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## What Does It Mean to Be a Thai Student at an American University?

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In this paper I first report on research on what it means to be a Thai student at a mid-sized (14,000 student) American university. Areas of inquiry concern how Thai students perceive academic work (reading texts, comprehending lectures, taking exams, talking in class, using the library, and writing papers) and the processes many Thai students go through in adjusting to life in a culture where behaviors and values are quite different from those in Thailand. In the second part of this paper I give suggestions for educators in Thailand as to how they can provide opportunities for Thai students to be prepared for the academic and cultural adjustments needed to be successful at an American university. Finally, I present references to recommended readings, texts, and activities relevant to the teaching of academic skills and cultural awareness.

### **Introduction**

More and more Thai students are going to the U.S. to study at American universities at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and in this paper I report on what it means to be a Thai student at a mid-sized American university--from the students' perspective. The point of this paper is to provide educators in Thailand with a renewed understanding of the immense challenge of being a foreign student, so as to provide guidance to students who plan to continue their education abroad. Through this paper I also hope to instill in educators in Thailand the very specific needs of students who are planning to study abroad. As will become obvious, students going to study in the U.S. not only need a certain competency in academic English, but also awareness of cultural behaviors and values and ways to successfully adapt psychologically to a new culture.

### **Part 1 : Being a Thai Student at an American University**

So what does it mean to be a Thai student at a mid-sized American university? For many Thai students it unfortunately means struggling with English to read texts, comprehend lectures, take exams, use the library, and write term papers. It also means adjusting to interaction with people who share different culturally based behaviors and values, and in the process of making such adjustments it quite often means wondering why they came to the U.S. to study and having feelings of depression, confusion, and homesickness.

Ambiguously, for a few, being a Thai student, in reaction to academic demands and negative feelings, means going deeper and deeper into the American culture, making more and more American friends, avoiding Thais on campus, and reaching out to professors and American students to help them solve their academic problems and gain language and social competence. For others, being a Thai student means finding a balance, interacting on a daily basis with both Thai and American students, as well as with students from other countries. However, for the majority, being a Thai student means alienation from the mainstream American population. The

academic demands and feelings of homesickness drive them to study and socialize exclusively with Thai and students from other Asian countries.

But, after some time, for most Thai students, when it becomes easier to use English to successfully comprehend texts and lectures, talk more easily in class, and write papers, being a Thai student at an American university also means having a feeling of accomplishment, often accompanied with a genuine fondness for the university and people within it. It is at this point it all seems worthwhile and that the decision to come to the U.S. to study was a wise choice.

### 1. Struggling with English

In an effort to understand how many foreign students perceive difficulty with academic work in their university studies, I distributed a questionnaire. This questionnaire was completed by 196 students, including 58 students from Southeast Asia, 20 being from Thailand. As the results in Table One show, students from Southeast Asia perceive difficulty in writing papers for professors (79%) and taking exams (61%), second only to the Central/South American population. Southeast Asian students also perceive much difficulty in comprehending lectures (55%) and talking in class (58%), second only to East Asians, while they perceive more difficulty than other foreign students in using the library (50%). The only area which Southeast Asian students perceive less difficulty than most other foreign students is in reading academic texts, and even so, 45% of the Southeast Asian population perceive some difficulty.

**Table 1**  
General Perceptions of Difficulty with Academic Work

Skills	East Asia	Southeast Asia	Cent/South America	Europe	South Asia
writing papers	67%	79%	86%	47%	35%
taking exams	59%	61%	64%	35%	17%
comprehending lectures	62%	55%	35%	35%	9%
reading academic materials	52%	45%	57%	29%	100%
using the library	31%	50%	35%	6%	43%
talking in class	65%	58%	35%	24%	4%

However, a further breakdown shows that of the Southeast Asian population, Thai students perceive much more difficulty with academic work than other Southeast Asian students. As Table Two indicates, 90% of the Thai students who completed the questionnaire perceive difficulty with writing, 85% in comprehending lectures, 80% in taking exams, 70% in talking in class, 65% in using the library and reading academic texts. Thus, it appears that Thai students at this university perceive much difficulty in using English to do academic work.

**Table 2**  
Perceived Academic Language Problems : Thai Students

Skills	Difficulty	No Real Difficulty
writing papers for professors	90% (18)	10% (2)
taking exams	80% (16)	20% (4)
comprehending lectures	85% (17)	15% (3)
reading academic materials	65% (13)	35% (7)
using the library	65% (13)	35% (7)
talking in class	70% (14)	30% (6)

On-going interviews with and observations of Thai students on campus does indeed show that they often find they lack the fluency needed to fully comprehend the English which is used in texts and lectures and to use English to write academic papers, answer exam questions, give oral presentations of their ideas, and use the library effectively, especially when they first arrive. The problems which evolve from the exclusive use of English is exemplified in the words of the following under graduate (in the actual words of this Thai student) :

“You know, before I come here I think I know English very well. Ah, in Thailand we study a lot of English. I studied English ten years. After I come here and start to study, you know, I know that I have a big problem with English. I have to understand English same as American. It was a big shock! But, now I can do o’kay, but when I first came, you know, I can’t understand my lecture at all! I had to read the text many times, and I still couldn’t understand! It gave me a big headache!”

