Unlocking pragmatic competence: The influence of intercultural communication on Thai learners during the study abroad program

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study examines how intercultural communication influences social interaction and pragmatic competence in Thai learners of English during a 12-week study abroad program. Sixteen individuals with varied educational backgrounds were given a questionnaire, an assessment tool measuring pragmatic competence and a semi-structured interview. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics whereas the qualitative data were transcribed and coded to identify patterns. The findings demonstrated a significant enhancement in social interaction and pragmatic competence due to intercultural communication. The average scores increased from 40.83% to 68.75%. The results uncovered a complex relationship between the ability to interact effectively across cultures, active participation in social activities, and the development of pragmatic competence. The qualitative data highlighted that engaging in meaningful conversations with native and non-native English speakers enhanced L2 learners' pragmatic competence. Additionally, the study found that intercultural communication, social contact, and pragmatic competence gradually improved throughout the study abroad period. This study showed that study abroad programs significantly improved learners' pragmatic competence through immersive intercultural communication and social interactions. The results indicate that study abroad programs promote linguistic and cultural growth providing learners with crucial communication abilities that allow them to thrive in an interconnected world.

Contribution/ Originality: This research contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the pivotal role of social interaction and intercultural communication in developing pragmatic competence among L2 learners. It also emphasizes that the quality and active engagement in language activities in diverse contexts promote intercultural communication and improve pragmatic competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study abroad (SA) program has gained significance in higher education because of the trend towards internationalization. Intercultural communication is essential to teaching a second or foreign language (L2) since globalization has made it easier for people to talk to people from other cultures. Several studies have tried to illuminate how people learn languages during study abroad. Longitudinal studies help look at ongoing qualitative or mixed-methods data (García-Amaya, 2017; Jackson, 2018; Taguchi, 2018). The SA setting is essential for finding a link between using L2 and language development which influences how to learn L2. Practitioners and teachers are concerned about the amount of time and quality of L2 interactions in SA settings, wondering if they are helpful

for significant language development (García-Amaya, 2017; Taguchi, 2018). However, limited research has examined learners' understanding of the frequency and depth of L2 practice in the SA program. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the impact of intercultural communication on acquiring L2 during the SA program.

The SA program provides learners with learning conditions that support naturalistic second language acquisition opportunities outside the classroom. Such opportunities are essential for learners to expose themselves to other language users and improve their language skills through actual practice (García-Amaya, 2017; Martinsen, Baker, Dewey, Bown, & Johnson, 2010). Moreover, the SA program enriches pragmatic development. Research has shown that the amount of time spent interacting with other speakers is positively associated with pragmatic competence (Bardovi–Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Matsumura, 2003; Taguchi, 2018). The quality of interactions is more critical for language development than the time spent in the SA program (Bardovi–Harlig & Bastos, 2011).

However, few studies have empirically investigated the relationship between intercultural competence and pragmatic competence despite extensive research on L2 pragmatics. Nevertheless, existing studies suggest that intercultural competence which involves effective and appropriate intercultural communication can enhance pragmatic competence through social contact (Taguchi, Xiao, & Li, 2016).

The current study investigates whether L2 learners' intercultural communication leads to increased social contact which in turn enhances their pragmatic competence. It tracks the incremental development of pragmatic competence during the SA experience and explores the intersection between intercultural competence, social contact and pragmatic competence. Specifically, this study employs quantitative and qualitative analyses of responses to an adapted Language Contact Profile (LCP) guided by the following research questions:

1. How does intercultural communication influence social contact and pragmatic competence among L2 learners during study abroad?
2. How does the interplay of intercultural communication, social contact, and pragmatic competence develop over time in L2 learners during study abroad?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Study Abroad (SA)

Study abroad (SA) is considered a prime opportunity for immersion in a target culture and language with SA programs typically lasting three to 12 months. Students often return with improved linguistic abilities, greater intercultural sensitivity and increased motivation for language learning. Theories of SLA have been developed within SA contexts. For example, Freed (1995) demonstrated that SA benefits differ from formal instruction with a focus on linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects. Jackson (2018) categorized key premises in language learning, including cognitive processes, sociolinguistic input and interaction, and sociocultural aspects. Other studies have also revealed that non-linguistic factors such as anxiety or willingness to communicate, influence SA-based L2 acquisition (Kinginger, 2008; Pérez–Vidal, 2014).

