
COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THE THAI SETTING

Gwyn Williams

Department of Linguistics
Thammasat University

Abstract

The English language is international and, as such, should be viewed as culturally neutral. Conversational "competence," specifically "appropriateness" ("polite speech"), should be determined by the cultural setting in which an interaction in English occurs. In Thailand the use of English is cross-cultural. Judgements of competence should not be based on foreign and alien notions derived from "norms" of Western culture and society. Cultural differences ought not to be viewed only as a source of difficulty in the cross-cultural situation, but rather as contributing to and enhancing the interaction. The discourse of Thai speakers of English in the Thai setting should therefore be viewed as competent.

Introduction

Given that English is spoken as a foreign language in Thailand and Thais using English are likely not interacting with native speakers of English, on what basis should we view their use of

English? In particular, how should we view "communicative competence," which is typically viewed in terms of "appropriateness"? My position is similar to that of Limtong (1988:6) as quoted below:

Native speakers of English may find that Thai English deviates from their native varieties. Provided with a sociolinguistic explanation, these deviations are acceptable and intelligible within the context of the use of English in Thailand.

The peculiarities of the performance variety of English in Thailand are the product of linguistic and cultural contact. The result is innovation and deviation from the external norms of American or British English, that is, localization. Recent conceptions of language contact, particularly in the context of language learning, have focussed on the unique aspects of the learner's language, that is, those innovations not attributable to the learner's own native language. In this paper,¹ I

extend this conception to the notion of "appropriateness," and suggest that, while some features of English usage by Thais in Thailand are attributable to cultural transfer, others are not and instead are the product of the cross-cultural encounter. Further, I argue that certain features of Thai English discourse, while "inappropriate" in a Western context, should not be evaluated with reference to the Western context, but with reference to the Thai context.

Communicative competence, appropriateness, and cultural context

The Council of Europe has delineated the components of communicative competence as follows (Simon 1992, citing Van Ek 1988) :

- linguistic competence: including knowledge and production of vocabulary and syntax;
- sociolinguistic competence: including the ability to use and interpret forms of language in context as determined by the environment, relationships between speakers and speakers' intentions;
- discursive competence: the ability to pick out utterances which are distinguishable within communication patterns, such as knowing how to begin or end a conversation;
- strategic competence: the ability to draw on verbal or non-verbal strategies enabling the speaker to compensate for any inadequacies which may cause breaks in a conversation;
- social competence: "Communication is a social activity which requires the combined efforts of two or more persons" (Gumperz, 1982 cited in Simon, 1992). People need to have both the desire and the ability to communicate;
- socio-cultural competence: the ability to perceive and produce utterances which are culturally appropriate within the socio-cultural context in which communication takes place. It involves knowing which rules and norms govern conversation in the foreign language.

All of these components are relevant and important in an ENL situation (English as a Native Language--a non-native speaker is interacting in a community where in English is the normal medium of communication; it is the native tongue) such as in Britain, Australia, or the United States. However, in ESL situations (English as a Second Language--English is a medium of communication between various language groups) as in Singapore or India, and more particularly in an EFL situation as in Thailand (English as a Foreign Language--English is not a normal medium of communication; it is a non-native tongue) several of these components as commonly interpreted, in particular "socio-cultural competence," are not as relevant or as important [an issue brought up by Tickoo (1991) in a broader context].

Critical to any communicative event is the context in which it occurs (as stated in the definition of "socio-cultural competence" above). Important properties of the context are location, event, purpose, topic, participants, and act (functions such as statements, requests, commands). Cooley and Roach (1984) note that discussions of communicative competence largely ignore cultural setting and cultural differences. Competence is typically defined with reference to the "values, beliefs, and communication strategies of white, middle-class America" and as such is culture-specific (op. cit. 22). However, competence and communicative behaviours which realize that competence are bound by, in general terms, the cultural context in which they occur and, in specific terms, by the situation in which they occur. Hence, behaviours perceived as "competent" (appropriate) in one culture are not necessarily perceived as such in another. Thai and American observers of an encounter, whether intra-cultural or inter-cultural, are likely to perceive and evaluate the participants' behaviours very differently. If an observer is unfamiliar with the norms of the other culture, he is likely to judge the participants as "incompetent." Clearly, such a judgement is suspect and, as Cooley and Roach note (op. cit. 14), "a great deal of difference exists between a judgement of 'incompetent' and a judgement of 'incompetent in one culture but competent in another'."

