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**Intercultural Communication Challenges and Strategies  
for the Thai Undergraduate Hotel Interns**

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**Abstract**

The hospitality industry is one of Thailand's most important sectors that contributes to the national economy. Human capital has become so vital that a strong foundation and development of undergraduate students in this discipline are needed. Their internship experience is part of the process of learning and integrating their knowledge into practice, especially concerning intercultural communicative encounters. There are, however, few studies related to this particular issue. This research aims to study Thai undergraduate hotel interns' intercultural communication challenges and strategies while undertaking their internship at an in-house hotel training center located on a university campus. Drawing upon a mixed-method approach based on questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the results based on calculated mean scores suggest that the interns ranked five intercultural communicative strategies from highest to lowest as follows: (i) critical cultural awareness ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.94), (ii) attitudes ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.81), (iii) knowledge ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.71), (iv) skills to interpret and relate ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.63), and (v) skills to discover and interact ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.62). This study suggests that academic programs should equip Thai undergraduate hotel interns with proficiency in foreign languages and cultures, problem-solving skills, and cross-cultural and interpersonal

understanding. This study contributes to awareness and the need to incorporate intercultural communicative competence into the hospitality programs that can produce graduates who are well-equipped and prepared for multilingual and multicultural working environments.

**Keywords:** Internship, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Intercultural Communication Challenges, Communicative Strategies, Hospitality Industry

## Introduction

Globalization increases the mobility of foreign tourists to cross borders for business and leisure purposes through which languages and cultures are inevitably exchanged and challenges arise in intercultural communicative encounters (Thurlow & Jarwoski, 2010). English has long been considered as a vehicular language for the hospitality industry as it is commonly used among hotel professionals and international tourists. It has recently gained its *lingua franca* status within ASEAN in Charter Number 34 where workers in the hospitality industry are required to communicate in English effectively to meet the increasing demand of the hotel and tourism sectors.

The hospitality industry is one of the income-generating sectors of the Thai economy since inbound tourism in Thailand attracts a considerable number of foreign tourists, who are generally and warmly welcomed and impressed by the services this industry offers them (Office of the National Economics and Social Development Board, 2017). Nomnian (2014a, b) states that effective intercultural communication helps business owners and employees to provide quality services and create positive attitudes on the part of visitors. However, besides English proficiency, Phumpho and Nomnian (2019) claim that communication challenges between Thai business people and their ASEAN counterparts remain due to the lack of cultural knowledge and awareness, and factors such as indirectness and subtlety, which may hinder effective business communication. Personnel working in the Thai hospitality industry need to be trained and equipped

with interpersonal and intercultural communication skills as part of their academic course and during their internship period to become fully competent.

Studies in intercultural communication have been well-documented and disseminated due to the growing interest of scholars in the multidisciplinary fields of hotel and tourism, applied linguistics, and communication studies (Deardoff, 2006; Gibson & Zhong, 2005). The findings of Hsu et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis study on hospitality and tourism education from 2005-2014 reveal that the main topics of previous studies included teaching and learning, student development, curricula and programs, education environment and faculty development. Research on the topic of hotel undergraduate students' internship was relatively under-explored despite the fact that it is crucial in order for students to be prepared and cultivated with authentic hands-on experience for effective performative outcomes (Shapero & Collegium, 2006; Sinicrope et al., 2007; Suebwongsuwan & Nomnian, 2020).

It is evident that intercultural communication deals with cultural awareness, sensitivity and understanding of cultural differences should be perceived as a critical issue in the hospitality industry in terms of challenges and strategies, which can develop intercultural competence among tourism and hospitality students to interact and operate effectively in multicultural and multilingual settings (Grobella, 2015). In Thai higher education context, Dhevabanchachai and Wattanacharoensil (2017) confirm the essential role of compulsory in-house internship plays within the Tourism and Hospitality Management curriculum, which potentially equip and prepare students through the genuine internship experience.

The objective of this study is to explore the intercultural communication challenges and strategies employed by Thai undergraduate students who have undergone in-house internship at a hotel training center as part of their academic requirements. The results hope to shed light on the hospitality program that aims to equip students with intercultural communicative

competence that is relevant and applicable for their future as hotel professionals.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Intercultural Communicative Competence: Definitions and Model**

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC hereafter) has been variously defined. Byram (1997) views ICC as the term that covers key components, including linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and intercultural competence, which enable individuals to interact with others who are from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Likewise, Chen and Starosta (1996) define ICC as speakers' abilities and competencies, namely intercultural sensitivity (affective process), intercultural awareness (cognitive process), and intercultural adroitness (behavioral process), which are vital for effective and appropriate communication in a culturally diverse community. Lázár et al. (2007), similarly state that ICC is composed of speakers' skills and attitudes with respect to communicating in various cross-cultural situations. To sum up, ICC can be viewed as speakers' communicative abilities, competences, skills, and attitudes towards other interlocutors with regard to their linguistic and cultural identities in multilingual and multicultural contexts. In this study, Thai undergraduate internship students were required to employ ICC components and other relevant communicative skills in interactions with foreign visitors to the hotel, considered as a linguistically and culturally diverse context.