The structure of SA also known as "residence abroad" or "overseas language immersion," programs varies across foreign institutions and can include whole-programme mobility (entire academic cycle abroad) and within-programme mobility (studying for credits). Definitions of SA emphasize its educational context within university programs aimed at learning in a hybrid communicative learning environment (Jackson, 2018). SA contrasts with formal instruction (FI) in that SA offers extensive L2 input and interaction opportunities while FI is a conventional classroom setting with limited out-of-class interaction. Research shows that learners benefit from prior FI in SA contexts and that some do not fully engage with SA opportunities, often interacting only with native-speaking peers (Hirai, 2018). Additionally, SA frequently requires FI especially where instruction is in the target language.

2.2. Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence has become a crucial focus in our globalized society with over 30 models and 300 related constructs (Leung, Ang, & Tan, 2014). Definitions of intercultural competence span various fields, including international education, communication studies, psychology, international business, and global leadership highlighting its significance in SLA research.

Many definitions of intercultural competence overlap. For example, Byram (2012) describes it as the ability to mediate across linguistic and cultural boundaries using linguistic knowledge, cultural awareness, and negotiation skills. On the other hand, Taguchi (2018) defines intercultural competence as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with linguistically and culturally different people. Finally, Bardovi–Harlig and Bastos (2011) emphasize the knowledge, skills and personal attributes needed to work successfully with people from different cultural backgrounds. These definitions share a common theme i.e., intercultural competence involves specific personal qualities, attitudes, knowledge, and skills for effective interaction across cultural differences.

Communication skills are central to intercultural competence models. Byram (2012) states that successful intercultural communication requires both intercultural and communicative competence in mediating between different languages. However, current models often do not specify the linguistic skills necessary for successful intercultural interaction and measures of intercultural competence assess linguistic proficiency indirectly through self-reports. Few studies have directly examined the relationship between intercultural competence and linguistic competence or its impact on language development.

2.3. The Relationship between Study Abroad and Intercultural Communication

Research has shown that the study abroad (SA) program is essential for developing L2 proficiency since it enhances intercultural communication, interaction, and pragmatic competence. The SA program provides learning experiences that boost learner motivation and self-confidence in language acquisition, intercultural awareness, and linguistic skills (Kinginger, 2008; Taguchi et al., 2016; Xiao, Taguchi, & Li, 2019). Recent studies have also highlighted the significance of the SA program that intercultural communication, interaction, and pragmatic competence are essential components of mastering language proficiency (Taguchi, 2018).

Research indicates that language learning outcomes in SA contexts are affected by various factors, including language proficiency levels, gender, age, motivation, and duration of residence. Learners with lower proficiency are prone to exhibit greater development than their advanced peers, and shorter SA durations can lead to significant improvement (Hirai, 2018; Lara, Mora, & Pérez-Vidal, 2015). Enhancing language acquisition and intercultural communication requires substantial interactions and sociocultural integration (Kinginger, 2008; Xiao et al., 2019). Successful language acquisition and adaptation in SA contexts also require both intercultural communication and communicative competence (Taguchi, Li, & Xiao, 2013). Intercultural communication is believed to facilitate language acquisition and foster global readiness and individual growth (Jackson, 2018). The current research attempts to better understand intercultural communication on language acquisition and growth despite its prominence (Harsch & Poehner, 2016; Taguchi et al., 2016).

Pragmatic competence has evolved to emphasize interaction and social engagement. Recent studies have distinguished between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge underlining the importance of social interaction in authentic communication (Celce-Murcia, 2007; Taguchi, 2018). In SA contexts, social engagement has a positive influence on pragmatic competence. However, longitudinal studies are necessary to understand the long-term effect of social engagements on pragmatic skills (Matsumura, 2003; Taguchi, 2008).

The existing literature indicates that there are mixed results regarding the influence of learner-related factors including individual differences and varying levels of language exposure on the development of pragmatic competence during the study abroad period (Kinginger & Farrell, 2004). The necessity for more focused research on

pragmatic acquisition and development particularly in culturally diverse contexts has been emphasized by recent investigations (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020; Taguchi, 2018).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. Participants and Setting

This mixed-methods study involved 16 Thai learners who voluntarily participated in a 12-week SA program in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. All names were altered to pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities. The participants were aged from 24 to 28 and came from a variety of educational backgrounds and language proficiency levels. The participants' academic disciplines included Accounting, Computer Business, Chinese, English and Mathematics, Tourism and Business Administration, Humanities, Traditional Medicine, Business English, Business Information, Multimedia Art, Law, Education, Information and Communication Technology and Marketing. All participants enrolled in a language course at a language school in Sydney.

