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THE ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE IN THE HOST COUNTRY'S  
LANGUAGE: A UNIVERSAL SKILL REQUIREMENT FOR  
ENHANCING CONFIDENCE AMONG EXPATRIATE  
ACADEMICS

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**Abstract:**

This paper highlights the association of language use skills with self-confidence as a contributing factor to the determination of expatriate self-adaptability in a foreign cultural environment. The objective of this study was to examine whether the skills of using the local language of the host country are considered as a universal skill requirement for improvisation and self-skills among expatriate academics in Malaysian Public Universities. Utilisation of qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews on 35 lecturers with international staff status in four Malaysian Public Universities which were subsequently processed by inductive analysis for dominant and subdominant thematic classifications. The findings prove that the informants utilised language proficiency as a backup to recognise their ability to respond to external stimuli, thus producing positive value to themselves. The proactive process is done by trying to find answers to change and self-transformation while in a foreign country. Studies linking the elements of confidence and self-identity skills among expatriates are often highlighted, but the approach taken is to put the advantage to be utilised on the part of the organisation and not expatriates as the subject of the study. Therefore, the results of this study fulfil the search for answers regarding their identity as an expatriate, including exploring foreign cultures, releasing the culture of the country of origin, developing a network of contacts and assessing their

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potential and ability to deal with the challenges of life abroad. The direction of future research refers to the addition of value in the expatriate management literature by making basic concepts of interaction such as language proficiency as an element capable of increasing self-confidence and sketching the career development of self-initiated expatriates.

**Keywords:**

Use of Local Language, Communication Skills, Self-Identity Skills, Expatriate Academics, Malaysian Public Universities

## Introduction

In general, expatriates are divided into two groups namely independent expatriates (individuals who undergo expatriation on their own initiative) and executive expatriates (employees sent by organisations on international assignments) (Othman, 2021a). Yet the similarity of the two is that they reside abroad for a certain period of time and experience expatriation in a new environment (Utami, Tobing, Paramu & Slamim, 2019). From the perspective of expatriate career management, the direction and orientation of career development is said to be more stable among independent expatriates when compared to executive expatriates (Harry, Dodd & Chinyamurindi, 2019). According to Goede, (2020) self-employed expatriates tend to start careers much younger, exhibit higher levels of self-confidence as well as confidence in developing their careers more proactively by utilising their experience for greater financial rewards.

In the context of the country's higher education sector, the main mission of the university is to have employees who are not only experts in the academic field alone, but must come from a variety of skin colour, race and religion as well as proactive and have universal communication skills including speaking more than one language and high self-esteem skills (Othman, Mohd Kamal, Yusoff, Norazah, Awang & Jupiter, 2017; Othman, Esa, Hajimin & Marinsah, 2021a). Proficiency in the use of the language of the host country is a valuable advantage to expatriates because the feature can further increase self-confidence during expatriation (Othman, 2019a). The quality of the character produces an aura of personality that stands out not only in the self, but also creates respect among the local staff for the versatile ability of expatriates to master the local language which in turn facilitates smooth communication in the workplace (Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016).

From an organisational perspective, local language skills among international staff indicate that cross-cultural training organised by most MNC organisations has a positive impact and proves that expatriates have successfully assimilated themselves with the current environment (Fenech, Baguant & Abdelwahed, 2020). The currents of globalisation catalysed the revolution of the higher education industry and at the same time showed an increase in expatriate among academics (Fei, & Le, 2020; Othman, 2021b). The policy of internationalisation of higher education around the world has given ample space for expatriate academics to spread their wings to all corners of the world due to the need for their academic expertise (Chankseliani, 2017).

**Table 1: Number of Expatriate Academic Staff in 20 Malaysian Public Universities  
from 2007 to 2020**

Year	Total
2007	1027
2008	1261
2009	1403
2010	1681
2011	1765
2012	2151
2013	2712
2014	2430
2015	2199
2016	1719
2017	1540
2018	1452
2019	1472
2020	1288

Source: [http://www.mohe.gov.my/web\\_statistik/](http://www.mohe.gov.my/web_statistik/) (From year 2007 to 2020)

Based on Table 1 above, it clearly shows how the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia has undertaken various efforts in achieving the internationalisation trend of Malaysian Higher Education Institutions by focusing on Malaysia as a hub of educational glory in the region by 2020. Statistics released by the Ministry of Higher Education have recorded an increase in the number of expatriate academic attendance in Public Universities in 2007 which was 1027 people, which further increased to 2712 people in 2013 (MOE, 2021). Regardless of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic over the past 2 years on the expatriation of expatriate academics to Malaysia, the number has proven that our country's higher education system has the highest quality and standards equivalent to developed countries internationally.