Most Thai students will respond to the question, “What is the most difficult part of being a student in America?” with, “Writing.” The following student’s comment fairly much summarizes what most Thai students say about their problems with writing in English :

“Professors at this university ask students to write a lot. We have to write reports, term papers, essays (during exams), notes to the professor, and even, ah, in one course I had to write in a journal everyday. Sometimes my professor can’t understand what I write about. The hardest part is writing exactly what I mean. It’s hard. Answering exam questions is the most difficult. You have to write so fast! There’s no time to go back and check grammar. And, professors expect good English, you know.”

Most Thai students will also tell you that they can not understand all their professors. As a Thai graduate student in the Business department put it :

“Some professors are easy to understand. Their ideas are clear and they speak slowly. But, other professors talk very fast. It takes a long time to get used to their English.”

An undergraduate freshman showed her frustration when she stated, “I sit in the lecture and wonder, ‘What am I doing here?’ I can’t even take notes. I have no idea what the teacher talks about.” Several students have said what the following student pointed out (with a smile):

“The American teacher, ajarn, he likes to tell stories. He will tell stories in the middle of the lecture. I have no idea if it is story or not. I keep writing, but it doesn’t make sense. How do you know if the teacher stops a lecture to tell a story?”

Students also show frustration over exams. As two students put it:

“Sometimes I can’t understand the question. Maybe I know answer, but I can’t figure out the question. So, I go to the next question. Sometimes I don’t have time to go back and think about that question. The teacher yells, “Time’s up!” So I quickly write anything, but I don’t know....”

I like multiple choice tests. They are easy for me because I am a good reader. But, when my teacher gives essay questions, I have a problem. It takes me a long time to write the answer. I have to think, and translate from Thai. I can never write down what I mean. Now I don’t care. But, before I really got upset!”

Talking in class poses problems for some students, especially students in upper division undergraduate classes or in graduate seminars. One student, who had to take a business policy course twice, explained the problems she had :

“The class only had eight students because, ah, the class had a very difficult professor. Nobody want to study with him. He expect everybody to talk a lot. So, I

talked a lot. But, then he said he can't understand my pronunciation. Everytime. So, I stopped talking. Nobody likes him, at least foreign students, because he expects our English to be same as American. That's impossible!"

Although Thai students seem to have to struggle with English, and sometimes become frustrated because their English does not meet the expectations of their professors, there are times when their efforts pay off. They are rewarded for their efforts and grow in their abilities to use English competently within an American university setting. For example, an undergraduate expressed the following :

"In my Geography class my teacher asked us to give a speech. I was very very nervous. I never gave a speech before in front of American students. I thought, "May be they won't understand my English." But, I got friends to help me, you know, and I practiced very much. My speech was on geography in Thailand. Everybody liked my speech, I got an A, and after class students asked me a lot of questions about Thailand. It was fun."

This positive experience shows that although some Thai students do indeed have to struggle with English, they do not always have problems! In fact, there are some professors who truly understand the position of the Thai and other foreign students. They can be very empathetic, and some will even go out of their way to help the struggling student to be successful. For example, a very happy Thai accounting major told me :

"I have one professor; I like him very much. I failed his first test because I didn't know how to study for his test. He told me to come to his office anytime. So, I did. He explained everything to me. I could go to his office and he, how do I say, he was happy to see me. He is very friendly to Thai student. He wants us to get A. But, he makes us work hard. But, anytime we can go to his office and he will explain everything."

Many Thai students have positive experiences with reading, and they seem to have less problems in this area of academic work. In fact, many Thai students will use reading as a way to overcome other language problems. One Thai student put it this way :

"When I don't understand the lecture, I read and reread the text. It takes a long time, but I get better grades than American students because they don't read the text until the night before the test. Well, not all American students, but a lot."

## **2. Process and Problems : Adjusting to American Culture**

Cultural behaviors, values and assumptions are quite different across cultures, especially between cultures such as Thai and American in which there is a "social distance" between them. As Brown points out, when a person enters a culture which is new for him or her, "this person's world, self identity, systems of thinking, acting, feeling, and communicating are disrupted" (1986:34). Thus, besides adjusting to the use of English to do academic work, Thai students find that they also need to adjust their behavior and learn to live in a culture which has different values and assumptions about the world around them.

Lewis and Jungman (1986) and Oberg (1960) discuss what it means to enter and adjust to another culture, a process which can be broken into four basic stages. It is through this process of cultural adjustment that it is possible to describe how Thai students adapt to life at an American university.

