

Language Learning & Multi-Cultural Education

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Language learning and multicultural education can lead to harmony between people. With this basic premise, two English educators and two Chinese educators of The International Language Center of Southern College of Technology explore the perceptions and experiences of students and teachers in relation to language learning, multi-cultural education and diversity management. The researchers probe student's language abilities, feelings of cultural comfort and belongingness and teachers' levels of cultural competence at Southern College of Technology.

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การเรียนรู้ภาษากับการศึกษาในสภาพแวดล้อมพหุวัฒนธรรม

พระภิกษุณี ดร.ลี* บายาตี ตือรามัน* โจอานา โจ* เจ็สติกา โจ*

การเรียนรู้ภาษาและการให้ความรู้ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรมจะทำให้เกิดความสามัคคีในหมู่คณะ ด้วยแนวคิดนี้อาจารย์ผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษ 2 ท่าน และอาจารย์ผู้สอนภาษาจีน 2 ท่าน ที่ทำงานในสังกัดศูนย์ภาษาและวัฒนธรรม สถาบันในเครือเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้จึงได้ศึกษาทัศนคติและประสบการณ์ของนักศึกษาและครูที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการเรียนรู้ภาษา การศึกษาในสภาพแวดล้อมพหุวัฒนธรรม และการจัดการความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรม ซึ่งผู้วิจัยได้ศึกษาเกี่ยวกับความสามารถในการเรียนภาษาต่างๆ ของนักศึกษา ความรู้สึกของนักศึกษาเมื่อมีการรวมกลุ่มกับสมาชิกที่มีความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรม ตลอดจนความเข้าใจในเรื่องของวัฒนธรรมในส่วนของอาจารย์ที่สอนอยู่ในวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้

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Introduction

Language learning and multicultural education can lead to harmony between people. With this basic premise, two English educators and two Chinese educators of The International Language Center of Southern College of Technology explore the perceptions and experiences of students and teachers in relation to language learning, multiculturalism and the managing of diversity. The researchers probe student's language abilities, feelings of cultural comfort and belongingness and teachers' levels of cultural competence at Southern College of Technology as an example for the educational institution as a whole to learn how to manage diversity, as well as, for Thailand as a nation to embark on a bold new exploration of multicultural education.

When we look closely at the language classroom in a Thai context, benefits will arise from teachers embracing issues of the: educational, social, cultural, religious and linguistic group characteristics of their learners. In fact, the teaching staff can come to terms with the reality of the interrelatedness and importance of these influences on their

students' attitudes towards learning a new language. Also, it can encourage a student-centered learning approach whereby learners' ever-increasing awareness of their existential condition and the possibility of acting independently to change it are enhanced through understanding their cultural history, language context and the important cultural features of foreign languages.

We as educators have come to acknowledge the different types of students in our language classroom and consider their cultural, religious and linguistic heritages, their multiculturalism, in learning foreign languages at Southern College of Technology. The researchers also explored the interactions between gender, department, and students' affective states with linguality.

Literature Review

One major characteristic that distinguishes human beings from other species is the Right to Education. Education enables human beings to develop their personality in order to live meaningfully in any location of the world in any time period of modern history.

Thus, before we discuss multiculturalism and language teaching, we have chosen to briefly reflect upon what is called education.

Education as a gradual process of acquiring knowledge, skill training, or disciplining the character goes beyond formal or informal schooling to encompass the struggles and triumphs of daily life. The “process of learning necessarily goes along with the learner’s ever-increasing awareness of his/her existential condition and of the possibility of acting independently to change it—with individuals reflecting on their values, their concern for a more equitable society, and their willingness to support others in the community” (Pimentel, 2006, p.1). This process Freire called conscientization, an empowerment of the individual. The education process becomes one of reflection plus action whereby the learners become active subjects in the learning process, by taking a position of change agents.

Many recognize education as a pathway to freedom and leading a self-directed life. And, this no doubt arose in part through the United Nations’ 1948 Universal

Declaration of Human Rights in which Article 26 addresses the right to free and compulsory education.

