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Knowing the Taboos, Improve Intercultural Communication: A Study at Terengganu, East Coast of Malaysia

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Abstract

Information about a taboos of different ethnic groups could help to understand each other's sensitivity especially at the workplace in order to avoid any misunderstandings. Thus, this paper investigated the taboos in relation to intercultural communication among University Malaysia Terengganu personnel from three ethnic backgrounds. The research employed a mix-method approach, the combination of online survey and in-depth interview. Data were sequentially analysed using SPSS and thematic analysis. The interview findings indicate that Malay personnel do not know much about the taboo of other ethnic groups compare to their colleague from different ethnicity and concludes that Malay personnel should be more open towards others values.

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Keywords: taboos; intercultural communication; ethnic groups, workplace.

1. Introduction

The Malaysian context is diverse in that there are three main ethnic and religious groups: Muslim Malay, Chinese Buddhist and Indian Hindus. These ethnic and religious groups are reflected in the staff composition at the University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), a university on the East Coast of Malaysia. The site has been selected because, given

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the ethnic mix and the language and dialect use among staff, there is a possibility the misunderstandings could arise in the workplace. Learning other religious taboos, words, objects or animals, especially at the workplace could help to avoid any misunderstandings especially when dealing with the colleagues from different ethnicities. This paper outlines research conducted at University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), Terengganu, East Coast of Malaysia, which investigated the taboos in relation to intercultural communication among UMT personnel of various ethnic backgrounds and from the three managerial levels: upper, middle and lower.

2. What is Taboo?

Taboo means “forbidden” or “to forbid”, and has a comprehensive meaning which includes actions in which an object that cannot be touched or words that cannot be said (Allan and Burrige, 2006 as cited in Gobert, 2015). The religious taboos, words, object, animal, dietary and cultural taboo (Keturi & Lehmonen, 2011, as cited in Gobert, 2015) commonly a tacit understanding between people of what is acceptable to do and can be changed over time (Cyrstal, 2003 as cited in Gobert, 2015). As taboo words can be used in various ways, either in connotative or emotional meaning which refer to the taboo word’s meaning and use (Jay, 1992 as cited in Jay and Jay, 2015). Taboo language referring to a language that people trying to avoid because it is viewed as harmful, embarrassing or offensive (Cyrstal, 2003 as cited in Gobert, 2015).

In the Malaysian case having a range of languages, varieties are linked to the geographical and district areas. The more speakers of the language, the wider the district and the distribution of the language and the more differences will transpire. In this study, the Terengganu dialect must also be taken into consideration in language use. The Malay dialect in Malaysia generally can be divided into twelve dialect districts and then into sub-dialects (Asmah, 1987). Malay dialects are based on the twelve districts; nine in peninsular Malaysia and three in Sabah and Sarawak (Collins & Bahar, 2000). The nine districts in peninsular Malaysia are from Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, and Kelantan.

Language is a medium of communication although the way we pronounce it and the intonation may be different in some ways. In Malay language, objects or terms can represent several different things. Let say the pig, it can be described as ‘babi’ or ‘khinzir’, which refers to the same animal, a pig. But mentioning ‘babi’ in a conversation can be very different compared with using the word ‘khinzir’. The same goes for the term husband which means ‘suami’, ‘laki’ or ‘orang rumah’, but the word ‘suami’ is more formal, while ‘laki’ or ‘orang rumah’, is a bit informal and even a bit harsh. The other terms are ‘perempuan’, ‘wanita’ or ‘betina’, which means a woman, a lady and bad attitude woman. The meaning ‘betina’ can also refer to a female animal. These terms can leave a very different emotional connotation depending on the social context and the function of the language because certain words can have led to the taboo topic and different meanings in certain cultural contexts which can be viewed as positive or negative (Che Hasniza, 2010, Isma Rosila, 2012).

However, this study is not concerned with the grammatical structure of the language; rather it seeks to concentrate on the taboos in relation to intercultural communication among UMT personnel of three ethnic backgrounds and from the three managerial levels: upper, middle and lower. Since the language at this institution is varied, where the respondents possibly use Terengganu dialect and formal Malay language, thus the taboo issues are predicted to be a conflict and raise a problem for personnel who are not local and from the various ethnic backgrounds.

