

The Relationship between Hotel Employees' Backgrounds and Intercultural Communicative Competence Level: A Case Study of Hotel Front Office Personnel in Bangkok

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This study examined the relationship between the educational and work experience backgrounds of frontline hotel workers in Bangkok and their level of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The intercultural competence framework from Barrett et al. (2013), which included an exploration of the ICC domains — attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills and actions — all essential areas for interculturally competent speakers, was adopted as a guideline in the study. Added to the ICC domains, Byram's (1997) framework is an objective-based ICC approach to be operationalized as a guideline for the design of the ICC self-perception questionnaire. The participants for this study included 219 hotel front office employees randomly selected from three- and four-star hotels in Bangkok. The results of the study revealed that there was no relationship between participants' backgrounds and their intercultural competency level. The outcomes may provide useful guidelines for hotel human resources management to inform the future content of intercultural communication training courses. Also, the findings can be valuable for educational institutions to help enhance the ICC development of their graduates. Finally, the outcomes are an informational base for future research.

Keywords: *intercultural communicative competence, objective-based ICC approach, hotel front office personal*

INTRODUCTION

Generally, when compared to other fields of study, intercultural communication was considered relatively new in Thailand and this was proven by the availability of limited research in this area. There were relatively limited studies that quantitatively and qualitatively investigated employees, especially in the area of relationship between hotel front office personnel's educational and work

experience backgrounds and their ICC levels. Consequently, this study has filled part of the gap by having investigated the educational background and work experience of current hotel frontline workers by posing the research question whether there was any relationship between their backgrounds and their level of ICC in dealing with intercultural diverse interactions in their workplace.

There were two hypotheses for this study with regard to the front office personnel. Educational background from learning institutions is supposed to have gained these employees a degree of ICC. Likewise, an extended working experience has also presumably afforded them a higher degree of ICC. Did these two backgrounds impact the higher degree of the hotel front office employees' ICC in dealing with intercultural situations at their workplace? Consequently, the research question "was there any relationship between hotel employees' backgrounds and intercultural communicative competence level?" was examined in this study.

There were several perspectives from researchers in the field (e.g. Barrett et al., 2013; Gregersen-Hermans & Pusch, 2012; Saville-Troike, 2003) who all claimed that one can gain ICC through various methods, such as the standard schooling system or formal education, informal education or life experience and non-formal education or specifically-designed training. Being equipped with adequate ICC can enhance the hotel front office workers' proficiency in the marketplace. Consequently, the study's findings may benefit both Thailand's hospitality agents and educational institutions for future intercultural competence training/course design through the analytical information provided by this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of ICC

Even though there was no absolute defined term for ICC (Gregersen-Hermans & Pusch, 2012; Fantini, 2012), several scholars provided explanations as a framework for the studies in this field. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009, p.7) viewed that intercultural competence was the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world while Gupta (2008) defined ICC in terms of "impression management" (p.16) which allowed members of different cultural systems to be aware of their natural identity and cultural differences, and to interact effectively and appropriately with each other in diverse contexts.

In doing so, an agreement was reached on the meaning of a diverse symbol system, which then in turn produced a mutually satisfying relationship.

Similarly, Byram (2008) defined intercultural competence as the capacity to engage with people of a cultural group and identity to which we do not belong, to understand them and to act together with them. It was not a matter of changing identity, but rather of crossing group boundaries to see their culture from within, and to see one's own culture from the other/another perspective. Although almost all of the discussions on ICC come from a Western perspective, and therefore the development and evolution of intercultural competence has been constructed within a Western cultural context, those frameworks could be used and applied in a Thai context for this study with its operationalized definition of possessing competence in dealing with interculturally diverse encounters appropriately and effectively.

Framework of the study

In choosing the appropriately operationalized ICC model for this study, I firstly had to be aware of the fact that all proposed models were from the perspective of Western scholars. Taking this into consideration, the necessary adjustments and appropriate adaptations/adaptations were made as the study took place within a Thai context, with the majority of research participants and stakeholders being Thai and a small portion of foreign interlocutors with diverse cultural backgrounds.

