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THE BASIC STRATEGIES OF DEVELOPING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Abstract: In the context of globalization and intercultural communication, intercultural competence (IC) has become an essential part of modern education. As students increasingly engage in culturally diverse environments because of several factors such as study abroad, exchange programs, or multicultural projects, they should develop their intercultural competence in order to understand, interpret, and respond appropriately to cultural differences as well as make a successful interaction with others from various cultures. This article reviews thoroughly theoretical frameworks of intercultural competence, empirical studies, and pedagogical strategies which contribute to the development of students' intercultural competence. Also, the review identifies major difficulties that are faced by both teachers and learners while improving intercultural competence. The results of the article show that there is a significant gap between theoretical models and classroom implementation, especially in contexts related to limited authentic intercultural experiences. This study concludes that enhancing students' intercultural competence requires a comprehensive approach which integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of learning.

Keywords: intercultural competence, cultural awareness, intercultural learning, globalization, education.

Introduction

The rapid growth of globalization has changed the nature of human communication in today's world. Nowadays, people increasingly interact with those from different cultural backgrounds due to various purposes such as migration, travel, global business, and educational exchanges. Therefore, the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively across cultures is regarded as an essential skill for individuals, particularly students.

Actually, the traditional way of teaching and learning languages focuses on developing linguistic knowledge that encompasses grammar rules, vocabulary, and making sentences. These components are important fundamentals for language education. However, a successful interaction with people who have different cultural backgrounds requires learners to gain intercultural competence. That means misunderstandings between individuals are not caused by grammatical mistakes but rather by unawareness of cultural values, norms, and communication behaviors.

Nowadays, educational institutions are realizing the significance of intercultural competence for students. In many countries, intercultural learning has been integrated into foreign language curriculum. However, there are several challenges in the process of implementing intercultural

education in FLT classrooms (Foreign language teaching). In that case, effective methods must be identified in order to allow students to develop their intercultural skills.

The main purpose of this article is to examine the theoretical foundations of intercultural competence, major obstacles and pedagogical strategies to improve students' intercultural competence by analyzing scholars' studies and researches.

Theories of Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence is a complex and multidimensional concept. Generally, intercultural competence (IC) is an ability to interact effectively with others from diverse cultural backgrounds. To define this notion, many scientists have made researches so far. According to Byram (1997), learners should be able to use linguistic forms correctly and to interpret various cultural meanings appropriately at the same time. Byram created his own theoretical model in the spheres of language education and intercultural communication which contributed to the researches on intercultural competence. His model emphasizes five interconnected components:

1. Attitudes include curiosity about other cultures, openness to new experiences, willingness to suspend judgment and respect for cultural differences.
2. Knowledge refers to knowledge of one's own culture and other cultures, understanding different social groups and practices.
3. Skills of interpreting and relating include the abilities to interpret diverse cultural behaviors or events and to relate them to one' own culture.
4. Skills of discovery and interaction are mainly abilities to acquire new cultural knowledge and to communicate effectively with representatives of foreign cultures.
5. Critical cultural awareness means being aware of various cultural norms, values, and evaluating cultural practices critically.

Byram's theory is regarded as a main framework as it combines cognitive (knowledge) and affective (attitudes) aspects of learning and introduces a pedagogical structure that can be applied in the classrooms to develop intercultural competence. Another contribution of this model is the concept of critical cultural awareness which was not mentioned by other scholars before Byram. Nevertheless, there are some limitations in this framework. As Karen Risager (2007) mentioned, Byram's model views culture as relatively stable and clearly identified or learned. However, current perspectives argue that culture is not stable, but changeable. Cultural knowledge cannot be just acquired by learning from particular textbooks. It can be gained gradually when a person entered a new culture.

Also, Deardorff (2006) defines intercultural competence as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural settings. He developed Process-oriented model of intercultural competence, including five components – attitudes, knowledge, skills, desired internal outcome, and desired external outcome which shows the multidimensional nature of intercultural competence *(see Figure 1)*. This model also emphasizes that an effective communication depends on several factors such as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral ones.

