



## The influences of teachers' intercultural competence on teaching performance and international student engagement: The mediating role of teachers' transformational leadership

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### ABSTRACT

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#### Keywords

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the formational mechanism of how teacher intercultural competence affects teaching performance and international student engagement. A quantitative survey was designed to collect and analyze data from 400 international undergraduate students in China and Thailand. The partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) as a technical approach was employed to analyze the relationships of the variables between conceptual constructions. The results from the PLS-SEM found that the direct contributions of teacher intercultural competence to teaching performance and international student engagement are insignificant. However, the direct influence of intercultural competence on transformational leadership is positive and significant. Moreover, the findings indicate that teachers' transformational leadership plays a positive and significant role in mediating the effects of intercultural competence on teaching performance and international student engagement. The findings have practical implications for educational policymakers or university administrators in the field of teacher education and professional development. To improve the outcomes of higher education, teacher intercultural competence is suggested as a crucial part of teacher education and professional development. More inclusive and effective academic settings can be promoted by the development of teachers' intercultural competence.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study proposed and confirmed the mediating role of teacher transformational leadership, which clarified the formational mechanism of how teacher intercultural competence contributes to teaching performance and international student engagement.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The number of international students globally has been increasing in international higher education with the developing tendency of educational globalization (OECD, 2019). Even under the impact of COVID-19, the trends of educational globalization and internationalization have been continuously researched by scholars (De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Tight, 2021). Benefiting from new information technology, the options for international education are becoming more borderless and diversified. Students can participate in many international academic activities in any country, in person or online (Tierney, 2014). Some Asian countries as new international education destinations, such as China and Thailand, have broadened the horizon of traditional international higher education concentrated in North America, Europe, and Oceania. To increase the advantages and competitiveness in global education,

education internationalization and intercultural competence development as an important national policy and strategy have been intensively emphasized by many countries and organizations (Altbach & Knight, 2007; De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Larsen, 2016). For instance, in the early 1980s, Deng Xiaoping, a famous Chinese national leader, proposed the significant thought of “three facings” to reform Chinese national education, such as “education should face modernization, face the world, and face the future” (Zhang, 2010). In 2015, the Chinese government further launched the aim to strengthen the international competitiveness of higher education by building “Double First-Class,” namely first-class universities and first-class academic disciplines (Liu, Turner, & Jing, 2019). The number of foreign students in China from 196 countries published by the Ministry of Education (2019) has increased to 492,185. In Thailand, the internationalization of higher education has been adopted as one formal national policy and strategy since 1990. Terms such as “intercultural competence,” “global awareness,” and “international competitiveness” were stressed in the national 15-year long-range plan on higher education (Lavankura, 2013). In 2009, the Thai government further declared a plan to become a regional education hub by attracting more international students in the following years (Lavankura, 2013). Against a background of educational globalization and internationalization, university administrators and national policymakers are appealed to promote essential transformation and improvement in both teacher professional development and student learning outcomes (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). On the one hand, although the significant role of teacher intercultural competence in promoting teacher professional development and student learning outcomes has been stressed by scholars (Cushner & Chang, 2015; Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), most teachers have still not experienced any professional training for intercultural teaching and learning (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Paige & Goode, 2009). The existing problems in the practical field are still frequently reported. For instance, numerous case studies in China have disclosed that the lack of teacher intercultural competence in the process of international student education may intensify student learning weariness, inadequate engagement, and even cultural shock (Wang, 2013). Similarly, scholars in Thailand reported that Thai teachers tend to experience more anxiety and discomfort when they teach diverse cultural students in English as a foreign language (Kongchan & Singhasiri, 2008). Integrating intercultural competence into classroom teaching is still a challenge for many Thai teachers (Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016). On the other hand, student engagement as a key indicator of educational quality is not only associated with student learning achievement but also influences students’ overall satisfaction and well-being (Kahu, 2013). Unfortunately, too many failed cases have been reported in recent decades, particularly in some emerging international education destinations, such as China and Thailand. For instance, based on empirical research on international undergraduate students in China (Lu, Li, & Tian, 2020), only 23.2% are actively engaged in learning. In Thailand, international students are more likely to suffer from cultural shock, intercultural adjustment barriers, or mental health problems, such as loneliness and depression, when they come to Thailand from different language and culture backgrounds (Chen, Wang, You, Chen, & Chew, 2021; Rujipak & Limprasert, 2016; Rujipak, 2016). These problems cannot be easily solved without teacher involvement, and effective teacher intercultural competence in particular. Therefore, this study attempts to provide more insights and empirical evidence from the perspective of teacher intercultural competence to promote teaching performance in multicultural classroom settings and international student engagement. This study aims to identify the effects of teacher intercultural competence on teacher transformational leadership, teaching performance, and international student engagement. Although prior studies have discussed the contributions of intercultural competence to working performance and engagement in various contexts (Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Matveev & Nelson, 2004; Robinson, 2012), few attempts have been made to bridge these associations through potential mediating variables. Particularly, existing research is very limited in the context of emerging destinations of international higher education. There remains a research gap regarding the formation mechanism to explain how teacher intercultural competence boosts teaching performance and international student engagement by potential mediating variables in more countries or regions. This study proposes that teacher transformational leadership mediates the impacts of teacher intercultural competence on

teaching performance and international student engagement. In the academic field of leadership research, two threads can be explored and summarized. One thread is researching various leadership styles, particularly from the perspective of the cultural attributes of nations, organizations, or individuals, such as intercultural competence as an antecedent of global leadership (Miska, Stahl, & Mendenhall, 2013) and multicultural personality as an antecedent of transformational leadership (Van Woerkom & De Reuver, 2009). The second thread concentrates on the contributions of transformational leadership to organizational or individual outcomes (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; De Hoogh et al., 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). As teacher transformational leadership is one of the most significant teacher leadership styles that has been intensively emphasized (Hallinger, 2003; Harvey, Royal, & Stout, 2003; Pounder, 2008; Walumbwa & Ojode, 2000), this study integrates these two threads by suggesting that teacher transformational leadership is a mediating variable to bridge the associations of teacher intercultural competence with teaching performance and international student engagement. The anticipated outcomes of this study are to elucidate how teacher intercultural competence impacts teaching performance and international student engagement. This is mediated through the potential variable of teacher transformational leadership. The empirical analysis results will enrich the theoretical framework concerning the factors influencing student engagement and teaching performance within intercultural teaching and learning settings. On a practical level, these findings will offer recommendations to educational policymakers and university administrators for enhancing teachers' intercultural competency. This, in turn, will improve teaching performance and international student learning outcomes, which are crucial in navigating the competitive landscape and challenges of educational globalization.

