

Improving the Awareness of Cultural Diversity through Learning about Thai Literature: A Perspective from Ethnic Minority B.Ed. Students in Thailand

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Abstract: Cultural diversity is generally studied in the context of teacher education. However, within the Thai literature classroom, the awareness of cultural diversity is rarely discussed in detail, especially among students from different cultures. The aim of this research is to explore ethnic minority Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) students' perspectives on the awareness of cultural diversity and the feeling of non-discrimination between the B.Ed. students who have different cultural backgrounds. This research involved 15 ethnic minority B.Ed. students at a Capital City University (pseudonym) in Bangkok, Thailand. The participants were volunteers who were invited to share their opinions within a focus group discussion. Research data were examined and interpreted by using an interpretative phenomenological analysis technique. The qualitative results showed that the boundaries of cultural diversity awareness were considered regarding the unclear terminology of cultural diversity and the inability to apply Thai literature's themes and ideas to their prior knowledge. Suggestions were given regarding offering further opportunities for ethnic minority students to read and discuss about their preferred Thai literature. The limitation of this research is that the participants did not represent the full range of ethnic minority groups in Thailand. Hence, research findings could be limited when applied to educational settings which have minorities who were not part of this study. Future studies could be considered regarding the relationship between cultural norms and diversity and could also investigate ethnic minority B.Ed. students' stereotypes and beliefs in learning about Thai literature.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, Learning about Thai literature, Ethnic minority B.Ed. students

1. Introduction

According to the Thailand's 20-year national strategy, Thai undergraduate students are expected to realise the essence of cultural diversity (the Office of the Education Council, Ministry of Education, 2019). Furthermore, this cultural topic is a compulsory subject offered to students who are studying in a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme (the Office of Higher Education Commission, 2016). Although this cultural topic is generally studied in different B.Ed. courses, it is rarely discussed in detail within a Thai literature course. When learning about Thai literature, B.Ed. students are conventionally taught to analyse literature's themes, prosody and aesthetic language such as figures of speech (Kongkanun, 2013). However, students often avoid mentioning literature's themes and ideas in relation to cultural diversity because it is a sensitive topic in Thai society, especially regarding religious affiliation and different dialects (Changkhwanyaun, 2017). Hence, the awareness of cultural diversity was not promoted in the Thai literature classroom. In an attempt to gain a deep

understanding and overcome this learning issue, the aim of this research is to explore ethnic minority B.Ed. students' perspectives on the awareness of cultural diversity through learning about Thai literature. Opinions given by the B.Ed. students could contribute to broader pedagogical views and help enhance the respect for cultural diversity.

2. Literature Review

In accordance with the research title, related literature is clarified in this section. In sub-section 2.1, the essence of cultural diversity is described within the context of Thai society. Sub-section 2.2 explains challenges arising from the Thai literature offered to ethnic minority B.Ed. students. The discussion of related literature is shown in the following sub-sections.

2.1 Does the awareness of cultural diversity matter in Thai society?

Thai society is conventionally characterised by feelings of compromise, kindness and brotherhood (Changkhwanyaun, 2017). This concept refers to Thai society's willingness to communicate and accept people who come from different cultures. Thai culture sees the main purposes of cultural diversity as respect for differences and non-discrimination (the Office of the Education Council, Ministry of Education, 2019). However, the concept of cultural diversity was initially derived from western countries, which had a mixture of people of different backgrounds, such as colour, race, ethnicity, language, attire, religion and origin (Acquah & Commins, 2017). Hence, the term 'diversity' was differently interpreted within the Thai cultural context. In Thailand, the majority of Thai people are Buddhists who communicate through the Thai language as a mother tongue. The number of majority groups comprise more than eighty per cent of the entire population of Thailand (Prachagool, Nuangchalerm, Subramaniam & Dostal, 2016). Due to the limited variety of cultures, the lack of awareness and understanding of cultural diversity can be seen in the discrimination against religious affiliation, the use of racist pronouns in the Thai language and the mimicking of strong dialects and accents (Buckworth, 2019; Civitillo, Juang & Schachner, 2108). Although these negative behaviours are unacceptable in Thai society, solutions for these cultural issues are ineffective because of a traditional idea regarding the sense of obligation and the wish to avoid conflict (Changkhwanyaun, 2017). To overcome these drawbacks, Thai people, especially students, still need to be educated continuously to understand and respect others who have different backgrounds in terms of gender identity, abilities, preferences and cultures (Killian, 2016). This is a challenge that need to be overcome in order to gain awareness of cultural diversity in Thailand.