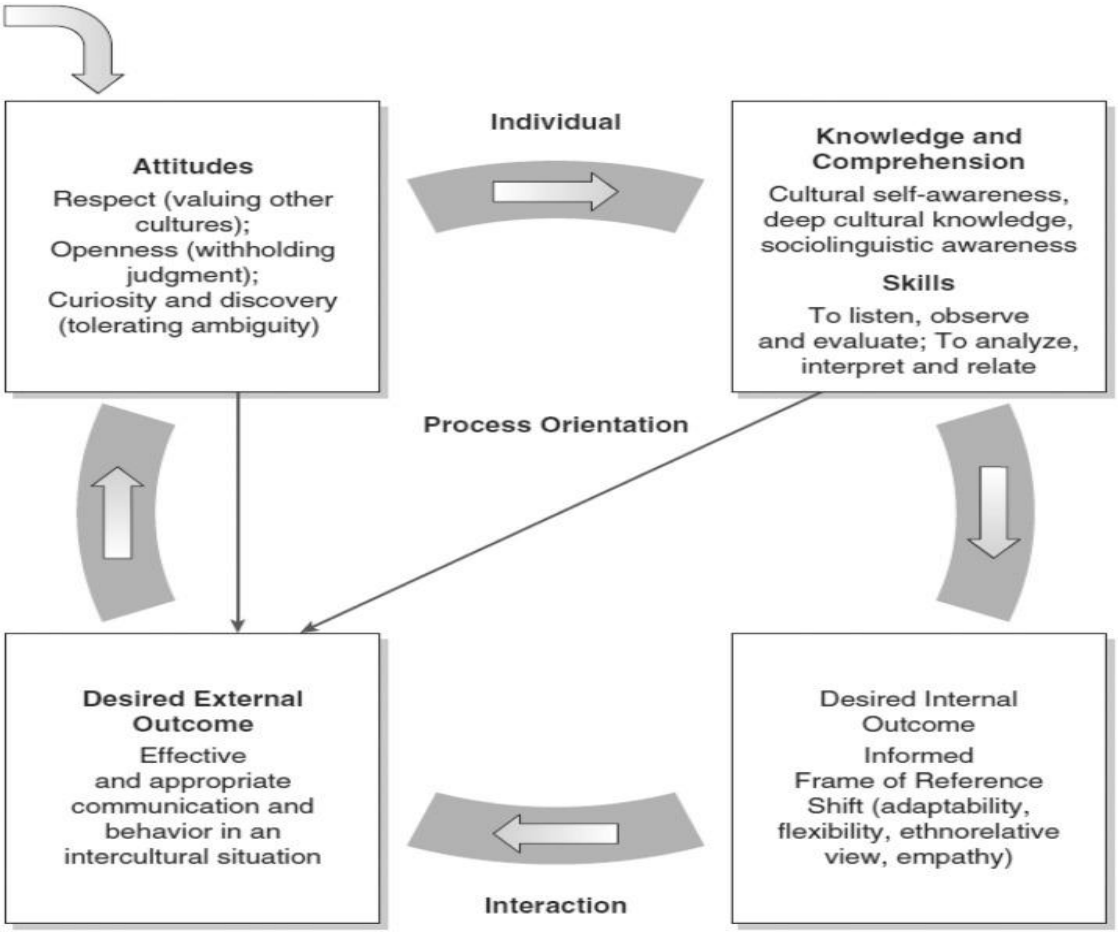


Figure 1. Deardoff's Process model of intercultural competence (2006, 2009).

It is also important to note that Deardoff's model is based on process-oriented aspect of IC that is not a fixed ability but a developmental skill. Despite its significant aspects in the science, this theoretical framework has some weak points. One of them is related to challenges in assessment. As it is known, Deardoff's model focuses on internal outcomes (e.g., adaptability, empathy, and flexibility) which are not observed by another person directly, or external outcomes (effective and appropriate communication, behavior in an intercultural situation) which are more context-dependent circumstances. Actually, this makes the assessment process difficult as it is hard for teachers to design reliable assessment tools as well as evaluating learners' development of intercultural competence in an objective way.

