

Unraveling the Intercultural Sensitivity of Foreign Teachers: A Cross-Sectional Examination in Secondary Education across Public and Private Schools, Thailand

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Abstracts: This research aims to explore cultural distinctions and investigate the adaptability of foreign teachers in both public and private secondary schools. A mixed methods approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews and questionnaires as study instruments. The study instruments included the Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale (SPCC), Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), and Tromso Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS). Data analysis relied on descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that foreign teachers in both public and private secondary schools demonstrated the highest levels in three key factors: Friends, Interaction Attention, and Social Information Processing. These factors corresponded to self-perceived communication competence, self-reported intercultural sensitivity, and social intelligence, respectively.

Keywords: Cultural Differences, Cultural Shock, Intercultural Sensitivity, Social Intelligence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing presence of foreigners from diverse cultures working in Thailand can give rise to cultural conflict. Foreign teachers, owing to their unfamiliarity with school operations, Thai culture, lesson plans, school policies, and major holidays, may inadvertently generate conflicts or issues in their work environment. Nevertheless, students benefit from studying with foreign teachers because it enhances their communication skills. However, language barriers exist because foreign teachers often do not speak Thai, which requires students to make an effort to interact. In light of this situation, it is essential for foreign language teachers and students to not only study the linguistic and cultural context, but also be aware of the interconnectedness between language and culture. Culture encompasses various aspects, including religion, food, clothing, language, marriage, and music, which differ across the world. Culture is defined as shared patterns of behavior, interactions, cognitive frameworks, and knowledge acquired through socialization.

In intercultural workplaces where cultural differences are prevalent, intercultural sensitivity plays a crucial role. It refers to the ability of individuals to transform themselves both emotionally and cognitively, progressing from a denial to an integration stage in the development process of intercultural communication. This transformation fosters an empathic ability to accept and adapt to cultural differences. Intercultural sensitivity is characterized by an active desire to understand, appreciate, and accept differences among cultures, ultimately promoting effective intercultural communication.

Higher intercultural sensitivity is a prerequisite for intercultural communication competence, enabling individuals to become more confident global citizens as their understanding of cultural differences deepens. People with heightened intercultural sensitivity display genuine interest in and engagement with learning about other cultures, fostering emotional connections, and promoting appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication.

Given the significance of intercultural sensitivity and the issues highlighted above, this study aims to explore the intercultural sensitivity of foreign teachers in Buriram schools, Thailand. The findings of this research will serve as valuable guidelines for understanding and addressing cultural differences, leading to further advancements in the study of intercultural communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In modern workplaces and multicultural settings characterized by diverse cultural backgrounds, intercultural sensitivity assumes a pivotal role. According to Bennett (1986), intercultural sensitivity refers to the capability of individuals to undergo emotional, cognitive, and behavioral transformations during the process of intercultural communication (Borello et al., 2016; Etri, 2021; Harper, 2020; Lei & Zhihui, 2018; Su & Pan, 2022; Weise & Monereo, 2018; Wu, 2021; Yenpdech et al., 2022; Zhang & Sun, 2018). These transformations progress from a state of denial to integration, fostering an empathic ability to acknowledge and adapt to cultural differences, as also emphasized by Chen and Starosta (2000: 4).

Culture shock is a phenomenon that individuals experience when exposed to unfamiliar cultures. This experience typically progresses through four stages: the honeymoon stage, where initial encounters are generally positive; the negotiation stage, characterized by frustration and challenges; the adjustment stage, where frustration lessens as individuals become more accustomed to new cultures; and the acceptance stage (Cupsa, 2018; Demes & Geeraert, 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2017; Geeraert et al., 2019; Goldstein & Keller, 2015; Gray & Savicki, 2015; Lysgaard, 1955; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013; McLaren & Paterson, 2019; Montanari, 2013; Moufakkir, 2013; Rockstuhl & Dyne, 2018; Rudmin, 2009; Valenzuela & Rogers, 2018, Wang et al., 2018).

