

**ASSERTIVENESS AND THE USE OF LANGUAGE OF ASSERTIVENESS  
AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN A MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY**

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Specially dedicated to my dearest father, mother, husband, family members  
and friends.

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*In the name of Allah, the most Gracious and the most Compassionate*

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## ABSTRACT

Research on assertiveness began to gain scholarly interest in the 1940s focusing mainly on the differences in assertiveness based on gender and race. More recent research on assertiveness has pointed to the importance of assertiveness in English language teaching and learning as well as in developing students' communicative competence. Previous cross-cultural studies have shown that Asians are less assertive than Westerners. Moreover, some research stated that in Western cultures, assertiveness is associated with confidence while in Eastern cultures it is considered to be rude behavior. Hence, this study aims to; i) discover the level of assertiveness among undergraduates in UTM, ii) identify if there is a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents of different ethnic groups, gender, faculties and level of English language proficiency, iii) identify if there is a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between different settings, and iv) discover the language of assertiveness used by UTM undergraduates. A total of 229 UTM undergraduates from different ethnic groups, faculty and gender were chosen through proportionate stratified sampling participated in this study in order to complete the questionnaire and 24 of them were randomly selected to participate in the focus groups discussion. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 20. From this study, it can be concluded that; i) UTM undergraduates possess high level of assertiveness, ii) there is a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents of different ethnic groups, but not between different gender, faculties and level of English language proficiency iii) there is a significant difference between different settings, and iv) several structures used by the respondents in their assertive messages are apology, explanation, cushioning, request, compromise, and 'I' statements.

## ABSTRAK

Penyelidikan ke atas ketegasan mula mendapat perhatian pada tahun 1940 dengan memberi tumpuan kepada perbezaan dalam ketegasan berdasarkan jantina dan bangsa. Penyelidikan terkini menunjukkan kepentingan ketegasan dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris serta dalam membangunkan kemahiran berkomunikasi pelajar. Kajian menunjukkan bahawa orang Asia adalah kurang tegas daripada Barat. Selain itu, beberapa kajian menyatakan bahawa dalam budaya Barat, ketegasan dikaitkan dengan keyakinan manakala dalam budaya Timur ia dianggap sebagai tingkah laku biadap. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk : i) mengetahui tahap ketegasan di kalangan pelajar di UTM, ii) mengenal pasti sama ada terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan dalam tahap ketegasan antara responden yang berbeza kumpulan etnik, jantina, fakulti dan tahap penguasaan bahasa Inggeris, iii) mengenal pasti sama ada terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan dalam tahap ketegasan antara situasi yang berbeza, dan iv) menemui bahasa ketegasan yang digunakan oleh mahasiswa UTM. Seramai 229 pelajar UTM daripada kumpulan etnik yang berbeza, fakulti dan jantina telah dipilih melalui persampelan berstrata berkadar mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini untuk melengkapkan soal selidik dan 24 daripada mereka telah dipilih untuk mengambil bahagian dalam kumpulan fokus perbincangan. Data dianalisis dengan menggunakan SPSS versi 20. Kesimpulannya : i) pelajar UTM mempunyai tahap ketegasan yang tinggi, ii) terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan dalam tahap ketegasan antara responden kumpulan etnik yang berbeza, tetapi tidak di antara jantina fakulti, berbeza dan tahap bahasa Inggeris kemahiran bahasa iii) terdapat perbezaan yang ketara antara situasi yang berbeza, dan iv) beberapa struktur yang digunakan oleh responden adalah memohon maaf, penjelasan, kusyen, permintaan, kompromi, dan kenyataan 'I'.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELT	-	English Language Teaching
FC	-	Faculty of Computing
FKE	-	Faculty of Electrical Engineering
FKM	-	Faculty of Mechanical Engineering
FKSG	-	Faculty of Geoinformation and Real Estate
IAP	-	International Advisory Panel
MUET	-	Malaysian University English Test
RAS	-	Rathus Assertiveness Schedule
SCS	-	Socio-communicative Style
UTM	-	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Assertiveness dates back to the pioneering work of Salter (1949) and Wolpe (1958) in the field of behaviour therapy, who recognized that certain individuals had specific problems in standing up for their rights. Assertiveness was then introduced during therapy in an attempt to help such people function more effectively in their daily lives. The skill has attracted vast attention, reflecting the importance of this aspect of social interaction across many areas, ever since.

