Cultural Adaptation in the U.S.: A Case Study of a Thai Naval Attaché's Cross-Cultural Experiences

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Abstract

In an era of increased global mobility, understanding effective cultural adaptation processes has become essential in various fields, including the military. Thai naval attachés, like other foreign diplomats, must build and maintain relationships with individuals who often have diverse beliefs, practices, and cultural attitudes. This requires a high level of sensitivity, adaptability, and strong communication skills in order to navigate their roles effectively. This study, grounded in a narrative inquiry approach, aimed to examine the linguistic and cultural challenges encountered by a Thai naval attaché while navigating his social and professional life in the United States. Additionally, it sought to identify the strategies employed to bridge cultural differences and facilitate successful integration into the host environment. A semi-structured interview was utilized to capture the attaché's narratives, which were then analyzed using content analysis consisting of four stages: *compilation, decontextualization, recontextualization, and categorization*.

The findings revealed that cross-cultural adaptation is a complex and ongoing process. It involves overcoming challenges such as societal divides, language barriers, racial discrimination, and unfamiliar social norms. This process requires an open mind, a proactive approach to bridging cultural differences, and a commitment to continuous learning through cultural immersion. Additionally, cultural adaptation does not necessitate full assimilation but rather calls for a balance between maintaining one's cultural identity while embracing aspects of the host culture. The findings also underlined the importance of cultural knowledge, adaptability, as well as the need to challenge cultural stereotypes. This study provides valuable insights for individuals and training institutions engaged in global interactions by offering guidance and developing more effective strategies for adaptation and fostering meaningful interactions in diverse environments.

Keywords: cultural adaptation, Thai naval attaché, cross-cultural experiences

Background and Significance of the Study

Global migration has accelerated rapidly in recent decades, making the world increasingly interconnected and diversified. Currently, an estimated 281 million individuals live outside their country of origin[1], emphasizing the crucial need to understand cultural adaptation. This is especially vital for naval attachés who undertake diplomatic missions abroad. A military attaché is an officer who has been nominated by his nation to serve in its diplomatic legation abroad[2]. They facilitate bilateral military activities, build networks among international military attachés, and gather strategic military information relevant to their nation's defense policies. Thai naval attachés are typically stationed at an embassy, and act as military advisors to the ambassadors or chiefs of the mission in the host country.

Currently, the Royal Thai Navy operates 18 naval attaché offices worldwide, located in Washington, D.C., London, Singapore, New Delhi, Madrid, Rome, Paris, Kuala Lumpur, Canberra, Beijing, Manila, Tokyo, Hanoi, Phnom Penh, Jakarta, Yangon, Berlin, and Moscow. The larger the host nation's military, the more military attachés it has[3]. For example, at the U.S. Embassy in Washington D.C., the Royal Thai Embassy is represented by a Defense and Military Attaché, a Naval Attaché, and an Air Attaché. The role of attachés comes with the honor of representing one's nation, but it also presents significant challenges. The nature of their assignment involves immersion in diverse cultural environments, requiring attachés to engage with individuals from different linguistic, religious, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. However, when confronted with a new cultural environment steeped in unfamiliar customs, norms, and behavioral patterns, people have to learn to adjust or change in accordance with these environmental demands[4].

Research has found that immigrants typically prefer to integrate into their new environment, such that they develop material and emotional connections to the host society while still maintaining ties to their home culture[4]. In contrast, other research suggests that for a sojourner to be culturally and communicatively competent, they must adopt the culture of the dominant group, and the person must abandon affiliation with the cultural patterns that have shaped who they are and what they are, in order to advance in their evolutionary development[5]. While integration allows individuals to maintain their cultural distinctiveness and engaging meaningfully with the host society[4], assimilation involves abandoning one's original cultural identity in favor of full alignment with the host culture, reflecting a state of maximum possible convergence of strangers' internal and external conditions to those of the natives[6]. The ongoing debate between integration and assimilation in the context of cultural adaptation reveals deeper insights into how individuals navigate and merge multiple cultural identities. Provided that integration experiences shape immigrants' life outcomes and that integration is critical to the maintenance of a prosperous, diverse, and socially cohesive society, it is important to

understand why some individuals are more likely to be in conflict with host nationals while others enjoy harmonious interactions[7].

