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# Assessment of Intercultural Communicative Competence in High-Stakes Speaking Tests: The case of the Czech Republic

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** For a long time, concepts such as the intercultural communicative competence have challenged the view of culture as purely fact-based, objective content to be transmitted to students, from whom only retention is expected. Today, cultural knowledge plays virtually no role in international standardised English exams such as TOEFL or the Cambridge English Qualifications. It is unknown to which extent this is true for examinations at the national level, and the materials used to prepare students for these examinations.

**Method:** The study provides a quantitative account of exam topics in the speaking part of the final exam in Czech grammar schools. The sample consists of 206 grammar schools in the Czech Republic (58% of all such schools). The percentage of knowledge-oriented, culture-specific topics was calculated for each school. The study further analyses the content of four books used to prepare students for the exam. The sample comprises four frequently used preparatory books. The text in the chapters that deal with cultural topics is classified using Larzén's (2005) typology of culture.

**Results:** The study has demonstrated that approximately 50% of the final exam topics are focused on specific English-speaking countries, their geography, history and literature. A similar tendency, but significantly more pronounced, has been found in the preparatory materials. More than 95% of their content was heavily knowledge-oriented with no discernible difference between older and recently published materials. Virtually no evidence of a skill-based or intercultural approach to culture was found.

**Conclusion:** The study has confirmed what is often only an unfounded assumption by researchers and it has shown that the traditional factual view of culture is still immensely popular with no change in sight. Recommendations for material writers, teachers, and teacher educators are provided at the end of the study.

## KEYWORDS

culture in language education; intercultural communicative competence (ICC); culture in high-stakes assessment; standardized English exams; content knowledge in language assessment; assessment of speaking

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of culture within English language teaching (ELT) has been the subject of extensive discussion over the past two decades (Baker, 2009; Bayyurt, 2006; Byrd et al., 2011; Larzén, 2005; Murphy, 1988; Paige et al., 1999; Zotzmann, 2015). As the field has shifted from a focus on communicative competence to intercultural communicative competence (ICC), and as English has increasingly

functioned as a lingua franca (ELF), new challenges have emerged in conceptualising, eliciting, and evaluating the cultural dimension of language proficiency (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010; Scarino, 2017). While a wide array of theoretical models and pedagogical approaches to ICC have been proposed, its role in language assessment remains relatively underexplored, especially in large-scale or high-stakes testing contexts. Historically, cultural content has been embedded in



both curricula and assessment practices, although some international standardised tests have sought to reduce cultural bias (e.g., Weir, 2005). Whether similar developments have taken place in national testing systems, however, is less well understood.

This study addresses this gap by examining the representation of cultural content in high-stakes English language assessment, focusing on the Czech maturita exam as a representative example. Despite growing curricular emphasis on ICC, there is limited empirical research on how cultural knowledge is reflected in assessment tasks and preparatory materials. In particular, little is known about how far assessment practices align with curricular aims, or about the extent to which they prioritise knowledge-based, attitudinal, or behavioural dimensions of culture. To explore these questions, the study investigates (1) to what extent knowledge-oriented cultural topics are represented in the maturita speaking exam, and (2) how knowledge-oriented the preparatory materials for the exam are. The study applies Larzén’s (2005) typology as an analytical framework to examine a corpus of exam topics and commercially available textbooks. In doing so, it offers a theoretically grounded, data-driven contribution to current debates about culture and assessment in language education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Culture in Language Education

To understand how culture affects assessment, it is necessary to define what culture represents. Traditional views often describe cultures as static artifacts tied to specific regions (Canale, 2016; Murphy, 1988; Paige et al., 1999), enabling generalisations that reinforce us-them dichotomies.

Table 1  
Teachers’ Conceptions of ICC in TEFL

	Cognitive orientation	Action orientation	Affective orientation
	Quantitative view	Qualitative view	
WHAT? (Teachers’ conceptions of «culture»)	Factual knowledge	Skills	Bi-directional perspective
WHY? (Teachers’ beliefs about cultural objectives)	Providing general background information	Preparing for future intercultural encounters	Promoting tolerance and empathy
HOW? (Teachers’ classroom practice)	Pedagogy of Information Teacher in centre	Pedagogy of Preparation Teacher and pupil in centre	Pedagogy of Encounter Pupil in centre

Note. Adapted from Larzén (2005).

Yet cultures are not synonymous with superficial knowledge of language communities. As Baker (2022, p. 289) notes, “cultures are heterogeneous and cultural characterisations are contestable.” They change over time and are continuously interpreted and co-constructed. For English in particular, there is no single English-speaking culture; not even among native speakers, long viewed as custodians of the language (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2022; Seidlhofer, 2005). ELF further perspectives challenge this view, positioning native speakers as participants in global culture, not its curators.

