



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY AFRICAN
GRADUATE STUDENTS IN THEIR INTERACTION WITH
MALAYSIANS IN A LOCAL UNIVERSITY**

PHANG SEE HWAI

FBMK 2002 5



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By

PHANG SCE HWAI

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science**

February 2002



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the intercultural communication problems and difficulties experienced by African graduate students when they interact with Malaysians in a local public university in the Klang Valley, and how they cope with these problems. The study aimed to answer to three research questions: (a) What are the communication problems and difficulties faced by African students when interacting with Malaysians in the university? (b) What are the factors that contribute to the problems and difficulties? and (c) How do the international students cope with these problems? Data were collected from twelve African informants from Eastern and Western Africa and six Malaysians through semi-structured interviews and observation.

There are three general conclusions derived from the findings of the study. The first conclusion is that the intercultural communication experience of the African students while interacting with Malaysians is problematic in nature. There are five



categories of problems found in the interaction, namely: (a) Reservations towards foreigners; (b) Issue of greetings; (c) Indirectness; (d) Interrogations; and (e) Gender issues. The second conclusion of the study is that there are four possible factors that contribute to the communication problems and difficulties experienced by the African students in their interaction with the locals, which are: (a) Cultural differences; (b) Language; (c) Prejudices and Stereotypes; and (e) Limited exposure to Africans. And the final conclusion is that the Africans use two coping strategies to regulate the psychological discomfort and stress when encountering these difficulties - problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. The problem-focused strategies include active coping, restraint coping, confrontive coping, and seeking instrumental social support. The emotion-focused strategies include acceptance, positive reinterpretation and growth, self-control, seeking emotional social support, distancing, and behavioural disengagement.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

MASALAH-MASALAH KOMUNIKASI YANG DIALAMI OLEH PELAJAR-PELAJAR SISWAZAH AFRIKA DALAM INTERAKSI MEREKA DENGAN RAKYAT MALAYSIA DI SEBUAH UNIVERSITI TEMPATAN

Oleh

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Kajian kes kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi masalah-masalah komunikasi yang dialami oleh pelajar-pelajar siswazah Afrika apabila mereka berinteraksi dengan rakyat Malaysia di sebuah universiti tempatan dan bagaimana mereka menghadapi dan mengatasi masalah-masalah tersebut. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menjawab tiga soalan penyelidikan: (a) Apakah masalah-masalah komunikasi yang dialami oleh pelajar-pelajar Afrika apabila berinteraksi dengan rakyat Malaysia di universiti tersebut? (b) Apakah faktor-faktor yang menyumbang kepada masalah-masalah tersebut? dan (c) Bagaimanakah pelajar-pelajar antarabangsa ini menghadapi dan mengatasi masalah-masalah tersebut? Data telah dikumpul dari 12 informan Afrika dari Afrika Timur dan Afrika Barat dan enam rakyat Malaysia menerusi temuduga separa struktur (*semi-structured interviews*) dan pemerhatian (*observation*).

