

A Systematic Review of Cross-Cultural Workplace Communication Challenges in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review investigates the primary barriers and challenges to cross-cultural communication in multinational workplaces in Thailand, where interactions between Thai and foreign employees are increasingly common. A comprehensive search of peer-reviewed literature published between 2019 and 2024 was conducted and assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) tool and the thematic data analysis.

The analysis revealed four recurring and interrelated themes: (1) Language barriers, reported in 60% of studies, arise from disparities in English proficiency; (2) Cultural norms and values, found in 50% of studies, where the Thai preference for hierarchical and indirect communication contrasts with more direct Western approaches; (3) Nonverbal communication differences, identified in 40% of studies, stemming from divergent interpretations of gestures, facial expressions, and silence; and (4) Workplace expectation gaps, present in 35% of studies, relate to divergences in leadership style, decision-making, conflict resolution, and time management.

These findings underscore the complex relationship between linguistic, cultural, and behavioural dimensions in shaping workplace interactions. The review concludes that effective interventions should extend beyond language training to encompass cultural competence development and adaptive leadership practices. Addressing these barriers can enhance collaboration, reduce conflict, and strengthen Thailand's competitiveness in the global economy.

1. Introduction

Effective communication is vital in a society where individuals from different countries and cultural backgrounds meet. Communication exists when individuals transfer thoughts, ideas, and emotions through shared understanding and expressions (Mahayussnan & Sitthitikul, 2021). Employees exchange information continuously while collaborating, and success depends on

recognizing and preventing misunderstandings that often arise when cultural backgrounds differ (Day et al., 2021). Culture shapes communication through shared values, norms, and practices that influence speaking styles, body language, and expectations in multilingual environments (Srimarut & Mekhum, 2020).

Thailand provides a unique context for examining these challenges. As a key business hub in Southeast Asia, the country attracts multinational corporations (MNCs) across industries such as technology, manufacturing, hospitality, and healthcare (Huang, 2021; Liu, 2023). Its central role in this region, coupled with long-standing openness to foreign investment and talent, has made the Thai workplace increasingly diverse (Hall, 2019). Over the past two decades, the rapid growth of international business has generated opportunities for innovation and creativity, while introducing communication challenges that affect teamwork, productivity, and workflow (Meyer, 2017; Tung & Chiu, 2020).

Existing literature highlights several persistent communication challenges specific to Thailand. These include reliance on indirect communication to maintain harmony (*kreng jai*), hierarchical workplace structures that discourage open disagreement, and differing interpretations of nonverbal signals such as eye contact or silence (Chu & Tsui, 2019; Peltokorpi, 2021). Language proficiency gaps, particularly the limited English skills among Thai employees and the limited Thai language ability among expatriates, further complicate communication (Rattanachot, 2021). Collectively, these dynamics create misinterpretations, inhibit collaboration, and may reduce organizational effectiveness.

This systematic review addresses a critical gap in the existing literature by synthesizing recent research (2019-2024) on cross-cultural communication challenges in Thai multinational workplaces. While prior studies have addressed general cross-cultural issues, there is a lack of a comprehensive synthesis that quantifies the prevalence of different communication barriers and provides integrated, evidence-based recommendations tailored to the Thai business context.

Accordingly, this review consolidates evidence on cross-cultural communication challenges in Thailand's multinational workplaces. It identifies common themes, evaluates methodological rigor, and offers practical recommendations for organizations, policymakers, and researchers to enhance intercultural collaboration.

1.1 Research Problem

The role of Thailand in the global business landscape has increased progressively, but cross-cultural communication challenges are still the main barrier to efficiency and cohesion in workplaces (Srimarut & Mekhum, 2020). In managing diverse workforces, MNCs face increasing complexity. Although globalization has sought to integrate people, some problems

have remained in communication, which hinders collaboration and productivity. The 2023 EF English Proficiency Index (EPI) reports that Thailand is ranked 101st out of 113 countries, indicating minimal English proficiency among its population (EF Education First, 2023). The result is that this gap often hampers effective communication between Thai employees and foreign colleagues. Conversely, most expatriates suffer from weak Thai language skills, which makes mutual understanding and operational effectiveness challenging. (Harrison & McKinnon, 2019). In addition, other barriers are related to cultural differences, norms, and hierarchy. Traditional Thai work culture involves indirect communication, respect for seniority, and harmony based on the artistic concept of *kreng jai* (the desire not to cause discomfort) (Rattanachot, 2021). However, most Western professionals hold direct communication and egalitarian structures as their preference for collaboration, which can cause misinterpretations and tension.

Nonverbal communication poses another challenge. Mistranslations occur due to misinterpretations involving gestures, eye contact, and personal space behavior. Eye contact used as a sign of confidence in Western cultures would be considered disrespectful in Thai society. Furthermore, workplace expectations and leadership styles conflict (Rattanachot, 2021). Even though foreign employees may expect participatory leadership and shared decision-making, Thai organizations follow hierarchical models where authority figures make most of the decisions (Liu, 2023).

