An Exploration on Intercultural Competency Skills: Thai International College Students’ Perspectives

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ABSTRACT
This study aimed to explore the intercultural competency skills among Thai undergraduate final year students who are studying in an international college of a public university located in Khon Kaen province, Thailand. Researcher utilized qualitative method focus group interview design. A total of six students were involved as informants. Results revealed that most of them prefer to practice cultural tolerance rather than cultural adjustment when they are dealing with their foreign course mates. They respect, accept, and appreciate of other people cultures and let other people behave according to their beliefs even though they disagree with the belief.

Key Words: Intercultural, competency skills, international college students

INTRODUCTION
Intercultural competency skills are one of the values that critical and demanding to be added through educational process in order to produce future relevant human capital for the nation. The key challenge of higher education institutions particularly international college is building knowledge-based and skilled workforce. As a result, the aim of this study was to explore the intercultural competency skills of Thai students of an international college in a Thailand public university. Since the main characteristic of international college students are ready to work in international communities, intercultural competency skills are significantly important to explore so that the graduates will possess knowledge that will allow them to compete successfully by fulfilling the needs of society and providing world-class quality labor and talent.

Intercultural competency skills refers to an individual’s ability to function effective across cultures (Whaley & Davis, 2007), to think and act in intercultural appropriate way (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman., 2003: 422) or an individual’s effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes in order to work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad (Johnson, Lenartowicz, Apud, 2006: 530). Intercultural competency skills development is emerging as an important competency as well as relevant to employability especially in the diversity of the world and the pressing global challenges confronting us as humans (Deardorff, 2012).

The key issue for education policy makers is the extent to which the higher education institutional design of education systems makes a difference to university-to-work transitions or whether economic aspects dominate (Karmel, 2017). Therefore, higher education institution rely greatly on numbers of graduates to exhibit success in internationalization, such as developing intercultural competent graduates who can compete successfully in the global workforce. Tang and Sanoamuang (November 2016) emphasized that the result of internationalization of international college has become one possible response to such challenges. However the specification of anticipated outcomes of internationalization are often general and vague, with goals stated broadly that the institution will become internationalized or that a goal is to graduate cross-culturally students or global citizens (Tang & Sanoamuang, November 2016).

The studied international college was established in 2008 and strives to be the leading international education center especial in north-east of Thailand. The international college was attached to the public university aims at producing quality graduates equipped with the knowledge and professional skills in the areas of business and social sciences. Students are recruited from various countries including China, South Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and so on thus creation of a multicultural society. Therefore the improvement in the quality of graduates that possess knowledge and skills that will allow them to compete successfully by fulfilling the needs of society and providing world-class quality labor and talent is especially important.

Multicultural societies in this international college help to promote cultural acceptance and pluralism among students. However students should be careful not to focus on simple aspects of culture such as food, dance, music, and clothing, as they do not represent a culture in its complexity and do not disturb the organization and power of the dominant culture. In its rich diversity, culture has intrinsic value for development as well as social
cohesion and peace. Then living in multicultural societies requires tolerance and acceptance of the diversity in the societies.

The Thailand Qualification Framework (TQF) of higher education system is planned to support the educational practice based on the guidelines set out in the National Education Act, to guarantee consistency in both standards and award titles for higher education qualifications, and to make clear the correspondence of academic awards with those approved benchmarks set by other universities worldwide. As a result, this TQF will assist to deliver appropriate ideas of comparison in academic standards for higher education institutions in their planning and internal quality assurance processes, for evaluators involved in external reviews, and for employers, in understanding the skills and competencies of graduates they may employ (Thailand Ministry of Education, November 2006). Consequently, all the higher education students in Thailand have to study according to these five domains namely ethical and moral development, knowledge, cognitive skills, interpersonal skills and responsibility, and analytical and communicative skills. Out of these five domains, intercultural competency skills are mainly included in interpersonal skills.

Cultural tolerance is defined as the respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expressions, and ways of being human. The essence of tolerance is the right of people to behave according to their beliefs, even when there are others who disagree with the belief. Being tolerant means not to exert any pressure on anyone to change his/her beliefs, to respect opposite opinions, habits, and to be free from prejudices. Tolerance is not a compromise, forgiveness or encouragement of negative behavior. On the other hand, it is an active attitude on the basis or recognition of the human rights and freedoms. Cultural adjustment is defined as a common stress reaction that individuals have when they find themselves immersed in an unfamiliar culture. Generally cultural adjustment has four common stages namely “The honeymoon – initial euphoria/excitement, culture shock – irritation/hostility, gradual adjustment, humor and perspective, and feeling at home – adaptation and biculturalism (Oberg, 1954).

