

The Definition of an Intercultural Person

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Abstract: *With the continuous increase in international cooperation and exchange, the intercultural person is receiving more and more attention in today's globalization. This study carries on the preliminary definition of the intercultural person and observes their commonness through two cases, thus obtaining the intercultural competence that an intercultural person should have. This study also references for the methods and models of intercultural talent training.*

Keywords: *intercultural competence, intercultural person, communication*

1. Introduction

Coping with the common problems brought by globalization requires trust and cooperation between different countries and international organizations. However, mutual trust between countries is not easy to establish, intercultural communication and cooperation are not always beneficial. Intercultural communication does not always bring integration, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts when participants find their assumptions different and cannot agree with each other^[1] (Ochieng and Price, 2010). At this point, severe interaction difficulties may occur. Therefore, how to better interact and communicate with other countries while ensuring national interests, and jointly cope with the economic, political and cultural challenges brought by globalization has become a problem that every country needs to face and think about.

However, nation-states cannot interact politically, economically and culturally. Therefore, nation-states must rely on individuals or groups to represent their interests and interact with other individuals or groups. I propose this type of person is called an intercultural person. The study aims to define the intercultural person, focusing on the context of intercultural communication such as cultural shock, social stereotypes and intercultural contact. The research is grounded on the literature research method and case analysis method. I would focus on extracting the main viewpoints from relevant literature on intercultural competence and give a preliminary definition of the intercultural person. Two small case studies are conducted to investigate intercultural persons common points, which can offer a perspective on the previous discussion. Therefore, the final question to be explored in this article is what kind of intercultural competence the intercultural person should possess.

I begin by outlining the major issue in the literature review of intercultural competence. I then move on to describe two examples of intercultural persons. Finally, this paper concludes with my definition of the intercultural person. The possible problem in cultivating an intercultural person also is considered in the end.

2. Literature Review

The discussion on intercultural competence elements can be summarized as “list type” and “structure type”. “List type” refers to a checklist of the components of intercultural competence. For example, Harris (1975) summed up 24 qualities of successful volunteers, including language talent, adaptability, responsibility, etc^[2]. Deardorff (2009) pointed out in *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence* that more than 330 constituent elements of intercultural competence are summarized in a checklist by researchers^[3]. The research in the form of checklists is not conducive to the definition of an intercultural person, because a complicated checklist is difficult to highlight the key points and fails to explain the relevance of the components. Moreover, although researchers have proposed many terms related to intercultural competence, these terms did not help clarify the concept of an intercultural person. However, they made it more complicated due to the different contexts and situations, such as business, immigration, international students, etc.

Based on the results of the checklist research on the components of intercultural competence and

considering its defects, researchers began to devote themselves to generalizing and searching for the relationship between these elements, tending to use a structural competency model to explain intercultural competence. Among the existing structural models of intercultural competence, I most agree with the one proposed by Byram^[4] (1997). This model is based on the cognitive ability classification but further divides the skills into interpret/relate skills and discover/interact skills. I summarized and drew a diagram of the model to illustrate the relationship between the various elements.

