



Using the Interdisciplinary Approach to Enhance Students' Intercultural Communication Competence in English Language Training Program

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Abstract

Establishing Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) relationships between neighboring universities is not easy. With this uneasiness, there exists a need for a more mindful collaboration approach between different educational institutions in ASEAN. Therefore, this trial research project was created to establish better networking, resource development, joint research projects cooperation, expertise sharing, and student development. It aimed to investigate the effectiveness of interdisciplinary approach on students' intercultural communication competence. The research participants were eight Lao teachers and twenty Lao students from a government college, Lao PDR. Data were collected using a set of questionnaires and video observation. Data from the questionnaire were analyzed for descriptive statistics. In terms of qualitative data, content analysis techniques were utilized. Findings revealed that the participants had positive attitudes towards the use of interdisciplinary approach and multilingualism to enhance their intercultural communication competence. It allowed them to have language switching and knowledge integration from different areas of disciplines for better understanding of different cultures. Findings also further suggest that developing student and teacher exchange projects along with joint research projects between educational institutes can help stimulate inter-tertiary dialoging, sharing resources and collaboration that may lead to more sustainable development between ASEAN countries.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary Approach, Intercultural Communication, Language Training Program, Multilingualism

Introduction

Educational institutions in Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are seeking new approaches for educational integration and training projects among the ASEAN countries. One of the most popular and effective ways to launch those education activities is to sign MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) agreements. Thailand is one of the ASEAN countries which is located in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) which plays critical roles in developing education, economy, and tourism together with the neighborhood countries in the region. With this great location, a public university in the northern part of Thailand has an opportunity to establish educational development and participate in joint research collaborations with the countries in the border area of the Golden Triangle in GMS, especially Lao PDR which has many cultural similarities with Thailand. By initiating MOU agreements, organizations, administrators and teachers can change their unproductive behavior of merely attending ASEAN conferences to a more productive outcome approach that includes the implementation of collaboration projects between different education institutions in ASEAN countries. This collaboration enables them to share human and material resources, join professional development projects, and improve networking among them.

A public university in the northern part of Thailand has signed a MOU collaboration agreement with a government college in Lao PDR for the specific academic purpose of initiating and enhancing English language and cultural training. As a result of this MOU signing, the Thai researchers have launched an interdisciplinary training project using the interdisciplinary approach as its main focus in order to integrate resources for language and cultural training projects. It has been recognized that this approach can help to narrow intercultural communication gaps and increase the effectiveness of training projects and help participants' learning and raise

their capacities in global competence. According to Jacobs (1989), interdisciplinary approach refers to the integration of different fields of knowledge in balancing the learning contents and handling the problems by using more than one teaching approach. In other words, it is the combination of various sources from different subjects related to the concepts and thematics of the work (Hayes, 2010). Interdisciplinary approach is also defined in the way of integrating different learning resources for students to learn a unit of knowledge in the real world. For example, Florentina & Barbu (2015) note that interdisciplinary approach is the method that helps students learn a completed unit of knowledge from the cooperation of different forms of study which are adapted to a specific teaching method. However, interdisciplinary approach in this present study refers to the concept of integrating multilingual language sources, local cultural knowledge resources, and intercultural communication strategies for developing well-grounded understanding of global diversity and global competence.

By utilizing the interdisciplinary approach in this study, it is possible to develop students' language skills and enhance their knowledge of culture which can result in better intercultural communication and overall competence. Results are expected to fulfil students' learning needs in terms of obtaining knowledge from various disciplines, increasing students' intercultural competence, and improving understanding of the world cultures.