ICC model (Byram, 1997) is appropriate for this study because it provides foreign language educators a fundamental principle for promoting language learners and users as intercultural speakers who should be equipped with knowledge, skills, and attitudes of language other than their first or native languages, which can be applicable for educational and professional settings.

Byram's (1997) ICC model, which underpins this study, is illustrated below (see Figure 1).

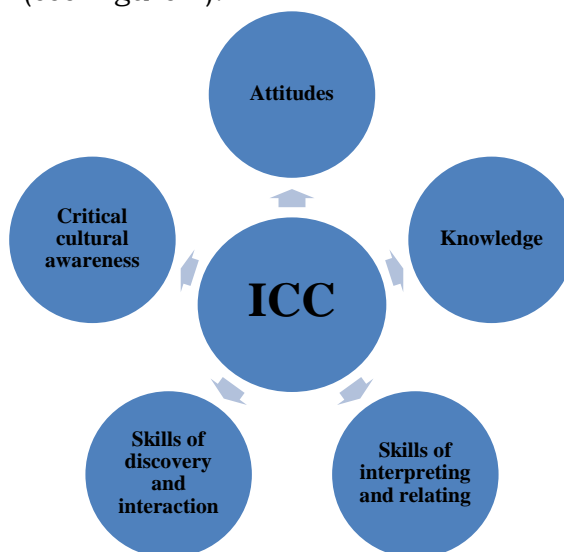


Figure 1 Byram's ICC Model (1997)

According to Byram's ICC model (1997) (Figure 1), there are five competencies, which are essential to develop intercultural communicative competence as follows: first, attitudes; second, knowledge; third, skills of interpreting and relating; fourth, skills of discovery and interaction; and fifth, critical cultural awareness; each of which will be discussed below.

The first element is attitudes, which consist of curiosity, and openness, and readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs. This can help the development of intercultural knowledge and skills essential to interact appropriately and effectively with people from other cultures. The second competency is intercultural knowledge, which is the information about social group, product, and practices in one's own. Byram divides knowledge into two categories: conscious and unconscious; the former is knowledge that can be more or less refined, but present in some degree and the latter is knowledge of concepts and processes in interactions.

The third and fourth skills are those of interpreting and relating and skills of discovery and interaction. The skills of

interpreting and relating are the capabilities to interpret information in different cultures and relate them to one's own, whereas the skills of discovery and interaction are the abilities to acquire new knowledge of other cultures and employ knowledge, attitudes, and skills within the communication and interaction. Finally, the fifth component is critical cultural awareness, which can be referred to as the ability to evaluate critically based on the explicit criteria of perspectives, practices, and products in the individual's own culture and others (Byram, 1997, p.54). In summary, the ICC model (Byram, 1997) is the most extensive framework to evaluate ICC learners in various contexts, particularly in this study's research setting.

According to Byram's view, the success of an interaction can be judged not only by the effective exchange of information, but also in terms of the maintenance and establishment of human relationships, which depend on attitudinal factors. Another important factor that people bring to intercultural communication is their knowledge. According to Byram (1997), knowledge is divided into two categories: "knowledge about social groups and their cultures in one's own country, and similar knowledge of the interlocutor's country" and "knowledge of the processes of interaction at individual and societal levels" (Byram, 1997, p.35). In addition, speakers' knowledge influences the effectiveness of intercultural communication in that the former includes the skills of interpreting and relating, which are described as the capabilities to interpret a document from other cultures and vice versa (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p.66). The latter consists of the discovery and interaction, which are considered as the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills in real-time communication and interaction, and to acquire new knowledge of a culture. Speakers' knowledge and attitudes are also necessary for successful intercultural communication. To conclude, intercultural communicative competence has an affective domain (attitudes), a cognitive domain (knowledge) and a skills domain.

### **Challenges of Intercultural Communication**

Challenges in intercultural communication are often due to the fact that people have different perceptions and attitudes towards other people's language and culture, particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts (Nomnian, 2018; Phumpho & Nomnian, 2019). Accordingly, a variety of speakers' social roles, thoughts, and communication behaviors exist (Deresky, 2002; Keles, 2013; St. John, 1996). For instance, in a hotel environment, there are people who bring their own language, culture, and attitude with them; and thus, hotel staff face challenges related to intercultural communication whenever they interact with others of a different cultural background (Gudykunst, 2003). Hotel staff have to be culturally sensitive to communicate with foreign guests because effective communication depends on various interpretation and comprehension (Deresky, 2002; Beamer & Varner, 2001). It is common for people to freely communicate with those who share a similar language, culture, and attitudes, and the opposite is also true in that they avoid communicating with people who have a different linguistic and cultural background since it is more likely that intercultural communication breakdown will occur. Thus, effective intercultural communication competence is extremely important to overcome communication challenges since such challenges between people of diverse language and cultural backgrounds usually stem from sociolinguistic and cultural differences that influence their distinctive perceptions, interpretations, lack of shared experiences and frames of reference (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Silverthorne, 2005).

