

A Critical Analysis of 'Developing Intercultural Competence in the Language Classroom' by Bennett, Bennett and Allen

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Abstract: Awareness of one's own culture and the cultural differences between societies is a part of intercultural competence. At the centre of the present paper is the essay 'Developing Intercultural Competence in the Language Classroom' by Bennett, Bennett and Allen in which the authors draw a parallel between the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) and the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Guidelines for Language Proficiency. The authors argue that the development of intercultural competence is a mixture of culture-specific and culture general approaches. The present paper summarized the DMIS and evaluated the parallel drawn between DMIS and the ACTFL Guidelines. A critique of the applicability of this parallel follows with suggestions about a more efficient implementation of the model.

Key words: ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) • Developmental Model of Intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) • Ethnocentrism; Intercultural sensitivity • Intercultural Communication • Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

The essay 'Developing Intercultural Competence in the Language Classroom' by J.M. Bennett, M.J. Bennett and W. Allen is an attempt by the authors to help students survive in this growing multicultural global village. A unique feature of this essay is the parallel that the authors draw between the DMIS (Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity) and the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Guidelines for Language Proficiency. The DMIS categorizes various ethnocentric stages of development as moving initially from denial towards defense, followed by minimization, acceptance, adaptation and concluding with integration, whereas the ACTFL Guidelines are a series of descriptions of proficiency levels for different levels in each of the four major language skills- speaking, listening, reading, writing, as well as culture in a foreign language. Bennett *et al.* discuss the collaborative and parallel role of these two approaches in developing intercultural competence among the learners of foreign languages. The present

paper first summarizes DMIS and then evaluates the parallel drawn between DMIS and the ACTFL Guidelines for Language Proficiency. A critique of the applicability of this parallel will follow with suggestions about a more efficient implementation of the model in real life situations.

Intercultural Competence and Language Learning:

The relationship between language and its cultural context has been studied across a range of interrelated disciplines, including sociolinguistics [1] social semiotics [2], communication studies [3] and cultural studies [4]. The unifying factors to which all these disciplines is summed up in the claim that 'language does not function independently from the context in which it is used' [5]. The term 'Intercultural Communicative Competence' signifies the relationship between language learning and culture. In the words of one of the foremost theorists in the area, intercultural communicative competence is 'the ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries' [6]. According to Lustig and Koester [7] Intercultural Competence refers to 'a symbolic, interpretative, transactional, contextual process in which

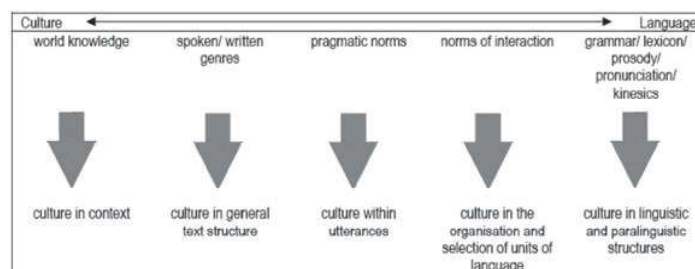


Fig. 1: Interactions between culture and language

Source: [19].

people from different cultures create shared meanings', or at least attempt to. Intercultural communicative competence may break down, for example 'when large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently' [7].

Interculturally informed language teaching and learning is becoming well established in education systems across the globe and has attracted increasing government and intergovernmental support, mainly in Europe [8-11], North America [12, 13] and Australia [5, 14, 15]) and through intergovernmental agencies such as UNESCO. According to Byram [16,17], these policies reflect a growing awareness of the role that education and languages education in particular, needs to play in developing tolerance and understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds who live together in increasingly multicultural and multilingual societies.

Figure 1 shows how culture connects to the different aspects of language. Newton *et al.* [18] explain that at the far left of the model, culture informs understandings of the world and knowledge types and sources that are valued within a particular cultural context. This knowledge in turn informs the shape and nature of genre within a culture. Culture also informs and constructs pragmatic and interactional norms, including, in particular, the ways in which politeness and appropriateness are realized through choice of communication strategies and speech acts. Finally, at the far right in the model, culture is realized at the pragmalinguistic level in linguistic signs, including both the body (i.e. non-verbal signs) and language – the words, expressions and grammar that realize particular speech acts or communication strategies.

At every level in Figure 1, cultural knowledge is needed to accurately interpret and understand verbal or non-verbal behaviours in particular contexts. Lack of awareness of the cultural dimensions of communication in interaction between native speaker and non-native

speaker interlocutors can lead to communication breakdowns with more serious consequences than those caused by linguistic difficulties. While gaps in linguistic competence lead to problems of mutual intelligibility, sociocultural problems arising from a lack of awareness of appropriateness and politeness tend to result in unintended offence and insult, or in loss of face and, hence, authority or dignity on the part of the non-native speaker [20].

