

EVALUATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS FROM DIFFERENT NATIONALITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to evaluate the relationship between interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence among postgraduate students from different countries with different cultural backgrounds. A mixed method research design which includes both the quantitative and qualitative methods was applied to carry out this study. This study had 125 participants from 17 different countries. All participants of this study were postgraduate students and were living in a multicultural university campus. The results from this study confirmed that the levels of interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication among individuals from different nationalities who live in a diverse environment have close relationship and significantly affect one another. Based on the results of the study, the good level of interpersonal communication competence encourages and enables individuals to be involved in interactions with their peers from different backgrounds and gain some new social and cultural information. According to the results of this study, interactions among individuals from different backgrounds help them to improve both of their interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence. The results from this study may add some new and interesting information in the literature.

Keywords: Intercultural interactions; Interpersonal communication competence; Intercultural communication competence; Multicultural university campus; International students.

INTRODUCTION

Communication among individuals from different social and cultural backgrounds may help them to gain some new social skills and cultural information. The new perspectives in diverse educational and professional environments ask individuals to be prepared with some essential competence, skills and information to overcome the probable social and environmental challenges. According to Vevea (2011), White (1955) had defined competence as the main human force and inspiration to maestro the environment. Among other individuals who live in a new and diverse environment, international students who stay and study in modern multicultural collegiate environments are needier for the essential skills and information to survive and have better lives in the new environments. According to Kashima & Loh (2006), social ties among international students from different nationalities help them to be adjusted with the multicultural environments.

Sharing of personal and cultural information among international students and their relationships are beneficial for them (Huang, 2010).

As the field of intercultural communication came out from interpersonal communication, thus the progress of intercultural communication competence is connected to interpersonal communication competence (Vevea, 2011). In multicultural academic environments, both interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence help international students who have their different social, cultural and communicative norms to have successful interactions with their peers. Interpersonal communication is the fundamental aspect of communication among individuals that leads to the intergroup communication and intercultural communication perspectives. Moreover, interpersonal communication is the micro level for social connections and communication process (Kim, 2001; Kim, 2005), and interpersonal communication is the main and essential element of social life of an individual which leads to social contacts and relationships (Gao, 2011; Kim, 2001; Fogel, 1993). According to Vevea (2011), many scholars and researchers have introduced Hall (1959) as the father of the intercultural communication field.

According to Gudykunts (2002), intercultural communication refers to interactions between individuals who belong to dissimilar national cultures, and it has been limited into the direct and face-to-face setting of communication. As interpersonal communication and intercultural communication have connections, thus there might be some close relationships between interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence. The main attributes of interpersonal communication competence are the skills to interact, to listen, to understand, and to cooperate properly (Aidoo, 2012).

Moreover, the improvement of interpersonal communication competence among students increases their academic achievements (Mahoney, Cairns & Farmer, 2003). Kim (1991) defined intercultural communication competence as “the cognitive, affective, and operational adaptability of an individual’s internal system in all intercultural communication contexts.” Scholars and researchers have defined intercultural communication in different ways (Miller, 2005), and the ways that researchers define intercultural communication influence the study of intercultural communication competence (Arasaratnam and Doerfel, 2005). Intercultural communication is relatively and conceptually different from interpersonal communication in some ways, because of the existence of various and different culturally and sub-culturally fixed mechanisms of meaning, information, viewpoints, and values (Kim, 2010).

The previous works on communication among individuals from various social and cultural backgrounds have focused on either interpersonal communication competence or intercultural communication competence. Moreover, the previous works in interpersonal communication and intercultural communication among individuals from different backgrounds (e.g. Abdullah, 2008; Huang, 2010; Hu & Fan, 2011; Gao, 2011; Aidoo, 2012) were conducted in the western parts of the world and under the western communicative norms and settings. The works based on the western communicative norms and under the western environmental circumstances may not answer questions about interactions among individuals from different backgrounds in other parts of the world. Thus, this study aims to evaluate the relationship between interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence among postgraduate students from different nationalities in a public university.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT

A theory cannot be a particular behaviour for communication, but it is a conceptual group of viewpoints that enable us to understand the communicative behaviours, and to make it simple, a theory directs us to know daily experiences in our lives (Miller, 2005). As asserted by Kim (2010), concentration in the fundamental parts and micro levels of differences among people across cultures and societies maintain the main domain of theories and studies of intercultural interactions, where as linking it with the notion of interpersonal interactions inside the communication disciplines and regulations. Kim's (1991) theoretical conceptualization of intercultural communication competence emphasizes on the active and interactive circumstances of communication between at least two communicators. Kim stated that intercultural interactions must be situated inside an individual as the overall capability and capacity of the individual facilitate the process of interaction between individuals who belong to various cultures and also to contribute to assisting communication outcomes (Kim, 1991).