Vivatananukul (2016) categorizes three kinds of communicative obstacles: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Cognitive obstacles are caused in communicative situations where speakers do not understand the others' language and are unaware of the appropriate language to use in terms of the intrinsic meaning of words and signs. Speakers usually encounter intercultural communicative problems when they translate from one language to the other without changing the original meaning,

and by misusing the genre of the language such as using slang words in a formal conversation or rituals, or formal language with casual acquaintances or intimate friends. Lack of cultural knowledge is also a key barrier to intercultural communication. This kind of problem can be divided into several levels, including being unaware or lacking experience of the culture, or lacking knowledge of the sociocultural background and subcultures of a particular society. Some people do not always recognize the complexities and subtleties of intercultural communication and this may lead to misinterpretations or failures in translation.

Secondly, affective obstacles such as negative attitudes, bias, prejudices, and stereotypes lead to frozen perception on the part of speakers whose opinions, thoughts and behaviors are difficult as a result of judging others based on race, gender, religion, physique, or skin color at the outset of communication can be misleading, inappropriate, and discriminatory. Last but not least, behavioral obstacles stem from the lack of recognizing other people's cultural backgrounds and their non-verbal cues such as gestures, smiles, movements, social distances, and practices, which can constrain and hinder effective communication. To acculturate themselves to the new cultural environment requires mutual understanding, a flexible mindset, and adaptability on the part of the interlocutors, especially at their first encounter.

According to Dang (2016), communication between cultures are likely to be less effective because of the violation of cultural norms; in fact, people are unlikely to know if they are expected to follow others' cultural norms or behave according to their regular culture. Speaker anxiety and assumptions of similarity rather than difference can widen the intercultural communication gap, cause negative perceptions towards one another, and lead to ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is based on "negatively judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own culture" (Jandt, 2003, p.83), which means every culture has its rules and standards. Hence, one is unlikely to apply the same standards of one's own culture to others, which can lead to restrictions and



limits on the ability to obtain knowledge or appreciation which can lead to the values of other cultures. Stereotypes and prejudice are also challenging to intercultural communication as people make judgments about a person based on common values, beliefs, and images (Jandt, 2003). However, in intercultural communication, people of different cultural groups tend to misinterpret each other's meanings, and even when both speakers share the same language, there may still be differences brought about by nuances in dialects. In conclusion, challenges in intercultural communication are underpinned by a mix of both verbal and non-verbal cues.

### **Intercultural Communication Strategies**

Communication strategies were first discussed in Selinker's (1972) work regarding interlanguage, which deals with strategies related to errors in learners' interlanguage systems in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The interactional perspective sees communication strategies as the "mutual attempts of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared" (Tarone, 1980, p.420). That is, there is a joint effect by both speakers to negotiate agreement on meaning "to ensure that both interlocutors are talking about the same thing" (Tarone, 1981, p.288). Færch and Kasper (1983) state that communication strategies are "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual present itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (p.36).

For the strategies for effective intercultural communication development used in this study, Schmidt et al.'s concepts (2007) are employed as they emphasize internal features of the communicators in terms of their cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence, and behavioral skills, which are correlated to the intercultural communication challenges aforementioned. According to Schmidt et al. (2007), cognitive intelligence concerns interpretive scheme development, multiple viewpoints, acculturation and openness for the third culture, innovative mindset, and awareness of being part of a cultural jigsaw.

Emotional intelligence, on the other hand, focuses on mindfulness, rhetorical sensitivity, positive attitude, and empathy, and no anxiety in ambiguous situations. Behavioral skills, however, deal with language proficiency and skills, observation and ability to capture a wider picture, flexibility, activeness, accessibility to new information and changes, adaptations to changes, cooperative relationships rather than self-centeredness, and management ability in any negative situation.

Kasper and Kellerman (1997, p.2) suggest that communicative strategies should be employed to attain speakers' goals that can alleviate communication challenges. Huang (2011) highlights key strategies normally employed in intercultural communication for language teaching and tourism education as follows: adapting to cultural differences, adopting appropriate skills, creating similarities, maintaining appropriate relationships, and promoting conflict resolution strategies.

