

# Critical ‘intercultural awareness’ enhancement: Effects of using asynchronous online discussion with Thai tertiary students

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## ABSTRACT

In the globalized era, the interaction between people from different cultures increases dramatically. This affects the way the English language is used, and how the language is taught at all levels of education. Regarding this, English language teachers are recommended to reconsider their current classroom practices in light of the above issue. One basic recommendation is to incorporate other cultural aspects besides just the American and British models commonly used today. However, research on developing learners’ critical ‘intercultural awareness’ (ICA) is rare in the literature, particularly regarding the use of asynchronous online discussion (AOD) at the Thai tertiary level. This study aimed to investigate the AOD use to develop critical ICA and to examine the effects of such AOD use on the learning of Thai students. Twelve ICA-enhanced AOD tasks were developed as instructional instruments. From these, research instruments were developed, including a pretest, a posttest, a self-reported questionnaire, and an in-depth interview. Two groups of Thai students with different English proficiency levels were selected to join the experiment, classified as a high proficiency (HP) group and a low proficiency (LP) group. After AOD implementation, their performances were assessed. Findings revealed improvements in the performances of both groups, with the mean posttest scores being higher in both groups, with the HP group demonstrating better performance. In addition to posttest scores, the participants provided positive perceptions of the AOD tasks, with no significant differences in the perceptions between groups. The interview responses revealed the students’ perceptions that the AOD tasks were challenging, but provided them with an opportunity to think critically about the culturally related questions. This study highlights the benefits of developing critical ICA in an ELT classroom with the AOD use, especially HP students, even though it may not work very well with LP students.

**Keywords:** Asynchronous online discussion; Critical cultural awareness; General English; Intercultural awareness; Thai ELT

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## INTRODUCTION

Many scholars in the field of English as an International Language argue that the paradigm of teaching English as a foreign language requires careful consideration if it is to be implemented in a contemporary ELT classroom (Marlina, 2014;

Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011). Given how globalization in the modern world has changed the way people interact, incorporating cultural aspects in learning with an aim to develop skills, knowledge, and attitudes regarding cultural awareness has opened up opportunities for the inclusion of more

target cultures besides just the American and British cultures in learning activity (Byram et al., 2013). In addition, a number of successful case studies have reported increases in cross-cultural knowledge and understanding, together with the improvement on critical-thinking skills through the use of technology-enhanced learning activities, including asynchronous online discussion (AOD), in educational contexts worldwide (Brierton et al., 2016; Carroll et al., 2010; Chiu, 2014; Commander et al., 2012; Jin & Cortazzi, 2017; Tran & Seepho, 2016).

However, the teaching of English language in Thailand, especially at the tertiary level, does not seem to have incorporated many innovations in classroom practices to respond to the contemporary changes in modern society (Snodin, 2016). The practice of enhancing students' critical '*intercultural awareness*' (ICA) has been rarely reported, and only a few innovative teaching case studies have been reported in Thai contexts, such as illustrated by Baker (2012), Ekahitanond (2013), and Snodin (2016). While developing ICA requires students to become critical thinkers, ELT classrooms do not prepare students for success in acquiring ICA or provide opportunities for them to experience this type of learning environment (Baker, 2012). In addition, systematic and well-planned syllabuses for English courses incorporating instructional materials integrating critical ICA in language learning have until recently been unavailable (Baker, 2012). Even though the concepts of how to develop '*intercultural communicative competence*' (ICC) in English language education have been formulated for over a decade, their use in enhancing the development of critical ICA as part of ICC is either superficial or completely ignored at present (Baker, 2008).

In addition, the use of technology, including AOD, in Thai ELT classrooms tends to be limited. Even though supplementary online learning programs are commonly provided to students to promote autonomous learning, they are not always used successfully in the classroom (Chunhawiriyakul & Chinwonno, 2006). It is also rare to find the use of AOD, apart from the typical teaching practices, such as grammar drills and listening practice, in Thai schools. This is probably because of the typical large class size in Thai schools, leading to the heavy teaching load and making it challenging for the instructors to offer supplementary learning activities, such as AOD to students (Ekahitanond, 2013). In addition, local communicative contexts should be considered in teaching English (Baker, 2012). In Thailand, some students may not have many opportunities to interact with people from native English-speaking countries; but they might have more opportunities to interact with people (i.e., tourists, international students, and teachers) from non-native English-speaking countries, like China, Korea, Japan, and most European countries (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2019). Thus, it is suggested

that ELT teachers should be encouraged to train their students for contemporary communication based on the local context, alongside the provision of newly revised instruction (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017).

Considering the reasons above, teaching English in the present era should be relevant to the contemporary global and local communicative contexts and should help prepare students to become part of a future workforce that increasingly requires English speaking skills (Marlina, 2014). There are rare instances of classroom practice in a Thai ELT context that promote critical ICA, and surprisingly, such practices have often already been performed in other ELT Asian contexts, such as China (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017) or Vietnam (Tran & Seepho, 2016). This study concerns the teaching of General English at a tertiary level, which typically focuses on the development of linguistic competence. Nothing is wrong with this practice. However, Thai ELT scholars and teachers have to make some changes if they are determined to train students to become intercultural speakers of English in this modern globalized era (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011).

#### **Critical cultural awareness**

The Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) framework aims to prepare foreign language students for meaningful interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds by addressing the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for effective communication (Deardorff, 2006). Students should learn how to communicate with other people from other cultural communities in their own locality. Within the framework, the component of critical cultural awareness (CCA) was originally placed at the centre and for students it was defined as "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices, and products in their own and in other countries and cultures" (Byram, 1997, p. 53). To help implement CCA, students have the opportunity to achieve proficiency in critical evaluation skills, see the connections between the instructional materials and real-world issues, and practice critical thinking in an intellectually stimulating foreign language classroom (Nugent & Catalano, 2015). Thus, lessons should be designed to empower the students by giving them the opportunity to practice the analysis, interpretation, communication, and the interactions between the products and practices of the target cultures, referring to a use of tangible or intangible creations of a particular culture (National Standards for Foreign Language Education Project, 1999).

