Integrating Intercultural Competence into the Curriculum: A Catalyst for Critical Thinking in Thai Tertiary English Education

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Abstract

In Thai tertiary English education, the adoption of intercultural competence represents a modern teaching approach. This paper seeks to unveils the potential of integrating intercultural competence into the curriculum to enhance critical thinking skills. The examination centers on two key components: intercultural competence and critical thinking. Initially, the paper delves into the origins and advantages of intercultural competence, outlining its frameworks. Subsequently, it addresses the challenges associated with teaching intercultural competence in Thai tertiary English education and provides a general understanding of critical thinking. The article posits a connection between intercultural competence and critical thinking, asserting that intercultural competence has the potential to augment critical thinking for five primary reasons. These include the alignment of characteristics such as 'holistic' and 'judiciousness' within both cultural understanding and critical thinking frameworks, as well as the shared learnability through inquisitive, truth-seeking, analytical, and confident reasoning skills. The dynamic nature of intercultural competence, coupled with cultural relativism, can foster open-mindedness. Finally, systematic functions mutually reinforce these elements. Consequently, the integration of intercultural competence into instructional practices holds substantial promise for cultivating critical thinking skills with neutral perspectives and social skills for diverse cultural challenges among tertiary students.

Keywords: curriculum design, intercultural competence, critical thinking, tertiary education

Introduction

English is considered a global language, and to keep pace with our ever-globalizing world, Thailand is attempting to increase its citizens' English ability through the enforcement of an English education policy. This involves allocating time and budgets for foreign teachers with the goal of improving English language skills (Punthumasen, 2007). Efforts to develop English education in Thailand have been influenced by three main factors: Thailand's 1999 National Education Act (NEA), English Education Reform, and the ASEAN Community in 2015 (Sanpatchayapong, 2017). As a result, English education in Thailand can be empirically observed in the form of bilingual schools, English training for teachers, incentives for English skills, and the hiring of native English-speaking teachers, among others (Kirkpatrick, 2012). However, the results have been unsatisfactory, as the slow progress in English language skills and proficiency contrasts with the efforts (i.e., time and budgets) made (Kaur et al., 2016). Additionally, the Anglo-centric native teachers, often viewed as embodying monolingual and monocultural ideas, do not reflect the global growth of English as a lingua franca (ELF) (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017).

In our ever-globalizing world, the imperative skill of navigating and thriving in culturally diverse environments is increasingly acknowledged (Byram, 2020). This acknowledgment has spurred a growing interest in intercultural competence, described as the ability to interact effectively and sensitively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram, 2020). Despite its significance, many educators and learners may remain unfamiliar with the concept of intercultural competence within language teaching, highlighting the necessity for further research in this domain (Mu & Yu, 2023).

Simultaneously, there is an unprecedented demand for heightened critical thinking skills, particularly as societies grapple with complex issues that span philosophy and psychology. This is evidenced not only in the quality of thoughts (Lai, 2011) but also in the capacity to assess information originating from diverse sources. Operationally, critical thinking is delineated as the cognitive process of problem-solving (Sternberg, 1986) and the adeptness in addressing intricate tasks (Mathews & Lowe, 2011). Although both intercultural competence and critical thinking are acknowledged as crucial competencies for the 21st century, this paper delves into the intersection of these fundamental constructs, seeking to illuminate a relatively unexplored terrain in the realm of intercultural competence and critical thinking research within Thai tertiary English education.

Encouraging the development of intercultural competence and critical thinking can be achieved through targeted educational approaches. In the Thai educational context, intercultural competence is a relatively recent focus, with limited studies, such as the one conducted on Thai secondary education teachers (Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016). The strategies employed in this study included teachers sharing their knowledge about foreign cultures, assigning research tasks on foreign cultures, displaying images of diverse cultures in classrooms, and inviting individuals with international experiences to share insights (Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016). Despite these efforts, intercultural competence receives minimal attention in Thai tertiary English education, indicating a

need for more comprehensive strategies and awareness-building initiatives in higher education settings. Addressing the nexus between intercultural competence and critical thinking in educational policies and practices can significantly contribute to preparing students for the challenges of a globalized and culturally diverse world.

In the tertiary classroom, instruction serves as a means of fostering intercultural competence to elevate critical thinking skills. Within a tertiary setting, the capacity of students to grasp the intricacies of diverse cultures and backgrounds has the potential to spearhead the development of critical thinking. Though previous studies indicate that younger learners may acquire L2 vocabulary faster than older learners; however, Uchihara and colleagues (2019) suggests that when it comes to complexity, individuals of advanced age, particularly university students, appear to acquire vocabulary more rapidly than those at other educational level. As learners mature and gain accumulated experience with L2 texts, their aptitude for higher accuracy and comprehending intricate issues increases (Uchihara et al., 2019). Given the intricate terms and vocabulary associated with cultural aspects, university students tend to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of such complexities. Additionally, considering the substantial advantages of intercultural competence, such as fostering awareness of intercultural differences, facilitating comprehension of cultural distinctions, nurturing open-mindedness, leading to cross-cultural adaptability, enhancing international industries (e.g., education), and promoting translanguaging in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context (Gallois et al., 2014), it is plausible that intercultural competence contributes to the enhancement of critical thinking skills in tertiary students. Therefore, this current study seeks to investigate the potential of utilizing intercultural competence to foster critical thinking in Thai tertiary English education.

