

# C

## ommunication in AEC Multicultural Workplaces การสื่อสารในสถานที่ทำงานแบบพหุวัฒนธรรม ในเออีซี

- ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ พรพรรณ บุญพัฒน์ภรณ์
- สาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษธุรกิจ
- คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และประยุกต์ศิลป์
- มหาวิทยาลัยหอการค้าไทย
- 
- **Assistant Professor Pornpan Boonpattanaporn**
- Department of Business English
- School of Humanities and Applied Arts
- University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce
- E-mail: pornpan\_b@hotmail.com

### บทคัดย่อ

การรวมตัวของประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนจะมีผลในปลายปี 2015 โอกาสในการทำงานร่วมกับคนที่มาจากวัฒนธรรมอื่นมีมากขึ้น อันเป็นผลมาจากการเคลื่อนย้ายของแรงงานฝีมือในกลุ่มประเทศสมาชิก และจากประเทศต่าง ๆ ทั่วโลก ดังนั้น สถานที่ทำงานหลายแห่งจะเปลี่ยนแปลงเป็นสถานที่ทำงานแบบพหุวัฒนธรรม นอกเหนือจากความสามารถทางวิชาชีพแล้ว ความสามารถในการสื่อสารอย่างเหมาะสมด้วยความนับถือผู้อื่นในสภาพแวดล้อมแบบหลากหลายวัฒนธรรมจึงเป็นสิ่งสำคัญ เพราะในหมู่คนที่ทำงานร่วมกันมีความเชื่อ ค่านิยม จารีต และภูมิหลังที่แตกต่างกัน ซึ่งสามารถนำไปสู่การเข้าใจผิดและความสับสนได้ บทความนี้จะชี้ให้เห็นความแตกต่างของวัฒนธรรมในหลายแง่มุมที่มีผลกระทบต่อประสิทธิภาพของการสื่อสาร และเสนอแนะวิธีการปรับให้เหมาะสมกับสภาพการทำงานแบบ

พหุวัฒนธรรม รวมทั้งข้อเสนอสำหรับผู้สอนในการเตรียมผู้เรียนเพื่อเข้าสู่โลกของการทำงานใน  
บรรยากาศใหม่ที่ท้าทาย

**คำสำคัญ:** ประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน การสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรม ความตระหนักรู้ทางวัฒนธรรม  
สถานที่ทำงานแบบพหุวัฒนธรรม

## Abstract

AEC, Asean Economic Community, integration will be in effect by the end of 2015. There are possibilities of working with people from different cultures as there will be a free flow of a skilled workforce among member countries and from various parts of the world. Therefore, more offices will become multicultural workplaces. Apart from professional expertise, a capability to communicate appropriately with respect to others in intercultural settings is also very important because staff will have different beliefs, values, customs, and backgrounds which can easily lead to misunderstandings and confusion. This article seeks to present various cultural aspects that affect communication and, furthermore, gives some suggestions for adapting to new multicultural working scenarios including strategies for teachers to prepare students to approach the this new challenge.d working world.

**Keywords:** AEC, Intercultural Communication, Cultural Awareness, Multicultural Workplaces

## Introduction

Both government and private sectors have expressed their concerns about AEC integration by the end of 2015. Various efforts have been implemented to prepare business companies and their workforce to effectively merge into the community. One of the main consequences of this AEC integration is the free flow of a skilled workforce and the growing number of more multinational companies. Workforce mobility will, of course, create a multicultural working environment. There will be an increasingly diverse workforce who will have to deal with various different languages and cultures on a daily basis. Apart from an expertise in professional areas, an ability to communicate in English, which will function as the working language, is one of the main requirements. Most staff will have to communicate with each other in English, which is their second or even a foreign language. As a result, they may misinterpret both language and cultural signals, leading to confusion and misunderstanding. The communication and understanding among staff from various different countries can be a major part in delivering success or failure to a company. With the number of people from different cultures interacting, communication problems may often occur. Therefore, intercultural awareness is a necessity to ensure that communication between staff and also between staff and management is

clear. It is stated in a proclamation entitled “Preparation for ASEAN Community in 2015” by the Office of Higher Education that the future employment in ASEAN will require graduates to have additional skills such as English and other languages used in ASEAN and intercultural skills apart from their professional skills (Office of the Higher Education, 2010).

