Exploring International Programme Students' Intercultural Communication Competence in Thailand

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to explore the international students' Intercultural Communication Competence ICC in the international programme at a private university in Thailand as to whether they can adapt and utilize their abilities effectively and appropriately when interacting among people from various different cultural backgrounds in terms of knowledge, attitudes, skills and awareness. A total of 36 international students voluntarily participated in and responded to the survey questionnaires on a 5-Likert scale. Moreover, the data was collected by interviewing and observing the participants through the extracurricular activities and communication through social media. The findings showed that the international programme can enhance an individual's Intercultural Communication Competence ICC. While the students' language proficiency is much better, especially when using English language as the main medium to communicate among themselves, they are able at the same time gain knowledge about other cultures. The result is that the longer they stay in their host country, the more understanding they have towards other cultures because they are studying in an international programme

Keywords: Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), cross-cultural communication, international programme

Introduction

Diversity in the world is a basic characteristic of human society and also the key condition for a dynamic world. Whilst living in a culturally diverse world, each individual seeks to maintain one's unique cultural identity and at the same time be open to other cultures. Mahatma Gandhi (1921) once said, "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any." This quote could be used to explain the concept of a diverse society in this modern world. In the globalization era, people increasingly contact and engage with individuals from different ethnicities, races, nationalities, religions and cultures in their daily lives on a more frequent basis and so no surprise that diversity has become an interesting topical issue among many scholars.

Due to such differences in societies, many researchers and theoreticians have studied the ability to step beyond one's own culture with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Ruben, 1976; Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2006; Bennett, 1993). It is called '*Intercultural Communication Competence*' (ICC). According to Fantini (2006), 'Intercultural Communication Competence' can be defined as 'a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself.' Besides, many different terms can be used to describe Intercultural Communication Competence (Sinicrope, Norris & Watanabe, 2007) such as Transcultural Communication, Cross-cultural Adaptation, Intercultural Sensitivity, Global Competence, Intercultural Interaction, Global Competitive Intelligence, and Intercultural Cooperation.

According to Ruben's (1976), a behavioural approach links between what individuals know as well as what those particular individuals actually do in intercultural situations. He has listed seven dimensions of Intercultural Communication Competence in order to assess individuals' behaviours based on observation procedures.
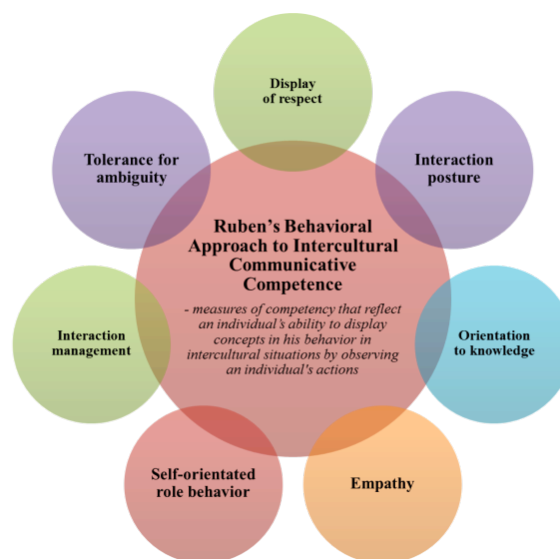

Figure 1: A Comparison of Ruben's Model of Intercultural Communication Competence

On the other hand, Byram (1997) has proposed that intercultural competence involves five factors, especially in linguistics communication, including verbal and non-verbal forms and the development of linguistic sociolinguistic and discourse competencies. Furthermore, Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) consists of six stages which are divided into three ethnocentric stages and three ethno relative stages. Each spot along the continuum represents increasingly complex perceptual views of cultural differences. By identifying the underlying experience of cultural differences, predictions about behaviour and attitudes can be made and education can be modified to facilitate development along the continuum.

