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Pakistani ESL Teachers' Intercultural challenges and Intercultural Competence Experiences: In the Context of Malaysia

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Abstract

This study explores the intercultural challenges and experiences of Pakistani ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers working at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The aim was to understand the difficulties they faced in adapting to a new cultural and educational environment and to examine how they developed intercultural communicative competence during their time at the university. Using qualitative content analysis of participant interviews, several key themes emerged: language barriers, incorrect assumptions about cultural similarities, anxiety toward the host culture, and cultural relativism. Teachers reported struggles with local languages and communication, feeling initially isolated due to false assumptions about cultural familiarity, and facing nervousness before adapting to new cultural norms. Over time, they learned to navigate cultural differences and grew more confident and competent in their interactions. The study also revealed institutional differences, such as the need for better pre-arrival preparation and a more supportive academic environment. Overall, while Pakistani ESL teachers experienced notable intercultural and educational challenges, they also showed resilience and adaptability, ultimately gaining valuable intercultural competence through their experiences at USM.

Introduction

Globalization, development of new technology along with disappearance of national borders has changed world into a new global society where individual needs to develop an ability to communicate in intercultural context. This phenomenon has led to a challenge for EFL teachers, many of the researchers argue that having only communicative competence is not enough but there should be notion of intercultural competence (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The objective of foreign language teaching should be developed not only through language but there should be intercultural competence to help students to conduct a successful challenges with the people from different backgrounds, many countries have developed and applied the intercultural communicative competence in their education policies for example, Britain and USA (Moller & Nugent, 2014).
Common European Framework (2001) and the British Quality Assurance developed the structure to equip their language teachers to develop the ICC and develop their teachings and apply into their practices. Having all these ways, encourage the EFL teachers to include ICC in their classrooms, the researcher like (Lazen-Ostermark, 2008), has found that ICC have not been

operationalized the classes, so in Pakistani context in language classes there have been no implementation of cultural teaching which can benefit both teachers and students. Saricoban and Oz (2014) argue that in order to have ICC English teachers should possess a high level of ICC. Furthermore, Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) say that to know more about others' culture people must know about their own culture and they must take interest in their own culture, and should be sensitive about their own culture. Intercultural is considered as prerequisite for ICC, that is to be intercultural competence one should develop the intercultural sensitivity.

Statement of the problem

In an increasingly globalized academic environment, intercultural competence has become essential for educators, particularly for ESL teachers who regularly engage with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Pakistani ESL teachers travelling abroad for working or educational purposes, such as in Malaysia, often encounter significant intercultural challenges that influence their teaching efficacy and classroom interactions. These challenges stem from differences in cultural norms, communication styles, and educational expectations, which may lead to misunderstandings and hinder effective language instruction. Despite the growing presence of international faculty in Malaysian universities like Universiti Sains Malaysia, there is limited research exploring the intercultural experiences and communicative competence of Pakistani ESL teachers in this context. Understanding these experiences is crucial for fostering inclusive, culturally responsive educational environments. Recent studies emphasize the importance of intercultural competence in improving teacher-student relationships and promoting effective language learning (Chen & Starosta, 2022). Therefore, there is a pressing need to investigate the intercultural challenges faced by Pakistani ESL teachers and analyze how they navigate intercultural communicative competence in Malaysian higher education institutions.

Significance of the study

This study is significant in providing an insight into the use of intercultural challenges and intercultural competence by Pakistani ESL teachers with their experiences. It is also significant in a way that it will help to explore the experience of teachers and their level of intercultural competence and challenges. Furthermore, it will also help to understand Sains University experience by Pakistani ESL teachers. The study is also important in a way to add to critical knowledge about challenges and competence in the field of language with respect to intercultural environment. Moreover, this study will be significant for future researchers, who will be interested to carry out their research on ESL teaching.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the Pakistani ESL teachers' intercultural challenges in the University of Sains Malaysian Context.
2. To analyze the Pakistani ESL teachers' intercultural communicative competence experiences in the University of Sains Malaysian Context.

Research Questions

1. What are the Pakistani ESL teachers' intercultural challenges in the University of Sains Malaysian Context?
2. What are the Pakistani ESL teachers' intercultural communicative competence in the University of Sains Malaysian Context?