Moreover, the use of the English language in intercultural interactions plays a significant role in cultural adaptation. As a global lingua franca, it facilitates individuals to adapt to new environments by modifying their language use, adopting specific linguistic forms, vocabulary, or accents to align with host culture expectations. This adaptability, including strategies like simplifying speech, using non-verbal cues, or code-switching, reflects the principles of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which suggests that individuals adjust their communication behaviors to accommodate others' cultural and social contexts[8]. This approach creates a space for cultural convergence, where both parties align their language for seamless interactions, while speakers retain distinct linguistic markers as part of their identity.

In the broader context of global communication, the concept of *World Englishes*[9] highlights the diversity of English usage across different regions and cultural groups. Variations in language use, including expressions of politeness and word choice, reflect cultural norms and social identity[10]. These variations are a reflection of the dynamic interplay between language and culture, where speakers may adapt their English to express their local identities while still participating in global communication. However, individuals may face challenges such as linguistic discrimination or stereotyping, where their accents or language choices influence how their identity is perceived by others. Research has shown that speakers with certain regional or non-standard accents are often unfairly associated with negative perceptions of competence and credibility[11]. Such biases can result in social exclusion and inequality in professional or educational opportunities. Addressing these issues demands resilience and adaptive strategies to negotiate their identities effectively, particularly in intercultural settings.

The core of successful diplomacy lies in understanding the cultural dynamics of the country in which a diplomat is posted. Individuals who demonstrate open-mindedness and a readiness to immerse themselves in the local culture and learn from peers are more likely to respond positively to intercultural challenges[12]. Engaging fully and without bias in new experiences further enhances effective learning[13]. Ultimately, cross-cultural awareness—defined as the ability to see a culture from the perspective of an insider—enhances a diplomat's ability to communicate effectively, reduces uncertainty, and fosters trust in intercultural exchanges[14]. Thus, effective intercultural communication is indispensable in diplomacy. It not only enables diplomats to navigate the complexities of cross-cultural interactions but also helps mitigate stress, manage uncertainty, and enhance diplomatic outcomes.

Objectives

While extensive research has been conducted on cultural adaptation, studies focusing on military attachés remain limited. Much of the existing literature centers on the adaptation of expatriates, students, educators, and corporate professionals, often overlooking the unique challenges faced by attachés operating within rigid institutional structures. This case study examined the cross-cultural experiences of a Thai naval attaché assigned to the U.S. It demonstrated how he balanced personal adaptation with his official roles, conforming to both his home country's military traditions and cultural expectations of the host nation. Specifically, this study aimed to:

1. Examine the linguistic and cultural challenges encountered by a Thai naval attaché while navigating social and professional life in the U.S.

2. Identify the strategies employed by a Thai naval attaché to bridge cultural differences and successfully integrate into the host environment.

The insights drawn from this inquiry may be beneficial for the Royal Thai Navy and other military services in enhancing training programs to equip officers not only with language proficiency but also with intercultural communication competence. This preparation would enable them to navigate multilingual and multicultural environments to foster smoother adaptation into foreign environments. Furthermore, the findings could assist individuals who engage in international settings, whether for professional, educational, or sociocultural reasons, by providing strategies and helping them develop the skills needed to adjust to varying cultural norms and practices and to improve their overall cross-cultural adaptability.

