

The Hierarchy of Thailand and its Effects on English Language Learning

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Abstract

Despite the numerous reforms that Thailand’s educational system has undergone, test scores show that a majority of the population still lacks the ability to use English with the skill required to compete in the international community. While many reasons have been proposed for Thailand’s poor ranking, only a small number have looked beyond classroom concerns to the culture in which the problems emerge. This article presents an examination of the ways in which culture affects language learning, as well as focusing upon an aspect of culture that is particular to Thailand, namely the Thai hierarchy. The author traces the origins and history of this division of social class, together with the intertwining concept of “face” to determine how they negatively affect the implementation of educational reform in the realm of English language teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

In the years leading to the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), it was recognized that English language proficiency in Thailand was sorely lacking. In 2011, the Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index (EPI), which is considered the global standard for rating countries according to their abilities in English, gave the country a ranking of 42 out of 44 countries or a “very low” proficiency rating (EF Proficiency Index, 2019). It was during this time that several initiatives were launched that were intended to improve English language teaching and learning and help the nation better integrate into the AEC. Among them was a plan to distribute tablets to first graders around the country as part of the “One Tablet per Child” project. Another, a program entitled “English Speaking Year,” asked schools to set aside one day per week to engage in academic activities while speaking English. While both plans were well-intentioned, a lack of foresight and poor preparation failed to ensure their longevities (Fredrickson, 2012; Tubplee, 2019).

In 2015, with Thailand’s EPI language ability index score ranked “very low” for the fifth year in a row, there was concern that the country would lose its standing in business, social, and cultural opportunities (Khidir, 2018). Despite this, the country became part of the AEC when it came into effect on December 31, 2015. In response, the Thai Ministry of Education sought to redesign the English language curriculum in schools. Additionally, the Ministry of Education partnered with the British Council from 2016 to 2018 to establish Regional English Training Centres (RELC) that aimed to improve the skills of primary and secondary English teachers throughout Thailand (British Council, n.d.). The program focused on communicative methods of training and provided teachers with the tools to share their knowledge with other teachers and school directors. Further measures were undertaken in the adoption of a framework of English based on the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) to describe learner abilities at different stages of learning. With the use of descriptors for each level of ability, instructors could design relevant tasks to meet their learners’ needs (Hiranburana et al., 2017).

While these measures would seem to place Thailand on the path to improvement, test scores show that little has changed in the country's overall performance in English. After a slight rise to an EPI ranking of "low" proficiency from 2017 to 2018, Thailand fell back to the category of "very low" in 2019, placing 74 out of a total of 100 countries and making it the third lowest country in Southeast Asia, with only Myanmar (86) and Cambodia (94) scoring lower (EF Proficiency Index, 2019). Similarly, average scores in English for the Ordinary National Education Test (O-Net) have yet to rise above 50 percent (Mala, 2019), and overall performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has continuously ranked Thailand far below other Asian countries ("Poor scores," 2019). In the latest Global Competitiveness Index released by the World Economic Forum (WEC), the country's ranking dropped two places from 38 to 40 ("Lack of critical thinking," 2019). With a regular expenditure of 20 percent of its annual budget on education, it becomes clear that there are deeper issues in the Thai educational system that undermine attempts at reform.

LANGUAGE AND THE ACQUISITION OF CULTURE

Culture is as dependent upon language as language is on culture. Indeed, it is generally believed that it is impossible to separate the two (Buttjes & Byram, 1991). According to Leveridge (2008), language is the medium used from the moment of birth to establish ties and relationships within a culture. While the ties and relationships that language establishes vary depending upon one's location, culture emerges when particular behaviors are met with either acceptance or rejection (Brooks, 1986). It is common, for example, and often rewarded when an American worker suggests improvements to their superiors. In a country such as Thailand, however, this behavior would be frowned upon and quite possibly dealt with by dismissal. No matter which culture the individual is born, it is soon realized that surrendering the self in favor of more cooperative behaviors offers many rewards. By following the rules of society and utilizing language in acceptable ways, an individual can predict behaviors of others, maintain security, and learn strategies for the attainment of wealth and success (Millon, 2000). Over time, these parameters of "right and wrong" behaviors establish the individual's worldviews and – consequently – the very nature of their character.

CULTURE AS A DETRIMENT TO PROGRESS

While there is some debate about the inherent “goodness” and “badness” of culture, we must keep in mind Lederach’s (1995) definition of culture as a means of responding to social reality. With society – particularly Western society – advancing at an alarming rate, it is understandable that some cultures are not as quick to adapt to these social realities as others. In fact, there are many societies that view the changing world as an outright and very real threat to culture, as can be seen in the case of governmental treatment of the native Aborigines of Australia in which relocation efforts resulted in poverty and illness. Yet culture can often be a double-edged sword, acting as both a benefit and a detriment to its members. When detrimental effects threaten progress, livelihood, or survival, behaviors and beliefs must be modified to ensure the safety and security of future generations. For an example of this, one need look no further than the struggle against AIDS in Central Africa, where socio-cultural factors have been identified as one of the factors responsible for the spread of the disease and subsequently dealt with through education programs.

