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# Intercultural competence in Danish as a second language for adult migrants: A teacher perspective

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**Abstract**[1]**:** Although studies on intercultural competence (IC) and teacher beliefs are relatively common, no research has yet focused on teachers of Danish as a second language for adult migrants. More broadly, second language teaching in migration contexts, especially for languages other than English, remains significantly underexplored (Ushioda 2017). The primary research questions guiding this study are: 1) How do teachers conceptualize IC? 2) How do they value IC? 3) How do they describe their IC practice? and 4) How does the way that teachers conceptualize and value IC relate to their classroom practices? Findings suggest that while teachers have a relatively broad understanding and recognize the value of IC, they face significant challenges implementing their theoretical knowledge about IC. Notably, there is a weak alignment between teachers' stated beliefs and their observed classroom practices. These insights contribute to the broader understanding of second-language teaching in migration contexts beyond English-language instruction.

**Keywords:** Second language learning, teacher cognition, intercultural communicative competence, migration, classroom practice.

## 1. Introduction

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Byram 1997, 2021) plays a pivotal role in theoretical discussions and policy frameworks regarding language education in many contexts around the world, including Denmark, the setting of this study. ICC comprises two main components, communicative competence (CC) and intercultural competence (IC). While work with CC is often systematically targeted in language classrooms, attention to IC is often underemphasized and less systematized. To enable students to develop IC, language teachers need to be and feel equipped for the task. Therefore, it is relevant to explore language teachers' beliefs and feelings of self-efficacy regarding IC. Although studies on IC and teacher beliefs are relatively common, no research has yet focused on the specific context of our investigation – namely, teachers of Danish as a second language for adult migrants. More broadly, second language teaching in migration contexts, especially for languages other than English, remains significantly underexplored (Ushioda 2017).

In contrast to English, Danish is a small national language with limited global reach. Adult learners of Danish are often migrants or refugees who learn the language for purposes of integration into Danish society, rather than for broader international mobility. Exposure to Danish and opportunities for authentic interaction in Danish can be limited for migrants, as Danes are generally proficient in English and resort to English when communicating with migrants (Fernández et al. ms.). Besides, the Danish curriculum is designed with integration, insertion into the labour market, and citizenship in mind, and it is often mandatory for migrants to take up Danish courses in order to receive certain social benefits. A study on Danish as a second language can therefore contribute to our general understanding of IC by illustrating how adult learners develop intercultural competence under conditions of limited natural exposure to the target language, strong local integration demands, and an asymmetrical linguistic environment where English is often chosen over Danish in everyday communication with migrants.

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This paper presents findings from a study on teacher cognition, aimed at identifying the specific "roadblocks" faced in teaching IC in Danish as a Second Language (DSL) to adult migrants. Using an online survey, classroom observations, and interviews, the study explores how DSL teachers conceptualize and implement IC in their teaching practice. The primary research questions guiding this study are: 1) How do teachers conceptualize IC? 2) How do they value IC? 3) How do they describe their IC practice? and 4) How does the way that teachers conceptualize and value IC relate to their classroom practices?

This teacher cognition study constitutes one facet of the larger project "Danish in the Making". This broader project aims to redefine the core knowledge essential for acquiring DSL and revitalize how learners and teachers engage with the language. The overarching objective of this project is to develop a pedagogical resource for DSL classrooms that emphasizes intercultural semantics and pragmatics grounded in the minimal languages approach (Goddard 2021; Sadow & Fernández 2022). The teacher cognition study presented here, a learner cognition study (Fernández et al. ms.), and a teaching materials analysis (Sadow et al. ms.) are all part of the preliminary work for the development of the new learning resource.

This paper is structured as follows: first, an introduction to the context of the study – Danish education for adult migrants – is followed by a brief overview of intercultural communicative competence. Next, we provide a discussion of teacher cognition as a research field, followed by an outline of the methodology and data. The results are presented in relation to the four research questions mentioned earlier. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion including implications.

## 2. The context: Danish education for adult migrants

In Denmark, a Danish education program (DU, for its initials in Danish, *Danskuddannelse*) is offered to newly arrived immigrants who have turned 18 years of age and have a residence permit or otherwise have permanent, legal residence in Denmark (Ministry of Immigration and Integration n.d.). There are three different DU lines that a migrant can be assigned to:

1) Danish Education 1 (DU1): for those who cannot read and write the Latin alphabet
2) Danish Education 2 (DU2): for those who have a short school and educational background from their home country
3) Danish Education 3 (DU3): for those who have a medium or long school and education background

Each DU consists of six modules (since this research was conducted, as of 1st January 2025, DU1 has been reduced to five modules (SIRI 2025)), each of which concludes with a module test that students must pass to is to the next module. The goal of Danish language instruction across the three lines is to provide students with Danish language skills that enable them to secure employment and become active, equal citizens within Danish society. Therefore, the teaching of Danish as a second language must focus on developing communicative competence and it is explicitly stated that communicative competence includes socio-pragmatic, discursive, linguistic, and intercultural competence. A focus on IC implies, according to the official curriculum, highlighting the importance of understanding Danish cultural and social norms, values, and routines. Additionally, the curriculum suggests exploring differences and similarities between Danish and students' native languages and social contexts (Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2022).

To teach in the Danish education program, it is required to have a teaching degree in Danish as a second language. To be admitted to the master's degree in DSL, candidates must have one of the following qualifications:

- A teaching degree with a specialization in languages
- A bachelor's degree in the humanities with a central focus on languages (Ministry of Higher Education and Science n.d.)

The openness regarding qualifications prior to the DSL degree implies that, while most teachers have the same DSL degree, they come from a broad range of bachelor's programs, from politics to Russian literature to theology. This variation is also reflected in the teachers in this study (see section 5).

## 3. Intercultural (comminicative) competence

The concept of ICC originates from Byram (1997) and describes the overarching goal of second and foreign language teaching, namely, to develop learners' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. The concept emphasizes the need to combine work on language and communication (*communicative competence*) with the ability to manage encounters with "others" (*intercultural competence* (IC)). Byram's well-known model integrates these two perspectives. The part of the model focusing on IC includes five aspects:

1) Knowledge of oneself and others
2) The ability to interpret and relate
3) An attitude of curiosity and openness, and the willingness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own, which means "the ability to decenter and take up another's perspective" (Byram 2021: 53)
4) Skills of discovery and interaction
5) Critical cultural awareness, which Byram also names "political education"

The last aspect is central to the model, serving as the culmination and integration of the other components (Byram 2021).