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY SKILLS

Leung, Ang and Tan (2014) had conceptualized intercultural competency skills based on 300-plus personal characteristics identified in previous research that could be distilled into the content domains of intercultural traits, intercultural attitudes and worldviews, and intercultural capabilities. Costa and McCrae (1992) and Funder (2001) defined personality traits as enduring personal characteristics that determine a stable pattern of cross-situational behaviors. In other word, intercultural traits refer to enduring personal characteristics that determine an individual’s typical behaviors in intercultural situations. Researcher concluded the operational meaning of intercultural traits as open-mindedness (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000), dissimilarity openness (Lloyd & Härtel, 2010), tolerance of ambiguity (Bird, Mendenhall, Stevens, & Oddou, 2010; Deardorff, 2006), cognitive complexity (Lloyd & Härtel, 2010), flexibility (Matsumoto, LeRoux, Ratzlaff, Tatani, & Uchida, 2001), inquisitiveness (Bird et al., 2010), quest for adventure (Javidan & Teagarden, 2011), patience (Kealey, 1996), and emotional resilience (Kelley & Meyers, 1995).

Intercultural attitudes and intercultural worldviews as the second component of intercultural competency skills focus on how an individual perceive other cultures or information outside their own cultural worlds (Leung et al., 2014). According to Leung et al., individual may have positive or negative attitudes toward other cultures or intercultural interactions. Individuals who are highly culturally competent have positive attitudes toward intercultural contact. Bennett (1993) and Srinivas (1995) highlighted that individual may have cultural or global worldviews that either ethnocentric (i.e., seeing the world from one’s own cultural worldview) or emphasize the complexity and contradictions of different cultures and countries, as well as the similarities beneath surface-level differences. Individuals who are highly intercultural competent should have sophisticated, rather than ethnocentric or simplistic, construal of cultural differences and similarities. Constructs that capture such individual differences include ethnocentric-ethno relative cultural worldviews (Hammer, 2011), cosmopolitan outlook (Bird et al., 2010; Javidan & Teagarden, 2011), and category inclusiveness (Bird et al., 2010).

Intercultural capabilities will be the third components of intercultural competency skills emphasize what a person can do to be effective in intercultural interactions (Earley & Ang, 2003). Examples of the intercultural capabilities include showing knowledge of other cultures or countries (Earley & Ang, 2003; Javidan & Teagarden, 2011); metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003); linguistic skills (Imahori & Lanigan, 1989); social flexibility (Bird et al., 2010); adaptability to communication (Lloyd & Härtel, 2010), and cultural tuning in terms of holistic concern, collaboration, and learning (Leung & Cheng, 2014).

In this study, the intercultural competency skills are domain specific and focus solely either intercultural traits
Finally there was a significant difference between the different academic year of their study on their intercultural practices \((p = 0.006)\), impact of different ethnic and cultural background on their learning \((p = 0.010)\), and building positive relationship with friend from different ethnic and culture \((p = 0.009)\). In addition, there was a significant difference between the different program of students on their intercultural competency skills such as impact of cultural background on their thinking and actions \((p = 0.009)\), impact of institutional practices \((p = 0.010)\), and building positive relationship with friend from different ethnic and culture \((p = 0.002)\). Finally there was a significant difference between the different academic year of their study on their intercultural competency skills namely ignore racist statements \((p = 0.032)\), impact of cultural background on their thinking and actions \((p = 0.000)\), concern about values, traditions, and culture of others \((p = 0.004)\), and the impact of prejudice \((p = 0.009)\). Table 3 indicates the inferential findings of this study.

