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Exploring Thai EFL Teachers' Perceptions of How Intercultural Communicative Competence Is Important for Their Students

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Abstract

In recognition of the growing volume of communication between people from different cultural backgrounds around the globe presently, this study was conducted to investigate Thai EFL teachers' perceptions toward intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in three dimensions: (i) their understanding of ICC; (ii) their views on how to integrate ICC into English language teaching; and (iii) their perceptions of ICC's contributions to learners' English communicative competence. Data were collected from sixteen Thai EFL teachers at a private university in Thailand via questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed through descriptive statistics while the qualitative data from both the questionnaires and interviews were analyzed with a constant comparative method. The findings revealed that the participants had a general, not a firm, grasp of ICC. They also perceived that ICC can be integrated into

their teaching by presenting more cultural content to learners. Nevertheless, according to the ICC theoretical explication, this way of integration is not sufficient, nor is it effective in helping learners acquire ICC. Finally, the participants perceived that ICC was an important element in English language teaching today, but it did not considerably help learners to better communicate in English. An important implication from this study was that ELT teacher educators include ICC in teacher education programs to ensure a successful integration of ICC into English language teaching.

Keywords: Thai EFL teachers, perceptions, intercultural approach to language teaching, intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

Introduction

The 21st century is a time when people around the globe can communicate together swiftly and at a relatively low cost. This type of communication, also known as intercultural communication, has become more common thanks to the advent of communication technologies, especially the Internet.

In recognition of the rising volume of intercultural communication around the globe, several scholars in foreign language education (e.g. Alptekin, 2002; Byram, 1997, 2009; Byram, Gribova & Starkey, 2002; Corbett, 2003; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) suggest that intercultural communicative competence (i.e. an ability to effectively and appropriately communicate across cultures) be integrated into foreign language teaching in order to prepare and equip learners with knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for intercultural communication.

Language teaching that encompasses intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is known as an intercultural dimension in, or intercultural approach to, language teaching. Emerging in the late 1990s, the intercultural approach to language teaching has been implemented by some foreign language teaching practitioners (e.g. Furstenberg, 2010; Kourova & Modianos, 2013; Liaw, 2006; Planken,

van Hoof & Korilius, 2004) who found that this approach can be successfully implemented in foreign language teaching. These practitioners also reported that this approach can help language learners to acquire ICC and improve their linguistic competence at the same time. Although this approach has been proposed for over two decades and it has yielded positive results with language learners, it has not been widely adopted by foreign language teachers worldwide (Alyan, 2011; Byram, Holmes & Savvides, 2013; Byram & Risager, 1999; Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Sercu, 2006) including those in Thailand.

In light of the burgeoning role of ICC in today's global communication and English language teaching, this study was conducted to investigate Thai EFL teachers' perceptions toward ICC. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data from Thai EFL teachers working at a private university in Thailand. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Thai EFL teachers' perceptions toward ICC?
2. In the eyes of Thai EFL teachers, how can ICC be integrated into English language teaching?
3. How do Thai EFL teachers perceive ICC's contributions to learners' English communicative competence?

Literature Review

Guided by the above research questions, the literature relevant to this study includes the intercultural approach to language teaching and ICC, how ICC can be integrated into foreign language teaching, and ICC's contributions to learners' English communicative competence. In addition, challenges in integrating ICC into foreign language teaching were also reviewed.

Intercultural approach to language teaching and ICC

Although the intercultural approach to language teaching is grounded in and extended from communicative language teaching (CLT) (Byram, 1997; Derin, Zeynep, Pinar, Özlem, & Gökçe, 2009; Piątkowska, 2015), it is different from CLT in many facets. For instance,

the intercultural approach is broader than CLT in the way that it encompasses and underscores non-linguistic aspects of communication (e.g. nonverbal communication, inter-group and cross-cultural relations) which did not gain much attention of language educators (Byram, 1997). The recognition of these non-linguistic aspects is reflected in an underlying assumption of this approach that successful interaction between people from diverse cultures does not depend only on an exchange of information, but also on human relationship establishment and its maintenance (Byram, 1997).

Another difference between the two teaching approaches is that the primary goal of the intercultural approach to language teaching is not to enable learners to communicate like the native speakers in the same way as CLT, but to develop them to be “intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through single identity” (Byram, et al., 2002, p.5). Put another way, the intercultural approach aims to equip language learners with ICC which is defined as the “competences which enable them to mediate/interpret the values, beliefs and behaviours (the ‘cultures’) of themselves and of others and to ‘stand on the bridge’ or indeed ‘be the bridge’ between people of different languages and cultures” (Byram, 2006, as cited in Ho, 2009, p. 65) or “a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself”(Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006, p. 12).

