

What is Intercultural Communicative Competence in English Language Teaching? Examining the Discourse of Thai Pre-Service English Teachers

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Abstract

Due to globalization, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become important. To integrate ICC into the classroom, appropriate perceptions towards this construct are needed. To know and understand what these perceptions might be, this study examined pre-service English teachers' views collected through an online open-ended survey; a total of 53 respondents completed the survey. Analysis of the data was done through a corpus approach; specifically, keywords were derived from comparison with a benchmark corpus. Subsequently, the contexts of occurrence of these keywords were analysed. This study analysed the first five keywords, which were "we," "language," "different," "culture," and "students." Based on the contexts of occurrence, this study found that the pre-service teachers perceived ICC as a notion that can be taught through specific pedagogical practices; that ICC is driven by differences in language and culture; and that students have the role of enhancing their ICC knowledge and skills. The findings present a contextual understanding of ICC, which may not necessarily be aligned with other cultural settings.

Keywords: *Intercultural communicative competence, pre-service teachers, English classroom*

Introduction

With the rise of globalisation and the recent emphasis on equality, ICC has remained an essential notion and skill (Mai, 2021). The fundamental principles of ICC include the promotion of sensitive and respectful communication among interlocutors from different linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many have advocated for ICC to be integrated into the English language classroom, so that it may be taught alongside English—a communicative tool used globally. In the Southeast Asian region, there have been various reports about the integration of ICC. For instance, in Malaysia, the integration of intercultural lessons may be subject to students' English language proficiency and their personal intercultural lived experiences (Dalib et al., 2017). In Thailand, Thongprayoon et al. (2020) has also reported students' lack of willingness to partake in intercultural activities if they perceive their English language ability as being low. Furthermore, in-service teachers reported a lack of pedagogical knowledge and skills for integrating intercultural lessons in their English language classrooms (Oeamoum & Sriwichai, 2020).

While these reports have been helpful in illustrating the position of ICC in the English language classroom, they have focused primarily on the experiences of in-service teachers. Very few studies have actually considered the experiences or perceptions held by teachers who are still undergoing training. As argued by Van Katwijk et al. (2023), doing research on pre-service teachers is pivotal, as it may help practitioners and teacher educators recognise issues that may pose a challenge in the future. This could then spur appropriate responses to ensure that pre-service teachers would be ready when they enter real classrooms and school contexts.

With this as a caveat, this study aimed to analyse the perceptions of Thai pre-service English teachers regarding ICC. It is hoped that the findings from this study would contribute to the improvement of teacher education in ICC, which is a crucial notion in today's globalised world.

ICC in the English Classroom

The English classroom is considered a suitable location for ICC integration, as the language is important for both global and academic communication. In the English classroom, teachers and students have the space to explore communication in different cultural contexts (Baker & Fang, 2020).

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) may be defined as having cultural frames of reference to guide and navigate through interaction in a multicultural or global setting. Furthermore, ICC acknowledges that communication across cultures encompasses not only linguistic knowledge and skills, but also other communicative and non-communicative perspectives that may shape how an interaction unfolds (R'boul, 2021). It should be noted that ICC has long been identified as an essential skill for students at different educational levels. In fact, the notion of ICC was first introduced through Communicative Language Teaching, where one of the principles was for students to possess pragmatic awareness to facilitate interaction that is respectful towards other interlocutors and appropriate for the communicative event (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999).

Teaching ICC is not a linear process, as there are multiple considerations that the teacher needs to make. Among them are the teacher's perception towards him- or herself, the teacher's perceptions towards culture and language, the teacher's perceptions towards students, and also the teacher's perceptions about how culture fits into the larger educational curriculum. The integration of ICC is also dynamic, given the many classroom variables. In other words, the extent of intercultural-ness of a lesson may constantly shift. Furthermore, including ICC in the English language classroom may not be entirely open to other cultures, as teachers may revert to focusing on information presented in the materials used. This may lead to a focus on Western-based cultures as the model for communication, especially if materials originate from English-speaking countries (Vitta, 2023). Variables that shape the integration and teaching of ICC are not isolated; rather, they have the propensity to affect one another.

