

Safe-Space Messages and Psychological Safety: Enhancing Intercultural Competencies in Multicultural Higher Education Classrooms

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Abstract

This research investigated the impact of safe-space messages on psychological safety, student engagement, and intercultural competence in multicultural higher education classrooms. Specifically, it aimed to (1) examine how safe-space messages could be systematically integrated into pedagogical practices to enhance students' psychological safety, inclusiveness, and intercultural engagement, and (2) compare the effectiveness of safe-space framing versus traditional trigger warnings in promoting trust, engagement, and perceptions of instructional quality. A mixed-methods design was employed, involving 120 undergraduate students and 10 instructors from Thai–international joint programs during the 2024 academic year. Quantitative data were collected through psychological safety scales, intercultural competence self-assessments, and engagement surveys, while qualitative insights were obtained via semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The findings indicated that safe-space messages significantly enhanced psychological safety ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.47$), trust in instructors, and perceptions of instructional quality compared with trigger warnings. Intercultural competence emerged as a moderating factor, amplifying students' ability to navigate cultural differences, interpret classroom interactions effectively, and engage collaboratively with peers. Engagement was found to mediate the relationship between psychological safety and learning outcomes, particularly in reflective dialogue, critical thinking, and peer collaboration. Qualitative analyses revealed that students experienced a greater sense of belonging, greater confidence in expressing diverse viewpoints, and greater trust in instructors when safe-space messages were consistently applied.

In contrast, instructors reported smoother classroom interactions and reduced misunderstandings in multicultural contexts. Overall, this study contributed to both theory and practice by proposing a conceptual model that illustrates how safe-space messages—reinforced by intercultural competence—function as a systematic pedagogical tool to foster psychological safety, engagement, and collaborative learning in culturally diverse classrooms. The results suggested that higher education instructors could deliberately adopt safe-space pedagogy to create inclusive, equitable, and psychologically secure learning environments, thereby enhancing both cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes across multicultural educational settings.

Keywords: Safe-Space Messages; Psychological Safety; Intercultural Competencies; Multicultural Higher Education Classrooms

Introduction

In the rapidly globalizing context of higher education, classrooms have become increasingly multicultural, requiring both instructors and students to navigate complex intercultural dynamics. This shift has amplified the importance of psychological safety as a foundation for effective learning, particularly in culturally diverse environments where differences in norms, communication styles, and expectations may otherwise inhibit participation and limit meaningful engagement (Edmondson, 1999; Hofstede et al., 2010). As higher education institutions continue to expand their cultural diversity, the demand for pedagogical strategies that intentionally foster inclusivity, trust, and intercultural competence has grown correspondingly.

Safe-space messages—explicit verbal or written cues that articulate classroom norms, encourage mutual respect, and reduce social anxiety—have emerged as a promising pedagogical approach. Prior research indicates that such messages can enhance students' willingness to engage in dialogue, particularly when addressing culturally sensitive or controversial issues (Banks, 2015; Sue et al., 2019). Beyond their immediate effects, safe-space messages intersect with intercultural competence. This key capacity enables students to interpret and respond effectively to diverse perspectives, thereby amplifying the positive impact of inclusive pedagogy on trust, engagement, and collaboration (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Bennett, 2013).

The existing literature provides important groundwork but remains fragmented in scope and in its empirical validation. Studies such as Arao and Clemens (2013) and Cabrera et al. (2020) have conceptualized safe-space pedagogy primarily in Western higher education contexts, focusing on discourse management rather than its measurable psychological effects. Meanwhile, Carnevale et al. (2021) and Bhute et al. (2021) have demonstrated that psychologically safe environments foster participation and reduce communication apprehension among international students. However, few have examined how safe-space messages specifically function as an instructional framing mechanism that operationalizes psychological safety in multicultural classrooms. Furthermore, Lee and Ciftci (2014) and Newman et al. (2017) have linked intercultural competence with learning engagement. However, empirical research integrating intercultural competence as a moderating or synergistic factor in safe-space pedagogy remains limited.

In Asian and Thai higher education contexts, multicultural learning environments have expanded significantly, yet localized research on inclusive pedagogy remains sparse (Chaisanit & Petchsri, 2022; Ratanapojnarn, 2023). Many Thai international programs adopt globalized curricula yet lack explicit frameworks for fostering intercultural dialogue or psychological safety among diverse learners. This absence of contextually grounded evidence limits instructors' ability to design pedagogical interventions that effectively address cultural sensitivities and promote equitable participation.

Thus, a critical knowledge gap exists regarding how to systematically integrate safe-space messages into classroom pedagogy to enhance psychological safety, trust, engagement, and intercultural competence—particularly in multicultural higher education settings in Thailand and Asia. While theoretical discussions highlight their potential, empirical models demonstrating causal or mediating relationships between these constructs are scarce.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to address both theoretical and practical gaps by proposing and empirically testing a conceptual model that situates safe-space messages as an integrative pedagogical intervention. By examining how safe-space practices, reinforced by intercultural competence, contribute to psychological safety and engagement, this study advances scholarly understanding of multicultural pedagogy. It provides evidence-based

guidance for higher education instructors seeking to cultivate inclusive, trust-based, and culturally responsive learning environments.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate how safe-space messages can be systematically integrated into pedagogical practices in multicultural higher education classrooms in order to enhance students' psychological safety, sense of inclusiveness, and intercultural engagement.

