



# International Journal of Educational Methodology

Volume 8, Issue 2, 211 – 219.

ISSN: 2469-9632

<https://www.ijem.com/>

## Effect of Thai Junior High Student Intercultural Competence on Resilience, Well-being, and Reading Attitudes

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*Received: December 7, 2021 • Revised: March 2, 2022 • Accepted: April 19, 2022*

**Abstract:** Students' intercultural competence and reading ability are an essential aspect of their education. Intercultural competence, defined as respect for the cultural views, beliefs, and traditions of others, is a necessary skill for effective and appropriate communication. Using a multidimensional model, this study investigated the effect of intercultural competence among Thai junior high school students on their resilience, well-being, and attitudes toward reading. A 2018 Program for International Student Assessment data set relating to 7,411 students from 289 schools in Thailand was analyzed using structural equation modeling. The research findings suggest that improved intercultural competence strengthens resilience, well-being, and attitudes toward reading.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural competence, junior high student, reading attitudes, resilience, well-being.*

**To cite this article:** Chang, Y. C., Bangsri, A., Jabioon, C., & Pakdeewong, U. (2022). Effect of Thai junior high student intercultural competence on resilience, well-being, and reading attitudes. *International Journal of Educational Methodology*, 8(2), 211-219. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ijem.8.2.211>

### Introduction

Global citizenship is included in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Consequently, schools and universities are developing courses associated with globalization and internationalization to enhance the quality of global citizenship among students and cultivate their ability to tolerate and respect different countries and cultures (Auld & Morris, 2019). Education leaders worldwide recognize the need for students to be cross-culturally sensitive and intellectually prepared for their future careers (Maharaja, 2018). Phumpho and Nomnian (2019) indicate that factors such as a lack of cultural knowledge and awareness, which may be implicit, may hinder effective business communication.

Globalization in business and communication means that people from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds are increasingly required to be able to understand each other when interacting. Therefore, intercultural competence (Bennett, 2009; Deardorff, 2006), defined as a respect for the cultural views, beliefs, traditions, and motivations of others, has become an essential skill for effective and appropriate communication. Thus, intercultural competence is recognized as essential for communicating effectively across cultures (Whaley & Davis, 2007).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016) defines global competence as being open and respectful toward cultural diversity and having the analytical and critical skills to understand intercultural and global topics. Johnson et al. (2006) defined intercultural competency as the ability to use knowledge, skills, and personal traits to work successfully with people from different cultures, and Bennett (2008) defined intercultural knowledge as "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts".

Intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures (Sinicrope et al., 2012). Dorn and Cavalieri-Koch (2005) argued that intercultural skills "enable us to interact both effectively and in a way that is acceptable to others when working in a group whose members have different cultural backgrounds." Some foundational aspects of intercultural competency are as follows: comparing, discovering and identifying, observing and analyzing, understanding language and culture, using one's linguistic to communicate with people from different backgrounds, learning and communicating, and having cultural knowledge (Moeller & Nugent, 2014).

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Therefore, fostering cultural respect and intercultural understanding in students enables them to experience and understand humanistic values such as interpersonal harmony and human rights (Louie, 2005) and gain a deeper and more personal understanding of conflict resolution, all of which would help them empathize with individuals or groups that they may have once considered “the other” (Holmes, 2019).

Byram et al. (2002) proposed a cross-cultural competency model with four intercultural competence components or dimensions: content knowledge, mental skills, attitudinal skills, and awareness. Content knowledge is acquired from cultural knowledge; mental skills are associated with the ability to process cultural information; attitudinal skills are the skills required to value cultural information; and awareness is a perception of the learning associated with the content knowledge, mental skill, and attitudinal skill domains. Key to this multidimensional model of intercultural competence is that individuals should be open to learning and accepting new worldviews, beliefs, and values to participate in equal relationships.

### Literature Review

When a person is living in a different environment, they must learn to cope with uncertainty, which can cause stress and feelings of frustration and inadequacy. Intercultural resilience refers to an individual’s ability to adapt to the dynamics of external cultural development and change. The word “resilience” comes from the Latin “resalire” (to rise up again) and refers to the ability to cope successfully or to recover from adversity (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007). At the heart of resilient thinking is the ability to recognize that the situation will change and that being forced to adapt to these changes can facilitate growth (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007). Masten and Powell (2003) explained that resilience refers to patterns of positive adaptation in the context of substantial risk or adversity. Walsh (2006) conceptualized resilience as involving self-correction, a growth mindset, and the ability to stick with something for the long haul. Resilience also depends on the social environment an individual is in (Ungar, 2008), their ability to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses (Ahern et al., 2006), and their ability to seek healthy development in the face of risk (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). If people resist change, they risk becoming more vulnerable and missing opportunities. Resilience, therefore, is a process of development that involves not only finding solutions to difficulties and challenges but also viewing them as opportunities.

