Intercultural Readiness of Cambodian University Students for English as a Medium of Education (EME) in the Thai Context: A Missing Perspective in the Pre-Arrival Stage

Sakseth Sou and Anchalee Wannaruk[*]

School of Foreign Languages, Institute of Social Technology,
Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: Intercultural citizenship includes the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for active participation in diverse, multilingual communities with critical cultural awareness. These competencies are especially crucial in English as a Medium of Education (EME) programs, where academic success and social integration depend on intercultural readiness. This study investigates the development of intercultural readiness among Cambodian university students preparing for EME programs in Thailand. It examines how environmental factors—family, community, and regional influences—along with formal and informal intercultural experiences, shape students' readiness. By focusing on the pre-arrival stage, this research addresses a critical yet often overlooked aspect of intercultural readiness. The results aim to inform educators, policymakers, and program developers about the importance of early interventions in fostering students' adaptability and intercultural competence.

Methodology: Using a qualitative design, the study draws on autobiographical narratives and in-depth interviews with five Cambodian university students. Participants were purposively selected to promote diversity in gender, academic background, and previous intercultural experiences. Thematic analysis identifies patterns and themes in their experiences, providing insights into their readiness for EME environments before arrival. This approach captures both individual and cross-case perspectives, framed by the Ecological Systems Theory and the Intercultural Communicative Competence Model.

Main Results: The results show that family narratives, community engagement, and geographic proximity affect students' readiness for English as a Medium of Education (EME). Family support was crucial, with education often seen as a pathway to social advancement. Parental support and narratives about education abroad fostered emotional resilience and motivation. Community involvement through religious groups, schools, and volunteer activities contributed to developing intercultural competence. Geographic proximity to Thailand offered some participants familiarity, though its impact varied. Students with extensive intercultural experiences, both formal (e.g., exchange programs) and informal (e.g., cross-border interactions), exhibited greater confidence and adaptability in EME contexts. Conversely, those with

limited exposure relied heavily on family support and second-hand insights, resulting in varied levels of readiness.

Discussions: The study emphasizes the importance of pre-departure preparation programs in developing linguistic, emotional, and cultural competencies. These programs support both students with extensive and minimal prior experiences, ensuring equal opportunities for a smooth transition into English as a Medium of Education (EME) contexts. The findings highlight the interplay between environmental and experiential factors in fostering intercultural citizenship, a key quality for thriving in diverse multilingual and multicultural academic settings. Pre-arrival interventions, including language training, cultural workshops, and organized reflection activities, are essential for developing intercultural readiness and enhancing students' adaptability in diverse academic environments.

Conclusions: The study supports organized pre-departure preparation programs that include language training, cultural awareness workshops, and activities designed to enhance emotional resilience. Such programs can help bridge gaps in intercultural readiness and promote a more inclusive perspective on international education. Furthermore, this research emphasizes the need for further investigation into the challenges and strategies related to post-arrival adaptation, providing greater insight into the development of intercultural citizenship within EME frameworks.

*Corresponding author
E-mail address: wannaruk@sut.ac.th

Introduction

In today's interconnected world, English as a Medium of Education (EME) has evolved beyond a mere instructional tool—it represents a gateway to academic mobility and global engagement. Defined as the use of English for teaching and learning academic content in non-English-speaking countries, EME has significantly influenced higher education across Southeast Asia (Fang & Baker, 2018). In Thailand, international programs increasingly utilize EME, drawing students from neighboring countries, particularly Cambodia (Snodin, 2019).

Given this context, ASEAN EME programs typically emphasize English-only instruction, restructured classroom discourse, and greater reliance on student-centered and independent learning. These features impose considerable linguistic and academic demands on students who are expected to acquire both content and language proficiency simultaneously. Instructors also face challenges, balancing accessibility with academic rigor (Dafouz & Smit, 2020; Phakiti et al., 2013). For international students, these pressures translate into difficulties related to language proficiency, unfamiliar educational expectations, and navigating cultural norms within the classroom. As Minoia (2019) argues, intercultural competence must be intentionally cultivated in language instruction settings, where pedagogical approaches deeply influence how students engage with cultural differences. Understanding these dynamics underlines the importance of intercultural readiness before arrival, which significantly shapes students' experiences in EME environments. Notably,

Cambodia's national emphasis on English education supports ASEAN's broader vision for academic mobility and regional integration (Hum & Heng, 2024).

