

***Intercultural Competence in Internationalization Context:  
Some Recommendations for Tertiary-Level Foreign Language Teaching***

Ngan-Giang Dang, University of Ferrara, Italy

The Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2020  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

In the context of globalization, the internationalization of higher education is an unavoidable tendency. This endeavor, in one way or another, highlights the need for intercultural competence which plays an influential role in students' development and acquisition of sociolinguistic skills. To explain, native speakers of different cultures communicate and interpret a language behavior in various ways due to discrepancies in values and customs. As a result, many foreign language learners have encountered obstacles in real-life communicative situations with foreigners despite their in-depth study and rich linguistic knowledge. It is, thus, crucial for them to be trained with intercultural competence on a regular basis so as to facilitate successful interaction and avoid unexpected cultural misunderstandings. This paper aims to provide a theoretical overview of intercultural competence as well as suggest some recommendations to integrate it into foreign language teaching and learning at tertiary level.

Keywords: intercultural competence, internationalization, foreign language teaching, higher education

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## **Introduction**

Over the past few decades, the cultural dimension has gradually become as a key component of foreign language education, adding learners' acquisition of intercultural competence to the objectives of teaching and learning foreign languages. Unfortunately, many universities have yet to fully address the development of students' intercultural competence. Even for those who have, some key questions remain obstacles in the way of documenting intercultural competence within internationalization context: Why is it important? What is it? How can universities graduate interculturally competent students? This paper provides a systematic review of the important theoretical frameworks about intercultural competence with the hope to raise the awareness of educational institutions and teachers about intercultural competence as well as to propose some recommendations for individuals to incorporate it in their foreign language teaching programs.

### ***The Why question: The importance of intercultural competence in internationalization context***

The word *internationalization* has been used not only to refer to “relationships between and among nations, cultures, or countries”, but also in the sense of “the diversity of cultures that exists within countries, communities, and institutions” (Knight, 2004, p. 11). Therefore, it can be said that the 21<sup>st</sup> century given the context of internationalization has witnessed a number of drastic changes in all societies, including an increase in global and multilingual interactions within and across boundaries thanks to frequent mobility as well as the development of Internet. Users of any foreign language have a great deal more opportunities than ever to be involved in intercultural encounters, either online or offline, within or beyond their countries. As a result, it is unavoidable that the tendency of cultural diversity has become noticeable within global market place (Stier, 2006). A labor force should, therefore, be equipped with adequate intercultural knowledge and skills in order to compete globally in various situations. In response to this need, one of the main values of higher education should be to increase the quality and preparation of their students and staff to live and work in a global world, highlighting the importance of intercultural competence (Odgers, 2006).

At the same time, teaching and learning a foreign language becomes more popular than ever because people from various linguistic groups need a common means of communication. In foreign language universities, a wide range of foreign languages have been taught. From the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the main focus of foreign language education in general and English language teaching in particular had been laid on developing linguistic competence, which involves different aspects of a language. Therefore, traditional English classes tended to help students acquire and master reading, listening, speaking and writing skills along with grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of the foreign language. However, it is undeniable that only the knowledge of the language cannot guarantee effective communication in multicultural groups. Indeed, a lot of foreign language majors still experience culture shocks and misunderstandings when communicating with either the native speakers or people from different cultures. In an attempt to face this challenge, there is an increasing demand for the understanding of other people's cultures as well as their own during cross-cultural encounters. Consequently, the goal of language education is shifted to

culture as the core. This has brought more interests from scholars to intercultural competence since it enhances the notion of what it is to be competent for communication with speakers of different languages and with speakers using a lingua franca (Byram, Holmes & Savvides, 2013).

It is, thus, essential for students' intercultural competence to be developed in foreign language teaching and learning at tertiary level because it makes learning a foreign language more than merely learning linguistic skills. Intercultural teaching not only helps learners develop themselves and facilitate richer and more successful interaction with people from different backgrounds. More importantly, it also equips learners with crucial knowledge, skills and attitudes to survive the complicatedness of an open and integrated world, improving the quality and sustainability of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century labor force.

