

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH CRITICAL REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

Kulmamatova Mokhichekhra

Uzbekistan State World Languages University

Abstract

Developing intercultural competence (IC) is an important goal of higher education, yet cultural exposure alone does not necessarily lead to meaningful changes in learners' perspectives. This paper examines critical reflection and dialogic interaction as complementary mechanisms for fostering IC. Drawing on Deardorff's (2006) process model, it synthesises the contributions of Ceo-DiFrancesco, Dunn, and Solorio (2020) and Einfalt, Alford, and Theobald (2022). The former emphasise structured reflection in helping students process intercultural dissonance, while the latter conceptualise competence as a relational process negotiated through dialogue. Findings from their respective discussions and research suggest that guided reflection can challenge cultural assumptions, whereas dialogic interaction enables learners to encounter alternative perspectives and reconsider their understanding of themselves and others. This paper argues that integrating both approaches into higher education curricula may provide a more comprehensive pedagogical pathway to intercultural competence.

Keywords: intercultural competence; critical reflection; dialogic pedagogy; higher education; Deardorff's model

Introduction

Preparing students to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries is an increasingly important responsibility of higher education. However, exposure to cultural diversity does not automatically develop intercultural competence (IC), and the pedagogical processes that support this development require further consideration (Einfalt et al., 2022). Deardorff (2006, p. 247) defines IC as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures based on intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Within this framework, critical reflection and dialogic interaction offer complementary approaches to developing

learners' intercultural awareness. Ceo-DiFrancesco et al. (2020) emphasise reflection as a means of processing challenging intercultural experiences, whereas Einfalt et al. (2022) highlight dialogue as a relational process through which individuals negotiate cultural perspectives. This paper examines how these approaches contribute to IC development and argues that their integration can provide a more comprehensive pedagogical framework.

Theoretical Foundations

Deardorff's (2006) process model provides a theoretical foundation for understanding intercultural competence. Developed through the Delphi technique, the model identifies attitudes, knowledge, and skills as essential components of IC. These elements contribute to internal outcomes, including adaptability, flexibility, and empathy, which subsequently support effective and appropriate intercultural communication and behaviour. The model emphasises the importance of understanding different perspectives, but identifying the components of competence does not fully explain how learners transform their assumptions through intercultural encounters. As discussed by Einfalt et al. (2022), this limitation creates a need to examine the processes through which such development occurs. Critical reflection and dialogic interaction address this issue by focusing respectively on learners' interpretation of experience and their engagement with others.

Critical Reflection as a Mechanism for Intercultural Competence

Ceo-DiFrancesco et al. (2020) present reflection as an essential component of experiential learning, enabling students to interpret experiences and reconsider established beliefs. Their discussion draws on transformative learning theory, particularly Mezirow's emphasis on critical reflection as a means of questioning assumptions and developing alternative perspectives. Intercultural encounters can challenge learners' existing understandings of cultural practices, communication, and identity. However, such experiences do not necessarily produce transformation. When unfamiliar situations generate discomfort or dissonance, students may either reconsider their assumptions or reinforce existing stereotypes.

Structured reflection can help learners examine these reactions and interpret challenging experiences more critically (Ceo-DiFrancesco et al., 2020). This approach is particularly relevant to study-abroad and international immersion programmes. Reflection can help students process unfamiliar cultural experiences by addressing both their emotional responses and their interpretations of difference. Carefully designed prompts, supportive learning environments, and opportunities for student-led reflection can therefore contribute to more meaningful learning. Reflection should not be treated as an automatic outcome of experience but as a pedagogical practice requiring deliberate guidance.

Dialogic Interaction as a Relational Mechanism

While critical reflection focuses on how learners interpret experience, Einfalt et al. (2022) conceptualise IC development as a relational process. Integrating Deardorff's (2006) model with Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) theory of dialogism, they argue that engaging with others' perspectives enables individuals to reconsider both their understanding of difference and their own cultural identities. Einfalt et al. (2022) investigated this approach through a programme involving eight culturally diverse students at an Australian university. The programme consisted of three guided dialogic forums addressing self-identity, student identity, and future global identity. Data were collected through interviews, stimulated verbal recall, and written reflections and were analysed thematically. The findings indicated that structured dialogue encouraged students to recognise previously overlooked aspects of their own cultures and reconsider assumptions about others. Participants also developed greater awareness of the role of English in intercultural communication, including the different experiences of native and non-native speakers. Furthermore, some students began to reconsider their potential contributions to a globalised society (Einfalt et al., 2022). These findings illustrate how dialogue can make cultural assumptions visible and open them to critical examination. Nevertheless, the authors emphasise that awareness alone is insufficient: students need structured opportunities to engage in meaningful intercultural exchange. Although the study offers useful insights, its small, context-

specific sample means that the findings should be interpreted as illustrative rather than universally generalisable.

Integrating Reflection and Dialogue

Critical reflection and dialogic interaction address different but interconnected dimensions of intercultural competence. Dialogue brings learners into contact with alternative perspectives, creating opportunities for questioning assumptions and experiencing intercultural dissonance. Reflection enables them to examine these encounters, interpret their responses, and reconsider previously held beliefs. When implemented separately, each approach may have limitations. Dialogue without subsequent reflection may expose students to cultural differences without ensuring deeper learning. Conversely, reflection without meaningful engagement with others may remain abstract and disconnected from lived intercultural experience. Their integration therefore offers a potentially stronger pedagogical approach. This relationship is consistent with Deardorff's (2006) process model, which connects attitudes, knowledge, and skills with internal development and effective intercultural behaviour. Higher education instructors could operationalise this relationship through guided peer discussions followed by reflective journals, structured self-assessment, or facilitated group analysis. Such activities would allow students to encounter alternative perspectives, examine their initial reactions, and evaluate how their understanding has changed. The central implication is that intercultural competence should be developed through intentionally designed learning experiences rather than assumed to emerge from cultural diversity alone. Reflection and dialogue can be incorporated into language education, international programmes, and other learning contexts in which students engage with different cultural perspectives.

Conclusion

This review highlights critical reflection and dialogic interaction as complementary mechanisms for developing intercultural competence in higher education. Reflection supports learners in examining the assumptions and emotional responses generated by intercultural encounters, while dialogue provides

opportunities to encounter alternative perspectives and negotiate meaning. Both approaches require deliberate pedagogical support to move beyond superficial cultural awareness. Integrating guided dialogue with structured reflection may therefore provide a more comprehensive approach to IC development. Rather than relying solely on cultural exposure, higher education institutions should create learning environments in which students can engage meaningfully with difference, critically examine their assumptions, and apply their developing understanding to intercultural communication.

References

1. Ceo-DiFrancesco, D., Dunn, L. S., & Solorio, N. (2020). Transforming through reflection: Use of student-led reflections in the development of intercultural competence during a short-term international immersion experience. *Internet Journal of Allied Health Sciences and Practice*, 18(2), Article 8. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/ijahsp/vol18/iss2/8/>
2. Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>
3. Einfalt, J., Alford, J., & Theobald, M. (2022). Making talk work: Using a dialogic approach to develop intercultural competence with students at an Australian university. *Intercultural Education*, 33(2), 211–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2022.2031903>
4. Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
5. Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. University of Texas Press.
6. Bakhtin, M. M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. University of Texas Press.