



Intercultural Engagement through Peer-Assisted Learning: Thai Students' Experiences in Applied Digital and Service Disciplines

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Abstract

In this paper, 1) Introduction: Peer-Assisted Learning is examined as a structured pedagogical space that extends beyond academic support to facilitate intercultural engagement within Internationalization at Home, particularly in Thai higher education and applied digital and service disciplines. 2) Objectives: The study aims to investigate how PAL sessions support intercultural interaction, intercultural awareness, personal development, and overall student satisfaction among Thai undergraduate students. 3) Materials and Methods: A quantitative research design was employed involving Thai first-year students who voluntarily participated in PAL sessions over a 10-week period at a university-based PAL center. Data were collected using an English proficiency pretest and post-test and a 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed through descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis. 4) Results and Discussion: The findings indicate that formal English proficiency remained largely stable across the program, with post-test scores strongly predicted by pretest performance, reflecting the engagement-focused orientation of PAL. In contrast, students reported consistently positive perceptions across all questionnaire dimensions, and regression analysis showed that satisfaction with PAL quality was significantly predicted by clearly communicated program objectives and perceived academic usefulness rather than social comfort alone. 5) Conclusion: The study concludes that while PAL does not produce short-term gains in formal English proficiency, it serves as an effective, low-anxiety platform for intercultural engagement, communication confidence, and positive learning experiences, providing empirical support for PAL-based Internationalization at Home initiatives in Thai higher education.

Keywords: *Peer-Assisted Learning, Intercultural Competence, Internationalization At Home, Thai Higher Education, Applied Digital And Service Disciplines Small D*

1. Introduction

As higher education institutions and policy bodies expand international mobility initiatives, increasing attention has been placed on enabling students to access international experiences that support intercultural learning and personal development (Di Pietro, 2023). Contemporary universities are increasingly expected to prepare graduates who possess strong communication skills, teamwork abilities, critical thinking, ethical professionalism, and a willingness to learn, as these soft skills are valued by employers as more important than technical competencies for entry-level professional success (Jones et al., 2018). However, despite growing international student populations and the widespread use of English as a medium of instruction, opportunities for sustained and meaningful intercultural interaction within higher education remain uneven across institutional and cultural contexts and, without deliberately structured and scaffolded learning activities, students often have limited opportunities to engage deeply with peers from different cultural backgrounds (Custer & Tuominen, 2017).

Within Thai higher education, internationalization remains constrained by institutional cultures, nationalist curricula, and hierarchical educational traditions that complicate the meaningful integration of international students (Waters & Day, 2022). Thailand has emerged as a regional hub for international education due to its strategic location, affordability, and expanding English-medium programs. Empirical



evidence indicates that linguistic limitations, culturally shaped communication norms such as anxiety and conflict avoidance, and unfamiliar interactional contexts can constrain Thai students' engagement with peers, thereby limiting opportunities for sustained intercultural interaction and learning (Pratama et al., 2024). As a result, the potential benefits of internationalization, especially those related to intercultural competence (henceforth IC) focusing primarily on formal coursework and classroom-based instruction is often insufficient to fully realize students' intercultural development within everyday academic settings (Witayarat, 2023).

Peer-Assisted Learning (henceforth PAL) is widely conceptualized in higher education as a structured, collaborative pedagogical approach in which students alternate roles as learners and peer supporters, fostering reciprocal academic support, active peer interaction, and shared responsibility for learning (Bacon & Maneerutt, 2024). Traditionally, PAL has been examined in higher education in relation to students' academic performance, perceived learning benefits, and satisfaction with peer-supported instructional experiences (Bacon et al., 2021). More recently, scholars have begun to recognize its broader social and developmental affordances, particularly in fostering emotional safety, meaningful peer interaction, and the development of communicative confidence, social relationships, and shared intercultural understanding (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a). These characteristics position PAL as a promising platform for fostering intercultural engagement, especially when implemented within culturally diverse learning communities (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b).

Despite this potential, empirical investigations of PAL as a structured context for intercultural engagement remain limited, particularly within non-mobility, campus-based higher education settings in Southeast Asia (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). Existing research on IC in Thai higher education has largely concentrated on language classroom instruction and Anglophone-oriented perspectives, giving comparatively limited attention to how local students' intercultural understanding develops beyond these instructional contexts (Witayarat, 2023). Students enrolled in applied digital and service disciplines, such as computer art, computer games & Esports, computer science, and multi-platform radio and television are increasingly operated in professional contexts that demand intercultural communication, teamwork, and adaptability. Understanding students' experiences of intercultural engagement within institutionally embedded Internationalization at Home (henceforth IaH) activities has become increasingly important, particularly in contexts where such interactions represent students' primary exposure to global learning during their university studies (Custer & Tuominen, 2017).