The implications of Tang and Sanoamuang’s (November, 2016) study revealed that the international college students should have an opportunity to reflect consciously on their intercultural skills, receive feedback on those skills, and develop a foundation of intercultural knowledge would be better prepared them to take on leadership roles in diverse group. This is because when these students enter the workplace later, they are often identified as potential leaders, given their training in areas such as project management and leading teams. However, according to Chuang (2013), to be successful leaders in a diverse workplace specifically need to acquire intercultural skills and knowledge. These international college students have to become increasing globally mobile, moving from country to country as part of their career areas such as global business, international marketing, and tourism management. Even within Thailand, international college students are going to encounter a highly globalized workforce upon graduation. Tang and Sanoamuang (November, 2016) suggested that all the teaching programs have to be planned to enhance with intercultural competency components in order to allow graduated international college students in the future are equipped with a highly transferable set of interpersonal and facilitation skills that are sought by employers both in academia and in industry setting. Faculty educators were expected to help international college students to reflect on the competencies they have gained in the training programs and articulated them to potential employers after graduation.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In this study, researcher planned to look at the intercultural competency development from the perspectives of six Thai students who experienced in dealing with people who have different cultures. The researcher would seek to describe the intercultural competency skills development from these 10 specific research questions as below:

1. Do Thai international college students find difficulty to get along with some of their friends who have
different culture with them?
2. Do Thai international college students feel uncomfortable when someone shows different values and beliefs with them?
3. To what extent do Thai international college students have knowledge regarding the culture of other ethnic groups in their class?
4. To what extent that their cultural background affecting their thinking and actions?
5. To what extent do Thai international college students agree that the international college practices that impacting on students from ethnic minority groups?
6. To what extent do Thai international college students understand about the concept of cultural diversity and sensitivity?
7. Do Thai international college students able to communicate their needs to their friends who are from different cultural background?
8. To what extent Thai international college students are able to build positive relationship with their friends from different ethnic and culture?
9. To what extent Thai international college students can apply their cultural awareness and knowledge while interacting with multicultural friends?
10. What do Thai international college students understand about the meaning of prejudice?

METHOD

Purposeful sampling technique was employed in this qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). This is involves identifying and selecting individuals that are especially knowledgeable or experienced with this phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002) noted the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner.

After considering the above circumstances, focus group interviews were conducted to six final year international college Thai students. The selected participants had the experience in dealing with other countries cultures such as stayed at oversea countries through student exchange program for the length of time spent ranged from six months to four years. The study was approved by the university’s Research Ethics Board. Participation in the research was voluntary. Participants were invited to indicate their willingness to participate in focus group interviews (Dawson, Dimitrov, Meadows, & Olsen, 2013). The duration of the focus group interview was one and a half hours. The interview guide included a series of probes and clarification questions to maintain consistency in questioning across participants. The most frequently represented cultures included China, Mexico, United States, and Europe cultures.

The interviews were audio recorded and partially transcribed, then coded using a theme analysis approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During coding, key themes related to research questions were identified, such as concrete examples of intercultural competency skills learned and also examples of how participants’ knowledge of cultural differences influenced their interactions with their foreign course mates. After the first round of coding, similar themes were grouped into larger categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Exact quotes representing each frequently occurring theme were then fully transcribed based on the audio recordings. To ensure participant anonymity, participants’ quotes are identified only by symbol R.

RESULTS

Results of this study are presented according to the research questions as indicated above.

Difficulty to get along with different cultures friends

Qualitative findings indicate that most of the Thai international college students found difficulty to deal with their foreign course mates particularly from China. All the informants did not take initiatives to work together with foreign course mates partly they have their own Thai friends whom they can understand each other very well. Language differences can be one of the reasons made them feel reluctant to work together. They also found difficulty to understand their foreign course mates’ cultures. Likewise they also found their foreign course mates did not take initiatives to understand their cultures.

“I did not join together with them…just a little bit. I do not have language problem but I have many friends from Thai. We can easily understand each other. But foreign course mates like those from China, they did not understand our Thai culture like they did not take off your shoes when they come to have discussion in our hostel.” (R1)

“They have different identity with us and also different cultures with us. But they always try to cope with our Thai culture and learn the Thai culture from us. I have difficult to explain to them about our...
cultures.” (R2)
“May be because of the language…. Sometimes I find difficult to work with them. Most of the time, I will let them do what they want.” (R3)
“Most of the China boys are very stubborn, they do not accept our ideas when we are doing our group assignment together. Most of us have given up to work with those China boys. China girls slightly better, they are not that stubborn.” (R4)
“I find difficult to work together with them. They do not understand our Thai culture.” (R5)
“When we do activities together, China course mates are very serious. We are more relaxed, not as serious as them. They are very serious in their studies. But we have to work it up with them. Most of them I have to tolerate with their style.” (R6)
“My foreign course mates especially those from China, now they have their group already. They do not want to mix with us. Actually they understand what they have to do by studying in other country like Thailand. But they just do not want to learn our cultures and they do not have much commitment in our student union. They refused to be part of our big family.” (R4).

