



## Peer-Assisted Learning as a Platform for Intercultural Engagement: Evidence from Thai Health Sciences and Business Administration Students

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### Abstract

As higher education institutions increasingly pursue Internationalization at Home initiatives, there is growing recognition that intercultural competence development requires intentionally structured learning environments rather than incidental exposure to campus diversity. This study investigates Peer-Assisted Learning as a pedagogical platform for intercultural engagement among Thai undergraduate students enrolled in health sciences and business administration programs at a Thai university. Employing a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, data were collected from 30 Thai undergraduate students who participated in PAL sessions facilitated by international peer mentors. Data sources included English pretest and post-test scores and a validated questionnaire measuring intercultural engagement, intercultural awareness and sensitivity, personal development, and overall satisfaction. Descriptive statistics and regression analysis were conducted to examine students' perceptions and the relationships among key PAL-related constructs. The findings indicate that PAL sessions functioned as low-anxiety, socially mediated environments that supported sustained intercultural interaction, enhanced intercultural awareness, fostered confidence and personal development, and generated high levels of student satisfaction. Although improvements in English proficiency were not statistically significant, this outcome is discussed in relation to a substantial decline in PAL center attendance during the study period, which likely limited opportunities for sustained linguistic exposure. Overall, the results highlight PAL's value as an intentional and scalable mechanism for promoting intercultural learning within professionally oriented disciplines, extending its role beyond academic support to encompass broader intercultural and developmental outcomes aligned with Internationalization at Home objectives.

**Keywords:** *Peer-Assisted Learning; Intercultural Competence; Internationalization At Home; Health Sciences Education; Business Administration Education*

### 1. Introduction

As higher education institutions increasingly pursue Internationalization at Home (IaH) and curriculum internationalization initiatives, they are expected to prepare graduates not only with disciplinary knowledge but also with the communicative, collaborative, and intercultural competencies (henceforth IC) required to function effectively in globalized and digitally mediated professional environments (Swartz & Shrivastava, 2022). Within this context, IC has increasingly been conceptualized as a core graduate capability in higher education, reflecting its essential role in enabling students to communicate effectively, interact appropriately, and build constructive relationships across culturally diverse academic, professional, and social contexts (Wang & Teo, 2024). However, despite widespread recognition of intercultural communicative competence as a core outcome of undergraduate education, evidence suggests that students' intercultural development remains uneven across key dimensions and is often shaped by implicit, non-systematic exposure rather than sustained or explicitly structured intercultural engagement (Sevimel-Sahin, 2020).

Thailand has increasingly positioned itself as an international education hub for Asian students, as evidenced by sustained growth in inbound student enrollment and advantages related to low educational costs, favorable geographic location, and supportive campus environments (Pongsin et al., 2023). This has resulted

[45]



in increasingly diverse campus populations and heightened intercultural contact that underscores the need to address cross-cultural adjustment and support within local academic environments (Chaiyasat, 2020). Yet empirical evidence from Thai higher education contexts indicates that sustained and meaningful interaction between Thai students and international peers does not emerge automatically from campus diversity but is constrained by linguistic, cultural, and social factors that limit spontaneous intercultural engagement (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a). Empirical findings indicate that linguistic challenges, divergent communication styles, and interactional discomfort can constrain Thai students' ability and willingness to initiate and sustain meaningful intercultural dialogue with international peers, even within intentionally structured peer-learning environments (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). As a result, intercultural and international learning outcomes associated with IaH depend on the purposeful and intentional integration of international and intercultural dimensions into curricula; otherwise, such benefits may remain unevenly realized within everyday academic settings in the absence of deliberate pedagogical design (Falkenberg & Joyce, 2023).

In response to these challenges, recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes that meaningful interaction, dialogue, and shared meaning-making do not emerge spontaneously but require deliberately structured and intentionally facilitated learning or support environments that create low-pressure conditions for participation, reflection, and collaborative sense-making (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025c; Darley et al., 2021). Peer-Assisted Learning (henceforth PAL) has gained increasing prominence as a pedagogical approach across higher education, as reflected in growing international research attention, formal institutional implementation, and documented benefits for student learning and skill development across disciplinary contexts (Bacon et al., 2021; Burgess et al., 2014). Grounded in collaborative learning principles, PAL positions students as active contributors to one another's learning through structured dialogue, reciprocal peer support, shared instructional responsibility, and guided interaction within socially situated learning environments (Apiraksakorn & Howden, 2019; Bacon & Maneerutt, 2024). Existing research demonstrates that PAL contributes positively to students' academic achievement and progression, while also fostering active participation, sustained involvement, and supportive learning environments that enhance learners' confidence and overall satisfaction with the learning process (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a; Slabbert & Du Plessis, 2021). Although PAL has been widely examined for its contributions to academic performance, motivation, and engagement, comparatively limited empirical attention has been given to its role as a structured pedagogical space for intercultural engagement and IC development (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b).

