

IDEA SHARING:
A LANGUAGE LESSON UNDER A BODHI TREE:
TEACHING ENGLISH TO MONKS - A REFLECTION

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Introduction

From external nature, Buddhist monks learn to draw parallels with some profound truths in life. Similarly, in a simple English classroom at a Buddhist university in Northeast Thailand devoid of anything except a whiteboard and walls, we can learn much as well.

When we strip things to their bare minimum, we learn of their very essence. We also learn a lot in the process itself.

The following is my brief account of teaching an English grammar class to a group of young monks in Ubon Ratchathani for one semester. It describes what I have learned about the monks and myself.

How it all came about

Early this June, a senior Ubon Ratchathani University (UBU) colleague wanted a few volunteers to teach about 20 monks in their third year of study at a Buddhist university near my home. Their subject was teaching English and their minor was teaching Thai. At first, I hesitated, for several reasons. First, I had quite enough to do this semester at UBU already: three undergraduate classes (two new ones, including one introductory literature class) and one graduate class in TEFL teaching

methods. On top of this, I had a few more responsibilities both inside and outside UBU—although they were not every week. Second, the class was to be taught at an off-campus teaching site, ten kilometers from the campus, with no transportation provided. This would mean two things: the class not being counted as workload and my having to drive back and forth to check my email messages. Third, it was rumored that their English was poor. Also, since the university was still in its infancy stage, several things, e.g. curriculum, staff, textbooks, and Internet facilities, would not be ready. It meant that I had to create my own course and textbook(s)—but would I have the time, I thought? Finally, it would be a completely new environment: an all-Buddhist-monk setting, with no secular students. In fact, this point alone could prevent me from accepting the challenge. The idea of being close to religion, especially teaching monks, was not particularly appealing to me. A sense of intimidation arose when I thought of being near “the virtuous,” afraid of being reminded of my imperfection. And, a few questions came up: How should I deal with these monks? How should I address them? How should I address myself? Do I need to *wai* (a Thai gesture of respect) my own students?

But somehow my inner self compelled me to give it a try. I am a type of person who likes challenges, for instance teaching students with very poor English or with low motivation, or teaching adults.

Thinking about the classes with “special” students, I was reminded of a few classes. To begin with, I used to teach a Sukothai Thammatirat Open University Foundation English class for a few years, in Buriram and later Ubon. Although I might not completely agree with their approach, I was glad to gain some experience, especially about how to motivate students with short attention spans, including a few monks, novices, and nuns. I did it by simplifying things and by letting them do activities.

The second class was at Khon Kaen University (KKU), where I taught a Foundation English class for public health adults, some of whom had stopped using English for more than 15 years! I was proud to let them know that learning English could be a lot of fun,

too. This was done by showing my strong determination for them to succeed. I added a few hours on top of the regular hours, without charging them any extra. I had them write grammatical constructions on the board, e.g. indirect speech or passive sentences, and we corrected them together. I invented a lot of these tasks based on the experience I had gained from teaching English Structure, a required class for the third-year English majors at the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, in Bangkok. Other activities included pronouncing words, phrases and sentences, and doing short dictations.

The KKU exercises that I created had personalized characters, such as “Somying,” “Maytee” or “Kittisak”—names of the students in that class. This method greatly stimulated them. Calling out their names with English courtesy titles, “Ms,” “Mrs,” or “Mr” and many times confusing myself of the students’ titles instantly gained the students’ attention and produced some laughter. It showed that the instructor really cared about the learners as individuals. In the end, I was glad that at least a student who never showed any interest in English bought a dictionary (even though it was an English-Thai dictionary).

Who were these students really?

From some in-depth interviews with a few of the monks I was teaching late in the semester, I found that my 20 students were aged between 18 and 45 and came from financially poor backgrounds in and around Ubon. All of them resided at nearby temples in Ubon Ratchathani and a few were taking refuge at the monastery that the university was located at. All of them had an equivalent of a high school certificate.