To make the ICC concept comprehensible, in 1997, Byram introduced a model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC Model) which is rooted in applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, social identity theory, cross-cultural communication and social and cultural capital concepts (Byram, 1997, 2009). Byram’s (1997) ICC Model, which was revised in 2009, illustrates that ICC basically consists of four components: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse competence (three fundamental components of the CLT’s communicative competence) and intercultural competence (IC). Among the four components, IC is the most significant and is comprised of five elements which are believed to affect people’s ability to communicate across cultures. These five elements are attitudes, knowledge (of culture), skills of interpreting and

relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (For further details of each element, see Byram, 1997, 2009).

A thorough examination of IC in Byram's ICC Model reveals that the IC has nothing to do with linguistic features at all. Instead, the five elements constituting IC can be viewed as non-linguistic aspects which have been consistently posited by a number of intercultural scholars (e.g. Gudykunst, 1994; Jandt, 2013; Samovar & Porter, 2004) as key factors affecting both intracultural and intercultural communications. This interpretation makes it possible to view Byram's ICC Model as a hybrid between language teaching and intercultural communication disciplines (Piatkowska, 2015).

How to integrate ICC into foreign language classrooms

Grounded in the concepts of learner-centeredness and learning by doing in the same way as CLT, the intercultural approach to language teaching requires learners to be active, rather than passive. Up to the present, three techniques have been proposed as effective ways to integrate ICC into foreign language teaching. The first technique is a comparative analysis. According to Byram et al. (2002), the comparative analysis technique requires learners to analyze and compare the target language culture with the learners' own culture in order to discover similarities or differences between these cultures. This technique is also applicable to various activities available in the CLT approach, for instance, simulation, role-play and information-gap activities (Byram et al., 2002; Corbett, 2003). Byram et al. (2002) provided one example illustrating how to apply the comparative analysis technique to a role-play activity. To help learners understand how people in the target language behave, interact and communicate in a certain situation, learners can be assigned to do a role-play of welcoming a visitor. In this role-play activity, which can be performed in the form of pair work, one learner acts as a foreigner visiting his or her own country while the other learner acts as a host welcoming the visitor (Byram et al., 2002). It is believed that this kind of activity can expose learners to other cultures and help them to better realize the similarities and differences between cultures in this particular situation as well as learn from their experiences of putting themselves in another person's shoes (i.e. taking the role of visitor).

The second technique is to present the existing learning materials from intercultural and critical perspectives (Byram et al., 2002). For this technique, teachers can make use of any theme or content available in learning materials and “encourage learners to ask further questions and make comparisons” of such theme or content with those available in the learners’ culture (Byram et al., 2002, p. 16). For instance, if a reading passage in a textbook is about sports, apart from having students practice basic reading skills such as identifying main ideas, supporting details or summarizing the passage, teachers may encourage students to relate the theme of sports to other issues such as gender, age, region and religion. In other words, teachers may ask questions like whether this sport is popular in learners’ country, or whether this sport is predominantly played by males or females. According to Byram et al. (2002), what lies at the heart of this technique is “to get learners to compare the theme in a familiar situation with examples from an unfamiliar context” (p. 16).

The third technique is to use authentic materials such as audio recordings, written texts and a variety of visual aids (e.g. map, photographs and cartoons) (Byram et al., 2002; Corbett, 2003; Ho, 2009; Liddicoat, 2005; Lindner, 2010; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008). Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor’s (2008) suggestion of critical reading is a good example illustrating how to use this technique. According to Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2008, p. 165), critical reading is an activity that requires readers to “make judgments about how a text is argued” and it will help learners “to focus not only on what the text says (typical of close reading exercises) but also, and most important, on how the text portrays the given topic (i.e. author’s choices of language and structure)” (p. 166). In this way, the learners are believed to grasp how a particular topic is viewed in the target language culture, and whether or not this topic is similarly or differently viewed in the learners’ culture.

ICC’s contribution to learners’ English communicative competence

Several studies (e.g. Liaw, 2006; Planken et al., 2004; Popsecu & Iordachescu, 2015) showed that ICC has positive effects on learners' ability to communicate in the foreign language learned. According to Planken et al. (2004), learners taking the foreign language program into which ICC was integrated were found to have a bigger vocabulary bank and better oral and written skills in the foreign language learned. Likewise, Liaw (2006) reported that ICC can help students to fluently communicate in the target language (i.e. English). Apart from this, Popsecu and Iordachescu (2015) reported that the linguistic knowledge of learners in their ICC-related experimental study improved remarkably. In addition, Genc and Bada (2005) and Doganay and Yergaliyeva (2013), who explored the learners' perceptions toward ICC which had been integrated into their English courses, similarly reported that their learners perceived that ICC can improve their English communicative competence, especially speaking skills.

