



Exploring Factors Influencing the Teaching of Culture and Its Challenges: Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

This study, as part of a more comprehensive master's thesis, investigated the perceptions of Thai teachers of English about culture teaching. The aims of the study were twofold: (a) to identify the key factors influencing the teaching of culture in the English language classroom; and (b) to identify the key difficulties and problems in the teaching of culture in the English language classroom. A survey questionnaire was employed to collect the intended data. A total of 556 questionnaires were distributed to the teachers from 26 public universities in 6 geographical regions of Thailand. Eighty-four questionnaires were returned; however, only 65 were qualified for the analysis. The obtained data was analyzed by using SPSS. The descriptive statistics, namely, frequencies and percentages were used to discuss the teachers' views on the aforementioned aspects. Despite the low return rate, the results indicated that three factors regarding teacher's knowledge of the foreign culture, course description, and learners' interest were believed to be significant in influencing the teaching of culture. Also, the teachers in the study pointed to teacher's limited knowledge of the foreign culture, and learners' lack of interest in learning the foreign culture as two significant difficulties and problems detrimental to the teaching of culture. Although the results of the study help shed some light on culture teaching in the Thai ELT context, further research is encouraged to either substantiate or challenge the findings obtained from this study.

Keywords: teachers' beliefs, teachers' perceptions, in-service teachers, Thai EFL teachers, culture teaching

Introduction

Drawing largely on the assumption that language and culture are two inseparable entities (Mitchell and Myles, 2004; Wright, 1996), both cannot be taught separately (Pesola, 1991; Swiderski, 1993; Valdes, 1990). The success of language learning not only relies on the ability to familiarize oneself with the symbols of particular language, but also involves the knowledge and skills of social practices of interpreting and making meanings (Damen 1987; Kramsch, 1993, 1998; Samovar, Porter and Jain, 1981). As such, a mere focus on the teaching of the linguistic aspects of a language is no longer considered adequate to help learners become a competent language learner (Byram, 1997). Practically speaking, a lack of cultural knowledge and skills can potentially risk a language learner in "becoming a fluent fool" (Bennett, Bennett and Allen, 2003, p. 237). It is for this reason that the necessity to teach culture while teaching language is undeniable and must not be taken lightly (Corbett, 2003; Seelye, 1976).

In the contemporary world, the phenomenon of globalization has inevitably embraced and expanded countless intercultural encounters where English language is widely employed as a central medium of communication, or English as a *lingua franca* (Jenkins, 2003). In effect, the notion of using English effectively has shifted from a person's ability to use English as a medium of communication communicatively to intercultural; that is, the ability to communicate with other members of different cultures in a given intercultural communication context (Byram, 1997). Given a dramatic change in the socio-cultural context and the increase of intercultural communication in the globalized world, learners of English language must now be well-prepared and equipped with necessary cultural and linguistic knowledge and skills to go through this kind of communication (Corbett, 2003; Sercu et al., 2005). For these critical reasons, culture teaching in the teaching and learning of English language should no longer be considered a mere addendum to language teaching. Rather, it should, pedagogically speaking, be put in the forefront and gain more visibility and viability in the ELT curriculum. Only then will the learners be given the opportunity to fully develop their sense of cultural understanding and awareness as they are exposed to or introduced to a new set of cultural references and frameworks.

According to the national curriculum guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2008), the instruction of foreign languages is comprised of four major strands: language for communication, language and culture, language and relationship with other learning areas, and language and relationship with community and the world. Although, theoretically speaking, these suggested strands will prove useful to learners of English language, "it is left to the discretion of education institutions to prepare courses and provide learning management as appropriate" (MOE, 2008, p. 252). However, an attempt to change the entire course and direction of English instruction in the Thai context will never be put into effect without teachers' overall approval.

Teachers are a crucial factor in steering the teaching direction to which a class instruction is led as a whole (Kagan, 1992; Nespor, 1987). This can widely range from teaching methodologies to teaching materials used in class (Williams and Burden, 1997). Simply put, teachers enter a classroom fully equipped with what they believe to be conducive to language learning success. A newer teaching innovation will have a chance to be placed into a class only if it is more or less in consistence with the teachers' beliefs (Johnson, 1994). For this critical reason, one might logically conclude that an investigation into teachers' beliefs is of a variety of extensive uses to the teacher development (Calderhead, 1996; Pajares, 1992; Richards, 1996).

