Teacher-Expert Dialogues

An Inquiry into Intercultural Competence, Its Assessment and Enhancement: An Interview with Dr. Darla Deardorff

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Abstract

This interview with Dr. Darla K. Deardorff, explores her contributions to the field of intercultural competence and its implications for language education. Dr. Deardorff reflects on the origins and evolution of her widely cited Process Model of Intercultural Competence, highlighting how definitions of intercultural learning have expanded beyond cultural differences to encompass diverse forms of human difference. She discusses the essential role of attitudes such as openness, respect, and curiosity in fostering effective and appropriate communication across differences, as well as the importance of modelling these in EFL/ESL classrooms. The conversation also addresses the challenges of assessing intercultural competence, emphasizing the need for multi-measure, formative, and co-created approaches that foreground evidence of change. In addition, Dr. Deardorff introduces the UNESCO Story Circles methodology as an accessible, impactful practice for cultivating intercultural competence worldwide, including language learning contexts. The interview concludes with practical strategies and global perspectives that enrich current understandings of intercultural competence and underscore its lifelong, dynamic nature.

Keywords

Introduction

Darla K. Deardorff is the Executive Director of the Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) and a Research Scholar at Duke University. She has held faculty and leadership roles at North Carolina State University and Duke, and has consulted widely for universities, governments, and organizations around the world. An internationally recognized authority on intercultural competence, internationalization, and global education, she is the editor or author of over a dozen books, including The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence and Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies (UNESCO, Council of Europe). Her work has appeared in leading journals and policy reports, and she has been invited to speak in more than 50 countries. Dr. Deardorff is the founder of the World Council on Intercultural and Global Competence, which is a global network on intercultural competence research, connecting hundreds of scholars and practitioners, and has advised the OECD, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe on intercultural and global education policies. For more information, see the organization's website (https://iccglobal.org/). She is the creator of the widely cited Process Model of Intercultural Competence, which has shaped both research and

practice worldwide. In recognition of her contributions, she has received numerous awards, including distinguished service honors from AIEA and NAFSA.

The interview aimed to obtain further insights on Deardorff's way of thinking and provide the literature with a summary composed of the extract of her work. This interview presents a direct synthesis of Deardorff's ideas and studies on intercultural competence as a complex construct, its nature necessitating a multi-measure approach for assessment and an effective way to enhance it, UNESCO's Story Circles. The interview offers first-hand perspectives and experiences on the development of Process Model which is also referred to as Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence, the assessment of intercultural competence through both qualitative and quantitative approaches, along with development process and tools for intercultural competence, which could provide assistance in course and curriculum design. Due to these reasons, the interview was held and thanks to the permission obtained from Dr. Darla Deardorff, this publication became possible.

What inspired you to develop a framework on intercultural competences, and how has your understanding of intercultural learning evolved since its inception?
The basic question behind my research, and what has driven me all along, is what is necessary for us to get along together as humans sharing this one planet. In academia, that can be translated into intercultural competence. I have been working mostly in the field of international education and saw that intercultural competence is at the core of international education and developing intercultural competence in our students and in ourselves. I also saw that many scholars were putting out different definitions, but there was no research-based definition of intercultural competence. I was curious to see if these scholars and experts could reach consensus on a definition of intercultural competence. That is where it all started. For those who do research, I used the Delphi methodology, which is a quasi-quantitative qualitative methodology. The good news is that the experts in the study did reach consensus.

That is what you see in the framework, in terms of how my understanding of intercultural competence has evolved. For about the last decade, I have been working with global organizations, particularly the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations through UNESCO. In both entities, the definition of intercultural competence has expanded from when I originally did the research. At that time, there was more reference to intercultural differences, cultural differences. Now, particularly at the global level, intercultural competence looks at interactions across difference, whatever those differences may be. It has expanded to include how we connect with those of different genders, generations, languages, religious beliefs, socioeconomic backgrounds, whatever those differences might be. It is not strictly limited to culture, recognizing that we all belong to multiple groups. It is important to understand how we can connect across all the different groups to which we belong.

Could you briefly inform us about the Intercultural Competence Model that you developed and how it could be utilized in EFL settings?
I actually come out of an EFL background. I taught English as a second language for many years, to adults in the United States, Japan, and Germany. I also worked in a program at Duke University that trained ESL/EFL teachers, and intercultural competence courses were some of the main ones I taught.

