Where multicultural worldviews begin: Development of Thai university students' intercultural competence through their life experiences and formal education

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Article Info

Abstract

Prior studies have focused on promoting Thai university students' intercultural competence with a heavy emphasis on orientation towards Anglophone cultures in language classrooms, neglecting the importance of the cultural knowledge of members of subcultures, and providing a more comprehensive viewpoint from which to develop students' intercultural competence. However, the potential sources for developing students' intercultural competence are diverse, and simply focusing on enhancing students' intercultural competence in the context of formal education may not be sufficient. When seeking to fill a gap in the literature, this qualitative study aims to explore Thai university students' development of intercultural competence as a result of their reflection and introspection on their life experiences, and their enrolment in an Intercultural Communication course, with an innovative photo-elicitation technique integrated into online interviews. By following an integrative multi-level paradigm model for culture and Intercultural Communication, the findings offer new insights into participants' significant growth and positive attitudes towards other (sub) cultures, which eventually promote their multicultural mindsets. These incidences can, arguably, be crucial for people from different cultural backgrounds seeking to live together in harmony. Taken together, the study has a range of implications for including non-native English speaker cultures and subcultures in material development and pedagogical practice in intercultural pedagogy in Thailand. The study also offers suggestions for further research into applying the integrated multi-level intercultural model as an alternative lens when cultivating intercultural competence, not only in Thai contexts, but also in other intercultural settings.

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Introduction

This study adds to the limited body of literature concerning the inclusion of individuals from subcultures, e.g., those from minority groups and people with disabilities, and those from non-native English-speaking countries, to promote university students' awareness of the differences in cultural values present in a variety of cultures and subcultures, minimizing their misperceptions of other people's behavior, so that they can develop their intercultural competence to communicate with those from alternative cultural backgrounds effectively. Intercultural competence has already received considerable attention in the 21st century, having been placed at the heart of mission statements made by several governmental and educational sectors around the globe (Rapanta & Trovão, 2021). Intercultural competence refers to "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247–248). Definitions of effective and appropriate can be derived from Spitzberg's (1989) work, which clarifies that effectiveness concerns achieving goals for communication and appropriateness when understanding rules and violations within a society. According to the Council of European Union (2018), intercultural competence plays a significant role in reducing discrimination, racism and hate speech and increasing mutual understanding between people from different cultural, socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Intercultural competence can arise as a result of life experiences such as spending time overseas (Maharaja, 2018; Nguyen, 2017; Wolff & Borzikowsky, 2018), or participating in youth work as a volunteer (Tiessen, 2017). Concurrently, intercultural competence can be enhanced by integration into a foreign language education system (see Li & Liu, 2017; Pasand et al., 2021; Wu, 2021; Zhang, 2020). There is an implicit impression that students should be able to connect their firsthand experiences outside the classroom with those inside the classroom in order to develop their intercultural competence (Kennedy, 2020; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Thus, this study aims to explore the development of Thai university students' intercultural competence by reflecting upon their life experiences and following their enrolment on an Intercultural Communication course.

Research Question

In accordance with the aims of this study, the following research questions were formulated to guide the data analysis:

RQ1. What do Thai university students think they have learned about different cultures as a result of their life experiences and their enrolment on an Intercultural Communication course?

RQ2. How have their life experiences and the knowledge they gained from the Intercultural Communication course assisted them to develop their intercultural competence?

Literature Review

A large body of literature directs attention towards the development of intercultural competence among students by engaging with different methods or in a variety of classroom activities. This includes conducting ethnographic interviews with the students' classmates or people from different cultures to explore intercultural interactions between local and international students (Arshavskaya, 2018), a Chinese TV drama to develop the intercultural competence of second language (L2), Chinese learners in Australia (Zhang, 2020), TV advertisements (Tirnaz & Narafshan, 2020), inviting guest speakers from other countries, classroom discussions and role-plays (Nakano, 2019), and using English textbooks to cultivate intercultural competence among Vietnamese university students (Quyen, 2018). In Thailand, attention has focused on adopting a teaching method and creating appropriate teaching materials to promote intercultural competence in English language classrooms, such as role-play (Noonkong et al., 2019; Worawong et al., 2017), English songs (Na Ayuthaya, 2018) and paintings (Wen, 2018). Notably, the large body of intercultural communication research in Thailand tends to be influenced by Anglophone culture (see Rattanapan et al., 2019; Suwannasom, 2019). Furthermore, minimal attention has been paid to encouraging different ethnic and social groups to interact and live together in harmony, or to promoting multiculturalism. This includes people in a dominant culture and those from subcultures, such as those with disabilities, different sexual orientations or from minority groups (see Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2015). Arguably, developing students' intercultural competence should enable them to connect with their prior knowledge of life experiences outside of classrooms,

