

## **Navigating Multilingual Dynamics in Higher Education: Exploring Student Perceptions of University Support for Cross-Cultural Communication at a Thai International University**

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### **Abstract**

In today's increasingly internationalized higher education landscape, effective cross-cultural communication is essential for international student success and institutional inclusivity. This study investigates how international undergraduate students at a university in Thailand experience and perceive university-led language and cultural support initiatives. Drawing on data from 155 students collected through a mixed-methods design that combines surveys and interviews, the research examines experiences related to language proficiency, intercultural competence, and institutional support. Findings indicate that while students highly valued cultural competency ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), their actual participation in formal training programs was considerably lower ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ). Qualitative thematic analysis revealed that the language barrier was the most prominent challenge to collaboration (45 mentions), driven by difficulties with fluency and regional accents. However, a significant subset of participants (40 mentions) reported no major obstacles, highlighting distinct variability in students' adaptation. Students frequently relied on adaptive strategies, including translation tools, peer feedback, and extracurricular social integration, to navigate these dynamics. The study concludes with recommendations for universities to strengthen cultural competency training, expand language support beyond English, and create more inclusive opportunities for intercultural collaboration.

**Keywords:** *language support, international students, intercultural competence, multicultural*

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### **1. Introduction**

In today's globalized education landscape, universities are becoming increasingly diverse, hosting students and faculty from a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In Thailand, the number of international students rose from 18,000 in 2013 to 34,202 in 2022, representing over twenty countries (Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2023). This upward trend is expected to continue as global mobility and internationalization efforts expand. For Thai students, this presents a valuable opportunity to develop cross-cultural communication skills by engaging with peers from different cultural contexts. At the same time, international students bring their own linguistic resources, learning strategies, and cultural practices that influence how they experience academic life in Thailand (Ngamchatturat, Jumpakate, & Seepho, 2024; Sanoh & Ambele, 2025).

While diversity enriches academic environments, it also introduces challenges in communication, collaboration, and cultural understanding. In Thailand, where internationalization is a national priority under initiatives such as Thailand 4.0, the ability to navigate multicultural dynamics plays a pivotal role in shaping student experiences and institutional reputation (Day et al., 2021). Studies in Thai higher education have shown that both linguistic preferences and translanguaging practices shape how students integrate academically and socially, underscoring the importance of university-led initiatives to support multilingual and multicultural dynamics (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2024; Chaiyasat, 2020).

Cross-cultural communication challenges extend beyond language and interpersonal interactions—they also include institutional misunderstandings rooted in differing educational systems. For example, Snodin (2019) documented frustrations among international students in Thailand, including a UK student who described confusion over transcript recognition:

“They don’t recognize any education system except the Thai one... Your Ministry of Education doesn’t understand that, and they constantly ask: ‘Where’s the transcript?’, ‘Where’s the GPA?’” (p. 12)

This example highlights how systemic assumptions can create barriers for international students, reinforcing the need for culturally responsive communication and administrative practices in higher education. Similar cultural adaptation challenges have also been reported in other contexts, such as New Zealand students studying in China, where students needed to develop strategies to manage language barriers and academic expectations (Gong et al., 2021).

Previous studies have identified common communication barriers faced by international students, including indirect speech styles, language proficiency gaps, and differing cultural norms. Luo (2025) found that international students in Chonburi struggled to adapt to Thai communication styles, which negatively impacted classroom participation and social integration. Similarly, Benjatikul et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of informal conversations and cultural sensitivity in supporting Thai language acquisition and interpersonal relationships. Building on these insights, more recent studies highlight how international students in Thailand negotiate English, Thai, and other languages in everyday academic interactions, which shape their sense of belonging and success (Sanoh & Ambele, 2025; Boonsuk & Ambele, 2024).

Drawing on survey data and reflective interviews with 155 international students at a Thai university, this research offers practical insights into the factors that support or hinder effective cross-cultural collaboration by examining the students' lived experiences, challenges, and self-reported perceptions. The findings aim to inform students, instructors, and university administrators by identifying actionable strategies to improve communication, reduce cultural friction, and improve collaborative academic experiences.

