



Factors Favoring Intercultural Sensitivity

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Abstract-- *In times of increased students' mobility worldwide at the tertiary level, preparing them to function in an international and intercultural context is one of the major goals of higher education. In line with this concern, scholarly findings across the globe express concern about the low level of interaction between domestic and international students; ergo, a corresponding increase in intercultural sensitivity on the part of the students is consequently highly required. Hence, the research objective of this study is to compare freshmen' level of intercultural sensitivity based on seven recurrent factors found in the literature. The population of this study was freshmen from an International College in Bangkok, Thailand. The sample method used was convenience sampling. The research instrument was the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). Results suggest that international college freshmen exhibit a high level of intercultural sensitivity as measure by the ISS. Data also showed that there is a statistically significant difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity based on two factors only, namely, nationality, and international friendships. From the findings, it could be recommended to provide intercultural courses for domestic students in order to widen their worldview repertoires, and to engineer intercultural trainings that enable both domestic and international students to go beyond mere contact, and encourage them to forge meaningful and long-lasting relationships with culturally different others.*

Keywords: *Foreign Language, Friendship Network, Intercultural Sensitivity, International College, Study abroad*

INTRODUCTION

Bhandari and Koh (2007) noted that 2.5 million tertiary level students were studying in countries other than their passport nations. By 2011, the number of international students is estimated to be over 3.8 million (Banks & Bhandari, 2012). Consequently, it is argued that universities have increasingly become multicultural and international places. Contrasting this international trend, however, Burns (1991), Nesdale and Todd (1993), Quintrell and Westwood (1994), Volet and Ang (1996), and Volet and Pears (1994, 1995) converge on the premise that culturally different students do not readily mix; rather, they prefer to network with people from a similar cultural background. Moreover, literature on interaction between international and domestic students worldwide converge to indicate that the amount of intercultural interactions is generally low (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Summers & Volet, 2008; Volet & Pears, 1995). Therefore, it can be argued in line with Knight and de Wit (1995) that if such attitudes are generalized, it is unlikely that the internationalization of higher education will achieve its major educational aim of preparing students "to function in an international and inter-cultural context in the future" (p. 13). Ergo, the international and intercultural setting at the higher education calls for interculturally sensitive students.

There is a large theoretical literature on what intercultural sensitivity means, implies, and embraces (Landis & Bhagat, 1996; Lustig & Koester, 2010; Martin, 1986). The work of Chen (1997), Chen and Starosta (1998), Bennet (1986); M. Bennett (1993), J. Bennett and Bennett (2004), and Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) provide a wealth of literature on intercultural sensitivity and its historical development. For the purpose of this study, the author adopts Chen and Starosta (2000) definition of intercultural sensitivity, which mainly deals with the affective dimension of intercultural communication competence. They have defined intercultural sensitivity as persons' "active desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate and respect differences among cultures" (Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 3). Later, Chen and Starosta (2008) added that the previous definition of intercultural sensitivity "includes a person's ability to receive and send positive emotional signals before, during and after intercultural interaction. These emotional responses will in turn lead [them] to acknowledge and respect cultural differences" (p. 54). In tune with this definition, Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) argue that intercultural sensitivity is a forerunner for successful intercultural encounters to occur.

Extensive research has been done to recognize factors favoring intercultural sensitivity. In reviewing literature on this topic, seven key elements recur. However, data from these studies indicate the lack of consensus among researchers as to which factors favour intercultural sensitivity.

Gender is one of the key elements that theorists and practitioners include in their list (Altshuler, Sussman, & Kachur, 2003; Margarethe, Hannes, & Wiesinger, 2012; McMurry, 2007; Ruiz-Bernardo, Ferrández-Berruenco, & Sales-Ciges, 2012; Ruokonen & Kairavuori, 2012; Vilà, 2006; Westrick, 2004). Taking into account the vast array of studies showing differences between behavioral roles and task performance between males and females, researchers argue that gender does influence the student's behavior, concluding that females display more intercultural sensitivity than males.

