Intercultural Problems and Adaptations of Thai EFL Students in English Classes Instructed by Foreign Teachers

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Abstract

This research is aimed at studying problems of intercultural communication among Thai students in foreign teachers' teaching classes and analyzing their cultural adaptation. Six students enrolling in 2020 academic year of English Major, Faculty of Education, Phuket Rajabhat University were purposively selected as the participants of the study. In collecting data, the researchers employed semi-structured interviews in which their issues focusing on intercultural adaptation borrowed from Hofstede and Hofstede (2005). The results found that the participants were likely to encounter intercultural communication experiences at the early stage of their adjustment in studying with foreign teachers. The participants revealed further that due to the lack of an opportunity to communicate with foreigners in everyday life causing them unconfident and perceived negative attitudes to communicate with the foreigners. They also avoided to communicate with the foreign teachers after classes as they could not maintain the conversations. Given this, the foreign teachers might give the longer wait time for the students to compensate the words and construct the structure of English sentences. In terms of the cultural adjustment, the participants were aware of the cultural differences as they experienced unfamiliar behaviors and manners, but they still respected their foreign teachers' cultural differences. They argued further that to keep their own cultural identities were important in successful intercultural communication.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, cultural adaptation, foreign teachers

Background of the Study

With the advance of communication technology and modern transportation, the world today has become globalized and borderless resulting in contacts and communicate among people from different backgrounds. Given this, the common communication is involved with diverse human backgrounds, and intercultural competence is undeniably regarded as a significant component in successful

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communication. Likely, Dahl (2005) argued that intercultural communication is an indisputable and integral part of modern human communication. People need to understand the cultural differences as they know what kind of expressions or behaviors to perform. The expression of a person in a situation under a particular culture may be appropriate for that cultural context, but when a person has crossed into another culture the same expression the same expression can become inappropriate (Gorlach, 2008).

Intercultural communication is the interaction between individuals that through processes and symbols. It takes the characteristics of interpersonal meaning that come from different cultures and could be viewed as the speaking process (Patcharapa Uaamonwanich, 2017; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984, 1992). In other words, intercultural communication is about the ability of emotions and the process of expressing behaviors both verbal and non-verbal forms of senders and receivers.

Dimensions of Intercultural Communication

Intercultural studies are usually practiced in public contexts where an appreciation of cultural differences of partners are needed, groups, as well as organizations (Ishii, 2006). However, Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) argued that cultural differences might happen where people communicate with the same language, belong to the same regions, ethnics religions, genders, or ages as they conceptualized their mindsets in different ways. The researchers divided the cultures into five dimensions which were high and low power distance, individualism, and collectivism-, short- and long-term orientation, masculinity and felinity society, and uncertainty avoidance.

Power distance can be described as the power of institutions and corporate members in a society. Institutions are the basic elements of society such as the family, community, school, or government. The high or low power distance could be reflected through the inequality in society in the different social classes or individual members. The wider ranges of differences that create different opportunities usually create the gaps of social advantages. In most cases, a large power distance society relied on power rather the right of person. In other words, the person with power will be the right person, the person with little power must rely on other people. In contrast, in a small power distance society, the right conflicts are rare as an individual is equally respected.

Individualism and collectivism is the cultural dimension of a society that affects communication styles of people. The first social group of a human life is the family providing upbringing. Each family inevitably allows people to learn in different environments. Some families have taught and educated people to help themselves from childhood while another family in some culture teaches dependence and respect for other members of the family. The individualist is regarded as a person who focuses on their rights, roles, needs, and privacy. Low communication styles unsurprisingly are frequently used to directly communicate their expressions and feelings. Meanwhile, the collectivist

considered others as a family that must be protected. Children are taught to think of others rather than their own. This kind of society, therefore, promotes a high context communication where the expression of importance is relied on the group, and private life is relevant to the group.

Long- and short-term orientation is the dimension that reflected the breadth of a society focusing on the perseverance of values and fostering the virtues towards the future rewards. On the other hand, a short- term orientation society tended to preserve the traditions, focus on the current social hierarchy, and fulfill the social obligations. These circumstances will drive quick and short-term results.

