

# Assessment of the Characteristics of Interpersonal Communication Competence among Postgraduate Students from Different Cultures

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## Abstract

This study was carried out to assess the characteristics of interpersonal communication competence among postgraduate students from different cultures at a Malaysian public university. This study applied the mixed methods research design with the participation of 130 postgraduate students from 18 different countries. The Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ) was used as the main instrument of this study. Based on the results from this study, their interactions with their peers from different cultures helped the participants to improve the contact initiation, disclosure and conflict management skills of their interpersonal communication competence and gain some new personal and cultural skills and information. However, the participants were struggling to learn how to manage probable conflicts during their interactions with their peers from different cultures. The results from this study illustrate that the level of education variable affect interactions among individuals from different cultures in the Asian context of communication.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural Communication; Interpersonal Communication Competence; Asian Context of Communication*

## Introduction

Interpersonal communication among individuals from different cultures, who live in a multicultural environment, is an essential part of their daily lives. However, it might be a challenging issue for individuals to have successful interpersonal interactions with people from various backgrounds without the improvement of their interpersonal communication competence. In the emerging concept of globalization and multicultural environments, the skills to interact with people from various backgrounds are among the essential requirements of personal and professional lives of human-beings (Dusi et al., 2014; Sinicrope et al., 2007). Moreover, interpersonal communication among individuals from different social and cultural backgrounds helps them to know one another, and to share their knowledge and information. According to Kim and McKay-Semmler (2013), the main means that help people from different backgrounds to share their information and establish social and cultural relationships with one another is communication.

To conduct proper interactions with different people, individuals need to focus on the improvement of their communication competence. According to McCroskey (1982), communication competence refers to the knowledge and skills of demonstrating proper performance. Ruben (1976) defines communication competence as “the ability to function in a manner that is perceived to be relatively consistent with the needs, capacities, goals, and expectations of the individuals in one’s environment while satisfying one’s own needs, capacities, goals, and expectations.” However, interpersonal communication is the

fundamental part for all social connections and communication among people (Kim, 2001; Kim, 2005). Thus, one of the basic and fundamental aspects of all kinds and concepts of communication competence is interpersonal communication competence. Interpersonal communication competence encompasses knowledge, motivation, skills and ethical values that are accomplished through mutual and collaborative communication in an interpersonal setting. The collaborative nature of communication refers to the shared actions among communicators (Lewis, 2006; Purhonen, 2007). Dusi et al. (2014) argued that interpersonal communication competence refers to the combination of some components such as abilities, skills, attitudes, and patterns of the personality.

Interpersonal communication competence includes attention to both psychological and interactional processes, including relationship definition and message production under different cultural perspectives (Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Interpersonal communication among people from different cultures enables them to gain some cultural information and have better lives in multicultural environments. As argued by Kim (2001), interpersonal interactions among people from various backgrounds help them to find their right places in multicultural environments and diversified societies. At the same time, direct interpersonal communication among people from different cultures can be considered as intercultural communication as well (Aba, 2015; Bennett, 1998). As dissimilar cultural perceptions do not change the basic nature of communication, thus the competence for interpersonal communication can be applicable in intercultural context of communication as well (Spitzberg, 1989). However, Chang (2008) believes that, interpersonal interactions among people from different cultures in different environments could be affected by cultural intangibility of humanity that are rooted in the concepts of their different cultures.

Furthermore, interpersonal communication competence is the main requirement for conducting successful interpersonal communication which includes the skills to initiate interactions, to disclose some personal information, to understand messages, to manage personal and relations, and to prevent probable conflicts (Buhrmester et al., 1988; Rhodes, 2009; Rubin & Martin, 1994). Interpersonal communication competence could be considered as an important requirement for professionals who work in public sectors, and well-performed interpersonal communication increases collaboration and teamwork among employees (Brindley & Reynolds, 2011; Kraiger & Kirkpatrick, 2010; Saaranen et al., 2015). Thus, individuals, especially university students, could be more successful through the improvement of their interpersonal communication competence (Mahoney et al., 2003).

