

(i-COME'20)  
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA 2020

**EXPLORING ISSUES OF STUDENT INTERCULTURAL  
COMPETENCE: THE CASE OF RAKAN CAS**



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### Abstract

The internationalization of higher learning institutions necessitates higher education providers to consider student intercultural competence as a critical outcome. For many institutions, such outcome is often achieved by promoting students' participation in various internationalization activities. With this in mind, this paper investigates the case of RAKAN CAS, a formally established student association in a Malaysian university that has been active with internationalization activities. Given this context, this paper seeks to explore insights of intercultural competence. While previous research tends to focus on the issues of intercultural competence from students' perspective, this paper argues on the need to probe into administrators' perspective. Accordingly, this paper addresses intercultural competence from the perspective of the RAKAN CAS advisor who plays administrative role in assisting students with their activities. Using a qualitative approach, two important issues of student intercultural competence were identified: language proficiency and training. Language proficiency deals with the advisor's views on the lack of ability to use language, particularly English that has set some barriers for the students to interact cultural others. Training highlights the advisor's perspective on the lack of intervention strategies to help students develop their intercultural competence. Driven by the two issues, the paper concludes on the important role of higher learning institutions to promote students' intercultural competence.

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*Keywords:* Intercultural competence, interaction, language proficiency, training



## 1. Introduction

The rapid process of globalization has resulted in a remarkable change in population. Such changing population suggests that life in the 21st century, both internationally and domestically, requires individuals to develop intercultural competence (Ting-Toomey, 2015). In the context of higher learning institutions, intercultural competence is recognized as an important educational outcome for students. With this in mind, there are compelling drivers for universities to address intercultural competence among students. This paper presents a preliminary study that focuses on the case of RAKAN CAS, a student association formally established by a Malaysian university under the supervision of its Student Development Office. Given that research on administrator's perspective is understudied in the literature, this paper brings forth insights from the RAKAN CAS advisor on student intercultural competence. The data for this advisor were extracted from a case study project that investigated empowerment of student intercultural competence through the RAKAN CAS as an institutionalized practice by the university. The advisor's viewpoints were selected for this paper because it offers rich insights not only on the issues of intercultural competence among students, but also intervention strategies taken to help students develop their competency.

## 2. Problem Statement

Intercultural competence is defined as the effective and appropriate behaviors within intercultural situations (Deardorff, 2006). Effective behaviors are referred to as behaviors that enable an individual to achieve successful communication (Xiao & Chen, 2012). Appropriate behaviors concern with avoiding or violating social or interpersonal norms, rules, or normative expectations for interaction (Yeh, 2010). In order to achieve effective and appropriate communication, intercultural competence requires these three factors: motivation, knowledge and skills. Spitzberg (2012) suggests that motivation refers to the many positive and negative valences that move a communication toward, against, or away from a particular path of activity. Knowledge represents the possession and understanding of resources that inform the enactment of skills in a given context. Skills are repeatable goal-directed behavioral sequences producing some level of goal achievement.

Within the context of higher learning institutions, development of intercultural competence among students is viewed as a critical outcome that needs to be achieved (Deardorff, 2006). This outcome can be attained by promoting students' participation in the outgoing mobility program. However, the percentage of students who studied abroad is relatively small due to economic factors that influence their decision to study abroad. Fortunately, given the internationalization-at-home strategy, universities have taken the role to encourage non-mobile students to develop their competency by engaging with internationalization activities. In the context of Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), the CAS Representative Association (RAKAN CAS) is established by the Student Development and Alumni office, College of Arts & Sciences, UUM (PPA CAS) to provide opportunities for undergraduate students to become volunteers to their foreign buddies in the campus. Much of RAKAN CAS voluntary work involves procedural aspects such as doing pick-up services, assisting for medical check-up and registering classes of their foreign

buddies. In the course of doing such voluntary work, the students gained experience interacting with cultural others. While such activity is commendable, it is misleading to assume that intercultural interaction guarantees effective and appropriate communication among the interactants. Rather, it is quite possible that the interaction increases stereotyping among the interactants and results in poor development of intercultural competence. Thus, students' interaction must not be left with chance. Rather, the university has to play a facilitating role in educating students about the skills needed for meaningful interaction. Despite this premise, administrators' perspective (such as advisors to student associations) on student intercultural competence is understudied. In the case of RAKAN CAS, there is a formally appointed advisor who must play administrative role in helping students. The advisor's perspective on the RAKAN CAS would offer insights on the issues surrounding intercultural competence among students. Exploring such insights serves as an important input for apprehending students' competency and the intervention strategies that can be taken by universities.

### **3. Research Questions**

What are the issues of student intercultural competence as perceived by the RAKAN CAS advisor?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to identify issues of student intercultural competence from the perspective of the RAKAN CAS advisor

### **5. Research Methods**

This study was a preliminary study. As such, it adopts qualitative research method that looks into the subjective understanding of the topic under study. The following section explains research context, informant, data collection method and analysis of the study.

