Teaching in English to Non-English First Language Students
in some Thai University Programs in Business and Management

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Abstract

This paper is about teaching non-English first language students (mainly Thai students) at a number of Thai universities in International Programs (English Programs) in Business and Management. The author has had considerable experience in teaching in such programs in various countries, Thailand, Malaysia, China, and India. The concentration in this paper is on a qualitative study conducted in Thailand where most students were Thai plus two Chinese students studying in Thailand plus interviews with four Professors (co-researchers) who also have had considerable teaching experience in teaching in English in Thailand and other countries to business students. One Professor is Australian who has lived in Thailand for more than 40 years, one is English who has lived in Thailand for over 20 years, one is American who has lived in Thailand for over 10 years, and one is a Thai national who teaches some classes in English. The author is an Australian academic who has taught in Thailand for over 20 years. All the foreign Professors are married to Thai wives. For this project, all the students and professors were aware that the author was conducting a formal research study, the research methodology being used being a qualitative study using a phenomenology methodology.

Keyword: Teaching in English, Non-English First Language Student, Thai University

Introduction

As indicated this paper is concerned with teaching in English mainly to Thai students studying for a business degree, either undergraduate or postgraduate in Thailand. It is based on in-depth interview with six Thai students, two Chinese students, three foreign English first language professors and one Thai professor who also teaches some classes in English (he has a Doctorate from an Australian University). A well as detailed interviews with the four professors (academic co-researchers) there were eight students (co-researchers) included in the study, as follows:

Four undergraduate students, all Thai (two males, two females).
Two Master's degree students, one Chinese (female), one Thai (male).
Two Doctoral students, one Chinese (female),one Thai (male).
So altogether there were 12 persons (co-researchers) included in this study.

As indicated, the three English first language academic co-researchers together with the author all have considerable experience in teaching Business/Management courses in English in Thailand. Also, three of the three English first language academic co-researchers plus the author also have considerable experience teaching Business courses in English to non-English first language students in other non-English first language countries.

This wide experience did mean that the academic co-researchers were able to provide considerable insight into this topic but it also possibly created some potential bias in terms of their respective views. However, the author and these academic teachers were all well aware of this danger and tried to make their comments as accurate and as unbiased as possible.

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From their comments, however, a number of similar or common themes began to emerge.

The researchers were attempting to undertake a cross-cultural study, particularly in the Thai environment on various cultural factors applying to teaching mainly Thai students in these English language programs. The undergraduate students were all studying undergraduate programs in Business (BBA) in two different Thai public universities. One undergraduate student (female) was in first year and the other (male) was in third year. Two other Thai undergraduate students, both second year were studying in another public university BBA Program.

The two master's degree students (one Thai, one Chinese) were both from one public university and both were in the final semester of an MBA Program.

One of the two doctoral students (Thai, male) was undertaking his final coursework subject before commencing to write his thesis, while the second doctoral student (Chinese, female) was in the final stages of writing her dissertation, from two different doctoral programs both offered by public universities.

Research Questions

As indicated, this was a qualitative research study, using phenomenology methodology, so no questionnaire was used in the study, however, there were a number of issues which the researcher wanted to explore with the co-researchers.

In particular, their own attitudes and what they thought were the attitudes of other students towards teaching in English language in Thailand and the cultural aspects associated with their perceptions.

The specific questions asked of the student co-researchers were:

(1) What are the major methods of teaching a degree in English in Thailand and are these methods satisfactory?

(2) Are there cultural factors which impact on teaching in English in Thailand?

(3) What do you see as the major problem or problems for non-English first language students for studying an English language degree in a non-English first language country?

(4) How do you or did you evaluate English teaching by Foreign English first language professors compared to English language teaching by a Thai professor?

Several questions were also put to the English first language professors for their impression or evaluation of Thai and other students studying for their English language degree in Thailand:

(1) How do you or did you evaluate Thai or other non-English first language students in studying for their degrees taught in English language (in a non-English first language country?)

(2) What do you consider to be the major problems, especially 'cultural problems' faced by these students in understanding their programs?

(3) What do you consider to be the major problems, especially 'cultural problems' you faced personally in teaching these students in English?

These questions were also discussed with the eight student co-researchers but from a student viewpoint.