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

In the process of interpersonal communication and intercultural communication among individuals from various backgrounds, some skills and competence may enable them to conduct successful and productive interactions. As pointed out by Reed (2008), individuals who want to have fruitful and successful communication with other people, must be prepared with some essential skills and abilities that enable them to overcome the diversified social and cultural issues, predictable anxieties, and intergroup attitudes. It has also pointed out that intercultural competence has useful impacts on the social and professional relationships among people. For the first time, the term of interpersonal competence was used by Foote & Cottrell (1955), and they used it for the psychological health (Vevea, 2011). According to Coffey, Kamhawi, Fishwick and Henderson (2013), in the ever-growing multicultural environments, educational organizations and markets, intercultural understanding and sensitivity are among the important requirements to

improve human relationships. Besides the essential skills of intercultural communication, interpersonal communication competence as the basic element of interactions may also help students to interact successfully. Paulak (2008) asserted that, interpersonal communication competence is the main point of well performance across the different fields of human progress such as psychological, academic, relational and occupational developments.

Their personal abilities and efforts help individuals to improve their communicative skills and competence. As argued by Arasartnam & Doerfels (2005), an individual who is component in a particular setting of multicultural interaction process, it illustrate that he or she has some abilities that enable them to be involved in different situation of intercultural interactions competently. For the purpose of this study, intercultural communication refers to the direct interactions among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural communication refers to face-to-face communication between individuals who belong to different cultures (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Sarwari & Abdul Wahab, 2017). At the same time, besides their personal abilities and efforts, respect for cultural differences is essential for individuals to have successful interactions (Sarwari & Wahab, 2016). As argued by Schoenhuth (2005), among participants of intercultural communication processes, appreciation of the existing cultural diversities helps the communicators to achieve their goals. Moreover, existence of the similar levels of communication competence among individuals also helps them to have a productive communication. Different levels of communication competence among communicators objectively have negative effects on the equivalent status of communicators in intercultural communication (Baryshnikov, 2014).

Interpersonal communication is the first step for intercultural communication but they are not the same at all. Intercultural communication is relatively and conceptually different from interpersonal communication in some ways, because of existence of various and different culturally and sub-culturally fixed mechanism of meaning, information, viewpoints, and values (Kim, 2010). Studies on the intercultural communication field must be concerned about specific factors and elements influencing real intercultural interactions in life (Hu and Fan, 2010). The above mentioned statements and assertions of previous researchers and scholars focus on the relationship between interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence. But, still there are not enough evidences on mutual effects of these competences on each other.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design plays as the construction blueprint for the study, which links the research method, collection of the data, and data analyses (Bickman and Rog, 2009). A mixed method research design which includes quantitative and qualitative data sets was applied to conduct this study. As argued by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), the mixed method design of researches can involve the multiple structures of data collections. According to them, researchers use mixed methods as a procedure on integrating of quantitative and qualitative approaches and steps in a research project to answer the questions well. The quantitative method is projected to play the predominant role in this study and the qualitative data set will be used as the secondary data set to support the quantitative data.

Participants

The estimated population for this study was all 492 international postgraduate students of a Malaysian public university. As asserted by Henry (2009) the aimed population in a study would be a group of people in a manageable structure to make it possible for the researchers to present their findings in the reports. Thus, all international postgraduate students of a Malaysian public university who were living in the same campus were proposed to be the aimed populations of this study. This study had applied the convenience sampling method during the quantitative data collection procedure.

This study had 125 ($M = 171.8$, $SD = 13.6$) participants from postgraduate students of the above mentioned university. The participants belonged to 17 different countries. From all participants, 96 ($M = 182.3$, $SD = 15.9$) of them were male and 29 ($M = 191.6$, $SD = 15.2$) others female students. Also, from all of them 71 ($M = 183.1$, $SD = 16.1$) of them were master students and 54 ($M = 187.8$, $SD = 16.8$) others PhD students. Based on personal agreement of some participants of the study, 10 of them were interviewed for the qualitative section of this study.