However, most of the available works in communication in the literature were conducted in the Western parts of the world and under the Western context of communication. Even if Westerners assessed communication among other people, their judgements were based on their own cultural and communicative norms. Thus, if other people assess their communicative norms and activities by themselves, they may get better results (Kim, 2007; Kim, 2012). According to Hei, Ling and David (2011), people from different cultures have different behavioural patterns, as people in the Northern America and Western Europe who practise the individualistic communicative and cultural norms, while Asians (e.g. Malaysians) mostly practise the collectivistic communicative and cultural norms. Thus, the results from studies under the Western context of communication may not answer questions on interpersonal communication competence in an Asian country. Therefore, this study aims to assess the characteristics of interpersonal communication competence among international postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university.

## Conceptual Framework

A theory as a group of conceptual viewpoints enables researchers to understand the communicative behaviours of people and help them to improve their communicative behaviours (Miller, 2005). The concentration of researchers on the micro levels of interface of individuals from different backgrounds constructs the key domain of theories and studies of communication among people from different backgrounds (Kim, 2010). The system theory of Kim (1992) focuses on the dynamic, active and interactive nature of interactions between communicators. Based on this theory, “all parties involved in a given encounter, including the conditions of the social context in which the encounter takes place, co-determine the communication outcomes. This means that no one element in a multi-person communication system can be singled out for being solely responsible for the outcomes.”

Moreover, Sarwari's (2017) the Contact and Cohesion Theory focuses on Contact Initiation, Negotiation, Cognition, and Cohesion as the four steps for conducting proper interactions among individuals from different backgrounds in Asian context of communication. The Contact and Cohesion Theory also introduces seven pre-conditions for conducting successful interactions among individuals from various backgrounds in Asian context of communication. The proposed preconditions are: Coherent Competence, Coherent Heart, Self-knowledge, Purposefulness, Respect Differences, Shared Interests, and Flexibility (Sarwari, 2017). The proposed steps and pre-conditions of the Contact and Cohesion Theory could guide an academic study on the assessment of interpersonal communication competence among individuals from different cultures in an Asian context of communication. These preconditions may help students from different cultures to conduct successful interactions and improve their personal and social skills through their interactions. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), it is important for university students as members of a new and different community to develop the levels of their social connections in the university environment, as their lives in a multicultural campus require them to have interactions with their peers from different backgrounds. Thus, consideration of the differences helps them to improve their interpersonal communication competence. The above mentioned arguments and assertions of the cited theorists and scholars are supportive of the importance of interactions among university students.

## Literature Review

Interpersonal communication is among the essential requirements of the university related to the lives of international students who live in a multicultural environment. Spitzberg (1993) argued that interpersonal communication paves the ways for individuals to establish friendships and expand their social relationships. Friendships and social relations among individuals may help them to have durable interpersonal interactions to improve their interpersonal communication competence. According to Spitzberg and Cupach (2011), interpersonal interactions occur because of the relationship among individuals which is the results of collaboration among them. Moreover, interpersonal communication competence is the main pre-condition for individuals to conduct successful interpersonal interactions. Interpersonal communication competence helps individuals to have effective and well-managed interactions (Matsudair et al., 2008). As argued by Kim (2001), interpersonal interactions among individuals from different societies have effects on their psychological well-being and functional fitness. Moreover, an effectual interpersonal communication competence improves the quality and performance of relationships among people (McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2005).

When individuals from different backgrounds enrol in multicultural universities, they might not be competent enough in communication. But, they may find opportunities to improve the levels of their social skills and communication competence through their daily interactions with their peers from different backgrounds. According to Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002), international students mostly face some personal, environmental and social challenges. Besides their university related issues, international university students struggle to overcome some environmental challenges as well (Lin, 2011). When international students interact with their peers from other nationalities, they may gain some new information to help them to overcome the environmental challenges in a diversified environment. According to Hall (1990), information about different cultural aspects helps individuals to improve their interpersonal abilities and to get rid of pessimistic stereotypes.

