

## Intercultural Communication Competence and Miscommunication: A Study on Malaysian and International Students

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### Abstract

With the rapidly increasing number of international students, University Technology Malaysia (UTM) is considered one of the well-known multicultural universities in Malaysia. Due to these rapid changes, the issue of intercultural communication is increasing day by day. A review of literature indicates that this issue, especially, within tertiary educational institutions is given little attention by researchers. The current study is an attempt to look at this type of communication. It investigates how students internalize and describe intercultural communication competence. This quantitative study, which was conducted on both Malaysian and international students, identified the quality of intercultural communication through investigating the various challenges students face in this regard that can result in possible incidents of miscommunication. Adopting purposive sampling and using two sets of questionnaires as the primary tools of data collection, 377 Malaysian and 335 international students participated in the current research. The data was analyzed using SPSS software. The current study found that there are differences between the perspectives of Malaysian and international students on intercultural competence. It also raises awareness of the importance of intercultural communication in tertiary educational institutions and invites researchers to examine the various challenges that face both Malaysian and international students in this regard.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication competence, multicultural universities, miscommunication, tertiary education.

### INTRODUCTION

Communication is an integral part of the term 'intercultural communication'. In order to understand the concept of 'intercultural communication', the term 'communication' should be introduced. Although, the concept of intercultural communication assumes that this communication happens among people from different cultural backgrounds, the core of this communication stays similar to human communication in general. Basically, communication refers to the process that takes place between two or more people to share information or to reach mutual understanding (Lee, 2003).

Gudykunst (2003) maintained that the major goal of communication is the 'shared understanding'. This goal of shared understanding was also highlighted by Martin and Nakayama (2013) who mentioned that communication involves a system of linguistic symbols transmitted among communicators. They also added that these symbols can be verbal (words) or non-verbal (body language). They also include para-verbal symbols such as the way individuals speak and the tone they use while speaking. Thomas and Peterson (2017) asserted that a good understanding leads to a successful communication.

For any communication to be effective, there are some skills that communicators need to have in order to reach the goal of communication represented by mutual understanding between communicators. According to Gudykunst (2003) these skills are "listening, interpretation, comparison, application of different reference schemes, cultural assumptions, attribution of meanings, use of stereotypes, and prejudices in the everyday construction of meaning". Thus, these skills determine the quality and the effectiveness of communication.

The current paper is looking at the concept of intercultural communication competence and attempts to explore it among university students. It is noticed that many scholars and researchers used different terms to refer to intercultural competence such as, cultural learning, intercultural understanding, cross cultural knowledge, multicultural or cross cultural competence, global competence cross-cultural adaptation, cross-cultural effectiveness, cultural competence, cross-cultural adjustment and cross cultural awareness (Deardorff, 2004, 2006, 2011; Fantini, 2009; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009)

Deardorff (2006) defined intercultural competence as the individuals' ability to interact and communicate with others from different cultures effectively and appropriately. This communication is based on the individuals' backgrounds in terms of skills, knowledge and attitudes. Fantini (2009) further added that intercultural competence has four dimensions namely: knowledge, skill, attitude, and awareness.

Similarly, Intercultural communication competence refers to the effective and appropriate communication with culturally different people based on the individual's knowledge, skills and motivation (Gitimu, 2005). Byram (1997) stated that a comprehensive view of intercultural communication competence should include knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Among similar terms like intercultural communicative competence and intercultural communication, the term of intercultural communication competence is more into communication and highlights the 'linguistic awareness' as a significant aspect of ICC (Krajewski, 2011).

This paper also zooms in on the issue of intercultural miscommunications (ICC) and tries to uncover its causes among students with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Martin & Nakayama (2013) mentioned that this issue of intercultural miscommunication and misunderstanding is mainly caused by the difference between people in terms of their own cultures. In intercultural communication, interaction takes place between people who come from different cultures having different values and traditions. Such things can strongly impact the way they understand and interpret things.

