

**Incorporating Inter-Cultural Awareness in the Teaching of
Business Communication: The IIUM Experience**

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ABSTRACT

Students of The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) come from many Islamic countries around the world. They are enrolled in different faculties including the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences. One of the compulsory courses for these students is *The English for Occupational Purposes (EOP)*. It is meant for final year students (3 credit bearing) to equip them with the necessary skills before joining the workforce. Over the years, various approaches have been introduced and applied in ensuring that the best method is applied so that this course will be more meaningful and effective to the students. However, the course content only focuses on the communication skills in Business English without taking into account the different cultures of students who may have different business cultures back home. This study hence will look into the possibility of incorporating cultural awareness across context in the teaching and learning of *English for Occupational Purposes* and answering research questions related to culture, communication, teaching and learning. The qualitative methodology employing the interpretive analytical framework and case study are used in the 2-semester observations and interviews of the *EOP* students and lecturers. Findings are discussed with regard to the developmental theories of intercultural communication and the business communication aspects.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

Culture has been part of us since the day we were born. It is the make-up of our personalities and it surrounds us like the air we breathe. We simply do not see it. However, language, literacy and culture have not always been connected, either conceptually or programmatically, but this is changing as numerous schools, colleges and higher institutions around the world are beginning to reflect a growing awareness of their intersection and the promise they hold for rethinking teaching and learning. This is particularly true in the case of students of The International Islamic University Malaysia where almost 15% of the population are international students. They come bringing with them a whole different cultures, beliefs and customs, some are well accepted by others, some are paving their ways in making others understand about their customs and some are being totally dejected.

The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) is one of the public universities in Malaysia which uses English and Arabic as medium of instructions. Students come from more than 92 countries around the world, therefore bringing with them different sets of customs, values, beliefs and cultures. During a period of about 8 years teaching a mixture of foreign and local students, the writer has observed an interesting factor in the teaching and learning in general of students and lecturers alike.

What is The English for Occupational Purposes Course?

The English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) is a 6-hour per week, 3 credit-hour course designed to equip students of Economic and Management Sciences with the type of English Language skills they require for future occupational purposes. Students will participate in an extended work-related simulation while receiving the necessary skills-based training to enable them to fulfil the various spoken and written communication required of them. The core business of this course is group work or teamwork where students will be grouped together to cover core areas of the subject such as setting up a company, forming the departments where certain group members will be appointed as the CEO, HRM, CFO etc. Students will hold meetings after meetings, conduct business presentations, make research and market analysis, write reports and many other business-related matters. Generally the composition of students in a class (normally 25-30 students in a class) comprises of 90% Malaysian and 10% international students.

Why teamwork? There are many reasons why the course is structured as such where about 80% of the course evaluation comes from teamwork. First and foremost it is to prepare the students for the challenging and turbulence of the workforce where they need to be working in teams. Team effort produces better results when tackling unfamiliar problems by combining the knowledge and skills of each individual. (Ausweb96). The team also provides an environment in which each individual has the opportunity to maximise their input to the task. This study will then generally look at how far teamwork amongst students of diverse culture work and then general conclusion can be drawn as to how far the theory of effectiveness of teamwork works.

Working closely with each other for about 3 months is a daunting experience if any of the group members does not 'fit' into the group or may have other personal matters to handle besides this subject. This is made worsen if group members do not understand how the others work and of course the business custom and culture of others is not taken into account, and then it is not at all highlighted in the course material or by the lecturers themselves. A lot of negotiations should be handled amongst group members and these negotiation skills are among the most popular skills in Business English or Business Communication. For the purpose of this research, the term Business English will be interchangeably used with Business Communication throughout this paper.

Most investigations into cross-cultural negotiations so far conducted have focused on how a native speaking English (American or British) negotiator interacts with a non-native speaking English negotiator. However, the context of this research is more complicated as the negotiators (the students themselves) are second or foreign language speakers. This can be doubly hard if the students are struggling with the second or foreign language themselves.

Thus, this study will look into some aspects that would highlight the difficulties of group work among students of different cultures which also include business culture, the need of inter-cultural awareness amongst the students and lecturers and also the need of the incorporation of inter-cultural awareness in the materials used for this course. Recommendations will be made based on the findings of the study and possible other related suggestions.

