

# **Lost in Translation? Not Anymore: Three Hybrid Games for Intercultural Communication in the EFL Classroom**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has moved to the center of English language education, extending the learning goal beyond grammatical accuracy toward the ability to interact effectively across cultural boundaries (Byram, 1997). In Indonesian higher education, this shift carries weight: students increasingly encounter international collaborators, ASEAN partners, and globally connected workplaces where navigating cultural difference is as consequential as controlling vocabulary or syntax. Yet despite widespread recognition of ICC's importance, implementation continues to fall short—cultural content is either absent from curricula or delivered through lecture-based methods that leave students as observers of intercultural phenomena rather than participants in it (Atmojo & Putra, 2022; Hasbi et al., 2025; Morganna et al., 2018)

Games address this gap in ways that direct instruction cannot. Well-designed game-based activities create conditions for authentic communicative output as students make real decisions, respond to genuine peer reactions, and manage the discomfort of

not quite knowing the right answer—all in the target language (Krashen, 1982). Empirical reviews of gamification in EFL and ESL contexts document consistent gains in motivation, engagement, and willingness to communicate, with particular effectiveness in speaking-oriented activities (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Critically, these benefits hold across both face-to-face and online learning environments, making game-based approaches especially relevant in the post-pandemic landscape of hybrid instruction (Astawa et al., 2026; Fajaria et al., 2026).

This chapter presents three games developed through the author's experience facilitating a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) program. That program, which connected Indonesian and foreign students across different campuses consistently revealed that the most productive intercultural learning moments arose not from scheduled content delivery but from structured, game-like tasks in which students discovered firsthand how differently silence, disagreement, and turn-taking function across their respective communication cultures (Al Mansoori, 2024). The three games—LOST IN TRANSLATION, CULTURE COURT, and PASSPORT PLEASE—translate those classroom discoveries into replicable pedagogical activities grounded in Byram's (1997) ICC framework and Bennett's (1986) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity.

Each game is designed to run within a 90-minute class session and requires no dedicated technology beyond a standard Zoom meeting for online classes or a whiteboard for onsite ones. Moodle-based follow-up activities extend each game into asynchronous reflection, supporting deeper processing and formative assessment. Taken together, the three games form a sequenced framework—from cultural observation to perspective negotiation to identity performance—applicable across proficiency levels and adaptable to any English communication course that includes intercultural objectives (Susyetina, 2025).

## 2. DISCUSSION

The three games below follow a deliberate pedagogical sequence aligned with Bennett (1986) developmental model: students move from noticing cultural difference (Game 1) to arguing across it (Game 2) to inhabiting an unfamiliar communicative position (Game 3). This progression mirrors the movement from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism and reflects task-based learning principles that scaffold increasingly open-ended language use (Ellis, 2003). Each game includes specifications for both onsite and online delivery via Zoom, along with a Moodle-based follow-up that extends the in-class experience into asynchronous reflection.

### 2.1 Game 1: *LOST IN TRANSLATION*

#### *Overview*

Students interpret culturally ambiguous situations from multiple perspectives and argue for their readings—a game that reveals how much meaning lives outside the words.

#### *Onsite*

The teacher distributes hand-written or printed situation cards to pairs. Each card describes a short, ambiguous interaction—for example: *During a group meeting, one member goes completely silent after receiving feedback from the team leader. What does the silence mean?* Each pair then writes down two cultural interpretations: one plausible in an Indonesian context, one from another culture of their choice. Pairs then share with the class, and the class votes on which interpretation is most surprising, most common globally, and most likely in their own community. The pair that generates the most genuine debate wins the round.

#### *Online (Zoom)*

The teacher pastes one situation card per round directly into the Zoom chat. Students are placed in Breakout Rooms in pairs for

three minutes to type or verbally discuss their two interpretations. When rooms close, each pair shares live, and the class votes using Zoom's Reactions (thumbs up for "most surprising," raise hand for "most likely in Indonesia"). The teacher tracks the debate in a shared Google Doc projected via screen share.

