Experiencing the Other: Students' Construal of Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

The demographic, technological, economic and peace imperatives have created a world in which our interactions are dominated by cultural differences and our ability to understand 'the other'. Intercultural competence is thus a necessary skill for individuals to build positive communication with others. This paper explores students' construal of intercultural competence. Specifically, we highlight their experiences interacting with the other and their understanding of intercultural competence. Using a qualitative approach, focus group interviews were conducted with the selected undergraduate students from three universities in Northern Malaysia. The findings indicate three important themes: attitude, cultural knowledge and language skills. The paper contributes to specific factors needed of intercultural competence within the Malaysian context.

Keywords: Intercultural competence; The Other; Intercultural communication; Western perspective; Malaysian perspective.

1. Introduction

As one lives within an increased multicultural population, one's ability to relate to 'the other' has become crucial in the globalized world. The presence of the other implies that intercultural competence has become a necessity and is no longer an option in today's global world. Thus, there arises the need for universities to help students acquire intercultural competence. This specific communication skill is not only needed for students to relate to the other in an appropriate and effective manner, it is also important for their employability in today's job market.

It is undeniable that there are numerous models of intercultural competence. Yet, the academic literature indicated that most current knowledge on intercultural competence is dominated by the Western perspective (Yep et al., 2014). Notwithstanding the fact that intercultural competence is a theoretical construct, researchers must recognize that the application of this construct within very specific cultural context matters immensely (AArasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff, 2017). As such, this study explores the Malaysian students' experiences with the other and their understanding of intercultural competence. This probing is useful to explore the specific factors of intercultural competence that resemble student intercultural experiences in the Malaysian context.

2. Defining Intercultural Competence

The literature indicated that there is a plethora of choices that guides scholars' definition of intercultural competence (Spitzberg et al., 2009) Despite the various terminologies and definitions, scholars indicated that the fundamental conception of intercultural competence is centered on the notions of appropriateness and effectiveness (Bennett and Deardorff, 2009), (Liu, 2012). Effectiveness refers to the ability to achieve one's goals in a particular exchange and appropriateness considers the ability to behave in a manner that is acceptable to the other person (AArasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff, 2017). In addition to the notions of effectiveness and appropriateness, Spitzberg et al. (2009) review of over 20 intercultural competence models indicated that the most common components that constitute intercultural competence are motivation, knowledge, and skills.

Given the plethora of choices in the literature, we found Deardorff's (Deardorff, 2004), (Deardorff, 2006) study is more useful in providing a foundational understanding of intercultural competence. Her study attempts to provide the key components of intercultural competence as an agreed upon definition by experts in the intercultural field in the United States. Based on the data generated from the intercultural experts through a Delphi study, intercultural competence is defined as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2004).

The following provides further understanding on the three foundational components of intercultural competence proposed by Deardorff (2004), Deardorff (2006):

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(i) Attitude is viewed as foundational to one's development of knowledge and skills. It requires an individual to acquire the attitudes of openness, respect (valuing other cultures), and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity).

(ii) Knowledge is gained through one's ability to acquire cultural self-awareness, cultural specific information, cultural knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness.

(iii) Skills require the ability to process the knowledge about one's culture and other cultures. To acquire skills, an individual must be able to engage in communicative behaviors that include observing, listening, evaluating, interpreting, and relating with others.

Since we wanted to situate our probing within the context of students in Malaysian universities, we contend that Deardorff's (Deardorff, 2004), (Deardorff, 2006) definition of intercultural competence is useful for our conceptual framework. More importantly, Deardorff's work also addresses development of student intercultural competence in the U.S. However, Deardorff cautioned that her study represents a Western and mostly U.S. centric view of intercultural competence that tends to highlight issuesrelevant to the western context. In a similar vein, other scholars cautioned that while intercultural competence is a theoretical construct, the application of this construct in specific cultural context must be taken into consideration (AArasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff, 2017).This contention suggests that in addition to the general factors of intercultural competence, there may be particular factors that vary among cultures.For example, whilethe issue of language is less significant in the Western context, a current study in the Malaysian context indicates that language is a crucial factor (Deardorff, 2006), (Dalib *et al.*, 2017). We feel more studies are needed to enrich our understanding given Tamam's (Tamam, 2015) remark on the underdeveloped perspectives of intercultural competence in Malaysia. Since Deardorff's (Deardorff, 2004), (Deardorff, 2006) work provides foundational conception of intercultural competence, a revisit of such conception is useful within our study.

