Article
Developing Intercultural Competence: recognizing the minimization effect

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1. Introduction

　　Recently, many scholars have explored and discussed the notion of intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, and how this relates to our judgments of others' behavior and thinking. Intercultural competence results in producing unique perspectives that arise from the interaction of several cultures and is a part of developing multilingual or multicultural perspectives (Fantini, 2007). In other words, intercultural competence can give us the ability to adapt to unpredictable multicultural situations, which is a recurrent theme in English as an International Language contexts as well as English as foreign language contexts. Bennett (1986) describes how intercultural sensitivity is not natural to any single culture and that the development of this ability depends on acquiring a new awareness and attitudes. The author introduces an awareness model called the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) which consists of a continuum of six stages (discussed in Section 3.2) of personal growth among intercultural communication from denial to integration. The latter being the acceptance of behavioral differences, including language, communication style, and nonverbal patterns. Bennett (1986) emphasizes that developing empathy in intercultural sensitivity is defined as a temporary shift in perspective such that one interprets events as if one were the other person. Empathy has been identified as the key factor when trying to understand and adapt to other worldview belief systems for successful intercultural communication. When the other person is using a significantly different world view to process reality, the development of intercultural empathy allows for a shift in our cultural world viewpoint. Chen and Starosta's (1998) research about intercultural sensitivity takes a wider approach by relating attitudes, such as self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy as well as non-judgement to the term. Perry and Southwell's (2011) approach to developing intercultural sensitivity for successful intercultural interaction is to have an active desire to motivate interactants to understand, appreciate and accept differences among cultures.

1.1 English as an International Language

　　Because English is used more widely as a second language than as a first and spoken widely, it can be defined as an international language. Within the field of English as an International Language (EIL) , for example, being international means that the language has developed to where it is no longer linked to a single culture or nation, but serves both global and local needs as a language of wider communication (McKay, 2002). In the process of achieving the status as English as a lingua franca, the very nature of

English has changed in terms of how many of its speakers make use of English and how English relates to culture (McKay, 2003). This means that the development of English on a global and local scale has created world Englishes, such Singlish (Singaporean English), which carry unique linguistic and cultural features. Yet, when someone is speaking our native tongue, albeit in another world English form, there is a tendency to unconsciously link our dominant culture values to the form of English that best represents our larger norms and rules of interactions. Because language is a symbol of culture, symbols often have unique interpretations depending on what culture values and norms underpin it. For example, ambiguous communication styles (*aimai*) in Japan is the norm to maintain social harmony; whereas in the American English ambiguous communication is usually interpreted negatively in face-to-face interaction. Because different interpretations are often unconsciously derived from each country's national culture values and norms, more complex cross-cultural interactions involving migration, economic and business situations (see Hammer, 2000) can easily lead to miscommunication and negative evaluations of the other speaker. This is why, acknowledging intercultural competence in first, second and EIL contexts is essential. In this essay, we shall briefly discuss how to acquire Intercultural Competence and several different models that can help us along the journey. The main purpose of this paper, however, is to highlight the minimization stage (Section 3.2.1) of Bennett's DMIS model (2011) as it is arguably the most important stage in understanding cultural diversity. First, it is necessary to define and discuss the concept of intercultural competence within the field of Intercultural Communication, and why it is needed as a critical component to developing intercultural sensitivity for those in contact with dissimilar cultures.

2. Intercultural and Communicative Competence

2.1 Terms

The term culture in this paper shall be referred to as, "...a learned meaning system that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, meanings, and symbols that are passed down from one generation to the next and are shared by varying degrees by interacting members of a community" (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2012, p. 16). Norms tell us what is correct behavior and can be defined as a "standard of behavior that exist within a group or category of people" (Hofstede et. al., 2010, p. 29). Values tell us what is right or wrong and are based on what we have learned from interacting with members of our community. Schema can be defined as being, "...generalized collections of knowledge of past experiences which are organized into related knowledge groups and are used to guide our behaviors in familiar situations " (Nishida, 1999, p. 754). "Schema(ta)" and "background knowledge" are used interchangeably to imply unrecognized culture-specific groups of knowledge that the speaker uses to interpret a text or utterance.

