Probing intercultural competence in Malaysia: A Relational Framework

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Abstract. Studies in intercultural competence are quite numerous but they were mainly derived from Eurocentric experiences. Since Eurocentric scholars may become oblivious to certain elements or issues of intercultural communication that are pertinent to Asian people, the Western conception of intercultural competence have been argued for its relevance in the Asian world. This paper aims to revisit the current (Eurocentric) perspective of intercultural competence and probes an alternative perspective of intercultural competence by reviewing current Asian literature. Our review suggests that the conception intercultural competence must consider relational aspects when it is situated within Asian experiences. Since relational aspects were a noted gap in the existing Eurocentric definitions, this paper proposes a relational framework in probing intercultural competence in Malaysia.

1 Introduction

The need for higher learning institutions to produce interculturally competent graduates has emerged in this globalized era [1]. Intercultural competence is important to help university graduates to not only solve problems in a globalized society, but also for employability, job performance and personal development. If university graduates are required to possess intercultural competence, then higher learning institutions must play an important role to educate students on what it takes to become competent.

There are numerous developed models of intercultural competence that can be used to educate students. However, most models were completely defined from the perspective of Western scholars particularly the Euro-American community [1,7, 9, 13]. Accordingly, such Euro-American centric definition has led to delineation of theories and perspectives that were Eurocentric in origin [6, 13]. Recent development in the studies of intercultural competence indicated a challenge to the application of Eurocentric theories in other cultural settings [1, 3, 8, 9, 10]. Thus, calls have been made to re-examine whether the Eurocentric perspectives can be translated into other cultural contexts. Such re-examination is useful for scholars to offer comprehensive explanations on viewing communication that goes beyond the Eurocentric perspective.

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2 Defining intercultural competence: A Eurocentric bias?

The term "intercultural competence" is not only diverse in its definitions by Eurocentric scholars; they are also highly diverse in terminologies (see Bennett, 2009). Regardless of such various terminologies and definitions, the notions of appropriateness and effectiveness form the fundamental conception of intercultural competence [3]. Effectiveness refers to successful goal achievement and it is closely related to satisfaction of attaining desired outcomes [4]. Appropriateness refers to the ability to identify the rules of a given situation that provides a sense of what is acceptable and unacceptable to perform behaviours [4-6]

Given the fact that current conception of intercultural competence is dominated by the Eurocentric orientation, it is worthy to explain how competency is viewed from such orientation. Scholars noted that the existing Eurocentric definitions tend to place a primary focus on the individual as the locus of intercultural competence [2]. Although many Eurocentric models assume a partner, competence is still largely viewed as an individual concept [7]. Accordingly, most Eurocentric models define skills and knowledge as a function of the individual, thereby viewing intercultural competence as possessed by the individual. In addition to the notions of effectiveness and appropriateness, intercultural competence also includes three important components: motivation, knowledge, and skills. Based on a review of current models of intercultural competence, Spitzberg (2012) proposed that motivation refers to the many positive and negative factors that encourage a person to approach or avoid members of other cultural groups. Knowledge represents the possession of cognitive information about rules for appropriateness that helps in the performance of skills in a given context. Skills are the behavioural aspect of competence that is directed toward goal achievement.

Taking all the aforementioned components, it can be conjectured that the Eurocentric orientation of intercultural competence tends to focus on the ability of an individual to achieve effective and appropriate interaction in intercultural situations based on her or his knowledge, motivation, and skills [9]. This definition certainly provides fundamental understandings on intercultural competence. However, given that current ideas about intercultural competence are vastly drawn from Eurocentric scholars' experiences, do such definitions resonate with Asian experiences? Scholars attested that if the Western scholarship is used to analyze communication experiences in the West, it is a legitimate framework for such an analysis [10]. However, the problem arises when the single perspective is often presumed for its universality in many intercultural studies. Scholars contended that placing personal control at the heart of communication competence strongly reflect Western bias in which it may fall short to explain the workings of competency in other cultures [4]. Given that the intercultural competence field has developed world wide, the Eurocentric perspective has been challenged and questioned by both mainstream and other non-Eurocentric cholars [1, 11, 12].

3 A Relational Framework

One paradigmatic assumption that was conceived as offering an alternative answer to the dominant Eurocentric perspective is the notion of Asiacentric paradigm that provides the meta-theorical lens to view Asian communication practices [10]. Asiacentric paradigm provides a theoretical explanation that emphasizes Asian values at the centre of inquiry for viewing Asian phenomenon [10]. Based on Asian cultural and communication practices, the Asiacentric paradigm offers philosophical assumptions that include the ontological, epistemological, axiological stance of human nature [10]. The ontological assumption of Asiacentric paradigm rests in the form of relationality that views everyone and everything as interrelated [10]. Many Asian traditional ways of thinking is based on the fact of humans

as interdependent and interrelated beings [3, 10, 11]. This ontological assumption is much more explicitly recognized in Asian cultures than in Eurocentric cultures that are traditionally dominated by the theme of individualism and independent self [3,7]. The foregoing ontological assumption leads to the epistemological assumption that since everyone and everything is viewed as interrelated, they can be meaningfully understood in relation to one another [3, 10]. The axiological assumption in Asiacentric paradigm is intertwined with the previous assumption in that, the valued goal of harmony is crucial in Asian communicative practices [10]. This Asian axiology of harmony is in mark contrast to the Western axiology that places freedom and control as the ultimate goal for communication [4].

