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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION (CBC): A CASE STUDY OF MEKAR IN TERENGGANU

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ABSTRACT

Terengganu is a biodiversity-rich state hosting four species of sea turtles - Leatherback, Hawksbill, Olive Ridley, and Green Turtle - that are emblematic to the region and critical to its ecological balance. As vital contributors to Terengganu's natural heritage, these species also bolster the local economy through ecotourism. The sustainable management of these natural resources through conservation initiatives not only safeguards the turtles but also ensures the continuity of benefits for local communities. Sustainable education and lifelong learning are key pillars in the conservation efforts for these species in Terengganu. This study aimed to evaluate the intercultural communicative competence of the MEKAR community, a local conservation group, in engaging with a global tourist demographic. This competence is crucial for fostering a sustainable relationship between conservation efforts and tourism, which is a significant source of funding for ongoing protection programs. Adopting a quantitative framework, this study surveyed 187 MEKAR community members, investigating their motivation, knowledge, and skills in intercultural communication. The data was rigorously analyzed using IBM SPSS 21, adopting a descriptive approach that underscores the community's learning curve and adaptive strategies. Results indicate a robust level of intercultural communication competence within the community, signifying a strong foundation for lifelong learning and the capacity to engage with diverse cultures. This competence underpins the sustainable education framework that is critical for conservation efforts to adapt and thrive in a changing global context. The findings provide a

framework for ongoing education and growth in conservation, adapting to the changing intercultural landscape. This approach empowers the MEKAR community to sustainably manage their natural heritage and align with global conservation goals.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication Competence, Community-Based Tourism, Ecotourism, Conservation management, Sustainable learning

INTRODUCTION

Sea turtles are an iconic and ecologically significant species in the state of Terengganu, with numerous active nesting sites located along its coastline and surrounding islands. Recognising their ecological and economic value, the Terengganu state government has prioritised turtle preservation, conservation, and monitoring through various educational and awareness programmes in collaboration with multiple authorities and stakeholders. Several coastal areas, including Telok Mak Nik (Kemaman), Ma'Daerah (Kerteh), Rantau Abang (Dungun), and Pulau Redang (Kuala Nerus), have been officially designated as sea turtle sanctuaries. Beyond conservation, turtle-related tourism has emerged as an important contributor to the local economy, with estimates indicating its potential to generate over USD 360,000 annually in employment benefits (Teh et al., 2018).

Department of Fisheries Terengganu (DOFT) reported that about 52 beaches are known for hosting sea turtle nesting activities. To involve more people in the conservation efforts and reduce the cost of conservation, the local authority has implemented a smart partnership program that allows community groups and NGOs to participate in conservation efforts. One successful example of this is the establishment of Persatuan Khazanah Rakyat Ma'daerah (MEKAR) in 2005, a unique NGO made up of local community members from the Kertih, Kemasik, and Paka districts, with WWF-Malaysia acting as a technical advisor. As a community-based conservation project, MEKAR actively engages in outreach programs to raise awareness about the importance of turtle conservation and their habitats. With a membership base of 500 people from various backgrounds, including fishermen, homemakers, teachers, government employees, and pensioners, MEKAR can potentially promote the Ma'Daerah Turtle Sanctuary globally.

However, the increasing integration of conservation with tourism has introduced new communicative demands on local communities. Tourism inherently involves continuous interaction between hosts and visitors from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, making effective intercultural communication a critical component of sustainable tourism development. Prior research highlights that effective communication in tourism should involve understanding cultural differences between visitors and hosts and aim to bridge those differences rather than just engaging in idle talk (Steiner & Reisinger, 2004). Culture shapes communication through patterns of thought, emotion, behaviour, and interaction (Neuliep, 2011), while language choice, communicative motivation, and interpersonal skills further influence communication competence (Spitzberg, 1991; Limpornpugdee et al., 2009).

Intercultural communication is a form of interpersonal communication between people aware of their cultural differences. Different cultural backgrounds can lead to misunderstandings due to different communication styles (Albu, 2015; Hall, 1990). Intercultural communication competency skills refer to a person's ability to adapt and understand culturally different individuals or communities. Defined by Byram (1997) as the ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries, ICC encompasses knowledge, motivation, and skills that enable individuals to adapt effectively in

intercultural settings. This competence is vital for effective communication between people from different cultures and peace, stability, and improved relationships between countries. It can also promote resource sustainability and values such as tolerance and diversity (Ilie, 2019). Language proficiency can also increase intercultural communication competence and help avoid misunderstandings.

