

Perceptions of Internationalization and Intercultural Sensitivity among English as a Foreign Language Students at a Thai University: A Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Study

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ABSTRACT

Internationalization has become a strategic priority in higher education, yet its relationship with students' intercultural sensitivity remains insufficiently understood, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. This study examined the relationship between perceptions of internationalization and self-reported intercultural sensitivity among 123 second-year EFL students at a Thai university. Employing a convergent parallel mixed methods design, quantitative data were collected using the Students' Perception on Internationalization Instrument (SPII) and the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), while qualitative data were obtained through written open-ended responses and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Both strands were analyzed independently and subsequently integrated to develop a comprehensive

interpretation of the findings. Results revealed very high perceptions of internationalization ($M = 4.389$, $SD = 0.671$) and high self-reported intercultural sensitivity ($M = 3.627$, $SD = 0.431$), with a statistically significant positive relationship between the two constructs, $r(121) = .372$, $p < .001$. Despite these favorable assessments, interaction confidence and enjoyment emerged as comparatively weaker dimensions of intercultural sensitivity. Qualitative findings indicated that meaningful intercultural engagement was facilitated by direct interaction, English-mediated communication, perspective-taking, collaboration, and relationship-building, while limited participation opportunities, language difficulties, and communication anxiety constrained students' experiences. Integration of the findings revealed that favorable perceptions of internationalization did not necessarily translate into sustained intercultural participation. These findings informed the development of the proposed Walailak Intercultural Sensitivity Program (WISE), which emphasizes accessible, structured, and sustained intercultural learning opportunities. The study suggests that the educational value of internationalization depends not merely on institutional initiatives but on students' opportunities to engage meaningfully across cultural differences.

Keywords: *EFL students; higher education internationalization; intercultural sensitivity; Internationalization at Home; mixed methods; Thailand*

INTRODUCTION

Internationalization has become a strategic priority for universities seeking to prepare graduates for increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse societies (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Knight, 2004, 2021). Beyond expanding international partnerships and academic mobility, universities are expected to integrate international and intercultural dimensions into teaching and learning, making intercultural development an important educational goal (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Leask, 2015). Central to this goal is intercultural sensitivity, which refers to the affective capacity to recognize, appreciate, and respond positively to cultural differences.

Chen and Starosta (2000) conceptualized intercultural sensitivity through five dimensions: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Developing such capacity is important because effective engagement across cultures requires more than linguistic knowledge; it also involves openness, respect, and the willingness to engage with unfamiliar perspectives (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). However, the presence of international programs and culturally diverse environments does not guarantee intercultural development because exposure alone may not foster meaningful interaction, critical reflection, or changes in attitudes toward cultural differences. Intercultural learning requires intentional educational support, including guided reflection and sustained engagement, rather than passive exposure to diversity (Deardorff, 2006; Vande Berg et al., 2012). Thus, the educational significance of internationalization lies not only in expanding international opportunities but also in creating conditions that may strengthen students' intercultural sensitivity.

Across Southeast Asia, internationalization has accelerated through regional academic cooperation, international programs, and English-mediated education (Sisavath et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2023). However, this expansion has occurred amid differences in institutional resources, linguistic environments, and access to international opportunities. For many domestic students, intercultural learning depends on experiences available within their universities rather than overseas mobility. Even when international activities are offered, limited participation and occasional contact may restrict opportunities to develop intercultural sensitivity (Pastena, 2025; Vu, 2022). Consequently, the growing international presence of universities does not necessarily reflect the depth or inclusiveness of students' intercultural experiences.

In Thailand, international partnerships, English-medium programs, and increasingly diverse university communities have created opportunities for intercultural engagement (Hines & Dockkiao, 2021; Ulla et al., 2022). However, these opportunities may remain difficult to access for students with limited English proficiency or communicative confidence. For Thai students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), English serves both as a means of intercultural communication and a potential barrier to participation, particularly when limited proficiency and communicative confidence constrain meaningful interaction (Hines & Dockkiao, 2021; Ulla et al., 2022). Although international exchanges and collaborative activities provide opportunities for cultural learning (Chuangchid & Siriwato, 2023; Deacon et al., 2025), not all students experience internationalization through sustained interpersonal interaction. This raises concerns about whether students' favorable perceptions of university internationalization are accompanied by greater intercultural sensitivity or remain largely disconnected from their actual experiences.

The central problem is the limited understanding of how domestic Thai EFL students' perceptions of internationalization relate to their self-reported intercultural sensitivity. While internationalization is increasingly embedded in university policies and activities, its educational significance cannot be inferred from institutional initiatives or student attitudes alone (Brito et al., 2025; Lv et al., 2024). Students may perceive internationalization positively yet have few opportunities to interact across cultures, while those who value cultural diversity may still experience communication anxiety and low confidence. Such a concern is particularly urgent in light of Sustainable Development Goal 4.7, which calls for education that promotes global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity (United Nations, 2015). Understanding both students' perceptions and their intercultural experiences is therefore necessary to identify the conditions that support meaningful, inclusive, and sustained intercultural learning.

This study examined perceptions of internationalization and self-reported intercultural sensitivity among 123 second-year EFL students at a higher education institution in Thailand. Using a convergent parallel mixed methods design, it assessed both constructs, investigated their relationship, and explored students' experiences of intercultural engagement. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings informed the proposed Walailak Intercultural Sensitivity Program (WISE), intended to strengthen accessible, structured, and sustained intercultural learning opportunities. The study hopes to contribute student-centered evidence to discussions of Internationalization at Home and provide practical directions for improving intercultural learning in Thai higher education.