Methods

Participant

In this study, purposive sampling was utilized to ensure that the participant's experiences aligned with the research objectives and goals[15]. The participant in this study, whose pseudonym is Captain Andrew was selected based on the study's inclusion criteria. He met the specified qualifications and had no prior interaction or familiarity with the researcher. Although this study only includes one participant, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings, his inclusion renders valuable information with regard to cultural adaptation and cross-cultural encounters. Initial contact was facilitated through a colleague, after which communication was conducted via email and LINE to provide detailed information about the study and obtain his voluntary informed consent. At the time of data collection, Captain Andrew, a Thai naval attaché in his mid-50s, had just completed a 3-year posting in Washington, D.C., and returned to Thailand. This timing was particularly relevant as it enabled him to reflect on his entire

cross-cultural experiences and recall fresh narratives of his time abroad. Prior to his deployment, he had also spent two and a half years in the U.S. while completing his flight training in Florida. His early exposure to American language and culture played a significant role in shaping his ability to navigate cultural differences.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines set by the King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi Institutional Review Board (IRB), with approval number KMUTT-IRB-COE-2023-170. The approval was obtained before any data collection took place. The participant was fully informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and rights, including the scope of participation and the freedom to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was secured to ensure voluntary participation, confidentiality, and ethical integrity throughout the process.

Data Collection

An in-depth semi-structured interview, framed through a narrative lens, was utilized to extract Captain Andrew's stories, allowing an in-depth examination of how he made sense of his intercultural experiences[16]. The interview was conducted face-to-face in the lobby of the Royal Thai Navy headquarters, and careful consideration was taken to choose quiet, comfortable areas that facilitated a comprehensive examination of his experiences. Open-ended questions were employed as they allowed the participant the freedom to express and articulate his opinions, which yielded rich, relevant data and ensured clarity and mutual understanding[17]. Inquiries focused on his trainings, preparations and cultural experiences before, during, and after deployment. The inclusion of follow-up questions also facilitated greater depth of investigation, clarifications, and the acquisition of additional knowledge about his experiences. The interview was structured into three phases. The first phase (*preparation*) focused on building a rapport with the participant, restating the goals of the study, and explaining the interview procedure to ensure clarity and mutual understanding. During the second phase (*narration*), the participant freely shared his experiences in response to open-ended prompts. Active listening was demonstrated to help the participant feel acknowledged while ensuring the narrative remained participant-driven. Finally, the third phase (*conversation*) consisted of an interactive dialogue, engaging in follow up questions based on participant's responses. The interview lasted approximately one and a half hours and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

To explore Captain Andrew's cross-cultural experiences, content analysis was employed as the primary methodological framework, which enabled systematic, replicable, and valid inferences from textual data within its context of use[18].The analysis comprised four stages:

decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation[19]. Each stage was recursive, requiring several repetitions to ensure analytical quality and validity. The first stage (*decontextualization*), involved immersion in the transcripts to make initial sense of his story. The data were sorted into categories and patterns to identify essential concepts. A coding list was then used to minimize cognitive bias in order to secure reliability. The second stage (*recontextualization*), ensured that all aspects of the content aligned with the aims of the study. The data were reread alongside the final list of meaning units, excluding unnecessary content in order to focus solely on information pertinent to the research questions. The third stage (*categorization*), involved condensing of extended meaning units by reducing word count without losing essential content. Themes and categories were then identified and refined into broader categories and sub-themes for latent analysis. In the final stage (*compilation*), data analysis and writing began after the categories were established. Participant validation was also conducted to ensure the findings accurately reflected his perspective.

Results

Captain Andrew was posted as a naval attaché in Washington, D.C. Like other attachés, he received language and cultural training from the Naval Intelligence Department and other pertinent agencies prior to his assignment. He had previously studied and lived in Florida, but had never been to Washington, D.C. The findings are divided into two parts: (1) challenges, which constitute language, communication, and cultural adaptation challenges; and (2) cultural adaptation strategies, which include bridging language and communication gaps and bridging cultural differences.

Challenges in Language and Communication

Captain Andrew's linguistic challenges began even before his post. Reflecting on his previous experience as a flight student in Florida, he recalled the substantial adjustments required to communicate with his American and foreign peers.