## 2. LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

### 2.1. Teacher Intercultural Competence

Numerous scholars have devoted time to researching the development of intercultural competence models (Byram & Zarate, 1997; Deardorff, 2006, 2009; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1984; Matveev, 2017; Matveev & Nelson, 2004; Spitzberg, 2000). Deardorff (2009) and Matveev (2017) published systematic academic books on intercultural competence in different contexts of research and practice. Two core academic outcomes are reviewed as follows: First, Matveev and Nelson (2004) constructed the collaborative intercultural competence model. Four dimensions of intercultural competence are identified by this framework—interpersonal skills, cooperative spirit and ability for team effectiveness, intercultural uncertainty, and intercultural empathy. Intercultural competence is related to national cultural orientation. Intercultural competence affects multicultural team performance. In addition to the collaborative intercultural competence model, Deardorff (2006) proposed the process model of intercultural competence. According to Deardorff's theoretical discourse, intercultural competence consists of individual attitudes, knowledge, and communicative skills. Desired external outcomes, including effective and appropriate communication and behavior, are shaped through the mediating roles of internal outcomes, such as personal adaptability and flexibility. The process model of Deardorff (2006) and the collaborative model of Matveev and Nelson (2004) argue that working performance or outcomes can be shaped by intercultural competence in common. Zhang and Zhou (2019) undertook a comprehensive meta-analysis of existing intercultural competence studies, outlining four pedagogical approaches to enhance individuals' intercultural competence: culture-based teaching materials, classroom activities, teaching strategies, and integrated intercultural programs. Additionally, Goldstein (2022) delved deeper into the outcomes of intercultural competence through short-term experiences of studying abroad. Their prior academical contributions inspired this study to further investigate the role of teacher intercultural competence in promoting teaching performance and relevant educational outcomes.

In the education industry, teacher intercultural competence has been recognized as an important element and skill for teachers' professional development (DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009). Moule (2005) defined teacher intercultural competence as teachers' ability to successfully teach students from diverse cultures. Davis and Sumara (1997) attempted to associate teacher intercultural competence with academic outcomes and defined it as an ability to

promote teaching and learning outcomes through integrating and translating knowledge about people from different cultural backgrounds. The contributions of teacher intercultural competence to teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes have been well-documented by scholars (Bennett, 1995; Cushner & Chang, 2015; Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). For instance, Bennett (1995) stated that teachers with higher intercultural competence tend to be more comfortable communicating with a diverse group of students because they can understand different learning styles and avoid the dangers of stereotyping. Cushner and Chang (2015) explained that teacher intercultural competence, such as the skills of intercultural communication, intercultural empathy, and problem-solving through team collaboration, plays a positive role in constructing teacher–student rapport and inclusive classrooms. Moreover, Romijn, Slot, and Leseman (2021) underscored the critical role of teacher education and ongoing professional development in cultivating teacher intercultural competence. Similarly, Dervin, Moloney, and Simpson (2020) highlighted the importance of teacher intercultural competence and its positive impact on teachers' job performance.

## 2.2. Teacher Transformational Leadership

As one of the most significant teacher leadership styles, transformational leadership is defined as the leader's ability to motivate and stimulate their subordinates to realize more outcomes beyond their initial self-interests, intentions, or expectations (Bass, 1985). Some great educators or politicians in history have often been recognized as transformational leaders, such as Confucius and Gandhi (Bi, Ehrich, & Ehrich, 2012). Transformational leadership contributes to the extensive outcomes in the field of business management, such as the working performance of teams and individuals (Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013) and subordinates' engagement (Breevaart, Bakker, Demerouti, & Derks, 2016; Prochazka, Gilova, & Vaculik, 2017). Recently, Bakker, Hetland, Olsen, and Espevik (2023) conducted a study exploring the influence of leaders' transformational leadership on the working engagement and performance of their followers. Similarly, Purwanto, Purba, Bernarto, and Sijabat (2021) conducted research affirming the positive impact of leaders' transformational leadership on organizational citizenship behavior. In the context of education, some scholars have discussed and researched the outcomes of teacher transformational leadership, such as teaching performance and effectiveness (Harvey et al., 2003; Pounder, 2008; Walumbwa & Ojode, 2000), teacher credibility in the classroom (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Harrison, 2011), student learning motivation (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Walumbwa & Ojode, 2000), and student engagement (Wilson et al., 2012). Purwanto (2022) demonstrated a notably positive impact of transformational leadership on teachers' job performance. Additionally, Antonopoulou, Halkiopoulos, Barlou, and Beligiannis (2021) found a positive correlation between transformational leadership and both work efficiency and job satisfaction. According to the synthesis (Bass & Avolio, 1994), transformational leadership consists of four main dimensions, namely idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Teacher idealized influence means that a teacher should play a positive role in academic interest and achievement as well as make the students acknowledge that a commitment to learning is a critical antecedent to achieving good academic performance and progress (Pounder, 2008). In other words, the teacher as a transformational leader should be a model in academic spirit, morality, and sacrifice to influence his/her students positively. The dimension of inspirational motivation requires a teacher to transfer enthusiasm, optimism, and confidence to students. The teacher as a transformational leader should be good at conveying a clear vision and mission to students through their charismatic leadership behaviors or skills, such as debating skills, persuasive skills, and professional background or experience. Thus, students can be inspired by their teacher to realize higher performance expectations through increased effort (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Van Eeden, Cilliers, & Van Deventer, 2008). The individualized consideration dimension requires a teacher to respect individual differences in the abilities and needs of students. A teacher should provide diverse training, directions, and teaching strategies to explore the potential of each student (Barrington\*, 2004). The dimension of intellectual stimulation means that teachers can

promote students to realize innovation and creativity based on their independent thoughts. Within this dimension, students are encouraged to think and solve problems through different approaches from different perspectives. Meanwhile, experimentation, and even mistakes, are allowed by teachers (Bi et al., 2012; Van Eeden et al., 2008).

