



An analysis of intercultural challenges and desired competencies of the U.S. and Thai employees of a large international organization in Thailand

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Abstract

As Thailand is advancing its roles on the international stage, the study recognizes the significance of intercultural training and development in Thailand and responds to the inconclusive scholarly discussion about effective intercultural training. This article presents an analysis of intercultural challenges and desired competencies of the U.S. and Thai employees of a large international organization in Thailand. It is a part of a broader study encompassing the whole ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) instructional design model. Only the Analysis phase will be presented in this article. The study uses a case study research method and data are collected through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, observation, and literature reviews. The analysis found shared patterns of competencies and challenges between the two different cultural groups. The shared competencies present the affective, knowledge, skills, and behavioral elements, while the shared challenges encompass language competency, direct versus indirect communication, and cultural and organizational norms. The findings demonstrate that intercultural competence in the workplace is contextual as it goes beyond national cultures and communication alone.

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Introduction

Thailand's 20-year plan (2018–2037) to enhance its role on the world stage through soft power diplomacy including promoting Bangkok as “the Geneva of Asia” by hosting foreign diplomatic missions, the UN,

and various international organizations' regional offices (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018) underscores the need to equip the workforce of these organizations with intercultural development within the Thai context. The importance of intercultural communication has long been recognized by organizations investing in

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costly language and intercultural training to ensure their expatriates are prepared for intercultural challenges. Despite the intensive training, language proficiency and cultural gaps endured (American Foreign Service Association [AFSA], 2018; U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2017; Warner, 2019).

Research Problem, Objective, and Questions

Many intercultural competence studies were conducted in western countries while other areas including Thailand are yet to be explored. The lack of empirical data on this topic in Thailand results in less understanding of intercultural competence development within the Thai context. Addressing this problem contributes to better understanding of the relatively uncharted area. The study also has practical benefits for Thailand's endeavor to advance its role globally.

This article presents the Analysis phase, the first part of a broader case study aiming to develop effective intercultural training for a large international organization in Thailand whose success relies heavily on its U.S. and Thai employees' intercultural competence. The study uses the ADDIE training design model as its framework. The acronym ADDIE refers to five training steps, namely, Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation. In this context, the term Analysis refers to needs analysis. Needs analysis is the first, critical phase as it uncovers what lies at the roots of the problems and what learning is needed to enable training participants to be interculturally competent. Data from needs analysis lead the other four phases throughout. This article solely focuses on needs analysis, the first phase of the ADDIE model.

Following Deardorff (2006)'s study, this article refers to intercultural competence as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations". Effectiveness refers to achieving the communication goal, and appropriateness refers to the manners to achieve that goal. As the definition's emphasis is on communication, Deardorff (2006) used the terms intercultural competence and intercultural communication competence interchangeably. Three research questions for the analysis phase are presented below.

1. What are the desired behavioral outcomes of the training?
2. What knowledge, skills, and affective elements would the participants need to acquire to enable them to advance these outcomes in the workplace?
3. What challenges have the participants experienced in their intercultural interactions?

Literature Reviews

The first part of the literature review focuses on cultural and language challenges of intercultural interactions. Given that cultural challenges stem from cultural differences, the article discusses grounded intercultural premises that highlight differences between cultural groups, namely, individualism/collectivism and high-context/low-context communication. The article then presents language challenges of the U.S. and Thai groups, followed by their impact. The last part of this section focuses on Deardorff's intercultural competency model. This study uses Deardorff (2006)'s framework because it highlights ongoing development and encompassing affective, knowledge, and skills elements that lead to effective and appropriate intercultural communication. The model also aligns with the second research question on identifying knowledge, skills, and affective elements that promote desired behaviors.

Challenges of Intercultural Interactions

Cultural differences

When comparing Thailand to the U.S. on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the two countries' scores on individualism are in stark contrast: 20 points for Thailand and 91 for the U.S. Differences in Hofstede's other dimensions are relatively minor. The underlying differences between the two cultures are the priority given to oneself or to in-group members. The first, called individualists, are more independent. The other, called collectivists, are more group-oriented (Hofstede, 2011). Individualists tend to be unique, expressive, and confrontational, which display their value of freedom of expression. Collectivists tend to be interdependent, subtle, and prefer face-saving methods to foster their value of group harmony (Andersen, 2012). The differences were echoed by Kohls (1984)'s list of 13 American values focusing on independence and competition, and Knutson and Posirisuk (2006)'s Thailand's key value centering on harmony and interdependence.