Origin and Advantages of Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence (IC) signifies the capacity to interact adeptly and sensitively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, embodying the nuanced engagement with various identities, groups, and their respective cultures. This encompasses the efficacy and appropriateness of communicative behavior in navigating differences. The academic paper, in essence, delineates 'intercultural competence' as the skilled interaction of individuals in communication with people from varying cultures (Byram, 2020; Council of Europe, 2018; Deardorff, 2020). This multifaceted ability involves not only effective engagement but also a heightened awareness of the diverse cultural dynamics at play. By recognizing and navigating these intricacies, individuals can foster meaningful and respectful communication across cultural boundaries, a competence increasingly vital in our interconnected and diverse global landscape.

The growing interest in intercultural competence can be traced back to the seminal work about George Simmel (Rogers, 1999). Simmel, whose Jewish parents lived in Germany, introduced the concept of the 'stranger,' referring to an individual belonging to a community but not fully accepted by its members. Park (1924) expanded on Simmel's ideas, introducing terms like 'social distance' to

describe the perception or treatment of individuals based on factors such as ethnicity, race, or skin color. Park also introduced concepts such as 'marginality,' which describes someone living in two cultures and feeling like a stranger in both, and 'sojourner,' representing a person residing in a host culture while maintaining ties to their home culture. These early concepts laid the groundwork for the development of intercultural communication (Gallois et al., 2014; Pacheco, 2020). Recent research has integrated diverse disciplines, including psychology, culture, and economics, introducing the term "sino-distance" to quantify the cultural distance experienced by individuals undergoing acculturation (English et al., 2021). In Thailand, another popular term 'farang' can be widely seen. Typically, a foreign male who comes to Thailand through transnational marriage is part of the phenomenon known as 'phua farang'. This has led to the stigmatization of rural Isan transnational wives 'mia farang' as immoral materialists, according to Sirijit (2012). The term 'stranger' can also apply to education, for example, to 'farang teachers'. In response to the demand for Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) in Thailand, 'farang teachers' are expected to employ modern English language teaching pedagogies, which reflect the idealization of NESTs (Durdle, 2024). These terms reflect the challenges and adjustments individuals face when adapting to a new culture, contributing to the broader discourse on intercultural competence. The multifaceted nature of intercultural competence becomes evident in this historical trajectory, illustrating its relevance and evolution as societies navigate the complexities of cultural interactions. This exploration highlights the dynamic nature of cultural studies and the need for a nuanced understanding of intercultural competence in the contemporary global landscape.

With the progression of global dynamics, characterized by technological advancements, heightened economic globalization, mass migrations, and intensified international exchanges, intercultural communication has become increasingly prominent within culturally diverse environments (Gallois et al., 2014). This trend heralds significant advantages attributed to intercultural competence. Primarily, it fosters an acute awareness of intercultural differences, encouraging individuals to suspend judgment and embrace diversity. Secondly, it propels a profound understanding of multiculturalism, instilling an ethos of equitable treatment and diminishing prejudices. Thirdly, it nurtures open-mindedness, facilitating seamless cross-cultural adaptation as individuals fluidly adjust their behaviors between their home and host cultures. Fourthly, it bestows substantial benefits upon international industries, spanning education, business, and entertainment, by streamlining transactions through cultural communication. This not only augments verbal and nonverbal comprehension but also contributes substantially to business triumphs. Lastly, intercultural competence plays a pivotal role in translanguaging within an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. Translanguaging provides a chance to leverage the diverse resources individuals possess for communication, including different linguistic elements, body language, distinct modalities, and more, across multiple languages (Fang & Xu, 2022), thereby incorporating cultural communication.

