

An Investigation of Barriers and Strategies in English-Speaking Skills for Buddhist Monks during Chatting Activities with Foreigners

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated (1) English-speaking barriers experienced by Thai Buddhist monks when communicating with foreigners during Monk Chat activities about Buddhism and (2) strategies used to overcome these barriers. Participants were 30 Buddhist monks from Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU), Chiang Mai Campus, Thailand, purposively selected based on active participation in the Monk Chat Program. Data were collected using two 5-point Likert-scale questionnaires (barriers and strategies) and semi-structured interviews with 10 volunteer monks. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, integrating descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and percentages) with thematic analysis. Results showed that intercultural communication barriers occurred at a moderate level. The most salient barriers were understanding slang/idioms and language proficiency. Monks reported difficulties with fluency, comprehending diverse accents, translating Buddhist terminology, and responding spontaneously. External constraints included limited opportunities for practice and challenges related to foreigners' speech patterns. Regarding coping strategies, monks reported frequent overall strategy use. Social skills were used most often, particularly active listening and showing cultural respect, followed by personal skills, non-verbal strategies, and verbal strategies such as approximation, paraphrasing, and clarification requests. Peer support and technology use also emerged as supplementary strategies. Overall, the findings indicate that monks manage linguistic limitations through interpersonal sensitivity and strategic resourcefulness in authentic intercultural exchanges.

Keywords: Barriers, Strategies, Buddhist Monks, Intercultural Communication, English as a Lingua Franca

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Introduction

Globalization has intensified cross-border mobility, tourism, and intercultural encounters, creating frequent communication among people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Library of Congress, 2024; Revida et al., 2021). In this environment, English commonly functions as a lingua franca that enables interaction in settings where interlocutors do not share a first language. As a result, speaking English for real-time communication has become increasingly important for individuals and institutions operating in international and multicultural contexts (Purba, 2021).

In Thailand, English has gained heightened significance across sectors such as tourism, business, trade, technology, and education (Wongkumsai, 2023). Despite ongoing efforts to strengthen English education, English-speaking ability in Thailand has been repeatedly reported as an area of concern in regional comparisons, with national indicators suggesting persistent challenges in communicative competence and oral fluency (Chuanpongpanich, 2021; EF Education First, 2023). Thai learners commonly report difficulties related to pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary use in conversation, and these linguistic constraints often interact with psychological factors (e.g., anxiety, fear of mistakes) and limited opportunities for authentic speaking practice (Chuanchaisit & Prapphal, 2024; Tahe, 2020). These barriers can undermine participation in intercultural interactions where successful communication depends not only on linguistic accuracy but also on intelligibility, responsiveness, and pragmatic appropriateness.

Intercultural communication barriers may be understood as obstacles that disrupt meaning-making due to limitations in verbal and non-verbal resources, sociocultural understanding, and interactional management in cross-cultural exchanges (Pavenkov & Rubtcova, 2021). In real conversations, barriers may emerge from limited language proficiency, unfamiliar accents, idiomatic usage, time pressure, topic specificity, or insufficient interactional strategies, especially when speakers must respond spontaneously. Accordingly, communication strategies become crucial as compensatory resources that help speakers negotiate meaning, maintain interaction, and minimize breakdowns when linguistic or contextual difficulties arise.

Thailand is a predominantly Buddhist country, and Buddhist institutions play a central role in cultural and educational life. Thai Buddhist universities provide a distinctive learning ecology in which monks study religious doctrine while also engaging with international visitors and intercultural communities (Srinok et al., 2021). Buddhism itself has a global presence, and Thailand attracts substantial numbers of visitors who are interested in Buddhist teachings and practices (Schedneck, 2021). Within such contexts, monks are not only learners of English but also mediators of Buddhist knowledge who interact with foreigners about religious and philosophical concepts. These interactions place monks in a specialized communicative position: they must explain abstract concepts, interpret culturally embedded meanings, and respond to questions that may involve differences in worldview and communicative norms (Boonmatun & Huttayavilaiphan, 2025; Simmali & Huttayavilaiphan, 2025).

Monk Chat Programs, organized on many Buddhist university campuses, provide an informal space where monks and foreign visitors converse about Buddhism in English as a lingua franca. Such programs potentially support language development through experiential learning in authentic exchanges, while also contributing to cultural tourism and the communication of Buddhist teachings to international audiences (Schedneck, 2021). However, these settings can also intensify communicative demands. Monks may experience language-related challenges such as limited fluency, difficulty with unfamiliar accents, and the need to translate Buddhist terminology into accessible English. At the same time, sociocultural factors; including the symbolic role of monks, behavioral norms, and expectations in religious discourse, may shape the interaction in ways that differ from general EFL classroom communication. Without sufficient intercultural communication competence, monks may struggle to convey Buddhist concepts accurately or to respond appropriately to visitors' questions, potentially limiting mutual understanding.

Previous research on English-speaking barriers among university learners commonly identifies linguistic difficulties (e.g., vocabulary limitations, grammar control, word choice), as well as affective barriers such as nervousness and fear of making mistakes (Chand, 2021). Studies also suggest that speaking is often perceived as the most demanding language skill because it requires real-time processing and immediate interactional responses (Tahe, 2020). Importantly, learners' ability to cope with speaking barriers is shaped not only by their language knowledge but also by the strategies they employ to manage communication breakdowns and maintain interaction. In intercultural settings, such strategies may include asking for clarification, paraphrasing, approximating meanings, using non-verbal cues, and drawing on interpersonal and relational resources (e.g., showing respect, active listening, rapport-building) (Coskun, 2016; Kramersch, 1993; Listyani, 2018). Regular participation in authentic conversation can also strengthen confidence and promote adaptive communication behaviors over time (Coskun, 2016; Listyani, 2018).