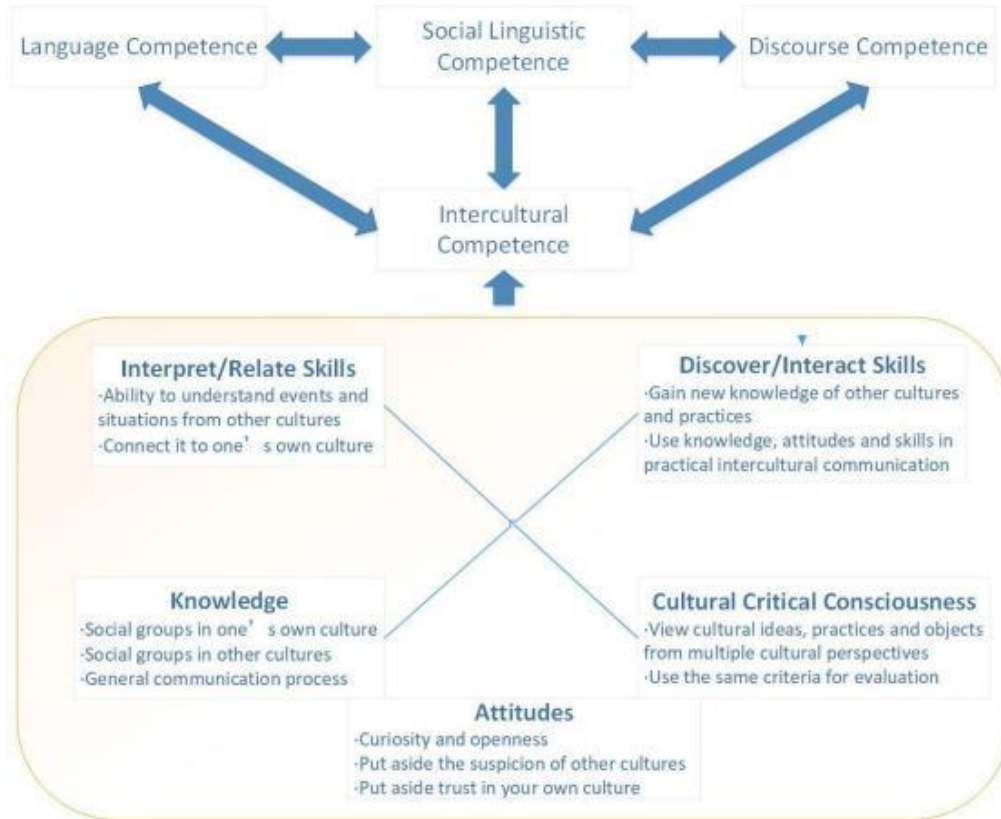


Figure 1: Byram's model of intercultural competence

The basis of interpret/relate skills is cognition, and the basis of discover/interact skills is critical thinking about culture. Nevertheless, at the same time, critical thinking about culture will affect the individual's understanding of different cultures and the process of establishing contacts. Similarly, the cognition of different cultures will also affect individuals' exploration and interaction with different cultures. They are cross-correlated. Attitude is the foundation of all intercultural competence. In Byram's opinion (1997), intercultural communicative competence is the core of intercultural competence, and language competence is the core of communicative competence^[4]. Therefore, he distinguishes language competence from other knowledge and skills essential for intercultural competence. This model well summarizes the image of the intercultural person. On the one hand, they need to understand the language and discourse of different cultures. On the other hand, they must have the knowledge of themselves and other cultures, have an open attitude to establish connections with other cultures. Critical thinking and awareness have laid the foundation for all of this.

In my opinion, in the study of intercultural competence, we should pay attention to the subject of human ability because intercultural competence ultimately needs to be practiced by people. Therefore, we should put "competence" under the basic epistemological category of the subject to define the intercultural person or intercultural competence. The essay considered competence a personal attribute, emphasizing the ability to complete a specific activity related to human behavior, including the quality, knowledge, and skills of effectively completing the behavior.

3. Case study

The term "intercultural competence" can be traced back to the 1970s^[5] (Dinges, 1983, p177). Although there has not been a unified definition of intercultural competence scholars have tried to

summarize and explain the connotation from different perspectives. In early studies, the definition of intercultural competence mainly focused on the learning ability and adaptation ability to understand cultural differences, as well as the ability to act appropriately in different cultures. With the deepening of research, scholars further summarize and define intercultural competence from the aspects of cognition, behavior, process and personality attitude. Increasingly pay attention to thinking style and self-awareness for intercultural competence. Since then, scholars have been supplementing the connotation of intercultural competence. Fantini (2007, p9) defined intercultural competence as the abilities individuals and people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds required to behave effectively and appropriately. However, she has not taken cultural shock into account. Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse^[6] (Oberg, 1954, p.1). Therefore, there is a limitation when considering whether the intercultural person can integrate or reconcile with other cultures when subjected to culture shock. Thus, the following two examples taken from Kim (2008) can more accurately summarize the competence of the intercultural person and provide a convincing factual basis for theoretical interpretation^[7].

Cellist Yo-Yo Ma's parents were Chinese born and lived in Paris, he learned the cello with his father when he was four years old, and then they moved to New York, where he spent his formative years and received his music education at the Juilliard School^[8] (MA YY, 2008). He uses music as a means of intercultural communication, drawing inspiration from musical circles around the globe. He wrote on his website (www.yo-yoma.com):

In my musical journey, I have had the opportunity to learn from a wealth of different musical voices—from the immense compassion and grace of Bach's cello suites to the ancient Celtic fiddle traditions alive in Appalachia to the soulful strains of the bandoneon of Argentina's tango cafes. Throughout my travels, I have thought about the culture, religions and ideas that have been influential for centuries along the historic land and sea routes that comprised the Silk Road. I have wondered how these complex interconnections occurred and how new musical voices were formed from the diversity of these traditions...In 1998, I founded the Silk Road Project to study the ebb and flow of ideas among different cultures along the Silk Road, illuminating the heritages of its countries and identifying the voices that represent these traditions today. Through this journey of discovery, the Silk Road Project hopes to plant the seeds of new artistic and cultural growth and celebrate living traditions and musical voices throughout the world.