According to Han (2013), intercultural awareness has become a prerequisite for successful intercultural communication. This can be developed by: (i) "Knowing Yourself", because "you" are one side of the intercultural communication, and your manifestation will have a direct effect on the success or failure of intercultural communication. Secondly; (ii) "Disclosing Yourself" through methods of exchange and introduction in order to let other side know yourself, your own culture and both sides' cultural differences; (iii) "Increasing Cultural Awareness", led by the fact that globalization demands the enhancement of intercultural communication among people from diverse cultures in order for us to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; (iv) "Obtaining Cultural Knowledge," which refers to the cognitive information you need to have about the people, the context, and the norms of appropriateness that prevail in a specific culture, and with such knowledge, it is likely that you will interpret the meanings of other people's messages or behaviors correctly; (v) "Mastering Communication Skills," which refers to how well the behaviors that are regarded as appropriate and effective are actually performed, meaning that competent communicators are required

to practice sufficient and appropriate communicative skills; and (vi) “Enhancing Motivation,” driven by personal intentions that are positive, accurate, and reciprocal, and as a consequence intercultural competences will likely be promoted.

Grobella (2015) suggests that the hospitality industry creating challenges for the study programs not only to provide students a real-life opportunity to gain knowledge of cultural differences, but also to enhance language and communication skills and abilities to work in a linguistically and socioculturally diverse environment. Cross-cultural appreciation and respect for diversity is, therefore, the starting point for hospitality students to be aware that service encounters should be tailored to the specific needs of foreign guests with culturally sensitive behaviors that can enrich intercultural interactive experiences; and thus an interculturally oriented teaching and learning approach can equip the students competitive advantages in hospitality management careers.

In this study, intercultural communicative strategies require Thai students to demonstrate sufficient awareness, knowledge, motivation, and skills. Successful intercultural communication requires positive intent, enthusiasm, and willingness on the part of speakers to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers.

## **Research methodology**

### **Research setting and participants**

This current study was conducted at a hotel belonging to an international college located at a leading university near Bangkok after receiving approval from the hotel manager who was also the lecturer responsible for the three-month-long in-house internship. There were twenty-six participants in this study. Thirteen of them were third-year students and the rest were fourth-year students. They were enrolled in a Bachelor of Business Administration (International Program) in Tourism and Hospitality Management at the in-house hotel training center. The interns had to work in the following departments: food and

beverage, front office, kitchen, and house keeping. Used as a medium of instruction, English has become a *lingua franca* in Thai higher education due to the increasing demand from ASEAN students to study in international programs in Thailand (Nomnian, 2014c). This internship course was aimed at equipping the interns with experience and the skills needed to work in the hotel's intercultural context, where communicating with foreign guests, and experiencing intercultural communicative encounters was the norm. Such encounters were most likely to take place at the front office, and in the food and beverage departments.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study employed a mixed-method research approach. Prior to the data collection, the study was approved for research ethics by the Institute for Population and Social Research at Mahidol University, Thailand. After receiving the permission from the hotel manager, who was also chair of the in-house internship course, the participants were informed of the research project objectives and procedures, and they were then given the written consent form to sign according to the research ethics protocol. According to Kumar (2005), it is important to protect the privacy of the participants in order to increase the quality of the data and the validity of the study; and thus information about the participants was kept highly confidential.

The participants were asked to do the self-assessment questionnaires with regard to their perceptions of intercultural communication drawing upon Byram's ICC model (1997) based on five intercultural competence domains, namely knowledge, skills to interpret and relate, skills to discover and interact, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness. The quantitative data were analyzed by descriptive statistics data analysis (SPSS program and presented in mean scores and standard deviation (S.D.). The interpretation was based on Likert's (1932) psychometric scale. Each item was rated based on a range of scores from 1-5 points, representing 1 as "strongly disagree", 2 as "disagree", 3 as "not sure", 4 as "agree" and 5 as "strongly agree", as shown below.

<b>Score range</b>	<b>Mean rating</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
4.21-5.00	strongly agree	very high
3.41-4.20	agree	high
2.61-3.40	not sure	moderate
1.81-2.60	disagree	low
1.00-1.80	strongly disagree	very low

Following the questionnaire, ten volunteer students were invited to attend a semi-structured interview that lasted for thirty minutes. The interview was conducted in Thai, which is the mother-tongue of the participants and researchers. The interview discussion was recorded throughout the sessions for the convenience and confidentiality of the participants. The guided interview questions were scheduled as follows:

1. During the working period as a hospitality student intern, what kind of intercultural communication problems did you encounter?
2. When serving guests, what was your attitude with regard to their cultural differences, such as race, religion, language, and age?
3. Did intercultural communication problems affect your work or daily life? How?
4. How did you immediately overcome any intercultural communication challenges?
5. After resolving these intercultural communication problems, how did you review the issues and prepare or formulate a strategy to deal with similar incidents in the future?

In order to identify the problems, challenges, and solutions of these participants, content analysis was employed as a tool to analyze the data from the focus group interviews. The qualitative research design enables rich data to be gathered from participants' own words and experience. Suggested by Merriam (1998), a qualitative research method assumes that meanings and

knowledge are constructed in a social context and enable the researcher to learn from participants' subjective perspectives, which are aligned with the open-ended exploratory questions that guided this study. In order to analyze the interview data, the data were categorized and interpreted in terms of the five key domains based on Byram's (1997) ICC model.

