

CHALLENGES OF ACQUIRING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE  
COMPETENCE: BASED ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this paper to my dearest nephew, Edric Ram Zeleznick. His beautiful and warm smile was a great comfort to me whenever I struggled with my thesis. I truly hope this paper will be an inspiration for him to pursue a higher education when it is his time.

I would also like to dedicate this paper to my sister, Renuka Sugumar. Thank you for believing in me.

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Each year thousands of international students enroll in universities across the United States of America. However, we know very little about the challenges they encounter to become competent intercultural communicators in the American academic system. Therefore, the purpose of this is to use the basic components of Deardoff's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model to explore the challenges international students face to acquire requisite attitudes, knowledge, and skills to achieve ICC. The study was conducted through in-depth interviews with eight foreign students who were enrolled in a large Midwestern university during the time of this study. Participants described about their experiences with the intercultural communication that took place between them and their American peers and professors. Results the thematic analysis revealed the presence of four main themes and several sub-themes.

*Keywords:* Intercultural Communicative Competence, intercultural communication challenges, international students, American education system

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## **Introduction**

International education programs have become a globalized industry in Western, English-speaking countries, such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States (Campbell, 2012). The programs have significantly contributed to the economic growth of various countries around the world. According to the Institute of International Education (2014), in the 2013-2014 academic year, international students living across the United States supported 300,000 jobs and contributed \$26.8 billion to the country's economy. Aside from economic growth, this education system also provides a multicultural learning environment and curriculum for American students. Even though international students are welcomed for their contribution to the economy and internationalization of the curriculum, previous research suggests that in order for them to succeed in their education, they need a high level of adaptability to their host culture (Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011; Swan, 1983; Zhuojun, 2000).

International students who enroll in American degree programs are usually the best academic achievers in their home countries (Kuo, 2011). However, extant literature indicates that international students face adaptability issues during their transition into American culture. These adaptability issues commonly arise when they realize that American culture varies from their own, and sometimes lead to a significant amount of psychological stress (Cushner & Karim, 2004; Zhuojun, 2000). Scholars have identified several factors that influence this phenomenon, specifically macrosocial influences (e.g., discrimination, international students' acceptance of diversity, academic stress), individual's psychographic factors (e.g., values, opinions, attitudes,), and demographic attributes (e.g., age, gender, English proficiency level (Sumer, 2009).

According to previous research, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is a major contributing factor to the adaptation process of international students into the American education culture (Deardorff, 2006; Gareis et al., 2011; Zimmermann, 1995). Deardoff (2006) collaborated with scholars in international education and intercultural communication to construct an assessment model for ICC. The collaboration efforts stemmed from a need for an effective assessment of the American education system that would be beneficial to internalization efforts (Deardoff, 2006). Through this research, Deardoff (2006) recommended that ICC should be studied through the lens of the students. Using this perspective would help educational institutions create specific training programs for foreign students (Deardoff, 2006).

Although scholars have studied numerous methods to measure international students' ICC levels, and the attitudes, skills and knowledge needed to achieve ICC (Wiemann, 1997; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Zimmerman, 1995; Deardoff, 2006; Spitzberg, 2015), they have not explored the challenges foreign students face to effectively communicate in a multicultural classroom (Chunhong & Griffith, 2011). Hence, the current research project will shed light on the difficulties of attaining ICC, which in turn could develop new ideas to assist international students to successfully adapt to the American education system (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). By focusing on the students' perspective, this study explores the various challenges international students face in attaining ICC. In the next section, I will give a review on extant literature that allows my readers to gain the essential knowledge that will form the backbone of my study.

## Literature Review and Research Questions

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is a term used to explain the act of communicating effectively in a foreign culture (Spitzberg, 2015). According to Gebhard (2011), most intercultural scholars study education systems around the world through an anthropological perspective. An anthropological approach to education tends to focus on the cultural aspects of education, including informal as well as formal education. Although educational anthropology provides us with a better understanding of other academic cultures, it does not educate us on how to communicate effectively in a foreign educational setting (Gebhard, 2011). In order to understand how to become a competent intercultural communicator, we should first work to understand the various attributes of culture and how it affects the way an individual communicates.

### Culture

“Culture in its broadest sense, is what makes you a stranger when you are away from home,” (Esposito, Buckalew & Chukunta, 1996, p. 23). Scholars have used various metaphors to describe the notion of culture. For instance, Anderson (1994) likened it to an iceberg that is slightly visible on the surface, but mostly submerged underwater and unobservable. Although culture is difficult to describe, scholars have defined it to be *symbols, meanings* and *norms* that have been historically transmitted in a particular environment. Culture is *systemic*, and is comprised of many complex components that are interdependent and related; these components form a type of permeable boundary. A component of this system is *symbols* such as verbal and non-verbal cues, and icons. The next component is *meanings* that refer to the different interpretations of symbols (Collier, 2015). The last component of the system is *normative conduct* or *norms*. Norms refer to

appropriate ways of communicating in a specific social setting (Collier, 2015). For example, Asian students address their professors with a title (Miss, Mr., Dr., etc.), however, American students sometimes address their professors by their first name.

Saint-Jacques (2015) on the other hand, argued that culture has four different meanings, which include high lifestyles, or in other words the achievements of a society in terms of the most valued forms of literature, art, and music; the way people agree to behave, act and respond in a particular situation; a way to perceive different beliefs and values; and culture as language, the close link between language and culture. Based on the different meanings that have been assigned to culture, we can view it as a set of societal rules. It provides us with a framework that enables us to understand the meanings others give to events, objects and people. Consequently, this framework helps us comprehend our surroundings, and reduce uncertainty about our social environment. Culture also forms our identity, or sense of self McDaniel and Samovar (2015)

Our different experiences in life expose us to different cultures. Unfortunately, if our experiences are limited to a particular way of life, our societal rules will be limited to that culture as well (Gebhard, 2011). International students who move to the United States, a place that is culturally different from that which is familiar to them, are challenged to adapt to a new set of societal rules (Kim, 2015) and a new education culture (Gay, 2015; Skow & Stephen, 2015).

### **The American Education Culture**

Gay (2015) suggested that there is a semiotic relationship between communication, culture, teaching, and learning, and it highly influences the implementation of culturally responsive teaching and learning. This is so because “what

we talk about; how we talk about it; what we see, attend to, or ignore; how we think; and what we think about are influenced by our culture” (Porter & Semovar, 1991, p.21). As a result, it is impossible for communication to exist without the influence of our cultural backgrounds; culture cannot be observed or recognized without communication, and teaching and learning occur within a culturally-specific environment (Gay, 2015). In their study, Skow & Stephen (2015) explored two aspects of societal practices that affect the communication in American university classrooms. First, they studied the influence of values on intercultural communication. Next, they looked at the culture-based verbal and nonverbal ways of interacting that influence the communication in the classroom (Skow & Stephen, 2015).

**Values and classroom communication.** One of the primary ways culture can affect the teaching and learning environment in an intercultural education setting is through the communication of traditional values and attitudes (Skow & Stephen, 2015). The work of Ladd and Ruby Jr (1999) lends an insight into the dominant American values that are observable in the current U.S education system. Two of those values are individualism and healthy competition among individuals (Ladd & Ruby Jr, 1999). These principles are demonstrated in the American grading system, and its focus on independent thinking and learning (Skow & Stephen, 2015). For example, the American academic system does not accept plagiarism, as students are expected to form their own opinions based on the knowledge they acquire from other sources, and cite their sources appropriately. This is in opposition to most egalitarian academic systems that assign knowledge to the public domain, and embrace the sharing of knowledge and opinions (Root & Ngampornchai, 2013).

The notion of equality is also widely demonstrated in the American university's classroom. The equal access to education materials, the use of numerous forms of evaluation, and the common relaxed relationship between professors and students demonstrate the values of equality and informality within the American society (Skow & Stephen, 2015). Moreover, the U.S academic structure is built upon the pragmatic application of learning real life examples. Therefore, classroom lessons are expected to relate to real world situations, and students are required to think creatively and critically. Conversely, other education systems around the world focus less on real world problems, and motivate their students to obtain as much information possible from the existing literature (Seo & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). The different teaching and learning methods utilized by education institutions around the world are based on what is valued within the particular culture, and the standard employment requirements in the country (Skow & Stephan, 2015).

**Verbal and nonverbal classroom communication.** Cultural differences exist in any multicultural classroom, especially in a university classroom with a significant international student presence. One of the most common differences is in the area of language (Skow & Stephan, 2015). English is usually the primary language spoken in every university classroom in the United States. Therefore, international students are typically required to speak and comprehend the English Language (Kuo, 2011). However, students from foreign countries, specifically non-English speaking countries, often times struggle with understanding lectures, taking notes, participating in classroom discussions, and writing papers (Huntley, 1993). In their study, Skow and Stephan (2015) suggested that international students face such issues because they are unfamiliar with the

American culture and its influence on the communication that takes place in the classroom. Those cultural influences on the American class room include: *idiomatic expressions, rules for politeness, and communication content* (Skow & Stephan, 2015).

Most international students learn idiomatic expressions from the media or their American peers. However, they might not possess enough knowledge to use those expressions in appropriate contexts (Pruitt, 1978). For example, in a study conducted by Magrath (1981), a student from the Middle East shared his story about using an inappropriate expression with his professor, and his professor was highly offended by it. However, the student did not understand why it was inappropriate, as he had used the expression numerous times with his classmate (Magrath, 1981).

Language difficulties can also be observed in multicultural classrooms when international students use their own cultural rules, instead of the American cultural rules for politeness (Skow & Stephen, 2015). For instance, in an American academic setting, students are expected to participate in class discussions, and are allowed to question their professors' teachings. In contrast, in most egalitarian education systems, such behaviors are considered to be unacceptable (Balas, 2000).

In some instances, the communication content in the American classroom can intimidate students from foreign countries. Even though individuals have their own preferences for how much information to reveal within education contexts, what is defined as "public" and "private" in the classroom is different across cultures (Skow & Stephen, 2015). As an example, class discussions about sex and love may be appropriate in the United States, but in conservative societies, such discussions would be viewed as offensive and shallow (Kuo, 2011). While verbal communication is a universal

occurrence found in every culture, what students and teachers discuss in the classroom varies depending on the where the classroom is in the world (Carbaugh, 1993).

Non-verbal communication includes a wide array of communicative behaviors such as tone of voice, eye contact, and the use of hand gestures. Non-verbal cues also include pronunciation of words and accents (Kim, 2015). International students are almost always required to know the appropriate way of using nonverbal cues in a classroom (Kuo, 2011). Although these students have the liberty of acquiring this information from the media, there are still non-verbal cues that they are not accustomed to because they either do not exist or are not prominently practiced in their own home countries (Skow & Stephen, 2015). For instance, in some cultures, students are not required to lift their hands before they share their ideas with the class. On the other hand, when they do not lift their hand and wait for an opportunity to speak in an American classroom, they are mistaken to be rude, and at times are ignored by their professors and peers (Collier & Powell, 1990).

Cultural differences are inevitable in an American international education setting. Hence, foreign students need to successfully adapt to the American culture in order to excel in their academic programs. However, this adaptation process requires students to possess Intercultural Communicative Competence (Deardoff, 2006). Using Deardoff's (2006) Intercultural Communicative Competence model (ICC) as the theoretical framework, I will analyze the challenges international students face when trying to communicate effectively in an intercultural setting.



