

International students' Intercultural Sensitivity and Intercultural Communication Competence In Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study is set out to understand intercultural communication competence and sensitivity among International students in Malaysia. In the discipline of communication, intercultural communication competence (ICC) has been a subject of study for more than five decades. Over this time, many have identified a number of variables that contribute to intercultural communication (ICC). This paper examines significant relationship between international students' intercultural communication competence and their intercultural sensitivity as per their everyday situations in Malaysia. Anxiety uncertainty management theory is applied to the study to explain the relationship between intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity among international students studying in Malaysia. Gudykunst (2005) described seven factors that envisage a person's uncertainty and anxiety levels while communicating with unfamiliar persons: motivation to interact with strangers, self-concept, reactions to strangers, social categorization of strangers, situational processes, ethical interactions and connections with strangers. These help reduce other people's anxiety as well as their uncertainty. The study employed a quantitative research design using the survey method where a self-administered questionnaire was employed and respondents were recruited using non-random sampling to generate the data. 300 international students from international Islamic university Malaysia (IIUM) who have studies in Malaysia for over a year participated in the study. Findings show, that there is a significant relationship between students with intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence. The study recommends, that further research should be done to examine whether a single mediating factor such as change in anxiety and uncertainty can affect the level of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence. The theory is also supported in the study.

Key words: Intercultural Communication competence, Intercultural Sensitivity, International students, Anxiety uncertainty management theory

Introduction

Malaysia, which lies in the south East Asia, has become a centre of education in the Asian region thanks to its affordable and quality education for international students (Aziz and Abdullah, 2018). Malaysia's rich cultural diversity is something that foreign students will gain from however they have faced challenges in their intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is an important aspect of lives of many people who travel and relate with individuals from other cultural backgrounds different from their own. This aspect of communication enables people to achieve desired ambitions, accomplish tasks and also form relationships.

Ameli and Molaei (2012) found that one of the main factors that affect successful communication is the idea of intercultural competence. Accordingly, intercultural competence is an essential factor in facilitating improved contact with different people from other cultures as well as strengthening close relations (Coffey, Kamhawi, Fishwick, & Henderson 2013).

Earlier studies by Hall (1959) pioneered the development of intercultural communication as a conception of communication. Futhermore, according to Chi and Suthers (2015), one must concentrate on improving and recognizing various cultures as well as maintaining a healthy learning attitude with other cultures in order to gain intercultural communication competence. In addition, a number of researchers assessed this concept from various viewpoints. From previous literature on intercultural communication being a wide scope of study however not much exists regarding intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity.

As a result, this study aims to provide more information and add to this analysis by analyzing the intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence of international students in Malaysia, with a primary emphasis on those at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

Problem statement

The intercultural communication phenomenon has been widely studied and therefore not a very new aspect of interaction in existing research. Therefore, this study is set out to explore the connection between intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity. Additionally, the current study addresses the problem of intercultural communication competence (ICC) and intercultural sensitivity of international students, in addition to the significance of the relationship

between ICC and intercultural sensitivity. This study examines, whether a significant relationship exists between intercultural and intercultural sensitivity communication competence among international students studying at IIUM.

Although a number of studies on communication competence found that international students are less willing to communicate, few studies exist on the relationship between intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity among international students in higher institutions of learning in Malaysia. Additionally, the study will explore if there is low or high intercultural communication competence based on examining intercultural sensitivity.

Research Objectives

1. To find out the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence among international students.
2. To examine the level of intercultural communication competence among international students.
3. To find out the level of intercultural sensitivity among international students.

Research questions

1. What is the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence among international students?
2. What is the level of intercultural communication competence among international students?
3. What is the level of intercultural sensitivity among international students?

Significance of the study

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity through the framework of anxiety and uncertainty management theory. As will be noted in the literature review, much of the studies in the areas of intercultural communication competence and sensitivity are from countries outside Malaysia. Therefore, there is minimal research on the issue of intercultural communication among International students in Malaysia. Therefore. The paper attempts to fill the gap in the area of intercultural communication competence and sensitivity among international students in Malaysia. The study will look at the intercultural communication experiences by international students with particular attention to the perspective of gender, age, cultural and ethnic identity concepts among

other things: how do international students experience intercultural opportunities while staying in Malaysia? What is happening to them, their level of education, their Malaysian friends, cultural and ethnic mentality and values? How far do they go in adapting to their new environment?

In terms of practical implications, the research hopes to provide governments and institutions of learning in Malaysia insight into how they can best handle international students upon their arrival in Malaysia and help them adapt to the Malaysian culture and norms in order for them to fit in the society.