Thirteen participants' English proficiency was pre-intermediate and three of them possessed an elementary proficiency level. Some participants had already experienced traveling to foreign countries whereas others had never. During the SA program, the participants lived with international friends from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The participants studied four days a week and their classes were at three to five hours a day. These language classes were instructed by native English speakers with certified qualifications.

3.2. Research Instruments

3.2.1. Language Contact Profile (LCP)

The study adopted the slightly modified Language Contact Profile (LCP) version initially developed by Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey (2004). The LCP was a self-administered questionnaire comprising demographic background information, social engagement and intercultural communication. The participants were required to complete the questionnaire about the frequency of language practice and social engagement during the SA program. Participants were to estimate the time they spent engaging with others and engaging in weekly social activities.

3.2.2. Measuring Pragmatic Competence

The pragmatic competence measure developed by Taguchi, Xiao, and Li was slightly modified to capture the participants' pragmatic competence. This practical measure was used to collect the data in this study because it had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .89 indicating a high level of internal consistency (Taguchi et al., 2016; Williams, 2005). The pragmatic competence measures comprised 20 items assessing different pragmatic competence and intercultural communication in distinctive scenarios during the SA program.

3.2.3. Semi-Structured Interview

The semi-structured interview was administered to explore the participants' experiences during the SA program. It was carried out twice, one at the onset of the semester and the other at the end of the SA program. The interview was conducted in the participant's native language, Thai and each interview took about 1-30 minutes. The interview focused on the sociocultural adjustment of the participants, the types of social engagements they had, and their awareness of pragmatic practices. This semi-structured interview was used since it allowed for flexibility in the conversation of the pre-determined topics.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The LCP questionnaire was administered to all participants at the onset of the SA program to gather their experiences in language practice and social engagement using English. The questionnaire was also administered at the end of the program to examine whether there was any change in language practice during the SA journey. The

SA program participants were asked to record the amount of time spent on language activities, social engagement, and sociocultural practices. The semi-structured interview was also carried out at the start of the SA program and again at the end of the journey. Video recordings were conducted during the semi-structured interview to capture the participants' verbal and non-verbal language. Additionally, according to individual participants' availability and comfort, the semi-structured interview was flexibly scheduled.

3.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics, including means, percentages, standard deviation, and *t*-tests were performed to determine any change in intercultural communicative competence during the SA program. The adapted version of Taguchi et al.'s (2016) rubric scoring scales assessed participants' pragmatic competence in different situational contexts. This scale mainly ranges in terms of pragmatic competence across different communicative contexts. The scale, ranging from 1 to 6 categorized performance levels from excellent to cannot evaluate and thus provided a structured means to assess linguistic proficiency and situational appropriateness in speech.

Qualitatively, the study explored the intricacies of participants' language use and intercultural interactions through manual recursive analysis using sociocultural theory to identify themes and patterns to better understand their experiences. The qualitative data were transcribed and carefully coded into patterns and themes. These transcribed data were recorded by a trained and experienced university English language lecturer. The interview participants cross-checked the identified patterns and an inter-coding process were conducted to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative findings.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Self-Reported Findings on English Language Communication Skills

This study examined English language communication skills among Thai learners of English during the SA program. Table 1 presents the time spent on speaking English outside class by the SA program participants. The results demonstrated that the participants obtained a mean of 13.06 hours with a standard deviation of 8.25 speaking English outside of the classroom. The amount of time spent on oral conversations varied from 2 to 28 hours. Moreover, the findings uncovered a mean of 40.38 hours conversing with other interlocutors with a standard deviation of 21.36. The duration of speaking ranged from 8 to 75 hours indicating the individual differences and willingness to communicate and engage with others during the SA experience. The analysis of the findings also revealed that the SA program participants expended a mean of 23.94 hours on task-based engagements with a standard deviation of 17.83. In addition, their time spent on such task activities also varied from 2 to 60 hours. The current findings highlight the diverse experiences of English practices during the SA journey indicating the learner differences and styles.

Table 1. Time spent speaking English outside class while studying abroad (n=16).