#### **5.1. Research context and informant.**

The context of the study is the CAS Representative Association (or RAKAN CAS). Formally established in 2014, the RAKAN CAS holds 75 members consisting ethnically diverse backgrounds of students. The RAKAN CAS is established by the Student Development and Alumni Office, College of Arts and Sciences, UUM (PPA CAS). The PPA CAS aims to develop skills among students that would enable them to become effective global citizens. Accordingly, the PPA CAS provides various types of activities for students to enhance their global awareness, which include among others, engagement with their foreign counterparts within the campus. The PPA CAS also envisions to improve their level of assistance on increasing students' employability skills and their overall development. Accordingly, there has been continuous soft skills training, leadership and entrepreneurial skills training offered regularly by the office. The outward and inward mobility program have been the focal point of services by the PPA CAS.

The PPA CAS operates with a Dean, a Deputy Dean, two Registrar Officers, two Coordinators and seven supporting staffs. The Deputy Dean was formally appointed as the RAKAN CAS advisor. The advisor has positioned RAKAN CAS as a critical unit for the PPA CAS to assist in services with foreign students, particularly those who attended mobility program in the campus. In view of this, students who are members of RAKAN CAS do not only take the role as a volunteer / liaison officer (or university ambassador) in assisting social adjustment of their foreign counterparts (or foreign buddies), but also host several activities with the latter. Apart from doing such role, the PPA CAS also collaborates with the RAKAN CAS in hosting several ASEAN/International level seminars in the campus. To date, they have organized two international seminars, namely the ASEAN University Youth Summit 2019 and South East Asia Teacher Evaluation Meeting 2019. Through these activities, the RAKAN CAS was given hands-on experience with foreign participants.

Given the objective of this study that seeks to understand the perspective of university administrators on student intercultural competence, the RAKAN CAS Advisor was chosen as the informant of the study which is seen as the person responsible in the administration of RAKAN CAS. The informant has been working with the RAKAN CAS since its early inception in 2014. He has been very proactive at encouraging students to engage with foreigners through various programs. Under his advisory and administration, the RAKAN CAS has been awarded by the university as the “Best Student Association” in 2019. It is given as a formal recognition by their university to further encourage their active involvement with international level programs. The informant aspires to continue doing many international level programs with the RAKAN CAS in the future to provide more exposures for students.

## **5.2. Data collection method and data analysis**

In-depth interview was used to collect data from the informant. The study adopts semi-structured interview that orient the informant to reflect on his experience as an advisor to the RAKAN CAS. The interview was conducted within the length of 60 to 90 minutes. A systematic step of thematic analysis technique suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed to analyse data from the interview. The data were coded into themes that emerged through the informant’s voices rather than a predetermined model of intercultural competence. The emergent themes were then compared to existing literature

## **6. Findings**

Findings indicate two main issues of intercultural competence. The issues are categorized into the following main themes:

### **6.1. Language proficiency**

The informant observes that students seemed to have difficulties with their English language proficiency, particularly during the initial encounters with their foreign buddies. He claims “it’s not that they cannot speak in English at all, they can (speak)... but with broken English”. Noticing that English serves as a communication tool for them to interact with their foreign buddies, he acknowledges that their difficulty to speak smoothly in English has given some impacts on their self- confidence. He observes that

students tend to feel anxious when they need to talk to their foreign buddies. In other situations, he also notices that it is hard for the students to volunteer to speak in front of an international audience.

He adds that the university can help students increase their proficiency and confidence in using the English language. In the case of RAKAN CAS, he urged students to organize programs in a neighbouring countries. Such programs would force students to practice their speaking skills when interacting with people from other cultures. Accordingly, the RAKAN CAS has conducted several programs with Thailand, Indonesian, Vietnamese and Cambodian universities. He observes that the programs have inspired the participating students to become more confident with their English language proficiency. He notices that over the course of time in engaging with many international programs, the students have shown some level of improvements. He claims “After two years. I could see changes among two to three RAKAN CAS members. Although there is not much... but I can see they have more confidence. They used to be shy and reluctant (to speak in English) but now they have improved a bit. They can speak (in English) with some confidence”. Other approaches taken by the PPA CAS include sending several members of RAKAN CAS to an outbound mobility program for a short duration (at least two weeks). He believes that students would be able to find more opportunities to interact with cultural others and improve their communicative skills through such a program. Fortunately, over a period of time, he observes that there have been slight changes in the students’ confidence to interact in English.

## **6.2. Training**

There is an expectation by the PPA CAS that students would be able to “play it by ear” when engaging with foreigners. Such engagement experiences would lead students to learn on their own on how to be effective and appropriate in their interactions. Unfortunately, he observes that students failed to learn about good interactions on their own as expected. For example, the informant observed that some students were not aware about the importance of politeness when using a foreign language (primarily English). This occurred particularly within the context when the students were serving foreign participants in many international seminars that they had hosted.

