

Intercultural Awareness: Bridging the Gap for Global Understanding of EFL Learners

Suchanuch Sriprom¹ / Anutsara Seetongsuk² / Chaleomkiet Yenphech^{*3}

¹English Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Buriram Rajabhat University, Thailand

E-mail: 630112155035@bru.ac.th

²English Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Buriram Rajabhat University, Thailand

E-mail: 630112155038@bru.ac.th

³Lecturer of English Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Buriram Rajabhat University, Thailand

* Corresponding author's

E-mail: Chaleomkiet.y.p@bru.ac.th

Received: April 4, 2024
Revised: April 24, 2024
Accepted: April 26, 2024

Abstract

In an increasingly globalized world, intercultural awareness plays a significant role in promoting effective communication, fostering understanding, and addressing societal challenges arising from cultural diversity. Therefore, the main goals of this mixed-methods study were to assess the level of current intercultural awareness of EFL learners and to examine the implications of intercultural awareness for effective communication and collaboration in multicultural settings. A sample of 73 EFL learners completed an intercultural awareness questionnaire, which was followed by semi-structured interviews with five EFL learners. They were selected by using the convenience sampling method. The results of the research were that 1) The EFL learners had a high level of intercultural awareness, and 2) Communication and collaboration with people from different cultures require intercultural awareness because it will help reduce conflict and work effectively. In addition, the study also found that EFL learners have a high intercultural attitude, intercultural skills, and intercultural knowledge. Moreover, it was found that EFL learners think that communicating with people of different cultures is not difficult if they know and understand that culture, but it is difficult when the culture is very different from one's own culture, such as language, lifestyle, food, and behavior.

Keywords: EFL learner, intercultural awareness, intercultural communication

Introduction

Intercultural awareness is a vital area of research that explores the dynamics of cross-cultural interactions and the development of cultural competence in individuals (Chen & Starosta, 1996). In an increasingly globalized world, intercultural awareness plays a significant role in promoting effective communication, fostering understanding, and addressing societal challenges arising from cultural diversity (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 29). This introduction provides an overview of the importance of intercultural awareness research and its implications for individuals, organizations, and societies (Byram, 1997).

Lack of intercultural awareness can lead to a number of problems. When people from different cultures interact with each other, they may have different expectations about how they communicate and behave. If they are not aware of these differences, they may misinterpret each other's actions and words, which can lead to conflict (Hall, 1959). For instance, the Southern Thai accent and speaking style are often perceived as harsh and lacking in tone. This can lead to misunderstandings and negative stereotypes, such as the belief that Southern Thais are blunt, rude, and disrespectful. However, it is important to remember that cultural differences can play a role in how communication is interpreted. By taking the time to understand different cultures, even when we disagree with them, we can make significant progress in conflict resolution and coexistence. Secondly, people who lack intercultural awareness may be more likely to stereotype and prejudice others from different cultures. This can lead to discrimination and exclusion (Bennett, 2019). Finally, people who lack intercultural awareness may find it difficult to build relationships and work effectively with people from other cultures. This can have a negative impact on their personal and professional lives (Thomas, 2004).

However, for people to have a positive attitude towards culture, they must choose to live in a good environment and society. This will lead to expressions of behavior that demonstrate respect and appreciation for one's own culture. It is a valuable skill that can help you to connect with people from all over the world, as well as being able to coexist between one's own culture and others (Le Breton, 2009).

Literature Review

1. Intercultural Communication

The term “intercultural communication (IC)” generally refers to dialogue between individuals from various cultural backgrounds (Porter & Samovar, 2023). More precisely, it refers to “symbolic exchange processes whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities negotiate shared meaning in an interactive situation” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 16).

2. Intercultural Awareness

Intercultural awareness conceptualizes intercultural knowledge and skills (such as tolerance, acceptance, and appreciation of diversity) needed to communicate effectively and avoid intercultural misunderstandings (Robins et al., 2002). That is, constructing knowledge about cultural and social diversity constitutes a very important element in nurturing individuals' intercultural awareness (Hill et al., 2006). Byram (1997), gives a detailed account of intercultural awareness as part of a framework of intercultural communicative competence. The critical component of his framework is the importance of understanding the nature of cultural norms to reach an ability to evaluate practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries (Guerriche, 2020). Dr. David Matsumoto, Professor of Psychology at San Francisco State University and a leading expert on intercultural communication, has said that “intercultural knowledge is essential for effective communication and collaboration in multicultural settings because it allows us to understand the different cultural norms and values” (Matsumoto, 1990).