Challenges in integrating ICC into foreign language teaching

Although many techniques for integrating ICC into foreign language teaching have been suggested and several studies indicated ICC's positive effects on learners' ability to communicate in the foreign language learned, an integration of ICC into foreign language teaching is hardly seen in foreign language classrooms worldwide (Alyan, 2011; Byram & Risager, 1999; Byram et al., 2013; Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Sercu, 2006). A review of literature concerning an integration of cultural and intercultural dimensions into foreign language classrooms reveals that several factors have deterred foreign language teachers from fully and accurately implementing the intercultural approach to language teaching and integrating ICC into their teaching.

The first factor is the teachers' lack of a firm grasp of ICC and how to integrate it into their teaching. Several scholars (e.g. Atay, Kurt, Çamlıbel, Ersin & Kaslioglu, 2009; Gu, 2016; Sercu, 2006; Tran & Dang, 2014; Cheng, 2007; Tian, 2013) similarly reported that although teachers had positive views toward ICC, they rarely integrated the cultural and intercultural dimensions into their classrooms because they did not thoroughly understand the intercultural approach to language teaching and ICC. This lack of a firm grasp of the intercultural

approach to language teaching and ICC has adverse impacts on the way the teachers integrated cultural and intercultural dimensions into their teaching. Without a firm grasp, most teachers teach culture in the traditional way of passing cultural knowledge or information onto learners which is not likely to help learners to become intercultural speakers or acquire ICC (Barletta Manjarrés, 2009; Gu, 2016; Sercu, 2006).

The second factor preventing foreign language teachers from fully adopting the intercultural approach to language teaching and integrating ICC into their teaching is that the intercultural approach lacks a consistent methodology for dealing with culture in a language classroom (Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Barletta Manjarrés, 2009). Garrido and Álvarez (2006) indicated that this lack of consistency in culture teaching methodology makes it hard for teachers to set cultural objectives for teaching and learning in a language classroom, and “even when cultural objectives have been clearly outlined, further decisions have to be made as to what cultural aspects should be included to enhance communication and how they can be introduced to students” (p. 167). This lack of consistent methodology may result from the fact that culture is a fluid and complex concept, making it hard to define. Because of the lack of consistent teaching methodology, fluid and complex natures of culture, together with a lack of a firm grasp of the intercultural approach to language teaching, it is very likely that foreign language teachers feel lost or even confused when teaching culture (Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Gu, 2016).

Another factor contributing to foreign language teachers’ minimal adoption of the intercultural approach to language teaching is that the intercultural approach to language teaching does not have systematic assessment (Barletta Manjarrés, 2009; Gu, 2016). A lack of systematic assessment may be attributed to the fact that “ICC assessment methods are mainly of qualitative and subjective nature” (Gu, 2016, p. 13). Similar to the foregoing view, Barletta Manjarrés (2009) posited that the assessment of culture and ICC is always loaded with subjectivity which poses various challenges to teachers. Also, to perform a proper assessment of culture and ICC as suggested by the intercultural approach to language teaching, teachers have to design and employ various forms of assessment instruments (e.g. problem-

solving tasks, case studies and portfolios) which imply additional workload for teachers (Gu, 2016). Because of this lack of systematic assessment and possible increase in their workload, it comes as no surprise that teachers feel reluctant to fully adopt the intercultural approach to their language teaching despite their positive attitudes toward this approach.

Apart from the above factors, inadequate administrative support and learning materials that can be used to promote ICC in a language classroom can be considered obstacles to ICC integration into language teaching (Barletta Manjarrés, 2009; Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Gu, 2016; Young & Sachdev, 2011). As for administrative support, Gu (2016) explicitly reported that “the lack of administrative encouragement, support or imperatives” (p.12) resulted in the low integration of ICC into foreign language teaching. In terms of relevant learning materials, presently, learning materials that can be used to support an incorporation of ICC into foreign language teaching are still short in supply (Barletta Manjarrés, 2009; Garrido & Álvarez, 2006). Most readily-available textbooks are still designed to support linguistic competence, rather than ICC. Additionally, the fact that ICC is still not the major goal for foreign language learning in the eyes of teachers, learners and their parents (Sercu, 2006; Onalan, 2005, as cited in Tran & Dang, 2014), and that teachers do not have enough time to cover the cultural content due to the abundance of curriculum content (Karbinar & Guler, 2013) led to the teachers’ minimal adoption of the intercultural approach to language teaching.