Terdapat tiga kesimpulan umum diperolehi dari analisis kajian ini. Kesimpulan pertama ialah pengalaman komunikasi antara budaya pelajar-pelajar Afrika apabila berinteraksi dengan rakyat Malaysia, adalah bermasalah. Terdapat lima kategori masalah di dalam interaksi, iaitu: (a) Keraguan terhadap orang asing (*Reservations towards foreigners*); (b) Tidak langsung (*Indirectness*); (c) Soal siasat (*Interrogations*), (d) isu sapaan (*The issue of greetings*), dan (e) Isu jantina (*Gender issues*). Kesimpulan kedua ialah terdapat empat faktor yang mungkin menyumbang kepada masalah-masalah komunikasi yang dialami oleh pelajar-pelajar Afrika ketika mereka berinteraksi dengan rakyat tempatan, iaitu: (a) Perbezaan budaya (*Cultural differences*); (b) Bahasa (*Language*); (c) Prejudis dan stereotaip (*Prejudices and stereotypes*); dan (d) Kurang pendedahan kepada orang Afrika (*Limited exposure to foreigners*). Kesimpulan terakhir ialah pelajar-pelajar Afrika menggunakan dua strategi pengatanganan (*coping strategies*) untuk mengawal ketidakselesaan psikologi dan tekanan bila menghadapi masalah-masalah tersebut - strategi berfokuskan masalah (*problem-focused coping strategy*) dan strategi berfokuskan emosi (*emotion-focused coping strategy*). Strategi berfokuskan masalah termasuk pengatanganan aktif (*active coping*), pengatanganan terkawal (*restraint coping*), pengatanganan konfrontatif (*confrontive coping*), dan mencari sokongan sosial instrumental (*seeking instrumental social support*). Strategi berfokuskan masalah termasuk penerimaan (*acceptance*), pentafsiran semula positif (*positive reinterpretation and growth*), pengawalan diri (*self-control*), mencari sokongan sosial emosi (*seeking emotional social support*), penjauhan (*distancing*), dan pengunduran kelakuan (*behavioural disengagement*).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer would like to extend her appreciation to those who have contributed to this thesis in various ways. This study was made possible due to their guidance, assistance, cooperation and encouragement.

First of all, I wish to express my most sincere gratitude to my Thesis Supervisory Committee members who have given me guidance and encouragement throughout the study. Special appreciation is extended to Dr. Ezhar Tamam, the chairman of the committee, who patiently provided valuable guidance, advice and motivation to help me finish the study; and also to Dr. Raja Ahmad Tajudin Shah and Dr. Shamsuddin Ahmad for their insightful comments and encouragement.

Special thanks go to the informants of the study, for their co-operation and help in providing valuable data for the study. Without all of them, this study would not have been successful.

I would also like to thank the following people: Dr. Azimi Hamzah from the Faculty of Educational Studies, Jean Saludadez, and my course mates in the graduate school for their constructive ideas, comments, and most importantly, their moral support; and Koon Mei Ching, Greta Huygen, Dan Andre Brunstad, and Emma Bowden, for helping me edit the thesis.



Last but not least, I would like to direct my gratitude to my parents, my siblings and all my friends, especially Greta, Dan, Eric, and Siew Loong for their emotional support throughout the thesis writing process. Their help, encouragement, and support are deeply appreciated and are the source of strength and inspiration that helped the writer complete the thesis.



This thesis submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of Master of Science.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The world in which we live is such that people are increasingly coming into contact with those who are different from ourselves (Brislin & Cushner, 1996). Each day, we see thousands, even millions of people crossing borders and coming into contact with people from cultures other than their own cultures. Among them are people who go overseas to receive an education, work in multinational firms, conduct missionary work, undertake military assignments, or for purposes of diplomacy, immigration, and tourism. These are only a few of many examples of sojourners going abroad. Sojourner is a common term used to refer to people who spend a significant length of time in another country.

International students are one of the largest categories of sojourners who spend longer visits overseas. In recent decades, the number of students travelling abroad to study in unfamiliar cultural environments has increased dramatically (Chiu, 1995). For instance, a report from the Institute of International Education (2000), for instance, stated that the United States alone hosted 514,723 international students in the 1999/2000 academic year, representing a sharp increase of 4.8% over the previous year's figure.



The flow of foreign students has traditionally been from the developing nations of the Third World to the Western industrialised nations (Altbach, 1991). However, although developed countries host a bigger population of international students, the developing countries are receiving foreign students in increasing proportions. While there are a small number of students from the industrialised nations who study in the Third World, the number of Third World students studying in other Third World countries, such as the Philippines, India, Egypt, and Lebanon, is significantly larger. Over the recent years, Malaysia, a developing country, has also hosted a significant number of students from other countries, and continuous to do so today.

The benefits of international education and student exchange programs have been widely promoted in the last decade (Volet & Renshaw, 1995). Saidla and Grant (1993) have stated that by recruiting international students, the host country will not only be able to receive financial gains, but also help to enrich the learning environment for its students, in addition to working as a powerful instrument in fostering mutual cultural understanding amongst people.