Literature Review

Intercultural Competence (IC)

Intercultural competence is a way in which people seamlessly interact with other cultural by following the norms of that culture, and for this a person must know and be sensitive about their own culture first, thus intercultural is considered as prerequisite for IC (Hammer, et al., 2003). The necessity of IC for teachers in today's modern education will lead that IC can predict the effectiveness of individual's effectiveness and interaction from different cultures (Bhawuk&Brislin). Chen and Starosta (1997) consider IC as the individual's "ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural challenges" (p. 1). Chen and Starosta (2000) contend that IC consists of five dimensions, including (a) interaction engagement, (b) respect for cultural differences, (c) interaction confidence, (d) interaction enjoyment, and (e) interaction attentiveness.

Intercultural Communicative Challenges (ICC)

The most appropriate definition of ICC is the way you interact and the ability to gain about other cultures and to know about the cultures of the other people, along with it to help other people about their own culture (Byram, 1997). According to him people from different cultures can be good moderators between people of different cultures, he believes that through this one can understand the target language and the behaviors of the people and can better explain the both source of the target cultures. According to Byam (1997), ICC need to have some attitudes, skills and knowledge along with linguistic and discourse competence because it is very important for other cultures. Fantini (2007), adds another definition to a cultural competence that awareness dimension which is "self" in relation reflects to all else in the world.

Investigating Teachers ICC

Teachers is an important role in the society and being an important part of the society teachers' ICC level is very important. In one of the study conducted by Zhou (2011) in Chinese University on EFL teachers' ICC competence and level by using self-report questionnaire. The results were that the teachers' competence or their intercultural competence was above the level of the average. Among the four levels of intercultural competence the participants had less knowledge but higher level for the attitude. Another study was conducted by Saricoban and Oz (2014), in which they explored the Turkish pre-service English teachers' ICC level and explored that whether their competence effects such factors as gender, study abroad, and academic achieve effect their differences in ICC or not. So their results reveal that there was difference between and male female participants in terms of knowledge with respect to intercultural competence.

In case of intercultural challenges it has been observed that there are many studies conducted in intercultural sensitivity and there have been growing interest in it, a few studies have been carried out in Iran to address the IS level of the EFL teachers Jantawej (2011), investigated that Thai school teachers working in Iran and they have high level of IS. Fretheim (2007) conducted study and it was mixed method to see if there were variables that influences the level of IS of 58 teachers and administers working in in international schools in southern Africa by using intercultural development inventory. The analysis results were that 89% of the educators of intermural development inventory corresponded to an ethnocentric world view. Finally, Pourakbari and Chalak (2015) evaluated the IS of 60 Iranian EFL learners. The findings revealed that the learners' level of IS was moderate (M = 2.89). Among the five subscales of IS, students displayed the strongest ability in their "Interaction Engagement" and the weakest in their "Interaction Enjoyment."

Relationship between Teachers' ICC and IC

Relationship between teachers ICC and IC has an important role in a teacher's career especially in intercultural perspective; in this regard few studies have been conducted. Sarwari and Wahab (2017), investigated relationship between intercultural challenges and intercultural competence among 108 postgraduate students who were international students from 17 different countries. The study was qualitative in nature and interviews were conducted, findings of the study depicted that there is close relation between intercultural competence and intercultural challenges. The conclusion says that students' good level of intercultural competence help individuals to initiate intercultural challenges and intercultural competence helps them to perform in a good way or effectively.

The above review of the literature reveals that studies have been conducted in perspective of intercultural competence and sensitivity keeping EFL teachers, as far as research is concerned in ICC and IS. Mirzaei and Fourouzandeh (2013) explored the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers ICC and their L2 learning motivation. In this way Rahimi and Solatni (2011) they explored the relation between the leaners language proficiency and IS.

Methodology

The present study explored Pakistani ESL Teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence and Intercultural challenges in the context of University of Sains Malaysia. The paradigm of the research is interpretive; because it aims to analyze the phenomenon present in the data. According to Black (2006) beyond subjectivity the interpretive paradigm is one that thrives on softness, it is one where hidden and important meaning is buried.

The study involves qualitative method for the collection and analysis of the data. The data were collected from six Pakistani ESL teachers who were at the University of Sains Malaysia for doing their PhDs. All the participants were male and belonged to different regions of Pakistan. The data were collected through online semi structured interviews from all the participants. Initially, they were contacted for the approval for the participation in the study, and were informed about the topic and scenario of the study. According to their convenience interview timings were scheduled. Later researchers conducted the interviews from all six participants on their given time and date through online sources. The interviews were recorded in audio form with the consent of the interviewees. Finally, interviews were transcribed and results were made through thematic analysis.

