

Cross-culture Communication for Undergraduate International Students:

A case study of one university in Chonburi province

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Abstract

This objective research aims to explore the cross-culture communication problem for undergraduate international students and to provide recommendations for undergraduate international students. It is a case study of one university in Chonburi province using phenomenological methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 undergraduate international students from different cultural backgrounds to understand their experiences and challenges. The results found that the cross-culture communication problem for undergraduate international students can be categorized into 8 problems: 1) communication adaptation, 2) verbal communication, 3) non-verbal communication, 4) language barriers, 5) inclusion barriers, 6) culture barriers, 7) environment barriers, and 8) attitudinal barriers. The recommendations for undergraduate international students can be categorized into 2 topics: 1) culture and 2) language.

Keywords : *Cross-culture, Cross-Cultural Communication, Undergraduate International Students*

Introduction

Intercultural communication, firstly introduced by Hall in his *Silent Language* (1959), he highlighted culture's critical role in human social life and posited that culture shaped every aspect of human existence. With over 5 million international students globally in 2019, these students have been facing unique challenges such as cultural differences, language barriers, and academic expectations (Carter & Cook, 2020). The history of international student mobility, significant since the 1960s and 1970s due to improved transportation and communication, continued to evolve, with a diverse student body today (Deardorff, 2006). While studying abroad offered benefits like cultural exposure and job opportunities, it also presented challenges including language barriers and discrimination (Institute of International Education, 2020).

The history of international student mobility could be traced back to the early 20th century when they came from Asia and Africa and began to study in Europe and the US. However, until the 1960s and 1970s, the international student mobility continued increasing significantly, as a result of improved transportation and communication technologies, as well as increased funding for international education programs. Nowadays, international students come from a wide range of countries and backgrounds and are enrolled in a variety of academic programs (Deardorff, 2006). Institute of international education (2020) expressed that while studying abroad could offer many benefits, including exposure to new cultures and ideas, improved language skills, and enhanced job opportunities, international students still faced significant challenges.

These challenges could include language barriers, homesickness, academic differences, and discrimination. As a result, cross-cultural research on international students had focused on identifying strategies to help students overcome these challenges, such as cultural orientation programs, mentoring, and academic support services. Cultural competence had emerged as an important concept in cross-cultural research on international students. This referred to the ability of individuals and institutions to understand and appreciated cultural differences and adapted to different cultural contexts. Cultural competence was important in higher education because it could help to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for international students, improve academic outcomes, and strengthen intercultural relationships (Ying, 2015).

In addition, attending an international school was an enriching experience for students of all ages, and culture shock was a term which was first coined by anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in the

1950s to describe the experience of disorientation and anxiety that individuals felt when they were exposed to a new culture. Culture shock can occur when individuals travel to a foreign country, move to a new city, or even encounter a new culture within their own country. It is typically characterized by four stages: the honeymoon stage, the negotiation stage, the adjustment stage, and the adaptation stage (Pedersen, 2015). Thereafter, Cross-Cultural Communication occurred when people with different nationalities, styles of working, ages, races, sexual orientations, gender, and so on (Bhasin, 2021). Different cultural ways give people different ways of thinking, analyzing, hearing, accepting, and interpreting different things (Bhasin, 2021).

At present, cross-cultural education is considered imperative for international students acting in managerial capacities abroad. However, little is known about for international undergraduate students in Thailand contexts. For example, Bal (2023) showed that teachers with international experience had higher scores than those without international experience, and there was a positive relationship between teachers' intercultural sensitivity and the length of their international experience. Furthermore, multilingual teachers had much higher intercultural sensitivity than their monolingual counterparts in Turkish contexts. In addition, Li (2024) found that multinational companies often faced employees and customers from different cultural backgrounds in the process of internationalization. This made cultural differences and communication major challenges. He analyzed communication patterns and values between different cultures and their impacts on business operations and teamwork, for instance, good cross-cultural communication could help a company to diversify, while poor cross-cultural communication could create conflicts, misunderstandings, and impediments to proper functioning.

Moreover, the increase of globalization in the world has been replaced by a new environment without borders with the support of global organizations (Ma, Charoenarnpornwattana & Svastdi-Xuto, 2019). The findings suggested that the core essence of culture shock experienced by foreign teachers included six themes: 1) Hierarchy culture at school, 2) behavior of people at school, 3) Jealousy caused gossip at the workplace, 4) school management differences, 5) language barriers, and 6) School environment differences. Furthermore, the influences of culture shock had been determined to include three themes: 1) culture shock affected self-emotions; 2) culture shock affected attitudes; 3) techniques to overcome culture shock.

