



POTENTIALS OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN PROMOTING CRITICAL THINKING IN THAI TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Abstract:

Intercultural competence is a contemporary pedagogy in Thai tertiary education. The current study aims to explore the potentials of employing intercultural competence to promote critical thinking in Thai tertiary education. There are two constructs being reviewed: intercultural competence and critical thinking. The origin and benefits of intercultural competence are first discussed, followed by its frameworks. Then the challenges of teaching intercultural competence in Thai tertiary education are raised, followed by general knowledge of critical thinking. After that, the interconnection between intercultural competence and critical thinking is provided as a claim of the potentials of intercultural competence in enhancing critical thinking. This academic article proposes that there are five reasons why intercultural competence potentially enhances critical thinking. First, its matching characteristics of 'holistic' and 'judiciousness' in culture and critical thinking's frameworks. Second, the shared characteristic of both constructs is that they are learnable through inquisitive, truth-seeking, and analytical skills. Third, the open-mindedness of CT skills as a dynamic process of thinking. Fourth, the confidence in reasoning towards ethnocentrism with high determination. Finally, the aforementioned aspects are mutually and systematically supportive of one another. With all these elements, there is high potential for using intercultural competence instruction to promote critical thinking in tertiary students.

Keywords: intercultural competence, critical thinking, tertiary students

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1. Introduction

In our rapidly globalizing world, the ability to navigate and thrive in culturally diverse environments has become increasingly essential. This phenomenon has led to a growing interest in intercultural competence, defined as the capability to interact effectively and sensitively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Byram, 2020). Many teachers and students are likely to be unaware of intercultural competence in language teaching. Thus, research on intercultural competence needs to be developed (Mu & Yu, 2023). Simultaneously, the demand for critical thinking skills has never been greater as societies grapple with complex issues between philosophy and psychology, as seen through the quality and standard of thoughts (Lai, 2011) and the ability to evaluate data from various sources. Indeed, critical thinking is defined as the mental process of finding solutions to problems (Sternberg, 1986) and the ability to solve complex tasks (Mathews & Lowe, 2011). While both intercultural competence and critical thinking are recognized as vital competencies for the 21st century, this paper looks at the intersection of these two crucial constructs as a way to shed more light on an area in intercultural competence and critical thinking research that has received limited attention in Thai tertiary education.

The mediation of these two constructs can be stimulated through pedagogical approaches. Since intercultural competence is seemingly a new trend in Thai education, there has only been one previous study exploring the intercultural competence of Thai secondary education teachers so far (Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016). The pedagogical approaches were, for example, sharing with students what teachers know about foreign cultures, asking students to do research about foreign cultures, putting pictures of different cultures on the classroom's wall, and inviting people used to living abroad to share their experiences (Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016). With relatively small amounts of knowledge, intercultural competence receives little attention in Thai tertiary education.

Tertiary classroom instruction is a medium of intercultural competence to enhance critical thinking skills. In a tertiary context, students' ability to understand the complexity of different cultures and backgrounds could potentially pioneer critical thinking development. The previous study indicated that older people, especially university students, seem to acquire second language vocabulary faster than other levels due to their ability to comprehend sophisticated issues (Uchihara, 2019). With the complex terms and vocabulary found in cultural aspects, university students seem to develop a full understanding of those complexities. Also, with the tremendous benefits of intercultural competence such as being aware of intercultural differences, promoting understanding of the differences between cultures, nurturing open-minded skills, leading to cross-cultural adaptations, heightening international industries (i.e., education), and fostering translanguaging in an EFL setting (Gallois et al., 2014), intercultural competence is likely to enhance critical thinking in tertiary students as well. Thus, the current study wants to explore the potentials in employing intercultural competence in promoting critical thinking in Thai tertiary education.

2. Origin and Benefits of Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence (IC) has been defined as the capability to interact effectively and sensitively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Byram, 2020), the ways we interact with different people, different identities, different groups, and their different associated cultures (Council of Europe, 2018), and the effectiveness and appropriateness of communicative behavior when interacting with differences (Deardorff, 2020). Integrated, the current academic paper defines ‘intercultural competence’ as the proper interaction of individuals when communicating with people from different cultures.

