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Assessing intercultural communicative competence: a survey-based needs analysis of Thai university students

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Abstract: Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) remains underexplored in Thai EFL university contexts. This study investigated the ICC levels of 159 third-year English-major students at a public university with an aim to identify their intercultural communication needs. A survey questionnaire developed based on Byram's (1997, 2021) ICC model, which demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$, $\omega = 0.82$), was used in data collection. Students had a high level of ICC across all five components; emotional tasks were the most frequently encountered while knowledge-based tasks were the least frequent but among the most difficult. Explaining their own culture's history or politics to a foreigner was the only item rated as a high-priority need. Online gaming and social media were the most common contexts for intercultural contact; linguistic skills were the most urgent training need. These findings highlight the need for teachers to incorporate more specific learning activities to promote language learners' ICC in addition to language skills.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence; ICC; needs analysis; Thai university students.

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1 Introduction

English is one of the most influential languages in the world, widely used as an international means of communication across such fields as education, science, business, trade, media, technology, tourism, and global organisations. In fact, the English language has become the world's most widely used language of communication, with the British Council (2024) reporting that around the world, 2.3 billion people speak it either as a first

or as an additional language. Evidently, English plays a vital role in facilitating effective communication in today's globalised world (Marlina and Giri, 2024; Rubio-Alcalá et al., 2023). In Thailand, English has become deeply embedded in everyday public life, influencing local language practices in lexical borrowing, orthography, and phonology (Huebner, 2006). This influence has since continued, with English borrowing now widely accepted as a natural part of Thai communication (Whanchit and Sukkaew, 2023). However, effective communication involves more than linguistic proficiency; it requires intercultural communicative competence (henceforth ICC).

English functions as a lingua franca, so interactions involve speakers from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These conditions emphasise the importance of ICC in ensuring that communication is both effective and culturally appropriate. For this reason, ICC is one of the main requirements of 21st century skills and EU key-competence frameworks for active citizenship and employability, especially in education and international business (Djafri and Hasanah, 2025; Sarwari et al., 2024; Simões, 2021; Zhou et al., 2024). Without sufficient ICC, speakers may risk misunderstanding cultural norms, causing unintended offence, or failing to reach shared understanding even when their linguistic proficiency is high (Iswandari and Ardi, 2022; Sarwari et al., 2024). In response to these evolving communicative demands, English Language Teaching (ELT) has increasingly expanded its focus beyond linguistic competence to include the development of ICC (Genc and Bada, 2005; Iswandari and Ardi, 2022; Permatasari, 2023; Prasetyarini et al., 2025; Sevime Sahin, 2020; Zhou et al., 2024).

In Thailand, higher education institutions have intensified their expectations for graduates who need to be able to participate in both academic and professional contexts in English in multicultural environments (Boonteerarak et al., 2025; Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak, 2017; Kosashunhanan, 2025). As Thailand's engagement within ASEAN and the broader international community continues to expand, for successful communication in these settings, students need to be equipped with not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to interact appropriately and effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Kosashunhanan, 2025; Sarwari et al., 2024). However, in today's current practice, ICC is not yet explicitly integrated into teaching practices or systematically assessed across English-major programmes and English courses, which inevitably creates a gap between higher education institutions' goals and graduates' preparedness (Boonteerarak et al., 2025; Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak, 2017; Kosashunhanan, 2025).

Accordingly, a theoretical framework is needed to more clearly define ICC and to guide how ICC can be systematically taught and assessed across language teaching and learning contexts. Byram (1997, 2021) identifies five components of ICC, referred to as *savoirs* a French term broadly meaning 'knowings', each of which addresses a different dimension of intercultural competence. The first component, *savoir être*, refers to attitudes of curiosity, openness, and respect towards other cultures, as well as a willingness to suspend judgement and engage with cultural differences. The second one, *savoirs*, refers to knowledge of one's own as well as that of other social groups, including their cultural practices, values, and the norms which involve social interaction. The third term, *savoir comprendre*, refers to the ability to interpret and relate cultural texts or events from different cultural contexts, and the fourth one, *savoir apprendre/faire*, refers to the ability to apply existing knowledge, attitudes, and skills appropriately in new and unpredictable intercultural situations. Finally, the fifth component, *savoir s'engager*, refers to critical cultural awareness which is the ability to critically evaluate the

perspectives, practices, and products of both one's own and other cultures against explicit and well-reasoned criteria. Therefore, these five *savoirs* provide a practical and comprehensive basis for assessing ICC in foreign language education, which results in a wide adoption of Byram's model in various language teaching and learning contexts including the present study.

In EFL contexts, assessing ICC is not simply about measuring students' language ability; it is about understanding what students can and cannot do interculturally so that teachers and course designers can make better decisions about curriculum and instruction (Deardorff, 2009; Fantini, 2009; Xu et al., 2025). Needs analysis is a systematic approach generally used to identify the existing gap between what students currently know and what they need to be able to do, which makes it a practical tool for curriculum and course design (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). When investigating ICC, a needs analysis approach is particularly suitable for identifying learners' intercultural strengths and gaps, given that ICC encompasses multiple dimensions, including attitudes, knowledge, and skills, that cannot be captured by language assessment alone (Byram, 1997, 2021; Deardorff, 2009; Trang and Phuong, 2023). In the present study, a survey questionnaire served as the instrument through which the needs analysis framework (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998) was operationalised, enabling systematic collection of data on students' current ICC levels and perceived learning needs. Generally, survey-based instruments have been adopted as the primary data collection tool in ICC needs analysis research, as they allow for scalable collection of learners' self-reported perceptions across multiple intercultural dimensions in contexts where standardised ICC tests are unavailable (Kosashunhanan, 2025; Sevimeel-Sahin, 2020; Trang and Phuong, 2023), highlighting areas that need more attention in teaching, as well as curriculum and course design.