Despite increasing recognition of EME's challenges, research has predominantly focused on students' post-arrival adaptation, including coping with coursework, navigating cultural differences, and adjusting to classroom communication norms. While these insights are valuable, they overlook a vital phase: the period before departure.

The pre-arrival stage is more than a logistical countdown; it is a formative period during which students begin developing the skills, mindsets, and expectations that shape their educational journey. The concept of intercultural citizenship by Byram (2008) offers a framework for understanding this readiness, emphasizing the capacity to engage across cultural boundaries with critical awareness and empathy.

In this light, Cambodian students preparing to study in Thailand face varied trajectories. Some from urban centers like Phnom Penh may possess international school backgrounds, high English proficiency, and diverse cross-cultural experiences. Others from rural areas may encounter obstacles such as limited language instruction, fewer role models, and little intercultural exposure. Yet, all share a common goal: viewing education as a bridge to broader opportunities.

However, few studies have addressed this essential pre-arrival stage. Jackson (2019), for instance, illustrates how early intercultural experiences shape student mindsets even before departure, though his work rarely examines Cambodia specifically. This gap in research highlights the need for a deeper understanding of how environmental influences—such as family narratives, community support, or regional proximity—affect students' preparation. Furthermore, informal experiences, such as watching foreign media, receiving encouragement from parents, or speaking with someone who studied abroad, also remain underexplored, indicating a broader area of inquiry that warrants attention.

This study aims to address these gaps. It investigates how Cambodian university students develop intercultural readiness during the pre-arrival stage before joining Thai EME programs. The research explores the factors that shape students' adaptability and preparedness for studying in a new cultural and academic environment. Additionally, it seeks to understand how universities and administrators can better support this transition.

To achieve these aims, the study integrates two guiding frameworks. The Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) examines how multiple environmental layers, from family to broader sociocultural systems, influence student development. Meanwhile, the Intercultural Communicative Competence Model by Byram (1997) assesses how individuals interpret and interact across cultural contexts.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do environmental influences, such as family, community, and regional dynamics, shape Cambodian university students' intercultural readiness before arriving in Thailand?

2. How do prior intercultural experiences contribute to Cambodian university students' readiness to adapt to EME environments in Thailand?

Employing qualitative methods, this research draws on five diverse student cases. Their narratives reveal not only differences in intercultural readiness but also shared themes of resilience, aspiration, and cultural negotiation. These insights highlight the complexities of student experiences and underscore the importance of tailored support. Ultimately, the study informs the design of pre-arrival interventions—including orientation programs, language support, and cultural workshops—that aim to create equitable starting points for all students

(Byram & Golubeva, 2020; Deardorff, 2006). In light of these findings, the following section reviews the theoretical and empirical foundations that frame this inquiry.

Literature Review
English as a Medium of Education (EME) and Its Role in the Thai Context

English as a Medium of Education (EME) refers to using English to teach academic content in non-English-speaking countries. EME signifies a shift in academic culture, encompassing broader engagement, classroom interaction, and expectations of internationalized learning environments (Fang & Baker, 2018).

In Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, EME is central to internationalization strategies. These programs often involve English-only instruction, student-centered pedagogies, and curriculum reforms aligned with global standards (Kirkpatrick, 2010). For Cambodian students, such programs present opportunities for upward mobility and cross-border engagement. However, they also introduce challenges, particularly for students from rural or under-resourced backgrounds, emphasizing the need for cultural and communicative preparedness—defined in this study as intercultural readiness.

Intercultural Citizenship in EME Contexts

Intercultural citizenship is integral to the success of students in EME contexts, encompassing not just language skills but also the ethical, social, and cultural dimensions of learning in a global environment (Byram, 2008; Deardorff, 2006). In ASEAN, regional education frameworks emphasize mobility and mutual understanding, fostering intercultural citizenship to prepare students for meaningful engagement with difference—academically and socially.

