

Intercultural Competences: Some Reflections based on the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters¹

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I report on a theoretical analysis of the attitudinal, affective, cognitive and behavioural competences which are required for effective functioning during an intercultural encounter. This paper also summarises findings which have been obtained in recent research on how children's and adolescents' attitudes to people from other cultural groups develop.

This analysis and these empirical findings have been used to guide the development of a new educational instrument called the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE), which a multidisciplinary team of researchers has recently developed for the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe. The policy context within which this work has been carried out is the CoE's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (2008). The *White Paper* observes that the competences which are required for intercultural dialogue are not automatically acquired, but instead need to be learned, practised and maintained throughout life, and calls for educators to develop new methods for preparing future generations for such dialogue. The AIE has been developed in response to this call: it is an educational instrument which has been designed to facilitate and support the development of the intercultural competences which are necessary for engaging in effective intercultural dialogue.

2. Interculturality, tolerance and respect

In our analysis of the competences which are required for intercultural dialogue, the term 'interculturality' is used to refer to the capacity to experience cultural otherness and to use this experience to reflect on matters which are normally taken for granted within one's own culture and environment. Interculturality therefore involves being open to, interested in, curious about and empathetic towards people from other cultures. However, in addition, interculturality involves using this heightened awareness of otherness to evaluate one's own everyday patterns of perception, thought, feeling and behaviour in order to develop greater self-knowledge and self-understanding.

Interculturality, defined in this way, enables people to act as mediators among people of different cultures, and to explain and interpret different cultural perspectives. It also enables people to function effectively and to achieve interactional and conversational goals in situations where cultural otherness and difference are involved.

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Interculturality presupposes both tolerance and respect for cultural others, but goes considerably beyond them. The term ‘tolerance’ (from the Latin ‘tolerare’ = enduring) literally means enduring, or putting up with, other people who are judged to be different from oneself. This definition means that it is possible to be both tolerant and prejudiced simultaneously.

The term ‘respect’ refers to a more positive attitude, where an individual does not simply tolerate difference, but regards it as having a positive value. Respect, as defined here, can be combined with tolerance, since it does not require agreement with what is respected, but it can be seen as a way of positively appreciating the ‘other’ and his or her differences from the self.

In our analysis, both tolerance and respect are necessary prerequisites for interculturality, but are not sufficient. Over and above tolerance and respect, we believe that interculturality also involves using the experience of otherness to evaluate one’s own cultural perspectives and positions.

Hence, for us, the term ‘interculturality’ refers to:

- having a tolerant and respectful attitude towards individuals and groups from other cultural backgrounds
- being open to, interested in, curious about and empathetic towards people from other cultures
- being willing to use the awareness of cultural otherness to evaluate one’s own cultural perspectives and everyday patterns of perception, thought, feeling and behaviour in order to develop greater self-knowledge and self-understanding

3. The model of intercultural competences

Based on this understanding of interculturality, our analysis subdivides intercultural competences into six broad categories (which are derived from the work of Byram, 1997):

- Attitudes
- Knowledge
- Skills of discovery and interaction
- Skills of interpreting and relating
- Critical cultural awareness
- Action orientation

Each of these categories is explained below.

3.1 Attitudes

3.1.1 Attitudes: respect for otherness

Firstly, interculturality requires a willingness to suspend one’s own values, beliefs and behaviours, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and a willingness to accept that people from other cultures have different sets of values, beliefs and behaviours. Hence, interculturality requires an attitude of *respect for otherness*. This respect is manifested in a readiness to suspend belief about the ‘naturalness’ of one’s own culture and a readiness to accept that the members of other cultures may regard their own culture as ‘natural’. Respect for otherness is also manifested in showing curiosity about, and an interest in, cultural others.

3.1.2 Attitudes: empathy

Secondly, interculturality involves understanding other people's perspectives, and being able to project oneself imaginatively into the beliefs, values, thoughts and feelings of people from other cultures. In other words, interculturality involves having *empathy* with people from other cultures.

Empathising with people from other cultures is not easy, because they have different beliefs, different values and different behaviours from ourselves. Success in understanding people from other cultures therefore depends on:

- being able to 'decentre' from one's own cultural presuppositions, that is, becoming aware of what is usually unconscious
- being able to adopt the other person's perspective, and accepting that their ways also seem 'natural' to them

3.1.3 Attitudes: acknowledgement of identities

A further important aspect of interculturality, which is linked to empathy, is the ability to acknowledge the identities which cultural others ascribe to themselves, and to acknowledge the meanings which they themselves associate with those identities. This is not always easy because there is a tendency to assimilate other people's identities to the ones which we know from our own cultural perspective. Hence, interculturality also involves the *acknowledgement of identities* and recognising these for what they are from the perspective of the other culture.