Competence is generally defined as knowledge, skills, and attitudes. I wanted to know what knowledge, what skills, what attitudes. Working with the experts in my study, they agreed on

some key elements under each of those. For example, attitudes are a foundational piece. Three key attitudes emerged: openness, respect, and curiosity, with respect being absolutely essential—valuing each other as fellow human beings, especially those who don't think or look like we do. These attitudes are requisite for developing knowledge and skills. Some key knowledge components include cultural self-awareness. Some skills include listening—not just any kind of listening, but listening for understanding instead of response. Together, as persons develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes, an internal change occurs: becoming more adaptable and flexible in communication and behavior. In the model, this is considered an internal outcome. The external outcome is a summarized definition of intercultural competence: behavior and communication that are effective and appropriate across difference. The words effective and appropriate are both important. Effectiveness alone, often emphasized in business literature, is only half the picture. Intercultural competence emphasizes the appropriateness of how we meet our goals.

Particularly for teachers in EFL settings, it is important to model intercultural competence and not just talk about it. Developing intercultural competence is a lifelong process. There is no point at which we can say we are fully interculturally competent. Speaking several languages or living in several countries does not necessarily make someone interculturally competent. One element the experts could not fully agree on was the role of language in intercultural competence. Language seems important for communication, but experts pointed out the existence of "fluent fools"—people who know the grammar and vocabulary of another language but are incompetent in navigating social and cultural contexts. This can also be true in one's first language. The intercultural competence framework offers valuable guidance for teachers, both for their teaching practice and for course content. But it must go beyond just teaching language.

How can institutions measure intercultural competence effectively without reducing it to a checklist or oversimplified rubric?

I would even say one pre and post measure [in addition to a checklist or oversimplified rubric] because that is insufficient in assessing intercultural competence. This was also part of my research. I wanted to see if the experts agreed, if intercultural competence could be assessed, because that was a question out there as well. I was pleased to see that they agreed it could be assessed. However, if we're assessing intercultural competence, it will always remain a complex task. If we are serious about rigorous assessment, it needs to be a multi-perspective multi-measure approach, which is why one tool is insufficient. It can be part of what we do, but it needs to be more.

Several pieces around assessing. First of all, many people like to start with the question of what tools should I use? That's actually much further down the list. The first question to ask is why? Why do you want to assess? Depending on the response, you may not need to assess because assessment is about providing feedback to the learner so they can continue to grow and develop. Oftentimes when I ask universities why they want to assess, they say, because we want to see if our program is working and we want to improve our program. That is program evaluation, not outcomes assessment. It involves very different processes. So again, starting with why is very important. If there's not an answer, then my response is why bother? Why bother assessing if you don't have a clear answer? For assessment, it needs to be to give feedback to students so they can continue to grow and develop.

The first question is "why?". The second question is "what?". What is it exactly that you want to assess about intercultural competence? Intercultural competence is a goal. We want to

develop it in our students, but goals are too broad to assess. We need to break those down into specific measurable learning outcomes or objectives. Those are what we assess. With those specific learning outcomes, we need to ask what's the evidence that this outcome has been achieved and what's the best way to collect that evidence? It may or may not be through some pre-post instrument. It's not about the tools. It's about collecting evidence of change. At Harvard, there is a body of work around making thinking visible. It's available on a website. One of those tools is having students reflect on this phrase, "I used to think; now I think". That demonstrates change. You can quantify the qualitative. If you're about numbers, you can make numbers out of qualitative data. Again, it's about evidence, not tools. If we are serious about assessing intercultural competence it needs to be a multi-measure multi-perspective approach.

Given the appropriateness piece, only the other can determine whether we've been appropriate or no, so we must have a multiple perspective approach in assessment. And there is no easy way to do it. I know many people are looking for that, but there's no easy way to assess intercultural competence. We need to make sure we use the data we collect to provide feedback to the students. There's currently much more emphasis on formative assessment, meaning collecting evidence during the learning experience and not as much on the pre and post, because that's more difficult to provide the feedback to students. It could be part of it, but in the end it's much more of an emphasis on formative. There needs to be a mindset change around assessment because too often we think about assessment as something we do to learners. In this case, it's something we're doing with learners. They need to be co-creators in this.

In some of my courses I present learning objectives. One of the first assignments is for students to tell me at least two of their own learning objectives within the context of the course, how they're going to meet those learning objectives, and what the evidence will be that they have met them. We touch base on that throughout the course. At the end, they have to show that they have met or not their own learning objectives. It needs to be more of a co-created approach to intercultural competence. There's increased use of peer assessment. There's a lot that we need to think about when it comes to intercultural competence assessment. I have written and published a lot on it, available online. There's also a book I wrote on assessing international education learning outcomes, particularly intercultural competence. I should mention the World Council on Intercultural and Global Competence, a global nonprofit with over 5000 colleagues from around the world. There are over 20 different working groups within the World Council, and anyone's welcome to join. One of those working groups is on ICC assessment. That group delves much further into these questions around assessing intercultural competence.