In its early popularity, assertiveness was mainly focused on the differences in assertiveness based on gender and race of the communicator. Previous cross-cultural studies have shown that Asians are less assertive than Westerners (Kim, 2010). Moreover, Bernstein and Norwood (2008) stated that in Western cultures, assertiveness is associated with confidence while in Eastern cultures it is considered to be rude behaviour. However, Kim (2010) stressed that more complex and accurate understanding of the communication process in many countries in Asia is needed in order to reduce the bias for always comparing the U.S with a single East Asian country.

Parallel to the above statement, this study intends to investigate the issue of assertiveness in the Malaysian context. To date, very few researches has investigated the issue of assertiveness in Malaysia. It shows the lack of interest in this area even though it is strongly believed that assertiveness is highly important especially to multi-ethnic countries. As such, Malaysia is known as a multi-ethnic country living in harmony under one roof comprising the three dominant ethnic groups in Malaysia which are Malay, Chinese and Indian.

In an earlier study, Sigler, Burnett and Child (2008) stated that “assertiveness is a timely topic with much applied value because it has much potential for improving human relations and as people from many different races live and work in the same cities, more assertiveness research is needed” (p.91).

## **1.2 Background of the Study**

There's a direct link between the quality of your communication and the quality of your life.

(Stewart, 1999: 6)

In the previous study, Karagozoglu, Kahve, Koc, and Adamisoglu (2008) stated that creating individuals of high level of self-esteem and assertiveness is vital for university education. Currently, one of the major goals of education is to train individuals to make them adaptable to different conditions and to possess critical thinking ability. Moreover, it is crucial for university students to possess high self-

esteem and assertiveness in order to be able to communicate more effectively in showing, communicating and demonstrating their professional knowledge and skills.

Furthermore, the International Advisory Panel (IAP) brought forth an issue in local institute of higher education students who lack the courage to ask question, lack assertiveness in defending their own ideas as well as not having good analytical skill as compared to the international students. It is, thus necessary for Malaysian students to be exposed to how to be more assertive. Through assertive behaviour, students will be equipped with positive personality and high self-esteem which is a very valuable asset for them when facing the challenges in their future life. With positive personality, students will become a valuable asset as future generation leaders.

Moreover, a study done by Yong (2010) which focuses on *Assertiveness and Academic Procrastination of English and Communication Students at a Private University* stated that as a way to excel in English and Communication Skills, students need to show high level of assertiveness. In addition, it can be supported by a statement made by Singhal and Nagao (1993) that one of the signs of communicative competence is assertiveness. Also, Zakahi (1985) stated that assertiveness is seen as a characteristic of a competent communicator and it can be supported by a statement made by Cook and St. Lawrence (1990) that assertiveness is observed as being more competent and attractive in the U.S.

Assertiveness started to gain the scholarly interest in 1940s. In its early popularity, assertiveness was mainly focused on the differences in assertiveness based on gender and race of the communicator (Sigler, Burnett and Child, 2008). Assertiveness is related to culture. Generally, it is more characteristic of individualistic societies in the West as compared to collectivistic societies (i.e. Asian societies). For example, a study conducted assertiveness role-playing situations among African-

American, Hispanic and Caucasian women, reported a substantive cultural differences in interpreting assertive responses (Yoshioka, 2000). Additionally, Eskin (2003) found that Turkish teenagers were less assertive than Swedish teenagers. All these suggest that assertiveness is influenced by culture.

Additionally, Witsel (2003) stated that it is clear that different cultures have different norms in terms of acceptable degrees of indirectness. Furthermore, an appropriate communicative behaviour in one culture might not be appropriate in another culture. For example, eye contact is a sign of communicative competent in the U.S., but does not convey the same meaning to the Japanese (Singhal and Nagao, 1993). However, Kim (2010) asserted that further research is required in order to provide in-depth understanding regarding the communication process in Asian countries, so that a better understanding of how assertiveness and level of assertiveness in different ethnic groups and culture differ in terms of perception and acceptance.

