

Theoretical and Practical Challenges in Assessing Intercultural Competence

Xinxin Lyu

Social Sciences, the University of Warwick, UK

ABSTRACT

Assessing intercultural competence is crucial in today's globalized business landscape. This study delves into the challenges of evaluating intercultural competence, focusing on dimensions like cultural understanding, adaptability, sensitivity, and intercultural interaction. By exploring theoretical frameworks and practical hurdles in assessing intercultural competence, the research aims to illuminate its evaluation across disciplinary contexts. Additionally, the study aims to elevate understanding of cultural differences, trust-building, effective communication, efficiency enhancement, and innovation fostering. It also seeks to offer comparative methods for evaluating dynamic intercultural competences at different learning stages and provide insights to enhance professional communication in diverse business settings. The study underscores the significance of creating inclusive assessment tools adaptable to diverse disciplinary contexts, with findings expected to provide valuable guidance for individuals navigating cultural differences in diverse and multicultural business settings.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural Competence; Assessment; Business Relationship; Cultural Sensitivity; Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

With globalization driving business interactions across diverse cultural backgrounds, organizations benefit from high levels of intercultural competence. This enables a better understanding and adaptation to varying cultural practices, enhancing competitiveness in the global market. By honing cross-cultural communication, cultural sensitivity, and flexibility, businesses can capitalize on global opportunities, expand operations, and foster growth.

Prior research on intercultural competence has often overlooked the specific skills essential for effective intercultural business communication. This study addresses this gap by evaluating intercultural communication competence, adaptability, and business communication skills. By focusing on these dimensions, the research aims to deepen understanding of intercultural competencies in business contexts.

The study's primary goal is to identify key competencies crucial for successful intercultural business communication. Insights gained aim to help overcome challenges related to cultural differences, enhance adaptability, and improve communication effectiveness. Findings are expected to offer valuable guidance for businesses navigating intercultural communication complexities and gaining a competitive advantage in the global market.

2. THEORETICAL CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH ASSESSING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Based on more than five decades of intercultural competence researches, the widely accepted definition for the intercultural competence (IC) is that “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2006, p.247). Until now, the diverse competence clusters stressing different studying fields and a wide range of related elements have correspondingly generated, such as mindfulness, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, open-mindedness, and flexibility (Brinkmann, 2011; Bennett & Hammer, 2003; Matveev & Nelson, 2004).

From a theoretical perspective, the first step in evaluating intercultural competence is to figure out the compositions and exact definition of intercultural competence (Fantini, 2001). Moreover, the crucial criterion for holistic measurements is to address diverse parameters as much as possible (Fantini, 2007). With much scholar effort in the field of intercultural competence, there is a broad conceptual landscape with a wide range of models emerging. However, the contemporary experts and research results cannot reach consensus on the issues that constitute IC (Oliver & Porta, 2006). The diversity of the intercultural relevant labels and the disunity of the conceptualization also increase the uncertainty and the ambiguity of the assessment goal on a theoretical level. Although there is no concrete and unified aim of the IC assessment, Deardorff and Hunter (2006) regarded intercultural competence development as a lifelong process while the IC assessment aims to identify the crucial compositions at a given point. That brings a far-reaching impact on further IC assessments and increases the operational difficulties of the assessment with longitudinal and developmental attributions.

Recently, the term “intercultural competence” represents increasing implications and the majority of that focuses on the social pragmatic area (Rathje, 2007). Specifically, current scholars widely relate intercultural competence to the elements from the four dimensions – attitude, awareness, knowledge, and skill (Collier, 1989). Also, the existing and widely accepted five types of models including the compositional models, the co-orientational models, the developmental models, the adaptation models, and the casual process models (Griffith & Harvey, 2001) are evolved from the dimensions as mentioned above. Among them, compositional models mainly classify the components of competence, while co-orientational models show interactional achievement through understanding relative elements. The stages of progression and the typical competence appeared in the adaptation process separately constitute the developmental and adaptation models. Moving to the causal process which is applied with lower frequency compared with the above-mentioned four models, it shows an interactive pathway among the elements (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). However, the existing various intercultural competence assessment tools based on different theoretical frameworks tend to concentrate on different elements, such as openness (i. e, attitudinal).

Generally, every type of model with its inherent imperfection is unreasonable and incredible to be the theoretical guidance for the actual intercultural competence. To some extent, the compositional model cannot handle the deeper issues that the list of factor labels is considered and processed separately. In this type of model concentrating on the interactants, the hypothesis is all based on the condition that interactants are too rational, conscious and intentional (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Besides, the published IC models are incompetent to consider both the changeable context and the various perceives.

