

Original Research Article

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

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 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.

UNDER PEER REVIEW

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 (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2007). 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 (Bernama, 2014). 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 (Gebhard, 2012; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Berry & Sabatier, 2010; Vedder, 2005; Kwon, 2013).

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 (2014) 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 (Khan et al., 2016). For example, accommodating and coping with unfamiliar language and accent of the host country. Unlike what is commonly known, Mahmud and Wong 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 (2012).

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 (Cle´ment et al., 2001; Coleman, 1995; Gudykunst et al., 1996; Noels & Cle´ment, 1996; Singelis & Brown, 1995). Mahmud and Wong (2016) 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 (2007) 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 (1997). Simultaneously, the concept of language acculturation, coined by (Ng, 2007) was applied to investigate if the international students are acculturated by conforming to mainstream language of the host country.

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 (Malaklolunthu, & Selan, 2011). 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 (Alavi & Mansor, 2011).

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. (2012) stated that ‘the ability to work effectively in culturally heterogeneous groups should be an integral part of a student’s competence’ (p. 314). Escudeiro (2011) and Valthaty, Kuo, & Schwartzberg, (2019) 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 (Sawir, 2005; Sawir et al. 2008; Wadsworth et al., 2008; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). 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 (Zhang & Goodson 2011; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Green, 2019). 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 (Yashima, 2002; Hartnett et al., 2004; Fenton-Smith, 2012). Moreover, transitioning and adapting into a culturally diverse environment requires communication competence (Spencer-Oatey, 2012). 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 (Schilling-Estes, 2002).

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 (Berry & Annis, 1974). 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 (Wan et al., 2013). 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. Roselind et al. (2013) 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 (as cited in Dignes, 1983) noted that flexibility in the notion of the multicultural individual who

is in perpetual shift. Dignes (1983) wrote that Bochner discussed about the concept of cognitive flexibility, whereas Gudykunst, Hammer and Wiseman (as cited in Dignes, 1983) 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, (2015) 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 (Choo, 2013). 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 (Kim, 1988; Noels et al., 1996; Croucher, & Kramer, 2017). Through interaction with host nationals, students obtain social support, language proficiency and become familiar with the host society customs and values (Soong, 2013). To reiterate similar credence, a study done by Hendrickson et al. (2011) and Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, (2018), 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 (MacIntyre et al, 1998). Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot (2010) 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 (Minkov, 2008). Byram (1997) 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.

Figure-1. Acculturation Strategies (Berry, 1997)

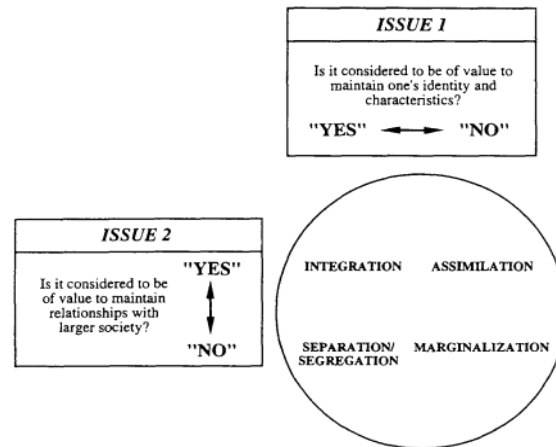


Figure 1 displays four quadrants of acculturation strategies delineated by Berry (1997), showcasing the integration, assimilation, separation/ segregation as well as marginalization. The integration strategy quadrant exemplifies an indication of ardent emphasis towards own culture as well as host's culture, 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 (1997) 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 (Han et al., 2016). Delving beyond the circumstance, Phinney et al. (2001) 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 (Berry, 1997).

Figure-2. Components of Intercultural Communication (Byram, 1997)



Figure 2 illustrates the components of intercultural communication in Byram's model (1997). Intercultural Communication Competence's model by Byram (1997) 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 (Alfred & Byram, 2002). As mentioned by Byram (1997), one has to be competent in each savoir stated above in order to be intercultural competence.