### Literature Review

Research on expatriate management previously focusing on academics as study subjects is seen to be more likely to discuss pedagogical issues such as international curriculum development and implementation based on university needs and teaching and education issues that can benefit from experienced academics (Wilkins & Neri, 2019). Literature review of the expatriation management literature set aside the emphasis in analysing differences in terms of work motivators internationally based on self-credibility, motivation, source of aspiration, orientation direction and career management methods between assigned expatriates and self-initiated expatriates (Bakel, & Susan Salzbrenner, 2019). Essentially, the discussion in this paper focuses on the exploration of elements of identity associated with language proficiency among individuals undergoing expatriation through self-effort. As such, they take proactive initiatives to place themselves in a comfortable position in the organisation for career advancement in the host country.

### Confidence and Self-Identity Skills

Discussions on self-confidence and self-identity skills among expatriates are often highlighted but the approach taken is to place those advantages to be utilised on the part of the organisation rather than expatriates as study subjects (Richardson, Tan & Kiumarsi,

2018). The confidence and self-identity skills of independent expatriates are clearly seen as a way of recognising an individual's ability to respond to external stimuli, thus producing positive value to themselves (Harari, Reaves, Beane, Laginess, & Viswesvaran, 2018). The proactive process is done by trying to find answers to change and self-transform while in the foreign country. The search for answers regarding their identity as an expatriate includes exploring foreign cultures, releasing the culture of the country of origin, developing a network of contacts and assessing one's potential and ability to deal with the challenges of life abroad (Othman, 2019a).

Self-confidence provides a spiritual advantage when expatriates gain the comfort of going through the routines of daily life. The process of assimilation in social structures is known as a cognitive process that occurs individually when trying to adapt into a foreign cultural environment (Mahmud, Zainal, Arham & Hasan, 2020). Whereas a study conducted by Rashid Aziz, (2014) claimed that the element of lack of self-confidence implies difficulty in adjusting in a country outside of one's country of origin. In that context of self-confidence is associated with psychological process that give indications for expatriates with low self-confidence then they will face difficulties in exploring the cultural differences found in the host country (McNulty & Brewster, 2020). On the other hand, high-confidence expatriates show a tendency to cultivate soft skills by trying to adapt to the environment through recognising cultural differences, respecting local customs and learning to master the language of the host country (Richardson, Tan & Kiumarsi, 2018).

There is empirical evidence from past studies debating the element of self-confidence associated with the self-identity transformation of expatriates. Di Fabio & Kenny, (2018) in his study are related to the contribution of value-added elements of self-confidence with changes in potential, dynamics and identity among independent expatriates during expatriation. According to Othman, (2019a) the effort to cope with different situations not only in the workplace, but also in daily life personally affects the self-identity of the expatriate. Positive assumptions and individuals' interpretations of new social structures can enhance positive values in expatriates in turn helping to further improve their self-skills (Harari *et al.*, 2018). In that context, assumptions regarding the need for the importance of individual proactive action in social structures are seen to have relevance to an expatriate's expatriation experience.

As discussed by Othman, (2019a), self-confidence is understood to play a role in developing one's thoughts and actions in communication and interaction along such social and phenomenological structures bind one person to another. Hence, self-confidence is said to be more personal and dynamic. Along with the discussion of this paper, a narrative approach is used to gain an understanding of expatriates' interpretations of self-confidence improvisation and skills as well as to help researchers better understand expatriate actions in interpreting the self-confidence gained from such expatriations.

### **Proficiency and Use of Language**

Proficiency in language usage is one of the elements often associated with self-confidence that determines the success of expatriates in adapting to new environments. Foreign culture is indeed a great challenge for the majority of expatriates especially for those who are just coming to a foreign country for the first time (Othman, 2019b). However, the barrier can be

overcome well if the expatriate has local language skills. The use of host language is capable of eliminating the problem of communication constraints especially in cross-cultural situations with colleagues and the local community (Richardson, Yaapar & Abdullah, 2017). Language advantage is said to be useful for guiding expatriates and families in the process of adjustment. Adaptation in host countries where different environments are capable of triggering cultural shocks that are difficult to deal with without achieving accurate access to information is often an issue (Fei & Le, 2020). The international tasks undertaken by expatriates become easier when expatriates use the opportunity to understand the language of the host country (Selmer & Luring, 2015). This can be seen when a wider network of help is successfully obtained by asking yourself every time when facing with difficulty understanding things or tasks.

In a similar study, Kim, (2015) also argued that expatriates often manipulate local language advantages to improve understanding of the cultural background and customs of local communities that form the basis of different lifestyles. It is undeniable that the process of expatriation itself provides different experiences from one individual to another and each of the expatriates cannot escape from new experiences if they are first time settling in a foreign country (Othman, 2019b). However, the difficulties of the assimilation process can be eliminated with the help of the local community who most feel more excited to help willingly when meeting with foreigners who take the initial initiative to master their local language. The seriousness of an expatriate in using the local language usually succeeds in capturing the hearts of those around, therefore the service of “free language teacher” is obtained among colleagues and friends (Tenzer, Pudelko & Harzing, 2014). The role of significant parties with expatriate life becomes a valuable medium for expatriates in learning new languages quickly and smoothly.