Another major theory of intercultural competence is Bennet's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) that was proposed in 1993. Bennet describes intercultural competence as a developmental and psychological process in which individuals should move from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages. This model is considered as valuable since it explains how people respond to cultural difference and challenges psychologically and also, provides a clear developmental structure of intercultural competence. On the other hand critics such as Spitzberg & Changnon (2009) argue that intercultural development is oversimplified in this model by viewing it as a linear progression in which learners achieve intercultural competence through step-by-step process. In reality, people may progress in one stage while they may regress in another one. Also, they can sometimes develop their skills in multiple steps simultaneously.

It should be highlighted that those three theoretical models are regarded as the most important frameworks of intercultural competence which still serve as a foundation for other researches and empirical studies.

Empirical studies on improving Intercultural competence

In the 21st century, intercultural competence has emerged as an important component of language teaching and learning. Many researches have been carried out to investigate how intercultural competence can be efficiently developed, particularly in educational contexts. In fact, research findings mostly show that intercultural competence cannot be acquired automatically through learning cultural information or facing cultural differences but it requires a clear and well-structured guidance, consistently doing practice, and definitely a meaningful interaction across cultures.

This section of the article aims to review major empirical studies on fostering intercultural competence which are discussed in the following lines.

Firstly, the research of Kinginger (2009) shows that immersive experiences such as study abroad or experiential learning contribute significantly to the development of IC that cannot be achieved by traditional methods (e.g. learning cultural information, developing linguistic knowledge). These ways provide several opportunities – authentic intercultural experience, experiencing cultural diversity in real life, everyday exposure to cultural practices. Despite these benefits, being in a foreign country and entering a new culture may not develop intercultural skills. According to Jackson (2010), structured reflection plays a vital role in developing IC during study abroad experiences. It includes writing reflective journals, guided discussions, and participating in intercultural training courses. That means these activities allow students to analyze their cultural experience critically, develop self-awareness, and recognize veriaties between cultures.

Secondly, technological advancements allow online intercultural interactions to become an alternative way to physical mobility. Online intercultural collaboration (virtual exchange programs) can benefit intercultural competence improvement (O'Dowd, 2018). That means virtual exchange programs provide learners with regular connections with people from other cultures. Students can have a chance of participating in collaborative intercultural learning activities such as discussions and project works, without the need for being physically present. However, there are some challenges that may limit effectiveness of these programs. For example, internet connectivity may be sometimes poor or there may be limited access to technological devices which makes online interaction difficult. Also, virtual communication cannot fully provide intercultural experiences as in reality. Only interaction is not enough to explore cultural differences deeply and understand other cultural values and norms.

The next one is classroom-based research in which the importance of pedagogical strategies are mentioned. Byram and Feng (2004) emphasize that classroom strategies can foster students' intercultural competence. For instance, cultural comparison task encourages learners to examine differences and similarities of cultures which enhances analytical thinking while reflective activities such as journals, portfolios, and classroom discussions develop deeper understanding. However, Holliday (2011) states that classroom approaches mainly focus on limited cultural topics such as traditions, food, clothing, or stereotypes. As a result, students may not analyze other cultural elements critically.

When it comes to researches in Uzbekistan, they show that intercultural competence enhancement is often limited by structural factors such as restricted international exposure and curriculum priorities (Tursunov, 2021). Furthermore, Rashidova (2020) mentions that teachers do not sometimes have enough qualification in educating intercultural knowledge which can impact on classroom implementation.

Challenges in improving IC

As it is known, developing intercultural competence is a complex process and surely, there are some difficulties that put obstacles in the way of enhancing IC. Now this literature review identifies these challenges.

To begin with, ethnocentrism and stereotypes are major obstacles. Mostly, students tend to interpret unfamiliar cultural meanings and behaviors through relying on their own cultural values and norms (Hofstede, 2001). In that case, they may develop oversimplified or negative perceptions about other cultures.

Also, limited access to authentic intercultural interactions is considered as a significant barrier to the development of intercultural learning. In some educational places, students cannot always participate in real-life communications with individuals from foreign cultures due to several factors such as financial constraints, geographical issues, limited institutional partnerships with foreign universities.

It should be emphasized that teachers play a crucial role in enhancing students' intercultural knowledge. However, they may sometimes lack in experiences for integrating intercultural competence into language education. As mentioned by Liddicoat & Scarino (2013), educators may not be ready to teach culture as an integrative part of intercultural competence since they mostly focus on developing learners' linguistic proficiency. Consequently, educating culture is based on usual surface-level data such as food, customs, traditions instead of discussions of cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes. This situation is also one of the main obstacles to IC development.

