

Conference Paper

A Study on Intercultural Communication between Japanese Employers Based in Malaysia and the Malaysian Employees

Hairuzila Idrus*, M. Ridhuan Tony Lim Abdullah

Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS, Seri Iskandar, Perak

Abstract.

Intercultural communication is the process of exchanging, negotiating, and mediating cultural differences between people from different cultural backgrounds, encompassing language, non-verbal gestures, and spatial relationships. Research on intercultural communication involving Japanese individuals has mainly focused on comparisons between Japanese and Westerners, particularly Americans. As Japan plays a significant role in the global business environment, foreign businesspersons working with Japanese companies may encounter communication gaps due to cultural values, assumptions, business customs, and language differences. In Malaysia, where there are several Japanese companies employing many Malaysians, there is a strong interest in learning the Japanese language and culture. Malaysians are impressed with the work culture of Japanese companies and seek to learn from them, which enhances their chances of working in Japanese companies, both in Malaysia and Japan. Effective communication between Japanese employers and Malaysian employees is crucial for learning from people of different cultures. To gain deeper insights into the intercultural communication in Japanese corporations working environment, this study examines the situations and challenges faced by Japanese employers working with Malaysian employees, and vice versa. The participants consist of Japanese employers and Malaysian employees who interact with Japanese employers in their day-to-day jobs. A qualitative study using focus groups was adopted, and the responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, leading to the emergence of three main themes: working culture, communication ability, and cultural differences. This paper discusses the results based on these themes and presents recommendations to improve intercultural communication in the workplace.

Keywords: intercultural communication, workplace, Japanese, Malaysian

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication can be defined as the interpersonal interaction between members of different groups, which differ from each other in respect of the knowledge shared by their members and in respect of their linguistic forms of symbolic behaviour

Corresponding Author: Hairuzila Idrus; email: hairuzi@utp.edu.my

Published 7 December 2023

Publishing services provided by Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the ICESG Conference Committee.

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(Yoshida et al., 2013). Intercultural communication is also defined as a set of communications between people from different cultural backgrounds, which comprises of a process of negotiating, exchanging, and mediating cultural differences through verbal gestures, non-verbal gestures and space relationships.

In other words, it refers to making people aware and able to adopt others' cultures when they communicate with them and thus have a meaningful communication.

Lacking in intercultural communication can lead to the insult of the culture and people involved (Lazar et al., 2007), particularly for business people or people providing services in the areas out of their culture. People interpret messages based on their culture, so what one mean might not be what the other person understands. The intentions might not be met as their attribution towards a person might be telling them something else about that person. Intercultural differences also cause lack of trust between people as the meaning of trust itself can be different (Arasaratnam, 2013). Non-verbal communication difference can also increase trust issues between people.

As Japan has become a key part of the intricate global business environment, the foreign businessperson working in Japan or with Japanese companies outside of Japan may encounter a wide variety of communication gaps arising from differences in cultural values and assumptions, business customs, and language. There are quite a number of Japanese companies in Malaysia and employing many Malaysians. Thus, in order to further understand the intercultural communication that is going on in the working environment at Japanese corporations, this study seeks to find out on the situations and challenges faced Japanese employers working with Malaysian employees, and vice versa.

2. METHODOLOGY

As the goal of this research is to better understand what kind of intercultural communication skills Japanese employers and Malaysian employees' value, a qualitative study using focus groups was adopted. Because intercultural communication skills are somewhat abstract, participants might not know what to say in if individual interviews are to be conducted. By bringing a group together participants could feed off each other's ideas and opinions while also agreeing or disagreeing with each other. The participants are Japanese employers and Malaysian employees who deal with the Japanese employers in their day-to-day job. The following interview questions were:

1. What are some situations in which you experience cultural differences?

2. What are the skills you feel would be helpful when communicating across cultures?
3. What are the challenges that you face when communicating with your Japanese employers/ Malaysian employees?

About 10 Japanese and 8 Malaysians participated in this study.