Although barriers and strategies in English speaking have been explored in general university EFL populations, research focusing specifically on Buddhist monks in informal intercultural chatting contexts remains limited (Boonmatun & Huttayavilaiphan, 2025; Simmali & Huttayavilaiphan, 2025). Findings derived from lay university students may not generalize to monks for at least three reasons. First, Monk Chat interactions often involve specialized discourse about Buddhism, including culturally embedded and abstract concepts that are difficult to translate and explain. Second, monks' institutional role and visible identity (e.g., wearing robes, adhering to monastic rules) can influence conversational topics, power dynamics, and pragmatic expectations. Third, the communicative goal in Monk Chat is not only to practice English but also to communicate religious teachings to international visitors, which may increase the stakes of clarity and appropriateness in communication. For these reasons, a focused examination of monks' perceived barriers and coping strategies is needed to inform context-sensitive language support and training.

Accordingly, this study investigates English-speaking barriers and communication strategies among Buddhist monks participating in Monk Chat activities with foreigners about Buddhism. By identifying salient barriers and documenting the strategies monks use to manage them, the study contributes to intercultural communication scholarship in religious and tourism-related contexts and provides practical implications for developing English training programs tailored to monks' communicative needs.

Research Objectives

1. Identify specific barriers that Buddhist monks face when speaking in English with foreigners during Buddhist chatting activities.
2. Explore effective strategies employed by Buddhist monks to overcome these English-speaking barriers during Buddhist chatting activities with foreigners.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to examine intercultural communication barriers and coping strategies among Buddhist monks in Monk Chat interactions. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected in parallel, analyzed separately, and then integrated to provide complementary explanations and strengthen the interpretation of findings. Mixed methods were appropriate because intercultural communication involves linguistic, affective, sociocultural, and contextual dimensions that may not be fully captured by a single method (Byram, 1997; Dearsorff, 2006). Integration was conducted through triangulation and comparison of convergent results (Fetters et al., 2013).

2. Research Setting

Data were collected at the Monk Chat Program at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU), Chiang Mai Campus, Thailand. The program is an informal intercultural exchange in which foreign visitors converse with monks about Buddhism and monastic life using English as a lingua franca.

3. Population and Sample

3.1 Quantitative Participants

The population comprised Buddhist monks enrolled at MCU Chiang Mai Campus who regularly participated in Monk Chat activities in 2024. Using purposive sampling, 30 monks were recruited on a voluntary basis, with participation criteria including regular engagement in Monk Chat sessions and willingness to complete questionnaires. Participants included monks from Thailand (40%), Myanmar (30%), Laos (26.7%), and Nepal (3.3%). Most reported limited formal English learning experience (0–2 years: 40%; 3–5 years: 30%; 6–8 years: 24%). The majority were undergraduate students (76.7%), while 23.3% were enrolled in master's programs. None reported having lived or studied in English-speaking countries. Regarding English use, 40% used English daily, 37% weekly, and 16.7% monthly.

3.2 Qualitative Participants

From the 30 questionnaire participants, 10 monks volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews. These participants represented a range of nationalities, education levels, and English proficiency backgrounds reflected in the larger sample. Interviews were conducted face-to-face immediately after Monk Chat sessions, lasted approximately 15–30 minutes, and followed an interview guide with open-ended questions focusing on barriers experienced during the conversation and strategies used to cope with them. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. Because participants included monks from multiple nationalities, interviews were conducted in a language participants were comfortable with (Thai and/or English), and clarification or rephrasing was provided when necessary. Where Thai was used, interview excerpts were translated into English for reporting, with careful attention to retaining the intended meaning in context.

4. Research Instruments

Three instruments were used for data collection: a Barriers Questionnaire, a Strategies Questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. The Barriers Questionnaire measured monks' perceived barriers encountered during Monk Chat interactions. Items covered internal barriers (e.g., language proficiency, personal traits, affective factors, and communicative skills) and external barriers (e.g.,

environmental constraints, interlocutor-related challenges, and material/resource limitations). Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = always). The instrument was adapted from relevant speaking-barrier and intercultural communication frameworks (e.g., Rahayu, 2015; Chand, 2021). Prior to administration, the questionnaire was checked for clarity and appropriateness of wording, and minor wording adjustments were made to improve readability.

The Strategies Questionnaire assessed strategies used to manage communication difficulties during Monk Chat interactions. It included four domains: verbal strategies, non-verbal strategies, personal skills, and social skills, and used the same 5-point Likert scale response format. The questionnaire was informed by established communication strategy frameworks (Tarone, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983) and later applied models in related contexts (e.g., Syarifudin & Rahmant, 2021). Before data collection, items were reviewed to ensure they aligned with the study context and were understandable for participants, and the final version was administered immediately after chatting sessions to support accurate recall.

To gain deeper insight into monks' experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 volunteer monks selected from the 30 participants. Interviews were carried out face-to-face immediately after Monk Chat sessions, lasted approximately 15–30 minutes, and followed an interview guide with open-ended questions focusing on barriers experienced during the conversation and strategies used to cope with them. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. Because participants included monks from multiple nationalities, interviews were conducted in a language participants were comfortable with (Thai and/or English), and clarification or rephrasing was provided when necessary. Where Thai was used, interview excerpts were translated into English for reporting, with careful attention to retaining the intended meaning in context.

5. Data Collection Procedures

Following ethical approval from the University of Phayao Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) data collection was conducted during Monk Chat activities at MCU Chiang Mai Campus. After each monk–foreigner chatting session, participating monks completed the Barriers and Strategies Questionnaires to support accurate recall. The researcher provided standardized instructions and collected completed questionnaires. Volunteers for interviews then participated in a semi-structured interview immediately after questionnaire completion. Prior to recording, participants were informed of the purpose of the interview and provided consent for audio recording.

