



## INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AS A VERITABLE TOOL FOR PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

Eyitayo Adewale Adelakun (Ph.D.)<sup>1</sup>, Adegbola Thomas<sup>2</sup>,  
and Abiodun Omolara Adelakun<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Intercultural Studies and Administration.

Email: [eyitayoadelakun@gmail.com](mailto:eyitayoadelakun@gmail.com), Tel.: +2348024983928

<sup>2</sup>Finance & Governance Strategist on Societal Dynamics.

Email: [adegbolathomas@gmail.com](mailto:adegbolathomas@gmail.com); Tel.: +2348081182200

<sup>3</sup>Old Testament Studies, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Email: [adelakunabbey86@gmail.com](mailto:adelakunabbey86@gmail.com); Tel.: +23470615131418

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**ABSTRACT:** *In Nigeria, intercultural dialogue is inevitable for peaceful co-existence and mutual relationships among the citizens. The reason is that intercultural dialogue involves interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds and ethnic nationalities. To achieve constructive intercultural dialogue, it requires a sense of intercultural competence. Therefore, this study examined the role of intercultural competence in promoting intercultural dialogue, focusing on Nigeria's cultural diversity. The study explored the descriptive research method and drew data from the review of previous studies, while the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was adopted as the theoretical framework for the study. The rationale behind the choice of this theory is rooted in the fact that intercultural dialogue requires intercultural competence and sensitivity. Through the theoretical framework, the study investigated different stages during intercultural dialogue and Engagement, challenges associated with intercultural dialogue, and the imperative of intercultural competence for intercultural dialogue. Acquiring intercultural competence will enable individuals to overcome some of the challenges associated with intercultural competence. The study discovers that intercultural competence is imperative for preventing communication problems, misunderstanding and conflict, fostering trust, collaboration, inclusion and social harmony, and professional relationships across cultural divides when people engage in intercultural dialogue.*

**KEYWORDS:** Intercultural competence, Intercultural dialogue, Cultural diversity.



## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is often celebrated for its cultural diversity, with over 500 languages and a mosaic of ethnic and religious identities. While rich and dynamic, this diversity poses significant challenges in fostering national unity. Apparently, achieving national unity in a diverse cultural country can be difficult without room for intercultural dialogue. However, the rule of engagement in intercultural dialogue rests upon intercultural competence. The reason is that ignorance of intercultural competence has resulted in several challenges such as linguistic identity crises, ethnic or cultural rivalries, and governance structures that marginalize minority groups have deepened superiority conflict among ethnic groups and limited opportunities for constructive dialogue. The place of intercultural competence is critical to constructive intercultural dialogue. In view of this, the study focuses on challenges associated with intercultural dialogue in contemporary Nigeria, and emphasizes intercultural competence as an indispensable tool for intercultural dialogue.

### Conceptual Clarification

#### A. Intercultural Competence

Several individuals have explored different parameters to express the concept of intercultural competence in relation to their discipline and context of operation. Hence, it is also important to note that intercultural competence is a term often interchanged with multicultural competence, global citizenship, transnational competence, cross-cultural skills, intercultural communication, intercultural sensitivity, and cultural intelligence (Sjøen, 2021). All these terminologies are essential for effective dialogue among people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In his view, Fantini (2009) conceptualized intercultural competence as the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills, and attitudes that lead to effective and appropriate communication in intercultural settings. In this sense, Fantini's concept of intercultural competence provides some of the key elements needed for intercultural dialogue. Similarly, Deardorff (2006) emphasized that it involves internal (knowledge, attitudes) and external (behavioural skills) outcomes that support effective engagement in diverse contexts.

In the Nigerian context, where tribalism and ethnic divides have fuelled social unrest, intercultural competence offers a pathway to reducing biases and fostering mutual understanding. For instance, youth leadership programs in Lagos State, a microcosm of Nigeria's diversity, have demonstrated the potential of intercultural competence in mitigating cultural superiority and promoting equity (Adelakun, 2023; Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009). Intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively across cultural boundaries seamlessly. It offers a pathway to mitigate intercultural-related challenges in any multicultural context. It equips individuals with the cognitive, affective, and behavioural tools necessary to bridge cultural divides and foster inclusive dialogue.

