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Article Title

Should culture be an overt component of EFL instruction outside of English speaking countries? The Thai context

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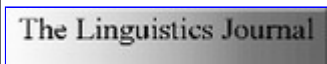
Introduction

Culture has become an increasingly important component of English language teaching in recent times. There are a number of reasons for this related to a view of language that incorporates a wider social and culture perspective, and to the increasingly multicultural use of English. To illustrate this multicultural use of English this paper will examine the use of English in Thailand and the teaching of culture. This will then be followed by a discussion of some of the difficulties involved in teaching culture awareness outside of the central English speaking countries, especially which culture to focus on and overcoming stereotypes. Some suggestions will be made as to how these difficulties may be overcome and how we might approach the teaching of cultural awareness in a systematic way as applied to the Thai environment.

The cultural context of language and language teaching Writers such as Boas (1911), Halliday and Hymes have changed our view regarding the position of language to include the wider context of culture and socio-pragmatics. In particular Halliday's (1979) and Halliday and Hasan's (1984)

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socio-semiotic view of language emphasizes the social meanings that language both represents and shapes, "The social structure is not just an ornamental background to linguistic interaction...It is an essential element in the evolution of semantic systems and semantic processes." (Halliday, 1979,114). Therefore every language will reflect the values, beliefs and assumptions of the culture it came from. Thus learning a language will also involve learning the culture the language expresses.

Subsequently our view of language teaching has also changed to incorporate this link between culture and language. Being competent in communication involves more than just an understanding of the syntax and range of _expression within a language. Hymes' (1972) definition of communicative competence, which underpins much of communicative language teaching, highlights the importance of understanding the socio-linguistic aspects of language. This conception of communicative competence has been expanded in recent years to include intercultural communicative competence (see Byram 1991 and Kramsch 1993). Whereas communicative competence involves an understanding of the norms of social interaction of one socio-cultural community, intercultural communicative competence entails an understanding of the differences in interactional norms between different speech communities and an ability to "reconcile or mediate between different modes present" (Byram and Fleming 1998, 12). Central to the notion of intercultural communicative competence is 'cultural awareness'. Cultural awareness involves an understanding not only of the culture of the language being studied but also of the learners' own culture. This is viewed as an intrinsic part of language learning and without it successful communication may be impossible.

English teaching and use in a foreign culture: Thailand English has become firmly established as the international language of the present time. It is used and taught in a diverse range of situations and cultures throughout the world, often far removed, in both distance and in beliefs and values, from the cultures of the original English speaking countries. Krachu (1977) has illustrated different varieties of English outside of these original English speaking countries such as Indian English and Nigerian English. Many of these contexts, such as Asia have very different beliefs, value systems and educational doctrines to the traditional English speaking countries such as Great Britain and the United States.

Turning to the example of Thailand, English is the second language for most Thais and is taught in schools often from the first years of schooling (O'Sullivan and Tajaroensuk 1997). Furthermore, some ability in English is a requisite of higher education and all students must pass an English component in government universities undergraduate degrees. A national survey of English use revealed English being used to communicate with native speakers (NS) from both the 'central' English speaking countries (the UK, the US, Australia, etc), and non-NS from countries such as, Japan and Germany as an international language (Wongsothorn et. al. 1996). At school and in higher education English is generally taught by Thai teachers with a small number of native English speaking teachers (NEST), however, there is also a large commercial language school sector that employs almost exclusively NESTs (Kershaw 1994).

This provides a mixed picture of English use, as it is used both

to communicate with NS and with non-NS, who may not share the cultural assumptions of NS. Moreover, it is taught mainly by non-NESTs who again may have different cultural beliefs from NESTs. Williams (1992) has also discussed the variety of uses English is put to in Thailand, and other writers such as Ellis (1996), and Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) have illustrated English being used in a variety of South East Asian contexts in ways removed from native speaker norms.

Difficulties in teaching culture

Which culture?