Methodology

Context of Study

This study was conducted at a leading private university in Thailand. Presently, this university offers both undergraduate and graduate programs of study, including international programs. Thai language is the medium of instruction for most courses offered at this university. In the year 2015 when this study was conducted, a total of 30,125 students enrolled at this university; 28,380 of which were undergraduate students and 1,745 of which were graduate students (Jampanoi, 2015).

The English Language Institute (Institute) is an academic division responsible for teaching foundation English courses under the general education curriculum at this university. In 2015, the Institute offered seven foundation English courses to undergraduates. Although details and main emphases of these courses are not identical, these courses share a similar goal of developing communicative competence in English language for university's graduates. This goal was in fact the Institute's vision at that time. As for the teaching approach, it was clearly stated in the Institute's philosophy that a functional approach was applied to EFL teaching to enable learners to communicate in practical environments. With this philosophy and the above vision, it is possible to state that English language teaching at this university is communication-based.

Participants

At the time when this study was conducted, there were eighteen EFL teachers working as full-time lecturers for the Institute whereby sixteen of them were Thai EFL teachers and two of them were native English speakers (American and Australian nationals). Apart from these full-time lecturers, the Institute employed approximately 20-40 EFL teachers as part-time lecturers on a term-time basis.

For the purpose of this study, sixteen full-time Thai EFL teachers (five males and eleven females) of the Institute were purposively selected as the study's participants on the grounds that they had taught English as a foreign language to undergraduate students. Their teaching experience in this context enabled them to be an appropriate source of data for the study. In terms of age, nine participants (56.25%) were older than 40, and seven of them (43.75%) were 40 or younger. As for their length of teaching at this context, six participants (37.5%) had been teaching here for 6 months to 5 years while the rest (62.5%) had been teaching here for more than five years. Additionally, all participants had completed at least a master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) or English language teaching-related fields.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

This study was designed as mixed methods research, using both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the study's research questions. The quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire which had been developed from (i) the literature concerning the intercultural approach to language teaching and ICC (e.g. Aguilar, 2007; Byram, 1997, 2009; Byram et al., 2002; Corbett, 2003); and (ii) previous studies on teachers' perceptions of ICC by Alyan (2011), Cheng (2007), Tian (2013) and Zhou (2011). These studies were also based on Byram's ICC Model. The questionnaire consisted of four sections. Section 1 was designed in the form of alternative selection to obtain the participants' demographic data. Section 2, in the form of an open-ended question, investigated the participants' perceptions of ICC. Sections 3 and 4, both in the form of rating scales, explored the participants' perceived possibility of integrating ICC into their teaching and their perceptions toward the extent to which ICC contributes to learners' English communicative competence, respectively.

To ensure that all questions in the questionnaire were valid, five professors holding doctoral degrees in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) were requested to perform an item-objective congruency (IOC) test of each question item on the questionnaire. In this regard, a score of item acceptance was established at 0.5 or above as recommended by Rovinellin and Hambelton (1997), as cited in Turner and Carlson (2003). The IOC test of the questionnaire revealed that all questions on the questionnaire were rated from 0.6 to 1, suggesting that all questions were valid.

The qualitative data were collected through thirteen semi-structured interviews. Only thirteen participants were interviewed because the other three participants were not available to participate. Also, the interviews were conducted after the questionnaire data analysis was completed, and they were guided by an interview protocol which was developed from the questionnaire's findings. The interviews were employed to gain further insights into the participants' perceptions of ICC, including their views on how ICC can be integrated into their teaching and ICC's role in learners' English communicative competence.

Similar to the questionnaire, the interview protocol was tried out with five part-time lecturers of the Institute to ensure that all questions

in the protocol were valid. The trial revealed that overall, the interview protocol was comprehensible and successfully yielded required data.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed through a use of descriptive statistics (i.e. frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation). As for the qualitative data from Section 2 of the questionnaire and the interviews, they were analyzed through a constant comparative analysis in which the data were analyzed into smaller topics or issues and sorted into categories according to the recurring themes (see Merriam, 2009). In addition, the quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated together in order to obtain the most comprehensive answers to the study's research questions and to enhance the validity and reliability of the data analysis. Also, to ensure that the interview data were objectively analyzed and interpreted, member-checking was used; that is, a summary of interview data interpretation was presented to each interview respondent who was requested to examine whether the summary accurately reflected their perceptions or experiences expressed during the interviews.

Findings

In this section, findings were reported to answer the study's research questions.

