Steering towards the Savvy: Students' Interpretations of Intercultural Competence and their Intercultural Learning in EFL Classrooms[1]

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, the teaching and learning of foreign languages (FL) has shifted towards providing English as a foreign language (EFL) learner with the necessary skills in a cross-cultural encounter widely known as intercultural competence. Based on the notion that one's intercultural savvy depends on having a clear conception of what intercultural competence involves, this study aimed to explore Thai students' interpretations of intercultural competence (IC). The study was carried out through interviews with 20 Thai undergraduate students from two Thai universities in Bangkok. All participants took part in both one-on-one and group interviews. The study used Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The findings show that the participants had little understanding of the concepts underlying IC, and how students perceived IC was essentially influenced by their intercultural learning experiences in their classrooms. Overall, the findings of this study offered a wide range of recommendations, specifically regarding classroom practices for intercultural learning.

Resumen

En el siglo XXI, la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras (LE) se ha orientado hacia proporcionar al estudiante de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) las habilidades necesarias en un encuentro intercultural ampliamente conocido como competencia intercultural. Basado en la noción de que el conocimiento intercultural depende de tener una concepción clara de lo que implica la competencia intercultural, el estudio tuvo como objetivo explorar las interpretaciones de la competencia intercultural (CI) de los estudiantes tailandeses. El estudio se llevó a cabo mediante entrevistas con 20 estudiantes universitarios tailandeses de dos universidades tailandesas en Bangkok. Todos los participantes participaron en entrevistas individuales y grupales. El estudio utilizó el modelo de competencia comunicativa intercultural (CCI) de Byram (1997). Los hallazgos muestran que los participantes tenían poca comprensión de los conceptos subyacentes a la CI, y la forma en que los estudiantes percibían la CI estaba esencialmente influenciada por sus experiencias de aprendizaje intercultural en sus aulas. En general, los hallazgos de este estudio ofrecieron una amplia gama de recomendaciones, específicamente en relación con las prácticas en el aula para el aprendizaje intercultural.

Introduction

In response to the growing diversity and multiculturalism of the globalized world, supporting learners in becoming intercultural speakers is a key focus in a growing body of research in second and FL education (e.g., Byram & Feng, 2005; Corbett, 2003; Liddicoat, 2002; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Sercu, 2002). Given the importance of interculturality in this globalized era, the intercultural dimension is increasingly influential in today's curricular frameworks for foreign language (FL) pedagogy (Hismanoglu, 2011; Young & Sachdev, 2010). This radical change has urged FL teachers to consider language pedagogy beyond linguistic tasks (Baker, 2012; Kongkerd, 2013; Sercu, 2006). Because of this, the English curriculum in Thailand was revised to modify its goal from the instruction of grammar rules to expanding the students' communicative repertoires (Baker, 2008), helping students to communicate across different cultures. The revised curriculum challenges the pedagogical value of rote learning, making it compulsory for teachers to go beyond the codified descriptions of language teaching or accuracy. In fact, teachers should also guide their students on the sea of cross-cultural learning, directing and steering them toward becoming savvy intercultural speakers.

As the world is becoming increasingly diverse, there has been an attempt to promote cultural and ethnic heterogeneity in higher education. With the far-reaching impact of the growing cultural diversity in higher education contexts, many studies in FL teaching have focused on intercultural competence (IC) among

learners. Despite the existence of studies on IC in educational settings, most previous research in this area has predominantly focused on students' beliefs about their experience with intercultural learning in their language classrooms. Besides that, there are numerous studies which have documented classroom activities that students believed to be necessary for their development of IC, as well as the barriers to cross-cultural learning in their English classrooms (e.g., Ippolito 2007; Lee et al., 2014). Those studies, however, have not dealt with the students' interpretations of IC and what it involves. A clear interpretation of IC plays a crucial role in the successful teaching and learning of intercultural communication (Gu, 2016). Moreover, perceptions of IC can vary due primarily to students' previous experiences both in and outside the classroom (Krajewski, 2011), as well as their differences (Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013). This study aims to explore how Thai undergraduate students interpret IC, as well as their intercultural learning experiences in their English classrooms. The research questions for this research are: (1) what were the students' interpretation of intercultural competence? and (2) what were their intercultural learning experiences in their English classrooms? This study provides insight into students' interpretation of IC based on Byram's (1997) framework, and the extent to which the English Language pedagogy in Thailand exposes them to the intercultural dimension proposed by Byram as a model for intercultural learning.

Theories of Intercultural Competence

Theoretical frameworks and the model

Despite the availability of several IC frameworks, they are not generally applicable to a wide range of contexts (Krajewski, 2011). The existing models appear to have descriptions with differing details such as Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1986), Byram's Intercultural Competence Model (Byram, 1997), Chen and Starosta's Intercultural Sensitivity Model (Chen & Starosta, 1996), and Deardorff's Intercultural Competence Model (Deardorff, 2006). On the other hand, there are certain similar characteristics in the existing models, including, for example, having an awareness of both one and others, being open-minded, possessing knowledge of other cultures, and having the disposition to behave in a culturally appropriate manner (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2004; Whaley & Davis, 2007).