Findings

The collected data through above questions were assessed through content analysis. Important themes which were gathered are discussed below:

1. Language barrier:

Language is a way of communication it works as a medium of communication. It is referred as exchanging of ideas or thoughts among two individuals. On the other hand, when there is difference in cultures obviously language is a barrier and there may develop a communication gap as well. In this study the majority of respondents' response was language remained a barrier when they were at Sains University. All the participants were facing somehow difficulty in speaking with the locals when they were buying things from market or even in the university and at the airport as well. They had somehow difficulty in listening to the lectures in class as well, although they spoke English but sometimes they also switched to the native language as well. However, one of the respondents used to talk with the locals through gestures and he faced a lot of difficulty while communicating.

Thus, the personal experience before and after arrival at the Malaysia Sains University, in this regard, all the participants had some kind of nervousness going to the Sains University they were having different thoughts about the university and the people themselves. But slowly and gradually when they came to join the university their nervousness vanished away and they built a kind of confident. Secondly the respondent 1 and 4 did a research before leaving for Malaysia and had different exposure when arrived Malaysia. In the same way the respondent 2 and 5 had the same thoughts before entering the university but after joining the university were very much relaxed by their culture, norms and academics. The respondents 3 and 6 talk about intercultural competence, they found many new things as far as culture is concerned especially the people of Malaysia and the people coming from other countries for their purpose, education purpose overall it was a good to be there.

The first respondent talks about the intercultural challenges in Malaysia that they were of course different as compare to Pakistan. First and far most was the language, food and weather. Could be more but what she felt is they are the most important challenges one would face. When the participant had experience to Malaysia most of the people were unable to speak in Malaysia. The Malaya language they speak so it is better to know some of the phrases of that language. So the interaction between teacher and the student is the major problem that is a cultural barrier. But to some extent she tried to exchange the information. But it was difficult for her to talk to them especially with the common people. Later on found that the food was very different it was very spicy so the preference of the food was very different to our country. So many of the time she was disturbed with the food as well. For example the students from china or other countries who were there, they did not prefer spicy food as they eat very normal. So this was also a challenge. The second respondent answer was he didn't find great intercultural competence related challenge in Malaysia as the faculty knows about the neighboring countries culture the culture of same continent even about the distinct culture of Europe or America. But there is one challenge that is the faculty should work with folk literature of the different cultures of the world. And also teach literature in the context of that folk literature. Talking in context to the Malaysian Sains University where the faculty is aware about the culture but not aware about the folk literature. In the same way the third respondent talks about communication that have different language as they had their own language, though we also spoke in English and they were also communicating in English. The exchange language got the respondent in some sort of challenge. Another thing that is related to intercultural was very much unknown to him, he found out that these are the cultures that had to respect them and show them some sort of sympathy because these things were some sort of strange for him at first because it was from very different culture. As far as the communication is considered as they were new to him and he was new to them. So everything varies in their culture with respect to communication. So these were little bit confusing but later on when the time passed and when he merged with them he was used to it, with some challenges he learned there culture.

Furthermore, language barriers can be removed by either knowing some of the phrases of that culture or special training can be achieved before leaving for foreign country. In addition, special training can be organized to improve speech tendency.

2. **Similarity assumptions across cultures**

Sometimes, when people assume that two cultures cannot be different, but are very similar to each other. For example, if a Pakistani prefers to drink a cup of coffee instead of tea so one assumes that coffee is a popular drink in Pakistan and is easy to access and cheap for drinking. But this is not always true as it may be a preference of one individual where as it does not depict the whole nation. When dealing with different cultures one must not assume about their culture. But one must assume that there may be different for whole nation. Our second question from the respondents

was about the similarities and differences, the same answer was given that they assumed as we Pakistani do, and we help foreigners as compared to locals. We show empathy to them. So the assumption from the participants was that the Malaysian people would do same to us but the response was not as they assumed. When the competence is considered the competence was assumed as the participants said that the Pakistani scholars are mostly in ELT PhD and the assumption was that same case would be with Malaysian scholars but it was not like that as they had PhDs in various fields.

