

# UTM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE ON INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION AND COMPETENCE

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## ABSTRACT

Most of the previous studies attempted to investigate intercultural communication competence (ICC) from the students' perspectives. Other studies were done on adaptation and adjustment reporting the experiences of expatriates in this regard. However, the current study is one of the few studies investigating adaptation on the light of intercultural communication. A detailed questionnaire with different sections is used in the current study to achieve its aims and objectives. The current study is systematic in terms that it uses the theory of cross-cultural adaptation as the theoretical framework to investigate the issues in hand. Three dimensions of the cross-cultural communication model are highlighted and investigated in this study namely: social communication, personal communications and predispositions. Using manual analysis, the study explores intercultural competence and adaptation experiences of international students.

**Key words:** Intercultural communication, intercultural competence, adaptation, international students.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In order to achieve an appropriate understanding of the issues of intercultural communication and competence, it would be fruitful to look at the human communication in general. Although, the concept of intercultural communication assumes that this communication happens with people from different cultural backgrounds, the core of this communication stays similar to the same kind of communication that takes place between people from the same culture. One of these similarities is the type of questions that we may raise to understand this kind of human communication such as investigating the reason for this communication, anticipating what might happen during this communication, and what can be done to influence and improve the outcome of this event.

The field of intercultural communication involves two important concepts or terms being the focus of this field namely: intercultural communication and intercultural competence. The former term has been defined by many researchers and authors like [Gudykunst (2003)] and [Kim (1998)] who referred to it as the face-to-face communication that takes place among people with different cultural

backgrounds. As for the latter, [Deardorff (2006)] included three main components which are the targeted knowledge, skills and an attitude stating that intercultural competence is the ability to reach these core components creating or leading to an appropriate and effective communication or behaviour in intercultural encounters. [Samovar & Porter (1993)] also supported that by saying that competent individual is the one who expresses skilful behaviours. It is important to mention that this behaviour is not necessary to be judged as competent in all contexts. It might be seen as competent in a certain context but not in another. [Spitzberg (2010)] also used the terms effective and appropriate communication in his definition being the target of intercultural competence. The current study is going to explore these two concepts from the students' perspectives through the use of questionnaires and in-depth interviews.

As for the process of adaptation, it is one of the central concerns of scholars and researchers in the field of intercultural competence. Due to the fact that adaptation is a controversial issue being an essential component or prerequisite to ICC, it would be fruitful to explore the types of adaptation

necessary at the various states of ICC provided by the developmental models. According to [Spitzberg & Changnon (2009)], it is recommended that the different types of adaptation at the various stages of development should be taken into consideration especially because of the developmental nature of adaptation.

As mentioned above, the current study explores the students' perspective of intercultural communication and competence. This is done through the use of a questionnaire to solicit their experiences in this regard. The participants of the current study are international students. To achieve the goal of the study, the questionnaire was distributed among them in a purposeful sampling.

The current study is adopting the theory of cross-cultural adaptation as the theoretical framework. It also highlights the model of cross-cultural adaptation models by [(Kim 1998)] with its six components. Out of these six dimensions of adaptation presented in this model, the current study is only investigating three namely: personal communication, social communication and predispositions. The students' intercultural competence and adaptation experiences are measured on the light of these dimensions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the studies done in the area of intercultural communication and competence tended to investigate these two concepts among populations where there is a mix between local and sojourners. In such places, communications are expected to take place between sojourners and local people and also between sojourners themselves. The majority of these places have been universities and tertiary educational institutions that have the advantage of hosting both local and international students.

Recently, certain issues and questions became the core of researchers' interest like the extent of students' engagement in this kind of communication and the nature of this communication in terms of its features and characteristics [Halualani, (2008)]. Thus, as a starting point to understand these questions and to have better insights, many studies were conducted by scholars and researchers mainly in order to solicit the participants' perceptions and experiences in this regard so that research can have better insights into the issue of intercultural communication.

An example for that would be the study by [Halualani, (2008)] that took place between 2002 and 2005. The

study aimed at investigating the concept of intercultural difference among student from different cultural backgrounds. The study used two research instrument namely questionnaires and in-depth interviews.

The researcher claims that the perspective and the construction of the intercultural interaction by students includes new factors that are not yet examined such as the amount of demographic diversity in the region and societal views of diversity. Therefore, the researcher claims that these factors might have an influence on intercultural interaction. Another interesting finding is when students reported that they do not remember whether their interaction is intercultural any more. The researcher provided two possible interpretations for this finding. One interpretation is that these interactions became neutralized and normal to the extent that the students no longer have the intention to change their mind and perception of their culturally different interactants. Another reason for that might be that students discovered that all interactions including the intercultural ones require the same skills including openness and efforts.