"At the beginning, it's very tough for me because I think all the Thai students, we learn all the grammar, reading and writing, but for the speaking, I think almost 10% or 7% chance... We only speak to our teacher in the class."

Since he lacked frequent exposure to conversational English in his home country, he felt the need to put in extra effort to improve his language skills, particularly in spoken communication.

"We have Thai dialect, so it sticks to our tongue when we speak English. It's not natural like native American. I think it helped me a lot to adjust coz from morning till the night, I have to use only English, English, English all the time, so you have to adjust yourself."

Aside from linguistic proficiency, Captain Andrew struggled with regional accents and different attitudes. He observed that certain people were less accommodating to visitors, particularly in rural areas.

"Some people, not everybody, you call like uh, redneck. They try to ignore everything that you said because they didn't like foreigner, especially in the southern part of America, especially Texas, they have different perspective of the foreigner. Sometimes, you feel that they not try to cooperate, not try to understand you when you speak."

He further explained that in the countryside, people often communicate using their own dialects. He believed that some locals had little exposure to people from other countries, making communication more challenging.

"If you go to the countryside, they speak their own dialect. Texas, they have their own dialect… maybe because they only stay in one place. I mean stay only in Texas, so they understand only the Americans, but some foreigners that speak English as a second language, it's very difficult for them to understand."

He also realized that certain Thai-accented pronunciations were not easily understood, requiring him to adjust the way he spoke.

"Most of the time, we understand what they said. But when you speak back to them, sometimes they didn't understand. So, we have to act or pretend like American. If you speak 'Owantine' in American, nobody can understand what you would like to order. You have to make a sound 'Ovaltine' so they understand."

Another word he frequently mispronounced was "shrimp," which caused him embarrassment and frustration.

"Back then, I speak 'shrump' all the time but the correct pronunciation is 'shrimp'. Every time that I speak the word shrimp, I speak it wrong, different pronunciation, but they know that you speak it wrong all the time, you get embarrassment of yourself."

Pronunciation challenges were further complicated by tonal distinctions between Thai and English. He stated that he found it challenging to sound natural when speaking English because Thai has a more consistent tone, whereas English has a range of intonations.

"The sound of English, they have like a note, they have high and low tones but the sound of Thai very flat when speak English unlike other country like India or Philippines."

Captain Andrew's communication and language challenges demonstrate the complexities of adjusting to a new linguistic culture. Regional accents, local dialects, and variations in communication styles across his interactions all contributed to the challenges he encountered. This required him to adapt and navigate his communication strategies in order to bridge gaps effectively.

Challenges in Cultural Adaptation

In addition to his struggles with language, Captain Andrew experienced cultural challenges that hindered his adaptation. One of the most challenging aspects of his adaptation was being misidentified as Chinese during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in racial discrimination.

"My face doesn't look Thai, look very Chinese. During the COVID, they have very bad impression about Chinese. When I walk on the street, I get a lot of "Go back to your country!" because they think that I'm Chinese. I just ignore them and walk by."

For him, it was best to ignore the situation, reflecting that Americans' resentment was likely fueled by the hardships that many Americans went through during the pandemic, including job losses and the emotional toll of the situation. However, these encounters demonstrated the racial prejudices that hindered his ability to adapt to the society. Similarly, he pointed out that living downtown also presented challenges caused by varying behaviors. He believed that the environment shaped people's attitudes. While Washington, D.C. was manageable, his experience in cities such as New York, particularly downtown, was different. His son also had a negative encounter with some locals.

"My son travel to New York City. One bad guy, they just hand the CD, so my son thought it's free. So, when he took it, he asked for the money. He said 'it's my CD! It's my performance!' So, my son tried to give it back. They not accept it, only want money, money!" So, I just give him the money that he want. It's not much but sometimes, it irritate you. They took advantage because my son didn't understand."