The debated issue concerned the appropriate use of English and the native language (L1) in the teaching and learning process within an English Medium Instruction (EMI) context. One perspective

indicates that EMI represents ethnocentrism and was found to be one of the motivational constructs for investigating transitional education in English as a medium of instruction (Pack, 2021). The other viewpoint posits that EMI could foster intercultural awareness (Aguilar-Pérez, 2021), while the EMI lecturers seem unaware of employing intercultural competence in pedagogical practices (McAllister-Wylie & Vodopija-Krstanović, 2023). Some EMI scholars weigh in using English only in the classroom, while others suggest that EMI can employ both L1 and L2 for students' ultimate learning goals. The consequent question is: how much English exposure is to be called EMI? Thus, EMI seems conceptually problematic because of its confusion in clarity and consensus in a higher education context (Akıncıoğlu, 2023). The research on translanguaging asserted that, regardless of content, the primary challenge lies in English communication between teachers and students. Therefore, employing both English and the native language proves advantageous for instructional success, fostering engagement, facilitating the comprehension of new concepts, and creating a supportive learning environment. The findings found that in Thai classes where English is utilized as the medium of instruction, it appears impossible to entirely dismiss the learners' L1 (Thai). Since students are encouraged to use their linguistic repertoires creatively, including L1, the capacity to generate information expands from the cooperation among teacher and students, leading to critical thinking (Ambele, 2022). Here, individuals not only acquire linguistic proficiency but also delve into the multifaceted dimensions of culture, discourse, and context, thereby challenging the conventional notion grounded in native language proficiency (Gallois et al., 2014).

Intercultural Competence Frameworks

Intercultural competence consists of two main constructs: interculturality and competence. The first construct is competence, which has been defined differently. First, Chomsky and Halle (1965) defined mastery of the grammatical system, while 'performance' denoted the actual language use in real-life situations. Second, Hymes (1972) expanded the definition of competence to include communicative aspects, coining the term 'communicative competence.' This concept gained prominence and evolved into what is now known as communicative language teaching (CLT). Hymes' work also touched upon the broader link between linguistic and sociocultural competency, though he did not specifically address cross-cultural communication. Finally, Byram (1997) introduced the term 'intercultural competence (IC),' defining it as the ability to interact effectively and sensitively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Research on intercultural competence based on Byram's framework has continued to be explored in contemporary studies. The other construct is interculturality, which is viewed as a multifaceted endeavor that entails an examination of both emic and etic aspects of cross-cultural contexts, delving into cultural phenomena from within and outside the cultural perspective, respectively (Akrout & Mrad, 2023).

Typically, cultures are intricate and multifaceted, revealing themselves through four salient characteristics. First and foremost, cultures are holistic entities, functioning as integrated and complex

wholes where breaking them into smaller elements risks losing their essential functions (Yampolskaya, 2015). This interconnectedness is crucial for understanding the intricate relationships within a culture. Secondly, culture is acquired, starting from the earliest stages of childhood. Individuals consciously and unconsciously learn and absorb the cultural nuances of their surroundings, and this learning process becomes an integral part of their identity and worldview. It shapes how they perceive the world around them and influences their interactions with others. Thirdly, culture is dynamic, constantly evolving and adapting over time (Hymes, 1972; Gallois et al., 2014). This dynamism ensures that cultures remain relevant and responsive to the changing needs and contexts of their adherents. It reflects the living nature of cultures, which are not static entities but rather dynamic phenomena shaped by ongoing experiences and influences. Lastly, cultures often exhibit a degree of ethnocentrism, where people perceive their own cultural norms, practices, and values as superior. This ethnocentric perspective influences various aspects of life, including choices in purchasing decisions and healthcare preferences (Berger et al., 2023; Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2019). This tendency to prioritize one's own cultural context contributes to the uniqueness and diversity observed across different cultures. In summary, these four characteristics collectively provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the intricate tapestry of cultures. They highlight the integrated, learned, dynamic, and occasionally ethnocentric nature of cultures, contributing to the richness and diversity that defines human societies.

Cultures can be categorized into subcultures, including ethnic culture, social-class culture, organizational culture, and regional culture. Ethnic cultures are considered minority groups within the main country. Social-class cultures categorize people based on their socioeconomic status (SES), distinguishing individuals by income, education, occupation, and other factors. Organizational culture pertains to the beliefs, values, and assumptions prevalent among employees within specific organizations. Regional or geographic cultures involve classifying people based on their living areas (Gallois et al., 2014).

One prevalent research methodology that has gained prominence in the exploration of culture is ethnography. Researchers, adopting a neutral observational stance, employ diverse data collection methods, including document observation, visual documentation, informative conversations, and structured interviews (Sang, 2023; Sari et al., 2023). Ethnography's significance lies in its ability to provide a holistic understanding of cultures, capturing the intricacies and subtleties that might be overlooked by other research methods. While traditional studies of cultures often demanded prolonged durations, contemporary ethnography has revolutionized this approach. Modern adaptations utilize a range of techniques to streamline the research process, enabling more efficient cultural studies without compromising the depth and richness required for a comprehensive understanding of diverse cultural contexts (Gallois et al., 2014). These evolving methodologies are pivotal in shedding light on the intricate fabric of cultures and contribute to a more nuanced and contemporary comprehension of cross-cultural dynamics. Researchers, armed with these tools, gain deeper insights into the interplay of cultural elements, fostering a richer understanding of the diverse ways in which societies navigate and

express their cultural identities. This approach, grounded in contemporary ethnography, thus facilitates a more profound exploration of the complexities inherent in cross-cultural interactions and dynamics.