In 1994 the General Assembly of the United Nations introduced the UN Decade for Human Rights Education. They emphasized the need: for people to fully develop their human personality and sense of dignity; to promote “understanding, tolerance and gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples, and racial, national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups;” (Pimentel, 2006, p.10) in order to participate effectively in a free society. The UN emphasized that these values, including the right to education, go beyond the schools’ curricula, and involve the training of teachers in how to foster a safe and healthy learning environment.

Teachers and learners share equally the experience of learning through questioning, reflecting and participating, thus contributing to the enforcement of human potentials. Participants begin to question the nature of their history and social situation—to “read their world.” This approach is contrary

to the approach of refuting, weakening, distorting or repressing human potentials.

This learning process acknowledges an ever-increasing globalized world in which teachers “must be prepared to deal with diversity in every level (cultural, social, economic, religious, ethnic, and linguistic) and schools must be prepared to cultivate a joyful environment to foster this get-together. Learning is to celebrate the communication and interaction between people” (Pimental, 2006, p.12).

Success in education acknowledges that there is no limit to students’ abilities when they are doing their best to do something worthwhile, which also shows respect to individual diversities.

When compared with groupthink, in which members strive for agreement and similarity, synergy provides a healthier learning environment where everyone works cooperatively and productively with cultural competence and awareness of diversities and differences in age, gender, opinions, beliefs, etc. (Mujtaba & Mujtaba, 2004).

According to Malakolunthu (2006) the philosophy of multicultural education

should be immersed in every aspect of school life, from the physical factors, like the infrastructure and celebrations of cultural events, to the core ones, like helping students to respect and accept cultural diversities by getting rid of feelings of ethnocentrism, in order to build a culturally responsive environment. In this environment, the teacher applies content integration processes for instruction, enlightens students for cultural understanding and encourages academic achievement in different groups with equity pedagogy and prejudice reduction. Thus, an empowering school culture in which every student participates can be constructed. And the creating, managing and sustaining of such an environment requires strong leadership and competence from school leaders.

Morrier et.al. (2007) indicate that in a multicultural learning and teaching context, the educator should have an understanding of values and beliefs of cultures other than his/her own. Besides understanding the learner’s cultural identity and resolving issues which may impact the learner, the teacher should understand the learner’s cultural history, traditions, socio-economic status and

family. The students can feel the degree of cultural comfort of the teacher. During teacher training programs, teachers can learn about authentic and non-threatening multicultural courses to fit their own cognitive and affective styles. Thereby teachers can overcome their ethnocentrism, and become more culturally accepting and appreciative. Teachers need to offer learners the time and space for reflection and opportunities for improving their cultural understanding.

Throughout the whole process, educators need to reframe their knowledge, skills and dispositions to embrace multicultural education in order to successfully assist their students' learning processes, and as a whole the teacher needs to be consistent in this approach.

Last, the work of Baker (2003) shows that the inseparable and interlinked relationship between language and culture gives support to second language learners experiencing cultural awareness in their learning process, and this process emphasizes an understanding towards both the target language and the learners' own culture. It should be noted that stereotypes of one

definite national characteristic should be avoided and individuals with their diversities deserve more attention.

In language learning, cross-cultural understanding can be facilitated in terms of semantics, syntax, tone, body language, taboos and interpersonal relationships, etc., which both the native and non-native English teacher and learners should be aware of. When learning English as a second language, learners are actually in a place between their own culture and the culture of the target language from their own perspective, during which two cultures are mediated during this interlanguage interface, which develops as the learning process goes on.

In order to cope with this and have culture as an overt component in language teaching, educators can do so by implementing a cultural component in: classroom activities, learning materials and content, and in the training of both native and non-native teachers.

Methodology

The researchers collected data via a survey method in October 2008. Participants were asked to complete the survey after

completing ENG 201, the conversational English class at Southern College of Technology, (SCT). The researchers administered the survey at a single time to 164 third-year students. They were told that the purpose of the study was to understand the students' feelings about languages and cultures at SCT and the learning process therein.