The English language is an international commodity and, as such, is used by native and non-native speakers of divergent social and cultural backgrounds. English is no longer the exclusive possession of the white Anglo-Saxon community: "the English language must be accepted as not simply or solely the cultural possession of those who are its native speakers but also the possession of great populations of users for whom it is a foreign language" (Stevens 1980:99). Perhaps we as instructors of English often fail to recognize this. We have no right to demand that Western (usually North American) cultural values and social behaviours be packaged along with the language; this is cultural imperialism.

Cooley and Roach (1984:25) define communicative competence as "the knowledge of appropriate communication patterns in a particu-

lar situation and the ability to use the knowledge." It is thus context that defines what is to be regarded as competent (appropriate) behaviour. The context of the communicative situation "establishes the rules of appropriateness for the behaviour of participants in a language event on the basis of who they are, where they are, and why they have come together, and gives meaning to that behaviour" (Savignon 1983, quoted in Limtong 1988:2-3).

An individual normally operates within a culture that defines and specifies norms for behaviour in particular situations. Expectations are that others of the same culture will behave according to these norms. Despite individual differences among participants within an interaction they will create a set of behaviours unique to that situation but that fall within these norms (Cooley & Roach 1984:25). Likewise, in a cross-cultural interaction (ignoring for the moment setting), individuals will together create roles and a set of behaviours that are unique and distinct in some ways from the norms of either culture. Cultural norms are suspended. Ideally, expectations are that the other may behave differently. Neither expects the other to exhibit exactly the same behaviours at all times. There may be compromise (the situation may demand it).

The goal of successful and meaningful communication in a cross-cultural situation overrides cultural norms of either culture. To put it another

way: in an intra-cultural setting successful communication is secondary to maintenance of social relations, in an inter-cultural setting successful communication is paramount. The importance of appropriateness, that is, adherence to "social norms and rules governing situated language" (typically Western norms and rules), is diminished in a cross-cultural encounter; analytic, listening, information processing strategies, and strategic behaviour (Delia & Clark, cited in Sypher 1984:112) become more salient.

The learner's language and appropriateness

From the observer's point of view, the learner's language and behaviour may be deviant when compared with the target language and culture. From the learner's point of view, however, his/her language and behaviour are not deviant. Deviance is in part, but not wholly, the product of transfer. "Transfer" refers to the application of old habits or behavioural patterns in a new situation. When appropriate behaviours in the new situation are the same as in the old, transfer is "positive;" when behaviours are different, transfer is "negative." The result of negative transfer is "interference." Transfer may be two-way (Weinreich 1953), that is, negative transfer from the native language (or culture) to a foreign language (or culture) is "interference," transfer from the foreign language (or culture) to the native language (or culture) is "borrowing:"

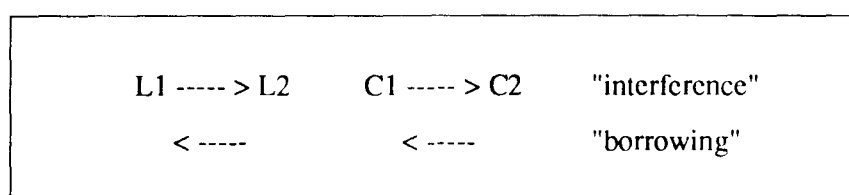


Figure 1

The transfer model is relevant in an ENL situation or any cross-cultural setting where norms are that of L2 and C2, respectively. However, interlanguage research has revealed that, contrary to expectations and previous models of language learning (in particular the Contrastive Analysis approach), only a very small proportion of deviations can be explained in terms of L1. What learners in fact appear to do is create a system derived partly from the source language and

partly from the target language, but one that is unique to a large extent and that may gradually approximate more and more to the target language as learning progresses (assuming an adequate target language model is available).

It has been recognized that the learner's language is not a "deviation" from the "norm", but an "interlanguage," a systematic, coherent and distinct language system to be examined in its

own right. The learner's utterances are recognized as consistent and valid in terms of this interlanguage (Corder, 1981). Learners are no longer regarded as producers of bad, error-full language, but as intelligent and creative individuals who, through trial and error, proceed through logical, systematic stages of acquisition, reordering their linguistic knowledge as they encounter new forms and functions in meaningful contexts, in a way similar to the way a child constructs its first language. I believe that this understanding is true not only at the linguistic level but should be extended to socio-cultural aspects of language use. In the setting, cultural or social "appropriateness" should be defined in relation to the situation in which it occurs and not in terms of uncertain target Western "norms": "The universality of pedagogical models is suspect: it has to be sacrificed for local sociopolitical, educational, and communicative aims" (Kachru, cited by Strevens 1980:89).