### *2.3. Teacher Intercultural Competence and Teacher Transformational Leadership*

This research predicts that intercultural competence positively affects transformational leadership. The important role of culture in managerial or educational leadership has been intensively discussed by scholars (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996; Hofstede, 1986; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). According to the collaborative intercultural competence model, an individual with a high level of intercultural competence has four characteristics, namely interpersonal skills, cooperative spirit and ability for team effectiveness, openness to intercultural uncertainty, and intercultural empathy (Matveev & Nelson, 2004). These characteristics tend to be functional in increasing transformational leadership. First, interpersonal skills increase transformational leadership. Interpersonal skills as one characteristic of intercultural competence mean that individuals can build and maintain relationships with strangers through proper communication (Matveev, 2017; Matveev & Nelson, 2004). Considering that transformational leaders often utilize effective communication skills to motivate their followers to realize team goals, i.e., the inspirational motivation dimension of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), the effectiveness of transformational leadership can be more easily achieved by people with interpersonal skills (Sunindijo & Zou, 2013). Second, cooperative team spirit and ability tends to be functional in increasing transformational leadership. This characteristic means that individuals display concern about team goals and effectiveness more than personal performance. The team leaders are required to have the ability to understand and define team goals, roles and norms, and solve team problems through discussion and cooperation with other team members (Matveev, 2017; Matveev & Nelson, 2004). Such abilities coincide with the potential qualifications as a transformational leader. Third, openness to intercultural uncertainty tends to be functional in increasing transformational leadership. Intercultural uncertainty as a characteristic of intercultural competence means that a team leader should have an open mind and display patience and flexibility to cope with the uncertainty of cultural differences (Matveev, 2017; Matveev & Nelson, 2004). Openness to intercultural uncertainty might empower team members to understand more individual differences from diverse cultural backgrounds (Homan, Greer, Jehn, & Koning, 2010) and care about other team members with less prejudice (Flynn, 2005), which are aligned with the characteristic of individualized consideration as a transformational leader. Fourth, intercultural empathy tends to be functional in increasing transformational leadership. Intercultural empathy as a characteristic of intercultural competence means that an individual should sense and appreciate different ways or styles embedded in other cultures, values, and beliefs from other people's perspectives (Matveev, 2017; Matveev & Nelson, 2004). Empathy plays a significant role in shaping leadership, particularly transformational leadership, in the dimension of individualized consideration (Sadri, Weber, & Gentry, 2011). Bass (1985) stated that a transformational leader should consider and respect the individual differences of group members from diverse cultural backgrounds. In multicultural contexts, an effective leader often displays empathy to understand the difficulties and needs of their followers so that a rapport among team members and better performance of leadership can be cultivated (Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Daus, 2002; Duan & Hill, 1996; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002).

In addition to theoretical discussions on the contributions of the four characteristics of intercultural competence to transformational leadership, some empirical findings from different dimensions also provide support for the current study. For instance, by collecting data from full-time employees in America, Mencl, Wefald, and van Ittersum (2016) confirmed that interpersonal skills have a positive influence on transformational leadership. In the research context of managers in Brazil, a positive relationship between a leader's openness to new experiences and transformational leadership was reported by Cavazotte, Moreno, and Hickmann (2012). Moreover, Sadri et al. (2011) identified a positive relationship between a leader's empathy and leadership performance in 38 countries.



Similarly, Van Woerkom and De Reuver (2009) studied the impact of multicultural personalities on transformational leadership in the context of expatriate managers in thirteen countries. Guang and Charoensukmongkol (2020) studied the influence of cultural intelligence on leadership performance in the context of Chinese expatriates in Thailand. Given this theoretical and empirical support, it is reasonable to propose that teachers with a high level of intercultural competence tend to positively influence their level of transformational leadership perceived by international students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Hence, the first hypothesis of this study is as follows.

*Hypothesis 1: Teacher intercultural competence is positively associated with teacher transformational leadership.*

#### 2.4. Teacher Intercultural Competence and Teaching Performance

According to the discussion on the collaborative intercultural competence model (Matveev & Nelson, 2004), intercultural competence is associated with multicultural group performance. Thus, teacher intercultural competence will be predicted to have a potential influence on teaching performance when teaching a multicultural group of international students. In addition to the intercultural competence model by Matveev and Nelson (2004), the association of teacher intercultural competence with teaching performance in the multicultural context is also supported by other scholars. For instance, DeJaeghere and Cao (2009) discussed the significant role of teacher intercultural competence to cope with the increasing diversity of young students in the United States and further suggested that school administrators or teacher educators should train teachers in intercultural competence to support their professional development. Cushner and Mahon (2009) proposed that teacher intercultural competence should be placed at the foundation of teacher education. Teachers are suggested to learn and accept different cultures and world views because students are more likely to reach their full potential if their teachers have more diverse cultural competence (Moule, 2011). Empirically, the relationship between teacher intercultural competence and teaching performance has been supported by some existing quantitative studies. For example, a study in four European countries by De Beuckelaer, Lievens, and Bückner (2012) investigated and confirmed the impact of teacher intercultural competence on students' perceived teaching performance and quality. Similarly, Van Woerkom and De Reuver (2009) proposed and examined the influence of multicultural personality on working performance in the intercultural context. Derwin et al. (2020) examined the positive role of teacher intercultural competence in facilitating teachers' working performance. Given such theoretical and empirical support, it makes sense to propose that a teacher with higher intercultural competence will have better teaching performance in the intercultural context. Therefore, the second hypothesis of this study is as follows:

*Hypothesis 2: Teacher intercultural competence is positively associated with teaching performance in the intercultural context.*

#### 2.5. Teacher Intercultural Competence and International Student Engagement

This study predicts that teacher intercultural competence is functional in fostering international student engagement. Kuh (2009) defined student engagement as “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (p. 683). Due to the significant role of student engagement in indicating educational quality, scholars have explored the various dimensions of teacher intercultural competence to boost student engagement. First, given that many scholars (Den Brok, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Van Uden, Ritzen, & Pieters, 2014) have suggested the influences of teacher interpersonal behavior and teacher–student relationships on student engagement, the teacher interpersonal skills dimension of intercultural competence tends to affect student engagement. Moreover, considering that the dimension of cooperative team spirit and ability empowers a team leader to understand and define team goals, roles and norms and solve team problems through discussion and cooperation (Matveev, 2017; Matveev & Nelson, 2004), student engagement is likely to be associated with this

dimension of teacher intercultural competence. Furthermore, the intercultural empathy dimension is likely to construct a rapport based on concerns regarding the difficulties and needs of multicultural group members (Ashkanasy et al., 2002; Duan & Hill, 1996; Wolff et al., 2002). Student motivation and learning engagement tend to be promoted by teacher empathy (Meyers, Rowell, Wells, & Smith, 2019; Waxman, 1983). Additionally, considering that the dimension of intercultural openness tends to contribute to open-mindedness, patience, and flexibility (Matveev, 2017; Matveev & Nelson, 2004), teacher openness is suggested to facilitate student engagement (Crane, 2017). Empirically, by collecting data from international students in Hong Kong, Robinson (2012) reported that there is a significant positive impact of teacher intercultural competence on student engagement. Supported by such theoretic and empirical studies, the third hypothesis is constructed as follows:

*Hypothesis 3: Teacher intercultural competence is positively associated with international student engagement.*

### *2.6. Teacher Transformational Leadership and Teaching Performance*

This paper predicts that teacher transformational leadership tends to be functional in facilitating teaching performance. Conger et al. (2000) mentioned that transformational leaders tend to have a more effective working performance than non-transformational leaders. Pounder (2014) stated that quality teaching can be promoted by teacher transformational leadership in the classroom. To argue this, some scholars (Dionne, Yammarino, Atwater, & Spangler, 2004; Yammarino, Spangler, & Bass, 1993) attempted to explain how the specific dimensions of transformational leadership influence the performance of a team or individual. For instance, the dimensions of transformational leadership, including idealized influence and inspirational motivation, are likely to improve team performance through constructing team vision, commitment, and cohesion (Dionne et al., 2004). Quantitatively, collecting data from undergraduate students at Bishop's University, the components of teacher transformational leadership have been investigated and confirmed to affect teaching performance (Harvey et al., 2003). Similarly, Van Woerkom and De Reuver (2009) presented a positive relationship between transformational leadership and the working performance of expatriate managers in thirteen countries. Deinert, Homan, Boer, Voelpel, and Gutermann (2015) confirmed a positive relationship between the dimensions of transformational leadership and leader performance through a meta-analysis of 58 existing studies. Leaders' transformational leadership positively influences followers' working performance (Bakker et al., 2023). Purwanto (2022) explored the positive contributions of transformational leadership to teacher working performance. Given such support, it makes sense to propose that a teacher with higher transformational leadership tends to have a better teaching performance. Hence, the fourth hypothesis of this study is as follows:

*Hypothesis 4: Teacher transformational leadership is positively associated with teaching performance.*

### *2.7. Teacher Transformational Leadership and International Student Engagement*

This study hypothesizes that teacher transformational leadership facilitates international student engagement. In the parallel field of business management, the influence of transformational leadership on employee work engagement has been intensively discussed and investigated (Breevaart et al., 2016; Hawkes, Biggs, & Hegerty, 2017; Prochazka et al., 2017; Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011). In the field of education, as teachers are usually viewed as the leaders of the classroom or course (Baba & Ace, 1989; Harrison, 2011), the different theories of educational leadership, particularly transformational leadership, have been applied in the context of classroom instruction (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). First, given that student extra effort and participation can be promoted by the inspirational motivation dimension of transformational leadership (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Pounder, 2008), student behavioral engagement is more likely to be facilitated by a transformational teacher (Balwant, Birdi, Stephan, & Topakas, 2019). Moreover, as a transformational leader tends to encourage followers to think and solve problems through different perspectives or solutions (Bass & Avolio, 1994), student cognitive engagement is more likely to be fostered by a transformational teacher (Balwant et al.,

2019). Additionally, considering that a transformational leader tends to have positive psychological states such as optimism and enthusiasm to cope with stress (McCull-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002), student emotional engagement might be cultivated through mood contagion by a transformational teacher (Balwant et al., 2019). Empirically, Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) confirmed a moderate but significant relationship between teacher transformational leadership and student engagement in Canada. Teacher transformational leadership has been found to have a significant correlation with student engagement in the United Kingdom (Balwant et al., 2019). Similarly, Shin and Bolkan (2021) explored the positive association between the intellectual stimulation aspect of teacher transformational leadership and student engagement among undergraduate students in the United States. Drawing on this theoretical and empirical foundation, the present study posits the fifth hypothesis as follows:

*Hypothesis 5: Teacher transformational leadership is positively associated with international student engagement.*

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework in this study.

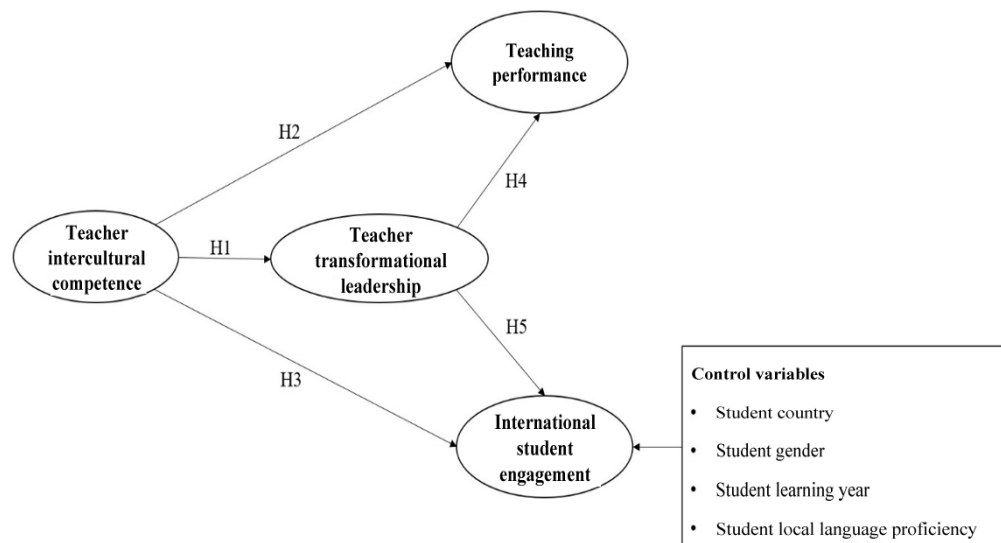


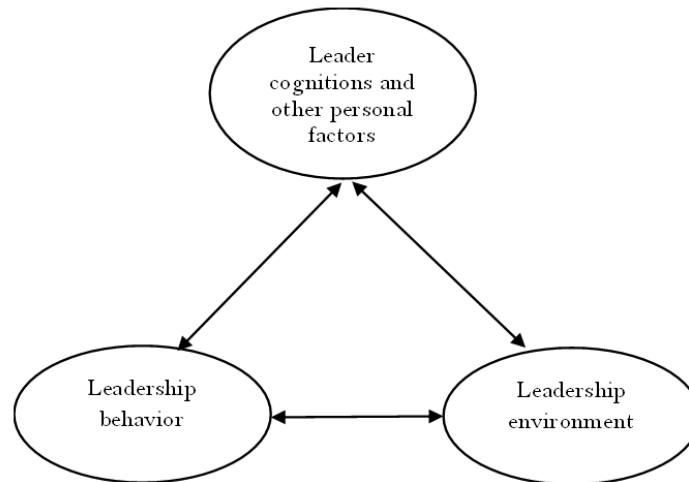
Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

