

A theoretical insight into enhancing student intercultural competence: Saudi Arabia as a future business and tourism hub

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Abstract: This paper provides a theoretical insight into intercultural competence by examining its concept, types, and significance, and by highlighting the urgent need to enhance it in Saudi Arabia—a promising, culturally diverse hub. It emphasizes the importance of improving intercultural competence among Saudi students so they can adapt to the country’s increasingly cross-cultural environment. Drawing on past research, the paper offers future insights into developing intercultural competence and proposes a method for its assessment. The findings are expected to be of significant value to university stakeholders in refining academic programs and institutional practices, ensuring that graduates are well-prepared to compete and thrive in a multicultural and multiethnic global environment.

Keywords: *Business, Cross-cultural, Intercultural competence, Intercultural communication, Saudi Arabia.*

1. Introduction

With ambitious plans and massive budgets, the Saudi government is set to transform the country into a highly desirable destination for international investors and tourists. Soon, the country is expected to witness an unprecedented influx of international visitors and the formation of culturally and ethnically diverse communities. A key question arising from this national transformation is whether the local pre-service workforce is prepared to engage effectively and appropriately with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Intercultural competence, or the ability to effectively employ intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes and appropriately communicate in intercultural encounters, is regarded as a required competency in emerging and established internationalized and ethnically diverse regions [1]. Realizing the importance of intercultural competence, higher education institutions worldwide have dedicated considerable effort and resources to assessing the intercultural competence of their students and designing and offering special programs for developing it Zhang and Zhou [2]. However, Saudi higher education institutions hold significant potential for growth in intercultural competence assessment and development, as evidenced by the limited research on this issue within the Saudi context.

2. Intercultural Competence: Concept and Significance

Rapid advancements in information technology and long-distance transportation have led to significant changes in the educational and labor sectors by facilitating cross-cultural collaboration [3]. With this new reality, intercultural competence (IC) emerged as one of the key competencies of the 21st century [1]. These twenty-first century competencies are believed to be necessary for “success in the 21st century workplace and were originally conceived via collaboration between business leaders and

educational organizations in an effort to better prepare students for successful careers in a society that is internationally integrated and highly technological” [4].

Michael Byram, a leading figure in the field of intercultural competence, argues that “intercultural competence, linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence interact with each other and work together to achieve communication goals” [5]. In this sense, intercultural competence can be defined as “the capability to interact and communicate appropriately and effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds” [6]. This ability is no longer only necessary for specific professions like international ambassadors and tourist guides. Indeed, intercultural competence has become an essential competency in almost all walks of life and for all people whether at home or abroad. This has attracted considerable, cross-disciplinary research in recent years and motivated higher education institutions to develop and implement training programs that prepare their graduates to effectively compete in the labor market [7]. As Odag, et al. [8] put it,

While it is important that universities and other tertiary educational institutions continue to promote the development of academic and professional skills, the additional fundamental need for interculturally competent graduates has emerged in the era of globalization. Accordingly, universities need to “educate their students for global citizenship, to keep pace with their peers, to better serve the national and international community” [9] and “produce global competence, or a sense of civic responsibility that extends beyond the local or even national level” [10]. On the individual level, global (intercultural) competence goes hand in hand with employability on the international job market, along with increased job performance and personal development...(p. 2)

3. Types of Intercultural Competence

Scholars speak of several types of intercultural competence, each highlighting a certain aspect of interaction and communication. These are:

1. Cognitive Competence
2. Affective Competence
3. Behavioral Competence
4. Motivational Competence
5. Linguistic Competence

Cognitive Competence includes knowledge about different cultures. Affective Competence involves the development of emotional openness, understanding, and the readiness to engage with people from different cultures without prejudice. Behavioral Competence refers to the ability to adapt one's behavior fittingly in cross-cultural settings. Motivational Competence involves curiosity and motivation to learn and fit in intercultural settings. Finally, linguistic Competence includes the ability to understand and use language effectively in intercultural communication.

Combined, these varied competencies enable individuals to interact effectively in diverse and interconnected settings. As individuals develop these competencies, their cross-cultural interactions become increasingly effective and appropriate.