Gilligan (2008) argued that “the degree of resilience displayed by a person in a certain context may be said to be related to the extent to which that context has elements that nurture this resilience.” Therefore, resilience can be considered as the fit between the solutions developed by individuals and how these solutions address the challenges posed by each tension in each community norm, all of which contribute to the individual’s resilience (Ungar, 2008).

Consequently, culture and diversity can provide a clearer picture of the risk and resilience processes encountered by young people in their daily lives (Arrington & Wilson, 2000). However, some aspects of global, cultural, and other experiences in young people’s lives contribute to their resilience (Ungar, 2008), and intercultural competence helps to improve resilience (Genkova & Kruse, 2020). Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H<sub>1</sub>: Intercultural competence exerts a positive effect on student resilience.

Although the role of cognition is essential in cross-cultural interaction, emotional responses can also affect motivation and the regulatory functions of thought and action; thus, emotional responses must also be considered (Izard, 2007). Abarbanel (2009) emphasized that intercultural studies should adopt a more proactive approach to dealing with emotional overload, rather than labeling all overwhelming experiences as “culture shock.” Instead, scholars should acknowledge that emotions are heightened in many intercultural interactions and that emotional control requires skill and practice (Abarbanel, 2009).

Emotional needs are therefore an essential aspect of the cross-cultural competency model because they play a role in motivating and regulating thought, action, and ultimately, adaptation (Izard, 2007). Unaddressed emotions can affect decision-making, well-being, and relationships, all of which influence the resilience to manage how one relates to a particular cultural context (Izard, 2007; Mitchell, 2011). Garcia et al. (2014) defined psychological well-being as the ability to deal with environmental changes, and Sandage and Jankowski (2013) stated that personal spiritual well-being plays a positive role in intercultural competence. Therefore, intercultural communication competence emerges as a key predictor of well-being (Balakrishnan et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2011). Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H<sub>2</sub>: Intercultural competence exerts a positive effect on student well-being.

As a key educational indicator, intercultural competence has the aim of not only improving learners’ adaptation to certain behaviors and attitudes to facilitate effective communication but also laying the foundation for grasping the nuances of words and representations (Dervin & Hahl, 2015; Kramsch, 2011). Thus, reading literature in a foreign language can be a multifaceted approach to learning that helps students understand intercultural communication as a “complex, ever-changing and conflicting endeavor” (Kramsch, 2011).

Adler (2014) defined reading as a means of communication, explaining that it can assist in establishing a guiding dialog between the author and reader. Reading is typically a difficult and deliberate task that engages the reader’s sensory and cognitive faculties. Reading is thus a process where the reader overcomes new heights through their efforts (Adler, 2014).

Rodríguez and Puyal (2012) developed an intercultural competence framework that provided learners with guidance for acquiring the skills to explore cultural complexity, enhance their cultural understanding of literary texts, and develop critical reading skills, helping students understand different cultures and change their worldviews to include new cultural frames of reference. Hellerstein-Yehezkel (2017) noted that intercultural competence is acquired through intercultural reading and comprehension in a multicultural classroom. An intercultural approach can trigger openness, curiosity, and readiness to learn and embrace the implications of other cultures (UNESCO, 2006). Using intercultural reading approaches can assist students in understanding cultures from different countries and gaining intercultural concepts. Adam and Harper (2016) also revealed that students' reading skills are related to intercultural competence. In addition, intercultural competence can improve foreign language reading ability (Wang et al., 2021). Therefore, because students with intercultural competence may also enjoy reading, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H<sub>3</sub>: Intercultural competence exerts a positive effect on student reading attitudes.

Multiculturalism has been widely embraced in Thailand (Arphattananon, 2021), with most schools preferring to follow a liberal multicultural education (Arphattananon, 2018; Nawarat, 2018). Therefore, based on an analysis of data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 and the multidimensional model of intercultural competence, this study sought to investigate the effect of intercultural competence among junior high school students in Thailand on their resilience, well-being, and reading attitudes, the results of which can serve as a basis for subsequent research into intercultural competence among these students.

