

A Study on the Relationship between English Language Proficiency and Intercultural Communication Competence among Arab Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study was carried out to evaluate the relationship between English language proficiency (ELP) and intercultural communication competence (ICCC) of Arab students in Malaysia. This study included both of the quantitative and the qualitative data sets to further the information. The participants of this study were 108 Arab students from nine different Asian and African nationalities. Based on the results of this study, English language was the main means of education for the participants, and the main means of their communication with students from other cultures. The results from this study found some significant correlations between the attributes of ELP and ICCC. The good levels of ELP encouraged and enabled individuals to be involved in daily interactions with their peers from different countries who speak different languages, and their interactions helped them to improve the levels of their ELP. Moreover, the participants who obtained higher scores in English language proficiency test got higher mean scores in ICCC as well. Based on the results, in some cases, their personal characteristics and the low levels of their ELP had negative effects on the process of interactions among Arab and other students. The results of this study may add some interesting information in the literature regarding the relationships between ELP and ICCC of Arab students in an Asian multicultural collegiate environment.

Keywords: Arab students, English language proficiency, intercultural communication competence, interpersonal communication competence.

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Introduction

Language is the main means of communication among people from different backgrounds, and communication is the main opportunity that enables them to collaborate, to share their information, and to understand one another so as to establish some social, cultural and professional relationships. Communication is the main carrier enables different people to share their cultural values, and to establish social relationships (Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2013), and language is the main means of communication among different people (Yamao & Sekiguchi, 2015). At the same time, Yoshida et al. (2013) introduce language proficiency and communication competence as the main requirements for conducting successful communication among people from different cultures.

Intercultural communication competence refers to the knowledge and abilities enable individuals to think and interact properly in culturally diversified environment, and English language proficiency includes the abilities enable individuals to perform and speak in an acquired and proper language (Aba, 2015; Hammer et al., 2003; Moreno, 2016). Thus, both of intercultural communication competence and English language proficiency may help university students to conduct proper and fruitful interactions with their peers from different cultures. Moreover, communication is essential for the daily lives of students and researchers who stay and study in modern multicultural university campuses which host hundreds of students from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. As argued by Lin (2011), interactions among individuals enable them to learn, to understand one another and to find their right places in the modern societies.

Moreover, according to the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) (2012), English language is the main language of instruction at Malaysian universities. Successes of students depend upon the levels of their proficiency in the language of instruction, and being proficient in the language of instruction affects the overall communication and performance of students (Wilkinson, Morrow & Chou, 2008; Malekela; 2003). English language is the main medium of interactions among international students of Malaysian universities. A good level of English language proficiency is among the main predictors of academic adjustments and socio-cultural issues in ever-growing multicultural environments (Yu & Shen, 2012). Zhang et al. (2012) argue that the levels of their English language proficiency affect daily social and professional lives of individuals from various nationalities who stay in multicultural environments. Communication competence and English language proficiency are among the main requirements of employment in multicultural organizations in the Asian countries (Goh & Chan, 1993). Thus, it is important to assess the relationship between English language proficiency and intercultural communication competence among Arab students in Malaysia who are the potential workers of multicultural organizations in the future.

According to Hamilton and Woodward-Kron (2010), because of the complex interlinks among culture, communication and language, foreign language learners should focus on the effects of culture and communication on language utilization. Language proficiency is connected with the levels of self confidence and personal skills (Yamao & Sekiguchi, 2015). So far, the relationship between the levels of language proficiency and communication competence grabbed the attention of many researchers and scholars to work on these important and interrelated issues. Different

studies in the past have identified English language proficiency as an essential determiner for involvements in the helpful interactions, university related activities and academic success of students (Martin-Beltrán, 2010; Yoon, 2008; Dooly, 2007; Haneda, 2008; Harklau; 2000; Sarwari, Ibrahim & NorAshikin, 2016). As pointed out by Enright (2010), when students prepare themselves to achieve some of their important communicative goals, they must be prepared with good communication competences and linguistic skills.