Literature Review

Internationalization in Higher Education: From Institutional Initiatives to Student Experiences

The meaning of higher education internationalization has widened from international mobility and cross-border cooperation to the educational experiences available to students. Knight (2021) treats international, intercultural, and global dimensions as integral to the purposes and functions of higher education, whereas de Wit and Altbach (2021) caution that competition for reputation, revenue, and mobility can displace educational and social objectives. This tension matters because institutional internationalization and student learning are not equivalent outcomes. An institution may report numerous partnerships and international programs without demonstrating who participates, what those students experience, or whether their engagement is educationally consequential. A student-centered approach consequently asks how internationalization is perceived, accessed, and enacted within everyday university life.

Internationalization at Home (IaH) seeks to address inequalities associated with mobility-centered internationalization by integrating international and intercultural dimensions into domestic learning experiences (Beelen & Jones, 2015). However, the presence of international faculty or students does not necessarily ensure meaningful intercultural learning. Soulé et al. (2025), in their systematic review of 58 studies, identified various IaH practices alongside linguistic, pedagogical, and institutional barriers. In Thailand, Lemana et al. (2024b) examined international faculty participation in curriculum internationalization, while Lemana (2026) explored how internationalization is experienced through teaching, academic collaboration, and intercultural relationships. These studies illustrate how internationalization extends beyond institutional policies and mobility programs to everyday academic practices.

Students' perceptions offer another perspective on these experiences. Drawing on the Students' Perception on Internationalization Instrument (Iuspa, 2013), the present study considers students' attitudes, intercultural orientation, perceived institutional support, and perceived benefits. Alcoba and La-Ongsri (2024) investigated perceived internationalization and student outcomes, while Alcoba et al. (2024) compared domestic and international students' experiences and satisfaction. Similarly, Lemana et al. (2024a) examined foreign faculty perspectives, identifying contributions to academic collaboration and cultural exchange alongside linguistic and institutional challenges. Although these studies provide insights into internationalization in Thai higher education, the relationship between students' perceptions of internationalization and their intercultural sensitivity remains insufficiently explored. Favorable perceptions do not necessarily indicate meaningful intercultural engagement or greater sensitivity.

Intercultural Sensitivity among EFL University Students

Intercultural sensitivity concerns the affective orientation that supports engagement with culturally different individuals. Chen and Starosta (2000) developed the 24-item Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) around five dimensions: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. The framework recognizes that respect and willingness to interact are not the same as feeling comfortable or attentive during interaction. This differentiation is especially pertinent to EFL settings. A student may endorse intercultural openness yet avoid speaking with an international peer because

of uncertainty about language, cultural expectations, or possible misunderstanding. Treating sensitivity as multidimensional therefore provides a more informative account than relying solely on a total score.

Evidence from culturally diverse university settings supports examining both overall sensitivity and its dimensions. Chen and Hu (2023), studying 375 students in Macao, reported generally high intercultural sensitivity but also group differences associated with characteristics including intercultural coursework and foreign-language proficiency. Their findings suggest that sensitivity varies across educational and linguistic circumstances rather than being guaranteed by a multicultural environment. The contextual relevance to Thai EFL students is clear, but differences in educational setting and participant composition limit direct generalization. The study also reinforces the need to distinguish students' self-reported orientations from demonstrated interactional ability.

Measurement itself requires critical attention. The original ISS provides a widely used framework, yet its dimensional structure may not transfer unchanged across cultural contexts. Gómez Yepes et al. (2023) reviewed evidence from different adaptations while validating the scale in Spain, noting that some studies recovered fewer than the original five factors. Dong et al. (2024) also reported appreciably weaker internal consistency for some ISS subscales than for the overall scale in their university sample. These findings caution against treating every subscale as equally precise or interpreting small dimensional differences without considering reliability. For the present study, the ISS is most defensible as a measure of reported intercultural dispositions, with subscale patterns interpreted in light of their psychometric performance rather than as objective evidence of communicative competence.

Internationalization and Intercultural Sensitivity: Empirical Relationships

The proposed connection between internationalization and intercultural sensitivity rests on the opportunities internationalized environments can create for contact, dialogue, perspective-taking, and reflection. Yet the evidence is more conditional than a simple exposure-benefit assumption suggests. A systematic review of IaH teaching and learning practices found reported benefits for intercultural sensitivity and collaboration but also persistent barriers in language, technology, pedagogy, and organization (Soulé et al., 2025). The synthesis points to a central mechanism: educational value depends on how experiences are designed and supported, not merely on whether international elements are present. This is particularly important when universities equate opportunities offered with opportunities experienced.

Research using more demanding designs also complicates optimistic claims. Dong et al. (2024) evaluated a semester-long cultural partner program for domestic graduate students in the United States. Although the study identified some encouraging patterns in perceived support and interaction attentiveness, adjusted analyses did not demonstrate significant intervention-related differences across most measured outcomes, including overall intercultural sensitivity. The authors noted challenges involving time, participation, and statistical precision. These results do not imply that intercultural pairing is ineffective; rather, they show why contact cannot be assumed to produce uniform gains and why claims about educational impact should be proportionate to the design and evidence.

Related research often measures constructs that overlap with, but are not identical to, sensitivity. Teng and Cosier (2024) synthesized links among cultural capital, internationalization, and global competence, while Goldstein (2022) reviewed intercultural competence outcomes of short-term study abroad and found that the evidence did not yield a simple conclusion about effectiveness. Global competence and intercultural competence include capacities beyond the affective dispositions measured by the ISS. Likewise, Lv et al. (2024) examined students' willingness to continue participating in IaH learning, an outcome related to engagement but not equivalent to intercultural sensitivity. Treating these outcomes as interchangeable can obscure what an internationalized learning environment is actually associated with.

The distinction between opportunity, participation, perception, and outcome is therefore central. An EFL student may rate internationalization positively because the university appears globally connected, even without substantial personal contact. Another may participate frequently yet still experience discomfort or low confidence. Brito et al. (2025) foreground inclusion and student perceptions in internationalization, reinforcing the need to consider who benefits and under what conditions. The most defensible expectation is not that perceptions

necessarily cause sensitivity, but that the two may be positively associated while remaining shaped by different experiences. A correlational study can test the direction and magnitude of this association; it cannot demonstrate that favorable perceptions or institutional initiatives produce intercultural sensitivity.