6. Data Analysis and Integration

Quantitative data from questionnaires ($n = 30$) were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and percentages) were calculated for each dimension and item. Mean scores were interpreted using the following scale: 1.00–1.80 = never; 1.81–2.60 = rarely; 2.61–3.40 = sometimes; 3.41–4.20 = often; 4.21–5.00 = always.

Qualitative data from interviews ($n = 10$) were transcribed verbatim. Where needed, transcripts were translated into English for reporting. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify recurring patterns and themes related to barriers and strategies. Coding combined (a) theory-informed categories aligned with the study framework and (b) inductive codes emerging from the data. Representative excerpts were selected to illustrate key themes.

For Mixed-methods integration, findings from quantitative and qualitative strands were compared and integrated to identify convergence, complementarity, and areas of divergence, thereby strengthening interpretation through triangulation (Fetters et al., 2013).

The Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework integrates perspectives from intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and communication strategy research to explain how Buddhist monks manage English-mediated interactions with foreigners in Monk Chat settings. Drawing on ICC scholarship (Byram, 1997; Dearsdorff, 2006), the framework assumes that successful intercultural communication depends on the interplay of (a) linguistic resources and (b) intercultural competence, including relevant attitudes, knowledge, and interactional skills.

Within this framework, communication barriers are conceptualized as obstacles that may disrupt meaning-making during intercultural exchanges. Barriers are organized into two broad domains: internal barriers and external barriers. Internal barriers refer to factors within the speaker, including limitations in language proficiency, personal traits, affective factors (e.g., anxiety), and communicative skills. External barriers refer to contextual constraints such as environmental conditions, interlocutor-related challenges (e.g., unfamiliar accents or interactional styles), and material/resource limitations. This internal-external categorization is informed by prior research on speaking barriers and intercultural communication challenges (Rahayu, 2015; Dwi, 2018; Chand, 2021).

To account for how monks cope with these barriers, the framework conceptualizes communication strategies as deliberate techniques used to maintain interaction, negotiate meaning, and achieve mutual understanding in real-time communication. This definition follows foundational work in communication strategy research (Tarone, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983). Strategies are grouped into (1) language-oriented strategies, including verbal (e.g., paraphrasing, approximation, clarification requests) and non-verbal strategies (e.g., gestures, facial expressions), and (2) intercultural interactional resources, operationalized in this study as personal skills and social skills that support relationship management and culturally appropriate interaction (e.g., active listening, respect, and rapport-building). This distinction reflects the dual requirement of linguistic management and intercultural sensitivity in lingua franca communication.

Finally, the framework aligns these strategic resources with ICC-related components, particularly attitudes, knowledge, and skills, highlighted in Dearsdorff's (2006) process model and Baker's (2011) notion of intercultural awareness. In this study, barriers and strategies are therefore examined as interconnected: perceived barriers indicate where communication is vulnerable, while strategy use reflects how monks mobilize linguistic and intercultural resources to sustain communication and develop competence through authentic intercultural engagement. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study, showing the relationship between intercultural communication barriers (internal and external) and communication strategies (language strategies and cultural skills) within the Monk Chat context.

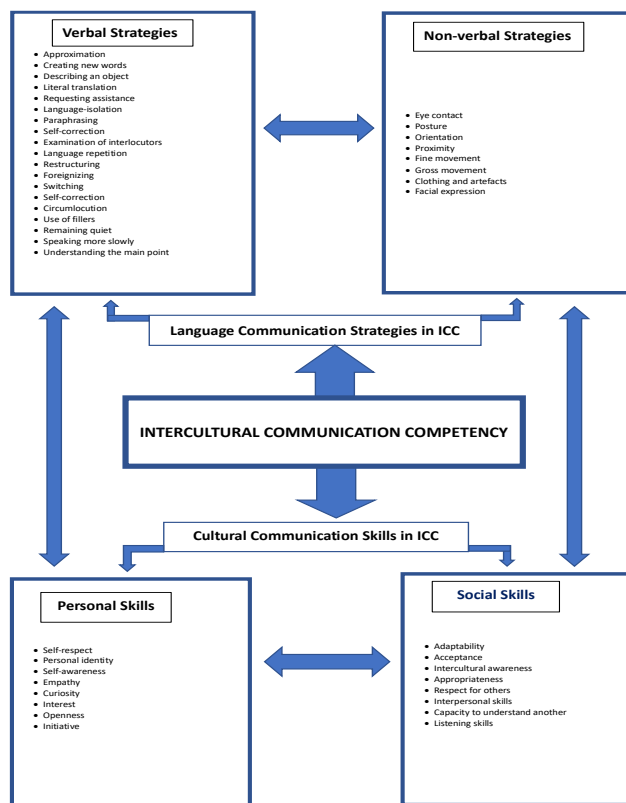


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Intercultural Communication Barriers and Strategies

Research Results

The findings are presented in three sections: (1) participants’ background information, (2) intercultural communication barriers, and (3) intercultural communication strategies reported by the monks.

1. Background Information of Participants

The 30 participating monks represented diverse backgrounds from four countries. Table 1 presents the complete demographic profile of the participants.

