

Intercultural Communicative Competence and Communication Challenges Among Hotel Employees in Chiang Mai

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Abstract

This research consists purposes were 1. to compare the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of less experienced and highly experienced hotel employees in Chiang Mai 2. to investigate the intercultural communication challenges encountered by hotel employees when interacting with international guests and 3. to explore the strategies used to overcome intercultural misunderstandings and language barriers. This study employed a mixed-methods design with a dominant quantitative approach supplemented by qualitative data from open-ended questions. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire consisting of five sections covering demographic information, ICC, communication challenges, communication strategies and three open-ended questions regarding the importance of intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes. Twenty hotel employees working in the Front Office and Food and Beverage departments were selected as participants through purposive sampling from 3–4-star hotels in Chiang Mai. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation, while qualitative responses from the open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis. The research findings revealed that 1) both less experienced and highly experienced hotel employees demonstrated a very high overall level of ICC, with attitudes and knowledge receiving the highest mean scores, while highly experienced employees showed stronger skills of discovery and interaction 2) highly experienced employees reported fewer intercultural communication challenges, with difficulties in understanding different accents and pronunciation, limited speaking fluency and unfamiliarity with technical vocabulary being the most common problems, particularly among less experienced employees and 3) both groups reported a high level of strategy use, with simple words and short sentences, confirmation checks and summarizing or rephrasing key points being the most frequently used strategies to overcome intercultural misunderstandings.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence, Intercultural Communication, Hotel Employees



Introduction

Globalization in the hospitality industry has significantly increased intercultural interactions, requiring hotel employees to communicate effectively with guests from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Successful communication in multicultural service settings extends beyond English language proficiency and requires intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which enables individuals to interact appropriately and effectively across cultures (Byram, 2021). Previous studies have shown that ICC contributes to reducing cultural misunderstandings, improving service quality, and enhancing teamwork in multicultural workplaces (Cavalheiro, 2015; Saraswati, 2017; Zheng, 2015). Intercultural communication has also been recognized as increasingly vital in globalized and transnational contexts, as it fosters the confidence and mutual understanding needed to navigate diverse communication settings (Inta et al., 2025). As international tourism continues to expand, ICC has increasingly become essential for employees in the hospitality industry.

Previous studies in hospitality and tourism revealed that strong ICC contributes to efficient service and successful communication with international guests. Liu et al. (2022) found that hospitality stakeholders in China considered intercultural attitudes and behavioral competence as the most important components of ICC for future hospitality professionals. Similarly, Kiatkiri (2021) reported that cultural empathy, interaction involvement, and motivation were the strongest predictors of ICC among Thai hotel employees in Koh Samui. In another hospitality setting, Khuanmuang (2022) found that Thai cruise crew members demonstrated high levels of ICC, particularly in intercultural skills and attitudes.

Despite these findings, several research gaps remain. Existing studies have focused on identifying important components of ICC or measuring employees' overall competence, whereas few have examined how professional work experience influences the development of ICC. Comparisons between less experienced and highly experienced hotel staff remain limited, particularly in the Thai hospitality industry. Furthermore, few research has examined the communication challenges employees encounter when interacting with international guests or the strategies they use to overcome intercultural misunderstandings in the Thai hospitality context. This is particularly important in Chiang Mai, one of Thailand's leading cultural tourism destinations, which welcomes visitors from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Since hotel employees frequently interact with international guests in this multicultural environment, understanding their ICC, communication challenges, and coping strategies can provide valuable insights for improving hotel service quality and hospitality training.

Therefore, this research investigates the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of hotel staff in Chiang Mai, Thailand, by comparing less experienced with highly experienced employees, examining the intercultural communication challenges they encounter, and exploring the strategies they use to overcome intercultural misunderstandings and language barriers. This research seeks to contribute to the understanding

of intercultural communication in hospitality and provide practical implications for hotel management, staff training, and hospitality education.

The Purposes

1. To compare the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of less experienced and highly experienced hotel employees in Chiang Mai.
2. To investigate the intercultural communication challenges hotel employees encounter when interacting with international guests.
3. To explore the strategies hotel employees use to overcome intercultural misunderstandings and language barriers.

