

Toward Gendered Intercultural Competence: Reconceptualising Gender Bias in EFL Textbooks as an Intercultural Education Problem

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Gender continues to shape individuals' experiences, opportunities, and self-perceptions within educational contexts that are often assumed to be neutral or progressive. At the same time, intercultural competence (IC) has gained increasing prominence as a key educational goal in response to globalisation and cultural diversity. Despite this, influential intercultural competence frameworks tend to conceptualise culture primarily through nationality and/or ethnicity, leaving gender largely under-theorised. This article argues that widely used models of IC remain theoretically incomplete due to their limited engagement with gender as a cultural dimension, despite its central role in identity formation, power relations, and everyday interaction. Focusing on the frameworks proposed by Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006), the paper emphasises the integration of gender as an explicit analytical and pedagogical dimension of IC. Adopting a conceptual approach, the study examines how gendered representations in educational materials mediate intercultural meaning, using English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks as a key illustrative site. It proposes Gendered Intercultural Competence (GIC) as a reconceptualisation of IC, positioning gender as a constitutive dimension of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on inclusive and socially responsive education and highlights the need for theoretical models and curricular approaches that more accurately reflect learners' identities in culturally diverse classrooms.

Keywords: Gendered Intercultural Competence, EFL textbooks, Gender bias, Hidden curriculum, Intercultural competence, Intercultural education

Introduction

Gender, as a socially constructed system of meaning, continues to significantly influence individuals' experiences, opportunities, and identities across educational contexts. From early socialisation onward, learners encounter gendered expectations, stereotypes, and representations embedded not only in cultural norms but also in institutional practices and everyday interactions. These patterns are not incidental; they reflect broader societal structures that influence how identities are formed, valued and constrained. In this article, gender is understood as a socially constructed dimension of identity, distinct from biological sex, and shaped through cultural, social, and institutional practices. This understanding highlights the central argument of this paper: that gender must be recognised as a constitutive dimension of intercultural competence.

At the same time, IC has gained increasing prominence within educational discourse as a key skill for navigating culturally diverse and globalised societies. Existing IC frameworks (e.g., Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006) as

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well as policy-oriented models such as the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCD, 2018), typically emphasise openness, empathy, critical awareness, and respectful communication across cultural boundaries. However, they tend to conceptualise culture primarily in terms of nationality, ethnicity, or language, leaving gender comparatively under-theorised despite its significant role in shaping social interaction and power relations.

This gap becomes particularly significant in educational contexts, where learning materials play a key role in mediating cultural meanings. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) concepts of cultural capital and symbolic violence, education can be understood as a site where social norms and hierarchies are both reproduced and contested. Within this context, textbooks function as cultural artefacts that legitimise particular identities and social roles while rendering others invisible or marginal. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, textbooks form part of a "hidden curriculum" through which gender roles, social relations, and cultural hierarchies are implicitly constructed and normalised.

Despite the growing emphasis on IC in education, the absence of gender as an explicit analytical dimension raises a critical question: how can IC be fully realised if gender, as a culturally embedded system of meaning, remains marginal or invisible within its frameworks? Addressing this question requires rethinking how culture is conceptualised in intercultural education and examining how gender intersects with processes of meaning-making in both theory and practice.

This article argues that IC is theoretically incomplete without sustained engagement with gender. It proposes a reconceptualisation in which gender is positioned as a constitutive dimension of culture within existing models, particularly those developed by Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006). Rather than introducing a separate component, the paper develops Gendered Intercultural Competence (GIC) as an integrative lens through which IC can be more fully theorised and applied. GIC is understood in this article as the capacity to interpret, negotiate, and critically engage with intercultural meanings through an awareness of gender as a culturally embedded system of identity and power.

More specifically, the aims of this conceptual paper are: (1) to examine the marginalization of gender within existing models of IC and to argue for its inclusion as a core cultural dimension; (2) to propose GIC as a conceptual lens for reinterpreting the core components of IC, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness, through a gendered perspective; and (3) to explore the implications of this reconceptualisation for intercultural education, with particular attention to EFL textbooks as sites where gendered and intercultural meanings intersect. In doing so, the article draws on intercultural studies, gender studies, and research on EFL textbooks, understood not simply as linguistic tools but as cultural artefacts that communicate values, norms, and assumptions about both gender and culture. The article contributes to ongoing discussions on inclusive and socially responsive education and offers a conceptual foundation for future research, curriculum development, and teacher education.

Background

The evolution of intercultural competence

The field of intercultural studies examines how cultural identities, values, and meanings are negotiated through interaction, with an emphasis on mutual understanding, respect, and the development of intercultural awareness (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Portera, 2008). Drawing on education, linguistics, sociology, and communication, the field is concerned not only with identifying cultural differences, but also with understand-

ing how such differences are represented, mediated, and experienced in social and educational contexts. Emerging in the post World-War II period, early work was shaped by anthropological perspectives on cultural relativity (Hall, 1959), which later informed more systematic approaches to IC (Chen & Starosta, 1998).

Parallel to this, conceptions of language competence have evolved. Early models of foreign language teaching were largely grounded in structuralist approaches, where linguistic accuracy was prioritised and the native speaker was positioned as the ideal model (Alptekin, 2002). This perspective was challenged by Hymes' (1972) notion of communicative competence, which expanded language learning to include the ability to use language appropriately and effectively within diverse social contexts rather than merely producing grammatically correct sentences.