While studies on international student adaptation abound, most focus on post-arrival experiences. Few investigate how intercultural readiness develops before departure. For instance, Fang and Baker (2018) examined how short-term study-abroad experiences shaped Chinese students' global perspectives through English as a lingua franca. Their work suggests that intercultural awareness begins before physical mobility—often in local environments. This insight is particularly relevant in Cambodia, where the education landscape is influenced by transnational aspirations but lacks consistent pre-arrival preparation.

To support the development of intercultural citizenship, it is crucial to examine both individual competencies and the systems that shape them.

Integrating Intercultural Competence and the Bioecological Model

Intercultural competence forms the foundation of intercultural citizenship. The Intercultural Communicative Competence Model by Byram (1997) identifies key competencies including openness, knowledge of other cultures, interpretation and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness. Complementing this, Deardorff (2006) highlights empathy, reflection, and adaptability as core traits of intercultural engagement.

Building on this foundation, Minoia (2019) adds that language classrooms are prime spaces for cultivating these competencies—especially through dialogic, reflective pedagogy. In this context, teachers play a critical role not only as linguistic facilitators but also as cultural guides.

However, while individual traits are important, they do not account for the full spectrum of readiness. To understand this complexity, the Bioecological Model of Human Development by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) allows us to examine readiness as an evolving process influenced by nested systems: personal motivation, family support, school environments, community interaction, and broader sociopolitical norms. The Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) model captures how these factors interact over time, making it

particularly well-suited for understanding how Cambodian students' backgrounds shape their capacity for EME adaptation.

Together, these frameworks lay the theoretical foundation for this study. However, the interplay of these elements calls for further layers of analysis to address emerging realities.

Intercultural Adaptation and Sensitivity Models

To enrich its theoretical grounding, this study draws on two frameworks that address the emotional and cognitive dimensions of intercultural interaction: the Anxiety and Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

AUM theory, developed by Gudykunst (2003), posits that successful intercultural communication relies on individuals' ability to regulate uncertainty and anxiety in unfamiliar contexts. In the pre-arrival phase, where students anticipate but have not yet encountered cultural differences, managing uncertainty is central to emotional preparedness. Studies by Huiwen et al. (2022) and Neuliep (2019) affirm the theory's relevance in explaining pre-transition stress among international students.

Building on this understanding of emotional preparedness, the DMIS framework, developed by Bennett (2017), outlines a progression from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, offering a way to interpret how students perceive and respond to cultural diversity. According to Hammer et al. (2003) and Chen and Starosta (2000), the model provides a useful diagnostic tool for evaluating intercultural sensitivity in educational contexts.

Together, these models provide complementary lenses to understand both the emotional and developmental dimensions of intercultural readiness. However, to attain a more detailed broader perspective, contemporary influences such as digital access, social inequality, and student agency are prerequisite considerations.

Contemporary Dimensions of Intercultural Readiness

While formal instruction and mobility programs play key roles, growing evidence points to informal environments as powerful incubators of intercultural learning. Helm (2015) demonstrates how virtual exchanges and online collaboration can promote cultural reflection and awareness. Likewise, O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) emphasize the value of telecollaboration in cultivating cross-cultural competence even before physical relocation. For Cambodian students with limited travel experience, digital platforms—such as online gaming, YouTube, or social media—provide avenues for gaining intercultural insights.

However, access to such platforms is not evenly distributed. Scholars like Piller and Cho (2015) and Gray (2013) argue that EME initiatives, though promising, may reinforce existing inequalities, particularly when rural students lack resources, role models, or institutional support. This critique is especially salient in Cambodia, where urban-rural disparities profoundly influence who is prepared—and who is not—for globalized education.

To mitigate these gaps, researchers have pointed to the value of structured pre-departure support. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) highlight how orientation programs that address language, culture, and emotional readiness can ease transitions for students. In the ASEAN context, Jon (2013) illustrates how Korean universities integrate intercultural components into onboarding processes, offering a model for regional best practices.

Crucially, students must be viewed not only as recipients of support but also as agents in their own development. Marginson (2014) introduces the idea of student "self-formation," emphasizing how learners actively construct meaning and identity through their educational journeys.

These contemporary perspectives are central to this study's framing, as they suggest that Cambodian students' readiness emerges not only from access or instruction but also from complex interactions among digital exposure, structural inequality, and personal agency.