'Developing Intercultural Competence in the Language Classroom' and the *Big C*/the *Little C*': In the beginning of their essay, Bennett *et al.* [21] introduce the key terms of their theory like 'intercultural competence', 'the *Big C* and the *little c*' and 'culture specific and 'culture general approaches to effective interaction'. They define 'intercultural competence' as, "the general ability to transcend ethnocentrism, appreciate other cultures and generate appropriate behavior in one or more different cultures" [21]. As an exploration of one of the concerns as to "which" culture to teach, they discuss the *Big C* and the *little c*. The *Big C* (objective culture) refers to the visible, abstract and theoretical aspects of culture like social, cultural and historical institutions as well as aspects of geography, politics and arts. The *little c* (subjective culture) refers to the comparatively tangible and practical aspects of culture like greetings, eating habits, rituals and "everyday situations" [21] etc. The authors lead their discussion further by concluding, "It is the apprehension of this subjective culture... that underlies the development of intercultural competence". In addition, the "behavior that is adaptive to the *everyday culture* is assumed by interculturalists to emerge from successfully making this shift in perspective" [21]. These aspects of the subjective culture are the major parts of the authors' discussion of the development model of intercultural competence. As for competence, wherein the goal of the culture specific approach is to achieve

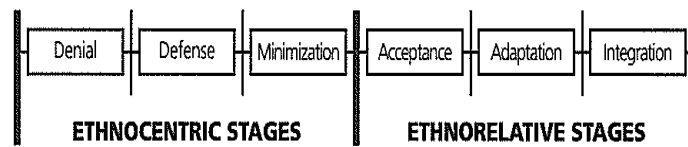


Fig. 2: The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity
Source: [22]

competence in a target culture, the culture general approach to intercultural competence deals with the adaptation of a universal worldview that can help an individual adapt to whatever culture he becomes a part of.

The Different Stages of Dmis: Bennett *et al.* [21] take the help of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) by M.J. Bennett [22] to suggest a way in which the intercultural competence could be a part of language classrooms. The Bennett model of intercultural sensitivity describes the ways in which people construe cultural difference. Bennett theorizes that acquiring intercultural sensitivity is a developmental process, in which a person moves from denial of, defense from and minimization of cultural difference (ethnocentric stages) to acceptance, adaptation and integration of difference (ethnorelative stages).

As shown in Figure 2, the first stage called Denial involves a total isolation from any other cultural experiences and for the people in this stage, “the world is completely their current experience of it and alternatives to that are literally unimaginable” [22].

This stage can be diagnosed by the popping up of many “stupid” questions by people altogether ignorant of any culture apart from their own. However, the second ethnocentric stage, that is Defense, is a little improvement in perception. People in category might be aware of cultural differences of other societies or countries but still find them “less real (i.e. less human) than one’s own kind” [22]. They perceive the other cultures in a stereotypical way and deal with them in a defensive manner, like in the form of ethnic slurs, defensive or aggressive attitude towards cultural norms etc. Unlike the defensive attitude involved in the second stage, at the third stage, Minimization, a kind of compromise is achieved wherein “a basic similarity among all human beings” [22] is assumed. Nevertheless, this perception of similarity is still based on the sense of superiority of the people’s own culture.

The fourth stage, that is the first stage of Ethnorelativism, is called Acceptance wherein “people have discovered their own cultural context and therefore they can accept the existence of different cultural

contexts” [22]. Therefore, they mostly make culture-related statement in a cultural context like, “As an Indian, I believe...” etc. Here we can also notice an awareness of the fact that different value systems of the world have their own authenticity and credibility. This leads us to the fifth stage called Adaptation in which “people are able to look at the world *through different eyes* and intentionally change their behavior to communicate more effectively in another culture” [22]. Empathy, pluralism and adaptation are the highlights of this stage. The sixth stage, Integration, is the last stage of all. It is characterized by the fluidity of cultural perceptions. A person at this stage “begins to see one’s self as *moving around in cultures*, no longer completely at the centre of any one or combination cultures- *a cultural marginal* [22]”, a kind of citizen of the world. This stage is the ultimate aim of any effort at developing intercultural competence amongst the learners of a foreign language.

Bennett *et al.* [21] suggest that their model informs languages education in the following ways:

- It focuses not on learning discrete facts but on the development of an intercultural mindset, thus mapping easily on to models of communicative competence.
- It highlights generalizable intercultural skills and awareness that learners acquire from learning about culture in relation to a particular language.
- The centrality of cultural self-awareness in the model parallels the awareness of one’s own language that emerges from studying a second language.
- The model emphasises the need for a sensitive approach on the part of the teacher to issues of cultural similarity and difference, which parallels decisions that languages teachers already make with respect to how they deal with linguistic similarities and differences.