Quantitative associations alone are also limited in explanatory reach. Scores may identify students who simultaneously endorse internationalization and intercultural openness, but they do not show whether those students have formed intercultural relationships, overcome language-related hesitation, or participated repeatedly in meaningful activities. Integrating student accounts can reveal why reported openness coexists with infrequent interaction and can help interpret whether institutional opportunities are perceived as accessible. Such integration adds interpretive depth without treating qualitative testimony as proof of causality or conflating self-reported dispositions with observed behavior.

Barriers to Meaningful Intercultural Engagement in Thai EFL Higher Education

The Thai university setting brings these issues into sharper focus. International partnerships, English-medium programs, and international academic staffing can make internationalization visible, yet domestic students do not necessarily experience these developments in the same way. Hines and Dockkiao (2021) identify institutional issues affecting the future of internationalization in Thailand, while Ulla et al. (2022) examine language-related challenges in English-medium curriculum reform. For Thai EFL students, English serves a dual role: it creates access to intercultural exchange while potentially intensifying apprehension about speaking, misunderstanding, or losing face. Language-related difficulties may therefore shape participation even when students value the educational goals of internationalization.

Experiential opportunities also differ in intensity and continuity. Chuangchid and Siriawato (2023) consider cross-cultural competence in Thai inter-university activities, and Deacon et al. (2025) examine intercultural sensitivity in the context of Thai students acting as study-abroad program buddies. These settings illustrate the possibilities of purposeful intercultural contact, but they cannot establish that the broader domestic student population enjoys comparable access. Participation may depend on schedules, recruitment, prior confidence, or the visibility of activities. A program attended by a motivated minority may produce valuable experiences for its participants while leaving less confident students largely untouched.

More broadly, digitally mediated IaH activities can widen access, but they introduce additional design and participation demands (Soulé et al., 2025). These observations suggest that Thai EFL internationalization should be evaluated not only through the presence of international initiatives but also through the frequency, quality, and accessibility of student interaction. Attention to such conditions is necessary before translating favorable perceptions into claims of intercultural readiness.

Research Gap and Conceptual Direction

The literature recognizes internationalization as a potential context for intercultural learning but cautions against assuming that exposure automatically leads to development. Previous studies have examined Internationalization at Home (IaH) practices, mobility experiences, intercultural competence, and international student populations. However, limited research has explored the relationship between domestic Thai EFL students' perceptions of internationalization and their intercultural sensitivity, particularly in relation to participation and language-related challenges.

To address this gap, the present study employs a convergent parallel mixed methods design. The quantitative strand examines the relationship between perceptions of internationalization and self-reported intercultural sensitivity, while the qualitative strand explores students' intercultural experiences, opportunities, and barriers. Integrating both strands provides a basis for proposing the Walailak Intercultural Sensitivity Program (WISE), whose effectiveness remains to be evaluated.

Figure 1 presents the study's conceptual framework, informed by Knight's (2004) conceptualization of internationalization and Chen and Starosta's (2000) intercultural sensitivity framework. It illustrates the hypothesized relationship between the two constructs and incorporates qualitative accounts to contextualize the quantitative findings. Their integration informs the proposed WISE Program.

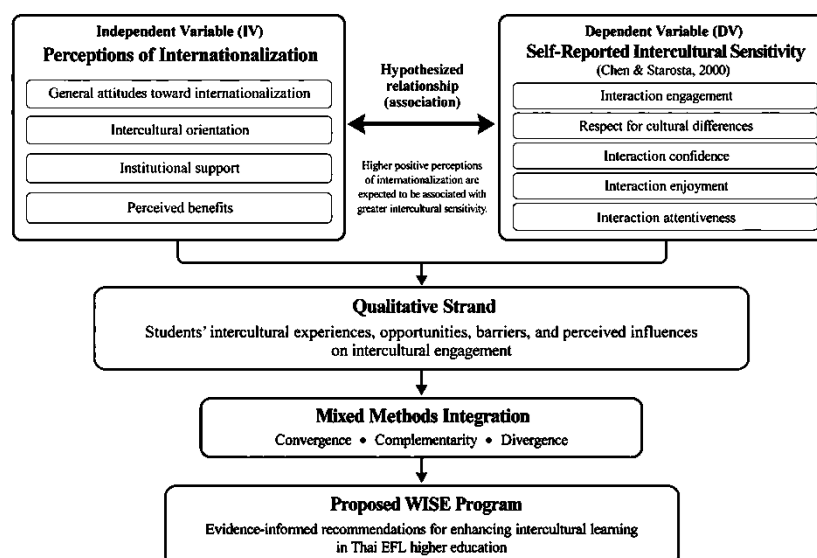


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework of the Study*

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed methods design to examine perceptions of internationalization and self-reported intercultural sensitivity among Thai university students. Quantitative and qualitative data were generated during the same general phase, analyzed independently, and merged during interpretation, consistent with Creswell and Plano Clark (2018). The quantitative component used a descriptive-correlational approach to characterize both constructs and test their association. The qualitative component used a qualitative descriptive orientation and written open-ended responses to explore how students experienced internationalization and intercultural interaction. Neither strand was treated as a follow-up to the other. Integration focused on convergence, complementarity, divergence, and expansion, with integrated interpretations informing a proposed intercultural learning program. As an observational, cross-sectional investigation, the study was not designed to establish causal effects.

Research Setting, Participants, and Sampling

The study was conducted at Walailak University, a public autonomous university in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, southern Thailand. Participants were second-year undergraduate students enrolled in General Education English courses offered by the School of Languages and General Education during the 2026–2027 academic year. Second-year students were selected because their prior exposure to the university environment provided opportunities to reflect on internationalization and intercultural experiences.