## **Intercultural Communicative Competence**

Throughout the late twentieth century, intercultural scholars have explored the means of becoming an effective intercultural communicator (Root & Ngamponchai, 2013). The study of intercultural communication can be traced back to Aristotle's rhetoric, which focuses on the use of language by individuals to identify with their various surroundings (Shuang, 2014). However, the widely cited definition of ICC in intercultural communication literature is provided by Wiemann (1977), who defines ICC to be an individual's ability to successfully accomplish interpersonal goals through appropriate communicative behaviors, while maintaining the face and line of fellow interactants. In other words, ICC is achieved when individuals' avowed identities (an individual's portrayal of his or her own identity) ties in with their ascribed identities (other's perception of an individual's identity) (Collier, 2015). The key to these definitions are effectiveness (achieve intended goals through communication with interactants) and appropriateness (possess required skills to act and speak in a way that leads to desired communication outcomes) (Shuang, 2014).

According to Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) there are three interrelated components of ICC. First is the knowledge component, which refers to the level of cultural knowledge individuals have about the person with whom they are communicating. Next is the motivation component, which acknowledges the emotions of an individual in an intercultural setting, and influences their motivation to interact with their communication partners. Skills, the final component, refers to the ability to use verbal and nonverbal cues to communicate in a culturally appropriate way. Expanding on Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) model, Zimmerman (1995) proposed a model that

conceptualizes intercultural competence as three processes: the intellectual process (ability to interpret verbal and nonverbal messages), affective process (sensitivity towards different cultural practices) and operational or behavioral process (intercultural adroitness).

Although there have been many theoretical approaches to ICC, there were no unified set of competence measurements to help American educational institutions assess the Intercultural Communicative Competence levels of their international students (Root & Ngampornchai, 2012; Deardoff, 2006; Kuada, 2004). ICC assessments are essential for academic institutions in order to assist international students with their transition into the American education system, which in turn could help students succeed in their academic programs (Deardoff, 2009). For this reason, Deardoff (2006) conducted a study in order to compile 23 intercultural experts' (intercultural scholars and educational administrators) proposed ICC definitions and measurement methods. Based on the data collected in this study, Deardoff (2006) constructed the ICC Pyramid Model (Figure 1).

The lower levels of the model include an individual's attitude towards different cultures, knowledge of other cultures and the skills needed to process the knowledge (Deardoff, 2006). These components then contribute to the higher level of the model, which are internal and external outcomes. *Internal outcomes* are characteristics embedded within an individual as a result of acquired attitudes, knowledge and skills. *External outcomes* are the summation of attitudes, knowledge and skills, as well as internal outcomes, which is determined through the behavior and communication of an individual (Deardoff, 2009). Given the above review of ICC, there are three overriding

components of ICC: positive attitudes, sufficient knowledge of host culture, and communication skills.

**Positive attitudes.** Previous research indicates that positive attitudes towards other lifestyles are essential for international students to achieve Intercultural Communicative Competence. Several of those positive attitudes include: respect, openness, curiosity and discovery (Deardoff, 2006). The notion of openness implies an individual's willingness to take part in intercultural learning, while withholding judgements about people from other cultures. Furthermore, Furnham's (1987) study has shown that when a sojourner enters the host culture, he or she will experience a certain level of social difficulties. These difficulties are typically associated with international students' personal ability to deal with situations such as frustration, stress, alienation, uncertainty and ambiguity (Furnham, 1987). Deardoff's (2006) concept of curiosity and discovery addresses these social difficulties, and suggested that tolerance towards these issues during an intercultural encounter will allow foreign students to communicate more appropriately in their host countries. In addition, a great level of respect towards people's cultural values is necessary for someone to be considered an effective intercultural communicator (Deardoff, 2006). Deardoff (2006) asserted that these attitudes are foundational to the further development of knowledge and skills needed to acquire ICC.

According to Redmond and Bunyi (1993), social decentering (empathy) is the most important component in building positive attitudes towards a new culture. Social decentering refers to one's ability to utilize his or her existing "knowledge, understanding, and personal hypotheses" (p. 237) about general categories of people, to communicate accordingly in a given situation. A few attributes of social decentering are:

the ability to understand and adapt to others, effective persuasion, enhancement of relational development, and creating a supportive and confirming environment (Redmond, 1989). Individuals usually employ social decentering when they accept that people from other countries are different, and make an effort to adapt to the differences (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993).

Self-disclosure promotes social decentering as well. Self-disclosure refers to the process of a person revealing cultural background information to a communication partner who is culturally different, and not likely to know the information from other sources (Pearce & Sharp, 1973). In their study Lee and Rice (2007) revealed that most American students lack the knowledge of other cultures around the world, as most of them have never travelled out of the United States. Therefore, international students should have a positive attitude and tolerate any communication barriers they may experience due to the local student's lack of cultural knowledge (Deardoff, 2006). Furthermore, foreign students should disclose necessary background information, and explain their behaviors to their communication partner in order to avoid future intercultural communication breakdowns (Pearce & Sharp, 1973). Martin and Hammer (1989), suggested that self-disclosure can help sojourners achieve their communication goals. However, international students should be able to judge how much information they should disclose a given situation (Chen, 1992).

According to Redmond (1989), a lack of decentered communication could lead to a difficulty in establishing successful intercultural communication encounters. The opposite of social decentering is egocentric communication, which refers to individuals' tendency to construct communication patterns that only make sense to themselves

without adapting to differences. Egocentric communication is often present in an intercultural encounter, however, it can be avoided when at least one participant recognizes, analyzes and adapts to the significant differences in their cultural backgrounds. In order to promote social decentered communication, an individual should have a substantial amount of knowledge of the host culture (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993).

**Knowledge.** It is essential for international students to have sufficient knowledge of the American culture. Gudykunst and Hammer (1984), in a study of anxiety and uncertainty management, identified that there is a decrease in communication apprehension when international students' knowledge about American culture increases. In the same study, the researchers found a positive correlation between knowledge of the host culture, and other dependent variables that were under investigation in this study, specifically, communication effectiveness with the American nationals, communication adaptation, and social integration (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1984). Extant literature has cited communication effectiveness to be a positive indicator of ICC (Hammer & Wiseman, 1998; Hammer, 1987). Communication effectiveness is defined by the international students' capability to communicate with American students and professors, to manage communication misunderstandings, and to understand and be considerate towards the feelings of host nationals with whom they have interacted (Campbell, 2012).

Knowledge of the host culture also includes the degree of familiarity foreign students have with American culture's historical background; societal values, traditions, and beliefs; verbal and non-verbal norms; point of view or frame of reference; and knowledge international students have gathered through the interactions with American students and professors (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993). Deardoff's (2006) study emphasized

on a few types of cultural based knowledge that are necessary for intercultural communication encounters. First is cultural self- awareness; this term refers to individuals being aware that their cultural norms or practices may be different compared to individuals who belong to a different culture. According to Chen (1992), the ability of one to monitor and know oneself enables the individual to implement conversationally competent behaviors, and adjust better in other cultures. The next type of knowledge is culture-specific knowledge (Deardoff, 2006), that could be acquired through previous cultural interactions (Martin, 1987) and experiences (Basu & Ames 1970). Previous scholars suggest that this knowledge helps ease the adjustment process international students go through during their stay in the United States (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993). Moreover, a foreign student should also possess a deep cultural knowledge, which includes the understanding of other world views (Deardoff, 2006). Lastly, Deardoff (2006) highlighted that the one element agreed upon by all the intercultural scholars who took part in the study was the importance of understanding the world from others' perspectives.

**Skills.** Scholars have indicated that communication skills are essential for one to achieve ICC (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993). The skills that emerged in Deardoff's (2006) study were ones that addressed the acquisition and processing of knowledge. A few of the emphasized skills were: observation, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, and relating (Deardoff, 2006). However, other intercultural scholars have highlighted additional skills that are needed for international students to achieve ICC. Kuo (2011), claimed that language competence is one of the most essential skills international students should possess in order to achieve ICC. Language competence refers to the

foreign students' ability to speak, read, listen to, and understand the American version of the English language (Redmund & Bunyi, 1993). Competence in the English language will assure a minimum loss of information transmitted within the classrooms.

Furthermore, it will reduce communication misunderstandings between the international students and their professors, as well as their classmates (Imahori & Lanigan, 1989).

Foreign students with a strong command in the English language are also expected to experience the least amount of stress while communicating in the American education system.

Previous scholars have also identified social integration skills as another important component of ICC (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Hammer, 1987). The term social integration denotes the degree to which international students are able to initiate interactions with Americans, develop and maintain relationships with their classmates and professors, and make use of the interaction opportunities that are presented to them in the classroom. Other indications of social integration skills are: the number of American friends the foreign students have made, the number of American families they have visited, and the number of university organizations they have joined (Redmund & Bunyi, 1993).

Social relaxation skills refer to low levels of communication apprehension (Chen, 1992). In their study, Brian H Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) specified that socially relaxed individuals are those with the ability to control anxious behaviors such as “undue perspiration, shakiness, postural rigidity, self and object adapters,” (p. 488) and minimal response tendencies when communicating with Americans. In addition, Wiemann (1977) suggested that intercultural competent persons should skillfully manage behaviors that

indicate communication anxiety. For example, controlling rocking movements, leg and foot movements, speech rate and disturbances, and managing the hesitation to speak up in an intercultural setting. Therefore, international students should possess social relaxation skills in order to communicate in an intercultural classroom, communication apprehension will affect the way they speak and present themselves in class. Moreover, the American education system encourages an interactive learning environment, unlike some countries where students are not allowed or required to speak (Chen, 1992).

The next skill that has been highlighted in the existing literature on ICC, is the behavioral flexibility skill (Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Chen, 1992; Martin, 1987). According to Bochner and Kelly (1974), behavioral flexibility refers to a person's ability to behave appropriately in diverse cultural settings. The notion of behavioral flexibility includes an individual's ability to be accurate and flexible in processing cultural based information, to be flexible in selecting communication strategies in order to achieve personal goals, and to be flexible in giving a response to their communication partners (Park, 1976, p.16). Additionally, several scholars have linked intercultural adaptability skills to interpersonal flexibility (Hammer, 1987; Martin, 1987; Wheelless & Duran, 1982). Successful adaptation refers to how well international students have been able to adapt in different points of view, and withhold judgments when confronted by cultural dissimilarities. On a more specific level, this component expands upon the skills foreign students need to function within and adapt to the American education culture, as well the American lifestyle and social customs (Redmund & Bunyi, 1993).

Using these three basic components of ICC (positive attitudes, knowledge, and skills), many scholars have measured the ICC levels of international students (Sebnem,



Dicle & Guldem, 2009; Marek, 2009; Liu, 2014). The next section of this literature review will expand upon those studies.

