



Integrating Intercultural Competence in English for General Education in a Thai University: A Document Analysis of Course Syllabi

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the integration of intercultural competence in the general English education curricula of a private university in Northern Thailand. The study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing document analysis to examine 8 course syllabi from the two English for General Education curricula that commenced in the 2024 academic year. Byram's intercultural model, comprising of 5 intercultural components including cultural knowledge, skills of discovery/interaction, skills of interpreting/relating, attitude, and critical cultural awareness, was employed to guide the design of the study. Findings reported that 4 intercultural components, including cultural knowledge, skills of discovery/interaction, skills of interpreting/relating, and critical cultural awareness, were integrated into the two curricula to varying extents, while attitude was missing from both curricula. The study emphasizes the need for instructors and curriculum developers to incorporate both Thai culture and its global perceptions, as well as real-time interaction practices, into their General English courses. Furthermore, students' intercultural attitudes can be achieved through teaching and learning activities that explore both their own values and cultural practices, as well as those of the interlocutors.

Keywords: English curriculum development, general English education, intercultural communication, integration of intercultural communication, qualitative research

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Introduction

Internationalization has been promoted by the Thai government, especially in higher education, as evident in the latest curriculum standards for the bachelor's degree (B.E. 2565) (Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2022). As stated in the standards, general education must prepare students to be effective global citizens. Accordingly, English for General Education (GE) is expected to equip students with knowledge and skills for international communication. However, the ability to use English to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds is not simply enhanced through an English class that focuses solely on grammar and vocabulary because students also need knowledge and skills for understanding and interpreting the perspectives of people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Wang, 2024). In addition, research has shown that intercultural competence is not given enough emphasis in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Thailand (Rajprasit, 2017). This lack of focus is further supported by a document analysis conducted by Huttayavilaiphan (2024), which examined ELT materials at a Thai university. The analysis revealed that, while these materials involved cultural diversity, they predominantly emphasized the cultures of English-speaking countries. Additionally, Suwannasom (2019) recommended that intercultural strategies be enhanced among students to promote mutual understanding in cross-cultural communication.

Given the current lack of focus on intercultural competence in English language teaching in Thailand and the need to prepare students to become global citizens, it is important to examine how intercultural competence is recognized in a Thai university. Also, since a course syllabus typically outlines learning outcomes, content, teaching and learning procedures, and assessments, it serves as a valuable resource for demonstrating how intercultural competence is emphasized and integrated throughout the course. Accordingly, this study analyzed course syllabi of 8 English courses to explore how intercultural competency is integrated into English for General Education.

Literature Review

1. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and Intercultural Competence (IC)

Byram (2021) proposed the ICC model with two sets of competences: a) communicative competence, consisting of linguistic competence and sociolinguistic competence, and b) intercultural competence (IC), which is a focus of the present study, consisting of the following 5 components. Firstly, *knowledge* refers to 1) history and relationships between countries, 2) history of one's own country and the interlocutor's perception, 3) history of the interlocutor's country and its perception in one's own country, 4) geography of one's own country, 5) geography of the interlocutor's country, 6) social distinction, 7) the process of interaction in one's own country, 8) the process of interaction in another country, 9) institutions influencing relations between countries, 10) ways to connect with interlocutors, and 11) types of causes and processes of misunderstanding. Secondly, *skills of interpreting and relating* refer to the abilities to 1) identify ethnocentric viewpoints, 2) identify areas of misunderstanding, and 3) facilitate cultural conflicts. Thirdly, *skills of discovery/interaction* include 1) the elicitation of concepts and values, 2) the identification of cultural references, 3) the identification of similarities and differences of interaction process, 4) the use of knowledge, skills, and attitudes

in a real-time scenario, 5) recognizing the connections between one's own and the interlocutor's culture, 6) institutions that facilitate contact with another country, and 7) the use of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for communicating with interlocutors. The fourth component, attitudes, refers to 1) willingness to interact with others, 2) interest in exploring diverse perspectives, 3) willingness to challenge values and beliefs of one's own culture, 4) readiness to adapt to another culture, and 5) readiness to participate in communication. Lastly, *critical cultural awareness* refers to the ability to 1) interpret explicit or implicit values, 2) evaluate documents and events, and 3) engage and facilitate in cross-cultural exchanges.

