Reflections on Teaching English in Thailand

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Abstract: Teaching English in Thailand is viewed from the perspectives of Japanese and some other Asian countries. Cross-cultural references are made to English-Thai language contrasts in pronunciation, grammar as well as some Thai discourse and social relations affecting the use of English and classroom management, such as Thai concepts regarding *ajarn/ ajaan* (teacher) and *sanuk* (enjoyment) and how they impact social and classroom behavior. The essay is a reflection of the author's experiences of learning about the Thai language and culture not only in the contexts of school life but also in developing personal relations.

Keywords: Teaching English in Thailand, comparisons with Japanese, Thai language characteristics, social relationships and expectations, good teacher concepts

1.   Thai Classrooms and Learning

Questions often asked of me from my four and a half years of teaching in Thailand are: What are Thai students like? Are they good at learning English? What is it like teaching there? Is there much difference between a Thai classroom and that of Japan?

Before going to live in Thailand, I had visited many times both as a tourist as well as attending some conferences. Life seemed congenial, the people very sociable, lively and outgoing with a nice sense of humor. Their politeness was a strong feature of how they related to others. The contact with Thais, whether in the street stalls or in professional settings, was very satisfying. The people were emotionally expressive and always seemed eager to please. I knew that Thai society was very sensitive to status and one's position in a hierarchy. Deference (being polite) was important in identifying who you might be but responses were carefully gradated in terms of who you actually were. Being polite included not only being soft-spoken but also speaking in a standard language, whether in Thai or English. In other words, there were subtle degrees of deference depending on the relationship and situation.

2.   An Eye on the *wai* Gesture

An iconic Thai gesture is the *wai.* This gesture is widely used in making greetings and on occasion in apologizing or making requests. It combines a bow with the hands placed together usually before the face level. The appropriate *wai* gesture was actually quite complex, the height and degree of the bow being dependent on whom you were interacting with, but whether to do a *wai* also depended on one's relative social ranking. For example, a professor would not do so to his students, nor to shop keepers and service personnel. Everyone, of course, would show their respect to a monk with a deep *wai*, but within the monastic communities the use or not would depend on the hierarchy present. Doing things with good humor was important; joking and making puns were means to smooth any interaction. As a tourist and as a guest, life seemed comfortable in Thailand. Naïve visitors, of course, indiscriminately violated many of the proper behaviors but a sense of humor and an acceptance of whatever *karma* each

person has, has given the Thai people a reputation for tolerance. But as I was later to learn, tolerance does not necessarily mean approval.

3.   Thai-Japanese Similarities and Differences

Before going to teach in Thailand, I had expected a number of similarities between Thai and Japanese, especially since both were from Asian hierarchy-oriented societies and proper deference, polite language and behavior were very important in both. One's identity was conditioned more on what you were doing than on what you had. Both cultures were deeply embedded in Buddhist precepts, all be it that Thai are Theravada and Japanese Mahayana. While the similarities are there, the differences are deep and lined with many potential pitfalls. An English speaking person from Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States tends to seek an informal relationship between teachers and students. Wanting to step outside of formal social roles and express themselves in casual speech styles are regarded by Westerners as showing one's true colors to establish a relationship of trust. Not necessarily so in Thailand. Giving face to honor the position of someone superior is essential to establish or maintain a relationship.

I remember when I first came to Japan to teach, the classrooms were highly formalized. The teacher was to stand on a platform for his/her presentation. And when the teacher entered, the class leader would call out "stand" (*rits)* derived from the command *(kiritsu),* then "bow" (*rei)* followed by "be seated" *(chakuseki)* before the class lecture would begin. Asking questions of a teacher in class was considered impolite. As it was expected that the teacher would hold forth from a raised platform in giving a lecture, trying to develop conversational skills by moving about went against student expectations in the classroom management and made many students feel uneasy. Times have changed in Japan even though the "top down" teacher to student input is still strongly present; there are now increasing varieties of classroom pedagogy. But the current fascination with PowerPoint presentations just reinforces traditional expectations about teacher-student interaction.