#### **Intercultural awareness**

The concept of Intercultural Awareness (ICA) goes beyond the goal of merely mastering linguistic competence (Baker, 2008). It originated from the idea of "cultural awareness" (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993), which was then redefined as a form of

intercultural communication, particularly among non-native English speakers using English in a *lingua franca* context. It refers to “the conscious understanding of the role of culturally based forms, practices, and frames of understanding, and the ability to put these concepts into practice in a flexible,

context-specific manner, in real-time communication” (Baker, 2012, p. 66). The ICA concept provides six areas for the language classroom to develop students’ knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Baker, 2008), as shown below.

**Figure 1**

*Six Strands of the ICA Concept*

- Strand 1: Exploring the complexity of local cultures, which should lead to an awareness of the multi-faceted nature of cultural characteristics.
- Strand 2: Critically exploring images of cultural representations in language learning materials.
- Strand 3: Exploring traditional media and arts through English to critically evaluate images of local and other cultures.
- Strand 4: Exploring IT and electronic media in English to investigate cultural representation.
- Strand 5: Cultural informants, including non-local English-speaking teachers and local English teachers with experience of intercultural communication and other cultures.
- Strand 6: Engaging in face-to-face, online intercultural communication.

The first area, or strand, covers the culture of the students with an aim to help them to understand themselves better, while the other five areas, or strands, are related to other cultures and the global context. Once English speakers or students develop their ICA, they should be able to understand their own cultural perspectives and be able to make general comparisons between their own culture and other cultures. In addition, their cultural knowledge could be used to predict any possibility of misunderstanding and miscommunication during interpersonal interactions (e.g. daily conversation, negotiation, and discussion), thus avoiding cultural stereotypes. More importantly, they should be able to mediate and negotiate meanings in any communicative situations with an awareness of the emergent nature of cultural forms, references, and practices in intercultural communication. Therefore, developing ICA is considered suitable for Thai tertiary students, including the participants in this study, as the framework of ICA was initially developed in Thai ELT setting (Baker, 2012).

#### **Asynchronous online discussion**

Asynchronous online discussion (AOD) is a kind of computer-mediated communication. Its specific characteristics include: it is time oriented toward the present and the past; threads are mainly used and controlled by a moderator; the editing of previous postings is not allowed; it is an information-exchange activity with a focus on collective work mediation; and cooperation is needed in online communities (Ekahitanond, 2013; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010). As online communication is always maintained and allows all the discussion dialogue or threads to be kept for later analysis, one can engage in online discussion at any time, unlike face-to-face communication (Cheong & Cheung, 2008). Because

of its specific characteristics, it provides many benefits to learners (Boroushaki & Ng, 2016; MacKnight, 2000): (1) learners can appreciate the self-space and self-regulation of AOD; (2) they have time to research topic-related information, and consider their comments before responding to the post; (3) they have individualized time to master the learning process; (4) there is an equal opportunity for both extroverted and, in particular, introverted learners to participate in AOD; (5) they can share knowledge and experiences with each other; and (6) they have opportunities for intellectual exchange, learning new ideas and refining old one (Mandernach, Dailey-Herbert, & Donnelly-Sallee, 2007).

There have been many attempts to employ AOD to enhance critical-thinking skills and intercultural competence, including ICA, in academic contexts worldwide. For instance, Carroll, Britton, and Barr (2010) developed an online project for facilitating reflection on practice and educational contexts with a variety of topics related to the representations of cultural media and artefacts. Their findings showed positive effects of the project on participants’ intercultural learning. In the U.S.A., Commander et. al. (2012) attempted to encourage their American and Chinese students to gain an international learning experience through AOD on the cross-cultural understanding of education in a learning theory class. After the AOD implementation, those students succeeded in increasing their cross-cultural knowledge and understanding in dealing with people from other cultures. Chiu (2014) studied the effect of applying a modification of a dialogical strategy in AOD on Chinese learners’ critical thinking on film-based themes. After the AOD implementation, some improvement in participants’ critical-thinking skills were observed; but these skills were not relevant to

cultural issues. Brierton et. al. (2016) conducted a study to investigate the levels of thinking skills that were developed from different types of online discussion, with topics from multiple areas related to agricultural extension education. Their results showed that, in general, AOD increased students' higher thinking skill level compared to the other types. Even though their study did not focus on ICA or aim for intercultural competence enhancement, they ascertained that AOD could develop learners' critical thinking.

In Thai tertiary contexts, endeavours have been made to increase ICA or intercultural competence through AOD and online courses. For instance, Baker (2012) developed an online course in intercultural communication and ICA for Thai undergraduate students. The participating students had positive perceptions of the new learning approach and the course content related to the cultural aspects in a local and global context, intercultural communication, and global Englishes. Ekahitanond (2013) promoted critical-thinking skills for tertiary students majoring in advertising through peer feedback activity in an AOD with topics culturally related to TV commercials. The results confirmed AOD could help develop the students' critical-thinking skills through peer feedback practice. Another attempt to integrate cultural aspects into an English course was made by Snodin (2016), who used instructional materials such as non-fiction, TV programs, and films to foster cultural awareness as well as to develop students' linguistic competence. This innovative practice received a positive response from the students as those students revealed changes in their perspectives and empathy towards other cultures, and could practice critical thinking skills. However, her study primarily focused on promoting the culture of English-speaking countries, rather than local and global cultures.

Against those backdrops, critical ICA enhancement and AOD use are more likely relevant and necessary in relation to ELT activity development in the present era. The previous studies show a real possibility that the use of AOD could enhance learners' critical ICA in an academic context through learning English. However, there are not many efforts that have been made to develop critical ICA in ELT, particularly in Thai higher education contexts. In order to propose another innovative classroom practice to promote critical ICA, this study aimed to experiment with the use of AOD to develop critical ICA, and to examine the effect of such use on Thai tertiary students with different English proficiency levels. This study attempted to address the following questions:

1. Is there a significant difference in the performance of critical ICA between students with high and low English proficiency after participating in AOD?