Byram distances himself from what he terms the native speaker model, where the goal is for the foreign language learner to achieve a linguistic level equivalent to an educated native speaker. He considers this both unrealistic and undesirable, as it would require learners to "abandon one language in order to blend into a second linguistic environment" (Byram 2021: 17). Instead, the goal is to perceive and manage the relationship between one's own and others' cultures and become an 'intercultural speaker'. Moreover, Byram (2021) highlights the importance of remembering that it is individuals, not cultures, that meet.

Byram's model is widely used but has been criticized for having a too narrow national orientation and a static view of culture (Matsuo 2012). Language teaching risks perpetuating stereotypes and focusing excessively on national cultures in a superficial manner (Daryai-Hansen & Fernández 2019; Fernández 2015; Löbl 2022). Risager & Svarstad (2020) propose an operationalization of the ICC model through their "cyclical model of intercultural learning", which seeks to avoid this pitfall by engaging in noticing, comparing, reflecting, and interacting. They state that openness and curiosity towards the world are prerequisites for decentralization and perspective-shifting, and thus for intercultural learning (Risager & Svarstad 2020: 34). This approach calls for a constructivist, interactive, and experiential type of learning rather than the mere presentation of cultural information.

## 4. Teacher cognition as a research field

Simon Borg (2003: 18), a leading figure in the study of *language teacher cognition*, defined the research area as dealing with "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers

know, believe and think". Research on teachers' knowledge and beliefs emerged as an academic discipline in the 1970's, when it became clear that teachers are deeply involved in making important decisions within the classroom, as they continuously plan, implement, and assess their teaching strategies (Blömeke et al. 2022; Hattie 2003).

Borg (2015: 35) describes teacher cognition as complex, dynamic, and often unconscious. It is complex because of the various types of knowledge that teachers possess, ranging from societal and intercultural understanding (macro level) to insights into the national educational context (meso level), and the specific local institution where teachers work (micro level). In addition to factual knowledge, teachers possess both general and subject-specific pedagogical knowledge, acquired through education and practice. For language teachers in particular, this includes proficiency in the language they teach, as well as an understanding of their target language's historical, cultural, and social contexts. All of this makes up their *pedagogical content knowledge* (Shulman 1986).

Teachers' knowledge interacts with their beliefs, which are their personal convictions about teaching, learning, and their roles as educators (Fives & Buehl 2012). These beliefs, deeply influenced by social and cultural norms (Kubanyiova 2018), lived language experiences (Busch 2017), and personal aspirations or fears (Kubanyiova 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Pitkänen-Huhta 2020), do not always align with research-based knowledge and can act as filters in connection with intake from teacher education (Borg 2006). However, teacher beliefs are not static; they evolve throughout a teacher's career, as a teacher's own classroom practice influences cognition and is also influenced by it, among other things, through reflection. Beliefs about self-efficacy, i.e., confidence in own knowledge and abilities, also play a significant role (Bandura 1994). Teachers with low self-efficacy may avoid certain topics, such as aspects of interculturality, if they lack confidence in addressing student questions (Borg 2015).

### *4.1. Teacher cognition and intercultural (communicative) competence*

In the field of language teacher cognition research, scholars have explored a variety of topics related to language teaching and learning, ranging from grammar instruction (perhaps the most thoroughly explored area) to literacy, oral communication, plurilingual education, feedback, differentiation, and many others. Our own focus of interest, intercultural competence, has also received attention both internationally (e.g., Aleksandrowicz-Pędich et al. 2003; Sercu 2005; Jedynak 2011; Young & Sachdev 2011; Xiaohui & Li 2011; Koike & Lacorte 2014; Oranje & Smith 2018; Yang et al. 2018; Safa & Tofighi 2022) and in Denmark (e.g., Gregersen 2007; Fernández 2015; Svarstad 2016; Pettersson 2019; Löbl 2022; Larsen 2024).

Many of these numerous studies on teacher beliefs and practices show that teaching IC in language classrooms is not realized as often as it should be, as often as teachers would like it to be, or in the way that literature recommends. In general, both the international and Danish studies indicate that teachers are aware of the importance of promoting IC in the context of language learning, but that they experience several obstacles that prevent them from paying as much attention to this aspect of language learning as they would like. Studies exploring this lack cite the "vastness of the concept of culture", "lack of resources", "pedagogical problems" (such as what teaching strategies to use and how to program lessons), teachers' feelings of low self-efficacy regarding knowledge of the target cultures, a reluctance to take up certain topics in class which could be potentially sensitive for some learners, and a "lack of focus on ICC in teacher training" (Hermessi 2016) as some of the main reasons why IC is marginalized in language classrooms. Oranje & Smith (2018) point out that, while these reasons do emerge repeatedly, hidden behind them is the fact that teachers are not supported to transform their knowledge about IC into something that they can act on in classroom practice.

Even though studies on IC and teacher beliefs are not rare, there is no existing work about the context of our investigation – teachers of Danish as a second language for adult migrants. As mentioned in the introduction, second language teaching in the context of migration, and particularly

regarding languages other than English, has been the target of very little research (Ushioda 2017). The very few existing studies differ significantly from our study in context and focus, as they center on migrant students in primary and/or secondary school settings (see, e.g., Brookie 2016; Obondo et al. 2016; Rosnes & Rossland 2018; Simopoulos & Magos 2020).

## 5. Method and data

In the present study, which can be defined as mixed-method, we use a combination of data collection instruments in order to shed as much light as possible over DSL-teachers' thoughts and practices regarding the promotion of intercultural competence among adult migrant learners in Denmark.

The study includes a questionnaire for DSL teachers, which has received 93 responses, classroom observations, and interviews with nine DSL teachers. The questionnaire was sent electronically to the leaders of all Danish language schools in Denmark and then distributed to the teachers by the school leaders. The responses were collected between May and August 2023.

In selecting participants for observations, emphasis was placed on ensuring representation across all DU lines and levels. The observer (author 1) took on a non-participant role, focusing on making field notes using a semi-structured observation chart (O'Leary 2010) with the possibility to note time, teacher and student actions, as well as the teaching materials used. Since the teacher is considered the key actor in this study, the observation results presented here focus on the teacher. Classroom observation was selected because it is widely regarded as the most direct approach for examining teachers' instructional skills (OECD 2018).