If English language teachers are not sure of how to integrate ICC, they may always consider starting with the local culture; nevertheless, this must be done sensitively, especially if the English teacher is a foreigner. Furthermore, English teachers have reported that ICC is rather difficult to integrate as they believe that high language and communicative proficiency are necessary; however, other practitioners and scholars believe that there are other ways to attend to this issue, such as allowing translanguaging in the classroom (Tai & Wong, 2023). Besides having the willingness and pedagogical skills to integrate intercultural lessons, English teachers also need to have ample support from their environment. One issue which may pose a challenge is support in the form of teaching and learning materials. This specifically concerns the limited inclusion of local and regional cultures in classroom materials (Saemee & Nomnian, 2021; Labtic & Teo, 2020). In addition, the integration of ICC into the English language classroom may only be viable if there is enough curriculum space afforded by the larger educational context. On the contrary, if school administrators or other stakeholders believe in strict adherence to the curriculum, it will be challenging to integrate ICC or any other related or valuable concepts into the learning setting.

Thai Teachers' Practices and Perceptions towards ICC

As seen through the discussion above, the integration of intercultural lessons into the English language classroom still meets with challenges. One reason possibly affecting the integration of ICC in Thailand may be a lack of guidance on how it may be included in the English language classes or other subjects. This may be the case, given the report by Loo and Sairattanain (2023), where there was a perceived lack of clarity in efforts for education reform. This may pose a greater challenge to teaching and learning efforts, such as a mismatch between curriculum goals and teaching materials (Oeamoum & Sriwichai, 2020; Ulla et al., 2022). There may also be an overt concern with regards to the teaching of other cultures, given the prevalence of the local culture. For instance, the importance of hierarchy in society is a defining feature of Thai culture. To consider and adopt other cultures that do not necessarily share similar cultural practices may cause tensions within the teacher or with others (Young, 2021). There is the perception that Thai English teachers, whether pre-service or in-service, would not be able to carry out the teaching of culture effectively. Snodin (2016) reported a myriad of reasons, such as a lack of first-hand experience with other cultures, which had an adverse impact on teachers' confidence in integrating culture into the English language classroom. This issue, however, may be addressed if teachers are able to take a more open approach in their pedagogical practice. A

way to do this is to teach English with an emphasis on the significance of the local culture. Doing this will avoid the displacement of cultural beliefs and practices in the immediate context (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2020).

While research on in-service teachers has highlighted challenges faced when integrating ICC, little is known about the experiences or perceptions of pre-service English teachers. One reason may be the lack of studies done with this group of teachers; another reason may be the hesitance of Thais to have negative reports about themselves. This is not due to pre-service teachers thinking highly of themselves; rather, it is a way for them to not offend their teacher educators. Saying that they did not understand how a teaching practice is done, or how a cultural value may be integrated into an English class may be considered disrespectful, as it inadvertently reflects on the teacher educator's inability to get the pre-service teachers to do or understand something well (see Loan, 2019). This conundrum was also reported in Sairattanain and Loo (2021), where Thai pre-service teachers were found to hold a positive view towards teacher education reform; however, this did not mean that they understood what this reform meant.

The Study

This study seeks to analyse the perceptions of Thai pre-service English teachers regarding ICC. To this end, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate, as this would allow for the researchers to identify varying views that may be held by the pre-service teachers. Conceptually, this study was premised upon notions of intercultural teaching and learning as proposed by R'boul (2021). He proposed nine strategies, all of which were meant to support the dialectal teaching of intercultural communicative competence. The purpose of these teaching strategies is to allow for the examination and reconfiguration of power between teacher and students, as well as to create a space where multiple perspectives may be given equal consideration.

Methodology

This study was carried out at Sisaket Rajabhat University, Thailand, among 53 pre-service English teachers. At the time of this research, the participants were in their third year of studies, and were taking a course about communication across cultures. The study utilised an open-ended online survey to collect the participants' perceptions about intercultural communicative competence in English language teaching. There were nine items in the survey, all of which were statements of teaching strategies proposed by R'boul (2021). For each of the nine items, participants had to respond to this prompt, "What do you think of this strategy in your English language classroom?"

There were 477 responses, and the data analysis was corpus assisted. To start, participants' responses were analysed through AntConc version 3.5.9 (Macintosh OS X) for keywords that were derived from a comparison with the 5,000 top words of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). After the keywords were generated, the first five nouns and adjectives were selected for further analysis. These five words would have a high frequency count, as well as high keyness. The latter would indicate the aboutness of the corpus being analysed, as well as the main concepts or concerns of the participants (Watson Todd, 2020). To ensure that meaningful words were selected for further analysis, only nouns and adjectives were selected; the former represent concepts, while the latter reflect evaluations or judgements pertinent to the discourse (Durán-Muñoz, 2019). From there, their contexts of occurrence (concordance lines) were read iteratively to draw insights about the participants' perceptions. Analysing the contexts in which keywords occurred is a useful gauge for perceptions, given that they provide insights into how terms are used to express meaning (Anthony, 2022).