In a cross-cultural setting, there are elements of transfer, but there are also unique features: the situation itself creates the behaviours. A 'deviation' is not a mistake. A deviation is systematic and governed by the particular linguistic and cultural setting in which it occurs, that is, it could be characterized by transfer, interference, and hybridization, at any level of language. The participants' behaviours are to be assessed in terms of the setting. We cannot talk wholly in terms of "interference" from the native culture (C1), because socio-cultural norms of the target culture (C2) are not alone applicable. It is not necessary nor is it necessarily desirable that the learner approximate to these norms. This is especially true when English is a lingua-franca between non-native speakers. In this view, participants are to be judged by norms of international behaviour or "international popular culture" (Kennedy, 1985).

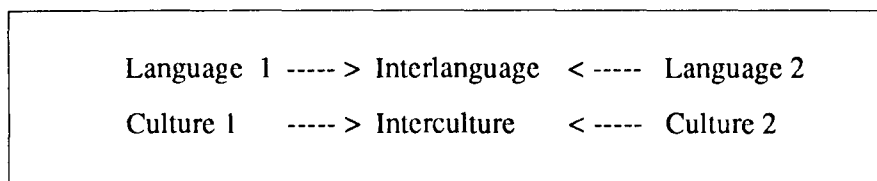


Figure 2

Alternatively (this is the view I shall follow in the remainder of this paper), it can be argued that when English (conceived as culturally

"neutral") is the medium of communication in a culture, then its use should be evaluated in terms of the norms of this culture:

...it is part of the identity of the L2-using community not to be the same as the British or the Americans. Language education in a given country, therefore, may need for pragmatic reasons to include English, but the pedagogical model selected for English must reflect local or regional characteristics. It must (a) be mutually intelligible with all other national and international forms, but (b) it must also be different from all others, and (c) recognizably an L2 form, not an L1 form. (Strevens, 1980:88).

Such a view is demanded by the rigid application of the concept of communicative competence, that is, competence is governed by situation. The language of the learner or non-native speaker of English is thus a legitimate form of English, but one that is localized or nativized.

Local variation is not undesirable. Intelligibility can exist without conformity. Concern over appropriateness and acceptability reflects the value

judgement that only native-speaker varieties of English are desirable and correct. However, even among native speakers there is a high degree of variability. It is generally agreed that there exists a "Standard English" which is not localized or associated with any particular accent (Strevens, 1980). At the same time it is recognized that the term "Standard" essentially refers to the grammar of the formal written variety of English and that spoken English diverges from the Standard in

many ways. Most educated native speakers are able to switch between Standard English and their own local variety, as well as between different styles and registers. In the same way that Standard English is not associated with any particular accent, it should not be associated with any socio-cultural notions of appropriateness (except perhaps where these can be shown to be truly universal).

Strevens (1980:72, also Richards, 1981) states that where English is taught as a foreign language, the educational model is usually that of a native-speaker variety. The term "model" implies that there exists a conscious ideal target that teachers and students aim at. Perception and actual performance, however, do not necessarily coincide. The stated model may be "British" or "American," but in practice the actual form taught and learned is the local variety (Kachru, 1981). It has been suggested that there exists a localized or nativized variety of English in Thailand (Limtong, 1988; Williams, 1992a). The English taught to the majority of Thai learners is the local variety, Thai English. It is only a very small and privileged number who have access to a native model, an even smaller number who return to become language teachers, and even for those learners at advanced levels the main input is usually interlanguage talk.

Question that Thais ask

A considerable and important element of conversation is concerned with the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relations and rituals of politeness and social posturing in which often little or no information is exchanged. These rituals are culturally determined. One such situation is the first meeting between strangers. When individuals meet for the first time, they face many uncertainties. When they begin to converse with a total stranger, they have little direct knowledge of that person's background, beliefs, attitudes and preferences, though some elements may be inferred from the stranger's appearance, dress or speech. Conventions of interpersonal interaction demand that there be communication; silence is generally not an option.