Moreover, Captain Andrew observed major differences in how Americans and Thais interact socially. Thais value politeness and indirect communication, whereas Americans tend to become more direct and assertive.

"When somebody did something wrong, American, they very straightforward. They just say, 'Hey, I think you were not supposed to do that!' Thai people not feel comfortable to speak strange. When you did something wrong, Thais just ignore or stay away from them, doesn't want to look at you. But American people, they will tell you right away."

This directness made him feel uncomfortable because he was used to a more reserved nature of Thais. In order to adapt to the American norm, he had to modify his conversational approach and become accustomed to their direct communication style. He also observed differences in hierarchy and authority, where strong respect for seniority and rank is deeply fostered in Thai culture, in contrast to the more informal interactions between military personnel in the U.S.

Another significant difference he noticed was the American sense of independence, specifically the culture of leaving the family, which contrasted with Thai society's strong familial bonds.

"It's their culture when they like 18 or when they go to college, they gonna leave the house and they explore themselves in the new world. Compared to Thailand, we stick to our family all the time. That's one thing I didn't like about the Americans."

Similarly, he admitted that he disliked the lack of respect for elders especially when compared to his culture's deeper respect for them. He emphasized his preference for maintaining this value along with the tradition of familial unity.

"I think sometimes they don't care each other. I think in Asian style, we respect elders but Americans, they not respect elders. When they speak to elders, they speak like they speak to your friend, but in Thai, we have the way to speak with the older, with the younger, and I think we respect elder than the Americans."

Furthermore, Captain Andrew observed that people in the U.S. tended to form social groups based on shared racial and ethnic backgrounds, making it more difficult for foreigners to adapt. This pattern of social grouping emerged in a variety of settings, including workplaces, schools, and casual interactions.

"My son is a newcomer. The only friend that he could connect with is only the Asian friend. The friend of my son is from Japan, from Korea or from Asia. They only stick together, the Asian people. White American, they also stick together. The black American, they stick together, Asian, Latino, this kind of thing."

Captain Andrew additionally learned that racial divisions extended into employment and institutional systems. He mentioned that hiring practices sometimes take race into account, requiring quotas for specific racial groups, such as Black and Latino employees. This led some individuals to imitate the characteristics of these groups in order to obtain an advantage.

"I think it's not fair for all ethnics. I think you should compete to yourself; you should try to prove yourself that you are good enough for the kind of job, not use your ethnic or races, because I'm black, I have the advantage more than other people. This kind of thing happen a lot in the US. They have quota for black people, quota for Latino. But in Thailand, we don't have that kind of quota we treat everybody the same."

His observations of racial disparities, from his student years to his role as a naval attaché, emphasized the challenges of adaptation. Cultural differences, communication styles, workplace conventions, linguistic difficulties, and discrimination interfered with his adaptation. These factors required continuous adjustment in both social and professional settings.

Strategies for Bridging Language and Communication Gaps

Captain Andrew utilized several techniques to overcome language and communication challenges. He executed full immersion in interactions since he recognized that constant exposure was essential to enhancing his spoken communication.

"It's part of my job to communicate with all the people. I try to adapt myself to blend in with the society. You have to try to speak English as much as you can with the Americans, with your friends, even though sometimes they may not understand but every time that you speak more, you get more experience."

He made a conscious effort to improve his communication competency through structured learning, emphasizing vocabulary expansion and refining pronunciation. However, he placed more emphasis on speaking freely and efficiently instead of being overly cautious with grammar.

"I think grammar is a big deal but when I was in the US, nobody cares. If you can communicate with them, they try to understand you because they know that you are not a native American, you're a foreigner. So, even though you speak like wrong grammar or anything, they try to understand you."

He also noticed that Americans would modify the pace of their speech when conversing with him, just like he did when speaking to them. This illustrated the efforts made by both parties during conversations. However, confusion often persisted which required him to actively demonstrate skills in clarifying and understanding.