Intercultural competence is a crucial aspect encompassing various concepts such as global competence, graduate attributes, employability skills, global citizenship, education for sustainable development, and global employability. These concepts recognize the impact of globalization in today's world and emphasize the need for graduates to engage and act at a global level (Allen, 2022; Babaev et al., 2020; Leung, Ang, & Tan, 2014; Luo, 2021; Sapienza, Helena Schoen, & Fisberg, 2017; Smaoui, 2021).

Dr. Milton Bennett developed the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS), depicting how individuals respond to cultural differences (Toda & Maru, 2018). The DMIS comprises a continuum ranging from ethnocentric to highly ethnorelative attitudes, emphasizing that increased cultural awareness leads to enhanced cognitive sophistication (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012:155; Feng, 2021). This model is applicable for both children and adults as they develop cross-cultural awareness (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012; Etri, 2021).

For foreign language learners to achieve intercultural communication competence and function effectively in diverse linguistic, ethnic, and religious contexts, intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and competence are essential goals of foreign language teaching (Dombi, 2016; Han, 2013). These attributes enable learners to become competent communicators in various intercultural situations.

In light of the significance of intercultural sensitivity and its impact on diverse fields, this literature review explores various dimensions of intercultural sensitivity, culture shock stages, intercultural competence, and the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. It also examines the role of intercultural sensitivity in foreign language teaching, highlighting the importance of nurturing this competence to create competent global communicators.

2.1. Research Objectives

1. To explore the distinctions between various cultures
2. To investigate at the adaptability of foreign teachers from public and private secondary schools

2.2. Research Questions

1. What are the distinctions between various cultures?
2. How does the adaptability of foreign teachers from public and private secondary schools manifest in multicultural environments?

2.3. Definition of Key Terms

1) Intercultural Sensitivity: In this study, intercultural sensitivity refers to the active desire of individuals to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate, and accept cultural differences among diverse cultures, as defined by Chen and Starosta (1998:231).

2) Lingua Franca: The term "lingua franca" is used to describe a language that is adopted as a common means of communication between individuals who have different native languages.

3) Culture: For the purpose of this study, culture is defined as a comprehensive collection of people's qualities, knowledge, customs, and traditions, encompassing aspects such as language, religion, cuisine, social behaviors, music, and arts.

4) Socialization: Socialization refers to the process that begins during childhood, through which individuals acquire the values, habits, and attitudes of their society, shaping their behavior and identity.

5) Public and Private Secondary Schools: The study focuses on foreign teachers from both public and private secondary schools located in Buriram province, Thailand covering all nine united campuses, namely: 1) United Campus Krasang, 2) United Campus Nangrong, 3) United Campus Prakhonchai, 4) United Campus Phutthaisong, 5) United Campus Buriram, 6) United Campus Lahan Sai, 7) United Campus Lam Plai Mat, 8) United Campus Satuk, and 9) United Campus Nong Kee.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants & Sample

This study employed a mixed-methods approach that included both survey methods and semi-structured interviews. A purposive sample strategy was used to identify 30 overseas teachers from public and private secondary schools across all nine united campuses from the population of interest of 40 overseas teachers.

3.2. Instruments and Procedures

1) Closed-end questionnaire: The study instrument employed was a closed-end questionnaire with four parts for information collection, 2) Demographic Information: To collect demographic information such as gender, ethnicity, school of study, and intercultural experience, a four-question checklist was incorporated, 3) Self-Perceived Communication Competence: The SPCC scale, developed by McCroskey and McCroskey (1988), was used to measure self-perceived communication competence, 4) Self-Reported Intercultural Sensitivity: A 24-item (120-point) scale was added to the survey to assess self-reported intercultural sensitivity. Chen and Starosta (2000) classified this scale into five kinds, which indicated great reliability and validity, and 5) Social Intelligence: Silvera et al. (2001) created a 21-item (105 score) measure called the Tromso Social Intelligence measure to assess social intelligence.

