

Communication in Intercultural Marriage: A Chinese-Indonesian Bride in A Taiwanese Family

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ABSTRACT

The number of intercultural marriages is increasing globally over time. In Indonesia, around 10% of the total population of Indonesian did lifetime migration which implies the high possibility of intercultural marriage. The couple must have several problems with communication due to different cultural and educational backgrounds. Therefore in this study, the researcher intends to find out the communication problems related to language and culture between a Chinese-Indonesian wife and a Taiwanese husband, and how they manage the problems using the communication competence they develop over cultural differences. The findings suggest that the wife sometimes has language misinterpretation with her parents-in-law due to the inability to speak Taiwanese. In relevance to culture, the wife employs *sungkan* on many occasions, while the husband is affected by the patriarchal culture and money-saving habits of the Taiwanese. Knowledge and skills are essential for the couple to manage their communication problem.

Key words: Intercultural marriage; intercultural communication; communication competence; communication problems

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural marriage is a marriage between people coming from different cultural backgrounds. The trend of intercultural marriage is gradually increasing over time. In America, for example, Lewis and Ford-Robertson (2010) showed the occurrence of intercultural marriage increased from 3,2% in 1980 to 5,6% in 2000, and further increased to 8,4% in 2010. Spörlein and friends (2014) also showed that during 1880-2011 in America, the percentage of endogamy (marriage from the same cultural background) has decreased from approximately 60-70% in 1880 to 40-50% in 2000.

In Indonesia, Lembaga Masyarakat Perkawinan Campuran Indonesia (Perca) has several obstacles in calculating the numbers of intercultural marriage; therefore, there is no exact data of the occurrence of intercultural marriage yet (Amin, 2015). However, recent data from the Badan Pusat Statistik in Indonesia shows that 27.975.612 people (approximately 10% of the total population of Indonesia in 2021) are doing lifetime migration. Badan Pusat Statistik states that a person is categorized as a lifetime migration if the province or district/city where the person was born is different from the province or district/city where he/she resides at the time the migration process is made. Seeing from the data, we can indirectly conclude that the occurrence of intercultural marriage will be relatively high.

Although the number is increasing, intercultural marriage couples still have a lot of problems. One of the external problems is the different views or acceptance from society. Wang (2012) shows that as many as 43% of Americans stated that marrying people of a different race has brought a good impact on society, while 11% said that they could not accept intercultural marriage and another 44% said that there is no difference when marrying someone from another race. Coming from different cultural backgrounds, they also have some internal problems to deal with. Pratamawaty (2017) shows that conflicts within intercultural marriage are mostly due

to the different mindsets of the couple, therefore, require understanding and adaptation from each other. Other potential internal problems including communication hardships due to different languages, different views in educating children, the different goals of life, etc.

The researcher intends to find out the communication problems related to language and culture between a Chinese-Indonesian wife and a Taiwanese husband. The researcher also intends to find out how they manage the problems using the communication competence they develop over cultural differences.

As the occurrence of intercultural marriage is gradually increasing, the intercultural couple must have a lot of communication problems due to different cultural backgrounds. The researcher hopes to ask the questions: what are the communication problems related to language and culture between a Chinese-Indonesian wife and a Taiwanese husband? How do they manage the problems using the communication competence they develop over cultural differences?

The findings of this study will benefit Indonesian society considering that more and more Indonesian are doing lifetime migration and potentially be involved in intercultural marriage. The Indonesian government can be more aware of the communication problem encountered by the migrants in forming a new family, thus deciding how to help them. This study will also provide a better understanding of the communication between Indonesian wives and foreign husbands, hence helping to improve their harmonious relationship. For the researcher/s, this study will be a useful reference for any study in the field of intercultural marriage and intercultural communication.

The researcher used the theory of intercultural communication and intercultural communication competence because this study mainly focuses on the communication problems between intercultural marriage couples and how they solve them using the Rainbow Model of intercultural communication competence (ICC) by Kupka (2007). Any other theories related to ICC are not discussed in this paper. This research also limits the communication problems concerning language and culture only.

A family in Surabaya was interviewed to collect the data needed in this research. The family is formed by a Taiwanese Husband and a Chinese Indonesian wife. They speak Indonesian at home because the wife knows little Chinese while the husband can speak Indonesian fluently, so they may have fewer communication problems related to language than usual intercultural couples. However, they have married since 2003, so the researcher believes they are the right respondent as they must have experienced many hardships in the family due to cultural differences.

