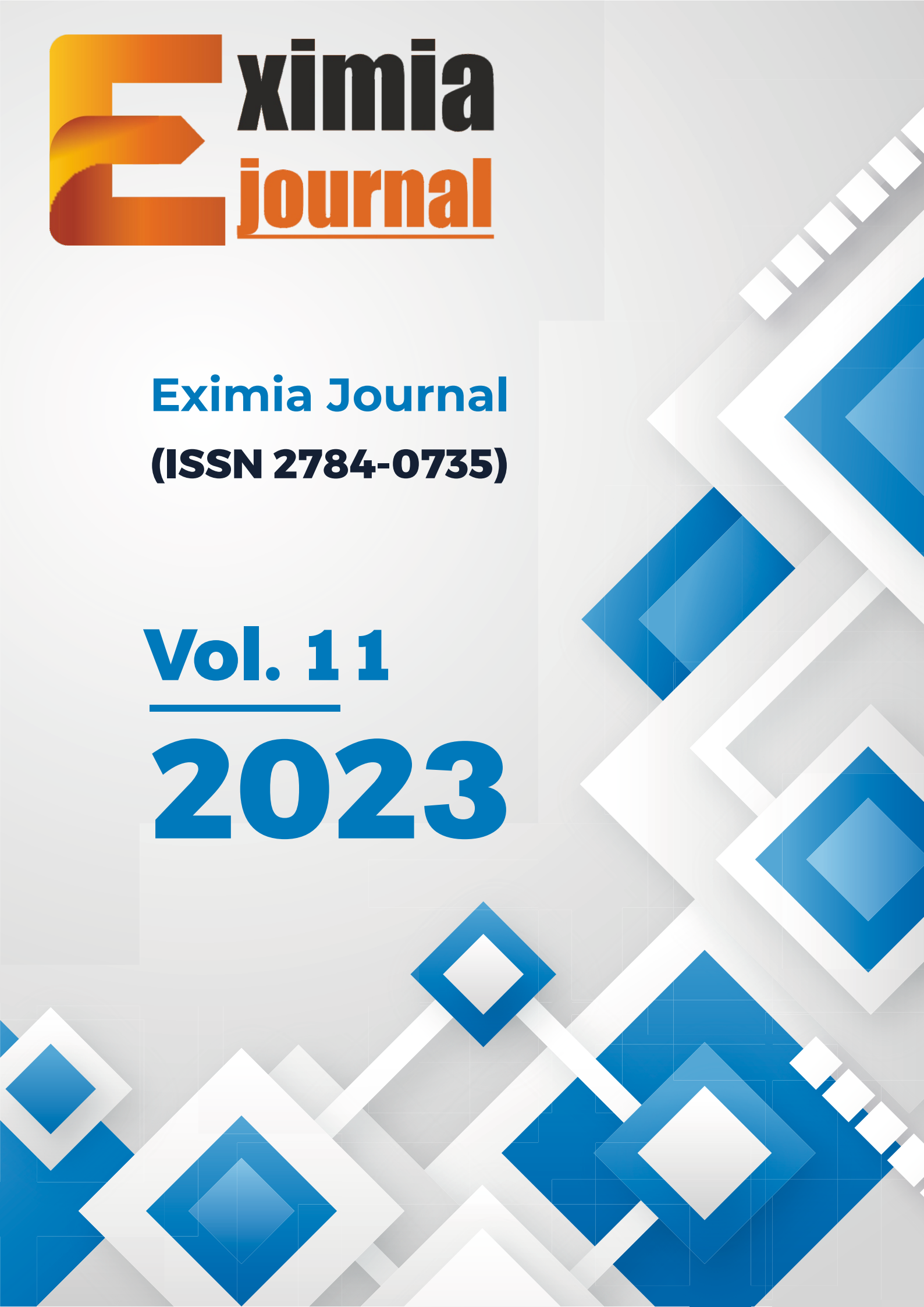




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Intercultural Miscommunications Faced by UTM Students and the Strategies They Use to Overcome Them