After having reviewed the available literature, I discovered that some of the ICC models dealt with psychological perspectives involving some degree of practices and actions (Bennett, 1993; Deardorff, 2006; King & Baxter-Magolda, 2005). There were some models that, apart from the psychological perspectives, tended to put a more intensive degree of focus on actions (Barrett et al., 2013; Council of Europe, 2009) and a somewhat limited degree on language competence (Byram, 1997).

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between the educational and work experience backgrounds of the hotel front office personnel and their levels of ICC. This required an assessment of both psychological perspectives and, to some degree, with more focus on the outcomes of their performances and whether they were appropriate and effective, I therefore chose the ICC model proposed by Barrett et al. (2013) which comprised attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions domains as the key framework for this study. It was the most appropriate approach to examine competence and it allowed for the focus to include an analysis of the applied actions used in the workplace. Operationalized definitions of the investigated ICC domain in this study are described below.

The “Attitudes” domain employed in this study covered several aspects. The first aspect was about respecting people who had different cultural affiliations from one's own. Secondly, it included the aspects of being open to and curious about,

and willing to learn from and about, people who had different cultural orientations and perspective from one's own. Thirdly, it involved being willing to empathize with people who had different cultural affiliations and attitudes, and be willing to question what is usually taken for granted as 'normal' according to one's previously acquired knowledge and experience. The final aspects included in this definition were being willing to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, and being willing to seek out opportunities to engage and cooperate with individuals who had different cultural orientations and perspectives from one's own (Barrett et al., 2013).

The *"Knowledge and Understanding"* domain in this study was concerned with understanding the internal diversity and heterogeneity of all cultural groups and having awareness and understanding of one's own and other people's assumptions. It also included understanding the influence of one's own language and cultural affiliations on one's experience of the world, and of other people. In addition, communicative awareness included an appreciation that other peoples' languages may express shared ideas in a unique way, or express unique ideas difficult to access through one's own language(s). Also, it showed that people of other cultural affiliations may follow different verbal and non-verbal communicative conventions which are meaningful from their perspective but not necessarily from one's own. Other aspects included in this domain were oriented at how knowledge, beliefs, values, practices, discourses and products were used by people who had particular cultural orientations (Barrett et al., 2013).

The *"Skills"* domain was defined as the ability to decenter from one's own perspective and to take other people's perspectives into consideration alongside one's own. In addition, the skills aspects included the ability to discover information about other cultural affiliations and perspectives, and to be able to interpret those other cultural practices, beliefs and values and to relate them to one's own. This covered the ability to adapt one's behavior to new cultural environments – for example, avoiding verbal and non-verbal behaviors which may be viewed as impolite by people who have different cultural affiliations from one's own. Finally, the ability to act as a 'mediator' in intercultural exchanges was included in the skills domain (Barrett et al., 2013).

The *"Actions"* domain was framed to include what actions were displayed in order to seek opportunities to engage with people who had different cultural orientations. This domain also covered the actions displayed when interacting and communicating appropriately, effectively and respectfully with people who had different cultural affiliations. The next aspect included in this domain was what actions were displayed to cooperate with individuals who had different cultural orientations on shared activities. Additionally, actions that were displayed to challenge attitudes and behaviors of people regardless of their

cultural affiliations and the action used for mediating in situations of cultural conflict were also covered (Barrett et al., 2013).

With regards to the ICC assessment for this study, it aimed to identify the hotel front office personnel's attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills and actions at the point in time when this study was conducted. In order to choose the appropriate assessment strategy to be employed in this study, various intercultural assessment models were reviewed and analyzed to measure their relevance for assessing the ICC of graduates who were working in frontline hotel service. Only applicable models to this study were reviewed (e.g. Barrett et al., 2013; Byram, 1997; Council of Europe (AIE), 2009; Fantini, 2005; Hammer, 1999).