The most important intercultural models in education research are those of Deardorff (2006) and Byram (1997). Arranged in a compositional pyramid-shaped model, Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) represents the stages of one's development of IC (Krajewski, 2011), moving from the set of attitudes to the desired external outcomes. Byram's (1997) framework of ICC is, however, more pedagogically applicable in formal education contexts (Chen, 2009), and is therefore widely employed as a guideline for intercultural learning in FL learning (Elola & Ozkoz, 2008; Liaw, 2006). To incorporate the framework into a language classroom, Byram (1997) noted that ICC should be an extension of the existing communicative language teaching approach (CLT). He explained this as "The link makes it explicit that our focus will be on the contribution of foreign language teaching (FLT) to the development of the qualities required of a sojourner" (p. 3). The aim of language teaching in this model, consequently, is to encourage the learners to become intercultural speakers who can communicate effectively in cross-cultural communication, rather than to be "someone who is likely to remain a failed native speaker" (Tennekoon, 2015, p.6). Byram's (1997) ICC model contains five aspects that can contribute to intercultural competence. A summary of each area in the domain is as follows:

1. Knowledge (*savoirs*) of one's culture and those of other social groups, as well as the knowledge of societal interaction processes.
2. Attitudes (*savoir être*) toward cultural differences, including openness and curiosity, and the readiness to suspend disbelief of both one's own culture and other cultures.
3. Skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) which refers to the ability to interpret events or documents of other cultures to explain and compare the evidence with one's own.
4. Skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*) which means the ability to acquire new knowledge of cultural practices and operate the acquired knowledge, attitudes, and skills in real-time communication.

5. Critical and cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*) which is the ability to critically evaluate one's and others' cultures based on explicit criteria.

According to the model, the attitudes (*savoir être*) underpin the students' development of IC (Byram, 1997). This means that the attitudes, including respect for, and openness to, the differences between cultures indicate one's willingness to initiate a relationship with someone and to learn something new (Marques-Schäfer et al., 2018). It should, however, be noted that the attitudes (*savoir être*) do not necessarily need to be positive, as even positive prejudices can hinder mutual understanding (Byram, 1997, p. 34).

Promoting FL learners' intercultural effectiveness

It is necessary to point out that the common purpose of overseas experience is to aid students in improving their intercultural effectiveness. Intercultural effectiveness has widely been discussed in the literature (e.g., Dunkley, 2009; Perry & Southwell, 2011; Williams, 2005; Yashima, 2010), several studies indicated that simply sending students abroad does not create a significant and instant improvement in students' IC (e.g., McAllister et al., 2006; Trede et al., 2013). Existing literature discusses many examples of students who experienced difficulties with intercultural encounters due to the lack of proper intercultural training. These unpleasant experiences include, for example, a strong feeling of either superiority or inferiority when encountering different cultures (Hurtado, 2001), misunderstandings, stereotyping others, and prejudices resulting from the absence of IC (Mohan et al., 2004; Otten, 2003). Therefore, to reduce the possibility of communication conflicts while assisting learners to become interculturally competent communicators, higher-education institutions should promote pedagogy that develops students' cross-cultural awareness (Lee et al., 2014; Tennekoon, 2015).

Since the concern related to IC is becoming increasingly influential in FL pedagogy (Howard et al., 2019), the 2002 National Education Curriculum of Thailand has been modified in response to the change. It now places greater emphasis on English language learning by making it the national intellectual development (Wongsothorn et al., 2002), embodying the four strands, including culture, communication, connection, and community (Baker, 2008). Notwithstanding this change, studies found that in practical application at a classroom level, teachers still focused mainly on the accuracy, rather than fluency (Chaibunruang, 2000; Kongkerd, 2013). Some Thai graduates are proficient in the language; however, they are not yet capable of communicating with interlocutors and colleagues who come from different cultural backgrounds (Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016). In addition, Worrawong, et al. (2017) revealed in their study that the use of non-verbal communication in classroom practice was problematic for the Thai students in the context of intercultural exchange at all levels.

More worryingly, scholars claim that it is challenging to make decisions on what to teach students to improve their IC. Thai teachers recognized the importance of teaching IC, but many of them had a limited understanding of how to reach this objective (Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016). Merely presenting specific cultural information to the learners does not contribute to the development of intercultural effectiveness and a genuine understanding of cultural differences (Gu, 2016; Talkington et al., 2004). Rather, classroom activities that allow learners to critically examine both others' and one's own cultures can play an important role in developing students' IC (Perry & Southwell, 2011).