Intercultural competence seems to be a new trend in Thailand, which started with George Simmel (Molseed, 1987), whose parents were Jewish and living in Germany. The concept of ‘stranger’ was first given by him, meaning someone who is part of the community but not accepted by other community members. Then, Park (1924) also developed other concepts such as ‘social distance,’ meaning that someone is perceived or treated differently because of their ethnicity, race, skin color, etc.; marginality, meaning someone who lives in two different cultures and is a stranger in both; and ‘sojourner’, meaning a person living in the host culture but preserving their home culture. These terms are the beginning of cultural frustrations leading to the beginning of intercultural communication (Gallois et al., 2014; Pacheco, 2020). Recent research combined the multidisciplinary strands of psychology, culture, and economics to measure the cultural distance of individuals undergoing acculturation through the use of the novel term “sino-distance” (English et al., 2021).

With the advancement of technology and transportation, the global economy and business transactions, mass migration, and international exchange, intercultural communication has become more prevalent in culturally diverse environments (Gallois et al., 2014), leading to tremendous benefits of intercultural competence. First, it helps individuals be aware of intercultural differences. Individuals delay the judgments of others. Second, it helps promote an understanding of multiculturalism. Individuals consider other people based on equal treatment, reducing prejudices. Third, it fosters the open-minded skills of individuals, leading to cross-cultural adaptation. Individuals accept and adapt their behaviors between their home and host cultures. Fourth, it benefits international industries such as educational industries, business industries, and even entertainment industries. Transactions through cultural communication can deepen both verbal and nonverbal understanding, leading to business success. Fourth, it enhances translanguaging in an EFL setting. Individuals are embedded with knowledge of not only the language aspects but also other issues involving cultural, discourse, and mutual background, reducing the native-based notion (Gallois et al., 2014).

3. Intercultural Competence Frameworks

Before defining intercultural competence, the word 'competence' was first defined by Chomsky (1965) as meaning the mastery of the grammatical system. While the other term 'performance' means the actual language used in real situations. However, Hymes (1972) argued that competence can also be communicative. He then invented the term 'communicative competence', which is competence in communication and became widely known as communicative language teaching, or CLT. Hymes' argument also touches on a broader understanding of the connection between linguistic and sociocultural competency. However, he did not pay specific attention to cross-cultural communication. After that, Byram (1997) defined intercultural competence (IC) as the capability to interact effectively and sensitively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The research on intercultural competence based on Byram's framework has continued to be studied until the present days.

The study of a cross-cultural context usually deals with emic and etic aspects. They have been viewed in the cultural perspective meaning that the examination from the inside and outside of the culture, respectively (Akrouf & Mrad, 2023). When studying culture, the common research methodology used is ethnography (Sang, 2023; Sari et al., 2023). The researcher is positioning themselves as a neutral observer collecting data through document observational, visual images, information conversation, formal interview, etc. Normally, the timespan studying cultures usually takes long; however, contemporary ethnography shortens time by using multiple techniques (Gallois et al., 2014).

There are four salient characteristics of cultures. First, it is holistic (Yampolskaya, 2015). The functions of the cultures are integrated and complex as a whole; we cannot separate cultures into small elements while fully retaining their main functions. Second, culture is learned. All cultures are learned both consciously and unconsciously from the beginning of childhood. Third, it is dynamic. Culture is not fixed but is changing all the time (Hymes, 1972; Gallois et al., 2014). Finally, culture is normally ethnocentric. People usually view their own cultures as superior to others when buying products or using medical care (Berger et al., 2023; Fernández-Ferrn et al., 2019).

Cultures can be divided into subcultures: ethnic culture, social-class culture, organizational culture, and regional culture. Ethnic cultures are viewed as minority groups of people in the main country. Social-class cultures view people based on their socioeconomic status (SES), separating people by income, education, occupation, etc. Organizational culture deals with the beliefs, values, and assumptions of the employees in particular organizations. Regional or geographic cultures refer to how to categorize people based on their living areas (Gallois et al., 2014).