2. Is there a significant difference in the perceptions of students regarding critical ICA between high and low English proficiency students after participating in AOD?

## **METHOD**

### **Research design**

A two-group pretest-posttest design (Allen, 2017) was employed to compare measures of a dependent variable before and after the introduction of an independent variable (AOD tasks) between two groups with selected participants. This study comprised six stages as follows: English proficiency placement test (week 1), pretest and a face-to-face training session on AOD use (week 2), out-of-classroom AOD tasks (weeks 3–14), posttest (week 15), survey on the perceptions of the student participants (week 16), and in-depth interviews with selected participants (week 17). The duration of the data collection was approximately one semester.

### **Research participants and setting**

The participants were two groups of Thai first-year students, who were purposively selected at an autonomous university. This is because they were taught by the researcher who performed as a teacher-researcher. One group majored in Social Sciences and the other in Science. Both groups were enrolled in a General English program in which English and Thai are equally used as a medium of instruction. After an initial placement test using *Oxford Online Placement Test* (Purpura, 2009), the students were split up into two groups based on their English language proficiency. Results of placement test were checked against the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). According to the results, it can be said that the first group was at the B1 CEFR level (i.e. intermediate level-learners are more independent in their use of language, although they may sometimes need support when they cannot find the right words to say) and was considered to be the high proficiency (HP) group. On the contrary, the second was at the A2 CEFR level (i.e. elementary level-learners still need some support from the person they are communicating with) and was considered to be the low proficiency (LP) group in this study.

Then, each group with thirty students was divided into smaller groups of five, resulting in a total of six small groups consisting of five students. A small online learning environment was also proposed, where students can comfortably share their ideas or responses. They were invited to attend a face-to-face training session on the use of AOD in a web course one week before taking part in the ICA-enhanced AOD tasks. This helped them familiarize themselves with the format and the nature of AOD.

**Instruments**

**ICA-enhanced AOD tasks (Instructional Instrument)**

Asynchronous online discussion representing one of the web course’s features was mainly used in this study. The researcher developed twelve AOD tasks, which consisted of questions that would encourage the students to think critically. These were based on a taxonomy of learning domains, with three domains of educational activities, identified as the cognitive domain (knowledge), affective domain (attitude), and psychomotor domain (skills) (Bloom et al., 1956). In this study, the first domain was the primary focus, and involved assessing the knowledge and development of intellectual skills, as the scope of the study was to mainly cultivate knowledge regarding cultures. Such knowledge included the recall of specific facts, procedural patterns, and concepts that support the development of intellectual abilities and skills. There are six major categories of cognitive domain, starting from the simplest to the most complex. To effectively manage the learning activity, cue questions covering the six levels of prompts were constructed to check whether students were stimulated to respond to all levels of the cognitive domain, especially at higher levels (Cardinal, 2015).

The AOD tasks also addressed the cultural aspects with content based on the six ICA strands (Baker, 2008). All of the content was adapted from fixed sources: a master’s thesis: *Portrayal of Thailand: A comparative study of American and Chinese films* (Shang, 2015); a research article:

*Linguistic Perspectives of Thai culture* (Vongvipanond, 1994); two websites: *Bangkok tour*: and *tour packages to Thailand*; and English textbooks: *Unlock: Reading and Writing Skills 2* (O’Neill, 2014) and *Unlock: Listening and Speaking Skills 2* (Dimond-Bayir, 2014). The master’s thesis and the research article were specifically selected as their key findings were relevant to ICA strands 1 and 3. Besides, the two websites provided content in relation to strand 4, and the textbooks were used for strand 2 (see Tables 1 and 2).

According to the tables above, the AOD tasks required students to think critically in a culture-related context. The tasks ranged from the lower to higher thinking orders and covered some culture-related contexts of students’ own culture and other cultures.

Over twelve weeks, the participants had to post their responses in English to each weekly question posted in the AOD tasks in their small groups. In this manner, they learned to think critically in certain cultural/intercultural contexts, and to also learn from their other group members’ postings. They can also observe other group members’ postings and online interactions.

**Pretest and posttest**

Paper-based pretest and posttest were developed, based on the Action Words and Critical-Thinking cue questions of Bloom (Cardinal, 2015) and the six suggested strands chosen to increase ICA (Baker, 2008).

**Table 1**  
*Samples of the AOD Tasks*

Task	Content			Question
	Intercultural awareness	Critical thinking skills	Thinking order	
1	Strand 1	Knowledge/ Understand	Lower	Thailand is one of the countries where its culture is unique and fascinating to many foreigners. <i>List*</i> three things or aspects that represent ‘Thai culture’ or your country, and <i>explain*</i> briefly the reasons why you come up with these 3 things or aspects. <i>*action words</i>
5	Strand 3	Evaluating	Higher	“Transportation commonly shown in Chinese films about Thailand is tuk-tuk, a three-wheeled taxi. Both in films and in reality. Chinese visitors travel by tuk-tuk to explore Thailand’s markets, temples and roads. This unique transportation brings out the true excitement, mystery and the beauty of Thailand. Similarly, these films indicate that Thai people are used to riding elephants. Boats appear often in both American and Chinese films.” <i>Do you agree with the excerpt above that Thais typically use tuk-tuk and are able to ride elephants? Why or why not?</i>
8	Strand 4	Evaluating	Higher	Go to the following link of foreign tour company promoting ‘Bangkok tour’ <a href="https://www.toursbylocals.com/Bangkok-Tours?s=AW_05B_003B_bangkok%20%2Btour%20companies&amp;gclid=CKLO2f7QstACFUoWaAodUYgEsw">https://www.toursbylocals.com/Bangkok-Tours?s=AW_05B_003B_bangkok%20%2Btour%20companies&amp;gclid=CKLO2f7QstACFUoWaAodUYgEsw</a> According to the website, <i>do you agree or disagree with the images of Thailand presented? What evidence is there to support your answer?</i>