The concept of high and low-context communication is intertwined with the individualism and collectivism. Individualists lean towards low-context communication and collectivists towards high-context communication (Neuliep, 2020). Consequently, the U.S. and Thailand are poles apart in context-related communication. The U.S. is among the countries that use lowest-context communication (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992; Hall, 1976), whereas Thailand is among the countries that use

highest-context communication (Harada, 2017). High-context communication is implicit, less verbal, indirect, and takes the topic of communication more personal. Low-context communication is explicit, more verbal, and separates the topic of communication from the sense of self (Hall, 1976; Neuliep, 2020).

Language differences

In addition to having distinct communication approaches, the U.S. and Thailand also use different languages. Thai is the official language of Thailand. Although many international organizations in Thailand use English as their main official language, the country was placed in the lowest English proficiency level, 21st of 23 countries in Asia and 101st of 113 countries worldwide (English Proficiency Index, 2023). The proficiency gaps also exist among Americans whose career prospects partly rely on their host country language skills. For instance, GAO (2017) reported that 22 percent of the U.S. Department of State's language-designated positions in East Asia and the Pacific were filled by foreign service officers who failed to meet the language proficiency requirements.

Impact of cultural and language differences

The impact of limited language and intercultural skills extends beyond mere insufficient comprehension. These challenges affect employees' emotions, social identities, trust building, and power relations (Tenzer et al., 2017). Employees have less confidence, avoid meetings held in the language foreign to them, and switch back to their own language during group meetings. These challenges are directly relevant to the study and inform the third research question, which explores the challenges the target participants experienced in their intercultural interactions.

Deardorff's Intercultural Competency

Deardorff (2006)'s intercultural competence model has four components: attitudes, knowledge/comprehension, and skills; internal outcomes; and external outcomes. The attitudes component comprises respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery. The knowledge component includes cultural knowledge and sociolinguistics. Skills refer to observing, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, and relating. The internal outcomes refer to flexibility, adaptability, ethno-relative views and empathy. The external outcomes refer to effective and appropriate communication in an intercultural interaction. The model illustrates three ways to achieve the external outcomes:

(1) straight from attitudes; (2) from attitudes to knowledge/comprehension, and skills; (3) a pathway through (2) and internal outcomes, eventually arriving at the desired external outcomes. The study used Deardorff (2006)'s model to inform the first and second research questions, which focus on identifying desired intercultural communication behaviors and the affective, knowledge, and skills elements that contribute to these behaviors.

Methodology

The researcher used a case study to answer the research questions. The case study is a type of qualitative research appropriate for identifying action to improve practice and resolve social problems in a particular context (Salkind, 2018). It allows the study to inquire into individuals' affective, cognitive, skills, and behavioral elements in depth (Roberts et al., 2019).

Population & Samples

Population

Data were collected in a large international organization comprised of several dozen units totaling about 2,000 Thai and U.S. employees. The U.S. employees have a turnover cycle of two or three years. A handful of the U.S. employees receive language training in the U.S. before their arrival in Thailand. The Thai staff, recruited in Thailand, do not have a turnover cycle. English proficiency requirements vary according to position.

Samples

A total of 12 employees, six Thai and six U.S. employees, participated in the study. Three Thai and three U.S. employees participated in separate focus groups, and the rest participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The focus groups were used to inform the first two research questions: 1) identifying desired behavioral outcomes, 2) identifying knowledge, skills, and affective elements that help develop these behaviors. The semi-structured interviews were used to form the third research question: identifying challenges in intercultural interactions.

Given the limited available desired population, the study used purposive sampling with snowball technique (Passmore & Baker, 2005) to identify potential participants. The researcher started by reaching out to the HR office and a few influencers because of their large networks. Participant selection for the focus

groups targets employees who have worked closely and successfully with other cultural group for at least four months. Participant selection for the semi-structured interviews were those with less than one year of experience working in the organization or who expressed interest in joining the training.

Table 1 shows the participants' demographic data and experiences. The abbreviations FG and SI refer to the focus group and semi-structured interview methods respectively. Pseudonyms A1-A3 and T1-T3 refer to the U.S. and Thai focus group participants respectively; A4-A6 and T4-T6 refer to the U.S. and Thai U.S. semi-structured interview participants respectively.