METHOD

This study was conducted in 5 months using an ethnographic method, a research approach where you look at people in their cultural setting, with the goal of producing a narrative account of that particular culture, against a theoretical backdrop, to answer the research question. The research used a qualitative approach which is a semi-structured interview in the data collection process.

The interview was conducted online via *Whatsapp* due to covid-19. The information was collected from a cross-border marriage couple consisting of a Taiwanese man and a Chinese-Indonesian wife. First, the researcher collected a group of such couples as the informant candidates. Next, a purposive sampling technique to select the best informant for data

collection. After that, the interview was conducted several times to get data from the informant. After the data collected, the data was categorized into a matrix based on the “rainbow model” of Kupka (2007).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researcher will report the findings from the data collected. However, since this is ethnographic research, background information about the interviewee is necessary to help better understanding. Then the communication problems related to language and culture and the communication competences will be displayed.

Background Information

Before reporting the findings, basic information about the respondents is necessary for a comprehensive understanding. The respondents are a couple of consists of a Taiwanese husband and a Chinese Indonesian wife. The husband (46) came from Taipei, and the wife (44) was born in Surabaya. They are now living in Surabaya. They used to live in Jakarta until around 5 years ago. They have got 2 children, a daughter (16) and a son (10), studying in Surabaya.

The couple has been married since 2003. The husband following his Taiwanese parents moved from Taipei to Jakarta in the 1980s. He completed his 6-year high school education in Jakarta. In 1996, both the husband and wife attended a university in London. After finishing their study in 2000, they went back to Jakarta to start their business which is an expedition container.

Religion may not be necessary to be included in this study; however, there is something worth to be mentioned. The husband’s family members are Buddhist, and he is the first son in his family. Generally, the first son or the only son in the Taiwanese family needs to follow his parents’ religion. However, the husband became a Christian before married without his parents’ disapproval.

Language Used

To answer the first research question: what are the communication problems related to language and culture between them? It is necessary what languages are mastered by both the husband and the wife and whether there are language barriers between them. The husband as Taiwanese can speak Taiwanese and Hokkien fluently, as they are his mother tongue. The husband can also speak Indonesian, precisely Chinese Indonesian fluently. As stated in the background information section, the husband has moved to Indonesia in his teens, which means he has been living in Indonesia for more than 30 years. He has been influenced a lot by the Javanese around him during school and work, which makes people hard to find out the fact that he came from Taiwan as he could speak the Chinese Indonesian language in Javanese accent with some Javanese language very well. In addition, he can also speak English very well since he learned English during high school and studied in London. The wife, as a Chinese Indonesian in Java, masters the Chinese Indonesian, and Javanese language. She can also speak English as she also learned English during high school and studied in London. However, having married to Taiwanese husband for around 20 years, she can only speak a little Chinese to the extent that she could pronounce her husband’s name wrongly. Her husband’s name has a Chinese character 凱 (pinyin: Kai3) . In Chinese, pinyin “kai” is pronounced with the airflow out from the mouth, as we pronounce “khai”. However, the wife pronounced it as “kai”, which is wrong. In addition, she pronounced some Chinese words during the interview with the wrong tones. For instance, 敬酒 (pinyin:jing4 jiu3) was pronounced jing1 jiu, 拜拜 (pinyin: bai4 bai4) was pronounced bai1 bai3.

Communication Problems related to Language

Communication problem refers to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of other people's meanings while talking (AlleyDog, n.d.). Intercultural marriage couple generally has a lot of communication problems related to language due to the language barrier. However, this couple experienced little to no communication problems related to language because even though the wife can only handle a little bit of Chinese, they can still employ Chinese Indonesian as the dominant language in their daily conversation. Furthermore, both of them can speak English very well. Therefore, there is no language barrier between the couple.

However, the wife finds it hard to communicate with her parents-in-law. Although having worked in Indonesia for more than 20 years, her parents-in-law can only speak a little Indonesian. They can only speak Chinese and Hokkian, which the wife can't handle. The wife relies most on his husband's interpretation when talking with her parents-in-law. However, sometimes there is still misunderstanding when her husband interpreting to her parents-in-law due to language meanings. For example, once when she and her husband went to Taiwan visiting her parents-in-law, the wife said "kami mau pergi keluar makan malam" (meaning: we are going out for dinner, note that the wife said "kami"), and asked her husband to tell her mother-in-law. In Indonesian, there are two words to refer to "we" in English. They are "kami", which does not include the addressee while speaking, and "kita", which includes the addressee while speaking. The use of "kami" in her saying means that the ones going out for dinner are only her and her husband. However, the husband told his parents "我们要出去吃晚饭

" (meaning: we are going out for dinner). The use of "我们" is the same as "we" in English, which is unclear whether the addressee is included or not. Therefore, her mother-in-law misunderstood the messages and prepared to go out with the couple, which differs from the initial meaning of the wife's message.