Like culture, the term intercultural competence is a slippery term to define but a needed baseline at the beginning of any work using it because a study's interpretations are often influenced by the researcher's particular point of view. For instance, one researcher may be focused on *how well participants recognize* cultural differences in a particular intercultural context. Another may try to answer *how competent participants performed* in the same or similar intercultural context. The former approach concerns intercultural awareness skills while the latter intercultural competence skills. The two are linked but at different parts of the same spectrum of intercultural and communicative competence. Lustig and Koester offer a rather opaque definition of intercultural competence as "..a symbolic process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings" (p. 57, 1999). However, the creation of a successfully shared meaning depends on applying our IC knowledge of the norms and values of both cultures to the appropriate context. How well we can create this meaning determines our level of competence. Unfortunately, it is problematic to recognize our own level of competency and, hence, the need for the models of intercultural awareness for didactic purposes.

Communicative competence is an important concept in cross-cultural studies because it implies more than only linguistic competence. Communicative competence is a term that was first used by Hymes (1971) to describe a system of rules underpinning communicative behavior. Similarly, the field of ethnography of speaking or communication (Saville-Troike 1982, Gumperz 1982b) attempts to answer the question, "What does a speaker need to know to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community, and how does (s)he learn? (Saville-Troike, p. 2). While intercultural competence is based on a solid understanding of our own cultural rules and norms in relation to the culture being compared, communicative competence focuses more on the language part of this cultural understanding and so that a social judgement can be made of how well a person interacts with others (Lustig and Koester, 1999).

Chen and Starosta define intercultural communication competence as, "...the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment" (1998, p. 28). However, the terms intercultural competence, awareness and sensitivity are often muddled in Intercultural Communication literature obfuscating the meanings and can lead to slightly different conclusions. The differences are summarized below, and thanks to Chen and Starosta's (1996, 1998) work in this area, we have a clear starting point to differentiate the terms. According to their work, intercultural competence is comprised of three interrelated concepts: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness and intercultural adroitness. *Intercultural sensitivity* can be described as our willingness to try and understand and appreciate cultural differences. *Intercultural awareness*, which is the focus of this paper, is the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence that seeks to understand cultural tendencies that can affect communication cross-cultural contexts. Developing intercultural awareness most often occurs in didactic contexts such as university lectures, exchange

programs, study abroad or cross-cultural role-plays. Finally, *intercultural adroitness* is the aspect that emphasizes the "skills needed for us to act effectively in intercultural interactions" (1998, p. 28).

3. Models of intercultural awareness

The purpose of intercultural awareness (IA) models is to understand the deep structure or cognitive aspects of a culture. Cultural values tell us how to be behave and are the framework of our schema that holds culture together. Schema itself is based on generalizations, or stereotypes, to help us interpret the constant stream of complex stimuli in daily life. Seeking to identify cultural values asks the question "why" as opposed to what or how. Why are Japanese polite? Why do Americans value modesty less? The answer to these why questions can greatly aid in our understanding and awareness of our own culture and increase our intercultural awareness and sensitivity.