2. General Education in Thailand

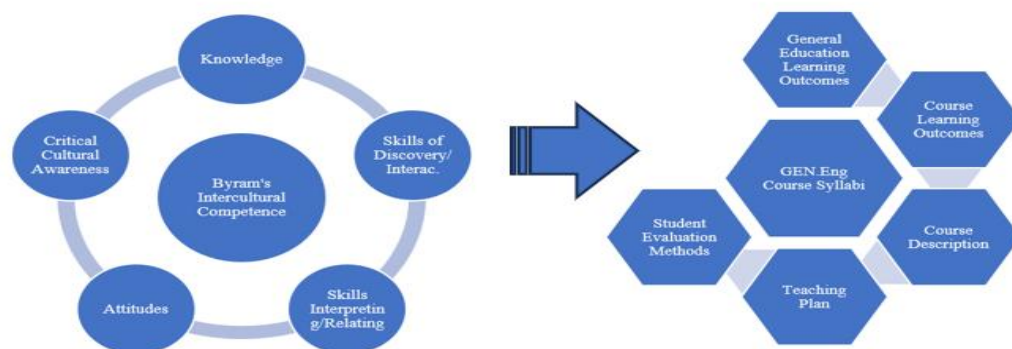
General Education (GE), as defined by the Program Standard Criteria B.E. 2565 (2022) from the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, consists of at least 24 credits. These GE courses aim to create lifelong learners who can integrate various disciplines to solve problems, uphold moral values, appreciate their national identity, and contribute to society. To fulfill the goals, GE curricula in universities consist of various categories, including Foreign Languages, Social Sciences, Life Quality, and Technology and Innovation. In addition to specific skills that students will learn from their major courses, it is noted that students will acquire necessary generic skills such as communication, technology, morals, and values through these GE courses, enabling them to work and live happily in this world.

3. Conceptual Framework

The present study was designed based on Byram's IC components, which were used to develop a coding protocol to examine course syllabi.

Figure 1

The Conceptual Framework



Research Objectives

1. To explore the integration of cultural knowledge in English for GE at a Thai university
2. To explore the integration of skills of interpreting/relating in English for GE at a Thai university

3. To explore the integration of skills of discovery/interaction in English for GE at a Thai university
4. To explore the integration of attitudes in English for GE at a Thai university
5. To explore the integration of critical cultural awareness in English for GE at a Thai university

Methodology

1. Research Design

The present study employed a qualitative research design based on document analysis, which aims to analyze the meaning in preexisting documents, such as books, newspapers, journals, and reports, to address a topic of study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

2. Population and Samples

The course syllabi of 8 English courses for General Education (GE) offered at a private university in the 2024 academic year (June 2024-May 2025) were analyzed. These courses are from two GE curricula: the former curriculum (for students entering in the year 2022 or before) and the revised curriculum (for students entering in the year 2023 or later). Since both curricula were utilized at the university in 2024, they were included as subjects of study in this research.

I: Former Curriculum

Foundation Course:

GE 1 English for Daily Life

Compulsory Courses:

GE 2 English for Cross-Cultural Communication

GE 3 English through Media for Lifelong Learning

GE 4 English in the Workplace

II: Revised Curriculum

Compulsory Course

GE5 Academic Writing and Presentation Skills

Elective Course:

GE6 English for Communication in Multicultural Societies

GE7 Listening and Speaking for Communication

GE8 English for Career

3. Instrument(s) and Procedures

3.1 The Development of the Coding Protocol

The present study employed a coding protocol to analyze the content of 8 course syllabi. The coding protocol was designed in accordance with definitions of the five components of Byram's IC.