RQ1: What are Thai EFL teachers' perceptions toward ICC?

An open-ended question in Section 2 of the questionnaire inquired of the participants to provide their own definitions of ICC. A constant comparative analysis of these answers revealed that most participants generally perceived ICC as something involving communication between people from different cultures.

Apart from the above general perception of ICC, the answers to this question in the questionnaire exhibited four key elements of ICC as perceived by these participants. The first element, perceived by 10 participants, was cultural differences between communicators. Closely linked with the first element, the second element, indicated by eight participants, was an awareness or understanding of such cultural differences. The next element, perceived by three participants, was that

ICC occurred in communication that was made through a lingua franca. Finally, ICC involved a use of body or nonverbal language. This element was perceived by two participants.

To elicit more information concerning the participants' perceptions of ICC, during the interviews, the 13 interview participants were asked to express their views on whether ICC was similar to or different from communicative competence (i.e. CLT's ultimate goal). For this question, the interview respondents' answers can be divided into two groups. Seven respondents perceived that ICC and communicative competence were different while six respondents perceived that they were similar to each other.

What is intriguing about this interview finding was the explanations these two groups of respondents gave to support their answers. Despite giving contrary answers, these two groups used the same reason to support their answers. According to T1, "They are different. ICC is an ability to communicate with people from different cultures, but when people with similar cultural backgrounds communicate together, they only need communicative competence." On the contrary, T3 remarked: "They are the same. People use communicative competence when communicating with anyone from the same country or having similar cultures. But they use ICC when communicating with foreigners. To me, communicative competence and ICC are both communication ability."

From the above answers, it is apparent that regardless of whether the interview respondents viewed that ICC was similar to or different from communicative competence, their supporting reasons revolve around the concept that ICC and communicative competence were basically an ability to communicate, but what makes them different was an interlocutor. According to the respondents, communicative competence was needed when people communicate with anyone having the same or similar cultural backgrounds. In this type of communication, people do not need to focus much on cultural issues because they and their interlocutors share these issues together. Also, as pointed out by eight respondents, basically, communicative competence can help people to get their message across.

However, ICC is what people need when communicating with anyone having a different culture from theirs. In this type of

communication, people are not only required to make their messages comprehensible, but both they and their interlocutors need to be mindful of each other's cultural nuances. Several responses during the interview illustrated this point well. For instance, T14 remarked that "For ICC, it's not only to get a message across, but also cultures across." T8 similarly noted that communicative competence mainly focused on language competence while ICC touched on cultural issues. Additionally, T6 explicated:

If we aim at communicative competence, we primarily focus on helping our students to make themselves understood. That is, they can say what they want to say and they don't need to worry much about cultural issues. But if we aim at ICC, in addition to that, we need to make students aware of cultural nuances, and this cultural awareness can help them to build good first impressions and communicate better. (T6)

In brief, the findings from the questionnaire and interview were consistent with each other. The participants perceived that ICC involves communication between people from different cultures, and that knowledge or awareness of cultural differences between communicators can contribute to the success of the communication. Also, ICC and communicative competence were basically an ability to communicate, but what makes them different was the interlocutor involved in the communication.

RQ2: In the eyes of Thai EFL teachers, how can ICC be integrated into English language teaching?

To obtain the participants' perceptions on how to integrate ICC into English courses, the questionnaire was used to ascertain the participants' perceived possibility of ICC integration into English language teaching. Specifically, Section 3 of the questionnaire asked the participants to rate the degree to which they perceived that the ten ICC components, which were developed from Byram's ICC Model, can be integrated into their teaching. The rating scale used in the questionnaire ranged from greatly possible (4), moderately possible (3), slightly possible (2) to impossible (1). Table 1 shows the participants' perceived possibility for ICC integration into English language teaching.

Table 1: Teachers' Perceived Possibility for ICC Integration into English Language Teaching

ICC Components	Mean	S.D.
Knowledge of foreign cultures	3.56	.629
Knowledge of learners' own cultures	3.50	.516
Ability to compare and contrast Thai and foreign cultures	3.44	.629
Curiosity to understand and respect foreign cultures	3.43	.646
Ability to realize impacts of culture and sociocultural context on people's interactions	3.38	.619
Ability to adapt to new cultural environment or different communication style	3.31	.873
Ability to listen to and observe other people during conversation	3.25	.683
Ability to understand worldviews and feelings of people from other cultures	3.13	.719
Ability to suspend learners' own beliefs or judgment of other people and be open to other people's viewpoints	3.06	.680
Ability to critically evaluate perspectives, practices or products of Thais and people from other cultures based on explicit criteria	2.63	.885

As shown in Table 1, the ten ICC components were perceived by the participants as moderately possible for integrating into their teaching. Specifically, knowledge of foreign cultures was the component that the participants rated with the highest mean (3.56) while the ability to critically evaluate perspectives, practices or products of Thais and people from other cultures based on explicit criteria received the lowest mean (2.63). These findings were then substantiated in the interviews in which a hypothetical question of "What would you say if the Ministry of Education set ICC as one key objective for teaching English at higher education?" was posed to the interview respondents. Surprisingly, all respondents agreed with such an idea of having ICC as one key teaching objective. This interview finding by and large showed that in the eyes of the participants, ICC was possible for integration into English courses.

