

Connecting with culturally diverse others

The case of Malaysian students' social interactions on campus

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Abstract

Connecting with culturally diverse individuals require in-depth understanding and knowledge of intercultural competence. This paper focuses on the Malaysian students' intercultural competence in the Malaysian campus to gain insights into their social interaction. Specifically, we highlight the Malaysian students' reflection of intercultural competence based on their encounters with the international students in the Malaysian university environment. Using a qualitative approach, we collect data from in-depth interviews with the selected Malaysian undergraduate students from three universities in Northern Malaysia. The findings draw attention to two emerging themes: self-other awareness and interlingual communication strategies. The paper contributes to enhancing awareness of self and other, and language-related accommodation strategies in embracing intercultural communication.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence, intercultural communication, self-other awareness, interlingual communication strategies, Malaysia*

Introduction

The rise of diversity in this globalization era necessitates the need for culturally different members to live and co-exist harmoniously with one another. Such need means that people must find ways to interact effectively and appropriately with others who speak different languages and hold different values from themselves. Within such awareness, intercultural competence is the key element that enables people to not only recognize but acknowledge differences. For sure, the need for addressing intercultural competence is not only crucial in the United States but also around the world. In the context of Malaysia, local graduates are expected to have the necessary (intercultural) communication skills for success in the global environment (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2015-2025). As such, it is timely for researchers to explore intercultural competence among Malaysian students in the local tertiary institutions.

In exploring intercultural competence, we are aware that much has been written about this construct in the academic literature. Yet, current knowledge on intercultural competence is vastly drawn from the western context (see Yep, 2014). Given the argument that cultural contexts influence our understanding of human communication competence (Arasaratnam 2009, 2014; Chen 1993; Yum, 2012), many researchers have re-examined the western conception in their own contexts. Similarly, we feel there is much need to contribute to the intercultural competence realm by embracing our multicultural Malaysian campus. Recent developments suggest that intercultural competence must consider not only the individuals' awareness of their own identities, but also the willingness to negotiate and recognize others' identities as much as their own (Borghetti 2017). Such understanding seems to resonate well with our context where we see people with multicultural and multilingual identities experience daily interactions with one

another. We raise this important question: How do individuals consider intercultural competence within such a context? We feel a suitable place where we can probe this understanding is in our Malaysian academic institution. It is an environment where Malaysian students are presented with the opportunities to engage with others. Specifically, we examine how Malaysian students interact with their foreign counterparts. We hope to add such knowledge of Malaysian students' intercultural competence alongside other existing literature, particularly, Deardorff's (2006) work.

Revisiting Intercultural Competence

The term 'intercultural competence' is not only diverse in its definitions, but also its terminologies (see Arasaratnam 2014; Bennett 2009). Despite such diverse terminologies, the notions of effectiveness and appropriateness form the central conception of intercultural competence (Liu 2012). Effectiveness is referred to as successful goal achievements and it is closely related to the satisfaction of attaining desired outcomes (Parks 1994). Appropriateness is "the avoidance of violating social or interpersonal norms, rules, or expectations" (Spitzberg & Cupach 1984:7). Lustig and Koester (2010) indicated that a communicator needs to identify the rules of a given situation to achieve appropriate communication. In addition to the criterion of appropriateness and effectiveness, motivation, knowledge, and skills are the most common components of intercultural competence although scholars do not always label their models precisely with these terms (Spitzberg & Changnon 2009). Given the varied choices for definitions of intercultural competence, Deardorff's (2004, 2006) study is useful to illuminate a foundational understanding of this construct. Deardorff's study attempts to provide the key foundational components of intercultural competence as the agreed upon definition by experts in the intercultural field in the United States. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) claimed that Deardorff's study is one of the relatively few efforts to identify such components of intercultural competence which utilized both quantitative and qualitative processes, and the first study to document a consensus among intercultural experts. Using a grounded theory approach, Deardorff excluded previous conceptions and asked twenty-one experts (who are nationally known in the United States) about what constitutes intercultural competence to allow the definition to emerge from the experts themselves. As such, intercultural competence is defined as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Deardorff 2004:194). Deardorff (2006) shared a pyramid model that visualizes intercultural competence through five important elements, namely, attitudes, knowledge, skills, internal, and external outcomes (Figure 1).