In the light of gender, men and women differ not only in physical appearances but also the status and roles perceived. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) characterized social behaviors that were passed down from a generation to generation into masculinity and femininity. The characteristic of masculinity focuses on earning, adoption, and advancement. People living in such cultures are expected be confident, ambitious, and responsible, meanwhile a femininity society puts an emphasis on the relationship, empathy, and quality of living.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree of uncertainty that a human allows to occur as it is believed that insecurity could cause concerns and insecurities in different ways. People in strong uncertainty avoidance have high levels of stress and anxiety. To encounter unexpected situations are seen as risks. They may be aggressive, paranoid, and concern about health and money. In contrast, the weak uncertainty avoidance society sees the problems or unexpected situation as challenges to obstacles, and the social rules are quite flexible but practical.

Cultural Adaptation

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity is one of the influential models in the fields of intercultural communication, engagement, and equity. Sometimes it is called the "Bennett Scale". The model describes the standard ways in which people experience, interpret, and interact across cultural differences, and it proposes a developmental continuum along which people can progress toward a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural variance, as well as greater social facility when negotiating cross- cultural dissimilarity. Bennett founded the Intercultural Development Research Institute to support related research and practical applications of the model. According to Bennett, "As one's perceptual organization of cultural difference becomes more complex, one's experience of culture becomes more sophisticated and the potential for exercising competence in intercultural relations increases. By recognizing how cultural difference is being experienced, predictions about the effectiveness of intercultural communication can be made and educational interventions can be tailored to facilitate development along the continuum." (p.21-77)

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity describes six developmental stages of intercultural sensitivity and communication, beginning with denial— the perception that one's cultural perspective is the only real, accurate, or valid interpretation of reality, and culminating with integration— the internalization of multicultural awareness and the ability to interact productively across cultural differences. It is important to note that the stages of intercultural sensitivity described in the model apply to individuals, groups, and organizations although, as Bennett has noted, different approaches to evaluating or measuring developmental progress are required for different applications. The six developmental stages of intercultural communication and sensitivity are as follows.

In the first stage. Denial, an individual's denial indicates an experience in which cultural difference is not perceived at all. This may reflect either physical or social isolation from people of different cultural backgrounds.

In the second stage. Defense, indicates an experience in which cultural difference is perceived in stereotyped and polarized ways. Cultures are organized into "us and them," where typically the "us" is superior and the "them" is inferior. Defense may also manifest in efforts to deny people from other cultures equal access or opportunity, such as opposition to affirmative-action policies.

The third stage is minimization. An individual in this stage acknowledges cultural differences, but elements of one's own cultural worldview are perceived as universal. People assume that their own physical or psychological experiences are shared by people in all cultures. This may also manifest in arguments that human similarities are more important than cultural differences.

In the fourth stage. Acceptance, an individual recognizes and values cultural differences without evaluating those differences as positive or negative. The acceptance stage may also manifest greater curiosity about or interest in other cultures, but their knowledge of other cultures does not yet allow them to easily adapt their behaviour to different cultural contexts.

In the fifth stage. Adaptation occurs when people are able to adopt the perspective of another culture to them. The adaptation stage may also manifest when people from different cultural backgrounds can discuss their cultural experiences and perspectives in ways that are conversant in and sensitive to the other culture.

The final stage is integration. It indicates an experience of self that is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews. People can experience themselves as multicultural beings. These individuals integrate aspects of their own original cultural perspectives with those of other cultures, they are able to constantly choose the most appropriate cultural context for their behaviour.

Literature Review

Prommin Songsirisak (2018) has studied "Cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students: Problems and solutions" The findings revealed that the most significant problems for cultural adaptation included language barriers in both English and Thai, having no strategies for inter- cultural communication with Thai people, not being familiar with Thai etiquette and food, appropriate social behavior and Thai classroom culture. As far as solutions and strategies, the research recommends three main areas including increasing the study of Thai language and culture, having better competence in inter-cultural communication strategies for talking with Thai people, and providing more detail orientation training before coming to Thailand in order to understand proper Thai cultural behavior, etiquette and Thai university study habits.