Literature review

Intercultural Sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity is among the vital practical and cultural dimensions that are characterized by action as an outcome of encountering individuals who come from different cultures.

Chen and Starosta (1997), who conceded that intercultural sensitivity is basically a deep-rooted aspect of intercultural communication competence that is supported by being receptive, self-esteem, empathy, no bias, active interaction, and self-awareness. These six components thus supported the findings of (Chen and Starosta, 1997) for individuals who have intercultural sensitivity. Furthermore, (Bosuwon, 2017) specifically identified attitude and sensitivity to have a significant part in determining the intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence of individuals.

Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) also noticed that intercultural sensitivity is literally the behavioral way people willingly respond during interactions with persons of other cultures. Thus international students' interactive reaction is essential in order to have effective communication.

During their stay abroad, there noticeable intercultural sensitivity elements international students encounter such as the new experience staying without family, learning different cultures as well as forming relationships with other cultures (Huang 2013).

However, it is important to allow international students freedom to grace themselves naturally in different culture as well as freely be sensitive and accept new practices. Besides acknowledging different cultures, international students inability to be communicate is due to their poor intercultural sensitivity as well as poor intergration with the existing different cultures to embrace global education (Rizvi and Lingard 2010).

According to (Chen and Starosta 2000), to attain intercultural competence individuals should be having desired level of intercultural sensitivity.

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)

Catteeuw (2012) established that knowledge, attitude and skills are the three major core components of intercultural communication competence. Thus having these three elements enables improve the ability of individuals to be respectful of the existing cultural differences, handle situations with flexibility and improvement in awareness when interacting with people.

Intercultural communication greatly influences interpersonal communication and may lead to an interpersonal conflict when talking to persons from different cultures (Shupe, 2007). To avoid these conflicts that's why international students ought to improve their intercultural communication skills.

Sarwari & Wahab (2017), noticed that intercultural communication competence occurs when people have ability to freely listen and speak properly with individuals from other cultures.

Furthermore, Shupe (2007) elaborated that intercultural communication competence gets better with social adaptation to foreign cultures in intercultural settings.

Similarly, intercultural communication skills symbolize an individual's behavioral trait in their intercultural competency skills; it is thus more elaborated as the ability to achieve communication goals in intercultural communications when dealing with new cultures (Chen & Starosta, 1996).

A growing significance indicates that both intercultural communication competence and indeed intercultural sensitivity are primary key factors helping people engage in successful intercultural interactions, and this is line with academic contribution to this study.

Theoretical framework

Anxiety uncertainty management theory (AUM)

Introduced by William B. Gudykunst (1985) as a move to extend Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory, Gudykunst aimed at explaining the reduction of uncertainty in different intercultural societies as the first step in developing anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory.

The theory proposes, that efficiency of communication is a function of an individual's capabilities to manage their level of uncertainty and anxiety. Ideally, the effect of uncertainty and anxiety on effectiveness of communication is examined in two relationships that strangers and close friends and Malaysian and foreign students' cultures in the present study.

A chapter in Wiseman's (2002) book on intercultural communication competence "Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication" suggests further descriptions of theories in intercultural communication competence (ICC). Even though there exist numerous models of ICC developed, there have been a few other well-formed and tested theories of ICC. The intercultural communication theories as identified by Wiseman (2002) are Anxiety Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory as well as Face Negotiation theory by Stella Ting-Toomey developed in 1988.

Initial studies by Berger and Calabrese (1975), AUM theory (Gudykunst, 1993 & 2005) also suggests that ICC emphasizes the ability to be mindful and the effective management of anxiety that is brought about by the uncertainty in intercultural interactions.

This study is applying AUM theory to emphasize uncertain and anxiety toward intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence. In his advanced study, Gudykunst (2005) described seven factors that envisage a person's uncertainty and anxiety levels while communicating with people from other cultures for the first time; interest to communicate with strangers, self-confidence, reactions to strangers, social classification of strangers, ethical decisionmaking, getting along with strangers and behavior interactions.

Neuliep (2012), further elaborated that in intercultural communication, strangers experience feeling on uncertainty and anxiety. This specifically comes from lack of ability to predict the behaviors, emotions, opinions, values and actions of strangers explains that high levels of anxiety are also felt when one worries that others will not get the response one seeks. Therefore, positive behaviors in these aspects assist reduce the uncertainty of others as well as their anxiety (Gudykunst, 2005).