Literature Review

Previous studies have shown that the interdisciplinary approach is beneficial for students' learning across disciplines. For example, Ackerman (1989) imparts that interdisciplinary approach enables students to have flexible thinking skills, learn and understand within and beyond their disciplines, and gain better understanding of their strengths and limitations. Also, interdisciplinary approach improves critical thinking skills, creativity, synthesis and integration of learning ability (Field, Lee, & Field, 1994; Jones, 2009), and has deep learning across disciplines (Lombardo, 2010). Likewise, Florentina & Barbu (2015) note that interdisciplinary approach promotes students' personality development and enables them to acquire various knowledge, skills, and values from different disciplines. It enables students to make a connection of their knowledge and the process of knowledge organization (Ivanitskaya et al., 2002). In addition, students have freedom to choose their own learning topics and develop self-responsibility which facilitates their thinking skills, interaction, and understanding of self-assessment. Also, interdisciplinary approach raises students' motivation and freedom to experience what they learn (Holmbukt & Larsen, 2016), stimulate their knowledge processing, data analysis and interpretation, logical thinking skills (Demirel & Coşkun, 2010), and enhance their academic skills, problem-solving skills, professional growth, and lifelong learning habits (Jones, 2009). Importantly, interdisciplinary approach enhances communication between teachers and students and raises students' learning motivation (Sağdıç & Demirkaya, 2014) and engagement in learning activities (Holmbukt & Larsen, 2016). Researchers and educators need to consider students' learning needs, goals, and aspirations in learning new things and extend their cultural viewpoints to the use of interdisciplinary approach (Catana, 2014).

Equally important when considering mixing and matching different disciplines in the communication process, it is essential to include communication for intercultural situations. Regarding students' intercultural competency development, Bennett (2016) notes that the "intercultural communication is the coordination of meaning and action according to different coordinating systems—a meta-coordination" (p. 7). In this case, effective intercultural communicators are required to have competency, strategies, and intentionality in interacting with another culture. Similarly, Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence reflects Bennett's (2016) definition of



intercultural communication. It indicates that intercultural communication is the move from personal to interpersonal level which consists of five components including attitudes, knowledge, skills, desired internal outcomes, and desired external outcomes. Many previous researchers have attempted to employ different approaches to gain knowledge and build students' intercultural communication competence. Contemporary research has shown that the interdisciplinary approach enables students to learn and gain knowledge from various disciplines and that make them have better skills in communication across disciplines (Redchenko, 2016). Interestingly, Rajani Na Ayuthaya (2018) conducted a study on the use of songs for intercultural communication competence development of non-English major students in the fields of arts and science. Findings showed that this approach developed students' intercultural communicative competence in three aspects. First, it develops students' cognitive skills. It raises students' understanding and recognizing of individual's cultural background, symbols and values, and appreciation in language and cultural interaction. Second, it develops students' communicative skills. It raises students' confidence in communication with people from different cultures and learn how to employ proper strategies to communicate and correct the mistakes culturally. Lastly, it develops students' affective skills. It raises students' awareness of cultural differences and learn how to respect other cultures. Similarly, students' abilities of intercultural communication can be increased through the process of language learning (Popescu & Iordachescu, 2015) and interdisciplinary learning (Redchenko, 2016). In addition, Byram (2013) states that the competence of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse need to be included in language; while the competence of analysis, comparison, and critique of cultures need to be included in intercultural competences. Likewise, successful intercultural communication learners need a systematic intercultural training in order to gain knowledge from different cultures, develop their abilities to compare different cultures, and to be able to critically evaluate, interpret, and apply those knowledge effectively in both verbal and non-verbal communication (Chlopek, 2008).

According to the review of literature above, it could be assumed that knowledge of language alone is not enough for successful intercultural communication. The language use in communication that lacks appropriate cultural contents could lead to communication breakdown and may end up with unsatisfactory results. To enhance students' intercultural communication competence, Mansilla & Jackson (2011) have proposed the model of understanding the world through disciplinary and interdisciplinary study. This model includes four main aspects in developing students' global competence which enables them to integrate and make sense of social phenomena through interdisciplinary knowledge. The first aspect of this model is to recognize one's own perspectives. Students have to understand their own perspectives, as well as to examine the other's perspectives that influence and impact them on cultural interactions. They need to know how knowledge, technologies, and resources affect their life and perspectives. The second perspective is to communicate one's own ideas with diverse audiences. Students are required to recognize and know how to listen and communicate cultural meanings with diverse people through proper technologies and media and reflect on the effectiveness on communication. The third perspective is to change their ideas into proper actions for conditional improvements. In this stage, students are required to identify and create opportunities for collaboration and assess the plan and actions in order to improve the condition and reflect upon the action for better contribution. For the last stage, students have to investigate the world to a wider environment in order to make sense of the knowledge beyond their areas. They are able to identify, question, and explain its significance. They can use critical thinking skills, language, and technologies for researching, constructing responses, and draw an appropriate conclusion on an argument. This model has been applied as a part of the learning and teaching process of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Asian Society Partnership



for global learning with the purpose to develop students' global competence across disciplines in the 21st century. Therefore, it is adapted and employed in this present study in order to determine the use of interdisciplinary approach in improving students' intercultural communication competence at a government college in Lao, PDR. The purposes of the present study were formulated as follows:

Research Objectives

1. To determine how interdisciplinary approach improves students' intercultural communication competence
2. To investigate students' attitudes towards the use of interdisciplinary approach for students' intercultural communication competence

Research Questions

1. How does interdisciplinary approach improve students' intercultural communication competence?
2. What are students' attitudes towards the use of interdisciplinary approach for their intercultural communication competence?

Conceptual Framework

The model of understanding the world through disciplinary and interdisciplinary study (Mansilla & Jackson, 2011) was adapted to be Intercultural Communication through Interdisciplinary Model and it was used to underpin the present study. This model consists of four important dimensions showing the dynamic interactions in building students' global competence and integration of their understanding of the world.

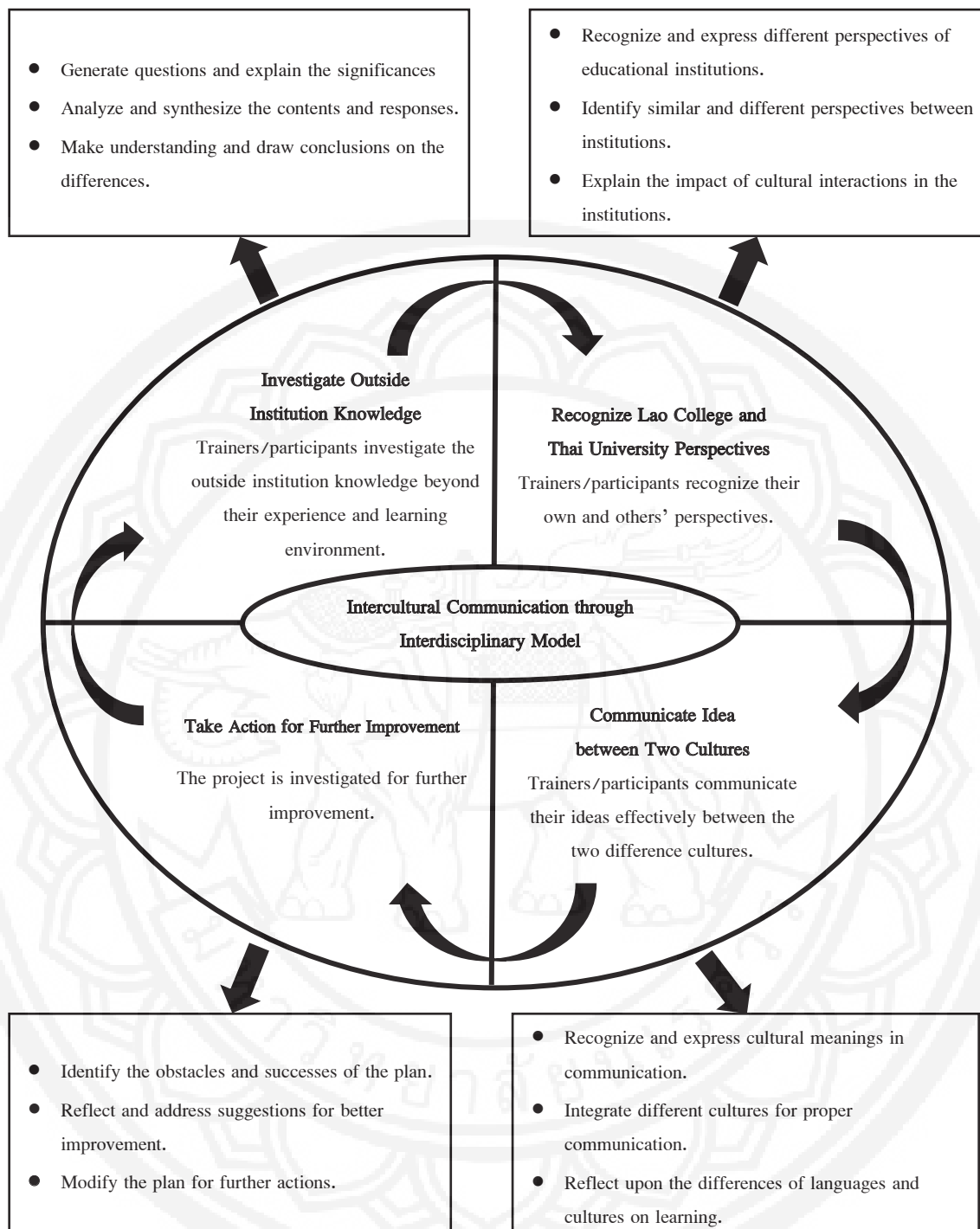


Figure 1 Intercultural Communication through Interdisciplinary Model

The four dimensions in the Figure 1 demonstrate the key concepts of trainers/participants' learning of the world through interdisciplinary approach. The first stage is to open opportunity for trainers/participants to experience and acquire knowledge from outside institutes and new learning environment. It stimulates participants' interactions among themselves and the trainers in order to analyze, synthesize, and make sense of the world which is different to their learning experience. It also leads trainers/participants to gain more information in a way that can raise their understanding of different cultural contexts and draw a conclusion upon the differences which are



the foundation concepts in building their global competence. The interactive engagement on investigating outside institution knowledge at the first stage significantly supports trainers/participants' recognition and the ability to identify the similar and different perspectives and cultural impacts of individual educational institution in the second stage. Understanding these concepts build a deeper understanding of cultural differences which lead them to have better intercultural communication skills among the trainers and participants. Intercultural communication concepts are integrated into the training at the third stage in order to facilitate the participants' abilities in intercultural communication regarding expressing proper cultural meanings between the two different cultures. The trainers and participants can reflect upon the language and cultural knowledge learnt at the training for deeper understanding of their cultures and intercultural communication competence. Finally, the researchers investigate the project's limitations, obstacles, successes, and make suggestions and offer options for further improvement.