2. To examine the comparative effectiveness of safe-space framing versus traditional trigger warnings, with particular attention to their impact on student trust, engagement, intercultural competence development, and perceptions of instructional quality in diverse learning environments.

Literature Review

Safe-Space Messages

The pedagogical construct of safe-space messages stems from critical pedagogy and multicultural education, emphasizing the need for learning environments that affirm students' dignity, encourage openness, and legitimize diverse voices (Boostrom, 1998; Arao & Clemens, 2013). In contrast to trigger warnings, which primarily caution about potentially distressing material, safe-space messages are proactive affirmations embedded in instructional framing that cultivate psychological safety, inclusivity, and dialogic engagement (Cabrera et al., 2020).

The theoretical basis derives from psychological safety theory (Edmondson, 1999), which asserts that individuals are more likely to take interpersonal risks—such as sharing experiences, challenging ideas, or admitting uncertainty—when they perceive the environment as safe from ridicule or negative judgment. In multicultural higher education contexts, safe-space pedagogy serves as a framing mechanism that guides engagement with sensitive themes (e.g., race, gender, cultural identity) to transform discomfort into productive learning rather than avoidance (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

Furthermore, safe-space messages align with intercultural competence frameworks (Deardorff, 2006), which highlight openness, empathy, and cultural self-awareness as essential for effective communication across diverse groups. From this perspective, safe-space messages are not only affective supports but also structured pedagogical tools that foster intercultural dialogue, trust, and collaborative knowledge construction.

Empirical research confirms the positive effects of safe-space framing. Carnevale et al. (2021) demonstrated that students exposed to safe-space messages reported higher levels of psychological safety, trust, and willingness to participate in classroom discussions. Similarly, Bhute et al. (2021) found that safe-space messages significantly reduced communication apprehension among international students, thereby increasing participation equity in multicultural classrooms.

Comparative studies also reveal that safe-space messages outperform traditional trigger warnings. While trigger warnings can unintentionally encourage avoidance behaviors (Banks, 2015; Cabrera et al., 2020), safe-space framing promotes engagement with challenging material by normalizing discomfort as part of the learning process. This approach not only enhances student engagement and instructional trustworthiness but also correlates with measurable gains in intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Lee & Ciftci, 2014).

Overall, findings suggest that safe-space messages operate as pedagogical signals of inclusivity and trust, enabling students from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage critically while maintaining psychological security. This framing strategy thus represents a crucial element of inclusive pedagogy in multicultural higher education classrooms.

Psychological Safety in Learning Environments

Psychological safety, first conceptualized by Edmondson (1999), refers to a shared belief that a learning or working environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. At its core, it emphasizes mutual respect and trust, enabling individuals to express ideas, raise questions, and make mistakes without fear of humiliation, rejection, or adverse consequences. In educational contexts, psychological safety aligns closely with constructivist and socio-cultural learning theories (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998), which highlight the significance of open dialogue, collaboration, and critical engagement for deep learning. Within multicultural classrooms, psychological safety intersects with intercultural competence frameworks (Deardorff, 2006), as it encourages openness to diverse perspectives, supports meaningful cross-cultural interaction, and facilitates inclusive pedagogical practices. Explicit pedagogical strategies, such as safe-space messages, have been identified as effective mechanisms for fostering psychological safety, enhancing learners' willingness to participate, and promoting trust in instructors (Banks, 2015; Deardorff, 2006).

Empirical studies consistently indicate that psychologically safe environments positively impact learning outcomes and group performance. Edmondson (1999, 2019) demonstrated that such environments foster voice behaviors, collaboration, and adaptive learning. In higher education, psychological safety has been linked to increased class participation, deeper critical reflection, and greater engagement in intercultural dialogue (Carnevale et al., 2021; Bhute et al., 2021). Recent research in multicultural classroom contexts further reveals that psychological safety reduces communication apprehension, enhances students' perceptions of fairness and inclusivity, and strengthens trust in instructors (Carmeli et al., 2010; Carnevale et al., 2021). Moreover, when psychological safety is embedded in pedagogical framing—through strategies such as safe-space messages—students exhibit greater resilience and confidence in addressing sensitive or controversial topics (Cabrera et al., 2020). Collectively, these findings underscore that psychological safety functions as a critical mediator between inclusive pedagogical practices and enhanced learning outcomes, intercultural competence, and equitable participation in diverse educational environments.

Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is defined as the combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural contexts (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Bennett, 2013). In higher education, developing intercultural competence is essential for students in Thai international or other multicultural learning environments, as it equips learners to navigate diverse perspectives with cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Theoretical frameworks emphasize that intercultural competence encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, including cultural knowledge, empathy, flexibility, and the ability to engage respectfully with others (Deardorff, 2006; Banks, 2015). Pedagogical strategies such as experiential learning, reflective exercises, and structured intercultural dialogue have been shown to enhance both students' cognitive understanding of cultural diversity and their affective engagement in the classroom. When instructors deliberately cultivate intercultural competence, they help create psychologically safe and inclusive learning environments that encourage student participation and meaningful collaboration in multicultural settings.

