

Role of Social Intelligence in Enhancing Cross-Cultural Awareness among International Students

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural interaction offers international students the opportunity to improve their cross-cultural awareness so that they can successfully adapt to new environment. Many international students face challenges when pursuing their higher education outside of their home countries. This is because they have to live in a new environment that is completely different from their home country. International students who fail to understand cultural differences will encounter problems such as social and academic adjustments in the new environment. Social intelligence, which is defined as a person's ability to successfully decode and interact in social situations, is presumed to be an important competency that could help promote international students' cross-cultural awareness. The aim of this paper is to propose a framework for conceptualizing the role of Social Intelligence in enhancing international students' cross-cultural awareness.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The challenges faced by international students, especially when they pursue their studies outside their home country, occurs overwhelmingly in almost all countries (Hull, 1978; Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009) because they have to live in a new environment that is completely different from their home country. An understanding of *culture* requires an understanding *not only* of differences in language, *but also* differences in knowledge, *perceptions, beliefs*, attitudes and behaviours. In situations of *cultural* differences, people observe, interpret and evaluate things in *different* ways because they have the tendency *to judge other's behaviour based on their own norms*, values, and beliefs. Cross-cultural awareness not only gives people an incentive to understand their own culture but also develops attitudes that recognize and accommodate cultural differences (Zhang et al., 2018). Therefore, cross-cultural awareness is regarded as an

important mechanism to develop skills and abilities to overcome cultural differences. Other researchers have claimed that an increase in cultural awareness might enhance students' educational experience (Carter & Vuong, 1997; Richardson, 2012). *Positive educational experience* could help international *students* to embrace cultural *diversity* and move beyond stereotyping.

A substantial number of studies have been conducted in an effort to understand the basic needs and requirements of international students (Mamiseishvili, 2012; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012); the issues and challenges faced by international students while studying abroad (Lee & Rice, 2007; Popov et al., 2012); challenges faced by international students, such as adapting to new living and learning environments (Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015; Kusek, 2015;

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Abdul-Talib, Abdul Malik, Jaguli & Husin, 2016); the psychological and social well-being of international students (Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima, 2010; Sobré-Denton, 2011) and adjustments of international students while studying abroad (Khatiwada, 2010; Swami, 2009; Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, 1993b). However, attempts to empirically examine the influence of social competency on international students' cross-cultural awareness have been limited.

Social Intelligence is essential for building effective *communication*. An individual needs Social Intelligence to successfully build relationships and navigate in diverse *social* contexts. Brislin et al., (2006) contended that Social Intelligence is composed of capabilities that help a person to interact with others more effectively. They also indicated that Social Intelligence consists of abilities associated with social connections and appropriate behavior during interactions. In general, scholars tend to view Social Intelligence as a factor that has the potential to contribute towards more positive attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes in social settings.

Previous studies have found that Social Intelligence has a positive influence on social problem-solving abilities (Jones & Day, 1997), intercultural sensitivity (Dong, Koper & Collaço, 2008; Bosuwon, 2017; Genç & Boynukara, 2017) and learning behaviour (Praditsang, Hanafi & Walters, 2015). Dong et al., (2008) discovered that Social Intelligence facilitates the development of intercultural communication sensitivity. This is because Social Intelligence components have the ability to *demonstrate empathy* toward others, can stimulate better acceptance and adaptation, and this is essential for ensuring successful cross-cultural communication. According to Genç & Boynukara (2017), socially intelligent individuals are expected to be flexible in their behaviours and change their behaviour depending on the requirements of the situation.

Social intelligence is a significant factor in predicting and interpreting human behaviour in cross-cultural context. Despite this research effort, studies on the effect of social competency on international students' cross-cultural awareness are still lacking. Thus, the main aim of this paper is to explore and investigate the influence of Social Intelligence on students' cross-cultural awareness, specifically among international students who are studying in Malaysian institutions of higher learning. Another important aim of this study is to explore the differential effects of the three Social Intelligence dimensions, namely social information processing (SP), social awareness (SA), and social skills (SS), on international students' cross-cultural awareness. The focus of the current study is to propose Social Intelligence as an important competency that international students must possess to effectively adapt to a new cultural context.

