Research Article

Development Of ICC-Box to Enrich Intercultural Communication Among Asian ESL/EFL Speakers

Nor Syamimi Iliani Che Hassan[1]*, Siti Ainul Ayzan Ayub[2], Nor Hairunnisa Mohammad Nor[3] and Wan Muhammad Fitri Wan Amir Nizam[4]

[1]   Universiti Teknologi MARA Kelantan Branch; syami@uitm.edu.my; 0009-0009-7470-7213

[2]   Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam; ainul058@uitm.edu.my;

[3]   Universiti Teknologi MARA Kelantan Branch; nisa032@uitm.edu.my; 0009-0003-5912-7903

[4]   Universiti Teknologi MARA Kelantan Branch; wmfitri@uitm.edu.my; 0009-0002-8801-1400

*   Correspondence: syami@uitm.edu.my

Abstract: *Globalization transforms the world into a highly connected and interdependent space. The modern era has expanded globalization practices to the academia. For higher education, global prominence is included as one of the aspirations to strengthen Malaysia as an educational hub. One of the key initiatives suggested is by fostering collaborations with international educational institutions to equip students with instrumental knowledge and skills which they can apply in an increasingly competitive global environment. Nonetheless, globalization can lead to cross-cultural communication issues among students if they have not developed cultural intelligence to help them understand other cultures well. To overcome some of these issues, ICC-Box (Intercultural Communication Box) has been developed and incorporated in oral communication activities in a multicultural classroom which consisted of Malaysian, Chinese and Indonesian students at UiTM Kelantan Branch. A survey was conducted to gather the students' perceptions of ICC-Box. The results from the survey indicated that the students held positive perception towards intercultural communication, suitability to students, utilitarian, and general learning content attributes of ICC-Box. By adopting the Communicative Language Teaching Approach, ICC-Box offers students the opportunities to interact and learn more about cultural similarities and differences with their international counterparts without feeling highly concerned about their English language competence.*

Keywords: communicative language teaching; intercultural communication; cultural intelligence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization transforms the world into a highly connected and interdependent space. Previously, globalization was more frequently practised by traders from silk to spices (National Geographic Society. (n.d.). The modern era has expanded globalization practices to the academia. In the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 for higher education, global prominence is included as one of the aspirations to strengthen Malaysia as an educational hub. One of the key initiatives suggested is by fostering collaborations (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2015) that will enhance the competitiveness and elevate the standard of Malaysian higher education. Malaysian higher educational institutions have been encouraged to embrace globalization through various efforts from establishing academic collaborations to carrying out social responsibility projects with international educational institutions. Fostering partnerships with international educational institutions can help equip students

with instrumental knowledge and skills which they can apply in an increasingly competitive global environment. UiTM as a public higher educational institution aspires to become a globally renowned university in science, technology, humanities and entrepreneurship. Among the efforts that have been carried out are establishing partnership and collaboration with African, Asian, American, European and Oceanian countries, and conducting mobility programmes such as student exchange and summer programmes (Universiti Teknologi MARA. (n.d.).

Despite the benefits gained by students, globalization does present its own set of challenges. One of the major concerns is cross-cultural communication issues as students are expected to connect and communicate with others who are outside their own cultures. The common barriers to effective intercultural communication are misunderstanding, norms and roles, beliefs and values, stereotyping and ethnocentrism (Jenifer & Raman, 2015). In order to establish a higher educational institution as a globally renowned university, foreign language competence (e.g., English, Chinese, French, etc.) must be incorporated with responsibility and respect towards other cultures (Catana, 2014). To attain this communication standard, we develop a kit which can be incorporated in oral communication activities in a multicultural classroom.

This kit, named ICC-Box which is an abbreviation for Intercultural Communication Box, is developed based on the following objectives:
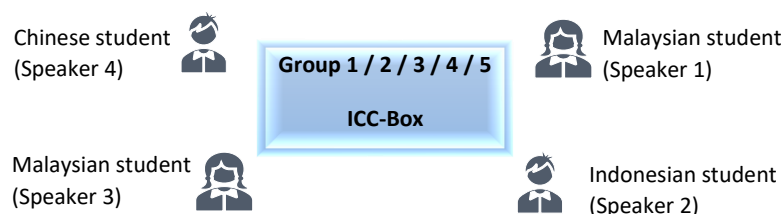
1. To mitigate students' anxiety in an intercultural academic setting.

