

Intercultural Communication Competence and Acculturation Dialectics: A Study on International Students in a Private University in Malaysia

Malissa Maria Mahmud^{1*} and Wong Shiau Foong²

¹Centre for English Language Studies, Sunway University, No. 5, Jalan Universiti, Bandar Sunway, 47500 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.

²Centre for American Education, Sunway University, No. 5, Jalan Universiti, Bandar Sunway, 47500 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in between both authors. Author MMM designed the study, wrote the protocol, managed the literature searches, wrote the first draft of the manuscript, read and approved the final manuscript. WSF managed the analyses of the study.

Article Information

Editor(s):

(1) Dr. Suleyman Goksoy, University of Duzce, Turkey.

Reviewers:

(1) Fatimah Salwa Abd. Hadi, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia.

(2) Anonymous, India.

(3) António Calha, Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre, Portugal.

Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/54858>

Received 10 December 2019

Accepted 20 February 2020

Published 03 March 2020

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

The demand for higher education institutions to internationalize their practices is an indication of rapid globalization and transformation processes, contributing to change the of existing education system landscape. To be competitive globally, many universities open their doors to international students to fashion diversity to university's settings, which in turns enriches and enhances university's experiences for students. However, cross-cultural adjustment for international students can be challenging. Numerous researches have established that it is more susceptible for the international students to create their own circle and be detached from the local community; consequently, leads to social and cultural disassociation from host countries. Various studies reported that intercultural communication competence (ICC) is one of the exogenous factors for adaptation to exist. Thus, this study is aimed to probe the perceptions of international students towards the perceived nuances of communication competence, acculturation attitude and language acculturation. These established dimensions were measured by adapting Berry's Acculturation

*Corresponding author: E-mail: malissam@sunway.edu.my;

Framework (1997). The results revealed that the acculturation strategies employed by the students in acquainting to the host culture have amplified their intercultural communication competence; hence, making them to be more culturally sensitive. Nonetheless, only 25% ($N=3$) of the participants were categorised as highly competent/ competent, suggesting that there are other contributing factors to language acculturation, as the notion of ICC is a profoundly incongruent and complex concept. The domain of inquiry could potentially contribute to the modelling of social programmes for educational institutions in Malaysia to increase the value of cross-cultural mobility's significance for international students' successful integration in the new environment.

Keywords: Perception; intercultural communication competence; language acculturation; attitude; international students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Geographical mobility in the past few decades has contributed to the substantial growth of students enrolling into universities abroad. For the past decade, the proliferation of both public and private educational institutions has positioned Malaysia as one of the frontrunners of educational hub, drawing more and more international students to the country [1,2]. The transformative strategy mandated by the Malaysian government has led to a large exodus of international students to the country, seeking and discovering new life experiences. The enrolment of international students in the Malaysian's higher educational institutions (HEIs) has significantly expanded and it was documented that in 2013, the international student's populations grew to 117,833 [3]. The widespread admittance of international students necessitates the needs for the involved HEIs in Malaysia to recognize the imperative tenets to promote and foster intercultural discourses and spaces, considering the unique multicultural elements stemming from the three major ethnic groups; Malay, Chinese and Indian. Though such phenomena have prompted a growing number of studies to explore the acculturation strategies of international students to the host culture [4,5,6,7,8].

However, these international students in Malaysia commonly face multifaceted struggles, having to adjust to the new university setting which often times is akin to issues associated with unfamiliar learning context, language and communication constraints as well as new culture. Mahmud [9] argued to the extent of how communication proficiency of students with their overall academic performance are interconnected. Predominantly, international students experience high uncertainty caused by cultural variances [10]. For example, accommodating and coping with unfamiliar

language and accent of the host country. Unlike what is commonly known, Mahmud and Wong [11] discovered that one of the attributes of a language, such as accent, play a critical role in the formation and categorization of one's cultural identity, in which the accent that was the most favored was also the most difficult to understand.