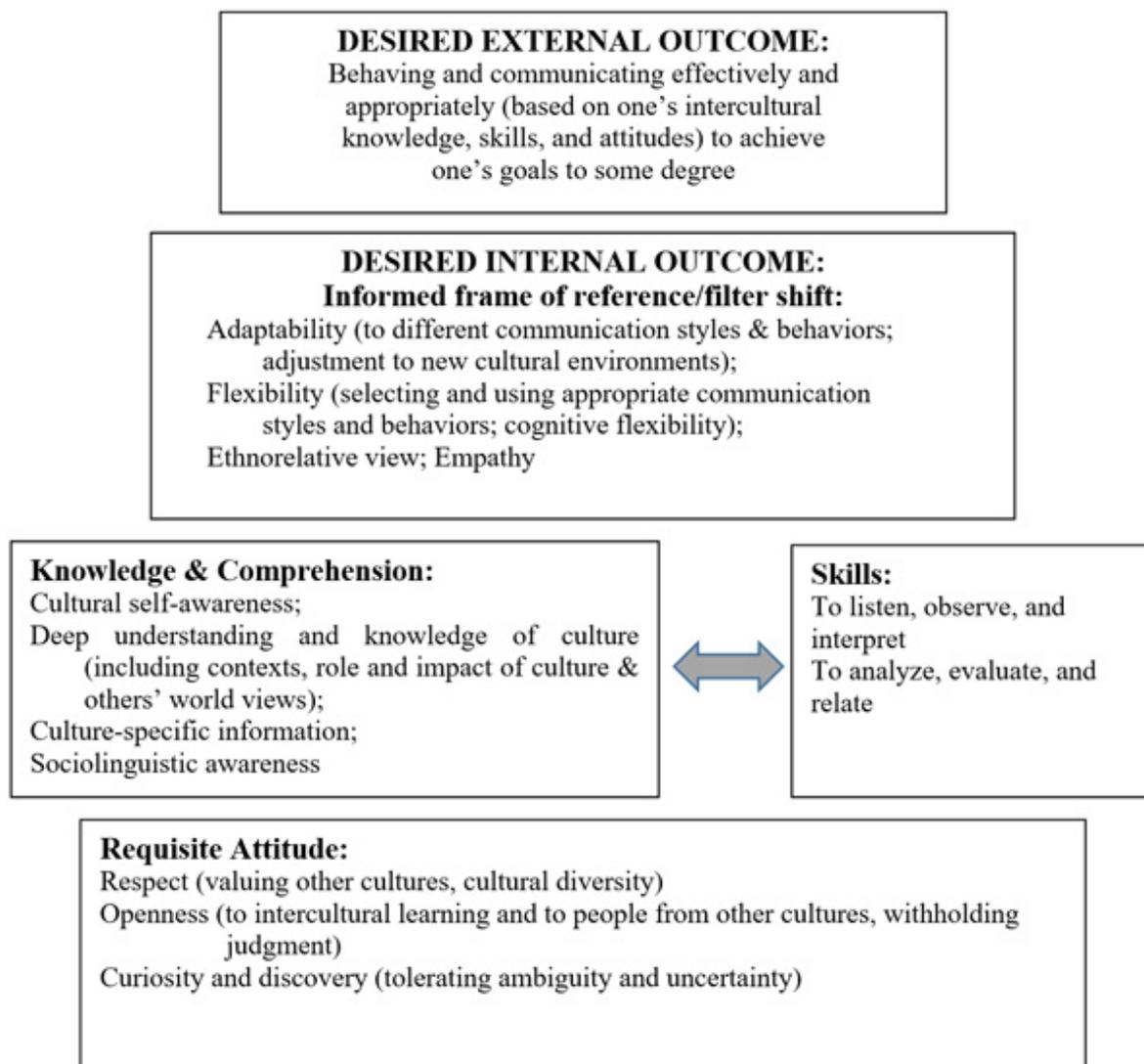


Figure 1: Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006:254)

- Move from personal level (attitude) to interpersonal/interactive level (outcomes).
- Degree of intercultural competence depends on acquired degree of underlying elements

The model views attitude (openness, respect, curiosity and discovery) as foundational to the development of one's knowledge and skills. One's knowledge is manifested through his or her ability to acquire cultural self-awareness, cultural specific information, cultural knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness. The skills (observing, listening, evaluating, interpreting, and relating) emphasizes one's ability to process the knowledge about his or her culture and other cultures. The internal and external outcomes represent a distinctive element of the model. The internal outcomes and external outcomes are the resulting element of an individual's attitude, knowledge and skills. These outcomes are expressed based on the individual's ability to acquire flexibility, adaptability, ethno relative view, and empathy which will lead him or her to behave effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations.

