

## The Challenges of Intercultural Communication Competence and the Use of English as Lingua Franca

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### Abstract

This study investigated the barriers Myanmar students faced in developing intercultural communication competence, with a focus on the role of English as a lingua franca in multicultural interactions. Using a mixed-methods approach-comprising surveys, interviews, and observations-the research identified both personal and systemic challenges, such as language proficiency, cultural misunderstandings, and limited exposure to diverse environments, which hindered students' intercultural skill development. Furthermore, the study examined how English, as a lingua franca, mediated communication across cultural boundaries, facilitating or complicating interactions depending on context and proficiency levels. The findings provided valuable insights for educational institutions and policy makers, highlighting the need for curricula and program designed to enhance intercultural communication skills. By addressing these barriers and leveraging English as a lingua franca effectively, the study offered actionable recommendations to support Myanmar students in thriving within multicultural and globalize setting.

**Keywords:** challenges, English as a lingua franca, intercultural communication competence, Myanmar students

### Introduction

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is increasingly essential in today's globalized society, especially within English Language Teaching (ELT) environments, where English often serves as a lingua franca. ICC involves the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries, understanding cultural nuances, and adapting communication styles

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accordingly. As students engage with English both in and outside the classroom, developing ICC becomes critical for their personal and professional interactions, particularly for those from linguistically and culturally distinct backgrounds like Myanmar (San & Htwe, 2023).

This study focused on the unique challenges Myanmar students encountered in developing ICC, especially in the context of using English as a lingua franca. For Myanmar students in international academic settings, barriers such as language proficiency issues and cultural misunderstandings can significantly impede effective communication (San & Htwe, 2023). This study aimed to address this gap by identifying these challenges and offering insights that educational institutions can use to develop targeted ICC programs, such as intercultural training workshops, language support tailored to various proficiency levels, and curriculum adjustments to incorporate cultural awareness components.

The use of English as a lingua franca introduces additional complexities, as students may face difficulties with diverse proficiency levels and cultural differences in communication styles. Specifically, in Myanmar's context, where English is increasingly used for educational and professional purposes, understanding these dynamics can help in crafting educational strategies that ease these language-related challenges (San & Htwe, 2023).

The potential contributions of this research are significant: insights from the study will help develop curricula that not only support language proficiency but also foster the cultural awareness needed to navigate diverse cultural landscapes successfully. By addressing these challenges through targeted educational interventions, this research will inform policies and practices that enable Myanmar students to become more adept at intercultural communication, equipping them for more meaningful and successful intercultural interactions.

## Literature Review

In examining Myanmar students' development of intercultural communication competence (ICC) using English as a lingua franca, this literature review highlights essential concepts and recent findings that frame the unique challenges and strategies relevant to their experiences. This literature review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of relevant theories, approaches, and findings that inform our study.

### *1. Intercultural Communication Theories and Approaches*

The field of intercultural communication is characterized by diverse perspectives on human behavior, research goals, cultural concepts, and methodologies (Antonello, 2023). Three main approaches have emerged over time, each offering unique insights into the challenges faced by Myanmar students in intercultural settings.

#### *1.1 The Social Science (Functionalist) Approach*

This approach, rooted in psychology and sociology, emerged in the 1980s. It posits that culture can be quantified and that human behavior in intercultural contexts is predictable (Panocová,

2020). For Myanmar students navigating intercultural environments, several theories within this approach are particularly relevant:

**Face Negotiation Theory:** Developed by Ting-Toomey, this theory explores how different cultures handle conflict and concerns about "face" or self-worth. The distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures in preserving face is particularly pertinent to Myanmar students, who may come from a more collectivistic background (Auwalu & Yunusa, 2015).

**Conversational Constraint Theory:** This theory explains how cultural differences influence conversational choices based on universal constraints such as clarity and consideration for others' feelings. Understanding these constraints can help Myanmar students navigate the nuances of intercultural communication (Auwalu & Yunusa, 2015).

**Communication Accommodation Theory:** This theory suggests that individuals adjust their communication style to accommodate others. For Myanmar students using English as a lingua franca, this theory provides insights into how they might adapt their communication strategies in intercultural contexts (Auwalu & Yunusa, 2015).

**Anxiety Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory:** William Gudykunst's theory emphasizes the importance of reducing anxiety and uncertainty in successful intercultural communication. This is particularly relevant for Myanmar students who may experience heightened anxiety in unfamiliar cultural and linguistic environments (Auwalu & Yunusa, 2015).

While these theories offer valuable insights, it's important to note their limitations. Critics argue that human communication is more dynamic and creative than these theories suggest, and that reality is not solely external but also shaped by individuals' internal perceptions (Baker, 2018).

### *1.2 The Interpretive Approach*

Gaining popularity in the late 1980s, this approach focuses on understanding the subjective meanings individuals assign to intercultural interactions. Unlike the social science perspective, the interpretive approach views culture as created and sustained through communication (Paynton & Hahn, 2024). This perspective is valuable for understanding how Myanmar students construct and negotiate their cultural identities through intercultural interactions and their use of English as a lingua franca. The interpretive approach employs qualitative methods such as ethnographic research and rhetorical analysis to examine communication within specific cultural groups. Some scholars have developed cultural frameworks like Afrocentricity and Asia centricity to analyze communication patterns in particular contexts (Auwalu & Yunusa, 2015). These frameworks could provide insights into the unique communication patterns of Myanmar students. While this approach offers deep insights into communication patterns within communities, it faces limitations in the scarcity of interpretivist studies on intercultural communication, particularly when researchers are outsiders to the communities they study (Auwalu & Yunusa, 2015).