Literature Review

1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

Several frameworks have been proposed to conceptualize ICC, which is broadly defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural boundaries while incorporating both language use and understanding cultural differences (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). As shown in Figure 1, Byram's model conceptualizes ICC through five dimensions: intercultural attitudes (*savoir-être*), knowledge (*savoir*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir-comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir-apprendre/savoir-faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoirs'engager*). This framework has been widely applied in intercultural communication research across educational, business, and hospitality contexts.

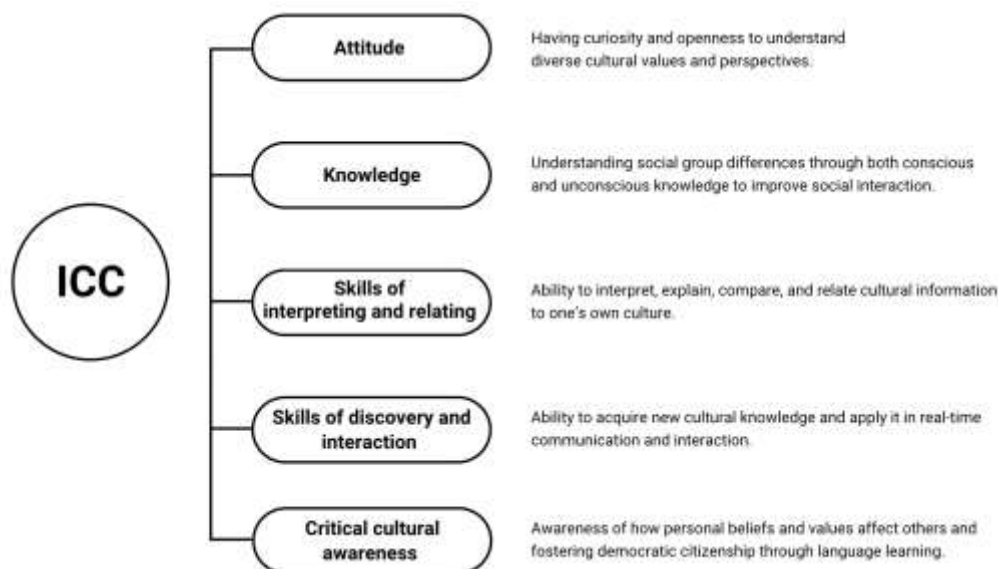


Figure 1 Byram's ICC Model (1997)

The conceptual framework of this study is illustrated in Figure 2, which is based on Byram's (1997) model of ICC. The model's dimensions represent the core constructs for assessing hotel employees' ICC. Work experience, categorized as less and highly experienced employees, serves as the independent variable, while communication challenges and communication strategies are examined as outcome variables to analyze their intercultural communication experiences.



Figure 2 Conceptual framework of the study

Kiatkiri (2021) identifies five elements of ICC: cultural empathy, attitude, experience, interaction involvement, and motivation. Similarly, Inkaew (2016) proposes four components: attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions. Both models share the same idea that ICC combines inner qualities, such as empathy, respect, and knowledge, with outward behaviors such as active listening, appropriate responses, and behavioral adaptation. Although the terminology and number of their components differ, they share similar views that ICC is a multidimensional construct incorporating cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies. Among these models, Byram's (1997) framework provides the most comprehensive explanation of intercultural communication by explicitly connecting intercultural knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness. Therefore, it serves as the theoretical framework for the present study.

Significance of Intercultural Communicative Competence in Hospitality

Previous research has consistently demonstrated the importance of ICC across multicultural workplaces. Byram (1997) argues that intercultural attitudes, knowledge, communication skills, and critical cultural awareness enable individuals to communicate appropriately across cultures. Similarly, Fantini (2018) and Fantini and Tirmizi (2006) emphasize that ICC facilitates effective communication between people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Other studies have shown that ICC promotes mutual understanding, reduces

intercultural misunderstandings, encourages open-mindedness, and strengthens interpersonal relationships (Banjongjit & Boonmoh, 2018; Jhaiyanuntana & Nomnian, 2020; Liu et al., 2022). Collectively, these findings suggest that well-developed ICC enables hospitality employees to deliver culturally appropriate services while minimizing communication barriers during interactions with international guests.