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized that PAL can function not only as an academic support mechanism but also as a supportive and low-anxiety social learning environment that enhances communication confidence, facilitates peer support, and enables the development of positive interpersonal and socio-cultural relationships among students (Bacon et al., 2021; Veerabhadrapappa et al., 2021). When intentionally designed, PAL sessions function not only as mechanisms for academic support but also as socially mediated environments that foster learner confidence, positive self-perceptions, collaborative engagement, and interpersonal development through structured peer interaction (Arthur et al., 2022; Bacon & Maneerutt, 2024). Through sustained peer interaction within structured PAL environments, students engage in ongoing dialogue, collaborative problem solving, and perspective sharing that promote reflection, social awareness, and intercultural understanding beyond the boundaries of formal classroom instruction (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a; Hidayat et al., 2023). Despite growing recognition of PAL as a collaborative pedagogical approach, empirical research examining PAL explicitly as a structured mechanism for IC development within applied and professional disciplines remains limited, particularly in higher education contexts where peer interaction is not intentionally designed for intercultural learning outcomes (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b).

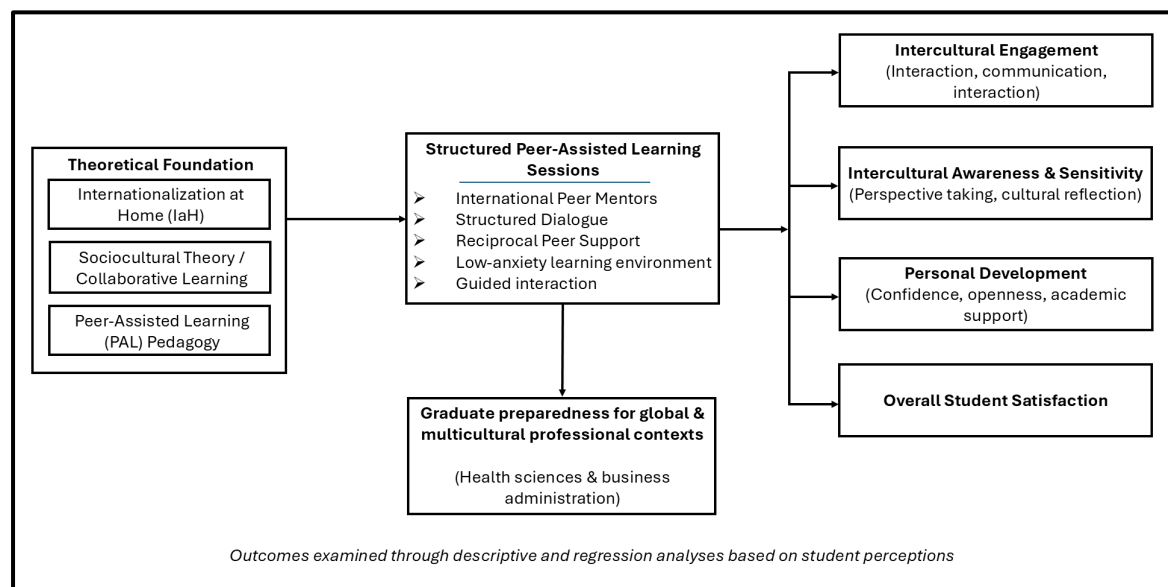
This gap is particularly salient for students in health sciences and business administration programs. These disciplines increasingly operate within global and multicultural professional landscapes, as



professional practice in both fields routinely involves cross-border collaboration and interaction with culturally diverse populations (Taras, 2016; Zhao, 2023). However, undergraduate students' opportunities to develop IC during their studies remain inconsistent and largely dependent on the availability of intentionally designed pedagogical interventions rather than being systematically embedded within standard curricula. Understanding how students in these fields experience intercultural engagement through structured peer learning environments is therefore of growing importance.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates PAL as a platform for intercultural engagement among Thai undergraduate students enrolled in health sciences and business administration programs. Focusing on PAL sessions facilitated by international peer mentors at a Thai university, this study examines how structured peer interaction supports cultural exchange, intercultural awareness, personal development, and student satisfaction. By foregrounding students' experiences within a local internationalized setting, the study seeks to contribute empirical evidence to ongoing discussions of IaH and to extend existing PAL research beyond its traditional academic focus.

