Beyond the "Asian Culture" Assumption: Intercultural Supervision and Academic Adaptation among Vietnamese PhD Students in Thailand

Nguyen Van Nguyen[1*]
[1]*Ho Chi Minh University of Banking, Vietnam*

Abstract The study examines how Vietnamese doctoral students engage in intercultural communication with Thai supervisors. Adopting a qualitative case study design with the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), the study investigates three dimensions: the communicative challenges encountered, students' interpretations and responses during critical supervision moments, and the developmental trajectory of their intercultural pragmatic competence. Semi-structured in-depth interviews focusing on 27 critical incidents were conducted with eight Vietnamese doctoral candidates in Thailand. Thematic analysis identified four interrelated themes: (1) negotiating unspoken expectations and power dynamics, (2) interpreting and responding to indirect feedback, (3) building relational trust as communicative capital, and (4) developing hybrid communicative strategies. The findings reveal intercultural supervision not as a clash of static national cultures, but as a dynamic process where students actively negotiate mismatched expectations regarding feedback directness, autonomy, and relational boundaries. This research demonstrates how students develop hybrid communicative styles through pragmatic negotiation rather than simple cultural assimilation, highlighting the interplay of student agency, relational trust, and context-specific interpretation.

Keywords: *Intercultural doctoral supervision, Intercultural pragmatic competence, Vietnamese doctoral students, Supervisory communication, Education*

[*]**Corresponding Author:**
Nguyen Van Nguyen
nguyennv@hub.edu.vn

Received: June 2, 2026
Revised: August 5, 2026
Accepted: September 1, 2026
First Published: September 17, 2026

© 2026 Nguyen.
This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

Internationalization of doctoral studies leads to the development of academic relations between supervisors and doctoral students from diverse linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. Doctoral supervision thus comprises not only advising on research but also negotiating expectations regarding autonomy, authority, feedback, disagreement, and academic roles (Baydarova et al., 2023; Moshtari & Schleper, 2025; Pinto, 2024). Such mismatches may lead to communication problems despite the

https://doi.org/10.22034/ijscl.2026.2089704.4699

common working language among supervisors and doctoral students. These problems are especially pertinent in the case of intercultural supervision, where students have to make sense of context-specific meanings and respond appropriately to culturally informed communicative behaviors. Prior work has already pointed out the importance of such concepts as power, face, and cultural expectations in doctoral supervision (Nguyen & Robertson, 2022; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014). However, as indicated in intercultural communication literature, there is a danger of considering national cultures as a system of homogeneous communication (Kecskes, 2014). In addition, kreng-jai, a Thai cultural schema associated with consideration for others and reluctance to impose on or cause discomfort to others, has been discussed as one factor shaping Thai interpersonal and intercultural communication practices (Hyun, 2021; Knutson et al., 2003).

Doctoral supervision is an ideal context to study intercultural pragmatic negotiation owing to the nature of the relationship between students and supervisors within doctoral education. Different from the brief and informal interactions of students in the classroom, supervision entails negotiations by students regarding such aspects as autonomy, authority, disagreement, feedback, and decision-making for a relatively long time. In this case, it is likely that misunderstandings in communication will have significant consequences both for academic performance and the identity of the researchers. Although there is some research regarding intercultural supervision (Ding & Devince, 2018; Hu et al., 2016; Wang & Byram, 2019; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014), very little has been done to identify critical moments of misunderstandings or negotiations of feedback in the context of the Southeast Asian PhD program. Indeed, there has been insufficient fine-grained examination of the process of interpretation and negotiation of such problems in practice. In particular, little is known about the interaction between Vietnamese PhD students and their Thai supervisors. This interaction is theoretically interesting because, although both cultures are situated within the ASEAN region and share certain sociocultural similarities, they differ in their educational backgrounds and institutional practices, creating a distinctive context for intercultural pragmatic negotiation.

The present study therefore examines the experiences of Vietnamese doctoral students in the context of intercultural supervision by Thai academics. Concentrating on the critical incidents related to expectations for supervision, feedback, disagreements, and relationship management, the study seeks answers to the following questions: (1) What intercultural communicative challenges do Vietnamese doctoral students experience in their supervisory relationships with Thai supervisors? (2) How do Vietnamese doctoral students interpret and respond to culturally situated supervisory practices during moments of disagreement or misunderstanding? (3) How do Vietnamese doctoral students describe developing and adapting their intercultural pragmatic competence throughout the supervisory process? By focusing on situated interaction rather than fixed differences between Vietnamese and Thai cultures, the study highlights pragmatic negotiation, relational trust, and student agency in intercultural doctoral supervision.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Doctoral Supervision as an Intercultural and Relational Practice

Doctoral supervision has been viewed as a complex relational process involving supervisors acting as academics, communicators, interpersonal actors, and developers. Previous literature indicated that there are certain issues associated with language, hierarchy, culture, and supervision in cross-cultural doctoral supervision (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014). In the case of international doctoral students, the relational elements of supervision can assume significance as the students carry varied learning experiences and expectations into their interactions with the supervisor (Kong et al., 2023; Pinto, 2024). Intercultural guidance may help international PhD students engage more effectively with their supervisors due to increased psychological safety and academic as well as social interactions (Kong et al., 2023). The quality of mentoring also depends on both professional and emotional aspects; hence, effective mentoring is not just about guiding but also about building trust and relationships (Zhao & Mao, 2024). Flexibility, empathy, accessibility, good communication skills, and acknowledgment of the students' previous learning experiences have been highlighted by students as attributes of an effective intercultural supervisor (Pinto, 2024).