This study addresses this gap by examining Thai students' experiences of intercultural engagement through participation in PAL sessions at a university-based PAL center. Drawing on participatory action research, the study explores how structured peer interaction with international peer mentors supports cultural exchange, intercultural awareness, and personal development among Thai students from applied digital and service disciplines. By focusing on everyday learning encounters rather than formal international programs, the study contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding IaH and inclusive approaches to intercultural education.

By situating PAL as both an academic support mechanism and an intercultural learning space, this research seeks to provide empirical insights into how universities can more effectively leverage peer learning structures to promote intercultural engagement. The findings are expected to inform institutional practice, contribute to the growing body of PAL and IC research, and support the development of inclusive learning environments that prepare students for participation in increasingly multicultural academic and professional landscapes.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

The specific research objectives of this study are to:



- 1) examine how PAL sessions facilitate intercultural interaction and cultural exchange between Thai students and international peer mentors through structured peer learning activities;
- 2) investigate the impact of participation in PAL sessions on Thai students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity, including their openness toward diverse cultural perspectives;
- 3) explore Thai students' perceptions of personal development outcomes associated with intercultural engagement in PAL sessions, including communication confidence, interactional comfort, and global awareness; and
- 4) assess Thai students' overall satisfaction with PAL sessions as a platform for intercultural engagement and identify factors perceived as contributing to session effectiveness.

To address these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do PAL sessions facilitate intercultural interaction and cultural exchange between Thai students and international peer mentors?
- 2) To what extent does participation in PAL sessions influence Thai students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity?
- 3) How do Thai students perceive the personal development outcomes associated with intercultural engagement in PAL sessions?
- 4) What factors predict Thai students' overall satisfaction with PAL sessions as a platform for intercultural engagement?

By addressing these research objectives and questions, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence on how PAL can function as an inclusive, structured, and contextually responsive approach to fostering intercultural engagement within Thai higher education, particularly for students whose primary exposure to global learning occurs through campus-based learning environments rather than international mobility programs.