So, how do IA models work? IA models originally started to identify the basic factual information of a culture (e.g. Saville-Troike 1978). Hall's model (1976) classified culture into high and low context which highlighted different thinking patterns. Kohl's fifty question model (1984) was aimed to develop the sojourner's knowledge of their host country. Questions such as, "who are your country's national heroes?" and "what is an important religious ceremony?", helped participants to understand their own cultural values better. Chen and Starosta (1998) developed an IA model that investigated cultural value orientations on 15 items. IA models seek to form a "cultural map" through collecting empirical information and then showing how to measure intercultural awareness (Chen and Starosta, p. 349). Measuring cultural values, however, is problematic due the large number of data required to cover the complexity of cultural value orientations. Therefore, cultural value orientations are often measured using Likert scale questionnaires to analyze the degree with which participants agree or disagree with targeted statements. More recently, Hofstede's (2004) developed six dimensions that contrast national culture: individualism, large/small power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, long-term orientation, indulgence versus restraint. Finally, Bennett's (2011) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), mentioned above, describes a developmental process of how we construct boundaries between our cultural "self" that of the "other" culture with the ultimate goal of providing intercultural training in deficient areas in corporate contexts.
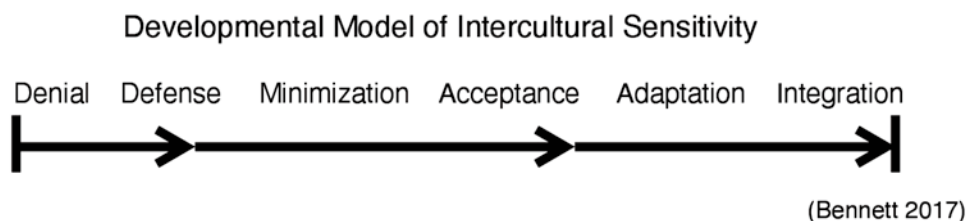
3.1 Intercultural Sensitivity

Developing sensitivity, it is argued, as opposed to awareness or skills, would be the necessary first step in order to increase awareness of cognitive cultural differences so that intercultural skills can be further developed and used for interacting successfully. If the learner is not sensitive to intercultural topics and issues, becoming more aware and skillful at interacting with intercultural environments

becomes problematic. Herein lies the problem with developing intercultural competence. Those who often most need intercultural awareness and adroitness fail to accept the first step of acquiring sensitivity of intercultural differences *by seeking only to address the commonalities between two diverse speakers*. In order to develop greater IC sensitivity, the receiver of the information or knowledge must first recognize three levels of understanding: 1) the need for better relationships and successful outcomes with people from different backgrounds 2) an acknowledgement as a starting point to sensitivity that cultural norms and values are indeed unique to a community of people resulting in distinct communication and behavioral tendencies. 3) dispelling the naïve form of individualism and inaccurate idea that if you treat everyone equally and communicate openly, you will succeed cross-culturally. Common sense is only common to the community of speakers to which we derive our culture identity from.

3.2 DMIS model

    For didactic purposes, Bennett's DMIS model (2011) is particularly useful and practical for highlighting our level of sensitivity to cultural differences. The DMIS is relevant to the discussion of IC competence and awareness because it highlights problematic areas in thinking that can prevent the transition from IC awareness to sensitivity. Because of this, it is worth describing in detail here and becomes the focus of this paper. The DMIS model describes a six stage process (see Figure 1) we undergo, from denial to integration, to become competent in intercultural contexts or from dissimilar groups within the same national culture and is described in more detail below.

Figure 1

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

Denial   Defense   Minimization   Acceptance   Adaptation   Integration

(Bennett 2017)

    The first stage is denial. According to Bennett (2017), this stage is the most ethnocentric because those within this stage deny that differences are important. The denial stage is characterized by an isolation from those who different than themselves. Imagining that other people have a different experience and worldview is difficult mainly because of a lack of exposure to them. For example, many Americans who have not traveled outside the US cannot tell the difference between a person from China or Japan.

Likewise, someone from an Asian country is likely to have trouble discerning Europeans from Americans or Australians. The result of the lack of intercultural competence means diversity and cultural differences tend to be ignored and negative stereotyping, and dehumanizing more readily occurs. A person in the denial stage will have the attitude of "I don't need to know" and have what Bennett calls "aggressive ignorance."

One step after denial is the defense stage. In this stage, we tend to positively evaluate our own world view and negatively evaluate "the other" culture. We believe that we are the "good guys" and often feel that our identity or majority power base is under threat. We have a tendency to have polarizing views that put others in evaluative categories such as, "immigrants are lazy and taking our jobs" or "foreigners are loud and don't understand how to act properly." According to Bennett, common implications for minority individuals in this stage is being excluded from dominant group decision making and the denial of equal opportunities. Those in the minority often feel under siege and threatened to try and protect their identity and world view.

