asbn
The 3rd ASEAN School of Business Network International Conference 2026
www.aseansbn.org August 6-7, 2026 Pathum Thani, Thailand

Mediating Meaning Across Borders: Burmese Communication Arts Students as Peer Mentors in a Thai University's English Learning Environment

Wang Haotang[1], Edward Devere Bacon[2]*
[1]Shanghai Pinghe School, Shanghai, China
[2]Rangsit University, Pathum Thani, Thailand

*Corresponding Author: superduperreadyeddie@rsu.ac.th

ABSTRACT

As Thai universities pursue Internationalization at Home (IaH), there is an increasing need to provide meaningful intercultural learning opportunities without relying on overseas mobility. Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) offers a practical approach by creating authentic interactions between domestic and international students within regular academic settings. This study investigates the effects of structured intercultural PAL sessions facilitated by Burmese Communication Arts students on the intercultural competence and English communication skills of Thai university students. Guided by Sociocultural Theory and Byram's Intercultural Competence Model, the research employs a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design involving 100 Thai undergraduate students. Fifty students participate in a ten-week PAL intervention with trained Burmese peer mentors, while fifty students complete English self-study activities without intercultural engagement. Quantitative data are collected using a validated Intercultural Competence Questionnaire and English communication assessments, while qualitative data are obtained through semi-structured interviews to explore participants' experiences of cultural meaning-making and communication. The study is expected to demonstrate that sustained intercultural peer interaction enhances students' intercultural attitudes, communication strategies, and confidence in using English as a lingua franca. The findings will contribute to the growing body of research on Internationalization at Home by providing an evidence-based model for integrating intercultural learning into routine university support programs. The study also highlights the educational value of intra-ASEAN peer collaboration in preparing graduates for culturally diverse academic and professional environments.

Keywords: Internationalization at Home, Peer-Assisted Learning, Intercultural Competence, Burmese Peer Mentors, Thai Higher Education.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64458/asbnic.v3.178

Introduction

As Thai higher education continues to strengthen its internationalization within the ASEAN and global contexts, universities are increasingly emphasizing internationalized curricula, international campus

environments, and interaction between Thai and international students to broaden local students' global perspectives and support the internationalization of higher education (Jampaklay et al., 2022). Internationalization at Home (henceforth IaH) has therefore become a central strategy for creating intercultural learning opportunities on campus, where financial and structural constraints limit study-abroad participation.

For Thai students, who often have limited exposure to culturally diverse peers, developing mechanisms that embed intercultural interaction into regular academic practices is essential. Peer-Assisted Learning (henceforth PAL), traditionally implemented to support academic development, has emerged as a peer-driven, campus-based pedagogical approach that fosters intercultural dialogue, collaboration, and sustained cultural exchange through structured interactions among students, thereby supporting the development of intercultural competence (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). This study investigates how Thai university students develop intercultural competence through structured PAL sessions facilitated by Burmese Communication Arts mentors, offering empirical insight into how everyday peer learning can advance the goals of IaH.

Background of the Study

As Thailand has expanded the internationalization of its higher education sector, its universities have enrolled growing numbers of international students from neighboring ASEAN countries, with Myanmar representing one of the principal countries of origin (Jampaklay et al., 2022). The growing presence of international students in Thai higher education creates opportunities for intercultural interaction through structured peer support programs. PAL provides a collaborative learning environment that promotes reciprocal communication, shared problem-solving, and meaningful cultural exchange while supporting the academic, social, and intercultural development of both peer mentors and mentees (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a).

Research has demonstrated that Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) enhances academic achievement by fostering collaborative learning, authentic peer interaction, a stronger sense of belonging within academic settings, and supportive socio-cultural relationships among students (Bacon et al., 2021). With Burmese students forming a substantial portion of the international student body, PAL programs naturally bring Thai and Burmese learners together, positioning PAL as a platform not only for academic support but also for cultural exchange. However, although PAL is well established in Thailand, little research examines its potential role in fostering intercultural learning, particularly through interactions involving Burmese participants.

Peer-Assisted Learning as a Catalyst for Cultural Interaction

Beyond its academic benefits, PAL provides an inclusive, low-stakes, peer-mediated learning environment that reduces hierarchical pressures, promotes reciprocal dialogue, and encourages open communication through collaborative peer interaction (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). This structure is particularly valuable for Thai learners, who may experience English language anxiety, or hesitation in cross-cultural dialogue.

Through structured PAL, students engage in sustained intercultural interaction that strengthens multilingual communication, cultural awareness, communicative adaptability, and intercultural competence while broadening their understanding of culturally diverse perspectives through collaborative peer dialogue (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a). In sessions led by Burmese mentors, Thai students are exposed to intra-ASEAN diversity that is rarely emphasized in internationalization models centered on Western contexts. These interactions allow Thai mentees to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and explore regional identities in a supportive, dialogic setting.

Research Problem

Although IaH frameworks emphasize domestic students' intercultural development, Thai learners often have limited opportunities to engage in structured, meaningful interaction with culturally diverse peers. Existing PAL research in Thailand tends to focus on academic outcomes or mentor experiences rather than the intercultural growth of Thai mentees. Little is known about how Thai students interpret and negotiate cultural meanings within PAL environments or how cross-border peer interaction influences their communication skills. The role of Burmese students in facilitating Thai learners' intercultural development is particularly underexplored. Moreover, controlled experimental studies examining PAL's impact on intercultural competence remain scarce.

Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the extent to which structured intercultural PAL sessions contribute to the development of intercultural competence and English communication skills among Thai university students. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the effects of PAL on Thai students' intercultural competence;
2. Determine whether PAL enhances their English communication skills;
3. Compare developmental outcomes between students participating in PAL and those engaged in self-study; and
4. Explore how Thai mentees interpret and negotiate cultural meanings during their interactions with Burmese mentors.

Research Questions

To address these objectives, the study focuses on four research questions:

1. To what extent does participation in PAL sessions influence Thai students' intercultural competence compared with self-study?
2. Does the intervention improve their English communication skills relative to the control group?
3. What specific intercultural competencies do Thai students demonstrate after the PAL program?
4. How do Thai mentees describe their experiences of interpreting and responding to cultural differences during interactions with Burmese mentors?

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how intercultural competence can be cultivated through socially mediated learning within the Thai university context. By integrating Sociocultural Theory and Byram's Intercultural Competence model, the study provides insight into the processes through which Thai students negotiate meaning and adapt communication strategies in intercultural settings.

Practically, the findings offer an evidence-based model for integrating intercultural learning into routine academic support activities, reinforcing IaH goals without requiring overseas travel. The study also highlights the valuable role of Burmese students as cultural resources within Thai universities, underscoring the importance of regional peer interaction in preparing Thai learners for participation in an increasingly interconnected ASEAN community.

Literature Review

Intercultural Learning and Meaning-Making Among Thai University Students

Intercultural learning in Thai universities is shaped by how students encounter and respond to cultural difference in everyday academic life. As Thai universities have become increasingly internationalized

through the enrollment of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, campus environments have created greater opportunities for interaction between Thai and international students, thereby broadening local students' global perspectives (Jampaklay et al., 2022). Their interaction patterns are influenced by wider sociocultural norms such as hierarchy, social harmony, and reliance on context. These norms affect how students ask questions, show disagreement, and position themselves in intercultural spaces.

Through sustained cross-cultural dialogue and peer collaboration, students develop greater cultural adaptability, strengthen their intercultural communication skills, and become more open to diverse cultural perspectives (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). Encounters with unfamiliar norms, for example more direct speech or different turn taking, prompt them to rethink how they express opinions and interpret others.

At the same time, English language anxiety and communication-related challenges can reduce students' willingness to participate actively in classroom discussions, leading them to communicate less confidently and less frequently in academic interactions (Htar Ei Wai, 2025). Meaning making therefore depends on environments that lower perceived risk and encourage clarification, comparison of perspectives, and shared interpretation.

Internationalization at Home as a Framework for Supporting Thai Students' Global Competence

IaH has emerged as an inclusive approach to higher education internationalization by purposefully integrating international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum, thereby extending access to global learning opportunities beyond physical student mobility (Soule, 2025). IaH seeks to integrate international and intercultural dimensions into the curriculum and campus environment, thereby providing all students, including those who do not participate in international mobility, with opportunities to develop globally oriented knowledge, skills, and perspectives within their domestic learning environment (Opeto & Onen, 2024). In Thailand, where outbound mobility remains low, IaH offers a practical response to structural and economic barriers.

Research indicates that well-designed cross-cultural curricula associated with IaH can enhance students' intercultural sensitivity by strengthening their respect for cultural differences, interaction engagement, and interaction enjoyment (Feng et al., 2025). However, previous research on Internationalization at Home has focused primarily on institutional strategies, curriculum internationalization, and organizational implementation, with comparatively less attention devoted to how academic staff enact international and intercultural learning within teaching practices (Soule, 2025). There is still limited evidence on how specific IaH practices, such as intercultural peer learning, shape Thai learners' communicative flexibility and intercultural development.

Peer-Assisted Learning as a Vehicle for Thai Learners' Intercultural Development

PAL is a peer-driven pedagogical approach grounded in reciprocal peer interaction, mutual scaffolding, and collaborative meaning-making, through which students co-construct knowledge and support one another's learning (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). PAL provides collaborative learning environments in which students work together through structured peer interaction, exchange feedback, develop socio-cultural relationships, and construct understanding through dialogue and shared learning experiences (Bacon et al., 2021). These features support confidence, engagement, and language practice, especially for students learning in a second or foreign language.

For students in culturally diverse learning environments, PAL provides inclusive, low-stakes opportunities for intercultural dialogue, reciprocal peer interaction, and collaborative meaning-making, thereby strengthening communication skills, cultural adaptability, and openness to diverse perspectives (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). When Burmese students serve as peer mentors, PAL provides structured opportunities for sustained intercultural interaction that promote cultural integration, strengthen cross-cultural communication, and support the development of intercultural competence among both mentors

and mentees (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a). Yet few studies have examined PAL as an intercultural space for Thai mentees or as a concrete mechanism for achieving IaH goals.

Thai Students' Intercultural Experiences with Culturally Diverse Peers

Communication-related challenges and concerns about making mistakes when using English can reduce students' confidence and willingness to engage in academic and social interactions within international university settings (Htar Ei Wai, 2025). As a result, intercultural contact frequently occurs in structured projects rather than through informal friendship networks.