Empirical research demonstrates that students with higher levels of intercultural competence exhibit greater openness to diverse perspectives, improved cross-cultural communication, and enhanced collaborative learning outcomes (Deardorff, 2006; Banks, 2015). Studies within multicultural classroom contexts show that targeted interventions—such as reflective exercises, dialogue facilitation, and experiential learning activities—positively affect students' engagement, confidence, and willingness to participate in culturally diverse discussions (Bennett, 2013; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Moreover, the intentional integration of intercultural competence development by instructors synergizes with pedagogical framing strategies, including safe-space messages, reinforcing psychological safety and trust among students. Collectively, these findings suggest that intercultural competence functions not only as a facilitator of effective cross-cultural interaction but also as a mediator linking inclusive pedagogy with improved learning outcomes and equitable participation in diverse educational environments.

Multicultural Higher Education Classrooms

Multicultural higher education classrooms have become increasingly prevalent in globalized academic environments, bringing together students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds (Banks, 2015). Multicultural education emphasizes equity, inclusion, and respect for cultural diversity, aiming to reduce prejudice and promote cross-cultural understanding, not only through curriculum content but also via classroom dynamics, teaching methods, and assessment practices that accommodate diverse learners (Gay, 2018).

The conceptual foundation of multicultural classrooms integrates several key theories. Intercultural competence theory underscores the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective and appropriate communication across cultural contexts (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Social constructivism highlights collaborative learning shaped by cultural and social contexts, emphasizing the co-construction of knowledge through interaction and dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978). Psychological safety theory posits that learners perform and engage most effectively when they perceive the environment as safe for expressing ideas without fear of judgment or reprisal (Edmondson, 1999). Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how pedagogical framing, classroom interactions, and institutional practices shape students' experiences in multicultural higher education settings.

Pedagogical sensitivity is crucial in such contexts. Instructors who apply inclusive communication strategies, including safe-space messages, foster trust, dialogue, and engagement among diverse learners (Carnevale et al., 2021; Deardorff, 2006). Conversely, approaches like trigger warnings, while well-intentioned, may inadvertently encourage avoidance behaviors and limit meaningful engagement with challenging material (Cabrera et al., 2020). Effective multicultural pedagogy balances acknowledging students' vulnerabilities with promoting active participation in complex or sensitive discussions.

Empirical studies indicate that multicultural higher education classrooms present both challenges and opportunities for learning. Students from culturally diverse backgrounds frequently encounter barriers such as differences in language proficiency, educational traditions, and classroom norms, which may inhibit participation and increase anxiety, especially in discussions of sensitive or controversial topics (Andrade, 2010; Huang & Brown, 2009).

At the same time, such classrooms offer rich opportunities for transformative learning. Research demonstrates that when instructors create psychologically safe and inclusive environments, students exhibit higher engagement, empathy, and intercultural awareness (Newman et al., 2017; Lee & Ciftci, 2014). Explicit pedagogical framing that emphasizes inclusivity—such as structured safe-space messages, reflective exercises, and intercultural

dialogue—enhances trust in instructors, fosters collaborative peer interactions, and supports the development of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Banks, 2015; Bhute et al., 2021).

For instance, studies in Thai international university contexts have shown that structured intercultural dialogue and reflective assignments improve both cognitive understanding of cultural diversity and affective openness toward peers. Safe-space messaging significantly reduces participation anxiety among international students, resulting in more balanced and equitable classroom discussions (Bhute et al., 2021). Collectively, these findings support the theoretical assertion that psychological safety, intercultural competence, and inclusive pedagogical framing are mutually reinforcing, creating conditions that enhance learning outcomes in multicultural higher education classrooms.

Synthesis of Literature and Theoretical Framework

In summary, a synthesis of the literature indicates that effective multicultural pedagogy necessitates deliberate attention to psychological safety, intercultural competence, and pedagogical framing strategies. Safe-space messages emerge as a pivotal mechanism for fostering inclusive, equitable, and engaging classroom environments, enabling students from diverse cultural backgrounds to navigate complex academic, social, and cultural interactions with confidence. The integration of these constructs—psychological safety, intercultural competence, and safe-space pedagogical framing—provides a coherent and robust framework for enhancing learning outcomes, promoting trust, and facilitating collaborative engagement in Thai–international and other multicultural higher education settings.

Synthesizing the reviewed literature, it becomes evident that psychological safety, pedagogical framing, and intercultural competence are mutually reinforcing constructs in multicultural education. Psychological safety serves as the foundation for active student participation, fostering confidence and a willingness to engage with peers and instructors. Pedagogical framing, particularly through the use of safe-space messages, establishes explicit norms and structures that promote inclusivity, respect, and constructive dialogue. Intercultural competence equips both students and instructors with the cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills necessary to navigate cultural differences effectively, mitigating potential misunderstandings and enhancing collaborative learning. Together, these interrelated factors underscore the critical importance of intentional instructional design and inclusive communication strategies. By implementing safe-space messages, systematically promoting intercultural competence, and designing supportive pedagogical frameworks, educators can cultivate trust, encourage engagement, and facilitate critical reflection, thereby improving both affective and cognitive outcomes for learners in culturally diverse classrooms.