Instruments

The Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ) of Buhrmester, Furman and Wittenberg (1988) which has 30 items and was used by Sherburne (2009) was adopted to evaluate interpersonal communication competence. This instrument is a well-established questionnaire and has been used by different researchers in the past (e. g. Michaeli, 2013; Parsons, 2008; Sherburne, 2009). The ICQ instrument measures interpersonal communication competence under five domains which are: Initiation; Negative Assertion; Disclosure; Emotional Support; Conflict Management. This instrument is design based on the Likert Scale with 5 options per item.

For the intercultural communication competence section, the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) of Chen and Starosta (2000) which has 24 items was adopted and used. Based on the literature, the ISS questionnaire was used by different researchers in the past (e.g. Lin, 2011; Gantt, 2014; Risner, 2011). The ISS instrument evaluates intercultural communication competence under five factors, which are: Interaction Engagement; Respect for Cultural Differences; Interaction Confidence; Interaction Enjoyment; Interaction Attentiveness, and was designed based on the Likert Scale with 5 options per item. The reliability test of SPSS applied to check the quantitative instruments and the Cronbach alpha score for all items together was .798. For the qualitative interviews, an interview protocol which included 8 open ended interview questions was used.

Data Collection Procedure

The quantitative data were collected directly from the participants by distribution of the questionnaires. After distribution of the questionnaires, enough time was given to the participants to choose the answers that mirror the level of their agreements with statements in the pre-prepared checklists in the questionnaire. The qualitative data was collected through the direct and audio-recorded interviews from the volunteer interviewees. Prior to the interviews and data collection, the printed copy of the interview protocol which includes the information about the research project, interview procedure and also the interview questions were given to them to read and reconfirm their agreement. Once the volunteer participant agreed to be interviewed, the interview was

conducted under the guidance of the interview protocol and all interviews were digitally audio-recorded.

Data Analysis Procedure

The quantitative and qualitative data sets were analyzed separately and the possible tests were applied based on the requirements of the data analyses procedure. To well answer the “right” questions, we must know which analyses are essential in the study (Bickman & Rog, 2009). The essential tests from the SPSS were applied to analyze the quantitative data set, and the qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed and reported in the text based on the research questions. First of all, the descriptive tests were applied for the quantitative data to find out the statistical frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviation scores. The bivariate correlation test was conducted to find out the probable correlations between items and variables, and the independent-samples t-test was used to compare the mean scores of variables and items to find out the probable significant differences between variables and main constructs of the survey data.

The qualitative interviews were transcribed and divided under the research themes and emerging themes from answers of the interviewees. For the qualitative analyses procedure, the constant and comparison method which was developed by Glasser & Strauss (1967) was used. Based on this method, three steps will be done to code and analyze the recorded interviews. The required steps are: transcribing the interviews, categorization of the data, and identifying and categorizing main themes to correspond the data (Sherburne, 2009). As stated by Marshall and Rossman (1999), researchers must carefully listen to the recorded interviews and read the data prior to the data analysis procedures. All of the digitally audio taped interviews were listened carefully and repeatedly, and after that all interviews were transcribed and categorized under the research questions and based on the salient comments of the interviewees. Once all interviews were transcribed, the data were read and reviewed line-by-line to find out the important and relevant ideas and answers from the participants. The salient views and comments from some interviewees are directly quoted and reported in the texts under the particular and related categories and open codes. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), a code refers to a label which covers a unit of data that derived from the responses and comments of participant.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Findings

The essential tests of SPSS were applied to analyze the quantitative data of this study. The descriptive test was applied to find out the frequencies, percentages and Mean/SD scores for variables and items. Based on the descriptive results, this study had 125 participants from 17 different countries as 96 (76.8%) male participants and 29 (23.2%) female participants. The data for both of interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication were analyzed separately. The *M/SD* score of interpersonal communication competence for all participants were 98.4/13.1, and for intercultural communication competence were 75.2/13.4. As the given Mean scores are above the average scores, thus it illustrates that the participants are relatively good in both interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence.