Verbal instructions to assist the students in completing the survey were offered

in Thai and English. The survey itself was in Thai and took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Results

Demographics

Demographic data reveals: 63% females and 37% males; an age distribution of the students from 19-25 with a mean of 21 years of age (see Figure 1);

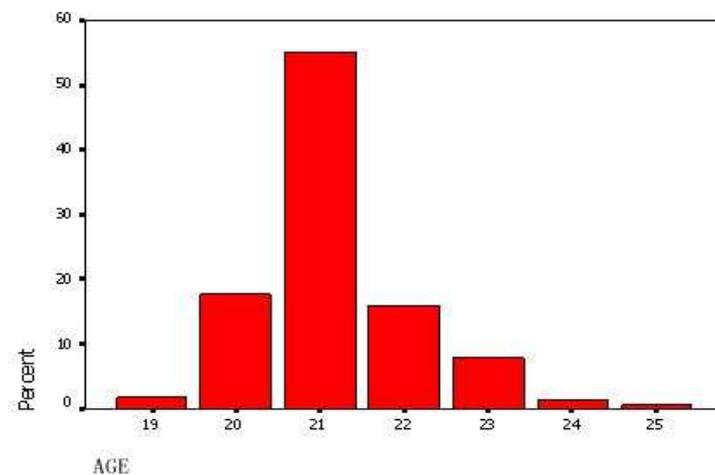


Figure 1: Students' Age Distribution

a religious identity of: 58.5% Buddhist, 40.9 % Muslim and .6% Christian (see Figure 2); and last, a departmental distribution (see

Figure 3) with Industrial Management and Information Technology students both at 24% and totaling nearly 50% of the student body.

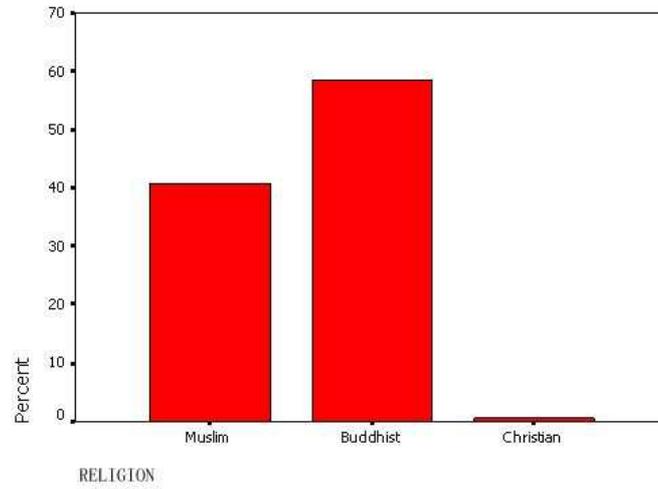


Figure 2: Students' Religious Identities

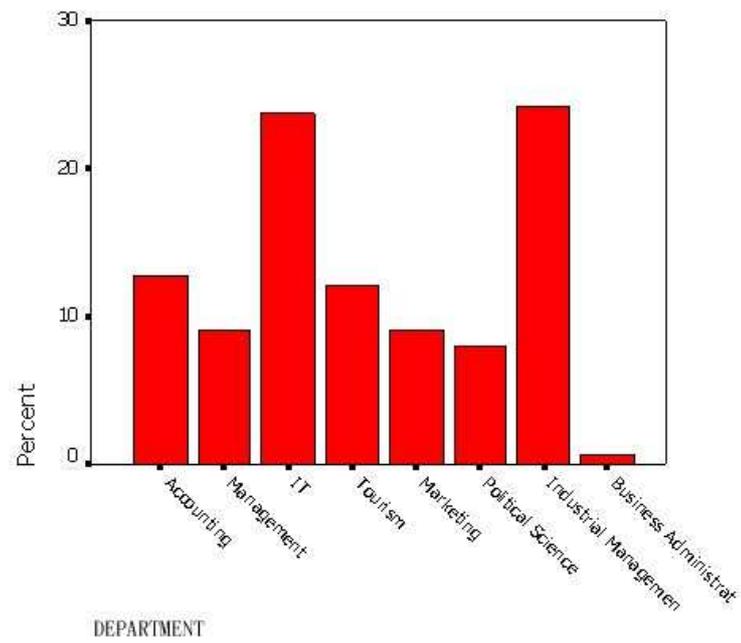


Figure 3: Students' Academic Departments

Language Abilities

There are interesting findings in the area of language abilities (see Figure 4) whereby 41% of SCT students self-evaluated as having language skills in 3-6 different languages. In particular, 23% of SCT students