Research Methodology

Research Model

The Intercultural Communication through Interdisciplinary Model was used for the purposes of the present study that pertains to both the trainers and participants in planning, doing, and reflecting of the joint research project between Thai and Lao government schools.

Four steps were followed including; 1) investigating outside institution knowledge; 2) recognizing differences/similarities in Lao and Thai perspectives; 3) communicating between Lao and Thai cultures; and 4) taking action for further improvement. Details of this adapted model was described in the conceptual framework. This model was used to underpin the training through interdisciplinary approach for the research participants at a government college in Lao, PDR.

Trainers and Participants

The participants were eight Lao English teachers and twenty Lao students majoring in English at a government college, Lao PDR. They were the purposive participants of this research. This training was organized according to MOU agreements between a government university in the northern part of Thailand and a government college in Lao PDR for the purpose of academic collaboration, sharing expertise and learning resources, networking for ASEAN readiness, and student development. Those participants were trained and observed by two experienced trainers with interdisciplinary background, who are the lecturers from a government university in the northern part of Thailand. The interdisciplinary background included studies in the field of science, geography, history, linguistics, social science, and fine arts. One trainer was a Thai female, and another was a male American.

Instruments

This study employed a set of questionnaires for data collection. It consisted of twenty-four items which were divided into six main parts: 1) questionnaire objectives; 2) demographic data of the participants; 3) language use in communication activities; 4) using learning resources; 5) participants' satisfaction of the project, and 6) open-ended question. A five-pointed Likert scales was used. Those scales were ranged from strongly agreed (5), agreed (4), neutral (3), disagreed (2), and strongly disagreed (1). The participants were allowed to do the questionnaire for approximately 30 minutes. They also encouraged in sharing their ideas about the training and future academic collaboration.

