

## Thai Flight Attendants' Intercultural Sensitivity and Topics in Intercultural Communication with Muslim Passengers

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### Abstract

Besides English proficiency, intercultural communicative competence is a desirable qualification for flight attendants. An under-researched cultural group of Muslim passengers was the focus of this mixed-method study which investigated Thai flight attendants' intercultural sensitivity and related biographical details. Topics in intercultural communication between Muslim passengers and Thai flight attendants were explored. Data collected from 416 self-rated questionnaires on intercultural sensitivity were completed by a purposively selected sample and were analyzed using chi-square test and frequency count. The interview data from a total of 45 Muslim passengers as well as both Muslim and non-Muslim Thai flight attendants were analyzed based on content

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| passengers, airlines | analysis. The findings showed that most Thai flight attendants rated themselves with a high score in intercultural sensitivity. The factors significantly associated with intercultural sensitivity were sex, work duration, job position, and being ex-crew at the significance level of 0.05. Qualitative findings suggested that three major topics, which were the concept of halal, religious practices, and some additional topics, should be considered in training on intercultural communication with Muslim passengers through English language teaching (ELT). Implications for both airlines and pedagogy are discussed in this paper. |
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Training on intercultural communication is frequently embedded in English language classes (Fang & Baker, 2018; Hazrati, 2015; Matsuda, 2019; Tajeddin & Rezanejad, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in Thailand where the integration of intercultural communicative competence in ELT is still at a developing stage (Loo et al., 2019). The English language plays an important role in business worldwide, including air travel, as it is a common chosen communication tool (Crystal, 2009) while the airline industry is an important part of tourism which contributes up to 10 percent of Thailand's GDP (Azam et al., 2018). This industry alone generated 33 million jobs in 2015 (IATA, 2016). Nižetić (2020) discusses a worldwide reduction of flights up to 25% during the current pandemic of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which could affect the economy negatively. Nonetheless, it is predicted that there will still be a demand for air travel post-COVID-19 (Mustapha et al., 2020). Competition among airlines is likely to continue. Satisfactory in-flight communication and interaction could be a contributing factor for customers' loyalty.

Intercultural sensitivity, a component of intercultural competence, is essential for airline personnel as they encounter passengers from multicultural backgrounds. Among various cultural groups of passengers, Muslims tend to be understudied in the Thai context, despite them being the second largest population in Thailand, and the second largest and the fastest growing population in the world (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016). Without COVID-19, there would be probably more than 190 million Muslim travelers

People worldwide would have been expected to travel by air in the year 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2017). Since intercultural communication studies focusing on foreign Muslim passengers on Thai airlines are rare, it is worthwhile to investigate Thai flight attendants' intercultural sensitivity and factors significantly associated with it. Moreover, frequent topics in intercultural communication between Muslim passengers and Thai flight attendants need to be explored. This study hopes to provide a guideline for the airline industry and ELT to use in intercultural communication training.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

English language proficiency is a requirement for flight attendants. Airlines in Thailand require applicants to obtain TOEIC scores of at least 500 to 700. Intercultural sensitivity is not a required qualification despite it being a desirable attribute (Kim & Park, 2014). Chen and Starosta (2000) discuss intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural adroitness as the three dimensions of intercultural communication competence. Intercultural awareness and intercultural adroitness represent conative and behavioral components of intercultural communication competence respectively. An intercultural communicator is expected to be able to acknowledge and understand the differences and similarities of culture, and to effectively and appropriately interact with persons of different cultures. While intercultural awareness is the “know what”, and intercultural adroitness is the “do what”, intercultural sensitivity is the “feel how” or the affective component of intercultural communication competence. Fritz et al. (2001, p. 167) define intercultural sensitivity as “the emotional desire of a person to acknowledge, appreciate, and accept cultural differences.” While intercultural awareness and intercultural adroitness can be viewed as more objective, intercultural sensitivity appears to be rather subjective; hence, self-assessment tends to best suit the investigation of intercultural sensitivity.

While there are a few standardized English language proficiency tests such as TOEIC, IELTS and TOEFL, there is no worldwide standard test for intercultural competence (Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Dearsdorff, 2006; Hammer et al., 2003). Although the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) by Chen and Starosta (2000) has been criticized for not measuring the