Official enrollment records identified 3,129 eligible students. Using Cochran's formula with finite-population correction, the target sample was 342, based on a 95% confidence level, 5% margin of error, and assumed population proportion of .50. However, only 123 students participated voluntarily. Recruitment was conducted through course instructors, who invited eligible students to complete an online questionnaire. Participation required informed consent, second-year enrollment, and sufficiently complete responses. All 123 respondents contributed quantitative data and written responses to five bilingual open-ended questions, although non-substantive qualitative responses were excluded from thematic development.

The achieved sample was smaller than the calculated target, and voluntary recruitment introduced potential self-selection bias, as students more interested in internationalization or intercultural experiences may have been more inclined to participate. Consequently, the sample cannot be considered statistically representative of the eligible population, and the findings should be interpreted within the study context rather than generalized to all second-year students at the university.

Research Instruments and Validation

The quantitative questionnaire comprised two 24-item, five-point Likert instruments. Perceptions of internationalization were measured using the Students' Perception on Internationalization Instrument (SPII), originating in Iuspa (2013) and subsequently revalidated by Adriano (2023). Its four dimensions were general attitudes toward internationalization, intercultural orientation, institutional support for internationalization, and perceived benefits of internationalization. Self-reported intercultural sensitivity was measured using Chen and Starosta's (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), covering interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Negatively worded ISS items were reverse-scored before composite scores were computed.

The instruments underwent minor contextual wording adaptations and were assessed by three academic experts for relevance, clarity, representativeness, contextual appropriateness, and linguistic suitability. The thesis reports an item-level content validity index of 1.00 for every item and an average scale-level content validity index of 1.00 for both measures. A preliminary pilot dataset comprised 11 records; one without consent was excluded, leaving 10 for reliability assessment. Pilot Cronbach's alpha was .974 for the SPII overall and .840 for the ISS overall after reverse-scoring. SPII dimension coefficients ranged from .904 to .962. Because this pilot was small, these estimates constitute preliminary rather than definitive reliability evidence. The main study also considered dimension-level reliability limitations, particularly for the ISS; interpretation of its subscale comparisons should therefore remain cautious.

Qualitative data were elicited through a researcher-developed, bilingual English–Thai open-ended questionnaire addressing students' understandings of internationalization, experiences with cultural difference, communication with international people, the enabling or limiting role of English, and suggestions for improving intercultural learning. Respondents could write in either language. Thai-language responses were translated into English for analysis and reporting, with attention to retaining participants' intended meanings. These were written responses, not recorded interviews.

Data Collection Procedures

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Perpetual Help DALTA, Philippines and permission was granted by the Dean of the School of Languages and General Education, Walailak University, Thailand. The data collection was done among eligible second year EFL students taking General Education English courses. The survey was handed out by the instructors during suitable class times so as not to interfere with regular instruction. The data obtained were both quantitative and qualitative through a single questionnaire of Google Forms. The first page was an information sheet, which gave participants details about the aims, methods, confidentiality and informed consent of the study. Participants filled out a questionnaire that contained questions on demographic and academic profile, the Students' Perception on Internationalization Instrument (SPII), the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) and five bilingual open-ended questions after providing electronic consent.

A total of 123 consenting students participated in both elements of the study. Each participant completed the questionnaire independently without interviewer probing or researcher-directed responses. Responses were exported from Google Forms after submission and reviewed for eligibility, completeness and consistency. Quantitative responses were coded and grouped for descriptive and inferential statistical analyzes, including reverse-coding of negatively worded ISS questions. The qualitative responses were collected and anonymized with participant identifiers (S1–S123) in an effort to keep the linkage between each student's quantitative and qualitative data and to protect personal identity. Qualitative interpretation of Thai-language responses was

conducted in the original language and translated to English as required for reporting. The two sorts of data were collected at the same time using the same questionnaire but were examined as two independent strands

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies and percentages summarized participants' profiles, while means and standard deviations determined the overall and dimension-level scores for perceptions of internationalization and intercultural sensitivity. Negatively worded ISS items were reverse-coded before scoring. Pearson's product-moment correlation was employed to examine the relationship between the two constructs, with consideration given to score distributions, linearity, and influential observations. Spearman's rank-order correlation served as a supplementary analysis. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$, and correlations were interpreted as associations rather than causal relationships.

Qualitative responses from all 123 participants were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021, 2023). The analysis involved repeated familiarization with responses to five bilingual open-ended questions, generation of initial semantic codes, identification of focused patterns, and iterative development and refinement of themes. Coding was primarily inductive, allowing patterns of meaning to emerge from students' accounts rather than imposing predetermined categories. Researcher reflexivity was incorporated through analytic notes documenting emerging interpretations, assumptions, coding decisions, and revisions to theme boundaries. Particular attention was given to how the researcher's familiarity with the university context and expectations about internationalization could influence the interpretation of participants' experiences. An audit trail linked anonymized responses (S1–S123) to initial codes, focused patterns, and final themes, while contrasting and less frequently expressed accounts were examined to challenge emerging interpretations. Thai-language responses were interpreted in their original language before translation for reporting.

Following independent analyses, the quantitative findings and qualitative themes were integrated through a joint display to examine how the two datasets informed one another. Integration involved identifying convergence, where findings supported similar interpretations; complementarity, where qualitative accounts provided contextual explanations for quantitative patterns; divergence, where findings revealed contrasting perspectives; and expansion, where one dataset contributed insights not captured by the other. Particular attention was given to understanding how students' favorable perceptions of internationalization related to their reported intercultural experiences, participation opportunities, and communication challenges. These integrated interpretations informed the development of the proposed Walailak Intercultural Sensitivity Program (WISE), an eight-week program with a four-week follow-up designed to promote sustained intercultural interaction, collaborative learning, English communication confidence, and critical reflection. WISE was developed as an evidence-informed educational recommendation and was not implemented or evaluated within the present study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Perpetual Help DALTA, Philippines, while permission to conduct the study was secured from the Dean of the School of Languages and General Education at Walailak University, Thailand. All participants provided informed consent after receiving information about the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights as research participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were assured that declining or withdrawing would not affect their grades, attendance, or academic standing. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning participant identification codes (S1–S123), removing personally identifying information from the analytical dataset, and anonymizing excerpts used in reporting. Electronic research records were stored in password-protected files accessible only to authorized researchers. The provision of English and Thai response options also supported equitable participation by allowing students to express their experiences in their preferred language. All collected information was used exclusively for research purposes, with participants' privacy, autonomy, and welfare protected throughout the study.