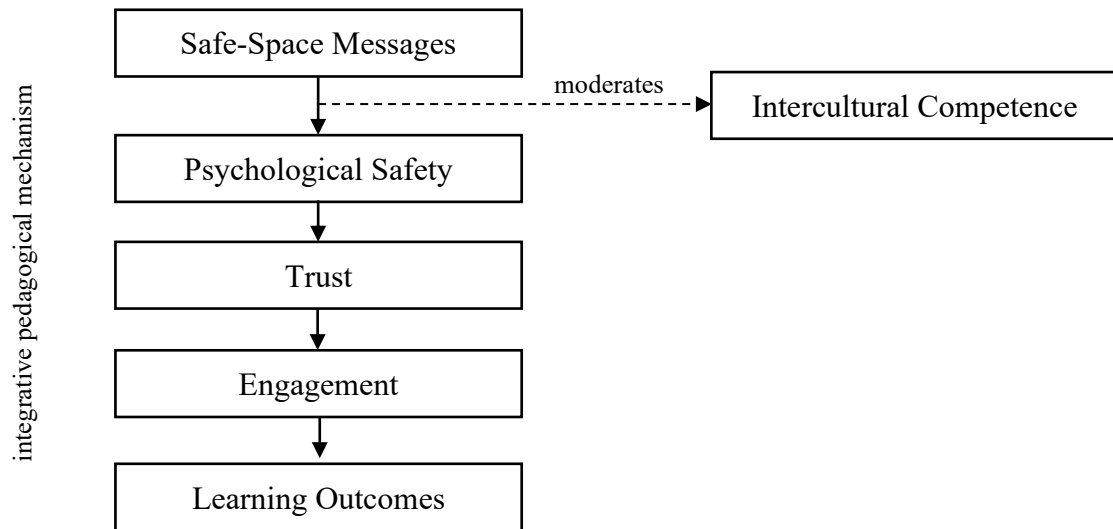


Figure 1 Research Framework

Research Methodology

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design comprising two phases: a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. The quantitative phase was conducted first to statistically examine the effects of safe-space messages compared to traditional trigger warnings on students' psychological safety, trust, engagement, and intercultural competence. The subsequent qualitative phase aimed to deepen the interpretation of quantitative findings by exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of both students and instructors regarding the use of safe-space messages in multicultural classrooms. This sequential design ensured a robust integration of numerical evidence with contextual understanding, thereby providing both breadth and depth of insight.

The study was structured across four dimensions—content, population, area, and time—as follows:

1. **Content:** The study focuses on pedagogical framing strategies that integrate safe-space messages as an instructional intervention. It compares the outcomes of this approach with those of traditional trigger warnings, examining their effects on students' psychological safety, engagement, intercultural competence, and trust in instructors in multicultural higher education classrooms.

2. **Population and Sample:** The target population comprised students and instructors in Thai–international joint university programs. The sample included 120 university students (both Thai and international) from diverse cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds, as well as 10 university instructors who regularly teach in multicultural contexts. Participants were selected using purposive sampling within specific Thai higher education institutions offering international or bilingual programs, ensuring that all participants had direct experience in culturally diverse classroom environments. 120 students participated in an instructional intervention study, in which both safe-space messages and trigger-warning conditions were introduced within the same cohort over time. This quasi-experimental approach allowed for within-group comparisons before and after exposure to each pedagogical framing condition.

3. **Area:** Data were collected from selected Thai universities with active international programs to ensure ecological validity within multicultural higher education contexts.

4. Time Frame: The study was conducted over the course of one academic year, encompassing instrument development, pre-test data collection (trigger warning phase), intervention implementation (safe-space message phase), post-test data collection, and qualitative follow-up interviews.

Phase 1: A comprehensive review of scholarly literature, including empirical studies and theoretical frameworks on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), intercultural competence (Bennett, 2013; Deardorff, 2006), and safe-space pedagogy (Banks, 2015; Arao & Clemens, 2013), was undertaken. Insights from the literature informed the development of research instruments, including: 1) Psychological Safety Scale (adapted from Edmondson, 1999) 2) Trust in Instructor Scale (adapted from Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000) 3) Student Engagement Scale (based on Fredricks et al., 2004) and 4) Intercultural Competence Inventory (adapted from (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2019). Each instrument was adapted to the multicultural classroom context and reviewed by three experts in education and intercultural communication for content validity (CVI \geq .80). A pilot test with 30 students yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .82 to .90, indicating high reliability.

Phase 2: The quantitative phase employed a within-subjects quasi-experimental design, involving two instructional framing conditions administered sequentially: 1) Trigger Warning (Baseline Phase). Students were given traditional trigger warnings before classroom discussions on culturally sensitive topics. Pre-test measures of psychological safety, trust, engagement, and intercultural competence were collected. 2) Safe-Space Message (Intervention Phase) The same students were later exposed to safe-space messages integrated into classroom communication. Post-test measures were collected after a comparable series of lessons. This structure enabled comparisons of mean differences within the same cohort before and after the intervention, using paired-samples t-tests and repeated-measures ANOVA to assess statistical significance. Data Collection Instruments: A five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was used in all quantitative instruments. Demographic variables—including age, nationality, gender, and academic background—were also collected to examine group variations through descriptive and inferential statistics. These demographic results will be summarized in the Results Section, showing participant diversity and potential correlations with psychological safety and engagement scores.