In order for the teaching and learning of English language in Thailand to be successful, and most importantly in response to the Act, teachers must be the first to recognize the importance and role of culture, given their teaching authority in classroom instruction (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, and Chinnawongs, 2002). To date, several attempts have been made to investigate the beliefs of teachers held about English learning and teaching in general (e.g., Saengboon, 2002; Sinprajakpol, 2004; Vibulphol, 2004); however, less attention has been given to the exploration of the beliefs of teachers in regard to culture teaching. In response to this scarcity, the current study was set out primarily to explore the beliefs of Thai teachers of English at the university setting held about the teaching of culture. More specifically, it focused on the following aspects: (a) the key factors influencing the teaching of culture, (b) the key difficulties and problems in the teaching of culture. It is hoped that data gathered from the study may more or less contribute to the ELT professional development in the Thai context.



Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the key factors influencing the teaching of culture in the English language classroom.
2. To identify the key difficulties and problems in the teaching of culture in the English language classroom.

Research Questions

1. What are the key factors influencing the teaching of culture in the English language classroom?
2. What are the key difficulties and problems in the teaching of culture in the English language classroom?

Review of the Related Literature

Factors Influencing the Teaching of Culture

While it is clear that, in reference to a good many of the related studies (e.g., Alptekin, 1993; Brooks, 1968; Damen, 1987; Valdes, 1990), culture is important to foreign language learning success, and therefore, must by all means be taught alongside with the language; however, there is a number of factors that play a role in the integration of culture teaching. For instance, teachers' familiarity and unfamiliarity with the foreign culture needed or intended to be presented in class. Sercu (2005a) reported that, most FL teachers who are more inclined to teach culture to their learners are those who are already knowledgeable about the foreign culture. Their level of familiarity of the foreign culture also affects the teaching time devoted to culture teaching as a whole. For those FL teachers who are less familiar with or knowledgeable about the foreign culture are found to focus less on teaching cultural topics to learners. Morales (1999) found that teachers' teaching experience also affected culture teaching applied in class. This is especially true for the situations where teachers are able to teach learners with a wide variety of cultural topics. As such, learners are not merely told about the cultural information for the sake of knowing about the foreign culture, but also given opportunities to develop their cultural perspectives.

Apart from the teacher factors, Chinh (2013) reported that, based on the study investigating Vietnamese learners' attitudes about cultural diversity in English language teaching, although they were overall positive with the teaching of culture where different cultures were introduced in class, not every learner perceived that it was always a good idea to discuss their native culture alongside with the foreign culture. This aspect of the finding makes a good example of another important factor that affects the teaching of culture, which is the learner's interest and disinterest in learning different cultures presented in class (Sercu, 2005b). Although a good many of the related literatures clearly suggest that teachers must teach the learners' native culture as they introduce them (learners) to the foreign culture (e.g., Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993), this pedagogical recommendation might not always be practical when applied into real classroom practice.

Another important factor which influences the teaching of culture is the curriculum itself. Castro and Sercu (2005) reported that, although most FL teachers were generally cognizant of the fact that culture teaching needs to be taught while teaching language, they

focused more on the teaching of language as suggested in the curriculum. Hui (2010) also found this similar perception among Chinese teachers and trainers of English.

Difficulties and Problems in the Teaching of Culture

Like language teaching, culture teaching is not without obstacles (Lessard-Clouston, 1996; Sercu et al., 2005). Though most teachers are generally aware that language and culture must not be taught separately (Crawford-Lange and Lange, 1987), the teaching and learning of culture is still rarely practiced due to a number of difficulties and problems (Omaggio-Hadley, 2000). For instance, teachers do not have enough time to teach culture in addition to language teaching; teachers are not very knowledgeable about the foreign culture; learners lack their interest in learning the foreign culture; and learners are resistant to learn the foreign culture contrasted with their cultural beliefs and values (e.g., Ahmed and Shah, 2013; Byram and Risager, 1999; Chinh, 2013; Crawford-Lange and Lange, 1987; Sercu et al., 2005).

Given limited teaching time for each class, teachers most often disregard culture teaching in addition to language teaching (Castro and Sercu, 2005; Morales, 1999). Despite their awareness of the importance and role of culture, little time is allocated to this area of teaching and learning (Omaggio-Hadley, 2000). This insufficient time also leads to the point that many teachers feel that the teaching of culture is not considered an integrated skill in association with the language teaching. Rather, it is the kind of teaching that must be taught separately from the teaching of linguistic characteristics and skills (Moore, 1996).

Although it is apparent that FL teachers, in general, are positive at the notion of teaching culture to their learners (Hui, 2010; Sercu et al., 2005), many teachers find it exceptionally difficult to execute the teaching of culture given the fact that they are not very knowledgeable about the foreign culture (Seelye, 1993). That includes their lack of first-hand experiences in the foreign culture. As such, in many cases, teachers do not feel as if they were suitable for teaching this area in which it is dealt mainly with what they are less familiar and inexperienced (Aleksandrowicz-Pedich, Draghicescu, Issaiass, and Sabec, 2003).

