

The Relationship between English Language Proficiency and Intercultural Communication Competence among International Students in a Malaysian Public University

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Abstract

Postgraduate students from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds enrol at Malaysian universities to have better learning opportunities, and gain new social and cultural skills. Students may also gain essential competence through their contacts with their peers from different cultures, but some factors may affect their daily interactions. English language is the main means of interactions among international students in Malaysian universities. This study therefore was conducted to examine the relationship between English language proficiency (ELP) and intercultural communication competence among international postgraduate students at a Malaysian public university. A mixed method research design which includes quantitative and qualitative data was employed. Participants were 120 postgraduate students from 17 different countries, in which, 12 participants were interviewed. The findings confirm that ELP is among the main factors that influence interactions among international postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university. The students' ELP has helped them to have more interactions and improve their intercultural communication competence. The results also illustrate that daily interactions have helped the students to improve their ELP and discover new strategies to deal with different linguistic and communicative challenges while they are in a multicultural collegiate environment.

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Keywords: English language proficiency; Intercultural communication; Intercultural communication competence; Interpersonal communication

INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency (ELP) is among the main factors that influence intercultural interactions among students from different nationalities in a multicultural academic environment. According to Zhang, Hong, Takeuchi and Mossakowski (2012), English language proficiency is accepted as a significant factor that affects daily lives of individuals from various backgrounds. Their daily interactions with their peers from different cultures and countries at the campus may enable international students to evaluate and improve their ELP. As stated by Lin (2011), interactions among people from different backgrounds help them to learn from one another, understand one another, and overcome possible social and environmental challenges. Interactions and conversations among individuals mirror their social skills such as language proficiency, and also outline the way learners decide how to use language and how to fit themselves in a –

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discourse community (Martin-Beltrán, 2010). Moreover, Yamao and Sekiguchi (2015) asserted that daily interactions and practices among individuals in a multicultural organization enable them to learn a foreign language and improve their linguistic skills.

Hamilton and Woodward-Kron (2010) focused on the relationships between linguistic skills, communication competence, cultural norms and social skills of individuals. As pointed out, the complex interlinks among language, culture and communication require language learners to pay attention, and focus on the possible effects of communication and cultural norms on spoken language. According to Yamao and Sekiguchi (2015), language is the main means of communication among people from various backgrounds, and considerably linked with the levels of their personal skills and self-confidence. Kassim and Ali (2010) also focused on the effectiveness of oral communication among professionals in the engineering field in a Malaysian setting of communication. According to Goh and Chan (1993), English language proficiency and communication skills are important for Malaysian educated people to be employed and successful in their professional lives.

Good level of English language proficiency may help international students who live in a multicultural university campus to develop their communication competence and academic achievements. Based on the argument by Yu and Shen (2012), a good level of English language skills was identified as a significant predictor for the socio-cultural issues and academic adjustment. They have also stated that nowadays, studying in an international and multicultural collegiate environment has overwhelming popularity throughout the globe (Yu & Shen, 2012). According to the arguments of the said researchers, gathering of students from different nationalities in multicultural collegiate environments is a common phenomenon in the world, and the level of their skills in the foreign language that they use as the main means of their interactions may have significant effects on their social and academic lives.

Intercultural communication refers to the direct and spoken interactions among individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Baran, 2004; Huang, 2010). Moreover, intercultural communication competence includes the abilities and skills that enable individuals to initiate interactions with different people, consider the differences, manage probable arguments well, and establish relationships with individuals from various backgrounds (Friedman & Antal, 2005; Marrone, 2005). Researches on communication, communication competence, assessments and the relationships between social and cultural factors and human communication mostly have been conducted in the Western parts of the world. Thus, if people from the other parts of the world need to know about the communicative norms, social and cultural issues and activities within their own local community, the researches and assessments would have to be adapted or newly conducted from their point of view (Kim, 2007; Kim, 2012). As most of the previous studies on the relationship between intercultural communication among students from different countries in the modern universities and the level of their language proficiency belong to the western context of communication; thus, this study aims to examine the relationship between English language proficiency and intercultural communication competence among international postgraduate students of a Malaysian public university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A theoretical assumption which was introduced by Pettigrew (1998) focuses on the impacts of interpersonal and intergroup contacts among communicators based on their positive attitudes towards achievements of their communicative goals. According to Haneda (2014), daily interactions and collaborations of students with their peers from various backgrounds may cause anxieties among them, and this situation may motivate students to gain the essential skills to interact properly. These arguments are also supported by the results of previous studies (Dooley, 2007; Haneda, 2008; Harklau; 2000; Martin-Beltrán, 2010; Yoon, 2008), which found that English language proficiency as an important determiner for participation in intercultural communication, academic activities and successes of students.

