Registered in Germany **Europa Revue Journal**
ISSN: 1862-6564 **Vol. 6 No. 6 (2026) Published June 16, 2026**

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AMONG KOREAN LANGUAGE STUDENTS: CONTENT, PRINCIPLES, AND STAGES

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Abstract: This article examines the development of intercultural communication competence among Korean language students through the lens of Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The study analyzes the content, core principles, and six progressive stages of intercultural competence formation from ethnocentric orientations (denial, defense, minimization) to ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, and integration). Particular attention is paid to pedagogical strategies, the use of authentic Korean cultural materials, and practical methods suitable for Uzbek higher education contexts. The research demonstrates that systematic application of Bennett's model enables students to move from monocultural thinking to multicultural flexibility, forming not only linguistic proficiency but also deep cultural intelligence, empathy, and effective cross-cultural communication skills essential in the era of globalization.

Keywords: intercultural communication competence, Korean language education, Bennett's DMIS model, ethnocentric stages, ethnorelative stages, cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, Korean cultural materials, global citizenship

In the era of rapid globalization and increasing cultural interconnectedness, the process of learning a foreign language has transcended the mere mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. For students studying Korean, the development of intercultural communication competence (ICC) has emerged as a fundamental pillar of effective language education. This competence involves not only the correct application of linguistic elements but also the capacity to engage in meaningful, respectful, and contextually appropriate interactions with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. It enables learners to interpret cultural nuances, manage potential misunderstandings, and build bridges of mutual understanding in both personal and

professional settings. Intercultural communication competence is a multifaceted construct that integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Cognitively, it requires deep knowledge of cultural values, norms, and communication patterns. Affectively, it demands attitudes of openness, curiosity, empathy, and tolerance toward cultural differences. Behaviorally, it manifests in the ability to adapt verbal and non-verbal communication strategies in real-time interactions. For Korean language students, this competence is particularly vital due to the unique characteristics of Korean culture, which blends Confucian traditions, rapid modernization, and a distinctive hierarchical social structure with contemporary global influences from K-pop, K-dramas, and digital culture.

The formation of intercultural communication competence is neither spontaneous nor short-term. It is a gradual, dynamic, and often challenging developmental process that spans multiple psychological and cognitive stages. A well-structured pedagogical approach is therefore essential. This article draws upon Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) as its primary theoretical framework. Bennett's model offers a clear roadmap for understanding how individuals progress in their perception and response to cultural differences, making it an invaluable tool for Korean language educators.

Ethnocentric Stages: From Unawareness to Superficial Recognition

Bennett's model divides intercultural sensitivity development into six stages, beginning with three ethnocentric orientations in which one's own culture is viewed as the central reference point.

1. Denial Stage

In the denial stage, learners exhibit minimal awareness of cultural differences. They tend to interpret the world through a single cultural lens, often assuming that their own norms are universal. A novice Korean language student, for instance, might fail to recognize the importance of pre-arranged appointments in Korean professional or social contexts and express surprise or frustration at the structured nature of social interactions. Cultural differences are either unnoticed or dismissed as irrelevant. Pedagogical strategies at this stage focus on raising basic awareness. Effective methods

include exposure to visual materials (photographs, short video clips from Korean daily life), simple comparative tasks between Uzbek and Korean customs, and introductory lectures on visible cultural elements such as greetings, food etiquette, and public behavior. The goal is to gently disrupt monocultural worldviews without causing defensive reactions.

2. Defense Stage

As awareness grows, learners enter the defense stage, where cultural differences are acknowledged but often judged negatively. A binary "us versus them" mentality frequently appears. Students may describe Korean respect for elders and hierarchical address systems as overly formal, rigid, or even insincere, while simultaneously viewing their own direct communication style as superior. In some cases, learners may idealize Korean culture (e.g., praising the "perfect" politeness of K-drama characters) while devaluing their native culture. The educator's primary task here is to shift learners from evaluation to understanding. Classroom activities should emphasize universal human values such as respect, harmony, and hospitality and demonstrate how these values are expressed differently across cultures. Comparative analysis of proverbs, family structures, and conflict resolution styles proves particularly useful.