The discussion thus far has pointed to the need for a study on assertiveness especially in multi-ethnic societies. However, to date, no research has compared the differences in assertiveness by ethnic groups in Malaysia. A study done by Yong (2010) investigated the level of assertiveness of Malaysian students, however, as a whole without comparing the differences among ethnicity. Since Malaysia consists of various ethnic groups, it would be interesting if a study is done to discover the differences in the level of assertiveness among different ethnic groups. Thus, this study focuses on the different levels of assertiveness among ethnic groups in Malaysia (i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indian).

Apart from the differences in assertiveness based on culture or ethnicity, assertiveness is also related to gender. In some studies, women were found to be less assertive than men (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001). However, research findings

yielded mixed results. According to Twenge (2001), in the last period, women's assertiveness has increased. For instance, Onyeizugbo (2003) described a complex pattern of gender and education differences in Nigeria, whereby adult female of lower educational achievement reported higher levels of assertiveness than their male counterparts. On the other hand, among respondents with higher education the adult female reported less assertiveness than their male counterparts.

In the previous study by Anant (2009), it has been recommended that organizations need to impart assertiveness training to their employees across all levels as this will improve the quality of interpersonal relationships within the organization. As a result, managerial effectiveness will be improved and pathological stress reduced (Anant, 2009). Previous study have shown that poor interpersonal communication is said to be the number one cause of managerial failure and through assertive training the organizational efficiencies will increase dramatically (Hymowitz, 1988). These statements have shown the importance of being assertive in the workplace, thus indicating that such skill should also be developed among UTM undergraduates for their future.

The discussion thus far has pointed to the need for a study to examine the level of assertiveness and the factors influencing the level of assertiveness among undergraduates in Malaysia. Since assertiveness is important for university students and their future, it is relevant to identify their level of assertiveness and how they perceive assertiveness. The previous study proposed the need for profound knowledge regarding the styles and process of communication, especially in Asian countries (Kim, 2010). It is, therefore, a need for a study done in other Asian countries, as for this study is done in Malaysia and focuses at different ethnicities (i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indian).

### 1.3 Statement of Problem

English takes the status of a second language in Malaysia and it is an important medium of communication, both at the local and international levels. English is taught as an important subject in both primary and secondary Malaysian schools alongside other subjects. Amizura Hanadi et al. (2007) stated that those who are from rural areas, the motivation for learning English in schools is primarily driven by the need to pass examinations rather than the need to communicate with others using the second language. The students' performance in writing is comparatively high compared to their fluency in oral English. In fact, 50 percent of the candidates were marginal speakers and another 50 percent were limited users of the language based on the students' performance in Speaking Skills for Malaysian University English Test (MUET). It is reported that not taking the initiative to participate in the group discussions is one of the reasons for these limited speakers of English (Amizura Hanadi & Zaiton Abdul Majid, 2003).

With the demand of mastering English as a global language in the global market, many of the local graduates are faced with the issue of unemployment as they "failed to secure jobs because of their lack of competence in the English language, particularly during interviews" (Chan & Tan, 2006:5). It was discovered that about 60,000 Malaysian graduates were unemployed due to a lack of experience, poor English and low communication skills (Gurvinder and Sharan, 2008). In an earlier study by Zarina Othman et al. (2011), low proficiency in English is one attributing factor to the failure to secure a job. In addition, despite their graduated excellent academic results many graduates are left jobless. This is due to the lack of communication skills, especially to communicate in English.

There is little doubt about the low performance of these students in communicating in English orally. To encourage these second language learners to communicate in English and to prepare them for the demands of the job market has become the greatest challenge for English teachers, especially at the tertiary level. As such, it has always been the primary concern of second language teachers to increase learners' oral competency among second language learners. However, the low performance of the second language learners, especially in oral communication, still remains a problem even after years of learning English in school as a compulsory subject (Amizura Hanadi et al., 2007). Therefore, this study examines the aspect of communication skills which are still lacking and it is believed that assertive communication could be the key to this issue.