### **Studies of Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence**

In analyzing the attitudes international students have towards other cultures, Sebnem et al. (2009) declared that students' respect for different cultures improves their levels of engagement in intercultural interactions. Moreover, Marek (2009) pointed out that when the students' language skills increase, their level of understanding and comprehending information shared in the classroom increases as well. Although these studies point out the correlation between the basic components of ICC international students' adaptation to the American culture, these findings do not practically assist international students to attain ICC. Instead, scholars should conduct research that will construct a specific training model, which in turn could contribute to the internationalization efforts in American universities (Root & Nampornchai, 2013). Making the same argument, Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) asserted that measuring students' ICC levels will not be beneficial to American universities that are seeking specific training programs for their international students. However, studying the challenges international students face during their attempt to achieve ICC, will help universities develop specific training programs to address those challenges (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). The current literature reveals little about the challenges international students face in attaining ICC (Root & Ngampornchai, 2013), and many scholars have acknowledged ICC as an important factor that influences students' adaptation to the American culture (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Canale, 1983; Chen, 1992; Chunhong & Griffiths, 2011; Deardoff, 2009; Deardorff, 2006; Redmond & Bunyi, 1993; Root &

Ngampornchai, 2013). For this reason, I would like to fill in the gap in the current literature, by studying the challenges international students encounter in their efforts to achieve ICC. Specifically, I will explore the lower level factors of the Deardoff's (2006) Pyramid Model (requisite attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, and skills) as a guideline to study the various challenges international students face to acquire ICC. I chose the lower level factors, as they are the underlying factors that build the upper level components (desired internal and external outcome) in Deardoff's (2006) model.

Therefore my research questions are:

**RQ1:** What challenges do international students face in developing requisite attitudes to effectively communicate in the American education system?

**RQ2** What challenges do international students face in acquiring culturally specific knowledge and comprehension to effectively communicate in the American education system?

**RQ3:** What challenges do international students face in developing specific skills to effectively communicate in the American education system?

## **Methodology**

My analysis of Intercultural Communicative Competence is drawn from in-depth interviews with international students in the United States. I chose to use the interview method for two reasons. First, Tracy (2013) suggested that interviews allow the researcher to stumble upon and further explore complex phenomena that are unobservable. Similarly, the challenges students face to acquire ICC are not easily observable, as they do not always experience those difficulties in a single location (Gebhard, 2011). For instance, they could encounter such experiences when they meet their American peers for group projects in the library, or during a discussion in their classroom. Next, interviews provide a safe space for respondents to share their opinion, motivation and experience (Tracy, 2013). Therefore, through this method my participants were able to share all their experiences with me, and I was able to study the barriers international students encounter to communicate effectively in an intercultural education setting.

### **Study participants**

For the purpose of this study, I focused on international students who were enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs at a large Midwestern university. I chose to narrow my participants down to this particular university because 2,019 international students were enrolled in the university at the time of this study (Indiana University, 2015). To qualify for my study, my participants met certain criteria. First, they were all above the age of 18 because I interviewed them without the presence of a parent or a guardian. Next, English was not their first language; the reason for this is that I wanted to explore the role of language in their intercultural communication process.

Third, I only recruited students who were able to converse, read and write in basic English, in order for me to understand them during the interview. Fourth, my participants were new to an international academic experience, as they had never pursued an education in a foreign country prior to their enrollment in this university. I chose this criterion because I did not want their previous experiences to affect their answers, and I want their answers to be based upon their experiences with the American education system. In addition, the students I recruited were enrolled in this university for more than a semester. According Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2009) international students would have developed a sufficient level of intercultural communicative competence after completing at least a semester of study. Therefore, I was able to study their experiences with this process.

I had two main strategies to recruit my participants for this study. First I attempted to gain access to my potential participants via a gatekeeper. Gatekeepers are people or organizations who have a prominent or recognized role in the selected population of study. They typically have sufficient information about the characteristics of the population and are influential to encourage the targeted population to take part in the study (Hennink, 2011). As for my study, the gatekeeper to my participants was the university's Office of International Affairs (OIA). They had access to the entire database of international students, and they helped me recruit my participants based on the criteria for my study. The OIA forwarded my participant recruitment email, and a copy of my study flyer to all the international students through the international listserv. However, this technique was not successful, as none of the international students contacted me. According to the OIA, this recruitment method failed because it was the end of the

semester, and typically international students return to their home countries for the summer break.

My next recruitment strategy was recruiting participants through other participants. Scholars refer to this method as the snowball technique (Hennink, 2011; Tracy, 2013). As I am a student in this university, I made initial contact with my international classmates. Three of my classmates volunteered to participate in my study. Once I interviewed them, I requested them to recommend and introduce new participants to me. I sent a recruitment email with my study flyer to the recommended population and was able to recruit five more participants through this method.

Eight international students participated in my study, three males and five females. My participants' ages ranged from 19 to 30 years ( $M= 23.87$ ,  $SD= 4.22$ ). Students came from a wide range of nationalities such as Saudi Arabia ( $n=2$ ), India ( $n=1$ ), Guinea ( $n=1$ ), Thailand ( $n=1$ ), Singapore ( $n=1$ ), South Korea ( $n=2$ ). Three students in my sample were enrolled in the university's communication graduate program; however, the rest of the students were registered in undergraduate programs such as communication ( $n=2$ ), nursing ( $n=1$ ), dentistry ( $n=1$ ), and engineering ( $n=1$ ). Furthermore, none of the participants had travelled to the United States before their enrollment in this university, and on average they had lived in this country for more than a year ( $M= 1.50$ ) at the time of the interview.

### **Data collection**

I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews (Tracy, 2013) to collect the data for my study. In-depth interviewing is a research method that involves an interviewee and an interviewer discussing a specific topic in depth. This research method may be

described as a conversation with purpose. The researcher's purpose is to gain insight on a topic of research (Hennink, 2011). According to Tracy (2013), interviews are beneficial because they enable the researcher to explore things that are usually hidden and unseen. Moreover, interviews enable participants to share their opinions, motivations and experiences with the interviewer without any hesitations of being exposed to others around them. Therefore, this method was great for my study because my participants were able to share the challenges they faced to acquire ICC, which is an event that I would not be able to observe easily in an intercultural setting (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). Moreover, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews, as it enabled me to explore the individual thoughts of my participants, and stimulate a discussion based on the answers provided (Tracy, 2013).

In the beginning of my study I planned to conduct 60 minute interviews, however my interview timings varied from 36 minutes to 72 minutes. From these interviews, I observed that male participants were less likely to elaborate on their experiences compared to female participants. Therefore, I did not compel my participants to share or elaborate on their experiences beyond their comfort level. I was able to gauge their comfort level based on their facial expressions. For instance, a participant stated that he experienced a certain level of discrimination because he was African; when I asked him to share a specific occasion; he laughed and looked down silently. After a couple of seconds I told him that it was okay and I appreciated all the information he had given me, and proceeded with the next question.

In order to respect the privacy of my participants, I allowed them to choose a comfortable interview location and a suitable time. As I was attempting to complete my

data collection within a month, I created a schedule with time slots that indicated my availability to conduct interviews. While setting up appointments, I emailed the updated schedule to my participants and allowed them to choose a time slot that was convenient for them as well. As a requirement for my study, I audio recorded my interviews with my smartphone. In order to save time, I informed my participants that they were going to be recorded during the interview when I sent them the time schedule. This technique gave them the space and opportunity to accept or decline the interview before choosing a time slot. Moreover, after each interview I wrote field notes so that there is documentation of my initial thoughts and feelings, as well as methodological and theoretical thoughts.

Before I conducted my interviews, I distributed consent forms to my participants; I read through the forms with them and clarified a few of their doubts, which mostly included the anonymity of this study. After reading through the form, I requested them to sign it. Once I completed procedures for obtaining consent, I gave each participant a brief questionnaire to gather demographic information. Next, I briefly explained the concept of ICC to my participants for them to understand the term when I referred to it during the interview. First, I described that ICC is a term used to explain the act of communicating effectively in a foreign culture. Next, ICC is measured through an individual's attitude towards different cultures, knowledge of other cultures, and intercultural communication skills. Finally, I explained that the questions in the interview are based on those three overriding components of ICC.

My interview protocol was semi-structured so that there was room for change during my study. In order for my participants to feel comfortable to communicate with me, I allowed them to have a certain amount of control over the conversation in the

beginning of the interview. I organized my interview questions based on the “Funnel Metaphor” mentioned in Tracy (2013). The “funnel metaphor” like a funnel starts off with broad and general questions and later narrows the questions to a specific topic (Tracy, 2013, p. 27). Thus, I started my interview with general questions about their culture and their perception on the American education system. Next, I moved on to questions that explored the differences between their own culture and the American culture. Once they begun comparing the cultures, I narrowed my questions down to the communication challenges caused by these differences. My questions revolved around Deardoff’s (2006) underlying components of ICC which are: positive attitudes, knowledge and skills.

Prior to my first interview, I conducted a pilot test for my interview guide with my international classmates who suited the criteria of my study, but were not my participants. This helped me practice my interviewing skills, as well as reconstruct/rephrase my questions in order for my actual participants to understand them. In the first interview and then throughout all of the following interviews, it became apparent that most participants had a difficult time remembering specific challenging situations while communicating with Americans. Therefore, the questions in the interview protocol had to be adjusted to accommodate what the participants could remember by omitting questions about specific situations and adding more general questions about types of communication challenges they faced.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

In her work Tracy (2013) suggests that a qualitative researcher’s background generally shapes her approach towards various research topics. Moreover, “the mind and



body of a qualitative researcher literally serve as research instruments – absorbing, sifting through, and interpreting the world through observation, participation, and interviewing” (Tracy, 2013, p.2). Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to be self-reflexive while conducting research. The term self-reflexivity denotes the careful consideration of the ways in which researchers’ previous experiences, points of views, and roles impacts these same researchers’ (Tracy 2013). Prior to engaging myself in this study, I was aware that my research focus of ICC would require me to be self-reflexive, as I was researching a part of my own international cohort, and I have experienced similar challenges as my participants. Apart from recognizing how my personal experiences will influence this current study, being self-reflexive also included me being honest and open with my participants. To be honest with my participants I answered their inquiries, and shared my experiences that motivated me to conduct this study. Finally, I recorded my personal feelings and reactions to others in my field notes.

I conducted this study from the position of an international student who has experienced two years of the American education system. Although I have experienced various challenges to achieving Intercultural Communicative Competence, I have a genuine interest in understanding and studying other student’s perceptions and experiences with those challenges as well. I recognized that my experiences and views may differ from others. I had the advantage of living with a sibling who was once an international student in the same university. She was able to guide me through a lot of my communication difficulties in this foreign culture. Therefore, I have no experience of being alone in a foreign country, and having to adapt to the culture without any guidance. All of my research participants however have never pursued an education outside their

home countries, and moved to the United States to live on their own. Most people do not have the same experiences with cultural adaptation, but most times there are reoccurring patterns amongst groups of people. For this reason, I was intrigued to learn about their experiences, and study the similar patterns of challenges faced by international students. Hopefully my findings may help future international students.