### ***The What question: Theoretical framework of intercultural competence***

As much research has been conducted in an attempt to conceptualizing intercultural competence since the 1960s, a great deal of definitions and understandings from various perspectives have been provided. Among them, Byram (1997) offered one of the most fundamental definitions, referring intercultural competence to the ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries.

However, the most widely accepted definitions of intercultural competence have been attributed to one of the most significant scholars of the field, namely Darla K. Deardorff. In her work in 2006, Deardorff provided one of the top-rated recent definitions of intercultural competence, claiming that it is “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (p. 247). This definition is undoubtedly quite comprehensible in terms of language used, which has gained success in helping educational stakeholders have the most fundamental understandings about the competence. It highlights effectiveness and appropriateness, referring to the abilities to achieve desired personal outcomes and to meet the expectations and demands of the communicative situation, respectively.

A few years later, Deardorff (2009) offered more comprehensive conceptualization of intercultural competence: “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world” (p. 7). It both expands “the ability to communicate” to the “management of interaction” and clarified “intercultural situations”. From this later definition, an emphasis is laid on not only the importance of success in communication but also people involved in the situations, the differences between them and the mutual effects exerted on them.

Since these definitions seem quite general and broad in nature, it is important to examine the specific components that constitute knowledge, skills and attitudes mentioned so as to frame a pathway for the development of intercultural competence. In such effort, Byram (1997) described a model in which the dialogue between people from two different cultures is viewed as a process involving intercultural factors. According to Byram, intercultural competence entails the following five ‘savoirs’ as shown in the Figure 1. Among these components, Byram (1997) considered the ability

to create positive attitudes to be most fundamental to intercultural competence. Although it shows both interrelated and separate relationships between the dimensions of intercultural competence, the model seems to ignore the process an individual learner goes through to attain deeper levels of each component.

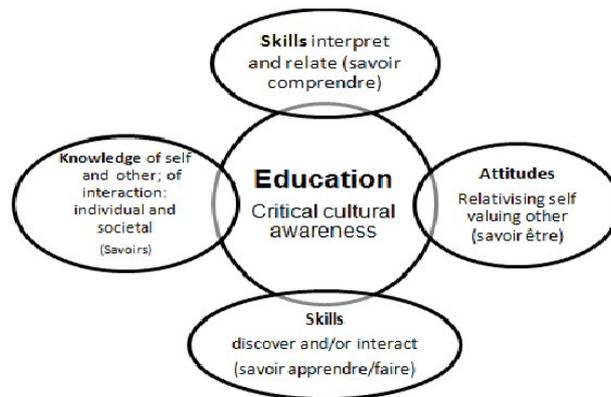


Figure 1. Byram (1997)'s Intercultural Competence Model  
 Source: Deardorff (2009)

Deardorff also introduced two models of intercultural competence. The first one is the Pyramid model (2004), including five different domains in four levels moving from individual to interpersonal or interactive. They are requisite attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, skills, desired internal outcomes and desired external outcomes, representing motivational, cognitive and skills components, respectively. Agreeing with Byram's model, this model emphasizes the importance of attitudes as a fundamental basis of intercultural competence. On the foundation of attitudes, knowledge and skills, it is expected that an interculturally competent person can produce some desired outcomes both internally and externally. This model implies that the components are closely related to each other in a sequence of development.