Nationality is another variable that scholars take into account when seeking out factors promoting intercultural sensitivity. The work of Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, and Hubbard (2006), Altshuler et al. (2003), De Santos Velasco (2004), Lyttle, Barker, and Cornwell (2011); McMurry (2007), Olson and Kroeger (2001), Ruiz-Bernardo et al. (2012) Sizoo, Iskat,

Plank, and Serrie (2004), Straffon (2003), Williams (2005) converges on the premise that the development of intercultural sensitivity is related to personal experiences of being immersed and living in a host culture or country. Recently, Lyttle et al. (2011), and McMurray (2007) reported that people living in a host culture or country exhibit higher intercultural sensitivity than local people.

Educational background is also a variable that scholars take into account. Literature depicts science students as being more conservative regarding cultural institutions than Liberal Arts students, for instance. Therefore, the work of Pruegger and Rogers (1994), Spinthourakis, Karatzia-Stavlioti, and Roussakis (2009), and Wu (2009) contends that educational background such as students pursuing different major plays an important role in the development of their level of intercultural sensitivity.

Foreign language ability is also regarded as a variable promoting intercultural sensitivity. Olson and Kroeger (2001), Sizoo et al. (2004), and Vilà (2006) concluded after their extensive survey on factors related to intercultural sensitivity that being able to speak a second language (or several languages) promotes the ability of intercultural sensitivity. Recently, Ruokonen and Kairavuori (2012) reported that pupils who had some other language than their mother tongue chose to behave in more ethnorelativistic ways than did monolingual students, that is, they showed to be more sensitive to cultural differences.

Currently, over 140 million young people travel internationally each year (Huang & Tian, 2013). This trend is growing to the extent that researchers contend that international students have become a potential great market in the international tourism industry (Huang, 2006; Kim, Jogaratanam, & Noh, 2006; Kim, Noh, & Jogaratanam, 2006). In line with this international trend, a recurrent factor in the literature on factors promoting intercultural sensitivity is international travel. Although few studies argue against international travel as a means of fostering intercultural sensitivity, there is, however, concern claiming that traveling abroad does not necessarily ensure greater intercultural sensitivity (J. Bennett, 2011; Chen, 1987; Martin, 1987). Kelly (1963) in particular posits that a person can witness an event without ever experiencing it. Paraphrasing Kelly (1963), a person can spend time travelling abroad without really experiencing the culture in which he or she sojourns.

Study abroad is also regarded as a variable promoting intercultural sensitivity (Williams, 2005). Bennet (2009, p. S2) pointed out that "Every program [international student exchange program] no matter at what level, format or focus, continues to claim that educational cross-cultural contact contributes to intercultural competence..." (brackets added). That is, a capital assumption of any study abroad program is that the sole and direct contact with the host culture promotes successful interactions and adaptation to the host country or culture. However, Martin (1987) documented studies showing opposite outcomes from the above assumption, which included "'more xenophobic reactions and dependence' (McGuigan, 1959), reinforced appreciation of one's homeland at the expense of the nation visited (Kafka, 1968), and significantly less positive perception of the host country (Marion, 1974)" (Martin, 1987, p. 341).

Finally, although literature suggests that domestic students hold positive perceptions of international students, most inquiries have noted that domestic students are largely uninterested in interacting with international peers. The work of Bchner, McLeod, and Lin (1977), Burns (1991), Nesdale and Todd (1993), Quintrell and Westwood (1994), Summers and Volet (2008), Trice and Elliott (1993), Volet and Ang (1996), and Volet and Pears (1994, 1995) converges on the premise that culturally different students do not readily mix; rather, they prefer to network with people from a similar cultural background. Summers and Volet (2008) concluded that the lack of interaction between culturally different people appears to be not just an isolated phenomenon or a trait of just some people from some cultures. Rather, it is a common tendency that has been registered in Scotland (Closs, Stead, Arshad, & Norris, 2001) "in the UK (e.g. Pritchard & Skinner 2002), the United States (e.g. Trice 2004), Australia (e.g. Smart, et al., 2000), New Zealand (e.g. Ward 2001) and Japan (e.g. Tanaka et al., 1997)" (Summers & Volet, 2008, p. 357). Since intercultural sensitivity deals with individuals' response to the feelings, behavior, and perspectives of people from other cultures (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992), it can be posited that being able to forge and maintain international friendships is a factor that can favor intercultural sensitivity.