Byram stated that the *savoir of engager* is when individuals possess the awareness imperative in which acceptance of cultural diversity is acknowledged albeit different. Besides, the discourse concerning effective communication in intercultural contexts has acquired much interest in recent cross-cultural research [12,13,14,15,16]. Mahmud and Wong [17] advocate the idea of how social and communication skills are equally important to acquire intercultural competence; consequently, lessen the feeling of uncertainty and elucidate the exact challenges encountered to concoct a mechanism of facilitation for a smooth transition to the university setting. In the same vein, Ng [18] stressed the importance of numerous encounters with the locals that would lead to adapting to the host country; nonetheless, intercultural communication competence is argued as one of the key factors for the circumstance to subsist. With the background laid, the aim of this study is to examine the perceptions of international students towards the significance of perceived (*self-assessed*) intercultural communication competence and acculturation attitudes in Malaysia by adapting Berry's Acculturation Framework [19]. Simultaneously, the concept of language acculturation, coined by Ng [18] was applied to investigate if the international students are acculturated by conforming to mainstream language of the host country.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the recent years, UNESCO reported that Malaysia has been recognized and

acknowledged as one of the top 10 countries for international students to pursue their post-secondary education. The emergent and increased of monetary support from the government has prompted the international enrolment to multiply tremendously; hence, situates Malaysia as an education hub in Southeast Asia. With numerous varieties of both public and private for quality higher education institutions along with affordable living cost and multi-ethnic environments, has made Malaysia as an excellent option. However, it has been reported that international students in Malaysia face numerous challenges; for instance, adjustments to academic matter, language use, social contexts, financial management, religion variant and, personal life [20]. A study was conducted at the University of Technology (UTM), Malaysia to probe on the problems faced by international postgraduate students and the findings indicated that lack of social and recreational activities on campus and as well as curriculum and teaching issues; namely, the heavily accented Malay pronunciation employed by the lecturers are amongst the prevalent conundrums [21].

The upsurge trend amongst many higher education institutions (HEIs) is to create meaningful learning outcomes in which the applicability and transferability of the attained skills are evident to real world. These skills are imperative for college graduates to face capricious and professional demands especially in multinational organizations. Popov et al. [22] stated that 'the ability to work effectively in culturally heterogeneous groups should be an integral part of a student's competence' (p. 314). Escudeiro [23] and Valthaty, Kuo & Schwartzberg [24] corroborated similar sentiment that culturally diverse environment is crucial to promote communication skills at an intercultural level. At this juncture, numerous scholarly studies indicated that international students found language and communication to be one of the major constraints and inhibiting factors to successful learning [25,26,27,28]. Furthermore, evidence has led to prove that international students are able to cope better with their academic struggles and feel that they are a part of the in-group when contacts and interactions exist with domestic students which in turn augment experiences of studying abroad [29], [30,31]. In particular, much research highlights that issues faced by international students are typically allied to language and communication impediments concomitant to a myriad of cultural

barriers which may instigate indignations towards their self-concept [32,33,34]. Moreover, transitioning and adapting into a culturally diverse environment requires communication competence [35]. Predominantly, this brings about a multitude of challenges to the international students, entailing language usage such as linguistic accommodation, active listening, stylistic variation, and negotiation of terms [36].

Adjusting and acclimatizing to unfamiliar culture and environment can be challenging. Generally, the initial adjustment process is experienced differently by individuals as acculturative stress varies [37]. The compelling differences may be attributed to how well individuals adapt to a new culture. Besides, varying mediating factors influence and shape the experiences of cultural adaptation process that contribute to the levels of intercultural competence individually [38]. In this context, when students possess a sense of self-awareness, they are more motivated to learn about other culture, consequent to the sense of steadiness and improved self-esteem. Thus, more perceptible towards changes. Wan et al. [38] assert that adaptation is a transitional process in which students learn to overcome psychological distress and learn to make the necessary adjustment to the challenges that they encounter. In other words, flexibility to accustom and adapt in an obscure circumstance and concurrently maintain an open mind can foster intercultural competence. Profusion of existing theory substantiate these two factors as one of the main ingredients for intercultural communication competence to ensue. Adler [39] (as cited in Dinges [40]) noted that flexibility in the notion of the multicultural individual who is in perpetual shift. Dinges [40] wrote that Bochner [41] discussed about the concept of cognitive flexibility, whereas Gudykunst, Hammer and Wiseman [42] (as cited in Dinges [40]) notated it as being able to hold open-mindedness when confronted with new or often times peculiar ideas as opposed to their own. Ting-Toomey & Dorjee [43] further criticised the ways in which some authors have loaned extensive ideas and paradigms from the field of interpersonal competence; for instance, "social identity membership phenomenon, intergroup attitudes, group vitality, communication accommodation, and the dynamics of intergroup dialogue"; instead, they further suggested that both members; sojourners/ immigrants and host nationals to be "present in the moment, meta-cognition awareness, affective attunement"

(p. 503). One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether the mediating factors discussed earlier should be eliminated in the equation? The assumption is, adopting the supposition has overlaid a new and fascinating idea in the research of intercultural communication competence; therefore, surmising the notion of adaptive individuals who are able to consciously adapt and attune in any given intercultural context.