Throughout the interview process I learned that sharing my experiences with my participants helped them open up to me. I was able to rephrase questions, without making them feel anxious or uncomfortable, as I frequently reassured them that I have experienced the same issues. In my opinion, my role as a researcher was similar to a role of a reassuring friend, as I was able to establish a certain level of trust. This trust was formed because I understood my participants' struggles, and shared my similar personal experiences with them. I noticed that by listening to my experiences, my participants were more willing to open up to me.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process of this research was probably the most challenging part for me. Unlike a quantitative approach, which provides the researcher with direct answers to their research questions, the qualitative method required me to immerse myself in the data and find the answers to my questions. In an effort to proceed with my data analysis and save time, I transcribed my interviews as soon as I completed them. I had partially started my data analysis while I was collecting my data to identify whether I was asking sufficient and accurate questions to obtain the information I needed to answer my research questions. Once I completed transcribing all my data into a Word document, I read through each transcript and studied all the material. In the meantime, I highlighted

all the data that specifically answered my research questions. It included any dialogue about challenges my participants faced with having a positive attitude towards the American academic culture, as well as attaining cultural based knowledge and skills. I found this activity to be particularly useful because I was able to discard any irrelevant information. For example, conversations about the difference between Asian food and American food were not relevant to my research questions. Although it may seem as if narrowing down the information is time consuming, it helped me just focus on relevant information during the primary cycle coding process.

Tracy (2013) refers to “coding” as an “active process of identifying data as belonging to, or representing, some type of phenomenon. This phenomenon may be a concept, belief, action, theme, cultural practice, or relationship” (p. 199). In my current study, the primary focus was on themes that were described by my participants about intercultural communication in the American academic environment. Based on Deardorff (2006) ICC model, I was attuned to look for challenges international students faced while attempting to attain the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills to become competent intercultural communicators. As a new researcher, I was afraid that I might not have sufficient data to quote in my results section. However, when I read through the transcripts I noted various challenges, and some of them were unexpected. For example, the literature I explored highlighted the lack of English language skills to be one of the challenges international students faced (Kuo, 2011). In contrast, some of my participants found that their high command of the English language created a few issues for them while they were attempting to adapt to the American culture.

In the initial part of my data analysis, I focused on looking for first-level codes. According to Tracy (2013) there are two ways one can approach this coding process. One method is through lumping the data together, whereby the researcher would lump together statements that are similar into broad categories. The alternative method is through fracturing the data into smaller parts by labeling each sentence in the data with its own code. As I am a new researcher, and I did not want to confuse myself with multilevel codes, I chose to use the lumping together method. While reading through my transcripts, I used “umbrella” terms to lump my data together in a more general or overarching theme. I read and re-read the data several times to make sure I covered all the common themes. During this process, I used the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2003), to compare the data that were applicable to each theme, and modified the terms to fit in more data (Tracy, 2013). For example, initially I used the term “racial discrimination,” to label any sort of racist statements that were made by the Americans. However, I noticed that most of these statements derived from stereotypical assumptions. Moreover, many of my participants claimed that they felt they were not discriminated against; however, participants said that some Americans tend to assume their characteristics based on what they see in the media. Therefore, I changed the term to “stereotypical assumptions.” Corbin and Strauss (2003), suggested that, “making comparisons assists the researcher in guarding against bias, for he or she is then challenging concepts with fresh data” (p. 9).

Through the primary level coding process, I identified five categories: language, cultural differences, stereotypical assumptions, personal perceptions, and psychological challenges. “Language” was the category I named when interviewees described any

language based challenges they faced while communicating with their American classmates or professors. All my participants faced this issue; most of them explicitly stated that their academic progression was challenged by the various language barriers. Those language barriers included poor English language skills, difference in accents and pronunciation, and difference between British and American English. Based on Kuo's (2011) study on language challenges international students face in United States, I had expected those barriers; however, one thing that took me by surprise was an interviewee's story about how she faced language-oriented issues because of her high command of the English language. "Cultural differences" was a category I used to name any instance where my interviewees compared the differences between the American culture and their own culture, and mentioned an issue that arose due to those differences. Next, I used the term "stereotypical assumptions" to categorize the issues my participants faced when they were expected to act or speak in a certain way. According to an international student I interviewed, some Americans expect foreigners to behave the way the media portrays them. Some of the interviewees also felt that they were discriminated against because their American classmates judged them based on previous encounters with international students. "Personal perceptions" was the code I used to refer to the intercultural communication challenges my interviewees faced as a result of their own negative perceptions. These perceptions derived from their low self-esteem and assumptions that they are not well accepted by their American classmates and professors. I also used the term "psychological challenges" to categorize all the mental and emotional stresses experienced by my participants during their cultural adaptation process.

Once I completed my primary cycle coding, I read through the codes and added general statements that summed up my interviewee's answers on a Word document (Appendix A). To make sure I was able to identify excerpts when writing the Results section, I noted the file name and sentence number on the interview transcript template. Based on Tracy's guide to creating a codebook, I listed out my primary level codes in order to find common themes for my secondary level codes. However, I did not use a table format that was recommended by Tracy (2013), instead I just wrote each code, and listed out all the data that fit into the code. Personally, I found this to be more efficient as it enabled me to add notes and comments next to each statement, which would have been difficult to do so if the codebook was in a table format. For the second level coding, I went through all my primary level codes, and looked at them through the lens of Deardoff's (2006) ICC model, specifically the three overriding components of ICC, which are positive attitudes, knowledge and skills. Then, I created a theme for each component. The names of my themes derived from idioms, which in my opinion, best explained the content of the themes. The idea to use idioms came from my participant who mentioned, "Old habits die hard" during the interview, and I thought it would be interesting for my readers if I used it as a theme. Thus, I looked for other idioms on the internet to suit the name the other themes as well. The first theme is "Americans judge a book by its cover," as most of my participants suggested that they found it challenging to develop a positive attitude towards the American culture because of their American peers who negatively judged them based on their race. "Humans see what they want to see," is the theme I chose to describe the perceived communication barriers commonly held by my participants, which prevented them from seeking the cultural knowledge they needed.

The third theme in my study is, “Old habits die hard,” as all my participants stated that they found it challenging to adapt to a new cultural skill set, because they were used to the norms and habits in their home countries. There were a few codes that did not fit into any of those three themes; however, all those codes had a common factor which was the time participants needed to attain ICC. The time factor was one of the biggest challenges they faced to acquire the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills to become competent intercultural communicative communicators. Therefore, I created a theme named “Rome was not built in a day.” After completing the classification of my codes into themes, I went through my transcripts again, and read through all the data, specifically those I left out as irrelevant before I started my primary-level coding process. I did that just to make sure I did not leave out any information that I might have considered irrelevant before the coding process, but fits into my finalized themes. Once I re-read through all the transcripts, and did not find anything to add to my themes, I moved to write my results section.

## Results Section

The results of my study revolve around four main themes, all derived from examining the data through the lens of Deardoff's (2006) model. Deardoff's (2006) research revealed the three overriding components of ICC, which are: positive attitudes, communication skills, and sufficient knowledge of host culture. Although, extant literature highlights the factors that makes an individual a competent intercultural communicator, it does not disclose the challenges international students face to achieve ICC. Therefore the themes I identified through my data analysis, revealed the various challenges foreign students experience in order to communicate effectively in the American educational setting. Each theme in the following section will specifically answer one of my research questions. The first theme I established, *Americans judge a book by its cover*, answers my first research question which is, "What challenges do international students face in developing requisite attitudes to effectively communicate in the American education system?" In the second theme, *Humans see what they want to see*, I highlighted all the data that I gathered pertaining to my second research question which is, "What challenges do international students face in acquiring culturally specific knowledge and comprehension to effectively communicate in the American education system?" The answer to my third research question, "What challenges do international students face in developing specific skills to effectively communicate in the American education system?" can be found in my third theme which is, *Old habits die hard*. As I mentioned in the previous section, my fourth theme is an overriding theme that answers all my research questions. In the following results section, I will uncover all the data I collected in the interviews with my participants. At the end of this section, my readers



should gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges international students face to achieve ICC, specifically in the United States. While reading this section, it is important to note that I used pseudonyms to refer to my participants. Moreover, the brackets in the excerpts contains information that I added to further explain what my participant's answers meant.

### **Americans Judge a Book by its Cover**

Having a positive attitude towards new cultures is essential for sojourners in order to successfully communicate with those around them (Deardoff, 2006). Although this may be the case, the data from my study revealed that it takes two to tango. My participants stated that they had a positive attitude while communicating with their American classmates; however their communication efforts were not always reciprocated by their local peers. Rather than being accepted into the new culture, international students face a lot of racial stereotyping from their American peers. According to Peter, a nursing undergraduate student from Singapore, most international students find it difficult to develop and uphold a positive attitude towards the American culture because of such discrimination. Thus, this theme revolves around the various challenges international students face with racial stereotyping, and how those experiences shaped or changed their attitudes. The categories within this theme include racial profiling due to the media and preconceived notions. Within "judged based on media" I included statements where the interviewee described that their American peers judged them based on the way people from their country/culture are portrayed in the media. "Judged based on preconceived notions" discusses stereotyping issues that take place because the local students avoid forming peer relationships with international students, as they assume

students from a different country will not understand American academic ethics. Moreover, most American student also have an assumption that international students would not be able to contribute to group assignments because they did not speak English fluently.

**Judged based on media portrayal.** This sub-theme emerged when I interviewed my first participant Aishah from Saudi Arabia, who was a graduate student in the university's communication graduate program. She claimed that she faced a lot of discrimination from her peers and Americans in general, because of the way Muslims are portrayed in the media. She further explained that she wore a scarf when she first came to the United States, but stopped wearing it because she felt Americans associated her culture and religion to terrorism. Aishah also shared her experience with racial discrimination the first time she entered the United States as a student:

The first time I arrived in the US, I remember the Customs officer was accusing me to be a liar because I did not know the exact date on my return ticket, even though I provided my ticket to him. He kept asking me about my age and he kept saying all Saudis are liars. You are here to come and stay in the US [stay illegally]. The Saudis never stay in the US illegally, that is just crazy. That was my first experience, also people here always imagined Muslims and Arabs to be terrorists, and people who are not trustworthy.

Based on my interview with Aishah, I asked my other participants if they were discriminated because of negative media content as well. Similar to Aishah many of my participants suggested that they have experienced such challenges with their American peer as well. Rani from India, who is an undergraduate student majoring in dentistry, claimed that this act of stereotyping “stems from their [American students] inability to differentiate media content and reality.” This issue is also reflected in the following statement from Boonsri, another communication graduate student, from Thailand:

People who have visited Thailand, they will understand that Thai people are nice and very kind, so generous. But there are some Americans who talk about bad things about Thailand, things like prostitute, transgender or something like that. I have met a couple of Americans who make fun of me because I come from Thailand, by asking me like "have you cut your penis, have you changed your gender?" Even some of them with their perception of all Thais, are like prostitutes, they are like bad women, they are so easy with guys.

She continued to explain that pornography has played a big role in how some of her American peers view her. While discussing this issue, she shared an incident that took place during a study session she had with one of her classmate. She asked him why most American boys have a false impression that Thai girls are "cheap and easy." He said, "It is because Thai girls are highly exposed in pornographic websites, and that leads some stupid Americans to believe that all Thailand is the land of the whores."