Researching Intercultural Competence in a Malaysian context

Deardorff's (2006) model has in many ways contributed to our understanding of intercultural competence. While this model can be useful for the exploration of intercultural competence in Malaysia, Deardorff cautions that her work represents the U.S. perspective. As such, it is imperative for Malaysian researchers—ourselves included—to be reminded of the cultural context(s) they/we are in when pursuing the studies pertaining to intercultural competence and/or intercultural communication among diverse

ethnic members (Harun, 2007). In view of this, we feel there is a need to explore the main factors of intercultural competence within the Malaysian context, which might have been ignored in the West.

Malaysia is a multicultural realm comprising *Bumiputera* (meaning *sons of the soil*, i.e., the Malays and the minority groups of Sabah and Sarawak; 68.8%), Chinese (23.3%), Indians (7%), and other ethnic groups (1%; Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal 2018). Malaysian students have been exposed to the formal English language education since primary school (Hazita, 2016). The official language is Malay language, whilst English is considered the second language. English is also used as the language of instruction in many universities (Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). With globalization, Malaysian campus is a melting pot of various nationalities (Sarwari & Wahab, 2016) which further suggests that a common language is used when two or more culturally diverse individuals interact. In the context of Malaysia, English is most likely used when conversing with the international students.

A recent study claimed that while the role and importance of language in intercultural competence seems to be less recognized in many western models, the language factor is prominent in the Malaysian context (Dalib, Harun & Yusof 2017). Specifically, the researchers proposed a particular ability for intercultural competence that necessitates individuals to have the ability to communicate across linguistic-cultural differences. Although the study might be useful for an understanding of intercultural competence, it highlights the need for international students in Malaysia to accommodate the interaction styles/patterns of the multilingual and ethnically diverse host students. In this regard, intelligible communication skill is an important factor that helps students to achieve successful interaction among them. We feel the need to expand the focus on the Malaysian students' competency and their motivation to interact. Thus, this paper draws attention to the experience of Malaysian students' social encounters with their international friends. The latter include those from China, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Yemen. The presence of the international students at Malaysian campuses provides an advantage for Malaysian students to interact and enhance their social communication skills with the former. Since intercultural competence is co-constructed by the interlocutors in interaction (Borghetti, 2017), we believe that Malaysian students are aware of their own (in)competencies when interacting with the foreigners. In line with this, the following research questions guide our inquiry:

How do Malaysian students relate to the culturally diverse others in their social interactions in the campus? More specifically, in what ways do their interactions influence or motivate them in understanding the other?

Methodology

The study was done in three public universities in Northern Malaysia. We conducted in-depth interviews with Malaysian undergraduate students. We used a purposive sampling in identifying the potential participants. We established three important criteria: first, participants are undergraduate students who have been in the campus for at least two semesters. This criterion indicates a reasonable duration of experience within the campus in which students might have developed at least, some form of social networks. Second, the students must have had some form of social encounters with the international students. Since face-to-face interaction is an important condition for our interrogation (Holmes & O'Neill 2012), we believe the criterion indicates that such students are likely to experience intercultural interaction on a daily basis. Third, the students must be able to provide the actual rather than the hypothetical situations. In other words, they are required to narrate each encounter with the international students as they experienced it.

We asked assistance from the instructors who teach undergraduate courses in the three universities to locate the potential participants using the criteria. Our purposive sampling comprised thirteen participants who were then interviewed given that the sample size for data saturation may be reached by as little as five participants depending on the sample size of the population (Dworkin, 2012; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006; Mason, 2010). However, data saturation is not about reaching a certain number per se, but about the depth of the data (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012; Fusch & Ness, 2015). Our study sample is sufficient to elucidate rigorous analysis of the interview data (Creswell, 2007). The participants are non-native speakers of English from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Asmah (1992) remarked that within the

linguistic scenery of Malaysia, Malay language is recognized as the language of Malaysians and is often used among most multi-ethnic Malaysians in social interactions. Majority of the citizens are bilingual speakers, with some being multilingual speakers; as such, they tend to use one language, or a mixture of, at least, two languages in their communication.

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of participants in terms of ethnicity, programme taken, year of enrolment in the campus, and gender. The participants were identified by the instructors from the mobility center in their own respective campuses. Some participants worked as volunteers in the center where they were involved in assisting the newly arrived international students. The platform gives numerous opportunities for them to interact. Meanwhile, some have had the experience interacting with the international students in class or when doing the group assignments.

Table 1: *Participants' demographic profile*

Participant (P)	Ethnicity	Program	Semester	Gender
P1	Indian	Communication	7	Female
P2	Chinese	Communication	7	Female
P3	Malay	Communication	7	Male
P4	Malay	Communication	3	Male
P5	Chinese	Communication	2	Female
P6	Indian	Management studies	7	Female
P7	Chinese	Finance	7	Female
P8	Malay	Chemistry	7	Male
P9	Malay	Multimedia	6	Female
P10	Malay	Multimedia	6	Male
P11	Malay	New Media Communication	2	Female
P12	Indian	New Media Communication	2	Male
P13	Chinese	New Media Communication	2	Female

Source: Data gathered from the participants.