Literature Review

A number of works on cross-cultural factors were used in developing this study. Each of the academic co-researchers had taught their students about national cultural characteristics, so all were aware of such concepts, particularly from such well-known writers

as Hofstede (1983, 2004) and Trompenaars (1993). They were well-aware, for example, that these writers had generally classified Thai cultural factors as being considerably different, for example, from those of Western countries, such as USA, UK, and Australia. Student co-researchers in this study were also aware of these studies. Hofstede, for example, classified these countries as follows, in his earlier studies:

Table 1 Hofstede's Dimensions

	Power Distance	Individual/ Collectivism	Uncertainty Avoidance	Masculinity/ Femininity
UK	35 (low)	89 (ind.)	35 (low)	66 (m)
USA	40 (")	91 (")	46 (moderate)	62 (m)
Australia	36 (")	90 (")	51 (moderate)	61 (m)
Thailand	64 (high)	20 (low)	64 (high)	34 (f)

Source: Hofstede (1983)

Later, Hofstede added 'time orientation' as a fifth factor. In the author of this papers's view, by far the most comprehensive study of Thai culture was the work of Komin (1991). She identifies nine cultural value clusters according to their relative significant position in the Thai cognitive system:

Table 2 Value Clusters According to Their Relative Significant Position in Thai Cognitive System

Ranking	Value clusters	Selected Values
1	Ego Orientation	Face-saving
2	Grateful Relationship Orientation	Bunkhun (indebted goodness)
3	Smooth Interpersonal Relationship Orientation	Caring and considerate
4	Flexibility and Adjustment Orientation	Responsive to Situations and Opportunity
5	Religio-Psychical Orientation	Religions and spiritual Life
6	Education and Competence Orientation	Form over content
7	Interdependence Orientation	Brotherhood Spirit
8	Fun-Pleasure Orientation	Sanuk (to have fun, to enjoy oneself and have a good time)
9	Achievement-Task Orientation	Ambitious and hard working

Source: Komin (1990: 158)

This work was, of course, written over 20 years ago and all culture, including Thai culture, changes over time, although all these cultural values still continue to exist in Thailand today. Joungtrakul and Sheehan (2012) wrote about Thai values as these applied to industrial relations but these can also be taken to apply to other areas of Thai life.

Table 3 Description of Thai Values

No.	Concept	Description
1	Bunkhun	It is the concept of gratitude or repaying of favour with favour (Komin 1990). It is instilled in the Thai people deeply and is quite difficult to change. For example, some employers claim that to hire labour is to render 'Bunkhun' in the form of income to employees (Piriyarangsan, 1989).

Table 3 (Continue)

No.	Concept	Description
2	Kreng Jai	This is the concept of being "considerate." Komin (1990: 161-162) asserts that this concept underlies a significant portion of everyday interpersonal behavioral patterns of Thais. Its closest meaning is "to be considerate, to feel reluctant to impose upon another person, to take another person's feelings (and 'ego') into account, or to take every measure not to cause discomfort or inconvenience for another person".
3	Compromising	Thais are compromising in nature and it is one of the strengths of the Thai people. They practice this concept in their daily lives and the phrase of 'meeting half-way' is understandable by Thais (Joungtrakul, 2009).
4	Work and personal relationships	In Thailand the success of dealing with others no matter if it is in a public or private organization depends on who you know and not what or how good you do. Creating connections and networking are very important in Thailand.
5	Face-saving	It is an expression of the top concern for "ego" (Komin 1990: 160). Whenever there is any problem to be solved "that would directly or indirectly involve persons, the first criterion to consider is saving 'face' (the 'ego') of the persons involved". The Thai would usually find "indirect ways to soften a negative message. Most important is to avoid public confrontation, regardless of whether it involves an inferior, an equal or worse still, a superior". To make a person "lose 'face,' regardless of rank, is to be avoided at all costs".
6	Helping each other	The helping mind is instilled in Thai people and they help each other without expecting any return or any compensation. At the same time, the person who receives help will feel indebted to the helper and he will remember that and try to repay or return the favour at a later date.
7	Criticism avoidance	According to (Komin, 1990: 160), it reflects that Thais are very 'ego' oriented, to the extent that it is very difficult for … Thais to dissociate one's ideas and opinion from the 'ego' self. This is why strong criticism to the expressed idea is often automatically taken as criticism of the person holding those ideas.