These elements do not necessarily persist unchanged throughout the supervisory relationship. Earlier studies suggest that international doctoral students' expectations of supervision may involve guidance, feedback, formal meetings, and opportunities for interaction with supervisors (Hussain & Ali, 2019). Expectations may evolve through interactions over time, especially where there are differences between students and supervisors regarding roles and responsibilities (Baydarova et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2016; Wang & Byram, 2019). Students accustomed to more directive supervision might have a different understanding of what the stress on autonomy means in comparison to the expectations of the supervisor about the doctoral students' responsibility for their research. In addition, the same form of feedback might be interpreted differently depending on students' educational backgrounds and expectations (Wang & Li, 2011; Xu, 2017). According to Kisworo et al. (2026), international doctoral students do not accept supervisory practices unreflectively but rather interpret and negotiate them and reconstruct cultural meanings in the interpretation of supervisory feedback.

2.2. Power, Face, and Communication in Doctoral Supervision

The relational aspect of doctoral supervision is accompanied by an imbalance of power at the institutional level. For instance, supervisors often wield significant power regarding determining the course of research, progress in studies, evaluation, and access to academic resources for doctoral students. Power becomes particularly important when students need to challenge, criticize, or negotiate with their supervisors. The impact of supervisors' sources of power on the work environment of doctoral students is shown by Moshtari and Schleper (2025). More recently, the negotiation of power during doctoral supervision has also been considered, emphasizing the formal and interpersonal aspects of such negotiations (Berge & Kobayashi, 2025). Besides, recent research suggests that relational structures may also provide forms of academic and social scaffolding for international doctoral students (Huang et al., 2026). This power imbalance makes communication between supervisors and doctoral students a complex and consequential process. It is particularly relevant when applying Face-Negotiation Theory to examine communication in this situation. This theoretical perspective is valuable in examining communication where individuals try to protect not only informational but also identity-related aspects of interaction, that is, face (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Within this complex communicative process, feedback stands out as one of the most significant and recurrent sites of supervisor–student interaction. Feedback is especially essential since it not only evaluates students' academic achievements but also conveys expectations about academic standards and progression towards obtaining the degree. The qualitative synthesis of 86 studies conducted recently defines doctoral feedback as a dialogical and sense-making process where students can gain access to explicit and implicit academic standards (Bearman et al., 2024). Wang and Li (2011) noted that international doctoral students encountered different expectations in relation to the level of guidance and directness in the supervisory feedback. In a similar way, Xu (2017) explored how the structure of written feedback in intercultural doctoral supervision influenced the interpretation of supervisory comments by the doctoral student. As regards intercultural perspective, understanding of this kind of feedback can become even more challenging if there are different expectations between students and supervisors regarding directness and criticism (Kisworo et al., 2026).

2.3. Intercultural Adaptation and Hybrid Communicative Practices

Adaptation has traditionally been understood as becoming accustomed to new social or cultural settings (Ding & Devine, 2018). Recently, however, researchers pointed out that the process of adaptation was not homogeneous and did not follow a linear course. For instance, Liu et al. (2026) found that different adaptation paths existed among Mainland Chinese doctoral students studying in Hong Kong and that students were able to transition between their previous academic background and the new setting instead of exchanging one setting for another. Similar patterns have also been identified in other intercultural supervisor–subordinate relationships in Asia. For example, Lu and Habil (2024) noted that intercultural misunderstandings among Chinese doctoral candidates and their Malaysian supervisors are a result of several factors including language, social culture, research culture, gender, and communication styles. The results from the study support the notion that intercultural supervision should be considered an interaction process involving multiple dimensions rather than simply a national encounter.

The same is true in the context of intercultural supervision of doctoral students. Students might keep using some of the communicative strategies learned in their previous educational setting, while adapting others depending on their supervisors and situation-specific context. This leads to the development of flexible communicative strategies rather than to the total adaptation of the communication norms of the new environment (Kisworo et al., 2026).

According to intercultural pragmatics theory, adaptation will thus include learning how to interpret implicit meaning, how to modulate directness, how to seek clarification, how to disagree, and how to respond to feedback appropriately. More importantly, the process of adaptation also includes student agency. Nguyen and Robertson (2022) demonstrated how Vietnamese doctoral students were capable of displaying various kinds of agency, such as relational agency and non-confrontational resistance. These findings indicate that rather than giving up on their own communicative practices, students can find ways to adopt new strategies while combining and negotiating them with existing practices.