Unlike Boonsri's horrific experience with gender based racial discrimination, Ismael faced racial stereotypes because of his skin color instead. Ismael is my interviewee from Africa, who was enrolled in the university's communication graduate program as well. He exclaimed, "Just because I am from Africa, I do not speak with (makes clicking sounds)! [He is referring to the Khoisan language, which is an African dialect]." He suggested that "television stand-up comedians" such as "Russel Peters" make it seem like all "Africans are poor and are from underdeveloped countries. He further explained:

They [American peers] think that you [he is referring to himself] are maybe not up to date because you are from Africa. You still live in a tree or a cave you know. Yeah! When I just moved in I was looking for a house, I posted an ad on XX website, and I had one guy responded. He was a grad student I think the engineering school there, and he was surprised to see me with an iPhone, that was when he just asked me you just got the iPhone. "No" I said "I had this iPhone for a year or two," and he was like you guys in Africa I have an iPhone there, do you have Internet? And he was kind of surprised.

Many of my interviewees indicated that such racial remarks affected the way they viewed their American peers. Most of them said that they would rather “stick to” other international students because they feel that their American peers are ignorant and insensitive, as comments from the following participants show:

I was excited about America, and mingling with Americans. However, my American classmates always make jokes and think it is funny. They think all Koreans eat monkey brains. One of the guy from my chemistry class called me “monkey brain eater.” So I just stick to my other international friends, they understand my issues and frustrations. – *Min, South Korean student majoring in communication.*

It is stressful to be friends with Americans. One guy said to me all Arabs are mean, and they treat their mothers badly. I was like no! None of us do that, even the bad ones. He wasn’t even open to listening, he didn’t listen to anything. It was just pointless. Frankly, I don’t blame them, the media is not helping to build their perception. – *May, an engineering undergraduate student from Saudi Arabia.*

Extant literature indicated that respect for other cultures helps international students view other their American peers and professors in a positive way (Deardoff, 2006). However, many of my participants suggested that they lost their respect for the American culture, as they found that most Americans, specifically their classmates, judge foreigners based on what is shown in the media. Deardoff (2006) also suggested that international students should also be “open to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures, while withholding judgement” (p.254). Numerous interviewees stated that they are open to communicating with their peers from other cultures, however their American peers are not open to interacting with international students. In the next subtheme, I will expose the challenges international students face because of this issue.

**Judged based on preconceived notions.** This subtheme demonstrates the challenges international students face because their American peers were not open to

interacting with international students in the classroom. Although most of my participants have experienced some form of racial profiling, they believe a multicultural environment would be beneficial for students to learn new cultural perspectives. May proposed that to learn about a new culture in an academic setting, there should be a significant level of intercultural communication between students in the classroom. Unfortunately, there are several impediments to successful interaction between the local and international students. A similar barrier pointed out by several interviewees was cultural segregation in the classroom. According to Peter, most of his classes were “segregated.” He expressed his concern by saying, “it seems like we are back in the period leading towards the civil rights era; my classrooms are all segregated. The international students sit on one side of the classroom, and the Americans on the other side.” It important to note that students situate themselves this way. When Roger, another communication undergraduate student from South Korea, addressed the segregation issue, he shared his presumption that local students experience the same level of communication apprehension as foreigners. He expressed his frustration by saying: “intercultural communication is VERY hard, and it is not surprising to witness the reactions we get from American classmates”. Even though he understood intercultural communication entails a considerable amount of stress, Roger sensed that his local classmates, in his own words, “would rather not even try to be friends with international students.” When I asked him if he has made an attempt to be friends with them, he shared the following experience with me:

I still remember, I did not want to just stick to the international students. So I tried to sit with the American classmates, and I try to talk to them. They just smiled at me and did not talk back. I asked them if I can be in their group, but they look at each other awkwardly and they didn't answer. So I just walk away. I mean at least I tried right? If they don't want to be friends, I can't do anything.

May had a similar comment when I inquired about her experience with classroom segregation:

Oh God! I don't know why they act like I am going to bite them. They have this look on their face when I sit next to them. I don't know what they are thinking but it makes me feel uncomfortable. If I can I want to be friends with them, you know? I came all the way from Saudi, I come to a new place and still stick with Saudis? What is the point of travelling for this education then?

Based on the responses I received from my interviewees, most American students avoid forming groups with international students for class assignments as well. As noted by Boonsri, “natives will stick together when the professor asks us to group up, so then all of the international students will have to be together.” Moreover, she added “I don't think they gonna pick me in a group, unless I ask them, “Can I join you?” but they would not say, “Would you join us?”” In Ismael's perspective, American students have a false assumption that foreign students are not capable of contributing to group work. Although local students prefer to stick to themselves, they are forced to be in groups with international students when the groups are assigned by their professors. Some of my participants highlighted a few communication barriers that arose during group projects as a result of the preconceived notions Americans have about foreigners. First, American students assume that international students are unable to understand instructions for assignments. Therefore, they immediately take on the leadership role and tell the international students what to do, and often times these students are given a very small portion of the assignment. As most of my participants are not assertive, they were unable to communicate their disagreement with the American students, and this communication

breakdown caused them to feel alienated from the group assignment. Aishah shared her experience with this issue:

There are many times I want to do a lot in the group work, but most of the time the Americans take the lead and push the rest of us aside. I always face this issue, because they think I don't understand. I mean I got into the Master's program just like them, it means I am just as capable, but they are not willing to let me play a big part. So I just let it be, I don't want to fight, so I just do what they ask me to do.

Next, some American students presume international students do not know anything because they are unable to articulate their ideas well in English. Therefore, in most situations American students accept the responsibility of writing out the assignments. According to Boonsri, usually there is a lot of miscommunication that takes place during group meetings, specifically because the locals are unable to understand the foreign students; this often leads to the international student's perspectives being left out of the final assignment submission:

Whenever I work in a group that have at least have one native, they would prefer to be the person who type and work on *everything* that related to language. So, during the group discussions we Asians more like talk, giving our opinions. The Americans will say, "Do you mind if we just write everything? You can tell your ideas and stuff but we will complete it" Many times my ideas just go missing, if I ask them they will just smile and say it is there and avoid me, but I know it is not – *Aishah*

Other times, their viewpoints are misinterpreted, which results in circumstances where American students criticize them for the lack of knowledge on a particular subject. Min's narrative is a typical example of this issue:

I get shot down every time I say anything. It is hard for me to always say my ideas in the right way. So I try my best to share my thoughts, but by the time I can finish they will say I am not or I don't have a good understanding of the things. But when they finish writing, my ideas are actually the same as theirs. I wish they will at least listen, but they are so pushy.

Lastly, Peter pointed out that most of the students from the United States are very individualistic when it comes to group work, and most of the time they refuse to include international students in the decision making process for group assignments. He presented his interpretation of this issue: “They constantly have the need to remind you that you are foreign, and you do not know how things work... You know plagiarism, research methods and all that good stuff. Therefore they should be in charge of the whole thing.” He presented his interpretation of this experience:

Ethnocentric, it is either their way or the highway. I personally find that to be a tad bit arrogant. I am just as good as them, I am just as capable of getting things done. I speak perfect English, and I have taken on the leadership role before. So don't tell me that I don't know anything.

Although international students have encountered various issues with racial profiling, it is important to note that they did not experience it with older classmates. Three of my participants who were in graduate school at the time I interviewed them, belonged to the same Master's in Applied Communication program that consisted of younger and older adults. In their opinion, American peers who belonged to their age group were more susceptible to alienating them compared to their older classmates who were American citizens. Ismael shared his experience working with an older classmate:

I felt very comfortable working with them, they were impressed with my abilities. I remember working with an older African American lady, she did become the leader of the group, but she was a good leader. She recognized my strengths with IT and research, so she asked me if I can do it. That is another thing I liked, she did not order me to do it, and she asked me if I am comfortable with it.

Aishah explained that she had a very negative attitude towards her American classmates because she felt like, in her own words, “a victim of being racial stereotyped.” However, she was surprised with the way the older adults were very proud of her, and respected her



for travelling to a foreign country to pursue a Master's degree. What's more is that they helped her with assignments and adapting into the American education system.

Furthermore, Ismael, Aishah, and Boonsri expressed that their interactions with older local classmates helped, slowly but surely, change their negative perceptions of American classmates.

In sum, in order for international students to have a positive attitude towards the American culture, their local peers should have a positive attitude towards them as well. This is demonstrated when my participants suggested that they had a negative perspective towards their peers who discriminate them. However, they view their older classmates in a positive light as they were more accepting of international students.

### **Humans See What They Want to See**

Another emerging theme in the transcripts illuminated a perceived communication barrier commonly held by international students. These barriers prevent students from seeking cultural knowledge from their American peers or professors; and Deardoff (2006) asserted that cultural knowledge is essential to attain ICC. Thus this theme will discuss the challenges international students face with such intercultural communication impediments. As I examined the data within this theme, I found that there were three subthemes that illustrate the way international students perceived their communication with their American peers. The first subtheme "perceived barriers caused by verbal and non-verbal cues," includes the issues my participants faced with interpreting the facial and verbal expressions of their American professors and peers. Many participants also stated that they experienced a certain level of psychological challenges when they first entered the United States, and it made them perceive their

interactions with the locals negatively. This, in turn, created a communication barrier that demotivated them from seeking further cultural knowledge from their American peers and professors. They experienced those challenges because they were homesick, and found it hard to adapt to the new environment. For this reason, I created the second sub-theme “Perceived barriers caused by psychological challenges.”

**Perceived barriers caused by verbal and non-verbal cues.** One of the perceived barriers that came up over and over again was “Americans are not willing to listen.” Peter shared an insightful and interesting interpretation of this issue. He described himself to be a very observant person, and from his experience he noticed that most Americans have a unique way of answering questions:

Most of the time, they say things with their non-verbal cues. For instance, during my political science class I approached one of my classmates to ask her something and she gave me this puzzling look, it was indirectly asking me what the hell I was doing there. I immediately felt uncomfortable and I backed off. However, to my amazement she turned out to be extremely amazing, and very helpful. I remember walking up to her again after a couple of months and she gave me that exact “what the hell are you doing here?” look. So I asked her, and she said that was just the way Americans are, they have intimidating facial expressions.

Later on, Peter shared his theory of the situation with me. He explained that international students are not used to such facial expressions, and even if they are, those expressions are always perceived negatively. Since most Asians are easily intimidated, they immediately avoid the conversations. Boonsri had a somewhat similar experience as Peter; however she experienced it while communicating with her American peers and professors:

There is a look that comes on their face, if you say something and they don't really get what we are trying to say, their face will be so obvious, “What is she talking about, is she like stupid?” [She referred to her American peers and professors]. I experienced that things many times.

That made me lose my confidence to ask them anything, cause I feel like they are judging me. From then I don't want to ask them anything.

Some participants mentioned that the combination of facial expressions and American colloquialisms confuse them, and at times they find it intimidating to converse with their peers. This reflected on Ismael's explanation of his experience with seeking guidance from one of his local classmates:

I did not understand why we can't just use the research, instead we must cite and rephrase everything. It was so hard, and I was struggling. So I asked my professor, and she looked at me like I asked her something very offensive, and she said, "plagiarism constitutes as cheating." I wanted to ask why, but I just left it, and I was going to ask a classmate. So I ask one of my groupmate, and she said, "like duh! It is important!" with the same face my professor had. That point it was the first time I heard "like duh!" and I didn't know what it meant. So I just ended the conversation.