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Abstract. The phenomenon of intercultural communication is increasing day by day due to the new trend of global economy which brings people from various ethnicities and nationalities to work together in the same places. There is a need to look into this type of communication and have a closer look at the possible causes of miscommunication. This paper looks into intercultural miscommunication between international and local students in one of the major multicultural universities in Malaysia. It examines the quality of intercultural communication through investigating the various challenges students face in this regard as well as the different strategies they use to avoid and fix miscommunication. Interviews were conducted on 20 students. It was found that the participants of the study face various challenges which were classified into linguistic and cultural ones. The present paper invites researchers to further examine the various challenges that face both groups of students in this regard.

Keywords. Intercultural communication competence, multicultural universities, miscommunication, tertiary education

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication (IC) is the kind of communication that involves both 'culture' and 'communication'. These two concepts are closely related and overlapping concepts. Martin and Nakayama (2013) highlighted this fact saying that both of these terms are "inseparable" and "reciprocal" [1]. In addition to the fact that culture controls the patterns of communication among individuals, it dictates and controls the basic process of communication in general and IC in particular. This is true because people learn the proper way of communication from their own cultures.

Moreover, individuals grow up in a certain culture and that makes them see everything including their world views and the proper behavior according to this culture. Wood (2011) supported this view and further explained that people of all cultures have the same 'sensing' of the world [2]. However, people have different ways processing, understanding and interpreting information according to their cultures. In other words, people of different cultures are expected to have different ways of interpreting information and this is known as intercultural miscommunication or misunderstandings.

This feature can negatively affect the process of exchanging information in any intercultural communication. This occurs due to the different systems of meaning among

intercultural communicators (Martin & Nakayama, 2013). They added that this difference impacts the whole process of intercultural communication. Mainly, in intercultural communication, the receiver interprets the message according to his/her culture which might not be the meaning intended by the sender.

Thomas and Peterson (2016) explained the challenge in intercultural communication in terms of “less groundings” shared among communicators from different cultures [3]. They claimed that this grounding information is based on people’s previous experiences. They further explained claiming that when people from different cultures communicate and interact; they are expected to have different experiences and less common information due to the difference between their own cultures. Due to these differences between the communicators’ cultural backgrounds, intercultural communication is likely to end up with misunderstandings (Barnett & Lee, 2003) [4].

Other researchers have their own interpretation of the different sources of intercultural miscommunication. For example, Chick (1996) highlighted that intercultural miscommunication can take place due to a number of factors (sources) [5]. These sources are sociolinguistic transfer, differences in the distribution of compliments in different communities, systematic difference in contextualization cues, intonation and different politeness strategies. Other researchers such as Qin (2014) stated that ways of thinking, value system, belief and attitude, and language use and habits are the main sources of intercultural miscommunication [6]. Lowell and Devlin (1998) found out the main sources of intercultural miscommunication are the differences in perspectives, expectations, understandings and interpretations (phenomenological differences) [7].

This paper is an attempt to explore the nature of the intercultural communication that takes places between intercultural and local students in one of the multicultural universities in Malaysia.

Malaysia is one of the destinations that welcome students from different countries and cultures. Having a competitive educational system and a lot of internationally recognized universities, an increasing number of international students are enrolled in the different universities throughout Malaysia. Therefore, Malaysian universities are turning into multicultural universities in which students from different parts of the world interact and make friends with culturally different students including Malaysians. In such multicultural environments, it is assumed that students face many difficulties and various challenges as they interact with their culturally different counterparts.

Thus, the current paper explores the various linguistic and cultural challenges these students come across through their daily interactions with their culturally different counterparts. This investigation takes the advantage of being held in a multicultural setting of the research by having culturally different participants taking part of this investigation. Through including culturally different students, the current research attempts to reveal the influence of the different cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students on the intercultural communication inside UTM.