The study by [Dunne, (2009)] also aimed at exploring the local students'

construction of the cultural difference they encounter at their university through investigating their experiences and perspectives of such a difference. The study took place in at an Irish university and targeted Irish students being the locals. The study also looked at the various factors that may influence the intercultural conflict. The researcher concludes by stating the benefit of this study being able to improve intercultural competence in the university especially it is considered a multinational one and that leads to a better educational achievements and outcomes. The study also found that the construction of cultural difference is influenced by values and behaviours related to educational environment.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study is conducted at University Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and includes international postgraduate and undergraduate students. Looking at the interest of this study, UTM is seen as a rich environment that suits the needs and the application of this study. Being a multicultural university with students from different parts of the world coming from different cultures and ethnicities, UTM provides the perfect setting for such a cultural study.

The scope of the current study focuses on international students studying at UTM. These students are going to receive questionnaires soliciting there perspectives on intercultural competence and adaptation through the different parts of the questionnaire.

The researcher visited the library and only approached undergraduates or postgraduates international students there. The ones who expressed their intention to participate in the research were given questionnaires. In this sense, the sampling is deemed as a non-probability sampling since not everybody in the library had the same opportunity to join the research. This kind of sampling is also known as the non-random sampling due to the fact that it does not follow a random selection of the participants.

Basically, the questionnaire contains four main sections: A, B, C and D. These four sections were designed to meet the requirements of the current research and provide a rich data that can be utilized to get the best possible results.

Section A was to collect demographic information, section B was on intercultural communication and competence while Section C was about cross-cultural adaptation.

Section D asked students to provide their contact details for future communication.

The questionnaire was distributed among 120 international postgraduate and undergraduate students at the main library, UTM. 60 % of these respondents were males and the other 40% were females. Most of the participants were from the engineering faculty and the rest were from the faculties of education and business administration.

After collecting the questionnaire, the researcher started the analysis phase using the manual analysis of data. The analysis resulted in percentages reflecting the students' perceptions on the two main issues of this paper: intercultural competence and cross-cultural adaptation.

## 5. DISCUSSION

As the current study used Deardorff's (2006) method to assess students' definitions, the results reported different opinions and definitions between students and those derived by experts in Deardorff's assessment. Out of the seven definitions provided in the questionnaire, three definitions received the highest agreement among students including the one that received the highest consensus among

scholars (refer to figure 1). The definition with the highest agreement was the *'Ability to achieve one's goals to some degree through constructive interaction in an intercultural context'* with 89% agreement among students. The other one was *'Behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations based on one's knowledge, skills, and motivation'* scoring 82%. The third highest definition in terms of agreement was *'Transformational process toward enlightened global citizenship that involves intercultural adroitness (behavioral aspect focusing on communication skills), intercultural awareness (cognitive aspect of understanding cultural differences), and intercultural sensitivity (focus on positive emotion toward cultural difference) with 75%.*

Regarding the components of intercultural competence ( refer to Figure 2), the item on *'Cognitive flexibility—ability to switch frames from etic to emic and back again'* received the highest agreement among students with 96% followed by *'flexibility' and 'the understanding of role and impact of culture and the impact of situational, social, and historical contexts involved'* scoring 92% each. The item received the least level of agreement among

students was number 10 stating that *'Deep knowledge and understanding of culture (one's own and others')* that only received 57% by students.

The difference between students' and experts' opinions might be explained by the fact that students are the ones in the field who interact and feel the very nature of this communication. The rating by students is also supported by their responses on the open ended questions that were loaded with these terms and concepts that they agreed on like 'respect', 'the understanding of culture', 'interaction with locals' and many others.

Concerning cross cultural adaptation and the three dimensions under investigation (refer to Figure 3); the results revealed that the most powerful component among these three was the personal communication which received the highest rating by students with 65% followed by predispositions with 56% agreement among student. The third dimension this paper highlights called 'Social Communication' received the least agreement by students score only 53%. This proves that the different dimensions investigated below have different impacts on cross-cultural adaptation. This result is also supported by that of the open-ended question that asked

students about the most important factor in facilitating their adaptation. Most of the students mentioned the learning and understanding the host culture is one of the most important factors and that can be done through interacting with locals and moving around exploring the history of the host culture. Most of them mentioned that personal characteristics like respect and being humble are very important requirements of adapting to the host country.

When students were asked to evaluate their adaptation in Malaysia, their answers varied and all of them provided explanations for that. For those whose evaluations were above 70%, cultural similarity between their original culture and the host culture was number one factor for their high level of adaptation along with other reasons like having local friends and living in a friendly environment. For those whose evaluations were below 50% claimed that language is the biggest barrier for them to adapt as well the cultural difference between their original cultures and the Malaysian culture. They also mentioned that the lack of programs by the University for gathering international with local students is one of the reasons for the low level of adaptation. Therefore, the current

study is recommending that such programs to be taken into consideration by the university.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study is among the few efforts to investigate cross-cultural adaptation connected with intercultural communication and competence. It provides insights into the students' perspectives on intercultural competence and adaptation. The study revealed that the students' perspective of intercultural competence is different from that of experts. Also, the components of cultural competence agreed on by students were reported. Moreover, the cross-cultural adaptation of students was measured and the results of their experiences within the three dimensions were reported. The study recommends more intercultural programs to be provided by the university where international and local students can gather and make friendships as interaction considered an important factor for a good adaptation.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Agreement among students regarding the definitions of ICC