According to Watanabe and Swain (2008), students' awareness of interlocutors' social and linguistic proficiencies has significant effects on the process of collaboration during their interactions rather than calculated proficiencies. This statement is supportive of the existence of relationship between the level of

ELP and daily interactions among international students in a multicultural university campus. Furthermore, daily practices and interactions among students enable researchers to evaluate the levels of their social and linguistic skills and abilities. The interactional situations among students enable researchers to understand the levels of their abilities and proficiencies (McDermott, 1996).

It was also stated that in the process of interactions among people from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, linguistic factors have stronger effects rather than the demographic variables and factors. From a study on the effects of insufficient English language proficiency on the social lives of Asian-Americans and Latinos in the U.S., Zhang et al. (2012) found that the effects of the limited level of ELP on social lives of Asian-Americans were more significant than the demographic and socio-economic factors. However, linguistic factors sometimes may have indirect effects on the process of interactions among people. As stated by Zhang et al. (2012), the level of ELP may have indirect effects through other factors on personal lives of individuals. Furthermore, good level of ELP enables international students to be enrolled at any school and university that they prefer. Students with strong English language proficiency were recognized to be easily replaced in the different organizations (Martin-Beltrán, 2010).

According to Zhang et al. (2012), a good level of English language proficiency is able to assist students to deal with social and environmental challenges, and based on the results of a study they suggested that people with good and high levels of ELP might be more flexible towards the results of discrimination and may be able to easily cope with the daily stress which are related to discrimination. At the same time, in an academic setting, just being able to speak a language is not enough, and individuals should be able to use it carefully in their daily interactions as well. Fallah (2014) asserted that many language learners' assumption towards language learning is to learn the language just to speak it. However, according to Dörnyei (2005), the main goal to learn a particular language is to improve the communication competence and abilities.

The assertions and findings of the previous researchers are supportive of the relationship between the level of ELP and daily interactions among people from different nationalities. However, the findings mostly belong to the western context of communication and social norms, and therefore, conducting similar studies in the Asian context may be more useful for communicators and researchers in the region.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed method research design which includes both the quantitative and qualitative data collection procedure was applied to conduct this study. As stated by Bickman and Rog (2009), the researchers must know that the selected research method matches the agenda of their research projects. Thus, the mixed research design was employed to achieve the aims of this study. The quantitative data is the main data set for this study, and the qualitative data were collected and analyzed to support the findings from the quantitative survey.

3.1 Population and Participants

The estimated population of this study included all international postgraduate students of a technical-based public university in Malaysia, which were about 300 students. Participants were 120 of the international students who responded to the quantitative questionnaire. The participants were from 17 different countries, in which 100 (83.3%) were male students with M/SD scores of 101/12.7, and 20 (16.7%) were female students with their M/SD scores of 100.6/13.6. In terms of their study program, 71 (59.2 %) students were pursuing their Master degree with M/SD scores of 100.7/13.6, and 49 (40.8%) were PhD students with M/SD scores of 100.6/14.7. Based on their agreements, 12 of the participants who participated in the quantitative questionnaire were interviewed. Table 1 illustrates the frequencies and percentages of participants based on their countries.

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of participants based on their countries.

