

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE THROUGH INDEPENDENT WORK: PEDAGOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FEATURES

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Abstract

The article examines how independent work contributes to both psychological and pedagogic development in regards to students' intercultural communication competence within higher education. Student's intercultural communication competence are considered a multi-dimensional ability which includes open-mindedness, cultural knowledge, empathy, reflective self-regulation, critical cultural awareness and interactional competences. The study draws upon Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence, Deardorff's process model of intercultural competence, Zimmerman's self-regulated learning model and Vygotsky's sociocultural model for scaffolding.

For example, by examining attitudinal development, knowledge acquisition, and the developing of interpreting/relating and discovery/interacting skills, Byram identifies the following five components as key elements in developing intercultural communicative competence: (1) Attitudes (2) Knowledge (3) Interpreting/Relating Skills (4) Discovery/Interaction Skills (5) Critical Cultural Awareness. In contrast, Deardorff focuses on the developmental progression from attitudes to internal and external outcomes. (Deardorff, 2006; Byram, 1997).

Independent work is viewed as an effective learning format because it encourages students to develop strategies for planning, monitoring, evaluating, and reflecting on their own intercultural learning activities. As such this article employs a mixed-methods research design to provide examples of how structured independent assignment can promote measurable growth in student intercultural communication competence.

Keywords

intercultural communication competence, independent work, self-regulated learning, higher education, reflective learning, pedagogical psychology

Introduction

The requirement for students to have an ability to communicate cross-culturally while using their foreign language skills proficiently has increased globally, because today's globalized world requires universities to focus on preparing their graduates to communicate effectively and professionally. Therefore, developing a students' intercultural communication competence is no longer considered a supplemental skill. Instead, it should be viewed as one of the primary academic, professional, and social competencies. According to Deardorff's groundbreaking study, intercultural competence can be assessed utilizing multiple methods including qualitative assessments such as interviews, observations, self-assessment, and assessment based upon judgments made by others. This validates the utilization of both qualitative and quantitative approaches in educational research (Deardorff, 2006).

Independent work plays a unique role within the development of a students' intercultural communication competence. While traditional classroom teaching provides cultural knowledge, independent work allows students to internalize cultural differences and similarities, compare them, raise questions about these differences and similarities, and make them meaningful to themselves. From a psychological standpoint, independent work promotes self-directed learning where students establish personal objectives, choose methods to achieve those objectives, evaluate their own performance, and assess their own results. Self-regulated learning was defined by Zimmerman as the active regulation of motivation, cognition, and behavior by the learner. He further stated that self-regulated learners do not receive instruction passively; instead they proactively regulate their own motivation, cognition and behavior during the learning process (Zimmerman, 2002).

Pedagogical research indicates that independent work is successful when it is part of a systematic developmental model rather than simply being assigned as "homework." Examples of independent tasks designed to promote the progression from cultural awareness to intercultural action include writing comparative essays on culture, keeping reflective journals on experiences related to other cultures, interviewing individuals who represent another culture, analyzing authentic media representative of another culture, engaging in virtual collaborations with peers from different cultural backgrounds and completing intercultural case studies. Research into collaborative virtual activities among culturally diverse pairs of students support the idea that interactive learning environments may foster intercultural communication competence in postsecondary education (Gutiérrez-Santiuste et al., 2023).

Therefore, the central issue addressed in this article is that most students work independently, without critically reflecting on their experiences or experiencing significant intercultural growth. Thus, the major research question asked in this article is:

What pedagogical models of organization will facilitate the best possible independent work so that students' intercultural communication competence develops appropriately?

Literature Review

Byram's model describes intercultural communicative competence through several interrelated dimensions. Those are: attitude, knowledge, interpreting and relating skills, discovering and interacting skills, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997). Byram's model is particularly valuable for language education since it links communication and culture as opportunities for students to reflect on both cultural and ethical dimensions.

Deardorff's process model describes intercultural competence as a continuous cycle of development, beginning with attitudes such as respect, openness, and curiosity, then progressing to knowledge and skills, and finally culminating in either internal or external intercultural outcomes (Deardorff, 2006). Deardorff's research suggests that intercultural competence should be evaluated using a combination of assessment tools rather than a single tool.

Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity helps explain how students' mental shifts from ethnocentric to more ethnorelative viewpoints occur. In practice, Bennett has demonstrated that student learning begins when many students view other cultures through stereotypical lenses. However, when students engage in appropriately designed independent assignments, compare themselves to others, develop empathy, and adopt different perspectives, they begin to see other cultures differently.

When students have opportunities to regulate their own learning during independent work, it becomes meaningful. Zimmerman's Model of Self-Regulated Learning identifies the key processes as setting goals, taking strategic actions, monitoring progress, and reflecting on their own performance (Zimmerman, 2002). All of these processes provide a foundation for the types of cognitive activities necessary for successful intercultural learning. Students must identify cultural differences, question their assumptions about those differences, evaluate their communication options, and adjust their behaviors accordingly.

The additional sociocultural component Vygotsky added to the concept of independent work was the importance of scaffolding before allowing students to complete complex tasks independently. The Zone of Proximal Development refers

to the difference between what students can accomplish without assistance and what they can accomplish with assistance (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, independent work should be done in conjunction with some type of teacher support or guidance. That includes providing students with rubrics for completing projects, facilitating peer discussions among students who completed similar tasks, providing students with constructive feedback on their work, and gradually transferring all levels of responsibility for completing tasks back to students.

Method

This article proposes a **mixed-method quasi-experimental design**. The model can be used in a higher education setting with undergraduate students studying English or another foreign language.

Participants: 60 undergraduate students divided into two groups:

Group Number of Learning condition
students

Experimental group	30	Structured independent intercultural tasks
Control group	30	Traditional independent reading and written homework

Independent Work Intervention

The experimental group completes an eight-week independent work program. Each week focuses on a different intercultural task.

Table

1

Eight-Week Independent Work Program for ICC Development

W eek	Independent task	ICC dimension	Psychological mechanism
1	Cultural autobiography	Self-awareness	Reflection
2	Cultural stereotype analysis	Critical ness	Cognitive restructuring
3	Comparison of Uzbek and target-culture communication norms	Cultural nowledge	Contrastive thinking
4	Interview with a person from another re	Interaction skills	Empathy and anxiety ction
5	Analysis of authentic media	Interpretation	Meaning-making
6	Case study of intercultural nderstanding	Problem-solving	Perspective-taking
7	Reflective journal and peer feedback	Metacognition	Self-monitoring
8	Portfolio presentation	Integrated petence	Self-evaluation

Instruments

Table

2

Suggested Research Instruments

Instrument	Purpose	Data type
ICC questionnaire	Measures students' perceived intercultural competence	Quantitative
Reflective journal rubric	Measures depth of reflection	Quantitative + qualitative
Intercultural analysis case	Measures problem-solving and interpretation	Qualitative
Semi-structured interview	Explores students' psychological experience	Qualitative
Portfolio assessment	Evaluates integrated learning outcome	Mixed

Data Analysis

Quantitative data can be analyzed using pre-test and post-test comparisons. Qualitative data can be analyzed through thematic coding of journals, interviews, and case responses.

Results

The following results are **illustrative** and should be replaced with real empirical data after classroom implementation.

Table

3

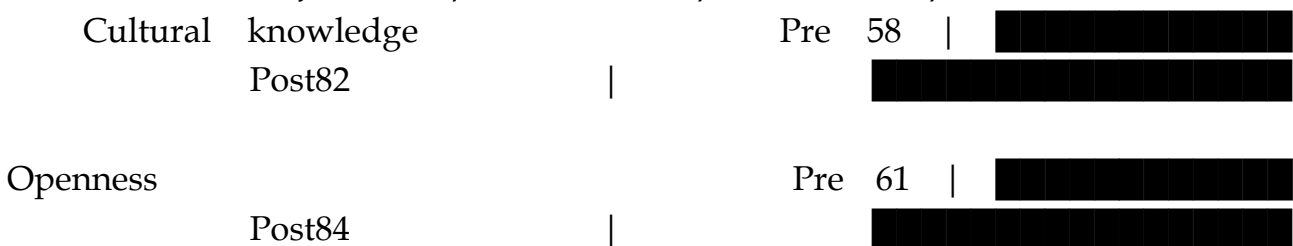
Illustrative Pre-Test and Post-Test ICC Scores