Previous Studies on ICC in Hospitality

As ICC gains importance in the hospitality sector, more studies have examined its perception, development, and application in hospitality workplaces. Liu et al. (2022) investigated stakeholders' perceptions of ICC education in China's hospitality and tourism industry and found that intercultural attitudes and behavioral competence were regarded as the most important competencies for future hospitality professionals. Similarly, Kiatkiri (2021) reported that human resource professionals in Thai hotels considered cultural empathy, positive attitudes, interaction involvement, intercultural experience, and personal attributes to be essential qualities for hotel employees. These findings demonstrate that both educators and industry practitioners recognize ICC as a fundamental competency for successful hospitality professionals. Previous research has also examined the development of ICC among hospitality employees. Khuanmuang (2022) found that Thai cruise crew members generally demonstrated high levels of ICC and developed these competencies primarily through workplace experience rather than formal education. The finding suggests that regular intercultural interactions may contribute significantly to the development of ICC in professional settings. Similarly, studies conducted in educational contexts have shown that intercultural experiences enhance learners' cultural awareness, communication confidence, and ability to build relationships with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Sainia & Ardhy, 2023). These studies indicate that the importance of ICC is consistently recognized across different cultural contexts and stakeholder groups.

Other studies have explored the communication challenges encountered in multicultural workplaces. Mahayussnan (2021) reported that employees working in multilingual educational institutions experienced communication difficulties despite demonstrating relatively high levels of ICC. Participants identified strategies such as active listening, simplifying language, observing others' behavior, and learning about cultural differences as effective ways to overcome communication barriers. Likewise, Jhaiyanuntana and Nomnian (2020) found that Thai hotel interns encountered challenges related to interpreting cultural differences, interacting appropriately across cultures, and developing critical cultural awareness during workplace training. More recently, Noobutra (2026) observed that Thai hotel interns experienced difficulties particularly in speaking and listening, with challenges including understanding different accents, recalling vocabulary, and producing language fluently in real time. The interns employed strategies such as substituting unfamiliar words with more familiar ones, requesting repetition or confirmation, and using non-verbal cues to facilitate communication. These findings

indicate that while ICC cannot completely eliminate communication challenges, it provides individuals with strategies to manage intercultural interactions more effectively.

Despite focusing on different participant groups, these studies consistently indicate that authentic intercultural experiences contribute more extensively to ICC development than only formal classroom instruction. However, they were less likely to examine whether varying levels of professional work experience result in different levels of intercultural competence among hotel employees. Although previous studies have contributed significantly to the understanding of ICC in the hospitality industry, several research gaps remain. First, most studies focused on identifying ICC components or measuring employees' overall competence rather than comparing employees with different levels of professional experience. Second, relatively few studies have simultaneously examined ICC, communication challenges, and the strategies employees use to overcome misunderstandings during workplace interactions. Finally, despite Chiang Mai's status as one of Thailand's leading international tourism destinations, empirical research examining hotel employees' ICC within this context remains limited. To address these gaps, the present study compares the ICC of less experienced and highly experienced hotel employees in Chiang Mai, investigates the intercultural communication challenges they encounter when interacting with international guests, and explores the strategies they employ to overcome misunderstandings and language barriers. By examining both competence and workplace experiences, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural communication in Thailand's hospitality industry and provides practical implications for staff development and hospitality education.

Methodology

This research employs a small-scale, quantitative-dominant mixed-methods design, combining a structured survey with open-ended questions to investigate the levels, challenges, and strategies of ICC among hotel employees in Chiang Mai. The research method is as follows.

1. Research Participants

The participants consisted of 20 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) hotel employees selected through purposive sampling from 3–4-star hotels in Chiang Mai, Thailand. They were selected based on the following criteria: (1) current employment in the Front Office or Food and Beverage department, (2) non-native English-speakers, and (3) regular interaction with international guests which required them to apply ICC in multicultural service settings. The participants were divided into two groups of 10 based on their years of work experience: (1) less experienced employees with 1–3 years of work experience, and (2) highly experienced employees with 4 years or more of work experience. The sample size was limited by employees' varying shift schedules and restricted access to 3–4-star hotels. Therefore, the study prioritizes in-depth, context-specific insights over statistical generalizability, consistent with small-scale purposive sampling.