Critiques like Yoshitake (2002) argue, that AUM theory has been used in a number of first-hand studies over the years (Dumont, Nishida, & Nakayama, 2005; Ni & Wang, 2011) and that after research modern measurements will be implemented on a variety of other occasions.

A number of studies show both anxiety uncertainty management (AUM) theory and uncertainty reduction theory as enablers of efficiency of communication amongst individuals from different cultural and social backgrounds. Furthermore, the theory postulates that through uncertainty and anxiety management, people can adapt to a different cultural environment (Gudykunst, 2005). This imposes a huge benefit to international students to participate in the process of sharing and knowing about new cultures.

Therefore, AUM was appropriate for this study because it has been widely tested and used in several similar studies to the present. The researcher there managed to distinguish intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence using the anxiety uncertainty management theory (AUM).

Conceptual framework

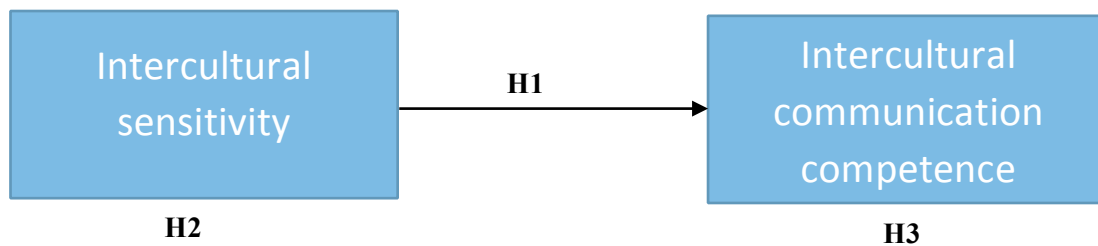


Figure 1. A conceptual framework for intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence for the study.

Hypotheses

H1: There is a relationship between Intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence among international students in IIUM.

H2: There is a high level of intercultural sensitivity among international students in IIUM.

H3: There is a high level if intercultural communication competence among international students in IIUM.

Methodology Research Design

The study particularly uses the quantitative research design using survey method to facilitate the data collection process in obtaining large sets of data in a short time. Quantitative design enables more practical approach, it's convenient, saves time and efficient (Creswell, 2009).

Population and sample

The population of the study comprised of International students in Malaysia. International students at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) were chosen as the sample population because they are related to the subject of the study and they often practice intercultural sensitivity as well as intercultural communication competence with other students from the different cultures and backgrounds. Thus, they were appropriate to reflect the accurate results for the study.

A sample size of 300 responses were obtained through a convenient non-random sampling, where the population was chosen according to convenience and high number of international students the study. Permissions were sought from the respondents themselves before and after collection of the data through the survey questionnaire.

Data collection instrument

Survey questionnaire was the preferred technique for data collection. The survey was conducted in two months starting on 11th November up to 30th December 2019. Then the data was then computed for analysis.

The questionnaire used for data collection was divided into three sections (A, B and C). Section A features demographic information about the respondents. Section B shows intercultural sensitivity measured by Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) adopted from (Chen & Starosta, 2000) with 14 items. Section C measures intercultural communication competence with 24 items by asking respondents how they communicate with their other international students during their daily studies and conversations both in class and outside.

All the items were measured on a 5-point Likert scales of strongly disagree to strongly agree and never to always. Overall variable was then computed to form a mean score with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 5. To calculate the overall percentage of an item, 20 multiplied the mean for each of the items; this is based on the 5-point scale, which is equivalent to 100%. Therefore, an overall percentage was obtained by multiplying average score by 100 and divided by 5 as demonstrate in their analysis by Wok and Hashim(2014).

Validity and reliability

A pilot study (N=30) was conducted before the actual study to measure the quality and flow and of the questions in the survey, and identifies any problems faced by the respondents. The questionnaire was also evaluated and acknowledged by an expert in the field of intercultural communication. Reliability tests were carried out on all the items; each of items in the questionnaire was tested and verified against Cronbach's alpha of .70 to show the reliability of the variables. Table 1 illustrates that the results confirm internal cohesiveness and consistency of the research variables with Cronbach alpha values of .752.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations and Reliability of Variables in the Study

No.	Variables (N = 300)	M	SD	Number of items	Reliability (Cronbach's α)		
					Pilot study (N = 30)	No. of items	Actual study (N = 300)
1	Intercultural sensitivity	3.310	0.588	24	.884	24	.879
2	Intercultural communication competence during haze	3.362	0.604	13	.824	13	.801
	Overall intercultural	6.672	1.147	2	.752	2	.758

5 Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly agree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

Findings

Demographic statistics of respondents

From the target population, a sample of 300 respondents was analyzed for this research. Table 2 below illustrates the details of demographics of the respondents. The sample comprised of international students from IIUM Gombak campus. Females were slightly more than a half of the sample (52.7%) compared to that of males (47.3%). Meanwhile 46.3 % of respondents fell in the age group of 18 and 25, closely followed by those less than 18 at 37.7 % and the least between 25 and 35 with just 16%. Most respondents had stayed in Malaysia for 2 -3 years with 43% then a close gap between those who stayed for 0 – 1 year and 1 – 2 years with 18.0% and 17.7 % respectively.

