

## **An Association between International Students' Attitude and Intercultural Communication Competence**

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This paper targets to explore an association among Attitude towards Other Cultures (ATOC) and Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) of the international students from a Non-Western context of Malaysia. A quantitative research approach is adopted and through survey technique, the data is collected from the international students of University Utara Malaysia. The data is analyzed through Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS). The findings revealed a positive significant relationship between ATOC and ICC. International students possess such attitudes that are favorable for their competency in intercultural communication. Furthermore, it is evident from the findings of this study that attitude towards other cultures is one of the predictors of intercultural communication competence.

**Keywords:** International students, Non-Western context, Attitude, ATOC, ICC.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) has now become the need for those who live in multicultural societies for work or educational purposes. Malaysia has a great diversity of more than 0.1 million international students in its public and private higher education institutes (Aziz, 2016). In the coming years, their concerned ministry of higher education is planning to capture more and more international students throughout the world (Bernama, 2015). As the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) Malaysia is planning to host 0.2 million international students from all over the world by 2020 (Chi, 2011). Due to the cultural ease and eminence of education, the international students' desired destination is Malaysia and the students from various countries feel more relaxed there (Aziz, 2016). Therefore, it is much necessary for ministry of higher education commission to look for the factors that intersect with the competence of international students during intercultural interaction.

The literature of ICC indicates that most of the conceptions of this concept came from the West (Arasaratnam, Banerjee, & Dembek, 2010a; Chen & Starosta, 1996; Deardorff, 2006; Wiseman, Hammer, & Nishida, 1989). The earlier attempts have no doubt done a remarkable contribution to the field of ICC and we have to accept that ICC is much influenced by the Non-Western cultural contexts (Dalib, Harun, & Yusoff, 2017; Yeh, 2010; Yum, 2012). There have been many studies conducted in the West regarding the influencers that influence the ICC of the individuals (Arasaratnam, 2006, 2007; Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011). On the other side, several researchers strongly recommend retesting the same constructs on the Non-Western cultural contexts (Arasaratnam, 2006; Arasaratnam et al., 2010a, 2010b) to validate the culture-general nature of variables. For this reason, the context of Malaysia is considered more suitable due to great cultural diversity and to give proper attention to the Non-Western cultural context.

Even though there are various influencers of ICC but attitude as a variable in intercultural communication has predominantly emerged from the Western context (Byram, 2008; Gudykunst, Wiseman, & Hammer, 1977; Wiseman, Hammer, & Nishida, 1989). More specifically, the link among attitude towards other cultures and intercultural communication competence is investigated in the culture-general models of ICC (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Arasaratnam, Banerjee, & Dembek, 2010a, 2010b). It reveals that Non-Western context (like Malaysia) is still overlooked in earlier investigations. Based on these discussed concerns, this present study aims to explore this association which is established from the Western context and targets to retest it on the Non-Western context of Malaysia. It is much crucial to discuss the findings of attitude towards other cultures in the context of culture-general models of ICC before discussing the details of the present study.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Attitude**

Attitude towards other cultures (ATOC) is preliminarily termed as the global attitude in the previous culture-general models of ICC. Arasaratnam (2006) defines ATOC as "a positive, non-ethnocentric disposition towards people from other cultures" (p. 94). ATOC grasps the attitudes of the individuals to play a crucial role in influencing how negative or positive is the outcome of their intercultural interaction with individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds. Besides, it also determines the strength of their intercultural communication in achieving collective understanding. Gudykunst et al. (1977) termed it as a cross-cultural attitude in the development of their multidimensional model.

They further proposed that there are three correlated elements of cross-cultural attitudes. The cognitive element denotes the attitudes of a person in how he or she holds stereotypes about the people or group of other cultures. Second, the effective element refers to the feeling of the person toward attitudes and it may be perceived as the extent of ethnocentrism handled by the person. Lastly, the conative element comprises of a person's

behavior tendency toward attitudes and it shows the intention of the social distance of the person toward people from different cultures (Gudykunst et al., 1977).

A study by Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) is an illustration to research for culture-general perspective. They identified the similarities from the existing approaches of intercultural competence by the respondents who belong to multiple cultural backgrounds. Based on this, five variables emerge, namely positive ATOC, motivation, empathy, experience, and listening. Later, these variables are addressed from an empirical standpoint in the fresh culture-general model of ICC (Arasaratnam, 2006).

