

Development of a Culturally Responsive Curriculum for English Language Learners in Higher Education

การพัฒนาหลักสูตรการสอนภาษาอังกฤษที่ตอบสนองต่อวัฒนธรรม สำหรับผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในระดับอุดมศึกษา

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ใช้วิธีการวิจัยและพัฒนา เพื่อพัฒนาและประเมินหลักสูตรที่ตอบสนองต่อวัฒนธรรมสำหรับนักศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่สอง ในระดับมหาวิทยาลัยในจังหวัดอุดรธานี การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อแก้ไขปัญหาเฉพาะของผู้เรียนหลากหลายวัฒนธรรมในภูมิภาค โดยการนูรณาการบริบทวัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่นเข้ากับมาตรฐานการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษ ระดับสากล การเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลดำเนินการผ่านแบบสอบถามประเมินความต้องการ ($n=156$) การสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างกับอาจารย์ผู้สอน ($n=12$) และการสังเกตการณ์ในห้องเรียน หลักสูตรที่พัฒนาขึ้น ได้รับการทดลองใช้เป็นเวลาสองภาคการศึกษากับนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรี 78 คน ที่มาจากหลากหลายภูมิหลังทางวัฒนธรรม วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลด้วยสถิติเชิงพรรณนา การทดสอบค่าที่ แบบอิสระและแบบจับคู่ การวิเคราะห์ความแปรปรวนร่วม และการวิเคราะห์สหสัมพันธ์ ข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพวิเคราะห์ผ่านการวิเคราะห์เชิงมือย่างเป็นระบบ

ผลการวิจัย พบว่า นักศึกษามีพัฒนาการด้านความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษเพิ่มขึ้นอย่างมีนัยสำคัญ โดยมีคะแนนเฉลี่ยเพิ่มขึ้น 22.4% ($p<.001$) และตัวชี้วัดความสามารถข้ามวัฒนธรรมที่วัดด้วยแบบสำรวจการพัฒนาข้ามวัฒนธรรม แสดงผลการพัฒนาอย่างมีนัยสำคัญ ผลการวิเคราะห์เชิงคุณภาพเพย์ให้เห็นการเพิ่มขึ้นของการมีส่วนร่วมและแรงจูงใจของนักศึกษา เมื่อการสอนนูรณาการเนื้อหาที่เกี่ยวข้องกับวัฒนธรรม การวิจัยนี้สนับสนุนวรรณกรรมเกี่ยวกับการสอนที่ตอบสนองต่อวัฒนธรรมในบริบทการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่สอง และให้กรอบแนวคิดเชิงปฏิบัติสำหรับการพัฒนาหลักสูตรในสภาพแวดล้อมการศึกษาหลากหลายวัฒนธรรมในประเทศไทยและบริบทอื่นๆ ที่มีความหลากหลายเช่นกัน

คำสำคัญ: การพัฒนาหลักสูตรภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่สอง การเรียนรู้หลากหลายวัฒนธรรม การสอนที่ตอบสนองต่อวัฒนธรรม การเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษ

Abstract

This study employed a research and development (R&D) methodology to develop and evaluate a culturally responsive curriculum for English as a Second Language (ESL) university students in Udon Thani, Thailand. It addressed the unique challenges faced by multicultural learners in the region by integrating local cultural contexts with global English learning standards. Data were collected through needs assessment surveys ($n=156$), semi-structured interviews with instructors ($n=12$), and classroom observations. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent and paired t-tests, ANCOVA, and correlation analysis, while qualitative data were examined through systematic thematic analysis. The resulting curriculum was implemented over two academic semesters with 78 undergraduate students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Results indicated significant improvements in both language proficiency scores (mean increase of 22.4%, $p<.001$) and intercultural competence metrics measured using the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Additionally, qualitative analysis revealed increased student engagement and motivation when instruction incorporated culturally relevant materials. This research contributes to the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy in ESL contexts and provides a practical framework for curriculum development in multicultural higher education settings in Thailand and similar Southeast Asian contexts. Study limitations include the single-site design and the focus on undergraduate students only, suggesting that future research should examine implementation across multiple institutions and educational levels.

Keywords: English as a Second Language Curriculum Development; Multicultural Learning; English Language Acquisition; Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

1. Introduction

The rapid globalization of higher education has transformed the demographic composition of university classrooms worldwide, with Thailand experiencing particularly significant changes in its student population. Regional universities in Thailand, especially those in strategic locations like Udon Thani, are witnessing unprecedented enrollment growth of international students from neighboring countries, including Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. This demographic shift has created increasingly multicultural learning environments that present both opportunities and challenges for English language education. Contemporary theoretical developments in culturally sustaining pedagogy emphasize not only merely affirming diverse cultures but also actively maintaining and fostering linguistic and cultural pluralism as essential components of democratic educational programming (Paris, & Alim, 2022). The emergence of Generation Z students, characterized by digital fluency and a preference for interactive learning experiences, further compounds the complexity of designing effective curricula for these diverse populations in Thai higher education contexts (Ramadhan, & Rumondang, 2023).

Despite the increasing diversity in Thai university classrooms, significant systemic problems persist in current English language teaching approaches. Research by Darasawang, & Watson Todd (2023) demonstrates that many English language teaching curricula in Thai universities continue to employ Western-centered pedagogical approaches that fail to accommodate multicultural student populations. Recent policy analysis reveals that curriculum and teaching processes remain characterized by outdated approaches focused on one-way teaching, memorization, and modular instruction rather than systematic learning approaches that encourage critical thinking and intercultural competence (Phromphithak, & Chaisorn, 2021). Additionally, contemporary

research by Sangwanglao (2024) reveals persistent challenges in Thailand's competency-based education policies, where implementation gaps between policy formulation and classroom practice continue to hinder effective multicultural education delivery. Traditional humanities curricula face particular criticism for theoretical rigidity and lack of employability-focused skills, failing to integrate the interdisciplinary, technology-enhanced, and competency-based approaches necessary to meet contemporary learner expectations (Sandra, Wijaya, & Santoso, 2020).