### 2.8. Mediating Role of Teacher Transformational Leadership: Social Cognitive Theory Perspective

In addition to the direct effects of teacher intercultural competence on teaching performance and international student engagement, this study proposes that teacher transformational leadership is likely to play a mediating role in boosting the contributions of teachers' intercultural competence to the dependent variables. Social cognitive theory can provide a theoretical perspective to explain this mediating role of teacher transformational leadership. Bandura (1988) constructed social cognitive theory in which learning is viewed as the interactional process among cognitive and other personal factors, behavior, and the external environment. The mutual associations among personal cognition, behavior, and external environments can be interpreted by this theory (Wood & Bandura, 1989). As a classic adult learning theory, social cognitive theory has been utilized to explain many academic issues. For instance, McCormick (2001) and Allen (2007) attempted to explain the behavior of leadership through social cognitive theory. Based on Bandura's work, McCormick (2001) constructed a theoretical model (see Figure 2).

Social cognitive theory explains the relationships among personal factors, leadership behaviors, and related outcomes (Allen, 2007; McCormick, 2001). In this study, teacher intercultural competence is viewed as part of leader cognitions and personal factors. Teacher transformational leadership is one style of leadership behavior. Teaching performance and international student engagement are deemed as the related outcomes from teacher intercultural competence and transformational leadership. Teacher transformational leadership plays a role in mediating the connection between teacher intercultural competence and teaching performance and international student engagement. Therefore, according to social cognitive theory, this study proposes two indirect hypotheses as follows:





**Figure 2.** Applying social cognitive theory to leadership.  
Source: McCormick (2001).

*Hypothesis 6: Teacher transformational leadership mediates the effect of teacher intercultural competence on teaching performance.*

*Hypothesis 7: Teacher transformational leadership mediates the effect of teacher intercultural competence on international student engagement.*

### 3. METHODS

#### 3.1. Sample and Data Collection Procedure

Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU) and Assumption University (AU) were suggested as two representative universities for international student higher education in China and Thailand. BLCU is known as the “Small United Nations” in China because it has a diverse national background of foreign student resources. AU is the first international university in Thailand, which provides an international learning environment with nearly 3,000 international students from more than 90 nations. Therefore, it makes sense to select BLCU and AU as the target sample of international university students in China and Thailand.

This study utilized a convenience sampling method, with data collected through an online self-administered questionnaire created by Wenjuanxing, an online survey tool. The link to the questionnaire and detailed instructions were distributed to international undergraduate students at BLCU and AU via email and various online social media platforms. Respondents' personal information remained anonymous and confidential, and the data collected were solely intended for academic analysis, devoid of any assessment of personal morality or values. The data collection period spanned from October 2021 to March 2022. The questionnaire comprised seven scales and a demographic profile. To mitigate common method variance, each scale was presented separately in the questionnaire with psychological isolation (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Following scholarly recommendations advocating for sample sizes ranging from 200 to 500 for quantitative analysis (Kent, 2007), a total of 430 international undergraduate students from AU and BLCU participated and completed the online questionnaire.

However, 30 questionnaires were deemed invalid due to responses being random or the survey being completed within an implausibly short timeframe. Consequently, 400 valid questionnaires were retained for data analysis. Of these, 200 sets (50%) originated from AU students, while the remaining 200 sets (50%) were from BLCU students. Descriptive statistics outlining the respondents' characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents.

Characteristic	Descriptive statistics
Gender	Male: 180 (45%) Female: 220 (55%)
Age	Mean: 20.750 S.D.: 2.337
Country	Asian countries: 274 (68.5%) Non-Asian countries: 126 (31.5%)
Length in university	First year: 70 (17.50%) Second year: 79 (19.75%) Third year: 101 (25.25%) Fourth year: 150 (37.50%)
Local language proficiency	Beginner: 80 (24.5%) Elementary: 98 (24.5%) Intermediate: 101 (25.25%) Upper: 76 (19%) Advanced: 45 (11.25%)

### 3.2. Measures

Teacher intercultural competence was assessed using the scale developed by Matveev and Nelson (2004) encompassing interpersonal skills (5 items), cooperation spirit and team effectiveness (7 items), openness to intercultural uncertainty (6 items), and intercultural empathy (5 items). The scale's reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.8) and validity were established across various research contexts (Matveev & Del Villar, 2014; Matveev & Nelson, 2004). The wording of items was adjusted to reflect the subjects' Chinese or Thai teachers in BLCU or AU, employing statements such as "My Chinese teacher of this course in BLCU (or my Thai teacher of this course in AU) has the ability to..." Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Teacher transformational leadership was gauged using the scale developed by Carless, Wearing, and Mann (2000) comprising 7 items and demonstrating high reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.8). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was employed. Items were tailored to the study's context, beginning with "My Chinese teacher of this course in BLCU..." or "My Thai teacher of this course in AU..."

Teaching performance was assessed using the teaching performance scale from the course experience questionnaire (Wilson, Lizzio, & Ramsden, 1997), with 6 items demonstrating high reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.8). Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Item wording was adapted to the study context, starting with "My Chinese teacher of this course in BLCU..." or "My Thai teacher of this course in AU..."

International student engagement was measured using the scale developed by Burch, Heller, Burch, Freed, and Steed (2015) consisting of 24 items across four subscales: emotional engagement, behavioral/physical engagement, cognitive engagement in class, and cognitive engagement out of class. The scale exhibited high reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.8) and has been validated by various scholars (Burch et al., 2015; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) for each item.