3. Intercultural Competence

Drawing on the range of research that has been conducted in this field, and the numerous conceptual models that have been proposed, Barrett (2011) identified the cores of intercultural competence as follows:

Attitudes: respect for other cultures; curiosity about other cultures; willingness to learn about other cultures; openness to people from other cultures; willingness to suspend judgment; willingness to tolerate ambiguity; and valuing cultural diversity.

Skills: skills of listening to people from other cultures; skills of interacting with people from other cultures; skills of adapting to other cultural environments; linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse skills, including skills in managing breakdowns in communication; skills in mediating intercultural exchanges; skills in discovering information about other cultures; skills of interpreting cultures and relating cultures to one another; empathy; multi perspective; cognitive flexibility; and skills in critically evaluating cultural perspectives, practices and products, including those of one's own culture.

Knowledge: cultural self-awareness: communicative awareness, especially of the different linguistic and communicative conventions within different cultures; culture-specific knowledge, especially knowledge of the perspectives, practices, and products of particular cultural groups; and general cultural knowledge, especially knowledge of processes of cultural, societal, and individual interaction.

Research Objectives

1. To assess the level of current intercultural awareness of the EFL learners
2. To examine the implications of intercultural awareness for effective communication and collaboration in multicultural settings

Methodology

1. Samples

This study surveyed 73 third-year students in English Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Buriram Rajabhat University. They were selected by using the table of Krejcie and Morgan (1978), and convenience sampling method. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students (three females and two males) by purposive sampling method.

2. The Research Instruments

The research instruments in this study were: quantitative and qualitative methods.

2.1 Quantitative Methods

This study employs a quantitative methodology to assess the EFL learners' current intercultural awareness level. The questionnaire contains both closed- and open-ended questions, as well as a five-point Likert scale used as follows: 5 means Strongly Agree, 4 means Agree, 3 means Uncertain, 2 means Disagree, and 1 means Strongly disagree. The questionnaire was created from theories and principles from documents, articles, and related literature to serve as a guideline in questionnaire creation.

The 23-item questionnaire form total scores from the three experts were 0.95 and tryout with fourth-year students a total of 20 students with the reliability of Conbach's Alpha, and the result of the questionnaire was 0.91.

2.2 Qualitative Methods

The researchers conducted interviews with five third-year students using a semi-structured interview form total IOC from the three experts was 1.00. Among the circumstances that favor qualitative research are the following: 1) Intercultural communication, 2) Cultural adjustment, and 3) Intercultural awareness.

Research Design

This research was a mixed method. Researchers administered the questionnaire and semi-structured interview, which served as the research instruments for this study. After the samples had completed the questionnaire and semi-structured interview, the researchers double-checked the completion of the answers and met experts.

Data Collection

The researchers conducted the investigation between the 1st till 7th of August 2020, and then the data were conducted.

Data Analysis

1. The Quantitative Data Analysis

A statistical package computer program was used to analyze the quantitative data from the questionnaire. Each section's data was analyzed as follows:

Part 1: General information. This part contains questions about gender. The data were analyzed by the computer program in order to find percentages.

Part 2: The intercultural awareness questionnaire involves intercultural knowledge, intercultural skills, and intercultural attitudes. This section contains closed-ended queries using a 5-point Likert scale. The computer program had been used to analyze ordinal data in order to calculate the mean (*M*), and standard deviation (*S.D.*). As shown in Table 1, the mean (average) score for each item was interpreted as the level of intercultural awareness.

Table 1

Comparison of Level of Intercultural Awareness and Mean

Level of Intercultural Awareness Mean	Mean
Highest	4.50 – 5.00
High	3.50 – 4.49
Moderate	2.50 – 3.49
Low	1.50 – 2.49
Lowest	1.00 – 1.49

2. The Qualitative Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews analyzed data by taking data from notes, observations, and audio recordings obtained from interviews to analyze in the form of descriptive analysis. The researchers chose to use content analysis to link them into articles.

Results

1. Quantitative Part

1.1 General Information of Samples

Table 2

General Information

General Information	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	9	12.33
Female	64	87.67
Total	73	100

From Table 2, the finding showed that most of the samples were female 64 students (87.67%) and male 9 students (12.33%), respectively.

1.2 Intercultural Awareness

Intercultural awareness includes the cognitive perspectives of intercultural competence. Intercultural awareness is the foundation of intercultural competence. Without intercultural awareness, it is difficult to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to function effectively in intercultural settings. The researcher has adapted Deardorff's' (2006) intercultural competence model in this research as follows: knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

1.2.1 Intercultural Knowledge

Intercultural knowledge involves knowledge of different cultures such as history, values, beliefs, traditions, and norms.