Huang Xichang (2013) has studied "The effect of cross-cultural communication on adaption of Chinese teachers in Bangkok". It was found that the cross- cultural communication of Chinese teachers teaching Chinese in Bangkok was at a high level overall. In detail, it was found that the Ethnic Social Communication was at a high level while Host Communication Competence and Host Social Communication were at a moderate level. The Adjustment of Chinese teachers teaching Chinese in Bangkok both in overall and all of three components were at a high level. In detail, it was found that Affecting Components had the highest mean, followed by Behavior Component and Cognitive Component, respectively. The results of hypothesis testing indicated that the Cross-Cultural Communication in overall and Host Social Communication had the positive impact on the impact of the host social communication has a positive impact on the Adjustment of Chinese teachers teaching Chinese in Bangkok both in overall and all of three components (Cognitive Component, Affective Component, and Behavior Component) at a low level.

Xiaoqing Su (2017) has studied "The intercultural adaptation of the Pakistani students at Chinese universities". The findings revealed that first, proper orientation on Chinese education system is crucial to minimizing students' problems. If students could know in advance the grading system and classroom environment, they would be psychologically prepared for their academic life at Chinese universities. Then, as Chinese language competence plays a very important role in students' psychological and socio-cultural adaptation, some pre- departure intercultural workshops could be very good approaches to help facilitate students' life in the unfamiliar culture setting. What's more, Chinese language course, Chinese culture course, intercultural communication course and similar programs in the curriculum of Chinese universities for international students can contribute to meeting the needs of students of different cultural backgrounds. As confirmed in this study, the successful intercultural adaptation of international students is highly connected to the sustainable development of Chinese educational institutions. Considering the impact of globalization on education, the competition among countries to attract more international students becomes of vital importance. Therefore, China, as

one of burgeoning regional educational hub needs to employ the most effective strategies to attract international students.

Tomin VV (2016) has studied "Intercultural adaptation of students in the information field of cross-cultural interaction". The study found that the concrete result of cross-cultural adaptation - "adaptability" of an individual in varying degrees is understood as the current status of the subject in terms of synchrony, allowing a person to feel confident and free in the new sociocultural environment, to take active, (ideally) internally-motivated participation in the core activities, to have moderate sensitivity to changes in various spheres of life of the new society and the environment, and to strive for intellectual self-development and cultural enrichment of their own inner world in the real cross-cultural interaction.

Alexey L. Novikov and Irina A. Novikova (2015) have studied "Relation between communicative tolerance and intercultural adaptation in international students". Summing up the results of the study, it can be concluded that: – Most of the examined PFUR international students have average indicators of the communicative tolerance; students from Central Asia in most cases are characterized by higher rates of tolerance toward partner in the communication; – The level of communicative tolerance, as a whole, is one of the positive factors of intercultural adaptation (especially for the students from Africa, the Arabian countries and Latin America); – It is necessary to develop the programs of individual and group psychological and pedagogical work with the PFUR international students from the different regions, aimed at developing in them the tolerant attitudes to different cultures in general, to the Russian culture, in particular, towards accepting the variety of the world around, forming tolerant communicative attitudes on the basis of the received data.

As the studies mentioned, classroom cultures are significant in determining teachers and students' roles in learning. Students will engage in learning when they perceive that they belong to that cultural contexts. Intercultural communication skills, thus, should be promoted to create cultures of learning and a new way of thinking.

Particularly, in English classes of Thai educational contexts, different forms of cultures are involved. They are the cultures transmitted from subject contents, cultures of learning in English classes, cultures of community or schools, cultures of teachers who are the host cultures or native English speakers or non-English native speakers, and even the host cultures of learners who are different in religious backgrounds, social status, races, ethnics, or financial status. Given the complexities of cultures mingled in English classes, the students' acceptance, adaptation, and integration towards the cultural differences should be proceeded as it affects directly the students' learning of English. (Bertalanffy, 1956; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Ruben and Kim, 1975). In other words, when humans have the internal drive to adapt to the new cultural environments, this will drive the students to carry out their thoughts and expressions through communication.