2.4. Thai Communicative Practices and Kreng-jai

In the Thai case, there exists an important cultural environment that enables the investigation of the negotiation of culturally based meaning in supervisor-supervisee communication. In prior studies (e.g., Hyun, 2021; Knutson et al., 2003), the connection between Thai interpersonal communication and social harmony, interpersonal consideration, and relationship-status sensitivity has been made. Kreng-jai is one of the most commonly used terms to describe these attitudes, and its meaning can be characterized by consideration for others, reluctance to impose, and sensitivity to the other person's feelings and status (Hyun, 2021). Previous analyses of Thai interpersonal communication have drawn on culturally specific notions related to consideration, reciprocity, relational equilibrium, and the management of interpersonal obligations (Fuangkajonsak, 2026; Hyun, 2021; Knutson et al., 2003).

However, kreng-jai should not be viewed as a static cultural rule that dictates how all Thai people communicate. This would result in the reproduction of cultural essentialism that intercultural pragmatics has been challenging. Rather, kreng-jai may be viewed as an emic cultural construct which becomes relevant in interpreting specific acts of communication (Hyun, 2021). Thus, for example, an apparently indirect answer or reluctance to impose on a senior academic may mean something completely different depending on the relationship, positions, previous experience, and immediate communicative situation of the interlocutors. While Vietnam and Thailand may have certain common regional and social features, such similarities should not be used to prove the existence of a unique Asian communication style. Rather than using the concept of kreng-jai as a deterministic explanation of Thai supervisors' behavior, the current study views it as one emic interpretive construct that may inform communication. The analysis focuses on whether participants themselves invoke such concepts or describe behaviors aligned with them, using it as an analytical tool to understand indirectness and relational sensitivity rather than a predictive cultural rule.

2.5. An Integrated Framework

To understand the intricacies involved in intercultural supervision, this research utilizes an integrative theoretical framework. The general approach taken is that of Intercultural Pragmatics (Kecskes, 2014, 2022), where meaning in intercultural discourse is not seen as a mere transfer from one cultural system to another; rather, it is jointly constructed in the process. This enables us to see any misunderstanding as an opportunity to learn pragmatically rather than culturally.

Face Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 2005) can be applied to identify relational objectives in such interaction. As part of a hierarchical interaction such as supervision, students may have communication strategies based on the desire to save face (e.g., being competent) as well as their supervisor's face (e.g., showing respect). Finally, Intercultural Adaptation Theories (e.g., Liu et al., 2026) can be used to describe the process of development over time, as adaptation is not a process of assimilation but rather a result of creating hybrid communication repertoires. This approach allows the study to explore supervision as an interaction where students apply pragmatic knowledge to achieve all the aforementioned objectives.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure that they had direct, sustained experience of intercultural doctoral supervision in Thailand. Selection criteria were: (1) Vietnamese nationality and L1 Vietnamese; (2) currently enrolled in a PhD program at a Thai university; (3) having a Thai primary supervisor (or co-supervisor) with whom they had regular supervision meetings; (4) having completed at least one full semester of supervision in Thailand to ensure sufficient exposure to supervisory communication practices; and (5) willingness to recount concrete supervision episodes in detail.

Eight Vietnamese doctoral students participated (5 females and 3 males; aged 28–40) across fields including social sciences, business, and engineering. All had completed coursework and were at the dissertation/thesis stage, which increased the likelihood of encountering feedback-intensive supervision episodes.

The unit of analysis was the critical incident, and saturation was evaluated at the level of coding incident-related data along with evaluation of the contribution of each particular interview. Within the 27 incidents, it was investigated whether the new incidents provided any substantial categories, properties, or relations related to the focus of the research. By the time of the last interviews, the new incidents did not provide any substantially different categories related to the mentioned themes. Therefore, the eighth interview served to check the stability of the emerging themes. It should be noted that this does not mean that no new data may emerge, but that the current data set possesses enough information power for the research questions.

3.2. Instruments

The primary tool used in this research was the semi-structured interview, based on the CIT method (Flanagan, 1954). This method was intended to induce interviewees to reflect on specific events rather than emotions. The interview guide consisted of eight open-ended questions, with additional probing questions used flexibly according to participants' accounts. Examples of elicitation questions asked include: "Do you remember any particular incident in which you had an interaction with your supervisor that was particularly difficult, confusing, or unexpected for you? What happened before this? What happened in the interaction? What was your interpretation of it at that time, and what was your reaction? What was the result?" The interview was conducted in Vietnamese.

3.3. Procedure

3.3.1. Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes) conducted in Vietnamese. In line with the CIT, participants were prompted to recall specific supervision episodes that were memorable and consequential rather than general impressions. For the purpose of this study, a reported experience qualified as a critical incident if it included: (a) a supervision-related communicative event perceived as difficult, confusing, unexpected, or involving disagreement/ feedback; (b) the participant's interpretation of what the supervisor meant in that moment; (c) the participant's immediate response (or decision not to respond); and (d) perceived consequences (e.g., revision decisions, relational effects, or later changes in communication strategy).