Figure 2: Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

According to Fantini (2006), he proposed that ICC can be developed for successful intercultural communication through four dimensions: Knowledge, Attitude, Skill and Awareness (KASA). In general, Intercultural Communication Competency can be seen as a necessary part of people's personal and professional lives as an ability to overcome difficulties when communicating with people from different backgrounds.
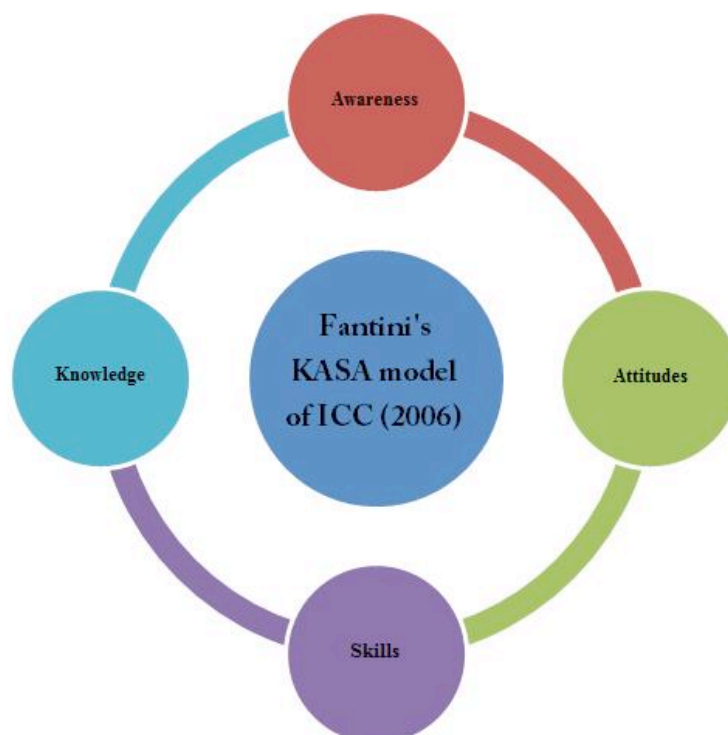

Figure 3: Fantini's (2006) KASA Model of Intercultural Communication Competence

In the globalizing world, studying abroad can be considered as one of the most effective assessment tools to explore the Intercultural Communication Competence

(Saricoban and Oz, 2014; Keles, 2013; Nedelcu and Ulrich, 2014; Mirzaei and Forouzandeh, 2013; Hismanoglu, 2011; Farnia and Wu, 2012; Dusi, Messetti & Steinbach, 2014). It is believed that by studying in another country in an international programme, the individual can gain international knowledge and experience, face challenges and enlarge the intercultural communication competency and of course, one can generally improve their language proficiency.

Based on Saricoban and Oz's reserach (2014), they have investigated pre-service English teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in Turkey. They used a 5-point Likert scale self-reported questionnaire to examine differences in participants' ICC. It showed the strong positive correlations between the participants' studying abroad and their ICC levels. Additionally, Keles (2013) studied the attitudes and beliefs of some European university students to Turkish people while they joined the ERAMUS Exchange Programme in Turkey. It is found that people from different cultures need to break the assumptions towards other cultures. These assumptions are beliefs rather than truths and are usually influenced by various subjective factors. People need to be aware of how to interact with others with respect and knowledge of their culture. Furthermore, Nedelcu and Ulrich (2014) explored students and faculty's perceptions on experiences provided by international exchange programmes in Romania. The results showed that both incoming and outgoing Erasmus students assessed studying abroad in a positive way as they improved in both foreign language proficiency and intercultural understanding and competences of the host country's culture and society.

