

## **Cultural dimensions for a foreigner teaching English in a Thai university**

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*In many countries like Thailand foreigners are sought after as teachers in English language programs, apparently because of a belief in the advantages of native speakers as models of the language. Aside from linguistic considerations, important cultural differences between foreign teachers and local students come into play in ways that can be either detrimental or beneficial for the students' learning.*

*In this article I focus on the students' perception of a foreign teacher of English as an outsider, and how that unique position may provide a positive opportunity for learning. While teaching English at a rural university campus in northern Thailand, I gathered field notes of my experiences and recorded interviews with teachers and students. From this data I derive a picture of the student body as a tightly structured community, with students forming close bonds within their respective disciplines and showing respect to older students and to teachers. Additional data from classroom observation suggest that the foreign teacher moves between the authoritative position of teacher and speaker of English on one hand, and the more personal one of interested outsider on the other. This flexibility allows students to move into new spaces in their interactions with the teacher, providing opportunities for using English communicatively and creatively and for their own purposes.*

*I want to have brave to tell about Thai story to foreign teacher.*

[Student, first year English major]

### **Introduction**

The words of this young university student in Thailand express a deeply felt desire to communicate his culture to the outside world. He wants to speak English confidently so that others can learn about his country, and in articulating this to a foreign listener he displays courage in his willingness to try – the very courage he speaks of. Identifying himself as Thai, he is making an early step into the role of intercultural speaker.

In this rural community, learners of English like this student generally find scarce opportunities for real life interaction in the language. The recruitment of native speakers and other foreigners to teach English in schools and universities has advantages and disadvantages. If they are seen as outsiders and difficult to relate to – whether it is because of the language barrier or because of an appearance of difference – the local student culture may actually work against making the most of such visitors. Yet it is the very position of the foreign teacher as 'outsider' that can open up possibilities for

language and culture learning in the classroom, and it is this opportunity that provided the impetus for the research reported here.

### **Context of the study**

Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) consists of six campuses across the north of Thailand. My research was conducted at Lampang, a rural campus traditionally specialising in the teaching of Agricultural Science. It is located a twenty-minute drive from the regional capital of Lampang Province which has a population of 44,700 (Cummings, 2002). Few students on this campus have social contact with foreigners or much opportunity for authentic interactions in English outside of class.

This paper is a personal view of my experience teaching at this rural university campus in Thailand. It draws on data by way of lesson observations and recordings, and interviews with teachers, Thai and non-Thai, and students. My interpretive perspective is sociocultural; in keeping with Etienne Wenger's (1998) ideas of 'communities of practice', I view the university as a community whose function is not only the formal learning of academic disciplines, but also the social learning of participants.

### **Foreign and local**

The relative merits of NS (native speaker) and NNS (non-native speaker) teachers is a topic of on-going debate (Burns, 2005; Shin & Kellogg, 2007; Rao, 2008) but in this study I avoid those terms. One of the participants in my study who was referred to by Thais as a 'native speaker' was in fact a European whose most fluent languages were German and French. Although he claimed that his use of English was inferior to that of a native speaker, an alternative view might see him as having skills and understandings for the teaching of English beyond those of a monolingual NS. However, to refer to him as a NNS would be to overlook important commonalities with NS teachers. First, he lacked the fluency in Thai language that local teachers had and which they used for explanations about English and for managing classroom activities. Second, he was seen as an outsider to the local community, belonging to a class of people more closely related to tourists. I therefore prefer to use the terms 'local' and 'foreign' or alternatively 'Thai' and 'non-Thai'. Indeed, I found that many useful insights for my study came from a young teacher of Chinese from China, who similarly lacked fluent Thai, and who found her natural social group among other expatriate Chinese.

Thus two factors stand out as impacting on classroom interactions between foreign teachers and Thai students: the monolingual nature of the discourse between them, leading to a communicative focus in teaching and learning; and the status of the teacher as outside the established local community, leading to more flexible expectations about roles and relationships.