Source: Adapted from Joungtrakul and Teparagul (2011: 135-152)

Research Design

Phenomenology, as an inductive research approach has been increasingly used in social science research (Morse, 1994). The phenomenological research methodology is used to shed light upon the meaning of human experience and is particularly suitable for explaining 'learnt experiences' (van Manen, 1990). According to Streubert and Carpenter (1999: 56), topics "appropriate to phenomenological research include those central to Human's life experiences". Intercultural communication is a subject that is central to human life experience of both the academic and the student co-researchers. (Qin Yi, 2012, Giorgio, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1997, 2002). As indicated, one of the major scholars describing the descriptive phenomenological approach is Giorgio who elaborated the following points:

"1. Gaining a sense of the whole, this step was to gain a sense of the whole, by reading the entire description as a whole, in order to grasp a sense of the experience.

2. Discriminating on different meaning units: this step was to return to the beginning and read the text in order to identify the different meaning units or blocks that express a self-contained meaning.

3. Summarizing meaning units: this step was to summarize the central theme within each meaning unit without changing the subject's language.

4. Transforming the meaning units: this step was to transform the subject's everyday expressions into psychological language which involved the process of reflection and imaginative variation.

5. Situated and general structure statement: this step was to synthesize the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement of the structure under investigation.

6. Extrapolating the essence of the phenomenon: this step was to extrapolate the essence of the phenomenon by examining the situated structures" (Qin Yi, 2012: 79).

Data Analysis

The data were collected, transcribed and stored. The ALTIS ti software program was used to categorize the data into themes .These themes were also examined manually by the researcher. The phenomenological model used was that proposed by Moustakas (1994).

Results of Analysis

This was a private research project not conducted under the auspices of any university, so no university permission was sought or was necessary. It was, of course, necessary, however, to obtain the permission of all co-researchers. This permission was given on the clear understanding that any co-researcher could withdraw at any time he or she wished. Fortunately, for the researcher no co-researchers withdrew from the study. Also, such permission indicated that no specific student be named and nor would their specific university or program be named in the study.

The sample of undergraduate students was selected based on a quasi-random basis but this was after the researcher had selected the two universities and programs concerned and it was not completely random in that the researcher wanted equal numbers of male and female student co-researchers. The postgraduate students, both for Masters' degrees and for Doctoral degrees were chosen on a convenience basis. All student co-researchers are identified by letters.

The four undergraduate students, were code named A, B, C, and D. As indicated, these students were all Thai from two undergraduate business degree programs at two Thai public universities, both in Bangkok. All four students were regarded as reasonably representative of the undergraduate business students at these two public universities and, indeed, of Thai undergraduate business students generally. As indicated, two were female and two were male.

Students A and B (one female and one male) were both second year students and C (female) was third year and D (male) was a first year student (all in four-year undergraduate business degree programs). All undergraduate students indicated that they sometimes missed classes for no good reason and also that they fairly often came late to classes, particularly those commencing at 8.30 or 9 am. They all said that Thai teachers did not seem to worry about this even though an 80% attendance record was supposed to be mandatory. They also said that all classes were quite large (first year, 50 or more, second year, about 30). The instructors passed around the attendance sheets and if they were not present, often, their friends signed for them.(but not always for all students)

However, they all indicated that English first language professors were stricter on attendance than most Thai professors. They also said that the non-Thai professors were much stricter on late-comers. They also indicated that they preferred non-Thai professors even though sometimes they (the non-Thai) spoke too quickly and were generally stricter both in class and in marking class exercises, tests and examinations. They felt that they 'deserved' to have at least some foreign professors as their parents were paying a lot more fees than for Thai language programs. Interestingly, only one of these four students (female year 3) said that she was aiming for high-level results, each of the other three students said that they did not want to fail any course but were happy to receive just pass-grades.

The researcher tried to ascertain why this was so but did not really get clear answers but they said that they were young, that they wanted to have a 'good time' at university, and that once they passed in a degree taught in English they would be able to get a good job despite only average grades. The one undergraduate (female, third year), whose main interest was in computer science, appeared to be much more highly motivated. She named three very large and very well-known computer MNCs operating in Thailand and said that her aim was to work for one of them. At the time of the interview, her GPA was just over 3.8 and she said that she only competed for the top mark in any one course with two other students (both female!) who also had similar GPAs.

In asking the undergraduates why they might skip classes or come late, three of them said that sometimes they "had something else to do" or "wanted a rest"! The more serious student said she only skipped classes if it was an emergency situation and she rarely came late, again only in a situation she could not avoid. When it comes to discussing the findings from the four postgraduate students things were rather different.

First, naturally they were older, the youngest of the four being 23 and the other three were over 25, while the four undergraduates were between 17 and 20. So as one would expect, the post graduate students were a more mature group.