Existing research indicates that sustained intercultural peer interaction through PAL fosters greater openness to diverse cultural perspectives, strengthens intercultural communication skills, and enhances cultural adaptability through reciprocal dialogue and collaborative meaning-making (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). Working with regional peers such as Burmese students is particularly important because it exposes Thai learners to both shared and contrasting historical, political, and linguistic experiences. These encounters can challenge stereotypes and support a more nuanced sense of regional belonging.

Sociocultural Theory and Thai Students' Learning Within Socially Mediated Peer Environments

Sociocultural Theory (henceforth SCT) conceptualizes learning as a socially mediated process in which higher mental functioning develops through social interaction and is shaped by culturally mediated tools and signs, particularly language (Gauvain, 2008). A central concept in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (henceforth ZPD), which conceptualizes the range of cognitive functions that emerge through instruction and collaborative activity, enabling learners to perform beyond their current level of independent competence with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other (Kozulin, 2015). Within peer-learning environments, the ZPD is enacted through collaborative activity in which learners engage in dialogue, jointly construct knowledge, and internalize new understanding through social interaction (L. Wang, 2007).

In intercultural PAL sessions, students develop intercultural competence through reciprocal dialogue, collaborative meaning-making, cultural knowledge exchange, and shared problem-solving during sustained peer interaction (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). Interaction with Burmese mentors exposes them to alternative ways of framing experience and interpreting meaning. Over time, repeated participation in these socially mediated practices can expand Thai students' communicative repertoire, support perspective taking, and foster the gradual development of intercultural competence.

Byram's Intercultural Competence Model as an Analytic Framework for Thai Students' Development

Byram's (1997) model conceptualizes intercultural competence as comprising five interrelated components: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (Wang & Teo, 2024). Research indicates that intercultural competence develops through sustained intercultural experiences, meaningful social interactions, and continued learning from those experiences over time (Bartel-Radic & Cucchi, 2025).

Within PAL settings, intercultural competence is fostered through sustained reciprocal peer interaction that promotes greater openness to diverse cultural perspectives, intercultural dialogue, and cultural adaptability (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). Students' intercultural knowledge expands through greater understanding of both their own and other cultures, while their skills of comparing, interpreting, and relating are strengthened as they engage with diverse cultural perspectives (Feeney & Gajaseni, 2020). Skills of discovery and interaction are reflected in learners' capacity to acquire new cultural knowledge and engage effectively during intercultural communication with individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Wang & Teo, 2024). Critical cultural awareness develops as they reflect on Thai assumptions, reconsider stereotypes, and evaluate cultural practices in a more analytical way.

English as a Lingua Franca and Thai Students' Communicative Flexibility

In multilingual university contexts, English increasingly functions as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF) that enables communication among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Galloway et al., 2026). Within PAL sessions, English provides a shared communicative medium through which Burmese mentors and Thai mentees engage in dialogue, seek clarification, negotiate meaning, and complete collaborative tasks, thereby strengthening multilingual communication and intercultural competence (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a).

In ELF interactions, speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds employ communication strategies that facilitate the negotiation of meaning and mutual intelligibility, with communicative effectiveness taking precedence over adherence to native-speaker norms (Galloway et al., 2026). When communication difficulties arise in intercultural PAL sessions, participants adapt their communicative practices and negotiate meaning through scaffolded peer interaction. Sustained participation in this environment strengthens communication skills, cultural adaptability, and emotional resilience (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). These experiences are particularly valuable for preparing students to participate effectively in globally connected professional environments that require English-mediated communication, intercultural collaboration, and digital interaction (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a).

Thai Students in Intercultural Peer Learning: A Review of Existing Evidence and Persistent Gaps

Evidence from intercultural PAL demonstrates that sustained peer interaction enhances intercultural competence by strengthening communication skills, cultural adaptability, openness to diverse perspectives, and reflective engagement with cultural differences (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). However, the literature reveals several gaps. Few studies place Thai mentees, rather than mentors or institutions, at the centre of analysis. Little work examines intercultural learning in PAL programs, despite their prominence as support structures.

Existing research on intercultural PAL in Thai higher education remains limited by single-site, short-term, and predominantly self-report designs. Future research should incorporate more diverse participant groups, behavioral measures, and longitudinal approaches to examine how intercultural competence develops through sustained peer interaction (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). The present study responds to these gaps by tracing Thai mentees' developmental trajectories across ten weeks of PAL sessions and examining meaning making, communication strategies, and identity reflection as core processes.

Summary

This review shows that Thai students face both opportunities and constraints in intercultural engagement. IaH and PAL provide promising frameworks for widening access to global learning through peer-based interaction on campus. SCT and Byram's model offer strong theoretical resources for analysing how Thai learners develop intercultural competence in these settings.

At the same time, there is a clear need for research that focuses explicitly on Thai mentees' intercultural growth in regional, culturally complex interactions with peers such as Burmese Communication Arts students. The present study builds on this literature by investigating how Thai students mediate meaning, negotiate identity, and develop intercultural competence within an English learning PAL environment.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design to examine the effects of a structured intercultural Peer-Assisted Learning program on the development of intercultural

competence and English communication skills among Thai university students. The design incorporated two intact groups: an experimental group that participated in a ten-week intercultural PAL intervention and a control group that engaged in independent English self-study without intercultural content. Because random assignment at the individual level was not feasible within the curriculum structure, intact class groups were utilized, making the quasi-experimental design appropriate for maintaining ecological validity within the authentic university setting.