"If I don't understand them, I just say 'Pardon' or 'Sorry, can you say that again?' If I don't understand, so second time, they would speak slowly. We try to understand each other. Some country speak English very hard to understand and their dialect like in South Africa. When he communicates, I try to listen carefully and I speak back to them very slow and precise, so it's very easy for me to communicate with them."

Furthermore, he emphasized the significance of active listening in understanding people's perspectives, since it enabled him to gauge his responses accordingly. This approach is essential not only for comprehending verbal messages but also for interpreting non-verbal cues, which were necessary for bridging communication gaps.

"If you listen more, you can get what kind of perception that they have. So, you can adjust the situation or adjust what think."

Likewise, he acknowledged the shortcomings in his language abilities, but he regarded his mistakes and experiences as learning opportunities and to strive for continuous improvement. He also underlined the importance of consistent practice and careful preparation in accomplishing successful communication.

"I think practice, practice, and practice! I just speak to myself. If I have the meeting, I have to prepare. I have a draft of what I'm gonna say, because I don't speak naturally sometimes. My brain is very slow from translate Thai to English and to speak to them. So, I just have to prepare for the meeting."

As a whole, not only did language training and structured learning help him, but also preparation, active listening, understanding non-verbal cues, and most especially full immersion in the local environment. Through consistent effort and self-reflection, he effectively bridged language and communication gaps to better navigate challenges.

Strategies for Bridging Cultural Differences

For Captain Andrew, dealing with cultural differences was relatively easier due to his past experience as a student in the U.S. His familiarity with American culture facilitated a smoother adaptation. However, he underlined that cultural experiences vary across different locations, so whenever he travels outside of his country, he recalls the saying, "Do as the Romans do." This indicated that when visiting a foreign country, one should adapt to the local customs and traditions.

"From my opinion, I think I try to adapt to them because I come to their country, like 'Do as the Romans do,' as they say. So, I try to adapt, adjust myself to blend in with them, with the society. Try to have common interest with them, so you have things to say and things to connect with them in the future."

He further stated that visiting various places brought him a deeper awareness of cultural differences and a better understanding of other people's ways of life.

"When you have time to travel outside the city, I think it's time you learn a new experience. When you go to different places, you look at how they live, you observe and you try to understand what they do, what they think, something like that, so you can adjust yourself to blend in with different society, different parts of the U.S."

In order to build relationships and better understand American culture, Captain Andrew participated in social activities and engaged with locals. He learned that accepting invitations and attending gatherings helped him foster a sense of belonging and develop meaningful connections.

"If some of my classmates, American friends invited me to join the party or hang out with them, or during the night, every time someone invited me, I would join them. I try to have experience also in the nightlife and I try to blend in with the society."

Likewise, he encouraged his son to participate in school clubs to connect with friends and to facilitate adaptation.

"I ask him to join a club in school, so the more they practice with all the American friends because they have common interest to connect easily than in a class."

In a similar vein, he noted that finding common interest with other officers, such as engaging in sports or hobbies is an effective strategy to help build rapport and strengthen connections. These activities are beneficial, particularly when working overseas, where it can

be challenging to make friends. It offers opportunities to bond, create friendships, facilitate information exchange, and ultimately earn the trust of people while assisting effectiveness in handling responsibilities.

"You have to be friendly with the people. You have to have sport that you can play with each other like golf, tennis, any kind of sport. It's very good for you to have some common interest with the other people through sport or hobby."

Another essential aspect is fostering relationships through cultural exchange, and food can serve as a meaningful way to create connections.

"Sometimes, I invited some of my friends that I would like to know better to have Thai dinner at my place. We call like uh 'soft power.' When you ask them to have Thai dinner at my home, they all accepted. Nobody rejected because of the food."

Soft power involves positive attractiveness to build networks and establish relationships through engagement and communication. Captain Andrew embodied this approach by hosting gatherings for fellow attachés, which allowed them to experience his culture through authentic Thai cuisine. These interactions enhanced mutual understanding and intercultural relations.