Based on previous writings, the Asiacentric paradigm proposes five important aspects : (1) circularity, (2) harmony, (3) other-directedness, (4) reciprocity, and (5) relationality that gives implication on communicative practices [10]. These propositions essentially reiterated the themes of interconnectedness and mutual dependence that forms an integral worldview of Asian communicative practices [3, 10,]. Nonetheless, it is important to be cautious that Asian nations are plural societies that constitute remarkable varieties of communities that are divided by language, religion, case, and ethnicity. Accordingly, the Asiacentric propositions do not necessarily reflect real-life communication among Asians but they can be used as theoretical lenses to see an Asian version of communication [3,10].

The Asiacentric paradigm provides a meta-theoretical lens for us to re-examine the relevancy of Eurocentric perspective in the Asian contexts. However, it is important to note that such a re-examination does not suggest it is a tool that can be used to exclude the existing Eurocentric perspective. Rather, it provides the opportunity for finding convergent and divergent points between the Eurocentric and Asian perspectives. This attempt does not only contribute into providing an alternative outlook to the conception of intercultural competence, it also offers multicultural sharing that acknowledge cultural differences.

4 Probing intercultural competence in Malaysia

A recent phenomenological study in Malaysia indicated that intercultural competence is viewed as a co-created process between culturally different members that occurs through interpersonal relationship [1, 8]. Drawing from such study, a new conceptual model of intercultural competence has been delineated [1]. Accordingly, we propose a new conceptual model (figure 1) that re-defines the individual focused conception of intercultural competence into a framework that highlights a relational process between two culturally different members to achieve effective and appropriate outcomes. It is important to note at that, to echo Deardorff, although there are distinctions between the Western and non-Western perspectives in viewing intercultural competence, there are also certain elements that may be similar between Western and non-Western cultures [7]. As such, in the spirit of Chen's call to finding co-existence with Eurocentric perspective by accepting foreign elements and integrating them into one's cultural milieu [12], we contend that it is useful to re-conceptualize Deardorff's work [2]. Such a re-conceptualization does not only sensitive Asian perspective in describing competency in Asian context, but also provides a rethinking on the application of Eurocentric scholarship.
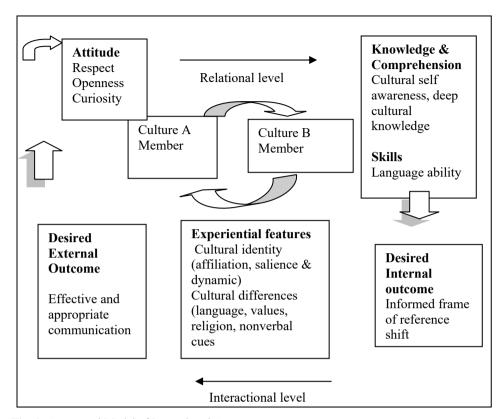
Fig. 1. Conceptual Model of Intercultural Competence

The model suggests the following perspectives on intercultural competence:

(1) Intercultural competence is a complex process to which it occurs through the movement and process orientation of various elements from the relational level into the interactional level.

(2) Culture A and Culture B members are interlocutors with different cultural identities. Intercultural competence is a mutual function of attitude, knowledge and skills of both interlocutors (Culture A and Culture B individuals). Such function occurs through interpersonal relationship.

(3) Attitude is viewed as the fundamental starting point that moves both interlocutors to acquire knowledge and skills, and to achieve internal and external outcomes.

(4) The internal outcome which involves the internal shift in frame of reference enhances the external outcome. The internal shift in frame of reference indicates the ability of interlocutors to adapt to different communication behaviors in their interaction with one another. The external outcome can be described as the ability of interlocutors to behave and communicate effectively and appropriately in their interaction.

(5) Experiential features indicate the level of interaction in which the identity of both interlocutors (affiliation to a certain cultural group, identity salience and identity dynamic) interacts with one another resulting in the experience of cultural differences (e.g. language, religion, values and nonverbal cues).

While this new model contributes into enriching the field of intercultural competence, it needs to be further explored to gain extensive insights. As such, we suggest a further exploration of this model as a theoretical framework for Malaysian researchers. We concur

that a plausible setting to probe intercultural competence is within Malaysian universities. The influx of international students has produced an increased level of diversity in Malaysia's campuses. This development indicates that it is possible for Malaysian students to experience interaction with people from diverse national backgrounds in the campuses. Since previous studies indicated that students noted living in a multicultural campus necessitates them to develop competency [1], this suggests unique opportunity to investigate how the recipient of higher education (Malaysian students) experience interaction with cultural others (those holding different national memberships) and how they define intercultural competence out of their experiences. The findings of such research may not only enrich current understanding of intercultural competence. It also helps in educating intercultural competence among our students that resonates well with the Malaysian context.

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