behavior or skills of a person, it nevertheless provides a salient method of measuring intercultural sensitivity. The 24-statement questionnaire is claimed to measure five aspects of intercultural sensitivity: 1) interaction engagement; 2) respect for cultural differences; 3) interaction confidence; 4) interaction enjoyment; and 5) interaction attentiveness. Replication of ISS in different cultural contexts is much encouraged (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Wu (2015) conducts a confirmatory factor analysis, and reconfirms the validity of ISS in Taiwanese cultural contexts. Tamam (2010) proposes two factors of ISS be excluded to better fit Malaysian culture in a multicultural university context. In the Thai context, the original 24-statement questionnaire is appropriate. Peng et al. (2005) report that ISS is a reliable measurement tool of Chinese and Thai nationals' intercultural sensitivity. Wattanavorakijkul (2020) measures the intercultural sensitivity of 30 English major Thai students who have spent four months in the US Work and Travel program by adopting the ISS. Her findings suggest that the program does not significantly increase intercultural sensitivity. Bosuwon (2017) measures the intercultural sensitivity of Thai and foreign undergraduates from a Thai university and finds that foreign students, especially Americans with the shortest and longest times spent in Thailand, have a higher level of intercultural sensitivity than Thais and other nationalities. Similarly, Chocce (2014) discusses foreign students' higher levels of intercultural sensitivity when compared to their Thai fellow college students in Bangkok. The reliability of the ISS is agreed upon by Dong et al. (2008), who recommend it to develop greater intercultural sensitivity in group interactions.

Besides factor analysis, arguments on intercultural sensitivity tend to focus on exposure to different cultures. On the one hand, such exposure is argued to be a non-contributing factor in intercultural sensitivity development. Fuller (2007) compares intercultural sensitivity between graduate students at a university in the USA who studied and did not study abroad based on the Intercultural Development Inventory of Bennett (1993) and content analysis of interview data. Fuller (2007) argues that there is no significant difference between the two groups. His findings partly concur with Soria and Troisi's (2013) discussion that American students who did not study abroad, but participated in global or international activities in class and outside classrooms, are more interculturally competent than those students who have studied abroad. On the other hand, Stebleton et al. (2013) assert that college students

having international experiences have more potential to develop intercultural competencies than others. The idea that the longer the duration, the more the development of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence, is supported by a few studies (Petrie et al., 2018; Salisbury et al., 2013).

Among the variety of cultures that Thai flight attendants encounter, Muslims are perhaps the most misunderstood cultural group as a result of the media (Baker et al., 2013). In May 2015, there was a news report that Tahera Ahmad, the Associate Chaplain and Director of Interfaith Engagement at Northwestern University, USA, who was a Muslim American passenger on an American airline flight, was discriminated against and treated poorly by an American flight attendant (Kaplan, 2015). This shows the attendant's lack of intercultural competence, despite the two of them sharing a nationality and language in common. Tajima (2004) proposes that, apart from language, culture be considered in aviation communication training as it is a key to success in intercultural communication, as inappropriate and ineffective use of English among multicultural aviation personnel could threaten the safety of a flight. Atkinson (1999) discusses culture as the central concept of ELT, apart from learning and teaching, which is supported by Byram and Wagner (2017), who discuss that intercultural communicative competence should be the focus of language teaching. Therefore, English language teachers need to be aware of this concept and pay more attention to intercultural competence (Baker, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Young & Sachdev, 2011; Zilliacus et al., 2017). Kim and Park (2014) recommend that airline companies hire well-qualified and interculturally-aware flight attendants because the business relies greatly on the service quality delivered by them. The importance of service delivery is confirmed by the literature which asserts that the quality of flight attendants is a factor for travelers in choosing airlines (Abrahams, 1983; Bamford & Xystouri, 2005; Chang & Yeh, 2002; Grönroos, 1982; Hsieh et al., 2004; Wattanacharoensil & Yoopetch, 2012). Preferred flight attendants' qualifications mostly involve judgmental and social skills in multicultural interactions (Kulchol, 2007). Poor intercultural communication by Thai flight attendants could negatively affect the business of an airline (Permtanjit, 2003).

A few airlines in Thailand offer foreign language and cross-cultural training, but training for intercultural communication with Muslim passengers is not available, despite a large number of prospective

Muslim passengers worldwide and their specific requirements for travel. Bastaman's (2019) content analysis findings suggest halal food and drinks, and facilities supporting Muslim religious practices as major factors affecting Muslim tourists' hotel selection in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Turkey. Another study employing content analysis is by Suradin (2018), who investigates frequently found attributes of six of Indonesia's official tourism websites and finds Muslim festivals, halal food, and prayer facilities as the three most preferred attributes attracting Muslim tourists. Without intercultural understanding of the topics and attributes deemed important by Muslim passengers, their needs could be neglected. Intercultural sensitivity towards Muslim passengers is developed from intercultural awareness. Therefore, Thai flight attendants need to learn about cultural differences to develop a positive attitude towards them. A positive attitude could lead to efficient and appropriate communication and interaction (Yaman & Demirtaş, 2014). It is likely that the more Thai flight attendants are exposed to the culture of their Muslim passengers, the better the intercultural communication between them will be.

Previous studies employing ISS to investigate intercultural sensitivity varied in nationalities and were limited in social settings as most respondents were students. The findings argued whether the exposure to different cultures affected intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence. This study diversifies the context of these studies by focusing on foreign Muslim passengers and Thai flight attendants to better understand this intercultural communication phenomenon.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Participants

The population of Thai flight attendants at one of the largest airlines in Thailand was approximately 6,000. The sample size of 416 ( $n=416$ ) for the survey was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample calculation to represent the population. The minimum sample size was 397. The sample for the survey was selected based on a purposive sampling method which required that the sample was a Thai flight attendant who had worked on an international flight. The sample was

from one of the largest airlines in Thailand in terms of a variety of aspects including number of employees, aircrafts, and destinations.

