



## Understanding Intercultural Competence and its Assessment Tools

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### ABSTRACT

New technology and information systems, migration and the growing internationalisation of many economic sectors are some of the issues that nowadays put us into contact with people whose cultural background is different from our own. People at work need to be able to communicate in this 'new world' of diverse colleagues, clients and customers. Numerous people have to work in multicultural teams or engage in cross border negotiations or execute projects in foreign countries. Students therefore more and more need to develop competencies to operate in an intercultural context. This not only asks for education programs that respond to this need, but it is also necessary to formulate the components of this intercultural competence and develop assessment methods to measure it.

### Keywords:

New technology, information systems, intercultural

Reading through the massive amount of articles and books that have been published on intercultural communication and intercultural competence one is confronted with the wide variety of definitions of the concepts. To start with, "intercultural competence" also sometimes is referred to as "intercultural communication competence" (Arasaratnam, 2005; Byram, 1997; Parmenter, 2003) or "global competence", "cross-cultural competence" or "intercultural sensitivity" (Greenholz, 2005; ..), "intercultural effectiveness" (Stone, 2006) or "transnational competence" (Koehn, 2002). Various authors offer overviews of the elements that intercultural competence or effectiveness should contain (Stone, 2006, p. 343; Daerdorff, 2006, p. 249 and 250; Koehn, 2002, p. 110; Arasaratnam, 2005, p. 140). The number of elements range from 3 to 27, whereby the elements of flexibility, adaptability, empathy, respect and communication skills are most frequently mentioned.

Daerdorff (2006) tried to determine a definition and appropriate assessment methods of intercultural competence in her study, based on the opinions of a panel of 23 internationally known intercultural scholars and validated by 24 higher education administrators, representing a variety of institutions from across the United States. The most preferred definition, out of a choice of nine definitions derived from literature, was the definition of Byram (Byram, 1997, p.34): "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviours; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role" (Daerdorff, 2006, p.247). One of the main conclusions of Daerdorff, however is that, although she assumed that specific components of intercultural competence needed to be alienated for institutions in order to better be able to assess students' intercultural competence, the findings run contrary to this assumption. Both administrators and

intercultural scholars preferred more general conceptions of intercultural competence and the researcher concludes that “further research is needed to delve more deeply into the terminology used in the actual definition of intercultural competence” (Daerdorff, 2006, p.253). She constructed a pyramid model of intercultural competence in which the desired external outcome is described as: behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately to achieve one’s goals to some degree. And the components of the desired internal outcome are: adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative view and empathy. The importance of attitude is emphasized by several authors, specifically the attitudes of openness, respect (valuing all cultures), and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity) are viewed as fundamental to intercultural competence.

Daerdorff (2006) made an inventory of assessment methods used in 24 U.S. postsecondary institutions, representing a wide variety of institutions, from community colleges to large research universities. Top assessment methods currently being used include student interviews, followed by student papers and presentations, student portfolios, observations of students by others/host culture, professor evaluations (in courses) and pre-tests and post-tests (Daerdorff, 2006, p. 248). In our training course we use student presentations and students' reflective journals as assessment. In the reflective journals they have to describe their personal intercultural experiences as critical incidents and in their analysis, they describe their feelings and opinions, but also have to apply the frameworks to analyse cultures which are offered during the course. Next to these methods we were interested in a more objective, standardized instrument to measure the students' intercultural competence and the progress they made.

Focussing on pre-test and post-test instruments, we found several widely used and well known questionnaires in the literature and we present an short overview below.

- *Intercultural Development Inventory* (IDI), developed by Dr. Mitchell Hammer and Dr. Milton Bennett. (ICI , 2007) This assessment

instrument is a psychometrically normed and validated 50-item questionnaire based on M. Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1993). The IDI measures cognitive structure rather than attitudes. It has several scales measuring worldviews that vary from more ethnocentric to more ethnorelative. According to Bennett’s model more ethnorelative worldviews have more potential to generate the attitudes, knowledge and behaviour that constitute intercultural competence.

- The *Intercultural Readiness Check* (IRC) is a 60-item questionnaire assessing four key aspects of intercultural competence: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, building commitment and preference for certainty (IBI, 2007). The IRC has scales for intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, intercultural relationship building, conflict management, leadership and tolerance for ambiguity. The instrument has been developed and tested over a period of more than three years. (Van der Zee and Brinkmann, 2004)

- The *Multicultural Personality Questionnaire* (MPQ) is a personality questionnaire that measures multicultural effectiveness, with scales on cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility (Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee, 2002).

- The *Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory* (CCAI) is a “training instrument designed to provide information to an individual about his or her potential for cross-cultural effectiveness” (Kelley & Meyers, 1995, p.1 in Williams, 2005, p. 360). The CCAI covers four dimensions: emotional resilience, flexibility and openness, perceptual acuity and personal autonomy and as the name of the instrument indicates it measures the degree of cross-cultural adaptability. (Williams, 2005).

- The *Intercultural Sensitivity Index* (ISI) was “designed by Olson and Kroeger (2001) to

measure the global competencies and intercultural sensitivity of individuals and their relationship on individuals' effectiveness and experience abroad" (Williams, 2005, p.361). The components of this instrument are substantial knowledge, perceptual understanding and intercultural communication.

- The INCA project has the *Intercultural Profile*, which is a questionnaire containing 21 statements on intercultural situations. It measures tolerance for ambiguity, behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness, knowledge discovery, respect for otherness and empathy. (INCA, 2007).

The assessment of intercultural competence in foreign language education is a complex and important issue. At a time where there is an implicit commandment in education to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence, and where employers demand quality instruments that can predict whether or not employees will function successfully in intercultural contact situations, it is high time that systematic action was taken to develop adequate assessment tools. We hope to have supplied a tool that can help to assess the quality of existing test formats and to develop new high quality test types. We also hope that this paper may constitute the starting point for research investigating the framework's validity when applied to a variety of test types in a variety of test situations with a variety of test-takers.

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