Arasaratnam et al. (2010a) developed a comprehensive model named as Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence' (IMICC) having different contributors that lead to ICC. They incorporated ATOC as a mediating variable in the model. However, it was not having any direct relationship with ICC but still, it was considered as the contributor of ICC (Arasaratnam, 2006). In the next effort, Arasaratnam et al. (2010b) refined IMICC by adding sensation seeking to the other variables of the existing model. The findings of the study were consistent with the previous model (Arasaratnam et al., 2010a). In the recent effort, Arasaratnam and Banerjee (2011) further expanded the IMICC model that consists of different variables that contribute to ICC. Findings revealed a significant relationship between ATOC and ICC. Another study by Arasaratnam (2016) confirmed that attitudes towards other cultures positively leads to ICC.

Despite the fact, these discussed models witnessed that individuals with positive ATOC are competent in their intercultural communication. Though these are developed and addressed in the Western context (Nadeem, Mohammed, & Dalib, 2017a). What is yet to be addressed, however, a direct relationship of ATOC and ICC from a Non-Western context of Malaysia. A study by Nadeem, Mohammed, and Dalib (2017b) suggests that the competency of the international students of Malaysia during their intercultural communication need to be addressed. The present study attempts to address this.

### **Intercultural Communication Competence**

Researchers from several theoretical grounds have been conferring for the word Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) and finally built "an unwieldy collection of terminologies" (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989) extending from global citizenship, cultural sensitivity, transcultural communication appropriateness, intercultural communication effectiveness to cross-cultural adjustment. While, the most frequent terms among all are intercultural communication competence and intercultural competence (Deardorf, 2004). There is no mutual consent regarding any distinct description of ICC. However, it appears that ICC has to do with two core elements, which are appropriateness (to display predicted and acceptable behavior) and effectiveness (the skill to fulfill one's targets) during the intercultural communication (Deardorf, 2004; Fantini, 2005; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

Regardless of the principal concepts of ICC (which is about effective and appropriate behaviors), several scholars have pointed out the components which are required to gain ICC. Gudykunst (2002) argued that knowledge, motivation, and skills are essential requirements for the individual to be competent in intercultural interactions. When an individual is

competent in motivation and knowledge it does not necessarily mean that he/she would exhibit effective and appropriate behavior (Lustig & Koester, 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Thus, to be competent in intercultural interactions an individual must be competent in knowledge, skills, motivation, and attitudes (Lustig & Koester, 2003; Spitzberg, 1983; Wiseman, 2002).

The last component of intercultural communication competence is the attitude which refers to the appreciation and acceptance to the diversity of the cultures and is able to communicate with culturally different others in an unexpected, interested and open manner (Deardorf, 2006; Matveev & Milter, 2004). As confirmed by Arasaratnam and Banerjee (2011) that when the attitude towards other cultures are found more positive than the individual is likely to be competent in intercultural communication.

### **Attitude and Intercultural Communication Competence**

ATOC grasps the individuals to play a crucial role in influencing how a negative or positive towards the individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds as well as the strength of achieving the collective understanding. Gudykunst et al. (1977) termed it as a cross-cultural attitude in the development of their multidimensional model. They further proposed that there are three correlated elements of cross-cultural attitude (cognitive, effective, and conative). Byram (2008) concluded that to become a competent speaker in intercultural interaction, the speaker must possess a positive ATOC, give respect to other cultures, and accept the cultural differences.

Wiseman et al. (1989) stated that when normative strains restrict several performances, individual's activities perception to access the attitude object is the strong contributors to an individual's actual behavior. They introduced a different style to conceptualize ICC as a multidimensional construct. They mentioned attitude towards other culture and knowledge of the host culture are the significant influencers to ICC. In the same line, Hannigan (1990) concluded that ATOC is a broadly researched element and a key feature in expecting cross-cultural achievement, one of its results is claimed as ICC.

MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Donovan (2003) found that the individuals who live in a foreign country generally have a more positive ATOC as an alternative to those who do not. It takes a spell to be effective. The more they devote time in a foreign context, the more enthusiastic they are to interact with culturally different individuals. Another research by Lu and Hsu (2008) concluded that a friendly communication with positive ATOC helps to minimize communication anxiety of overseas residents. Additionally, it turns into the improvement of willingness for communication and intercultural relationships.

Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) found that when the instructors show a positive ATOC, the learners are able to learn more from the instructors and this element will enhance their competency in intercultural communication. Manathunga (2009) noted that to perform efficiently besides the individuals of different cultures, skills, and intercultural understanding are compulsory. Most importantly, having a positive ATOC will lead to boosting their mutual understanding.

It is also evident from the previous culture-general models of ICC that individuals holding positive ATOC are likely to be competent in intercultural communication (Arasaratnam &

Banerjee, 2011; Arasaratnam et al., 2010a, 2010b). This path has gained theoretical support from the well-known theory of intercultural communication which is Anxiety Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory. ATOC is closely related to the 'positive expectations regarding strangers' in "social categorization of strangers" by Gudykunst (2005). He predicts that when the positive expectations regarding the stranger's increases then they are likely to behave more appropriately and effectively. Based on these discussed studies, the present study proposes the following hypothesis:

**H1:** There is a relationship between ATOC and ICC.

## METHOD

### Participants

For this study, international students were considered as the participants of the study from the public university of Malaysia (namely, University Utara Malaysia). The rationale for selecting international students and one particular university was that the higher education institutes provide the platform for international students to interact frequently with the culturally diverse others (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996). Furthermore, the prime focus of previous studies was the international students (Arasaratnam, 2016a; Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011) from a single university to confirm the culture-general nature of the variables. Lastly, according to the suggestions of experts of ICC like Arasaratnam (2007), Collier (1989), and van de Vijver and Leung (1997) to ensure the culture-general nature of variables, researchers must incorporate multiple cultural perspectives in their studies. Therefore, this study considered a single university due to the great cultural diversity of international students. The participants of the study were randomly selected and approached accordingly to collect data.

Participants (N=336) were the international students of the public university of Malaysia. The age of the majority of participants (n=126) lies between 16 to 25. Participants were considered from both levels of education, undergraduate as well as postgraduate programs (Male = 259, Female = 77). International students represented 34 different countries, in which Nigeria (n = 59), Indonesia (n = 54), China (n = 36) and Pakistan (n = 25) were in majority. Most of the participants (n = 242) were living in Malaysia in between 1-2 years. Lastly, the participants indicated 253 as Muslims, 42 as Christian and 41 as Others (like Buddhist, Hindu, Atheist). This proportion indicated that the majority of the research subjects were the Muslims as well as they belong to the Muslim countries.

### Measures

The Likert-type scales were used as a survey instrument with 5-point responses ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. After the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) several items were deleted to maintain a single factor structure. The following sections discuss the results of the measures.

#### Attitude

ATOC was measured by the 8-item unifactorial scale (Remmers, Gage, & Rummel, 1965) that consist of items such as, "People of other cultures are equal in intelligence to people in my own group".  $\chi^2 = 17.63$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.93$ , SRMR = .01, GFI = .984, NFI = .987, IFI = .992, TLI .979, CFI = .992, PNFI = .695 and RMSEA = .07; M = 3.41, SD = .971, Cronbach's alpha = .91.

## Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication competence was measured by the 15-item unifactorial scale (Arasaratnam, 2009) that consist of items such as, "I often notice similarities in personality between people who belong to completely different cultures".  $\chi^2 = 113.79$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.70$ , SRMR = .03, GFI = .940, NFI = .956, IFI = .972, TLI .963, CFI = .972, PNFI = .730 and RMSEA = .07; M = 3.44, SD = .849, Cronbach's alpha = .93.

## RESULTS

The data were analyzed by using two software's; SPSS and AMOS version 23. Various tests were conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the constructs. Structural Equation Modelling was employed to determine the causal relationship between the variables.

### Measurement Model

The assessment of the fitness of the measurement model was carried out to assess the composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) and discriminant validity to check the reliability and validity of the construct. According to Table 1, all the results exceed the threshold level. Through CFA the fitness of the model was produced. The measurement model of the study indicated the values of the fitness indices and confirmed that the data had an excellent fit to the model;  $\chi^2 = 233.25$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.06$ , SRMR = .03, GFI = .925, NFI = .943, IFI = .970, TLI .964, CFI = .970, PNFI = .784 and RMSEA = .05.

**Table 1. CR, AVE and Discriminant Validity**

	CR	AVE	ATOC	ICC
ATOC	.917	.648	<b>.805</b>	
ICC	.940	.588	.439***	<b>.767</b>

\*\*\* p < 0.001

The results of the regression analysis of the study are presented in Table 2. The findings show a positive significant relationship between ATOC and ICC ( $\beta = .439$ ,  $t = 7.563$ ,  $p < .001$ ). International students' positive ATOC having a statistically significant influence on their ICC. Therefore, the hypothesis (H1) was supported by the findings of the study.