AEC workplaces will be gathering places for people from the western world and those from different countries in ASEAN. Though ten countries in ASEAN are geographically close to each other, there are some similarities and differences in terms of culture. The cultures of Asian countries are as diverse as their ethnic communities and historical experiences (Bhasin, 2012). These differences are consequences of the diversity of language, religion, ethnic community and historical experience. For example, there are 135 ethnic groups with their own languages and dialects in Myanmar (The Nations Online Project, 2014), and the motto of Indonesia is “Unity in Diversity” (Government of Canada, 2014). This shows that countries in ASEAN are clearly diverse in terms of people, languages, and cultures. As a result, the workforce, both at management and operational levels, will be composed of people from different cultural backgrounds and different generations who carry with them their own cultures. All these workforces need

to communicate with colleagues in the same company, with business counterparts in other companies, and with customers. They have to deal carefully and appropriately regarding communicating, thinking, meeting, negotiating, and doing business with people from different cultures. Suthaceva and Yuangsri (2013: 1049) concluded in their research that one of the communication problems between non-Thai passengers and Thai cabin crews was being unaware of their cultural differences. Consequently, it is necessary to be aware of other cultures as well as respecting and appreciating cultural differences. Understanding different cultural interactions increases team unity and intercultural communication effectiveness because it is a means to establish relationships and lessen the possibility of misunderstandings. Beamer and Varner (2001: 345) noted that the success of companies with an increasingly diverse cultural background workforce depends on good communication between diverse groups.

Unfortunately, it is shown that the average English capability of Thai people is rather low (Education First, 2011) which can lead to limitations in using it as a means to express and perceive both language and culture in workplace communication. However, since we can expect working people from various countries throughout this region and from other parts all over the world in AEC workplaces,

miscommunication, misinterpretation and confusion can easily happen especially during the beginning of the integration when all the staff are new to each other. Learning other cultures and preparing to adjust ourselves to a new multicultural working environment is needed. There are several aspects related to culture and communication that should be paid attention to and some preparations that can be implemented in order to avoid problems and successfully adapt to the diversity.

### **Cultural Aspects Affecting Communication in Multicultural Workplaces**

When we use language to communicate, we hope others will get the meaning of the message sent in the way we intend. However, the meaning lies not only in what is said but also in what is left unsaid. Moreover, what seems clear and sensible in one culture may be confusing and absurd in another culture. In intercultural workplaces, people are from different cultures and generally they interpret meanings according to their language knowledge and cultural background. This can cause misunderstandings, disagreements, and even communication breakdown. There are several factors causing communication misunderstanding which should be taken into consideration:

- Language

Language can be a prominent cause of miscommunication, especially when it is not the first language of both communicators. In AEC offices where English is not the mother tongue of all members, misunderstandings due to linguistic limitation can easily arise. The use of wrong or inappropriate expressions and vocabulary as well as making erroneous inferences can frequently occur in any communicative situation. Moreover, varieties of English, for example British and American English and especially the use of different terms to describe the same thing, can also affect the understanding of the message sent. Harper (1997: 13) mentioned that a lack of language skills is a strong barrier to effective cultural adjustment and communication whereas a lack of knowledge concerning the ways of speaking of a particular group will reduce the level of understanding that we can achieve with our counterparts. For example, negative question and question tag are quite troublesome for Vietnamese and Thai staff. A question like “Plan A isn’t good enough, is it?” can probably get the answer like, “Yes, it isn’t good enough”. This can cause confusion as answers to negative questions are influenced by their first language use. Moreover, Thai staff with low English ability tend to speak English by translating word by word which does not make sense in English as the position of words are quite different between Thai and English.

Another point that should be noted is code switching. Code switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages. It is common to see Thai staff practicing code switching from English to Thai language when they speak to each other, though there are other staff sharing the conversation. This might happen because Thai people feel uncomfortable to speak to another Thai in foreign languages without being aware that this can create a sense of separation since other people can feel left out. Sometimes, being limited to the common language in the office when discussing work related matters, staff of the same nationality might think that it is faster to speak to each other in their native language and they can go into much more detail. However, this code switching may not only create an unhealthy work environment but also distort work relationships and be regarded as impolite manners.

- Frame of Reference

Frame of reference is a combination of ideas, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, values, knowledge, culture and past experiences that provide the basis for one’s understanding of people and events because it filters our perception (Sen, 2006: 13; Steinberg, 2006: 49). This frame of reference influences how people interpret meanings. People from different cultures also assign different meaning to the message because the frame of reference for

each person is created with his/her norms, customs, and culture. Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2007: 171) mentioned that a word may elicit many different meanings depending on the background and context in which the word is encountered. All people employ their backgrounds and culture to decide what a word means. For example, a westerner is more likely to assume that a response “maybe” suggests a possibility (Liu, Volcic and Gallois, 2011: 88), whereas to Asian people, including Thais, “maybe” can also be an indirect way of saying “no”. Therefore, we have to consider the speaker’s cultural references in order to interpret the meaning. In the working scenario of western and Asian colleagues, the expectation of the western staff may not be met, which can lead to a false judgment of his/her colleague’s efficiency.