3. Methodology

The primary approach for this research study is ethnography. Ethnography can be defined as ‘the direct observation, reporting and evaluation of the customary behaviour of a culture’ (Jandt, 1998, p. 49). This technique requires the unlimited period of residence, knowing the language of the group, participating in the group activities, and using a variety of observational and recording techniques. The researcher is familiar with the local dialect, the Malay language and part of the member of the institution.

This study used a survey, followed by one-on-one interviews and e-interviews (depending on the personal preferences of the respondents). The use of the quantitative method in this study will be complementary to the qualitative methods in that this data summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents and measuring instances of intercultural issues that may exist in the workplace from the three ethnic groups’ viewpoints. Quantitative

methods ‘employ meaningful numerical indicators to ascertain the relative amount of something’ while qualitative methods ‘employ symbols (words, diagrams and non-meaningful numbers [to indicate the meaning] other than relative amounts) people have something’ (Frey & Kreps, 2000, p.83). The qualitative approach is selected in order to provide an in-depth perspective regarding the personal experiences that cannot be measured through a straight quantitative approach. The respondents for this study comprised administrative and academic personnel from three managerial levels: the upper, middle and lower levels from three ethnic backgrounds: Chinese, Indian and Malay. Eighty-nine respondents were involved in the survey across three managerial levels and twenty respondents were selected for the interviews.

4. Research Method

The survey was designed and administered using Survey Monkey, a web-based survey software available at <http://www.surveymonkey.com>. Around 120 surveys were distributed across three organizational levels: the upper, middle and lower management, with approximately forty respondents for each level. The respondents for surveys are chosen through a purposive sampling technique to ensure a range of ethnicity, religion and years of service are represented. Purposive sampling involves ‘recruiting people on the basis of shared characteristic which will help you in your inquiry’ (Cousin, 2009, p.79). The survey questions consisted of two parts: demographic data and a basic question about taboo.

Interview questions then developed after analyzing the survey data. In general, the interview questions were elaborated from those on the survey then used in semi-structured interviews and e-interview. The respondents were given a choice of interviews: one-on-one semi-structured interviews and e-interviews. E-interviews are used as an alternative method in collecting data and were offered because the topics may be too sensitive to discuss face to face, to encourage genuine experience and to give respondents a choice so that they can answer the interview question to their convenience (Bampton & Cowton, 2002). E-interviews can also generate feelings of comfort for interviewees and make it easier for them to discuss sensitive and cultural issues without feeling embarrassed or discomforted by the presence of the interviewer (Bampton & Cowton, 2002).

Semi-structured interviews are the main, preferred data collection method because respondents are able to freely discuss their experience as to how they deal with taboo issues at their workplace. Semi-structured interviews and e-interview allow researchers to explore in-depth experiences and perceptions of the individuals, which also mean ‘the description of groups’ (Cousin, 2009, p.109). Twenty respondents were selected using purposive sampling, in order to access a particular subset of respondents based on religion, ethnicity, years of service and gender.

5. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using explanatory data analysis which includes data from the survey. Data from the survey used SPSS to summarize demographic data and gather the basic information about the taboo issues. The qualitative interviews were transcribed in verbatim and translated. In transcribing, the researcher tried to minimize and corrected the grammatical error of the direct quotations to ensure that the meaning is not lost during the transcription process to preserve the respondents’ ‘voices’. The qualitative data had been grouped into thematic concerns and pseudonyms used to address respondents.

6. Taboos themes and discussion

6.1. The Taboos

The results were themed into a several types of taboo such as words, objects, animal, cultural, religious and dietary taboos. In the survey, respondents were asked about their awareness of the taboo such as some words, objects or animals that could be the taboo to other ethnic groups, their awareness of the topics and about their experience(s) in

relation to the taboo. While, during the interview, the survey question were used to guide the interview and the respondents were probed to get in-depth experience.

6.1.1 The Taboo words and topics

The survey respondents were asked whether or not that they choose their topic or words carefully when communicating with the other ethnic groups. The respondents were also asked whether or not they were aware that some objects or animals that could be the taboo for other ethnic groups. Table 1 below displays the survey results:

Table 1. Choosing topics and awareness of taboo words.