such as travelling or temporarily living abroad (Lenkaitis, 2019), in addition to integrating intercultural competence into an educational setting. Thus, in seeking to fill in a gap in the literature, this qualitative study explores Thai university students' development of intercultural competence as a consequence of both their life experiences and their formal education, i.e., knowledge gained from enrolment on an Intercultural Communication course.

Conceptual Framework

This study employs the integrative multi-level paradigm model of culture and Intercultural Communication proposed by Wang and Kulich (2015). It represents eight primary domains by which culture is defined. Its definition entails: (A) structures/patterns, including cognitive structures (e.g. beliefs and values across different societies); (B) functions/stereotyping function or psychological predispositions; (C) processes/ practices – interactions with other people; (D) products/ artefacts (e.g. rituals and food); (E) privilege/refinement – e.g. the superiority of Western culture over another culture; (F) Group membership/ participation – identification with an ethnic group or subcultures; (G) power/ideology – cultural dominance of one group over others (Faulkner et al., 2006); and (H) prejudice/ discrimination.

Utilizing the eight domains above, which comprise the definition of culture, the model was developed according to the following steps:

1. Levels of culture are classified as meta level – "broader civilization groupings of culture, e.g., Asian, Western, Arab" (Kulich, 2011, p.48); macro level – the national levels of culture; meso and medio level – sub-cultural or geographic regional groupings; and finally; micro level – "the interpersonal level of communication between individuals" (Kulich, 2011, p. 48; Wang & Kulich, 2015). Noticeably, these levels of culture move downward; starting at the meta level and transitioning to the micro level in order to emphasize the level of analysis. This model illustrates that intercultural interaction occurs across borders (meta/macro levels), before narrowing down the level of analysis to domestic co-cultural groups (meso/medio levels), and individuals (micro levels).

2. The parallel (G) to (H) spans vertically from *power* and *privilege*, which is situated in the macro structure, to *psychological predispositions* that encompass stereotypes or prejudice/discrimination, which are present in the micro structure.

3. Moving horizontally, there are dynamic expressions of cultures, i.e. from fixed *patterns* to *plural* or *multicultural* ones.

4. In the middle of the model, there is a dynamic process that occurs when individuals interact with each other, clarify their *perceptions*, adapt to one another, develop positive attitudes and responses towards one another, affirm their *positionality* and finally promote personal growth to become an intercultural person or adopt attitudes towards becoming a *plurality*-oriented person, defined as recognizing the diverse race, culture and language of other groups (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009), which is the desired outcome when developing intercultural competence (Wang & Kulich, 2015).

5. Levels of culture correspond (e.g., macro level) to expressions of culture (e.g. privilege). For example, the relationship between the macro level and privileged status is evident when a person thinks that one' own country is more developed or more superior than another, reflecting a comparison at the national level or a macro level.

This integrative multi-level intercultural model as shown in Figure 1 aligns with the objectives of this study, as it emphasizes cultural diversity within a dominant culture, i.e. subcultures, and reflects unequal relations, or the negative reality of prejudice and discrimination as psychological barriers that individuals might experience prior to developing positive attitudes towards understanding and respecting others from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, this study will demonstrate how its qualitative results affirm this model, and its potential in terms of intercultural competence studies in a Thai context.
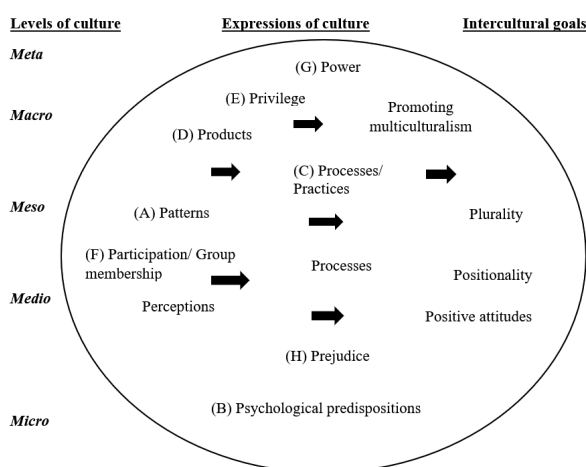
Figure 1 An integrative multi-level paradigm model for culture and Intercultural Communication (Wang & Kulich, 2015)