Further to the factors, there is an interesting exposition of a significant link between students' multicultural experience and their socio-cultural adaptation. This positive relationship is said to develop and cultivate when students interact and form relationship with those from the host culture [44]. Numerous researches mentioned that possessing competency in intercultural communication and in the language of the host country is imperative to gratify not only social needs but also practical needs, so much so that it coaxes a sense of happiness which is extremely vital for the adaptation process [45,46,47]. Through interaction with host nationals, students obtain social support, language proficiency and become familiar with the host society customs and values [48]. To reiterate similar credence, a study done by Hendrickson et al. [49] and Gist-Mackey, Wiley & Erba [50], in which commissioned social connectedness scale and existing theoretical strands, suggesting socializing with the locals plays an important role as social support. Therefore, international students who maintain varying relationships with the locals are socially more connected and satisfied. Nonetheless, it is argued that an important factor to socializing and forming relationship with the locals is self-confidence in using the language of the host country that evidently shapes acculturation. Juxtaposing confidence in speaking the second language is said to be more vital than the true ability of linguistic competence, resulting in better psychological adjustment [51]. Parrish & Linder-VanBerschoot [52] indicate that culture learning is a situation where foreigners learn new things, culture and skill in order to cope and grow in a new environment. Increased knowledge and awareness in turn enrich students' life in university wherein learning about a culture is a way of adapting to a new environment. At this juncture, knowledge about other culture normalizes a sense of steadiness and improved self-esteem [53]. Byram [54] further ascertained that competent intercultural communicators demonstrate a sense of inquisitiveness and

openness to embrace and negotiate different cultural meanings in which compels detachment from their status quo to permit the recreation of new reality adjacent to the present norms. Thus, the discussion so far suggests that these intercultural aptitudes are regarded as requisite to discern the nexus of knowledge, awareness and attitude as well as competency in intercultural environment.

Fig. 1 displays four quadrants of acculturation strategies delineated by Berry [19], showcasing the integration, assimilation, separation/segregation as well as marginalization. The integration strategy quadrant exemplifies an indication of ardent emphasis towards own culture as well as host's culture, assimilation strategy quadrant illustrates a stronger inclination towards the host's culture, separation strategy quadrant on the other hand shows formidable orientation towards own culture and finally, marginalization strategy quadrant exhibits weak orientation to both cultures. Berry [19] further expounded that communication strategies utilised by individuals demonstrate dispositions which coerce them to lean towards a specific category. At this juncture, mediating variables for instance; age, gender, status, education, locus and etc. simultaneously contribute to the distribution of categories; thus, the differing acculturation strategies adopted by individuals [55]. Delving beyond the circumstance, Phinney et al. [56] indicated (in reference to Berry's model) that acculturation process does not impose for any dichotomizing to exist; instead, it is experienced at varying levels, means and contexts. This evidently shows that the model is flexible to be adopted and adapted in the different contexts. International students which can also be classified as sojourners generally strive to hold on to their ethnic values and at the same time adapt to the mainstream culture of the host country. This condition resonates with integration strategy quadrant as expounded by [19].

Fig. 2 illustrates the components of intercultural communication in Byram's model [54]. Intercultural Communication Competence's model by Byram [54] consists of five *savoirs*, including attitudes, knowledge, interpreting and relating skills, discovery and interaction skills as well as critical cultural awareness. The knowledge *savoir* is the ability to be able to understand the backgrounds of self and others' cultures. Interpreting and relating skills are the ability to understand, explain and associate

things related to discourses, events or documents from other culture. Discovery and interaction skills are the ability in gaining new knowledge and information, communicate and socialize with others about a culture that is different from own self. Attitude is the reaction presented by an individual in responding to an intercultural environment while learning about one's culture. Critical intercultural awareness is the ability to critically evaluate the explicit criteria for instance, perspective, practices, and beliefs in

one's own and other cultures or countries. The intercultural communication competence (ICC) of an individual demonstrates the ability of the individual to be able to adapt to an environment of new cultures other than own self. To be able to survive in this challenging world, it is important for us to have the capability to adjust ourselves to be more flexible towards other cultures [57]. As mentioned by Byram [54], one has to be competent in each savoir stated above in order to be intercultural competence.