3.2 The Validity of the Coding Protocol

To reduce the researcher's bias during data analysis and to validate the accuracy of the findings, the researcher adapted "the respondent validation" (Silverman, 2011, p. 369), which involves taking the findings back to the subjects being studied to verify them. Since this present study used course syllabi as subjects of study, the coordinator of the General English courses was asked to determine whether the findings conformed to the nature, content, and actual practices of each English course. The interpretation was refined in consideration of the coordinator's responses.

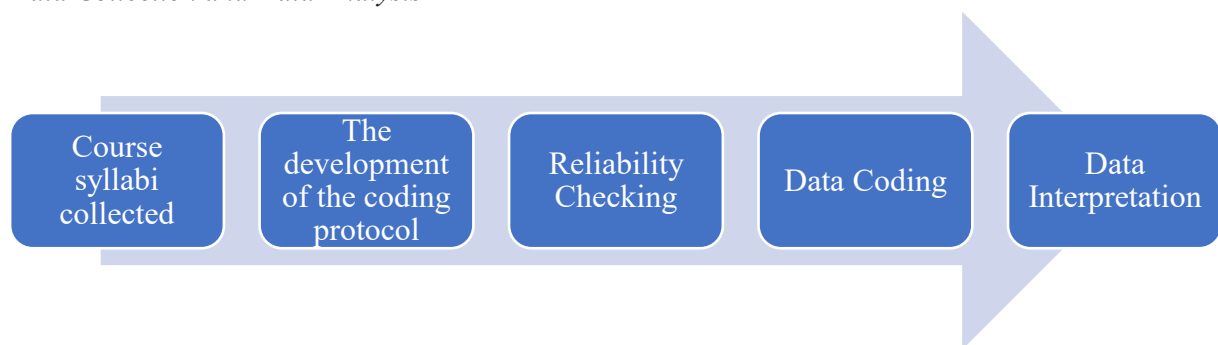
3.3 The Reliability of the Data Analysis

In this research, inter-rater reliability was used to strengthen the reliability of the data analysis. Silverman (2011) mentioned that "inter-rater reliability" (p. 364), where researchers are asked to analyze the data according to an agreed set of categories, is used in qualitative data analysis to confirm that data will be coded consistently. In this study, after the first draft of the coding protocol was developed, three coders used it to code two course syllabi: GE2 and GE6. These two courses were used to validate the coding protocol because they are directly related to English communication in a cross-cultural context; therefore, the course syllabi were expected to cover more IC knowledge and skills than the other courses. After the three coders finished coding the two course syllabi, their coding results were compared and discussed.

4. Data Collection

Figure 2

Data Collection and Data Analysis



Data collection started in December 2024 at a private university in Northern Thailand. All course syllabi of English for GE courses taught during the 2024 academic year were collected. The development of the coding protocol started in January 2025, and it was sent to three experienced teachers for a pilot coding session, followed by data coding and data interpretation.

5. Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was adopted as the data analysis approach. Based on Hsieh and Shannon (2005), data analysis starts with identifying and quantifying words or content in text, followed by content analysis, which aims to interpret the underlying meanings of content.

Results

The overall findings are reported first, followed by the findings of each research question.

Table 1
The Overall Findings

GE courses	Cul. Knowledge	Skills of Discov. /Interact	Skills of Interpret. /Relating	Attitude	Cul.Awareness
Former curriculum					
GE 1	-Causes & process misunderstanding - Thai interaction -Foreign interaction	-Recognition of cul. ref. -Elicitation	-Identification ethnocentric	-	Negotiation intercul. exchange
GE 2	-Causes & process misunderstanding - Thai interaction -Foreign interaction	-Elicitation -Identification of sim. and dif. -Facilitating cul. conflicts -Recognition of cul. Ref. -Real-time interaction	-Facilitating cul. conflicts	-	-Interpretation of cul. values -Negotiation intercul. exchange
GE 3	-Causes & process misunderstanding -Foreign interaction	-Elicitation - Recognition of cul. Ref.	-	-	-Negotiation intercul.exchange
GE 4	-Foreign interaction	-Identification of sim. and dif.			-Negotiation intercul.exchange
Revised curriculum					
GE 5	-Foreign history -Thai process interaction -Foreign interaction	-Facilitating cultural conflicts -Recognition of cul. Ref. - Identification of sim. and dif. -Real-time interaction	-Identification ethnocentrism	-	-
GE 6	-	-	-	-	-
GE 7	-Thai history -Foreign geography -Foreign interaction	-Recognition of cul. Ref. - Real-time interaction	-	-	-
GE 8	-	-	-	-	-