Methodology

Participants

The participants comprised eighteen students majoring in English at a Thai public university (Table 1). They were all in the final year of their studies and had enrolled in an Intercultural Communication course in semester 1, in the academic year 2020. The researcher recruited participants following their consideration of the research questions (Schwandt, 2015). The participant's ages ranged from 21 to 24 years. Employing purposive sampling, the researcher selected students who had enrolled on an Intercultural Communication course. The course is compulsory for fourth-year-students majoring in English wishing to explore the development of their intercultural competence. There were two sections to the course, and the researcher was a lecturer for one section. The course consisted of 45 hours, during which the students learnt about cultural dimensions, verbal and non-verbal communication, intergroup communication, gender and communication, stereotyping, ethnocentrism, prejudice and discrimination, cultural adaptation and acculturation strategies, personality types and research ethics. The course included oral presentations, class discussions, supplementary readings of research papers, group assignment of a research project (students selected their own research topic based on what they learnt from the course, conducted research, and wrote research papers). There was a take-home exam for students to discuss the topic assigned by the lecturer.

Data Collection

The ethics committee at the university of Thailand, where this study was carried out, approved all the ethical requirements. The researcher was the lecturer of some participants. Thus, to prevent researcher bias, the researcher asked a secretary from the Department of English to send letters of invitation to all the students with the researcher's contact details, e.g. email address, so the students wishing to participate could volunteer to do so. The secretary emailed the students after the course was over, and the students had received their grades. This meant no pressure was placed on the students to participate, as they knew their grades would not be affected if they did not participate.

A creative photo-elicitation technique, which involves using photographs during a semi-structured interview (Elizabeth et al., 2017), was employed. The participants were asked to select photographs they had taken themselves; the photographs represented the similarities and differences between Thai culture and other cultures. Then, the researcher asked them to provide more details about the photographs, and share what they had learnt from these similarities and differences. For example, one participant selected a photograph of a man with a small fashion tattoo to reference the shared beliefs of Thai and Japanese people, who typically have negative attitudes towards people with tattoos, believing them to be gangsters or yakuza, reflecting negative judgements. However, the researcher acknowledged that it was impossible for the researcher to ask the participants to select a photograph for each interview question. Despite this limitation, the photo-elicitation technique offered advantages for several reasons. First, it helps reveal the participants' insights into cultural and symbolic objects that are difficult to describe using words, creating a mutual understanding between the researcher and the participants (Glaw et al., 2017). Second, it facilitates participants' explanations of the abstract concepts behind their photographs (Glaw et al., 2017). For example, a photograph of a landline reflected the abstract intent to use proper communicative styles, to distinguish between direct and indirect messages when speaking with people from different cultural backgrounds. This is because people from Asia, Arab and African countries typically rely on indirect messages, whereas those from North America and Western Europe are more dependent on

Table 1 Demographic profiles of the participants

(*n* = 18)

Participants	Age	Gender	Previous experiences of enrollment in the intercultural communication course
P1	21	Female	No
P2	21	Female	No
P3	22	Female	No
P4	22	Female	No
P5	21	Male	No
P6	22	Female	No
P7	24	Male	No
P8	21	Male	No
P9	22	Female	No
P10	22	Female	No
P11	22	Female	No
P12	21	Female	No
P13	22	Male	No
P14	22	Female	No
P15	21	Female	No
P16	23	Female	No
P17	21	Female	No
P18	21	Female	No

direct messages. Thus, an awareness of cultural difference can help someone become intercultural competent, as using proper communicative styles with different groups of people can help avoid misunderstandings and creating a false interpretation when a person interacts with those from different cultural backgrounds. Finally, the photo-elicitation technique triangulates data from the participants' photographs, the meaning associated with these photographs, and the narratives from the interview as guided by the photographs, which helps strengthen and enrich the trustworthiness of the findings (Glaw et al., 2017).