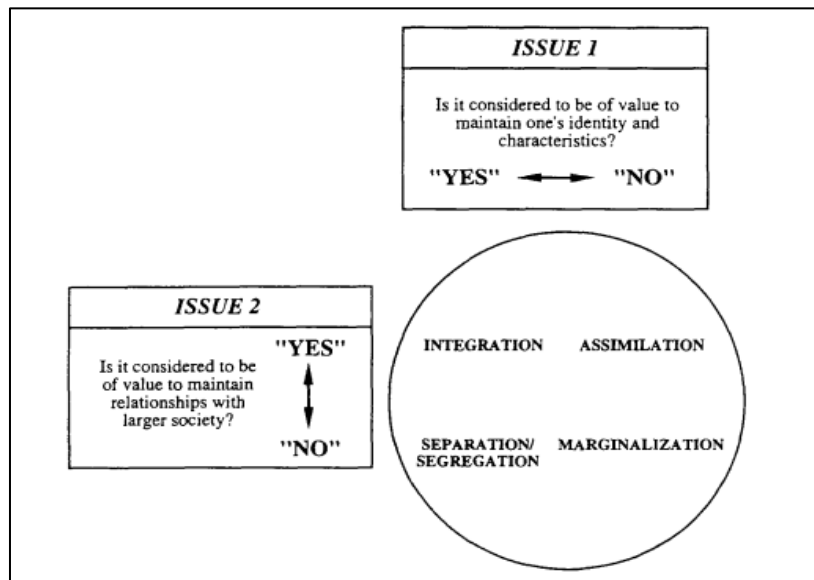


Fig. 1. Acculturation Strategies [19]

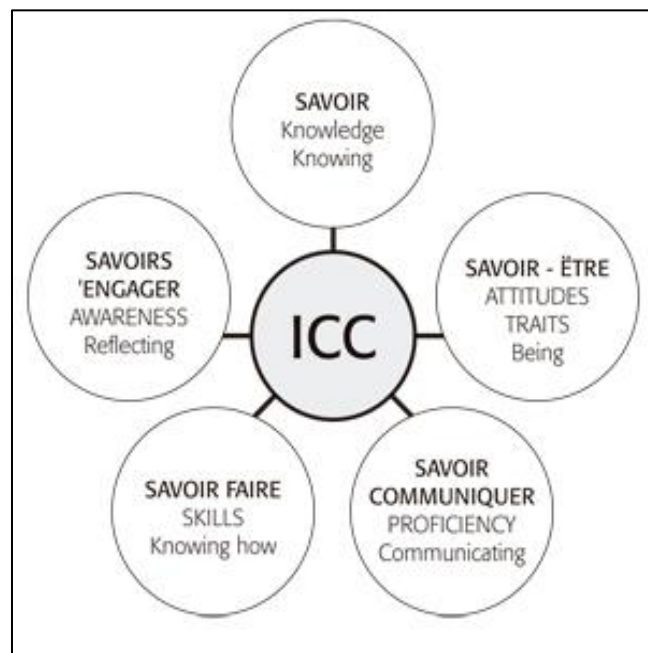


Fig. 2. Components of Intercultural Communication [54]

The acculturation process experienced by the international students in adapting to different cultures in another country has linked to changes in daily behaviour. According to Berry [58], acculturation is a complicated process that lead to changes on different levels including individual, family and cultural. However, engagement and involvement of the students to the different culture has great impact on the acculturation experience encountered by the students in the host country. Language barrier is one of the biggest challenges that influences the acculturation experience. According to Leong [59], it leads to miscommunication and misunderstandings as well as the inability to form friendships. Low proficiency level in mainstream language may affect the communication and interaction skills, which in addition, leading to cultural misunderstanding, making one becomes less confident and more isolated in socializing with others. Thus, the elucidation of the stated concepts and theories, implicating the circumstances of the intended objective, this study elected Berry's as well as Byram's models to be adapted in designing the instruments. Thus, demystifying the perceptions of international students towards the significance of intercultural communication competence and acculturation attitudes, and investigating whether the students are acculturated by conforming to mainstream language of the host country is a crucial step in convalencing a more customized learning environment for international students.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The survey data were collected by employing a stratified random sampling. A total of 42 international students participated in this study, which made up approximately 50% of the international students' population in Center for American Education, Sunway University. Of the 42 respondents, there were slightly more males; 55%, than females; 45%. From the 42 international students, 12 were purposively selected to answer five situational questions. The selection of the 12 students (January/ May, 2015 semester) was based on the duration of their stay in Malaysia which was a minimum of 3 months, suggesting that an on-going acculturative process had already been in place.