The consequences of this mismatch between pedagogical approach and student demographics manifest in concerning patterns of student disengagement and academic underperformance. Students consistently report feeling alienated from course content that fails to reflect their lived experiences, leading to reduced classroom participation and lower achievement levels. Studies by Kongkerd (2022) and the Ministry of Education, Thailand (2021) indicate that Western-centered approaches often result in diminished student motivation and cultural disconnection, creating additional barriers to effective language acquisition. The emphasis on Western communicative norms frequently conflicts with indigenous communication styles, further exacerbating these challenges. Current evidence demonstrates alarming patterns in language learning outcomes, with Thai university applicants scoring an average of only 28.34% in English in recent university entrance examinations (Ministry of Education, Thailand, 2024). Thailand's ranking of 54th out of 56 countries globally for English proficiency in the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook reflects what international competitiveness reports describe as "some of the world's weakest English-language skills," underscoring the severity of these educational challenges.

While the importance of developing culturally responsive curricula has been recognized internationally, research specifically addressing culturally responsive curriculum development for multicultural ESL classrooms in the Thai higher education context remains significantly limited, particularly in regional universities where student diversity is increasing most rapidly. Recent research on intercultural communicative competence implementation reveals that although the importance of intercultural language teaching is acknowledged, Thai educators often struggle to effectively incorporate culture into English learning due to a lack of instructional models facilitating students' intercultural development (Chayaprakob, & Maroha, 2023). Current approaches frequently overlook the rich linguistic and cultural resources that multilingual students bring to the classroom, treating cultural diversity as a challenge to overcome rather than an asset to leverage. This represents a critical gap in educational research and practice, as culturally responsive curricula that acknowledge and integrate students' cultural backgrounds have been demonstrated to promote both academic achievement and cultural identity maintenance.

This study aims to address this critical research gap by employing a systematic research and development approach to create and evaluate a culturally responsive curriculum specifically designed for English language learners at a public university in Udon Thani, Thailand. Its significance lies in its potential to provide evidence-based guidance for developing ESL curricula that effectively address the unique needs of multicultural student populations while respecting and incorporating their diverse cultural backgrounds. By focusing on regional university contexts where demographic changes are most pronounced, this study seeks to develop practical and implementable curriculum solutions that can bridge the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities, ultimately contributing to improved learning outcomes and enhanced intercultural competence among diverse student populations.

2. Research Objective

To identify and analyze the specific language learning needs and cultural backgrounds of multicultural ESL students in the Udon Thani higher education context for the development of a culturally responsive curriculum framework.

3. Literature Review

3.1 ESL Curriculum Development and Needs Analysis in Multicultural Contexts

Contemporary ESL curriculum development has evolved toward systematic approaches that prioritize comprehensive needs analysis as the foundation for culturally responsive programming. Research by Brown (2023) and Creswell, & Creswell (2023) demonstrates that effective ESL curricula must integrate linguistic competence assessment with cultural background analysis, particularly in higher education contexts where diverse student populations bring varying academic preparation and cultural learning preferences. This integration proves essential for developing curriculum frameworks that address both language proficiency gaps and cultural adaptation challenges simultaneously.

The systematic research and development methodology emphasized by Thompson, & Martinez (2024) provides a robust framework for investigating multicultural student needs through iterative cycles of data collection, analysis, and curriculum refinement. Studies in Thai higher education contexts reveal that traditional curriculum development approaches often fail to adequately assess the specific linguistic and cultural resources that international students from neighboring countries bring to the classroom, resulting in missed opportunities for leveraging cultural diversity as a pedagogical asset (Darasawang, & Watson Todd, 2023; Ministry of Education Thailand, 2021). This research gap directly supports the necessity of conducting a comprehensive needs analysis that examines both language learning requirements and cultural backgrounds as interconnected variables in curriculum design.

3.2 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Student Background Integration

Gay's (2021) framework of culturally responsive pedagogy provides a the theoretical foundation for systematically identifying and incorporating students' cultural knowledge and prior experiences into curriculum development. This approach is particularly relevant in multicultural ESL contexts where understanding diverse cultural backgrounds becomes essential for creating meaningful learning experiences. Ladson-Billings' (2023) extension toward culturally sustaining pedagogy further emphasizes the importance of maintaining linguistic and cultural pluralism, suggesting that effective needs analysis should examine not only what students bring to the learning environment but also how curriculum design can preserve and build upon these cultural assets.

Recent research indicates that effective culturally responsive curriculum development requires systematic attention to cultural factors that influence communication styles, learning preferences, and the development of intercultural competence (Abacioglu, Volman, & Fischer, 2020). This theoretical foundation directly informs the methodology for analyzing multicultural student populations, suggesting that a comprehensive needs assessment should examine cultural background variables alongside traditional language proficiency measures to create truly responsive curriculum frameworks.

3.3 Intercultural Competence Assessment as a Curriculum Development Tool

The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), developed by Hammer (2023) provides a validated instrument for measuring students' intercultural competence levels, providing crucial data for understanding the cultural adaptation needs of diverse student populations. Research applications in higher education indicate that IDI-based assessment can inform curriculum development by identifying specific intercultural competence gaps that should be addressed through systematic programming (Brownicity Research, 2024). This assessment approach is particularly valuable in multicultural ESL contexts where understanding students' intercultural development levels becomes essential for designing appropriate pedagogical interventions.

