

**EVALUATION OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF
INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AMONG
POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS FROM DIFFERENT
NATIONALITIES AT A MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY**

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ABSTRACT

Communication among students from different nationalities who stay and study in multicultural university campuses is an important issue for their personal and academic lives. Among other concepts of communication, interpersonal communication which requires the direct interactions among communicators is important to be assessed. This study was carried out to assess the characteristics of interpersonal communication among international postgraduate students of a Malaysian public university. This study had 128 participants from 17 different countries, and the quantitative and qualitative methods were applied for the data collection procedure. Based on the results from this study, their stay and study in a multicultural university campus with students from various backgrounds helped the participants to have opportunities to interact with different people, and to gain some new personal and social skills and information. The results from this study confirmed that most of the participants of this study who were from different countries had daily interactions with students from other nationalities, and were comfortable and satisfied when interacting with their international peers. Based on the results, personal skill building was among the main reasons that encouraged the participants to leave their own countries and enroll at a multicultural university abroad. The results from this study may encourage university students to have more interactions with

their peers and may also help researchers to focus on the related issues in the future.

Keywords: Communication; Interpersonal communication; International postgraduate students; Malaysian universities

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication among university students from various nationalities helps them to exchange their views and experiences, and to know and help one another to have happier and successful personal and academic lives in the university campuses. Interpersonal communication refers to the direct interactions and discussions between at least two communicators who exchange their spoken messages with each other (Crowell, 2011; Dawson, 2008; Stewart, 2006). One of the main encouraging points for international students who prefer to enroll in the multicultural modern universities abroad is to gain some new personal and social skills. Thus, university time is the main opportunity for them to achieve their goals. Kim and McKay-Semmler (2013) argued that, communication is the main means that enables individuals to establish personal and social relationships. University students through their interactions can make international friends and establish multicultural social networks. Lin (2011) believes that communication is one of the main requirements for individuals to understand one another, to learn, and to be fitted in the diverse environments. It is considered as an important skill to have contacts and to be connected with people from different backgrounds (Sinicrope et al., 2007). According to Reed (2008), university time is an important opportunity for students to decrease their stresses and improve the levels of their communication competence.

Interpersonal communication has important effects on personal and professional lives of individuals. Their daily interpersonal communication may help postgraduate students to develop the different parts of their personal and professional lives. As asserted by Paulk (2008), the skills to have successful interpersonal communication are the main pints of human progress and well performance in the different fields. Also, interpersonal communication is the fundamental step of human communication. According to Vevea (2011), interpersonal communication is the main step of communication and other aspects of communication were developed from the interpersonal communication field. Gao (2011) also believes that interpersonal communication is the main factor that help individuals to increase their public relationships.

Moreover, interpersonal communication among students from different nationalities helps them to have more academic successes and share their different academic experiences to tackle their university related problems. According to Mahoney et al. (2003), their good interpersonal skills help university students to have good academic success. As interactions among students may have good effects on their personal and professional lives, thus they should consider their daily interactions as an important part of their daily lives, and they should try to be involved in daily interactions with their peers as much as they can. Also, their eagerness towards their involvements in the daily interactions with students from different countries may encourage them to have more interactions and gain more skills and information.

The arguments and statements of the cited scholars are all supportive of the effects of interpersonal communication on personal and social abilities and lives of individuals. This issue may be more important for international university students who are living out of their countries to study and gain some new skills. But, previous researchers mostly focused on

the process of interactions in the western parts of the world. The communication field and most of the works on this field belong to the Western people, especially Americans and if other people want to know their own communicative situation, they have to work by themselves (Kim, 2007; Kim, 2012). Therefore, assessment of this issue may help university students and university managing bodies to pay more attention on the process of interpersonal communication among postgraduate students from different nationalities. Thus, this study aims to assess the characteristics of interpersonal communication among international postgraduate students of a Malaysian public university.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT

This study was conducted under the guidance of the Contact Theory of Allport (1954). Allport (1954) grabbed the attention of scholars, researchers and policymakers in the social and intergroup contacts affairs by introducing of his Contact Theory in his famous book of (The Nature of Prejudice). Allport had stated his concerns and views about the peaceful and fruitful contacts among people from different racial and social backgrounds who were facing bias and conflicts in the societies. Based on his concerns and ideas, he introduced his framework for the development of a successful and undisturbed contacts and communication among different groups of people in his Contact Theory/Hypothesis (Aidoo, 2012).