Table 1 Demography of Participants

Demography	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Country of origin	Thailand	12	40%
	Myanmar	9	30%
	Laos	8	26.7%
	Nepal	1	3.3%
Years of English education	0-2	12	40%
	3-5	9	30%
	6-8	7	24%
	9+	2	6%
Current education level	Bachelor's	23	76.7%
	Master's	7	23.3%
English use frequency	Daily	12	40%
	Weekly	11	37%
	Monthly	6	20%
	Rarely	1	3.3%

Table 1 Demography of Participants (Continued)

Demography	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Years of experience chatting with foreigners about Buddhism	0-2	16	53.3%
	3-5	9	30%
	6-8	5	16.7%
Comfort level in chatting with foreigners about Buddhism	Sometimes comfortable	11	36.7%
	Usually comfortable	10	33.3%
	Always comfortable	9	30%

The participants represented four countries, with the highest proportion from Thailand (40%), followed by Myanmar (30%), Laos (26.7%), and Nepal (3.3%). In terms of English education, most had studied English for relatively short periods: 40% reported 0-2 years of study, 30% had 3-5 years, and 24% had 6-8 years. Regarding educational level, 76.7% were enrolled in bachelor's programs and 23.3% in master's programs. With respect to English use frequency, 40% reported using English daily, 37% weekly, and 20% monthly. Their experience with chatting to foreigners about Buddhism was also limited: 53.3% had only 0-2 years of experience, 30% had 3-5 years, and 16.7% had 6-8 years. Levels of comfort in chatting with foreigners varied: 36.7% felt "sometimes comfortable," 33.3% "usually comfortable," and 30% "always comfortable."

2. Intercultural Communication Barriers

The intercultural communication barriers faced by Buddhist monks are categorized into internal barriers (language proficiency, traits, affect, and skills) and external barriers (environment and linguistic/conversational challenges). Table 2 presents the quantitative results ordered from highest to lowest mean scores, which are further explored through qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews.

Table 2 Intercultural Communication Barriers

Barrier Category	Specific Barrier	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
Language Proficiency	Speaking fluency	3.27	0.74	Sometimes
	Comprehension	3.17	0.69	Sometimes
	Category Mean	3.22	0.71	Sometimes
Linguistic/Conversational	Slang/idioms	3.37	1.03	Sometimes
	Native speaker practice	3.07	1.31	Sometimes
	Category Mean	3.22	1.17	Sometimes
Skills	Grammar & vocabulary	3.20	1.18	Sometimes
	Quick response	3.10	1.18	Sometimes
	Category Mean	3.08	1.12	Sometimes
Environment	Practice time	3.17	0.98	Sometimes
	Teaching methods	3.03	1.06	Sometimes
	Category Mean	3.08	1.00	Sometimes
Affect	Fear of mistakes	3.10	1.12	Sometimes
	Motivation	2.73	1.23	Sometimes
	Category Mean	2.91	1.17	Sometimes
Traits	Understanding feelings	3.10	0.92	Sometimes
	Starting conversations	3.10	1.21	Sometimes
	Category Mean	2.77	1.19	Sometimes
Overall Mean Score		3.09	1.10	Sometimes

Language Proficiency: Language proficiency was the highest-rated barrier category ($M = 3.22$, $S.D. = 0.71$), with speaking fluency ($M = 3.27$) and comprehension ($M = 3.17$) being the most significant challenges. These findings were reflected in interview responses, where monks described challenges with various accents and pronunciation differences.

Excerpt 1 (P1): “Accents like Caribbean or African are hard to follow; I had to ask many times.”

Excerpt 2 (P2): “I misunderstood the question. They asked, who created the rules? but I heard Who created the world?”

Linguistic and Conversational Challenges: Linguistic/conversational challenges also scored highly ($M = 3.22$, $S.D. = 1.17$), with slang/idioms ($M = 3.37$) being the most difficult issue, followed by native speaker practice ($M = 3.07$). Monks found it particularly challenging when foreigners used colloquial language or spoke with unfamiliar accents.

Excerpt 3 (P3): “Sometimes foreigners use idioms I cannot understand at all.”

Excerpt 4 (P8): “The American pronunciation of car made me confused; I only understood when they repeated it.”

Skills-Related Barriers: Skills-related barriers were also considerable ($M = 3.08$, $S.D. = 1.12$), with grammar & vocabulary ($M = 3.20$) and quick response ($M = 3.10$) being most common. Monks struggled to express complex Buddhist concepts in English due to limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge.

Excerpt 5 (P5): “Sometimes I want to explain Buddhist terms but do not know the English word, so I use another.”

Excerpt 6 (P8): “Sometimes when they ask me a question suddenly, I stop and think for quite a while before I can give an answer.”

Environmental Barriers: Environmental barriers received a mean score of $M = 3.08$ ($S.D. = 1.00$), with practice time ($M = 3.17$) and teaching methods ($M = 3.03$) being the primary concerns. Interview data supported these findings, as several monks mentioned that limited practice opportunities constrained their English development.

Excerpt 7 (P5): “I do not spend enough time practicing English outside of the Monk Chat Program.”

Excerpt 8 (P6): “My teacher's methods make it hard to learn English effectively.”

Affective Barriers: Affective barriers were somewhat less prominent ($M = 2.91$, $S.D. = 1.17$), with fear of making mistakes being the most common issue ($M = 3.10$). Despite the lower mean score, these emotional challenges still reduced monks' willingness to participate actively in intercultural exchanges.

Excerpt 9 (P4): “In my first years, I often felt nervous and asked senior monks to help answer.”

Excerpt 10 (P9): “When I made a mistake in speaking, the foreigners laughed. They were not mocking me, but I still felt embarrassed, so I stayed quiet.”

Trait-Related Barriers: Trait-related barriers were the least significant ($M = 2.77$, $S.D. = 1.19$), although understanding feelings ($M = 3.10$) and starting conversations ($M = 3.10$) were still reported at a moderate level. This indicates that personality traits were not a major obstacle; instead, linguistic and experiential limitations were the dominant barriers.