Many newer definitions of culture seek to move beyond static models but often remain vague. Importantly, how culture is conceptualised, whether as fixed knowledge or as a dynamic communicative skill, has direct consequences for assessment. Static views lend themselves to factual testing, whereas processual approaches require more complex and authentic formats that are harder to implement, especially in high-stakes contexts.

Teachers’ Conceptions and Classroom Practices

Byram’s (1997) influential model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) identifies knowledge, skills, and attitudes as core components. Larzén (2005) links these to classroom practice, showing how each shapes goals and teacher-student roles (see Table 1). In practice, however, it is factual knowledge, especially about target cultures, that dominates (Johnson & Rinvulucrí, 2010, p. 15; Kramsch, 1995, p. 89; Scarino, 2017, p. 16; Sercu, 2002, p. 62). Although Byram (2014) and Gu & Zhao (2021) report shifts towards more complex assessment (e.g., in China, Bulgaria, Argentina), gaps exist elsewhere, likely due to insufficient teacher training or discrepancies between policy and practice (Safa & Tofighi, 2021).

Empirical studies across national contexts further illustrate that teachers' conceptualisations of culture correspond to this fact-based instructional focus. Decke-Cornill (2003), for example, found that teachers at German *Gymnasien* resisted ELF-oriented perspectives and instead focused on conveying information about specific English-speaking countries. One participant emphasized that “[w]hat they [students] expect from us, at school, is cultural knowledge. They want information about the specific countries” (p. 63). In Finland, similar attitudes led Larzén (2005) to conclude that teachers viewed culture as a static product to be transmitted. Roughly half of the participants specifically described culture explicitly in terms of “facts about the history, geography, religion and political conditions of the English-speaking countries” (p. 103). Zerková (2012) reported nearly identical views among lower-secondary teachers in the Czech Republic. Bayyurt's (2006) study added further nuance, noting that while some teachers valued local or international cultural references, others excluded culture altogether unless it clearly supported linguistic objectives.

These knowledge-oriented beliefs are also reflected in classroom practice. In the UK, Driscoll, Earl, and Cable (2013) found that cultural instruction was typically treated as an *ad hoc* supplement, with most activities focused on factual knowledge. Larzén (2005) and Zerková (2012) both observed that approximately 90% of instructional time devoted to culture was spent transmitting factual content. Safa & Tofghi (2021) compared teachers' beliefs about ICC with their implementation, and found that “the implementation of ICC in their pedagogical practices was evidently quite poor and far from their stated beliefs” (p. 170). These findings point to the widespread dominance of what has been termed the “Pedagogy of Information” – a model in which culture is presented as a body of knowledge rather than a set of communicative skills. This over-reliance on the factual approach to cultural instruction, despite the availability of alternative models, warrants an examination of the role of culture in testing and assessment, and learning materials. The following section turns to an analysis of teaching materials as another domain where cultural ideologies are embedded and transmitted.

## Textbooks as Vehicles of Cultural Ideology

The dominance of the Pedagogy of Information approach in language instruction is further supported by analyses of learning materials, which primarily focus on expanding factual knowledge about specific English-speaking countries (Lee 2009; Rodríguez & Espinar 2015), often without deeper exploration or consideration of an ELF intercultural perspective. Byrd, Cummings, Watzke, and Montes (2011) attribute this deficiency to university teacher-training programs, which, while often covering cultural content in their curricula, rarely provide training specifically focused on how to teach that content effectively. This lack of hands-on teaching preparation further widens the existing gap be-

tween research and classroom practice and may ultimately lead teachers to shy away from addressing cultural topics altogether.

Turning to the materials themselves, Canale (2016) analysed foreign language textbooks across six languages and concluded that:

a common pattern of homogenisation which – almost paradoxically – can be achieved by means of adopting politics of exclusion or inclusion of cultural diversity and heterogeneity. This homogenisation manifests itself both in verbal and non-verbal language, and also in the activities and exercises surrounding the text itself. (p. 239)

Kang-Young's (2009) analysis of EFL textbooks revealed that general culture, i.e. culture not specific to a particular country, as well as the subjective (small-c) culture, are consistently neglected. Instead, preference was given to what could be memorised (arts, history, and customs) with a strong bias towards facts about the USA. Shin, Eslami, & Chen (2011) examined seven EFL textbook series, distinguishing between knowledge-oriented and communication-oriented culture. The knowledge-oriented culture accounted for the average of 83.1%, with 58.7% and 100% as the minimum and maximum respectively. Since teachers generally display reluctance to go against the textbook (Forman, 2014), inferences about their classroom practice can, among other things, be made based on the materials they use.