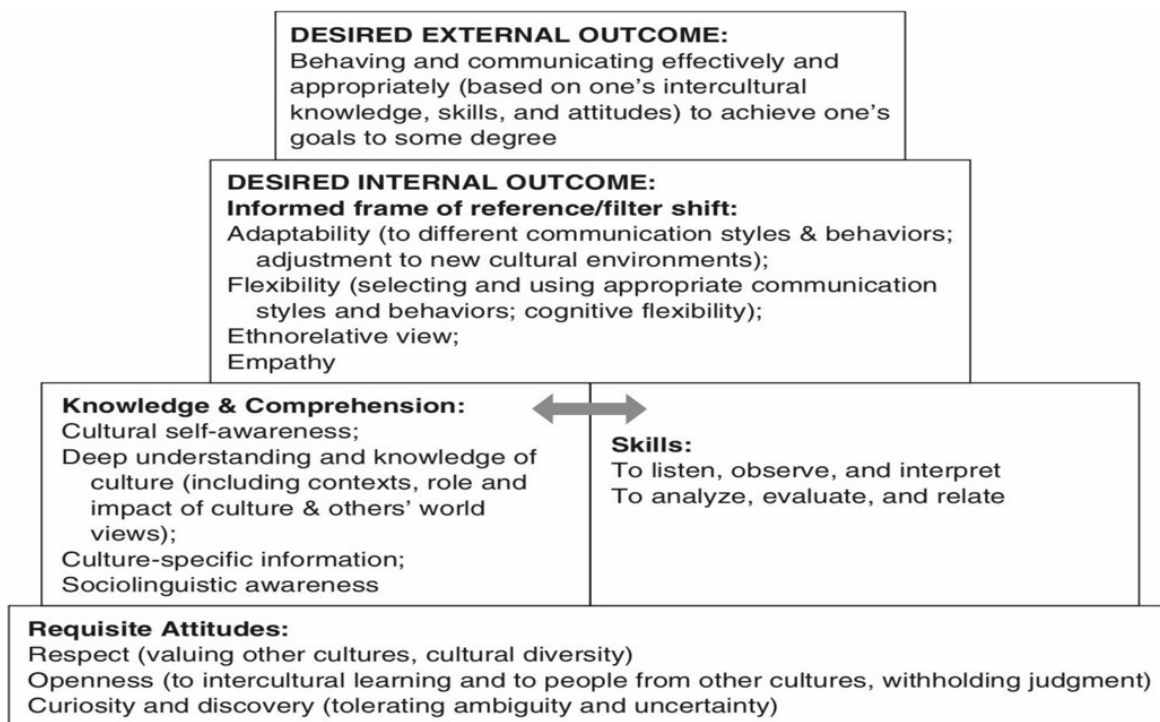
Building on this, Byram (1997) introduced the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), arguing that language learning must also involve the ability to engage ethically and reflexively with cultural differences. His model conceptualises intercultural competence through five interrelated dimensions, commonly referred to as the five *savoirs*: attitudes of openness and curiosity (*savoir être*), knowledge of social groups and practices (*savoir*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). Together, these dimensions reframe the language learner as an intercultural mediator rather than a passive imitator of native-speaker norms.

Further developments in the field questioned the centrality of the native speaker as an educational ideal. Alptekin (2002) explicitly critiques native-speaker based models of communicative competence as unrealistic and constraining in a globalised world, where English primarily functions as a *lingua franca*. He argues that most English communication takes place between non-native speakers and therefore requires what he calls *global appropriacy* rather than adhering to culturally specific native norms. From this perspective, the goal of language education is not imitation but rather the development of bilingual or multilingual speakers capable of negotiating meaning across diverse cultural contexts while maintaining their own cultural identity.

This reconceptualisation is extended by Baker (2015), who frames IC within English as a *lingua franca* communication. Baker emphasises transcultural awareness, highlighting that cultural meanings are fluid, hybrid, and context dependent rather than fixed or nationally bounded. Learners are thus understood as active negotiators of identity and meaning. This is particularly relevant in EFL contexts, where textbooks play a crucial role in mediating how learners perceive both culture and themselves as intercultural speakers.

Alongside these theoretical shifts, scholars have increasingly emphasised the affective, reflective, and ethical dimensions of IC. For example, Sercu (2004) argues that genuine IC extends beyond factual knowledge of other cultures to include empathy, openness, and critical reflection. Overall, she advocates for a dialogical approach that encourages learners to question cultural representations, recognise bias, and actively construct meaning.

A further consolidation of IC theory is provided by Deardorff (2006), who conceptualises IC as a developmental and cyclical process. Her framework, as illustrated in Figure 1, begins with foundational attitudes such as respect, openness, and curiosity, progressing through knowledge and skills toward effective and appropriate intercultural behavior. Widely adopted in educational contexts, her Pyramid Model emphasizes that IC is not a fixed outcome but an ongoing process shaped by reflection and experience.



- Move from personal level (attitude) to interpersonal/interactive level (outcomes)
- Degree of intercultural competence depends on acquired degree of underlying elements

Figure 1. Deardorff's Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence. Source: Deardorff (2004)

More recent developments have extended these approaches by explicitly linking IC to democratic participation, social responsibility, and critical engagement with power. The Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) conceptualises intercultural competence through 20 competences organised into four interconnected domains (as demonstrated in Figure 2): values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge, and critical understanding (Council of Europe, 2018).