## Results

The key findings of this study were categorized, according to Byram's (1997) ICC domains, into knowledge, skills to discover and interact, skills to interpret and relate, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness, respectively. The results address the Thai undergraduate interns' main challenges and strategies in intercultural communication in the hotel context as explained below.

### Knowledge

The average interns' self-assessed perceptions of their knowledge towards their intercultural communicative competence were rather high ( $\bar{x} = 3.71$ ) (see Table 2).

**Table 2 The hotel interns' knowledge of ICC**

Items	Statements	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpret
1	I am aware of the differences in religion and nationality between each guest.	3.50	0.99	High
2	I know the correct manners to use to communicate with guests.	3.62	0.94	High
3	I know how to behave appropriately with foreign guests.	3.88	0.76	High
4	I understand body language.	3.58	1.13	High
5	I know how to impress foreign guests.	3.69	1.05	High
6	I am aware of the special food needs of foreign guests.	4.04	0.72	High
7	I can understand different accents.	3.58	0.90	High
8	I know how to deal with the different guests.	3.54	0.85	High

Items	Statements	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpret
9	I understand the different mindsets of guests from different generations.	3.92	0.74	High
10	I am familiar with the different cultural expressions of guests such as kisses for greetings and goodbyes.	3.77	1.03	High
<b>Mean score</b>		<b>3.71</b>	<b>0.65</b>	<b>High</b>

Table 2 shows that the Thai undergraduate interns were highly competent in terms of knowledge of cultural diversity relevant for intercultural communication at the hotel, especially in the food and beverage services ( $\bar{x} = 4.04$ ).

#### **Extract 1**

*There could be problems in different situations. For Chinese guests, I am not 100% sure about their language, so I am not confident and get a bit tense as I am not sure whether I can communicate in Chinese correctly. (Student 3)*

Because the interns studied in an international program, English was used as the medium of instruction and communication. There were, however, other foreign language courses such as French, German, Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese. Although Chinese was included in the curriculum as a selective course, some interns might not take the course. They then employed non-verbal communicative strategies, including gestures and sign language instead.

#### **Extract 2**

*If we cannot speak their language, we can still refer to signs and symbols or use gestures and they would understand us easily. (Student 2)*

**Extract 3**

*I used body language that is easy to understand by everyone. (Student 9)*

Besides body language, signs and symbols, the interns also made sure there was at least one colleague who could speak Chinese for each work shift to help with communication with Chinese visitors.

**Extract 4**

*They use gestures and the majority of my friends can speak Chinese, so I ask those who could communicate. It is all planned from the start when they divide us into groups. There are various teams: day, evening, and night teams. It is anticipated at the beginning that we will surely encounter Chinese guests who do not speak English; and thus, people who can speak Chinese are distributed among the teams. (Student 6)*

To sum up, the interns' skills and communicative competence in English were not adequate for intercultural communication in this hotel setting. In fact, the interns had to rely on Chinese language, as well as non-verbal methods such as gestures to deal with the language barrier whenever it occurred.

**Skills to interpret and relate**

The second domain of ICC is the skills to interpret and relate to the culture of foreign guests. Table 3 indicates that, in general, the interns possessed such skills at a high level ( $\bar{x} = 3.63$ ) (see Table 3).



**Table 3 The hotel interns' skills to interpret and relate culture**

Items	Statements	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpret
1	I understand what foreign guests need.	3.65	0.79	High
2	I can interpret foreign guests' body language.	3.77	0.95	High
3	I can assume what foreign guests want.	3.73	0.91	High
4	I know what infants, the disabled, or the elderly need.	3.38	0.80	Moderate
<b>Mean score</b>		<b>3.63</b>	<b>0.70</b>	<b>High</b>

The interns were able to interpret foreign guests' gestures ( $\bar{x} = 3.77$ ), and also used non-verbal cues for intercultural communication as previously explained in Extracts 1, 2, and 3. However, being able to recognize the needs of infants, the disabled, and the elderly might not be as high as other skills ( $\bar{x} = 3.38$ ). This could be due to the interns' lack of experience in handling such groups as they mentioned below.

**Extract 5**

*I was nervous at first because I usually only dealt with young clients. (Student 8)*

**Extract 6**

*When I encounter the elderly, I am uncertain of how formal the language has to be or what tone of voice to use as I am not sure how to approach them. (Student 1)*

**Extract 7**

*During the early period, I did not get to meet customers, so I observed how senior staff responded. When I had a chance to do it, I copied what I had seen. (Student 1)*

These extracts reveal that they were not really confident when communicating with the elderly with whom they were not familiar. To learn how to, they observed senior staff who were experienced in handling and overcoming intercultural communication challenges effectively. This peer observation

strategy enabled the interns to perform their communication with foreign visitors appropriately.

### **Skills to discover and interact**

Another key domain is the interns' skills to discover and interact with other foreign guests. The average score of this domain was quite high ( $\bar{x} = 3.63$ ), which suggests that they were well-trained in terms of hotel services, policies, and practices.