These studies collectively reveal a pattern in which textbooks tend to present culture as a static body of factual knowledge, rather than as a dynamic set of communicative skills. This representation aligns closely with the Pedagogy of Information conception and serves as evidence for the limited intercultural focus in many ELT materials. Moreover, given teachers' reliance on textbooks, the predominance of static cultural content likely influences both classroom practices and the nature of culture-related assessment tasks.

## Culture in Language Assessment and ICC Testing

Compared to teaching, relatively little is known about how culture should be assessed – or whether it should be assessed at all (Scarino, 2017; Sercu, 2010). As in teaching, two core questions arise: what should be assessed and how. However, unlike teaching, where cultural content is often expected, in assessment the very inclusion of culture remains contested. Zotzmann (2015), for example, argues that intercultural learning is an embodied, value-laden, and unpredictable process that “certainly [does] not lend [itself] to assessment” (p. 186). Borghetti (2017, p. 10) echoes this, likening interculturality to values such as honesty or generosity – qualities that should be promoted but not necessarily tested.

These concerns go beyond the familiar objection that ICC is too latent to be measured (Schauer, 2020). Here, ICC is

framed not just as a complex construct but as a value, and thus fundamentally unsuited to assessment. While such positions are in the minority, they highlight key tensions. Even advocates of ICC assessment like Deardorff (2009) stress of ICC assessment like Deardorff (2009) stress that "assessment is ultimately about learning" (p. 490). This reflects a broader shift from cognitive (psychometric) to sociocultural views of assessment (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2012), prompting renewed attention to both *what* and *how* to assess.

Content recommendations often mirror ICC dimensions, and while assessing all components is desirable (Sercu, 2010), no comprehensive measure exists. As Schauer (2020) notes, holistic assessment may not even be feasible in compulsory education. This makes it likely that knowledge will be prioritized as it is the easiest to assess and historically linked to cultural instruction (Byram, 1997; Scarino, 2010, 2017). But this raises dilemmas. As Larzén (2005) and Sercu (2010) point out, choosing which cultural facts to assess is complex and depends on teacher preferences and learner needs. Given the interdependence of teaching and assessment (McNamara, 2000), cultural knowledge tied to history, geography, and literature will likely dominate. Additional factors, such as resistance to ELF benchmarks (Ke, 2018) or treating Anglo-centric norms as "international" (Jenkins & Leung, 2017, p. 114) can further strengthen this bias.

As for *how* culture is assessed, alternative approaches aim to capture more dimensions of ICC. These include reflective diaries, self-assessment portfolios, role-plays, group discussions, and other tasks that foster learning and provide insight into development (Byram, 1997; Liu, 2021; Schauer, 2020). Yet testing cultural knowledge in isolation remains problematic. First, without support from other task types, such tests are one-sided, reducing assessment to mere factual recall. Second, they suffer from a complication shared by all approaches that seek to integrate language and content – construct irrelevant variance, where "the trait being assessed...is confounded with the irrelevant requirement of having knowledge of a particular topic" (McNamara, 2000, p. 53). Llosa (2017, p. 4) clarifies that construct irrelevant variance depends on whether the focal point of assessment is content or language:

From the perspective of content assessment, language has typically been considered a source of construct-irrelevant variance – variance in scores that is not related to the construct being assessed. From the perspective of language assessment, content (also referred to as topical knowledge or background knowledge) has also been considered a potential source of construct-irrelevant variance. (p. 4)

If the primary goal of language education is to develop ICC or communicative competence, with both framed around

language use, assessment should reflect this. Yet, as Fantini (2009) observes, this alignment between goals, instruction, and assessment is often absent (p. 460). Problems with validity and reliability compound the issue (Sercu, 2004). For instance, if a course targets communication skills, assessing cultural facts may undermine content validity. Likewise, if a test rewards memorized knowledge, its construct validity is compromised. Reliability suffers too when test objectives are unclear, e.g., one version emphasizes interaction, and another factual knowledge. These concerns are especially relevant in high-stakes exams, where washback can reinforce outdated, fact-based models of cultural instruction.

## Research Gap

Despite growing theoretical interest in assessing ICC and the development of well-grounded recommendations, significant gaps remain regarding the implementation of these ideas in practice. On one hand, the relatively recent interest in assessing ICC, and, more importantly, offering theoretically grounded recommendations for doing so, is without a doubt a positive development. On the other hand, it remains unclear if and how these recommendations materialise in practice.