			Ethnicity							
			Malay		Chinese		Indian		Total	
			Frequency	Percentage						
			(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Lan10	Do you choose your topic or words carefully when communicating with the other ethnic groups?	No	1	1.3	1	12.5	0	.0	2	2.3
		Yes	75	98.7	7	87.5	4	100.0	86	97.7
		Total	76	100.0	8	100.0	4	100.0	88	100.0
Lan11	Are you aware that some objects or animals should not be mentioned in front of other ethnics (e.g. pigs to Muslims)?	No	9	11.8	0	.0	0	.0	9	10.2
		Yes	67	88.2	8	100.0	4	100.0	79	89.8
		Total	76	100.0	8	100.0	4	100.0	88	100.0

Table 1 illustrates a small percentage of Malay personnel (1.3%) and Chinese personnel (12.5%) that do not choose their topic or words when they communicate with other ethnic groups compared with their Indian colleagues. Overall, the survey respondents, regardless of ethnicity, aware that sensitive topic of conversation can be offensive or embarrassing to other ethnic groups. Similarly, about 11.8% of Malay personnel are not aware that there are some objects or animals that are supposed not to be mentioned in front of others. These indicate that the colleagues from different ethnic backgrounds are much aware of the issues compared with their Malay colleague in this survey. These questions then further elaborated by the interview respondents (refer Appendix A).

Interview respondents then explain in details regarding the use of taboo words and topics. Malay personnel are aware of taboo words and that some words can be perceived as vulgar words related to ethnic slurs and may be an obscene expression. The Malay personnel were asked about which ethnic group that they think may be sensitive to certain words, some confidently nominated the Indian ethnic group.

Indians may feel insulted by the word pariah. (Mohammad, male, Malay, middle-level academic)

The Malay personnel are aware that certain words such as *pariah* and *keeling* (a derogatory term in Malay) are viewed as humiliating, impolite, coarse and degrading words for Malaysian Indians (Ting 2009; Yoga 2009). This word once triggered a very controversial issue and created ethnic tensions among the multicultural society as reported by the Malaysian newspaper (Chooi 2011; Shankar 2012; Yoga 2009).

Adam (male, Malay, upper-level professional) however believes that the word *babi* (swine/hog) can upset the Chinese and *lembu* (bull) can cause offense in front of Indian colleagues.

Let say, with Chinese, I would not say directly in front of them the words 'babi'; this to avoid any hard feelings. Even though some of them may not consume pork, we know that some of them do eat pork, so it is their way. The same goes to Hindu's. If I meet them, I will be careful not to mention 'lembu' because I know the cow is sacred to them.

The cow or bull in Indian society is traditionally identified as a caretaker and a maternal figure and Indian society honours the cow as a symbol of unselfish giving. He understands that pork is normally consumed by the Chinese while the bull is perceived as sacred by Indian communities. In the interview, Adam refers to Hindu as an ethnicity, not a

religion. The actual fact is that Hindu refers to a religion and the people who embrace Hinduism are Indians. This shows that some Malay colleagues cannot distinguish between the religion and the ethnicity. The fact is Malaysian Indians can be a Hindu or Christian or Muslim, but they are seen ethnically as Indians.

Malay personnel shared their experiences of the taboo words in the Malay society, particularly at this institution. They explain that *babi* (swine/hog) is the taboo word and represents a negative image for the Muslim community, particularly the Malays at this institution. Some Malay personnel explain that the word *lembu* is also a sensitive word in the Malay community. This finding indicates that the word *lembu* is not only taboo to the Indian community but also to some Malay personnel at this institution. They also reveal that some Terengganu Malay can be very sensitive towards the word *anjing* (dog) which other ethnic groups should take into consideration when dealing with Malay colleagues especially from the local area (Terengganu). They suggest a better word to replace with such as replacing *babi* (pig) with *khinzir* (Arabic words for pig) or *kerbau pendek* (a Malay words which sound nicer). Malay personnel could only explain and shared the taboo words from their viewpoints but do not have a clear idea about the other ethnic groups taboo words or topic other than the one mentioned above. This suggests that Malay personnel at this institution need to acquire more knowledge of the other ethnic taboo words and topic so that they will be more sensitive towards other cultures and enhance their intercultural communication at the workplace.