Although prior research has examined cross-cultural communication in international university contexts—such as Wilczewski and Alon’s (2023) review of language adaptation in higher education and Wang’s (2023) study on communication strategies among foreign language majors—few studies have explicitly focused on Thai institutions. While some research has explored international students’ mental health and

adjustment in Thailand (Rujiprak, 2016), a gap remains in understanding how institutional support programs address cross-cultural communication challenges. This study helps fill that gap by situating cross-cultural communication within both the Thai higher education context and broader discussions of multilingualism, cultural adjustment, and institutional support.

## **2. Research Questions**

This study evaluates the impact of university-led language and cultural support programs on international students' ability to navigate these challenges. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What are international students' experiences with and perceptions of university-led language assistance and cultural competency programs in enhancing communication and collaboration in a diverse academic environment?

RQ2. What are the main challenges faced by international students in cross-cultural communication, and what strategies do they employ to overcome these barriers in academic settings?

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1 Defining Cross-Cultural Communication in Higher Education**

Cross-cultural communication refers to interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, encompassing both verbal and non-verbal exchanges. Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023) highlight cross-cultural competence as essential for fostering understanding and collaboration in global education, emphasizing its role in helping students engage with diverse perspectives and develop cultural sensitivity. Chaiyasat (2020) also shows how international students in Thailand face both cultural and communicative challenges when adjusting to local academic and social life, highlighting the importance of institutional sensitivity. Within university settings, effective cross-cultural communication promotes inclusivity, empathy, and collaboration, preparing students to navigate culturally diverse academic and professional environments.

### **3.2 Multilingual Dynamics in International Universities**

International universities increasingly recognize the importance of integrating cross-cultural perspectives into education. More broadly, this is known as multilingual dynamics, and it refers to the complex interactions, negotiations, and translanguaging practices that occur when students from diverse linguistic backgrounds interact within an English-medium academic environment. These dynamics are shaped by a range of individual and institutional factors. At the individual level, students vary considerably in English proficiency, in their familiarity with regional accents and informal expressions, and in their cultural preferences for direct or indirect communication — all of which affect how comfortably and effectively they interact across linguistic boundaries. At the institutional level, factors such as the prioritization of English development over host-country language support, and the tendency of students to gravitate toward peers who share their first language during group tasks, can limit the depth of cross-cultural engagement even on otherwise diverse campuses.

In language education, developing cross-cultural communicative competence enhances learners' cultural empathy and attitudes, reinforcing the value of cultural awareness in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context (Byram, 1997). However, challenges persist due to limited experience with multilingual dynamics among students, thus informing the need for more culturally responsive teaching practices. Wilczewski and Alon (2023) and Wang (2023) emphasize that language adaptation and culturally informed communication strategies are critical for international students' academic and social success. In Thailand, recent studies show that Global Englishes shape how international students integrate into university life, pointing to the need for universities to consider linguistic diversity as part of their cross-cultural support (Ngamchatturat, Jumpakate, & Seepho, 2024; Sanoh & Ambele, 2025). These studies highlight the need for institutional support systems that address both linguistic and cultural dimensions of student experiences.

### **3.3 Challenges in Cross-Cultural Communication**

Effective cross-cultural communication in academic settings requires proficiency in both spoken and non-verbal language. Jin and Cortazzi (2012) emphasize that misunderstandings often arise from differing cultural expectations and interpretations. Gong et al. (2021) also report that international students studying abroad often struggle with language comprehension, non-verbal cues, and academic expectations, and must develop adaptive strategies to manage these differences. Words, gestures, and idioms may carry different meanings across cultures, and metaphoric language can further complicate interpretation.