As a result, this research is aimed at studying the problems of intercultural communication of the Thai students encountered in English classes instructed by foreign teachers, as well as studying their adaptation in intercultural communication learning.

Research Methodology

This study focuses on issues of intercultural communication and adaptation of English majored students, Faculty of Education, Phuket Rajabhat University. The researchers specifically invited the students who have experiences in studying with foreign teachers at least for one academic year. Then six students were willing to participate in the study.

The study employed semi- structured interviews to collect data. The semi-structured interviews were processed to collect general information of the participants, the issues relating to the problems in intercultural communication, and their experiences of cultural adaptation in different cultural contexts.

The research tool— the interview questions were assured their quality by designing interview questions for Thai students following the framework of intercultural communication theory and concept of adaptation (Hofstede& Hofstede, 2005; Bennett, 1993). Moreover, the content accuracy of the questions was constructed by three experts with IOC not less than 0.5.

Data Collection

The data were collected using semi- structured interviews. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes to sixty minutes, and Thai language was used as a medium to allow the participants to fully express their thoughts and feelings. The interviews was audio recorded, and notes were taken during the interviews. As Kitiasa (2012) said, in qualitative research methods, the main principle was to write down everything according to what the informants said, everything according to our eyesight, our ears, our hearing, our senses, our brain thinks, and produces language. The more detailed information was given, it will be more helpful for the result analysis.

Data analysis

After all data had been collected, they were transcribed and translated from Thai to English. All six participants' names were pseudonyms. The obtained data were analyzed following the concept of content analysis in which they were initially organized systematically into categories, and some were put back together considering their conciseness.

Results and Discussion

The six participants recruited in the study were studying in 2020 academic year of English major, Faculty of Education, Phuket Rajabhat University in sophomore, junior, and senior years. They all had experiences studying with foreign teachers for at least two semesters. Some of their foreign teachers were English native speakers; others were bilinguals. The participants have been living in the southern part of Thailand throughout their lives.

The results of the study collected through semi- structured interviews could be categorized into two parts which were the intercultural communication problems and their strategies of adjustment.

Intercultural Communication Problems

It is likely that the student participants encountered the problems of English speaking skills with their foreign teachers especially at the early stages of their learning experiences with foreigners. The majority of students perceived that they could not manipulate the conversations with the foreign teachers due to the limitation of English linguistic knowledge. As Sara directly stated, "Sometimes, the things that I want to communicate with the things in mind don't match. I can't choose the word suitable for the situation." Similarly Cindy mentioned, "The problem (to communicate in English) is that I cannot arrange the sentences which are grammatically correct, so it takes time to communicate." Watson also clarified that he faced the problems in speaking with his foreign teachers in this way. "I am not able to think of the vocabulary and compose into sentences. So, it is a communication problem because once the communication has been proceeded, the foreign teachers cannot understand what we want to communicate."

In addition, the participants seemed to have a high degree of uncertainty avoidance at the beginning of studying with their foreign teachers. This was reflected through their intercultural communication as they tended to avoid talking with foreign teachers. Some students could not come across the problems of their linguistic barriers as they were concerned with the accuracy of their English usage. As Watson revealed, "I would talk with the foreign teachers only in the class." Nonetheless, after the participants were exposed to the learning experiences with their foreign teachers for a while, they were relaxed and felt free to communicate with their teachers. As Lasa stated, "I feel fear of incomprehensible communication for speaking and grammatical errors. After studying with a foreign teacher, I have gained more confidence in communication". Likely Mindy stated, "I rarely meet the foreigner teacher outside of the classroom but if there is an opportunity, I would like to talk and interact in order to practice my own language as well"