At present, working in a team has become a normal practice in most organizations. Each member’s frame of reference also plays a vital role in the way he or she deals with other team members, which can strengthen or deteriorate team relationships. Take ‘No, thanks’ in a help-giving and declining situation as an example. For Americans, help is given when asked for and if they offer help and that offer is declined, they will not insist because they respect the other person’s privacy (Hall, 2005: 136). However, for Asian people, though people decline the offer they insist on helping

without a feeling of intrusion into other people’s comfort zone because they have the culture of not bothering other people, but help when they see a need to help. This situation, which should be clarified to avoid working conflicts, can also occur in any multicultural offices.

Moreover, people from different cultures, or even in the same culture, may not have exactly the same thoughts due to the uniqueness of each individual; consequently, it is easy to misunderstand the message sent because people attach their own set of meanings based on their own perceptions and standards. For instance, punctuality for the meeting can be rigid for Cambodians, since being late is regarded as showing no respect to the other person. On the other hand, it can be flexible for Indonesians as the word “Jam Karet” meaning “rubber time” is used in their language. (Kwintessential, 2014)

#### - Stereotyping

A stereotype is a cognitive structure encompassing the perceiver’s knowledge, beliefs, and expectancies about some human social groups (Abbate, Boca and Bocchiaro, 2004: 1192). Problems occur when the overgeneralization and negative evaluations of attitudes and behaviors are attached to the person we communicate with. Only information that is consistent with the information already believed is acknowledged; as a result, we

disregard the individualism of each person by concluding that all people of a culture group have the same traits. This attribute leads to an inaccurate basis for judgment and interpretation. Neuliep (2012: 182) pointed out that stereotyping causes difficulty when it is used to generalize negative traits to an entire group of people when few members of the group actually possess such traits. For example, some Filipinos sometimes make mistakes with “he” and “she” as well as “him” and “her” because there is no distinction between these pronouns for male and female in Tagalog, their native language. Therefore, if we assume that all Filipinos make this mistake every time they speak, we have a misconception by stereotyping this kind of mistake to all Filipinos we communicate with. However, paraphrasing to confirm the understanding can be applied to get the intended messages correctly.

- Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism means viewing things from one’s own cultural perspective and evaluating other people and cultures by using his or her own culture values as criteria (Kurylo, 2013: 52). The idea of ethnocentrism is problematic in intercultural contexts since it leads to negative judgments of others. Ethnocentric people in a position of authority might disregard or respond arrogantly to other people’s opinions as they generally perceive their own culture superior, which can hinder

communication, the exchange of ideas and knowledge, as well as create prejudice and even discrimination. Beamer and Varner (2001: 16) mentioned that people with little experience of other cultures believe their own culture is at the center of human experience and they prefer cultures that are similar to their own. This belief can interfere with the interpretation and perception of people being credible, competent, qualified or intelligent (Neuliep, 2012: 198). The false belief that Thais are superior to people from neighboring countries because Thailand has never been colonized should be discarded. When this ethnocentric concept occurs in the workplace, it can lead to mistreatment and misjudgment of colleague or subordinates, which can only cause dissatisfaction and separation.

Some ethnocentric attitudes are not obvious, such as being fluent in English language. As there will be a lot of staff with mixed proficiency in English in AEC workplaces, it is expected that some staff will be more fluent in English than others since more people completed their education in English speaking countries. On the other hand, there will also be staff that may have expertise and experience in the field but are not so fluent in speaking English. Those who cannot speak English fluently are often perceived and treated as somehow less intelligent than those who are fluent in English, even though such



individuals are just as limited in their linguistic abilities (Hall, 2005: 199). Although English is a common language in AEC workplaces, English language ability alone cannot represent the criteria of intelligence. Staff with ethnocentric attitudes may unconsciously speak rapidly and use jargon, idioms or complex grammatical structures, which can cause hard feelings, destroy working relationships and lower work efficiency. Moreover, ethnocentrism can lead to an underestimation of other team members' capability by displaying disrespect for members with lower English skills.