Castro and Sercu (2005) found that learners' lack of interest in learning the foreign culture is also significant. Since learners are introduced to a new cultural framework or reference, it should not come as a surprise to see learners' negative reactions (Alptekin, 1993; Moran, 2001). One might also conclude that their unfamiliarity of the foreign culture, to some extent, contributes to their lack of interest. Jabeeb and Shah (2011) and Kasaian and Subbakrishna (2011) discovered that their lack of interest and participation in learning the foreign culture might potentially be caused by the differences shared between the learners' native culture and the foreign culture. This is especially true for the learners who come from the Middle East, whose culture is drastically different from the foreign culture, namely, the Western culture. Also, their commitment to their native culture shape their perceptions towards the learning of foreign culture, and therefore, thinking that it is not appropriate to learn about other cultures.

Methodology

Participants and contextualization

To recruit the participants in line with the purposes of the study as well as the study framework, the researchers relied on both convenience and purposeful sampling methods. According to Dörnyei (2003), a convenience sampling is referred to a group of individuals



perceived to be representative of the population from which it is selected. It is not chosen in a random manner. Rather, the sampling group is selected primarily because it is “easy to access” (Patton, 1990, p. 181). Given accessibility to the resources, this allowed the researchers to gather the intended data. A purposeful sampling method was also chosen as a strategy to recruit merely those participants whose characteristics were in commonalities with the target population. As such, the participants recruited in this study had the following three main characteristics: (a) all were Thai EFL tertiary teachers; (b) all were in-service teachers at the time of the study being conducted; and (c) all worked at public universities in Thailand.

Table 1
Numbers of the Target Population and Participants

Subjects	Regions						Total
	N	NE	C	W	E	S	
No. of the public universities in six regions ^a	8	19	36	3	4	10	80
No. of the target population in six regions ^b	249	358	721	41	60	208	1,637
No. of the public universities chosen for the study	3	5	7	2	2	7	26
No. of the target population in the chosen universities	119	107	202	30	35	109	602
No. of the questionnaires sent	103	96	192	30	35	100	556
No. of the questionnaires received	9	10	25	5	5	30	84
No. of the questionnaires received with the consent form	7	7	19	0	4	28	65

Note. ^aThe total number of public universities in Thailand according to MOE.

^bThe total number of in-service Thai teachers of English as of the Academic Year B.E. 2556 (A.D. 2013) according to the information received from a human resource department of each university and their official websites. However, it should be noted that the total number of in-service English teachers listed here also included those from the extended campuses.

Table 1 presents the total number of target population in the context of public university in Thailand. An initial survey indicates that there were approximately 1,627 in-service Thai teachers of English in six geographical regions as of Academic Year B.E. 2556 (A.D. 2013). To have an appropriate size of the sampling, the sample size formula proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) was consulted, resulting in a sample size of 311 participants. To ensure that the response rate would reach the expected number, the study drew on an average percentage of a paper-based questionnaire, which was found to be 56% (Nulty, 2008), as the technique for increasing the response rate. As such, a total of 556 questionnaires were distributed to the target participants in six regions. They include: Northern (N), Northeastern (NE), Central (C), Western (W), Eastern (E), and Southern (S).

Table 2
Demographic Data of the Teachers (N=65)

Data	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Gender		
Male	15	23.1
Female	48	73.8
Unspecified	2	3.1
2. Age group		
Under 25	0	0
25-30	18	27.7
31-40	34	52.3
41-50	8	12.3
51-60	4	6.2
61 and over	1	1.5
3. Regions		
Northern	7	10.8
Northeastern	7	10.8
Central	19	29.2
Western	0	0
Eastern	4	6.2
Southern	28	43.1

Table 2
Demographic Data of the Teachers (N=65) (Cont.)

Data	Frequency	Percentage (%)
4. Highest degree earned		
Bachelor's degree	1	1.5
Master's degree	52	80
Doctoral degree	12	18.5
5. Former culture learning experience		
Yes	52	80
No	13	20
6. English teaching experience		
0-5 years	26	40
6-10 years	22	33.8
11-20 years	13	20
21-30 years	1	1.5
31 years and over	3	4.6
7. Levels of teaching		
Bachelor's degree	65	91.5
Master's degree	5	7
Doctoral degree	1	1.4
8. Former culture teaching experience		
Yes	15	23.1
No	49	75.4
Unspecified	1	1.5

Since the study was officially approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Thammasat University, the teachers were required to sign the consent form to participate in the study. Eighty-four questionnaires were returned; however, 19 were received without the consent form, leaving merely 65 of them qualified for later analysis.

