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Reflections on the Function of National Images in Intra- and Intercultural Communication

Jens Allwood
The Immigrant Institute, Marston Hill Intercultural Center for Quality of Life, Strömstad Academy & The University of Gothenburg

Abstract: This paper presents an analysis and some reflections on the nature of national-ethnic images (mostly visual) in intercultural and intra-cultural communication. We discuss some of the functions and possible principles of national-ethnic images for “soft power” and “national branding”. The discussion is illustrated by examples of positive and negative self- and other-images from different nations with different purposes and the images are discussed in relation to their level of concreteness or abstraction and the types of signs they contain. Examples of historical changes in national images are given and comparisons between the images of different nations are made. The purpose of the article is to increase understanding of national images as one of the mechanisms through which cultural attitudes can be constructed.

Keywords: national images, soft power, national-ethnic images, intercultural communication, intra-cultural communication, national branding.

1. Why are national images interesting?
One of the problems in teaching intercultural communication is that we need an understanding of cultural differences, without thereby increasing prejudice that leads to discrimination and conflict. Unfortunately, national images (when they are part of branding [Kotler et al. 1997] or soft power [Nye 2004]) often tend to make differences between cultures larger, stressing uniqueness and differences rather than similarities. Since national images are an important part of the mechanisms through which cultural attitudes can be constructed, we need to examine the nature of national-ethnic images more carefully as an aid in understanding the nature of cultural differences and similarities.

2. Introduction
The paper is based on an interdisciplinary combination of perspectives from semiotics (Peirce 1931–58), anthropology (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952), branding theory (Kotler, Jatusripitak & Maesincee 1997), media analysis (Neal 2012), rhetoric (Kennedy 1994), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995), political science (Nye 2004) and communication theory (Allwood 1985, 2013).

Semiotics is used to try to determine the semiotic status (i.e., index, icon or symbol) of national images, anthropology and communication theory to get a perspective on the definitions proposed, and branding theory, media analysis, rhetoric, critical discourse analysis, political science as well as communication theory to investigate their function.

The method employed in the paper is abductive (Peirce 1931–58), and qualitative, using examples of images from the public domain to contribute to a deconstruction and analysis of the structure and function of national images as means to construct nationalism and national as well as cultural identity.

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1 Immigrant Institute, c/o Småtuvegatan 12, 431 69 Mölndal, Sweden. Email: jens@allwood.se.
First, however, we will discuss some concepts that we will need in our examination and discussion; they are communication, culture, ethnicity, national image. All pictures in the article are used non-commercially. They are taken from the public domain and are reproduced for illustrative research purposes only.

3. Some concepts needed for our analysis

3.1 What is communication?
We can define “communication” as follows: communication = sharing of information, cognitive content, or understanding (which of these three concepts is used to describe what is shared, depends on the focus of discussion). The sharing can take place with varying degrees of consciousness and intentionality. Thus, communication can also take place on subconscious levels.

We can also define “to communicate with someone” as follows: A (sender) communicates with B (recipient) iff A and B share a cognitive content as a result of B’s having been influenced by A (A’s behavior or by the result of A’s behavior e.g. texts, other symbols or pictures e.g., national images).

Further we may note that communication is a causally conditioned, activity influenced, motivated type of rational action in which the understanding of communication requires using both intentional and causal explanations; see also Allwood (2013).

3.2 What is culture and inter/intra-cultural communication?
We can define “culture” in the following way: culture = patterns (similarities) between people that are not given directly by nature concerning four main types of phenomena; see Allwood (1985):

- Thoughts.
- Behavior.
- Artifacts.
- Traces in nature.

Culture is always the result of human cultivation of Nature and does not concern the similarities between people that are directly given by Nature, like the ability to walk or the ability to breathe. It could, however concern specific patterns of breathing or walking in a particular community, since this would be the result of cultivation of the abilities given by Nature. Culture therefore always involves Nature as its basis. Natural events, however can occur without the involvement of culture. Nature thus imposes basic constraints on culture. However, human activity and culture can then in their turn also influence Nature to some extent.

Definitions of culture can vary with regard to how many of the four types of cultural phenomena listed above, they include. Basically, we can distinguish definitions of “culture in a wide sense” from definitions of “culture in a narrow sense”; see also Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952).

(i) Culture in a wide sense includes technology, economy and agriculture.

(ii) Culture in a narrow sense includes behavior and/or only thoughts.

As we will see below, in actual empirical data the four aspects are mostly combined and influence each other: e.g., in health care and education. Although culture can be based on many types of human groups, like regions (the culture of a city or a province, gender (culture of men or women or age (culture of young, middle aged or old people), we will in what follows, in this paper, be primarily interested in the culture of national and ethnic groups.
Using the definitions given above, we can now also define “inter-cultural communication” and “intra-cultural communication”.

- **Inter-cultural communication** = communication between people with different cultural backgrounds (national, ethnic).
- **Intra-cultural communication** = communication between people with the same cultural background (national, ethnic).

### 3.3 What is ethnicity and ethnic group?

Two other concepts that often appear in the discussion of national images are “ethnic group” and “ethnicity”. Let us therefore also define these two concepts for our discussion.

We can define “ethnic group” as follows:

- **Ethnic group** = group of people united by a belief in a common ancestry, sometimes with a desire for political autonomy (e.g., French, Russians, Swedes, Sami, North American Indians).

…And “ethnicity” as:

- **Ethnicity** = the culture of an ethnic group.

Ethnic groups can be differentiated from national groups since the latter do not have to involve belief in common ancestry, rather the term “national group” instead indicates political autonomy (Australians, US Americans, Russians, Swedes). In parallel with “ethnicity”, we can thus define “national culture” in the following way:

- **National culture** = the culture of a national group.

In line with the definitions given above, we may now note that some ethnic groups like the Swedes and the Han-Chinese are also national groups, while others like the Sami and the Miao are ethnic groups but not national groups.

### 3.4 Comparison of cultures

Making use of the four main aspects of culture introduced above, we can compare two or more national or ethnic units with each other with regard to thoughts, behavior, artifacts, traces in nature and different combinations of the four aspects.

Combinations of the four aspects are found in history, politics, institutions, economics, business and legal practices. National images usually combine thoughts and artifacts but can also be based on behavior and traces in Nature.

### 3.5 Analysis of national images

We can define a national image in the following way:

- **National image** = a description in symbolic (verbal and other) or iconic (pictorial) form that captures some property claimed to be characteristic (indexical) of a national (or possibly ethnic group).

National images are often based on cultural stereotypes (i.e., common but not necessarily well-founded generalizations about the group). Some of the issues, we will be concerned with in analyzing, describing, classifying, discussing and understanding national image construction, are the following:

- What is the semiotic status in the Peircean sense of the image: symbolic, iconic or indexical or a combination (see Peirce 1931–58)?
- Is the image positive or negative or a combination?
• Is the image a self-image for a domestic audience (self → self) or a self-image for a non-domestic audience (self → other) or is it an other-image for a domestic audience (other → self)? It could also be an other-image for a non-domestic audience (other → other) or a combination of these.

• What are the communicative functions of national images, especially the functions, identified in rhetoric and critical discourse analysis (see below and see Aristotle in Kennedy 1994 and Fairclough 1995)?

Two important functions of national images are building up the self-identity of a national group (“selfing”) and building up a conception of the identity of other national groups from the point of view of the first group (“othering”). In this paper, I will discuss if we can find principles of selfing and othering. To do this we will examine the role of national images in communication, with the goal of finding some features of selfing and othering.

This means we will be interested in how the national images are used for intra-cultural communication (self → self, other → self): e.g., for mobilization, loyalty, solidarity, protect regime or how they are used for intercultural communication (self → other, other → other): e.g., to give a positive self-image, give a negative other-image. We will be interested in discovering similarities and possible uses of images for both intra-cultural and inter-cultural communication.

4. Some examples of national images described with the features given above

4.1 Semiotic status: Symbolic or iconic with indexical features

Flags are usually national images with mostly symbolic (arbitrary, conventional) features. Sometimes they also have iconic and indexical features. For example, the cross is an icon for the Christian cross and also an index of the Christian faith. Images of the sun, the moon or different stars are icons of different heavenly bodies (see figures 1 and 2) which often in addition are given an indexical or symbolic interpretation. For example, the iconic stars on the flag of the USA are symbols of the states which make up the union of the United States.

![Figure 1: National flags.](image-url)
In the Swedish national coat of arms (Figure 3), symbolic, iconic and indexical features are combined. The crown is an icon of a royal crown and also an index of the king and the national state. The fact that there are three crowns probably has its origin in the Swedish king Magnus Eriksson who called himself king of Sweden, Norway and Skåne (then part of Denmark). The other symbols are heraldic coats of arms for the royal families that dominated Sweden. There are many other types of national images. Many are created for home consumption, often to boost loyalty and self-confidence. Usually, they involve a combination of iconic, indexical features.

4.2 Self-images for home audience (intra-cultural communication)

A very common metaphor when it comes to self-images is that of a mother, father or ancestor. We can see this, both in linguistic expressions, like motherland, fatherland, mother language and in more iconic images like images of Rule Britannia (Great Britain) or Mother Svea (Sweden). Sometimes these self-images are humorous like the images of Uncle Sam (USA), John Bull (Great Britain) – see Figure 4 – or Ola Norman (Norway).
The two self-images of Uncle Sam and John Bull have at times also been very well known outside of the USA and Britain, so they have become other-images of USA and Britain that could be used in the two countries and (perhaps outside) to create images of cooperation between them (Figure 5).

![Figure 4: USA's Uncle Sam and Great Britain's John Bull.](image)

Let us now take a look at some of the functions of national images in intra-cultural communication. A first function can be found by asking the main question of critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough 1995, Van Dijk 1998, Wodak 2001): in whose interest is the national image constructed? Some possible answers to this question are: The functions of national images are in the interest of the nation itself and those ruling it, often to promote loyalty and to mobilize the population for whatever goals the rulers of the nation have. In some national cultures this can best be achieved by having positive and humorous national images. In others, more dramatic and sometimes aggressive images are required.

Our functional analysis can also be aided carrying out an analysis of the rhetoric (see Kennedy 1994) of national images. Following Aristotle, we distinguish the rhetorical aspects of logos, ethos and pathos of any message. For many national self-images the logos is to communicate Strength, the ethos is to communicate trustworthiness because of solidarity with the nation, in some national cultures reinforced by humor and the pathos is to evoke solidarity, unity, loyalty and mobilization.

![Figure 5: Cooperation between the USA and Great Britain.](image)
4.3 Other-images for home audience and other audience

Let us now take a look at some examples of iconic-symboic national images of other nations. The images combine humorous and negative features and are intended both for a home audience and for audiences in other countries. The examples are English and are images of France and Frenchmen, Germany and Germans and Russia and Russians (Figure 6).

**Figure 6:** A frog (French), a kraut (German), the Russian bear.

In some cases, a sense of humor takes over, as when Dutch people use the other-image Belgians have of them *Kaaskopje* (cheese head) to make fun of themselves or when Belgians use the other-image Dutch and French people have of them *Fritje* (fried potato) to make fun of themselves. They are adding an other-image of themselves to their self-image to make fun of themselves (Figure 7).

**Figure 7:** Humorous Belgians and Dutch: *Kaaskopjes* (“cheese heads”; Dutch) and *Fritjes* (“pommes frites”; Belgians).

4.4 National images in war

In war, national images are mainly related to strength of the own nation and weakness of the enemy nation(s). In World War I, the Germans were fighting the Russians, the French and the British, and the British (as well as the French and Russians) were fighting the Germans. In the two national war images below (Figure 8) we see the self-images of both Germany and Britain and their enemy other-images meant both for a home audience and for audiences in other nations to influence them. The Germans are told *magst ruhig sein* (you can be calm) and the British poster belittles the Germans by metaphorically representing them as a pig, which the British will make bacon out of.
Figure 8: German self-image and enemy other-image of Russian, French and British; British self-image and other-image of the Germans.

If we again carry out a rhetorical analysis, we can see that the images communicate *logos*: strength of the own nation; *ethos*: credibility, believe this because we are strong; and *pathos*: directed to own nation, be brave, fight.

4.5 National image and inter-cultural communication
Let us now turn to consider the role of national images in intercultural communication: i.e., how do we want to portray ourselves to people in other nations. Again, we can ask: “in whose interest is the image constructed?”; and, again, the reply very often is the nation itself and those ruling it. The functions of the images are also similar since the images can reach also the own population. In relation to the home audience they should inspire, reinforce loyalty and mobilize the nation for the goals of the leaders. In times of conflict, the images should also frighten and sometimes belittle others, in order to strengthen self-confidence. As we have seen, in some cultures, this is best done through positive and humorous national images, while in others more dramatic images are thought to be more effective. As for a rhetorical analysis, the *logos*, *ethos*, *pathos* and national image in conflictual intercultural communication are also similar to intra-cultural functions: *logos* (strength), perhaps also thought to give credibility(*ethos*), and pathos to evoke solidarity, unity, loyalty and self-confidence in the own nation by belittling others as well as *pathos* evoking fear and low confidence in others.

We will now continue our discussion of national images by considering some national images from the Nordic European countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland).

5. Nordic national images
5.1 Nordic traditional positive heroic self-images
The images we will consider are national self-images made both for domestic and foreign consumption. Traditionally, Nordic self-images were very often oriented to a supposedly glorious past, using images of Vikings, 17th Century Protestant warriors and more modern times polar explorers or soldiers in the Second World War. Below we first present some versions of the most popular figure: the Viking. The images show how the Viking has retained its popularity to our days, in the Nordic countries. Small children can draw Vikings and dress up as Vikings (Figure 9).
During the period 1600–1700, Sweden-Finland and to some extent Denmark-Norway were heavily involved in the religion-based conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Europe. This also gave rise to heroic self-images. One very popular such image was that of the Swedish king Gustaphus II Adolphus: the hero Protestant king from the north (Figure 10).

Another self-image that was very popular during the 19th Century and first half of the 20th Century was that of the explorer of the unknown and perhaps dangerous areas of the Earth. Two such areas were the Arctic and Antarctic regions (the North and South Pole), and the

Figure 9: The Viking (Denmark, Norway, Sweden).

Figure 10: The hero Protestant (Sweden, 1600s).
polar explorer was a popular figure in Denmark, Norway, Sweden in the 18-1900s. This image was popular in all three countries but perhaps most of all in Norway (Figure 11).

**Figure 11:** Norway on the North Pole.

Finally, in the 20th Century, the Second World War was also a source of new heroic images, especially in Finland where there was a lot of pride in the tough Finnish soldiers (Figure 12).

**Figure 12:** The tough soldier (Finland, World War II).

5.2 Nordic more modern positive national images

With a possible exception of the Viking, Nordic national images, the last fifty years have, however, been less focused on heroes and more focused on other aspects of modern life such as design, where the concepts of Scandinavian design as well as of Swedish design, Danish design and Finnish design have been launched (see Figure 13). In all three cases, claims have been made that the styles of design combine elegance and skillfulness. In the Swedish case, the company IKEA has spread ideals of design to many areas of Earth.

**Figure 13:** Swedish design, Danish design, Finnish design.

Another modern theme of Norway, Sweden, Finland is to use their beautiful Nature to promote a positive national image. Beside Nature, Sweden has also tried to use its welfare state to create a positive self- and other-image. This has been done in serious ways and more humorous even satirical ways. Below (Figure 14), we see two such attempts.
5.3 Nordic humorous negative national images
Just like in the central European countries, there are many negative humorous images of others in the Nordic countries. The Swedes make fun of the Danes claiming that they are treacherous, petty bourgeois and drunk. The Danes make fun of the Swedes saying that they have a Soviet-like political correctness mentality and are drunk. The Norwegians make fun of the Swedes saying that they are “Germans in Human guise”. The Swedes make fun of the Finns saying that they drink, fight and are silent and strong. As we can see the two last claimed characteristics of the Finns are not only negative. Below we can see some of the images in pictorial form (Figure 15).

![Figure 15: Swede, Dane and Norwegian, and a drunken Swede.](image)

5.4 Other negative humorous images
All over the world, it is fairly common for nations who believe they are strong to have humorous negative images of other groups. Sometimes these other groups are weaker groups. An example of this

![Figure 16: German image of an East Frisian and English image of an Irishman.](image)
are the German jokes about East Frisians, the English jokes about the Irish or the American jokes about the Polish. Below we see German and English negative humorous images of East Frisians and Irish (Figure 16).

Negative evaluations of weaker groups are relatively common all over the world. However, sometimes these evaluations meet resistance from the weaker groups so that negative humorous counter images are also produced in the other direction. This has happened to a great extent in the Nordic countries where initial Swedish jokes about Norwegians and Finns have been met with resistance producing a lot of Norwegian jokes about Swedes and Finnish jokes about Swedes. The same thing has happened in the Netherlands and Belgium where Dutch jokes about the Belgians have been met by Belgian jokes about the Dutch and vice versa.

As we have seen, negative humorous images can also be used in conflicts, where the sense of humor is virtually absent; one such example is a caricature from the Opium War in China which builds on the Chinese talk of long-nosed foreign devils (Figure 17).

**Figure 17**: Chinese caricature of Western long-nosed foreign devils.

### 5.5 More on the functions of national image and intra-cultural communication

We can now return to our analytic questions concerning the functions of national images, to see if the answers we have suggested need to be modified in the light of the new types of humorous and negative images we have considered. Concerning in whose interest the national image is constructed, the answer is the same as before, the functions of national images continue to be in the interest of a particular nation (however perhaps not always directly in the interest of those ruling it), often to promote self-confidence and to belittle people in other nations rather than to promote loyalty or to mobilize the population for some cause.

As far as functions of national images, we have seen that positive self-images often have the function of inspiring loyalty and mobilization, while negative national other-images often are related to evoking self-confidence combined with condescension toward other groups. Both of these functions are related to the pathos function of rhetorical analysis. Regarding the logos and ethos of humorous and negative national images, the logos remains an expression of strength, the ethos relies on the credibility of mobilization in one’s own interest.

We have also seen how images change due to pressures of political correctness dependent on ideology. In the next section we will consider some more examples of how national images can be constructed under the influence of political correctness: this time from the Soviet Union and Russia, finally ending up with a comparison between Sweden and China.

### 6. National images: Changes and differences

#### 6.1 Soviet positive intra-cultural self-images

The images below reflect how Soviet images changed in the period from 1948 to 1965. In 1948, following World War II, the focus was on producing bread and food. In the 1950s, focus was on achieving five-year plans, and the last image reflects national pride in being first in exploring space (Figure 18).
6.2 Soviet negative intra-cultural self-images
Especially the first ten years of the existence of the Soviet Union involve a struggle between capitalism and the new Soviet Communist power. This found expression in images depicting exploitation and subjugation and the struggle against this (Figure 19). These images disappeared in later stages of Soviet development.

Figure 19: Soviet negative conflictual images.

6.3 Changes in national images: From the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation
In 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved and replaced by the Russian Federation. This political change has also meant that the national images of Russia have changed. In general, they have become more traditional and sometimes softer than during the Soviet period. See Figure 20.
6.4 A comparison of Sweden and China

We have seen above how national images change with the historical development of political and other ideals. It is also interesting to note how national images are dependent on different concerns and ideals in different national cultures. Below (Figure 21), we compare National Day images from Sweden and China.

Figure 21: National Day images in Sweden and China.

We can see how Sweden focuses on Nature and popular celebration while the Chinese focus is on the unity of the traditional temple of heaven with the national communist banner as well as on national military strength. In both nations, flags – perhaps the most widespread of all national symbols – are used to promote national identity.

7. Some conclusions

National images are made with a communicative purpose. They are an essential part of national culture construction as well as of ambitions concerning soft power (Nye 2004) and exhibit many similarities in structure and function across nations. From a Peircean semiotic point of view, the most abstract national images are symbolic, possibly with some iconic and indexical elements, often they are flags or coats of arms with the function of unifying the nation.

The national images that are iconic images can be self-images or other-images, or combinations where an image is meant both for a home audience and an audience in other nations. Images can be positive or negative or combinations of positive and negative. Often
positive images are self-images and negative images other-images. Sometimes negative images are also used for a domestic audience when there is internal conflict.

Intercultural other-images have often been negative in the past – combining attempts at soft power with hard power through war and conflict. Intra-cultural self-images are often positive or ambiguous – often connected with mobilization of effort, or with promoting a positive self-attitude and loyalty. One of the differences between nations concerning national images seems to be the status of humor. All nations seem to attempt satirical humor directed against other nations. Some nations also seem to tolerate and appreciate self-directed humor while others avoid this.

Even if we can see similarities in the structure and function of national images across nations, their function is often to increase differences between cultures, for example, by employing negative other-images or overly positive self-images. Since in accordance with soft power ambitions of promoting the own nation, they often tend to emphasize uniqueness and to deemphasize similarities, they should therefore be analyzed and deconstructed, in order to facilitate an increased appreciation of the similarities between cultures. An appreciation, which, in turn, will probably tend to support positive outcomes of intercultural communication.

About the author

Jens Allwood is professor of Communication Studies at Strömstad Academy. He is born in Moline, Illinois, USA in 1947. He is active as a researcher and professor emeritus, in projects at the University of Gothenburg. He is also active in the Company Communication Development J.A. & E.A. HB. He is the director of Marston Hill Intercultural Center for Quality of Life, chairman of the board of the Immigrant Institute and editor in chief of the Journal of Intercultural Communication (on-line, open access). He has worked as researcher and teacher in linguistics, specialized in semantics, pragmatics, corpus linguistics, multimodal communication and intercultural communication. He has coordinated and participated in a large number of national and international research project in semantics, pragmatics, corpus linguistics, studies of spoken language, multimodal communication, intercultural communication and development of research and research education. He has been the chairman of the department of linguistics, director of the Interdisciplinary center SCCIIL (semantics, cognition, communication, information, interaction, language).

References


The Double-Edged Sword of Empathy: Two Migrant-Serving Organizations in South Texas

Miriam Sobre¹ & Emily Ehmer

University of Texas at San Antonio

Abstract: While Texas has long led other US American states in number of refugees resettled, anti-migrant rhetoric globally and locally creates challenges for nonprofit organizations serving refugees and asylum seekers. This paper represents a portion of an ongoing project focusing on the needs and scope of two organizations serving migrants in San Antonio, Texas: a nonprofit focusing on legal and educational resources for migrants, and a liberal arts university’s campus coalition assisting migrants in South Texas. The project reported on here is ongoing. This paper only reports on the work with these organizations and the development and early stages of interventions to assist employees and volunteers in intercultural communication, community outreach, and post-secondary trauma.

Keywords: refugees, migrants, intercultural communication, post-secondary trauma, intercultural training, social justice advocacy.

1. Introduction

Texas leads the nation in the number of refugees resettled: from 2007 through 2015, 54,400 refugees were resettled. With the Trump administration’s anti-immigration actions and Texas Governor Greg Abbott’s complicity in blocking refugee and migrant rights, it is more salient than ever to understand migrant transitions to new cultures – given the current hostile environment and the impending shift of white US American citizens from majority into minority status.

This project examines two organizations in San Antonio, Texas, working with refugees and asylum issues; this paper presents the initial analysis of these organizations. The first (henceforth referred to as NP for “nonprofit”) is a nonprofit that provides legal and educational assistance with rights and citizenship; programs for torture survivors, asylum-seekers, and victims of violent crime; emergency shelter; and legal services. The second (henceforth referred to as CO for “campus organization”) is a private, liberal arts university-based program with a mission to raise funds for refugee education, provide tutoring and ESL for migrants, and educate the local community about migrants. People aided by these organizations include those arriving from the Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador), as well as refugees and migrants from the Middle East and North Africa. Our purpose for the section of the study reported here is to examine current education, training and strategies used by both groups; to propose solutions for intercultural education and training and other needs for those working with migrants; and to discuss some beginning interventions. First, we offer political and theoretical context.

2. Background, context, and theory

2.1 Convention of refugee status treaty

The majority population’s perceptions of migrants can drastically affect their transition into their host culture (Halualani, Mendoza & Drewzwiecka 2009); current rhetoric seeks to

¹ Dept. of Communication, Main Building 2.248.6, College of Liberal and Fine Arts, 1 UTSA Circle, San Antonio, TX 78249 USA. Email: miriam.sobre@utsa.edu.
dehumanize them every way possible (Campoy 2018). Since Trump took office in 2017, he enacted two orders that directly hinder migrants from entering the country (Volz et al. 2017): an expansion of detention centers along the border and increased removal of individuals entering the country. Under wildly swinging policy, families are currently kept intact in family detention centers or released with a court date while awaiting a decision. Migrants held in detention have at times been separated from their families and submitted to legal hearings without legal assistance to determine if they should be granted amnesty in the United States (Volz et al. 2017). The US State Department lowered the cap for US refugee resettlement in 2018 to 50,000; more recently (2019), Trump slashed the number to 18,000 (Shear & Kanno-Youngs 2019).

**Texas legislation 2017-2018.** Texas lawmakers followed the federal government’s actions at the state level. The Sanctuary Cities Bill (SB4) gives Texas officers the ability to question the immigration status of anyone they detain (Texas Legislature Online 2017). The law punishes local government heads and officials who don’t cooperate with agents’ requests to arrest immigrants subject to deportation, and mandates exchanging immigration information.

The Texas legislature approved $800 million of spending for state-based border security despite Trump’s promise to make border security a federal priority (Choi & Logan 2017). Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) has been in increasing peril; currently, Congress has been unable to address the issue, despite government shutdowns. Over half of the 2,000-mile US/Mexico border is in Texas. This includes hundreds of miles and 5,000 parcels of property in the path of Trump’s proposed wall (Choi & Logan 2017), which he began to construct in 2019. Utilizing intercultural communication theory, we analyze how organizations like NP and CO navigate the often contradictory anti-immigration terrain below.

**2.2 Intercultural Communication Theory**

**2.2.1 Cultural transitions**

Cross-cultural adaptation encompasses the process by which individuals learn the roles and customs of a new culture (Ting-Toomey 1999). In this research, culture refers not to a static concept but a dynamic process that communicatively constitutive and incorporates shifting sets of norms, values, and insular and accommodative actions (Bartlett, Mendenhall & Ghaffar-Kucher 2017). Our research examines how locals can aid transition experiences of migrants forced into diaspora due to threats of extreme violence at home. Such migrants are often encouraged to assimilate to dominant host cultures entirely, rather than self-segregate into cultural enclaves (Ting-Toomey 1999).

Migrants with access to networks (cultural, religious, and familial, including home and host-culture nationals and other migrants) experience an easier cultural transition than those who don’t (De La Garza & Ono 2015: 277). Organizational connections can further aid migrant transitions. Studies show organizations working with migrants can help to “facilitate cultural assimilation (e.g., language courses, interventions to limit ethnic enclaves, civic and cultural activities to foster interactions between migrants and natives) [and] may have great potential regarding increasing immigrants’ well-being” (Angelini, Casi, & Corazzini 2015: 841). These organizations provide social support, aiding immigrants and reducing their uncertainty and anxiety.

Sobre-Denton, Carlsten and Greuel (2013) note that intercultural communication competence (knowledge and skills to communicate appropriately and effectively across cultures) may be limited to privileged populations and doesn’t reflect shifting demographics and cultural flows. While migrant experiences in new cultures rely on the ability to navigate host cultures, alongside connecting with sympathetic host-cultural members, we do not take
the perspective that intercultural communication competence is the best solution to the refugee crisis. More nuanced approaches must account for postcolonial cultural identities, including critical aspects of power, race, and gender, on both migrants and those who aid them.

2.2.2 Brown bodies and white privilege
As white Americans’ majority position in the US is threatened, cross-border migrations by those designated as non-white (particularly those who appear “brown”, including Arabs, Muslims, Latinxs, and South Asians) have become increasingly demonized in national (and global) political rhetoric. In South Texas, given the influx of Latinx migrants from the Northern Triangle beginning in 2014, it is beneficial for whiteness scholars and activists to join Latinx activists in the call to re-center whiteness with respect to Latinx identities (Moreman & Calafell 2008). It is challenging to describe whiteness/Latinx constructions of identities without moving towards attempts to “reify Latinas/Latinos as Others through the disciplining and division of Latino masculinity and Latina femininity” (Moreman & Calafell 2008: 310).

In a study of caregivers working with Mexican and Central American refugees, while many were proud of their work, respondents reported symptoms of secondary traumatic stress (Husk & Terrazas 2015). Those (predominantly women of color) working directly with migrants in legal aid and counseling reported feeling horrified by refugees’ stories of abuse, helpless at their own inability to change the situation, and suffering from burnout. That said, many were impressed by their clients’ strength and courage. Hispanic caregivers exhibited more resilience working with migrants than their white counterparts due to high degrees of compassion satisfaction, self-care management skills, and family and community connections.

This relationship invites educational interventions to encourage intercultural dialogue for both migrants and host-locals, particularly caregivers, for migration to move beyond forced assimilation and inevitable prejudice, given the current administration’s rhetoric and migration policies.

2.3 Nonprofit organizations, refugees and asylum seekers
Community diversity has led to the formation of nonprofits to meet the specialized needs of particular groups (Grønbjerg & Paarleber 2001). The necessity to bridge cultural differences between host nationals and migrants is particularly important in research on migration to new – and increasingly hostile – host-cultural environments (Croucher, Caetano & Campbell 2018). Nonprofit organizations have evolved to serve migrant populations alongside municipal initiatives to create culturally welcoming environments. Volunteer-based agencies may be faith-based or secular nongovernmental organizations with the goal of supporting the economic and social integration of refugees (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2017). Asylum seekers, traveling to the US and entering at a land border or port, may qualify to receive asylee or refugee status and be served by voluntary agencies after receiving approval (US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2017). Those who do not qualify face deportation.

Heightened emphasis on enforcement actions against asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants increases the need for access to legal counsel to navigate increasingly complex immigration laws (Annobil 2009). These nonprofit organizations offer pro bono legal counsel to prevent deportation, increase knowledge of immigrants’ rights, and challenge immigration policies and practices impeding the rights of noncitizens facing removal (The Immigration Representation Project 2008). In Texas, dozens of organizations provide pro bono legal services; each agency specifies which types of cases it handles.

The organizations participating in the portion of the project reported here represent minority coalitions: they are based off an initiative and have grassroot origins (Germane 2015). Grassroot organizations or coalitions focus on local problems rather than national
legislation (Cable & Benson 1993). The coalitions formed within NP and CO focus on community-level injustices. Community coalitions provide resources for members to identify and solve problems, potentially enabling systemic community change (Zakocs & Edwards 2006). When communities work together towards a shared agenda, this forms kinship and reduces hostility (Torres 2002).

2.4 Research questions
This paper explores processes that people in migrant-serving organizations use to aid these communities and populations. Our research questions include:

- **RQ1**: What needs should organizations in the San Antonio area address to assure safe, educational, and positive transitions to their host communities?
- **RQ2**: What kinds of education and training are needed for assisting refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in the San Antonio area?

3. Methods
This study uses a participatory action research (PAR; Reardon 1998) framework, meaning research attempting to understand the site through collaboration with members, creating reflection and change. Researchers bear “moral witness to experiences of disillusionment, disorientation, suffering, and trauma that arise in fragile and volatile post-independence cultures” (Lindlof & Taylor 2011: 62). We explore collective goals of the communities we work within, while ensuring pragmatic and theoretical goals are simultaneously met.

Methods to collect and analyze data include participant observation, formal/informal interviews, and coordinating monthly meetings with a cohort of interested parties including members of NP, CO, faculty and students of three local universities, and additional interested individuals. Interventions were developed in concert with the expressed needs of the organizations. While these interventions are still nascent, they are being developed into trainings and workshops in collaboration with the researchers, interested parties and the two organizations.

3.1 Participants
Participants were recruited through snowball and convenience sampling (Lindlof & Taylor 2011). Site selection arose from the researchers’ personal and professional connections, solicited through social-media networking and word-of-mouth calls within local groups with sympathetic interests. Participants included employees, interns and volunteers for NP in San Antonio, as well as university students and others involved with CO. Participants were solicited and approved by gatekeepers of each organization in concert with the researchers. Sixteen participants were interviewed for the study and eighteen interviews transcribed: nine for NP and nine for CO; three participants had worked at both organizations. Participants, five males and 11 females, ranged in age from 18-44 years. Interviewees were predominantly immigrants: eight from Mexico, one each from the Philippians, Columbia, Jordan, Syria, Cyprus, and Palestine. Those originally from the local area were all first- or second-generation immigrants.

We gained access to participants through their ongoing engagement with each site (Lindlof & Taylor 2011). An ever-changing workgroup was formed to develop ideas and interventions for each site, based on interest in the project, meeting monthly March–August 2017. While some participants were formal interviewees, twelve additional people took part in these meetings and other events who were not formally interviewed for the project, reflecting its PAR nature.
3.2 Interviews
Semi-structured interviews were conducted from October 2016 through August 2017. Questions were developed along the literature review’s themes, including working with migrants, processes migrants go through, intercultural education, current social and political influences, and organizations and roles participants worked within. Interviews ranged from 25-60 minutes, yielding ~300 pages of transcription. They were conducted by the researchers and both researchers’ graduate assistants.

We transcribed the interviews by dividing them equally. We made sure to transcribe interviews we had not conducted and have the researcher who conducted the interview check the transcription for accuracy. Transcription was done via listening to digitally recorded interviews stripped of participant identifiers; digital files were deleted once the transcriptions were completed and checked by the original interviewer. We found it important to transcribe and analyze the research in detail so we could ensure our findings were not what we were searching for, but rather inductively emergent.

3.3 Observations
Observations took place from the fall of 2016 through the fall of 2017 in several venues: CO monthly meetings; a city-wide Cultural Conversations workshop involving educational, governmental and nonprofit organizations working with migrants; SB4 protest rallies; Muslim-ban open forums cosponsored by CO; NP’s Refugee Advocate Training programs; Greyhound Station intervention trainings; meetings with educators and refugee parents in local migrant enclaves; naturalization and DACA clinics; local elementary school ESL programs educating migrant students; and monthly meetings between the researchers and key members of CO and NP as described above. We conducted approximately 50 hours of participant observation across venues. Notes were taken using observational frameworks describing the scene, participants, and procedures at events. We conducted several informal informational interviews, which were not recorded or transcribed.

3.4 Analysis
An inductive codebook was developed by three of the researchers (one graduate assistant dropped out of the project). Four interviews were cross-coded, then the codes developed independently based on emergent themes related to the research questions. These were combined and reduced during two codebook development sessions. The final codebook consisted of fifteen open codes (Lindlof & Taylor 2011), which were identified, described, and used across the data. Coding was divided among the three researchers using this codebook, then triple checked for consistency. Member-checking interview data was used extensively as well to ensure that interventions discussed below were what the participants were seeking. This level of coding and analysis was necessary to triangulate data and develop valid findings, rather than reflecting the independent perceptions of the researchers.

After coding all data, we broke it down into line-by-line transcriptions by code and, referring to memos and coding notes, developed themes for each code, ultimately connecting the themes together as patterns emerged. After three months of intensive coding analysis, we found that the data emerged into patterns across four overarching themes.

4. Results and discussion
4.1 Political context
During project development, Obama was US president; however, as data collection began, Trump was elected, causing our research to take a sharp turn. San Antonio received immediate backlash reflecting anti-immigration ideologies, as a new bill was gaining traction. SB4, a controversial bill making sanctuary cities in Texas illegal, passed in May 2017. San
Antonio sued, claiming the bill was unconstitutional; however, the bill has since taken hold. Since we started this project, NP has gained traction as an organization, raising over $20 million in a viral Facebook campaign and relying on grassroots and social-media consciousness raising. Narrative and linguistic choices were found at both sites to be common tools in the fight for knowledge and power. These are explored below.

4.2 Narrative and language
We found two linguistic strategies used by participants to influence perception: providing agency to and humanizing migrants. Applying Foucault's (1995) theory on knowledge and power, we propose that through sharing stories and propositioning specific linguistic choices, both NP and CO advocate a juxtaposition to the dehumanizing discursive formation surrounding migrants.

4.2.1 Humanizing language
Migrants are purposefully dehumanized through linguistic strategies like detention center requests to transport “bodies” rather than people. In 2018, the Department of Justice mandated that US officials must use the term “illegal aliens” rather than “undocumented migrants” (Campoy 2018). During a CO meeting, when someone used the term “illegal immigrants”, group leaders quickly intervened, noting the imperative to change cognitive categories through language. This point was often reiterated in interviews: refugees/asylees should be called “undocumented migrants”, rather than “illegals”, “illegal immigrants”, or “illegal aliens”. Participants stressed the importance of ensuring proper language when discussing and conversing with migrants. Participant T1 discussed how simply changing the identifier “aliens” to “migrants” or “victims” to “survivors” both humanizes and empowers migrants. These linguistic choices fight the common ideology of migrants as subhuman law-breakers, viewing people not simply as “bodies”, as ICE employees are instructed to call them, but as “survivors” of harrowing experiences. When sharing stories, speakers must carefully select the language they are using to avoid further de-humanization. Participant B1 exemplified this by discussing the importance of migrants’ titles; they urged awareness of the power that labeling and language have on migrant identities.

4.2.2 Agency, knowledge, and storytelling
Foucault (1995) discusses how power translates through knowledge, occupying individual identities through ritualistic information sessions. For asylum seekers and migrants, these identifiers directly impact how courts judge their stories. Such rhetoric treats individuals as objects by taking away unique aspects of their individual character (Foucault 1995). Participants discussed fighting this objectification through culturally appropriate language use, like addressing migrants as *Usted* (“you”, formal) rather than *Tú* (“you”, informal), or acknowledging migrants’ experiences and listening to their stories, restoring humanity stripped away throughout ordeals. Sharing stories was mentioned by participants in both NP and CO as a way to construct new discursive formations that embody enhanced empathy with others, especially those who may have opposing beliefs about immigration:

M1: For thousands of years people told their stories and I think that it’s really powerful… about humanity and one of the humanizing things there is. So I think if I could figure out how to tell these stories and get people to understand these stories, I think that’s when you start making a difference.
These narratives out a human face on the “alien” anecdote of immigration. Through sharing stories, members of CO and NP illuminate moments not often seen by the media and battle commonly held stereotypes. This battle also engages consciousness-raising through education.

4.3 Education
At the Cultural Conversations workshop that we observed, we learned that education (and its need/lack) permeates immigration processes. While educational focus is considered important by both CO and NP (as noted in 13 of the 18 interviews and often during observation sessions), types and uses of education vary across contexts.

4.3.1 English as a second language
The most obvious discussion of education involves English as a second language. Much of CO’s work involves assisting teachers and ESL programs at local elementary schools serving immigrant enclaves in San Antonio. Two major components emerged: the politics of teaching ESL and the practicalities, finding people who can communicate with the variegated population these schools serve, able to speak not just Spanish or Arabic, but also Portuguese, Burmese, Turkish, Dari, and other languages. Finding instructors who know these languages in South Texas poses challenges, disregarding that ESL programs in Texas teach to the TEKS test, which excludes cultural knowledge. As cultural knowledge is imperative to language acquisition, cultural understanding, and successful adaptation (Schieffelin & Ochs 1986), this is an increasing issue, particularly in an educationally conservative state (Johnson 2015).

4.3.2 Consciousness-raising
As soon as we began to discuss education with participants, its synonymity with consciousness-raising became clear. At the university where CO is housed, education represents a priority, bringing the wider community to campus for forums, panels and lectures about immigration. Participant J1 notes:

A lot that comes with the education is educating just the student body first, outreaching to the community second. We’re doing a lot of stuff through immigration panels and things like that… bringing in professors, outside speakers, and specialists to serve on panels, educating students and others in the community.

Participant A3 agrees:

CO’s main goal with NP could be accessing the interest and energy at [the university] and connecting that to what NP needs. So, we’re trying to do that with awareness, like the panel discussion, with practical service things like change of address forms, and to connect the pre-law society with lawyers in the community.

In terms of consciousness-raising, much of NP’s educational goals directly involve workshops advising migrants of their rights on US soil. NP-sponsored naturalization and DACA clinics inform migrants of their rights and connect with larger communities to dispel migrant stereotypes. NP has an education and outreach department whose sole purpose is to empower migrants:

B1: The first thing is that education is power. So, what we do is what we do is “know your rights” because a lot of the affected community is scared especially with SB4… having that information empowers them.

4.3.3 Intercultural interventions
Research (Sobre-Denton, Carlsen & Greuel 2014; Landis, Bennet & Bennet 2004) indicates that most individuals working with refugees and migrants have not undergone any formal
intercultural training. We found that most intercultural training happens *in situ*, responding to challenging interactions on the ground. Multiple participants noted that intercultural training is needed at varying levels: for employees and volunteers at NP and CO to be able to work with populations they serve, for migrants needing to connect with members of the dominant culture, and for community members facing local inundation with migrant populations. Several members of CO and NP, during formal and informal interviews, stressed the necessity for intercultural training to work with these populations, and the overwhelming lack of resources.

One way intercultural training occurs *in situ* involves working with migrants who travel through San Antonio from detention centers via the Greyhound bus station. Multiple participants described the necessity of understanding cultural cues to restore dignity to migrant women and children. Nonverbal communication issues arise: according to Participant T1, the largely Latina population of employees and volunteers meeting female migrants and their children may instinctively want to hug them, but since sexual violence is typical on the journey, such contact, while culturally appropriate, isn’t always situationally appropriate. As volunteers meet migrants at the station with backpacks of supplies, intercultural sensitivity plays a role in selecting backpack items and filling out administering paperwork. One volunteer mentioned the importance of including sanitary items and beauty items like razors and hairbrushes because it is important that Latina women feel they are taking care of their self-presentation to preserve their dignity. Such cultural knowledge is not readily apparent. Even filling out paperwork needs cultural and contextual consideration. Participant T1 notes:

> It’s very cultural; the people that we serve at the bus station have never been given anything for free. Back in their home countries they’re running away from very dire situations that ask something in return for whatever they are given… a lot of times we will give them supplies to help them figure out their bus station ticket… they will feel compelled to answer that survey for you because you gave them help. We need to be aware of this so we don’t coerce them without meaning to.

Here, cultural knowledge would be highly useful, but is not readily available; one must fill out intake forms to negotiate the asylum process correctly; yet form work was deliberately obfuscated by the Trump administration (Barrett, Dawsey & Miroff 2018). Finally, cultural knowledge is needed to thrive in US society. Migrants have few resources to apply for jobs, find homes and schools, and become involved in their communities, according to Participant Y1:

> Understanding [refugees’] culture… can help a lot in allowing them to assimilate in the US as much as they can. Because a lot of them didn’t come here by choice…. So their ability and their willingness to… become part of this society is sometimes hindered by the fact that they don’t understand this culture.

Intercultural training is needed but lacking across contexts, hindering opportunities for successful transitions and inclusive communities.

### 4.3.4 Empathy

Global competency research emphasizes empathy in education, promoting the importance of empathetic educators throughout the pedagogical process (Sobre-Denton, Carlsen & Greuel 2014). Fourteen interviewees explained that they work with migrants due to their own positions as first- or second-generation migrants, several from the same locations that the migrants have escaped. This cultural connection combined with a sense of privilege of legal US citizenship has led participants to a strong desire to give back to communities, often so similar to their own cultural groups. This provides a deep connection to the migrant
In the end, we are all here because we are united in one mission, one drive, one passion. So [the migrants] are all people who are very similar to us.

For RQ2, we learned that education is paramount to assisting migrants. While present throughout both sites, education is neither formalized, consistent, nor connected across venues. The need for formal intercultural training was expressed by the majority of participants at both organizations. We similarly found that while intercultural education is being learned and used *in situ*, it is not being shared across venues. This emphasizes needed coalition-building across multiple organizations working with migrants in the greater San Antonio community, discussed in the conclusion.

### 4.4 Race, gender and burnout

Unexpectedly, the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, citizenship, gender and power exists not only in the communities that NP and CO serve, but in the organizations themselves. Data across interviews and participant observation yielded complex hierarchies, particularly at NP. Oftentimes, power imbalances, along with migrants’ personal experiences, cause post-secondary trauma and burnout for those working with them. This disconnects with those in higher-up positions, who don’t seem to experience such issues, causing high turnover rates for lower-level employees and volunteers at NP and members and leadership at CO.

#### 4.4.1 Race, ethnicity and gender at NP

During observations, particularly at NP, white males occupied positions of power while women of color did most of the on-the-ground interfacing with migrants and community members. Early in our research with NP, we noted high turnover rates of employees. Over the data collection period, our main contacts turned over four times. Many individuals we interviewed are no longer with NP. We found that burnout seemed to lead to tenure of about a year for employees who worked in the education and outreach sector, our main contacts. Multiple factors lead to burnout: stress of post-secondary trauma from working with victims of sexual assault, human trafficking, and other traumas; injustices faced by migrants and the system due to dehumanizing practices encouraged by ICE and the Trump administration; constant uncertainty and continually changing mandates due to rapid increase of anti-immigrant legislation and sentiment; lack of decent paychecks; and lack of environmental and psychological/emotional support combined with long hours and compassion fatigue.

One primary way this was witnessed was as a large discrepancy between white, male, economically-privileged employees in leadership positions at NP and the everyday trauma experienced by primarily women-of-color staff working directly with refugees and migrants. Husk and Terrazas (2017: 258) state that “bi-lingual providers of Hispanic origin almost exclusively serve the client population of refugees”. As Participant A1 notes:

> A lot of my peers… don’t wanna work at NP ’cause they’ve left already because of this complete disregard for like our opinions and like who gets the raises, who gets the new title and the new position and it continuously is white people.

Participant B1, who works in education and outreach for NP, states:

> I think a lot of leadership is all white… and it brings up a lot of disconnection…. I think for myself I really want to remind them that a lot of the people that they are working with, there are racial disconnections.

Participant A1 emphasizes:
What does it do for the leadership in an organization to be all or mostly white that serves a population that is of color and is more vulnerable?

While all involved legitimately want to help refugees and migrants as much as possible, the infrastructure, including compensation and support, lacks follow-through to assist its employees. There is a strong perception from lower-level employees that this disconnect is due to race, ethnicity, and gender. This cements findings on organizational diversity issues in nonprofits by Johansen and Zhu (2017): gender has an active impact on attitudes towards diversity issues in public and private sectors. Although we tried repeatedly to interview individuals in more powerful positions at NP, we were never able to connect with these individuals beyond observations and informal interviews during events.

4.4.2 The double-edged sword of empathy

Another emergent issue involves what we call the double-edged sword of empathy. Eight interview participants were from Mexico; one each hailed from the Philippians, Cypress, Palestine, Columbia, Jordan, and Syria. Remaining participants were from the San Antonio or Austin area from second-generation immigrant families. This is not coincidental. Participant M1 notes:

It is difficult to create empathy for others if they’re never been in a situation like that before.

Educational and outreach programs rely on empathy. Thus, they are staffed by people who empathize with migrants as their own situations are, while not analogous, similar.

Guilt accompanies the privileged legal immigration status due to circumstances, socioeconomic position, and family connections, and is compounded by working with those who have had harrowing experiences trying to gain similar privileges. This leads to high emotional connectedness to migrants’ plights, causing burnout, thus contributing to high turnover rates. Participant T1 articulates:

This passion, it can lead to some problems when people are over-dedicated; when you can’t say no to things, burnout is a real thing.

This double-edged sword of empathy paradox is that involvement is imperative, but that with high levels of compassion, the work becomes completely draining, leading to illness, depression, and post-secondary trauma. This can be considered compassion fatigue, what Adams, Boscarino and Figley (2010: 105) define as a “…caregiver's reduced capacity or interest in being empathic or ‘bearing the suffering of clients’ and is ‘the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced or suffered by a person’”. Compassion fatigue relates to the com/passion with which folks at NP and CO approach the traumatized populations they connect with, but also creates greater capacity for burnout. That, combined with time and resource restrictions, has led members of both CO and NP to choose to leave their organizations, requiring a break from the emotional labor performed daily as they work with those less fortunate by nothing other than circumstances.

4.4.3 Burnout

Husk and Terrazas (2017: 258) describe the high incidences of violence experienced by migrants from South and Central America as they travel north, and the secondary trauma that nonprofit workers and other caregivers experience through their work with these communities:
Many of those who have migrated have directly experienced or witnessed traumatic events such as kidnapping, murder, assault, rape, torture, death threats, and extortion. Mental health and non-profit agencies that serve migrants have been swamped with individuals who have the signs and symptoms of acute anxiety disorder, PTSD, panic attacks, and depression.

Our findings overwhelmingly supported this. Nine of 16 interviewees directly mentioned postsecondary trauma; nearly all referred to trauma even if they didn't use the term. Several participants pointed to the disturbing process of credible-fear interviews as directly contributing to severe trauma. Participant B1 noted that these interviews serve as deterrent processes, forcing mothers to describe in detail the violence they are fleeing in front of their children, or to “choose” to return home. The possibility of confronting children with such violence is systematically intended to deter mothers from describing their circumstances, thus disallowing them to justify seeking asylum in the US. These interviews are distressing for asylum-seekers, and hearing their stories often leads to a sense of shared trauma by empathetic helpers. Musalo and Lee (2017: 145) describe the processes where “asylum officers have conducted CFIs of mothers in detention in the presence of their children… [requiring] mothers to testify fully and to reveal traumatizing details such as death threats and sexual assault”. The degradation of disenfranchised people gets passed onto those who work with them.

One of the biggest needs of both organizations involves developing strategies to help workers and volunteers mitigate these traumatic effects. At CO, the magnitude of problems to be addressed deters members from participating for longer time periods. Witte’s (1992) Extended Parallel Process Model provides a rationale for this: a tipping point exists for dealing with the high levels of stress and trauma experienced by the at-risk communities, after which employees of NP and members of CO will quit. Witte (1992) defines “danger control” as stressful situations dealt with by exercising agency: for instance, perception of the injustices to which migrants are subjected might lead to seeking work with these communities to reduce the injustices perpetrated against them. “Fear control”, conversely, is where perceptions of the problem become so overwhelming that the individual seeks to remove themselves from the situation entirely. According to EPPM, the “critical point” is the moment when individuals cannot handle the stress/fear anymore and move from danger control to fear control. This points to reframing and self-care as possible approaches to helping workers feel more in control of their environments. Participant T1, a member of CO who later worked at NP, describes existing approaches to self-care at NP:

When we got our secondhand trauma training we were like, our bar is not that high, it’s like finding a buddy to make sure that you eat lunch, which sounds stupid but on a day like today where I have back-to-back meetings if I didn’t have my buddy that brings me lunch today, I wouldn’t have eaten today.

We have attempted to intervene through assisting in establishing self-care programs including yoga, guided meditation, and training sessions for intercultural and reframing strategies; time and resources currently prohibit it. While members of both groups repeatedly cited this as a main issue for burnout, busy schedules, overwork, and lack of additional resources led to bypassing opportunities for self-care.

During interviews, we repeatedly asked participants what we, as researchers, could do to help their organizations (RQ1). Next, we use our expertise and findings to provide recommendations for CO, NP, and similar organizations to increase intercultural competence in an increasingly polarized nation. Some of these recommendations are currently being implemented, but it is beyond the scope of this article to follow these longitudinally at this time.
5. Recommendations

Given our PAR framework, at the request of both organizations, we provide below a list of recommendations. This paper focuses primarily on assessing the needs and considerations for each group and the wider community. At the time of writing, one author of this paper has worked with a colleague to develop an intercultural training program that we are waiting to schedule delivering to NP. We are also in talks with NP and CO to integrate yoga, meditation, and support groups for members of both organizations, with the present option of a bi-monthly day of support for volunteers and employees at both organizations. This list of recommendations has been shared with both organizations, and is in the process of being actualized, to be reported on in subsequent papers.

5.1 Intercultural training

Several participants pointed out the lack of intercultural knowledge to adapt to the host community. Members of CO and NP stress the necessity for intercultural education, citing a dearth of resources designated for such training. Participant B1 states that during events, many legal advisors, volunteers, and community organizers lacked understanding of the local culture and the migrant communities they serve. This is salient due to lack of trust in the system most migrants have; “know your rights” outreach needs to be accessible and understandable, which isn’t always the case, given the lack of cultural context and information available. Specified intercultural trainings are currently being developed by researchers and other members of interested parties, and will be addressed in future articles.

NP would also benefit greatly from workplace diversity training. This would assist in addressing power differentials (and perceptions thereof) between those at the top and those on the ground. Voicing concerns of the predominantly women-of-color working for the organization has the potential to provide resources to prevent burnout and trauma. Given the influx of funding NP received in summer 2018, being able to hire outside trainers to aid employees could reduce high employee turnover and the concomitant cost of new training, while increasing employment satisfaction. One researcher on this project has developed a diversity training to be carried out at NP, but we haven’t heard back from NP to schedule its implementation.

One alternative to intercultural training might involve active listening sessions with vertical members of both associations (those in power listening to those working on the ground), discussing stresses and requirements of the job that are not currently met. We found that many participants, particularly of NP, felt like their struggles weren’t being heard or understood by the leadership; a non-disciplinary way of airing grievances in a supportive environment could prove useful. We are still figuring out how this might work in the continually changing structure of NP.

5.2 Reframing

One way to assist individuals dealing with postsecondary trauma and burnout involves helping workers reframe perceptions of traumatic situations they experience. If workers feel that they have increased agency over circumstances, they might be less likely to suffer burnout and engage in fear control. One possibility involves regaining agency through personal narrative and storytelling between migrants and host culture members. Stories de-emphasize political ideologies, and allow migrants and participants to tell their truth and their experiences. Through storytelling and listening, people can reduce stereotypes, because they’re exposed to a different “side” of the ideological narrative that has progressed throughout the USA.

Another useful reframing strategy is the oxygen mask theory. We found that most people working with migrants are women, from more group-oriented co-cultures, and have
guilt due to perceived privilege of citizenship. Such folks are likely to put others’ needs before their own. One useful reframe might involve putting one’s own oxygen mask on before assisting those less able. This emphasizes self-care attending to the physical, psychological and emotional health of the self first, thus being better able to assist others in the long term.

In concert with a local yoga studio and trauma-informed yoga teacher, we are working to create bi-monthly self-care days involving yoga and meditation with NP, also open to members of CO.

5.3 Coalition building

Unfortunately, we found that there are so many organizations working on these issues in San Antonio, each one trying to reinvent the wheel – yet few are in contact with one another. Regardless of myriad organizations working with these populations, little lasting communication crosses organizational borders. Organizations working with migrants in the San Antonio area include (inexhaustively) Catholic Charities, Center for Refugee Services, Interfaith Welcome Coalition, Migrant Center for Human Rights, Dreamers Resource Center at UTSA, DACA at Alamo Colleges District, CARA Project, Justice for our Neighbors, San Antonio Sanctuary Network, and South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation Project.

For example, CO is housed at a private university and is attempting to reach out to develop branches at two other universities, one in San Antonio and one 40 miles away. Much of CO’s work assists teachers and ESL programs at local elementary schools that serve immigrant enclaves. Researchers at a different university have reached out to another elementary school in an adjacent district that also serves a refugee and migrant community – yet these two programs are not in contact with one another.

After several meetings where we attempted to liaise with folks across organizations, we found most groups don’t connect with one another; some are actually at odds with each other. The presence of so many organizations, nonprofits, educational and religious/interfaith groups, but the lack of coalition-building among these groups, indicates a large gap in potential productivity. We recommend a city-wide task force, involving educators (ESL, community, and university), local government, religious/interfaith groups, and nonprofit organizations, similar to the Cultural Conversations workshop mentioned at the beginning of this paper, but meeting on a regular basis like our taskforce. As of the fall of 2019, our principal investigator and a faculty member from another university have been working with the city of San Antonio immigration liaison to attempt more community outreach and coalition building. Results of this work may be reported in a follow-up study.

6. Limitations

This research project represents a portion of a larger study on a small cross-section of work with refugees and migrants in one region of the world. It barely scratches the surface of migration processes and their political, social and cultural implications. Given the at-risk nature of the populations these organizations serve, we were not able to collect useful data from the migrants themselves, only those who worked with them. While CO was very transparent about their organization (not surprising, given its collegiate nature), NP’s leadership, though repeatedly contacted for interviews, were never able to connect with our researchers, despite multiple visits to the offices and contact attempts. Thus, this paper reflects the values of the participants we worked with but doesn’t present a complete picture of the organizations.

Current administrative changes, such as Governor Greg Abbott’s 2020 ending of refugee resettlement in the state of Texas, make it difficult to state whether NP will be able to schedule the intercultural trainings and workshops developed by the principal investigator and colleagues or find other means of assisting employees. We are currently waiting to hear from
NP and CO to schedule interventions, information on which they have already received. The current precarious nature of the state of resettlement necessitates a follow-up study on the implementation and longitudinal outcomes of such interventions, as the current work cannot report on them at this time.

Additional future research will determine whether and how such interventions are applied to NP, and the impacts of these on workplace satisfaction and employee burnout. A follow-up project is currently being developed that attempts to connect more deeply with NP and similar organizations, potentially through a wider variety of gatekeepers at multiple levels.

During the political period of our data collection, the changing administration and constant shifts in border policies threw both organizations into disarray, obfuscating which issues were temporary, which were more permanent, and which were entirely contextual. This paper is limited in terms of the scope of interventions that we can report. In truth, any organizations working with migrants on the southern US border (and across migrant-crossings throughout the world) are so constantly in flux that research might at best only be able to bandage current concerns, as they shift so rapidly. This paper, using a PAR framework, serves to describe parts of the project including conceptualizing the problems and developing interventions that we hope to apply in the future and report the outcomes of within the next two years.

In the face of current trends away from globalism and towards populism, we can only hope that this research provides a jumping-off point to study more organizations, improving communication and connections at the micro, meso and macro levels. Cultural flows will not slow; it is our responsibility as academics, community members, and empathic human beings to continue to work in the face of increasingly reactionary policies. We need to make empathy less of a double-edged sword and more a tool to fight global injustices perpetrated against those in need.

About the authors

Miriam Shoshana Sobre is a lecturer of communication at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She teaches classes on intercultural communication, research methods, language and culture, communication theory, and diversity. She has been working as a professor of intercultural communication for nine years, and has been studying intercultural communication for nineteen. She received her BA in English from the University of Puget Sound, her MA in language and culture from the University of Texas at Austin, and her PhD in intercultural communication from Arizona State University. She has written one other book, Cultivating Cosmopolitanism for Intercultural Communication, which won the Best Single Authored Book Award for the International and Intercultural Communication Division of the National Communication Association. She has published articles on intercultural communication, white privilege and intersectionality, language and culture, and intercultural communication pedagogy in journals such as The International Journal of Intercultural Relations, The Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Education, The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, and Communication Theory.

Dr. Emily Ehmer grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, and earned her BA in arts administration from Butler University, her MA in public relations from Ball State University, and her PhD in mass Communication from Indiana University. Prior to her graduate degrees, she had a career as a newspaper journalist and public-relations director for government and non-profit organizations. Dr. Ehmer's dissertation analyzed conflicting media portrayals of Burmese refugee populations. Her subsequent research continued to focus on the media’s role in the framing of immigration issues and citizenship, and their intersection with gender and social
movements. Dr. Ehmer served as associate professor with the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University in San Marcos until her death in 2019.

Dr. Ehmer is on the left, Dr. Sobre on the right.

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Strategies to Overcome Communication Apprehension during Academic Presentations: A Case of International Students in Malaysian Universities

Fatemeh Amiri¹ & Marlia Puteh²
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Abstract: Communication apprehension is defined as “an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey 1984: 279). While many prior studies have investigated oral communication apprehension among undergraduate students, there has been little research exploring this phenomenon among doctoral students. This study applied qualitative methodology via observation and interviews. The research subjects were international doctoral students from several Malaysian universities. The experiences of the students in communicating with their examination panel during academic presentations (e.g., proposal and viva) are analyzed and the strategies and techniques employed to overcome communication apprehension are explored.

Keywords: oral communication apprehension, international doctoral students, academic presentations.

1. Introduction

University students are generally required to interact orally in various contexts: namely, class presentations and conference presentations, discussions with professors, and thesis oral defenses. These academic activities are significant not only for the successful completion of courses and programs but also for the students’ disciplinary enculturation and apprenticeship into academic discourse and culture (Morita 2000). International students, particularly those whose first language is not English, experience a more challenging situation, especially when speech is both formal and critical to success (Lipovsky 2006).

This study emphasizes the highest layer of students' communication pursuit: i.e., their viva. According to Howard and colleagues (2002), one's viva (final doctoral oral examination) depends highly on students' oral communication skills. Without the support of supervisors, notes, or books, students are forced to perform under pressure. Howard and colleagues add that the vitality of oral skills is manifest in the candidate's ability to defend his research project and clarify aspects of his work.

A viva is a situation that imposes a lot of negative feelings and pressure on doctoral candidates. A common predisposition that may affect students in such an event is communication apprehension (CA). CA has been identified as a major factor that inhibits an individual’s willingness to communicate and ability to develop effective communication skills.

This paper offers insights into how international doctoral students relate the experience of presenting during viva sessions. Six themes emerge from the findings: self-confidence, use of efficient presentation strategies, passivity, positive cognitive restructuring, visualization
techniques, and (in relation to the interaction between students and their examiners) (inter-)
cultural awareness.

Intercultural awareness is regarded as the foundation of communication. It encompasses
two qualities: awareness of one’s own culture and of another culture. Put differently, it
covers the ability to stand back from one’s own point of view with enhanced awareness of
not only one’s own cultural values, beliefs and perceptions but also those of other cultures.
Cultural awareness is crucial when one communicates with individuals from other cultures.
Bush and colleagues (2001) demonstrate that a communicator's cultural awareness is a key
factor in developing intercultural communication competence. Zimmermann (1995) reports
that getting along with the owners of one culture is essential to successful communication.
Wiseman and colleagues (1989) note a positive correlation between intercultural
communication competence and awareness of other cultures.

This study has its theoretical origins in the integrative theory of cross-cultural
adaptation. Its main focus is on international students’ coping mechanisms in overcoming
communication apprehension in the academic context: i.e., in the viva and other presentations.

2. Literature review

International students are confronted with many problems when crossing national borders to
pursue their education. Their experience may have an impact on their academic success and
psychological well-being (Poyrazli & Grahame 2007). There is a general consensus among
researchers that international students’ communication problems are the main reason for
numerous challenges that transcend all areas of their personal and social lives (Sandhu 1994).
Communication research has identified a number of barriers to communication. Klimova and
Semradova (2012) identify issues including relevant differences of national culture, life
temperament, personal disposition and character, style of thinking, paradigm of rationality,
professional level, age, experience/knowledge, and language.

Communication practices and behaviors inevitably vary as a result of different
perspectives on the world. Intercultural communication is defined as the study of
communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct
enough to alter their communication (Samovar & Porter 1997). Samovar and Porter illustrate
how the meaning of a message changes when it is encoded by a person in one culture and
decoded by a person in another culture, in the context of that person’s own cultural
background. In some cases, the message may be interpreted to carry a different meaning than
intended.

Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimension of power distance is very much relevant to this
research. Hofstede defines power distance as “the extent to which the less powerful members
of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally”.

There is definitely an absolute divergence of power between international doctoral
students and their examination panels. Hofstede’s definition of power distance is based on a
survey on IBM Corporation staff in 72 countries. It may not quite capture international
students’ experience of power distance in the context of educational attainment.

This study evaluates students’ adaptation in relation to Kim’s (1988) five dimensions of
integrative theory: namely personal, social and ethnic communications, as well as
environment and predispositions. Kim’s theory embraces the hosts (Malaysian examiners) and
the newcomers (international students).

In a recent study on ethnic proximity and cross-cultural adaptation by Asian and
European students in the United States, Kim and Kim (2016) elaborate the central part of
integrative theory that includes personal and social communications involving host-
communication competence that shapes the host’s interpersonal (IC) and mass
communication (MC) as well as newcomers’ ethnic IC and MC. Personal and social-
communication engagements during IC and MC activities provide newcomers with “…distinct, subcultural experiences with fellow co-ethnics” (Kim & Kim 2016: 64).

The present research is significant because it emphasizes the need to include the newcomers’ (i.e., students) communicative competence, rather than only focusing on the host’s communicative competence, as per Kim (1988). The students’ competence in interpreting and responding to interactions is crucial in easing the process.

Oral presentation – especially during the viva – is a real challenge for international students because it is conducted in English. Ability to communicate clearly under pressure and defend ideas is vital for success. Some individuals encounter challenges communicating with their examiners.

Previous studies have classified language, cultural and educational issues as the major challenges faced by non-native English speakers. Some of these studies focus more on linguistic issues while others find educational issues to be the major problem for international students (Alavi & Mansor 2011, Andrade 2006, Brown 2000, Campbell & Li 2008, Novera 2004). McCroskey (1984) identifies seven factors leading to CA: low intellectual skills, low social self-esteem, speech deficiencies, social alienation, voluntary social introversion, communication anxiety, and ethnic/cultural divergence in communication norms. Barriers to effective communication – as identified by Klimova and Semradova (2012) and Smith (2013): physical, perceptual, emotional, cultural, linguistic, gender, and interpersonal barriers – contribute to CA during academic presentations.

Andrade (2006) notes that, with distinct differences, both international and domestic students face academic and social transition issues in their first year of university. Ohnishi and Ford (2015) reason that domestic students are more advantaged than international students because they are well-versed on the university environment and have cultural knowledge within a particular university system. Brown (2000) writes that, despite fulfilling the English language prerequisite (i.e., IELTS), many students feel inferior for their poor oral English ability and suffer from apprehension and low self-confidence. Krashen (1982) argues that an individual’s low self-image negatively influences his language experience. Andrade (2006) claims that academic and linguistic issues gradually reduce as students improve their linguistic and research skills; i.e., CA disappears once students demonstrate sufficient improvement. Radzuan and Kaur (2010) relate limited technical knowledge and limitations in students’ English proficiency to students’ CA during academic presentation. Academic presentations, particularly one’s viva voce, cause students to display anxiety due to worries whether their research has addressed and sufficiently articulated the criteria for the award of a doctorate (Tinkler & Jackson 2004).

A few studies have been conducted investigating CA among international students in Malaysia. Amiri and Puthe (2018) studied cross-cultural communication and international doctoral students’ experiences of CA during academic presentations. Participants’ CA was influenced by linguistic issues, deficiency in knowledge of research, negative perceptions towards the presentation panel and related factors.

Another study (Zhiping & Paramasivam 2013) on international postgraduate students highlighted the students’ anxiety speaking English due to CA and fear of negative evaluation. The study revealed that Nigerian students who speak English as a second language are more proficient in English and display lower levels of anxiety compared to their peers from Iran or Algeria who speak English as a foreign language.

Idris and colleagues (2015) surveyed 170 international postgraduate students on English comprehension and interpersonal communication at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Most of the study participants reported feeling awkward, uncomfortable, embarrassed, nervous and anxious in speaking English with their peers and supervisors. The researchers call for further
research to identify students’ experiences of CA to assist them towards more effective interpersonal communication.

Morita (2000) argues that non-native-English-speaking students experience psychological difficulties (lack of confidence or an inferiority complex, along with linguistic and sociocultural difficulties) related to presenting orally. Carter (2012) writes that international students' experience of the viva differs from their native counterparts, as they experience more language anxiety; this anxiety increases when speech is both formal and critical to success. Ariff and Mugableh (2013) investigated experiences of Jordanians in Malaysia. They discovered that linguistic difficulties were the students' main concern: particularly vocabulary, pronunciation, listening comprehension, and difficulties related to the immediacy and interactive nature of spoken language. The researchers argue that lack of experience in oral academic presentations in English put Jordanians in a difficult position while completing their studies. Ariff and Mugableh's motivation for their study is the growth in the number of international students in Malaysia with evidence of dissatisfaction and experience of CA. Their focus is on strategies employed by the international postgraduate students during academic presentations.

3. Method

This objective of this paper is to explore the phenomenon of oral communication apprehension (OCA) experienced by international doctoral students in Malaysia. Observations and interviews were conducted to develop an understanding of “the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples’ experiences” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). First, an interview guide and observation protocol were prepared which, drawing from the literature, directed the topics to be covered. The emphasis in the literature on strategies employed to eliminate OCA shaped the construction of the interview guide and observation protocol.

The interview participants comprised 25 male and female international doctoral students from multiple public universities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Participants were chosen on the basis of their level of study and country of origin.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher clarified the objective of the study and the confidential nature of the research, emphasizing the interviewee’s anonymity. The initial part of each interview was devoted to demographic information. When sufficient rapport was built up so that the interviewee seemed comfortable, the conversation turned to the interviewee’s experience and perception of OCA during academic presentations. Interviews were voice recorded for subsequent transcription.

Gaining entrance to the observation site was accomplished through personal contact recommended by the interview participants. The researcher attended, as an observer, an open session of proposal presentations offered by one university's faculty. She participated during each question-and-answer session as permitted by the presentation format. She took field notes during the presentations and recorded them with participants' permission. She had the opportunity to establish rapport with the students and foster their cooperation.

The data was analyzed using NVivo v.11 software to uncover common themes. Using Ryan and Bernard’s (2003) terminologies, themes were unfolded inductively from the data as well as deductively from the literature. Most of the themes emerged from the empirical data: interview transcriptions and observation images. Open-ended questions unearthed fundamental expressions that assisted the researcher. The process of discovering themes is described as open coding by the grounded theorists and as qualitative analysis by the content analysts.

The NVivo software is designed for qualitative, mixed-methodology research. It helped to 1) reorganize the coding and node structure quickly; 2) ensure efficient, effective and easy
coding making retrieval easier; 3) improve accuracy of the qualitative study, and 4) assist precise and transparent data analysis (Zamawe 2015). It assists recording, sorting, matching and linking data without losing access to the source data or context from which the data has been sourced (Bazeley & Jackson 2013). It facilitates efficient organization of nonnumerical, unstructured data with powerful procedures to index and search; simplifies complex data; offers an ample toolkit for speedy coding thorough exploration and exhaustive organization and analysis; is prized for generating text-data matrixes for comparisons; and provides for visually mapping themes identified in the analysis. The coding procedure for the present study applied the coding method suggested by Corbin and Strauss (1990) consisting of open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

4. Results
As said, six themes emerged from the data: self-confidence, efficient presentation strategies, passivity, positive cognitive restructuring, visualization techniques and cultural awareness.

4.1 Self-confidence
Participants reported that their confidence is gained from acquiring sufficient knowledge in the subject matter and an ability to anticipate beyond the current research. Confidence in one's own research was viewed as a great way to control anxiety during academic presentations:

   **P6:** I put this in my mind [that] no one in this class knows my title better than me. This is the way to encourage me and don’t interrupt myself and don’t hesitate and gone.

   **P9:** I think the best thing is to try to be enough confident. This is the only way you can reduce your anxiety.

By the researcher’s own observations: whenever students had academically reasonable justifications sufficient to convince the examiner, linguistic issues or anxiety were no longer a concern to the student. When students were not able to provide the requested answer, heightened anxiety was evident from their voices and behavior. They found themselves at a loss for words, repeated themselves, etc.

4.2 Efficient presentation strategies
Strategies included preparing good slides, rehearsing, preparing notes, engaging in eye contact with examiners and memorizing the presentation. Participant P13:

   Even they don’t understand English, through diagram, graph and pictures in my slides I was able to show them pictures in my slides. Because they have the knowledge, they know what you are doing but the main thing is their English by seeing the diagram, graph, they know where I am going through. They knew what is happening.

Participant P7 rehearsed his presentation many times, to reduce his anxiety:

   I usually do preparation. I usually do rehearse before the presentation. Rehearsal to overcome the anxiety. I think as long as presentation is concerned the only thing is preparation and rehearsal that can help you out.

Some participants prepared notes as preparation for the question-and-answer session; Participant P6:

   I [had] written the whole things that I will say, just in case maybe I feel anxious. Sometimes is not all the discussions inside the in presentation asking and answer. It is
more notes, I wrote the notes to get benefit and see what’s the weaknesses places that I have. I kept busy with writing these notes and try to say something about if I have.

Participant P5 made use of eye contact:

I try to [have] eye contact with them. When they comment me I try to accept their comments. I openly welcome any comments.

Some students compensated for their language deficiencies by memorizing their presentations.

P10: I focus on reading when I have presentation the previous night to make myself confident. Sometimes I try to memorize full sentences.

4.3 Passivity
Passivity is an effective coping strategy in two situations: first, in situations where a student feels he lacks sufficient knowledge to argue with his examiner. Passivity was the basis for the coding category full agreement to avoid confrontation. Students may react expressively but non-verbally in response to intense OCA. An individual may attempt to mask his true feelings of anxiety by smiling or laughing. Consider:

P7: But yes of course you feel nervousness when you do not know the answer… now you surrender yourself to the evaluators because I knew that I can’t do anything.

There are instances when students are forced to remain passive despite high confidence in their work. This can be an effective technique when dealing with strict examiners asserting their authority over students.

P2: If they are saying something even you don’t like you have just to agree. If you make like just disagreement or like argument you will get in troubles.

The student tried to save face by smiling and nodding when she failed to convince the examiners during the Q-and-A session.

4.4 Positive cognitive restructuring
Strategies employed here include self-reflection on one’s own abilities and accepting comments from examiners. Some students overcame OCA by remaining positive and trusting their work.

P6: Focus on my presentation and my talking and don’t care about who is in the room. I try to make something and continue saying what I know because I put this in my mind no one in this class knows my title better than me. This is the way to encourage me and don’t interrupt myself and don’t hesitate and gone.

Receiving comments about a proposal is difficult for some participants, who may end up experiencing resentment due to unresolved communication issues. Some students choose to avoid any confrontations with the examination panel and accept whatever comments are offered.

P7: When you come the question-and-answer session now you surrender yourself to the evaluators because I knew that I can’t do anything. I need to listen whatever they say weather it is a positive feedback or negative feedback so I left it on the evaluators.
4.5 Visualization techniques
These techniques include imagining the kind of questions that might be asked. Students—especially those experienced in making presentations—feel the need to prepare beyond simply making the presentation slides.

P2: Emotionally prepare your mind. Imagine what kind of the questions they will ask especially like tricky questions. Yeah sure it’s a trick, why you think they are coming? They are coming to make sure that one hundred percent you know, you understand and this is your work and its originality.

4.6 Cultural awareness
Cultural awareness is another way to cope with OCA and mitigate communication breakdowns encountered with one’s examination panel. International students become aware that Malaysia is a high power-distance society, and they have to accept status differences to avoid communication misinterpretations.

P5: This is a culture of Malay, I have understood, I know a lot of Malay professors and lecturers; really, they expect that we must show that we are humble towards them and so cannot claim we know more than you. They cannot accept this. Especially in public universities. They say you are still student as long as you don’t have any position and you cannot publish you cannot claim anything. In front of them you must be very humble.

P4: …Because you know they say you should not argue much because it might give them negative feelings so I had to just give it up. Even when I am sure that I have the answer, even when I am sure I am correct about the answer I am providing.

5. Discussion and conclusion
This study is one of a few efforts investigating strategies that international students adopt to overcome CA during academic presentations. Analysis of the data reveals various strategies employed to overcome CA. The emerging themes are consistent with both viewpoints and findings in the literature. The findings here parallel previous findings that students are able to develop their own survival techniques for dealing with CA depending on their experiences and maturity.

The analysis of communication strategies employed by the study participants is in line with the oral communication strategy categories developed by others who have argued that students’ use of oral communication strategies depends largely on their level of linguistic proficiency. Highly proficient students tend to employ social affective strategies, fluency-oriented strategies, and negotiation for meaning, while weakly proficient students employ message abandonment strategies and less active listener strategies.

Apart from language proficiency, participants’ confidence on their knowledge of their research significantly influenced the choice of strategies to maintain communication or avoid CA. The findings are further in line with Zhiping and Paramasivam (2013) who report that apprehensive students tend to avoid eye contact and display expressive reactions such as smiling to mask their anxiety. Those participants who possess enough confident in their research choose relaxation, positive thinking or other alternative strategies to address the situation.

Confidence in oral presentation should also be highlighted. Some participants experienced CA due to their poor communication skills or those of the examination panel. However, if one possesses prior experience in oral presentation, one is able to manage the communication breakdown through application of relevant strategies.
McCroskey (1984) argues that, by attempting to solve issues causing CA, one can overcome CA. If a student's linguistic competency, research skill or cultural awareness increases in subsequent semesters, CA is perceived to decrease.

This research has many implications that relate to educational settings. Its findings may increase students’ awareness of OCA and make them mindful of relevant strategies when experiencing OCA during academic presentations. The findings indicate that interpersonal conflict between students and examiners during presentations greatly affects students’ performance. Examiners need to adopt flexible strategies depending on the student.

Investigations on academic-presentation events contribute to the quality of graduate research. The findings of the present research give useful insights on the implementation of policies towards elevating and improving international students’ experiences.

Acknowledgements

The researchers wish to express a sincere thank you to the participants who graciously agreed to participate in this study and share their experiences. In the course of gathering data, we had invaluable assistance from the students.

About the authors

Fatemeh Amiri recently received the degree of doctor of philosophy from the faculty of social sciences and humanities at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Her research area is language, culture and communication. She holds a master's in the teaching of English as a second language from the faculty of education at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Her publications include refereed journals and conference papers.

Marlia Puteh is associate professor at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, currently seconded to the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. Her publications include refereed journals, conference papers, book chapters and academic books in the domains of English language studies, engineering education, technology in language learning, higher education policies and disruptive challenges to higher education.

References


Chinese College Students’ Intercultural Competence: Current Situation, Barriers and Solutions

Yuting Mu¹ & Baohua Yu²
The Education University of Hong Kong

Abstract: Situated in Byram’s intercultural competence model, this study employed survey questionnaires and face-to-face interviews to investigate the current situation of Chinese college students’ intercultural competence through exploring a class of English majors. The results show that students were not satisfied with their reported intercultural competence; their desire for cultural learning was constrained by the current language teaching methods and content. Suggestions are made on how to position culture in language teaching and learning with implications for how teachers could provide more opportunities for authentic intercultural learning and prepare students to participate as global citizens.

Keywords: intercultural competence, culture teaching, language teaching, vocational education.

1. Introduction

Many countries, including China, have embedded culture teaching objectives such as cultivating students’ intercultural ability and intercultural communication in language teaching guidelines. Some researchers (Han & Song 2011) point out that there is a lack of empirical research concerning this important topic in the context of mainland China. From a practical perspective, integration of language skills and intercultural competency could assist learners to be better prepared for interacting in the global world. To prepare students for their future careers, there is great need to emphasize the development of intercultural competence in the globalizing job market. Evidence suggests that students’ intercultural abilities need to be developed (Liu 2016). It is necessary to conduct research, such as the one at hand, that seeks to explore students’ current situation regarding intercultural competence.

This study seeks to enrich the existing intercultural literature by adding empirical information on the development of students’ intercultural competence and filling the gap in research within the Chinese context. The study provides suggestions for language teachers in China and elsewhere on how to manage their future classroom teaching practice with the view to promoting the development of students’ intercultural competence.

1.1 Culture learning and the cultivation of intercultural competence in language education

Culture is important for effective communication not only because it contains shared experiences but also because it involves individual life experience (Guilherme 2002). Liu and Fang (2017: 26) define culture from a post-structuralist perspective as “a complex social system, as opposed to natural system, that emerges through individuals’ joint participation in the world giving rise to sets of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and practices”. Culture is not only a cognitive concept; it involves social practices. Many linguists, language educators, and teachers believe that it is necessary to integrate culture into language teaching and learning (Nguyen 2017). To communicate effectively, speakers must not only have

¹ Email: visa21@163.com.
² Faculty of Humanity, The Education University of Hong Kong, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, New Territories, Hong Kong. Email: baohuayu@eduhk.hk.
knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but also know how to use them properly in a particular context (Choudhury & Kakati 2017). Brown (2001), cited in Nguyen (2017), contends that learners who are exposed to language-related culture can better participate in the real, functional use of language.

Fenner (2000) claims that language education should provide students with opportunities to acquire cultural knowledge, awareness, and abilities of the target culture and their own culture. Some researchers (e.g., Piątkowska 2015) illustrate the outcomes of cultural learning with reference to knowledge, awareness, and competence. Larzén (2005) proposes three aims of cultural teaching: knowledge of other cultures, skills for intercultural interaction, and tolerance as well as empathy. Cultural learning in language education is a process that involves developing cultural knowledge and skills, cultivating cultural awareness, and gradually bringing learners closer to high levels of intercultural competence. Byram (2000) posits that someone who is interculturally competent can see the relationship between cultures and develop a critical understanding of their own culture as well as other cultures. Nguyen (2017) makes an apt observation that, apart from the acquisition of cultural knowledge and skills, learners develop the ability to reflect, evaluate, and construct critical perspectives on cultural issues and identity. This helps them build tolerance and harmony towards their own and other cultures.

Previous research (e.g., Bean & Boffy-Ramirez 2019) indicate that overseas experience correlates with the development of intercultural competence. Apart from providing opportunities for overseas programs, language teachers can make an effort to promote development of students’ intercultural competence. Zou and Yu (2019) emphasize proper and purposeful teaching design for promoting the development of intercultural competence in language classrooms. Piątkowska (2015) reviews main approaches, such as the comparative approach, that can be harnessed to integrate culture into language teaching.

Previous studies focus on the effects of classroom teaching approaches on students’ intercultural competence development. Zhao (2013) used literature as a training resource to promote the development of learners’ intercultural competence. Miao and Wang (2013) used network and multimedia resources to achieve the same goal. Ye (2014) promoted critical thinking and intercultural communication skills through application of comparative cultural case studies.

While these studies are encouraging, most focus on approaches used in the classroom environment. Besides classroom settings, researchers (e.g., Roberts et al. 2001, Wang & Kulich 2015) point out the necessity of encouraging learners to experience authentic intercultural interaction with interlocutors from other cultures. It is against this backdrop that the present study was designed.

Using authentic resources can help ESL/EFL learners participate in the target cultural experience (Choudhury & Kakati 2017). Traditionally, English courses connect English and English-speaking Western culture. New interpretations of culture challenge this simple understanding (Baker 2015). Too often in English teaching, cultural views favor Anglophone culture (Kramsch 2014), while “the dynamic and liminal nature of much intercultural communication” (Baker 2011:198) is overlooked. Apart from existing resources, Bray (2010) recommends the use of new tools based on evolving technologies. As Çiftçi (2015:322) points out, relying on training learners is not enough for effective intercultural interaction. It is necessary to create a stimulating environment that provides learners opportunities to engage with other cultures.

In addition to proper teaching designs, some researchers highlight the importance of fostering inclusivity in the classroom. Hurtado (2001) suggests that students may experience a sense of superiority or inferiority if they encounter cultural differences without a proper
Guidelines (e.g., Jabbar & Hardaker 2012) have been developed that help teachers to work effectively with students from different backgrounds.

1.2 Cultivating intercultural competence in the Chinese context
In a market-driven, globalized education environment, development of students’ intercultural competence has changed from a focus on value-added effects to full persuasive motivation (Huang 2017). Re-emphasizing intercultural education is essential, contributing to institutional internationalization (Deng 2013, UNESCO 2006). The Chinese government pointed out in its Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) that “a large number of talents shall be cultivated that are imbued with global vision, well-versed in international rules, and capable of participating in international affairs and competition” (Huang 2017: 184). National guidelines for integrating the cultivation of intercultural competence into foreign language education at all levels have emerged from more than two decades of cross-cultural communication research and teaching experience in China. However, key concepts, skill sets, and procedures are not yet clearly defined, implemented effectively or studied comprehensively (Wang, Deardorff & Kulich 2015).

The connection between intercultural competence and foreign language education has been discussed in previous studies conducted in China (e.g., Chen 2012). Gao (2006) emphasizes the necessity of promoting students’ intercultural competence in language teaching. Wang and Yu (2008) adopt Byram’s (1997) model in a study focusing on non-English-majors’ intercultural competence. They evaluated students’ intercultural competence on four dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness. Their survey results reveal that the 193 participating students’ intercultural competence was unsatisfactory (M=67.46). After taking an intercultural communication course designed for English majors, Liu (2009) proposed that use of stereotyping in cultivating students’ intercultural competence should be minimized. Fan, Wu, and Peng (2013) report that Chinese college students consider their foreign cultural knowledge to be inadequate and think their foreign language skills and cultural awareness should be improved for effective communication.

Although intercultural communication is reflected in the objectives and principles of official guidelines, the cultivation of intercultural competence is otherwise hardly addressed (Song 2008). Culture teaching is often taken to be teaching knowledge of the target culture explicitly (East 2012). Systematic development of intercultural competence with consideration of how this could be integrated effectively into language teaching remains a great challenge for Chinese language teachers and researchers.

Some researchers (e.g., Wang 2015) point out features of vocational colleges that are necessary for developing intercultural competence. They state that students in vocational colleges need more instruction on cultural competencies to address the fierce job-market competition. With rapid globalization, students have more chances to work with foreigners; this requires intercultural competence. Universities must prepare students adequately.

1.3 Intercultural competence and Byram’s model
Although intercultural competence is a complex concept to define (Deardorff 2006) – “just as culture is constantly changing, scholars’ perceptions of intercultural competence will change over time” (Romjue & MacDonald 2018: 258) – one can take it as the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively with people from other cultures. Byram (1997) explains that someone who is interculturally competent can communicate with people from other cultures who speak another language. They can negotiate interactions to satisfy both themselves and the interlocutor.
Byram’s model of intercultural competence is widely accepted. It has four interacting dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, skills (of discovery and interaction, of interpreting and relating), and critical cultural awareness.

The first dimension, attitudes (savoir-être), refers to “curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own” (Byram 1997: 50). The second dimension, knowledge (savoirs), refers to familiarity with “social groups and their products and practices in one’s own country and in the country of one’s interlocutor, and knowledge of the general processes of societal and individual interaction” (Byram 1997: 58).

The third dimension comprises two sets of skills. The first is skills of interpreting and relating (savoir-comprendre): the “ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to the documents from one’s own” (Byram 1997: 61). The second is skills of discovery and interaction (savoir-apprendre/faire): “the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction” (Byram 1997: 61).

The fourth dimension is critical cultural awareness (savoir s’engager): “the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (Byram 1997: 63). Byram developed teaching objectives under these four dimensions as guidelines for language teachers.

Byram (2006) proposes the concept of intercultural mediator as one of the objectives of being interculturally competent. Another objective (Byram 2008, 2012) is promoting citizenship education. Byram’s model has been used as the basis for developing projects such as the Intercultural Competence Assessment (INCA) and Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) projects (Byram 2014).

1.4 Research questions

RQ1: What are the current levels of students’ intercultural competence along the four dimensions of Byram’s model?

RQ2: What challenges/barriers do students face in acquiring intercultural competence?

2. Method

This research adopted a combination of a survey questionnaire and face-to-face interviews to collect data. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data allows the researcher to obtain more comprehensive information about the problem (Creswell 2014). The survey data were used to evaluate students’ intercultural competence. The interviews explored problems and confusions among students in the area of language and cultural learning. The survey data were collected to assess the current situation of college students’ intercultural competence and analyzed under the four dimensions according to Byram’s theory. Qualitative interviews were conducted as a follow-up to the quantitative results to help explain critical issues concerning the development of students’ intercultural competence. The interview data also helped the researcher to explore students’ learning situation.

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were drawn from a vocational college in mainland China. A class of business English majors in their second year was randomly selected. All the students in the class were invited to fill in the questionnaire of intercultural competence, to evaluate their language ability and intercultural competence along the four dimensions of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness.
A total of 33 valid responses were used for data analysis: 26 female and seven male students who studied English for at least seven years. The researcher contacted those students who completed the questionnaire to explain the purpose and procedure of the interview in more detail. Ten students agreed to participate in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Students were invited to share their views towards their cultural learning experience as well as barriers, challenges and expectations. In line with good ethical practice, each participant was given full information about the study and asked to sign a consent form before beginning.

2.2 Data collection
Collecting data from different sources (questionnaire and interview in this case) can help the researcher to fully understand the research problem and enrich the depth of discovery (Creswell 2008). Quantitative data from the questionnaire were collected through a Chinese online platform called Wenjuanxing. During interviews, students were encouraged to reflect on their experience and express their opinions regarding cultural learning in their language courses. The interview sessions were conducted in Chinese and recorded using an audio recorder. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English for subsequent analysis. The translation of quotes poses challenges such as difficulty translating concepts used by the participants (van Nes et al. 2010). Besides working with a professional translator, the researchers developed rich descriptions with the use of participant quotes.

The questionnaire assessment of intercultural competence for Chinese college students (AIC-CCS) was adapted from Wu’s (2013) study assessing Chinese college students’ intercultural competence. This tool was selected for its validity, firm theoretical base, and consideration of Chinese college students. Modifications were made to ensure that the wording was concise and avoid misunderstanding. Several items were added based on the detailed objectives in Byram’s model.

The revised questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part focuses on collecting self-evaluated language abilities and personal information. The second, composed of 46 questions, allows students to evaluate their intercultural competence along Byram’s four dimensions using a five-point Likert scale from weakest agreement to strongest.

2.3 Data analysis
The questionnaire data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v.21.0. The qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The qualitative phase of the study revealed information about students’ experiences and expectations of cultural learning in language courses. After transcription, reading and re-reading, interview responses were divided into common themes, as presented in the next section. All names have been changed.

3. Results and discussion
The researchers began this project with two primary goals: to better understand students’ evaluation of their own intercultural competence and to explore barriers, confusions and expectations regarding the development of intercultural competence in language learning, from the perspectives of students. Results are reported under four main themes: learners’ self-evaluation of intercultural competence and experience of intercultural interactions, learners’ cultural learning experience in language courses, learners’ after-class learning preferences, and learners’ confusions and expectations towards language courses.
3.1 Self-evaluation of intercultural competence and experience of intercultural interactions

Table 1 shows students’ self-evaluated intercultural competence: overall, and for each of the four dimensions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>m (max 5)</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>intercultural competence</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attitude</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skill</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>awareness</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean score for attitude is 4.03: the highest of the four dimensions, indicating a general positive attitude towards culture, cultural learning and intercultural communication. Students considered their knowledge to be weakest (m = 2.53, SD=0.48). The results for skills and awareness are almost the same, with skills (m = 3.29) a little higher than awareness (m = 3.18). From the results, it can be seen that students’ self-evaluated intercultural competence is not very satisfying.

The results echo findings from previous studies. Wu, Fan, and Peng (2013) gathered information on Chinese university students from five colleges. Their results show that, among the six factors they studied, knowledge of others and skills of intercultural communication ranked the highest. Knowledge of self and the attitude dimension were at medium level; intercultural awareness ranked the lowest. These findings confirm that intercultural teaching practice in the Chinese context still focuses on knowledge and skills training.

Aside from language, teachers are asked to cover areas such as culture and society. Due to increasing curriculum requirements, growing pressure, and lack of qualified intercultural trainers, teachers may not have the energy and skills to develop a truly intercultural curriculum (Wang & Kulich 2015).

These statistical findings are supported by the interview data. They reveal that the students felt they know little about intercultural competence or what is needed to communicate in intercultural situations. Students have vague perceptions of intercultural competence, which they have not learned about in previous courses. A considerable number of students indicated that they were not familiar with intercultural abilities.

S3: I can only say that I have vague consciousness. That is to say, when I communicate with people who come from different countries, we may have conflicts.

S5: This kind of high-level cross-cultural topic has not really been learned.

The researchers also explored students’ experience interacting with foreigners. Experience of intercultural interactions influences students’ intercultural competence. Bean and Boffy-Ramirez (2019) conducted a study to find differences in intercultural communication skills between undergraduate Chinese students in the United States and those studying in China. Their results reveal that the students who studied abroad generally demonstrated higher intercultural communication abilities compared to those who based in China.

The first aspect of students’ previous contact with people from other cultures to be explored was the frequency of previous communicative experience. From the interview results, it was clear that most of the students did not have much experience with English
speakers. Most had never had any interaction with foreigners, while a few just had opportunities to say hello on occasion.

S2: It’s just like “hello”, then it’s over; it’s not a deep conversation.

S1: I haven’t communicated with foreigners. Even if I really meet them, I think I might not be able to organize wording.

Two participants shared their experience interacting with foreigners. One helped foreigners buy things and gave directions on the street. Another communicated with foreigners when working in a plant. Some students had experience communicating with foreign teachers but only over a short period, and the communication tended to be passive.

S10: I talked to a foreign teacher recently, but it’s kind of nothing to talk about, very passive, and sometimes I couldn’t react quickly.

The student tried to find partners online to practice speaking, but she was afraid and opportunities were quite limited.

S10: Well, I tried to find it by myself, and there is some software that can be used, but it is infrequent because I didn’t dare to take the initiative, especially in real life, I am willing to do but don’t have the courage.

Students lack opportunities for intercultural interactions. Although they are willing to communicate, they sometimes lack the courage to do so. As students have limited opportunities, it is necessary for teachers to design classroom activities to provide students more opportunities to experience authentic intercultural learning. Activities should be designed to promote equal learning opportunities for all students. It is necessary to consider the knowledge base of each learner, help each to achieve common goals, and promote positive interactions outside the formal learning environment.

Another issue is students’ experience dealing with misunderstandings or other difficulties that arise. All the students who had communicated with English speakers reported difficulties: problems understanding, problems with speakers’ accents and the use of colloquial or difficult words, and problems expressing themselves, including the inability to find the right words and just being nervous or feeling awkward.

S9: Because my English is not very good, so when he said some difficult words, or he has an accent, I can’t understand, because of that word, I can’t understand the meaning of the whole sentence.

The study invited students to share their coping strategies. Most indicated that they seek help from others such as professional translators or rely on body language. It was evident that the participants did not have much experience or confidence addressing misunderstandings or dealing with difficulties in communication.

3.2 Cultural learning experience

First, the study explored the cultural dimensions the students were familiar with. Students mentioned etiquette (telephone, table, giving presents), daily life (eating habits), and entertainment (sports, movie, music). Students indicated they were not familiar with other cultures. They used words such as “some” and “a little” to express their cultural knowledge. The main channels they used to learn culture were social media, TV series, and tasks designed by their teachers. They highlighted cultural topics they were not familiar with such as customs.
That kind of professional cultural customs, I may not know very well.

I know a bit more life-like, for example, what to say when people are greeting me. In fact, I really don’t know much.

When asked to recall what they had learned about culture in their language lessons, students reported a focus on facts. Only a few made reference to the integration of culture with language in ways that enhance the learning of both. When asked about aspects of culture (values, belief systems, etc.) discussed in language classes, students had few impressions. They knew a little about cultural differences such as taboos, but the learning was not systematic and could be biased – possibly due to limited teaching methods or ineffective curriculum design.

They didn’t mention it in my mind, that is, teachers rarely mentioned it, basically teaching is based on textbooks.

It is actually according to the textbook, and less about daily life, I didn’t learn it systematically.

Some teachers made an effort to teach culture and avoided stereotyping other cultures. One student cited a lesson she had in a reading class that changed her traditional way of thinking.

Taking the reading course for example, in the United Kingdom, everyone is wearing a hat with an umbrella. Actually, it is very strange in the UK, and this changes my previous view.

Besides cultural knowledge, communication skills are necessary to cope with intercultural situations. When students reflected on communication skills they learned in language classes, it seems that they did not learn much. Students developed skills such as changing expressions in interactions, but the learning was quite limited. Students did not feel confident to communicate effectively.

In fact, teachers taught us some expressions, for example, to express agreement we can not only use ‘I agree with you’, and there are still many other ways.

I remember that in almost all countries, ladies don’t want to be asked about age, which should be the matter of privacy.

Teachers can provide learners with a stimulating environment to engage with cultures (Çiftçi2015). When designing the environment, teachers must consider the diversity of digital tools (Bray 2010) and unique aspects of participation and context. Video technology provides an important opportunity for future practice and research. Effective design though requires interculturally competent language teachers who have knowledge of cultures and understand the theoretical background of intercultural dimensions. One teacher used such visual resources as movies; she also shared her work experience.

She often let us watch some movies, such as the Rio Adventure for several times, and then the teacher explains a lot of details. For example, people in this place will say this, that is to say, in different situations, it may be different…. She told us about her experience, in some occasions, what you should say and what you should not say. For example, she used to work at the front desk and then she saw several foreign customers coming over. Then they were chatting, that is, what to say and what should not be said.

As Zou and Yu (2019) propose, meaningful intercultural interactions do not occur naturally; purposeful teaching design and adequate preparation of learners’ mindset, skills, and behavior
are essential. Teachers can make use of guidelines (Jabbar & Hardaker 2012) to facilitate the cultural learning of students with different backgrounds. Unfortunately, how to communicate with people from other cultures is not being treated as an important consideration.

S8: It is not very specific; teachers only mentioned in some exercises.

S9: Teachers have not said it specifically, if you see a foreigner, how can you communicate with him, no teacher has specifically said it.

Most of the students interviewed considered were not confident communicating in intercultural interactions. Teachers should provide students more opportunities to pay attention to and explore cultural diversity. They should strive to influence the classroom atmosphere positively and encourage their students to analyze differences.

Table 2: Students’ comments on language courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is really beneficial to have some activities such as video analysis.</td>
<td>Some activities are awesome but learning for language skills is still the priority.</td>
<td>Not much time for culture learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some resources used by teachers are interesting and helpful.</td>
<td>One studies culture from the resources, but still lacks opportunities for cultural learning.</td>
<td>Relying too much on the textbook is still one of the major problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some teachers provide opportunities for learning different communication skills.</td>
<td>It is nice to have some teachers who are willing to share own experience of communication, but very limited.</td>
<td>Skills and knowledge of business is an important part of course content; students who are not interested in business face difficulties in learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Preference for after-class learning activities

When discussing after-class language learning opportunities, students most frequently mentioned learning through entertainment, including English-language TV series, movies, songs, news reports and TED talks. A number of students shared their preferences:

S3: Singing English songs. Sometimes I will sing with the singer, but I find it really hard.

S6: Generally, I watch American TV dramas such as American Horror Story, I’m interested in this type anyway.

S5: In addition to watching American TV dramas, I also like TikTok. There are many videos that teach English. There is a teacher named Alex, and he will pose some videos teaching some methods of learning English, and some guidelines of how to improve spoken English.

S8: I use some video software or Weibo. There are many Chinese people studying abroad. On those platforms, they talk about some experiences abroad or the differences between foreign countries and China.

S2: I am now preparing for the CET-4 exam, so I have been memorizing the words and doing exercises for the exam.

The cultivation of intercultural competence cannot rely only on classroom teaching. Previous studies (e.g., Miao & Wang 2013, Zhao 2013) have focused on the effects of various classroom teaching methods on the development of students’ intercultural competence.
However, encouraging students to “break the walls of the classroom” to experience authentic intercultural interaction remains a problem (Roberts et al. 2001: 243).

3.4 Confusions and expectations concerning language and culture learning
Most of the students want to improve their speaking skills. Achieving fluency, improving pronunciation, and interacting simply and fluidly are all concerns. Other things such as vocabulary, listening and writing skills, and grammar were also mentioned. Three main problems were identified: how to speak more fluently, how to improve listening and response, and how to enhance learning interest.

S1: I don’t know how to learn English better, how to speak English fluently, and not to worry about it.

When asked about short-term expectations, most of the students talked about translation certificates or examinations such as the CET-4.

S2: The most important thing is the CET-4 exam. Then I especially want to improve my speaking ability, because I always know that my oral English is not very good, but I must insist on it, that is, to improve this ability.

Students expressed the desire to learn more about foreign cultures, cultural knowledge for daily life, and cultural differences: in short, they want to expand their cultural horizons. They want to improve their speaking ability, communicate fluently, and express their ideas freely. Some students said that they want to learn to communicate in a more confident way.

S2: Hope that teachers will involve more cultural content in the future, and it can help in learning English.

S9: I want to learn more, if I really see a foreigner on the street someday, after all, it is our major. Then how to communicate smoothly, just talk to him directly, not being afraid, and talk about casual topics.

S8: I am particularly interested in this aspect: that is, the difference between British and American culture and Chinese culture.

Students expressed the desire to learn more skills that are closely connected with their lives. They are keen to go beyond the textbook contents.

S2: It is better to learn things that are used in real life. Don’t just teach history or geography, I feel a bit boring. It is better to involve a little bit of practical use, such as etiquette when you talk to foreigners.

S6: To understand a country, I think you should learn more aspects. Not just through the textbook.

If one looks at the higher education in China, English is the most important foreign language in the majority of educational institutions, although some universities provide instruction in other languages (Huang 2017). There are a large number of learners who study English through formal instruction. As Huang proposes, making full use of English as a lingua franca can be helpful and effective toward strengthening intercultural training programs.

4. Conclusion
This case study explored current circumstances concerning students’ intercultural competence along with their language-learning problems and expectations at one vocational college. The
results show that students consider their intercultural competence not satisfactory. Their desire for cultural learning and improved intercultural competence is constrained by current language teaching methods, course contents, and an exam-oriented learning situation.

This research is timely. It has practical implications for English language teachers, teacher trainers and curriculum developers. Language teachers can find useful insights here and practical examples of students’ learning situations, confusions, and expectations. Teacher trainers need to understand students’ needs and opinions, to assist pre- and in-service teacher training by promoting the advancement of intercultural competence in the classroom. Curriculum developers can find help here for designing courses and preparing useful materials.

Future research should focus on the impact of specific teaching methods on the development of students’ intercultural competence, along with studying English teachers’ perception of intercultural competence and their teaching practices. As Huang (2017) writes, it is of great importance to investigate how to enhance teaching practices by building on Byram’s model. Finally, future research can consider constructing an intercultural competence work model for designing programs and guiding teaching practices at the same time as shedding light on the current state of intercultural-communication courses.

About the authors
Mu Yuting received her EdD from the Education University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include intercultural communication, cultivation of students’ intercultural competence, and intercultural language teaching. This manuscript forms part of her thesis.

Baohua Yu is assistant professor in the Faculty of Humanities at the Education University of Hong Kong. Her research focuses on digital storytelling, intercultural communication, cross-cultural psychology of international students, and technology-enhanced teaching and learning. Her work has been published in leading international journals such as Re-CALL, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, Language Teaching and the International Journal of Intercultural Relations and Higher Education. She is an associate editor of Educational Studies. Currently, she is a principal investigator of the project Enhancing Positive Psychology and Life Value through a Collaborative and Reflective Digital Video Project in a Technological Learning Environment.

References


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“I Am Not Racist, But ...”: Rhetorical Fallacies in Arguments about the Refugee Crisis on Czech Facebook

Tereza Krobová¹ & Jan Zapotocký
Charles University, Prague

Abstract: This paper examines the strategies of social media users commenting on the so-called refugee crisis. This qualitative analysis of the role of passion politics discourse on social media primarily employs the concept of rhetorical fallacies. It aims to stress the interdiscursive nature of immigration as a topic. It is connected with anti-liberalism, anti-feminism (or homophobia), and conservatism. For the purpose of this study, we used techniques for social-media monitoring to analyze social-media conversations related to migration on the Facebook page of Parlamentnílisty.cz news during the Czech parliamentary and presidential elections. This analysis showed that rhetorical fallacies were used in a relatively small amount of the studied material. Only 13% of all comments contained rhetorical fallacies, among which the most used was the ad hominem fallacy (55% of the total), "call for fear" (11%) and "false authority" (7%).

Keywords: refugee crisis, Facebook, emotions, rhetorical fallacies.

1. Introduction

In May 2018, Petr Bezruč Theatre in Ostrava saw the premiere of the production #nejsemrasista_ale (#I'mnotracist but). It comprised transcripts from Internet discussions, where, as the creators of the production stated, “hate and fear are so often spread under the cover of anonymity and pride in personal opinions”. The title of the production points to the long-term use of a type or form of rhetorical fallacy (as described in the second part of the sentence and later in the article), where the speaker attempts to distance himself in advance from negative evaluations of his statements by others. The phrase was previously linked chiefly with anti-Roma speech in Czech society: for example, as shown by the project HateFree Culture organized by the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic or by the results of the Intercultural Education project carried out in primary and secondary schools in 2002, by the organisation Člověk v tísni (“People in Need”). The results of the survey that was part of this latter project showed that “the majority of secondary school youth reject intolerance; but, on the other hand, an overarching proposition prevails: “I’m not racist, but I hate Gypsies” (Kroupa 2002).

Rhetorical fallacies are often connected with a fear or the attempt to cause it: “reading this article [about the number of immigrants coming to Europe], I get goose bumps thinking about what awaits my daughter, granddaughter, great granddaughters and their families”, writes the debater Hana in one of the comments we analyzed.

Fear appeals – in this case “a message that attempts to arouse the emotion of fear by depicting a personally relevant and significant threat and then follows this description of the threat by outlining recommendations presented as feasible and effective in deterring the threat” (Witte 1994: 114) – are a common feature of the argumentation inventory of online discussion participants. They are regarded as one of the standard rhetorical fallacies by popular educational projects, such as HateFree Culture and Logically Fallacious, as well as specialized publications (Tindale 2007, Walton 2013).

¹ FSV UK, Smetanovo nábřeží 6, Praha 1, 110 00, Czech Republic. Email: tereza.krobova@fsv.cuni.cz.
The aim of this article is to analyze the extent of the use of rhetorical fallacies in discussions about immigration in online discourse conducted in Czech. The intention is to capture the extent to which the phrase “I'm not racist, but” appears or whether it is replaced by other types of manipulative argument. We first put the theme of manipulative rhetorical techniques into a theoretical context, primarily in their relationship with affective turns, which emphasize the role of emotions as the source of all social interactions and relationships. Subsequently, we present a qualitative analysis of the use of rhetorical fallacies with use of some quantitative data: i.e., in what quantities do they appear in discussions or which categories are most often used.

2. The topic of migration online

The media plays a key role in framing crises. It creates the scale and speed of news (Entman 1993) and its framing process determines how a crisis is perceived (Thomson 2016). The mass use of social networks as a tool of political communication contributes greatly to the intensity of framing. In the Czech Republic in 2018, 85% of individuals over 16 years of age use the Internet, 97% of whom reported that they use the Internet regularly; while 87% of users connect to the Internet every day or almost every day (Czech Statistical Office 2018: 26). Facebook, Twitter and other platforms have become a key component of the communication mix. For the purpose of mobilizing voters, they can be used to facilitate the spread of conspiracy theories (Stempel et al. 2017) or unverified rumors, as well as the promotion of so-called speculative politics: “the intentional use of unverified information to undermine the credibility and public image of a political opponent” (Rojecki & Meraz 2016: 26, Shin et al. 2016).

In the Czech Republic, the incorporation of social networks into the ways that politicians use to build an agenda has grown continuously since the parliamentary elections in 2010. Similarly, the attention given to this subject in academic research is growing (Macková & Štětka 2016, Štětka & Vochocová 2014). The discourse of migration is often connected with the topic of anti-Islamism (Křtínová 2017: 96), especially in the agenda of political parties. All use (or were forced to use) the depiction of migration as a tool to fight with opponents and gain more voters: “Islam is criticised as a dangerous ideology and all immigrants are categorized as Muslims” (Křtínová 2017: 96). For example, anti-Islamic discourse is a central theme for the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party of Tomio Okamura (SPD) (formerly Dawn of Direct Democracy of Tomio Okamura). Křtínová’s research shows that the number of Okamura’s ideas about Islam in his posts have been rising since 2014.

In the depiction of migrants, Chouliaraki (2012) has noticed a symbolic duality in media discourse: the media refers to immigrants as either voiceless victims or evil-doing terrorists. Essens (2013) claims that negative portrayals of immigrants in the press are dehumanizing and can engender the sense that a social crisis represents a threat; however, framing is not geographically uniform. The determining factor is the local context, and differences between countries are significant (Berry et al. 2015). For example, a strong anti-Islam/anti-Muslim sentiment can be found in Czech public discourse, even though the Czech Republic has a relatively poor reputation among migrants (Malý 2015). In 2018, the Czech Republic recorded only 154 people in cases of illegal transit migration.
3. The affective turn

Emotions are elements of human social behavior and relationships and, as such, are important in all phases of the political behavior of all political actors (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001). It is only in recent years they also have been given their appropriate role in academic studies. This tendency to give attention towards emotions in the fields of public and political life is often referred to as the *affective turn*. For example, Hoggett and Thompson perceive the role of emotion as a determining factor in the attitude-making process, thus opposing the predominant “assumption that political actors are, by their very nature, rational actors who maximize their strategic interests” (Hoggett & Thompson 2012: 1).

In the last three decades, emotions have been negatively perceived by the prevailing direction of academic research, where “emotional studies have no place in rationalist, structural and organizational models” (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001: 1). Warner (2002) states that too much emphasis on Habermas’ (1989) concept of the public sphere as a platform of debate with rational-critical discussion suppresses discussion on other forms of communication, such as performative. Other authors even call the rationalist approach to the public sphere a nostalgic chimera (Schudson 1992: 161).

Affective and narrative practices are common and decisive elements of communication, although emotional dynamics are an often-neglected part of the argumentation process (van Stokkom 2012). From van Stokkom's (2012: 41) research into deliberative rituals in the field of Dutch landscaping discussions, “it is not rational argumentation which changes the views of the participants but being confronted with particular stories or metaphors”. He has designated such negotiations as transition rituals, which create new forms of collective identity.

Although emotional practices are standardized and their patterns internally structured, their use differs across social groups (Holmes 2012). In Internet discussions, examples can be observed where the purpose of the communication is not an attempt to present certain arguments to an opponent, but a need for self-satisfaction in socially closed groups. Castells (2009: 66) refers these online forms of communication to “mass self-communication” or “electronic autism”, although the use of the term “mass” is not entirely appropriate.

These practices are close to so-called hate speech: verbal and other symbolic actions that aim at expressing the inferiority of members of a particular social group or intense antipathy towards them (Simpson 2013, Nielsen 2002, Tirrell 2012). The technological development of the Internet and, above all, the social networks that are a key platform for hate speech (Miskolci, Kováčová & Rigová 2018) allow for the maintaining of solidarity and building up of power for hate groups (Bargh & McKenna 2004). Collective characteristics, such as ethnicity and religion, are at the very core of hate speech (Hawdon, Oksanen & Räsänen 2017). For Hoggett and Thompson (2011), hatred is a negative political emotion that is often associated with racism, nationalism, or the fact that foreigners take advantage of the benefits of the social system of the given country. This is typical of the Czech context, where abuse of the social security system is traditionally emphasized in “problematic” ethnic groups: especially Roma in the past, and currently Arab or Muslim immigrants.

Hoggett and Thompson (2012) also class fear as a negative political emotion, which can reach forms of paranoia when the object of fear is largely imaginary. The use of the fear appeal in connection with immigration is described by scientists from the University of Copenhagen in their research on cloaked Facebook pages and fake Islamist propaganda. “This rhetoric directly relates to the fear of the Islamisation of Europe through immigrant rape discourse as well as the victimisation of white European women alongside the ‘evil feminists’” (Farkas, Schou & Neumayer 2018). The fear appeal need not arise only from other discussants; “politicians can even use hateful ideas feeding on irrational fears based on prejudices on social media as an electoral strategy to win the popular vote and the presidential...
or parliamentary seats” (Miškolci, Kováčová & Rigová 2018: 1). So-called fear culture (Glassner 2000) or the politics of fear (Altheide 2006) is credited as a means of creating consent and political apathy (Wolin 2004).

4. Methodology

The subject of this research is commentary on the Facebook posts of ParlamentníListy.cz (“Parliament Papers”). This media entity was chosen for two reasons. First, according to a Phoenix Research (ParlamentníListy.cz, 2016) April 2016 online survey on public interest in the refugee crisis and sources of information, less than half of the 1,088 respondents said they draw information from domestic media, of which approximately 40% came from television and the Internet. Of the respondents who cited the Czech Internet as the main source of information on the topic, 22% identified ParlamentníListy.cz as the truest source, representing the second largest share after 24% iDNES.cz and 16% before Novinky.cz, the online platforms of the two biggest print papers: MF Dnes and Právo.

Second, ParlamentníListy.cz has long been criticized for its bias, unethical reporting and violations of the principles of objective journalism (European Values 2016, Gregor & Vejvodová 2016). It is perceived as an alternative source of information in contrast to traditional media. According to the Kremlin Watch report (European Values 2016), ParlamentníListy.cz is considered to be one of the six most disinforming media entities (and also the most read and most cited) publishing so-called fake news in the Czech Republic. Gregor and Vejvodová (2016) describe the manipulative potential of ParlamentníListy.cz to spread fear and destabilize Czech society.

One of the objectives of this research is to open discussion on the use of so-called social listening tools as relevant forms of data collection. These tools, the essence of which is “an active process of monitoring, observing, interpreting and responding to various stimuli through mediated, electronic and social channels” (Steward & Arnold 2017: 2), allow for scans of online channels (web discussions, online fora, social networks, etc.) based on specific criteria, which are most often time ranges and keywords. Thanks to this, it is possible to aggregate a large number of encoding units (such as Facebook comments). While social listening tools are used primarily in marketing, they are gradually being promoted in academic research, where they can offer innovative data collection solutions and the potential for exploring the entire online space (Chlpková 2018).

In this study, we used Zoomsphere analytical software combined with the keywords "migra*", "uprchl*" ("refugee"), "muslim*" and "islam*" to collect the material for analysis, with the wildcard operator * capturing various derivations of the basic words. The date ranges were chosen as the period before the Czech parliamentary elections (7 October 2017 – 28 October 2017) and the period before the Czech presidential elections (5 January 2018 – 31 January 2018), where an increased interest in the topic of migration and higher activity on social networks could be expected. Out of a total of 139 posts, those where migration is a central theme were manually selected. There were 34 in total, which contained 2,152 comments that were further coded. Although this work is purely qualitative, it is advisable to conduct a quantitative analysis applied to a large volume of data.

5. Results

Consistent with the literature cited here, refugees were depicted as a de-personalized threat and evil. The narrative of an upcoming civil or religious war was often highlighted. The terms “wog” and “slug” were used for refugees while sluníčko (“sunshiner”), vítáč (“welcomer”) and dobroser (“do-gooder”) were used repeatedly to describe those who support refugees.

Comments were coded according to a typology of rhetorical fallacies. In the posts analyzed, rhetorical fallacies surprisingly appeared in relatively small numbers. Only 13% of
all comments contained a rhetorical fallacy. Most of those (55%) who used rhetorical fallacies used an ad hominem argument, such as questioning the education of debaters or attacking their use of grammar (the so-called “Grammar Nazi” argument) or using simple hate speech (Bargh & McKenna 2004). Otherwise, the rhetorical fallacies corresponded to the current trends in online discussions, including false authority (7%) and call for fear (11%), where the object of the fear response is largely imaginary (Hoggett & Thomson 2012). Only 1% used the phrase “I'm not racist/xenophobic, but...”.

The interdiscursive aspect of the topic is related to the fact that the whole discussion was markedly gendered. First, the rhetorical fallacies were promoted by women (i.e., by people with female names2) in 74% of cases. This should not be understood as a claim that women are more prone to using rhetorical fallacies or spreading fake news. However, the explanation of this difference is missing. Second, the evidence of the gendered discussion about immigrants is tied to the media image of refugees; it can be said that immigrants are mostly described as male, with comments emphasizing their sexual activity, as well as the desire to rape and to produce offspring. If female immigrants are mentioned, they are described as victims or sex slaves.

These slugs are not coming here to work, they want to rule us, enslave us, and exterminate us. They want to use our wives as sex slaves. What else are women in Islam?

In terms of framing supporters of immigration as “enemies”, it is important to stress the interdiscursive nature of immigration as a topic: it is connected with anti-liberalism, anti-feminism (homophobia) and conservatism. In 100% of comments where the EU was mentioned, the comment was negative. It could be said that for ParlamentníListy.cz readership, the EU is viewed as liberal, feminist and leftwing; hence, blaming the EU for immigration is a common theme emerging from the posts.

Merkel is an evil sent to Earth by Satan and all MEPs are fools. The EU? What is it for exactly?

Thanks to the stupid Brussels fascist immigration quotas a religious war is coming.

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2 The Czech language uses gender inflection: a female surname is derived from the male surname by adding -ová in the end. Therefore, the purported gender of a comment's author can be recognized more effectively.
5.1 Ad hominem arguments

The argument most frequently used was *ad hominem*. This is an argument by which the debater tries to refute the opponent's claim by pointing to his personality, qualities, characteristics, or actions. HateFree (2020) defines *ad hominem* arguments as “attacking the debater, pointing to his negative qualities, instead of questioning the argument as such”. A related fallacy is known as *poisoning the well*, in which the speaker’s reputation is damaged in advance before he even begins his argument. His credibility and thus the strength of his arguments are questioned.

Because this type of rhetorical fallacy was used most often, a typology was developed to explore further its different forms.

- Individual vulgarities or many insults in a row:
  
  You cannot be that stupid.

  You are not funny, just repeating shit. Do something with your life so as not to be so fucked up.

- Challenging the mental health of commenters, with emphasis on mental illness, low education or low intelligence:
  
  I hope a psychiatrist will help you.

  Your studies are evidently not going very well, are they?

  It’s lucky that you look like an idiot too. Therefore, your dementia will not surprise anyone here.

- Grammar Nazi framing: i.e., bringing attention to grammatical or stylistic mistakes in the comments being replied to:
  
  Mister, learn grammar!

- Sexism, sexualization: remarking on the sexual life of the commenter, describing the commentator's sexual practices, threatening rape:
  
  It seems you really like black dicks, don’t you?
I hope you are raped by eight immigrants. I hope they tear your butt, splatter your mouth and piss on your head. You are just a prostitute, so you will like it anyway. Wishing many immigrants in your cunt, Misa.

- Homophobic discourse: marking a commenter as gay to devalue his opinion (this argument is used only to hurt male commenters):

  There are many latent homosexuals among all these “patriots”, because half of all comments are connected with the anus.

**5.2 Call for fear**

The second most frequently used rhetorical fallacy was the call for fear. A strong emphasis on emotions and fears is used to end a debate. It often finds a solution to a particular social problem in favor of radical approaches. Of course, one cannot say with certainty whether commenters really believe in the visions they are describing, or whether they merely wish to cause moral panic. Cohen (1972) defines “moral panic” as a group reaction based on a false or exaggerated impression that the behavior of any other group (mostly minority groups or subcultures, so-called folk devils) is dangerously deviant and poses a threat to society. Nevertheless, common features can be found. Commenters using this fallacy often claim that “it's too late” and the state has reached a point of no return. They often speak about the future of their children (the general plural “our children” is used to enhance an impression that not only individual families but the entire nation will be liquidated). Expressive words associated with violence, struggle, war, blood and pain are often used to strengthen the feeling of helplessness and panic.

  I'm afraid it's too late. Unfortunately, the only thing that can preserve real European-Christian values is religious war.

  Our children have to watch Muslims killing, slicing and burning innocent people on the news.

Surprisingly, the commenters do not seek to provoke fear of the current state. Rather, they provoke fear of the future, when the problem will continue to escalate.

  Current reality is presented as the beginning of a series of other – in this case, negative – events. A call for fear is an attempt to increase the fear related to a given course of events, thereby gaining predominance in a discussion, without the person presenting evidence proving the inevitable link between events.

  All these 2,600 immigrants will have kids, they will go to kindergarten, and what will happen to pork? Every child will ask for exceptions connected with their “religion” and we idiots will allow them.

  We will invite them and they will start to tell us how to behave. They will start to hate Christian symbols and want to implement Sharia law and other nonsense.

  Today we see poor and vulnerable immigrants, but who will guarantee they will stay the same? Sooner or later they will start running people over with cars and spreading their faith by violence.

With this rhetorical fallacy, fake analogies are often used. Following this strategy, the debater creates a false analogy or a dilemma to devalue an opponent's arguments.

  Simply, if you want Islam, rape, killing and slavery, vote for [presidential candidate] Drahoš.
5.3 False authority
The discussant refers to an unspecified authority. This is intended to add weight to the argument. It can be a friend, a known or unspecified medium (the phrase “the news says” is used often). HateFree (2020) points out that fake news and hoaxes emerge according to a similar principle, where similar information appears in emails, blogs or social networks without a source or author, so that the information cannot be verified.

My friend has family in Germany, and I get info from him. New immigrants do not work much.

In some news they say that war is coming.

5.4 Invincible ignorance
This rhetorical fallacy is related to reluctance or inability – or unwillingness – to base arguments on proven facts, relying instead on appeals to (assumed) common knowledge, claims of omniscience, or – conversely – attacking the credibility of any information source through claiming equivalence between competing assertions regardless of any evidence on which they are based.

In the first case, the debater insists on his assertion regardless of the quality of counterarguments. He is not able or is unwilling to present the facts, expressing his position explicitly, thus maintaining a circular argument.

It is not true, but I will not explain why.

At the same time, commenters using this fallacy demand proof for alternative opinions. This strategy could be explained as an attempt to transfer the burden of presenting facts and arguments to the other, with the belief that the debating party who has produced the fallacy has nothing to prove and his opponent must prove him wrong.

Surely, you have proof, or are you saying that, for example, in Germany there are millions of Arabs wandering the streets? Have you ever been to Germany?

Otherwise, commenters support their statement using the argument that everyone knows these facts. The approach is based on the simple thought that if many people say something, it must be true. It refers to “common sense”, to supposed facts that do not need to be proven as they are evident to everyone.

The snails are imported by NGOs; everyone knows that.

Everybody knows about presidential powers – but you clearly don’t have much information.

Any normal person can see that he’s defending the interests of his or her country.

Reluctance or inability to work with facts is also often associated with the aim of masking lies or manipulation by challenging all sources of information. It creates the feeling of a world where there are no credible sources of information. The debater often puts himself in the position of being the only one who “knows everything”.

Nowadays people draw information from news and newspapers, but the truth is you need to seek them in different sources, not only read those subdued by recent propaganda.

The whole world knows the truth, but here people are told lies!
5.5 “I am not racist, but…”
The speaker employs this introduction in an attempt to distance himself in advance from negative assessments of his statements to follow. This fallacy is often associated with the so-called friend argument. This argument is used in the context of racism, xenophobia or homophobia. It refers to when commenters want to show they have friends among a specific group of people, and therefore cannot be labelled as someone who hates this group. In the case of the “I am not racist, but” argument, the commenters do not claim to have friends among immigrants, but they operate with the belief that their hatred of refugees is not based on the color of their skin, but rather with their supposed sociocultural attribute. A similar argument is used in discussions about Roma, where commenters argue that they are not racists because they do not mind the color of the Roma, but rather their lifestyle.

Xenophobia is not my problem, it is an issue for Gypsies, Muslims, vegans and faggots.

It is not a racist argument because I am not racist. I like Gypsies for example, I swear by them. Speaking of racism – it is used by those who use racist comments very often.

6. Conclusion
This qualitative analysis, which used the method of social listening for data collection, showed that rhetorical fallacies were used in a relatively small amount of the studied material in the periods under review, although the nature of the discussions corresponded to the theories mentioned above and users preferred emotive shouts and performative acts to rational, critical discussion (Warner 2002; Hoggett & Thompson 2012; Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001).

Surprisingly, only 13% of all comments contained rhetorical fallacies among which the most used was the *ad hominem* fallacy (55% of the total), call for fear (11%) and false authority (7%). Our expectation about the frequency of usage of “I am not racist, but…” as the main argumentation strategy (which was the reason for using it in the title of this study) was not confirmed. This fallacy, as the “traditional” way of making racist arguments and protecting the commentator’s own integrity at the same time, was used less often than expected. It shows us that anti-immigration comments analyzed in this study are thematically tied more with cultural and societal aspects of the immigration crisis than an ethnic or racial perspective, even though they are often explicitly racist and race-themed.

The whole discussion was markedly gender oriented. Not only were immigrants mostly described as men, comments highlighted their sexual activity and their desire to rape and produce offspring; yet 74% of all rhetorical fallacies were produced by women. The results of the research show that the topic of migration was not significantly associated with the European Union in the case of refugees. On the other hand, where that was the case, then it was only in a negative sense, when the European Union was seen as a culprit.

Apart from the analysis of rhetorical fallacies, it can be said that in discussions on migration on the Facebook pages of ParlamentníListy.cz, only three types of reactions appear: invectives (simple *ad hominem* fallacies), head nodding (“exactly, Mary; have a nice day!”), and exclamations (“Zeman for president” or “immigration is evil”). Every effort to discuss was drowned out -- not only by fallacies but also simple abusive language.

Acknowledgments
This research was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (GACR), Standard Grant Nr 17-17085S: “Dynamics and forms of citizen online participation in the Czech Republic in response to the European migration crisis”.
About the authors
Tereza Krobová is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University in Prague. Her research focuses on issues related to gender and representation in the media, especially in video games. She works as administrator for the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and as a programmer for Czech Television: the public service broadcaster in the Czech Republic. She teaches feminism, cultural studies and game studies at several Czech universities. Her work has been published in Cyberpsychology, Transformative Works and Cultures and Replay. Currently, she is a member of the project “Dynamics and forms of citizen online participation in the Czech Republic in response to the European migration crisis.” She also works as a freelance journalist.

Jan Zápotocký is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University in Prague. His research focuses on new media and political communication. His research examines the affective turn in political communication in online environments and the creation of virtual communities around political actors. His work has been published in Social Media and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe (2017). Currently, he is a member of the project "Dynamics and forms of citizen online participation in the Czech Republic in response to the European migration crisis.” He is also an independent social media strategist.

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HateFree (https://www.hatefree.cz/) (2020). Kdy má diskuze ještě smysl? Aneb jak se v diskuzích nenechat faulovat (“When does the discussion still make sense? Or how not to be fouled in discussions”).


An Investigation into Undergraduate Students’ Readiness for Intercultural Written Communication in a Foreign Language

Tatiana V. Salynskaya, Irina G. Tuchkova & Arina A. Yasnitskaya
State University of Management, Moscow

Abstract: Employees’ ability to interact with international business partners in writing determines the success of their work, but difficulties conducting business correspondence in a foreign language complicate this process. The study aims to assess undergraduate students’ readiness for participation in intercultural written communication in a foreign language. The initial research data included the English language proficiency level for 169 undergraduate economics and management students and a list of difficulties performing written assignments. The study determined the degree of students’ awareness of how to write a business letter and readiness to conduct intercultural written communication. The level of the readiness was divided into high (8.88%), medium (66.27%), and low (24.85%). Such levels are enough for development of the students’ writing skills.

Keywords: intercultural written communication, foreign language proficiency level, cultural differences, business letter.

1. Introduction
Integration into the global economy has made training university graduates with professional skills a priority for higher education (Afanasyev et al. 2019). The demand for skilled employees who are competitive in the labor market and fluent in foreign languages is not disputed. It is not enough for employees to focus on their professional activities or speak a foreign language. It is much more important for them to develop integrated communication skills for conducting business communication with representatives of other cultures (Nikuła & Moore 2019). Developing these abilities requires implementing intercultural communication skills.

Foreign language training at university should promote development of intercultural communication skills, along with linguistic and professional skills. This development is incorporated into content and language integrated learning (Coyle 2018), which means studying a future profession and mastering a foreign language. If a university graduate is able to communicate in a foreign language, they can overcome difficulties in intercultural business communication.

It is important for employees to improve their ability to speak and write in a foreign language with a view to solving problems of intercultural business communication. Such ability gives them new linguistic and cultural experience, which has a positive effect on their individual development and professional confidence (Council of Europe 2003). They begin to understand cultural differences better, “which in turn is crucial for international collaboration and multicultural workplaces” (Sznajder & Giménez-Moreno 2016).

Effective intercultural business communication can make communication inside and outside an organization smooth and trouble-free (Sharma & Mohan 2016). For that, it is important to improve linguistic and professional skills. While mastering a foreign language, undergraduate students develop foreign language speaking skills in everyday, business and
professional situations. Their reading skills are enhanced when they extract relevant information on general, business and professional topics from original sources.

Writing skills are an essential part of intercultural business communication; “this is due to technological progress, the development of information and communication technologies and... an increase in the number of contacts between business partners” (Karbasova 2015: 90). Written correspondence between international business partners is used to resolve managerial issues and to organize and maintain business contacts. An employee should be able to write the same texts in a foreign language that an educated native speaker can. Working with business correspondence involves making such documents as proposals, reports, press releases, and product descriptions. An employee must prepare memos, emails and letters on a daily basis (Zorina 2019). No matter what business document is dealt with, an employee makes effective use of language to convey commercial or industrial messaging (Sharma & Mohan 2016).

The most popular business correspondence in the world today is email (Beer 2017) because of its speed and simplicity. It has altered business relationships, etiquette and everyday professional activities. However, electronic correspondence has drawbacks. A central problem for many employees is their inability to adapt to communication formats of their foreign partners (Akbari 2017), which can harm both the personal career of the email’s writer and the company’s reputation. Emails are known for confidentiality and security shortcomings, which can lead to mistaken emails and so-called junk mail. These shortcomings are not typical of business letters.

Business letters are a common form of formal correspondence; employees deal with business letters more than any other type of written communication in a foreign language (Roshid et al. 2018). Employees keep business letters for reference (Zorina 2019) when they deal with customers, suppliers, firms, credit agencies, and government officers. They can make a complaint, reminder, refusal or request as a type of business letter. As Dido (2017) observes, in business letters writers express their views and communicate information in writing in their professional life. It is important to understand the appropriate style and outline of the business letter to adapt more effectively to professional activities and be as successful as possible in one’s chosen professional field (Sorokina et al. 2019).

Employees face various barriers to intercultural business communication (Hurn & Tomalin 2013, Kwan et al. 2018, Mosunova 2018) that are mainly attributed to cultural diversity, similarities with their native culture and stereotypes (Kutz 2013, Gulivets 2014). Stereotyping, non-verbal, and language barriers have a negative impact on intercultural business communication. Misinterpretation of a foreigner’s cultural data can lead to misunderstanding of the cultural information conveyed in business writing, which inhibits intercultural written communication in a foreign language.

Undergraduate students face obstacles writing business letters. Aimoldina and Zharkynbekova (2014) name misinterpretation of national and cultural standards of the business letter outline, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of a business letter. The English-language business letter is typically composed of the following structural parts: the letterhead, date, attention line, inside address, salutation, subject line, body of the letter, complimentary closing, signature, name and job title, reference initials, copy notation, and enclosure notation (Dido 2017, Zorina 2019). The letterhead includes the organization’s full name, address, telephone and email address. The inside address provides the recipient’s name and address. In addition, such parts of the letter as the opening, body and closing should be differentiated. In the opening, the recipient observes the purpose and subject of the business letter, while clarification about the writer’s location and hope for specific response actions in return are typical in closing.
Such a business-letter layout creates difficulties for foreign students due to diverse approaches to teaching. On one approach, the absence of strict or well-regulated rules for writing business letters as well as procedures for designing and structuring their content (Badger 2008, Brieger 2011) create difficulties producing effective business letters (Arputhamalar & Kannan 2017). Researchers explain that each letter is unique and has its own specific features. Another approach suggests that it is possible to work with templates, samples and real documents (Dengel & Shafait 2014, Roshid et al. 2018) so that students can study, analyze and use model texts when writing their own business letters. Combining both approaches (Janelli, 2018) to teaching business-letter writing helps undergraduate students grasp the structure of a business letter as well as write their own. Courtesy and consideration for the recipient’s interests along with directness, conciseness, clarity and precision make intercultural written communication successful (Sharma & Mohan 2016).

To understand how successfully undergraduate students can write a business letter, it is necessary to assess their level of readiness to participate in intercultural written communication in a foreign language. To do this, their awareness of how to write a business letter must be considered first. Undergraduate students may fail to understand structural parts of a business letter or otherwise find themselves unable to write their own business letters. The level of intercultural written communication reveals the difficulties that university graduates will encounter in the workplace, which can primarily be mitigated in university classes.

Organizational difficulties in particular manifest as inabilities to present ideas clearly in writing. Insufficient practice of English in real-life situations (Mezrigui 2011) results in communicative difficulties, often as a result of employing writing rules in the native language and not knowing how to apply them in the target language. Analytical difficulties prevent the construction of a well-argued response. Logical difficulties explain obstacles to presenting a business document in which all the ideas are interconnected. Linguistic difficulties are characterized by inability to use vocabulary and discourse structures and consequently perform with lexical and grammatical accuracy. Cultural difficulties illustrate “cultural differences in the way [the] register is perceived and understood in different countries” (Klimova 2014: 433). Business etiquette in various countries influences the choice of language to convey ideas in writing. Foreigners may fail to correctly interpret ideas due to the use of set phrases, which abound in Russian as in English business correspondence. Examples of set phrases include “we thank you for the letter…” and “at your request, we sent you …”.

Teaching the formal style and outline of the standard business letter to undergraduate students should result in improving their intercultural communication skills. The level of skills shows students’ awareness of how to write a business letter and consequently how effectively they can conduct written correspondence in a foreign language with international business partners. The purpose of the study is to assess undergraduate students’ readiness for participation in intercultural written communication in a foreign language.

2. Materials and methods

The study involved 169 undergraduate students (94 first-year and 75 second-year students) from a public business-oriented university in Russia, where content and language integrated learning is practiced in foreign-language classes. The students were trained to conduct written business communication in a foreign language on the basis of blended learning technology. Their completed assignments included determining the type of business correspondence, since a large number of texts can have similar content features as well as structural characteristics. In classrooms and consultations, they grasped the differences using business letters, reports, meeting minutes, and subpoenas as examples.
The students overcame barriers to intercultural business communication with the help of the *Three P's Method*: presentation, practice, production; the method involves presenting new material along with development and creative implementation of the acquired knowledge and skills in written practice (Harmer 2015). It was possible to explain the business letter outline by presenting the structural parts in a variety of documents. Then students had to unscramble parts of one business letter or match parts to different letters. “Production” refers to structuring the business letter as a whole by arranging all its parts in a logical way.

The initial research data included an assessment of the English-language proficiency level for each student and a preliminary list of difficulties performing written assignments. This assessment tested the undergraduate students’ ability to participate in intercultural written communication in a foreign language. Specifically, it determined their awareness of how to write a business letter in an intercultural context.

First, we obtained results from the standardized state exam in English qualifying for the general certificate of Russian secondary education: 73 (43.2%) students passed the exam, which was not obligatory for school-leavers. Table 1 shows the highest, lowest, and average scores on a 100-point scale received by 29 first-year and 44 second-year students. Students must score 22 points to pass the exam. Scoring 84–100 is considered excellent, 59–83 good, and 22–58 satisfactory.

**Table 1:** Results of the standardized state exam in a foreign language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>High score</th>
<th>Low score</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>first-year</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second-year</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We determined foreign language proficiency level using assignments that correspond to each type of English language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The levels ranged from A1 (breakthrough) to B2 (vantage), according to the Common European Framework of Reference; see Table 2.

**Table 2:** Results of the foreign language proficiency test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>A1</th>
<th>A2</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>first-year</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second-year</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We then compiled a preliminary list of difficulties that the undergraduate students majoring in economics and management encountered in studying a foreign language. The students did written assignments included in print and electronic teaching materials in English, provided by Macmillan Education, Oxford University Press, and Pearson Education. We observed the students complete the assignments and interviewed them after submitting to find out types of difficulties.

The students mainly faced difficulties of an organizational, communicative, analytical, logical, linguistic and cultural nature. In particular, there were difficulties presenting ideas clearly in writing. They tried to employ writing rules in their native language rather than using them in the English language. There were inconsistencies in constructing well-argued responses. Some of the ideas in their business letters proved not to be interconnected. The documents were characterized by lexical and grammatical inaccuracy. Only a few students considered cultural differences in deciding the relevant content of the letter.

The data from the standardized state exam in English and the foreign language proficiency test showed a varying degree of readiness among the students to learn a foreign language at university. Intercultural written communication could not be fully achieved due to difficulties perceiving cultural differences embodied in the business letter. The degree of
preparedness should be taken into account when determining the students’ readiness for intercultural written communication. For us, it was necessary to systematize the difficulties the students experienced when writing business letters.

The study used two main stages to identify students’ readiness for intercultural written communication in a foreign language. The first stage used a written test to determine students’ awareness of how to write business letters in a foreign language. We developed four written assignments corresponding to the preliminary list of difficulties.

**Task 1** involved skim reading: e.g., “read the letter below and choose the type of document”. The students familiarized themselves with the text and, from the proposed options, determined the type of business letter: complaint, reminder, refusal or request.

**Task 2** aimed to identify a general understanding of the business letter outline: e.g., "put the typical paragraphs of a piece of business letter in the right order". To complete this assignment, students had to determine the logical sequence of a business letter: attention line, body, copy notation, complimentary closing, date, enclosure notation, full address, inside address, organization’s full name, reference initials, salutation, signature subject line, telephone and email address. We determined if the students completed the task correctly.

**Task 3** involved answering eight questions:

1. Look at the letter above. Does it conform to a standard business outline? Why? Why not?
2. Has the writer used the correct style? Give examples.
3. Does the letter have a good start (opening sentence)?
4. Is the information in a logical order and easy to read?
5. Does the letter express how the company will solve the problem?
6. Will the reader know clearly what to do in response?
7. What do you think the company would do?
8. Is the letter the best way to deliver the information?

These questions aimed to evaluate understanding of the business letter outline, along with the ability to present ideas, employ writing rules, construct a well-argued response, interconnect ideas, and understand cultural differences. Answers were evaluated according to the following criteria: accuracy of the answer, degree of completing the task (high/medium/low), degree of detail (high/medium/low), lexical and grammatical accuracy, presence of a well-argued response, effectiveness of the proposed solution, and availability of examples. The students were welcomed to provide explanations for their answers. Their readiness for intercultural written communication was connected to their ability to analyze business letters when considering cultural differences in communicating in English.

**Task 4** allowed students to employ their writing skills while performing a writing assignment typical of intercultural business communication. Students’ readiness for international written communication was revealed in the formal style and outline of their letters.

Write a similar letter [to the one you have just reviewed]. You should provide a clear description or explanation of what is wrong with the project, delivery, product or service. You should describe the steps you expect the company to undertake to solve the problems: replace defective products or correct the errors without delay, etc. The language and tone in the letter should be firm, reasonable, and courteous.

Evaluation was based on the criteria that we had elaborated. They included the presence or absence of the business-letter outline, ability to solve a cultural problem, presence or absence of sequence markers, textual flow, degree to which punctuation and spelling rules were
followed, lexical accuracy, grammatical accuracy, appropriate style, and presence or absence of excess information.

The second stage of the study involved data analysis, assessing the degree of students’ readiness to participate in intercultural written communication in a foreign language. We arranged the test results obtained from the four tasks according to degree of readiness: high (86-100%), medium (60-85%) or low (0-59%).

3. Results

When describing the results of the written assignments, we present the undergraduate students’ examples and explanations without any stylistic, grammatical or lexical corrections.

Almost all the students were able to establish the type of business letter (Task 1). The number of students who answered the questions in Task 1 correctly was 151 (89.35%) while 18 (10.65%) failed this task.

No student obtained high scores for Task 2; 92 (54.44%) received average scores and 77 (45.56%) low. Ninety-two (54.44%) students were aware of the logical sequence of the business letter outline and its generally accepted structure. The main difficulties concerned such structural parts of the letter as copy notation, complimentary closing, enclosure notation, and reference initials.

Table 3: Students’ analysis of the business letter outline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question in Task 3</th>
<th>“Yes” answers</th>
<th>“No” answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Does it conform to a standard business outline?</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Has the writer used the correct style?</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Does the letter have a good start (opening sentence)?</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Is the information in a logical order and easy to read?</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Does the letter express how the company will solve the problem?</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What do you think the company would do?</td>
<td>111 (47+64)</td>
<td>58 (56+2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Is the letter the best way to deliver the information?</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 presents the data regarding students’ readiness for intercultural written communication (Task 3), where each positively answered question demonstrates their readiness. High scores were assigned to 69 (40.83%), medium to 63 (37.28%), and low to 37 (21.89%). One third of the students were unable to give a well-argued response to several
questions in Task 3. The students explained: “I didn’t completely finish”, “I lacked time”, “I did not understand the task”, etc. Regarding the lexical and grammatical accuracy of their answers, 139 (82.25%) assignments received a positive assessment, while 30 (17.75%) contained errors that did not significantly affect the intercultural written communication.

For the first question, 130 (76.92%) students offered a well-argued response. In some cases, the students simply rephrased the question in the affirmative: for example, “I think the letter corresponds to the business format”.

All students answered the second question; 101 (59.76%) gave a well-argued response with examples, while 68 (40.24%) did not provide any examples or explanations. Some students offered phrases from the letter as examples of the appropriate formal style: “we have been doing...”, “have not been...”, “let us know...”, “company intends to do to rectify this situation”. Some simply said that the writer had used the correct style. Some attempted to analyze the text and its structure, indicating the absence of abbreviations, noting the use of complex verb forms and set phrases. Overall, the students demonstrated an understanding of the general rules for writing business letters.

For the third question, 73 (43.2%) students indicated yes or no without explanation, while 96 (56.8%) students tried to answer reasonably. To explain their position, a number of them drew attention to violations of the structure or logic of the business letter: for example, “the letter has a good start, but it was possible to write differently / more fully”, “no, the letter doesn’t have an opening sentence”.

For questions 4, 5 and 6, 97 (57.4%) students answered yes or no without commentary; 70 (41.42%) answers contained various kinds of explanations, some of which did not quite correspond to the task:

No. There are no clear instructions how to solve the problem. I think the reader doesn’t know clearly what to do. May be the reader will know clearly what to do in response.

In some cases, the students appeared to understand the situation but were unable to adequately explain it. Two students (1.18%) did not provide any answers at all.

For Question 7, 47 (27.81%) answers offered highly effective solutions, 64 (37.87%) offered average effectiveness, and 56 (33.14%) showed low effectiveness. Two students (1.18%) made no comments, even though one of those students obtained 70 points on the state standardized exam in English.

For Question 8, 96 students (56.8%) offered well-argued responses; 73 (43.2%) gave one-word answers.

Almost all students (165; 97.63%) performed Task 4 albeit to varying degrees of success; four failed to complete the task, without any explanation. See Table 4.

Table 4: Analysis of students’ own business letters (Task 4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>general understanding of the business letter outline</td>
<td>53 (90.53%)</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>solution to the cultural problem</td>
<td>137 (81.07%)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clear presentation and interconnection of ideas</td>
<td>147 (86.98%)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>following punctuation and spelling rules</td>
<td>138 (81.66%)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lexical accuracy</td>
<td>138 (81.66%)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appropriate style</td>
<td>132 (78.11%)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>absence of excess information</td>
<td>162 (95.86%)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clear presentation and interconnection of ideas was achieved via sequence markers and textual flow. Seventy-five students (44.38%) followed punctuation and spelling rules to a high, 63 (37.28%) to a medium, and 31 (18.34%) to a low degree. Seventy-six (44.97%) were
lexically accurate to a high, 62 (36.69%) to a medium, and 31 (18.34%) to a low degree. Eighty-one (47.93%) were grammatically accurate to a high, 60 (35.5%) to a medium, and 28 (16.57%) to a low degree.

Of the four tasks, Task 3 proved the most difficult; 43 (25.44%) responses showed a low degree of task completion compared to 18 underperformers (10.65%) for Task 1 and 29 (17.16%) for Task 4. Overall, the results show the students’ readiness for intercultural written communication, corresponding to their English proficiency levels: 15 (8.88%) received high scores (Level B2), 112 (66.27%) average (B1), and 42 (24.85%) poor (A2); see Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Students’ readiness for intercultural written communication in a foreign language.](image)

4. Discussion

The findings show that the undergraduate students can carry out intercultural written communication to varying degrees. High, medium and low scores illustrate sufficient, insufficient or lack of readiness for such communication. Despite the range of scores, most students can recognize the English business letter outline with its introductory (opening), main (body) and final parts (closing). They are able to indicate a summary of the main content in the subject line.

However, the difficulties determining the business letter structure, which almost half of the students encountered, indicate their misunderstanding of cultural information. Failure to understand the content of a business letter completely is a sign that effectiveness of their intercultural written communication may be questionable. Many students do not quite grasp what information the foreign recipient should obtain. Pikhart (2019) writes that ignoring students’ cultural differences and preferences for discussion leads to problems in intercultural business communication.

When preparing their letters, the students are able to identify the introduction. They indicate the purpose/subject of the letter, such as responding to a letter, expressing gratitude, providing additional information on an issue, or requesting information. In the final part of the letter, the students are able to indicate their location and express hope for specific response actions in return.

The English norms for addressing the recipient and closing the letter differ significantly in Russia. Russian salutations typically include exclamation marks, which are untypical in English (Aimoldina & Zharkynbekova 2014). The English “dear” might be misinterpreted due to its meaning "sweetheart" in Russian. In Russia, the choice of a complimentary close does
not depend on the presence or absence of a name in the salutation, as in the typical English business letter.

The students demonstrate partially, but not entirely, successful attempts to switch to a formal style of intercultural written communication. Nonetheless, they are generally aware of such a style of business correspondence and are ready to use complete grammatical forms (“I am”, “you are”, “it is”, “we will”), complex clauses (“I would appreciate it if you could send…”, “we would advise you to…”), and the passive voice (It should be done), which is preferable to the active voice.

Other researchers pinpoint similar difficulties that undergraduate students’ experience in international written communication in a foreign language. The Japanese researcher Nixon (2018) observes that the skill of understanding business letters is considered more passive than productive due to the lack of direct contact with business partners overseas. The Chinese researchers Qian and Pan (2019) clarify difficulties in writing business letters by referring to their formal style and stress a polite tone in intercultural written communication. Akbari (2017) from Australia discusses linguistic means for expressing her students’ viewpoints when writing business letters. She claims that subjectivity and direct judgments are characteristic of students who speak a foreign language at a low level.

As a result, students are aware of the business letter outline but do not always manage to take into account its specifics in for example writing their own business letters. The data we obtained indicates that the undergraduate students are generally not ready to maintain intercultural written communication in a foreign language. Such results were to be expected, and the students will have the opportunity to master their writing skills in further university classes. Still, the level of their readiness for intercultural written communication can be considered at best average, albeit enough for the development of their skills in senior years of studies.

The results obtained correspond to the A2–B1 level of the students’ English proficiency. Their proficiency level and linguistic experience as gained in secondary school allows them to implement a rational approach to solving cultural problems when writing business letters. That rational approach implies not only selecting appropriate linguistic forms, but also following the typical letter structure and otherwise observing business etiquette.

Blended learning technology contributes to students’ achievements due to its ability to teach formal style and the business-letter outline; students can be “totally satisfied with extra materials and sources provided through the web-based platform” in practicing their writing skills (Pikhart 2018: 44). Moreover, it offers an opportunity to provide feedback to support further development of writing skills (Khakimova & Mikhailova 2012). Blended learning technology “improves both learning curve and experience for the participants” in intercultural business communication (Pikhart 2018: 44) as well as encouraging initiative and independence, increased motivation, open learning, taking an individual approach, and developing creative skills (Smallhorn 2017, Legan 2017).

By assessing students’ readiness to participate in intercultural written communication in a foreign language, this study makes a significant contribution to assessing the level of intercultural communication skills in undergraduate students and university graduates. Their generally high skill level explains their ability to express their thoughts clearly and correctly, persuade insistently and present effectively (Klimova, Klimova & Dubinka 2019): the main skills needing implemented in the workplace.

5. Conclusion

Our study revealed the undergraduate students’ awareness of how to write a business letter effectively, as well as the level of their readiness to participate in intercultural written communication in a foreign language. The results show that they are able to perform simple
writing assignments relevant to business letters. The difficulties identified do not cause serious communication barriers but can prevent students from maintaining intercultural business communication successfully when they encounter cultural differences.

Development of writing skills in intercultural business communication improves foreign language training and contributes generally to the quality of university education. Our recommendation is to develop assignments aimed at writing various types of business letters - complaint, reminder, refusal, request - in both formal and semi-formal styles. We further recommend using blended learning technology and the Three P’s method.

It is advisable to provide tasks that not only relate to university graduates’ professional activities but also target the logics of presenting information, clarifying letter content and writing in accessible language. It is important to provide checklists with questions about the layout and content of a business letter: its style, grammatical forms, etc.

University graduates should understand that a well-structured and linguistically accurate letter is a significant tool for making effective business contacts when conducting intercultural written communication. Employees can be enrolled in training programs that help them overcome difficulties dealing with business letters and understanding culturally-specific information: to whom, for what purpose, and in what format the letter is written; what information is critical and what details should be omitted; and how to write to achieve the desired result.

Acknowledgments
The authors are grateful to the reviewers for reading the article carefully, offering relevant criticism, and contributing to its improvement.

About the authors

References


Intercultural Communication Competence: Well-being and Performance of Multicultural Teams

Kavitha Balakrishnan¹, Madhubala Bava Harji & Ajitha Angusamy
Multimedia University, Malaysia

Abstract: Multiethnic groups coexist in a typical Malaysian university setting. Cultural patterns are expressed through communication facilitating better understanding between diverse cultural groups. Intercultural communication competence based on ethnicity is explained by employing structural equation modelling using Barrett and colleagues’ (2013) indicators of attitude, knowledge and skills. These three constructs are hypothesized to explain intercultural communication competence and its effect on well-being and performance. Purposive sampling via a self-administered survey involved 288 Malaysian educators from higher education. The findings confirm that both endogenous constructs -- well-being and team performance -- can be used as predictive factors to assess intercultural communication competence.

Keywords: intercultural communication, communication competence, educators, well-being, team performance.

1. Introduction

Malaysia comprises of multiracial and multicultural communities where three predominant ethnicities coexist. Malays form the majority (67.4%) of the population, followed by the Chinese (24.6%) and Indians (7.3%) (Department of Statistics 2018). With the increased impact of globalization on the multiracial, multicultural, multilingual, multireligious society of Malaysia, there is a need to function effectively in one’s own culture as well as that of others. In multicultural university settings, a large amount of communication and interaction takes place between educators from various ethnic backgrounds. Creating a culturally compatible communication platform that rejects ethnic, racial, religious and gender discrimination and promotes equality is the aim of all multicultural research (Woolfolk 2010). Higher-education institutions need to develop understanding and recognize their educators’ cultural ethnocentrisms and other biases before they form judgments.

Attitudes are usually based on people’s cultural background (Nunan 1991). To understand these attitudes, researchers must address the underlying beliefs on which these attitudes are based (Benson & Nunan 2002). Effective intercultural communication demands adopting a variety of strategies (Gay 2002, Ladson-Billings 1994). Inspiration comes from exploratory studies finding that culture and cultural diversity affect communication (Brooks, Bloomer & Manias 2018; Chung 2019). Cultural patterns of thought are expressed through communication.

Wen Huey (2012) found difference in work culture between Japanese and Malaysians when tested against five cultural dimensions. Idrus (2012) addressed the concept of shared identity among multicultural Malaysians. A study conducted on the three dominant ethnic groups in Malaysia reported significant differences in negotiation styles (Osman-Gani & Tan 2002). Zawawi (2008), who studied the cultural values of employees, was clear about the limited scope of the study, which failed to consider all the main ethnic groups. Malaysian

¹ Faculty of Applied Communication, Multimedia University, Jalan Ayer Keroh Lama, Bukit Beruang, 75450 Melaka, Malaysia. Email: kavitha.balakrishnan@mmu.edu.my.
culture as analyzed by other researchers does not disclose any justification for the subtle differences that exist within its different ethnicities. Despite a national development plan for 2020 focused on uniting the three main ethnicities, studies highlighted intercultural discord and cultural disparities (Mustapha et al. 2009, Abdullah 2010).

Sualman, Hamzah and Roskhamdi (2019) found different Malaysian ethnic groups perceived engagement with other cultures a challenging experience largely due to ethnocentrism, which is to say bias caused by historical forces. Although Malaysia is a multicultural nation, Malaysian ethnic groups perceive themselves as segregated. Previous studies have ignored the heterogeneity, a byproduct of global transformation and the emergence of a pluralistic Malaysian society (Fontaine & Richardson 2003; Fontaine, Richardson & Peik Foong 2002; Hofstede 1991, 2001). Different cultural groups have cultural similarities, but it would be wrong to assume that these groups share the same values. Communication competence is largely influenced by one’s culture. Understanding differences leads to better, mutually beneficial relationships (Nishimura, Nevgi & Tella 2008).

Research on higher-education institutions has identified deficits in intercultural communication competence that result in conflicts and negatively affect the productivity of the institution (Ismail & Lawrence 2012). This study aims to understand communication competence among the different cultural groups in Malaysia, with its effect on respondents’ well-being and performance.

1.1 Cultural factors affecting communication
According to Hall (1990) and Lewis (1999, 2005), different cultural backgrounds facilitate different ways of communication that can lead to misunderstandings. Culture influences thought patterns, feelings, actions and interactions constituting basic communication behavior (Neuliep 2011). Dalib, Harun and Yusof (2017) identified the critical importance of cultural identity consciousness toward intercultural competence.

Cultural congruence can be achieved when an ethnic group acknowledges the values, beliefs, traditions, practices, and lifestyles of other cultures. Would-be communicators must be able to accommodate others’ demands for culturally adapted communication (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot 2010). Woolfolk (2010) focuses on communication as the heart of interaction and the way that culture affects communication. Communication is never merely an interaction tool but a reflection of one’s culture.

1.2 Intercultural communication competence
Hall (1959) was the first to use the term “intercultural communication”, and his publication became “the first founding document” (Rogers & Hart 2002). Hall identified two major communication styles he called “high context” and “low context” (see also Dumitrescu 2013). Bennett (1998) identified direct/indirect and contextual/personal communication styles as the main contributors to the scope and perception of intercultural communication. Neulig (1999) wrote that understanding a communicator’s intentions can be challenging and lead to serious misunderstandings including distorted and disrespectful views (see also Salo-Lee 2006). Côté and Clément (1994) describe an intercultural communication competent individual as recognizing the verbal and nonverbal communication styles of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Competency can be achieved when individual qualities, abilities and intellect come together to form a unified self (Matveev 2002). Dinges and Lieberman (1989) treat communication competence and intercultural communication as synonymous.

An effective intercultural approach to communication takes a receiver-centered view (Sulkowski & Deakin 2009), which encourages communicators to be more introspective (Cartledge & Kourea 2008). Nunan (1991) believed that an intercultural approach should take into consideration the attitudes of the receiver and preferred nature of communication.
Intercultural communication competence requires remaining flexible, adapting to suit the needs of different individuals. An effective intercultural approach helps communicators create a tolerant, respectful and comfortable environment.

Such an approach is a spinoff of Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles & Powesland, 1997), where one tries to match one’s verbal and nonverbal communication to suit a listener. Americans and Europeans men largely adopt a linear and direct communication approach, unlike Africans, Arabs and Asians, who prefer indirect, contextualized communication. Such contextualized approaches are typical among European and American females, too. Malaysians are known to be indirect and ambiguous and to seek to save face under adversity. Each style has its strengths and limitations. Interculturalists try to develop competency in all these styles.

Intercultural communication competence enables interaction based on better understanding among individuals and groups (Liu 2016). Differences in communication can be attributed to different language structures, compositional styles, cultural practices, norms and thinking styles. While these differences can be a major source of misunderstanding and conflict, a good understanding of the fundamental patterns of intercultural communication competence can accommodate differences, reduce communication barriers, build relationships and facilitate collaboration (Liu 2016). Appreciating differences is the main objective of intercultural communication.

There is neither a common approach nor a set of similar assumptions to this research area. What can be said is that intercultural communication competence thrives on interpersonal relationships and focuses on differences in all aspects of communication where one’s culture is expressed.

Dalib, Harun and Yusof (2017), in studying university students, identify the critical importance of identity consciousness toward intercultural competence. Individuals can hold multiple cultural identities. Interculturally cultured individuals view their identity as continually reconstructed during the course of interaction in a multicultural environment.

Byram (1997) proposes five dimensions of intercultural communication: knowledge, interpretation, interaction skill, an open attitude, and cultural awareness. Gu (2017) classifies intercultural communication competence models into compositional (see also Hunter, White & Godbey 2006), co-orientational (see also Fantini 2005), developmental (see also Bennett 1986), adaptational (see also Kim 1988, Navas et al. 2005) and causal (Hammer et al. 1998).

Barrett and colleagues’ (2013) comprehensive model serves as the main reference for this study. The model was adapted to suit the Malaysian context. Particular attention was given to the dimension of attitude, which includes appreciating culturally pluralist views, understanding the heterogeneity of culture, and showing the ability to adapt and maneuver in other cultures (Barrett et al. 2013, Byram 1997).

1.3 Intercultural communication, well-being and performance

Studies have highlighted how knowledge transfer is more effective when organizations take the necessary measures to cater to the well-being of their employees (Sulkowski & Deakin 2010, 2009). These studies have found that communication competence instills a sense of belonging, which promotes active participation and facilitates interpersonal relationships. An interculturally competent individual should be able to display a range of behaviors appropriate to any given situation.

It is very important to connect before any real work output takes place. Recognizing the perceptions of individuals from different cultural backgrounds assists in the management of work teams for more effective performance.

to feelings of satisfaction and pleasure. In most cases, well-being and happiness are used interchangeably (Diener, Scollon & Lucas 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2014).

This study will use the term “well-being”. It should be understood as high quality of life factors (Durand 2015, OECD 2013). The relation of well-being to overall happiness, life satisfaction, and positive emotions will be analyzed to understand the way it mediates between intercultural communication competence and multicultural team performance.

The impact of culture on intercultural communication competence and the performance of multicultural teams has not been studied extensively in Malaysia. Buzaglo and Wheelan (1999) studied the work performance of multicultural individuals to reveal the traits that promote productivity and efficiency (see also Matveev & Miller 2004; Johnson, Lenartowicz & Apud 2006). The study’s results revealed that a work group emerges as a high-performance team and achieves its work targets when its members recognize the need for continuous group development. A number of other studies have found a direct relationship between intercultural communication competence and effective performance (Matveev & Miller 2004; Sizoo et al. 2005; Chen, Lin & Sawangpattanakul 2011), while Gut, Wilczewski and Gorbaniuk (2017) express the need to explore continuously the relationship between cultural diversity and communication efficacy; they recommend further research on the best practices for building effective work teams.

Intercultural communication plays a crucial role in reducing anxiety, discomfort and uncertainty during interaction with different cultures (Neuliep 2019). According to Yeasmin, Koiurova and Heikkilä (2019), intercultural interaction promotes feeling of trust and fairness. To the extent that intercultural communication exerts influence on well-being, it is a predictor of satisfaction and happiness.

To enhance the performance of a multicultural team, it is essential to increase awareness of communication patterns and styles (Wheelan, Buzaglo & Tsumura 1998). Matveev (2002) and Dinges and Lieberman (1989) found a direct relationship between intercultural communication competence and performance. Other studies have found a positive correlation between intercultural competence and work attitudes and motivation, leading to higher performance for team members (Wilczewski 2015, Zimmermann 2010). Hmielewski and Sheppard (2019) investigated those attributes whereby employees see themselves as a good fit for their company, enhancing their well-being and leading to higher performance. Studies conducted in Malaysian higher-education institutions (Krishnasamy, Hussein & Dalib 2014, Ismail & Lawrence 2012) confirm the local need to develop intercultural communication competence to overcome the challenges faced by multicultural groups.

This study is based on three hypotheses:

- **H1**: Intercultural communication competence has a positive effect on well-being.
- **H2**: Intercultural communication competence has a positive effect on team performance.
- **H3**: Well-being has a positive effect on performance.

2. Methodology

The goal was to investigate how ethnic Malays, Chinese and Indians perceived intercultural communication competence and to measure its impact on well-being and team performance. Public and private universities with diverse set of participants (all educators) were chosen.

The data was collected primarily using purposive sampling. According to Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2012), purposive sampling allows researchers to “use judgement to select a sample that they believe, based on prior information” is best suited for the research.

The primary data collection was done via an online structured questionnaire. To ensure a satisfactory response rate, the prior consent of participants was obtained by email. All
questions were compulsory; respondents could only submit their questionnaire after completing every question.

The questionnaire was pilot tested with a small group of individuals based on the convenience sampling method, designed to include all subgroups from the target population. The questionnaire was administered online to 60 academics from higher-education institutions in Malaysia. Forty-seven completed questionnaires were used to validate the pilot-study results. All instruments of study revealed a high internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha of more than 0.80. The Cronbach’s alpha results for each instrument are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Cronbach’s alpha.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
<th>Number of items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>intercultural communication competence</td>
<td>.840</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well-being</td>
<td>.956</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>team performance</td>
<td>.977</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The intention of this study was to identify intercultural communication competence constructs and their relationship with well-being and team performance. Educators with the academic positions of tutor, assistant lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor, professor, dean or director having multicultural work experience were chosen. G*Power results determined the minimum sample size to be 160. The study had 288 respondents.

The well-being indicators suggested by the OECD (2013) guidelines were used. The seven-item indicator tested in this study measures happiness, life satisfaction, positive and negative experience, satisfaction with life, degree of flourishing and evaluation of domain. A modified version of Wheelan’s (1994, 1990) High-Performance Team Questionnaire was used to evaluate team performance. This likewise seven-item indicator assesses team performance at its highest development stage. A seven-point Likert scales was used, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree, as validated by Griffith and colleagues (2016), Peterson and colleagues (2011), Arasaratnam (2009), Goldstein (1999) and others for all areas of intercultural communication competence.

Several intercultural competence models were used to evaluate intercultural communication competence. Models considered for this study were those of Bennett (1993), Byram (1997), King and Baxter Magolda (2005), Deardorff (2009, 2006), and Barrett and colleagues (2013). The operational model for this study closely followed Byram’s intercultural communication competence model, adapted to the educational setting. The twelve-item indicator was based on the dimensions of attitude, knowledge and skills proposed by Barrett and colleagues. Four questions addressed attitude, four knowledge, and four skills, with the questions for each dimension randomly distributed.

The first part of the questionnaire gathered demographic information including ethnic background. The next three sections inquired into perceptions of communication competence and its influence on respondents’ well-being and performance.

Descriptive statistics, reliability tests, correlation analysis and advanced structural equation modelling were used to analyze the data and address the research hypotheses. Completed questionnaires were scanned for outliers and unengaged data. Construct reliability was examined and confirmatory factor analysis conducted.
3. Results

Participants were 58.3% female and 41.7% male; 36.1% Malay, 33.7% Chinese, and 30.2% Indian. Fifty-eight percent worked at private Malaysian universities, 27.4% at public Malaysian universities, and 14.6% at foreign universities. Lecturers accounted for 45.1% of the sample, senior lecturers 28.1%, associate professors 10.1%, professors 4.2%, assistant lecturers 3.5%, tutors 3.5%, deans and directors 3.1%, and deputy deans / deputy directors 2.4%. Just over a third had 0-5 years' experience (36.8%); 16% had 6-10 years, 20.1% 11-15 years, 9.7% 16-20 years, and 17.4% over 20 years.

Structural equation modelling was used to understand the multivariate data relationships for the three hypotheses, testing the measurement model to establish its convergent validity and discriminant validity. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to study the relationships between the measured indicators of the reflective construct (outer loadings).

First, the outer loadings and the relationships between the latent variables (path coefficients) were estimated in the structural model using the PLS-SEM algorithm. The three main assessment criteria to be met were internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. Several threshold values were acceptable; but, for this study, loading values equal to or greater than 0.6 were accepted provided the summation resulted in high loading values and AVE scores of 0.6 (Byrne 2013).

Next, convergent validity was assessed to examine the degree that individual indicators reflect a converging construct compared to other indicators measuring other constructs (Urbach & Ahlemann 2010). The threshold value for AVE was 0.50 (Bagozzi & Yi 1988, Fornell & Larcker 1981, Hair et al. 2017). According to the discriminant validity for Fornell and Larcker’s criterion, the square root of AVE of a construct should be larger than the correlation between that construct and other constructs in the model. The discriminant validity for the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) is achieved when the 90% bootstrap confidence level of HTMT does not include the value of 1.

Table 2: Measurement model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Loadings</th>
<th>Consistency reliability (CR)</th>
<th>Average variance extracted (AVE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>attitude</td>
<td>ATT1</td>
<td>0.873</td>
<td>0.848</td>
<td>0.652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ATT2</td>
<td>0.813</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ATT3</td>
<td>0.730</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge</td>
<td>KNOW2</td>
<td>0.884</td>
<td>0.853</td>
<td>0.660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KNOW3</td>
<td>0.818</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KNOW4</td>
<td>0.728</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skill</td>
<td>SKIL2</td>
<td>0.916</td>
<td>0.881</td>
<td>0.713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SKIL3</td>
<td>0.757</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SKIL4</td>
<td>0.850</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>team performance</td>
<td>TP1</td>
<td>0.856</td>
<td>0.950</td>
<td>0.730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TP2</td>
<td>0.861</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TP3</td>
<td>0.892</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TP4</td>
<td>0.849</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TP5</td>
<td>0.802</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TP6</td>
<td>0.830</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TP7</td>
<td>0.887</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well-being</td>
<td>WB1</td>
<td>0.893</td>
<td>0.953</td>
<td>0.743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WB2</td>
<td>0.842</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WB3</td>
<td>0.861</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WB4</td>
<td>0.845</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WB5</td>
<td>0.856</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WB6</td>
<td>0.911</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WB7</td>
<td>0.822</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Discriminant validity using Fornell-Larcker criterion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>ATT</th>
<th>KNOW</th>
<th>SKIL</th>
<th>TP</th>
<th>WB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ATT</td>
<td>0.808</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNOW</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>0.812</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SKIL</td>
<td>0.334</td>
<td>0.673</td>
<td>0.844</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TP</td>
<td>0.293</td>
<td>0.417</td>
<td>0.493</td>
<td>0.854</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WB</td>
<td>0.168</td>
<td>0.371</td>
<td>0.307</td>
<td>0.515</td>
<td>0.862</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Discriminant validity using the HTMT criterion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>ATT</th>
<th>KNOW</th>
<th>SKIL</th>
<th>TP</th>
<th>WB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ATT</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.235</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNOW</td>
<td>0.410</td>
<td>0.885</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SKIL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.570</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TP</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>0.498</td>
<td>0.338</td>
<td>0.538</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WB</td>
<td>0.192</td>
<td>0.414</td>
<td>0.338</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The consistency reliability (CR) of all indicators (attitude, knowledge, skill, performance, well-being) and their loading values is more than 0.730 after the deletion of items ATT4, KNOW1 and SKIL1. These indicators were deleted because they failed to satisfy the threshold factor loading of 0.5.

Based on the results presented in Table 2, the convergent validity of the model was verified by the average variance extracted (AVE) with a minimum value of 0.652, and construct reliability (CR) of 0.848 (Hair et al. 2017). Next, the Fornell and Larker criterion (Fornell 1981) and heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) were used to check the discriminant validity. For the Fornell and Larker criterion (Table 3), the square root of each construct's AVE should be higher than its highest correlation with any other construct (Fornell 1981). The results show that this study achieved discriminant validity for all constructs.

An acceptable value for HTMT must be lower than 0.9 (Table 4). According to Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt (2015), HTMT values should not exceed 0.85 for the constructs that are conceptually most distinct. The results again show that discriminant validity is achieved for all constructs.

Table 5: Hypothesis testing – partial least square

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Relation</th>
<th>Std. beta</th>
<th>Std. error</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>R2</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>VIF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>ATT→WB</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>1.695</td>
<td>supported</td>
<td>0.236</td>
<td>.0130</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>1.514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KNOW→WB</td>
<td>0.299</td>
<td>0.312</td>
<td>3.379</td>
<td>supported</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>2.532</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SKIL→WB</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>1.961</td>
<td>supported</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>2.434</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>ATT→TP</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>2.150</td>
<td>supported</td>
<td>0.303</td>
<td>0.180</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>1.514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KNOW→TP</td>
<td>0.154</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>3.450</td>
<td>supported</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>2.532</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SKIL→TP</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>1.760</td>
<td>supported</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>2.434</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>WB→TP</td>
<td>0.515</td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>8.570</td>
<td>supported</td>
<td>0.303</td>
<td>0.180</td>
<td>0.361</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Hypothesis 1, Table 5 shows the relationship between the three intercultural communication competence constructs and the independent variable, well-being, with its t-value ≥ 1.645 significant at 0.05 level. This explains 23.6% of the variance in well-being.

For Hypothesis 2, the table shows the relationship between the three intercultural communication competence constructs and the independent variable, team performance, with its t-value ≥ 1.645 significant at 0.05 level. This explains 30.3% of variance in team performance.
For Hypothesis 3, the table shows the relationship between well-being and the independent variable, team performance, with its t-value 8.570 significant at 0.05 level. This explains 30.3% of the variance in team performance. All three hypotheses stand supported.

In conclusion, the findings show that well-being and team performance increase with increase in intercultural communication competence, while well-being shows a substantial positive correlation with team performance. Therefore, these factors can be used as predictive factors to assess intercultural communication competence.

The VIF values were found to be below the threshold values of 5 (Hair et al. 2017) and 3.3 (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw 2006). This means that the collinearity values are far below the critical levels, and again this model can be used for estimating intercultural communication competence.

4. Discussion
The study is intended to develop intercultural communication competence among local Malaysian educators as recommended by Krishnasamy, Hussein and Dalib (2014), helping them to prevail over the challenges of communication in a multicultural environment that directly affects their well-being and team performance (Ismail & Lawrence 2012). Pandian (2008) reports the perception of internationals who believe that Malaysians lack intercultural communication competence and believe that higher-education institutions do little to promote it.

The findings of this study support those of previous studies that culture influences communication and perception of communication (e.g., Brooks, Bloomer & Manias 2018; Chung 2019). Intercultural communication competence facilitates cooperation among multicultural team members by promoting understanding (Korzenny & Griffs-Korzenny 1984), thereby reducing anxiety, discomfort and uncertainty (Neuliep 2019); while team members adopting differing communication styles leads to bias and misunderstanding (Lewis 1998).

The findings of this study are likewise in accordance with those of Yeasmin, Koivurova and Heikkilä (2019), who found that intercultural communication competence positively affects well-being by promoting feeling of trust and fairness. Intercultural communication competence emerges as an important predictor of satisfaction and happiness.

Like the studies of Matveev (2002), Wilczewski (2015) and Zimmermann (2010), this study found a direct positive correlation between intercultural communication competence and performance of multicultural teams. Likewise, this study found a positive correlation between well-being and team performance, in keeping with previous studies (Athota, Budhwar & Malik 2019; Cooper et al. 2019; Guest 2017; Hmieleski & Sheppard 2019).

5. Conclusions and recommendations
The results of this study confirm that communication is contextual in nature. The results add to existing knowledge of intercultural understanding among ethnic groups. The instruments used in this study can be replicated in any multiracial workplace. This study hopes to trigger research interest in intercultural communication as researchers come to understand better the influence of culture on communication competence, well-being and work performance.

The authors recommend that future researchers observe real-life situations to understand the dynamic nature of intercultural communication competence. Researchers should bear in mind that intercultural competence is not limited to communication but can be applied to all areas of interaction.
About the authors

Dr. Kavitha Balakrishnan is a principal lecturer in the Faculty of Applied Communication at Multimedia University in Malaysia. She teaches English language and communication and provides business writing courses, in-house trainings and communication-skills workshops for government agencies, corporate clients and private organizations. She has published in the areas of communication, language and education in Scopus-indexed journals.

Dr. Madhubala Bava Harji is an associate professor attached to Multimedia University with vast experience in the administration of institutes and faculties, serving as head, director or dean. She is actively involved in research in language, communication and education. She has published textbooks as well as numerous papers in internationally indexed journals. She is a reviewer for various international journals. Her research areas of interest include the use of information and communications technology in education.

Dr. Ajitha Angusamy is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Business at Multimedia University. Her expertise is in the areas of education and social sciences. She teaches quantitative subjects to undergraduate and postgraduate students. She is actively involved in research and has published articles in numerous Scopus-indexed journals and with international conferences.

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