Country of Origin	Number of Participants	Percentages	Number of Interviewees
		%	
Afghanistan	10	8.3	1
Bangladesh	9	7.5	1
China	11	9.2	1
Pakistan	10	8.3	2
India	15	12.5	2
Algeria	4	3.3	1
Yemen	8	6.7	0
Iraq	14	11.7	0
Sudan	5	4.2	1
Nigeria	11	9.2	1
Indonesia	6	5	0
Libya	7	5.8	0
Ghana	1	.8	1
Egypt	2	1.7	1
Iran	3	2.5	0
Ethiopia	2	1.7	0
Jordan	2	1.7	0

Students' ELP level was measured using the International English Language Test System (IELTS) and an English Proficiency Test (EPT). Both the language assessments are used as entry requirement and placement in the English courses at the university for international candidates who do not hold the IELTS or TOEFL certificate. The EPT was benchmarked against the IELTS during its development, so its level of proficiency measurement is made similar to IELTS. Students who do not have the IELTS results would provide their EPT results instead. The ELP scores were assessed and categorized under three categories, namely those who obtained 1) 5.0-5.5, 2) 6.0 and 3) 6.5 and above. Based on the self-reported information, the IELTS/EPT scores of 48 (40%) of the participants fell under the first category of 5.0-5.5, 52 (43.3%) participants scored 6.0 for their IELTS/EPT, and finally, the scores of 19 (15.8%) of them were under the category of 6.5 and above. Table 2 shows the frequencies, percentages and the M/SD scores of all participants based on their categories.

Table 2. The frequencies and percentages of categories and their M/SD scores.

Item	Frequency	Percentage	Mean Score	St. Deviation
Gender				
Male	100	83.3	101	12.7
Female	20	16.7	106	13.6
Level of Education				
Master	71	59.2	100.7	13.6
PhD	49	40.8	100.6	14.7
IELTS/EPT				
5.0-5.5	48	40	99.1	14.5
6.0	52	43.3	100.8	14.1
6.5and above	19	15.8	100.5	13.8

3.2 Research Instruments

The instrument for the quantitative questionnaire is the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ) developed by Buhrmester, Furman and Wittenberg (1988). The ICQ is a well-established instrument in the field of human communication. Many researchers (e.g. Dickstein, 1999; Michaeli, 2013; Parsons, 2008; Sherburne, 2009) used this questionnaire to assess communication competence among people from different backgrounds. According to Vevea (2011), intercultural communication develops from interpersonal communication, thus the development of intercultural communication competence is connected to interpersonal communication competence. Therefore, the ICQ questionnaire was used to assess intercultural communication competence. The adapted version of ICQ used in this study consisted of 30 scale items using 5-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The ICQ evaluates intercultural communication competence under five factors which are: Initiation; Negative Assertion; Disclosure; Emotional Support; Conflict Management. Prior to the main data collection procedure, the quantitative instrument was checked through a pilot test which had 20 participants and the Cronbach alpha rating score for the quantitative instrument was .84. The second research instrument, which is a qualitative instrument included eight open ended interview questions.

3.3 Research Procedures

The quantitative and qualitative data were collected in different stages. The quantitative data were collected directly through the administration of the ICQ questionnaire. The qualitative data were collected through the direct and audio-recorded interviews from the volunteered interviewees. Prior to the interviews and data collection, the printed copy of interview protocol which included the information about the research project, interview procedure and also the interview questions were given to them to read and reconfirm their agreement. Once the volunteer participant agreed to be interviewed, the interviews were conducted under the guidance of interview protocol and all interviews were audio-recorded.

FINDINGS

4.1 Quantitative Findings

This study was conducted to evaluate the relationship between ELP and intercultural communication competence among international postgraduate students of a Malaysian technical-based public university. Descriptive statistical analysis was run using SPSS to find out the frequencies and percentages. The mean score for all participants shows a good level of interactions among them, and it shows a good level of communication. The bivariate correlation test was run to find out the possible correlations among the level of ELP and the main constructs of ICQ. The results showed some positive correlations between ELP and the main constructs; the correlation value of ELP/Initiation is .268, the ELP/Negative assertion is .301, and for ELP/Emotional support, the correlation value is .252. Table 3 illustrates the correlations between ELP and the main constructs of ICC.

