discussion may privilege rapid processing or access to the floor. Where the objective permits, oral explanation, concise written commentary or multilingual preparatory notes can offer alternative routes to comparable evidence. Students should not be required to disclose personal beliefs or experiences in order to demonstrate contextual interpretation.

9. Discussion and Research Agenda

9.1 Answers to the Research Questions

The first research question is answered by treating cultural knowledge as a provisional resource whose relevance must be established in the encounter. The second is addressed through a trace from evidence to a consequential choice: familiarity with contacting a lecturer cannot authorise a different submission route, and an evaluator's authority cannot establish causation. For the third question, sources, drafts and explanations support an assessment of a specified performance; transfer requires evidence from unfamiliar tasks under documented support conditions.

9.2 Boundary Conditions and Productive Tensions

Interpretive accountability is not claimed as a construct with demonstrated discriminant validity against critical literacy, Byram's critical cultural awareness or Scarino's interpretive assessment. Those approaches can also identify the failures analysed here. The narrower contribution is an explicit task-level requirement to inspect the connection among warrant, choice, represented meaning and assessment inference. Consider a critically perceptive

commentary that identifies the reviewer's deficit framing but accompanies a revision from "is associated with" to "causes." It may satisfy a locally defined critical-awareness criterion focused on identifying an ideological attribution, while failing the present meaning-preservation criterion. Conversely, a faithful, usable guide produced from a supplied model without an inspectable decision trail may satisfy a product-focused communication criterion but provide insufficient evidence for interpretive accountability. These are contrasts between specified assessment decisions, not demonstrations that the parent theories would endorse those performances. If an existing rubric already examines all four links, this framework predicts no unique advantage. Its added value must therefore be tested against such a comparator rather than inferred from a new label.

Power imposes a further boundary. Learners may understand an expectation and still lack a safe or effective way to challenge it. The framework should not award greater agency simply to those whose institutional position permits visible resistance. It can recognise a carefully justified accommodation, a request for clarification or a decision to defer disagreement. Assessors must examine the options available rather than impose a preferred performance of confidence. Reciprocal accountability also asks whether the institution can remove the ambiguity or barrier that the learner is being required to negotiate.

9.3 Curriculum and Teacher Development

Teacher development can begin with the three contrasting responses in Section 8.2. Teachers should record the exact words supporting each judgement and identify any descriptor that conflates accessibility with fidelity. Materials should specify the source, audience, purpose and permitted assistance before rating begins. The timing plan in Section 6.4 and calibration protocol in Section 9.4 provide bounded starting points for evaluating workload and descriptor usability.

9.4 Propositions for Empirical Investigation

The immediate priority is a small teacher calibration exercise on Table 3. This is a proposed protocol, not a completed study. Recruit eight to ten university English teachers, obtain appropriate institutional approval or exemption and consent, and provide the same source policy, audience brief and the three constructed samples in Section 8.2. Present the samples in varied orders without the authors' suggested profiles. Allow 10 minutes for individual rating of meaning preservation and audience adaptation, using the three descriptor categories and a separate "insufficient evidence" option. Teachers should highlight the textual feature supporting each decision, record confidence and note time taken. Retain the original ratings before a 15-minute discussion of disagreement, then collect independent reratings and suggested wording changes. The full session would take approximately 35–45 minutes including briefing. Report recruitment, teaching experience, missing ratings, actual completion times, all sample-by-dimension rating distributions, exact agreement and the reasons for disagreement. Compare initial and revised distributions without treating convergence after discussion as proof of validity. Crossed profiles for Samples A and B would provide preliminary evidence that teachers use the dimensions separately; persistent identical profiles would prompt examination of descriptor overlap. With only three deliberately contrasted

samples, neither a factor analysis nor a general reliability claim is justified. Authentic anonymised learner work and recipient feedback would be needed in a subsequent study.

Proposition 1: Evidence-linked revision improves fidelity beyond equivalent revision practice. Compare workshop conditions with equal task time, source access and feedback, differing only in the requirement to justify consequential changes. Blind assessment of an unfamiliar follow-up text should examine preservation of conditions, uncertainty and responsibility. A gain confined to reflective commentary would not support improved communicative performance.

Proposition 2: Source-focused AI comparison supports independent judgement. Compare learners who identify and explain consequential changes in generated revisions with learners who revise for fluency under equivalent support. An unfamiliar task completed without AI should assess distortion detection and audience usefulness separately. Better assisted products without stronger independent judgement would support a claim about supported production only.