2.2 Thai literature offered to ethnic minority B.Ed. students

In the classroom, students learned about cultural diversity by reading and appreciating Thai literature. Students usually interpreted and discussed about the literature's themes, ideas, dialogues and settings within a historical and cultural context (Kongkanun, 2013). By reading literature, students had greater opportunities to understand a variety of human behaviours, attitudes and beliefs in different cultures (Eggen & Kauchak, 2016). The importance of cultural diversity was discussed in Thai literature courses as part of a B.Ed. programme (Thai major). However, B.Ed. students who were not affiliated Buddhism or non-native speakers of the Thai language found it difficult to learn about Thai literature (Thongah, 2013). Non-Buddhist B.Ed. students were unable to understand or appreciate Thai literature because of its themes and ideas regarding Buddhist principles and proverbs. Additionally, Muslim B.Ed.

students struggled to study Thai literature titles that mentioned a dog or traditional Thai food containing pork. The content of the literature titles tended to be restricted because of the rules of the Muslim religion. Students who were non-native speakers often found it difficult to explain literature's vocabulary, idioms and prosody because the students had a lack of understanding of the Thai language (Thongaht, 2013). Therefore, ethnic minority B.Ed. students preferred to keep silent and avoid answering teachers' questions during poem interpretations and discussion activities (Russell & Russell, 2014; Smith, 2018). These difficulties for students from different cultural backgrounds meant that the awareness of cultural diversity was not effectively promoted when learning about Thai literature.

Cultural diversity awareness has generally been studied in the context of teacher training (Ashton, 2018; Fylkesnes, 2018; Gutentag, Horenczyk & Tatar, 2018; Kumar & Lauermann, 2018). However, there are very few research publications associated with learning about Thai literature. Hence, this study attempts to fill the gap by offering ethnic minority B.Ed. students' perspectives. The research results are investigated to provide pedagogical views to enhance the awareness of cultural diversity in the Thai literature classroom.

3. Research Questions

To provide a clear direction for conducting the study, the research consisted of the following two research questions:

- 3.1 Why do ethnic minority B.Ed. students find it difficult to develop the awareness of cultural diversity?
- 3.2 What support do ethnic minority B.Ed. students need to develop the awareness of cultural diversity in a Thai literature course?

4. Research Methodology

In an attempt to answer these research questions, this study follows an exploratory ethnographic research design (Thomas, 2017; Yin, 2018). An interpretivist philosophical world-view underpinned the research methodology. Following the interpretivism, a reality or truth in the research refers to ethnic minority B.Ed. students' perspectives on the awareness of cultural diversity regarding learning about Thai literature. To obtain the aforementioned B.Ed. students' opinions, research participants consisted of 15 ethnic minority undergraduate students who studied in a B.Ed. programme (Thai major) at a Capital City University (pseudonym) in Bangkok, Thailand. The participants had different cultural backgrounds with respect to religious affiliation (Buddhism and Islam), domicile (northern, north-eastern, southern and central regions) and dialect (Lanna, Isaan, Khmer and Bahasa Melayu Pattani). To obtain the findings, the participants were invited to take part in the research and all participants were volunteers who were willing to share opinions and experiences in a focus group discussion regarding the awareness of cultural diversity in the Thai literature classroom. The research instrument consisted of eight in-depth open-ended questions that were employed in face-to-face discussions (Denscombe, 2017).

To improve the quality of the research instrument, the open-ended questions were amended to eradicate slang words, idioms, jargon and any vocabulary or phrases that may cause confusion (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, to ensure the security of the respondents, gatekeepers and other stakeholders involved with the research, ethical clearance was

officially confirmed prior to conducting the pilot study, data collection and analysis (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The data collection was undertaken during the third week of February 2021. It was kindly supported by the Faculty of Education at a Capital City University.