Across eight interviews, participants narrated 27 critical incidents that met the above criteria. All 27 incidents were included in the analysis. Each incident was summarized using a consistent analytic template: situation → participant interpretation → participant response → outcome → later reflection/adaptation. This incident-level structure enabled systematic comparison across cases and ensured that analysis remained grounded in participants' accounts of what happened in interaction.

3.3.2. Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in Vietnamese, then subjected to a process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process was recursive and comprised three

IN PRESS

phases. First, the incident-level coding was conducted on (i) the communicative problem (e.g., lack of clarity regarding autonomy expectations; indirect feedback; hesitancy in expressing disagreement), (ii) the participant's interpretation of the situation (e.g., direct interpretation vs. interpreting the message implied by indirect directive), and (iii) the participant's response strategy (e.g., silence, hedged questions, suggestion of alternative solutions, request for clarification). The theory of Intercultural Pragmatics sensitized the researcher to the interpretation of context-specific meanings by participants, especially indirect feedback, disagreement, clarifications, and variation in directness. Second, similar codes from different incidents were compared, categorized into larger patterns of meaning, and similarities, differences, and relationships between the patterns emerging were analyzed. The concept of Face Negotiation Theory was employed in the interpretive phase for the analysis of how the participants accounted for the management of their own academic face and that of their supervisors in cases of disagreements and face threats. Third, themes were checked against the entire collection of 27 incidents to make sure that they were internally consistent, distinct enough from each other, and well-supported by the incident-level data. Intercultural Adaptation Theory assisted in the analysis of variations experienced by participants from one incident to another with regard to pragmatic knowledge, directness, hedging, clarification, and disagreement. The final thematic structure consisted of four interconnected themes. This process was not linear; instead, the researcher went back and forth between the incidents, codes, candidate themes, and the research questions. Thematic analysis was done by the researcher in a reflexive manner. That is to say, coding and theme generation were done in an interpretive process in which the coder is involved in interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To add transparency to the process, the researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the entire process.

The analytic framework aligned with the three research questions in the following way: incidents were analyzed according to RQ1 (categories of communicative problems), RQ2 (interpretation and response in the critical incident), and RQ3 (changes that have taken place over time with regard to pragmatic awareness and strategy use). Critical quotes were translated from Vietnamese to English by the researcher; back-translation was done by an independent bilingual scholar in order to ensure that there would be no loss of meaning.

4. Results

Thematic analysis of the 27 critical incidents revealed four interconnected and often co-occurring themes that characterize the students' intercultural supervisory journey. Table 1 provides an overview of these themes.

Table 1
Overview of Emergent Themes

Theme	Definition
1. Negotiating Unspoken Expectations and Power Dynamics	Uncertainty on the part of the participants, followed by attempts to comprehend the implicit rules surrounding the students' autonomy and independence and their way of disagreeing.
2. Interpreting and Responding to Indirect Feedback	Learning how to interpret the pragmatically toned-down and indirect messages conveyed by the supervisor, from literal interpretations to those that convey communicative intentions.
3. Building Relational Trust as Communicative Capital	The significance of establishing relationships with their supervisors was considered extremely important by the participants because it created a safe space for them to communicate and negotiate.
4. Developing Hybrid Communicative Strategies	The emergence of a flexible repertoire of communication wherein students do not reject their previous norms but integrate these with new approaches (such as hedging and inquiry-based disagreements) for face management and goal achievement.

IN PRESS

4.1. Theme 1: Negotiating Unspoken Expectations and Power Dynamics

One problem arising in the stories of the participants was the lack of clarity about what doctoral students should do and what role supervisors should play. Some participants thought at the outset that the supervisors would guide them quite precisely, especially when they began working on their dissertations. Instead, the supervisors gave them some general direction and left them to figure out the rest. As one participant explained:

> *At first, I thought my supervisor would tell me more specifically what I should do. But he usually just gave me the main idea and said, 'You can decide'. I wasn't used to that, so I thought maybe he didn't want to guide me. Later, I realized that he expected me to be more independent.*

This distinction was often accompanied by uncertainty about the extent to which students felt able to challenge their supervisors. A few participants indicated that while they did not have any problem discussing research-related issues, they became more hesitant if there were any differences in opinion with their supervisor. As one participant noted:

> *At times, I really did not agree with my supervisor, but I did not know how to convey this feeling to him. I was afraid that saying 'I disagree' would seem impolite on my part. Hence, I usually tried to explain my point in an indirect manner.*

The issue, therefore, was not merely the institutional authority wielded by supervisors, but also how such power was conveyed through day-to-day interactions.