As the case of Thailand demonstrates, English teaching and use may occur in a wide variety of contexts in non-English speaking countries, which often do not involve English NS. This raises the important question of what culture we should be addressing when teaching cultural awareness. If not all communication is taking place with English NS then it may not be relevant to teach English culture. This has led writers such as Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) to suggest that we should not be teaching English with reference to English-speaking countries' cultures. Rather they suggest that English should be taught in a way that is independent from this cultural content, and refers only to the "International attitudes" (Alptekin and Alptekin, 1984, 16) of international English.

However, they do not specify what these 'international attitudes' might be, and furthermore I would agree with Medgyes (1999, 7) in doubting that there is any one identifiable variety of English that could be called 'International English'. Perhaps most importantly though is Alptekin and Alptekin's suggestion that English can somehow be taught without culture. As stated at the beginning of this paper, culture and language are inexorably linked and as such cannot be separated. Numerous authors (see for example Valdes, 1986, 1990, Byram 1991, Byram and Fleming 1998, Kramsch 1993) have highlighted the impossibility of teaching English without teaching culture. Whether culture is consciously or unconsciously part of the teachers' pedagogic aims the transmission of culture is unavoidable. The content of what we teach will always be in some way linked to culture, as Valdes points out, every lesson is about something and that something is cultural (1990, 20). Nevertheless, the central question of what culture should be taught still remains, and I would agree with Alptekin and Alptekin in questioning the relevance of focusing exclusively on English speaking culture in all contexts. I would argue the learners' own culture is of equal importance and this will be examined in more detail later in this paper.

Stereotyping

Another significant difficulty is avoiding stereotypes when teaching culture. Guest (2002) has argued that attempts to identify national characteristics for the purposes of comparing and contrasting cultures, leads to oversimplification and stereotypes of cultural characteristics. Moreover, he believes that focusing on national cultural stereotypes ignores the individual and the diverse range of equally important sub-cultures that every individual is a part of. Guest suggests that culture is best left to covert, unconscious transmission rather than direct teaching (2002, 160). Furthermore an examination of TESOL materials by Clarke and Clarke (1990) illustrated the one sided, idealized and narrow view of culture presented in many of these materials. This, they claim, can create an unrealistic stereotyped view of English culture in learners,

especially when learners compare the culture presented in TESOL materials with their own probably more balanced view of their own culture (1990, 35). This is often further reinforced by the distorted images of English, and in particular North American, culture presented in the media, which is often learners main source of contact with English culture.

These problems illustrate some of the difficulties in teaching culture and the necessity of avoiding stereotypes; however they do not seem to support avoiding teaching culture directly as Guest proposes. Rather this highlights the importance of the distinction between generalisations and stereotypes. Stereotypes are fixed and are not open to change or modification with experience, whereas generalisations are flexible and change over time with our experiences (Clarke and Clarke 1990, 34) and thus can aid understanding. As Lado (1957 cited in Valdes 1986) notes, when comparing two cultures we must be very careful in the generalisations we make and be prepared to revise or change these generalisations as our understanding of another culture develops.

Within the Thai context learners are often exposed to a limited range of encounters with English culture through Western media and brief encounters with tourists, which can easily lead to unrepresentative stereotypical impressions. In response to this it has been recommended that teachers aid learners to become aware of these stereotypical images, through discussions and critical examinations of them in the classroom (Wongbiasaj 2003), in particular through the use of English media.

As regards ignoring the individual in teaching culture, Kramsch (1993) has highlighted the constant conflict between the individual and the personal meanings they may try to communicate, and the larger context of society in which those meanings are expressed. As language teachers and learners this is a conflict we cannot avoid but must be aware of. We should not, as Guest feels, ignore that task, as being too difficult or complex, but accept it as a part of understanding a culture and the individuals within it. Furthermore, in no way does making generalisations about other national cultures and our own in the teaching of culture imply that we should ignore other aspects of culture such as gender, class, or ethnicity, and Kramsch (1993, 49) urges teachers to consider this range of diversity within culture.