Prior to commencing the interview, the researcher conducted an online pilot interview with a participant who had shared similar characteristics with the participants in the main study, i.e. a fourth-year student majoring in English. The pilot interviews served to generate a more focused and clearer set of the interview questions (Ismail et al., 2017). The participants were requested to identify photographs that represent similarities and differences between Thai and other cultures and discuss what they had learnt from studying cultural similarities and differences. The participants were also asked about their life experiences, and how they have impacted their lives. Regarding their reflection of the Intercultural Communication course, they were asked to speak about which assignments or concepts they liked the most and how the assignments and the knowledge they had gained from the course helped them to understand people from other cultures better. The pilot interview helped the researcher adjust the interview question to clarify what was meant by "life experiences", by offering the participants examples, e.g. experiences of travelling abroad, experiences of being an exchange student, and interactions with other people.

The duration of each individual online interview was approximately 40 to 60 minutes. The researcher conducted the interview in Thai to encourage the participants not to worry about the use of their English, e.g. making a grammatical error, or limited English vocabularies, when providing their accounts. The interviews were conducted online via Chats in Microsoft Teams as the campus was closed at the time due to the covid-19 pandemic; the interviews were recorded via Chats in Microsoft Teams.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were returned to the participants for validation purposes prior to conducting the analysis (Thomas, 2017). Express Scribe and Foot Pedal Controls were used to produce verbatim transcriptions of the interview data. Utilizing NVivo 12 software, the researcher employed thematic analysis, defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Terry et al., 2017, p.18). This was the main analytical method used in the study due to its flexibility for determining themes. The researcher followed the six phases of Thematic Analysis (i.e., reading the entire transcripts several times to achieve familiarity with the data, identifying and labelling important features of the data, grouping similar themes together, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report) (Terry et al., 2017, p.18). Themes and quotes were determined by following Krueger and Casey's (2015) guidelines (i.e. extensiveness - a repeatedly discussed theme quoted by different participants, frequency – a frequent quotation discussed by the participants, specificity - specific and detailed quotes, and themes that demonstrated participants' emotions, enthusiasm, passion, or intensity). The researcher followed an inductive approach, which means the interview data guided the researcher when establishing the conceptual framework of this study. Photographs were taken and selected by the participants. In addition, photographs were used for discussions with the researcher during the interviews. Referring to the interview questions, the participants were asked to select two photographs representing similarities and differences between Thai and other cultures, and to describe what they had learnt about cultural similarities and differences. With regard to incorporating photographs in the study results, the researcher selected photographs that corresponded with the participants' quotations, identifying themes and subthemes. The themes were cross-checked by a researcher who had earned a PhD in cross-cultural studies.

Results

The following themes highlight the participants' development of intercultural competence. These themes include gaining knowledge of other (sub) cultures, understanding other people with novel perspectives, and respecting individual and cultural differences. These themes are elucidated with direct quotations from the participants, coded P1–P18.

Gaining Knowledge of Other (sub) Cultures

Broadening knowledge of cultural diversity
During the interview, some participants combined

their life experience with knowledge of subcultures that they had acquired in the Intercultural Communication course. They repeatedly reported that local Thai cultures were diverse, and not limited to the norms of Thai dominant culture. This was reflected upon by P12, who had learnt about a ritual carried out by a hilltribe group in the north of Thailand when volunteering for a rural development camp. This minority group built an altar and placed figurines upon it to represent ghosts along with offerings; the group worshipped ghosts as protecting the natural landscape around the village. When she initially saw the altar and the figurines, P12 felt surprised, as *"the belief in ghosts among the hilltribe seems to be that they are good spirits who protect the mountain and water, which seems to differ from the notion of ghosts among most Thais, who tend to see ghosts as evil spirits."* P12 added that "*this practice is a unique hilltribe's ritual, and it is very interesting to see it.*" Her account implies that she seems to respect the hilltribe's ghost worshipping, which differs from the views of Thai dominant culture. P12's account conforms to a cultural norm in which the altar and the figurines the hilltribe use to worship ghosts are considered as (D) cultural products/artefacts based on the domain of the definitions of culture. Awareness of the artefacts of these subcultures provided P12 with a good opportunity to develop her own multicultural perspective. She learned that members of some subcultures use these objects for their spiritual rituals, making them distinct from dominant cultures, implying that members of subcultures can adopt their own values and practices. Moreover, people from dominant cultures should not regard such values or practices as strange or opposed to the dominant culture, but rather as unique ways of believing and behaving. Additionally, four participants learnt that Japanese people tend to slurp Japanese noodles (i.e. ramen, soba, and udon), so that they can take air into their mouths to lower the temperature of noodles and prevent their tongues being burned. Interestingly, P4 stated that she *"would not have regarded this behavior as rude"* if she *"had seen Japanese tourists slurping noodles in Thailand"* as she *"understood the reason behind this eating habit."* This suggests P4's understanding of foreign cultures consequently assisted her not to apply Thai table manners, i.e. to eat quietly, as a standard to judge another culture's eating etiquette. Furthermore, this type of cultural understanding can enable participants to avoid having negative attitudes towards or looking down on Japanese people when they see them slurping noodles. P4's account correlates with (D) culture as products/artefacts, i.e., food, Japanese noodles in this case. P4 learnt not to impose Thai eating etiquette or to judge Japanese people who slurp their noodles.