**Table 2**  
Summary of the Main Components of the AOD Tasks

Task	Content		
	ICA strand	Critical thinking skills	Thinking order
1	1	Knowledge/ understand	Lower
2	1	Understand	Lower
3	2	Understand/ analyse	Lower/ higher
4	2	Understand/ evaluate	Lower/ higher
5	2	Evaluating	Higher
6	3	Evaluating	Higher
7	3	Evaluating	Higher
8	4	Evaluating	Higher
9	4	Evaluating	Higher
10	5	Creating	Higher
11	5	Creating	Higher
12	5	Evaluating/ creating	Higher

The tests comprised four similar open-ended questions requiring the participants to write their responses within sixty minutes. The primary purpose of the tests was to identify the critical ICA of the participants. A pretest was done before starting the

first AOD task and a posttest was then done after completing the final task. All the responses of the two tests were checked and scored by two raters. A sample question from the tests is provided in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
Sample Pretest and Posttest Question

Question	Critical thinking skills	Thinking order	ICA
4. "The interaction between Thai people and native speakers of English (i.e. American, English, and Australian) and non-native speakers of English (i.e. Indian, Korean, German) has increased in the Thai society. English language tends to become a key tool for success communication." According to the statement above, <i>can you imagine</i> what kind of the Thai society will become in the next 10 years, and what the role of cultures will play in that society?	Creating	Higher	Strand 5

**Self-reported questionnaire**

The questionnaire included two parts that were initially created in Thai to avoid misunderstandings with the questions and to ensure receiving accurate responses from the participants. It attempted to investigate the students' perceptions of their critical ICA development. In the first part, there were five questions asking for demographic information, such as gender. The second part emphasized perceptions of critical ICA, with the questions adapted from the initial intercultural communication questionnaire proposed by Baker (2012). This part included two sub-sections with close-ended questions: perceptions of ICA, comprising nine items (e.g. *do you have to understand their culture to be able to communicate with someone in a foreign language?*), and perceptions of the participants' and other people's cultures, comprising nine items (e.g. *is Thai literature better than English language literature?*). A five-point Likert scale was employed in the second and third parts, ranging from 5 (strongly agree/excellent) to 1 (strongly disagree/awful). The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of this questionnaire was .783.

**In-depth interviews**

A semi-structured interview was also developed in Thai and used to gain insights into the participants'

perceptions of ICA. It covered four items relating to the ICA (e.g. *do you think your own culture is superior to others?*); and their experience in the use of AOD, comprising eight items (e.g. *how would you comment on the contents of AOD tasks?*). These interview questions were adapted from the course evaluation questionnaire proposed by Baker (2012). The interview was intended to be conducted in Thai with six participants of each group who had been randomly selected.

**Data analysis**

**Pretest and posttest**

Two raters were recruited to assess the responses to the open-ended questions in the pretest and posttest. To select the raters, the criteria were that they had to have taught English at the tertiary level for at least five years. Before the assessment, the raters were given directions for rating the responses and an explanation of the rubrics adapted from the criteria of the generic thinking model of Cheung and Hew (2005). Then, they were trained on marking some sample responses. The generic thinking model aims to evaluate the quality of the critical-thinking skills of students with respect to their level of information processing. It simply indicates whether the thinking skills exhibited by students are of a superficial or a deep critical ICA level. There are four indicators of

surface-level thinking skills and another four indicators of in-depth thinking skills, as shown in Figure 2. During the assessment of the pretests and

posttests, the adapted scoring rubrics were provided to raters to assess the responses to each question (See Figure 3).

**Figure 2**

*Framework for Evaluating Thinking Skills in AOD (Cheung & Hew, 2005)*

Critical thinking – Assess the viability of the alternative solutions		
Surface	← →	In depth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does not justify conclusions or judgments made</li> <li>Stating that one shares the conclusions or judgments made by others without taking these further</li> <li>Does not spell out the advantages or disadvantages of a suggestion, conclusion or judgment.</li> <li>Sticking to prejudices or assumptions</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Justifies conclusions or judgments made</li> <li>Stating that one shares the conclusions or judgments made by others and supporting them with relevant facts, experience or personal comments</li> <li>Identifying the advantages or disadvantages of a suggestion, conclusion or judgment.</li> <li>Making valid assumptions based on the available indicators.</li> </ul>

**Figure 3**

*Adapted Scoring Rubrics for Each Question*

Category	Score			Question No. ____
	0	1	2	
Justification	No attempt	Does not justify conclusions or judgments made	Justifies conclusions or judgments made	____/2
Reference	No attempt	Stating that one shares the conclusions or judgments made by others without taking these further	Stating that one shares the conclusions or judgments made by others and supporting them with relevant facts, experience or personal comments	____/2
Identification	No attempt	Does not spell out the advantages or disadvantages of a suggestion, conclusion or judgment.	Identifying the advantages or disadvantages of a suggestion, conclusion or judgment.	____/2
Assumption	No attempt	Sticking to prejudices or assumptions	Making valid assumptions based on the available indicators.	____/2
<b>TOTAL SCORES</b>				____/8

According to the scoring rubrics, the total score possible for each question was eight and so the total possible score for each test of four questions was thirty-two, i.e., the maximum score was thirty-two and the minimum was zero in this study. Adapted from the framework for evaluating thinking skills (Cheung & Hew, 2005), a score of between seventeen and thirty-two indicated that the student had an in-depth level of thinking, while a score of between zero and fifteen meant that the subject had a tendency to be considered as a superficial thinker. A score of sixteen was the borderline between superficial and deep-thinking levels. In other words, the higher the score achieved by the subject, the higher their levels of deep thinking and vice versa.

