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Factors Influencing Interpersonal Interactions among Students from Different Nationalities Using English Language as the Primary Means of Their Daily Communication

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Abstract
This study evaluated factors influencing interpersonal communication among local and international students of a Malaysian public university. The embedded design of mixed methods was applied to conduct this study. This study had 220 participants from both local and international students of the mentioned university. Based on their agreements, 12 participants were interviewed to strengthen the survey data. Based on the results, the participants were using the English langue as the primary means of their daily interactions with their peers from different nationalities, and the levels of their English language proficiency and their daily interpersonal communication had mutual effects on each other. According to the results, around 80% of the participants had experienced some interactions with students from other nationalities at the university campus. Based on the results, their daily interactions helped the participants to improve their English language proficiency and to gain some new social and cultural information about different people.
Keywords: *collaborative learning, English language, English language proficiency, interpersonal communication.*

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Introduction

Communication and interactions have played a vital role in enabling humans and nations to shape the new world and achieve the so-called modern value and aspect of globalization. From all aspects of communication, interpersonal communication (IPC) is the key and essential value of contemporary life for all human beings. According to Chen (2022), people can improve their conversation abilities through conducting helpful interpersonal communication. To have proper and effective interpersonal communication, interpersonal communication competence (IPCC) and English language proficiency (ELP) are among the main requirements (Yamao & Sekiguchi, 2015; Yoshida, Yashiro & Suzuki, 2013). The primary means of education for international students at Malaysian public universities is the English language (MoHE, 2012). Thus, ELP is among the essential requirements for interactional students of Malaysian public universities to conduct proper interpersonal communication with their peers from other nationalities.

According to Kraiger and Kirkpatrick (2010), interpersonal communication competence is an essential predictor of success in business and professional achievements. Good levels of IPCC and ELP are also among the factors that enable students to have successful university-related and after university lives and find more employment opportunities (Lin, 2011; Sarwari, Abdul Wahab, Mt Said & Ashikin, 2018; Wilkinson, Morrow & Chou, 2008; Goh & Chan, 1993). Wade (2008) stated that daily interpersonal communication among students from different nationalities helps them to share their findings and knowledge. Moreover, the university environment is the first location for many people to achieve their aims, and experience different kinds of interactions in their lives. English language proficiency could influence daily interactions among international students from different nationalities at Malaysian public universities who use the English language as the primary means of their interactions (Sarwari & Abdul Wahab, 2018; Sarwari, Ibrahim & Ashikin, 2016). A good level of skills to interact with individuals from different nationalities may also help students to have more social and academic achievements at multicultural university campuses. However, according to Ding (2021), because of the lack of verbal interactions, students at Chinese universities mostly have higher structural and grammatical skills in the English language rather than higher communication skills. As argued by Lusting & Koester (2006), the ability to interact in different intercultural backgrounds is an ever more significant ability of everyday life.

Interpersonal communication is a key factor for students of higher education institutions for capacity building. According to Hargie (2021), it is clear that skillful interpersonal communication is essential to success in the professional and personal lives of individuals. According to Aidoo (2012), interpersonal communication skills help students to be more successful in their after-university careers. Interpersonal communication skills include the ability to communicate and interact, to motivate and influence, and also to be able to establish relationships based on trust, good attitudes, values and beliefs, and also transparency (Katz, 2003). However, local students of Malaysian universities may learn many things from interactions with their international counterparts and vice versa. But it is not easy for all Malaysian students to visit several foreign countries to achieve this goal. Thus, the presence of international students at Malaysian universities is a good chance for both Malaysian and international students to interact, gain new knowledge, and improve their communication skills. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate factors affecting interpersonal communication among local and international students of a Malaysian public university. The results from this study may be helpful for both researchers and policymakers in the future.

