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Exploring the intercultural competence of Thai secondary education teachers and its implications in English language teaching

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate Thai teachers' perceptions of intercultural competence and how they integrate it into their English classrooms. It also explores learning activities that enhance students' intercultural competence and provides several recommendations for teaching intercultural competence. The participants are 61 teachers who were purposively selected from four secondary schools. The instruments for data collection were a questionnaire, structured interviews, and journal entries. The findings reveal the importance of developing students' intercultural competence, as well as several implications for professional teacher training.

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1. Introduction

For more than one hundred years, English has played a significant role in various Thai contexts as a mode of international communication. At present, English is officially taught to Thai students from grade one onwards (Ministry of Education, 2001). Although the educational system has long focused on putting in great efforts to develop the functions and uses of English teaching, plenty of people still complain about their dissatisfaction with it (Chaibunruang, 2000). The findings reveal that, despite being proficient in English, most Thai students who graduate from a university are unable to effectively communicate in English with co-workers from different cultural backgrounds. Hence, cultural differences play a vital role in promoting a student's competence in English.

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Based on the perceptions of teachers, intercultural competence (ICC), which involves teaching English directly in the classrooms, encourages Thai teachers to put their emphasis on both linguistic competence and ICC knowledge. According to the national curriculum, language and culture are included as one of its four strands, fostering Thai students' understanding of the relationship between language, other cultures and Thai cultures, as well as their ability to apply these concepts properly in real situations (Ministry of Education, 2008). However, many Thai graduates have encountered communication problems with people from different cultures. This may be due to a lack of integrated cultural content with English teaching (Abdollahi-Guilani, 2012).

Many Thai secondary teachers have faced difficulties when integrating ICC into their classroom teaching. According to Chaibunruang (2000), Thai teachers face three problematic factors when teaching English: teaching techniques, topics and content, and teaching materials. Because these challenges prevent Thai teachers from integrating ICC knowledge into their classroom, the Thai government and the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) must take ICC into consideration. In particular, to provide Thai teachers with sufficient skills for the effective integration of culture in their classroom, they require them to have knowledge and techniques of cultural teaching. This current research aims to investigate Thai secondary teachers' perceptions of ICC in English language teaching.

2. The importance of intercultural competence

In the age of globalization, when students must be aware of culturally appropriate ways to address people from different cultural backgrounds, e.g., expressing gratitude, making a request, and agreeing or disagreeing with someone, linguistic competence alone is insufficient for students to gain competence in speaking English (Krasner, 1999). As a result, the importance of ICC is increasing in English language teaching. Byram (1997) proposes ICC components that include linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, intercultural attitudes, and critical cultural awareness. He defines linguistic competence as an ability to produce and interpret meaningful utterances in accordance with the rules of the language. The second component, 'sociolinguistic competence', relates to the influence of various conditions on the formation of an individual's language choices, such as the relationship between communication partners and their intentions. The third component, 'discourse competence', concerns an individual's ability to communicate using appropriate strategies in the construction and interpretation of text. In fact, due to the range in specificity, and the perceptions and definition of competence, ICC has been conceptualized in a wide variety of ways (Song, 2008).

To promote students' acquisition of ICC in English classrooms, teachers' understanding and perceptions of intercultural dynamics are crucial. With an understanding of ICC, they are better able to teach its concepts to their students accurately and properly. According to Byram's intercultural model, language, which people use for communication, is intertwined with culture, community, and society. Consequently, in order for their students to become competent intercultural speakers, teachers should promote ICC among English language learners (Byram et al., 2002). This process becomes an essential responsibility of English teachers who enable their students to succeed when communicating in English with people from different cultural backgrounds.

3. Perception of intercultural competence in English language teaching

Recent research findings have revealed the importance of integrating culture in foreign language teaching. For example, Serçu et al. (2005) conducted research specifically on English teachers' perceptions of intercultural competence teaching. When mapping teachers' beliefs about the integration of ICC in English teaching, their research findings revealed two distinct teacher profiles: "*the favorably disposed foreign language teacher*" and "*the unfavorably disposed foreign language teacher*". The findings further suggested that more teachers are becoming ICC teachers; however, their profiles did not meet all of the expectations concerning the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are desirable for ICC teachers.

Likewise, Zhang (2007) stated that intercultural education should be included in the system of foreign language teacher education because the research into Chinese teachers' perceptions of ICC was still inadequate. Similarly, little research has been conducted on how English teachers who are Turkish perceive intercultural competence

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