Table 2 shows details regarding the teachers' demographic data. As can be seen, the majority (43.1%) of teachers were from the Southern region. Most (73.8%) of the participating teachers were females and 52.3% were in between 31-40 years of age.

For educational background, most (80%) of the teachers held Master's degrees. The majority (80%) of teachers mentioned their former experience in culture learning prior to their formal English teaching.

With regard to English teaching experience, the majority (40%) of teachers taught English with either under or equivalent to 5 years of classroom experience. The majority (91.5%) of them taught bachelor's degree students. Most (75.4%) had no prior experience in culture teaching in terms of formal English courses.

Instrumentation

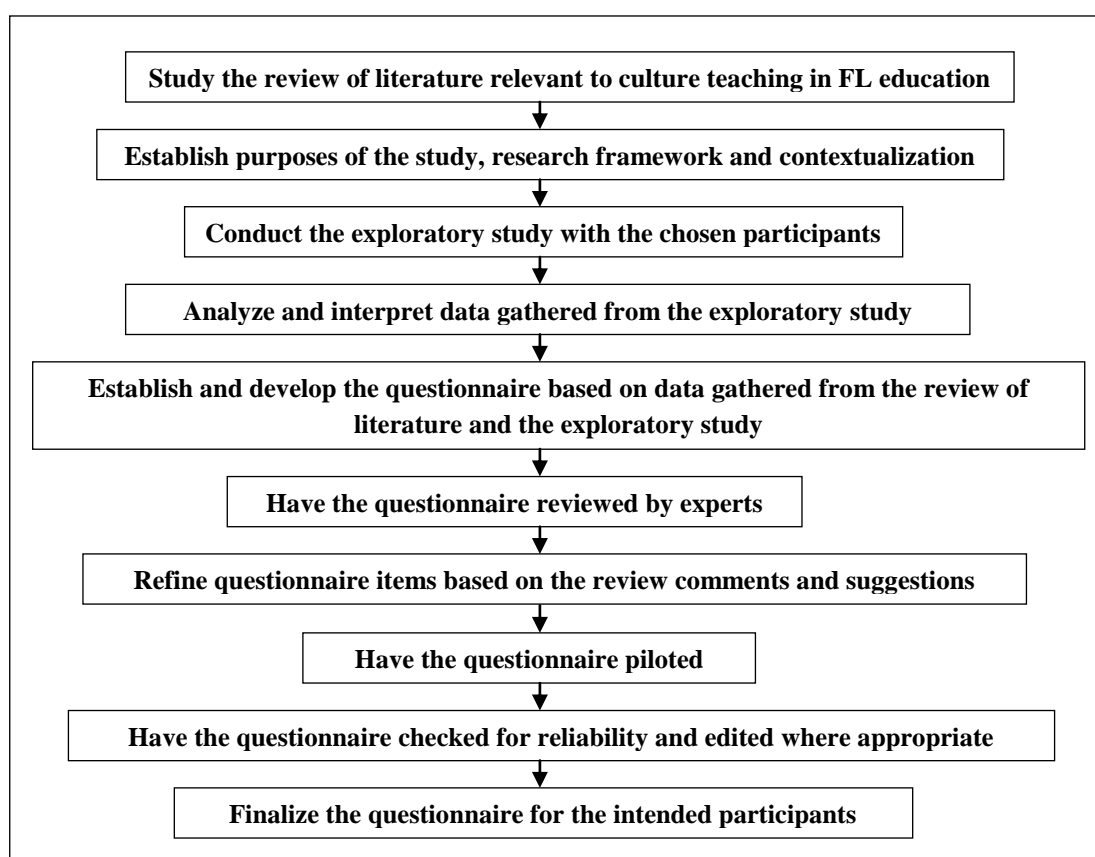


Figure 1. Questionnaire development flow chart

Figure 1 shows details regarding the development of the questionnaire employed in this study. In order to have the research instrument most suitable for the intended participants in the Thai ELT context, the questionnaire employed in this study was established and developed from data gathered from two primary sources: (a) the review of literature and (b) the exploratory study.

Since the objectives of the study were to identify the key factors influencing the teaching of culture, and the key difficulties and problems in the teaching of culture, a multi-response question template was used. With that, to provide an answer for Research Question No. 1, the teachers were asked to respond to a list of factors, which were believed to be significantly influencing the teaching of culture. For Research Question No. 2, the teachers were asked to respond to a list of difficulties and problems, which were believed to be significant in the teaching of culture.