Research on the assessment of ICC in national speaking exams is scarce, especially regarding the status of cultural content in compulsory high-stakes speaking tests and how well exam content aligns with stated curricular goals relevant to ICC. This study addresses these gaps by empirically investigating the presence and nature of cultural content in Czech national high-stakes speaking tests and preparatory materials, and how this reflects curricular objectives. Similarly, teachers can hardly be expected to follow and act upon research findings (McIntyre, 2005; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010; Willingham & Daniel, 2021<sup>1</sup>). This study thus aims to make the first step, at least in the Czech context. Specifically, its purpose is to investigate the current state of compulsory high-stakes examinations because:

- (1) These exams strongly influence the educational content leading up to them, as teachers and institutions often align their curriculum and instruction to prepare students for the test. Examining exam content thus provides critical insights into the cultural priorities that shape classroom teaching and learning.
- (2) If the study reveals any inconsistencies or misalignments in how culture is addressed, implementing corrective changes in the exams could have a widespread impact. This would in turn benefit a large number of students who rely on these exams as a measure of their readiness and cultural competence in English.

<sup>1</sup> Willingham, D. T., & Daniel, D. B. (2021). *Making education research relevant: How researchers can give teachers more choices*. *Education Next*, 21(2), 28-33.

## METHOD

### Context of the Study

The study focuses on the secondary/high-school leaving exam in the Czech Republic called *maturitní zkouška* or *maturita*, for short. The scope has been narrowed down to grammar schools that are academically oriented (*gymnasium*) and aim to prepare their students to study at a university. This excludes a field-specific orientation of the final exam, which is often the case with other more vocation-oriented secondary schools. When taking the exam, students are 18-19 years old, and they have completed nine years of mandatory primary education and four years of grammar school. For the exam, four subjects are typically chosen by every student, with Czech language being compulsory for everyone. Presently (2024), students further have to opt for either Mathematics or a foreign language. They choose the two remaining subjects based on their interests.

Both the educational content and the educational goals of secondary education, and by extension the corresponding final exams, are regulated by the Framework Education Programme (MEYS, 2021). Much like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), this curricular document specifies what a successful student should be able to do. Apart from this, it also provides information on the content to be covered during the four years of study. While cultural content is indeed mentioned as one of many areas to be addressed, it is not part of any of the expected learning outcomes listed. Instead, the following references to ICC can, among other things, be found as the goal of the area of *language and communication*:

- (1) mastering the basic rules of interpersonal communication in a given cultural environment and respecting them;
- (2) forming a general overview of the social and historical development of human society, which aids in learning respect and tolerance for the different cultural values of various language communities<sup>2</sup>

In line with Fantini's (2009) plea for the alignment of education goals, their implementation, and assessment, it seems sensible that the overarching goals (competence acquisition) as well as the expected outcomes should also be the object of assessment.

As for the final exam itself, it is divided into the so-called *state* and *profile* part. For English (or any other foreign language), this means that the state is responsible for creating

a standardised test that every student regardless of school type is required to take. The test is set approximately at a B1 level and comprises tasks in the areas of listening, reading and use of English. This test is only graded pass or fail. The rest of the exam is currently administered by the school. The law stipulates that there has to be a writing task with an output of min. 200 words, and that the speaking part (which carries 60 % of the mark) should take max. 15 minutes. 20-30 topics are to be prepared by the school for the purposes of the speaking exam and a student chooses one of them at random. The speaking exam can be divided into more parts (monologic, dialogic, with/without visual aids etc.) as long as these are confined to the selected topic. For the *gymnasium* school type, the target level for these two parts is B2. The writing as well as the speaking sections are designed by teachers, which means that both the form and the content of the examination may differ across schools.

### Research Questions

The prevalence of a cognitive, knowledge-based approach to culture is often mentioned in various studies (see above), but mostly no reference is made to any data supporting the view that this is indeed a common practice. Very little is also known about the national assessment policies with respect to ICC despite the number of students affected. Therefore, a quantitative account of what is assessed is needed. The following research questions have been formulated:

**RQ 1:** To what extent are knowledge-oriented cultural topics represented in the speaking part of the Czech *maturita* exam?