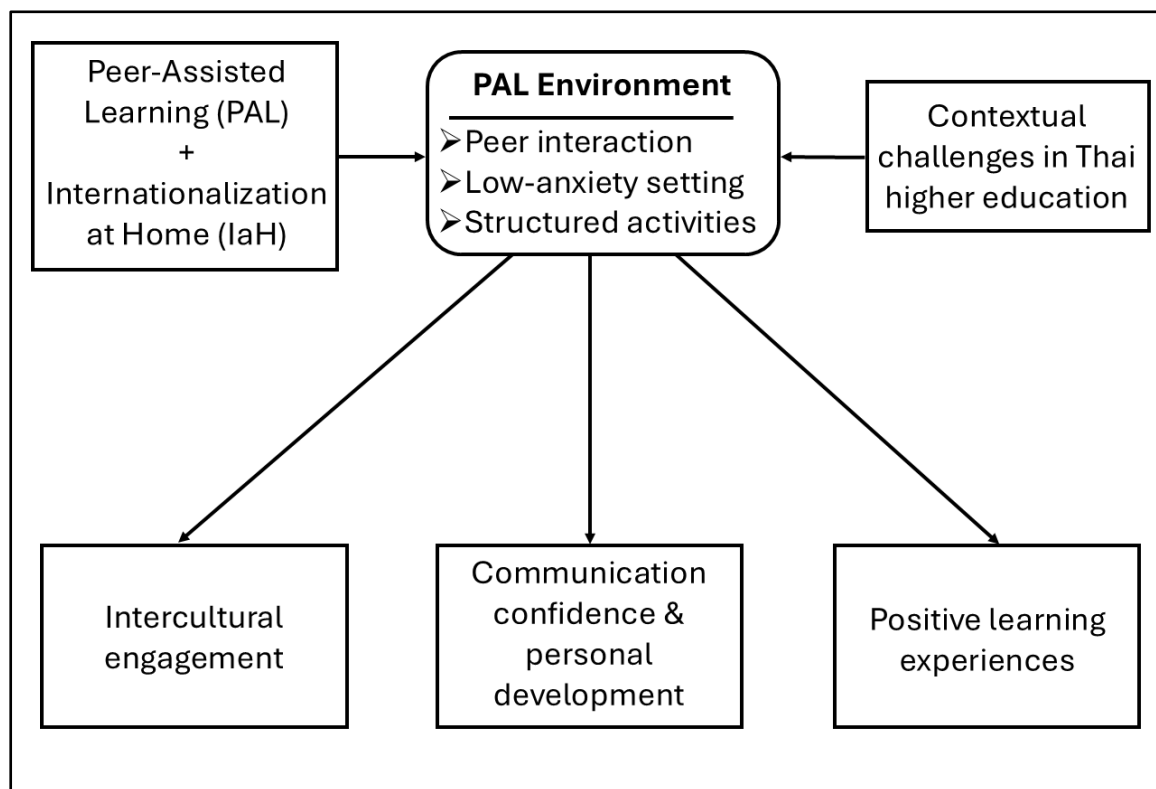


Figure 1 Theoretical framework of the study

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework guiding this study, positioning PAL within an IaH context as a structured environment for intercultural engagement. The framework conceptualizes PAL as a low-anxiety, peer-led setting in which intentional interaction and collaborative activities facilitate intercultural awareness, communication confidence, and personal development among Thai undergraduate students. These outcomes are understood to emerge through repeated, structured peer interaction rather than short-term gains in formal language proficiency. The model further emphasizes the role of clear program objectives and perceived academic relevance in shaping students' overall learning experiences and satisfaction. This framework informs the development of the research objectives, questions, and analytical approach adopted in the study.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine Thai students' intercultural engagement through participation in PAL sessions. The design focused on identifying statistical relationships between students' engagement in PAL sessions and key outcomes related to intercultural awareness, communication confidence, personal development, and overall satisfaction. Regression analysis was used as the primary analytical method to assess the predictive relationships among the study variables.



3.2 Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at RSU Global! at Rangsit University, the institution's official PAL center. Participants consisted of Thai undergraduate students enrolled in applied digital and service disciplines, including digital media, computer-based programs, health-related fields, and service-oriented majors. All participants were first-year students enrolled in a general education English course and voluntarily attended PAL sessions over a 10-week period during Term 1.

Approximately 2,000 Thai students participated in PAL sessions during the study period and were invited to complete the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

3.3 Description of PAL Sessions

PAL sessions were structured, collaborative learning activities facilitated by trained international peer mentors. Sessions typically lasted a minimum of 30 minutes and emphasized small-group interaction, discussion, and peer support rather than direct instruction. In addition to academic assistance, the sessions provided structured opportunities for intercultural interaction, allowing Thai students to engage in communication and collaborative tasks with international peer mentors in a supportive learning environment.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

3.4.1 English pretest and post-test

An English proficiency pretest and post-test were administered to measure students' formal English language performance before and after participation in the 10-week PAL program. The pretest was conducted prior to the commencement of the PAL sessions, while the post-test was administered immediately following the completion of the program. The tests were designed to assess students' general English proficiency and provided a baseline and outcome measure for examining whether participation in PAL sessions was associated with changes in formal language performance. The pretest and post-test scores were used as variables in the regression analysis to explore relationships between initial proficiency and post-program outcomes.

3.4.2 Questionnaire

A 30-item questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data on students' perceptions of intercultural engagement in PAL sessions. The questionnaire measured five dimensions: interaction and communication, cultural awareness and sensitivity, collaborative learning, personal growth and development, and overall satisfaction. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire was administered online via a QR code after students completed their final PAL session. Responses from the questionnaire served as the primary data source for the regression analyses examining predictors of intercultural engagement outcomes.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

Content validity of the questionnaire was established through expert review by three university lecturers specializing in education and language pedagogy. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with the instrument demonstrating excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.964$).

3.6 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' responses across all questionnaire items. Regression analysis was conducted to examine the extent to which engagement-related variables within PAL sessions predicted



outcomes associated with intercultural awareness, communication confidence, personal development, and overall satisfaction. This approach enabled an examination of the strength and direction of relationships between PAL participation and intercultural engagement outcomes.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the institutional review process at Rangsit University. Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was collected. All responses were anonymized, securely stored, and accessed only by the researchers. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

4. Results and Discussion

Responding directly to the concerns raised in the Introduction regarding the uneven realization of intercultural engagement within Thai higher education and the need for deliberately structured IaH initiatives beyond the formal classroom (Custer & Tuominen, 2017; Waters & Day, 2022; Witayarat, 2023), this section presents and interprets the empirical findings of the study. As outlined earlier, PAL was conceptualized not as a short-term language intervention, but as a structured, low-anxiety pedagogical space designed to facilitate intercultural interaction, communication confidence, and meaningful peer engagement (Bacon et al., 2021; Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a).