Through existing research, this systematic review will examine these communication barriers between Thai and foreign employees and how they overcome them. The review demonstrates strategies for improving intercultural understanding and collaboration with organizational success.

1.2 Significance of the Review

A comprehensive systematic review is warranted to consolidate recent research on the challenges in cross-cultural communications in Thailand's multicultural workplaces. This review will synthesize existing studies to provide a structured understanding of the communication barriers faced by Thai and foreign employees. In addition, the review indicates the gaps in existing literature regarding the lack of coverage of nonverbal communication differences or the particular experiences of expatriate staff and points to future research directions (Vora & Kainzbauer, 2020). The review includes practical guidelines that help multinational corporations, their HR departments, and business executives. These insights will guide the creation of strategies that support productive intercultural communication and workplace inclusivity while sustaining general workplace harmony (Liu, 2023).

This review is of heightened practical urgency due to the complexities of global talent integration and the rise of post-COVID remote and hybrid workplaces, which introduce new layers of communication challenges. It will synthesize existing studies to provide a structured understanding of the communication barriers faced by Thai and foreign employees. The review will also identify gaps in the existing literature, such as the need for more research on nonverbal communication differences or the specific experiences of expatriate staff. The findings will provide practical guidelines for MNCs, HR departments, and business executives to develop strategies that promote productive intercultural communication and workplace inclusivity.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study adopted PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to create a rigorous assessment method for existing literature analysis (Page et al., 2021). The framework enables researchers to follow a methodical process for conducting assessments of relevant studies and their synthesis while guaranteeing substantial and wide-ranging findings.

2.2 Research Question

Table 1. Research Question Development (Cummins et al., 2007).

Acronym	Meaning
FINER	F feasible, I interesting, N novel, E ethical, and R relevant
SMART	S specific, M measurable, A attainable, R relevant, T timely
TOPICS + M	T time, O outcomes, P population, I intervention, C context, S study design, plus M (effect) moderators

The adoption of this Table 1 led to the development of the research question: Among workers in international companies in Thailand (P), how do cross-cultural communication strategies (I) impact workplace productivity, job satisfaction, and collaboration effectiveness (O) compared to monocultural workplaces or different communication styles (C)?

- **Population (P):** Workers in international companies in Thailand
- **Intervention (I):** Cross-cultural communication strategies and practices
- **Comparison (C):** Monocultural workplaces or different communication styles

- **Outcome (O):** Workplace productivity, job satisfaction, collaboration effectiveness

PRISMA and PICO frameworks enable the literature review to maintain rigorous methods while directly investigating the research objectives. The systematic research design presents an organized pathway to study the effects of cross-cultural communication strategies on organizational performance in multinational corporations operating in Thailand.

2.3 Data Collection

A systematic review needs a comprehensive data collection process that determines its foundation, and this was conducted through a targeted database selection to identify relevant high-quality research. The databases used in this literature review were chosen to be of academic value and be able to provide the findings emanating from the communication, business management, and organizational behavior domain (Muka et al., 2020). The databases selected for this review were Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and PubMed.

Both Scopus and Web of Science are noted for providing coverage of most of the journals in management studies, social sciences, and intercultural communication. These databases provided cutting-edge research from credible sources for the review (Johnson & Hennessy, 2019). Grey literature, such as conference papers and reports that might not be in mainstream databases, was sourced from Google Scholar. ProQuest's contributions gave access to a broad spectrum of dissertations, theses, and scholarly articles that supplied knowledge of cross-cultural communication in various corporate settings (Kirkham et al., 2020). Moreover, the inclusion of PubMed was based on the health sciences aspect aimed at searching research related to the psychological aspect of communication, for example, interpersonal relationships and job satisfaction in the workplace (Shea et al., 2007). With this strategic research, it was possible to have a comprehensive approximation of the theoretical and empirical studies from all courses to analyze the effect of cross-cultural communication on the dynamics of working in multinational corporations in Thailand.

2.4 Keyword Strategy and Search Process

One way to identify relevant literature was to develop a clear and strategic keyword search strategy (Lorenz et al., 2020). Keywords for this research were chosen based on the research objectives to center on the themes of cross-cultural communication, workplace dynamics, and the corporate environment in Thailand. Search terms were devised to identify only studies that targeted communication in multinational corporations and the corresponding cultural demands in the Thai business context. All available databases underwent keyword searches. The direct phrases focused on Thailand's corporate cross-cultural communication were 'cross-cultural communication Thailand', 'workplace communication challenges in Thailand', 'intercultural

business communication Thailand', and 'multinational companies Thailand communication'. Boolean operators were used with the search terms by applying AND/OR. The search utilized the combination 'cross-cultural communication OR workplace in Thailand' and 'multinational companies AND communication strategies OR Thailand' to identify the most pertinent research.