### *1.3 The Critical Approach*

The critical approach examines power dynamics and social inequalities in intercultural communication, aiming to challenge dominant structures and advocate for social change (Fuchs, 2016). This perspective is crucial when considering the experiences of Myanmar students (which they can be from various ethnic backgrounds), who may face power imbalances and inequalities in intercultural academic settings (Aung, Barnes, Yip, & Saito, 2023). This approach focuses on macro contexts, such as political and social structures, that influence communication. It seeks to enact change in the lives of everyday communicators by examining power dynamics and empowering individuals to challenge oppressive structures. Critical scholars often use textual analysis of cultural products like media to understand their influence on shaping contemporary culture (Fuchs, 2016). While the critical approach offers valuable insights into power dynamics and historical context within intercultural interactions, it has limitations. Many critical studies tend to focus on media communication rather than face-to-face intercultural exchanges, which may limit their practical application to the experiences of Myanmar students (Auwalu & Yunusa, 2015).

### *2. The Role of Language in Intercultural Communication*

Language, encompassing both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, plays a foundational role in intercultural communication. For Myanmar students, language is not just a tool for communication but also a marker of personal identity, worldview, and social position (Jackson, 2014). The complex interplay between language and culture significantly influences how these students interact and perceive others in intercultural settings. Misunderstandings stemming from language and cultural differences can impede successful intercultural interactions. For Myanmar students, language barriers might be misconstrued as cultural barriers, highlighting the need for a thorough understanding of the linguistic aspects of intercultural communication (Ayu et al., 2022).

### *3. English as a Lingua Franca in Intercultural Communication*

The use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is particularly relevant to Myanmar students in intercultural academic settings. Baker (2015) defines ELF as inherently involving intercultural dynamics due to its use by speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For Myanmar students, ELF serves as a bridge for communication but also introduces unique challenges. The advent of ELF has significantly impacted intercultural communication, emphasizing the need for linguistic proficiency alongside cultural understanding and empathy. Myanmar students, as ELF users, may possess a unique understanding of the challenges faced by other non-native English speakers, allowing them to adjust their communication strategies effectively (Ke, 2012). Sifakis & Bayyurt (2019) highlight several strategies adopted by ELF users to enhance intercultural communication. These include the 'let-it-pass' approach, where minor misunderstandings are disregarded to maintain conversation flow, and accommodation strategies such as repetition and code-switching. Myanmar students may employ these strategies to navigate complex intercultural interactions and overcome linguistic challenges.

#### *4. Language Proficiency and Its Impact on Intercultural Communication*

English language proficiency (ELP) is a pivotal factor in fostering effective intercultural communication for Myanmar students, especially in multicultural academic settings. Proficiency in English not only improves clarity in communication but also enables students to navigate cultural subtleties more effectively. Research supports this link; for example, Zhang et al. (2012) emphasizes that strong language skills are essential for engaging in meaningful, context-aware interactions in diverse environments. Lin (2011) also highlights that interactions across cultural lines promote mutual learning and understanding, helping students break down social and environmental barriers. Such interactions provide Myanmar students with valuable opportunities to enhance both their language proficiency and intercultural competence.

Recent studies further underscore the importance of language in developing these skills. Win, Soe, and Tang (2022) found that Myanmar students who participate in interactive, communicative English teaching methods develop stronger cross-cultural communicative skills, which are crucial for success in multicultural academic environments. Their findings suggest that the interdependence of language and culture makes English proficiency a fundamental element in promoting intercultural understanding.

In addition, San and Htwe (2023) argue that simply sending students abroad is insufficient for building intercultural competence. They advocate for intentional pedagogical strategies—such as pre-departure intercultural training, reflective activities, and native-speaker interactions—which are critical for maximizing the benefits of study abroad. By incorporating these structured educational practices, Myanmar students can develop deeper cultural awareness and become more skilled in navigating diverse cultural landscapes, transforming study abroad into a holistic experience that promotes both linguistic and intercultural growth.

In conclusion, this literature review provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding the challenges faced by Myanmar students in developing intercultural communication competence and using English as a lingua franca. By integrating insights from various approaches to intercultural communication and considering the specific linguistic and cultural context of Myanmar students, this review sets the stage for a deeper exploration of their experiences and the development of targeted strategies to enhance their intercultural communication skills.

#### **Research Objectives**

1. To identify and analyze the key challenges faced by Myanmar students in developing intercultural communication competence
2. To explore the role of English as a lingua franca in facilitating intercultural communication contexts among Myanmar students

#### **Research Questions**

1. What are the specific challenges faced by Myanmar students in developing intercultural communication competence within an English lingua franca context?

2. How does English as a lingua franca facilitate intercultural communication dynamics and interactions among Myanmar students in multicultural academic settings?

## **Methodology**

### *1. Research Design*

The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection. For the quantitative aspect, surveys and structured questionnaires were designed to assess Myanmar students' self-evaluations of intercultural communication competence and experiences using English as a lingua franca. The survey questions focused on challenges, strategies, and comfort levels in cross-cultural interactions. All participants, transfer students from SCC, were confirmed to have at least B2 English proficiency (TOEFL), ensuring consistency in language skills.

