DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH COLLABORATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: The significant advancement of globalisation, which has affected every sphere of activity, has increased the importance of intercultural competence in training future specialists. However, current research results indicate the insufficient effectiveness of this skill among university graduates, prompting scholars to search for new pedagogical methods to foster its development. This study aimed to identify the main stages involved in the formation of intercultural competence and to examine the role of media education in this process. To accomplish this, the study employed several methods, including a literature review, an analysis of competence development stages, an experimental study with subsequent statistical analysis and comparison of test outcomes, data visualisation, and synthesis of conclusions. The research revealed five stages of competence formation: denial, defence, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. The study confirmed the effectiveness of media education - especially through video lessons and video presentations - in developing intercultural skills. A strong positive correlation was identified between the number of video presentations created by students and their positive test responses. Consequently, media education has a beneficial impact on the formation of intercultural competence and, due to its specific features, can be effectively integrated into the educational process.

Key words: Video lessons, Video presentations, Intercultural skills, Virtual exchange, Communication, Intercultural collaboration, Online lessons, Intercultural competence, Education, Visualiasation.

INTRODUCTION

Mutual understanding and intercultural competence are more important than ever today because through them we can address some of the most virulent problems of contemporary societies. Manifestations of prejudice, discrimination and hate speech have become common, and political parties advocating extremist ideas have gained fresh momentum. These problems are linked to socio-economic and political inequalities and misunderstandings between people from different cultural backgrounds and affiliations. There is a felt urgency – and it touches many aspects of our lives – for education which helps citizens to live together in culturally diverse societies. The ability to understand and communicate with each other across all kinds of cultural divisions is a fundamental prerequisite for making such societies work. We all need to acquire intercultural competence. For this reason, intercultural education, which aims to develop and enhance this ability, can make an essential contribution to peaceful coexistence. In recent years a call for evidence-based strategies for internationalisation has come strongly to the forefront. The number of studies on the impact of internationalisation on the development of intercultural competence or related constructs has increased as a result. Reviewing this higher education discourse it becomes evident there seems to be a great deal of conceptual diversity among both higher education leaders and among scholars in the field about what exactly is meant by the term 'a global ready graduate' and the related assumed intercultural competence, which pedagogies are effective and what this implies for competences of academic staff. This conceptual diversity has hindered universities in putting effective strategies in place to successfully enhance intercultural competence development in students.

MAIN PART

WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE?

In order to understand the concept of intercultural competence, it is helpful first to understand a number of related concepts, including the concepts of identity, culture, intercultural encounter and competence. The term identity denotes a person's sense of who they are and the self-descriptions to which they attribute significance and value. Cultural affiliations are fluid and dynamic, with the subjective salience of cultural identities fluctuating as individuals move from one situation to another, with different

affiliations or different clusters of intersecting affiliations being highlighted depending on the particular social context encountered. Fluctuations in the salience of cultural affiliations are also linked to the changes which occur to people's interests, needs, goals and expectations as they move across situations and through time. Furthermore, all cultures are dynamic and constantly change over time as a result of political, economic and historical events and developments, and as a result of interactions with and influences from other cultures. Cultures also change over time because of their members' internal contestation of the meanings, norms, values and practices of the group. If, in the process of contestation, new meanings, values or practices emerge which are sufficiently novel, and then become fashionable or attractive to other people within the group, these novel constructions may in turn contribute to the total pool of cultural resources available to group members and therefore change the culture itself in the process. The ways in which individuals relate to the cultures to which they are affiliated are complex. Because cultural participation and cultural practices are context-dependent and variable, individuals use the multiple cultural resources which are available to them in a fluid manner to actively construct and negotiate their own meanings and interpretations of the world across the various contexts which they encounter in their everyday lives. However, cultures also constrain and limit the thoughts and actions of individuals. Cultural affiliations influence not only how people perceive themselves and their own identities, but also how they perceive others, other groups and other ways of acting, thinking and feeling, and how they perceive the relationships between groups.

In addition to the cultural identities which people subjectively use to describe themselves, further cultural identities may be ascribed to them by other people. However, these ascribed identities, which are often based upon visible characteristics such as ethnicity or gender, may not be identities to which individuals themselves attach any great importance. The inappropriate ascription of identities by others, and the experience of discrepancies between one's own preferred identities and other people's perceptions of the self, have been found to have adverse effects on people's psychological well-being and social adaptation.

An intercultural encounter is an encounter with another person (or group of people) who is perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself. Such encounters may take place either face-to-face or virtually through, for example, social or communications media. They may involve people from different countries, people from different regional, linguistic, ethnic or religious backgrounds, or people who differ from each other because of their lifestyle, gender, social class, age or generation, level of religious observance, etc. An interpersonal encounter becomes an intercultural encounter when cultural differences are perceived and made salient either by the situation or by the individual's own orientation and attitudes. Thus, in an intercultural interaction, one does not respond to the other person (or people) on the basis of their own individual personal characteristics – instead, one responds to them on the basis of their affiliation to another culture or set of cultures. In such situations, intercultural competence is required to achieve harmonious interaction and successful dialogue. There are diverse ways in which the term competence is used, including its casual everyday use as a synonym for ability, its more technical use within vocational education and training, and its use to denote the ability to meet complex demands within a given context. For current purposes, competence is understood not merely as a matter of skills which are applied in a given context, but as a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills applied through action in any relevant situation. Competence is the capacity to respond successfully to types of situations which present tasks, difficulties or challenges for the individual, either singly or together with others. Intercultural encounters are one such type of situation. Since situations of the same type may vary in a range of different ways, competence is always susceptible to enrichment or further learning through exposure to, and acting in response to, this variation.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE.