Table 3

Intercultural Knowledge of EFL Learners

Intercultural knowledge	\bar{x}	S.D.	Meaning
1. I know the rules for expressing non-verbal behaviours in some different cultures.	3.71	0.87	High
2. I know the customs of the holidays or special days of other cultures.	3.92	0.97	High

Table 3 (Continued)

Intercultural knowledge	\bar{x}	<i>S.D.</i>	Meaning
3. I know that intercultural awareness is important for success in today's globalized world.	4.26	0.85	High
4. I know that intercultural awareness is a lifelong journey.	4.15	0.98	High
5. I know that intercultural awareness can help create peace and harmony.	4.34	0.82	High
6. I am aware of the different ways that people from different cultures express emotions.	4.19	0.83	High
7. I am aware of the various ways that individuals from various cultures demonstrate respect.	4.30	0.78	High
Total	4.13	0.54	High

From Table 3, the finding showed that intercultural knowledge was at a high level ($M = 4.13$, $S.D. = 0.54$). When considering each item, EFL Learners had the most intercultural knowledge were "I know that intercultural awareness can help create peace and harmony." ($M = 4.34$, $S.D. = 0.82$), Followed by "I know that intercultural awareness is a lifelong journey." ($M = 4.15$, $S.D. = 0.98$), and "I know the rules for expressing non-verbal behaviors in some different cultures." ($M = 3.71$, $S.D. = 0.87$), respectively.

1.2.2 Intercultural Skills

Intercultural skills include interaction, empathy, and adaptability.

Table 4

Intercultural Skills of EFL Learners

Intercultural Skills	\bar{x}	<i>S.D.</i>	Meaning
8. I am able to adapt my behaviour to different cultural contexts.	4.14	0.90	High
9. I am able to communicate effectively with people from different cultures.	3.96	0.98	High
10. I am able to build relationships with people from different cultures.	4.00	0.91	High
11. I avoid displaying behaviours that may pave the way for misunderstandings while interacting with people coming from different cultures.	4.22	0.82	High

Table 4 (Continued)

Intercultural Skills	\bar{x}	S.D.	Meaning
12. I distinguish differences between my own culture and other cultures.	4.05	0.80	High
13. I try to learn about their cultures while interacting with people coming from different cultures.	4.10	0.82	High
14. I avoid generalizing behaviours or attitudes of one person in a group to others.	4.10	0.97	High
Total	4.08	0.61	High

From Table 4, the findings showed that intercultural skills were at a high level ($M = 4.08$, $S.D. = 0.61$). When considering each item, EFL learners had the most intercultural skills were “I avoid displaying behaviors that may pave the way for misunderstandings while interacting with people coming from different cultures.” ($M = 4.22$, $S.D. = 0.82$), followed by “I try to learn about their cultures while interacting with people coming from different cultures.” ($M = 4.10$, $S.D. = 0.82$), and “I am able to communicate effectively with people from different cultures.” ($M = 3.96$, $S.D. = 0.98$), respectively.

1.2.3 Intercultural Attitudes

Attitudes include respect, curiosity, and openness.

Table 5

Intercultural Attitude of EFL Learners

Intercultural Attitude	\bar{x}	S.D.	Meaning
15. I am open to the ideas of people coming from different cultures.	4.11	0.87	High
16. I am open to make friends with folks from other cultures	4.19	0.86	High
17. I am happy to change my own cultural ideas with others.	4.23	0.94	High
18. I tolerate unusual behaviours of people coming from different countries.	3.55	1.14	High
19. I respect beliefs of people coming from different cultures.	4.26	0.83	High

Table 5 (Continued)

Intercultural Attitude	\bar{x}	<i>S.D.</i>	Meaning
20. I respect values of people coming from different cultures.	4.18	0.95	High
21. I respect other cultures' festivals and celebrations and appreciate their unique traditions.	4.15	0.89	High
22. I accept the differences between my culture and other cultures.	4.32	0.74	High
23. I am interested in learning about different cultures.	4.23	0.87	High
Total	4.14	0.59	High

From Table 5, the findings showed that intercultural attitudes were at a High level ($M = 4.14$, $S.D. = 0.59$). When considering each item, EFL learners had the most intercultural attitudes were “I accept the differences between my culture and other cultures.” ($M = 4.32$, $S.D. = 0.74$), followed by “I am able to adapt my behavior to different cultural contexts.” ($M = 4.10$, $S.D. = 0.90$), and “I tolerate unusual behaviours of people coming from different countries.” ($M = 3.55$, $S.D. = 1.14$), respectively.