Based on this contextual gap, it is observed that extant studies have largely ignored bachelor degree students even though they contribute to a large population in the school context, and they are in a vital position to be affected by a dramatically globalized world. Therefore, this study aimed to focus on the Cross-culture communication issues among the international undergraduate students at a university in Eastern Thailand. As Bhasin (2021) proposed that globalization had further emphasized the importance of cross-cultural communication, particularly in educational settings, where failure to understand, cultural nuances could lead to significant challenges. The study intended to demonstrate that language differences are the most common obstacles. Students who were not proficient in the language of the host country may struggle to understand lectures, participate in discussions, and build relationships with peers. This might lead to frustration and obstructions of academic success (Yassin et al., 2020; Gostev & Belous, 2019). These differences in values, communication styles, and social norms might result in misunderstandings or discomfort. (Yassin et al., 2020; Hardecker, 2019)

Research Questions

1. What are the cross-cultural communication problems for undergraduate international students? A case study of one university in Chonburi province.
2. What should be the recommendation for the undergraduate international students? A case study of one university in Chonburi province.

Literature Review

Concept of Communication

Definition of Communication

Communication is the exchange of information, ideas, and feelings between individuals or groups, involving both verbal and non-verbal cues such as speech, writing, gestures, and body language. It is essential for clear information transfer, building relationships, and achieving goals (Vedantu, 2024). Derived from the Latin "communis," meaning "shared," communication involves a sender and receiver, utilizing forms like email, chat, and video calls. This complex process includes symbols, signals, and behaviors to transmit and receive information (Gordon, 2024; Taylor & Francis, 2001).

Elements of Communication

Communication involves several key elements: the source, message, channel, receiver, feedback, environment, context, and interference (Radhika, 2020). Scholars have developed models like the Shannon-Weaver model, which includes the transmitter, encoder, channel, decoder, receiver, noise, and feedback. Effective communication requires understanding these elements and adapting to individual differences in personality, attitude, and learning ability (Elisa & María, 2015; Crawley, 2019).

Concept of Cross-Culture Communication

Definition of Global Communication: Global communication had involved the development and sharing of information through verbal and non-verbal messages across international contexts. It had integrated multiple disciplines such as intercultural, political, health, media, crisis, social advocacy, and marketing communications. Professionals in this field had worked in advertising, journalism, foreign service, and entertainment (Kevin et al., 2020). The field had grown in importance due to globalization, which had led to increased interdependence among the world's economies, cultures, and populations (Britannica, 2022).

Elements of Global Communication: Global communication faces challenges such as language, inclusion, cultural, and environmental barriers (Min Wu, 2021). Strategies like language exchange programs, cultural club participation, and technology-enhanced language learning can help address these issues (Smith & Johnson, 2020; Sun, 2021). Understanding these barriers is essential for improving communication in academic and professional settings. Organizational diagnosis is vital for fostering development and sustainability, involving the identification of issues, data collection on systems and culture, and implementing necessary changes (Koziol et al., 2015; French et al., 2006). It promotes change and new directions, enhancing future performance (Cummings, 2005).

Concept of Communication Barriers

Language Barriers

Language barriers have been significant obstacles for international students in non-native environments like Thailand. These barriers stem from differences in language, dialects, and specialized knowledge, causing confusion and miscommunication. Addressing language barriers is crucial for ensuring clear and effective communication (Brandi, 2022).

Inclusion Barriers

Inclusion barriers occur when individuals or groups are unable to fully integrate or participate due to differences in culture, language, or other factors. Overcoming these barriers requires fostering diversity and inclusion, which enhances organizational performance and creates more inclusive environments (Home-care, 2022).

Cultural and Environmental Barriers

Cultural barriers arise from differences in norms, values, and practices that hinder effective communication. Environmental barriers include physical and social factors, such as living conditions or societal norms, that affect communication. Addressing these barriers requires understanding and adapting to the cultural and environmental contexts of the communication (EasyUn, 2024).

Research Methodology

This study chose qualitative research by employing a phenomenological approach through semi-structured interview with 12 international undergraduate students as the participants who came from a university in Chonburi, Thailand. As the research was about cross-culture multicultural and diversity, so qualitative research could clearly find out the issue of the factor or reason it happened and explain this topic deeply and strictly, like Mbaleka and Rosario (2022) explained that it was useful in solving phenomena and issues that were novel, complex, and context-specific. It could heal, humanize, and empower participants. It could be used for theory generation.

Participants

The study aimed to focus on the cross-culture communication issues among the international undergraduate students at a university in Eastern Thailand. The twelve participants came from eight countries: China (three males), USA (one female), India (one male and one female), Indonesia (one female), Russia (one male and one female), France (one female), Japan (one female), Sweden (one Male). Their ages ranged between 19 and 24, and their lives in Thailand varied from one year to thirteen years.