The independent-samples t-test was also applied to compare the mean scores of the main components of both of interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence. Therefore, the independent-samples t-test was

conducted to compare the mean scores of Initiation construct of interpersonal communication competence with the Interaction Engagement construct from intercultural communication competence. A significant difference was found as $t(124) = 61.382$, $P < .01$, and the mean score of Initiation was $M = 3.2$, $SD = .6$, and for Interaction engagement which was $M = 3.5$, $SD = .37$. The same test was applied to compare the mean scores between the Negative Assertion construct from interpersonal communication competence and Respect for Cultural Differences construct from intercultural communication competence, and a significant difference was found as $t(124) = 43.884$, $P < .01$. Mean score for Negative Assertion was $M = 3.0$, $SD = .77$ and for Cultural Differences $M = 2.8$, $SD = .36$. The mean scores for Disclosure construct of interpersonal communication competence and Interaction Confidence of intercultural communication competence were compared through independent-samples t-test, but no significant difference was found as $t(124) = 61.214$, $P < .05$. Also the mean score of Disclosure was higher as $M = 3.4$, $SD = .42$ than $M = 3.1$, $SD = .57$ Interaction Confidence. It means that the participants were more competent in disclosure rather than interaction confidence.

The independent-samples t-test also was applied to compare the mean scores of Emotional Support to Interaction Enjoyment and no significant difference was found as $t(124) = 75.07$, $p > .05$, mean score for Emotional Support $M = 3.78$, $SD = .63$, and for Interaction Enjoyment $M = 3.39$, $SD = .63$. The same test was conducted to compare the mean score of Conflict Management to Interaction Attentiveness and no significant difference was found as the result is $t(124) = 55.88$, $p > .05$, mean score for Conflict Management $M = 3.42$, $SD = .65$ and for Interaction Attentiveness $M = 3.5$, $SD = .53$. To find out correlations between items and variables, the bivariate correlation test was applied and based on the correlation results; there were some significant correlations between constructs and domains of interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence. Table 1 below illustrates the correlation test results.

Table 1: correlations between variable and main constructs of IPC and ICC

Initiation	Initiation	Negative assertion	Disclosure	Emotional support	Interaction engagement	Respect cultural differences
Negative assertion	.298					
Disclosure	.551	.324				
Emotional support	.355	.249	.480			
Conflict management	.359		.463	.612		
Interaction engagement Respect cultural differences				.210		
Interaction confidence	.294	.243	.463		.494	
Interaction enjoyment				-.266		.494
Interaction attentiveness					.275	

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative section of this study had 10 interviewees from 10 different countries. The interviewees were: 1) a female master student from China, 2) a male PhD student from Nigeria, 3) a female PhD student from Iran, 4) a male master student from Algeria, 5) a female PhD student from Pakistan, 6) a male PhD student from India, 7) a male PhD student from Bangladesh, 8) a male master student from Afghanistan, 9) a male PhD student from Sudan, and 10) a female PhD student from Indonesia. All interviewees of this study were staying and studying in the same campus. In the upcoming paragraphs, the given code for each participants based on their numbers in the above mentioned list will be used as P1 (for participant number 1).

The Relationship between Interpersonal Communication Competence, Intercultural Communication Competence and Daily Lives of the Participants

Based on the answers of the majority of all interviewees of this study, interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence play important role on their daily lives when they stay and study in a multicultural collegiate environment. According to them, the levels of their interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence enable them to have interactions with individuals from different countries, tackle the social and environmental issues and have happy lives when they are out of their home countries. For example, participant 1 told that “At first, when left my country as a degree student and joined this university, I had a tough time because of the lack of social skills and communication competence. As I come from a suburb area in China, I had not enough opportunity to interact with people from other nationalities and cultures, thus I faced many social problems in the first two years of my stay and study here, and gradually I learned how to tackle the issues and talk with other people. Now, as a master student and after four years of experience in a multicultural campus, I am good enough in both of interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence, have many friends from different countries and have a happy life in the campus”. Participant 3 also told that “As I am from Iran and have lived for a while in India, thus I have already experienced some interactions with people from different backgrounds and during my stay in India I have improved my interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence and I did not face any problem as a foreign student here in Malaysia”. The mentioned statements show the relationship between communication competence and the quality of lives of students from different countries in a multicultural environment.