2. Research Tools

The research instrument consisted of a questionnaire designed to investigate ICC, communication challenges, and coping strategies of hotel employees in Chiang Mai. The questionnaire was adapted from the studies of Mahayussnan (2021), Jhaiyanuntana and Nomnian (2020), Khuanmuang (2022), and Monklom (2016), and was developed based on the Intercultural Competence Model proposed by Barrett et al. (2013) and Byram (1997). The questionnaire consists of five parts: (1) Demographic information and personal background, (2) Twenty-two five-point Likert scale items measuring ICC, (3) Ten five-point Likert scale items investigating intercultural communication challenges and experiences of misunderstanding, (4) Ten five-point Likert scale items examining strategies for overcoming misunderstandings and language barriers, and (5) Three open-ended questions exploring participants' opinions regarding the importance of intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

3. Data Collection

Before data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in English language teaching and intercultural communication to establish its content validity using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). The IOC values ranged from 0.67 to 1.00, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.50 and indicating satisfactory content validity. Following the validation process, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the management of the participating hotels. After receiving ethical approval (RMUTL-IRB 149/2025), all participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study and voluntarily provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed through the Human Resources departments of the participating hotels, and data collection was completed within one week.

4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, to describe participants' demographic characteristics, levels of ICC, communication challenges, and communication strategies. The findings were presented separately for less experienced and highly experienced employees to facilitate comparison. Responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis. Similar responses were grouped into categories representing the three dimensions of ICC (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) and representative themes were summarized to support the quantitative findings. The mean scores for ICC and communication challenges were interpreted according to the criteria presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Interpretation of Hotel Employees' ICC, Communication Challenges, and Coping Strategies

Mean Score	Interpretation of ICC	Communication Challenges	Communication Strategies
4.21–5.00	Very high competence	Most frequently encountered	Most frequently used
3.41–4.20	High competence	frequently encountered	Frequently used
2.61–3.40	Moderate competence	Occasionally encountered	Occasionally used
1.81–2.60	Low competence	Infrequently encountered	Infrequently used
1.00–1.80	Very low competence	Least frequently encountered	Least frequently used

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the ICC of less experienced (1–3 years) and highly experienced (4 years and over) hotel employees. As shown in Table 2, no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups across any of the five ICC dimensions: attitude, $t(18) = -0.225, p = .824$; knowledge, $t(18) = -0.373, p = .713$; skills of interpreting and relating, $t(18) = 0.000, p = 1.000$; skills of discovery and interaction, $t(18) = -1.257, p = .225$; and critical cultural awareness, $t(18) = -0.600, p = .556$. Although highly experienced employees demonstrated slightly higher mean scores across all five ICC dimensions, the differences were not statistically significant.

Table 2 Independent-Samples *t*-Test of ICC by Work Experience

Work Experience	Work Experience	No. of respondents	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	t	Sig.
Attitude	1 – 3 years	10	4.62	0.447	- 0.225	0.824
	4 years and over	10	4.66	0.341		
Knowledge	1 – 3 years	10	4.42	0.614	- 0.373	0.713
	4 years and over	10	4.50	0.287		
Skills of Interpreting and Relating	1 – 3 years	10	4.17	0.805	0.000	1.000
	4 years and over	10	4.17	0.423		
Skills of Discovery and Interaction	1 – 3 years	10	4.04	0.753	- 1.257	0.225
	4 years and over	10	4.38	0.405		

Critical Cultural Awareness	1 – 3 years	10	4.30	0.762	- 0.600	0.556
	4 years and over	10	4.48	0.520		

Results

The results are presented in five parts: (1) demographic profile of respondents, (2) level of ICC across five domains, (3) common problems encountered when communicating with international guests, (4) strategies used to overcome misunderstandings, supplemented by responses to open-ended items, and (5) Importance of Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes of Intercultural Communication.

1. Demographic Profile

Participants were fairly evenly distributed across three age brackets (18–24, 25–30, and 31–40 years), and most held a bachelor's degree (70%). Most respondents rated their English proficiency at the B1-intermediate (45%) or A2-elementary (35%) level, acquired primarily through formal education (90%), supplemented by self-study and work-related experience (65% each). Respondents worked mainly in Food and Beverage (60%) and Front Office (40%) departments, most commonly as waiters/waitresses (45%) or receptionists (20%), and the majority used English or another foreign language daily (45%) or often (30%) in their work.