3.1.4 Attitudes: tolerance of ambiguity

Because people who belong to other cultures have different beliefs, values and behaviours from ourselves, interculturality also involves recognising that there can be multiple perspectives on, and interpretations of, any given situation. Hence, interculturality requires multiperspectivity, that is, the ability and willingness to take others' perspectives on events, practices, products and documents into account, in addition to our own. In other words, interculturality involves the acceptance of uncertainty and a *tolerance of ambiguity*.

3.2 Knowledge: Specific and general knowledge

Specific knowledge about one's own culture and about its practices and products is acquired primarily through socialisation within the family and the school. However, in order to be able to understand the perspective of a person from another culture, one also needs to have some *specific knowledge* about the culture of that other person and about its practices and products.

In addition, if one wishes to engage in dialogue with a person from another culture, it is also important to have more *general knowledge*. In particular, one needs general knowledge about interaction and communication processes and of how these processes are shaped by cultural factors.

Interculturality therefore requires both specific and general forms of knowledge.

3.3 Skills of discovery and interaction

Novelty is often encountered in intercultural dialogue, and nobody can anticipate all of their knowledge needs in advance. For this reason, it is important to be able to find out new knowledge and integrate it with what is already known. In particular, we need to know how

to ask people from other cultures about their beliefs, values and behaviours, and how to seek out further information about their cultures. So intercultural dialogue requires *skills of discovery and interaction*, and these sometimes have to be deployed under the constraints of real-time communication with the cultural other.

Because new cultural knowledge may be acquired during the course of interaction, interculturality also requires *behavioural flexibility*, that is, the ability to adjust and augment one's existing capacities and to adapt one's behaviour to new situations.

Problems in intercultural communication can often occur because the communication partners follow different linguistic conventions. This is because people from different cultures:

- associate different meanings with specific words
- express their intentions in different linguistic forms
- follow different cultural conventions of how a conversation should take place with regard to its content or its structure
- attribute different meanings to gestures, mime, volume, pauses, etc.

These problems are exacerbated by the use of foreign languages, when people are often not able to formulate or interpret intentions appropriately in given contexts. Successful intercultural dialogue therefore also entails *communicative awareness*. Communicative awareness is the ability to recognise different linguistic conventions, different verbal and non-verbal communication conventions and their effects on discourse processes, and to negotiate rules appropriate for intercultural communication.

3.4 Skills of interpreting and relating

A further important aspect of interculturality is the ability to interpret the perspectives, practices and products of another culture. These *skills of interpreting* require specific knowledge of the other culture, as well as empathy, multiperspectivity and more general knowledge of cultural practices, products and identities.

Interpretation also requires *skills of relating*, that is, the ability to compare the perspectives, practices and products of the other culture with corresponding things in one's own culture, and *seeing the similarities and differences* between them.

3.5 Critical cultural awareness

In our model, a crucial component of intercultural competence is *critical cultural awareness*. This is the ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products both in one's own culture and in other cultures. It involves:

- becoming aware of one's own assumptions, preconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices
- identifying the values which are expressed through the perspectives, practices and products both of one's own culture and other cultures
- making an evaluative analysis of those perspectives, practices and products, using an explicit set of criteria in order to do so

Critical cultural awareness therefore entails a critical awareness of oneself and of one's own cultural situation and values (not only those of the cultural other). It is for this reason that we argue that interculturality involves using the awareness of cultural otherness to evaluate one's

own everyday patterns of perception, thought, feeling and behaviour in order to develop greater self-knowledge and self-understanding.

3.6 Action orientation

The final competence identified in our analysis is *action orientation*. The actions which an intercultural individual can take can be of many forms, for example:

- grasping and taking seriously the opinions and arguments of others, according personal recognition to people of other opinions, putting oneself in the situation of others
- accepting variety, divergence and difference, recognising conflicts, finding harmony where possible
- regulating issues in a socially acceptable fashion, finding compromises, seeking consensus, accepting majority decisions
- weighing rights and responsibilities, emphasising group responsibilities, developing fair norms and common interests and needs

Action orientation is the willingness to undertake action, either alone or with others, with the aim of making a contribution to the common good. Action orientation is therefore the crucial link between interculturality and what we would term ‘intercultural citizenship’.

4. The development of young people’s attitudes to cultural others

In developing the AIE, we have also taken into account a substantial body of recent research into the development of children’s and adolescents’ attitudes to people from other cultures.