Communication Problem Related to Culture

Intercultural marriage couples will have cultural problems in their communication due to different cultural backgrounds. Despite having no language barrier, the couple also has different attitudes when dealing with several things in their daily life as they were born in different places. The researcher finds that the wife employs Javanese attitude *sungkan* on some occasions, and the husband is affected by the patriarchal culture and money-saving habits of Taiwanese.

One of the common Javanese attitudes *sungkan* is employed by the wife. Hildred Geertz (1961) describes *sungkan* as "a feeling of respectful politeness before a superior or an unfamiliar equal", and as "the graceful constraint of one's personality out of deference to the other person." When the wife experienced the aforementioned miscommunication with her mother-in-law, she did not directly correct her mother-in-law by saying that "我们" refers to only herself and her husband, but rather she went out alongside her mother-in-law. In this case, the wife employed *sungkan* because if she tried to correct her mother-in-law (superior), it might be disrespectful. On another occasion, she added that there were more restrictions when she was in Taiwan. The researcher believes that the restrictions she felt in Taiwan are not only due to her inability to speak Taiwanese, but also *sungkan* in front of her parents-in-law. For example, she needed to pay more attention to Chinese dining etiquette when eating together in Taiwan. She would be considered rude or disrespectful to her superior, or her parents-in-law if she did not.

As for the Taiwanese husband, the patriarchal culture of Taiwan seems to affect some of his way of thinking during their marriage. Patriarchy refers to a social structure where the actions and ideas of men are dominant over those of women (Soman, 2009). Traditional Taiwanese expect that women should focus on housework such as child-rearing and cooking, and men

should be more superior than women. During the interview, the wife pointed out that her husband often expects her to do house jobs such as cleaning and cooking, which is bound to traditional patriarchal thinking. This also can be seen from their different attitude in educating their children. In the interview, the wife said that her husband has more expectation for their son, therefore, is more strict with the son, expecting the son to be fearless and responsible because he is the future leader and breadwinner of the family. The husband also added “my daughter is other’s in the future, she will follow her husband after marriage.” His saying implicated that he would “invest” more on his son rather than his daughter, meaning he would focus more on his son than his daughter. Therefore, His patriarchal thinking resulted in some unfair treatment toward his children. If the son does something inappropriate, for instance not getting a good score in school subjects, her husband will scold him strictly to the extent of physical punishments. On the other hand, if the daughter does something wrong, her husband sometimes turns a blind eye to her mistakes.

The husband, coming from a traditional Taiwanese family, has also inherited money-saving habits of the Taiwanese. The high money-saving habits rate in Taiwan is considered as one of the key factors contributing to the rapid growth of Taiwan and the other newly industrialized economies (NIEs) in East Asia in the past quarter-century (Athukorala & Tsai, 2003). Therefore, he tends to be more frugrative and independent in the family. Once, he was displeased when he knew his daughter bought a lot of clothes and cosmetics because he thought it was a waste of money. He also rarely eating outside home or ordering food online because he thought the restaurants are expensive even though he is financially sufficient. This is different from most Indonesian because in 2019 before the covid 19 pandemic, 58% of Indonesian prefer ordering food through apps such as *Gojek* and *Grab* (Lingga, 2019), and the number further increased to 70% during the pandemic (Intan, 2021). He also is more independent. He tends to do things by himself without assistance from others. The wife pointed out that although there is a servant in their house, the husband rarely asks her to do things, but rather doing the house jobs such as cooking and cleaning by himself. His money-saving habit has also resulted in his wife’s unwillingness to discuss something that may displease him. In the interview, the wife said that sometimes she doesn’t dare to talk about family trips on holidays or hang out on weekends because she thinks that her husband would be mad. To sum up, the husband’s money-saving habits have made him tends to be more frugrative and independent, thus created several communication problems in their family.

Communication Competences

The second research question: How do they manage the problems using the communication competences they develop over cultural differences? Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various cultural contexts. The “rainbow model” of ICC consisted of ten components of competence: (1) foreign language competence; (2) cultural distance; (3) self-awareness; (4) knowledge; (5) skills; (6) motivation; (7) appropriateness; (8) effectiveness; (9) contextual interactions; and (10) intercultural affinity (Kupka, Everett & Wildermuth, 2007, p1). The findings suggest that knowledge and skills are essential for the couple when managing their communication problem.