Once the responses had been assessed by the two raters, all the raw scores from the pretests and posttests were converted into percentages, and then the mean and standard deviation values were analyzed. This was done to identify whether there was a significant difference between the two groups and an independent *t*-test was run using pretest scores. To find out whether each group had made any progress as a result of the AOD treatment, an in-group paired *t*-test was performed for each group,

using the pretests and posttests scores. Another independent *t*-test was run using the posttest scores of the two groups to find out which group had made the higher gains as a result of their learning.

To ascertain the reliability of the scores assessed by the two raters, the inter-rater reliability and correlation were also analyzed. Here, the reliability of the pretests and posttests scores assessed by Rater One was .683, and .484, respectively. With regard to the pretests and posttests assessed by Rater Two, the reliability of the scores was .663, and .593, respectively. The correlation of assessing the pretests of the LP and HP groups was statistically significant at a level of .05 ( $r = .463$ ). In addition, the correlation of Rater One and Rater Two, in terms of assessing the posttests scores of both groups, was also statistically significant at .05 ( $r = .444$ ). This means that the scores for the pretests and posttests were assessed by both raters in the same direction and without much difference in terms of the scores.

**Questionnaire**

The returned copies of the questionnaire were all checked and determined to be valid and eligible samples. A Statistical Package for Social Science

(SPSS) program was used to calculate the results, including the percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

**In-depth interviews**

As for the in-depth interviews with randomly selected participants, the responses were first transcribed, and the data patterns were then identified, categorized and coded by the researcher. The main findings were thematically analyzed manually to identify the perceptions of critical ICA. The interpretation of the findings was then finally made (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003).

**FINDINGS**

**Critical ICA performance between the two groups**

There was no significant difference in the critical ICA performance between the two groups of students. However, the HP group had improved their critical ICA more than the other group, as shown in the following section.

**Performance in the critical ICA tasks**

According to Table 4 and Figure 4, the mean score for the posttests (15.20) in the HP group was higher

than the mean score for the pretests (11.90). The highest raw scores on the posttest were nineteen out of thirty-two. As for the critical ICA levels after implementation of the AOD tasks, the students showed some improvement; for instance, half of the students who were initially classed as having a superficial ICA level reached average and in-depth levels. It can thus be interpreted that after providing the AOD treatment, generally the students showed an improvement in their critical ICA, even though only six of them reached the in-depth level (see Table 5).

**Table 4**  
*Mean Scores from the Pretests and Posttests in the HP Group*

	n	Mean	SD
Pretest	30	11.90	2.87
Posttest	30	15.20	2.01

**Table 5**  
*Critical ICA Level in the HP Group*

Level	Pretest	Posttest
Superficial	28	14
Average	0	10
In-depth	2	*6

**Figure 4**  
*Mean Scores of the Pretests and Posttests in the HP Group*

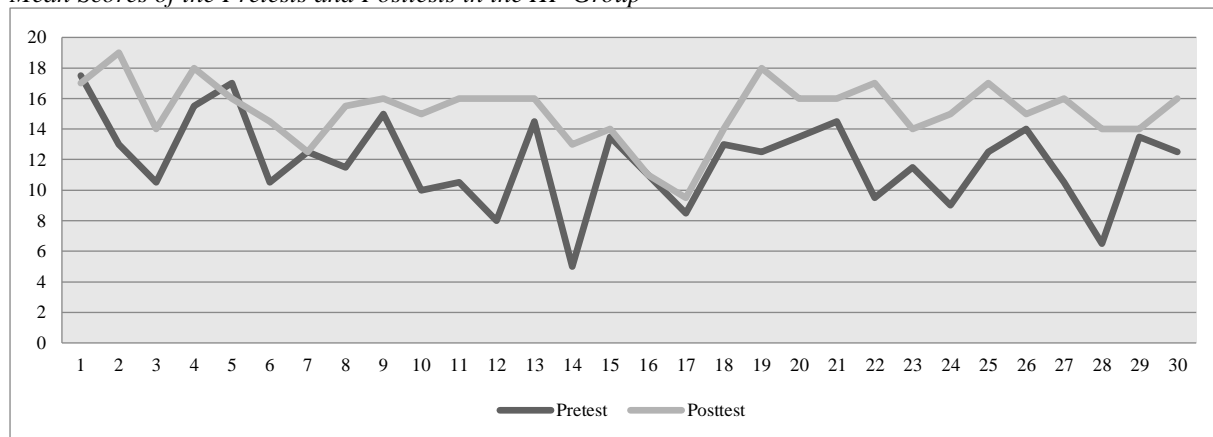


Table 6 and Figure 5 revealed that the mean score on the posttests (14.35) within the LP group was higher than the mean score on the pretests (10.67). The highest raw score was eighteen out of thirty-two. With regard to their critical ICA level, about sixty percent of students in this group did not improve their critical ICA, as twenty-one of them were still at the superficial level, while the rest reached higher levels (see Table 7).

**Table 6**  
*Mean Scores of the Pretests and Posttests in the LP Group*

	n	Mean	SD
Pretest	30	10.67	2.31
Posttest	30	14.35	1.67

**Table 7**  
*Critical ICA Levels in the LP Group*

Level	Pretest	Posttest
Superficial	29	21
Average	1	6
In-depth	0	*3

To find out whether there were any significant differences between the two groups in terms of improvements in ICA, their mean scores on the posttest were analyzed, revealing that both groups improved their critical ICA differently, as shown in Table 8. Here, the HP group showed more improvement compared to the other group. Figure 6 confirmed this finding, showing that a significant number of HP students (about fifty percent) moved up to the average and in-depth ICA levels, while



about sixty percent of LP students did not show much improvement and still remained at the superficial level.

