



Peer-Assisted Learning as a Platform for Intercultural Development among Thai Students in Applied Sciences, Technology, and Health Sciences

Edward Devere Bacon*, and Gary Ambito Torremucha

Rangsit University International College, Rangsit University, Pathum Thani, Thailand

*Corresponding author, E-mail: superduperreadyeddie@rsu.ac.th

Abstract

In this paper, 1) the study situates Peer-Assisted Learning within Internationalization at Home and intercultural competence development by addressing persistent challenges related to uneven and often superficial intercultural engagement among Thai undergraduate students, particularly within applied and professionally oriented disciplines, despite increasing campus diversity and internationalization efforts. 2) Adopting a participatory action research design with a quantitative approach, data were collected from Thai undergraduates enrolled in Applied Sciences, Technology, and Health Sciences programs through a structured questionnaire examining intercultural interaction, cultural awareness, collaborative learning, personal development, and satisfaction, alongside an English proficiency pretest and posttest administered over a 10-week PAL program, with descriptive statistics and regression analyses employed to examine patterns and predictive relationships among variables. 3) The findings indicate that PAL sessions function as effective platforms for sustained intercultural interaction, with interaction quality and collaborative learning emerging as significant predictors of perceived intercultural engagement and personal development, while English proficiency scores remained largely stable, reflecting the program's emphasis on intercultural and socio-communicative development rather than explicit language instruction, thereby supporting the reconceptualization of PAL as a structured pedagogical space that extends beyond academic support to foster intercultural competence within applied and professional higher education contexts.

Keywords: *Peer-Assisted Learning; Intercultural Competence; Internationalization at Home; Applied Sciences and Health Education Health Sciences? ; Thai Higher Education*

1. Introduction

As higher education institutions pursue internationalization and global citizenship education agendas, increasing emphasis is placed on developing graduates' intercultural competence (henceforth IC), effective communication, and capacity for collaboration across cultural boundaries in response to the demands of an interconnected and globalized world (Van Rompay-Bartels & Watkins, 2025). In this context, increasing emphasis has been placed on developing students' capacity to engage effectively across national and cultural boundaries as part of their academic and professional preparation (Kolm et al., 2024). However, despite sustained institutional efforts to internationalize curricula and campus life, empirical evidence from Internationalization at Home (henceforth IaH) contexts indicate outcomes are unevenly developed, with students demonstrating strengths in intercultural awareness and engagement but persistently lower levels of interaction confidence within everyday academic settings (Feng et al., 2025).

Over the past two decades, Thailand has increasingly positioned itself as an international education hub for students from the Asian region, supported by sustained growth in international enrollments and advantages related to geographic location, comparatively low educational costs, and campus environments that are welcoming to international students (Pongsin et al., 2023). Thai universities have experienced a sustained increase in the enrollment of international students from a wide range of countries, a trend that has expanded the cultural diversity of local academic environments and created enhanced opportunities for multicultural interaction and intercultural learning among domestic and international students (Jampaklaya et al., 2022). Yet empirical evidence indicates that opportunities for sustained and meaningful intercultural

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interaction are uneven, with some students reporting limited depth of engagement and others experiencing only superficial or constrained intercultural contact (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). Linguistic challenges, indirect communication styles, and hierarchical academic norms have been shown to constrain student participation and limit open interaction within intercultural peer learning environments, thereby shaping how students engage with peers from different cultural backgrounds (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a). As a result, the integration of intercultural learning within higher education curricula often remains uneven, fragmented, and dependent on individual academic practices rather than being systematically embedded through clearly articulated learning outcomes, assessment structures, and coordinated institutional strategies (Soule, 2025).

To address these challenges, recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of structured and intentionally designed internationalization experiences that integrate intercultural and socio-emotional dimensions into teaching and learning processes, thereby fostering inclusive and supportive environments that facilitate interaction, relationship building, and intercultural competence development (Montes Granada et al., 2025). Within this discourse, Peer-Assisted Learning (henceforth PAL) is widely conceptualized as a structured, collaborative learning approach in which students actively contribute to one another's learning through reciprocal support, peer teaching, and shared knowledge construction within socially and cognitively congruent learning environments (Bacon et al., 2021; Slabbert & Du Plessis, 2021). Traditionally, PAL has been predominantly examined as a structured academic support strategy, with empirical research focusing largely on its effects on course performance, persistence or retention, and student satisfaction, particularly within high-stakes undergraduate learning contexts (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a; Ellison et al., 2023). However, recent scholarship has increasingly recognized PAL as extending beyond academic outcomes to encompass broader social and developmental affordances, particularly in supporting communication confidence, peer belonging, and sustained intercultural engagement through structured peer interaction (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b; Hidayat et al., 2023). Despite recognition for its academic benefits, empirical research examining PAL as a structured site for intercultural learning remains underdeveloped, particularly within Southeast Asian higher education contexts and among underrepresented student populations (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025c).