Based on Table 1, IC was integrated into both the former and revised curricula of GE in the university to various degrees. While the former curriculum lacked one IC component, attitude, the revised curriculum lacked two IC components: attitude and critical cultural awareness.

Research Question I:

Table 2
Integration of Cultural Knowledge

Course syllabus	Cul. Knowledge				
	The Thai process of interaction	Foreign process of interaction	Foreign history	Causes and proc.of misunderstanding	Others
GE LOs	-	GE1, GE2, GE4	-	-	-
CLOs	GE1, GE5	GE1, GE5	-	-	-
Course Description	GE2, GE5	GE2, GE5	-	-	-
Teaching Plan	GE1, GE2, GE3 GE5	GE1, GE2, GE3 GE5, GE7	GE5	GE3	-
Evaluation	-	-	-	GE2	-

Based on Table 2, most General English courses prioritize the Thai and foreign processes of interaction. For example, the course learning outcomes of GE 1 expect that students will be able to apply both Thai and global social etiquette to exhibit appropriate manners in various daily life situations. In GE3, the teaching plan includes topics such as traffic signs and other signs in public places, as well as food and medicine labels, as language styles, patterns, or formats of these signs or labels may be influenced by the culture of the original or manufacturing countries. As a result, such signs and labels may affect the understanding of sign readers or customers to some extent, especially if a sign reader or a customer is not from the same country as the country of manufacture of the food or medicine.

In addition, 2 other aspects of cultural knowledge were also identified: foreign history and the causes and processes of misunderstanding; however, they were integrated into a few courses. For example, foreign history was identified in GE 5, which covers topics related to the official and unofficial holidays of various countries, as well as the history associated with these holidays. In GE 2 and GE 3, causes and processes of misunderstanding, such as cultural differences in cuisine and table manners, as well as expressions of sympathy and condolences, were identified. However, other subcomponents were missing from both curricula. Therefore, it can be concluded that cultural knowledge is integrated into most General English courses, with a heavy emphasis on the Thai and foreign processes of interaction.

Research Question II:

Table 3

Integration of Skills of Interpreting/Relating

Course syllabus	Skills of Interpreting/Relating		
	Identification of ethnocentrism	Identification of cul. Misunderstanding	Facilitating cultural conflicts
GE LOs	-	GE1	-
CLOs	GE1	GE1	GE2, GE5
Course Description	-	-	GE2
Teaching Plan	-	-	GE2
Evaluation	-	-	-

Based on Table 3, it is notable that only three English courses integrate the skills of interpreting/relating, two in the former curriculum, and one in the revised curriculum. For example, in GE 1, students are expected to be able to explain social etiquette from different ethnocentric perspectives. In addition, GE2 and GE5 focus solely on the skill of facilitating cultural conflicts. For example, in GE2, the course description emphasizes the ability to understand and communicate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Also, one of the learning outcomes for this course highlights the ability to present cultural conflicts and their solutions to others. Moreover, the teaching plan for this same course includes a topic on giving guidance on prohibitions and obligations related to taboos and superstitions. It can be concluded that the skills of interpreting/relating are not intensively focused on in either curriculum, especially in the revised curriculum.