### **Culture**

Another contentious term is ‘culture’, which is difficult to define (Street, 1993; Pennycook, 1994; Papademetre & Scarino, 2000) and is almost impossible to rely on in a specific context. Even Thais can disagree about what is culturally Thai. On one hand, S. Nimmannit (personal communication, 29 June, 2006) claimed that Thai students were ‘shy to speak’ in public, implying a strong cultural motivation for their reticence. On the other, K. Ratchadavisitkul (personal communication, 30 June, 2006) expressed the opinion that everyone experiences anxiety in public speaking, especially in a second language, suggesting that Thai students were not different from other national groups. Both of these eminent Thai educators were saying something true and meaningful, and insofar as culture emanates from history and experience, the reticence of Thai students may very well be modifiable by appropriate teaching and learning approaches.

### **Questions about student culture and classroom culture**

Some questions that arose for me as I engaged with the teaching of English in this rural university campus were:

- Why do Thai students speak Thai among themselves so much?
- Why do students sometimes appear unable to answer an apparently simple question from a foreign teacher?
- What can a foreign teacher uniquely offer to encourage Thai students to speak English?

While the same questions may arise in other cultural contexts of teaching English, something specifically Thai might have been going on. I hope to draw together some of the experiences I had during two visits to the campus, the first when I taught some classes, and the second when I observed another foreigner teaching.

### **Social awareness**

During this time as a foreign teacher I lived on campus and the most confronting aspect of this was the attention I attracted as a foreigner. On the short walk from my house to

the staffroom I was frequently approached by someone on a motorcycle and offered a lift. The first time this happened, the rider was known to me and I accepted the lift, but often I was offered lifts by complete strangers, including students. I experienced feelings of self-consciousness and even irritation, as I preferred to take the garden pathway that offered a shortcut to the office. Nevertheless, I appreciated the generosity and attentiveness people showed towards me.

These offers were not entirely due to my foreign appearance; anyone walking along the campus roads could expect to be offered a ride by someone on a passing motorcycle. The cultural attitude seemed to be one of awareness of others, a focus on what they are doing and expectations about why. One student told me of a different example: in Thailand if you drop something in a restaurant, everyone looks at you. This kind of social awareness contrasts with a more individualistic response, which might suggest that a fallen item is the responsibility of the person who lets it fall and is therefore best ignored. Similarly, the motorcyclists' persistent invitations for me to ride with them contrasted with my individualistic perception that a person walking along a road is in control of her own mode of transport.

### **Life experience**

One day early in the morning, a teacher drew my attention to something that was happening just outside the window of the staff room. I could see some people working in a large vegetable garden on the adjacent property. One of them was a student wearing a backpack, ready to leave for her classes just as soon as she had finished watering the vegetables. So some of the students were very local indeed! Even those who came from further afield and had to take up accommodation near the campus would travel every weekend to be with their family.

Thus in terms of life experience, the gap between students and foreign teachers was dramatic. While the gardening student saw her family every day and engaged with them in her role as member of that family, the day to day experience of a foreign teacher was one of isolation from family as well as from culture of origin. The Chinese teacher, for example, was dismayed one day to learn of the death of her grandmother in China, and as she received the news too late to arrange to attend the funeral, her best consolation was to go alone to the Chinese temple in the town.

### **Respect for teachers, respect for elders**

Attitude to respect was another noticeable difference among us. On the morning of Wai Khruu Day, the traditional day for paying respect to teachers, the students all congregated in a huge pavilion. At the front was a dais with senior staff seated on it, facing the students. On the ground to one side was seating for teachers, whose ranks I joined. I could not see what was going on the other side of the dais, but I could hear Buddhist monks chanting, and everyone held their hands together in a sustained 'wai' position. When the monks had finished they departed, and the paying of respect for teachers began. Students bearing elaborate flower arrangements lined up two by two. As each pair moved forward, they went first to a shrine on one side of the dais, where there was a picture of the King of Thailand, and knelt down low and made a deep 'wai' before it; then they moved to a position in front of the senior teachers, knelt again and made a 'wai' less deep than before, and presented their flowers. The ceremony took up most of the morning.