1.2.4 Intercultural Awareness

Intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes of third-year EFL learners in the English Program at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Buriram Rajabhat University.

Table 6

Summary of Intercultural Awareness in Three Categories

Intercultural Awareness	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	Meaning
1. Knowledge	4.13	0.54	High
2. Skills	4.08	0.61	High
3. Attitudes	4.14	0.59	High
Total	4.12	0.58	High

From Table 6, the findings showed that the overall mean of intercultural awareness of EFL learners in this research was at the level of high ($M = 4.12$, $S.D. = 0.58$). When considering each item, the results showed that EFL students had the highest intercultural attitude ($M = 4.14$, $S.D. = 0.61$), followed by intercultural knowledge ($M = 4.13$, $S.D. = 0.54$) and intercultural skills ($M = 4.08$, $S.D. = 0.61$), respectively.

2. Qualitative Part

The qualitative data was collected from the samples which were classified into three categories:

1. Intercultural Communication

It was found that EFL learners think that communicating with people of different cultures is not difficult if they know and understand that culture, but it is difficult when the culture is very different from one's own culture, such as language, lifestyle, food, and behavior.

2. Cultural Adjustment

It was found that most EFL learners feel excited when going to unfamiliar places. On the other hand, some people feel uncomfortable, but they try to adapt to that culture.

3. Intercultural Awareness

It was found that EFL students think that intercultural awareness is important because it helps reduce conflicts, work effectively with others, and live together peacefully in society.

Discussion

The results indicate that EFL learners have a high level of intercultural awareness, which is consistent with Uruporn's (2018) research on Factors Affecting the Cultural Awareness of Undergraduate students, Kasetsart University Kamphaeng Sean Campus. The results showed that undergraduate students also had a high level of cultural awareness. However, there are some areas where they could improve, such as their knowledge of non-verbal behaviors in different cultures and their ability to communicate effectively with people from different cultures.

One of the most notable findings is that EFL learners have a strong positive attitude towards intercultural awareness. They understand the importance of intercultural awareness for success in today's globalized world and they are interested in learning about different cultures. This is a positive sign, as it suggests that EFL learners are motivated to develop their intercultural skills. The data obtained in this study were quite similar to those of Marissa's study (2019) which investigated students' attitudes toward their intercultural learning experience to develop intercultural awareness in an English language classroom. The results showed that the participants had highly positive attitudes toward their intercultural learning experience in various aspects.

Another positive finding is that EFL learners have a good understanding of intercultural knowledge. They are aware of the various ways that individuals from different cultures demonstrate respect and they know that intercultural awareness can help create peace and harmony. This knowledge is essential for effective communication and collaboration in multicultural settings which is consistent with Matsumoto's (1990) statement that "intercultural knowledge is essential for effective communication and collaboration in multicultural settings because it allows us to understand the different cultural norms and values".

Overall, the research data on the intercultural awareness of EFL learners, they have a high level of intercultural awareness, and they are motivated to develop their intercultural skills. However, there are some areas where they could improve, such as their knowledge of non-verbal behaviors in different cultures and their ability to communicate effectively with people from different cultures.

Recommendations

1. Implications

First, establish a secure and encouraging environment. EFL learners should feel comfortable expressing themselves and inquiring about different cultures. Secondly, it is important to provide EFL learners with opportunities to practice their intercultural skills in authentic contexts. This could entail participation in cross-cultural exchange programs, collaboration with multicultural teams, or simply interaction with people from different cultures in their everyday lives. Lastly, it is imperative to demonstrate patience and understanding when communicating with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. By exhibiting tolerance and empathy for people of different cultures, people can facilitate the creation of a more inclusive and productive environment for all.

2. Further Studies

First, it suggests that researchers should continue to explore the various factors that contribute to the development of intercultural awareness in EFL learners. This could include factors such as language learning motivation, exposure to different cultures, and intercultural communicative competence.

Second, researchers should investigate ways to help EFL learners improve their knowledge of non-verbal behaviors in different cultures and their ability to communicate effectively with people from different cultures. This could involve developing new teaching and learning materials and providing opportunities for EFL learners to interact with people from different cultures.

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Author

Chaleomkiet Yenphech who is an Associate Dean for Technology, Journal Management, and Online Media Management is currently a lecturer in Humanities and Social Sciences, Buriram Rajabhat University, Thailand. His research interests include language in factor analysis, classroom contexts, linguistics and technology-based activities. He has presented papers at international conferences both domestically and internationally, and has published articles and papers in several academic journals. He is now pursuing a Ph.D. in Linguistics at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University in Thailand.