Rationale of the Study

Few studies have examined how intercultural readiness develops before students depart for English as a Medium of Education (EME) programs, particularly in the Cambodian context. Most existing research focuses on post-arrival adjustment, overlooking pre-mobility developmental processes.

Very limited studies have synthesized intercultural communicative competence, ecological systems theory, and contemporary factors like digital exposure, structural inequality, and student agency to assess Cambodian students' pre-arrival readiness for Thai EME contexts. This study adds conceptual depth and regional specificity to the literature on international education.

By exploring how environmental influences (e.g., family, community, geographic location) and prior intercultural experiences (e.g., digital media, exchange programs, informal peer interactions) shape Cambodian students' preparation, the study aims to inform the design of more inclusive pre-arrival interventions. It highlights that readiness is built through complex interactions of lived experience, social support, and individual agency, not just formal instruction.

Critical perspectives also need acknowledgment. Scholars like Marginson (2014) and Tran and Vu (2018) caution that reliance on informal support networks—such as family encouragement or secondhand cultural insights—can create idealized or ethnocentric expectations about host countries. Without systemic interventions, EME programs risk perpetuating existing inequalities in global education access and outcomes.

This study addresses these concerns by centering the voices of Cambodian students and exploring the nuances of their readiness journeys. The following section outlines the methodology used to investigate these dimensions.

Methodology
Context and Participants

This study was conducted within the context of English as a Medium of Education (EME) programs at Thai universities. These programs use English to teach academic content in countries where English is not the primary language. The rise of EME programs in Thailand reflects broader regional trends toward internationalization and draws students from neighboring ASEAN countries, including Cambodia. While these programs foster global competitiveness and intercultural interaction, they also introduce challenges related to language proficiency, academic expectations, and cultural adaptation.

To explore how Cambodian students prepare for such programs, this study adopted a qualitative case study approach utilizing purposive sampling. Five Cambodian students currently enrolled in Thai EME programs were selected to ensure diversity in educational, geographic, and cultural backgrounds. Pseudonyms are used to maintain participant confidentiality. Key details of their profiles are summarized below, focusing on relevant pre-arrival experiences and intercultural readiness.

Lita, a fourth-year Mechanical Engineering student from Phnom Penh, gained early intercultural exposure through a year-long high school exchange in Japan. She participated in English-based extracurriculars such as STEM events, Ignite Cambodia, and TED Talks. Fluent in English and Japanese, Lita's experiences significantly contributed to her intercultural sensitivity and confidence.

Similarly, Hiro, a third-year Innovative Agripreneur student from Kampong Speu, previously studied nursing in South Korea before health issues led to his return. Fluent in multiple languages, including English, Korean, Thai, and French, Hiro's intercultural awareness was shaped by both formal exchange opportunities and early interactions with foreign visitors through NGO events.

In contrast, Ben, a first-year Master's student in Food Technology, originally from Phnom Penh and later Poipet, developed language skills through self-study and informal engagement with Thai media. Despite limited international exposure in high school, he cultivated intercultural curiosity and a strong desire to pursue scholarship opportunities abroad.

Ron, a fourth-year Civil Engineering student from Phnom Penh, had minimal intercultural exposure prior to arrival, primarily interacting with foreign cultures via online gaming and English-language media. His decision to study abroad was motivated by family encouragement and the perceived benefits of overseas education.

Lastly, Don, a third-year Mechanical Engineering student from Battambang, relied mainly on classroom-based English instruction and familial support. Without extracurricular or international program participation, his intercultural readiness stemmed from personal motivation and access to scholarship funding.

Table 1. A Summary of Participants' Profiles

Participant	Region	Field of Study	Languages Spoken	Cultural Exposure
Lita	Phnom Penh	Mechanical Engineering	Khmer, English, Japanese	Japan exchange, STEM events, cultural volunteering
Hiro	Kampong Speu	Innovative Agripreneur	Khmer, Korean, English, Thai, French	Korea study, high school exchange to Thailand, NGO intercultural exposure
Ben	Phnom Penh/Poipet	Food Technology	Khmer, English, Thai	Media-based language learning, scholarship pursuit
Ron	Phnom Penh	Civil Engineering	Khmer, English	Online gaming, family encouragement
Don	Battambang	Mechanical Engineering	Khmer, English	Family motivation, limited English instruction

Research Design and Data Collection

A qualitative case study design was employed to investigate the lived experiences of Cambodian students and understand how their environments and personal attributes shaped their intercultural readiness. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' narratives within the broader educational context.