Time spent	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
Overall	13.06	8.25	2.00	28.00
By interlocutors	40.38	21.36	8.00	75.00
By tasks	23.94	17.83	2.00	60.00

Table 2 depicts the participants' engagement with English language activities including writing, reading and listening during the SA journey. The results indicated that participants devoted a mean of 5.5 hours to reading with a standard deviation of 5.5 and the time spent on reading ranged from 0 to 29 hours weekly. Furthermore, the participants dedicated a mean of 21.94 hours to reading task-related engagement, widely ranging from 2 to 66 hours, with a standard deviation of 18.53.

Regarding listening engagement, the participants committed an average of 12.63 hours with a standard deviation of 7.30 ranging from 3 to 30 hours. It was noticeable that the time dedicated to listening-related activities was far higher with a mean of 32.75 indicating a broad range of 24.68 to 82 hours. A similar trend was also observed in writing engagement. The participants dedicated an average of 4.75 hours weekly with a standard deviation of 6.53 on writing suggesting a broad range of 0 to 25 hours. A greater engagement with focused tasks increased to 8.73 hours weekly on task-related activities with a standard deviation of 7.31. They spanned the time spent on such writing engagement from 2 to 34 hours. Other related results are depicted in Table 2.

Overall, the results showed that Thai participants devoted most of their time to listening followed by reading and writing with wide variability observed across all activities. These findings indicate that individual schedules, learning preferences, and resource availability can influence social interactions which in turn promote greater language use.

Table 2. Time spent on English language activities outside class during the SA program (n=16).

Time spent	Overall				By tasks			
	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
Reading	5.50	5.50	0.00	20.00	21.94	18.53	2.00	66.00
Listening	12.63	7.30	3.00	30.00	32.75	24.68	5.00	82.00
Writing	4.75	6.53	0.00	25.00	8.73	7.31	2.00	34.00

4.2. Changes in Intercultural Communicative Competence

Table 3 demonstrates a developmental pattern of language use during the SA program among Thai learners of English. The results showed that all participants had limited English use across all the language skills in their daily lives (M = 0, S.D. = 0) before the SA program. These findings indicate that everyday English communication was not a routine practice for these Thai learners of English. However, once the participants embarked on their SA journey, there was a notable increase in the use of English across all the language skills. Specifically, the time spent speaking increased to 13.06 hours at T2 (S.D. = 8.25) and continued to rise to 13.63 hours at T3 (S.D. = 6.17) although at a more gradual pace.

Similarly, Thai participants devoted more time to reading with an average of 5.50 (S.D. = 5.50) at T2 and progressing to 5.57 hours (S.D. = 4.23). The results showed that the time spent on listening sharply rises to 12.63 hours (S.D. = 18.53) at T2 and slowly increases to 14.56 hours (S.D. = 7.03) at T3. This developmental pattern was also observed in writing skills as the participants' SA experience progressed. The participants devoted an average of 4.75 hours (S.D. = 6.53) at T2. However, the time spent on writing at T3 slightly dropped to an average of 4.69 hours (S.D. = 4.65).

This pattern shows that being immersed in an English-speaking context encourages learners to engage more deeply with the language, driven by the necessity to communicate in various situations from social settings to academic demands. This consistent and expanding use of English likely contributed to improved fluency and a better understanding of the language and intercultural nuances. It underscores the significant role of immersion and continuous practice in language acquisition.

Table 3. Developmental patterns of L2 use during the SA experience of Thai learners of English.

Names	Speaking			Reading			Listening			Writing		
	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3
Jenny	0.00	5.00	7.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	7.00	6.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Phil	0.00	7.00	9.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	7.00	9.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
John	0.00	2.00	5.00	0.00	1.00	1.00	0.00	3.00	5.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Mod	0.00	2.00	7.00	0.00	1.00	3.00	0.00	3.00	5.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Nutty	0.00	15.00	12.00	0.00	1.00	2.00	0.00	18.00	16.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Irene	0.00	10.00	13.00	0.00	2.00	5.00	0.00	24.00	30.00	0.00	6.00	4.00