In support of teaching culture

A reoccurring theme of this paper has been that language and culture are inseparable, and even writers such as Guest (2002), who question the purpose of direct teaching of culture, accept that in teaching English we will also be transmitting the values of English culture. Kramsch has pointed out that "language teachers are so much teachers of culture that culture has often become invisible to them." (1993, 48). If this is the case then culture would surely be best approached in the same kind of systematic way as other aspects of language, such as grammar and vocabulary. As Valdes remarks if culture is an unavoidable part of language teaching, then "recognizing the culture lessons to be learned for what they are and making the most of them enhances the learning experience." (1990, 20). The kind of systematic approach we might take will be outlined later.

A further, and far from insignificant reason for teaching

culture, is its popularity amongst learners. Over half of the learners in a survey by Prodromou (1992) indicated an interest in learning about the native culture of English, and the higher the level of English the more important learners felt it was to learn about culture. These results support my own experiences, where students often express a desire to learn about English speaking culture on needs analysis forms. A short survey given to 80 students at the university where I teach revealed 77 of the respondents either using or expressing a desire to use their English with NS or within English speaking environments. Furthermore, a more in-depth study into cultural awareness amongst Thai learners at the same university revealed 51 out of 75 respondents citing interest in English culture as an important reason for studying English. An even larger majority 67 out of 75 respondents marked wanting to communicate with English native speakers as an important reason for studying English (Baker 2003).

Further support comes indirectly from a survey by Timmis (2002), in which the majority of learners and teachers of English from a large range of countries expressed a desire to speak English according to native speaker norms, however the survey also demonstrated a wish to retain aspects of their own culture such as accent, especially amongst Asian students (Timmis 2002, 242). These surveys would seem to provide good evidence for teaching the culture of English speaking countries. However they also suggest that not only English speaking culture should be taught but also other cultures need to be examined. In particular learners need to develop an awareness of their own and other cultures and this will be dealt with more fully in the examination of approaches to teaching culture.

Approaches to teaching culture

Cultural comparisons

Culture has traditionally often been taught through transmission of facts about the culture in courses such as Landeskunde in Germany and Civilisation in France. These courses have been concerned with presenting information about the target culture such as history, geography, institutions, the arts, traditions and way of life (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993). However our view of culture has broadened to include a more interpretive approach towards culture (Kramsch 1993, 24). Instead of just being concerned with the facts of one culture the emphasis has moved towards interpreting culture based on cross-cultural understanding, involving comparisons and contrasts with a learners' native culture and the culture of the language they are studying (see Valdes 1986). Dunnet et. al. suggest six aspects of culture that learners and teachers should be familiar with.

(1) Languages cannot be translated word-for-word... (2) The tone of a speaker's voice (the intonation pattern) carries meaning... (3) Each language-culture employs gestures and body movements which convey meaning... (4)...languages use different grammatical elements for describing all parts of the physical world. (5) All cultures have taboo topics... (6) In personal relationships, the terms for addressing people vary considerably among languages. (1986, 148-149)

Teachers and learners should be aware of these features and be prepared to analyse both their own culture and the target culture according to such criteria. Applying this criteria to the Thai context it is possible to identify a number of areas for productive cultural comparisons.

(1) Languages cannot be translated word for word. As Dunnett et al. stress individual words have idiomatic uses and connotations that go beyond the individual word itself. If we take the English word 'serious' the list of connotations for a Thai are very different to the average native speaker. Whereas in English it can have positive, negative or neutral connotations, the Thai connotations of 'serious' (which can be translated in various ways e.g. 'krieat', 'jing jang' or even 'serious') are very different and usually associated with stress, boredom or hard work. This is not a concept that is likely to be explained in a simple dictionary style word-for-word translation.