3. PRACTICAL CHALLENGES IN ASSESSING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Practically, the broader application scope of the term “intercultural competence” is enriching its involved implication and meanings. Meanwhile, the location of the intercultural competence assessment becomes more obscure. Through the decades of assessment experiences, the following four issues have occurred with high frequency in the practical operation of intercultural competence assessment. Firstly, according to the evaluators’ inherently assumption for the cultural-related dimensions ordering, part of the evaluators prefer to design a program to assess the participant’s knowledge and skill relating to the culture while the attitudinal and cognitive aspect is neglected. Notably, educators tend to concentrate on evaluating the knowledge and skills of the trainees depending on their professional attributions and habits (Byram, 1997).

Moreover, the majority of the existing intercultural competence assessment underestimates the role of attitudes and cognitions for the objective reason that the two areas are too abstract and changeable to qualify and prove. Besides, objective factors like language proficiency are frequently ignored in the intercultural competence assessment, especially for which is conducted by sociologists who only stress intentional behaviour (Fantini, 2009). Significantly, it is scientific to build the assessment from a developmental and consistent perspective. Intercultural competence is usually a vertical and continuous development process; As such, it will develop over time, although sometimes it may stagnate or even standstill (Matveev & Yamazaki Merz, 2014). Furthermore, setting a benchmark is fundamental for monitoring intercultural competence development at different levels. The benchmark can evaluate a competitive or adverse situation depending on the degree of contact and the motivation of the target language, whether it is instrumental or comprehensive (Heckmann, 2003). The last challenging point is that all components of intercultural competence, from the attribute to the developmental level, are necessary to be monitored during the comprehensive and quality assessment process (Fantini, 2007).

The assessment quality will be affected by the related factors, including the purpose, audience, the representative sample, the validity and credibility of the involved aspects and tools, and strategy selection (Deardorff, 2004). The currently developed approaches that include interviews, logs, portfolios, questionnaires operated on modern technologies, and performative tasks permit a measurement shift from taking the pencil-paper test alone (Deardorff, 2004). Moreover, the combination of various measurement methods and the application of a multidimensional approach are essential to obtain valid data, while it also puts a burden on practical operation. Besides, the test design with a high level of reliability and validity is the requisite and premise of a successful assessment (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001), which also acts as a challenging role for assessors. Validity indicates that the applied measures with a reasonable conceptual basis and the purpose of the assessment should show a direct correlation. Reliability refers to whether the chosen tool measures items in a consistent and meaningful way. Correspondingly, the testing items that appeared in the IC assessment must be applicable for all the target audiences, not only a particular group, and the survey form should be understandable and meaningful from diverse perspectives.

The relatively holistic and comprehensive IC assessment will utilize two-way evaluating perspective (from the “emic” and the “etic”) as well as the multiple groupings with the “particularism” convergence and divergence and the “universalism” data which are widely adaptable for the public cross cultures (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009).

4. THE EVALUATION OF THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO (ELP)

The European Language Portfolio aims to assess language learners' intercultural experience and awareness from a pragmatic perspective. The identified five components of intercultural competence in the ELP are relevant cultural knowledge, intercultural awareness, intercultural skills, multiperspectivity, and critical cultural awareness. Based on the intercultural competence components models proposed by Howard Hamilton et al. (1998), the evaluation elements in the ELP refer to knowledge, skill, and attitude. On a theoretical level, the location of the assessment is to “respect for diversity of cultures and ways of life” (Little, Goullier, & Hughes, 2012, p.15). Correspondingly, the content design of the ELP stresses the learner's sensitivity to the cultural differences and similarities from the “self” and the “others” perspective. Then, the open questions about intercultural encounters show consideration of residence abroad and home context. As for credibility and validity, some ELP pages are designed to capture the intercultural experiences associated with the particular language and the personal growth in the recursive structure, which is consistent with the guiding theoretical dimensions. Besides, the creation of the ELP is that it carries a two-way mediating role between language proficiency and intercultural awareness. The suitability of the ELP is represented from some of the content pages, which can be adaptable for any age stage. In practical, to evaluate the learner’s specified intercultural awareness, skills and actual ability, the measurement formats cover language passport, language biography and dossier. The questions designer of the ELP take practical factors like location and learning intensity seriously to encourage learner’s multiperspectivity. Furthermore, the characteristics of the ELP is the extensive use of the self-assessment checklist to stimulate learners’ reflection and further generate self-motivation. Specifically, the open questions are designed with no preferred answers. This is helpful to avoid the over-generic fixed options and learn about the learner's subtle intercultural changes.

The assessment questions related to the cultural acceptance and cultural uncertainty are displayed in the context of school, workplace and the world outsider (Council of Europe, 2001), to some extent, the design represents a tendency of intercultural components' subdivision. Thus, the assessment consequence turns out to be more concrete and widely applicable. The most remarkable point of the ELP design is the applied recursive structure, to a great extent, which avoids the inherent weakness of the assessment based on the compositional model and helps the sustained reflection during the learning process. If time is permitted, the continual usage of the ELP with a recursive structure is possible to assess subjunctive factors and objective factors which affect learners' learning achievement at different stages.