This research gap is particularly pronounced in applied and professionally oriented fields such as Applied Sciences, Technology, and Health Sciences. Students in disciplines including multimedia, engineering, health sciences, and medical-related programs often engage in practice-based learning environments that require teamwork, problem solving, and effective communication. As professional and academic fields, including applied and professionally oriented disciplines, increasingly operate within globalized and multicultural contexts, undergraduate students' development of IC remains uneven and largely dependent on the availability of intentionally designed pedagogical interventions rather than being systematically embedded within standard curricula (Paronyan & Ayunts, 2025). Existing research has tended to focus on international student experiences or discipline-specific academic outcomes, with comparatively less attention given to how local students in applied and technical fields engage interculturally through structured peer learning environments.

Within this context, PAL functions as a structured pedagogical platform that facilitates meaningful intercultural engagement between Thai students and international peers by creating inclusive spaces for sustained interaction, collaborative learning, and cross-cultural exchange within Thai higher education contexts (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a). By structuring sustained interaction between students and peer mentors from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, PAL sessions create supportive, low-pressure learning environments that foster socio-cultural relationship building, encourage communication in English, and enable meaningful intercultural interaction (Bacon et al., 2021). Grounded in collaborative learning and sociocultural theory, Peer-Assisted Learning emphasizes reciprocal peer interaction, shared responsibility, and scaffolded support through structured social engagement, aligning with core processes associated with intercultural competence development such as perspective-taking, dialogue, and socially mediated meaning-making (Bacon & Maneerutt, 2024; Mccarthy & Armstrong, 2019; Qiu & Lee, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). When intentionally structured, PAL can function not only as a form of academic support but also as a socially



grounded learning space that fosters interpersonal growth, identity development through peer roles, and communities of learning, while in culturally diverse contexts it can further enable meaningful cultural exchange and IC development through sustained peer interaction (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b; Slabbert & Du Plessis, 2021).

Accordingly, this study investigates the role of PAL sessions in facilitating intercultural engagement among Thai undergraduate students enrolled in Applied Sciences, Technology, and Health Sciences programs at a Thai university. Specifically, the study examines how participation in PAL sessions influences students' intercultural awareness, communication confidence, personal development, and perceptions of cultural exchange with international peer-mentors. By focusing on applied and professionally oriented disciplines, this research responds directly to gaps in the existing literature and contributes empirical evidence to ongoing discussions surrounding IaH, IC development, and the expanded pedagogical value of PAL in higher education.

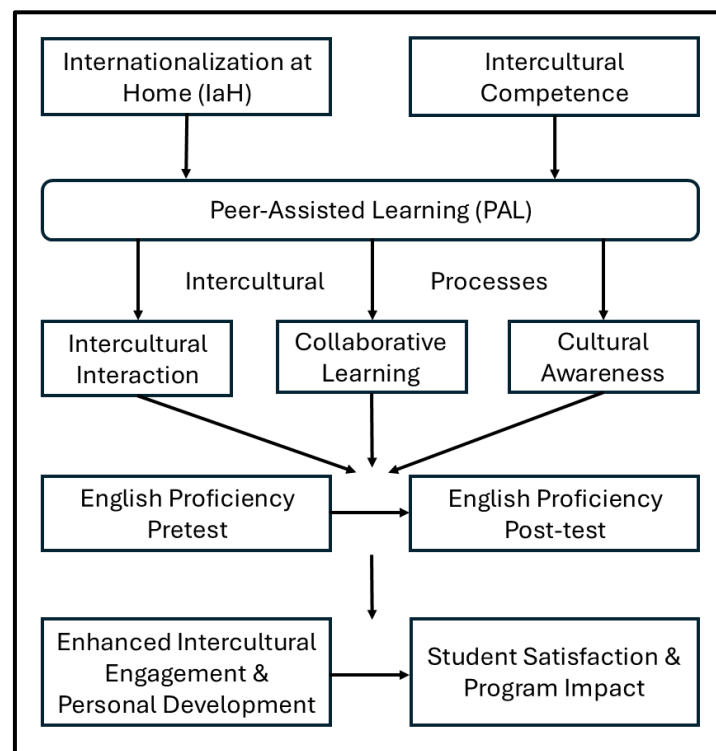


Figure 1 Theoretical Framework of this study

Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework guiding this study, illustrating how Peer-Assisted Learning operates within an Internationalization at Home context to facilitate intercultural processes and related developmental outcomes.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1) To examine how PAL sessions facilitate intercultural interaction and cultural exchange between Thai students and international peer-mentors through structured collaborative learning activities.
- 2) To evaluate the extent to which participation in PAL sessions enhances Thai students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity, including their understanding of cultural differences and perspectives.