Although some questions were raised about assessment theories, such as whether all the components of intercultural competence had to be assessed holistically or separately (Borghetti, 2011), for this context the proposed models from many scholars were further developed, adapted and used as a guideline to deal with the study's investigation of intercultural competence within the Thai context. Particularly, the framework developed by Byram (1997) was adapted as a guideline to assess ICC of the hotel front office personnel. Byram's framework suggested that outlining the individual's particular trait was the initial stage of the ICC assessment and should be followed by constructing simulated situation that represent and relate to the set objective. He advised that participants then should have the opportunity to reflect on their perceptions towards each set competence domain. With this assessment approach, Byram's framework was considered an effective strategy, significantly contributing satisfactory outcomes for the study.

Even though it is still debatable as to whether ICC can be measured holistically, experts agreed that intercultural competence can indeed be measured (Deardorff, 2006). Consequently, in this study, ICC assessment model proposed by Byram (1997) was adapted and provided a framework and guideline to assess each individual ICC domain of Barrett et al. (2013)'s ICC model.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative approach was used in this study to investigate the relationship between the hotel front office employees' backgrounds and their ICC level. Investigating ICC among hotel front office personnel working in hotels in Bangkok, focusing on only three and four-star properties was the focus of this research. These two categories of hotels were particularly selected for this study because they featured front office working formulas that comprised of duties with standard front office functions.

There were three other levels of hotels — one, two, and five-star hotels — but they were intentionally excluded from this study as they could not contribute a significant outcome for this investigation due to their inherent operational characteristics. One and two-star hotels minimized the front office functions, wherein one staff member may perform a wide variety of duties in the hotel due to the property's smaller size. Besides which, most tended to be managed personally by their owners. The five-star hotels, on the other hand, provided a service quality that was required to go beyond the high expectations of the guests, as expected in this exceptional category. As such they usually provided more personal services for guests and, therefore, they expected greater specialization from their working staff (Baker, Bradley & Huyton, 2000). In order to fulfill the aforementioned high service standard level, a range of service training was provided to the hotel staff to maximize the hotel guests' satisfaction. With respect to the characteristic clarification above, the range of three and four-star hotels were considered a proper target group for the study.

For the sample selection, it was open to the employees of the randomly selected hotels from the shortlist with their working stations located within the hotel's lobby. These participants included receptionists, reservations officers, guest relations officers, concierge staff, and porter service personnel.

Participants

The participants were 219 hotel front office employees, randomly selected from a total of 27 hotels in Bangkok, 8 of them are categorized as three-star hotels and another 19 properties are classified as four-star hotels (Thai Hotels Association, 2014).

Instrument

The instrument for this study is a questionnaire which consists of two parts. The first part addresses participants' educational and work experience backgrounds. For educational background, participants were asked if they were of non-English language and/or non-hotel and tourism background, or foreign languages or hotel and tourism background which is expected to have certain degree of ICC. As for work experience, the questions addressed the length of participants' working period of less than two years (newly graduated and considered low experience staff), between two to five years (possessed moderate experience in the field), and more than five years (considered as experienced front office personnel).

The second part of the questionnaire consists of 20 items of self-perception assessment statements, specifically derived from Barrett's (Barrett et al., 2013) model, comprising four ICC domains — attitudes (5 items), knowledge and understanding (5 items), skills (5 items), and actions (5 items). In formulating

question items for this part, I utilized the adapted objective-based approach (Byram, 1997). The first strategy was setting up an objective for each ICC domain — the ability to perform or produce to a certain degree within that particular ICC domain. Next, the simulations or situational statements from culture that people cannot see, such as attitudes, values, beliefs and worldviews, were developed based on the set objective for the participants' competence assessment. Finally, the participants were asked to perform their self-perception assessment in a 4-0 point Likert-type scale. Each item was rated based on a range of scores from 4 to 0 points, representing 4 as "Strongly Agree", 3 as "Agree", 2 as "Disagree", 1 as "Strongly Disagree", and 0 as "Undecided". However, because half of the total items (Items 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 17, 19 and 20) were constructed with negative situations for the participants to rate, those items were reverse-coded in the analysis process. In other words, those negative items were coded as follows: 4 = Strongly Disagree, 3 = Disagree, 2 = Agree, 1 = Strongly Agree, and 0 = Undecided.