Although ICC has gained increasing attention in English language education research, most previous studies have focused on teacher perceptions (Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak, 2017; Young and Sachdev, 2011; Zhang et al., 2024), specific professional groups such as tourism and hospitality (Trang and Phuong, 2023), or general language learning outcomes (Sarwari et al., 2024). Previous studies undertaken with EFL learners in university contexts in Taiwan and China have found that learners tended to score higher on attitudinal dimensions of ICC than on knowledge and skills components, while knowledge and skills dimensions in fact responded more readily to explicit instruction (Huang, 2021; Liu et al., 2022). A systematic review of ICC research in EFL settings has further revealed that the majority of empirical studies had centred on teachers' cognition, beliefs, and practices, with student-focused investigation of ICC needs remaining comparatively underexplored (Iswandari and Ardi, 2022). In particular, studies have not systematically assessed students' ICC needs across all components of the theoretical framework proposed by Byram. In Thailand, research on ICC is still limited, and previous studies have examined either teachers' perspectives or how ICC was taught in the classroom, rather than students' self-reported ICC or their needs regarding ICC development (Boonteerarak et al., 2025; Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak, 2017; Kosashunhanan, 2025). As a result, an empirical study that directly investigates how Thai university students perceive their own needs of ICC across Byram's five components is evidently needed as the findings are expected to provide evidence to improve curriculum design and assessment practices in English-major programmes in Thailand when it comes to promotion of Thai students' ICC.

To address such an existing gap in ICC research, the present study, which was a survey-based needs analysis was conducted to assess the ICC of Thai EFL learners so as to identify their ICC learning needs. The study objectives were to explore the current levels of ICC of Thai EFL learners and to identify their ICC learning needs.

2 Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study comprised 159 third-year English major students enrolled in an English for Intercultural Communication course at a public university in Thailand in the second semester of the 2025 academic year.

The course was offered in four sections, all of which followed the same course curriculum; therefore, section level comparisons were not part of the study aims. This particular sample was selected for several reasons. First, as third-year students, all 159 participants had already completed a substantial sequence of compulsory English courses prior to enrolment in the ICC course, including three listening and speaking courses, and three reading and writing courses progressing from introductory to advance levels, two literature courses, two structure courses, three translation courses, and a course entitled English varieties and cultures of English native speakers. Such prior coursework ensured that the participants possessed a sufficient linguistic foundation and had received some degree of formal exposure to cultural content before the study was conducted. Furthermore, the English for intercultural communication course itself represented the first course in their programme to address intercultural communication as its primary and systematic focus. The course covered fundamental concepts of English for international communication, including the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to develop intercultural competence, cultural dimensions in global contacts, barriers to intercultural communication, and negotiating and giving presentations in intercultural contexts.

Regarding English proficiency, the participants self-rated their level of English with the majority reporting having a moderate level of English proficiency (75.47%), followed by high (12.58%), low (11.32%), and very high (0.63%). It should be noted that these figures reflect participants' self-assessment, not results of any standardised English proficiency tests.

With regard to human participation protection, the present study was carried out with strict adherence to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was granted by the Kasetsart University Research Ethics Committee (COE No. COE69/007). Prior to participating in this study, the participants were informed that their participation was solely voluntary and both verbal and written informed consent was obtained from all participants before they filled out the questionnaire.

2.2 Research instruments

The data collection instrument was an ICC questionnaire developed by the researcher based on Byram's (1997, 2021) five-component framework of ICC, often referred to as Byram's *savoirs*: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part 1 (general information) collected participants' background data. Part 2

(ICC) assessed students' ICC across the five components using a five-point Likert scale comprising a total of 21 items distributed as follows: attitudes (5 items); knowledge (4 items); skills of interpreting and relating (4 items); skills of discovery and interaction (4 items); and critical cultural awareness (4 items). Part 3 (intercultural communication needs) examined students' perceived needs in intercultural communication contexts. Item 4 under attitudes dimension was negatively worded, meaning that agreeing with it reflected a lower level of intercultural attitude rather than a higher one, and reverse scoring was used to maintain directional consistency across the scale (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994), ensuring that higher values consistently indicated stronger ICC. A single negatively worded item is generally included in an instrument to reduce acquiescence bias, which refers to the tendency for respondents to agree with statements regardless of content. It also served as a check for respondent attentiveness (DeVellis, 2016), and using only one such item helped avoid the cognitive confusion and potential drop in internal consistency that often occur when a scale uses too many reversed items (DeVellis, 2016; van Sonderen et al., 2013). The questionnaire was written in English, as the participants were English-major students who had a rather advanced level of English proficiency and who regularly engaged with English texts in their coursework. The questionnaire took no more than 40 minutes to complete.

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of three experts in applied linguistics and EFL education prior to data collection. The instrument was revised based on their feedback before being finalised for use.

Following instrument validation and finalisation, the reliability of the questionnaire was determined using the Cronbach's alpha (α) and McDonald's omega (ω). Table 1 presents the reliability coefficients for each of the five subscales and the overall scale. As shown in Table 1, the overall 21-item ICC scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$, $\omega = 0.82$). At the subscale level, reliability coefficients ranged from $\alpha = 0.41$ to 0.62 and $\omega = 0.50$ – 0.63 . The relatively lower subscale values reflect the nature of Byram's (1997, 2021) five-component ICC framework, in which each component measures a distinct aspect of intercultural competence rather than a single unified construct. As Schmitt (1996) has suggested, alpha values in this range are acceptable in exploratory research.

