Assessment of Intercultural Communication Competence among Postgraduate Students from Different Cultural Backgrounds in an Asian Context of Communication

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Abstract

The current study aimed to assess intercultural communication competence (ICC) among foreigner postgraduate students at a Malaysian university campus. This study applied the quantitative survey and interviews to collect the required data. The participants of this study included 118 international postgraduate students of a Malaysian university, who belonged to 15 different nationalities. Based on the answers from the participants, the availability of opportunities at the university campus enabled them to have regular intercultural communication (IC) with people of different cultures, and to gain new information about different cultural norms. Based on the results, their frequent intercultural interactions with their peers from various cultures helped the participants to gain some helpful intercultural information and skills, and change their personal points of views regarding the ever-increasing multicultural surroundings and societies in the globe. The results from the current study may persuade university students to conduct more communication with their peers from different cultures to gain helpful intercultural skills and information.

Keywords: Intercultural; Communication; Competence; Cultural backgrounds

Introduction

In the current ever-increasing culturally-diversified institutions and environments in the modern world, being proficient to perform proper and successful intercultural communication (IC) with people from dissimilar backgrounds is an essential and helpful asset. Bennett and Bennett (2003) define IC as face-to-face interactions between individuals from various cultural backgrounds. According to Vevea (2011), IC is a new and emerging concept and branch of social sciences that emerged in the field of communication through the efforts of Hall (1959). However, intercultural communication competence (ICC) is a key requirement for conducting IC with people from various cultures.

Kim (1991) believes that ICC related to the affective skills, cognitive skills, and adaptability abilities of individuals, which assist them in various contexts of interactions. Moreover, one of the main constructs of ICC is intercultural sensitivity (IS), that is an affective and behavioural construct, and the insight of IS is identical through the concept of ICC (Bennett, 1986; Bennett & Bennett, 2003; Chen, 1997). According to Chen (1997), we can conceptualize IS as a ability that enables individuals to improve their positive emotions regarding understanding and appreciation of different cultural perspectives, that is effective in performing proper intercultural communication and leads to intercultural competence.

Nowadays, Malaysian higher education institutions host thousands of foreigner students from various cultures and nationalities; thus, Malaysia became as an emerging Asian hub of higher education in the globe. Besides other environmental factors, daily and frequent communication among foreigner students of Malaysian higher education institutions might be effective on their personal, academic and social lives. Moreover, the recruitment of foreigner students from diverse countries at Malaysian universities, who aim to further their studies, could enable them to interact with individuals from dissimilar cultures, and to increase their cultural information and skills. Wade (2008) believes that being at university is an important period for students to know some new things, and to lessen their personal and communal stresses. Contacts between/ among students with various cultural norms could help them to share their information and knowledge with one another, to collaborate with one another, and to increase their information regarding diverse social norms and cultural values. Interactions between/ among individuals from different settings are the main means that enable them to create and continue societal and cultural relations with one another (Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2013). Therefore, ICC could be considered among the most effective factors on personal, academic and social lives of international postgraduate students in multicultural university environments. Previous studies in the field of IC mostly been carried out in the Western environments and countries, and generally accentuate on the Western communicative norms and cultural values. Kim (2007, 2012) argues that as the communication meadow and concept were developed by Westerners in the Western parts of the globe and based on the Western values, hence Western people will prioritize their own communicative norms and cultural values, and they may evaluate the communicative and cultural norms of others based on their own perspectives and norms as well. Thus, because of the fundamental dissimilarities between the Asian and Western communicative norms and cultural values, the accessible studies from the Western parts of the globe may not respond the probable questions regarding the characteristics of interactions among people, especially university students, from different cultures in Asia, especially in Malaysia.