Theoretical Background

Both language and culture affect each other. Language can be both unifying and divisive. A common native language ties people together, yet the presence of many different native languages in a small geographic area can cause problem. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, because language determines cognition and perception, if a person is removed from his/her linguistics environment, he/she no longer has the conceptual framework to explain ideas and opinion. This theory suggests that language functions as away of shaping a person's experience and not just a devise for reporting that experience. People adhere to the connection of their language to communicate effectively. This is further elaborated by Bernstein hypothesis which explains how social structure affects language and is an extension of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Bernstein considers culture, subculture, social context and social system to be part of social structure (Chaney & Martin, 2004).

Another set of theoretical background of this study will also be based on Applegate & Sypher's (1996) constructivist theory where it describes the influences of culture on individual communication behaviour. The theory emphasizes the interpretive nature of communication and the interrelatedness of culture and the individual cognitive construction. In short, it means if we are to assume that people are active interpreters, then we must focus upon their interpretations. It is there that the culture we seek to explain is created and maintained.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Culture encompasses all that we have developed and acquired as human beings. Culture guides our choices of food and clothing, our reading materials and art, our dating partners and friends (Linsey & Beach: 2004). According to them culture can be subdivided into materials culture and nonmaterial culture which includes a society's intangible and abstract components such as values, beliefs and traditions. In this case study, the researcher will focus on the nonmaterial culture in the students' pursuit in the negotiation skills of Business Communication.

Carte and Fox (2004) stress that culture consists of the rules and expectations that come into play when two people interact. It is an agreed-upon set of rules for living that consists of components ranging from seemingly inconsequential events about how to address a letter or style one's hair to grand ideas about the origin of the universe. This includes etiquette, values, languages, traditions and customs, beliefs system and world views, food and dress, musical tastes and much more. While inter-cultural communication in the business world, according to Chaney and Martin (2004), is a relatively new term in the business world and is defined as communication within and between businesses that involves people from more than one culture.

People do not want to abandon their past, therefore they acculturate new ideas into the existing culture. Acculturation is the process of adjusting and adapting to a new and different culture (Hazuda, Stern & Hoffner. 1998). In the IIUM context, the process of 'Acculturation' that is learning to function within the confines of a different culture is pertinent as students come from various parts of the world bringing with them their own cultures and customs. Acculturation is one of the strategies for reducing levels of distance from one person to another. As Byram & Morgan (1994) point out, 'Acculturation' depends on positive factors in terms of social distance and would seem to offer a fruitful possibility for appreciating cultural values.

If people of two different cultures absorb a significant number of each others' cultural differences and have a number of similarities, cultural synergy takes place with two cultures merging to form a strong overriding culture (Chaney & Martin, 2004). Corporate cultures are examples of the synergy of diverse cultures.

In the light of foreign language teaching and learning, the communicative approach to Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) based on the concept of communicative competence (Austin:1962; Seade 1969) brought into focus the importance of communicative skills. The goal of language study includes both receptive and productive skills. The learner had to be able to understand and produce the language both oral and written. But it is important to note that foreign language study was, however, still directed by textbooks. In relation to this, the language programs at Centre For Languages and Pre-University Academic Development (CELPAD) IIUM, stresses on the communicative competence of a learner as to expose and prepare them to the variety of language requirements in future. This is also emphasized in the teaching and learning of the English for occupational purposes where communicative skills in business dealings is very much the skills needed by the students in carrying tasks related to the subject.

According to Kaikkonen & Kokonen (2001) the learning of a foreign language depends essentially on its standing point, that is the learner's basic culture. Several researchers have emphasized that the learning of a foreign language means different things for a Frenchman, Englishman or a Chinese. The learner's basic culture determines what kind of primary goals are set for foreign language teaching. A culture which generally sets great store by the written word will not primarily value the spoken form in foreign language learning. Conversely, a society which values individual oral communication ability will see spoken fluency at the principal goal of foreign language learning. In

addition to these goals set by society, the goals for foreign language education, especially the goals of primary teaching have to be considered from the learner's point of view. We have to examine first what the learner's particular cultural background holds important and in high esteem. Often, the foreign language was taught for communication regardless of the learner's basic culture. In this study, the English language being the medium of communication amongst students is the language used throughout their communication with all levels of people related to their requirement of fulfilling their tasks.

Since group members consisted of students from different cultures, there were many a time when they admitted that there existed a gap or complexity in not only communication but also behaviour. Think for a moment of all the bodily activities that accompany even the simple act of saying 'hello' to a friend. From the stimulation of one's nerve endings, to the secretion of chemicals in the brain, to the moving of the lips to produce sound, thousands of components are in operation (and most of them at the same time). The notion of complexity becomes even more complex when cultural dimension is added.