Table 1 Internal consistency reliability of the ICC questionnaire

<i>Component</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Cronbach's α</i>	<i>McDonald's ω</i>
Attitudes	5	0.41	0.50
Knowledge	4	0.51	0.52
Skills of interpreting and relating	4	0.62	0.63
Skills of discovery and interaction	4	0.59	0.61
Critical cultural awareness	4	0.59	0.59
Overall ICC scale	21	0.81	0.82

2.3 Data collection

Data were collected in January 2025, approximately six weeks into the second semester of the 2025 academic year via an online questionnaire platform. Data collection was administered with all 159 participants simultaneously across the four course sections. By this point, the participants had been introduced to key theoretical frameworks including

Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and Hall’s concepts of high and low context communication in Weeks 3 and 4 of the semester, but they had not yet received instruction on the five components of ICC as defined in Byram’s (1997, 2021) framework. This timing was methodologically relevant, as the participants had received some foundational exposure to intercultural communication concepts before completing the questionnaire; therefore, their responses capture their ICC awareness at an intermediate stage of the course rather than at baseline or completion.

2.4 Framework of analysis

The present study adopted Byram’s (1997, 2021) ICC model as the analytical framework for interpreting the data because it provides a comprehensive and operationalisable account of ICC across five distinct components: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997, 2021). Byram’s model was selected because it has been widely adopted in EFL contexts as a practical framework for assessing and developing ICC in formal language education settings (Iswandari and Ardi, 2022; Permatasari, 2023; Zhou et al., 2024). Each of the five components served as an analytical category against which students’ self-reported ICC levels and learning needs were interpreted and discussed.

2.5 Data analysis

Quantitative data from the 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics, including mean (M), and standard deviation (SD). Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha (α) and McDonald’s omega (ω), with a threshold of 0.70 as acceptable reliability (Hayes and Coutts, 2020; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Mean scores for Part 2 (the ICC components) and Part 3 (the ICC learning needs) were interpreted using the criteria proposed by Best (1981), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Criteria for interpreting mean scores and priority classification based on best (1981)

Mean score range	ICC level (RQ1)	Frequency level (RQ2)	Difficulty level (RQ2)	Priority (RQ2)
4.21–5.00	Very high	Always	Very difficult	High
3.41–4.20	High	Often	Difficult	High
2.61–3.40	Moderate	Sometimes	Neutral	Medium
1.81–2.60	Low	Rarely	Easy	Low
1.00–1.80	Very Low	Never	Very easy	Low

To address RQ2, the ICC learning needs were examined through two scales: a frequency scale measuring how often students encountered each intercultural task, and a difficulty scale measuring how challenging they found each task.

The difficulty mean of each item was used; however, no item reached the very difficult range ($M = 4.21\text{--}5.00$), and no item reached the very easy range ($M = 1.00\text{--}1.80$). Since no item fell within the very difficult or very easy ranges, retaining these as separate categories would have resulted in empty classifications that did not reflect the actual distribution of the data; therefore, the top two and bottom two levels

were combined to ensure that all priority categories contained meaningful data. Consequently, there were three priority categories:

- 1 high priority (very difficult and difficult range)
- 2 medium priority (neutral range)
- 3 low priority (very easy and easy range) as shown in Table 2.

For Section2: the situation needs, the contexts of intercultural interaction (Q15) were reported based on students' rankings, while the most needed training area (Q16) was analysed using frequency (f) and percentage (%), as this item was a single-choice nominal item rather than a Likert-scale measure.

3 Results

3.1 Part 1: General information

Most participants identified themselves as women (62.90%), followed by men (28.30%), and non-binary (8.80%). Almost half of the participants (47.17%) were 21 years old, followed by those who aged 20 (37.10%). Smaller proportions were 22 (12.58%), 23 (2.52%), and 19 (0.63%) years old.

Regarding academic background, most students reported mid-range GPAs: 33.33% fell in the 2.50–2.99 range and 32.08% in the 3.00–3.49 range. Smaller proportions reported GPAs of 2.00–2.49 (18.87%), 3.50 or higher (7.55%), or below 2.00 (8.18%). Three quarters of the students rated their English proficiency as moderate (75.47%); fewer rated it as high (12.58%) or low (11.32%), and only one student selected very high, which indicated a generally intermediate self-assessment.

In terms of prior exposure to intercultural courses, 103 students (64.78%) indicated that the course they were taking this semester was their first course explicitly related to culture or intercultural communication, whereas 56 students (35.22%) had previously taken a intercultural communication-related course. The students' intercultural experience was limited because most participants (69.18%) had never been abroad. Among students who had travelled overseas ($n = 49$), almost two-thirds reported that the purpose was tourism (63.26%), followed by study/exchange (20.42%), family visits (8.16%), participation in the work and travel program (6.12%), and other purposes (2.04%). Across the full sample, 14.47% reported traveling to another country once, 10.69% reported going abroad two to three times, and 5.66% reported traveling more than three times to another country. With respect to the most recent stay abroad ($n = 49$), trips were typically brief: 59.18% reported stays of less than one week and 20.42% reported stays of one to four weeks, whereas fewer reported longer stays (1–3 months: 10.20%; 4–6 months: 2.04%; longer than 6 months: 8.16%).

In face-to-face settings, nearly half of the participants (47.17%) stated they interacted with people from other countries only rarely (a few times a year), and 2.52% reported interacting very often (several times a week). However, for online interaction, 31.45% reported interacting online often or very often, compared with 10.70% for face-to-face contact. In the multiple-response item on interaction settings, 'social media/online communities' was the most selected situation, chosen by 36.68%, followed by 'travel/tourist places in Thailand' at 22.26%, and 'in class at university' at 19.75%. other

settings, such as ‘part-time job/workplace’ (9.40%), and ‘language exchange or online project’ (8.46%) were reported less frequently.