**Perceptions regarding critical ICA between both groups**

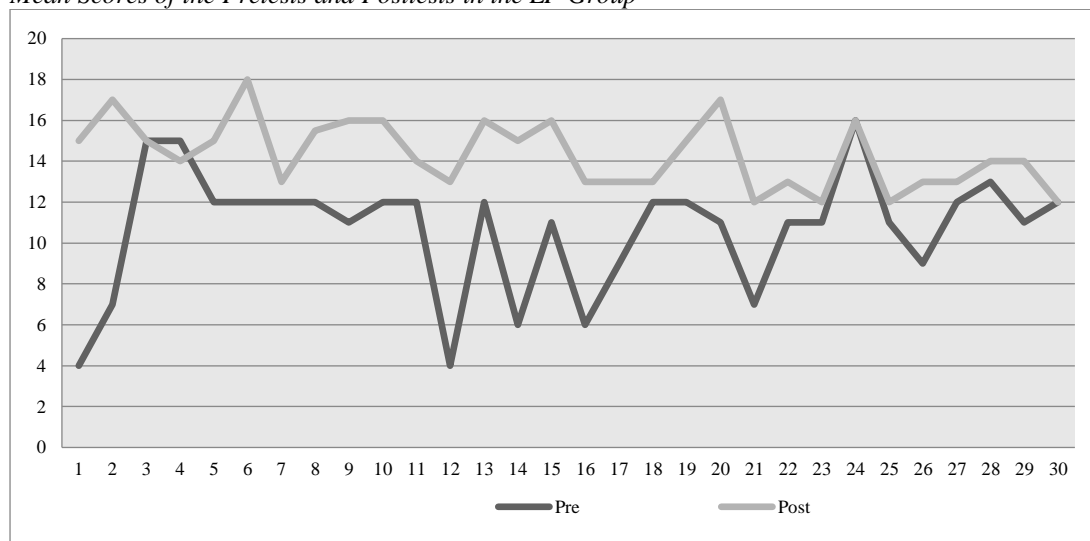
The use of AOD in developing critical ICA affected both groups' perceptions in a similar way, as shown below.

**Students' perceptions of ICA, their own culture, and the cultures of others**

According to Table 9, in general both groups had

positive perceptions of intercultural awareness (HP Mean = 4.22, LP Mean = 4.00, both out of 5). They believed that it was important not to judge people from different cultural backgrounds (HP Mean = 4.41, LP Mean = 4.60). In addition, they felt that culture and language were linked or inseparable (HP Mean = 4.41, LP Mean = 4.23). The two groups developed improved critical ICA to react to other interactants without prejudice or stereotypes and understood that English is a tool for communication bound to other cultures, and culture is an important aspect of communication.

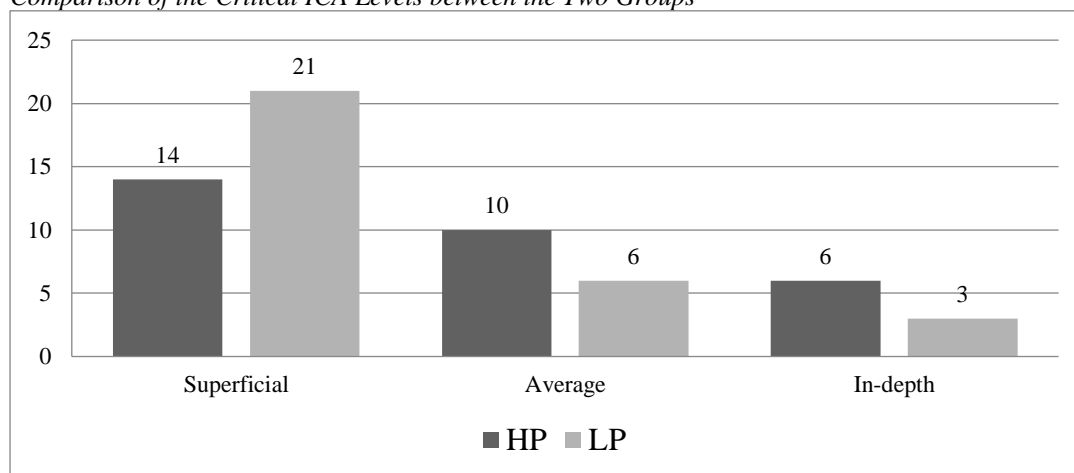
**Figure 5**  
Mean Scores of the Pretests and Posttests in the LP Group



**Table 8**  
Comparison of the Mean Scores on the Posttests between the Two Groups

	n	Mean	SD	t-test	Sig.
HP	30	15.20	2.01	1.71	0.09
LP	30	14.35	1.67		

**Figure 6**  
Comparison of the Critical ICA Levels between the Two Groups



**Table 9**  
*HP and LP Students' Perceptions of ICA*

Item	Statement	HP		LP	
		Mean	Level	Mean	Level
1	All cultures have taboo (subjects which should not be discussed) topics	4.31	Agree	3.90	Agree
2	It is important not to judge people from other cultures by the standards of my own culture.	4.41	Agree	4.60	Strongly agree
3	To be able to communicate with someone in a foreign language you have to understand their culture.	4.09	Agree	3.93	Agree
4	Learning culture is part of learning a foreign language.	4.28	Agree	4.27	Agree
5	It is important to understand my own culture when learning a foreign language.	3.94	Agree	3.93	Agree
6	Learning a foreign language means learning new kinds of behaviour.	4.22	Agree	4.17	Agree
7	Learning a foreign language means learning new beliefs and values.	4.09	Agree	3.87	Agree
8	Culture and language are linked.	4.41	Agree	4.23	Agree
9	Specific languages, cultures and countries are always linked (e.g. the English language, English culture and UK)	3.00	Neutral	3.10	Neutral
Total Average		4.22	Agree	4.00	Agree

As can be seen in Table 10, the participants overall were indecisive when asked to compare the cultural elements of Thai culture to those of other cultures (HP Mean = 2.55, LP Mean = 2.65). Interestingly, they were neutral when comparing

their own culture to those of other countries. However, both groups expressed disagreement with the opinion that three cultural elements in Thailand (e.g., education, technology, and business) were superior to those elements in other countries.