Dmis and Actfl Proficiency Guidelines: Bennett *et al.* aim to help language teachers achieve the above-mentioned aim through a kind of integration of the DMIS to the process of language learning.

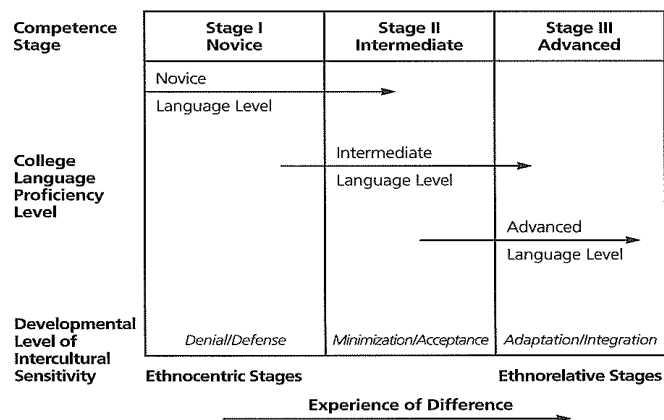


Fig. 3: Development of intercultural sensitivity

Source: [21]

They do this by suggesting a theoretical model that parallels the different levels of language proficiency as given in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines wherein the students at the different levels of language proficiency are categorized as being at Novice, Intermediate or Advanced stages of language learning.

In Figure 3, Bennett *et al.* [21] map levels of cultural sensitivity on to language proficiency levels. They note that the model is useful for the purpose of curriculum design, but not for individual assessment, since in any one class, learners will exhibit a wide range of levels of intercultural development.

The authors divide the DMIS model by putting Denial and Defense at stage I- Novice, Minimization and Acceptance at stage II- intermediate and Adaptation and Integration at Stage III- Advanced. For all of the above-mentioned stages they suggest a framework and different culture learning activities in the language classroom. With the help of this model, they hope to help the foreign language instructors in making the cultural competence an integral and effective part of foreign language learning process.

At the Denial stage, the suggestions by the authors for developing intercultural competence are very interesting and appropriate because these activities aim at arousing the curiosity of a learner at the Denial level and then gradually bringing awareness about the existence of a world outside his limited worldview. In order to develop intercultural competence at the Denial stage where, according to the authors, we can find most of the early-Novice language learners [21], the teacher's approach should be to expose the student to the objective culture of the target language. The content for dealing with this stage "converges on what we have defined as objective

culture- the sociopolitical and arts institutions of the target culture – as well as the functional culture of getting through a day" [21]. The authors suggest such activities as cultural fairs, shopping trips as well as exposure to values and communication behaviors too, "that will not present an excessive challenge but may simulate their curiosity" [21]. These suggestions are very appropriate and can help a novice learner come out of her cultural shell without feeling any threat from an imminent foreign culture.

For the late- Novice learners at the stage of Defense, the authors suggest activities that focus on the similarities between the learners culture and the "seemingly *weird* [21]" culture of the target language. This suggestion is very logical considering it aims at mellowing down the defensive attitude of the learner by making her realize, at least, the apparent similarities between two cultures. However, even at this stage some kind of differences that are non-threatening can be introduced. For example, an American can be introduced to the type of bread or rice that Indians use since, after all, it will be another type of bread or rice. This would only enhance their knowledge of the variety found in the world.

Further, for the development of intercultural competence at the Minimization stage for the early-Intermediate language learners who assume that the people of the target culture are "*just like them* [21]" the authors suggest activities through which these learners are able to "differentiate categories for cultural comparison between their own culture and the target culture" [21]. This involves challenging the learners' perceived notions of inherent similarity between different cultures. While one can agree with the suggestions given,

it has to be argued that this stage is a very sensitive one, since, here, the development of the intercultural competence touches the sensitive issue of *differences* between the different cultures and bringing awareness among the student about it. This needs to be dealt with very sensitively because if enough care is not taken the efforts can backfire and, in fact, push the students backwards in the stages of Defense or even Denial.

One can agree when the authors suggest that the task of cultural awareness should be made more challenging to the late- Intermediate language learner at the ethnorelative Acceptance stage of the intercultural development. This can be done by selecting topics such as “complex value analysis, cultural comparison and contrast, cognitive, cultural and communication styles interaction etc.” [21]. Here, the writers say that the challenge for the learner is a concern about cultural relativity as it relates to moral relativity [21]. Thus, the task of the language teacher here is to make the student more aware of the relative moral and cultural values of the target culture independent of the same value system in her own culture. This suggestion can be quite valuable but its application is very demanding of the teacher. It requires the teacher herself to be in a position where she can look at the value system of the two cultures in an objective non-committal manner. The suggestions for this level require a teacher to be fully aware of the various ethical and moral complexities of both the cultures.