Seven factors have been highlighted as important factors to promote students' intercultural sensitivity, though it has been also pointed out that the scholarly findings regarding these variables are ambivalent and inconclusive. Hence, these conflicting results make a strong case for examining these variables effects further, particularly in Mahidol University since it is said that the university has one of the most famous International Colleges in the country, and since a main goal of the international college is to promote "a learning culture that prepares its students to meet the challenges of living and working in a diverse and globalized world" (www.muic.ac.th). Although the importance of intercultural sensitivity has become of paramount importance on our increasingly international campuses (Chen & Starosta, 2008), no studies in which university students (freshman, sophomore, junior or senior) assess their own intercultural sensitivity have been done at Mahidol University. Hence, the research objective of this study was to measure the MUIC freshmen's intercultural sensitivity and to compare it based on gender, nationality, field of study, foreign language abilities, international travels, study abroad, and foreign friends.

In this paper the researcher presents the results of the comparison of intercultural sensitivity of MUIC freshman (n=209) based on seven factors. Data showed that there were statistically significant differences in the level of intercultural sensitivity of MUIC freshmen based on two factors, namely, nationality and international friendship.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to compare freshmen’s intercultural sensitivity based on gender, nationality, field of study, foreign language abilities, international travels, study abroad and foreign friends. Therefore, a goal of this study was to provide useful insight information for researchers and practitioners on the understanding of afore mentioned factors and their impact on the development of intercultural sensitivity.

Participants

The population of the study was MUIC freshmen enrolled in the academic year of 2013 (N=814). The sample size was 268, however, only 209 freshmen participated in this study. The researcher used convenience sampling to recruit subjects at the classroom setting. Of the 209 students, 39 were from Arts, 48 from Science, and 122 students were from Business Administration (Table 1).

Table 1 Study sample

B. of Arts	B. of Science	B. of Business	Total
39	48	122	209

Research Instrument

The research instrument for this study contains two sections: (1) Demographic information, and (2) The Intercultural Sensitive Scale (ISS).

(1) Demographic information section contained questions concerning the student’s personal information such as gender, nationality (which was requested to indicate if the student is a domestic or international student), as well as their major (which was requested to get the field of study), and foreign language abilities. There also were three questions about their international travel experience, whether they have studied abroad, and whether they have foreign friends.

(2) The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), a 24-item Likert scale developed by Chen and Starosta (2000), was used to measure MUIC freshmen’s intercultural sensitivity.

Results

Data suggest that MUIC freshmen exhibit high level of intercultural sensitivity as measured by the ISS (Table 2).

Table 2 level of intercultural sensitivity of MUIC freshmen (n=209)

Factor	Mean	SD	Level of IS
MUIC freshmen’s intercultural sensitivity	3.62	.434	High

Note: The interpretation of mean scores was determined by using the evaluation criteria of Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, and DeJaeghere (2003). Therefore, 1.00-1.50 = very low, 1.51-2.50 = low, 2.51-3.50 = moderate, 3.51-4.50 = high, 4.51-5.00 = very high.