4.2. Theme 2: Interpreting and Responding to Indirect Feedback

Other issues related to differences in how the feedback was communicated. Participants thought that their supervisors should clearly state what was wrong and what had to be changed. Sometimes, however, they found their Thai supervisors' comments less straightforward than they had anticipated. One participant said:

> *During my literature review revision, my supervisor wrote in the margin: 'Maybe we can think if this model is completely necessary here'. I initially interpreted this as an open-ended intellectual musing and kept the section intact. In the following meeting, when she gently asked whether I had considered looking for other theoretical frameworks, I finally understood that her subtle remark was, in reality, a directive to omit that model. In Vietnam, feedback from senior scholars tends to be direct: 'Remove this' or 'Rewrite this part'. Here, supervisory authority is cushioned by politeness, which required me to learn to read between the lines*

Another participant had a similar experience:

> *While commenting on my research method, my supervisor did not indicate any flaw in the sampling I had chosen. Rather, he paused, smiled, and remarked, 'Are you sure this timeframe would be somewhat too tight to gather the data from three sources?' That is when I realized that the problem was not only about the timeline but the entire scope of my data gathering.*

As the participants became increasingly attuned to these more subtle forms of feedback, it became more important for them not just to listen to the words their supervisors said but also to listen for their tone, their repetition, how long they paused when talking about something, and how much attention they gave to certain aspects of their work.

The stories told by the participants also offer a limited connection to the notion of kreng-jai found in Thai communication studies. While the participants did not directly refer to kreng-jai when trying to describe the supervisory practice, some of the cases were related to the feedback that was seen by the participants as thoughtful and careful. For instance, it is mentioned that the supervisors use questions and soft suggestions instead of clear directives. Nonetheless, the current findings cannot be used to prove that the decision-making processes adopted by the supervisors were motivated by kreng-jai. The concept is therefore used here as an interpretive lens for understanding participants' accounts of indirectness and relational sensitivity rather than as a cultural explanation of individual behavior.

IN PRESS

4.3. Theme 3: Building Relational Trust as Communicative Capital

The participants also stressed how the nature of this relationship evolved with increased knowledge of their supervisors. At the beginning, the communication was quite formal and mainly related to their research work. However, when the relationship progressed, some participants reported having more informal conversations regarding family, food, activities, and other personal topics. In this case, the participant said:

> *We would only discuss my research project. After some time, my supervisor would start to ask me about my family and my weekend activities. We got to know each other better. After that, it was easy for me to ask any question even if I wasn't sure about it.*

Such an evolution of the relationship facilitated academic discussion in some cases. It reduced participants' fear of making mistakes and made them more comfortable seeking clarification. One participant expressed her feelings this way:

> *Initially, I was being very cautious as I didn't know my supervisor at all. Later, when we came closer to each other, I felt more comfortable.*

The accounts indicate that trust developed through repeated interactions, and there were concrete implications of this relationship-building on supervision. The stronger the relationship, the more likely students were to raise issues, ask questions, and voice dissenting opinions.

4.4. Theme 4: Developing Hybrid Communicative Strategies

As the supervisory relationship matured, participants developed refined pragmatic sensitivity, shifting from direct confrontation or passive silence to nuanced discursive strategies. For instance, one participant noted:

> *As my supervisor suggested a further quantitative variable that I thought would be superfluous, I did not confront him with an outright refusal such as 'I don't agree with this technique'. Rather, I posed my contrary view through hedging and inquiry: 'Can we also explore how this variable may affect our secondary question, or will this distract us from the main issue?' Thus, I could justify my limits in analysis while saving my supervisor's face completely.*

Furthermore, participants indicated that when responding to suggestions from their supervisors, they had changed the way they disagreed. Rather than rejecting a suggestion outright, they would propose alternatives and ask questions. A participant said that:

> *Instead of saying 'I do not agree with this', I would now perhaps ask 'Can we also consider this matter from other perspectives?' I believe that my message is clear; however, it's the manner in which I have conveyed the message that has changed.*