This was also supported by Thomas and Peterson (2017) who highlighted that 'less groundings' is one of the most important factors that can lead to intercultural miscommunication among people from different cultures. Qin (2014) was more specific and claimed that in the incidents of IC, people are expected to have different systems of values and different attitudes. They even have different ways of thinking. Qin (2014) also added that people from different cultures use language differently. All of these factors are potential cause of intercultural miscommunication.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

'Intercultural Competence' is a vague and unclear concept and needs to be studied. According to Kuada (2001), a clearer definition of intercultural competence should be provided. Deardorff (2006) further claims that a uniform definition of what it means to be "interculturally competent" does not exist. Fantini (2009) mentioned that this concept is even replaced by other concepts like cross-cultural awareness, multicultural competence, global competence and intercultural sensitivity. This indicates that this concept needs to be highlighted and redefined in a more systematic research using the students' perspectives and conceptualizations. Odağ, Wallin and Kedzior (2016) maintained that the investigation of intercultural competence and its definition from the perspective of higher education students has received little attention by researchers.

Besides looking at students' perspectives, it is observed that most of the previous related literature is conducted from the western perspective which might be different from other perspectives like the African, Asian or middle eastern ones. Therefore, there is a need to look at intercultural communication from a non-western standpoint. Given the inadequacies of western perspective to capture other ways of viewing intercultural competence, calls have been made for more investigations that move beyond the Western standpoint (Odağ et al., 2016).

The current research is carried out and conducted based on several observations. One of these observations is that most of the research in intercultural communication especially in Malaysia was conducted on cross-cultural communication or adaptation. In other words, cross-cultural communication, adaptation and adjustment to the new culture were the main topics discussed under intercultural communication. Dalib, Harun and Yusof (2017) stated that almost all of the research done in the area of ICC was to investigate international students' adjustment and adaptation to the Malaysian cultural environment. The current research is taking a step further by looking at how university students identify and make sense of intercultural communication competence. Moreover, the research goes deeper and looks at the challenges faced by these students when communicating with others especially with different backgrounds.

Another observation is that most of the research in the area of intercultural communication looks at culture as nationality. This approach has been criticized by many scholars (Martin & Nakayama, 2013; Moon, 2010). Instead, there are calls to modify this approach by including other elements as suggested by Martin and Nakayama (2013) who maintained that other elements such as race, ethnicity, gender should be taken into

consideration while approaching culture. Martin and Nakayama (2013) further added that treating culture as a nationality can be problematic as it does not capture the lived experience of individuals in the same nation.

By investigating intercultural communication and zooming in on intercultural miscommunication, the current research captures the unique lived experience of individuals. In addition, it investigated the perspectives of students taking into consideration the differences in terms of culture, ethnicity, gender and religion. Thus, this research is considered an attempt to look at culture differently which provides more insights into students' perspectives.

It is also observed that most of the attempts to conceptualize intercultural competence have been western and those conceptualizations were done on western societies (Chen, 1993; Yu & Chen 2008; Deardorff, 2004, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). This conceptualization might be different in non-western societies. Thus, there is a need to look at how non-western society members make sense of and identify intercultural communication.

The investigation of the current research is based on the model of intercultural competence by Deardorff, (2004) which is a western theory. By using this theory and testing it in a non-western community, the current research is expected to have important insight on the difference between the perspectives of western and non-western societies. Although, there might be similarities between these perspectives, there are significant differences. According to Deardorff (2004), one of the main differences in perceptions is that interpersonal relationships is considered an important ingredient in non-western societies while western societies look at individuals as independent from all other people.

The current research paper aims at exploring intercultural communication competence among international postgraduate and undergraduate students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). This paper also extends to investigate miscommunications and misunderstandings between international and Malaysian students. In particular, the current paper seeks to explore the various definitions and components of intercultural communication competence from the perspective of students and then it zooms in on the intercultural miscommunications and misunderstandings in UTM.

This paper attempts to answer the following two research questions:

- 1- What is ICC to UTM students and how they define it
- 2- What challenges do international and Malaysian students face when communicating with each other?

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The current study explores the notion of Intercultural Communication competence among UTM students with different cultural backgrounds. This study also highlights the issue of intercultural miscommunication between Malaysian and international students in UTM. For meeting the above-mentioned objectives, the study was conducted in a

multicultural setting with participants from different cultural backgrounds, values, attitudes, religions and traditions.