To gain insights into the teachers' beliefs, evaluations, and perceived practices after the observations, semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale 2014) were conducted with each observed teacher. An interview guide was developed and used for this purpose. The interviews and observations were conducted between 5th October 2023 and 7th May 2024. The interviews and the survey were conducted in Danish and transcribed immediately after recording. The quotations presented in this paper were translated from Danish into English by the authors. The quotations from the questionnaire are marked as "survey response"; those from the interviews are marked with the line and level that the teacher teaches, e.g., "DU3/M4" (i.e., Danish Education 3, module 4).

The table below shows the modules that have been observed, the amount and duration of observations, and the duration of the teacher interviews. Each of the observed modules was taught by a different teacher.

Table 1: Overview of data collection

| **Danish line and level** | **Observations** | **Interviews (minutes)** |
|---|---|---|
| DU1/Mixed | 3 x 2hr 30min | 1hr 24min |
| DU1/M1-2 | 3 x 2hr 30min | 1hr 9min |
| DU1/M2-4 | 4 x 4hr 30min | 1hr 47min |
| DU2/M1-2 | 4 x 2hr 30min | 51min |
| DU2/M3-4 | 4 x 2hr 30min | 40min |
| DU2/M5-6 | 4 x 2hr 30min | 1hr 4min |
| DU3/M1-2 | 4 x 2hr 30min | 48min |
| DU3/M4 | 4 x 2hr 30min | 51min |
| DU3/M5 | 4 x 2hr 30min | 1hr 1min |
| **Total** | 93hr | 9hr 35min |

The data underwent content analysis using a combination of inductive and deductive coding (David & Sutton 2004: 205). The coding was carried out independently by two of the authors and

subsequently discussed.

The teachers participating in the interviews are native speakers of Danish. In the table below, an overview of background data for the 9 participating teachers is provided. The table shows that the educational background of the participating teachers is varied, but that they all hold a degree in Danish as a second language or an equivalent qualification.

Table 2: Overview of education and experience

| **DU Level** | **Education** | **Experience as a DSL-teacher (years)** |
|---|---|---|
| DU3/M4 | Master's in Linguistics and European Studies<br>Ph.D.<br>Teaching degree in Danish as a second language | 7<br>+ Danish lecturer for 6 years |
| DU3/M5 | Master's in Nordic Language and Literature, History, and Philosophy<br>Teaching degree in Danish as a second language | 20 |
| DU2/M5-6 | Master's in Social Studies and Russian<br>Primary school teacher in Danish and English<br>No teaching degree in Danish as a second language (because it did not exist at the time), instead completed various courses, including a three-week intensive course<br>FVU-education (Preparatory Adult Education)<br>Certification as a dyslexia teacher for adults (from VIA University College) | 28 |
| DU1/Mixed | Master's in Music and Nordic Studies<br>Teaching degree in Danish as a second language<br>Certification as a dyslexia teacher for adults (from VIA University College)<br>Teacher training for high school (*pædagogikum*) | 21 |
| DU1/M1-2 | Master's in English and Danish<br>Currently completing a teaching degree in Danish as a second language | 4 |
| DU1/M2-4 | Qualified primary school teacher (subjects: Danish, English, and Music)<br>International hotel and restaurant management education<br>FVU-education (Preparatory Adult Education)<br>Teaching degree in Danish as a second language | 9.5 |
| DU3/M2 (online) | Master's in English and Philosophy<br>Teaching degree in Danish as a second language | 10 |
| DU2/M1-2 | Master's in Religion and Social Studies (Propaedeutics in Latin)<br>Currently completing a teaching degree in Danish as a second language | 1.5 |
| DU2/M3-4 | Bachelor's in Arabic and Islamic Studies and Sociology<br>Master's in Psychology and Cultural Studies<br>Currently completing a teaching degree in Danish as a second language | 1.5<br>+ 9 months of experience teaching DSL at an asylum center |

The teacher participants gave their written consent to participate in the study. They were assured anonymity and the possibility of withdrawing their consent at any time.

## 6. Results

The results are presented to address four main questions: 1) How do teachers conceptualize IC? 2) How do they value IC? 3) How do they describe their IC practice? and 4) How does the way that teachers conceptualize and value IC relate to their classroom practices?

### *6.1. How do teachers conceptualize IC?*

Many of the participating teachers demonstrate a relatively broad understanding of IC. Although they describe it in slightly different ways, they consistently emphasize the same core values and identify IC as involving sensitivity and openness towards other people and cultures. This includes being observant, curious, and engaging in an exchange of perspectives. One teacher explains:

> It is a sensitivity towards not viewing or experiencing the world in the same way... What we take for granted and express in words may hold no meaning or something entirely different to someone from another part of the world. (DU3/M4)

Another teacher reflects:

> The fact that you are open to the idea that things can be different is, I believe, the most important aspect. (DU3/M2)

Moreover, they state the significance of respecting and acknowledging different people, identities, and cultures. One teacher emphasizes:

> It has a lot to do with cultural acknowledgement. I make an effort to recognize the person and identity of the learners. (DU1/M1-2)

This sensitivity and openness foster self-reflection on one's own culture, enabling individuals to view themselves from an external perspective. This awareness allows for the recognition that "we can look at the world in different ways, and both can be equally valid" (DU2/M2-3). Another teacher links this more directly to the students' development of IC, stating:

> Each individual understands both the cultural background they come from and the culture they find themselves in. And in some way, they acquire competencies to navigate within a field that encompasses multiple cultures. (DU1/Mixed)

As an extension of this, it is also emphasized that IC involves recognizing that there is no singular culture; rather, there are multiple cultures, all of which are dynamic and subject to change over time. Some teachers advocate focusing on the individual rather than reducing them to their cultural background. Hence, IC requires "avoiding generalization" (DU2/M5-6) and being "flexible" (DU2/M3-4) in one's understanding of people, cultures, and situations.