When encountering someone from another culture, communication barriers are often created when the behaviour of the other person differs from our own. Communication barriers are obstacles to effective communication. An example of such barrier is the head nod. The nod indicates understanding in most of the countries of the world but in Japan it means only that the person is listening. By understanding inter-cultural communication in the business world, we can break down barriers and pave the way for mutual understanding and respect.

When we consider a simple thing like this; some people in Korea and China put dogs in their ovens, but people in the United States put them on their couches and beds. Why? Some people paint their entire bodies, but others spent millions of dollars painting and decorating only their faces. Why? Some people talk to God, but others have God talk to them. Why? The general answer to these questions is the same. People learn to think, feel, believe and act as they do because of the messages that have been communicated to them, and those messages all bear the same stamp; culture. This omnipresent quality of culture leads Hall (2001) to conclude that '*This aspect of culture is connected to the way they think, behave and do business in the business context*' (pp. 254). For example, according to Samovar et.al (2000) in Germany, the manager is not a cultural hero. In fact, Germans do not have a very strong concept of management. The reason for this is that Germans have historically honoured the worker who possesses exceptionally high occupational skills and qualifications. The highly skilled and responsible German workers do not necessarily need a manager to 'motivate' them. As was the case with the Germans, the Japanese do not share a strong sense of management. For them, the key component of the organization is the 'worker group'. This worker group can expect lifelong employment and advancement according to seniority.

North American, Australian, Swiss, British and Singapore negotiators value rapid negotiations, whereas other cultures such as China, Japan much of Latin America and Africa prefer slower negotiations. The pace of negotiations process is but one example of

cross-cultural negotiation differences. Direct versus indirect communication is often problematic in business dealings as well. In negotiations with many cultures, a 'yes' really means 'no'. In some cultures, personal relationships take priority over the product or service, and therefore business does not begin until friendships are established. Decision-making 'top down' versus group decisions, risk taking versus prudence and individual values versus collective values also complicate the negotiation process. These are part of the business skills that is practised in the Business Communication skills in the course students are taking in this study. Hence, it is vital for the students and the lecturers alike to be aware of such business skills and the culture surrounding it to make business dealings more effective, therefore brings positive impact to the tasks at hand.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEMS

The need to study the relationship and/or cultural impact to the Business Communication or any in any other English courses offered in CELPAD is timely as the composition of international students at this university is growing. Although there is a wealth of research and opinion about inter-cultural communication in a business setting, there is comparatively less that examines the subtle relationship between culture, language ability and communicative ability of students working together in a team who come from different cultural background. The cultural awareness itself should be taken seriously by all levels of people at this institution to avoid any unnecessary misunderstanding and communication breakdown amongst people of different culture or between people of the same culture but has entirely different perspective of others' cultures. Hence, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How far does the awareness of other students' cultures help to ease group work in the English for Occupational Purposes?
2. How far does awareness of students' cultures help in the delivery (teaching) of the English for Occupational Purposes?
3. Is there a necessity to incorporate inter-cultural elements in the materials used in this subject and inculcate inter-cultural awareness to the teaching and learning of Business Communication at this institution?

METHODOLOGY

To answer these questions, the approach used is the case study of two sets of students who took the English for Occupational purposes from two different semesters. The number of students in these two sets is approximately 250, where 15 of them were randomly chosen to be interviewed, 10 international students and 5 Malaysian. The rest answered a set of questionnaire distributed to them towards the end of the semester. The reasons for choosing the end of the semester to distribute the questionnaire were because the students have had their hands-on experience of working in groups and were able to discern the strengths and weaknesses of their friends and their own in making progress of

their business dealings. The findings were analysed employing the interpretive analytic framework. Data was collected using a variety of ethnographic techniques including a six-month non participant observations and semi-structured interviews with 15 students and 7 academic staff who have taught this subject. Data analysis followed the convention described by Glasser & Strauss (1967).

Criteria of Sample selection

The two sets of students were selected as the researcher was on of the lecturer teaching the subject for many semesters. Most of the international students interviewed for this study were the researcher's former students from previous semesters. 5 Malaysian students were selected from other sections where they were taught by other lecturers. 7 lecturers selected were colleagues of the researcher and interviews were then granted from all of them with a lot of persuasion and considerable pesky effort.