Meanwhile, Table 2 highlights the participants' social encounters with the international students.

Table 2: *Participants' social encounters with the other*

Participants	Encounter/Social interaction
P1	She has known individuals from Bangladesh, Indonesia and Nigeria. She usually interacts with them in class. She feels that mutual respect is important to build good relations.

P2	She has known individuals from Indonesia and Middle East. Her social encounters occur mostly in class. She feels she can interact with the others if needed.
P3	He has participated in an exchange program in Indonesia. He has social encounters with Indonesians, Tajikistan, Dutch, Uzbekistan, and Uganda. He feels that it is very important to have good interaction with the foreigners, using English language for instance, as this can help overcome low self-esteem.
P4	He has traveled to United Kingdom, Australia and Thailand. He is a student volunteer at the mobility center in the campus. He has friends from Japan, Korea, Canada, USA, Sweden, Brunei, and Indonesia. He looks forward to building good relationships with the others.
P5	She is a student volunteer at the mobility center in her campus. Her social encounters with the international students begin when she joins the ‘buddy program’. Most of her interaction occurs in the mobility center, classroom and other social settings.
P6	She is a student volunteer at the mobility center in the campus. She has friends from Germany, Finland, and Korea. She believes that people should respect differences and learn new cultures. She likes to interact with the others in the student lounge at the department.
P7	She is a student volunteer at the mobility center in her campus. She has some experiences interacting with people from China and Nigeria. She usually interacts with them at the restaurant, library and in class. She likes to make friends with the others and keep in touch with them through the social media.
P8	He is a student volunteer at the mobility center in the campus. He had joined the “Summer Camp program” organized by the university where he met individuals from Japan and Kazakhstan. He prefers to take any opportunity available to interact with the others in the campus.
P9	She has social encounters with friends from Somalia, Brunei, Indonesia, China, Japan, and Thailand. Most of her interaction occurs in class.
P10	He has engaged in social encounters with the individuals from Uzbekistan, Indonesia, China, Thailand, and Japan. His interaction mostly occurs in class.
P11	She has worked in a multinational company where she met people from Nepal, Norway, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. She still keeps in touch with them through the social media. Her social encounters in the campus are mostly with the students from Middle East and Africa.
P12	He has social encounters with the students from Iraq in class. He likes to interact with the others. He believes that every culture has its own unique way.
P13	She has travelled to Indonesia. She has social encounters with people from Nepal, Norway, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Australia. She still keeps in touch with them using the Facebook. She often interacts with the international students in the campus.

Source: Research data

We used open-ended protocols to elicit as much information as possible from the participants (Patton 1999). Each interview ran between 30 to 40 minutes and included questions eliciting the details of the participants’ experiences. We recorded the interview using a digital audio recorder upon the participants’

consent. We used English as the primary language for the in-depth interviews. However, some participants felt comfortable to speak in Malay language. In such cases, we proceeded with the preferred language during the interviews. We constructed the interview questions based on the Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence. During the interviews, we asked the participants to provide some understanding of their ethnic/cultural backgrounds. Then, we asked them to reflect on their experiences interacting with the international students and share the situations that provide some insights on intercultural competence. To facilitate the participants to think about intercultural competence, the question we asked, among others, includes, "Given what you have said about your experience, what is helpful in achieving effective communication?"

Data analysis

We used the NVivo 10 qualitative data software in managing our data. We transcribed the interviews by retaining each of the participants' words as much as possible. However, when the verbatim statement impedes understanding, editing was done to ensure the appropriate comprehension of the participants' response. We sent the verbatim and edited response of each participant for verification. We also requested the participants to review our transcription for member checking purposes (Patton, 1999).

We examined all sessions of the interview using the thematic analysis technique. The theme for every question was coded by applying the 'thematic analysis' technique proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Following the aims of the study, we conducted the conceptual thematic analysis by providing description of the relationship between the themes identified. The unit of analysis for this study was the sequence of sentences, response or a complete dialogue related to feelings, attitudes, and reactions of the participants' experiences. Table 3 reveals some sample response and related themes of one participant in the study (P5).