2. Level of Overall Intercultural Communicative Competence

Both less experienced ($\bar{x} = 4.31$) and highly experienced ($\bar{x} = 4.44$) staff demonstrated a very high overall level of ICC across the five domains: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (Table 3). Attitudes was the strongest domain for both groups ($\bar{x} = 4.62$ and 4.66), followed by knowledge ($\bar{x} = 4.42$ and 4.50). Knowledge was the second-strongest domain, driven by familiarity with appropriate manners ($\bar{x} = 4.75$) and awareness of guests' differing mindsets ($\bar{x} = 4.70$). The largest descriptive difference was skills of discovery and interaction, with highly experienced staff scoring higher than less experienced staff ($\bar{x} = 4.38$ vs. 4.04), particularly in listening to and observing others during conversation (4.60 vs. 4.00) and managing intercultural conflict (4.20 vs. 3.80). However, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. By contrast, the two groups obtained identical mean scores for skills of interpreting and relating ($\bar{x} = 4.17$). Critical cultural awareness was also slightly higher among highly experienced staff ($\bar{x} = 4.48$ vs. 4.30), particularly in relation to openness to learning from guests. Overall, although highly experienced staff obtained slightly higher mean scores across all five ICC domains, the differences were not statistically significant.

Table 3 Level of Overall Intercultural Communicative Competence by Domain

Domain	Less Experienced		Highly Experienced		Overall		Interpretation
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	
Attitudes	4.62	0.45	4.66	0.34	4.64	0.39	Very High
Knowledge	4.42	0.61	4.50	0.29	4.46	0.47	Very High
Skills of interpreting and relating	4.17	0.81	4.17	0.42	4.17	0.63	High
Skills of discovery and interaction	4.04	0.75	4.38	0.41	4.21	0.61	Very High
Critical cultural awareness	4.30	0.76	4.48	0.52	4.39	0.64	Very High
Total	4.31	0.62	4.44	0.32	4.37	0.48	Very High

3. Common Problems in Intercultural Communication

As shown in Table 4, hotel staff reported a moderate level of difficulty communicating with international guests ($\bar{x} = 3.19$), with less experienced staff reporting greater difficulty than highly experienced staff ($\bar{x} = 3.32$ vs. 3.05). The most common challenges were difficulty understanding accents or pronunciation ($\bar{x} = 3.80$), unfamiliarity with specific or technical vocabulary ($\bar{x} = 3.65$), and lack of speaking fluency ($\bar{x} = 3.50$). Less experienced staff reported greater difficulty with technical vocabulary ($\bar{x} = 3.90$ vs. 3.40) and cultural etiquette ($\bar{x} = 3.50$ vs. 2.90) than highly experienced staff.

Table 4 Common Problems Encountered When Communicating with International Guests ($\bar{x}$)

Items	Less Experienced		Highly Experienced		Overall	
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD
Difficulty understanding accents or pronunciation	4.10	0.88	3.50	0.71	3.80	0.83
Not familiar with specific/technical vocabulary	3.90	0.74	3.40	0.70	3.65	0.75
Lack of speaking fluency	3.50	1.18	3.50	0.71	3.50	0.95
Unable to follow or catch the main idea of a conversation	3.10	1.10	2.90	0.57	3.00	0.86
Feeling anxious or lacking confidence when communicating	3.10	0.99	3.00	1.05	3.05	1.00

Misinterpreting body language or facial expressions	3.10	0.74	3.20	0.63	3.15	0.67
Lack of understanding of cultural etiquette/traditions	3.50	0.85	2.90	0.88	3.20	0.89
Unable to adjust to the communication style of international guests	3.10	0.99	2.60	1.07	2.85	1.04
Using inappropriate humor or jokes	2.60	1.07	2.60	1.07	2.60	1.05
Failing to grasp speaker's intentions/IMPLIED meaning	3.20	1.03	2.90	0.57	3.05	0.83
Total	3.32	0.73	3.05	0.61	3.19	0.67
Interpretation	Moderate		Moderate		Moderate	

4. Strategies to Overcome Communication Problems

In Table 5, both groups reported a high overall level of strategy use ($\bar{x} = 4.00$ vs. 4.06; overall $\bar{x} = 4.03$). The most frequently used strategy across both groups was using simple words and short sentences ($\bar{x} = 4.70$), followed by asking for confirmation when unsure of meaning ($\bar{x} = 4.65$) and using comprehension checks to ensure understanding ($\bar{x} = 4.45$). Highly experienced staff reported greater use of summarizing or rephrasing key points ($\bar{x} = 4.70$ vs. 4.10) and non-verbal aids ($\bar{x} = 4.40$ vs. 4.10), whereas less experienced staff more frequently asked for confirmation when unsure of meaning ($\bar{x} = 4.70$ vs. 4.60) and switched between Thai, English, and other languages for clarification ($\bar{x} = 3.50$ vs. 3.10).