The similarities and differences they perceived about the Malaysian culture as of Pakistan obviously they had a differences in cultures of both the countries. So, one of participants says that when we talk about Pakistani context they just want to help the foreigners and they want to be with them. One of the respondent talks about Malaysia that they are interculturally not attached with other students. Like in Pakistan, majority of scholars or PhD holders are from Pakistani universities there is a very few scholars having PhDs from abroad in ELT. Therefore, people are not aware about the intercultural competence. The other difference is the urban metropolitan distinct areas universities in Pakistan. Like, Pakistan is as multilingual sort of region. So the majority of ELT experts and teachers do not know all the languages that students are coming from like in Pakistani university people are coming from Punjabi or Sindhi background. So teachers do not know all the languages and they obviously lack intercultural competence. In the same way the third respondent answer was that there is much difference and similarity as well as the intercultural competence or context is considered. The similarity is the hospitality there way of living and there way of dealing with the people. Further says that those people were very interesting and the difference is there language is so much different, the dressing style there cultural value. So, there cultural values are different as what they follow their values and norms. So it was a good exchange of thoughts and good exchange of culture there.

3. Anxiety for other culture

Anxiety is known as state of being nervousness or a fear of unrealistic. It occurs when a person comes across with first cultural interaction with the feeling of not knowing, what to expect from their ways of interacting with them or the opposite culture. For example in the UAE it is culture, shaking of hands and long hugs. Same was the anxiety when the respondents were first leaving for Malaysia. They were worried about the culture of the people and the way people would treat them there. The respondents were obviously worried but when they reached there, they had a different experience after few days as people of Malaysia were very much caring, respective and were good in nature. They were very professional in their attitudes as they had diverse cultures and Sains University is considered one of the cultural diverse universities in Malaysia.

4. **Cultural relativism:**

It is one of the notable barriers of intercultural communication as it reflects to the superiority of one's own culture. It is as you impose your conceptions on others. There is a weak system of communication when there is cultural relativism. Hence, the respondents had a kind of fear of the cultural relativism with respect to cultural communication as they had do focus on the culture adopted by the Malayan people and they felt themselves as alien in that country. One of the participants said that at the work place in Pakistan people bring their personal matters, in this case the people who are employ or students they face the consequences but in Malaysia this was not the case people were very cooperative and were friendly. When the cultural relativism is considered the people of Malaysia were more cooperative and friendly in that case. The reason may be they may have a solution for cross-culture communicators, understanding each other's cultures and thoughts. This may impact the barriers while engaging in cross cultural interaction.

The experiences of local and non-local people regarding their attitudes, beliefs, social interactions and mutual respect were commendable as according to respondents the attitude of the students and local were so good they prefer to talk with other people as well. When there was a kind of language barrier, the sign language was used by the participants and they were welcomed by them with great respect. The attitude was very good of the common people. But when talking about non-locals they were also communicating but not too much cooperative as compared to Malaya people. A great exposure of diversity as people from different regions are there and they are very well accommodating and are welcoming. They are very professional in their attitude and behavior.

Along with the above mentioned problems there were educational barriers which influence the career growth of an individual and all the participants expressed that the barriers they had were preexisting in the information they were lacking in that area. So they were not having the information about the subject they were taught, they had no idea what teacher is going to discuss. He used to give them the articles, in order to know about the subject. The unfriendly environment of the research in Pakistan, there are lot of managerial and administrative sort of issues, where researchers don't really get any help and a small number of scholarships is offered. The educational institutions don't make it feasible to award scholarships to all the students who can't afford. They urged the world schools to create scholarships in this field which are noncommercial and we find a less number of scholarships in humanities field.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Pakistani ESL teachers at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) encountered several intercultural challenges that impacted their teaching and social integration. These challenges are consistent with previous research in intercultural communication and competence (Deardorff, 2006; Byram, 1997). Key themes such as language barriers, similarity assumptions, cultural anxiety, and cultural relativism emerged as prominent factors influencing the participants' experiences.

Language Barriers

Language emerged as the foremost challenge. Despite English being a common medium of instruction, the presence of local languages and dialectal variations caused difficulties in everyday interactions. This aligns with the assertion of Kim (2001) that second-language speakers in new sociocultural environments often struggle with linguistic competence, especially when code-switching or multilingualism is prevalent. Participants expressed discomfort during interactions in public spaces and classrooms, citing difficulty in understanding local accents or when locals switched to Malay. This is reflective of what Kramsch (1998) described as "symbolic power" of language in defining inclusion and exclusion in intercultural settings.