Research Question III:

Table 4

Integration of Skills of Discovery

Course syllabus	Skills of Discovery/Interaction			
	Elicitation	Recognition of cultural ref.	Identification of sim. and dif.	Real-time interaction
GE LOs	-	GE1	-	-
CLOs	GE1, GE2	GE1, GE2, GE5	GE2	-

Table 4 (Continued)

Course syllabus	Skills of Discovery/Interaction			
	Elicitation	Recognition of cultural ref.	Identification of sim. and dif.	Real-time interaction
Course Description	GE5	GE2	-	-
Teaching Plan	GE1, GE2, GE3, GE5	GE2, GE3, GE5, GE7	GE2, GE4, GE5	GE5, GE2, GE7
Evaluation	GE5	-	-	-

The present study revealed that the skills of discovery/interaction are integrated in all four General English courses in the former curriculum. In contrast, in the revised curriculum, they were found only in two courses.

It is also interesting that the subskills of elicitation, recognition of cultural references and meaning, and identification of similarities and differences were emphasized throughout the course syllabi. For example, in GE1, the subskill of elicitation is coded in a teaching and learning activity of a teaching plan, stating that students are required to identify the culture related to giving acceptance and decline. In GE2, elicitation was found in one of the course learning outcomes, stating that students will be able to identify cultural concepts of different countries after reading. The subskill, recognition of cultural reference and meaning, was identified, as seen in GE2, in the teaching plan where the code was assigned to a topic involving understanding cultural references related to prohibition, obligation, sympathy, condolence, and congratulations. The subskill of identifying similarities and differences was found in a teaching activity in GE2, which involved a classroom discussion comparing cuisine, table manners, and etiquette tips from various cultures. While the first four subskills were integrated into many courses, the subskill of real-time interaction was integrated into only GE2, GE5, and GE7, when students are required to perform a role-play that incorporates cultural diversity. In conclusion, the skills of discovery/interaction were integrated into both the former and revised curricula. However, the subskill of real-time interaction is not intensively focused.

Research Question IV:

Table 5

Integration of Attitudes

Course syllabus	Attitudes				
	Curios. - other perspectives	Curios.- other cul.	Openness to cul.engagement	Openness to the unfam.culture	Openness to unfam.com. rules
GE LOs	-	-	-	-	-

Table 5 (Continued)

Course syllabus	Attitudes				
	Curios. - other perspectives	Curios.- other cul.	Openness to cul.engagement	Openness to the unfam.culture	Openness to unfam.com. rules
CLOs	-	-	-	-	-
Course Description	-	-	-	-	-
Teaching Plan	-	-	-	-	-
Evaluation	-	-	-	-	-

Based on Table 5, the ICC component, attitudes, was not integrated into any of the General English courses in either the former or revised curricula. This reflects an important oversight in preparing students to develop attitudes that are ready for communication in a multicultural setting.

Research Question V:

Table 6

Integration of Critical Cultural Awareness

Course syllabus	Critical Cultural Awareness		
	Interpretation of cultural values	Reasoning & evaluation	Negotiation in intercultural exchanges
GE LOs	GE2	-	GE1, GE2, GE3, GE4
CLOs	-	-	-
Course Description	GE2	-	-
Teaching Plan	-	-	-
Evaluation	-	-	-

Based on Table 6, it was revealed that critical cultural awareness is integrated only into the English courses within the former curriculum. The first sub-component, interpretation of cultural values, is reflected in the General Education Learning Outcome of GE2, which states that students will be able to explain the values and culture of another country obtained through daily life experiences. The second sub-component, reasoning and evaluation, was not found in any courses. The final sub-component, negotiation in intercultural exchange, was identified in the General Education Learning Outcome that all four courses are responsible for, which states that students must be aware of their own and others' values and cultures to negotiate a mutual

understanding in daily communication. It is concluded that critical cultural awareness is integrated into all four courses of the former curriculum, but not in the revised curriculum.