The deference to teachers and avoidance of questioning by students is much the same in Thailand. Teachers are called *ajarn (*also transcribed as *ajaan),* an honorific address term used to address monks as well. The aura of authority and respect given to monks encompasses teachers as well. The Thai classroom, however, has a relaxed conviviality, where there is much joking and banter between teachers and students. Deference is shown but with a familiarity suggestive of family. A key term in Thai social psychology is *sanuk* meaning "to enjoy" /"have fun". If the activity isn't enjoyable, students will not only lose interest but show their displeasure by their absence. An effective teacher is seen very much as having a parental role with authority and deserving respect but allowing a relaxed, fun relationship. Some foreigners have commented that Thai students lack a sense of perseverance (*doryoku, ganbaru* in Japanese*),* when they are faced with challenging tasks or situations, but that would be mistaken in my experience. What I have noticed is that Thai students meet up with their friends/classmates to do homework together or to help each other overcome difficulties. There is a strong sense of familial community which not only encourages their studies but provides a time for congenial bantering and relaxation to soothe stress. Lixian Jin and Martin Cortazzi have researched such culturally different patterns in study habits. Chinese, they note, tend to study independently, Malaysians and Lebanese opt for group study (Jin & Cortazzi in Berendt, 2008, p. 177-202).

Another complaint often heard among international students studying in Thailand is that Thais "do not keep promises". In a class discussion about when promises should be kept, under which circumstances, the Thai first of all said they would not usually honor simple promises such as meeting for lunch or afternoon tea. Would they notify the other person if they were not coming? The answer was evasive, saying they had no obligation to do so. It was more important to express an interest in meeting to maintain a good relationship than to actually carry out such promises. This is somewhat reminiscent of the nature of keeping social promises in Latin America. When would they honor a promise made? The highest obligation is keeping promises with parents and family. So if a student should be in class but grandmother needed a ride somewhere, the latter would always take precedence. Contrasting this to Japan, it was noted that in Japan family obligations are second in importance to company or institutional obligations.

3.1. The Impact of Writing Systems

Like Japanese, the Thai language has a highly elaborate system of language to show degrees of deference. This is seen in the choice of vocabulary as well as in pronunciation. This is further made complex by the Thai script and its role in education. Reputably the script was created by King Ramkhamhaeng in the 13th century, based on the Khmer script but modified with the large number of loan words from Indian *Devanagari* scripts which had been brought to the Thai Kingdom with the sacred Buddhist sutras. Particularly the Pali language and script was the medium for introducing Theravada Buddhism. The creation of a script for Thai pronunciation was a major linguistic achievement. Over the past centuries it has been at the core of Buddhist teaching of the sutras and has become an important, even sacrosanct, icon of Thai identity, making its adaptation to modern Thai difficult. It should be noted that there are many duplicate letters, and the system is essentially consonantal with vowels added before or after, above or below the consonant letter. Many letters are "silent" or unpronounced either because they only represent the original loan words or have become lost in modern Thai. Mastering the complexities of the alphabet is a major feature of Thai basic education, with no allowance given for the ethnic minority groups in Thailand. This has had an important impact on not just Thai school education but also affects how the Thai student approaches learning English in many ways. After all, the written languages usually provide us with our frames of reference of what we expect of language whether in Thai, Japanese or English. This, I would say, is important in how students respond to learning English, as the language schemata they have are largely based on the fact that what they are conscious about is the written forms, whether of English or Thai (or Japanese for that matter). It is such knowledge which is the basis for self-monitoring in speaking as well as writing. This also has implications for what has been called "English as a *Lingua Franca*" with its linguistic roots in European languages.