Respondents for the semi-structured interview

1. 10 international students each from Albania, Bosnia, Brunei, Guinea, China, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Vietnam and Tanzania
2. 5 Malaysian students
3. 7 lecturers- All Malaysian

Instrument

The procedure of data collection is the observation of the researcher's own sets of students from two semesters, semi-structured interviews with the respondents and informal interviews with 7 lecturers teaching English for Occupational Purposes. The observation was a six-month non-participant classroom observation. (Approximately 2 hours/session of observations per week). Some of the questions sought responses about their likes and dislikes, perceptions of the new environment, differences learning at home and abroad, learning the language, academic performance, and students' learning goals, group and team work, understanding other people's culture etc. (Refer to Appendix 1 for the interview questions asked to the students and Appendix 2 for the interview questions with the lecturers) .The interviews were not taped by requests of the students and lecturers.

It was necessary to obtain two measurements from each respondent: the extent to which they like/dislike the culture of their new learning environment. This includes the teaching and learning at IIUM, their surroundings, living at their hostels, food and the way they socialise. The Cultural Index devised by Swift (1999) was adapted and used in this study broadly correspond to those aspects with which the respondents are likely to come into context during their initial months at IIUM. (Refer to Appendix 5 for Cultural Index). The resulting figure would indicate either an overall dislike of culture (negative attitude) or an overall liking of the culture (positive attitude)

The semi-structured interviews were carried out as to give the respondents as much freedom but with guidance to speak and enabled the researcher to probe more on any information she felt was unclear and needed further explanation. Structured interviews were also carried out where necessary as to compare and contrast the respondents' responses to a question and to know how they perceive learning the language in a new environment. These methods were carried out in hoping to have a better insight of what should a multi-cultural class consist of from the perceptions of the students themselves especially when dealing with business etiquette.

The 2- semester classroom observations were conducted primarily between December 2005 – June , 2006. During that time approximately 2- hour- per person were spent on data gathering and related field analysis. The students were told that they had been selected to be the samples during the classroom observations as the researcher felt the data collection would be more accurate. The whole class was only told about the researcher's intention of carrying out a research in general.

Informal interviews with lecturers teaching the subjects were also conducted. There is a need to get the lecturers' perceptions about the course and the students' acceptance to the course, group work and communication flow in the classroom setting to verify the outcome of the data collected. As Denzin & Lincoln (1994) put it:

Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation. It also serves to clarify meaning by identifying different way the phenomenon is being seen. (1994:241)

LIMITATIONS

The fact that the interviews were not taped was a huge setback on the researcher's part. The researcher had to get back to the students via e-mail or through their friends or phone them in order to find out any other information or points that were not clearly jotted down by the researcher. The interview reports were done based on the points jotted and some through e-mail correspondence. Getting an appointment to get an interview with the lecturers was a daunting experience. This happened as many had full teaching load, administrative duties and other prior commitment. A lot of persuasion was done in order to get feedback from them although some gave a very positive attitude toward carrying out a research on this subject.

The two-hour-per-person's observation is definitely too short a time to collect accurate data. Since the subjects were the researcher's former students, some of the data were being inferred from the researcher's experience when teaching them. To add to that, probably because the researcher is new and unskilled at conducting a case study, carrying out interviews in particular, that many a time she had to get back to the same questions from the same respondents to ensure that the answer to questions were consistent and also other questions that she felt related but not asked in the previous interviews.

The researcher could not really tell whether the respondents were giving accurate information because there are possibilities that the students wanted to look good in their teacher's eyes. Therefore, they might be giving the response they thought the teacher would want to hear instead of telling the truth. This, in some way could affect the reliability of the data collected.

Data Collection and analyses

Data collection began on the first day of the second semester and ended approximately 6 months later. Concurrently collecting and analyzing data allowed the researcher to develop data summary themes and as she went along, changing and refining the possible cultural variables that could be used in identifying the respondents' attitude towards certain conditions while following the subject.

Specific strategies employed to ensure data trustworthiness included triangulation of methods and follow-up interviews to check consistency of responses. Data analysis involved summarizing data into themes and categories using procedures recommended by Goetz and LeCompte (1984). The final step of the analytic procedure was to present a copy of the interview report to the lecturers interviewed to verify the accuracy of the data and validate the outcome of their responses.

FINDINGS

Teamwork in a diverse culture

Bringing together a number of people with different personalities, skills, experiences and opinions to form a team can affect their ability to achieve a common goal. Problems can arise from the social interaction between members or through poor team management. Since most of the skills in the subject are from the result of teamwork, the students were asked on their acceptance of other nationalities in the group. Generally it can be said that the students are most comfortable working with their own nationality. Since the composition of students in each company comprises of more Malaysian than any other nationalities, they cannot but accept the fact that they have to work with whoever that had been assigned in that particular group.