- 1) Results of the *t*-test suggest that there is no significant difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity between MUIC female and male students ($t = -.804, p=.380$). However, data indicated that females (M=3.66, SD= .480, n= 145) did score higher than male students (M=3.60, SD= .415, n=64).
- 2) There is a statistically significant difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity between Thais and foreigners ($t=-4.760, p<.01$), indicating that foreigners (M=3.88, SD=.402, n=45) exhibit higher intercultural sensitivity than domestic students (M=3.54, SD=.418, n=164).
- 3) The results of the ANOVA analysis suggested that there is no significant difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity between students from the three different programs ($F=3.257, p=.80$). Data showed that Sciences students (M=3.75, SD=.381, n=48) tended to score higher than students from Arts (M=3.51, SD=.479, n=39), and Business Administration and Marketing (M=3.57, SD=.461, n=122).
- 4) The results of the ANOVA analysis suggest that there is no significant difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity of MUIC students based on their foreign languages abilities ($F= 1.496, p=.217$). However, data showed that the more foreign languages they can speak, the higher their score on intercultural sensitivity.
- 5) The ANOVA analysis suggested that there is no significant difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity of MUIC students based on their international travel experiences ($F= 1.667, p=.190$).
- 6) Results of the *t*-test suggested that there is no significant difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity between MUIC domestic students who studied abroad and those who haven’t yet studied abroad ($t= -1.484, p=.140$).
- 7) Finally, results of the *t*-test suggested that there is a significant difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity between MUIC freshmen with and without foreign friends ($t = -3.574, p<.01$), indicating that students with foreign friends (M=3.73, SD= .433, n= 93) did exhibit higher intercultural sensitivity than their counterparts without foreign friends (M=3.52, SD= .416, n=116).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

1) The findings suggested that nationality has a statistically significant effect on the level of intercultural sensitivity of MUIC freshmen. Since the number of students coming from different countries was limited (i.e., 1 from Pakistan, Australia, Nepal, Canada, Burma, and Saudi Arabia, 2 from the UK, 2 from Germany, 3 from Taiwan, 4 from Switzerland, and so forth), it was not possible to compare students' intercultural sensitivity based on their actual country of origin. Therefore, the researcher put together foreign students in the group of foreigners, and domestic students in the group of Thais in order to compare their intercultural sensitivity. Hence, nationality was required to divide the sample of this study into two groups, namely, Thai and foreigners only. Findings of this study suggested that foreigners did exhibit higher level of intercultural sensitivity than the Thai sample.

It is important to bear in mind that both Thais and foreigners did score high in intercultural sensitivity with an average score of 3.54 and 3.88 respectively. The reasons why the difference between these two groups reached significance can be explained by what Coser (1975) calls "complex social structures". Foreigners in complex social structures meet people who are different from themselves, and these culturally different people challenge them to think and behave in unfamiliar ways. Moreover, host people hold different expectations from sojourners causing uncertainty and unpredictability during the intercultural interactions. Hence, since foreigners are actually immersed in a host culture, they are more exposed to experience new events from the host culture that may challenge and contradict their own cultural perceptions, behavioral roles, beliefs and certainties. Hence, the new environment pushes foreigners to make sense of new situations if they are to operate effectively in the host culture. Conversely, Thai students are living in their own environment, they have already learned the essential roles, behaviors, assumptions and values that enable them to operate properly in their own social context. And most importantly, there is no reason to challenge or question those core values, roles, beliefs that enable them to operate effectively in their own culture. Therefore, the worldview of Thai students of this sample may be less wide than foreigners. This argument is also well grounded on the assumption claiming that differences must be experienced by persons during their interactions with culturally different others to effect change in their level of intercultural sensitivity (Chen & Starosta, 1998)

Besides, foreigners are forced to learn new set of values, beliefs, behaviors and assumptions of the host culture or country to successfully achieve their academic endeavors and to communicate properly and effectively with people, peers, lecturers and staff from the host culture. As positive interactions are a necessity of adjustment to a host culture, this may contribute to the foreigners' high level of intercultural sensitivity. Moreover, by learning the values, beliefs, behaviors and perceptions of the host culture, foreigners may feel more confident in interacting with culturally different people, hence they may exhibit higher intercultural sensitivity than Thai students. Conversely, Thai students of this sample do not need to learn new set of values, beliefs, and assumptions that enable them to operate in their own culture, they are more mono-cultural individuals and so they may exhibit less intercultural sensitivity.