A slight more than a half at 51% of respondents were at master's level, 41.7% from degree and a few from PhD (7.3%).

Table 2
Demographic statistics of the respondents

Demographic characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	142	47.3
	Female	158	52.7
	Total	300	100
Age	Less than 18	113	37.7
	18 - 25	139	46.3
	25 - 35	48	16.0
	Total	300	100
Length of stay in Malaysia	0 - 1	54	18.0
	1 - 2	53	17.7
	2 - 3	129	43.0
	3 - 4	13	4.3
	4 or more	51	17.0
	Total	300	100
Level of education	Degree	125	41.7
	Masters	153	51.0
	PhD	22	7.3
	Total	300	100

Intercultural sensitivity

One sample t-test was run to test the level of intercultural sensitivity of international students in Malaysia. Table 3 reveals, that 87.8 % respondents interact with other people from different cultures as illustrated with item S2.1 with ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.668$) and the item with the lowest means being S2.15 ($M = 2.1767$, $SD = 1.22357$) meaning, that students do not feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures. However, two items were not significant, item S2.19 that says (I am sensitive to my culturally distinctive counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction) with a t-value of $1.776(p = .077)$ and item S2.22 (Avoid situation where I have to deal with culturally distinctive situations) with a negative t-value of $-.926(p = .355)$. Generally, the overall intercultural sensitivity of international students illustrates a significant t-value of $9.125 (p = .000)$, which means that the largest share of the sample 66.2 % ($M = 3.31$, $SD = .58844$)

demonstrates a high level of intercultural sensitivity among international students. Thus, this result also indicates, that most items are positively related. Hence supporting H2, which stipulates that there is a high level of intercultural sensitivity among international students in IIUM.

Table 3

One sample t-test for intercultural sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity (N=300)		M	SD	%	t	df	p
S2.1	Interaction with other people from different cultures	4.390	.668	87.8	36.105	299	.000
S2.13	Open minded to people from different cultures	4.316	.847	86.3	26.899	299	.000
S2.17	Obtaining as much information as possible when interacting with people from different cultures	4.193	.897	83.8	23.033	299	.000
S2.8	I respect values of people from different cultures	4.050	1.262	81.0	14.410	299	.000
S2.14	I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures	4.010	.919	80.2	19.019	299	.000
S2.24	Feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my cultural distinctive counterpart and me	4.006	1.324	80.1	18.993	299	.000
S2.3	I am sure I interact with other people from other cultures	3.930	.928	78.6	17.357	299	.000
S2.6	I can be as sociable as I want to be while interacting with people from different cultures	3.876	.999	77.5	15.199	299	.000
S2.21	Giving positive responses to my culturally different counterparts in our interactions	3.803	.916	76.0	15.174	299	.000
S2.16	Respect behaviors of people from different cultures	3.786	1.157	75.7	11.775	299	.000
S2.5	I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures	3.656	.984	73.1	11.556	299	.000
S2.23	Showing my culturally distinctive counterpart my understanding through verbal and non-verbal cues	3.460	1.005	69.2	7.921	299	.000
S2.10	I wait before forming an impression of culturally distinct counterparts	3.436	1.162	68.7	6.508	299	.000
S2.19	Sensitive to my culturally distinctive counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction	3.116	1.137	62.3	1.776	299	.077
S2.22	Avoid situation where I have to deal with culturally distinctive situations	2.9367	1.184	58.7	-.926	299	.355
S2.20	I think my culture is better than other cultures	2.720	1.383	54.4	-3.505	299	.001
S2.18	Not accepting opinions of people from different cultures	2.706	1.380	54.1	-3.274	299	.001
S2.4	I find it hard to talk to people from different cultures	2.706	1.380	54.1	-3.679	299	.000
S2.2	People from other cultures are narrow minded	2.57	1.518	51.4	-4.867	299	.000
S2.11	I am afraid to speak in conversations with people from different cultures	2.433	1.420	48.6	-6.908	299	.000

