A question of competence

1 **Warmer**

a. **Complete the sentences with some of the suggestions in the box.**

> are more or less my age   are much older than me   are much younger than me
>
> have a different background from me   have a different first language from me
>
> share my interests outside of work   work in another country
>
> work in my department   work in my field of business

I usually find it easy to work with people who _____ ,

as well as people who _____ .

I sometimes find it more difficult to work with people who _____

_____ . and people who _____

_____ .

b. **In groups, compare your completed sentences.**

2 **Key words**

Match the key words to the definitions. Underline the key words in the article, and notice how they are used in context. The question numbers are given to help you find the words.

> approach   clear up   encounters   judgemental   offence
>
> outlined   prejudices   prerequisites   readiness
>
> renowned   resilience   standing   tolerance   tremendously

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1. a particular way of thinking about or dealing with something _____ (question 1)

2. the status or reputation that someone has _____ (question 1)

3. the state of being willing to do something _____ (question 1)

4. describes when the main ideas of a piece of writing are provided without giving all the details

   _____ (question 2)

5. the attitude of someone who is willing to accept someone else's beliefs, way of life, etc. without

   criticizing them even if they disagree with them _____ (question 2)

6. someone's ability to become healthy, happy or strong again after an illness, disappointment or other

   problem _____ (question 2)

7. well-known and respected _____ (question 2)

8. meetings, especially ones that are not planned _____ (question 2)

9. the feeling of being angry, upset or insulted, caused by something that someone says or does

   _____ (question 3)

10. solve or make right again _____ (question 3)

11. things that must exist or happen before something else is possible _____ (question 4)

12. greatly; enormously _____ (question 4)

13. too willing to criticize other people's actions and behaviour and say that they are wrong

    _____ (question 5)

14. unreasonable opinions or feelings, especially the feelings of not liking a particular group of people

    _____ (question 6)

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People from different backgrounds need a language that allows them to communicate with each other. Learning a foreign language means more than just memorizing vocabulary and grammar. Intercultural competence is gaining greater importance, as two experts explain.

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1 **How would you define intercultural competence and what are its main elements?**

Camerer: Let's start with the basics: *a culture* is not the same as *a nation*. This is important and has often been misunderstood in the past. There is strong evidence, in fact, that more cultural differences exist within nations than between nations. Think of a big country like China or a small one like Switzerland. Also, in real life, I have never met "a culture", only individuals, who may or may not relate to the expectations I might have of them. Therefore, we suggest a different approach: cultures are actually any groups of people who share certain things, such as values, ways of communicaption or behaviour (the technical term is "discourse communities"). If you look

at it like this, each of us belongs to several cultures, such as age group or gender, professional and national cultures – and lots more. I, for example, communicate like other people of my age group and professional standing do, which is different from the communication styles used by the university students I teach. I am German, of course, but then I was socialized in the north and feel familiar with the ways typical of people from that part of Germany. I play several musical instruments and easily relate to people with similar interests and so on. The point is: each of us relates to several cultures, or discourse communities, and these may change as we go through life.

Now, to your question. A person who communicates effectively in intercultural situations is someone who is able to establish a trustful relationship with people from different backgrounds – in spite of possibly fundamental differences in world view, values, behaviour, etc. Basically, three things are necessary. Firstly, a certain readiness to accept ways different to your own. What you find "normal" might not be seen as such by people from different cultural and other backgrounds. You also need to be clear about your own limits – for example, how far you can go in accepting other ways. Secondly, the starting phase of relationship-building is important. If you fail, a trustful relationship may never develop. Therefore, knowing what may be expected of you in terms of politeness is important. But remember: politeness conventions are not "normal" in any sense, but are always context-specific. These two are the *knowledge* parts of intercultural competence. Thirdly, and most importantly, *communicating* in a way that makes trustful relationships possible is what really counts – and that is what needs to be trained.

2 **Is it possible to measure intercultural competence? If so, how?**

Camerer: The answer is yes. Provided you accept the approach outlined above – meaning that intercultural competence is "doing" it, rather than primarily a feature of personality, such as tolerance, mindfulness or resilience. These features are good to have in any kind of situation, and they are in no way specific to intercultural competence. Interestingly, the Occupational English

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Test (OET), a renowned international language test for healthcare workers, is presently being extended to include criteria such as "empathy". What they mean by that – and intend to test – is how you show empathy by the way you communicate using language. I have no doubt that this can be trained, observed and tested. Similar things can be said for intercultural encounters where openness, understanding, politeness and so on are required to deal with a variety of possible situations.

3 **What is the relationship between intercultural competence and language competence? Should these two elements be taught together or separately?**

Mader: Although they are sometimes seen as two different things, there is no reason for teaching a language, in particular English, and intercultural competence separately any more. We learn another language in order to communicate with other speakers of the language. These will probably not be from our own culture, so we will need intercultural competence as well as vocabulary and grammar in order to get on with them. As English has become the world's number-one language of communication, we will probably not be communicating with native speakers in English but with speakers of many different languages, who will all have their own cultural backgrounds. We need to take these into account when using English, so it is no longer a case of learning about what people do or how they think in Britain or the USA.