3.2.1 Minimization

The next state after denial and defense Bennett labels minimization. This stage is quite common in low context cultures that value social equality and individualistic self identities. It is also the most difficult stage to recognize and acquire a greater depth of intercultural sensitivity unless we have developed a deeper culture awareness and recognition of our own specific cultural schema. In the minimization stage, we tend to recognize superficial cultural differences (e.g. Japanese don't say their opinions directly or Americans are friendly) but maintain the belief that "all humans are basically the same." People in this stage tend to ignore or disregard different world views as a way to reduce the threat to their cultural norm(s). We unconsciously (via culture specific schemata) look for commonalities that can confirm this cultural assumption such as personality, character, tolerance of ambiguity, or views of the self. However, as Bennett argues, when we give use to these psychological systems to find commonality as humans, we are giving more weight to these descriptions themselves than the fact that people come from distinct world views with unique values. Assuming what other people would think (e.g. we are all free individuals who want to live in a capitalistic society) is an ethnocentric problem resulting from this form of minimization by assuming human alikeness. Bennett cites the example of the US government's tendency to consistently believe that if they can remove a particular country's leader, its people will want to live *like us*. This comes from the erroneous position of assuming that cultural values are universally the same for all humans resulting in an unrecognized schema of "we are all basically the same *like me*." The idea of expecting others to be "just like ourselves" *minimizes* important unrecognized differences and often results in the different interpretations of the same behaviors. The minimization of cultural differences is used as a way of avoiding recognizing our own cultural patterns and prevents us from adapting to understanding others

(Bennett, 2011). In the unconscious search for the minimization of differences via cultural schemata, or "cultural constructs" as Bennett uses, information is construed non-evaluatively within familiar categories of our own world view, not because we believe we are better, but because we believe everyone is essentially the same. This stage makes it difficult to develop our own cultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity to others and in the workplace can stifle diversity and creativity from those with divergent world views. This makes it the most critical and problematic stage to recognize. For most Americans, for example, believing that "we are all basically the same *just like me*" is a deeply held cultural belief because this is underpinned with the cultural values of social equality and individualism. It would be difficult to apply this social equality norm if we believed that people had different views and opinions on social hierarchy and individual versus group norms and values. This is exactly the case between Japan and the US when it comes to the norms of interdependent consensus making in Japan versus defining one's individuality and independence in the low context communication US. Both unconsciously assume their way is the norm and, therefore, most desirable approach. Several examples of intercultural conflict due to minimization of cultural differences are discussed in section 4.0.

Minimization of the minority culture almost always, and sometimes unintentionally, cedes power and status to the dominant culture to maintain status quo. This minimization effect is usually evident in large institutions with a disproportionate number of culturally diverse minorities in the lower ranks compared with the upper ranks of those with decision making power. Interestingly, for organizations, this minimization often leads to *difficulty in retaining employees from diverse cultural backgrounds* because of an extreme emphasis on conformity, commonalities and a lack of recognition of their own unique cultural context in the world (Bennett, 2004).

If a person or organization is able to acquire enough intercultural sensitivity through education and training, the next stage becomes acceptance. In this stage, the dominant cultural group accepts differences. This means that individuals actively seek out knowledge of different cultures and may even "apply ethical principles cross-culturally." Organizations finally see the need for training efforts and those in positions of power are encouraged to recognize cultural differences. Once this is done, the acceptance stage manifests itself into behavior that allows us to put ourself in the other's shoes or what Bennett describes as "cognitive frame shifting." Our cultural schema becomes more flexible and we become more confident to communicate across different cultural contexts. We are able to recognize power discrepancies and the need for colleagues to have intercultural skills to maintain a climate of respect for diversity.

 Finally, adaptation develops into integration which is the final stage of Bennett's six stage model. In the integration stage, we define cultural differences as part of our identity and often feel that we do not belong in any one single culture. We may have multiple frames of references we can draw from and can move in and out of more than one cultural group seamlessly. Our identity is not based on any one culture

but a conglomeration of two or more cultures. Unfortunately, few of us are at this stage unless we were raised in a bicultural and bilingual environment.