Excerpt 11 (P7): “I rarely start the conversation. I wait for them to ask, because I am not sure what topic is safe.”

Excerpt 12 (P3): “I find it hard to understand foreigners' feelings sometimes.”

Mixed-Methods Integration of Barriers: The qualitative themes largely converged with the quantitative results. Language proficiency and linguistic/conversational challenges, which received the highest mean scores in the survey (both $M = 3.22$), were also the most frequently discussed in interviews, with monks providing detailed accounts of fluency difficulties, comprehension breakdowns, and confusion caused by idiomatic language. Skills-related barriers reflected in the survey (grammar & vocabulary $M = 3.20$; quick response $M = 3.10$) were supported by interview accounts of monks struggling to explain Buddhist terminology in English and needing extended time to formulate responses. Affective barriers, though rated lower quantitatively ($M = 2.91$), were nonetheless vividly described in interviews, particularly fear of mistakes and embarrassment, suggesting that the emotional impact may be more significant than frequency scores alone indicate. Environmental barriers (practice time $M = 3.17$; teaching methods $M = 3.03$) were confirmed by interview accounts of limited practice opportunities and perceived constraints in teaching approaches. Trait-related barriers were least prominent in both data strands, consistent across the survey and interviews. One area that emerged more prominently in qualitative data than in the survey was cultural misunderstanding monks described situations where visitors' expectations or assumptions about Buddhism led to communication difficulties, an aspect not directly captured by the questionnaire items.

Summary of Barriers: In summary, monks experienced intercultural communication barriers across both internal and external dimensions. Language proficiency and linguistic/conversational challenges were the most salient domains (both $M = 3.22$), highlighting difficulties with fluency, comprehension of unfamiliar accents, and understanding slang/idioms. Skills-related and environmental barriers (both $M = 3.08$) further constrained performance, particularly grammar/vocabulary limitations and insufficient practice opportunities, which contributed to delayed or hesitant responses. Affective barriers ($M = 2.91$), especially fear of mistakes, could reduce participation, while trait-related barriers ($M = 2.77$) were least prominent. Together, these results illustrate that monks' intercultural communication difficulties reflect an interplay of linguistic constraints, real-time interactional demands, and contextual limitations.

3. Intercultural Communication Strategies

To address intercultural communication challenges, Buddhist monks employed various strategies categorized into verbal strategies, non-verbal strategies, personal skills, and social skills. Table 3 presents the quantitative results ordered from highest to lowest mean scores, which are further illustrated through qualitative examples from interviews.

Table 3 Intercultural Communication Strategies

Strategy Type	Strategy	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
Social Skills	Listening	4.30	1.05	Often
	Respect	4.20	1.09	Often
	Category Mean	4.16	1.14	Often
Personal Skills	Acceptance	4.23	1.00	Often
	Curiosity	4.13	1.03	Often
	Category Mean	3.99	1.01	Often
Non-Verbal Strategies	Eye contact	4.00	1.08	Often
	Posture	3.83	1.11	Often
	Category Mean	3.73	1.05	Often
Verbal Strategies	Approximation	3.87	0.97	Often
	Self-correction	3.73	1.08	Often
	Category Mean	3.59	1.00	Often
Overall Mean Score		3.74	1.05	Often

Social Skills: Social skills were the most frequently employed strategies ($M = 4.16$, $S.D. = 1.14$). Listening carefully to people from other cultures obtained the highest score across all items ($M = 4.30$), while showing respect for cultural rights was also highly rated ($M = 4.20$). These interpersonal skills reflected monks' strong orientation toward creating welcoming and respectful interactions.

Excerpt 13 (P9): "I observe body actions and eye contact to check if they really understand."

Excerpt 14 (P3): "After conversations, I always ask, did you understand?"

Personal Skills: Personal skills scored highly ($M = 3.99$, $S.D. = 1.01$), with monks expressing willingness to accept new perspectives ($M = 4.23$) and curiosity to learn about other cultures ($M = 4.13$). These attitudes facilitated mutual learning and created comfortable communication environments.

Excerpt 15 (P6): "I am curious to learn their culture, so I ask them questions too."

Excerpt 16 (P7): "At first I did not understand Western culture, but later I learned to adapt and accept differences."

Non-Verbal Strategies: Non-verbal strategies were frequently reported ($M = 3.73$, $S.D. = 1.05$), with maintaining eye contact ($M = 4.00$) and showing interest through posture ($M = 3.83$) being especially common. Monks relied heavily on body language as a compensatory resource when vocabulary or grammar was insufficient.

Excerpt 17 (P6): "When I talk with them, I smile and use facial expressions and gestures to make the communication more friendly and easier to understand."

Excerpt 18 (P10): "I use my hands and examples so they can visualize what I mean."

Verbal Strategies: Verbal strategies had a mean score of 3.59 ($S.D. = 1.00$), with approximation, or using a word close in meaning to the target word ($M = 3.87$), and self-correction ($M = 3.73$) being the most frequently employed. Monks actively used paraphrasing and clarification requests to compensate for vocabulary limitations.

Excerpt 19 (P1): "If I do not know the exact word, I use another one with a similar meaning."

Excerpt 20 (P2): "If I do not understand, I ask them to repeat slowly."

Mixed-Methods Integration of Strategies: Quantitative and qualitative findings showed strong convergence regarding strategy use. Social skills, rated highest in the survey ($M = 4.16$), were consistently

described in interviews as central to monks' communicative approach, particularly listening carefully and showing respect for cultural differences. Personal skills such as acceptance and curiosity, also highly rated ($M = 3.99$), were reflected in monks' descriptions of approaching Monk Chat as mutual learning rather than one-way teaching. Non-verbal strategies ($M = 3.73$), while rated slightly lower in the survey, were frequently mentioned in interviews as practical compensatory tools when vocabulary was insufficient. Verbal strategies ($M = 3.59$), including approximation and self-correction, were confirmed by interview accounts of monks using alternative words, requesting repetition, and asking visitors to speak slowly. Additionally, two supplementary strategies emerged from qualitative data that were not directly captured by the questionnaire items: peer support (consulting senior monks or volunteers) and technology use (using translation applications). These findings suggest that monks draw on collaborative and technological resources beyond individual linguistic and interpersonal skills.