Table 3. The correlation values between ELP and main constructs of ICC.

ELP Constructs	ELP	Initiation	Negative Assertion	Disclosure	Emotional Support
Initiation	.268				
Negative assertion	.301	.325			
Disclosure	.192		.460		
Emotional support	.252		.423	.631	
Conflict management	.189				.265

To compare the mean scores of the attributes of intercultural communication competence (ICC) and English language proficiency (ELP), the independent-samples t-test was applied. The comparison mean scores of initiation to ELP shows no significant difference as $t(119) = 74.06$, $p > .05$, mean score for initiation is $M = 3.87$, $SD = .61$, and the mean scores for ELP is $M = 3.37$, $SD = .61$. The same test was applied to compare the mean scores of negative assertion and ELP and no significant difference was found as the result is $t(119) = 55.78$, $p > .05$, mean score for negative assertion is $M = 3.52$, $SD = .63$ and for ELP $M = 3.7$, $SD = .51$. A significant difference is found between mean scores of disclosure attribute and ELP, $t(119) = 60.37$, $P < .01$, and the mean score of disclosure is $M = 3.1$, $SD = .5$, and for ELP it is $M = 3.6$, $SD = .38$. The same test was applied to compare the mean scores between emotional support and ELP, and a significant difference is found as $t(119) = 43.68$, $P < .01$. Mean score for emotional support is $M = 3.2$, $SD = .67$ and for ELP is $M = 2.6$, $SD = .34$. The mean scores of conflict management and ELP were compared through the use of independent-samples t-test, but no significant difference is found as $t(119) = 62.21$, $P > .05$. The mean score for conflict management is $M = 3.2$, $SD = .46$, and for ELP it is $M = 3.1$, $SD = .47$. However, the results from the t-test are supportive of the results from the correlation test. The given results for correlation test and t-test show the existence of relationship between the levels of ELP and intercultural communication competence of the participants. As the results from correlation test show the existence correlations between ELP and the attributes of intercultural communication.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data were collected from 12 interviewees from 10 different countries. The interviews were conducted and audio taped and transcribed thematically. Participants' responses were categorized under the related themes. For the relationships between interactions among international postgraduate students and the level of their ELP, almost all participants reported a strong relationship between the two mentioned factors. For example, participant 1 who was a male PhD student from Bangladesh stated that "We use English language as the main means of our interactions on the university campus, and thus the main factor that affects our interactions is English language [proficiency]". Participant 2, who was a female PhD student from Pakistan, said that "As the level of my English language [proficiency] is good and I have my roommates from different countries, I have very successful interactions with other international students and very happy to interact with them".

Moreover, Participant 5 who was a male master student from Afghanistan said that "Sometimes, I do not understand the real messages of some international students, because they use different accents and slangs and some of them try to speak as fast as possible". Participant 9, who was a female master student from China also focused on the relationship between their daily interactions and the level of their ELP and said that "I have some daily interactions with other foreign students, but mostly with female students and one of my main achievements from my interactions is improvement of the level of my English language proficiency". The above mentioned assertions of the participants are all supportive of the positive relationships between the level of ELP and increase of intercultural communication competence among participants of this study.

Based on the answers of most of the interviewees, daily interactions among students from different cultural backgrounds and the level of their ELP have important mutual effects on each other. Their good levels of ELP help students to have more and successful interactions and their daily interactions help them to improve the levels of their ELP. As pointed out by participant 4 "I am quite a social person and am always in contact with my friends and fellow researchers from different countries. Initially, when I joined this university, I was not able to speak and understand English language well, but my interactions with other students help me to improve my English language and now I have no problem talking with anyone." Participant 12 also said that "As I worked as an English language teacher for many years, the level of my ELP is good but as I didn't have any experience to stay in any multicultural environment before coming to this country. I do not have much experience interacting with foreigners, but as I can speak English language well, I can interact with other students easily and now I am learning how to interact and talk with them." Participant 6 had to say that "As I come from a traditional and culturally restricted environment, thus when I joined this international university, I have learnt both how to speak English language when

talking with different people and to interact with people from different countries, especially male students.”