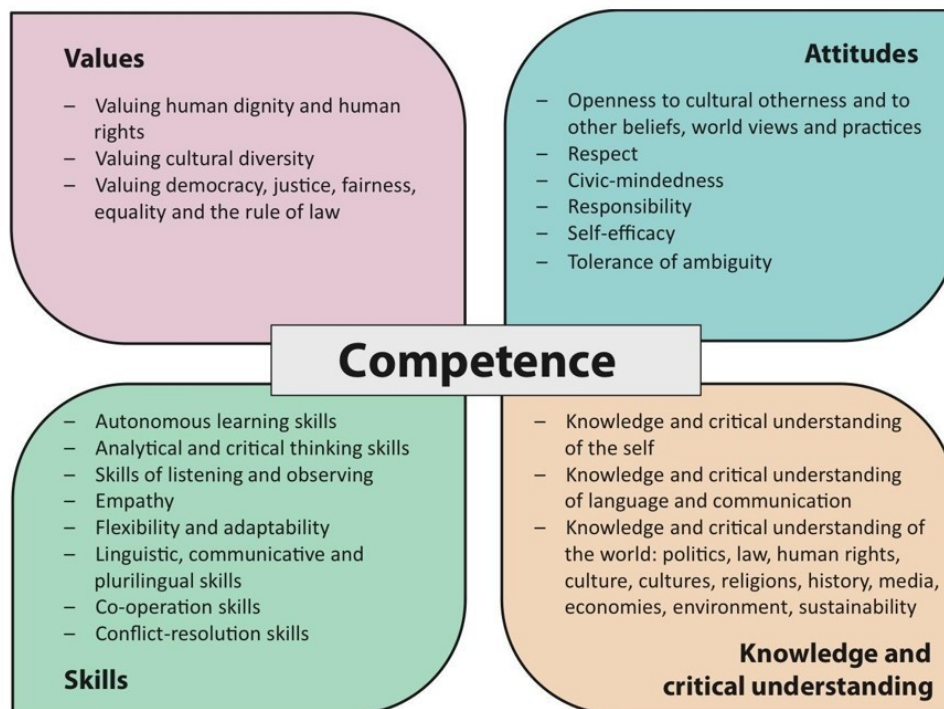


Figure 2. The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018). Source: Council of Europe (2018)

Within this framework, values such as human dignity, cultural diversity, and equality, are foregrounded alongside attitudes of openness and respect, as well as skills including empathy, critical thinking, and conflict resolution. Importantly, the framework emphasises critical understanding of the self, communication, and the wider social world, thereby recognising that intercultural competence involves engagement with the social structures and power relations that shape communication.

At the same time, recent perspectives in intercultural communication further challenge static understandings of culture by conceptualising it as a dynamic, discursive process rather than a bounded set of shared attributes (Kramsch & Hua, 2016). Culture is not something individuals simply possess or belong to, but something they actively enact through interaction. Cultural identities are therefore continuously negotiated, foregrounded, or rendered irrelevant within specific communicative contexts. However, many models of IC often depend on generalised cultural knowledge, thereby risking the reification of social groups and the reproduction of reductive or stereotypical representations (Kramsch & Hua, 2016).

Despite these significant theoretical advances, a persistent limitation prevails across many IC models. Culture is most often conceptualised in terms of nationality, ethnicity, or language, while gender remains comparatively under theorised. Even IC models that emphasise fluidity, hybridity, and reflexivity rarely address how gender norms, power relations, and expectations shape intercultural interaction within and across societies. As a result, learners may be equipped to recognise national or ethnic differences while lacking the conceptual tools to critically engage with the gender dimension of culture that extends throughout everyday communication.

This theoretical gap becomes particularly visible in language education, where textbooks function as mediators of intercultural meaning. While IC frameworks emphasise openness and critical awareness, they often fail to account for how gendered representations in educational materials may contradict these aims. Addressing this gap requires extending existing models to explicitly recognise gender as a culturally embedded system

of meaning, that is, a system through which norms, identities, and power relations are structured and reproduced. Moreover, the limitation is not only pedagogical but also cognitive, as individuals interpret information through established gender schemas (Bem, 1981).

In response, GIC is not introduced as a standalone framework, but as a reconceptualisation of intercultural competence in which gender is recognised as a constitutive cultural dimension embedded within attitudes, knowledge, skills and critical awareness. The following section examines gender as a culturally embedded system of meaning and its implications for intercultural education and textbook analysis.

Gender, Culture, and Education

To define gender as a culturally embedded system of meaning is to acknowledge that it is not an individual trait, but rather a shared cultural framework that shapes and organises norms, expectations, and power relations. As a complex social construct, gender encompasses the roles, responsibilities, behaviors, and expectations ascribed to women and men within specific cultural and social contexts (FAWE, 2018). These expectations are not biologically determined but socially learned, historically situated, and subject to change.

Contemporary perspectives in intercultural communication increasingly conceptualise culture in relation to identity rather than as a fixed set of national characteristics. From this perspective, cultural identity is understood as multiple, dynamic, and constructed through interaction, encompassing not only ethnicity, or nationality, but also intersecting dimensions such as gender, class, and social position (Zhu, 2014). Identity, therefore, is not something individuals simply have, but something that is actively performed and negotiated in communication. This understanding reinforces the argument that gender cannot be treated as separate from culture, but must be recognised as one of its constitutive dimensions.

Building on the work of Zhu Hua (2014), gender can be understood as both a “master identity” that remains relatively stable and a “negotiable identity” that is contested through social interaction. Viewed through the lens of interculturality, the process by which individuals project and negotiate identities in discourse, it becomes clear that the gendered representations in EFL textbooks are not merely biased images, but are part of a dominant discourse that shapes the “cultural identity markers” available to learners.

At the policy level, international frameworks such as CEDAW (United Nations, 1979) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., SDG 4.7) position gender equality as a central component of education and global citizenship (UN, 2015). This reflects a growing recognition that gender is fundamental to how social and cultural participation is structured. However, the implementation of these commitments remains inconsistent. Despite policy-level recognition, persistent gender inequalities continue to exist across educational contexts, particularly where local cultural norms intersect with globalised educational standards (UNESCO, 2009). This gap highlights a disconnect between policy discourse and everyday pedagogical practice, where the hidden curriculum often continues to reproduce traditional gender hierarchies.