For the qualitative part, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions provided deeper insights into students' personal experiences and challenges. These methods allowed participants to share specific examples and reflections on intercultural communication encounters in real-life settings.

The study used criterion sampling to select participants who had studied abroad or participated in intercultural exchange programs, ensuring the students had relevant experiences for the research. This approach helped provide a thorough understanding of the difficulties Myanmar students face in developing intercultural communication competence in English lingua franca contexts.

### *2. Population and Samples*

The study's population consisted of Myanmar university students who were studying various disciplines in Chiang Rai, Thailand, along with three experienced professors who taught these students. A total of 30 students were selected using a criterion sampling technique, which aligned with the research objectives by focusing on those who had studied abroad or participated in intercultural exchange programs. This sample size was chosen to balance the need for diverse perspectives with the practical considerations of data collection and analysis, ensuring that the study remains manageable while obtaining meaningful data. The inclusion of professors aimed to provide additional insights into educational strategies that fostered intercultural communication competence.

### *3. Instrument(s) and Procedures*

The researchers employed a comprehensive set of instruments to collect data for this study. The primary tool was a carefully designed survey questionnaire, distributed via Google Forms, which captured participants' demographics, language skills, cultural backgrounds, and intercultural communication experiences. This digital format allowed for efficient data collection and a broader reach, achieving a response rate of 92% (n=30). To delve deeper into individual experiences, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with students

(n=25) and professors (n=3), both individually and in group settings. These interviews, utilizing open-ended questions, provided rich qualitative data on the challenges and perceptions related to intercultural communication competence and the use of English as a lingua franca. Additionally, the researchers carried out systematic observations of students' engagement in intercultural communication across various settings, including classrooms and extracurricular activities, totaling 40 hours of observational data. This observational data offered valuable insights into real-world communication practices and cultural interactions.

The data collection process integrated multiple methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. Quantitative data was gathered through survey questionnaires and Google Forms, providing a broad overview of participant characteristics and experiences. The survey instrument demonstrated high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews, offering in-depth perspectives on individual experiences and perceptions. The inter-rater reliability for coding interview transcripts was strong Cohen's kappa = 0.82. Direct observations complemented these methods by providing real-time insights into students' intercultural communication practices in authentic settings.

To ensure data reliability, researchers used rigorous quality control measures. Validated instruments were tested for consistency and accuracy. Survey instrument test-retest reliability was high ( $r = 0.91$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) over a two-week interval. The reliability of the survey and interview responses was continually monitored to ensure comparable results under similar conditions. Validity prioritized through pilot testing (n=10) and expert review of instruments. Content validity index (CVI) for survey items was 0.89, indicating strong relevance. Researchers maintained strict consistency in administering all instruments. Systematic approach minimized biases and errors, enhancing integrity of collected data.

#### *4. Data Collection*

The data collection phase employed a structured approach using survey questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and direct observations. Surveys captured demographic and background information, while interviews provided in-depth qualitative insights into participants' intercultural experiences. Observations added a real-time dimension to the data by highlighting communication dynamics in natural settings. By standardizing data collection practices and ensuring methodological rigor, the researchers obtained reliable, representative data that reflects participants' intercultural communication experiences accurately.

To delve into deeper understanding of the research, the classroom observation was conducted in a diverse educational setting at Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, comprising 34 students, primarily of Myanmar descent, along with four Chinese students. The classroom was conventionally arranged, with approximately 60 seats oriented towards the front, where the whiteboard was situated. This structured environment provided a suitable context for examining intercultural communication dynamics among the students.

### *5. Data Analysis*

Data analysis involved both qualitative and quantitative methods. For the quantitative data collected from surveys and Google Forms, statistical analysis was performed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and patterns in the participants' demographics, language proficiency, and experiences. Language skills were determined through self-assessment questions included in the survey, where participants rated proficiency in English and other languages on a standardized scale. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts from interviews and observations to uncover key themes and insights related to intercultural communication competence and the use of English as a lingua franca.

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the research findings, triangulation was employed by comparing data from both students and professors. This method ensured that multiple perspectives were considered, thereby strengthening the validity of the conclusions drawn from the data. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and maintaining participant confidentiality, were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. By addressing these aspects of reliability, consistency, and validity, the researchers aimed to produce trustworthy findings that accurately reflected the participants' intercultural communication experiences.

## **Results**

Intercultural communication has emerged as a critical element in our increasingly globalized society. A comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by individuals when communicating across cultural boundaries are essential for fostering effective interactions. This research investigates the challenges associated with intercultural communication, placing particular emphasis on the role of language, specifically English, as a lingua franca.

### *1. Demographic Information*

The demographic data collected from survey respondents provided significant insights into the composition of the sample group, which consisted exclusively of Myanmar students at Chiang Rai Rajabhat University. In terms of gender, a majority of respondents identified as male (60%), while females accounted for 36.7%, and a small percentage (3.3%) chose not to disclose participant's gender.

Analysis of the age distribution revealed that most respondents were in the 23-24 age range (46.6%), followed by those aged 20-22 (33.4%), and those aged 25 and older (20%). All respondents were Myanmar nationals, as this research specifically targeted Myanmar students studying at Chiang Rai Rajabhat University.