Table 3: Participant 5 sample response and themes

Relevant Response	Meaning Unit	Theme
<i>- I feel it's really good to talk to international students because they have different perspectives. - For example, this girl from Brunei who I met this semester. You know Brunei culture is just like us but she doesn't understand that in Malaysia we can celebrate Hari Raya, Chinese New Year, Christmas, but in Brunei apparently she can't. She is not allowed to celebrate Christmas or Chinese New Year.</i>	Developing awareness of cultural differences between self and the other	self-other awareness

Findings

The data reveal two themes that illuminate the participants' experiences, namely, (i) self-other awareness, and (ii) interlingual communication strategies. The following description further illuminates each of the two themes that informs their perspective on intercultural competence.

Theme 1: Self-other awareness

Awareness of self and other indicates close association with one's culture and the culture of the other. It reflects the notion of being mindful of each other's presence given that Malaysia is a multicultural setting. People are more aware of the other more often than perhaps in a context where individuals are monolinguals. The campus setting is similar in this sense. It drives the self (Malaysian) to acknowledge the other's presence by accepting one's cultural differences and similarities. To illustrate, such awareness involves the participants to constantly reflect on their own culturally held practices, beliefs and attitudes as they interact with the other person who is culturally different. In this regard, participants' awareness

encourages them to identify with the other and thus develop a sensemaking of their own conduct as well as the other's language and behavior. As such, they are mindful of each other's cultural ways. What it entails is the interlocutors attempt to accommodate each other by showing empathy or trying to make sense of the other's differences as illustrated by P5.

Put simply, the way participants identify self in relation with the other cannot be detached from their language, ethnicity, and cultural identity. Such awareness is developed given that the participants live in a campus where they are surrounded by ethnically diverse people who are also speakers of many different languages, not necessarily English. The scenario resembles the larger parts of Malaysia where we witness many ethnic groups residing with each other. Having foreign friends will not necessarily change the way they behave towards the other except perhaps more efforts need to be taken in understanding the other through the interaction. For instance, P5 shared her social interaction experience with the international students through the 'buddy program' in the campus. The program is organized by the International Mobility and Collaboration Center in the university. The center provides opportunities for the Malaysian students to engage in social interactions with the international students. Being a 'buddy', P5 is required to assist the international students' well-being in the campus. She found that mingling with them made her recognize different perspectives. Upon further probing, P5 remarked that her experience also triggers awareness about her own cultural (ethnic and national) identity and how her identity differs from the other:

R= Researcher

P= Participant

R: How long have you been involved in this 'buddy program'?

P5: I joined the program during my first year. We facilitate the exchange students' orientation programs every year. We help them around during the day like from the moment they land at the airport. We will bring them to the campus and accompany them, give them their room keys.

R: Where do the students come from?

P5: They come from many countries...Asian countries and European countries like Netherlands, Russia, Germany, France.

R: How do you find your experience?

P5: I feel it's really good to talk to the international students because they have different perspectives. For example, this girl from Brunei who I met this semester. Brunei culture is just like us but she doesn't understand that in Malaysia we can celebrate...Hari Raya (a time whereby Malaysian Muslims, particularly the Malays, celebrate the end of the fasting month), Chinese New Year, Christmas, but in Brunei apparently she can't. She is not allowed to celebrate Christmas or Chinese New Year. Even though we come from the same background, I was shocked, (I asked her) "you are not allowed to celebrate Christmas?" That is just really interesting because over here (Malaysia) we can go to open houses.

R: Do the international students ask about your own culture?

P5: Sometimes they ask me like "oh, you are mixed?" What language do you speak at home?" I explain to them. It's cool you know even in Japan they consider themselves Japanese, they will not say they are Chinese or Indian. Even in Indonesia. When we ask "what (ethnicity) are you" they will answer "oh I'm Indonesian". But we (Malaysians) (ask

them further), like “no, no, no, what (ethnic member) are you”? And they will say “oh I’m Chinese-Indonesian”. Even though we come from Asian countries, we think that we are pretty similar but actually we are quite different.

P6 views that the awareness about one’s own cultural identity as well as the other’s identity is very much needed for people who live within a heterogeneous country like Malaysia. Heterogeneity is an element that draws the Malaysians together, at least, all—ourselves included—realise that it is important to embrace to achieve national integration. The participant shared some awareness that she has gathered, such as the religious practices and cultural norms of her own and the other ethnic groups. Citing her experience of getting used to the differences in Malaysia, this participant expressed her interest to learn from the non-Malaysians. She claimed that her cultural learning with the non-Malaysians helps her to respect others, become adaptable, and flexible, which she viewed as the important elements of intercultural competence:

P6: We have a lot of different cultures, so we need to be able to understand, So that, we can show our respect as much as the other showing respect to our cultures...like here being a heterogeneous country, it’s very important to know the difference.

R: What have you learned about the Chinese culture or Malay culture in our country?