Previous studies on intercultural competence in education contexts

The issues regarding how teachers support the development of IC have dominated the discussion of intercultural studies. These include, for example, how students were prepared for international experiences (Trede et al., 2013), how intercultural lessons were included in English language teaching and curricula (Trede et al., 2013; Young & Sachdev, 2011), teachers' perceptions and the practices of assessing students' IC (Gu, 2016), teachers' thoughts regarding the teaching of English language and cultures simultaneously in an English classroom (Clark-Gareca & Gui, 2019; Jata, 2015), teachers' beliefs and practices about incorporating cultural lessons in their EFL classrooms (Ghavamnia, 2020), and the effectiveness of using multimedia to promote intercultural sensitivity (Tirnaz & Narafshan, 2020).

In addition to the teachers' perspectives about IC, some studies have discussed students' opinions, and past experiences, of incorporating intercultural lessons in their classrooms. Lee et al. (2014) examined the moments in classrooms that students perceived as critical to their intercultural development. The researchers argued that the cultural knowledge shared explicitly in the classroom was believed to be the critical content that contributed to intercultural effectiveness. Regarding the challenges of intercultural learning, Ippolito (2007) discovered the difficulties of incorporating intercultural learning in a culturally diverse classroom including language obstacles, time pressure, and what to learn in a classroom. More recently, Phongsirikul and Thongrin (2019) investigated students' attitudes toward their experiences of intercultural learning in an English classroom. Their participants were enrolled in a course in which 'working in multicultural contexts' was included as an additional course objective for the purposes of the research. The results displayed the students' beliefs regarding the practicality of integrating intercultural learning in an EFL classroom together with the knowledge and skills they obtained from the course.

Considering the importance of IC in education contexts, many previous studies on IC examined students' opinions and experiences of intercultural learning in EFL classroom contexts. However, those studies have not yet taken account of the students' familiarity with the concepts of intercultural communication. The link between students' perceptions of their subject and their success in learning has been discussed in many studies (e.g., Kern, 1995; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). In particular, students' academic achievement is associated with their understanding and perceptions of their learning, their intention of learning, and the strategies used to achieve their goal of learning (Han & Ellis, 2020). Thus, effective intercultural learning and teaching in a classroom rely on a clear knowledge of IC (Gu, 2016). Existing research in this area not only considered the student's perspective but also highlighted the need for teachers to understand student conceptions. Lucero et al. (2017) noted in their study that the knowledge of students' conceptions of learning topics could be a valuable resource for teachers to help students learn difficult concepts, and such knowledge could also account for the teacher's knowledge base. This signifies a need for research into the students' interpretations of IC to clarify how the students conceptualize the term and to investigate factors that account for their understanding.

Methods

Given the suitability of the qualitative research approach for providing insightful findings, and the focus on an in-depth exploration of the issues, the present research was carried out using a qualitative methodology with the collected qualitative data analyzed qualitatively. The research questions were.

1. What were the students' interpretations of intercultural competence?
2. What were their intercultural learning experiences in their English classrooms?

Participants

A total of 20 Thai undergraduate students from two universities in Bangkok voluntarily participated in this study. Half of them were students at *Social University* (pseudonym), particularly known for its excellence in social sciences and humanities education, while the other half were from *Technology University* (pseudonym), an institution emphasizing engineering and technology research and education. There were ten males and ten females, aged between 19 and 22 years. More than half of them were second-year students (n = 11), while the rest were fourth-year students (n = 9). They came from diverse educational backgrounds, including engineering (n = 8), languages (n = 7), computer science (n = 3), and finance and accounting (n = 2).

In this EFL context, English is the default primary FL in mainstream schools and in higher education (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). English is, therefore, a compulsory subject for degree completion among all Thai university students. Given the norm of EFL pedagogy in Thailand which focuses on the purposeful use of English to communicate in different social contexts (Darasawang, 2007), English is a typical medium of instruction believed to provide sufficient input for meaningful communication.

The criterion for choosing the participants in this study was that the students had to be enrolled in at least one fundamental English course at their university. The research initially used the convenience sampling approach for recruiting participants. However, this technique did not let us get significant participation, so

the snowball sampling technique was used. All twenty participants' contributions were voluntary; participants were informed that their personal information is treated anonymously. Participants signed a consent letter prior to the collection of data.

Instruments, data collection and analysis

Prior to the data collection, this study had been approved by the ethics committee of the author's university. Data were collected through interviews, including semi-structured interviews (one-on-one) and four group interviews. Interviews play a vital role when researching how people articulate their worldviews (Patton, 2002). The interviews took place at the participants' institutions and were audio-recorded.