Names	Speaking			Reading			Listening			Writing		
	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3
Fai	0.00	12.00	12.00	0.00	4.00	4.00	0.00	14.00	15.00	0.00	2.00	2.00
Paul	0.00	7.00	8.00	0.00	4.00	3.00	0.00	14.00	13.00	0.00	2.00	3.00
Molly	0.00	14.00	14.00	0.00	4.00	4.00	0.00	14.00	15.00	0.00	5.00	5.00
Chris	0.00	18.00	17.00	0.00	5.00	7.00	0.00	7.00	9.00	0.00	8.00	8.00
Manow	0.00	28.00	23.00	0.00	7.00	9.00	0.00	7.00	13.00	0.00	12.00	10.00
Ann	0.00	20.00	18.00	0.00	7.00	7.00	0.00	30.00	24.00	0.00	25.00	18.00
Jane	0.00	28.00	23.00	0.00	8.00	7.00	0.00	14.00	16.00	0.00	2.00	2.00
George	0.00	14.00	21.00	0.00	10.00	12.00	0.00	10.00	21.00	0.00	2.00	3.00
Pete	0.00	4.00	8.00	0.00	14.00	12.00	0.00	14.00	17.00	0.00	3.00	5.00
Mona	0.00	20.00	21.00	0.00	20.00	14.00	0.00	16.00	19.00	0.00	9.00	10.00
Average	0.00	13.06	13.63	0.00	5.50	5.57	0.00	12.63	14.56	0.00	4.75	4.69
S.D.	0.00	8.25	6.17	0.00	5.50	4.23	0.00	18.53	7.03	0.00	6.53	4.65

Note: T1=Time1 or before SA, T2=Time2 or during SA, T3=Time3 or at the end of SA.

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for pragmatic competence measured by the speaking scenario test, at the beginning and end of the SA period. Pretest scores indicated a mean of 50.19 (40.83%) with a standard deviation of 13.41 and scores ranging from 25 to 68 points. In contrast, post-test scores showed significant improvement with a mean of 82.50 (68.75%) and a lower standard deviation of 10.27. This notable increase in scores highlights the overall progress made by participants.

Table 4. Pragmatic knowledge test scores as measured by speaking scenario test.

Test scores	Speaking scenario test (120)				
	120	%	Std. deviation	Min.	Max.
Pre-test scores	50.19	40.83	13.41	25	68
Post-test scores	82.50	68.75	10.27	67	102

Table 5 presents the paired t-test analysis of pragmatic competence among Thai participants studying abroad. The analysis of the quantitative data revealed statistical improvement. The mean increase in test scores from pre-test to post-test was 32.31 with a standard deviation of 7.80 (t=16.563, p=.000). These results indicate a significant enhancement in participants' pragmatic competence underscoring the effectiveness of the SA program.

Table 5. Analysis of paired t-test of speaking scenario test scores at the beginning and end of the SA period.

Paired-t-test	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Post- -pre-test	32.31	7.80	1.950	16.563	0.000

The study demonstrates that the SA period significantly improved participants' pragmatic competence in English. The significant improvement in speaking scenario test scores supported by the paired t-test results, underscores the effectiveness of immersive learning experiences in enhancing practical language skills. The data suggests that participants' ability to use English in real-world contexts was notably enhanced due to their experience studying abroad. Further analysis particularly of the speaking scenario test indicates significant strides in pragmatic knowledge, encompassing both functional language use and sociolinguistic awareness. These findings suggest that the SA experience improved basic language skills and enriched learners' understanding and application of English in socially and culturally appropriate ways.

Table 6 presents developmental changes among Thai learners of English during their study abroad period. The qualitative analysis highlights the value of understanding interactions to compare language development among participants. The experiences of Irene and Mona reflected the quality of their language use during the SA period.

Irene and Mona's interactions were markedly different regarding quality and length, although they engaged in English four days a week. Specifically, Mona stated that she had about a few hours of casual conversations with

friends and acquaintances during dinner or hangouts. However, Irene spent less time a day chatting with her friends. Once compared to Mona's experience, Irene's less time spent daily indicates the superficial language practices. In brief, the cases of Mona and Irene suggest that the duration and quality of interactions are vital in language proficiency. Furthermore, their similar amount of time and SA experiences can result in different learning opportunities and outcomes. The findings highlight the importance of considering qualitative aspects of language interactions for capturing language development.

Table 6. Superficial or brief exchanges (excerpt from LCP).

Participants	Activity		Days per week	Average hours per day	Any relevant comments about this activity
Mona	How often did you use English outside the classroom for each of the following purposes?	4c. For superficial or brief exchanges (e.g., greetings, "Please pass the salt," "I'm leaving," "ordering in a café or restaurant") with roommates or acquaintances in English.	4	2-3 (About two hours)	I talked to my friends and acquaintances during dinner or hangouts.
Irene			4	1-2 (Around one to two hours daily, depending on conversation partners).	With my friends before bed and during a meal or shopping.