### *Moodle follow-up*

Post one new situation card per week as a Forum activity. Students submit their two interpretations as a reply and must respond to at least one classmate's post with a counter-interpretation. This asynchronous extension deepens the reflection started in class.

### *Why it works*

Silence, eye contact, lateness, smiling while disagreeing—these micro-behaviours carry enormous cultural weight yet are almost never taught explicitly. By asking students to interpret rather than describe, this game moves them into the deeper register of cultural pragmatics (Byram, 1997). In the previous COIL sessions, Indonesian students were consistently surprised to discover that behaviours they read as respectful —pausing before speaking, avoiding eye contact—were sometimes read by the other as uncertainty or disengagement — a dynamic consistent with Al Mansoori's (2024) finding that authentic international audiences heighten student attentiveness and communicative investment in ways that simulated tasks cannot replicate (Susyetina, 2026).

## **2.2 Game 2: CULTURE COURT**

### *Overview*

Students are challenged to argue culturally contested statements under time pressure, then are required to defend the opposing side in the following round. The game trains students to separate personal conviction from communicative performance

— a distinction that matters as much in intercultural encounters as it does in academic argumentation. Structured debate tasks of this kind have been shown to improve speech fluency, lexical complexity, and argumentation coherence in L2 contexts (el Majidi et al., 2024), while the added intercultural layer ensures that the statements selected expose assumptions about directness, authority, and collective responsibility that vary meaningfully across students' own cultural backgrounds.

### *Onsite*

The teacher writes a contested cultural statement on the board, such as: *"Saying no directly is more honest than being politely indirect."* The class divides into AGREE and DISAGREE. Each side has three minutes to prepare, then one representative argues for ninety seconds. The class votes —not on the position, but on who argued most effectively in English. The losing side must then argue the opposite position in the next round.

### *Online (Zoom)*

The teacher announces the statement in the chat and assigns sides in Breakout Rooms. After three minutes of preparation, both sides return to the main room. Representatives argue live on camera while classmates type their votes in the chat ("A" for Team Agree, "D" for Team Disagree) based on argument quality, not personal conviction. For larger classes, run simultaneous courts in separate Breakout Rooms with one student acting as judge per room.

### *Moodle follow-up*

Post the week's statement as a Choice activity asking students to vote before class. After playing Culture Court, post a Reflection prompt: "Did the game change your vote? Why or why not?" comparing individual beliefs to the arguments they heard.

### *Why it works*

The deliberate flip—arguing a position you may not hold, then its opposite—is the game’s most powerful feature. It decouples personal belief from communicative performance, which is exactly the cognitive flexibility that ICC development requires (Byram, 1997). Research on structured disagreement in EFL contexts confirms that tasks with clear time constraints and audience stakes produce higher-order language functions and stronger willingness to communicate than open-ended discussion (Henisah et al., 2023). Culture Court adds an intercultural layer by choosing statements that reveal how deeply assumptions about respect, directness, authority, and time vary across the students’ own backgrounds—often within the same classroom.

## **2.3 Game 3: PASSPORT PLEASE**

### *Overview*

Each student receives a secret communication style profile and must use it during a collaborative task—while their partners try to identify what style they are operating from.

### *Onsite*

The teacher distributes small, folded slips of paper—the “passports.” Each slip contains a communication style profile rather than a nationality, for example: *You value group harmony above personal honesty. You will agree with people even when you privately disagree, to avoid conflict.* In groups of 3-4 students, the students plan a short joint presentation on an assigned topic while staying in character. After five minutes, the teacher pauses the planning. Students guess each other’s profiles and justify their guesses before revealing the passports.

