JEL Journal of English Language and Linguistics
Vol. 7 No. 3 (September–December) 2026
ISSN:2730-2431 (Print)
ISSN:2821-952x (Online)




# Unmasking the Performed Self: Anticipatory Anxiety and Direct Communication among Thai Learners in High-Stakes Business Contexts

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**APA Citation:**
Belardo, J. M., Noipa, J., Chulakum, P., Jinaseng, K., & Siriwattanakarn, S. (2026). Unmasking the performed self: Anticipatory anxiety and direct communication among Thai learners in high-stakes business contexts. *Journal of English Language and Linguistics, 7*(3), 414-434. https://doi.org/10.62819/jel.2026.2447

**Received:** June 4, 2026
**Revised:** November 4, 2026
**Accepted:** November 8, 2026

## Abstract

Cross-cultural competence in global business extends beyond grammatical proficiency to encompass the negotiation of deeply socialized psychological and identity-based pressures that are not adequately addressed in second language pragmatics research. This multiple-case study examines how six Thai business English learners in Isaan, Northeast Thailand, navigate high-stakes corporate simulations by exploring three dimensions: their baseline perceptions of direct communication, the nature and directionality of their anticipatory anxiety, and the adaptive linguistic strategies used to balance competing relational and professional demands. Using baseline interviews, an oral discourse completion task, and immediate retrospective interviews, a hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis revealed four patterns. Participants intellectually endorsed low-context directness yet experienced its enactment as a forced identity performance. Anticipatory anxiety was most acute in lateral peer interactions rather than upward communication, challenging classical politeness theory. Observable disruptions, such as silence, syntactic fracture, and code-switching, align with an interpretation of processing pressure under affective load, though language difficulties cannot be entirely ruled out. Most learners constructed hybrid communicative strategies balancing transactional clarity with relational face, indicating emergent intercultural competence. The study introduces the Phu Yai Effect, a proposed culturally specific construct capturing communicative suppression under Thai hierarchical framing that

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requires further empirical investigation. Findings challenge deficit-oriented pragmatic models and call for pedagogy that foregrounds cultural identity negotiation as a trainable competence.

**Keywords:** anticipatory anxiety, business English, face-negotiation theory, high-context communication, intercultural competence

## Introduction

Communicative effectiveness across cultural boundaries cannot be reduced to a question of grammatical knowledge. Thomas (2006) established that lexical and structural proficiency do not automatically translate into interactional competence in contexts where divergent cultural frameworks govern meaning-making. Deardorff (2006) extended this insight by arguing that genuine intercultural competence requires cognitive flexibility, in other words, the capacity to shift interpretive frames while simultaneously regulating the affective disruption that cross-cultural encounters produce. Yet the affective dimension of this process, how it feels to enact a culturally dissonant communicative identity in real time, remains poorly mapped in the second language pragmatics literature.

The structural tension between high-context and low-context communicative systems (Hall, 1976) creates particular difficulty for professionals who must move between them. High-context interaction values implicit, relationally embedded cues and shared social knowledge; low-context interaction values propositionally explicit, transactionally direct expression. Contemporary research into Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) underscores that professional communication in these globalized settings is not a static body of linguistic knowledge, but rather a dynamic practice where intercultural meaning is constantly negotiated in real time (Hofweber & Jaworska, 2022; Jenkins et al., 2017; Kaur & Birlik, 2021). The Thai professional in Western corporate settings is expected to deploy not only a different linguistic code but to perform a radically different interactional self that regularly breaches deeply socialized norms of relational harmony and hierarchical deference (Mahayussnan, 2021). Sriussadaporn (2006) found that in Thai multinational settings this difference leads to systematic cross-cultural misunderstanding: local employees' highly mitigated language in delivering bad news is routinely interpreted by Western counterparts as evasiveness or professional unreliability.

Thailand, and particularly the Isaan region of Northeast Thailand, provides a compelling site for investigating this tension. Isaan communicative culture is characterized by strong collectivist norms, pronounced hierarchical sensitivity, and community-based relational logic that supports high-context interactional norms (Mahayussnan, 2021). Students and early-career professionals from this regional context enter international business interactions carrying communicative orientations forged by years of socialization into face-sensitive, hierarchy-aware relational practices. Requiring them to perform explicit Western directness is not merely a pragmatic

challenge but a threat to self-concept and to the relational fabric of their professional identities. In corporate practice, this unmitigated identity threat causes observable interactional hesitation that Western evaluators frequently misdiagnose as linguistic deficiency, ultimately resulting in biased performance appraisals and misguided organizational training initiatives (Sriussadaporn, 2006).
A significant research problem persists because the empirical literature on cross-cultural pragmatic failure emphasizes almost entirely on external surface-level errors, while ignoring the invisible affective load that causes these communicative breakdowns (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Thomas, 2006). The internal cognitive and affective processes that produce those surface features remain comparatively underexplored. When a learner socialized in a high-context, face-sensitive environment is required to issue an unmitigated corporate directive, the resulting psychological friction involves a rapid, largely unconscious metacognitive calculation: the professional mandate for clarity must be weighed against a deeply internalized moral imperative to protect the interlocutor's social face. Festinger's (1957) concept of cognitive dissonance captures the phenomenology of this conflict, while Molinsky's (2013) account of the subjective emotional labor of cross-cultural code-switching clarifies why the cost of that conflict so rarely appears in observational data. The neuropsychological substrate is explored through Baddeley's (2003) working memory model. Competing demands on attentional resources present a plausible explanation for the degraded quality of linguistic production, which may operate alongside lexical or grammatical competence rather than entirely independent of it.