For Chinese personnel, they are alert about the taboo words or topic that may be sensitive to other ethnic groups. They know that the word *babi* (swine/pig/hog) is not appropriate to mention in front of other ethnic groups such as Malay colleague. They will try to avoid mentioning the word *babi* (swine/pig/hog) yet assume the word *anjing* (dog) is acceptable to other ethnic groups like Malays. Chinese personnel also explain about their own taboos that other ethnic groups should be sensitive too. Whenever there is a funeral, someone should not mention a merry topic such as a wedding ceremony and vice versa. This is offensive for the Chinese community when there is such a sad event. They believe a happy event should not be mixed with a sad event. The enclosed community should be aware of this situation whenever there is a funeral in the area. They explain that whenever there is a funeral occasion, the coffins will be around for four to five days. If there is a wedding, the community should hold the wedding at another place. This is to show respect to the family. This should be made known to the other ethnic groups living in a multicultural country such as Malaysia. Apart from that, they prefer to use positive words in their ritual ceremonies. For instance, in celebrating the birthday, the word *mati* (die) or any related word to death should be avoided. They also explain that any rude or vulgar words which are used to tease the family or individuals are also perceived as the taboo. Swear words are perceived as the taboo to their community. Yet this is just a guideline and cannot be applied to all Chinese. This information considers valuable to this institution to enhance the intercultural communication at this workplace. The Chinese personnel are seen to put efforts into learning others' cultures and are aware that communication will be easier if they know about the culture of their colleagues.

6.1.2 Object or animal

Malay personnel are aware that some objects or animals such as *lembu* (cow) should not be mentioned in front of other ethnic groups such as Indians because they believe that this is sacred to the Indian personnel.

Chinese personnel are conscious that dogs and dog droppings are considered taboo in Islam. They are also aware that figurines could offend their Muslim colleagues. They know that in some places, these figurines should not be displayed to respect the Muslim sensitivity. They also aware that knowing this taboo could help them develop a good relationship and better communication with the people from various religion, culture and background. This is shared by one of the Chinese personnel:

Figurines may not be appropriate in some places, such as you putting figurines on the roadside, this is not proper... I tried to learn others' culture...I love this... if we do not understand others culture, it is difficult to communicate. (Steven, male, Chinese, middle-level academic).

This is because Islam prohibits statues and three-dimensional figures of living creatures. The prohibition is stressed in a case where the statue is already dignified as angels, prophets, the Virgin, or idols like animals. Islam's stand on this issue is a means of safeguarding the concept of monotheism ('Islamic Views on Erecting Statues' 2012).

One of the Chinese personnel also explains that the cat can be the taboo for the Chinese community.

I can say a cat. For Chinese community, the funeral can be 5 to 7 days, the shortest is about 3 days, the problem will be when the neighbour has lots of cats, and nearby is a Chinese funeral, and they may feel offended because the cat is seen as the bad omen to their funeral process. (Steven, male, Chinese, middle-level academic)

This taboos should be acknowledged by other ethnic groups in a multicultural country such as Malaysia. This information should make known to people at this institution even though Chinese is a minority personnel yet this could build a better intercultural communication within the community.

Steven (male, Chinese, middle-level academic) also mentions about the sensitivity of the Malay personnel about dog and dog droppings:

Even me myself, I'm not keeping a dog at my home, because I understand that Muslims may not like this. Dog droppings are considered taboo for them.

However, it is not certain if he knows that dogs are allowed in Islam. Muslims treat a dog as a dog; they are not to be household pets, sleeping indoors and dressing them up in clothes. For Muslims it is permissible to keep a dog for hunting, guarding livestock or guarding crops. It is lawful to own a dog and to touch dogs (with reason) as Islam provides guidelines about washing the body part and the item of clothing touched by the dog's mouth or snout (Banderker 2012). The dogs and swine are the issues that widen the gaps between Malays and the minority groups. However, it is suggested that if the reason to make known and with proper explanation to the other ethnic groups such as Chinese and Indian community, this could improve their basic knowledge about the dog taboo. This suggests that Malay personnel need to acquire more knowledge of their religious restrictions because narrow understandings of their own religious restrictions widen the gap in knowing other ethnicities.