**TABLE 1***Biographical Information of the Sample*

|  | Frequency  | Percentage |
|--|------------|------------|
| 1. Sex                                       |            |            |
| Male   | 172        | 41         |
| Female                                       | 244        | 59         |
| 2. Muslim/Non-Muslim Thai flight attendant   |            |            |
| Muslim                                       | 54         | 13         |
| Non-Muslim                                   | 362        | 87         |
| 3. Having Worked on Muslim Pilgrimage Flight |            |            |
| Yes  | 89         | 21         |
| No   | 327        | 79         |
| 4. Ex-crew                                   |            |            |
| Yes  | 87         | 21         |
| No   | 329        | 79         |
| 5. Duration of Employment                    |            |            |
| Less than 6 months                           | 100        | 24         |
| 6 months to 15 years                         | 35         | 8          |
| 1 to 3 years                                 | 5          | 1          |
| 3 to 5 years                                 | 25         | 6          |
| 5 to 10 years                                | 52         | 13         |
| 10 to 15 years                               | 86         | 21         |
| More than 15 years                           | 113        | 27         |
| 6. Job Position                              |            |            |
| Trainee                                      | 65         | 16         |
| Economy Class                                | 101        | 24         |
| Regional Business Class                      | 88         | 21         |
| Intercontinental Business Class              | 60         | 14         |
| First Class                                  | 74         | 18         |
| Chief Flight Attendant and Manager           | 28         | 7          |
| <b>Total</b>                                 | <b>416</b> | <b>100</b> |

Forty-one percent of the respondents were male while 59% were female; 13% were Muslims and 87% were non-Muslims; 21% have worked on a Muslim pilgrimage flight while 79% have not; 21% were ex-crew while 79% were not. The duration of employment at previous airlines ranged from 6 months to less than 5 years. The duration of employment at the current airline ranged from less than 6 months to

more than 15 years: less than 6 months at 24%, 6 months to 1 year at 8%, 1 to 3 years at 1%, 3 to 5 years at 6%, 5 to 10 years at 13%, 10 to 15 years at 21%, and more than 15 years at 27%. It was determined in accordance with the past recruitment of Thai flight attendants to the airline company.

With regard to job positions, they were divided into 16% trainees, 24% economy class attendants, 21%, regional business class attendants, 14% intercontinental business class attendants, 18% first class attendants, and 7% chief flight attendants and managers.

With regard to the interview, there were fifteen participants from each of the three groups: Muslim passengers, Muslim and non-Muslim Thai flight attendants. A total of 45 respondents were purposively selected. The Muslim participants were not passengers on the airline where the flight attendants worked. Out of fifteen, there were two Saudi Arabians, two Malaysians, two Indonesians, two Pakistanis, and one each from Kuwait, Oman, Turkey, Germany, Nigeria, Algeria, and England. Eight were female and seven were male. All had at least an undergraduate level of education and had traveled on an international flight where English was the chosen language for in-flight communication with flight attendants. All participants volunteered to participate in the study. The participants in the flight attendant interviews were members of the sample of the survey.

### **3.2 Instruments**

The questionnaire used in this study consisted of two parts (Appendix 1). The first part was the six-item biographical data section which asked the participants personal information regarding sex, whether they were a Muslim, whether they had worked on a Muslim pilgrimage flight, whether they were an ex-crew or a former flight attendant at any other airlines, including the duration they had worked for the former airline (if applicable), their work duration at the current airline, and their job position. The second part was the 24-statement Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) adapted from Chen and Starosta (2000) to investigate associations between the intercultural sensitivity scores and the biographical details of the flight attendants. The five scales represented a respondent's judgement: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=uncertain, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree.



The voice-recorded one-on-one face-to-face semi-structured interview questions were developed from in-flight observational data of a total of 12 Muslim and non-Muslim Thai flight attendants who communicated with Muslim passengers. Only the observations of the flight attendants were considered (Appendix 2).

The questionnaire and the interview questions were validated by three experts who suggested ISS be translated to clearly convey the intended meanings which made the questionnaire bilingual using both English and Thai. The interview questions were revised according to the suggestions from the experts of English for International Communication, Airline Cross-culture Training, and Islamic Affairs Education fields.

The results from the IOC (Item Objective Congruence) analysis with the mean values of all items higher than 0.5 identified that the instruments were acceptable. Additionally, the original validity of the ISS tested by an exploratory factor analysis by Chen and Starosta (2000) indicated a high level of internal consistency with a 0.86 reliability coefficient.