This study addresses these specific practical misdiagnoses and theoretical oversights by examining the cognitive and affective dimensions of direct communication performance among six Thai business English learners at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan. The central research question is, "How do Thai business English learners in Isaan perceive and experience direct communication in high-stakes business contexts, and what cognitive and psychological processes shape their performance?" This study consists of the three following objectives: 1) to map learners' baseline perceptions of and attitudes toward directness in professional interaction, 2) to characterize the nature, sources, and directionality of their anticipatory anxiety, and 3) to analyze the adaptive linguistic strategies through which learners negotiate competing cultural and professional demands. Beyond its empirical contribution, this study argues that observable interactional hesitation in these six Thai business English learners constitutes a culturally reasoned response to genuine social threat, offering a reframing with potential implications for curriculum design and pedagogical practice (Baker, 2012).

## Literature Review

To understand the internal tension that Thai learners experienced, it is necessary to synthesize structural, relational, and affective frameworks rather than treating them in isolation. The intersection of high-context communication norms (Hall, 1976), relational face-preservation imperatives (Ting-Toomey, 2005), and working memory limitations under affective load

(Baddeley, 2003) collectively explains why direct professional communication can cause profound interactional hesitation instead of mere pragmatic error.

*1. High-Context and Low-Context Communication Theory*

Hall's (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context communication remains the foundational structural framework for cross-cultural business communication research, despite criticisms of its relative lack of empirical operationalization (Cardon, 2008; Hua, 2014). In high-context systems, meaning is distributed across relational context, shared social knowledge, and implicit interactional cues; speakers rely on interlocutors to decode pragmatic intent without verbal specification. In low-context systems, meaning is located in the propositional content of the utterance, with a preference for clarity of transaction and direct expression of meaning. Thai communicative practice is prototypically high-context: relational harmony, hierarchical deference, and face-preservation logic take priority over propositional completeness (Sriussadaporn, 2006).
The practical consequences of this structural divergence for international business are well documented. Thai professionals embedded in low-context corporate environments are expected to produce explicit feedback, voice disagreement, and issue direct instructions, which, within the Thai socialized communicative system, carry significant face-threatening weight. Where this difference is not viewed as cultural, the reason is mostly attributed to evasiveness or professional incompetence of the individual (Mahayussnan, 2021). The communicative competence literature has increasingly called for frameworks that treat such divergences as systemic rather than individual (Baker, 2012; Canagarajah, 2013), but empirical work documenting the internal experience of learners navigating this gap remains limited.

*2. Face-Negotiation Theory*

Ting-Toomey's (1988, 2005) face-negotiation theory provides a dynamic relational framework for understanding how culturally embedded self-image concerns modulate interactional behavior under conditions of social threat. The theory holds that all communicators are motivated by face concerns, the desire to sustain their own and their interlocutor's social identity, but that the tone, style, and strategic execution of facework are culturally specific. In high-context, collectivist communities like Thailand, maintaining mutual face is not merely a social preference but a constitutive feature of relational conduct; performing face-threatening acts such as direct refusal, unmitigated criticism, or explicit disagreement risks not only social awkwardness but the relational fabric itself.

For Thai learners in high-stakes business simulations, the demand to enact direct communicative acts therefore poses a compound threat: it requires performing behaviors that violate internalized norms of relational conduct while simultaneously implicating the learner's sense of social and moral self. This observation aligns with Molinsky's (2013) argument that the emotional labor associated with culturally dissonant behavior is chronically underestimated by observational

assessment. This resonates with recent findings on identity negotiation in cross-cultural professional contexts, which suggest that individuals must actively navigate and reconcile the tension between their authentic cultural identities and the rigid behavioral expectations of global workplaces (Nigar et al., 2026). When viewed through the lens of face-negotiation theory, the mitigation strategies, hedging, and avoidance documented in this study are repositioned as evidence of sophisticated relational intelligence rather than pragmatic failure. However, while face-negotiation theory helps to explain the interpersonal relational stakes of these interactions, the exact directionality and level of this face threat are essentially mediated through the macro-structural forces of power distance and collectivism, requiring a combined analytical approach to accurately identify learner anxiety correctly. (Hofstede, 2001).