The participating teachers frequently define IC by what it is not. It stands in opposition to concepts such as "normativity" (DU3/M4), "monoculture" (DU3/M5), "hegemonic views" (DU3/M5), "stereotyping" (DU3/M4), "assimilation" (DU2/M3-4), "generalization" (DU2/M5-6), and "preaching" (DU3/M5). As one teacher states:

> I see it as a goal that they should be able to navigate some aspects of Danish culture, but not necessarily become culturally Danish. In other words, one can learn Danish without adopting Danish culture. (DU3/M5)

Another teacher adds: "We shouldn't preach a new way of looking at things" (DU2/M5-6). Additionally, it is pointed out that they try to avoid generalizing when discussing Danish conditions:

> I am aware that I must not teach what Danishness is, because I think it is a problem if I stand in front of a foreigner and say: this is how it is in Denmark. (DU3/M5)

Moreover, some of the teachers emphasize a linguistic dimension of IC, often linking it to the concept of translanguaging (García & Li 2014). One teacher explains:

> I think intercultural teaching is just as much about what I have been working with in translanguaging – this idea of creating space for languages to be interconnected, rather than treating them as isolated units. (DU1/M1-2)

It is often unclear whether the teachers are discussing their own IC and how these competences influence their teaching, or whether they view IC as something they impart to their students. This ambiguity likely arises from the overlap between these perspectives: IC can be both a tool teachers use in their professional interactions and a competence they aim to foster in their students.

In this respect, the participating teachers frequently emphasize that IC is an essential skill for them to possess and apply in their own classroom interactions. For instance, when asked how IC is practiced in the classroom, one teacher responded:

> I engage in dialogue about my own culture and the many cultures present in the classroom. I reflect and remain curious. (Survey response)

Here, the teacher describes her own personal IC rather than detailing how students are encouraged to participate in intercultural dialogue and reflection. Some teachers also mention that personal experiences – such as living abroad, having family in another country, or being a foreigner in Denmark – have contributed to the development of their own IC:

> I studied intercultural competence as part of my degree in Danish as a foreign and second language, and I also have 20 years of experience as a Dane living abroad. (Survey response)

> I have personally lived abroad for more than 20 years, so I can easily relate to my students and their efforts to understand a new culture. I 'know' their challenges and, to some extent, also view Denmark through an 'intercultural' lens. (Survey response)

> I have family in Egypt, so I understand that there are other ways of doing things and other ways of thinking about things than the way we do them here. (DU3/M2)

This suggests that the teachers' answers regarding IC may be more about their own competence than explicitly developing IC among students.

As mentioned in the introduction, these teachers demonstrate a relatively broad understanding of IC. However, it is worth noting that some teachers express a need for a clearer definition of IC or convey uncertainty about its meaning. One teacher states:

> I'm not sure I understand what is meant by 'intercultural competence'. (Survey response)

Another comments:

> Next time, please define intercultural competence, as it can have multiple meanings. (Survey response)

A third teacher notes:

> 'Intercultural competence' sounds very sophisticated. I'm not even sure if I can teach it. (Survey response)

This creates a mixed picture, although our data suggests that the majority of teachers do, in fact, have a relatively well-developed understanding of IC.

Having explored the teachers' understanding of IC and their reflections on their own IC, we now turn to the teachers' evaluation of the concept.

### *6.2. How do teachers value IC?*

The data shows that teachers consistently value the teaching of IC positively. In doing so, they highlight several key aspects. First, it is emphasized that IC is important simply because it "is a very important topic for the students" (Survey response). This aligns with teachers' statements that IC helps engage students and motivates them to learn both the language and cultural nuances more effectively:

> Just as important is also being able to spark some enthusiasm in them or some curiosity because this also creates motivation to learn and understand. (DU2/M3-4)

One teacher further elaborates:

> [IC] is such an obvious way to be in the process of learning languages because together you can explore different things. (DU2/M5-6)

Additionally, teachers suggest that a stronger focus on IC can ease learners' integration into Danish society:

> [IC] is so extremely important in relation to integration. The language school is an entry point on so many levels to large parts of society, both in terms of learning Danish and acquiring a vocabulary … but also in terms of gaining cultural insight into how it all works. (DU2/M1-2)

Another teacher highlights how IC addresses insecurities that might hold learners back:

> People can walk around and be extremely afraid of making a faux pas, and therefore you might hold back. (DU3/M4)

Furthermore, teachers feel that understanding cultural differences fosters an acknowledgement of learners' identities, helping them feel valued as individuals:

> [IC] is enormously important for the experience of being acknowledged as a person. (DU3/M5)

On a related note, another teacher points out that IC promotes intercultural tolerance:

> It is important in the sense that intercultural competence also includes intercultural tolerance. That's really my main point. We should all be able to be here, regardless of how we look, and honestly, I don't care what someone wears – I'm not just thinking about Arabic head coverings, but also other headwear from different cultures and things like that. It shouldn't matter. I feel there's a lot of pressure to hide one's culture. (DU1/M1-2)

The teaching of IC is also recognized as a tool for rapport building. One teacher suggests that IC helps learners protect themselves from social missteps while also learning how to make positive impressions:

> I think we [teachers] owe it to them [the learners] to protect them against loss of face but also to show them how they can earn some easy points by being polite so that Danes think: 'Oh, that was a nice man'. (DU1/M1-2)

The same teacher describes the classroom as a place where learners can practice these skills:

> We are such a boot camp, a training camp, a playpen for real life… Not every Mr. and Mrs. Denmark is equally … educational… There could be some slightly more abrupt encounters out there. (DU1/M1-2).

Finally, teachers believe that including IC in lessons enhances learning outcomes. One teacher explains that starting from familiar cultural concepts helps build bridges to new knowledge:

> Because it's smart in terms of learning to start from something known, which you then build on to something that is still not known… It's scaffolding, building up from something instead of just stating: 'this is how it is in Denmark'. (DU3/M5)

Another teacher adds:

> I think it would give them another hook, an anchoring point for both the words and structures we are trying to teach them, if you can attach them to a conversation about what we use it for and what they have, what they could use it for in their language. (DU1/Mixed).