Several frameworks contribute to our understanding of intercultural competence, reflecting its multifaceted nature. Griffith and colleagues (2016) proposed a comprehensive model encompassing attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions (Griffith et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2023). Alternatively, the Council of Europe (2018) divides intercultural competence into four components: values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge with critical understanding. The Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC), developed by Mu and colleagues (2022), outlines five stages: denial, polarization, minimization, acceptance, and adaptation. Liddicoat and Scarino's framework (2013) aids in teaching culture by encouraging the noticing, comparing, and reflection on one's and others' cultures. The reflective framework of intercultural language teaching, proposed by Mu and Yu (2023), integrates language, culture, and learning. In this paper, the perspective of intercultural communicative competence is adopted within the framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), emphasizing the interconnectedness of language, culture, and learning, providing a nuanced and practical approach to intercultural competence instruction.

Challenges and Opportunities Associated with Teaching Intercultural Competence in Thai Tertiary English Education

Instruction in intercultural competence has been somewhat neglected in Thai tertiary English education, facing challenges related to the general comprehension of intercultural competence, students' attitudes, the acquisition of cultural knowledge, intercultural awareness, and skills. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, there were three studies conducted on the teaching of intercultural competence in Thailand. The initial study, conducted by Fungchomchoei and Kardkarnklai (2016), focused on exploring the intercultural competence of secondary education teachers in Thailand. The findings revealed the significant importance of cultural teaching in aiding and motivating students. The study also highlighted the necessity of integrating intercultural competence into classroom practices. Surprisingly, only two out of 61 teachers demonstrated a clear understanding of intercultural competence, while the majority were only familiar with the term. The study suggests that future research should give explicit and systematic attention to different educational levels. Another study investigated Thai EFL teachers' self-reported levels of intercultural communicative competence and intercultural sensitivity. The findings showed a significant correlation between intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (which can be somehow used interchangeably with intercultural competence), and intercultural sensitivity (IS). The implications indicated that the increasing knowledge of sociocultural variation can be included in the curriculum of teacher training and professional development programs (Imsa-ard, 2023). Finally, it is a study about integrating intercultural communicative competence into an online EFL classroom at a secondary school in Thailand. The findings showed that intercultural development and learning motivation increased after the 8-week experiment. It is suggested that, to

teach intercultural competence effectively, inputs such as textbooks, environment, and space are important in fostering intercultural learning. Distinct cultures, prior knowledge, and life experiences should also be taken into consideration. Their suggested future research studies include 1) employing different proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds within the group, and 2) including international students to provide cross-cultural interaction and experience (Lee et al., 2023). All in all, the majority of intercultural competence studies mainly focus on perceptions, and the instruments primarily include questionnaires, surveys, and interviews. Other instruments, such as tests, observations, or teaching techniques for promoting intercultural competence in Thailand, were little applied.

Previous studies have indicated that activities such as noticing cultural differences, analyzing intercultural issues, and simulating appropriate behaviour in intercultural contexts can motivate cultural and intercultural communication, facilitate meaning negotiation, and foster intercultural competence (Mu & Yu, 2023). Another teaching approach that can possibly be employed in Thai context would be Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). It emerges as a prominent model for cultural instruction, employing diverse methods such as learning journals, interviews, and intercultural assignments to assess students' intercultural learning (Liao & Li, 2023). The outcomes of CRT implementation reveal its efficacy in fostering students' openness, encouraging the sharing of multiple perspectives, and facilitating critical meaning-making processes. Reflection techniques are proposed by Casoli-Uvsløkk and Brevik (2023) as an instrumental approach to teaching intercultural competence. Having students reflect on contemporary social challenges within intercultural societies and applying these reflections in language classrooms is identified as a crucial strategy for cultivating intercultural competence through linguistic skills. Mu and Yu (2023) advocate for diverse intercultural activities, including discussions, presentations, role-playing of cultural phenomena and intercultural communication, and the creation of intercultural environments through student exchanges or inviting speakers to share their intercultural experiences. Story circles are also recommended as teaching tools to enhance intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2020). With the various pedagogies proposed earlier, the most important thing is not seeking the best teaching approach but rather flexibility and adaptability in embedding intercultural competence practices. Thus, it is an ongoing matter for educators to continually refine their approaches to dynamically developing IC instruction, particularly based on previous research.

As evident in its framework, intercultural competence involves the interplay of cognitive domains, attitudes, skills, and critical understanding, mirroring areas found in critical thinking. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the intercultural competence's features are holistic, acquiring, dynamic, and ethnocentric which somehow overlapped with the characteristics of critical thinking. Through various methods of intercultural competence instruction, it appears to contribute to the acceleration of critical thinking in education. The next section provides general understanding regarding critical thinking strand.