*3. Cultural Dimensions Theory and the Phu Yai Effect*

Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions model supplies a complementary macro-structural account of the forces shaping communicative behavior. Two dimensions are centrally relevant: power distance, which captures the degree to which less powerful community members accept and expect unequal distribution of power; and individualism–collectivism, which indexes the relative primacy of in-group harmony over individual assertion. High power distance cultures produce communicative environments in which questioning a superior, speaking out of turn, or foregrounding one's individual opinion in the presence of authority violates deep moral codes. Collectivist socialization reinforces this by embedding a communicative logic in which relational cohesion constitutes a higher-order value than propositional accuracy or transactional efficiency.
While Hofstede's dimensions provide a useful macro-structural lens, they risk obscuring important within-culture variability and the dynamic, context-sensitive nature of communicative behavior (McSweeney, 2002). The present study both confirms and complicates the Hofstedian framework. It supports the notion that socialization in high power distance leads to observable communicative suppression in upward-directed interactions. This complicates the framework by showing that collectivist lateral harmony concerns can, in certain interactional arrangements, generate more anxiety than hierarchical deference, a finding that runs counter to the assumption of upward communication as the dominant primary source of face-related anxiety in high power distance cultures.

The study introduces the Phu Yai Effect as a culturally specific extension of the power distance dimension. Phu Yai, the Thai term for a person of social or institutional authority, anchors a construct that captures the distinct mechanism through which Thai hierarchical framing produces communicative suppression. The term describes more than stylistic accommodation, positing a plausible cognitive burden and observable interactional disruption under conditions of perceived authority. This construct builds on the broader literature on authority-induced communicative inhibition (Keltner et al., 2003) while specifying the culturally particular form that inhibition takes in Thai relational contexts.

*4. Anticipatory Anxiety and Working Memory in Cross-Cultural Interaction*

The relationship between anxiety and second language performance has been extensively theorized (Horwitz, 2010; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), but most of this work has treated anxiety as a trait-like individual variable rather than as a situationally induced cognitive state shaped by cultural identity threat. Baddeley's (2003) working memory model provides the neuropsychological basis for understanding how affective disruption degrades linguistic production: the central executive, which coordinates attentional resources, is a limited-capacity system. When the cognitive demands of linguistic formulation compete with the simultaneous demands of social risk assessment and cultural identity management, processing efficiency predictably declines. Recent empirical studies on L2 pragmatics further demonstrate that anxiety and affective variables significantly moderate a learner's ability to retrieve and execute pragmatic strategies, confirming that heightened emotional load directly constricts working memory capacity during high-stakes communicative tasks (Taguchi, 2019, Zhang et al., 2024).

Anticipatory anxiety, which can be described as an anxiety experienced in advance of a threatening event rather than during it (Barlow, 2002), is particularly relevant in this context because it shapes learner behavior before a communicative act is executed, influencing planning, word choice, and the decision to speak or remain silent. The literature on identity-based communicative anxiety (Norton, 2013; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) has established that this form of anxiety is experienced most acutely not as fear of linguistic failure but as fear of self-betrayal, which is the sense that performing a culturally dissonant communicative persona violates one's authentic self. The present study examines this phenomenon empirically in a business English context, a setting that has received less attention in the identity-and-anxiety literature than classroom or social interaction.

## Research Objectives

1. To examine Thai business English learners' baseline perceptions of and attitudes toward direct communication in high-stakes professional contexts
2. To identify the nature, sources, and directionality of anticipatory anxiety experienced by Thai business English learners when performing face-threatening communicative acts in simulated corporate interactions
3. To analyze the adaptive linguistic strategies employed by Thai business English learners in negotiating competing high-context relational norms and low-context professional communicative demands

## Methodology

*1. Research Design*

The phenomena under investigation, learners' subjective cognitive and affective experiences of cross-cultural communicative performance, resist quantification and require interpretive depth

rather than statistical generalizability. A qualitative multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018) was adopted, treating each participant as a bounded analytical unit within a shared contextual frame. The multiple-case structure enables systematic cross-case comparison while preserving the contextual specificity essential to interpretive inquiry; its logic is analytical generalization rather than statistical inference (Yin, 2018). The selection of qualitative methodology reflects not a limitation of the study but a deliberate epistemological alignment with the research questions, which concern processes of meaning-making, identity performance, and affective regulation that cannot be adequately captured through survey instruments or experimental designs.

*2. Participants and Sampling*

The study was conducted on 6 undergraduate students studying at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan. To capture the range of communicative confidence, purposive maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to provide a thorough analytical description of the learner population. At the start of the academic term, participants were identified using a pre-screening questionnaire, which measured self-reported confidence in English-medium business communication in five standardized scenarios. The respondents were categorized into high, medium and low confidence groups and two participants were selected from each group. The sample therefore spanned the entire spectrum of self-assessed communicative readiness. The stratification strategy was explicitly devised to avoid analytical homogenization and to maximize the conceptual range of affective and strategic responses captured.

Theoretical saturation was assessed following each phase of data collection by evaluating whether new cases contributed additional conceptual content to the developing thematic framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). No substantially new themes emerged after the fifth case; the sixth case served as confirmatory. The sample size of six is consistent with the methodological norms of qualitative multiple-case inquiry in applied linguistics, where depth of contextual engagement typically takes precedence over breadth (Duff, 2008). All participants were recruited within the Isaan regional context, ensuring cultural homogeneity with respect to the high-context communicative norms central to this study.