Keelson, Addo, and Dodor (2024) highlight the impact of non-verbal cues—such as facial expressions, gestures, and body language—on students' perceptions of teaching quality and classroom engagement. These cues vary significantly across cultures and can lead to misjudgments or discomfort. This is particularly relevant in Thai academic contexts, where norms around eye contact, indirect speech, and respectful gestures differ from those of many international students.

Edward T. Hall's theory of high-context versus low-context cultures (Kittler et al., 2011; Cardon, 2008) provides a useful framework for understanding these differences. Thai culture, often categorized as high-context, relies heavily on implicit communication and non-verbal cues. This can be challenging for students from low-context cultures who are accustomed to direct and explicit communication styles, potentially leading to confusion and reduced participation in group settings.

### **3.4 Institutional Support and Adaptive Strategies**

Although cross-cultural communication has been widely studied, few works have examined how university-led programs specifically support international students in Thai institutions. Luo (2025) and Benjatikul et al. (2022) offer localized insights, showing that informal interactions and cultural sensitivity training can significantly enhance language acquisition and interpersonal relationships.

Maele and Jin (2022) advocate for cultural competence training that equips students with skills in verbal and non-verbal communication, conflict resolution, and cultural adaptability. These programs foster openness, flexibility, and awareness of cultural

biases—key traits for successful cross-cultural collaboration. Negi (2024) expands this perspective by showing how translanguaging and multilingual practices in English-medium instruction contexts can serve as adaptive strategies that support cross-cultural understanding.

In addition to formal training, adaptive strategies such as relationship-building, active listening, and participation in extracurricular activities have been shown to promote trust and reduce cultural friction. These approaches align with the strategies identified in this study’s qualitative data, including the use of translation tools, feedback-seeking, and flexible communication styles. Together, they highlight the importance of both institutional support and student agency in navigating multicultural academic environments.

## 4. Research Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. This approach aligns with Hà and Nguyễn (2024), who demonstrate that reflective interviewing with international students yields rich insights into intercultural communicative competence that structured instruments alone cannot capture. The survey provided generalizable trends, while the interviews offered nuanced, contextualized perspectives. Together, these methods addressed the research questions by identifying both the prevalence of challenges and the strategies students use to navigate them.

### 4.2 Population and samples

The study focused exclusively on international undergraduate students. A total of 155 students participated in the survey, representing approximately 15% of the university’s international student population (estimated at 1,000 students). According to Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgins (2001), a sample size of 10–20% is sufficient for populations of 100–1,000, ensuring representativeness and reliability.

The sample included students from seven faculties—Arts and Humanities, Business Administration, Education, Information Technology, Religious Studies, Science, and Nursing—and across all years of study. Students in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities were recruited directly by the researcher, while surveys were distributed via email to international students in the remaining six faculties.

**Table 1** : Participant Demographics by Faculty and Year of Study

Faculty	Percentage	Participants
Faculty of Arts and Humanities	45.2%	70
Faculty of Business Administration	10.3%	16
Faculty of Education	12.3%	19
Faculty of Information Technology	5.2%	8
Faculty of Religious Studies	7.7%	12
Faculty of Science	9%	14
Faculty of Nursing	10.3%	16

Year of Study	Percentage	Participants
Under a year	6.5%	10
1 to 2 years	40%	62
Between 2 to 3 years	22.6%	35
Between 3 to 4 years	27.7%	43
Above 4	3.2%	5

### 4.3 Research instrument

The survey consisted of 12 questions, including 10 Likert-scale items and 2 open-ended questions, organized into four thematic sections:

The survey consisted of 12 questions (10 Likert-scale items and 2 open-ended questions) divided into four thematic sections: (1) *Language Experience*, which assessed comfort using English and the participation in or perceived helpfulness of language programs; (2) *Cultural Competence*, exploring perceptions of campus diversity, training participation, and peer collaboration frequency; (3) *Cross-Cultural Collaboration*, measuring agreement on teamwork efficacy alongside an open-ended item addressing collaboration obstacles; and (4) *Perception of University Support*, capturing overall institutional satisfaction and gathering student recommendations. Additional items explicitly probed non-verbal cues, implicit biases, and cultural values to address the micro-level factors identified in the literature.