At the Adaptation stage, where we can find the early- Advanced language learners, the writers suggest “risk- taking skills, problem solving skills, interaction management, social adaptability and empathy. All these activities are challenges to the learner. In fact, at this level the process, we would expect students to become more or less self-reliant in the area of the development of intercultural competence. The task of the teacher here is to challenge the students more and more and through this gently push them to the next stage of Integration. Therefore, a student at this stage would explore the target culture at her own. A student at the adaptation stage, after living in the host country for some time, can explore the culture of that country on her own in different situations and move more and more towards the Integration stage even without the help of any formal training.

Nevertheless, for the students at this last level called Integration, the authors suggest a method called “identity management [21]” of the multicultural learner. One can agree with their suggestion that these peoples, who are always under the threat of becoming the marginals, the supportive process should involve these “bicultural/

bilingual marginals as resource persons in other language classes, preparing students for study abroad, facilitating small groups in target language etc [21]” because they have the privileged of being at home anywhere. These people can be made a part of language learning process at any stage specifically because they the learners at the other stages can still identify with them due to a shared culture.

Problems with the Developmental Model: The systematic way in which the authors have dealt with the issue of development of intercultural competence is commendable. The stages are very scientifically defined and methodically arranged. The definitions of the different ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages and the characteristics of the people at these stages are very believable. However, this scientific clarity is both strength as well as weakness of the whole method. Perhaps it is too perfect and clear-cut to be put into practice. The reason being that human psyche and its reactions and adaptations to different phenomenon are as varied as there are human beings on the earth. Therefore, any effort at categorizing it would prove self-defeating.

Liddicoat *et al.* [5] argue that the linear nature of Bennett’s developmental model of intercultural sensitivity assumes a ‘progressive, scalar phenomenon’ which may not be the case at lower levels of abstraction and shorter time periods than those assumed in the model. They also criticize the model for failing to adequately link interculturality and language. Liddicoat *et al.* [5] also find that the mapping of the model on to levels of proficiency, as displayed in Figure 3, is deficient, because it assumes no prior starting point of exposure to cultural difference. Moreover, the model assumes, as a starting point, a monocultural learner. In fact, in multicultural societies such as India, learners usually enter the language classroom with a variety of pluralistic cultural and linguistic starting points. For some of these learners, language learning will be reconnecting them with a heritage culture.

Another problem with this model lies with the assumption that the different stages of DMIS can be perfectly paralleled with the different levels given in ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. A Novice learner need not necessarily be at the Denial or Defense stage. For example an Indian origin student at an American university may be at the Novice stage, but she does not necessarily be at the Denial/ Defense stage rather they may easily be at the Adaptation/ Integration stage. This is because they may have been brought up in the Indian culture without having much exposed to the target language Hindi.

Migration of people to different countries has led to such situations throughout the world. Hence, such a simplistic approach as taken by the writers of the essay while dealing with different language levels is bound to prove wrong.

A question also arises about how to measure cultural competency in real life classrooms and whether the feedback given by the students can be taken as a foolproof sign of their having developed competency with the help of the above mentioned activities. The different variety of students with their different approaches to different cultures may respond in different manners to those activities. Then, the question arises as to how to effectively gauge their proficiency level? One suggestion in this regard can be that the language teacher should not make the task of measuring cultural proficiency a formal, rigid activity, limited to the classroom only. She should go about it in a slightly informal and random manner like, throwing a question to her students occasionally or by putting them in some cultural situations that would garner even though varied but very valuable reactions. It would give her hints about where the students stand with regard to cultural proficiency.

Another problem involves the applicability of this method in countries with not much exposure to multiculturalism. The method seems to be more applicable in the US 'the melting pot', but in isolated or underdeveloped countries like Afghanistan, Cambodia or even Nepal, the applicability of this method is questionable. There may not be enough trained teachers in these places. Even finding situations for exposing students to the target culture can be a near impossible task. This limits the range of effectiveness and applicability of this method.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Bennett *et al.*'s essay can be used as a stepping-stone to building effective strategies for the development of intercultural sensitivity in a language classroom. Its systematic approach to the topic of cultural development can be very effective in the classroom if we take care not to rely too much on it for practical purposes, since it is generalist in approach whereas in most language classrooms every student is a unique case of language proficiency and cultural sensitivity.

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