3. Minimization Stage

In the minimization stage, learners recognize superficial differences but minimize deeper cultural distinctions by asserting that "fundamentally, all people are the same." An Uzbek student might equate Uzbek hospitality with Korean social customs, failing to appreciate the Korean emphasis on personal boundaries, punctuality, and indirect communication. This stage represents a well-intentioned but incomplete worldview that can still lead to intercultural misunderstandings. To move beyond minimization, instructors employ the "cultural iceberg" model, helping students distinguish between visible cultural elements (language, food, clothing) and invisible ones (values, assumptions, power distance, and time orientation). In-depth discussions, reflective journaling, and analysis of authentic Korean media help reveal these hidden layers.

Ethnorelative Stages: Toward Cultural Adaptation and Integration

The transition to ethnorelative stages marks a significant cognitive and emotional shift, wherein learners begin to view their own culture as one among many equally complex systems.

4. Acceptance Stage

In the acceptance stage, students recognize Korean culture as a coherent, logical, and valid system. They may not agree with every aspect such as the intensity of age-based hierarchy or the preference for indirect refusals but they respect these features as meaningful within their context. Learners start to understand how the Korean honorific system (banmal vs. jondaemal) functions as a tool for social harmony rather than mere formality. They also become more attentive to contextual cues, including age, social status, and relationship distance. Pedagogical efforts at this stage concentrate on systematic knowledge building: structured lessons on Korean social hierarchy, analysis of authentic dialogues from K-dramas and workplace scenarios, and comparative cultural research projects.

5. Adaptation Stage

Adaptation represents the practical application of intercultural knowledge. Learners consciously modify their behavior, communication style, and emotional responses to interact effectively with Koreans. Empathy becomes a central skill as students learn to see situations from the other person's cultural perspective. For example, a Korean language student might shift from the direct, straightforward Uzbek communication style to the more indirect, face-saving Korean approach. They learn to use appropriate honorifics, perform respectful bows, offer and receive items with both hands, and interpret silence or hesitation as meaningful signals rather than awkwardness. Non-verbal communication eye contact, personal space, and gesture usage also undergoes conscious adjustment.

Recommended strategies include:

- Role-playing and simulation activities set in realistic Korean contexts (university life, job interviews, family gatherings);
- Case studies based on real intercultural incidents;
- Authentic material practice (K-dramas, podcasts, news articles);

- Virtual exchanges with Korean native speakers via digital platforms.

This stage transforms theoretical understanding into embodied competence.

6. Integration Stage

Integration is the most advanced stage, characterized by the development of a multicultural identity. Learners can fluidly navigate between Korean, Uzbek, and other cultural frameworks depending on the situation. They function as cultural mediators, capable of explaining Korean perspectives to Uzbek interlocutors and vice versa. Their self-identity expands beyond a single cultural affiliation to that of a global communicator. At this level, students engage in complex activities such as international collaborative projects, academic conferences with Korean participants, reflective portfolios documenting their intercultural growth, and independent research on Korean-Uzbek cultural relations. The teacher acts primarily as a facilitator and mentor, supporting autonomous learning and critical self-reflection.

Pedagogical Principles and Practical Implications

The successful implementation of Bennett's DMIS model in Korean language education rests on several core principles:

- Developmental sequencing — activities must correspond to learners' current stages;
- Experiential learning — priority given to active participation over passive lecturing;
- Reflexivity — regular self-reflection and feedback mechanisms;
- Authenticity — heavy use of real Korean cultural materials (K-content, social media, literature);
- Technological integration — incorporation of adaptive learning platforms, virtual reality simulations, and AI-supported feedback to personalize the developmental process.

Educators should conduct regular diagnostic assessments (questionnaires, reflective essays, observed interactions) to identify students' positions within the model and adjust teaching strategies accordingly. Special attention must be paid to emotional challenges such as culture shock, stereotyping, and identity confusion that may arise during transitions between stages. The development of intercultural communication competence among Korean language students is a complex, multi-

stage journey that extends well beyond linguistic proficiency. Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity provides both a theoretical foundation and a practical roadmap for this process. By systematically guiding learners from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientations, educators can foster not only linguistic mastery but also deep cultural intelligence, empathy, and adaptability. In today's globalized world, Korean language graduates who possess high levels of intercultural competence enjoy significant advantages in diplomacy, international business, education, tourism, and cultural exchange. They emerge as tolerant, flexible, and effective global citizens capable of building meaningful connections across cultural boundaries. Ultimately, integrating Bennett's model into Korean language curricula transforms language education into a powerful instrument for personal growth and cross-cultural harmony, preparing students to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world.

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