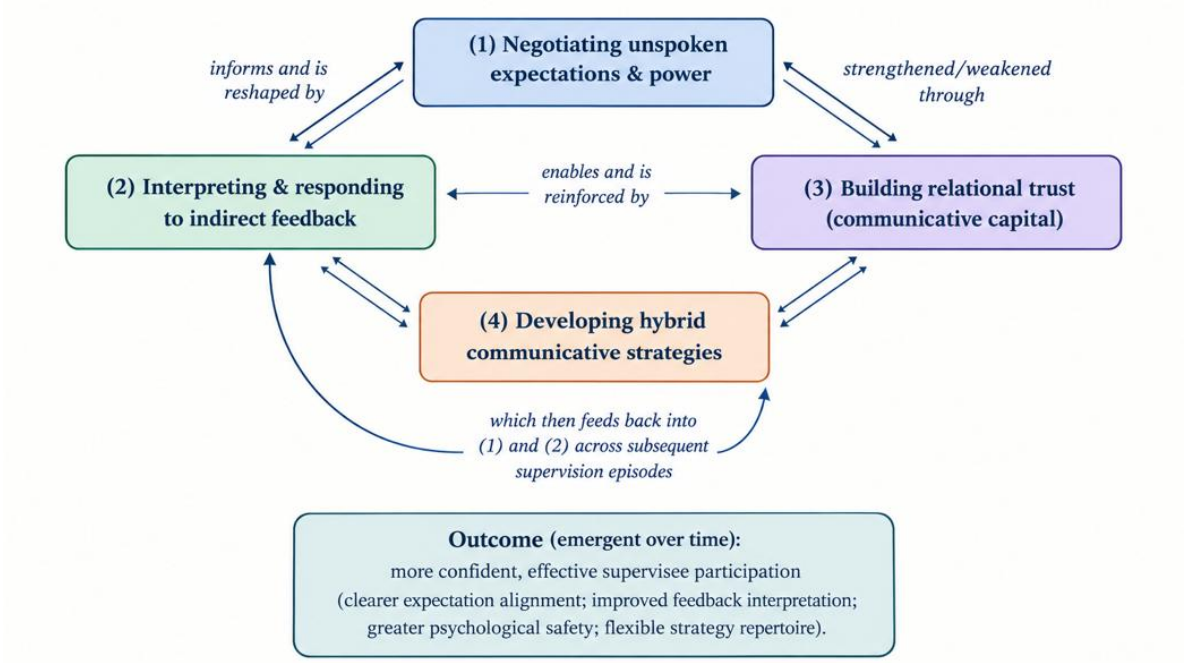
Across the incidents, hybrid communicative strategies were reported as a repertoire rather than a single technique. Participants described combining (a) content-directness (clearly stating academic concerns such as scope, feasibility, or methodological limits) with (b) form-indirectness (mitigation, hedging, and inquiry) to manage face and hierarchy while still advancing their academic goals. Concretely, this hybridity appeared in strategies such as reframing disagreement as a question ("Can we also explore…?"), proposing alternatives instead of refusals ("Could we consider another framework?"), and using clarification moves to resolve indirect directives (e.g., checking whether a suggestion was in fact a required revision). Crucially, participants emphasized that this was a process of integration, not replacement. They did not abandon their previous communication style entirely but learned to embed it within new pragmatic frames. For instance, one participant mentioned learning how to add a softener before asking a direct question, a practice she adopted after observing her Thai colleagues. In participants' accounts, these hybrid strategies reduced relational tension, increased the likelihood of productive dialogue, and enabled them to participate more agentically in decision-making without presenting themselves as confrontational.

IN PRESS

On the whole, the findings suggest a change in communication style from uncertainty to confidence. At first, participants had certain problems with fulfilling the implicit criteria related to supervision, criticism, and disagreement. However, they gradually learned how to interpret the communicative messages of their supervisors, how to develop their relationships with them, and even how to communicate differently. This was not just an adjustment to Thai culture. Instead, they seem to have created new models of communication due to their relationships with particular supervisors. Figure 1 demonstrates the model of intercultural pragmatic negotiation in doctoral supervision.

Figure 1

A Model of Intercultural Pragmatic Negotiation in Doctoral Supervision



Note. The arrows indicate a dynamic, non-linear process. Components interact bidirectionally and may be activated in different sequences depending on the incident context.

The model was derived by comparing the 27 incidents using the analytic chain (situation → interpretation → response → outcome → adaptation). Across incidents, participants repeatedly described how uncertainty about expectations (Theme 1) shaped how they interpreted mitigated feedback (Theme 2); how trust and relational safety (Theme 3) influenced whether they sought clarification or voiced concerns; and how newly adopted hybrid strategies (Theme 4) altered subsequent interactions, often reducing ambiguity in later episodes. The model therefore represents a recursive pattern observed in participants' accounts rather than a fixed stage sequence.

5. Discussion

The current study examines the issue of intercultural communication of Vietnamese doctoral students in their interactions with Thai supervisors. The results revealed that the problems arose due to expectations of the supervisor, feedback, conflicts, and relationship management. With increased experience of interactions, the participants improved their ability to read between the lines, manage face and power, and modify their behaviors accordingly. The adaptation process was not related to learning the rules of communication of the host culture only. Instead, the participants created flexible communicative strategies that included both the elements of their prior experience and new pragmatic competence. Thus, intercultural doctoral supervision can be seen not as adaptation from one national culture to another, but as an ongoing pragmatic negotiation within a developing relationship with the supervisor.

Notably, the results have direct relevance for the "Asian culture" presupposition. There is no evidence in the participants' reports for the idea that Vietnamese students confront a uniform Thai/Asian style of communication and slowly adapt to it. On the contrary, out of 27 critical incidents, it is clear that there was much diversity in how the students made sense of the messages from their supervisors, reacted to conflict, and adapted their communication behavior. The same kind of situation might lead to different outcomes, based on the specific supervisor-student dyad, perceived importance of the particular exchange, and growing understanding of what was expected of the students. In this sense, the results challenge the oversimplification of the notion of Asian communication. While terms such as hierarchy, relational sensitivity, indirectness, and kreng-jai might serve as valuable tools for interpretation, they should not be viewed as static features common to all Asians or Thais. Rather than a particular communicative feature, what became visible through the incidents was a dynamic process of situational pragmatic negotiation in which the students responded to specific communicative features, assessing the relational and educational implications of the communication, and adapting their behavior to these consequences. In this sense, the research extends the analysis of culture as a variable to a theory of interaction.