Phase 3: The qualitative phase was conducted after quantitative data analysis to contextualize and explain the numerical findings. Data were collected through: 1) Semi-structured interviews with 20 students (10 Thai, 10 international), 2) Focus groups with student participants to explore perceived inclusivity, trust, and engagement, and 3) Instructor interviews to examine pedagogical experiences and reflections on implementing safe-space practices. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with emergent themes triangulated against quantitative results to ensure validity and interpretive depth.

Research Results

The study sample comprised 120 university students enrolled in Thai-international joint degree programs, reflecting a balanced intercultural composition (50% Thai and 50% international students). Among the participants, female students (55%) slightly outnumbered males (45%). The majority were aged 21–23 years (51.7%), representing typical undergraduate cohorts.

In terms of nationality, students came from ASEAN countries (20%), East Asia (15%), and Europe/Americas/other regions (15%), ensuring cultural and linguistic diversity. English was the predominant language used in class (78.3%), followed by Thai (15%) and other languages such as Mandarin and Japanese (6.7%).

Academically, 60% were in their third or fourth year, and the largest fields of study included Business and Management (40%), Communication and Media (25%), Social Sciences and Humanities (20%), and Engineering and Technology (15%).

Overall, the demographic profile confirms a diverse and representative multicultural student population, well-suited to examining how safe-space messages function across linguistic and cultural boundaries in international higher education contexts.

Objective 1

To investigate how safe-space messages can be systematically integrated into pedagogical practices in multicultural higher education classrooms to enhance students' psychological safety, sense of inclusiveness, and intercultural engagement.

The quantitative phase used a within-subjects pretest–posttest design, in which all 120 students experienced both a trigger warning (baseline) and a safe-space message (intervention) instructional framing condition. Surveys used a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to assess four constructs: psychological safety, trust in instructors, perceived instructional quality, and classroom engagement. Because the same participants experienced both conditions, paired-samples t-tests were used to compare pretest and posttest scores. (An ANOVA was initially used to test for within-subject variance consistency, but the primary inferential test reported here is the paired t-test, which is appropriate for two related groups.)

1. **Psychological Safety:** Students exposed to safe-space messages reported significantly higher psychological safety ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.48$) compared to those under trigger warnings ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.61$). A paired-samples t-test confirmed that the difference was statistically significant, $t(119) = 8.24$, $p < .001$, indicating that safe-space framing effectively established a secure and supportive classroom climate.

2. **Trust in Instructors:** Trust scores were higher under safe-space conditions ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.52$) than under trigger warnings ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.57$). This difference was significant, $t(119) = 7.03$, $p < .001$, suggesting that safe-space messages fostered perceptions of instructors as caring, empathetic, and trustworthy.

3. **Perceptions of Instructional Quality:** Instructional quality ratings were also higher under safe-space messages ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.46$) than with trigger warnings ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.55$). Further analysis showed that international students were susceptible to framing differences ($p < .01$), indicating that culturally inclusive communication enhances perceptions of teaching quality.

4. **Classroom Engagement:** Engagement was significantly enhanced under safe-space conditions ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.50$) compared to trigger warnings ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.59$). Regression analysis revealed that psychological safety mediated the relationship between framing condition and engagement, accounting for 42% of the variance in participation.

Table 1 Quantitative Comparison of Safe-Space Messages and Trigger Warnings

Variable	Safe-Space Messages (Mean \pm SD)	Trigger Warnings (Mean \pm SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value	Interpretation
Psychological Safety	4.32 \pm 0.48	3.67 \pm 0.61	8.24	< .001	Significantly higher under safe-space framing
Trust in Instructors	4.18 \pm 0.52	3.74 \pm 0.57	7.03	< .001	Safe-space messages enhance instructor trust
Instructional Quality	4.21 \pm 0.46	3.85 \pm 0.55	6.49	< .01	Higher perceived teaching effectiveness
Engagement	4.11 \pm 0.50	3.69 \pm 0.59	6.53	< .001	Students are more engaged under safe-space conditions.

Quantitative results confirm that safe-space messages outperform traditional trigger warnings across all dimensions, significantly enhancing psychological safety, trust, engagement, and intercultural responsiveness in multicultural classrooms.

Objective 2

To examine the comparative effectiveness of safe-space framing versus traditional trigger warnings, focusing on student trust, engagement, intercultural competence, and perceptions of instructional quality.

The qualitative phase included semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 40 students (20 Thai, 20 international) and 10 instructors. Although only two participant groups were involved, methodological triangulation was achieved by combining three distinct data sources—student focus groups, student interviews, and instructor interviews—each offering complementary perspectives on pedagogical framing and classroom experience. Thematic analysis identified four major themes:

1. Inclusive Climate and Belongingness:

- Safe-space messages promoted inclusivity and mutual respect. International students particularly noted reduced anxieties regarding cultural and linguistic differences.

- Representative Quote: “When the instructor told us it is a safe space, I felt I could share my opinion without being judged.”

- Implication: Encourages open participation and reduces anxiety.

2. Perceived Authenticity of Instructor Care

- Both Thai and international students reported that safe-space messages conveyed genuine empathy and support, enhancing trust.

- Representative Quote: “The instructor genuinely cares about our opinions and backgrounds.”