The semi-structured interviews inquired about each participant's interpretations of IC. These one-on-one inquiries were conducted in Thai, aiming to make the questions comprehensible to the participants. The use of Thai created a friendly, comfortable atmosphere while conducting the interviews, resulting in an insightful account of the participant's responses. To begin, the participants provided a detailed definition of IC. It is reasonable to assume that the students might not be very familiar with the technical term (IC) as the English courses they took did not deal with it specifically, and so the researcher used lay language during the interviews. Rather than being asked what IC was, they were initially asked to define the phrase: "An ability to communicate with people from different cultures". To explore the extent to which the students were familiar with the components of IC, they identified the skills that individuals need to be able to communicate in cross-cultural encounters. The following interview questions, translated from Thai, initiated discussions about the perception of IC.

1. Define "an ability to communicate with people from different cultures".
2. In your opinion, what elements, factors, or skills are necessary for individuals to be successful in communicating across cultures?

These one-on-one interviews were organized to minimize the potential anxiety about giving incorrect responses to the questions, although participants were also informed that their responses would not be judged.

To explore their intercultural learning experiences, or more precisely what took place in their English classes, students from the same university were invited to join group interviews in which they were divided into groups of four to six for each discussion. The students provided detailed information about the experiences in their EFL classrooms, based on the general English courses they took. The questions encouraged the participants to share their experiences of how English was taught and how the lessons about cultural differences were carried out. During the group interviews, the researcher encouraged the informants to expand and develop their responses to each interview question. The following questions were used to start the discussion:

1. Can you briefly explain the English activities or lessons in your compulsory English courses?
2. In your compulsory English courses, was there any teaching of cultural differences? If yes, how was it delivered?

The researcher directed focused questions on certain students who found it difficult to express their opinions to motivate the discussion. The semi-structured interviews lasted around 20 minutes, while the four group interviews each took approximately 45 minutes. The data collected from the interviews were transcribed and translated into English. The data attained from the first research question were analyzed using Byram's (1997) model of ICC, as it models cross-cultural elements essential for helping learners grow as intercultural speakers (Chen, 2009; Hoff, 2014), resulting in concrete educational goals in FL pedagogy (Elola & Oskoz, 2008). In particular, Byram's ICC model was employed to set up a thematic framework for the participants' conceptions of ICC, meaning that the responses regarding their interpretations of ICC were categorized based on the key ICC dimensions of the model. For the second research question, axial coding techniques were employed to categorize the group interviews' data to shed light on the participants' learning experiences in their EFL classrooms. Data from the interview were analyzed, categorized, and recategorized to identify meaningful categories in relation to the issues regarding intercultural learning in the participants' EFL classrooms. The classified issues then became the basis for data interpretation.

Results

In the following sections, the results are presented according to the research questions: (1) students' interpretation of intercultural competence and (2) their experiences of intercultural learning in their English classrooms. Besides the requirements of the ethical practices of conducting research, pseudonyms for both the participants and their institutions used in the following sections to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Students' interpretation of intercultural competence

There was a subtle difference in the participants' responses regarding their perceptions of IC. Overall, they perceived IC as the ability to communicate with people from other cultures. Charlotte, for example, explained, "It is the ability to communicate with people from different cultures, involving certain skills to communicate successfully with each other". Payton noted, "... it is also the ability to interact with interlocutors from other countries appropriately." In addition to the common interpretations expressed by the majority, certain comments indicated a broader perspective on the term. Tanya, for example, emphasized the importance of recognizing the existence of cultural differences, and she said, "I think it is the ability to understand that people can be different". Junior, moreover, explained, "I think people in the world share different cultures, so intercultural competence means the ability to understand that cultural diversities exist and to know other people's ways of life".

From these excerpts, overall, the participants viewed IC as a cluster of skills that could contribute to effective communication across cultures. To attain a deeper understanding of the participant's familiarity with the term, it was helpful to inquire about what IC involves. The participants were therefore asked to indicate factors and skills necessary for IC. The data gathered were categorized using Byram's (1997) framework of ICC. The four themes which emerged from the analysis include knowledge *(savoirs)*, attitudes (*savoir être*), skills of discovery and interaction *(savoir apprendre/faire)*, and language competence.

Knowledge *(savoirs)*

For most of the participants, cultural knowledge is key to IC, thus having knowledge of other cultures ensures successful cross-cultural encounters. Brian stated, "First things first, we should know the cultures of our interlocutors, like how they greet by shaking hands —either before or after a conversation, and also other norms." This view was also expressed by another participant, Mason, who stated, "We should at least know the basic norms and try to understand them."