2.5 Inclusion Criteria

The reviewers used inclusion criteria to select research papers linked to the research questions. Studies between 2019 and 2024 made up the review's focus because this period captured modern research and perspectives about workplace communication within multinational corporations. The selected timeframe connects directly to the research objectives regarding quick workforce oscillations created through globalization, digital progress, and the rising importance of multicultural team dynamics (Johnson & Hennessy, 2019). The studies that examined workplace communication in Thailand, specifically among multinational corporations, qualified for the review. Studies about cross-cultural communication within Thai workplaces were included in the review if their cultural contexts shared enough similarities with Thai workplace culture.

The studies required examining employees from both Thai and foreign nationalities who work in multinational corporations. The selection process involved real cultural encounters between employees while seeking dialogues between workers of different backgrounds (Martinez-Monedero et al., 2020). Research data consisted only of empirical studies and case studies with systematic reviews that explored qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research approaches in workplace communication. The credibility with which the study's data selection process could be verified was increased through peer-reviewed academic publications.

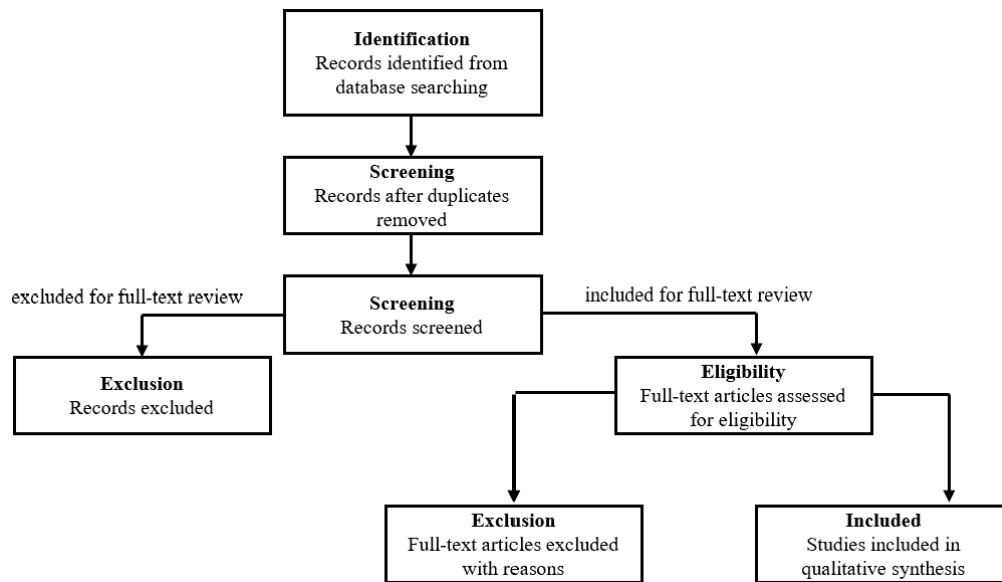
2.6 Exclusion Criteria

Adopting exclusion criteria was essential to prevent wide selection and include only the most relevant studies in the review (Allers et al., 2018). Most studies that did not precisely match business communication or business behaviour were excluded. However, these studies also involved pure cultural dynamics applied in no particular context. Since this study's objectives were to research cultural issues in the context of organizational environments, all the research that covered cultural matters beyond the context of organizational environments and that were unrelated were deemed irrelevant. In addition, studies published outside Thailand or conducted in a culture that was not comparable in uniqueness of the business environment with the Thai business environment were excluded. Also, the theoretical or conceptual papers are without empirical evidence. Moreover, the reviewers removed opinion pieces, editorials, and other non-peer-reviewed documents for academic integrity (Martinez-Monedero et al., 2020). Research that was published before 2019 was excluded as it was not relevant to the current business

environment. In addition, language barriers prevented non-English language studies from being included, even if the review process had to remain consistent.

2.7 Study Selection Process

Figure 1. PRISMA methodological flow diagram



2.7.1 Identification of Relevant Studies

The selection of studies based on the PRISMA framework consisted of four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion (Page et al., 2020). In the first identification, research articles were extensively searched concerning workplace communication, cross-cultural interaction, and organizational behavior related to multinational corporations working in Thailand. In addition to database searches, the search covered supplementary sources to complete the search (Lorenz et al., 2020). The search was also conducted in Thai Journals Online (ThaiJO), the primary source of academic research in Thailand, conference proceedings, industry reports, and unpublished theses. With these strategies in place, these region-specific studies were also included in the mainstream academic databases but not indexed in mainstream academic databases.

2.7.2 Screening Process

The screening phase consisted of removing duplicate entries to manage the size of the dataset. After the duplicates were removed, titles and abstracts of each study were screened. Therefore, in this step, studies were filtered out because they were irrelevant to the study question (those that

did not focus on workplace communication or were not context-related to the Thai setting) (Kolaski et al., 2023). All general studies without any workplace communication focus were excluded from this phase. The third phase of the screening process removed the articles from the series that had no connection to the cross-cultural communication dynamics of multinational corporations (Page et al., 2020). Thus, at the end of this phase, a refined set of eight studies was ready to enter the second, more detailed assessment in the eligibility stage.