When I asked Aishah about her challenges with this situation, she referred to the way Americans have the tendency to say "ahuh" and smile whenever she thanks them for something. She found that to be very rude, as if they were abruptly trying to end the conversation. This led her to not continue the conversation, or ask follow-up questions because she assumed that they were not interested. Similar to Peter, she confronted one of her classmates, and soon learnt that "ahuh" is a way Americans say "you are welcome."

Another perceived communication barrier that came up over and over again in my interviews was related to the American version of the English language. Many participants claimed that the way they spoke English differs from the locals. According to Roger, he finds it hard to converse with the natives. He explained that he developed some anxiety to approach or communicate with Americans because of his previous experiences with some of his classmates. The communication apprehension arose because he felt that the English he spoke might not be understood or accepted by his peers. Moreover, he did

not want to be made fun of. Furthermore, in my interview with May, she expressed her concerns about not being understood as well. However, she stated, “I think it is just our bad perception about this issue, after sometime I talk to them. They understand me and we share things.” Boonsri also expressed a certain level of frustration with her American peers; based on their facial expressions, she felt like they were pretending to understand her. Therefore she avoids making any effort to converse with them.

I mean I don't mind if I speak something wrong , it would be better if someone correct me, and ask me if this what I was trying to say. I would prefer that rather than somebody pretend they understand. Even if they laugh at me, and let me know that they don't understand it is okay. But they have this what you call, poker face. So I just shut up and smile in any class discussion. Anyways when I speak they never even acknowledge it.

When I discussed this topic with Ismael, he shared his interpretation of the situation. “I think sometimes we overthink things, yes there are some who discriminate us, but not all. Some of them actually want to hear our opinions.” He continued to highlight that his observation led him to believe that such perceived barriers exist. Ismael described the communication between the local students and international students to be a “vicious cycle, with each side assuming the worst of each other, and when they have an encounter it is like flight or fight. I do not think it is that bad, if the international students try to speak, the Americans will try as well.” Additionally, he explained that “at least one party should overcome the negative perceptions and communicate with the other party. As long as we assume they won't understand us and laugh at our English, we will never improve our command on the language.” In a nutshell, many participants assumed that their American communication partners are not interested to interact with them because of unfamiliar verbal and non-verbal cues. These perceived barriers, demotivated them from gaining a better understanding of the American cultural norms. Another issue that

triggers a perceived communication barrier for international students are the psychological challenges they face when they moved to America.

**Perceived barriers caused by psychological challenges.** In their research, Cushner and Karim (2004) identified homesickness to be one of the psychological challenges international students face when they move to the United States. Many of my participants linked homesickness to the way they perceived things as well. Min stated that he was extremely depressed when he first arrived to United States because he missed his family and hometown.

It was hard, but now I know it is not. The first time I came here, it was cold, and a new everything. I didn't want to speak to any Americans, cause I thought they won't like me or accept me. I just thought everything was bad. Once I got used to things here, I felt better to be friends with everyone.

According to Deardoff (2006), cultural self-awareness is necessary for international students to communicate effectively in an intercultural setting. Intercultural self-awareness refers to individuals being aware that their cultural norms or practices may be different compared to individuals who belong to a different culture (Deardoff, 2006). However, many participants suggested that their homesickness stopped them from understanding that there is a difference in the culture. Instead of gaining a deeper understanding of the new culture, they constantly compared it to their own cultures back home. This in turn, caused them to perceive their surroundings and interactions with locals negatively. Aishah stated that she still feels homesick, which in return causes her to compare everything to the mores and norms in Saudi Arabia. This is similar to the first theme, "Old habits don't die," however in this situation homesickness caused her to perceive things negatively, and prevented her from acquiring the cultural knowledge

needed to become an effective intercultural communicator. This is supported by her statement: “I know I always compare everything here to back home cause I miss home, and sometimes I know the culture and education here is nice and I want to learn, but I still look at it negatively because I miss the way Saudi’s do things.” For example, in Saudi they are not used to expressing their feelings and sharing their personal thoughts with others. However, in the United States, her American friends constantly asked her personal questions such as, “why did you get married at such a young age, don’t you have the freedom to choose?” She stated that she was overwhelmed with the way people openly communicate in this country, and started to avoid such conversations. Similar to Aishah, Boonsri’s homesickness made her very unhappy with her classes. Interestingly, in her case, the weather affected her perceptions.

Owh my God! It was my first winter, also the worst one here in Indianapolis. I found it so hard to get out of bed. I just want to sleep, but I have to go to class. I missed Thailand so much, it is always hot there. Then when I go to class, the professor will ask me to speak, but I just want to sleep. So I just avoid it, avoid talking to student, avoid talking to professor. I mean back home we don’t have to speak in class, and it was like perfect for this situation you know. But now I see the importance of class discussion, it help me learn a lot. But that time when it was cold, I just see everything as a bad thing.

Roger concluded that it is frustrating for international students to adapt, “especially when we have to learn new skill and knowledge of America, tolerate Americans. Also if we want new knowledge we must communicate with American, but the way some of them treat us, we just can’t look at them positively, so we just stay away.”

The overall message of this third theme is that there are perceived communication barriers commonly held by foreign students that demotivates or stops them from seeking the cultural knowledge necessary to achieve ICC.

## **Old Habits Die Hard**

Deardorff (2006), suggested that in order to be achieve ICC, international students should adapt to the cultural skill sets that are existent in the host country. However, many of my participants expressed that they were challenged to dismiss the mores, norms and habits with which they have been ingrained since birth in order to adapt to this new cultural skill set. Therefore the theme “Old habits die hard” will discuss how international students struggle with the cultural differences in the American classroom. This theme contains three sub-themes. The first sub-theme is “cultural differences in English language skills,” which addressees the difficulties international students face with American English, as it differs from the way they speak and comprehend the English language in their home countries. Some of my participants revealed that they lacked the skills to communicate in a new education system. As a result, I created the sub-theme “cultural differences in education systems” to uncover the challenges they faced with communicating effectively in the American academic setting. The last sub-theme “cultural differences in social structures” highlights the difficulties international students faced with social integration skills, while they attempted to establish peer relationships with classmates from a different age group.

**Cultural differences in English language skills.** One of the major issues my participants faced was with the ability to communicate in the American version of the English language. The following quotation by Rani is a typical example of what many participants experienced with the differences in accents:

In India, girls still strive for the right to a good education. I was brought up to be a perfectionist, and excel at everything, just so that nobody would look down on me because I am a girl. Still, when I came to America, a country so liberal, many people made fun of my accent. Why does this

happen? Why we are still put down? Why does my accent matter? I had to put in a lot of effort to change my accent because I wanted to be taken seriously, however old habits die hard you know?

She further explained that she found it hard to develop “American English” skills because she was taught to speak “British English” and has had an accent all her life. Peter explained that his mastery of the English language made him feel anxious to communicate with his classmates. He felt apprehensive because his choice of vocabulary differs from that of American students.

I struggled immensely due to the cultural differences, they [American peers] were appalled with my choice of words. My vocabulary is highly influenced by the education system in Singapore. Sadly, I came off as a snob to most of my classmates... There were times they would tease me and refer to me as a walking dictionary.

Peter also stated that he speaks in English with his family and friends, therefore he is used to thinking in English as well. Unlike Peter, both of my participants from Saudi Arabia struggled with the English language because they did not habitually think in English. Typically they think in Arabic, and mentally translate it to English. The translation process results in incorrect pronunciation, as well as different choices in vocabulary compared to American students. For example May explained:

I always change it in my head before say it, we studied English that way... But most time it is wrong vocabulary because it is direct translation. Sometimes the word does not exist in English, because Arabic is very flowery language, which makes it harder for the translation process. Inshallah [if Allah wills it] one day I will think in English.

Aishah shared the similar experience with language translation:

I have an issue with language, I think because of my language, my Arabic language. When I say something, I say it in a sentence or two, and then I observed one of my American classmates and they will talk for 10 minutes and I feel like they keep saying the same thing. It makes me feel anxious, because I am not saying enough. But the Arabic language, we say things



straight forwardly, we don't say a billion things to get to our point. I still find it difficult to talk so much, and it is my third semester.

Aside from language barriers, another comment that came up time and time again in my transcripts was the difference between the American education culture and the participants' education culture back home.

**Cultural differences in education systems.** Based on my participant's responses, it is important to note that the American education culture is different from other countries around the world. Ismael described the differences to be "two worlds apart." He explained that in Guinea, they have a teacher-centered education system. Students are not allowed to share their opinions in the classroom, or question their professors; such behaviors would be considered to be highly offensive, and would result in being "thrown out of the classroom." However, when he joined a Master's program in the United States, he realized that he was required to share his thoughts and ideas in class, he called it the "speak up in class skills." Similar to Ismael, five of my other participants suffered from anxiety issues because they did not know how to share their ideas in the classroom. This is reflected in the following typical comments:

The first time I sat in the classroom in the US, my professor asked me to share ideas on a theory. I had an idea, but I did not know how to say it out loud in class, I was very scared. Especially because I am not used to explaining something to my teacher and classmates. It took a long time for me to know how to speak in the classroom. – *Roger*

Usually in my country we never contradict our professors, or correct him, or disagree with him rudely. If I am going to do that I need to consider the type of professor, for example if he is open to criticism or not. Usually if he is strong headed, he wouldn't let any of the students disagree with him, with anything. But here in the U.S. it is very common, it doesn't matter about the personality of the professor anything. – *May*

Aishah struggled with sharing her ideas in class because she was not used to speaking up in class. However, she shared an interesting insight on why international students struggle with speaking up in class. She explained that international students are required to read a large amount of material in a short span of time, the inability to comprehend all those materials causes them to not participate in class discussions.

I just finished my third semester and it is still very hard to communicate in class, because I don't feel comfortable enough to do that. One I am not used to it, but it is also because the reading was very difficult in the first semester because I am not used to reading this quantity of articles in my old degree [she is referring to her bachelor's degree from Saudi]. Still with the language I have to use a dictionary for every two sentence. I have to learn all the academic words. Sometimes I have to read it two or three times before I understand. That process makes me even more nervous to talk in class, I don't want to say something wrong in class because I understand the reading wrongly. I will get embarrassed.

Boonsri suggested that she sensed the connection between the quantity of readings and sharing ideas in class as well.

I know that American culture will be more like discussion in class, but I did not think that it going be that much discussion. So... the first time when I got to the class, I was like "Okay, I don't know what all of them are talking about, I did not know what to add." It was because I did not finish all the readings before class, I never read so much in such a short time before.

Furthermore, Boonsri claimed that in her culture, teachers usually point at the students and ask them to speak or share ideas. On the other hand, in the United States students express their ideas in class without constantly waiting for someone to give them the permission to speak. Moreover, people from Thailand are not used to speaking boldly, they are always very humble and polite. Boonsri explained that speaking loudly will be viewed as being rude and aggressive. Therefore, she struggled to share her opinions in class because she lacked the skills to be assertive, and "competitive." Another cultural

difference that was highlighted in my interview with Boonsri was the ability for students to look for academic resources. She described her first experience with completing an assignment for her Master's degree in the United States was horrifying because she did not have the skills to look for information on her own. Boonsri continued to compare this experience to the education culture in Thailand.

With our culture, we are not used to going to look for information for our assignment. You know what I am saying? The professor was the person who just keep talking and we jot it down, we lecture everything [she referred to the professor's lecture], and so they give us everything. We don't have to do much homework.