Summary of Strategies: In summary, monks reported frequent use of strategies to manage intercultural communication demands (Overall $M = 3.74$). The most prominent domain was social skills ($M = 4.16$), reflecting a strong emphasis on attentive listening, respect, and maintaining a supportive interactional climate. Personal skills ($M = 3.99$), including openness and curiosity, appeared to facilitate mutual learning and adaptation. Non-verbal strategies ($M = 3.73$) helped reinforce meaning and rapport through gestures and facial expressions, while verbal strategies ($M = 3.59$) supported negotiation of meaning through approximation and self-correction. Taken together, these strategies suggest that monks relied not only on linguistic techniques but also on interpersonal and intercultural resources to sustain communication in authentic Monk Chat interactions.

Discussions

This study examined intercultural communication barriers and coping strategies among Buddhist monks participating in Monk Chat interactions with foreign visitors about Buddhism in English. Overall, the findings indicate that monks experienced barriers at a moderate level, particularly in language proficiency and pragmatic understanding in authentic exchanges, while also reporting frequent use of interpersonal, cultural, and compensatory strategies. The background data further suggest that while monks had frequent opportunities to use English in daily or weekly interactions, their limited years of English study and relatively short experience with Monk Chat activities may have constrained their confidence and competence in intercultural communication. These patterns add empirical insight into English as a lingua franca (ELF) communication in a religious setting, where speakers are required not only to convey information but also to explain culturally embedded concepts and manage relationship-oriented interaction.

1. Intercultural Communication Barriers

The barriers reported by monks can be interpreted through the internal–external distinction commonly used in speaking-barrier and intercultural communication research (Rahayu, 2015; Dwi, 2018; Chand, 2021). Language proficiency emerged as the most salient barrier domain, reflected in difficulties with fluency and comprehension—especially when interlocutors used unfamiliar accents, rapid delivery, or idiomatic expressions. This pattern is consistent with research on monks' English communication in Buddhist contexts, which similarly highlights language difficulties as a primary challenge when

communicating with foreigners (Simmali & Huttayavilaiphan, 2025). Importantly, the communicative demands of Monk Chat are not limited to everyday conversation; monks often need to explain abstract and culturally grounded Buddhist concepts (e.g., karma, anatta, nirvana) that may not have direct equivalents in English and therefore require elaboration and contextualization. This helps explain why vocabulary limitations and comprehension challenges can become particularly pronounced in this setting.

Skills-related barriers further compounded these difficulties, particularly constraints in grammar and vocabulary and the pressure to respond spontaneously in real-time interaction. This supports prior accounts that limited lexical resources and insufficient speaking practice can hinder oral performance and interactional management (Rahayu, 2015). The results also resonate with observations that traditional instructional emphasis on forms and receptive skills may leave learners underprepared for the pragmatic complexity of authentic spoken interaction (Littlewood, 2013). In this respect, challenges in translating Buddhist terminology and meanings can be understood through the lens of cultural scripts, where culturally specific concepts resist straightforward transfer across languages without additional explanation (Wierzbicka, 1997).

Affective barriers, while lower than linguistic barriers, still influenced participation through fear of making mistakes and concern about giving inaccurate explanations. This aligns with the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that anxiety can interfere with language processing and performance (Krashen, 1982). For monks, the perceived responsibility of representing Buddhist teachings may intensify communicative pressure, potentially creating a cycle in which linguistic uncertainty increases anxiety and anxiety further reduces fluency. Similar affective and cognitive challenges have been reported among monks communicating Buddhist teachings in English (Boonmatun & Huttayavilaiphan, 2025).

External barriers were also evident, particularly interlocutor-related linguistic/conversational challenges, with understanding slang/idioms being the most difficult single item. This suggests that classroom exposure alone may not prepare speakers for informal, idiomatic, and context-dependent language commonly used in spontaneous interaction (Littlewood, 2013). Environmental constraints, including limited practice time and limited access to sustained authentic interaction, further restricted opportunities for skill development. Taken together, these findings indicate that monks' difficulties should be viewed not only as individual limitations but also as outcomes shaped by interactional demands and contextual constraints.

Finally, although cultural misunderstandings were not directly measured quantitatively, interview responses suggested that misalignment in expectations and interpretation can occur when visitors and monks draw on different cultural assumptions about appropriate topics, norms, or meanings in religious conversation. This supports the view that successful ELF communication depends on context-sensitive negotiation and intercultural awareness rather than strict adherence to native-speaker norms (Baker, 2011).

2. Intercultural Communication Strategies

Despite these barriers, monks reported frequent use of strategies overall. Social skills were the most frequently used domain, especially careful listening and respectful interaction. This reflects the relational nature of Monk Chat, where maintaining a welcoming and respectful atmosphere can help

sustain interaction even when linguistic gaps occur. Personal skills were also high, particularly openness and curiosity, which are consistent with intercultural competence models that emphasize respectful attitudes and openness as foundational conditions for effective intercultural engagement (Deardorff, 2006). In practice, these dispositions may facilitate mutual learning by encouraging visitors to elaborate, rephrase, or adjust their speech, thereby reducing communicative breakdowns.