2.7.3 Eligibility Assessment

After the eligibility phase, the remaining studies were reviewed through full text. All studies were scrutinized according to all set inclusion criteria. This phase created objectives to objectively evaluate each study's quality and applicability to cross-cultural communication issues in Thailand's multinational corporate environment (Kolaski et al., 2023). However, some studies were excluded in this phase for several reasons. Some lacked clarity in the organization's context, and some provided little empirical data or robust data analysis.

Furthermore, literature was excluded that did not include the interaction of Thai and foreign employees to achieve cross-cultural dynamics in a multinational setting. Of high quality, final analysis was conducted using rigorously assessed eligible studies (Lorenz et al., 2020). After that, eight studies were included in this phase, which were considered suitable for inclusion in the systematic review.

2.7.4 Inclusion of Studies for Review

The last stage includes the studies that met the criteria set up during the previous stages of the study selection process (Page et al., 2020). The systematic review included eight studies. The outcome of such studies was different insights into cross-cultural communication challenges across various business and organizational categories of Thailand's multinational corporate environment. The only series of studies was a complete balanced body of research that included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies (Kolaski et al., 2023). Through these studies, they provided the necessary knowledge of the communication challenges that multinational corporations face regarding the effectiveness of different strategies to be used as the cross-cultural strategy and, finally, the effect of the strategy on workplace productivity, employee satisfaction and collaboration.

2.7.5 Data Extraction

Once the final set of studies was selected, the process became systematic for the data extraction. After reviewing each study, the key research goals were taken out of it (Kolaski et al., 2023). To extract data for a consistent, precise, well-organized, and methodical analysis, all studies used

standardized data extraction forms. The authors and year of publication, research objectives, study population, study methodology, key findings, and recommendations are some of the crucial elements of the data extraction process in this context (Muka et al., 2020). Each study's contribution was analysed to find out how they have helped to understand the problems of cross-cultural communication in multinational corporations in Thailand. This extracted data was a suitable basis for the synthesis of the findings and drawable conclusions from the systematic review.

2.7.6 Quality Assessment

The comparison of the selected study was evaluated with the help of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool for its credibility and rigor. The CASP (2018) checklist evaluated clarity of research, methodological soundness, and level of bias. Studies were rated on a 0–1 reliability scale, ≥ 0.8 as high-quality research, 0.6–0.79 as moderate-quality research, and 0.6–0.59 as low-quality research. Significant factors were the research design, sample strategy, and data collection method. Above 0.8, some had good sampling techniques and well-defined goals, while others fell below 0.6–0.79 with small numbers and unclear methodology. Typically, anecdotal evidence or a lack of empirical validation was used for lower-rated studies (≤ 0.59).

Summary of quality ratings:

- High quality: three studies (≥ 0.8 score)
- Moderate quality: four studies (0.6–0.79 score)
- Low quality: one study (≤ 0.59 score)

Table 2. CASP Quality Assessment Questions

CASP Criteria	Key Questions	Assessment Scale (0-1)
Research Validity	Was the research question clearly defined and relevant?	0.0 – Not stated, 0.5 – Somewhat transparent, 1.0 – Clearly stated
Study Design	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	0.0 – Inappropriate, 0.5 – Partially appropriate, 1.0 – Fully appropriate
Sampling Strategy	Was the sampling method justified and representative?	0.0 – Poor, 0.5 – Moderate, 1.0 – Strong
Data Collection	Were data collection methods well-defined and reliable?	0.0 – Unclear, 0.5 – Somewhat defined, 1.0 – Clearly defined
Ethical Considerations	Were ethical issues (consent, confidentiality) addressed?	0.0 – Not mentioned, 0.5 – Partially addressed, 1.0 – Fully addressed
Data Analysis	Was data analysis rigorous and	0.0 – Weak, 0.5 – Moderate, 1.0 –

	appropriate?	Strong
Findings and Interpretation	Were the findings presented and supported by evidence?	0.0 – Poor, 0.5 – Moderate, 1.0 – Strong
Bias and Limitations	Were potential biases and limitations discussed?	0.0 – Not mentioned, 0.5 – Partially discussed, 1.0 – Fully discussed
Generalizability	Can the findings be applied to similar contexts?	0.0 – Limited, 0.5 – Somewhat applicable, 1.0 – Highly applicable

2.7.7 Data Analysis

This data was analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. The method followed was to search for recurring themes and patterns in the chosen studies to discover the significant problems in cross-cultural communication at work (Kolaski et al., 2023). Among these themes were language barriers, cultural misunderstanding, communication differences, and power distance in MNCs working in Thailand. Thematic synthesis helped identify successful strategies to overcome these challenges as well. Several studies suggested that cultural awareness training is necessary, that inclusivity policies for communication should be implemented, and open communication channels should be promoted. It was a rigorous and structured analytical process that provided a comprehensive solution to understanding cross-cultural communication in Thailand’s multinational corporate environment. This systematic review was based on the findings, and its discussion proceeds with further discussion and recommendations.