### **3.3 Data collection**

The data were collected over 12 months from April 2017 to March 2018 using a questionnaire distributed in person by the researcher at one of the largest airline companies in Thailand where the researcher worked as a flight attendant. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and to respond to the self-administered 24-statement intercultural sensitivity questionnaire based on their judgement towards each item. Out of 435 questionnaires distributed, a total of 416 were returned. Thirty Thai flight attendants participated in the interview. The interviews of the Muslim passengers took place at random places around the world trips where the researcher traveled as part of the job and on personal trips. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

A chi-square test was conducted using R Program (R Core Team, 2018). This test displayed the results of the associations between the biographical factors and intercultural sensitivity overall as well as each of the five aspects of intercultural sensitivity. While the test indicated whether a factor was significantly associated with intercultural sensitivity, the frequency count of the rated scales determined positivity and negativity of the associations. Scale numbers 4 and 5 (agree and strongly agree) indicated positive association, while scale numbers 1 and 2 indicated negative association and scale number 3 indicated no association. The most rated scales in this study were scale numbers 4 and 5 which outnumbered the others. This led to the conclusion that indicated factors that had a positive association with intercultural sensitivity since scale numbers 4 and 5 indicated high intercultural sensitivity scores. This also shows that the factors significantly associated with intercultural sensitivity were desirable attributes for Thai flight attendants.

Interview data were analyzed based on Krippendorff's (1989) content analysis framework with the focus on frequent terms from across the three respondent groups. The analyzed data were validated by the experts. Only those topics agreed upon by a majority of the experts were included in the findings.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Results of the survey

The results of the survey show the extent of Thai flight attendants' intercultural sensitivity and the associated biographical factors.

The rated scale numbers 4 and 5 of each attribute under each biographical factor were combined and counted to indicate a positive association with intercultural sensitivity.

It can be seen from Table 2 that most Thai flight attendants consider themselves interculturally sensitive as 86% or 358 out of 416 attendants rated themselves with a high score in intercultural sensitivity.

#### TABLE 2

*Frequency Count and Percentage of Ratings of 4 and 5 Combined*

|  | Frequency  | Percentage |
|--|------------|------------|
| 1. Sex                                       |            |            |
| Male   | 138        | 39         |
| Female                                       | 220        | 61         |
| 2. Muslim/Non-Muslim Thai flight attendant   |            |            |
| Muslim                                       | 51         | 14         |
| Non-Muslim                                   | 307        | 86         |
| 3. Having Worked on Muslim Pilgrimage Flight |            |            |
| Yes  | 82         | 23         |
| No   | 276        | 77         |
| 4. Ex-crew                                   |            |            |
| Yes  | 82         | 23         |
| No   | 256        | 77         |
| 5. Duration of Employment                    |            |            |
| Less than 6 months                           | 95         | 27         |
| 6 months to 15 years                         | 30         | 8          |
| 1 to 3 years                                 | 4          | 1          |
| 3 to 5 years                                 | 23         | 7          |
| 5 to 10 years                                | 43         | 12         |
| 10 to 15 years                               | 73         | 20         |
| More than 15 years                           | 90         | 25         |
| 6. Job Position                              |            |            |
| Trainee                                      | 64         | 18         |
| Economy Class                                | 90         | 25         |
| Regional Business Class                      | 72         | 20         |
| Intercontinental Business Class              | 50         | 14         |
| First Class                                  | 60         | 17         |
| Chief Flight Attendant and Manager           | 22         | 6          |
| <b>Total</b>                                 | <b>358</b> | <b>100</b> |

## 4.2 Factors significantly associated with intercultural sensitivity

The results from the data analyzed by chi-square test showed that sex, work duration, and job position were the three factors significantly associated with intercultural sensitivity across all five aspects. Being ex-crew was significantly associated with interaction enjoyment at the significance level of 0.05. To determine which attributes under each significantly associated factor were more desirable, data from Table 2 must be considered.

### 4.2.1 Sex

As shown in Table 3, sex is significantly associated with intercultural sensitivity. Female flight attendants were more interculturally sensitive than male flight attendants. Table 2 shows that 61% of the female flight attendants rated themselves high in intercultural sensitivity, compared to 39% of the male flight attendants.

**TABLE 3**

*Three Factors Significantly Associated with Intercultural Sensitivity*

|               | $\chi^2$ | df | Significance |
|---------------|----------|----|--------------|
| Sex           | 10.256   | 2  | .003*        |
| Job position  | 14.627   | 12 | .019*        |
| Work duration | 9.907    | 12 | .0005*       |

#### 4.2.2 Job position

Job position was significantly associated with intercultural sensitivity. The two lowest job position groups, the trainees and the economy class attendants, scored the highest in intercultural sensitivity. Almost all of the trainees at 98% and 90% of the economy class attendants rated themselves higher in intercultural sensitivity than all of the higher job position groups, despite being the two lowest job position groups. The second highest scoring groups in intercultural sensitivity were the two highest job positions combined, namely, the chief flight attendants and the managers, which accounted for 88%.

#### 4.2.3 Work duration

Work duration was the other factor significantly associated with intercultural sensitivity overall. The same pattern as for the job position was repeated for work duration. Despite having the least work duration, the group of the youngest flight attendants with less than 6 months work duration rated themselves the highest in intercultural sensitivity at 95%.