The experimental approach enabled direct comparison of learning gains by collecting baseline (pretest) and outcome (posttest) measures on intercultural competence and English communication. This structure provided strong internal validity for examining changes attributable to the intercultural intervention rather than to general course progression. The design is aligned with the study's aim of empirically evaluating intercultural learning as a measurable educational outcome within a university English course context. A simplified flow of the study included:

1. Pretest administration (ICQ and English assessment)
2. Ten-week intervention period
3. Posttest administration
4. Semi-structured interviews for qualitative insights

Participants

A total of 100 Thai undergraduate students aged 18 to 20 years old participated in the study. All students were enrolled in the same General Education English course at a private university in Thailand. Participants were assigned to one of two groups: the experimental group (n = 50) and the control group (n = 50).

Inclusion Criteria

1. Students were eligible if they met the following criteria:
2. Thai nationality
3. Minimum CEFR B1 English proficiency
4. Enrollment in the required General Education English course

Recruitment and Sample Size Justification

Participants were recruited from course sections taught during the academic term in which the study took place. A target sample of 100 students was selected to ensure adequate statistical power for detecting medium effect sizes in pretest–posttest comparisons, consistent with conventional recommendations for quasi-experimental educational research.

Demographic Overview

Students represented multiple academic majors typical of General Education cohorts, including Communication Arts, ICT-related fields, Business, and Health Sciences. Gender distribution was balanced and broadly representative of the university population.

Instruments

Intercultural Competence Questionnaire (ICQ)

Intercultural competence was assessed using a 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire aligned with Byram's intercultural competence model. The instrument measured five domains: intercultural attitudes, intercultural knowledge, interpreting and relating skills, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness. Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Reliability and Validity

Prior to implementation, the instrument underwent a pilot study involving 45 students not connected to the present research. The pilot yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.926, demonstrating excellent internal consistency according to Mohamad et al. (2015). Moreover, four experts in intercultural education evaluated the instrument using the Item Objective Congruence index, with all items receiving scores of +1, confirming strong content validity.

English Communication Assessment

To examine potential language-related effects of the intervention, students completed pretest and posttest English communication assessments. These assessments included reading and writing tasks aligned with CEFR B1 expectations and evaluated functional academic communication. Four expert raters validated the content using the IOC procedure, with all items receiving scores of +1. Although English proficiency was a secondary outcome, its inclusion acknowledges the role of English as a lingua franca in intercultural interactions.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 students (10 from each group) following the intervention. Interviews explored students' reflections on cultural difference, communication challenges, and the development of intercultural awareness. Questions were grounded in Byram's IC dimensions and were validated through expert review. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated when necessary.

Intervention Procedures

Duration and Frequency

The intervention spanned ten weeks, with one 30-minute PAL session conducted each week for the experimental group.

Experimental Group Activities

Students in the experimental group participated in structured PAL sessions facilitated by trained Burmese Communication Arts peer mentors. Each session followed four stages:

1. Warm-up interpersonal activity
2. Collaborative academic and intercultural task
3. Cultural reflection and guided discussion
4. Communicative practice through English as a lingua franca

Mentors completed preparatory training in peer facilitation, intercultural awareness, and ethical communication. Thai mentees also completed weekly reflection tasks to reinforce metacognitive engagement with intercultural experiences.

Control Group Condition

The control group completed weekly English self-study activities using tasks aligned with course objectives but lacking intercultural content. Neutral reflection prompts ensured that engagement remained academic rather than culturally focused.

Fidelity and Monitoring

Attendance was recorded at every session. Mentors followed structured guidelines and received ongoing support from the research team. The principal investigator monitored session fidelity to ensure consistent implementation across the ten-week period.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection proceeded in four phases:

- Phase 1: Administration of the ICQ and English pretest
- Phase 2: Ten-week intervention or self-study period
- Phase 3: Administration of the ICQ and English posttest
- Phase 4: Semi-structured interviews with selected participants

All data were anonymized and stored on a secure password-protected server accessible only to the research team.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

SPSS software was used to compute:

- Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations)
- Paired samples t-tests to examine within-group pretest–posttest changes
- Independent samples t-tests for between-group comparisons
- Effect sizes (Cohen's d) to determine practical significance
- Correlation analysis between intercultural competence gains and English communication improvements

Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Coding categories were aligned with Byram's intercultural competence framework. Triangulation was achieved by integrating questionnaire responses, interview narratives, and student reflection data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the university's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Data confidentiality and privacy were ensured through anonymization and secure digital storage. Peer mentors received training on respectful intercultural interaction and ethical engagement with participants.

Summary

This methodology integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both measurable outcomes and rich experiential insights into Thai students' intercultural development. The quasi-experimental design, combined with validated instruments and structured PAL sessions, provides robust evidence for evaluating how structured intercultural peer learning can foster meaningful development in intercultural competence.

Results

This section reports both quantitative and qualitative findings on IC and PAL among Burmese Communication Arts students. The quantitative analysis, derived from a 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire, assessed IC levels and explored relationships across subscales. Complementing this, the qualitative results offered deeper perspectives on students' intercultural experiences facilitated through PAL. Collectively, the evidence illustrates the role of PAL in fostering IC development.