The Contact Theory was used as a theoretical framework for different studies in the fields of human communication and social activities among people from various backgrounds for around half a century (Aidoo, 2012; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). According to Broad et al. (2013), Contact Theory of Allport (1954) is among the broadly cited works in the studies on

contacts and communication among people from different backgrounds. Allport (1954) introduced the four main steps for the process of interpersonal and intergroup contact which starts with the *sheer contact* that leads into the *competition*, as a third step experience the *accommodation* and meets the last step which is *assimilation*. The steps and preconditions of the Contact Theory can support a study on interpersonal communication in an academic environment. Students from different social backgrounds when enrol in a multicultural university, and stay with individuals from different backgrounds, they may start some basic contacts when they face one another in the campus. Their basic contacts may help them to know one another and establish some social relationships. Also, their social contacts and relationships with their peers may help and encourage them to have durable interactions. Their daily interactions may help individuals in a multicultural collegiate environment to get familiar with the environment and adapt the existing social and communicative norms and conditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

All types of communications among people begin with interpersonal interactions. Interpersonal interaction is the basic part of social contacts and connections among people (Kim, 2005; Kim, 2001). Also, daily interpersonal interactions among people help them to advance their social abilities. According to Kim (2001), interpersonal interactions among individuals from various backgrounds have positive effects on their functional strength and psychological well-being, and help them to be adjusted in the new environments. As argued by Gao (2011), interpersonal interaction among individuals living overseas are good opportunities to make friends and expand their social relationships.

Interpersonal communication includes the process of interactions among individuals through the use of verbal or non-verbal messages, and under the interpersonal context of communication, while the presence of communicators is preferred (Crowell, 2011; Dawson, 2008). Interpersonal communication is a continuing and durable process, not just an event or few events. All of the daily contacts, negotiations and discussions of students with their peers, roommates, classmates and other people are the examples of interpersonal communication (Crowell, 2011; Stewart, 2006; Dominick, 1999).

Interpersonal communication is one of the main parts of social lives of all human-beings. Some researchers (e.g. Gao, 2011; Aidoo, 2012; Abdulla, 2008) through their studies found that daily interactions among university students from different nationalities have important effects on their personal and university related lives. Based on the cited scholars, interpersonal communication as an important part of social lives of individuals, especially university students from various backgrounds has impacts on their daily lives. According to them, interactions among university students from various nationalities help them to know environments and overcome the environmental challenges.

Huang (2010) through the assessment of the relationship between American and Chinese students in some higher education institutions in the United States found that interpersonal interactions play important role on the daily university related lives of students regarding their personal and social issues. Based on the results of a study on interactions between American and Japanese students of some American higher education institutions, Izumi (2010) found that personal characteristics of students have important effects on their daily interactions and daily lives when they stay and study abroad. These assertions and findings illustrate the important role of interactions among students on their personal and academic lives.

Wade (2008) also focuses on the effectiveness of the university time on students' lives to learn new things through their contacts with their peers and to develop their personal abilities. Also, Lusting and Koester (2006) believe that interpersonal interactions among individuals are important for their personal and social lives. Thus, assessment of the characteristics of interpersonal communication among university students in a Malaysian public university through an academic study may answer more questions and may add some new information for the Malaysian context of communication in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

Both of the quantitative and qualitative methods were used to conduct this study. The main method was the quantitative method and qualitative data used to support the quantitative data set. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), researchers use both of the quantitative and the qualitative methods as mixed method to well answer their research questions. The participants of this study were 128 postgraduate students of a Malaysian public university, namely University Malaysia Pahang. The participants belonged to 17 different countries with their *M/SD* scores of $M = 180$, $SD = 15$. From all participants, 100 of them were male and 28 others female. The participants were living in the international residential college of the university. From all participants, nine of them were interviewed for the qualitative section of this study as well.