Theoretical Framework

This study is conducted under the theoretical guidance of the Contact Theory of Allport (1954). The contact theory, which is one of the leading intergroup and interpersonal contact theories, was developed and introduced by Allport (1954) in his "The Nature of Prejudice" book (Dovidio, Gaertner & Kawakami, 2003) and introduced the peaceful progression framework of communication. According to the Contact theory, the process of communication begins with the *sheer contact* that leads to *competition*, which paves the way for a*ccommodation* and, as the final step, reaches *assimilation*. According to the theory, interactions will bring positive outcomes under the four conditions, which are: 1), Equivalent rank in the situation, 2), Shared interests or aims, 3), Intergroup collaboration, and 4) Formal support (law, authorities, traditions, or environment).The theory became famous among strategy makers in the 1950s as the means for supporting cultural integration efforts among American people, especially, when the Supreme Court of the United States highlighted the benefits and importance of interracial contact in its famous decision on integration Brown v. Board Education (1954). The Contact theory became a leading hypothesis in providing the foundations for applicable plans for improving intergroup communication for more than five decades (Aidoo, 2012).

Moreover, Chickering and Reisser (1993) believe that the improvement of social contacts among university students is essential for their lives; because, when they stay in the university environment, they become members of a diverse and new community that requires them to communicate with the individuals from various backgrounds. Furthermore, Hamilton and Woodward-Kron (2010) focus on the importance of assessment of the relationship between language and communication. Yamao and Sekiguchi (2015) argued that language is the primary means of interaction among individuals. However, the English language is the main means of communications among local and international students at Malaysian universities (Sarwari & Abdul Wahab, 2018). Consideration of the proposed steps of the contact theory will make it clear that this theory can cover study of interpersonal communication in an academic environment.

Methodology

Participants

This study had 220 participants from both local and international students of a Malaysian public university, as local N = 110 and international N= 110. Of 220 participants, 147 of them were male, and 73 others were female. From the male participants of this study, 97 of them were international and 50 of them were Malaysians. Also, 60 of the female participants were local and 13 of them international students. According to the results, the *M*/*SD* score of local participants, 45.63/6.16, was higher than international participants' 41.75/6.66. Also the *M*/*SD* score of the female participants was more elevated than males, at 45.27/6.63 and 42.91/6.60 respectively. Local participants belonged to almost all states and ethnicities of Malaysia, and international participants were from 16 different nationalities with different cultural norms. Table 1 shows the frequencies and countries of international participants.

Tab.1. *frequencies of international participants based on their countries*

Country	Frequency	Country	Frequency
China	18	Libya	6
Indonesia	13	Nigeria	5
Iraq	13	Sudan	4
Yemen	13	Algeria	1
Afghanistan	10	Canada	1
Pakistan	9	Egypt	1
India	8	Iran	1
Bangladesh	6	Somalia	1

Research Design

An embedded design of mixed methods with the predominant role of the quantitative approach applied to conduct the current study. One of the classifications in mixed methods is embedded design, in which, for the primary data, a data set plays a secondary and supportive role in a study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). A survey through direct distribution of questionnaires was conducted to collect the quantitative data as the primary approach in this study and the interviews were done to enrich the data. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), the researchers apply this (embedded) method when needed to comprise the qualitative or the quantitative data on answering a question in a quantitative or qualitative study with a more significant number of participants. However, direct interviews could strengthen the findings. According to Light (2001), individual interviews offer remarkable richness and depth. The predominant method for this study was the quantitative method to enable the researcher to collect data from a large number of participants. The second process was the interviews to have direct views and assertions of some participants to strengthen the survey results.

Instruments

The main device of this study was the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire included demographic information, interpersonal communication competence, and factors affecting interpersonal communication. The quantitative instrument was designed based on Likert scale, and each item of the instrument had four options from 1(Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree) as structured check-boxes. As asserted by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), to collect quantitative data, the process might include the use of a structured checklist as well. A package of 12 open-ended interview questions also was prepared for the qualitative data collection. The qualitative data consists of information that is open-ended, and the researcher conducts the participants' interviews to collect it (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Before preparing the final instrument, researchers check the questionnaire by conducting a pilot test from a small number of participants (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). To check the reliability of the instruments, a pilot test applied before the process of data collection. The pilot test had 14 participants from both local and international students of the said university. Based on the results from the pilot study, Cronbach's alpha rating for the survey questionnaire was .743.

