

# The Impact of Studying English in China on Thai University Students' Intercultural Competence

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Received: November 1, 2022

Accepted: December 10, 2022

Online Published: December 21, 2022

doi:10.5430/wjel.v13n1p248

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v13n1p248>

## Abstract

The major purposes of this study aimed (1) to investigate the communication differences and cross-cultural adaptation of Thai university students studying English in China PR., (2) to investigate the problems of the Thai university students' cross-cultural adaptation, as well as (3) to investigate factors influencing their intercultural competence. A structured questionnaire was conducted across 30 Thai students as the target group studying English at Yu'Xi Normal University China PR, selected by the purposive sampling technique. The results of the study revealed that 1) demographically, there was not much difference in adaptation between male and female target groups in terms of gender, age, and residency length; 2) negative attitudes in Thai university students to Asians caused a separation between Thai and Chinese groups due to the behavioural characteristics of Thai people who were concerned about speaking straightforwardly. In terms of communication ability, language affects communication directly between individuals and groups in everyday life and the classroom. Also, they all are looking to be positive, open-minded, and accepting; moreover, a new culture can be accepted by not setting yourself up, and language contributes to adapting across cultures to create mutual understanding, as well as to build relations with local people. Also, choosing a friend from various groups in different activities is necessary to exchange opinions with each other in the target society.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, Adaptation, EFL

## 1. Introduction

In the era of social globalization, making the world connected has rapidly influenced economic, social, political, environmental, and technological dimensions (Dreher, Gaston, & Martens, 2008). Culture is specifically accounted as another dimension in effect, leading to a reposition once people encounter socio-cultural differences and diversities. One must study and digest such differences to be able to cope with and respond to various social changes effectively based on what they are familiar with and has learned. Most importantly, "communication" is considered an essential tool that allows people to understand each other better (Dziegielewski, 2003); therefore, everyone needs to understand intercultural communication.

Cultural differences arise in many ways. That is to say, anybody travelling abroad, whether temporarily or permanently, for a career, education, or marriage, needs to accept different cultural norms. The norms are formed from that society and culture through a learning process and fall in a duct of social behaviour in which the person has to live within a comparatively different culture. Perceptions, concepts, and practices based on the acquired knowledge cannot be applied to all cultures (Sackmann, 1992). Therefore, people must not only find a way to learn it, but they must attempt to be matched, making themselves comfortable with other communities, to be fitted with the social and cultural norms and practices in the new environment under enculturation and be able to associate with and survive in other societies.

Regarding the cross-cultural adaptation of people who have to live in a new environment, the study by McAdams and Pals (2006), found that adaptation is a characteristic in every person; moreover. Due to the changes occurring in the surroundings, people have to learn how to adapt to that society. If no adaptation happens, it will inevitably cause mental and emotional anxiety and tension, which will also affect communication.

It is observed that many people are travelling abroad; therefore, this study investigated the cultural adaptation process in Thai overseas university students. Most importantly, the main focus of the study was on the process of cross-cultural adaptation. As a result, a person will be exposed to unfamiliar features, stresses, and pressures stimulating them to detect a solution effective in diminishing the stresses. To cope with the stress, as well as to survive in society, this adaptation process involves communication, which is considered one of the tools that allow a person to adapt to the social culture of the new environment (Kim, 2000). Roy's concept (1988), revealed that there are three steps in the process of adaptation: the process of cultural assimilation resulting from both parties having to adopt each other's cultures. Besides, the method of cultural integration is where both parties accept but do not overwhelm each other. Also, permanent cultural integration is a full acceptance of a new culture. In addition to the above studies, this study also underpins the causes and problems influenced by cross-cultural adaptation, as well as factors influencing their intercultural competence when encountering their problems of studying English in China. Therefore, it needs to investigate the impact of studying English at Yu'Xi Normal University, China PR. on the intercultural competence of Thai university students.