Regarding English proficiency, a considerable portion of respondents rated themselves as proficient (53.3%), while 43.3% identified as native speakers, and 3.3% rated participant's fluency lower. The English proficiency levels were self-reported, as no standardized proficiency test was administered, which may have impacted the reliability of these results.

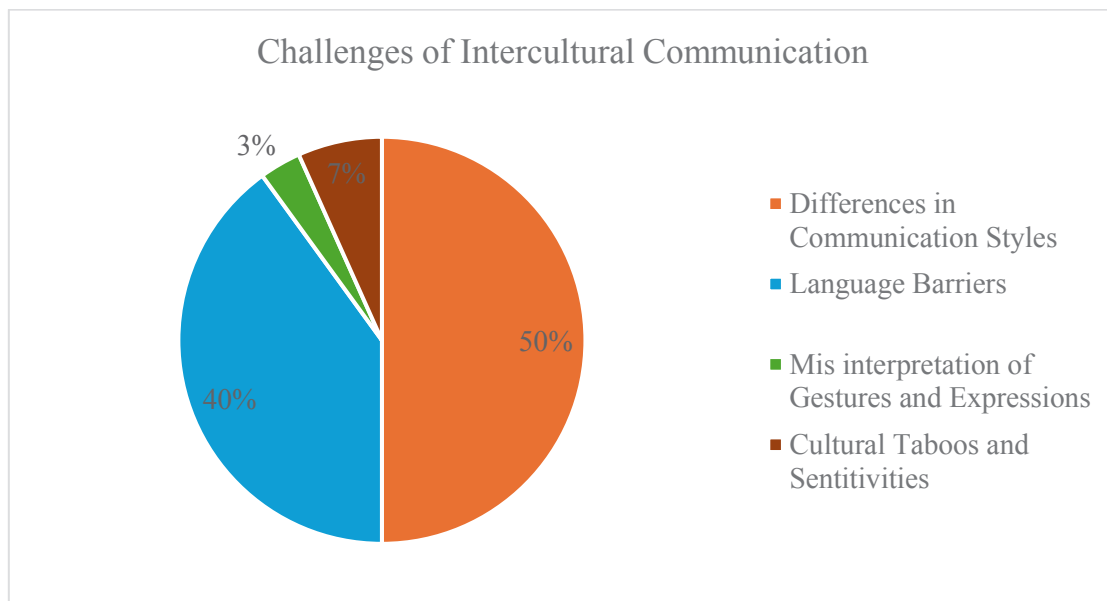


Concerning the frequency of intercultural communication, a significant number of respondents reported engaging in such interactions daily (66.7%), followed by those who communicated weekly (26.7%) and monthly (6.7%).

### 3. Challenges of Intercultural Communication

**Figure 1**

*The Primary Challenges of Intercultural Communication*



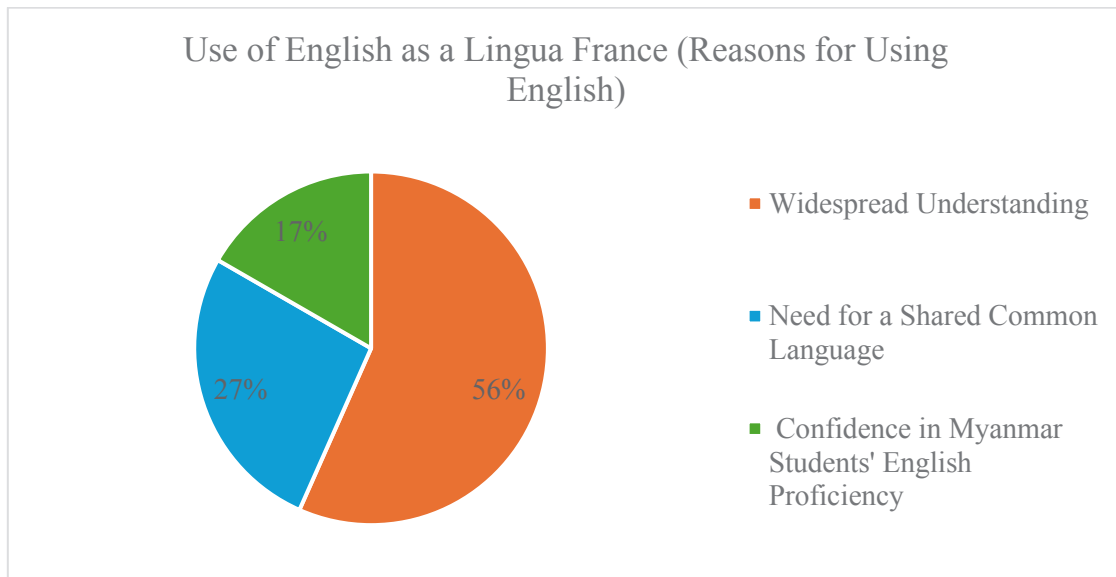
The figure 1 showed that the most significant issues identified by respondents are differences in communication styles (50%) and language barriers (40%). This data underscores the complexities inherent in communicating across diverse cultural backgrounds. Respondents were asked about the most significant challenges encountered when communicating with individuals from different and diverse cultural backgrounds. The predominant challenges identified included differences in communication styles (50%) and language barriers (40%). A smaller fraction noted issues such as misinterpretation of gestures and expressions (3.3%) and cultural taboos and sensitivities (6.7%). Specific examples of these challenges, such as difficulties in understanding indirect communication or managing differing nonverbal cues, provided further context.