**TABLE 4**

*Factor Significantly Associated with Interaction Enjoyment*

| Interaction Enjoyment | $\chi^2$ | df | Significance |
|-----------------------|----------|----|--------------|
| Ex-crew               | 1.863    | 2  | .0019*       |

#### 4.2.4 Being ex-crew

Table 4 shows that the ex-crew enjoyed interacting with intercultural passengers more than those who had never worked as flight attendants at any other airlines.

There are two other additional aspects of intercultural sensitivity and one biographical factor that are worth mentioning, though they were not significantly associated with intercultural sensitivity. The two additional aspects were interaction confidence and interaction attentiveness, while the biographical factor was being a Muslim flight attendant.

### 4.3 Interaction confidence

Interaction confidence tends to be a challenge among the high intercultural sensitivity scoring flight attendants from three particular groups, namely, ex-crew, female, and the youngest. The female flight attendants, whose overall intercultural sensitivity score was higher than the males', rated themselves lower than the males under interaction confidence at 58%, compared to 70% of the male. Similarly, the 6 months to 1 year attendants group, who were the second highest in intercultural sensitivity under the work duration category, rated themselves the lowest in interaction confidence at 51%. Moreover, the trainees, the highest intercultural sensitivity group under the job position category, rated their interaction confidence the second lowest at 62%, compared to the highest of 87% rated by the chief attendants and the managers. The scores for the other groups fluctuated, but were higher.

This suggests that interaction confidence could be a challenge for the highest-scoring intercultural sensitivity flight attendant groups.

### 4.4 Interaction attentiveness

The trends for both overall intercultural sensitivity and interaction attentiveness were similar in that their scores reached a peak by the

trainees. Then, the score sank dramatically from 78% for the trainees to 50% for the 5 to 10 years work duration group, and fluctuated among the others. The trainees' interaction attentiveness score at 78% was their second lowest score after interaction confidence. Moreover, the lowest score of interaction attentiveness at 50% rated by the 5 to 10 years attendants group was the lowest percentage throughout this survey. This suggests that they do not perceive themselves to be highly attentive for intercultural interactions while the attendants overall rated themselves as high as 90% for interaction engagement. On the contrary, interaction engagement was the second highest score across all five aspects of intercultural sensitivity with respect to cultural differences at 92%.

#### 4.5 Being Muslim flight attendants and intercultural sensitivity

**TABLE 5**

*Percentage of Muslim and Non-Muslim Flight Attendants Rating High Scores on the Aspects of Intercultural Sensitivity*

| Aspects of Intercultural Sensitivity | Percentage of Sample Rating Scale Numbers 4 and 5 |                              |
|--------------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
|                                      | Muslim Flight Attendants                          | Non-Muslim Flight Attendants |
| Interaction engagement               | 94  | 90                           |
| Respect for cultural differences     | 98  | 91                           |
| Interaction confidence               | 69  | 62                           |
| Interaction enjoyment                | 87  | 80                           |
| Interaction attentiveness            | 67  | 64                           |
| Intercultural sensitivity overall    | 96  | 87                           |

Though there was no significant association between being a Muslim flight attendant and intercultural sensitivity, the Muslims rated themselves higher than the non-Muslim flight attendants on every aspect. A total of 96% of the Muslim attendants rated themselves high in intercultural sensitivity, compared to 87% of the non-Muslim attendants.

The overall findings indicate that most Thai flight attendants have high intercultural sensitivity. Nonetheless, certain groups of the attendants and certain aspects of intercultural sensitivity seem to need further development.

## 4.6 Findings from interview data

The interview data were analyzed based on content analysis to explore frequently found topics in intercultural communication between Muslim passengers and Thai flight attendants.

## 4.7 Discovered topics

Three topics with a total of eight subtopics in terms of frequency across the three respondent groups were discovered and examples from the transcripts are presented.

**TABLE 6**

*Percentage of Discovered Topics and Subtopics*

| Discovered topics         | Frequency Percentage | Subtopics   |
|---------------------------|----------------------|---|
| Halal concept             | 100                  | 1. Halal perception<br>2. Halal meal request  |
| Muslim religious practice | 70                   | 1. Prayer on board<br>2. Washing before prayers<br>3. Prayer direction                |
| Additional topics         | 60                   | 1. Identifying Muslim passengers<br>2. Muslim passengers and alcohol<br>3. Politeness |

## 4.8 Halal concept

The concept of Halal with halal perception and halal meal requests as subtopics was mentioned by all of the participants.

### 4.8.1 Halal perception

While all three groups of respondents perceived halal as the most prominent topic, perceptions of what “halal” was varied. While Muslim passengers affirmed that the meal must be halal, some flight attendants found the concept of halal unclear. Some non-Muslim flight attendants affirmed that they were informed during their initial training that halal meant the livestock had to bleed to death when slaughtered. The same halal concept was reported by the youngest group of Thai flight

attendants who were among the highest scorers in intercultural sensitivity. An understanding of the halal concept could affect how the attendants would manage halal meal requests when there were none available. Therefore, it is important for flight attendants to have a clear idea about halal food restrictions so as to properly serve their guests.