### *1.1 Research Objectives*

1. To investigate Thai university students' communication and cultural differences while studying English in China
2. To investigate the problems in the cross-cultural adaptation of Thai university students while studying English in China
3. To investigate the factors influencing the intercultural competence of Thai university students while studying English in China

### *1.2 Research Questions*

1. What are the communication and cultural differences between Thai university students facing the impact of studying English in China?
2. What are the main problems of Thai university students' cross-cultural adaptation reflected in their intercultural competence?
3. What are the factors reflected in successful cross-cultural adaptation?

## **2. Research Methodology**

### *2.1 Research Model*

As both quantitative and qualitative research, this research model was based on a survey. The research methodology for collecting data was as follows:

- In terms of the primary data collection, a questionnaire was used to explore the Thai university students' communication and cultural differences, problems of their cross-cultural adaptation, as well as factors influencing the Thai university students' intercultural competence while studying English in China.

- In terms of secondary data collection, all reviewed books, academic papers, theses, and other related research materials were used.

### *2.2 Samples Used in the Study*

A sample of 30 Thai university students studying an English Program at the School of Foreign Languages, Yu' Xi Normal University, China PR were selected by the purposive sampling technique.

### *2.3 Research Instruments*

In this study, a structured questionnaire used for data collection was divided into three major parts: Part 1: Demographical information related to gender, age, nationality, religion, and length of stay in a foreign country. Part 2: The attitudes towards adapting to cultures when encountering some problems during studying English in China PR. and dealing with the cross-cultural adaptations and Part 3: The factors influencing the Thai university students' intercultural competence when encountering some problems in cross-cultural adaptation in Yu' Xi Normal University, China PR.

### *2.4 Research Instrumentation*

First, as preliminary information, the related documents including research academic papers, theses, term papers, and articles in the cross-cultural adaptation area are used in the study for formulating the concept paper which was all reviewed for constructing a structured questionnaire. Besides, the scope of this study involved the Thai university students' communication and cultural differences together with their problems in cross-cultural adaptation, as well as factors influencing their intercultural competence while studying English in China. In terms of constructing a questionnaire, the questions in the structured questionnaire were all validated for accuracy and content analysis. Then, they were subsequently approved by 4 educational experts and 2 language specialists. An evaluation checklist of IOC of more than 0.50 (Index of Item Objective Congruence) on English communication, which was rated at 0.60-1.00, was testified. Finally, the approved questions were all applied across the Thai university students as a non-target group studying English at Yu' Xi Normal University, China PR.

### *2.5 Data Collection Procedures*

1. An advisor was requested to check the academic validity and accuracy of the approved questionnaire, consistent with the respondents' content analysis.
2. The Institute for Study Abroad was directly contacted to ask Thai university students for their cooperation in completing the questionnaire.
3. The approved questionnaires were all submitted to the Institute for Study Abroad to ask for their cooperation in answering the questionnaire. Collecting the questionnaire lasted for two weeks.
4. All the data taken from all the questionnaires were finally applied across the Thai university students as a target group to collect the data.

### *2.6 Data Analysis Procedures*

All of the approved structured questionnaires were completed with Thai university students as the target group studying English in China. The compilation was divided into three parts: the first part of the questionnaire was used for their demographical information. The second and third parts of the questionnaire were all carried out to analyze the qualitative data. Finally, all the qualitative data was analyzed and summarized.

**3. Results of the Study**

The results of the study of the impact of studying English in China on Thai university students’ intercultural competence are detailed as follows:

**Part 1. Demographical information**

Table 1. Demographical information of Thai university students studying an English Program at the School of Foreign Languages, Yu’ Xi Normal University, China PR

Demographical Information	Number of Thai University Students (30)	
	N	%
<b>1) Gender</b>		
Male	18	60
Female	12	40
<b>2) Age</b>		
15 to 22-year-old	22	73.33
28 years and over	8	26.67
<b>3) Residency Length</b>		
Teaching Style	9	30
Language Barrier	7	23.33
Assertiveness	5	16.67
Cross-Cultural Attitudes	4	13.33
Accustom	3	10
Adapt A New Environmental Culture	2	6.67

Table 1, in terms of gender, it indicated that they could adapt to a new culture. In other words, the males (60%) met new issues which were amusing and challenging to learn; moreover, they were able to think positively. On the other hand, the females (40%) had different attitudes when encountering problems, while they were able to think positively as well, they attempted to fit themselves into a new perspective.

