

Importance of Intercultural Competence for Foreign Language Teacher

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Abstract – Through this research paper, I intend to highlight the significance of intercultural competence for foreign language teacher. How a foreign language teacher should be aware of students' cultural backgrounds and behavioral dynamics to fit him/ herself in different circumstances. Learning a language opens a new window to a new culture as language and culture are intricately linked to each other.

The paper intends to explain how a foreign language teacher should be open-minded and receptive, be able to withhold any biased judgement and know how to treat the students optimally. How can teachers help the students to develop an 'intercultural lens' to view the world?

Keywords - Culture, Intercultural Competence, Intercultural Communication Competence, Intercultural Dialogue, Teacher –Student Relationship.

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1. INTRODUCTION

'We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools' Martin Luther King

Today, the world is shrinking progressively into a global village. Territorial borders, that once acted as a divide between cultures, now tend to facilitate diversity among people of different races and ethnicities. Being successful in the present times requires one to meet the demands of time.

Teaching a language is certainly not as easy a task as many would believe and mastery over the concerned language is just one of the many different skills required for the same. Culture is an iceberg with majorly hidden proportions and what we see on the surface is just the tip of that iceberg. To develop a thorough understanding, one has to navigate what is under water. The extent to which a foreign language teacher is open to those from different cultural, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds holds the key to effective teaching.

Various works have been done in this field to pave the way for foreign language teachers to do their task in an affective and dynamic way. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* (Michael Byram), *Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice* (Michael Byram, Adam Nichols and David Stevens 2001), *The Save Handbook of Intercultural Competence* (Ed. Darla K. Deardorff), *"The Identification and Assessment of*

Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization at Institutions of Higher Education in the United States." (Deardorff 2006), *Building Interculturally Competent Faculty* (Deardorff 2012) *Assessing Intercultural Competence* ((Deardorff), *Cultivating Intercultural Competence: A process Perspective* (Janet M. Bennett in Deardorff ed. 2009), *The Moral Circle in Intercultural Competence: Trust Across Cultures* (Hofsted, G. in Deardorff ed. 2009), *When Not in Rome, Don't Do as the Romans Do.* (Pelle, Stefano 2013) *Parole comuni culture diverse Guida alla comunicazione interculturale* (Paolo E. Balboni), *Foreign language teachers and intercultural competence: an international investigation* (Lies Sercu 2005), *Intercultural competence: concepts, challenges, evaluations* (Ed. Arnd Witte and Theo Harden 2011), *Assessing intercultural language learning: the dependence of receptive sociopragmatic competence and discourse competence on learning opportunities and input* (Veronika Timpe 2013), *Motivation and foreign language learning: from theory to practice* (Ed., David Lasagabaster, Aintzane Doiz, & Juan Manuel Sierra 2014), *L2 interactional competence and development* (Ed. Joan Kelly Hall, John Hellermann & Simona Pekarek Doehler 2011), *Visual Materials for The Language Teacher* (Andrew Right 1976), *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom* (Zoltán Dörnyei 2007).

2. WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

There is not a single definition of Intercultural Competence. Many terms are used to describe the concept of Intercultural Competence, international competence, global citizenship, intercultural effectiveness, cultural intelligence, cross-cultural competence, and intercultural sensitivity to name just a few [1], according to the disciplines. To understand well the “Intercultural Competence” let’s start from three key concepts; *culture, intercultural and competence*.

Culture: the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from another’....A simpler definition is ‘the unwritten rules of the social game’[2].

Intercultural describes what occurs when members of two or more different cultural groups (of whatever size, at whatever level) interact or influence one another in some fashion, whether in person or through various mediated forms [3].

Competence refers to having sufficient skill, ability, knowledge, or training to permit appropriate behavior, whether words or actions, in a particular context [4].

Intercultural competence: I would like to mention here tow definitions of Intercultural Competence;

Set of *cognitive, affective, and behavioral* skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts [5].

Ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural *knowledge, skills, and attitudes* [6].

3. MODELS OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

There are various models of Intercultural Competence presented by scholars:

- Reflective Model (Williams, 2009).
- Relational Model of Intercultural Competence (Imahori and Lanigan (1989)
- Intercultural Competence model of Spitzberg (2000)
- Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)
- The Process/Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006)

3.1 Reflective Model (Williams, 2009)

According to Reflective Model, the three dimensions of intercultural competence can be converted into learning outcomes of successful study abroad (Williams, 2009) [7].

- For the *cognitive dimension*, a learning outcome would be the acquisition of knowledge about different cultures (Williams, 2009).
- For the *affective dimension*, learning outcomes would be the enhancement of both open-mindedness and flexibility (Williams, 2009).
- Lastly, for the *behavioural dimension*, a learning outcome would be the acquisition of skills needed in cultural settings (Williams, 2009)

3.2 Relational Model of Intercultural Competence (Imahori and Lanigan (1989)

This integrative model is based on the following principles:

- a) affect, behaviour, and cognition are all interrelated and necessary components of intercultural competence;
- b) in order to assess intercultural competence, all those who interact in an intercultural encounter must be examined;
- c) all those who are interacting should derive benefits from and be able to form long-lasting bonds with others in the intercultural interaction;
- d) intercultural competence is not only measured by how appropriate the intercultural interaction behaviours are, but also by whether the interaction results in effective outcomes (Imahori & Lanigan, 1989).