In such a situation, an individual will attempt to reduce the unknowns. The most obvious means of reducing uncertainty is to acquire information about the stranger. Berger (1973) and Calabrese (1975) (cited in Berger & Bradac, 1982:25) found that the first few minutes of a first encounter between strangers were dominated by question asking. Most of these questions were concerned with requests for background information, such as "Where are you from?", "What is your main subject?", "Where do you live?", and so on. After the first two or three minutes, the rate at which questions was asked showed a marked decline. This was because participants felt they had enough information to be confident of the other's behaviour (Roloff & Kellermann, 1984). They began to spend more time on conversation topics on which they had some common ground. Zunin and Zunin (1976:127) refer to this process as the "search for mutual interests." Studies show that we are generally attracted to, and rate more positively, those people whom we perceive as having interests, attitudes, beliefs and values that reflect our own (Applegate & Leichy, 1984:37).

These preliminary questions thus serve at least two important functions in an encounter. First, they reduce initial uncertainty in a relationship and they provide the basis for a possible continuation of the relationship. If we find the stranger is a student, we will make inferences about that person's attitudes, preferences and opinions that are quite different than if we find that the stranger is a doctor. We generalize from what we know (or believe) of such people and adjust our behaviour accordingly: "The interrogator's speech produces a receiver response which feeds back to the interrogator and potentially affects his or her future strategic choices, choices of speech acts, and stylistic choices" (Berger & Bradac, 1982:83). Questions and the topics they cover are seen to be crucial elements in the initialization of a relationship.

Quite clearly, questions and notions of appropriate topics are likely to vary from one culture to another. Any foreigner residing in Thailand for any length of time can construct a list of questions and topics that are peculiarly and characteristically "Thai." Segaller (1989:71-72) writes:

I'll repeat here the more or less standard questionnaire with which every taxi driver who's disposed to talk, and realizes I can speak some Thai bombards me. Question one: Yoo meuang Thai ghce bpee? - How long have you been in Thailand?... Poot Thai geng! - You speak Thai very well! ...Question two: where do I work? Question three: Do I have a Thai wife? ...Question four: How many children? ...Question five ...: Why not? (As you can see, these questions do border rather on the personal, but they're not meant to be nosey; they're just friendly enquiries) ... Question six (sometimes almost as an afterthought) : Which country are you from? A variation on this, a hangover from the GI R & R days of the Vietnam War: Is the traffic/weather/cost of living/ the same in America as in Bangkok? ... Question seven (optional, and a bit embarrassing) : how many meun. (tens of thousands) baht do you earn per month? ... Question nine (also optional) : Rot dtit meuang nork meuan meuang Thai? - Are the traffic jams in foreign countries the same as in Bangkok?" More could be added.

Piprell (1991:30) describes a typical male Thai-male Westerner encounter:

Anyway, everyone crowded around and wanted to know how long I was going to be in Thailand and how come I could speak Thai? ... They also wanted to know if I could eat hot food, and did I like Thai girls? I know they asked these questions to show they liked me; it didn't matter that every Thai I ever met asked me the same things.

Tsow (1987) describes the efforts of foreign teachers at a Bangkok university to encourage students to engage in conversation with foreigners. To do this, they sent the students out to interview tourists at local attractions. Typical questions asked by the students were "Do you like Thailand?" "What places have you visited?" and "What do you think of Thai people?" Teachers attempted to encourage students to ask more creative, imaginative questions, perhaps on contro-

versial issues, that would encourage discussion. However, they found that "getting the students to formulate appropriate questions was an exhausting job" and several students devised questions that "offended some respondents as being excessively personal."

Rojanaphruk in an article in *The Nation* (1991) gives this advice to the foreigner in Thailand:

Many direct if not personal questions may be thrown at you but please do not mistake it for an invasion of privacy. As a foreigner you do not easily fall into the Thai social order, so many Thais may feel confused as how to address you. Don't be offended if a Thai asked what your salary is or whether you're married or not--if you do not wish to answer, a polite evasion is fine. As much as foreigners are curious about Thailand, so too are Thais about foreigners.

Komln, in her study of Thai cultural values and behaviour (1990:228-229), writes:

Most Thai and foreign observers of the Thai would agree that the Thai value good form and appearance, as well as material possession oriented [sic]. They are particular about appearance and dressing, in quantity and quality with designer labels, and brandnames of all kinds ... This appearance conscious value is an everyday life reality. A sociolinguistic analysis of conversational topics in Thai social interactions can readily show that one of the common conversational themes, is appreciating one another's clothings and its accessories at length.