Data Collection Methods

The study used focus group, semi-structured interview, and observation methods during the inquiry

processes. The focus group technique, suitable for delving into collective and in-depth information on perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) aims at identifying desired intercultural competencies as addressed in the first two research questions.

The research questions, together with Deardorff's (2006) model were used to guide focus group questions. Key interview questions are (1) What was one of your successful intercultural interactions about?; (2) what behaviors did you exhibit in that experience?; (3) what knowledge and skills helped facilitate these behaviors? The semi-structured interviews aim at identifying intercultural challenges to answer the third research question. The interview questions, guided by the research question and literature reviews, centered on the challenges they encountered in intercultural communication. Key interview questions are (1) what did you encounter?; (2) why didn't it go as planned?; and (3) what possibly caused the communication breakdown?

Table 1 The research participants' demographic data and experiences

Data collection	Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Employment period	Work in the organization	Work prior to the organization
FG	A1	M	39	2.5 years	Admin, complex interactions	13 years of experience in similar jobs in Europe and Asia.
FG	A2	F	45	1.5 years	Financial-related duties	8 years of experience in similar jobs in Africa and the U.S.
FG	A3	M	56	2.5 years	Security-related jobs	4 years in similar job in Africa, and Eastern Europe after decades in sales in the U.S.
FG	T1	M	36	14 years	Diverse duties and complex interactions	8 months in teaching and translation.
FG	T2	F	46	4 years	Customer service and admin	7 years in hotel business in Thailand and 5 years living in the U.S.
FG	T3	F	33	6 years	Coordinate with internal, external, and international stakeholders	2 years in international travel business and 2 years study in the U.S.
SI	A4	F	42	4 months	Agricultural-related responsibilities	Similar duties in Japan for 3 years and in Indonesia for 3 years.
SI	A5	M	41	4 months	Health-related duties	Worked in a military unit in the U.S. Never worked and lived abroad before Thailand.
SI	A6	F	61	5 months	Building maintenance	Similar duties in many countries including Kenya, Russia, and Vietnam.
SI	T4	F	28	6 months	Admin	Worked in a Thai company for 2 years and Japanese company for one year, mostly in admin areas.
SI	T5	F	30	11 months	Employee-related duties	Worked in a Japanese business for 7 years in sales and production
SI	T6	M	51	5 months	Security-related duties	Worked in a Thai governmental office for more than 30 years taking care of international cases. 5 months training in the U.S.

Observation was used to confirm verbal data and/or discover emerging non-verbal data. Observation began when the participants accepted the invitation to participate in the study, continued through the inquiries, and extend until they left after the sessions concluded. Each 90-minute focus group session was held in a meeting room during lunch hour. A light lunch was provided to create informal and conducive discussion environment. To accommodate semi-structured interview participants, each 60-minute interview was conducted at a time and location of their choice. Audio recorders were used to record data during the inquiry sessions while analytic memos were recorded right after each session concluded. All candidates were informed of their rights as participants and provided informed consent.

Data Analysis

Analytic procedures

The researcher transcribed the recorded data within two days of completion of each inquiry. All the notes from observation and reflection were revisited, organized, and incorporated into the data analysis process. The researcher used the combined data to draw main ideas/themes.

The researcher applied both deductive and inductive analysis approaches. The deductive approach, guided by literature reviews and research questions, was used

to hone coding framework. The inductive approach was used to make broad generalizations of raw data and to generate codes (Roberts et al., 2019). Braun and Clarke (2006)'s six phases of thematic analysis were used to perform coding: from familiarizing with and immersing into the data, finding connection of meanings, generating codes through multiple visits to the transcripts to assess for coding accuracy and alignment with literature reviews, finding connections of codes to create themes, reviewing the theming accuracy, and reporting the themes and codes as the last step.

Data Validation

During the inquiry sessions, the researcher used member checking to verify her understanding. After the data were transcribed, the researcher sent the main ideas drawn from transcription to each participant to confirm accuracy. Unclear remarks found during transcription were followed up with the corresponding speakers. Data from the inquiry sessions were triangulated with observation and literature reviews related to each coding to enhance the findings' validity, as shown in Table 2, data from the U.S. focus group. Tables 3 and 4 show the results of data analysis. The letters T and A followed by numbers refer to the research participants' pseudonyms described in Table 1, and the letters "O" and "L" represent observation and literature reviews respectively.