In connection with the above findings, the interview respondents were then asked to suggest some techniques or activities that can be used to integrate ICC into English language teaching. For this question, seven respondents (T1, T2, T6, T9, T10, T12 and T13) replied that to integrate ICC into their teaching, they would add more information about culture and ICC components into their teaching.

Consistent with the above technique, T3 and T5 replied that teachers may show videos or documentaries about cultural differences among countries to learners from time to time to raise their awareness of cultural differences. In addition, T2 suggested that learners be assigned to watch Hollywood films or listen to English songs and list out the things which they think are different from Thai culture for group discussion in class. Similarly, T8 suggested that learners be assigned to do a self-study project on ICC for class presentation. Apart from this, T5 and T10 suggested that extra-curricular activities allowing learners to mingle with foreigners (e.g. short overseas trip or study tour and short training course) be organized to promote ICC. In addition, T9 suggested some sort of learning-by-doing activities: "To integrate ICC into our teaching, we need activities that allow students to take action. For example, if we want them to know about handshaking, we should let them try handshaking together, not just explain to them."

Given the fact that ICC was not a major goal nor was it formally integrated in English language teaching in this context, the above-suggested techniques and activities could be deemed as being based on the participants' perception of how ICC could be promoted or integrated into their teaching, not their actual teaching practice. One thing worth mentioning was that while most participants managed to suggest the techniques to promote or integrate ICC into their teaching, three respondents (T7, T11 and T14) replied that they had no clue of how to do so. This response mirrors one major challenge in integrating ICC into language teaching earlier reviewed.

In short, according to the questionnaire and the interview findings, the participants perceived that ICC was quite possible for integration into English courses. Also, over 50% of the interview respondents perceived that one possible way to integrate ICC into their teaching was to add more information about culture and ICC components into their teaching.

RQ3: How do Thai EFL teachers perceive ICC's contributions to learners' English communicative competence?

The final section in the questionnaire asked the participants to rate the extent to which they perceived that ICC can help learners to effectively communicate in English on a 4-point scale: very helpful (4), helpful (3), somewhat helpful (2) and not helpful (1). Table 2 presents the findings in this regard.

Table 2: Teachers' Perceptions of ICC's Contribution to Learners' English Communicative Competence

ICC Components	Mean	S.D.
Knowledge of foreign cultures	3.56	.629
Ability to adapt to new cultural environment or different communication style	3.44	.629
Knowledge of learners' own cultures	3.44	.629
Curiosity to understand and respect foreign cultures	3.40	.507
Ability to compare and contrast Thai and foreign cultures	3.38	.619
Ability to listen to and observe other people during conversation	3.31	.704
Ability to understand worldviews and feelings of people from other cultures	3.25	.775
Ability to realize impacts of culture and sociocultural context on people's interaction	3.19	.750
Ability to suspend learners' belief or judgment of other people and be open to other people's viewpoints	2.81	.750
Ability to critically evaluate perspectives, practices or products of Thais and people from other cultures based on explicit criteria	2.69	.793

Table 2 shows the participants' overall perception that ICC was helpful to learners. Specifically, they perceived that the knowledge of foreign cultures tended to help learners most while the ability to critically evaluate perspectives, practices and products of Thais and people from other cultures based on explicit criteria was not very helpful. The latter finding, by and large, implies that to the participants,

the ability to critically evaluate different perspectives based on explicit criteria was least important for their learners.

In connection with the above findings, during the interview, the question, “Do you think these 10 ICC components can help students to better communicate in English with foreigners?” was raised to the respondents. The respondents’ responses to this question can be divided into three groups with details as explicated below.

The first response, given by eight respondents, was “Yes, these ICC components can help.” According to these respondents, the ICC components were helpful because ICC can boost learners’ confidence in using English for communication; enhance communication effectiveness; and make learners more aware of cultural differences which can lead to better communication.

The second response was that ICC can help to a certain extent. This answer was given by T2 and T8 as shown below.