In fact, a study has shown that students should demonstrate high assertiveness level as a way to surpass in English and Communication Skills (Yong, 2010). Yong (2010) also added that for students to succeed in oral presentation and group discussion, assertiveness is important. Based on this research, it is found that; i) Malaysian students' assertiveness tends to be situation-specific, ii) low assertiveness in terms of interpersonal relationships with peers and lecturers, iii) business and engineering students significantly differed on assertiveness and iv) male students are highly assertive than female students. Since Yong (2010) focused mainly on private university students, the researcher believes there is a need to focus on public university undergraduates as well, specifically Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM).

Yong (2010) also stated that "research on assertiveness would enable lecturers to find ways to help students reach their fullest potential in English and Communication Skills" (p.64) and believed that it could improve the students presentation skills. Since assertiveness is important for university students and their future, it is relevant to identify their level of assertiveness and how they perceive assertiveness as it will contribute to an informed conclusion regarding the impact of assertiveness in enhancing

communication competency among Malaysian students. Moreover, Mc Cabe and Timmins (2002) stated that in order to prepare the students to deal with domineering atmosphere that may exist in the future, teachers can equip them with knowledge on assertiveness. Parallel to the above statements, the researcher intends to have university undergraduates as the respondents throughout this study.

Previous research into assertiveness has explored gender differences towards interpersonal communication competence and assertive behaviour (i.e. Khairul Anuar et al., 2011). However, further research is required to explore how students' assertive behaviour can be influenced by demographic factors such as age, education level, and ethnicity. Moreover, the research done by Yong (2010) investigates the level of assertiveness of Malaysian students. However, the study did not focus on the assertiveness based on ethnicity. It would be interesting and relevant to identify the difference in the level of assertiveness between different ethnic groups in Malaysia. However, since Malaysia consists of more than 10 ethnic groups, the researcher focuses on the three dominant groups; Malay, Chinese and Indian. Hence, this study focuses on identifying the difference in the level of assertiveness between different ethnic groups, namely Malay, Chinese and Indian.

#### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

Based on previous research, it is understood that assertiveness could develop or has an impact on the communicative competence of a person (Yong, 2010; Zakahi, 1985; McCroskey, 1985); hence, this study also identify the factors influencing the differences in the level of assertiveness based on ethnic groups, gender and faculty. The objectives of this study are:



- 1.4.1 To discover the level of assertiveness among undergraduates in UTM.
- 1.4.2 To determine if there is a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents of different: i) ethnic groups, ii) gender, iii) faculty (i.e. engineering and non-engineering) and iv) level of English language proficiency.
- 1.4.3 To determine if there is a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between different settings – personal and situational settings.
- 1.4.4 To discover the language of assertiveness used by UTM undergraduates.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

In an attempt to address the research problems and objectives, this research embarks on answering the following research questions:

- 1.5.1 What is the level of assertiveness among undergraduates in UTM?
- 1.5.2 Is there a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents of different: i) ethnic groups, ii) gender, iii) faculty (i.e. engineering and non-engineering) and iv) level of English language proficiency?
- 1.5.3 Is there a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between different settings – personal and situational settings?
- 1.5.4 What is the language of assertiveness used by UTM undergraduates?

## 1.6 Significance of the Study

Previous survey has discovered that about 60,000 Malaysian graduates were unemployed due to a lack of experience, poor English, and low communication skills (Gurvinder and Sharan, 2008). In align with the issue of low communicative competence discussed above, it is important to examine what aspect of communication skill which are still lacking in these graduates which may be one of the reasons for their inability to communicate competently. Hence, the present study is important as it provides insights to English language teachers about the relationship between assertiveness and communicative competence.

It is hoped that the findings will shed some light on the lack of communicative competence among undergraduates by exploring their level of assertiveness, the difference in the level of assertiveness of different ethnic groups, gender, faculty, level of English language proficiency and settings, and the language of assertiveness used.

It is believed that assertiveness can be a sign of communicative competence by Western scholars and therefore, it could develop the students' communicative competence. As mentioned by Richmond and McCroskey (1985) people who possess high assertiveness level are perceived as competent communicator. Additionally, Zakahi (1985) stated that assertiveness is seen as a characteristic of competent communicators and it can be supported by a statement made by Cook and St. Lawrence (1990) that assertiveness are observed as being more competent and attractive in the U.S.

Due to the lack of research on assertiveness in Malaysia, the researcher intends to investigate the level of assertiveness among Malaysian university undergraduates.

