

**An Analysis of Intercultural Communicative
Competence: Hotel Front Office Personnel
in Bangkok**

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Abstract

When we consider a strategy for dealing with globalization, it can be seen that intercultural interactions and encounters are very important and appropriate as effective outcomes are expected. Therefore, the need to assess the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of those expected to achieve these outcomes is worth consideration. This study examined the intercultural communicative competence of front office personnel working in hotels in Bangkok. The study aimed to find out whether or not these hotel front office personnel were equipped with and/or have adequate intercultural competence to deal with interculturally diverse interactions within their workplace. The intercultural competence framework of Barrett, Byram, Lazar, Mompoin-Gaillard, and Philippou (2013) and the work of Byram (1997) provided a framework for analysis in this study. They were both operationally adjusted to fit within a

Thai context. Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence objective-based approach was used as a guideline for the ICC assessment, and randomly selected hotel front office personnel were the target participants. The outcomes that emerged from the study can be used as guidelines for hotel human resources management in order to set up intercultural communication training courses, or by educational institutions to better enhance the ICC development of their graduates. Furthermore, the outcomes can also be used as an informational base for future research.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, intercultural competence, ICC, ICC assessment, hotel front office personnel

Introduction

Recently, there has been growing interest in the intercultural communicative competence of employees working within the hospitality industry, especially hotel front personnel. In today's world of globalization, the idea that we are now living in a 'borderless world' has been suggested (www.econweb.tamu.edu, retrieved in March 2016), which in turn is said to provide a gateway to permit and encourage people from different backgrounds to connect with one another for various purposes, especially in regards to business-related matters. Effective communication is becoming increasingly important in order to manage these new and emerging relationships. To understand the importance of effective communication within these given contexts, it is essential to look at what is meant by interpersonal communication. Most definitions of interpersonal communication do not limit it to just speaking or writing. There are many more aspects involved in a single interaction, for example there can be nonverbal communication, in the form of facial expressions or gestures, as well as in the interactional context, which takes into account factors such as, cultural background, pre-existing

knowledge, place, time and gender. With these communication factors at play it is essential that people from different parts of the globe are able to successfully communicate without misunderstanding or confusion, in order to achieve mutually satisfying outcomes for both parties.

Although the tourism industry in Thailand is thriving, with dramatically increasing numbers of travelers having visited, and expected to visit in the near future, there is still no clear evidence of policy development from the concerned authorities and parties with respect to effectively developing the hospitality industry's workforce. The article 'Thai Education Preparation for Future Changes', prepared by the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) (www.tcdc.or.th, retrieved in March 25, 2015) stated that with the world's rapid development and the active mobility of people, Thailand has to prepare its own working personnel — especially in the service industry — to cope with the constant changes demanded by the global community. The report did acknowledge that something is required; however, it did not provide any practical strategies, or clear policy on how to achieve this.

Statistically, compared to other fields of study, intercultural communicative communication is considered relatively new in Thailand. This was proven by the limited availability of research in this area. As a result, current intercultural competence research was considered inadequate and insufficient. The literature review of research in Thailand showed that there had only been a limited number of both quantitative and qualitative studies undertaken which investigated employees' intercultural competence — especially in the area of hotel front office personnel — and assessed the degree of intercultural communicative competence that they possessed. Alongside this, there was no clear evidence indicating whether or not hotel front office personnel were satisfied with their own perceived intercultural communicative competence, or what aspects they considered they were inadequate in.

This study has contributed to filling part of the existing gap by investigating whether or not hotel front office personnel were equipped with intercultural communicative competence. The study explored the degree and extent to which hotel front office personnel in Bangkok were equipped with intercultural communicative competence, and whether they identified any areas in which they thought they lacked competence in, or required extra training or improvement on.

Literature Review

In the recently globalized world, possessing intercultural communication competence is essential for people to be more productive in their communication, especially for hotel front office personnel who regularly deal with interculturally diverse encounters. Much of the literature reviewed suggested that in order to prepare graduates for engaging with diverse cultures, educational institutions needed to develop intercultural competence within their students so that they were prepared to enter the tourism employment market. To date, there was not much research to suggest that students were equipped with intercultural competence upon graduation.

Conceptualizing intercultural competence

For over five decades, the term ‘intercultural competence’ has not been absolutely defined, although several scholars have provided explanations, all of which have included references to global competence, international competence and multicultural competence (Fantini, 2012). Byram’s (2008) definition provides a helpful explanation. He states that intercultural competence is “the capacity to engage with people of a cultural group and identity to which we do not belong, to understand them and to act together with them; it is not a matter of changing identity but rather of crossing group boundaries to see their culture from within, and to see our own culture from the other perspective”.