General Understanding of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking (CT) embodies diverse definitions, capturing the essence of a mental process of problem-solving according to Sternberg (1986). It is further defined as a dynamic and reflective journey toward the most suitable solution, rooted in evidence, as per Ku and colleagues (2014). Yüce (2023) extends the definition, framing critical thinking as the competence to make decisions and unravel intricate tasks, transcending mere cognition to encompass logic and reasoning. Glaser's (1941) seminal work introduces three foundational elements: a predisposition for contemplating critical thoughts, proficiency in strategic thinking like logic, and the capacity to seamlessly apply these critical thoughts and strategies in unison. This multifaceted understanding of critical thinking implies a holistic approach that encompasses not only cognitive abilities but also the disposition and skills necessary for robust and effective decision-making in various contexts.

Critical thinking exhibits diverse facets across different cultural landscapes. In the Western milieu, its roots extend to Ancient Greek philosophy, notably with Socrates, highlighting the significance of questioning within a democratic citizen framework (Mason, 2009). Another seminal Western contribution is Bloom's Taxonomy, a paradigm widely embraced in contemporary educational research. The original model entails knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, while the revised version substitutes 'evaluation' with 'creation' (Bloom & Krathwohl, 2020). Bloom's Taxonomy serves as a fundamental element in pre-service teachers' pedagogies in the Western educational domain (West, 2023), shaping scaffolding questions to nurture higher-order thinking skills, particularly in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Seibert, 2023). Conversely, in non-Western contexts, critical thinking takes on a distinct character, often viewed as a conciliatory, face-saving, negotiating, and diplomatic method for resolving conflicts (Jung et al., 2016). This cultural adaptation of critical thinking reflects the diverse interpretations and applications of this cognitive process across global educational landscapes.

Viewing critical thinking as a form of cognitive instruction involves an examination of critical thinking dispositions, which encompass specific interests and intercultural abilities. Facione (1990) identifies seven key characteristics facilitating critical thinking: inquisitiveness, systematicity, judiciousness, truth-seeking, analytical ability, open-mindedness, and confidence in reasoning. These traits are intricately integrated into teaching frameworks, with Group Reading Strategies (GRS) being identified as an effective tool for promoting critical thinking skills, as demonstrated by the work of Namsaeng and Sukying (2021). The disposition towards critical thinking is susceptible to various influencing factors, including cultural background, religious beliefs, parenting styles, and the broader developmental environment, as suggested by the comprehensive study of Mathews and Lowe (2011). Understanding critical thinking dispositions thus involves a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted elements that contribute to the development of these cognitive skills, emphasizing the intricate interplay between individual characteristics and external influences in shaping critical thinking abilities.

Critical thinking is closely associated with 1) self-regulation and 2) teaching and assessment. Self-regulation provides students with the essential metacognitive awareness necessary for proactive learning, enabling them to engage in cognitive processes linked to critical thinking, including evaluation, reflection, and inference. Through metacognitive abilities, students become independent learners capable of evaluating their own learning (Phan, 2010). Metacognitive awareness acts as a mediator in the relationship between critical thinking and self-regulation, and self-regulation components also intertwine with critical thinking and reading comprehension (Akcaoğlu et al., 2023; Mohammadi et al., 2023). Critical thinking can be explicitly taught and assessed through various strategies, such as using reciprocal teaching strategies to examine the connection between critical thinking and academic self-concept (Mafarja & Zulnaidi, 2022), applying critical thinking strategies to enhance vocabulary learning (Purfallah & Gholami, 2014), and utilizing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) to promote critical thinking skills (Namsaeng, 2022). Regarding assessment, the Halpern Critical Thinking Assessment is widely recognized as the standard assessment practical for real-world outcomes (Butler et al., 2012). However, as this standardized test primarily covers Ireland, Portugal, and Spain, applying it to non-European countries, such as those in Asia, may yield different results. The concept of critical thinking is being reconceptualized, leading to the self-assessment of critical thinking skills, as seen in studies by Namsaeng and Sukying (2020), who used an in-house critical thinking self-assessment questionnaire instead of a standardized test. Current trends in critical thinking research also explore the impact of mood on critical thinking (Lun et al., 2023), the relationships among critical thinking, autonomous learning, and academic grit or perseverance, as well as students' learning engagement and higher-order thinking skills (Li et al., 2023; Yüce, 2023). Additionally, there is a focus on teacher education emphasizing teacher autonomy, collaboration, and critical thinking-focused instruction (Guo & Wang, 2021).

To conclude, our general understanding of critical thinking is variously defined; however, this paper typically refers to the mental process of problem-solving and decision-making characterized by logic, reasoning, and reflective judgment based on evidence. In Western contexts, CT is grounded in traditions such as Socratic questioning and Bloom's Taxonomy, whereas in non-Western countries, it often encompasses negotiation and diplomacy, as well as dispositions like inquisitiveness and open-mindedness. CT is also associated with self-regulation and can be enhanced through specific teaching strategies and assessments.