Non-verbal strategies served as an additional compensatory resource. Gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and demonstrative examples helped clarify meaning and convey engagement when precise vocabulary was unavailable. This aligns with research highlighting the supportive role of non-verbal communication in intercultural interaction, especially under conditions of limited shared linguistic resources (Wilson, 2021). Verbal strategies, including approximation and self-correction, indicate active meaning negotiation and monitoring; patterns that are consistent with classic communication strategy taxonomies (Tarone, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983). Moreover, interview evidence suggested that monks also relied on interaction management moves such as requesting repetition or clarification when needed, reinforcing the view that strategic competence plays a key role in sustaining ELF interaction.

The qualitative emergence of peer support and technology use further suggests that monks approach communication as a collaborative process. Consulting senior peers or using translation tools can function as immediate scaffolding, helping monks maintain interactional flow and accuracy when discussing specialized concepts. Such support may be particularly valuable in contexts where learners have limited formal training but are expected to communicate complex content in authentic intercultural exchanges.

3. Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in Monk Chat

Although the study did not directly measure ICC as a standardized construct, the patterns of reported attitudes (e.g., respect, openness), interactional skills (e.g., listening, adapting), and strategic coping behaviors are broadly consistent with ICC-oriented perspectives (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). The findings also align with an ELF view emphasizing mutual accommodation and shared responsibility for intelligibility (Baker, 2011). In many interactions, communicative success appears to depend on reciprocal adjustment; for example, monks simplifying explanations and using multimodal cues, while visitors slow down, rephrase, or avoid idioms. This underscores that effective intercultural communication is co-constructed rather than determined solely by one party's language proficiency.

4. Summary

In summary, monks in Monk Chat settings experienced moderate barriers, particularly related to fluency, comprehension of diverse accents, and pragmatic challenges such as idioms and informal expressions. At the same time, they reported frequent use of strategies, especially social and personal resources, supported by non-verbal and verbal compensatory techniques. These findings highlight the interplay of linguistic constraints, affective factors, and contextual conditions in religious ELF communication and suggest the value of context-specific language support that integrates (a) speaking practice with authentic interaction, (b) pragmatic listening for accents and idioms, (c) strategies for explaining Buddhist concepts in accessible English, and (d) confidence-building and supportive learning environments.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

This study contributes to intercultural communication, English as a lingua franca (ELF), and English language teaching in religious contexts by foregrounding Buddhist monks as a communicative group that has been underrepresented in mainstream EFL and intercultural communication research in Thailand. Unlike typical university learners or tourism workers, monks in Monk Chat settings interact with international visitors while simultaneously acting as mediators of Buddhist knowledge. Their interactions involve topic-specific discourse, culturally embedded concepts, and institutional norms (e.g., monastic protocols and expectations of appropriate topics), which create communicative demands that differ from general conversational English contexts. By documenting barriers and coping strategies in this specialized setting, the study extends current understanding of intercultural communication in Thailand beyond commonly examined learner populations.

Methodologically, the study employs a convergent mixed-methods design, combining questionnaire-based patterns of perceived barriers and strategy use with interview-based explanations of how monks manage breakdowns and sustain interaction. This approach strengthens interpretation by linking frequency patterns (e.g., challenges with idioms and comprehension; frequent reliance on social and personal skills) with contextualized accounts from authentic intercultural encounters. As a result, the study offers both descriptive breadth and explanatory depth regarding communication processes in an informal religious exchange program.

Theoretically, the findings provide empirical support that elements commonly discussed in ICC-oriented models, particularly interactional attitudes and skills such as respect, openness, curiosity, and attentive listening (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), are salient resources in religious ELF communication. While the study does not claim to measure intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as a standardized construct, the pattern of strategy use suggests that monks draw heavily on interpersonal and cultural resources to sustain communication when linguistic limitations are present. This offers a context-sensitive extension of ICC discussions by illustrating how intercultural interaction in a Buddhist setting may be supported by value-consistent practices such as respectful engagement and mindful attention.

Practically, the study provides an empirical basis for context-specific language support in Buddhist educational institutions and contributes to ELF research by examining communication in a religious discourse domain. Identified barriers (e.g., explaining Buddhist terminology and concepts, managing idiomatic speech, responding spontaneously) and strategies (e.g., approximation, multimodal explanation, peer support, and interactional checking) can inform targeted training materials and speaking practice tasks aligned with Monk Chat realities. Notably, the finding that social and personal resources were reported more frequently than purely linguistic strategies suggests that communication effectiveness in intercultural contexts may be supported substantially by interpersonal and interactional competence alongside language proficiency, with implications for ESP-oriented curriculum design for monks.