*3. Data Collection*

Data collection was conducted according to a three-phase protocol designed to elicit both spontaneous communicative performance and deep metacognitive reflection.

*3.1 Phase 1: Baseline Interviews*

In the first interview, participants were asked about their language learning history and their attitudes toward other cultures were assessed. The language learning history element established developmental trajectories and identified formative experiences that contributed to current communicative confidence. Baseline cultural attitudes were assessed through targeted questions

on implicit beliefs regarding hierarchy, relational harmony, and face-saving norms, emphasizing kreng jai, the Thai cultural requirement to avoid burdening or inconveniencing others. This baseline mapping established the comparative frame against which the psychological tensions that emerged in subsequent phases could be measured.

### *3.2 Phase 2: Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT)*

Participants went through a sequence of high-stakes business simulations intended to generate progressively more intense face-threatening situations along the vertical and horizontal axes of relationship. Scenarios included disagreeing with a peer about a client's dietary restriction, challenging a supervisor's operational decision, and delivering corrective feedback to an intern regarding written errors. Scenario design was guided by Brown and Levinson's (1987) account of face-threatening act severity, with particular attention to the interaction between relative power, social distance, and imposition. The ODCT format was selected over role-play to minimize the performative distancing that role-play can introduce; participants were instructed to respond as themselves, in their own professional capacity, to a real-time interlocutor. To systematically assess communicative performance, the ODCT audio recordings were evaluated utilizing a targeted pragmatic rating protocol that isolated specific variables of task fulfillment, mitigation density, and interactional breakdown.

### *3.3 Phase 3: Immediate Retrospective Interviews (IRI)*

Immediately following each discourse task, participants were asked to reflect on their performance, account for specific vocabulary choices and observable hesitations, and explain any hedging or politeness strategies employed. The methodological rationale for the IRI protocol is temporal: immediate retrospection provides access to raw metacognitive traces before the natural decay processes that alter episodic memory over even short delays (Gass & Mackey, 2000). Responses were audio-recorded and, together with the ODCT recordings, transcribed verbatim.

## *4. Data Analysis*

All transcribed data were evaluated using a hybrid thematic analysis approach that integrated data-driven inductive coding with a theory-guided deductive framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Initial coding was conducted independently by two members of the research team to establish a reliable coding framework; inter-rater reliability was calculated by dividing the number of identical coding agreements by the total number of coding decisions, yielding a coefficient of 0.84 (Cohen's kappa = 0.79) to verify analytical consistency before finalizing the overarching codebook. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and by returning to the original transcripts, with a third team member adjudicating persistent disagreements.

Subsequently, researchers categorized the initial semantic codes into broader conceptual themes by combining inductive insights drawn directly from the transcripts with a deductive mapping

process against three existing theoretical paradigms: high-context/low-context theory, face-negotiation theory, and cultural dimensions theory. Specific analytical attention was directed to instances of working memory depletion and metacognitive overcorrection identifiable in the transcript record. Performance markers were used to measure the duration of unprompted silences, tracking instances of syntactic fracture, and calculating the frequency of unmitigated face-threatening propositions relative to the overall utterance length. This triangulated approach, combining task performance data and immediate retrospective self-report, ensured that thematic findings were grounded in participants' documented cognitive and affective experience during task performance rather than in retrospective reconstruction.

*5. Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent following a full briefing on the study's purpose, recording procedures, and the intended use of face-threatening simulation scenarios. Reflective debriefing sessions were conducted immediately following each ODCT to support participants in de-roling and to ensure that any culturally induced dissonance was adequately addressed before departure. Participant anonymity was maintained throughout transcription, analysis, and reporting; participants are referred to by the pseudonymous convention Student [initial letter] throughout.

## Results

The hybrid thematic analysis identified four overarching themes. While these macro-level themes capture the dataset as a whole, specific behavioral manifestations and adaptive patterns varied among the individual cases, highlighting the nuanced spectrum of learner responses. The themes map the logical progression of learners' experiences from initial attitudinal framing through anticipatory anxiety, active performance disruption, and, ultimately, strategic adaptation. Cross-case comparison was conducted iteratively throughout analysis to distinguish themes that reflected individual experience from those constituting shared structural patterns. All participant quotations cited below are drawn from verbatim IRI transcripts and are identified by participant code and session date. These four themes align directly with the study's objectives. Theme 1 addresses baseline perceptions of directness (Objective 1), Themes 2 and 3 capture the nature, directionality, and cognitive manifestations of anticipatory anxiety (Objective 2), and Theme 4 details the adaptive linguistic mitigation strategies (Objective 3).