The afternoon was set aside for the students to conduct their own program. Since this was the beginning of the academic year, the first year students were welcomed with an array of activities. Grouped according to their area of study, and wearing the uniform polo shirt colour-coded for their year level, they were led by second year students in performing songs and chants, with body actions and accompanied by drums. For example, I saw a group singing a children's action song about riding in a *tuk-tuk* [3-wheel motorised rickshaw]; a sports field full of students in formation, each line taking a turn in doing an action-response chant led by a second year student shouting through a megaphone; a line of first years waiting outside the gym, each one wearing a blindfold; a row of second year students sitting on a bench looking down on a row of first year students kneeling in a profound 'wai' before them. Such activities went on throughout the afternoon, and continued sporadically for the first four weeks of the university year.

The impression I received was one of order and organisation, as well as a hint of intimidation which was emphasised by the military-style drumming that accompanied many of the goings-on. Students I interviewed generally expressed a liking for these welcoming activities, because as first years they met up with their peers – students of their own age and year level studying in the same academic discipline – and got to know the second years, their immediate seniors. Third year students were involved in

helping the second years plan the activities, having already established their seniority at the beginning of the previous year; fourth year students were not involved at all.

In an interview with a second year student from another university in the region, I learnt that these welcoming activities were common to all universities in Thailand. While participation was not compulsory, few first years failed to attend. The student claimed that the university teachers did not necessarily approve of them, because the second years would shout at the first years; but, she said (defending their actions), the first years would not respect the second years, so the second years were obliged to shout at them, to make them pay respect.

### **Negotiating culture and space**

Against this background of intense peer group socialisation, possible answers to some of the questions posed above begin to emerge. An acute awareness that the eyes of students' peers are on them, scrutinising their answers for correctness or social acceptability, is likely to create self-consciousness. Students in class cope with the situation by checking with each other in Thai for the appropriate answer. When this is not possible, they may even 'stall' and not reply at all. One Thai teacher, recalling his own reticence as a student, explained that even when he knew the right answer, he used to feel that staying silent was preferable to appearing to promote himself at the expense of his friends. In such a classroom culture, speaking out is seen as undesirable, and the social pressure of the peer group works against the foreign teacher's efforts to engage and involve students in interaction in English.

An interview with a foreign teacher of English-Australian background revealed how he dealt with this situation. He said he had tried to stop the Thai chatter in his class without success, and in the interests of harmony permitted it. When a student failed to answer a question, he simply moved on to another student until he found someone prepared to give one. This was consistent with the very patient approach he showed when I observed his classes. He also demonstrated a willingness to move out of the role of teacher in response to the communicative requirements of an interaction, as can be seen from the exchange below.

This exchange took place near the beginning of a lesson with a class of 14 third year students studying Tourism. Their English classes were conducted once a week, and

since the previous lesson, two groups from this class had conducted a two-day ‘dummy’ tour to different tourist locations as the project they must undertake for their course. The remaining two groups had planned but not yet implemented their tour. Part of their assessment consisted of giving an oral presentation by way of a report; it was to be accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation and delivered in English with every student taking a turn with the delivery. The teacher therefore saw this lesson as an opportunity for them to practise speaking in English about their trip. He thought that all the groups had completed their tour, when in fact only two had done so. He began the lesson by asking for the main destination of each trip, and then he asked students from each group to give their account. When he got to the second group, a student needed to correct his misunderstanding.