3. Exploring Intercultural Competence

We contend that the complex concept of intercultural competence can be examined by exploring students' experiences with 'the other'. When considering how 'the other' can be conceptualized, we foundGudykunst and Kim's (Gudykunst and Kim, 2003) explanation of intercultural communication more useful. Gudykunst and Kim asserted that intercultural communication is often characterized by one's experiences with people from other cultures whom the person sees as 'strangers'. Accordingly, most writers viewed intercultural communication as encounters of oneself with the other (e.g., (Chai *et al.*, 2006), (Harun, 2007), (Takahara, 2013). The other is essentialized through description of impersonal and unfamiliar experiences that the self has with somebody from other cultures who does not belong to his or her cultural group (Yep *et al.,* 2014). Taking such a proposition, we admit it is intricate to articulate the other because it requires students to describe their experiences with those who are very different from themselves. In the context of intercultural communication, the other may include students' experiences with those coming from different cultural groups such as social class, gender, ethnicity or nationality.

Looking into the current scenario in many Malaysian campuses, the influx of foreign students has created Malaysian campuses as an interesting setting for diverse people to interact with one another. We believe that the presence of foreign studentsprovides opportunities for Malaysian students to engage in interaction with the formerand learn what it means to be competent in their social interaction. This face-to-face interaction was what we hoped to explore in our study. Specifically, we wanted to probe how our Malaysian students who carry Malaysian cultural norms narrate their encounters with the other (i.e. their foreign counterpart who is ruled by his/her own cultural norms). In line with this, the following research question guide our inquiry:

RQ: How do Malaysian students construe intercultural competence out of their experiences?

4. Methodology
4.1. Method of Data Collection

Focus group interviews were used in the study. The focus groups enabled us to look for multiple realities of intercultural competence as participants gather, discuss and collaborate in constructing meaning of their experiences (Hollander, 2010) Focus groups have also enabled us explore the 'shared' fund of experiences as participants engage in dialogue with one another and elaborate points raised by other members in the group (Jasper, 1996)

This collaborative process of meaning construction provides the means for adding richer descriptions on the complexity of intercultural competence (Bradbury-Jones *et al.*, 2008).We constructed the interview protocol based on the three foundational components (i.e. attitude, knowledge, and skills) of intercultural competence proposed by Deardorff (Deardorff, 2006), (Deardorff, 2009). Taking the components, we explored how participants make sense of their experience with the other and their view on intercultural competence.

We used open-ended protocols to elicit as much information as possible from the participants. Each focus group interview ran between 40 to 90 minutes. The interview included questions that assist participants to share their accounts, explanations, and stories illustrating their experiences with the other and their perspective on intercultural competence. We recorded the interview using a digital audio recorder upon participants' consent. We constructed the interview questions based on the components of intercultural competence suggested by Deardorff (Deardorff, 2006). During the interviews, we asked participants to provide some understanding of their ethnic/cultural backgrounds. Then, we asked each participant to reflect on their experiences interacting with the other and share the situations that provide some insights on intercultural competence to the group. Every participant was given an equal opportunity for his or her story to be heard with minimal interruptions. Other members of the group added valuable inputs as each

participant's story unfolds. Such interactive discussion adds more information related to the shared constructed meanings of intercultural competence by the participants (Sorrell and Redmond, 1995)