By doing so, this research aims to provide both theoretical and practical insights into how PAL can be leveraged as an intentional pedagogical space for intercultural learning in higher education, particularly within professionally oriented disciplines where IC is increasingly indispensable.



**Figure 1** Theoretical framework of the study

Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework guiding this study, illustrating how PAL, grounded in IaH and sociocultural learning theory, is conceptualized as a structured platform for intercultural engagement and related student outcomes.

## 2. Research Objectives and Questions

The objectives of this study are:



- 1) To examine how participation in Peer-Assisted Learning sessions facilitates intercultural engagement between Thai students and international peer mentors in health sciences and business administration programs.
- 2) To investigate the extent to which Peer-Assisted Learning sessions contribute to Thai students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity when interacting with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- 3) To assess the perceived impact of Peer-Assisted Learning sessions on Thai students' personal development, including confidence in intercultural interaction, openness to cultural differences, and perceived academic support.
- 4) To evaluate Thai students' overall satisfaction with the intercultural learning opportunities provided through Peer-Assisted Learning sessions and to identify areas for pedagogical improvement.

Guided by the above objectives, this study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do Peer-Assisted Learning sessions facilitate intercultural engagement between Thai students and international peer mentors in health sciences and business administration programs?
- 2) To what extent do Peer-Assisted Learning sessions enhance Thai students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity?
- 3) How do Thai students perceive the influence of Peer-Assisted Learning sessions on their personal development, including confidence in intercultural interaction and perceived academic support?
- 4) How satisfied are Thai students with the intercultural learning opportunities provided through Peer-Assisted Learning sessions, and what improvements do they perceive as necessary?

### **3. Materials and Methods**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to investigate Thai undergraduate students' experiences of intercultural engagement within PAL sessions. The design was selected to capture participants' perceptions at a single point in time following sustained participation in PAL sessions, allowing for a systematic examination of intercultural engagement, intercultural awareness, personal development, and overall satisfaction. This approach is appropriate for identifying patterns and relationships across a large participant group within an authentic educational setting.

#### **3.2 Research Context**

The study was conducted at RSU Global! of Rangsit University, which functions as the university's official PAL center. The PAL sessions are structured, voluntary, and facilitated by trained international peer mentors. Sessions emphasize collaborative learning, peer interaction, and student-led engagement rather than direct instruction. Each session typically lasts a minimum of 30 minutes and provides a low-anxiety environment designed to support both academic development and intercultural interaction.

#### **3.3 Participants**

The participants comprised 30 Thai undergraduate students enrolled in health sciences and business administration programs who actively participated in PAL sessions during the academic term. These students were primarily first-year undergraduates with English proficiency ranging from beginner to intermediate



levels. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all respondents had attended PAL sessions during the study period.

A purposive sampling approach was employed to ensure that participants had sufficient exposure to PAL sessions to meaningfully evaluate their intercultural experiences. Attendance records were used to confirm engagement with the program prior to questionnaire distribution.

### 3.4 Research Instruments

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire designed to measure students' perceptions of intercultural engagement within PAL sessions. The instrument consisted of 30 items organized into five constructs:

- 1) Interaction and communication
- 2) Cultural awareness and sensitivity
- 3) Collaborative learning
- 4) Personal growth and development
- 5) Overall satisfaction and recommendations

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The questionnaire was developed based on established literature on PAL, IC, and collaborative learning, and was aligned explicitly with the study's research objectives and questions.

### 3.5 Validity and Reliability

To establish content validity, the questionnaire items were evaluated by three experts in education and second language pedagogy. The Item Objective Congruence (henceforth IOC) procedure was used to assess alignment between questionnaire items and research objectives. All items met acceptable IOC criteria and were retained for data collection.

Instrument reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to evaluate internal consistency. Pilot testing with undergraduate students who were not part of the main study yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.964 across the 30 items, indicating excellent internal reliability and suitability for quantitative analysis.