In terms of age, it illustrated that 15 to 22-year-old (73.33%) participants were able to accept learning a different atmosphere and language factors to improve their attitudes towards cross-cultural adaptation. Moreover, they were able to embrace new matched features, while they did not block themselves against different cultures. However, the way to adjust is Choosing foreign friends the age group of 28 years and over (26.67%) had a more in-depth interpretation of the problems and obstacles.

In terms of residency length, it represented that spending time in China assisted them to adapt to new social societies. In the initial stages, it needed to be matched with teaching styles (9%) that were different from Thai; to overcome the language barriers (23.33%) in communication; assertiveness (16.67%), to be matched with cross-cultural attitudes (13.33%) to accept foreigners’ frank opinions; to be accustomed (10%), as well as to adapt a new environmental culture (6.67%).

**Part 2. Results of the study on the Thai university students’ cross-cultural adaptation reflecting on their intercultural competence when encountering problems while studying English in China**

The second part of the study revealed that most of the participants faced problems when living abroad as they did not adjust themselves to China while studying English in China. More specifically, in responses to the respondents’ arguments, it indicated that most Thai university students often paid their respects to people’s choices. Most importantly, they might be in an Asian relationship, particularly in Vietnam and Thailand; moreover, it would be easier for them to get along with their Chinese counterparts and foreigners. That was to say, the golden-haired people only dated golden-haired partners, resulting in a clear division of the group. In addition, meeting the stereotypes of Chinese people was mostly found when the teacher asked for groups or pairs, while the work was often judged by roommates.

In terms of the foreigners’ and negative attitudes towards Asians, it was observed that an inferior country was occupied when they come together. Most Thai university students tended to join together with the same ethnicity. On the other hand, most westerners would like to be united together with the same style, leading to a distinguished separation in class when a teacher did a group report or a pair report whereas people sometimes judged their stereotypes. For example, Chinese nationals reported not understanding each other well because of different societies within China. The problem in the Thai university students’ interpersonal communication was as much that it sometimes became a bias which made it impossible to be open-minded in learning new cultures.

In terms of the Thai university students’ communication behaviours and difficulties in cultural differences, it indicated that most Thai university students were considerate, not assertive, or dared to express their opinions honestly apart from the Chinese counterparts’ essential characteristics of being thoughtful and outspoken. On the other hand, the characteristics of Thai people were delicate and spoke cautiously understanding the Chinese people’s characteristics and adapting to their straight speaking behavior. More profoundly, the respondents’ statements were assertive to be very considerate and rarely dare to express their opinions. They did not understand the basic habits of the Chinese people speaking with Thais counterparts frankly as Thai people might be more sensitive to this matter.

In terms of the problems of studying English in China PR., it was found that a barrier to learning was the Chinese lecturer’ different

teaching styles. The Chinese counterparts concentrated on understanding and discussing in their communities, on the other hand, Thai people, meeting a new environment and a new school, would not be familiar with such a teaching style. This caused them embarrassed, indolent, and scared of being wrong. It was a behavioural trait that was different from the characteristics of Chinese university students not being afraid of wrong answers and being eager to answer questions. Also, barriers to the selection of Thai university students' oversea studying purposes were all shifted for fitting their lifestyles in their place to live. In this issue, the respondents commented that the main obstacle in the early stages of learning was the different teaching methods, because teachers in Thailand mainly focus on more detailed explanations and lots of information during their lectures, while teachers in China emphasized taking tests and academic assignments. The students were not familiar with the environment at the first, feeling a little embarrassed and did not desire to express any opinion due to fear of being wrong. Moreover, when they did not understand the lesson, they might raise their hands and it could be answered enthusiastically. It was difficult in the first semester due to the different teaching styles that they were not used to.