Furthermore, sociological and feminist research conceptualises gender not as an individual attribute but as a social structure that produces and legitimises social hierarchies (Delphy, 1993/2016; Lorber, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gendered socialisation processes, which take place through labelling, learning and internalisation, shape what is perceived as appropriate, desirable, acceptable, or possible for different genders (Richardson, 2021).

Poststructural perspectives extend this understanding by conceptualising gender not as something one has, but as something one does. Butler’s theory of performativity ([1990] 2006) frames gender as an ongoing accomplishment produced through repeated social practices, rather than a stable identity rooted in biology, challenging binary and essentialist understandings of gender. This perspective is further enriched by intersectional ap-

proaches, which stress that gender does not operate alone, but intersects with race, class, sexuality, and other social divisions, producing layered and unequal experiences (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Hooks, [1981] 2015).

In educational contexts, this intersectional perspective is particularly relevant. Bešić (2020) further demonstrates that educational systems often address only singular dimensions of identity, overlooking how gender intersects with race, class, and other social categories. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power, she highlights how institutional practices reproduce layered inequalities by privileging certain forms of cultural capital over others. In EFL materials, this suggests that gender bias is often compounded by representations of race, ethnicity, and class, reinforcing broader socio-cultural hierarchies. Intercultural communication can thus be understood as the interaction of multiple, intersecting discourse systems, including gender, profession, and social positioning, through which identities are dynamically constructed and negotiated in context (Kramsch & Hua, 2016).

Importantly, gender is not only socially produced but also cognitively internalised. Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory explains how individuals develop mental frameworks that organise information according to culturally dominant notions of femininity and masculinity. These schemas influence perceptions, memory, and evaluation, shaping how people interpret social roles, leadership, competence, and behaviour. In educational contexts, repeated exposure to stereotypical gender representation can reinforce these schemas, while more diverse portrayals can disrupt them (Dunham et al., 2015; Fernández et al., 2014).

Gender bias, in the context of this study, refers to the ways in which educational materials and pedagogical practices construct, normalise and reproduce gendered roles, identities, and relations. These biases shape learners' perceptions of what is appropriate, desirable, or possible for different genders, influencing participation, authority, and legitimacy in intercultural interactions. Importantly, gender bias operates not only through explicit stereotyping but also through subtle and repeated discursive, cognitive, and institutional processes.

Taken together, these perspectives highlight that gender is dynamic, relational, and deeply embedded in cultural meaning making. It is enacted in everyday interaction, sustained through social institutions, and reproduced through representational practices. Education plays a significant role in this process, as learning materials both reflect and shape dominant understandings of gender. Scholars such as Apple (1992) and Blumberg (2008) have argued that textbooks are not neutral pedagogical tools but are ideological in nature and can reinforce or challenge cultural norms, including gendered ones, through what they include, marginalise, or silence.

Understanding gender as a culturally embedded system of meaning is therefore crucial for intercultural education. Unlike nationality or ethnicity, gender operates across all cultural contexts and is continuously enacted in everyday interaction. Gender shapes not only what learners know about a culture, but also the attitudes they develop, the skills they employ, and the forms of critical awareness they are able to exercise.

Building on this understanding of gender as a culturally embedded and cognitively mediated system of meaning, the following section turns to textbooks as key sites where intellectual and gendered meanings are produced, circulated, and normalised.

Textbooks as Cultural and Ideological Artifacts

To understand how gendered meanings are produced and sustained in educational materials, it is necessary to examine the ideological role of textbooks themselves. Textbooks are not neutral repositories of information, they are embedded in the social, political, and economic networks that shape what counts as legitimate knowledge (Apple, 1992). Through processes of selection, omission, and emphasis, they can naturalise dominant ideological assumptions about culture, identity, and social roles. In the context of gender, this often occurs through what Apple refers to as cultural incorporation, where selective and symbolic representations of wo-

men, such as occasional images of professional or empowered female figures, are included to signal progressiveness while leaving underlying gender hierarchies intact.

Drawing on Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model (as highlighted in Figure 3), classrooms function as sites of interpretation where teachers and learners engage in dominated (accepting the text largely at face value), negotiated (questioning some parts while accepting others), or oppositional readings (actively challenging dominant perspectives). While this interpretive flexibility allows for resistance, it does not negate the structural power of repeated representations. When gendered patterns occur consistently across texts, units, and visual imagery, they can establish normative frameworks that shape how gender is understood as part of everyday social reality.