To illustrate a little: The languages of northern India are Indo-European in structure with elaborate inflections for tense and grammatical gender markings. In pronunciation the *Devanagari* script used to write those languages (including the classic Sanskrit and Pali languages) is a consonant based syllable type. Japanese *kana (hiragana & katakana)* are also syllabaries incorporating both a consonant (usually) and a vowel. The phonological patterns of Japanese are very well-suited for such syllabaries. The *Devanagari* scripts (originally influenced by the consonant based alphabets of ancient Arabic languages) are based on consonants, but vowel markings

can be added below them to indicate the full pronunciation of the syllables. This is true of all the scripts originating in India which have been the adapted models for Southeast Asian writing.

3.2. Thai Pronunciation

The Thai language, however, is very much different. It is a tone language (of five tones) with very complex vowel systems in its syllable structure, even more so than Chinese. Usually a word or syllable has only one consonant at its head but often none. Similar to Chinese, a word is usually only one syllable, except for the many foreign loan words (more on that later). There are nine basic vowels with two which are mostly different from European languages (a mid-central rounded and a high back unrounded vowel). Vowels are also contrasted by length, plus there are three general glide patterns, somewhat similar to English diphthongs (high front, high back and central). In addition there are five tones. The syllable final consonants are very limited with three nasal sounds [m, n] plus a velar nasal as well as unreleased voiceless stops [p, t, k]. This makes a highly complex syllable structure centering on complex vowels and tones and contributes to Thai learners' difficulties in mastering an intelligible English pronunciation.

Further, the fact that most native words in Thai are short, one-syllable types means that longer written words tend to be clipped short and consonants (initial and final) are simplified or assimilated. Somewhat like the English alphabet with its archaic or "silent" letters, the Ramkhamhaeng script has some consonant letters which are no longer pronounced or their phonetic quality has shifted. For example, there are letters for <l> and <r>, as well as retroflexed consonants (the latter are not part of the modern Thai language). For the <r> letter the classic pronunciation was a trill and can still be heard in formal speech among Thais, but for most Thais it has become an alveolar flap like the Japanese <r>. As any teacher knows, the flap is easily confused with a lateral both acoustically and in how it is articulated. Further, Thai speakers have generally assimilated the <r> when it is written as a cluster with <t> or deleted when it should occur with <k>. E.g. *trong* "straight" becomes *dong*, and *krap* becomes *kap* sentence final particle.

A few examples from what happens to the pronunciation of loan words into Thai can illustrate how changes affect the shape of the words into the Thai syllable structure. "Apple" becomes <aepon>, a "check" or "bill" in a restaurant becomes <chek bin> as a compound, "ice cream" becomes <aiti:m>, "English" becomes <anggrit> or <anggit>. Words spelled with "sh" (a palatal spirant) are usually pronounced as a palatal affricate, such as "shopping" becomes "chopping", "fashion" becomes "faechon". As there is no palatal spirant, so words spelled with "sh" are often pronounced as [s] as in "Shinawatra" becomes <sinawada>. Further, it must be kept in mind that the voice/voiceless contrast found in English and generally in Japanese is not distinctive, rather it is a lenis/fortis contrast with strong aspiration in the latter usually. This is compounded by the fact that the Thai affricate is not truly palatal but more alveolar. So the initial "ch" in *chitlom* is more of an alveo-palatal articulation somewhat closer to [tz]. Many Sanskrit/Pali loan words are also written with "v" or as aspirated voiced stops "bh" and "dh". In Thai such words spelled with "v" are pronounced as a bilabial [w] and "bh" simply is a lenis bilabial stop somewhat like [b]. E.g. *Suvarnabhumi i*is actually pronounced as [suwaanabum]. The final vowel is required in the script but not pronounced either. The second syllable spelled

with "ar" in romanization is just a long vowel. In fact, the use of "r" spelling after vowel letters is generally used to mark vowel length rather than any [r] articulation.