Mutual Challenges between Critical Thinking and Interculturality Research

Critical thinking and intercultural competence share mutual challenges. First, critical thinking knowledge as well as intercultural competence seem to be low for students, instructors, and stakeholders. The studies of critical thinking in the previous research found that with an average score of 74% in critical thinking assessments, these students exhibited weaker skills in systematic and confident thinking, scoring at 68% and 70%, respectively (Namsaeng & Sukying, 2021). Additionally,

a critical reading test indicated an average score of 5.93 out of 15 marks, underscoring a significant gap in critical reading skills (Ploysangwal, 2018). Concurrently, awareness and understanding of intercultural competence among Thai educators, especially in secondary schools, appear limited. A substantial proportion of instructors, nine out of 10, lack awareness and effective teaching methods for intercultural competence, as revealed in the study by Fungchomchoei and Kardkarnklai (2016). These shared limitations emphasize the interconnected challenges in cultivating both intercultural competence and critical thinking skills among Thai tertiary students, highlighting the need for comprehensive educational strategies to address these intertwined areas of development.

Second, policymakers neglect intercultural competence and critical thinking. A previous study underscored that the enforcement of critical thinking as part of 21st-century educational policy lacked specific guidance for classroom implementation. This resulted in teachers struggling to comprehensively integrate critical thinking into their teaching, affecting curriculum design and leading to assignments that primarily focused on lower-level thinking, causing a decline in student motivation (Kerdsomboon & Boonsathirakul, 2021). Similarly, intercultural adaptability (IA), encompassing elements such as "language support, culturally responsive pedagogy, career orientation, and intercultural exchange programs," received inadequate attention from policymakers and training institutions, despite the considerable demand for an intercultural competence curriculum (Luong et al., 2023). Thus, at the policy level, both IC and CT lack clear direction for national development policies. These challenges highlight the need for more explicit and comprehensive guidance in policy implementation for both intercultural competence and critical thinking in educational settings.

Hence, IC and CT share similarities in terms of restricted awareness, policy enforcement at a broad level lacking clear directives, and the correlation between increased exposure and the enhanced development of IC and CT. Nevertheless, there seems to be a lack of instructional approaches, guidance for classroom implementation, and adequate attention from policymakers. Additionally, there's a dearth of emphasis on integrating local wisdom into courses, a practice that could facilitate learners in understanding, connecting, and contributing to the long-term development of new knowledge (Kwangmuang et al., 2021).

Intercultural Competence in Augmenting Critical Thinking

Both Critical thinking and intercultural competence share common characteristics concerning exposure to diverse circumstances. Increased exposure to different situations contributes to the development of both IC and CT. Exposure to varied settings fosters open-mindedness. Individuals residing in culturally diverse environments tend to cultivate more intercultural competence than those in less diverse surroundings. A recent study demonstrated that both pre-service and in-service teachers who studied abroad exhibited enhanced intercultural competence (Huang et al., 2023). This implies that greater exposure to new cultural environments correlates with increased intercultural competence. Similarly, a previous study highlighted that critical thinking exposure can be achieved through diverse

forms of collaboration, such as team participation, observation of others, involvement in joint activities across different classes, and participation in conferences. These collaborative experiences contribute to the emphasis on real-life and knowledge components in critical thinking-focused instruction. Increased collaboration results in a greater incorporation of these elements into critical thinking-focused teaching methods (Guo & Wang, 2021).

Intercultural competence has the potential to enhance critical thinking through various mechanisms. Initially, the comprehensive view of culture, characterized as holistic (Yampolskaya, 2015), corresponds to the judicious element of critical thinking (Facione, 1990). This perspective acknowledges culture as an intricate and integrated entity, necessitating a thoughtful consideration of all its facets. This, in turn, fosters the ability to thoughtfully assess pertinent issues before arriving at a decision or drawing conclusions on a specific matter. For instance, when students are selecting elective courses for an upcoming semester, their considerations encompass various factors such as the utility for future employment, the potential impact on GPA, and the desired knowledge and skills to be cultivated. As critical thinkers, they approach this decision-making process with a holistic and judicious mindset.

Moreover, both intercultural competence and critical thinking can be acquired. The process initiates in early childhood as cultural learning begins through parental influence and exposure to various cultural elements. The conscious and unconscious acquisition of culture involves the development of specific skills, including inquisitiveness, truth-seeking, analytical abilities, and confidence in reasoning. These four skills stand out as notable and fundamental aspects of critical thinking (Hymes, 1972; Facione, 1990). Fusaro and Smith (2018) pointed out that inquisitiveness is linked to the accuracy and fluency of receptive vocabulary knowledge, while information seeking contributes to problem-solving, considered a learning process. Analytical skills, on the other hand, are closely tied to resolving learning tasks. A prior study highlighted that students, when engaged in solving physics and chemical problems through demonstrations, witness the development of their analytical skills (Politsinsky et al., 2015). After analyzing accumulated data deliberately, the consequence is the confidence in reasoning. A study highlighted that cultural confidence stimulates community citizenship behaviors through active cultural involvement, linking cultural confidence to identity, ownership, and various behavioral patterns (Yin et al., 2023). Therefore, as individuals learn about cultures, there is a likelihood that inquisitive, truth-seeking, analytical, and confident reasoning skills are cultivated, contributing to the development of critical thinking abilities in a holistic learning context.