The current paper aims at investigating miscommunications and misunderstandings between international and Malaysian students. In particular, this paper zooms in on the intercultural miscommunications and misunderstandings between these two major groups trying to understand the sources of miscommunication. Moreover, this paper also explores the different strategies these students use in order to overcome and avoid these miscommunications. It also solicits the participants’ views on how to improve intercultural communication in UTM. This research has three main objectives and they are:

1. To explore the different challenges faced by students as they interact with their culturally different counterparts causing miscommunications and misunderstandings.
2. To explore the strategies used by UTM students to overcome these challenges and eliminate or reduce these miscommunications and misunderstandings.
3. To solicit students' suggestions on how to improve ICC inside UTM

2. Method

The respondents of the current research were international students from different nationalities: Arab, Nigerian, Iranian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi students. As for Malaysians, the respondents were from the three major races: Malay, Chinese and Indian students. These participants were interviewed for a better understanding of these two issues and for the different factors affecting their intercultural communication leading to possible miscommunications.

Due to the fact that the interviewees were from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds, English language was used as the medium of communication.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the main tool of data collection. For ethical research purposes, the interviewees were given informed consents before going through the interviews stating that the interviews are confidential and that they volunteered to participate in this interview. These in-depth interviews had two major sessions. In the first session, students were interviewed on the topic of ICC while the second session covers the topic of intercultural miscommunications and misunderstandings.

The first part of the interview had nine guiding questions designed to capture the students' perception on intercultural competence and communication. The second part was held at the same day as the first part because the interviewees were busy and they preferred to set for the two parts in one day. The second part of the interview took more time than the first due to the fact that it covered the topic of intercultural miscommunication which is considered the primary topic and the main interest of the current paper. It included 11 questions aiming at exploring the students' intercultural miscommunication as well as their experiences in this regard.

The analysis of this interview including both sections followed Creswell's process of coding which includes initial and secondary coding of the qualitative data (Creswell et al., 2007) [8]. Basically, this method of analysis has different phases: reading the transcripts and reflecting on them; highlighting and labelling interesting sentences and paragraphs; and clustering sentences into Categories and describing the experience as well as the relevant context. The recorded data was first transcribed into a textual form. After transcribing the data, the process of decoding was initiated. Since the inquiry of this research is guided by the principles of Grounded theory, the research adopted the three-phase coding process.

These three phases are open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Creswell et al. (2007) highlights that this systematic coding methodology has much in common with the general way of analyzing qualitative data mentioned above. This process of coding was performed using NVivo software.

3. Results

The interview was designed to explore UTM students' experiences in terms of intercultural communication, the different strategies they use to overcome intercultural miscommunication and their suggestions to improve the quality of ICC inside UTM. This section presents the findings obtained from international students followed by those obtained from their Malaysian counterparts.

3.1 Intercultural challenges faced by Malaysian students

3.1.1 Linguistic Challenges.

Linguistic challenges refer to any challenges that are related to English language as it is the language of communication between Malaysian and international students and also among the different groups of international students. As introduced to the students, these challenges can be in terms of accent or pronunciation, English language proficiency level, style of communication, and any other challenge that is related to the use of English language inside UTM.

It is observed that most of the challenges faced by Malaysian students are linguistic ones. For example, they highlighted the challenges related to the English language accent or pronunciation stating that they face such challenges as they communicate with international students. For example, interviewee 1 mentioned that she faced problems understanding the accent of some groups of international students.

Interviewee 2 had the same standpoint. She further explained the reason behind such challenges and difficulties understanding the accent of some international students or the accent of some locals. Regarding English language proficiency, interviewee 3 mentioned that this poses challenges to him when he communicates with international students with a low level of English language proficiency.