To achieve this, two primary data collection methods were utilized: autobiographical narratives and in-depth interviews. Participants began by writing personal accounts that described their academic, social, and cultural development from secondary school to pre-departure. These narratives provided foundational insights that informed the follow-up interviews.

The in-depth interviews, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, served to expand upon the written narratives. Conducted in both English and Khmer, depending on participant comfort, these interviews clarified and deepened emerging themes. This dual approach enabled triangulation, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of participants' readiness. Data

collection took place from September 2023 to January 2024, a period marked by post-pandemic academic normalization.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The initial stage involved reviewing the data repeatedly to build familiarity and identify initial codes that represented student attitudes toward cultural differences, language challenges, and personal development. For instance, statements like "I felt unprepared to speak in English" were coded as "communication anxiety."

These codes were subsequently organized into broader themes such as "influence of prior schooling," "self-directed learning," and "support from family." A total of six major themes were identified under two research dimensions. Themes were refined through iterative comparison and revision, with supporting quotes and context added to reinforce interpretations.

The analysis was guided by two theoretical frameworks: the Intercultural Communicative Competence Model by Byram (1997) and the Bioecological Model by (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). The former evaluated the development of intercultural skills among students, while the latter contextualized readiness within familial and community systems.

To ensure rigor, strategies for trustworthiness were applied based on Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was achieved through triangulation of narrative and interview data, while inter-rater reliability was ensured by involving a second independent coder who reviewed selected transcripts. Any coding discrepancies were resolved through collaborative discussion and iterative framework refinement.

This rigorous approach enabled both detailed individual case analysis and the synthesis of broader readiness patterns across participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were rigorously followed throughout the study. Participants received full disclosure about the study's aims, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained, and pseudonyms were employed to protect identities. The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Suranaree University of Technology.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents findings aligned with the study's two guiding research questions. Themes are organized into two overarching categories: (1) Environmental Influences in Shaping Intercultural Readiness and (2) Prior Intercultural Experiences Contributing to Readiness for English as a Medium of Education (EME). Each theme integrates theoretical lenses from Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model and Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence, highlighting shared and divergent trends across participants.

Environmental Influences in Shaping Intercultural Readiness
Family Influences

All participants cited family as a pivotal influence on their decision to study abroad and their emotional preparedness. For instance, Hiro's mother encouraged him toward a healthcare path and overseas study:

> *"...So that's why my mom encourage me to study nursing [...] so that's why I just like, go on the flow with her."*

Ben emphasized perceptions of Thai superiority:

> *"They simply know that Thailand is more advanced than us… So, with the economy and healthcare sector, they assume that the education system is also good based on that."*

Lita spoke of her family's emotional support:

> *"That day when I have to leave and fly on my own […] they believed that this is the only way I can develop and grow as a human being."*

These excerpts align with Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, where the family is the primary developmental environment. They also reflect the ICC model by Byram (1997), particularly in how students form attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about intercultural encounters through family narratives.

While all participants received encouragement, the quality varied. Hiro and Lita's families provided emotionally supportive narratives, reducing uncertainty and anxiety in line with AUM theory (Gudykunst, 2003). In contrast, Ben's pragmatic framing and Ron and Don's general encouragement lacked emotional support, possibly leaving them more vulnerable to stressors during transition.

Community Influence

Community engagement—both formal and informal—emerged as a critical factor in shaping intercultural orientation. Lita benefited from an English-speaking church:

> *"… the Bible class was conducted in English. […] Everyone is so supportive and so open and so friendly…"*

Hiro gained experience during his time as a nursing student in South Korea where he volunteered at a cultural exchange festival:

> *"I feel like getting connection, have a lot of connection… and make new friends. And I really enjoyed it."*

These forms of exposure contributed to the development of interactional skills and empathy, key aspects of Byram's ICC model and DMIS's ethnorelative stages (Bennett, 2017). They also represent mesosystem influences (Bronfenbrenner), where interaction between family and broader institutions shapes readiness.