- Implication: Builds rapport essential for engagement.

3. Critical Reflection vs. Avoidance

- Trigger warnings were perceived as protective but encouraged avoidance of complex topics, whereas safe-space messages encouraged critical engagement.

- Representative Quote: “Trigger warnings made me avoid discussing certain topics, but safe-space messages encouraged me to reflect critically.”

- Implication: Promotes deeper learning and intercultural dialogue.

4. Pedagogical Application and Challenges

- Instructors emphasized the need for cultural sensitivity in implementing safe-space messages. Balancing openness with respect for cultural norms was challenging but beneficial.

- Representative Quote: “Balancing open dialogue and respect for cultural values is challenging but rewarding.”

- Implication: Highlights the need for professional development and intercultural sensitivity training.

Table 2 Qualitative Themes from Student and Instructor Interviews

Theme	Description	Representative Quote	Implication
Inclusive Climate and Belongingness	Safe-space messages foster inclusivity and emotional safety	“I felt I could share my opinion without being judged.” – International student	Encourages open participation and reduces anxiety
Perceived Authenticity of Instructor Care	Framing enhances students’ perception of instructor empathy and support	“The instructor genuinely cares about our opinions and backgrounds.” – Thai student	Builds trust and rapport essential for engagement
Critical Reflection vs. Avoidance	Safe-space messages promote engagement rather than avoidance of complex topics.	“Trigger warnings made me avoid discussing certain topics, but safe-space messages encouraged me to reflect critically.” – International student.	Supports deeper learning and intercultural dialogue
Pedagogical Application and Challenges	Instructors implement framing sensitively in multicultural classrooms	“Balancing open dialogue and respect for cultural values is challenging but rewarding.” – Instructor	Highlights the need for intercultural communication training

The integration of safe-space messages into pedagogical practice significantly enhances psychological safety, trust, engagement, and intercultural competence in multicultural higher education contexts. Quantitative analyses provide statistical confirmation of improved outcomes, while qualitative findings enrich interpretation by revealing the lived experiences of inclusivity, empathy, and engagement. Together, these results validate the theoretical proposition that inclusive pedagogical framing fosters a psychologically safe and culturally responsive classroom environment—beneficial to both local and international learners.

Discussions

The findings of this study advance the theoretical understanding of psychological safety and intercultural pedagogy by demonstrating that the systematic use of safe-space messages functions as a pedagogical mechanism that bridges affective inclusivity with cognitive engagement in multicultural higher education contexts. Across both quantitative and qualitative strands, evidence converges on the notion that inclusive framing enhances students’ trust, engagement, and intercultural competence—key indicators of psychological safety and effective learning (Edmondson, 1999; Newman et al., 2017).

Safe-Space Messages as Pedagogical Framing for Psychological Safety

The study extends Edmondson's (1999) model of psychological safety to multicultural classroom settings by showing that explicit affective framing—through safe-space messages—acts as a situational antecedent to perceived safety and inclusiveness. Whereas traditional trigger warnings emphasize risk and emotional protection, safe-space messages emphasize empowerment, care, and openness, thereby shifting the instructional focus from avoidance to engagement. This supports Carnevale et al. (2021) and Bhute et al. (2021), who found that inclusive classroom cues enhance students’ willingness to participate and self-regulate emotions in sensitive discussions.

Furthermore, the improvement in psychological safety ($M = 4.32$) illustrates how affective pedagogical framing can directly influence socio-emotional readiness, validating the notion that emotional security is a prerequisite for cognitive exploration (Maslow, 1968; Meyer & Turner, 2002). Students' narratives of feeling "safe to share without judgment" reflect the internalization of these cues, reinforcing the role of instructor communication as a key determinant of psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2010).

Instructor Trust and Intercultural Dialogue

Safe-space messages also emerged as a critical predictor of trust in instructors. This aligns with Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence model, which emphasizes respect, openness, and curiosity as foundational to intercultural engagement. When instructors explicitly frame the classroom as an inclusive space, they signal ethical caring (Noddings, 2012) and cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2018), thereby establishing credibility and fairness in the eyes of diverse learners.

The observed trust effect supports social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), suggesting that students reciprocate perceived instructor empathy and fairness with higher engagement and participation. This is particularly salient in multicultural classrooms where power asymmetries and linguistic barriers may otherwise constrain participation (Banks, 2015). The evidence thus contributes to intercultural pedagogy by illustrating how trust functions as both a mediator and outcome of psychologically safe instruction.

Engagement and Learning through Affective-Inclusive Practices

From the perspective of engagement theory (Fredricks et al., 2004), safe-space messages can be conceptualized as motivational scaffolds that strengthen emotional and cognitive engagement. The mediation effect of psychological safety on engagement (42% of variance explained) supports the proposition that affective conditions are necessary for sustained behavioral participation (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Qualitative insights revealed that safe-space classrooms nurtured deeper intercultural dialogue and collaboration. These findings resonate with Bennett's (2013) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which posits that empathetic, inclusive discourse moves learners from ethnocentric toward ethnorelative orientations. Instructors' reports of smoother communication and reduced cultural misunderstandings further demonstrate how safe-space messages operationalize intercultural inclusivity in practice.