### 3.6 Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online at the conclusion of the PAL program period. Participants accessed the questionnaire via a QR code displayed at the PAL center following their final session. No personally identifiable information was collected, and responses were submitted anonymously to encourage candid participation.

Data collection was overseen by the principal investigator to ensure consistency and ethical compliance. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were informed that declining or withdrawing would have no academic consequences.

### 3.7 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize participants' responses, including means and standard deviations for each questionnaire construct. These analyses provided an overview of students' perceptions of intercultural engagement within PAL sessions.

To further examine the relationships between PAL-related constructs and perceived intercultural engagement outcomes, regression analysis was conducted. This analysis allowed for the identification of key predictors associated with students' intercultural awareness, personal development, and satisfaction. Statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$ .



### 3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as research participants. Informed consent was obtained electronically before questionnaire completion. All data were stored securely and accessed only by the research team. Following completion of the study, data will be retained for the required institutional period and then permanently deleted.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the quantitative findings of the study and interprets them in relation to the four research questions and the theoretical and empirical literature outlined in the Introduction. Results are organized thematically according to each research question, integrating descriptive statistics and regression analysis to provide a comprehensive account of students' intercultural engagement through PAL.

### 4.1 Research Question 1

*How do Peer-Assisted Learning sessions facilitate intercultural engagement between Thai students and international peer mentors in health sciences and business administration programs?*

Descriptive analysis of questionnaire responses indicates that PAL sessions functioned as effective platforms for structured intercultural engagement. As shown in Table 1, students reported high levels of interactional participation, openness to communication, and willingness to engage with international peer mentors. Mean scores across interaction and communication items consistently exceeded the scale midpoint, suggesting that PAL sessions successfully created low-anxiety environments conducive to cross-cultural dialogue.

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics for Intercultural Engagement and Interaction (n = 30)

Construct	Mean	SD
Interaction and communication	4.18	0.52
Collaborative learning	4.12	0.49
Cultural exchange opportunities	4.21	0.46

These findings support earlier arguments in the Introduction that meaningful intercultural interaction does not emerge spontaneously but requires intentionally structured learning environments (Darley et al., 2021; Bacon & Torremucha, 2025c). Consistent with prior PAL research, the results suggest that structured peer interaction lowers affective barriers and facilitates sustained intercultural engagement beyond formal classroom boundaries (Bacon et al., 2021; Arthur et al., 2022).

### 4.2 Research Question 2

*To what extent do Peer-Assisted Learning sessions enhance Thai students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity?*

Students reported positive outcomes related to intercultural awareness and sensitivity. As illustrated in Table 2, respondents indicated increased awareness of cultural differences, improved sensitivity to diverse communication styles, and greater reflection on their own cultural assumptions.

**Table 2** Descriptive Statistics for Intercultural Awareness and Sensitivity

Construct	Mean	SD
Cultural awareness and sensitivity	4.09	0.55
Perspective taking	4.03	0.58



Respect for cultural difference	4.26	0.44
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These findings align closely with the Introduction's discussion of IC as a core graduate attribute in internationalized higher education (Wang & Teo, 2024). They further corroborate claims that PAL environments support reflective engagement and social awareness through repeated, guided peer interaction (Hidayat et al., 2023; Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a).

### 4.3 Research Question 3

*How do Thai students perceive the influence of Peer-Assisted Learning sessions on their personal development, including confidence in intercultural interaction and perceived academic support?*

Descriptive results indicate that PAL participation contributed positively to students' personal development. Students reported increased confidence when communicating in intercultural settings, greater willingness to initiate interaction, and a heightened sense of peer support.

**Table 3** Descriptive Statistics for Personal Development and Confidence

Construct	Mean	SD
Confidence in intercultural interaction	4.15	0.51
Perceived academic support	4.11	0.54
Personal growth and openness	4.17	0.48

To further examine these relationships, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with overall satisfaction as the dependent variable and intercultural engagement, intercultural awareness, and personal development as predictors. The model explained a substantial proportion of variance in student satisfaction, indicating that personal development and intercultural engagement were significant positive predictors.

These findings reinforce prior research emphasizing the socially mediated benefits of PAL, including confidence building, interpersonal growth, and supportive peer relationships (Veerabhadrapa et al., 2021; Bacon & Maneerutt, 2024). Importantly, the results demonstrate that intercultural learning outcomes are closely intertwined with students' perceptions of personal growth, consistent with sociocultural and collaborative learning frameworks discussed in the Introduction (Apiraksakorn & Howden, 2019).