Considering the multidimensional perspectives of acculturation, the employment of both quantitative and qualitative was deemed apt. The instruments; a survey questionnaire and situational questions were created by

conceptualizing Byram's Intercultural Communication Competence Model [54], Berry's Acculturation Model [19] as well as from the literature. All ten items in the scale were revised in accordance to the validity and reliability wherein a pilot study was conducted prior to the dispersal of the survey and administration of the interview. Any items which yielded insignificant value, implying redundancy were discarded. Both the notions of perceived intercultural communication competence and acculturation attitudes avowed by international students were assessed with five items respectively, probing on the essential domain of acculturation experience and strategies. The survey consisted of two parts; A and B. Part A necessitated the respondents to provide their age and the country of origin. Part B comprised of 10 Likert-scale statements in which the responses scale was anchored from 1 - 5 in the order of strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree respectively. A sample item from the survey questionnaire, "I feel it is essential to promote communication skills in a culturally diverse environment" corresponds to one of the ICC Model by Byram [54], which is the Proficiency/ Communicating savoir.

Typically, sojourners attain sociolinguistics competencies and appropriateness; a set of skills and aptitude to interpret social meanings which governs and influences their linguistics variations [60]. Fused with the theoretical framework on measurements of acculturation from both adapted frameworks, it is hypothesized that an acquisition of colloquial competencies would have intercepted after a certain duration in the host country in which sociolinguistic competence exists; thus, exerting and possessing some evidence of assimilation and integration. To explore and further measure the embraced acculturative aptitude by the respondents, open-ended questions consisted of five situational questions linking to the Malaysian sociolinguistics competencies and appropriateness were employed. In this instance, common Malaysian slangs or cultural loading (Mesolect (Colloquial); "mamak" (a food stall serving Indian Muslim delicacies), "diamlah" (shut – up), "bojio" - /bo: 'dʒio:/ (Hokkien word which is made up of two words – "Bo" and "Jio". Bo means "No" and Jio means invite; so, coalescing both together - never invite), "kaotim" - (Hokkien word which means finish or to get something done) as well as situations related to the typical communicative behaviors embraced by predominantly Malaysian were used to design

the questions. Furthermore, the lexical choices were determined apt based on the corresponding semantic fields allied to the “loanwords, compound blends and loan translations into Malaysian English” [61]. Each situational question is adapted to reflect both models by Berry [19] and Byram [54] utilized in this study and is worth 2 points or 1 point or 0 point for each correct or partially correct or incorrect response respectively. A sample question from the situational questions, “How do you place your order at a restaurant in Malaysia using some of the common words/ phrases typically used by your Malaysian friends?” parallels to one of Acculturation Strategies [19] the adaptation outcomes. The coalesced findings from both quantitative and qualitative can be utilized to offer imperative insights and suggestions about the existing international students’ adaptation attitudes in Malaysia.

Diagram 1 above shows the step by step procedure of how the study was done. By conceptualizing Byram’s Intercultural Communication Competence Model [54], Berry’s Acculturation Model [19] as well as from the existing literature, the survey and situational questions were designed to focus on probing the intercultural communication competence and acculturation attitudes amongst the participants.

4. RESULTS

Illustrations of the findings from this study are juxtaposed into two parts; quantitative and qualitative findings. Table 1 illustrates the results for the perceived intercultural communication competence and acculturation attitudes from the quantitative data, Table 2 and Table 3 exemplify the results for the qualitative data, wherein the language acculturation and sociolinguistic competencies and competence level are depicted.

Diagram 2 shows the 19 countries of where the respondents are from. Majority were from Bangladesh and Pakistan with 21.4% and 14.3% respectively. Indonesian and Nigerian each constituted 11.90%. Another 4.8% were Indian and Maldivian respectively. The rest of the participants were from America, Yemen, Kenya, Netherlands, Somali, Tanzanian, Zambia and countries in Asia.

Table 1 illustrates the opinions of the participants on their perceived communication skills and acculturation attitudes. It is noteworthy to mention that majority of the participants felt studying abroad helps them in developing communication skills and that it is essential to promote communication skills in a culturally