Discussion and Classroom Implications

1. The absence of Thai culture and Global Perceptions towards it

Based on the findings, cultural knowledge was integrated into both curricula; however, many important subcomponents of cultural knowledge, which will offer opportunities for students to learn about perceptions of people of another country towards Thailand, such as Thai history, Thai geography, institutions in Thailand, and connectivity between Thailand and other countries, are missing. The lack of these subcomponents of cultural knowledge may lead to Thai students' unawareness of biases or perceptions of their foreign interlocutors while communicating. Byram (2021) stated that “knowledge...is relational...” (p. 64), which means that one will obtain knowledge about other countries clearly if they can relate them to their own country. For example, when Thai students learn about history and values related to American and Japanese people in GE5, students will learn about how Thai people perceive American and Japanese history and values. However, it is also important for students to learn how American and Japanese people view Thai history and values. Peng (2021) found that an English teaching model that emphasizes knowledge related to Chinese societies, politics, history, geography, values, customs, and lifestyles could help Chinese students gain a deeper understanding of another country and their own country, leading students to “open and tolerant concepts and attitudes” (p. 188). In conclusion, an English curriculum should provide cultural knowledge about the relationship between students' home country and the country of their interlocutor. Such knowledge will help them recognize the perceptions and biases that their conversational partners from these two countries may hold when they communicate with them.

2. Integration of Skills of Discovery/Interaction: A Call for More Real-Time Interaction Practices in General English Education

Based on the findings, the real-time interaction skill, a subskill of discovery and interaction, was identified only in GE2 of the former curriculum and in GE5 and GE7 of the revised curriculum and was enhanced through a single type of activity—roleplay. It is questionable whether a role-play activity in these courses will be sufficient to support the development of real-time interaction skills among students. These findings suggest that neither curriculum places sufficient emphasis on real-time interaction. This is similar to what students reported in Phongsirikul and Thongrin's (2019) study, that real conversations with foreigners or interlocutors from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds were needed more in their English classes. To ensure that students are equipped with real-time interaction skills, an instructor may employ various types of learning activities that offer students opportunities to apply their knowledge, skills, and attitudes in real-time interactions, either in class or outside, face-to-face or online, so students can validate the cultural knowledge they have learned in class and apply it in real-life situations.

3. A Lack of Integration of Attitude

Based on findings, attitude is the only ICC component that was not integrated into any courses of either curriculum. This finding aligns with a study by Boonteerarak, Thepud, and Wattanakul (2022), which indicated that instructors of General English courses often overlook intercultural attitudes. When students' attitudes are not addressed in class, they may not recognize the importance of intercultural communicative competence, as reported in Phongsirikul and Thongrin's study (2019), where some students raised questions such as "why do we have to learn about culture?" (p. 94). Based on Byram (2021), an objective of teaching IC is to increase student interest in discovering and interacting with people from other cultural perspectives, which will consequently improve student attitudes to new cultures. Given a situation where the enforcement of student attitudes is absent from both curricula of General English Education, students may question the necessity of integrating other components of IC into the English courses they study. As a result, IC knowledge or skills acquired through the courses may not remain with students for long, as they do not recognize their importance. Therefore, it is suggested that instructors incorporate the development of attitudes, such as questioning the values and cultural practices of people from other cultures, into their courses.

Conclusion

The present study aims to explore the integration of intercultural competence in English for GE courses at a Thai university through the analysis of 8 course syllabi. The findings reported that all components of the IC were integrated into the two curricula, except for the attitudes component. Findings call for the integration of Thai culture and global perceptions of Thai culture, as well as intercultural attitudes, into English for General Education. At the same time, teaching and learning activities that enhance real-time interaction skills should be incorporated into courses.

Recommendations

Future research may focus on a comparative study of English education in Thailand and other countries with similar contexts for English usage, such as Vietnam and China, as these countries and Thailand all aim to preserve their national cultures while developing students to become global citizens simultaneously. Specifically, it would be interesting to explore how IC components are enhanced in these countries and to examine teachers' and students' perceptions towards their intercultural communication pedagogical approach. Such studies will offer insights into teaching English for intercultural communication, including the challenges faced, potential solutions, best practices, and the English education policies of other countries.

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