- Context

The way a person communicates is affected by his/her background and cultural context. Context refers to the information that surrounds a communication event, which is closely tied to the meaning of the event (Sorrells, 2013: 204).

According to Hall (1976: 91), culture is categorized as high context and low context, depending on the degree to which meanings come from the settings or from the words being conveyed. High context culture is the culture where most of the information is intrinsic to the person and context, while very little is in the coded, explicit part of the message. Lustig and Koester (2013: 97) explained that most of the meaning is either implied by the physical setting or is presumed to be part of the individual's internalized beliefs, norms, and

social practices. Therefore, communication style is indirect. In Brunei, for example, instead of saying 'no', people tend to say 'It is inconvenient' or 'We shall see' which generally indicates a negative response (Kwintessential, 2014). Meanings of the messages are based on shared knowledge and networks of relationships, the situation, and nonverbal cues. Therefore, people in high context cultures value the group relationship and are generally sensitive and pay more attention to nonverbal behavior during transactions (Neuliep, 2012: 300). On the other hand, low context culture emphasizes an explicit code of information and a lot of details in a message with less attention placed on unstated context cues. Communication is direct, specific, and more explicit. This results from individualistic cultures in which people are more independent and tend to separate personal and work relationships (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel, 2007: 160).

Cultures arranged from the high-context to low-context dimension are as follows:

(High-context) Japanese-Chinese-Korean-African American-Native American-Arab-Greek-Latin-Italian-English-French-North American-Scandinavian-German (Low-context) (Hall, 1976: 91)

Though AEC consists of countries in South East Asia that are in high-context cultures, there are also situations where work



and communication involves colleagues and staff from low context cultures. Even among AEC member countries, there are more or less differences that can lead to misunderstanding such as when emphasis is placed on context that includes not only the surroundings at the moment of communication, but also nonverbal cues like tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, postures, and even a person's status. Therefore, the workforce needs to be aware of differences when communicating with colleagues and superiors from both low-context and high-context cultures.

- Interpretation of Nonverbal Codes

Nonverbal codes are rooted in culture. Nonverbal communication can be defined as all communication beyond the spoken or written words. Nonverbal messages normally do not occur in isolation and they reinforce or modify what is said in words. Lustig and Koester (2013: 185) mentioned functions of nonverbal codes as being to provide information, manage impressions, express emotions, regulate interactions, and convey relationship messages. Examples of nonverbal message are eye contact, facial expressions, gestures like head or arm movement, posture, space, silence, touch, paralanguage, and time.

Nonverbal communication is extremely complex because nonverbal codes have different cultural connotations. For example, Thai and Malaysian people may laugh at

what may seem inappropriate moments to foreigners. However, sometimes it is used to conceal uneasiness (Kwintessential, 2014). Nonverbal misinterpretation can be a barrier in intercultural communication because the true meanings and interpretation depend on a variety of factors, such as the cultural background, context of the communication, education or gender. Vandenabeele (2002: 1) mentioned that nonverbal communication plays a crucial and necessary part in communicative interactions between people from different cultures as they attach different meanings to nonverbal signals. For example, silence is regarded as ambiguous and needs to be interpreted in Western countries (Oliver 1971: 264), whereas it is often used to avoid conflict in Asia. Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2007: 226) mentioned that Asian people refuse to speak any further in a conversation if they cannot personally accept the speaker's attitude, opinion or way of thinking about particular issues or subjects. A gesture of 'ring', a circle formed with thumb and forefinger, means 'okay' and 'v sign' is used for 'victory' for Americans, but it means 'zero' and 'number two' respectively for Indonesians (Gunawan, 2014). As a result, in intercultural workplaces, there is a tendency for misunderstandings to occur because people use their cultural norms to interpret the message.

Regarding eye contact, North Americans and Northern Europeans regard eye contact

as signs of openness, trustworthiness and integrity while Arab cultures use very intense eye contact and concentrate on the eye movement to read real intention (Beamer and Varner, 2001: 163). But most Asian cultures use less eye contact, as direct eye contact in some countries like Cambodia is considered impolite and challenging. For Laotian people, one arm's length apart is an acceptable distance when speaking with someone. When the other person is too close, they will back off to a more comfortable distance (Government of Canada, 2014). Tuleja (2009: 24) concluded that genuine understanding occurs only when both communicators agree not only on the meaning of the verbal symbols, but on the nonverbal elements of the transaction as well.

Since there are several factors affecting a success in communication, an understanding and awareness of other cultures should be addressed and practiced by all parties involved in order to overcome misunderstanding in intercultural workplaces.