Could you also briefly inform the audience about the Story Circles technique and how it could be employed in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms?
This is very much coming from UNESCO. I worked with them on developing this intercultural methodology because they wanted to find a methodology for developing intercultural competence that could be used with any group of people anywhere in the world, using little to no resources. And that could be facilitated by almost anyone, certainly teachers. That didn't need special training or background in intercultural communication. I had been doing intercultural training for years and even co-authored a book on 50 different activities that can be used, and none of those fit the criteria. So, we engaged in a series of focus groups and interviews around the world. What emerged were two things: the sharing of our own personal life experience and sharing those in circles. Hence, "UNESCO story circles." We recognized that circles have existed in indigenous cultures around the world for centuries, and there may be other types of story circles, so we make sure to say UNESCO story circles. They were piloted in all five UNESCO regions around the world just pre-pandemic to see if they really

work with any group of people anywhere. The good news is yes, they worked and were impactful. Only one of those five pilots was in a formal learning setting, with middle school students in Vienna, Austria, where most students were of immigrant background and German was their second language. Two of the pilots were held outside under trees, one in San Jose, Costa Rica, and one in Harare, Zimbabwe. In Costa Rica we worked with a group of indigenous leaders, and in Harare with at-risk young people. It was powerful to see UNESCO story circles in action.

For those not familiar with it [the methodology], it is a structured yet adaptable methodology. The structured part is that there is a specific UNESCO protocol that needs to be followed. It involves three rounds once persons are in circles. All of this is outlined in an open access manual from UNESCO downloadable in at least seven languages. UNESCO story circles work best in groups of 4 to 6 people. No fewer than four, no more than six. There is no facilitator in the groups. There is one facilitator that provides the guidelines, the protocol, the instructions and then debriefs at the end. For that reason, it's scalable. Usually, I prefer at least eight participants so we can have two groups of four, but there is no end to how many can participate.

A couple of weeks ago, I was in Argentina and facilitated UNESCO story circles at a conference for over 1000 participants. There was even an overflow room, and one of my colleagues assisted there. When the pandemic came, we found out we could also do these online. During the pandemic, we used UNESCO story circles to train United Nations staff, UNHCR staff that work with refugees, and even peacekeepers in Mali. One UN staff member in Brazil said it was the most impactful experience she had had during the entire pandemic, and she didn't realize she could have that through a computer screen. It takes about 90 minutes to run a UNESCO story circle experience, and outcomes from those 90 minutes far exceed the outcomes of a half to full day intercultural training. It is a very powerful tool.

In the classroom, I use UNESCO story circles at the very beginning of a course as a way to build community. Students refer to it throughout the course because it becomes a touchstone. When students are doing this in a language not their own, some teachers say they'd like to give the prompts. There are specific intercultural prompts we use. Not just anything. For example, not "talk about an exciting time in your life." That is not an appropriate prompt. The first round is an icebreaker round. The one [prompt] we use most often is to say your name and three words or phrases about your identity and why those words or phrases are important to you. There is a time limit. That should be done in two minutes or less. The next round is at the heart of the story circle methodology. It's an intercultural prompt. The one we use most often is to tell about a specific, memorable time you've had with someone different from you and what you learned about yourself or the other person. That is to be told in three minutes or less. It's adaptable because you can select other prompts, and the manual has other examples. The facilitator can select the most appropriate prompts and adapt the time limit too, but you need to calculate to make sure you have enough time. The third round is very important. It's called the flashback round. This is what I mean by protocol. None of these can be skipped. The flashback round is where participants go around and focus on one person, for example the person who started. All the rest of the members go around and say, "the most memorable part of your story for me was this." Not the best part, not evaluative, just what was memorable. They are not supposed to say why, just name the memorable part. That has been very transformational for many participants. One young man said it was the first time in his life that he had ever felt heard. After those three rounds, there can be more free-flowing conversation. But up until that point, it is important participants practice listening for understanding. They

do not ask questions, do not comment, do not interrupt. They are listening for understanding only without responding.

Language teachers sometimes say they'd like to give prompts in advance. UNESCO does not recommend that. Students tend to spend time writing it out, memorizing or reading it, and then it is no longer authentic. Instead, language teachers — and really anyone with any group — should allow a few minutes after each prompt to think about what they'll say and just pause. Then give the next round. Allow a few minutes so it can be authentic and, in the moment, not rehearsed and prepared, which defeats the purpose. There is also an online 2.5-minute video made by UNESCO to introduce story circles. It is available in three languages. I encourage you to look at the video and download the manual. The largest group of UNESCO Story Circle facilitators can be found in the World Council. There is a whole group of facilitators. We meet quarterly and share experiences, ask questions, and give recommendations. I encourage those who facilitate UNESCO story circles to join the group at the World Council, that is a little bit about UNESCO story circles.