RESULTS

Participant Profile and Opportunities for Intercultural Contact

The study involved 123 second-year EFL students, most of whom were 19 years old (50.4%) and female (65.0%). Participants represented seven academic schools, with the largest proportions enrolled in Public Health (35.8%), Science (26.8%), and Medicine (16.3%). Self-rated proficiency was concentrated at elementary (59.3%) and beginner (28.5%) levels, indicating that the intercultural experiences examined here largely involved students who perceived their English resources as limited. These self-ratings should not be read as independently tested proficiency levels.

As Table 1 shows, participation indicators point to an important difference between the availability or perceived value of internationalization and students' actual contact with culturally diverse others. Nearly half (47.2%) reported no international or intercultural activity participation, while 54.4% indicated that they never or rarely interacted with international people. Only eight students (6.5%) reported three or more activities.

Table 1. *Participation in international or intercultural activities (N = 123)*

Category	n	%
Yes	65	52.8
No	58	47.2

Table 2. *Frequency of interaction with international people (N = 123)*

Category	n	%
Never	26	21.1
Rarely	41	33.3
Sometimes	34	27.6
Often	17	13.8
Very Often	5	4.1

Students' Perceptions of Internationalization

Perceptions of internationalization were very high overall ($M = 4.389$, $SD = 0.671$). Intercultural orientation received the highest rating ($M = 4.450$, $SD = 0.676$), followed by perceived benefits ($M = 4.404$, $SD = 0.770$), general attitudes ($M = 4.389$, $SD = 0.683$), and perceived institutional support ($M = 4.332$, $SD = 0.747$). Although all four dimensions fell within the same descriptive category, their ordering is informative. Students' openness to intercultural learning and expectations of benefit were somewhat more favorable than their assessments of institutional support.

Table 3. *Perceptions of internationalization by dimension (N = 123)*

Dimension	M	SD	Level
General Attitudes toward Internationalization	4.389	0.683	Very High
Intercultural Orientation	4.450	0.676	Very High
Institutional Support for Internationalization	4.332	0.747	Very High
Perceived Benefits of Internationalization	4.404	0.770	Very High
Overall Perceptions of Internationalization	4.389	0.671	Very High

Students' Intercultural Sensitivity

Overall intercultural sensitivity was high ($M = 3.627$, $SD = 0.431$). Interaction engagement ($M = 3.963$) and interaction attentiveness ($M = 3.946$) received the highest ratings, followed by respect for cultural differences ($M = 3.554$). By contrast, interaction confidence ($M = 3.327$) and enjoyment ($M = 3.168$) were classified as moderate. The uneven pattern is analytically important: students reported comparatively strong

willingness to attend to and engage with cultural difference, but less assurance and ease in actual intercultural exchanges.

Table 4. Intercultural sensitivity by dimension (N = 123)

Dimension	M	SD	Level
Interaction Engagement	3.963	0.607	High
Respect for Cultural Differences	3.554	0.979	High
Interaction Confidence	3.327	0.705	Moderate
Interaction Enjoyment	3.168	1.629	Moderate
Interaction Attentiveness	3.946	0.894	High
Overall Intercultural Sensitivity	3.627	0.431	High

Relationship Between Perceptions of Internationalization and Intercultural Sensitivity

Pearson's product-moment correlation indicated a statistically significant, moderate positive association between perceptions of internationalization and intercultural sensitivity, $r(121) = .372$, $p < .001$. The corresponding coefficient of determination ($r^2 = .139$) indicates approximately 13.9% shared variance between the composite scores. Spearman's rank-order coefficient was also positive ($\rho = .344$, $p < .001$), lending support to the direction of the relationship despite departures from normality reported in the assumption checks. These estimates are consistent with a meaningful but limited relationship, rather than a strong correspondence between the constructs.

Table 5. Correlation between perceptions of internationalization and intercultural sensitivity (N = 123)

Analysis	N	Coefficient	p
Pearson	123	$r = .372$	$< .001$
Spearman	123	$\rho = .344$	$< .001$

Qualitative Findings: Five Patterns of Student Experience

The qualitative component provided a more contextualized understanding of how Thai university students experienced internationalization and interpreted its contribution to their intercultural sensitivity. Written responses to five bilingual open-ended questions were collected from the same 123 participants who completed the quantitative instruments. Reflexive thematic analysis generated five interconnected themes: (1) internationalization through direct contact, (2) English as both a barrier and a resource for development, (3) perspective expansion through cultural encounters, (4) relational and collaborative intercultural learning, and (5) uneven participation and aspirations for greater involvement.

These themes represent recurring patterns of meaning rather than mutually exclusive participant categories or frequency-based rankings. Importantly, the analysis considered both positive experiences and accounts of limited participation, allowing the findings to capture the opportunities, tensions, and inequalities associated with internationalization. Participant excerpts are identified using anonymized codes (S1–S123).

Theme 1: Internationalization Became Meaningful Through Direct Intercultural Contact

Students tended to understand internationalization through encounters with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds rather than through institutional initiatives alone. Their accounts referred to interactions with international lecturers, foreign students, and individuals encountered during classroom activities or informal campus exchanges. These experiences made internationalization personally recognizable, particularly when students could connect them to their own language learning and intercultural development.

S6 described limited opportunities to interact with international individuals but identified classroom communication with foreign teachers as an experience that gradually increased comfort with English. Similarly, S67 associated internationalization with lectures and direct exchanges involving international faculty members.