### 3.3. Control Variables

Based on the relevant literature, this study proposed that international student engagement is likely to be influenced by several control variables consisting of student country, gender, learning years in university, and local language proficiency in the host country. First, according to Rujipak and Limprasert (2016), international students from western countries have better performance than international students from Asian countries in intercultural adjustment when studying abroad. Therefore, student country was considered as a control variable to examine the potential influence on student engagement. Student country is measured by utilizing a dummy variable. The

international students from western countries are coded as 1, while the international students from Asian countries are coded as 0. Second, based on prior arguments regarding the influence of student gender on learning engagement (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Lietaert, Roorda, Laevers, Verschueren, & De Fraine, 2015; Tison, Bateman, & Culver, 2011), student gender as a control variable is measured by utilizing a dummy variable. Females are coded as 0, and males are coded as 1. Third, given the existing studies, college students might have different academic performance in different learning years, particularly for students in their first year who usually need more encouragement and adjustment (Bowman, 2010; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2009; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Holmbeck & Wandrei, 1993). Hence, the length of student learning years in university is another control variable and is measured by using the actual learning length at school. Freshmen in university are coded as 1, sophomores are coded as 2, juniors are coded as 3, and seniors are coded as 4. Fourth, given the existing studies, the local language proficiency of international students in host countries is likely to influence student academic engagement (Stephen, Welman, & Jordaan, 2004; Torres & Solberg, 2001; Yu & Downing, 2012). Thus, local language proficiency is used as a control variable and is measured by the 5-point Likert scale (Takeuchi, Yun, & Tesluk, 2002). According to the realistic context of this study, the scale for BLCU students was adapted to “My Chinese language proficiency,” while the scale for AU students was adapted to “My Thai language proficiency.”

### 3.4. Data Analysis

This study utilized partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze the data. Multifunction consisting of multiple regression analysis, path analysis, and structural equation modeling can be realized by PLS (Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978). Compared with other SEM techniques, PLS has two advantages. First, PLS is effective in analyzing the complex relationships among numerous variables with many items as indicators. Second, PLS is more adaptable in data distribution and sample size, particularly in dealing with the abnormal distribution of small sample sizes (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011; Kline, 2015). In this study, some scales of variables, such as teacher intercultural competence and international student engagement, have over 20 items. Additionally, considering the abnormal data distribution in this study, PLS-SEM was suggested as a suitable analytical approach. WarpPLS 7.0 was employed to execute the PLS estimation.

## 4. RESULTS

Prior to conducting the PLS-SEM analysis, the validity and reliability of the scales were assessed. Firstly, convergent validity was evaluated based on factor loading values, with Hair et al. (2011) recommending a threshold of at least 0.5. All items in each construct surpassed this threshold, indicating satisfactory convergent validity. Secondly, discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each variable with the correlations between that variable and others. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), if the AVE value exceeds the correlations, discriminant validity is established. The results in Table 2 confirm satisfactory discriminant validity. Thirdly, scale reliability was determined through Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability values, with scholars suggesting values above 0.70 as adequate (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All Cronbach's alpha coefficients in this study exceeded 0.7, as presented in Table 2, indicating satisfactory reliability.

To address multicollinearity concerns, variance inflation factor (VIF) values were examined. Additionally, a full collinearity VIF test was employed to assess common method bias (CMB) during questionnaire design and collection (Kock, 2015). According to Ringle, Da Silva, and Bido (2015), VIF values below 5 are considered acceptable. As shown in Table 2, all of the variables' VIF values range from 1.036 to 2.250, indicating the absence of serious issues with multicollinearity and CMB in this study.

**Table 2.** Correlations among variables and square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE).

Variable	VIF value	Cronbach's alpha coefficient	Composite reliability coefficient	TIC	TTL	TP	SE	COU	GEN	YEA	LLP
TIC	1.283	0.944	0.950	(0.672)	0.399***	0.154**	0.289***	0.063	-0.018	0.083	0.186***
TTL	1.540	0.916	0.933		(0.815)	0.403***	0.483***	0.032	-0.037	-0.010	0.310***
TP	1.881	0.881	0.910			(0.792)	0.617***	0.093	-0.090	-0.016	0.312***
ISE	3.764	0.945	0.950				(0.667)	0.119*	0.014	-0.064	0.664***
SC	1.041	n/a	n/a					(1)	-0.083	-0.045	0.033
SG	1.036	n/a	n/a						(1)	0.005	0.080
YEA	1.039	n/a	n/a							(1)	-0.077
LLP	2.250	0.705	0.895								(1)

**Note:** TIC = teacher intercultural competence, TTL = teacher transformational leadership, TP = teaching performance, ISE = international student engagement, SC = student country, SG = student gender, YEA = length of student learning in years in university, LLP = student local language proficiency in the host country.  
 \* p-value < 0.05, \*\* p-value < 0.01, \*\*\* p-value < 0.001.  
 The square roots of the AVE are displayed in parentheses.

The results from the PLS-SEM estimation are reported in Figure 3.