A study conducted by Nzitunga & Nyanway, (2019) also supports the view that expatriates are a group that will face various problems in relation to new assignments when they first arrive in the host country. From that perspective, expatriates should expect language barriers to be among the key factors in adjusting in the workplace. In embarking on a career in a new place, expatriates are constantly faced with issues of new employment or assignments (Abdien, 2019). Thus, language proficiency skills that involve daily use to communicate in organisations and the broad scope of the cultural environment also help expatriates learn something that can be expected especially in the context of answering the question of how to interpret something that will be encountered on a daily basis, and what is appropriate behaviour to be conducted and applied in a variety of situations (Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016). In addition, in various situations expatriates need a clear understanding and work knowledge to provide excellent service. Such things will be easier with a good command of the language (Selmer & Luring, 2015).

### **Research Methodology**

The study is an exploratory research that unravels the skills of using language as a universal skill in the improvisation and skills of expatriate academic identity in Malaysian Public Universities. The decision to apply the case study design for this study was to survey intensively through observation of local interactions and communication intertwining between social groups encompassing either individuals, combinations of individuals, unions or local communities (Kuckartz, 2014). The study uses a qualitative method that includes

semi-structured interviews on 35 lecturers with international staff status in Malaysian Public Universities. The determination of the case study design in this study was due to the fact that a thorough understanding was felt to be important to obtain clarification from the respondents in relation to the issues raised (Silverman, 2013).

From the researcher's point of view, intrinsic case study is the best option to be applied in this study as the case study design is able to get an explanation regarding the diaspora of the expatriate elite group that is academic scholars experience expatriation and use the advantage of local language skills to increase their self-confidence while in foreign countries (Babbie, 2017). A qualitative method approach that uses case study design and in-depth interviews on normality requires a small number of samples to open up space for study respondents to voice their opinions in detail on related issues (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Before the study was conducted, then based on due consideration by the researcher then the selection of a group of respondents was done by making a determination on the criteria that should be possessed by the respondents known as purposive sampling technique (Creswell, 2014).

The purposeful sampling selected by this study focuses on a group of academics from abroad known as expatriate academics who are currently serving in Malaysian Public Universities. There are three institutions of higher learning involved in this study named University I, University II and University III. Among the criteria identified are as follows, namely (a) the respondent is an expatriate who has resided in Malaysia for at least 12 months legally and works using a workers visa in this country, (b) the respondent is working with one of the universities named in this study, (c) the respondent is an expatriate who took the initiative to expatriate to Malaysia for the purpose of obtaining employment and (d) the respondent is not an employee who is on sabbatical leave or has the status of an exchange of staff between other universities.

Referring to this study, semi-structured interview method has been used to obtain empirical data rich in useful information to answer the research questions and then meet the objectives of the study. The approach obtains the reactions of respondents when answering questions posed to them such as facial expressions, language speech, body language and tone of voice that help the researcher understand more the meaning of the statements given by the respondents. Semi-structured interviews have the advantage of obtaining specific feedback from respondents. For example, the use of narrative focuses more not only on the meaning of the speech thrown by the respondent on each question posed, but also priority is given to the respondent's reaction such as tone of voice, facial expression, hand gestures, body language gestures and eye contact that can give a thousand different meanings (Flick, 2014).

The next step is a data analysis procedure that begins with inductive analysis of audio recordings of interviews with respondents transcribed into text form. Thematic categorisation was performed on each respondent's transcription using coding that gave birth to specific themes. Upon completion of the process, the researcher obtained the main themes and supporting themes presented by the respondents. Qualitative research utilises narrative data to answer research questions and subsequently meet research objectives (Creswell, 2014).

Table 2 lists the demographic profiles of the informants which contains four main variables namely gender, age, education level and marital status. This research involved a total of 35

informants of which 22 people equivalent to 63.0 percent were male informants and the remaining 13 people were female informants equivalent to 37.0 percent. The majority of the informants belong to the age range between the ages of 30 to 39 years old which is total of 12 people equivalent to 34.0 percent. Informants aged 40 to 49 years recorded a total of 9 people equivalent to 26.0 percent involvement in this research. For the informants aged 50 to 59 years is a total of 8 people equivalent to 23.0 percent and the remaining 6 informants are those aged over 60 years and above equivalent to 17.0 percent. Furthermore, the informants involved in this study have the highest level of education at the Postgraduate Degree level as many as 16 people equivalent to 46.0 percent and the remaining 19 people equivalent to 54.0 percent are Doctor of Philosophy Degree holders. In terms of the informants' marital status, those involved in this research consist of those with single status as many as 21 people which equivalent to 60.0 percent and those who are married is 14 people equivalent to 40.0 percent.