#### B. Intercultural Dialogue

Intercultural dialogue, as defined by UNESCO (2009), is a process that fosters constructive interaction and understanding between people of diverse cultural origins. It is aimed at building mutual respect and cooperation by addressing misunderstandings and prejudices. In pluralistic societies like Nigeria, intercultural dialogue serves as a vital mechanism for preventing



conflicts and promoting social cohesion. Scholars such as Byram (1997) and Amadeo (2016) argued that intercultural dialogue goes beyond mere communication; it requires deliberate efforts to understand and value the cultural perspectives of others. It is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where a history of ethnic clashes and mistrust has hindered national development.

Practical examples of successful intercultural dialogue can be seen in initiatives like community peace forums and intercultural education programs that address cultural stereotypes and foster unity (Byram, 1997; Amadeo, 2016; UNESCO, 2009). Udoh and Emmanuel (2020) further highlighted that linguistic identity plays a crucial role in shaping social interactions. However, the marginalization of minority languages and the dominance of English in governance and education have created cultural dissonance. Intercultural dialogue offers a framework for resolving these tensions by fostering inclusive conversations that respect all cultural identities.

### **C. Cultural Diversity in Nigeria**

Cultural diversity is one of the uniqueness of Nigeria as a country. There are several opinions about the statistics of ethnic and cultural groups in Nigeria. The reality is that Nigeria is a multicultural country of people with different cultural affiliations and orientations, each with its own language, traditions, social life, leadership pattern, political and administrative structure. Arguably, the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria are the Hausa-Fulanis in the north, the Yorubas in the southwest, and the Igbos in the southeast. However, Nigeria is also home to numerous other ethnic groups such as Edo, Ijaw, Kanuri, Tiv, and Ibibio, among others.

The commonly available statistics reveal that Nigeria has approximately 200 million people, over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 spoken languages (Kilgori, 2023; Oluwadele *et al.*, 2023). However, it is important to note that Nigeria's cultural composition was formed and influenced by transatlantic trade, colonisation, and globalization. Prior to the British invasion and colonisation, Nigeria was an abode to several powerful kingdoms and empires, including the Hausa city-states, the Yoruba kingdoms, and Igbo-speaking communities (Lekuculture.com, 2024).

This diversity has played a significant role in Nigeria's politics as it has brought about both positive and negative impacts. The cultural diversity of Nigeria has the potential to unite citizens and allow diverse experiences to be shared, but it can also lead to competition for resources and power between groups and often result in conflict.

## METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study made use of descriptive methodology to investigate the concept of intercultural competence and it is imperative for promoting intercultural dialogue in contemporary Nigeria. The focus of this study informed the rationale for the choice of Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). Research among scholars in the North American context produced a different model of intercultural competence which has been generally examined and explored in modern scholarship (Bennett, 1993). Critical studies reveal that this model was developed with a grounded theory approach and then gained much attention as a dynamic model that reveals the process of accumulation of experience and changes in attitudes (Mellizo, 2019).

Human nature and individuals' emotional intelligence are not the same. Hence an individual's response to cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue is likely to be different as well. Developmental models of intercultural sensitivity describe how people behave and communicate when they encounter people from different cultures. In addition, this model also indicates how people develop over time, particularly when in contact with people from different cultures or find themselves in different cultural locations. In view of this, Intercultural sensitivity aids or enhances one's development of skills essential for intercultural dialogue.