These accounts suggest that students attached significance to encounters that allowed them to communicate and participate, not merely to the presence of international activities.

“Communication with foreign teachers in class was identified as a principal opportunity for becoming more comfortable using English.” (S6)

“Classroom lectures and direct interactions with international professors were described as meaningful experiences of internationalization.” (S67)

Although international faculty may contribute to a university’s international environment, students appeared to derive greater educational meaning when that presence translated into direct communication. Nevertheless, some experiences were occasional or confined to formal classroom settings. Direct contact thus emerged as an important way in which internationalization became meaningful, although its accessibility and continuity varied.

Theme 2: English Was Both a Communication Barrier and a Resource for Intercultural Development

English occupied a complex position in students’ accounts. It enabled communication across cultural backgrounds and provided opportunities to develop confidence, yet limited proficiency, unfamiliar accents, fear of grammatical errors, and uncertainty about appropriate responses also created anxiety and discouraged participation.

“Talking to a foreigner one-on-one, I get very nervous.” (S82)

S82’s account illustrates how intercultural encounters could be emotionally demanding even for students who recognized their educational value. Anxiety about speaking English was not necessarily evidence of unwillingness to engage with cultural differences; it reflected the challenges of communicating in a language in which students did not always feel competent.

Other responses described strategies for managing these challenges, including simplifying vocabulary, speaking more slowly, listening attentively, and requesting clarification. S67 connected interactions with international professors to gradually overcoming the fear of speaking English and encountering different teaching approaches.

“Interactions with international professors helped reduce fear of speaking English and introduced unfamiliar teaching approaches.” (S67)

These experiences reveal an important tension: English proficiency could shape whether students felt confident enough to initiate interaction, while interaction itself could provide opportunities to develop confidence. Language thus functioned as both a threshold for participation and a medium of perceived development. Students could value intercultural engagement while still requiring linguistic and interpersonal support to participate comfortably.

Theme 3: Intercultural Encounters Encouraged Perspective Expansion and Cultural Decentering

Beyond English practice, participants described intercultural experiences as occasions for reconsidering assumptions about other people and cultures. Their responses emphasized open-mindedness, respect for differences, and awareness that familiar social practices could influence judgments about others. S9, for example, described learning to respect differences and avoid judging people by appearance or nationality.

“Intercultural experiences encouraged respect for differences and discouraged judgments based on appearance or nationality.” (S9)

“Cultivated strong open-mindedness and learned to completely avoid evaluating other cultures through my own lens.” (S42)

These accounts illustrate a perceived movement away from interpreting differences solely through familiar assumptions and toward recognizing other cultural perspectives. Participants associated intercultural learning not only with gaining information about cultures but also with reconsidering how they interpreted unfamiliar practices and behaviors. These statements, however, are self-reported interpretations rather than independently verified behavioral changes. They demonstrate that participants perceived themselves as becoming more open-minded, but do not establish whether such changes were sustained or enacted in subsequent intercultural situations.

Theme 4: Meaningful Internationalization Was Built Through Relationships and Collaborative Participation

Participants also associated meaningful intercultural experiences with shared activities, cooperation, and interpersonal relationships. Rather than depicting learning as passive observation of cultural diversity, students emphasized opportunities to exchange ideas, contribute to common tasks, and establish connections across backgrounds.

S109 described participating in a group activity with international students, exchanging ideas and cultural knowledge, and learning about respect and teamwork. S120 recounted attending a Christian event where being welcomed and joining shared activities contributed to a positive experience.

“Working with international students in a group activity created opportunities to exchange ideas and cultural knowledge while learning the importance of respect and teamwork.” (S109)

“Being welcomed at a Christian event and joining shared activities contributed to a meaningful experience of intercultural participation.” (S120)

These accounts suggest that reciprocity, inclusion, and shared purpose strengthened the perceived value of intercultural encounters. Collaborative tasks created opportunities for communication and mutual consideration, while social activities showed that intercultural learning was not restricted to formal coursework. The findings point to the potential value of purposeful collaborative opportunities, although they do not demonstrate that collaboration consistently causes greater intercultural sensitivity.

Theme 5: Internationalization Remained Unevenly Experienced and, for Some Students, Aspirational

Despite favorable descriptions of internationalization, not all participants reported substantial intercultural engagement. Some had joined few activities, while others described little or no direct interaction with international individuals. Positive perceptions did not necessarily correspond to extensive personal experience.

“I have not participated in any internationalization activities at Walailak University yet. I hope to join in the future.” (S3)

S3's statement expresses interest despite the absence of direct participation. This favorable orientation was aspirational rather than grounded in extensive intercultural experience. Other participants described brief or peripheral contact rather than sustained engagement. This theme provides an important counterpoint to the very high overall quantitative perception score. Favorable perceptions may reflect anticipated benefits, institutional aspirations, or willingness to participate rather than consistent involvement. Limited participation should not

automatically be interpreted as disinterest; access to activities, language confidence, academic schedules, and opportunities for meaningful encounters may all matter. The responses identify uneven engagement but do not establish which factors were most influential across the sample.

Across the five themes, internationalization emerged as an experience shaped by institutional opportunities, language confidence, interpersonal relationships, and students' engagement with cultural differences. Direct contact made internationalization recognizable, communication challenges influenced confidence, encounters with different perspectives prompted self-reported reflection, and collaborative activities offered opportunities for meaningful relationships. At the same time, limited participation showed that the availability or perceived value of internationalization did not guarantee access to its potential benefits.

Integrated Results

The quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated through a joint display to examine how students' perceptions of internationalization related to their intercultural sensitivity and reported experiences. Following the convergent parallel mixed methods design, the two datasets were analyzed separately before being compared to identify convergence, complementarity, and divergence. Convergence refers to findings that support a similar interpretation across both strands, while complementarity occurs when qualitative accounts provide additional explanations or context for quantitative patterns. Divergence refers to findings that reveal conflicting or contrasting patterns requiring further interpretation.