Alongside developing connections through cultural exchange, Captain Andrew needed to bridge cultural gaps by understanding political ideals in the U.S. and appreciating gender equality. He supported the American principle that jobs should be based on abilities, not gender.

"I think it's their choice, their body, their mind, their thought. What you wanna be is your choice. If I have an LGBTQ workmate, I have no problem. Even in the military, even though they are in the uniform, if they behave themselves in the good manner with the discipline of the military code of conduct, I think I won't have any problem at all."

In an environment where values and norms differed, Captain Andrew remained open-minded and adaptable. Even though some aspects of the American culture were initially uncomfortable, he eventually came to appreciate these distinctions, embraced new experiences and adjusted his communication style to interact more effectively. At the same time, he preserved his Thai heritage while simultaneously integrating into American society. Through these strategies, he deepened his cultural understanding and built meaningful connections in both social and professional settings.

Discussion and Recommendations

The study's findings provide significant insights into the complex challenges of cultural adaptation, such as variations in language, communication patterns, and cultural norms. The narrative of Captain Andrew demonstrates a clear contrast between his deeply-rooted Thai values and the communication norms that are prevalent in the U.S. Given that he comes

from a collectivistic culture with a strong emphasis on hierarchy, he perceived Americans' directness as a manner of confrontation and a lack of courtesy toward elders and seniority, reflecting the difference between Thailand's collectivistic, high-power-distance culture and the U.S.'s individualistic, low-power-distance society[20]. His discomfort with direct communication further reflects the distinctions between high- and low-context cultures. In American culture, people tend to be more direct and explicit, while in Thailand, communication is often more indirect and rooted in politeness[21]. These differences can sometimes lead to misunderstandings, emphasizing the importance of cultural awareness in cross-cultural interactions. Successful adaptation means recognizing and understanding these differences rather than interpreting them based on one's own cultural lens.

Furthermore, while Captain Andrew's proficiency facilitated functional communication, effective cultural adaptation necessitates knowledge of different varieties of English. His interactions demonstrate the notion of *World Englishes*, implying that English exists in varying forms across different groups[22]. As a result, this study underscores the limitations of viewing English as a uniform medium of communication, as regional variations can act as barriers, particularly in contexts where interlocutors have limited exposure to non-native accents. Recognizing these differences is essential for fostering clearer communication and reducing misunderstanding in cross-cultural settings.

Nevertheless, it was apparent that Captain Andrew operated various skills to manage accent-related misunderstandings, including word simplification, adjusting speech pace, emphasizing enunciation, and asking questions for clarifications. These strategies illustrate that when English is utilized as a lingua franca (ELF), individuals adapt to various English varieties, engaging in mutual negotiation and accommodation to communicate effectively[23]. On the other hand, his experience of encountering people who seemed unwilling to adjust their speech patterns or accommodate foreigners demonstrates how ethnolinguistic identity can sometimes reinforce social distance. Accents, particularly those perceived as non-native, can lead to unfair treatment which affects many areas of a person's life, including integration into the host culture[24]. In light of these challenges, it is recommended that individuals visiting areas with limited exposure to non-native English varieties make conscious efforts to adjust their speech. Mutual understanding can be enhanced through flexibility and empathy in communication.

In addition to language and communication challenges, racial discrimination had a substantial impact on adaptation. Captain Andrew experienced being mistaken for Chinese and subjected to xenophobic treatment. This reflects broader patterns of ethnocentric attitudes and power dynamics in times of crisis[25]. However, his ability to interpret this behavior as a

reaction to pandemic worries rather than personal hostility demonstrates his capacity to 'decenter' and maintain an open-minded attitude to suspend judgement[26]. Moreover, his categorization of some Americans as 'rednecks' reveals the ongoing challenge of overcoming ingrained stereotypes. This emphasizes the need for continuous self-reflection and conscious efforts to mitigate biases. Hence, it is suggested that individuals and organizations should engage in trainings that focus on recognizing and challenging stereotypes and promoting more inclusive attitudes.