In terms of the problems in communication abilities, it showed that language differences were the main barrier to which almost all respondents answered the same. As language is a communication tool, whether between friends or in various class activities or routine daily life, when people live in different cultures, knowledge of the English and Chinese languages could be a communication tool fostering mutual understanding in different cultures. Although the students were able to communicate and talk to each other, it was not easy to make friends in such a new environment. Any aspect of the ethnic group has its limitations, when there was a group of people who could feel a part of an ethnic society. they would eventually be attracted to that society to be adjusted. Another barrier to communication in different cultures is a misinterpretation of non-verbal communication such as Thai people's smiling and many more. According to the respondents' arguments, it was stated that the most common problem at first was the difficulty in language communication (English and Chinese) even though different cultures could still communicate and understand each other. Sometimes, they did not dare to communicate in English with their Chinese counterparts and foreigners due to being afraid of doing wrong.

In conclusion, for the first research question, it was detected that Thai university students' misinterpretation mostly occurred in their cross-cultural adaptation. As one of the results of this study, the attitudes of the foreign and Thai university students in their communication, with respect to cultural differences, illustrated that it was too difficult for them to access their Chinese or foreign counterparts, to be able to adjust themselves. In other words, their personality differences sometimes made it difficult to study, it was socializing and getting into their Chinese counterparts' way of life because they did not understand some different behaviours from what they had learned. Finally, the issue of communicative incompetence focused on the language which is a medium of communication, as a barrier. The most significant effect occurred in cross-cultural adaptation due to the inability to communicate with the Chinese counterparts in English. Furthermore, some Chinese behaviours were never learned. If there was no tool, it helped them to understand their communication in English with each other. Also, adaptation to Chinese society and local Chinese people would be difficult.

### **Part 3. Results of the study related to Thai university students' cross-cultural adaptation while studying English in China PR.**

In the third part of the study, it indicated that the cross-cultural adaptation approach in this study consisted of two main aspects, namely their attitude. Firstly, language that affected their communication in daily life, as well as their socialization, contributed to improving cross-cultural adaptation in the aspect of their attitudes towards intercultural competence while studying English in China. It was a guideline for transforming before going abroad for education.

Looking for information about China would help prepare them to encounter some issues in all aspects while living in a new place. Thirdly, being optimistic, encouraging yourself, being patient, setting goals, and not daring to think we're in high frequency while studying English in China. Instead, attempting to meet the advantages and disadvantages of culture, while being open-minded to cultural diversities and accepting of new features without limiting themselves or being independent, as well as taking into account the cultural differences, were all results from the ability in adapting to a new culture. According to the respondents' statements, it indicated that studying the culture of that country well before going abroad for education; being open-minded to accepting new features and ethnical differences all resulted in Chinese acceptance. Therefore, the following were found to be successful: attempting to understand different cultures along with adjusting to the Chinese people's attitudes, developing a personality to be accepted without any constraint or holding themselves limited to a certain location, being optimistic, as well as a necessity of learning wrongs and rights. In terms of the Thai university students' language factors influencing their cross-cultural adaptation, the respondents commented that living in a foreign country required an adjustment to friends, living, eating, and socializing with foreigners which could not occur in Thai people because they do not usually use English to communicate with the Chinese counterparts. Most importantly, language is considered fundamental in their social interaction, by which they can understand other nations' cultures. It might mean a wrong way of communication if speaking or listening is applied improperly. Therefore, most of them attempted to do activities together with local people; moreover, they usually cooked food, played sports, and went camping together. Also, helping to exchange cultures with each other, making more foreign friends, as well as absorbing the Chinese culture and personality of each nation well were all needed in adjustment.