**Table 10**  
*HP and LP Students' Perceptions of the Participants' Own and Other People's Cultures*

Item	Statement	HP		LP	
		Mean	Level	Mean	Level
1	Thai films are better than English language films.	2.66	Neutral	2.70	Neutral
2	Thai music is better than English language music.	2.41	Neutral	2.60	Neutral
3	Thai literature is better than English language literature.	2.56	Neutral	2.73	Neutral
4	Thai education is better than English speaking countries' education.	1.97	Disagree	2.03	Disagree
5	Thai technology is better than English speaking countries' technology.	1.97	Disagree	2.13	Disagree
6	Thai businesses are better than English speaking countries' businesses.	2.25	Disagree	2.30	Disagree
7	Thai family structures are better than English speaking countries' family structures.	3.06	Neutral	2.80	Neutral
8	Thai food is better than English speaking countries' food.	3.31	Neutral	3.67	Agree
9	Thai lifestyles are better than English speaking countries' lifestyles.	2.78	Neutral	2.90	Neutral
Total Average		2.55	Neutral	2.65	Neutral

**Perceptions of students regarding their critical ICA**

According to Table 11, the findings mainly showed good support for the use of AOD. First, the participants had good impressions of the guidelines and the support they were given, rating them as 'good' and 'excellent' (HP Mean = 4.47, LP Mean = 4.67, both out of 5). Their opinions on the AOD content in general, the weekly tasks assigned to them, and the use of AOD in the web course, were rated as 'good'. The two groups perceived that they had made progress by engaging in the AOD tasks (HP Mean = 3.94, LP Mean = 3.97). Obviously, the use of AOD had a positive effect on both groups in terms of student participation. This may be because the students were divided into small groups when performing tasks, and were able to learn from other group members and they seemed to enjoy the collaborative learning environment. Completion of the AOD tasks when implemented in class required the students to participate in collaborative work with their peers, together with the support of their instructor or the researcher. However, the students

showed some hesitation in stating a preference for online or face-to-face discussions (HP Mean = 3.47, LP Mean = 3.27). They were probably indecisive because they did not have the opportunity to compare the online and face-to-face discussions in this study, each of which has unique characteristics and may affect users in different ways.

**Voices of critical ICA raising by both groups**

From the in-depth interviews, it was revealed that many of the critical ICA tasks challenged the students as they had to put in a lot of effort to complete each task despite not having much initial experience with the cultural aspects at their age and level of education. Due to this fact, these tasks were developed with the primary aim to enhance the abilities of the students to think critically about culture-related topics in English. Even though some topics or questions were similar to the contents taught in the classroom, the level of those topics or questions was deeper. Therefore, the students had to find additional information outside of the classroom to

complete the tasks. By doing so, they gained a better understanding of the cultural aspects of other cultures, and even of their own. More challenging

tasks and more tasks related to current issues with a cultural aspect were also suggested by those students. Responses from the participants can be seen below.

**Table 11**  
*Evaluation of the Use of AOD*

Item	Questions	HP		LP	
		Mean	Level	Mean	Level
1	How would you rate the content overall in 'online discussion' learning activities?	3.97	Good	4.00	Good
2	How would you rate the weekly tasks (i.e. tasks 1-12)?	3.88	Good	4.10	Good
3	How would you rate online learning in ATutor?	3.88	Good	4.00	Good
4	I liked doing online learning activities.	3.56	Agree	4.00	Agree
5	I would prefer to do discussion tasks face-to-face (not online)	3.47	Neutral	3.27	Neutral
6	How would you rate the support and guidance?	4.47	Good	4.67	Excellent
7	How would you rate your progress and achievement?	3.94	Good	3.97	Good

***Voices of the HP and LP students in expressing their perceptions of their critical ICA enhancement***

Even if HP students had a tendency to show more improvement than the LP, the two groups had the same positive perceptions about the use of AOD. It may be said that even though they had different levels of language proficiency (A2 and B1 CEFR levels), the use of AOD helped raise their ICA levels through the tasks provided, as shown below:

“I realized how some foreigners look at Thai people and culture, and it made me think about how we conserve our Thainess and culture.” (HP 1)

“I do not know some of the cultural aspects of some countries. Sometimes I think I know, but actually I do not. These tasks helped me to rethink about other cultures.” (HP 6)

“Doing AOD tasks helped me develop critical thinking skills as I had to think and find out the cause and reasons of the problems or problematic issues why they had the negative perceptions to my country.” (LP 1)

“Usually, I answer one-dimension question, but in this online learning activities, the questions arouse me to think with the supporting evidences. Also, the questions ask me to compare things culturally, so I have to think more seriously in many dimensions.” (LP 3)

“Doing the tasks aroused me to think whether or not some foreigners actually had negative images of my country or misunderstanding. So, I thought seriously every time before I posted online.” (LP 6)

***Voices of the HP and LP students expressing their perceptions of their own culture and other people's cultures***

Both groups expressed a great pride in their own culture and were able to identify many unique Thai characteristics. Some mentioned the same cultural roots of many ASEAN countries in relation to Thai culture. More interestingly, many of them mentioned that each culture has its own identity which is not comparable and regarded them as belonging to their

own culture or cultures because they realized that they were members of a multicultural community. In addition, taking part in the AOD tasks increased their ICA as they become more aware of their own culture and others, as shown below:

- Awareness of Thai culture as a set of shared behaviors, beliefs and values  
“I feel proud of Thai culture which is one of the world cultures. The well-known examples of Thainess which most of the foreigners know are ‘Wai’ for warm-welcome greeting, respectfulness to the older, and the most importantly, ‘Siam or Thai smile’. (LP1)

“Thai artistic patterns are refining and can be found on the temple buildings’ walls. The Thai silk is great as well, and many foreigners cannot deny its well-designed and woven cloth and patterns. There are more cultural aspects in our culture such as the abundance of food, friendliness, and the royal family, particularly the late King.” (LP2)