Interactions among students enable researchers to evaluate the levels of their linguistic abilities and social skills. Understanding of the relationships between linguistic skills and communication competence of students may help scholars and researchers to outline some effective ways for both language learners and communicators in the academic environments. The situation of daily interactions among students helps researchers to know the levels of their skills and abilities (McDermott, 1996). By understanding the social ways that construct proficiency, researchers can find more effective ways for improvement of language learning methods (Martin-Beltrán, 2010). However, the cited assertions of the previous researchers emphasize on the existence of some close relationships between communication competence and linguistic skills. But, for the best of our knowledge, the previous works were mostly conducted in the western parts of the world and under the western context of communication and social and cultural norms. Thus, this study aims to evaluate the relationships between English language proficiency and intercultural communication competence among Arab students from different nationalities in Malaysia.

Theoretical Support

The main theory that guided this study was the Contact Theory of Allport (1954). While daily contacts and communication among people grabbed the attention of many scholars and researchers (e.g. Baker, 1934; Lett, 1945; Williams, 1947) in the early 20th century, Allport had introduced his theory and had pointed out some steps and preconditions for peaceful and successful interactions among different groups and individuals under his Contact Theory. According to the Contact Theory, the process of interactions between groups/individuals from different backgrounds includes the four main steps as: *Sheer Contact*, *Competition*, *Accommodation*, and *Assimilation*. Based on the said proposed steps which were introduced by Allport (1954) the process of interactions between/among individuals and groups from different backgrounds starts by mere contacts and their involvements in interactions. Then, they struggle to find their right places, accommodate in their places and later integrate with their peers. Eller, Abrams and Gomez (2012) have stated that the Contact Theory of Allport (1954) focuses on the reduction of prejudice and conflicts among individuals through their involvements in the daily interactions.

As language is the means of direct and spoken communication among people, thus the said steps of the Contact Theory of Allport (1954) may have direct and indirect connections with the linguistic skills of communicators. As pointed out, linguistic skills are among the main preconditions for conducting successful interactions, and language has significant effects on the levels of personal abilities and self-confidence of individuals (Yamao & Sekiguchi, 2015). As the both theories focus on the reduction of anxiety among individuals, the findings of a study in Japan indicated that the promotion of learning of a foreign language is an essential way to cultivate and increase the optimistic attitudes among individuals in an organization (Yamao & Sekiguch, 2015).

The cited assertions of the above mentioned researchers and scholars indicate the connections between the proposed steps and preconditions of the mentioned theories for successful interactions among people from different backgrounds and the levels of their linguistic and communicative skills.

Literature Review

Understanding of how different cultural beliefs and norms may affect the linguistic choices of communicators is essential to have successful direct interactions, especially in a multicultural academic environment (Hamilton & Woodward-Kron, 2010). Intercultural communication competence is the skill that enables communicators to have safe and successful interactions in a multicultural environment (Marron, 2005). Intercultural communication competence is among the essential aspects of social life in the modern societies. According to Reed (2008), intercultural communication competence as a main predictor of intercultural interactions focuses on the understanding of those cultural norms that may influence daily interactions among individuals. The important skills in intercultural interactions among different people are: initiation, the necessary skills to express own feelings and ideas and the abilities to estimate thinking of others, language skills and communication competence, and also logical thinking and mental strength (Yoshida, Yashiro & Suzuki, 2013).

So far, most of the studies on interactions among international students from different countries in multicultural collegiate environment were conducted in the western parts of the world, especially in the United States, which have different social, cultural and communicative norms from Malaysia and other Asian countries (Abdulla, 2008; Abu Bakar and Mustafa, 2013; Izumi; Sarwari & Nubli, 2017). The differences between social and cultural norms between Arab students from the Middle East and American students had affected their interactions negatively, but their personal efforts helped Arab students to make some friends from the local students and be happy in the new environment (Abdulla, 2008). Reed (2008) based on the results of a study on intercultural interactions among students in Harvard University argued that collegiate environments are important locations for reducing anxieties and promotion of intercultural communication competence among students. As we experience the ever-growing multicultural locations and environments and different cultural norms in our lives, we must carefully evaluate the abilities of communicators in the multicultural settings of communication (Reed, 2008).