Developing intercultural communicative skills

According to six participants, they also learnt about the differences in the way people from different cultures communicate. P7 reported applying this life experience to what he learnt in the Intercultural Communication class, commenting that Asian people tend to use indirect messages, whereas Western people prefer direct messages. This is consistent with Hall's (1976) description of the characteristics of high-context and low-context cultures. High-context cultures tend to prefer indirect or implicit messages (e.g. countries including China, Japan and Thailand) (Neuliep, 2018), whereas low-context cultures are likely to subscribe to direct or explicit messages (e.g., countries including the United Kingdom, the United States and Germany) (Neuliep, 2018). For example, saying "no" as a direct rejection in a high-context culture should be avoided, due to concern for maintaining relationships and protecting feelings. Thus, it is recommended to say "maybe" or "probably" instead. However, a communicative approach can be taken to navigate low-context cultures. This contrasting communicative style is reflected in P7's photograph (Figure 2), taken in an office where he had worked part-time. His photograph offers a symbolic representation that remains hidden until the participant reveals its significance (Rose, 2014). This photograph represents a contrast between the direct and indirect messages provided by Asian and Western people, which is reflected by the landline as people use it to communicate with another person. Forms of communication differ across cultures.

Figure 2　A photograph of a landline illustrating the different communicative approaches in Eastern and Western countries

"In some situations, when applicants do not hold a qualification for a job, they [human resources] do not state the results [of the job application] directly to avoid hurting the applicants' feelings. ... I think this [not telling applicants directly] tends to be a habit common to Thais from a high-context culture, as I learnt from the course... The applicants have to wait for the results... I think Western cultures like British or American cultures typically use direct communication." (P7)

It should be noted that this is only P7's personal opinion and cannot be generalized to the entire Thai or Western population. His account implies that the knowledge gained may help him to communicate appropriately with individuals from different cultures. Similarly, learning about using direct versus indirect messages on the course helped P5 use particular language when emailing his Japanese lecturers (e.g. starting to talk about the weather first and then getting straight to the point). Moreover, P6 learnt about the different meanings associated with Indian people's head movements from the course. P6's understanding of the different meaning of various forms of non-verbal communication made her aware of the different interpretations of non-verbal messages and the option to use them with caution, as their meaning differs interculturally. These accounts reflect (C) processes/practices according to the definitions of culture, as culture is a process of sense making, designed to help individuals to understand other people's behaviors through interaction (Faulkner et al., 2006). Thus, the participants learnt about different modes of communication across cultures in order to avoid causing misunderstanding and false interpretation.

Exposure to differences in values and ways of life

During the Intercultural Communication course, P11 learnt about the simple life led by the Amish, a minority Christian group, in the US. P11's account relates to (A) patterns as a domain of the definitions of culture. According to Faulkner et al. (2006), culture can be regarded as patterns that include attitudes, beliefs and styles of behavior associated with particular groups of people. The patterns reflected in the case of the Amish's beliefs, related to descriptions in the Bible regarding leading simple lives emphasizing self-reliance (Birrell, 2018). P11 was exposed to the beliefs of this minority group and did not consider them as deviating from those of the majority.