Data analysis and procedures

The strategies of data analysis mainly consisted analyzing the quantitative data. It was evident that as the research sites were in different locations, and the number of participants was large, the quantitative approach was implemented as a primary strategy.

In addition, the Pearson Chi-Square Test was employed to explore the relationships between the independent variables of the study to identify the correlations between the educational and work experience backgrounds of the participants and their level of IC competence. Besides, the Independent Samples Tests (T-Test) was also utilized to examine significant differences between the investigated two different groups of educational backgrounds. The groups were divided into (1) English or foreign languages, and hotel and tourism related majors and (2) non-majors. Finally, the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine the three independent variables of work experience backgrounds — their length of work experience (less than two years, between two to five years and more than five years) — and assess if this contributed any significant difference statistically in possessing ICC.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the following findings:

1. the educational and the work experience backgrounds of the participants
2. the relationship between the two backgrounds and the participants' ICC in four domains

3. the differences in ICC between the two groups of participants of different educational background
4. the differences in ICC between the three groups of participants of different work experience

Educational and work experience backgrounds of the participants

The educational background of the participants is reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Educational background of participants

Non-English and/or non-hotel & tourism background	Foreign languages or hotel & tourism background		
55.25%	44.29%		
	Sources of English communication skills and ICC		
	Workplace	Life experience	Educational institutions
	62.10%	20.09	13.70%

The majority of the participants who completed the questionnaires graduated with a non-English and/or non-hotel and tourism background (55.25%) while 44.29% of the respondents graduated with foreign languages or hotel and tourism background.

With regards to sources of English communication skills and ICC, most respondents (62.10%) claimed to have obtained their English communication skills from their hotel workplace, while 20.09% of the respondents asserted that they got their skills from life experience by exposing themselves to an international environment. Significantly, only 13.70% of the respondents held the perception that they were equipped with English communication skills and ICC from educational institutions.

The findings related to the length of working period can be grouped into three types: less than two years (41.55%), between two to five years (24.20%) and more than five years (34.25%).

Relationship between the participants' educational and work experience backgrounds and ICC in four domains

Table 2
Relationship between educational and work experience backgrounds and ICC of hotel front office personnel in four domains

	ICC domains	Educational background		Work experience	
		Chi-square	p-value	Chi-square	p-value
1	Attitudes	2.552	0.279	1.388	0.846
2	Knowledge and	1.378	0.502	6.674	0.154

	Understanding				
3	Skills	1.559	0.459	4.147	0.386
4	Actions	1.315	0.518	11.635	0.020

The findings from the data analysis to examine the direction and trend of the respondents, as well as the means drawn from all investigated groups suggested that there was no significant gap found in all explored domains. Concerning the investigation to explore whether participants' background has a relationship to the level of ICC in the areas of attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills and actions revealed that the results of educational backgrounds showed no correlation between the examined variables where the p-values were more than 0.05 as displayed in Table 2. The figure of 0.05 (and below) was considered contributing correlation significance.

With regard to exploring the area of work experience backgrounds, the first three investigated domains - attitudes, knowledge and understanding and skills suggested no correlation between work experience and the level of ICC with significant values of 0.846, 0.154 and 0.386 respectively. However, the results derived from the Pearson Chi-Square Test for the actions domain emerged with a reverse outcome compared to other domains. When exploring this deeper to see if a relationship between work experience and the hotel employees' level of ICC degree in actions existed, it was discovered that there was a significant relationship with a 0.020 p-value.

It seemed that a possible explanation for this phenomenon was likely to be "the more work experience, the higher level of ICC in actions". Hotel front office personnel could gradually learn and absorb what actions were appropriate to do in dealing with hotel guests. Each working day, they had learned and added new intercultural practice items, either from their supervisors, colleagues or with direct intercultural interactions with their guests. However, in my view, learning to know "Do & Don't" intercultural practices does not create sustainable intercultural competence. One can have listed actions to perform in a particular period of time and contexts which can be changed over time. Therefore, their ability to produce actions might not be applicable in a situation where there is a shift in the environment. The phenomenon in which a minor relationship exists between work experience and level of ICC in the actions domain would be worth exploring in detail in future researches concerning the relationship between work experience and degree level in ICC actions delivery.