3.3. Validation

Before conducting the main study, a tryout run was performed on the closed-end questionnaire. The Alpha Coefficient was used to ensure a measure of internal consistency, with a value of at 0.96 considered acceptable. Additionally, the semi-structured interview questionnaire was reviewed and validated by three experts, ensuring the relevance and clarity of the questions. By employing this comprehensive mixed-method approach, the study aims to gather relevant and reliable data on foreign teachers' intercultural sensitivity and communication competence, considering demographic factors and the adaptability of working in different cultural settings.

3.4. Data Collection

Upon obtaining the necessary permissions, 30 copies of the questionnaire were printed for distribution. The questionnaires were personally distributed to foreign teachers working in both private and public secondary schools. The study participants consisted of 30 foreign teachers who voluntarily took part in the survey. Participants were assured that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that their responses would be treated with utmost privacy and confidentiality. Data collection was conducted from March to August 2022, allowing ample time to gather the required information from the participants.

3.5. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the mean scores and standard deviations of the collected data. Rather than focusing on predictive capabilities, this study aims to explore the associations and distinctions between dependent and independent variables based on the mean scores and standard deviations. The Likert Scale (1932) questionnaire was used to interpret respondents' views or opinions. This scale provides valuable insights into their levels of agreement or disagreement, allowing a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives.

4. RESULTS

The results, displayed in Table 1, present the levels of communication competence observed among the 30 foreign teachers who participated in the research, representing both public and private secondary schools.

Table 1 Levels of Communication Competence

Elements of Communication Competence	Mean	S.D.	Percentage	Opinions
1. Public	21.4	0.97	82.44	Agree
2. Meeting	3.91	1.14	78.22	Agree
3. Group	4.36	0.93	87.11	Agree
4. Dyad	4.33	0.90	86.67	Agree
5. Stranger	3.91	1.04	78.17	Agree
6. Acquaintance	4.18	0.99	83.50	Agree
7. Friend	4.46	0.90	89.17	Agree

Table 1 indicate the highest-rated opinion as "Friend" with a score of 4.46. The second-highest rated opinion was "Group" with a score of 4.36, while "Dyad" obtained the third-highest rating at 4.33.

Table 2 Levels of Intercultural Sensitivity

Elements of Intercultural Sensitivity	Mean	S.D.	Percentage	Opinions
1. Interaction Engagement	3.99	1.05	79.71	Agree
2. Respect for Cultural Differences	2.67	1.66	53.33	Uncertain
3. Interaction Confidence	3.78	1.16	75.60	Agree
4. Interaction Enjoyment	1.87	1.01	37.33	Disagree
5. Interaction Attention	4.04	0.97	80.89	Agree

Table 2 reveal that "Interaction attention" received the highest rating at 4.04. The second-highest rated opinion was "Interaction engagement" with a score of 3.99, followed by "Interaction confidence" at the third-highest rating with a score of 3.78.

Table 3 Levels of Social Intelligence

Elements of Social Intelligence	Mean	S.D.	Percentage	Opinions
1.Social Information Processing	3.87	0.81	77.47	Agree
2.Social Skills	3.28	1.18	65.62	Uncertain
3.Social Awareness	2.84	1.08	60.85	Uncertain

Table 3 indicates that "Social Information Processing" received the highest rating at 3.87. The second-highest rated opinion was "Social Skills" with a score of 3.28, while "Social Awareness" obtained the third-highest rating at 2.84.

4.1. Semi-Structured Interview: Causes of Cultural Shock among Foreign Teachers

1) Adapting to a New Culture and Intercultural Sensitivity: During interviews, foreign teachers shared their experiences and methods of adapting to a new culture and developing intercultural sensitivity. Three distinct approaches were expressed:

Teacher A: "Adapting to a new culture or intercultural sensitivity comes naturally to me. I embrace the diversity of cultures, which makes the process easy without any significant challenges."