The theoretical grounding in Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) provides a framework for analyzing how students from different cultural backgrounds progress from monocultural to intercultural mindsets, offering valuable insights for curriculum sequencing and the selection of appropriate pedagogical approaches. This assessment dimension complements traditional language needs analysis by providing data on students' cultural adaptation requirements and their readiness for intercultural learning.

3.4 Regional Context and Multicultural Education Models

A comparative analysis of Southeast Asian multicultural education approaches reveals both opportunities and challenges specific to the Thai regional university context. Research by Park, & Wee (2022) in Malaysia, & Wei (2022) in Singapore demonstrates successful models for incorporating cultural diversity into ESL programming; yet these contexts benefit from formal multicultural education policies that do not exist in Thai regional universities. This policy gap creates unique challenges for institutions such as those in Udon Thani, where increasing international student enrollment occurs without systematic frameworks for addressing cultural and linguistic diversity (Sandra, Wijaya, & Santoso, 2020).

Recent studies on culturally responsive pedagogy in Asian contexts demonstrate that the systematic integration of cultural background analysis can enhance academic achievement across diverse student populations (Halim, Ramli, & Norawi (Eds.), 2024). However, the Thai context requires specific investigation into the cultural backgrounds and language learning needs of students from neighboring countries, as existing research has not adequately examined the unique demographic composition found in regional Thai universities. This research gap reinforces the importance of conducting context-specific needs analyses that can inform the development of culturally responsive curriculum frameworks tailored to the particular multicultural composition found in institutions serving the Greater Mekong Subregion.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a research and development methodology, which is particularly suitable for curriculum development projects that aim to create and validate educational products. The R&D cycle followed in this study consisted of four systematic phases: preliminary investigation, prototype development, implementation and formative evaluation, and summative evaluation and revision. This approach allowed for systematic development and refinement of the curriculum based on empirical evidence and stakeholder feedback.

The research integrated both quantitative and qualitative methods in a convergent mixed-methods design to provide comprehensive data on curriculum effectiveness across multiple dimensions. This methodological approach aligns with contemporary best practices in educational research, which emphasize the importance of

triangulating data sources to enhance validity and provide a nuanced understanding of complex educational phenomena (Asamoah, Ofori-Dwumfuo, & Opoku, 2023). Quantitative methods were employed to measure language proficiency outcomes and student perceptions through standardized assessments and validated surveys. Qualitative methods provided deeper insights into implementation processes and cultural integration aspects through interviews, observations, and reflective journaling.

4.2 Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at Rajabhat Udonthani University, a public institution in Udon Thani, Thailand, serving approximately 12,000 students, including a growing population of international students primarily from Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. The university offers undergraduate and graduate programs across various disciplines, with English language courses required for all undergraduate students.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure representation of diverse cultural backgrounds and language proficiency levels across different phases of the study. The sampling strategy was designed to capture the demographic diversity characteristic of regional Thai universities, where multicultural student populations are rapidly expanding due to increased regional mobility and educational cooperation initiatives (Sandra, Wijaya, & Santoso, 2020).

The needs assessment phase included 156 undergraduate students representing five distinct cultural groups: 78 Thai students, 42 Laotian students, 18 Vietnamese students, 12 Cambodian students, and 6 Myanmar students. Additionally, 12 ESL instructors with varying levels of multicultural teaching experience participated in this phase. These instructors were selected based on their experience teaching multicultural classes and their willingness to participate in curriculum development activities. All participating instructors held appropriate qualifications in ESL teaching, with experience ranging from 3 to 15 years.

During the curriculum implementation phase, 78 second-year undergraduate students participated, with 39 assigned to the experimental group and 39 to the control group. The demographic composition of this implementation group reflected the diversity of the broader university population, with proportional representation from each cultural background. Random assignment to experimental and control groups was conducted using stratified randomization to ensure cultural balance across groups. Six experienced ESL instructors implemented the curriculum across both experimental and control groups, ensuring consistency in instructional delivery while maintaining the integrity of the experimental design.

4.3 Instruments and Data Collection

Multiple instruments were utilized throughout the research and development process to ensure comprehensive and reliable data collection, aligning with contemporary mixed-methods research standards in educational curriculum development (Estaji, & Kogani, 2024).

A comprehensive needs assessment survey was developed based on established frameworks for ESL learner analysis and was validated by a panel of five experts in ESL curriculum development and multicultural education. This survey included both closed and open-ended questions designed to gather data on language learning needs, cultural backgrounds, learning preferences, and perceived challenges in ESL learning. The survey was pilot-tested with 25 students who were not included in the main study and achieved satisfactory reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.84. In general, Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 indicate acceptable reliability, whereas values above 0.80 indicate good reliability.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ESL instructors to explore their perspectives on multicultural teaching, current curriculum challenges, and potential cultural integration strategies. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was audio-recorded with explicit permission from participants. The interview protocol was developed based on culturally responsive teaching frameworks and pilot-tested with two instructors not included in the main study. All interviews were conducted in Thai or English based on participant preference and were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Classroom observations were conducted using a structured observation protocol adapted from Powell, Cantrell, Malo-Juvera, & Correll (2023) Culturally Responsive Teaching Observation Instrument, which was further enhanced with elements from contemporary multicultural pedagogy assessment tools (Rychly, & Graves, 2012). This protocol documented teaching practices, student engagement patterns, and cultural dimensions across 48 ESL classroom sessions: 24 sessions before curriculum implementation and 24 sessions during implementation. Each observation session lasted 90 minutes and was conducted by trained observers using standardized forms. Inter-rater reliability was established through dual observations of 20% of sessions, achieving a kappa coefficient of 0.82. Kappa values 0.61-0.80 indicate substantial agreement, above 0.81 indicate almost perfect agreement.

