



Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA) among BA and MA Students

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APA Citation:

Rimkeeratikul, S. (2024). Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA) among BA and MA Students. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 17(2), 638-654.

Received
09/03/2024

Received in revised form
10/05/2024

Accepted
05/06/2024

ABSTRACT

The research was conducted at a public university in Bangkok, utilizing the Personal Report on Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA) to measure Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA). The study aimed to compare the ICA levels among three groups of students within the same university: bachelor's degree students majoring in Business Administration, MA students majoring in English, and MA students majoring in Political Science. All classes were held on the same campus. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to analyze the differences in anxiety levels among these groups. The findings indicated that undergraduate students exhibited higher levels of ICA compared to the MA students from different majors. These results provide valuable insights for EFL teachers and the administration, enabling them to develop strategies to reduce student anxiety. This, in turn, could help ensure that intercultural communication does not become a barrier to societal development in the era of globalization.

Keywords: anxiety, EFL, intercultural communication, university students

Introduction

Intercultural communication has become increasingly important for Thai people working in multinational organizations, as well as those with smaller companies interacting with international individuals. Among Thai people in daily life, the language used most of the time is Thai. However, most of those who deal with people from another country have to use English, since it is considered a lingua franca in Thailand. But the English language (L2) itself can possibly be an obstacle to communication in international settings, as can inner feelings, such as anxiety.

English is taught in schools throughout Thailand, but many students rarely use the language outside the classroom. Some people recognize the importance of English for their own lives and particularly for their children's futures. Consequently, the Thai educational system primarily offers two types of teaching/learning methods, distinguished by the language used as the medium of instruction in the classroom: (1) Thai is used as the medium of instruction in regular programs, or Thai programs (non-EMI); (2) English is used as the medium of instruction (EMI) in international programs and English programs.

There are various major subjects and levels offered for individuals to choose to pursue in educational institutions, especially at the tertiary level, including the public university in the current study. Understanding how students feel when communicating with people from different cultures can be invaluable for teachers and students of subjects related to intercultural communication, especially English language subjects, which is also considered a foreign language (EFL) in Thailand. Insights gleaned from this research could serve as valuable guidance for university educators in tailoring courses, teaching methodologies, and extracurricular activities aimed at better accommodating students, thereby preparing them to communicate confidently with foreigners in English, minimizing fear and anxiety. This not only facilitates students' professional advancement post-graduation but also enhances the overall quality of human resources across various disciplines and academic levels. By addressing students' apprehensions and fostering a relaxed environment for English communication with foreigners, the country stands to gain significant benefits, spanning economic growth and social development.

When English as a foreign language (EFL) is taught to students with the varieties of skills, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking in the university, one of the main purposes is to equip the students to be capable of using English to communicate with people from foreign countries with different cultures effectively when they graduate from university and enter the job market.

Within the university setting, a diverse array of students enroll across various faculties and educational tiers, spanning bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. programs. Irrespective of their discipline, all students are required to engage with English language studies. However, the specifics and quantity of English courses vary among different academic levels.

While some students exhibit a genuine enthusiasm for English studies, opting to major in the subject, others find themselves compelled to undertake English courses as mandatory components of their curriculum. This discrepancy can probably lead to apprehension among certain students, hindering their willingness to engage in communication with foreigners using English. Thus, the present research endeavors to explore whether students across varying disciplines and academic levels experience divergent levels of fear or anxiety when communicating, or anticipating communication, with individuals from culturally dissimilar backgrounds.

Research Objective

The objective of this current study is as follows:

- To investigate the ICA of students at the university level, especially among students who are studying in different disciplines or majors.

Research Question

The current research study is guided by the following research question.

- Do students at different levels (MA and BA) and with different majors experience varying levels of anxiety when communicating with people from different cultures?

Literature Review

The framework of this study focuses on the concept of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA), its causes, its effects, and factors or elements that can help reduce ICA. As a result, the literature review was done accordingly.

Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA)

ICA is a negative inner feeling occurring with an individual in communication with an individual or individuals from another culture, which leads to some negative communication outcomes. It is anxiety which

is associated with real or anticipated communication with another person or people from perceived or real different cultures. Neuliep and McCroskey (1997) define ICA as “the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated interaction with people from different groups, especially cultural or ethnic groups” (p. 147).