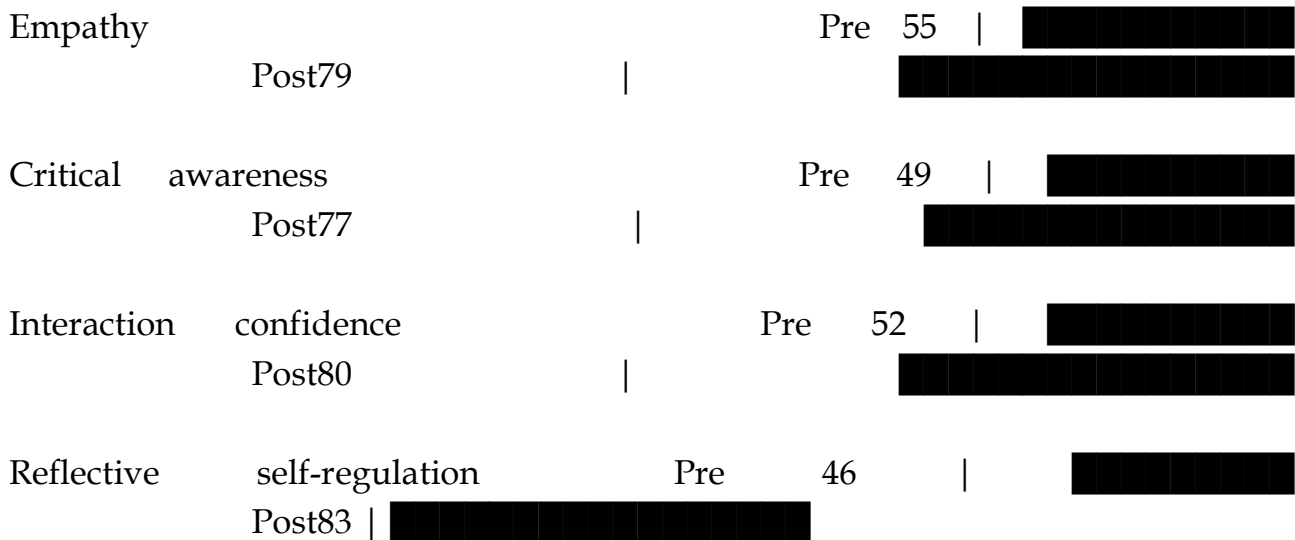
ICC component	Experiment al pre-test	Experimenta l post-test	Contr ol pre-test	Contro l post-test
Cultural knowledge	58	82	57	66
Openness	61	84	60	68
Empathy	55	79	56	63
Critical cultural awareness	49	77	50	59
Interaction confidence	52	80	53	62
Reflective self-regulation	46	83	47	58

Figure

1

Illustrative Growth of ICC Components in the Experimental Group





The illustrative data suggest that the strongest improvement occurs in reflective self-regulation, critical cultural awareness, and interaction confidence. This is pedagogically significant because independent work requires students to move beyond memorizing cultural facts and toward self-directed interpretation, evaluation, and communicative decision-making.