These classroom comparisons should follow initial usability work. Each should record instructional time, language proficiency, permitted support and unfamiliar-task performance. Null and mixed outcomes should inform revision of tasks or descriptors.

9.5 Limitations

The purposive review supports a conceptual argument, not a claim about the distribution or quality of all research in the field. English-language searches and public access may have restricted the traditions represented. The central comparison draws on full texts, although some contextual studies are used through abstracts and some monographs through previews; Appendix A identifies these boundaries. A narrower systematic review could examine the robustness of particular propositions and search explicitly for contradictory evidence.

The scope is a proposed university academic communication workshop, not a national educational system. The cases and sample responses are constructed; no teacher ratings, learner outcomes or calibration results are available. The descriptor stress test establishes possible contrasting profiles only. The protocol in Section 9.4 addresses what evidence should be collected, leaving the reviewer's requested empirical demonstration outstanding. Effectiveness, equitable access to the reasoning tasks and transfer to spontaneous interaction remain untested.

10. Conclusion

Intercultural English language education requires a defensible relationship between understanding an encounter and acting within it. Cultural knowledge supplies resources whose relevance must be established; communicative conventions orient action but remain open to criticism; successful performance supports claims bounded by its production conditions. Interpretive accountability connects these distinctions by making consequential choices explainable and revisable.

The specification links five recursive activities with separate feedback on meaning preservation and audience adaptation. Its practical contribution consists of contrasting response profiles, a timed workshop plan and a teacher calibration protocol. Existing intercultural and assessment

theories remain its intellectual basis. Whether this specification makes those commitments easier to teach and assess requires empirical comparison.

AI assistance disclosure: During the revision stage, ChatGPT provided limited supplementary assistance with restructuring text, language revision, stylistic phrasing for illustrative response contrasts, and drafting an unimplemented calibration protocol. All analytical concepts, frameworks and interpretations were independently developed by the authors. No participant data or empirical results were generated.

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Appendix A Search route and source-access boundaries

The review used targeted public scholarly searches completed on 19 October 2026. Topic searches were followed by exact-title, author and DOI checks against journal, publisher, university and official institutional records. Representative queries included the following:

- "intercultural communicative competence" EFL systematic review 2024 2025
- "Global Englishes" "systematic review" 2024 2025 teaching
- "pragmatics instruction" "meta-analysis" Ren 2023
- virtual exchange intercultural competence meta analysis 2024 2025
- "generative AI" "cultural" "language education" 2024 2025 bias
- "Assessing intercultural capability" Scarino Kohler Liddicoat 2025 pages

These queries document the route into a purposive conceptual synthesis. They are not a complete database protocol. Searches were not conducted directly within Scopus or Web of Science, and no database exports, duplicate counts, independent screening or registered protocol are claimed. Selection prioritised conceptual relevance, traceable bibliographic identity and a distinguishable role in the argument.

Full article or document texts were consulted for Byram et al. (2002), Baker (2022), McConachy (2019), Liddicoat (2024), Scarino et al. (2025), Jaakkola (2020), Ren et al. (2023), O'Dowd et al. (2020), Council of Europe (2020), Galloway (2025), Suzuki and Crowther (2025), and Lee et al. (2025). Access included publisher texts, official documents, repository manuscripts and publicly available author copies. The discussions of metapragmatic reflection, dialogic elicitation, assessment evidence and the limits of pragmatics-instruction outcomes draw on these fuller sources. Author manuscripts may differ in pagination from the published versions; no page-specific quotations are used.

Abstract-based uses include Chen et al. (2026), Jin and Sercu (2026), and Zhang and Zhou (2023). Their reported scope and findings are used within the information available; unobserved procedures and study-level quality are not independently reconstructed. Other historical and contextual articles were used through accessible publisher records, abstracts or available text for the specific positions attributed to them. This does not constitute a full-text critical appraisal of every cited work.

The monographs by Baker (2015), Byram (1997, 2021), Corbett (2003), Dervin (2023), Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), McConachy (2017), and Risager (2007) supply conceptual background through accessible descriptions and previews. Detailed comparisons are anchored where possible in the full texts listed above. The UNESCO source is used as institutional guidance, not as evidence of classroom effectiveness.

Publication years follow assigned journal issues where available, including Galloway (2025) and Jin and Sercu (2026), whose online publication preceded their issue dates. DOI links identify the cited works and do not imply unrestricted full-text access. The access distinctions limit the review's evidential claims and identify where a future systematic investigation would require further retrieval and formal appraisal.

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No additional data are available.

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