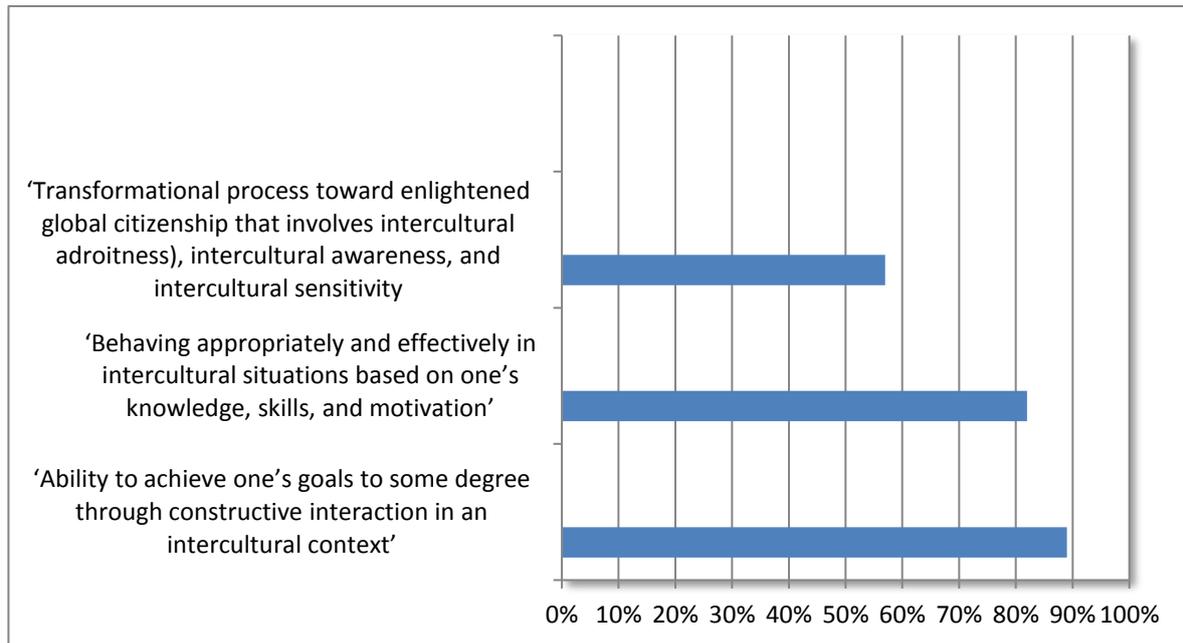


Figure 2: Agreement among students regarding the components of ICC

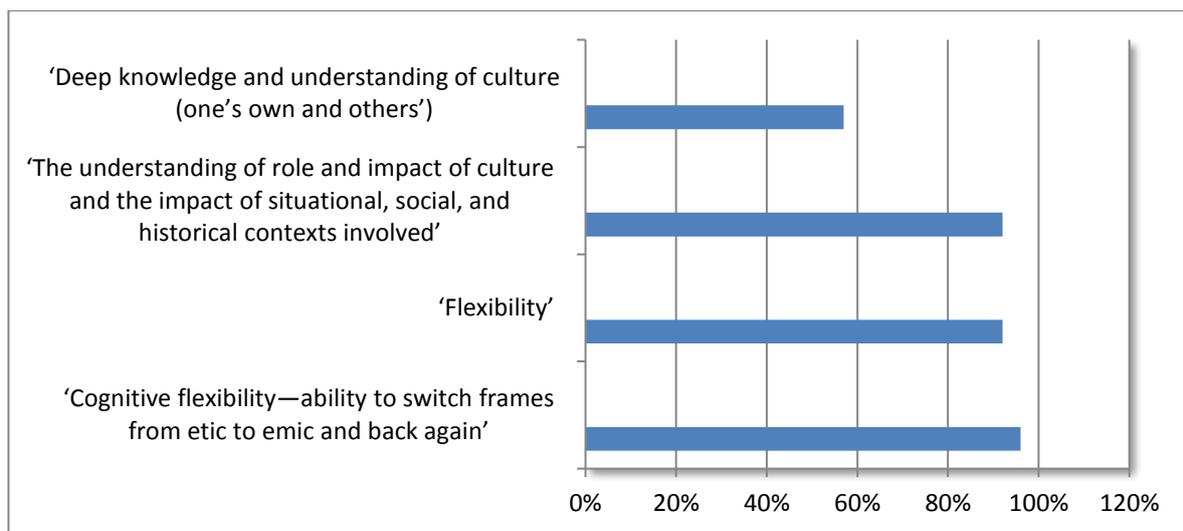


Figure 3: The three dimensions of Cross-cultural adaptation experienced by the student