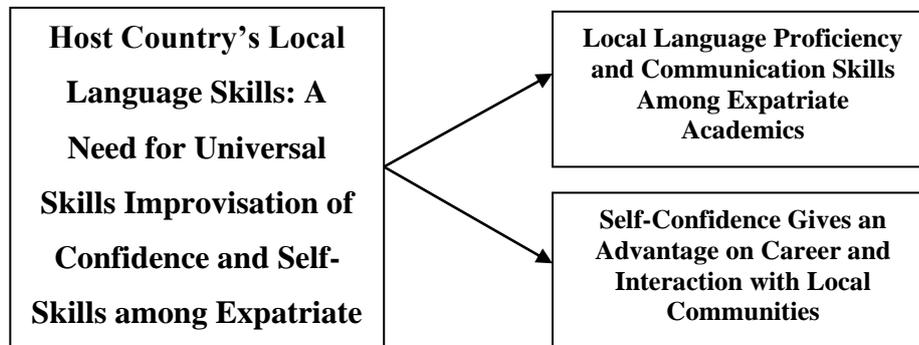
**Table 2: Demographic Profile of Informants**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	22	63.0
Female	13	37.0
<i>Age (Year)</i>		
30-39	12	34.0
40-49	9	26.0
50-59	8	23.0
>60	6	17.0
<i>Level of Education</i>		
Master's Degree	16	46.0
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	19	54.0
<i>Status</i>		
Single	21	60.0
Married	14	40.0

## Research Results

The findings of this study contribute empirical data on the management of expatriates by discussing the tendency of language proficiency and skills in providing advantages to expatriates from the context of self-confidence (Selmer & Lauring, 2015; Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016; Richardson, Yaapar & Abdullah, 2017; Othman, 2019a). The findings prove that the importance of using the language of the host country is practiced in the workplace environment and also in living personal life when interacting with the surrounding community. The expatriate academics involved in the study generally think that they have the ability to speak the local language as well as utilise those skills as one of the factors that contribute to the success of international assignments. In the context of the discussion of this paper, local language skill is a requirement that is considered a universal skill for the improvisation of confidence and self-skills among expatriate academics in Malaysian Public Universities (Razak, Othman, Yusoff & Mohd Suki, 2016; Yusoff, Othman, Razak & Mohd Suki, 2016; Othman, 2019a). Figure 1 shows the need for such universal skills which are divided into two components, namely (i) Local language proficiency and communication

skills, and (ii) Self-confidence gives an advantage to career and interaction with the local community.



**Figure 1: Local Language Skills of the Host Country: A Need for Universal Skills Improvisation of Confidence and Self-Skills among Expatriate Academics at Malaysian Public Universities**

### *Local Language Proficiency and Communication Skills*

The results showed that out of 35 respondents involved from three selected Public Universities, 18 respondents as listed in Table 1 below agreed that proficiency and skills in using the national language are beneficial while experiencing expatriation in the host country. A total of 18 out of 35 expatriate academics interviewed agreed that the advantages of communication using the local language benefited the development of self-confidence throughout the expatriation process. Meanwhile, for respondents who utilised the use of Bahasa Malaysia as an intermediary language outside working hours have been able to improve their language skills in a short period of time.

**Table 1: Local Language Proficiency and Communication Skills Among Expatriate Academics**

University 1	University 2	University 3
Expatriate Academic 2	Expatriate Academic 11	Expatriate Academic 26
Expatriate Academic 4	Expatriate Academic 12	Expatriate Academic 28
Expatriate Academic 5	Expatriate Academic 14	Expatriate Academic 30
Expatriate Academic 7	Expatriate Academic 15	Expatriate Academic 31
Expatriate Academic 10	Expatriate Academic 18	Expatriate Academic 32
	Expatriate Academic 23	Expatriate Academic 35
	Expatriate Academic 25	

The following are a selection of narrative excerpts screened from in-depth interviews regarding language use skills as a universal skill in improvisation of confidence and identity skills among expatriate academics in Malaysian Public Universities.

*“Speaking in Bahasa Malaysia is an easy thing for me. I have the advantage of being proficient in mastering a new language. From the first day I arrived in Malaysia I have started practicing the local language. By tamely using one or two words that*

*are easy to memorise, I was able to build a full sentence in just a few weeks. One thing you must know is practice makes perfect. I always communicate with the local community no matter whether when buying goods in the store or while giving lectures to my students. Malaysian society is such a good sport. They will feel excited every time they see a white man trying to speak in their language. What I can say here is that mastering the local language is very helpful for expatriates to get the cooperation and influence of the people around you.” (Expatriate Academic 2)*

Based on a statement issued by Expatriate Academic 2, the ability to master Bahasa Malaysia is something that feels easy because Expatriate Academic 2 started learning to speak in the local language from the first day setting foot in Malaysia. Such proactive actions have resulted in benefits for Expatriate Academic 2 to seek cooperation at work or help from local contacts. In that context, the wise move of Expatriate Academic 2 in utilising language skills indirectly has developed self-confidence as well as being able to adapt to the local community scenario at a faster rate (Shaikh & Ahmad, 2018; Richardson, Tan & Kiumarsi, 2018; Othman, 2019a).