The findings from Table 7 highlight patterns of extended English conversations outside the classroom for participants Paul and Pete focusing on their interactions with fluent English speakers, including friends and acquaintances. Both reported spending 0 to 1-hour daily conversing but their weekly interaction frequency differed.

Paul engaged in extended conversations in English two days a week primarily with his English-speaking roommates and friends in an English-speaking dormitory. These casual interactions often took place with friends in an apartment setting including native Thai speakers with whom he chose to speak English. In contrast, Pete conversed in English four days a week for an average of 0 to 1 hour daily. His interactions were with international friends and dormitory acquaintances, typically lasting around half an hour daily. This comparison reveals nuanced differences in their use of English outside formal settings. Specifically, Paul's less frequent but meaningful conversations suggest a preference for deeper engagement a few times a week whereas Pete's more social interactions reflect his characteristics and learning styles. As such, the present results indicate that learner factors, such as personality, intelligence and intrinsic motivation have influenced language acquisition and development.

Table 7. Extended conversations in English outside the classroom (Excerpt from LCP).

Participants	Activity		Days per week	Average hours per day	Any relevant comments about this activity
Paul	How often did you use English outside the classroom for each of the following purposes?	4d. Extended conversations with my host family, English roommates, friends, or acquaintances in an English-speaking dormitory, native speakers of Thai with whom I speak English.	2	0-1	I just talked with my friends in an apartment.
Pete			4	0-1	Around half an hour a day with my international friends and acquaintances who live in the same dormitory building.

The analysis of the interviews with George and Man also revealed distinct differences in their English use outside their classroom contexts. Excerpt 1 demonstrates a face-to-face interview with George indicating the importance of social interactions in acquiring his English. He pointed out that everyday conversations with others

in different situations helped improve his English. George's interview information suggests that the SA program provides learners with more interactions that promote language acquisition and cultural understanding.

Excerpt 1: Face-to-face interview with George.

Interviewer: How would your time in Sydney help you improve your English?

George: Oh, it was eye-opening! I learnt it's not just about speaking English. It's how you speak English. You know? Being in Sydney and talking to all sorts of people showed me how to fit in better with their ways of talking and doing things.

Interviewer: Good, good. So, hanging out with people in Sydney made a big difference for you?

George: Definitely. Every chat and every group work including ordering coffee taught me something new. It's like I got to see the real-life side of English, way beyond the classroom stuff.

Interviewer: Do you have any tips for other people wanting to improve their English and cultural knowledge?

George: Just dive in, sir. Talk with locals; join in on what's happening around you. And don't sweat the small mistakes. It's all part of the learning game.

The analysis of excerpt 2 also highlighted Mona's account of how her SA experience influenced her English language proficiency and cultural awareness. Mona further explained that being immersed in an English-speaking environment allowed her to use English in real-life contexts. However, she felt anxious about using English and adjusting to a new environment. In brief, Mona argued that SA experiences increased her English proficiency and expanded her understanding of different cultures, improving her ability to communicate across cultures.

Excerpt 2: Face-to-face interview with Mona and interviewer.

Interviewer: Can you share a bit about your study experience in Sydney? How did it go?

Mona: Oh, it was fantastic! At first, I was a bit nervous about fitting in and using English all the time. But honestly, living in Sydney changed everything. I got to practice English in real life not just in a classroom.

Interviewer: That sounds amazing! Did making friends and meeting people help with learning the language?

Mona: Definitely! I made friends from all over the world, and we'd chat about everything. It helped me get comfortable with everyday English, and I learnt about different cultures, too.

Interviewer: Like what cultures? Any example?

Mona: Something like how to say "Sawasdee" in English. Not just say, "hi' "hello" or good "morning" or "afternoon" to different sorts of people or situations. I'm even more confident to order food in a café or restaurant. I think I have more confidence to use my English.

Interviewer: Great! How do you think this experience has helped you understand and use English better?

Mona: It's like I've become more confident in speaking and understanding English. I can catch jokes and expressions more easily and even start conversations on my own now. Being immersed in the culture made a huge difference.