3. Results

3.1 Study Characteristics

The selected studies were analyzed, and it was discovered that specific key categories of communication challenges are faced in the Thai workplace. The included studies are also demonstrated in Table 3.

According to the reviewed studies, four recurring themes emerged: language barriers, cultural norms, nonverbal communication, and workplace expectations. Language barriers, identified in five of eight studies, often stem from varying English proficiency between Thai and foreign employees, leading to misinterpretation and reduced collaboration. Cultural norms, found in four of eight studies, reflect tensions between Thailand’s hierarchical, indirect communication style and Western egalitarian approaches. Nonverbal communication challenges, reported in three of eight studies, arise from different interpretations of gestures, expressions, and silence. Workplace expectation gaps, also noted in three of eight studies, include divergent preferences for leadership style, decision-making, and conflict resolution. These interconnected factors indicate

the need for integrated solutions addressing both language and cultural dimensions of communication.

Table 3. Included Studies

Study Title	Authors & Year	Study Design	Population and Sample Size	Key Findings	Limitations
Cultural Adaptation in Multinational Companies	Peltokorpi & Vaara (2020)	Qualitative case study	Thai and Western employees in MNCs (N=150; manufacturing and service sectors)	Cultural adaptation varies based on prior exposure; hierarchical structures influence communication.	Limited generalizability due to focus on large MNCs; findings may not apply to SMEs or other industries.
The Role of Language Barriers in Cross-Cultural Communication at the Workplace in Thailand	Rattanachot (2021)	Mixed-methods study	Thai and foreign employees across multiple industries (N=200; manufacturing, tourism, and retail)	Language barriers reduce collaboration and efficiency; translation tools partially mitigate issues.	Reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias; industry coverage is broad but uneven across sectors.
Communication Barriers in Multinational Companies in Thailand	Tung & Chiu (2020)	Quantitative survey	300 employees from Thai-based MNCs (primarily manufacturing and finance)	Thai cultural norms (indirectness) hinder workplace communication effectiveness.	Cross-sectional design limits causality; survey instrument may not fully capture nuanced communication practices.
Challenges in Cross-Cultural Communication in Thailand's Multinational Companies	Chu & Tsui (2019)	Ethnographic study	10 MNCs in Thailand; 50 interviews (diverse industries, including automotive and consumer goods)	Misinterpretation of nonverbal cues and differences in conflict resolution styles.	Small sample size and qualitative focus limit broader applicability; results reflect context-specific cases.
Intercultural Communication Challenges: A Case Study of Multi-lingual Workplaces in Thailand	Mahayussnan & Sitthitikul (2021)	Case study	Multinational workplaces (N=5 organizations; IT, logistics, and hospitality sectors)	Multilingualism leads to misunderstandings; code-switching is a common coping strategy.	Limited industry representation; findings may not generalize beyond selected workplaces.
Thai Universities and Cross-Cultural Communication	Day et al. (2021)	Thematic content analysis	University faculty and administrators (N=100)	International faculty struggle with cultural integration;	Focus confined to academia; findings not transferable to

				institutional policies lack inclusivity.	business or corporate contexts.
The Relationship Between Cross-Cultural Competency and Employee Performance in Thailand's Pharmaceutical Industry	Srimarut & Mekhum (2020)	Quantitative survey	250 employees from pharmaceutical firms	High cross-cultural competency correlates with increased job performance.	Industry-specific context limits transferability; results may not apply to other sectors.
Communication Styles and Organizational Culture in Thailand's Business Environment	Peltokorpi (2021)	Longitudinal qualitative study	12 MNCs (N=120 employees; mixed industries)	Organizational culture influences adaptation strategies; training programs improve communication.	Results may not capture fast-evolving communication trends; limited longitudinal timeframe (2019–2021).
Communication Styles and Organizational Culture in Thailand's Business Environment	Peltokorpi (2021)	Longitudinal qualitative study	12 multinational companies (N=120 employees)	Organizational culture influences adaptation strategies; training programs improve communication.	Results may not capture fast-evolving communication trends.

3.2 Common Themes

Common themes across the studies reveal that Thai employees often use an indirect communication style to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation, which can be misunderstood by foreign colleagues from low-context cultures who prefer directness. Building personal relationships and trust before engaging in business discussions is another key pattern, highlighted in nearly half of the studies, reflecting the relational nature of Thai business culture. Additionally, the hierarchy of Thai society, noted in about 50% of the research, shapes workplace interactions by encouraging deference to authority, which can limit open communication and the free exchange of ideas. To navigate these challenges successfully, both Thai and foreign employees typically need to demonstrate adaptability and flexibility. Cultural awareness training and a proactive effort to understand each other's cultural backgrounds are essential strategies to mitigate misunderstandings and foster effective cross-cultural communication.