While cases such as this may be considered extreme, they emphasize the point that culture must be considered before policy can be enacted. Yet it is equally important to keep in mind that to study a country’s culture for the purposes of determining what challenges need to be overcome is not to pass judgment or condemn that particular culture, but rather to highlight particular aspects that need to be considered when determining the best path to resolution of a problem.

CULTURE AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

The ability of a cultural group to maintain its continuity and stability depends largely upon the passing of behaviors to successive generations. As Parson (1958) noted, the way in which culture is transmitted from generation to generation is a determining factor in each new generation’s views of other languages and culture. Beliefs influence behavior, which in turn can have a strong influence upon learning (Alexander & Dochy, 1995). Furthermore, in the words of Amya (2009),

...acquiring the language involves taking on patterns of behavior of that group. As a consequence, an individual's attitudes toward that group and toward other cultural groups in general will influence his or her motivation to learn the language, and thus the degree of proficiency attained (para. 1).

In addition, Harrison (2010) writes that “Language plays a role in forming a strong personal identity and diversity can be seen to threaten group cohesiveness” (p.14).

Throughout the years, there have been numerous diverse and far-reaching studies of the ways in which attitudes and beliefs have influenced second language learning. To name but a few, Beykont (2002) found that since World War One, the promotion of monolingualism by public schools in the United States quickly increased the rate of language erosion. In Japan, it has been theorized that non-native speakers of Japanese are regarded in disfavor by native speakers (Ohta, 1993). And in Korea, anti-Americanism has shown to impact motivation among Korean learners of English (Kim, 2006).

THE THAI HIERARCHY

The hierarchal organization of Thai society has its roots in the Ayutthaya period of the 14th and 15th centuries, in which expanding territory called for a system of administration. As a result, society was divided into three classes, with commoners and slaves comprising the lower class, officials and nobles ranking above them, and princes at the very top. The Buddhist monkhood was the only classless sector of society, into which all Thai men could be ordained, and thus providing a “bridge” between hierarchal levels. Despite the various transitions that Thailand has undergone, the social hierarchy has remained one of the defining characteristics of Thai culture. According to Smalley (1994), the hierarchy “promotes unity because it structures and rationalizes the inequalities of life” (p. 345). Mulder (1997) furthermore regards the Thai hierarchy as a natural extension of primary values:

...children depend on parents and teachers, they are little whereas adults are big. This hierarchical and obliging model is then enlarged to encompass ‘the three basic institutions’, Nation-Religion-King, so

projecting a familial model into the public world... subjected to the same moral rules that pertained to being a child (p. 36).

The hierarchical society is further given approval by Thai Buddhism, with its teachings of gratefulness, obligation, obedience, rote learning, desire for disciplined subjects, and stability. Additionally, one's status in present life may not be based on fairness, but rather reflect the fate to which they are entitled by merit accumulated in previous incarnations. In the words of author and educator Dr. Kriengsak Charoenwongsak, "If you get something without effort, that means you have a lot of merit accumulated from past life" (personal communication, March 25, 2012).

One's position on the hierarchal ladder is determined by factors such as age, family, occupation, and education. Individuals are aware of their place in society and know better than to challenge others in a higher position (Mulder, 1997; Smalley, 1994). This can be attributed to the fear of social chaos, avoiding uncertainty and – most important of all – preserving one's "face." The concept of face is often interpreted as "dignity" or "honor" yet when applied to nations such as Thailand, the meaning runs much deeper. For the Thai, a loss of face can be the severest of emotional blows. It could involve something as simple as complaining about the service at a restaurant (which would cause a loss of face to the server) to the questioning of failed government projects (which would cause a loss of face to the government). It is for this reason that saving face is often considered more important than speaking the truth. The Thai are not only concerned with saving one's own face, but with preserving that of others. This helps to explain why many Thais are gentle and peaceful on the surface but can suddenly explode into emotional outburst or aggression if provoked (Prpic & Kanjanpanyakom, 2004).

As features of society that both support and sustain each other, the Thai hierarchy and the concept of face are traits that are deeply ingrained in the Thai character. Preserving and respecting the hierarchy involves exhibiting behaviors that are deemed 'positive' for one's face (Ukosakul, 2005). In return, maintaining one's face involves obeying the rules of society and acting according to laws both written and unwritten. Upholding the values of harmony through the social hierarchy and constant vigil of the face of oneself and others keep all the negative and chaotic factors that may influence society at bay.