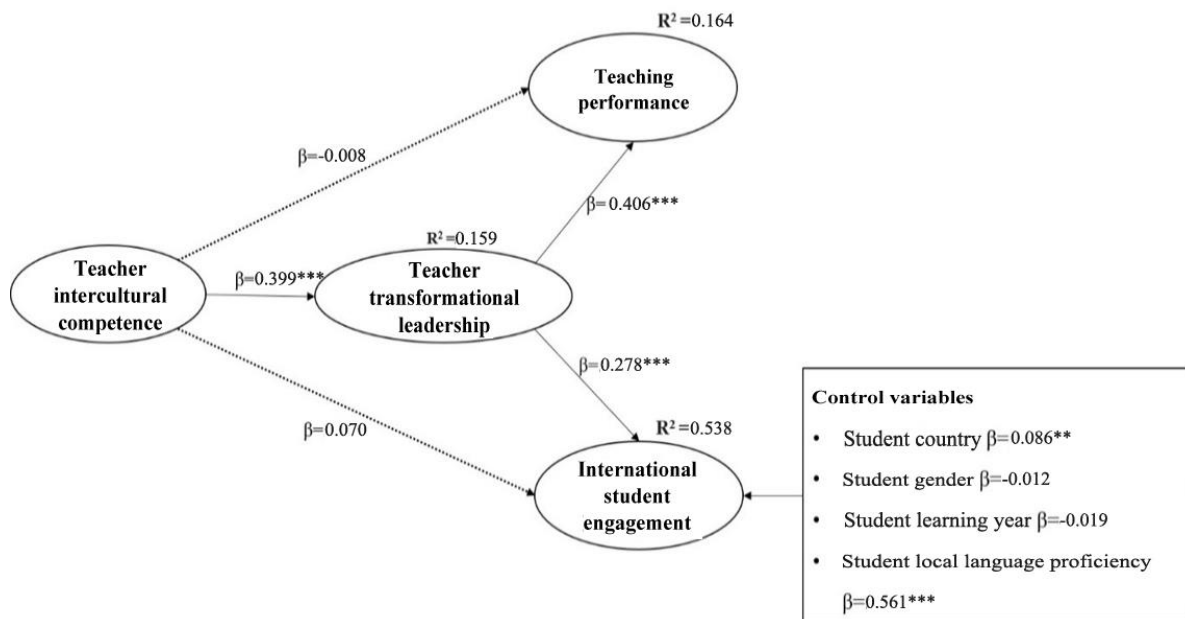


Figure 3. PLS results.

Note: \*\*\*  $P < 0.001$ , \*\*  $P < 0.01$ .

Standardized coefficients are reported. The solid lines represent a significant relationship.

Hypothesis 1 posits that teacher intercultural competence is positively associated with teacher transformational leadership. The result identified that the link between teacher intercultural competence and transformational leadership is statistically significant and positive ( $\beta = 0.399$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported.

Hypothesis 2 proposes that teacher intercultural competence is positively associated with teaching performance. However, the result revealed that the relationship between them is not statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.008$ ,  $P = 0.459$ ). Hence, hypothesis 2 is not supported.

Hypothesis 3 states that teacher intercultural competence is positively associated with international student engagement. However, the result demonstrated that the link between them is not statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.070$ ,  $P = 0.117$ ). So, hypothesis 3 is not supported.

Hypothesis 4 proposes that teacher transformational leadership is positively associated with teaching performance. The result confirmed that the relationship between them is positive and statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.406$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Hence hypothesis 4 is supported.

Hypothesis 5 predicts that teacher transformational leadership is positively associated with international student engagement. The result revealed that the link between them is positive and statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.278$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Thus, hypothesis 5 is supported.

Hypothesis 6 proposes that teacher transformational leadership mediates the association between teacher intercultural competence and teaching performance. The mediating effect was examined by analyzing the coefficient of the indirect effect suggested by MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, and Sheets (2002). The analysis indicated that teacher transformational leadership positively and significantly mediates the effect of teacher intercultural competence on teaching performance ( $\beta = 0.162$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Hence, hypothesis 6 is supported. Regarding the result that the direct association between teacher intercultural competence and teaching performance is not significant, the mediating effect of teacher transformational leadership is recognized as full mediation.

Hypothesis 7 states that teacher transformational leadership mediates the relationship between teacher intercultural competence and international student engagement. The coefficient of the indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.111$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) demonstrates that teacher transformational leadership positively and significantly mediates the effect of



teacher intercultural competence on international student engagement. Thus, hypothesis 7 is supported. Given that the direct relationship between teacher intercultural competence and international student engagement is not significant, the mediating effect of teacher transformational leadership is deemed as full mediation.

Regarding the control variables, the results indicate that student country ( $\beta = 0.086$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) and local language proficiency ( $\beta = 0.561$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) significantly affect international student engagement. The other control variables did not statistically significantly affect student engagement.

In addition to the PLS results combining the data from China and Thailand, the PLS results from China and Thailand were compared separately. Regardless of the specific  $\beta$  values, no significant difference was discovered in the results of the hypothesis analysis.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### 5.1. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of teacher intercultural competence on teacher transformational leadership, teacher performance, and international student engagement. Teacher transformational leadership was proposed to mediate the relationship between teacher intercultural competence, teaching performance, and international student engagement, drawing from social cognitive theory to elucidate this mediation process.

The findings support a significant positive association between teacher intercultural competence and teacher transformational leadership. However, teacher intercultural competence does not directly influence teaching performance and student engagement.

Teacher transformational leadership significantly and positively impacts both teaching performance and international student engagement. Importantly, the results indicate that teacher transformational leadership fully mediates the relationship between teacher intercultural competence and both teaching performance and student engagement.

Additionally, the analysis of the control variables revealed that students from non-Asian countries exhibited higher levels of engagement in class. Furthermore, international students with proficiency in the local language also demonstrated enhanced levels of engagement.

### 5.2. Discussion of Results and Academic Contributions

The results of the PLS estimation validated the hypothesis regarding the significant positive relationship between teacher intercultural competence and transformational leadership. This suggests that teachers with higher intercultural competence tend to exhibit a greater perceived level of transformational leadership by international students. This finding aligns with the proposition put forward by McCormick (2001) regarding the positive correlation between leaders' personal attributes and leadership behaviors. Furthermore, the outcome corroborates previous studies' findings on the beneficial impact of intercultural competence on transformational leadership (Cavazotte et al., 2012; Mencl et al., 2016; Sadri et al., 2011). It also aligns with research on personal traits and transformational leadership. For example, studies have demonstrated a positive contribution of multicultural personality to transformational leadership among expatriate managers across various countries (Van Woerkom & De Reuver, 2009) as well as the favorable influence of cultural intelligence on leadership performance among Chinese expatriates in Thailand (Guang & Charoensukmongkol, 2020). Transformational leadership is fostered through interpersonal skills such as negotiation and persuasion (Mencl et al., 2016). Additionally, characteristics of teacher intercultural competence, such as openness to intercultural uncertainty and intercultural empathy, have been shown to enhance transformational leadership qualities (Cavazotte et al., 2012; Mencl et al., 2016; Sadri et al., 2011).

However, the results from the PLS estimation did not significantly support the direct effects of teacher intercultural competence on teaching performance and international student engagement. The results contradicted

some of the previous findings, which support the significant contributions of teacher intercultural competence to teaching performance and student engagement. In particular, the result contradicted a prior study by [De Beuckelaer et al. \(2012\)](#), which revealed that teacher intercultural competence has a significant association with teaching performance and quality. The result also contradicted a previous study by [Robinson \(2012\)](#), which reported that teacher intercultural competence has a positive significant contribution to student engagement.