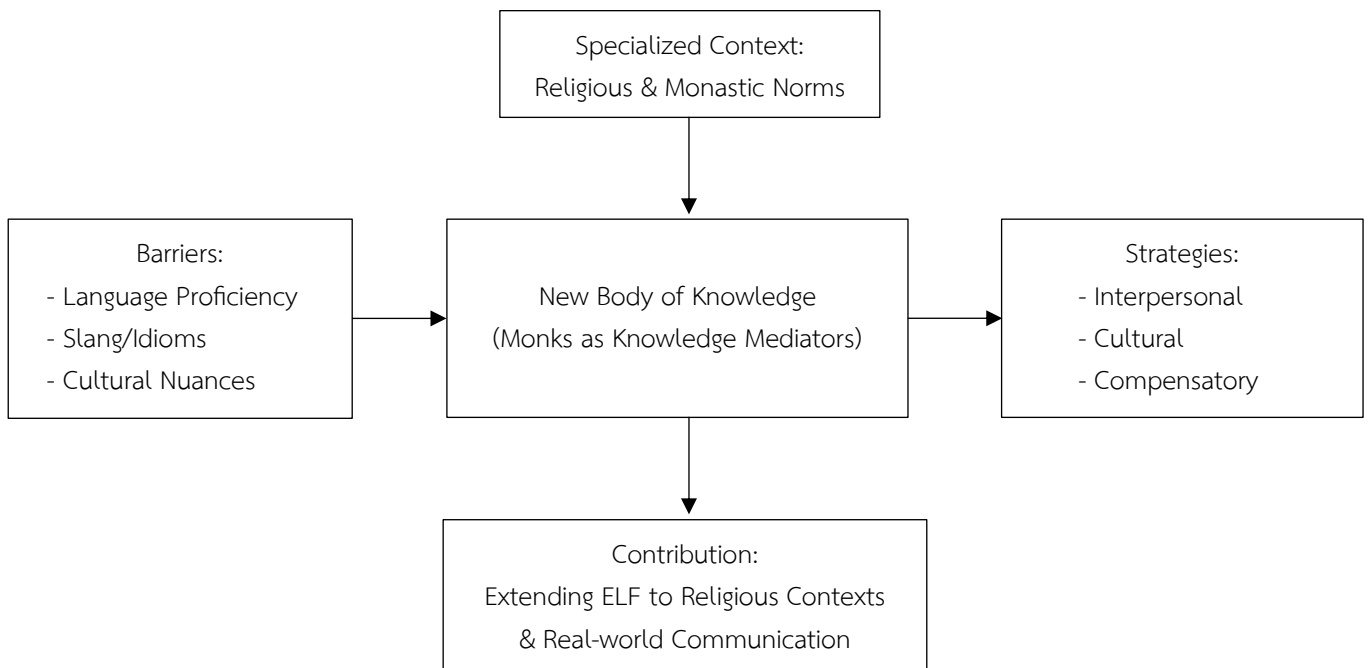


Figure 2 Body of Knowledge: Intercultural Communication in Monk Chat

Conclusions

This study examined English-mediated intercultural communication barriers and coping strategies among Buddhist monks participating in Monk Chat interactions with foreign visitors about Buddhism. Using questionnaire and interview data, the findings show that monks experienced communication barriers at a moderate level, with the most salient challenges related to language proficiency and authentic conversational demand, particularly fluency, comprehension of diverse accents, and understanding idioms or informal expressions. Skills-related constraints (e.g., grammar/vocabulary limitations and time pressure for spontaneous responses) and environmental factors (e.g., limited practice opportunities) further shaped communication difficulties, while affective concerns such as fear of making mistakes also influenced participation.

Despite these challenges, monks reported frequent use of strategies to sustain interaction. Social skills and personal dispositions, especially attentive listening, respectful engagement, openness, and curiosity, were the most prominent resources, complemented by non-verbal strategies (e.g., gestures and facial expressions) and verbal compensatory strategies (e.g., approximation and self-correction). Together, the results suggest that monks manage intercultural communication not only through linguistic techniques but also through interpersonal and interactional resources that help maintain rapport and negotiate meaning in real time.

The study contributes to ELF and intercultural communication research by extending empirical attention to religious intercultural exchanges in a Monk Chat context and by highlighting how communication effectiveness can be supported through interpersonal and strategic competence alongside language proficiency. Practically, the findings support the development of context-specific training for monks, including (a) speaking practice with authentic interactional tasks, (b) listening and pragmatic awareness training for accents and idioms, (c) strategy instruction for explaining Buddhist concepts in accessible English, and (d) supportive learning environments that reduce anxiety and encourage

participation. Strengthening these areas may help monks communicate Buddhist teachings more effectively with international visitors and foster mutual understanding in intercultural encounters.

Recommendations

1. Policymaking and Institutional Recommendations

Based on the identified barriers (e.g., fluency and listening difficulties with diverse accents, idioms, limited practice opportunities) and the strategies monks reported using frequently (e.g., listening, respectful interaction, non-verbal support, approximation), Buddhist educational institutions and relevant policymakers should strengthen structured support for English-mediated intercultural communication in monastic contexts. First, institutions should develop context-specific ESP modules that incorporate Buddhist terminology, common visitor questions, and guided practice in explaining culturally embedded concepts in accessible English, alongside explicit instruction in communication strategies (e.g., paraphrasing, approximation, clarification requests) and pragmatic listening for informal expressions. Second, programs should expand regular low-anxiety speaking opportunities (e.g., structured Monk Chat sessions, peer-speaking circles, and facilitated exchange activities) to increase authentic interaction time and reduce fear of mistakes through supportive practice. Third, institutions should provide professional development for teachers and program facilitators focusing on ESP for religious discourse, intercultural pedagogy, and task-based speaking instruction aligned with real Monk Chat scenarios. Finally, resource allocation should support materials development (e.g., bilingual glossaries of Buddhist concepts, scenario-based speaking tasks) and sustainable partnerships with language specialists to strengthen program quality and continuity. Such measures can create an enabling environment in which monks can communicate more effectively with international visitors and manage intercultural interactional demands (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009).

2. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could extend this study in several ways. Longitudinal designs could track how perceived barriers and strategy use change as monks gain experience or receive targeted training. Intervention studies could evaluate the effectiveness of specific ESP curricula, strategy instruction, or technology-enhanced learning tools designed for Monk Chat contexts. Comparative studies across settings (e.g., different institutions, regions, or communication formats such as formal Dhamma talks versus informal conversations) could test the transferability of findings. In addition, research incorporating multiple perspectives; such as foreign visitors' perceptions of comprehensibility and interaction quality, would provide a fuller account of communicative success in ELF exchanges. Finally, qualitative work exploring how monastic values and practices shape interactional choices may deepen understanding of how interpersonal resources contribute to communication effectiveness in religious intercultural encounters.

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