Descriptive Statistics for Intercultural Communication

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for Burmese Communication Arts students

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Level
Overall IC	20	3.90	0.62	High
Attitudes	20	4.08	0.57	High
Knowledge	20	3.89	0.64	High
Interpreting and Relating	20	3.89	0.62	High
Discovery and Interaction	20	3.87	0.67	High
Critical Cultural Awareness	20	3.81	0.69	High

(Table 1) summarizes the descriptive statistics of IC among Burmese Communication Arts students. The overall mean IC score was 3.90 (SD = 0.62), indicating a high level of competence. Among the five dimensions, attitudes achieved the highest score (M = 4.08, SD = 0.57), reflecting pronounced openness and curiosity toward cultural diversity. Both knowledge (M = 3.89, SD = 0.64) and interpreting and relating (M = 3.89, SD = 0.62) were also rated at a high level, suggesting that students possess strong conceptual understanding and relational abilities.

Discovery and interaction (M = 3.87, SD = 0.67) similarly demonstrated high competence, highlighting active engagement with diverse cultural contexts. Critical cultural awareness, while slightly lower (M = 3.81, SD = 0.69), remained within the high category. Overall, these findings indicate that Burmese Communication Arts students exhibit robust intercultural competence, with particular strengths in attitudes, though critical cultural awareness appears to be an area for further enhancement.

Correlation analysis for all Intercultural Communication subscales

Table 2. Correlation analysis for all IC Subscales

	Attitudes	Knowledge	Interpreting and Relating	Discovery and Interaction	Critical Cultural Awareness
Attitudes	1	0.86	0.83	0.85	0.81
Knowledge	0.86	1	0.91	0.88	0.86
Interpreting and Relating	0.83	0.91	1	0.97	0.94
Discovery and Interaction	0.85	0.88	0.97	1	0.97
Critical Cultural Awareness	0.81	0.86	0.94	0.97	1

(Table 2) presents the Pearson correlation analysis of intercultural competence (IC) dimensions among Burmese Communication Arts students. The analysis revealed statistically significant positive associations across all components ($p < .001$), with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.81 to 0.97, underscoring the strong interdependence of the variables. The strongest correlations were observed

between Interpreting and Relating and Discovery and Interaction (r = 0.97), as well as between Discovery and Interaction and Critical Cultural Awareness (r = 0.97).

Interpreting and Relating also demonstrated robust associations with Critical Cultural Awareness (r = 0.94) and Knowledge (r = 0.91), highlighting the close connection between relational skills, cultural understanding, and awareness. Attitudes exhibited consistent positive correlations with all other dimensions (r values between 0.81 and 0.86), suggesting that openness and curiosity toward diversity serve as a foundation for IC. Overall, these findings indicate that students who actively engage in intercultural interactions and relational processes tend to also display higher levels of knowledge and cultural awareness, reinforcing the holistic and interconnected nature of IC development.

Summary of Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis revealed that Burmese Communication Arts students demonstrate consistently high levels of intercultural competence across all dimensions. Attitudes emerged as the strongest area, reflecting openness and curiosity toward cultural diversity, while knowledge, interpreting and relating, and discovery and interaction also indicated solid understanding, relational skills, and active engagement with diverse contexts. Critical cultural awareness, though slightly less pronounced, remained within the high category, suggesting scope for further development. Correlation analysis showed strong positive relationships among all dimensions, underscoring the interconnected nature of intercultural competence, with attitudes and relational engagement serving as key strengths.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to the quantitative survey, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with four participants. This approach combined structured guiding questions with opportunities for elaboration, ensuring both consistency and the emergence of rich, contextual perspectives beyond standardized instruments. The interviews offered deeper insights into how students perceive and practice IC, complementing the statistical findings with nuanced accounts of attitudes, knowledge, interactional experiences, and critical reflections that highlight the role of PAL in fostering intercultural development.

Emergent Themes from PAL Experiences

The peer-assisted learning experience provided participants with meaningful opportunities to reflect on their development in communication, cultural understanding, and interpersonal skills. Through dialogue and shared encounters, recurring themes emerged that illustrate the influence of intercultural learning. These themes highlight how students gained confidence, fostered friendships, practiced empathy, and enhanced their awareness of cultural differences.

Theme 1: Language Barriers and Communication Strategies

Participants frequently identified language barriers as a challenge, however, they utilized strategies such as simplifying speech, using gestures, relying on translation tools, and practicing active listening to navigate and overcome these difficulties. One of the participants mentioned that "I'm trying to speak clearly first and slowly when I talk something in English to the Thai students, there are sometimes like, they seem so confused when I talk something fast. In that time, I, you know, reflect myself and trying to speak in a clearer and simpler way."

Theme 2: Respect and Open-mindedness

Respect for cultural differences emerged as a central lesson where participants emphasized patience, openness, and avoiding judgment when encountering unfamiliar behaviors. Another participant noted

that "I understand that different cultures have different meanings and viewpoints. Uh, yes, um. Try to understand. I'm trying to understand other more carefully before making any judgment."

Theme 3: Redefining Good English

Several participants shifted their view of "good English" from speed and native like pronunciation to clarity and effective meaning as this reflects how intercultural encounters reshaped language ideologies. One of the participants mentioned that "before I joined PAL, I thought, I always think about, like, good English have to be, like, fluent.