They stated that they had entered their monasteries because they wanted to carry on the Buddhist tradition, to return their gratitude to their parents and, to discipline themselves and to escape from vice. Others had followed elder brothers into the monkhood. Interestingly, a few mentioned very indirectly that they came from a poor background; thus, religion was the single institution that provided affordable education. Most of them did not feel that their temple schedule interfered with their class time,

except that it was not convenient for some to have morning classes since they would have to be available for alms throughout the morning before their 11am lunch. And, occasionally, it would be inconvenient to travel to the campus since the regular mini-buses might not pick them up because they could not sit near women.

None of them had to take an entrance examination for this Buddhist university. They only had to fill in an application form. However, most of them wanted to study political science or public administration more than TEFL but had to do it since what they wanted was not offered as initially announced. Therefore, a certain lack of motivation in studying English would be expected.

Teaching within a Buddhist monastic culture

From my semester teaching English Structure 1 to monks and novices, interviews, as well as some reading, and discussions with people, several issues have emerged that deserve careful consideration by anyone about to teach English in a similar setting.

First, a great number of monks tend to rely more on memorization than critical or creative thinking. This may be because their education consists mainly of reciting long and difficult texts in Pali. The better a monk repeats the unalterable scriptures verbatim, the higher level of education he attains. Some people also consider the Middle Path, the moderate way of doing things, as leading us to being uncritical, thereby fostering a rather passive and uncritical learning style. For this reason, a monk may find it difficult when it comes to discussion or making comments. Ironically, I remembered reading about the Buddha telling us to *concentrate* or pay full attention to gain insights into things (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1956, pp. 93ff): "...to examine things closely in order to come to know and understand their true nature" (p. 13). There may well be some misunderstanding of this issue that in the two plus millennia since the time of the Lord Buddha have crept into our Tipitaka interpretation.

Nevertheless, sometimes, the students would show me work that demonstrated both creativity and boldness:

- Boonmee is walks very fast but Tatsapan is walks slowly because Tatsapan old man.
- Dr. Apisak is teachre of Maha Makut Ratchawittayalai University and Dr. Apisak is handsome and humorous man.

They also took risks to produce these longer texts:

- Thanong's wife live in the kitchen. Now she is cooking for dinner. Her husband has lived in the living room since afternoon. He took medicine this morning. Because he was working all day yesterday. His wife had lived in the kitchen for one hour. They are eating dinner in the dining room. We will go to the u.s. next week or next month they thought.
- Monk students happy study English due to Ajan Apisak taught understood for they. Some monk students would not study English because not study English before primary and middle school. They hope to proficient in English soon due to their teacher good. That teacher is Ajan Apisak.
- Monk students will go to University for study English. It that is good teacher but have some teachers to cause the atmosphere in a classroom to taut (sic) and monk students do not want into classroom because cause that.

Although the above examples of their writing contain plenty of mistakes, in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and even spelling, I rejoiced in their creative attempts. And in some of the sentences, despite my feeling that the students might be trying to flatter me, I could not help smiling! The word choice errors (e.g. "live," "proficient" or "due to") were most likely because the students were using a (small) Thai-English dictionary. And, the awkward statement "Ajaan Apisak taught understood for they" might be a direct translation from Thai.

Second, it is possible that the strictly male dominated monastic environment brought with it several things. The crucial issue here appears to be the face notion, i.e. everyone trying to avoid the embarrassment of making a mistake. In the English Structure 1 class, I could detect some frustration when a monk had a wrong answer and his fellow monk classmates started laughing. Even though the laugh was a friendly gesture, it could easily have been misunderstood.

My question: Doesn't this face saving instance contradict what the Buddha has warned us against—pride? The highly-revered Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1956) states, "The Buddha's intention was to avoid any bhikkhu having a high opinion of himself" (p. 18). I am also reminded of one of the Seven Deadly Sins in Christianity.

To cope with such a situation with an embarrassed monk student, I usually told him to "try again" or that his answer was "almost right." To the class, I would tell them that I admired students who were brave enough to say something out loud, not those keeping quiet who, to me, were "uninteresting." A pleasant tone of voice and smiles would accompany the verbal support I provided. This sensitivity in the handling of errors in this type of class is indeed particularly important.