**Table 4 The interns' skills to discover and interact**

Items	Statements	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpret
1	I know how to deal with emergencies appropriately.	3.38	0.85	Moderate
2	I can offer what the guest needs correctly.	3.65	0.84	High
3	I know how to respond to foreign guests' body language appropriately.	3.58	0.98	High
4	I know the process and ways to prepare what the guest wants.	3.54	1.02	High
5	I know how to service the disabled, infants, and the elderly.	3.77	0.81	High
6	I know what to do when guests experience emergency situations.	3.85	0.96	High
<b>Mean score</b>		<b>3.62</b>	<b>0.73</b>	<b>High</b>

The interns had to be cognizant of all the necessary information, rules, and regulations, which could later be shared with foreign guests to avoid conflicts and confusion. However, there were a few challenges stemming from different service practices and standards such as luggage service that did not meet customers' expectations.

### **Extract 8**

*There are also problems with communication about luggage services, but it is not about the language, it is about culture because they may have different experiences from hotel over in their country which provide different kinds of services. (Student 2)*

The interns employed planning and problem-solving strategies that helped them to deal with unexpected challenges caused by different practices through research or asking their peers or supervisor in order to avoid miscommunication.

### **Extract 9**

*I asked about hotel that clients would ask for. When someone asks in the future, I can give correct answers.  
(Student 4)*

Thus, understanding how customers are likely to react to communication during intercultural service encounters is important. In addition, the interns' positive attitudes are also essential for intercultural communication, as reported next (see Table 5).

### **Attitudes**

Table 5 illustrates that the interns had highly positive attitudes towards foreign guests whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds were different ( $\bar{x} = 3.81$ ).

**Table 5 The interns' attitudes towards ICC**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Statements</b>	<b><math>\bar{x}</math></b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Interpret</b>
1	I have a positive view of people from different culture.	4.27	0.77	Very high
2	I am curious and want to know about the cultural backgrounds of guests from other countries, so I look for information in order that I know how to treat them properly.	3.88	0.95	High
3	I enjoy talking or working with foreign guests who are from different cultures.	4.15	0.88	High
4	I think all people are basically the same.	3.12	1.60	Moderate
5	I treat every guest equally no matter what their religion or nationality.	3.92	1.23	High
6	I feel embarrassed when I see people from other cultures exchanging greeting and goodbye kisses.	3.85	1.19	High

Items	Statements	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpret
7	I question the situation when I see an old foreigner living in Thailand carrying things without any help from their children accompanying them.	3.38	1.16	Moderate
8	Sometimes I feel uncomfortable to provide help to some groups of foreign guests.	3.88	1.21	High
9	I feel nervous when I have to service guests who are from a different culture.	3.96	1.34	High
10	I enjoy working in an intercultural context.	3.77	1.33	High
<b>Mean score</b>		<b>3.81</b>	<b>0.60</b>	<b>High</b>

Despite the high level of the students' attitudes towards intercultural communication with foreign guests, one intercultural incident they found challenging was when Chinese guests smoked in non-smoking areas.

#### **Extract 10**

*Chinese people like to smoke in their room. I feel uncomfortable asking them to stop, but it is a rule of the hotel not to smoke in the rooms. I have to select my words carefully. I understand that Chinese people are like this.  
(Student 3)*

This situation could be culturally sensitive as Chinese guests might find the intern's request rather offensive. The intern, thus, tried to communicate with them by addressing the hotel rules and regulations with which they had to comply. The findings correspond with Inkaew's (2016) study in which hotel graduates needed to be equipped not only with the essentials regarding attitude, knowledge and understanding, skills, and behaviors, but also possess a positive attitude towards cultural diversity. Critical cultural awareness will be presented next.

#### **Critical cultural awareness**

Table 6 shows that the interns' critical cultural awareness was relatively high ( $\bar{x} = 3.81$ ), which indicates that they were

culturally sensitive to a significant extent and appreciated the chance sensible and appreciative to work in a multicultural environment.

**Table 6 The interns' critical cultural awareness of ICC**

Items	Statements	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpret
1	I can distinguish cultural differences among guests.	3.77	0.99	High
2	I understand the various cultural expressions of foreign guests.	3.85	0.73	High
3	I like to learn new cultures from foreign guests.	4.12	0.86	High
4	I understand the cultural diversity among guests, and I have learned to provide appropriate services accordingly.	3.96	0.87	High
5	From my working experience as a hotel intern, I have greater cultural awareness.	4.04	0.87	High
<b>Mean score</b>		<b>3.94</b>	<b>0.69</b>	<b>High</b>

Working in a multicultural and multilingual hotel environment, the interns inevitably faced cross-cultural practices that were different from Thai culture as the following extract revealed.

