

A Self-Reflection of Intercultural Interaction with European People

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Abstract

As a Thai people, I admit that I gained very little knowledge of European culture and who are European people. This may be because a travel to European countries and the business transaction with European people are difficult when comparing with Asian Countries. However, it is now important for Thai people to know more about European people how to interact with them in the globalization era. In order to contribute my direct experience of intercultural interaction with European people, a self-reflection of intercultural interaction may allow us to gain a better understanding of European people. The self-reflection provides direct experience with situations, such as education, academic conferences and multi-cultural workplaces. This academic paper reflects the author's experience of interacting with British people, German people, Polish people and Romania people. At the end, pedagogical implications with European people are also given in order to prepare Thai people before having the intercultural interaction with European people. It is expected that the discussion of this academic paper will be useful for EFL learners and Thai business people to gain better understanding of European people.

Keywords: European culture, intercultural interaction, self-reflection

Introduction

Intercultural competence is the unavoidable issue of people in the 21st century. This topic has been increasingly important for everyone to pay attention to. Most people think that intercultural interaction is an important issue, but they lack of enough intercultural knowledge (Czerwionka, Artamonova & Barbosa, 2015). Think about working in intercultural organizations with people from different cultural backgrounds or going abroad to study with friends from different culture. In a specific situation, when a flight attendance needs to take care of her passengers with different cultures, intercultural knowledge is important or not? Culture is a sensitive issue. If we avoid understanding people having different cultures, unexpected consequences may occur (Bazarovna, 2022). This would break the relationships between the two parties. So, it is significant for us to build our intercultural competence in order to interact with people across cultures effectively and appropriately.

As a member of Thai people, I a male university lecture teaching at universities for 6 years. He was 37 years old. I spent time in Romania for a month while he lived in Poland for a year. I have studied with Bitis teachers for longer than 6 years and have work with German lecturers for two years. Although I has experience to interact with European people, I am more familiar with Asian culture. For example, on the dining table, Chinese people who belch after a meal signal that food is tasty, whilst Eurooean people refer to this behavior as disgusting (Li & Huan, 2019). Speaking loudly by Chinese

people denotes sincerity, whereas other people think that they are arguing with each other. The same behavior may be viewed differently by people from different cultures. With this concern, this academic paper reflects the authors' direct experience of interacting with European people in different situations, such as education, workplaces and international conferences. British, German, Polish and Romania people were chosen due to a specific reason. Since every single person who the author of this study interacted with are male whose ages were above 45 years old, the study used the criteria of gender to select European countries to make intercultural reflections. According to Hofstede, the concept of masculinity refers to the roles of male in societies where the women's value differs from male's value. The male's value in this societies is assertive and competitive. The ranking of masculinity in British, German, Polish and Romania were rated similarly. According to Hofstede' six scale, the ranking of masculinity in British, German, Polish and Romania were exactly rated the same at the fourth scale (Hofstede, 2016). Since the author only had experience to interact with male in these countries, the reflection in this study could not explain the characteristics of females in these countries. Therefore, it is the intercultural interaction between male and male from different cultures. It is expected that the experience as reflected in this academic paper may help Thai people gain better understanding of European culture.

Objective of the Study

1. To reflect direct experience in intercultural interaction with European people
2. To address pedagogical implications of intercultural interaction with European people

Definitions of Intercultural Competence

To begin with, the definition of intercultural competence should be given. According to Matveev (2017), intercultural competence is the knowledge of different cultures acquired by a person. Having intercultural competence allows people to interact with people from different cultures appropriately and unproblematically. Adopting intercultural competence means that they have the knowledge of intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness and intercultural adroitness or expertise.

Intercultural sensitivity means that a person shows respect towards other cultures. Intercultural awareness refers to the ability to understand various cultures. Intercultural adroitness refers to a person's knowledge of self-disclosure, social skills and flexibility. Based upon Matveev (2017)'s intercultural competence, people need knowledge, understand and respect to build up their intercultural competence towards other cultures. If one has only intercultural knowledge without trying to understand and paying respect, intercultural competence has not been built yet.