At the same time, participant 10 asserted that “When we are in China, we learn English language and spent many years to learn it. Theoretically, we learn something about internationalization and contacts and collaborations with foreign people, but we do not have enough opportunities to practise spoken English language and to demonstrate our communicative skills. When we moved to a foreign country, we can find some opportunities to interact with different people. Through our interactions with students from other nationalities, we learn how to speak and how to interact, and now I can speak fluently and can interact and live happily with our international peers.” Based on the mentioned answers and assertions of the interviewees, the levels of their ELP, their daily interactions and the levels of their intercultural communication competence had effects on one another. The good levels of their ELP helped the participants to have more interactions with their peers and their interactions helped them to improve their ELP as well.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

International students mostly use English language as the main means of their daily interactions at the Malaysian universities. Thus, this study was conducted to assess the relationship between English language proficiency (ELP) and intercultural communication competence among international postgraduate students of a Malaysian technical-based public university. Based on the literature, the relationships between ELP and daily contacts and practices among students grabbed the attention of many researchers in the past. As stated by Yu and Shen (2012), a good level of abilities in English language is accepted as an important factor for the social, cultural and academic issues. The results from this study also confirmed that the levels of ELP and linguistic skills of international postgraduate students have significant impacts on their daily social and academic lives.

Based on the correlation results, there were some relationship between ELP and some attributes of intercultural communication competence. The qualitative findings also confirmed the relationship between the levels of ELP and intercultural communication competence of the participants. The results of this study were supported by Zhang et al. (2012) who based on the results of a study argued that the level of ELP had more effects on daily interactions and social lives of Asian-Americans in the United States rather than their demographic factors. The qualitative results from this study also confirmed that people with good levels of ELP are happier in the university campus.

The qualitative results of this study illustrated that the participants with higher scores in IELTS/EPT were good in intercultural communication competence, and had more interactions with their peers from different countries. The quantitative results also showed significant correlations between the levels of ELP of students and some main components of intercultural communication among them like initiation and emotional support. The qualitative findings also illustrated the important effects of ELP on daily interactions among international postgraduate students. Almost all interviewees of this study have mentioned English language and the levels of their ELP as the main factors that influenced their daily contacts. Based on the qualitative results, daily interactions among students from different countries enabled them to improve the levels of their ELP. Yamao and Sekiguchi (2015) based on the results of a study in Japan had stated that daily interactions and practices among different people help them to learn a foreign language and promote their linguistic skills.

The findings from this study are quite new for the Malaysian context of communication among international students and these findings may be helpful for both students and universities to pay more attention on interactions among students from different countries.

5.1 Recommendations

Daily interactions among students from different nationalities in the modern and multicultural universities will remain as an interesting and important social and academic issue. As English language is

the main academic language and the main means of communication in the Malaysian and most of other modern universities, then relationships between interactions among international students and English language will also remain as an important issue. Thus, future researchers can evaluate the relationship between communication and English language from different perspectives. As this study was conducted among international postgraduate students, researchers in the future can conduct the same study among international undergraduate students, and also they can evaluate the same issue between local and international students of Malaysian universities.

CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to assess the relationship between English language proficiency (ELP) and intercultural communication competence among postgraduate students from different cultures and countries at a Malaysian public university. The findings from this study confirmed that the level of ELP has important role on the process of intercultural interactions among postgraduate students from different nationalities. This study also identified that students with good level of ELP had more successful interactions with their peers from different countries, and through their interactions have gained some new social and linguistic skills. Based on the results of this study, daily interactions among students from different nationalities are the main opportunities for them to improve the level of their ELP, and also to learn how to interact with people from different countries and how to use their linguistic skills in the different locations and situations. The results from this study may encourage university students to be involved in the daily intercultural interactions with their peers from various backgrounds.

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