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 co-operate 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 sense of self. Second, because intercultural competence involves learning about and interpreting other people's cultural perspectives and relating them to one's own, interculturally competent individuals are able to use their intercultural encounters to learn about and reflect critically on their own cultural affiliations. Interculturally 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 emphasise 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. However, intercultural competence can be enhanced through a range of intercultural experiences, for example by participating in intercultural events that have been organised 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.

HOW TO DEVELOP INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH EDUCATION.

Intercultural education refers to a pedagogy – aims, content, learning processes, teaching methods, syllabus and materials, and assessment – of which one purpose is to develop intercultural competence in learners of all ages in all types of education as a foundation for dialogue and living together. Facilitators usually have intentions or purposes throughout their interaction with those in their charge. For instance, teachers, youth workers and adult education tutors are trained to plan and design their lessons and activities, and do so in a conscious way. On the other hand, parents may sometimes consciously plan activities for their children, or they may follow advice from books, imitate their own parents, adopt what is customary in their community or follow practices they see on television, doing so intuitively. In informal learning, where people are constantly learning from each other, they can have the intention, more or less conscious, of influencing others.

Principles of planning.

Planning and pursuing the development of intercultural competence amongst learners is thus important for all facilitators of learning. Some will do so deliberately

as a professional task, like teachers, youth workers or social workers, for example; others will do so less deliberately, as an inherent aspect of their roles as parents, employers, politicians, etc.; and yet others will do so often without any conscious planning or awareness of what they teach by what they do or say. In most cases there are some principles of planning which are related to the different components of intercultural competence described earlier. Facilitators need to include experience, comparison, analysis, reflection and action in their planning.

– *Experience.* The best way to develop attitudes of respect, curiosity and openness, and to acquire knowledge of other cultural orientations and affiliations, is by directly experiencing how people act, interact and communicate – from their perspective. Facilitators may well provide opportunities for learning through experience, which can be either real or imagined; learners are able to gain experiences through, for example, games, activities, traditional media and social media, face-to-face interaction with others or through correspondence. Parents may select books for their children or travel with them to other neighbourhoods, regions and countries; youth workers may organise training events and international meetings for young people or history teachers may plan dramatic reconstructions or activities that aim to develop multiperspectivity. All of these examples can provide opportunities for challenging one's assumptions through comparison and analysis.

– *Comparison.* In order to encourage understanding and respect for people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from themselves, learners can benefit from exposure to "difference". Facilitators need to be aware of this kind of comparison of value and replace it with comparison for understanding, which involves seeing similarities and differences in a non-judgmental manner and taking the perspective of the other in order to see ourselves as others see us. Learners thus reflect on and are engaged in a conscious comparison of their own values and attitudes with different ones, in order to better realise how they construct the other.

– *Analysis.* Behind similarities and differences, there are explanations for the practices, the values and the beliefs which many people of a particular cultural affiliation may share. Facilitators can support their learners in the analysis of what may

lie beneath what they can see others doing and saying. This can be achieved, for example, by careful discussion and analysis, through inquiry-based methods, of written or audio/video sources. The analysis can then be reflected back on the learners so that they may question their own practices, values and beliefs.

– *Reflection.* Comparison, analysis and experience need to be accompanied by time and space for reflection and the development of critical awareness and understanding. Facilitators, especially in non-formal and formal education, need to ensure that such time and space is provided in a deliberate and planned way. For example, teachers may ask students to discuss their experiences, encourage students to keep a logbook to keep track of their learning, and write, draw, share or otherwise respond to what they have learnt; parents may also sit quietly with their children to talk about an experience.

– *Action.* Reflection can and should be the basis for taking action, for engagement with others through intercultural dialogue and for becoming involved in co-operative activities with people who have different cultural affiliations. Facilitators may take the responsibility of encouraging and even managing co-operative action, for example in making improvements in the social and physical environment (through "whole school" approaches or school partnerships) and should emphasise that all action should be responsible and respectful.

Methods of learning and teaching.

Experience, comparison, analysis, reflection and co-operative action, as briefly outlined above, are most effectively implemented in non-formal and formal education if teaching and learning methods are in line with the educational aim of developing intercultural competence in any subject matter. There is much research indicating that learners learn better in contexts where lecturing from the front and transmitting information is minimal, and where pedagogical approaches, methods and techniques that encourage learners to become actively involved in discovery, challenge, reflection and co-operation are used instead. The most effective learning activities engage learners as whole persons and address their intellectual, emotional and physical potential. This also applies to the development of intercultural competence.

Co-operative learning embodies principles which are central to intercultural competence: learners work together to achieve a common goal in a respectful, appropriate and effective way, using their plurilingual competence. Facilitators who aim to develop intercultural competence are encouraged not only to activate learners' intellectual understandings but also to address their emotional stances and support new action and participation. "Learning by doing" approaches, acknowledging and drawing upon learners' previous experiences and promoting community outreach and partnerships are just a few examples of practices which are best suited to develop learners' autonomy and responsibility in the matter of intercultural competence.

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