However, the issue is not this clearcut. In a cross-cultural interaction set in Thailand, even when the Thai and the native English speaker may exhibit the same overt behaviours, such as asking the same questions, often their motives differ. A Westerner may ask one's occupation in order to fill in background information, establish common ground, and possibly to establish a link for further interpersonal exploration. A Thai may ask this question in order to establish also one's relative status, wealth, level of education, and hence to define interpersonal roles and status. The Thai is fulfilling his/her social needs in a manner appropriate in Thai culture.

At other times overt behaviour may differ. In general, in Western cultures, it is inappropriate or irrelevant to ask another's age, except in certain situations. In Thai culture, on the other hand, age is an important factor in status and role definition. If, in Thailand, a Thai asks me how old I am in Thai, he is perfectly justified in his question; it is culturally appropriate; he is establishing relative status and roles according to his own cultural norms and attempting to fit me in.² I am on his territory. If he asks me the same question in English, what has changed? What grounds have I to be offended? It is still culturally appropriate. I am still on his territory. Competence should be "measured against locally felt communicative needs and not against the norms of native speakers of English" (Stevens, 1980:106). If I choose to be offended or not to deflect the question graciously, it is I who am acting inappropriately. By using English, does he cease to be a Thai? The question may not be appropriate in an ENL situation in the United States or Britain but, as already stated, this interaction is not occurring in these settings. There is nothing wrong with socio-cultural "transfer" or innovation in this setting.³ Indeed, transfer is unavoidable: if we demand the Thai act in a "culturally appropriate manner" (like a foreigner), reverse transfer is occurring. Negotiation of meaning, as negotiation of price in the market stall, must be a win-win situation. Both negotiators must feel that they have won, have gained the upper hand, or at least have gained some benefit. The Thai has as much a right to define participant roles and statuses, traditionally important in Thailand, in a way appropriate to him, as does the native speaker of English. From that basis, both have a footing and the interaction and relationship can develop.

It is the foreigner in Thailand who needs a higher degree of cultural awareness, and much less the Thai. Fortunately, the foreigner is generally aware of this and will make allowances. He is aware that a question that another foreigner may not ask in this situation may be asked by a Thai or other non-native and asked legitimately. Some foreigners may attribute it to ignorance but, if so, only their own ignorance and intolerance is being displayed. They are ignoring the realities of the cross-cultural situation. Very often, it is the differences as well as the negotiation towards common ground that are most valued in a cross-cultural interaction, as well as being most mutually enriching. It is only when Thais travel overseas to an Anglo-Saxon country that they are required to be highly aware of cultural differences and social norms and modify their overt behaviour accordingly. Yet how many of our students will have this opportunity?

I am not saying that our learners should not be made aware of cultural and sociolinguistic differences. They need to be taught to be sensitive to and tolerant of these differences.⁴ They should also be made aware that their own cognitive strategies, affective orientation or cultural background may hinder communication (McCroskey, 1984). For example, Thai learners will have to learn to speak out when they don't understand what is being said in a conversation. It is not enough to say that Thais don't ask questions while Westerners do, and so Thais should too. This is too simplistic and glosses over the real and immediate communication problems. When a Thai fails to understand another Thai, he seeks clarification. When I am talking to Thai friends in Thai and I fail to make myself clear, they ask for clarification. Failure to indicate lack of understanding results in the breakdown of the communication. When conversing in Thai, Thais do ask questions of each other and of Thai-speaking foreigners. Why don't they do it in English?⁵ Whatever the language, a meaningful communication must be maintained, hence clarification must be sought. Perhaps it is because we have not taught them how to seek clarification. Ironically, and sadly, while Thai speakers of English attempt to save face by not indicating that they fail to understand, they risk losing face when the other person does realize their lack of comprehension.

Questions of the type mentioned above are

very different from others such as "Have you eaten Thai food?", "Do you like Thai food?", "Do you like Thailand?" Sometimes puzzling to the foreigner ("I've just told him I have lived in Thailand for two years, so why is he asking me if I've ever eaten Thai food?"), but apparently important questions to the Thai (compare similar questions in Thai "Does it taste good?" "Have you eaten yet?"). Maybe this particular Thai genuinely does not know that this particular foreigner does eat Thai food. There are plenty of foreigners who do not: visit any hotel or guesthouse. There is a common stereotype shared by many Thais that Thai food is extremely spicy and that Westerners are unable to eat it. Many Thais I have encountered are genuinely surprised that many Western foods (eg., introduced Mexican dishes) are equally spicy. The question "Do you like Thai food?" is hence legitimate.