"The lecturer told us about the subculture of the Amish, as they do not use technology ... It is an eye-opening experience for me ... There is no concrete road, as they [the Amish] use a horse-drawn carriage ... they

neither use electricity nor have running water, including not having Internet access at home. ... The lecturer told us that they might be satisfied with what they have. They do not want anything to change the way they live. I think it is another way of thinking and it is understandable." (P11)

Although P11 expressed feeling very surprised to learn that the Amish do not use any forms of technology, she also seemed to be open-minded with regard to their way of life as an alternative to her own. P11 does not judge the Amish's way of life by her own standards based on leading a life with technology (e.g. smartphones and computers), reflecting her multicultural mindset, which enables minority groups in any society to maintain their own identity.

In the case of P9, her photograph (Figure 3) reflects her interest in Korean culture, which led her to a deeper cultural understanding of Korean table manners. Koreans say "jal meo-kket-ssum-ni-da", meaning "I will eat well", or "I will enjoy this meal", before commencing a meal to show appreciation of the food they have received and to compliment the chef.

Figure 3 A photograph of Korean food representing the traditional approach to Korean eating habits

P9 explained, *"People in [South] Korea cannot cultivate crops all year round, so they ferment vegetables, such as Kimchi, and keep them in a jar to eat them in the winter. ... Korea used to be a poor country with a limited food supply. Thus, Korean people tend to appreciate every meal they have."* (P9)

Her knowledge enabled her to not only gain awareness of a unique food culture, but also helped her to understand Korean cultural values in depth, as reflected by people's relationship to food. From P9's account, a polite way to

show appreciation for the food of Korean people is to observe the patterns of behavior that Korean people engage in every time before consuming food. Korean table manners broadened P9's knowledge of other Asian cultures, instead of focusing simply on learning about the cultures of English-speaking countries.

Understanding other people with new perspectives

Overcoming the stereotype of people with disabilities
People with disabilities are considered to also inhabit a subculture (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2015), being "the smaller, coherent collective groups which exist within the larger dominant culture" (Liu et al., 2019, p. 350). Frequently, disabled people are stereotyped as being dependent, and thus, nondisabled people are likely to be taught to help them (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2015). Indeed, some of the participants observed that they used to believe that people with disabilities tend to need help from those without disabilities. However, this perception has changed as a result of knowledge gained on the course. Four of the participants strongly stated that "*it is better to ask disabled people if they need help or not instead of instantly offering our help, as they may not need it.*" This is because, in some situations, disabled persons seem to be forced to accept help that they may not require (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2015). These perceptions of disabled people can make them feel that they are being treated with dignity and equality. The participants' accounts are in line with a domain of the definitions of culture, i.e. (B) stereotyping function or psychological predispositions that include stereotypes. In this case, people with disabilities tend to be considered dependent and are pitied by wider society. Thus, people without disabilities may unnecessarily offer help. The participants' accounts demonstrate that doing so is not always perceived as respectful, and so non-disabled people should be aware of when they are responding to a stereotype when interacting with disabled people.

Respecting individual and cultural differences

Accepting an LGBTQ group member
Some participants went into detail about issues associated with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) culture, that they had learned about through the Intercultural Communication course. As P10 explained:
"*I like [when I learn about] the concept of gender as it makes me see gender diversity … In the final project, the lecturer told me to add another box for participants to tick to indicate that they are neither male nor female*

[when I ask them to fill in the questionnaire]. I had never thought about this before." (P10)

On P16's Instagram (IG) social media platform, she had seen her friends tell other people that they have a homosexual orientation, and she observed that all "*people have the equal right to like anyone regardless of their gender, and society should not judge them if they are homosexual.*" Noticeably, avoiding judging others, as P16 observed, helped to prevent prejudice, defined as "a negative attitude towards individuals resulting from negative stereotypes" (Liu et al., 2019, p. 349) towards LGBTQ individuals who may be regarded negatively by other people as they tend to deviate from social expectations. P17 "*did not treat those who are LGBTQ differently*" from how she treats those with a heterosexual orientation. This suggests that P17 is open-minded towards people with a homosexual orientation, which can have an impact on how she reacts to them. The participants' accounts reflect their multicultural worldview, as this non-majority group (LGBTQ individuals) are not seen as different from the majority, as they are expected to live with heterosexual individuals in harmony. These accounts reflect (F) group membership based on the domain of the definitions of culture, as culture refers to the inclusion of groups of people accepting their behaviors (Faulkner et al., 2006), which in this case is LGBTQ. This makes them feel that they are also a part of wider Thai society.