Social Intelligence is one of the capabilities that should be possessed by international students as it can help them to effectively interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Mastering Social Intelligence is crucial for better understanding the feelings and needs of people, to communicate with them effectively, and to build and maintain

relationships. Thus, Social Intelligence could potentially impact cross-cultural awareness, which would then positively impact the international student's cultural and social adjustments.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Intelligence

The term 'Social Intelligence' (SQ) was propounded by psychologist Edward Thorndike in 1920. He contended that Social Intelligence is different from academic ability and is a key element that helps people succeed in life. Thorndike (1920) divided intelligence into three major facets, namely, mechanical intelligence or the ability to manage concrete objects, abstract intelligence or the ability to manage ideas, and Social Intelligence or the *ability* to think and act wisely in social situations. Thorndike (1920) defined Social Intelligence as "the ability to understand and manage people so that they act wisely in human relations" (p. 228). In his concept, Social Intelligence consisted of cognitive and behavioural requirements.

In 1983, Gardner challenged the assumption of a single *intelligence* by proposing a *theory* of *Multiple Intelligences*. He believed that each person has a special ability to use his or her own intelligence. The Theory of *Multiple Intelligences* posits that *there are seven types of intelligence*: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, body-kinesthetic, intra personal and interpersonal. *Social Intelligence* is equivalent to interpersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1983).

Social intelligence has been analysed in early studies on the basis of two aspects, namely cognitive (understanding people) and behavioural (managing people) aspects; whereas, later studies had put forth the fact that it has a multiple aspect structure. Goleman (2006) divided Social Intelligence into two broad categories, namely social awareness (*what we sense*) and social facility (*what we do*). More recently, Silvera, Martinussen, and Dahl (2001) defined Social Intelligence as "the ability to understand other people and how they will react to different social situations" (p. 314). *Social Intelligence* is proposed as a *multidimensional construct* comprising social information processing, social skills and social awareness.

Cross-Cultural Awareness

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) is a major theory in relation to cross-cultural awareness. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was created by Bennett (1986) as a framework to explain the reactions of people to cultural differences. Bennett (1986, 1993) theorized that acquiring intercultural sensitivity is a developmental process, in which a person moves from denial, defence and minimization of cultural difference (ethnocentric stages) to acceptance, adaptation and integration of these differences (ethno-relative stages). The underlying assumption of the model is that as one's experience of cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated, one's competence in intercultural relations increases. Each stage indicates a particular cognitive structure that is expressed in certain kinds of attitudes and behaviour related to cultural difference.

Cultural awareness provides the foundation for sensitivity towards intercultural communication which, in turn, leads to intercultural communication competence (Chen, 1997). Individuals who are culturally aware can become more culturally competent through the development of specific skills related to cultural competency. Intercultural or cross-cultural awareness can be regarded as the foundation of communication. It involves two abilities, such as the awareness of one's own culture and the awareness of others' cultures. (Zhu, 2011). Byram et al., (2002) defined cross-cultural awareness as "the process of becoming more aware of and developing a better understanding of one's own culture and others' cultures all over the world to increase international and cross-cultural understanding" (p. 5). According Zhang and Steele (2012), cross-cultural awareness is "the willingness and ability to realize the need for social changes within an international context as well as to understand the increasing connectivity between different cultural groups" (p. 53).

Thus, becoming culturally aware of one's own and of other's cultural norms is the initial step towards understanding the differences among cultures and being able to use one's understanding to better communicate and interact within a new culture (Gundling, Hogan, & Cvitkovich, 2011). Hence, by understanding the similarities and *differences between cultures, an individual can* readjust his or her thoughts and actions to *suit* the new and evolving *environment*.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study had proposed a theoretical framework to investigate the effects of Social Intelligence on international students' cross-cultural awareness as shown in Figure 1. The independent variable is Social Intelligence and the dependent variable is cross-cultural awareness. Social Intelligence comprises three dimensions, namely social information processing (SP), social skills (SS) and social awareness (SA).