A third teacher says:

> You have something ... you can compare with, so you don't just start from scratch ... You suddenly get a context you can speak from. You get ... a scaffolding you can sort of tie something else up on or compare with. So, the fact that they can speak from something they know and put it in relation to something that is unknown or different, that, I think, is a huge advantage. (DU1/M2-4)

Thus, the participating teachers see advantages in teaching IC both because it overlaps with and promotes core values of tolerance and understanding but also on a more pedagogical level, as IC in their perception creates engagement and supports learning because of the coherence-creating potential inherent in the concept. The teachers also demonstrate a rather holistic view, discussing how it can support integration into the Danish society. From these responses, we can say that in addition to having a well-developed theoretical understanding of IC, teachers also see value in including IC in their classroom practice. But how do they *implement* this understanding and appreciation in their practice? In the next section, we will examine teachers' descriptions of their practices, including the roles of textbooks, learners, and teachers, and the challenges they encounter. Following this, we compare these self-reported practices with observational data.

*6.3. How do teachers describe their IC practice?*

Despite appreciating and having a well-developed understanding of IC, teachers do not seem particularly conscious or systematic in integrating it into their teaching practice. Some examples of how this is expressed in interviews and survey answers include:

> I don't believe I teach specifically about intercultural competence. However, we do touch upon how things are done in Denmark versus in the students' home countries, and we discuss attitudes. (Survey response)

> I don't think I incorporate it into the actual planning of my teaching. (DU3/M4)

> I think intercultural aspects come into play because we are in a space where many different cultures are represented, and everyone has the opportunity to contribute. (DU2/M3-4)

> I also believe that a lot of learning happens, even if it's not the explicit focus ... much of it occurs unconsciously, in a way. (DU2/M1-2)

> Comparison is something that happens almost automatically. (DU2/M5-6)

> Since so many different cultures are represented, it happens naturally—it's not something I plan for. (Survey response)

Thus, according to the teachers' own statements, IC is not an explicit focus in their instruction. Instead, it tends to emerge spontaneously and somewhat automatically due to the presence of diverse cultures within the classroom, and it is reduced to comparison.

*6.3.1. The role of textbooks and topics*

From the data, it becomes clear that the inclusion of IC in the classroom is largely dependent on the textbooks used. In the survey, 65% responded that they often use textbooks when teaching IC, and 20% indicated that they sometimes do. Compared to other resources, textbooks are by far the most used material. This point is also clearly reflected in both the interviews and the qualitative responses in the survey:

> It is rarely a focus in my teaching and will often arise from the textbook I am already using. (Survey response)

> The reason for choosing that text is that it's in the book. In that sense, it's quite pragmatic. (DU3/M4)

Interestingly, the teachers seem to appreciate the materials they work with, particularly for their ability to foster intercultural dialogue. 97% of respondents indicate that the teaching materials are either very suitable, adequately suitable, or somewhat suitable, while only 3% report that they are unsuitable. The same book series are highlighted multiple times in both the interviews and the survey. For example, the book series *Fokus* and *Puls* are described as follows (for a more detailed look at the teaching materials, see Sadow et al. ms.):

> The 'Fokus' series works really well because it prompts questions like 'How is it in your home country?' (DU2/M3-4)

> One of the materials I really like to use is something I find invites intercultural conversation and understanding. It doesn't just discuss what happens in Denmark but promotes a broader dialogue. This material, called 'Puls', does this well. (DU3/M4)

As we shall see in section 6.3.5, DU1 stands out due to the significantly weaker educational starting point of this group of learners. Nevertheless, a DU1 teacher also notes that "the themes we work with automatically include this [comparison], such as 'my school', 'in my home country'". However, she also adds: "But there are just as many themes that don't encourage this [comparison]", to which she reflects: "It's certainly something I need to consider more moving forward, to ensure I bring their experiences into the room" (DU1/M2-4).

However, there are no examples which go beyond this idea of encouraging students to compare their own cultures with "Danish culture". This limit is also demonstrated in the interviews:

> We have an overall theme and some texts, and then there will be something asking you to compare it with your home country. So, there is a lot of material that does that, but it is not the starting point. (DU2/M5-6)

*6.3.2. The role of the learner*

In addition to prompts from the teaching materials, the inclusion of IC in the classroom also relies on learners' actions and engagement. Teachers often highlight the role of student-initiated discussions and students' own experiences in facilitating intercultural dialogue. For example, a couple of teachers note:

> Input from the students is probably the most important 'material' I use. (Survey response)

> These kinds of discussions … come into play when students ask questions or share their experiences. I don't need to open these comparative discussions because they happen very naturally. (DU3/M5)

Again, DU1 stands out in comparison to the other lines. A DU1 teacher says:

> In fact, I find that it is the Ukrainians who are much better at bringing their own experiences into the room. It is very, very rare that I experience that other DU1 learners do it, it is typically us who have to ask:'How is it in XX' ... In any case, I'm made aware that it's usually me who has to make sure I have that angle. (DU1/M2-4)

From this quote, it appears that many DU1 learners find it challenging to take initiative in sharing own experiences and have a greater need for the teacher's guidance.

Some of the teachers emphasize the underlying advantage of having the students initiate the intercultural focus:

> Students participate in internships and alternate between these and language courses, so I use their descriptions of communication problems from their internships as teaching material. (Survey response)

> To create the most relevant content possible, I base my teaching on student questions and my knowledge of their situations, such as their work environments. This happens continuously. (Survey response)

According to these teachers, a student-centered approach increases relevance, which is beneficial for the learning outcome. In fact, this was highlighted as one of the key values of working with IC in teaching (see 6.2.).

*6.3.3. The role of the teacher*

Beyond selecting the teaching materials, teachers also actively apply teaching strategies that facilitate the integration of IC in the classroom. The participating teachers appear to be particularly attuned to creating the right conditions for learners to engage in IC. Several teachers emphasize the importance of feeling safe as a key condition for fostering cultural comparison and interaction, and they therefore work to create a safe and supportive classroom environment for learning. A teacher expresses it like this:

> When they are in the classroom, it's important to me to create a safe space where we can laugh together, not at each other, and where there is room for everyone. (DU1/Mixed)

Another teacher says:

> I also create a classroom environment that encourages students from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds to embrace and respect each other. (Survey response)

At times, teachers are the primary actors in incorporating IC into the classroom. One teacher describes how they actively introduce IC elements, saying: "Sometimes it can also be something you fill in yourself" (DU3/M4). In this regard, teachers report enhancing the existing teaching materials, e.g., by asking follow-up questions about the students' home countries and thereby creating opportunities for intercultural dialogue. A teacher describes it like this:

> Primarily by facilitating discussions on topics that students are curious about, as well as conversations about how things are done in Denmark compared to their home countries – it is something I often ask about to encourage reflection and awareness of cultural differences. (Survey response)

Another teacher specifies topics that they typically compare:

> We compare differences and similarities in various celebrations – for example, naming ceremonies, coming of age, weddings, funerals, birthdays, and holidays. We look at family structures, housing, gender roles, childhood, old age, celebrations, food, social norms, and leisure activities across different cultures. (Survey response)

They sometimes support this by intentionally grouping students from different nationalities to foster cultural exchange:

> I usually pair them up, and I think it works well when they talk and exchange experiences. I also like to mix them across nationalities because it adds value – it creates those 'aha' moments when they realize, 'Oh, things can be different in other places'. (DU2/M3-4)

Or they initiate intercultural comparison by drawing parallels between different cultures they have knowledge of themselves:

> To me, it [IC] is about making references where I can. It's difficult to do this for all

> countries, but I aim to create those connections when I'm aware of certain cultural practices. (DU2/M1-2)

Common to the mentioned intercultural dialogue is that it is rooted in Danish traditions, norms, and culture – although teachers often emphasize that there is no singular Danish culture:

> So, when it's about interculture here, it obviously means that foreigners need to learn Danish, and the primary focus is on the Danish language, but with that comes culture as well... It's mainly Danish culture, and then comes the question, what is that exactly? Danish culture? (DU3/M5).

> The focus of the teaching is, of course, to teach the Danish language and Danish culture. That's really the main goal, but it can also be interesting to discuss how things are in other places as well. (DU3/M2)

Note again the overwhelming emphasis on comparison as the primary method for including IC in their classrooms.

*6.3.4. Five key challenges*

Based on the teachers' statements in both surveys and interviews, five main challenges emerge: module tests, lack of time, student skill level, sensitive topics, and teacher training. We will examine these challenges more closely in this section.

The participating teachers seem to prioritize the linguistic aspect over cultural elements. A DU1 teacher reflects on the learning objectives, which focus exclusively on language, while cultural aspects emerge more or less incidentally:

> I must say that the objectives we most often formulate or use ourselves are typically the linguistic ones. For example, at both the day level and the course level, I can say: 'Well, what language is to be learned here?' … And I don't think we've been very good at being clear about the cultural aspect, to be completely honest (DU1/M2-4).

This prioritization seems to be due to the module tests, as students are not assessed on their IC. This, coupled with the fact that schools receive financial compensation from the state only when students successfully pass these assessments, creates a pressure on teachers to prioritize "teaching to the test", causing IC to be relegated to a secondary position. This is reflected in several of the teachers' statements:

> It [IC] has no role whatsoever in the module test world. (DU3/M4)

> One could say that regardless of what I want to teach and what the books suggest, it is the final exams, as well as the module tests, that dictate our teaching. (DU3/M5)

> If there were a bit more time in the classroom and less focus on these tests, there is no doubt that intercultural competence would play a larger role... right now, it is more like we shut it down because we also need to discuss reading strategies, and we have to prepare for that [the module test]. (DU2/M5-6)

The challenge of exams is – as it is evident in the last quote – closely related to the second issue, which is the lack of sufficient time. The teachers express concerns about the very limited teaching time, which, combined with the pressure from the module tests, severely restricts the incorporation

of IC into their lessons, despite their recognition of IC's importance for learners. Some experienced teachers reflect on how things were different in the past:

> There is rarely time for it because it's like an extra layer… And it has gotten much worse over the last five to ten years, where students now receive half the teaching hours they used to have. (DU1/Mixed)

> In earlier Danish lessons, when we had a bit more time, we often did projects and things like that. (DU3/M4)

> I used to organize several excursions to places... I still try to fit in one or two during a whole course, but there's simply no time or resources for more than that. (Survey response)

Another aspect of the time pressure relates to lesson preparation. Teachers often lack sufficient preparation time, which increases their reliance on textbooks:

> I'm also somewhat limited by the textbook material I have, because I don't have the time to reinvent the wheel. (DU3/M2)

Additionally, teachers feel challenged when teaching IC to students with lower proficiency levels:

> It's difficult at the lower modules, where the primary focus is on basic grammatical structures. (DU2/M1-2)

Some teachers even mention that it is not meaningful to work with IC at the lower levels:

> Many of the above questions are touched upon in teaching at a concrete level, based on the students' attitudes and experiences. In my experience, you need to be at the higher language levels for it to make sense to address general questions – at least if it is to be conducted in Danish. (Survey response)

While lower-level modules generally pose challenges, DU1 is highlighted as particularly problematic due to the very low linguistic and cognitive levels of the students:

> Most of my teaching is at module 2 and module 3, and I find that the students currently lack the linguistic resources to engage with these topics. (Survey response)

> It is incredibly difficult because, at this level, it's all about peeling away and simplifying until you reach something very basic. (DU1/Mixed)

> Not everyone has the necessary language competence or ability to think abstractly enough to engage with language in this way. However, I'm always proud of my DU1 students who sometimes simply ask, 'Why aren't you married?', which allows me to explain that I haven't 'found a man' or that I'm a 'strong woman' who loves living alone. (Survey response)

One teacher directly links this issue to the availability of resources:

> I don't have any resources for the intro modules. (Survey response)

Additionally, it appears that some teachers tend to avoid topics that can be considered problematic or sensitive. A teacher mentioned having addressed topics like "religion, cultural differences, etc.", but found that these could create a "hostile atmosphere among the students" (Survey response). As a result, the teacher has for years "avoided these topics, as the school should be a positive place where everyone feels safe and comfortable" (Survey response).