*1. Theme 1: Baseline Perceptions and the "Knowing-Doing Gap"*

For all six participants in the baseline interviews, directness was a valued professional trait, associated with explicit communication in business contexts with operational clarity, transactional efficiency, and ethical honesty; for instance, students consistently cited the need to prevent costly logistical mistakes and maintain workflow efficiency as primary reasons for endorsing explicit

instructions. This is a clear conceptual endorsement of low-context communicative norms and is in line with Kankaanranta and Planken's (2010) finding that non-native speakers in international business foreground functional clarity as the main marker of communicative competence. Student J described an effective business interaction as "both parties understand and agree, and both feel comfortable" (personal communication, February 13, 2026), establishing a direct link between transactional clarity and relational satisfaction.

But this endorsement was unstable, as the interview questions moved from conceptual discussion to behavioral self-projection. Four of the six participants were highly resistant to practicing the direct professional persona, stating that it was inauthentic, relationally unsafe, or socially transgressive, as evidenced by recurring interview statements expressing a deep fear of appearing arrogant or permanently damaging workplace friendships. Student A introduced the notion of the "Me Plus" persona, a professional identity enacted in high-stakes scenarios that felt externally imposed rather than genuinely inhabited: "I have to be a different person when I speak English for work" (personal communication, February 13, 2026). This framing aligns with Molinsky's (2013) discussion of code-switching as identity performance that engenders strain, even in the absence of obvious interpersonal risk. Student P articulated the same gap from a different angle: despite recognizing the professional necessity of direct feedback, they described a persistent inhibitory force rooted in the fear of "hurting their feelings" (personal communication, February 13, 2026). The gap between intellectual endorsement and behavioral enactment that characterizes all four cases is best understood not as ignorance of communicative norms but as a failure of norm override under conditions of identity threat.

**Table 1**

*Interactional Preferences and Adaptive Strategies in Business Simulations*

| Theme | Core Concept | Key Findings and Participant Behaviors |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Baseline Perceptions and the "Knowing-Doing Gap" | Divergence between conceptual endorsement and behavioral enactment | All six learners endorsed explicit directness as professionally valuable, yet four articulated the performed self as an inauthentic "Me Plus" persona. Relational face concerns consistently override intellectual endorsement when behavioral execution is required. |
| 2. Anticipatory Anxiety and the Fear of Transgression | Pre-performance anxiety rooted in anticipated relational harm, not linguistic uncertainty | Face-threatening tasks activate morally weighted fears of social rupture. Crucially, lateral peer interactions provoked greater anxiety than upward-directed communication for three participants, complicating classical politeness theory predictions. |

**Table 1 (Continued)**

| Theme | Core Concept | Key Findings and Participant Behaviors |
|---|---|---|
| 3. Cognitive Overload and Observable Performance Effects | Working memory depletion manifest as visible interactional disruption | Dual processing demands of linguistic formulation and social risk calculation exhaust attentional resources. Lower-confidence learners exhibit paralysis or unplanned code-switching; higher-confidence learners may hyper-correct toward unfiltered bluntness. |
| 4. Strategic Mitigation and Adaptive Intercultural Competence | Deliberate construction of hybrid communicative frameworks | Four of six learners employed epistemic hedging, collaborative reframing, and sandwich feedback to navigate competing communicative demands. These strategies represent emergent intercultural competence rather than pragmatic failure. |

*2. Theme 2: Anticipatory Anxiety and the Fear of Transgression*

All participants experienced anticipatory anxiety prior to engaging in simulation tasks involving direct disagreement or corrective feedback. Critically, this pre-performance anxiety was organized around anticipated relational consequences rather than linguistic uncertainty, a distinction with significant implications for how communicative anxiety in this population should be theorized and addressed. Student F grounded their anticipatory anxiety in a specific prior experience in which direct feedback had caused a peer to cry, creating a durable affective association between directness and relational rupture that activated reliably in advance of each face-threatening scenario (personal communication, February 13, 2026). The affective memory of that event constituted a standing anticipatory signal that overrode conscious strategic calculation.

Particularly notable was the finding that the directionality of anxiety did not follow the pattern predicted by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which would foreground upward face-threatening acts as most anxiety-provoking given the interaction between relative power and face-threat severity. Three participants reported greater anticipatory anxiety in lateral peer interactions, such as confronting a colleague about a client's dietary restrictions, than in upward-directed communication, such as challenging a manager's operational decision. It must be acknowledged that these scenarios differed in specific propositional content and situational stakes as well as hierarchical structure, a limitation that may have independently influenced the severity of the perceived face threat. Student J was more concerned about damaging peer relationships than about addressing a superior, reasoning that "the boss would understand me more because they have been in that position for a long time" (personal communication, February 13, 2026). Student N reported heightened psychological pressure specifically when anticipating evaluation by Thai interlocutors compared to foreign counterparts, suggesting that cultural proximity amplifies rather than mitigates perceived transgression risk. These patterns complicate the dominant directional

assumptions of politeness theory and suggest that, in collectivist settings, lateral harmony maintenance may constitute a more salient anxiety trigger than hierarchical deference in certain interactional configurations, a finding that has direct implications for how face-threat severity is calculated in high-context professional contexts.