Research question one focused on issues of communication. From the findings about mismatch in the expectation of autonomy and directness of feedback (Themes 1 & 2), previous studies have been confirmed (Kisworo et al., 2026; Pinto, 2024). However, this study adds an important dimension by suggesting that these difficulties are not best understood as fixed cultural differences, but as interactional and pragmatic problems that participants worked to resolve through situated interpretation, relational management, and strategy adjustment across supervision episodes. The tendency to avoid direct disagreement reflects the importance of power relations (Moshtari & Schleper, 2025), which, in this case, is managed through face-saving strategies (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Regarding the second research question, it was discovered that students were able to learn how to make sense of indirect feedback through learning about pragmatic indicators, based on their understanding of relational context (Themes 2 & 3). Although participants did not explicitly use the term kreng-jai, several accounts described supervisory feedback as politeness-cushioned, non-imposing, and delivered through mitigated questions or gentle suggestions (e.g., "Maybe we can think…," "Are you sure…?"). In this study, kreng-jai is therefore treated only as a contextual interpretive lens, not as a causal explanation of supervisors' communicative behavior. That is, the findings do not demonstrate that Thai supervisors communicated in particular ways because of kreng-jai; rather, participants' sense-making indicates that relational sensitivity and indirectness were salient interactional features that students had to interpret in context. This stance aligns with intercultural pragmatics in viewing meaning as jointly constructed and locally negotiated, while avoiding cultural essentialism or deterministic national-culture explanations.

The third research question focused on the issue of developing pragmatic competence. One of the significant contributions of this study in relation to the research question is the idea of "hybrid communicative strategies" (Theme 4). This idea builds on Liu et al.'s (2026) account of non-linear adaptation by clarifying what kind of hybridity is involved. It is not only a combination of styles, but rather a form of pragmatic bricolage in which students creatively combine the communicative strategies from their L1 context (such as direct expression of content) with the new strategies from the L2 context (such as the indirectness of form or hedging).

The findings have practical implications for doctoral students, supervisors, and universities, and these implications can be linked directly to the four themes. For doctoral students, Theme 1 suggests the value of initiating early meta-communication about supervision norms, explicitly asking what counts as independence, how decisions are made, and what forms of disagreement are acceptable. Theme 2 indicates that students may benefit from learning and practicing strategies for handling indirect feedback, such as confirmation checks (for example, "Do you mean that I should remove this section?"), summarizing the supervisor's message at the end of meetings, and requesting examples of "what a strong version looks like". Theme 3 emphasizes that relational trust is not just social but communicative capital as well, since relationship building could enhance psychological safety and lessen the perception of risks involved in posing questions. In Theme 4, students should be able to use hybrid approaches to

ensure clarity while modifying their interpersonal style (hedge proposals, disagreement through questioning, and offering alternatives). For supervisors, Theme 1 implies that visibility of expectations can avoid undue uncertainty (for instance, boundaries of roles and autonomy, and structure of meetings). Theme 3 indicates that small relational practices (brief informal talk, reassurance that questions are welcome, acknowledging effort) can create a safer interactional climate for feedback dialogue. Theme 4 points to the usefulness of recognizing and validating students' emerging hybrid communicative moves (e.g., treating hedged disagreement as engagement rather than disrespect). For universities and graduate programs, the themes jointly suggest that support should go beyond generic intercultural training. Programs can implement (i) pre-supervision alignment workshops that address autonomy, authority, and disagreement (Theme 1); (ii) feedback literacy sessions that include interpreting indirect feedback and practicing clarification talk (Theme 2); (iii) structures that facilitate trust-building interaction such as writing groups, supervisory triads, retreats, and regular informal research seminars (Theme 3); and (iv) English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP)-oriented communication support that models flexible pragmatic strategies for negotiation, not just language accuracy (Theme 4). Together, these interventions can improve supervision quality by reducing ambiguity, supporting feedback dialogue, and enabling agentic participation.

This study has several limitations. First of all, only students' retrospective views were investigated, so definitive conclusions about communicative intent might not be made. A dyadic research design including supervisors would offer a more comprehensive view. Furthermore, the thematic analysis in this study was carried out by one researcher, and there was no other independent coder to examine the identified themes. Even though a reflexive journal was used to record all analytic decisions, interpretation could be influenced by the researcher's own position. In future studies, the involvement of several researchers in the discussion of the coding process might be considered as an alternative approach. Moreover, the cross-sectional research design provides only a snapshot of the phenomenon at one point in time, whereas a longitudinal design could help trace the process of developing pragmatic competence. Nonetheless, the findings offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of students in a South-South supervisory context, highlighting the complex interplay of pragmatic negotiation, student agency, and relational development. Future research could explore these dynamics in different disciplinary contexts or investigate the role of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) as a potential mediating factor in these interactions.

Acknowledgements

The author used an AI-based tool solely for linguistic polishing and generating the figure. The ideas, interpretations, and analyses presented in this paper are entirely original and the sole responsibility of the author.

Disclosure Statement

The author claims no conflict of interest.

Funding

The research was funded by Ho Chi Minh University of Banking, Vietnam.

Data Availability

The interview data cannot be publicly available because they contain potentially identifiable information concerning the participants' doctoral study experiences and supervisory relationships. Anonymized excerpts may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and confidentiality restrictions.