4. Minimization and IC conflict

Recognizing the importance of minimization is not solely a phenomenon in Western individualistic low-context cultures. High-context communication cultures, such as Japan, strongly emphasize group held norms over individual norms; social hierarchy is assumed in contrast to a low-context way of viewing the world. What does minimization look like for a high-context culture? "We are all basically the same *just like me*" schema also applies but from this cultural construct, assumes others value group consensus building and the maintaining of strong harmonious interpersonal relationships above all else. So, when a low-context world view speaker, interacts in this culture, individual opinions are interpreted from the standpoint of how it affects others in the group. This often leads low-context speakers to feel that their opinions have little or no weight or that they are being marginalized or forced to fit-in with others and, thus, threatening their individuality and social equality value world view.

4.1 Example: Japan and the US

Japan as a high context culture that highly values social harmony is a useful contrast to the US. The cultural emphasis on social harmony and in-group interdependency in Japan makes diversity more problematic than in other more multicultural diverse societies. Japanese culture is described as a large power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance culture (see Hofstede et. al. 2010) that highly values harmonious social relationships. This tendency has many strong points (see Ryan 2012 for merits and demerits) such as establishing and maintaining strong interpersonal relationships, team building, teamwork, less workplace stress. However, for those trying to work and live inside Japan as outsiders to this community of shared norms, Japan can be frustratingly opaque and impersonal because these traits often result in individual feelings, opinions being excluded or ignored by (*tatemae*) ambiguous public face communication values. For the American native English speaker, openness and frankness (*honne*) are vital to establishing trust in social relationships rather than anticipating the feelings of others first. These two conflicting deep structure traits are internalized to help communication run smoothly. Hall describes this as an "action chain" which relies on these internalized processes to quickly make judgements and decisions across the entire spectrum of communication behavior. Minimization is often an unintended consequence to those who are unfamiliar with their own cultural construct or schema for interaction.

5. Discussion

Intercultural competence is a diverse range of appropriate cognitive, behavioral and affective skills that can lead to more effective communication with someone from another culture. However, it is argued here that to have successful cross-cultural outcomes, we need to first acquire intercultural sensitivity. However, as we have discussed, the process of developing IC awareness, and the sensitivity that follows, is counterintuitive because we need to become mindful and aware of our own cultural tendencies as we contrast them with the other culture while suspending any ethnocentric judgements.　This is problematic because most of us take for granted that our norms and values are based upon the centralizing tendencies of our larger national culture to make "common sense" decisions and judgements. Bennett's DMIS model describes six stages of intercultural sensitivity that can help us raise our awareness so that sensitivity may follow. It was argued in section 3.2.1 that the third stage, minimization, is the most critical to acquiring the intercultural sensitivity to increase awareness of cognitive cultural differences so that intercultural skills can be further developed and used for successful outcomes. The minimization of differences as an unconscious cultural norm　(e.g. we all want to live in a free market society that stresses individualism vs. group consensus and interdependence) is often used to justify the dominant culture's behavior but often fails to give real inclusion and empowerment for those in the cultural minority to achieve real diversity. Cultural diversity means more than simply recognizing that differences exist; it also means becoming more aware of our own cultural norms of being so as not to impose them on those from difference cultural backgrounds. Becoming more interculturally competent allows those from diverse cultural perspectives to feel more included, empowered and productive which can inspire greater creativity and drive innovation in an organization or in smaller cross-cultural interactions.

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Abstract

Intercultural Communication studies help us to identify the unique cultural perspectives of others so that we do not misunderstand people in important situations such as in educational, health or business settings. To become a competent intercultural communicator, we first need to develop an awareness of our (lack of) cultural knowledge and not solely focus on the commonalities of two culturally diverse speakers because this neglects important value differences of the minority second or foreign language speaker. Intercultural Communication focuses on the study of differences because this is where we can best develop the sensitivity to speakers who have divergent cultural norms and values on our journey of becoming more interculturally competent. The goal of this paper is to define and discuss the concept of intercultural competence within the field of Intercultural Communication, and why it is needed as a critical component to developing intercultural sensitivity for those in contact with dissimilar cultures. Several intercultural competence models are discussed with the main focus on how we can become mindful of how our cultural biases affect the communication process.