When asked about specific cultural differences that posed challenges, a substantial majority (90%) of respondents acknowledged encountering such differences during intercultural communication. The importance of language proficiency, particularly English, in addressing these challenges was recognized by 70% of respondents. Notably, all respondents (100%) reported experiencing misunderstandings or misinterpretations during intercultural interactions.

#### 4. Use of English as a Lingua Franca

**Figure 2**

*The Reasons for Using English as a Lingua Franca in Intercultural Interactions*

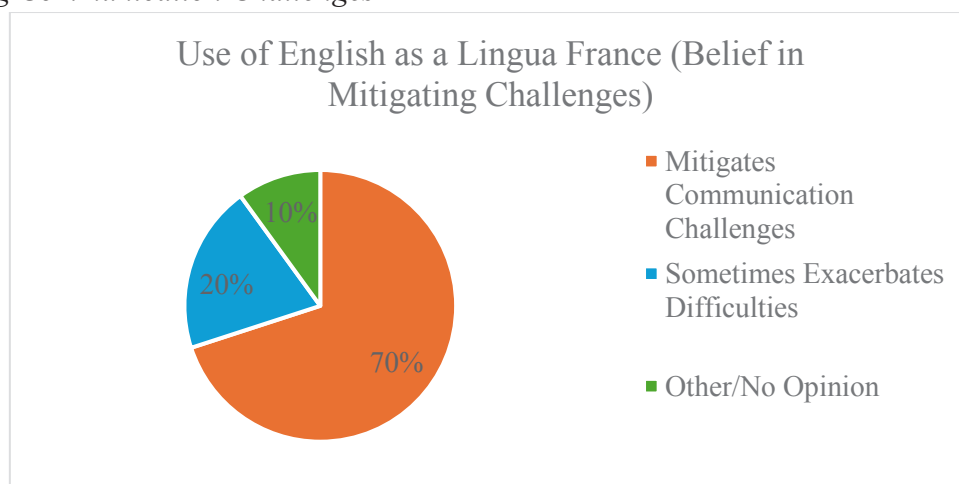


The figure 2 showed that the majority (56.7%) cited its widespread understanding as the main reason, followed by the need for a shared common language (26.7%). Confidence in English proficiency among Myanmar students (16.7%) was also a factor, indicating a reliance on English to bridge communication gaps.

The use of English as a lingua franca in intercultural communication was prevalent among respondents, with 86.7% indicating frequent usage. The primary reasons for choosing English included its widespread understanding (56.7%), the need for a shared common language (26.7%), and confidence in Myanmar students' English proficiency (16.7%).

**Figure 3**

*The Reflection on Respondents' Perceptions of Using English as A Lingua Franca in Reducing Communication Challenges*



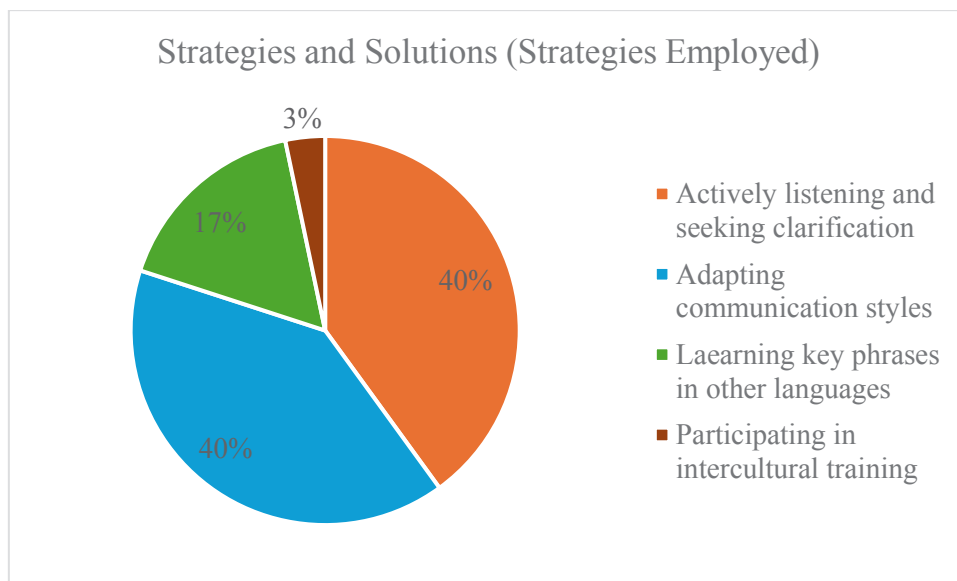
The figure 3 showed that the significant portion (70%) believes it mitigates difficulties, while 20% feel it can sometimes worsen them. This indicates a complex relationship between language use and effective communication in intercultural contexts.

Interestingly, most respondents (70%) believed that employing English as a lingua franca mitigated communication challenges, while a notable minority (20%) felt that it sometimes exacerbated these difficulties. Confidence levels regarding effective communication in English varied, with 60% expressing confidence, 23.3% feeling somewhat confident, and 3.3% lacking confidence entirely. Additionally, a significant majority (83.3%) reported instances where the use of English as a lingua franca led to misunderstandings or miscommunications.