However from the responses of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that the students have their own preferences in working with other nationalities. One comment came from a respondent (international students) that said :

The Malaysian normally will avoid working with others. However if they can't avoid it, they will do their work efficiently, especially the female students.

Many international students have the perception that the Malaysian students are too reserved, not able to express their thoughts, shy, especially the female students. However they are generally easy to work with and will not pose any serious problem to the group discussion and the on-goings of their company.

Another interesting point that the respondents wrote was that the African students will possibly be the best presenter (especially in presenting the Business Proposal) because they have the language ability, strong determination and their ability to convince their group members. However, the overall comment of these African students were they prefer to mingle amongst their people although from different groups, easily distracted, have a lot of other commitments apart from the task they were doing and always late for meetings.

Strong personalities can seriously affect the group's initial line of thinking and stifle innovative ideas from less dominant members. A group having a number of dominant personalities may transform their meetings into monologues between themselves – defeating the purpose of forming the group. From the observation and field notes the researcher found that the Arab students were dominant in their groups especially towards the female students. Perhaps it is their nature or their customs that the female are always left behind and submit to what they said. There was one instance that the researcher recorded where a Saudi Arabian student self elected himself as the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of the group's company just because the rest of the group members were female. There was strong protest by the group members and after consulting with their lecturer, finally they came to a consensus that the CEO should be elected by the count of vote. Why did this argument or protest happen? This is where understanding one's own culture and culture of others play an important role. Knowing how people of the world operate in business setting is crucial as they will face different kinds of people once they join the workforce.

Many of the respondents from the semi-structure interviews expressed their disappointment over the refusal of some of their group members to accept the way they work. One respondent commented:

I am the oldest in the group. Although I respect them as my team members, they should also respect me as the oldest. They cannot just order me to do this and that...

From this comment we can definitely see the attitude of this student where the custom of many Asian from the Archipelago would definitely be the respect towards an older person. It was found that two of his group members were from Bosnia and from China, the rest were Malaysian. A further situational distinction refers to the classroom versus "real world" context in which the understanding of business communication in the classroom negotiation differs from the negotiation in the actual business transactions.

Cultural awareness amongst local and international students

A total of 14 item (refer to Appendix1 for the questions) were asked to the respondents all of which referred to students adaptability, acceptance and willingness to compromise learning in either familiar or unfamiliar environment.

Entering an unfamiliar culture is stressful at the beginning for some students. Once they have settled and got adjusted, they would be able to commence work as normal. Perhaps this is not so true to some students. Right until their final year, (this subject is taken mostly by final year students) some students were still seen struggling with their surrounding, and some coping behaviour unfortunately are negative such as late nights, uncontrollable social interactions, missing classes where reasons for being unable to participate in teamwork was 'unwell'.

In cultures where there's strong oral tradition, for example, the use of metaphors, poetic language and colourful turns of phrase are usually much admired. This can be seen from the pieces of business communication that comes from Malaysian and also the middle-eastern students where memos or letters were written colourful languages. In turn, those from the Eastern Europe wrote plainly and almost toneless. The Chinese from the mainland China have different approach towards the subject and to their peer. Face is often far more important to the Chinese than performance, and contributes enormously to the inefficiency and apparent incompetency that plagues the negotiations between group members. They will typically not admit an error or ignorance because they would lose face. This has been some of the feedback from the questionnaire that was written by the respondents about mainly Chinese students.

When asked the question of who mostly dominated group discussion, the respondents gave differing answers. 4 out of 15 said the male students from Africa, 2 said from Bosnia, 2 from Malaysia, 3 from the Middle East and the rest were from different countries. When further probe into what probably made them dominant, many said that these students wanted to be seen as the leader and have had some experience being a leader in societies and organisations.

Why are there differing views about who is more dominant than the other? There are differences in the value placed by people from different backgrounds on behaviours such as assertiveness. Perhaps these individuals were seen dominant because they are being assertive. For example, one study found that American subjects rated assertive behaviour more highly and as more competent than Japanese subjects did. This can be the reason why students who come from the culture where being assertive is seen as competent will be seen dominant.

Cultural awareness amongst lecturers

Most of the lecturers found that teaching this subject is relatively easy to handle and it did not pose a lot of problems compared to teaching other subject like English for Academic Purposes or the English proficiency course. Some of the responses were:

The students are kind of matured since they are about to graduate. I just give them the instructions and make sure they finish the work on time.