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 (2002), 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 challenge that influences the acculturation experience. According to Leong (2015), 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 convalescing a more customized learning environment for international students.

Materials and Methods

Data for the survey were collected using 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 (1997), Berry's Acculturation Model (1997) 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 (1997), 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 (Liao, 2009). 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; “*mamak*” (a food stall serving Indian Muslim delicacies), “*diamlah*” (*shut – up*), “*bojio*” - /bo: 'dʒi'o:/ (*never invite*), “*kaotim*” - (*finish*) 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” (Tan, 2009, p. 14). Each situational question is adapted to reflect both models by Berry (1997) and Byram (1997) 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 (Berry, 1997) 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. Research Framework

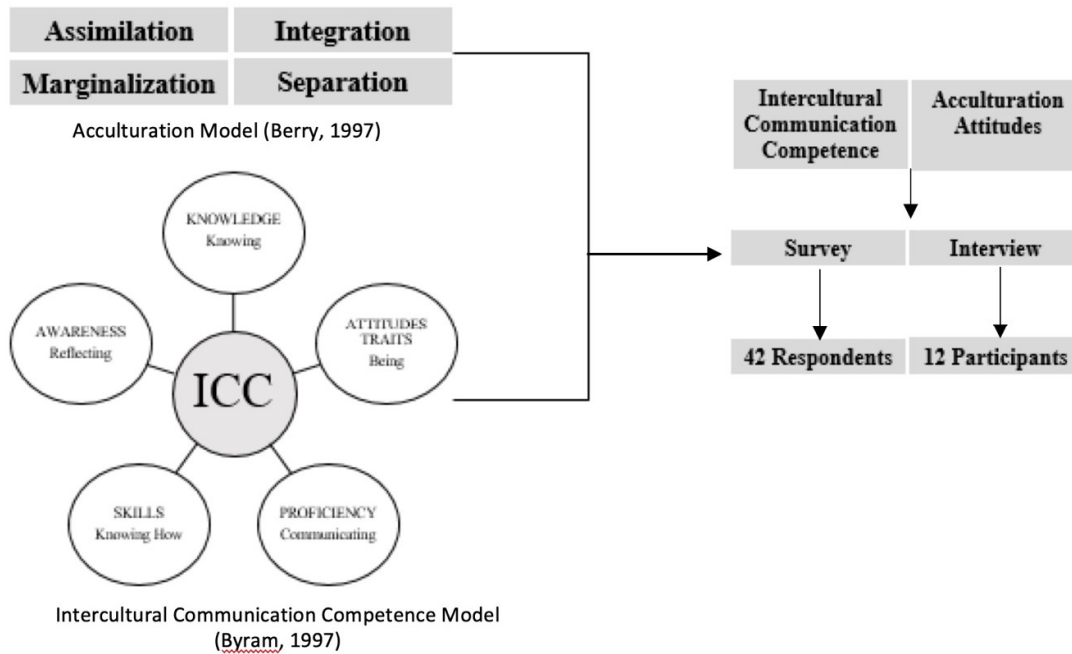


Diagram 1 above shows the step by step procedure of how the study was done. By conceptualizing Byram's Intercultural Communication Competence Model (1997), Berry's Acculturation Model (1997) as well as from the existing literature, the survey and situational questions were designed to focus on probing the intercultural communication competence and acculturation attitudes amongst the participants.