The data was mainly collected through two sets of questionnaires that were distributed among international and local students. One of these sets was designed for Malaysian students and the other was designed for international students. Eight hundred questionnaires were distributed: 400 among Malaysian students and another 400 among international students. After excluding the incomplete questionnaires, 712 participants were selected to be part of the current research divided into 377 local students and 335 international students.

Basically, the questionnaire contains three main sections: A, B and C. These three sections were designed to meet the requirements of the current research and provide a rich data that could be utilized to get the best possible results and answers to the research questions. The questionnaires were randomly distributed among UTM international and Malaysian students.

Part A, which is the first part, was designed to collect some details on the participants such as name, age, gender, race, nationality, specialization, IELTS/TOEFL score and the faculty. While section B1 is about the definitions of intercultural competence, section B2 was designed to assess the students' opinions of the 22 components of intercultural competence. This section was designed to solicit the students' agreement on these components that were also used as a part of the Delphi technique used by (Deardorff, 2006) and (Krajewski, 2011).

Part C of the questionnaire is a 36-item scale that aims at measuring and assessing the level of miscommunication among international and local students. This Scale was adapted from (Portalla and Chen, 2010) who assessed the reliability and validity of the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES). The current study adapted the final 20-item scale generated by these researchers and developed the rest of the 36 items. These extra 16 items were developed on the light of the in-depth interviews done by (Leinonen, 2015) which was conducted to examine intercultural communication challenges in an international company.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science Software (SPSS 18.0 version). In particular, SPSS was used to analyze the data on students' perceptions of ICC and their perspectives on the quality of intercultural communication in UTM. In particular, several tests were conducted to provide clear answers for the questions of the current paper. These tests were the Mean Value Test, frequency analysis, KMO and Bartlett's test.

## **RESULTS**

The questionnaires, which are the primary tools of data collection, were designed to explore students' definitions of ICC and the way they describe it. They also aimed at exploring the potential challenges faced by students as they communicate with their

culturally different counterparts. This section presents the results obtained from Malaysian students followed by the ones obtained from internationals.

## Malaysian students

### *Malaysian Students' Perspective of ICC*

In order to explore the students' responses and to have an understanding of how they internalize and define intercultural competence, the responses of the first scale were tabulated and analyzed using frequency analysis. Table 1 illustrates the mean scores of the students' responses for the first scale.

**Table 1.** Local Students' Perception on the Definitions of Intercultural Competence

Definitions of ICC	N	Mean
Ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes	377	3.8833
Good interpersonal skills exercised interculturally; the sending and receiving of messages that are accurate and appropriate	377	3.8541
A process that leads to global citizenship that involves intercultural ability, Intercultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity	377	3.8117
Ability to adapt to the new cultural context and being flexible in understanding the new context	377	3.7692
Behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations based on one's knowledge, skills, and motivation.	377	3.6976
Ability to achieve one's goals to some degree through constructive interaction in an intercultural context	377	3.5756
Ability to engage in new behaviors in other cultures even when behaviors are unfamiliar.	377	3.4828

It was discovered that the highest mean response was for the first definition [Ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes] (M=3.8833). The second highest definition was [Good interpersonal skills exercised interculturally; the sending and receiving of messages that are accurate and appropriate] (M = 3.8541). The third highest mean value was received by [A process that leads to global citizenship that involves Intercultural ability (Behavioral aspect focusing on communication skills), Intercultural awareness (cognitive aspect of understanding cultural differences) and intercultural sensitivity (focus on positive emotion toward cultural difference)] (M= 3.8117).

These results indicate that the priority for Malaysian students is communication and its quality. To them, competence is seen as the ability to communicate with culturally different people in an appropriate and an effective way based on the various components that can lead to a successful communication. This view is also supported by their second choice as it indicates that they pay much attention to the clarity of the message and the smoothness of its transition among the communicators. While their first two choices accentuate their concern of successful communication, their third choice shows that they think of intercultural communication as a useful tool that enables them to be intercultural competent. This result indicates that they are aware of the importance of IC in helping

them in the future intercultural life such as working in multicultural workplaces and interacting with people from different nationalities.