Comparative Effectiveness: Safe-Space vs. Trigger Warnings

By comparing safe-space messages with trigger warnings, the study offers empirical evidence to clarify ongoing pedagogical debates. While trigger warnings have been defended as tools for emotional preparedness (Cabrera et al., 2020), the current findings reveal that they may inadvertently reinforce avoidance tendencies, limiting cognitive risk-taking. Safe-space framing, conversely, provides reassurance without limiting discourse, thereby balancing emotional protection with intellectual challenge—an equilibrium consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, where learners grow through supported engagement in complex dialogue.

Integrative Theoretical Synthesis

Synthesizing across both research objectives, the study supports a Humanistic–Constructivist Paradigm of intercultural education in which affective communication and pedagogical framing act as catalysts for inclusive learning. Safe-space messages simultaneously fulfill affective (belonging, safety), cognitive (reflection, critical discussion), and social (trust, collaboration) dimensions of learning—illustrating a holistic framework of psychological and intercultural synergy.

Conceptually, this aligns with the Intercultural Competence Framework (Deardorff, 2006) and Edmondson's (1999) psychological safety model, integrating them through affective pedagogy. The results position safe-space messaging as a low-cost, high-impact intervention that transforms classroom climate and promotes equitable participation across cultural lines.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

1. The study expands psychological safety theory by identifying communicative antecedents of safety in multicultural settings, proposing safe-space messages as a measurable pedagogical variable within affective learning frameworks.

2. Instructors should systematically integrate safe-space messages at the beginning and throughout instruction to enhance trust, inclusivity, and engagement across diverse learners.

3. The findings illustrate that affective framing serves as a culturally responsive pedagogical strategy, reinforcing empathy, collaboration, and respect for diversity in internationalized higher education environments.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of safe-space messages on students' psychological safety, trust in instructors, engagement, perceptions of instructional quality, and intercultural competence in multicultural higher education classrooms. Integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the research provides robust evidence that systematically incorporating safe-space messages into pedagogical frameworks significantly enhances students' comfort, inclusiveness, and psychological security.

Quantitative findings indicated that students exposed to safe-space messaging reported higher psychological safety scores ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.47$), greater trust in instructors ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.49$), and increased engagement ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.50$) compared to those receiving traditional instructional framing or trigger warnings, with statistically significant differences across all measured dimensions. Qualitative data further revealed that students experienced a stronger sense of belonging, perceived the instructor's authenticity, and increased their willingness to engage with challenging or culturally sensitive content. In contrast, instructors highlighted improvements in classroom interactions and equitable participation.

The study also demonstrated that safe-space messages outperform traditional trigger warnings in promoting trust, engagement, and positive perceptions of teaching effectiveness. Trigger warnings, while helpful in alerting students to potentially sensitive material, were sometimes found to encourage avoidance behaviors, whereas safe-space messages fostered critical reflection, open dialogue, and constructive risk-taking. These results underscore the pedagogical efficacy of inclusive framing strategies in reducing anxiety, mitigating cross-cultural misunderstandings, and supporting collaborative learning in multicultural contexts.

Notably, the development of students' intercultural competence synergistically enhanced the effectiveness of safe-space messages. Structured activities, reflective exercises, and collaborative projects enabled learners to navigate cultural differences more effectively, enhancing trust, engagement, and psychological safety while promoting cognitive, affective, and social learning outcomes.

In summary, the findings highlight both the theoretical and practical significance of integrating safe-space messages into multicultural higher education pedagogy. By strategically embedding these messages and fostering intercultural competence, educators can create psychologically secure, inclusive, and equitable learning environments that support academic achievement, critical reflection, and socio-emotional development. This study contributes to the literature on psychological safety, multicultural education, and inclusive pedagogy,

offering actionable insights for instructional design to enhance engagement, trust, and intercultural understanding in culturally diverse classrooms.

Suggestion

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are offered for future practice, policy, and research in multicultural higher education contexts.

1. Pedagogical Implications

Instructors in multicultural classrooms should systematically integrate safe-space messages throughout their teaching practices. These messages not only enhance students' psychological safety but also strengthen trust in instructors, foster engagement, and support the development of intercultural competencies. Faculty development programs should therefore emphasize training in inclusive pedagogical communication, cultural sensitivity, and strategies for creating psychologically safe and equitable learning environments (Edmondson, 1999; Banks, 2015; Deardorff, 2006). Additionally, instructors should incorporate structured intercultural activities and reflective exercises alongside safe-space messaging to reinforce both cognitive and socio-emotional learning outcomes.

2. Policy Implications

Universities and higher education institutions should incorporate safe-space principles into broader teaching and learning policies. This includes:

- Developing guidelines for inclusive pedagogy that embed safe-space framing as a recommended instructional practice.
- Offering intercultural competence training for both faculty and students to enhance cross-cultural communication and collaboration.
- Institutionalizing safe-space messaging in curriculum design, course syllabi, and classroom management policies to ensure consistency and sustainability in promoting inclusive learning environments.

3. Practical Applications

Safe-space messages should be used iteratively, not only at the start of a course but also throughout the semester, to reinforce norms of inclusivity, respect, and openness to diverse perspectives. This ongoing framing can help reduce classroom anxiety, particularly in courses covering sensitive or controversial topics, and encourage students to participate in critical dialogue and intercultural exchange actively. Instructors are encouraged to monitor and adjust messaging based on classroom dynamics and students' feedback, ensuring that the pedagogical approach remains responsive to learners' evolving needs.