3.2 *Part 2 Intercultural communicative competence*

The finding indicated that the third-year English major students who participated in this study generally had a high level of ICC across all five components, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Summary Byram’s model of ICC

<i>Rank</i>	<i>ICC components</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>Level</i>
1	Attitudes	3.77	0.500	High
2	Critical cultural awareness	3.64	0.598	High
3	Knowledge	3.61	0.575	High
4	Skills of interpreting and relating	3.54	0.636	High
5	Skills of discovery and interaction	3.50	0.671	High

Students showed positive attitudes toward intercultural communication. They reported the strongest response to willingness to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds (item 1, $M = 4.11$, high) and interest in learning about everyday life in other cultures (item 5, $M = 4.02$, high); however, resisting immediate negative judgments of unfamiliar behaviours had the lowest mean score in this component (item 3, $M = 3.01$, moderate).

Concerning critical cultural awareness, most students agreed that their own worldview was not the only ‘natural’ or ‘correct’ way to see the world (item 19, $M = 4.31$, very high). However, their confidence and depth in doing critical analysis were limited for many students (item 18, $M = 3.40$, moderate).

As regards knowledge, students reported the strongest ability in understanding politeness rules such as greetings and addressing superiors in the cultures which they interacted with most (item 9, $M = 4.14$, high), followed by their ability to explain how social factors such as age, gender, and social status affected the way people spoke in their own culture (item 6, $M = 3.53$, high). However, the awareness of religious and social taboos when they interacted with people from other cultures was only limited (item 7, $M = 3.25$, moderate).

As for skills of interpreting and relating, students indicated the strongest ability in explaining how a specific gesture or behaviour in another culture might be misunderstood by people from their own country (Item 12, $M = 3.40$, high), followed by the ability to identify cultural stereotypes in movies or media (item 13, $M = 3.64$, high). However, comparing a foreign document with a similar one from their own culture to find differences in values received the lowest mean score in this component (item 11, $M = 3.23$, moderate).

Regarding skills of discovery and interaction, although the overall mean score remained within the high range, it was quite close to the moderate level. Students reported that the strongest ability in adjusting their body language to make someone from another culture feel comfortable (item 15, $M = 3.82$, high); however, they had limited strategies to use when they realised their own cultural reference was not understood (item 16, $M = 3.36$, moderate), and they rarely had opportunities to interact with foreigners to test their cultural knowledge (item 17, $M = 3.12$, moderate).

3.3 Part 3 ICC learning needs

The ICC learning needs of Thai third-year English-major students were examined using two scales:

Table 4 ICC learning needs: frequency and difficulty (N = 159)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Freq M</i>	<i>Freq SD</i>	<i>Freq level</i>	<i>Diff M</i>	<i>Diff SD</i>	<i>Diff level</i>	<i>Priority</i>
Knowledge	Knowing appropriate greetings and politeness rules	3.87	0.80	Often	2.18	1.01	Easy	Low
	Understanding religious/cultural taboos	3.33	1.04	Sometimes	2.66	0.89	Neutral	Medium
	Identifying social hierarchy in foreign group	2.43	1.29	Rarely	2.74	0.96	Neutral	Medium
	Explaining own culture's history/politics	2.19	0.98	Rarely	3.49	0.98	Difficult	High
	Category Mean	2.96		Sometimes	2.77		Neutral	
Interaction	Adjusting body language	3.53	0.96	Often	2.54	1.02	Easy	Low
	Keeping conversation going with a language barrier	3.42	1.00	Often	2.90	1.01	Neutral	Medium
	Asking for clarification on cultural references	3.38	1.14	Sometimes	2.39	1.00	Easy	Low
	Interacting in unstructured social settings	2.57	1.11	Rarely	2.92	0.93	Neutral	Medium
	Category mean	3.22		Sometimes	2.69		Neutral	
Interpretation	Understanding intercultural humour/jokes	3.41	0.94	Often	2.76	1.08	Neutral	Medium
	Identifying indirect meaning (yes/no)	3.21	1.09	Sometimes	2.85	0.98	Neutral	Medium
	Recognising cultural vs. linguistic misunderstanding	3.19	0.96	Sometimes	2.75	0.85	Neutral	Medium
	Category mean	3.27		Sometimes	2.79		Neutral	
Emotional	Remaining patient with accented speech	4.19	1.15	Often	1.77	0.95	Very Easy	Low

Table 4 ICC learning needs: frequency and difficulty (N = 159) (continued)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Freq M</i>	<i>Freq SD</i>	<i>Freq level</i>	<i>Diff M</i>	<i>Diff SD</i>	<i>Diff level</i>	<i>Priority</i>
Emotional	Managing anxiety/nervousness with foreigners	3.38	1.06	Sometimes	3.01	1.11	Neutral	Medium
	Suspending judgment about strange behaviour	3.12	1.19	Sometimes	2.65	1.10	Neutral	Medium
	Category mean	3.56		Often	2.48		Easy	

1 a frequency scale measuring how often students encountered each intercultural task

2 a difficulty scale measuring how challenging they found each task.

The 5-point Likert-scales were analysed for both a frequency scale and a difficulty scale as 1 = never to 5 = always, and 1 = very easy to 5 = very difficult, respectively. The needs were organised into four categories: knowledge needs, interaction needs, interpretation needs, and emotional needs. In addition, students reported the contexts in which they most often interacted with people from other cultures and identified the area where they felt they needed the most training.