6.1.3 Dietary

Malay personnel mention the taboo which are related to the food perceived as delicacies for Malay community but can actually ignite conflict if the food is perceived as a joke by Malays from different states. The words such as *tempe* (fermented soybean) for sub-ethnic Javanese Malays and *budu* (fermented fish sauce) could anger the Kelantanese and Terengganese if used as a bad joke. Adam (male, Malay, upper level professional) was the only Malay personnel who explained that Chinese may be sensitive to the word *babi* (pig) because they consume pork. He believes that Malays should respect what others consume so not to hurt their colleagues' feelings.

6.1.4 Religion

Apart from food, all Malay personnel take very serious offence if other ethnic groups make any bad remarks about their religion. This includes any matters in Islam, the Prophets, Al-Qur'an and Hadith, the Islamic scholars and even to their Muslim brothers and sisters. As a Muslims, they belong to each other and should defend their religion in any way, by mouth, heart, words and hands so as to protect their fellow Muslims and their religion. However, acts of terrorism are not promoted as a way to show the significance of Islam.

6.1.5 Summary

The findings suggest that all respondents, regardless of ethnicity, are aware that they should select their topics of conversation carefully while communicating with other ethnic groups to avoid any hard feelings. However, some topics are difficult to discuss when society takes issues of culture and religion too seriously. Some topics can be discussed privately and with a very carefully guided discussion. Any topic which touches any ethnic group culture and religion could easily be misinterpreted, even though the intention is to learn about each other. This may make them reluctant to discuss these issues in public. This finding also indicates that the majority of Malay personnel believe that they do understand the taboos of the colleagues from different ethnicities. They also assume that there is no problem in relation to this issues because they did not encounter any, but minorities might see this differently. The data analysed here are not comprehensive but they highlight the way the personnel at this institution basic knowledge of the taboos of each other's ethnic group. From the analysis, it appears that the Malay personnel at this institution need to acquire more knowledge of their own religious beliefs and taboos stemming from their religions, words, objects, animals or dietary requirement in order to integrate proficiently and ethically with others. For being as a majority they should not take things for granted of other ethnic group's taboos and restrictions yet they should take this opportunity to learn more about others.

7. Conclusion

Information about the taboo word in other communities helps Malay personnel to understand their colleagues from a range of ethnic groups. In general, Malay personnel believe that knowing others' food and cultural celebrations is enough to know about their colleagues cultural taboos. However, it can be argued that this is not sufficient if they are to understand their colleagues from different backgrounds. There are areas that they need to explore such as others' religious values and practices. They could show an interest in exploring others' views to minimize gaps between them. Knowing others' religious taboos or restrictions does not mean embracing their religions, yet this can enrich their information about other groups. They also need to share their own religious restrictions with their colleagues so that they get the right information about the restrictions applied by their Muslim colleagues. Future studies may want to focus on the taboo of the other ethnic groups from the East part of Malaysia, namely Sabah and Sarawak especially at the workplace situation so that there is some congruity in what have been analyzed here.

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Appendix A.

A.1. Listed below is a table of taboo words and topic that are sensitive to every ethnic group.

Taboo words	Meaning in English	Sensitive group
<i>sial</i>	damned	Malay
<i>anjing</i>	dog	Malay
<i>babi</i>	pig/swine	Malay/Chinese
<i>pariah</i>	low caste/untouchable	Indian
<i>Anak haram</i>	illegitimate child/bastard	Malay
<i>Anak sial</i>	retarded child	Malay
<i>lembu</i>	cow/stupid	Malay/Indian
<i>bodoh</i>	stupid	Malay
<i>biadap</i>	rude	Malay
<i>keling</i>	equal to nigger	Indian
<i>syaitan</i>	demon	Malay
<i>Mati</i>	death	Chinese (during happy occasion)

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