I think ICC can help a little bit. As we discussed, ICC is all about culture. If students have all of these components like a curiosity to understand and respect foreign cultures and knowledge of learners' own cultures, these can help students to have more topics for talking. For example, they can ask the foreigners about their cultures and then tell the foreigners how Thai culture is different from the foreigners' cultures. When the students can talk more, it means more speaking practices. This is just what ICC can help, I think. (T2)

The students' English communication should improve, but not a lot. ICC can help them to use English appropriately to the situation. I mean with ICC, they know what topics they can talk with foreigners and what topics they should avoid. However, it doesn't mean that if students don't have ICC, they won't be able to communicate. (T8)

The third response was given by T9, T10 and T14. According to these respondents, ICC did not play any significant role in helping learners to have better communication in English. Set out below were their responses to this question.

In case of communication, I think linguistic competence comes first. But these ICC components can enhance interaction. In

other words, linguistic competence can help students to get message across, but ICC can strengthen relationship between students and their interlocutors. When students are in workplace, ICC can enhance their image too. They will look very professional and ICC can make them superior to others. (T9)

I don't think they can help. All these ten components are about culture and they have nothing to do with an ability to use English. They are about knowledge, curiosity, attitudes but none of them say that if students know foreigners' cultures, they will be able to communicate in the language of those foreigners. (T10)

Language ability is still necessary. If students know some English words or phrases, they can use those words or phrases for communication although to an extent. If they have solid English background, they can succeed in communicating with foreigners. So I think that these 10 ICC components are not as necessary as language ability. (T14)

In conclusion, the findings from the questionnaire and the interview had certain commonalities and differences. As for commonalities, the questionnaire and the interview findings revealed that most participants perceived ICC as being helpful to learners' English communicative competence. In terms of differences, while the questionnaire data did not show anything indicating that ICC was not helpful to learners' English communicative competence, a few interview respondents held such an idea. Nevertheless, although these respondents perceived that ICC did not considerably help learners to have better English communicative competence, they perceived that ICC could have positive indirect impacts which could lead to improvement in English communicative competence. This point was illustrated by T10's following remark:

ICC can help learners to become curious and interested in learning English. For example, if they are curious about English culture, this curiosity will drive them to learn more about English which can lead to better English. A good example is Korean boy band fans who can speak Korean because they really want to know and communicate with the band. (T10)

Discussion

Perceptions of ICC

According to the participants, ICC involves communication between people from different cultural backgrounds and ICC has four key elements: cultural differences between communicators; cultural difference awareness; a use of lingua franca as a medium of communication; and a use of nonverbal language. This overall perception of ICC is fairly consistent with theoretical definitions of ICC provided by Byram et al. (2002), and Fantini and Tirmizi (2006). It also echoes the finding from Alyan's (2011) study.

However, an in-depth analysis of the above perception in comparison with the ICC definitions provided by ICC scholars reveals that the participants' perception simply explains with whom and in which type of communication ICC is involved. Their perception of ICC does not touch on cultural appropriateness during communication which is heavily emphasized by the ICC scholars (e.g. Alptekin, 2002; Corbett, 2003; Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006). This is one major gap between the teachers' perceptions and the theoretical explanation of ICC.

In the researcher's view, the above ICC perception of the participant is not beyond expectation and can be justified by the fact that the participants did not conduct an in-depth study of ICC or intercultural communication. As such, it is not sensible to expect them to give an exact definition of ICC in the same way as the ICC scholars. Nevertheless, their overall perception of ICC could be deemed as giving a promising start for the integration of ICC into English courses on the grounds that they are not totally new to ICC concept and they have some grasp of it.

The other interesting finding from this study is that most participants perceived that an ability to critically evaluate perspectives, practices or products of Thais and people from other cultures based on explicit criteria was least important and least possible for integration into English courses. This ability was, in fact, elaborated from a critical cultural awareness, the most significant element of IC under the ICC Model that should be promoted in foreign language teaching (Byram, 1977, 2009). Put simply, this finding is totally contrary to ICC

theoretical explanation. Nevertheless, it closely resembles the findings reported by Tian (2013) and Zhou (2011).

The perception that critical cultural awareness is least important for integration into English courses can be illustrated by one participant's (T10) response during the interview; that is, she did not see why learners need to critically evaluate culture. According to this participant, just understanding why interlocutors in the communication behave themselves in a particular way is enough; no need to do any critical cultural evaluation. In the researcher's opinion, this finding may be partly derived from some major aspects of Thai culture (e.g. harmony orientation, blind obedience and conflict avoidance) which are not very conducive to critical evaluation. These aspects of Thai culture, which have been postulated by Hofstede (1991), may cause the participants to feel awkward when they have to train their learners to critically evaluate anything, including culture.