The components or features of intercultural competence comprise several aspects that enhance intercultural communication,

and hotel front office employees are expected to possess some or all of them. To a certain degree, no one can completely and perfectly achieve “full” intercultural competence (Barrett et al., 2013). Nowadays, hotel front office workers are considered to be intercultural interactants, and they are required to have intercultural communicative competence in order to achieve appropriate and effective outcomes in their interactions. There are many intercultural competence models available to help measure ICC. The following six were selected as relevant models for this study, and prudently reviewed to understand which one was appropriate. The models explored were the Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2009); Intercultural Maturity Model (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005); Intercultural Sensitivity Model (Bennett, 1993); Intercultural Competence Model (Byram, 1997); Intercultural Components (Barrett et al., 2013); and the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (Council of Europe, 2009).

After reviewing the selected models, the most suitable for providing an appropriate framework for the study was Barrett et al. (2013). When choosing this appropriate operationalized intercultural communicative competence model, consideration was given to the fact that the model was from the perspective of Western scholars (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009). To ensure that the model was suitable within a Thai context, adjustments were made as appropriate, and where relevant, depending on the given situation.

Assessing intercultural competence

The intercultural competence characteristics assessed in the study were: attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions (Barrett et al., 2013). Attitudes included, valuing cultural diversity and a pluralism of views and practices. Knowledge and understanding included, comprehending the internal diversity and heterogeneity of all cultural groups. Skills involved using of a multi-perspectivity approach. This happens when a person is decentered from their own perspective and

encouraged to take into account another person's perspective alongside their own. In doing so, a person's skills in relation to how they interpret, express empathy, are able to adapt themselves to new cultures and their cognitive ability are evaluated. Finally, actions included, evaluating a person's ability to seek opportunities to engage with people who had different cultural orientations, and being able to interact and communicate with them appropriately, effectively, and respectfully (Barrett et al., 2013; Byram, 1997; Council of Europe, 2009).

The issue was raised about the use of assessment theories, as whether or not certain components of intercultural competence can be, or should be, assessed individually or holistically (Borghetti, 2011). The decision was taken that for the purpose of this study developed models from the chosen scholars would be adapted and used as a guideline to investigate intercultural competence within a Thai context, both individually and holistically, to ensure a comprehensive investigation.

The selected models for review were Barrett's Intercultural Competence Assessment Model (2013), Byram's Intercultural Competence Assessment Model (1997), The Assessment of Intercultural Competence (Fantini, 2006) and Intercultural Competence Assessment Model (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 1999). After careful consideration it was narrowed down to Byram's Intercultural Competence Assessment Model as the one most appropriate for assessing intercultural communicative competence within a Thai context. Setting up clear objectives for each competence prior to commencing the investigation was also necessary.

Empirical works on intercultural competence in the hotel business

With several proposed definitions, I adapted some key concepts from scholars in the field, and defined the term 'hotel front office personnel' as *"those who work in the front line unit of the hotel's lobby area. Their key responsibilities are to interact with guests or visitors, with all kinds of verbal and non-verbal*

communicational tasks, in order to fulfill and satisfy the needs of the persons they are interacting with.” The front office personnel in this study were limited to those who work in the hotel’s lobby and frequently interact with visitors. They were receptionists, reservation personnel, guest relations, concierge and porter service personnel.

In the hospitality industry, manpower is considered the foundation of a successful business catering to intercultural customers. Shapero (2006) notes that intercultural competence increases customer satisfaction. However, when looking at recent literature, the research directly involved in intercultural and service satisfaction was rare and difficult to find. Most reviews from the past 10 years placed the main discussion upon customer experience and customer satisfaction, with only an indirect relationship to intercultural communication influences. Blue and Harun (2003) emphasized that there was a growing worldwide need for frontline workers in the hospitality industry who were able to communicate with guests effectively. Therefore, according to the research carried out by Sizoo, Plank, Iskat and Serrie (2005), working personnel with high intercultural sensitivity would significantly perform intercultural duties such as, service attentiveness, revenue contribution, interpersonal skills, job satisfaction, and social satisfaction within a context of cross-cultural encounters. To be equipped with intercultural sensitivity, hotel employees would deal with the intercultural guests appropriately and effectively as they were able to carry on communication behavior to elicit a desired response in a specific environment (Chen, 1990).

Research Methodology

This study sought to establish explanations concerning the intercultural communicative competence with which front office personnel are equipped. It utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyze data. The approaches applied included, self-assessment questionnaires, stakeholders’ opinion questionnaires and participant observation.

This range of methods allowed for data to be gained from different groups of participants. The quantitative-based questionnaires were completed by the main targeted participants, who were hotel front office employees working in Bangkok. The combination of quantitative and qualitative questionnaires, as well as informal interviews, was employed to gain additional supporting data from the stakeholders, the ICC instructors, and the hotel front office managers. All of them are directly involved with the key participants. Finally, a one-week observation was conducted on-site at each hotel property to analyze and triangulate the data drawn from the main participants.