Despite the numerous challenges, Captain Andrew effectively bridged both linguistic and cultural differences through full immersion. His approach to adaptation was not fully assimilating to the host society but rather an integrated approach wherein his Thai identity was preserved while also embracing features of the host culture[27]. This cultural fusion allowed him to navigate interactions effectively, improve negotiation strategies, and resolve conflicts. Furthermore, refining language skills through continuous practice and exposure, as well as utilizing communication strategies including active listening, non-verbal cues, and cultural awareness contributed to smoother interactions. These strategies, along with preparation, ability to incorporate prior cultural knowledge into new experiences, and maintaining open-mindedness and flexibility, are essential for easing the challenges of cultural adaptation.

Overall, Captain Andrew's active engagement with local communities, language learning, and social integration not only broadened his perspective but also helped him build meaningful relationships. Therefore, cultural adaptation is a continuous process, as new experiences often challenge previously held beliefs, requiring individuals to position themselves as lifelong learners. Rather than perceiving cultural differences as threats, culturally competent individuals view them as opportunities for growth and understanding while allowing themselves to embrace new norms and flourish in the cultural landscape.

Conclusion

The case study investigated the cultural adaptation of a Thai naval attaché in the U.S. by employing a narrative inquiry approach. Captain Andrew's experiences provide a rich account of the considerable challenges and strategies involved in cross cultural adaptation. The findings highlight how he operated his knowledge, skills and the strategies to integrate successfully in the host nation. However, the participant exhibited certain limitations in his adaptation process. At some point, he demonstrated a tendency to shift perspectives when confronted with unfamiliar situations, occasionally displaying stereotypical views and unconsciously prioritizing his own cultural values. Despite these flaws, the participant was able to effectively manage cultural differences and harness his intercultural skills to integrate successfully into the host society.

For Captain Andrew, successful adaptation did not require abandoning his cultural identity but rather integrating elements of his Thai culture with those of the host culture. Throughout this process, he navigated the complexities of cultural adaptation by accumulating knowledge from personal discoveries, negotiating his attitudes through open-mindedness, and developing critical awareness while preserving his cultural heritage. Cultural adaptation, therefore, is a continuous process, where growth and integration occur through ongoing reflection, learning, and negotiation of differences.

Research Implications

The research findings provide valuable implications for the preparation of military attachés before deployment. First, pre-departure training programs should place greater emphasis not only the linguistic aspects of communication but also cultural dimensions, such as high and low context cultures, power distance, and improving communication accommodation skills as these can contribute significantly to enhancing effective intercultural communication. Second, language training should extend beyond Standard English and include awareness of *World Englishes* to enable attachés to navigate diverse English varieties with confidence and avoid miscommunication. Exposure to different English varieties prior to deployment can facilitate smoother interactions. Finally, cultural briefings should incorporate scenario-based training to prepare attachés for challenges such as culture shock, interpersonal conflict, stereotyping, and racial or ethnic misidentification. Trainings should emphasize on decentering and reflective practices to recognize and manage personal and external biases. Additionally, techniques that foster empathy and adaptability should be integrated to support deeper engagement with host nationals and promote successful cultural adaptation.

Future Research Directions

While this case study offers rich insights into cultural adaptation, future research could benefit from a broader participant base. Comparative narrative inquiries involving multiple attachés across different host countries would allow researchers to identify common themes and context-specific variations in adaptation strategies. Expanding the scope of research, covering different military services such as the army, air force and police could also offer a more comprehensive understanding of cultural adaptation intercultural competence development. In addition, comparative studies across different age groups, genders and professional backgrounds could help identify gaps and uncover overlooked dimensions of adaptation. Ultimately, longitudinal studies that track cultural adaptation progress before, during, and after the attaché's posting could provide deeper understanding of how cultural adaptation and intercultural competence evolve over time.

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