In addition, video recording was used as an observational tool for the researchers to observe the participants' action and interaction during the process of training and their intercultural communication skills through drama



performance at night in the school hall. With the video observation, researchers were able to observe 5 interdisciplinary elements that included the following: 1) science, including geography/geology; 2) social science, including morals; 3) linguistics, including bilingual language use; 4) history, including Lao and Thai chronicles; and 5) fine arts, including drama. Successful communication during the evening performance of each interdisciplinary element was recorded and observed in order to verify their competence.

Procedures of Learning Resources Development

The learning resources were designed in order to incorporate different interdisciplinary elements so that participants could experience a rich diversity of perspectives that would fulfill the global requirements of competence as depicted in Intercultural Communication through Interdisciplinary Model. The processes of making those learning resources are explained concerning the multilingual brochure and drama lesson plan.

The Process of Developing Language Learning Resources: Brochure

The multilingual brochure was developed based on merits of the interdisciplinary approach. It was believed that developing a multilingual brochure using interdisciplinary elements would provide for richer content for achieving improved global competence. Specifically, the aim was to provide a learning tool that would quickly be able to share intercultural ideas in different cross-cultural aspects of each government institution to all the participants including those in the Lao college and those attending the drama performance in the evening. The content utilized important elements of global competencies including multidisciplinary fields of study in linguistics, science, history, and humanities. Linguistically, English, Thai and Lao were used to communicate and promote intercultural understanding and awareness of the importance of having global competence in today's world. The topics covered included information about each institution's history, information about global competence and its relationship to the evening drama performance.

The process for developing this content required coordination between both the Lao and Thai resource people associated with each of the two government institutions. Their assistance, through shared cooperation and mutual adaptation, resulted in the successful creation of a learning tool in the form of a multilingual brochure. The brochure was used as an important steppingstone for the communication of ideas between the two cultures and during the teaching of the drama performance and was distributed to members of the viewing audience who came to watch the drama performance in the college auditorium in the evening. Importantly, this brochure presented an attempt at better understanding each other's perspectives and fulfilled the requirement for having shared input from both institutions.

The Process of Developing Language Learning Resources: Drama Script

In respect to the story content, the project sought content material that Lao and Thai students had equal familiarity with and that could best be utilized with a drama script that used different interdisciplinary elements including three languages namely English, Thai and Lao. In order to achieve this type of content, the researchers consulted with experts about the script and teaching contents which cover different global competency skills in the fields of science, history, linguistic, and fine arts. For example, geography and geology was an important part of the local legend which attempted to explain the formation of rivers in Thailand and Lao PDR. In order to use a legend that would be most appropriate, the researchers consulted with two Lao master's degree students studying at the Thai university. They suggested that any story about the "Naga" serpent would be interesting to Lao students who were studying at a government college in Lao PDR. Therefore, it was decided to look at various chronicles in order to retrieve background information for using a Naga story for the research project. The story content was



taken from the Yonok Chiang Saen Chronicle in the northern part Thailand. According to a Thai history teacher, the Naga serpent has tremendous superpower, has occasional relationships with humans, and often leaves a mark on the local geography in the form of a channel, ditch, depression or opening in the ground.

The researchers then used the plot structure (beginning, middle, climax and ending) for developing the multi-lingual drama script. In order to get participants aware of all the interdisciplinary elements of the story content, the lesson plan mixed and matched different drama action movements to support different interdisciplinary concepts. For example, students were taught to undulate a blue cloth to depict the movement of the river as it eroded the river's banks, and to show the movement of a Naga creature building a channel by zigzagging through mountain bedrock. By performing these actions successfully, researchers could determine their competence in science when viewing and analyzing their video performance. Also, jazz chants, jokes, and songs were also included to cover the fine arts. Lastly, it was decided that linguistically participants would use all three languages without focusing on any grammar points or without correcting mistakes. This was done because of the focus on the concepts of intercultural communication.