Participant profiles and study context

Concerning the participant profiles, there were 219 respondents randomly selected from a total of 27 hotels in Bangkok. This selected number derived from Yamane's sample size formula (Yamane, 1973). Regarding the selected hotels, eight of them are categorized as three star hotels and another 19 properties are classified as four star hotels. All of them are officially registered and star rated by the Hotel Standard Foundation, endorsed by Thai Hotel Association (THA), and the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), 2014 (www.thaihotels.org, retrieved in March, 2015).

Instruments

As the priority of the study was the quantitative, complemented by a qualitative approach, the research instruments used were self-assessment questionnaires, which were utilized in the first phase of data collection. The ICC self-assessment questionnaires were constructed based on the four intercultural competence domains, namely attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions, framed by Barrett et al., (2013).

All items in the questionnaires were written in Thai so that the participants could understand the questions without experiencing any language difficulties. Three specialists in the

field, two ICC specialists, university ICC lecturers and one hotel operational management representative all validated the question items in terms of content, construct, concurrent and predictive validity of each questionnaire. Furthermore, three Thai language magazine editors helped edit and make corrections to the language. The two sets of questionnaires were designed for two groups of participants — (1) self-assessment for the front office personnel, and (2) opinions questionnaires for selected stakeholders — also reviewed by the three specialists via the Index of Congruence (IOC) analysis.

The ICC self-assessment questionnaires (both the closed and open-ended formats) comprised of five parts, totaling 35 items. The first part sought general demographic information about the participants. This was followed by an additional three items asking for sources of language. The second part focused on ICC proficiencies, and the third part consisted of 10 questions regarding communication styles. This was adapted from Assessing Intercultural Competence questionnaires developed by Fantini (2005). This part investigated and measured general intercultural competence, including how aware participants were of their own culture contrasting, and their ability to relate to different cultures. Fourthly, the participants were asked to assess their own intercultural communicative competence through 20 items, specifically derived from the Barrett et al. (2013) model. This comprised of four ICC domains — attitudes (5 items), knowledge and understanding (5 items), skills (5 items), and actions (5 items).

When formulating question items for this part, I adapted the objective-based approach (Byram, 1997). The first strategy was to set up an objective for each ICC domain — for example, the ability to perform or produce to a certain degree within that particular ICC domain. Next, the simulations or scenarios, which employed the aspects of culture that people cannot actually see — such as attitudes, values, beliefs, and worldviews — were developed based on the set objective for participants' competence assessment. The participants were asked to perform their self-

assessment in a 5-point Likert-type scale. Each item was rated based on a range of scores from 1-5 points, representing 1 as “strongly disagree”, 2 as “disagree”, 3 as “not sure”, 4 as “agree” and 5 as “strongly agree.”

To acquire additional information from participants’, three open-ended questions were available in the last section of the questionnaires. This allowed for respondents to express their additional thoughts of how they perceived themselves in relation to ICC issues. In regards to examining the related stakeholders’ ideas and experiences towards intercultural communicative competence, a set of opinion questionnaires were designed. Lastly, the participant observation was conducted. During the observation period, the unstructured open-ended questions from the informal interviews were also applied on-site. The ICC guideline framework was adopted to attain genuine information that was separate from the quantitative questionnaires.

Data analysis and procedures

The strategies for data analysis consisted of first analyzing the quantitative data in the first phase to see if it yielded extreme or outlier cases. With respect to the outlier cases, the quantitative and qualitative follow-up informal interviews of the direct stakeholders, university ICC lecturers, and front office managers were conducted. In addition, observations from the participants’ workplaces were applied.

Next, the SPSS 14 software program was used to store the collected data from the first phase of data collection from the self-assessment questionnaires. By contrast, for qualitative analysis, the open-ended question answers, on-site observation notes, and informal interview notes were categorized into themes and coded with relationships which examined any correlations found in the data. Both quantitative and qualitative results were combined for an integrated interpretation.

Alongside this, a series of steps were implemented to check the validity of data derived from both the quantitative and qualitative findings. As a result, when discussing the validity of

the mixed methods used, the focus was on the strategies applied in all three phases of data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative approaches used (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Consequently, the validity and reliability of the data outcome for both methods were thoroughly checked throughout the working phases. The instrument validation was checked during the data collection phase by bringing up and reviewing the major themes that emerged in the qualitative findings and relating that to quantitative results with triangulation data sources. Additionally, integrating and interpreting all the findings from the three approaches was conducted to see what the commonalities were.

Findings and Discussions

The research aimed to investigate the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of hotel front office personnel, and assess whether they were able to apply this competence appropriately and effectively when interacting with foreign guests within their workplace. Specifically, the study explored the following four key research questions:

1. Were hotel front office personnel in Bangkok equipped with intercultural communicative competence, and was it being applied effectively in their workplace?
2. To what extent were hotel front office personnel in Bangkok equipped with the intercultural communicative competence?
3. How did hotel front office personnel view their own intercultural communicative competence?
4. What were the intercultural communicative competence aspects perceived to be inadequate among the hotel front office workers?

Summary of Overall Quantitative and Qualitative Findings Integration

From the demographic information drawn from respondents, there were some remarkable emergences brought up for discussion. The first significant point of the findings was that the front office staff working in the hotel industry were not limited to those who graduated from language, or from hotel and tourism related majors (44.29%). Some of the workers presently employed in the industry graduated from other fields (55.25%), such as finance and accounting. Most graduates' degrees were not related to their current jobs. The results of the quantitative and qualitative parts drawn from the questionnaires also raised several significant findings. Most hotel front office personnel thought that they had gained intercultural competence from their workplace (55.71%), and through life experience (28.77%). Participants maintained that the schooling system offered them the least intercultural competence (14.16%) learning experience.

In terms of communication styles, the findings significantly showed that most hotel front office personnel were able to perform their intercultural interactions appropriately and effectively during surface level situations, although in some cases respondents unconsciously integrated their own culture into these interactions. Integrating their own cultural practices into intercultural interactions hadn't appeared to create any conflicts or awkward circumstances. It appeared that both hotel guests and front office personnel were aware of each other's cultural differences. Participants indicated that they had learned about cultural differences through observation or by learning through various media channels, and/or through tourism promotional campaigns.

In assessing intercultural communicative competence — domain by domain — the findings indicated a significant trend of inconsistency which was found in every one of the examined ICC aspects, namely attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions. When responding to the simulated questions, participants reflected their intercultural competence both consciously and unconsciously. Hotel front office personnel could

respond to some situations appropriately and effectively, while at the same time in some situations, under the same domain, they failed to deal with them appropriately.

Table 1: Summary of mean and standard deviation of intercultural communicative competence assessment of hotel front office personnel in Bangkok in domains of attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions

Q-Items	Mean	SD
ATTITUDES		
1. I feel embarrassed when I see people from other cultures performing a greeting kiss and goodbye kiss.	2.92	1.29
2. I feel frustrated and question the situation when I see an old foreigner living in Thailand carrying things without any help from their accompanied children.	3.48	1.30
3. I am curious and want to know the cultural background of my new colleague who is from Uganda, so I look for information in order that I know how to treat my new colleague properly.	3.82	0.97
4. When I travel to a country that doesn't have a queuing or lineup system for services, I feel disappointed seeing their disorganized practice.	4.11	1.09
5. I enjoy talking or working with foreign colleagues who are from different cultures while my friends always avoid working with them.	3.62	1.07
KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING		
6. I know that people who are traveling from Europe are white people (Caucasian) and very punctual.	4.16	0.88
7. I am aware that most Thai people like spicy food and like to eat street food. However, when I take my new foreign colleagues out for dinner, I always bring them to a nice, clean restaurant and order food with a mild taste for everyone, including myself.	3.90	1.01
8. I don't like to listen to other non-native English accents because I think they are difficult to understand for Thai people like me.	3.09	1.20

Q-Items	Mean	SD
9. I know that when some foreigners raise their eyebrows or remain silent, it means they are frustrated or unhappy.	3.88	0.87
10. I know if there is a large group of Muslim guests staying in my hotel for a certain period of time, we will allocate or set up a 'praying zone' for them.	3.88	0.96
SKILLS		
11. I always show my Thai 'wai' to new foreign colleagues because I think this is a great way to show our beautiful Thai culture to foreigners.	4.34	0.84
12. For foreigners coming to stay or work in Thailand, they have to get to know Thai culture, with the aim of adjusting themselves in order to interact with local people effectively.	4.05	0.82
13. I can see that some foreigners who are from a particular part of the world have superstitions/beliefs, just like some Thai people, because I sometimes see them wearing or showing respect to an object.	3.69	0.84
14. When having a meeting with a group of people who are from different cultural backgrounds, I don't whisper to people next to me because other people might think that it is impolite or I am gossiping about them.	4.19	0.85
15. I like to help my Thai friends when they have difficulties in talking with foreign friends.	4.09	0.84
ACTIONS		
16. I like to work with friends who are from different countries. I think it is the way to develop my international social skills.	4.39	0.72
17. When I welcome a foreign guest who is a disabled person, I will actively approach this guest and immediately help him or her as much as I can in order to make them happy.	4.51	0.79
18. When I go out to have dinner with my Chinese friend, she/he will use chopsticks when eating but I am more comfortable using a spoon and fork without needing chopsticks, as he does.	3.48	1.17

Q-Items	Mean	SD
19. I will treat or offer services differently to guests from Thailand's neighboring countries than those guests who are from Europe because their requirements are different and guests from nearby countries are more easygoing.	2.44	1.25
20. To kill time when engaging in in small talk with foreign guests from the Middle East I raise the issue of the Palestine and Israel conflict for discussion in order to show my empathy.	1.94	1.25

The above phenomena illustrated the relationship of the findings drawn from hotel front office personnel. Participants claimed that they had gained intercultural competence from their workplace and through life experience. This could explain why their responses were inconsistent. The competences they had gained from both aforementioned sources were not necessarily systematically and/or theoretically assimilated, as they maybe would have been in a formal educational setting. Therefore, observing and learning ICC through informal education might not be adequate. The researched has indicated that the result can be inconsistency in ICC delivery when dealing with various intercultural interactions.

To triangulate the quantitative findings drawn from the questionnaires, the qualitative results from the respondents significantly supported the quantitative findings. Participants claimed they lacked intercultural competence (71.91%) and further stated that they needed to explore more intercultural competence from other available sources. Participants confirmed that the intercultural competence with which they were equipped with from educational institutions was inadequate (57.43%).

To strengthen the validity of the findings, the triangulated data drawn from an additional pair of quantitative and qualitative findings derived from related stakeholders, ICC instructors, and hotel front office managers was analyzed to see what relationship emerged.

Summary of Stakeholder Opinions Findings and Discussions

In order to triangulate the result data drawn from the study's main participants, questionnaires were disseminated to the selected stakeholders. The aim of this approach was to seek their perceptions of intercultural communicative competence held by hotel front office personnel. A group of six ICC university instructors, and a group of six hotel front office managers provided information.

The stakeholders, hotel front office managers, and university instructors all emphasized that educational institutions should seriously promote the importance of ICC, both in theory and in practice within the classroom (58.33%). They also highlighted that the key barriers to equipping undergraduates with intercultural communicative competence was namely the lack of English speaking and listening proficiency, as well as insufficient courses available for students (58.33%).

To tackle these obstacles would be a time consuming task and involve adjusting the current teaching and learning curriculum within the schooling system. However, being aware of the problem and attempting to provide more real life situations for students to practice, along with highlighting the importance of ICC facilitated by the teachers, would initially help promote ICC for undergraduates, and support them to enter the labor market with more confidence. Finally, both groups of stakeholders surveyed highlighted that the foundation of ICC domains, which are attitudes, knowledge about the diversities of cultures, skills, and how to implement their knowledge to real-life situations were necessary prerequisites for hotel front office personnel. In addition English proficiency was deemed as paramount, as it is the most frequently used language in the intercultural interactions within the hotel lobby environment.

Summary of Participant Observation Findings and Discussions

In order to triangulate the findings drawn from the hotel front office personnel, the two-week observation offered another approach, and was conducted in order to strengthen the validity of

the key findings. A three-star hotel and a four-star property, both representing hotel categories in the study were selected as the observation sites to witness intercultural interactions of front office workers. This activity was my first-hand experience with participants. I spent one week at each hotel to conduct the qualitative investigation. Apart from observing the front office personnel daily operation, I also spent time with various front office personnel conducting informal interviews.

Six significant points emerged that are worth discussing as they supported the finding results drawn from the first quantitative approach investigation. The six themes of interest include, daily work and guest interactions, negative perceptions towards hotel guests, frustrations when dealing with hotel guests, solutions when undergoing frustrations, enhancing hospitality service, and perceptions of ICC learning in educational institutions. The emerged patterns are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of themes and emerged patterns discovered through observation and informal interviews on-site at select three-star and four-star hotels

Themes	Emerged patterns
1. Daily working process — interactions with guests	1.1. Welcome presentation of an international standard, in conjunction with Thai smile and “wai” to show guests Thai customs of hospitality.
	1.2. Approach guests with smile before proceeding to check-in process.
	1.3. Everyone in lobby area reflects the image of the hotel, and should be able to assist the guests with all requirements.
2. Key negative perceptions towards their guests	2.1. Sometimes some of working personnel feel annoyed when dealing with guests from some countries as they don't respect hotel rules and they are excessively loud.
	2.2. Sometimes some of working personnel feel that they have to be extra aware when dealing with guests from some particular countries, as they tend to complain.

Themes	Emerg ed patterns
3. Frustrations when interacting with guests	3.1. They are unconfident with their own English language proficiency.
	3.2. They are unable to understand non-English guests' language and/or communication.
	3.3. They are unsure how to deal with guests, especially for the junior staff.
	3.4. They are uncomfortable when dealing with guests from some particular countries.
	3.5. They perceive "communication" is the key problem between front office workers and guests (they are not aware of identifying problems as "ICC" issues).
4. Solutions when undergoing frustration in dealing with guests	4.1. Improve language proficiency by practicing every day, and learn from available sources as well as daily encounters.
	4.2. Learn and observe from day-to-day interactions with the non-English guests, and ask for advice from the senior staff in particular cases.
	4.3. Seek advice from senior staff and obtain more knowledge from daily working experience, as well as from available sources such as the internet and other media channels.
	4.4. Try to understand the nature of the guests and keep in mind that they are customers and they are supposed to be treated well.
5. Enhancing their hospitality service	5.1. Hotel department provides daily briefings with strategies on how to deal with guests when there are problems (issues from guests, comments/complaints).
	5.2. Hotel provides regular training in various areas in need.
	5.3. Observe and seek advice from available sources.

Themes	Emerged patterns
6. Perception of IC learning in institutions	6.1. Learning from the classroom is not enough.
	6.2. Institutions provide only basic knowledge about cultures of various countries.
	6.3. They gain more knowledge from practical experience at workplaces

Summary of Integration and Interpretation of Research

Since this study employed the explanatory design of mixed methods, quantitative results and qualitative findings were integrated and interpreted by a joint display of the findings, and inferences were drawn from both quantitative and qualitative strands of analysis. The eight joint aspects presented in this section link the research questions posed within this study.

Aspect 1: Sources of ICC

In the quantitative findings drawn from hotel front office personnel, 55.71% believed that they obtained intercultural communicative competence from their workplace, while the inference quantitatively drawn from the stakeholders' opinions (33.33%) indicated that educational institutions provided inadequate ICC to their students. A total of 25% of the stakeholders also claimed that graduates were inadequately equipped with ICC after leaving educational institutions. Another 41.67% were unsure whether the graduates were adequately equipped with ICC. Finally, the qualitative analysis findings drawn from both the stakeholders (57.43%), and informal interviews with hotel front office personnel during the participant observation, confirmed that ICC obtained from the schooling system was inadequate for hotel front office personnel. When the findings were integrated, the results suggested that the hotel front office personnel's intercultural communicative competence earned from education institutions was indeed inadequate.

Aspect 2: ICC Assessment – Attitudes

The quantitative results, drawn from hotel front office employees, as to whether they were equipped with attitudes

domain was inconsistent. Some hotel employees were open to and curious about different cultures, and were willing to blend themselves into an international environment. However, there were some findings that showed some of these employees were unable to overcome their feelings of being uncomfortable and frustrated when dealing with people from different cultures. All in all, from the merged results, it was still questionable whether hotel front office personnel adequately possessed the attitudes domain in valuing cultural diversities, and pluralism of views and practices of people who possessed different cultural orientations.

Supporting the quantitative phenomenon of the hotel personnel, a total of 33.33% of the ICC instructors and hotel front office managers perceived that an attitude towards different cultures was one of the key ICC aspects that helped appropriate and effective intercultural encounters. Finally, the qualitative finding drawn from the observation indicated that front office workers' negative perceptions towards their guests, and their frustrations when dealing with hotel guests showed that they were unable to willingly empathize with people who had different affiliations from their own. They were not able to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty in their intercultural interactions. However, when asked about their solutions, front office personnel claimed that they tried to understand the behaviors of their guests. This signified that hotel workers were attempting to adjust their attitudes with an aim of improving their intercultural interactions. From the integration of findings, it was evident that hotel front office personnel were equipped with ICC in terms of attitudes, but only to a limited extent.

Aspect 3: ICC Assessment – Knowledge and Understanding

From the quantitative findings drawn from the hotel front office personnel, it was evident that even though the findings showed that personnel tended to be aware of cultural differences at surface level, they were unconsciously not aware of stereotyping. Additionally, some of the hotel employees were

unable to tolerate accents which were different from their own. In terms of ICC aspects drawn from the qualitative analysis, hotel employees perceived that they should possess knowledge and understanding domains in order to interact with foreign guests appropriately and effectively. They claimed that they needed to have more knowledge of foreign cultures and nonverbal communication to improve their performance in intercultural interactions (39.31%).

Supporting the stakeholders' qualitative opinions on this issue, 50% of them pointed out that hotel front office personnel should have intercultural competence in the area of knowledge about different cultures. Furthermore, when asked about barriers to promoting ICC among graduates, 58.33% of the stakeholders viewed graduates as still lacking knowledge of ICC. Finally, the participant observation and interviewees perceived that they gained knowledge by learning and observing day-to-day interactions and seeking advice from more experienced staff members in how to deal with foreign guests. Having integrated the quantitative and qualitative findings, it was concluded that in the area of knowledge and understanding assessment, hotel front office personnel are equipped with intercultural communicative competence, but only to a certain degree. It was considered inadequate as the employees stated that they still needed to gain more knowledge from their workplace and life experience.

Aspect 4: ICC Assessment – Skills

The quantitatively emergent findings indicated that hotel front office personnel who possessed skills in interpreting other cultural practices were aware of international business etiquette, and had the ability to act as mediators in intercultural interactions. However, some finding showed that they lacked the ability to decenter themselves from their own perspective when dealing with other cultures.

The qualitative findings that supported the main quantitative result were the results drawn from both the stakeholders' opinions and the observation. ICC instructors and

front office managers claimed that strategies for promoting ICC in classroom learning should include promoting more opportunities for undergraduates to practice their ICC skills, both in and outside the classroom to encourage more real-life situational learning. However, from the on-site observation it was discovered that the hotel workers felt frustrated when interacting with hotel guests. Sometimes they were unsure of how to deal with guests and felt uncomfortable when dealing with guests from particular countries. After completing the findings integration the results suggested that front office personnel possessed a certain degree of intercultural communicative competence, however it was considered inadequate as the majority of them claimed that additional learning and training were still required.

Aspect 5: ICC Assessment – Actions

For the actions domain, the quantitative findings drawn from the hotel front office staff showed that they were likely to be able to deliver their actions in intercultural encounters. They sought opportunities to engage with people who had different cultural orientations and perspectives that were different from their own. However, a significant finding was that the hotel employees tended to relate their own culture in their intercultural interactions.

The quantitative results were supported by the qualitative findings drawn from both the stakeholder opinions and the participant observation. Among the stakeholders, 33.33% viewed that a strategy to promote ICC was to encourage students to have life experiences by exposing themselves to foreign or intercultural environments. Similarly, hotel front office personnel revealed through the informal interviews, that when they were dealing with guests regularly it enhanced their own intercultural competence. The findings integration evidenced that the hotel front office staff were equipped with some degree of intercultural communicative competence in the area of the actions domain. However, there were some gaps that could be further improved upon, particularly

in the areas of the previous three domains that influenced the appropriateness and effectiveness of their actions.

Aspect 6: Barriers in Intercultural Interactions

The qualitative findings indicated that the majority of the hotel front office personnel (71.97%) believed that they possessed inadequate intercultural communicative competence. They expressed that they had problems with the variety of English spoken by foreign guests in terms of accents and speeds. Stakeholders qualitative results showed that they saw students as having a lack of ICC knowledge and foreign language skills, which resulted in them being unconfident when communicating with hotel guests.

Furthermore, the view of both university lecturers and hotel front office managers was that one of the barriers preventing undergraduates from possessing a proper degree of ICC was the insufficient ICC courses available in educational institutions (41.66%). This view was supported by the qualitative findings drawn from the observation, which indicated that front office personnel felt frustrated when dealing with intercultural guests when they had a negative perception of their guests. Having integrated both quantitative and qualitative results, it was revealed that hotel front office workers viewed their intercultural communicative competence as inadequate.

Aspect 7: ICC Aspects Needed for Front Office Personnel

The qualitative findings drawn from the hotel front office employees indicated that ICC aspects which they perceived they needed to possess were to know foreign cultures, including nonverbal communication (30.34%), and also know foreign languages (30.34%). To support the finding drawn from the employees, the results from the stakeholders' opinions and the observation also highlighted the significant findings drawn from the study's key participants.

Hotel front office managers (33.33%) thought that "general knowledge" was the main ICC domain that hotel employees should

possess, which is contrary to the ICC lecturers (33.33%) who maintained that “attitude” was the key ICC domain. Adding to the stakeholders’ point of view, the informal interviews with hotel workers revealed that learning from life experience, especially within their workplace had helped them gain intercultural communicative competence. From the findings integration, there were significant indicators, namely greater knowledge of foreign cultures that were identified as an importance competence for hotel front office personnel to possess.

Aspect 8: ICC Equipped from Educational Institutions

From the qualitative findings drawn from hotel front office personnel it was claimed that educational institutions provided inadequate intercultural communicative competence as they don’t offer adequate exercises or practice within their system. The perception of the workers was similar and relevant to the quantitative findings drawn from the stakeholders. Both hotel front office managers and ICC instructors (33.33%) viewed that educational institutions provided insufficient ICC training courses for students, while another 33.33% of them were unsure about this phenomenon.

In addition, 41.67% of the stakeholders who answered the qualitative opinion questions stated that one of the barriers to promoting intercultural communicative competence was insufficient ICC courses available in the schooling system. Finally, hotel front office employees also claimed that ICC instruction in the classroom was inadequate (57.43%), as institutions provided only basic knowledge about other cultures, with no emphasis on the importance of ICC at a deeper level. From the results integration, findings suggested that ICC gained in the schooling system was inadequate and not always transferable to situations within the workplace.

Summary of Overall Integration and Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

Having integrated both the quantitative and qualitative findings drawn from the analysis of the three research strategies, the hotel front office personnel's ICC self-assessments, the stakeholder opinions exploration, and participant observation, the results that emerged indicated that hotel front office personnel are well aware of intercultural practices, but the awareness tended to be limited to a surface level. They did however employ their surface cultural knowledge, both appropriately and effectively when dealing with their daily duties within the hotel lobby. With regard to intercultural communicative competence on a deeper level, front office personnel perceived that they were inadequately equipped, and that they mainly tried to gain more intercultural communicative competence from experience in the workplace.

The hotel employees' perception was supported by the opinions drawn from the stakeholders who claimed that graduates were inadequately equipped with intercultural communicative competence when they left educational institutions. In terms of the four intercultural competence domains, from the ICC model of Barrett and his colleagues (2013), which comprised attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions, used to examine the level of competence—the integrated findings suggested that hotel front office personnel' competence in each domain was both inadequate and of an inconsistent manner.

Overall, hotel front office personnel were equipped with a certain degree of intercultural communicative competence, particularly on a surface level. However, from the integrated findings, hotel employees perceived that their intercultural communicative competence was inadequate, and they felt that they needed to gain additional knowledge through workplace training and life experience. Consequently, the four intercultural competence aspects (Barrett et al., 2013) examined by using the assessment framework of Byram (1997) found inadequate to varying degrees of ineffectiveness amongst hotel front office personnel in Bangkok.

Conclusion, Limitations, Recommendations and Implications

The influx of international tourists to Thailand calls for service personnel who are trained to a certain degree to interact competently with individuals from a wide variety of cultures, many of whom use English as a first or second language. Thus the preparation of manpower to meet those demands is required. Additionally, it is essential for Thailand's hotel front office personnel to not only communicate through language, but also be aware of the cultural diversities of other nations, as personnel are required to serve international tourists from different nationalities and ethnic groups on a daily basis. Therefore, it is undeniable to assert that both educational institutions and the teachers within the field are key factors in making this happen. From both ICC learning and training, as well as exposure to real life intercultural situations, the hotel front office personnel must gain a higher competency to perform and deliver their intercultural interactions appropriately and effectively in their workplaces.

Methodological limitations

Throughout the study, as a researcher, I am aware of the methodological limitations which cannot be integrated or implemented into this study due to various limitations, such as time, organizational policies, locations, stakeholders and so forth. Therefore, I have listed below seven methodological limitations. Firstly, there were some variables such as, the employee's position, length of working period, sex, age, level of education, educational background, direct and non-direct exposures to intercultural environments. The latter variable was left unattended and perhaps could be investigated later to reveal a more detailed analysis of the individual perspective. Secondly, the methods applied in this study contained some biases due to the fact that the groups of participants were varied in term of characteristics and educational backgrounds. In addition, the sampling method of the hotel selection might not necessarily represent all hotels in Bangkok. For example, a larger representation could have comprised of various hotel categories that, in turn, would have

represented a wider degree of service quality. Furthermore, the chosen hotels were only the hotels that are star rated and endorsed by the Hotel Standard Foundation, 2014. In other words, they might not represent all the three and four star hotels in Bangkok. Finally, the study was conducted without the perspectives drawn from the service users, and this point should be noted for future research.

Recommendations and Implications

After the findings integration and interpretation, there were some points significantly remarked as recommendations and implications of the study. Firstly, due to the fact that those who are in today's labor market — where intercultural communities in different locations and regions are connected and globalized — being equipped with intercultural communicative competence is emphatically required in all hospitality service providers. Hence, intercultural communicative competence courses or training should be adequately provided in educational institutions and made available to all learners and not limited to language and/or hotel and tourism related majors. Secondly, there are situations in which intercultural communication training and/or courses are not made available. We urgently need to cope with the rapid changes of increased intercultural communicative competence requirements within the labor market. Despite the time constraints in adjusting the teaching and learning curriculum, it is recommended that language teachers play a vital role and can support intercultural communicative competence by integrating it into their language teaching.

Thirdly, there are four intercultural communicative competence domains — attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions — which are basically required as fundamental traits for hotel front office personnel to deal with day-to-day intercultural interactions. However, the research findings suggested that possessing positive attitudes towards different cultural affiliations must be the foundation for acquiring other intercultural communicative competence domains. Finally, there

are four intercultural communicative competences perceived to be inadequate among the hotel front office personnel. Knowledge of other cultures was ranked as the number one inadequate competence, followed by other ICC domains. Educational institutions, therefore, should prepare training courses to better serve the students' needs for improvement.

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