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. Respondents' Nationality

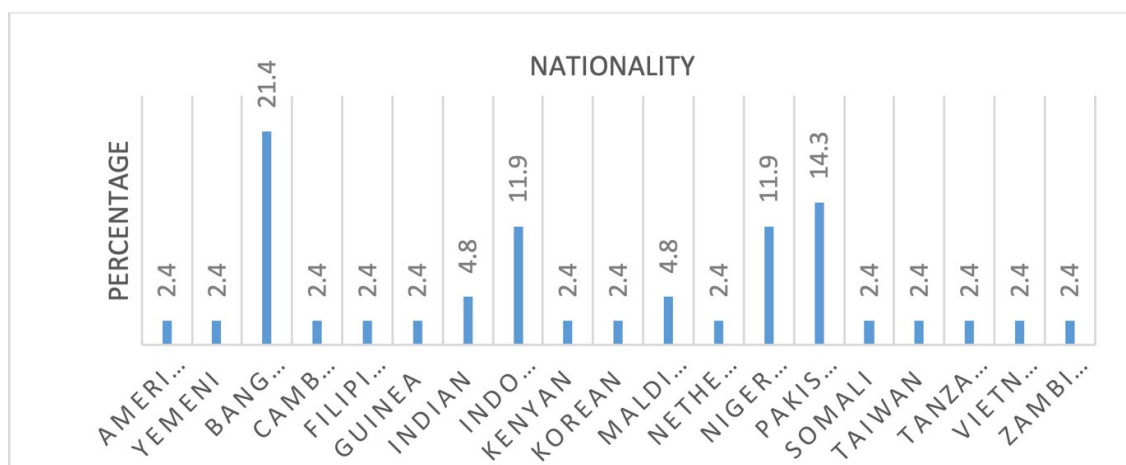


Diagram 2 shows the 19 countries of where the respondents are from. Majority were from Bangladesh and Pakistan with 21.4% and 14.3% respectively. Indonesian and Nigerian each constituted 11.90%. Another 4.8% were Indian and Maldivian respectively. The rest of the participants were from America, Yemen,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

Table 1. 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 <i>language proficiency</i> in order for international students to acquire admission.	5	11.9	14	33.3	23	54.8
2	I feel studying abroad helps students <i>develop intercultural communication skills</i> .	0	0.0	5	11.9	37	88.1
3	I feel it is essential to <i>promote intercultural communication skills</i> in a culturally diverse environment.	0	0.0	7	16.7	35	83.3
4	I possess <i>enhanced knowledge</i> 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 <i>low language proficiency level</i> would result in a negative impression about oneself.	11	26.2	10	23.8	21	50.0
6	I believe being <i>exposed to Malaysian culture</i> 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 <i>acquire enough knowledge about Malaysian cultures</i> 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 <i>observing the locals' interactions</i> with each other and try to <i>be a part of the interaction</i> so that I can have that <i>sense of familiarity</i>	4	9.5	11	26.2	27	64.3

	with their culture.												
9	I read, watch videos and ask the locals about the culture to help me learn more and <i>broaden my knowledge about Malaysian culture.</i>	6	14.3	13	31.0	23	54.8						
10	I <i>adapt better</i> with the environment when I <i>learn about the basic knowledge about Malaysian cultures.</i>	6	14.3	10	23.8	26	61.9						

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 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. 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, " <i>bojio</i> ". 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, " <i>Diamlah!</i> ". How would you respond to the situation/	1	1	1	0	N/A	0	0	1	2	0	2	2

	phrase?												
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

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

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.

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 (Martin, & Nakayama, 2010; Williams, 2005; Liu, & Fang, 2017). The participants agreed that studying abroad affords an opportunity to develop intercultural communication skills. In a recent research done by Barker, (2015) and Shafaei, & Razak, (2016) 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, posits that positive cultural orientation facilitates second language acquisition (2019). 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, (2012) 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. (2006), 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 (1997). 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 (2009) and Kristen (2019) that language proficiency contributes to better assimilation. It was also indicated by Zhang and Zhou (2010) 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 (Mahmud et al., 2010). On the other hand, Jia et al. (2016) 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, 2017, 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 (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Consequently, this lack of skills may lead to challenges in dealing with social encounters. **Bochner (1972)** 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.

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 (Berry, 1985). 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).