“For Muslims, as long as they [airlines] can provide halal food, it is ok.” (Muslim passenger 1)

“If nothing to eat and the flight is long, I think they [Muslim passengers] can take chicken [even if it’s not halal].”  
(Non-Muslim attendant 4)

“This chicken is halal. I have been informed that all meats from the airline are halal.” (Muslim attendant 11)

“Halal is when you slaughter and let the animal bleed to death.” (Non-Muslim attendant 8)

#### 4.8.2 Halal meal request

When there was no halal meal available but a Muslim passenger requested it, some of the flight attendants would consider removing any forbidden meat ingredients, and offering the modified meal to a Muslim passenger to prevent any possible complaints. On the other hand, all Muslim passengers insisted that any removal of forbidden ingredients would be unacceptable. They would rather have nothing than having a meal with any forbidden ingredients, especially pork, removed.

“They [Muslim passengers] always ask for halal food”.  
(Non-Muslim attendant 12)

“If there was nothing, I would just ask them [Muslim passengers] if they can take what we have. If they say no, I will do whatever I have to do to make them happy even removing any meats from the meal.” (Non-Muslim attendant 9)

“I would never remove pork from a dish and serve it to Muslim passengers.” (Muslim attendant 15)



## 4.9 Muslim religious practice

Seventy percent of the respondents mentioned Muslim passengers' three religious practices: prayer on board, washing before prayers, and prayer direction.

### 4.9.1 Prayer on board

Only male Muslim passengers asked for prayer space on board. Most of the attendants experienced Muslim passengers requesting a space to perform their prayers. Thai flight attendants mentioned that they relied on the nature of the flight and the passengers' appearance to identify their needs for a prayer space.

"I asked if any space I can pray and they [flight attendants] were very nice. They offered me a space". (Muslim Passenger 6)

"I asked if he [a passenger] wanted to pray. It is usual for that flight." (Non-Muslim attendant 14)

### 4.9.2 Washing before prayers

While non-Muslim Thai flight attendants were aware of Muslim prayers, only a few knew that Muslims need to wash before performing a prayer. Both Muslim and non-Muslim attendants found it frustrating when they found air plane lavatories wet with water after Muslim passengers performed their ablutions before praying.

"I have the impression that they tend to make toilets wet. I don't know why." (Non-Muslim attendant 2)

"I know they have to wash before prayer but it would be nice if they could keep toilets dry." (Muslim attendant 4)

### 4.9.3 Prayer direction

When wishing to pray on board, Muslim passengers asked for directions. They would not directly ask which direction the city of Mecca was. Rather, they would ask for directions in general. If an attendant was aware that the passengers were Muslims who wished to pray, they might

further ask for “qiblat”, a common term among Muslims for the direction to pray. This term is not commonly known among non-Muslims.

“Excuse me. Can you tell me the directions? Which direction are we heading now?” (Muslim Passenger 7)

“Some passengers asked me the directions. I knew they wanted to pray but I didn’t know which direction they needed.” (Non-Muslim attendant 13)

“A Muslim passenger asked me which way qiblat was. He knew I was a Muslim.” (Muslim t attendant 14)

#### 4.10 Additional topics

Sixty percent of the respondents mentioned three additional topics: identifying Muslim passengers, Muslim passengers and alcohol, and politeness.

##### 4.10.1 Identifying Muslim passengers

The respondents affirmed that the identification of Muslim passengers was important, especially when involving requests for halal meals. Thai flight attendants mentioned that some Muslim passengers’ appearances could be different from what they expected. This meant that sometimes it was difficult to identify a passenger as a Muslim, but not if the passenger asked for a halal meal.

“I think they [flight attendants] can tell that we are Muslims. They offered us chicken as the other menu was pork.” (Muslim Passenger 9)

“I could tell from how they [Muslim passengers] look and how they dress so I let them choose the meal first if they didn’t pre-order a halal meal.” (Non-Muslim attendant 3)

“You can’t always tell if a passenger is a Muslim but it’s OK as long as he or she does not ask for a halal meal when we don’t have one.” (Muslim attendant 10)

##### 4.10.2 Muslim passengers and alcohol

There were situations when Muslim passengers insisted on getting a halal meal, but then also requested alcohol. Thai flight attendants mentioned that the passengers tended to adopt certain supra-linguistic features when requesting alcohol. Sometimes the attendants found it difficult to understand what they wanted.

“Some [Muslim passenger] would whisper very softly as if they did not want other passengers to hear. Some used gestures to signal a request for another drink.” (Muslim attendant 12)

“I don’t mind if they ask for [alcohol] drinks, but sometimes it’s hard to tell what they want because some of them won’t say it.” (Non-Muslim attendant 11)

#### 4.10.3 Politeness

Muslim passengers said that they prioritized politeness over linguistic competence from flight attendants. The politeness strategy was in line with Thai flight attendants’ perceptions.