## **Cultural Awareness**

Cultural awareness becomes crucial when there are interactions between people from different cultures. With the integration of AEC, increased diversity in the workplace can be expected. Working staff will have to deal with the issues of diverse communication on a daily basis. According to the Collins Dictionary

(2014), cultural awareness is someone's understanding of the differences between themselves and people from other cultures or other backgrounds, especially differences in attitudes and values.

Misunderstandings arise when people use their meanings according to norms and values of their culture to interpret other people's activities. What is appropriate in one culture might be inappropriate in others. Moreover, different cultures may give different connotative meaning to the same word. In the Philippines, a host's wife should not be referred to as a 'hostess' as it has a negative meaning (a prostitute). Though this is now not so serious as in the past, it should be avoided (Kwintessential, 2014). This misinterpretation happens due to a lack of awareness by using one's own behavior rules and meanings to apply to others. Lacking cultural awareness can obstruct the sense of togetherness and unity in teamwork. Wang (2011) mentioned that a person may be linguistically competent because of his/her right choice of words, articulation and application of grammatical rules but he/she will not be culturally competent if his/her comment is not appropriate in a given cultural context.

Diversity, though, is a challenge as it enriches the groups' perspectives leading to more chances to gain better outcomes, every member should be sensitive to the influence

of culture on communication and decision making styles. Each person's communication style and ways of relating to others are shaped by his/her culture. Patel, Li and Sooknanan (2011: 18) mentioned that the characteristics that make people from different cultures similar and different are their cultural beliefs, values and their social norms or customs. Therefore, cultural awareness is one of the important elements that enhances understanding in workplaces.

Here are some techniques to build cultural awareness:

- Increasing Cultural Knowledge

Researching knowledge of the culture of people you work with will boost confidence when interacting with them. Thanks to digital technology, information about cultures is easily accessed. Apart from studying books or websites, observing what people in other cultures do will also increase and confirm the information studied. This will break down intercultural barriers. Khan-Panni and Swallow (2003: 11) noted that in communicating with people from other cultures, it requires a strong willingness to understand what it is that causes people of another culture to think and behave the way they do. An informal discussion about various aspects of culture such as important days, celebrations, or rituals can reflect beliefs and customs of people in

that culture. The process of discovering new knowledge of new cultures through experiences like joining activities or festive celebrations can widen perspectives of both cultures and their members. Not only learning about new cultures but also realizing the difference from one's own culture will give a deeper understanding and an ability to see things from different perspectives, which in turn will lead to accept cultural differences more easily. Moreover, it is important to employ cultural adaptability, such as switching the communication style to facilitate understanding or to make it easier to work together.

- Listening Carefully

Listening is the basic form of showing respect because while listening we disregard ourselves and pay attention to the message sent. How people listen is influenced by culture. Actively listening to colleagues enables you to read between the lines, and asking questions will show an interest to learn other cultures. Normally people appreciate the interest and enjoy sharing information about their culture. AEC member countries are in high-context cultures and people communicate indirectly, also through nonverbal cues. Consequently, summarizing the main points or paraphrasing can make it clear to both sides, reduce uncertainty and build trust in order to strengthen relationships.

- Appreciating Diversity

Being comfortable dealing with unfamiliar situations derived from cultural differences is one of the necessary skills for working in a diverse workplace. Apart from a capability in English, the working language in AEC, showing a willingness to learn about other cultures, like basic everyday language or traditions, can build familiarity and relationships. Acknowledging differences and diversity can be the first step to show openness and humility to others. This

can facilitate understanding and harmony within diversity.

## Cultural Values and Customs in AEC Community

Many cultural values and customs held by ASEAN people also affect the way communication is carried out. Important values and customs are shown in the table below with special remarks for different practices in some countries.

Values/Customs	Practices	Remarks
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Group oriented</li> <li>- Harmonious relationship</li> <li>- Hierarchical structure</li> <li>- Maintaining face</li> </ul>	
Communication Styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Indirect, implicit, subtle, formal</li> <li>- No absolute negative</li> <li>- Not showing emotions</li> <li>- Being silent to show disagreement</li> <li>- Avoiding embarrassing others</li> <li>- Pausing to give the question appropriate thought and consideration</li> <li>- Addressing the other party with honorific or professional titles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Soft-spoken and subdued tone in Singapore and Indonesia</li> </ul>
Non-verbal Cues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More attention to non-verbal than verbal language</li> <li>- A lot of facial expressions used</li> <li>- Prolong eye-contact avoided</li> <li>- Nodding sometimes to show acknowledgement, not necessarily agreement</li> <li>- Tone of voice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More hand gestures in Malaysia</li> <li>- Except in Singapore and Malaysia</li> <li>- Nervous tone of voice sometimes perceived as dishonesty in Laos</li> </ul>