Second, they were all working and their classes were at night or at weekends. Also, all two of the four were married and one married student had one young child. So they all had work and family commitments.

Also, they were all paying their fees from their own 'pockets'! Their families were not paying any of their fees while they were studying at this level. Both the Thai postgraduate students said that when they were undergraduates they did not worry about high grades, but once they started working, they started to think differently!

Sometimes they did arrive late, particularly to some of the night classes, because of work commitments and heavy traffic but they each indicated that they wanted to avoid this as far as possible. Each of these students had good grades but only one (female, doctoral student, Chinese) was really outstanding. She had almost completed her thesis and she would do so in the minimum time, however, each of these four students had a GPA in their graduate programs of 3.5 or higher.

They had quite a different attitude to study from most of the undergraduate students even though they each had much greater demands on their available time. However, both masters' degree students did indicate that not all their classmates were progressing as well as were they. Both masters' degree students had a good command of English but said that many other Thai students in their classes did have significant problems with English language.

English was also a problem for one of the two doctoral students (Thai, male). He was not yet at the thesis-writing stage but indicated considerable concern for when he reached this stage. At that time, he was still doing coursework courses and he said that he could handle this without too many problems. He did say, however, that he was in a coursework class of about 20 students and he thought that at least half the class had an even lower level of English

language competence than himself! He said that if had problems writing the thesis in English, he did not know how these other students would manage.

When introducing the topic of cultural difference into the conversations, interestingly, none of the undergraduates appeared to believe that there was anything in Thai culture which made it difficult for Thai students to study in English, i.e., that once Thai students had sufficient English there were no other important cultural factors which would affect their performance.

However, all the postgraduate students indicated a rather different view, The two Thai students in particular, both indicated that they felt that there was quite a different attitude to the learning process of English first language students. They tended to relate this to the 'rote learning' approach of the Thai schooling system. They did some 'research' projects in High School but these were essentially descriptive. They said that they never were required to undertake any critical analysis or evaluation even at the undergraduate level at Thai universities. This suddenly became different both when they went to work but also in their postgraduate studies. They all said that this was particularly true when they were taught by English-first language professors and that they really appreciated this experience, even though, it was frequently difficult for them initially. The main problem for the postgraduate students was time especially to try to read all the required literature.

This researcher is not really sure of how a 'rote learning' schooling approach can be regarded as a 'cultural factor' but I suggest that it can as it appears that there is a somewhat similar approach in a number of Asian countries. However, it is somewhat different in China, according to the two postgraduate Chinese students included in this study. They said that competition in the education system in China, from pre-school to post graduate education, is so great that everyone has to study as hard as possible, but, again, they were also critical of rote learning in the Chinese schooling system.

Incidentally, both the Chinese students in this study, one at master's degree level and the other, a doctoral student, were regarded as top performers in their courses in Thailand. This does not mean, of course, that all Chinese students studying in Thai universities are necessarily outstanding!

When interviewing the four academic co-researchers, one also finds interesting comments. Of the three English first language professors, all had taught in English in Thailand for ten years or more, but one of these professors had only taught postgraduate classes while the other two had taught both undergraduate and postgraduate classes.

They had the following criticisms of Thai students, particularly undergraduates:

(1) Not coming to class on a number of occasions or coming late, leaving early, not coming back from class breaks, etc. Usually, this occurred without any apology or any request or any excuse.

(2) A great amount of talking in class and sometimes talking on mobile phones even though these were supposed to be banned from classrooms.(although this ban was not necessarily enforced).

(3) An attitude of many undergraduate students (but certainly not all) that they just wanted to achieve a pass grade and not aim any higher.

(4) an attitude amongst many Thai undergraduate students that they 'deserved' to pass because their parents had paid so much money for them to study in an English language program (even if they missed many classes).

Two incidents: The American professor now refuses to teach Thai undergraduate business students at one of Thailand's most prestigious universities because of their in-class behavior. The Australian professor refused to let two Thai students sit for their final exam in a course because one had not attended any classes and the other had attended one class (out of 15 classes).The two students immediately went to the Thai Director of the program and

complained, she then allowed the students to sit the exam, even though a notice in English & signed by her was on the classroom door where the exam was held saying that students failing to attend 80% of classes might not be able to sit for the final exam.. When the Australian Professor complained and pointed to the Notice she said it was 'subject to interpretation'! The Australian professor then withdrew from teaching any more classes in that program. Again, this was/is at one of one of the top ranked public universities in Thailand.