The available works on the literature emphasizes on the mutual effects of language skills and communication competences among communicators. As argued by Fallah (2014), the foreign language learners and teachers have to try to improve the levels of motivation and self-confidence among students for their involvements in interactions and try to decrease the level of their anxieties. Kassim and Ali (2010) focus on the usefulness of verbal communication among professionals of engineering field for the Malaysian context of communication. Daily interactions among students illustrate their communicative abilities and social skills, and this opportunity helps them to evaluate their own abilities and improve the levels of their linguistic and social skills. According to Martin-Beltrán (2010), involvements in the daily interactions and language practices show the levels of social and linguistic skill of individuals, and also show the ways that they use language and also the ways that they deal with a discourse situation. Furthermore, the findings from different studies in the past ask the educators to arrange the learning circumstances that

enable students to use language proficiently (Martin-Beltrán, 2010). The findings of a study on impact of linguistic skills in the educational affairs also illustrated that the language proficiency is changing and improving through interactions with other people (Martin-Beltrán, 2010).

It has been identified that the level of English language proficiency is an important factor that influences on the psychological conditions of individuals who are outside of their countries and communities (Zhang, Hong, Takeuchi & Mossakowski, 2012). According to Mui, Kang, Kang and Domanski (2007), people who have limited level of ELP may become suspicious that they are mistreated and victimized because of their low level of language proficiency. They may face problems in the process of their interactions, and also may worry about embarrassment and interpersonal distress which may lead to social isolation and cause negative mental consequences. Moreover, among the different psycho-social elements, discrimination may play an important mediating role to link the low level of ELP and psychological distress (Zhang et al., 2012).

Based on the above mention assertions and findings of the previous researchers, the relationship between the levels of English language proficiency and intercultural communication competence is an interesting issue to be assessed and evaluated.

Methodology

This study applied both of the quantitative and qualitative data sets to further the information and strengthen the findings from the quantitative survey thorough the direct views of the participants. The main data set was the quantitative data and the qualitative data were collected to further the information. According to Tashakori and Teddlie (2009), researchers integrate the quantitative and the qualitative data and approaches to answer their research questions well.

Participants

Participants of this study were 108 Arab students of a Malaysian public university who were from nine different countries, with their Mean/St. Deviation scores of $M = 96.5$, $SD = 13$. . From all participants, 82 (75.9%) of them were male, and 26 (24.1%) others were female students. Also, from all participants, 63 (58.35%) of them were degree students, and 35 (32.4%) of them were master students, and 10 (9.25%) of them were PhD students. From all participants of the quantitative survey, 10 of them agreed to be interviewed for the qualitative section of this study and were interviewed. All interviews were conducted directly and audio taped.

Instruments

The Intercultural Communication Competence Questionnaire (ICCQ) of Matveev (2002) was used to assess intercultural communication competence among the participants of this study. The revised version of ICCQ includes 24 items and all items are designed based on the Likert Scale with five options per item (question) from (Strongly agree) to (Strongly disagree). The ICCQ assesses intercultural communication under five domains which are: Interaction engagement; Interpersonal skills; team effectiveness; cultural uncertainty; and cultural empathy. The Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) of Marian, Blumenfeld and Kaushanskaya (2007) was used to assess the levels of English language proficiency of the participants. The revised version of LEAP-Q has 17 items with five options per item and designed based on the Liker scale. The LEAP-Q assesses English language proficiency under five domains, which are:

Acquisition history; contexts of acquisition; present language use; language preference and proficiency ratings; and accent ratings. The language preference and proficiency ratings domain include the reading, understanding, speaking, and writing attributes.

At the same time, the recorded scores of the participants for the International English Language Test (IELTS) and the English Proficiency Test (EPT), which applies the same regulations and scoring system as IELTS, were recorded through the documentary review process. The IELTS/ EPT scoring range of 5.0 and above is among the main requirements for master students and the scoring range of 6.0 and above is for PhD students to be enrolled at Malaysian public universities. The Cronbach's alpha rating for the ICCQ was .85, and for the LEAP-Q was .73. Prior to the main data collection procedure, the questionnaire was checked through a pilot study. The instrument for the qualitative section of this study was an interview protocol which included 8 open-ended interview questions.