Of course, when we begin to learn a language, we need to learn the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, and we will make mistakes in these while we are learning. It is generally, however, not these mistakes that are important but mistakes in, for instance, politeness which prevent a trustful and long-lasting relationship. One important thing to remember is that language mistakes (in grammar, for instance) are only really important if they lead to misunderstanding, unintentional amusement or offence. The last of these is the most important and the most difficult to clear up. If you offend someone, it is extremely difficult to compensate for it. Most people are not offended if you use the wrong tense or the wrong preposition. They probably won't even notice.

4 **You've mentioned the importance of concepts such as "politeness" or "trust" for intercultural communication. To what extent are such concepts universal?**

Camerer: Communication theory has shown that relationship-building and trust-building are indeed universal prerequisites for effective communication. How this is done is largely context-dependent. For example, in business contexts, strategies of trust-building can be different from culture to culture – by which, again, we don't necessarily mean national cultures. Corporate cultures, for example, can vary even within one company. Compare the IT department with the finance department of any company you're familiar with. The way people communicate with one another may vary tremendously. So, here is my answer: politeness itself is a process of relationship-building. This is, in fact, a universal prerequisite. But politeness conventions, meaning precisely how you express respect, can vary tremendously. This connects with what I said above: nothing is "normal".

5 **What are the biggest challenges in trying to teach intercultural competence?**

Mader: We all have our own ideas of what is normal. These are generally culturally based and unconscious, so we need to become aware of them first. Also, in a very complex world, we all need stereotypes in order to make things easier to understand, but we must be very careful in using these stereotypes and especially when expressing them, as they can easily be seen as judgemental, ignorant or even racist. Not everyone who looks Asian eats with chopsticks, not everyone who looks Indian is a Hindu and not all English people drink tea all day or at five o'clock, just as not all Germans drink beer and wear lederhosen. This is one of the most difficult challenges to our own and others' thinking. It is these thought patterns that need to be overcome, so we need a combination of the elements we describe above in order to become interculturally competent.

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6 **What do you see as the biggest changes and challenges in the area of intercultural communication over the next ten years?**

Mader: At the moment, it looks as though this will depend on how long the coronavirus crisis lasts and what effects it will have on national economies and global relationships. The crisis is of a very different nature to any other we have experienced. Even the two world wars did not affect every single country. If we are all suffering from the same difficulties in our everyday lives, we can only hope that we will learn to work together more and overcome our prejudices to get through the crisis together.

Whether this will happen or not is another matter, but it does mean that it is becoming more and more important to understand what is going on outside your own national borders and culture. Indeed, global developments and the development of English as a lingua franca mean that more and more people, especially young people, will come into contact with other cultures. This should inevitably lead to more awareness of and understanding for other cultures and the ability to communicate effectively with people from these cultures. So maybe not in ten years, but in 50 years, courses in intercultural competence will no longer be necessary.

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Worksheet

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3 **Understanding the article**

Answer the questions with information from the article.

1. According to Camerer's definition of culture, what are some examples of culture?

2. What, according to Mader, are the main problems that can arise from using stereotypes to categorize people?

3. What personal qualities help people to succeed in intercultural communication?

4. According to Mader, why is cultural competence more important than language competence when it comes to business communication in English with speakers of other languages?

5. What will international business communication probably look like in the future, and how will this affect the need for intercultural training?

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4 Using the key words

a. **Complete these questions with five of the key words from task 2.**

1. Approximately how many intercultural ——————————————— have you had in the past week?

2. Have you ever had to ——————————— problems caused by a person who lacked cultural competence?

3. If someone unintentionally causes ——————————— to a person of another culture, what can they say to apologize?

4. How would you deal with a business partner or colleague who you thought was being

———————————————?

5. What ——————————— do you or would you take in order to better understand your business partners and customers?

b. **Discuss your answers to these questions.**

5 Discussion

- **Talk about a business situation you have been in with someone from another culture where you felt misunderstood, not treated with respect or dissatisfied with the outcome.**

  - Why do you think the situation happened?

  - Were you able to resolve the problem? If so, how? If not, what consequences did this have?

- **What stereotypes and prejudices have you heard about people from your country?**

  - How fair and accurate you think these are?

- **What can we do to gain the trust of people who belong to different cultural groups from us?**

- **Do you agree with Mader that in the future, we will no longer need to learn about intercultural competence?**

- **Have you ever attended an intercultural training course?**

  - Do you think companies should offer these? If so, who to?

- **What professional organizations and personal interest groups do you belong to?**

- **Do you feel that you have a closer relationship with people who belong to the same groups as you? If so, why do you think this is?**