These questions were designed to align with the study’s objectives by exploring not only language proficiency but also broader cultural challenges and perceptions of institutional support. The combination of Likert-scale and open-ended questions allowed for both statistical analysis and the capture of students’ personal experiences.

#### Semi-Structured Interviews

To gain deeper insights, 10 international students were selected for interviews using purposive sampling. This sample size was chosen to ensure thematic saturation—a point at which no new themes emerge—while allowing for rich, detailed responses. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggest that 6–12 interviews are often sufficient for saturation in focused qualitative research.

The interviews explored the following themes, directly aligned with the study’s research questions:

1. Personal experiences with cross-cultural communication in academic and social settings (e.g., *"How would you describe your overall experience working with peers from different cultural backgrounds?"*)
2. Specific challenges encountered, such as indirect speech, non-verbal cues, and differing cultural norms (e.g., *"Can you share a specific instance where a cultural or language misunderstanding occurred during a group project?"*)
3. Strategies used to overcome barriers, such as translation tools, feedback-seeking, and relationship-building (e.g., *"What were some things you did to overcome communication problems?"*)

4. Perceptions of university support and suggestions for improvement (e.g., *"In what ways did the university's orientation or language assistance help you with these difficulties?"*)

These themes were designed to explore both obstacles and adaptive strategies, providing depth to the survey findings and helping to explain patterns observed in the quantitative data. This dual focus on obstacles and strategies made it possible to highlight not just the problems students face but also the ways they actively cope with them.

## **5. Data analysis**

Quantitative data from the Likert-scale survey items were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and percentage distributions, to identify general trends and variability in student responses. Qualitative data from open-ended survey responses and semi-structured interviews were examined through thematic analysis, focusing on recurring patterns related to communication challenges and adaptive strategies.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research questions, survey and interview data were analyzed concurrently and integrated. Quantitative findings provided a broad overview of student experiences, while qualitative narratives offered deeper context and explanations. For instance, where survey results indicated moderate satisfaction with university support, interview responses helped clarify the specific areas where students felt improvements were needed. This triangulated approach allowed both data types to complement each other, strengthening the validity and richness of the findings.

## **6. Ethical Considerations**

Participants were informed of the study's purpose and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation. All participants were given the right to withdraw at any stage, and pseudonyms were used in interview transcripts to protect identities. Ethical approval was granted by the university's research ethics committee.

## **7. Results**

The results of this mixed-methods study are organized to directly address the two research objectives. Quantitative survey findings provide a broad picture of students' experiences with and perceptions of university-led language and cultural support programs, while qualitative data from open-ended responses and semi-structured interviews offer deeper insight into the specific challenges students face and the strategies they employ.

### **Quantitative Survey Findings**

Survey responses from 155 international students revealed generally positive perceptions of language and cultural support programs, with notable variability across individual experiences. Table 2 summarizes the mean scores and standard deviations for each item, offering insight into students' levels of agreement and the consistency of their responses.

**Table 2** : Summary of Survey Responses

Theme	Mean	SD	Interpretation
<b>Language Experience</b>			
Comfort communicating in English:	3.75	0.86	Moderate agreement with moderate variability
Participation in language assistance programs	3.32	0.89	Neutral perception with moderate variability
Helpfulness of language assistance programs	3.72	0.83	Moderate agreement with moderate variability
Effectiveness of language assistance programs	3.68	0.78	Moderate agreement with moderate variability
<b>Cultural Competence</b>			
Cultural diversity in the academic environment	3.59	0.81	Moderate agreement with moderate variability
Importance of cultural competency	4.34	0.98	High agreement with high variability
Participation in cultural competency training	3.46	0.82	Neutral perception with moderate variability
<b>Cross-Cultural Collaboration</b>			
Frequency of collaboration with diverse peers	3.49	0.90	Neutral perception with high variability
Agreement that cross-cultural collaboration enhances academic work	3.63	0.85	Moderate agreement with moderate variability
<b>Perception of University Support</b>			
Satisfaction with the university's cross-cultural communication efforts	3.65	0.82	Moderate agreement with moderate variability
Support for international students and faculty	3.46	0.86	Neutral perception with moderate variability