Aside from the differences education systems, the cultural differences in social structures impeded the development of my participant's intercultural communication skills as well.

**Cultural differences in social structures.** In my interview with Rani, she shared an interesting perception on social structures with me. She stated that Asians are collectivists and they are not used to working on their own; however, Americans are more individualistic. When she studied in India, she would get together with her friends to discuss assignments and seek necessary information. On the other hand, when she came to the United States her experience was very different.

I remember, I did not know how to read research papers. I emailed a couple of my American classmates, and asked them if they would like together to work together, and all of them declined. I suffered, I did not know how to do everything on my own, and I always had someone. It was hard enough that I am alone in this country, but getting used to being alone in every aspect was traumatizing.

Likewise, May found herself looking for "buddies" to work with because it was not a norm in Saudi Arabia for students to work on their own:

Oh my God! I had nobody who want to help me with my assignments. I didn't want to copy, so it is not plagiarism, I just want to discuss the

assignments with a friend. But people here are so worried about copying each other, they don't want to help each other.

Moreover, some participants also pointed out that they lacked social integration skills because they were unable to develop personal relationships with their classmates. According to Min, this issue was caused by the “differences in social structure.” He explained that most Asians are accustomed to a hierarchical society, education is viewed as a way of gaining prestige and a gateway into the higher social class. Therefore, students are forced to complete their education at a young age, and it is not acceptable for older adults to assume the role of a student. On the other hand, when international students enroll in the American education system they are sometimes placed in classrooms with older adults, and they found it hard to establish peer relationships with individuals who are significantly older than them. This is also reflected in the following statements from Aishah and Peter:

In my country we always have boundaries with the older people, and we always address them with respect and do things for them. For instance if I saw an older person as my mother [she meant if she saw a person as old as her mother] carrying books I will try to help her, but here it is totally different. Old aunties carry school bags and go to school. I could not be friends with them, they were so much older than me it would be bad to disrespect them. – *Aishah*

In our society we are expected to complete our education at an early age, and older adults rarely ever pursue a college education. Therefore, I found it very difficult to mingle with classmates who are older than me [he meant in America]. The first time I was required to work on a group assignment with a person who was old enough to be my parent, I was very uncomfortable and anxious. I was not able to speak my mind because I felt inferior, this person had way more life and professional experience than I did. – *Peter*

With regards to social hierarchy, many participants explained that they were unable to develop professional relationships with their professors as well. Ismael

explained that he did not know how to distinguish his relationship with his professors and peers. “In Guinea, students do not address professors by their names, we are very respectful and carefully choose what we will say to our educators.” However in America, students sometimes call their professors by their first names, and often times international students are unable to establish professional relationships because they assume that if you call someone by their first name they are your friends. Since it was okay to address his American professors by their first names, Ismael thought that it would be okay to be casual with them as well and he accidentally offended one of his professors by saying “Yo! Ross what’s up?” Therefore he concluded our interview by saying, “we can learn new skills, but when are forced to change our old ways and understand new ones [he meant skills], it ends up in chaos!”

In summary, my data indicated that international students face a lot of challenges to adapt to a new cultural skill set, because they find it difficult to dismiss their own cultural norms and practices.

### **Rome was not built in a day**

In accordance with the idiom I chose for this theme, many of my participants suggested that the most the most important factor that influence international students’ intercultural communication skills is time. My participants felt overwhelmingly that they were expected to assimilate into the American culture, and educational setting in a very short amount of time. The time limitations make it challenging for them to seek knowledge, as well as develop skills and attitudes to attain ICC. Rani stated that it takes time to learn to adapt to the “language, culture, food, education system, just about everything. It is extremely different and we [she meant international students] are

expected to adapt very quickly and it is stressful.” Rani specifically found it stressful because she was eighteen years old when she moved to the United States. She was fresh out of high school, and has been “protected from the real world” all of her life. When she moved to US she could not determine how much of the American culture she needed to adapt to because she could not distinguish between what kind of behavior is acceptable in the Indian culture and what is not. May’s experienced this issue as well.

In Saudi, we cannot be alone with a boy, we must have adults if not it is not acceptable. But when I join my program, most of it were boys because it is engineering. So we had to pair up with someone for group project, and my teacher put me with a boy. I didn’t know how to work on the project, here it is normal for girl and boy to hang out. Thank God that boy could understand and he brought his girlfriend when we work. Now I don’t care but in the beginning I was shocked.

Ismael stated that he felt like he was “suffocating,” because he did not have enough time to learn anything about this culture, and the Americans that he came across in his first class were not friendly. He said, “I did not have the skills to read or write research papers, and I did not know how to take part in classroom discussions. My grade was in the line you know because I had to be in the same standard as the local students. I did horribly in my first semester and it has affected my entire GPA.” Peter suggested that international students should not be held by the same standards as the local students in the beginning of their education program. Instead, he suggested:

They [he meant the university] could have a freshman course like intercultural communication, where we can mingle with the American students and ease into the education system. This will give the American students to get to know us as well. Instead of throwing us into a classroom and expecting us to take part in class discussions, when we have never spoken a word in class before.

Some of my participants, specifically the students from the Master’s in communication program, indicated that they found it very hard to adapt to the education

system because of their moderate English skills. Boonsri shared that she and a few of her international peers had to take an English course on their first semester. However, in the same semester they had to read and comprehend a lot of research materials, as well as write research proposals. She stated that it put a significant amount of stress on the international students because they needed to get used to “working their way around research papers.” Similar to Ismael, Boonsri did poorly in her first semester because she did not know how to write research proposals, and she did not have the time to learn. According to Aishah, there are few other things about the American education culture that international students needed time to adapt to. For example, the notion of plagiarism was very new to international students.

In Saudi, we just write what we find we never even heard of this plagiarism thing. Here everything is cheating and plagiarism. It took me so long to understand what it actually is. First I thought I just have to cite, so I just cited based on what I saw on the papers I read. Then my professor give me a bad grade. I was like what else she want, and she said she wants APA. I said okay so I find APA and I do APA, and I still get a C. I ask her why she said I did not rephrase. It was like that the whole first semester. I got a B- in that class because I did not know how to write the research paper. My local classmates got As. I was so angry cause I pay triple the money they pay and I get B-. I think the program needs to give international students some time to learn things like this or at least teach in these things in class.

When I asked my participants what they would recommend for the university to do in order to help them communicate more effectively in a new cultural environment; given the short amount of time they have to adapt to the American education system. Most of them suggested that the university should have freshman intercultural communication courses for both American and International students. This would give both parties a sufficient amount of time to adapt into the intercultural academic setting, as well as learn about other cultures. Moreover it would also help American students to be

more accommodating towards the students from other countries. To sum up this results section, it is important for my readers to keep in mind that it is common for international students to face various challenges in order to achieve ICC, and it takes time for them to overcome those challenges.



## **Discussion Section**

Intercultural Communicative Competence is essential for international students to complete successfully their academic pursuit in the United States (Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011). While previous studies have highlighted the three overriding components of ICC which are: cultural based skills, positive attitudes, and cultural knowledge (Deardorff, 2006; Brian H. Spitzberg, 2015; Zimmermann, 1995), their studies do not include the various challenges international students face to acquire those components (Root & Ngampornchai, 2013). In their study of ICC, Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) argued that identifying the key components of ICC will not be beneficial to American universities that are seeking specific training programs for their foreign students. Instead, they suggested that a study about the challenges international students face during their attempt to achieve ICC, will be highly beneficial for universities to develop specific training programs to address those challenges. With regard to their suggestion, the results of my study shed some light on the difficulties international students face while attempting to become effective intercultural communicators. Using Deardorff's (2006) ICC model as a framework, I will unpack my findings to examine them more closely in this section.

### **Requisite Attitudes**

Deardorff (2006) suggested that international students should have a positive attitude towards the host culture in order to be considered competent intercultural communicators. My study revealed that international students travel to the United States with a positive attitude towards the American culture. However, the discrimination they face from their American peers, made it difficult for them to maintain a positive attitude

towards the host culture. According to Trice (2004), most American students do not have the privilege to travel internationally, thus they lack the knowledge of other cultures. Moreover Lee and Rice (2007) suggest that some students from the United States learn about other cultures from the media. Hence, they develop a worldview based on what they observe in the media. The data from my study indicates that international students perceive that most American student's outlook towards international students is greatly influenced by their exposure to the media, but not from any personal knowledge. For instance, Boonsri stated that her local peers assumed that she was promiscuous because she was from Thailand, as Thai girls are widely exploited in the pornographic media. As most international students perceive such prejudicial statements to be ignorant, they find themselves to lose respect towards the American culture. Furthermore, my participants also suggested that their local peers were less open to forming peer relationships with international students. Moreover, Deardoff's (2006) ICC model also suggests that "openness" and "curiosity" are essential attitudes to possess in order to achieve ICC (pg. 249). Openness and willingness implies the willingness to risk and move beyond one's comfort zone (Deardoff, 2006). My participants stated that they experience a certain level of anxiety to communicate with their American peers. However, they did make an attempt to communicate with their American peers, but their efforts were not always reciprocated. Therefore, my participants mostly "stick to" other international students. Lee and Rice (2007) suggest that individuals are more accepting towards an intercultural environment when they are pre-trained about the adjustments they are going to face. Moreover, Campbell (2012) recommended that universities should create a platform for international students and local students to interact, as it would help them better

understand each other's cultures. Thus, an implication for this finding is that a possibly effective strategy for reducing the discriminatory behavior of some American students and helping international students maintain or develop a positive attitude towards the American culture is through a freshman intercultural communication course. This course should be made mandatory for all freshman students, as it would create the platform that is needed for both parties to communicate with each other. Moreover, the professors that teach the course can act as moderators that help international students and local students overcome the boundaries and communicate with each other.

### **Knowledge**

Deardoff's (2006) ICC model also suggests that foreign students should possess sufficient knowledge about the host culture to communicate effectively in the American education system. According to Brown (2009), international students typically learn about the American culture through interactions with their local peers. Therefore, a high level of interaction with American students is essential for international students to gain sufficient cultural knowledge to achieve ICC (Brown, 2009). Through analyzing my data, I discovered that international students have perceived barriers that stops them from acquiring cultural knowledge from their American peers. Several of these barriers stem from the unwelcoming attitude some American students have towards international students. Although most of my participants identified this to be the reason they have perceived barriers, they also suggested that not American students have such discriminatory behavior. Instead, their lack of knowledge of American colloquialisms acts as a perceived barrier as well. Moreover, my data also revealed that international students perceive their American English language skills to be a barrier as well. They

have an assumption that their American communication partners would not understand what they have to say. For this reason, they try to avoid having conversations with the locals. This Midwestern University has an “International Peer Mentoring Program” trains American and senior international students to help new international students with the transition into the American culture (Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis, 2015). However, my data reveals that international students still have perceived barriers that disables them from acquiring further cultural knowledge. Many intercultural scholars have advocated for universities to have pre-departure programs to prevent international students from experiencing a high level of culture shock when they travel to a foreign country (Bennett, Volet, & Fozdar, 2013; Deardoff, 2009; Root & Ngampornchai, 2013; Shuang, 2014). Therefore a practical implication that might be effective to address the issue of perceived barriers is a mandatory pre-departure training program for all foreign students. This training program should include a course on American English, and common American colloquialisms. I believe that such a training program might break down the barriers international students have, and it would enable them to communicate effectively with their American classmates.