However, when the roots of problems were critically analyzed, they were not only derived from linguistic barriers of the students but also the cultural dimensions that influence their perceptions of themselves and the positioning of their roles in learning environments. On the contrary, the learning environments also shaped the choices of the

students' behaviors. In other words, as the participants revealed, to study with foreign teachers, they were aware of the small power distance in English classes. They argued that it was easier to directly contact with their foreigner teachers as they felt more relaxed, more flexible, and adaptable comparing with their Thai teachers. Lisa's words could conceptualize this perception. "Foreign teachers are more friendly and down-to-earth, but Thai teachers will have space for the suitability, not getting too close, and quite strict." Likely, Peter underlined that "I think that Thai teachers are quite organized and have a clear framework in studying. The framework must be exactly followed as the teacher has set. Instead, foreign teachers are more flexible and adaptable. The foreign teachers tend to implement English learning activities in a way that is not too strict but applicable."

Therefore, to build the students' confidence in communicating in English requires femininity cultural learning environments. As Clara pointed, "Foreign teachers will focus on having the courage to communicate. They allow the student to express their opinion. They will not blame the students for answering questions. They will allow the students to ask questions repeatedly." It can be said that cooperative language learning were suitable with the cultural learning rather than competitive learning. More importantly, emotions of caring, empathy, and open mind should not be ignored in creating the students' engagement.

Intercultural Adaptation

The participants were likely to be aware of the cultural differences between themselves and their foreign teachers. They reported that they gained some basic knowledge of cultural adaptations from an elective course provided for English majors, and some students perceived these cultural difference appreciations through watching movies. The students were rarely exposed to the cultural learning with persons even though the university is located in international traveling destinations. They argued further that because they lacked the opportunities of exposure to English speaking environments, this led them felt not confident enough to talk and sometimes they avoided communicating with the foreign teachers after classes.

In terms of the linguistic barriers, the students revealed that they could improve a lot of their speaking skills as they had to apply several communicative strategies to handle the conversations with their foreign teachers such as guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words, focusing on fluency, and using non- verbal language to express ideas. For instance, "Personally, I tried to relate to what they said before, and what they tried to say after. I tried to guess the meaning of new words from the contexts and asked whether what I understood was correct or not." Lisa. Clara stated, "I solve the problem by trying to use more simple vocabulary to communicate and be able to communicate with foreigners by using nonverbal language."

In overall, the student participants were in acceptance and adaptation levels of intercultural learning. The students accepted and adapted to punctuality. The students not only respected the values the teachers hold, but they also tried to follow such values. This went along with the concept of cultural adaptation which occurs when people adopt the perspective of another culture and involve appropriately. Peter opined in this way, "I understand the differences of cultures that are inserted in communication. My foreign teachers paid more attention to being punctual. Even though sometimes I was late, the foreign teachers were still friendly and generous. This influences me to be responsible for myself and come to study on time." Mindy explained that being open- minded was something she learned from her foreign teachers. She said, "I was worried for the first time. I feared that I would not be able to communicate and pronounce correctly, but after learning with the foreign teachers, I think they were open-minded. If the communication fails, they do not blame but will fix it instead."

In addition, some students were likely to achieve the level of integration of cultural adaptation as they could reflect which social practices are more authentic and viewed themselves as a part of cultural diversity to learn from others. These perceptions were conceptualized through the expressions revealed by Clara. As she said, "I understand the foreign cultures in better ways. I think that foreign cultures don't have many conditions in greeting each other. They said hello to each other and made an eye contact directly with the interlocutor. This reflects that everyone is equal. Different from Thai people's greeting, we have an etiquette to be observed such as sitting, standing, and appropriate distance." Similarly, Watson revealed that "I understand the differences of cultures better. Thai people considered age and seniority, but the foreign teachers treated people equally. Therefore, after studying with foreign teachers, I can adapt their practices into my English classes in the future."

Limitations of the Study

As the current study focused only on the cultural problems and adaptation in one context of Faculty of Education, Phuket Rajabhat University, the findings generated in the study might not be applicable to other contexts as each is unique in its own ways. The future research should be conducted to study the cultural problems of non- English major students as they may involve different factors affecting the students' learning of intercultural communication and their adaptation. Therefore, the findings of the study could be used in designing potential English language learning environments.

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