**RQ 2:** How knowledge-oriented are the materials that help students prepare for the Czech *maturita* exam?

### Data Collection

In order to answer the first question, I examined the lists of topics for individual schools. In December 2022, I accessed the websites of 250 Czech grammar schools and succeeded in finding the lists in 206 cases. This was deemed representative enough given that there were 355 such schools in the country. Thus, approximately 58 per cent are covered with proportional representation across all regions. If the school had different streams (general, CLIL, bilingual), which also happened to differ with respect to the exam topics, the list for the general stream was taken. I tallied the topics for each school and determined how many of them were focused on specific cultural topics, which are commonly associated with the necessity to memorise facts. These topics included for example *the UK, the USA, Commonwealth countries, British lit-*

<sup>2</sup> MEYS - The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports [Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy České republiky]. (2021). Framework education programme for secondary general education (grammar schools) [Rámcový vzdělávací program pro gymnázia]. Retrieved from edu.cz: <https://www.edu.cz/rvp-ramcove-vzdelavaci-programy/ramcove-vzdelavaci-programy-pro-gymnazia-rvp-g/>

erature, Czech Republic, Prague etc. To control for the variety in the number of topics, the percentage of these topics was counted for each school. Some schools had made the corresponding materials publicly available, which I used to confirm that the content was indeed knowledge-oriented.

Although the first research question already provides insights into the exam focus, I also decided to analyse the materials marketed as preparatory for the Czech *maturita* exam. Not only are these commonly used by and recommended to students, but they are also often utilised as supplementary materials in schools. Unlike traditional textbooks, these materials are structured specifically around commonly tested topics, prioritising certain language aspects (mainly vocabulary) while neglecting others (such as grammar).

Several criteria were used to guide the selection of the *maturita* preparation books. First, only materials explicitly designed and marketed as dedicated exam-preparation tools were included. While there are other books with the word *maturita* in the title, many of these function primarily as comprehensive coursebooks with only a subset of exercises linked to the exam. Such titles were excluded, since their primary aim is general language instruction rather than systematic exam preparation. By contrast, the selected books (published in 2005, 2008, 2014, and 2020) were explicitly designed as exam-focused materials, and their distribution across different publication years makes it possible to observe developments in how *maturita* preparation has been approached over time. Second, the chosen titles represent the main publishers active on the Czech market, ensuring coverage of the principal options available to teachers and learners. Third, they are regularly recommended on the official websites of surveyed schools, appear in school libraries, and are cited in lists of required or supplementary reading, which demonstrates their adoption in practice. Finally, the limited number of specialized publications means that the list presented here covers the key materials available at the time of data collection and can thus be regarded as representative. A limitation of this selection is that newer materials published after the period of data collection may not yet have been widely adopted and therefore are not included. The following four books were included:

- Book 1: Mrákota, J. (2005). *Maturitní otázky z angličtiny* [*Maturita questions for English*]. Jiří Mrákota – vydavatelství jazykové literatury.
- Book 2: Smith-Dluhá, G. (2008). *Angličtina - otázky a odpovědi nejen k maturitě* [*English – question and answers not just for maturita*]. Infoa.
- Book 3: El-Hmoudová, D. (2014). *Angličtina - edice Maturita* [*English – the maturita edition*]. Vyuka.cz.
- Book 4: Baláková, L., Baron, U., Hamzová, A., Knápek, J., Pešková, D. (2020) *Maturita z anglického jazyka – Maturitní témata* [*Maturita in the English language – maturita topics*]. Didaktis.

## Analytical Framework and Procedures

I searched the publications for cultural topics that appeared in at least three of them. Five such topics were identified: the United States of America, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, (other) English-speaking countries, and literature (of the English-speaking countries). These topics were chosen because they directly reference specific cultural contexts, making it easier to reliably identify cultural content – even if it is implicit. Broader categories, such as education or technology could indeed involve cultural aspects, but these vary greatly in emphasis and would require subjective interpretation to confirm their cultural relevance. By focusing on topics tied to distinct cultural settings, this approach ensures consistency in identifying culturally relevant material. Using Larzén's (2005) typology outlined above, I aimed to establish how much of the text on the corresponding pages is related to factual knowledge (Pedagogy of Information), skills (Pedagogy of Preparation), and the bi-directional perspective (Pedagogy of Encounter). After initial probing, looking for the last two categories seemed a moot point, as no such instances were present. This conclusion was confirmed by two colleagues specialising in applied linguistics and ELT methodology.