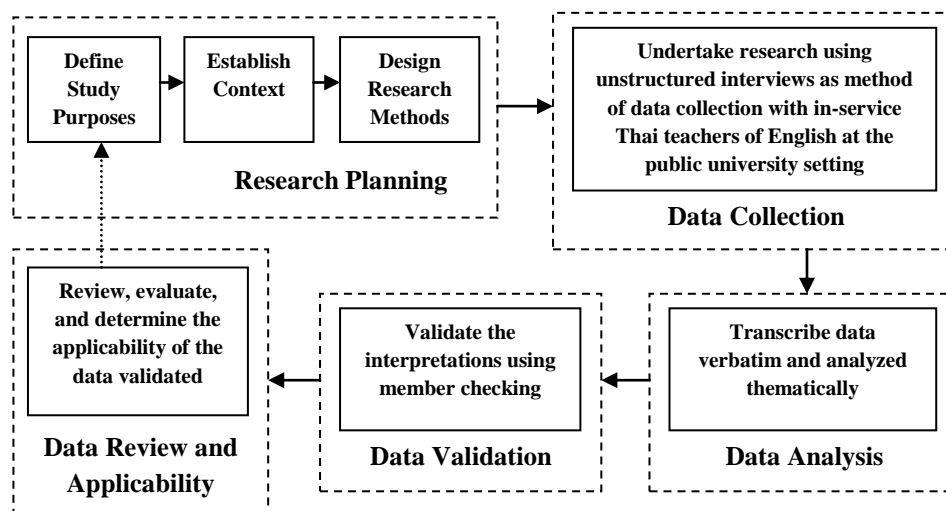


Figure 2. An overview of the exploratory study procedures

Figure 2 shows an overview of the exploratory study procedures. The purpose of the exploratory study was to get first glimpses of the teaching of culture through the eyes of Thai teachers of English, whose characteristics were in commonalities with the intended participants. Data gathered were later used to establish, develop, and refine items used in the questionnaire.

Data collection procedures

Since the target participants were from different regions, the questionnaires were sent by post to each faculty where the participants were working at the time of the study being carried out. Each participant received a set of documents, containing three types of documents and a note. The documents include: (a) the information sheet, (b) the consent form, and (c) the questionnaire. The note was to give the participants an instructional guideline since the researchers were not present there to administer the questionnaires to the participants in person. Each participant was given approximately two to three-weeks' time to fill out the questionnaires, which were later collected by the researchers.



Data analysis

The quantitative data obtained from two items of the multi-response questions in the questionnaire were analyzed by using SPSS. These descriptive statistics, namely, frequencies and percentages were later used to discuss the teachers' perceptions in regard to the key factors influencing the teaching of culture, and the key difficulties and problems in the teaching of culture.

Findings

Research Question 1: What are the key factors influencing the teaching of culture in the English language classroom?

Table 3

Factors Influencing the Teaching of Culture

Rank	Item Statements	Frequency		Percentage of cases (%)
		Number	Percentage (%)	
1	Teacher's knowledge of the foreign culture	61	10	93.8
2	Course description	53	8.7	81.5
3	Learners' interest	52	8.5	80
4	Teacher's overall attitudes towards the foreign culture	48	7.9	73.8
5	Learners' overall attitudes towards the foreign culture	45	7.4	69.2
6	Course objectives	43	7	66.2
7	Learners' social and cultural backgrounds	42	6.9	64.6
8	Teacher's experiences in the foreign culture	41	6.7	63.1
9	Learners' field of study	37	6.1	56.9
10	Learners' experiences in the foreign culture	35	5.7	53.8
11	Learners' linguistic proficiency	31	5.1	47.7
12	Teacher's language teaching expertise	30	4.9	46.2
13	Teaching materials	30	4.9	46.2
14	Class size	21	3.4	32.3
15	The cooperation of ASEAN Economic Community	20	3.3	30.8
16	Course duration	15	2.5	23.1
17	Course credit	5	0.8	7.7
18	Others (The teacher aspects)	1	0.2	1.5
19	Others (The other aspects)	1	0.2	1.5
20	Others (The learner aspects)	0	0	0
Total		611	100	940

Note. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

As shown in Table 3, the following three factors were perceived to be significant in influencing the teaching of culture in English language classroom: (a) teacher's knowledge of the foreign culture, (b) course description, and (c) learners' interest.

Research Question 2: What are the key difficulties and problems in the teaching of culture in the English language classroom?