### 4.4 Research Question 4

*How satisfied are Thai students with the intercultural learning opportunities provided through Peer-Assisted Learning sessions, and what improvements do they perceive as necessary?*

Overall satisfaction with PAL sessions was high, with students expressing strong agreement that the program contributed meaningfully to both intercultural learning and academic support. Satisfaction scores were positively associated with perceived intercultural engagement and personal development, suggesting that students valued PAL primarily as a holistic learning environment rather than a narrowly academic support mechanism.

At the same time, interpretation of English proficiency outcomes warrants careful consideration. Analysis of pretest and post-test English scores revealed no statistically significant improvement over the study period. One plausible contextual explanation for this finding relates to institutional participation trends: student attendance at the PAL center decreased substantially from approximately 4,500 students in the previous academic year to approximately 2,500 students in the most recent academic year. This reduction in attendance likely limited opportunities for sustained linguistic exposure and repeated practice, which may have constrained measurable gains in English proficiency.

Conversely, had statistically significant improvement been observed, it would suggest that gains occurred in spite of reduced attendance, underscoring the robustness of PAL as a pedagogical intervention.



Regardless, the present findings align with prior research suggesting that PAL's primary value may lie in affective, interpersonal, and intercultural domains rather than short-term language score gains alone (Slabbert & Du Plessis, 2021; Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b).

#### **4.5 Synthesis and Implications**

Taken together, the results provide empirical support for the conceptual arguments advanced in the Introduction. PAL sessions functioned as intentionally structured, low-pressure environments that facilitated intercultural engagement, awareness, personal development, and student satisfaction. While immediate language test gains were limited, the broader intercultural and developmental outcomes align with IaH objectives and underscore the importance of sustained, well-resourced peer learning initiatives.

These findings contribute to the growing body of literature positioning PAL not only as an academic support strategy but also as a meaningful platform for intercultural learning within professionally oriented disciplines such as health sciences and business administration.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study examined PAL as a structured platform for intercultural engagement among Thai undergraduate students enrolled in health sciences and business administration programs within an internationalized higher education context. Guided by IaH principles and sociocultural perspectives on collaborative learning, the findings provide empirical evidence that intentionally designed PAL sessions can support meaningful intercultural interaction, enhance intercultural awareness and sensitivity, foster personal development, and generate high levels of student satisfaction.

Across all four research questions, results indicate that PAL sessions functioned as low-anxiety, socially mediated environments that enabled sustained peer interaction and facilitated intercultural dialogue that does not typically emerge through campus diversity alone. Students reported positive experiences related to interaction and communication with international peer mentors, increased awareness of cultural differences, greater confidence in intercultural engagement, and strong perceptions of peer and academic support. These outcomes reinforce prior scholarship emphasizing that intercultural learning requires deliberate pedagogical structuring rather than incidental exposure, and that peer-based learning environments can play a critical role in creating conditions conducive to dialogue, reflection, and shared meaning-making.

While questionnaire data demonstrated consistently positive intercultural and developmental outcomes, analysis of English pretest and post-test scores revealed no statistically significant improvement over the study period. One plausible contextual factor influencing this result is the substantial decline in PAL center attendance from the previous academic year, which likely reduced opportunities for repeated linguistic exposure and sustained practice. Importantly, this finding underscores that PAL's primary contribution in the present context lies not in short-term language score gains alone, but in broader affective, interpersonal, and intercultural dimensions that are central to graduate preparedness in globally oriented professional fields.

Taken together, the findings position PAL as a valuable and underutilized mechanism for advancing intercultural learning within applied and professional disciplines, particularly in contexts where formal curricula may not systematically embed IC development. For institutions pursuing IaH, PAL offers a scalable and student-centered approach for translating campus diversity into meaningful intercultural learning experiences.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relied on a relatively small sample size and a cross-sectional design, which limits generalizability and precludes causal inference. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse participant groups, and mixed-methods approaches to capture developmental trajectories and deepen understanding of students' lived intercultural experiences within PAL environments.



In conclusion, this study contributes empirical support to growing calls for intentionally structured peer-learning environments as critical sites for intercultural engagement in higher education. By demonstrating how PAL can function beyond academic support to foster intercultural awareness, confidence, and personal growth, the findings offer both theoretical and practical insights for institutions seeking to align internationalization goals with meaningful student learning outcomes in health sciences, business administration, and related professional disciplines.

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