Table 1 The Demographics of the Participants

No.	Gender	Age	Country	Years in Thailand
P1	Male	19	China	6
P2	Male	20	China	2
P3	Male	20	China	3
P4	Male	21	Russia	12
P5	Female	23	Russia	13
P6	Female	20	India	1
P7	Male	21	Sweden	6
P8	Female	22	France	4
P9	Female	20	America	1
P10	Female	20	Japan	1
P11	Male	20	India	2
P12	Female	24	Indonesia	4

Table 1 provided a summary of the interviews conducted with 12 undergraduate international students. These interviews outlined fundamental aspects of the culture shock experience as perceived by the participants. The group comprised six males and six females from eight different countries: three students from China, two from Russia, two from India, one from Sweden, one from France, one from the United States, one from Japan, and one from Indonesia, with an average age of 20.83 years. Additionally, there were eight different religions represented among the participants: one identified as Buddhist, two as Taoist, two as Eastern Orthodox, two as Hindu, two as Catholic, one as Christian, one as Shinto, and one as Muslim.

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

This study had used a semi-structured interview as one of the instruments for the research. Semi-structured interviews had been the preferred interview technique among qualitative researchers (Alsaawi & Alshenqeeti, 2014). This interview guide had been developed from a literature review and related research studies and had been prepared for the type of questions used in semi-structured interviews. The researcher had sent the draft to 5 experts to check the accuracy of the content and language. The IOC results of the interview guide item 13 were 0.75 according to the standard of the IOC, in which scores over 0.50 were acceptable based on all the suggestions from experts.

Data Analysis

Data analysis chose the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, involving seven steps from reading protocols to validating findings from the participants. Data were analyzed by using ATLAS.ti, with open, axial, and selective coding to derive meaningful insights (Colaizzi, 1978). Trustworthiness was established through a robust methodological framework, transparency, and ethical practices. The use of phenomenology and semi-structured interviews ensured deep exploration and credible data. Systematic data analysis enhanced reliability and dependability (Merriam et al., 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Van Manen, 2014). Ethics in this research were rigorously maintained, with approval from the university and the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants' comfort and confidentiality were prioritized, and informed consent was obtained. The study adhered to ethical guidelines to safeguard participants' rights (Merriam et al., 2007; Cohen et al., 2007).

Findings

This study interviewed twelve international undergraduates from eight different countries, including China, Russia, India, Indonesia, Japan, America, Sweden, and France. All of them lived in Thailand more than one year, and they could speak English fluently. As listed in Table 2, it was found that the cross-cultural communicative problems for the participants included the difficulties in understanding different accents and subtle communication nuances which required patience and adaptability to overcome. To be more specific, international undergraduate students had to navigate cultural differences in symbolism, naming conventions, nonverbal communication, and dress codes.

Language barriers also posed a significant challenge which kept causing students to rely on gestures and simplified English, which highlighted the importance of a clear communicative approach. Additionally, digital acculturation, intercultural game interactions, and sharing personal narratives to challenge stereotypes and demonstrate cultural richness contributed to the complex experiences faced by international students, emphasizing the need for adaptability, intercultural understanding, and effective communication strategies, as listed in Table 2.

Table 2 Cross-culture communication problems for undergraduate international students

Category	Code
1.1 Communication adaptation	1.1.1 Different accent
1.2 Verbal communication	1.2.1 Meaning of numbers 1.2.2 Different Express
1.3 Non-Verbal communications	1.3.1 Etiquette Different 1.3.2 Dress style 1.3.3 Body language
1.4 Language barriers	1.4.1 Speaking 1.4.2 Translator communication
1.5 Inclusion barriers	1.5.1 High Low context 1.5.2 Social Space
1.6 Culture barriers	1.6.1 Culture shock
1.7 Environment barriers	1.7.1 Social media 1.7.2 Games
1.8 Attitudinal barriers	1.8.1 Life

Table 3 The recommendation for the undergraduate international students

Category	Code
2.1 Culture	2.1.1 Learn Thai culture 2.1.2 More activities
2.2 Language	2.2.1 Request the university to have an International students' Thai Class 2.2.2 Encourage Thai students to speak more English in classroom

As listed in Table 3, the research elaborated on participants' experiences of adapting to Thai culture, covering areas such as verbal and non-verbal communication, the cultural significance of numbers, overcoming language barriers, assimilating into the social fabric, and conforming to dress codes. In the process of understanding and honoring local traditions, the students needed to know about the importance of number symbols in Thailand, the inclination towards indirect communication, and the norms of modest attire. The account underscored the hurdles faced in adjusting to the tonal and grammatical intricacies of the Thai language, as well as the nuances of polite vernacular. An initiative was proposed to bridge the cultural gap through active participation in community activities and a deep understanding of Thai social etiquette for social integration. Moreover, the narrative reflected on tackling stereotypical perceptions and promoting mutual respect and understanding, underscoring the critical role of in-depth cultural immersion in facilitating the researcher's integration into Thai society.