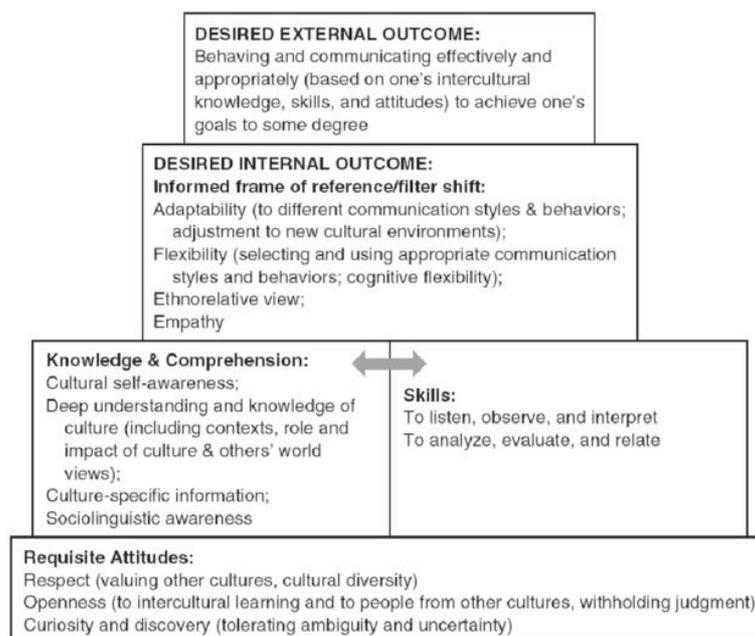


Figure 2. Deardorff (2004)'s Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence  
 Source: Deardorff (2009)

Deardorff (2006) also proposed another model from a perspective of a dynamic process of acquisition rather than merely fixed levels. It maintains the unique elements of each component of the Pyramid Model discussed previously and also considers attitudes of an individual the most critical component of intercultural competence, as they are demonstrated as the starting point of the process. Moreover, it implies that the external outcome can be achieved after owning appropriate attitudes, knowledge and skills but without having fully acquired the internal outcome. Another crucial point of this Process Model is that intercultural competence is described as an ongoing process of development, implying that one may never fully achieve ultimate intercultural competence.

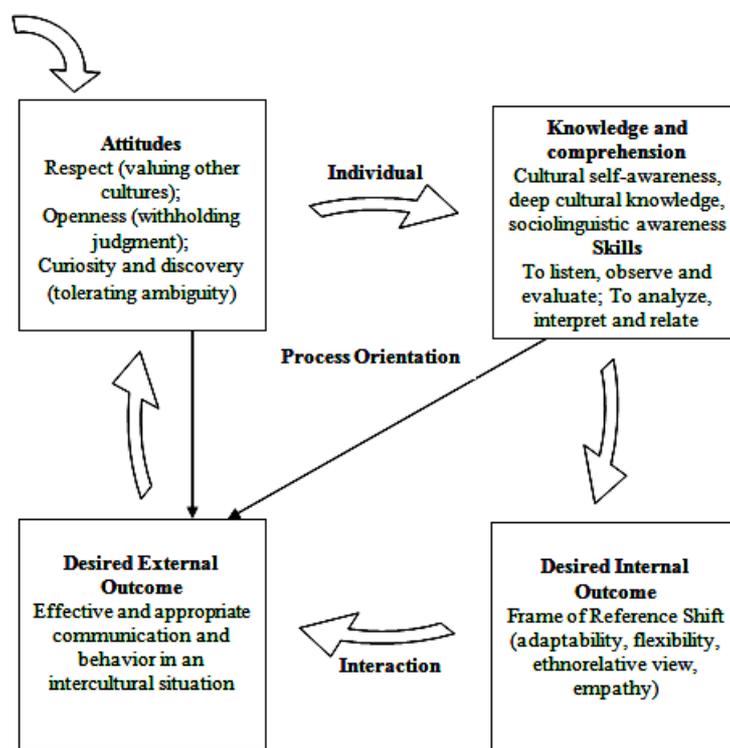


Figure 3. Deardorff (2006)'s Process Model of Intercultural Competence  
*Source: Deardorff (2009)*

It should be noted that the above three above models are in fact most widely agreed among intercultural scholars. Despite being developed based on different approaches, these models suggest that attitudes, knowledge and skills are fundamental dimensions of intercultural competence and that they are interdependent.