P6: For example, like Malay cannot go near the dogs, like Indians, we cannot eat beef. I am always curious to know why that is so. The “why” questions of the practices catch my attention the most.

R: Do you have non-Malaysian friends?

P6: Yes...I do have friends who are non-Malaysians as well.

R: Why do you make friends with non-Malaysians?

P6: I want to learn how different they are from Malaysians. Because we are used to be in an environment where we can understand each other, since young we are taught to live with different people,

R: After having experience interacting with people from other cultures, mostly non-Malaysians, what have you learned?

P6: I learned to be a person who starts the conversation first instead of waiting for someone else to speak. I’m not a person who ignores the world. It makes me more adaptable.

R: Do you believe that your friends or the other should have this kind of ability to interact with people from other cultures or non-Malaysians?

P6: It is something I believe they should have, but out of their own willingness.

Theme 2: Interlingual communication strategies

The participants felt that the primary goal of interaction is to convey clear messages by using various ways of understanding the other. Accordingly, they felt it is important to be aware of one’s unique way of speaking to achieve effective communication by adopting the interlingual communication strategies. In

view of this, interlingual communication strategies concern the participants' multitude ways of connecting with others including adapting and adjusting to one's language, and being flexible in the social encounters. In this sense, the way the Malaysians speak with the other (foreign student) who might be seen as less competent might resemble *foreigner talk*, or the way the native-speakers of English adjust their speech when conversing with the non-native speakers of English. Participants recounted situations where they engaged with the other non-Malaysians who had difficulties conversing. In this regard, they were taught to have patience and motivation in sustaining the interaction.

For example, P5 retold her social interaction experience with the Korean and Japanese exchange students as the latter struggles to speak intelligibly in the English language. Rather than disengaging herself with the situation, P5 develops empathy for the other by thinking about similar challenges she might face if she were an exchange student in a foreign country. When we probed her into sharing her empathy towards the others, P5 shared how the buddy program has assisted in providing her with the experience of mingling with the others including her Malaysian friends who come from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds:

R: Do you face any challenges when talking to the international students?

P5: They really tried so hard to get their messages across especially when they need help. Sometimes when you want to help them, you don't understand what they are trying to say.

R: How do you cope with such challenges?

P5: I ask one word... what is this word? Maybe trying to like, combine them, and like, understand what they are trying to say. They can understand basic English but I have to listen properly and be patient.

R: So how do you feel about the interaction? Do you feel like...I just don't want to...

P5: "Menyusahkan?" (causing trouble?), you mean something like that? Not really. If I were to put myself in their shoes, like if I were in their position, I would have a hard time...imagine doing an exchange program in another country for like six months and you don't know anything, of course, I will try my best to help.

R: Where does this awareness come from? Do you have a course within your own department that helps you to interact with the international students?

P5: No. For me...joining 'buddy program' helps. It is really a small club and we work well together... we are from different races. So that is sort of a starting point. All of us are comfortable with each other and quite open.

P9 shared her experience with the Chinese international students in the campus. Noticing difficulties to interact with them, she found ways to be flexible in the interaction. The strategies include asking others (Chinese Malaysians) who can speak Mandarin to help her interact with the Chinese international students. She also texted the words or expressions in English using their mobile phones as that can be translated quickly by the device and learned some basic expressions in Mandarin language:

R: What kind of challenges have you faced with the international students?

P9: Most of them cannot speak good English. Even sometimes when I use google translate, they still cannot understand.

R: How do you interact?

P9: I have to call my Malaysian Chinese friends to help.

R: If you do not have Malaysian Chinese friends, how do you interact? Do you write and tell them?

P9: We use hand phones.... their hand phones, not mine. I write in English and then they translate to Chinese (language).

R: Do you remember what you write?

P9: Normally I write full sentence... like “what is your name”?

R: They do not understand that?

P9: No...fortunately, I have a list of their names so I just follow the list.

R: Do you like your experience?

P9: If I want to say I like it, not really because it takes time. Sometimes a long time. Since I sincerely want to help, I will just be patient...

R: Do you take time to learn Mandarin to help you interact with them?

P9: Oh, yes... yes (laughing)

R: How do you learn Mandarin?

P9: By watching TV... (laughing)

R: What words do you use when interacting with the Chinese international students that you have to assist?

P9: Most often... “nǐ hǎo” (how are you) and “xièxie”(thank you)... simple words.

R: Why do you learn their language even though it is very basic?

P9: I feel it is not fair..I have Chinese and Indian friends who can speak Malay but I don't know other languages.