3.3.1 Knowledge needs

As shown in Table 4, the overall frequency mean for knowledge needs was at the Sometimes level ($M = 2.96$), and the overall difficulty mean was at the neutral level ($M = 2.77$). Knowing the appropriate greetings and politeness rules for different cultures was the most frequently identified knowledge task ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.80$, Often), with 71.70% of students reporting it as often or always; however, they found it easy ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.01$), placing it within the low-priority category. Understanding religious or cultural taboos during conversation was identified at the sometimes level ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.04$), and it was rated at the neutral level of difficulty ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.89$), and this pattern placed it in the medium-priority range. Furthermore, identifying the social hierarchy in a foreign group was rarely identified ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.29$), and it also showed neutral difficulty ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.96$), which indicated a medium-priority need. In contrast, explaining their own culture's history or politics to a foreigner was both the least frequently identified knowledge task ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.98$), with only 9.43% of students reporting it as often or always, and the most difficult task ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.98$). Also, it was the only high-priority item within this category.

3.3.2 Interaction needs

Regarding interaction needs, Table 4 indicates that the overall frequency mean was at the Sometimes level ($M = 3.22$), and the overall difficulty mean was at the neutral level ($M = 2.69$). Adjusting their body language to fit the other person's culture was the most frequently reported interaction task ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.96$, often), with 51.57% of students reporting it as often or always; however, students found it easy ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.02$), marking it as a low-priority need. In addition, keeping a conversation going when there was a language barrier was identified at the often level ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.00$), and was

rated at the neutral difficulty level ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.01$), which was a medium-priority need. Asking for clarification when they did not understand a cultural reference was rated at the sometimes level ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.14$), and it was reported as the easy level of difficulty ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.00$), suggesting a low-priority need. In contrast, interacting with international students or colleagues in unstructured social settings was the least frequently identified interaction task ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.11$); however, it showed the highest difficulty mean ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.93$), making it a medium-priority need. There were no interaction items at the high-priority level.

3.3.3 Interpretation needs

Table 4 also presents the frequency and difficulty means for interpretation needs, with the overall frequency mean at the sometimes level ($M = 3.27$), and the overall difficulty mean at the neutral level ($M = 2.79$). Understanding humour or jokes in an intercultural context was the most frequently reported interpretation task ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.94$, often), with 44.03% of students reporting it as often or always; however, students rated it at the neutral level of difficulty ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.08$), a result consistent with a medium-priority need. Identifying the real meaning behind a 'yes' or 'no' indirect communication was rated at the Sometimes level ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.09$), and it was rated at the Neutral level of difficulty ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.98$), placing this item within a medium-priority range. On the contrary, recognising when a misunderstanding was cultural rather than linguistic was the least frequently reported interpretation task ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.96$, sometimes), and was rated at the neutral level of difficulty ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.85$), which indicated a medium-priority need. None of the interpretation items reached the high-priority level.

3.3.4 Emotional needs

Turning to emotional needs, the overall frequency mean was at the often level ($M = 3.56$), and the overall difficulty mean was at the easy level ($M = 2.48$). Remaining patient when someone spoke their own language slowly or with an accent was the most frequently reported emotional task ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.15$, often), with 76.10% of students reporting it as often or always; however, the majority found it easy ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.95$), with 77.99% rating it as easy or very easy, suggesting a low-priority need. Managing their own anxiety or nervousness when speaking to foreigners was reported at the sometimes level ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.06$), and was rated at the Neutral level of difficulty ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.11$), placing it within a medium-priority range. On the other hand, suspending judgment when seeing behaviour that seemed strange was the least frequently reported emotional task ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.19$, sometimes), and was rated at the neutral level of difficulty ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.10$), marking it as a medium-priority need. None of the emotional items reached the high-priority level.

Regarding the contexts in which students interacted with people from other cultures most often, online gaming and social media ranked first, followed by social events and parties, service encounters, academic discussions and group work, and professional or internship settings, respectively, as shown in Table 5 which displays the top 3 contexts ranked by the students.

Table 5 Most common contexts for intercultural interaction (N = 159)

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Context</i>
1	Online gaming/social media
2	Social events/parties
3	Service encounters (shops, restaurants)
4	Academic discussions/group work
5	Professional/internship settings

When students were asked to identify the area in which they needed the most training, linguistic skills including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation was selected most frequently ($f = 63, 39.62\%$), followed by confidence and anxiety management ($f = 42, 26.42\%$), communication strategies ($f = 33, 20.75\%$), and cultural knowledge ($f = 21, 13.21\%$), as shown in Table 6, which presents students' selection of one area in which they felt they needed the most training.

Table 6 Most needed training area as identified by students (N = 159)

<i>Training area</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Linguistic skills (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation)	63	39.62
Confidence/anxiety management	42	26.42
Communication strategies	33	20.75
Cultural knowledge (facts, taboo, traditions)	21	13.21
Total	159	100.00

Overall, the ICC learning needs of the students varied across the four categories in terms of both frequency and difficulty. Interestingly, only one item across all four categories was identified as a high-priority need, which was explaining their own culture's history or politics to a foreigner in the knowledge category, while the remaining items fell within the medium or low-priority range.

4 Discussion

The findings regarding students' ICC needs revealed a consistent and interpretable pattern across the five components of Byram's (1997, 2021) model. To explain, students demonstrated a generally positive level of ICC, though the profile was not uniform. Attitudes and critical cultural awareness were the most well-developed, whereas the skills of discovery and interaction were the weakest components. This pattern, where students expressed genuine openness toward intercultural communication but struggled to act on that openness in real-life situations, reflected a widely observed challenge in EFL contexts in which formal instruction generally provides the primary site of intercultural learning (Tambunan et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2025). However, this pattern is not consistent across all EFL contexts. In Chinese EFL classrooms, for instance explicit instruction has been found to produce stronger gains in knowledge and skills than in attitudes (Liu et al., 2022), suggesting that component rankings may vary depending on the instructional approach and the degree of intercultural exposure available to language learners. As Byram (1997, 2021) emphasises, attitudes and awareness function as

necessary preconditions for ICC rather than as endpoints. Therefore, it is important to understand learners' specific strengths and weaknesses through needs analysis to inform targeted pedagogical support.