In this class, hierarchy was seen in the monks versus novices. The novices would remain very silent while the monks would often be more expressive. The *Pra Mahas* (higher ranking monks) spoke somewhat more. But this also depended on their confidence in their linguistic ability and perhaps whether they thought they belonged to the place or not. The monks residing at the temple where the university was situated and/or who had more peers showed a greater willingness to speak in class than the others. Unfortunately, I had not been able to do much to encourage more speaking and asking of questions among the novices, except occasionally having them read aloud a sentence.

Although the seating arrangement may be considered as merely their being disciplined or strict, it might also have been another indication of monastic hierarchy asserting itself in the classroom. It was not as blatant as senior monks all sitting at

the front or at the back but even so every monk always seemed to know where they were supposed to sit. It was fixed. Even when the front seats were not taken on a particular day, the back-row monks would not bother much to move. Even when I had them work in groups, they would soon return to their regular seating arrangement. I tried to see it as a positive sign, telling them that the fixed seating enabled me to remember their names faster and know who was absent, which produced some laughter and smiles. The face notion also led to the inclusion of extended lexical units taken from models in some of the monks writing. This included chunks and even complete sentences being copied by some monks and novices from textbooks or dictionaries, building exceptional sentences beyond their usual ability:

- They gave us [a] cool reception.
- He was cool during the argument.
- I aired the room by opening the windows.

One of the many reservations that I had in teaching this class was whether the praise and discipline I used in regular classes was appropriate in this setting. I was not much worried about complimenting them since it is a positive act. But it was more problematic providing critical or negative feedback where I did not feel comfortable doing this with quite the same directness as in my regular classes. But, then, maybe my heightened sense of sensitivity in dealing with mistakes, developed during this course, is something that I should do well to take back to my regular classes with me.

Pedagogical implications and conclusion

I thought that teaching Buddhist monks and novices English would be much the same as teaching ordinary secular students. However, I was wrong. Underneath the serene atmosphere of the class, there lay many complex issues relating to how to teach Buddhist monks and novices English and how to motivate them to love English and to do self-study.

Teaching them somehow forced me to reflect not only on what I was doing with them but on what I had grown so

accustomed to doing with my regular classes. It was like having a supervisor sitting at the back of the room checking on me all the time. Teaching the monks reinvigorated my teaching practice and gave me a new enthusiasm to re-examine many things I had grown used to doing unthinkingly in my regular classes.

Teaching this rather special class also motivated me to read more on EFL (especially on grammar, vocabulary), ELT (e.g. learning strategies and styles), and Buddhism (central concepts).

So, what have I learned from teaching these monks? The answer is a great deal!

- To maintain students' interest, incorporate Buddhism ideals into teaching: try to control one's temper; don't get angry too easily. Also, a "bad" deed, e.g. telling a lie, may be considered otherwise depending on the person's intention.
- Be sensitive in giving feedback, especially regarding the face notion.
- Don't underestimate students and classes. Know them well: the learners, their interests, and "special" language.
- Some activities can be used for UBU students to improve their English and ethics, e.g. practicing writing simple sentences to summarize a story, doing meditation and reading books on Dhamma and how to be a decent person.
- Finally, we instructors cannot stop learning.¹ And, we should not have so much pride that it prevents us from learning from our students.

Teaching monks should not be so different from teaching "ordinary" students at UBU after all, but I have become wiser through the readings, discussions, and reflections. I now realize that I can improve my regular practice by showing the same care

¹I am reminded of Dr. Robert Shrubbsall (Asian University of Science and Technology): "Any good teacher is also a student."

and respect to my ordinary students as I found it necessary to show the monks. Now, I hope to be a better teacher—and a better person!

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to those who have inspired me to do good. They are my parents; my aunt Pah Jua, Aunt Adaline P. Satterthwaite, MD, and Mama Dr. Anne M. Pendleton; Assistant Professor Dr. Kanitta Roengpittaya (formerly of Chulalongkorn University); Professor Dr. Phaitoon Ingkasuwan (former president of Kasetsart and Ubon Ratchathani Universities); Professor Piyabhand Sanitswong (formerly of Chulalongkorn University); Associate Professor Dr. Chaiyan Rajagool (Chiang Mai University); Associate Professor Sonthida Keyurawong (KMUTT); Ajaan Je Arunee Yeethong (Ubon Ratchathani University); and Phongson Sornarj.

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