4.3 ICC levels of the two groups of participants of different educational background

Concerning the educational background of the two groups of participants, the findings indicated that there was no correlation between the examined variables. In other words, there was no relationship between the educational

background and the level of ICC of the hotel workers. Whether the hotel front office personnel had taken English or other foreign languages, or hotel and tourism related courses or not, their background did not impact their ICC in dealing with intercultural encounters in the four investigated domains.

Under the educational background perspective, individual variables were investigated exhaustively to see why they yielded the significant findings of no correlation. The findings from the Independent Samples Test (T-Test) along with the statistical significance of difference showed that no matter what educational backgrounds they were from, with or without English or foreign languages, or with a hotel and tourism related studying background, the results drawn from both groups did not show any significant difference in all investigated domains, attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills and actions as displayed in Table 3.

Table 3
ICC levels of the two groups of participants of different educational background

Q-Items		With Background (Mean)	Without Background (Mean)	T-Test Value	p-value
Attitudes					
1. I feel embarrassed when I see people from other cultures performing a greeting kiss and goodbye kiss.	2.07	2.12	-0.681	0.497	
2. I feel frustrated and question the situation when I see an old foreigner living in Thailand carrying things without any help from their accompanied children.					
3. I am curious and want to know the cultural background of my new colleague who is from Uganda so that I look for information in order to know how to treat my new colleague properly.					
4. When I travel to a country that doesn't have a queue or lineup system for services, I feel disappointed seeing their disorganized practice.					
5. I enjoy talking or working with foreign colleagues who are from different cultures while my friends always avoid working with them.					
Knowledge and Understanding					
6. I know that people who are traveling from Europe are white people (Caucasian) and are very punctual.					
7. I am aware that most Thai people like spicy food and like to eat street food. However, when I take my new foreign colleagues out					

for dinner, I always bring them to a nice, clean restaurant and order food with a mild taste for everyone including myself.	2.02	2.08	-1.003	0.317
8. I don't like to listen to other non-native English accents because I think they are difficult to understand for Thai people like me.				
9. I know that when some foreigners raise their eyebrows or remain silent, it means they are frustrated or unhappy.				
10. I know if there is a large group of Muslim guests staying in my hotel for a certain period of time and there is no mosque nearby, we will allocate or set up a 'praying zone' for them.				
Skills				
11. I always show my Thai 'Wai' to new foreign colleagues because I think this is the way to show our beautiful Thai culture to foreigners.	2.42	2.44	-0.272	0.786
12. Foreigners coming to stay or work in Thailand have to know Thai culture, aiming to adjust themselves in order to interact with local people effectively.				
13. I can see that some foreigners who are from a particular part of the world have superstitions/beliefs like some Thai people because I sometimes see them wearing or showing respect to an object.				
14. When having a meeting with a group of people who are from different cultural backgrounds, I don't whisper to people next to me because other people might think that it is impolite or I am gossiping about them.				
15. I like to help my Thai friends when they have difficulties in talking with foreign friends.				
Actions				
16. I like to work with friends who are from different countries. I think it is the way to develop my international social skills.	2.48	2.46	0.318	0.751
17. When I welcome a foreign guest who is a disabled man, I will actively approach my guest and immediately help him/her as much as I can in order to make him happy.				
18. When I go out to have dinner with my Chinese friend, he will use chopsticks when eating but I am comfortable using a spoon and fork without needing chopsticks the way he/she does.				
19. I will treat or offer services to guests from				

Thailand's neighboring countries differently than to those guests who are from Europe because their requirements are different and guests from nearby countries are easygoing.				
20. To kill time when engaging in small talk with foreign guests from the Middle East I raise the issue of the regional conflict for discussion in order to show my empathy.				