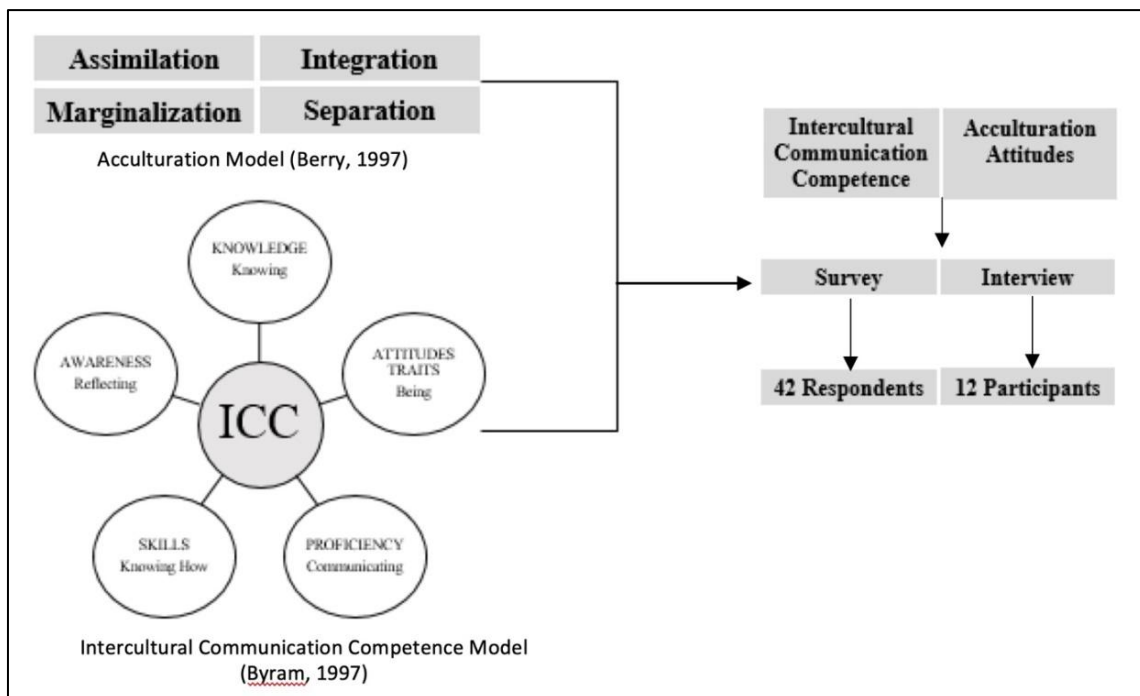


Diagram 1. Research Framework

Table 1. Perceived communication competence and acculturation attitudes

No	Items	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1	I believe there should be a specific mandatory requirement for language proficiency in order for international students to acquire admission.	5	11.9	14	33.3	23	54.8
2	I feel studying abroad helps students develop intercultural communication skills.	0	0.0	5	11.9	37	88.1
3	I feel it is essential to promote intercultural communication skills in a culturally diverse environment.	0	0.0	7	16.7	35	83.3
4	I possess enhanced knowledge of cultural assumptions that support communication that enable me to avoid miscommunication in a cross-cultural communication context.	3	7.1	11	26.2	28	66.7
5	I feel that having a low language proficiency level would result in a negative impression about oneself.	11	26.2	10	23.8	21	50.0
6	I believe being exposed to Malaysian culture is necessary to prevent from getting into cultural shock.	7	16.7	11	26.2	24	57.1
7	I believe that as an international student, I need to acquire enough knowledge about Malaysian cultures to know appropriate approaches in order to socialize better.	2	4.8	12	28.6	28	66.7
8	I expose myself more to Malaysian culture by observing the locals' interactions with each other and try to be a part of the interaction so that I can have that sense of familiarity with their culture.	4	9.5	11	26.2	27	64.3
9	I read, watch videos and ask the locals about the culture to help me learn more and broaden my knowledge about Malaysian culture.	6	14.3	13	31.0	23	54.8
10	I adapt better with the environment when I learn about the basic knowledge about Malaysian cultures.	6	14.3	10	23.8	26	61.9

Table 2. Language acculturation and sociolinguistic competencies

No	Situational Questions	PA	PB	PC	PD	PE	PF	PG	PH	PI	PJ	PK	PL
1	You mentioned to one of your Malaysian friends about a movie you watched to which he/ she responded with a phrase, " bojio ". What do you think he/ she mean?	1	N/A	N/A	0	1	0	2	1	2	N/A	0	2
2	You were laughing loudly while watching a movie to which one of your Malaysian friends responded with a phrase, " Diamlah! ". How would you respond to the situation/ phrase?	1	1	1	0	N/A	0	0	1	2	0	2	2
3	At the hawker's stall/ " mamak ", how do your Malaysian friends call the server?	1	0	2	0	2	N/A	0	0	2	0	1	0
4	You asked one of your Malaysian groupmates about the assignment he/ she was supposed to edit to which he/ she responded with a phrase, " Kaotim ". How would you respond situation/ phrase?	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	0	2
5	How do you place your order at a restaurant in Malaysia using some of the common words/ phrases typically used by your Malaysian friends?	2	N/A	1	1	N/A	0	1	0	2	N/A	0	0
Total Score		7	2	5	2	4	1	5	4	9	1	3	6