Intercultural contact is an important phenomenon for international students. Their lives outside their home countries and cultures are assumed to be communication-based experiences (Antwi & Ziyati, 1993). Being exposed to unfamiliar environments, they inevitably need to interact with people who possess different language, cultural, or even educational backgrounds. Some scholars believe

that communication plays a very important role for sojourners to successfully adjust to a new cultural environment. Kim (1997) stated that:

Communication activities of encoding and decoding verbal and nonverbal information lie at the heart of cross-cultural adaptation by serving as the essential mechanisms that connects strangers and the host society. Just as natives acquire their capacity to function properly in their society through communicative interactions, strangers come to organise their own and others' activities by learning the significant symbols of the host culture and by participating in various communication activities of the host society. (p.406-407)

Previous studies have shown that sojourners who have close interpersonal relations with the locals hold positive attitudes toward the host country. It has been suggested that the sojourners' ability to accomplish their goals in a foreign culture is greatly influenced by the nature and frequency of the social interactions that they have with the people in the host culture (Hammer, 1992). Apart from that, the local community's efforts at intercultural contact significantly contribute to whether or not the sojourner has a meaningful, uneventful or unsuccessful intercultural experience (Pawanteh, 1999).

Many scholars in the field of intercultural communication have pointed out that intercultural communication and contact are inherently difficult. Intercultural communication is not always successful and often represents a stressful event (Chiu, 1995; Lustig & Koester, 1993). Differences between cultures can give rise to communication problems (Irwin, 1996; Kim & Paulk, 1994; Porter & Samovar, 1997). A change in the cultural environment can also lead to "culture shock" (McKinlay, Pattison, & Gross, 1996; Begley, 2000). Lustig and Koester (1993) pointed out that interpersonal relationships between people from different cultural

backgrounds can be difficult to understand and describe because of the contrast in culturally based expectations about the nature of interpersonal communication.

A review of literature on international students has shown that many of the research topics were centred on the issues of cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation (e.g. Chiu, 1995; Harris, 1997; Jacob, 2001; Lin & Yi, 1997; Martin, Bradford & Rohrlich, 1995; Pawanteh, 1999; Tsang, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Ward, Okura, Kennedy & Kojima, 1998; Zhang & Rentz, 1996). While there have been substantial studies on the adjustment or adaptation process of international students, few studies specifically investigate the role of communication and the types of communication problems faced by these students in the foreign country. Most of the studies done on the adjustment issues do not specifically focus on the aspect of communication. This usually gets covered under the umbrella of adjustment and adaptation issues, and is not discussed as an independent topic of research interest. The majority of the research done on international students was carried out in the West or developed countries, particularly in the United States and Britain (Tanaka, Takai, Kohyama & Fujihara, 1994). Little is found on published studies done in the Third World.

The number of foreign students in Malaysian universities has increased steadily over the past few years. There were approximately 10,443 foreign students in Malaysia in the year 2001, as reported by a local newspaper, the New Sunday Times, on February 3, 2002. Statistics from the Malaysian Ministry of Education on foreign student enrolment in local public universities have shown that the total increased from

1,126 (Academic year 1994/95) to 3,360 (Academic year 1998/99). In the academic year 1998/99, among all the universities tracked, the International Islamic University hosted the highest number of international students (1,503), followed by Universiti Putra Malaysia (502), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (426) and Universiti Malaya (372). The above figures shows that Malaysia has successfully attracted many foreign students to further their education here, thereby steadily paving its way in making Malaysia a regional education hub and a centre for educational excellence in the new millennium.

Statement of the Problem

In spite of the growing importance of international education to the country, not many studies have been done on international students in Malaysia. One of the recent studies found was by Pawanteh (1999), which described the experiences and accounts of early intercultural adaptation and culture shock (i.e. language shock, education shock, role shock, culture distance and transition shock, and culture fatigue) of international students from four different countries.