How to integrate ICC into English language classrooms

When being asked how they would integrate ICC into their teaching, most participants replied that they would simply give extra cultural information to learners. When this finding is compared with the theoretical explanations of ICC and the intercultural approach to language teaching, it is apparent that the participants did not have a firm grasp of the intercultural approach to language teaching. According to several ICC proponents (e.g. Byram, 1997; Barletta Manjarrés, 2009; Gu, 2016; Liaw, 2006; Sercu, 2006), to teach culture by passing on cultural knowledge to learners is a traditional way of teaching culture and is not sufficient, nor is it effective, to enable learners to be intercultural speakers.

Nevertheless, while the finding in this regard does not concur with the theoretical propositions of ICC and the intercultural approach to language teaching, it is precisely consistent with the argument made by many scholars (e.g. Barletta Manjarrés, 2009; Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Gu, 2016; Sercu, 2006; Tran & Dang, 2014) that when the teachers do not thoroughly understand ICC or the intercultural approach to language teaching, they usually turn to teach culture in the traditional way. This finding, again, reflects the major obstacle to integrating ICC into foreign language teaching, and is similar to the

findings reported by Tian (2013) and Zhou (2011) who explored perceptions of Chinese teachers of English toward ICC.

ICC's contributions to learners' English communicative Competence

Unlike those of the previous studies (e.g. Liaw, 2006; Planken et al., 2004; Popsecu & Iordachescu, 2015), the participants did not perceive that ICC has a direct impact on learners' linguistic competence or language skills (e.g. knowing more words and speaking more fluently). Instead, the participants perceived that ICC can somewhat or indirectly help learners to improve their English communicative competence by informing them of what they should do or avoid doing when communicating with anyone having a different cultural background.

Nevertheless, the above perception of the participants can be regarded as consistent with Byram's (1997) postulation that the intercultural approach to language teaching also encompasses and underscores non-linguistic aspects of communication. This perception was made clear during the interviews. According to the interview respondents, with ICC, learners would be more aware of cultural differences, and this cultural awareness could lead to better communication. Besides, the interview respondents perceived that ICC can help learners to have more confidence in using English for communication. However, as explicitly indicated by some interview respondents, ICC is still secondary to linguistic competence, and ICC per se cannot make learners communicate fluently in the language learned.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Like other studies, this study is not free from limitations. The first limitation was derived from the fact that this study was carried out with only sixteen teachers at one private university. Thus, its findings cannot be held true for Thai EFL teachers at other higher education institutions in Thailand. Nevertheless, although the findings cannot be generalized to all Thai EFL teachers, they are transferable to those in the contexts with similar characteristics (e.g. other private universities in Thailand). The other limitation arises from the study's primary

objective of investigating teachers' perceptions toward ICC. With this main aim, the findings can shed light on teachers' understanding of ICC, but do not provide any concrete evidence of effectiveness or degree of impact of ICC on learners' English communicative competence.

In connection with the above limitations, there are a number of issues which can be the subjects of investigation in the future. First, given that this study was carried out in just one private university in Thailand, it can be replicated in other higher education institutions in Thailand so as to provide a more comprehensive account of Thai EFL teachers' perceptions toward ICC. Another type of study that can be extended from this study is a study that explores the effectiveness of ICC in enhancing Thai EFL learners' English communicative competence. In other words, future studies could be conducted to investigate whether or not ICC can actually improve Thai EFL learners' English communicative competence; the extent to which ICC can improve Thai EFL learners' English communicative competence; or what language skills or aspects (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar or vocabulary) are most likely to be improved by ICC.

Conclusion

This study investigated Thai EFL teachers' perceptions toward ICC and discussed how these perceptions are similar to and different from the theoretical explication of ICC. The findings revealed that the teachers had a general, not a firm grasp of, ICC. Also, they did not have thorough understanding of how to effectively integrate ICC into their teaching. These findings suggest that professional development on ICC and the intercultural approach to language teaching be put in place if ICC is to be set as one learning objective and to be successfully integrated into English language learning. In other words, ELT pre-service and in-service teacher education programs as well as professional development courses need to be revised by including ICC as an integral part thereof. This inclusion is strongly required in order to meet the growing demand for more intercultural speakers as a result of globalization. Additionally, most teacher participants perceived that ICC can enhance learners' English communicative competence, but to a certain extent only. This finding, by and large, reflects that for these

teachers, ICC is important, but not the most important facet of the curriculum for their learners.

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