All the English first language professors said that postgraduate students were very different from undergraduates although one had taught on a postgraduate degree which immediately followed an undergraduate degree and where the students were full time, younger and being paid for by their parents and he said that this was more similar to an undergraduate degree as far as student behavior was concerned.

Another problem pointed out by all the professor co-respondents was a fairly large amount of plagiarism in assignments and sometimes cheating in exams. In all cases, all the foreign professors have stopped reporting such instances as they say that they appear to be 'blamed' for even reporting them (even when they have clear evidence that such plagiarism/cheating has occurred). Cheating is more common in undergraduate tests and examinations but plagiarism, particularly from the web occurs to some extent both in undergraduate and post graduate assignments.

All Thai universities appear to have policies against cheating and plagiarism but, at least in the business/management area in some Thai universities, such policies may not appear to be followed to any great extent.

One example (but not from this study): the author was asked to sit on a panel to hear a presentation on her thesis by a Thai master's degree student at a large Thai private university. Before the panel meeting, he received a copy of the thesis to read. He began reading the thesis but sensed something was wrong probably as in parts of the thesis the writing was good and, in other parts, not so good. On investigation he found that about two-thirds of the work had been taken directly from the web without any acknowledgement. He presented this to the other panel members (all Thai professors) prior to the presentation. The student concerned was then allowed to present and given a pass grade despite what the author had found! The foreign professor considered writing to the President of the university concerned but decided it would be useless to do so. Understandably, he decided never to have anything further to do with that university.

However, it is realized that this may have been an isolated case and that in many other cases and Thai universities, plagiarism may be treated much more seriously.

Another problem encountered by the foreign professors is that frequently they have been approached by academic administrators (usually the Thai course coordinator) to 'upgrade' their final results. This is not an uncommon experience in a number of business/management courses in both undergraduate and graduate courses in a number of Thai universities (both public and private).

The Thai professor (co-researcher) was a most interesting interviewee. The two second year student co-researchers had been students in his class. He had done a doctoral degree at an Australian university. His English is good although he does have quite a heavy accent. He said he did not worry about student absences nor about students' coming late to class or talking in class. He has a lecture to give (in this case, in English), he gives his lecture and goes. This co-researcher says if the students pass, they pass, if they fail, they fail. He says he never changes grades, except where there is clear medical or other appropriate evidence to do so. This researcher has actually sat in on some of his classes. He frequently nominates a particular student to answer a question put to them in English in his class. If they can't answer correctly he criticizes them in front of the class (something Western professors have

been careful not to do!) Despite all this, he is regarded as a 'popular' teacher', apparently one of the most popular in that Faculty. Again, this is at one of Thailand's most famous public universities!

Rigour Criteria

The researcher used several techniques which included:
(1) Data triangulation
(2) Document review
(3) Theory Triangulation,
(4) Researcher-as -a- detective.
(5) Participation and feedback from co-researchers.

Discussion and Conclusions

The first thing that must be said is despite various criticisms which may have appeared earlier in this paper, all the academic researchers regard Thailand as a good country in which to live and work. Between them, the English first language professors (co-researchers) have collectively lived in Thailand for over 80 years, all have Thai wives and they all expect to live out the remainder of their lives here.

The author does not see the need to list or try to summarize the various points made by both the student co-researchers and the academic co-researchers. They speak for themselves. However, with the development of the ASEAN Economic Community, (AEC), Thai undergraduate students, in particular, may well have to 'lift their game' as a whole, especially as and when they may have to face competition from graduates from non-Thai universities in other ASEAN countries.

The other problem continues to be the English language. Thai students learn English at school, particularly at high school and sometimes at universities for a number of years but many still find it difficult to speak or to read or write English. This will definitely have to change if Thailand is to benefit from entry into the AEC. Indeed, many Thai students even those undertaking degrees given in English at the present time may not even have sufficient English to satisfactorily complete their studies.

Limitations

This research was qualitative research and so only used a small sample of academic co-researchers and student co-researchers. It certainly cannot be regarded as applying even to all Thai business/management students studying in their degrees in English.

As indicated earlier, it is certainly possible that the non-Thai professors in this study may be somewhat biased as a result of their experiences but they were all aware of this and tried to eliminate such biases as far as possible. Despite the problems they had encountered they said that they still enjoyed teaching in Thailand. They also said that they 'liked' Thai students and tried to encourage them to perform at their highest levels.

It is hoped that this study may stimulate other researchers to undertake further work in this interesting area.

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