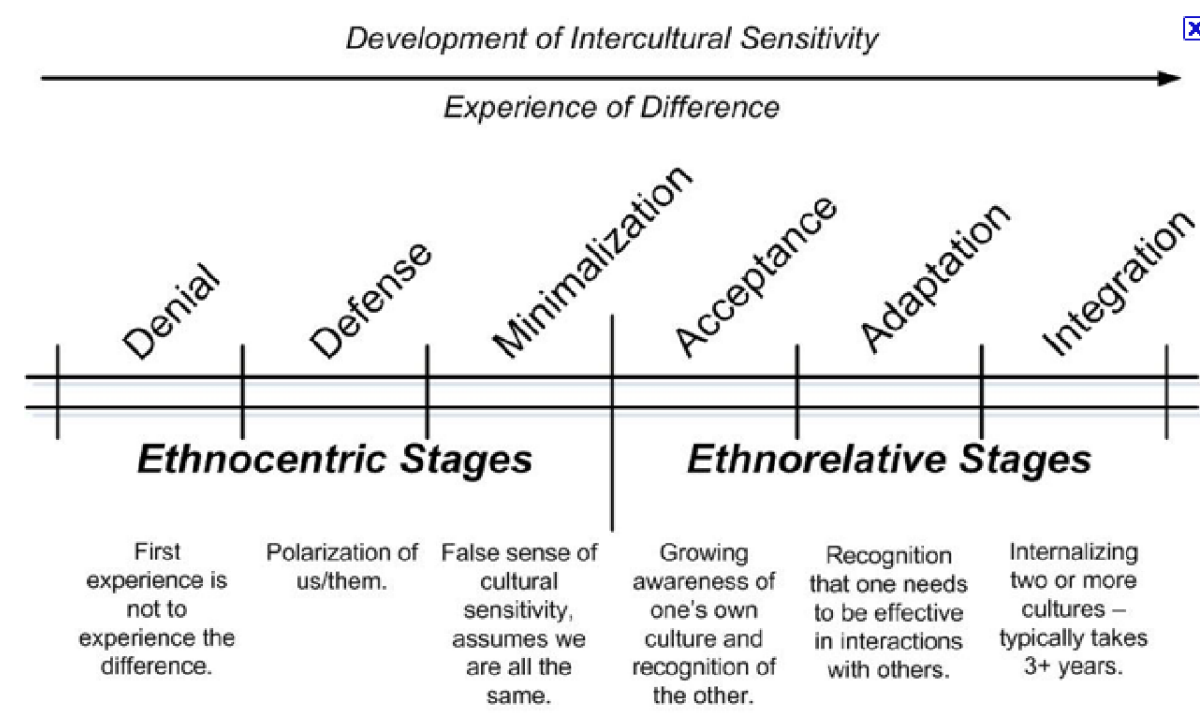


Figure 2.2: DMIS Model Diagrammatic Representation (Adapted from Bannet)

The above diagram presents six stages of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, but divided into ethnocentric stages and ethnorelative stages.



## Different Stages during Intercultural Dialogue and Engagement

### Ethnocentric Stages

- 1. Denial:** During intercultural dialogue, the individual tends to deny the difference or existence of other cultures by erecting psychological or physical barriers in the form of isolation and separation from other cultures.
- 2. Defense:** In most cases related to intercultural interaction, communication or dialogue, many people react against the threat of other cultures by denigrating the other cultures (negative stereotyping) in order to promote one's culture.
- 3. Minimization:** The individual acknowledges cultural differences on the surface but considers all cultures as fundamentally similar.

### Different Experiences in Ethnorelative Stages

- 1. Acceptance:** The individual accepts and respects cultural differences with regards to behaviour and shared values during intercultural dialogue.
- 2. Adaptation:** The individual develops the ability to shift his frame of reference to other culturally diverse worldviews through empathy and pluralism.
- 3. Integration:** The individual expands and incorporates other worldviews into his own worldview.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity is a framework that systematically projects an individual's experience with different cultures. In other words, people do not perceive the issues directly; rather their experience of issues is built up through a pattern and thereby used the pattern to form their perception of such issues. A typical example is a Yoruba boy with an orientation that the acceptable way of greeting elders is prostrating and then relocates to an Igbo community where their young people do not prostrate. He may begin to have an ethnocentric worldview that Yoruba culture is the best way to greet and show respect to elders.

Naturally, when people change their environment and move to another culture different from theirs, they are very likely to experience culture shock. This experience usually creates a struggle with one's cultural orientation, and against a new culture. Usually, an ethnocentric worldview is responsible for culture shock. People who experience culture shock have several issues to resolve through their new cultural encounters. However, encounters and experiences in different cultural settings will afford people the challenges of intercultural competence dialogue. Cross-cultural experiences typically create opportunities for understanding different cultural situations. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity provides a template for people to develop alternative knowledge and experiences that go with experiences of people from another culture.