Regarding the second scale of the questionnaire, the 22 components of intercultural communication competence were tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Based on the mean values, Malaysian students choose [Respect for other cultures', 'Skills to listen and observe], and [Recognizing differences between cultures and not judging people based on your own culture] as the three top-rated components of ICC from their perspective with (M=4.2971), (M= 4.0849) and (M= 4.0292) respectively. Their choices indicate that they consider these components as the most important ones in order to be competent in intercultural communication.

These 22 components were grouped into four groups known as four composite variables. These variables were identified based on the Pyramid and the Process Models of Intercultural Competence by Deardorff (2006). These components were internal outcomes, knowledge, skills and attitudes. The different items of the second scale in the questionnaires were computed using the transform function in SPSS in order to be grouped under these four composite variables. Items 3,6,7,15,12,17 and 21 were computed under internal outcomes; items 1,2,10,14,16 and 22 were computed under knowledge; items 4 and 8 were computed under skills and the rest of the items 5, 9,11, 13, 20, 18 and 19 were computed under attitudes. Table 2 illustrates the mean scores of the students' responses on the second scale.

**Table 2.** Local Students' Perception on the Major Components of Intercultural Competence

<b>Composite variables of ICC</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Skills	377	4.0186
Attitudes	377	3.8814
Internal Outcomes	377	3.8230
Knowledge	377	3.7458

It was discovered that most of the Malaysian respondents described ICC in terms of skills (M= 4.0186). Attitudes was the composite variable that received the second highest mean score by the students (M= 3.8814). This was followed by Internal outcomes and skills which received (M= 3.8230) and (M= 3.7458) respectively.

Based on these results, it seems that Malaysian students believe that skills in general are the most important components of ICC followed by attitudes and internal outcomes. Being the lowest rated component, Malaysian students do not think that knowledge in general is very important in order to achieve competence in intercultural communication.

### ***Challenges Faced by Malaysian Students***

In order to highlight the main problems and challenges faced by Malaysian students when communicating with their international counterparts, the mean score of each item in

(part C) scale was calculated. Table 3 below illustrates the five top-rated challenges by Malaysian students.

**Table 3.** The Five Top-Rated Challenges Faced by Malaysian Students

<b>Top-rated challenges faced by Malaysian students</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
I often miss parts of what is going on when interacting with international students	377	4.1618
Sometimes, I feel that I need to repeat myself to be understood by international students	377	4.0902
I have a problem understanding the different English pronunciation used by international students	377	4.0849
Sometimes, I feel that international students do not understand my English language	377	4.0504
I cannot fully understand the meanings of some concepts and words used by international students	377	4.0398

Based on Malaysian students' responses in the above table, it seems that most of these top-rated problems faced by them revolve around message transmission between them and their international counterparts. For example, items such as [I often miss parts of what is going on when interacting with international students] and [Sometimes, I feel that I need to repeat myself to be understood by international] received (M=4.1618) and (M=4.0902) respectively. These items are related to the message perception and interpretation which raises challenges for Malaysian students leading to miscommunications.

Other top-rated items are related to the cultural differences between UTM students which are reflected on the different behaviors by them. Such different behaviors could be perceived differently by other students or interpreted in a wrong way than what is intended by the speaker. These differences are clear in some items such as [I do not understand why international students behave in certain ways] and [I do not understand some of the gestures (body language) by Malaysian students] which received (M= 4.0080) and (M= 3.9841) respectively.

As for least challenges that face students, Table 4 below illustrates the five lowest-rated items in this scale.

**Table 0.** The Five Lowest-Rated Challenges Faced by Malaysian Students

<b>Lowest-rated challenges faced by Malaysian students</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
I don't feel relaxed when interacting with international students	377	2.7454
I am unable able to answer questions effectively when interacting with international students	377	2.6472
I feel that international students do not like to express their ideas and thoughts in conferences, workshops, ...etc.	377	2.5729
I use appropriate eye contact when interacting with students from different cultures	377	2.4987
It is not easy to identify international students during our interaction	377	2.2573

As observed in the table above, items such as [I am unable to answer questions effectively when interacting with international students], [I use appropriate eye contact when



interacting with students from different cultures] and [It is not easy to identify international students during our interaction] received the lowest mean scores ( $M=2.6472$ ), ( $M=2.4987$ ) and ( $M=2.2573$ ).