Table 4
Difficulties and Problems in the Teaching of Culture

Rank	Item Statements	Frequency		Percentage of cases (%)
		Number	Percentage (%)	
1	Teacher has limited knowledge of the foreign culture	55	13	84.6
2	Learners lack interest in learning the foreign culture	52	12.3	80
3	The inflexibility of curriculum does not yield the inclusion of cultural contents	44	10.4	67.7
4	Teacher does not have enough time to teach culture in class	40	9.5	61.5
5	Learners have low proficiency	34	8.1	52.3
6	Learners lack critical thinking skills	32	7.6	49.2
7	Learners hold negative attitudes towards the foreign culture	32	7.6	49.2
8	Teacher does not see value in culture learning	32	7.6	49.2
9	Teacher does not have enough time to learn more about the foreign culture	30	7.1	46.2
10	Learners do not see value in English language learning	29	6.9	44.6
11	Teaching materials do not yield the inclusion of culture teaching	23	5.5	35.4
12	Learners do not participate in culture learning in class	19	4.5	29.2
13	Others (The learner aspects)	0	0	0
14	Others (The teacher aspects)	0	0	0
15	Others (The other aspects)	0	0	0
Total		422	100	649.2

Note. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Table 4 shows that the significant difficulties and problems found in the teaching of culture are: (a) teacher has limited knowledge of the foreign culture; and (b) learners lack interest in learning the foreign culture.

Discussion

The Key Factors Influencing the Teaching of Culture in the English Language Classroom

Teacher's knowledge of the foreign culture

The analysis shows that the majority of teachers pointed to teacher's knowledge of the foreign culture as one of the two significant factors influencing the teaching of culture. The implication of this finding can be explicated in ways that the teachers in the study, in general, tend to carry the belief that they need to be well-equipped with the knowledge of foreign culture, preferably first-hand experiences, in order to teach culture effectively (Seelye, 1993), or to consider themselves entitled to teach the foreign culture (Aleksandrowichz-Pedich et al., 2003). Since it is also feasible that most of the teachers in the study have limited



knowledge of the foreign culture, this deficiency may affect the degree to which they feel confident enough “to teach about the sociocultural and sociolinguistic milieu of a society which is not their own” (Young, Sachdev, and Seedhouse, 2009, p. 151). The factor in regard to teacher’s body knowledge of and experiences in the foreign culture was found to be significant in affecting the teachers’ ability to manage the teaching of culture implemented in class (Morales, 1999). This scenario is especially provable when concerned with the teachers’ ability to manage and organize the integration of culture teaching despite their given limited instructional time. In other words, the more knowledgeable they were about the foreign culture, the easier it was for them to orchestrate culture teaching. Added to this, Sercu (2005a) found that teachers’ body knowledge of and experiences in the foreign culture also affected the time the teachers generally devoted to the teaching of culture. As further illustrated, teachers who were familiar with the foreign culture seemed to have a higher tendency to teach culture than those who were less familiar.

Still another explanation can be that this is more or less the way most of the teachers in the study were taught during their years of studying (Sercu, Garcia, and Prieto, 2005). Since teachers, more often than not, tend to teach their learners similar to the ways they were once taught (Calderhead, 1988; Tabachnick and Zeichner, 1984; Woods, 1996), one might also draw a conclusion that teachers who are taught merely with the cultural information are likely to carry the predominant belief that knowledge of the foreign culture is the only (and perhaps the entire) factor that matters in the teaching of culture.

Course description

The findings also indicate that a course description was believed to be a significant factor in influencing the teaching of culture. It can be implied that the teachers of the study rely heavily on the given course description dealt at the time to guide and encompass their teaching as a whole. While the finding was not quite a surprise; however, the teachers’ compliance to course description as a significant factor in the teaching of culture, in a way, accentuated the role of curriculum (Castro and Sercu, 2005). For example, Hui (2010) found that, although Chinese teachers and trainers of English were willing to allocate more time to teach culture, their actual practices were focused largely on language than culture as so suggested in the national curriculum. If this is also the case for Thai teachers of English, the indication drawn from the findings of the study can be that culture teaching is likely to gain its existence in class as far as it fits with the language teaching proposed in the curriculum.

Learners’ interest

It becomes apparent that the majority of teachers pointed to learners’ interest as another significant factor which influenced the teaching of culture. The implications of this specific finding can be threefold. First, most of the teachers in the study are overall aware that it is important to take into account the learners’ interest in the teaching of culture. This line of thought falls perfectly in line with the conclusion, which indicates that learners’ “abilities, needs and interests” must not be disregarded prior to the implementation of culture teaching (Sercu, 2005b, p. 162). Second, it can also be implied that the teaching of culture is likely to occur in class as far as learners, in general, show interest in learning the foreign culture. Third, it is possible that the teachers in the study are more encouraged to teach culture in class as long as the teaching can keep learners interested in learning more about culture. Even though no attempts were made to find out the extent to which learners’ interest actually

influenced the teaching of culture from the teachers in this study, data suggested in the literature and previous studies point out clearly that learners' interest in the teaching of culture is a complex issue as there seems to be relevant to a number of factors, ranging from the cultural contents portrayed in the textbooks used in the teaching of culture (McKay, 2002; Prodromou, 1988) to the learners' resistance to learn the foreign culture due to their cultural beliefs and values (Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi, 1990).