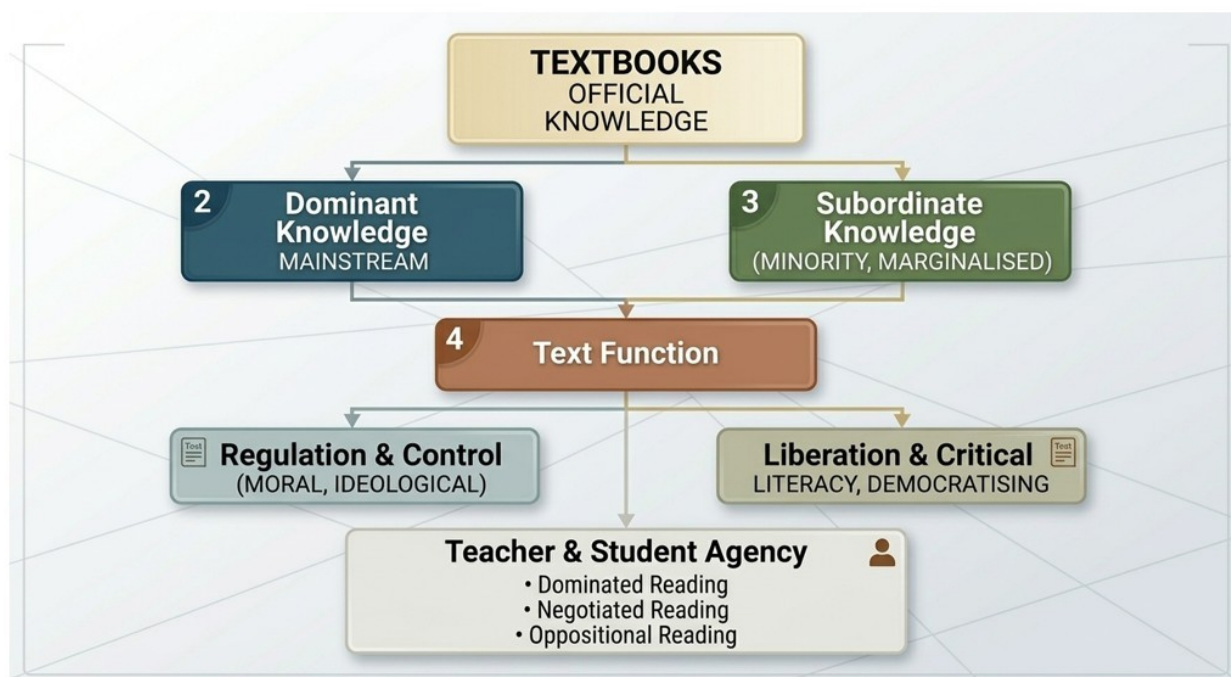


Figure 3. Types of Responses to Textbooks (Hall, 1980)

Within EFL education, this dynamic is particularly significant. English operates as a form of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Gray, 2010), granting access to symbolic, social, and economic resources. Consequently, EFL textbooks do more than teach language; for many learners, they constitute an initial encounter with the outside world, introducing English not only as a language but also as a carrier of cultural meanings and social values. Traditionally, such textbooks have been grounded primarily in Anglo-American cultural contexts, reflecting British or U.S. publishing norms. More recently, under the influence of IC frameworks, they increasingly attempt to incorporate cultural diversity and promote intercultural communication through the inclusion of characters from diverse backgrounds.

However, despite these developments, Western perspectives often remain dominant and the dynamics of textbook production shape what forms of cultural, and gendered knowledge are legitimized across different national contexts (Baker, 2015; Gray, 2010). When EFL materials privilege certain forms of masculinity and femininity, often rooted in cultural and social norms, they implicitly regulate access to this symbolic capital, positioning certain identities as more legitimate participants in intercultural communication than others.

Moreover, gendered representations in textbooks regulate access to symbolic capital by privileging certain forms of masculinity and femininity, implicitly positioning some identities as more legitimate participants in intercultural communication. These processes operate largely through the hidden curriculum (Stromquist et al., 1998), the unspoken lessons about power, normality, and social values embedded in educational materials and institutions. Given that textbooks can account for up to 70-95% of classroom time (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1992; Sadker & Zittleman, 2007), their ideological influence is cumulative. As Blumberg (2008) notes, Gender Bias in Textbooks (GBIT) is often “hidden in plain sight”, it mirrors socially familiar gender norms so closely that it becomes difficult to recognise as bias at all. Empirical studies across diverse national contexts consistently demonstrates that such patterns are not culturally isolated but structurally recurrent. Across EFL textbooks, males tend to dominate in frequency of appearance, range of occupational roles, and discursive prominence, while females are more often associated with domesticity, emotionality, or supportive roles (e.g., Aguilar, 2021; Benaissa, 2024; Bouziad, 2022; Esteves, 2018; Fatmawati et al., 2022; Hussain et al., 2023; Lee, 2014, 2018; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020; Musty, 2018; Sulaimani, 2017).

From this perspective, EFL textbooks can be understood as institutionalised sites of discourse in which cultural meanings are not merely represented but actively produced and normalised. If culture is conceptualised as a process of meaning-making (see section 1 & 2 of background above) enacted through language, then textbooks function as key mediating artefacts through which learners encounter and interpret socially situated identities and relation. Language teaching must therefore attend not only to the linguistic form but also to the symbolic and ideological dimensions embedded within discourse (Kramsch & Hua, 2016). In this sense, representations of gender in EFL textbooks participate in the construction and legitimisation of particular configurations of power, influencing learners’ interpretive framework, positioning them within specific sociocultural hierarchies.

These representational asymmetries have important psychological consequences. Drawing on Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy, and L2 Motivational Self System (Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013), gendered representations can shape learners’ beliefs about who can legitimately envision themselves as confident, competent users of English. When learners are not exposed to diverse and empowered representations of their own gender, their imagined future selves, and consequently their motivation and engagement, may be constrained.

Despite the growing emphasis on IC in language education (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), many textbooks continue to approach culture through folkloristic or tokenistic representations, focusing on surface level practices while avoiding deeper engagement with social inequality and power relations (López-Rocha, 2016). Gender is frequently treated, if at all, as an isolated topic rather than as a constitutive dimension of cultural meaning. This creates a conceptual gap: learners may be encouraged to demonstrate openness and respect toward cultural difference without being equipped to critically engage with the gendered structures that shape interaction, identity, and communication across contexts.

Furthermore, drawing on Kramsch’s (2011) notion of symbolic competence as the ability to interpret and negotiate meanings across cultural and ideological systems, EFL textbooks can be understood as symbolic spaces where culture, language, and gender intersect. Through discourse and imagery, they position learners within narratives of identity, belonging, and social participation. When representations remain constrained, learners may internalise narrow understandings of both gender and culture. Conversely, more inclusive and diverse portrayals can foster empathy, curiosity, and intercultural openness (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006).

Taken together, these observations illustrate that gender is a structural dimension of IC. This sets the stage for the reconceptualisation of IC through GIC lends, which is explored in the discussion.

Positioning of the Study and Theoretical Contribution

This article provides a theoretical reconceptualisation of IC by proposing GIC as a necessary integrative lens. The present paper is strictly conceptual in focus. Its primary contribution lies in reframing IC by positioning gender as a core cultural dimension embedded within its fundamental components, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness, rather than as an external or supplementary variable.

Building on existing IC frameworks, GIC extends the literature by explicitly foregrounding gender, highlighting how it shapes identity, interaction, and power dynamics in educational and intercultural contexts. In doing so, Deardorff's (2006) Pyramid model is used as a primary reference point due to its integrative structure and its widespread application in educational contexts; in particular, its organisation of IC into attitudes, knowledge, skills, and developmental outcomes (internal & external). While different models conceptualise IC through slightly different dimensions, this article adopts a synthesised view in which attitudes, knowledge, skills and critical awareness are treated as core components. In applying Deardorff's framework, critical awareness is understood as embedded within and developed through its internal and external outcomes.

Grounded in a critical constructivist paradigm, the study combines the meaning-making focus of constructivism with a critical emphasis on uncovering power relations and ideological structures in education (Freire, 1970; Taylor & Medina, 2011). From this perspective, IC cannot be fully realised without addressing the ways in which gender operates as a fundamental dimension of culture that is constantly negotiated in discourse.

To support this conceptual argument, the discussion draws illustrative examples from EFL educational contexts. These references serve to highlight how gendered representations manifest in practice; the article does not, however, present empirical data from specific national settings. Rather, it draws on published research across diverse socio-cultural contexts to demonstrate that gendered patterns in EFL textbooks are structurally recurrent rather than culturally isolated. In doing so, the paper fills a critical gap in existing intercultural models, arguing that the negotiation of gendered identities is central to the interculturality (Zhu, 2014) that learners encounter both inside and outside the EFL classroom.

Discussion: Toward Gendered Intercultural Competence

The previous sections have established three interconnected arguments: that IC models tend to conceptualize culture primarily through nationality and ethnicity, leaving gender under-theorised (Section 1); that gender functions as a culturally embedded system of meaning that shapes identity, power, and interaction (Section 2); and that EFL textbooks, as ideological artefacts, actively produce and normalise gendered meaning through the hidden curriculum (Section 3). Building on these foundations, this discussion articulates what GIC adds as a conceptual intervention and explores its implications.

GIC is proposed not as an additional component, but as an integrative lens through which existing models can be fully theorised and critically applied. This reconceptualisation positions gender as central to intercultural meaning-making, bridging intercultural studies and gender studies, which are often treated separately in EFL research. Reframing IC in this way highlights that intercultural communication is fundamentally shaped by power, ideology, and socially constructed identities. Drawing on Zhu Hua (2014), GIC foregrounds gender both as a relatively stable "master identity" and as a dynamic, negotiable aspect of intercultural interaction. It also draws attention to how gendered representations in EFL textbooks function as part of dominant discourses, shaping the cultural and identity markers available to learners. Through critical engagement with

these representations, learners develop the skills to question, contest, and negotiate gendered norms, reinforcing the centrality of gender awareness to IC.

This perspective aligns with intersectional approaches, recognising that gender intersects with other dimensions of identity, including ethnicity, class, and social positioning. The relative absence of gender within IC frameworks therefore limits learners' ability to critically engage with difference. While learners may be encouraged to demonstrate openness or respect toward cultural others, they may remain unaware of how participation, authority, and legitimacy are structured through gender. Intercultural competence, therefore, cannot be fully realised without attention to these dynamics.

The value of this reconceptualisation (as illustrated in Figure 4 below) becomes particularly evident when applied to established models such as Deardorff's (2006) pyramid-oriented framework. A gendered re-reading does not replace this framework but extends it by making its implicit dimensions explicit.

Within this integral view, *attitudes* involve not only openness towards cultural difference in a general sense, but also a specific willingness to engage with diverse expressions of femininity and masculinity and to question naturalised gender norms. *Knowledge* is expanded to include an awareness of how gender roles, expectations, and relations are culturally constructed and vary across societies, shaped by historical, institutional, religious, and social factors. In the pedagogical context of textbooks, this also entails recognising how textual and visual representations actively construct these meanings.

Similarly, the *skills* component is deepened to include learners' ability to interpret and critically evaluate gendered representations, identify implicit bias, and mediate between differing perspectives. *Internal outcomes* reflect deeper shifts in worldview, such as empathy, flexibility, and an ethnorelative understanding of gender. *External outcomes*, in turn, involve observable behavior, including respectful communication across genders and cultures, and the capacity to adopt negotiated or oppositional readings of gendered discourse (Hall, 1980).

This suggests that a GIC-competent learner does not engage with gender bias solely as internal cognitive exercise, but develops the communicative agency to negotiate it in interaction. In this sense, GIC positions the learner as an active participant rather than a passive recipient of cultural norms, translating internal critical awareness into discursive intervention in both the classroom and in real-world global communication.