**Extract 11**

*Basically, when we take the guests to their rooms, according to Thai cultural norms, we would expect them to take off their shoes. But as I can speak Chinese, I would ask them to "please, kindly take off your shoes", when normally, Chinese would walk right in with their shoes on. (Student 2)*

Equipped with Chinese language skills, the intern could communicate the hotel's rules to Chinese guests. Being aware of cross-cultural differences enabled the interns to behave appropriately to overcome cultural barriers. Chinese guests, however, might be a challenge for the interns due to their different cultural practices as described below.

**Extract 12**

*There was one time when a Chinese guest just checked in. If they had been Thai, he would have asked slowly, but the Chinese just came right out and demanded a lot of things. I was quite shocked and confused. (Student 7)*

To overcome negative affective barriers, the interns needed employ emotional intelligence by avoiding anxiety and promoting empathy, since, as interns as they were in the process of becoming future hotel professionals.

**Extract 13**

*I do not feel uneasy. It is a new experience to meet people of different races, so I can learn about the differences among them. Being in the hotel industry, we have to know the differences among all kinds of people, and in the future, I will have to serve guests of all sorts and I will have to do it correctly. So, I don't feel uncomfortable serving guests from other countries or guests who follow a different religion from mine. (Student 5)*

Figure 2 provides a summary of the importance of the five competencies of ICC perceived by the Thai interns. They assessed all competencies as being highly significant for being professional hospitality service providers in the future.

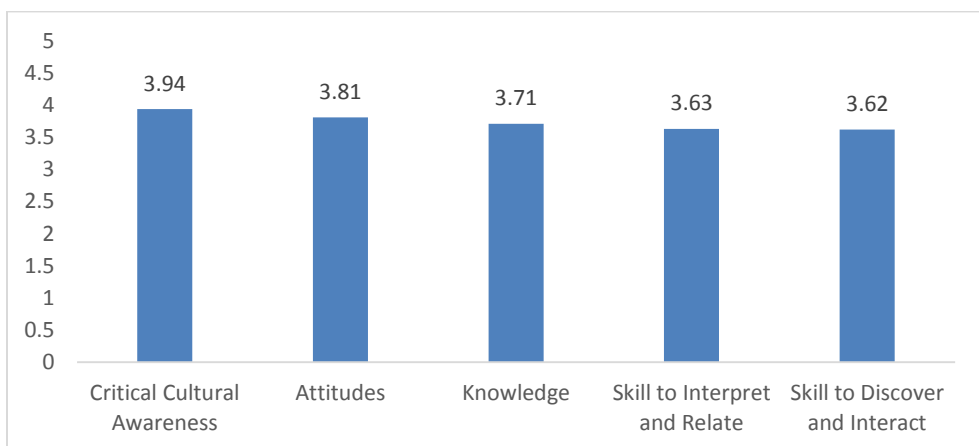


Figure 2 A summary of the five ICC competencies as perceived by Thai interns

To conclude, the competencies most needed by hotel interns to meet ICC challenges were encountered the most were (i) critical cultural awareness ( $\bar{x} = 3.94$ ), (ii) attitudes ( $\bar{x} = 3.81$ ), (iii) knowledge ( $\bar{x} = 3.71$ ), (iv) skills to interpret and relate ( $\bar{x} = 3.63$ ), and (v) skills to discover and interact ( $\bar{x} = 3.62$ ), respectively.

To meet the cultural awareness challenge, they needed to put effort into understanding and learning about the cultural diversity of guests, raise the courage to embrace cultural differences and be prepared to adapt to such cultural diversity. Secondly, strategy for attitude challenge was to adjusting their attitude by opening their minds to embrace cultural differences, in order to operate effectively without bias. Thirdly, strategy for knowledge challenge was to ask for help from colleagues who can communicate in Chinese, and also use body language in communication. Fourthly, the strategy they used to interpret and relate to challenges was to plan ahead how to deal with challenges. Finally, their strategy to discover and interact challenge was to observe how experienced colleagues solved problems and use them as a model for future challenges.

### **Discussion and pedagogical implications**

These results correspond to Byram's ICC model (1997) that demonstrates the importance of knowledge, skills to interpret and relate, skills to discover and interact, attitude, and critical cultural awareness, which are the key components of intercultural communication competence. To deal with and overcome intercultural communicative challenges effectively and appropriately requires a positive manner and attitude (Fantini, 2000).

Despite the challenges, including different linguistic differences, cultural practices and expectations, intercultural communication between the consumer and service personnel is at the core of the hospitality service encounter (Kang & Hyun, 2012; Nikolich & Sparks, 1995; Sparks, 1994; Sparks & Callan, 1992). The interns had to utilize cognitive and emotional intelligence, as

well as behavioral skills as intercultural communicative strategies to overcome such challenges (Schmidt et al., 2007).