Since Malaysia consists of various ethnic groups, it would be interesting if a study is done to discover the differences in the level of assertiveness among the different ethnic groups. Thus, this study focuses on the different level of assertiveness among ethnic groups in Malaysia (i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indian). Moreover, the researcher intends to identify the different level of assertiveness based on gender and field of studies. Therefore, the findings will offer insights useful for Malaysians or any other multi-ethnic citizens. Furthermore, it is hoped that the findings will reduce the bias for always comparing the U.S with a single East Asian country (Kim, 2010).

As this is a small-scale study, it nevertheless, becomes a preliminary step towards a significant research in the future. The findings will help to direct future research regarding the issue, as it helps to identify the area of assertiveness which needs further investigation, as well as to identify the categories for classification to be explored in future research especially with regard to ethnic groups, gender and field of studies.

Four key research areas that will be highlighted in this study; i) the level of assertiveness among undergraduates in UTM, ii) the level of assertiveness between respondents of different: i) ethnic groups, ii) gender, iii) faculty (i.e. engineering and non-engineering) and iv) level of English language proficiency, iii) the level of assertiveness between different settings – personal and situational settings, and iv) the language of assertiveness used by the undergraduates. It is believed that from this study, three social units would benefit from the findings; i) University students, ii) ELT educators and iii) communication researchers. The benefits are listed as below:

**Table 1.1:** The significance of study to various social units

Social Units	Benefits
University students	The findings will shed light on the problem of the lack of communicative competence and it can be minimised by creating awareness on the advantage of assertiveness as an important component of being a competent communicator.
ELT educators	The findings will shed light on the problem of the lack of communicative competence and it can be minimised by creating awareness among educators about the advantage of assertiveness as part of being a competent communicator.
Communication researchers	The findings will offer insights on the perception of assertiveness in Malaysia especially between different ethnic groups, gender, and faculty.

### 1.7 Scope of the Study

This study seeks to identify the level of assertiveness, the perception as well as the language used to show assertiveness of undergraduate students in a public university that is the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The respondents for this study consists of UTM undergraduates from the three main ethnic groups that are the Malay, Chinese and Indian, both male and female students, and from different faculties (i.e. engineering and non-engineering).

**Table 1.2:** Scope of the study

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
<b>1. What is the level of assertiveness among undergraduates in UTM?</b>	Level of Assertiveness	UTM Undergraduates
<b>2. Is there a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents of different: a) ethnic groups, b) gender, c) faculty (i.e. engineering and non-engineering) and d) level of communicative competence?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnic Group</li> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Faculty</li> <li>• English language proficiency</li> </ul>	UTM Undergraduates from three main ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese and Indian), male and female, engineering and non-engineering, and MUET Result.
<b>3. Is there a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between different settings – personal and situational settings?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal Setting</li> <li>• Situational Setting</li> </ul>	UTM Undergraduates
<b>4. What is the language of assertiveness used by the undergraduates?</b>	Language of Assertiveness	UTM Undergraduates

Table 1.2 illustrates the scope of this study. This study investigates the level of assertiveness among Malaysian UTM undergraduates and identifies the difference in the

level of assertiveness between different ethnic groups, gender, faculty and level of English language proficiency. Moreover, this study identifies the difference in the level of assertiveness between different setting (personal and situational settings), and also the language of assertiveness used by the undergraduates.

In order to gather data to answer the research questions, two instrumentations were used; i) questionnaire and ii) focus group interview. As for the questionnaire, the researcher will be using the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS) (refer to appendix A) and the data collected were analysed by using SPSS version 20. On the other hand, the data collected through the focus group interviews were transcribed using Transana software and they were analysed using interpretive analysis (Open Thematic Coding).

## **1.8 Definition of terms**

The following subchapters explain the definitions of terms used throughout this study; i) assertiveness, ii) communicative competence, iii) ethnic groups, iv) language of assertiveness, and v) Malaysian University English Test (MUET).