Similarity Assumptions Across Cultures

The notion of assuming similarity across cultures proved to be misleading for several participants. This echoes Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which highlights the danger of ethnocentric perspectives when engaging with unfamiliar cultures. Participants assumed that Malaysians would exhibit the same hospitality and support towards foreigners as is typical in Pakistan, but these expectations were not always met. This disconfirmation fostered an initial sense of isolation, which gradually diminished as participants adapted.

Anxiety Toward the Host Culture

Initial intercultural anxiety, as conceptualized by Gudykunst (2005), was prevalent among all participants. Concerns about cultural acceptance, behavioral norms, and institutional expectations contributed to nervousness before and shortly after arrival. However, consistent with the

anxiety/uncertainty management theory (Gudykunst, 1995), this anxiety diminished as participants gained familiarity with the local cultural norms and developed coping strategies.

Cultural Relativism

A significant observation was the presence of cultural relativism, where some participants initially perceived Malaysian norms as inferior or alien compared to their own. However, as suggested by Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman (2010), cultural sensitivity improved over time as they recognized the cooperative and professional behavior of Malaysian colleagues and students. The structured and respectful academic culture in Malaysia, compared to administrative inefficiencies in Pakistan, was seen as a refreshing change.

Educational and Structural Challenges

Beyond cultural barriers, institutional differences in pedagogy and administrative support were highlighted. Pakistani ESL teachers noted a lack of preparatory information and pre-arrival training. In contrast, the Malaysian system, while linguistically and pedagogically different, was better organized and more research-oriented. This lack of prior information led to initial academic struggles, reinforcing the importance of cultural and academic orientation sessions for incoming staff (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Conclusion

This study explored the intercultural challenges and competence experiences of Pakistani ESL teachers at Universiti Sains Malaysia. The findings revealed that these educators faced a range of difficulties while adapting to a new cultural and academic environment. Language barriers stood out as the most immediate and persistent challenge, affecting both social and professional interactions. Although English was the primary medium of instruction, the use of local languages like Malay often created communication gaps. Another key challenge was the assumption of cultural similarity. Many participants expected the same level of hospitality and support they were used to in Pakistan, but soon realized that cultural values and interpersonal behaviors differed significantly. This led to a period of adjustment as they recalibrated their expectations. The participants also reported experiencing anxiety about cultural acceptance and interactions before arriving in Malaysia. However, this anxiety generally faded as they became more familiar with the local norms and routines. Cultural relativism also played a role in shaping their early impressions. Some initially viewed Malaysian practices through a lens of comparison, often seeing them as strange or less familiar. Over time, exposure to Malaysia's respectful and professional academic culture helped them develop a more open and appreciative mindset. In addition to cultural barriers, structural and academic differences posed their own set of challenges. A lack of pre-arrival information and orientation left many participants feeling unprepared, especially in navigating a more research-driven academic environment. Despite these hurdles, the participants gradually adapted and found the experience enriching both professionally and personally. Overall, the study highlights the importance of intercultural competence, open-mindedness, and institutional support in helping international educators adjust to new environments. Providing cultural training and academic orientation prior to departure could ease this transition and improve both teaching effectiveness and personal well-being.

Limitations

- The findings are based on responses from a limited number of participants (six in total), which may not capture the full range of experiences of Pakistani ESL teachers in Malaysia.

- The study focuses solely on Universiti Sains Malaysia, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other Malaysian institutions or countries.
- Data collected through self-reporting may be subject to social desirability bias or selective memory.
- The research does not track changes in perceptions over a longer period, which could offer deeper insights into adaptation and intercultural competence development.

Suggestions for Improvement

- Institutions sending ESL teachers abroad should provide cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical training to minimize anxiety and enhance preparedness.
- Hosting institutions should organize regular workshops that promote intercultural awareness, empathy, and competence among faculty and staff.
- Establishing a peer mentorship system where local faculty assist international colleagues can smoothen the integration process.
- Access to basic Malay language classes and cultural immersion activities should be made available to new expatriates.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Future studies should include a broader sample across multiple institutions in Malaysia and perhaps other Southeast Asian countries to compare intercultural experiences.
- A long-term study tracing the development of intercultural competence over time would provide richer data.
- Supplement qualitative findings with surveys or intercultural competence scales (e.g., Intercultural Development Inventory) to provide measurable insights.
- Investigate the intercultural experiences of ESL teachers from different countries (e.g., India, Bangladesh) in Malaysia to identify culturally specific adaptation patterns.
- Including Malaysian students' perspectives on foreign ESL teachers could provide a more holistic understanding of the intercultural dynamics in educational institutions.

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