Feeling comfortable with different values and beliefs
Majority of the informants can tolerate with the different values and beliefs. The informants stated that they are young generation therefore they are also very open to accept west values and beliefs. They are not extremists. They found some similarities between eastern cultures but not western cultures.

“Thai people are not serious about religion. We do not go to temple very often. I can accept the modern culture nowadays like the couples stay together without marriage, nothing wrong.” (R1)
“We do not mind so much about other people’s belief and value system that are different from us. Well, they can do what they like” (R4)
“I found that most of the eastern cultures like Thai culture and China culture are quite the same in term of value. For example, we respect older people, we take care of our parents. But not western people, they do not care about their parents once they grow up, they stay on their own, they do not so much respect elderly people.” (R2)
“Sometimes I really cannot accept the west value like they like kissing at the public, hugging their girl friends. Wear very little clothes….Oh..Oh, I do not know what happen to our parents if we do that.” (R3)

Having knowledge regarding the culture of other ethnic groups
Most of the informants do not have much knowledge about other ethnic groups’ cultures unless they have opportunities to go abroad or visit other province. If they are locals, most of them do not have much knowledge about other people cultures.

“I have been in United States for 4 years under student exchange program. I stayed with my adopted Mexican family and learned a lot about their cultures. Such as they believe that their ancestor will become ghost after they died. They will pray to their ancestor and believe the spirit of their ancestor will help them to have better life.” (R2)
“I do not have a chance to travel abroad. But I found that I myself do not have knowledge about cultures in other province of Thailand either. For example, the local language here is different from the north of Thailand, different place, same word may have different meanings. I am always confuse.” (R4)
“Our Chinese friends like to talk loudly. When they are eating, they eat loudly. I do not understand why they like to act like that. It seems to be rude in our culture.” (R3)
“During the first year, I was quite shock with China students’ attitudes.” (R4)
“I have an American roommate during my first year. She is very open, always bring different boyfriends to our room. Sometimes even have sex with the boyfriend in our room. I cannot understand how can she do that. Finally, I advise her to do this outside the hostel, not in the hostel. After that she did not do that again. I can accept her openness by having sex with her boyfriend before marriage but not in my territory.” (R6)
“Besides, she likes to be naked, she always drunk. This is her daily life, but it is ok for me. I know this is their cultures” (R6)
“I want to say about Laos culture, their people like to wear long skirt and very formal most of the times. Thai people are not like that, we do not like to wear very formal.” (R5)
“I found that my foreign course mates are quite different from us especially those from western countries. For example 3 years ago, my foreign friend came late to the class, still can say hello to the lecturer. They do not feel sorry at all. Thai people are very respect teachers or lecturers, we will look down to the floor if we came late, we dare not to say hello to our lecturer. We respect and trust our lecturer.” (R1)
“Those China students sometimes even hold lecturer’s shoulder. I never see that happened to Thai
students. Thai students will not stand near to the teachers, we must sit or bend lower or knee down when we talk to our teachers. This is our culture to show respect” (R4)

Cultural background affecting thinking and actions
Most of the informants agreed that their background has affected their thinking and actions. For example, sometimes they do not need words to understand each other because their friends who are from the same cultures will send the message automatically to them through their actions.

“We do not reject people directly in Thai culture. We seldom say no even though we disagreed with somebody. It is considered rude if we do that.” (R4)

“Thai people want something from you but they do not say they want. They still do not want your gifts although they like it so much. We have to give many times, then only they accept. This is our manner that we learned since we are young.” (R2)

“Normally when we invite our friends several times, he or she still not responded, means that he or she rejected my invitation.” (R4)

“We don’t mind so much if our friends rejected to join us for any activities. For me, it is important to have many friends around.” (R2 and R4)

“Most of the time, we can understand each other very well because we are from the same background. It is easy to talk among friends, normally the young people say no means no. Not like adults, when we talked to adult, we need to be more polite.” (R6)

The impacts of international college practices on ethnic minority groups
Informants stated that most of the international college practices are using English as a medium. Therefore they concluded as a part of concern on ethnic minority group. However, certain events were not welcomed by foreign students such as Freshman Activity because of using Thai language instead of English.

“This international college is using English most of the time, which shows that they are considered about minority group.” (R1)

“But some words we cannot express in English, we have to use Thai language. Thai language and English language are very different. Chinese students do not like to join us because they cannot use Thai language. For example Freshman Activity, I never see any China student attend it.” (R4)

“All the forms in our international college are in English. But China students very funny. Sometimes we talked to them in English but they like to reply using Thai language.” (R2)

“My feeling why they act like that because they try to be parts of us. Thai language is hard. It is difficult for Chinese students to speak Thai. Likewise we Thai students found hard to speak in English.” (R4)

“We are shy and less confidence to speak English. That is why you will find that Thai students do not answer questions asked by lecturers.” (R5 and R6)

Understanding about the concept of cultural diversity and sensitivity
Most of the informants are not sensitive about cultural diversity and they got culture shock when they started to mix with their foreign course mates.

“For me, I am not sensitive. I was shock at first but is ok after that. For example, take off the shoes, sit on the floor are the Thai cultures. But our foreign course mates do not care about it.” (R3)

“But we are not sensitive about that. If they do not take off their shoes, just advise them.” (R2)

“In Thai culture we are very sensitive about women cannot touch monks. I always advise my foreign course mates to be sensitive in this matter.” (R1)

“In Thai culture, we respect monks and older people very much. If they are older than us, we have to alert for not going close to them or touch their head.” (R4)

Communicative abilities with different cultural background friends
All the informants do not have problems dealing with friends who have different cultural background.

“Yes, I have no problem to tell my friends about our Thai culture.” (R1)

“We not only tell them about our culture, we also help them to understand.” (R4)

“I have Australian friend, she come to my house to stay for a few weeks. My mum and dad cannot speak English. But because of her, now my mum and dad can speak English a little bit.” (R5)

“I joined the student exchange program to Hungary. I spent time with them and told them my lives in Thailand.” (R6)

Abilities to build positive relationship with their different culture friends
All the informants did not clearly show that they possessed this kind of ability to build positive relationship with friends from different cultures.

“I have friends from countries like Mexico and Taiwan. They like to give candy to each other to build positive relationship.” (R1)

“Although I was in US for 4 years, but it took me 6 months to adapt to their cultures. I like Mexican friend but I do not like US friend. They are more arrogant.” (R2)

Cultural awareness and knowledge while interacting with multicultural friends
All the informants seemed to be low cultural awareness and knowledge while interacting with multicultural friends.

“I have New Zealand friend and Japanese friend, but I do not know very much about their cultures.” (R5 and R4)

“I do not have any knowledge about their cultures, they come to me and approach me as friend.” (R2)

“Normally I learned other people cultures through watching movie. Among us, we seldom talk about other people cultures.” (R4)

“I will only start to learn about other people cultures if I plan to visit that country especially about its law. Because some country may restrict us from doing something so I will alert about that.” (R1)

Understanding about the meaning of prejudice
All the informants did not really understand the meaning of prejudice.

“I found easy to talk with my Thai friends but I wish to have friends from other countries too.” (R1)

“I can accept anyone, I am easy going person.” (R2)

“I can easily accept Thai but not others.” (R3)

“I choose friends because of their behavior but their ethnic groups. As long as their cultures not much different. I am comfortable to talk with them.”

“I would like to add on why Thai people speak weak English. This is because we learned English according to principles. So Thai people will laugh at us when we speak grammatical wrong English. But when we speak to foreigners, we do not care about the principles anymore. Thai people may look at you as you are showing off if you speak English too much.”

“We do not like to speak English because we scared to make mistake in front of our Thai friends.” (R4)

CONCLUSIONS
In conclusion, the more different people from one to another, the more difficult it will be for them to work together and communicate, which is the basis of any society. Diversity is not only involves how people perceive themselves but also how they perceive others. Those perceptions are affecting their daily interactions. Today the awareness of this diversity has become much more widespread because of being facilitated by globalized communications and increased cultural contacts. Findings of this study revealed that most of Thai international college students are practicing cultural tolerance more than cultural adjustment when they dealing with their foreign course mates. This can produce a range of consequences form such as simple lack of civility or ignoring others, through elaborate social system or the international destruction of people in the perpetuation of genocide. On the other hand, peace is impossible without tolerance. To live in the multicultural society like this international college, we should practice cultural tolerance which will contribute to the evolution of a culture of peace and social harmony. The essence of tolerance is the right of people to behave according to their beliefs, even when there are others who disagree with the belief. These Thai international college students are not practicing cultural adjustment due to they did not find themselves immersed in an unfamiliar culture that can cause culture stress. Since they are the majority ethnic group of the multicultural society, cultural adjustment is not a necessity.
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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This research has been financially supported by the Khon Kaen University.