However, some studies (e.g. Abdulla, 2008; Abu Bakar & Mustaffa, 2013; Gao, 2011; Hu &

Fan, 2011) on daily communication among individuals from diverse cultures and nationalities, especially between Arab and American students, between Japanese and American students, and between Chinese and American students were conducted in some American higher education institutions. But the studies were conducted under the Western context of communication and based on the Western norms of communication. Therefore, this study aimed to assess ICC among postgraduate students from different nationalities at a Malaysian public university. For the purpose of this study, international postgraduate students refer to Master's and PhD students who hold the passport of another country rather than the host country (Malaysia). This study may add some new results and helpful information in the literature regarding ICC of international students at Malaysian multicultural campuses.

Theoretical Support

As stated by Miller (2005), a theory, as a group of abstract perspectives and viewpoints, helps scholars and researchers to recognize behaviors and communicative norms of different people, and to propose the possible methods that could help people to develop their communicative abilities. Kim (1992), in her System Theory, emphasizes on the active as well as interactive situation and nature of contacts and communications among different people. The mentioned theory focuses on the continuation of equivalent position and responsibility between communicators. Moreover, Kim (2001) focuses on the probable effects of interactions among people from different cultures on their practical efficiency, emotional health, and the advance of their intercultural uniqueness as the main and interrelated components of communication among human beings.

Furthermore, the Contact and Cohesion Theory of Sarwari (2017) points out the Contact-Initiation, Negotiation, Cognition, and Cohesion as the four main steps for conducting appropriate communication among people from different social and cultural backgrounds based on the Asian communicative norms and communication context. The Contact and Cohesion Theory, which been developed and introduced based on the Eastern context of communication, introduces seven preconditions for conducting proper and helpful communication among people from dissimilar backgrounds based on Asian communicative norms and communication context as well. The proposed preconditions are: 1) Coherent-competence, 2) Coherent-heart, 3) Self-knowledge, 4) Purposefulness, 5) Respect-for-differences, 6) Shared-interests, and 7) Flexibility (Sarwari, 2017). Based on the Contact and Cohesion Theory, individuals from dissimilar cultures and nationalities, who interact with one another based on the Asian context of communication, need to consider and improve the mentioned stages, preconditions and abilities.

The mentioned and cited theoretical concepts and arguments by the above-mentioned theorists, particularly the steps and preconditions of the Contact and Cohesion Theory, which been developed based on the Eastern context of communication, could guide an academic study on the assessment of intercultural interactions among individuals from dissimilar backgrounds at an Asian multicultural university campus.

Review of Literature

Daily communication among students from various cultures and nationalities, who enrol

at multicultural universities to further their postgraduate studies, is the necessary part of their academic and social lives. Their good levels of ICC could help them to conduct proper and successful interactions with their peers from dissimilar backgrounds. The main elements of ICC are the affective, cognitive, and behavioural skills and abilities, which are essential for individuals to conduct proper communications with persons from diverse cultures (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Sarwari & Nubli, 2017; Kim, 1991). The advanced stage of intercultural contacts and relations in the internationalized globe asks each individual to enhance the levels of his/ her ICC (Ameli & Molaei, 2012). Moreover, language skill and cultural understanding identified as the basic points of intercultural competence in Malaysia, and language and the "dynamic nature of identity" been proposed as probable affecting factors on interactions among individuals from dissimilar backgrounds (Dalib, Harun &Yusof, 2017; Dalib, Harun, Yusof & Ahmad, 2018).

The results of a study by Sarwari and Abdul Wahab (2018) show that daily communication among student from various cultures and countries assist them to increase their helpful information, and to develop their ICC as well. A good level of ICC could enable international students to conduct proper IC with individuals from different cultures, and to become more competent in work attitudes and intercultural adjustment (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Froese, Peltokorpi & Ko, 2012; Kim, 2007; Kim, 2012). Based on Sarwari et al. (2018), stay and study of international students at a Malaysian multicultural university campus enabled them to conduct proper interactions with students from other cultures, and to become competent in intercultural communication.