#### 4. Strategies and Solutions

##### Figure 4

*The Strategies Employed by Respondents to Enhance Intercultural Communication Competence*

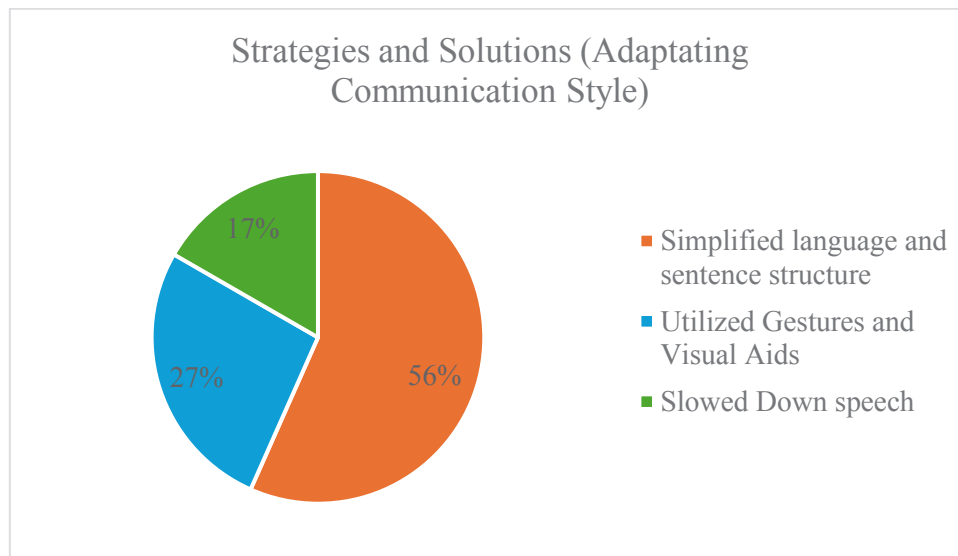


The figure 4 showed that the most commonly used strategies include actively listening and seeking clarification (40%) and adapting communication styles (40%). A smaller percentage indicated learning key phrases in other languages (16.7%) and participating in intercultural training (3.3%), reflecting a proactive approach to overcoming communication barriers.

To enhance Myanmar students' intercultural communication competence, respondents reported employing various strategies. The most frequently cited strategies included actively listening and seeking clarification (40%) and adapting communication styles to fit cultural contexts (40%). A smaller percentage indicated learning key phrases in other languages (16.7%), while a few participated in intercultural training (3.3%).

**Figure 5**

*The Details of How Respondents Adapt their Communication Styles When Using English*

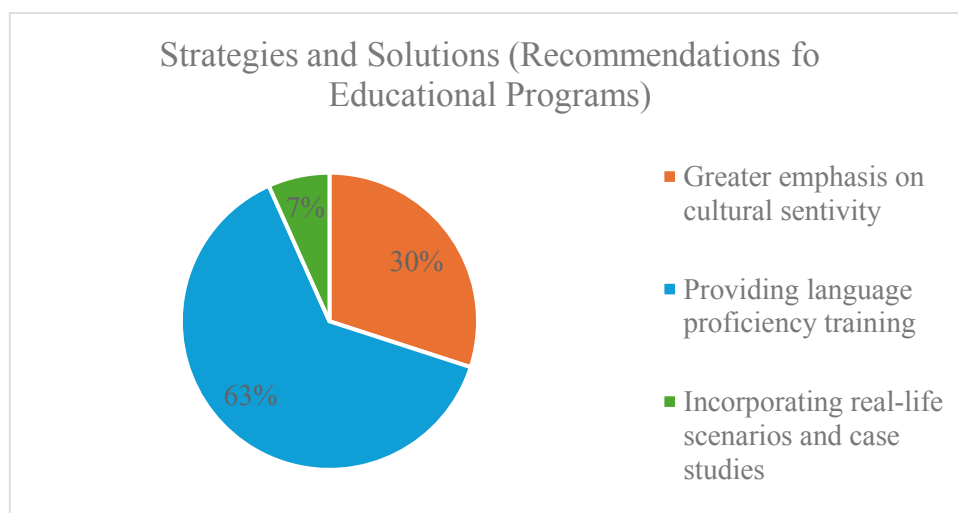


The figure 5 showed that the majority (56.7%) reported simplifying their language and sentence structure to enhance understanding, while 26.7% used gestures and visual aids. Slowing down speech (16.7%) was also noted, highlighting the various methods employed to ensure clarity in intercultural interactions.

In adapting Myanmar students' communication style while using English as a lingua franca, most respondents simplified their language and sentence structure (56.7%). Others utilized gestures and visual aids to facilitate understanding (26.7%), and some opted to slow down Myanmar students speech (16.7%). Notably, all respondents (100%) had engaged in training or workshops aimed at improving their intercultural communication competence.

**Figure 6**

*The Lists of Recommendations for Improving Educational and Training Programs Aimed at Enhancing Intercultural Communication*



The figure 6 showed that the most suggested approach was providing language proficiency training (63.3%), followed by emphasizing cultural sensitivity (30%). Incorporating real-life scenarios and case studies (6.7%) was also mentioned, indicating a desire for practical application in training efforts.