Table 2 Triangulation of data

Theme	Code	Excerpts from participants (A1, A2, A3)	Observation (O)	Literature review (L)	Description drawn from data
Affect	Respect	<p>"When I ask what do you think about that, folks feel heard and valued." (A1)</p> <p>"Starting with something they are doing well so that it's known that they are appreciated." (A2)</p> <p>"I respect them by listening... I told them all the time I am not your boss I am your colleague." (A3)</p>	<p>After they accepted an invitation to join the focus group, they declined an internal event, showing their commitment to the appointment. They showed up on time and were engaged in the dialogue and the researcher's questions. They made the researcher feel respected and comfortable in asking follow-up questions through their respectful and approachable demeanor.</p>	<p>Respect is one of the essential attitudes necessary for effective and appropriate intercultural interaction, Deardorff (2006).</p>	<p>Recognize and respect differences in values, norms, and practices. Be polite, composed, and use inclusive approaches in discussions and activities. Be willing to build trust in Thai staff to establish rapport.</p>

Table 3 Desired intercultural competencies

		Desired Intercultural Competencies	
Themes	U.S.		Thai
Affect (Attitudes & values)	Growth mindset: Be open-minded and curious about Thai culture. Willing to use a bit of Thai. Willing to adapt communication. See misunderstanding rather than conflicts. Learn and adapt to carry through and accomplish tasks. (A1, A2, A3, O, L)		Growth mindset: Be curious, frank, and open-minded. Be willing to communicate and renegotiate to achieve goals. Want to learn from others and embrace differences. Be willing to develop a working rapport to secure cooperation and accomplish tasks. (T1, T2, T3, O, L)
	Self-composure: Be aware of and manage one's own emotion and in control of outward expressions, be patient, calm, and sensitive to their perception on feedback. Hold back remarks or speech that could be held negatively. (A1, A2, A3, O, L)		Self-confidence: Feel confident and comfortable to interact with Americans and express own opinions. Do not feel intimidated by pushbacks. Be assertive when needed. Be ready to answer questions. Avoid being apologetic. (T1, T2, T3, O, L)
	Respect: Recognize and respect differences in values, norms, and practices. Be polite, composed, and use inclusive approaches in discussions and activities. Be willing to build trust in Thai staff to establish rapport. (A1, A2, A3, O, L)		Resilience: Be result-oriented. Overcome obstacles through persistence and use of communication and resources to regain ground and secure achievement. Know where and how to get help to accomplish tasks. (T1, T2, T3, O, L)
Knowledge	Cultural awareness: Recognize and understand differences of verbal and non-verbal communication approaches between Thais and Americans including possibility of Thais taking offence at some of Americans' non-verbal cues. (A1, A2, A3, O, L)		Cultural awareness: Recognize and understand differences of verbal and non-verbal communication approaches between Thais and Americans. Recognize and understand differences of Thai and American values and norms. (T1, T2, T3, O, L)
	Cultural knowledge: Know the Thai culture such as festivals, ceremonies, food, and Thai language. Be able to speak a few phrases to show interest and build rapport. (A1, A2, L)		Cultural knowledge: Know the U.S. core values such as Americans' culture of communication and privacy rights, and increasingly recognized principles such as the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) principles. (T1, T2, L)
	Job knowledge: Know what your staff are doing. Have solid knowledge of their jobs/assignments to be able to give the Thai employees support. (A1, A2, A3, L)		Job knowledge: Know what you are doing. Have solid knowledge of one own's jobs including content, purpose, steps, impact, etc. Be able to discuss, answer, and ask questions about your work (T1, T2, T3, L)
Skills	Perspective taking: Listen, observe verbal and non-verbal language and be able to arrive at possible interpretations from Thais' perspectives. Use the new perspectives to guide new communication approaches (A1, A2, A3, L)		Perspective taking: Sympathize with the U.S. interlocutors about their problems. Be observant to individual's communication styles and able to anticipate and/ or respond to their needs, questions, reactions, and decisions. Be able to adjust own communication style accordingly. (T1, T2, T3, L)
	Clear & confirmed communication skills: Be sensitive to Thai staff's language skills and adapt approaches to produce clear messages. Use varied resources and multiple methods to get the messages across. (A1, A2, A3, O, L)		Clear & confirmed communication skills: Have solid listening, reading, speaking, and writing English skills to communicate accurately. Able to connect, build on, discuss, and question ideas in fast, firm, focused, clear, direct, honest, and assertive manners. Use multiple methods to get the messages across. (T1, T2, T3, O, L)
	Non-verbal communication skills: Know how to read and react to certain non-verbal communication e.g. smiles and silence. Adjust approaches to align with the Thai non-verbal communication. Avoid using non-verbal language to vent frustration. (A1, A2, A3, O, L)		Non-verbal communication skills: Know how to use non-verbal communication to clarify and emphasize the meaning of the verbal communication. Project confidence during interaction through body posture. (T1, T2, T3, O, L)