Another common question, already mentioned, is "How old are you?" Many Thais have difficulty estimating the approximate age of a Westerner (as do Westerners estimating the age of Thais) and are naturally curious. (I have observed Westerners who ask Thais their age, for this same reason. It is not always the Thai who initiates this topic!) A direct answer can be avoided and the Thai questioner is satisfied, as he is when asking this question of another Thai (albeit less directly).

Kanittanan (1983) presents examples of "cross-cultural transfer" which she argues are inappropriate in a Western setting. One is the question "Where are you going?", in this instance addressed to a farang teacher by a university student every time they met (op cit. 64). I would admit to not hearing this one very often on campus nowadays (in English or Thai), perhaps indicative of "successful" teaching over the years. I would contend, though, that it is too simplistic to say that Westerners never ask each other this question as an opening gambit. Several situations may be created where this question is appropriate: "Hello, John. Where're you going?" "Where've you been?"

Another example (ibid.) is the reluctance of a Thai student on Christmas holiday in America to address her hostess by her first name. The discussion of address terms and the constraints on the use of first names in Thai is

straightforward. What is apparent to me, however, is that the use of first name to address older people (especially by a young student who is a temporary guest) is very typically American. Such familiar use would be much less acceptable in New Zealand, for example, and probably Britain as well. In these settings, the Thai would be acting appropriately and the American inappropriately.

Finally, asking the price of something, a shirt for example, could be presumed inappropriate. Again, however, several situations can be imagined in which such questions are perfectly acceptable among Western speakers: "I see you've bought a computer. Did it cost much?" "I like that shirt. Was it very expensive?" Social constraints on asking the price in the West may increase as the value of the article increases, for example, there is a difference between asking the price of a new shirt and that of a new car. These few examples serve to show that it is not easy to generalize about social or cultural appropriateness, even in a Western setting.

I am not saying that certain things should not be corrected. It is not customary in Thai society to shout "khun" ("you!") at a stranger on the street purely for the sport of it (the form of address is understandable but the behaviour is not). Asking anyone how much they earn, a bugbear of any foreigner in Thailand, is an inappropriate and embarrassing question, whether in the West or modern (and perhaps "traditional") Thailand (on this point I disagree with Rajanaphruk (1991) quoted above). It is puzzling why so many Thais feel free to ask this particular question of foreigners. It is not transfer: one Thai does not ask this question of another.⁶ Is it interlanguage discourse? Is it because they do not know what else to say and so fall back on cultural stereotypes ("All Westerners are rich")? Perhaps many think because Westerners are outside of Thai society that "anything goes."⁷ There is another possible explanation. Wealth and income are elements that define relative status for a Thai. As such they are important concerns in interpersonal relationships. However, enquiries are usually indirect: one may comment on another's appearance or possessions and prices. In addition, a Thai typically uses display behaviours to indicate financial status (items of clothing, jewelry, a car, etc). When encountering a foreigner and faced with the inner need to establish one's place, but constrained

by a limited linguistic repertoire, the Thai asks a direct question. The same may be true of questions about age. Among Thais, indirect methods such as queries about year of graduation and length of employment are used.

Do we teach the learner not to ask certain questions and so not let him fulfill social needs or remain in ignorance? Maybe it is true that in the West the above questions or others such as "Are you married?", "How many children do you have?", "Do you like Thailand?" are more suitably delayed until later in a conversation when a greater degree of intimacy and personal disclosure has been attained. But we can safely assume that the foreigner is not so thin-skinned nor the conversational process so fragile that it will break down because of these questions. He usually recognizes that these questions are asked because of genuine interest and curiosity. Thais do not have to abandon their own identity. The foreigner, whether a tourist or businessman, does not expect or perhaps even want the Thai to act like a foreigner. If he does, the Thai becomes ridiculous--a parody and a travesty--like anyone who "goes native." If the Western foreigner does take issue, as I have already suggested, the fault does not lie on the Thai side.