Table 5 Strategies to Overcome Misunderstandings and Language Barriers

Items	Less Experienced		Highly Experienced		Overall	
	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	$\bar{x}$	S.D.
Ask the speaker to explain or repeat what they said	3.90	0.99	4.00	1.05	3.95	1.00
Use gestures, body language, or visual aids	4.10	0.99	4.40	0.70	4.25	0.85
Summarize or rephrase key points to ensure mutual understanding	4.10	0.74	4.70	0.48	4.40	0.68
Use simple words and short sentences	4.70	0.48	4.70	0.48	4.70	0.47
Ask colleagues for help or use an interpreter	3.70	1.42	4.00	0.82	3.85	1.14
Make a clarification request when you do not understand	4.20	0.92	4.20	0.79	4.20	0.83
Use comprehension check to ensure understanding	4.40	0.70	4.50	0.53	4.45	0.60
Ask for confirmation when unsure of the meaning	4.70	0.48	4.60	0.70	4.65	0.59

Switch between Thai/English/other languages for clarification	3.50	1.51	3.10	1.37	3.30	1.42
Stop trying to explain a message if it becomes too difficult	2.70	1.49	2.40	0.97	2.55	1.23
Total	4.00	0.65	4.06	0.50	4.03	0.57
Interpretation	High		High		High	

5. The Importance of Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes of Intercultural Communication

Responses to the open-ended questions were categorized into three dimensions of ICC: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For knowledge, participants most frequently cited English proficiency and general language ability (11 responses). Many participants indicated that a foundation in vocabulary, sentence structure, and intercultural communication was essential for effective interaction with international guests. Cultural knowledge, including appropriate manners, religious sensitivity, and Thai greetings were also significant (5 responses). Participants explained that respecting guests' religious beliefs, recognizing appropriate facial expressions, and understanding culturally appropriate greetings, such as Thai *wai*, contributed to more effective intercultural communication. Job-specific vocabulary and formal register were mentioned less often (3 responses). Additionally, one participant noted that learning a third language such as Chinese was useful for service, reflecting an increasing demand for multilingual competence in the hotel industry.

For skills, core language abilities, such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing, were most frequently cited (10 responses), followed by interpersonal skills including the use of body language and problem-solving during interactions (7 responses). Participants explained that using body language to compensate for limitations in verbal communication and asking appropriate questions helped them better understand guests' needs and provide more effective service. Service-specific skills such as patience and quick thinking were mentioned less often (3–4 responses).

For attitudes, open-mindedness and a service-oriented mindset were most prominent (7 responses). Participants believed these qualities to be helpful in accepting cultural differences and deliver better service to guests from diverse backgrounds. They also indicated that initiating conversations confidently with international guests was important, noting that actively communicating with guests was preferable to remaining silent when faced with language difficulties. Other frequently mentioned attitudes included positivity, politeness, and self-confidence (6 responses), followed by attentiveness and patience (5 responses) and cultural sensitivity (2 responses).

Discussion and Conclusion

This Research The researcher can discuss the research results as follows.

1. Regarding the comparison of ICC between less experienced and highly experienced hotel employees, both groups demonstrated very high overall levels of ICC, with attitudes and knowledge as the strongest domains for both groups. Interview data indicated that participants considered open-mindedness and a service-oriented mindset essential for respecting cultural differences and serving guests from diverse backgrounds. They also emphasized the importance of English proficiency and knowledge of international and Thai cultures. Nevertheless, positive attitudes and cultural knowledge do not necessarily ensure effective performance, as ICC also requires employees to apply these resources appropriately in unpredictable service encounters.