### **Skills**

Successful adaptation of host’s cultural skill sets is also considered to be an indication of ICC (Deardoff, 2006). The influential work of Hofstede (1986) lends an insight into the impact that cultural values have on communication between students and teachers. According to his study, there is a large power distance between the teacher and students in most African and Asian countries. Moreover, they have a teacher-centered education system, whereby students expect their educators to outline the paths to follow

(Hofstede, 1986). Although Hofstede conducted this research several decades ago, the dynamics of teacher-student communication in African and Asian societies have not significantly changed since then. According to Ismael, in Africa the power distance between students and teachers is so great that students are not allowed to contradict their educators. My study revealed that international students lack the skills to take part in class discussions because they are used to a teacher-centered education system. An interesting point undiscovered in the literature review was raised by a couple of participants from the Master's program. They stated that international students are not used to reading and comprehending large amounts of academic materials in a short period of time. Therefore, not being able to complete their class readings is an obstacle to class participation. According Deardoff (2006), international students should possess the skills to successfully seek for information, in order to be successful in their academic programs. Through analyzing my data, I discovered that my participants found it difficult to seek for information on their own, as they are used to being spoon-fed with the necessary information by their educators. Hence, they find it challenging to complete their assignments, as well as meet the American education standards. My participants further suggested that their professors hold them at the same standards as their local classmates, which results in them receiving bad grades. A practical implication for this issue would be to train international students to take part in class discussions in the pre-departure training program as well. Moreover, a classroom mentoring system would be great for freshmen international students. Teachers could assign American students or senior international student to be mentors for freshmen international students.

Social integration skills are essential for international students to acquire ICC (Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen, & Brusckke, 1998). The data from my study also revealed my participants do have social integration skills, but they are only used to establishing peer relationships with students from the similar age cohort. Min suggested that such issues arise because of the societal rules that are existent in most Asian and African countries. In such collectivistic societies, it is a norm for young adults to learn, but it is not acceptable for older adults to assume the role of a student. On the other hand, in individualistic societies such as the United States, one is never too old to learn (Hofstede, 1986). Therefore, international students struggle to assimilate with other students who are older than them. Especially when they are expected to work in groups with them, as they find it to a challenge to question these older students or disagree with them. However, my data analysis uncovered that my participants found older American students to be more accepting towards them compared to younger American students. Therefore, in order to help international students with assimilating with older classmates, as well as taking part in class discussions, a topic on cultural dynamics should be discussed in the pre-departure training program.

### **Practical Implications**

There are three practical implications for my study, which include a mandatory pre-departure training program for international students, a mandatory freshmen intercultural communication course for local and foreign students, and a classroom mentoring system.

**Pre-departure training program.** Based on my research, the program should cover these topics:

1. American English.
2. Common American colloquialisms.
3. Cultural dynamics (Power distance between teachers and students; Power distance between young and old; individualism vs. collectivism.)
4. Understanding the American classroom setting (Classroom discussions, information-seeking behavior, academic integrity and workload.)
5. Communicating with Americans who display discriminatory behavior.

**Freshman Intercultural Communication course.** Based on the data collected from my study, international students and American students need a platform to communicate with each other. Previous scholars suggest that most American students do not have the opportunity to experience or learn about other cultures (Lee & Rice, 2007), and my study revealed that some of them display discriminatory behavior towards international students because of their lack of exposure to other cultures. Therefore, this course will expose them to students from different cultures, and they will also learn how to communicate effectively with their international peers. Moreover, it will also provide international students with a platform to gain some knowledge about the American lifestyle as well. At this point in time, I would suggest that more research should be done about the communication barriers between international students and American students in order to identify the topics that should be included in this course.

**Classroom mentoring system.** As my study revealed that international students lack the skills to read and comprehend large amounts of reading material, as well as skills to seek for information to complete their assignments. American students or senior international students could be mentors that assist freshmen international students with

this issues. It could be a one-on-one training method. These mentors can be offered extra credits for their efforts as well.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

One of the main strengths of my study is my approach to collecting my data. As this was a qualitative study, I was able to understand in-depth the challenges my participants faced in the American education system. Moreover, this approach also allowed me to ask follow-up questions, thus I was able to clarify my participants answer. I was also able to add additional questions to my interview guide, based on previous interviews. Which in my opinion was very useful, as I was able to explore areas that I did not think off while writing my interview guide. For example, I did not include questions about how media played a role in the adaptation process of my participants. I included this question after Aishah mentioned it in her interview.

The other main strength of my study is its contribution to intercultural communication research. As I mentioned in my literature review, extant literature reveals very little about the challenges international students face in attaining ICC (Root & Ngampornchai, 2013). Through my study, I was able to discover the various challenges international students face with acquiring ICC in an American education setting. Moreover, in their study Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) asserted that studying the challenges international students face during their attempt to achieve ICC, will help universities develop specific training programs to address those challenges. I was able to address their suggestions as well in the practical implications section of my paper.

There were three main limitations to my study. First, my participants were limited to international students from Asia and Africa. Since my study was volunteer based, and I



was not able to provide a compensation for my study, I had a very limited number of participants. Unfortunately, my study is limited to students from countries in which English is not the first language. I was unable to analyze the challenges international students who speak English as their first language face. Based on my literature review, most studies on international students mostly include Asian students. Therefore, a follow-up study is needed in order to discover the challenges international students from other parts of the world might face. This would help create a better training program that caters to all international students.

The next limitation of my study is that I had a very small sample of students that represent international students who are in the graduate level. Moreover, the three graduate students I interviewed belonged to same program and cohort. Since my study does not include the challenges international students from other programs face, I was unable to identify if the challenges they faced were limited to the international students enrolled in this program, or other graduate students faced these issues as well. Lastly, my study is also limited to the challenges international students face in this particular Midwestern University. Therefore the practical implications of my study might also be limited to the international students from this university as well. Overall, although my study had an unavoidable representative limitation, I am confident that my results are revealing about the challenges international students face in an American education setting.

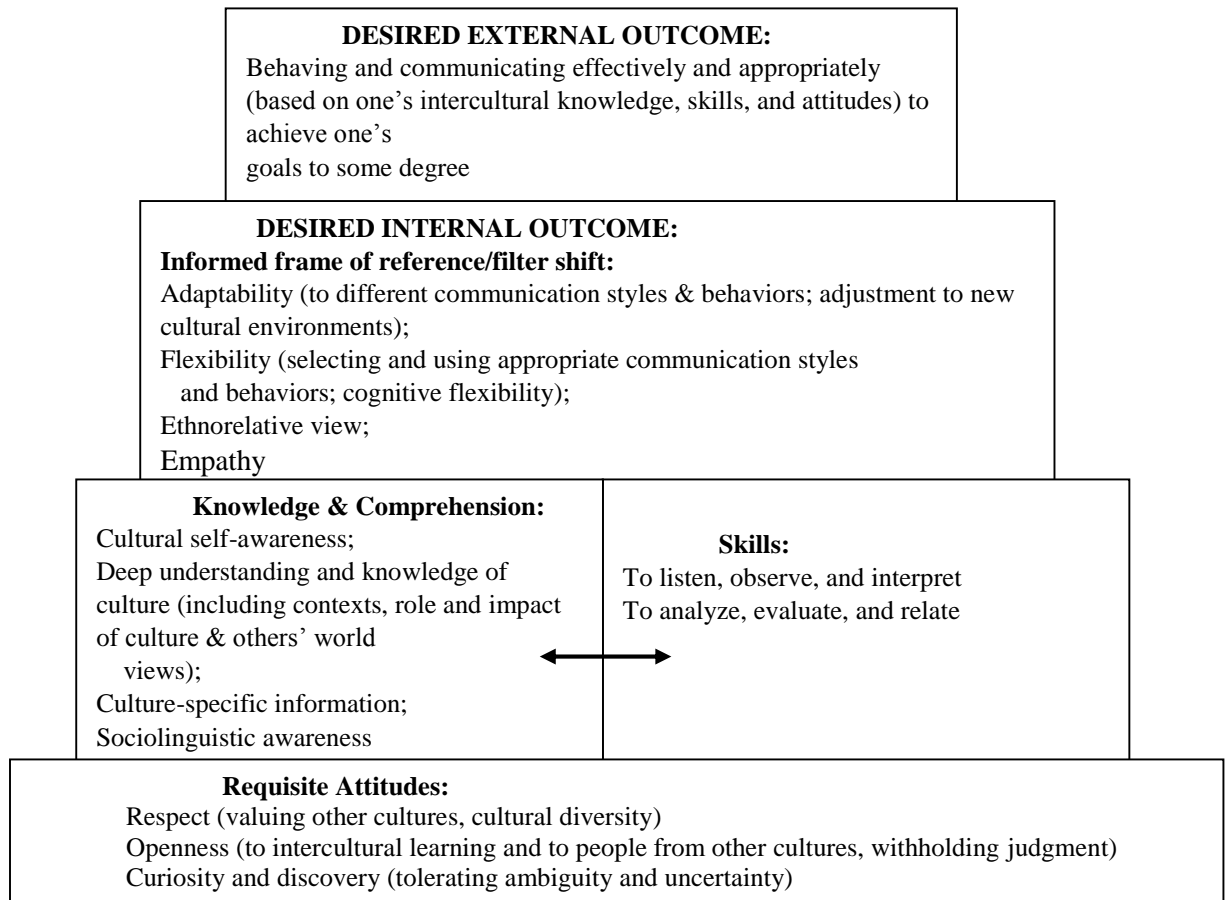
## **Conclusion**

Intercultural Communicative Competence is essential for international students to achieve their academic goals. The three underlying components of ICC are requisite

attitudes, knowledge and skills. My study sought to identify the various challenges international students face with acquiring these underlying components, in order to attain ICC. Through my qualitative study I was able to identify that international students travel to the United States with a positive attitude; however they found it challenging to maintain this attitude because of the prejudicial behaviors that were displayed by their American classmates. Therefore, it is important to create a platform for American students to interact with international students in order to reduce such behavior.

Moreover, I identified that international students have a difficulty with acquiring cultural knowledge from the American peers because of some perceived communications barriers that are held by them. Furthermore, international students find it challenging to adapt to a new cultural skill set because they found it challenging to dismiss the mores, norms and habits with which they have been ingrained since birth. Hence, a pre-departure training program is essential for them to gain some cultural knowledge, as well as learn to adapt to a new cultural skill set. Since many universities in the United States are embracing globalization, and international students significantly contribute to the economy (Institute of International Education, 2014), it is essential for universities to acknowledge the challenges international students face. As it would provide a more welcoming environment for international students, and they will be able to be succeed in the American education system.

**Figure 1** Deardoff (2006) ICC Pyramid Model



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## Curriculum Vitae

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### Education

- **Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)**, Indianapolis, Indiana, 2013-2016
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  - Thesis: Challenges of acquiring intercultural communicative competence: based on international student's perspectives
- **Limkokwing University of Creative Technology**  
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- **Public Speaking Instructor**, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, IN, 2015-2016
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- **Customer Service Consultant**, NOL Global Service Center, Malaysia, 2011-2012
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