The quantitative instrument for the purpose of this manuscript included the demographic information and four questions which were adapted from Gao (2011). The questions were designed based on the Likert scale with five options per question from (Strongly disagree) to (Strongly agree). The convenience sampling was applied for the quantitative data

collection and the qualitative interviews were directly conducted and audio taped based on personal agreements of the participants. The quantitative data were analyzed through the use of the essential tests of SPSS and the qualitative interviews were transcribed and categorized based on the research themes.

FINDINGS

The findings section includes the results from the quantitative and the qualitative data sets. The results from both of the quantitative and the qualitative sections are reported separately below. The quantitative findings include the results from the analyses of answers of the participants for the structured quantitative questionnaire, and the qualitative findings include the direct answers of the interviewees for the qualitative open-ended questions.

Quantitative Findings

The descriptive test of SPSS was applied to find out the demographic details of the participants. Based on the results, from all participants, 100 (78.1%) of them were male postgraduate students, and 28 (21.9%) of them female. Also, from all participants, 73 (57%) of them were master students, and 55 (43%) of others PhD students. Table 1 below illustrates the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

Item	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Gender				
Male	100	78.1	186.1	16.8
Female	28	21.9	193.6	14.9
Level of Education				
Master	73	57	186.1	15.7
PhD	55	43	188.9	17.1
Age Category				
22-27	57	44.5	184.3	16
28-33	45	35.2	189.7	17.9
34-39	13	10.2	195.4	8.5
40+	13	10.2	182	14

The characteristics of interpersonal communication among the participants were also analyzed through the descriptive test of the SPSS. Based on the results, the participants had most of their interactions with students from other nationalities, and also most of the participants reported that they had daily or at least many times per week interactions with students from different countries. According to the findings, the participants mostly satisfied when interacting with their peers from different countries. Table 2 below shows the results for the characteristics of interpersonal communication among the participants.

Table 2: the results of the characteristics of interpersonal communication

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Frequency of ICC with other students		
Almost everyday	24	18.8
A few times per week	15	11.7
Twice a week	19	14.8
Once a week	34	26.6
Less than once a week	35	27.3
Level of Satisfaction of participants from the ICC		
	4	3.1
Very dissatisfied	8	6.2
Dissatisfied	49	38.3
Neutral	49	38.3
Satisfied	18	14.1
Very satisfied		
Level of confidence of participants during ICC		
Very uncomfortable	1	.8
Uncomfortable	1	.8
Neutral	37	28.9
Comfortable	69	53.9
Very comfortable	20	15.6

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative section of this study had nine participants from nine different countries. The participants were: 1) a PhD student from India, 2) a PhD student from Iran, 3) a Master student from Yemen, 4) a Master students from Ghana, 5) a Master student from Afghanistan, 6) a PhD student from Bangladesh, 7) a PhD student from Sudan, 8) a Master student from Algeria, and 9) a PhD student from Indonesia. The given numbers for the participants will be mentioned below instead of their personal information.

Based on the answers of almost all participants, they had daily interactions with their peers from different nationalities and their interactions helped them to gain some new personal and social skills, and have happier lives in the university campus. For example, participant 1 said that “PhD is an international degree and after PhD someone must be able and survive in the different countries. Thus, during my stay in the university campus and through my communication with students from Arab, Asian and African countries I learned many things and if I go and work in their countries, I am able and already I know how to interact with them.” Also, as stated by participant 2 “This is something very interesting when talking with people from different cultures and we learn many interesting issues. Also we learn how to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds.” Moreover, participant 3 told that “My interactions with other students were very useful for my social and academic lives. Thorough my interactions with students from different countries I gained the comfort and secured to go and work in their countries and interact with their people.” Moreover, participant 4 said that “Obviously our contacts improve our personality and we learn many things from each other over involvements in interactions. Also, our interactions enable us to communicate with some good researchers and our interpersonal and intercultural interactions help us

to establish some academic networks and personal relations with others.” Based on the above mentioned views of the interviewees, their daily interactions with individuals from various backgrounds had important effects on their lives.