Regarding recommendations for enhancing educational and training programs, respondents suggested placing greater emphasis on cultural sensitivity and awareness (30%), providing language proficiency training (63.3%), and incorporating real-life scenarios and case studies (6.7%). The survey did not capture additional details regarding other recommendations.

### *5. Interview Results*

The semi-structured interviews conducted with Myanmar students (n=25) and professors (n=3) yielded rich insights into intercultural communication challenges and the use of English as a lingua franca. The analysis revealed several key thematic areas that highlight the complexities of intercultural communication in an academic setting.

In terms of language barriers, the interviews uncovered that Myanmar students, despite possessing functional English skills, encountered significant challenges in their academic journey. A substantial majority (80%) of students reported difficulties with academic terminology and formal presentations. As Student 7 expressed, "Sometimes I know the concept but cannot explain it properly in English, especially during class presentations." The challenge extended beyond academic settings, with 68% of students struggling with casual conversations and colloquialisms. Student 15 noted, "In class, I can manage, but during lunch breaks or social activities, I find it hard to join informal conversations." Additionally, accent and pronunciation emerged as significant concerns, with 72% of students reporting that their accent affected comprehension. This was poignantly illustrated by Student 3's comment: "Other students sometimes ask me to repeat myself multiple times, which affects my confidence." These observations were corroborated by faculty, with Professor 1 noting that while Myanmar students typically possessed strong technical knowledge, they often struggled to articulate complex ideas in English.

Cultural adjustments presented another significant challenge for Myanmar students. An overwhelming majority (88%) expressed hesitation in classroom participation due to cultural norms, as exemplified by Student 11's observation: "In Myanmar, we wait to be called on. Here, active participation is expected, but it feels uncomfortable to speak up." The adjustment to less formal student-teacher relationships proved challenging for 76% of students, with Student 19 describing the casual student-professor interactions as initially shocking. Furthermore, 84% of students reported difficulties navigating multicultural group work dynamics, particularly regarding different attitudes toward deadlines and group contributions.

To overcome these challenges, students developed various communication strategies. The vast majority (92%) relied on digital tools such as translation apps and digital dictionaries, with Student 5 mentioning keeping Google Translate readily available for emergency situations.

Peer support emerged as another crucial strategy, with 76% of students forming study groups with fellow Myanmar students. As Student 13 explained, these groups helped them understand difficult concepts and practice English together. Cultural integration also played a vital role, with 64% of students actively participating in cultural exchange events. Professor 2 observed that students who actively sought clarification and participated in extracurricular activities typically developed better communication skills.

Academic challenges formed another significant theme in the interviews. Writing assignments proved particularly challenging, with 84% of students struggling with academic writing conventions. Student 17 noted that writing essays in English required significantly more time compared to Thai classmates. Group presentations posed challenges for 76% of students, while an overwhelming 92% expressed anxiety about participating in class debates. Student 8 captured this sentiment, expressing concern about correctly articulating opinions in English during controversial discussions.

The interviews also revealed insights about various support systems and their effectiveness. University language support services were viewed positively by 72% of students, with Student 21 specifically praising the writing center's assistance. Peer mentoring emerged as a particularly valuable resource, with 88% of students emphasizing the importance of relationships with senior Myanmar students. Faculty support also played a crucial role, with all three interviewed professors reporting implementation of specific support strategies, including additional office hours and encouraged email communications for students requiring more time to express themselves.

Interview participants offered several recommendations for improvement. A significant majority (84%) advocated for enhanced pre-departure language training, with Student 12 emphasizing how more intensive English preparation would have been beneficial. Cultural orientation programs were suggested by 76% of students, while professors emphasized the need for specialized academic writing support. Professor 1 specifically recommended dedicated academic writing workshops for international students to improve their performance.

These comprehensive interview results illuminate the multifaceted challenges faced by Myanmar students in intercultural academic experience, as well as the various strategies and support systems that facilitate their success. The findings underscore the complex relationship between language proficiency, cultural adaptation, and academic achievement in an intercultural setting where English serves as a *lingua franca*.

## *6. Observation*

The observation aimed to explore various aspects of intercultural communication competence, focusing on students' language choices, participation patterns, accents, and overall communication dynamics. Both Myanmar and Chinese students demonstrated commendable fluency in English, which facilitated effective engagement in classroom discussions. However, accent variations were noticeable, reflecting influences from their respective native languages

and dialects, such as Burmese-accented English for Myanmar students and Mandarin-accented English for Chinese students. Despite these variations, communication remained largely effective, and the diverse linguistic backgrounds contributed to the classroom's intercultural dynamics.

The observation also identified patterns in participation, showing distinct differences aligned with cultural backgrounds. Students from cultures that emphasized assertiveness and individualism, such as the Chinese students observed, actively participated in discussions without hesitation. In contrast, Myanmar students—whose communication styles may have been influenced by a collective approach and respect for authority—often exhibited more reserved participation, preferring to await cues from the instructor or more assertive peers before engaging. Instances of code-switching were particularly evident among Myanmar students during emotionally charged or complex discussions, serving as a comfortable means of expression.