“There was one time I noticed they neglect to say ‘please’ when asking participants to follow instructions. I was afraid the participants might have negative impressions on the RAKAN CAS as the host”.

In other instances, he sees challenges faced by RAKAN CAS to assist mobility students due to language and cultural differences:

“There was one time a RAKAN CAS assisted mobility students from China to register courses at schools. The Chinese student cannot speak in English. It was hard for them to talk and that RAKAN CAS does not know what to do”

The informant acknowledges that RAKAN CAS serves as an important platform to help students with their intercultural interaction. However, establishing the platform alone is not sufficient. He asserts that the students need a proper training that enables them to learn and understand cultural differences. He adds that although the PPA CAS has offered various soft skills training, skills training that is specific to help students interact appropriately and effectively with cultural others has not yet been designed. Additionally, the PPA CAS has not yet conducted any evaluation on student intercultural competence. He

felt such evaluation is important to help equip students with the skills needed for managing cultural differences. He believes that fostering intercultural competence among students requires continuous commitment and effort from the university. It is impossible for students to develop their competency by attending short trainings. As such, he argues on the importance of continuous training which enable students to learn about intercultural competence throughout their undergraduate years.

The informant shares his plans to organize student workshops. The workshops would guide students on developing their communicative skills with cultural others. Unfortunately, the university has seized the operation of PPA CAS due to the new restructuring of student services. Accordingly, he suggests that the Student Affairs Department (HEP) of the university may take the role on training students. For example, he suggests competence related module can be included in the Organizational Management Training which is held annually by the HEP. He points out:

“The HEP seems to focus more on organisational management skills. Perhaps, when they address leadership skills, they should have a slot that highlights communication skills. I see a need to include communication elements in leadership camp. Communication skills are important. We don’t have enough module”

The informant sees that the need for the university to help students by offering specific training on communication skills within international or intercultural context. He proposed that the university can also encourage students to attend international workshops or training by giving them several incentives. He hopes to see that students would be able to gain confidence in their interaction with others as he said “I hope to see students who are confident to interact. I see students need communication skills. They must be able to become effective global citizens

## **7. Conclusion**

The themes indicate two main issues of student intercultural competence as perceived by the Deputy Dean of PPA CAS.

### **7.1. Language proficiency and intercultural competence**

The first theme addresses the informant’s view on the issue of language proficiency. Language proficiency deals with one’s ability to use language to achieve communicative purpose that entails having a good command of the language, expressing clear ideas and interacting with others comfortably (Renandya et al., 2018). This finding supports previous research within Malaysian context that indicates language proficiency as an important element of intercultural competence (Dalib et al., 2017; Dalib et al., 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Interestingly, this study indicates informant’s concern on the speaking skills of the RAKAN CAS. This finding corresponds with the idea that among all other language skills, speaking is seen as an exclusive tool to effective communication and self-confidence facilitates individuals to start conversation (Gurler, 2015). It is also telling that the study suggests the informant’s view on the relationship between students’ language proficiency and their self-confidence. This finding supports research within the language learning field that indicates significant correlation between self-confidence and English-speaking skills (Barrett, 2018; Gurler, 2015; Trinidad, 2018). Taking such findings, it can be

suggested that language proficiency and self-confidence work as important facilitating factors for students to speak and engage with cultural others. These abilities can be considered as pre-requisite conditions for students to develop intercultural competence.

Given the observation of students' low language proficiency and self-confidence, it is telling that the informant took action by encouraging the RAKAN CAS to conduct non-academic activities in foreign countries. This effort has led to an improvement of language proficiency and self-confidence over a period of time. This finding exemplifies the specific intervention strategy within which higher learning institutions can take to help raise students' self-confidence and language proficiency for their intercultural competence. The finding also adds to the literature in terms of interventions and the targeted specific skills of intercultural competence which must consider its developmental process within the Malaysian setting.

## 7.2. Training and intercultural competence

The informant sees training as needed to help students develop intercultural competence. He expresses that simply encouraging students to experience intercultural interaction is not sufficient to help students. He sees challenges faced by students given lack of proper knowledge on how they should manage their interaction with others. As such, a proper training is critical for educating students on what is appropriate and effective in their intercultural interaction. This finding supports previous literature that indicate the importance of training for intercultural competence (Kural, 2020; Schwarzenhal et al., 2020). While previous studies tend to focus on the critical need of training for study abroad students (Çiftçi & Cendel Karaman, 2017; Kural, 2020); this study points a concern on the training targeted at non-mobile students who are active with intercultural exchanges on campus. Equipping such students with the attitude, knowledge and skills through training will empower them to be effective and appropriate in intercultural exchanges within their own local setting. Admittedly, there exists many training models that can be used to develop student intercultural competence. Amongst other, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 2017). This model can be adapted to the context of non-mobile students' as indicated by this study

## Acknowledgments

This study is funded by the Institute for Management and Business Research, UUM

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