**Table 2. Regression analysis for Hypothesis Testing**

Path	$\beta$	S.E	t	p	Status
ATOC → ICC	.439	.053	7.563	***	Significant

\*\*\* p < 0.001

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this study is to further examine the relationship between positive ATOC and ICC from the Non-Western context of Malaysia. The results revealed a positive significant relationship among ATOC and ICC, confirming the findings of the Western context that individuals with the positive attitudes regarding the people of different cultural backgrounds are competent in their intercultural communication. The present study contributes to the current body of knowledge and increased the understanding by exploring the connection that is previously done in the Western context. As discussed earlier, Arasaratnam (2016) investigation revealed a significant association between ATOC and ICC. The findings confirmed that from a Non-Western context Malaysia, students do possess such favorable attitudes for the people of diverse cultures which can produce favorable outcomes in terms of their intercultural communication.

The findings of this relationship are according to the investigations of Gudykunst et al. (1977), Arasaratnam (2004), and Byram (2008) about ICC influenced by the ATOC of the individuals. The findings also supported Wiseman et al. (1989) and Hannigan's (1990) assertion that having a more positive ATOC increases the competency of the individual in intercultural communication. This study is in line with previous studies on individuals who possess positive ATOC are more interculturally competent compared to others (Byram et al., 2002; Manathunga, 2009).

The relationship between ATOC and ICC can be witnessed from the empirical culture-general models of ICC (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Arasaratnam et al., 2010a, 2010b) in the Western context. On the other hand, specifically for the Non-Western context, it is evident from the findings of this study that positive ATOC significantly influences the ICC of international students of Malaysia.

The present study not only contributes to the association between ATOC and ICC from a Non-Western context but also sheds light to a prediction made by the AUM theory developed by Gudykunst (2005). He predicts that when the positive expectations regarding the culturally different individual's increases, it results to increase their behaviors to behave appropriately and effectively. These positive expectations are closely related to the positive attitudes of the culturally different individuals. Therefore, it is evident from the findings of this study that a positive attitude towards other cultures significantly influences the intercultural communication competence of the international students of Malaysia.

The findings of this study can help the policymakers of ministry of higher education commission of Malaysia in a number of ways. Firstly, as indicated in the findings that the international students are having more positive ATOC which directly contributes to their ICC. So, they can make future policies a bit flexible for international students as they appeared positive in their attitudes towards other cultures. It further reveals that the international students are likely to adjust in Malaysia. Thus, it may assist that ministry of higher education commission is likely to execute their plan of 2020. Lastly, one can learn how to become competent in intercultural communication. Ministry of higher education commission can utilize these variables or investigate other contributors of ICC (such as sensation seeking, empathy, motivation, etc.) to provide training sessions to the international students. By the training, they can improve the competence of the international students which ultimately links with their adjustment and results to fulfill their plans of 2020 for making Malaysia a hub of international students.

There are several limitations that need to be mentioned in this study. Firstly, the data were collected from the international students of the one public university of Malaysia, the findings could not be generalized to the student population of private universities. Secondly, to examine the association between the variables, this study incorporated a cross-sectional survey technique which can limit the causal interpretation of the results. The impact of attitudes and other factors on ICC is needed from the longitudinal studies.

## CONCLUSION

This study clearly supported the findings of the previous studies that attitude towards other cultures contributes to

intercultural communication competence. The association between ATOC and ICC was investigated for the very first time in the Non-Western context of Malaysia. Even though the participants of the study were from multiple cultural backgrounds, still indicated noteworthy results. Furthermore, the international students were mainly from the Muslim countries and they are living in a Muslim country (Malaysia) that is why their attitudes towards other cultures are positive and have a strong influence on their competency during intercultural interactions. What is yet to be addressed is whether this relationship remains significant from the other Non-Western contexts. If this link can be examined in the upcoming researches, it may provide worthy results regarding the assessment of the attitudes of the individuals that belong to the Non-Western countries. In addition to confirming the established relationship between ATOC and ICC from the Non-Western context of Malaysia, the future researchers should consider other trait-like factors (such as empathy, sensation seeking, motivation, etc.) influencing ICC of the individuals.

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