Language proficiency was assessed using standardized tests aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) standards, specifically adapted for Southeast Asian learners. These assessments measured students' skills across four skill areas: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The assessment instruments demonstrated strong reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89. Pre-tests were administered two weeks before curriculum implementation, and post-tests were conducted within one week of implementation completion. All assessments were conducted under standardized conditions by certified language assessors.

Intercultural competence was measured using the IDI Version 5, developed by Hammer (2023). This validated instrument assesses individuals' capability to shift cultural perspectives and adapt behavior to cultural contexts, providing quantitative measures of intercultural sensitivity and competence development. The IDI was administered by a certified Qualified Administrator in accordance with standard protocols. Participants completed the 50-item online assessment in both pre-test and post-test conditions, with individual debriefing sessions provided to all participants following post-test administration. IDI scores are interpreted as follows: scores of 85–114 indicate the Minimization stage, scores of 115–129 indicate the Acceptance stage, and scores of 130 or above indicate the Adaptation stage.

Students in the experimental group maintained structured reflection journals throughout the implementation phase, using guided prompts developed specifically for this study. These journals documented learning experiences, cultural connections, and perceived progress. Weekly prompts encouraged critical reflection on the relationship between cultural content and language learning. A total of 468 journal entries were collected and analyzed, with entry lengths averaging 200-300 words per weekly submission.

Six focus group discussions were conducted after the curriculum implementation to gather in-depth feedback on student experiences. Each focus group contained six to seven students representing diverse cultural backgrounds and was facilitated by a trained moderator using a semi-structured protocol. Sessions lasted 60-75 minutes and explored participants' perceptions of the culturally responsive curriculum's effectiveness and impact on learning experiences. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

4.4 Development Procedures

The curriculum development process followed a systematic four-phase approach aligned with contemporary R&D methodologies in educational innovation, ensuring both theoretical grounding and practical viability (Thompson, & Martinez, 2024).

Phase 1: Preliminary Investigation (4 months): This foundational stage involved a comprehensive needs assessment and context analysis to establish the basis for curriculum development. Activities included a detailed analysis of existing curriculum documents and teaching materials, the administration of needs assessment surveys to the diverse student population, and extensive interviews with ESL instructors about their multicultural teaching experiences. Additionally, this phase included a systematic review of relevant literature on culturally responsive ESL teaching and a thorough analysis of institutional policies and available resources. A detailed context analysis was conducted, examining university demographics, cultural diversity patterns, and existing support systems for multicultural learners.

Phase 2: Prototype Development (6 months): The phase utilized findings from the preliminary investigation to create a comprehensive curriculum framework grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy. This phase involved developing course objectives that aligned with both institutional requirements and identified student needs, organizing content to incorporate multicultural perspectives and authentic materials, and designing teaching and learning activities that promoted intercultural exchange and collaboration. A systematic approach to assessment strategy development ensured that evaluation methods valued diverse ways of demonstrating knowledge and cultural understanding. Resource materials were curated to represent diverse cultural contexts while maintaining academic rigor. The prototype underwent expert review by three external curriculum specialists before implementation.

Phase 3: Implementation and Formative Evaluation (8 months): This phase involved systematic testing of the prototype curriculum over two academic semesters with the experimental group, while the control group received the standard ESL curriculum. Continuous data collection occurred through weekly classroom observations documented using standardized protocols, instructor reflection logs capturing implementation challenges and successes, student reflection journals recording learning experiences and cultural connections, and bi-weekly feedback sessions with instructors to address emerging issues. Formative evaluation data were analyzed continuously using rapid assessment techniques to make evidence-based adjustments to the curriculum during implementation. A systematic feedback loop ensured that necessary modifications were implemented promptly while maintaining research integrity.

Phase 4: Summative Evaluation and Revision (3 months): The final phase provided a comprehensive assessment of curriculum effectiveness through multiple data sources and stakeholder perspectives. This phase included analysis of pre-test and post-test language proficiency scores to measure learning outcomes, comparison of intercultural competence assessments to evaluate personal and social development, focus group discussions with students to gather detailed feedback on learning experiences, and final interviews with instructors to capture implementation insights and professional development impacts. Expert review by three external ESL curriculum specialists ensured academic rigor and transferability to other institutional contexts. Based on summative evaluation findings, final revisions were made to the curriculum framework and implementation guidelines.

4.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using statistical software, employing multiple statistical procedures to ensure a comprehensive examination of curriculum effectiveness across all measured variables. Descriptive statistics provided detailed information on participants' demographics and survey response patterns across cultural groups. Independent and paired t-tests compared pre-test and post-test scores between experimental and control groups and within groups over time. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) controlled for pre-existing differences between groups, ensuring that observed changes could be attributed to the intervention while accounting for potential confounding variables. Correlation analysis examined relationships between variables such as cultural background, initial proficiency levels, and learning outcomes. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d to determine the practical significance of observed differences, providing additional context for interpreting statistical results. Statistical significance is set at $p < .05$, with $p < .01$ indicating high significance and $p < .001$ indicating very high significance. Effect sizes were interpreted using Cohen's d , with values of 0.2 indicating a small effect, 0.5 a medium effect, 0.8 a large effect, and 1.0 or higher a very large effect.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted through systematic thematic analysis following Braun, & Clarke (2023) revised six-step approach, enhanced with contemporary techniques for mixed-methods integration. This process involved familiarization with the data through multiple readings of transcripts and field notes, initial coding of meaningful segments using both inductive and deductive approaches informed by culturally responsive pedagogy theory, searching for patterns and themes across coded segments using systematic comparison techniques, reviewing and refining themes to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness, defining and naming themes with clear descriptions and boundaries, and producing comprehensive reports that integrated themes with supporting evidence.

To ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative findings, multiple validation strategies were employed following contemporary standards for mixed-methods research (Creswell, & Creswell, 2023). Triangulation of data sources compared insights from interviews, observations, and reflective journals to identify convergent and divergent patterns. Member checking provided participants with summaries of their contributions to verify the accuracy and completeness of the interpretation. Peer debriefing sessions with colleagues not involved in the study offered external perspectives on data analysis and interpretation processes. Additionally, audit trails were maintained, documenting all analytical decisions and interpretive processes. Thematic saturation was achieved when 85% of coded segments fit existing themes without generating new primary themes. Multiple validation strategies included triangulation, member checking (80% participant confirmation considered satisfactory), peer debriefing, and audit trails to ensure trustworthiness.

5. Results

5.1 Needs Assessment Findings

The comprehensive needs assessment revealed significant insights that informed subsequent curriculum development, demonstrating clear patterns in student priorities and cultural factors that influence language learning effectiveness in multicultural contexts.

5.1.1 Student Language Learning Priorities

Quantitative analysis of survey data indicated distinct patterns in skill prioritization across cultural groups, reflecting both academic requirements and professional aspirations of diverse student populations.

Speaking skills emerged as the highest priority for 78.2% of participants, followed by listening skills at 71.8%. Reading and writing skills received lower priority ratings at 54.5% and 47.3% respectively. However, significant variations appeared across cultural groups, with Thai students emphasizing employment-related communication skills (83.3%), while international students prioritized academic success (89.7%) and cross-cultural communication abilities (91.2%).

Content analysis of open-ended survey responses revealed four primary motivational factors for English proficiency among participants, providing crucial insights for curriculum design priorities. Academic success was prioritized by 87.2% of respondents, reflecting the instrumental role of English in higher education contexts. Future employment opportunities motivated 93.6% of participants, highlighting the economic value of English proficiency in the regional job market. Cultural exchange purposes were emphasized by 62.8% of students, particularly among international participants who viewed English as a bridge language for regional communication and integration. Personal development goals motivated 56.4% of respondents, indicating intrinsic motivation for language learning beyond immediate practical needs.

5.1.2 Cultural Factors Influencing Learning Approaches

The thematic analysis of interview and survey data identified several critical cultural factors that significantly influence language learning preferences and outcomes in multicultural classroom settings, revealing the complexity of addressing diverse learning needs through curriculum design.

Table 1: Cultural Factors Influencing ESL Learning by Cultural Group

Cultural Group	Preferred Communication Style	Learning Approach Preference	Cultural Content Satisfaction (1-5 scale)	Score Interpretation
Thai (n=78)	Indirect, relationship-focused	Collaborative learning (68.2%)	2.6	Unsatisfied
Laotian (n=42)	Contextual, narrative-based	Visual learning (72.4%)	2.3	Poor
Vietnamese (n=18)	More direct, analytical	Analytical approaches (74.3%)	2.1	Critical
Cambodian (n=12)	Hierarchical, respectful	Contextual learning (65.7%)	2.4	Low
Myanmar (n=6)	Formal, group-oriented	Mixed approaches	2.2	Poor
Overall (n=156)	Mixed	Varied by group	2.4	Concerning

Source: Analysis of survey and interview data (Neerapan, 2025)

Communication style preferences revealed substantial differences across cultural groups that have important implications for curriculum design and pedagogical approach selection. Thai and Laotian students consistently reported discomfort with direct communication styles often emphasized in Western ESL methodologies, preferring indirect and relationship-focused interaction patterns that align with traditional Southeast Asian cultural values. Vietnamese students expressed greater comfort with direct communication approaches, while Cambodian students emphasized hierarchical and respectful communication norms. These variations suggest the need for flexible pedagogical approaches that accommodate diverse communication preferences rather than imposing a single standard, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive curriculum design.

Learning approach preferences similarly varied across cultural backgrounds, indicating the importance of incorporating multiple instructional strategies within a unified curriculum framework. Thai students demonstrated a strong preference for collaborative learning opportunities, with 68.2% identifying group-based activities as most effective for their learning. Laotian students showed a preference for visual learning approaches, with 72.4% reporting greater success when using graphic organizers, visual aids, and spatial

representations. Vietnamese students favored analytical approaches, with 74.3% preferring structured problem-solving and systematic analysis activities. Cambodian students emphasized the effectiveness of contextual learning, with 65.7% reporting improved comprehension when information was presented within familiar cultural frameworks.

5.2 Curriculum Development Outcomes

Based on needs assessment findings and theoretical frameworks from culturally responsive pedagogy, a comprehensive ESL curriculum was developed, incorporating systematic attention to multicultural learning needs and intercultural competence development.

5.2.1 Curriculum Framework

The curriculum framework was organized around three integrated dimensions: linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, and communicative skills, designed to address the complex needs identified through the needs assessment process. The framework specifically addressed identified needs through the systematic integration of diverse pedagogical approaches that accommodate multiple learning preferences within a coherent instructional design.

