

Intercultural competences

Introduction

According to Deardorff (2006), intercultural competences are defined as the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions. Therefore, intercultural competences are essential to work effectively with refugees, newcomers and people with a culturally diverse background, since enable people to interact both effectively and in a way that is acceptable to others when working with a diverse group.

Intercultural competences, as all the competences, are composed by three elements: attitudes, knowledge and skills.

Deardorff (2006) proposed a model to explain the process of acquiring intercultural competence, where the attitudinal element is the most indicated as the starting point.

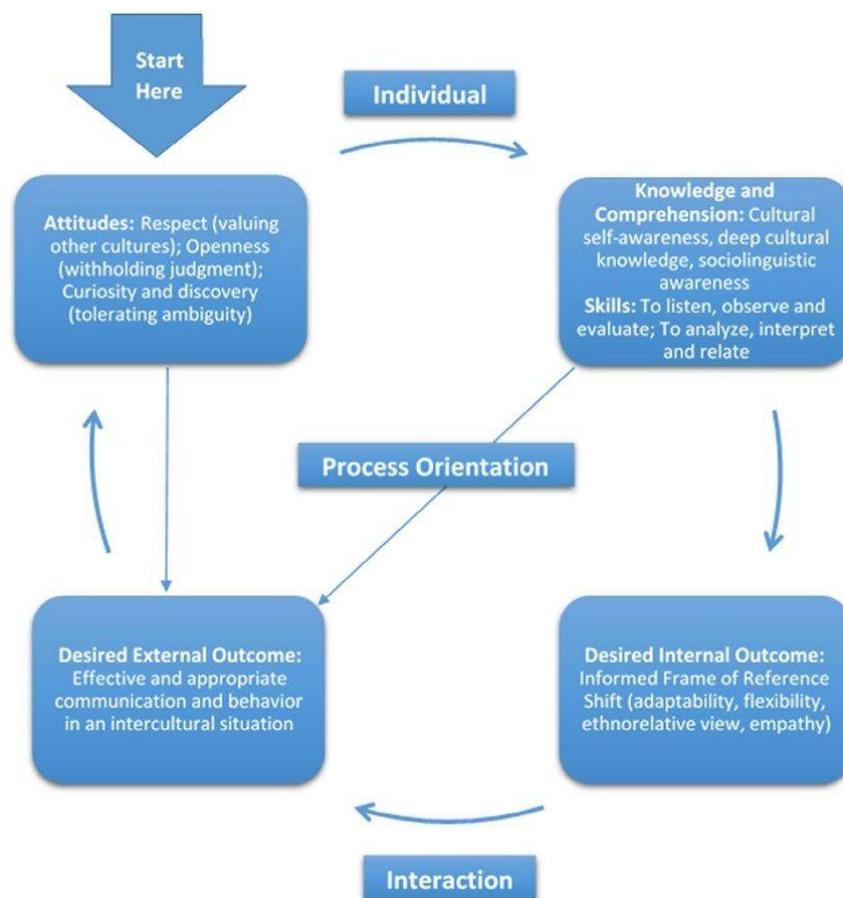


Figure 1. Deardorff's (2006) Process model of Intercultural competence.

Fundamentals of intercultural competences

The elements of the intercultural competence include:

Knowledge

- **Cultural self-awareness:** the ability to articulate how one's own culture has shaped one's identity and world view.
- **Culture-specific knowledge:** the ability to analyse and explain basic information about other cultures (history, values, politics, economics, communication styles, values, beliefs and practices).
- **Sociolinguistic awareness:** basic local language skills, the use of different verbal/non-verbal communication, and adjusting one's speech to accommodate nationals from other cultures.
- **Grasp of global issues and trends:** explaining the meanings and implications of globalisation, and relating local issues to global forces.

Skills

- **Listening, observing, evaluating:** using patience and perseverance to identify and minimise ethnocentrism, seek out cultural clues and meaning.
- **Analysing, interpreting and relating:** seeking out linkages, causality and relationships using comparative techniques of analysis.
- **Critical thinking:** the ability to view and interpret the world from other cultural points of view, while recognising one's own.

Attitudes

- **Respect:** seeking out others' cultural attributes, valuing cultural diversity, and thinking comparatively and without prejudice about cultural differences.
- **Openness:** suspending criticism of other cultures, collecting 'evidence' of cultural difference, and openness to being proven wrong.
- **Curiosity:** seeking out intercultural interactions, viewing difference as a learning opportunity, being aware of one's own ignorance.
- **Discovery:** being comfortable with ambiguity and viewing it as a positive experience, and willingness to move beyond one's own comfort zone.

The above mentioned knowledge, skills and attitudes lead to internal outcomes which refer to an individual who learns to be flexible, adaptable, empathetic and who adopts an ethno-relative perspective.

These qualities are reflected in external outcomes, which refer to the observable behaviour and communication styles of the individual. They are the visible evidence that the individual is, or is learning to be, interculturally competent.

Intercultural competences for boosting the integration of refugees and newcomers

Professionals dealing with people with diverse backgrounds need to be able to **help them understand cultural patterns** and habits, such as work ethics, social competences, timekeeping, addressing people from different backgrounds, and how to ask for and give information (**intercultural awareness**). They should also know and apply methodologies, like community intervention, intercultural conflict mediation and social coaching (**intercultural mediation**).

In addition, when working with refugees, it is important to take into account that they commonly experience trauma, deprivation and loss. An adequate intercultural education will avoid ethnocentrism and stereotypes, which are important obstacles between communication and familiarization with another culture, and develop special communication and counselling skills such as skills on verbal and non-verbal communication, empathetic communication and active listening.

Tips to improve intercultural competences

- Self-awareness, understand the culture that defines you: What kind of behaviours does the professional see as appropriate and acceptable? Does he/she like to communicate directly or let people read between the lines? Does she/he like obedience or seek arguments from other people? All these factors and many others determine how interaction style has been shaped by our own culture.
- Do your research. If professionals know in advance who are dealing with or will be working with, search for cultural norms and standards for a specific location. Having knowledge of the people's background and how this may impact on their experiences of trauma, resettlement and cultural transition will help them to do a more effective intervention.
- Listen, observe, and learn. Listening will teach professionals new ways to conduct interactions. Before giving a personal opinion on what is wrong and what is right, it is important to listen to the ideas and opinions of others, observe the verbal as well as non-verbal cues as they communicate, and try to find out what it reflects by learning more about their cultural behaviours and practices.
- Start communicating. Intercultural communication can improve both professional and personal interactions. It is a lifelong process requiring self-awareness, understanding and empathy.
- Ask if you don't understand. It demonstrates willingness to learn more about a new culture.
- Use open-ended questions so the person you are communicating with will explain or outline a point and you will better understand his/her response.
- Learn from the mistakes. Professionals will make mistakes, just do your best to be self-aware and learn from them.
- Enjoy. It may be a challenge to communicate with people of other cultures, but it can also be enjoyable.
- Commitment to build a culturally competent organization. Develop this commitment through staff development and training, hiring, retention, career advancement, performance evaluations, and employee policies that support culturally competent and linguistically appropriate practice.

Resources

- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). The Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization at Institutions of Higher Education in the United States, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Fall 2006, 10:241-26
- *Strategies to Improve Intercultural Communication*. University of Notre Dame. Retrieved on 14th January 2019.



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