For some participants, knowing the norms of other cultures could assist them with acting in a culturally appropriate manner. Several participants provided detailed accounts of how knowledge of other cultures is especially important for intercultural communication with elaboration and clarification, including, for example, "... in some countries, there is a hierarchy in their languages. So, we need to be aware of using the proper level of words with each person; otherwise, there will be misunderstandings.". Molly also claimed that "I think we need to know the contexts or situations and use the right words to communicate appropriately." Nathan's comments specified the use of proper words in cross-cultural encounters, stressing the need to be aware of using appropriate terms of address, as he explained, "We need to know whom we are talking with and use appropriate address terms to talk to them." These quotations clearly indicate that specific knowledge of certain cultures is necessary for cross-cultural communication. Regardless of the wide variety of the responses, the participants" understanding of *savoirs* appeared to be limited to knowing the norms of others and being selective about word usage, both of which fall into the knowledge of societal groups and others" practices (Byram, 1997). For Byram, *savoirs* include culture-specific knowledge of both one's own and of foreign cultures. This means the participants' grasp of *savoirs* was only partially valid, due to the absence of the 'knowledge of self'. This aspect may appear to be less significant, yet it is particularly salient for intercultural speakers who can "act as mediators between people of different origins and identities" (Byram, 1997, p. 38) to be able to reflect and evaluate their own beliefs to critically evaluate others' beliefs.

Attitudes *(savoir être)*

Savoir être was another dominant feature of IC among most participants. They perceived that being open to cultural differences initiates the development of IC. For instance, William mentioned that "If we are open to the differences, we are ready to communicate." Another participant also alluded to this idea, as Nicholas argued, "I think it is the first door to becoming an intercultural speaker." For them, to be open means to accept that cultural differences exist. One student put it, "…accept that there are things we may not understand." Daisy commented, "…we also need to understand that our beliefs could be different from those of others." Irving, however, shared somewhat different perceptions of the attitudes. For him, the attitudes should be positive, as he stated, "To me, we have to maintain the positive attitudes toward other cultures which might differ from ours."

The issue of passing judgment on other people who came from different cultural backgrounds also arose in the interviews. Tanya mentioned, "... and we should not discriminate against other people whose cultures differ from ours." Another student, Molly, said, "I think we need to understand that people are different. The differences are not wrong." She continued, "like in Japan, I think people are so disciplined that Thais may think that it is too strict. But we should not judge them; indeed, we should accept that there are some advantages." All these points certainly demonstrate that openness to differences was the premise for IC, particularly about understanding otherness. It should be noted, however, that the *savoir être* involves more than putting oneself in others' positions. In fact, it is also concerned with one's ability to cope with the stages of adaptation and rejection of other cultures during intercultural encounters (Byram, 1997). The 'openness' discussed by many of the participants can be considered as 'acceptance', meaning the participants appeared to overlook the rejection phase of cross-cultural interactions, which is also a natural part of an intercultural encounter (Hoff, 2014). Furthermore, while some participants expressed their stance on cultural sensitivity, mainly against discrimination, which could be related to readiness to suspend disbelief and judgment about other cultures (Byram, 1997), they did not appear to demonstrate their willingness to explore cultural differences, as they did not mention the 'curiosity' aspect while being interviewed. Lastly, it should be noted that maintaining a positive attitude is not in line with what is posited in Byram's model. This is because being positive in interaction across cultures can potentially promote prejudices and stereotypes (Byram, 1997; Hoff, 2014).

Skills of discovery and interaction *(savoir apprendre/faire)*

Skills of discovery and interaction, despite being discussed by a few participants, also arose in the interview data. For them, it is helpful for individuals to gain the ability to identify gaps between one's own norms and those of others and implement this knowledge in real-time cross-cultural interactions. Christopher stated, "... another thing I'd like to add is one's ability to attain the knowledge during an interaction, like patterns of interactions or behaviors, and adjust ours to fit theirs." He also shared his study experience abroad related to this issue, he added: "Once I was in the USA, and during a conversation, I was noticing that they (the interlocutors) complimented each other a lot. At first, I thought they were sarcastic to each other. Then, I got used to the patterns, so I learned".

Christopher's point suggests that participation in intercultural encounters might expose him to the skills of discovery and interaction. From his comment, he might unconsciously draw on his cultural background to perceive the spoken discourse expressed by the interlocutors who came from different cultural backgrounds. Given that *savoir apprendre/faire* uses one's worldview as a basis for comparing and understanding otherness (Byram, 1997), his response implies that he began to develop his skills of discovery and interaction. Similarly, Irving stated that "When having a conversation with interlocutors from other countries, ones should be able to recognize the gaps ‒ the things that you haven't known before about their cultures ‒, learn, and adapt our communication behaviors." For Irving, to become an intercultural speaker, one should adopt values and behaviors and be adaptable to the foreign culture. This, however, slightly differs from what Byram (1997) proposed in his ICC model, where to 'adapt' to the target culture precedes the need to 'adopt' the customs and beliefs.

Although only a small number of interviewees mentioned *savoir apprendre/faire,* some responses offer a look at the skills from a slightly broader perspective. Two comments indicate that certain factors and characteristics underpin the skills of discovery and interaction. First, Charlotte asserted that *savoir*

apprendre/faire is grounded in being observant, sharing, "An individual needs to be observant. Like, when we first meet a person, we need to observe how our interlocutors behave and talk in order to adapt. We really need to be observative".