With Pedagogy of Information being the dominant conception in the materials, I instead turned my attention to the nature of factual knowledge; Larzén (2005) offers four sub-categories:

- (1) realia
- (2) cultural products
- (3) traditions and ways of life
- (4) modes of thought

*Realia* refers to “facts about the history, geography, religion and political conditions of the English-speaking countries” (p. 103). The second category is represented by art, literature, film and music associated with the English-speaking world. Examples of the third category include, for example Christmas, Easter, and Halloween but also practices related to family life, work life, and leisure. Lastly, modes of thought “can be described in terms of the values, norms and beliefs underlying the way people live and act” (p. 105). The instances in these categories were counted for each book and topic. The counting proved challenging because there was rarely a one-to-one correspondence between a sentence and an idea. As I did not want to artificially inflate the numbers, I approached the counting relatively conservatively and decided to err on the side of caution; as shown in c) below, longer lists of items were counted as only two pieces of information. A couple of examples:

- (a) Canterbury: The spiritual centre of the Church of England, the Cathedral was built between 1000s and the early 1500s. It was the destination of travellers in *The Canterbury tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer.

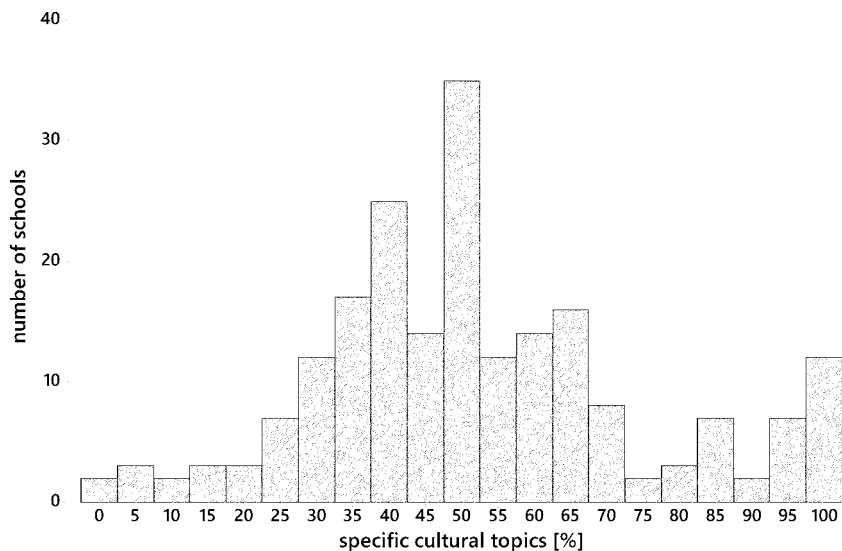
- i. The spiritual centre of the Church of England was the Cathedral.
  - ii. The Cathedral was built between 1000s and the early 1500s
  - iii. It was the destination of travellers in *The Canterbury tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer.
- (3 pieces of information)
- (b) Legislature: Congress consists of two houses: the 100-member Senate, elected for a term of 6 years; the 435-member House of Representatives, elected for a term of 2 years.
- i. Congress consists of two houses.
  - ii. The Senate has 100 members.
  - iii. Senators are elected for a term of 6 years.
  - iv. The House of Representatives has 435 members.
  - v. Th Members of the House of Representatives are elected for a term of 2 years.
- (3 pieces of information)
- (c) Important products: Agriculture – wool, beef, cattle horse breeding, potatoes, barley, sugar beet, wheat, oats.
- i. [a list of words or short phrases]
- (2 pieces of information)

Reliability and Validation

In order to enhance the reliability of the categorisation process, the coding scheme was first piloted on a small sam-

Figure 1

Proportion of Cultural Topics in the Final Exam in Czech Grammar Schools (n=206)



ple of texts and refined through discussion. A coding guide was created to ensure consistent application of Larzén’s categories across the full dataset. To further validate the approach, approximately 20 % of the textbook content was independently coded by one of the two colleagues. Coding decisions were then compared, and differences in interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached. While formal intercoder reliability statistics were not calculated, this process of double coding and negotiation helped to reduce subjectivity and clarify ambiguous cases. Although some discrepancies emerged, these were mostly limited to the precise quantification of realia. For example, one coder counted 85 instances, while the other counted 93, for the USA topic in Book 1. In a few cases, the colleague also expressed scepticism about whether examples from the other three subcategories were present at all.

Even though the quantitative approach taken here allows for a systematic scrutiny of the cultural content in exam topics and preparatory materials, it cannot capture how teachers interpret or implement the materials in practice. The study as such does not endeavour to account for classroom dynamics or teacher perspectives, which could add more context and depth. These aspects are further discussed in Section 5.5.

RESULTS

Cultural Topics Account for About Half of the Final Exam

Figure 1 below shows the relative proportion of cultural topics in the final exam across Czech grammar schools.