Conclusion

There are two distinct concerns in the Thai EFL context. One is the teaching of English language communication skills (the teaching of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursive, strategic, and social competence), the other is the teaching of socio-cultural competence (appropriate or polite communication). Laver (1981) has made a similar distinction (quoted in Maurice, 1985:1): "The process of conversation displays a continual tension between two general conversation needs--the need to communicate as efficiently as possible and the need to be polite."

I believe that we should refocus our attention on the core or "basics" of language teaching, that is "communicative competence", defined as "adequate ability to pass along or give information" (McCroskey, 1984) and the ability to understand information passed on by others. This dimension encompasses the first of the above concerns and can be conceived as accultural or pan-cultural. The second concern as presently conceived, where Western socio-cultural norms

are the standard of appropriateness, is problematic. Before we teach our students what we assume to constitute "appropriate", "correct" or "polite" speech, we should set out to examine what they do say that is considered "inappropriate," "incorrect," or "impolite." I have examined some questions that are often perceived as such. I have suggested that these questions are not alike, that some are the product of the cross-cultural interaction, that they are not all inappropriate, and have suggested that there is justification for their existence given that the cultural setting is Thailand and the use of English inter-national.

It is all very well to make students aware that when they meet an attractive foreigner of the opposite sex at a party that, in a Western (ie., North American) setting, they may invite that person out without having first to engage in extended preamble or to establish mutual acquaintances as is appropriate in the Thai socio-cultural setting (Simon, 1992). Granted, role-playing such a situation is an instructive and fun way to practise English language and an ensuing discussion provides further practice. This is an interesting exercise in cultural comparison and could teach students increased cultural awareness and tolerance, which they certainly need. Yet, do we need to take the next step and actually train them to adopt Western behaviour modes? First, the situation is most unlikely to arise in the Thai context (as Simon notes). Secondly, a Thai is likely to feel uncomfortable behaving in this manner, either in the classroom or in a real situation. Thirdly, if the Thai does actually try to act like a Westerner (in Thai *dajjarit* "to put on airs") in an interaction with a Westerner, in a roomful of Thai friends, he is likely to be the object of teasing, if not resentment or criticism.

A Thai who uses English in Thailand is typically a tour guide, a hotel receptionist, a secretary with a foreign boss, a business person with a foreign colleague. These people do not require competence in Western (North American) norms of socio-cultural behaviour to the same extent, nor do they require this competence to the same extent as when operating in the Anglo-Saxon world. More importantly, the secretary or business person is as likely or is more likely to be dealing with a foreigner who is not a native speaker of English as with one

who is. Non-native speakers of English include other Asians (such as Japanese, Taiwanese, and Singaporeans) as well as Europeans (such as Germans, Italians, and French). As a result, several of the situations and functions commonly taught in our classes may not be relevant or applicable in the situations where learners are most likely to be using their English.⁸

There are those who bemoan the fact that Thai learners of English are weak in listening and speaking skills. This simply reflects the reality that the majority of learners do not and never will require these skills. Those that do are the privileged few who require to understand and to be understood by users of English from other countries.

Is it useful or productive to teach learners Western modes of behaviour when these run counter to Thai behaviours? For example, is it useful to teach students patterns of argument, disagreement and opinion when they have been brought up not to express difference of opinion, but rather consensus? These patterns are of questionable value when dealing with other Asians. They may be of use when dealing with Westerners, but even here there are difficulties. It is to be noted that Western values and behaviours are far from uniform. Certain Australians and Americans may appear crass and overbearing to other

Westerners, while the English may appear restrained and conservative. Loveday (1982, quoted in Maurice, 1985:5) notes that "some Germans find the American way of opening a conversation with comments on the weather to be rather simpleminded ...French and German speakers tend to use an argumentative type of discussion where controversial points are checked and clarified throughout the discussion. In contrast, the American style is more akin to that of a debate, where there is less interruption involved." Even this one quote suggests difficulties in teaching such functions as, in this case, small talk (the weather) or expressing disagreement and opinions. Yet these functions are typically part of language teaching texts used in classes.

The efforts of teaching a "balanced" curriculum ("General" English--Stevens, 1980), and one emphasizing oral skills as is now in vogue, would simply place an intolerable and unachievable burden on teachers and available resources. Should we not rather find out what kinds of communication Thais actually are involved in and with whom, and then teach them what they really need? These encounters are cross-cultural. At the very least, we need to reconsider the basis for our conception of socio-cultural competence. Perhaps it is time that language teachers turned their attention to studies of cross-cultural competence.