Despite the recognised importance of intercultural communication in tourism, a critical gap remains in the context of turtle tourism in Terengganu. Experience-based tourism has increased direct interaction between local communities and international tourists, with these interactions often amplified through social media exposure. Yet, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the extent to which local communities involved in turtle conservation, particularly MEKAR members possess the intercultural communication competence required to navigate these encounters effectively. Factors such as the frequent use of local dialects, perceptions of tourists as outsiders, language barriers, and cultural differences may hinder communication and mutual understanding (Rızaoğlu, 2003; Whitley Jr. & Kite, 2016; Che Hassan & Ong Lok Tik, 2019). The absence of systematic assessment obscures whether these communicative challenges affect community engagement, hospitality practices, and the sustainability of conservation-based tourism initiatives.

Accordingly, the central research problem of this study lies in the lack of empirical, quantitative understanding of intercultural communication competence among community members engaged in turtle tourism and conservation in Terengganu. This study therefore seeks to assess the intercultural communication competence of the MEKAR community by examining three core components which is knowledge, motivation, and skills and to determine the community's effectiveness in communicating with foreign tourists. By addressing this gap, the study aims to contribute to more effective community-based conservation practices and to support the sustainable integration of tourism, hospitality, and intercultural engagement in Terengganu.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have consistently identified multiple factors that influence tourists' destination choices, including economic, environmental, cultural, and community-related elements (Mihai et al., 2023). While this body of work underscores the importance of local communities in enhancing tourism appeal (Ramely et. al., 2025; and fostering cultural pride (Thetsane, 2019; Afthanorhan et al., 2017), much of the literature treats community involvement as a broad, positive contributor rather than examining the specific communicative capacities that enable effective host–tourist interaction. Research on community integration in popular culture tourism (Lundberg et al., 2024) and indigenous cultural revival (Nguyen et al., 2025) attest to the fact that tourism flourishes when communities actively protect and promote their cultural identity. Studies focusing on Terengganu similarly emphasise hospitality, friendliness, cultural richness, and natural scenery as key attractions (Mohammed Hazaea et al., 2018), yet they offer limited insight into how communication practices shape tourists' experiences or how prepared local communities are for sustained intercultural engagement.

Although intercultural communication and tourism research frequently intersect, this intersection has largely been approached from a descriptive or sector-specific perspective (Kiełbasiewicz-Drozdowska & Radko, 2006). Language barriers are widely acknowledged as a central challenge in tourism

encounters (Isma Rosila, 2012, 2015; Gmelch, 1997), particularly in destinations where local dialects dominate daily interaction. Empirical studies in Malaysian island tourism contexts, such as Pulau Perhentian, have identified significant relationships between race, education, geography, language barriers, and dialect use among tourists and local communities (Samsudin et al., 2016). However, these studies tend to focus on visitor perceptions or surface-level interaction patterns, offering limited assessment of the communicative competence of local community members themselves. Similarly, research on multilingualism in retail and service settings in Kuala Terengganu reveals persistent linguistic challenges among service providers, including limited vocabulary and inaccurate pronunciation (Suhaimi & Abdullah, 2014), yet stops short of situating these challenges within a broader intercultural competence framework.

Research on English language use in tourism further highlights this limitation. Studies consistently demonstrate that tourism employees recognise the importance of English for communicating with international tourists (Che Hassan & Ong Lok Tik, 2019; Oliveira, 2015; Ramyar et al., 2020). Nonetheless, findings from rural homestay and community-based tourism contexts indicate that limited English proficiency constrains meaningful interaction, particularly in functions such as greeting, public speaking, negotiation, and experience sharing (Shuib et al., 2011). Comparable issues have been reported in international settings, including Japan, where inadequate communication skills among local residents negatively affect tourist satisfaction (Fujita et al., 2017). Despite this growing evidence, most studies remain centred on language proficiency rather than examining communication as a multidimensional competence involving motivation, cultural awareness, and behavioural skills.