(2) The intonation pattern carries meaning. The Thai language is a tonal language and so the intonation patterns are very different to the English language. For Thai students it is important that they recognise the importance of tonal patterns at the super segmental level in English as opposed to the individual syllable pattern for tones in Thai.

(3) Languages and cultures use non verbal communication which conveys meaning. Although many gestures are similar in Thai and English such as nodding for affirmation many others are not shared. A good example of this is the ubiquitous 'Thai smile'. The 'smile' carries a far wider range of meanings in Thai than it does in English culture. This can sometimes lead to serious communication breakdowns between Thais and English speakers. An example from my own early experience in Thailand illustrates the point. When confronting the Thai owner of a language school with administrative problems, complaints regarding student numbers in the class were met by a beaming smile and little else. I took this to mean lack of concern or an attempt to trivialise or ignore the problem. I left the discussion upset and angry by what appeared to be the owner's offhand attitude to my problems. It was only later when another native speaking English teacher, with considerably more experience of Thailand, explained that a smile meant an apology and the fact that the following day all my complaints had been addressed, that I fully understood the situation.

(4) Languages use different grammatical elements for describing the physical world. Thai and English grammar are very different in a number of areas such as subject use, tense and aspect, inflections and word order. These can at times cause communication problems at a semantic level. For instance the Thai language contains no tense or aspect. This can make areas of English grammar such as past simple or present perfect and any accompanying temporal references difficult to grasp for Thai learners. Even when learners understand them, they may find them cumbersome and avoid using them (Svalberg and Chuchu 1998). The extent to which this may represent different approaches to viewing the physical world are debatable, however I think anyone familiar with both Thai and English culture would feel their concepts of time are different.

(5) Cultures have taboo topics. Many of the topic taboos of English and Thai culture are the same and certainly Thai's rarely give offence, in my experience, to native English speakers in terms of topic choice. Nevertheless there are a number of topics which are perhaps a more acceptable choice of topic in Thai than in English. Thais are often quicker than a native English speaker to move the conversation on to family matters, in particular why someone is unmarried, or why they

do not have children. However, a taboo topic for Thai speakers which is not taboo for English speakers is royalty. Thais do not openly criticise their royal family (O'Sullivan and Tajaroensuk 1997) and are often shocked by the irreverent attitude of both British and Australian English speakers to the British royal family.

(6) The terms for addressing people vary considerably among languages.

This is another area of considerable difference between English and Thai. Terms of address in Thailand often refer to the age of the interlocutors (see O'Sullivan and Tajaroensuk 1997). There is no equivalent for this in English, although Thai students often ask for age clarification when it is not given in English. For example when asked about my family, I explain I have one brother, the second question is invariably 'is he older or younger?' (I now always say I have one younger brother). Matters are further complicated by the use of first names in formal address rather than surnames. Native English speakers are often referred to as Mr. followed by their first name and no surname e.g. Mr. William. This extends all the way to the Prime Minister and the King. Surnames are very rarely used in address. Even English language publications in the country refer to people by their first names for example, Mr. Suwat, his full name being Sawat Saengharn (Hutasingh, 2002).

Kramsch's "Third Places"

A contrastive approach to culture should aid learners' understanding of another culture, however it will be necessary to go beyond this to achieve a full understanding of culture. If language and culture are inseparable then as learners acquire a new language they will also be acquiring a new culture. However, we cannot expect this culture to be the same as either the learners' native culture or the culture of the language they are studying. The learner will initially have a synthesis with their own culture, and in learning a foreign language such as English may use it in ways that express meaning in their own culture. Nevertheless, as learners' understanding of a foreign language develops they may come to understand other values and meanings familiar to the foreign culture that are alien to their own culture.

Yet their understanding of these values and meanings may still be different to that of the native speaker. This leads Kramsch to suggest that foreign language learning takes place in a 'third place' that the learner must make for him/herself between their first culture (C1) and the foreign language culture (C2). This 'third place' involves the language learner in an objective and subjective reflection of C1 and C2 from which they must choose their own meanings that best reflect their personal perspectives. Hence this conception of culture emphasizes the importance of individual interpretations of culture rather than rigid stereotypical notions.