Additionally, interactions among individuals increase the levels of collaboration among them, and their collaboration may help them to have more successes. Cohen et al. (2010) from the results of two experimental studies on the effects of communication among individuals on the increase of interpersonal cooperation found that interpersonal communication and the consideration of trust and fairness during interactions promote collaboration among individuals. Based on the results of a study, Lefroy et al. (2011) argued that interactions among students have significant impacts on their university related lives. At the same time, the existence of positive atmosphere and contacts and collaboration among students and their personal experiences help them to learn more (Lahtinen, 2008; Goldman & Goodboy, 2014).

Furthermore, interpersonal interactions among individuals from different nationalities and their good levels of interpersonal communication competence help organizations to be successful globally (Sarwari & Wahab, 2016). Pikhart (2014) based on the results of a study on the effects of interactions among

employees on the success of organizations argued that the process of interactions among members of an organization strongly influence the effectiveness of that organization in the global market. The above mentioned arguments and findings of the cited scholars and researchers are supportive of the effectiveness of good levels of interpersonal communication competence among individuals from various backgrounds on their daily interactions, and also the usefulness of their interactions on their personal and social lives.

## Methodology

The quantitative survey was used to collect responses from the participants for the structured checklists. The direct and digitally-recorded interviews were conducted to have the direct views and answers of some of the participants for the open-ended questions to enrich the data and support the quantitative results. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), researchers apply both of the quantitative and qualitative datasets to answer their research questions. The main research question of this study is: what are the characteristics of interpersonal communication competence among postgraduate students from different cultures in an Asian context of communication?

## Participants

The participants of this study were 130 international postgraduate students from a Malaysian public university and they came from 18 different countries. The *M/SD* scores of all participants were  $M = 96.9$ ,  $SD = 12.8$ . The vast majority, 98 (75.4 %) of the participants were male, and 32 (24.6 %) of them were female. From all of the participants, 74 (56.9 %) of them were master students, and 56 (43.1 %) others were PhD students. From all 130 participants of this study, nine volunteers were interviewed to strengthen the results.

## Instruments

The quantitative survey instrument included the demographic information in the interpersonal communication competence questionnaire. The revised version of the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ) by Buhrmester et al. (1988) was used as the main instrument for the quantitative data collections. The revised version of ICQ includes 29 items with five options per item based on the Likert scale. The ICQ instrument assesses the levels of interpersonal communication competence under five attributes which are initiation, disclosure, emotional support, negative assertion, and conflict management. The ICQ questionnaire of Buhrmester et al. (1988) has been used by many researchers in the past (e.g. Giromini et al., 2016; Michaeli, 2013; Parsons, 2008; Sherburne, 2009) and studies of the mentioned researchers are supportive of the reliability and validity of the ICQ instrument.

The initiation attribute indicates the skills and abilities of individuals that enable them to conduct interactions and be involved. The disclosure attribute is the skill that enables individuals to disclose and share their personal information with their friends and others to develop trust and establish relationships. The emotional support attribute includes the abilities of individuals which enable them to express genuine empathy to their friends and companions when facing problems and difficulties. The negative assertion attribute includes the skills and abilities that help individuals to stand for their own rights or oppose any harassment and unpleasant actions. The conflict management attribute indicates the skills and abilities that help individuals to manage conflicts properly and deal with the probable disputes in the proper ways (Buhrmester et al., 1988; Michaeli, 2013; Paulk et al., 2011). The qualitative instrument was an interview protocol which included eight open-ended interview questions. The interview questions were adapted from the salient statements of the ICQ instrument.

## Data Analyses

The descriptive, t-test and bivariate correlation tests of SPSS were applied to analyze the quantitative data. The qualitative interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were read carefully and based on the research themes and answers of the participants, the qualitative findings were categorized. The salient views and comments of the interviewees are directly quoted in the text under the qualitative findings.