They have to, like, speak faster because, like, I watch a lot of romance, comedy, English movie. And, like, I can understand, I can get it what they want to talk about too fast. After joining PAL, I think, like, good English means clarity and, like, how to express your feeling or expression clearly. That, the listener can understand."

Theme 4: Cultural Exchange through everyday life

Food, lifestyle, and traditions were recurring points for cultural sharing. These everyday exchanges helped to build rapport and deepened understanding. Where a participant mentioned that "Peer share me their culture especially with their lifestyle and like food life food style food and drink. Because I like. I like food and drink. So yeah, when they shared that we are very yeah it helped it help better our discussion."

Theme 5: Confidence and Personal Growth

Participants reported becoming more confident, less awkward, and more comfortable in intercultural interactions as this theme captures the personal transformation. One of the participants quoted that "So I became much more, you know, much more free when I talk to people because of the practice."

Changes in Communication and Cultural Awareness

Through the PAL program, participants experienced notable growth in cultural awareness. Prior to engagement, many anticipated difficulties, often emphasizing language barriers or potential discomfort in intercultural exchanges. As the program unfolded, however, their reflections revealed a shift toward greater confidence, adaptability, and openness, illustrating how peer-assisted learning facilitated meaningful progression in intercultural competence. One of the participants mentioned that "So before I came here, I thought it will be awkward when I talk talk with, you know, different people for different cultures and then language barrier and thought like there will be a lot of language barriers like that."

During the program, interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds fostered greater appreciation and respect, as participants learned to adapt and embrace cultural differences. Another participant noted that " Through PAL, I learn about different traditions, communication styles, and thinking." After the program, participants reported deeper self-awareness and a shift toward greater open mindedness, recognizing the importance of respect and clarity in intercultural contexts, where another participant highlighted that "after joining PAL, like, I try to, like, I try to explain my real feeling to my peers, like, so they can understand what I want to talk. So, I use a lot of techniques."

Summary of Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews highlight how PAL fostered intercultural competence among students. Participants reflected on growth in communication, cultural understanding, and interpersonal skills, with recurring themes including overcoming language barriers through adaptive strategies, practicing respect and openness, redefining "good English" as clarity, engaging in cultural exchange through everyday life, and gaining confidence in intercultural

interactions. Across stages of participation, students progressed from initial concerns about barriers to developing appreciation, self-awareness, and open mindedness, underscoring PAL's role in supporting meaningful intercultural learning.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that structured intercultural PAL offers an effective mechanism for promoting both intercultural competence and English communication within the framework of IaH. Consistent with the study's theoretical framework, Thai students developed intercultural competence through sustained interaction with Burmese Communication Arts mentors rather than through passive exposure to cultural diversity.

The quantitative findings indicate consistently high levels of intercultural competence across all five dimensions of Byram's model, while the qualitative findings reveal how these competencies emerged through socially mediated dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, and cultural exchange. Together, these findings suggest that intercultural development is best understood as an interactive and developmental process that unfolds through meaningful peer engagement. The discussion below addresses each research question by relating the findings to previous scholarship and the theoretical perspectives presented in the literature review.

To what extent does participation in PAL sessions influence Thai students' intercultural competence compared with self-study?

The findings indicate that participation in structured intercultural PAL sessions contributed more substantially to Thai students' intercultural competence than independent self-study. Unlike the control condition, which emphasized individual English learning, the PAL intervention immersed participants in sustained intercultural interaction that required continuous negotiation of meaning, collaborative problem-solving, and reciprocal communication with Burmese mentors. These findings support previous research describing PAL as a collaborative, peer-driven learning model that promotes intercultural dialogue, reciprocal learning, and cultural exchange through structured peer interaction (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a, 2025b). They also reinforce earlier evidence that PAL strengthens socio-cultural relationships and student engagement beyond purely academic outcomes (Bacon et al., 2021).

The findings further support the principles of Internationalization at Home by demonstrating that meaningful intercultural learning can occur through campus-based peer interaction rather than international mobility. This aligns with the view that IaH expands opportunities for all students to develop intercultural competence by embedding international and intercultural dimensions within domestic educational settings (Opeto & Onen, 2024). At the same time, the study responds to concerns that IaH research has concentrated primarily on institutional implementation while paying comparatively less attention to students' actual learning experiences (Soule, 2025). By providing empirical evidence of Thai students' intercultural development within a structured PAL program, the present study extends existing IaH scholarship by illustrating one practical mechanism through which its objectives can be achieved.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings strongly support Sociocultural Theory. The regular interaction between Thai mentees and Burmese mentors created opportunities for learning within the ZPD, where participants developed new understandings through socially-mediated dialogue and collaborative activity (Gauvain, 2008; Kozulin, 2015; L. Wang, 2007). Rather than learning intercultural competence through direct instruction alone, students gradually developed intercultural understanding through repeated participation in authentic intercultural communication.

Does the intervention improve their English communication skills relative to the control group?

The qualitative findings indicate that the PAL intervention improved students' English communication by increasing communicative confidence and encouraging more adaptive use of English during intercultural interaction. Participants consistently described becoming more comfortable communicating with Burmese mentors over time, gradually shifting their attention from linguistic accuracy toward successful communication. Rather than viewing English as a subject requiring native-like proficiency, students increasingly perceived it as a practical resource for interacting across cultural boundaries.