Knowledge

Openmindedness plays an important role in solving the cultural problems between the couple. The Taiwanese husband has changed a lot since he lived in Indonesia and was involved in a marriage. In the interview, the wife said that her husband used to demand her to do the house jobs. After all, in the past, her husband has opposed the idea of hiring a servant in their family as it was considered unsafe because her husband did not believe outsider, and money-wasting as the house jobs can be done by themselves. However, after the wife explained to him how difficult it was to do house jobs while working, the husband compromised eventually and decided to hire a servant instead. He was also displeased about his daughter’s shopping habits.

Her daughter is willing to pay more for fashion, which is considered money-wasting. However, he compromised eventually after his wife explained the shifting of shopping habits upon young shoppers. In fact, 70% of young shoppers nowadays would pay more for fashion from sustainable or socially conscious brands (Kalscheur, 2021). This is different from the husband as the Gen Xers tend to shop conservatively than other generations (Salesfloor, n.d.). In these cases, the husband acknowledges the differences and changes in culture and be ready to change if it is needed in their harmonious family.

Knowledge of language is also important for effective communication in their family. Even though the wife cannot speak Taiwanese, they can still employ English and Indonesian in their family daily interaction. However, the wife has a difficulty in speaking with her parents-in-law, as mentioned previously. The wife added in the interview that she feels *sungkan* when she is the only one who is unable to speak Taiwanese when they are in Taiwan. She relies much on translations from others to communicate with her parents-in-law and other Taiwanese when she goes to any places in Taiwan. When there is nobody to assist her, she relies on her body gestures and *Google Translate* to deliver her messages. On some serious occasions, for example, dining together, she is unable to express her feelings and wants because she feels *sungkan* for being translated. Her life in Taiwan would be easier if she were able to speak Taiwanese.

Skills

Skills essential to solving communication problems between the couple are self-disclosure and mindfulness. Self-disclosure seems to be vital in the couple's effective communication. Self-disclosure refers to the willingness to disclose their feelings, needs, and wants. This skill might be quite challenging for Asian couples because of the differences between Western and Eastern cultures. Western culture allows people to be more open and critical. It allows its people to discuss subjects that are considered taboo in eastern cultures, it allows them to show their emotions and vent anger if they think they should. This sort of behavior wouldn't take place in eastern cultures. People prefer to approach difficult situations by using good manners and tact, not aggression (MigrationTranslators, 2021). However, the wife claimed that studying in London for 4 years has made both her and her husband more open to each other. If there are serious matters between them, they will try to discuss together and come up with a solution. The researcher notices that both of them employ the self-disclosure skills when they demand a change in attitude from their family member, or they demand something that is opposed to the idea of others. For example, the husband initiated a discussion with her wife about his displeasure toward his daughter's shopping habit, because he wanted his daughter to change, and his demand of his wife doing the house jobs because he wanted her wife to do so. The wife also initiated a discussion about family trips and eating outside the home which is opposed to the husband's money-saving habit.

On the other hand, when the matters are not as serious as before, both of them employ mindfulness towards each other. Mindfulness in this case refers to how one is aware of other's problems even when they are not disclosed. Mindfulness shows how much they know and care about each other, which results in the satisfaction of their partners. Once, the wife encountered an issue in her financial management in their business. The wife thought she did not need to bother her husband as he was busy with operational parts of the business, therefore unwilling to disclose. However, the husband was soon aware of her unusual attitude, asked her for details, and lent a hand in solving the issue. The wife exclaimed how happy she was as she felt satisfaction from his husband's mindfulness.

CONCLUSION

Intercultural marriage involves two people coming from different cultural background, and the trend is increasing over time. Due to the differences in cultural background, the couple will have to deal with several communication problems related to language and culture. Therefore, communication competences are essential to manage the potential conflicts. Upon interaction with the interviewee, the researcher finds that although the couple has no language barrier as they employ Indonesian in their daily conversation, the wife sometimes has misunderstanding with her parents-in-law due to the inability to speak Taiwanese. In terms of cultural problems, the wife employs *sungkan* on many occasions, while the husband is affected by the patriarchal culture and money-saving habits of the Taiwanese. From the 10 Rainbow Model of Intercultural Communication Competences by Kupka (2007), knowledge (openmindedness and knowledge of language) and skills (self disclosure and mindfulness) are important to the couple in managing their conflicts. By applying the communication competences, the couple are able to manage their conflicts and keep their harmonious relationship for more than 20 years of marriage.

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