In addition to the definition of intercultural competence,

different theories are proposed to measure a person's intercultural competence. One of them is uncertainty reduction theory. It is an approach to measure the level of uncertainty of people from different culture (Knobloch, 2008). For example, an employee may need to seek information or ask a lot of questions before a project starts to avoid uncertainty that might occur

Some models of intercultural competence measurement highlight intercultural adjustment and effective intercultural interaction. For example, a Thai employee works with a German company, adjusting oneself to the high level of punctuality is important culture. Consequently, the Thai person might undergo psychological stress as this is not a common practice when comparing with their own culture. If one could adjust oneself to this difference, it leads one to effective intercultural communication. Accordingly, not only should we understand the concept of intercultural competence, but we should also start with measuring our knowledge of intercultural competence that we have.

Aside from intercultural competence, intercultural interaction refers to verbal and non-verbal behaviors of people from different cultures in certain situations. These behaviors might not be familiar by other parties, so different interpretations are given (Spencer-Oatey & Frankin, 2013). Similar ideas are also given by Halualani et. al. (2004) who stated that intercultural interaction refers to the differences of communication behaviors and style among different groups of people. For example, European lecturers

came to teach Thai students at a Thai university. In this teaching and learning situation, the two parties may present own behavior that the other party do not expect before. One can be too direct, whereas the other may be indirect concerning their communication styles.

This study relates to the author's experience in intercultural interaction with European people. The discussion is drawn upon different theories of intercultural competence. The author presents British people punctuality, German people's uncertainty avoidance and directness, Polish people's endurance and the reflection of Romania's collectivistic societies.

British People's Punctuality and Politeness

The levels of punctuality and politeness have different meaning in different cultures. Even though Thai people do not take the idea of punctuality seriously, British people views punctuality as the serious issue in their culture. Punctuality means the quality of being on time.

In British corporate culture, meetings are scheduled well in advance and punctuality is important. Although they like to build business relationships, they prefer to get down to business after a few moments of polite conversation. (Shaw, 2015, p. 434)

Punctuality is one of the outstanding characteristics of British people. They always come on time when having appointments. Not only does the punctuality of British people could create

impression, but making an appointment with British people must be careful as lateness could mean rudeness. To further support this, as recorded by Efthymiou, M., et. al. (2018), the delay of British airway at London Heathrow during 2015-2018 was reported to have an average of a lower than 15 minutes. This is considered to be relatively low when considering the weather conditions in England.

To reflect this view, I had experiences in learning English writing with three native British teachers. The first one was Mr. A who came from the West Country of England. The second was Mr. B who came from London and the third one is Miss C who came from London. I studied English writing with Miss A for 5 years, while I studied English writing with B and C for one year each. Although I cannot take this case to generalize to every British people as a whole, I could notice some characteristics of British people in common. Their outstanding parts are punctuality, politeness and social etiquette. They have traditional styles of British teaching, which is the encouragement of thinking. Before each lesson starts, the British teachers encouraged the students to have a general conversation with students before leading them to the formal lessons. How was your week was a frequent question to start the interaction. Every time I have a meeting appointment with British people, punctuality is an issue to be careful. This could be pedagogically applied with Thai EFL learners when they study with native British lecturers. They should come to class on time. Before the class started, British lectures might have a general talk to

students which mean that they want to establish positive relationship and do the ice breaking. When sitting down quietly or keep the atmosphere of the class to be silent, British teachers are likely to be faced with culture shock and it may signal rudeness.

German People's Uncertainty Avoidance and Directness

As mentioned in the introductory section, people from different culture possess different degrees of tolerance towards uncertainty. When meeting new people from different intercultural background, it seems that understanding people's belief, attitudes and values is so difficult. In the worst case, we know nothing about our interlocutors. To minimize this challenging, it is important for us to predict our interlocutors who come from different intercultural backgrounds via uncertainty reduction theory (URT).

According to Berger and Calabrese (2006), URT are made up of cognitive uncertainty and behavioral uncertainty. Cognitive uncertainty refers to a lack of knowledge of our interlocutor from different intercultural background. Consequently, this affects behavioral uncertainty as we do not know how to behave appropriately towards our interlocutors. However, there are three strategies to cope with this challenging. This includes passive strategies, active strategies and interactive strategies. People apply passive strategy to observe and analyze situations that they do not know to search cues to understand the interlocutors from different cultures. People apply active strategies to challenge the other party by seeking for information, such as asking and questioning. However,

the strongest strategy is the interactive strategy. It is applied to ask direct questions when people want to disclose themselves and the other party. Accordingly, people from different cultures are likely to apply different strategies.