As presented in Table 6, convergence was evident in students limited intercultural participation and generally favorable intercultural orientations. Complementarity emerged in the accounts of meaningful international contact, communication-related challenges, and the circumstances surrounding the positive correlation between perceptions of internationalization and intercultural sensitivity. A further point of integration was the endorsement–experience gap, in which very favorable perceptions of internationalization coexisted with limited direct participation. This represented a tension between quantitative indicators rather than a direct contradiction between the quantitative and qualitative strands.

Table 6. *Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings and Types of Integration*

Integration focus	Quantitative findings	Qualitative findings	Type of integration
Intercultural participation	47.2% reported no international or intercultural activity; 54.4% never or rarely interacted with international individuals.	Students described unequal opportunities for intercultural engagement and expressed interest in greater participation.	Convergence
Perceptions of internationalization	Very high overall perceptions ($M = 4.389$).	Students described direct contact and personal interaction as experiences that made internationalization meaningful.	Complementarity
Intercultural sensitivity	High overall intercultural sensitivity ($M = 3.627$).	Students emphasized respect, listening, teamwork, and adaptation when interacting across cultures.	Convergence
Interaction confidence and enjoyment	Moderate confidence ($M = 3.327$) and enjoyment ($M = 3.168$).	Students described English-related anxiety and hesitation, alongside perceived improvements through interaction and practice.	Complementarity

Relationship between internationalization and intercultural sensitivity	A significant positive correlation was observed ($r = .372, p < .001$).	Students described intercultural contact, communication challenges, and supportive interactions as relevant to their experiences.	Complementarity
Endorsement–experience gap	Very high perceptions of internationalization ($M = 4.389$) coexisted with limited participation and interaction.	Students valued internationalization while describing uneven access to meaningful intercultural experiences.	Cross-indicator divergence with qualitative complementarity

Convergence indicates agreement in the overall interpretation of findings across strands, while complementarity indicates that one strand elaborates on the other. Cross-indicator divergence refers to contrasting patterns among quantitative indicators, not a direct contradiction between the methodological strands. The integrated interpretations are context-specific and do not establish causal relationships.

The integration revealed three important findings. First, students generally expressed positive orientations toward internationalization and intercultural engagement, as reflected in their questionnaire ratings and written accounts. However, these favorable orientations did not consistently correspond to participation in international or intercultural activities. Second, students' moderate interaction confidence and enjoyment, together with their accounts of English-related anxiety, suggest that positive attitudes alone may be insufficient to support comfortable intercultural communication. Third, although perceptions of internationalization were positively associated with intercultural sensitivity, students' accounts indicate that opportunities for direct contact, language support, and collaborative experiences may be relevant to understanding this relationship.

These findings suggest that internationalization should be examined not only through students' favorable perceptions but also through their opportunities to participate in meaningful intercultural experiences. The endorsement–experience gap provides a basis for considering more accessible, structured, and supportive intercultural learning opportunities within General Education English courses. These implications informed the proposed Walailak Intercultural Sensitivity Program (WISE), which remains a recommendation derived from the findings rather than an intervention whose effectiveness has been established.

DISCUSSION

Positive Perceptions Without Equivalent Participation

The most consequential finding is the mismatch between strong endorsement of internationalization ($M = 4.389$) and limited direct participation: 47.2% reported no international or intercultural activity. Internationalization is therefore not adequately represented by institutional visibility or favorable student attitudes alone. As de Wit and Altbach (2021) argue, internationalization has multiple rationales and manifestations, while Leask (2015) locates its educational significance in what students encounter through the curriculum. In this setting, a positive appraisal of internationalization may reflect aspiration, perceived future benefit, or awareness of university initiatives rather than repeated intercultural learning. The qualitative accounts reinforce this interpretation: students without prior participation nevertheless expressed interest in future exchanges. The evidence identifies a gap between endorsement and experience, not an institutional failure established through an independent audit.

This tension gives practical weight to Internationalization at Home, which seeks purposeful intercultural learning for students who remain in their home institution (Beelen & Jones, 2015). In a multisite United States study, Soria and Troisi (2014) linked campus-based international activities with students' self-reported global and intercultural development, indicating that mobility is not the only possible route to such learning. However, access and participation must be distinguished: the presence of international students, foreign lecturers, or exchange events does not establish that most local students engage with them. The present findings suggest evaluating

internationalization through opportunities actually encountered, their accessibility, and their educational quality, alongside students' positive perceptions (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Leask, 2015).

Intercultural Openness and the Challenge of Interaction

The ISS results reveal an uneven profile within an overall high level of intercultural sensitivity ($M = 3.627$). Interaction engagement ($M = 3.963$) and attentiveness ($M = 3.946$) exceeded confidence ($M = 3.327$) and enjoyment ($M = 3.168$). This matters because the five-factor scale conceptualizes sensitivity as more than general approval of cultural diversity (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Students may be disposed to listen carefully and participate respectfully while remaining uneasy about actual interaction. Deardorff (2006) similarly conceptualizes intercultural development through interacting attitudinal, knowledge, and skill-related elements; willingness or respect alone should not be mistaken for demonstrated communicative effectiveness. These dimensions were measured through self-report, so the observed differences describe perceived dispositions, not directly observed behavior.

The qualitative strand clarifies the educational relevance of this pattern. Some respondents described anxiety about mistakes, unfamiliar accents, and difficulty sustaining conversation, yet others described gaining confidence through supportive exchanges with lecturers and international peers. Because 87.8% self-classified their English proficiency as beginner or elementary, language demands offer a plausible contextual interpretation, although this study did not test proficiency as an explanation for the ISS profile. Research on intercultural learning cautions against assuming that exposure automatically produces development; opportunities for guided participation and reflection matter (Leask, 2015; Vande Berg et al., 2012). Accordingly, English support should be understood not merely as language remediation but as a condition that may make intercultural participation more approachable. The participants' accounts suggest this possibility without establishing a treatment effect.