Higher mean scores (above 4.0) indicate strong agreement, particularly regarding the importance of cultural competency (M = 4.34), suggesting that students recognize its relevance in academic and social interactions. Scores between 3.5 and 4.0 reflect moderate agreement, including comfort with English and satisfaction with university efforts. Scores below 3.5 suggest mixed perceptions, especially regarding participation in support programs. Standard deviations near or above 0.9 indicate high variability, pointing to diverse student experiences. For instance, while cultural competency is highly valued, the wide spread of responses suggests differing levels of exposure or understanding.

Students reported moderate comfort communicating in English (M = 3.75), yet participation in language assistance programs was lower (M = 3.32). This may reflect that many students already possess strong English skills, while challenges may stem from others' limited proficiency, especially in group work. The university places significant emphasis on English development but offers limited support for foreigners learning Thai. This gap may hinder deeper integration and mutual understanding, particularly in non-Bangkok regions where Thai language instruction for foreigners is less accessible.

The highest-rated item was the importance of cultural competency (M = 4.34), indicating strong student awareness of its value. However, the relatively low score for participation in cultural training (M = 3.46) suggests that formal opportunities to develop these skills are limited. Despite the university's diverse student body, with near-equal numbers of Thai and international students, many students tend to collaborate within their

own language or cultural groups. This is reflected in the moderate score for cross-cultural collaboration ( $M = 3.49$ ), highlighting a gap between interest in intercultural engagement and actual practice.

While students value cultural competency, their satisfaction with university support ( $M = 3.65$ ) and perceived adequacy of support for international students ( $M = 3.46$ ) suggest room for improvement. Tailored programs that introduce students to each other’s cultures and histories could foster greater cosmopolitanism and mutual respect. Although the university lacks dedicated cultural competency workshops beyond orientation and embedded course content, students benefit from informal cultural exposure through events such as cultural shows, English camps, and food festivals. These activities offer hands-on learning experiences, which may be more impactful than theoretical instruction. However, the uneven distribution and accessibility of these programs may contribute to the variability in student perceptions. Overall, the survey findings directly address RQ1 by showing how students perceive existing language and cultural support programs and RQ2 by pointing to areas where challenges remain, such as limited participation in training and uneven collaboration across cultural groups.

To address the second research question—What are the main challenges faced by international students in cross-cultural communication, and what approaches do they employ to overcome these barriers? —open-ended survey responses were analyzed using thematic coding. Responses were grouped into recurring categories based on content and frequency.

**Table 3** : Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

Theme	Frequency	Interpretation
Language Barrier	45	Students frequently cited difficulty with English, accents, slang, and translation.
No challenges	40	A significant number of students reported no major issues in cross-cultural collaboration.
Cultural differences	27	Differences in customs, values, and expectations were commonly mentioned.
Communication challenges	25	Issues with expressing ideas, group communication, and misunderstandings were noted.
Misunderstanding and conflict	8	Some students described disagreements and misinterpretations due to cultural gaps.
Confidence and Participation	3	A few students mentioned fear of making mistakes or hesitance to speak.
Other	47	Responses that were vague, unclear, or did not fit into the above categories.

The most frequently cited challenge was the language barrier (45 mentions), including difficulties with fluency, accents, slang, and translation. This is expected in a multilingual academic environment where English is the medium of instruction but not the first language for many students. These challenges affect not only comprehension but also students’ confidence in expressing ideas clearly.