Table 3 Continued

		Desired Intercultural Competencies	
Themes		U.S.	Thai
Behaviors	Cultural sensitivity: Be sensitive to the cultural differences and mindful of how their approaches may be perceived differently. Hold back remarks or speech that could be held negatively. Civilly demonstrate understanding of the differences and appreciation/interest of the Thai culture. (A1, A2, A3, O, L)		Cultural sensitivity: Observe the Americans' communication styles, learn, and be sensitive to the cultural differences. Adapt to align with the U.S. values, principles, and approaches, e.g., showing confidence in interaction and interest/understanding of DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility). (T1, T2, T3, L)
	Relationship building: Know how to make Thai staff feel comfortable conversing, and/or sharing information with them. Use personal aspects, or common grounds to connect and build on the relationships. Socialize through chat, food, drink. Celebrate their success and share their grief. Show interest in Thai culture. (A1, A2, A3, O, L)		Relationship building: See the importance of relationship and its connection to work accomplishment. Build relationships by walking around, connect by starting small talk, picking up and joining conversations. Use casual conversations to advance work results. Use personal aspects, or common grounds to connect and build on the relationships. (T1, T2, T3, O, L)
	Adaptation: Modify communication approaches and practices to align with cultural practices and office norms. Accommodate individual context, in speaking and in writing. Be calm and supportive using positive language to encourage and recognize Thai staff. (A1, A2, A3, O, L)		Adaptation: Modify communication approaches. Learn, anticipate, and adapt communication styles and approaches to align with cultural norms and individual context, in speaking and in writing. Be confident, clear, concise, fast, and well prepared. (T1, T2, T3, O, L)

Table 4 Challenges in intercultural interaction

		Challenges in intercultural interaction	
		U.S. employees	Thai employees
Language competency	Limited knowledge and skills of the Thai language: Preventing U.S. employees from understanding and making dialogue with Thai employees. Communication with Thai employees with lower English skills being performed through office translators or Thai supervisors. This practice reduced opportunities to connect and build relationships with the Thai employees. (A5, A6, O, L)		Limited knowledge and skills of English: Having challenges in understanding the U.S. employees' different accents, fast tempo, jargon, and idioms. Limited abilities to use appropriate syntax, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Struggling with report writing. Those with lower English skills communicated with the U.S. supervisors through office translators or Thai supervisors. (T6, A6, O, L)
	Adherence to one own's natural speech during interaction: Many U.S. employees used their natural speech, which could be fast, full of jargon, idioms, and/or with accents unfamiliar to the Thai employees causing more barrier. (T4, T5, O, L)		Lack of confidence in speaking English: Some Thai employees' avoidance of speaking English despite having enough basic skills. They felt more comfortable with and/or prefer talking to other Thai colleagues in Thai. (T5, A5, O, L)
Direct versus Indirect communication	Task-based focus: Conversation centering on tasks not relationships. Minimum use of small talk, or lighthearted conversations to connect with lower-ranking Thais, leading to the Thais' lack of confidence in sharing problems and other information with the U.S. supervisors. (T5, A5, L)		Relationship-based focus: Thais used casual conversation to build relationships. Thais may say 'yes' even in the event that they were supposed to say 'no' to maintain relationships, causing confusion or distortion of information. (T5, A4, L)
	Confronting: The U.S.' direct communication approaches including pushbacks, loudness, conciseness, and straightforwardness in disagreement may cause uneasiness, less self-assurance, and/or misunderstanding among the Thai employees. Questions from the U.S. supervisors demanding immediate answers may be intimidating for the lower ranking Thais. (T4, T5, T6, A4, A6, O, L)		Avoiding: Thais' silence and smiles were perplexing for some U.S. employees. Thai employees' avoidance of asking despite having questions during group meetings. They were also found to give no or limited feedback in group meetings, and be apologetic when they could not answer questions immediately. Thais share limited information about problems or dissent with U.S. supervisors. (T4, T5, T6, A6, O, L)