Here is a sample list of English derived loan words and how they sound in Thai with modified spellings:

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computer	[kompyuda:]
copy	[gawpi:]
disco	[disa:go]
free	[fi:]
football	[fubon]
hotel	[hoten]
ice	[ai]
nice	[nai]
jam	[yaem]
sandwich	[saenwit]
serious	[si:li:at]
shock	[chok]
six	[sik]
sure	[chua:]
TV	[ti:wi:]
video	[wi:di:o]
view	[wiu]

All of this is only to suggest that pronunciation hurdles in mastering English are greater for Thais than Japanese, and this has implications for teaching comprehensible varieties of Asian Englishes. Pronunciation textbooks presume European phonological variation and poorly represent the challenges that Thai learners face. There are issues about teaching models for pronunciation as well as effective listening strategies. I found it very important to think of context and possible intent while listening to Thai's speech. The diversity of nationalities in my classrooms with generally only a third Thai native speakers made the interaction among them equally a challenge. This need to focus on intent and context is, of course, an important strategy even among people who share a common language.

While the Royal Institute of Thailand is responsible for establishing official forms for writing Thai (the standard spellings of Thai in Thai script), there is also an official romanization which has been authorized. The problem is that most Thai people rather indiscriminately spell Thai words into their intuitive sense of what English or Thai might be in romanizing them. The result is a mishmash of spellings for the same word. Word divisions with spaces in English are also not shown in Thai script, so students often do not have a sense of word division which is assumed in Western languages and reinforced through reading.

3.3. Grammatical Hurdles

Thai grammar, too, is closer to the typologies of Chinese than to either European languages or Japanese. Tense and aspect are not marked in verbs, but are shown by modal adverbs of various types. Nouns are grouped by classifiers with number added

when necessary in counting as in Japanese or Chinese. For Thai learners of English the verb based sentence patterns of English are a great challenge. There are a number of common grammatical patterns based on Thai which surface in Thai English communication. One example is the alternating of a verb with a negative adverb in asking a question. E.g. "Can no can?" (*dai mai dai mai).* The first "mai" is the negative adverb and the final "mai" is a question marker. "Have no have?" (*Mii mai mii mai).*This pattern can also be found in the English of Chinese speakers. Another point of considerably noticeable impact is the avoidance of "saying no" in discourse strategies among Thais. In fact, the Thai language has no direct words to express "no". Rather it has to use circumlocutions as "not yes" (*mai chai).* The lack of tense and aspect inflections means that grammatical patterns are very different as well. All in all, with the pronunciation challenges, distinctive grammatical and discourse patterns, the comprehension of Thai English can be a challenge. This is an important issue with the integration of ASEAN from 2015 with English as the primary medium of communication.

3.4. Social Registers

What the Thai language is highly expressive about both in speaking and writing is the use of appropriate social registers, somewhat like the shifts in Japanese use of *keigo* (honorifics). As mentioned above, Thai society and language is very hierarchically oriented, similar to Japanese. There can be shifts of appropriate vocabulary depending on who is addressing whom. Somewhat as in Japanese there is a great variety of interpersonal referential nouns. (Note: I do not call them "pronouns" as they do not function as grammatical pro-forms, required substitutes for nouns in sentences.) They are used as address terms and come in a wide variety of functions, some for men, some for women, others for both sexes. The degree of formality, rank in social hierarchy, and intimacy are also involved in choosing appropriate address terms. Some examples:

<phom> (male term) First person ranging from polite to intimate but not used with children.

<kraphom> (male) First person but highly deferential.

<dichan> (female) First person, very formal and often avoided as it creates social distance.

<chan> (female) First person, less formal, more friendly than <dichan>. Used by men to express intimacy when paired with <thaa>. Used with children.

<khaaphajaw> (male/female) First person pronoun used in formal public statements and official documents.

<kuu> (male) First person used in male bonding informally as in drinking. Also used to express anger.

There are many more with second person and third person reference, but let these suffice as examples. It should remind us that Japanese too has a great variety of such

relational reference nouns. Whether spoken or not they lay the foundation for the various kinds of interpersonal communication.