- T: *So the first group went to Phu Chi Fah, so can you [addressing a student from the second group] tell me about the trip, about what you did, where you went, what things did you see?*
- S: [Thai – quietly to herself]
- T: *You can tell me just from your own head, just from –*
- S: *They went – I went to Pha Yao to visit the ancient Pha Yao Lake.*
- T: *Oh yeah, uh huh.*
- S: *And after that we will go to [XXX] in Chiang Rai.*
- T: *Mm hm.*
- S: *And then shopping at Mae Sai market.*
- T: *Oh yeah.*
- S: *There to – I will go to –*
- T: *I went to – the past, yep.*
- S: *I don’t –*
- T: *Oh, you haven’t gone yet, oh, I see.*
- S: *Yes.*
- T: *When do you go?*
- S: *Two – two – two – four on February.*
- T: *Oh, oh, OK, you’re going next week, right, next week, oh OK.*
- S: *On Saturday.*
- T: *Oh, OK, yeah. OK, fine, yep, sorry, yeah. Excellent.*

It can be seen here that the student does not directly challenge the teacher’s misconception, initially conforming to his requirement of using past tense. The first time she switches to future tense he lets it go, but the second time he corrects the tense she uses. This student knows that she has actually got it right, so she lets him know that the trip has not yet taken place. The teacher shows flexibility in picking up the fact that the trip he thought had already taken place is yet to happen, and he apologises for getting it wrong.

The shift that occurs here can be seen as a change in ‘footing’, as identified in early work by Goffman (1981):

A change in footing implies a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance. A change in our footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame for events. (p. 128)

At the beginning the teacher takes up a footing as questioner and elicitor of information and linguistic output, gently encouraging the student to respond. Meanwhile, the student answers reluctantly, mindful that the teacher is unaware that the trip has yet to occur. She begins to avoid the past tense requirement and uses the future tense correctly. When the teacher tries to change her choice of tense, she refuses obliquely; by saying ‘I don’t’ and then, hesitating, she provides a negative but is apparently unsure how to express the whole idea. In contradicting the teacher, however politely, she claims a position of knower and information-holder. The teacher recognises his mistake, implicitly accepting her new role. When he asks, ‘When do you go?’, he is no longer positioning himself as a teacher eliciting and correcting responses but as an outsider in need of information from an insider who knows it. Between them they clarify and confirm the information. When the teacher apologises he accepts correction from the student; then he reasserts his footing as teacher in control of the interaction by stating his evaluation of the exchange: ‘Excellent.’

Transcripts of this teacher’s lessons show a number of instances of shifts in footing of this nature, where a student initiates a shift and the teacher responds with a complementary one, and it is also evident in analysis of my own teaching. As foreigners and outsiders, we are seekers of information, curious tourists intrigued by the culture around us, and we can call on this role in the classroom in order to create space for the learners to take control of communication. In this way they can learn how to take the role of user and owner of the language for their own communicative purposes.

### **Conclusion**

The statement by the first year student at the beginning of this paper was made in an interview rather than a lesson, but it is similar to what he might have said in class with a foreign teacher if the focus had been on meaning. It is impressive in the length and completeness of the utterance, as most of his peers in the same conversation confined themselves to single words or phrases, and this is a full sentence. The lack of perfect grammatical correctness barely impedes the full meaning of his words, and even adds to



the earnest desire they express. At the same time, pride in his cultural identity is hinted at in his choice of the story he would like to tell. He is explaining to the foreign listener his ambition to shift his footing from learner to knower, from student and interviewee to knowledgeable host. Far from accepting a role as victim of linguistic imperialism, this young man lays claim to the role of story-teller, teacher and cultural bridge-builder, to broadcast the stories and values of his cultural inheritance.

Foreign teachers are uniquely placed to respond in kind to this orientation. Motivated at least in part by the curiosity of the traveller and newcomer, and equipped with strategic communication skills from their experiences making their way in an unfamiliar culture, they can engage with Thai students as an ideal audience for their stories. A foreign teacher in a language classroom can make available new spaces for learners to move into so they can take ownership of the language and use it communicatively and creatively. The pedagogy of social and personal connection that emerges from these spaces can provide a rich environment for the linguistic, intercultural and personal development of learners.

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