Thirdly, the ever-changing and dynamic nature of culture significantly and the enhancement of cultural relativism impact the open-mindedness aspect of critical thinking (Facione, 1990; Gallois et al., 2014; Hymes, 1972). In our globalized world, cultural relativism should be more focused than ethnocentrism. As is known, the culture is ethnocentrism in nature, involving people placing greater significance on ideas within their in-group compared to those from the out-group, a phenomenon observed in their preference for goods and services from their own cultural circles (Berger et al., 2023; Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2019). In any case, the cultural relativism concept posits that we should refrain

from evaluating a culture according to our own standards of what is right or incorrect, normal or abnormal. Instead, we should endeavor to understand other cultures' cultural practices within their own cultural context (Rachels, 2009). Cultural relativism is classified into two types: radical cultural relativism and radical universalism. According to radical cultural relativism, a right or rule's legitimacy is solely determined by culture. While extreme universalism holds that culture has no bearing on the validity of rights or regulations, cultural relativism can be divided into two categories: strong or weak. Strong cultural relativism accepts a few basic rights with universal application, whereas weak cultural relativism accepts the important sources of validity of right or rule but falls short of radical universalism (Donnelly, 1984). Cultural relativism teaches us that the world is full of diverse civilizations. This encompasses variations in language, traditions, beliefs, values, conventions, and ways of living. Understanding and appreciating other people's cultures begins with becoming aware of cultural variety (Ali, 2024). This concept is aligned with the open-mindedness component of critical thinking.

In this context, open-mindedness refers to an individual's capacity to navigate uncertainty and novelty in their environment (Kashima et al., 2017). Research illustrates that international students exhibiting high mindfulness (open-mindedness) showcase superior cross-cultural adaptation compared to those with low mindfulness (close-mindedness). Sojourners with high mindfulness develop advanced sociocultural skills and superior knowledge compared to those strongly rooted in a singular local culture (Kashima et al., 2017). This underscores the transformative nature of original ideas or notions in response to new exposures or the passage of time. The interplay among cultural dynamism, cultural relativism, and open-mindedness contributes significantly to the evolution of critical thinking skills.

Finally, a systematic skill, a key characteristic of critical thinking, interacts with and integrates the aforementioned aspects, mutually contributing to the enhancement of critical thinking skills through intercultural competence. The current paper puts forward a framework outlining how intercultural competence enriches critical thinking skills, as illustrated below.

Figure 1

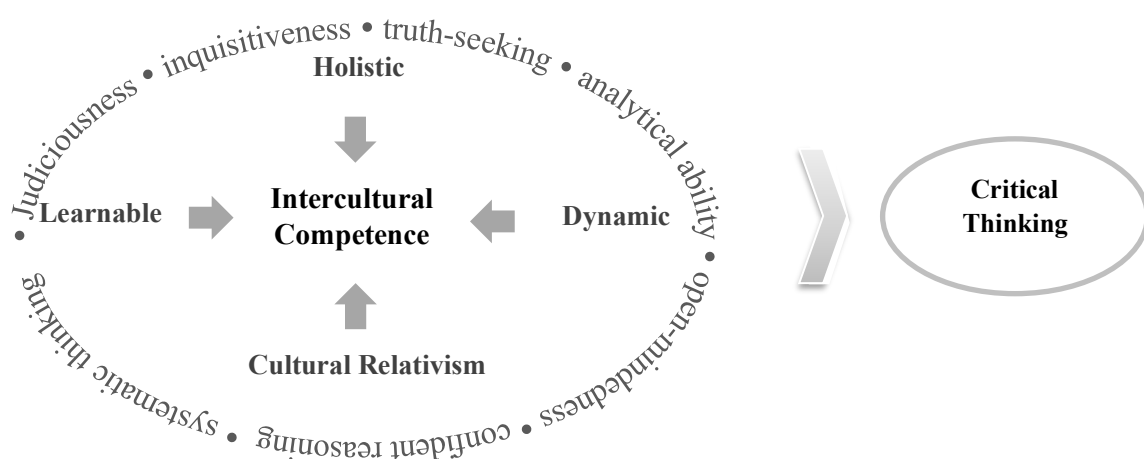*The Framework for Augmenting Critical Thinking through Intercultural Competence*

Figure 1 serves as a visual representation of the conceivable enhancement of critical thinking through intercultural competence. The attributes of intercultural competence, characterized by holism, learnability, dynamism, and ethnocentrism, exert influence on specific sub-skills integral to critical thinking. These include judiciousness, inquisitiveness, truth-seeking, analytical ability, open-mindedness, confidence, and systematic thinking. The interconnectedness of these characteristics within the framework illustrates how the development and refinement of intercultural competence can contribute synergistically to the augmentation of critical thinking skills.