4. Saudi Arabia: A Transforming Country and Region

Historically, travel to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was restricted to expatriate workers, business visa holders, or religious pilgrims visiting Mecca and Medina. However, under Vision 2030—an initiative adopted in April 2016 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to develop Saudi Arabia's economy and education—the country is launching a sustainable tourism industry aimed at showcasing the kingdom and its ancient treasures. In one agenda of the Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia promises, “[i]n the tourism and leisure sectors, we will create attractions that are of the highest international standards, improve visa issuance procedures for visitors, and prepare and develop our historical and heritage sites.” (Vision 2030).

In addition to the Saudi government's intention to diversify its main sources of income away from oil and related industries, it clearly understands the importance of building strong bridges of

communication with other countries and cultures throughout the world, by means of economic, social, and cultural cooperation. As a milestone of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has opened its doors to international visitors as part of efforts to boost tourism and stimulate travel to the Kingdom. In September 2019, Saudi Arabia announced the launch of a visa regime allowing for citizens of 49 countries to visit the Kingdom. According to the Saudi Ministry of Tourism (MOT), tourist visas were issued starting on September 28, 2019.

With this new electronic tourist visa, prospective tourists can apply online with a quick and easy-to-use online portal and affordable fees or upon arrival in Saudi Arabia at visa points in the passport areas of international airports and should be able to obtain a one-year, multiple-entry basis, allowing them to spend up to 90 days in the country and discover the Saudi heritage, vibrant culture, and diverse and breathtaking landscapes. Over 77,000 e-visas were issued to travelers from around the world in only the first month of the e-visa regime launch. Officials in Saudi Arabia declared that Saudi Arabia seeks to attract 100 million foreign visitors by 2030. The Saudi government also promises to establish special zones that are competitive to all visitors. Regarding this, Vision 2030 states,

We will create special zones in exceptional and competitive locations. We shall take into account the comparative advantages of the Kingdom's different regions, assess their feasibility for promising sectors, and then establish special zones, such as logistic, tourist, industrial and financial ones. Special commercial regulations to boost investment possibilities and diversify government revenues will be applied to these zones (Vision 2030).

Among the destinations that Saudi Arabia is preparing and hopes tourists will visit is Tabuk. Tabuk city is one of the largest and most important cities in the northern region, with a heritage dating back to the 5th century BC. In fact, as a region, Tabuk hosts the ancient city of Mada'in, home to the Nabateans before Roman annexation in 106 CE, which is one of five UNESCO listed heritage sites. Tabuk region is nestled between the Red Sea, to the west, and Al-Nafud desert, to the east. Five of its governorates are on the coast: Haql, Dabba, Al-Wajh, Umlaj and Al-Bada. It has acquired several nicknames, including "Tabuk of the Roses" and "Northern Gate." The region also hosts several festivals, organized by the MOT, and the climate is wonderful all year round, making it a particularly popular destination during the summer months.

Preparing this region for tourism and easing obstacles for international visitors will contribute significantly to diversifying society and advancing globalization. For communication between Saudis and international visitors to the Kingdom, there needs to be a common means of communication since they both do not share the same first language. Dombi [11] shows that successful communication between individuals not speaking the same mother tongue requires the use of a language spoken and comprehended by both parties (p. 187). Therefore, English is used as a lingua franca. The next section will discuss and elaborate on the use of English as a lingua franca.

5. English as a Lingua Franca

English is the world's international language and is used in nearly every aspect of global interaction. Since Saudis and international visitors do not share a common first language, English serves as the essential lingua franca for effective communication." In the realm of tourism, English is the lingua franca used for communication between, for example, Saudis and prospective international visitors to the country. In essence, while high proficiency in English is crucial for most professionals and citizens, intercultural competence is essential for effective communication. Since Saudis contact with people from other cultures is expected to expand because of the many tourism initiatives, the need for skilled intercultural communicators increases. In this case, English becomes a medium of intercultural communication.