4.2. Participants and Research Setting

Participants in this study were students from three public universities in the northern region of Malaysia. Given that are three known public universities in the northern region, three focus groups were recruited to represent each university. Since focus group participants are selected based on certain characteristics that relate to the topic under study (Cresswell, 2007), (Cresswell, 2009) we obtained the respondents on these particular criteria that include (i) being able to communicate ideas and experiences with others, (Yep *et al.*) having non-Malaysian friends and (iii) having had the experience interacting with the other, in particular, the foreign students. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants by the assistance of an instructor who taught the undergraduate students in the study setting

Participants for each focus group comprised of students of different ethnicities. We contacted the students to arrange for a meeting, and set the place and time to have the focus group discussion. The session of each focus group lasted between 60 to 90 minutes which was both taped and video recorded after receiving the participants' consent. Each focus group only had between one to two moderators with four to six participants. A total of fifteen students narrated their experiences in the focus group interviews held at their own campuses. Given that data saturation is not about reaching a certain number per se, but about the depth of the data (Fusch and Ness, 2015) this sample enables us to reach exhaustive analysis of the interview data (Cresswell, 2009).

English was used as the primary language for the focus group interviews. However, some participants felt comfortable to speak in Malay language. In such cases, we proceeded with the preferred language during the interviews. We transcribed their discussion following each session. A majority of the students were in their senior years while a few were in the fourth and fifth year of study. The student profile indicates the background information including gender, year and discipline of study, and ethnicity (Table 1).

Table-1. Focus group interviews – participant information

Participant (P)	Ethnicity	Program of study	Semester	Gender
Focus Group 1(FG1)				
P1	Malay	Communication	8	Male
P2	Malay	Communication	7	Male
P3	Chinese	Social Science	5	Female
P4	Chinese	Communication	7	Female
P5	Malay	Architecture	5	Female
P6	Chinese	Biology	5	Male
Focus Group 2(FG2)				
P7	Malay	Communication	6	Male
P8	Chinese	Communication	10	Male
P9	Malay	Communication	10	Female
P10	Indian	Communication	4	Female
P11	Malay	Communication	4	Female
Focus Group 3(FG3)				
P12	Malay	New Media Communication	6	Female
P13	Malay	New Media Communication	6	Female
P14	Malay	New Media Communication	6	Female
P15	Malay	New MEdia Communication	4	Male

4.3 Data Analysis

The focus group interview data were analysed using the thematic analysis technique (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following the aims of the study, a conceptual thematic analysis was employed by providing description of the relationship between the themes identified. The unit of analysis for this study was sequence of sentences or a complete dialogue related to feelings, attitudes, and reactions of the participants' experiences. Given that we utilized Deardorff's (Deardorff, 2006), (Deardorff, 2009)foundational components of intercultural competence in the construction of our interview protocol, accordingly, the components were used as predetermined themes for data analysis. Nonetheless, given our aim to revisit Deardorff's conception and the nature of qualitative research that explores subjectivity of human experience (Cresswell, 2007), (Cresswell, 2009), we also approach students' experiences with an openness to emergent themes that are significant to the context of our study. The NVivo 10 qualitative data software assisted in sorting out the data.

5. Findings

The findings of the study lead us to observe three major themes; (i) *attitude* (Yep *et al.*)*cultural knowledge* and (iii) *language ability.* The themes are, however, inter-related, which suggest that as the participants interact and adapt to the others' presence, they become more conscious of their own culture and manner.

Theme 1: *Attitude.* Deardorff (Deardorff, 2006), (Deardorff, 2009) remarked that attitude includes openness, respect (valuing other cultures), and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity). The finding supports Deardorff's work in which it indicates that participants retold their perspectives on being open to other cultures. Interestingly, we

observed a rather complex nature of attitude that seem to weave closely with the knowledge component. In view of this, the attitude of openness must consider participants' consciousness on the interpretation of their own and others' behaviours that are influenced by culture (cultural self-awareness). This leads participants to develop some sensitivities on different interpretations of 'appropriate' communicative behaviours, which to some extent, moot participants to think of not only the attitude of openness, but also tolerating with ambiguity when relating with the others. For example, P5 (FG2) observes that holding hands among Nigerian male friends is considered as "normal" given the Nigerian cultural norms. However, similar social behavior is viewed as "inappropriate" given that it is uncommon among Malaysian males to be seen holding hands with one another in the public sphere. The participants take such experience as an opportunity for them to learn cultural differences and make necessary adjustments:

P5: I started to interact with Nigerians when I joined "silat" (a form of martial arts) in this campus. I observed when they are walking together, they like to hold hands. There was one time my Nigerian friend tried to hold my hand.