These items are related to immediate interaction between Malaysian and international students reflecting their feelings to one another. Having these items as the lowest rated challenges reveals the nature of the warm intercultural communication among culturally different students inside UTM. It also accentuates the friendly nature of Malaysian students being the representatives of the host culture (Malaysian culture).

## International Students

### *International Students' Perspective of ICC*

The first research question on the perspective of international students on ICC was addressed in scales (B1) and (B2) of the questionnaire version directed to international students. These two scales were designed to see how students define ICC and how they identify its various components.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data gathered on the first scale of the questionnaires. The analysis of this scale aims at exploring the respondents' definitions of intercultural communication competence and the way they internalize this concept. Table 5 illustrates the mean scores of the students' responses for the first scale.

**Table 5.** International Students' Perception of Intercultural Competence Definitions

<b>Definitions of ICC</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations based on one's knowledge, skills, and motivation.	335	3.6149
Good interpersonal skills exercised interculturally; the sending and receiving of messages that are accurate and appropriate	335	3.6090
Ability to adapt to the new cultural context and being flexible in understanding the new context	335	3.5373
A process that leads to global citizenship that involves intercultural ability (behavioral aspect focusing on communication skills), intercultural awareness (cognitive aspect of understanding cultural differences), and intercultural sensitivity (focus on	335	3.5254
Ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes	335	3.4269
Ability to achieve one's goals to some degree through constructive interaction in an intercultural context	335	3.3761
Ability to engage in new behaviors in other cultures even when behaviors are unfamiliar.	335	3.3612

As for the highest rated definitions by international students, [Behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations based on one's knowledge, skills, and motivation] received the highest mean score of ( $M = 3.6149$ ). The second high rated definition was [Good interpersonal skills exercised interculturally; the sending and receiving of messages that are accurate and appropriate] while the third was the [Ability

to adapt to the new cultural context and being flexible in understanding the new context] with (M = 3.6090) and (M = 3.5373) respectively.

These results reveal how international students internalize ICC. Their first choice indicates that their first priority is behaving in an appropriate and an effective way being the strangers in UTM which is considered a new cultural environment for them. Their second choice highlights their need to appropriately understand the different messages by culturally different people and to be understood at the same time. Their major concern which is appropriate and effective behavior is supported by their choice. Being aware that they are in a new cultural context to them, their third choice indicates the importance of cultural adaptability and adjustment. To them, flexibility and adaptation to the new cultural environment is considered an important prerequisite for ICC.

Regarding the second scale of the questionnaire, the 22 components of ICC were tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics (refer to appendix I). Based on students' responses, [Respect for other cultures] received the highest mean score of (M= 4.3821) followed by [Skills to listen and observe] which received (M= 4.0806). The third choice by international students was [Flexibility] which received (M = 3.9910).

The 22 components of ICC were grouped into four groups known as composite variables. These variables were identified based on the Pyramid and the Process Models of Intercultural Competence by Deardorff (2006). These components were internal outcomes, Knowledge, skills and attitudes. The different items of the second scale in the questionnaires were computed using the transform function in SPSS. Items 3,6,7,15,12,17 and 21 were computed under internal outcomes; items 1,2,10,14,16 and 22 were computed under knowledge; items 4 and 8 were computed under and the rest of the items 5,9,11,13,18,19 and 20 were computed under attitudes. Table 6 illustrates the mean scores of the students' responses on the first scale.

**Table 6.** International Students' Perception of Intercultural Competence Major Components

Components of ICC	N	Mean
Skills	335	3.9358
Attitudes	335	3.8222
Internal Outcomes	335	3.7825
Knowledge	335	3.6000

The table above illustrates that international respondents described intercultural communication competence in terms of skills which received the highest mean score (M= 3.9358). Attitudes was the composite variable that received the second highest mean score by the students (M= 3.8222). Attitudes was followed by Internal outcomes and skills which received (M= 3.7825) and (M= 3.6000) respectively.