Kramsch (1993, 205-206) proposes an examination of four aspects of culture in keeping with this view of cultural acquisition:

1. Establishing a sphere of interculturality - relating C1 to C2 and reflecting on perceptions of C1 and C2.
2. Teaching culture as an interpersonal process - going

beyond the presentation of cultural facts and moving towards a process of understanding foreignness ('macro-features' such as cultural specific values and attitudes).

3. Teaching culture as difference - culture should not be viewed as only national traits, many other aspects of culture such as age, race, gender, social class need to be considered.

4. Crossing disciplinary boundaries - Teachers need to have some understanding of a wider range of subjects such as sociology, ethnography, and sociolinguistics.

If this process of acquiring culture and language is successful, learners should be able to use English in such a way as to communicate effectively with English NS and also in a way that reflects their own local cultures and personal beliefs (see Kramsch and Sullivan 1996). In this way learners of English will no longer be seen as trying to be pseudo-English NS but as speakers in their own right. A concept echoed by Medgyes (1999) when he purposes a successful bilingual teacher as a more suitable model for learners than a mono-lingual/mono-cultural NS teacher. This seems a more realistic and appropriate aim for many EFL learners in contexts outside of the central English speaking countries than that of the ideal native speaker. Underlying this approach is the idea of learners and teachers who can mediate between cultures, and find a place of their own from which to view both cultures and to make sense of communicating between them in "third places". This paper now turns to an examination of how comparisons and mediations between cultures by both learners and teachers might be implemented in the Thai classroom.

Pedagogic Implementation

At present, there is growing realisation of the importance of culture within English teaching in Thailand, and the need for teachers and learners to be aware of the complexity of culture. This was highlighted at the 2003 Thailand TESOL conference entitled ELT 2003: Culture, Content, Competency, in which a number of speakers (Damnet 2003, Wongbiasaj 2003) discussed the importance of raising cultural awareness among Thai learners. Given the diverse range of uses for English in Thailand highlighted previously, this would suggest that Thai learners need to use English in multi-cultural contexts rather than with reference to only the English speech community, and teaching content needs to reflect this. Furthermore, teaching methodology itself needs to mediate between Thai and Western educational values, especially concerning communicative, learner centered approaches to language teaching (see for example Williams 1992, Kajornboon 2000). This has been illustrated in Thailand by the difficulty experienced in implementing the new learner centered national curriculum under the 1999 Education Act in a traditional teacher centered education culture (Bunang 2002, O'Sullivan and Tajaroensuk 1997, Simon 1990).

Culture in the classroom

The teaching of culture should take place within the normal language classroom and not as a separate subject as has been traditionally the case in Thailand. It is within the classroom that EFL learners acquire English language and hence culture, it is surely at this point that culture should be discussed. Many writers (Kramsch 1993, Tomalin and Stempleski 1993 and Valdes 1990) view the content of what takes place in the

language classroom as the ideal material with which to address culture. This may be for many learners especially in 'foreign' EFL contexts their first point of contact and possible conflict with a foreign culture; both through the language and materials and possibly NS English teachers. Furthermore, the language classroom provides plenty of opportunity for 'meta-talk' (Kramsch 1993, 246), that is, a discussion of the language and behaviours presented. Such meta-talk could involve discovery of the kinds of difference identified earlier using Dunnett et.al's (1986) contrastive framework.

Materials and content

Equally importantly, materials and content in EFL instruction should try to make learners aware of the cultural content of language learning and encourage Thai learners to compare English culture with their own. Materials that do this will, as Valdes (1990, 23) suggests, prove successful with learners. Popular course books in Thailand such as English File (Oxendon and Latham-Koneig 2000) and Interchange (Richards 2000) provide good examples of materials that provide plenty of opportunities for learners to examine other cultures and their own. Furthermore materials that present English culture through the perspectives of foreign learners may also provide valuable insights from 'third place' perspectives (for a good example of this see Mlynarczyk, R. and Haber, S. 1998). However in preparing such materials it is necessary to avoid the kind of oversimplifications and stereotypes mentioned earlier by Clarke and Clarke (1990).