Findings

The participants' responses comprised 22,945 words. After a comparison with COCA, five key nouns and adjectives were identified, which were, "we," "language," "different," "culture," and "students." Information about their frequency and keyness are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 *Keywords and Their Frequency and Keyness*

No	Keyword	Frequency	Keyness
1	We	333	+122.34
2	Language	316	+115.64
3	Different	309	+112.88
4	Culture	244	+87.37
5	Students	212	+84.18

In this section, keywords are discussed by drawing upon meaning from their contexts of occurrence (extracts). The keywords and important elements of the the context are indicated in italics.

“We”

While “we” might be conventionally viewed as a pronoun, some have reclassified it as belonging to the class of nouns due to its reference to people. The pronoun we may be inclusive or exclusive; the former refers to the collective inclusion of interlocutors and others who might not be immediately present, while the latter refers to interlocutors involved in the interaction. In the case of responses provided by the participants, we may be inclusive–referring to Thai people in general. This may be seen in Extracts 1 and 2.

Extract 1 [emphasis added]

We must understand that communication has many issues, and many factors affect communication.

Extract 2 [emphasis added]

But when *we communicate* with teachers or adults, *we must have* respect, know how to think, think before speaking.

In both extracts, it may be seen how the participants perceived communication as being shaped by different factors, especially in terms of how Thais value respect in communicating with those who are older. Besides being culturally shaped, communication conventions may also be determined based on interlocutors involved in a communicative event, such as those indicated in Extracts 3 and 4. An awareness was evident among the participants that Thais could find themselves interacting with those of different cultural backgrounds. Knowing how different cultures shapes communication may help with understanding.

Extract 3 [emphasis added]

We also have to accept and learn about the differences of our communication partners. so that we can easily access and understand

Extract 4 [emphasis added]

We can develop Thai communication by teaching a new communication culture by building up cognitive and accurately speaking systems.

While responses were seemingly inclusive, they were also imperative in their intended meaning. This may be observed through the use of verbs such as can, must, and need. What is seen from here is how the participants may perceive the teaching of communication as something that has definitive pedagogical practices. While this may be necessary, especially for pre-service teachers who are yet to tackle teaching and working in the classroom and school settings, they may lead to misaligned professional expectations and inadvertently lead to tensions. This could be beneficial, as pre-service teachers would then need to develop resilience and creativity (Loo et al., 2019).

“Language”

To the participants, language was viewed in tandem with another concept, such as culture (Extract 5). This notion has been well established in the teaching of English from a communicative perspective, where the language user needs to have an understanding of the culture of interlocutors involved, as well as the culture of the communicative context.

Extract 5 [emphasis added]

In communication, *language and culture are completely intertwined* because *language and culture can tell the identity* of a particular race. Instructors must take into account their understanding of *language and culture in order to lead to acceptance* of cross-cultural communication.

Language is also not just confined to verbal or written exchange, as there are other complimentary communicative strategies such as body language (Extract 6). These need to be used appropriately to enhance the intended meaning of a communicative event. Similar to how language and culture are related, the use of gestures and body movements to support language use is also culture sensitive. This would require language users to be aware of body language that is acceptable.

Extract 6 [emphasis added]

Because *body language* is added to the *supplement*. This reason allows us to choose what to talk about and what facial look to show.

Another aspect that shapes the use of language, especially in spoken discourse, is accent (Extract 7). In the context of Thailand, studies have reported a preference of English teachers for certain accents, such as the elusive native English accent that is considered standard or in some cases, the correct one. In this response offered by the participant, however, there was a recognition that there are varied accents of the English language, which include those that are typically not associated with native English speakers. These accents were evaluated as being easy or difficult, rather than right or wrong. Having this perspective may be indicative of an intercultural perspective, as well as an acknowledgement that some accents may be easier as they are more familiar, and some may be more difficult as students or teachers have never encountered them.

Extract 7 [emphasis added]

Therefore, understanding a *language* may be *easy or difficult* depending on the speaker's *accent*. Which this accent may be different in the terrain, culture, pronunciation, English has many accents such as Indian accent, Thai accent, etc.

In the participants' responses regarding language, it may be observed that its use is shaped by the recognition and knowledge of other aspects meaningful to communication. Furthermore, according to participants, students in Thailand have been exposed to these meanings from a young age, and that language has to be used carefully, especially when interacting with those who are older (Extract 8).