“I don’t mind if flight attendants don’t speak English so well as long as they are polite to us, like when they give service to everyone.” (Muslim passenger 2)

“If they tell me nicely, it’s ok even if I don’t get a Halal meal. No need for extra attention” (Muslim passenger 6)

“I try to be polite because I think they [Muslim passengers] might get more upset [from not getting what they want] if we don’t treat them nicely.” (Muslim attendant 11)

“No matter what passengers say, we [flight attendants] keep smiling, and remain professional.” (Non-Muslim attendant 13)

Thai flight attendants’ understanding of passengers’ needs related to religious requirements, especially halal meals, was appreciated. Despite the possible specific needs and typical practices of Muslim passengers, they did not want to be treated differently from other passengers as long as they were treated politely. Both Muslim passengers and Thai flight attendants valued politeness. Besides rating higher scores in intercultural

sensitivity as indicated by the survey results, Muslim flight attendants, who had been more exposed to Muslim culture, also appeared to better understand Muslim passengers to some degree regarding the topics mentioned above.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The quantitative findings indicate that most of the Thai flight attendants perceived themselves to possess high levels of intercultural sensitivity. The younger females with the lowest job positions in the shortest work duration group and the top rank flight attendants group were the first and second top-scoring groups, respectively. The 5 to 10 years work duration group scored the lowest. For the others, the scores fluctuated. The three factors significantly associated with intercultural sensitivity were sex, work duration, and job position. The female flight attendants, having the least work duration and having the two lowest job positions were the most suitable employees with respect to intercultural sensitivity. These findings are similar to those of Soria & Troisi (2013) and Wattanavorakijkul (2020), who suggest that more exposure does not necessarily mean greater intercultural competence.

The qualitative findings suggest that the three most frequent topics in intercultural communication between Muslim passengers and Thai flight attendants were halal, Muslim religious practices, and other topics. Of these three topics, there were a total of eight subtopics: halal perceptions, halal meal requests, prayers on board, washing before prayers, prayer direction, identifying Muslim passengers, Muslim passengers and alcohol, and politeness. Halal was the most frequently found topic, followed by Muslim religious practice and other topics, respectively.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

While most Thai flight attendants consider that they have high intercultural sensitivity, some consider they have low intercultural sensitivity, which suggests that airlines need to investigate how to increase the overall intercultural sensitivity of their flight attendants. In particular, there are

two aspects to which airlines need to pay attention, which are interaction confidence and interaction attentiveness as they tend to be challenging for the flight attendants with the highest intercultural sensitivity scores. Without intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication and interaction could be compromised, therefore, airlines should ensure that their flight attendants can communicate and interact effectively and appropriately with their passengers. Satisfied passengers are likely to become loyal customers. One way to help develop intercultural sensitivity is via appropriate training.

While current ELT practice tends to over represent Anglophone cultures (Baker, 2015), this study proposes that cultural groups based on belief systems and other non-Anglophone cultures gain more attention. It is hoped that training focused on intercultural communication with foreign Muslims could be developed based on the findings from this study. The training could be useful to English language teachers and airline training programs in preparing their learners and personnel for intercultural communication with foreign Muslims. To begin with, they need to be able to identify their Muslim customers and be aware of their food and beverage needs and restrictions. Knowing their possible specific needs regarding their religious practice could also help them to respond to their Muslim customers' needs better. Lastly, they need to be aware that politeness is appreciated over language proficiency and that Muslim customers do not want to be treated differently from others. It is also hoped that this study will lead to further research and discussion on the training of diverse cultural groups in intercultural communication and its integration into ELT.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Firstly, future studies should be based on a larger number of airlines and participants for better generalization. Secondly, it is recommended that future studies should adapt the findings from this study to design an introductory English language course for intercultural communication with foreign Muslims. Lastly, studies of other contexts and cultural groups should be encouraged in order to contribute to constructing a deeper body of knowledge across contexts and cultures.

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## APPENDIX 1

Please complete the questionnaire

1. Sex

- Male                       Female

2. Are you Muslim?

- Yes                       No

3. Have you ever worked on a Muslim pilgrimage flight?

- Yes                       No

4. Are you ex-crew?

- Yes (please specify duration) .....years  
 No

5. How long have you been with the current airline company as a flight attendant?

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 6 months | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 months to 1 year |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5 to 10 years      | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 to 3 years       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10 to 15 years     | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 to 5 years       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> More than 15 years |   |

6. What is your current job position at the airline?

- Trainee  
 First class attendant  
 Economy class attendant  
 Chief flight attendant  
 Regional business class attendant  
 Manager  
 International business class attendant

Below is a series of 24 statements concerning intercultural communication.