Moreover these materials must also encourage learners to compare cultures and to take a critical perspective. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) propose a range of tasks such as class discussions, research and role-plays using materials drawn from English speaking countries that promote discussions, comparisons and reflection on English culture and the learners own culture. These can be arranged around such subjects as cultural symbols and products e.g. popular images, architecture, landscapes, cultural behaviour e.g. what is considered appropriate, values and attitudes, patterns of communication e.g. non-verbal communication, and exploring cultural experiences e.g. looking at learners own feelings and experiences of the target culture (Tomalin and Stempleski 1993,11-12). Moreover, English language materials drawn from the learners' own culture such as local newspapers can prove an excellent source of cross-cultural materials. Within Thailand English language newspapers such as 'The Bangkok Post' provide a useful selection of such material.

Teacher Training

Teacher training both for the NEST and non-NEST should equip them to deal with culture and cultural contrasts as they arise in English teaching. In the context of learning English in non-English speaking countries, for the local non-NEST, knowledge of English culture and of their own culture would be necessary and some time spent in an English speaking country would be valuable. For the NEST a good understanding of their learners' culture and language and also of their own culture would also be valuable. This would imply the advantages of NESTs with long-term experience working in their learners' country over NESTs with little experience of the culture. Further insights can be gained from non-NEST and NEST teachers working together. Such co-operation in materials and course planning would hopefully reduce or at least anticipate some of the

many cross-cultural difficulties encountered such as different teaching and learning styles (Oxford and Anderson 1995, Reid 1987), styles of discourse, different content schema when approaching reading tasks (Steffensen and Joag-Dev 1984) and diverse writing styles (Hinkel 1999, Kaplan 1966, O'Sullivan and Tajaroensuk, 1997).

Conclusion

If culture and language are interlinked and inseparable then we need to try to teach culture in some kind of systematic way, as we try to do with other aspects of language. However there are problems in deciding what culture to teach, possibly creating cultural stereotypes and ignoring the individual when teaching culture. Furthermore, in many foreign countries, such as Thailand, English is often used as an international language rather than as a means of communicating with English speakers from English speaking countries, bringing into question the relevance of English speaking culture. Nevertheless, these difficulties do not mean that culture should be ignored or left to unconscious processes. Learners and teachers should be aware of the cultural aspects of communication and language and need to be able to interpret these on both national and individual levels. They should also be prepared to re-evaluate and re-assess their knowledge based on experience.

Learners also need to be encouraged to view using a second language as a new cultural experience and not part of either their native culture or the TL culture. Communication in an L2 or FL takes place in a 'third place'. Teacher training, materials, and course content within Thailand need to reflect such uses of English. English teachers in Thailand should be familiar with both English and Thai culture and be able to take cross-cultural perspectives. Moreover materials should encourage learners to reflect on comparisons between cultures and to form their own perspective on them; through materials drawn from English cultures, cross-cultural materials involving outsiders' observations on English culture, and locally produced (Thai) English materials. Finally the teaching of culture should be integrated into normal English lessons and be a covert part of the lesson.

The view of language learning presented above encourages learners to view themselves as acquiring a new culture and one that enables them to take a cross-cultural perspective on their own and the TL culture. This is especially relevant to teaching English in non-English speaking countries such as Thailand. Whilst making learners aware of English NS norms it does not stress the need for learners to always follow those norms. Rather this gives learners the opportunity to express both local cultural (Thai) and individual meanings. Hopefully, instead of ignoring the individual and creating cultural stereotypes, such a view of language and language teaching should generate more diversity within the international use of English.

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