Nevertheless, teacher intercultural competence is still positively and significantly associated with teaching performance ( $r = 0.154$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) and international student engagement ( $r = 0.289$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) when considering the results of the correlations reported in [Table 2](#), although the direct effects of teacher intercultural competence on teaching performance and international student engagement are insignificant after incorporating the mediator of teacher transformational leadership. In this regard, the analysis of the mediating effect can explain such unsupported links. As the indirect effects demonstrated that the influence of teacher intercultural competence on teaching performance and international student engagement is fully mediated by teacher transformational leadership, it means that teacher transformational leadership serves as a bridge to transmit the contributions of teacher intercultural competence to teaching performance and international student engagement.

The findings confirm that teachers with high levels of transformational leadership exhibit better teaching performance, consistent with previous research by [Harvey et al. \(2003\)](#), which highlighted the positive impact of teacher transformational leadership components on teaching performance. This result also resonates with studies in business management, such as [Van Woerkom and De Reuver \(2009\)](#), which demonstrated a positive relationship between transformational leadership and performance among expatriate managers. Moreover, the direct effect of teacher transformational leadership on international student engagement is supported by the findings, aligning with existing research ([Balwant et al., 2019](#); [Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000](#); [Shin & Bolkan, 2021](#)), indicating that teacher transformational leadership enhances student engagement across various contexts. Thus, teaching performance and international student engagement are affirmed as desirable outcomes of teacher transformational leadership.

Furthermore, the results indicate that teacher transformational leadership mediates the relationship between teacher intercultural competence and teaching performance. This suggests that teachers with high intercultural competence are more likely to exhibit good teaching performance through the positive mediating role of transformational leadership, consistent with research by [Van Woerkom and De Reuver \(2009\)](#), which proposed the mediating role of transformational leadership between multicultural personality and performance. Similarly, the proposed mediating effect of teacher transformational leadership between teacher intercultural competence and international student engagement is supported. This implies that teachers with high intercultural competence are more likely to enhance international student engagement through the positive mediating influence of transformational leadership. Consequently, this study confirms the role of teacher transformational leadership in fully mediating the impact of teacher intercultural competence on intercultural teaching performance and international student engagement.

From a theoretical perspective, the results of this study are consistent with social cognitive theory ([McCormick, 2001](#); [Wood & Bandura, 1989](#)). Social cognitive theory explains the interactive relationships among personal cognitions and other personal factors, behaviors, and related outputs toward the external environment ([Wood & Bandura, 1989](#)). McCormick further employed social cognitive theory in leadership development and attempted to explain the relationships among leaders' personal cognitions, leadership behaviors, and related outcomes ([McCormick, 2001](#)). This study confirmed that teacher transformational leadership as one style of leadership behavior mediates the relationship between teacher intercultural competence as part of personal factors and the related educational outcomes in terms of teaching performance and international student engagement.

Overall, this study contributes to related academic research in several ways. First, it adds new insight on teaching performance and international student engagement through the effects of teacher intercultural

competence, particularly enriching the research contexts regarding international students from Asian countries as new destinations of international higher education. More importantly, this study clarified a mechanism by finding the mediator of teacher transformational leadership, which explains the formational process of how teacher intercultural competence boosts teaching performance and international student engagement. This finding contributes to the prior intercultural competence models that generally link personal intercultural competence to working performance or other outcome variables without considering a potential mediating factor that might provide in-depth insight into the effect of intercultural competence. Additionally, considering that the existing studies on intercultural competence lack the theoretical perspective to support the effects of intercultural competence, this study improves this shortage by applying a social cognitive theory perspective. Specifically, this theory helped to propose the mediating effect of teacher transformational leadership to explain why teacher intercultural competence is essential to promote international teaching performance and student engagement.

### *5.3. Practical Implications*

This study aims to provide implications for educational policymakers or university administrators to improve the level of intercultural teaching performance and international student learning outcomes from the perspective of teacher competence and professional development. Based on the results of this study, two aspects of implication are provided. First, given the (in)direct effects of teacher intercultural competence on teacher transformational leadership, teaching performance, as well as international student engagement, it is suggested that educational policymakers and university administrators should consider teacher intercultural competence as a significant part of teacher competence and professional development. To emphasize, although developing teacher intercultural competence has been mentioned by scholars (Cushner & Mahon, 2009; DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009; DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008), the process of successful implementation depends on a wide commitment and support from various stakeholders, consisting of educational policymakers, university administrators, and teachers themselves. Developing teacher intercultural competence is a long-term, consistent, and complex process based on the common pursuit and responsibility of both individuals and organizations (Barrett, 2013). Second, considering that teacher transformational leadership has a positive and significant mediating effect to transmit the contributions of teacher intercultural competence to teaching performance and international student engagement, teacher transformational leadership is suggested as a critical concern for teacher education and professional development. With the development of teacher leadership in different stages, teacher leadership is not only directed at school leaders but also refers to all teachers in the classroom (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). As one of the most significant teacher leadership styles, transformational leadership has been intensively discussed in classroom settings (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Pounder, 2014; Pounder, 2008). As teacher transformational leadership makes substantial contributions to the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom (Pounder, 2008), scholars should explore a systematic way to train and develop teacher transformational leadership (Pounder, 2014). As this study discusses the contributions of various teacher intercultural competence components to teacher transformational leadership, it could be a meaningful implication for teacher transformational leadership training.

### *5.4. Limitations and Future Research*

There are some limitations to this study. First, data were only collected from two representative universities in China and Thailand. The limited source of data collection may not reflect all the characteristics of the whole population. Second, the measurements of all variables in this study were self-reported by students, which may be distorted by the potential common bias. For instance, the response to student engagement and academic satisfaction may be affected by social desirability rather than honest answers. Third, due to Covid, some university courses were instructed online. The actual situation of teachers' intercultural competence and transformational leadership in real life may be difficult for students to fully perceive online.

Suggestions for future research are as follows. First, collecting data from more universities is suggested to improve the generalizability of the current research results. Second, double sources of data collection from both teachers and international students can be carried out to further check possible variations of the results. Third, comparison studies between onsite teaching and online teaching can be conducted to analyze the potential impact of informational technology.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The Ethical Committee of the International College, National Institute of Development Administration has granted approval for this study on 27 July 2023 (Ref. No. 028/2565).

**Transparency:** The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

**Competing Interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**Authors' Contributions:** Conceptualization, L.G. and M.L.; data collection and analysis, L.G.; writing, L.G., supervision, reviewing, and editing, M.L. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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