The framework balanced skill development across all four language domains (listening, speaking, reading, writing) with particular emphasis on communicative competence that honors the diverse cultural communication styles identified in the needs assessment. Cultural content representing diverse Southeast Asian contexts was woven throughout all units, rather than being treated as separate add-on elements. The framework incorporated varied learning approaches to accommodate different cultural learning preferences, ensuring that collaborative, visual, analytical, and contextual learning opportunities were available across all instructional units. Additionally, authentic language use opportunities were provided that connected directly to students' academic and professional goals while respecting their cultural backgrounds and communication preferences.

5.2.2 Cultural Integration Strategies

Several comprehensive strategies were developed for integrating cultural elements into the ESL curriculum, moving beyond superficial cultural content toward deeper engagement with diverse worldviews and learning approaches.

Theme-Based Units: The curriculum was organized around eight thematic units that incorporated cultural perspectives from Thailand and neighboring countries, systematically selected based on needs assessment findings and contemporary research on multicultural education effectiveness. These themes included traditional and contemporary arts that celebrated diverse Southeast Asian artistic expressions, environmental challenges in Southeast Asia that connected students' local knowledge with global issues, economic development and regional cooperation that emphasized ASEAN integration and cross-cultural business practices, family structures and values that honored diverse cultural traditions while building English communication skills, educational systems and practices that compared learning traditions across cultures, food cultures and sustainability that integrated local knowledge with global awareness, technology adoption and innovation that bridged traditional and modern communication practices, and tourism and cultural heritage that promoted intercultural understanding and communication skills.

Comparative Cultural Activities: Each unit included structured activities that promoted cross-cultural comparison and analysis, encouraging students to examine both similarities and differences across cultural contexts while developing critical thinking skills. These activities were designed to develop intercultural competence alongside language proficiency, with students engaging in structured discussions, collaborative

research projects, and presentation activities that required them to analyze, compare, and synthesize information from multiple cultural perspectives.

Multilingual Resources: Supplementary materials were developed in multiple languages (Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, Khmer) to support students' understanding and validate linguistic diversity as an educational resource rather than a challenge. These resources served as bridge materials that honored students' first languages while facilitating English language acquisition, including vocabulary connections across languages, cultural context explanations, and translation activities that developed metalinguistic awareness.

The curriculum systematically incorporated local knowledge from Udon Thani and the surrounding region, including cultural practices, historical contexts, and community resources. This integration validated students' lived experiences while providing authentic contexts for English language use, connecting classroom learning with community engagement and real-world communication needs.

5.2.3 Assessment Framework

A comprehensive assessment framework was developed to evaluate both language proficiency and intercultural competence development, addressing traditional academic requirements while honoring diverse ways of demonstrating knowledge and understanding. The framework included performance-based assessments that allowed for cultural expression and diverse demonstrations of competence, portfolio assessments documenting language development over time, self and peer assessments promoting reflective learning and cultural awareness, and traditional assessments aligned with institutional requirements to ensure academic standards.

5.3 Implementation Results

5.3.1 Language Proficiency Outcomes

Analysis of pre-test and post-test language proficiency scores revealed significant improvements in the experimental group compared to the control group across all measured skill areas, demonstrating the effectiveness of culturally responsive curriculum approaches for enhancing academic achievement.

Table 2: Language Proficiency Scores Pre-test and Post-test by Group

Skill Area	Experimental Group (n=39)	Control Group (n=39)	Between-Group Comparison
	Pre-test M (S.D.)	Post-test M (S.D.)	Gain (%)
Listening	65.3 (8.2)	84.6 (7.5)	29.6
Speaking	61.8 (9.4)	82.3 (8.6)	33.2
Reading	69.2 (7.6)	81.4 (6.9)	17.6
Writing	63.6 (8.7)	78.9 (7.8)	24.1
Overall	65.0 (8.5)	81.8 (7.7)	25.8

*Statistically significant at $p < .05$

Source: Statistical analysis of experimental data (Neerapan, 2025)

The results demonstrate substantial and statistically significant improvements in language proficiency across all skill areas for students in the experimental group compared to their control group counterparts, supporting the theoretical foundation of culturally responsive pedagogy for enhancing academic achievement. The experimental group showed the largest gains in speaking skills (33.2% improvement), which aligns with the culturally responsive curriculum's emphasis on communication approaches that honor diverse cultural communication styles. Listening skills showed the second-largest improvement (29.6%), reflecting the curriculum's integration of diverse cultural contexts that provided meaningful and engaging listening experiences.

Writing skills improved by 24.1%, indicating that culturally relevant content provided students with more authentic and motivating contexts for written expression.

Effect size analysis using Cohen's d revealed large effect sizes for all skill comparisons between experimental and control groups (d ranging from 0.89 to 1.24), indicating not only statistical significance but also practical significance of the observed improvements. These findings align with contemporary research demonstrating that culturally responsive approaches enhance rather than compromise academic achievement in language learning contexts.

5.3.2 Intercultural Competence Development

Analysis of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) results showed significant improvement in intercultural competence scores for the experimental group, demonstrating the curriculum's effectiveness for developing both language proficiency and cultural competence simultaneously. The mean IDI score increased from 89.3 (S.D.=12.6) in the pre-test to 112.7 (S.D.=11.3) in the post-test, representing a shift from the "Minimization" to the "Acceptance" stage of intercultural development according to Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. The control group showed minimal change, from 90.1 (S.D.=11.9) to 93.4 (S.D.=12.1), with effect size analysis revealing a large effect ($d=1.02$) for the between-group comparison.

This progression represents a significant developmental advancement, as movement from Minimization to Acceptance indicates students' increased capability to recognize and appreciate cultural differences rather than minimizing their importance. Individual debriefing sessions revealed that 76% of experimental group participants demonstrated improved cultural self-awareness, and 82% showed enhanced perspective-taking abilities.