Teacher B: "I actively use language learning to adapt and immerse myself in a new culture. Consistently learning and socializing with locals have proven helpful for me in this regard."

Teacher C: "Honestly, I still find it challenging to adjust and develop my intercultural sensitivity. It remains a difficult aspect for me in my experience."

2) Shocks Experienced While Teaching in Secondary Schools and Different Environments, the foreign teachers revealed the specific cultural shocks they encountered while teaching in secondary schools and working in diverse settings.

Teacher A: "One of the biggest shocks for me was observing how Thai people spent a considerable amount of time at work compared to my home country, Germany. Additionally, I was surprised to see them engaging in cooking and games during office breaks."

Teacher B: "Despite having taught in Thailand for 16 years, I continue to be amazed by the daily behavior of the boys I teach. Their actions and habits consistently surprise me."

Teacher C: "I faced significant difficulty finding someone who could understand my jokes. Fortunately, one of my colleagues could relate, but with students, it is often a challenge. For instance, when I said 'I was born ready,' they interpreted it as me being ready to be born again. Such instances are still shocking and create a communication barrier with students and colleagues."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study's findings highlight that foreign teachers from public and private secondary schools demonstrate higher levels of Communication Competence and Intercultural Sensitivity, while Social Intelligence scores were comparatively lower. This suggests that foreign teachers possess stronger abilities in effective communication and intercultural understanding but may require further development in social intelligence skills. Foreign teachers' intercultural sensitivity is believed to be influenced by their inadequate understanding and appreciation of cultural differences. This lack of awareness may lead to unintentional misunderstandings and challenges when interacting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, lower scores on social intelligence skills imply that foreign teachers may encounter difficulties in navigating social situations and building rapport with students and colleagues. To successfully adapt to Buriram province, Thailand's foreign teachers predominantly employ the following strategies: 1) Collaborative Approach: They engage in open communication and discussions with students,

fostering a cooperative environment that encourages mutual learning and cultural exchange, 2) Respect and Compliance: Foreign teachers prioritize adhering to local laws and regulations, respecting cultural customs, and showing consideration for the values and beliefs of others, and 3) Embracing Cultural Diversity: Understanding and appreciating cultural variations play a crucial role in enhancing adaptability and reducing anxiety. By embracing diversity, foreign teachers can create more inclusive and supportive classroom environments. In conclusion, promoting intercultural sensitivity, strengthening social intelligence, and cultivating deep appreciation for cultural diversity are essential aspects for foreign teachers to effectively thrive in multicultural settings. By continuously developing these skills, foreign teachers can enhance their teaching experience, facilitate smoother cross-cultural interactions, and foster an enriched educational environment for both students and educators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings offer valuable implications and suggestions, which can be divided into two categories.

1) Implications: The study's results highlight the importance of incorporating Intercultural Sensitivity, Communication Competence, and Social Intelligence into the design of the English language learning curriculum. By integrating these aspects, foreign teachers and students can gain a better understanding of cultural differences, leading to enhanced cross-cultural interactions and effective communication in multicultural classrooms. Additionally, proper preparation and orientation programs for accepting foreign teachers into schools should be implemented. These programs should emphasize cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills to foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

2) Further Studies: To comprehensively address the effectiveness of foreign teachers in Buriram province, Thailand, future studies should explore other potential factors influencing Intercultural Sensitivity. Investigating these factors would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities foreign teachers encounter when teaching in diverse cultural settings. By examining additional variables, schools can develop more robust strategies and guidelines to improve their overall learning experience. For future research endeavors, researchers should be well prepared to conduct surveys or interviews within the school setting, as the process may involve significant time and effort. Furthermore, a comparison of these research findings with those of future studies would provide insights into any evolving trends and statistically significant changes, helping assess progress and guide future interventions.

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