Values/Customs	Practices	Remarks
Decision Making	- Consensus	- Mixed with decision from the higher level in hierarchy in Indonesia - From the top of the company in The Philippines
Dealing with Conflict	- Avoiding confrontation - Speaking in private preferred	- Speaking about problems without blaming anyone in Malaysia, Indonesia and The Philippines
Punctuality	- Flexible	- More rigid in Cambodia, Singapore and Vietnam
Meeting	- Conservative attires - Building a rapport for the first meeting	

(Kwintessential, 2014; Government of Canada, 2014)

Though these customs and values are similar among Asian countries, the degree of practice is different from person to person. It is necessary to carefully observe and learn from the person we communicate with to adjust and find appropriate ways to fully understand each other.

### Adaptation to AEC Environments

Though colleagues from different backgrounds share a common language at work, they do not share beliefs or attitudes and they have different expectations about how things should be handled and how conversations should flow; therefore, miscommunication can still exist. Working with people from different cultures, we need to be tolerant with ambiguity

and be carefully considerate as sometimes we need to step out of our comfort zones. At the same time, it is an opportunity to experience new things with open-minded communication. Lustig and Koester (2013: 240) mentioned that relationships among people from different cultures occur as a result of the knowledge and perceptions people have about one another, their motivations to engage in meaningful interactions, and their ability to communicate in ways that are regarded as appropriate and effective. Here are some strategies that can be applied and adjusted to successfully deal with new environments:

- Develop Communication Flexibility

Communication flexibility means adjusting the communication behavior to fit the setting,

the other person and yourself as well as being amenable in the intercultural context (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel, 2007: 346-347). Since communicating with people from different cultures can cause ambiguity and confusion, an ability to cope with them is needed. Ruben and Kealey (1979: 19) noted that the ability to react to new and ambiguous situations with minimal discomfort has been regarded as an important asset to adjust to new cultural environments. It is necessary to remember to communicate clearly with coded messages, recheck the understanding of the message received, and be flexible so as to adjust to other means to get the message across.

- Learn to Accept Differences

It is important to realize that people from different cultures act differently. There is no right or wrong action; each person acts according to their own cultural norms and values. To behave appropriately, one should know how the frame of reference of other cultures differs from one's own. This will help interpret the meanings more accurately. Moreover, we need to adjust our expectations as people have different opinions, beliefs, habits and way of life depending on their cultures.

- Offer Non-Evaluative and Avoid Negative Feedback

Whether the feedback is verbal or nonverbal, non-evaluative feedback or comments set a positive tone to communication and

create a supportive climate. In some cultures, like northern Europe, freely criticizing ideas are regarded as the salient facts, and do not represent an attack on the individual personally. However, when the workforce is a mix of people from various cultures, some might value the interaction as a way of building and reinforcing relationships while some might take all comments personally. Especially in high-context cultures like Asian cultures, most people seek to promote harmony instead of confrontation, and maintaining face is a significant value to be aware of. Giving feedback should be done with caution because when people are evaluated, they tend to feel defensive and that will cause hesitation to give information or opinions.

- Develop Empathy

In order to figure out the meaning of the message received, one needs to develop empathy, or the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Being empathetic requires knowledge of the other person's culture in order to understand how and why that person feels that way. However, it does not mean that you need to agree with what is said or done. People do appreciate empathetic feelings because they realize that they are being understood.

It should be the effort of every staff member to be sensitive to cultural differences and respect each other's beliefs and values. Since cultures in large offices may be extremely

diverse, staff can develop their shared office culture as a sub-culture in an organization to facilitate the work process. To enter confidently into the new AEC working environment and be able to develop cultural awareness, Thai students need to be prepared not only with English language capability, but also cultural competence through collaborative activities in courses.

### **Classroom Activities to Prepare Students for a Multicultural Workplaces**

In English learning-teaching situations, students need to be equipped with the ability to handle different attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of other people with open-mindedness and respect. Linguistic competence is a must; however, it should be accompanied by intercultural competence to avoid any communication dysfunction. According to Byram (1997: 33), five elements of intercultural competence include 1) knowledge 2) attitudes 3) skills of interpreting and relating 4) skills of discovery and interaction, and 5) critical cultural awareness. In order to successfully prepare students for AEC work environments, teachers should try to integrate intercultural dimensions with language teaching. Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002: 10) suggested the following ways:

- Giving students linguistic and intercultural competence;
- Preparing students for interaction with people of other cultures;
- Enabling students to understand and accept people of other cultures as individuals with distinctive, values, and behaviors;
- Helping students to see that such interaction is an enriching experience.