# Findings

## Quantitative findings

The descriptive and scale tests of SPSS were used to find out the frequencies and percentages of the participants based on the demographic variables, their overall *M/SD* scores for interpersonal communication competence questionnaire (ICQ), and also for each of its attributes. The *M/SD* scores of all 130 participants of this study for the all items of ICQ were  $M = 96.9, SD = 12.8$ . ICQ has 29 items, and five options per item. Thus, the average mean score is 73 and the given mean score is higher than the average mean score. This means that the participants of this study were relatively competent in their interpersonal communication. The male participants were 98 in number with their *M/SD* scores of  $M = 94.7, SD = 13$ , and female participants were 32 with their *M/SD* scores of  $M = 95.3, SD = 13.5$ . Based on the results, the mean score of female participants was higher than the male participants. The overall *M/SD* scores of participants who were master students were  $M = 89.2, SD = 12.6$ , and for PhD participants the scores were  $M = 97, SD = 12.1$ . The results show that the participants who were PhD students had higher levels of interpersonal communication competence. Based on the descriptive results, the participants had higher mean scores for the three attributes, which are initiation, disclosure, and emotional support. However, their mean scores for the negative assertion and conflict management attributes were lower than the average mean scores. Table 1 includes the *M/SD* scores the participants for each attribute of ICQ.

**Table 1:** Includes the *M/SD* scores of all participants for each attributes of ICQ

Attribute	Number of Items	Mean	SD
Initiation	6	21.9	4.1
Disclosure	5	12.8	2.5
Emotional Support	6	25.4	3.6
Negative Assertion	7	16.8	4.2
Conflict Management	5	11.1	3.1

Moreover, the paired-samples t-test was applied to compare the mean scores of the Initiation attribute with the Conflict management attribute, and a significant difference was found as  $t(129) = -4.108, P < .01$ , and the *Mean/SD* scores of Initiation were  $M = 4.2, SD = .36$ , and for conflict management were  $M = 3.2, SD = .34$ . The same test was applied to compare the mean scores of the Disclosure attribute to the Negative assertion, and a significant difference was found as  $t(129) = -6.751, P < .01$ . *Mean/SD* scores for Disclosure were  $M = 3.2, SD = .67$  and for the Negative assertion were  $M = 3.2, SD = .29$ . The mean scores for Disclosure and Emotional support attributes were compared through the use of the paired-samples t-test, but no significant difference was found as  $t(129) = .272, P > .05$ . The *Mean/SD* scores for the Disclosure were  $M = 3.4, SD = .48$  and for the Emotional supports the scores were  $M = 3.3, SD = .82$ . The same test was conducted to compare the statistical mean score for the Conflict management attribute to the Emotional support attribute and no significant difference was found as the result was  $t(129) = .542, p > .05$ . The *Mean/SD* scores for Conflict management were  $M = 3.2, SD = .56$ , and for Emotional support were  $M = 3.1, SD = .48$ .

The bivariate correlation test was applied and some positive correlations were found between the variables and attributes of this study. There were some positive correlations between level of education and initiation, level of education and disclosure, and level of education and emotional support. There were some positive correlations between the attributes of the ICQ as well. Table 2 shows the results of correlation test.

**Table 2:** *Illustrates correlations between the variables and attributes*

<b>1 - Level of Education</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
2 - Initiation	.325	.268				
3 - Disclosure		.371	.551			
4 - Negative Assertion	.301					
5 - Emotional Support	.252	.472	.355	.249		
6 - Conflict Management	.463		.359	.463	.324	.612

## Qualitative Findings

The qualitative results of this study comprised to the direct answers of nine interviewees who were chosen based on their own agreements, and they were from nine different countries. The interviewees were: 1) a male master student from Afghanistan, 2) a male master student from Algeria, 3) a male PhD student from Bangladesh, 4) a female master student from China, 5) a male master student from Ghana, 6) a female PhD student from India, 7) a female PhD student from Iran, 8) a male PhD student from Pakistan, and 9) a male master student from Yemen. In the upcoming paragraphs, the given number for each interviewee will be used instead of their personal information. The answers of the interviewees were categorized under three categories: initiation and interaction engagement, disclosure and emotional support, and conflict management.