In addition, ICC is a crucial requirement for individuals who live in multicultural environments. IC among individuals, especially among university students, could help and facilitate them to achieve new information, and to know dissimilar people. Daily interactions at university environments enable students to understand more, to know their counterparts, and to conquer the probable environmental challenges (Lin, 2011). Therefore, their fine ICC levels could enable international students to conduct more and meaningful interactions with one another, and to have active lives at university campuses. Moreover, the results from some studies in Malaysia indicate the effectiveness of communications between/ among students who belong to dissimilar cultures on the increase of their cultural information and intercultural skills (Sarwari & Nubli, 2017; Sarwari et al., 2016).

ICC, as a key component of intercultural interactions, enables persons to carry out fruitful interactions with persons from different countries and cultures. ICC is the abilities and skills to encode and decode information and messages according to the dissimilar suppositions that practice based on the different cultural values, and diverse communicative norms and assumptions (Beamer, 1992; Lin, 2011). The concept of ICC emphasizes on the perceptive of cultural points that could affect interactions among individuals from diverse cultures (Reed, 2008). The elements that build the concept of ICC indicate the levels of capabilities of persons throughout their direct communication.

Chen and Starosta (2000) introduce the Interaction engagement, Interaction enjoyment, Interaction confidence, Interaction attentiveness, and Respect for cultural differences as the main elements of ICC. The interaction engagement element includes the skills of people to start communication with persons from dissimilar backgrounds; the interaction confidence skill includes the levels of self-confidence of individuals during their interactions with persons from

diverse backgrounds. The interaction enjoyment element indicates the levels of happiness and enjoyment of persons when interacting with persons from dissimilar backgrounds. The respect for cultural differences competence indicates the awareness of individuals about the differences in diversified and multicultural communicative settings, and the consideration of dissimilarities during their communications with others. The interaction attentiveness element indicates the ways persons behave with dissimilar individuals when interacting with them (Michaeli, 2013; Chen & Starosta, 2000).

Some previous works (e.g. Abdulla, 2008; Huang, 2010; Gao, 2011; Izumi, 2010) have assessed IC among international and local students at some universities and colleges in the United Sates. The mentioned works identified some associations between interactions between foreigner and local students and their university related achievements. Based on the results from studies by the mentioned researchers, because of the deep dissimilarities between the Asian and American cultural values and communicative norms, some students from Asian countries, especially from Arab countries and Japan preferred to have more communications with students from their own country based on their own cultural values and communicative norms.

As many remarkable differences exist between the Western and Asian cultural values and communicative norms, studies based on the Western communicative norms might not provide answers to the probable questions on daily communications among students from diverse backgrounds at an Asian university campus. People of most Asian countries use the indirect and respectful communicative manner and language; while people in most Western countries use the open, relaxed and dramatic manners and message delivery methods when interacting with one another. The gender variable and age categories are important and effective based on the Asian norms of communication, whereas the mentioned aspects are not that much effective based on the Western norms of communication (Abu Bakar & Mustaffa, 2013; Bolong & Waheed, 2013; Gudykunst, 2001; Gao, 1998; Park & Kim, 2008). The mentioned dissimilarities ask scholars and researchers to asses and judge the cultural values and communicative norms of Asian people according to the findings from their own works based on the Asian communicative norms and cultural values. Therefore, the evaluation of ICC among foreigner students, who belong to dissimilar cultural and social norms and backgrounds, at a Malaysian university may add some new and helpful information into the related literature.

Methodology

The current study used the survey and interviews to collect the necessary data. The quantitative survey was applied as the core data collection procedure, and the interviews were conducted to include the spoken and direct answers and views of the participants as a supportive dataset for the survey results. Researchers apply two different data collection procedures to provide answers to their research questions in a better way (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The interviewees were chosen from the participants of the survey based on their own agreements.