Second, William pointed out another factor – enthusiasm for gaining new knowledge of communication patterns. He established that individuals should be enthusiastic to both learn and adapt during conversations when they are taking place and in future conversations, explaining:

> *Another aspect is readiness or enthusiasm to acquire new knowledge during an interaction. It's like when we are having a conversation, rather than just converting and looking forward to the end of the conversation, we should be enthusiastic enough to notice the patterns of communication from our interlocutors to accommodate ours now or in the future.*

These two participants believed that those attributes were necessary for the skills of discovery and interaction. They both perceived IC as being more than simply getting the message across in cross-cultural communication. Actually, it is about being observant and enthusiastic enough to notice certain aspects of the discourse during communication. Regardless of these discrete skills mentioned by the two informants, their responses appeared to focus more on interactions in general than on those with people from other cultures.

Language competence

While linguistic competence does not bear upon the IC domain in the framework, several responses predominantly focused on its influence on cross-cultural interactions. For example, Olivia stated "The first thing that comes to my mind is language. I think language is the core of successful communication with foreigners." Furthermore, Nathan, commenting on the fluency of language, noted, "… I believe ones should possess decent language capability so they can communicate with other people from other countries." Michelle also agreed with this idea, saying, "When it comes to communicating with people from different cultures, ones should be familiar with the language used as a medium for communication." For the participants, fluency in the language dominates other aspects of intercultural communication. The issues of accuracy, nevertheless, did not emerge in the participants' discussions. In addition to language issues, lexical knowledge played a crucial role in intercultural encounters. Some participants established that the individuals' lexical knowledge should be ample to communicate with interlocutors from other countries. Maria claimed that "We should know as many words as possible to communicate successfully." Another language student, Tanya, noted, "… knowing vocabulary will enable us to talk more fluently with foreigners." Noah also commented on this issue, saying, "We should learn more and more words and, more importantly, we need to know how each word could be used in a specific context." While most responses focused on the number of words, for Noah, the number of words known was as significant as understanding how the meaning of those words may vary in specific contexts. Overall, the participants believed that fluency of the target language was key to IC. This clearly shows that in their conceptions of IC, language fluency outweighs other aspects of intercultural communication, particularly the ability to recognize cultural differences. All these responses, nevertheless, were nowhere near the concept of linguistic competence compulsory for intercultural communication, given that the native speaker model should not be used as a reference point for intercultural competence (Byram, 1997).

Students' classroom experiences of cultural learning in their English classes

The previous sections provided insight into the participants' interpretation of IC. It is also necessary to identify the issues of classroom teaching of cultural differences which might have a bearing on the students' interpretations of IC. Given the salience of these experiences, in the group discussions, the participants were asked to give an account of their experience of English language learning in their classrooms. The following quotes from participants illustrate how their teachers delivered the lessons on cultural differences. Megan recalled her experiences in her English Listening and Speaking course, which was a compulsory English course for her and other students at *Social University*, "… and after each presentation of this course, the teacher will elaborate on the issues in the news which sometimes included the knowledge of other cultures." She also gave the example, "For example, my friend reported the news about the collaborations of the two countries, mentioning that the leaders were shaking hands with each other. The teacher then explained to us the expressions of handshaking in each culture." Daisy also

recounted the activity in her English Reading course, "The teacher usually let us read some articles, which I could find some interesting cultural information of other countries, but mostly those of the USA." Molly, further explained, "But, she didn't let us analyze or discuss the differences. She primarily focused on getting the information from the texts to answer the questions."

In addition, some participants in one group discussion at *Technology University* identified problematic aspects of their cultural learning in one English course aiming to prepare students for workplace communication (Table 1).

Participants	Excerpts
Christopher	About cultures, we learned them mostly, or I'd say definitely, by listening to the recordings. We once listened to an interview with a Japanese businessman talking about what he likes and dislikes. Like Ryo doesn't like waiting and people in Japan are very punctual.
Mason	And, sometimes we learned very traditional Chinese cultures, like the number 'four' in Chinese is a sign of bad luck because it is pronounced as 'Si' which means death in Chinese.
Nathan	Yes, those are what happened in our classes. We just listened to the recordings to answer the questions. There were no further interpretations, comparisons, and explanations from the teachers or the textbooks.

Table 1: Students' discussion on problems with their cultural learning in an English course regarding workplace communication

Students in another group at *Technology University* also recounted their experiences with one English course which focused on academic reading and writing (Table 2).

Participants	Excerpts
Brian	I liked this course. And, about cultures, the teacher always shared his experiences abroad and the cultural information of other countries.
Wendy	I remembered when we were learning about how to write a hook sentence in a paragraph. He linked it with a hook that represents certain meaning in Maori cultures in New Zealand.
William	He also addressed 'Haka' – the traditional dancing of Maori to express energy and harmony.

