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## **Effects of Daily Interpersonal Communication among Students of Different Cultures and Countries on Enhancement of Collaborative Learning at Malaysian Universities**

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### ***Abstract:***

*Collaborative learning among students of different cultures and countries at university environment is one of the most essential requirements of all modern higher education institutions including Malaysian universities. This research project examined various aspects of daily interpersonal communication (IPC) among local and international students of University Malaysia Pahang (UMP), including effects of their daily IPCs on the level of collaborative learning among them. A quantitative survey was conducted as the main method of this study and qualitative interviews were nested to it to enrich the data. The quantitative survey had 220 participants equally from both Malaysian and international students of UMP, and also from both local and international participants, 12 of them were interviewed for the qualitative data. Findings of this study illustrated that daily IPC among local and international students of UMP enabled both Malaysian and international students to have enough daily collaborative activities at the university environment with students of different cultures and nationalities. Findings of this study may highlight the ways for both university students and university policymakers to increase the level of collaborative learning at the university environments. However, further studies on the related issues recommended as well.*

***Key words:*** *Interpersonal communication; interactions; Collaborative learning; Local and international students; Malaysian universities*

### **1. Introduction**

Interpersonal communication (IPC) is a key factor for students of higher education institutions to build their capacity, have better opportunities of collaborative learning, and gain some essential communicative skills. In common learning, increasing of interpersonal communication abilities is the main precondition of collaborative education that has been mentioned to be positively effective on self-reported gains of students in knowledge and problem-solving (Astin, 1993; Light, 2001 cited in Aidoo, 2012). At the same time, good skills of interpersonal communication will pave the ways for students to find good jobs and be more successful in their future careers as well. As argued by Aidoo (2012) interpersonal relations or understanding at university may improve individual and professional lives of students.

Some researchers (e.g. Baryant, 2012; Izumi, 2010; Huang, 2010) conducted some studies on the related issues, but their research themes and findings belong to cultural and educational styles and norms of western countries like the United States and cannot cover the real communicative situation among local and international students of Malaysian universities. Therefore, daily interactions among students with various regional and cultural backgrounds at Malaysian universities and the effects of this process on the level of collaborative learning at university campuses needed to be examined. At the same time, this research project aimed to assess the role of daily interpersonal communication among local and international students of University Malaysia Pahang (UMP) on enhancement of their daily collaborative learning at the university campus as well.

### *1.1. Aim of Study*

This research project was designed and conducted to evaluate the characteristics of daily interpersonal communication among Malaysian and international students of UMP. It also aimed to find out the effects of this process on enhancement of collaborative activities among students at UMP campus.

### *1.2. Significance of Study*

Findings of this study illustrate the level of daily collaborative learning among local and international students at a Malaysian university (UMP), and the effects of their daily interactions on this process. Therefore, the results of this study may help university students and related organizations to enhance the level of collaborative learning at the university campuses, and also may help researchers in the future to have more focus on the related issues.

## **2. Literature Review**

IPC among students from different countries and different cultures may pave the ways for them to share their knowledge, information, and experiences. Talks and communications make a profound and prosperous experience of global education, sharing of knowledge, questioning and testing thoughts, arguing conclusions, and reaching agreements (Hord & Hirsh, 2008 cited in Bryant, 2012). The educational aspect of IPC and its effects on the development of learning process at the higher education institutions have been highlighted by many scholars. According to Donaldson & Kurtz (1997) learning and teaching are the central skills of communication.

The aim to improve IPC is mainly important for education. As argued by Marr (2009) the preliminary steps to develop this area are: at first, to identify variables which affect the process and outcomes of communication and secondly, to understand the relations of the variables. At the higher education institutions, participation of students in IPC may help them to improve their personal and academic skills. At the same time, it may help them to learn how to communicate and how to deal with others during university or after graduation.

Participation of university students in IPC may develop essential skills of their personal and university related lives as well. Interpersonal relations or understanding at university may improve individual and professional lives of students (Aidoo, 2012). Nowadays, skill of IPC is required for all educated people to be successful in their occupations. In the 21st century all educational and business-related works are paying high value on the employees and educated people who have enough skills on interpersonal communication; therefore, communication and gatherings of students at the university may bring these skills, when students cooperate with people of several societies (House, 2004 cited in Aidoo, 2012; Crowell, 2011; Aidoo, 2012).

As asserted by Jeffries (2013) Interpersonal communication emphasis on students' awareness of the results of communication in our daily interactions and relations through teaching them social communications without an obviously rhetorical aim in which the purpose is informing, persuading or motivating. Also, in some institutions, IPC is the first essential step to be involved in the next steps of communication. As Cheng (2007) argued students must know the methods of communication for the purpose to acquire access on the selected discipline's discourse community by knowing and acting requisite genres and gaining essential disciplinary-knowledge. The university environment is a good place for students to improve their communication skills and communicative abilities. Academic environment is the place, in which students not just grow and mature in their classes, but also find out themselves being involved to the new views and ideas outside of their classrooms (Norton, 2010).

All of the above mentioned findings from the literature supportive of positive effects of daily interactions among university students, especially students of different cultures and countries on the level of their collaborative activities at the university environment.

## **3. Method**

A quantitative survey was conducted to collect the required data and the qualitative interviews were done to achieve the triangulation of methods and deepen the results.

### *3.1. Participants*

The quantitative survey had 220 participants from both Malaysian and international students of UMP as 110 participants per each group, and 12 students (6 local and 6 foreigner) of UMP were participated in the qualitative interviews. Malaysian participants of this study were almost from all parts and ethnicities of this country, and international participants were from 20 countries from different parts of the world.

### *3.2. Instruments and Data Analyze*

The main instruments of this study were the demographic information and questionnaires. Questionnaires included the two packages of items (questions) for the quantitative survey, and a package of questions for the qualitative interviews. The instruments were arranged by the researcher of this study with reference to instruments of some previous works (e.g. Aidoo, 2012; Gao, 2011; Izumi, 2010). Quantitative instruments were designed based on Likert's scale base and the qualitative questionnaire included 12 open ended interview questions. Also, SPSS program used to analyze quantitative data and qualitative interviews were analyzed under categories and sub-categories based on answers of interviewees, research questions and emerged themes.

#### 4. Results

The quantitative data were tested through essential options of SPSS, and the qualitative data were analyzed separately and the results were categorized into categories and sub-categories based on the research-, and interview-questions and themes which found from answers of the interviewees.

##### 4.1. Quantitative Results

The reliability test of SPSS applied to check the instruments and Cronbach's alpha rating for all items together was .707. Also, Frequencies and percentages of quantitative survey were examined through descriptive option of SPSS. Based on the descriptive results, from both Malaysian and international students of UMP, 220 were participated in the survey. As the results show, 110 participants were local and 110 international students. From all participants, 147 were male, and 73 of them were female. From female participants, Malaysians were 60 and 13 of them were international students. Results which included in this conference paper are answers of those questions which related to it.

From 14 questions of Interpersonal Communication Competence (IPCC)'s package of items (questions) of the quantitative instruments, two items belonged to the topic of this paper which were item 2 as asserted (My daily interpersonal communication with international/Malaysian students helps me to have some collaborative activities and solve my daily university- related problems) and item 4 as (When I am in the class or other gathering areas at the University, when I need help or want to discuss an issue, I will talk and discuss with any of my classmates, and do not care of their cultural and nationality differences).

The quantitative instruments of this study were prepared based on the Likert's scale and each item (question) had 4 options, from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree), but to analyze the findings in the positive way, by use of transform option of SPSS, all items were recoded as from 1 (Strongly agree) to 4 (Strongly disagree). Also, beside all other items, these two items were examined through the descriptive option of SPSS to find out the level of agreements of participants from the frequencies of their answers.

For the both above mentioned items the level of agreements of participants were high as from all 220 participants of this study, 188(85.4%) of them agreed that their daily IPC help them to have some collaborative learning and activities. Also, the vast majority of participants (78.2%) accepted that they interact with their classmates regardless of their countries and ethnicities. Mean/standard deviation scores for item 2 and item 4 were 2.97/.59, and 3.11/.83 respectively. As each item had 4 options and the average mean of each item is 2, therefore mean/standard deviation scores of these items are positive and show high level of agreements of participants.

##### 4.2. Qualitative Results

Beside the quantitative survey, qualitative interviews were conducted to enrich the data and have the direct views of participants. Also, based on their personal agreements, from both Malaysian and international participants of this study, 12 of them were interviewed for the qualitative data. According to the details of qualitative interviewees, local participants of interviews were 1) Mr. Has Sanal Haris, a Master's Malay-Malaysian student, 2) Miss. Aziza Binti Aziz, a degree Malay-Malaysian student, 3) Mr. Mohammad Amir Bn Abdullah, a degree Indian- Malaysian student, 4) Miss Jamunaa, a degree Indian-Malaysian student, 5) Miss. Khair-un-Nesa, a degree Malay-Malaysian student, and 6) Mr. Yeow Jian Qin, a senior degree Chinese-Malaysian student. Also, these international students were interviewed as well, 1) Mr. Ahmad Jahid Mushtaq, a master's student from Afghanistan, 2) Mr. Amarchand Chordia Murugan, a PhD student from India, 3) Mr. Abdulhakim, a PhD student from Algeria, 4) Mr. Johni Chinese, a senior degree student from China, 5) Mr. Aziz Qannaf, a degree student from Yemen, and 6) Mr. Belo Ibrahim Garko, a master's students from Nigeria.

In findings section, interviewees will be mentioned as MSX (MS for Malaysian student and X for number) ISX for international students. This coding method was used by Ainol Haryati bt Ibrahim (2011). All interviewees were asked to choose some codenames, but they accepted use of their real identifications, except a Chinese student who chose a penname.

Beside other themes and categories of the qualitative findings, an important theme which found through this study was the positive effects of daily IPCs among students of different cultures and countries on the level of their university related collaborative activities. As, most of participants accepted that their IPCs paved the ways for them to have some team works and academic discussions with students of different countries and ethnicities, and helped them to learn easily and be happy at the university campus. For example, participant IS2 said "During my daily studies, I interact with many Malaysian and international students in the lab and other areas, it helps me a lot, we exchange experiences and help one another and our communication is good." And his statement supported by participant IS3 as said "We do have some collaborative activities with some Malaysian students. Mostly our interpersonal communication with Malaysian students solves our university related problems." And another participant IS6 said that "I have enough collaborative works with my Malaysian classmates and also I learn many things from them."

Participant MS3 told that "I have some collaborative activities with my international classmates and this process helps us to understand each other." And he said "My daily interpersonal communication with international students helps [me] to improve my English and learn easily." At the same time, MS6 said "Actually we have discussions about our homework with international students and here is no any problem to communicate."

#### 5. Discussion and Recommendations

This study examined the process of daily IPC among local and international students of UMP, and its effects on process of collaborative activities among students at the university campus. Results of both quantitative and qualitative data showed that daily IPCs among students of different nationalities and cultures at the UMP campus had positive effects on the level of their

collaborative activities and paved the ways for them to solve their daily problems together. According to the quantitative results, the vast majority of participants of quantitative survey accepted that their daily IPCs with students of other cultures and countries at the university campus paved the ways for them to have some collaborative activities and team works. At same time, 78.2% of participants reported that they interact with any of their classmates regardless of their countries and ethnicities. These findings confirmed that interactions among students had positive effects on the process of their daily collaborative learning at the UMP campus, as they gained the opportunities through their IPCs to cooperate on their daily assignments and projects.

Also, results of qualitative interviews clearly supportive of positive effects of daily IPCs between Malaysian and foreigner students of UMP on the process of collaborative activities among them. As almost all participants of qualitative section accepted that their interactions with students of other nationalities at the university environment helped them to learn how to cooperate with different people and have enough university-related team works as well. However, findings of this study on effects of daily IPCs between local and foreigner students of Malaysian universities on their university related collaborations are new; therefore, may help students and policymakers of Malaysian universities to enhance the level of collaborative learning at the university campuses through daily interactions among students of different countries and ethnicities.

### 5.1. Recommendations

The process of interactions and enhancement of daily collaborative activities among students of Malaysian universities are among important and interesting issues; thus, further studies on the related issues recommended as well.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude it, the effects of daily interpersonal communication (IPC) among local and international students of a Malaysian university (UMP) on their university related collaborations were examined through this research project. This study found that daily IPCs among students of different cultures and nationalities enabled them to have enough collaborative activities at the university campuses. Although, results of this study enriched by participation of 220 local and international students of UMP, and may be useful for university students, university policymakers and future researchers, but still many questions are open to be answered.

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