Data Collection Procedure

The quantitative data collected directly from both local and the international students of UMP. During the survey, questionnaires distributed randomly. Through a survey instrument, the

researchers collect the quantitative data and to deepen their survey results and they conduct interviews from a few of the participants of their survey (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

The qualitative data collected by conducting direct interviews with both local and international students of the university. From all participants of the quantitative survey, based on their agreements, 12 of them, including six Malaysians and six international students, were interviewed directly for the qualitative data, and all interviews were audio-taped. It is preferable to tape the discussion; because, it helps the researcher to have the recorded voices of the interviewees instead of thinking about what the interviewees said during the discussion (Slavin, 2007). At the same time, all interviews had done under a parcel of 12 open-ended interview questions. In a survey, mostly all participants are interviewed through the same questions (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005).

Findings
Quantitative Findings
According to the feedback given, from all 220 participants, 57.8% of them had already experienced some daily, many times per week or at least weekly IPC with students from different cultures and nationalities at the university campus. At the same time, 60.1% of them were able to understand most parts of the messages and conversations when talking with students of different nationalities. The primary purposes for the majority of local and international participants of this study were educational and social issues. Academic issues reported by 47.7% and social issues by 28.2% as their primary purposes for being involved in interactions with different people.

Moreover, of all participants, 85.4% of them agreed that their daily IPC helped them to improve the levels of their ELP. Almost all participants, 207 of them, were happy when they interacted with different people. The vast majority of the participants (78.2%) accepted that they had interactions with their classmates regardless of their countries and ethnicities. Of 220 participants, 197 of them admitted that their interactions at the UMP campus were beneficial for their private and public lives, and 51.8% of them reported lack of English language proficiency (ELP) as the leading cause for not being able to begin and continue IPC with people from other countries, ethnicities and cultures.

Qualitative Findings
From all 220 participants of this study, 12 of them interviewed for the qualitative data. Based on the demographic information, six interviewees were Malaysians and six others were from six different countries. All interviewees coded as below and the given codes will be mentioned in the results, as 1, MS1, a Master's Malay-Malaysian student; 2, MS2, a degree Malay-Malaysian student; 3, MS3, a degree Indian -Malaysian student; 4, MS4, a degree Indian-Malaysian student; 5, MS5, a degree Malay-Malaysian student, and 6, MS6, a senior degree Chinese-Malaysian student. And international interviewees as 1, IS1, a master's student from Afghanistan; 2, IS2, a Ph.D. student from India; 3, IS3, a Ph.D. student from Algeria; 4, IS4, a senior degree student from China; 5, IS5, a degree student from Yemen, and 6, IS6, a master's students from Nigeria.

Personal Communication Characteristics
According to the answers from the interviewees, all of them had some interpersonal communication with students from different nationalities, had the willingness to have and continue their daily interactions to increase their collaborative learning, and acknowledged the effects of the English language proficiency on the processes of their daily interactions. For example,

participant IS2 said that "I have a good level of interaction with international and Malaysian students, because my English language is good, and it helps me a lot during my stay and study [at the university]." Participant MS4 said that "My interpersonal communication with international students is quite good and I feel comfortable when interacting with them, but sometimes the levels of our English language proficiency and our different accents affect our daily interactions negatively." And participant IS6 said that "I have a lot of Malaysian classmates and we have too much interpersonal interaction, and always I contact them, and ask questions from any of them and mostly we interact to solve our academic issues and sometimes we also interact for social issues." Statements as mentioned earlier show the involvement of both local and international students of UMP in interpersonal communication, and also these assertions are supportive of the quantitative findings on the participation of students in interpersonal communication.