The mean proportion of cultural topics was 52.33% (SD = 22.45), with a median of 50%. This indicates that, on average, approximately half of the final speaking exam topics are cultural in nature. However, substantial variation was observed between schools. Some institutions included only culture-focused topics such as *The Politics of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, American Literature after Romanticism, US Political System, or Early History of the USA*. In contrast, other schools included few or no explicitly cultural topics in their final exams, or integrated cultural content more implicitly within broader themes.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to examine whether the proportion of cultural content in final exams differed across the 14 Czech regions. The test indicated no significant differences ( $H = 13.06$ ,  $df = 13$ ,  $p = 0.443$ ; adjusted for ties:  $H = 13.10$ ,  $p = 0.440$ ), suggesting that regional variation in exam content is negligible. Although the median proportions varied slightly between regions (from 35% to 59%), these differences were not statistically significant.

Cultural Content in Preparatory Materials Is Predominantly Factual and Realia-Based

Table 2 below presents the frequency of cultural content in four commonly used preparatory books, categorised by topic.

In this table, the “realia” category includes factual content related to history, politics, geography, and culture. The remaining categories of cultural products, traditions and ways of life, and modes of thought are grouped under “other” due to their low frequency. For example, cultural content related to literature was typically presented in a factual or

historical style. The following excerpt from Book 3 is a case in point:

Much American writing in the 1600s and 1700s focused on religious issues linked to the challenges of such life. During the 1700s some writers turned to political issues. Essays like Thomas Paine’s pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776) encouraged Americans to seek independence from Britain. (Book 3)

This pattern of presentation was consistent across the materials surveyed.

DISCUSSION

The results paint a clear picture: on average, approximately half of the final exam topics in Czech grammar schools explicitly test cultural content. This cultural component, though nominally aligned with communicative goals, is overwhelmingly factual in nature. The preparatory materials reinforce this pattern, focusing heavily on realia such as political systems, historical events, and biographical details about authors. Literature, which might be expected to offer more affective cultural engagement, is presented almost entirely through factual summaries.

The findings also invite reflection on the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. Larzén’s (2005) typology was originally developed to categorise teachers’ conceptions of ICC. While the typology offers valuable conceptual clarity regarding different pedagogical orientations (cognitive, action, and affective), it was not designed with direct categorisation of assessment artefacts in mind. It follows from this that applying the model to exam tasks and textbooks involved inference. Furthermore, in practice, elements of different orientations may often appear in blended forms, even

Table 2  
Amount of Information about Culture in Preparatory Materials for the Final Exam

	USA	UK	CR	English-speaking countries	Literature
Book 1					
realia	93	109	134	91	116
other	0	0	0	1	0
Book 2					
realia	190	265	110	166	160
other	0	0	0	0	0
Book 3					
realia	163	104	192	130	80
other	4	7	11	11	4
Book 4					
realia	150	152	178	111	-
other	3	8	6	0	-



within individual tasks, although this was rarely the case in the data. Acknowledging this hybridity offers a potential refinement of the typology as it underscores the need to move beyond ideal-type distinctions and at the same time consider how educators' conceptions may co-exist, interact, and shape real-world educational materials. Overall, Larzén's typology provides a useful lens for analysis. Its use here simultaneously points to the need for caution when applying belief-oriented models to real-life educational materials, especially when these may further be shaped by institutional pressures and constraints, which the individual-driven model can account for only to a limited extent.

The findings overall corroborate Scarino's (2017) observation that culture in language teaching is still often treated as a repository of specific and factual knowledge. They also extend Zerková's (2012) work by showing that such tendencies persist well beyond lower secondary education and are now structurally embedded at multiple levels of the Czech school system. Decke-Cornill's (2003) account of similar patterns in other countries adds further weight to the claim that this is not merely a local anomaly but part of a broader issue in how language education conceives of and assesses culture.

The internal variation between schools is notable. Some institutions test almost exclusively knowledge-based content (e.g., "US political system," "American literature after Romanticism"), while others appear to downplay or even avoid such tasks altogether. This inconsistency suggests that teacher beliefs and institutional culture may play a larger role than formal curricula, a possibility that deserves further inquiry.

## Implications

It is remarkable – and troubling at the same time – that such practices persist in high-stakes exit examinations, where one would expect adherence to research-based standards in assessment and ICC. Despite Scarino's (2017) argument that "teachers' assessment practices are heavily constrained by the requirements of the education systems in which they work" (p. 27), the Ministry's curricular documents do in fact allow for considerable teacher autonomy, offering guidelines rather than prescriptive rules. Yet this flexibility appears underutilised. Rather than capitalise on this space for pedagogical innovation, many teachers continue to rely on traditional, information-heavy approaches, perhaps out of inertia, or perhaps due to deeper institutional pressures.