It is worth noting that in general Thai EFL learners progress through a curriculum that prioritises linguistic accuracy, reading comprehension, and examination performance over communicative practice and authentic intercultural interaction. Ross and Wasanasomsithi (2021) found that Thai learners studying English within Thailand had fewer opportunities for meaningful emotional and social engagement with people from other cultures compared with Thai learners in an ESL context in Australia, where intercultural encounters outside the classroom were frequent and emotionally intense. Such a difference in the quality and frequency of intercultural contact helps explain why learners may develop strong attitudinal and cognitive awareness of other cultures through formal instruction, while their practical skills for navigating unstructured intercultural situations remain limited. In classroom contexts, it is not uncommon to see students participate confidently in structured intercultural discussions but show hesitation when asked to respond to unexpected cultural questions or to represent their own culture spontaneously. In this study, the finding that skills of discovery and interaction were the weakest component reflects not individual deficiency, but the limited opportunities learners had to practice ICC beyond structured tasks. Developing the skill-based dimensions of ICC requires deliberate instructional design that moves beyond cultural awareness-raising toward authentic, unstructured communicative practice.

Attitudes ranked highest among the five components, indicating that students demonstrated openness and curiosity toward people from different cultural backgrounds. A comparable finding has been reported among Thai EFL undergraduates in Bangkok (Kosashunhanan, 2025). While this suggests that attitudes may develop more readily than skill-based components in formal EFL contexts, Huang (2021) found that Taiwanese EFL learners showed the least growth in attitudes following explicit instruction, as high initial scores left little room for improvement, suggesting that high attitude scores may not fully reflect how students actually behave in real intercultural situations. This may be partly explained by Thai norms of politeness and face-saving, where expressing goodwill comes naturally, while actually withholding judgement in unfamiliar situations is considerably more demanding (Jenvdhanaken and Rangponsumrit, 2020). In addition, it is also possible to see that students are articulate and enthusiastic when discussing cultural differences in structured tasks, but become noticeably hesitant when asked to respond to unexpected cultural situations without preparation, such as interpreting unfamiliar scenes from films, reels from social media, or comments in online posts.

Critical cultural awareness ranked second in the present study, suggesting that students had developed a reasonable capacity to recognise that their own worldview was not the only valid one, supported by the explicit focus on intercultural reflection built into the course they were enrolled in. Both components showed encouraging levels of development; however, the gap between expressing goodwill and applying non-judgmental perspectives in real situations suggests that these dimensions need to be developed through practice-based tasks rather than conceptual discussion alone.

The findings regarding the third-ranked component, knowledge, revealed that cultural content embedded in language instruction, such as politeness norms and greeting conventions, was more readily acquired than deeper cultural knowledge requiring broader exposure, such as awareness of religious and social taboos. Consequently, it can be implied that without explicit instruction targeting deeper cultural content, students are

likely to develop only the cultural knowledge that language courses naturally expose them to (Sevimel-Sahin, 2020).

Skills of interpreting and relating ranked fourth, indicating that students found it challenging to make sense of cultural differences and connect them across contexts. One plausible explanation is that while students could readily identify cultural differences in foreign texts, they may have found it harder to explain what their own cultural practices revealed about Thai values. While explicit instruction has been found to be particularly effective in developing the skills dimension of ICC (Huang, 2021), the present findings suggested that structured comparative tasks involving students' own culture may be especially needed.

Finally, the lowest-ranked component was skills of discovery and interaction, pointing to the most significant gap between students' current capacity and the demands of authentic intercultural encounters. Without sufficient real-world practice, the application-oriented demands of this component, particularly applying cultural knowledge and skills flexibly in live intercultural situations, are difficult to develop through classroom instruction alone (Trang and Phuong, 2023). This may be explained that students in an EFL context rarely have opportunities to interact with foreigners outside the classroom, which may limit their confidence in applying intercultural strategies in genuinely unpredictable situations.

The second objective of this study was to identify the intercultural communication needs of students, and the findings revealed a consistent gap between what students encountered most frequently and what they found most demanding. Emotional tasks dominated students' everyday intercultural experiences, but they were generally found to be manageable. Although knowledge-based tasks arose far less frequently in students' daily interactions, they were consistently rated as among the most difficult to perform. In fact, instructional priority should be based on both how challenging students find a task, and how often they face it. Tasks that are rarely faced but highly challenging, particularly those requiring students to explain their own cultural identity in English, reveal the most critical gaps in current language courses.

Although knowledge-based tasks were the least frequently encountered across all four categories, they included the only high-priority need identified in the entire study. Explaining their own culture's history or politics to a foreigner rarely occurred yet was rated as the most demanding item across the entire study, suggesting that students had more practices learning about other cultures than at presenting and representing their own. This is a gap that language courses in Thai EFL contexts have rarely been designed to address. By contrast, the lower emotional demands may be partly explained by the nature of English learning in a Thai EFL setting, where emotional experiences are less frequent and intense than those encountered by Thai learners in an ESL context abroad (Ross and Wasanasomsithi, 2021).