In relation to the above phenomenon, the ICC course availability situation for undergraduates alongside current foreign language teaching and learning strategies tracing back to the participants' demographic informational history concerning sources of language and ICC proficiencies is likely to explain this phenomenon. The majority of the participants claimed that they gained both English language proficiency and ICC from their workplace rather than from educational institutions, which were identified as the least significant resource to provide the necessary ICC traits required for working in the hospitality service industry.

In investigating the implementation stages through teaching and learning curriculums or pedagogies, a strategy set out in the policy to promote intercultural communication was virtually nonexistent for the nation's basic education and vocational school level organizations. Among high schools under the supervision of the Office of the Basic Education Commission, the study of cultural issues is partly integrated in the Social Studies subject taught in the classroom. For the vocational schooling system, cultural issues, particularly in a superficial level, can be found through learning English or other foreign languages classes. However, there is no evidence indicating that intercultural communication is highlighted in classroom learning of both organizations.

By examining the educational missions and policies of the Office of the Vocational Education Commission, a statement relating to a sense of highlighting international communication issues is found and seen to be emphasized in its policies. One of the missions and policies for its educational plan covering the period 2012–2026 is to produce and prepare its students to enter the workforce of an international market. Its educational policies also emphasize the important point of preparing its graduates to deal with the integration of the ASEAN Community by increasing the number of English or mini English programs available for their students. The aim is to increase students' English proficiency together with learning other ASEAN languages.

From investigating the policies of all educational institutions (Commission on Higher Education 2008; Ministry of Education 2015; Office of Higher Education Commission 2010; Office of the Vocational Education Commission 2012), it was evident that educational institutions should produce graduates with IC competence. However, in reality, when exploring several curriculums employed

in universities, both private and government related institutions, the inclusion of intercultural communication was considered inadequate. There was either no course or a maximum of one or two courses for English, foreign languages, and hotel and tourism related majors. Consequently, the access to ICC courses or trainings was very limited for those non-foreign languages and hotel and tourism related majors.

The explored outcome was in line with the research conducted by Tantiranat (Tantiranat, 2015, p.154-165) exploring the intercultural implications for Thai educational policies in higher education. She claimed that the Office of Higher Education Commission's policy clearly states its roles and responsibilities to cultivate and prepare young Thais for the future workforce and to equip them with the necessary ICC to deal with a fast-changing globalized world. However, when it comes to the implementation phase, there has been very little achievement with a significant or satisfactory outcome (Tantiranat, 2015, p. 154-165). It was because the set policies do not seem to have reached the teachers who are considered the implementers of the policies. Therefore, the final outcomes of Thai education, particularly in the field of ICC, are worth investigating.

Differences between ICC levels of the three groups of participants of different work experience

In terms of the work experience carried out by hotel front office personnel, the length of these periods among the participants did not have any correlation to the level of their ICC. Despite this lack of correlation, I investigated further whether there were any significant differences between the means of the three independent groups: (1) work experience of less than two years (<2 years) of staff who were new graduates and considered low experienced staff, (2) work experience between two to five years (2-5 years) of staff who possessed moderate experience in the field, and (3) work experience of more than five years (> 5 years) of staff who were considered experienced front office personnel.

The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine whether their work experience contributed any significant difference in possessing intercultural competence. After investigating the differences among the variables in detail, the results suggested no significant difference. Interestingly, there was no statistically significant difference among the three individual groups in all four examined ICC domains as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

ICC levels of the three groups of participants of different length of work experience