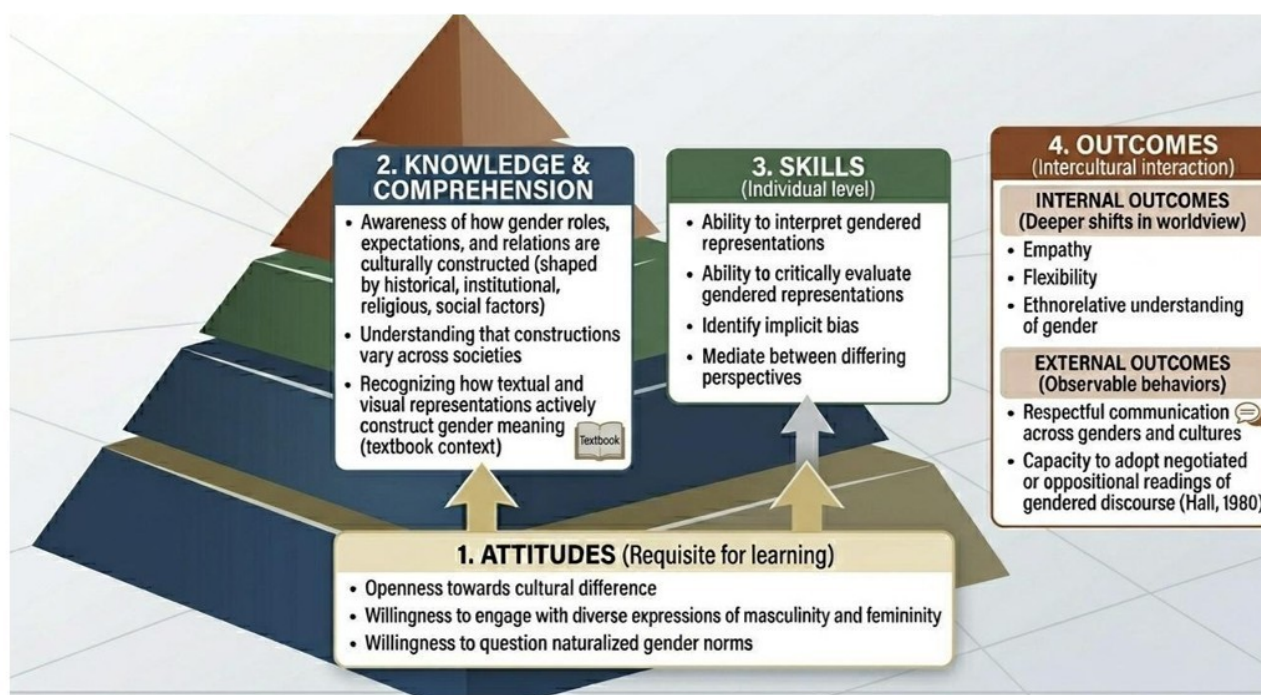


Figure 4. A Gendered Re-reading of Deardorff's (2006) Pyramid Model

GIC reframes how we understand the role of EFL textbooks. As established in Section 3, textbooks do not merely reflect cultural realities but actively participate in the construction and normalisation of meaning. Within a GIC framework, this means that textbook dialogues consistently portraying women in caregiving roles and men in positions of authority are not simply reflections of social patterns but active reinforcements of gendered expectations about participation and legitimacy in communication. Learners equipped with GIC can critically examine such representations, question their underlying assumptions, and explore alternative interpretations, thereby developing greater agency in negotiating gendered meanings in intercultural contexts.

The persistence of gendered patterns across diverse national and cultural contexts, as documented in research spanning European, Asian, African, and Middle Eastern EFL settings, suggests that such representations are not solely culturally specific, but are also shaped by globalised EFL publishing practices (Baker, 2015; Gray, 2010). Addressing this issue therefore requires moving beyond increased visibility toward critically engaging with how gendered identities are discursively constructed within intercultural narratives.

GIC has significant implications for pedagogy. While Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model highlights the potential for negotiated and oppositional readings, the cumulative effect of repeated gender representations means that critical engagement cannot be left to interpretation alone. Teachers play a central role as mediators of meaning, and GIC requires that they are equipped to address gender explicitly as part of intercultural learning. For example, learners might analyse a unit on "Success" that exclusively links leadership to masculine archetypes while attributing female figures to domestic or supportive roles. Rather than accepting these as neutral career profiles, the learner can challenge the text by proposing oppositional readings that detach leadership from gendered expectations. This, in turn, necessitates a reorientation of teacher education.

At the level of teacher education, existing research highlights inconsistencies in the integration of global and intercultural competencies, pointing to a gap between policy discourse and pedagogical practice (Saenghong et al., 2024). Intercultural pedagogy, thus, must shift from transmitting cultural knowledge to emphasising reflexivity, critical awareness, and engagement with the ideological dimensions of discourse (Deardorff,

2006; Sercu, 2004; Zhu, 2014). This shift is essential for developing the professional reflexivity necessary to recognise when textbooks function as symbolic spaces that can marginalise certain identities (Kramersch, 2011).

From a classroom perspective, this shift can be operationalised through tasks that explicitly engage learners with gendered meaning-making. For example, learners may be asked to analyse textbook dialogues or images to identify how gender roles are constructed and to consider alternative interpretations. Similarly, classroom discussion can explore how communicative practices are shaped by gendered expectations across cultures, encouraging learners to reflect on how authority, agency, and participation are distributed in interaction. Such activities move beyond comprehension toward critical engagement, supporting the development of learners' interpretive and reflexive capacities.

Central to this discussion is the recognition that both teachers and learners bring internalised cognitive schemas into the classroom. As explained by Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981), these frameworks shape how individuals perceive and interpret gendered meanings, often operating implicitly. For learners, exposure to diverse and inclusive representations can expand the range of identities they are able to imagine for themselves as users of English. Conversely, limited or stereotypical portrayals may constrain motivation, self-efficacy, and the development of possible L2 selves (Bandura, 1997; Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013). Embedding gender within intercultural competence enhances not only critical awareness, but also learner agency and engagement.

This reconceptualisation also has implications for European frameworks of intercultural and democratic education, particularly those developed by the Council of Europe. While the RFCDC emphasises values such as respect, openness, and equality, gender is not explicitly theorised within these competences. From a GIC perspective, this absence limits the framework's capacity to address how power and inequality are enacted in everyday communication. This aligns with the RFCDC's goal of fostering 'intercultural dialogue,' as such dialogue cannot be truly equitable if participants are constrained by unexamined gendered power structures. Integrating gender as a lens would strengthen its critical dimension, enabling learners to engage more fully with how identities, including gender, shape participation, voice, and legitimacy in democratic and intercultural contexts.