3.3 Spitzberg- Model of Intercultural Competence (2000)

This model assumes that intercultural competence can be broken down into three systems – *individual, episodic and relationship*—, and each system has several underlying principles.

- To elaborate, one *principles of the individual system* is that the confidence of the intercultural communicator affects motivation to interact, which in turn enhances intercultural competence (Spitzberg, 2000).

- A principle of the episodic system is that in an intercultural interaction between two individuals, each perceives the other as competent when prototypical expectations are met (Spitzberg, 2000).

3.4 Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity is a stage-based process, where individuals transition from lower ethnocentric stages to higher ethnorelative stages, and sometimes may regress to early stages or skip to higher stages in their progression towards intercultural competence.

The six stages in this model are *Denial, Defense, Minimization, Acceptance, Adaptation and Integration* (Bennett, 1986).

- *Denial* : The Denial Stage is identified by ignorance and a failure to acknowledge cultural differences (Bennett, 1986).
- *Defense* : The Defense stage involves an acknowledgement of cultural differences and a polarization towards the home culture (Bennett, 1986).
- *Minimization* : In the Minimization stage, cultural differences are blurred to enable cultural similarities to be the common link (Bennett, 1986).
- *Acceptance* : The Acceptance Stage is marked by a comfort with cultural differences and Openness to multiple perspectives (Bennett, 1986).
- *Adaptation* : In the Adaptation stage, individuals are able to retain their culture and modify their behaviours to function in other cultural contexts (Bennett, 1986).
- *Integration* Lastly, in the Integration Stage, the concept of culture is transformed because people incorporate elements of different cultures into their own cultural self-identity (Bennett, 1986).

3.5 Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006)

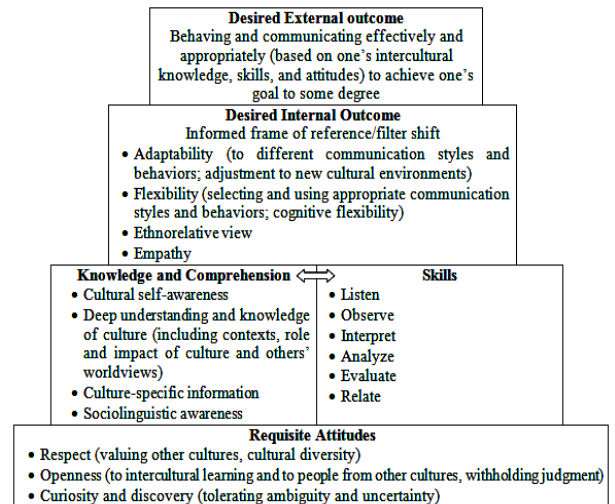


Figure 1

NOTES:

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

3.6 Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2009)

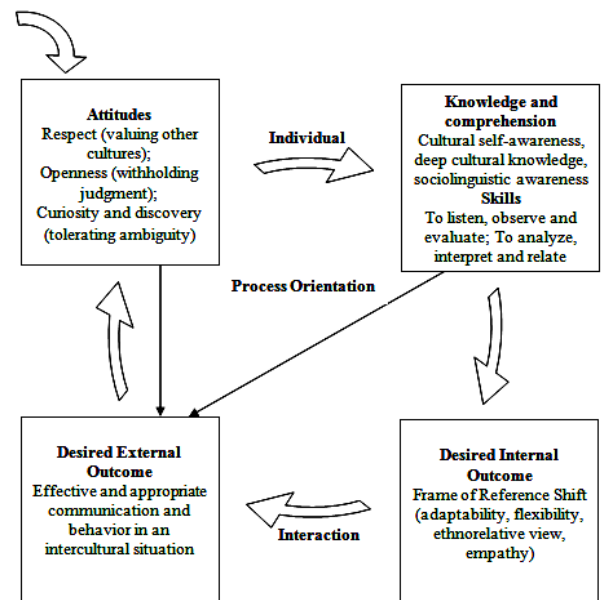


Figure 2

Notes:

- *Begin with attitudes; Move from individual level (attitudes) to interaction level (outcomes)*
- *Degree of intercultural competence depends on acquired degree of attitudes, knowledge/comprehension, and skills.*

4. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE – WHY DOES IT MATTER?

We are not independent. Our lives depend on the theory “*take and give*”. We live and work in multicultural environment where mutual understanding is required. When we encounter differences that make a difference, the ability to see, experience, and understand culture in increasingly **sophisticated and complex** ways enhances the effectiveness of our interactions and our work together.