Another commented:

I like teaching this course. It gives them freedom to manage their team and what I do normally was to guide them accordingly.

When asked about the difference of acceptance between the local and international students, it was surprising to note that all respondents unanimously agreed that they didn't think that it was important for the students to accept or not to accept the subject or the way it was being delivered. Their justification was when a subject is compulsory, then, there should be no question asked. This has pointed to one direction, the lecturers did what they have to do, nothing more and nothing less.

Ideally, lecturers should give ample opportunities for students to express their feelings and emotions to interact with their peers in their team or with other classmates or with the lecturers themselves whether to express rage or pride. This will help the lecturers to understand their students better in terms of how different people work and making the class more functional rather than being dictated.

When asked who dominated the group discussions, 4 out of 7 lecturers agreed that male students dominated the discussion more than female students. This can be seen from the numbers of CEOs elected were among male students. When asked to name one nationality that dominated the group discussion, all the respondents were unsure and said that it depended on individual charisma. This does not correlate with the students perception where many said the students from the Middle East and Africa are more dominant in group discussion.

Many said that there is no question about liking or disliking, comfortable or not in teaching the international or the local students. It's a matter of duty, so they say. Generally, they admitted that they are aware of the students' cultural differences amongst students. One commented:

Of course I'm aware of the differences in culture of our students. The Thais always bring back nice food whenever they came back from their country. The African students on the other hand are very fond of meeting lecturers at their office just to chat and I don't really have time for that.

Some suggestions that the respondents highlighted in order to bridge the cultural gap between students were among others to have more fieldtrips or business trips with group members so that they are more familiar with each other or conduct business outings or camps so that the time spent with each other can be effectively used to know how others work.

Cultural elements in materials used in the EOP subject

Cultures, race, gender, religion, socio-economic status is potential variables in the research of coming out with the adoption and adaptation of materials for the purpose of teaching and learning of this course. Based on the existing materials used, these elements are missing or were not being considered at the beginning of the materials production process. The course outline itself should incorporate the elements of multiculturalism or the very least considerations of how business communication were being conducted at various parts of the world

There were efforts in compiling various types of business communication materials by previous key personnel. However, when teachers were asked to describe the process of adapting materials, they often focus on vocabulary. They suggested replacing words with simpler synonyms or defining terms at the beginning of a reading passage. Some teachers will also point to sentence length and suggest writing shorter statements. These were some of the feedback that can be concluded from the interview session when asked should the materials used in this course be adapted to suit the students' diverse culture and background.

How far does awareness of students' cultures help to ease group work?

Based on the responses from the questionnaire and the interviews, it can be concluded that if the students are more aware of why other students behave they way they did, it could definitely ease the burden and pressure of working together in a team. The problem is now, the most of the students either have nor been given enough exposure of others' cultures, indifferent towards others or they were pressed for time in order to fulfill other subjects' requirement. So the time left to socialize and understand people's customs, beliefs and values were limited or nil. This means that the students are aware of the cultures of others. However, the degree of awareness is very low due to ignorance, too proud of one's own culture and ignored the others, lack of exposure, being oblivious to his/her surrounding and may other factors.

How far does the awareness of students' cultures help in the delivery of the subject?

Based on the interviews with the lecturers, it can be summarized that the awareness of the students' culture did not influence the smooth delivery of the subject. This can be proven by the comments from the respondents in saying that "*I'll do what is expected of me and at the end of the day I produce results*". Another respondent emphasized that "*cultural awareness is not as important as finishing the syllabus and getting the students ready for the final exams*". This is because at the end of the day, if the grades slump, they will have

to bear the cost and justify why the graph slumped downwards. Therefore, it can be thus concluded that to many lecturers, the students' achievement in the examination is far more crucial than to be aware of cultural differences.

The necessity to incorporate and inculcate inter-cultural elements in the teaching and learning of Business Communication/EOP in IIUM

It is, as mentioned earlier, timely to start incorporating cultural elements in the materials used for the delivery of this course as the population of the university is growing. Based on the Course outline of the EOP (Refer to Appendix 5), there was no indication of cultural elements in the presentation of materials. As it is, the materials itself is a compilation of several notes and there wasn't a smooth flow from one part to the other. Therefore, it is the right time to start compiling or working on the centre's own materials by injecting some cultural elements in the oral and written communication in business.