## Methodology

### Research Framework

Based on the multidimensional model of intercultural competence, this study investigated the influence of intercultural competence among Thai junior high school students on their resilience, well-being, and reading attitudes, as illustrated in the research model in Figure 1.

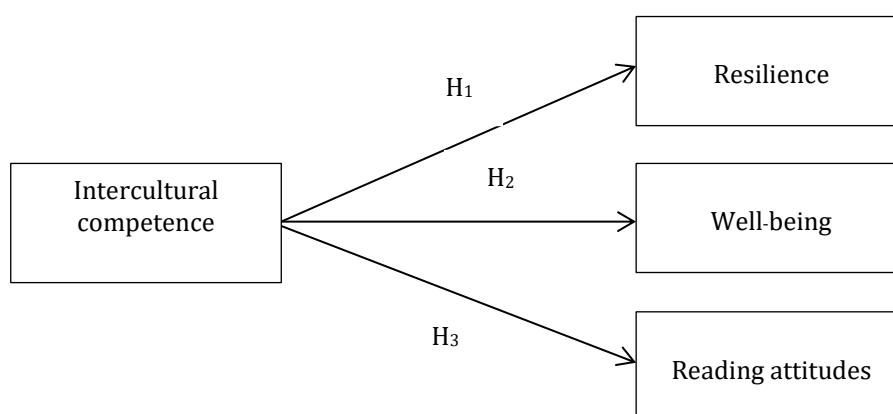


Figure 1. Research Structure

### Sample

A survey was administered to 8,633 students who participated in the 2018 Thailand PISA (OECD, 2019). After surveys with unanswered questions for focal variables were excluded, 7,411 students (3,337 boys and 4,074 girls) from 289 secondary schools in Thailand remained, and their data were analyzed.

### Research Instruments

The students' intercultural competence was measured using three indicators; "interest in learning about other cultures (ST214)," "takes the perspective of other people (ST215)," and "respect for people from other cultures (ST217)"; all items for which were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all like me) to 5 (Very much like me). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability values for the three indicators were .894, .883, and .948. This study adopted CFA to examine the degree of fit of the scale. The  $\chi^2$  coefficient for the scale was 1851.990, RMSEA= .057, which was less than the strict criterion of .08. GFI=.963, AGFI=.947, NFI=.977, CFI=.978, IFI=.978, all of which were higher than the criterion of .90. The construct reliability (CR) scores were .895, .885 and .948. The average variances extracted (AVE) were .681, .607 and .785 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This suggests that this scale had good fit.

The student resilience scale (ST188) was measured using a 4-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree*) containing five items. The scale was reliable; it had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .752. Pertaining to the CFA conducted, the  $\chi^2$  =545.525, RMSEA= .081, GFI=.972, AGFI=.916, NFI=.938, CFI=.938, IFI=.938, all of which were higher than the criterion of .90. The CR was .765. The average AVE was .400.

Student well-being was measured using two indicators, “a sense of meaning and purpose in life (ST185)” and “subjective well-being (ST186),” using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). The indicators were reliable; both had Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  values of .837 and .798, respectively. Pertaining to the CFA conducted, the  $\chi^2=332.374$ , RMSEA=.045, GFI=.989, AGFI=.979, NFI=.987, CFI=.988, IFI=.988. The CR were .863 and .838. The AVE were .561 and .634, fulfilling the standard of fit.

Student reading attitudes were measured using two indicators, “enjoyment of reading (ST160)” and “self-concept of reading (ST161),” using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The indicators were reliable; both had Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  values of .586 and .719, respectively. The reading attitudes scale was then examined using CFA. All indices satisfied the evaluation standard ( $\chi^2=285.215$ , RMSEA=.068, GFI=.987, AGFI=.967, NFI=.976, CFI=.976, IFI=.976), indicating that the indices fell within the acceptable range. The CR were .746 and .739. The AVE were .438 and .486.

#### Outlier Test

The most common test to determine if a variable is normally distributed is to standardize the data (i.e., Z-score). If the variable follows a normal distribution, the score will fall within 3 standard deviations of the mean. Outliers are defined as data points with Z-scores greater than 3 or less than -3 (Stevens, 1990). We standardized the screened sample data, and the Z-scores obtained were all between -3 and 3.

### Findings / Results

#### Relevant Analysis

Table 1 presents the mean scores for intercultural competence, resilience, well-being, and reading attitude, which were 3.711 (5-point scale), 3.037 (5-point scale), 2.976 (4-point scale), and 2.652 (4-point scale), respectively. The correlation coefficients of the variables were all significant ( $p < .01$ ) and between .151 and .366.