Students' intercultural contact occurred primarily in informal and digital contexts, with online gaming and social media ranking first as the most common setting for interaction with people from other cultures. In contrast, formal academic settings ranked fourth, which suggested that classroom-based instruction may not reflect the contexts in which students most commonly experienced intercultural communication. This finding suggests that informal digital platforms, particularly online gaming and social media, serve as important sites of intercultural engagement for these learners. Informal digital learning activities have been shown to support ICC development among EFL learners (Liu et al., 2025). It is possible that students experienced that their most memorable

intercultural exchanges had occurred through online games or fan communities, supporting the significance of informal digital contexts in their intercultural experiences.

Regarding training needs, linguistic skills were identified as the most urgent area by the largest proportion of students, reflecting the traditional emphasis on language accuracy in Thai EFL education. Confidence and anxiety management ranked second, which was consistent with the finding that skill-based dimensions of ICC requiring real-world practice were the least developed. By contrast, cultural knowledge was identified by the smallest number of students as a training priority, despite being among the most challenging task categories in the study. This disconnect suggests that students may not fully recognise where their most critical gaps lie, possibly because current language courses rarely present tasks that make this gap visible.

In summary, the findings of this study revealed that while students showed a high level of ICC, there remained a gap between their competence and their readiness to communicate effectively in real intercultural situations.

5 Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for English language teaching in Thai university contexts. First, students demonstrated a high level of ICC, but they still reported a gap in their readiness for real intercultural communication. Explicit, interculturally oriented instruction has been found to be particularly effective in developing the knowledge and skills dimensions of ICC, and learners report a strong preference for activities involving authentic intercultural communication (Huang, 2021; Trang and Phuong, 2023). Therefore, course designers should prioritise experiential and simulation-based tasks to bridge ICC knowledge and communicative performance. For instance, a teacher could design a role-play activity in which a student responds to an unexpected comment from a foreign visitor about Thai culture, followed by a group discussion in which students reflect on the linguistic and cultural challenges they have encountered.

Secondly, as online gaming and social media were found to be the most common contexts for intercultural contact, language courses should include digital and informal learning activities that reflect these real-life situations. Research has shown that informal digital learning of English is associated with stronger intercultural competence among EFL learners (Liu et al., 2025). However, current English language curricula in Thai universities have not yet reflected these digital spaces as meaningful learning contexts even though this is where students most commonly experience intercultural communication outside the classroom. Formal curricula should draw on this informal learning by incorporating tasks such as a structured reflection in which students document and share a recent intercultural exchange from an online game or social media platform, and analyse the strategies they use or still lack.

Thirdly, since linguistic skills were identified as the most urgent training need, and confidence and anxiety management was the second, language courses should adopt a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach so that students can build both the linguistic competence and the confidence needed for effective intercultural communication. Task-based approaches have been shown to support communicative competence in EFL contexts and to enhance intercultural competence when culturally rich tasks are incorporated (Chaika, 2023; Nghia and Quang, 2021). Courses should

incorporate task-based activities such as role plays, simulations, and intercultural interaction tasks. For example, teachers could assign a speaking task in which students first discuss a culturally unfamiliar scenario with a classmate of their choice before repeating, the exchange with an unfamiliar partner, so that they can build both the fluency and the readiness to manage unpredictable intercultural situations.

Finally, explaining their own culture's history and values to people from other cultures was the only item rated as a high-priority need by the student participants in this study, even though they rarely encountered it, and they found it highly difficult. This finding suggests that students had limited preparation for presenting and explaining their own cultural identity in English, though this is an important aspect of ICC that language courses rarely address. Therefore, teachers and course designers should integrate explicit training in presenting Thai culture in English alongside learning about other cultures, such as asking students to record a short video or reel explaining a cultural tradition or historical event in English for a non-Thai audience.

6 Limitations

Two limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted with a group of third-year English-major students at a public university in Thailand. Consequently, the findings only reflected the characteristics of this specific learner population and may not be directly generalisable to Thai EFL learners with other college majors, with different levels of English proficiency, or at institutional settings. Second, all data were collected through self-reported questionnaires at a single point in time, which limited the depth and breadth of insights into participants' actual intercultural communicative behaviours. These limitations indicate that the findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

7 Recommendations for further studies

The findings of this study have pointed to several productive directions for future inquiry. Future research could extend the scope to diverse groups of EFL learners with different levels of English proficiency and at various institutional contexts across Thailand in order to produce more generalisable conclusions. Moreover, studies employing qualitative methodology or mixed-methods designs with in-depth interviews, would provide more meaningful and enriching data that shed greater light on ICC of Thai EFL students. Finally, longitudinal studies should be conducted to track changes in students' ICC over time across different stages of their undergraduate programme to examine how ICC develops as students gain more exposure to language instruction and intercultural content.

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Declarations

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Verbal and written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to completing the online questionnaire. All data were anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

This study was approved by the Kasetsart University research Ethics Committee (COE No. COE69/007).

The author used AI-assisted tools (Perplexity AI and Consensus) to support literature search and language editing during the preparation of this manuscript. All studies cited and all content were independently reviewed, evaluated, and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

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Appendix

Survey: intercultural communicative competence for third-year English major students

This survey aims to understand your current intercultural communicative competence and your needs in intercultural communication. Your honest responses will help improve teaching materials. All answers are confidential and will be used only for research

purposes. There are no right or wrong answers. Please read each item carefully and answer honestly.