The Key Difficulties and Problems in the Teaching of Culture in the English Language Classroom

Teacher has limited knowledge of the foreign culture

As evidenced in the study, the teachers pointed to teacher's deficiency of knowledge of the foreign culture as one of the two significant difficulties and problems detrimental to the teaching of culture. While this result is far from surprising since such an issue is addressed quite extensively in the literature (e.g., Omaggio-Hadley, 2000), the finding can possibly be implied that the teachers in the study may feel incompetent to teach the cultural contents of which they are lacking, namely, their knowledge of and first-hand experiences in the foreign culture (Seelye, 1993). Also possible is that the teachers may not feel entitled to teach the content "that only being a member of a culture gives one the privilege of becoming an expert and thus being able to teach about it" (Aleksandrowichz-Pedich et al., 2003, p. 11). Since the teaching of culture is broadly perceived as the teaching of foreign culture (Seelye, 1993), it is feasible that most of the Thai teachers of English might hold the belief that this kind of teaching best belongs to the hands of natives.

Another view of this finding could be that Thai teachers of English generally perceive that the teaching of culture is mostly, if not entirely, the state of teaching where teachers present the cultural information regarding the foreign culture to learners. While this point of view does not entirely project a false line of thought, Byram (1989) argues that as FL teachers of culture they should not perceive the teaching of culture as narrowly as the state of teaching where learners are constantly loaded with the cultural information. Rather, it should be viewed as the teaching and learning environment where learners are given ample opportunities to develop their cross-cultural understanding (Byram, 1997; Seelye, 1993).

Learners lack interest in learning the foreign culture

Another challenge was found to deal with learners' lack of interest in learning the foreign culture. While this specific result is also highlighted in the study of Castro and Sercu (2005), it can be implied that most of the Thai learners of English are either resistant to learning the foreign culture, namely, the Western culture (Adaskou et al., 1990) or unfamiliar with the foreign culture (Ahmed and Shah, 2013).

Although some of the leading scholars (e.g., Alptekin, 1993; Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993) have emphasized time and time again the role of culture in foreign language education, in that it should not be treated as "a special treat, a lesson sweetener, or an appetiser before the main course" (Luk, 2012, p. 256); however, teachers must also be aware of how the presentation of foreign culture is actually introduced to the learners, whose native culture is most often far more different than the culture presented before them (Adaskou et al., 1990; McKay and Bokhorest-Heng, 2008). Since learners, in general, are strongly committed to their native culture; that is, their cultural values and beliefs (Byram and Morgan, 1994), it



should be expected that they may withdraw themselves entirely from learning the foreign culture as they approach a new cultural territory (Jabeeb and Shah, 2011; Kasaian and Subbakrishna, 2011). For example, the teaching of foreign culture, namely, the Western culture, was strongly disapproved by most of the Muslim learners of English. One of the predominant reasons was their concern over their native cultural values and beliefs risking of being overcome by the foreign culture through their repeated exposures while learning the language (Kasaian and Subbakrishna, 2011). Since most of the teachers in the study were from Southern Thailand, where resides the majority of Thai Muslims in comparison with the other regions, one might logically conclude that these cultural contrasts may be responsible for or contribute to the learners' lack of interest in learning the foreign culture as reflected through the teachers' perceptions.

Another possible view is that most of the Thai learners of English are, to some degree, unfamiliar with the foreign culture presented as resulted in their lack of interest in learning the culture. According to Alptekin (1993), this point of issue in the foreign culture teaching and learning is anything but unexpected. While it is well understood that the learning of foreign culture could potentially cause negative reactions (e.g., their unwillingness to learn the cultural information presented and their withdrawal to learn the foreign language), a good example of their unfamiliarity to the foreign culture could be explained in the sense that learners, especially those from totally different cultural backgrounds were unable to understand the underlying significance of each vocabulary item as learners of the foreign culture normally would. "For example, while a child from the Anglo-American world will normally think of a dog as 'man's best friend', Middle Eastern children are likely to perceive it as dangerous and dirty" (Alptekin, 1993, p. 137). Because learners usually rely on their cultural references as tools to interpret what is being presented before them (Moran, 2001; Seelye, 1993), teaching the foreign culture to the learners whose native culture are different from the culture orchestrated in class could become exceptionally difficult and complicated to manage.