Table 4 Continued

		Challenges in intercultural interaction	
		U.S. employees	Thai employees
Cultural and organizational norms	Limited intercultural knowledge and skills: The U.S. employees' limited knowledge of how Thais generally deal with certain situations. This may leave them in limbo as they were unaware of how to respond to the situation appropriately. (T4, A5, O, L)	Limited intercultural knowledge and skills: Limited knowledge of how U.S. employees generally deal with certain situations. Thai employees' interpretation of what they saw and heard was based on their cultural perspectives. They felt unsure of how to respond. (T4, T5, T6, O, L)	
	Cultural and political correctness: Different values and alterations in the language to align with constant changing of conformity and values may contribute to restriction of communication and opportunities to build relationships. (A6, T6, O, L)	Face values: Communication or actions deteriorating face values, such as criticism in public, direct pushbacks, or rearrangement of organization charts were likely to receive resistance. (T5, A5, O, L)	
	Lack of systematic platforms to reduce intercultural gaps: Absence of regular or structural meetings between U.S. supervisors and their Thai employees prevented the U.S. supervisors from work updates and/or dynamic in the office. Information gaps were widened with language and/or cultural barriers. (A5, A4, O, L)	Organizational hierarchy: The U.S. employees' separate offices were seen as a physical boundary between the U.S. and Thai employees. Multiple levels in the chain of command were also found to be demotivating for intercultural interaction. (T5, A4, A5, L)	

Results

Through the deductive and inductive approaches, predetermined themes guided by Deardorff's (2006) model, specifically affect, knowledge, skills, and behaviors were used as a framework for emerging codes, aligned with the first two research questions. Results of the first two research questions, namely, desired behavioral outcomes and knowledge, skills, and affective

elements that help develop these behaviors are presented together in [Table 3](#) and [Figure 1](#). [Table 4](#) answers the third research question about the intercultural challenges experienced by both cultural groups. Both tables display the codes, followed by their corresponding descriptions. Most of the codes are shared between the two groups. However, descriptions of these competencies vary due to differing perspectives.

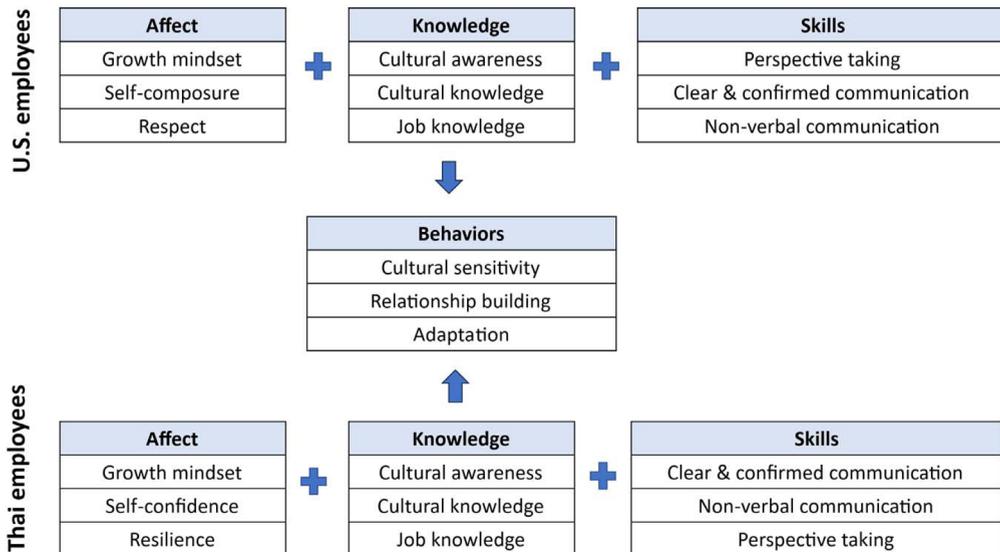


Figure 1 Affective elements, knowledge, and skills leading to desired behaviors

The Desired Behavioral Outcomes of the Training

Data from the focus groups yielded competencies contributing to effective and appropriate communication between the U.S. and Thai employees. As shown in [Table 3](#), the desired behaviors encompass cultural sensitivity, relationship building, and adaptation. During intercultural interaction, interlocutors should be culturally sensitive and mindful of different values, perceptions, and practices. This sensitivity prompts the interlocutors to adapt their verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to ensure effectiveness and appropriateness. Proper adaptation helps build and maintain relationships. These three desired behavioral outcomes are shaped by the affect, knowledge, and skills as shown in [Figure 1](#).