Therefore, it has been concluded that language factors were the most conducive to cross-cultural adaptation in the early stages of studying. Even though they had furnished themselves with the target language knowledge, they still encountered some language issues once they stepped into the class and started living in the society which was additional to an adaptation of their style. However, most Thai university students might have a lot of discussions to exchange their opinions with their Chinese counterparts to attempt to adjust as quickly as possible. In Chinese society, there was a wide variety of ethnicities. Learning English and Chinese languages used in their social interaction would be a part that helped them to understand individuals, communities and cultures due to a better understanding of

the differences in their Chinese counterparts' perspectives. Thus, the way to adjust is to learn the Chinese and English languages as quickly as possible. Furthermore, they were able to build good human relations, accept different personalities, choosing to be friends with various groups without sticking to each other. Unfortunately, many people with the same nationality would have no language improvements, but they attempted to use only their mother tongue and rarely learned new cultures. Also, acquiring new experiences for following the Chinese people to get acquainted could easily lead to living abroad, but they did not forget to keep learning about other cultures and to choose what to do on some occasions, such as humility and respect for adults.

In conclusion, according to the third research question, it was found that there were two essential factors: attitudes and languages that facilitated their cross-cultural adaptation directly leading to intercultural competence while studying English in China. More profoundly, most Thai university students often emphasized changing their perspective by being open-minded and accepting new cultures, not sticking to the same ones, as well as keeping themselves in a proper space and ready to adapt to a new culture although there was a lack of understanding of those cultures at first. In terms of language factors, it was stated that it was an essential tool for communication to learn and understand the culture. All of them endeavoured to improve English and Chinese language proficiency through language activities together with Chinese and foreign friends at the same time, using various activities in getting to know more and create a group of friends for the benefit of cross-cultural adaptation.

#### 4. Discussion

The results of the study revealed that most Thai university students faced language problems causing them to be unable to communicate in English with Chinese counterparts with a lack of tools facilitated to help them to understand each other. It was an obstacle to harmonizing with the Chinese culture and local Chinese people. That was to say, language factors were conducive to their cross-cultural adaptation to various cultures. This was consistent with Gudykunst's and Hammer's research (1988) which proposed eight factors influencing cultural transformation: the support, structure, and acceptance of the host society, association with each other to prejudice against ethnic groups and cultures, intercultural consensus, the proximity between cultures and ability to use the local language. According to Kim and Gudykunst (2005), insisted that the cause of transformation was an essential factor affecting the communication process because it was a channel through which learning could be achieved; moreover, understanding the different symbolized cultures in that society was needed, so most of them tried to deal with such problems by choosing English activities together with Chinese and foreign counterparts to have a variety of friends. Finally, creating English-speaking environments was also an action for learning dialects as quickly as possible.

#### 5. Recommendations for Further Studies

1. In terms of residency length, there should be a detailed study on how the residency period affects cross-cultural adaptation in a fresh immigrant. It may be studied based on Kim and Gudykunst's theory of cross-cultural adaptation (2005) into a new culture and the influence of different demographical elements on cross-cultural adaptation.
2. There should be more investigation into additional cases in different groups studying English in China when encountering problems in different aspects.
3. This study should be further investigated by generalizing it to different organizations and workplaces, not limited to Thai university students studying different languages as a communication tool in China, which affects different communicative competencies in terms of intercultural communicative competence, intercultural communication strategies, as well as factors influencing intercultural adaptation competence.

#### 6. Conclusion

It was concluded that the negative attitudes of Thai university students to Asians, caused a separation between Thai and Chinese groups due to the behavioural characteristics of Thai people concerned about speaking straightforwardly, as it directly affected communication in daily life and the classroom activities of the society members. Demographically, there was no significant difference in adaptation between males and females in the target sample in terms of gender, age, and residency length. It was, while language illustrated a significant role in creating mutual understanding in relations with the local people, school activities play a critical fruitful role through making friends and sharing or exchanging ideas.

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