In accordance with the interpretivist stance, research data resulting from the focus group discussion were analysed by means of an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach (Thomas, 2017). The findings were examined and interpreted through the process of dialogue transcribing, coding, data classifying and identifying themes and sub-themes (Denscombe, 2017). To confirm the integrity of the results, research data were approved by way of intra-coder reliability and a peer debriefing method (Bryman, 2016). Due to the pandemic restrictions in Thailand since March 2021, the results could not be double-checked by research participants. Thus, the intra-coder reliability was applied to the research by the research team after the completion of coding and data classifying two weeks later. Research data were double-checked throughout the aforementioned data analysis process by the same research team to confirm the accuracy of the findings (Eggen & Kauchak, 2016). Moreover, the peer debriefing was employed to check research results. Two university lecturers from different universities in Thailand were invited to check the findings throughout the data analysis process. Alterations were made following lecturers' comments regarding the identification of themes and sub-themes. Due to the use of the two techniques with respect to the intra-coder reliability and the peer debriefing, the credibility of research findings was confirmed (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

5. Results and discussion

Following the data analysis process, the findings were thematically investigated in relation to the boundaries of the improvement of cultural diversity awareness, having dialect accents and opportunities for reading preferred literature. The discussion of the results is shown in the following three main themes.

5.1 Theme 1: Boundaries of the improvement of cultural diversity awareness

The ethnic minority B.Ed. students found it difficult to improve the awareness of cultural diversity because of boundaries regarding the vagueness of the term 'cultural diversity', a feeling of looking down on themselves and the inability to link literature's themes and ideas to prior knowledge. Considering the term cultural diversity, it was defined differently by the five B.Ed. student focus group members in relation to food, attire and the English language. A sample idea was offered by a Buddhist female student from the north-east who claimed, *'diversity referred to a variety of international food from different countries. When I ate pizza, french-fries and mushroom soup in a restaurant, I realised that they [these foods] were from European culture'*. Another view was given by a Muslim male student from the south who stated, *'the English language was a representative of cultural diversity because it was a formal language which was communicated in many countries. Apart from communicating in English, we [the B.Ed. student focus group members] were not able to understand people from different cultures'*. In accordance with the aforementioned terminology of cultural diversity, its scope related to concrete objects and appearances rather than abstract ideas, which related to cultural beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes. Additionally, in the focus group discussion, the six B.Ed. students mentioned the feeling of looking down on themselves because they thought that they were minority groups. They believed they had less knowledge and ability than the mainstream student groups in Thailand who were Buddhists and native

Thai language speakers. This negative feeling led the B.Ed. students to lack confidence when sharing ideas and opinions in the classroom. A sample perspective was given by a Muslim female from the south who stated, *'I was a rural student from Yala [a province from southern Thailand]. My academic knowledge and skills were lower than the capabilities of mainstream students in Bangkok. As a result, I preferred to keep silent in brainstorm and discussion activities'*. Regarding reading Thai literature, the students found it a drawback that they could not interpret Thai poetry clearly because they were unable to link the literature's themes and ideas to their prior knowledge and experience. A sample view was given by a Buddhist male student from the north who claimed, *'I was not sure what a lecturer explained in the [Thai literature] classroom. It was too difficult and such a vague idea regarding the interpretation of Thai literature. In my view, I was unable to apply the understanding of Thai literature to associate with my prior knowledge and experience in a secondary school education level.'* This idea refers to the lack of understanding that the students had of Thai literature because they thought that their academic knowledge and experience was too limited to read it (Woolfolk, 2018). To overcome this learning issue, students should be supported by considering their individual academic backgrounds and offering greater opportunities for reading and discussing Thai literature's themes and ideas (Choudhary, 2016; Thongaht, 2013). This topic is discussed further in section 5.3.