Participants

The survey participants included 118 foreigner students of University Malaysia Pahang, with their M/SD scores of $M = 77.2$, and $SD = 3.4$. Population of this study was about 400 international postgraduate students of the mentioned Malaysian university. The participants were chosen based on the convenience data collection procedure. All of the participants were

postgraduate students, and belonged to 15 different nationalities. From all of them, 96 (81.35%) were male, and 22 (18.64%) others were female students. The M/SD scores for male and female groups were $M = 74.7$, $SD = 3.1$, and $M = 75.2$, $SD = 3.9$ respectively. From all participants, 65 (55.1 %) of them were master's students and 53 (44.9%) others were PhD students. The M/SD scores of the mentioned groups were $M = 73.6$, and $SD = 3.4$ for the master's students group, and $M = 76.4$, and $SD = 3.7$ for the PhD students groups. From the survey participants, eight of them were interviewed based on their personal agreements and availabilities. Table 1 below includes the frequency and demographic details of the participants based on their countries.

Table 1: *Frequency and demographic details of the participants*

Country	Number of participants	Male	Female	Master's students	PhD students
Afghanistan	8	7	1	7	1
Algeria	4	4	0	2	2
Bangladesh	13	11	2	8	5
China	16	12	4	9	7
Egypt	3	2	1	0	3
Ethiopia	2	2	0	2	0
Ghana	1	1	0	1	0
India	17	13	4	10	7
Iran	2	1	1	0	2
Iraq	12	8	4	6	6
Libya	4	4	0	1	3
Nigeria	8	6	2	4	4
Pakistan	16	14	2	7	9
Sudan	7	6	1	3	4
Yemen	5	5	0	5	0

Instruments

The survey tool included the demographic variables and the ICC items. For the survey data collection stage, the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) of Chen and Starosta (2000), which includes 24 items, was used. Intercultural sensitivity, as the affective and behavioural construct, works as a main construct for ICC (Bennett & Bennett, 2003; Chen, 1997); thus, ICC is assessable through the use of IS instruments. The reviewed works from the literature show that the ISS instrument was used by different researchers in some previous studies (e.g. Armfield, 2004; Mao, 2010; Risner, 2011; Lin, 2011; Gantt, 2014) to assess ICC. The ISS tool measures ICC based on the Likert's Scale with five options per item from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree), and under five factors, which are: Interaction engagement, Respect for cultural differences, Interaction confidence, Interaction enjoyment, and Interaction attentiveness (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Michaeli, 2013).

To conduct the required interviews, an interview protocol was developed. The interview instrument included nine open-ended questions. All interviews were conducted under the

guidance of the mentioned protocol and all interviews were audio-recorded. All questions for the interview protocol were adapted from Pyle (2014); Brogdon (2008); Aidoo (2012); Wilcox (2011).

Data Collection and Data Analyses

The Convenience data collection procedure used to collect the survey data. The survey data were collected from the main gathering locations of postgraduate students, such as labs, classrooms, cafeteria and hostels. The interview data were collected based on personal agreements of the interviewees and according on the prearranged appointments. The descriptive test and the bivariate correlation test of SPSS were applied to analyse the survey data. To find out the frequencies, percentages and mean scores, the descriptive test was applied. The bivariate correlation test was used find out the probable correlations between the constructs and variables. To analyse the interview data, the Contrast and Comparison method that developed by Glasser and Strauss (1967) was used. Based on the mentioned method, after transcribing the audio-recorded interviews, the salient parts of direct views of the interviewees are quoted directly under the interview results section.

Findings

This section indicates the findings from both the survey and the interview data-sets.

Survey Findings

The descriptive and the bivariate correlation tests of SPSS were applied to analyse the survey data. Based on the descriptive findings, the participants had relatively good levels of ICC. The total items of survey instrument are24 with five choices per each item. Thus, the average mean score for all items is 60. The participants' overall M/SD scores for all survey items were M = 74.6, and SD = 3.4. The mentioned mean score is higher than the average mean score, and it indicates the existence of a relatively good ICC of the participants. The information that belongs to each attribute of the ICC was analysed autonomously. Table 2 below indicates the M/SD scores for each attribute.