International students may experience a significant amount of communication problems and difficulties when they interact with the local community. They not only need to deal with academic challenges, but also with new customs, languages, food, living arrangements, social life, and much more (Perucci & Hu, 1995). Communication, understanding, and learning may also be inhibited by the cultural values gap between the international students and the local people.

The communication experiences of international students in Malaysia may vary distinguishably (and significantly) with those who are studying in other countries as the cultural milieu influences the communication experience. International students from different countries may also face different communication problems when they are studying here. For example, Jacob (2001) explains that students from Asian countries may have some concerns that are different from international students from Africa. Therefore, the problems experienced by the African students in this study, may be different compared to those of international students from other countries.

Given to the growing importance of international education to Malaysian interests and the dearth of local literature on international students in the country, there is a need to understand some of the problems and difficulties faced by international students in a Malaysian university. The main objectives are to identify the intercultural communication problems and difficulties experienced by African graduate students as they interact with Malaysians in a local university and describe how they cope with these problems.

Research Questions

This research attempts to study some of the problems faced by international students in an educational setting. The main intentions are to describe and understand the communication problems and difficulties of African graduate students in their

interaction with Malaysians in a local public university located in the Klang Valley. The term "Malaysians" here includes students, lecturers, supporting staff and other people who are on campus. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the communication problems and difficulties experienced by African students when interacting with Malaysians in the university?
2. What are the factors that contribute to the problems and difficulties?
3. How do the international students cope with these problems?

Significance of the Study

The study is done with the intention to expand the knowledge towards intercultural communication in the graduate education system of a developing country. Its significance lies in the attempt to provide a description of some of the problems and difficulties experienced by African graduate students in their interaction with Malaysians in a local university.

The study hopes to benefit not only the international students, but also the university in which they study, with the final aim of achieving international understanding while helping to establish better interaction between both parties concerned.

For the students, the outcome of the study aims to provide a description of some of the communication problems or difficulties and also guidelines and

suggestions for coping. This may help present or potential students get a better picture of the communication issues that they may encounter in the educational setting. This will further help them prepare themselves to be more interculturally competent in facing the challenges ahead; therefore, facilitating their adjustment into their new cultural setting.

As for the host university, the study will aid the development efforts of intervention training programmes and plans that may be able to help the students in coping or overcoming these problems and difficulties. This, in turn, will assist the student to adjust into the local environment, thus making their stay in the university a more favourable experience. Upon returning home, the students will have a more positive memory of their (graduate) studies overseas, rather than be a disappointed guest/sojourner returning with a negative image of the host country (Malaysia). This will effectively promote Malaysia as a centre of excellence for education, and attract more international students to Malaysia, thereby generating additional income for the university and the country.

A review of past literature revealed that most of the research done on the problems faced by international students were quantitative in nature. There were only a few studies that were done qualitatively (eg. Antwi & Ziyati, 1993; Luzio-Lockett, 1998; Pawanteh, 1999; Pedersen, 1991). According to Tsang (2001), quantitative research addressing adjustment issues of international students fails to generate the rich insights that can only be obtained through qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews with respondents. He proposed that more qualitative studies be conducted

in adjustment research of international students, which has been dominated by quantitative methods. In addition to this, despite the vital role played by communication in the adjustment process of the international student, most of the previous studies done did not focus specifically on communication problems and difficulties. Therefore, this study hopes to come up with a detailed description of such issues through a qualitative approach, which aims to provide more in-depth explanation on the phenomenon under study.

Finally, the study can also serve as a study to generate hypotheses for the construction of a survey questionnaire for future studies should any other researchers wish to develop generalisations of the entire African student population on campus, or even throughout Malaysia.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of the study, some of related terms need to be clarified. Some of the terms and concepts need more detailed definition and would therefore be elaborated in Chapter II.

The definitions are as follows:

International Students (also termed as **foreign students**): International students are individuals who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of citizenship or permanent residence in order to participate in international