Thus, these lines of thoughts encourage Thai teachers of English to take into account the issue of learners' cultural backgrounds, especially their religious beliefs and values prior to the inclusion of cultural contents dealing with the foreign culture. Since "[l]earners cannot simply shake off their own culture and step into another...[because] their culture is a part of themselves, has formed them and created them as social beings" (Byram and Morgan, 1994, p. 43), the extent to which the cultural information be introduced in the teaching and learning of foreign language should not be given lesser attention than the types of cultural contents implemented in class (Alptekin, 1993).

Conclusion

When combined together, what can be learned from the findings in the study is twofold. First, teachers must be aware of their own beliefs towards the notion of culture teaching, whether or not their predominant beliefs cause more harm than good in the teaching and learning of culture. Since teacher's knowledge of the foreign culture was ranked the highest in both categories, this might suggest some significance worth taking a closer look into. Although no attempts were made to find out in-depths as to why the teachers thought the way they did in this study, the implication seems to be indicating that the teaching of culture is largely viewed as the teaching of foreign culture, which, in a way, means that teachers must be well-equipped with knowledge of and experiences in the foreign culture in order to be able to teach culture. Even though there is no denying that teachers must have some knowledge of

the foreign culture to teach culture in class, it must also be in recognition that teaching culture is not entirely about showering learners with information of the foreign culture (Byram, 1989). Also necessary is that learners are given the opportunity to develop their sense of cultural and intercultural awareness, preparing themselves to communicating with people of diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993; Seelye, 1993). Thus, it is sensible to conclude that the quality of culture teaching and learning is not dependent entirely on how much they (teachers) know about or experience in the foreign culture.

Second, teachers must also be aware of their learners' overall attitudes towards the foreign culture. That is, they need to take into consideration the learners' cultural diversity and backgrounds prior to the teaching of culture because these learners also have their own cultural values and beliefs to which they are strongly committed (Byram and Morgan, 1994). Since learners are central to the rationale why the teaching and learning occurs, teachers must understand their learners' cultural backgrounds to the extent that they know how to manage the learning and teaching of culture in harmony with the learners' native culture. By leaving aside the factor of learners' cultural backgrounds, the teaching of culture will undoubtedly be pointless. Thus, this factor should not be taken lightly or their resistance and disinterest in learning the foreign culture may be at the expense of their language learning entirely.

Data reported in the study provide general glimpses of teachers' perceptions about culture teaching regarding factors influencing the teaching of culture, and difficulties and problems in the teaching of culture. Regardless of the aspects investigated, the study calls for more research into the perceptions of Thai teachers of English language, especially to either substantiate or challenge the findings obtained from the study.

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Appendix A

Instructions: Please tick ✓ in a box ☐ or write it out in the space provided in compliance with your opinion.

1. Which of the following do you think is a key factor that influences the teaching of culture in English language classroom? (Tick all that apply)

The Learner Aspects	The Teacher Aspects	The Other Aspects
<input type="checkbox"/> Learners' field of study <input type="checkbox"/> Learners' linguistic proficiency <input type="checkbox"/> Learners' overall attitudes towards the foreign culture <input type="checkbox"/> Learners' interest <input type="checkbox"/> Learners' experiences in the foreign culture <input type="checkbox"/> Learners' social and cultural backgrounds <input type="checkbox"/> If other, please specify:	<input type="checkbox"/> Teacher's language teaching expertise <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher's experiences in the foreign culture <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher's knowledge of the foreign culture <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher's overall attitudes towards the foreign culture <input type="checkbox"/> If other, please specify:	<input type="checkbox"/> Class size <input type="checkbox"/> Course credit <input type="checkbox"/> Course description <input type="checkbox"/> Course duration <input type="checkbox"/> Course objectives <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching materials <input type="checkbox"/> The cooperation of ASEAN Economic Community <input type="checkbox"/> If other, please specify:

2. Which of the following do you think is a key difficulty and problem found in the teaching of culture in English language classroom? (Tick all that apply)

The Learner Aspects	The Teacher Aspects	The Other Aspects
<input type="checkbox"/> Learners have low proficiency <input type="checkbox"/> Learners lack critical thinking skills <input type="checkbox"/> Learners do not see value in English language learning <input type="checkbox"/> Learners hold negative attitudes towards the foreign culture <input type="checkbox"/> Learners lack interest in learning the foreign culture <input type="checkbox"/> Learners do not participate in culture learning in class <input type="checkbox"/> If other, please specify:	<input type="checkbox"/> Teacher has limited knowledge of the foreign culture <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher does not see value in culture learning <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher does not have enough time to learn more about the foreign culture <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher does not have enough time to teach culture in class <input type="checkbox"/> If other, please specify:	<input type="checkbox"/> The inflexibility of curriculum does not yield the inclusion of cultural contents <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching materials do not yield the inclusion of culture teaching <input type="checkbox"/> If other, please specify: