INVESTIGATING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION ACROSS ETHNIC DIVERSITY: A PRELIMINARY STUDY AT UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA TERENGGANU

Isma Rosila Ismail[1, 2*], Jill Lawrence[1]

[1]School of Humanities and Communication, Faculty of Arts,
University of Southern Queensland, Australia
[2]Department of Language and Communication, Faculty of Social Development,
Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Malaysia
*Corresponding email: IsmaRosila.Ismail@usq.edu.au / ismarosila@umt.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The Malaysian context is diverse in that there are three main ethnic and religious groups: Muslim Malay, Chinese Buddhist and Indian Hindus. These ethnic and religious groups are reflected in the staff composition at the University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), a university on the East Coast of Malaysia. The site has been selected because, given the ethnic mix, there is potential for intercultural communication problems to surface among the staff which includes the three ethnic groups. The objective is to ascertain whether these communication patterns generate problems and conflict which may, in turn, affect the university's productivity.

Keywords: intercultural communication, ethnic diversity, Malaysian university

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This paper examines the potential for the development of intercultural communication problems between the different ethnic groups employed at University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT). Differences in cultural background may lead to communication difficulties between the administrative staff which could, in turn, affect the university's productivity. This paper will address this hypothesis by first explaining the Malaysian context, in terms of its socio-cultural, language, educational and political nuances. The paper will then outline the perspectives provided by cross-cultural, communication and conflict theories to theoretically contextualise the study. The research design and methodologies will be next described. Lastly, the paper will explore the results before outlining the preliminary findings produced by the study.

The Malaysian Context

The Socio-Cultural Impetus

Malaysia is a multicultural country consisting of people from different racial origins and ethnic groups. Demographically, Malays are the dominant race or Bumiputra, and constitute 65% of the population, along with the Chinese, 26%, and Indians 8%. The Chinese and Indians migrated to Malaysia (then called Tanah Melayu or Malaya) in the 16th century (Demographics of Malaysia, 2010). The national religion is Islam (60%) but other religions such as Buddhism (19%), Christianity (9%), Hinduism (6%),

Sikhism, Daoism, Confucianism/Taoism/other traditional Chinese religion (3%) and other religion (2%) are free to practise their own beliefs (Demographics of Malaysia, 2010). Malaysian Malays generally are Muslims. However Chinese Malaysians follow several religious beliefs such as Christianity, Buddhism, Chinese religion, Bahai, Sai Baba and Islam (see Carstens, 2006, Lee & Tan, 1999). Malaysian Indians practise different faiths such as Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Terengganu is a multicultural state on the east coast of Malaysia (see Figure 1), with ethnic Malays the most dominant group. Minority groups include ethnic Chinese, Indians and Thais [Terengganuswadee.com, 2004).
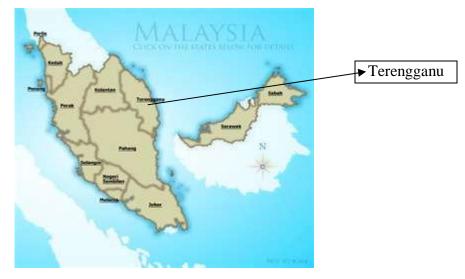

Figure 1. Malaysia map

In the 2010 census, the Terengganu population was 1,015,776. The majority were Muslim (96.9%) followed by Buddhists (2.5%), Hindus (0.2%), Christian (0.2%) and finally followers of other religions or non-religious groups (0.2%) [see Figure 2] (Terengganu, 2012).
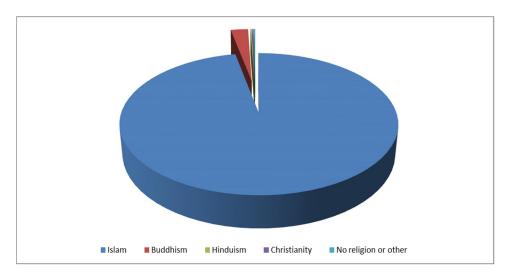

Figure 2. Religious population of Terengganu

The ratio of the ethnic groups differs from that the regions on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia such as Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Penang, Perak, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur (see Table 1). The Malay ethnic is seen dominant on east coast of Peninsular Malaysia while other ethnic group is seen distributed evenly on west coast of Peninsular Malaysia even though Malay is still the majority ethnic yet the differences are small.

Table 1. Population distribution by states

State	Bumiputera (%)	Chinese (%)	Indian (%)
Johor	57.1	35.4	6.9
Negeri Sembilan	57.9	25.6	16.0
Penang	48.5	40.9	10.6
Perak	55.87	31.35	20
Selangor	58.9	27.8	13.3
Kuala Lumpur	38.6	46.5	13.4

(Source: National Census 2000, Department of Statistics Malaysia as cited in Demographics of Malaysia, 2012)

The Language

The national language has been the Malay language since 1967. English is the second language. For Malaysian government official matters, the Malay language is widely used. English is used in service industries, schools and private institutions as well as in dealing with international counterparts and international relations. Malaysia has over a hundred languages and dialects being spoken daily (Lim, 1998). Apart from the formal Malay language and English, Malaysians also use other languages and dialects in their conversation, for example Cantonese, Hokkien, Mandarin and Tamil (Languages of Malaysia, 2010).

The Educational Impetus

Malays are generally educated through the Malay-medium school system in daily, vocational or religious schools which only for Malay Muslim. Some of the older generations (during the British colonial times) were educated in English medium-schools. In general, the Malays in Terengganu also possess the same educational background as most of the Malays in Malaysia. Chinese Malaysians experience a range of educational backgrounds. Some were educated in the English medium especially before the Second World War, during the British presence (Lee & Tan, 2000). Typically, this category refers to older generations, however, new generations of Chinese Malaysians are commonly educated in vernacular schools (schools using Mandarin as the medium of teaching) and Malay-medium schools [school using the national language, Malay, as a medium of teaching] (Lee & Tan, 2000). Malaysian Indians come from various educational backgrounds, mainly from Malay-medium schools and vernacular schools (Tamil as a medium of teaching).

Malaysia is therefore not a homogenous culture; in fact it is multicultural in many aspects such as in language systems, communication symbols, educational systems and religion. Yet in educational institutions, the three groups need to work together, to understand and respect each other's' cultural beliefs, and together, they shape Malaysian culture with its many different values and cultures. These different educational systems could affect intracultural and intercultural communication in the work place. Several studies have been conducted (see Lailawati, 2005; Fontaine & Richardson, 2003; Hofstede, 1991 & 2001) but they have neglected this issue and portrayed an image of Malaysians as a homogenous group. Nevertheless, recognizing the impact of such differences is important in a study which explores intercultural communication at a university as a workplace.

The Political Impetus

Politically, Malaysia practises as a federal constitutional monarchy, where the Yang di-Pertuan Agong is the Head of State and the Prime Minister of Malaysia is the Head of Government. Malaysia has three power bases: executive power which is exercised by the federal government and the 13 state governments; legislative power which is vested in the Federal Parliament and the 13 state assemblies; and the judiciary, which is more independent of the executive and the legislature, though the executive maintains a level of influence in the appointment of judges to the courts (Politics of Malaysia, 2010). A recent political impetus that is influencing Malaysian sensitivities towards multicultural affairs in the country, is the role played by the current Malaysian Prime Minister, Dato Seri Najib Tun Razak. The Prime Minister has chosen a 'One Malaysia' vision as his main focus. This vision promotes unity in diversity. The purpose is to build the country's strength though sharing a goal to retain respect, friendship and understanding and to form a better future for all Malaysians despite their differences (Prime Minister, Dato Seri Najib Tun Razak cited in Welcome to One Malaysia, 2010). The Prime Minister feels that Malaysia is experiencing many episodes of ethnic tension alongside the efforts to maintain unity; that Malaysia should value differences to boost the economy; that differences should not be seen as an adversity or neglected by the community; that a multicultural society should be seen as a virtue to be celebrated , shared and appreciated; and that the spirit of One Malaysia can be embedded through respecting each other regardless of the ethnicity or religiosity (Welcome to One Malaysia, 2010).

THE ISSUES

Malaysia

Malaysia has the potential for conflict arising between different ethnic groups and has long been trying to maintain harmonious ethnic relationships. This is crucial in the Malaysian setting where society is becoming more aware of differences in ethnicity (Guan, 2000). Culture, religion and ethnicity differences are easily triggered if intercultural communication skills are ignored. The recent issues of religious beliefs being used by some politicians in Malaysia can quickly disrupt ethnic collaboration (see Fuller, 2006). Current issues such as churches being bombed by ethnic Malays or mosques being desecrated with pig's head can also worsen ethnic relationships (see Mydans, 2010, Asia News, 2010, Staff Berita semasa, 2010). In 2006, Malaysia's

previous Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was worried about the level of ethnic tensions caused by religious and racial issues (see Fuller, 2006). If these potential confrontations are ignored and the uniqueness of the ethnicity mixture is overlooked, it is predicted that a large number of talented non-Malays may migrate to other countries. Malaysia should take the opportunity to value each and every ethnic group in the environment. The differences should be taken as advantages not as threats. There is a shortage of research about the issues of intercultural communication among the personnel who are actually working in universities. While there are studies which focus on intercultural communication issues these settings are not in the university context. They are based on local or multinational companies (see Hofstede, 1999, Renaldo, Christopher & Rao, 2007). In addition, most of the intercultural communication studies conducted by Malaysian researchers depend on quantitative methods (see Renaldo et al., 2007) rather than qualitative methods. The limited study that focused on qualitative methods did so, however, only in relation to the international students' adaptation (see Latifah, 2000). Such research also focuses on the West Coast, Peninsular Malaysia, where the composition of the various ethnic groups is more evenly distributed and language usage is not so challenging (see Pandian, 2008).

University Malaysia Terengganu

Diverse ethnic and religious groups, mainly Muslim Malay, Chinese Buddhist and Indian Hindus, are reflected in the staff composition at the University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), a university on the East Coast of Malaysia. UMT has been selected as the place of study because of the unique composition of the ethnic minorities. Most public universities in Malaysia have an equal balance of ethnic minority groups in their organizational levels, however the majority of personnel at this university are local Malay (local born) instead of non-local Malays (non-Terengganu born) and other ethnic minorities. The site has been selected because, given the ethnic mix, there is potential for intercultural communication problems to surface between local and non-local Malay personnel as well as between other personnel from different ethnic groups. For example differences in ethnicity and religion may have the potential to initiate communication difficulties between the personnel which could affect the university's productivity and, in turn, students' experiences at university.

UMT's work environment is also different from other universities as UMT is situated in the northern region, has a typical Islamic lifestyle and has not been as influenced by the West during colonization (History of Malaysia, 2010). For example, during 1888 to 1948, the Terengganu state government appointed several Muslim scholars as the Chief Minister, Minister, Mufti (a Muslim jurist expert in Islamic law) and officers in the administration of the Terengganu Sultanate to confront the threat of foreign powers such as Siamese and British influences. They were given the responsibility to be as advisers to the Sultan in administration affairs, social development, laws, jurisdictions and international relations (Berhanuddin, 2010). This indicates that Islamic influences are reflected in the workplace where the study is conducted.

Research Purpose

The purpose of the study is to investigate the intercultural communication patterns across ethnic diversity demonstrating personnel employed at UMT. The study aims to:

i) analyse the cultural values held by the UMT personnel include power distance, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation.
ii) investigate the verbal communication as in language use by the personnel,
iii) explore nonverbal communication, including their use of proxemics, haptic and silence;
iv) delve into how conflict arises and is mitigated as a consequence of differences in the cultural values, verbal and nonverbal communication.

The influences of religion and dialect (which is distinct from other non-local Malay languages and the formal Malay) thus contribute to a case study.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

These section overviews the definition and theoretical framework used in the study. The study uses a theoretical framework including the theory of cultural value dimensions (Hofstede, 1991; 2001), verbal and nonverbal communication theory (Hall, 1959; 1966; Knapp & Hall, 2006) and culture-based situational conflict theory (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

Intercultural Communication (IC): The Definition

The term first originated in the United States in 1946 with the establishment of Foreign Service Institute. It arose in response to the need to train foreign diplomats in the language and anthropological cultural understanding of different cultural groups. The term became widespread and was associated with Hall's 'The Silent Language' in 1959, where he applied abstract anthropological concepts to the real world and later extended the anthropological view of culture to include communication (Jandt, 1998). Since then, culture and communication are associated in the literature investigating different cultures. IC can be defined as the 'art of understanding, and being understood by, the audience of another culture' and 'the audience could be one person or more and not necessarily a large group' (Sitaram, 1980, p.92). Therefore, 'IC occurs whenever a person from one culture sends a message to be processed by a person from a different culture' (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2009, p.7). This definition needs to be understood in order to obtain a clear idea about intercultural communication. For the purpose of this study, then IC is defined as an interaction between individuals or groups from different cultural, religious and ethnic background, which very much different in shared meaning, behaviors, concepts and interpretations.

Cultural Values

Cultural values a core component in the study, will be analysed the cultural values in the respondents. As Ferraro (2002, p.26) explains, values are 'those things found in all cultures that are expected or hoped for, they involve embedded assumptions about what is right or wrong, good or bad; and they involve a set of standards by which behavior is

evaluated'. That is because differences in cultural values can point to confusion and uncomfortable feelings in business relationship (Ferraro, 2002).

The literature agrees that values are linked with culture. Most researchers can see that cultures may possess different values from other cultures. Hofstede (1991 & 2001), for instance, developed values dimensions and formulated a model that identifies value dimensions. Brew and Cairns (1993) contrast values from individualist and collectivist cultures. For example, an individual from an individualist culture values direct and explicit communication in contrast to a person from a collectivist culture may value indirect and appreciate context in communication strategies (Brew & Cairns, 1993). Ferraro (2002) notes that values and culture interlock and thus may determine the behaviors of others towards other cultures. Values are used to learn, to understand, to identify and to prevent diverse cultural traits and also create a cultural awareness in order to avoid miscommunication in intercultural communication (Ferraro, 2002).

Dimensions Of Cultural Values

Different cultures thus demonstrate different values in their community. Scholars such as Hofstede (1991 & 2001), Ferraro (2002), Hall (2005), Mircea (2008) and Samovar et al (2009) present these as cultural dimensions. Hofstede is the most prominent scholar in intercultural communication, developing values dimensions based on his study of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture. Hofstede formulated a model that identifies four primary value dimensions to assist in differentiating cultures: Power Distance (PDI), Individualism (IDV), Masculinity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) and Long-term orientation (LTO). Hofstede's (1991 & 2001) value dimensions foreshadowed those of Gudykunst (1998), Samovar et al (2009), Ferraro (2002) and Mircea (2008). Gudykunst's value dimensions (1998) verify five cultural dimensions similar to Hofstede's (1991 & 2001) such as individualism-collectivism and low-high-context culture. Samovar et al (2009) discusses nine dimensions of cultural values and called this a 'cultural syndrome'. Ferraro (2002) identified ten cultural dimensions which are applicable to global business as well as intercultural communication. Some scholars critique Hofstede's efforts, for example McSweeney (2002) in his classification of national cultures. Despite his critics, Hofstede's dimensions provide a point of reference when analyzing intercultural communication problems across cultures (Kim, 2005). National identities are seen then as a viable means that can be used to identify and measure cultural differences (Hofstede, 1998).

Understanding cultural values dimensions is important in avoiding misunderstandings and miscommunication especially when the communication occurs within different cultural backgrounds. This is because not every culture holds the same value of cultural dimensions. Cultural values such as collectivism vs. individualism were investigated by Parkes, Bochner and Schneider (2001) in a study about national culture dimensions affecting organizational values in Australia and Asian organizations. This study discovered that Australian employees were more individualistic and less committed in the organization (since the sense of collectivist responsibility were lower) compared with Asian cultural values (Parkes, Bochner & Schneider, 2001). This study suggests that feelings of uneasiness, misunderstanding and miscommunication can arise between different cultures. There has been research in Malaysian cultural values (see Dahlan, 1990, Hofstede, 1991 & 2001, Lailawati, 2005, Latifah, 2000, Lim, 1998,

Pandian, 2008 & Tamam, 2009a & 2009b) but these have generally overlooked differences in the ethnic cultural dimensions. Hence, this study is interested to investigate ethnic cultural value orientations of personnel at UMT. It will focus on power distance, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation.

Verbal Communication

Verbal communication is generally understood to be communication in the form of words which are spoken or written. Table 2 synthesizes several definitions of verbal communication. Differences in context, patterns of communication and the different assumptions underpinning the use of verbal communication can cause miscommunication especially in the workplace (Inon et al, 2009). Our culture educates us about how to use verbal messages in appropriate ways. For example, some cultures do not address their teachers by the teacher's first name which others are far more formal (see Hall, 2005). Our gender too, influences our verbal communication. Several studies show that women's speech tends to be more polite than men's speech, as well as in telephone conversations (Brown, 1980; Wetzel, 1988; Holmes, 1995; Smoreda & Licoppe, 2000 as cited in Devito, 2009). In this study, verbal communication refers to the words themselves (the way words are spoken is nonverbal). The study is not concerned with the grammatical structure of the language; rather it seeks to concentrate on the verbal communication in terms of word usage among the staff. Since the language at this institution is varied, where the respondents possibly use Terengganu dialect and formal Malay language, thus the word usage is important. This word usage is predicted to be confusing and may create problems for personnel who are not local.

Table 2. Definitions of verbal communication in the literature

Scholars	Definitions
Devito (2009)	Verbal message is the message that you sent using words, the word *verbal* also refers to words, not orality, where verbal message include oral and written word.
Mircea (2008)	Language refers to social interactions where language is an outstanding factor establishing understanding and conditions for dialogue.
Hall (2005)	Verbal communication is connected to context, where we may decide 'to use our words, written or spoken' (Hall, 2005, p.139) which is always associated with frames plus become parts of the whole issues of understanding the context.
Ferraro, (2002)	Language can be described as a symbolic system of sounds when combine together will give meanings to the speakers
Ting –Toomey (1999, p.85)	Language as 'an arbitrary, symbolic systems that names ideas, feelings, experiences, events, people and other phenomena and that is governed by the multilayered rules developed by members of a particular speech community'.
Jandt (1998, p.121)	Language is 'a set of symbols shared by a community to communicate meaning and experience'.

Nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication has several definitions. Table 3 outlines these definitions.

Table 3. Definitions of nonverbal communication in the literature

Scholars	Definitions
Jandt (2010, p.107, 1998, p.99)	Describe nonverbal communication as an 'intentional uses as in using a non-spoken symbol to communicate a specific message...and nonverbal communication refers to a source's of actions and attributes that are not purely verbal'.
Tyler et al. (2005)	Nonverbal behaviour literally means communication not using any words, which can be used in a certain context, to interpret the act into a meaning, where this action can either be alone or associated with verbal behaviours.
Gudykunst (1998)	Non-verbal is very distinct and invented in a basis of agreement among the members of a group which using the non-verbal, they are arbitrary like symbols and do not involve displacement.
Burgoon et al. (1988, as cited in Jandt, 1998, p.99)	Characterize nonverbal communication ' as those actions and attributes of human that have socially shared meaning, are intentionally sent or interpreted as intentional, are consciously sent or consciously received, and have the potential for feedback from the receiver'.

After considering these definitions, this study defines nonverbal communication as communication by all the means using symbols and body language to communicate the message to a receiver, except for the actual words themselves. The way words are spoken or written is therefore related to nonverbal communication.

Types of Nonverbal Communication

There are several types of nonverbal communication discussed by the communication scholars including kinesics, proxemics, chronemics, paralinguistic and semiotics (see Tyler et al., 2002). Others categories include silence, haptics, clothing and physical appearance, olfactory and oculesis (see Jandt, 1998 & Devito, 2009). Knapp and Hall (2006) suggest that theoretical writings and research on nonverbal communication can be broken down into the following three areas: the communication environment (physical and spatial), the communicator's physical characteristics and body movement and position (gestures, posture, touching, facial expressions, eye behaviour and vocal behaviour). Given that nonverbal communication is very wide and varied, this study limits its focus to three area of nonverbal communication. As suggested by Knapp and Hall (2006), this study feels that proxemics, touch and the use of silence are significant to the study.

Proxemics

The study about the use of space was pioneered by Edward T. Hall back in 1959. Proxemics can be divided into two categories: distances and territoriality (Devito, 2009). Proxemics distances can be categorized into four types: intimate relationship, personal relationship, social relationship and public relationship (see Devito, 2009). The four types of distance allow us to determine our relationship with others: whom we keep our distance from, and whom we may not keep our distance from. Our use of distance is influenced by gender, personality (extrovert or introvert), age and familiarity [stranger and the people we familiar with] (Burgoon et al, 1996; Burgoon & Bacue, 2003 as cited in Devito, 2009). Territoriality refers to 'a possessive or ownership reaction to an area of space or to particular objects' (Devito, 2009, p.133) and is divided into two types: territory types and territorial markers. There are three types of territories described by Altman (1975, as cited in Devito, 2009): primary, secondary and public territory. There are also three types of territorial markers: central markers, boundary markers and earmarkers [see Table 4] (Devito, 2009). Proxemics can be viewed differently by the individual based on their cultural background. Hence, this type of nonverbal is important in reflecting respondents' variations.

Table 4, Types of territorial markers

Marker types	Explanation
Central markers	Refers to an item that you put in a territory to reserve it such as a drink in a canteen table or books in library table.
Boundary markers	Refers to a boundary that separates your place and the others such as in a bus seats which separates by your bag in a centre or the moulded plastic seats.
Earmakers	Refers to identifying makers that show your ownership of the territory or object such as a nameplates, student cards or initials on a shirt. These earmarkers indicate that you belong to a certain group or territory such as a corporation or institution.

(Adapted from Devito, 2009)

Touch Communication

Touch also has a plethora of meanings. There are five types of messages which illustrate the meaning of touch (Devito, 2009). First, touch can convey positive feelings to others when we touch people to give them support or appreciation. Secondly, touch conveys our intention to play affectionately or aggressively. Thirdly, we use touch to control the behaviours, attitudes or feelings of others. Touch is also used to gain attention and finally includes ritualistic touching such as when greeting people, either by shaking hands, hugging or kissing (Devito, 2009). Even though touching is part of communication, some people avoid touching. This is called touch avoidance. Touch is subject to cultural differences as every culture has rules about touching. Some cultures may comfortable with lots of touching and some may be a touch avoidance society. People from cultures that value lots of touching are labeled as contact cultures, and those who are from touch avoidance cultures are labeled as noncontact cultures. Japan is a noncontact culture and northern Europe is a contact culture (Devito, 2009). Touch can

thus vary depending on the individual's cultural background. This study will explore the use of touch among the respondents in order to clarify differences between ethnic groups and any problems that may arise related to the use of touch.

Use of Silence

There are six functions of silence: silence allows speaker time to think, functions as a weapon, displays a 'response to personal anxiety', prevents communication, communicates emotional responses and says nothing (Devito, 2009). Speakers also use silence as a time to arrange and prepare their conversation or sometimes it is used to hurt someone's feelings (Devito, 2009). In a time of conflict, some couples remain silent to show their heated emotions which suggests that silence also works as a punishment. Silence is also used to respond to a new environment, where you choose to be silent because you are new to the environment or to avoid rejection. In a conflict situation, silence can be used to prevent an unfavorable topic from arising. Silence too may be applied to buy time to cool off when conflicts arise. Silence can indicate and communicate emotional responses, for example refusal to become involved in verbal communication (Ehrenhaus, 1988, as cited in Devito, 2009) or when you want to avoid any 'responsibility for any wrongdoing' (Beach, 1990-91, as cited in Devito, 2009, p.140). Silence may give positive meanings in some cultures such as modesty, shyness (in positive way) and self-consciousness or negative meanings such as insensitivity, disinterest or lack of understanding. Silence is also subject to cultural differences, for instance in United States, silence is seen as a negative expression while in Japan silence is believed to be an appropriate way of behaving (Devito, 2009). The use of silence is important to the study in order to ascertain how the ethnic groups use this as a strategy in conflict, the variances between ethnic groups and the use of silence in respondents' communication patterns**.**

Conflict

Hall (2005, p.233) sees conflict as:

> An expressed struggle between at least two parties who perceive incompatible goals and/or potential interference from the other party in achieving the desired goal. This conflict condition can turn into intercultural conflict when 'the incompatibility must be generated, where differences in meaning may emerge and understood differently.

Intercultural conflict can be defined as a 'study of conflict that evolves, at least in part, because of cultural group membership differences' (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p.2). It is the experience of emotional frustration in conjunction with perceived incompatibility of values, norms, face orientations, goals, scarce resources, processes, and/or outcomes between a minimum of two parties from two different cultural communities in an interactive situation (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p.17). There are several reasons, according to Ting-Toomey & Oetzel (2001, p.3), why intercultural conflict needs to be managed in a constructive and creative way. One reason is that a different viewpoint which may offer various ways to solve problems. Secondly, diversity in a workplace should not be neglected, as this may result in:

> Low morale because of culture clash, high absenteeism because of physiological stress, money have to be spend to retrain individual because of high employee turnover, time waste because miscommunication between diverse employees and the enormous amount of personal energy expended in defensive resistant to inevitable change (Loden & Rosener, 1991 as cited in Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p.8).

A diverse workforce, too, has advantages such as:

> Full use of the organization's human capital, increased knowledge, enhance mutual respect among diverse employees, increased commitment among diverse employees at all level of organizational and across all functions, greater innovation and flexibility as others participate more constructively in problem-solving teams and improved productivity as more employee effort is directed at achieving the system's goal and less energy is expended in dealing with cultural miscommunication issues (Loden, 1996 as cited in Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p.8, Loden & Rosener, 1991 as cited in Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p.8).

This study focuses on culture-based situational conflicts (see Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001) and believes that investigating conflict along a cultural variability perspective serves not only to understand conflict variations among different clusters of cultures but also the differences in value dimension and how they influence conflict management processes (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). This definition of conflict provides a better barometer to the study in exploring how conflict can arise interculturally.

Types of Intercultural Conflict

There are three types of intercultural conflict: object, relationship and priority conflicts (Hall, 2005). Object conflicts refer to 'conscious or unconscious disagreement and misunderstanding about something' (Hall, 2005, p.233). O*bject* in a very broad sense refer to anything that 'may be perceived intellectually be it physical or abstract' (Hall, 2005, p.233). Here, the discussion is important for both cultures and has:

> a strong relation to the issues either positively or negatively but the term or concept may be found in a variety of contexts and is often surrounded by greater cultural elaboration and restrictions, it provides and explanatory bridge between other concepts and finally the meanings associated with it are discrepant across particular cultural communities (Hall, 2005, p. 235).

Relationship conflict refers to the relationship between two or more people which normally 'deals with how these identities affect and link each other together in actual, specific relationships' and 'often highlight the implications of human actions relative to one another'(Hall, 2005, p.236). Relationship conflict links with the issue, the relationship and the effect on the relationship. Priority conflict 'involves a judgment of the relative moral worth of certain actions' (Hall, 2005, p.238). Often priority conflict links with the emotional state of the person and exposes people's values and communities to different kinds of people and the different actions taken.

Cultural Approaches To Conflict

Essentially, there are five styles of handling the interpersonal conflict described above: avoiding, accommodating (obliging), competing (dominating/controlling), compromising and collaborating [integrating] (Hall, 2005). An avoiding style is used to avoid the conflict topic (do not want to discuss) or avoiding the individual or the conflict situation. An accommodating (obliging) style puts a 'high concern for the other person's conflict interest above and beyond one's own conflict interest' (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p.46). A compromising style requires give-and-take in order to achieve an agreement in the conflict and a collaborating (integrating) style 'reflects a need for solution closure in conflict and involves a high concern for self and high concern for others in conflict substantive negotiations. This five styles reflect a western approach: 'it should be noted that 'obliging and avoiding conflict styles often take on a Western slant of being negatively disengage' (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p.46). In a collectivist culture, this conflict style helps 'to maintain mutual-face interest and relational network interest' (Ting-Toomey, 1988 as cited in Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p.46). A cultural approach to conflict adds an important element to the study. The study investigates the respondents' approaches towards the conflict and is related to other aspects of the study: cultural values, verbal and nonverbal communication patterns.

METHODS

Research Design

The primary approach for this research study is ethnography. Ethnography can be defined as 'the direct observation, reporting and evaluation of the customary behaviour of a culture' (Jandt, 1998, p. 49). This technique requires unlimited period of residence, knowing the language of the group, participating in the group activities, and using a variety of observational and recording techniques. The researcher is familiar with the local dialect and the Malay language. A limitation for the author is however that the author is not fluent in Mandarin, or its dialects such as Cantonese or Hokkien, or the language spoken by the Indian population, Tamil. The study will apply key methods of ethnography: participant observation and informal interviewing of respondents as proposed by Agar (1980, pp.6 as cited in Cousin, 2009) for 'the purpose of learning from their ways of doing things and viewing reality'.

Mixed-Method Approach

This study used a survey, followed by one-on-one interviews or e-interviews (depending on the personal preferences of the respondents). The use of quantitative method in this study will be complementary to the qualitative methods in that this data summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Quantitative methods 'employ meaningful numerical indicators to ascertain the relative amount of something' while qualitative methods 'employ symbols (words, diagrams and non-meaningful numbers [to indicate the meaning] other than relative amounts) people have something' (Frey et al., 2000, p.83). While ethnography ideally requires observation in natural setting (Jandt, 1998, p.49) this study applied this method in collecting demographic information and measuring instances of intercultural issues that may exist in the work place from the

three ethnic groups' viewpoints. The qualitative approach is selected in order to provide an in-depth perspective regarding the personnel experiences that cannot be measured through a straight quantitative approach.

Participants

The respondents comprised administrative personnel from three administrative levels: the upper, middle and lower levels including academic staff at University Malaysia Terengganu, Terengganu, East Cost of Malaysia. Eighty nine respondents were involved in the survey across three managerial levels. Twenty respondents were selected for the interviews.

Research Methods

Quantitative Methods

The survey was designed and administered using Survey Monkey, a web-based survey software available at http://www.surveymonkey.com. Around 120 surveys were distributed across three organizational levels: the upper, middle and lower management, with approximately forty respondents for each level. The respondents for surveys are chosen through a purposive sampling technique to ensure a range of ethnicity, religion and years of service are represented. Purposive sampling involves 'recruiting people on the basis of shared characteristic which will help you in your inquiry' (Cousin, 2009, p.79). The survey questions consisted of two parts: demographic data and respondents' knowledge of intercultural communication. In the second section respondents were asked 'Yes' and 'No' questions. They consisted of general questions about culture, cultural values (power distance, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation), verbal communication (language use) and nonverbal communication (proxemics, haptic and the use of silence).

Qualitative Methods

Interview questions then developed after analysing the survey data. In general, the interview questions were elaborated from those on the survey then used in semi-structured interviews. The respondents were given a choice of interviews: one-on-one semi-structured interviews and e-interviews. E-interviews are used as an alternative method in collecting data. The e-interview will be offered because the topics may be too sensitive for religious, linguistic or cultural reasons (Bampton & Cowton, 2002). E-interviews can generate feelings of comfort for interviewees and make it easier for them to discuss these issues without feeling embarrassed or discomforted by the presence of the interviewer. This method also 'suitable for research students who wish to conduct research on their home countries while studying abroad and so that they would labor under no cultural or linguistic difficulties…' (Bampton & Cowton, 2002, p.6). The study also used e-interviews if there are any matters which arose with regards to the e-interview questions and required follow ups from abroad, especially after the end of data collection period (which only occurred for three months in the home country). Twenty respondents were selected using purposive sampling, in order to access a particular subset of respondents based on religion, ethnicity, years of service and gender. By selecting the respondents this way, 'the interviewer is in fact selecting what

she thinks is a key source of variation to add to the depth and plausibility of her analysis' (Cousin, 2009). To investigate respondents' lived experiences in relation to their intercultural communication, a semi-structured interview was used. Semi-structured interviews are the main, preferred data collection method because respondents are able to freely discuss their experience as to how they deal with intercultural communication problems at their workplace. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore in-depth the experiences and perceptions of the individuals, which also mean 'the description of groups' (Cousin, 2009, p.109). This type of interview can be described as having a 'structured set themes which serve as guide to facilitate interview talk' (Cousin, 2009, p.109). Therefore, the interviewer should adapt, modify and add whenever possible in the prepared questions accordingly to the interview talk (Cousin, 2009). Through semi-structured interviews, the interviewer applied 'a set of basic questions on the interview schedule, but they are free to ask probing follow-up question...' (Frey et al., 2000, p.101) in order to obtain details.
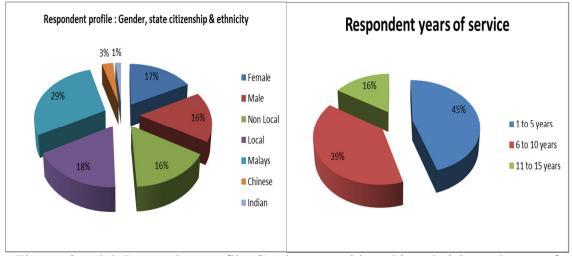
Interviews are 'exchanges in which people provide information orally' (Frey et al., 2000, p.99). These methods 'are self-report measures that ask respondents to provide information about their own and/or other people's belief, attitudes and behaviours (Frey et al., 2000, p.100). This study employed two question formats in the interview sessions. First, the funnel format is where 'open questions are used to introduce the question, followed by narrower, closed question to seek more specific information. Second, is the inverted funnel format, 'which begins with narrow, closed questions and build to broader, open questions' (Frey et al., 2000, p.101). The venues for the interview were chosen by the respondents: their most comfortable available place away from distractions and where they were able to speak about their intercultural experiences (Cousins, 2009). The researcher asked their permission to tape record the sessions every time before the interview started. The researcher also briefed the interviewees so that they understand the flow of the interview (Frey et al., 2000). If a question may address a taboo or personal topics, the researcher used an inverted funnel format 'because one can pose low-risk, closed, fixed-choice questions first and, after respondents are comfortable with the topic, move on to more probing, open question' (Frey et al., 2000, p.102).

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using explanatory data analysis which includes data from the survey and the interview. Data from the survey use SPSS to summarize demographic data and gather intercultural issues and awareness. The qualitative interviews were transcribed in verbatim and translated. In transcribing, researcher tried to minimize and corrected the grammatical error of the direct quotations to ensure that the meaning is not lost during the transcription process so to preserve the respondents' 'voices' in the text (see Colic-Peisker & Walker 2003; Ebbeck & Dela Cerna 2006). Those passages which did not have exact equivalent to English will also be stated in original language. The qualitative data has been grouped into thematic concerns and pseudonyms used to address respondents.

RESULTS

Demographic Survey Data: The majority of the respondents who participated in the survey aged from 31 to 35 years old. Non-local belongs to other 12 state such as Perak, Kelantan etc. as well as from East Malaysia such as Sarawak. The majority of respondent are Malay Muslim (n=78), 7% (n=6) Buddhist, 5% (n=4) Hindus and 1% (n=1) is Christian. The majority Malays worked at three levels of the organization, mostly at middle level (n=47) while the Chinese (n=7) and Indian (n=4) respondents mainly worked at the middle level, with only one Chinese working at the upper level and none at all at the support levels.

Figures 3 and 4: Respondent profile: Gender, state citizenship, ethnicity and years of service.

Survey and Interview Data: In a survey a general question was asked: *I know a lot about my colleague's culture*. The majority Malays (n=40) answered 'No' which illustrates that majority of the Malay in this study have limited knowledge about their colleagues from different cultural background. This result was reinforced through interview data, with respondents sharing their views concerning their lack of knowledge of their colleagues from minority groups:

> *I may know Mr Lingam, only as a colleague. I may talk to him, chatting, but I do not know in detail about him if compare to my Malay friends, which is I closed too. I know what is and what not. (Khadijah, Malay academician)*

> *I'm not comfortable to admit that I really know a lot about other ethnic cultures. But I did know their cultures a lot more than they know about my culture. (Liang, Chinese academician)*
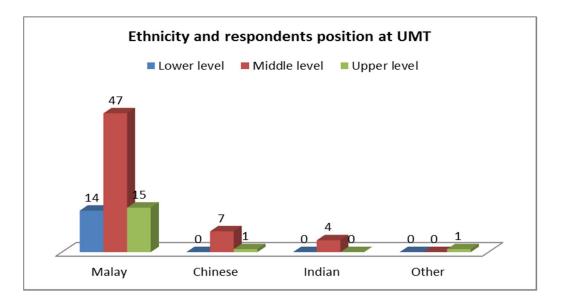
Figure 5. Ethnicity and respondents position at UMT

Cultural values: This study focuses into three cultural values: power distance, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation. These cultural values were selected based on Hofstede dimensions.

Power Distance (PD): The survey data in relation to cultural values however shows that there is very little difference between the ethnic groups. For example, Question Cul6 indicates that majority of the respondents regardless of their ethnicity value high power distance as well as question Cul8. These findings suggest that all groups are hierarchical and perceive power distance as an important value. On the other hand, question Cul10 indicates that the majority of the respondents, in spite of their ethnicity, value low power distance. This reveals that despite being high in power distance, in some other aspects they are likely to choose to not exercise power distance. Question Cul19 suggests that the majority of respondents, regardless of ethnicity, value high uncertainty avoidance. They prefer to have a well-defined rules and regulations at their workplace to avoid uncertainty. However question Cul21 shows that the majority of respondents, regardless of ethnicity, value low uncertainty avoidance which signifies that they are not afraid of any transformation in the institution. Questions Cul29 and Cul34 both signify the long-term orientation of the majority of respondents irrespective of their ethnicity towards their future achievement in the organization.

However the interview data does suggest that there are differences between the ethnic groups in the areas of power distance, uncertainty avoidance and long term vs. short term orientation. In relation to power distance:

Yeah, I'm not comfortable… I'm afraid that if I'm not using the right salutation for the right designation, when I know later on, it will make feel guiltier... (Yusof, Malay upper level)

I should address them correctly; it is recognition for their achievement... (Aditya, Indian academician)

In relation to uncertainty avoidance:

> *Basically, when we were reshuffled to other department, normally we asked for it, which we really love to do, it will be no problem to me. (Khadijah, Malay academician)*

In relation to long term vs. short term orientation:

> *… it is not a wise choice to let fate to control all. … I believe, everything should be plans accordingly…I consider with focus and effort, I will get what I deserves for. (Steven, Chinese academician)*

Amina (Malay academician) showed a different perspective, however, with regard to uncertainty avoidance:

> *If the changes that had been made are inappropriate, I reject them. For example I feel uncomfortable if the punch cards need to be punched twice. This actually does not fit to my flexi hours of working.*

One respondent described the power distance with regard of the job position and superiority which suggest the dominant position held by and understood by both ethnic groups:

> *Well, it just when my superior is around, I cannot mingle with them like I mingle with my colleague, surely there is a gap; I cannot simply make jokes... (Aishah, Malay support staff)*

Apart from respondents being high in power distance, there was a respondent who did not prefer their colleague to use their title or proper salutation as mention by Mek Na (Malay academician) who is both female and younger and may reflect a changing pattern of communication:

> *I prefer they use my name…I'm not comfortable and I think that's too formal for me.*

Table 5. Survey and feedback from respondents

Power Distance (PD): Survey	Yes	No
Cul6: Uncomfortable addressing their superior by name	97%	3%
Cul8: Always say 'Yes' even though disagree	87%	13%
Cul10: Cannot give their colleagues equal treatment; they need to consider their colleague's age and seniority in services, even though they are in a high level of management than theirs.	24%	76%
Uncertainty avoidance (UA): Survey		
Cul19: I am uneasy in situations where there are no clear rules in my workplace.	92%	8%
Cul21: I don't like changes or being transferred to other department.	19%	81%
Long-term vs. Short-term orientation (LTO vs. STO) : Survey		
Cul29: I will try my best to achieve the most excellent awards in my organization.	92%	8%
Cul34: I will let fate to control in order to achieve the most excellent awards in my organization.	27%	73%

Verbal Communication: Use of language

Figure 6 illustrates fifty Malay respondents who can converse in two languages: Malay and English. Seven Malay respondents can speak more than two languages, such as Malay, English and Arabic. Six of the Malay respondents can also converse in Mandarin and Japanese apart from Malay and English. Only twelve Malay respondents are bilingual either in Malay or in English. The majority Chinese respondents do speak three languages: mainly Malay, English and Mandarin. Only one Chinese can speak two languages namely Malay and English. All of Indian respondents (n=4) can converse in three languages: Malay, English and Tamil. The findings indicate that majority of the respondents either Malay or minority ethnics normally use Malay and English as a verbal language at this institution. A few Malay respondents were also capable of speaking several other languages such a Japanese, French and Arabic. This was usually their personal choice. While Chinese and Indian respondents generally able to speak more than two languages which include their mother tongue either a Mandarin or Tamil. During the interview, the respondents were asked which language that they use most in day to day interaction. Table 6, question Lan2, indicates that majority of respondents use Malay language in their daily communication at the institution.
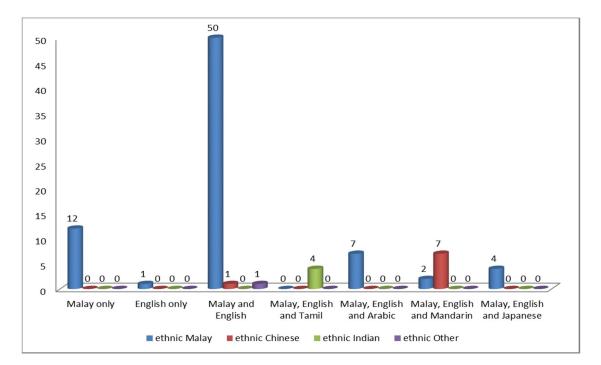

Figure 6: Variety of language that the respondent able to speak

Table 6. Survey and feedback from respondents

Verbal communication: Use of language - Survey	Yes	No
Lan2: Do you use Malaysian/Malay language (formal) in your daily conversation at UMT?	97%	3%
Lan4: Do you use Terengganu dialect in your daily conversation at UMT?	71%	29%
Lan8: Do you experience any misunderstandings in relations to the usage of words in Terengganu dialect?	40%	60%
Lan10: Do you choose your topic or words carefully when communicating with the other ethnic groups?	98%	2%
Lan11: Are you aware that some objects or animals should not be mentioned in front of other ethnics (such as pigs to Muslim)?	90%	10%

Yusuf (Malay upper level), Yahya (Malay middle level), Mek Na (Malay academician) and Lei Hua (Chinese upper level) share their views in relation to language use at UMT:

Interview 1
Researcher : Do you use Malay language in daily conversation?   *Yusuf : Yup…mostly in Malay language.*
Interview 2
Researcher : Normally when and with whom that you use English in your daily conversation?   *Yahya : Usually when there is an overseas visitor, for instance last week we did entertained two visitors from Australia, this actually a last minute duty assigns by International center to our department. I was designated to take them touring the campus. So I need to communicate in English.*
Interview 3
Researcher : Do you use Malay language and mixed with Terengganu dialect?   *Mek Na : Aaa…it really depends with whom I communicate, what situation and the context as well.*
Interview 4
Lei Hua (LH) : I will speak Chinese with my Chinese friend, a Mandarin.   *Researcher (R) : What is your mother tongue?*   *LH : I consider my mother tongue is Teo chew. Normally with my school friend I prefer to use Mandarin.*   *R : So, that means you will use Mandarin if you converse with your Chinese colleague as well?*   *LH : Mandarin, unless he/she cannot speak Mandarin.*   *R : What language do you use if they cannot understand Mandarin?*   *LH : I will use English, such as Mr L (which is a Chinese guy), he cannot speak Mandarin. Automatically I will use English, if not he may not understand me.*   *R : When and where that you normally use Malay language at UMT?*   *LH : Anytime and anywhere*   *R : Meaning that you will use Malay language with support staffs as well as with your superior?*

LH	*: Yup*
R	*: With whom, where and when that you normally use English?*
LH	*: I use English during my lecture, sometimes I will mix with Malay language if my students seems didn't get the point. Also it depends on the individual, sometimes certain individual prefers English, and then I use English.*

Interview 5
I normally uses Malay and English language, a part from that I also speak other Chinese dialect such as Hakka, Mandarin and Cantonese…I also uses Terengganu dialect whenever I need to speaks with my subordinate but not as fluent as local…(Liang, Chinese academician)

These data indicate that intercultural communication between Malay and others exists, but the language of inter-ethnic communication is the Malay language. Apart from Malay language, the personnel apparently use English and the Terengganu dialect as a medium of conversation among themselves. English is normally used whenever there was a visitor from overseas or in the classroom (as explain by respondent in interview 2 and 4). While the use of the Terengganu dialect really depends on the context and the individual that they are communicating with (as described in interview 3 and 5). Survey Question Lan8 shows that the majority of respondents did not experience misunderstandings in relation to the usage of words in the Terengganu dialect; however 40% of the respondent had experienced some misunderstanding. Yusuf (Malay upper level) explained during the interview:

Researcher (R):	*Encik Yusuf ever experiences any misunderstandings in relations to the usage of words in Terengganu dialect?*
Yusuf (Y)	*: Yes..it is…I mispronounce the words.*
R	*: what is the word?*
Y	*: I mispronounced and the staffs did not understand what I mean, it seems like **idgham** is not right, I'm sure it's a word.*
R	*: what is that word?*
Y	*: Oh…I couldn't remember…it sound like…*
R	*: is it **sokmo**…**lallu**?*
Y	*: Not **sokmo**, I mispronounced and the sound is not right…I used to use the words, eventually in one morning while having a meeting, when I pronounce it, my staff point out.*
R	*: Is it because the word is not appropriate?*
Y	*: No, it's the way I pronounced it. **Dengung i**s not right.*

Idgham and *dengung* are mentioned in this conversation referring to the right pronunciation when reading Al-quran (*Tajweed*). While *sokmo* is a Terengganu dialect referring to always/every time and *lallu* means now/ instantly/ promptly which is different from *selalu* in formal Malay language which normally refer as always/every time. This proved to be confusing for the first timer who had started at the institution.

> *Yup...at first...when my colleague said* **sokmo**...*it's a dialect that require more time to learn, so I will asked around, what is that thing means, sometime my students teach me instead....at one time I thought* **sokmo** *means as* ***semua** *(everything/the whole thing). (Steven, academician)*

***Semua** (everything/the whole thing) in formal Malay represents a different meaning from the word **sokmo** (always).

Findings indicate that the majority of respondents, regardless of ethnicity, are aware that they need to be selective in terms of topics while communicating with other ethnic groups. They were also aware that there is a taboo for some ethnic groups with regards to the object or animals being mention in front of the ethnic group which can then spark misunderstandings. This has been highlighted by Liang (Chinese academician).

> *...But I felt that Terengganu dialect is difficult to understand because the accent is different and there are possible words that have different meaning to what I generally know. I know several taboo words which should not be cited in front of other ethnic group such as* **Bodoh, biadap, lembu, anjing, babi, Keling, syaitan** *(stupid,rude,cow,dog,swine/pig,Keling and demon).*

The words such as stupid, rude, cow, dog, swine, etc. are a taboo to some of the ethnic groups and have prejudicial cultural meanings. *Keling* is a rude term used to refer to Indians (Malaysian Indians stuck with dictionary's ethnic slur, 2009 & Sabri,2012), the meaning is quite similar to the word 'nigger' used for African American or the word 'Boong, Abo and Coon' for the Aborigines of Australia (List of ethnic slurs, 2012).

Nonverbal communication: Proxemics, haptic and use of silence

Table 7. Survey questions and feedback from respondents

Proxemics	Yes	No
NV1: *I'm aware that every ethnic and religious group in UMT have their own interpretation of the use of space.*	60%	40%
NV2: *I feel uneasy if my male colleague gets too close to my working space/area (desk or your chair.)*	92%	8%
NV3: *I feel uncomfortable if someone of the opposite gender stands too close to me at my work place.*	70%	30%
Haptic		
NV25: *I'm aware that certain ethnic groups may have a taboo in touching practices.*	87%	13%
NV26: *I'm aware that some ethnic group do not like to be touched in some areas of their body because of their cultural and religious beliefs.*	78%	22%
Use of silence		
NV33: *I will normally use silence as a defensive strategy when in conflict with my colleagues from the same gender, ethnicity and religion.*	56%	44%
NV34: *I will normally use silence as a defensive strategy when in conflict with my colleagues from different gender, ethnicity and religion.*	54%	46%

Question NV1 indicates a high awareness by survey respondents with regard of the use of space by diverse ethnic groups. Furthermore, question NV2 and NV3 show that the ways in which space is used and interpreted are cultural. Questions NV25 and NV26 reveal a high level of awareness among the respondents about the taboo of touching and which ethnic groups that disapproves of touching in relation to religious and cultural beliefs. Besides, questions NV33 and NV34 suggest that silence in a particular situation may mean an acceptance, agreement and, in certain other cases, indifference, apathy or even anger. In some ways silence is used and interpreted as cultural practices.

Lei Hua (Chinese upper level) highlights the issue of proxemics during the interview:

> *I feel okay if my colleague from different gender gets too close to my working area. I don't mind to be just two of us in my room, but I may concerns that other ethnic may not feel comfortable...*

With regard to haptic issues, however some respondents could explain this in detail, while others couldn't.

> *I do not know any of the taboo that practice by other ethnic group. (Hawa, Malay upper level)*

> *In my culture, they do not practice touch... Also they used to touch whenever they need to greet someone by shaking hands. While touching is permissible and permissible in my culture...I knew that ethnic Malay do have taboo in touching practices, especially Malay women, which I believe are more sensitive to the use of touch due to religious and cultural beliefs ... (Liang, Chinese academician)*

Further, in discussing the issues of silence, Indian respondents appear to be more vocal. Aditya (Indian academician) explains this in an e-interview:

> *I will not keep silence whenever I feel annoyed by my colleagues; I think this will create more tension. I disagree that silence can solve conflict, to me; I should voice out and try to resolve the conflict. Whenever I face disagreement with my colleague from the same gender, ethnicity and religion, I will express my stand and discuss the issues, I believe this is more practical. Whenever I encounter a conflict with colleague from different ethnicity, I will speak up and will try to point out his stand. I feel this ways is more professional.*

Conflicts Resolutions

The respondents were given a situation and type of conflict resolution that they may choose. Essentially, there are five styles of handling interpersonal conflict: avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising and collaborating.

Table 8. Survey question and feedback from respondents

Conflicts resolutions that they choose to use in the situation given	By ethnic	No. of respondent	Chosen Solution
CF10: When there is a conflict between my colleague from the different ethnicity, religion and cultural background, I will...	Malay	40	Collaborate to solve conflict until a mutually agreeable solution is found
	Chinese	6	collaborate to solve conflict until a mutually agreeable solution is found'
		2	compromise whenever a conflict arise'
	Indian	3	collaborate to solve conflict until a mutually agreeable solution is found'
		1	gunny sacking

The survey question above provided fourteen alternatives for respondents to choose from. Yet, fifty five respondents selected 'collaborate to solve conflict until a mutually agreeable solution is found 'as a solution. Majority respondents prefers to collaborate whenever conflict arises, on the other hand two Chinese respondent prefers to compromise and one Indian select to avoid the conflict (gunny sacking).

This could imply that harmony and long lasting relationship is a priority. In terms of cultural differences, apparently the three ethnic groups prefer to avoid controversial solution and try their best to maintain good relationships. There are only a small number of Chinese and Indian respondents who prefer to avoid or choose compromise in relation to conflict. At hand no obvious difference from the three ethnic groups in choosing the solution.

Interview respondents provided interesting insights into the issue of conflict and its resolutions. Whenever conflict arose:

> I choose to be silent whenever there is a conflict especially with a colleague from different background because I do not know in detail their restrictions. (Liang, Chinese academician)
> Whenever there is a conflict, I will focus to the issues that we discuss, I certainly not depend on the ethnic, either you are Malay or Chinese, there is no differences in terms of resolution. (Lei Hua, Chinese upper level)
>
> I believe that the culture here may not accept an individual who are outspoken, that is the reason why I choose to be silent whenever there is a conflict between my colleague from different ethnicity, religion and cultural background. (Fatimah, Malay support staff)

Fatimah seems to avoid conflict by using a silence strategy as they assume that the culture of the workplace may not permit the individual to be open. Liang however says that not knowing the culture of the individual that they had a conflict with prevents a more pro-active strategy. Lei Hua indicates that it is the issue of the conflict should be

addressed not the cultural background of the individual. Considering Fatimah is from support level, this could be criteria where the subordinate would prefer to avoid the conflict and perceive their leader as a mentor or more superior. This is significant in the collectivist culture, where there is a need 'to maintain mutual-face interest and relational network interest' (Ting-Toomey, 1988 as cited in Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p.46). Lei Hua may not feel as restricted as Fatimah in dealing with the conflict considering she is at the upper level of the management where the leader may need to be seen as a reliable and respected individual.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the majority of respondents for both the survey and the interviews were Malay. This could be seen to be a limitation for the study. However it is theorised that this context would highlight the cultural influence of the Malays on the minority groups. Malays are the majority ethnic group and is the group present at the middle and upper levels of management. The majority of Malays in this study are local (53%). A general question about culture revealed by the survey data was that the Malay personnel have less knowledge about their colleagues from different cultural backgrounds. Given that the local Terengganu population has less minority ethnic groups than other Malay provinces this finding needs investigation. This is confirmed by the interview respondents, for example see the Khadijah interview. The interview findings reveal that the minority groups feel there is inequality in terms of the cultural knowledge Malays possess about their minority culture. The evidence shows that cultural values such as power distance have been embraced by the majority of the respondents, regardless of ethnicity. For example, the survey and the interviews both confirm that power distance differences are understood and valued in the institution. Yet there were a minority of interview respondents who disclosed that they valued others' power distance practices in minimal way only. The survey and the interview respondents also showed that they understood and valued differences about uncertainty practices. Some interviewees explained that there was a minority of respondents who saw uncertainty as a threat (for example Amina).The survey and interview data confirmed that majority of the respondents did value long term orientation prevalent among respondents at their workplace.

Verbal communication is seen as one way of integrating personnel from diverse backgrounds. The use of formal Malay in their daily conversation helps personnel to overcome differences in the variety of language that they normally use outside the workplace. The Terengganu dialect however was perceived to be difficult by some of the respondents and sometimes leads to misunderstanding, especially for personnel who are not local (as explained by the interview respondents Yusuf, Steven and Liang). Further, regardless of ethnicity, the survey and interview respondents demonstrated their awareness that every ethnic group should be sensitive in dealing with the taboo words in front of other ethnic groups. They were aware that this can lead to misinterpretation and conflict. The findings also reveal that there are differences in the use of nonverbal communication. The use of proxemics is varied according to ethnicity, as reveals by Lei Hua, a Chinese respondent with a PhD. On the other hand, other ethnic groups are concerned about the importance of proxemics exhibited by Malay Muslim colleagues. Whilst the survey shows the use of haptics is taken seriously, the interview reveals that Malay respondents seem to be unaware about the issues compared to non-Malay

respondents (see for example Liang). Moreover the use of silence is seen as a strategy to avoid conflict. Some respondents however do not prefer this way and choose to be vocal (see for example Aditya). The interviews confirm this more than the survey results. Additionally, the findings show that collaborating and compromising is the most popular conflict resolution strategy chosen by the respondents in the survey. Nonetheless, the interview also provides evidence that some respondents also choose avoiding and accommodating as a means to resolve conflict.

Overall the findings conclude that personnel ethnicity, religion and managerial position can influence respondents' actions towards several issues of intercultural communication at their workplace. The study provides insights that different ethnic groups take their peers 'for granted' from either the view point of a dominant or marginalized cultural perspective. The dominant group often assumes that their view is acceptable to the entire minority. In an ideal world, cultural diversity should be seen as an advantage not vice versa. Differences are supposed to be valued and respected and it is important not to underestimate variances. Every individual in the institution deserves to be appreciated regardless of their ethnicity, religion or cultural background and this eventually will reduce mistreatment to minority. To help respondents appreciate this view, the study recommends a process of creating awareness. It recommends the use of a conceptual model introduced by Lawrence (2009) in order to create and sustain more positive communication and connections among the personnel at this particular institution.

CONCLUSION

The differences in intercultural communication patterns depicted by the respondents may not be representative to the whole population of the University Malaysia Terengganu or Malaysian ethnicity as a whole. The results though are specially derived from the respective purposive sampling. While the findings of this study were not necessarily definitive due to the small sample and single location, it is nevertheless hoped that higher education institutions understand the importance of intercultural communication to the personnel working at the university level. This will contribute not only to the well-being of personnel and the students but also enhance the communication and promote ethnic integration among the personnel at Malaysian higher education alongside the ethnic integration of the students.

ACKNOWELDGEMENT

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