Data Analyses Procedure

The quantitative data were analyzed through the essential tests of SPSS. The descriptive test was applied to find out the frequencies and percentages and the bivariate correlation test was conducted to find out the probable correlations between the attributes of ICC and ELP. For the qualitative data analyses, the constant and comparison method which was introduced by Glasser and Strauss (1967) was used. Under this method, all interviews were transcribed, divided and categorized under the research questions and research themes, and also the newly emerged themes.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

The descriptive test of SPSS was applied to find out the frequencies and percentages of answers of participants and the *Mean* and *SD* scores for the different categories. Based on the results of the descriptive test, the *Mean* and *SD* scores for all participants for the ICCQ items were $M = 76.9$, $SD = 6.3$, and their overall *M/SD* scores for all items of the LEAP-Q together were $M = 51.7$, $SD = 4.2$. The given mean scores for both of the ICCQ and LEAP-Q are above the average mean scores. According to the results from the documentary review of the recorded scores of the participants for the IELTS/ EPT, from all 128 participants the IELTS/ EPT of 52 (40.6%) of them were under the category of 5.0-5.5, from all participants 55 (43%) of them were under the category of 6.0, and the scores of 20 (15.4%) of them were under the category of 6.5-7.0 and above. The overall *M/SD* scores of 52 participants, who were under the IELTS/EPT scoring category of 5.0-5.5, for intercultural communication competence items were $M = 73.8$, $SD = 6.4$, the scores of 55 participants, who were under the category of 6.0, were $M = 81.2$, $SD = 6.1$, and for 6.5-7.0 and above category the *M/SD* scores were $M = 78.4$, $SD = 6$.

Based on the descriptive results for the LEAP-Q, all (128) participants of this study have reported that they have used the English language as the main means of their daily interactions with students from other nationalities. Moreover, from all of them, 64 (50%) of the participants reported that they had more than 60% of their daily interactions with students from other countries rather than people from their own countries, and they have used English language for their interactions. Moreover, 68 (53.1%) of the participants reported that they understood almost all parts of the conversations when talking with students from different nationalities, and 89 (69.5%)

of them reported that they were satisfied during their interactions when using the English language as the main means of their contacts.

The bivariate correlation test of SPSS was applied to find out the relationships between the items and variables. Based on the results, there were some significant correlations between the categories of IELTS/EPT scores and ICCQ attributes, and also between the attributes of ICCQ and LEAP-Q. Table 1 below includes the results for the bivariate correlation test.

Table. 1: *Illustrates correlations between the attributes of IPCC and ELP*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Variable/ Attribute								
1- IELTS score								
2- Initiation	.298							
3- Negative assertion	.551	.324						
4- Disclosure	.355	.249	.480					
5- Emotional support			.463	.612				
6- Conflict management				.370				
7- Acquisition history	.359				.415			
8- Contexts of acquisition	.294	.243	.348		.435	.513		
9- Present language use		.322	.421	-.266		.494		
10- Proficiency ratings		.541		.472		.275	.255	
11- Accent ratings	.532				-.204			.253

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative section of this study includes the findings from the interviews of 10 interviewees who were from 9 different countries. Based on Glasser and Strauss (1967) constant and comparison data analyses method, all interviews were transcribed and divided and categorized based on the research themes. The interviewees of this study were 1) a PhD male student from Iraq, 2) a master male student from Algeria, 3) a PhD male student from Egypt, 4) a degree female student from

Iraq, 5) a degree female student from Syria, 6) a master female student from Oman, 7) a degree male student from Yemen, 8) a master male student from Sudan, 9) a PhD male student from Libya, and 10) a PhD male student from Algeria. To prevent the use of personal identification of the participants of this section, they were coded as P1 for (Participant number one) and instead of their information, the given number will be used in the upcoming paragraphs. The results from all interviews were categorized under the three main themes which are 1) interaction engagement and the levels of ELP and ICC among participants of this study, 2) mutual effects of the levels of ELP and ICC on each other, and 3) the effects of intercultural communication among students on their personal and academic lives.

