

## BUILDING TEACHERS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the concept of intercultural communication competence and intercultural communication in education settings. The digital era which is indicated by the explosion of communication technologies has tremendous implication for intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is a transactional and symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different culture. It may occur not only in virtual environment in which people interact through communication technology media, but also in non-virtual settings. The ultimate terminal of intercultural communication skill is the ability to interact appropriately and effectively with those from other cultural background. Thus, teachers should master the intercultural communication competence, as learners and teachers come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and bring a variety of expectations to the interaction.*

**Key Words** – *intercultural competence, intercultural communication competence, educational setting*

### INTRODUCTION

The changes in the digital era bring significant influence on the increasing cultural diversity in many contexts. The changes increase rapidly the compression of time and space in an ever-changing world where distances between different parts have contracted and shrunk into 'a small interactive field' (Chen & Zhang, 2010:805). There has been a stronger need of interdependence and interconnectedness among individuals and countries, as well as a stronger sense of difference. Moreover, it has impacted on all cultural, social, political, economic, and spiritual aspect of human life.

With an increasingly interwoven world, individuals from various parts of the world can interact and connect with each other without the constraints of physical proximity and spatial immobility (Buckingham, 2008:147). In this context, teachers need to have competency on intercultural communication. They want to better understand the culturally diverse colleagues and students. It is a scientific reason that this paper discusses the concept of intercultural communication competence, intercultural communication in education settings, and strategy of building intercultural communication competence for teachers.

### DISCUSSION

#### ***The concept of intercultural communication competence***

Intercultural communication is transactional and symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different culture (Novinger, 2001). The ultimate terminal of intercultural communication competence is the preparation of learners to interact appropriately and effectively with those from other cultural backgrounds. Culture is often considered as the core concept in intercultural communication.

Nieto (1999:48) proposes definition of culture as the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people. An additional

complicated dimension of intercultural communication competence relates to the goal of those who are preparing individuals for intercultural relationships as numerous contexts and multiple models of intercultural competence exist that include international business, study-abroad, international schools, medical careers, living abroad, and education.

Finally, intercultural communication competence is needed as a result of technological imperative. Technology has increased the frequency with which many people encounter multilingual situations and so must decide which language will be used and how to create a cross-cultural understanding with the target language speakers.

Intercultural communication competence occurs when people of different cultural background interact, but this definition seems simplistic and redundant. To understand properly the intercultural communication, it is necessary to describe four building blocks of intercultural communication, which are: culture, communication, context, and power (Martin and Thomas, 2008:28). Culture can be viewed as learned patterns of perception, values, and behaviors, shared by a group of people, that is also dynamic and heterogeneous. Culture is communication and communication is culture (Novinger, 2001:14). In a living and dynamic circle, culture governs communication and communication creates, reinforces, and re-creates culture. Culture also provides identity for humans. It is the total communication frame-work for words, actions, body language, emblems (gestures), intonation, facial expressions, for the way one handles time, space, and materials, and for the way one works, makes love, plays, and so on. All these things become complete communication systems.

Communication is a symbolic process whereby meaning is shared and negotiated. In addition, communication is dynamic, may be unintentional, and is receiver-oriented (Martin and Thomas, 2008:58). The relationship between culture and communication is complex since culture influences communication and communication reinforce educational process since education is a process of socialization and enculturation. For this reason, education is significant context for intercultural communication, as teachers and learners come from a variety of cultural background and have a variety of expectations in their interaction. Moreover, the roles that teachers and learners enact in the classroom are very much a part of the cultural influences on education.

Furthermore, there are some social issues that should be considered as they bear upon intercultural communication. Firstly, educational process reflects cultural power. This is indicated through the way of communication in the classroom, and interaction between teachers and students. This can bear a culture clash over learning styles and teaching styles become the case of intercultural communication in educational settings. Learning styles is the different ways that students learn in different culture, while teaching style is the style that instructors use to teach. Often learners are unaware of certain cultural assumption about education until they are confronted with different ways of learning. One of the facts to describe it is the case of Chinese students who study at a university in New Zealand. Chinese students should adapt to the New Zealand classroom communication styles which included interrupting, asking, and challenging the material. They found much guidance from other international students who helped them adapt, but they still found it difficult to engage in intercultural with New Zealand (Martin & Thomas, 2008).