3) To assess the perceived impact of PAL participation on Thai students' personal development, particularly in terms of communication confidence, openness to cultural diversity, and global outlook.

4) To explore Thai students' levels of satisfaction with the intercultural learning opportunities provided by PAL sessions, as well as their perceptions of how these sessions contribute to a sense of belonging and community.

5) To identify students' recommendations for improving the intercultural dimension of PAL sessions, with the aim of informing more effective implementation in applied, technological, and health-related academic contexts.

Guided by these objectives, the study is structured around the following research questions:

1) How do Peer-Assisted Learning sessions facilitate intercultural interaction and cultural exchange between Thai students and international peer-mentors in Applied Sciences, Technology, and Health Sciences programs?

2) In what ways does participation in PAL sessions influence Thai students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity toward international peer-mentors?

3) What personal development outcomes do Thai students perceive as a result of participating in PAL sessions, particularly regarding communication confidence and intercultural openness?

4) How satisfied are Thai students with the intercultural learning opportunities provided by PAL (move to front) sessions, and how do these experiences shape their sense of engagement and community?

5) What improvements do Thai students suggest for enhancing the intercultural effectiveness of PAL sessions within applied and professionally oriented disciplines?

Together, these research objectives and questions provide a coherent analytical framework for examining PAL not only as a mechanism for academic support but also as a meaningful site of intercultural engagement within Thai higher education. They guide the study's methodological design and data analysis while ensuring alignment with broader debates on internationalization at home and intercultural competence development.

3. Materials And Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a participatory action research (henceforth PAR) design with a quantitative research approach to examine the role of PAL sessions in facilitating intercultural engagement among Thai undergraduate students. PAR was selected because it allows systematic investigation within an authentic educational setting while supporting reflective program improvement. The study was conducted over a 10-week period during Term 1, 2024, corresponding to a full cycle of PAL participation.

Quantitative data were collected and analyzed in this study. Data were obtained through a structured questionnaire and an English proficiency pretest and posttest. This design enabled statistical examination of students' perceptions of intercultural engagement as well as patterns of English performance associated with PAL participation.

3.2 Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at RSU Global! at Rangsit University, which serves as the university's official PAL center. The center provides structured, peer-led learning environments designed to support academic development and intercultural interaction between Thai students and international peer-mentors.

The target population consisted of approximately 2,000 first-year Thai undergraduate students enrolled in a General Education English course and actively participating in PAL sessions. Participants were drawn from Applied Sciences, Technology, and Health Sciences programs, including Multimedia, Culinary Arts and Technology, Radiologic Technology, Computer Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Biomedical

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Science, Thai Medicine, and Optometry. These disciplines were selected due to their applied and practice-oriented nature, which emphasizes collaboration, communication, and professional interaction.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Attendance records were used to ensure that respondents had meaningfully engaged in PAL sessions. Students' English proficiency ranged from beginner to intermediate levels, and participants represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

3.3 Description of Peer-Assisted Learning Sessions

PAL sessions were structured, collaborative learning environments facilitated by trained international peer-mentors. Sessions typically lasted a minimum of 30 minutes and focused on interactive activities such as group discussion, problem solving, and peer-supported practice. Peer-mentors functioned as facilitators rather than instructors, encouraging reciprocal learning and shared responsibility among participants.

In addition to academic support, PAL sessions were designed to promote intercultural interaction by providing a low-anxiety environment in which students could communicate across linguistic and cultural differences. The sessions emphasized collaborative engagement and peer interaction rather than explicit language instruction, aligning with the study's focus on intercultural engagement.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

This study employed two quantitative research instruments: a structured questionnaire and an English proficiency pretest and posttest.

3.4.1 English Pretest and Post-test

An English proficiency pretest and posttest were administered to examine changes in students' formal English performance over the 10-week study period. The pretest was administered prior to participation in PAL sessions, and the post-test was administered at the end of the program. These tests were used to examine overall stability or change in language performance rather than direct instructional gains, as PAL sessions emphasized intercultural engagement and collaborative learning rather than explicit language teaching.

3.4.2 Questionnaire

A 30-item questionnaire was used to measure Thai students' perceptions of intercultural engagement within PAL sessions. The instrument employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree and was organized into five constructs: interaction and communication, cultural awareness and sensitivity, collaborative learning, personal growth and development, and overall satisfaction with PAL sessions.