Discussion

The first theme, “self-other awareness”, essentially highlights the participants’ social interaction which creates their awareness about the interdependent connection between identity and culture. A person’s way

of communicating reflects a person's culture (Gao, 2006) and embodied experiences (Yu, 2015). This indicates that language represents the cultural self (identity) which means that when one interacts with the other person, both tend to identify each other's linguistic and cultural self. The participants also gain self-other awareness through acknowledging and learning about other cultures, for instance, knowing the do's and don'ts of particular cultures. The Malaysian scenario articulates that the heterogeneity element is a contributing factor in creating the self-consciousness of the other. Both self and other will tend to be aware of each other's presence as the encounters are prolonged. In other words, Malaysians are drawn to embrace similarities and differences as these have always been mooted by all prime ministers since independence. National integration is the idea which is and has always been popularised by the authority to this date.

The finding thus contributes to understanding social and cultural self-awareness as indicated in the knowledge component in Deardorff's (2006) model. Although self-other awareness represents knowledge component, we see that their response indicates requisite attitude for gaining awareness since they remarked being open and curious about cultural differences. Having been exposed to many ethnic members within the society, Malaysian students do not really encounter difficulties in adjusting to one's alien culture to theirs. Adjusting and accommodating have always been the rules of the social interaction game. Thus far, Malaysians have never encountered outright display of hatred towards each other as all attempt to embrace unity and move towards achieving national integration. As such, the finding supports the requisite attitude to intercultural competence as proposed by Deardorff (2006). While the locus of competence in Deardorff's study emphasizes the self-awareness of one's own cultural orientation, the participants' responses seem to indicate rather different insight. In view of this, they felt that it is also important to understand the culture of the other in their interaction. This response closely relates to the current development of intercultural competence, in which, it is linked to the individuals' awareness of identities, willingness to negotiate and recognize other's identities (Borghetti, 2017; Kim, 2009)

Given that our study focuses on social interaction between the local students (Malaysians) and their foreign counterparts (other nationalities), the level of cultural self-awareness (identity), as indicated in other studies (e.g., Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Tian & Lowe, 2014), is more likely to include awareness about national identity than other specific identities. However, in the case of our study, it seems that awareness of the specific ethnic identities within the Malaysian context must be considered. Citing the experience of P6 for example, we found her own experience and ethnic identity within the Malaysian multi-ethnic context cannot be ignored because it acts as a useful starting point for her to learn about cultural differences. Her social interaction with fellow cultured Malaysians, who come from diverse ethnicities, assists her communication with the foreign students. In the light of this finding, Gao (2006) asserted that all people are simultaneously members of different groups and categories such as ethnic groups and national groups. In the case of our study, the finding indicates the uniqueness of how individuals gain self-other awareness as they interact on campus. The long established multi-ethnic context of the Malaysian participants serves as an important factor that shapes their attitudes towards their foreign counterparts.

The second theme, "interlingual communication strategies" indicates the idea that communication competence relates to the ability of the participants to make their communication intelligible. In this sense, intelligibility requires the interactants to make sense of the other's speech in an attempt to be understood (Nelson, 1982). More importantly, the participants need to demonstrate the ability to interact with culturally and linguistically different others. Evidently, the participants need to use different ways of interacting with others, in particular, coping with the language differences and difficulties of their own and the others' (in)competencies given that the language used is the language of wider communication (Kaplan & Baldauf-Junior 1997; Nahir 1984). Such acts require skills including understanding others' culture and language, engaging in some form of flexibility and making adjustment, especially in the way one speaks.

The participants' ways of accommodating language contribute to an understanding of what happens when message producers and message receivers are speakers of different cultures. Not only do the interactants listen intently, they also fine-tune their ways of speaking in the interactions. While Deardorff's model does not emphasize much on the language factor, this study provides evidence on the process of interaction that must consider the significant role of language and language awareness in intercultural

competence (Arasaratnam, 2016; Fantini 2009; Gao 2006; Dalib, Harun & Yusof 2017). This understanding seems to be helpful especially in situations where one's competency to speak appropriate language (for instance, English) is crucial. When one's language ability seems to be present, interaction tends to be smooth and prolonged even though the participants reported facing challenges with accented English of the other. Baker (2011) remarked that when two individuals in the interaction are from different cultures, and speak a language which is foreign to both of them, there are significant influences on communication that arise from their initial language. More importantly, the positive attitude in relating to others through a language worth noting given that English is not native to the participants, nor to the majority of the international students in the campus. Accordingly, competent intercultural participants need to have the awareness of the inherent cultural conventions that impact their speech practices. The idea of 'foreigner talk' (Ferguson, 1971) seems prominent in the social interactions with rather incompetent sojourners. The study demonstrates that mindfulness is manifested in the participants' ability to not only understand and being aware of each other's language competency (Ting-Toomey 2015), but also to be flexible and patient in their interaction by using appropriate language accommodation strategies. The finding corresponds with Liu's (2009) investigation. Liu found that non-native English speakers usually adopt their own ways of using the language to interact. Liu contended that intercultural competence takes into account the ability to see what goes in interaction that requires participants to use language flexibly to negotiate meanings in the process of interaction.