Participant 2 also had a different view related to confidence. She shed the light on the issue of confidence in speaking English being one of the main factors behind this challenge. Regarding the style of communication, participant 1 mentioned that some international students are loud in voice which might influence communication. In relation to the style of communication, participant 1 also mentioned that Malaysian students do not normally ask many questions and do not admit that they do not know.

She also added that Malaysians are not usually assertive in communication which is different from many other groups of internationals. She said that this can be negative some times. Regarding being indirect, participant 2 says that there are linguistic and cultural factors attached to this. As for the linguistic factors, she mentioned the role of the mother tongue.

Participant 4 highlighted interruption as an inappropriate style of communication saying that it negatively influences any communication based on one his experience with international student

3.1.2 Cultural Challenges.

Culture challenges here refer to any challenges related to cultural differences that may lead to intercultural miscommunication between communicators. As introduced to the students during the interview, cultural challenges are related to the different values, customs, behaviors, and non-verbal communication that may lead to intercultural miscommunications or misunderstandings.

It is observed that Malaysian participants are aware of the multicultural environment they have but they do not look at the difference in terms of culture as challenging. Interviewee 3 who was a Malaysian-Chinese says that culture and religion are not posing much challenge as all cultures “promote love and peace”.

Participant 2 was of the same standpoint and she further explained that once he overcomes the linguistic challenges, they can talk about their cultures and discuss the differences.

However, participant 4 was of the same of view regarding linguistic challenges but he also highlighted that religion might be a cause of miscommunication that might influence the values of communicators. He gave an example on the relationship between males and females

saying that they are allowed in some cultures but not preferred in others. Interviewee 1 was of the same point and raised the same example mentioned above. She mentioned the relation between males and females and some international students do not welcome this as this is not encouraged in their cultural.

As for non-verbal communication, she asserts that one should be aware of the meanings of the different gestures as they have different meanings in the different cultures. She gave the example of the 'cross figures' gesture that it means promise in Malaysia but has a totally different meaning by other cultures and sometimes misunderstood by international students. She added that such non-verbal communication should be minimized to avoid intercultural miscommunications.

3.2 Strategies Used by Malaysian Students

In the second part of the interview, the interviewees were also asked about the strategies that they used in order to overcome the different intercultural challenges they face as they interact with culturally different students in UTM. Based on thematic analysis, the strategies used by Malaysian students are of two main types: strategies to fix communication and others used for a better intercultural communication.

Interviewee 2 mentioned that one of the strategies is learning the behavior or the style of communication of the different groups of international students and being knowledgeable in this regard.

As for the challenges related to the accent or pronunciation, Interviewees 2 and 3 shared the opinion that they sometimes ask friends to help them so that they can understand the other part. She also added some strategies that can help in case there was a miscommunication due to the low level of English language proficiency or because of the different accent. Those strategies were asking the other part to slow down, asking them to write down, asking them to give synonyms or even use google translate application.

Regarding the strategies used to overcome cultural challenges, participant 4 highlighted some techniques such as respecting other, respecting boundaries and not talking about sensitive topics such as race and religion. He argued that these techniques can be used in order to avoid any potential miscommunications and misunderstandings.

3.3 Malaysian Students' Suggestions to Improve Intercultural Communication

At the end of the interviews, participants provided some suggestions on both institutional and individual levels to improve the quality of intercultural communication inside UTM being a multicultural university.

For example, Participant 1 highlighted that UTM is putting much effort in this regard by encouraging students to form clubs and societies. She argues that both local and international students should use these platforms efficiently. Participant 4 was more specific and illustrated that ethnic festivals should be open to all Malaysian and international students and not limited to a certain ethnic group

Participant 3 was of the same opinion and he stressed the issue of 'being brave to communicate'. He added that students should take the initiative and start communicating with others. Other participants highlighted the importance of having classed with international students and that the university should encourage such communication between international and local students.