Table 2: The discussion on cultural learning in an academic reading and writing course

Perhaps the most worrying issue in their EFL classrooms was that the instruction of cultural differences was not a major focus in the English pedagogy. Rather, the teaching of English in the participants' classroom focused primarily on receptive skills as a stimulus to students' language development. Additionally, in both universities, the learning of cultural differences relied heavily on teachers passing information about specific countries on to the students. In turn, neither the teachers themselves nor the classroom materials significantly encouraged the students to analyze, interpret, and explore cultural differences. This approach to cultural teaching casts doubts on the validity of English language teaching. Taking ICC as an educational goal, learners should be able to function as mediators who can interpret different worldviews to establish a shared understanding, which challenges the teaching of foreign languages to involve more than the teaching of cultural information (Hoff, 2014).

Dissatisfactions with cultural learning

Some of the dissatisfaction expressed during the group interviews warrants greater attention on the current instruction of cultural differences in Thailand. Generally, the participants from both universities felt that such instruction was limited to completing exercises in textbooks. Table 3 shows students in one group at *Social University* complained that the discussions on cultural issues did not go beyond the textbook exercises.

Participants	Excerpts
Maria	I think that the teacher did not seem to go beyond doing exercises in the textbook. Regarding the cultural information, I think we learned something, but they are only what was necessary just for answering the questions.
Olivia	When we did one reading lesson on the news which happened in the USA, I found that the lessons were rather mundane. We got only to discuss what's happening in the news. I actually wanted to know more about it, like the symbols or word choices in the news, which could be culturally-related.

Table 3: The complaints about cultural lessons which were limited to textbook exercises

Similarly, three students at *Technology* University were also dissatisfied with how the cultural lessons were presented in their classrooms (See Table 4).

Participants	Excerpts
Mason	We had a role play once about a situation in the workplace. I asked the teacher whether our group can go beyond the requirements, like a miscommunication between people who are from different regions, and she said no. Since the focus of this course is using English in a work environment, I expected the teacher to include some cultural information or at least allow the students to talk about this in a role play. I think the teacher did not pay attention to cultural differences in the workplace, but I think it is very important also to consider the differences.
Irving	Like what my friends just said. Although I was in a different section, we studied the same course. My teacher just played the recordings and let us take the information to fill in the gaps. This is boring. Sometimes I noticed that the tapes were about other cultures. Instead of clarifying or giving a bit more information about the cultures, he just ignored it.
Thomas	I think some of the cultural information was too broad that they are not applicable in real-life conversations, but the teacher still used them as the lessons.

Table 4: Students' discussion on impracticality of their cultural lessons

These opinions show that there was a major mismatch between the reality of the teaching of cultural differences and the students' expectations of what should have been happening in their EFL classrooms. While the teachers' preference to adhere to the course materials became obvious in the interviews, the students felt that their teachers failed to help them explore otherness, norms of others, and cultural differences. The fact that the teachers were not aware of these issues is worrying, even though the students seemed to explicitly address their needs in the classroom.

Discussions and Conclusions

The present study sought to gain insights into the students' familiarity with IC. Despite some small differences in the students' responses, which could be due to their different years and fields of study, the findings show that overall, the participants lacked a complete understanding of the issue, as only three aspects of IC were discussed in the interviews. They, meanwhile, ignored the skills of interpreting and relating, and critical and cultural awareness.

Byram (1997) posited that *savoir comprendre, savoir apprendre/faire,* and *savoir s'engager* are grounded on knowledge (*savoir*) and attitudes (*savoir être*). Given the fact that both *savoir* and *savoir être* are the most basic intercultural elements, this might have a bearing on why the participants paid a significant amount of attention to these aspects of IC during the discussions. For *savoir*, a significant focus was on the knowledge of others, while the salience of knowing oneself – an awareness that one's own culture can differ from those of others (Boye & Byram, 2017), was completely overlooked by the participants. Worryingly, the lack of knowing oneself could obstruct one's curiosity to explore the cultures of others (Agar, 1994). For *savoir être*, openness to, and respect for, differences dominated the discussions regarding the ideal attitudes of an intercultural speaker. Notwithstanding the facets of the attitudes which were generally discussed, the 'curiosity' about the differences did not appear to be among the issues which the students were familiar with. This reinforces the argument posited by Agar, that knowing oneself precedes an individual's curiosity about intercultural differences. Finally, it should be noted that language proficiency is not a part of the IC components according to Byram (1997), even though it was considered important among the participants. This finding is like what was reported in Ke and Cahyani (2014)'s study, the students associated the accuracy of a language with individuals' communicability. Similarly, the Chinese students in Peng''s (2012) research were found to believe that the barriers to their willingness to interact with a foreigner included language accuracy and vocabulary knowledge.