Moreover, a concern is raised in relation to the students' existing stereotypical perceptions of Danes, on the one hand, and their requests for simplified portrayals or stereotypes from their teachers, on the other. The students, with good intentions, seek these stereotypes as a way to better understand the topics dealt with in class and navigate their learning experience, but this can be problematic:

> Stereotypes are something you need to be careful with, in my opinion. On the other hand, they make it easier for the students to form these mental images to create some kind of pre-understanding of the topics covered in class. But I try as much as possible to remain neutral from both sides. (Survey response)

The discussion of stereotypes Danes might have about the students and their home countries is also seen as problematic:

> It's difficult to bring up the stereotypes Danes have about the students' cultures/countries because it can offend some. But you can tactfully try to prepare the students for the opinions they will encounter in the media. (Survey response)

The teachers' educational background appears to present a challenge, as the approach to IC in their teacher training is not practice-oriented. In the survey, 63% of the teachers indicated that they had learned about IC in one module of their DSL teacher education. While they found the module interesting, they criticized it for being overly theoretical:

> You can certainly criticize it – it was a very theoretical education. (DU3/M5)

> It felt more like a university subject ... there was no connection between the university teaching and the practical classroom teaching. (DU3/M2)

> I found it to be very university-oriented, theory-heavy, and full of concepts that weren't particularly relevant to a teacher's everyday life. There were some things I could use, but a lot of it I didn't find applicable. (DU1/Mixed)

After having focused on the teachers' perspectives on IC, we proceed to examine how these views are reflected in their classroom practices as observed during lessons.

*6.4. How does the way that teachers conceptualize and value IC relate to their classroom practices?*

The section is divided into several key topics: topic-led IC, teaching to the test, handling generalizations and stereotypes, and comparing languages. As will become evident from the following, there is a significant alignment between what the teachers say and what they do.

*6.4.1. Topic-led IC*

In accordance with what the participating teachers describe in their statements, our observations show that it is often the topics covered in class that encourage comparisons with the students' own cultures – particularly when they are asked to express their opinions and argue for those opinions. As it is to be expected, the students draw on personal experiences in these discussions. For example, during a lesson in DU3/M4, the students read a text about a woman who has actively chosen to

become a single mother by having a child with a sperm donor. The students were first asked to discuss: "*What do you think about choosing to become a solo mother?".* During this discussion, the students also talked about adoption and its prevalence in Denmark, as well as LGBT+ issues and rainbow families. Subsequently, they were given a similar written assignment as homework: "*You must write what you think about Susanne's choice and explain why you think so".* In the homework, the teacher determined the focus on the expression of opinion and argumentation. In the textbook, there are several questions of this kind, and the teacher's question can be seen as an adaptation of one presented in the book. In one of the subsequent lessons, the students were assigned a written task based on an interview they were to conduct with a Dane about family-related matters that had puzzled them. The teacher provided examples, such as how elderly people live, e.g., in multigenerational homes versus nursing homes (as is customary in Denmark), or child-rearing. She referenced her own experience during a stay abroad, where she observed that Czech children were better behaved than Danish children. She illustrated her own daughter's attitude and her husband's parenting style by recounting a story about her teenage daughter wearing a T-shirt that said: "I WANT PIZZA, NOT YOUR OPINION" (DU3/M4). With this, the teacher aimed to illustrate her own experience of Danish child-rearing practices, in which children are part of a rather flat hierarchy in the home and can therefore feel entitled to disregard adult advice. In the subsequent interview, the learners also brought up this example and described their surprise at what they perceived as a lack of respect from the child towards her parents. One learner explained:

> Okay, for example, children don't listen to their parents when they say, for example, 'do this, do that'. It is normal in Iran … For example, I just have to say to my son, 'wear this t-shirt', and he would say 'okay mommy' … What did C say: 'I want pizza not your opinion'? (DU3/M4 learner)

This example highlights the learners' perception of the greater autonomy children have in Denmark and their astonishment at the differences in expected respect and obedience.

The observations confirm that DU1 and the lower modules stand out, as we found extremely limited examples of IC-related episodes. However, there are a few notable instances.

For example, a DU1 teacher took students, primarily attending Module 4 (DU1 classes often consist of mixed groups due to the low number of students), on an excursion to a kindergarten. In the subsequent lesson, they discussed in simple Danish both their experience with childcare in the specific kindergarten and their knowledge of similar practices, including those from their home countries.

### *6.4.2. Teaching to the test*

The observations further corroborate the teachers' statements regarding the significant influence of module tests on the teaching process. These tests evidently occupy a central position for both educators and learners, frequently shaping the content and structure of lessons. They are addressed in nearly every session, either due to student inquiries about scheduling and other practicalities or as part of preparation activities, such as practicing with previous test materials. This was most apparent in DU1. It was also observed that topics do not necessarily lead to cultural comparisons, even when dealing with controversial subjects such as stress and gender equality, which would seem a perfect occasion. In addition, as some teachers describe in the interviews, it was observed that they sometimes shut down the cultural discussion and focus on what is essential to pass the module test.

### *6.4.3. Handling generalizations and stereotypes*

Some teachers place significant emphasis on contextualizing and being cautious about producing or reproducing stereotypes and prejudices – which is also emphasized by the teachers when defining IC. For example, one DU3/M5 teacher states: "*We must be careful when giving examples to ensure that we don't end up creating stereotypes".* This teacher writes "*stereotypes = all"* on the board and

explains that it refers to statements implying that everyone is the same, such as "*all Danes are closed-off and reserved"*. Other observed teachers refrain from commenting on the generalizations made by the students and/or inadvertently generalize based on their own experiences.

*6.4.4. Comparing languages (and cultures)*

The observations confirm that teachers make comparisons with other languages, but we have not found as many instances of comparisons regarding specific cultural practices related to these languages. The observed comparisons are grammatical in nature and often with English, which is typically the language most familiar to the teachers, but examples of the inclusion of German and French were also observed. Furthermore, teachers encouraged students to reflect on a given grammatical phenomenon in their own native languages if the teacher lacked knowledge of those languages. For instance, in DU3/M2, a student asked about the difference between "*du"* and "*man"*. The teacher compared this with English, where she said both are translated as "*you"*. She also explained the other Danish pronouns that translate to "*you"* and added: *"I know many of your languages have this distinction as well"*. In DU2/M5-6, a teacher covered modal verbs and how hypothetical situations are expressed in Danish. She provided an example: *"If I won a million [Danish crowns], I would buy a house"*. Then she added: "I think if you think about your language, you probably have the same structure. For example, what would you say in Thai, if you were to translate: *'If I won a million, I would travel to Thailand again'"*. In this way, she helped the students make the comparison themselves.