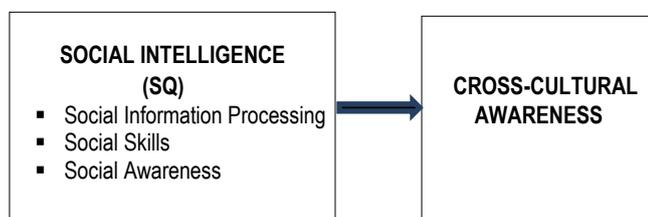


Figure 1: Research Framework

This research was primarily based on Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligence (1983), and Bennet's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1986), which provides adequate justification for the hypotheses in this study. On the basis of this literature review, the following hypotheses were formulated.

Main hypothesis

H1 - Social Intelligence will positively influence international student's cross-cultural awareness.

Sub-hypotheses:

H1a – Social information processing will positively influence

international student's cross-cultural awareness.

H1b – Social skills will positively influence international student's cross-cultural awareness.

H1c – Social awareness will positively influence international student's cross-cultural awareness.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to investigate the relationship between Social Intelligence and international students' cross-cultural awareness. Data will be collected quantitatively using the survey method. As the data are quantitative it will be analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, Partial Least Square (PLS) and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The respondents will be international students from 20 public universities in Malaysia.

Social Intelligence will be measured using the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS) developed by Silvera, Martinussen and Dahl, (2001). The CQ scale (CQS), consisting of 21 items with three sub-scales comprised social information processing (7 items), social skills (7 items), and social awareness (7 items).

Social Information Processing (SIP): This subscale measures the ability to understand verbal or nonverbal messages regarding human relations, empathizing and reading hidden as well as explicit messages. Sample Item: "I understand other people's feeling."

Social Skills (SS): This subscale measures basic communication skills such as active listening, acting boldly, establishing, maintaining, and breaking up a relationship. Sample Item: "I fit in easily in social situations."

Social Awareness (SA): This subscale measures the ability to actively behave in accordance with the situation, place, and time. Sample Item: "I find people unpredictable."

Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) will be utilized to measure cross-cultural awareness. The IDI is composed of 50-items, is a theory-based paper and a pencil instrument, which measures five orientations, such as Denial, Polarization, Minimization, Acceptance, and Adaptation (Hammer, 2011).

5 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to investigate whether Social Intelligence will positively influence international students' cross-cultural awareness in the context of pursuing education abroad. The empirical evidence from the study will help the researcher to identify whether Social Intelligence could help international students to understand the *host country's culture* and seek better ways to adjust themselves to the new environment

There are numerous benefits of mastering Social Intelligence. Social intelligence helps individuals garner important information about others, convey thoughts or ideas clearly and communicate better with others. In addition, Social intelligence is useful in solving the problems of social life and help in tackling various social tasks. It is expected that empirical findings from this study will provide some evidence

to the higher learning institutions in Malaysia that Social Intelligence could help to enhance international student's cross-cultural awareness in response to the challenges of dealing with cultural differences. Thus, it is essential for university educators and administrators to craft and design suitable courses and tailor-make programmes that focus on enhancing international students' Social Intelligence.

6 CONCLUSION

Most international students choose to study abroad so that they can acquire experiences and knowledge in a different study environment, which then forms new cultural, social and academic values as well as valuable opportunities for personal growth. *Cross-cultural awareness* is essential for those who communicate with people from other cultures. In addition, developing cross-cultural awareness helps individuals to identify and respect other's differences. Social Intelligence can help international students to remain aware of various social situational contexts, which in turn helps them to improve their cross-cultural awareness. Therefore, it is important for institutions of higher learning in Malaysia to support the conditions that facilitate and accelerate the development of Social Intelligence among international students. Social Intelligence can be enhanced by creating learning environments and designing a teaching approach that supports international students' adjustment process.

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