These findings support current perspectives on English as a Lingua Franca, which emphasize negotiation of meaning, communicative effectiveness, and mutual intelligibility over conformity to native-speaker norms (Galloway et al., 2026). Interview data demonstrated that participants modified their communication by speaking more clearly, simplifying explanations, and adapting their language to facilitate understanding. These behaviours illustrate the communicative flexibility associated with ELF interaction and reinforce previous findings that communication-related anxiety can restrict participation when students lack supportive environments for authentic interaction (Htar Ei Wai, 2025). The present findings suggest that PAL provides precisely such an environment by allowing learners to communicate without the evaluative pressures often associated with formal classroom instruction.

The results also support previous PAL research showing that intercultural peer interaction strengthens communication skills, cultural adaptability, and multilingual competence through sustained collaborative dialogue (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a). Compared with independent self-study, which offers few opportunities for authentic communication, structured interaction with Burmese mentors enabled students to apply English purposefully while simultaneously developing intercultural competence.

What specific intercultural competencies do Thai students demonstrate after the PAL program?

The findings demonstrate development across all five dimensions of Byram's intercultural competence model. First, participants exhibited increasingly positive intercultural attitudes through greater openness, patience, curiosity, and willingness to engage with culturally different peers. These findings correspond closely with previous research showing that sustained intercultural experiences strengthen openness toward cultural diversity and promote greater interaction engagement (Bartel-Radic & Cucchi, 2025; Feng et al., 2025).

Second, participants developed broader intercultural knowledge through discussions of Burmese traditions, food, communication styles, and everyday life. These findings support Feeney and Gajaseni (2020) observation that engagement with diverse cultural perspectives expands learners' understanding of both their own and other cultures.

Third, students demonstrated stronger skills of interpreting and relating by comparing Thai and Burmese communication practices while attempting to understand unfamiliar behaviours within their cultural contexts. Fourth, their increasing confidence during intercultural dialogue illustrates the development of discovery and interaction skills described by Byram's framework and further examined by (Wang & Teo, 2024). Rather than avoiding unfamiliar situations, participants became progressively more willing to engage in intercultural communication despite linguistic differences.

Finally, evidence of critical cultural awareness emerged as participants reflected on their own assumptions concerning effective communication. Their changing perceptions of "good English," shifting from native-like fluency toward clarity and successful communication, demonstrate critical evaluation of previously accepted beliefs. Collectively, these findings reinforce Byram's conceptualization of intercultural competence as an interconnected construct in which attitudes, knowledge, interactional skills, and critical reflection develop together through sustained intercultural experience (Wang & Teo, 2024).

How do Thai mentees describe their experiences of interpreting and responding to cultural differences during interactions with Burmese mentors?

The interview findings reveal that Thai mentees experienced intercultural learning as a gradual process of interpretation, negotiation, and adaptation rather than as isolated encounters with cultural difference. Initially, participants anticipated communication difficulties arising from language barriers and unfamiliar cultural practices. However, repeated interaction with Burmese mentors gradually transformed these concerns into opportunities for collaborative learning and intercultural reflection.

Participants consistently described responding to cultural differences by asking questions, seeking clarification, adapting explanations, and learning through reciprocal dialogue. Everyday conversations concerning food, traditions, communication styles, and university life became important contexts for comparing perspectives and negotiating cultural meaning. These findings closely reflect Sociocultural Theory, which proposes that higher-order learning emerges through collaborative interaction mediated by language and social participation (Gauvain, 2008; Kozulin, 2015; L. Wang, 2007). Rather than simply receiving cultural information, Thai students actively co-constructed new understandings through sustained dialogue with Burmese mentors.

The interview findings also support previous PAL research demonstrating that intercultural peer interaction strengthens communication skills, cultural adaptability, and openness toward diverse perspectives (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). Likewise, the findings reinforce evidence that Burmese mentors can function as important cultural resources who facilitate intercultural communication and regional integration within Thai universities (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a). Participants' growing confidence and willingness to engage across cultural boundaries further align with research emphasizing the value of intercultural peer learning for developing communication, cultural understanding, and collaborative competence within multilingual educational settings (Bacon et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that intercultural PAL provides an effective pedagogical model for advancing the objectives of Internationalization at Home by embedding meaningful intercultural learning within routine academic support. By integrating collaborative learning with sustained intercultural dialogue, the PAL program enabled Thai students to develop stronger intercultural competence, greater communicative adaptability, and more reflective understandings of cultural difference. These findings extend previous scholarship by demonstrating how structured peer learning with Burmese mentors can serve as an evidence-based approach for fostering intercultural development within Thai higher education and preparing students for participation in an increasingly interconnected ASEAN community.

Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of structured intercultural PAL on Thai university students' intercultural competence and English communication skills within an IaH framework. Drawing upon Sociocultural Theory and Byram's Intercultural Competence model, the findings demonstrate that sustained interaction with Burmese Communication Arts mentors provides meaningful opportunities for Thai students to develop intercultural attitudes, cultural knowledge, interpreting and relating skills, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness. The qualitative findings further indicate that repeated peer interaction strengthened communicative confidence, encouraged negotiation of meaning, and fostered greater openness toward cultural diversity. Collectively, the results suggest that intercultural competence develops through socially mediated dialogue and collaborative learning rather than through exposure to cultural diversity alone.