In Thailand as shown in Figure 4, the Office of the Higher Education's survey (2012) was found that the numbers of foreign students in public and private higher education institutions in Thailand gradually increased every year, especially at the undergraduate level. The latest report reveals that in the year 2011, there were 13,397 foreign students in Thai higher education institutions which had doubled from the year 2007, when there were only 7,184 students. The top three countries were from neighbouring countries in Asia such as China, Myanmar and Laos respectively.
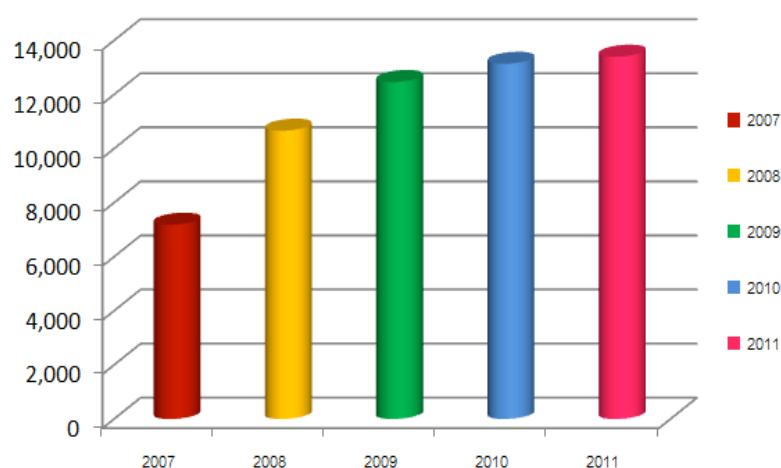

Figure 4: The Numbers of International Students studying in Thailand
Obviously, it can be seen that the more students explore other different cultures, the better they can improve their intercultural communication. Hence, studying abroad

appears to enable a wider experience of knowledge and understanding good practices across different cultures. To better appreciate how the international programme abroad can be used as an effective tool for assessing intercultural communication competence, this study aims at exploring students' intercultural communication competence in the international programme at a private university in Thailand, whether they can perform their abilities effectively and appropriately when interacting among people from various different cultural backgrounds. The study was designed to address the research question: What skills, knowledge, awareness and attitudes do international programme students at Kasem Bundit University have in regard to the intercultural communication competence?

Methodology

Participants

This study was carried out in the Department of Aviation Industry Management (International Programme), at Aviation Personnel Development Institute (APDI), Kasem Bundit University, a private university in Thailand. A total number of 36 international students voluntarily participated in this recent study and responded to the survey questionnaires on a 5-Likert self-reported scale. It consisted of 21 males (58.33%) and 15 females (41.67%). At the time of data collection, the participants were in their 2nd and 3rd year of their study in university and they have already had experience in the diverse cultures especially studying in the international programme. These participants were from different countries; Nigeria (N=5, 14%), China (N=7, 19%), Somalia (N=6, 17%), Bangladesh (N=1, 3%), Cambodia (N=3, 8%), Brunei (N=3, 8%), Nepal (N=4, 11%), South Africa (N=4, 11%), Comoros (N=1, 3%), and The Philippines (N=2, 6%). Their age ranges were between 18-25 years, 25-35 years and 35-45 years, and the average age among all participants was 22.49 years.
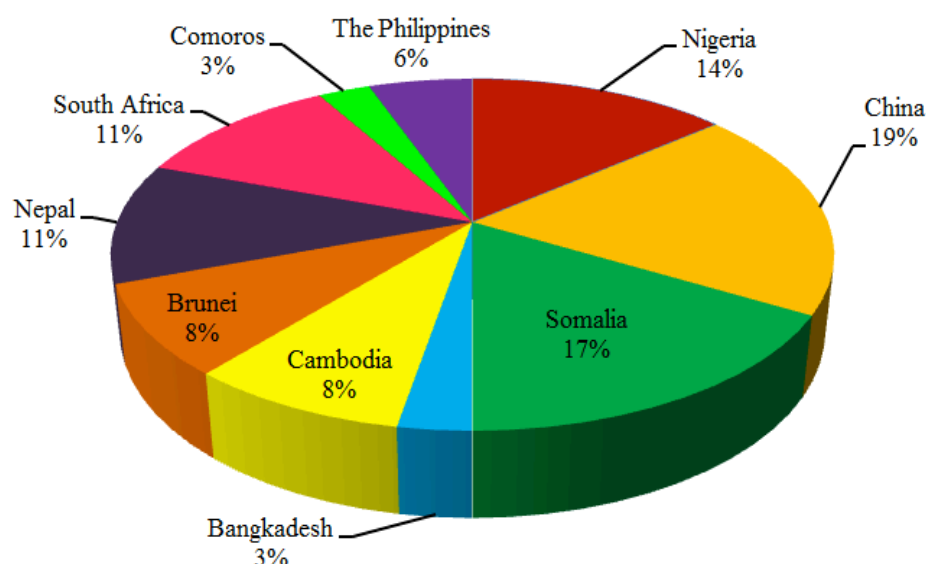