R: So how do you react to it?

P5: At first, I felt awkward and laughed. I was quite shocked why he was like that…. then I asked him…. he told me that it is their culture…they like to show some bonding with one another … like [they are]   close friends…

P1: We have to look at cultural differences

R: Okay…

P1: Like what we heard just now from him (P5) … talking about holding hands. We [Malaysians] feel awkward because we do not know other cultures… and we try to learn theirs. We can ask what is their culture and share our differences. We can build relationship. Then we can have positive perceptions towards others.

Theme 2*: Cultural knowledge.* As Deardorff (Deardorff, 2006), (Deardorff, 2009) asserted that knowledge is gained through one's ability to acquire cultural self-awareness; our finding shows that participants gained cultural self-awareness through the process of understanding their own cultural 'mindset' (norms) vis-à-vis the other through their experiences. Interestingly, participants' understanding seems to indicate their experience with a specific culture. Consider the following excerpt of P4-FG1 who seemed to gather some characteristics of her Japanese counterpart that include, among others, their cultural 'mind set' on punctuality. Such specific knowledge on cultural expectations enables P4 to not only make necessary adjustments within the local campus space, but also when she goes to Japan.

P4: When I first joined, I think, like…I understand their… how to say…

Researcher: Mind set?

P4: Yes… mind set… so I tend to adjust myself to their mind set. Like, to learn about Japanese, you must know that they are very on time. In Malaysia, I have interacted with some Japanese who came here and then when I went to Japan, I know them... I understand their mind set. So I learn how to be more Japanese. (laughing) To be more punctual, discipline…

Theme 3: *Language skills.*Deardorff (Deardorff, 2006), (Deardorff, 2009) remarked that skills require the ability of an individual to process cultural knowledge that helps him or her relate with others. Our finding shows that the component of skills is rather specific. In view of this, participants pointed out the need for language skills. Language skillsseem to derive from participants' awareness on the significant role of language as a communicative tool that enables smooth interaction to take place. Noticing some challenges to interact with the other as it is associated with cultural differences, participants remarked that having language skills (primarily English)does not only enable understanding of the exchanged messages in a specific interaction. It also enables them to connecteffectively with the other. It is telling that mastering linguistic skills does not necessarily mean interculturally competent for the participants. Rather, appropriate language use (that is, what is said corresponds with the other's ability to speak in English) determines commmunication effectiveness (that is, both parties being satisfied) in their interactions.

P3: I have a lot of challenges… trying to talk with my friends from Somali ... Especially English. We have different accent right? So when we talk about the assignment, for example, in research method, it is difficult to understand their accent. That's one of the challenges...

P6: I think it depends, firstly, when you be involved with international students, our first language will be English. That is our first language. So regardless where are you from, the first language will be English and it depends how it flows. Sometimes we know like for example, we communicate with those from Japan, okay Japanese like they are lack of English. Their English is not as good as people from the Europe. So we have to go a little bit down, lower our level of English.

6. Discussion

The theme of *attitude* addresses participants' consciousness of self and other through acknowledging the fact that one's communicative behaviour about the world is very much influenced by his/her cultural perspective. This consciousness echoes that a person's way of communicating reflects a person's culture and embodied experiences (Gao, 2006), (Yu and Sharifian, 2015). It is telling that the consciousness of self and other seems to weave together with the knowledge component of intercultural competence which requires an individual to also have cultural self-awareness of his or her own and other cultures (Deardorff, 2006). This awareness moves beyond the surface knowledge of culture (such as food and greetings) and requires an individual to understand the other's worldviews (Deardorff, 2006). The finding indicates that cultural self-awareness is a process that progresses through participants' ability to learn about self and the other through the lens of their cultural perspectives. Such experience provides valuable lessons that move participants into having an informed understanding about the other. In addition,