### Initiation and Interaction Engagement

Based on the answers of the vast majority (7) of the interviewees, their enrolment in an international university and their daily interactions with their peers from various nationalities helped them to increase the levels of their interpersonal communication competence, and enabled them to initiate interactions with individuals from different backgrounds. For example, interviewee 4 said that “We do study different courses and subjects about communication in our country [China], but we have little opportunities to have direct interactions with individuals from different countries when we are in our country. Thus, when we come overseas and enroll in international universities, we find good opportunities to interact with different people and improve our personal skills through our daily interactions.” Interviewee 2 also said that “When I was in my country [Algeria], I was not able to interact with people from different backgrounds properly and I do not have enough information about the Asian people. But, when I studied in a Malaysian university and lived with students from different countries, I now know many things about the Asian people.” Their views were supported by interviewee 8 as said “The university time is important for all students, and the university is the right place for us to improve our personal skills and learn how to communicate with other international students. After almost three years of being in a multicultural university campus, I learned how to interact with different people and how to establish relationships with them.” The answers and the comments of the mentioned interviewees show the positive effects of the university environment on the increase of interpersonal communication competence of the participants and their abilities to initiate interactions with different people.

### Disclosure and Emotional Support

Based on the answers of the interviewees, their interpersonal interactions with other students helped them to share their personal information with their peers and help one another during their daily lives. The disclosure and sharing of their personal and social information with their peers helped the participants to have more interactions and gain some new information. For instance, interviewee 7 said that “When we come together in a new environment with individuals from various cultures and nationalities, at first we have some basic interaction and then our daily interactions help us to talk about ourselves, to talk about our social and cultural norms and to know one another. At the same time, when we share some

information about ourselves and our social and cultural norms, we encourage other students to share their information and have durable contacts with us.” Interviewee 1 said that “The main reason that encourages us to have daily interpersonal communication with students from different countries is to know their social and cultural norms and to establish some relationships with them and to help one another during our university time.” Moreover, interviewee 4 said that “When we live abroad and in a multicultural university campus, we have international friends and have daily interactions with them to talk about our lives and help one another to overcome any environmental challenge. We know that students who have friends from different countries, have happier lives and are more sociable. However, students who prefer to stay and study alone, will feel lonely and sometimes cannot overcome these challenges.” The above mentioned views showed the importance of daily interactions among students on their personal and social lives in a multicultural university campus.

## **Conflict Management**

The results from the answers of most of the participants illustrated that they considered the probable conflicts and arguments during their interactions with students from different nationalities as an important issue. They were aware about the possible results of the probable conflicts and the abilities to manage well the conflicts on the process of their daily interactions. Interviewee 3 said that “One of the main things that we have to be careful during our direct communication with students from other nationalities is the use of unnecessary words and gestures which may cause some arguments. Also, we have to respect our differences and try to manage all misunderstandings in a better way to prevent conflicts.” Interviewee 5 also said that “At first, students from some countries try to show that their cultures are better and they try to force other students to accept their ideas and opinions. We try to be calm and prevent any conflict and throughout the time and through continuation of our interactions, we see some positive changes on the assumptions of those students towards the cultural and social norms of other people.” The above mentioned views show that the abilities to manage the probable conflicts are important for university students who live in a multicultural environment and their daily communication help them to improve their conflict management skills. The qualitative results are supportive of the quantitative results and all results show that the participants of this study had a good level of interpersonal communication competence.

## **Discussion**

This study assessed the interpersonal communication competence among postgraduate students from different cultures at a Malaysian public university. The participants of this study were from 18 different Asian and African countries. It means that in the ever-growing, colorful and multicultural modern university campuses, individuals from different countries and different cultural backgrounds stay and study together and have opportunities to interact with one another. Thus, it is important for students from different nationalities to improve their interpersonal communication competence to have successful interactions with their peers from various backgrounds. Moreover, their stay and study in a multicultural university campus is a good opportunity for international students to boost their personal skills and improve their interpersonal communication competence. Based on the results from this study, the overall mean score of the participants for interpersonal communication competence was higher than the average mean scores. It means that the participants of this study were good in interpersonal communication competence and were aware of the importance of their daily interactions on their personal and social lives. Kim (2001) argues that interpersonal communication competence is the main factor that enables individuals to experience developments in the different parts of their personal and social lives and to find their right places in the diverse societies.