Overcoming cultural superiority and dominance
Overcoming feelings of cultural superiority and dominance is considered a crucial requirement to developing intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009), and is central to respect for others (Liu et al., 2019). In the case of P1, a trip to a neighboring country altered her attitude, as she had previously believed this neighboring country was less developed and anticipated a lack of modern buildings and dirtier areas than Thailand. However, her trip completely changed her attitude, as she stated, "*some areas in [this neighboring country] are modern, clean and it has a luxurious shopping mall like the ones in Thailand; people there [in this country] are very friendly.*" P1's account is in line with (E) suggesting privilege/refinement in the domain of the definitions of culture, whereby one culture is treated as more superior than another culture. This is because P1 previously believed that Thailand was more developed than this neighboring country, suggesting the superiority of Thailand over it. However, this perception was changed after P1 visited the neighboring country and found it had modern buildings and many clean areas.

Interestingly, in the final exam for the Intercultural Communication course, P11 responded to a question on the ban preventing Muslim girls from wearing headscarves at school in France, as it infringes notions of unity and the country's secular system as a display of religious symbolism. P11 stated *"France should change their teaching method to teach their students to accept minority groups' culture in its curriculum."* P11's account reflects the imbalance of power between the dominant group and a minority group, requiring Muslim minorities to comply with the French government's legislation. Thus, P11's account connects with (G) power in the domain of the definitions of culture, as those in the minority group, i.e. Muslim girls, seems to have less power when living in France, as they are not permitted to wear headscarves at school to comply with the secular law in France. Notably, the researcher was aware of people who agree with the French government and are in favor of secular laws. Thus, the researcher has no intention to overgeneralize concerning this issue.

Overcoming prejudice and discrimination

P4 was among the many participants who raised the issue of prejudice and discrimination. She stated that people may think that those with tattoos tend to be associated with criminal behavior and be Yakuza or Japanese gangsters, and this consequently leads to discrimination as they tend "*to be treated negatively; they may be prohibited from using some Onsen*" (a Japanese hot spring bath available for public use at resorts (Urban Dictionary, 2021)). However, P4 noted that *"people with tattoos are not necessarily bad people, and we should not make assumptions about others based on their physical appearance."* Her reflection of this is demonstrated in the photograph below (Figure 4). It is a photograph of a small fashion tattoo, which is regarded as symbolic, although the meaning remains hidden until the participant discloses its significance (See Rose, 2014); in this case, the image was selected to represent the unfair treatment of those with tattoos.

Figure 4 P4's photograph of her friend having a tattoo despite discrimination against those with tattoos

In a group project assignment for the course, P16 and P17 conducted a study to investigate Thai people and tour guides' perceptions of tourists from one Asian country. They discovered that the perceptions of Thai people tended to be negative, contrasting with those of tour guides which tended to be positive. This may be because tour guides have more frequent contact with the tourists (i.e. spending time together with the tourists), contrasting with other Thai people who might have less contact with tourists. This notion is in line with Allport's (1954) proposition that interactions with people from diverse cultures typically reduce prejudice and possibly serve to develop their mutual understanding. P16 and P17's accounts emphasize the importance of intercultural interaction to help reduce prejudice against those from distinct cultural backgrounds. To demonstrate the link between these accounts with domains of the definitions of culture, the participants' accounts point out that in the domain of definitions of culture, i.e. (H) prejudice, exists. Notably, the participants' accounts suggest that people judge one another based on physical appearance, in addition to race or religion, including people with tattoos in this case. People in some cultures prejudge those with tattoos, and the classification of other people as not being in-group members leads to prejudice. Consequently, adverse feelings and prejudicial views may create a negative reaction to those with tattoos. The participants' accounts demonstrate that prejudice should be neutralized, and people should be encouraged to interact with each other with respect.