Data Analysis

Data from the questionnaire were analyzed for descriptive statistics such as percentage. This statistic value was used to interpret and report for the quantitative findings. In terms of the qualitative data, the content analysis techniques were used. Data from the open respond question and video observation were analyzed for the participants' intercultural communication competence and attitudes. As far as competence, 5 interdisciplinary elements were observed that included the following: 1) science, including geography/geology; 2) social science, including morals; 3) linguistics, including bilingual language use; 4) history, including Lao and Thai chronicles; and 5) fine arts, including drama. These data were interwoven and reported in the research result section. As far as attitudes, 3 outward behaviors were observed by the researchers that included the following: 1) participation with other group members; 2) showing enjoyment by way of smiling and having a good time; and 3) demonstrating confidence by saying script lines naturally and comfortably in any of the three languages.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results and discussion of the current study. It is divided into two parts according to the research questions. First, the use of interdisciplinary approach on students' intercultural communication competence. Second, students' attitudes towards the use of interdisciplinary approach for their intercultural communication competence. The first part is to answer the first research question; while the second part is to answer the second research question.

Part I: The Use of Interdisciplinary Approach in Improving Students' Intercultural Communication Competence

Data from the questionnaire showed the findings based on the Intercultural Communication through Interdisciplinary Model indicated that Lao students recognized their perspectives as different to Thai perspectives in terms of language use. They mainly used Lao language (55%) to communicate and shared ideas among themselves. Similarly, over half of the Lao students (55%) indicated that they fairly used English as the second language with the Thai trainers. Sometimes, English, Thai, and Lao were switched among them and the trainers for activities clarification. These findings infer that the language use strategies for language negotiation discourse based on interdisciplinary approach enable students to have better intercultural communication with the Thai and American trainers. These useful language strategies are considered as the significant learning resources to facilitate



their cultural learning among themselves and the trainers. It facilitates them to organize and connect knowledge (Ivanitskaya et al., 2002), have flexible thinking (Ackerman, 1989), raise their ability to synthesize or integrate their learning and enhance critical thinking skills (Field, Lee, & Field, 1994; Jones, 2009; Lombardo, 2010). It also enables students to build deeper understanding across disciplines (Lombardo, 2010) in the way that helps them to make sense of cultural differences and gradually acquire global competence.

Interestingly, data from the video observation demonstrated that the participants have favorable and sometimes enthusiastic response when using multi-lingual communication during the drama activity. It was observable that language switching was occurring among the trainers, Lao students, and some of the Lao teachers. The use of language switching supports the participants' learning and yields positive results in intercultural communication and increases their ability in cultural expression during the cultural activities through interdisciplinary approach.

As far as competence, the 5 interdisciplinary elements were observed by the researchers who summarized their observational comments in Table 1. The overall results from the table show that most of the drama participants were able to demonstrate through drama communication by using the five different interdisciplinary elements that were presented and taught during the training prior to the evening performance. Concepts found in science, history, fine arts and humanities were clearly dramatized. The local people, who came to watch their performance, enjoyed the drama that was being presented in two languages, English and Lao. Because the audience were local people who live nearby the college, the majority of the dramatization was spoken in Lao, and followed by English. Lao language was used to enable the performers to fully express their feelings and emotion of the enjoyment through the dramatization. Also, it is the language art used to make the audience absorb the aesthetics of the story which can be observed from their laughing, clapping hands, and engagement with the story.

In addition, this study argued that interdisciplinary approach helps the participants learn the knowledge of cultural sign, values, and morality through drama which can help those who are going to live in different cultures or deal with people from different cultures successfully. It helps increase the ability of intercultural communication and better cultural negotiations and understanding. However, this is impossible for one to understand the different cultures if they had limited number of foreigners of ASEAN and cultural resources. Thus, results of the present study pointed out that interdisciplinary approach allows the trainers, teachers and students to integrate different fields of knowledge, have more opportunity to explore to various cultural knowledge of the real world, better understanding of cultural differences, and improve their competence in cross-cultural communication in cultural diversity. These findings were in agreement with the studies of Catana (2014) and Jones (2009) as indicated that interdisciplinary approach enables students to learn new things and acquire knowledge from different disciplines.