In contrast, Ron and Don lacked community-based exposure, which, according to AUM theory, can lead to heightened uncertainty and less confident intercultural engagement. These cases also reflect educational inequality, where access to rich community networks is not uniformly distributed, as highlighted by Gray (2013) and Piller and Cho (2015).

Regional Dynamics

Proximity to Thailand influenced expectations. Ben noted:

> *"I thought that it was close and easy to visit home. The culture and tradition are not a big difference compared to Cambodia which made it easy for me to adapt."*

However, this regional familiarity did not lead to greater intercultural growth. Lita and Hiro, who studied in Japan and Korea respectively, reported more transformative learning. This outcome supports the argument by Kim (2001) that adaptation is driven by dissonance and immersion, not just cultural similarity.

Table 2. Environmental Influences on Intercultural Readiness

Theme	Lita	Hiro	Ben	Ron	Don
Family Influence	Emotional support and encouragement	Maternal guidance toward studying abroad	Motivated by perceived Thai advantages	Encouraged, focused on practical opportunity	General encouragement, few expectations
Community Influence	Diverse cultural participation (church, volunteering)	Cultural engagement in Korea	Local interaction through trade	Limited social exposure	Minimal community involvement
Regional Dynamics	Minimal relevance due to diverse exposure	Global experiences overshadow regional proximity	Cultural familiarity from border region	Regional similarity eased transition	Family ties to Thailand aided transition

Prior Intercultural Experiences Contributing to Readiness to Adapt to EME
Exposure to Diversity
Lita and Hiro had significant early intercultural exposure. Lita's exchange in Japan and her church engagement broadened her outlook, while Hiro benefited from Korean studies and NGO exchanges. These experiences align with DMIS's ethnorelative stages and reflect the development of interpretive and interactional competence (Byram, 1997). In contrast, Ron's exposure to different cultures came mostly through media and gaming, while Don had minimal experiences beyond school. This disparity highlights structural inequities in access to mobility and diversity.

Language Proficiency
Lita and Hiro were highly multilingual, speaking English, Japanese, Thai, and Korean fluently. In contrast, Ben was self-taught in English and Thai, showcasing strong personal initiative. This paradigm aligns with the notion of self-formation by Marginson (2014), where students shape their readiness through self-directed learning. Meanwhile, Ron and Don relied solely on classroom English, which provided them with limited opportunities for real-world use. This situation supports the claim by Deardorff (2006) that language proficiency is foundational to intercultural competence.

Cultural Interaction
Structured intercultural experiences further distinguished participants. Lita and Hiro participated in organized volunteering, exchange programs, and cultural events, actively immersing themselves in diverse cultures. In contrast, Ben's learning was more observational, while Ron and Don engaged mostly through passive or informal contact. This division mirrors the DMIS continuum, with Lita and Hiro approaching ethnorelativism, while Ron and Don remain in ethnocentric phases.

Table 3. Prior Intercultural Experiences

Theme	Lita	Hiro	Ben	Ron	Don
Exposure to Diversity	Japan exchange, local diversity	Korea study, exchange with Thai/Japanese NGOs	Indirect via Thai friends and media	Passive exposure through media/games	Minimal exposure beyond school
Language Proficiency	High English fluency and Japanese	Multilingual (English, Korean, Thai, French)	Self-taught English and Thai	Basic English from games and classes	Classroom English with limited use
Cultural Interaction	Church, volunteering, exchange program	Volunteering, academic cultural events, exchange programs, visits by NGO guests	Observational learning and internships	Gaming and casual encounters	Rare, informal interactions only

Table 3 shows that formal exchange and volunteering opportunities are strong predictors of intercultural readiness, while informal experiences—such as media engagement and peer interactions—also play a critical role, especially for students with limited institutional support. Ron's case illustrates how online gaming provided a low-stakes environment for practicing language and navigating cultural cues, reducing communication anxiety and building confidence. Similarly, Ben's self-directed learning through Thai media fostered bilingualism and cultural familiarity. These findings suggest that readiness can emerge from both formal exposure and self-motivated learning, highlighting the need to recognize diverse readiness pathways in EME policy and practice.