Statements of the participants also illustrated that their daily interpersonal communication with different people in the University environment had positive effects on their personal and academic lives. For example, participant IS4 asserted, "My involvement in IPC helped me a lot. At first, when I came here, I had many problems, I wasn't able to go to *Kuantan* city or ask a question from lecturer or classmate because of my lack of English language skills, but my interactions with local and international students helped me to solve the mentioned problems." And his statement was supported by views of IS2, as said, "My communication with local students helped me a lot. When I learn a few words from their language, it helps me when I go shopping, and also in the offices, I can ask them anything that I want." And "interactions with international students help me to learn some new things, and have good effects on my life" as pointed out by MS4. Participant MS5 said that "As we have different ideas and cultures, therefore, my communication with international students will help me to learn more things about their cultures and have collaborations with them." The mentioned view is supports the positive role of daily interactions among students in increasing teamwork among them.

Similarly, almost all participants of this study mentioned a lack of English language proficiency (ELP) as the main factor that affects the process of IPC among them negatively. As participant MS1 said that "The most important factor that has negative effects on our interactions is English language proficiency." Participants IS4 also said that "The English language is the main problem for us to interact successfully." Participant IS2 suggested that "To have better communication, international and Malaysian students must improve their English language proficiency and gain the essential communicative skills." According to this suggestion, students could be more successful in their interactions with different people by improving their language proficiency. The above mentioned qualitative results support the quantitative findings of this study.

Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate factors affecting interpersonal communication (IPC) among local and international students of a Malaysian public university. Based on the answers of the participants, the vast majority of both local and international students of the mentioned university had some experiences of daily interactions with their peers of different nationalities, cultures and ethnicities during their stay and study at the university. Based on the results, English language proficiency (ELP) was the main affecting factor of the process of interactions among the participants. According to the results from this study, almost all participants reported that their daily interactions positively affected their personal and academic lives.

Based on the results, their contacts and interactions with students from different nationalities helped the participants to gain some new social skills and cultural information, improve the levels of their ELP, and to have better educational achievements. Wade (2008), based on the results of a study on the influence of academic environment on the personal competence of individuals, asserted that the main effects of the presence of different people in the college environment would increase skills in interaction with people of other races, ages and diverse backgrounds, and it will bring diversified professional employees.

Moreover, the results from both quantitative and qualitative data confirmed that there were all opportunities available for the participants on the university campus to have interactions with their peers from different cultures, ethnicities and countries. At the same time, their good levels of English language proficiency, the availability of opportunities in the university campus, personal willingness of the participants to be involved in IPC with their peers, their eagerness to gain new cultural information and positive effects of their interactions on their personal and academic lives were among the main positive factors that affect the process of IPC among local and international students of the university. Based on both quantitative and qualitative results, all participants pointed out that the lack of ELP had the main adverse effect on their daily interactions. According to the qualitative interviews, the development of ELP levels among both Malaysian and international students would increase and improve the levels and quality of their IPC as well. However, most of the findings mentioned above are new and may be helpful for university students, university officials, and future researchers.

Conclusion

This study assessed factors affecting interpersonal communication (IPC) among local and international students of a Malaysian public university. The findings of this study confirmed that there have been enough opportunities at the university campus for students from different cultures and nationalities to be involved in IPC, and the levels of their English language proficiency (ELP) been identified as the main factor that affected daily interactions among the participants. The results illustrated that both local and international participants of this study already had some interactions with other students from different cultures and countries during their stay and study at the university campus. The findings from this study also illustrated that the involvement of both Malaysian and international students in IPC was beneficial for their public and private lives. As they gained some new cultural information, they also learned how to communicate with different people. The results from this study identified the lack of ELP as the main factor that affected the process of interactions among the participants. The results from this study may encourage university students to interact more with their peers from different cultures and nationalities. The mentioned results could help future researchers in their studies of related issues.

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