There are different frameworks for viewing intercultural competence. First, Griffith and colleagues (2016) proposed an "*attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral intercultural competence framework*" (Griffith et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2023). The other framework views the intercultural competence framework, has been separated into four

competences: values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding (Council of Europe, 2018). Recently, the intercultural development continuum (IDC) framework was developed by Mu and his colleagues (2022), which includes five steps of intercultural development: denial, polarization, minimization, acceptance, and adaptation. When it comes to teaching culture, the framework of Liddicoat (2013) may be applied as a way of noticing, comparing, and reflecting on their own and other cultures. The reflective framework of intercultural language teaching is shaped by the connection between language, culture, and learning (Mu & Yu, 2023). This paper views intercultural competence through the CLT lens as intercultural communicative competence.

4. Challenges of Intercultural Competence Instruction in Thai Tertiary Education

Intercultural competence instruction has received little attention in Thai tertiary education. Since there are challenges such as the general understanding of intercultural competence, students' attitudes, the acquisition of cultural knowledge, intercultural awareness, and intercultural skills, The previous studies indicated that intercultural language teaching activities such as noticing cultural differences, comparing and analyzing intercultural issues, and mocking behaving appropriately in intercultural contexts will motivate culture and intercultural communication, negotiate meaning, and develop intercultural competence (Mu & Yu, 2023).

Another interesting cultural teaching model is culturally responsive teaching (CRT). It investigated and assessed students' intercultural learning through the use of learning journals, interviews, and intercultural assignments. The findings showed that CRT can nurture the students' openness, multiple perspective opinion sharing, and critical meaning-making processes (Liao & Li, 2023). Casoli-Uvslkk and Brevik (2023) also suggested that intercultural competence can be taught by using reflecting techniques. Asking students to reflect on current social challenges found in intercultural society as well as apply those in the language classroom is another crucial way of teaching intercultural competence through linguistic skills. Mu and Yu (2023) further proposed possible intercultural activities such as discussing, presenting, role-playing cultural phenomena and intercultural communication, and supporting the intercultural environments by inviting student exchange or the speaker to share their intercultural experience. Moreover, the use of story circles as teaching tools for enhancing intercultural competence is also provided for developing intercultural competencies (Deardorff, 2020). The intercultural competence instruction proposed above is various and based on the convenience of the particular learning settings; however, there is still no consensus on the best teaching methods for teaching intercultural competence, and its challenges remain.

Intercultural competence shares some common features as found in critical thinking. As presented in its framework, intercultural competence interplays cognitive domains, attitudes, skills, and critical understanding, which displays a mutual area as found in critical thinking. Through several methods of intercultural competence instruction, can apparently accelerate critical thinking in education.

5. General Knowledge of Critical Thinking (CT)

Critical thinking (CT) can be defined differently. Sternberg (1986) defines it as the mental process of finding solutions to problems. It is also defined as the dynamic and reflective process of reaching the appropriate solution based on the evidence (Ku et al., 2014). Critical thinking can be viewed as the ability to make a decision and solve complex tasks (Mathews & Lowe, 2011). Critical thinking covers not only thinking but also logic and reasoning (Yüce, 2023). It is also suggested that there are three main components of critical thinking: a disposition for considering a critical thought, knowledge of strategies such as logic and reason, and the ability to apply those critical thoughts and strategies together (Glaser, 1941).

Indeed, critical thinking can be observed through different notions across different parts of the world. In the western part, critical thinking originally happened during the time of Socrates of the Ancient Greek philosophy as questioning by the democratic citizen (Mason, 2009). Later, another critical thinking in western construct is Bloom's Taxonomy, as found in contemporary research in education nowadays. The original version of Bloom's Taxonomy consists of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, in which the revised version changed 'evaluation' to 'creation' (Bloom & Krathwohl, 2020). The utilization of Bloom's Taxonomy was widely used as learning principles in preservice teachers' teaching pedagogies (West, 2023) and even as scaffolding questions fostering higher-order thinking skills, the upper hierarchical parts of Bloom's Taxonomy, i.e., analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Seibert, 2023). In non-western parts, however, critical thinking has been viewed as a compromising, face-saving, negotiating, and diplomatic way of reaching an agreement on the conflicts (Jung et al., 2016).