The Desired Knowledge, Skills, and Affective Elements

From [Table 3](#), the U.S. and Thai groups have shared competencies in all knowledge and skills elements. Both groups share one affective competency: growth mindset. The other two affective competencies differ, with the U.S. group emphasizing self-composure and respect, while the Thai group emphasized self-confidence and resilience. The differing reflects each side's recognition, respect, and adaptation to the other group's unique traits and priorities. For instance, Thais or collectivists highly value self-composure and respect while Americans or individualists place greater emphasis on self-confidence and resilience. This mutual adaptation highlights a co-effort in bridging the cultural gap.

Intercultural Communication Challenges

Three themes emerged through the inductive analysis approach: language competency, direct versus indirect communication, and cultural and organizational norms, see [Table 4](#). Language competency refers to ability to understand and communicate in Thai or English. Direct communication refers to explicit expression of ideas. Indirect communication refers to implicit expression of ideas including usage of non-verbal communication. Cultural and organizational norms refer to rules or shared practices adhered to by employees.

It is noteworthy that the challenges originating from one cultural group were recognized by both groups. For example, the Thai emphasis on face-saving was recognized as a challenge by both Thai and U.S. employees. Each challenge may intersect and/or impact one another, creating a domino effect. For instance,

Thai employees' lack of English skills may lead to the lack of confidence and consequently avoidance of open communication with the U.S. employees. Information flow would then be solely determined by employees with high English skills, contributing to information imbalance in the organization.

Discussion

This article highlights intercultural competencies that can effectively address the communication challenges faced by Thai and U.S. employees in a large organization. Notably, while the semi-structured interview participants identified limited language proficiency as a challenge in intercultural communication, the focus groups consisting of intercultural communication experts did not place a strong emphasis on the need for Thai employees to have advanced English skills or for U.S. employees to be proficient in Thai. Instead, they recommended that employees leverage various competencies and available resources to prevent or mitigate communication breakdowns. This may be due to the fact that employees' English proficiency was already screened during the recruitment process.

For instance, being well-equipped with job knowledge and techniques for clarifying messages both verbally and non-verbally can help employees adapt their approaches to enhance communication effectiveness. Additionally, having cultural sensitivity, which stems from acquiring cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and perspective-taking, can enhance communication appropriateness and strengthen relationships. The results provide a lens on effective intercultural communication, which is not solely about language proficiency but about mastering various competencies to communicate appropriately within diverse social contexts.

The second part of the intercultural communication challenges concerns the distinctive cultural traits between U.S. employees' direct and confrontational approaches and Thai employees' indirect communication and avoidance of conflicts. The results confirm the presence of Hofstede's individualism/collectivism and Hall's low-context/high-context communication in the organization. These dynamics were then amplified by the organization's hierarchical systems and current practices.

The study's intercultural competencies drawn from data analysis generally align with Deardorff's (2006) model, the framework of the study. However, two competencies not specifically included in Deardorff's model, namely,

job knowledge and relationship building, were found to play a significant role in the organization's context. Having job knowledge enhances employees' confidence in communication, and good relationships empower open and inclusive dialogues. These two competencies could also help lessen language barriers, cultural gaps, and power dynamics. The results of the study demonstrates that intercultural communication competence in the workplace extends beyond language, national cultures, and communication. It also includes the organization cultural practices and the work itself.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This article contributes to scholarly knowledge through the application of case study and qualitative methods to analyze challenges and desired competencies of the U.S. and Thai employees during their interaction. As this part of the study aimed at obtaining detailed data, the focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted in-depth for the researcher to thoroughly understand the participants' perspectives. Despite the small sample size, the findings were insightful. This study could serve as a foundation for future studies with larger sample sizes to expand on the findings. In addition, the study can be used by organizations of similar types to review their current intercultural training programs, or design new context-based intercultural training customized to their specific challenges. Organizations can also use the results to create communication strategies and policies to empower diversity and inclusion.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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