can utilize 4 different languages, and 2% can utilize 6 different languages. Oppositely, 10% express that they only have abilities in only one language, namely Thai, and overall, 49% self-identified as using 2 different languages.

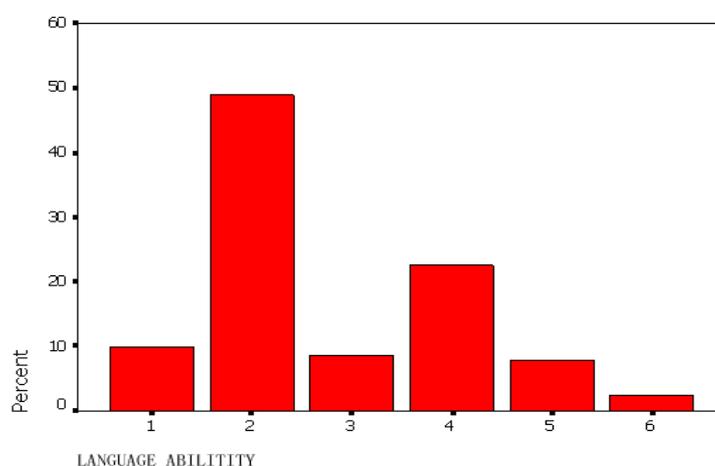


Figure 4: Students' Language Abilities

The Pearson correlation used in this study for determining the relationship between language abilities and demographics reveals 3 domains of statistical significance at the 0.01 level: (1) there is a strong relationship between gender and language abilities, namely females are more competent at learning languages than males; (2) there is a strong

relationship between religion and language abilities, namely Muslims have greater proficiency in languages than Buddhists; and (3) a one way ANOVA test showed a significant relationship between departments and language abilities. The significance found between the different departments and language abilities is shown in Table 1.

		LANGUAGE ABILITIES						Total
		1	2	3	4	5	6	
DEPT	Accounting	1	14	2	4	0	0	21
	Management	1	8	0	4	1	1	15
	IT	1	14	4	17	0	3	39
	Tourism	0	2	4	3	11	0	20
	Marketing	1	13	0	1	0	0	15
	Political Science	0	7	2	3	1	0	13
	Industrial Management	11	22	2	5	0	0	40
	Business Administration	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Total	16	80	14	37	13	4	164

Table 1: Academic Department * Language Abilities Cross Tabulation

ANOVA

LANGUAGE ABILITIES

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	82.990	7	11.856	10.410	.000
Within Groups	177.663	156	1.139		
Total	260.652	163			

English Language Skills

English students' perceptions of their abilities in the four skill areas reveal:

Very Good:

speaking & writing 1% & 2% respectively
reading 4%

Good:

speaking 10%
writing & listening 15% & 16%
reading 18%

Average:

listening, reading & writing 43%, 43%,
39%

Below Average:

speaking & reading 21% and 19%
listening & writing 26% for both

Thai students overall feel most comfortable and confident in their English reading skills. Slightly more than 50% of Thai students at SCT feel confident to speak English at an average level. Last, 20-25% of all students rate themselves as below average for all four language skills. This finding is similar in percentage to the number of students who indicate that they are uninterested in learning about other cultures (as described below).

Intercultural Competence & Belongingness

In summary, 21% of SCT students sampled have traveled to another country. In addition, 78% of SCT students indicate that they have interest in learning about other cultures, yet 21% indicate otherwise and may be culturally resistant. In relation to having any friends of another culture/ religion, 65% indicate that they have friends of a different culture (see Figure 5). Overall, SCT students feel “OK,” “good,” or “very good” about studying in a classroom with students of other cultures and religions, 32%, 33% or 32% and 97% in total (see Figure 6).