## Challenges Associated to Intercultural Dialogue

**Challenge of Language Barrier:** Language is fundamental to human existence and intercultural dialogue. It is a basis for how people relate and interact with one another in all situations. Supporting this, Ennin and Manariyo (2023) stressed that without a common language, verbal communication is practically impossible. People may not be able to associate or share their views or dialogue with each other. However, the challenge of a language barrier is inevitable during intercultural dialogue. Language barrier is likely to cause misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misinformation confusion, and conflict. Examples of language barriers are dialects, accents, native idioms, etc. The challenge of a language barrier is not limited to intercultural dialogue since people speaking the same language equally face communication gaps because of accents, dialectical differences or any related language challenges (Brandi, 2024).

**Challenge of Different Values and Beliefs:** Differences in values and beliefs can spark apprehension and misconception among people during intercultural dialogue. When people engage in intercultural dialogue, individuals tend to promote their cultural values and beliefs over others. According to Helper (2022), the challenge of different values and beliefs usually occurs between cultures that believe in individualism and collectivism. The people who belong to individualistic culture place priority on personal values and beliefs while the people who belong to collectivism are concerned about community people. The danger is that challenges arising from differences in values and beliefs among people involved in intercultural dialogue can result in intercultural/ethnic and religious conflict.

**Challenge of Social Class and Disparity:** Some scholars consider dialogue as an interactive process for bridging differences among people in a society (Elias & Mansouri, 2020). However, the challenge of social status and disparity cannot be overlooked in Nigerian societies. This is given that some people are often not conscious of other cultures in intercultural dialogue or engagement. There are many conceptions of social class, but Yuri (2017) defines social class as systems of social stratification, through which people are categorized based on their access to valuable resources, such as wealth, education, occupation and social network. Many people consider the culture of others as inferior to theirs, thereby using their culture as a standard of judgment because of their social status. This underscores that social class causes discrimination and disparity among people in a society.

Socioeconomic status can create barriers to meaningful intercultural dialogue. It can lead to a power struggle, deficient understanding, and ineffective intercultural dialogue. People of the lower class do not usually get the deserved recognition and honour while upper-class people are usually on top of every situation. Social class creates undue disparity and inequality that make intercultural dialogue seemingly difficult. Recognition of each social class is another benchmark for any form of dialogue because individual social class has an impact on intercultural dialogue.

**Challenge of Ethnic and Cultural Superiority:** Ethnic and cultural variation is apparently responsible for the superiority complex amongst people during intercultural dialogue. Superiority among people from different cultures resulted from ethnocentrism. Brodowicz (2024) describes ethnocentrism as the predisposition to believe that one's ethnic or cultural group is more important than others. In this case, ethnocentrism sets the stage for the challenge of ethnic and cultural superiority. Egbonu (2022) reiterates that often, the challenge of



ethnocentrism generates dissection and causes tribal prejudice rather than competence, equity, and equality. An ethnocentric individual always rates his or her ethnic or culture superior and better than other ethnic and cultural groups. People with ethnocentric mindsets are fond of using their culture as the standard to measure other ethnic groups and perceptions during intercultural engagement and dialogue. This superiority complex makes intercultural dialogue difficult and can result in disagreement.

**Challenge of Personal Identity:** Understanding identity is very crucial for intercultural dialogue. Saaïda (2023) defines identity as a dynamic and multidimensional concept that comprises several characteristics such as values, beliefs, and experiences that define an individual or group of people. In essence, identity is formed by internal and external influences, such as personal belief, religious affiliation or orientation, social norms, and cultural heritage. In addition, individual identity includes gender identity, sexual identity, racial identity and ethnic identity, among others. All these can influence an individual's perceptions and worldview either positively or negatively during intercultural dialogue.

### **Imperative of Intercultural Competence for Intercultural Dialogue**

**1. Preventing Communication Problem:** Communication is a form of dialogue regardless of those who are involved. Several challenges are associated with communication - choice of word, tone of communication, prejudice, and language differences, among others. Competence in verbal and nonverbal forms of communication creates a comfortable atmosphere for intercultural dialogue and mutual agreement in the decision-making process (Belasen & Belasen, 2018). Intercultural competence provides the necessary skills for effective communication with people from different cultural backgrounds and ethnic nationalities.