The data from the interview questionnaire was manually analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Based on Kiger and Varpio (2020), the steps for thematic analysis are as follows:

1. (a) Familiarizing the data – entails repeated and active reading through the data, taking notes on potential data items of interest, questions, connections between data items, and other preliminary ideas.
(b) Generating initial codes – a code is the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information. From the data collected, codes identified are work priority, ability to speak in English, adjustment to other culture, sense of respect towards colleagues and being meticulous.
(c) Searching for themes - examines the coded and collated data extracts to look for potential themes of broader significance. The themes that have emerged are working culture, communication ability and cultural differences.
(d) Reviewing the themes - decides if individual themes fit meaningfully within the data set, how themes interrelate and how they represent the interview questions.
(e) Naming the themes – after reviewing, the themes are named as what have been stated in Step 3, which are working culture, communication ability and cultural differences.

The next section will examine the results and discuss the findings based on the themes which are working culture, communication ability and cultural differences.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Working culture

In responding to the situations where the participants experience cultural differences, most of the Japanese gave similar issue which is working culture. According to them, Japanese put their work as their top priority most of the time, while the Malaysians see the importance of their family matters and also religious matters. Malaysians also

always take care of their health by taking medical leave when they do not feel well, in order to recuperate at home.

I sometimes find that Malaysian staff lacks a bit of responsibility. For example, He is feeling sick, so he is leaving home in the afternoon, without letting anyone know his meeting appointment.

You can understand well if you have Malaysian subordinates, members often take vacations or early leave at the convenience of their families. It makes me to feel culture difference from Japan.

I feel Malaysian staff take MC many times. It is difference from Japan

The Japanese also feel that Malaysian staff will just follow the instructions given by the superior without questioning whether the instruction is right or wrong. The Japanese will also try to adhere to the instructions of the superior, but the Malaysians have a stronger tendency to do so.

Malaysians try to adhere to bosses' instruction basically. It's a good thing. However, it sometimes happens the following situation, they don't consider whether the instruction is right or not because they don't understand bosses intention or the reason why bosses instruct. They just follow the instruction.

The responses from the Malaysian staff gave the same issue which is working culture.

Japanese are very passionate in completing job assigned, their honest and hard-working culture can be *yokoten* (best practice sharing) by Malaysian.

The Malaysians feel that the Japanese employees have a high sense of respect to a person higher in rank and always address the seniors (based on age gap or length of service) politely. For this reason, the younger Malaysian staff may have challenges to put forward ideas to the senior staff or prefer to remain silent instead of questioning the rationale behind some decision that is derived by their seniors. This has somehow given the explanation to the issue raised by the Japanese earlier on adhering to instruction from the Superior.

The Malaysians also feel that the Japanese generally have a high sense of loyalty towards their work which can be translated by the length of hours spent in the office to make sure the work completed even during public holidays. They are very hard working. But the Malaysians are more relax in their work and are able to work in informal situation.

Unlike Malaysian staff which I feel more flexible to communicate ideas and do not mind to do it in an informal session with their boss e.g. over a Teh Tarik session etc.

The Japanese are more extreme and strict in time punctuality and scheduling whereas Malaysian generally more acceptable of some tolerance (eg. in starting a meeting session).

The Malaysian also are in the opinion that the Japanese need to study certain issues in great length, hence, when it comes to decision making, they often take time to make their decisions, therefore, any changes cannot be expected overnight.

Japanese likes to post queries and expect clarifications after clarifications before they can be certain on what action to be taken.

This is not necessarily the same to Malaysians as sometimes they have to make decision at a short time especially in pressing matters.

3.2. Communication ability

Communication ability is the skill that is considered helpful to make the communication between staff of different cultures more effective. The Japanese feel that the ability to communicate in English language is very important because most of the time they need to communicate in English with the Malaysian staff because the Japanese cannot speak Malay language. However, they face difficulty when Malaysians code-switch between Malay language and English language when they speak.

Malaysians often speak English but suddenly switch to Malay and then return to English. In other words, if you do not understand both English and Malay, you cannot communicate in the workplace.

Thus, they will face difficulty in communicating with the Malaysian subordinates. The Japanese also must be able to speak in English in order to communicate effectively with the Malaysian subordinates. However, the Malaysians do not feel this as important as the Japanese. They feel that the important skills for effective communication with staff of different culture at work is being able to be open minded and considerate towards one another.

What is important is to have an open mind, remain respectful, and to practice active listening and use clear language when communicating.

In communicating with different culture background, most important is to have patience in taking time to explain and to listen more for having effective communication.