Table 1. The Correlation Coefficients

Variable	Intercultural competence	Resilience	Well-being	Reading attitudes
Intercultural competence	1			
Resilience	.365**	1		
Well-being	.151**	.361**	1	
Reading attitudes	.366**	.301**	.207**	1
Mean	3.711	3.037	2.976	2.652
Standard deviations	.666	.415	.391	.388

\*\* $p < .01$

#### Path Analysis of the Overall Model

Following the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999), this study used structural equation modeling to establish overall model fit. The model’s  $\chi^2$  value was 26,357.572, which indicates significance. However, the GFI was .826, with an AGFI of .806, NFI of .830, NNFI of .824, CFI of .835, IFI of .835, and RFI of .819, which were marginally smaller than their requisite minimum values (Byrne, 1994). Although the root mean square error of approximation of .065 and standardized root mean square residual of .077 also failed to reach the requisite minimum values, the model was considered to have reasonable fit because these values were between .05 and .08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; MacCallum et al., 1996).

Table 2 presents the structural coefficients for intercultural competence in relation to resilience, well-being, and reading attitudes, which were all statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), indicating a direct effect between intercultural competence and resilience, well-being, and reading attitudes. The respective standardized coefficients of .585, .532, and .645 indicated that intercultural competence among Thai junior high school students exerted a significant and positive effect on their resilience, well-being, and reading attitudes (Figure 2). Therefore, as students gained intercultural competence, their sense of resilience, feelings of well-being, and attitudes toward reading strengthened, validating H<sub>1</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>, and H<sub>3</sub>.

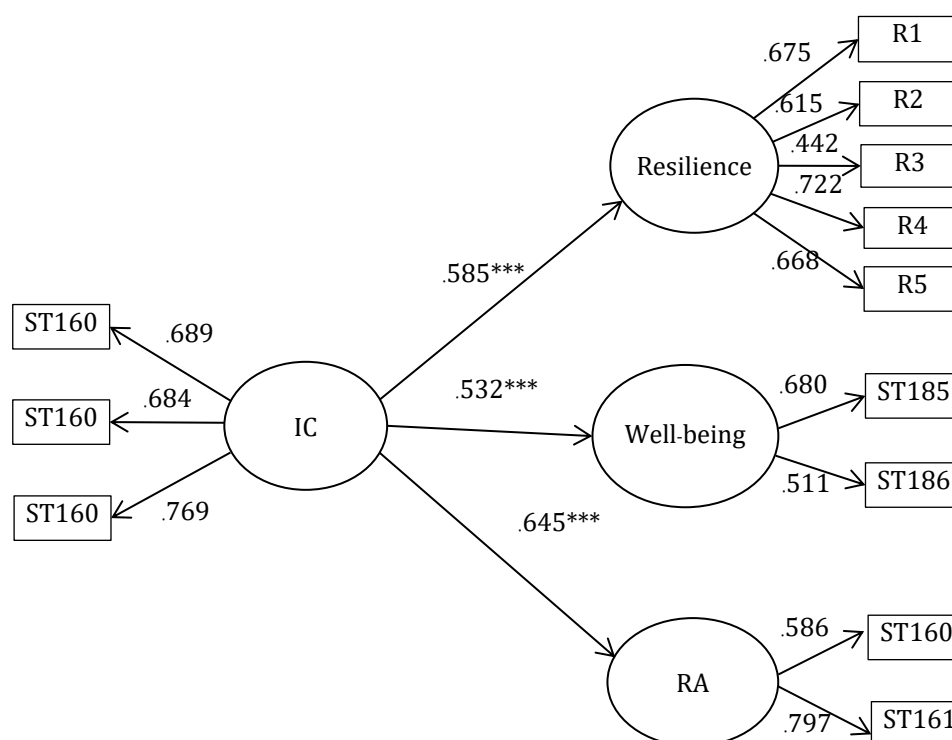


Figure 2 SEM Path Coefficient Diagram (\*\* $p < .001$ ; IC: Intercultural competence; RA: Reading attitudes)

Table 2. The Path SEM Analysis

Path	Estimate	t	p
Intercultural competence -> resilience	.585	31.396	< .001
Intercultural competence -> well-being	.532	18.413	< .001
Intercultural competence -> Reading attitudes	.645	23.016	< .001