**2. Preventing Misunderstanding and Conflict:** In every human interaction or dialogue, misunderstanding and conflict are inevitable. Generally, challenges and conflict are inevitable in every human institution, especially when people are involved in intercultural dialogue and communication (Zhao, 2021). Guo supports this statement that conflict is an inherent element of sociocultural life, especially in intercultural interactions. The challenge of misunderstanding and conflict usually emanates from neglecting or ignoring other people's cultural backgrounds and affiliations. In a situation like this, intercultural competence helps to understand or manage conflict among people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

**3. Fostering Trust and Collaboration:** Trust and collaboration are products of effective intercultural dialogue. Intercultural competence is unavoidable where the need for dialogue and interaction in a multicultural environment is common (Guillen-Yparrea & Ramirez-Montoya, 2023). The knowledge of intercultural competence can be a helpful way to build rapport, a sense of trust and smooth collaboration. Hence, trust and collaboration are possible in intercultural dialogue when all the parties involved in intercultural dialogue acquire intercultural competence skills. Intercultural competence enhances intercultural insights, open-mindedness to cultural diversity, effective partnership and bridging cultural gaps. Trust and collaboration would enable people involved in intercultural dialogue to identify shared values, goals or interests across cultures, and establish connections that transcend individual differences.



**4. Fostering Inclusion and Social Harmony:** Effective intercultural dialogue rests on inclusion and social harmony. More so, inclusion and harmony can be likened to what Hashemi (2025) describes as belonging. Therefore, inclusion and social harmony are synonymous with belonging which involves the feeling of association with others, sharing common goals, values, and conducts, and experiencing common respect and recognition (Baumeister, & Leary, 1995). Supporting this, Hashemi (2025) added that belonging is beyond the status of being a member of a group, but a noteworthy involvement and emotional attachment that ensures an individual derives identity and has a voice on raising issues in a community or an organisation.

This suggests that inclusion and social harmony are fundamental human needs that indicate a sense of being accepted and valued in intercultural dialogue. Inclusion fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance, leading to social harmony and cohesion in a multicultural context. However, inclusion and social harmony can be achieved if the concerned people have intercultural competence. The knowledge of intercultural competence prepares people to be able to navigate cultural complexities and foster inclusive relationships and social harmony. Intercultural competence helps to acknowledge and respect the diversity of other cultures during intercultural dialogue.

**5. Fostering Professional Relationship:** Today's workforce and workplace have become culturally diverse with co-workers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds working together (Durevall, 2022). In this case, intercultural dialogue is indispensable in a multicultural workforce and workplace. Experience shows that no individual advances in a profession in isolation, and often requires a connection with people from diverse cultural contexts. This attests to the view of Adamoniene et al. (2022) that intercultural competence has a great influence on an organisation's success and personal professional career.

Professional and corporate dialogue in Nigeria requires intercultural competence. Intercultural competence aids awareness of the unique insights and capabilities of individuals from different backgrounds and the resources they can bring to the table. Acquiring intercultural competence promotes intercultural dialogue in organizations recognizes the strength inherent in cultural diversity and harnesses opportunities available in a multicultural context. The multicultural reality in many professional bodies and corporate organisations in Nigeria demands intercultural skills for mutual relationships and partnerships. Intercultural competence helps to recognize and appreciate one's cultural values and sentiments, while being open to mutual relationships with people from diverse cultures.

## CONCLUSION

Dialogue remains an indispensable pillar of human institutions, particularly within Nigeria's multicultural landscape, where effective intercultural engagement necessitates specialized competencies. Scholarly research affirms that intercultural competence is fundamental to fostering productive and meaningful intercultural dialogue in contemporary Nigeria. Despite the challenges that often impede cross-cultural communication, intercultural competence enhances individuals' ability to navigate cultural differences with sensitivity, clarity, and respect. It facilitates meaningful interactions across ethnic and national boundaries, fostering mutual understanding and social cohesion. Moreover, in an era of increasing globalization, intercultural competence extends beyond national discourse, equipping individuals with the





critical skills required to navigate complex international relations and contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious global society..

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