In contrast, three limitations are worthy of attention in the ELP. Firstly, a comprehensive and holistic IC assessment in the production of multiple types of models, which attempts to cover the dimensions of intercultural elements and perspectives as much as possible. Practically, the ELP just focusses on the compositional model and pragmatic and sociolinguistic areas. Secondly, the ELP only applies the qualitative research method and traits to the evaluation process without the combination of the quantitative method. Inevitably, the weakness such as time-consuming data collection and biased research interpretation based on the researcher's perspective will hinder assessment objectivity and intended effect. Most importantly, the single-type open-questions are time-consuming and low motivated for the participants; in some cases, participants behave restricted (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012) and lack of interest due to the large quantity of open-question numbers.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has explored the evaluation of intercultural adaptability and communication skills in the context of multicultural business interactions. The findings indicate that a comprehensive assessment of these competencies is crucial for intercultural adaptation in dynamic working and living

environment. Specifically, the study highlights the importance of intercultural adaptability in navigating cultural differences and the significance of strong business communication skills in fostering productive relationships in diverse settings. While numerous theoretical frameworks and measurement tools exist for assessing intercultural competence, there remains a critical need for comprehensive and practical assessment methods. The complexities and challenges inherent in evaluating intercultural competence require careful consideration and mitigation in assessment design and implementation.

Moving forward, it is essential to address these challenges by developing more inclusive assessment tools that encompass a wider range of dimensions and are applicable across various disciplinary contexts. By addressing the limitations identified in this study, such as the need for more nuanced measurement tools and tailored training programs, organizations can better equip their employees for success in international and multicultural environments. Embracing a global perspective and prioritizing ongoing development in intercultural competencies will be key to thriving in the increasingly interconnected and diverse global marketplace.

REFERENCES

- [1] Brinkmann, U. (2011). Connecting intercultural learning with personal development: Insights from the Intercultural Readiness Check. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.505.9404&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.
- [2] Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- [3] Collier, M. J. (1989). Cultural and intercultural communication competence: Current approaches and directions for future research. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 13(3), 287-302.
- [4] Council of Europe. (2001). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Deardorff, D. K. (2004). The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization at institutions of higher education in the United States (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). North Carolina State University, Raleigh.
- [6] Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in Intercultural Education*, 10, 241–266.
- [7] Deardorff, D. K., & Hunter, W. (2006). Educating global-ready graduates. *International Educator*, 15(3), 72–83.
- [8] Fantini, A. E. (2001). Designing quality intercultural programs: A model and a process. *Interspectives: A Journal on Transcultural Education*, 18, 100–105.
- [9] Fantini, A. E. (2007). Exploring and assessing intercultural competence (Research report 07-01). Brattleboro, Vermont: Center for Social Development.
- [10] Fantini, A. E. (2009). Assessing intercultural competence. *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence*, 456-476.
- [11] Griffith, D. A., & Harvey, M. G. (2001). Executive insights: an intercultural communication model for use in global interorganizational networks. *Journal of International Marketing*, 9(3), 87-103.
- [12] Little, D., Goullier, F., & Hughes, G. (2012). European language portfolio. *Perspectives from the European Language Portfolio: Learner Autonomy and Self-assessment*, 7, 15-16.
- [13] Hammer, M., & Bennett, M. J. (2003). Measuring intercultural sensitivity: The Intercultural Development Inventory. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27, 403–419.
- [14] Heckmann, F. (2003). From ethnic nation to universalistic immigrant integration. In F. Heckmann & D. Schnapper (Eds.), *The integration of immigrants in European societies: National differences and trends of convergence*. Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius.
- [15] Howard Hamilton, M. F., Richardson, B. J., & Shuford, B. (1998). Promoting multicultural education: A holistic approach. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 18, 5–17.
- [16] Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2012). *The adult learner*. London: Routledge.
- [17] Matveev, A. V., & Nelson, P. E. (2004). Cross-cultural communication competence and multicultural team performance: Perceptions of American and Russian managers. *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*, 4, 253-270.

- [18] Matveev, A. V., & Yamazaki Merz, M. (2014). Intercultural competence assessment: What are its key dimensions across assessment tools. Papers from the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology Conferences, New York, USA. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp_papers/128/.
- [19] Oliver, J. L. H., & Porta, J. I. D. (2006). How to measure IC in clusters: empirical evidence. *Journal of Intellectual Capital*, 7(3), 354-380.
- [20] Rathje, S. (2007). Intercultural competence: The status and future of a controversial concept. *Language and intercultural communication*, 7(4), 254-266.
- [21] Spencer-Oatey, H., & Franklin, P. (2009). *Intercultural interaction: A multidisciplinary approach to intercultural communication*. London: Springer.
- [22] Spitzberg, B. H., & Changnon, G. (2009). Conceptualizing intercultural competence. *The handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 2-52). London: SAGE.
- [23] Van der Zee, K. I., & Van Oudenhoven, J. P. (2001). The multicultural personality questionnaire: Reliability and validity of self and other ratings of multicultural effectiveness. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 35, 278–288.