5.3.3 Student Engagement and Motivation

Analysis of classroom observation data indicated significantly higher levels of student engagement in the experimental group compared to the control group across all measured dimensions. Engagement was measured using a validated observation protocol's five-point scale across four dimensions: participation, persistence, collaboration, and critical thinking.

Thematic analysis of student reflection journals and focus group discussions identified five main themes related to student experiences with the culturally responsive curriculum, providing rich qualitative evidence of the intervention's impact beyond quantitative measures.

Cultural Validation: Students reported feeling that their cultural identities were valued and respected in the classroom environment, mentioned by 85% of experimental group students. This theme reflects the curriculum's success in creating inclusive learning environments that honor diverse cultural backgrounds.

Authentic Learning Connection: The curriculum's cultural relevance made language learning feel more connected to real-life communication needs and personal experiences, as reported by 78% of students. This connection enhanced motivation and the perceived relevance of learning activities.

Intercultural Awareness: Students developed greater awareness of and appreciation for cultural diversity, as mentioned by 82% of participants. This awareness extended beyond their own cultural group to include appreciation for other cultures represented in the classroom.

Motivation Enhancement: Cultural content increased motivation to participate and practice language skills, as noted by 74% of participants. Students reported a greater willingness to engage in speaking activities and collaborative projects when content reflected their cultural experiences.

Identity Negotiation: Students described positive experiences with exploring their identities as multilingual and multicultural individuals, as reported by 68% of participants. This theme reflects the curriculum's success in supporting identity development alongside language learning.

Representative student feedback illustrates these themes:

"In previous English classes, I always felt like I had to leave my cultural background at the door. In this class, I could bring my whole self. We talked about Lao traditions and compared them with Thai and Western practices. It made me more confident to speak English when I could talk about things I know well." (Student L7, Reflection Journal)

5.4 Instructor Experiences and Development

Analysis of instructor interviews and reflection logs revealed significant professional growth through implementing the culturally responsive curriculum, demonstrating the intervention's impact on teacher development alongside student learning outcomes.

Key themes identified through thematic analysis of instructor data included:

Expanded Cultural Awareness: Instructors reported developing greater awareness of cultural dimensions in teaching and learning processes, mentioned by all six participating instructors. This awareness extended beyond surface-level cultural knowledge to a deeper understanding of how culture influences learning preferences and communication styles.

Pedagogical Flexibility: Instructors described developing more flexible and responsive teaching approaches that could accommodate diverse learning needs within a single classroom environment, reported by five of six instructors. This flexibility enhanced their overall teaching effectiveness.

Material Development Skills: Instructors gained skills in adapting and creating culturally appropriate materials that maintained academic rigor while reflecting diverse cultural perspectives, mentioned by all six instructors. These skills represented significant professional development outcomes.

Implementation Challenges: Instructors identified specific challenges, including time management requirements for individualized cultural content (four of six instructors), assessment alignment with traditional institutional requirements (three of six), and balancing cultural content with linguistic objectives (four of six). Representative instructor feedback demonstrates these developmental outcomes:

"Working with this curriculum has transformed my understanding of culture in language teaching. I used to think that mentioning cultural festivals or foods occasionally was enough. Now I see how deeply culture influences communication patterns, learning preferences, and motivation. It's changed how I approach every aspect of teaching." (Instructor 3, Post-implementation Interview)

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Implications of Culturally Responsive Curriculum Development

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the theoretical understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy in multicultural ESL contexts, particularly in Southeast Asian settings where multiple indigenous cultures interact with global English learning requirements. Unlike previous research that has primarily examined culturally responsive teaching in contexts with clear majority-minority cultural divisions, this study demonstrates the complexity and effectiveness of implementing culturally responsive approaches in environments where multiple minority cultures coexist with a dominant culture.

The significant improvements in language proficiency outcomes support Gay's (2021) assertion that culturally responsive teaching enhances academic achievement by creating more meaningful learning connections. However, this study extends that understanding by demonstrating that cultural responsiveness can be effective even when curricula must address multiple cultural backgrounds simultaneously rather than focusing on a single non-dominant culture. This finding challenges assumptions about the specificity required for cultural responsiveness and suggests that broad multicultural approaches can be effective when systematically implemented through comprehensive curriculum development processes.

The substantial improvements in intercultural competence, as measured by the IDI, provide empirical support for theoretical claims that culturally responsive education develops not only academic skills but also critical intercultural capabilities necessary for success in globalized contexts (Paris, & Alim, 2022). The progression from Minimization to Acceptance stages of intercultural development represents meaningful advancement in students' capability to navigate cultural differences effectively.

6.2 Comparative Analysis with Existing Research

The language proficiency improvements observed in this study align with findings from contemporary research on culturally responsive ESL contexts while demonstrating larger effect sizes than many previous studies. Recent research by Estaji, & Kogani (2024) reported similar patterns of improvement in EFL contexts, though with smaller effect sizes, possibly due to differences in curriculum development methodology and implementation intensity.

The findings contrast with some research from Western contexts that suggests culturally responsive approaches may initially slow academic progress as students adjust to new pedagogical methods. The absence of such adjustment periods in this study may reflect the alignment between culturally responsive approaches and traditional Southeast Asian pedagogical values, which emphasize relationship building and contextual learning (Halim, Ramli, & Norawi Ali, (Eds.), 2024).

Contemporary research on intercultural competence development in higher education settings supports the effectiveness of systematic IDI-based interventions for enhancing intercultural capabilities (Hammer, 2023). This study's findings contribute to this literature by demonstrating the effectiveness of integrating intercultural competence development with language learning objectives through culturally responsive curriculum design.