2. To encourage students to communicate actively in an intercultural encounter.

3. To increase students' awareness and understanding of cultural diversity.

ICC-Box is a learning kit that is designed based on the Communicative Language Teaching Approach. The basis of this approach lies in developing students' communicative competence rather than grammatical competence because mastering the grammatical aspects and sentence formation of a language does not guarantee meaningful and successful interaction (Richards, 2005). Another theory that underlies ICC-Box is cultural intelligence with which one will be competent to communicate effectively in intercultural encounters (Ang, Dyne & Rockstuhl, 2015). Thus, to facilitate students' development of communicative competence and cultural intelligence, ICC-Box seeks to encourage students to talk about their own cultures with others. Students will do this by using the strips provided in ICC-Box which have questions related to cultural topics such as family, food, school, festival and relationship. The recommended duration for the ICC-Box activity is one to two hours depending on the group size (e.g. 5 – 6 members per group). More details of implementation of the ICC-Box activity will be provided in the next section.

2. METHOD IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ICC-BOX ACTIVITY

The initial stage of ICC-Box development commenced in 2023 and was piloted in the Summer Camp held at UiTM Kelantan Branch. 10, 12 and 8 undergraduate students from Malaysia, China and Indonesia respectively joined the Summer Camp. ICC-Box was then refined and applied in a temporary multicultural English language classroom. The project was carried out with a group of 59 Malaysian students, 6 Indonesian students and 5 Chinese students. During the project, the Indonesian and Chinese students were undergoing their internship at a public university in Kelantan, Malaysia. The internship was one of the internalisation efforts practised by the university. As for the Malaysian students, they were undergraduate students at the university. All students were between 18 to 22 years old. A questionnaire was developed to obtain students' feedback about the kit. The items in the questionnaire were adapted from Nimehchisalem and Mukundan (2013). The main components included in the ICC-Box questionnaire were intercultural communication, suitability to students, utilitarian attributes, and general learning content. The rating scale is from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

First, the Malaysian students were instructed to break out into five groups. One Chinese student and one Indonesian student were assigned to every group so that each group has at least one member of a different culture. This created a group of mixed cultures of Malaysian, Chinese and Indonesian, hence, the students were encouraged to sit alternately by their culture. This strategy was a means to prevent inherent sense of racism and inequality among them. Every group member would label themselves as speaker 1, 2, 3, et cetera in a clockwise order. This strategy would ensure the activity to be conducted in a proper order and every student would participate in the activity.

Chinese student
(Speaker 4)

Group 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5

ICC-Box

Malaysian student
(Speaker 1)

Malaysian student
(Speaker 3)

Indonesian student
(Speaker 2)

Each group was given an ICC-Box. The lecturer explained the steps in using ICC-Box to students as follows:

Student 1 will begin the activity by randomly picking out one paper strip. No one is permitted to look inside the box. The student, who has the question strip, will read/ask the question aloud to the group members.

Every group member will take turn to answer the question. Student 1 must answer the question too because this is activity is a means for all students to share information about their culture.

When all members have answered the question, the next speaker e.g. student 2 will resume asking another question by repeating steps 1 and 2.

Students must make sure that the question strips that have been used are kept separately from the unused ones to avoid repeating the same questions.