- Awareness of the role culture and context that play in any interpretation of meaning  
“Considering Thai cultures and other cultures in ASEAN, they are quite similar because they somehow come from the root or are influenced by the same civilization in the ancient time. However, some difference is found as each country interprets, applies and accepts parts of those ancient cultures differently, based on their belief, value, and norm.” (HP 4)

- Awareness of multiple voices or perspectives within any culture grouping  
“Each culture has its unique characteristics, and I am part of my culture. So, I cannot compare whose cultures are better or more refining. In my culture, Buddhism is embedded in our belief and faith, and there are some beliefs in superstition. Of course, British culture is a different story.” (HP 5)

- Awareness of individuals as members of many social groupings including cultural ones

“I am part of my own culture and of others because there is a cultural exchange among people. This leads to a multicultural community where we are part of one another.” (HP 2)

“I belong to Thai culture and others as we accept cultures such as Chinese, and western. Even though there is mixture of cultures, some refining cultural aspects should be merely adopted. For example, Japanese people are clean and care about the world environment. This is one of the good that we should accept.” (LP 3)

## **DISCUSSION**

This study attempted to develop critical intercultural awareness (ICA) among Thai tertiary students by experimenting with the use of AOD, and further, the study aimed to determine the effect of the use of AOD on Thai students with different levels of English proficiency. The findings demonstrated that possible modification could be made to Thai ELT classroom practice in the tertiary General English program for non-English major students using the AOD tasks, as there was no significant difference in the students' critical ICA performance between the two groups. This means that English proficiency differences (e.g. here between A2 and B1 CEFR levels) may not be a big barrier for those students to achieve the tasks and improve their critical ICA, to gain more positive perceptions, particular with the use of AOD. However, the better improvement was found in a group of higher English proficiency group.

For clarification, as a primary focus to develop critical ICA in this study, the participants were expected to understand their own culture, compare their own culture with other cultures without individual prejudices, and develop an awareness of the emergent nature of cultural forms, references, and practices in intercultural communication (Baker, 2012; Byram, 1997). According to the focus of this study, specific AOD tasks based on the six ICA strands outlined by Baker (2008) were designed, moving from local to international contexts, together with a taxonomy of learning domains, such as the cognitive domain (Bloom et. al, 1956), resulting in the participating students' showing improvements in their critical ICA, with a number of participants reaching a higher ICA level (i.e., average and in-depth), albeit the HP group's mean posttest score was a bit higher than that of the LP group.

In addition, the initial English proficiency may have had only a minor effect on the performances of the participants, as such proficiency did not seem to be a hindrance to the development of students' critical ICA. This may have been because they eventually found out how to discuss each online culture-related task by themselves, by consulting their peers, and by studying online, resulting in an increase in their critical ICA, in line with the findings

in various other studies (Boroushaki & Ng, 2016; Cheong & Cheung, 2008; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010). These findings are also consistent with those of other scholars' studies (e.g. Ekahitanond, 2013; Jin & Cortazzi, 2017; Snodin, 2016).

The specifically designed critical ICA tasks could also have affected the students' perceptions, which were generally positive, because there was no significant difference in their perceptions. Both groups had respectful attitudes to their own culture and other people's cultures, as they revealed that they would not judge people from different cultural backgrounds based on their own cultural backgrounds. In other words, they seemed to be neutral when comparing their own culture to those of other countries and accepted the truth that certain cultural aspects of their country are not superior to others. These findings are supported by the findings of Deardorff (2006) and Nugent and Catalano (2015), who reported that students would open their minds to cultural differences when they are provided with an opportunity to practice critical thinking in intellectually stimulating learning activities with a connection to real-world issues. That they showed positive perceptions in these AOD tasks is because they faced challenges in completing each task through a collaborative learning process in their small groups.

Therefore, this study could be adapted to other ELT classrooms in other contexts. It is also a big challenge for ELT scholars and teachers to empower their students by rethinking and redesigning English classroom practices and striving for the primary goal of critical ICA development with AOD use (Cheong & Cheung, 2008; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010). In doing so, instructional materials and classroom practices should be tailored in relation to a contemporary communication context, including both local and global cultures, and not merely rely on the dominant influence of inner-circle regions (Baker, 2012), as was successfully done in this study.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has provided an insight that a change from traditional classroom practice focused on only linguistic competence to a modern innovative classroom practice using AOD for critical ICA enhancement could provide a valuable supplement to students' linguistic competence development. The findings from the innovative AOD tasks can underline the arguments made by many scholars in the field of English as an International Language (Marlina, 2014; Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011) confirming that the paradigm of teaching English as a foreign language should be eventually reconsidered, and more target cultures apart from just American and British cultures should be implemented in the contemporary ELT classroom to

open up English learners' worldviews with respectful attitudes to cultural differences (Byram et al., 2013).

Even though this study achieved its objectives, there are some limitations to note. First, the researcher did not take part in the discussion tasks in the AOD community activity but was only a monitor providing technical supports. The main reason for this was to see whether or not students independently completed all of their tasks themselves and to observe the students during the AOD. If the researcher had joined the AOD community and facilitated discussions during the time taken to complete the tasks, the students might have developed more critical ICA under the researcher's influence, which the researcher wanted to avoid. Second, more training sessions on critical thinking practice prior to or during the actual study should be considered as students would then be more familiar with such activity and expectations. One short training session may not have yielded sufficient benefits for them.

For further study, the researcher suggests that stakeholders in ELT field consider using AOD to develop critical ICA through English learning with higher proficiency students (B2 and above CEFR levels). This is intended to see whether or not higher language proficiency level would have something to do with the students' learning activities. Also, language teachers who perform this research should participate in AOD and facilitate it during the learning process and compare whether or not AOD with teachers' involvement is more effective than AOD without one in the enhancement of students' critical ICA.

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