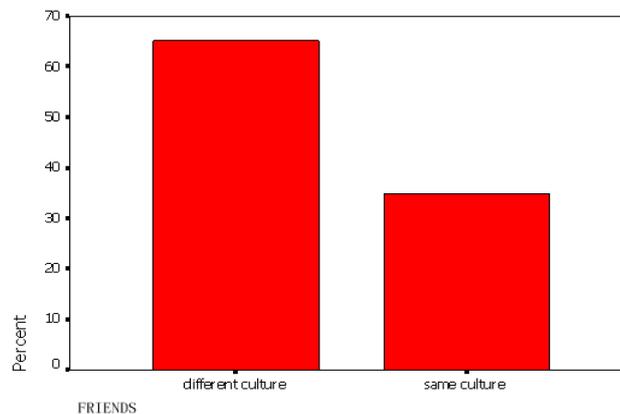


Figure 5: Students' Cross-cultural Friendships

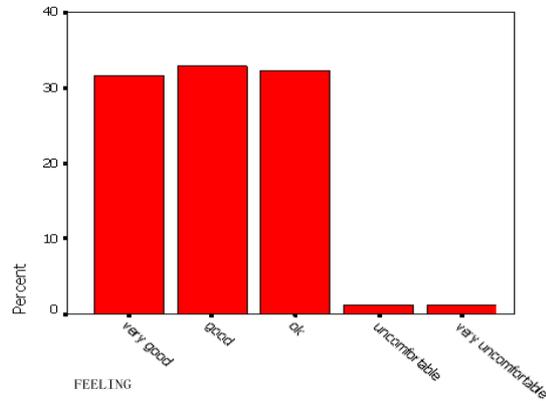


Figure 6: Cultural Comfort of Students with Peers of Other Cultural Backgrounds

SCT students have a variety of interests in other cultures, particularly including other cultures: food 22%, music 19%, customs 18%, clothing 17%, dance 12%, and body language 7%.

In terms of belongingness (see Figure 7), students experience the greatest sense of

belongingness at SCT in relation to their club 24%, their new friends 20%, their religion 17%, their hometown or home province friends 13% and their academic major 13%. Lagging behind were a sense of belongingness from their old friends 10% and sports 3%.

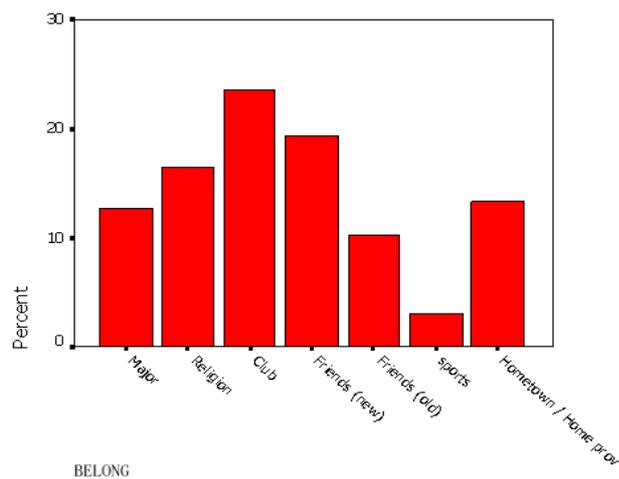


Figure 7: Students' Sense of Belongingness

Religious Needs

As SCT students' religion is an important component of their lives, the researchers explored their needs in this regard as follows:

At SCT activities, I am offered food appropriate to my culture. 18 % No

As a Buddhist student, I would like to have a prayer room at SCT. 44% Yes

As a Muslim student, it is important for me to have time for my afternoon prayer. 54% Yes