University students may have more successes through the improvements of their interpersonal communication competence (Mahoney et al., 2003). Therefore, interpersonal communication is an important part of daily lives of university students. According to the quantitative findings, the participants of this study had higher mean scores in the three attributes of interpersonal communication competence which are initiation, disclosure, and emotional support. To say it in other words, the participants were competent to initiate interactions with different people, to share their feelings and personal information with their peers, and to support other individuals emotionally during their daily lives. At the same time,

their stay and study in a multicultural university campus and their daily interactions helped them to improve their interpersonal communication competence and enabled them to learn how to initiate and continue interpersonal interactions with individuals from different nationalities. These findings are supportive of the assertion of Kim and McKay-Semmler (2013) about the important role of interactions among individuals on the process of the establishment of personal, social, and cultural relationships, and information exchange among them.

According to the findings, the participants were not competent enough in the negative assertion skill to oppose the harassing views of their peers during their interactions. Their mean score for the conflict management attribute was also lower than the average mean score. It means that the participants need to improve their conflict management abilities to prevent probable conflicts during their daily interpersonal interactions. However, the gender and the level of education demographic variable somehow had effects on the levels of interpersonal communication competence of the participants, as female participants had higher mean score rather than the male participants. It simply means that female participants were more competent and experienced more interactions with their peers from different cultures.

At the same time, there were some positive correlations between the level of education and some of the main attributes of interpersonal communication competence. It demonstrates that some demographic variables and factors could affect interactions among individuals under the Asian context of communication. There also were some significant positive correlations between the attributes of interpersonal communication competence. The results from the paired-samples t-test also confirmed the existence of relationships between the attributes of interpersonal communication competence. Based on the qualitative results, their stay and study in a multicultural Malaysia university campus helped the participants to have opportunities to interact with different people. Their interactions also paved the ways for them to gain some new skills and know the differences and dissimilar social and cultural norms of different people.

Moreover, their interactions helped the participants to know how to start and continue interactions with other international students, and how to share their personal information personal when interacting with different people to establish friendship with them. These skills could help the participants as potential professional employees of multicultural organizations to be successful in their duties. As pointed out, interpersonal interactions among professionals who work in public sectors and their good levels of interpersonal communication competence help them to have more collaboration and be more successful (Brindley & Reynolds, 2011; Saaranen et al., 2015). The results from this study are supportive of the coherent competence, self-knowledge, purposefulness, respect differences, shared interests, and the flexibility pre-conditions of the Contact and Cohesion Theory under Asian context of communication. The results from this study based on the Asian, especially Malaysian, context of communication are mostly new and may add some new information to the literature. The results may be useful for future researchers, and may also encourage university students to focus on their daily interpersonal interactions during their university time.

## Conclusion

This study was conducted to evaluate interpersonal communication competence among postgraduate students from different nationalities in a Malaysian public university. The participants of this study belonged to different Asian and African countries and were living and studying in the same university campus. According to the findings from this study, their enrolment at an international university enabled the participants to experience interpersonal communication with individuals from various backgrounds, and their interactions helped them to improve the levels of their interpersonal communication competence. Based on the results, the participants of this study were competent to initiate direct interpersonal communication and encourage their peers to have durable contacts with them. The participants were mostly able to disclose and share some of the required personal and cultural information with their peers and help them emotionally.

However, the participants still struggled to gain some conflict management skills to be able to manage the probable conflicts during their daily interactions in a proper manner. Based on the results, they were not

competent enough in the conflict management and negative assertion attributes of interpersonal communication competence. The results from this study show the importance of interpersonal communication competence on the daily lives of university students who study abroad and these findings may be interesting for future researchers and university students.

## Limitations

This study was carried out to assess interpersonal communication competence among postgraduate students from different nationalities at a Malaysian public university. As the main limitations this study could not assess and evaluate all contributes and aspects of interpersonal communication competence. Thus, the results from this study may not be replicable for all aspects of interpersonal communication competence. At the same time, this study was conducted at a single university, thus replication of the results from this study in other Malaysian universities and higher education institutions might be limited.

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