Interpreting the Moderate Relationship

The moderate positive correlation, $r(121) = .372$, $p < .001$, indicates that students with more favorable perceptions of internationalization tended to report higher intercultural sensitivity. The coefficient corresponds to approximately 13.9% shared variance, leaving most variation unaccounted for by the bivariate association. This is consistent with the conceptual separation between internationalization as an educational context and intercultural sensitivity as a multidimensional student disposition (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Deardorff, 2006). It also parallels the broader argument that internationalization outcomes should be assessed at the level of student learning rather than inferred from activity provision alone (Leask, 2015). Importantly, the present analysis does not show which particular experiences, institutional supports, or individual characteristics account for the association.

Several interpretations remain possible. Interculturally receptive students may be more inclined to value internationalization; students who perceive their environment as supportive may report stronger sensitivity; or other unmeasured characteristics may contribute to both scores. The use of two self-report measures also leaves open the possibility of shared response tendencies. Deardorff (2006) recommends multiple approaches to assessing intercultural outcomes, and the present qualitative responses add context but cannot establish temporal ordering or eliminate common-method concerns. Accordingly, the coefficient should be described as correlational, not as evidence that internationalization initiatives increased sensitivity. Its substantive contribution lies in identifying an association that requires further explanatory and longitudinal investigation.

Contact, Reciprocity, and Unequal Access

Students' narratives located meaningful internationalization in actual contact, collaborative tasks, and moments of cultural reconsideration. These accounts resonate with intergroup contact theory, particularly the potential value of cooperative interaction and supportive conditions (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The latter meta-analysis found that contact commonly relates to reduced prejudice across settings, but those results should not be transferred uncritically to the present study: intercultural sensitivity is not identical to prejudice, and no contact intervention was tested here. Rather, the contact literature helps explain why encounters involving

reciprocity and shared purposes may be educationally promising. Soria and Troisi (2014) likewise highlight the relevance of campus-based interactions, while Leask (2015) emphasizes integrating intercultural learning into ordinary educational experiences.

The contrasting accounts reveal uneven opportunities for intercultural engagement. While some students interacted with foreign lecturers primarily through routine classroom exchanges, others participated in cultural activities, and some reported no direct participation despite expressing interest. These differences suggest that an internationalized campus does not necessarily provide comparable intercultural experiences for all students. Similarly, Lemana et al. (2024b) documented international faculty members' contributions to curriculum internationalization in Thai higher education, whereas the present findings show that their presence does not automatically translate into meaningful engagement for every learner. This observation aligns with Beelen and Jones (2015) and Vande Berg et al. (2012), who emphasize intentional learning experiences rather than incidental exposure. These findings point to the importance of structured opportunities, guided interaction, and reflection in supporting intercultural learning. However, the reasons for nonparticipation cannot be established from the available data, as potential barriers such as scheduling and institutional exclusion were not independently examined.

Implications for the Proposed WISE Program

The convergent findings provide a reasoned basis for the proposed Walailak Intercultural Sensitivity Program (WISE), while also defining its limits as an unevaluated output. The eight-week core and four-week follow-up are designed to provide recurring encounters, scaffolded English-mediated dialogue, collaborative tasks, and guided reflection. Each element responds to a different empirical concern: uneven access to contact, moderate confidence and enjoyment, and students' descriptions of learning through reciprocity. These design choices are consistent with Internationalization at Home and curriculum-based intercultural learning (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Leask, 2015), with evidence concerning constructive contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and with arguments for facilitated rather than assumed learning from intercultural encounters (Vande Berg et al., 2012). The program's effectiveness cannot be claimed until it has been implemented and evaluated.

Evaluation of WISE should therefore extend beyond satisfaction ratings. A future study could examine attendance and sustained participation, pre–post changes in ISS dimensions, the accessibility of activities to students with lower English confidence, and qualitative evidence of learning. Using multiple forms of evidence would align with Deardorff's (2006) recommendations for assessing intercultural outcomes. More generally, the present study supports a shift from counting internationalization opportunities to examining who can participate, how interactions are supported, and what students report learning from them (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Soria & Troisi, 2014).

Limitations and Contribution

Several limitations warrant consideration. The study involved 123 voluntarily recruited students from one Thai university, limiting generalizability. Its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-report measures prevent causal conclusions. Written qualitative responses provided contextual insights but lacked opportunities for follow-up probing. Future research should employ longitudinal and multisite designs, alongside behavioral measures and more extensive qualitative inquiry.

The study contributes to internationalization scholarship by identifying an endorsement–experience gap, whereby favorable perceptions of internationalization coexist with limited intercultural participation. Although students reported high engagement and attentiveness, their comparatively lower confidence and enjoyment revealed challenges in actual interaction. The moderate correlation further suggests that perceptions of internationalization and intercultural sensitivity are related but not interchangeable. By integrating these findings with students' narratives, the study extends Internationalization at Home discussions toward understanding how students experience internationalization, rather than merely how they perceive it. This insight provides a basis for the proposed WISE Program, whose effectiveness remains to be evaluated.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes context-specific evidence that favorable perceptions of internationalization are moderately associated with self-reported intercultural sensitivity among second-year Thai EFL students, despite limited participation in intercultural activities. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings identifies an endorsement–experience gap, suggesting that positive perceptions of internationalization should not be interpreted as evidence of meaningful intercultural engagement. These findings extend Internationalization at Home research by drawing attention to students’ reported experiences alongside their evaluations of internationalization.

Educationally, the findings support incorporating accessible intercultural activities into General Education English courses, particularly through guided interaction, collaborative tasks, and language support for students with limited confidence or prior exposure. These recommendations provide an empirical basis for the proposed Walailak Intercultural Sensitivity Program (WISE), which requires implementation and evaluation before claims about its effectiveness can be made.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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