The Importance of Intercultural Competence and Critical Thinking in a Thai EFL Classroom

In the ongoing exchange of languages within contemporary societal communication, the number of studies about intercultural competence has been rapidly increasing (Peng et al., 2023) allowing individuals adeptly navigate communication with those from diverse cultures. The importance of intercultural competence in the Thai English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is underscored by multiple factors. Primarily, it imparts the skill of adopting neutral attitudes and perspectives. Expressions and utterances inherently carry specific beliefs cultivated by distinct cultures. Equipped with intercultural competence, individuals facilitate effective communication, fostering mutual understanding. For instance, consider the idiom 'better late than never.' The cultural origin of this saying may view lateness as more acceptable or preferable to not attending at all. Conversely, other cultures prioritize punctuality and may find the idiom unfitting. It is not about a side to take; however, it is about respecting and valuing all cultures equally. Or the perception of their own culture may be biased such as criticizing their own cultures while having positive perceptions with other cultures (Esmaeili & Kuhi, 2023). However, individuals possessing intercultural competence can maintain a neutral standpoint with open-mindedness, leading to successful communication. To employ the intercultural competence into the English curriculum, undergraduates would be able to critically think before jumping to the conclusion of a misconception or ending up with a biased perspective. Apart from being equipped with the knowledge and attitudes as mentioned earlier, Thai EFL undergraduates can practice several skills such as social skills, active listening, observing, and critical thinking. It is evidenced by the previous study that intercultural competence promotes soft skills including verbal and non-verbal communication skills, tolerance, adaptability, interpersonal skills, analysis and evaluation skills, relating and interpretation skills, self-awareness, and self-reflections (Honen-Delmar & Rega, 2023).

To conclude, alongside language, the study of intercultural competence has recently been increasing. Some behaviors deemed acceptable in one culture may be perceived as rude in another, and vice versa. Therefore, integrating intercultural competence and critical thinking into the English education classroom is essential. This incorporation ensures that students acquire knowledge and attitudes regarding intercultural competence, enabling them to adopt a neutral stance towards diverse cultural beliefs, biases, and fallacies. Simultaneously, this approach cultivates soft skills that are socially advantageous, equipping students to navigate future challenges related to cultural similarities and

differences. Moreover, it supports the personal and social construction of their identities, preparing them for potential cross-cultural issues in an intercultural context (Wu, 2023).

Conclusion

In the era of unstoppable globalization and cultural diversity worldwide, possessing intercultural competences (IC) becomes a crucial skill for navigating sensitivities across diverse communities. Given the relatively new nature of IC as a concept, numerous educational approaches, research studies, and contributions are striving to integrate cultural competence into academic settings. This emphasis is particularly pronounced in tertiary education, where adult learners grapple with the intricacies of diverse cultural aspects. This study delves specifically into critical thinking, proposing that intercultural competence has the potential to enhance critical thinking skills in students through pedagogical methods. Two key mutual challenges of IC and CT consist of 1) the deficient knowledge of both IC and CT among teachers, students, and stakeholders, and 2) the neglect of policymaking regarding IC and CT direction, leading to insufficient practices, guidance, and English education in the long run. Hence, the potential between IC and CT could be enhanced through the exposure to new cultural environments as well as the setting where critical thinking is promoted. This intersection of intercultural competence and critical thinking not only reflects the evolving nature of English education but also underscores the necessity of cultivating a holistic skill set that prepares individuals for the complexities of our interconnected world.

Certainly, intercultural competence holds the potential to enrich critical thinking for various reasons. Firstly, the alignment of the 'holistic' characteristic in IC with the 'judicious' attribute in CT encourages thoughtful consideration before reaching a judgment. Secondly, both IC and CT are acquirable and instructive. The foundational aspects of CT, including inquisitive, truth-seeking, analytical, and confident reasoning skills, are integral to the learning process and influence how knowledge is acquired. Thirdly, the dynamic nature of culture as well as cultural relativism correspond to the open-mindedness inherent in critical thinking. The interplay among dynamism, cultural relativism, and open-mindedness allows for adaptability as new information emerges, potentially altering initial conclusions over time. Lastly, a systematic approach that integrates these various aspects creates a mutually reinforcing framework. In essence, these inherent qualities suggest a promising avenue for leveraging intercultural competence to foster critical thinking in Thai tertiary students.

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