*3. Theme 3: Cognitive Overload and Observable Performance Effects*

During the active simulation phase, all six participants exhibited observable performance disruptions, though the qualitative character of those disruptions varied systematically by communicative confidence level. Lower-confidence participants who encountered the concurrent demands of linguistic production and real-time social risk assessment found those demands challenging, suggesting potential working memory depletion and interactional breakdown. Transcript analysis revealed that the most diagnostically significant performance markers were not lexical gaps but extended pauses, within-utterance syntactic fracture, and unplanned code-switching into Thai, each appearing at greatest density in the most face-threatening task segments. Student F illustrates this pattern with particular clarity. When asked to provide corrective feedback to a colleague, the participant produced a long pause before abandoning the English-medium task entirely, explaining that they could "only come up with a safe answer in Thai" (personal communication, February 13, 2026). Although the participant demonstrably possessed the target vocabulary, the code-switch supports an interpretation of processing pressure related to simultaneously managing linguistic formulation and the social weight of the face-threatening act, rather than solely indicating lexical unavailability. Student A displayed a structurally analogous pattern when attempting to address a supervisor's logistical error: repeated syntactic restarts and unfinished utterances indexed a cognitive cost attributable to hierarchical anxiety rather than vocabulary limitation. These findings are consistent with Baddeley's (2003) model of working memory depletion under affective load and with Molinsky's (2013) account of the subjective effort cost of cross-cultural code-switching.

Higher-confidence participants displayed a markedly different response to cognitive overload, one that was initially less visible but ultimately more pragmatically consequential. Rather than withdrawing, two participants resolved the internal conflict by suppressing all relational softening mechanisms, producing blunt output that overshot low-context norms rather than approximating them. Student N's response to a peer's absence request with, "However it was your dad die, or your birthday, I don't care" (personal communication, February 13, 2026), represents not a genuine pragmatic alignment with low-context norms but an overcompensatory performance executed under conditions of acute cognitive stress. The absence of any culturally embedded mitigation from a participant who had demonstrated sophisticated face-awareness in baseline interviews indicates a dissociation between pragmatic knowledge and pragmatic execution under pressure, a finding consistent with Skehan's (1998) trade-off model of attentional resources in task-based language performance.

*4. Theme 4: Strategic Mitigation and Adaptive Intercultural Competence*

Despite the cognitive and affective pressures documented in Themes 2 and 3, most participants demonstrated significant adaptive intercultural competence during the simulation tasks, successfully constructing functional communicative middle grounds that honored both the transactional demands of the low-context frame and the relational imperatives of the high-context self. Four of six participants employed identifiable mitigation strategies that reduced the face-threatening force of direct communicative acts without eliminating informational content, predominantly utilizing softening phrases, collaborative questioning, and relational buffering to maintain the interpersonal connection while still delivering the necessary professional critique.
The most frequently occurring strategy was epistemic hedging. Markers such as "I think," "maybe," and "it seems" were systematically employed to recast propositionally direct assertions as tentative propositions, reducing illocutionary force but preserving referential content (House & Kasper, 1981). When correcting a logistical error that was the fault of a superior, student C asked the correction as a future collaborative request: "Is it possible you send ten boxes for me tomorrow morning?" (personal communication, 13 February 2026). This reformulation shifts the frame from blame to working on the problem together. This shift saves face for the other speaker and also satisfies the transactional goal. Student P employed a complementary strategy, using a direct correction alongside an immediate compensatory relational gesture, "Or you can have another discount for us for this mistake" (personal communication, February 13, 2026), working in both ways simultaneously, acknowledging the interactional disruption and reaffirming relational goodwill.

At the horizontal relational level, several participants independently deployed the feedback sandwich technique, embedding corrective content within framing layers of positive reinforcement. Student J opened feedback to an intern with an explicit affirmation ("I think your work is great") before delivering the correction ("but you should examine a bit before send it to client"), a structural choice that softens the face threat without obscuring the corrective intent (personal communication, February 13, 2026). Student P extended this logic further by pairing the critique with actionable scaffolding, a specific remedial resource, thereby converting the potentially face-threatening correction into a relational investment. These strategies collectively demonstrate that the learners in this study were not failing to meet low-context communicative norms but were actively constructing hybrid interactional frames capable of honoring competing communicative imperatives. This finding is consistent with Canagarajah's (2013) account of translingual practice as a site of creative and strategic negotiation rather than deficit.

## Discussion

*1. Cognitive Friction as Cultural Adaptation*

The most consequential theoretical contribution of the present findings is the reframing of interactional hesitation as a form of cognitive adaptation to structural incompatibility rather than as a symptom of linguistic deficit. The latencies, syntactic disruptions, and code-switching

episodes documented across participants support an interpretation of processing pressure generated when high-context communicative habits must be suppressed in real time to produce low-context output, though language difficulties may still play a role. This interpretation is consistent with Baddeley's (2003) account of working memory capacity under affective load and with findings from the language-switching literature demonstrating that code-switching between structurally and pragmatically distant systems carries measurable executive function costs (Green, 1998). This finding directly challenges traditional interlanguage pragmatics frameworks that associate communicative delay with linguistic deficit, extending Taguchi's (2015) empirical work by demonstrating that working memory depletion under affective load actively suppresses a learner's otherwise available pragmatic repertoire.