The concept of communicative competence provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding intercultural interaction in tourism. Communicative competence extends beyond linguistic accuracy to include cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions that enable effective and appropriate interaction across cultures (Gudykunst, 1994; Chen & Starosta, 1996; Spitzberg, 2000). Scholars widely agree that motivation, knowledge, and skills constitute the core components of communicative competence (Gudykunst, 1994; Wiseman, 2003; Flaherty & Stojakovic, 2008). However, much of the empirical literature applying these models has focused on students, hospitality employees, or formal tourism professionals, rather than local community members engaged in informal or community-based tourism and conservation activities.

Recent studies in hospitality and tourism education further reinforce this imbalance. Jhaiyanuntana and Nomnjan (2020) demonstrated the importance of affective, cognitive, and skills-based components of intercultural communicative competence among Thai hotel interns, advocating for curricular integration of intercultural training. Similarly, Liu et al. (2022) found that intercultural attitudes among hospitality professionals significantly influence customer satisfaction, while Grobella (2015) emphasised experiential learning as a means of enhancing intercultural competence in tourism education. While these studies provide valuable insights into institutional and professional settings, they offer limited applicability to community-based conservation contexts, where participants are not formally trained tourism workers but local residents driven by environmental and cultural commitments.

Taken together, the existing literature reveals a clear research gap. Although intercultural communication competence is widely recognised as essential for effective tourism and hospitality interactions, there is a lack of empirical, quantitative research examining how this competence manifests among local community members involved in community-based conservation initiatives. In

particular, little is known about the intercultural communication competence of communities engaged in turtle tourism in Terengganu, such as MEKAR, despite their increasing interaction with international tourists. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how communication competence influences community participation, visitor experiences, and the long-term sustainability of conservation-based tourism.

METHODOLOGY

This study implemented a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach using a survey to describe the perceptions of intercultural communication competency among the members of MEKAR. The respondents of this study consisted of 187 members of MEKAR, aged between 18 and 56, who live in Ma'Daerah, Kemaman district, are passionate about protecting the turtle and often receive many tourists in their area.

The research used a 12-item scale to measure intercultural communication competency based on three components of Gudykunst's (1994): motivation, knowledge, and skills. The scale used a Likert's (1932) psychometric range of 1 to 5 points, with one being "strongly disagree" and five being "strongly agree". Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the respondents' levels of intercultural communication competency. Mean scores were divided into three categories based on Landell's (1997) interpretation: scores between 1.00 and 2.33 were considered low intercultural communication competency, scores between 2.34 and 3.67 were considered moderate, and scores between 3.68 and 5.00 were considered high intercultural communication competency.

The survey was distributed to the participants, and they were given two weeks to complete the survey and return it to the researcher. However, collecting and analysing the survey results took up to two months. The study lasted 24 months, from March 1, 2018, to March 30, 2019. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 was used to calculate each item's mean value and standard deviation. The survey was analysed, and the results were translated into findings. Descriptive statistics were performed, and the variables' mean values and standard deviations were calculated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The key findings of this study were categorised and interpreted into three key domains based on Gudykunst's (1994) components of communication competence: motivation, knowledge, and skills. The study was conducted on 85 male respondents (45%) and 102 female residents (55%), all members of the MEKAR community in Ma'Daerah, Kemaman, Terengganu. The following table shows each item's mean scores and standard deviations in the communication competency scale.

Motivation

The average respondents' motivation towards their communicative competence were rather high (mean = 3.71) (see Table 1).

Table 1

The respondents' motivation of communication competence.

No	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
1.	I am interested in knowing the cultural background of tourists from abroad	4.08	.617	High
2.	I enjoy talking to people from abroad and different cultures	4.13	.645	High
3.	I did not like to talk to people who could not speak English because of the difficulty in understanding them	3.15	1.154	Moderate
4.	I excited to communicate with people in different language and culture because i could build social skills	4.22	.648	High
Mean score		3.90		High

The results in Table 1 indicate that most items have a mean score ranging from 3.15 to 4.22, indicating a high level of motivation for communication competence among the respondents. For example, respondents expressed a strong interest in learning about the cultural background of foreign tourists (mean = 4.08) and enjoyed interacting with individuals from different cultures (mean = 4.13). This suggests that the local community is open to receiving tourists and may benefit from further cooperation with the tourism industry since the locals are the ones who initially met and interacted with the visitor, their support is crucial (Kazakova et al., 2021). The findings also highlight the proactive role of local communities as culturally responsive hosts who not only welcome tourists but actively embrace intercultural engagement as a form of continuous learning. This aligns with prior studies suggesting that positive affective orientations towards tourists are foundational to sustainable tourism development (Adam et al., 2019; Nordin et al., 2020). The support and involvement of residents in promoting tourist destinations might affect how satisfied visitors are overall (Erdem, 2024).