## Discussion

Intercultural competence is a key aspect of education. Thailand is a multicultural country (Arphattananon, 2021); furthermore, tourism is one of Thailand's main industries (United Nations Thailand, 2020), meaning that people from many different cultures visit regularly. Therefore, this study explored the relationship between students' intercultural competence and resilience, well-being, and reading attitudes. The findings suggest that the intercultural competence of Thai junior high school students exerts significant and positive effects on their resilience (Fong, 2020; Genkova & Kruse, 2020), well-being (Balakrishnan et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2011), and attitudes toward reading (Adam & Harper, 2016; Wang et al., 2021). Indeed, students with better intercultural competence tend to be more flexible, welcoming of challenges, and patient (Fong, 2020; Ungar, 2008; Walsh, 2006).

Furthermore, a student with intercultural competence is also an empathetic one, and this empathy helps them better appreciate their life purpose, which improves their well-being (Sandage & Jankowski, 2013). Furthermore, an interest in different cultures could motivate the student to read more to learn about different cultures (Kramsch, 2011); because such learning is also done through books, the student improves their reading skills in the process.

Therefore, if students enjoy, accept, and respect different cultures, they can accumulate more experiences and gather more information related to cross-cultural interactions, which can lead to more effective self-regulation, more positive problem-solving, and better resilience in the face of daily challenges (Dresen et al., 2019; Wolff & Borzikowsky, 2018). The understanding of different cultures can also reduce students' anxiety when they are expected to interact with other cultures, generate pleasant and relaxed positive emotions, and increase their sense of well-being. Moreover, students will need to read more books and materials if they have a strong desire for learning more about different cultures, stories, and knowledge, leading to a stronger interest in reading. Therefore, in the multicultural environment of Thailand, middle schools should enhance students' intercultural competence by strengthening the multicultural curriculum in order to improve their resilience, well-being, and reading attitudes.

## Conclusion

With the advance of globalization, students' intercultural competence has become more essential. The purpose of this study was to explore whether the intercultural competence of Thai junior high school students could contribute to their

resilience, well-being, and reading attitudes. The present study revealed three main findings. First, the study showed that intercultural competency of Thai junior high school students can lead to better resilience, allowing students to adapt well to their environment and face challenges. Second, having good intercultural competence can help students feel relaxed and joyful when interacting with people from different cultures, which can create a sense of well-being. Third, the more intercultural competent students are, the more they will enjoy reading and learning about different cultures. Therefore, it is crucial for schools to focus on students' intercultural competence and promote it through culturally inclusive curricula (Sleeter, 2018) and a campus environment that supports multiculturalism (Othman & Ruslan, 2020).

### Recommendations

Intercultural competence is one of the abilities that modern students need to be equipped with. The results of this study show that Thai junior high school students' intercultural competence assists in improving their resilience, well-being and reading attitudes. Thus, researchers could include intercultural competence when carrying out future studies on the above-mentioned areas. Moreover, the participants of this research study were only Thai junior high school students. Further investigations could utilize the findings to explore whether intercultural competence could increase resilience, well-being and reading attitudes of students from various nations or educational levels.

There are numerous residents from different countries and with varied cultures in Thailand; therefore, intercultural competence is essential. Junior high school teachers should attach importance to, and advance their students' intercultural competence. They should encourage their students to understand and respect a variety of cultures, and take into consideration the perspective of others, which would assist in developing their reading attitudes, resilience of encountering challenges and adaptation to environments, in addition to their well-being.

Thai schools prefer freeform multicultural education wherein they can implement cooperative learning, role-playing, and collaborative problem solving as part of their teaching techniques (Arphattananon, 2021). Schools can also create a supportive campus environment through cross-cultural activities, diversity programs, and culturally inclusive programs that focus on developing students' cultural competency (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021).

### Limitations

This study used PISA 2018 data on Thai students. Although the sample size was 7,411, it might not be advisable to extrapolate the findings to students from other countries. In addition, the study population was junior high school students, so the findings are not applicable to students from different grades. The study only conducted statistical analysis of existing data without further research, such as interviews, so more in-depth answers could not be obtained. Therefore, future studies should include interviews or comparisons of students from different grades or different countries to promote a deeper understanding of research on students' intercultural competence.

### Authorship Contribution Statement

Chang: Concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript, statistical analysis, admin, final approval. Bangsri: Concept and design, data acquisition. Jabioon: Data acquisition. Pakdeewong: Data acquisition.

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