The form of addressing others by name I found to be quite emotionally different from either English or Japanese. In Japan using the family name was assumed; personal names and nicknames are only used among very intimate relations. Social role terms also are common in Japan (e.g., *sensei, sempai, oneisan).* However, in Thailand the creation of legally registered family names is something dating from 1913 and they are derived from Sanskrit/Pali roots, auspicious in meaning but cumbersomely long. This results in two common ways of addressing others. One is to use personal names with titles to show deference, intimacy, etc. I found it embarrassing at first to be called "Eric" but realized that they were always careful to add appropriate titles such as "professor" or "doctor" in addressing me. On the street in deference to my age I was addressed with the friendly *lung* meaning roughly "uncle".

The other way is the very common use of nicknames. Students preferred to be called by their nicknames and would sometimes change them to suit their current predilections. I had students who humorously called themselves *Gung* (shrimp), *Ou* (fatty), *Aiaem* (from the English "I am"), *Bo* (from the French "beau" as she felt she was beautiful!), *Ei* (from the English letter "A") and so on. It was sometimes a challenge to connect the individual (with their nickname) to the formal names on the class registrar's list, as the formal names were rarely spoken, mainly used in legal documentation.

3.5. Expressing Relationships

A powerful vocabulary source in Thai for expressing interpersonal relations is the metaphors based on "heart" or *jai.* In Thai, heart expressions encompass the values related to good and bad relationships, expressing feelings and sympathy, showing attitudes and making decisions. The expression "cool heart" *jai yen* is used to describe a person who is a polite, quiet personality, being soft-spoken, someone who avoids confrontation and keeps smiling despite provocation or adversity. Proper feelings and attitudes are the gateway to effective communication. In English there is a sharp dichotomy between the metaphoric role of the "head" as the locus of the rational, logical, non-emotional, and "heart" as the locus of feelings and attitudes in the expressions we use. Very often the West assumes emotions are a lower order or even detrimental to rational discourse.

With Keiko Tanita I have made a study in the cultures of communication by comparing Thai, Japanese and English in this regard in "The 'heart' of things: A conceptual metaphoric analysis of heart and related body parts in Thai, Japanese and English" published in *Intercultural Communication Studies* (2011). The gist of the study is that by examining the language in underlying metaphoric patterns, expectations of communicative behavior can be highlighted. As suggested above, for Thais all communication processes depend on an interlinking of feelings, attitudes with making decisions. Rational/logical thinking cannot be divorced from attitudes or feelings for Thais. The compartmentalizing of such processes in the English/Western way of thinking often runs into conflict with the Thai. Japanese too share a cultural norm close to the Thai, but express this metaphoric linkage in the vocabulary of *hara (belly)* very often.

4.   ASEAN and English

Thailand with the rest of Southeast Asia is working toward a major integration of their livelihood since 2015. This is not only the challenge of integrating into a common market but also has requirements for communication in the association. English is seen as playing an important role, and thus English language skills are seen as a major challenge in this process. But cultural assumptions about effective and affective communication may be hidden in the languages' covert expectations about how to go about making and carrying out decisions, as suggested above. The classroom is the language laboratory for this.

Thailand prides itself as being a pivotal country in this development but is quite insecure about its English language skills as it competes with countries like the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. It is therefore pushing general educational reforms to heighten its competitive edge, trying to raise its technical as well as professional levels. New graduate schools are being developed and faculty qualifications raised. But there are big gaps between the urban middle classes and the bulk of the more rural areas. Thailand has about 150 universities but about half have been founded in the past two decades. Japan considers itself to be about 90% middle class whereas Thailand is about 20%. So there are considerable challenges involved, even though education is the key to climbing the social and economic ladders.