The main difference between the groups concerned skills of discovery and interaction. Highly experienced employees demonstrated greater competence in observing and listening to guests and managing intercultural conflict. This suggests that workplace experience particularly strengthens the practical and adaptive dimensions of ICC. The finding aligns with Khuanmuang (2022), who reported that Thai cruise crew members developed ICC largely through workplace experience, and Kiatkiri (2021), who identified intercultural experience and interaction involvement as important aspects of ICC among Thai hotel employees. Similarly, Noobutra (2026) found that direct interaction with international guests improved hotel interns' communication skills and confidence, although they continued to experience difficulty understanding unfamiliar accents and responding under time pressure. Repeated intercultural encounters may help experienced employees interpret communicative cues, anticipate misunderstandings, and adjust their language more effectively. Thongphut and Kaur (2023), for example, found that Thai front-desk staff enhanced intelligibility by repeating key information, paraphrasing unfamiliar terms, using circumlocution, and reformulating ambiguous utterances. These strategies show that effective intercultural service involves the flexible negotiation of meaning rather than linguistic and cultural knowledge alone. Thus, the stronger interaction skills of highly experienced employees may reflect a repertoire of communicative strategies developed through sustained workplace practice. These findings also extend Liu et al. (2022) by suggesting that attitudes and knowledge may develop relatively early in employment, whereas interaction, conflict management, and critical cultural awareness continue to develop through experience.

2. For communication challenges, both groups reported a moderate level of difficulty, with less experienced employees reporting greater difficulty. The most common challenges were difficulty understanding accents or pronunciation, unfamiliarity with technical vocabulary, and limited speaking fluency. These difficulties reflect the linguistically diverse nature of international hospitality encounters, in which employees must communicate with guests who use different varieties of English. Similar challenges were reported by Noobutra (2026), whose hotel interns struggled with diverse accents, vocabulary recall, technical terms, and sentence construction under time pressure. The coexistence of high ICC and moderate communication difficulty indicates

that intercultural competence does not remove linguistic barriers. Instead, it provides employees with the attitudes, knowledge, and strategies needed to manage them. This interpretation is consistent with Mahayussnan (2021), who found that communication difficulties persisted in multilingual workplaces even among employees with relatively high ICC. It is also supported by Thongphut and Kaur (2023), who demonstrated that Thai hospitality staff actively maintained mutual understanding by repeating key information, paraphrasing, using circumlocution, and reformulating potentially ambiguous utterances. Therefore, communication difficulty should not necessarily be regarded as communicative failure. It can instead prompt employees to negotiate meaning and adapt their language to guests' needs.

Less experienced employees reported greater difficulty with technical vocabulary and cultural etiquette than highly experienced staff. This difference suggests that workplace-specific communicative competence develops through repeated participation in authentic service encounters. Greater experience may enable employees to build a broader range of occupational vocabulary, recognize culturally influenced expectations, and respond more efficiently under pressure. However, experience alone should not be assumed to explain the difference, as job position, frequency of international guest contact, and access to workplace training may also influence employees' perceived difficulties. In addition, the moderate ratings may partly reflect the routine and predictable nature of many hotel interactions or employees' successful use of coping strategies, rather than an absence of serious challenges. The findings highlight the need for scenario-based training that exposes less experienced employees to diverse accents, job-specific terminology, culturally sensitive service practices, and communication strategies.

3. Both groups reported frequent use of strategies to manage intercultural misunderstandings and language barriers. The most common strategy in both groups was simplifying messages into shorter sentences, suggesting that employees prioritized intelligibility over linguistic complexity when communicating with guests from diverse language backgrounds. This finding aligns with Noobutra (2026), whose hotel interns most frequently replaced unfamiliar words with more familiar alternatives. It is also consistent with Thongphut and Kaur (2023), who found that Thai front-desk staff used self-reformulation to make their messages more accessible. For example, they replaced "transfer" with "go" when speaking with an Indian guest and reformulated "fitness room" as "gym," followed by "for exercise," to clarify its meaning. These examples illustrate how lexical simplification can reduce the listener's processing demands and facilitate mutual understanding.

However, the groups differed in how independently they managed their communication breakdowns. Highly experienced employees tended to use self-managed strategies, such as summarizing or rephrasing key information, checking guests' understanding, combining verbal explanations with non-verbal cues, and seeking help from colleagues or interpreters when needed. In contrast, less experienced employees relied more heavily on direct clarification from the guest, such as asking for confirmation when unsure of meaning. This pattern is

consistent with Mahayussnan (2021), whose participants used active listening, simplification, and observation of interlocutors' behaviors to manage communication barriers. It suggests that repeated workplace interaction may help broaden employees' strategic choices and autonomy. However, simplification alone may not always be sufficient, particularly when employees communicate technical, safety-related, or culturally sensitive information. Excessive simplification may omit important details or produce further ambiguity. Therefore, effective communication depends on the flexible use of multiple strategies, including paraphrasing, repetition, comprehension checks, non-verbal support, and assistance from others when necessary. Seeking help should not necessarily be regarded as a sign of limited competence. In complex situations, it may represent a responsible strategy for ensuring accuracy. Overall, the findings suggest that experience does not only increase the frequency of strategy use but may also improve employees' ability to select, combine, and adapt strategies to the demands of each intercultural encounter.