Figure 5: Fantini's KASA Model of Intercultural Communication Competence Instruments

The instruments in this study included a self-reported questionnaire, an observation and a semi-structured interview in order to triangulate the data and to enhance the trustworthiness of the results.

The self-reported 5 Likert-scale questionnaire ranged from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' and consisted of three parts. The first part included the participants' demographic information such as gender, age, and nationality whereas the second part contained questions about motivation and interest towards the host culture. Finally, the third part included 52 questions about ICC based on Fantini's (2006) investigation on intercultural abilities: 11 items for assessing the participants' knowledge, 13 items for evaluating the participants' attitudes, 10 skill items for assessing the participants' skill to communicate across different cultures and finally 18 items for assessing the participants' awareness of intercultural communication and one more question was the open-ended question, asking their further opinion towards intercultural communication. In order to judge participants' ICC, the criteria of the scores can be categorised into three levels as showing in Table 1, the scores were considered *High* if they were between 3.5 and 5.0, *Moderate* if they were between 2.5 and 3.4 and *Low* if they were between 1.5 and 2.4.

ICC Level	Mean	Options
High	4.0 - 5.0	Strongly agree
	3.5 - 4.4	Agree
Moderate	2.5 - 3.4	Neither agree or disagree
Low	1.5 - 2.4	Strongly disagree

Table 1: The Criteria of Intercultural Communicative Competence Level

Moreover, the data was collected by observing the participants through their classroom activities and extra curriculum activities such as the welcome party for international students. Besides this, observation was also done through social media such as Facebook group, and LINE programme, an application on mobile phones, where they use English language for communication among themselves. The semi-structured interview was also used as the research instrument in order to receive more information on the participants' intercultural communication competence as well.

Results

This study examined students' intercultural communication competence (ICC) in the international programme. The results of data analysis revealed that the participants' level of interest and motivation towards the host significantly increased by the time they have experienced cultural diversity. The longer they stayed in the host country, the higher their interest and motivation increased. Besides, the participants admired that the hosts could become as bicultural and bilingual as possible with the percentages of 47.22% and 44.44% respectively.

As shown in Table 2, In terms of knowledge of intercultural communication competence, the participants showed that they had abilities to learn about general and specific cultures. Within the Thai cultural setting, they learned to compare and differentiate their own cultures and the host culture in order to overcome communication barriers especially with language. More than half of the participants

knew techniques to aid their learning of Thai language and cultures. For instance, one of the Thai traditional norms the participants could easily recognise was Thai greeting. They knew how Thais greet others by saying the word '*sawasdee*', which means '*hello*' in English with the palms pressed together. Not only they learn a host language and cultures, but they also learn how to interact with local people and adjust themselves within a new environment among many people from different nationalities. Overall, the participants' ICC ability in terms of knowledge, the average ability was moderate level ($\bar{x}$ = 3.35). Even though it was not in a high level, the participants were able to recognise signs of strategies to overcome any difficulties that might occur while they live in a host country.