Furthermore, participant 5 said that “The main benefits of our interactions are to understand different cultures, customs and behaviours, and also the improvements of our academic lives and the levels of collaborations through our interactions.” These views were supported by participant 6 as said “I learned many different social and academic skills from other students through our interactions during my stay at the university.” Moreover, participant 8 also said that “We gained many academic benefits from our interactions as we help one another about particular software and exchange our books, we can learn more.” These acknowledgments were supported by the views of participant 9 as said “Socially I feel some positive changes in my life. Also, our interactions help us to know about different cultures and different people and socially it’s very helpful. But sometimes some students don’t want to share their information and don’t want to collaborate during the teamwork and these things are not interesting.” As it was added “As all people we contact are academic people, thus we can learn many things from them and also we can improve our information and our general knowledge which are very important for our lives” participant 7. Based on the results from this section of the qualitative data, students can achieve different experiences and information through their interpersonal interactions with individuals from different cultures and countries.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was conducted to evaluate the characteristics of interpersonal communication among postgraduate students from different countries in a Malaysian public university. When international students leave their own countries to study abroad, they expect to gain some new personal and social skills. Their gatherings in the new collegiate environments enable them to interact with different people. Kim and McKay-Semmler (2013), and Lin (2011) focus on the importance of the university time for students to learn new things and to experience some positive changes in their personal and social lives. The results from this study confirmed that during their stay in the university campus the participants of this study had good opportunities to interact with students from other nationalities, and make friends and learn new skills through their interactions. These findings are supportive of the assertions of the above mentioned scholars.

Based on the results, most of the participants had daily or many times per week interactions with students from different countries and they had the most parts of their interpersonal communication with other international students. According to the findings from this study, most of the participants satisfied and had good levels of personal confidence during their interactions with students from other nationalities. Their daily interactions helped them to improve their personal confidence and increase the levels of their satisfaction from their social lives at the university campus. These findings are supportive of the arguments of Reed (2008) and Paulk (2008) who emphasize on the important effects of daily interactions among university students on their personal and social lives.

According to the qualitative results, most of the participants of this study had regular interpersonal communication with other students and their gathering in a multicultural university campus helped them to have more

opportunities to be involved in daily interactions with individuals from different countries. Based on the answers of the qualitative interviewees, their daily interactions helped them to gain some new skills, to improve the levels of their personal skills, and to have happier lives in the university campus. Based on their answers, the interviewees of this study considered their daily interactions as an important part of their university related lives.

As the previous works in the human communication filed mostly were conducted in the Western parts of the world, thus the results from this study and the findings from other studies on the same or similar issues in the Asian countries, especially Malaysia would be helpful for researches and educational organizations. Kim (2007) also focusing on the importance of the assessment of social and communicative norms and practices of different people by themselves. Moreover, the results from this study may add some new information in the literature based on the Malaysian context of communication. The results may also help researchers in the future to focus on the related issues and expand the information through their works.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Malaysia as an emerging hub of higher education would host thousands of international students from different countries in the future as well. Thus, assessment of the process of interactions among international student would remain as an important and attractive topic. Assessment of interactions among local and international students of Malaysia universities also would be interesting for researchers and readers. Researchers in the future can assess interactions among international undergraduate students, and also between local and international students of Malaysian universities. Researchers in the future can assess the ways and factors that affect interactions among international students, and between local and

international students of Malaysian universities. Moreover, assessment of the same or similar issues in the different parts of Malaysia and in the different Malaysian higher education institutions may have different outcomes and results. Thus, researchers can evaluate the characteristics of interpersonal communication among international or between local and internal students in the different Malaysian universities.

CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to assess the characteristics of interpersonal communication among international postgraduate students of a Malaysian public university. The results from this study confirmed that there were good opportunities in the Malaysian multicultural university campus for international students to have daily interactions with students from various nationalities, and to improve their personal skills through these interactions. Based on the results from this study, their settlement in a multicultural university campus with students from different countries helped the participants to have regular interactions with other international students, and to gain some new skills and information. Also, their daily interactions helped the participants to have happier lives in the university campus.

Based on the results from this study, the main advantages of international postgraduate students who were enrolled in a Malaysian public university were the experience of interactions with students from various nationalities, and the achievement of some information about different social and communicative norms through their daily interactions. Their information about different people and different communicative and social norms may help international students to be more successful in their professional lives. The results from this study may encourage university students to have more interactions with students from different nationalities.

However, more studies on the related issues may expand the information and enrich the literature.

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