Consequently, teachers should be well aware that objectives of activities organized in class are not only to improve linguistic competence but also to equip students with intercultural competence. Abolghasem (2010: 374) pointed out that cultural awareness and understanding of a second language is enhanced through cultural teaching in foreign language classes. Language teaching, therefore, should be offered in a designated context with the purpose and motivation to boost knowledge and experience. Some suggested activities related to intercultural communication reinforcement are:

- Internet Research

Internet research and reflective investigation on various aspects of differences in cultures of Asian countries such as culture in food, eating, greeting, or gift giving can be assigned for further classroom discussions. Moreover, topics from textbooks used in class, such as investment, business meetings, or international trade can be broadened to cover



business etiquette in AEC settings to familiarize students for the upcoming situation.

- Special Talks

Special guest talks can widen students' perspectives on cultures and create opportunities for discussion with people from different cultures. Staff from Asian countries' embassies or people who used to work in multicultural organizations can be invited to share their experiences.

- Mini Research

Mini research on students' own cultures should be assigned so that they can be aware of their own attitudes, customs, and behaviors. This can be enhanced with students' own opinions as to whether they have similar or different attitudes and customs from their cultural norms. Moreover, they can identify relevant features of their culture and other cultures so that they understand how people from other cultures respond differently to similar situations.

- Online Chat Room

Online chat room or any online discussion platform for students to discuss with students from other classes, other institutions, or other countries regarding their cultures can be created with the purposes of learning new cultures and building relationships for further shared knowledge. Teachers can also post some useful information to encourage

discussion or spark an academic debate.

- Multicultural Experiential Activities

Students can share VDO clips of events or situations they found different from the way it would occur in their own culture. Boonpattanaporn (2014: 195) also suggested that students should be assigned to do some activities in order to experience genuine speaking situations with foreigners or tourists from different cultures. Students will gain not only cultural knowledge but also interpersonal and group communication skills. After pointing out and comparing the differences, students can discuss them or find more information by interviewing more people from that culture or from reliable sources such as cultural sections at foreign embassies or consulates to widen their worldviews.

- Cultural Exhibition

Students can be assigned to organize an academically cultural exhibition on various topics so that they can study in depth and share knowledge with others. This activity can be carried out in an interdisciplinary manner by planning and cooperating with lecturers in other courses.

- Intercultural Competence Self-Evaluation

Teachers can raise questions that lead to self-reflection so that students can reflect on their attitudes, values and beliefs and be

aware of cultural differences. Usefully, there is an intercultural competence self-evaluation form by Deardorff (2006: 254-256) to be found online. When teachers and students work together through activities, learning is more enjoyable and this can open opportunities for students to learn new things, and not simply to be rigid in their own cultural patterns.

## Conclusion

In favorable intercultural AEC workplaces, people try to find ways to effectively communicate with each other. However, they have to adjust to make themselves clearly understood by others and at the same time perceive what others try to communicate. Several measures should be realized and implemented by various parties involved to make communication flow smoothly in both perception and communication because, together with language, people carry with them their culture and different background. To create harmonious multicultural workplaces, all staff need to accept the differences of each member and act appropriately to people and situations with respect and openness. Not only working people but also students who are going to enter new working environments need to prepare themselves linguistically and culturally in order to integrate into AEC multicultural workplaces with confidence.

## References

- Abbate, C.S., Boca, S., and Bocchiaro, P. 2004. "Stereotyping in Persuasive Communication: Influenced Exerted by Disapproved Source." **Journal of Applied Social Psychology**. 34, 6: 1191-1207.
- Abolghasem, S.H.F. 2010. "Culture Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Teaching General English." In EABR & ETLIC Conference, pp. 371-376. Ireland: Dublin.
- Beamer, L., and Varner, I. 2001. **Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace**. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Singapore: McGraw-Hill.
- Bhasin, B. 24 April 2012. **Asean's Diversity: Asset or Liability?** [Online]. Available: [www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/290123/asean-diversity-asset-or-liability](http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/290123/asean-diversity-asset-or-liability)
- Boonpattanaporn, P. 2014. "Opportunities for Practicing English: It is a Matter of Picking Them up." **University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce Journal**. 34, 3: 176-190.
- Byram, M. 1997. **Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communication Competence**. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M., Gribkova, B., and Starkey, H. 2002. **Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching: A Practical Introduction for Teachers**. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