Extract 8 [emphasis added]

The use of *language* depends on *class and social role*, but it is understandable because students are cultivated when they are young. The use of the *language* in Thailand is used *carefully* because it requires respect for the elders.

Even though cultural meanings that shape communication in Thailand are prevalent, participants held to the perspective that these should still be taught. Perhaps this is necessary due to the new linguistic code being used—English. Doing so might require a comparison of cultural values that may be inherent to both the Thai language and English (Extract 9).

Extract 9

Because *language* is a *mark or a symbol of understanding* between teachers and students who want to convey culturally accurate meanings and understand each other. The teacher must arrange the speech in a systematic and step-by-step manner so that the students can easily understand.

“Different”

It has been established that communication in Thailand is affected by its cultural beliefs and practices. Because of this, it is expected that there will be a different approach when communicating in a foreign language, including English. This perspective is observed in the participants' responses, where there were considerations for the levels of language, depending on the interlocutor and their job, and age, as well as the environment where the communication takes place. This may be observed in Extracts 10 and 11.

Extract 10 [emphasis added]

It is necessary because there are *different levels of language usage* in Thailand, so we have to learn to use languages that are used *differently according to our interlocutors*, because when society and environment change, the use of language also changes.

Extract 11 [emphasis added]

Communication in societies with *different roles*, whether in *job* function or *age*. There will be *different cultures in communication*. For example, when we communicate with close friends We'll talk about some nonsense, talking about fun does not have to be very formal.

The differentiated approach in communication is also perceived to be applicable when learning about other cultures. This is because there may be differences in terms of 'identity', as mentioned in Extract 12. An intercultural view may also be observed here, especially in its acknowledgement of the 'lifestyle' and 'preferences' that a 'person' may have. This may point towards the awareness that some people may live individualistically, rather than being defined by cultural beliefs or practices.

Extract 12 [emphasis added]

Each person has a *different, lifestyle and preferences* will vary. So when we go to learn in other cultures, we will understand the *differences of identity* in other cultures as well.

These differences are not only recognisable, but they are also teachable, as mentioned in Extract 13. The view of this participant is that differences in communication may be taught to students. This does not need to happen in settings outside of the class; rather, it is something that can be integrated into students' formal learning experience.

Extract 13 [emphasis added]

So in the teaching methodology it actually has to teach the learners to know that in different settings we use a *different speech*. As a teacher I can show my students that the language that they use with *different people* may *differ* due to *individuals' personality and social position*.

"Culture"

In line with the perspective of differentiation, culture was also viewed as dynamic, as it is constantly changing. This reflects the principles of ICC, where there is an acceptance that culture is bound to change over time. This may be instigated by continuous interaction with others from a different culture, such as that seen in Extract 14. The dynamicity of culture is also fast paced, as seen in Extract 15. And to ensure that students have current insights of these changes, teachers are expected to provide skills to students. This is different from teaching students about culture as a body of knowledge. What is emphasised here is the teaching of skills that would help students to be able to independently learn about these changes in culture.

Extract 14 [emphasis added]

Because as said, *culture is not static*, it is *constantly changing*. In the future, we must meet and work with foreigners. Therefore, it is good that we are *aware* of the *culture* as it *affects communication, collaboration or understanding* with co-workers.

Extract 15 [emphasis added]

Due to the *culture is constantly changing*. Teachers need to update the situation all the time. In order to keep up with the world and to keep up with the events and should instill in learners to know how to listen and know how to learn from others. In order to live happily in the future.

When teachers themselves are cognisant of the dynamicity of culture, this may have an influence on their students. This may also lead to an 'understanding' and an 'awareness' of themselves. This may be indicative of reflexivity, which has been discussed by other researchers (Extract 16).

Extract 16 [emphasis added]

Then if student do *understand* about *culture*, they will have an *awareness of their identity*. For me I think this point is possible. Teacher can use many methods to make their student understand this point. Teacher can use activity like work in pair, work in group and let student discuss their idea or opinion with their friend then, teacher give summary about the activity.

“Students”

Based on the keyword ‘students’ and their contexts of occurrence, it may be seen how they are viewed as requiring support to develop language as well as intercultural skills. In particular, students were perceived to be deficient in aspects of communication, which may be seen through nearby words or phrases such as requiring, or how they are unable to. In these situations, teachers would then need to provide appropriate learning materials and experiences in the classroom (Extracts 17 and 18). Doing this might help students to clearly see how culture may be distinct.