Discussion

The findings reported in this study indicate that the participants developed their intercultural competence through reflection and introspection following particular life events, and from knowledge gained on the Intercultural Communication course. They were encouraged to re-examine other cultures from new perspectives, moving beyond negative factors (e.g. stereotype and prejudice) and creating positive ones, i.e. appreciation, mutual respect and understanding of other (sub)cultures, as well as enhancing their communicative skills (i.e. skills for leaving direct and indirect messages and deciphering the non-verbal messages that differ across cultures). Moreover, the findings of this study reinforce the importance of multiculturalism as indicated by the participants' respect for cultural differences. Consequently, this worldview enables people from diverse cultures, including those

from minority groups to be able to maintain their cultural identity without being judged by others who adopt their cultural standpoint (Lustig et al., 2017), as this notion is crucial to developing intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009). Interestingly, the issue of France's ban on prohibiting Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in public schools arguably reflects the mutual process involved in respecting one another's differences (Lustig et al., 2017), as it inhibits members from this particular subculture retaining their religiosity if they integrate into the dominant culture. This notion raises the importance of plurality or multiculturalism, and the requirement for people to embrace and accept cultural diversity.

When employing the multi-level paradigm model of culture and Intercultural Communication (Wang & Kulich, 2015), the findings of this study are illustrated accordingly (Figure 5). These findings are distributed around the circle close to the definitions and cultural parallels previously discussed. In the circle, the distribution of each theme in the findings correlates with the definitions of culture, as proposed by Faulkner et al. (2006). Moreover, these themes demonstrate progress towards the desired outcomes of intercultural competence and plurality. Furthermore, the model demonstrates evidence of a new awareness of issues of power, privilege and the notion of cultural superiority, stereotyping and prejudice, as well as greater understanding of multiculturalism and plurality.
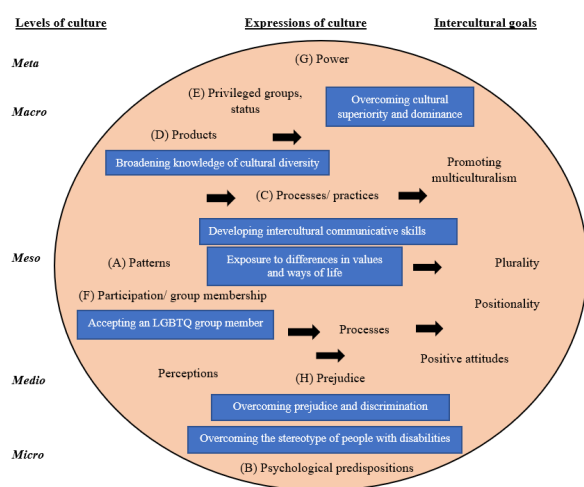
Figure 5 Themes from the findings related to the integrative multi-level paradigm model of culture and Intercultural Communication

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the development of students' intercultural competence through their reflection upon and introspection about life experiences, and the knowledge they gained from the Intercultural Communication course. It indicates that students are moving towards becoming intercultural (i.e. towards the goal of plurality based on the model). This study narrows down the gap in the existing literature by focusing on the development of Thai university students' intercultural competence. Additionally, the study contributes to existing research promoting students' knowledge of members of subcultures who deserve special acknowledgment of their differences within a dominant culture. Finally, the study proffered the integrated multi-level intercultural model to demonstrate students' progress towards the development of a multicultural mindset.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study is limited by a rather small set of participants from a single university. Thus, its findings cannot be generalized beyond the role of the participants and the institution. Moreover, the participants taking an English major may have influenced the study findings. This is because some of the participants informed the researcher that they had previously learnt about distinct cultures and associated issues, e.g. stereotype and prejudice, in some English courses, e.g. literature course. Furthermore, one participant told the researcher that another lecturer on the English major had discussed the Amish's ways of life in an English course. Thus, they may have been aware of these issues before enrolling on the Intercultural Communication course. Replication with a larger and more diverse set of participants is advised. The findings of this study also reflect the need for educators, policy planners and other stakeholders, i.e. students from the first year to the third year, to reference and be aware of the cultures of non-native English speakers and people from subcultures in higher education contexts to enhance Thai university students' intercultural competence before they enter the workforce. The findings have implications for university lecturers wishing to incorporate the cultures of non-native speakers of English from other cultures, and those of subcultures, into a culture course to broaden students' knowledge and develop their intercultural competence. This study

suggests that another potentially interesting domain to explore would be the cultures of non-native English-speaking countries, as well as members of subcultures, as a way to minimize the misinterpretation of the behaviors of people from different cultural backgrounds, and to increase the effectiveness of intercultural communication between non-majority groups and those within mainstream society.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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