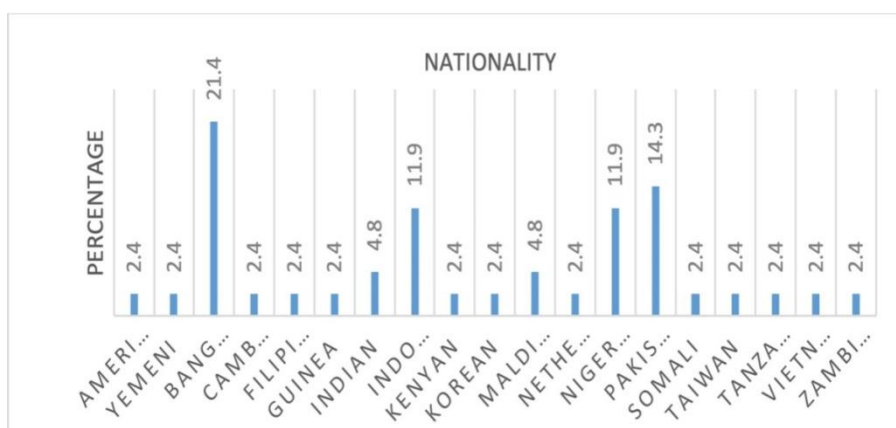


Diagram 2. Respondents' nationality

diverse environment, with the total agreement of 88.1% and 83.3% respectively. Meanwhile, 66.7% of the participants believed that as an international student, it is a necessity to acquire enough knowledge about Malaysian cultures; hence familiarization and awareness of the appropriate approaches to socialize better. They also agreed that by possessing enhanced knowledge of cultural assumptions that support communication, it enables them to avoid miscommunication in a cross-cultural communication context, which also constituted 66.7% of the participants. In addition, 64.3% of the participants agreed that they expose themselves more to Malaysian culture by observing the locals' interactions with each other and try to be a part of the interaction so that they can have that sense of familiarity with the culture. Of all the responses, 61.9% of them believe that they adapt better with the environment when they learn about the basic knowledge about Malaysian cultures.

Table 2 displays the scores obtained by the participants; PA, PB, PC, PD, PE, PF, PG, PH, PI, PJ, PK and, PL based on their responses of the five situational questions. Table 3 shows the sociolinguistic competency level categorized based on the range of scores obtained from the correct, incorrect and blank responses of the 12 participants. The scores range from 0 to 2; zero (0) being incorrect, one (1) being partially correct, and two (2) being correct. Participants who did not give any response for the interview questions are recorded as no answer (N/A), and likewise with incorrect answer, the score is counted as zero (0). The accumulated or total score of each participant would show their sociolinguistic competency level based on their perception on acculturation. The participants were categorized into three different competency levels grounded

on their accumulated score. The full score allocated for all five situational questions is 10. Thus, it is reckoned that the mean/ median score is 5 which is the middle distribution of the total score. The lowest score (0 - 4) is equivalent to *Not Competent*, the highest score (8 to 10), would be equivalent to *Competent* and scores in between is considered as *Averagely Competent*. There were a total of 3 participants (25%) categorized as highly competent. Meanwhile, 33.3% and 41.7% of the participants were categorized as averagely competent and not competent respectively. Participant I (PI) scored 9 out of 10, the highest amongst all the participants. Followed by Participant A (PA) and L (PL) who scored 7 and 6 respectively. Participants F (PF) and J (PJ) each scored 1 point.

Table 3. Competency level according to range of scores

Range of scores	Competency level
10 - 8	Highly Competent
7 - 6	Competent
5 - 4	Average
3 - 0	Not Competent

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined the perceptions of international students towards the significance of the perceived intercultural communication competence and acculturation aptitude of the international students in a Malaysian private university. The analysed data from the survey indicated that majority of the participants agreed that it is important to possess and obtain the knowledge of other cultures so that intercultural communication skills are honed. The finding echoes similar insights indicated in [62,63,64].