References

- Adler NJ, 1983. A typology of management studies involving culture. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 14(2): 29-47.
- Ahmad SZ and FR Buchanan, 2017. Motivation factors in students decision to study at international branch campuses in Malaysia. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(4): 651-668.
- Alav, M and SMS Mansor, 2011. Categories of problems among international students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 30: 1581-1587.
- Alencar A and M Deuze, 2017. News for assimilation or integration? examining the functions of news in shaping acculturation experiences of immigrants in the Netherlands and Spain. *European Journal of Communication*, 32(2): 151-166.
- Alfred G and M Byram, 2002. Becoming an intercultural mediator: a longitudinal study of residence abroad. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 23(5): 339-352.
- Barker GG, 2015. Choosing the best of both worlds: The acculturation process revisited. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 45: 56-69.
- Berry, J. W., & Annis, R. C. (1974). Acculturative stress: The role of ecology, culture and differentiation. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 5(4), 382-406.
- Berry JW, 1985. Psychological adaptation of foreign students in Canada. In: Samuda R. & Wolfgang A. (Eds.), *Intercultural Counselling and Assessment: Global perspectives*. Hogrefe: Lewiston, NY, USA.

- Berry JW, 1997. Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied psychology*, 46(1): 5-34.
- Berry JW, JS Phinney, DL Sam and PE Vedder, 2006. Immigrant youth in cultural transition: acculturation, identity, and adaptation across national contexts. *Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers*: Mahwah, NJ, USA.
- Berry JW and C Sabatier, 2010. Acculturation, discrimination, and adaptation among second generation immigrant youth in Montreal and Paris. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 34(3): 191-207.
- Bochner S and P Wicks, 1972. Overseas students in Australia. *UNSW Press*: Sydney, Australia.
- Byram M, 1997. Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence. *Multilingual Matters*: Clevedon, England
- Choo CW, 2013. Information culture and organizational effectiveness. *International Journal of Information Management*, 33(5): 775-779.
- Clément R, KA Noels and B Deneault, 2001. Interethnic contact, identity, and psychological adjustment: The mediating and moderating roles of communication. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(3): 559-577.
- Coleman HL, 1995. Strategies for coping with cultural diversity. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 23(4), 722-740.
- Croucher, S. M., & Kramer, E. (2017). Cultural fusion theory: An alternative to acculturation. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 10(2), 97-114.
- D’Lima GM, A Winsler and A Kitsantas, 2014. Ethnic and gender differences in first-year college students’ goal orientation, self-efficacy, and extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 107(5): 341-356.

- Doucerein, M. M. (2019). L2 experience mediates the relation between mainstream acculturation orientation and self-assessed L2 competence among migrants. *Applied Linguistics*, 40(2), 355-378.
- Escudeiro N, 2011. Enhancing Students Team Work and Communication Skills in International Settings. *Information Technology Based Higher Education and Training (ITHET)*, 44(3): 250-262.
- Fenton-Smith B, 2012. Facilitating self-directed learning amongst international students of health sciences: The dual discourse of self-efficacy. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, 6(1): A64-A76.
- Gebhard JG, 2012. International students' adjustment problems and behaviors. *Journal of International Students*, 2(2): 158-164.
- Gist-Mackey, A. N., Wiley, M. L., & Erba, J. (2018). "You're doing great. Keep doing what you're doing": socially supportive communication during first-generation college students' socialization. *Communication Education*, 67(1), 52-72.
- Glass CR and CM Westmont, 2014. Comparative effects of belongingness on the academic success and cross-cultural interactions of domestic and international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 38: 106-119.
- Green, Z. A. (2019). Emotionalized learning experiences: Inspiring students in Pakistan to reinvent themselves to nurture social competence. *Journal of College Student Development*, 60(3), 337-360.
- Gudykunst WB, MR Hammer and RL Wiseman, 1977. An analysis of an integrated approach to cross-cultural training. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 1(2): 99-110.
- Gudykunst WB, Y Matsumoto, S Ting-Toomey, T Nishida, K Kim and S Heyman, 1996. The influence of cultural individualism– collectivism, self-construals, and individual values