The implications are serious. A narrow interpretation of culture undermines not just the spirit of ICC but – perhaps more importantly – the validity, reliability, and authenticity of the final exam itself. If (intercultural) communicative competence is to be meaningfully assessed, then culture must be approached not as inert content but as something to be interpreted, negotiated, and situated in real-world interaction.

## Limitations

The limitations of the study stem mainly from the sampling. First, the study focuses exclusively on the situation in the Czech Republic and, although the discovered tendencies may be similar to those in other countries, the results cannot be generalised. Second, the study was narrowed down to gymnasium-type schools (secondary/further education), which are academically oriented and do not offer vocational specialisations. For other schools, the level and format of the final exam differ; specifically, the exam topics must reflect the particular focus of the programme (business, gastronomy, construction, etc.).

Equally important is the fact that this study relies solely on document analysis, specifically exam topics and preparatory materials. While this method is effective for identifying what is being assessed and how, it does not provide insight into why teachers and schools design their assessment in these ways. The absence of qualitative data, such as teacher interviews or classroom observations, limits the interpretative depth of the findings and makes it difficult to fully understand the beliefs, constraints, or institutional pressures that may influence assessment practices. To address this, a qualitative follow-up study would be beneficial. Investigating teachers' motivations and conceptions of culture and assessment through interviews, focus groups, or classroom-based research could enrich the present findings and provide a stronger foundation for possible interventions. By understanding the rationale behind current practices, the chances of meaningful change and alignment with ICC-informed assessment principles could increase.

## CONCLUSION

With intercultural communicative competence (ICC) becoming increasingly central in English language teaching (ELT), there is a need to consider how its development is reflected in assessment practices. This study analysed the final exam topics of 206 Czech grammar schools, alongside the cultural content found in preparatory materials. The findings confirm what many earlier studies have suggested anecdotally: the pedagogical focus on factual knowledge remains dominant. Despite the rhetoric of communicative and intercultural aims in curricular documents, there is still approximately a 50:50 chance that the most consequential component of the final exam – its speaking part – will assess students' factual knowledge about an English-speaking country, rather than their ability to communicate meaningfully across cultures.

This tendency is mirrored in the preparatory materials. Four widely used books were analysed, and their content was found to rely almost exclusively on factual, country-specific knowledge. Literature, for instance, was largely presented through historical summaries and biographical detail rather than through interpretive engagement. These findings

suggest that the testing of culture rests on a narrow and static conception of knowledge, effectively leaving ICC out of assessment. This has two significant consequences for assessment quality. First, it undermines construct validity: if the intended construct is intercultural communicative competence, then tests that reward factual recall misrepresent what they purport to assess. Second, it creates problematic washback effects. When high-stakes exams emphasise memorisation, teachers and learners are likely to prioritise factual knowledge over communicative and intercultural skills in the classroom, regardless of curricular intentions.

The results carry the following implications for different stakeholders in the educational landscape: Teachers should critically reflect on the content and methods they use for assessment. In high-stakes tests, they should avoid rote memorisation of cultural knowledge and instead aim to assess students' communicative abilities in diverse contexts.

Textbook authors and material designers are in a position to re-introduce ICC into preparatory materials. Moving beyond encyclopaedic content, they can develop resources that foster intercultural awareness, empathy, and negotiation skills through open-ended questions, critical comparisons, and situated dialogues.

Policy-makers and national exam designers must ensure coherence between curricular documents and actual assessment.

Teacher educators play a crucial role in shaping future teachers' conceptualisations of culture and assessment. They should prioritise critical engagement with culture and equip their students with the skills to assess ICC meaningfully.

While this study focuses on the Czech Republic, the challenges identified extend to other European countries, as documented in prior research from Germany, Finland, Spain, for instance. What sets this study apart is its large-scale empirical evidence base, demonstrating the dominance of factual cultural knowledge in both high-stakes testing and preparatory materials. The Czech case thus serves as both a cautionary example and a point of reflection for other systems that strive to genuinely embed ICC.

Future research should focus on understanding the interplay of factors that influence the assessment of intercultural communicative competence. As these are likely to differ across countries, data from other educational contexts and comparative studies across different countries could highlight shared obstacles and/or provide examples effective practices. Such work is essential to guide the development of policy, teacher education, and instructional materials that support ICC in language assessment, while upholding construct validity and reducing harmful washback.

## DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None declared.

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