Cultural differences (27 mentions) were also prominent, with students referencing variations in time perception, group dynamics, and behavioral norms. These differences often led to misunderstandings or discomfort in collaborative settings. Communication

challenges (25 mentions) included difficulty articulating ideas, lack of group interaction, and misinterpretations. These issues were closely linked to both language and cultural factors. A smaller group of students (8 mentions) reported misunderstandings and conflict, often arising from differing expectations or communication styles. Confidence and participation (3 mentions) were noted by a few students who expressed hesitance to speak or fear of making mistakes.

Interestingly, 40 students reported no significant challenges, suggesting that some are well-adapted or benefit from existing support structures. This group may reflect students with prior international experience, strong language skills, or access to peer networks.

### **Personal Interview Insights**

#### ***Thematic Analysis of Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges***

To further explore the lived experiences of international students, semi-structured interviews were conducted and thematically analyzed. The responses revealed six key challenges that reflect the nuanced barriers students face in cross-cultural academic collaboration:

**Direct vs. Indirect Communication Styles.** Students frequently encountered difficulties navigating differing communication preferences. While some cultures value clarity and directness, others rely on more implicit or nuanced expression. These differences often led to misunderstandings during group discussions and decision-making.

*“In group tasks, I've occasionally seen that some of us prefer to communicate things clearly, while others prefer to imply what they mean... it can get complicated.”*

*“I gave some feedback on a classmate's presentation... they seemed a bit upset, and I think maybe I was too straightforward.”*

**Language Proficiency and Expression.** Non-native English speakers, including Thai students, sometimes struggled to articulate complex ideas, especially in academic contexts. This affected group understanding and slowed collaborative processes.

*“Some students... find it hard to explain what they mean. Like last week, a Thai student had trouble explaining a concept, and it took a while for us to understand.”*

**Non-verbal Communication and Cultural Interpretation.** Students noted differences in body language, eye contact, and gestures, which led to misinterpretations of attentiveness or respect. These non-verbal cues varied significantly across cultures.

*“Thai students occasionally avoided eye contact or nodded their heads frequently... I initially assumed they weren't paying attention, but I discovered it is a gesture of respect.”*

**Classroom Norms and Cultural Expectations.** Students described confusion around classroom etiquette, particularly regarding formality with professors and participation norms. These differences sometimes created discomfort or hesitation in academic engagement.

*“In our class, there's this thing about respecting the teacher... It was perplexing at first because, in my culture, we are more informal with our professors.”*

**Biases and Assumptions.** Some students acknowledged holding cultural stereotypes or assumptions that were later challenged through interaction. These biases initially influenced group dynamics and perceptions.

*“I had made assumptions about Thai people being quiet... But then I noticed some Thai students actively participating in class debates.”*

*“I used to believe that my method was the best, and always ignored the other opinions.”*

**Group Dynamics and Participation Equity.** Students reported challenges in group collaboration, including unequal participation, scheduling conflicts, and difficulty reaching consensus. These issues often stemmed from cultural differences in teamwork and decision-making.

*“We recently quarreled over a group project deadline... It was difficult to find a compromise.”*

*“Some students take center stage in class debates... It's critical that everyone feels involved.”*

*“It might be challenging to plan group meetings... but we must learn to be adaptive.”*

These findings illustrate that cross-cultural communication challenges extend beyond language proficiency to include deeply embedded cultural norms, values, and interpersonal expectations. Misunderstandings often arise from differences in communication style, non-verbal cues, and group dynamics. However, students also demonstrated reflection and growth, suggesting that with appropriate support, these challenges can become opportunities for intercultural learning.

### ***Thematic Analysis of Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies***

To complement the challenges identified in the interviews, students also shared a range of adaptive strategies they employed to navigate cross-cultural communication. These strategies reflect both personal initiative and the influence of university support structures. Thematic analysis revealed five key approaches:

**Adapting Communication Styles.** Students frequently encountered challenges related to differing communication norms—some cultures favor directness, while others rely on indirect or nuanced expression. To overcome misunderstandings, students reported using strategies such as active listening, asking clarifying questions, and adjusting their communication style based on context.