Q-Items		< 2 Yrs. (Mean)	2-5 Yrs. (Mean)	>5 Yrs. (Mean)	P-value
Attitudes					
1.	I feel embarrassed when I see people from other cultures performing a greeting kiss and goodbye kiss.	2.43	2.50	2.46	0.687
2.	I feel frustrated and question the situation when I see an old foreigner living in Thailand carrying things without any help from their accompanied children.				
3.	I am curious and want to know the cultural background of my new colleague who is from Uganda so that I look for information in order to know how to treat my new colleague properly.				
4.	When I travel to a country that doesn't have a queue or lineup system for services, I feel disappointed seeing their disorganized practice.				
5.	I enjoy talking or working with foreign colleagues who are from different cultures while my friends always avoid working with them.				
Knowledge and Understanding					
6.	I know that people who are traveling from Europe are white people (Caucasian) and are very punctual.	2.22	2.31	2.35	0.123
7.	I am aware that most Thai people like spicy food and like to eat street food. However, when I take my new foreign colleagues out for dinner, I always bring them to a nice, clean restaurant and order food with a mild taste for everyone including myself.				
8.	I don't like to listen to other non-native English accents because I think they are difficult to understand for Thai people like me.				
9.	I know that when some foreigners raise their eyebrows or remain silent, it means they are frustrated or unhappy.				
10.	I know if there is a large group of Muslim guests staying in my hotel for a certain period of time and there is no mosque nearby, we will allocate or set up a 'praying zone' for them.				
Skills					
11.	I always show my Thai 'Wai' to new foreign				

colleagues because I think this is the way to show our beautiful Thai culture to foreigners.	2.89	2.92	2.84	0.398
12. Foreigners coming to stay or work in Thailand have to know Thai culture, aiming to adjust themselves in order to interact with local people effectively.				
13. I can see that some foreigners who are from a particular part of the world have superstitions/beliefs like some Thai people because I sometimes see them wearing or showing respect to an object.				
14. When having a meeting with a group of people who are from different cultural backgrounds, I don't whisper to people next to me because other people might think that it is impolite or I am gossiping about them.				
15. I like to help my Thai friends when they have difficulties in talking with foreign friends.				
Actions				
16. I like to work with friends who are from different countries. I think it is the way to develop my international social skills.	2.78	2.79	2.84	0.624
17. When I welcome a foreign guest who is a disabled man, I will actively approach my guest and immediately help him as much as I can in order to make him happy.				
18. When I go out to have dinner with my Chinese friend, he will use chopsticks when eating but I am comfortable using a spoon and fork without needing chopsticks the way he/she does.				
19. I will treat or offer services to guests from Thailand's neighboring countries differently than to those guests who are from Europe because their requirements are different and guests from nearby countries are easygoing.				
20. To kill time when engaging in small talk with foreign guests from the Middle East I raise the issue of the regional conflict for discussion in order to show my empathy.				

One might have a hypothesis that the more work experience the front office personnel possesses, the higher level of ICC they should possess. This emerged phenomenon of the finding that there was no significant difference among the

investigated variables could be explained by employing the same principles as discussed regarding the issue of major and non-major educational backgrounds. Within the context of this study, cases in which there were no or insufficient ICC courses available for graduates alongside the teaching and learning methodology were likely to be concluded as the factors that contribute the emerged phenomenon of no significance among different working periods and the employees' level of ICC. Besides, from the respondents' demographics, it was important to note that job promotion without additional training contributed to the phenomenon of no correlation between additional work experience and higher ICC level. For example, in the three-star hotel context, some of the current front office workers with vocational school backgrounds had been promoted to be front office employees without additional or appropriate training. Therefore, in some cases it was assumed that obtaining more knowledge about intercultural communication could be earned in the workplace, but the process of obtaining ICC from workplace had provided a superficial approach which often limited an in-depth understanding of ICC perspectives.

On the other hand, the four-star hotel workers tended to have more training, but the findings were the same as those of the three-star hotel employees with no relationship between their work experience and level of ICC. It was assumed that any extra training tended to be courses that focused on "how to" deliver proper actions in the hospitality field with instructions or recommended actions for a variety of hotel situations. When the context of the questions changed to situations of ICC at a deeper level beyond hotel contexts, respondents' answers contributed to the "no correlation" phenomenon. There was a possibility that if the questionnaire for this study was framed within a hotel context, the results of the study would likely have shown some relationships between participants' backgrounds and their level of intercultural competence. This is worth examining for further research.

Having integrated and interpreted all findings to answer the research question, it has been proved that there was no correlation between the hotel front office personnel's backgrounds and the level of their ICC when dealing with intercultural encounters. In other words, within this study's context, without the availability of adequate ICC courses with appropriate and effective teaching and learning strategies, the background of the employees does not play a vital role in consistently promoting ICC.