### **1.8.1 Assertiveness**

The term assertiveness is being used widely in various fields, mainly health, psychology and communication. There are some similarities in terms of the definitions

of assertiveness between these fields, however, since this study looks into assertiveness in the area of communication, the researcher will apply the definition by Richmond and McCroskey (1985) “the capacity to make requests, actively disagree, express positive or negative personal rights and feelings, initiate, maintain, or disengage from conversations, and stand up for one’s self without attacking another” (p.69).

### **1.8.2 Communicative competence**

Hymes (1972) stated that the ability to understand and produce speech in real situations in ways that are effective and suitable in relation to the context defined communicative competence as. In other words, communicative competence describes a speaker who has the skill to interact effectively with others and the knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately. Moreover, Spitsberg and Cupach (1984) stated that the concept of appropriate and effective communication in an interpersonal communication denotes communicative competence. However, in this study, the term communicative competence is limited to the English language proficiency of the respondents. MUET is used as a benchmark in determining one’s English language proficiency.

### **1.8.3 Ethnic Groups**

According to Kerry and Jill (2012) ethnicity or ethnic group is a socially defined category based on common culture or nationality. Ethnicity can, but does not have to,

include common ancestry, appearance, cuisine, dressing style, heritage, history, language or dialect, religion, symbols, traditions, or other cultural factor. Moreover, ethnic identity is constantly reinforced through common characteristics which set the group apart from other groups (Camoroff and Camoroff, 2009). As for this study, respondents from three main ethnic groups in Malaysia were involved; i) Malay, ii) Chinese and iii) Indian.

#### **1.8.4 Language of assertiveness**

In the previous study, it is believed that the actual content of an assertive response should include an expression of rights and a statement placing this within the context of socially responsible and appropriate behaviour (Hargie and Dickson, 2004, pg. 309). Moreover, May (2010) stated that the characteristics of assertive language includes active, direct and honest speech, communicates self-respect and respect for others, and helps create the “I win – you win” outcome. Consequently, creating positive influenced and expect cooperation.

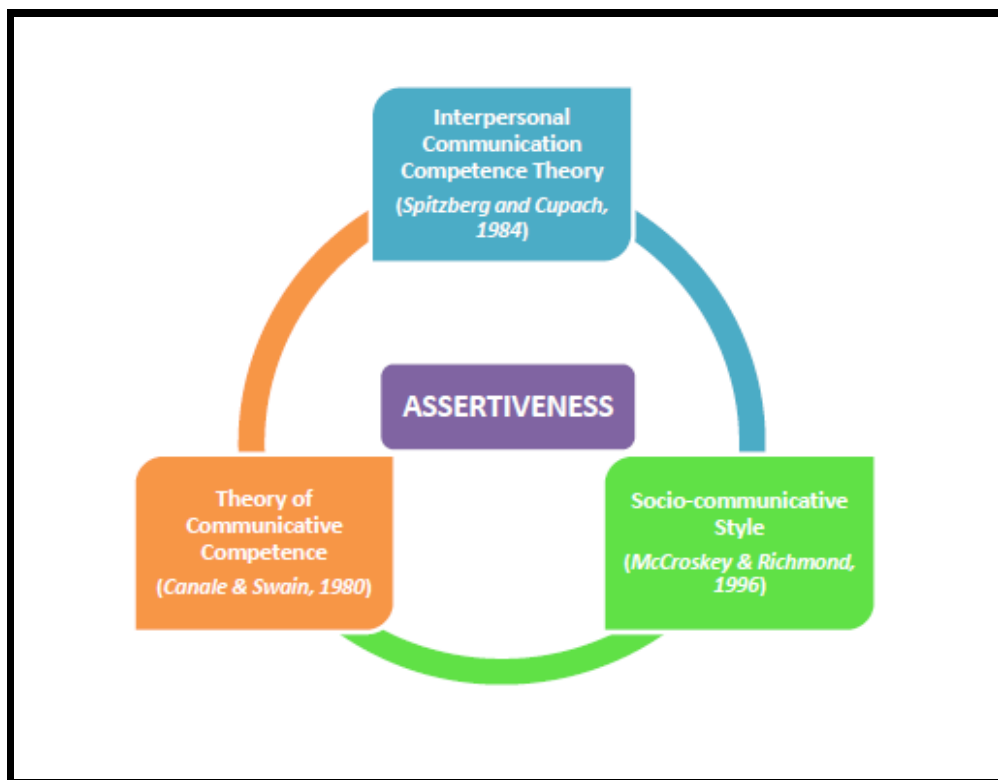
#### **1.8.5 MUET**

MUET is widely used as a benchmark in determining one’s English language proficiency for the purpose of admission into Malaysian public universities. The test is developed and administered by the Malaysian Examination Council and recognized only in Malaysia and Singapore. The grading for MUET is; i) Band 1: Extremely limited