3.4 Intercultural challenges faced by international students

3.4.1 Linguistic Challenges.

Participant 9 talked about the different levels of English language proficiency. He explained that this problem negatively affects the intercultural communication. He stated that this problem is a potential cause of miscommunications especially between international and local students and also between international students themselves. Communicating with other students especially with the ones who can hardly express themselves in English can be difficult.

On the same vein, participant 8 supported the above-mentioned view that communicating with other students who can hardly express themselves because of their weak English language level is somehow disappointing and discouraging. This challenge was also highlighted by participant 6 who talked about fluency from the perspective of those who are weak in English and claimed that this makes them somehow uncomfortable in engaging with other international students.

She also highlighted a specific problem and that is some Malaysian and international students do not use much articles in their sentences and that is because of their weak level of English language fluency. Another remarkable challenge is the accent and the way of pronunciation. Even though, the medium of communication among UTM students in English, different students have different ways of pronouncing English words. Participant 8 considered accent as one of the big challenges he is facing while communicating with other international students.

Similarly, participants 7 and 15 mentioned that the different accents caused “lots of problems” as sometimes he does not understand or misunderstands some words. He gave the example of using word stress saying that different students stress words differently and that causes miscommunication. This was also emphasized by participant 18 who said that he faces this challenge when he communicates with Malaysian-Chinese. He also mentions that this might be the case as their English is influenced by their mother tongue. Participant 10 also referred to the American and British accent as a factor causing the differences in accent.

In relation to linguistic challenges, most of the participants pinpointed that the style of communication adopted by some students might be challenging. For example, participant 3 claimed that some international students like to dominate the communication by speaking most of the time. Another style of communication that might be confused to some is what was reported by participant 7 that some students tend to be direct and others tend to be indirect in terms of communication. Participant 11 gave the example of the Chinese and Malaysian styles of communication. She referred to the former as more direct and the latter as indirect.

Another challenge related to the style of communication is the loud voice. Some participants mentioned that when they communicate with a person who is loud in voice, they feel uncomfortable and that discourages them to interact

The participants of the study also experienced some challenges in terms of the body language and gestures used by UTM culturally different students. According to most of the participants, body language and gestures used by some students can be misunderstood or understood differently by others. According participant 6, some of the body language might give “the wrong impression”.

He had this view as he experienced a situation with his supervisor in which he misunderstood her body language. The supervisor just threw her hands explaining something for him which is considered normal in the Malaysian context. Participant 6 also gave another example about the challenges related to body language. It was the gesture of smiling by Malaysian students. Smiling in the Malaysian context is considered greeting but in other

cultures, it has different meanings.

3.4.2 Cultural Challenges.

As for the cultural challenges, participants reported a number of misunderstandings resulting from cultural differences among UTM students. It is observed that one of these miscommunications is due to the different values that students bring into the multicultural environment. For example, participant 6 provided the example of jokes and certain concepts that are somehow attached to the values of a certain culture. He further asserts that others from different cultures might not be able to understand as they do not have the same cultural background.

Participant 8 also highlighted that some expressions are related to the deep level culture and that might have a different meaning other than most people know. He mentioned the example of “it is up to you” in Nigerian culture which can be interpreted differently by people from other cultures.

Another source of miscommunication might be the certain cultural concepts that students have in their cultures and they bring along to the multicultural environments. An example of these concepts is the concept of the relationship between males and females.

Another key issue is religion. Religion might be a source of harmony in communication and it might also lead to miscommunications or even misunderstandings. Participant 6 highlighted that having the same religion, students feel more comfortable talking as they have same grounds and concepts.

He further explained that when there are differences, especially religious differences, communication might not be that effective. Participant 8 further explained that the kind of miscommunication that may occur when students are not aware of this difference.

3.5 Strategies used by international students to overcome intercultural miscommunication

Based on the results of the current research, it is observed that several strategies are used by UTM Malaysian and international students in order to overcome intercultural miscommunication. According to the theoretical analysis, these strategies were of two main types: strategies for fixing intercultural communication and others for achieving a better communication.