*“Some people are really direct, and others kind of talk around the point... I realized that if I just listen carefully and ask questions when I’m not sure, things go a lot smoother.”*

*“I learned to adjust my communication style depending on who I was talking to. That really helped avoid misunderstandings.”*

**Cultural Awareness and Adjustment.** Several students highlighted the value of university-led cultural workshops and informal exposure to Thai customs. These experiences helped them better understand local norms and expectations, leading to more respectful and effective interactions.

*“I joined these cultural workshops... After that, I started to adjust how I talked to people, and honestly, it made my interactions way easier.”*

*“I used to think Thai students were really quiet... Now, I try to be more open-minded and not judge people based on first impressions.”*

**Improving Language Proficiency and Confidence.** Language barriers were a common concern, especially for non-native English speakers. Students who participated in English courses or used translation tools reported increased confidence and smoother communication in academic and social settings.

*“I took some English courses... Now, I feel more confident talking to both Thai and international students.”*

*“I started using translation apps and video calls... It helped us understand each other better and work more efficiently.”*

**Social Integration through Extracurricular Activities.** Students emphasized the importance of building relationships outside the classroom. Participation in extracurricular activities—such as clubs, cultural events, and university festivals—helped bridge cultural gaps and fostered more natural communication.

*“I started joining some extracurricular activities... We got to know each other outside of class, and now communication feels more natural.”*

**Proactive Collaboration Strategies.** To improve group dynamics, some students developed practical approaches such as setting communication norms, clarifying expectations early, and seeking feedback from peers and instructors.

*“We created some basic communication rules at the beginning... That really helped avoid confusion.”*

*“I started asking my friends and teachers for feedback... It helped me express myself better and understand others.”*

These strategies demonstrate students’ resilience and adaptability in navigating cross-cultural environments. While institutional support—such as workshops and extracurricular programming—played a role, many students relied on self-directed learning and interpersonal initiative to overcome barriers. The findings suggest that universities can enhance student success by offering structured opportunities for cultural learning, encouraging peer mentorship, and promoting inclusive group practices.

## 8. Discussion

This study explored how international undergraduate students navigate multilingual dynamics and cross-cultural communication within an international Thai university. Drawing on both survey and interview data, the findings reveal a complex interplay between individual factors — such as differences in linguistic proficiency and communication style preferences — and institutional factors, including uneven language support and the students’ tendency to collaborate within their own cultural or language groups. The following sections discuss how these factors shape both the challenges students face and the strategies they employ to overcome them.

While most students reported moderate comfort communicating in English, participation in language assistance programs was relatively low. This suggests that many possess functional English skills, yet challenges persist in expressing complex ideas and understanding diverse accents or idioms. Interview data reinforced this, with students describing difficulties in academic discussions and group work. These findings align with Maele and Jin (2022), who emphasize the importance of both verbal and non-verbal communication skills in cross-cultural academic settings. They also reflect what Boonsuk and Ambele (2024) found about multilingual undergraduates in EMI contexts, who often rely on translanguaging as a strategy to overcome language limitations in academic settings.

Notably, students perceived language barriers not only in their own expression but also in understanding peers—particularly when Thai students struggled to articulate ideas in English. This highlights the need for mutual language support, including opportunities for international students to learn Thai, which remains underdeveloped in many institutions outside Bangkok. Chaiyasat (2020) also showed that adjustment difficulties among French exchange students in Thailand were strongly linked to limited cultural and linguistic support, reinforcing the need for more systematic programs.

Students expressed confusion around classroom etiquette, such as formality with professors and participation norms. These differences often led to hesitation or misinterpretation, especially in group collaboration. The survey revealed high agreement on the importance of cultural competency ( $M = 4.34$ ), yet participation in formal training was limited. Interview narratives suggest that informal exposure—through cultural events and peer interaction—plays a significant role in helping students adjust. This echoes Gong et al. (2021), who noted that informal strategies, such as peer support and cultural immersion, are often just as important as institutional support for overcoming adaptation challenges.