This study found that both less and highly experienced hotel employees demonstrated very high ICC, particularly in attitudes and cultural knowledge. However, highly experienced employees showed stronger discovery, interaction, and conflict-management skills. Both groups reported moderate communication challenges, especially in understanding diverse accents, using technical vocabulary, and speaking fluently. These difficulties were greater among less experienced employees. Although language simplification was the most common coping strategy, experienced employees used more self-managed strategies, such as paraphrasing, comprehension checks, non-verbal cues, and consulting colleagues or interpreters when needed, whereas less experienced employees relied more on direct clarification from guests, such as asking for confirmation.

Academic Findings or New Knowledge

In terms of academic contribution, the findings indicate that ICC is a gradual and evolving process. Positive attitudes and basic cultural knowledge may emerge early, while the ability to apply them strategically develops through repeated workplace interaction. High ICC does not eliminate communication barriers but helps employees manage them more effectively. It can be said that workplace experience strengthens employees' applied ICC, supporting more adaptive communication strategies and, eventually, more effective hospitality service, as a model shown in Figure 3.

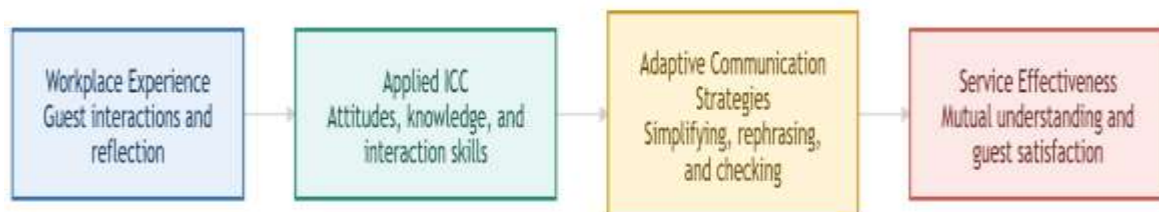


Figure 3 Proposed Experience-ICC-Strategy-Service Effectiveness Model



Regarding teaching implications, hotels should provide scenario-based ICC training involving diverse accents, cultural etiquette, complaint management, technical vocabulary, and communication-repair strategies. Mentoring and peer observation could also help less experienced employees learn from experienced colleagues. At the policy level, hotel organizations should integrate ICC into employee's recruitment, training, and performance assessment. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports and related agencies should incorporate ICC into national hospitality competency standards and promote training partnerships among hotels, universities, vocational institutions and professional associations.

Limitations

There are two main limitations for this study. Firstly, the purposively selected sample included only 20 hotel employees in Chiang Mai. Therefore, it may not fully represent the broader population of hotel employees in Chiang Mai or other hospitality contexts. The findings should be interpreted as context-specific insights rather than generalized to the Thai hotel industry. Secondly, the high self-reported ICC scores may reflect ceiling effects or social desirability bias, particularly since open-mindedness and service orientation are professionally valued qualities.

Suggestion

Future research should draw on larger and more diverse samples, including employees from other tourist destinations as well as different types and levels of accommodation, such as five-star hotels, boutique hotels, resorts, and local homestays. This would allow findings to be compared across regions and different hospitality contexts, strengthening the generalizability of results beyond the present study. In addition, future studies should triangulate self-reported data with more objective measures, such as observations of authentic service encounters, scenario-based assessments, supervisor and colleague evaluations, and feedback from international guests. Triangulation would help address the possibility of ceiling effects or social desirability bias in self-reported ICC scores and provide a more comprehensive picture of employees' actual intercultural performance. Furthermore, as this study compared ICC across experience groups using a cross-sectional design, future research could follow the same employees over time as they gain more work experience. This would allow researchers to directly examine how ICC and related communication strategies develop within individuals, rather than inferring developmental patterns from comparisons between different groups at a specific point in time.



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