Based on results from the answers of all 10 interviewees, all of them used English language as the main medium of their interactions with their peers from different cultures. Based on the results from the answers of the interviewees, the levels of their English language proficiency and intercultural communication competence had mutual effects on each other. The qualitative findings from the answers of the interviewees are categorized under the three categories as below: *Interaction engagement and the levels of ELP and ICC among participants*

Based on the answers of the vast majority of the interviewees of this study, because of their stay and study in a multicultural university campus, they have improved the levels of their linguistic and communicative skills and were happy to stay and study in a multicultural campus. For example, as P6 stated that “At first when came to Malaysia, I was not able to communicate with other students properly, but because of my daily practices now my English language is also good and I can easily interact with students from different nationalities.” P1 said that “I do not care of the social and cultural differences among university students and I do not have any problem to have communication with people from other countries.” At the same time, P7 stated that “I have daily interactions with students from different countries and almost all of my friends are from other countries, but I am a little shy when interacting with female students and sometimes my main problem to interact with other students is the linguistic issues.” P10 asserted that “As we are out of our homelands and hometowns and are studying at an international university, thus one of the main interesting points of overseas study is to communicate with people from different cultures and nationalities and make some friends from them. Now, I am good enough to have communication with people from different countries.” Based on the answers and statements of the above mentioned interviewees, their daily interactions were helpful for them, and some of them were in a good communicative situation and also had a good level of ELP to communicate easily. In some cases, their personal characteristics could affect their daily interactions as well.

Mutual effects of the levels of ELP and ICC on each other

Based on the answers of most of the interviewees, daily interactions among students from different cultural backgrounds and the level of their ELP had important mutual effects on each other. Their good level of ELP helped students to have more and successful interactions and their daily interactions helped them to improve the level of their ELP. As pointed out by P9 “I am quite a social person and am always in contact with my friends and fellow researchers from different countries. Initially, when I joined this university, I was not able to speak and understand English language well, but my interactions with other students help me to improve my English language and now I have no problem talking with anyone.” Also, P7 said that “As the main means of our

education is English language, thus the level of my ELP is good but as I didn't have any experience to stay in any multicultural environment before coming to this country, but now I can interact with other students." P8 had to say that "As I come from a different environment, thus when I joined this university, I have learnt both how to speak English language when talking with different people and to interact with people from different countries." At the same time, P6 asserted that "When we are in our [Arab] countries, we learn English language and spent many years to learn it. But we do not have enough opportunities to practise spoken English language with foreigners, and when we move to a foreign country and join an international university, we can find some opportunities to interact with different people and improve our spoken English language, but still I wait for other students to start the communication process." Based on the mentioned answers and assertions of the interviewees, the levels of ELP and daily interactions among them had significant effects on each other.

The effects of intercultural communication among students on their personal and academic lives
According to the participants' responses of the qualitative section of this study, their daily intercultural communication had some important effects on their social and academic lives. For example, P2 had to say that "When I was in my country, I had different ideas and assumptions about the Asian people and Asian countries. But, when I came to this university and lived on a multicultural campus, I learn many new things from my interactions with students. I have gained many useful skills and information and become aware of the realities among Asian people. Also, my interactions help me to easily do my academic tasks and assignments." P4 also stated that "I had very limited level of information about people from different countries. But, when I joined this university and stayed here for around three years in a campus with students from different countries." P6 also said that "My stay and study at an international university in Malaysia helped me to know how to interact with different people and improve my English language proficiency through my daily interactions with other students, but still English language is the main factor that affects my interactions negatively." The answers and ideas of the interviewees are supportive of the positive effects of their daily interactions with their peers from different nationalities on their social and academic lives.

Discussion and Recommendations

Communication is the main transporter of culture and social relationships, and communication competence and language proficiency are the main requirements enable individuals to conduct successful communication (Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2013; Yoshida et al., 2013). Thus, this study was carried to assess the relationship between English language proficiency (ELP) and intercultural communication competence (ICCC) among Arab students from different nationalities in Malaysia. The main language of instruction in the Malaysian public universities is English language (MOHE, 2012), and based on the results from this study, English language was the main medium of interactions among the participants of this study. Based on the results, their involvements in interactions with their peers from different cultures and the use of English language as the main means of their communication helped the participants to improve both of their ELP and ICCC.