That nationality has a statistically significant effect on intercultural sensitivity has been also corroborated previous inquires (Anderson et al., 2006; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Ruiz-Bernardo et al., 2012; Straffon, 2003; Williams, 2005). Lyttle et al. (2011) conducted a research study to evaluate the interpersonal sensitivity of 142 individuals living in a country other than that of their nationality. The result of this study showed that individuals living in a host country have significantly higher social sensitivity than local or mono-culture individuals. The finding of this study is also in accordance with literature showing that the experience of living in a host country or culture can be one of the most important factors favoring the development of intercultural sensitivity (J. Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Chen & Starosta, 1998; Paige, 1993).

2) Findings also suggested that there is a statistical difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity between students with international friends and students without international friends. This result was expected if it is taken into account studies reporting culture shock experienced by individuals to a varied degree (Chen & Starosta, 1998; Gudykunst, 1998). Culture shock, by definition, is the absence of familiar clues which causes disorientation, the inability to function according to habitual expectations. It also leads individuals living in a host culture to experience a state of distress (Chen & Starosta, 1998). Common symptoms of culture shock—according to the literature—include excessive anger over minor frustrations, a fixed idea that people are taking advantage of or cheating one, a feeling of loss regarding friends and family, a feeling of being rejected by host nationals and a strong desire to associate with persons of one's own nationality (Hofstede, 2001). In line with this, Furnham and Bochner (1982) noted that one of the most difficult things an individual faces in the process of intercultural adjustment is making host friends and spending time with host nationals they do not know very well.

The reason why it is difficult to cultivate foreign friends can be explained by the fear of uncertainty that has been documented largely by Hofstede (2001) and Gudykunst (1998). Uncertainty is associated negatively with positive expectations, communication satisfaction, and quality of communication (Gudykunst, 1998). Gudykunst and Shapiro (1996) demonstrated that there is greater uncertainty in intercultural encounters than in an encounter among people from the same culture. Following these two premises, Gudykunst, Nishida, and Chua (1986) proved that uncertainty decreases as the intimacy

of intercultural relationships increases. Here lies the connection between intercultural sensitivity and international friendships. (A) Intercultural sensitivity has been defined by Chen and Starosta (1998) as the individuals' ability not only to send positive emotional response during the intercultural interaction, but to control those emotions that can hinder the intercultural interaction process. (B) Chen and Starosta (1998) consequently underline the ability to control anxiety through tolerance of the unfamiliar and uncertain situations as a key ability that fosters the ability of intercultural sensitivity. In line with it, scholars converge on the premise that the ability to react to new and ambiguous situations with minimal discomfort is an important asset when adjusting to a new culture (Aitken, 1973; Guthrie & Zektick, 1967; Ruben & Kealey, 1979). (C) Ergo, individuals who can control the anxiety through certain degree of tolerance to the uncertainty are not only better equipped to be intercultural sensitive, but more prone to make host friends, to bear effectively with the uncertainty that accompanied any intercultural encounter. This can explain why the difference in intercultural sensitivity of MUIC freshman based on international friendships reached significance.

Gender, field of study, foreign language abilities, study abroad, and international travels do not ensure by themselves greater intercultural sensitivity. That is, putting together culturally different students in a classroom setting does not guarantee significant intercultural interactions unless intervention is made. Therefore, building on the study findings showing the significant effect of nationality and international friendships on students' intercultural sensitivity, it is recommended that intercultural courses be provided for these college students in order to widen and enrich their worldview repertoires. Cross-cultural activities coping with uncertainty and anxiety in an intercultural setting is also highly recommended since enable students to go beyond mere contact, and encourage them to forge meaningful and long-lasting relationships with culturally different others.

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