Meanwhile, the use of English as a universal language and the second important language medium in Malaysia has facilitated the communication process between expatriates and the local community. This is because majority of Malaysians have a good command of English and that ability has reduced the constraints of two-way communication with colleagues and the local community (Rashid Aziz, 2014; Richardson, Yaapar & Abdullah, 2017; Othman, 2019; Fei & Le, 2020; Mahmud *et al.*, 2020; Yusoff, Othman, Mohd Shah, Esa, AbangMuis, Marinsah & Ramlie, 2021).

*“For me as a family, language is not a big issue. Frankly, I can say that Bahasa Malaysia is one of the languages that are easy to learn and pronounce. For those of us who are used to travelling to different parts of the world can make a comparison that the Malay language is easy to learn. I feel the difficult language is Arabic. Even the Malay language group itself can be used because it is almost the same as the Indonesian, Singaporean and Brunei languages. And the easiest way to socialise here is that in Malaysia almost all the people can speak English. This is because the country’s education system adopts the learning of English as the second most important language after their national language. And you know that English is a universal language. So, if we all can speak English then there is no problem for us expatriates to communicate with others.” (Expatriate Academic 10)*

Therefore, from the statement of Expatriate Academic 10 also found that there is no urgent need for Expatriate Academic 10 and family to learn Bahasa Malaysia immediately because they can still live daily life by speaking English as a universal language understood by almost everyone. From that perspective, although it is undeniable that foreign culture is the greatest challenge for expatriates but with the option to use English has eliminated the problem of communication constraints among them (Nzitunga & Nyanway, 2019; McNulty & Brewster, 2020; Roberta, Priya & Ihab, 2020; Othman, Ationg, Esa, Hajimin & AbangMuis, 2021b). Yet it is undeniable that the advantage of local language provides an opportunity for expatriates and families to build social networks while avoiding facing cultural shocks (Buettner-Wobst, Dorner, dos Santos Dörholt, Hüttchen & Sahakians, 2020; Fenech,

Baguant & Abdelwahed, 2020). This is because access to issues and problems is addressed with more accurate information either referring to local people or gaining their own understanding through readings that use the national language.

Statements from Expatriate Academic 10 were also supported by several other respondents who stated that although they were not able to master the language of the host country, they had no problem adapting to the host country environment. This is because the medium of communication in the workplace is English. Based on the interviews, some of the respondents have given almost similar views as shown below:

*“Oh, language is not our problem here. Everyone is more likely to speak in English. Same as the compulsory course syllabus in English. The university system here is more inclined and supportive for us lecturers to give lectures in English. Textbooks and references are almost entirely in English. Our students are encouraged to speak in English. I think one of the factors is the university wants to make sure students are able to communicate in English after graduating. I was informed our students are very weak in English and they are having difficulty getting job opportunities due to poor English proficiency. If you can speak English, then you will only gain the benefits and advantages of your skills. So, the issue of us expatriates not being able to master the local language well is not an issue that puts pressure on the workplace or on a daily basis.”* (Expatriate Academic 12)

While Expatriate Academic 15 view the value-added contribution of self-confidence occurs when an individual has a stance such as stating, “language barrier is the last barrier that should be considered by an expatriate”. In other words, Expatriate Academic 15 shows that the effort to deal with different situations not only in the workplace, but also in daily life personally affects the identity of the expatriate. Efforts to understand most of what is spoken by the surrounding communities that use dialects rather than the national standard language have provided self-confidence (Rocke, 2017; Shaikh & Ahmad, 2018; Othman, 2019; Stoermer, Lauring & Selmer, 2020). Whereas the positive assumption in which the Expatriate Academic 15 interpretation of the new social structure can enhance the positive values in the expatriates in turn helps to further improve their self-skills.

*“I can speak a little bit of standard Malay. Not a local language that has a specific slang. Here, when we can speak in Bahasa Malaysia does not mean you can understand what they are talking about. I had trouble understanding most of what was being spoken because the dialect used by some people are very strong. After all, we cannot expect everyone to be comfortable using the standard language, so we also cannot force them to speak in the standard language. But whatever it is, it is not a big deal. As long as we want to learn, the language barrier is the last barrier an expatriate should think about. The important thing is that we can be accepted by our colleagues, neighbours regardless of what language is our liaison.”* (Expatriate Academic 15)

The dissatisfaction described by Expatriate Academic 23 is when faced with the problem of the general public’s view of expatriates who do not want to take any initiative to learn the national language, denying the claim that the use of local language can be used as a medium

to increase expatriate self-confidence. According to Expatriate Academic 23, language skills are considered facilitators for expatriates in adjusting to a new place. There is no doubt that the ability to master the national language will make it easier for expatriates to be approached by the local community (Richardson, Yaapar & Abdullah, 2017; Fei & Le, 2020; Othman, 2019; 2021b). Yet for Expatriate Academic 23 stance that does not mean we cannot have smooth two-way communication.