As argued by Hamilton & Woodward-Kron (2010), the complicated relationships among language, communication and culture ask researchers to focus on the probable mutual effects of

culture, communication and language on one another. The results from this study also confirmed that the levels of English language proficiency and intercultural communication competence of the participants had mutual effects on each other, and there were some significant correlations between the main attributes and domains of ELP and ICC of the participants. As pointed out, intercultural communication competence helps individuals to conduct proper interactions in a multicultural environment. At the same time, English language proficiency enables individuals to perform proper language and language is the means of communication (Aba, 2015; Moreno, 2016; Yoshida et al., 2013). The findings from this study are supportive of the cited assertions on the relationship between communication competence and language proficiency. However, there were some negative correlations between the personal language use attribute of ELP and the team effectiveness attribute of ICC, and between the accent ratings attribute of ELP and the cultural uncertainty attribute of ICC. It means that, the ways people perform language and use different accents affect their intercultural skills and team effectiveness abilities. This finding was supported by the qualitative results as well.

Moreover, the results from this study confirmed the existence of some significant correlations between the attributes and domains of English language proficiency and intercultural communication competence of the participants. Based on the results, the participants with higher scores in ELP got higher mean scores in ICC as well. It means that their good levels of ELP helped the participants to be more competent in intercultural communication. Their interactions helped the participants to improve both of their ELP and ICC and to conduct successful interactions with their peers from different nationalities. These findings are supportive of the argument of Martin-Beltrán (2010) on the effectiveness of daily interactions among university students on the improvement of their linguistic abilities.

The qualitative findings also confirmed that, the levels of English language proficiency and daily intercultural interactions of the participants had mutual effects on each other. Based on the qualitative results, their personal characteristics and their low levels of their ELP could affect the process of interactions among Arab and other students negatively. At the same time, their good levels of English language proficiency helped the participants to have more interactions with other international students and their frequent interactions helped them to gain more social, cultural and linguistic skills. Based on the qualitative findings, students with good linguistic skills were more active and happier at the university campus. According to Zhang et al. (2012), their good linguistic skills help students to deal with the environmental and social challenges and students who have good linguistic skills are more flexible in multicultural collegiate environments. The quoted assertion is supportive of the above mentioned findings from this study.

Based on the results of a study at Harvard University, Reed (2008) argued that university environment is the main location for students to gain some new essential skills and reduce the levels of their anxiety. The answers of the interviewees of this study also have confirmed that their daily interactions and conversations among had significant impacts on their personal and professional lives. Their interactions and conversations enabled the participants to gain some useful social and cultural information about other people and to improve their intercultural communication competence. Their talks and interactions with their peers from different backgrounds also helped the participants to know the different ways of oral communication and

understand the accents used by people from different countries. Through their daily talks and contacts, they also learned some new strategies to deal with the different levels and circumstances of linguistic challenges. At the same time, their daily talks and interactions with people from different countries gave some positive skills and ideas for them to look for some multicultural organizations after their graduation, and to find self-confidence towards shifting and working outside of their countries. The findings of this study are almost new for an Asian context of communication and may be interesting and helpful for university students and managing bodies of universities, and also for the future researchers as well.

Recommendations

In the ever-growing aspect of internationalization of higher education and increase of the number of multicultural collegiate environments and multicultural organizations in the world, the relationships between linguistic skills, communication among people from different backgrounds, and successes of the employers and employees will remain among the essential and interesting issues in the future. Thus, researchers in the future can focus on the impacts of daily interactions among students, and/or among employees from different social and cultural backgrounds and their social and linguistic skills on the success of organizations in the process of their globalization. Researchers in the future can also focus on the effects of personal characteristics of students and individuals on the levels of their linguistic skills and communication competence.

Conclusion

This study was carried out to evaluate the relationship between the levels of English language proficiency and intercultural communication competence among Arab students in a Malaysian collegiate environment. The results from this study confirmed that the participants of this study used English language as the main means of their daily interactions when interacting with their peers from various cultural backgrounds. Based on the results, the levels of English language proficiency and intercultural communication competence of the participants had significant relationship and influenced each other to be improved. According to the findings, the participants who possessed a good level of English language proficiency had more fruitful interactions and got higher mean scores in intercultural communication competence. At the same time, those participants who had more interactions have gained some new and essential social skills and improved the levels of their linguistic skills. Moreover, the results indicated that their personal characteristics and the levels of their ELP are among the main factor that affect interactions among Arab students and their peers from different cultures and countries. The results of this study may encourage university students to choose multicultural university campuses and be involved in the daily contacts and conversations with students from other nationalities to improve both of their English language proficiency and intercultural communication competence.

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