**Table 1** Students' Intercultural Communication Competence of Five Interdisciplinary Elements

Five Interdisciplinary Elements	Areas of Five Interdisciplinary Elements	Students' Competence in the Five Interdisciplinary Elements
Science Elements	Geography, Mountain, and River	Most were able to do all drama movements correctly according to the concepts of science
Social Science	Morals	Two of the performers were able to communicate in Lao language the moral of the drama legend to the Lao audience
Fine Arts	Drama	Most were able to use costumes/props, use different languages, use some local musical instruments appropriately during the drama presentation
Linguistics	Multi-Lingual Languages	Most were able to use two languages, English and Lao, but did not use any Thai
History Element	Chronicles	Were able to recall the history associated with the drama script according to the Thai chronicle

Part II: Students' Attitudes towards the Use of Interdisciplinary Approach for their Intercultural Communication Competence

Data from the video observation revealed that the participants have positive attitudes towards interdisciplinary approach used at the training. Findings revealed that they showed impressive towards the trainers, the process of activities, training materials, time duration, advantages of the project, and the process of dealing with people. Also, the statistical data from the questionnaire showed that the participants (70%) had positive perceptions towards the multilingual brochure and interdisciplinary drama script used during the training period.

As far as attitudes, Table 2 shows the 3 outward behaviors that were observed by the researchers that included the following: 1) participation with other group members; 2) showing enjoyment by way of smiling and having a good time; and 3) demonstrating confidence by saying script lines naturally and comfortably in any of the three languages. The overall results revealed that there was a very positive attitude towards the drama activity as demonstrated in the evening performance. As mentioned before, both the audience and participants interacted favorable with each other. All the participants participated well, presented their roles confidently and expressed joyful enthusiasm. All of the researchers commented positively towards this drama activity. It should be noted that these observations were views from the Thai perspective and no one from the Lao side had an opportunity to view and make observations from the video.

Table 2 Researchers' Observation of Students' Three Outward Behaviors

Three Outward Behaviors	Researchers' Observations
Participation	All participated with other group members in different roles
Enjoyment	All expressed happiness with smiles and laughter and enthusiasm
Confidence	All communicated script lines confidently either in English or Lao languages according to their own preference

Conclusion

The findings show that using the interdisciplinary approach between ASEAN member government institutions is an effective way to achieve improved intercultural communication competence. This study shows that through mutual adaptation and the coordination of human resources, ASEAN member countries who have MOU agreements can work together and successfully accomplish global competence goals. The study also shows that organizers



should consider using multi-lingual resource tools in order to better understand each other's unique perspectives and unique worldviews. Importantly, organizers should open their minds to the fact that we live in a world that is diverse and requires a multi-disciplinary approach to problem solving and for better understanding each other's unique perspectives.

This research revealed that Lao students' attitudes towards the interdisciplinary approach are favorable and they seem to enjoy learning about global competence through the use of many different interdisciplinary approaches. When trainers tap the resources of different disciplines, they can create heightened excitement among the learners, and they can help to improve students' intercultural communication competence. Finally, the research seems to suggest that trainers involved in any kind of MOU joint agreement need to add to their repertoire of contents and to consider using more diverse approaches when considering training, workshops or seminars for global competence.

Limitations and Recommendations of the Study

The use of interdisciplinary approach during this training is likely to be acceptable for both the Thai and Lao stakeholders. It seems favorable especially concerning the use of multi-lingual language teaching strategies for teaching Lao students and teachers at this particular government college in Lao PDR. The study seems to show that gaining global knowledge and understanding of different global perspectives can be accomplished by way of the interdisciplinary approach and that it can result in the improvement of intercultural communication competence. However, the findings of this present study were limited within only a government Lao college and a government Thai university. Therefore, the data were used to make understanding only in the context of this study. Also, this study was limited in terms of time and the research tools applied for data collection and the sample of participants was rather small. Clearly, there is a need for similar collaborative projects within ASEAN in order to better analyze this data with data collected in other ASEAN localities. That which is clear is the effectiveness of the motivated Thai researchers and the professionalism of the Lao participants made this research project successful. Therefore, it is highly recommended that future research should be conducted in the same or similar fashion as this one in order to help build better understanding in assessing students' intercultural communication through the use of interdisciplinary approach. In addition, the Intercultural Communication through Interdisciplinary Model of this study is a suggested option that could be applied or modified in other ASEAN contexts.

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