### ***The How question: Some recommendations for foreign language teaching***

Based on the definitions and models discussed above, there is no doubt that the development of learners' intercultural competence should pay attention to the aspects of attitudes, knowledge and skills, among which attitudes are at the basis as a starting point. In order to help learners acquire intercultural competence in tertiary-level foreign language teaching, the author proposes some following recommendations for educational institutions' administrators and individual teachers to apply models of intercultural competence.

First and foremost, intercultural competence should be identified as a student outcome of foreign language programs. This is important because by setting intercultural competence as an outcome, more attention can be paid to its development, particularly as an ongoing process rather than a direct result of merely one experience such as abroad study. More importantly, the design of foreign language curriculum can then be oriented in a way that involves a (inter)cultural aspect. In particular, such curriculum should address cross-cultural communication issues and provide students with training in intercultural skills. If separate courses or training programs cannot be provided, intercultural competence training should still be integrated in some courses. In order to do so, institutions and administrators should define intercultural in specific components. Since intercultural competence has been an undeniably complex construct, breaking it down into specific components and elements can help ensure the writing of curriculum objectives concerning the incorporation of this competence as well as fuel the implementation of intercultural teaching. It is also crucial for institutions and academics to reassess the definitions of intercultural competence on an ongoing process. According to Deardorff (2006), this is necessary since this construct continuously evolves as a result of the changes over time in scholars' viewpoints on intercultural competence. Therefore, there is a need to stay updated with research on this complex construct in order to properly adjust institutions' descriptions of outcomes and curricula.

Another recommendation for universities is to provide trainings for teachers with a focus on the development of their intercultural understanding. Such professional development can raise their awareness of the importance of intercultural competence. More importantly, it can allow teachers to be familiar with what constitutes the skills and strategies their students are expected to acquire to enhance their intercultural competence. According to Haas (2019), the more knowledgeable and competent language teachers are regarding this issue, the more able they become to integrate cultural practices in their teaching.

For language teachers, based on models of intercultural competence, there are several approaches and methods that they can adopt to incorporate cultural elements in their foreign language teaching in case separate intercultural training programs are not available. To begin with, in teaching foundational skills, teachers can make use of authentic materials of the foreign language, particularly literary texts. It has been argued that literature can make a meaningful contribution to students' development of intercultural competence (Hanauer, 2001; Gómez, 2012; Rodríguez & Puyal, 2012). Through an exposure to cultures and ideologies different from their own in time and space provided by literary texts, students can not only learn to become more open and respectful towards cultural diversity but also, from that basis, gain cultural knowledge. They can discover values of foreign authors and understand the differences basing on the socio-cultural as well as historical contexts. It is suggested that while exposing the students to literary texts, teachers should carry out Critical Discourse Analysis which, to put in simple words, views the language as a form of social practice. According to Starkey (2003), with this approach, teachers can frame a set of guided questions on an authentic literary text so as to critically engage the students in not only interpreting the content but also understanding cultural aspects of the text. As a result, students may feel more confident to discuss the issues analyzed in the class and make comparisons to their own cultures, improving their cultural

awareness. Starkey (2003) also insisted that the development of such awareness should indeed be facilitated continuously throughout learning.