Table 2: Intercultural Communication Competence Abilities: Knowledge

Question items	x̄	SD
1. I can cite a definition of culture and describe its components and complexities	3.33	.828
2. I knew the essential norms and taboos of the host culture (e.g., greeting, dress, behaviors, etc.)	3.28	1.08
3. I can contrast important aspects of the host language and culture with my own	3.36	.961
4. I recognise signs of culture stress and some strategies for overcoming it	3.14	1.01
5. I know some techniques to aid my learning of the host language and culture	3.69	1.00
6. I can contrast my own behaviours with those of my hosts in important areas (e.g., social interactions, basic routines, time orientation)	3.50	.971
7. I can cite important historical and socio-political factors that shape my own culture and the host culture	3.36	1.19
8. I can describe a model of cross-cultural adjustment stages	3.31	1.03
9. I can cite various learning processes and strategies for learning about and adjusting to the host culture	3.25	.906

10. I can describe common interactional behaviours among Thais in social
    and professional areas (e.g., family roles, team work, problem solving,
    etc.)
	3.39	.838

11. I can discuss and contrast various behavioral patterns in my own culture with those in Thailand	3.33	1.14

As Table 3 shows, in regard to the attitude ability of ICC, the average of the participants' ability was in high level (x̄ = 3.56). Most of the participants had positive attitudes when dealing with their own emotions and frustrations with the host culture. Overall, the participants had a willingness to learn from the hosts, both language and culture. Besides, they tried to adapt their behavior to communicate appropriately for different situations.

Table 3: Intercultural Communication Competence Abilities: Attitude

While in Thailand, I demonstrate willingness to	x̄	SD
12. interact with host culture members (I didn't avoid them or primarily seek out my compatriots)	3.42	1.07
13. learn from my hosts, their language, and their culture	3.58	1.02
14. try to communicate in Thai and behave in 'appropriate' ways as judged by my hosts	3.50	1.08
15. deal with my emotions and frustrations with the host culture (in addition to the pleasures it offered)	3.31	.856
16. take on various roles appropriate to different situations (e.g., as a volunteer)	3.53	.878
17. show interest in new cultural aspects (e.g. to understand the values, history, traditions, etc.)	3.61	.903
18. try to understand differences in the behaviours, values, attitudes, and styles of host members	3.61	.871
19. adapt my behavior to communicate appropriately in Thailand (e.g., in non- verbal and other behavioural areas, as needed for different situations)	3.58	.937
20. reflect on the impact and consequences of my decisions and choices on my hosts	3.53	1.08
21. deal with different ways of perceiving, expressing, interacting, and behaving	3.64	.798
22. interact in alternative ways, even when quite different from those to which I was accustomed and preferred	3.67	.894
23. deal with the ethical implications of my choices (in terms of decisions, consequences, results)	3.72	1.08
24. suspend judgement and appreciate the complexities of communicating and interacting interculturally	3.61	.994

As Table 4 shows, the participants used their skills to improve their intercultural communication, which was in the high level (x̄ = 3.52). For example, the question item 33, '*I use culture-specific information to improve my style and professional interaction with my hosts*' showed that the participants had abilities and skills to improve their interaction with Thais. Moreover, the participants found that using the social media such as Facebook and LINE programme was seen as very important and useful in order to expand their knowledge about Thai culture, practice their language skills and also make friends among international students at the same time.

Awareness could be seen as the crucial ability of intercultural communication competence in this study, the participants showed that they were aware of the differences and similarities across their own and the host language and culture. Even though the Thai environment has impact on their lives, they could learn and develop their intercultural communication competence and appreciate different cultures and at the same time they were also proud of their own identities. For instance, when there was a traditional costume show in the international student welcome party, each student was so proud to present their own cultures and also appreciated others.

Table 4: Intercultural Communication Competence Abilities: Skills

Question items	$\bar{x}$	SD
25. I demonstrate flexibility when interacting with persons from the host culture	3.56	.969
26. I adjust my behavior and dress as appropriate, to avoid offending my hosts	3.47	.810
27. I am able to contrast the host culture with my own	3.42	1.05
28. I used strategies for learning the host language and about the host culture	3.64	.990
29. I demonstrate a capacity to interact appropriately in a variety of different social situations in the host culture	3.61	.838
30. I use appropriate strategies for adapting to the host culture and reducing stress	3.47	.845
31. I use models, strategies, and techniques that aid my learning of the host language and culture	3.22	.929
32. I monitor my behavior and its impact on my learning, my growth, and especially on my hosts	3.67	.956
33. I use culture-specific information to improve my style and professional interaction with my hosts	3.39	.903
34. I help to resolve cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstandings when they arose	3.78	1.07