*“I am not sure what is the issue here. You are Malaysian. All your life here, being born, going to school and living your life here. But you still cannot speak Chinese and Indian. So, in that context language is not a barrier for us expatriates to be comfortable here. To me, language skills are just a facilitator for us to make our lives easier or approachable by the local community. But that does not mean we cannot have smooth communication. For professionals, the effect of language on our work performance is not something to worry about. We are in a cyber world. We move with time. And now is more of a technological time.” (Expatriate Academic 23)*

According to Expatriate Academic 28, the need to use the language of the host country is the key to success in adapting to the environment of the host country and it is considered one of the most important factors. The use of language is the easiest way to reach out to the local community (Selmer & Luring, 2015; Othman, 2019a). When the opportunity to get to know them has been obtained then the bond of friendship with the local community is considered a bonus to that effort.

*“I do not deny that I missed out on many opportunities when talking with local friends. They speak very fast and are interspersed with strange dialects. At first, I would often ask them to repeat slowly. Eventually, I did not want to ask over and over if I do not understand. The best way is to just laugh when they feel funny about something. Or you better just keep quiet, so you do not want to disturb the smoothness of their conversation. To me what matters is understanding. We cannot expect everything to be perfect in a friendship. The important thing is that we have a good heart and a way that respect another people’s culture. That is enough for me.” (Expatriate Academic 28)*

A similar issue has also been highlighted by Expatriate Academic 31 which is undergoing good self-assimilation is the answer to all the problems when you become an expatriate. With the correct command of language then the thoughts and actions of a person in communication and interaction with the surrounding community successfully bring a person closer to another person (Kim, 2015; Abdien, 2019; Othman, 2019a; 2019c; Mohd Shah, Mokhtar, Othman *et al.*, 2021b).

*“Yes, self-adaptation is the key to everything when you become an expatriate. One of them is being able to at least understand the spoken language of the locals. I faced a bit of a problem when all memos, emails and statements are made in the local language. Sometimes it is a bit frustrating when you have to translate into English. And it is kind of funny because sometimes you do not even know which one is important and needs your immediate attention or which is just a general notification. I always overlooked and stunned when the right information does not reach my*

knowledge. Therefore, in my opinion, in any way you are in a better position if you can master the local language.” (Expatriate Academic 31)

Expatriate Academic 35 in recounting the importance of getting to know someone through language proficiency, emphasising how the process of self-adjustment is aided by the local community who see such determination to learn the language so most of them offer themselves to be free language teachers. With the moral support shown in helping expatriates master the local language then it is fair to say that the role of various parties is significant and considered a valuable medium to expatriates.

*“Oh, I think it is very important. We get to know someone more closely through language. By having the advantage of speaking the local language, we not only facilitate our work but also most importantly we will be more easily accepted into the local community. I love learning about humans. About the nation, about religion, about culture. Everything is related to each other. Imagine if you could not understand what they were talking about. It is like you are not in the right place at the right time. I took a Malay speaking class for a year using my own money. I was motivated to do it because I saw the importance of language in helping me. Furthermore, I want to have fun living here. This is the best time to learn a foreign language easily and quickly. Maybe in the future when I migrate to another country, I will not feel so excited to learn the Malay language.”* (Expatriate Academic 35)

### ***Self-Confidence Gives an Advantage to Career and Interaction with The Local Community***

Based on the results of this study, 13 out of 35 expatriate academics believe that self-confidence is a contributing factor to the assimilation adaptation of the host country’s cultural environment. In general, respondents are aware that with self-confidence, an expatriate will be more confident to understand and deepen and conduct social interactions with the local community. This is also supported by the majority of respondents who voiced their views on the element of self-confidence should be present in an expatriate because it is an important factor that can influence the process of adaptation of the cultural environment in the host country. Therefore, self-confidence is an important element in doing the job better. In addition, the ability and having the confidence to interact with the local community also contributes to the smooth socio-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2015; Bayraktar, 2019; Canhilal, Canboy & Bakici, 2020; Fei & Le, 2020). The results of the study showed that 13 out of 35 expatriate academics listed in Table 2 below mentioned about self-confidence giving an advantage in their career and facilitating interaction with the local community.

**Table 2: Self-Confidence Gives an Advantage to Career and Interaction with Local Communities**

University 1	University 2	University 3
Expatriate Academic 3	Expatriate Academic 13	Expatriate Academic 25
Expatriate Academic 6	Expatriate Academic 16	Expatriate Academic 29
Expatriate Academic 8	Expatriate Academic 21	Expatriate Academic 30
Expatriate Academic 9	Expatriate Academic 24	Expatriate Academic 33
		Expatriate Academic 34

Along with the discussion of this paper, a narrative approach is used to gain an understanding of expatriates' interpretations of self-confidence improvisation and skills as well as to help researchers better understand expatriate actions in interpreting the self-confidence gained from such expatriations. This can be proven based on the statements of some respondents as described below:

According to Expatriate Academic 3, a high level of confidence leads to the visibility of a person's credibility in carrying out tasks, especially for professions that involve intensive daily interaction. As a lecturer, the respondent considered the key to delivering an effective lecture was to have high interaction skills that necessarily come from self-confidence.