Future Research

Future studies should explore the long-term impacts of safe-space messaging on:

- Academic performance and cognitive achievement.
- Intercultural competence development, including empathy, cultural awareness, and adaptability.
- Socio-emotional outcomes, such as confidence, belongingness, and collaborative skills.

Comparative research across different cultural regions, academic disciplines, and institutional types would provide insights into the generalizability and adaptability of the safe-space model. Additionally, the use of longitudinal designs, experimental interventions, and mixed-methods approaches could further validate the effectiveness of safe-space messages in diverse higher education contexts and elucidate mechanisms linking psychological safety, trust, engagement, and intercultural competence.

New Knowledge

This study provides novel empirical insights into the interrelationships among pedagogical framing, psychological safety, and intercultural competence in multicultural higher education classrooms. Drawing upon mixed-methods findings, a conceptual model is proposed that illustrates how safe-space messages function as an integrative pedagogical mechanism to enhance student engagement, trust, and learning outcomes.

In this model, safe-space messages serve as a primary instructional intervention. By explicitly communicating classroom norms, promoting inclusivity, and reducing social and cultural anxiety, these messages directly enhance students' psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Banks, 2015). Increased psychological safety enables students to participate more actively, ask questions without fear of negative evaluation, and engage in reflective and critical discussions across diverse cultural perspectives.

Intercultural competence is conceptualized as a moderating and synergistic factor. Students who possess higher levels of intercultural competence—demonstrating empathy, cultural awareness, and flexibility—experience amplified benefits from safe-space messages. These students reported stronger trust in instructors and peers, higher engagement, and more effective collaborative learning behaviors (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Bennett, 2013). The integration of safe-space messaging with intercultural competence development creates conditions in which psychological safety, trust, and intercultural awareness mutually reinforce one another.

The model further identifies student trust and engagement as mediating outcomes linking instructional framing to broader learning outcomes. Safe-space messages enhance trust in instructors, which increases willingness to engage with challenging content. Engagement, operationalized as participation, attentiveness, and reflective dialogue, subsequently contributes to both cognitive outcomes (e.g., knowledge acquisition, critical thinking) and socio-emotional outcomes (e.g., confidence, sense of belonging, peer collaboration).

Empirical evidence from this study supports the model. Quantitative findings revealed significant improvements in psychological safety ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.47$) and trust in instructors ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.49$) when safe-space messages were systematically incorporated, compared with traditional framing approaches ($p < .001$). Qualitative thematic analysis corroborated these results, highlighting themes such as perceived instructor support, freedom to express dissenting viewpoints, and enhanced peer collaboration. These findings validate the model, demonstrating that deliberate pedagogical framing can transform theoretical constructs into measurable, positive student experiences.

In summary, this research advances the understanding of how explicit safe-space messaging, integrated with intercultural competence development, functions as a systematic pedagogical tool to enhance psychological safety, trust, and engagement in multicultural higher education contexts. The conceptual model offers both a theoretical and practical framework, guiding instructors in designing inclusive, psychologically safe, and culturally responsive learning environments, thereby improving both cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds.

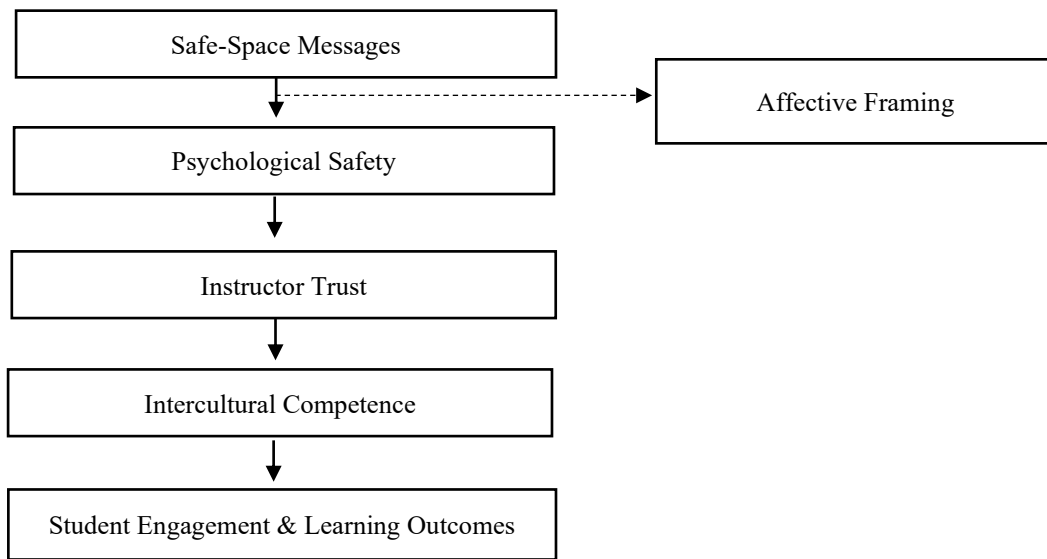


Figure 2 Conceptual Model of Safe-Space Messaging in Multicultural Higher Education

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