The relevance of cultural competence in enriching academic interactions is further supported by literature advocating for creative approaches to cultural training. Recent work on Global Englishes in Thai higher education (Sanoh & Ambele, 2025) suggests that universities should not only provide training but also acknowledge the diversity of English practices and cultural backgrounds that students bring with them. This perspective helps explain why some students adapt smoothly while others struggle with expectations of “standard” academic English. Such initiatives align with Candel-Mora (2015), who emphasizes that academic success and a supportive environment depend on how well students navigate the cultural and linguistic dimensions of their host institutions.

Cross-cultural collaboration was rated moderately ( $M = 3.49$ ), with students often working within their own cultural or language groups. Interview data revealed challenges in group dynamics, including unequal participation, scheduling conflicts, and differing expectations around deadlines and decision-making. These findings echo Wilczewski and Alon (2023), who emphasize the need for culturally responsive communication strategies in international universities. Similarly, Ngamchatturat, Jumpakate, and Seepho (2024) highlight that even Thai students in EMI programs must develop flexible learning strategies to succeed, suggesting that both local and international students benefit from explicit training in cross-cultural teamwork.

Students also described proactive strategies—such as setting communication norms and seeking feedback—that helped improve collaboration. These adaptive approaches demonstrate resilience and a willingness to engage across cultural boundaries, but they also highlight the need for institutional guidance in fostering inclusive group practices.

Several students acknowledged holding cultural assumptions that were later challenged through interaction. This self-awareness reflects the transformative potential of intercultural engagement. This is consistent with broader findings that intercultural encounters can reshape perspectives and foster openness when supported by both institutional initiatives and student agency (Gong et al., 2021).

These findings reinforce the need for targeted support in both language development and cultural competency training. While the university offers informal cultural exposure through events such as cultural shows, food festivals, and English camps, students may benefit from structured programs that explicitly address cross-cultural communication skills. For example, dedicated cultural competency workshops could help students:

1. Understand high-context vs. low-context communication styles
2. Practice active listening and conflict resolution
3. Explore cultural values and implicit biases
4. Build confidence in diverse group settings

Such programs would complement existing initiatives and directly address the challenges identified in both the survey and the open-ended responses.

## **9. Limitations**

This study focused exclusively on international undergraduate students at a single Thai university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Data were self-reported and collected in English, which could affect clarity due to varying language proficiency. The interview sample was relatively small (10 participants), offering depth but not full representation. Additionally, perspectives from instructors and staff were excluded due to access constraints, which may have limited the institutional viewpoint on cross-cultural support. Future studies should include both Thai students and teaching staff, as their perspectives are also crucial for understanding how cross-cultural communication operates in the wider university setting.

## 10. Conclusion

This study examined the cross-cultural communication experiences of international students at an international Thai university, focusing on students' perceptions of institutional support and the strategies students use to navigate linguistic and cultural challenges. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research revealed that while students generally value cultural competency and feel moderately comfortable communicating in English, significant barriers remain—particularly in group collaboration, classroom norms, and intercultural understanding.

Interview insights highlighted the nuanced ways students adapt, including adjusting communication styles, engaging in cultural learning, and building relationships through extracurricular activities. These findings underscore the importance of structured cultural competency programs, inclusive group practices, and expanded language support beyond English. Additionally, the study emphasizes the need for creative and context-sensitive approaches to cultural training, such as reflective case studies, cultural media discussions, and peer-led intercultural exchanges. The results also point to the need for Thai universities to embrace Global Englishes and multilingual practices, which can create more realistic and supportive learning environments for diverse student groups.

By contextualizing student experiences within a Thai university setting, this research contributes to the broader conversation on international education and offers practical recommendations for creating more welcoming, collaborative, and culturally responsive academic environments. The findings are particularly relevant for institutions seeking to strengthen their internationalization efforts and improve support for diverse student populations. Ultimately, the study highlights that effective cross-cultural communication in higher education requires a balance of institutional support, student initiative, and recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity.

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