Discussion

The findings demonstrated that communicative adaptation with different accents might make miscommunication as a major problem. At the same time, verbal and non-verbal communication enabled them to understand factors in daily life. Regarding the language aspect, it was found that sometimes the students (both Thai and international) had relied on gestures, electric translators, and simplified English to communicate effectively. Social space was also the big difference between Thai and international students. Simultaneously, cultural barriers had made culture shock, triggered cross-cultural communicative difficulties between Thai and international students.

Furthermore, there were environmental issues with social media; even though most applications were universal, also network blocking had made instant messaging lack continuity. Even the games (i.e., PC games, smartphone games, and video games) sometimes could not be played together because of the regional blockade. Finally, attitudinal barriers had existed; most international students had always asked some stereotypical questions, which caused a lot of cultural misunderstanding. Overall, international undergraduates studying in Thailand encountered many challenges in intercultural communication.

These challenges included the difficulties in understanding unique accents and subtle communicative nuances (which required patience and adaptability), as well as navigating cultural

differences in symbolism, naming conventions, nonverbal communication, and dress codes. For example, students from collectivist cultures may find it challenging to integrate into more individualistic cultures where self-expression is highly valued (Yassin et al., 2020; Hardecker, 2019). Additionally, international undergrads may face psychological stress, as cultural adaptation often leads to stress, especially when students encounter culture shock or isolation. The adjustment period can be mentally taxing as they attempt to balance academic pressures with the need to adapt socially and culturally (Kim, 2021). Language barriers posed a significant issue, causing students to rely on gestures and simplified English, thus highlighting the importance of clear communication approaches. As Garcia and Wang (2019) mentioned, international students often needed to learn and adapt to new non-verbal communication norms to integrate effectively into Thai society. Nowadays, digital acculturation, intercultural game interactions, and the sharing of personal narratives to challenge stereotypes and demonstrate cultural richness contributed to the complex experiences faced by international students in Thailand. These nuances required international students to be proficient in the language and understand the culture (Chen & Lee, 2020). The results highlighted significant challenges and recommendations regarding intercultural communication among international students in Thailand.

In addition, the findings revealed that international undergraduates studying in Thailand emphasized the need to deepen their understanding of Thai culture, language, and customs (Smith & Johnson, 2021). They advocated greater participation in cross-cultural events with Thai students to bridge cultural gaps and promote mutual understanding, suggesting diverse activities such as sports, music, and art. Encouraging Thai students to engage more in English during classroom interactions could have helped bridge the language gap and foster a more inclusive academic environment (Chen & Lee, 2020). They emphasized the necessity of comprehensive Thai language courses for effective communication and deeper integration into Thai life, recognizing the benefits of multilingualism for international students in Thailand.

To sum up, the results highlighted significant challenges and recommendations regarding intercultural communication among international students in Thailand. These challenges included various aspects such as communication adaptation, verbal and nonverbal communication, language barriers, inclusion barriers, cultural barriers, environmental barriers, and attitudinal challenges. One of the major obstacles was the difficulty in understanding unique accents and the nuances of

communication, which required patience and adaptability on the part of the students in their daily life and study. Cultural differences related to symbolism, naming conventions, nonverbal cues, and dress codes also contributed to communication barriers, reflecting issues rooted in language, inclusion, culture, environment, and attitudes. These insights contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of intercultural interactions and highlighted the importance of inclusive approaches, educational support, and cultural sensitivity in creating an enabling environment for international students in Thailand (Smith & Johnson, 2021). This discussion underscored the importance of addressing these multifaceted barriers through comprehensive support systems, inclusive policies, and active cultural exchange programs to facilitate smoother intercultural communication and integration for international students in Thailand.

At the same time in this study suggested which international students encouraging a deeper understanding of Thai culture, language, and customs. Promoting participation in cross-cultural events and activities to bridge gaps and foster mutual understanding before they (international students) ask more Thai language courses, this study shows the necessity of Thai language courses for effective communication and deeper integration into Thai society. But Thai students to needs to engage more in English during classroom interactions to help bridge the language gap. Highlighting the importance of inclusive approaches, educational support, and cultural sensitivity to foster an enabling environment for international students. At end the researcher find that the game is already become to the universal social tools in the father research the other scholar can research in this direction

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