Inculcating cultural awareness should be done if not in schools, the first day a person steps into the university's compound. This helps reduce anxiety amongst especially new students where getting acquainted during the first week is beyond imagination. This could help reduce anyone from making false assumptions. Making false assumption according to Guirdham (1999) based on the situation in someone's own culture can lead to giving or taking offence by, for example not giving respect where it is expected or expecting it where it will not be granted. This situation occurred rampantly as noted by the researcher where individual or several individuals made false assumption way before the even know their team members.

Who is important, whom would be useful to get to know, who is to be respected may be different in one culture than it is in another. A religious teacher may be more important in one culture and someone with wealth in another. People who are 'insider' in their own culture, due to their economic, professional, or educational status, maybe outsiders in another culture because their skills are not important there, or because of race and gender, or simply because they are from another culture and never will really be fully accepted in the host culture. These are among other things that everybody should be aware of once they are working in a multicultural environment. Without having this sense of awareness, it can be bluntly said that the person is going to go through a lot of resentment, rejection, dejection, the feeling of being isolated and alone in his/her or their lives living away from home.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be thus concluded that in order to communicate effectively in the multi-cultural business environment, being knowledgeable of all cultural factors that could affect business situations is essential. This will greatly depend on the support of the lecturer and group members towards understanding one's culture, custom and beliefs. By understanding intercultural communication, the students, lecturers and the university's community at large can break down barriers and pave the way for mutual understanding and respect.

It is also essential to have classrooms that foster cultural understanding and sensitivity of other students. This can start with the lecturers and then down to the students. If the lecturers themselves are indifferent towards other students' cultures and customs, it is not impossible that the classroom environment will be a dictated ones and this should be avoided in the business classroom at all cost. Effective teaching skills must be developed across the content areas to meet the socio-cultural cognitive and language needs of this almost multi-cultural classroom.

These graduating students come into the classrooms with great anticipation and ardent faith to the subject as many believe this subject will help them ease through some of the basic pre-working environment and prepare them mentally and physically to the challenging workforce that awaits them not too far away. Unfortunately, many lecturers, already overwhelmed with the challenges at all other levels, were too ill-prepared to provide the kinds of classrooms that will adequately identify and meet the needs of these students. Some typically find themselves unfamiliar with issues related to cultural awareness yet they must shoulder the responsibility for promoting such learning through content instruction.

If we as teachers are able to facilitate a healthy teaching and learning growth, we can definitely extend their horizons and enable them to reach their full potential as business graduates. If we do not notice or refused to notice, learn about and respond to the cultural diversity, miscalculations will be made that can easily compromise the efficiency, harmony and productivity of the teaching and learning environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this small-scale research, a few recommendations are listed as below:

1. There must be an on-going seminars/workshops or courses for the student and lecturers in inter-cultural communication to ensure that everyone is aware of others' culture.
2. A compulsory course on cultural identification and inter-cultural communication must be followed by students of all faculties to avoid any mishap and cultural barriers that hinders effective communication. This can be introduced as a basic core course at the Centre for Languages or at the faculties itself.
3. Students and lecturers' awareness of the culture of others and also business culture will not only enhance their teaching and learning but also foster cooperation within and beyond the subject. Hence, it is timely to prepare materials that promotes the inter-cultural communication which is nil in the existing syllabus.
4. Although the university promotes inter-cultural awareness and communication amongst its citizens, a lot more have to be done in terms of its promotion, effectiveness

and of course allocation of funds for the purpose of getting experts from all around the world and from within to speak with understanding about the matter.

5. More research should be conducted in this area, especially in promoting the inter-cultural business communication so that teaching and learning will be more meaningful, effective and fun. On top of that the needed to examine new challenges and curriculum ideas should be carried out in a much broader point of view.

6. Useful ideas about teaching and learning can be gained from studying the cultural system and educational organization of various nations. Hence, initials steps should be made to bring together researchers to study on this area, then on to disseminate them to everyone from the support staff until the top management of the institution.

7. Comparative studies should be carried out between intra and inter-cultural relatedness in the teaching and learning of Business English at this university. It can throw light on this relationship and help practitioners sail through the rough tide of a mismatch cultures amongst the students and even the lecturers and staff of this institution.

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APPENDIX 1

The interviews were conducted with 15 students who are taking The English for Occupational Purposes at The Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences of The International Islamic University Malaysia.

Interview Questions.