Based on these results, it seems that international students believe that skills in general are the most important components of intercultural competence followed by attitudes and internal outcomes. Being the lowest rated component, international students do not

think that knowledge in general is very important in order to achieve competence in intercultural communication.

### ***Challenges Faced by International Students***

The responses of the students on part C were analyzed using SPSS software. Part C includes 36 items investigating the students' intercultural communication experiences. Table 7 below illustrates the five top-rated items representing challenges faced by international students as they interact with Malaysian students.

**Table 7.** The Five Top-Rated Challenges Faced by International Students

<b>Top-rated challenges Faced by International Students</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Sometimes, I feel that Malaysians do not understand my English language	335	3.6567
Sometimes, I feel that I need to repeat myself to be understood by Malaysians	335	3.6299
I often miss parts of what is going on when interacting with Malaysians	335	3.6209
It is not easy for me to discuss issues with my supervisor as well as my instructors	335	3.6060
Sometimes, Malaysian staff members do not get my message properly and I need to explain	335	3.5731

Based on international students' responses in the above table, it seems that most of these top-rated problems faced by them are related to message transmission between them and their Malaysian counterparts. For example, items such as [I often miss parts of what is going on when interacting with international students], [Sometimes, I feel that I need to repeat myself to be understood by international] and [Sometimes, Malaysian staff members do not get my message properly and I need to explain] are related to the message perception and interpretation which raises challenges for international students leading to potential incidents miscommunications.

Other top-rated items are related to the cultural differences between UTM students which are reflected on the different behaviors by them. Such different behaviors could be perceived differently by other students or interpreted in a wrong way than what is intended by the speaker. These differences are clear in some items such as [I do not understand why international students behave in certain ways] and [I do not understand some of the gestures (body language) by Malaysian students] which received (M= 3.2299) and (M= 3.2060) respectively.

As for the least challenges that face students, Table 8 below illustrates the five lowest-rated items in this scale.

**Table 0.** The Five Lowest-Rated Challenges Faced by International Students

<b>The Lowest-Rated Challenges Faced by Malaysian Students</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
I cannot fully understand the meanings of some Malaysian concepts and words	335	2.6179
I feel that Malaysian culture does not encourage free expression of ideas and thoughts in conferences, workshops, ...etc.	335	2.6149

I find it challenging to communicate with Malaysian people of a higher status including my supervisor and my instructors	335	2.5791
I don't use appropriate eye contact when interacting with Malaysians	335	2.4269
I do not prefer to express myself when I interact with Malaysian students	335	2.4209
I feel that there is much difference between Malaysian culture and my own culture	335	2.3463

Looking at the items in the table above, it seems that these items are related to the direct contact with Malaysian students and the feelings that international students have as they interact with culturally different students. For example, items such as [I find it challenging to communicate with Malaysian people of a higher status including my supervisor and my instructors] and [I do not prefer to express myself when I interact with Malaysian students] received low rating by international student indicating that there is many challenges related to the direct contact with Malaysian students and university staff members.

## DISCUSSION

### Malaysian and international students' perspective of ICC

Looking at the mean scores of Malaysian and international students of part B1 in the questionnaire, it was noticed that there was a slight difference between the students' responses concerning the most suitable definition of intercultural communication competence. The highest rated definition was the [Ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes] in the case of Malaysian students while it was [Behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations based on one's knowledge, skills, and motivation] for international students. These definitions highlight the importance of appropriate and effective communication and behavior which should be based on knowledge, skills and attitudes. Thus, these definitions share the idea that any competent behaviors or communication should be based on a good level of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The finding obtained from the responses of Malaysian students goes in line with the outcome of Delphi study that reported this definition as the top-rated definition of intercultural communication competence among intercultural scholars (Deardorff, 2006). This view is also supported by other studies (Odağ et al., 2016) and (Krajewski, 2011) which found that "effective and appropriate communication" received consensus among their participants. As for the highest accepted definition by international students, it was ranked the fourth by international scholars as illustrated in Deardorff's study. Looking at Deardorff's pyramid of intercultural competence, the highest level of that model, which is the 'external outcome', was defined as "behaving and communicating appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations" (Deardorff, 2004).