In line with this conceptual framing, both descriptive statistics and multiple regression analyses were employed to examine students' English proficiency outcomes, perceptions of intercultural engagement, personal development, and overall satisfaction with PAL sessions. To ensure analytical clarity and coherence, the Results and Discussion are organized according to the four research questions, with each subsection explicitly linked to the theoretical and empirical foundations established in the Introduction.

4.1 Research Question 1

How do PAL sessions facilitate intercultural interaction and cultural exchange between Thai students and international peer mentors?

Descriptive analysis of questionnaire items related to interaction, communication, and peer engagement indicates that PAL sessions functioned as effective platforms for facilitating intercultural interaction in a structured and supportive manner. Students reported high levels of comfort engaging with international peer mentors, actively participating in discussion, and collaborating across linguistic and cultural differences.

As shown in Table 1, mean scores for items measuring interaction and peer belonging consistently exceeded 4.20 on a five-point Likert scale, indicating strong agreement that PAL sessions provided meaningful opportunities for intercultural exchange.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Intercultural Interaction and Communication

Dimension	Item Range	Mean (M)	SD
Interaction and Communication	Q1-Q6	4.22	0.68
Peer Comfort and Belonging	Q7-Q12	4.21	0.71

These findings directly support arguments advanced in the Introduction that Thai students' intercultural engagement is often constrained by linguistic anxiety, hierarchical communication norms, and conflict avoidance within traditional academic settings (Pratama et al., 2024; Waters & Day, 2022). Consistent with prior PAL research, the structured and peer-led nature of the sessions appears to have reduced social distance and created a low-anxiety environment conducive to reciprocal interaction (Bacon et al., 2021).



In this sense, PAL operationalized the type of deliberately scaffolded interaction that Custer and Tuominen (2017) argue is essential for effective IaH initiatives.

4.2 Research Question 2

To what extent does participation in PAL sessions influence Thai students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity?

Students reported consistently positive perceptions regarding intercultural awareness, openness toward diverse perspectives, and sensitivity to cultural differences. Descriptive statistics for items measuring cultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity revealed high mean scores with relatively low dispersion, suggesting that these perceptions were broadly shared across participants.

As presented in Table 2, the overall mean for this dimension was 4.25, indicating strong agreement that PAL participation contributed to greater intercultural awareness.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Intercultural Awareness and Sensitivity

Dimension	Item Range	Mean (M)	SD
Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity	Q13–Q18	4.25	0.66

These results align closely with claims made in the Introduction that IC development within Thai higher education often occurs outside formal coursework and is shaped by everyday interactional experiences rather than explicit instruction alone (Witayarat, 2023). The findings suggest that PAL sessions provided students with repeated exposure to intercultural communication in a structured context, supporting gradual awareness building consistent with IaH frameworks (Custer & Tuominen, 2017). This reinforces the argument that intercultural learning can be meaningfully fostered even in non-mobility, campus-based settings when interaction is intentionally designed.

4.3 Research Question 3

How do Thai students perceive the personal development outcomes associated with intercultural engagement in PAL sessions?

Students reported strong perceptions of personal development related to communication confidence, interactional comfort, and global awareness. Items measuring willingness to speak English, confidence interacting with international peers, and perceived readiness for multicultural environments received particularly high ratings.

As shown in Table 3, the personal growth and development dimension recorded the highest overall mean among the questionnaire subscales.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Personal Development Outcomes

Dimension	Item Range	Mean (M)	SD
Personal Growth and Development	Q19–Q24	4.27	0.64

These findings provide empirical support for the Introduction's claim that PAL offers benefits extending beyond academic support, particularly in fostering communication confidence and affective readiness for intercultural engagement (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a). Rather than emphasizing linguistic accuracy or formal proficiency, PAL appears to have supported students' willingness to participate, a critical precursor to IC development in contexts where students may otherwise remain reticent (Pratama et al., 2024). This aligns with sociocultural perspectives on learning, which emphasize participation and interaction as foundational to development.



4.4 Research Question 4

What factors predict Thai students' overall satisfaction with PAL sessions as a platform for intercultural engagement?

To examine predictors of overall satisfaction with PAL sessions, a multiple regression analysis was conducted using overall satisfaction as the dependent variable. Predictor variables were selected based on theoretical claims presented in the Introduction, namely clarity of program objectives, perceived academic usefulness, and comfort interacting with peers.

The regression results, presented in Table 4, indicate that clarity of objectives and perceived academic usefulness were significant predictors of satisfaction, while peer interaction comfort alone was not statistically significant.