## Discussion

The comprehensive findings from both survey data and classroom observations have provided significant insights into the intercultural communication experiences of Myanmar students at Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, particularly regarding their use of English as a lingua franca. The observational data strongly aligned with survey results, highlighting the crucial role of English proficiency in facilitating intercultural interactions within the academic environment. Notably, while accent variations were present among both Myanmar and Chinese students, these differences did not significantly impede communication. Instead, they contributed positively to the classroom's multicultural atmosphere, demonstrating the effectiveness of English as a common language for diverse linguistic groups. This finding particularly underscores the students' adaptability in managing language differences, a key component of intercultural communication competence. These observations align with research by Abduh and Rosmaladewi (2018), who emphasized the fundamental role of language proficiency in fostering intercultural understanding among diverse student populations.

The study revealed distinct patterns in classroom participation that reflected broader cultural communication norms. Myanmar students typically displayed more reserved participation behaviors, preferring to wait for explicit cues from instructors or more assertive peers before engaging in discussions. This approach contrasted notably with their Chinese counterparts, who demonstrated more direct and individualistic communication styles. These behavioral differences can be attributed to underlying cultural values, with Myanmar students' communication patterns reflecting a collective mindset and strong respect for authority figures, while Chinese students' participation style aligned more closely with individualistic cultural norms. These observations correspond with established literature on intercultural communication, which consistently indicates that cultural background significantly influences communication behaviors and preferences (Imai et al., 2016).

A particularly interesting finding was the prevalent use of code-switching among Myanmar students, especially during emotionally charged or complex discussions. This linguistic

strategy served dual purposes: facilitating clearer communication in challenging situations while maintaining connections to their cultural identity. As Kashima et al. (2014) noted, code-switching represents an effective strategy for individuals in multilingual environments, enabling them to communicate effectively while preserving their cultural authenticity. The frequency and context of code-switching observed in this study provides valuable insights into how students navigate the complex interplay between academic requirements and cultural expression.

The research findings emphasized the multifaceted nature of intercultural communication challenges and strategies in educational settings. While language barriers and cultural differences presented significant challenges, the students demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability in developing strategies to overcome these obstacles. The successful use of English as a lingua franca, despite varying proficiency levels, highlighted its effectiveness as a bridge for intercultural communication. Furthermore, the students' ability to maintain their cultural identities while adapting to new communication norms demonstrated the dynamic nature of intercultural competence development.

## Conclusion

This research has provided a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by Myanmar students in developing intercultural communication competence within an English lingua franca context, while also examining how English usage impacts intercultural communication dynamics among these students. The findings reveal that while Myanmar students encounter significant challenges related to different communication styles and language barriers, English as a lingua franca plays a crucial role in facilitating effective communication across diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This enabling role of English was particularly evident in classroom interactions, where it served as an effective medium for learning and intercultural exchange despite varying accents and proficiency levels.

The research has significant implications for educational practice and policy. The findings suggest a need for more targeted support systems that address both linguistic and cultural challenges faced by international students. The success of various coping strategies employed by students, such as peer support networks and digital tools, indicates potential areas for institutional support and resource allocation. The study also highlights the importance of recognizing and accommodating different cultural communication styles within educational settings, suggesting that a more culturally sensitive approach to teaching and assessment might better serve diverse student populations.

Looking ahead, this research opens several avenues for future investigation. There is clear potential for comparative studies examining these challenges across different host countries or among various international student groups. Additionally, more in-depth qualitative research could provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of Myanmar students and the complex factors affecting their intercultural communication competence. Future studies might also benefit from exploring the perspectives of host country nationals, including Thai students and



faculty members, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural communication dynamics in academic settings.

This research contributes valuable insights to the growing body of knowledge on intercultural communication in higher education, particularly in the context of Southeast Asian student mobility. The findings not only illuminate the challenges faced by Myanmar students but also demonstrate the adaptability and resilience of international students in navigating complex intercultural environments. These insights can inform the development of more effective support systems and educational practices that better serve the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

## **Recommendations**

### *1. Implications*

The findings of this research carry significant implications for both curriculum development and language policy. It suggests that curriculum designers should incorporate strategies for teaching English as a lingua franca, focusing on techniques such as accommodation, meaning negotiation, and the use of diverse communication resources to enhance understanding among speakers with different proficiency levels. Additionally, the study emphasizes the critical role of English proficiency and intercultural communication competence for Myanmar students studying abroad, offering insights that could guide language policy decisions. These insights underscore the need for adequate resources and support to improve these skills in the educational system.

### *2. Further Studies*

Future research could examine the challenges Myanmar students face in different host countries or compare their experiences with students of other nationalities, providing insight into how cultural context shapes intercultural communication experiences. More detailed qualitative approaches, such as ethnographic studies or case studies, could offer a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Myanmar students and the complex factors affecting their intercultural communication competence. Moreover, exploring the perspectives of host country nationals, including Thai students and faculty members, could provide a more well-rounded view of intercultural communication dynamics and the challenges encountered by both groups.

### *3. Limitations of the Study*

This study has several limitations. The sample size of 30 students may not fully represent the experiences of all Myanmar students in intercultural settings, and the study's focus on Chiang Rai limits the generalizability to other regions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, and the perspectives of host country nationals were not explored in depth. The study used a qualitative approach, and incorporating quantitative methods could provide a more comprehensive understanding. These limitations highlight the need for further research with larger, more diverse samples and additional perspectives.

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