Table2: *The participants' men and SD scores for each attribute of ICC*

Attribute	Items	Mean	SD
Interaction-Engagement	4	15.2	2.1
Interaction-Confidence	5	17.1	2
Respect-Cultural Differences	8	23	2.4
Interaction-Enjoyment	4	10.8	2.6
Interaction-Attentiveness	3	10.6	1.8

Based on the reported M/SD scores for all constructs, the participants gained relatively good levels of mean scores for all constructs of ICC. However, the participants gained higher scores for the interaction engagement, interaction attentiveness, and interaction confidence attributes. Furthermore, to discover probable correlations between the attributes and variables,

the bivariate correlation test was applied. Some positive correlations were identified between some demographic variables and some attributes of ICC. Table 3 below indicates findings from the correlation test.

Table 3: *The findings from the correlation test*

	Gen.	LoE	Inter.Eng.	Inter.Con.
1- Gender				
2- Level of Edu.				
3- Interaction-engagement	.493	.346		
4- Interaction-confidence		.474	.631	
5- Interaction-enjoyment	.436			.342

Based on the outcome from correlation test, there were some positive correlations between some demographic variables and some attributes of ICC.

Interview Results

This section includes the answers of eight interviewees for the interview questions. The participants of interview dataset were: 1- a male-PhD-student from Nigeria, 2- a male-PhD-student from Bangladesh, 3- a female-PhD-student from India, 4- a male-master-student from Afghanistan, 5- a female-master-student from China, 6- a female-PhD-student from Iran, 7- a male-master-student from Algeria, and 8- a male-master-student from Yemen. In the upcoming section, the given number for each participant will be used instead of his/her personal details. According to the answers of the interviewees, their stay and study at a Malaysian university enabled them to practice daily communication with students from diverse cultures and countries, and to develop the levels of their ICC as well. For instance, participant-2 said that "During my stay in my country, I had no clear idea about different cultural norms, and did not experience interactions with people from other countries. But when I came to Malaysia and enrolled in the university, I practiced interactions with different people, and now I have many friends from international students". Participant-5 stated that "In China, we learn many things about IC, but did not have that much opportunity to have interactions with different people. But when we join in multicultural environments, like Malaysian universities, we practice IC with students from different cultures and countries and improve our ICC through our interactions with others". Participant -1 also said that "In Nigeria, we have some opportunities to conduct IC with diverse people, but here are more opportunities at Malaysian universities to interact with people of different cultures". Based on the answers and views of the interviewees, there were good opportunities at the mentioned Malaysian university campus for foreigner students to have regular interacts with one another, and to increase and improve their intercultural information and abilities.

The quoted parts of the interviewees' answers show that their frequent IC at university campus affects their academic and social lives positively. For instance, participant-7 told that "When I was in my country, my idea about Asian people was different from now, and my stay

at this university helped me to know different people and get information about different social and cultural norms". Moreover, participant-2 stated that "My enrollment in a multicultural university campus in Malaysia enabled me to go and work anywhere that I want after my graduation for the university". The quoted parts of answers of the interviewees demonstrate the encouraging effects of IC among foreigner postgraduate students on their personal and professional lives. In addition, the results from interviews are supportive of the survey results.

Discussion

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is a key requirement to have proper and fruitful intercultural communication (IC) with persons from dissimilar cultures, and intercultural sensitivity is one of the main elements of ICC. Thus, the evaluation of ICC among persons from diverse backgrounds, especially among university students could bring some helpful results that could encourage international students from diverse nationalities to practice more and fruitful IC, and to increase their ICC. The current study evaluated ICC among foreigner postgraduate students at a Malaysian university. Stay at a university campus is a helpful and effective time for students to practice interactions with diverse people and improve their communication proficiency (Wade, 2008). Thus, the evaluation of ICC among students of higher education institutions could help researchers to know the potential effects of university environments on their academic and social lives.

