

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Several aspects of intercultural competence warrant further comment. First, intercultural competence does not involve abandoning one's own cultural identifications or affiliations, nor does it require individuals to adopt the cultural practices, beliefs, discourses or values of other cultures.

Intercultural competence instead involves being open to, curious about and interested in people who have other cultural affiliations, and the ability to understand and interpret their practices, beliefs, discourses and values.

Intercultural competence enables people to interact and cooperate effectively and appropriately in situations where cultural 'otherness' and 'difference' are salient. It also enables people to act as 'mediators' among people of different cultures, and to interpret and explain different perspectives. That said, encounters with people from other cultural orientations can be a source of personal development and enrichment if their perspectives are integrated into one's own sense of self.

Second, because intercultural competence involves learning about and interpreting other people's cultural perspectives and relating them to one's own, intercultural competent individuals are able to use their intercultural encounters to learn about and reflect critically on their own cultural affiliations. Due to the enculturation process in which cultural beliefs, values and practices are acquired particularly during childhood and adolescence, it can be difficult to psychologically decanter from one's own affiliations.

Intercultural competent individuals acquire a more critical awareness and understanding of their own cultural positioning, beliefs, discourses and values through comparing and relating them to those of other people. For this reason, intercultural competence not only enhances one's knowledge and understanding of other people; it also enhances self-knowledge and self-understanding.

Third, it is important to emphasize that language has a privileged role within intercultural encounters because it is the most important (although not the only) symbolic system which enables group members to share their cultural perspectives, beliefs and values. When people interacting have similar cultural affiliations, the medium of language itself is not usually a salient problem from the point of view of communicating with each other.

However, when people with different languages (or sometimes just different language varieties) interact, language becomes highly salient because they are unable to communicate effectively. Thus, plurilingual competence and communicative awareness are crucial components of intercultural competence. It is important to acknowledge and understand the relationship between language and culture, and between language competence and intercultural competence.

Because there is no simple, one-to-one correspondence between languages, and because languages carry meanings some of which are unique to particular cultural perspectives, competence in a language is crucial to understanding the cultural perspectives, beliefs and practices to which it is linked.

Skills of interacting, as well as other components of intercultural competence, are thus very much dependent on at least one partner in the interaction having competence in the language of the other (or both partners having competence in at least one common language – a *lingua franca*).

Where both partners have plurilingual competence which includes the other's language, the interaction will be all the richer and more successful. Fourth, it is important to acknowledge that intercultural competence alone may not always be sufficient to enable individuals to engage in successful intercultural dialogue.

This is because there are often systematic patterns of disadvantage and discrimination, and differentials in the allocation of resources within populations, which effectively disempowered many groups of individuals with particular cultural affiliations from participating on an equal footing in such dialogue (irrespective of their levels of intercultural competence).

These inequalities and disadvantages are often further compounded by

disparities of power and by institutional constraints and biases which lead to the terms of the dialogue being dictated by those occupying positions of privilege. It is for these reasons that the Eminent Persons report recommends the adoption of “special measures to ensure that members of disadvantaged or marginalized groups enjoy genuine equality of opportunity”.

Thus, in order to achieve harmonious societies in which all are able to participate fully in intercultural dialogue, the development of intercultural competence through education needs to be implemented in conjunction with and alongside measures to tackle inequalities and structural disadvantages, including giving special assistance to those with socio-economic disadvantages, taking action to counter discrimination, and remedying educational disadvantages.

Finally, there has now been a considerable body of research into intercultural competence. Significantly for present purposes, this research has shown that intercultural competence may not be acquired spontaneously by individuals, and it may not be acquired simply through exposure to and encounters with people with other cultural affiliations if the contact takes place under unsuitable conditions. However, intercultural competence can be enhanced through a range of intercultural experiences, for example by participating in intercultural events that have been organized in an appropriate manner and by attending educational institutions which have a non-discriminatory environment. It has also been found that intercultural competence can be enhanced through intercultural education and training.

Moreover, the research indicates that intercultural competence is a lifelong developmental process, and that there is no point at which someone achieves ‘full’ intercultural competence. What knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are involved in intercultural competence and what is the relevant importance of each?

The acquisition of intercultural competence is never complete and perfect, but to be a successful intercultural speaker and mediator does not require complete and perfect competence.

The components of intercultural competence are knowledge, skills and

attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups. These values are part of one's social identities. The foundation of intercultural competence is in the attitudes of the intercultural speaker and mediator: Another crucial factor is knowledge, not primarily knowledge about a specific culture, but rather knowledge of how social groups and identities function and what is involved in intercultural interaction. If it can be anticipated with whom one will interact, then knowledge of that person's world is useful. If it cannot, then it is useful to imagine an interlocutor in order to have an example – a specific country or countries and their social groups - to understand what it means to know something about other people with other multiple identities:

No teacher can have or anticipate all the knowledge which learners might at some point need. Indeed many teachers have not had the opportunity themselves to experience all or any of the cultures which their learners might encounter, but this is not crucial. The teacher's task is to develop attitudes and skills as much as knowledge, and teachers can acquire information about other countries together with their learners; they do not need to be the sole or major source of information. Skills are just as important as attitudes and knowledge, and teachers can concentrate as much on skills as upon knowledge.

Because intercultural speakers/mediators need to be able to see how misunderstandings can arise, and how they might be able to resolve them, they need the attitudes of decanting but also the skills of comparing. By putting ideas, events, documents from two or more cultures side by side and seeing how each might look from the other perspective, intercultural speakers/mediators can see how people might misunderstand what is said or written or done by someone with a different social identity.

They need especially to know how to ask people from other cultures about their beliefs, values and behaviors, which because they are often unconscious, those people cannot easily explain. So intercultural speakers/mediators need skills of discovery and interaction: Finally, however open towards, curious about and tolerant of other people's beliefs, values and behaviors learners are, their own

beliefs, values and behaviors are deeply embedded and can create reaction and rejection.

Because of this unavoidable response, intercultural speakers/mediators need to become aware of their own values and how these influence their views of other people's values. Intercultural mediators need a critical awareness of themselves and their values, as well as those of other people. It is not the purpose of teaching to try to change learners values, but to make them explicit and conscious in any evaluative response to others. There is nonetheless a fundamental values position which all language teaching should promote: a position which acknowledges respect for human dignity and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction.

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