Cross-Case Synthesis

The following synthesis reveals patterns across participants:

Table 4. Cross-Case Synthesis Findings

Dimension	Shared Trends	Divergent Patterns
Family Influence	All had emotional or motivational family support	Degree of encouragement and exposure varied
Community Influence	Enriched exposure aided readiness	Limited exposure led to reduced confidence
Regional Dynamics	Familiarity helped orientation	Broader international exposure more impactful
Exposure to Diversity	Fostered adaptability	Lack of structured experience hindered readiness
Language Proficiency	Essential for EMI/EME readiness	Varied from fluent to rudimentary
Cultural Interaction	Critical for preparation	Absence led to lower preparedness

While Lita and Hiro demonstrate advanced readiness across multiple dimensions, the other participants offer alternative pathways. For example, Ron's immersion in online gaming significantly reduced his communication anxiety, highlighting how informal digital spaces can act as digital intercultural environments (Helm, 2015). Similarly, Don's emotional stability, rooted in strong family narratives, helped compensate for his lack of formal

exposure. Meanwhile, Ben's self-directed study shows incremental growth along the DMIS continuum, reinforcing the role of agency.

These diverse cases illustrate that Cambodian students' intercultural readiness is not fixed or linear. Instead, it emerges through intersecting environmental, experiential, and personal factors—each shaped by access, support, and initiative. Consequently, EME programs must avoid assuming baseline preparedness and instead provide structured, reflective scaffolding that supports diverse learners.

Building on the frameworks established by Byram (2008), Deardorff (2006), and Jon (2013), this study advocates for readiness-oriented interventions that combine language support, cultural workshops, and emotional resilience training. In this way, institutions can become bridges between students' local realities and global academic demands, ensuring that readiness is equitable, holistic, and inclusive.

Conclusion

This study underscores the intricate interplay between environmental factors and prior intercultural experiences in shaping Cambodian university students' readiness for English as a Medium of Education (EME) programs in Thailand. Findings reveal that family, community, and regional dynamics, alongside both formal and informal intercultural exposures, significantly influence students' capacity to adapt to unfamiliar academic and cultural landscapes.

Building on these insights, the study makes a strong case for the implementation of structured pre-arrival preparation programs. Such programs should include language training, cultural awareness workshops, and resilience-building activities tailored to students' varied backgrounds. As Minoia (2019) emphasizes, intercultural competence should be embedded in language education not only through curriculum but also via pedagogical practices. For students with prior intercultural exposure, these programs can deepen their understanding of host culture values and academic expectations. Conversely, for those with minimal exposure, they offer essential foundational skills that bridge readiness gaps.

Further emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach, a critical implication is that EME must be framed not solely as a linguistic model but as a holistic transition framework. The challenges students face—linguistic, academic, and emotional—require institutional strategies that support the development of intercultural citizenship. A readiness-oriented EME model affirms the broader goals of global education: empathy, adaptability, and meaningful cultural engagement.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research, including its reliance on self-reported data and a modest sample size, which, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, may limit generalizability. The findings are also shaped by the Thai EME context and may not fully apply to other ASEAN or international settings. Therefore, cultural nuances should be considered when interpreting and applying these insights elsewhere.

This study contributes to the field by empirically examining pre-arrival intercultural readiness among Cambodian students preparing for English as a Medium of Education (EME) programs in Thailand. It integrates ecological, communicative, and emotional frameworks to provide a holistic perspective on readiness, including digital learning, structural inequality, and student agency—dimensions often underexplored in existing literature. These insights enhance current understandings of intercultural competence by emphasizing the importance of early, context-sensitive development before physical mobility.

Looking ahead, future research should expand on this work through longitudinal studies that assess changes in readiness across the pre- and post-arrival phases. Evaluating the effectiveness of specific preparation interventions across various institutional contexts can deepen our understanding of what best supports international student adaptation.

Additionally, exploring the role of digital environments and peer mentoring in readiness-building could further enrich this field.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes that recognizing and addressing the factors influencing intercultural readiness is not only beneficial but essential. Educational institutions play a critical role in designing inclusive programs that prepare students both linguistically and culturally. Doing so not only enhances academic success but also cultivates globally competent graduates equipped to thrive in diverse environments.

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