The pedagogical implications of this reframing are substantial. If classroom hesitation in Thai business English learners is evaluated through an implicit deficit lens, as evidence of insufficient target language exposure or inadequate pragmatic knowledge, the appropriate instructional response is drill and correction. If it is understood as evidence of cognitive friction under cultural identity threat, this implies a need for educators to consider scaffolded affective and metacognitive support as an implication for practice. Rather than utilizing standard communicative drills, pedagogical frameworks must incorporate targeted metacognitive interventions, such as simulated stress appraisals and delayed-response protocols, allowing learners to explicitly practice regulating the affective load that disrupts their pragmatic execution (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

*2. The Emotional Topology of Face Threat*

Face-negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988, 2005) deepens the cognitive friction account by foregrounding the emotional stakes of face-threatening act performance. The evidence from this study indicates that high-stakes communicative tasks in Thai business English learning contexts are experienced not as merely awkward professional challenges but as genuine threats to relational safety carrying significant moral weight. The mitigation strategies documented in Theme 4 are consequently not best understood as pragmatic compromises but as evidence of sophisticated emotional and relational work, which is the active labor of maintaining social integrity under conditions designed to destabilize it.

The risk, as the present data also demonstrate, is that this relational intelligence is systematically invisible to low-context interlocutors. Student C's transformation of a direct correction into a polite future request and Student J's deployment of the feedback sandwich may be read in Western corporate settings as evasiveness or indirectness rather than as evidence of calibrated relational skill. The practical stakes of this misreading are not trivial: systematic miscategorization of sophisticated face-work as pragmatic incompetence reproduces the very evaluative bias that disadvantages Thai professionals in international business communication training and assessment.

*3. The Modulating Role of Hierarchy and the Phu Yai Effect*

Hofstede's (2001) power distance dimension provides a structural account of the variation in anxiety intensity observed across interactional configurations in this study. Upward-directed communication, such as addressing superiors or challenging authority, activates the hierarchical suppression that high-power distance socialization produces, generating measurable communicative inhibition. The present data confirm this pattern, as illustrated by cases such as Student C's mitigated address of a supervisor's logistical error. The Phu Yai Effect, as introduced in this study, proposes a mechanism through which this inhibition operates: it is not simply stylistic accommodation, as existing accounts of power distance suggest, but a potentially disruptive phenomenon hypothesized to generate working memory load and observable interactional disruption. By conceptualizing this phenomenon as a measurable cognitive burden, the Phu Yai Effect extends Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson's (2003) approach-inhibition theory of power, demonstrating empirically that cultural authority figures trigger a specific affective vigilance that depletes the attentional resources required for low-context linguistic formulation. Integrating recent cognitive-affective frameworks (Shadiev et al., 2024), this conceptualization affirms that power disparities in professional ecosystems do not just alter social politeness markers, but fundamentally disrupt the cognitive processing required for intercultural adaptation. The Phu Yai Effect thus extends the Hofstedian framework from a behavioral description to a cognitive-affective mechanism with implications for how authority-induced communicative suppression is studied in other high-context professional contexts.

The study simultaneously complicates the Hofstedian account by demonstrating that collectivist lateral harmony concerns can exceed hierarchical deference as a source of communicative anxiety in specific configurations. Student J's greater concern about peer relationships than about direct address of a superior challenges the assumption that hierarchical directionality determines anxiety intensity in high power distance cultures. This finding aligns with Triandis's (1995) argument that horizontal collectivism, or the care for the welfare of in-group equals, is a separate motivational force from the vertical deference represented by Hofstede's power distance measure. This implies that intercultural communication models for Thai contexts should include both dimensions.

*4. Behavioral Anomalies and the Limits of Cultural Models*

Student N's hyper-corrective response demonstrates the explanatory limits of cultural-level models when applied to individual behavior under cognitive stress. Hofstede's dimensions, while analytically powerful at the population level, provide no mechanism for predicting when culturally aligned behaviors will break down and be replaced by overcompensatory responses, a limitation that the cognitive load framework addresses more directly. Student N's suppression of all relational softening mechanisms is better understood as a strategic attempt to enact perceived low-context norms by eliminating cultural markers than as a genuine shift in pragmatic competence. The fact that this response was produced by one of the most communicatively confident participants in the study is theoretically significant: it demonstrates that communicative confidence

and calibrated pragmatic performance under cultural friction are not developmentally synchronized. Confidence reduces the inhibitory effects of anxiety but does not automatically produce culturally calibrated output; it may instead license a different kind of pragmatic failure.

*5. Integrative Synthesis*

The findings, taken together, support an integrative account of communicative hesitation in cross-cultural business interaction that identifies three simultaneous structural pressures: cognitive friction arising from the incompatibility of high-context and low-context interactional schemas; emotional risk arising from the perceived threat to mutual face; and hierarchical and collectivist constraint modulating the intensity of that risk in relation to interlocutor positioning (Mahayussnan, 2021). No single theoretical framework is sufficient to account for the full range of observed behavior; the Phu Yai Effect, introduced here as a culturally specific construct, represents an attempt to specify the interaction between these forces in the particular cultural ecology of Thai hierarchical interaction.