Hence, communicating effectively does not depend solely on the verbal communication ability but non-verbal communication ability is also vital.

3.3. Cultural differences

Cultural differences is the biggest the challenge faced when communicating with the staff of different culture, and the Japanese find that it is quite challenging to really understand the Malaysian culture. Even though Malaysians and Japanese are both Asians, still they find that the differences are quite difficult to adjust to. Due to this, the Japanese found it hard to come up with proposals that could satisfy the Malaysians.

Writing quality may also be an issue when Japanese staff not able to express their thoughts using clear language. Sometimes I tend to misinterpret what they want when not able to understand the written language used.

According to the Malaysians, the Japanese normally provide information that are too general and brief and only certain essential terms are being spelt out.

This is because the Japanese tend to perceive others based on trust and often would avoid open conflict to preserve the relationship with their partners.

In addition, the Malaysians also face challenges in understanding some Japanese who are not well verse in English language, particularly the pronunciation and sentence structure because they tend to use the sentence structure of their mother tongue. This is supported by Tasaki (2020) in her study which found that Japanese are not accustomed to using English as a means of communication because they will use their mother tongue whenever they communicate be it in the country or overseas. Japanese are proud of their native language. Malaysians are proud of their native language too, but they still value English language as English is a second language in Malaysia. In most non-government organizations English is used the medium of instruction.

4. RECOMMENDATION

The key to success is acknowledging and understanding the differences in an organization with employers with multicultural background and then applying them to enhance the way in analyzing situations and making decisions. The challenge for business is to accept the differences among the employees and to use those differences to make better business decisions. The following are recommendations that the Japanese employers and Malaysian employees can take into consideration to enhance intercultural communications between them.

4.1. Implement an Adaptive Leadership Style

Adopting the right leadership style promotes strong team relationships, hence, makes it easier to introduce concepts like intercultural communication. According to Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow (2013), leaders who implement adaptive leadership style anticipate challenges and are able to identify their root causes and ways to mitigate them. This leadership style is one of the best styles for diverse and inclusive teams. Hence, the Japanese employers might want to consider adopting adaptive leadership style.

Adaptive leaders are ready for adversity, require feedback from the subordinates, are prepared and able to pivot when required, all of which is crucial in intercultural communication. Eventually, strong leadership guarantees intercultural communication is used and respected by all workers. When a leader can adapt their leadership style to their employers, communication becomes more effective and considerate.

4.2. Self-education

If and organization intend to take intercultural communication skills to the next level, the employers, as well as the employees should absolutely do some self-education. This is to ensure that all personnel have a good understanding on the importance of how culture can give impact on communication. In addition, employers and employees need to know how their own values and beliefs vary from others and study how to celebrate those variations rather than criticize them.

According to Winstead (2022), in order to work effectively in a multicultural organization, workers should be willing to learn about other cultures' languages, social norms, history, ways of living, stereotypes, community behaviour and the government. As such, it would be a great idea to encourage the Japanese employers and Malaysians employees to self-educate themselves about each other's culture.

Next, practice active listening to ensure that intercultural communication is utilized effectively.

4.3. Practice Active Listening

Active listening is where a listener makes a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, to hear the complete message being communicated. An active listeners would focus solely on the speaker and respond

precisely when in conversation. When an employer or employee is engaged in intercultural communication, practicing active listening is vital. As emphasized by Meyerhuber (2019), “Awareness of social tolerance and intercultural bridge-building can be raised by communication training that focuses on active listening competences” (p. 91). This will enable the person to learn as much as he or she can from the other person about how their culture affects their work and life. Furthermore, active listening helps others feel like the listener cares, and that, in turn, builds trust and encourages authentic connection.

5. CONCLUSION

Many Malaysians are very interested in Japanese language and to learn more on culture. With this knowledge, they would stand a better chance to work in Japanese companies in Malaysia as well as in Japan itself. The Malaysian government is also very impressed with the work culture of Japanese companies and would like Malaysians to learn from the Japanese. As such having good communication between Japanese employers and Malaysian employees is vital in learning from people that come from different cultures. In addition, adopting adaptive leadership style, self-educate to learn about other cultures and practice active listening could make working in multicultural organizations more fruitful for the career.

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