*“Self-confidence is important especially for an independent expatriate like me. Self-skills will be positive if we have a high level of confidence. A career as a lecturer makes it a basic requirement for a person to appear in public. Lecturers of calibre will not have the characteristics of shyness, not daring to speak out and lack of confidence. We are highly regarded by our students. We are role models to our students. I have yet to meet a lecturer who cannot argue well in public. That is our asset and advantage as lecturers. Plus, for those of us who come as international staff have to go through a rather difficult job interview process. Without the self-confidence shown during the interview then no employer wants you to work for them.”* (Expatriate Academic 3)

Excessive self-confidence can invite people's prejudices that they turn into personality traps that eventually share oneself (Bhatti, Battour, Ismail & Sundram, 2014; Harari *et al.*, 2018). Self-confidence is one of the qualities of self that is cultivated from education and surrounding influences (Othman, 2019a). Thus, self-confidence is said to be more personal and dynamic as supported by Expatriate Academic 9 explaining further that self-confidence can be utilised for self-interest but not to the point of overstepping the limits. Therefore, it can be learned and improved from time to time as recommended by Expatriate Academic 9 in the statement below:

*“Actually, by having self-confidence you will be respected by those around you. I mean self-confidence that does not go overboard to the point of making you look arrogant. Self-confidence comes from a developed personality. Not everyone is born with high self-confidence. I mean you learn to be confident in your own abilities. And self-confidence is something that can be learned. I think many people misunderstand the concept of self-confidence. It is not our nature. It is more of a trait formed from our environment and education since childhood.”* (Expatriate Academic 9)

According to Expatriate Academic 16, self-confidence has been a help to face the challenge of meeting outsiders of various races and religions as well as environments that were different back home. Expatriate Academic 6 feels that the self-confidence is developed progressing provides a spiritual advantage in the workplace and find comfort in going through the routine of daily life during expatriating. In that context, the process of assimilation in the social structure of expatriates is known as a cognitive process that occurs when individuals try to assimilate themselves in a foreign cultural environment (Ott & Michailova, 2018; Othman, 2019b; Canhilal, Canboy & Bakici, 2020).

*“The first time I set foot in Malaysia, I was a little nervous. For me personally, Malaysia is a country with its own challenges. Apart from having students from different races, languages and religions, one of the big challenges is to have colleague who have high confidence in their respective areas of expertise. In addition to having bonus points for working in their own country, their self-confidence comes with extensive experience. However, I am thankful because I was able to adapt well and build self-confidence in the host country.”* (Expatriate Academic 16)

In that context, self-confidence is associated with psychological process. Expatriate Academic 25 provide insights for expatriates with low self-confidence (low self-esteem) that they will have difficulty being in a different culture in the host country. From that perspective, it is normal for every expatriate to go through the expatriation process and time factors are able to help the problem of incompatibility with the foreign environment and in that context, expatriates who seeks to get out of the comfort zone the soonest possible will benefit from the new environment (Rashid Aziz, 2014; Abdien, 2019; Fenech, Baguant & Abdelwahed, 2020, Othman, 2021; Mohd Shah *et al.*, 2021).

*“Speaking of expatriates facing cross-cultural assimilation in the host country, the most helpful aspect is if the individuals have high self-confidence. For example, not everyone can get used to the new environment especially in terms of language constraints, food differences, adaptation to the weather and so on. But each of these difficulties can be overcome well if one has the self-identity and confidence to experience expatriation in the host country. This is very normal. Everyone is able to accustom themselves to the new environment. What differentiates is the time taken is either short or long. From there, we can see how important it is to have a high level of self-confidence while being an expatriate.”* (Expatriate Academic 25)

On the other hand, high-confidence expatriates show a tendency to cultivate soft skills by trying to adapt to the environment through recognising cultural differences, respecting local customs and learning to master the language of the host country (Othman, 2019a; 2019b; Mohd Shah *et al.*, 2021; Yusoff *et al.*, 2021).

*“Once upon a time, I had a good friend who aspired to be an expatriate. It is a bit awkward when my friend does not specifically state the field of work or interest. My friend emphasised of the ambition was to get a job in a foreign country, outside country of origin that is to work with an employer who is abroad. What is even more surprising when my friend tells the reason behind that desire is because wanting to travel around the world and knows that desire will be fulfilled because my friend possessed a high self-confidence. I did not understand what my good friend meant until I became an expatriate.”* (Expatriate Academic 30)

In general, the above discussion shows a series of challenges and obstacles faced by expatriates. Comparisons are also highlighted for a group of expatriates who are proficient in the local language and make use of those skills. Among them, the use of the host language has the ability to play a role in eliminating the problem of communication constraints in the process of cross-cultural assimilation with colleagues and the local community (Kim, 2015;

Selmer & Luring, 2015; Othman, 2019a; 2019b; Mohd Shah *et al.*, 2021; Yusoff *et al.*, 2021). A selection of dialogue narratives is inserted in the above discussion to examine the proactive academic attitudes of expatriates who take the initiative to replace the identity and cultural values of the country of origin. Examples of situations where a handful of expatriates give up their native language habits and master the local language to improve their communication skills during subsequent acceptance by the local community are also discussed.

