
Intercultural Sensitivity In Cross-Cultural Settings: The Case Of University Students In Italy And Greece

Introduction

Cosmopolitanization of modern life (Beck 2009), meaning the mixing of people from diverse cultural backgrounds, has set new sensible and more sophisticated standards for effective intercultural communication, reflexive dialogue and collaborative learning. Modern people are required to undertake a reflexive project (Giddens 1991), namely to build up their own diverse biographies (multiple identities and life-style cultures). They also have to assume more responsibility towards making choices to engage in intercultural learning experiences. An important quality towards this is one's rethinking/ re-evaluation of own experiences and assumptions to determine whether these remain functional in a globalized context.

In this context, intercultural teacher education becomes more important. Modern teachers are required to be highly tolerant, inclusive and culturally responsive practitioners. This means that they must be self-aware and reflexive of their own biases, demonstrate intercultural competence and responsiveness as well as be willing to develop a multi-faceted global, historical, and cultural perspective about embracing differences. It is fundamental for teachers to realize the potential risks of a) adopting a monocultural, ethnocentric and culturally-biased perspective when dealing with student. Obtaining an intercultural competence is a lifelong process closely associated with one's formal and informal intercultural experiences and contacts. In Higher Education (HE) context, students' intercultural learning is often assessed in study abroad programs (Hammer 2012; Deardorff 2013), although intercultural competences concern all students. Some terms, including global competence, global citizenship, cross-cultural competence, international competence, intercultural effectiveness and intercultural sensitivity (Deardorff 2011). However, there is a growing consensus on the definition of intercultural competence as the "ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff 2006, 249).

Furthermore, intercultural sensitivity has been regarded as a prerequisite for achieving intercultural competence (Chen and Starosta 2000) and a crucial attribute to enable people to become successful global citizens. This study focusses on intercultural sensitivity of students from two public universities in Greece and Italy, developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) This is timely as both countries have received a massive number of refugees and the citizens' sensitivity to reception is experiencing a tough season. Therefore, educational and social professionals are at the forefront and the possession of intercultural competence becomes an actual need. Intercultural Sensitivity (IS) in education appears necessary to investigate before any curriculum decisions are to be taken.

Internationalization of curriculum is particularly important when preparing future teachers. Proper and rigorous assessment of intercultural competence could enable knowledge professionals to critically reflect on the generic value of diversity and to obtain specific affective, cognitive, behavioral and moral dimensions of such competence.

Global interconnectness (due to international business, travel, social media) means that an

increasing number of people will need to live and work with culturally distinct others as well as to be aware of and adapt to cultural differences. The affective aspect of intercultural communication competence connects awareness with skills.. Intercultural sensitivity is represented by a set of attitudes, which enable teachers to actively “desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate, and accept differences among cultures” (Chen and Starosta 1997, 11). Thus, intercultural sensitivity can be defined as teachers’ ability to be interested in other cultures as well as to be sensitive in noticing cultural differences, to empathize with the views of people from other cultures and be willing to modify their behavior to sustain effective communication.

Twenty four items were extracted from the results of an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) developing a valid and acceptable intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS) based on five factors:

1. Intercultural Engagement;
2. Respect for Cultural Differences;
3. Interaction Confidence;
4. Interaction Enjoyment; and
5. Interaction Attentiveness.

Among the main objectives of the study were to investigate whether Chen and Starosta's model of IS fitted well with the Greek and Italian students. Although five factors were indeed extracted, these did not fully reflect on Chen and Starosta's categorisation and labelling of factors.

The newly built constructs are provided below:

- a) Construct of Respect of Cultural Differences and Open-mindedness (factor A) accept and respect cultural differences of others as well as cultural disposition/outlook.
- b) Construct of Relational Self-concept (factor B) the successful penetration of personal boundaries to develop intercultural relationships. It captures interconnectness and personal significance through relational learning and interaction.
- c) Construct of Interaction Confidence (factor C)
- d) Construct of Interaction Responsiveness (factor D) reflect the positive interaction responsiveness and easiness to engage.
- e) Construct of Interaction Attentiveness (factor E) the ability of thoughtful and careful consideration of communicative needs and messages during the intercultural interaction.

Students managed to perform better in those individual factors related to general or ethical descriptors of intercultural sensitivity such as open-mindedness and respect of cultural differences. These students were born and raised in multi-cultural contexts and live a “daily multiculturalism” (Wise and Velayutham 2009) that has socialized them from their early years to the importance of respecting the differences and maintaining relations with cultural others. In addition, their future career orientation and interaction with diverse school-age children probably sparked sensitivity to and respect for intercultural differences.

Concrete experience, especially if contact is positive (Allport 1954), increases confidence in interaction with people from other cultures. This data can, thus, reveal the need to strengthen IS by offering more concrete experiences in which exercise this skills and abilities. For example, it suggests the importance of empowering students to engage through more internationalized

experiences, coursework and field experiences.

In Europe it has been made important that all universities must internationalize their curricula and include extra curricula activities for their students “so they can benefit from internationalization and gain global competences” (International Association of Universities 2012, 5). the internationalization of HE curricula. Students will perform various roles as citizens, employees and persons in highly globalized settings. Secondly, HE intercultural courses should take into account the role of intersubjectivity and interculturality. This means that they need to offer learning opportunities enabling students to evoke their “relational self”.

Thirdly, the adoption of culturally responsive pedagogy framework as an important aspect for effective intercultural learning. The important issue here is how to design an authentic and reflexive curriculum that connects formal intercultural learning (theory and practice) with learners’ outside world experiences. Finally, measuring intercultural learning outcomes is an integral part of an internationalized curriculum (De Wit 2012).

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