Furthermore, assessing intercultural competence is another problematic issue. As it is known, traditional methods (e.g. multiple choice questions, quizzes, gap filling) aim to measure students' linguistic competence. Therefore, alternative assessment approaches such as portfolios, writing reflective journals, and project works should be used to check intercultural competence. However, they require significant time and pedagogical expertise (Fantini, 2009).

Key pedagogical strategies for developing intercultural competence.

To enhance learners' intercultural competence, there are several basic strategies which can be implemented in the classroom. One of them is Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory explains how students can improve intercultural skills through experiences. Activities such as role playing, stimulations, offline or online intercultural communications can encourage students to experience directly cultural differences. However, according to Jackson (2010), only experiences may not be enough to foster intercultural competence which means reflection is needed to make learners analyze various cultural behaviors critically.

Additionally, cultural comparison is used as an effective strategy to enable students to explore different features of cultures but this approach should be guided by instructors in a critical way in order to avoid learners from developing oversimplified perspectives about foreign cultures (Holliday, 2011).

Reflection is also a key pedagogical approach that contributes to the improvement of IC. Reflective practices encompasses several tasks such as portfolios, reflective journals, group discussions, or critical analysis. All of them help students to examine one's own or other cultural beliefs, to interpret unfamiliar cultural meanings appropriately, and especially critical cultural awareness.

As Kramsch (1998) emphasized, integrating authentic materials into language education is another beneficial strategy. That means authentic teaching materials like films, social media contents, news articles, or literary texts can provide real-life cultural contexts. Nevertheless, simply using these materials is not enough to foster intercultural competence. Students should examine such teaching materials critically.

Furthermore, virtual exchanges give a number of opportunities. For example, students can communicate online with members of diverse cultures in an sustained way without going abroad which is more financially affordable. However, O'Dowd (2018) argues that online interactions require structured implementation which means online intercultural exchanges should be well-planned, and guided by pedagogical instructions in order to prevent useless and meaningless communications.

As it is seen, simply putting pedagogical strategies into practice does not develop students' intercultural competence, all of them require reflective, supported, and structured guidance.

Discussion

This literature review shows that developing students' intercultural competence (IC) is a multidimensional process that combines theoretical and practical knowledge, and empirical evidences. The analysis of major theoretical models demonstrates that intercultural competence is an ability that involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral features. Even though theories provide significant conceptual foundations for further studies, the review reveals that there is a gap between theory and practical implementation.

According to the findings of this paper, intercultural competence cannot be improved through only passive learning like studying cultural facts. Alternatively, the approaches for enhancing IC (e.g. experiential learning, virtual exchanges, and study abroad) should be combined with well-guided instructions, structured reflective tasks in order to increase their effectiveness.

Moreover, this review examines a number of difficulties that are considered as barriers to the IC development. For example, ethnocentrism and stereotypes, limited access to real-life international experiences, and lack of teacher trainings are key challenges impacting on students' intercultural competence enhancement. Also, assessment is another issue in intercultural contexts.

Overall, the discussion suggests that to foster leaners' intercultural competence, an integrative approach is needed which encompasses critical analysis, reflection, experiential learning, pedagogically structured interaction, and appropriate assessment methods.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has analyzed the theoretical models of intercultural competence, empirical studies carried out in the science, pedagogical strategies and challenges for improving IC. The results show that students' intercultural competence cannot be developed by traditional methods. It requires implementing alternative approaches in the classroom in which integration of knowledge, attitudes, and skills is necessary.

In addition, the review states that several strategies such as experiential learning, cultural comparison, virtual intercultural exchanges, and reflection are the most effective ways that support the enhancement of intercultural competence when they are based on well-organized guidance, critical analysis, and pedagogical instructions.

In this article, difficulties are also identified and mostly, they are ethnocentrism, stereotypes, limited opportunities for authentic intercultural interactions, and problems related to IC assessment.

Finally, the literature review highlights that a comprehensive and structured approach plays a vital role in intercultural teaching. Next researches should focus on applying appropriate and effective assessment tools, designing context-related activities and teaching materials to integrate intercultural competence into foreign language education.

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