4.1 Importance of intercultural competence for foreign language teacher

- Foreign language teacher should be dynamic
- Foreign language teacher should be cultural orientated
- Foreign language teacher must be passionate and motivational about teaching language

4.2 Teaching students with very different cultural backgrounds

Teaching students with very different cultural background is not an easy task. Teaching and learning is reciprocal. To create a friendly ambience it is very important to know each other. So how does a teacher approach his/her role in teaching students with very different cultural backgrounds?

5. INTERCULTURALLY COMPETENT TEACHING

Taking into account the Intercultural Competence models of Deardorff one teacher should be equipped with various qualities, and evaluate him/herself how he/she is ready to change and deal with the students of different cultural background fit according various circumstances.

Attitudes

- *Openness: How truly open is he/she to those from different cultural, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds? Openness is very important bridge the gap between differences.*

- *Withholding the judgement: Does he/she make quick assumptions about a student? One teacher should not pre-judge a student but must withhold judgment ready to deal with different circumstances.*
- *Measuring a student: one teacher keep in mind does he/she measure a student’s behavior based on him. her own culturally-conditioned expectations or does he/she try to understand a student’s behavior based on that student’s own culturally-conditioned background?*
- *Valuing others: one teacher should value others even when he/she may disagree with their beliefs and opinions.*
- *Eagerness to learn about different cultures: eagerness to learn from others is very important for teacher that in terns helps him/her self to deal with students and create a friendly environment.*

Knowledge

- *Own cultural awareness: own cultural awareness is very important to deal with others and communicate with them.*
- *Worldview: one teacher has to know how to describe his/her worldview.*
- *Student’s worldview: one teacher should keep in mind that student’s worldview may differ from his own worldview.*
- *students’ cultural backgrounds knowledge: one teacher question him/herself that how much does he/she know about his/her students’ cultural backgrounds, and how can get the missing information?*
- *course materials: course materials are very important to teaching. One teacher must be dynamic.*

Skills

- *Listening to others: listening to students is very important. In effective teaching both sides are active.*
- *Active observation: active observation and paying attentions is essential for interaction with students.*

Internal Outcomes

- *Treating students: one teacher should try to how students want to be treated.*

- flexibility in responding to students' learning needs: seeking to understand the need of students and meet them in their cultural prospective.

External outcomes

- *Culturally appropriateness:* How culturally appropriate has he/she been in his/her interactions with students during teaching process?
- *Meeting the goals:* is he/ she is able to meet the goals in an appropriate and effective manner?
- What could he/she do differently in the future to be more appropriate and effective in his/her communication and behavior, both in interpersonal interactions and in teaching?

6. HOW ONE CAN BE INTERCULTURALLY COMPETENT?

There are some myths that Intercultural competence comes naturally and can't be taught. Intercultural competence is not that important in my discipline. Fluently speaking another language means the person is interculturally competent. Bring diverse people together and "magic" will happen.

6.1 Culture: Beyond the Tip of the Iceberg

Like an iceberg, there are many layers of a culture. The part of a culture "above water" that is visible and easy to identify and know. Paige explains that nine tenths of a culture is also hidden from view. The hidden part is termed as "deep culture". To understand well a culture one needs to navigate deeper part of a culture.

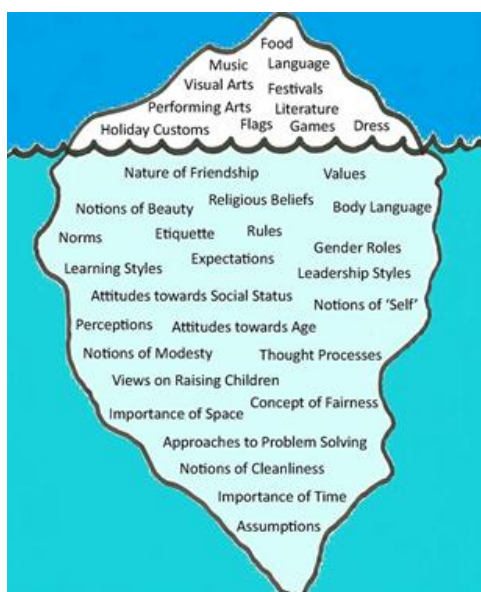


Figure 3

7. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Social actors need to be able to produce meaningful speech and behaviors and to do so in ways that will be understood as relevant in context by other participants in an interaction (Hymes/ Byram). For a foreign language intercultural communicative competence is very essential to teach students from different backgrounds.

8. BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN CULTURES

Bridging the gap between cultures requires understating others and interacting with them. To understand cultural differences and others, own cultural and worldview intercultural dialogue is very important.

Intercultural dialogue: Intercultural dialogue specifically refers to dialogues occurring between members of different cultural groups. Intercultural dialogue assumes that participants agree to listen to and understand multiple perspectives, including even those held by groups or individuals with whom they disagree. It is a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect.

9. CONCLUSION

At present when world is becoming a global market, the acquisition of Intercultural Competence is very important to live together in peace. A good teacher has a leadership quality and especially a foreign language teacher should be dynamic and be aware of cultural background of students coming from inside or outside of the country. Openness, desire and curiosity to know, critical thinking and withholding the judgement are very essential components for becoming interculturally competent.

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