The questionnaire was administered online at the conclusion of the final PAL session via a QR code displayed at the International Language Center (Global!). No personally identifying information was collected to ensure participant anonymity.

3.5 Validity and Reliability of Instruments

Content validity of the questionnaire was established through review by three experts in education and second language pedagogy using the Item Objective Congruence (IOC) method. All items were judged to be appropriate and aligned with the research objectives.

Reliability was assessed through a pilot study involving 39 undergraduate students not included in the main study. Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.964, indicating excellent reliability.



3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data derived from the questionnaire and English pretest and posttest were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize students' responses across the five questionnaire constructs.

To examine predictive relationships among key variables, regression analysis was conducted. Questionnaire constructs related to PAL participation and intercultural interaction were entered as predictor variables, while measures of perceived intercultural engagement and personal development served as dependent variables.

English pretest and posttest scores were analyzed descriptively to compare score distributions across time. Regression analysis was subsequently used to examine the relationship between pretest scores, posttest outcomes, and levels of PAL participation, allowing for interpretation of language score stability or change over the study period.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Data were stored securely in encrypted digital files accessible only to the research team and will be retained for three years following completion of the study before permanent deletion.

4. Results and Discussion

To ensure analytical clarity and direct alignment with the study's objectives, the results and discussion are organized explicitly around the five research questions guiding this investigation. Quantitative findings from the English pretest and posttest and the student questionnaire are presented using descriptive and regression analyses, followed by interpretive discussion grounded in the theoretical and empirical framework established in the Introduction.

4.1 Research Question 1

How do Peer-Assisted Learning sessions facilitate intercultural interaction and cultural exchange between Thai students and international peer-mentors in Applied Sciences, Technology, and Health Sciences programs?

Descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data indicates that students perceived PAL sessions as effective platforms for intercultural interaction and cultural exchange. Mean scores for interaction and communication, collaborative learning, and overall satisfaction were consistently high, suggesting that students experienced frequent and meaningful engagement with international peer-mentors.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Questionnaire Constructs

Construct	Items	Mean	SD
Interaction and Communication	Q1–Q5	4.17	0.65
Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity	Q6–Q10	4.05	0.75
Collaborative Learning	Q11–Q15	4.25	0.62
Personal Growth and Development	Q16–Q20	4.25	0.60
Overall Satisfaction	Q21–Q30	4.21	0.65

These findings directly address concerns raised in the Introduction regarding uneven and often superficial intercultural interaction within Thai higher education contexts (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025b). Rather than relying on incidental exposure to international peers, PAL sessions created structured opportunities for sustained interaction, peer dialogue, and collaborative learning.



Regression analysis further supports this interpretation. Interaction and communication emerged as a strong and statistically significant predictor of perceived intercultural engagement, while other constructs did not independently predict engagement once interaction quality was accounted for.

Table 2. Regression Analysis Predicting Intercultural Engagement

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	p
Interaction and Communication	1.00	0.09	1.00	< .001
Collaborative Learning	-0.12	0.11	-0.12	.303
Overall Satisfaction	0.13	0.10	0.13	.191
R²			.94	

The high explanatory power of the model highlights the central role of peer interaction within intentionally designed PAL environments, reinforcing Internationalization at Home scholarship, (comma needed?) emphasizing that intercultural learning outcomes depend on pedagogical structure rather than diversity alone (Soule, 2025).

4.2 Research Question 2

In what ways does participation in PAL sessions influence Thai students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity toward international peer-mentors?

Students reported high levels of intercultural awareness and sensitivity, as reflected in the cultural awareness and sensitivity construct shown in Table 1. These results indicate that PAL participation supported students' understanding of cultural differences and openness toward international perspectives.

From a sociocultural perspective, these findings align with theoretical accounts of learning as a socially mediated process that develops through dialogic interaction and shared meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978). By embedding intercultural interaction within routine academic engagement, PAL sessions appear to operationalize key mechanisms associated with intercultural competence development, including perspective-taking and negotiated understanding (Bacon & Maneerutt, 2024; Qiu & Lee, 2020).

Importantly, these outcomes respond directly to concerns raised in the Introduction that intercultural learning within Internationalization at Home contexts often remains fragmented or uneven (Feng et al., 2025). The consistently positive perceptions reported here suggest that PAL sessions may support deeper and more sustained intercultural awareness when interaction is intentionally structured.

4.3 Research Question 3

What personal development outcomes do Thai students perceive as a result of participating in PAL sessions, particularly regarding communication confidence and intercultural openness?