**Table 2**
*Synthesis of Discussion Findings: Cultural, Cognitive, and Affective Pressures*

| Discussion Focus | Theoretical Framework | Key Interpretive Insights |
|---|---|---|
| Cognitive Friction as Cultural Adaptation | High-Context vs. Low-Context Theory (Hall, 1976) | Performance disruptions, such as latency, syntactic fracture, code-switching, reflect the cognitive cost of overriding automated interactional schemas, not vocabulary gaps. The distinction reframes classroom hesitation as diagnostic information rather than remedial failure. |
| Emotional Topology of Face Threat | Face-Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988, 2005) | Directness threatens fundamental relational safety nets. Mitigation strategies represent emotionally reasoned tools for preserving mutual face not only as pragmatic hedges, and may be misread as evasiveness by low-context interlocutors. |
| Hierarchy and Collectivist Modulation | Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, 2001) | Upward communication triggers hierarchical mitigation (Phu Yai Effect); peer interactions activate collectivist harmony anxiety. Communicative suppression is relational and context-contingent, not unidirectional. |

**Table 2 (Continued)**

| Discussion Focus | Theoretical Framework | Key Interpretive Insights |
|---|---|---|
| Behavioral Anomalies and Cultural Model Limits | Overcompensation Strategies | Cognitive stress can drive confident learners to suppress all relational softening, producing bluntness that overshoots low-context norms. This hyper-correction reveals a dissociation between communicative confidence and calibrated pragmatic competence. |
| Theoretical Synthesis | Phu Yai Effect and Multi-Layered Cognitive Tension | No single framework is sufficient. Effective intercultural pedagogy must address the simultaneous interplay of cognitive load, emotional risk, and hierarchical constraint rather than targeting surface pragmatic form. |

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the interactional hesitation and communicative reluctance of the six Thai business English learners in high-stakes corporate simulations point toward processing pressure rather than solely linguistic deficiency. It reflects, instead, a systematic affective and cognitive response to cultural-communicative dissonance, a response that is rational, culturally coherent, and empirically documentable. The learners in this study conceptually endorsed the directness norms of low-context Western business interaction, but that endorsement collapsed under behavioral pressure, inhibited by deeply socialized face-preservation imperatives, hierarchical deference, and the collectivist relational logic of the Isaan regional context. Observable performance disruptions, such as code-switching, syntactic fracture, and extended silence, suggest potential markers of cognitive load under affective pressure, though they do not strictly rule out concurrent language difficulties. By repositioning cross-cultural hesitation as an adaptive cognitive process, this framework fundamentally challenges deficit-oriented pragmatic models and establishes a more equitable lens for evaluating high-context professionals operating within global corporate discourse.

## Recommendations

*1. Practical Implications*

The findings suggest that Business English instruction for Thai learners in high-context regional contexts might benefit from shifting away from prescriptive rehearsal of Western assertiveness norms as an implication for pedagogical practice. Scaffolded interventions should explicitly address the emotional labor and identity negotiation involved in cross-cultural code-switching. Acknowledging learners' adaptive mitigation strategies as sophisticated relational resources rather

than deficits produces communicatively flexible practitioners capable of participating authentically in global professional discourse (Canagarajah, 2013). Helping learners recognize and strategically manage the Phu Yai Effect constitutes a vital dimension of intercultural communicative competence training.

*2. Recommendations for Future Research*

Future studies need to break the geographic and demographic barriers of this initial localized environment to show broader applicability. Future research should study how learners in cosmopolitan cities cope with communicative dissonance and compare the groups with the regional Isaan population. Researchers can also use quantitative or mixed methods designs to increase the pool of participants and map the precise distributional patterns of interactional hesitation across various corporate settings.

Additionally, future research should implement longitudinal tracking models to accurately capture the developmental trajectory of intercultural communicative competence. Following cohorts as they transition from university settings into early-career professional roles will clarify whether the adaptive mitigation strategies solidify into permanent pragmatic assets. Observing these behavioral shifts over extended periods remains essential for distinguishing heightened situational coping mechanisms from durable cognitive adaptation.

A pressing imperative for applied linguistics involves the independent construct validation of the Phu Yai Effect across varied cultural ecologies. The operational definition advanced in this study frames authority-induced working memory load as a measurable catalyst for interactional breakdown, generating explicit predictions that demand rigorous experimental testing. Comparative investigations targeting high-context regions in East Asia or Latin America will actively refine the definitional parameters of this theoretical construct while assessing its global transferability.

Finally, future research should systematically translate the concept of cognitive-affective friction into actionable, context-sensitive pedagogical frameworks. Advancing this research agenda requires designing and evaluating intervention strategies that prioritize identity-respecting approaches over traditional deficit-based correction models. Testing the real-world efficacy of these targeted classroom interventions will directly benefit high-context communicators navigating rigid low-context professional mandates, thereby validating the practical utility of this paradigm shift.

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