Moreover, language teachers can design tasks and exercises with a focus on cultural elements in addition to language components. Quizzes, discussions, movies as videos, role-plays and simulations, projects and e-portfolios have been proved effective tools in exposing students to not only culture of the target language but also other languages as well. When integrating intercultural teaching in foreign language classes, as Bachmann, Gerhold and Wessling (1996, as cited in Neuner, 2003) suggested, teachers should follow a progression, starting from the training of awareness and perception to more complex tasks referring to communicative competence in intercultural situations. They introduced a four-stage typology of activities to be used throughout a syllabus, including:

- Stage 1: tasks developing intercultural awareness and perception (with a focus on describing impressions of people and events, telling stories, evaluating situations and changing perspectives);
- Stage 2: Concept and meaning (with a focus on interpreting concepts, defining meanings and explaining differences);
- Stage 3: Comparing cultures (with a focus on sharing opinions, comparing and contrasting cultural elements and norms);
- Stage 4: Developing communicative competence in intercultural situations (with a focus on analyzing speech acts, communication strategies, styles of expressions, and socio-cultural features of text types).

In order to yield the most effectiveness of any intercultural tasks and exercises, teachers should bear in mind that they need to explicitly formulate the objectives of each activity and examine its relationship to the overall context of the intercultural approach. Besides, it is also suggested that in their acquisition of intercultural competence, students should play an active role. In particular, each of them should be considered a unique resource and motivated to frequently reflect on their own culture and identity within and after each activity (Dunne, 2011). By being active, students cannot only be more aware of their own intercultural learning but also become motivated and critical during the process, helping them take the most advantage of the opportunities to improve their intercultural attitudes, knowledge and skills.

## **Conclusion**

It can be said that the college foreign language classroom presents a valuable opportunity for instructors to enhance the development of their students' intercultural competence. This article provides a rationale for the development of students' intercultural competence in higher education in internationalization context, summarizes the definition and models of intercultural competence agreed among top intercultural scholars and puts forward some suggestions for incorporating this competence in foreign language teaching. It is hoped that this study's findings will benefit administrators and instructors in helping students achieving intercultural competence at their educational institutions.

## Referenes

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Byram, M., Holmes, P. & Savvides, N. (2013). Intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education: Questions of theory, practice and research. *The Language Learning Journal*, 41(3), 251-253, DOI: 10.1080/09571736.2013.836343.

Deardorff, D. K. (2004). *The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of international education at institutions of higher education in the united states* (Unpublished dissertation). North Carolina State University, Raleigh.

Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Assessing intercultural competence in study abroad students. In Byram, M. and Feng, A. (Eds.), *Living and studying abroad: research and practice* (pp. 232-256). Multilingual Matters.

Deardorff, D. K. (2009). *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence*. California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Dunne, C. (2011). Developing an intercultural curriculum within the context of the internationalisation of higher education: Terminology, typologies and power. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(5), 609-622, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2011.598451.

Gómez, L. F. (2012). Fostering intercultural communicative competence through reading authentic literary texts in an advanced colombian efl classroom: A constructivist perspective. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 14(1), 49-66.

Haas, B. W. (2019). Enhancing intercultural competence of college students: A consideration of applied teaching techniques. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 2(2), 81-96.

Hanauer, D. (2001). Focus-on-cultural-understanding: Literary reading in the second language classroom. *CAUCE, Revista de Filología y su Didáctica*, 24, 389-404.

Knight, J. (2004). Internationalization remodeled: Definition, approaches and rationales. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8(1), 5-31.

Neuner, G. (2003). Socio-cultural interim worlds in foreign language teaching and learning. M. Byram (Ed.), *Intercultural competence* (pp. 17-62). Communication and Research Directorate.

Odgers, T. (2006). *Interculturalizing the internationalized curriculum: A faculty development approach* (Master's thesis). Antioch University.

Rodríguez, L. M. G. & Puyal, M. B. (2012). Promoting intercultural competence through literature in clil contexts. *Atlantis*, 34(2), 105-124.

Starkey, H. (2003). Intercultural competence and education for democratic citizenship: Implications for language teaching methodology. M. Byram (Ed.), *Intercultural competence* (pp. 17-62). Communication and Research Directorate.

Stier, J. (2006). Internationalisation, intercultural communication and intercultural competence. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 11.

**Contact email:** [ngangiang.dang@unife.it](mailto:ngangiang.dang@unife.it)