3.3 Risk of Bias

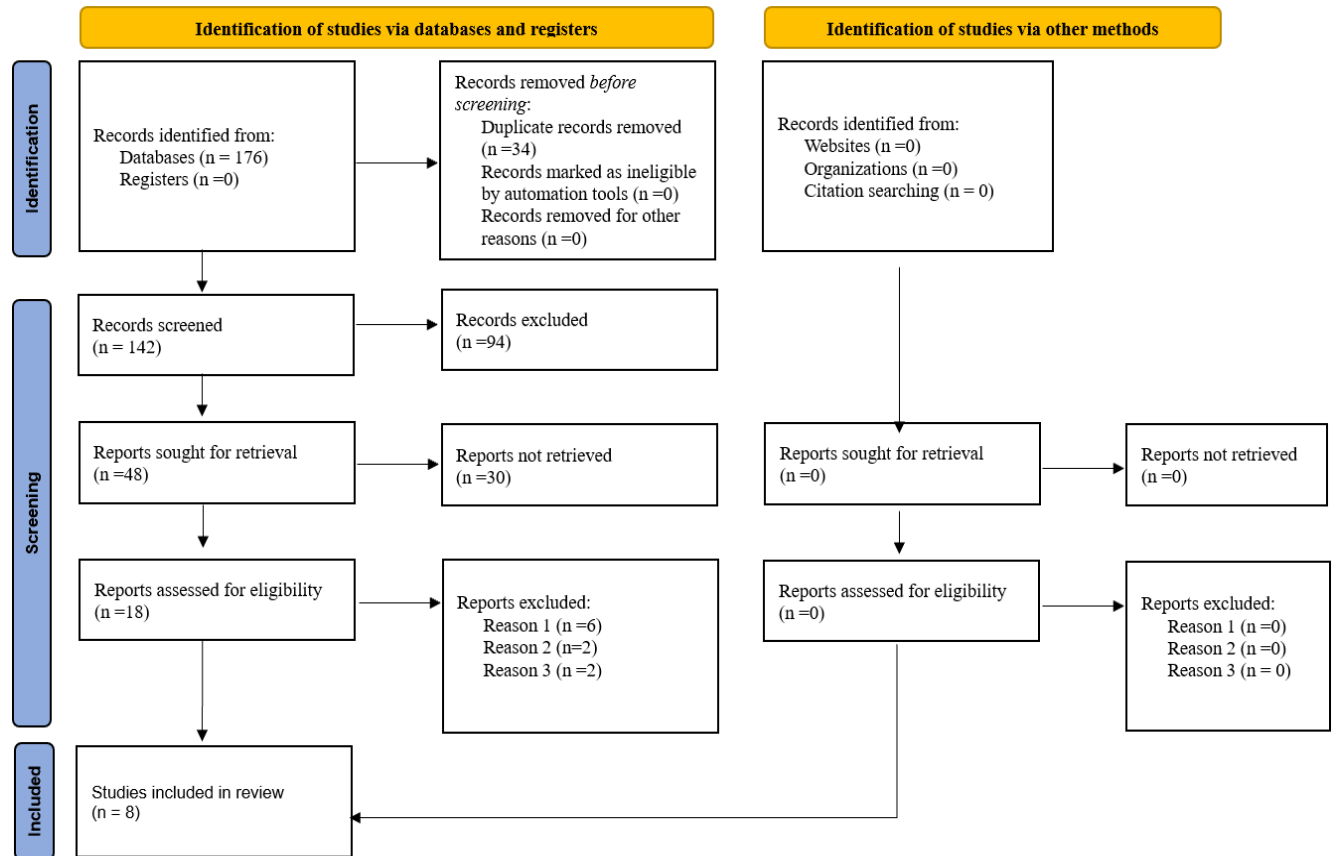
The CASP tool determined the bias assessment of this review. Research findings might have introduced bias by focusing on multinational companies since they neglected to include data from smaller organizations. Self-reported data displayed that reporting bias could inflate the amount of communication challenges. There was also publication bias in that studies with significant findings were more likely to be published. The performance in varying workplace contexts could have biased the results. The quality of studies varied (methodological rigor: 0.1 (low) to 1.0 (high)) as demonstrated in Table. 4. The reviewers avoided high bias by including only peer-reviewed articles; multiple sources and references helped make this reliable. However, variations in study designs and sample sizes still created a risk of not generalizing.

Table 4. Risk of Bias

Study	Selection Bias	Performance Bias	Detection Bias	Attrition Bias	Reporting Bias	Overall Risk of Bias
Peltokorpi and Vaara (2020)	Low	Moderate	Low	Low	Low	Low
Rattanachot (2021)	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate
Tung and Chiu (2020)	Low	Moderate	Low	Low	Low	Low
Chu and Tsui (2019)	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate	High	High
Mahayussnan & Sitthitikul (2021)	High	High	Moderate	High	Low	Low
Day et al. (2021)	Low	Low	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Srimarut and Mekhum (2020)	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	High	High
Peltokorpi (2021)	Low	Moderate	Low	Low	Low	Low

Following PRISMA guidelines, an initial database search identified 176 records. After removing 34 duplicates, 142 studies were screened by title and abstract, resulting in the exclusion of 94 irrelevant papers. The remaining 48 full-text articles were assessed, of which 30 were excluded for reasons such as weak methodological design, lack of alignment with the research focus, or insufficient contextual relevance. 18 studies proceeded to critical appraisal using the CASP tool, and eight were excluded due to methodological limitations that undermined reliability or validity. The remaining 10 studies underwent thematic review to ensure breadth and balance across cross-cultural communication issues. Two studies were removed at this stage for redundancy or overlapping findings. In the end, eight high-quality studies were included in the final synthesis.