## Conclusion

Essentially, the discussion in this paper focuses on the exploration of the elements of identity associated with local language proficiency among academics undergoing expatriation through their own efforts. The group is said to take proactive initiatives to place themselves in a comfortable position in the organisation for career advancement in the host country. Therefore, the discussion in this paper is directed to explore the relationship between the elements of language use skills in the transformation of identity and confidence among expatriate academics in Malaysian Public Universities. In other words, the situation refers to the proactive expatriate academics' attitude in the effort to replace the identity and cultural values of the country of origin such as giving up native language norms and mastering the local language to improve communication skills during subsequent acceptance by the local community (Kim, 2015; Selmer & Luring, 2015; Othman, 2019a; 2019b; 2021; Mohd Shah *et al.*, 2021; Yusoff *et al.*, 2021). The results of this study prove that self-confidence is understood to play a role in developing a person's thoughts and actions in communication and interaction with the social structure and phenomenology that binds a person to another person. Thus, in the context of this study, self-confidence is seen as more personal and dynamic. Along with the discussion of this paper, the interpretation of expatriates in relation to the improvisation of self-confidence and skills as well as helping researchers better understand the actions of expatriates in interpreting the self-confidence derived from such expatriation.

This study contributes to the expatriate management literature by discussing the propensity of mastery and language skills in providing advantages to expatriates from context of self-confidence. The discussion in this paper emphasises the importance of the use of the language of the host country being practiced in the workplace environment as well as in living personal life when interacting with the surrounding community. Expatriate academics involved in the study on average think that they have the ability to speak the local language as well as utilise those skills as one of the factors that contribute to the success of international assignments. Therefore, the discussion in this paper is directed to explore the relationship between the elements of language use skills in the transformation of identity and confidence among expatriate academics in Malaysian Public Universities. In the context of the argument raised, it refers more to the aspect of self-assimilation during the expatriation process in the host country with their initiative to let go of old values and renew them with current values. In other words, the situation refers to the proactive attitude of expatriate academics in the effort to replace the identity and cultural values of the country of origin such as giving up mother tongue and mastering the local language to improve communication skills during subsequent acceptance by the local community.

However, there are also suggestion from expatriate academics who feel that the appropriateness of acquiring national language skills is not a determining factor in competence in carrying out the task. The reasons given focus more on the ability of the Malaysian community in speaking English which is said to be the second most important language in the country. While the country's education system has exposed its people to such universal language skills then the mastery of the local language is not an urgent need and it is not a major factor that has a continuity with the self-confidence of expatriates. Furthermore, in the era of globalisation English is used as a medium of interaction which is a necessity for almost all levels of business. Thus, the use of language is an important dimension of the success of expatriate academics in the adaptation of the culture of the host country. But in the context of Malaysia, there are also respondents stating that they are able to adapt to the environment of the host country without using the language of the country. However, it is undeniable that by having the advantage of the local language, it will make the process of assimilation of foreign and cross-culture environment shorter.

Discussion on self-confidence and self-esteem skills among expatriates are often highlighted but the approach taken is to put the advantage to be utilised on the part of the organisation and not expatriates as the subject of study. The self-confidence and self-identity skills of expatriates are clearly seen as a way of recognising an individual's ability to respond to external stimuli, thus producing positive value. The proactive process is done by trying to find answers to change and self-transformation while in the country of the people. The search for answers regarding their identity as an expatriate includes exploring foreign cultures, releasing the culture of the country of origin, developing a network of contacts and assessing their potential and ability to deal with the challenges of life abroad. The focus of the discussion was placed on the great challenges for the majority of expatriates especially for those who are just coming to a foreign country for the first time. Comparisons are also shown for expatriates with local language skills where the used of the host language is able to eliminate communication constraints especially in cross-cultural situations with colleagues and the local community. The situation referred to in this study is to examine the proactive attitude of expatriate academics in the effort to replace the identity and cultural values of the country of origin such as giving up their mother tongue and mastering the local language to improve communication skills during subsequent acceptance by the local community.

In addition, this study hopes to add value in the expatriate management literature by identifying the academic career field as one of the specific career types for self-initiated expatriates and make basic concepts to explain how they interact such as language proficiency can increase self-confidence that sketches their respective career development. The practical implications of this study will meet the needs of human resource management of the higher education sector, especially in terms of recruitment, retention and career management of academics who are self-initiated can be seen from the aspect of soft skills. At the same time, this can help Malaysian public universities provide international academic staff that is global in nature, of high quality, and credible. This study contributes useful information on the expatriate management literature and provides further evidence that self-employed expatriates have tried to form a group that has long been overlooked from the focus of research.

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