Table 4 Multiple Regression Predicting Overall PAL Satisfaction

Dimension	B	p
Clear program objectives	0.65	< .001
Perceived academic usefulness	0.31	.038
Peer interaction comfort	0.09	.214

The model explained a substantial proportion of variance in satisfaction ($R^2 = .75$, $p < .001$). These findings reinforce arguments made in the Introduction that meaningful intercultural engagement does not arise automatically from social contact alone but depends on intentional design, clear expectations, and academic relevance (Custer & Tuominen, 2017; Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). While a supportive social environment remains important, students' evaluations of PAL quality were driven primarily by structure and perceived usefulness, underscoring the importance of purposeful program design in sustaining engagement.

4.5 English Proficiency Outcomes and Attendance Context

Descriptive analysis of English pretest and posttest scores indicated no statistically significant improvement in formal English proficiency across the 10-week PAL program. Regression analysis further showed that posttest scores were strongly predicted by pretest performance, indicating stability rather than measurable short-term gains.

One contextual factor that may help explain this outcome is the substantial decline in PAL center attendance compared to the previous academic year, which decreased from approximately 4,500 students to roughly 2,500 students. Reduced attendance likely limited sustained participation and frequency of exposure, thereby constraining opportunities for cumulative language development. If significant English proficiency gains had been observed, such improvement would have occurred in spite of this decline in student participation.

Importantly, the absence of significant language gains should not be interpreted as a limitation of the PAL model. As emphasized in the Introduction, PAL within IaH frameworks is designed to support intercultural engagement, communication confidence, and peer interaction rather than rapid improvements in standardized language test scores (Bacon et al., 2021). The observed stability in English proficiency is therefore theoretically consistent with the engagement-focused orientation of the program.

4.6 Integrated Discussion

Taken together, the results reveal a clear pattern. While formal English proficiency remained stable, students reported consistently positive intercultural, interpersonal, and experiential outcomes. Regression findings further demonstrate that satisfaction with PAL was driven primarily by intentional structure and perceived academic value rather than social comfort alone.



These findings directly address gaps identified in the Introduction regarding the uneven realization of intercultural learning within Thai higher education. PAL functioned as an inclusive, low anxiety, and academically grounded platform for intercultural engagement, supporting Thai students' communication confidence and openness to diversity within everyday campus settings. As such, the results provide empirical support for PAL based IaH initiatives as viable and contextually responsive approaches to intercultural education.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine PAL as a structured IaH initiative and its capacity to facilitate intercultural engagement among Thai undergraduate students enrolled in applied digital and service disciplines. Drawing on quantitative evidence from English pretest and post-test scores and a multidimensional questionnaire, the findings demonstrate that while participation in PAL did not lead to short-term gains in formal English proficiency, it played a meaningful role in fostering intercultural interaction, communication confidence, personal development, and overall positive learning experiences.

The stability observed in English proficiency outcomes is theoretically consistent with the engagement-oriented design of PAL. Rather than functioning as an intensive language intervention, PAL served as a low-anxiety, peer-supported environment that encouraged participation, dialogue, and intercultural exchange. This finding is particularly salient given the contextual challenge of reduced PAL center attendance during the study period. The absence of significant language gains should therefore not be interpreted as a program limitation but as evidence that PAL's primary contribution lies in affective, interactional, and experiential domains rather than immediate linguistic improvement.

Importantly, students reported consistently high levels of intercultural awareness, openness to diverse perspectives, and confidence engaging with international peers. These outcomes directly address concerns raised in the literature regarding the uneven realization of intercultural learning within Thai higher education and the limitations of relying solely on formal classroom instruction. The results suggest that repeated, structured peer interaction can support intercultural development even in non-mobility, campus-based contexts, thereby reinforcing the value of PAL as an inclusive IaH strategy.

Regression analysis further revealed that students' overall satisfaction with PAL was strongly predicted by clear program objectives and perceived academic usefulness, rather than social comfort alone. This finding underscores the importance of intentional design, structure, and pedagogical purpose in sustaining meaningful engagement. Simply bringing students together is insufficient; intercultural benefits emerge when interaction is scaffolded, goal-oriented, and aligned with students' academic expectations.

Taken together, the findings provide empirical support for reconceptualizing PAL as more than an academic support mechanism. Within Thai higher education, PAL can function as a viable, contextually responsive platform for intercultural engagement, contributing to students' communication confidence, personal growth, and readiness to participate in increasingly multicultural academic and professional environments. For institutions seeking to advance IaH in equitable and scalable ways, PAL represents a promising approach that leverages existing peer learning structures to create meaningful intercultural learning opportunities within everyday university life full stop

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