The excerpts from Mona and George suggest that social interactions are essential for language acquisition and cultural awareness. Indeed, the experiences of these participants demonstrate the significant influence of the SA program on the development of practical language skills and intercultural communication abilities.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Influence of Intercultural Communication and Social Contact on Pragmatic Competence among English Learners during the SA Program

The study investigated the influence of intercultural communication and social contact on pragmatic competence among Thai learners of English during the SA experience in an English-speaking environment. The results demonstrated the relationship between intercultural communication, social engagement and pragmatic competence. The study's results support previous studies that intercultural communication and social engagement

enhance language proficiency and cultural understanding (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020; Jackson, 2018; Taguchi, 2018; Xiao et al., 2019).

Social engagement could explain the development of intercultural communication. Engagement with others during the SA journey gives learners more opportunities to use English in real-life contexts. This social engagement promotes language acquisition by exposing themselves to practical use in different communications and contexts. The present results indicate that interactions are essential elements for the acquisition of intercultural communication because such interactions facilitate learners engaging with language users with different proficiency levels in a variety of authentic contexts (Hirai, 2018; Lara et al., 2015; Matsumura, 2003).

Intercultural communication also promotes pragmatic competence among language learners during the SA experience. This progression could be accounted for by the increased hours of language exposure. Specifically, learners with more active engagements with different activities in real situations are prone to distinguish communication strategies including verbal and non-verbal language. These strategies and practices promote learner confidence and facilitate the development of intercultural communication. Moreover, the increased engagement allows learners to experience using English in different situations and various social roles. This engagement enables learners to apply their language proficiency practically and enriches them with a better understanding of multicultural aspects.

Additionally, real-life activities motivate learners to actively engage with the social community. Engagements with diverse tasks and activities also prepare learners to adjust their language to effectively use in different contexts. To illustrate, learners modify their linguistic complexity and formality levels, choosing appropriate topics of conversation and communication strategies that facilitate mutual understanding (Taguchi et al., 2016). The present findings emphasize the role of intercultural communication and social interaction in developing pragmatic competence.

The duration of the SA program may be another variable that improves pragmatic competence facilitating intercultural communication. Learners become more confident in participating in social gatherings and events as the SA experience progresses. Such active participations enable learners to practice the target language and observe and gradually recognize social and cultural diversities. This recognition empowers learners to experience a broader range of communicative contexts, learning to adjust their communicative strategies and pragmatic competence such as politeness and formality to appropriately use communicative contexts and cultural practices.

The present findings also highlighted the importance of the quality of interactions in intercultural communication and pragmatic competence. The evidence provided by Mona, Irene, Paul, and George in the present study can support the claims that are consistent with previous studies (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020; Byram, 2012; Dewey, Ring, Gardner, & Belnap, 2013; Harsch & Poehner, 2016; Hirai, 2018; Jackson, 2018; Lara et al., 2015). These findings explain that although learners advocated a similar amount of time for engaging with people and social activities, the quality, frequency and duration of their conversations also influence the development of pragmatic competence. These factors including length, frequency and quality, facilitate their understanding of different accents, formality, colloquial expressions, and cultural diversities which are essential components of pragmatic competence. Consequently, the greater the authenticity and diversity of language experience, the more these learners develop intercultural communication and cultural awareness. The present findings suggest that the frequency of language practice and length of engagement are critical for improving intercultural communication and pragmatic competence despite the 12-week SA program in this study.

A dramatic rise in hours from the beginning of the SA program to time 2 and gradually progressing to time 3 also emphasized the importance of engagements in promoting intercultural communication and pragmatic competence. The increase may be described by greater exposure to varied tasks and activities. This improvement can also be explained by greater engagement with people from multicultural backgrounds which enhance intercultural communication and assists them in gaining a more profound understanding of varied cultural

diversities. Hence, learners can adjust and modify their communication strategies and styles to appropriately apply to diverse communicative contexts. These practices result in improved overall communicative effectiveness. Therefore, intercultural communication fosters pragmatic competence by developing language repertoire and enhancing the ability to communicate confidently. Altogether, the present study provides evidence to support the influence of intercultural communication on social contact and pragmatic competence. The study also highlights the interplay between intercultural communication, social contact, and pragmatic competence.