6.3 Practical Implications for Curriculum Development

The systematic R&D approach employed in this study provides a replicable framework for developing culturally responsive curricula in similar multicultural contexts. The four-phase development process, from preliminary investigation through summative evaluation, offers guidance for institutions seeking to implement culturally responsive approaches while maintaining academic rigor and institutional requirements.

The success of the needs assessment phase in identifying specific cultural factors influencing learning suggests the importance of comprehensive context analysis before curriculum development. The finding that different cultural groups exhibit distinct learning preferences and communication styles has important implications for pedagogical design and instructor training programs.

The integration of multiple assessment approaches, including traditional language proficiency measures and intercultural competence assessments, provides a model for comprehensive evaluation of culturally responsive curricula. This approach addresses both institutional accountability requirements and broader educational objectives related to intercultural competence development.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The single-site design limits the generalizability of the findings to other Thai universities or regional contexts with different demographic compositions and institutional characteristics. the generalizability to other Thai universities or regional contexts with different demographic compositions and institutional characteristics. Additionally, the relatively short implementation period of two semesters may not capture the long-term effects of culturally responsive curricula on language development and cultural competence.

The study's reliance on self-reported measures for some outcomes, particularly cultural competence and engagement, introduces potential response bias. Future research should incorporate additional objective measures of intercultural competence and multiple observational assessments to validate self-reported findings. Furthermore, the study did not examine the differential effects of specific cultural integration strategies, making it difficult to identify which elements of cultural responsiveness are most effective for particular learning outcomes.

Future research should examine the long-term impacts of culturally responsive curricula through longitudinal studies spanning multiple academic years to investigate whether the benefits observed in this study persist over time and contribute to broader academic and professional success. Comparative studies across different regional contexts in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries could illuminate how culturally responsive approaches may need to be adapted for different demographic compositions and institutional environments.

Research on technology integration with culturally responsive pedagogy could explore how digital learning environments can support multicultural ESL education, particularly in contexts with resource limitations or geographic constraints that limit face-to-face cultural exchange opportunities. Additionally, the investigation of instructor development programs for culturally responsive teaching could provide insights into effective professional development approaches for multicultural education contexts.

7. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that systematically developed culturally responsive curricula can significantly enhance ESL learning outcomes for multicultural student populations in Thai higher education contexts through comprehensive attention to cultural diversity as an educational resource rather than a challenge. The comprehensive R&D approach employed in this study produced measurable improvements in both language proficiency and intercultural competence while increasing student engagement and motivation, providing empirical support for theoretical claims about the effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy.

The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of culturally responsive education by demonstrating its effectiveness in multicultural, rather than just bicultural, contexts, thereby extending current knowledge about the scope and applicability of culturally responsive approaches. The study also provides practical guidance for curriculum developers working in similar Southeast Asian contexts, where student demographics are becoming increasingly diverse due to regional integration and educational mobility.

The systematic development process documented in this research offers a replicable framework for creating culturally responsive curricula that maintain academic rigor while also honoring cultural diversity. The

evidence that culturally responsive approaches can enhance, rather than compromise, academic achievement challenges assumptions about trade-offs between cultural inclusion and academic standards.

Beyond its immediate contributions to ESL education in Thailand, this research has broader implications for understanding how educational institutions can respond effectively to the increasing globalization and student mobility. The finding that systematic attention to cultural diversity enhances, rather than hinders, academic achievement provides important evidence for policy development and institutional planning in multicultural educational contexts.

8. Recommendations

8.1 Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, several evidence-based recommendations emerge for ESL curriculum development and implementation in multicultural higher education contexts. Educational institutions should invest in comprehensive cultural needs assessments that explore not only language priorities but also cultural backgrounds, learning preferences, and communication styles of their specific student populations. This assessment should inform curriculum development from the outset rather than relying on standardized approaches developed for different demographic contexts, ensuring that cultural responsiveness is systematically integrated rather than superficially added.

Instructors and curriculum developers should prioritize the creation of locally relevant materials that represent the cultural contexts of their specific student populations, moving beyond superficial cultural content to address deeper aspects of cultural influence on learning and communication. This may involve supplementing commercial textbooks with regionally developed resources that reflect local cultures, knowledge systems, and communication patterns.

Professional development programs should focus specifically on culturally responsive teaching approaches and multicultural awareness, with training that is practical and context-specific rather than generic. Such programs should address the particular cultural dynamics present in local educational environments and provide ongoing support for implementation challenges.

8.2 Recommendations for Policy Development

Institutional policies should explicitly support culturally responsive approaches through resource allocation, assessment frameworks, and professional development requirements. Universities should develop systematic approaches to demographic analysis and cultural needs assessment as standard components of curriculum development processes.

Assessment policies should incorporate multiple measures of success, including intercultural competence development alongside traditional language proficiency measures, recognizing the importance of cultural competence for student success in globalized contexts.

8.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should examine the long-term impacts of culturally responsive curricula through longitudinal studies spanning multiple academic years to investigate whether the benefits observed in this study persist over time and contribute to broader academic and professional success. Multi-site research across different regional contexts in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries could enhance the generalizability of findings and identify universal versus context-specific elements of effective culturally responsive curricula.

Research on technology integration with culturally responsive pedagogy could explore how digital learning environments can support multicultural ESL education, particularly in contexts with resource limitations or geographic constraints that limit face-to-face cultural exchange opportunities. Additionally, the investigation of cost-effective implementation strategies could provide guidance for resource-limited institutions seeking to develop culturally responsive programs.

Comparative research examining different models of culturally responsive curriculum development could identify optimal approaches for specific institutional contexts and student populations, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of effective implementation strategies in diverse educational settings.

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