Orhan Pamuk is a Turkish writer who won the 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature. He has a creative insight into the intercultural person. His works emphasize the integration of different cultures, taking art from the center of the world to the edge and then producing something new for others. Pamuk constantly reiterated his concern for cross-culturalism in his work. He said in an interview with the National Public Radio:

My whole book, my whole life, is a testimony that East and West combine, come together gracefully and produce something new. That is what I have been trying to do all my life...I don't believe in clashes of civilization. I think that was a fanciful idea that is sometimes coming to be true. But no, I think that East and West meet. My whole work is a testimony to the fact that we should find ways of looking, combining East and West without any clash, but with harmony, with grace, and produce something new for humanity.

The lives and thoughts of Yo-Yo Ma and Orhan Pamuk represent intercultural perspectives on self, others, and life^[7] (Kim, 2008, p.366). They can embrace other cultures under the condition of their own cultural identity and try to fuse seemingly different cultural elements into something unique. The emergence of individuals like them makes the intercultural person group grow more vigorous and witness the ability of human beings to renew and develop themselves.

4. The Definition of Intercultural person

Based on the definition of intercultural competence by scholars and the summary of the expected points of the above cases, my definition of an intercultural person refers to a person who has an understanding of different cultures, especially their specific traditional consciousness, thinking habits, social customs and cultural taboos, based on his or her own identity. Furthermore, this understanding can be applied to the communication process with people from cultural backgrounds or to complete various tasks in the cultural environment, effectively avoiding misunderstandings and conflicts caused by cultural differences.

Humans often identify with individuals by establishing their identity. The ultimate purpose of people's efforts to become intercultural people and improve their intercultural competence is to build a mutual identity with "others" in other cultures in intercultural communication and interaction. Because of establishing of a specific social identity, an individual's social belonging can be realized. On this basis, the degree to which an individual feels secure in his or her own identity is significant for successful intercultural communication, which will enhance to a greater extent the individual's adaptability, flexibility and cultural identity, as well as all other aspects related to intercultural competence. Therefore, the definition of concepts is based on identity.

At the same time, the essence of intercultural competence is in the interactions with other cultures of competency, which refers explicitly to having sufficient knowledge of a particular culture, and having a sufficient grasp of various problems arising from the interaction of members of different cultures, possessing the attitude of actively maintaining contact with other people, possessing the skills required to leverage knowledge and attitude. For example, Yo-Yo Ma is through music, Pamuk is through literature.

5. The Possible Problem of Cultivating Intercultural Person

This understanding of intercultural competence focuses on the interaction between individuals and how individuals acquire the skills, knowledge, attitudes, values and resources they need, but fails to clarify the responsibilities and obligations that individuals should assume to combat discrimination and oppression. Therefore, the cultivation of an intercultural person only requires the moral mission of individuals, that is, how to correctly treat individuals and groups from different cultures, but lacks the description of individual social and cultural responsibilities. As a result, although the intercultural competence of individuals has been improved, cultural discrimination and oppression still exist in society. Taking public institutions as an example, Sallah (2007, p.99) pointed out that a school in Britain where more than 80% of students are Muslims do not serve halal food^[9]. Because of the discrimination at the social and cultural level, some of the most vulnerable groups in the society are completely ignored, so there is no way for people in the group to gain practical knowledge and ability to communicate with these groups through the improvement of individual intercultural competence. The elimination of racial discrimination at the social and national levels is even more intractable.

Although the cultivation of intercultural competence is finally implemented to improve personal ability, the national and social position against cultural and racial discrimination should be constantly reflected in the process to avoid risks such as cultural stereotyping and racial discrimination. Therefore, the intercultural person's training activities need to be timely evaluated.

6. Conclusion

Although the definition and interpretation are complicated, this study has shown the essence of an intercultural person. First of all, their intercultural competence is ultimately manifested as individual competence. Secondly, they possess the competence they show when facing interactions between heterogeneous cultural groups and individuals. It is reflected in having sufficient relevant knowledge of different cultures, having a positive attitude to keep in touch with other people, and various skills required to interact with people from different cultures. Finally, the intercultural person has a strong sense of cultural identity with himself. The examples of Yo-Yo Ma and Pamuk proved that the intercultural person could understand and integrate different cultures in the context of their own identity.

At present, intercultural person emphasizes intercultural communication and mutual understanding between individuals, so they play a positive role in solving discrimination and prejudice among different individuals. However, the study is limited by the lack of solutions for dealing with discrimination and prejudice between cultural groups or even countries, and this would be a fruitful area for further work.

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