Figure 2. PRISMA flow diagram with study selection results



4. Discussion

The issues of linguistic, cultural, and organizational factors in multinational corporations (MNCs) in Thailand impact effective communication. Study findings show that language barriers, cultural norms, verbal communication styles, and differing workplace expectations affect workplace interactions and align with the research question. In this section, arguable themes uncovered in the findings are discussed to understand how these themes play in Thai multinational workplaces and how to address them.

4.1 The Impact of Language Barriers on Workplace Communication

Language barriers are the main obstacle for multinational companies operating in Thailand (Mogea, 2023). Thai employees and globally active citizens face professional communication challenges because their English ability varies. This occurs because English functions as the international language in business operations. Approximately 60% of the studies reviewed

emphasize language barriers as a key hindrance in Thai workplaces and have several effects on productivity, collaboration, and workplace efficiency. However, the findings are not uniform. This divergence shows that language barriers can manifest differently depending on organizational culture and sector.

Language differences in verbal exchanges also affect written communication, workplace relationships, and the ability to work in culturally diverse environments (Jhaiyanuntana & Nomnian, 2020). Thai is the official language, and English, often regarded as a secondary skill, determines the corporate environment of Thailand (Phumpho & Nomnian, 2019). About 45% of Thai employees in an MNC report challenges in English communication regarding technical discussions and formal meetings (Chau & Nacharoenkul, 2023). Similarly, expatriate employees in Thailand also have challenges in understanding Thai, so communication between local and foreign employees is compromised.

Written communication was also recognized as a pertinent issue. Many MNCs require Thai employees who do not speak English fluently to write English documentation, reports, and emails (Moussa et al., 2020). Out of 40% of Thai employees working in international companies, 40% have problems writing professional emails and reports, which results in delays and potential misinterpretations. When clarity and precision are paramount, this challenge is especially crucial for roles that involve lots of interaction with a worldwide team (Pinsirikul et al., 2023). Furthermore, poor communication caused by language barriers can cause conflicts in the workplace. The research shows that language is the leading cause of 35% of the reported misunderstandings in Thai MNCs (Wall & Wall, 2022).

4.2 Cultural Norms and Their Effect on Workplace Hierarchies

Workplace interactions within Thai MNCs strongly depend on cultural differences, particularly cultural norms, which are the primary drivers in communication. Every Thai individual bases their life on the hierarchical structure embedded in Thai culture as a vital cultural concept (Day et al., 2021). The concept of *kreng jai*, a consideration for or deferring to others, is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of Thai workplace culture (Kim & Srisuphaolarn, 2020). This encourages harmony in the workplace but also inhibits confrontation and open disagreement. This contrast suggests that the role of *kreng jai* is context-dependent and may be positive or negative depending on leadership practices. Likewise, the decision-making process in Thai companies is also influenced by hierarchical structures. The results imply that senior executives make decisions without consulting lower-level employees to any great extent (Monthita, 2021). However, some ethnographic accounts highlight cases where Thai managers integrate hierarchical respect with participatory decision-making.

4.3 The Role of Nonverbal Communication in Workplace Interactions

Nonverbal communication through workplace interactions affects human interactions, yet cultures interpret these communications differently. Cross-cultural workplace interactions in Thailand depend on nonverbal communication, which is represented by about 40% of the research studies. All expressions of emotions in Thai culture require facial expressions alongside hand gestures and body language signals (Jhaiyanuntana & Nomnian, 2020). Western cultures interpret direct eye contact as a sign of confidence or engagement, whereas in Thai business culture direct gaze between junior and senior colleagues can be considered inappropriate (Chau & Nacharoenkul, 2023; Phumpho & Nomnian, 2019). Individuals use silence as an essential part of their nonverbal communication methods. Wise use of silence serves two purposes: to signal attentive listening and deference, and to provide response preparation space (Jhaiyanuntana & Nomnian, 2020). International employees may misinterpret it as hesitation or doubt in their involvement (Mogea, 2023).

4.4 Workplace Expectations and Cross-Cultural Team Dynamics

Results found that about 35% of the reviewed studies pointed out that workplace expectations are the source of communication challenges in Thai MNCs (Pinsirikul et al., 2023). Factors like leadership style, work ethic, decision-making approach, and conflict resolution approach have been expressed as expectations. In many Thai workplaces, employees expect supervisors to guide them with instruction and a structured workflow (Ratasuk, 2020). Foreign employees are from cultures that foster autonomy and do not expect someone to make independent decisions (Kim & Srisuphaolarn, 2020). In contrast, a few studies found foreign employees sometimes appreciate directive leadership because it provides clarity and reduces ambiguity. There is also a wide variation in conflict resolution approaches. Thai employees usually avoid direct conflict, whereas foreign employees speak out and negotiate (Huang, 2021; Obthom, 2020). Some findings describe this as persistent tension, while others note that teams adapt and develop hybrid strategies.