we also observed that their response indicates requisite attitude for gaining awareness since they remarked being adaptive to how the other behave. It is telling that while previous studies tend to highlight foreigner's competence by being adaptive to the host culture (Ahmad *et al.*, 2017),the Malaysian (local) students were willing to adjust their behaviours. This finding can be attributed to the Malaysian context. Having been exposed to many ethnic members within the society, Malaysian students do not really encounter difficulties in adjusting to the other. Adjusting and accommodating have always been the rules of the social interaction game. Thus far, Malaysians have never encountered outright display of hatred towards each other as all attempt to embrace unity and move towards achieving national integration.

The theme of *cultural knowledge* draws attention to participants' experiences in learning about cultural mind-set of self and the other. In view of this, learning cultural mind-set leads participants to make sense of the behaviours of others as well as their own in relation to the others. Since culturally accepted behaviours are deeply internalized through re-occurring regularities in terms of values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that form expectations of what can be accepted within social groups (McDaniel *et al.*, 2012; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009); participants began to learn how such regularities that they usually experience within their own cultural group may be shared or may not be shared with the others. This finding supports the literature that indicated learning as a necessary starting point for a deeper cultural knowledge (Bowe and Martin, 2007; Chang, 2007; King *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, the process of learning culturally accepted behaviours also reflects the notion of appropriateness that forms the core conception of intercultural competence. As appropriateness is a question of rules of interaction (Deardorff, 2006;2009), it was evident in the finding that participants acknowledged the importance of acknowledging varied rules of behaviours that culture prescribes when they interact with the other. This finding also confirms the literature that proposed judgment of appropriateness is culture general since it is about social coordination that helps people to establish shared communication meanings of their behaviours (Yum, 2012).

The theme of *language skills* draws attention to participants' consciousness on the important role of language in their interaction. In this sense, the interlocutors need to make their communication intelligible that requires their ability to understand the other's speech in their interaction (Nelson and Kachru, 1982). Participants' ways of accommodating language contribute to an understanding of the interaction process where it involves speakers of different cultures. In view of this, the skills needed include the ability of the interlocutors to not only listen intently, but also fine-tune their ways of speaking in the interactions. This study provides evidence on language awareness in intercultural competence (AArasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff, 2017; Dalib *et al.*, 2017; Gao, 2006). This understanding seems to be very significant in our study setting given one's competency to speak appropriate language (for instance, English) is crucial for intercultural participants. More importantly, given that English is not native to the majority of local and international students in the campus, the need to relate to others through a language is worth noting in our study. The study demonstrates that language ability connotes not only the participants' ability to being aware of the other's language competency (Ting-Toomey, 2015), but also to be flexible in their interaction by using appropriate language accommodation strategies. The finding suggests that intercultural competence takes into account the ability to see what goes in interaction. This requires participants to use their language skills appropriately to achieve satisfaction of their interactions.

7. Conclusion

The themes interrelate with one another and reveal participants' understanding of intercultural competence. Communication effectiveness for the participants is about understanding not only the self, but also the other (Chen and Starosta, 2003).Meanwhile, appropriateness is about the participants' ability to relate with the other by being adaptable in their interactions. In general, the study supports previous work that intercultural competence requires individuals to develop attitude, knowledge and skills to achieve appropriate and effective communication (Deardorff, 2006;2009). Nonetheless, the study offers some specificities needed for intercultural competence in the Malaysian context. In view of this, significant factors such as language must be considered in one's interaction with the other.

Several recommendations can be considered for future researchers. Future researchers may use ethnography to observe people in their real life intercultural interactions Findings from such research will be beneficial to delineate competent acts in real situations. We also recommend that future researchers study how individuals interact with the other through the social media, for instance, on Facebook and *WhatsApp*. Such an inquiry is useful to transform our understanding of intercultural competence within the virtual realms where diverse speakers interact.

Acknowledgments

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