## 7. Discussion and implications

Many of the participating teachers demonstrate a broad understanding of IC, which closely aligns with Byram's (1997, 2021) conceptualization of the term. They emphasize the importance of sensitivity and curiosity, highlight that there is no single, static culture – rather, culture is dynamic – and stress that it is ultimately individuals, not cultures, that interact. The teachers are careful to avoid generalizations and consistently frame their comments in class in a specific context, in line with research on the topic (e.g., Byram 1997, 2021; Risager & Svarstad 2020). Much like Byram rejects the native speaker model, these teachers distance themselves from assimilation. Instead, they believe that students should learn to understand and navigate Danish society while having the skills to negotiate it in the context of their own.

Issues related to lack of self-efficacy (Bandura 1994) are scarce in the data, both in relation to the meaning and significance of IC and in terms of familiarity with Danish society (i.e., content-specific self-efficacy). This contrasts with findings from other studies (cf. Hermessi 2016). However, this is not surprising, given that most of these teachers have formal education in language teaching and are native speakers of the target language and/or have lived in Denmark for many years, gaining deep immersion in the culture. On the other hand, given the teachers' familiarity with IC, we would have expected more expressions of self-efficacy when talking about how they teach it. Instead, it is clear that some teachers avoid it for reasons of student comfort or time constraints. This indicates that they are not confident in integrating it into their current practice (see below).

As previous studies have also noted (cf. Hermessi 2016), these teachers recognize the critical importance of including activities that enhance IC. They observe that this helps engage students and motivates them to learn both the language and cultural nuances more effectively. It fosters tolerance and acknowledgment, serves as a tool for rapport-building, and is pedagogically relevant. From the teachers' perspective, working with culture and interculturality enhances engagement, establishes connections to learners' existing knowledge and, ultimately, can also aid integration into Danish society.

Given these perspectives, it may seem surprising that both teacher statements and observations indicate that IC is not a systematic focus in their classrooms. Furthermore, IC is largely limited to

noticing and comparing – this includes comparisons of both societal and linguistic aspects (e.g., translanguaging). If we compare this practice to Risager & Svarstad's (2020) cycle of intercultural learning (mentioned in section 3), it seems that teachers operate primarily within the first two levels (noticing and comparing) and only rarely proceed to the stages of reflecting and interacting (with the exception of the homework about the solo mother in 6.4.1). This is partly due to module tests and curricula that prioritize the Danish language. With limited instructional time, teachers are compelled to focus on elements critical for passing module tests – essentially teaching to the test. Other Danish studies regarding foreign languages in the school system have shown similar results (e.g., Fernández 2015; Andersen & Fernández 2022), and the same applies international studies like Young & Sachdev (2011).

Moreover, while the teachers in the interviews emphasize the importance of openness, curiosity, and reflectivity and stress that it is individuals rather than cultures that interact in practice, they nevertheless, at times, seem to overlook this. This is evident both in their teaching practice and in the interviews, when they describe classroom situations in which they ask questions such as "How is it in your country?". This question takes for granted that the learners are representatives of "a country" or "a culture", when they may not perceive themselves as representatives of a single culture, but rather as individuals embedded in subcultural or transcultural networks – often more than one at the same time. Openness and reflectivity require critical reflection on an individual's position within their "own" cultures, since this cannot be assumed. Yet the teachers do not always show this level of reflection.

In their practice, at times, it appears that IC equals avoidance of cultural diversity rather than its positive acknowledgment. This is, for example, manifested in the teacher statements in section 6.2., "It shouldn't matter", and in section 6.3.4., "I try … to remain neutral". Similarly, the exercise in section 6.4.1, in which students are asked to express "what they think" about a person's behavior, illustrates that cultural differences are treated as objects of evaluation. Intercultural competence might instead be fostered through an empathetic approach, focusing not on expressing opinions but on trying to adopt another person's perspective, i.e., as an exercise in decentering.

The teachers point out that their training has been overly theoretical, a critique that echoes previous studies (cf. Simopoulos & Magos 2020; Oranje & Smith 2018; Fernández 2015). While their education enables them to explain the concept of IC, it does not equip them with practical tools to apply it in the classroom. This lack of practical preparation might also explain why it is often unclear in both the questionnaire and the interviews whether teachers are discussing their own IC or that of their students. Similar conclusions are reached in studies around the world (e.g., Safa & Tofighi 2022; Jedynak 2011).

Another obstacle teachers identify is the students' low language proficiency level. This seems paradoxical, as they regard IC as a pedagogical tool for scaffolding learning. Perhaps lower-level learners are precisely the ones who could benefit most from systematic work with IC. This again underscores the need for teacher training that supports the implementation of IC at all proficiency levels. One way of addressing this challenge is to train learners to express themselves in simple terms, for example through the minimal languages approach (see Fernández & Sadow 2025). Another way of integrating intercultural competence at an early stage is to allow learners to reflect and articulate their thoughts in their first language, in another language in which they feel more confident than Danish, or by translanguaging (García & Li Wei 2014). These flexible language practices can support the learning of Danish in the longer term.

These findings point to a need for changes in module tests – a process already underway, as portfolio exams will soon be introduced in DU1. Additionally, modifying teacher education to include more practice-oriented perspectives would prove beneficial.

Our findings, along with insights from our learner cognition study (submitted) and our materials analysis study (in preparation), support our aim to develop an online learning resource focused on Danish communicative culture – covering cultural keywords, social values, and everyday

conversation routines – adaptable across programs and proficiency levels. The rationale behind our online resource draws on the minimal languages approach (Goddard 2017), where complex issues are described using very basic linguistic means. In the resource, we call this minimal language "stepping-stone Danish", as it is conceived as a metalanguage that supports learners in their progression towards acquiring Danish. Furthermore, the online resource includes teaching materials designed to encourage critical reflection. The aim is to avoid perpetuating a static and monolithic representation of culture. We have deliberately included potentially problematic cultural issues to avoid a tendency in teaching materials to focus only on topics where Danish culture is presented as progressive (e.g., single mothers, LGBT+ issues). For instance, we highlight the contradictions in Denmark's self-image as an environmentally progressive country alongside its high levels of consumption or the love for Denmark that can easily border on excessive pride. The results of the present study also highlight the need to help teachers approach IC more systematically, moving from simple comparisons to emphasizing true reflection and interaction. It is also our intention to provide training courses that will help teachers exploit our upcoming learning resource in the Danish classroom, thereby hopefully adopting a more systematic approach to IC.

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