5.2 Theme 2: Dialect accents

Although all participants in the focus group discussion were able to communicate through the Thai language, they still struggled to learn about Thai literature because of their dialect accent. Five B.Ed. students indicated that having different dialect accents was a problem, as they used to be mimicked when they were school students because their accents were strong. A sample idea was presented by a Muslim male student from the south who spoke Bahasa Melayu Pattani as a mother tongue. He stated, *'I remembered that my classmates in secondary school laughed at my speaking the Thai language because of my strong accent. That made me embarrassed. Therefore, I often kept silent because I did not want to meet the mimicking racist behaviour in the [Thai literature] classroom'*. Another view was given by a Buddhist female student from the north-east who spoke Isaan as a mother tongue. She said, *'a teacher tried to correct my Isaan dialect accent in order to be clear in the Thai language. I was so ashamed and upset because all my classmates looked at me and laughed'*. Due to having different dialect accents, the students felt uncomfortable communicating in the Thai language. Two B.Ed. students accepted that they had to speak the language clearly and as close to native speakers as possible because they would be Thai language teachers in the future; however, others argued that this idea was an inappropriate solution. Four B.Ed. students pointed out that it was impossible for undergraduates to remove their dialect accent because they had communicated with it since they were children. Beyond attempting to change a personal dialect accent, students should learn to understand people from different cultures and consider how to be a Thai language teacher who is a non-native speaker. A sample view was offered by a Muslim male student from the south who spoke Bahasa Melayu Pattani as a mother tongue. He stated, *'be yourself and try your best. That was my solution. Personally, I thought we [the ethnic minority B.Ed. students] could not change our identity, especially cultural background. Although you [the B.Ed. student focus group members] might not be able speak the Thai language as good as native speakers, you intended to provide appropriate teaching preparations and support your school students to learn about Thai language and literature. This could address the expectation from your students'*. This argument can produce additional thoughts to help and support non-native

language teachers who find it difficult to communicate in a dialect accent (Civittillo et al., 2108; Woolfolk, 2018).

5.3 Theme 3: Opportunities for reading preferred literature

In accordance with reading Thai literature, its titles were indicated following the Thai Basic Core Curriculum. The themes and contents of Thai literature mostly related to Buddhist principles in a traditional Thai context. The titles were mostly appropriate for Thai Buddhist students who were the mainstream group in Bangkok and in the central region in Thailand. Hence, regional Thai cultures and other religious affiliations were not well-represented by the chosen titles. In the focus group discussion, four B.Ed. students mentioned that they struggled to read Thai literature because they were Muslim students, so they were unable to interpret its themes and ideas regarding Buddhist principles, proverbs and the Buddha's biography. A sample view was presented by a Muslim male student from the centre who stated, *'I had no idea when a lecturer and classmates discussed about Buddhist proverbs in Thai literature. I knew I had to translate and interpret those proverbs, but I felt like I was being forced to read Thai literature'*. Another Buddhist student from the north-east gave an additional view that, *'we [the ethnic minority B.Ed. students] had not had any chance to select preferred Thai literature titles. Sometimes, I was unwilling to read literature which did not relate to my domicile and cultural background'*. Although the B.Ed. students realised that the aim of reading those particular titles was to apply to teach in the classroom when they were pre-service teachers, two student focus group members argued that the aforementioned purpose did not address the real love and appreciation of reading Thai literature. To resolve this, four B.Ed. students suggested that they should have additional opportunities to read their preferred Thai literature. A sample idea was offered by a Buddhist female from the north who claimed, *'we [the ethnic minority B.Ed. students] should have rights to read preferred Thai literature because of the freedom of reading and creating imagination for all readers, even though it did not address the requirements of the Thai Basic Core Curriculum'*. This suggests that teachers should consider minority student groups' opinions and preferences in order to develop their reading and appreciation of Thai literature (Killian, 2016; Smith, 2018; Thongaht, 2013).

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Considering the first research question *'Why do ethnic minority B.Ed. students find it difficult to develop the awareness of cultural diversity?'*, obstacles were presented in themes 1 and 2, such as boundaries of cultural diversity awareness and having dialect accents. The students referred to the unclear terminology of cultural diversity, the feeling of looking down on themselves as minority groups in Thailand and the inability to apply Thai literature's themes and ideas to their prior knowledge. These negative factors led the B.Ed. students to lack the confidence to share ideas regarding interpreting and discussing Thai literature. As a result, they had few opportunities to realise the essence of cultural diversity in the Thai literature classroom. Additionally, in an attempt to answer the second research question *'What support do ethnic minority B.Ed. students need in order to develop the awareness of cultural diversity in a Thai literature course?'*, suggestions and ideas were presented in themes 2 and 3, such as accepting people with different dialect accents to teach Thai language and literature, in addition to offering further opportunities for ethnic minority students to read preferred Thai literature. Limitations in the research were considered in relation to the small number of respondents and the lack of confirmation of data consistency given by the participants

themselves, due to the limited duration of data collection and analysis amid the COVID-19 pandemic. To provide a broader picture of cultural diversity awareness, future studies could be undertaken regarding the relationship between cultural norms and diversity and the investigation of ethnic minority B.Ed. students' stereotypes and beliefs in learning about Thai literature.

7. References

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