Ethics Declaration

All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and provided informed consent before participating. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they

IN PRESS

could withdraw from the study without penalty. Identifying information was removed or anonymized in the reporting of the findings to protect participants' confidentiality.

References

Baydarova, I., Collins, H. E., & Barron, D. (2023). Formation, negotiation, and alignment of doctoral student and supervisors' expectations: A co-constructed narrative. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 47*(10), 1362–1374. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2256683

Bearman, M., Tai, J., Henderson, M., Esterhazy, R., Mahoney, P., & Molloy, E. (2024). Enhancing feedback practices within PhD supervision: A qualitative framework synthesis of the literature. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *49*(5), 634–650. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2024.2307332

Berge, M., & Kobayashi, S. (2025). Joking aside: Negotiating power structures in doctoral supervision. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *48*(2), 202–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2025.2492001

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Ding, Q., & Devine, N. (2018). Exploring the supervision experiences of Chinese overseas PhD students in New Zealand. *Knowledge Cultures*, *6*(1), 62–78.

Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin*, *51*(4), 327–358. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0061470

Fuangkajonsak, W. (2026). Debt-credit equilibrium in Thai and Japanese communication patterns within the context of speech events involving offers. *Language and Linguistics*, *44*(1), 180–206. https://doi.org/10.64731/langling.v44i1.286545

Hu, Y., van Veen, K., & Corda, A. (2016). Pushing too little, praising too much? Intercultural misunderstandings between a Chinese doctoral student and a Dutch supervisor. *Studying Teacher Education, 12*(1), 70–87. https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2015.1111204

Huang, Y., Bano, S., Shi, A., Wang, Z., & Jing, X. (2026). Beyond power asymmetry: The Shimen system as relational scaffolding for international doctoral students' collective academic identity in China. *Journal of International Students, 16*(9), 11–36. https://doi.org/10.32674/ptvk6864

Hussain, M., & Ali, H. (2019). How to supervise international PhD students: A narrative inquiry study. *International Journal of Higher Education, 8*(5), 143–156.

Hyun, Y. (2021). Different cultural conceptualizations underlying intercultural business communication problems between Thais and Koreans. *International Journal of Language and Culture, 7*(2), 215–240. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijolc.18016.hyu

Kecskes, I. (2014). *Intercultural pragmatics*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199892655.001.0001

Kecskes, I. (2022). *The Cambridge handbook of intercultural pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.

Kisworo, A. Y., Nieminen, J. H., & Boud, D. (2026). Feedback dialogue in intercultural doctoral supervision. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2026.2621273

Knutson, T. J., Komolsevin, R., Chatiketu, P., & Smith, V. R. (2003). A cross-cultural comparison of Thai and US American rhetorical sensitivity: Implications for intercultural communication effectiveness. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *27*(1), 63–78. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(02)00060-3

Kong, L., Ma, Z., Li, X., & Kim, H. (2023). Interactions between international doctoral students studying in China and their advisors: The role of intercultural adaptive guidance and psychological safety. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *96*, Article 101872. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2023.101872

Liu, Y., Wang, Z., & Dai, K. (2026). Reframing intercultural supervision: Understanding mainland Chinese doctoral students' adaptation experiences in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *111*, Article 102368. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2026.102368

Lu, X., & Habil, H. (2024). "Why doesn't he care about me?" Intercultural misunderstandings between Chinese doctoral students and their Malaysian supervisors. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, *24*(12), 37-51. https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v24i12.7464

Moshtari, M., & Schleper, M. C. (2025). Supervisors' power sources and doctoral students' working conditions: A qualitative study of doctoral supervision in a developing country. *Studies in Higher Education*, *50*(9), 2030–2047. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2408667

Nguyen, M. N., & Robertson, M. J. (2022). International students enacting agency in their PhD journey. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *27*(6), 814–830. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1747423

Pinto, S. (2024). International doctoral students' perspectives on the qualities of supervisors: Expectations for intercultural supervision in Portuguese higher education. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, *19*(1), 46–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/17454999231221631

Ting-Toomey, S. (2005). The matrix of face: An updated face-negotiation theory. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 71–92). Sage.

Wang, L., & Byram, M. (2019). International doctoral students' experience of supervision: A case study in a Chinese university. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *49*(3), 255–274. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2018.1518405

Wang, T., & Li, L. Y. (2011). "Tell me what to do" vs. "guide me through it": Feedback experiences of international doctoral students. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, *12*(2), 101–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787411402438

Winchester-Seeto, T., Homewood, J., Thogersen, J., Jacenyik-Trawoger, C., Manathunga, C., Reid, A., & Holbrook, A. (2014). Doctoral supervision in a cross-cultural context: Issues affecting supervisors and candidates. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *33*(3), 610–626. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.841648

Xu, L. (2017). Written feedback in intercultural doctoral supervision: A case study. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *22*(2), 239–255. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1237483

Zhao, B., & Mao, J. (2024). Exploring the supervisor-student relationship of international doctoral students coming to China from the perspective of recognition theory. *Journal of Modern Education*, *3*, 90–99.

IN PRESS