Based on the findings, the participants of the current study were relatively good in ICC, and their stay at a Malaysian university campus enabled them to develop their ICC to conduct proper interactions with individuals from dissimilar cultural backgrounds. The results indicate that the participants gained higher mean scores in interaction engagement; it means that they were able to initiate interactions with students from other cultural backgrounds. Moreover, they (the participants) gained higher mean scores for the self-confidence attribute as well; it means that their self-confidence characteristic helped them to initiate and continue interactions with one another. The reported findings are supportive of the assertions of some previous researchers (e.g. Reed, 2008; Wade, 2008) regarding the usefulness of stay at university campus on academic and social lives of students, who live in international university campuses.

The reported results from the current study demonstrate some correlations between gender and some elements of ICC and between the levels of education and some constructs of ICC as well. The reported findings from the current study support the statements of some previous researchers and scholars regarding the relationships between personal characteristics and communication competence, and gender and communication competence of individuals based on the Eastern cultural and communicative norms (e.g. Abu Bakar & Mustaffa, 2013; Bolong & Waheed, 2013: Park & Kim, 2008; Gudykunst, 2001; Sarwari & Nubli, 2017).

Based on the interview results, the cultural differences of the respondents encouraged them to conduct more interaction with their peers from dissimilar cultural norms, and to get new and helpful cultural and intercultural information and skills. Based on the findings from some previous studies (e.g. Abdulla, 2008; Gao, 2011; Izumi, 2010), diverse cultural norms and assumptions affected the process of interactions among students from different cultures at some American universities negatively. However, the results from the current study regarding

the effects of dissimilar cultural norms and assumptions on interactions among students from dissimilar backgrounds in an Asian academic environment is different from the findings of similar works and studies among students in some Western universities.

Based on the interview results, their enrolment and activities at a Malaysian university helped the respondents to communicate with dissimilar individuals and to get new social and cultural information about other people. Also, their daily interactions with individuals from different cultures helped the respondents to increase their intercultural information and abilities and to change their points of views towards the ever-growing multicultural societies and environments positively. According to the reported findings from the current research project, their stay in a multicultural campus and their interactions with students from dissimilar nationalities enabled and helped the respondents to consider themselves as potential and probable workers of multicultural institutions throughout the globe.

The findings from the current study are supportive of the proposed condition of the System Theory of Kim (1992), which points out the active and interactive condition of interactions among individuals; as the answers from the participants of this study focus on the existence of regular interactions among them. The mentioned findings are supportive of the key conditions and steps of the Contact and Cohesion Theory as well. Based on the results from the current study, the contact initiation and negotiation stages help individuals from dissimilar cultures to recognize each other, and to reach in the cohesion stage. Furthermore, the coherent-competence, flexibility, shared-interests, and respect-for-differences conditions were also helpful in conducting proper and successful interactions among the participants. The findings from the current study are quite new based on the Asian context of communication. These findings may encourage researchers and university students to consider the mentioned issues in their works and lives in the future.

Conclusion

This study assessed ICC among foreigner postgraduate students at a Malaysian modern and multicultural university. The findings from the current study illustrate that the mentioned university provided opportunities for their foreigner students to experience frequent interactions with one another, who belong to diverse cultures and nationalities. Based on the findings, their frequent interactions with other foreigner students helped the participants to enhance their ICC and intercultural information. According to the reported findings from the current study, the participants gained higher mean scores for almost all attributes of ICC, and it illustrate their good levels of ICC. At the same time, there were some positive correlations between gender and ICC, and also between some attributes of ICC and the levels of education of the participants, which indicate the influence of the level of education of individuals on their interactions with different people under the Asian context of communication. According to the findings, their frequent IC with other foreigner students encouraged and enabled the participants to achieve some new and helpful personal, cultural and academic information and skills, and to count themselves as probable employees of international and multicultural organizations in the future.

Acknowledgment

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