ICC is nowadays considered to be essential to any organization operating in the global marketplace, and new communication strategies will ultimately prove to be crucial for working across cultures (Pikhart, 2014). ICC is promoted as a result of its impact on foreign language teaching (Inphoo & Nomnian, 2019; Lopez-Rocha & Arevalo-Guerrero, 2014). Angouri and Miglbauer (2013) state that the enhancement of ICC, particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts, requires individuals to go beyond stereotypes and address situated language use and the role that culture plays in that particular interactive encounter. Furthermore, curriculum design should take into consideration Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, which emphasizes the development of self-awareness, openness, and transformation (Furstenberg, 2010). One of the greater challenges language teachers face, however, is the assessment of their students' intercultural competence and whether they have achieved the stated objectives since individuals carry different perceptions and undergo the learning process at different rates. Language teachers need to raise their students' cross-cultural awareness, promote intercultural and linguistic competence, foster positive attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity, and create an environment in which students can develop and practice ICC to prepare them for interactions in diverse, intercultural environments (Inkaew, 2016; Nomnian & Arphattananon, 2018).

According to Wang et al. (2015), in order to enhance intercultural communicative experiences, some hospitality organizations have implemented two strategies to facilitate communication: (a) match the cultural background of the service provider and the customer and/or (b) use the customer's native language. To accommodate global travelers, some hotels provide tailor-made services based on visitors' sociolinguistic and cultural backgrounds. Hence, the interns should engage themselves in this internship process of raising cross-cultural awareness



critically, creating self-reflection space for sharing ideas and experiences, and exposing themselves to unfamiliar languages and cultures for further professional development.

In this study, Thai interns need to develop a strong sense of tolerance and acceptance of visitors from other cultures to make them feel comfortable as care, sensitivity and empathy will undoubtedly facilitate the flow intercultural communication, and create friendship, and a positive impression. They could perform and interact with foreign guests, whose cultural traditions and beliefs may not have been culturally familiar, in order to provide satisfactory service and meet the standards required by the academic program and hotel.

During the internship at the hotel, the Thai interns had to employ all sorts of communicative tools to overcome linguistic and cultural impediments caused by cognitive, affective, and behavioral obstacles. Non-verbal acts could often help convey the message better than verbal behaviors; however, there was always the risk of misinterpretation or confusion. In particular, non-verbal behaviors could create unfortunate misunderstandings and miscommunications, especially when it did not match the intended verbal meanings. Thus, non-verbal misinterpretation was another huge obstacle that needed to be in intercultural communication. Anxiety, stereotypes, prejudices, assumptions of similarity rather than difference, and ethnocentrism could all hinder intercultural communication, and for this reason, it was essential that students developed intercultural communication strategies to deal with such challenges. Wagner and Byram (2017) suggest that foreign language teachers can promote intercultural competence to language learners and users via intercultural activities with speakers from other cultures and languages in which learners can communicate or mediate in multilingual and multicultural situations.

Similar to studies by Dhevabanchachai and Wattanacharoensil (2017) and Grobella (2015), the study offers insights into the curriculum development of the tourism and hospitality management program that not only equips the

students with fundamental operational knowledge in the field, but train them in tourism and hospitality industry practices and management skills through hands-on experience that promotes problem-solving, analytical, and communicative abilities regarding intercultural and interpersonal communications, cultural sensitivity, ethical and professional mindsets, teamwork, and self-responsibility to be prepared for future tourism and hospitality industry careers in multilingual and multicultural contexts.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

This study explores the challenges and strategies used by Thai undergraduate interns for intercultural communication at an in-house hotel training center. The results of the study suggest that ICC needs to be incorporated into the language curriculum of tourism and hospitality program in order to help students develop an appreciation for other languages, such as Chinese and foreign cultures, a critical awareness of their own culture, and the development of communicative skills that will allow them to be competent and adaptable communicators for future employment. Knowledge of the culture and practices of different social groups enabled the interns to recognize and realize appropriate behaviors when encountering intercultural communication situations. For effective intercultural communication, the Thai interns needed to develop skills of interpreting and relating, which represent the capacity to interpret information about a different culture and relate it to one's own. The skills of discovery and interaction promote the acquisition of new knowledge of other cultures and employ the relevant knowledge, attitude, and skills within the communication and interaction process. The last significant domain is critical cultural awareness, which is the ability to evaluate critically based on one's own culture.

This study addresses the need for interns to possess a positive attitude towards linguistic and cultural diversity that is essential for intercultural communication as it can help them develop intercultural knowledge and skills essential to interact appropriately and effectively with hotel guests from other cultures.

This study also suggests that in order to deliver and express the appropriate both verbal and non-verbal communications in a context of Thailand, interns as service providers require not only a body of knowledge related to visitors' culture and related practices, but also the international standardized service protocols. However, future research may seek to explore how foreign visitors behave in this similar context as interns do in an in-house hotel training center on a university campus.

This study may be considered as a platform for other tourism and hospitality programs that provide an internship experience for their students, who not only learn the skills needed for hotel services, but also encounter authentic intercultural communicative experiences that are beneficial in their future careers in the hospitality industry.

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