The activity ends if all question strips in the ICC-Box have been used or if the time ends.
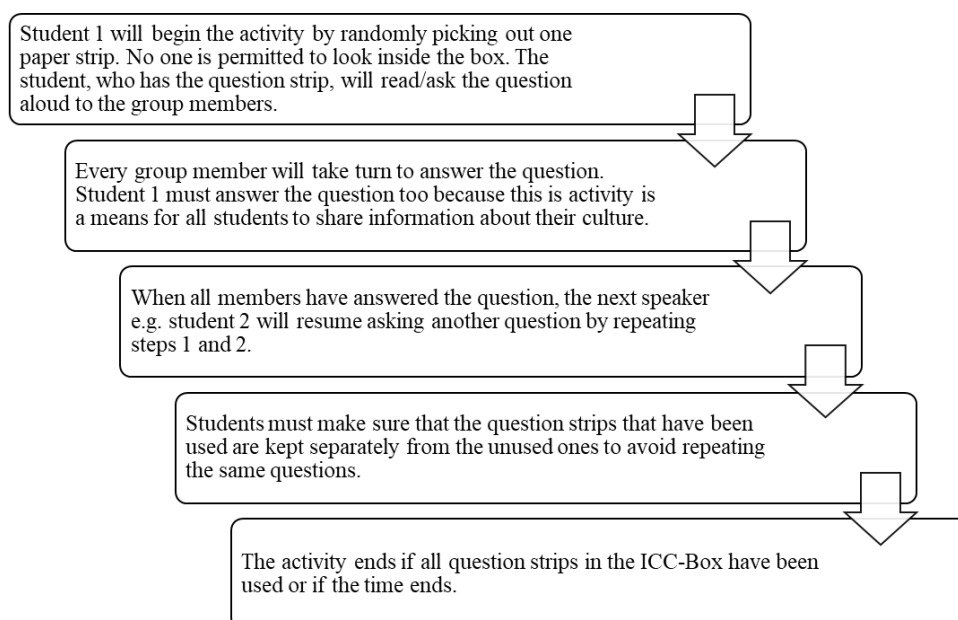
Figure 1: Steps in Using ICC-Box in An Intercultural Group Discussion

3. FINDINGS

The questionnaire has been tested for its reliability. The table below indicates the value achieved for the internal reliability.

Table 1: Reliability of the instrument

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.915	16

The questionnaire consisted of 16 items. The value achieved for reliability coefficient is α=.915. This indicates a considerably high reliability of the instrument used in the ICC-Box activity.

The next tables reveal the reliability coefficients of the four subscales in the questionnaire. For the first subscale (intercultural communication) which consisted of five items, the reliability coefficient achieved was α=.799. The value indicated an acceptable level of reliability of the subscale.

Table 2: Reliability of Intercultural Communication Subscale

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.799	5

Table 3 shows the value of internal consistency of the second subscale, suitability to students. The subscale consisted of four items. The value, α=.838 indicated a good level of reliability of the subscale.

Table 3: Reliability of Suitability to Students Subscale

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.838	4

Table 3 reveals the reliability coefficient achieved for the third subscale, utilitarian attributes. There were three items in the subscale. The value achieved was α=.588 which meant that the subscale had a low level of internal consistency.

Table 4: Reliability of Utilitarian Attributes

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.588	3

Table 4 shows the reliability coefficient achieved for the fourth subscale, general learning content which comprised four items. The value achieved was α=.821. This value indicates a good level of internal consistency.

Table 5: Reliability of General Learning Content

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.821	4

The next figures present the mean values for the four subscales. As shown in Figure 1, the mean values were within the range of 4.1 to 4.6 suggesting that the students agreed that ICC-Box could be used for intercultural communication. The highest mean was generated for item I1, M=4.6286. This means that the students agreed that ICC-Box could be implemented in class to communicate with people from different cultures.