Figure 2

Proposed Pedagogical-Psychological Model

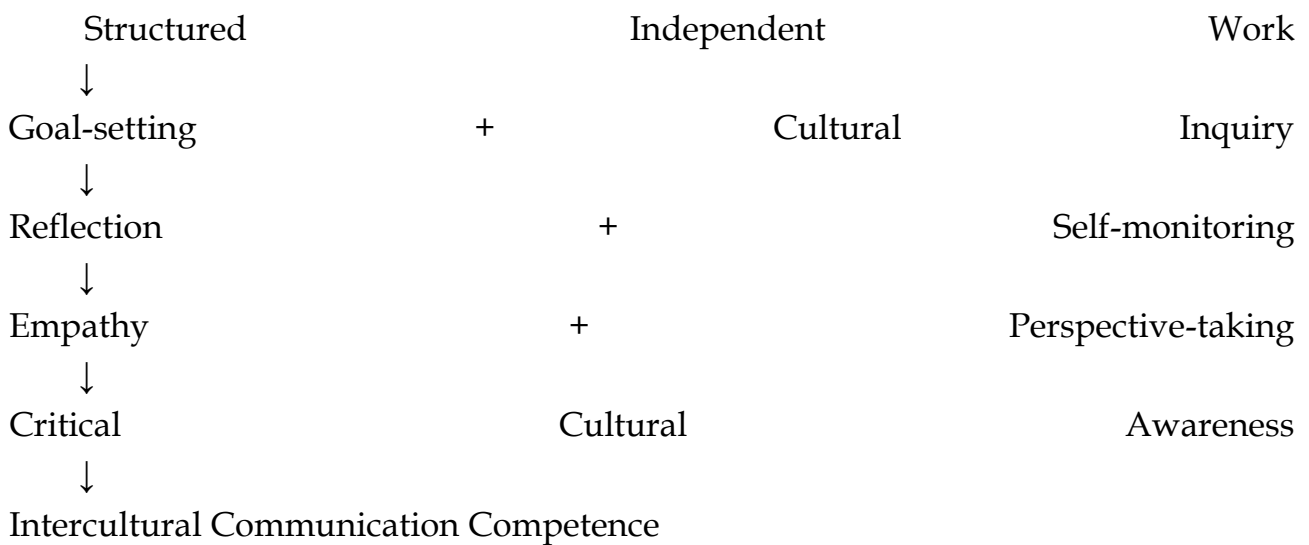


Table 4

Pedagogical and Psychological Features of Effective Independent Work

Feature	Pedagogical function	Psychological function
Clear task structure	Directs learning activity	Reduces uncertainty
Authentic cultural materials	Connects learning with real communication	Increases motivation
Reflective journals	Encourages deeper analysis	Builds metacognition
Peer discussion	Creates social learning space	Develops empathy
Teacher scaffolding	Guides complex interpretation	Supports confidence

Rubrics	Makes expectations transparent	Strengthens self-evaluation
Portfolio assessment	Shows progress over time	Builds learner autonomy

Discussion

A primary area where educators can build students' intercultural communication competencies through independent work is when they create opportunities that are both structurally and psychologically supportive.

While there is no one "right" way to do this, many scholars agree that the primary instructional conditions for successful independent work depend on whether the independent assignment(s) are well-designed to elicit desired outcomes and on whether students feel sufficiently comfortable expressing themselves during the assignment. When a teacher creates an opportunity for a student to engage in independent work related to culture, it is helpful to encourage the use of comparative, evaluative, and interpretive strategies. Although some students may find this type of thinking uncomfortable, it can help them move beyond stereotypical views of other cultures. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity provides a useful framework for examining student growth as they move from a limited view of others' cultures to more complex and nuanced views (Bennett, 1993).

In addition, independent work allows students to practice autonomous learning behaviors. Autonomous learning means that students can manage their own time, complete their own tasks, take responsibility for what they learn and reflect on what they learned. This is in contrast to traditional classrooms, where all activities are structured by the teacher, and students follow directions without making decisions. However, even though students are given some independence, they still need support. According to Vygotsky, students often require scaffolding to independently accomplish higher levels of intercultural analysis (Vygotsky, 1978). An example of scaffolding would be having the teacher initially provide questions for students to use for comparisons of cultures, providing examples of ways students could make observations about other cultures (e.g., conducting an interview), eventually asking students to generate their own questions, develop their own methods of observing other cultures (e.g., developing their own surveys), and present their own conclusions.

Conclusion

Finally, assessment is another major consideration when designing intercultural independent work. There are many different types of assessments that can be used to assess intercultural competence. As noted earlier, Deardorff has suggested using a combination of direct assessment (interviews) and indirect

assessment (self-assessment, peer assessment, etc.) in assessing intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). It is unlikely that a single writing test or multiple-choice grammar test would be sufficient to demonstrate intercultural competence. Rather than relying on a single paper-and-pencil test, educators may want to consider using a portfolio-based assessment system. In a portfolio system, students collect evidence of their cultural knowledge and reflections over time. Using portfolios helps capture not just the products of learning but also the processes of learning.

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