5.2. Developmental Patterns in Intercultural Communication, Social Contact and Pragmatic Competence among Thai Learners of English during the SA Experience

The findings demonstrated a significant improvement in English language development and cultural awareness among learner participants. Notably, at the beginning (T1), learners had very little interaction with English in their everyday conversations in Thailand. This suggests that Thai learners of English have limited experience using English in real-life situations before embarking on the SA journey. However, as the SA experience progressed at T2 and T3, learners devoted more time to using all language skills, especially speaking and engaging with individuals and community activities such as casual conversations and local events. The findings also showed that learners improved their language skills to some extent and gained a better understanding of cultural differences. The study demonstrates the developmental pattern of their intercultural communication, social interactions, and pragmatic competence. The developmental shift in intercultural communication from T1 to T2 can be explained through increased interpersonal engagements and active participation in the community. Increased exposure to the English language and culture immerses learners in real-life communications in authentic contexts. This phenomenon enhances English language acquisition and cultural comprehension more efficiently than in formal and conventional classroom contexts. Engagement with native and non-native English speakers from different backgrounds offers opportunities or platforms for learners to apply their English knowledge in real-life situations, receive immediate feedback, and adjust their language strategies to understand the conversation. Such engagements facilitate learners not just developing their language proficiency but also encouraging their confidence in using English. Consequently, the present findings provide evidence to support the claim that the SA program fosters learners' intercultural communication and pragmatic competence which aligns with previous research (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020; Bardovi–Harlig & Bastos, 2011; García-Amaya, 2017; Jackson, 2018; Matsumura, 2003; Taguchi, 2018).

The current findings also highlight the significance of steady language practice and engagement in language activities. This continued practice and engagement in language use enhances the development of language fluency as learners become more confident and comfortable in active participation, improving their language proficiency and cultural awareness. These findings align with other studies that state that more frequent language engagement and practice affect the development of learners' intercultural communication and pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020; Duff, 2019). The relationship between intercultural communication and social engagement can influence the gradual development of pragmatic competence as evidenced by the current findings. The interview findings can explain this development. Learners' proactive engagement in diverse contexts has proven to improve intercultural communication influencing pragmatic competence (Dewey et al., 2013; Jackson, 2018; Matsumura, 2003; Xiao et al., 2019). The cases of George and Mona can support this explanation in the present study. The developmental pattern of pragmatic competence in this study supports the previous claim that pragmatic competence can be improved through active engagement and communication across different cultural contexts during the SA experience (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020; Hirai, 2018; Lara et al., 2015; Taguchi, 2008).

6. CONCLUSION

The study's findings emphasize the importance of active engagement and intercultural communication in pragmatic competence during the SA experience. The study's quantitative data revealed the significant effect of

intercultural communication and social engagement on learners' pragmatic competence. The quantitative findings also discovered the developmental change in social engagement, intercultural communication and pragmatic competence indicating the rapid growth from T1 to T2 and the gradual progression from T2 to T3. The qualitative findings provided supplementary evidence to support the quantitative results that the quality and active engagement in both conversations and language activities in diverse communicative contexts encourage learner confidence and comfort in language practices. The qualitative findings also support the claim that social engagement and intercultural communication promote learners' cultural awareness and practices, improving pragmatic competence. In short, the study highlighted the role of interaction and intercultural communication during the SA program in developing pragmatic competence.

7. IMPLICATIONS

The present study showed that Thai learners of English developed their pragmatic competence through social interaction and intercultural communication during the SA experience. Social engagement and intercultural communication during the SA experience influenced learners' pragmatic competence. These findings demonstrate the significance of developing SA program that prioritizes cultural immersion and offers language learners opportunities to engage with native and non-native English speakers in authentic and diverse contexts. Continuous and sustained engagement in an English-speaking environment is essential as evidenced by the developmental pattern observed in intercultural communication, social interactions and pragmatic competence. Teachers and program designers should contemplate integrating structured and informal interaction opportunities into SA curricula to optimize the linguistic and cultural knowledge of learners.

8. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

This study has certain limitations while the SA program is essential for developing intercultural communication and pragmatic competence. The limited sample size of 16 Thai learners of English may restrict the extent to which these findings can be applied to a larger population. Future research should include a larger, more diverse sample to enhance representativeness. Furthermore, using self-reported data to assess language engagement and social interactions may introduce inherent biases. Future studies should use objective and standardized to validate the findings. Finally, the 12-week program may not capture the long-term effects of intercultural communication on pragmatic competence and longer-term studies are suggested. Indeed, longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effect of SA experiences on intercultural communication and pragmatic competence are essential. These studies should also include participants from diverse demographic backgrounds and should combine quantitative and qualitative methods to provide richer insights into the relationship between intercultural communication and language development.

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