It should be noted, however, that among Thai elite society, most people are highly educated and have great facility in foreign languages. The large number of international schools with multiple language instruction caters more to the middle and upper strata of Thai society than to foreign families. One day while waiting in a bank, I chatted with a university student in English. When I asked him something about reading in Thai, he replied he couldn't read Thai. To my surprised response he said he had been entirely educated in international schools in English in Bangkok and was currently studying at an English-medium international university. This may be rather unusual but it still reflects attitudes that English is essential for the business world. In addition, elite families of the wealthy send their children overseas to European and American finishing schools and universities. Two examples can be given from the political elite: a former Prime Minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, studied in the United States and her predecessor, Abhisit Vejjajiva, was educated in England and graduated from Oxford. Needless to say, their language skills allow them to move in international circles. The late King's daughter, Princess Royal, HRH Chakri Sirindhorn is well-loved and much respected, including her well-known fluency in English and Chinese. She frequently represents the Thai Royal Family in an international capacity. There is a great separation between such elite and the vast majority of Thai learners/users of English, as has been suggested above. In fact a common complaint about such internationally educated is that their Thai ability isn't up to par. Studies by the Royal Institute have shown that outside the central Thailand areas the level of Thai language reading skills is quite low. About 20-40% have reading deficiencies. This is even higher among the 60 ethnic minority groups in Thailand. (See the Royal Institute of Thailand.) Because English is very much a "foreign language" rather than a "second language" in Thailand, the standard of sophistication is very much based on idealized British or American models rather than accepting the reality of their adapted use of English locally.

5.   The Concept of a Good Teacher

This brings me back to the classroom and English language instruction. There are two issues I would like to discuss here in addition to what I wrote about the classroom above. First is the expectations of what a "good teacher" should be. As mentioned above, the term for "teacher" is *ajaan*, a highly honorific address term as well. Teachers share this with Buddhist monks. In the social rankings of Thai society teachers are regarded very highly, just below the monks. There is a national day to pay one's respect to teachers who are publicly honored on the *Wai Kru* Day, including a song sung to honor them.

Here are a few lines from the song:

The respected master who gives us knowledge
Trains our mind to know right from wrong
Before we sleep, we chant and pray each time
May virtues and merits bring happiness to him
The master is owed debts of gratitude, we pay him high respect…

I have made a study of cultural and behavioral expectations about what a "good teacher" is in Thailand by comparing it with a western country Finland. While some values are shared about the teacher's knowledge ability, the kind of relationship students expect in a learning environment cluster around a warm supportive role such as Parent and Friend, that the relationship is for life and that education should be primarily to build good character. Each of these has cultural implications specific to Thailand. All of them had a low preference among Finnish students. For details see "Poles Apart: Protocols of Expectations about Finnish and Thai Teachers" by Berendt and Mattsson in *Researching Cultures of Learning* (2013).The classroom relationship of teacher and student reach beyond the confines of that space into the larger social expectations of good behavior. With the high elevation of respect for teachers in Thailand, the mode of communication tends to be unidirectional lectures, that is top down. Questioning a teacher is taboo, similar to Japanese. This makes any interactive style of teaching difficult. The flipside is that younger students frequently complain about boredom in their grammar centered English lectures.

Another important issue is what role models in learning English are expected and available. As discussed above, Thai expectations are highly framed by the hierarchical nature of their society. To aspire to a prestigious standard in language is important as a symbol of their social identity. (It should be mentioned that dress codes are a similarly important public feature of their status.) Consequently, aspiring to a standard British or American speech variety is considered to be de rigueur. The downside is that they look down on Thai English speech. But this poses a big dilemma for most Thai learners of English as their greatest contact is with the pidginized speech they encounter with other Thais (outside of those in the international schools). The vagaries of how the English alphabet is used also inhibit developing written schemata to help monitor speech and grammar. The Royal Institute has noted that even though English instruction has now started from the first grade in elementary school, there have been no signs of improvement in English ability levels.

With the 2015 ASEAN integration goals, the challenge of improving English language skills is regarded as a major hurdle. No quick fix schemes will suffice unless there are opportunities to develop adequate self-monitoring schemata in pronunciation and written grammar as well as accepting a variety of role models in English to become the groundwork of language learning.

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