The second research question aimed to identify classroom factors in the students' interpretations of IC. The group interviews provided significant insight into the participants' thoughts on intercultural learning in their EFL classrooms, indicating an overemphasis on passing cultural information on to the students and on presenting the information taken from English textbooks. Clearly, the English lessons did not include a discussion of the knowledge of oneself, which explains the absence of the element 'knowing oneself' in the interview data. This finding is supported by Fungchomchoei and Kardkarnklai (2016), that the direct transmission of cultural information from specific countries is nearly ubiquitous in today's English pedagogy in Thai education. One possible explanation for this could be attributed to the shift towards outcome-based education (OBE) in Thailand's higher education, suggesting that teachers of a foreign

language should teach "culture in foreign language application for communication" (The Ministry of Education of Thailand, 2008, p. 10). The goal of foreign language teaching is, thus, to help students develop their knowledge of other cultures to meet the aims of Thailand's OBE. The excerpts taken from Nathan and Tanya could exemplify how the current teaching of cross-cultural aspects in Thai universities remain restricted to passing cultural facts on to the students. Whether this underlies the students' limited familiarity with the terminology, it should be noted that this one-dimensional teaching can create stereotypical representations of the target culture, and so it stands in direct contrast to teaching the intercultural dimension (Byram et al., 2002). The information related to the cultures of a foreign country alone will not contribute to intercultural competence and the learners' awareness of cultural differences (Gu, 2016; Perry & Southwell, 2013; Talkington et al., 2004). Rather, the teaching should be concerned with helping students explore how social groups and identity's function while encouraging comparative analysis with the learners' cultures (Byram et al., 2002).

Overall, the findings from this study have clear implications for both teachers and foreign language practitioners. Students' familiarity with the content is associated with their learning achievements (Schönwetter et al., 2002). Given the need to develop the students' understanding of the cross-cultural dimension, more emphasis should be placed on familiarizing them with other intercultural elements. This will not only promote their IC, but it will also facilitate the success of intercultural learning and teaching in a foreign language classroom (Gu, 2016). Teaching the intercultural dimension does not necessarily involve a sudden shift in the current norms of classroom teaching. Teachers can promote the intercultural dimension, while following a set curriculum, using the themes and grammatical structures in the textbooks to develop students' intercultural perspectives. The underpinning principle is to stimulate discussions beyond the themes emerging in English textbooks (Byram et al., 2002). This could be, for example, challenging the students to comment on the statements shown in their textbooks which show stereotypes and prejudices (e.g., The Japanese like …; This is bad luck in … culture). In addition, there could be a series of activities that allow students to draw on their own values to evaluate and make conclusions regarding the target culture. This could be done through role-play or collaborative goal-oriented activities, in which teachers encourage their students to become more observant to notice the subtleties of the interlocutors' cultural behaviors while assisting them to develop their skills of mediation and improve their understanding of cultural differences (Coperías Aguilar, 2007). Additionally, as a salient aspect of intercultural exchange, teachers may introduce some vocabulary useful for discussing and talking about cultural diversity. This would help them both in the role-play tasks and in having better cultural awareness (Byram et al., 2002).

While the knowledge of the target culture apparently outweighed other intercultural components in the participants' EFL classroom, teachers will not be capable of anticipating all the specific knowledge students need. As such, with the limitation of classroom time, in addition to the previously proposed activities, the teachers should help their students acquire the skills of exploring and finding knowledge, or the skills of discovery and interaction *(savoir apprendre/faire)*. Another issue that warrants special attention is attitudes *(savoir être)*, as a foundation of one's IC (Byram, 1997). In actual teaching, it is not necessary to attempt to change the learners' values or beliefs; rather, to create a willingness to relativize their own values and behaviors. This demands the skills of comparing, or the skills of interpreting, and relating *(savoir comprendre)*, which would help them understand how misunderstandings can happen. All of these would lead to critical and cultural awareness *(savoir s'engager)*, the intercultural component identified as "the most educationally significant of the *saviors*" (Byram, 2008, p. 236).

Limitations of the study

The series of interviews conducted within this study highlight the students' familiarity with IC and the current English pedagogy in Thailand which only focuses on certain aspects of IC. Even though, there are limitations that should be addressed. First, the current study employed a relatively small sample. Second, given that this study used the snowball sampling technique to recruit the participants, it might not contain participants with diverse backgrounds (Sadler et al., 2010). While the students' majors varied, they were selected from two universities. Consequently, the experiences shared in the group discussions might perhaps be limited to the four English courses. For better generalizability of the results, a larger number of participants from more diverse educational backgrounds should be included. In addition, future research could investigate the issue of familiarity from a different perspective. The data gathered from the students

could be extended to include reflective journals or diaries targeting how students interact with foreign interlocutors to examine how they exploit their skills and knowledge, as well as their attitudes in real-world communication.

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