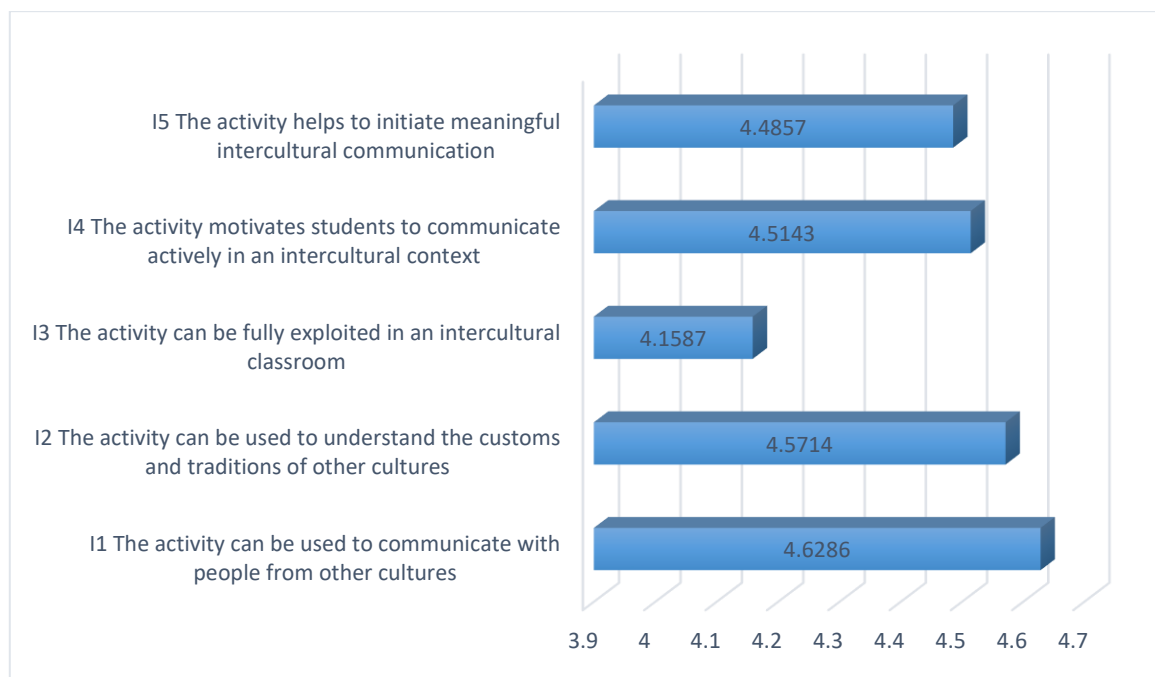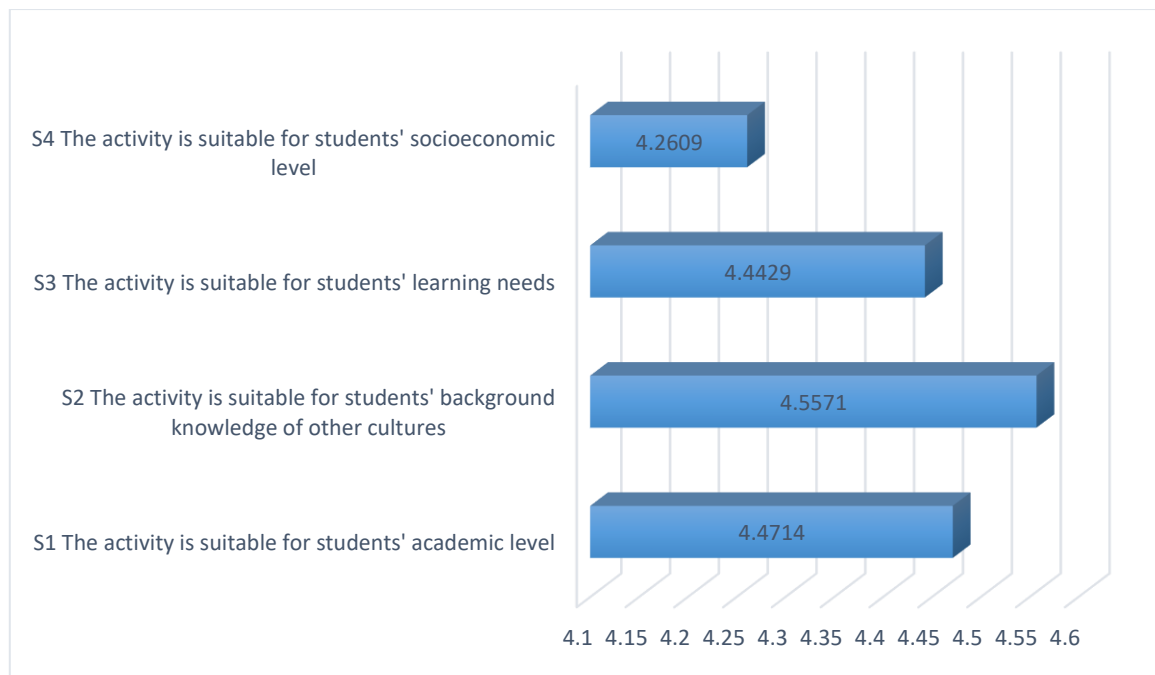Figure 1: Mean for Intercultural Communication Subscale

Figure 2 shows the mean values for the subscale of suitability to students. For this subscale, the highest mean is indicated by item S2, M=4.5571. Hence, it suggests that while using ICC-Box, the students had incorporated their background knowledge about Chinese, Malaysian or Indonesian cultures which could help increase their knowledge of these cultures.