The ability to speak English is important for the locals to be willing to receive tourists. While the respondents were excited to communicate with tourists of different languages and cultures because it can help them improve their social skills (mean = 4.22), they found it challenging when tourists could not speak English, and they did not like to talk because it was difficult to understand them (mean = 3.15). While English is widely accepted as a common language for communication among people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Jenkins, 2009) and plays an important role in the tourism industry (Ramyar et al., 2020), it is no longer sufficient in today's globalised world. In fact, proficiency in multiple foreign languages is essential for successful communication in the tourism industry (Uchenna et al., 2020). Lack of language fluency can create barriers in cross-cultural interactions. It is not only important to improve command of the English language, but also to learn multiple languages and basic cultural skills to help locals overcome communication barriers with visitors who are not native speakers. In addition to improving the caliber of cross-cultural interactions, this dedication to lifelong learning creates a solid basis for neighborhood-based conservation initiatives. Motivated individuals willing to learn multiple languages can become successful communicators in intercultural communication, even with limited language skills.

Knowledge

The second domain of communication competence is knowledge. Table 2 indicates that, in general, the respondents' communication competence is high (mean = 4.04).

Table 2

The respondents' knowledge of communication competence

No	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
1.	I know foreign tourists don't like or get disappointed when they show acts like raising an eyebrow or silence.	3.70	.901	High
2.	I Know That Tourists from Japan Are Fulfilling Time	4.32	.726	High
3.	I Know Some Foreign Tourists Who Come from Various Countries Have Beliefs and Taboos.	3.99	.797	High
4.	I will help friends who were difficult to communicate with foreign tourists	4.18	.614	High
Mean score		4.04		High

The findings of this study showed that the respondents had a high level of knowledge when it came to understanding other cultures, particularly concerning time and non-verbal communication. In particular, the respondents had a high understanding of Japanese tourists' punctuality (mean = 4.32) and that foreign tourists may be disappointed by certain non-verbal behaviours (mean = 3.70). According to Hofstede (2001), understanding cultural dimensions such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term orientations can help analyse and understand other cultures. These findings suggest that the respondents strongly understand cultural differences, particularly regarding time and non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication plays a significant role in intercultural interactions and can strongly impact the message being conveyed. In a study involving tourists in Malaysia, respondents indicated that they understood non-verbal signals such as lifting their eyes or remaining silent as a sign of dissatisfaction or disappointment with the services provided. The respondents also demonstrated a good understanding of the different cultural backgrounds of the tourists and a helpful attitude, with a mean score of 4.18 on a scale of willingness to assist friends who may have difficulty communicating with foreign tourists due to cultural differences. In order to effectively communicate across cultures, it is important to pay attention to and carefully observe the many non-verbal signals being sent through gestures and other means (Zhu et al., 2019).

There are several reasons why some people may be reluctant to speak in English, such as feeling embarrassed or anxious about making mistakes, lacking sufficient language skills, or lacking self-confidence (Khudobina et al., 2019; Aoyama & Takahashi, 2020). However, studies have shown that peer support can positively influence learners' attitudes towards learning a foreign language and

enhance their motivation and confidence in their self-perceived communication competence and willingness to communicate (Getie, 2020; Kalsoom et al., 2020; Ducker, 2021). This suggests that social support from friends can be an essential factor in helping people overcome their reluctance to speak a foreign language.

Every culture has unique characteristics and customs, including norms around trust and taboos. In a study involving respondents in Malaysia, it was found that respondents had a high level of understanding of the trust and taboo customs of foreign tourists from various countries (mean = 3.99). Taboo is a sensitive issue in intercultural communication, and it is important to respect these customs to avoid offending or causing discomfort to others (Rui, 2019). The respondents in this study demonstrated a positive attitude towards intercultural communication, which is essential for smooth and effective exchanges and helps to create a positive image of Malaysians as welcoming and respectful hosts, potentially encouraging more tourists to visit the country.

Cultural knowledge is an important factor in intercultural communication, and professionals in the hospitality industry need to be aware of and understand the cultural backgrounds of their guests in order to provide the best possible service and demonstrate professional behaviour (Lashley, 2017). Recognising and respecting cultural differences, including customs and taboos, can help to reduce anxiety and improve communication effectiveness (Gudykunst, 1998). However, it is important to note that prior discussions have tended to undervalue cultural knowledge's dynamic, contextual, and multi-layered nature in favor of portraying it as a static collection of facts concerning taboos, conventions, and behaviors. In the increasingly complex reality of global tourism, visitors now embody a hybrid identity shaped by globalization, mobility, and cross-border encounters rather than a single cultural identity. Developing multicultural awareness and being mindful and self-aware can also help people better understand and navigate cultural differences to communicate effectively across cultural divides.

Skill

The third domain of communication competence is the skills to interact with the foreign. Table 3 indicates that, in general, the respondents possessed such skills at a high level (mean = 4.20).

Table 3

The respondents' skills in communication

No	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
1.	I do not whisper in a group when discussing because it can lead to misunderstanding, and it is not good for tourists to see	4.14	.779	High
2.	I know in Malaysia, we eat in warungs, and Malaysians love spicy food. If there are foreign tourists, however, I will take them to a restaurant that specialises in food they would like.	4.15	3.735	High

3.	I would like to extend my warmest congratulations to the tourists since I believe this is the best method for reflecting Malaysia's heritage and values	4.28	.556	High
4.	I will adapt to the cultural differences of foreign tourists to ensure their comfort	4.22	.614	High
Mean score		4.20		High

The results presented in table 3 suggest that the respondents in this study had strong communication skills, with a mean score of 4.20. They also demonstrated a high level of awareness of appropriate behaviour in public conversations, with a mean score of 4.14, and were willing to adapt to the preferences of tourists, such as eating at a restaurant rather than a street stall, to celebrate cultural differences and avoid misunderstandings or creating an unpleasant atmosphere. This shows that the respondents had excellent communication skills and could navigate intercultural interactions effectively.

Effective communication skills are crucial in the tourism industry, as they are necessary for building relationships and collaborating with others (Ezzat, 2017; Jiang & Alexakis, 2017; Wesley, 2017). The results of the study mentioned in the sentence show that the respondents had high levels of communication skills and were willing to celebrate the presence of tourists and accommodate their cultural differences in order to showcase the beauty of Malaysian culture and ensure the comfort of foreign tourists (mean=4.28 and mean=4.22, respectively). Soft skills, such as communicating and showing affection towards tourists, handling difficult situations, and accommodating cultural differences, are also important for ensuring tourist satisfaction and creating a positive impression of an organisation (Rienda et. al., 2024; Sitompul et al., 2019). Communication skills should also not be seen as a basic interpersonal competence that is oriented towards customer satisfaction, without addressing the dimensions of power, cultural representation and the formation of destination images in a more structural way. The practice of "celebrating" visitors is not just a hospitality tactic in Malaysia's multicultural setting, but also a means of informal cultural diplomacy and national identity negotiation.

CONCLUSION

This study found that respondents demonstrated a strong welcome and celebration of tourists and a willingness to engage in lifelong learning by adapting to and understanding the languages and cultures of other races to ensure the comfort of tourists. Such dedication to lifelong learning is essential as it fosters a continuous evolution of skills and knowledge, enabling local communities to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures—benefiting both their own personal growth and the broader tourist experience.

While the local communities showcased strong communication skills with the highest mean score among the dimensions of intercultural communication competence, the findings also underscore the importance of sustained educational efforts. These include the need for ongoing language development, such as short-term English courses, to assist local residents in bridging communication gaps with non-

native tourists. This commitment to lifelong learning not only enhances the quality of intercultural exchanges but also builds a resilient foundation for community-based conservation efforts.

Furthermore, the study recommends enhancing infrastructure and initiating continual learning programs that involve residents at tourist destinations. Such initiatives can facilitate effective intercultural communication and prevent the emergence of negative stereotypes or communication barriers, often a result of cultural misunderstandings. Ultimately, this research provides valuable insights into the dynamics of intercultural communication and the critical role that lifelong learning plays in ensuring sustainable and positive interactions among global communities in conservation settings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Ismail, I. R., Che Noh, C. H., Set, K., & Rusli, M. U. conceptualised the study and designed the methodology. Ismail, I. R. & Set, K. conducted the fieldwork and collected the data. Ismail, I. R. & Abdul Aziz, N. A. performed the statistical analysis. Ismail, I. R. & Rusli, M. U. wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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