4.1 The Piagetian approach

Early studies into how children acquire their images of people from other cultures suggested that these images are acquired in a universally similar manner, irrespective of children’s own cultural background and experiences. This conclusion was based on the psychological theory of Piaget. This theory argued that attitudes to other people are dependent on a person’s underlying cognitive representations of the world. The theory also argued that there are major transitions in general thinking about the world at about 6-7 years of age and 11-12 years of age. Before 6-7 years, cognitive egocentricity results in children holding positive views of their own cultural groups and negative views of other groups. After the age of 6-7 years, as levels of egocentricity decline, attitudes to ingroups become less positive and attitudes to outgroups become less negative. Finally, at 11-12 years, as a result of the acquisition of the capacity for more abstract thought, it was proposed that further changes in attitudes to other cultural groups take place as a consequence of children’s enhanced capacity to make logical judgements.

4.2 More recent research

However, more recent research has revealed a much more complex picture. Contrary to the Piagetian picture, this research has shown that a diversity of different developmental profiles is in fact exhibited by children. For example, sometimes children’s attitudes to people from other ethnic and national groups actually become more negative (rather than more positive) with increasing age. However, sometimes their attitudes initially become more positive but then become more negative at a later point in development. In other cases, attitudes initially become more negative before becoming more positive once again. Cases have also been found where children and adolescents do not show any changes in their evaluations of, and feelings towards, people from other cultures with increasing age.

4.3 Factors influencing children's attitudes to people from other cultures

This variability which occurs in the development of attitudes to people from other cultures has been traced to a number of factors. These include:

- the specific structure of the intergroup relations within the child's own society
- the relative social status of the child's own cultural group within that structure
- family discourse and practices in relationship to cultural groups
- the use of multiple languages within the family home
- the contents of the school curriculum, especially curriculum coverage of issues relating to racism and discrimination
- teachers' discourse and practices in relationship to cultural groups, ethnic discrimination and victimisation
- the way in which cultural groups are represented in the mass media, especially television and the cinema
- personal contact with individuals from other cultures

Notice the last factor in this list: personal contact with individuals from other cultures. In other words, intercultural encounters are known to be a prime site in which attitudes to cultural others can be altered. However, encounters with cultural others do not always have a *positive* effect on children's and adolescents' intercultural attitudes. Certain specific conditions have to be met for the changes to be in a positive direction. Specifically, intercultural encounters lead to more positive attitudes towards the other group in general (and not merely towards the specific individual with whom the interaction has taken place) under the following conditions:

- when the individuals who meet and interact are of roughly equal status (for example, when both are school students of the same age)
- when the different cultural group memberships of these individuals are made salient within the contact situation (that is, when these memberships are emphasised and attention is drawn to them rather than underplayed)
- when they engage together on some cooperative activity (as in a cooperative learning task where the participating students are interdependent on each other for successfully completing the task)
- when there is external institutional support for the principle of equality (for example, when a school lays down clear and explicit expectations and rules about the unacceptability of any kind of harassment, discrimination or racism)
- when anxiety in the individuals who are involved in the intercultural encounter is low
- when, in the course of the interaction, they find things out about each other (for example, about each others' cultural practices)
- when the contact situation provides individuals with the opportunity to become friends with one another

4.4 Additional psychological factors influencing children's attitudes to people from other cultures

Thus, recent research has emphasised the role of environmental factors (such as the family, the school, the mass media and intercultural contact) in how intercultural attitudes emerge and develop, rather than the cognitive factors which Piaget had previously argued were the crucial determinants of attitudes to cultural others.

However, this is not to say that certain cognitive skills and competences are not also linked to the development of intercultural attitudes. There is evidence from recent studies that, in children, there are some specific cognitive abilities which are indeed sometimes related to lower levels of prejudice towards other cultural groups. These include:

- the ability to understand that the underlying nature of an entity does not always change even though its externally observable appearance may change
- the ability to classify a set of people in multiple ways rather than in just a single way, that is, cognitive flexibility
- the ability to understand that different people holding different opinions can both be correct when considered from their own point of view
- the ability to empathise with other people

In other words, there is research support for several of the components that we have identified in our analysis of intercultural competences. However, other components have not yet been subjected to empirical scrutiny. The hope is that appropriate studies will be conducted in the future to test the proposal that intercultural competences can be broken down into the following components, all of which we have argued are required for successful intercultural dialogue:

- Respect for otherness
- Empathy
- Acknowledgement of others' identities
- Tolerance of ambiguity
- Knowledge
- Skills of discovery and interaction
- Behavioural flexibility
- Communicative awareness
- Skills of interpreting and relating (seeing similarities and differences)
- Critical cultural awareness
- Action orientation

5. Some useful references

Further information about the issues discussed in this paper can be found in the following publications:

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