The integration of gender into intercultural competence also raises important questions for assessment. As Byram (2019) argues, the evaluation of IC frequently involves affective and attitudinal dimensions such as openness, tolerance, and the willingness to engage with difference, which are difficult to measure and ethically complex to assess. The absence of gender within these frameworks further limits their explanatory power, as it overlooks a key dimension through which power and inequality are experienced and negotiated. From a GIC perspective, assessment cannot be reduced to measurable outcomes alone, but must account for learners' capacity to engage critically with gendered meanings and power relations. In practice, moving away from a focus on static knowledge, this may involve the use of reflective journals, discourse analysis tasks, or scenario-based assessments. These activities allow learners to demonstrate their ability to identify, interpret, and respond to gendered meanings in intercultural communication. Such approaches allow for a more nuanced evaluation of learners' critical and reflexive development.

In this sense, GIC does not add a new dimension to IC, but reorients its existing components toward a more critically grounded understanding of culture and power.

Limitations and Future Directions

As a conceptual study, this article does not provide empirical validation, but instead establishes a theoretical foundation for further research. Its contribution lies in articulating GIC as a lens that bridges intercultural studies and gender studies, two fields that are often treated separately in EFL research. Future research can build on this framework by exploring how gender aware intercultural pedagogy is enacted in practice, how learners interpret and negotiate gendered representations, and how teachers mediate these processes in classroom interaction, particularly in relation to the design and critical use of EFL textbooks.

Conclusion

This article has argued that gender must be understood as a constitutive dimension of IC rather than a peripheral concern within EFL education. While IC frameworks have made important strides in emphasising openness, reflexivity, and critical engagement, gender has often been treated as a secondary or implicit dimension rather than as integral to intercultural meaning-making. By bringing together insights from intercultural studies, feminist theory, and textbook research, this study has addressed this conceptual gap through the proposal of GIC.

Rather than introducing a separate framework, GIC reconceptualises the core components of intercultural learning, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness, by foregrounding how gender shapes the construction, negotiation, and contestation of meaning in intercultural communication. Drawing on Deardorff's (2006) pyramid-oriented model, this article has demonstrated how each dimension of intercultural competence can be extended through a gendered lens.

The discussion has further highlighted the central role of EFL textbooks as ideological and symbolic spaces in which language, culture, and gender intersect (Baker, 2015; Blumberg, 2008; Gray, 2010). Despite policy-level commitments to equality and intercultural openness, gendered representations in textbooks often remain selective and/or stereotypical. Published research across diverse national contexts demonstrates that such patterns are structurally recurrent and reinforced through the hidden curriculum.

Pedagogically, GIC underscores the role of teachers as active mediators of meaning. Developing learners' capacity for critical engagement with gendered representations cannot be left to interpretation alone but requires pedagogical reflexivity, particularly teachers' awareness of their own internalised gender schemas and assumptions (Bem, 1981). For learners, more inclusive and reflexive representations of gender have the potential to enhance agency, motivation, and support the development of more empowered intercultural identities as users of English.

Without integrating gender as a constitutive dimension of intercultural meaning-making, IC risks remaining analytically limited and pedagogically insufficient for addressing the complexities of contemporary global communication.

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A gender fókuszú interkulturális kompetencia felé: Az angol mint idegen nyelv tankönyvekben megjelenő nemi előítéletek újragondolása interkulturális oktatási problémaként

A nem továbbra is meghatározza az egyének tapasztalatait, lehetőségeit és önképét olyan oktatási kontextusokban, amelyeket gyakran semlegesnek vagy haladónak tekintenek. Ugyanakkor az interkulturális kompetencia (IC) a globalizációra és a kulturális sokszínűségekre adott válaszként egyre nagyobb jelentőségre tesz szert, kulcsfontosságú az oktatásban. Ennek ellenére a fontosabb interkulturális kompetencia-elméletek a kultúrát elsősorban a nemzetiség és/vagy az etnikai hovatartozás szempontjából vizsgálják, így a nemi dimenzió elméleti feldolgozása nagyrészt elmarad. A tanulmány arra hívja fel a figyelmet, hogy az interkulturális kompetencia széles körben alkalmazott modelljei elméletileg hiányosak maradnak, ha a nemi dimenziót – annak ellenére, hogy az identitásképzésben, a hatalmi viszonyokban és a mindennapi interakciókban központi szerepet játszik – csak korlátozott mértékben veszik figyelembe. A tanulmány Byram (1997) és Deardorff (2006) által javasolt keretrendszerre összpontosítva kiemeli a nemi dimenzió integrálását az interkulturális kommunikáció (IC) kifejezett elemzési és pedagógiai dimenziójaként. A tanulmány fogalmi megközelítést alkalmazva azt vizsgálja, hogy a tananyagokban megjelenő nemi szerepekre vonatkozó ábrázolások hogyan közvetítik az interkulturális jelentést, melynek illusztrációjaként elsősorban az angol mint idegen nyelv (EFL) tankönyveket veszi alapul. A cikk az interkulturális kompetencia (IC) újragondolásaként a nemi dimenziót figyelembe vevő interkulturális kompetenciát (GIC) javasolja, amely a nemet a hozzáállás, a tudás, a készségek és a kritikai tudatosság alkotóelemeként értelmezi. Ezzel a cikk hozzájárul az inkluzív és társadalmi szempontokat figyelembe vevő oktatásról folyó vitához, és rávilágít arra, hogy olyan elméleti modellekre és tantervi megközelítésekre van szükség, amelyek pontosabban tükrözik a tanulók identitását a kulturálisan sokszínű osztálytermekben.

Kulcsszavak: *gender fókuszú interkulturális kompetencia, EFL tankönyvek gender előítéletei, rejtett tanterv, interkulturális oktatás*