“FACE” AND EDUCATION

Because the idea of maintaining one’s “face” is so important to the Thai, it is easy to see how problems within schools can persist. With concern resting more upon preserving one’s face and that of others, it can be assumed that problems may be overlooked or even tolerated to avoid creating a disruption in the social order. As Vanijaka writes,

The value of face permeates every aspect of the Thai culture, including the foundation of society that is education. As such, we have an education system that is more concerned with what is proper and appropriate than with what is open and critical (2012, para 21).

As seen by the rules presented by the social hierarchy, behaviors that are “proper and appropriate” are often those that involve remaining quiet instead of voicing opinion, following orders rather than questioning them, and accepting inequality rather than criticizing. The concept is rather ironically captured in a Nonthaburi public high school’s motto: “Being a good child for parents, being a good student for teachers, being a good member for society, and being a good citizen for country” (Pitiyanawat & Sujiva, 2005, p. 91).

THE THAI HIERARCHY AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

The process of learning a language is a complex interaction of internal factors such as confidence, motivation, and cognitive ability, and external factors such as curriculum, teaching methodology, and quality of instructors (Latha & Ramesh, 2012). However, the literature indicates that engaging in active language-learning tasks that provide opportunities for interaction is essential (Lantolf, 1994; Willis, 1996). This is not always the case in Thailand. According to Srinakharinwirot University Vice-President for International Relations Aurapan Weerawong:

(Thai students) are kind of passive learners, because they respect teachers, they have to be quiet, sitting, listening and jotting down – which is something teachers expect from them. But students who need to learn English for communication, they have to be very active learners (Sanyal, 2012, para. 13).

In the Thai classroom, the passive student who, rather than take charge of the learning process, merely listens, absorbs, and memorizes. This ensures that questions and participation are kept at a minimum (Ng, 2001; Thamraksa, 2004). In viewing this scenario through the lens of the Thai hierarchy, however, one may see that this student-teacher dynamic is a correct interpretation of the rules of society. Despite the fact that an unequal status relationship between students and teachers has been shown to inhibit “successful second-language comprehension, production, and ultimately acquisition” (Pica, 1987, p. 4), it is a relationship that maintains the social inequality and reduces anxiety caused by a perceived threat to identity (Tanveer, 2008). In attempting to implement reform, the reformers are asking all of those involved in the language learning process to diverge from the social hierarchy which threatens one’s identity within society – a threat that, according to Taylor, Meynard and Rheult (1977), has a greater impact upon second language acquisition than either instrumental or integrative motivation. In other studies (e.g. Tan & Phairot, 2018; Karnchanachari, 2019), it has been shown that a factor among Thai students with a high proficiency in English was their *willingness* to communicate both in and out of class (emphasis added).

Simpson wrote, “Sociologists perceive that the authoritarian predicates social relations on a hierarchical principle, such that almost every social act concerns a superordinate and a subordinate position” (1972, p. 223). Symbols of hierarchy in the Thai classroom in which the teacher as superordinate and the student as subordinate are preserved and maintained in a variety of ways, most noticeably in the deference of students regarding their teachers. In addition to the remaining silence in the classroom instead of questioning teachers, Thai culture does not allow for the student’s head to be higher than that of the instructor. Thus, students are taught at a young age to assume a low crouch or approach the teacher who is sitting at their desk on his or her knees. Another reminder of students place in the hierarchy takes place on *Wai Kru* or “Respect Teacher” Day. Once a year, students are forced to present a garland of flowers to their teachers and by prostrating themselves and crawling forward in a show of respect regardless of whether the teacher has earned this level of appreciation.

CONCLUSION

In the latest round of educational reforms, a platform entitled “Thailand Education Eco-System” has been introduced which promises to prepare students for the 21st century by moving away from the “fixed mindset” of the past and integrating a “growth mindset” in their lives. The plan calls for new curriculums, new evaluation processes and new guidelines to produce quality teachers (“Thailand’s Education Minister,” 2020). While it remains unknown whether these reforms will have an impact on the hierarchical-bound classrooms of Thailand, it is difficult to view these changes as anything more than rebranding of old ideas in a mindset which is described by political scientist Thitinan Pongsudhirak of Chulalongkorn University as being rooted in “the nation-building’s Cold War period to produce obedient and nationalistic citizens, which does not fit the 21st-century needs.” Pongsudhirak further adds that it is “hierarchical (and) top-down, with a systematic lack of critical thinking” (Ahuja, 2011, para. 7).

Ironically, it is not merely academics and outside observers who are skeptical. At the time of writing, the current Education Minister has come under criticism by none other than the students of Thailand who have taken to the streets in protest of an education they feel they are being denied. In the words of one Associated Press reporter, the protests demonstrate “a remarkable response to an authority figure from students schooled in a system that stresses deference and respect for elders” (“Students jeer,” 2020).

Whatever the outcome of the student protests, it is clear that the next pathway for reform should include consideration of the issues discussed in this paper as well as the voices of students, teachers, and further research into areas of culture that prove to be a hindrance rather than an enabler of change.

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