In my workplace, officers in the department were Thai. They worked to coordinate with a German professor. When people from different intercultural background met, it could lead to challenging in intercultural communication in organization team. Thai officers usually apply passive strategies and keep quiet. They are apt to respond only necessary answer which is the norm of practice in the office. When the German professor comes to the office, he usually applied active-interactive strategies to ask direct questions to avoid uncertainty. People in the same organization apply different strategies to cope with their uncertainty reduction. Conflicts or misunderstanding in the workplace are likely to emerge. The German professor does not receive enough answers as expected to know, so he seemed to keep asking further and visiting different offices to get the answers. Consequently, the officers in the department have been faced with culture shock due to German professor's assertiveness and directness. With this challenge, the URT theory should be trained to Thai officer who have German colleagues. It is important to understand that German colleagues may feel uncertain if they do not receive adequate information. Being active to ask and to provide enough information as needed could make them satisfy with a better concentration on their

workplaces.

Through an observation, the way that the German professor teaches Thai students is so active and direct. The active strategies mean that Thai students are asked a lot of questions and discussion while studying in classrooms. The advantages of this practice are that the students need to keep thinking in order to follow and concentrate on class activities. However, Thai students are faced with culture shock as they have never experienced this style of learning before. When their friends finish their presentation, the other students inside the class are asked to show their opinions about their friends' presentation whether it is good or bad. Criticizing their friends' presentation directly or asking questions is a common practice in European styles of learning, but this is not common for Thai EFL learners. Once Thai students are not used to this system of learning, they reported that this style of leaning is so stressful and scary, which could be noticed by the silent mode in the class and their physical expressions of hand shanking while talking. According, Thai students who study with German lectures should prepare questions to ask. This will help reduce the silence mode in the classroom. Therefore, they adjusted themselves to German style of learning.

In addition, another German lecturer who taught western cross-cultural communication to the author in an undergraduate level showed the same characters. He always asked for class discussion and questions. Coming to class late could make him

upset. So those who came to class late, which was only 10 minutes late, were asked to write their name on the board.

However, when the author was an undergraduate student, he also had a male German friend who was an exchanged student in Thailand. In English class, the German guy was so active, interactive, enthusiastic and always participated in classroom discussion. He was the person who kept motivating other Thai students in classrooms to speak English. The author noticed that German guy's characteristics are attentive and participative.

Polish People's Endurance

Problem-solving or the way how people address problem is relevant to intercultural aspect. Some people have a high level of endurance toward problems, while some people need to fix the problems immediately after it was found. Some Asian countries, such as Japan, problems are not addressed directly but they are kept under the floor (Herbig & Jacobs, 1996). This could be because people are collectivists and they help each other maintain harmony. This practice was also found in Poland but due to a different reason. When I was an exchanged doctoral student in Poland, the incidents happened on the first day of my arrival. Before the date of arrival, I went to Vienna, Austria to give an academic talk. I stayed there for a week so I used all my clean clothes I provided from Thailand. So the day I arrived, I needed my clothes washed. I asked the officer in the dormitory about the washing machine, and I bought my clothes to get washed. Unfortunately, the washing machine was

broken during the process of washing. As a result, all water got outside as if there was a big flood in the room. Finally, I spent the whole night to clean the flooding in the washing room. I reported this situation to the officer to fix the problem, but he said no problem with the washing machine. Three day later, another Korean exchange professor brought his clothes to wash with the same machine and the same problem happened. I saw the situation and ask the professor what happened. The same officer quickly replied “nothing”. So I made a complaints to the main office as follows: Staying in the dormitory here is a nightmare. When I arrived, I could not access the internet as I did not carry an internet extension cable. I fixed this problem myself by going to the shopping mall as suggested by Professor, and I finally got it.

About two days later, it could not access to the internet. At first, I thought it was the problems of my own laptop. I have checked everything on my computer system, but it worked very well. So, I asked the officers in this the building regarding internet access. The answer was that there was no problem. She said you need to call the technician YOURSELF. When the technician came, he checked my computer and there was no problem concerning the system on my computer. However, using the internet here requires a log in every 24 hours. No one in this building told me about this matter before. However, once I heard that, I felt happy because I could fix this problem myself.

After a long trip from Vienna, Austria, I ran out of clean

clothes to wear. I used the watching machine providing here on the first floor. It is the only machine available for all people in the whole building. After I put my clothes in the machine, it said waiting 2.30 hours to get done. I got back my room to study. 10 minutes before the informed finishing time, I went back to the laundry room. I found that the floor became flooded as the machine might have been broken. To stop water from coming out of the machine, I decided to pull out the plug. When I pressed it to stop, it did not work. After that I thought I should not do that because it was flooding over the floor. If something wrong happened, I might die. I spent nearly three hours to make the floor dry due to the only one broken washing machine in the building.