Figure 2: Mean for Suitability to Students Subscale

In Figure 3, the highest mean for the utilitarian subscale was generated by item U1, M=4.4857. The students agreed that using ICC-Box for an intercultural communication activity with international students was interesting. Perhaps, these students had little or no experience interacting with students from other countries. Hence, by participating in this activity, they had the opportunity to meet fellow students from different cultures and learn more about them.
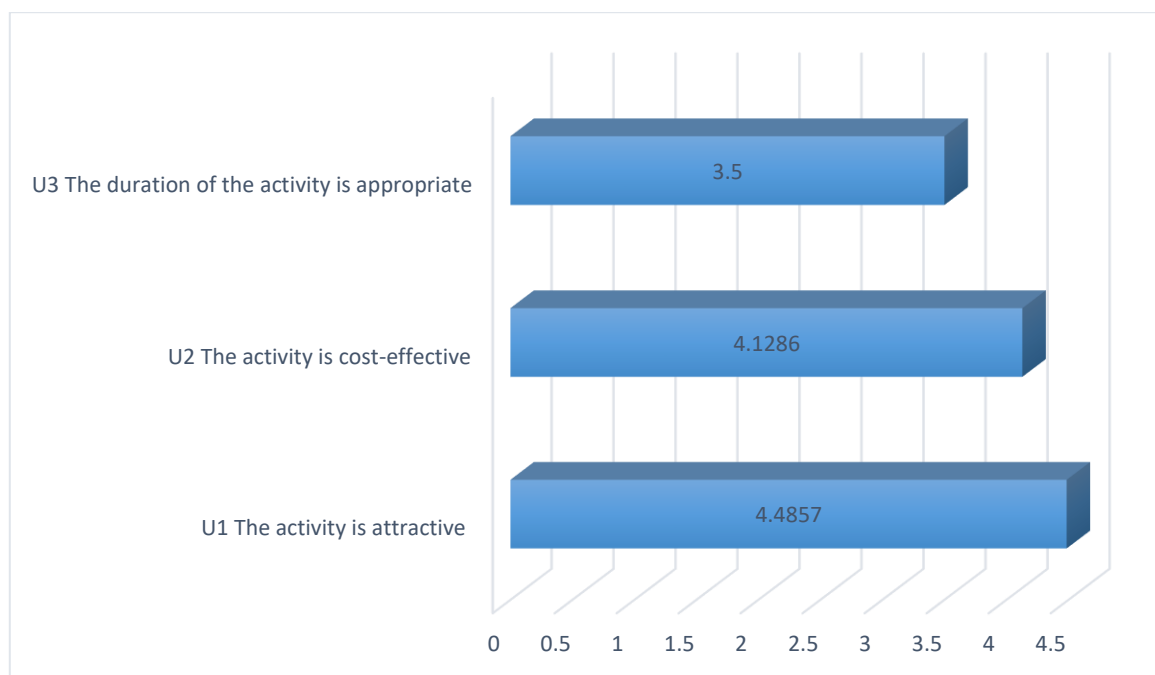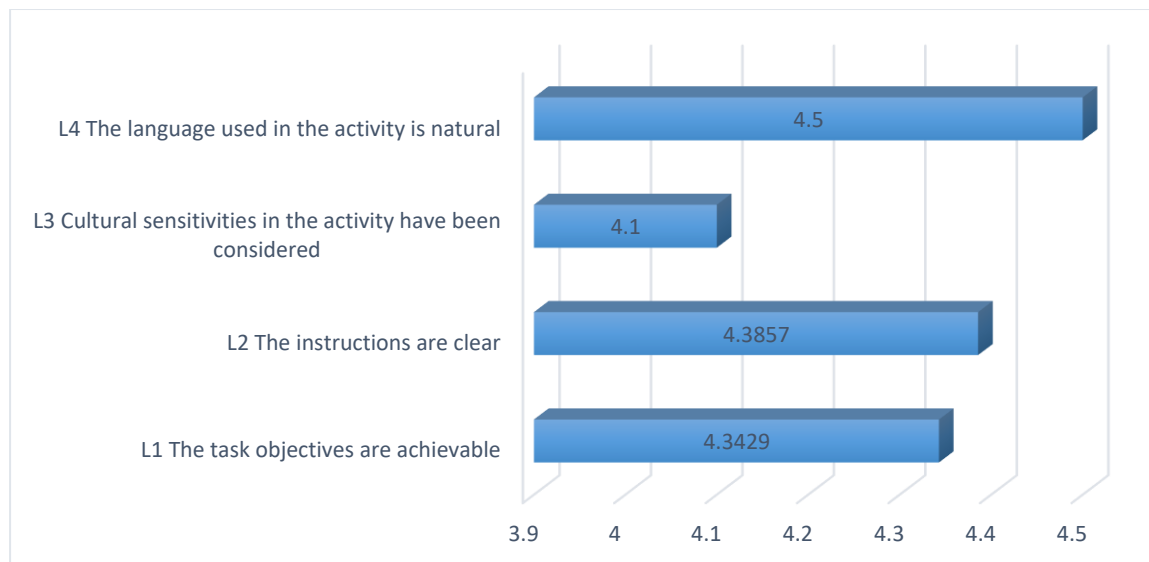
Figure 3: Mean for Utilitarian Subscale