Extract 17 [emphasis added]

Communicating with people with higher social status there are many levels of language in Thai society, such as *students requiring* a polite language when speaking to a teacher or someone with a lower social status requiring an official language to communicate.

Extract 18

Students are unable to see truly diverse cultural perspectives. Teachers should bring an example of both the advantages and disadvantages of foreign cultures. And the advantages and disadvantages of the traditional Thai culture and show students perspectives on differences in cultures and personalities.

While the teaching process of culture seems to be confined to teachers and students, there are also other elements, such as materials. Nonetheless, how these materials are utilised to facilitate intercultural development is still dependent on the teachers (Extract 19).

Extract 19 [emphasis added]

Teachers choose learning materials that will allow *students to clearly see* the differences in culture.

As seen in the keyword ‘student’ and some of their contexts of occurrence, participants perceive the teacher as being responsible to get students to see what they know or do not know; and what they did wrong. However, there were responses that showed otherwise. This may lead to negative thinking or feelings among students—an inferiority complex. This is interesting to note, especially in the context of Thailand, where there have been reports of high tension in the teaching of the English language. However, it appears to be ironic how there is still pressure to perform well in the English language, despite the possibility of adverse effects on the students (Extract 20).

Extract 20 [emphasis added]

For example, in Thai society, teachers who teach English or foreign languages must mention what *students have*, not just about accuracy alone. The *student's writing or pronunciation is wrong*. Then the teacher blamed or reprimanded the *students directly*. [This] Will cause *students to have inferiority complexes* in learning that language

Discussion

From the keywords identified, this study was able to draw several meanings that were reflective of pre-service English teachers’ perceptions. Broadly speaking, the pre-service teachers were of the view that there are pedagogical practices that they—as English teachers—should carry out to integrate intercultural lessons. They saw themselves as being responsible to educate their students. The participants were also of the belief that language plays a pivotal role in intercultural interaction and development. Furthermore, the teaching of ICC is driven by the acceptance of difference, such as that seen in the distinct characteristics of culture. In order to facilitate efficient communication, the participants underlined the connection between language and culture. Language includes non-verbal indicators like body language, in addition to spoken and written communication. However, the lack of clarity and direction in educational reforms, as highlighted by Sairattanain and Loo (2021), makes it difficult to integrate such international viewpoints into teaching practices, making it challenging for teachers to successfully incorporate cultural elements into their courses.

The results of this study are aligned with other research studies such as those by Imsa-ard (2023) and Lee et al. (2023). In particular, this study illustrated similar challenges in integrating intercultural communication into English language teaching in Thailand. Just as Loan (2019) highlighted the hesitation of pre-service teachers to admit difficulty in understanding teaching practices or cultural

integration, these findings reflected this concern. Similarly, the lack of adequate teaching materials supporting intercultural lessons, as noted by Labtic and Teo (2020) and Saemee and Nomnian (2021), was evident in this study. These parallels emphasise the need for tailored approaches, considering factors like the interlocutor's characteristics and communication context, as advocated in the literature, and echoed in the results. Perhaps a bigger challenge would be the effective teaching of the notion of difference. This may be subject to several factors, such as having the linguistic tools to consider intercultural concepts; having a suitable environment that permits and advocates for an intercultural stance; and having the willingness to partake of intercultural interaction. Teachers would need to be willing to take the risk of diving into intercultural aspects that may be unfamiliar or dynamic. Students, on the other hand, would need to take on a more critical stance in learning about cultures, which would also require overt instructions and guidance from their English teachers (Rajprasit, 2020).

Conclusion

The findings of this study shed light on pre-service English teachers' perceptions regarding the integration of intercultural lessons into their teaching practices. The study participants emphasised the importance of supporting students in developing both language and intercultural skills. They recognized that students may have difficulties in communication and understanding diverse cultural perspectives. Teachers are seen as being responsible to provide appropriate learning materials and experiences to help students clearly see the differences in culture. Overall, teachers are viewed as having a significant role in guiding students' learning and fostering intercultural understanding. Moreover, it also illustrates how ICC is possibly localised to the participants' settings. To examine these challenges further, as well as to gain a better understanding of pre-service teachers' experiences in integrating ICC, future studies should consider examining and observing their teaching practicum. Doing so may allow practitioners and teacher educators to offer immediate and contextual help, which may be more impactful to ensure that pre-service teachers are receiving ample and appropriate support during their formative period of learning to teach.

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