Descriptive results indicate strong perceived personal development outcomes among participants. As shown in Table 1, students reported high levels of agreement with items measuring personal growth and development, including increased communication confidence and willingness to engage with international peers.

Regression analysis predicting personal development outcomes demonstrates that collaborative learning and cultural awareness were significant predictors of perceived growth.

Table 3. Regression Analysis Predicting Personal Development Outcomes

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	p
Collaborative Learning	0.79	0.12	0.79	< .001
Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity	0.34	0.13	0.34	.015
Interaction and Communication	-0.23	0.18	-0.23	.209
R²			.87	



4.4 Research Question 4

How satisfied are Thai students with the intercultural learning opportunities provided by PAL sessions, and how do these experiences shape their sense of engagement and community?

Overall satisfaction with PAL sessions was high, as indicated in Table 1. Students reported a strong sense of engagement, belonging, and peer support, with particularly high ratings for feeling welcomed and comfortable interacting with peers from different cultural backgrounds.

These findings directly address challenges identified in the Introduction concerning linguistic anxiety, hierarchical norms, and indirect communication styles that may constrain Thai students' participation in intercultural settings (Bacon & Torremucha, 2025a). The results suggest that PAL sessions functioned as low-anxiety, peer-centered environments that reduced perceived power distance and encouraged more egalitarian interaction.

From an Internationalization at Home perspective, these findings underscore PAL's value as a mechanism for embedding intercultural learning within everyday academic life rather than confining it to mobility-based experiences.

4.5 Research Question 5

What improvements do Thai students suggest for enhancing the intercultural effectiveness of PAL sessions within applied and professionally oriented disciplines?

Regression findings presented in Tables 2 and 3 indicate that interaction quality and collaborative learning were the most influential predictors of intercultural engagement and personal development outcomes. These results suggest that while PAL sessions were generally effective, their intercultural impact could be further enhanced through continued emphasis on structured peer interaction and clearly articulated learning objectives.

This interpretation aligns with arguments advanced in the Introduction that intercultural learning outcomes are uneven when initiatives lack systematic integration and intentional pedagogical framing (Soule, 2025). For students in applied and professionally oriented disciplines, explicit alignment between PAL design and intercultural learning goals may further strengthen outcomes.

4.6 English Pretest and Posttest Performance

Descriptive analysis of English proficiency scores indicates that overall performance remained relatively stable over the 10-week PAL participation period, with only modest variation observed.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for English Pretest and Posttest Scores

Test	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Pretest	30	55.33	25.26	20	100
Post-test	30	54.53	25.05	24	96

Regression analysis of posttest scores demonstrates that pretest performance was the strongest predictor of posttest outcomes, while PAL participation did not significantly predict formal English gains.

Table 5. Regression Analysis Predicting English Posttest Scores

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	p
Pretest Score	0.81	0.11	0.81	< .001
R²			.67	

5. Conclusion

This study examined the role of PAL as a structured pedagogical platform for fostering intercultural engagement among Thai undergraduate students enrolled in applied sciences, technology, and health sciences programs. Situated within the broader discourse on IaH and IC development, the findings provide empirical



support for reconceptualizing PAL as more than a mechanism for academic support when it is intentionally designed and systematically embedded within everyday academic contexts.

The results demonstrate that PAL sessions effectively facilitated sustained intercultural interaction and cultural exchange between Thai students and international peer-mentors. Students reported high levels of intercultural awareness, communication confidence, and openness toward cultural diversity, alongside a strong sense of peer belonging and engagement. Regression analyses further revealed that interaction quality, collaborative learning, and clear program structure were key predictors of perceived intercultural engagement and personal development outcomes, reinforcing sociocultural perspectives that conceptualize learning as a socially mediated process shaped through interaction and shared meaning-making.

In contrast, participation in PAL sessions did not result in substantial short-term gains in formal English proficiency as measured by standardized pretest and posttest scores. This finding reflects the pedagogical focus of PAL sessions, which emphasized intercultural interaction and collaborative engagement rather than explicit language instruction. Importantly, the absence of large proficiency gains should not be interpreted as a limitation, but rather as evidence of the distinction between formal language development and broader communicative and intercultural growth, which were strongly reflected in students' perceptions.

By focusing on applied and professionally oriented disciplines that have been underrepresented in existing PAL and intercultural learning research, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature. The findings highlight the value of embedding intercultural learning opportunities within routine academic practices rather than relying on incidental exposure or mobility-based initiatives. Taken together, the results suggest that PAL, when guided by clear objectives and supported by structured peer interaction, offers a scalable and contextually responsive approach to advancing IC and global readiness within Thai higher education and comparable IaH contexts.

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