Table 5: Intercultural Communication Competence Abilities: Awareness

While in Thailand, I realise the importance of	$\bar{x}$	SD
35. differences and similarities across my own and the host language and culture	3.81	.856
36. my negative reactions to these differences (e.g., fear, ridicule, disgust, superiority)	3.22	.929
37. how varied situations in the host culture required modifying in my interactions with others	3.50	.737
38. how host culture members viewed me and why	3.58	1.05
39. myself as a 'culturally conditioned' person with personal habits and preferences	3.44	.998
40. responses by host culture members to my own social identity (e.g., race, class, gender, age)	3.42	.996
41. diversity in the host culture (such as differences in race, class, gender, age, ability)	3.39	1.05
42. dangers of generalizing individual behaviours as representative of the whole culture	3.61	.964
43. my choices and their consequences (which make me either more, or less, acceptable to my hosts)	3.50	.910
44. my personal values that affect my approach to ethical dilemmas and their resolution	3.50	1.02
45. my hosts' reactions to me that reflect their cultural values	3.58	.937
46. how my values and ethics are reflected in specific situations	3.56	.843
47. varying cultural styles and language use and their effect in social and working situations	3.53	.971
48. my own level of intercultural development	3.72	1.03
49. the level of intercultural development of those I work with (hosts, classmates, co-workers)	3.50	.910
50. factors that help or hinder my intercultural development and ways to overcome them	3.33	.756
51. how I perceived myself as communicator, facilitator, mediator, in an intercultural situation	3.53	.910
52. how others perceived me as communicator, mediator, in an intercultural situation	3.58	.874

Figure 6: Activities among international students from various countries

From the interviews and observation, the findings showed that students' language proficiency is much better through usage in the classroom while they had to discuss in class and also through extracurricular activities along with the social media, especially using English language as the medium to communicate among themselves. Not only their language abilities in English increase more, but they also gain knowledge about different cultures from various activities arranged in the university and local communities as well.

During the interviews, one of the foreign students from China said "*When I first arrived to Thailand. I couldn't speak Thai and my English was not good enough. My native language is Chinese, so I have to communicate with others by using the body language sometimes. Now, my English is getting better and I've learnt to speak Thai, too.*" Another student, originally from Cambodia, also mentioned about her achievement in improving language abilities and gaining knowledge of different cultures, "*My English is much better than when I was in my own country and I enjoy being around with people from different countries, I can learn their cultures and also share my own cultures.*" Furthermore, a Nigerian student stated "*I've learnt a lot from being here, but you need time to adjust yourself to others.*"

Discussion and Conclusion

In every diverse society, people will learn to adapt themselves through communication with others in order to increase their knowledge, attitude, skills and awareness abilities.
The findings show that the international programme can enhance an individual's intercultural communication competence. The longer they stay in the host country, the more understanding they have. The findings support Bennett's (1993) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, people learn to value and respond respectfully to other cultures. Changes in individuals' worldviews can be observed to see how one can respond and adapt oneself to cultural differences depending on the duration of time staying in the host country. Studying in international programmes can be seen as an exciting and new experience.
However, when people from different cultures come together, they should empathize to understand others' point of views as Ruben's (1976) mentioned '*Empathy*', the

ability to understand another person's situation, as one of the seven dimensions of intercultural communication competence.

Studying in the international programme helps improve language proficiency especially in English. Some students such as Chinese had difficulties and this would lead to misunderstandings in communication. However, they have learned to speak Thai and used their intercultural abilities to communicate with non-verbal such as body language and facial expressions. This is in compliance with Byram's (1997) factors of intercultural communication competence especially in linguistic communication. Further study should be focused on foreign students with larger numbers of participants in order to see whether it yields a different or similar result.

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