Most of the interviewees mentioned that they tend to use less and basic vocabulary, easy words, short sentences in the case the other person could not follow them or understand what they are talking about due to their English language proficiency level, their accent or their way of communication. In the same vein, participant 6 mentioned that he uses these strategies when he finds it hard understanding the other person. He adds that he uses other strategies like repeating, asking to repeat and the use of more signs.

Talking about body language. Participant 8 maintained that the use of body language is considered very useful in communication and especially the intercultural ones. Participant 14 said that sometimes he communicates with students with low level of English and he finds himself using strategies to fix the communicating so that they can understand each other and achieve the purpose of communication. Participant 11 added that she used the help of her friends or others to make sure that understands the other communicator.

Another strategy used by UTM students and staff as reported by students is writing. Some UTM staff ask students to write or even they point at the written words to make it easy for students to understand. Participant 11 from china described what happened with her in the

clinic and how the doctor acted to make her understand.

The respondents also revealed that they use certain strategies for a better communication. They bring these strategies with them to every intercultural communication. One of these strategies is respect and having the attitude of respecting the cultural boundaries. Another strategy that is considered important is the view of avoiding sensitive topics such as religious and political ones. Participant 11 was of the same view saying this is important as there are many differences among culturally different students and that is reflected on their understanding and view of life.

3.6 Suggestions by international students to improve intercultural communication

Based on the results of thematic analysis, these suggestions are categorized into two main categories: suggestions for UTM and suggestion for individuals (students). The majority of the suggestions were on the institution level directed to UTM and the other suggestions were directed to the individuals including Malaysian and international students.

Regarding the suggestions to the UTM as a multicultural institution, Participant 12 suggested that UTM should encourage international and local students to speak in English as it is considered the main language of communication among the students and staff at UTM. Participant 10 also added that UTM should organize cross-cultural communication programs in order to improve intercultural communication between students.

It is also observed that international students are suggesting activities and programs that bring both international and Malaysian students together so that they can learn from each other.

Most of the interviewees were of the view that the responsibility of improving intercultural communication mostly fall on UTM as an institution and has the capacity of organizing events and programs. Even though, most students were of the view mentioned above, some students pinpointed that a part of the responsibility fall on the individuals including international and Malaysian students.

4. Discussion

4.1 Challenges faced when communicating intercultural

The first research question aimed at exploring the different challenges UTM students face as they interact with their culturally different counterparts. The current paper classifies these challenges into two main types: Linguistic and Cultural ones. Under linguistic challenges, interviewees highlighted certain issues such as the difference in English language proficiency level, the difference accents and pronunciations which can create incidents of intercultural miscommunication as they negatively influence the processes of message perception and interpretation.

These finding are linked to both the theoretical and conceptual framework as they highlight the communicative competence model by Celce-Murcia *et al.* (1995). In particular, the first four competencies form the base of these challenges found under this research questions.

The findings on linguistic challenges can be related to the first three competencies: Discourse, Linguistic and Actional competencies. These competencies include the findings and the challenges found in these studies which were categorized under linguistic challenges. These challenges are the low level of English language proficiency, different dialects and accents, low and high tone, pronunciation and the difficulties in some parts of English language such as pronouns, grammar and structure.

The other two competencies in the model of Celce-Murcia *et al.* (1995) support the other

set of challenges highlighted in this research which are identified as cultural challenges. These challenges are well supported by the sociocultural competence. This competence is related to the ability of communicators to appropriately express messages in different cultural context. Since this research investigates the cultural challenges faced by students in this intercultural environment, it is seen that this set of challenges is closely related to the sociocultural competence highlighted in both the theoretical and the conceptual frameworks.

These challenges especially the cultural ones mentioned above are also closely related to Theory Dimensions of National Cultures by Geert Hofstede. This is true because this theory explains some of these cultural challenges. For example, the students from collectivistic cultures tended to have less incidents of miscommunication with their Malaysian counterparts as they are members of a similar type of culture. In contrast, they had more incidents of miscommunication with the students from individualistic cultures.