The participants agreed that studying abroad affords an opportunity to develop intercultural communication skills. In a recent research done by Barker [65] and Shafaei & Razak [66] found that pursuing higher education in a foreign country helps in developing cross-cultural adaptation. This suggests that acculturation aptitude is more apparent amongst those who have had the exposure and experience of studying abroad. Doucerain [67], posits that positive cultural orientation facilitates second language acquisition. The generated findings also shed some light on the significance of exposing and immersing to Malaysian culture by observing and interacting with the locals to attain a sense of cultural familiarity. Similar sentiment is shared by Volet & Ang [68], that the existence of cultural variability and diversity in a university setting frames an ideal intercultural learning space. The physical proximity with the local permits cross-cultural intersubjective interactions which impels plural characterizations and elements of intercultural competence. Highlighting a work done by Berry et al. [69], young individuals adjust and adapt themselves conjecturing five intercultural tenets which comprise of the language application as well as proficiency, resonating the original four acculturation strategies developed by Berry [19]. The intercultural tenets are profoundly essential, indicating a more in-depth means of acculturation useful for future discovery.

The qualitative yields suggest that there is a blending in the context of not only culture, but also language amongst the participants. It is observed that the participants with high level of sociolinguistic competency retorted correctly to different situation given. This corroborated with previous findings by Swami [70] and Kristen [71] that language proficiency contributes to better assimilation. It was also indicated by Zhang and Zhou [72] that students with limitations in English language proficiency find it more challenging to pursue different aspects of their lives. At this juncture, English functions as a catalyst to for communication avenue to exist with the locals and simultaneously permits and influences students' disposition to adapt to the host culture [73]. On the other hand, Jia et al. [74] discovered that the language learning of the mainstream language varies by different levels of acculturation. Being competent in sociolinguistic could function as a form of indicator that the participants are somehow able to adjust and display a positive attitude in adaptation towards a new culture and subsequently promote

acculturation. However, in order to be interculturally and sociolinguistically competent, interaction and relationship with people from the host culture is important. In recent research, an interesting finding by Alencar [75], wherein there is a strong relationship between the education level, language skills together with their perceptions of the host country's news and the use of different types of news media for assimilating and integrating into the host society; thus, suggests that participants with higher education level and proficiency in English tend to be more advantaged in accessing information than those with poor language skills. Approaching from the viewpoint of social psychology, individuals in the midst transitioning from their own culture to host culture may not possess social and interpersonal skills to immerse themselves to the host culture [76]. Consequently, this lack of skills may lead to challenges in dealing with social encounters. Bochner [77] hypothesized that to be able to diffuse and ease the struggles and challenges, language acculturation is deemed necessary to bargain and contextualize the pragmatics of the newly adapted culture.

6. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCHES

Malaysia is a melting pot which attracts people from all walks of life to pursue their study or career. Malaysia's demographical make up has created a unique cultural diversity, gravitating the students to either assimilate into the dominant culture or to a degree, maintain their cultural heritage, and simultaneously adopt the culture of the host country. Either way, cultivating intercultural communication and language acculturation skills are essential to breach any form of cultural barriers. Thus, the development of vital tenets such as cultural awareness and knowledge can exist in a university milieu. In this study, it can be ascertained that it is imperative to possess different intercultural repertoires to acquire the knowledge of other cultures, and in turns, intercultural communication skills can be alleviated, even if the process of acculturation is predisposed by various circumstantial factors. In addition, higher level of sociolinguistic competency can be equated to higher acculturation level.

Despite what was learnt and found in the study, there are a few limitations in this study. One of which is that the results of this study is constraint by the inadequate information of preliminary level

of acculturation, which was not determined before the selection of participants, prior to collecting the qualitative data. Such information is crucial due to the claim that international students who are more acculturated have higher inclination to experience less stress [78]. Thus, contributes to better coping mechanisms when dealing with unfamiliar contexts. Besides, there are some potential valuable assimilation variables which were not asked when the study was conducted; for instance, the native language of the participants or perceived cultural orientation. At this juncture, better understanding of different level of assimilation and integration can occur due to different backgrounds of the students, especially where English is not their mother tongue or one of the languages dominantly spoken in their country.

To better understand the mechanisms of sociolinguistic competency, prospective researches may design a mixed-method study to probe into a larger sample in order to generalize the findings to examine other moderators/mediators, including constructs such as the *actual* intercultural communication competency. Finally, it is crucial that a similar line of inquiry is sought in other countries to find out to what extent do existing modules in various educational institutions encourage social competency skills. It is only through further empirical studies that potential theoretical shortcomings can be detected in intercultural communication related assertions and therefore, remedial measures and embedded skills can be included for classroom settings, which unfortunately remain principally detached in spite of their complementarity natures.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, students' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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