6. Drawing on Past Intercultural Competence Research for Future Insights

Research has approached intercultural competence from two major paradigms to identify key intercultural competence components and development factors [12]. The

Cognitive/Affective/Behavioral (CAB) paradigm identifies components such as empathy, motivation, interaction involvement, sensation seeking, and attitudes toward other cultures [13]. These components have exhibited medium to high correlation with independent intercultural competence measures. In contrast, the development paradigm emphasizes the dynamic evolution of intercultural competence as individuals engage with cultural differences. Thus, the development paradigm provides the means to determine developmental factors that could inform the design and implementation of intercultural competence training programs [1]. Combined, these two intercultural competence paradigms could work together to enrich our understanding of intercultural competence and draw a more accurate picture of its development trajectory.

Higher education institutions around the world, especially in more developed and ethnically diverse areas, have realized the importance of developing their students' intercultural competence to become effective members of the 21st-century workforce [14]. Several studies were conducted in higher education institutions to measure the intercultural competence of their students, to develop intercultural competence training courses and to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions [2, 15, 16]. These studies found that “many students have insufficient intercultural knowledge, attitudes, or skills” [2] and different types of interventions were effective to varying degrees in promoting intercultural competence development.

Among the paucity of studies investigating intercultural competence of college students in the Saudi context, Havril [17] and Havril [18] examined intercultural competence components of female college students in Jazan University. She collected surveys from 341 female students to explore their attitudes and perceptions of intercultural interactions with Western teachers within an intercultural competence model formulated by Stiftung and Cariplo [19] that divides intercultural competence into five major and interconnected components: attitudes, knowledge, skills, desired internal outcomes and desired external outcomes. Results revealed that only half of students self-reported positive attitudes towards Western culture which included openness, curiosity, tolerance and respect for education and religion. The results also revealed that many students are not knowledgeable about major Western cultural norms and characteristics and do not sufficiently comprehend them. Finally, results revealed that most students self-reported poor English and communicative skills.

Havril [17] and Havril [18] made a valuable contribution towards understanding the intercultural competence of Saudi college students. Its findings underscored the critical need for further intercultural competence studies in the Saudi context especially as the country is transforming into a global hub for commerce, business, and tourism. This line of research is even more important for the Tabuk region as it is going to host two of the biggest national projects in Saudi Arabia: Neom and the Red Sea Project. In order to produce global graduates capable of successful and effective participation in an internationalized workforce, the University of Tabuk needs to explore its students' competence in positively and effectively engaging with people of other cultures, review its relevant institutional practices and beliefs and investigate the most effective types of pedagogical interventions for promoting students' intercultural competence.

7. Recommended Method for Assessing Intercultural Competence

According to Deardorff [20] intercultural scholars agree that “the best way to assess intercultural competence is through a mix of qualitative and quantitative measures” (p. 250). This means that a mixed-methods research approach with a focus on a narrative framework should be effective in assessing intercultural competence. The mixed methods research design can be shaped within a narrative thinking framework that helps participants conceptualize their life experiences in three dimensions—temporal, personal-social, and spatial. Studies of intercultural competence can adopt the explanatory sequential design in which the researchers collect quantitative and qualitative information sequentially in two phases, with one form of data collection following and informing the other. The explanatory mixed

methods design “consist of first collecting quantitative data and then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results” [21].

8. Conclusion

This paper has provided a theoretical perspective on how to promote intercultural competence among students in Saudi Arabia, a country poised to become a future hub for business and tourism. In this regard, intercultural competence plays a vital role in international business, “as it helps businesspeople adapt and navigate different cultural contexts in business worlds, thus increasing the opportunities of successful transactions” [5]. Intercultural competence is also crucial in the tourism sector. Studying intercultural competence and identifying its characteristics help tour guides and workers in the field of tourism. Competences, particularly the intercultural one, have proved to be a critical tool in various fields of application such as education, human resources, performance management, and vocational training. Enhancing intercultural competence among students is essential for preparing individuals to engage positively with diverse communities both within and beyond Saudi Arabia. Finally, investigating intercultural competence is particularly critical in regions such as Tabuk, which is set to host major projects like Neom under Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030.

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Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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