### *Online (Zoom)*

The teacher sends each student their passport profile via a private Zoom Chat message before opening Breakout Rooms. Students collaborate in rooms of four on the planning task—cameras on, profiles secret. After five minutes, the teacher

broadcasts a message to all rooms: “Stop. Guess your partners’ styles.” Groups discuss live, then reveal. The teacher facilitates a whole class debrief in the main room, using the whiteboard annotation tool to map the styles students identified.

### *Moodle follow-up*

Post a Reflection Journal prompt after the game: “Describe one moment during Passport Please when you felt genuinely misunderstood. What communication style were you performing? What do you think your partner assumed about you?” This written reflection consolidates the embodied experience into transferable self-awareness.

### *Why it works*

Unlike conventional cultural role-plays, Passport Please does not ask students to perform a nationality or stereotype a country. It asks them to embody a communication principle—indirectness, silence as meaning, directness, collective priority—without attaching it to a flag. This distinction is critical for intercultural education: it teaches students that communication styles are patterns, not fixed cultural properties, and that any individual may shift styles across contexts (Byram, 1997; Krashen, 1982). Post-game debriefs in COIL sessions revealed that the most memorable moments were when students realized their partners had been operating from a genuinely different communicative logic—and that both logics were internally coherent.

## **2.4 The Debrief: Where the Real Learning Happens**

Across all three games, the debrief is not optional—it is the lesson. The game creates the experience, and the structured reflection transforms it into transferable competence. Teachers should allocate ten to fifteen minutes for three layers of debrief questions: What did you notice? (observation) Why do you think that happened? (interpretation) What would you do differently in a real intercultural encounter? (application). This structure,

grounded in Byram's (1997) ICC framework, ensures that the playful energy of the game is channelled into the kind of metacognitive awareness that outlasts the session itself. Online, the debrief runs in the main Zoom room with the teacher using the whiteboard to capture key insights in real time; onsite, sticky notes or a shared class list on the board serve the same purpose. Research confirms that without structured reflection, the motivational gains of game-based learning tend to be short-lived; with it, the games become formative experiences students recall long after the semester ends (Zhang & Hasim, 2023).

### **3. RECOMMENDATION**

Teachers who are new to hybrid game-based ICC learning are encouraged to begin with LOST IN TRANSLATION. It carries the lowest performance risk, works identically onsite and online, and generates immediate, surprising content from students' own cultural knowledge without requiring any preparation from students in advance. Yet, CULTURE COURT works best in the middle of a course, once students have developed enough trust to argue openly with each other. Thus, PASSPORT PLEASE is most powerful as a culminating activity, when students are ready to take the risk of sustained role adoption. Research on COIL-based public speaking confirms that the presence of an authentic international audience—even a virtual one—substantively raises the quality of student preparation and delivery (Al Mansoori, 2024), making the cumulative effect of all three games particularly pronounced when students know they are performing for peers beyond their own campus.

One critical note for online implementation: the games depend on the genuine interaction, which means cameras-on is strongly recommended, though not always feasible (Hackett et al., 2023). When cameras are off, teachers can adapt by making the Zoom chat itself the playing field—LOST IN TRANSLATION interpretations posted as threaded replies, CULTURE COURT votes typed in real time, PASSPORT PLEASE guesses shared as direct messages before the reveal. The Moodle follow-up activities

for all three games serve a dual purpose: they extend the learning for students who need more processing time, and they provide teachers with written evidence of intercultural reflection that can feed into formative assessment (O'Dowd, 2021).

Finally, these games are not finished products—they are starting points. The situation cards for LOST IN TRANSLATION should be updated each semester to reflect contexts students are navigating international internships, online cross-cultural collaborations, COIL partnerships, or global fandom communities. The cultural statements for CULTURE COURT can be sourced directly from students' own experiences of intercultural confusion or surprise, making every class session simultaneously a game and a piece of qualitative classroom research. When students help create the games, they are not just playing—they are curating their own intercultural curriculum, which is arguably the most powerful form of learning available in any classroom, on any screen, anywhere (Ellis, 2003; Hasbi, 2025; Zhang & Hasim, 2023).

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