We found that over the course of interpreting data, both themes seem to inform one another. It seems that the participants' awareness of self and other interweaves with their interlingual communication strategies. For example, as the participants gather awareness about culture and language, participants simultaneously learn to accommodate and accept other people's differences. We find that the participants' awareness indicates the fundamental requirement for competency that must consider (positive) attitude. Attitude, as attested by Deardorff (2006), is the critical starting point that leads participants to be aware of the other and think about ways to relate to them intelligibly and meaningfully. It is within this interaction between the two themes that we contend while cultural knowledge is very much recognized within the Deardorff's pyramid model, the role of culture and language is not much emphasized. As argued by Gao (2006), foreign language education must not ignore the fact that language learning cannot be treated independently from the culture of a particular group for its meaning. Thus we echo Gao, in emphasizing that language factor cannot be treated independently from the realm of intercultural competence. It is part and parcel of understanding the human communication process.

In essence, both themes interrelate with one another and contribute to the understanding of the internal and external outcomes as visualized in Deardorff's model. The themes reveal that the participants develop the ability to be flexible and adaptable in their interaction which leads them to achieve appropriate and effective communication. It seems that the valued goal or effectiveness of the communication for the participants is about understanding the other through a common or shared language and creating harmony among interactants (Chen & Starosta, 2003). Meanwhile, appropriateness is about the participants' ability to regulate behaviours politely in a given situation. The idea suggests that appropriateness requires culturally different members to find suitable ways to interact with one another to achieve the intended interactional goals.

The finding of this study points to an interesting question for discussion, that is, "What does it mean to be competent in a multilingual and multicultural setting as is the case for Malaysia?" Since culture and language factors were keenly felt by the participants, an important skill for developing competency requires the ability to be mindful of language and cultural differences (Dalib, Harun & Yusof, 2017; Ting-Toomey 2015).

Conclusion

Since language seems to be a taken-for-granted aspect in Deardorff's (2006) model, our study indicates a strong emphasis on the role of language and the need to be aware of each other's language (peculiarities) in intercultural communication. By this we mean as social interactants, we will tend to learn about how to communicate effectively and intelligibly in daily situations. As such, this study contributes to enriching dimensions of intercultural competence in which language accommodation strategies and understanding

can be added as important components to other skills for achieving intercultural competence. Taken further, we concur that the study does not only contribute to the understanding of intercultural competence among bilingual/multilingual speakers in Malaysia. Rather, it also creates awareness of other non-western bilingual/multilingual speakers whose first language might not be English.

Language reflects the culture and identity of the individual. This indicates that whenever a person interacts, the speaker tends to use the language that he or she is familiar with. In the context of Malaysia, the participants cannot avoid using English or Malaysian English to some extent given that it is the second official language. Arguably, when we consider intercultural competence, a person's mastery of the language is not a priority in making the communication comprehensible. Rather, it concerns how self and other make efforts to understand each other. By doing so, speakers co-operate by accommodating the way they speak, and respond, in the interaction. When understanding occurs, both parties can resonate and make meaningful human connections.

Several recommendations can be considered for future researchers. A qualitative research method such as ethnography can be employed to observe people in their real life social practices related to the language and cultural elements. Potential research questions include: How do diverse participants interact with one another? How do participants accommodate their language to understand the other? Findings from such research will be beneficial to delineate competent behaviours among multilingual and multicultural speakers. Given the existence of the new social media and its impact on intercultural communication (Chen, 2012), we recommend that future researchers study the interlingual communication strategy that is used to interact with cultural others, for instance, on Facebook and *WhatsApp*. Perhaps, such an inquiry may transform our understanding of intercultural competence given the unique nature of the virtual realms where ethnically and linguistically diverse speakers interact.

Given that the development of intercultural competence is much needed in Malaysia (Tamam, 2015), it is hoped that the study will promote more efforts in developing the Malaysian students' intercultural competence. More importantly, the study provides insights into a particular Asian communication and how culturally diverse people interact. Higher learning institutions must play important roles in preparing students to learn how to interact effectively and intelligibly in the multilingual and multicultural society. Perhaps, people should begin understanding the other by finding ways to connect and resonate with others from linguistically and culturally diverse groups.

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