Part 1: General information

Please choose or write your answer for each item

1. Gender

- ☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Non-binary

2. Age

..... years

3. Year of study

- ☐ 3rd year English major
-

Part 1: General information (continued)

Please choose or write your answer for each item

4. Current cumulative GPA

- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| ☐ 3.50 or above | ☐ 3.00–0.49 |
| ☐ 2.50–2.99 | ☐ 2.00–0.49 |
| ☐ Below 2.00 | |

5. Self-rated overall English proficiency

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| ☐ Very high | ☐ High |
| ☐ Moderate | ☐ Low |
| ☐ Very low | |

6. Is this course ‘English for intercultural communication’ your first course related to ‘culture’ or ‘intercultural communication’?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

7. Overseas experience (travel, study, work, exchange, etc.)

- ☐ I have never been abroad (Skip to question 10)
☐ I have been abroad once
☐ I have been abroad 2–3 times
☐ I have been abroad more than 3 times

8. If you have been abroad, what was the main purpose of your most re-cent trip? (You may choose one)

- ☐ Tourism
☐ Study/exchange
☐ Internship
☐ Work and travel program
☐ Family visit
☐ Other:
-

9. Total length of your most recent stay abroad

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| ☐ Less than 1 week | ☐ 1–4 weeks |
| ☐ 1–3 months | ☐ 4–6 months |
| ☐ More than 6 months | |

10. How often do you interact with people from other countries?

	Never	Face-to-face	Online
Rarely (a few times a year)		☐	☐
Sometimes (about once a month)		☐	☐
Often (about once a week)		☐	☐
Very often (several times a week)		☐	☐

Please choose or write your answer for each item

11. In what situations do you usually interact with people from other countries? (You can select more than one)

- ☐ In class at university
☐ Social media or online communities
☐ Part-time job/workplace
☐ Language exchange or online projects
☐ Travel/tourist places in Thailand
☐ Other:

Part 2: Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

For each statement below, please indicate how much you agree or disagree

Use this scale for all items in this part

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Item no	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Attitudes</i>						
1	I am willing to interact with people whose cultural values are different from my own					
2	I try to look at my own culture from an outsider's perspective					
3	When I see a behaviour which I don't understand, I resist judging it as 'wrong' or 'weird' immediately.					
4	I believe that my culture's way of doing things is the only correct way					
5	I am interested in learning about the daily life habits of people from other cultures, not just the famous tourist attractions					

Knowledge						
6	I can explain how social factors (like age, gender, or social status) affect the way people speak in my own culture					
7	I know the specific religious or social taboos that I must avoid when interacting with people from cultures distinct from my own					
8	I am aware of the historical events that have shaped the current values of cultures distinct from my own					
9	I understand the rules of politeness (e.g., greetings, addressing superiors) in the cultures which I interact with most					
For each statement below, please indicate how much you agree or disagree						
Use this scale for all items in this part:						
1 = Strongly disagree						
2 = Disagree						
3 = Neutral						
4 = Agree						
5 = Strongly agree						
Item no	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Skills of interpreting and relating						
10	When a misunderstanding occurs, I can identify whether it was caused by language barriers or cultural differences					
11	I can compare a foreign document (e.g., a news article or movie scene) with a similar one from my own culture to find differences in values.					
12	I can explain how a specific gesture or behaviour in another culture might be misunderstood by people from my country					
13	I can identify cultural stereotypes in movies or media.					
Skills of discovery and interaction						
14	When I am speaking with someone from another culture and I don't understand a reference, I know what questions to ask to get clarification					
15	I can adjust my body language (e.g., eye contact, personal space) to make someone from another culture feel comfortable					
16	I can use different strategies (like rephrasing or using synonyms) when I realise my cultural reference isn't understood					
17	I actively seek out opportunities to interact with foreigners to test my cultural knowledge					

Critical cultural awareness

18	I can critically evaluate how my own cultural values influence my judgment of others
19	I am aware that my own worldview is not the only 'natural' or 'correct' way of seeing the world
20	I can identify potential areas of conflict between my culture and others based on differing values (e.g., individualism vs. collectivism)
21	I can explain how my country is perceived by people from other nations

Part 3: Intercultural communication needs

This section asks about situations and skills where you may need more support. Please answer honestly.

Section 1: Skill-based needs

For each skill below, please answer two questions:

- Frequency: How often do you encounter this situation or need to use this skill?
- Difficulty: How difficult is it for you when this situation occurs?

Use the scales below for both questions:

<i>Frequency scale</i>		<i>Difficulty scale</i>	
1	Never	1	Very easy
2	Rarely	2	Easy
3	Neutral	3	Sometimes
4	Often	4	Difficult
5	Always	5	Very difficult

Item no.	Skills	Frequency scale:					Difficulty scale				
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge needs											
1	Explaining my own culture's history or politics to a foreigner										
2	Identifying the social hierarchy (who is the boss/senior) in a foreign group										

Item no.	Skills	Frequency scale:					Difficulty scale				
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Emotional needs											
12	Managing my own anxiety or nervousness when speaking to foreigners										
13	Remaining patient when someone speaks my language slowly or with an accent.										
14	Suspending judgment when I see behaviour that seems 'strange' to me										

Section 2: Situation needs

15. In which contexts do you interact with people from other cultures most often?

Please rank the top 3 contexts (1 = most frequent, 2 = second most, 3 = third most). Leave the others blank.

- ___ Academic discussions/group work
- ___ Social events/parties
- ___ Online gaming/social media
- ___ Service encounters (shops, restaurants)
- ___ Professional/internship settings

16. Which area do you feel you need the MOST training in right now? (please select only one.)

- ☐ Linguistic: (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation)
- ☐ Cultural knowledge: (facts, taboos, traditions)
- ☐ Communication strategies: (how to start a conversation, how to solve conflicts)
- ☐ Confidence/anxiety: (overcoming shyness, feeling more secure)

The above information will be kept confidential, and not disclosed to the public.

Your personal information will be used to explain your answers.

Thank you very much for your kind support.