In addition, the machine is only for washing. There is no dryer for wet clothes. You might not really feel comfortable to hang your clothes in your bedroom and wait like a week until they became completely dry.

Through these incidents, it looks as if I came here to mostly upgrade unrelated academic skills. I understand that it could be hard at the start, but If I got these kinds of problems everyday, how could I concentrate to my study?

Later on, I attempted to figure this incident myself concerning the characteristics of Polish people. Polish people are highly collectivistic societies where they stay together as a group (Kilianska-Przybyło, 2023). People try to maintain harmony in their group, so people avoid to address the problem directly. Moreover,

the society in Poland is of high-power distance. This implies that if juniors raise the problems of senior people, they might be faced with problems or difficulty as the power of people in society is not equal. However, I think that this is not the right interpretation.

In fact, Polish people have a high level of endurance toward problems. They did not see what was mentioned above as the problems that need to be fixed. Kwasniewska, Thomas and Baker (2014) addressed that Polish people was manipulated by the Soviet Union and Martin Law in 1980s, not to mention their confront with a heavy economic crisis. Most Polish people had been faced with the toughest situation in their life. They should be careful about living conditions, such as the shortage of food and medicine. This helps practice their forebears. When I complained about the internet extension cable, the washing machine and the dryer, they are regarded as supplementary facilities to support people's convenience. For them, it does not mean much when compared to food and medication.

Romania's Collectivistic Societies

Romania is located in the southern Europe. I got experience to give an academic talk in Transylvania, Romania. This country is rather different when compared to other European countries. I could feel the strong characteristic of collectivism in this society. Triandis (2018) defined collectivism as the societies that view the goal of their group over individual goals. The collectivistic societies maintain social harmonies and relationships. Collectivism is the

values of the societies that stay together as a group and people in their own group or society depends on each other.

Transylvania, Romania is about three hours away from the capital city Bucharest. I need to contact a local person to drive me to the city of the conference. I expected that the driver would directly take me to Transylvania. However, he took me to try local food which was grilled pork which was a famous local street food. Surprisingly, the driver paid this meal for me. Then, the driver took me to visit the local church and try to explain its importance although I only understood a little bit.

On the first date of arrival to Transylvania, it was one date before the conference took place. I walked to observe around university. I accidentally saw the professor of literature there. After introducing myself, the professor took me to tour around the city although we did not know each other before. He took me to see the Black Church and we walked around the town.

On the second day, the conference organizer treated me as if I were a member of their family. They could remember my first name and ask me to share my ideas and discuss together during each presentation. Before I went back, they invited me to have lunch with them. The food served was Sarmale. The way they treated me may be exactly the same way when tourists come to visit Thailand. We welcome them with warmth and friendliness. So, after arriving in Thailand, I studied further about Romanian culture, Neculaesei and Tatarusanu (2004) explained that Romania is likely

to be a collectivistic society. For me, I personally think if Thai people go to study in Romania, they could adjust themselves to the society, style of learning and living condition easier as Romania and Thailand share the common pattern of collectivism.

Pedagogical Implications

When a classroom is made up of students from different cultural backgrounds, teachers should be aware of their cultural differences. For example, Romanian students would go well with Thai students due to the common intercultural patterns of collectivism. Assignments of groups work allow them to work together cooperatively.

Since the teaching style of British and German lecturers contrasts with the teaching styles of Thai lecturers who teach English as a Foreign Language, the Thai freshmen with the beginner level may took language classes with Thai teachers first. Once the students have a higher command of English proficiency, study with British and German lecturers who highly demand participation and discussion could reduce students' stress (Warsame, 2018).

Conclusion

Intercultural competence comes from the knowledge of other culture, understanding and respecting people who are culturally different from us. This supports us to work with other cultural people happily. When we need to join an organization that has increasingly become multi-cultural workplaces, intercultural

skills are as importantly as language skills and communicative skills. The intercultural skill allows us to adjust ourselves when interacting with European people, such as British people and German people. For example, Thai students need to adjust themselves when joining classrooms taught by British and German lecturers. Asking questions and participating with class discussion would increase the effectiveness of their own learning.

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