4.2 Strategies to overcome the challenges

Based on the results obtained from the semi-structures interview, the research found out that most of the strategies used by students to overcome intercultural miscommunications are similar across the two groups of Malaysian and international students. It is also found out that these strategies used by the students are of two types: strategies to fix intercultural miscommunications and strategies for a better communication. These strategies are related to both language and culture. In other words, some of these strategies are related to language miscommunication such as pronunciation and English language proficiency level while others related to culture such as avoiding religious and political topics, being knowledgeable about other cultures and accepting other cultures.

The use of these strategies by the respondents of the current research accentuates their nature as students who pay much attention to mutual understanding and the smoothness of communication. The use of this strategies pinpoints the fact that both Malaysian and international students are aware of the importance of message perception and interpretation which require a considerable level intercultural communication competence.

The use of these strategy is well supported by the communicative model by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995). The model suggests that certain strategies are used by communicators to overcome challenges and to negotiate meanings. Strategies are also used by communicators to ensure a smooth interaction with other communicators. These strategies were one of the core interests in this research and they were identified under linguistic and cultural challenges. The formers are used to overcome linguistic challenges and the latter are used to overcome cultural challenges.

4.3 Suggestions to improve intercultural communication among students

The fourth research question aimed at soliciting any suggestions by UTM students on how to improve ICC inside UTM being a multicultural university. This research found out that both international and Malaysian students share the same concern of improving the quality of intercultural communication inside UTM. Their suggestions were directed to both UTM as a multicultural university and to UTM students in general. Moreover, both groups of students mentioned almost the same suggestions. As on the institutional level, they suggested that UTM can organize clubs and events combining both international and Malaysian students which can improve the quality of intercultural communication as students get to learn from one another on cultural difference and other related differences. On the level of individuals, the interviewees stressed that UTM students should be knowledgeable and willing to communicate so that they can exchange experiences with others.

These results indicate that UTM students are interested in improving the quality of intercultural communication inside UTM and they are willing to communicate with other culturally students. Students stressed on the importance of the role of UTM in organizing such events arguing that students need encouragement. Throughout the interviews, it is noticed that students especially international are postgraduates are always busy with their studies and they do not find a proper encouragement and initiatives from Malaysian students who are, according to Malaysian interviewees, are normally too shy and do not have enough confidence to initiate interactions with international students.

Another reason why UTM as a multicultural university should act is that because of the stereotyping images that many students have about the others. Most of the Malaysian students look at international students as more fluent in English and that is why they do not have the confidence to talk to them. Thus, they tend to be shy and avoid using English to communicate with their international counterparts. At the same time, this shyness is understood by international students that Malaysian students are weak in English and they do not want to talk to them. This view is supported by the qualitative data analysis in which both Malaysian and international respondents highlighted this issue.

5. Conclusion

The current paper was conducted on tertiary students studying in one of the well-known multicultural universities in Malaysia. The research explored the different challenges faced by international and Malaysian UTM students. Moreover, the study explored the different strategies used by these students to overcome or fix communication problems.

The study revealed that the students are faced by two main types of challenges: Linguistic and cultural ones. These remarkable results provide valuable insights into the nature of this Intercultural communication that takes place between students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The study also pinpointed certain strategies used by students to overcome or fix miscommunication. Moreover, the current study reported some suggestions by students when how to improve the nature of Intercultural communication in the University.

The above-mentioned challenges, strategies, and suggestions should be taken into consideration by Multicultural educational institutions and workplaces in order to improve the quality of communication between students and staff members from different cultures.

It is recommended that future studies look into this type of communication from different perspectives using different methods updates collection and analysis. For example, more comprehensive research can be done on multiple universities using various research methods in order to get a better understanding of Intercultural communication.

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