The Relationship between Interpersonal Communication Competence and Intercultural Communication Competence

Based on the on answers of the vast majority of all interviewees of this study, the levels of their interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence have close relationships. Based on their answers, their good levels of interpersonal communication competence encourage and help them to have more intercultural communication and gain some new cultural information and intercultural communication skills. Also, their intercultural communication helps them to improve their interpersonal communication competence. As stated by participant 2 “I spent almost all of my school and university lives in hostel when I was in my country, and have learned how to interact with my peers and friends, thus I have good interpersonal

communication skills. But, I had no experience of intercultural communication for longer than few minutes, and fortunately my social face and personal experiences in interpersonal communication helped me to overcome all environmental challenges and learn how to be involved in intercultural communication as well. Through my interaction with other students, I have improved both my interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence. Participant 6 said that “For a while, I have tried to stay alone, study alone and do not be in contact with other students even from my own country [India], but during my stay I faced many problems and I got bored in the campus. Some friends helped me to start some communication with students from my own country and participate in their daily activities. These opportunities helped me to gain some interpersonal communication skills and be involved in interactions with students from other countries who were roommates and friends of my India colleagues”.

Their ideas were supported by participant 8 who said that “I am a social person and like to have talks and negotiations with other people, thus my social skills and personal willingness helped me to have daily communication with students from different countries”. Moreover, participant 10 said that “Our social lives and cultural norms have some similarities with the host people, but my stay with students from different countries in a campus helped me to learn many things and know how to interact with different people. At first, I had more interactions with the host people, but now my close friends are from other countries and mostly I interact with them”. These statements and answers illustrate the existence of close relationship between interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence and their important mutual effects on each other.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was conducted to evaluate the relationship between interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence among postgraduate students from different countries. Based on the assertions of scholars, interpersonal communication is the first step of interactions and social connections among individuals and intercultural communication also derived from interpersonal communication (Kim, 2001; Kim, 2005; Vevea, 2011). Thus, study of the relationship between interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence is important. The results from this study also confirmed the existence of a close relationship between interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence. Based on the results, good level of interpersonal communication competence enables and encourages individuals to have more intercultural interactions with other individuals from different backgrounds and their interactions help them to improve both of their interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence.

As argued by Kim (2010), interpersonal communication is different from intercultural communication in some ways, and the findings of this study are also supportive of this argument. Even though, this study found the existence of significant relationship between interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence. But, it also found that individuals could be good in interpersonal communication competence and have daily interpersonal communication with their own people, but still have not good level of intercultural communication competence because of the lack of their contacts and communication with people from

diverse backgrounds. At the same, good level of interpersonal communication competence plays the role of a positive catalyst among individuals to have more successful intercultural communication and gain some essential cultural information and intercultural skills.

The results from this study have illustrated that, individuals with good levels of interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence are successful on their daily lives in a multicultural environment, and are able to overcome the daily social and environmental challenges. These findings are supportive of the argument of Arasartnam & Doerfels (2005), as pointed out that individuals who have communication competence to conduct interaction in a diverse environment are able to overcome the different social and environmental challenges. Also, the findings from this study confirmed that stay and study in a multicultural collegiate environment is an important chance for individuals from different backgrounds to gain more social and cultural information, to improve their social skills and to be ready to overcome the probable social and environmental challenges.

The quantitative results of this study found some significant correlations between the main domains that evaluate both interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence. It means that, interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence have close relationship. Findings from the qualitative interviews of this study were also supportive of the quantitative results. Finally, the results from this study confirmed that interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence have close relationship and also have important mutual effects on each other. The results from this study may be interesting for scholars in the related fields and also researchers in the future. The results may also encourage university students to be involved in interactions with different people to improve their social and cultural skills and communication competence.

Recommendations

This study was conducted in an Asian collegiate environment and the same study in other parts of the world may bring some different results. This study focused on the relationship between interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence. Future researchers can evaluate the relationship between interpersonal communication competence and personal attitudes of individuals, and their personal attitudes with the levels of their intercultural communication competence. Evaluation of the relationship between interpersonal communication competence, intercultural communication competence and environmental factors may be an interesting issue as well.

CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to assess the relationship between interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence among postgraduate students from different nationalities. The results of this study confirmed the existence of a close relationship between the levels of interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence among the participants. Based on the results, their good levels of interpersonal communication competence helped the participants to have more successful communication with students from different

countries and their interactions helped them to improve both their interpersonal communication competence and intercultural communication competence. According to the findings of this study, in some cases individuals were good in interpersonal communication competence but still not good in intercultural communication competence because of the lack of their interactions with students from different social and cultural backgrounds. The results of this study may be interesting for future researchers and also scholars of the related fields. The results may also encourage university students to partake in daily communication with their peers from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds to improve their social skills and communication competence.

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