- on communication styles across cultures. *Human Communication Research*, 22: 510–543.
- Han L, JW Berry and Y Zheng, 2016. The relationship of acculturation strategies to resilience: the moderating impact of social support among Qiang ethnicity following the 2008 Chinese earthquake. *PloS one*, 11(10): e0164484.
- Hartnett N, J Römcke, and C Yap, 2004. Student performance in tertiary-level accounting: an international student focus. *Accounting & Finance*, 44(2): 163-185.
- Hendrickson B, D Rosen and RK Aune, 2011. An analysis of friendship networks, social connectedness, homesickness, and satisfaction levels of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(3): 281-295.
- Jia F, A Gottardo, X Chen, P Koh, and A Pasquarella, 2016. English proficiency and acculturation among Chinese immigrant youth in Canada: a reciprocal relationship. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 37(8): 774-782.
- Khan T, M Pitts and MA Williams, 2016. Cross-cultural differences in automotive HMI design: a comparative study between UK and Indian users' design preferences. *Journal of Usability Studies*, 11(2): 45-65.
- Kim YY, 1988. Communication and cross-cultural adaptation. *Multilingual Matters*: Clevedon, England.
- Kristen, C. (2019). Language assimilation and the education of immigrant students. In *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Education*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Kwon EE, 2013. Psychometrically Valid Relationships between Acculturation and Neuropsychological Factors. *Loma Linda University Electronic Theses, Dissertations & Projects*, 129. Available: <http://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/etd/129>

- Leong P, 2015. Coming to America: Assessing the patterns of acculturation, friendship formation, and the academic experiences of international students at a US college. *Journal of International Students*, 5(4): 459-474.
- Liao S, 2009. Variation in the use of discourse markers by Chinese teaching assistants in the US. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41(7): 1313-1328.
- Liu, J., & Fang, F. G. (2017). Perceptions, awareness and perceived effects of home culture on intercultural communication: Perspectives of university students in China. *System*, 67, 25-37.
- MacIntyre PD, Z Dörnyei, R Clément and KA Noels, 1998. Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: a situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4): 545-562.
- Mahmud, M. M. (2014). Communication aptitude and academic success. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 134, 125-133.
- Mahmud, M. M., & Wong, S. F., 2016. Understanding the repercussions of intercultural communicative competence: a study on the degree of students' cultural awareness, social and communication skills. *Journal of Human Sciences*, 13(3): 5561-5573.
- Mahmud, M. M., & Ching, W. S. (2012). Attitudes towards accented speech among radio deejays in Malaysia. *Academic Research International*, 2(3), 520.
- Mahmud Z, S Amat, S Rahman and NM Ishak, 2010. Challenges for international students in Malaysia: culture, climate and care. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 7: 289–293.
- Malaklolunthu S and PS Selan, 2011. Adjustment problems among international students in Malaysian private higher education institutions. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 15: 833-837.

- Martin JN and TK Nakayama, 2010. Intercultural communication and dialectics revisited. *The Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication*: 59-83.
- Masgoret AM and C Ward, 2006. Culture learning approach to acculturation. *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*: 58-77.
- Minkov M, 2008. Self-enhancement and self-stability predict school achievement at the national level. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 42(2): 172-196.
- Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2007. The National Higher Education Action Plan, Phase 2, 2011–2015.
- Ng SH, 2007. From language acculturation to communication acculturation: Addressee orientations and communication brokering in conversations. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 26(1): 75-90.
- Noels KA and R Clément, 1996. Communicating across cultures: Social determinants and acculturative consequences. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*, 28(3): 214.
- Noels KA, G Pon and R Clément, 1996. Language, identity, and adjustment: The role of linguistic self confidence in the acculturation process. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 15(3): 246–264.
- Parrish P and J Linder-VanBershot, 2010. Cultural dimensions of learning: Addressing the challenges of multicultural instruction. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 11(2): 1-19.
- Phinney JS, G Horenczyk and K Liebkind, 2001. Ethnic identity, immigration, and well-being: an interactional perspective. *Journal of Social Issues* 57(3): 493–510.
- Popov V, D Brinkman, HJ Biemans, M Mulder, A Kuznetsov and O Noroozi, 2012. Multicultural student group work in higher education: an explorative case study on