The second highest-rated definition was the same for both international and local students. Both groups chose the second definition [Good interpersonal skills exercised interculturally; the sending and receiving of messages that are accurate and appropriate] with (M= 3.8541) for local students and with (M= 3.6090) for international students. This

finding contradicts with the findings from Deardorff's study in which this definition received the second lowest rating by Intercultural experts. This contradiction indicates that local and international students have their own way of looking at intercultural communication competence. This is supported by Krajewski (2011) who found that there was a difference in the perspectives between students who basically receive competence and the experts who deliver this competence.

As for the current research, this surprising finding indicates that the sending and the receiving of the message is the student's second priority after appropriate and effective behavior and communication. This can be explained by the fact that students are the ones experiencing this kind of interaction encountering the various cultural and linguistic challenges while communicating with their culturally different counterparts. Thus, the main goal for the students is to convey their messages both appropriately and accurately and to be understood by other students avoiding the potential miscommunications that might arise during such interactions.

The third top-rated definition by local students is [A process that leads to global citizenship that involves intercultural ability, Intercultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity]. However, International students chose [Ability to adapt to the new cultural context and being flexible in understanding the new context] to be their third top-rated definition. These findings again contradict with the findings of Deardorff's study that rated the former as the lowest-rated definition and the latter as the second most accepted definition among intercultural experts.

These are interesting findings since they further explain the first choices by local and international students. These definitions accurately reflect the state of both local and international students and the way they look at intercultural competence inside UTM that is considered a multicultural university. For Malaysian students, they look forward to gain some features like [intercultural ability], [Intercultural awareness] and [intercultural sensitivity] which became a necessity nowadays to join the global market. In other words, and in addition to be understood by their international counterparts, they want to be able to interact appropriately and effectively on a global scale with culturally different people. In fact, this is the common aim of tertiary educational institution such as UTM. Multicultural Universities nowadays want to and should create global citizens able to compete in the global market of business (Hunter, et al, 2006).

### **International and Malaysian students' perceptions of ICC**

A remarkable point here in the case of international student is that one of the top-rated definitions focuses on intercultural adaptation and the idea of flexibility as well as the understanding of the new surroundings cultural environment. International students' choice of this definition reflects their need to adapt and adjust to the new environment. Moreover, as students in a multicultural university, they need to be interculturally flexible to mix with Malaysian and other culturally different students. International students' choice of this definition is an extension to their top-rated definition which talks

about behaving appropriately and effectively for a better intercultural communication. This definition highlights their need to adapt and adjust to the new culture.

Thus, these definitions indicate that it is a priority to them to behave in a decent way according to the Malaysian culture so that they can avoid any misunderstandings or miscommunications by Malaysian students or staff members. The choice of international students reflects their willingness to embrace and to be a part of Malaysian culture which helps them to adapt to this new cultural environment.

As for local students, their choices are more specific and they clearly reflect their priorities. Their priorities were clear starting by an appropriate communication, good interpersonal skills and their focus on intercultural awareness as well as sensitivity. Their choices indicate that they look at this intercultural environment as a chance to be competent in intercultural communication which prepares them to the multicultural marketplace.

An interesting finding is the agreement among the Malaysian and international students over the two lowest-rated definitions in intercultural communication competence. These definitions were [Ability to engage in new behaviors. in other cultures, even when behaviors are unfamiliar] and [Ability to achieve one's goals to some degree through constructive interaction in an intercultural context]. These two definitions were ranked the third and the fifth by intercultural scholars Deardorff (2006). This again proves that international and local students in UTM have a different perspective than scholars or experts in terms of looking at intercultural communication competence.

As for the components of ICC, the current research found out that there is a similarity between local and international students in terms of describing the most important components of ICC. Both international and Malaysian students described ICC in terms of skills, attitudes, internal outcome and knowledge. This finding indicates that UTM students believe that individuals special students should be equipped with the right skills such as listening to the others which is to them is considered as a type of respect. Looking at the 22 components in general, it is found that respect for other cultures and skills to listen and observe are the two top rated components. This goes against the perspectives of experts who placed [respect of other cultures] almost in the middle of the components' list. Instead, the item [Cultural self-awareness and capacity for self-assessment] received the second highest component by the experts and was given a low importance by students.