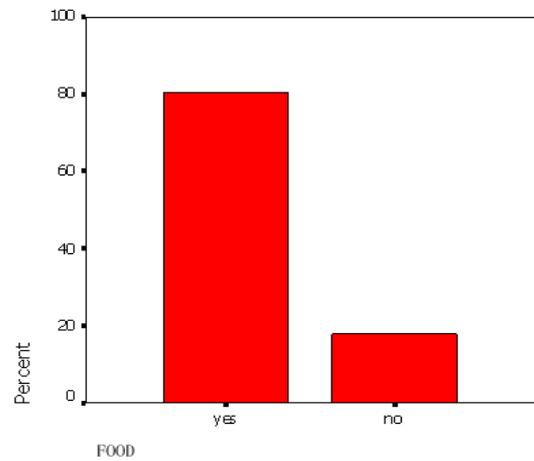


Figure 8: Culturally Appropriate Food Offerings

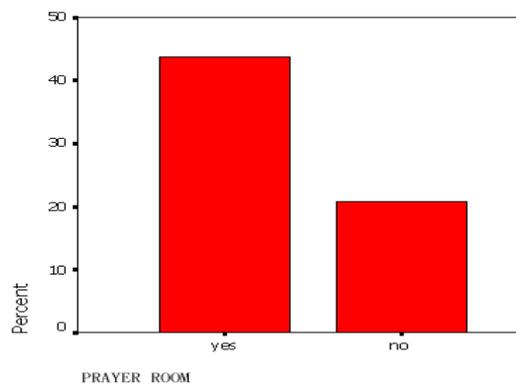


Figure 9: Need a Prayer Room, Requested by Buddhist Students

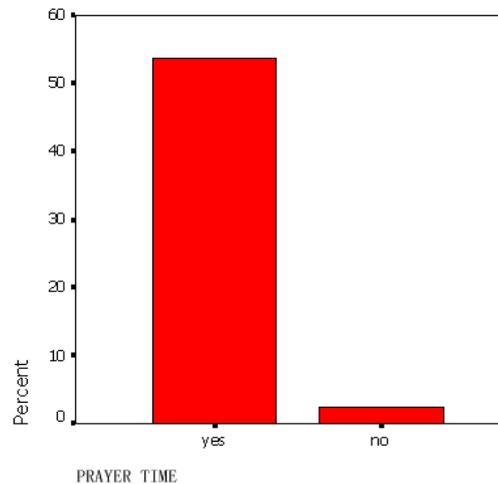


Figure 10: Need Afternoon Prayer Time, Requested by Muslim Students

These findings indicate three things: (1) at all SCT events there needs to be sensitivity to Halal food preparation, (2) at SCT there should be a prayer room established for Buddhist students, and (3) there should be a 15 minute break for prayer time for Muslim students for any classes extending from 12.30 – 15.20.

Cultural Competence

It is well documented that students can perceive the cultural comfort of a teacher when he/she is teaching students of a culture different from his or her own. Students notice this through the individualized authentic experiences that the teachers provide the

students to engage them in the academic content. It is also well known that the philosophy of multicultural education should be immersed in every aspect of school life.

In order for this to succeed, teachers need to develop cultural competence and thereby educational institutions can manage diversity issues successfully and bring forth the positive synergistic effects of all members of their staff and students for the benefit of society.

Therefore the researchers posed the following question to the students. “Do you think that through your ENG 201 English class with Dr. Lee you have learned about and

become more accepting of other languages, cultures and religions?" The results were overwhelmingly positive (see Figure 11). We note that the students thus feel culturally

comfortable and more open to and accepting of other languages, cultures and religions. Thus, multicultural education occurred.

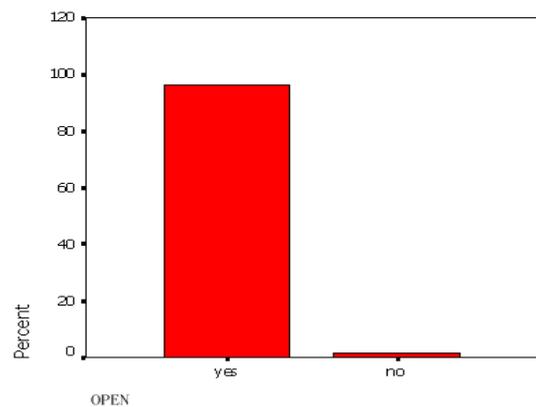


Figure 11: Cultural Openness of the Conversational English Teacher

Next the researchers explored the cultural competence of other teachers and the cultural comfort of the students. The question

posed follows, "How do you rate your other SCT teachers in terms of their understanding about your cultural needs?"