- Collinsdictionary.** 2014. Available: [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/American-cobuild-learners/cultural-awareness](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/American-cobuild-learners/cultural-awareness)
- Deardorff, D.K. 2006. "Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization." **Journal of Studies in International Education.** 10, 3: 241-266.
- Education First. 2011. **EF EPI English Proficiency Index** [Online]. Available: [http://www.ef.co.th/sitecore/\\_//media/efcom/epi/pdf/EF-Epi-2011.pdf](http://www.ef.co.th/sitecore/_//media/efcom/epi/pdf/EF-Epi-2011.pdf)
- Government of Canada. 2014. **Canada's International Gateway** [Online]. Available: <http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/ci-ci/index.aspx?lang=eng>
- Gunawan, M.H. 2014. **Non-Verbal Communication: The Silent Cross-Cultural Contact with Indonesians** [Online] Available: [www.ialf.edu/kipbipa/papers/MuhamudHandiGunawan.doc](http://www.ialf.edu/kipbipa/papers/MuhamudHandiGunawan.doc)
- Hall, B.J. 2005. **Among Culture: The Challenge of Communication.** Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Hall, E.T. 1976. **Beyond Culture.** Garden City: Doubleday.
- Harper, A.M. 1997. "Cultural Adaptation and Intercultural Communication: Some Barriers and Bridges." In the Annual Convention of the western Speech Communication Association, pp. 13. Monterey, CA.
- Khan-Panni, P., and Swallow, D. 2003. **Communicating Across Culture.** Oxford: Howtobooks.
- Kurylo, A. 2013. **Intercultural Communication.** Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publication.
- Kwintessential. 2014. **Global Etiquette** [Online]. Available: [www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-Etiquette.html](http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-Etiquette.html).
- Liu, S., Volcic, Z., and Gallois, C. 2011. **Introducing Intercultural Communication: Global Cultures And Contexts.** London: SAGE Publications.
- Lustig, M.W., and Koester, J. 2013. **Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures.** 7<sup>th</sup> ed. ASA: Pearson Education.
- The Nations Online Project. 2014. **One world-Nations Online** [Online]. Available: [www.nationsonline.org](http://www.nationsonline.org)
- Neuliep, J.W. 2012. **Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach.** London: SAGE Publication.
- Office of the Higher Education Commission. 2010. "Preparation for the ASEAN Community in 2015." **Thai Higher Education Review.** 10, 33: 1-2.
- Oliver, R.T. 1971. **Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China.** Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Patel, F., Li, M., and Sooknunan, P. 2011. **Intercultural Communication: Building a Global Community.** London: SAGE Publication.

- Ruben, B.D., and Kealey, D.J. 1979. "Behavioral Assessment of Communication Competency and the Prediction of Cross-Cultural Adaptation." **International Journal of Intercultural Relations**. 3, 1: 15-47.
- Samovar, L.A., Porter, R.E. and McDaniel, E.R. 2007. **Communication Between Cultures**. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Sen, L. 2006. **Communication Skills**. New Delhi: Prentice-Hall.
- Sorrells, K. 2013. **Intercultural Communication: Globalization and Social Justice**. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publication.
- Steinberg, S. 2006. **Introduction to Communication**. Cape Town: Juta.
- Suthaceva, S., and Yuangsri, N. 2013. "Communication Problem Between Non-Thai and Thai Cabin Crew." In **The 2nd LITU International Graduate Conference Proceedings: Vol. 2**, pp. 1042-1052. Bangkok: Thammasat University Press.
- Tuleja, E. A. 2009. **Intercultural Communication for Business**. Canada: Nelson Education.
- Vandenabeele, B. 2002. "The Need for Essences: On Non-Verbal Communication in First Intercultural Encounters." **South African Journal of Philosophy**. 21, 2: 85-96.
- Wang, J. 2011. **Communication and Cultural Competence: The Acquisition of Cultural Knowledge and Behavior** [Online]. Available: <http://scholarworks.grsu.edu/orpc/vol7/iss1/3>



**Assistant Professor Pornpan Boonpattanaporn** received her Master of Education in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from Chulalongkorn University. She is currently a full-time lecturer in the Department of Business English, School of Humanities and Applied Arts, University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce. Her main interests include Business English and language teaching.