Secondly, it is a crucial thing that the structure of educational institutions often plays a significant role related to how that power functions. It is important to understand how the educational system empowers some over others and how this occurs because of the way the system is shaped. For instance, some colleges require the study of culture that tends to be Eurocentric which focuses on European or Western perspective. This course creates a particular worldview that challenges some student identities more than others. Consequently, this approach to education brings barriers to intercultural communication.

The aspect of grading and power is another case of intercultural communication. As in any other social setting, the classroom is surrounded firmly with cultural expectation about power relationship. In this case, a power gap may occur in the communication among teachers and students in which the difference can be greater or lesser in various cultures. In the United States, for instance, the relationship between teacher and students tend to be less formal than in other cultures (Martin & Thomas, 2008). In brief, cultural differences often create intercultural conflicts simply. This occurs since the individuals who has involved fail to confront those differences.

Finally, a dialogue that confronts cultural difference should be recognized honestly (Tierney, 1997). To achieve this, it is important to identify a cultural difference that creates problems in the educational

process. The change in the educational process can be begun through discussing these cultural differences. Moreover, it is important to create an environment in which cultural differences are assumed to exist and discussed.

### ***Building teachers' intercultural communication competence***

As the digital era amplifies, the efforts toward building teachers' intercultural communication competence become more important. Becoming competent in intercultural communication competence relates to mindset, affection, and skill (Bennett, 2008). Mindset refers to knowledge and one's awareness of operating within a particular cultural context, values, and norms. Affection refers to attitudes and tolerance of ambiguity. Skills refer to abilities in creating relationship and managing social interaction.

Teachers need to receive intercultural communication training. The intercultural communication training is directed to raise awareness on the bases of cultural formation and their correlations with the construction of different cultural norms and communication skills when interacting with individuals from other cultures.

Intercultural communication training must provide a functional awareness of the cultural dynamic present in intercultural relations and assist trainees in becoming more effective in cross-cultural settings (Ganesh & Mingsheng Li, 2017). Through intercultural communication training, teachers are guided to become more competent interculturally. Moreover, teachers are lead to move from ethnocentrism to *ethno-relativism*. This term highlights that the experiences of an individual's beliefs and behaviors are merely on organization of reality among a range of feasible possibilities (Bennet, 2004).

Training of intercultural communication competence is also directed to master intercultural competence. Intercultural competence refers to achieving adequate relevant knowledge about particular cultures, as well as general knowledge about the sorts of issues arising when members of different cultures interact, holding receptive attitudes that encourage establishing and maintaining contact with diverse others, as well as having the skills required to draw upon both knowledge and attitudes when interacting with others from different culture.

Byram (2008) divides intercultural competence into separate skills: *savoirs* (knowledge of the culture), *savoir comprendre* (skills of interpreting/relating), *savoir apprendre* (skills of discovery/interaction), *savoir etre* (attitudes of curiosity/openness), and *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness). To account for the complex interrelations of so many elements, the term is most often used in the plural form, such as competence or competences, depending on the country where discussion originates.

Intercultural interaction sometimes runs well in which participants have mutual understanding. At other sides, intercultural interactions sometimes lead to misunderstanding and conflict. Thus, the core of intercultural competence is the preparation of individuals to interact appropriately and effectively with those from other cultural background. Consequently, understanding culture becomes an integral component of intercultural competence. Ward (2004) adds that cultural knowledge and cultural attitude are not adequate to prepare individuals to deal with a range of intercultural settings. Thus, the training should include social skills in order to create behavioral changes.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In the globalized context, it is vital that teachers to master intercultural communication competence. All teachers, therefore, need to pay significant attention to grasp and enhance the intercultural communication competence as one of efforts to survive in the multicultural communication. In order to develop this skill and achieve the goal of becoming effective intercultural speakers and communicators, teachers are required to deeply master the foundations of intercultural communication and its implication in educational settings. These can be acquired through training of intercultural communication competence. Last but not least, it is also important to engage them in the intercultural community.

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