Figure 4 shows the mean values of the general learning content subscale. The highest mean was indicated by item L3, M=4.3857. The students agreed that the instructions explained by the lecturer were clear. This was proven by the smooth administration of the activity.

Figure 4: Mean for General Learning Content Subscale

4. DISCUSSION

The results presented earlier showed that the students had a positive perception towards the ICC-Box activity. This was indicated in their responses to the items in every subscale. The development of ICC-Box has taken into consideration the essential elements recommended by Nimehchisalem and Mukundan (2013). Furthermore, this activity emphasises student-centredness in which the students carry out the activity independently under lecturers' facilitation. By using ICC-Box, the students had opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions with their international counterparts using English as a lingua franca (Courtney, 2020). This activity also fulfils three out of four criteria of communicative activities: fun, meaningful and interactive activity (Courtney, 2020). The fourth criteria, routine activity has not yet been implemented because the students did not meet frequently and did not attend common classes.

In addition, the target macro skill in the ICC-Box activity is speaking. Although this skill is perceived as the most challenging (Tran & Duong, 2018), the students managed to complete the speaking test successfully. The underlying factor could be owing to their own positive attitudes towards intercultural communication which can encourage them to have more flexibility towards other cultures (Davis, 2005). Through the meaningful interactions with their international counterparts, students are progressing towards developing cultural intelligence which is a key attribute in effective intercultural communication (Ivenz & Blanka, 2022). Through this activity, the students were exposed to cultural values and expectations that were different from theirs. Therefore, not only did the students reinforce their speaking skills, but they also had the chance to enrich their knowledge about other cultures and enhance their cultural intelligence.

5. CONCLUSION

The first version of ICC-Box was specially designed for one of the mini projects during the Summer Camp held in 2023. This led to the development of a second, better version of the kit which still serves the same primary purpose of encouraging students to communicate in a multicultural setting and enrich their intercultural communication experience. Despite variations in the English

language proficiency among the students, e.g. ESL vs EFL and basic vs intermediate, all students demonstrated enthusiasm while participating in the activity. Adopting the communicative language teaching approach, the ICC-Box activity pays minimal attention on students' grammatical accuracy and sentence construction. Nonetheless, the situational practices using the kit are useful for improving students' knowledge and understanding of English language use and putting their knowledge into practice (Dos Santos, 2020). In short, by adopting the communicative language teaching approach, ICC-Box has contributed to students' development of their English language learning process and cultural intelligence for effective intercultural communication. The success of ICC-Box lies in the future application of this kit in wider multicultural settings such as those which involve more Asian cultures and cultures from other continental regions.

Instruction on References and In-Text Citation

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