Could you share any additional methods or techniques—beyond your existing frameworks and models—that you recommend for enhancing the intercultural competencies of language learners?
Nothing substitutes for real life interactions. When I was teaching English as a second language, I had assignments where my students had to go out and interact with English speakers. Not just interacting with themselves, but through specific structured assignments. I was also teaching in the same building with other language courses. For example, the Spanish as a second language teacher and I brought our two classes together so they could practice speaking English or Spanish, since quite a few of my students also spoke Spanish. There are many creative ways to give students real life experiences. I encourage that, not just keeping them in the classroom if possible. These experiential learning opportunities can be even more impactful.

I also encourage us to think about other perspectives on intercultural competence as a UNESCO chairholder on intercultural competence at a South African university. We are keen to identify and elevate African voices, perspectives, and practices around intercultural competence because this has for too long been dominated by those in the global North. I acknowledge that I'm a white woman from the global North, and I remain eager to learn from my colleagues in South Africa and across the continent about other perspectives on intercultural competence. One of the co-chairs with my chair at Stellenbosch is Doctor Precious Semba. Her research is on ubuntu. Ubuntu is a different way of looking at this because too often in the global North we focus on the individual. Ubuntu says, "I am because we are and we are because I am". The individual cannot be separated from the "we". What we each do impacts the other, so interdependence and interrelationships are very important. As part of the UNESCO chair team, we are developing concrete methods and techniques around Ubuntu. We are working on it now, and we'll publish a book so there can be more practical strategies for developing intercultural competence.

I mentioned a colleague, now a VP at Meta and doing intercultural training there. She and I put together a book several years ago with over 50 activities to cultivate intercultural competence. That is available as a resource. There are also many other resources, including free downloadable resources from the Council of Europe. One of them is called Tasks for Democracy. They have a wealth of intercultural tools. There is also a database in the United States at Purdue that is searchable and has many tools called the Hub. The World Council is

also a great resource for strategies. The working groups share a lot on this question, so there are many resources available.

Implications for practice
This section aims to present a reflective commentary from the teacher-interviewer on the implications for practice.

The interview laid emphasis on the fact that English as a foreign language is not limited to language structures and must address how students interact across differences. The implication could be to design lessons creating room for students to share personal perspectives, realize and accommodate differing viewpoints respectfully and reflect on these interactions to shape intercultural communication by cultivating intercultural competence.

Since attitudes of intercultural competence which are openness, curiosity and respect cannot be taught in traditional sense, those should be modelled and encouraged by teachers in cases of conflicting ideas and viewpoints, and misunderstandings.

The framework also highlights the importance of specific skills, especially "listening for understanding rather than response." In classroom contexts, employing structured listening tasks such as the UNESCO's Story Circles could transform a mechanical listening exercise to a relational skill fostering empathy, collaboration, shared responsibility, and deeper understanding not just individual reflection. In addition, the simplicity of this method proves that intercultural learning does not have to rely on elaborate instruments or expensive resources.

In terms of measurement of intercultural competence, it should be acknowledged that both assessing and cultivating intercultural competence are complex tasks and besides tools and frameworks suggested, one needs to pay attention to evidence of change in learners' perspectives and behaviors, by utilizing multiple perspectives, multiple measures, and most importantly, authentic human interaction. Furthermore, another significant point to keep in mind is that the assessment process should start with "Why am I assessing?" and "What exactly do I want to assess?" instead of "What tool should I use?", which should be continued with continuous feedback sessions. This shift in focus highlights that assessment should not be an exercise or program evaluation, but a means of giving students meaningful feedback to support their continued growth.

The emphasis on "fluent fools" highlights the importance of becoming aware that one needs to consider not just what they say, but how appropriately and effectively they say it. For teaching, this means, cultural scenarios, role-plays, and reflective tasks should be implemented to lead students to achieve navigating across differences respectfully and flexibly.

The insights from the interview also suggest that real life interactions cannot be substituted. Teachers should investigate and find ways to extend learning to contexts outside classrooms. Students could be encouraged to have interactions with people in diverse communities, be partnered with other language classes and led to experiential learning opportunities which are necessary for genuine cultural growth cultivation.

Overall, the evolving definition of intercultural competence—shifting from a narrow focus on cultural differences to a broader recognition of difference in all its forms— suggests that this is a never-ending process. Today, learners need to be equipped with intercultural competence to be able to engage meaningfully in not only culturally diverse contexts but also across

different religions, genders, languages, generations, social backgrounds and so on. Teachers' role here is to help their students navigate this diversity by being curious, open, humble and ready to learn. This could be achieved by adopting a multi-perspective approach: integrating storytelling, reflective prompts and collaborative projects while rethinking assessment as evidence of transformation rather than measurement of knowledge.

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