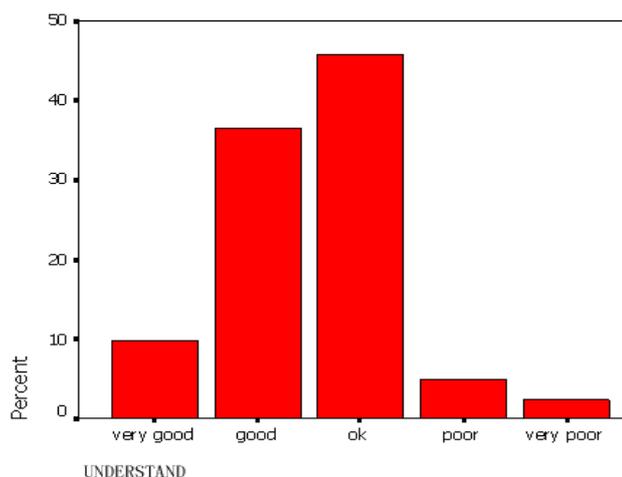


Figure 12: Cultural Competence of Other Teachers

4. What is your major?

- Accounting
- Computer Information System
- Industrial Management
- Tourism&Hospitality Management
- Marketing
- Business Management
- Business Administration
- Political Science

5. What languages can you use?

- Thai English
- Malay Arabic
- Chinese Japanese

6. Of the language you can use, Please rate your skills in the boxes below where appropriate. The numbers represent:

- 1 = Very Good, 2 = Good, 3 = OK,
- 4 = Poor, and 5 = Very poor.

No.	Language	Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing
1	Thai	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
2	English	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
3.	Malay	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
4	Arabic	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
5	Chinese	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
6	Japanese	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

7. Have you ever traveled to another country?

- Yes No

8.If yes, where?

9. Do you have any friends of a culture/ religion different than your own?

- Yes No

10. If no, how would you feel having a friend of a different culture/ religion?

.....

11. Do you like to learn about other people's cultures?

- Yes No

12. How do you feel studying in a classroom with students of other cultures & religions?

- very comfortable comfortable
- ok uncomfortable
- very uncomfortable

13. What groups do you feel that you belong to SCT? (check as many as you want)

- major religion
- club friends (new)
- friends (old) sports
- hometown / home province

14. I would be interested to know about other cultures. (You can check more than one.)

- food clothing
- customs music
- dance religions
- behaviours body language

15. At SCT activities, I am offered food appropriate to my culture.

- Yes No

16. a. For Buddhist students, would you like to have a prayer room at SCT?

_____ Yes _____ No

17. b. For Muslim students, is it important for you to have time to make your afternoon prayer?

_____ Yes _____ No

18. Do you think that through your ENG 201 English class with Dr. Lee that you have learned about and become more accepting of other languages, cultures and religions?

_____ Yes _____ No

19. How do you rate your other SCT teachers in terms of their understanding about your cultural needs.

_____ understand very well

_____ understand

_____ OK

_____ not understand

_____ really do not understand

แบบสอบถามสำหรับนักศึกษา

1. เพศ หญิง ชาย

2. อายุ ปี

ที่	ภาษา	ทักษะการพูด	ทักษะการฟัง	ทักษะการอ่าน	ทักษะการเขียน
1	ไทย	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
2	อังกฤษ	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
3	มาลายู	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
4	อาหรับ	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
5	จีน	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
6	ญี่ปุ่น	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

7. คุณเคยเดินทางไปต่างประเทศหรือไม่?

..... เคย ไม่เคย

8. ถ้าเคย, ที่ประเทศใด?

9. คุณมีเพื่อนที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรมหรือไม่?