ICA is considered another dimension of communication apprehension (CA), which has been primarily studied in four dimensions of human communication, namely dyadic conversations, group discussions, meetings, and public speaking (Samochowiec & Florack, 2010). However, Communication Apprehension (CA) is measured by the PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 2006), while Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA) is measured by the PRICA (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997) (see Appendix).

Causes of ICA

Individuals feel more comfortable when they communicate with people of the same culture (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001). In terms of communicating across cultures, individuals must expose themselves to unfamiliar communication situations, as each culture has its own characteristics. Differences in cultural characteristics can heighten anxiety in cross-cultural communication (Croucher et al., 2015). Uncertainty when communicating with someone from another culture can lead to intercultural communication apprehension, both for individuals actually in the situation and those merely imagining being in such a communication scenario (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997).

Ethnocentrism is considered to be another cause of ICA (Gudykunst, 2005). When individuals exhibit ethnocentrism, they are reluctant to communicate or interact with those from different cultures, leading to heightened uncertainty and anxiety when they do engage in cross-cultural communication.

A deficiency in English language skills is considered a significant obstacle to interacting with people from different cultures (Dawish, 2015; Rivas et al., 2019). That is, language deficiency is a factor increasing ICA.

Effects of ICA

ICA is considered to be a factor impeding individuals from cultural understanding and adaptation (Shuya, 2007; Swagler & Ellis 2003) while, at

the same time, cultural understanding and adaptation are considered factors reducing ICA (Chen, 2010).

ICA is also negatively associated with a willingness to communicate or WTC (Lin & Rancer, 2003). That is, individuals with high ICA have less willingness to communicate (WTC) with others, especially with those who are from another culture. When they avoid interacting with people from different cultures, they lack cross-cultural communication skills, reducing their opportunities to decrease ICA. As a result, they often maintain high levels of ICA.

Hence, ICA reduction is crucial because it makes individuals more willing to communicate with people from outside their comfort zone, which can help alleviate stress and enable individuals to communicate more effectively with people from different cultures. Such improved communication skills can be highly beneficial for the organizations they are involved with or working for.

Elements or Factors Reducing ICA

Individuals possess varying degrees of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA) due to differences in the elements involved or inherent within them. This section provides insights regarding factors identified to diminish ICA in individuals.

Understanding that people from different cultures have different mindsets can help individuals adjust themselves when they engage in communication across cultures. Chen (2010) posited that individuals with an understanding of cultural differences can easily adapt themselves in intercultural communication. Both English language proficiency and cultural sensitivity, or the ability to understand other cultures, have been found to influence the reduction of individuals' ICA (van Essen, 2020). Jacobi (2020) also suggested that exposure to interactions with diverse cultures can help reduce ICA. In addition, perceived similarity between the communicator and the interlocutor has been found to reduce ICA (Neuliep, 2012).

Moreover, Duran (1983) confirmed that individuals' communicative adaptability can help them in ICA reduction. Communication adaptability refers to "the ability to perceive socio-interpersonal relationships and adapt one's interaction goals and behaviors accordingly" (Duran, 1983, p. 320). Duran (1992) has divided communicative adaptability into five elements: (1) social experience, (2) social composure, (3) social confirmation, (4) appropriate disclosure, and (5) wit. Hocker and Wilmot (1985) also revealed that individuals with greater adaptability are more likely to succeed in reaching those goals through social, relational, and contextual adaptation.

Therefore, the more adaptable one is, the more goals they may achieve, including in communication with those from different cultures.

Relevant Previous Studies

In their study on general human communication, Howe and Cionea (2021) examined individuals who exhibit perceived communication competence alongside communication apprehension (CA). They discovered that, despite their perceived competence, these individuals may not experience positive outcomes in their willingness to communicate, as feelings of nervousness serve as a hindrance, negating the positive effects of self-perceived communication competence. However, recently, in terms of intercultural communication, Wang and Cionea (2024) found that the negative effects of intercultural communication apprehension (ICA) can be reduced by self-perceived intercultural communication competence.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The current research adopts a quantitative approach. Regarding the educational levels and types of students in the current study, the participants were university students studying in the following majors and levels of education in a public university: (1) MA in English, referring to an MA program categorized as an international program using the English language as the medium of instruction (EMI); (2) MA in Political Science, referring to an MA program using the Thai language as the medium of instruction (non-EMI); and (3) BA in Business Administration, referring to a BA program using the Thai language as the medium of instruction (non-EMI). All three types of students were studying at the same public university in Bangkok, Thailand. The main research instrument used to measure ICA was the Personal Report on Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA) (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997) (See Appendix).

Data Collection

In this study, the data was collected via the purposive and convenience sampling method. A digital questionnaire was sent as a Google Form to (1) first-year MA students majoring in English in an international program at the university in the study (EMI) ($N = 43$); (2) first-year MA students majoring in Political Science (non-EMI) ($N = 30$); and (3) third-year students in a bachelor's degree program in Business Administration

(non-EMI) at the university in the study ($N = 50$). The questionnaire link was distributed to the LINE group of students in each category following the completion of the three distinct English courses during the first semester of the 2022 academic year.

The number of the returned questionnaires from students across the three categories was 74, representing a 60.16% response rate. The average age of the BA students was 19 years old, while the average age of the MA students of the two different programs of study was 27-28 years old, with a few years of working experience.

The breakdown of the returned questionnaires is as follows: (1) first-year MA students majoring in English ($n = 24$) (response rate = 55.8%); (2) first-year MA students majoring in Political Science ($n = 28$) (response rate = 93.3%); and (3) third-year BA students majoring in Business Administration ($n = 22$) (response rate = 44%). All in all, the response rate of all sample categories in this current research study is acceptable. According to Wu, Zhao, and Fils-Aime (2022), the average response rate of the online questionnaire in the education-related field is 44%.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed after the questionnaires were returned. The first step in the data analysis was to calculate the scores of ICA and find the mean score for each group of the students in the study. After that, one-way ANOVA was utilized to compare the mean scores of the students of the three groups.

Research Results

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine if the three types of students at the same public university have different ICA or not.

Table 1 shows that among the respondents from the two MA programs and the BA program (74 students in total), the majority (67.6%) have moderate ICA, while a smaller portion (24.3%) were found to have low ICA. Only 8.1% of the respondents were found to have high ICA.

Table 1

Levels of ICA among the Different Types of Students

Level of ICA	Frequency (<i>N</i>)	%	Cumulative Percentage
Low (<32 scores)	18	24.3	24.3
Moderate (32-52)	50	67.6	91.9
High (>52)	6	8.1	100.0
Total	74	100.0	

Table 2 provides information regarding ICA in the form of descriptive statistics. It reveals that the undergraduate students were found to have the highest ICA ($M = 44.73$, $SD = 6.88$), while students pursuing an MA in English had the lowest ($M = 36.00$, $SD = 11.66$).

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of ICA

Student Type	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower boundary	Upper boundary		
Undergraduate	22	44.73	6.88	1.47	41.68	47.78	35.00	56.00
MA in English	24	36.00	11.66	2.38	31.08	40.93	21.00	67.00
MA in Political Science	28	37.68	8.05	1.52	34.56	40.80	18.00	52.00
Total	74	39.23	9.69	1.13	36.99	41.47	18.00	67.00

Table 3 shows a significant effect of student types in regard to anxiety when communicating with people from different cultures at the $p \leq .05$ level for the three groups [$F(2, 71) = 5.94$, $p = 0.004$].

Table 3

ANOVA Test

ICA	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Between groups	982.624	2	491.312	5.942	.004*
Within groups	5870.471	71	82.683		
Total	6853.095	73			

* $p \leq .05$

After the ANOVA test revealed a significant difference between at least one pair of student types, the next step was to test for homogeneity of variance. To determine whether the variances of the three groups of university students were equal, Levene’s test was applied.

Table 4 reveals that, from the Levene’s test, the equality of the variance of the students from three different majors and levels of education was not assumed.

Table 4

Test of Homogeneity of Variance

Levene’s Test

Levene statistic	Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
3.299	982.624	2	71	.043*

*p≤.05

As a result of the Levene’s test, the subsequent post hoc test for multiple comparisons, Dunnett’s T3 was deemed appropriate (see Table 5).

Table 5 shows the results of the post hoc test for the multiple comparison. At this stage, Dunnett’s T3 test indicated that the ICA mean score for BA students in Business Administration ($M = 44.73$, $SD = 6.88$) was significantly different from the ICA mean score of MA English major students ($M = 36.00$, $SD = 11.66$), and it also was significantly different from that of the MA in Political Science students ($M = 37.68$, $SD = 8.05$). However, the ICA mean score of MA English major students ($M = 36.00$, $SD = 11.66$), was not found significantly different from that of the MA in Political Science students ($M = 37.68$, $SD = 8.05$).

Table 5

Post Hoc Tests

		95% Confidence Interval					
Students	Students	Mean difference	SE	Sig	Lower boundary	Upper boundary	
BA Business Administration	MA English	8.72727	2.79559	.010*	1.7563	15.6982	
	MA Political Science	7.04870	2.11359	.005*	1.8256	12.2718	

MA English	BA Business Administration	-8.72727	2.79559	.010*	-15.4379	-1.7563
	MA Political Science	-1.67857	2.82454	.910	-8.7052	5.3481
MA Political Science	BA Business Administration	-7.04870	2.11359	.005*	-12.2718	-.5714
	MA English	1.67857	2.82454	.910	-5.3481	8.7052

*p≤.05

Conclusion and Discussion

Conclusion

Referring to the research question that guided this research study, the research results revealed that among the students of various levels and major subjects of study, the bachelor's degree students studying Business Administration were found to have higher intercultural communication apprehension (ICA) when compared to MA students in Political Science and MA students studying English at the same public university in Bangkok, Thailand. However, there was no statistically significant difference in ICA scores between the two MA programs.

Discussion

First of all, the research results of the current research study might be due to the fact that the undergraduate students of Business Administration in the current study are in a non-EMI program, where every subject, including the English language subject, is taught using the Thai language (L1) as the medium of instruction. Therefore, they do not have much chance, if any, to use the English language in their daily life activities. Moreover, they may not perceive a necessity to prepare for interactions with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. They may observe that graduates from similar programs can excel by capitalizing on their business acumen, such as accounting skills, in organizations where robust intercultural communication abilities are not essential. This perception might result in insufficient exposure to English language practice, leading to lower confidence in English communication compared to other students in the study, particularly MA students specializing in English.

Next, the research results show that MA students majoring in English had the lowest ICA mean score ($M = 36.00$, $SD = 11.66$) among all types of the students in the study, which is significantly different from the undergraduate students' ICA. This may be due to their higher English proficiency, as their major is English and the medium of instruction in the MA in English program is English. Proficiency in the English language has

been shown to reduce individual ICA (van Essen, 2020). Furthermore, as language students, they are likely to have a better understanding of culture than other students in the study. This is because, as many scholars have noted and is widely accepted, culture is intertwined with language, and language is a reflection of culture. Their greater understanding of cultures may enable them to adapt themselves to the communication across cultures more easily, which leads them to have lower ICA (Chen, 2010).

Regarding the higher ICA found in undergraduate students when compared to MA students in Political Science, it is possible that the latter had work experience in which they met people from diverse cultural backgrounds. These professional experiences may have facilitated their ability to adapt to people from various cultural contexts. While they predominantly utilize the Thai language in their work environments, the daily accumulation of such experiences likely enhances their adaptability and flexibility in cross-cultural communication. This aligns with Duran's (1983) assertion that communicative adaptability can mitigate feelings of ICA.

An essential takeaway from this research is that, despite BA students in a non-EMI program exhibiting the highest ICA scores among the university's MA programs, the average ICA score of BA students still falls within the moderate range ($M = 44.73$, $SD = 6.88$). This suggests that, on average, students across various disciplines and educational levels in this study do not experience significant anxiety when communicating with individuals perceived to be from different cultures.

Implications and Pedagogy

People today have more opportunities to work and live in a globalized environment, which necessitates effective communication with people from different cultures. By addressing and reducing their fears and anxieties related to intercultural communication (ICA), students can navigate their professional lives more smoothly. This not only benefits individuals but also contributes to the economic growth of the country by fostering a welcoming environment for international visitors, workers, investors, and tourists.

Assessing students' levels of ICA and getting some insights into the differences among them can be valuable for educators, administrators, and university executives. Armed with this critical insight, appropriate support and resources can be deployed to assist students in managing their ICA, particularly if their levels are exceptionally high. By taking proactive measures, educational institutions can effectively equip students to navigate the complexities and embrace the opportunities of our progressively interconnected world.

To be more specific, students studying business at the undergraduate level, especially in the Thai language or a non-EMI program, at the university in the current study were not found to have excessively high ICA. Nevertheless, they can be encouraged to seek out more opportunities to interact with diverse individuals beyond the confines of the classroom. This exposure can foster greater flexibility in their communication skills, enabling them to transfer the experiences gained from extracurricular activities to adapt more readily when communicating with people from varied cultural backgrounds.

Finally, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses can be designed and crafted with the intention of helping business students increase their intercultural communication competence in addition to improving the four skills in English, which are reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Limitations

This research study was conducted exclusively with students from a single university, with the sample purposively selected. It presents an overview of ICA among three distinct student groups within this particular public university, serving as an initial exploration for a potential comparative research study on student anxiety at the university level. While the findings offer valuable insights and serve as a relevant precedent in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly concerning anxiety in cross-cultural communication, a more comprehensive understanding could have been achieved through conducting in-depth interviews, especially with participants exhibiting exceptionally high levels of ICA.

Recommendations for Further Research

The results of the current research study provide some insights into the anxiety levels students experience when communicating with individuals perceived to be from different cultures, a topic many English language teachers often address when teaching their students to communicate effectively using English. However, the ICA of students from other majors and study levels could also be explored.

Further research endeavors could also look at students across diverse majors, incorporating relevant variables such as their self-perceived intercultural competence, communicative adaptability, and intermediary behaviors in cross-cultural communication. Expanding the participant pool to encompass a broader range of majors and universities would also enhance the study's scope and depth.

Crucially, future studies could focus on developing EFL/ESP courses and materials tailored to enhance soft skills for non-EMI bachelor's degree programs in Business Administration, given their higher levels of ICA. These initiatives aim to equip students with the cognitive (knowledge and awareness) and affective (attitudes and emotions) aspects essential for intercultural communication, facilitating proper behaviors (actions) as they prepare for a dynamic and borderless business world. As Tuna and Razi (2016) suggested, designing foreign language curriculum and course syllabi should strike a balance between linguistic and cultural elements to foster intercultural communication competence (ICC) among learners. Ultimately, the holistic benefits of proficiency in cross-cultural communication, particularly in English, will accrue to our students as a whole.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful for generous, sincere, and altruistic support for academic pursuits of the Language Institute, Thammasat University. Without such support, conducting research and achieving publication would be much more challenging, or even impossible. The author also deeply appreciates the significance of institutional resources and assistance in academic advancement.

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Appendix

Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA)

This measure was developed to address communication apprehension in the intercultural context. The 14 statements below are comments frequently made by people with regard to communication with people from other cultures. Indicate how much you agree with these statements by marking a number representing your response to each statement using the following choices: **Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Neutral = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly Agree = 5.**

- _____ 1. Generally, I am comfortable interacting with a group of people from different cultures.
- _____ 2. I am tense and nervous while interacting with people from different cultures.
- _____ 3. I like to get involved in group discussion with others who are from different cultures.
- _____ 4. Engaging in a group discussion with people from different cultures makes me nervous.
- _____ 5. I am calm and relaxed with interacting with a group of people who are from different cultures.
- _____ 6. While participating in a conversation with a person from a different culture, I get nervous.
- _____ 7. I have no fear of speaking up in a conversation with a person from a different culture.
- _____ 8. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in a conversation with person from a different culture.
- _____ 9. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations with a person from a different culture.
- _____ 10. While conversing with a person from a different culture, I feel very relaxed.
- _____ 11. I am afraid to speak up in conversations with a person from a different culture.
- _____ 12. I face the prospect of interacting with people from different cultures with confidence.
- _____ 13. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when interacting with people from different cultures.
- _____ 14. Communicating with people from different cultures makes me feel uncomfortable.

Scoring: To compute the PRICA score, complete the following steps:

Step 1. Add the scores for the following items: 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, and 12

Step 2. Add the scores for the following items: 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, and 14

Step 3. Complete the following formula: $\text{PRICA score} = 42 - \text{Total from Step 1} + \text{Total from Step 2}$.

Scores can range from 14 to 70.

Scores below 32 indicate low intercultural CA.

Scores above 52 indicate high intercultural CA.

Scores ranging between 32 and 52 indicate a moderate level of intercultural CA.

Source: Neuliep, J. W., & McCroskey, J. C. (1997). The development of intercultural and interethnic communication apprehension scales. *Communication Research Reports*, 14, 385-398.