The study contributes to the growing literature on IaH by demonstrating that structured PAL can function as an effective campus-based strategy for embedding intercultural learning into everyday academic practice without relying on international mobility. It also extends previous PAL research by positioning Burmese students not only as academic peer mentors but also as valuable intercultural

partners who facilitate regional learning within the ASEAN context. By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, the study provides a comprehensive account of how intercultural competence develops through sustained peer interaction.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted at a single private university, involved a relatively modest sample size, and examined only one ten-week intervention, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should employ multi-institutional and longitudinal designs involving more culturally diverse participant groups and incorporate additional behavioural measures, classroom observations, and interactional analyses to examine how intercultural competence develops over longer periods.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that intercultural PAL represents an evidence-based pedagogical approach for advancing Internationalization at Home while simultaneously strengthening English communication and intercultural competence among Thai university students. As higher education institutions continue to pursue internationalization within increasingly multicultural learning environments, structured peer-learning programs involving regional partners such as Burmese students offer a practical and sustainable model for preparing graduates to communicate and collaborate effectively across cultural boundaries.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, Thai universities should consider integrating structured intercultural Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) into Internationalization at Home (IaH) initiatives as a sustainable strategy for developing students' intercultural competence and English communication skills. Rather than relying primarily on overseas mobility programs, institutions can maximize the educational value of their existing international student populations by engaging them as trained peer mentors in structured intercultural learning activities.

Universities should provide systematic mentor training that includes peer facilitation techniques, intercultural communication, reflective practice, and ethical mentoring to ensure consistency and quality across PAL programs. Faculty members are also encouraged to incorporate structured intercultural reflection activities into PAL sessions to help students critically examine cultural assumptions, develop empathy, and strengthen intercultural awareness beyond conversational exchanges.

Future research should investigate the long-term impact of intercultural PAL through longitudinal studies involving multiple universities across ASEAN. Comparative studies involving students from different cultural backgrounds and academic disciplines would further enhance understanding of how peer learning contributes to intercultural competence in diverse educational contexts. Researchers may also explore the integration of digital collaboration platforms and AI-supported learning tools to facilitate intercultural interaction in blended and online environments. Such developments would align with ASEAN's vision of inclusive and sustainable digital innovation while expanding access to meaningful intercultural learning opportunities for a broader range of university students.

References

Bacon, E. D., Satienchayakorn, N., & Prakaiborisuth, P. (2021). Integrating seamless learning within a peer-assisted learning center to develop student English academic writing skills. *rEFLections*, 28(2), 147–167. https://doi.org/10.61508/refl.v28i2.251147

Bacon, E. D., & Torremucha, G. (2025a). *Fostering Leadership and Cultural Integration: Burmese Team Leaders' Role in Peer-Assisted Learning Among Science and Technology Students*. 299–313. https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2186-229X.2025.24

Bacon, E. D., & Torremucha, G. A. (2025b). Designing cultural bridges: A participatory action research study on peer-assisted learning and intercultural competence in design education. *CoDesign*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2025.2571801

Bartel-Radic, A., & Cucchi, A. (2025). How do students develop intercultural competence during international mobility? International *Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 105, 102132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2024.102132

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Feeney, T., & Gajaseni, C. (2020). Effectiveness of reading short stories to develop intercultural communicative competence among Thai students at an international school. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 13(2), 126–141.

Feng, H.-Y., Tseng, C.-L., & Lee, Y.-C. (2025). The particular and universal in cross-cultural curricula in general education: A comparative study of students' intercultural sensitivity. *Revista de Cercetare Si Interventie Sociala*, (88), 23–37. https://doi.org/10.33788/rcis.88.2

Galloway, N., Delogu, P., Zhou, J., & Lamprecht, N. (2026). Global Englishes, global voices and global approaches to ELT: Facilitating a glocalised community of practice in the Thai context. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 19(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.70730/GRWL6003

Gauvain, M. (2008). *Vygotsky's sociocultural theory*. In J. B. Benson & M. M. Haith (Eds.), Encyclopedia of infant and early childhood development (pp. 404–413). Elsevier.

Htar Ei Wai. (2025). *Challenges and strategies in English communication among Myanmar students in international programs in a Thai university* [Master's thesis, Thammasat University].

Jampaklay, A., Penboon, B., & Lucktong, A. (2022). Internationalization of higher education in Thailand: Promises and reality. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, 43(1), 217–224. https://doi.org/10.34044/j.kjss.2022.43.1.25

Kozulin, A. (2015). *Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development*. In J. D. Wright (Ed.), International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences (2nd ed., pp. 322–328). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.23094-8

Opeto, B., & Onen, D. (2024). Internationalisation at home: The cases of the Universities of Makerere and Nairobi. *International Journal of African Higher Education*, 11(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.6017/ijahe.v11i1.17339

Soule, M. V. (2025). Contextualizing internationalization at home: Academic perspectives from Cypriot higher education in a changing global landscape. *Frontiers in Education*, 10, 1657401. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1657401

Wang, L. (2007). Sociocultural learning theories and information literacy teaching activities in higher education. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 47(2), 149–158. https://doi.org/10.5860/rusq.47n2.149

Wang, Q., & Teo, T. (2024). Explaining the relationships among components of intercultural competence: A structural equation modelling approach. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *99*, 101953. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2024.101953