1. Can you tell me your background, where you are from and a little bit of your English language ability?
2. How long have you studied in IIUM?
3. How do you find learning in IIUM? What about the Staff/Students?
4. You have the experienced of learning the English language at this university. Can you tell me generally what you think about it?
5. What do you think of the differences (if any) of the acceptance to the subject between the local and the international students?
6. What do you think is the distinctive feature of local and international students pertaining to the acceptance of the subject?
7. From your observation and experience, who (the origin of the country/gender) dominated your group work?
8. Are you comfortable learning and studying with local and the international students?
9. Have you ever faced any problem while performing any tasks in the subject especially from anyone who has different culture from yours? Please elaborate.
10. What would you do if a student or any of the group members protested/commented about other students in class?
11. From your own experience, who do you think are easier to work with (from which country) and the most difficult?
12. Do you think the lecturers and teachers are aware of cultural differences that the students bring with them?
13. Do you think it is important for the lecturers/teachers to be aware of cultural differences amongst students before they start teaching a class?
14. What are your suggestions to bridge the cultural gap amongst the students and also lecturers?

APPENDIX 2

The interviews were conducted with the lecturers who are teaching and who have taught English for Occupational Purposes in The International Islamic University Malaysia.

Interview Questions.

15. Can you tell me your educational background?
16. How long have you worked in IIUM?
17. How do you find teaching in IIUM? Staff/Students

18. You have the experienced of teaching the EOP courses. How long/how many semesters have you taught this course?
19. What do you think of the differences (if any) of the acceptance to the subject between the local and the international students?
20. What do you think is the distinctive feature of local and international students pertaining to the acceptance of the subject?
21. From your observation and experience, who (the origin of the country/gender) dominated the group work?
22. Are you comfortable teaching the international students?
23. Have you ever faced any problem while teaching students from diverse culture in one class? Please elaborate.
24. What would you do if a student protested/commented about other students in class?
25. From your own experience, who do you think are easier to teach (from which country) and the most difficult?
26. Do you think the lecturers and teachers are aware of cultural differences that the students bring with them?
27. Do you think it is important for the lecturers/teachers to be aware of cultural differences amongst students before they start teaching a class?
28. What are your suggestions to bridge the cultural gap amongst the students and also lecturers?

APPENDIX 3

CULTURAL INDEX

(Adapted from Swift (1999:189))

Do You like

1. the food and drinks available at the cafeterias on campus?
2. the clothing of students at this university?
3. the style of greetings/address/introduction and 'salam' the Malaysia style?
4. the efficiency of public transport system in and out of campus?
5. the extent to which everyday life of the students at this university?
6. keeping on time
7. the way students behave towards their lecturers and friends?
8. the socialization of the students?
9. the use of gestures, eye contact and body language?
10. the general pattern of meal time?
11. the teaching styles of the lecturers?
12. the learning styles of the students?
13. the extent to which male and female appear to have the same opportunities open to them on campus?

- 14. the behaviour of male towards female in class?
- 15. the general availability of leisure and entertainment facilities?

APPENDIX 4

Assalamualaikum wrt.wbt.

Dear students,

The objective of this questionnaire is to find out the answers to the complexities of group work in a diverse culture of The International Islamic University Malaysia.. Please answer honestly. Try not to be too idealistic because this will not affect any of your performance. Answers are strictly confidential and will be used for the purpose of this research only. Thank you.

Please circle or fill in your answers where required.

- 1. Nationality : Malaysian / Others
- 2. Gender : Male/ Female
- 3. After the name of each group of people, write down the **characteristic/s of the students** that comes to mind immediately. Do not stop to think too much about your response and do not try to be fair, reasonable or rational.

	Nationality	Your first response	Source (where you heard or got info frm ie. Friends or own experience
	Malaysian		
	African : State country if preferred		
	Bosnian		

	Thais		
	Vietnamese		
	Indonesian		
	Other European countries (state country if preferred)		
	Arabs (state country if preferred)		
	Oceania		
	Others (Please state country)		

4. If you have been given the task to work with a group of students from different nationalities, rank the nationalities below according to your preference.

Malaysian	
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African :	
Bosnian	
Thais	
Vietnamese	
Indonesian	
Other Eurpoean countries	
Arabs (state country if preferred)	
Oceania	
Others (Please state country)	

5. Provide reason/s of why you chose no.1 as your first choice.

6. Provide reason/s of why you chose no.10 as your last choice.

7. Describe your worst experience in working in a group with different nationalities?

8. Describe your best experience in working in a group with different nationalities?

9. What do you think is the most important element in order to communicate effectively in the inter-cultural business environment?

Thank you for your cooperation.