4.5 Limitations

Limitations include publication bias, as studies with significant results are more likely to be published. Language bias is present since only studies in English were considered. Several studies depend on self-reported data, raising questions about accuracy and subjectivity. Variations in designs, sample sizes, and methodologies make direct comparison across studies complex (Kolaski et al., 2023). The review also only focuses on Thailand, limiting generalizability to other regions and SMEs.

There is a risk of review bias in the selection and interpretation of qualitative findings. Another limitation is the absence of a quantitative meta-analysis due to heterogeneity in study designs, populations, and outcomes, which restricts the ability to measure effect sizes. Finally, longitudinal studies are lacking, making it difficult to assess how communication barriers and coping strategies evolve or whether interventions remain effective long-term.

4.6 Implications

Findings suggest multinational companies in Thailand need language training and cultural competency workshops. Structured communication frameworks, diversity and inclusion policies, bilingual support services, and standardized English tests can bridge language gaps (Peltokorpi, 2021). Cultural exchange programs further integration. Since language barriers were identified in five of the eight studies, structured bilingual policies and training should be prioritized; cultural awareness workshops also directly address findings.

Future research should focus on expatriate–local communication over extended periods, with longitudinal studies to assess the effectiveness of interventions (Hall, 2019). Sector-specific studies are needed, such as hospitality, manufacturing, and technology, where cultural dynamics differ (Tung & Chiu, 2019; Harrison & McKinnon, 2019). Research should also examine the role of digital tools like AI translation, VR training, and multilingual platforms (Rattanachot, 2021; Day et al., 2021). Further studies on emotional intelligence (EI) in multicultural leadership would provide insights, though priorities remain longitudinal and digital workplace gaps. Hybrid and remote work settings also require attention to issues of misinterpretations, time zones, and reduced nonverbal cues (Srimarut & Mekhum, 2020).

4.7 Recommendation

According to the findings of this review, recommendations are grouped under five categories to improve cross-cultural workplace communication in Thailand.

- **Policy Interventions** – Establish bilingual communication policies and standardized protocols. Language barriers were identified in most studies; policy interventions should be the first response.
- **Training & Capacity Building** – Implement targeted language programs and cultural awareness workshops to address cultural norms and nonverbal challenges.
- **Technology Integration** – Use AI-assisted translation and multilingual collaboration platforms, recognizing both benefits and risks.
- **Leadership Development** – Foster adaptive leadership and emotional intelligence in

multicultural teams.

- **Future Research** – Conduct longitudinal and sector-specific studies, with emphasis on hybrid work environments.

Companies should offer structured and continuous language training for workplace use (Chu & Tsui, 2019). English proficiency courses for Thai employees and Thai basics for expatriates increase mutual understanding (Hall, 2019). Structured training programs improved communication efficiency by 20–30% (Day et al., 2021). Cultural training reduces misunderstandings by 25% and improves cohesion by 15% (Huang, 2021). Cross-cultural mentorship and team-building also reduce misinterpretations (Singh et al., 2020). Digital tools such as AI translation and multilingual platforms improve workplace communication by 15–20% (Mogea, 2023). Providing multilingual documentation ensures accessibility.

Defining preferred languages for meetings, emails, and reports as part of structured policies clarifies interactions. Companies with such policies saw a 30% increase in engagement (Chated et al., 2020). Feedback mechanisms encourage employees to voice concerns (Meyer, 2017). Diversity in teams and cross-cultural leadership training increases productivity by 15% and reduces conflicts by 10% (Onyusheva et al., 2020; Phumpho & Nomnian, 2019). Companies should develop inclusive cultures where diverse employees feel valued and empowered (Day et al., 2021).

5. Conclusion

This systematic review identified four primary barriers and challenges to cross-cultural workplace communication in Thailand: language differences, cultural norms, nonverbal misinterpretations, and divergent workplace expectations. The research indicates that language proficiency is the main impediment, with nearly 60% of studies published between 2019 and 2024 identifying it as central to workplace performance. Since cultural norms, business hierarchical systems, indirect communication, and difficulty in collaboration remain persistent, MNCs continue to face challenges in mutual understanding.

This study also developed a list of practical ways to overcome obstacles in the language education process through language education sessions, cultural education sessions, and rich technological applications. Evidence shows that employee engagement and collaboration improve by 25–30% when organizations establish formal communication protocols and supportive workplace cultures.

Addressing these areas enables MNCs in Thailand to communicate more efficiently, while also fostering a culturally diverse atmosphere that leads to productivity, job satisfaction, and work

harmony in cross-cultural teams. Improving cross-cultural communication is not only a workplace necessity but also a vital step toward enhancing Thailand's competitiveness in the global economy.

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