- challenges as perceived by students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 36(2): 302-317.
- Wan R, S Nordin and R Razali, 2013. International students' cultural experiences: Exploring socio-cultural and academic adjustment in Malaysian Universities. *Recent Advances in Modern Educational Technologies*: 31-37.
- Sawir E, 2005. Language difficulties of international students in Australia: The effects of prior learning experience. *International Education Journal*, 6(5): 567-580.
- Sawir E, S Marginson, A Deumert, C Nyland and G Ramia, 2008. Loneliness and international students: an Australian study. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(2): 148-180.
- Schilling-Estes N, 2002. Investigating stylistic variation. *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*: 375-401.
- Shafaei, A., & Razak, N. A. (2016). Internationalisation of higher education: Conceptualising the antecedents and outcomes of cross-cultural adaptation. *Policy Futures in Education*, 14(6), 701-720.
- Singelis, T. M., & Brown W. J, 1995. Culture, self, and collectivist communication linking culture to individual behavior. *Human Communication Research*, 21(3): 354-389.
- Soong H, 2013. Why volunteer? The complexities of international pre-service teachers' intercultural adjustment experiences through community service engagement. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(1): 69-83.
- Spencer-Oatey, H, H Işık-Güler and S Stadler, 2012. Intercultural communication. *Routledge*: Abingdon, England.
- Swami V, 2009. Predictors of sociocultural adjustment among sojourning Malaysian students in Britain. *International Journal of Psychology*, 44(4): 266-273.

- Tan S. I., 2009. Lexical borrowing in Malaysian English: Influences of Malay. Lexis. *Journal in English Lexicology*, (3): 11-62.
- Ting-Toomey S and T Dorjee, 2015. 20 Intercultural and intergroup communication competence: toward an integrative perspective. *Communication Competence*: 503-538.
- Valthaty, R., Kuo, Y. H., & Schwartzberg, P. (2019). CAST (Cultural Awareness Through Student Theater): A Workshop to Improve Resident Communication Skills With Patients from Diverse Backgrounds. *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 134, 58S.
- Vedder P, 2005. Language, ethnic identity, and the adaptation of immigrant youth in the Netherlands. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 20(3): 396-416.
- Volet SE and G Ang, 2012. Culturally mixed groups on international campuses: An opportunity for inter-cultural learning. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(1): 21-37.
- Wadsworth BC, ML Hecht and E Jung, 2008. The role of identity gaps, discrimination, and acculturation in international students' educational satisfaction in American classrooms. *Communication Education*, 57(1): 64-87.
- Wan R, S Md Nordin and R Razali, 2013. International students' cultural experiences: Exploring socio-cultural and academic adjustment in Malaysian universities. *Recent Advances in Modern Educational Technologies*: 31-37.
- Williams TR, 2005. Exploring the impact of study abroad on students' intercultural communication skills: Adaptability and sensitivity. *Journal of studies in international education*, 9(4): 356-371.
- Yashima T, 2002. Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(1): 54-66.

- Yeh CJ and M Inose, 2003. International students' reported English fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness as predictors of acculturative stress. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 16(1): 15-28.
- Zhang J and P Goodson, 2011. Predictors of international students' psychosocial adjustment to life in the United States: A systematic review. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(2): 139-162.
- Zhang Z and G Zhou, 2010. Understanding Chinese international students at a Canadian university: Perspectives, expectations, and experiences. *Comparative and International Education/Éducation Comparée et Internationale*, 39(3): 43-58.
- Zhou G and Z Zhang, 2014. A study of the first-year international students at a Canadian University: challenges and experiences with social integration. *Comparative and International Education/Éducation comparée et internationale*, 43(2): 7.