Since critical thinking is viewed as cognitive instruction, critical thinking dispositions can include particular interests and intercultural abilities. Facione (1990) suggested the seven personalities that facilitate critical thinking skills: inquisitive, systematic, judicious, truth-seeking, analytical, open-minded, and confident in reasoning. These seven characteristics of critical thinking skills are further included in a particular teaching framework to promote critical thinking skills, for example, using the Group Reading Strategies (GRS) to promote critical thinking skills (Namsaeng & Sukying, 2021). The critical thinking disposition can be influenced by other factors, for example, culture, religion, parenting style, and the growing environment (Mathews & Lowe, 2011).

Critical thinking can be associated with 1) self-regulation, and 2) teaching and assessment. Self-regulation provides the students with the fundamental metacognitive awareness needed for proactive learning. Students are able to participate in cognitive processes associated with critical thinking, such as evaluation, reflection, and inference. They become independent in their learning through the meta-cognitive ability to evaluate their own learning (Phan, 2010). Metacognitive awareness has been found as a mediator in the relationship between critical thinking and self-regulation, and self-regulation

components also interrelate with critical thinking and reading comprehension (Akcaoglu et al., 2023; Mohammadi et al., 2023). Critical thinking can be explicitly taught and assessed, such as through the use of reciprocal teaching strategies to see the relationship between critical thinking and academic self-concept (Mafarja & Zulnadi, 2022), the application of critical thinking strategies to promote vocabulary learning (Purfallah & Gholami, 2014), and the use of CLIL in promoting critical thinking skills (Namsaeng, 2022). As per assessment, the use of Halpern Critical Thinking Assessment is widely known as the standard assessment and is practical for real-world outcomes (Butler et al., 2012). However, since the claimed standardized test merely covers Ireland, Portugal, and Spain, the results can be different when applied to the non-European countries as such the Asia continent. The concept of critical thinking can be reconceptualizing resulting in the self-assessment of critical thinking skills instead, as found in the studies of Namsaeng and Sukying (2020) that using an in-house critical thinking self-assessment questionnaire rather than the standardized test. Additionally, the trends of critical thinking research also cover the effect of mood on critical thinking (Lun et al., 2023), the relationship among critical thinking, autonomous learning, and academic grit or perseverance, students' learning engagement, and higher-order thinking skills (Li et al., 2023; Yüce, 2023), and the teacher education focusing on the teacher autonomy, collaboration, and critical thinking focused instruction (Guo & Wang, 2021).

6. Interconnection between IC and CT

There are common areas where intercultural competence (IC) and critical thinking (CT) are interconnected. First, the limited knowledge of intercultural competence and critical thinking. According to the previous studies, the critical thinking of Thai tertiary students was quite low. Using the in-house assessment, the average score of critical thinking in Thai tertiary students was only 74%, with systematic and confident skills being found as the lowest scores at 68% and 70%, respectively (Namsaeng & Sukying, 2021). The mean score of the critical reading test was 5.93 out of 15 marks (Ploysangwal, 2018). While the general understanding of intercultural competence among Thai educators seems limited, nine out of ten instructors in Thailand's secondary schools did not appear to understand the notion of intercultural competence or recognize effective methods for teaching about culture (Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016).

Also, both IC and CT are the current levels of enforcement at the policy levels without clearly explicit guidance. The importance of intercultural competence and critical thinking is being seen and embedded in the policy for the nation's development; however, there is a lack of obvious teaching approaches for their implications. The previous study indicated that critical thinking as a 21st century educational policy was being enforced without clear guidance of classroom implication, resulting in teachers not comprehensively teaching critical thinking, being unable to include it in curriculum design, or focusing on assignments relating to lower-level thinking, resulting in learning demotivation (Kerdsomboon & Boonsathirakul, 2021). Likewise, intercultural

adaptability (IA), such as “*language support, culturally responsive pedagogy, career orientation and intercultural exchange programs,*” received insufficient attention from policymakers and training institutions, contrary to the great demand for intercultural competence curriculum (Luong et al., 2023).

Finally, both IC and CT have similar characteristics in terms of their exposure to the circumstances. The more exposure to different circumstances, the more IC and CT are developed. The exposure to the different settings brings about open-mindedness. Individuals living in different cultural settings seem to develop more intercultural competence than others. A previous study shows that pre- and in-service teachers studying abroad seem to express their intercultural competence (Huang, 2023), meaning that the more exposure to new cultural places, the more intercultural competence is developed. Similarly, the previous study illustrated that critical thinking exposure can be done through various levels of collaboration, such as joining a team, observing others, engaging in a joint activity across different classes, and attending conferences, which can foster critical thinking-focused instruction. The more collaboration, the more use of real-life and knowledge components of critical thinking-focused instruction (Guo & Wang, 2021).

Therefore, IC and CT are fairly similar in terms of the limited knowledge, the enforcement of policy level without specific guidelines, and the more exposure, the more prosperous IC and CT are. In any case, there is no educational institution that promotes knowledge formation and higher-order thinking abilities based on the social and cultural environment, as well as the incorporation of local wisdom into courses to enable learners to learn and connect and therefore contribute to the long-term development of new knowledge (Kwangmuang et al., 2021).

7. The Potentials of IC in Promoting CT

Intercultural competence potentially promotes critical thinking for several reasons. First, the holistic perspective of culture (Yampolskaya, 2015) influences the judicious aspect of critical thinking (Facione, 1990). As is known, culture is being viewed holistically as an integrating and complex matter that requires deliberate consideration of all aspects involved, leading to the ability to judiciously consider relevant issues before making a decision or conclusion about a particular issue. For example, when students choose the elective course for the upcoming semester, they will consider several issues, such as the benefits and use for future employment, the capability to attain good grades to stabilize the GPA, and the preferred knowledge and skills to be intrinsically developed. As critical thinkers, they view this decision-making holistically and judiciously.

Second, intercultural competence and critical thinking are learnable. At the very beginning of childhood, we learned culture from our parents and continued learning interculturality from what we were exposed to. When consciously and unconsciously learning, there are particular skills that are developed, such as inquisitive, truth-seeking, and analytical skills. These three skills are salient and important characteristics of critical

thinking (Hymes, 1972; Facione, 1990). Fusaro and Smith (2018) indicated that inquisitiveness is associated with the accuracy and fluency of receptive vocabulary knowledge, and information-seeking helps solve the problem, which is considered a learning process. While analytical skills are interconnected with solving learning tasks, The previous study indicated that while the students solve physics and chemical problems through the demonstration, their analytical skills are developed (Politsinsky et al., 2015). Thus, when we learn cultures, inquisitive, truth-seeking, and analytical skills are likely to be developed.

Third, culture is dynamic and changing all the time. Through this dynamic process, it influences the open-mindedness of critical thinking (Facione, 1990; Gallois et al., 2014; Hymes, 1972). Open-mindedness refers to how people comfortably deal with uncertainty and novelty in the environment (Kashima et al., 2017). The previous study showed that international students with high mindfulness (open-mindedness) are greater in cross-cultural adaptation than those with low mindfulness (close-mindedness). The findings showed that sojourners with high mindfulness develop more sociocultural skills and superior knowledge than a unique local culture (Kashima et al., 2017). Thus, the original notion or idea may be subject to change with new exposure or time.

Fourth, culture is ethnocentric with confidence in reasoning. People tend to see the significance of the in-group circle's ideas as more important than the out-group circle's, including prioritizing goods and services from their own cultural circles (Berger et al., 2023; Fernández-Ferrn et al., 2019). People usually provide reasons to support their claims with great confidence. The previous study indicated that cultural confidence awakens community citizenship behaviors through cultural involvement. Cultural confidence is associated with identity, ownership, and several kinds of behaviors (Yin et al., 2023). Confidence in reasoning, as one of the critical thinking characteristics, confidentially makes an argument that their own cultures are superior to others, which is then considered one of the factors promoting critical thinking skills.

Finally, a systematic skill, one of the critical thinking characteristics, interplays an integration of the aforementioned aspects that mutually help intercultural competence enhance critical thinking skills. The current paper proposes a framework regarding IC in enhancing CT, as illustrated below.

Figure 1 illustrates the potential of intercultural competence in enhancing critical thinking. The characteristics of intercultural competence, which are holistic, learnable, dynamic, and ethnocentric, influence the sub-critical thinking skills such as judicious, inquisitive, truth-seeking, analytical, open-minded, confident, and systematic skills, which mutually promote critical thinking skills.

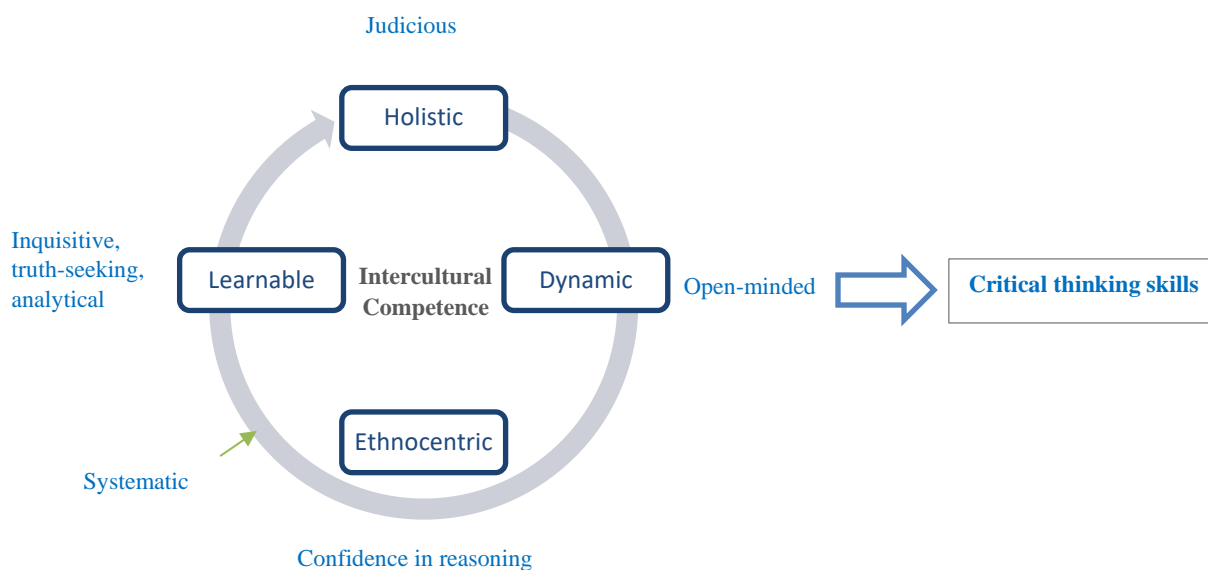


Figure 1: The Framework of Intercultural Competence in Enhancing Critical Thinking

8. Conclusion

With unstoppable globalization and cultural diversities around the globe, intercultural competences (IC) are very vital in adapting to cultural sensitivities among communities. Since IC is viewed as a novelty, there are several teaching and learning approaches, research studies, and contributions to academic circles that attempt to position cultural competence in the educational field. A special focus was given to tertiary education since it deals with adult learners with the ability to comprehend the complexity of several cultural aspects. The current study narrows the focus to critical thinking with the notion that intercultural competence can potentially promote critical thinking skills in students through pedagogy. There are three common areas in which intercultural competence and critical thinking are interconnected. First, the lack of knowledge of intercultural competence among teachers and the lack of critical thinking skills in Thai tertiary students. Second, these two notions were added to the policy's level with the unexplicit guidance for practitioners, which leads to wrong implications and misconceptions in classroom practices. Finally, the similar development of IC and CT when facing different cultural settings.

Indeed, intercultural competence can potentially enhance critical thinking for several reasons. First, the matching IC characteristic of 'holistic' and CT characteristic of 'judicious', which provide deliberate consideration before making a judgment, Second, both IC and CT are learnable and teachable. The characteristics of learning underlying CT aspects include inquisitive, truth-seeking, and analytical skills, and these skills influence learning processes. Third, the culture is dynamic, and the critical thinking is open-minded. The interplay between dynamic and open-mindedness is subject to change whenever new information or evidence arises; the original conclusion may change over time. The fourth one is ethnocentrism with confidence in reasoning, meaning that people

will try to defend their belief at its best and better than others. Lastly, a systematic approach that integrates all mentioned aspects mutually supports one another. Overall, with these latent properties, there is potential for using intercultural competence to promote critical thinking in Thai tertiary students.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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