S2.9	I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures	2.410	1.499	48.2	-6.814	299	.000
S2.12	I often get discouraged when am with people from different cultures	2.406	1.324	48.1	-7.760	299	.000
S2.7	I don't like to be with people from different cultures	2.333	1.433	46.6	-8.054	299	.000
S2.15	Feeling useless when interact with people from different cultures	2.176	1.223	43.5	11.655	299	.000
Total for intercultural sensitivity		3.31	.588	66.2	9.125	299	.000

***5 Likert scale ranging from 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, and 5 = Always**

Intercultural communication competence

Table 4 below illustrates results obtained from one sample t-test for international student's level of intercultural communication competence. The highest level of response is for item S3.1 (I am comfortable interacting with people from different cultures). Here, 85.3% of respondents are in agreement ($M = 4.2667$, $SD = 0.85518$). The item with lowermost mean is item S3.6 ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.29821$). The general levels of intercultural communication competence of international students in IIUM have a high significant t value of 10.388 ($p = .000$) with an average of 67.2% of respondents in agreement. This suggests, that most of the respondents have high levels of intercultural communication competence because all the items are positively related. Consequently, H3 is accepted.

Table 4
One sample t-test for intercultural communication competence

No	Intercultural communication competence (N=300)	M	SD	%	t	df	p
S3.1	Comfortable interacting with people from different cultures	4.266	.855	85.3	25.655	299	.000
S3.9	Calm and relaxed while in a talking to a person from different culture	4.233	.994	84.6	21.482	299	.000
S3.7	No fear of talking to a person from a different culture	4.086	1.135	81.7	16.571	299	.000
S3.3	Getting involved in discussions with people from other cultures	4.050	1.031	81.0	17.628	299	.000

S3.5	Relaxed and calm while interacting with people from different cultures	3.983	.908	79.6	18.742	299	.000
S3.10	Very relaxed while talking to a person from a different culture	3.973	1.047	79.4	16.101	299	.000
S3.12	I am confident interacting with people from different cultures	3.910	1.002	78.2	15.720	299	.000
S3.8	I am tense while in conversation with a person from different culture	2.673	1.456	53.4	-3.886	299	.000
S3.13	I am confused while talking to people from different cultures	2.596	1.368	51.9	-5.104	299	.000
S3.2	Nervous while interacting with people from different cultures	2.543	1.329	50.8	-5.950	299	.000
S3.4	Engaging in discussions with people from different cultures makes me nervous	2.520	1.307	50.4	-6.360	299	.000
S3.11	Afraid to speak in a conversation with a person from different culture	2.440	1.358	48.8	-7.139	299	.000
S3.6	Nervous while talking to a person in different cultures	2.440	1.298	48.8	-7.471	299	.000
Total for intercultural communication competence		3.362	0.604	67.2	10.388	299	.000

***5 Likert scale ranging from 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, and 5 = Always**

Correlation

Bivariate correlation is done to measure the significant relationships between the variables. Results reveal, that there is a significant relationship between these two variables. The strengths of the relationship found were moderate but exceedingly significant at .000 that the items are positively correlated.

There is a moderate significant relationship between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence ($r = .611, p = .000$) therefore, H1 is accepted.

Table 5

Bivariate correlation between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence

Variable (N=300)	Mean	SD	Intercultural Sensitivity	Intercultural communication competence
Intercultural Sensitivity	3.310	0.588	1	
Intercultural communication competence	3.362	0.604	r=.611**, p=.000	1

** p<.001 (2-tailed).

Conclusion

The objective of this research was to evaluate the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence (ICC) amongst international students in Malaysia. The participation of 300 respondents from different cultural backgrounds at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) enabled the researcher to assess the relationships between the two mentioned factors in a multicultural university campus. As a result, it can be concluded that intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence are not only interrelated but also influence one another making them major key requirements for successful communication among people from different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, these two key components of intercultural communication are different, but have interrelated and similar aspects of intercultural communication that complement each other thereby conveying swift interactions with person from other cultures.

Drawing a conclusion, the results from this study indicate that intercultural sensitivity enables individuals to start conversations with people from different cultures, and intercultural communication competence aids them to endure and maintain their interactions properly in multicultural societies.

Finally, in this study, the researcher can deduce, based on the respondents and literature, along with secondary reference data, that an intercultural competent individual is one who is resilient, empathetic and able to communicate easily with people from other cultures. Such persons are open to new challenges, adaptable and flexible during communication with strangers. They are able to cope with difficulty and ambiguity.

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