Please work quickly and record your first impression by indicating the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

There are no right or wrong answers (คำตอบไม่มีถูกผิด ขอความกรุณาตอบตามความเป็นจริง)

### Rating Scales

- 1 = strongly disagree (ไม่เห็นด้วยอย่างยิ่ง)  
 2 = disagree (ไม่เห็นด้วย)  
 3 = uncertain (ไม่แน่ใจ)  
 4 = agree (เห็นด้วย)  
 5 = strongly agree (เห็นด้วยอย่างยิ่ง)

Please mark an [X] corresponding to your answer in the blank column provided.

| Statements |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1          | I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.<br>(ฉันสนุกกับการปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 2          | I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.<br>(ฉันคิดว่าคนที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรมมีความคิด/จิตใจคับแคบ)   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 3          | I am quite confident/I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures. (ฉันค่อนข้างมีความมั่นใจในตัวเองในการปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)               |   |   |   |   |   |
| 4          | I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures. (ฉันคิดว่าการพูดคุยกับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรมเป็นเรื่องยาก)   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 5          | I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures. (ฉันหาเรื่องพูดคุยได้เสมอเมื่อปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 6          | I can be as sociable/outgoing as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures. (ฉันสามารถพูดคุย/เข้าสังคมได้เท่าที่ฉันต้องการเมื่อปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม) |   |   |   |   |   |
| 7          | I don't like to be with people from different cultures.<br>(ฉันไม่ชอบที่จะอยู่กับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 8          | I respect the values of people from different cultures.<br>(ฉันเคารพค่านิยมของผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 9          | I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures. (ฉันอารมณ์เสียง่ายเมื่อปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 10         | I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures. (ฉันรู้สึกมั่นใจเมื่อปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 11         | I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts. (ฉันมักจะไม่วุ่นวายตัดสินความรู้สึกของตนเองที่มีต่อคู่สนทนาต่างวัฒนธรรม)                                     |   |   |   |   |   |

|    |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|----|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| 12 | I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures. (ฉันรู้สึกไม่กระตือรือร้นเมื่ออยู่ท่ามกลางผู้ที่มาจากวัฒนธรรมที่แตกต่างกัน)   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 13 | I am open-minded to people from different cultures. (ฉันเปิดใจรับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรมเสมอ)  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 14 | I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures. (ฉันเป็นคนช่างสังเกตเมื่อปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 15 | I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures. (ฉันรู้สึกว่าการปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรมนั้นไร้ประโยชน์)   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 16 | I respect the ways people from different cultures behave. (ฉันเคารพวิธีปฏิบัติตัวของผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 17 | I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures. (ฉันพยายามที่จะเก็บข้อมูลรายละเอียดต่าง ๆ ให้ได้มากที่สุดเมื่อปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ที่มาจากวัฒนธรรมที่แตกต่างกัน) |  |  |  |  |  |
| 18 | I would NOT accept the opinions of people from different cultures. (ฉันจะไม่ยอมรับความคิดเห็นจากผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 19 | I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction. (ฉันสามารถรับรู้ได้ถึงความหมายโดยนัย/ความหมายแฝงของคู่สนทนาที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรมกัน)                               |  |  |  |  |  |
| 20 | I think my culture is better than other cultures. (ฉันคิดว่าวัฒนธรรมของฉันดีกว่าวัฒนธรรมของผู้อื่น)  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 21 | I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterpart during our interaction. (ฉันมักจะแสดงความคิดเห็นในแง่บวกเมื่อปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)                                       |  |  |  |  |  |
| 22 | I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct (ต่างวัฒนธรรม) persons. (ฉันมักจะเลี่ยงสถานการณ์ที่ฉันต้องเข้าไปเกี่ยวข้องกับผู้ที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)                                |  |  |  |  |  |
| 23 | I often show my understanding to my culturally-distinct counterpart through verbal or non-verbal cues. (ฉันมักจะใช้อวัจนภาษา/ภาษาท่าทางเพื่อแสดงความเข้าใจคู่สนทนาที่มาจากต่างวัฒนธรรม)                          |  |  |  |  |  |
| 24 | I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me. (ฉันรู้สึกเพลิดเพลินกับความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรมระหว่างฉันและคู่สนทนา)   |  |  |  |  |  |

..... Thank you .....

## APPENDIX 2

### Interview questions for Muslim passengers

1. Have you traveled on an international flight?
2. What language do you speak to flight attendants?
3. What is your impression towards communication with flight attendants?
4. Please share your air travel experience as a Muslim.
5. Have you ever made any requests to flight attendants? If so, what were they?
6. What topics were usually mentioned when communicating with flight attendants?

### Interview questions for Thai flight attendants

1. Have you worked on an international flight?
2. What language do you speak to foreign Muslim passengers?
3. What is your impression towards communication with foreign Muslim passengers?
4. Please share your in-flight work experience regarding foreign Muslim passengers.
5. Have you ever had any special requests from foreign Muslim passengers? If so, what were they?
6. What topics were usually mentioned when communicating with foreign Muslim passengers?