CONCLUSION

Today, working personnel are required to be equipped with high intercultural sensitivity to significantly perform intercultural competence duties in terms of service attentiveness, revenue contribution, interpersonal skills, job satisfaction

as well as social satisfaction as those duties relate to intercultural communication encounters (Sizoo et al., 2005, p.245). Therefore, it is essential for all employees who are working in the hospitality service industry to possess a certain degree of ICC diverse interactions. This study has answered the research question, with discussions to highlight the possible factors that contributed to the findings. Although the outcomes of this study were the directional guidelines for the stakeholders in the hospitality industry and education sector of the Kingdom of Thailand, there are several noteworthy perspectives that are required to be considered by the authorities and related parties such as policy makers for immediate, medium and long term implementation as well as scrutinized for future research to answer all unanswered questions.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Throughout the study, I was aware of numerous methodological limitations (e.g. time, organizational policies, locations, stakeholders) which might not be able to be integrated or implemented into this study. Therefore, the possible methodological limitations related to this study are listed as follows. First, the most significant limitation of this study concerns the findings relating to the question of whether or not the ICC gained by hotel front office personnel derived from what they learned at their institutions, from the nature of the work in their workplaces, or simply through unconscious adaptation from their own interactions and personal experiences. Secondly, the methods applied in this study might contain some biases due to the fact that the groups of participants were varied in some characteristics and educational backgrounds, and likewise varied in their own experiences with regards to exposing themselves to international interactions. However, the findings of this study can be taken as a guideline and help establish what the trend of intercultural competence was at the time of the study. Finally, the sampling method of the hotel selection might not be inclusive of all hotels in Bangkok, as there were various hotel categories not studied which represented different degrees of service quality, functions, and so forth. During the investigating stage, I was fully aware of these points and recognized their limitations in this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

After the interpretation of the findings, some points emerged which are significantly remarked upon as both recommendations and implications of this study. They may help identify and fill gaps in training to assure ICC and increase customer satisfaction. Firstly, intercultural competence courses and training are suggested and they should be sufficiently available both in high schools and vocational schools and within higher education. Today's labor workforce is

strongly required to be equipped to a certain degree with ICC so that they can engage in intercultural interactions and encounters appropriately and effectively. It is also worth noting that expanding ICC training courses to high schools, vocational colleges, and other institutions is considered important because nowadays hotel workers, and those who are working in other service-oriented fields, are not limited to university graduates.

Finally, ICC among hotel working personnel is perceived to be derived primarily from their workplace and through their life experience, not from educational institutions. To address this phenomenon, there should be measurement methods and criteria that can be used to assess as to what extent the graduates obtained intercultural competence from the schooling system, and whether it is adequate for them to be able to apply it in their workplace. On top of that, the level of competence with which they are equipped should also be recognized by both employees and their employers.

With regards to future research, there are a number of paths that could be taken. Firstly, it is essential to investigate pedagogies or teaching and learning strategies to effectively promote ICC among learners in a Thai context. Unlike the Western atmosphere and international learning environments where a diversity of cultures, races and nationalities can be found in schools and in classes, it has to be recognized that this is not the case in the Thai context, and ways must be established to overcome this phenomenon. However, within Thai context, there are many social subgroups that can be differentiated in terms of cultural perspectives. In addition, providing more opportunities for Thai students to expose themselves to diversities outside the classroom is worth considering.

Lastly, it is a question of how teachers of foreign languages can integrate the concept of ICC into the classroom learning experience within a Thai context. Perhaps, this question is an urgent matter requiring immediate further research due to the fact that changing educational policies takes time. Changing educational policies takes time; however, there is an immediate requirement from the market to have a workforce equipped with ICC. Integrating intercultural competence through language teaching and learning in the classroom can possibly make it happen quicker. However, a swift implementation of this integration should take into account that particular teaching pedagogies and strategies are required to be developed and appropriate training courses conducted for the teachers.

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