user, ii) Band 2: Limited user, iii) Band 3: Modest user, iv) Band 4: Competent user, v) Band 5: Good user, and vi) Band 6: Very good user. In this study, the researcher adapted the MUET classification band by categorizing them into three groups; i) High, ii) Moderate, and iii) Low.

### 1.9 Theoretical Framework



**Figure 1.1:** Theoretical Framework

Three theories contribute to this study (Figure 1.1) and they are interrelated with one another especially in the issues of assertiveness and communicative competence.

Previous research have shown that the Interpersonal Communication Competence Theory by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) play an important role in developing communication competence and dominance and attitude could indirectly influence assertive behaviour. Furthermore, a study done by Khairul Anuar Rusli et al. (2011) on *Relationship between Interpersonal Communication Competence and Students' Assertive Behavior* concluded that assertive behaviour among secondary school students are influenced by interpersonal communication competence. It is, therefore, can be related to one of the research objectives which is to identify the significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents of different level of communicative competence.

The next theory involve in this study is the Socio-communicative Style, also known as SCS. According to McCroskey & Richmond (1996), SCS is a way in which a person presents himself to others and stands on the assessment of an individual's use of assertive and responsive behaviours. SCS is also defined as an individual's ability to initiate, adapt and respond to the communication of others (Thomas et al., 1994). Furthermore, Snavely (1981) believed that these are simple and effective ways to adjust communication behaviours of self with others as a way to increase understanding and improve communication. Thus, it could be understood that these abilities, namely assertiveness, could lead to a person's communicative competence. This theory leads to one of the research objectives addressed in which is to identify the significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents of different level of communicative competence.

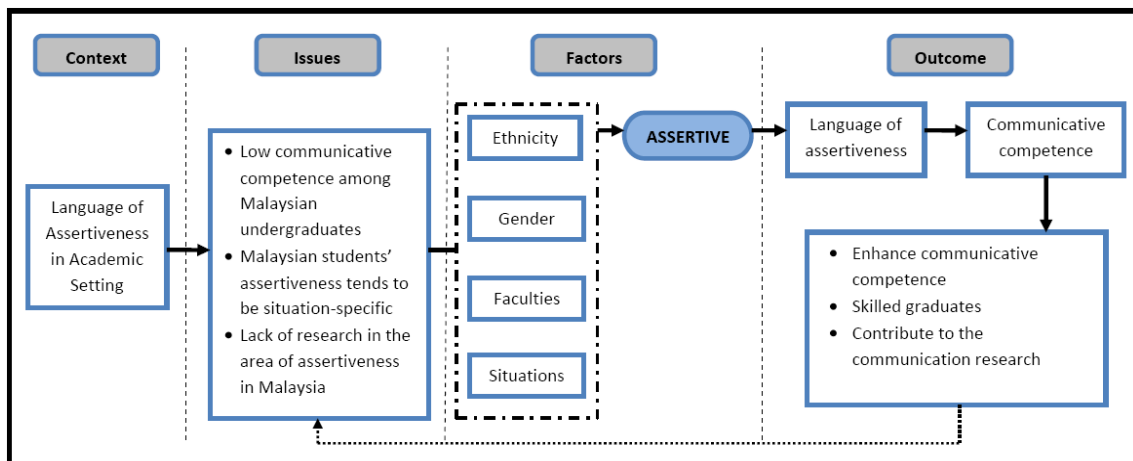
The final theory involved is the theory of communicative competence developed by Canale and Swain (1980). They proposed a theoretical framework of communicative competence which is believed to be applied in second language teaching and testing. There are four types of competence incorporated in this theory; i) grammatical competence, ii) sociolinguistic competence, iii) strategic competence, and iv) discourse

competence. Based on these types of competence, it could be seen that communicative competence does not merely focus on the linguistic or language proficiency of a person, but also the ability to adapt, to adjust and to overcome communication gaps with others. Moreover, Spitsberg and Cupach (1984) stated that the concept of appropriate and effective communication in an interpersonal communication denotes communicative competence. It is, therefore, can be seen that this theory leads to the research objectives which to identify the significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents of different level of communicative competence and also to discover the language of assertiveness used by the undergraduates.