Notes

(1) The trains of thought presented in this paper were triggered to a large part by the recent International Conference on Explorations and Innovations in English Language Teaching Methodology, organized by CULI, 2-4 December 1991, Bangkok, and particularly by Simon (1992). Simon appeared to suggest that English teachers in Thailand should train their students in Western modes of behaviour. Another impetus was an incident which occurred at the same conference. In one session, a high-school teacher of English stated that she had stopped teaching listening and speaking because examinations tested only reading and writing abilities. This "admission" was greeted with much consternation and clicking of tongues, in particular by non-local participants. The "in word" of the conference was "communication". I then began to wonder if ENL notions and methods were being transferred wholesale to EFL situations without proper consideration for local realities. For the sake of argument I have taken a somewhat contrary and I hope provocative stance.

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(2) Many Thai, in particular those who have overseas experience, often deny that Thai ask such questions in modern times. It is to be granted that Thailand, in particular Bangkok, has experienced tremendous material and cultural influence from the West in recent years. However, certain

sectors of the population have been influenced more than others. Neither is it true that such questions as I discuss are limited only to the uneducated and "unsophisticated" masses. Ask any resident foreigner.

(3) Note my earlier discussion on the relevance of the term "transfer" in cross-cultural context.

(4) Cultural awareness does not necessarily ease the task of cross-cultural interaction. In fact it may complicate the interaction. A Westerner may be aware that the question "Have you eaten yet?" asked by a Thai is merely a conversational gambit. A Thai may be aware that this question asked by a Westerner may be a preamble to an invitation to a meal. The problem of which interpretation is to be taken still arises when one asks this question of the other--is the person following Thai or Western conventions? At times real difficulties may arise. A colleague reports once being invited to a meal by a Western male. In Thai culture a young woman would not accept such an invitation as it would be seen to be an expression of interest on her part. However, she was aware that in the West, such an offer may be merely an expression of friendliness and nothing more. She thus accepted the invitation. Unfortunately, the Westerner intended the Thai interpretation and took the acceptance as an expression of interest. It is not always best to do as the Romans do.

(5) It is often noted that students do not ask questions or volunteer information in the classroom for various reasons: fear of other students, admission of ignorance or inattention, or respect for the teacher. This is behaviour in a specific and conventionalized situation and is certainly not restricted to only Thai students. It cannot be generalized to conversational interactions.

(6) This is contentious. One Thai colleague, Dr. Pinthip Tuajcharoen, reports only having been asked her income by an elderly male villager. Another colleague, Ms. Amecta Sohni reports that she is frequently asked this question in conversation. The topic is not listed as an appropriate topic of conversation by students. The topic of money or economic status does, however, appear in listings of topics not to ask, perhaps reflecting what they have learned in class (Williams & Phudhicharoenrat, 1992). Discussions with colleagues reveal a great deal of disagreement about the acceptability and frequency of this particular topic. It may again be a matter of traditional culture, age, degree of Westernization, and status (see note 2).

(7) A friend related to me several years ago an incident in Bangkok. She was attempting to cross a busy road with her young daughter when a Thai woman approached her and asked her if she had had a hysterectomy yet. Quite clearly some Thais, when encountering a foreigner, do not know how to behave. Maybe, as Rojanaphruk (1991) notes, they are "confused."

(8) Of 1,246,844 tourists to visit Thailand in the period January-March, 1991 699,715 (ie., 56.12%) were from East Asia (ASEAN countries, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and others), 341,709 were from Europe (27.41%), 76,373 from Americas (53,745 from US (4.31%), a 27.63% drop from 1990, due to such factors as the Gulf War), 59,729 from South Asia (4.79%), etc. Business travellers to Thailand totalled 399,534 in 1990, broken down into Japanese (60,279-15.1%), Singapore (46,290-11.6%), US (34,784-8.7%) and Hong Kong (32,957-8.3%). Figures are from *Bangkok Post* (1991).

The Author

Gwyn Williams first came to Thailand in 1984 to do fieldwork on Tai Lue and related dialects in northern Thailand. He subsequently taught English and Linguistics at Auckland University, New Zealand, and English in Korea. He returned to Thailand in 1989 and teaches Linguistics at Thammasat University. His present interests are with language contact phenomena and localized English in Thailand.

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