..... มี ไม่มี

3. ศาสนา อิสลาม พุทธ
..... คริสเตียน

4. สาขาวิชา

_____ การบัญชี

_____ การตลาด

_____ การจัดการธุรกิจ

_____ รัฐศาสตร์

_____ ระบบสารสนเทศคอมพิวเตอร์

_____ การจัดการอุตสาหกรรม

_____ การจัดการการท่องเที่ยวและการบริการ

_____ การบริหารธุรกิจ

5. คุณมีความสามารถในการใช้ภาษาอะไรได้บ้าง?

_____ ไทย

_____ อังกฤษ

_____ มาลายู

_____ อาหรับ

_____ จีน

_____ ญี่ปุ่น

6. จากข้อ 5. กรุณาระบุความสามารถในการใช้ภาษาของคุณข้างล่างนี้ โดยวงกลมระดับที่คุณเลือก

ระดับความสามารถ

1=ดีมาก 2=ดี 3=ปานกลาง

4=พอใช้ 5=ควรปรับปรุง

10. ถ้าไม่มี, คุณคิดอย่างไรถ้ามีเพื่อนเป็นคนที่มาจากวัฒนธรรมไม่เหมือนกัน?

.....

11. คุณเป็นคนที่ชอบศึกษาเกี่ยวกับวัฒนธรรมอื่น ๆ หรือไม่?

..... ใช่ ไม่ใช่

12. คุณรู้สึกอย่างไรที่ต้องเรียนร่วมห้องกับเพื่อนต่างวัฒนธรรมหรือต่างศาสนา?

..... รู้สึกดีมาก รู้สึกดี ปกติ

..... รู้สึกอึดอัด รู้สึกอึดอัดมาก

13. กลุ่มใดที่ทำให้คุณรู้สึกในใจว่าคุณเป็นหนึ่งในกลุ่มนั้นจริงๆ หรือกลุ่มนั้นยอมรับคุณได้

_____ สาขาวิชา _____ เพื่อนศาสนาเดียวกัน

_____ ชมรมที่เข้าร่วม _____ เพื่อนใหม่

_____ เพื่อนเก่า _____ กีฬา

_____ เพื่อนที่มาจากจังหวัดเดียวกัน

14. ฉันสนใจที่เรียนรู้เกี่ยวกับวัฒนธรรมอื่นๆ ในเรื่องต่อไปนี้ (เลือกได้มากกว่า 1 ข้อ)

_____ อาหาร _____ เสื้อผ้า

_____ ประเพณีวัฒนธรรม _____ คนตรี

_____ การเต้นรำ _____ ศาสนา

_____ พฤติกรรมต่างๆ _____ ภาษากาย

15. ทุกครั้งที่มีการจัดกิจกรรมของวิทยาลัย, อาหารที่เตรียมให้ฉันถูกต้องตามหลักศาสนาของฉัน

..... ใช่ ไม่ใช่

16. ก. สำหรับนักศึกษาที่นับถือศาสนาพุทธคุณต้องการให้มีห้องสวดมนต์ที่ SCT หรือไม่?

..... ต้องการ ไม่ต้องการ

ข. สำหรับนักศึกษาที่นับถือศาสนาอิสลาม

คุณคิดว่าจำเป็นหรือไม่ที่ต้องมีการพักเพื่อละหมาดซุฮรีในช่วงที่มีเรียน?

..... จำเป็น ไม่จำเป็น

17. คุณคิดว่าจากการที่ได้เรียนวิชา ENG 201 ของคร.ลี ทำให้คุณได้มีโอกาสรับรู้เกี่ยวกับภาษา, วัฒนธรรม และศาสนาอื่นๆ และยอมรับสิ่งเหล่านั้นได้มากขึ้น

..... ใช่ ไม่ใช่

18. คุณคิดว่าอาจารย์อื่นๆ ที่ SCT เข้าใจในวัฒนธรรมของคุณในระดับใด?

..... เข้าใจดีมาก เข้าใจดี

.....ปานกลางไม่เข้าใจ

..... ไม่เข้าใจเลย

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