Therefore, it could be summarized that the three theories will help the study to answer the research questions that have been stated in the previous subchapter. These theories go around the importance of assertiveness and how it has an impact on individual's communicative competence. The researcher believes that having the ability to be assertive, it shows that the person is able to maintain and to develop an effective communication, hence, the communicative competent.

### **1.10 Conceptual Framework**

There are four key research areas that will be highlighted in this study; i) the level of assertiveness among undergraduates in UTM, ii) the level of assertiveness between respondents of different: i) ethnic groups, ii) gender, iii) faculty (i.e. engineering and non-engineering) and iv) level of English language proficiency, iii) the level of assertiveness between different settings – personal and situational settings, and iv) the language of assertiveness used by the undergraduates. Figure 1.4 illustrates the framework of the study.



**Figure 1.2:** Conceptual Framework

As illustrated in Figure 1.2, the issues in this study are; i) low communicative competence among Malaysian undergraduates, ii) Malaysian students' assertiveness tend to be situation-specific, and iii) lack of research in the area of assertiveness in Malaysia. It is believed that assertive communication could be the key to these issues. Based on previous research, it is understood that assertiveness could develop the communicative competence of a person (Yong, 2010; Zakahi, 1985; McCroskey, 1985). Thus, the researcher intends to look into the factors influencing the level of assertiveness in order to minimise the issues above.

There are four factors affecting the level of assertiveness such as ethnic groups, gender, faculty and situations (Hargie and Dickson, 2004). Previous study has shown that assertiveness is related to culture and it is more characteristic of Western societies as compared to Asian societies (Yoshioka, 2000). Assertiveness has also been discovered to be related to gender. In some studies, men were found to be more assertive than women (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001). However, the study by Twenge (2001) has shown the increase in women's assertiveness in the last periods.

It is believed that these factors could influence the level of assertiveness of a person. In the previous study, Hargie and Dickson (2004) stated that the situation in which assertiveness is required is important. Few individuals are assertive through all situations, but most find it easier to assert themselves in some situations than others.

Apart from that, this study will also aim to investigate the Malaysian university students on their perception towards assertiveness and the importance of assertiveness for university students. It is believed that assertiveness could develop the students' communicative competence and by being a competent communicator, their chances of being employed will also increase. As mentioned by Zedeck and Goldstein (2000) that one of the most preferred skills by many employers is communication skills. When the assertiveness level and communicative competence of the students is developed, it could increase their employability.

### **1.11 Thesis structure**

This thesis begins with the introduction of the study which includes the background, statement of problem, four research objectives and research questions, significance, scope, definition of terms used in the study, the theoretical and conceptual framework, and limitations. In the next chapter, the researcher provides the literature on the areas of assertiveness which are relevant to the research questions. In Chapter 3, the methodology used to achieve the aims of the study is thoroughly explained. The findings from the data collected are presented in Chapter 4 in order to answer the four research questions. Further discussions are elaborated in Chapter 5 where the researcher ties the findings with the related literature. Finally, Chapter 6 provides the conclusions and the recommendations based on the findings and for future research.

### **1.12 Limitation**

Although this study has reached its aims, there were some unavoidable limitations and shortcomings. First, this study was a small scale study involving only 229 UTM undergraduates. Finally, the number of Indian respondents is too small as compared to the other ethnic groups (i.e. Malay and Chinese).

### **1.13 Summary**

As a conclusion, this chapter explains the background, the statement of problem, the objectives, the research questions, the significance and the scope of this study. The researcher came up with four research objectives, thus developing four research questions as guidelines throughout the research process. This chapter also explains the definition of terms that will be used in this study. Next, the researcher developed a theoretical framework and conceptual framework of this study. Finally, the researcher explained the limitations which hindered the process of this study.

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