This again indicates that having the right skills is a key factor to the success of any intercultural communication. Although there is a difference between both Malaysian and international student in terms of defining ICC, both of them agree on the most important components of ICC. This finding can be explained by the fact that both of these groups have their own way of looking at ICC which is different from that of scholars and experts in this field. In particular, this view reflects the fact that message sending and receiving is very important and that it can be achieved through listening to the others.

Another remarkable difference between UTM students and intercultural experts is the component of [understanding the value of cultural diversity]. Both local and international students rated this item as one of the highly important components of ICC. In contrast, this component was given a moderate level of importance by intercultural experts. Instead, experts focused on [adaptability and general openness] which is a more general component compared with the students' choices.

### **Challenges faced by both Malaysian and international students**

Regarding the results on the challenges faced by UTM students, the initial findings are interesting as similarities were found between these two groups of students in terms of top-rated items. [I often miss parts of what is going on when interacting with International/ Malaysian students] was the top-rated item by Malaysian and the fourth by international students. [Sometimes, I feel that I need to repeat myself to be understood by international students/ Malaysians] was the second top-rated item by both Malaysian and international students. The third choice by Malaysian students was [I have a problem understanding the Englishes by international students] and it was the eighth top-rated item by international students.

The fourth choice by Malaysian students is also the first choice by international students and the item was [Sometimes, I feel that Malaysians/ international students do not understand my English language]. The item [Sometimes, Malaysian staff members / International students do not get my message properly and I need to explain] was the seventh choice by Malaysian students and the fifth by internationals. [I have problems with grammar when interacting with Malaysian/international students inside UTM] was the ninth choice by Malaysian students and the sixth by international students.

It is noticed that all of these items represent challenges related to the messages (verbal and non-verbal communication such as gestures and body language) transmitted between these two groups of students and their meanings. This is an interesting finding as it indicates that mutual understanding is the students' first concern or priority. This goes in line with their top-rated definitions and the way they described intercultural communication competence in which they highlighted the main outcomes if ICC being the 'proper and effective communication/behavior' followed by the sending and receiving the message. This can be explained by the fact that students care the most about the quality of communication represented by the fact that they need to understand and to be understood by other culturally different students.

For Malaysian students especially undergraduates, who form the majority of respondents in the current research, graduating from high school and moving into multicultural Malaysian universities such as UTM is the first step for them to mingle with international students from different nationalities and with different cultural backgrounds. The first priority for them is to achieve this mutual understanding and that is achieved by the direct intercultural communication that might be accompanied with miscommunications.

Similarly, this applies to international students who come from different parts of the world to study in UTM. For them, this is a good chance to be introduced to the Malaysian culture and to have Malaysian friends. As sojourners, they tend to interact with their Malaysian counterparts to know more about the host culture. That helps them to adapt to the new cultural surroundings and facilitate their academic experience.

## CONCLUSION

Although, much research has been done in the area of ICC, little attention has been given to students' perception of ICC within tertiary educational institutions (Odağ et al., 2016). Thus, the current research is adding to the existing knowledge in this regard by exploring how university students make sense of and describe ICC. The findings of the current research support the previous literature and highlight that there are differences between students' and experts' opinions when it comes to their perspectives of ICC (Krajewski, 2011).

Moreover, the current paper provides insights into the perspectives of both Malaysian and international students in this regard. By including both Malaysian and international students, this paper provides insights into the perspectives of these two main groups of students. In addition to the understanding of ICC, the current paper also offers insights into the different intercultural challenges that face students as they communicate with their counterparts from different cultures with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Being aware of these challenges, UTM and other multicultural universities can spot these challenges and try to decrease the potential incidents of miscommunications.

To achieve a comprehensive view, the study was conducted on undergraduate and postgraduate students including Malaysian and international students. Given the fact that there are other multicultural universities in Malaysia with a considerable number of international students, future comprehensive research could extend and include other multicultural universities with other Malaysian and international participants. Finally, it is recommended that researchers should explore the concept of ICC beyond face-to-face communication. For example, future research might look at the use of social media for the purpose of intercultural communication between students.

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