The initial stage is like a "vacation". Everything is exciting and intriguing. However, the person soon starts to feel the intrusion of more and more cultural differences. Such differences include, as Tannon (1986) points out, when to talk, what to say in different contexts, how to pace a conversation, when to pause, how to use intonation, when to be direct or indirect, and how to be cohesive and coherent. As Hall (1974) and Morain (1987) make clear, body language, such as gestures, posture, facial expressions, gaze, touch, and use space is also different. And, these differences come into play during everyday interaction, such as simply getting change at a store, opening a checking account, closing a telephone conversation, crossing the street, catching a taxi, saying good morning, introducing a friend to someone, turning down an invitation... Due to such differences, virtually every interaction becomes an "intense relationship" in which tremendous effort is expended to keep communication from breaking down (Clark, 1976).

Thai students at this stage of their adjustment tend to display certain symptoms. They avoid interacting with Americans, complain about the food, weather, and American behavior, sleep a lot, become depressed, homesick, lonely, and overly anxious about their studies. For example, a student who was showing symptoms of culture shock told me :

"Sometimes I get really tired of Americans. They don't understand Thai people. They put their dirty shoes on my bed, get angry at each other, and are not very modest. Sometimes I just want to go back to my home in Thailand."

The third stage of cultural adjustment is typified by an understanding that cultural behaviors and values are simply different. There is still cultural stress and problems to contend with, but the Thai becomes more empathetic, understanding that Americans have been raised in a culture different from their own and that Americans can not possibly adjust themselves to the Thai way of doing things. A third year student provides insight :

"When I first came here, all I could do is sleep. I did not want to go out, and I avoided people. I used to go to the library to study where I could be by myself. Even small things were hard, like going to the cafeteria, talking with Americans, going to classes. Then, after some time, I learned to accept, ah, that I am in the United States and that this is not Thailand. Then I found that it's not so bad. The people are really friendly in their own way. It's different here, that's all."

In the fourth stage, which not all students reach, the person becomes self-confident. He or she is able to use the behaviors of American people, interact freely in the second culture, and gain a new cultural identity or image of his or herself as a participant in the American culture.

But, how do Thai students adjust as a group? My observations show that during the second stage of cultural adjustment, when the new culture seems too heavy and demanding to cope with, many Thai students will move out of the dorms, leave their American roommates, and locate housing off campus with other Thai students. This is so prevailing that of the 52 Thai students at this mid-sized university, 43 live off campus with other Thai students or students from other Asian nations. As a Thai sophomore puts it :

"Before, I really wanted to know American. I made a good American friend. But, he changed schools. I missed Thailand, and I couldn't make new American friend. I was alone. No friends. But, Thai students are very friendly. When I'm with Thai, you know, I enjoy everything very much. I can study, too. So, my Thai friend, he talked me to live with him off campus. Now I never talk with American. I speak Thai all the time."

## **Part II: Preparing Students to Study in the U.S.: Suggestions**

In the first part of this paper I addressed the academic and cultural adjustments Thai students need to make when they attend a mid-sized American university. Although most Thai students are successful in making these adjustments, it stands to reason that the process of adjustment can be made easier. In part two of this paper I offer suggestions as to how educators in Thailand can possibly make the adjustment process easier for the American-bound Thai student.

First of all, those responsible for advising Thai students can make sure that the student is indeed ready for the challenge of studying at an American university. One way is to have evidence that the student could be academically successful in the U.S. One indication is that the student has a fairly high score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). A score below 500 generally indicates that the student is not ready for academic work in English. A score of 600 is recommended.

Advisors can also be aware of the various language institutes in the U.S. which have English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs. I suggest that most students spend time in one of these programs when they first arrive in the U.S. A colleague and my research has shown that students who participate in a language institute during their initial stage of study in the U.S. are highly successful in their later academic work (Tannacito and Gebhard, 1987).

An alternative to having the student prepare by studying in U.S. language institutes is for Thai universities and high schools or even commercial institutes to set up specific EAP programs. An EAP program, modeled on an American system, could include courses in Academic Reading, Lecture Comprehension, Note Taking and Study Skills, American Classroom Communication, and Academic Writing. There are a number of texts available on the U.S. market which could be used, or creative writers in Thailand could use these texts as models for creating their own. At the end of this article I provide references to recommended texts currently on the market for each skill.

Finally, even the brightest and most capable student of English seems to be unprepared for the process of cultural adjustment. Cultural adjustment is often taken for granted, as if there is no way for the student to prepare for the cultural differences and subsequent problems which are ahead of him or her. However, there is much that can be done to provide the America-bound student with the knowledge and insight to successfully, and perhaps more easily, make the cultural adjustments needed to adapt to an American university environment. This adjustment process, it could be emphasized, could include the idea that culture shock can be used as a positive learning process, as Adler (1987) writes about, rather than a negative experience, something to get over. In this way, perhaps more Thai students would opt for a deeper and richer experience with the American population, rather than escaping into the secure Thai community of students. By accepting the fact that American cultural values and behaviors are simply different, and by joining Americans, the Thai student will subsequently have opportunities to gain genuine insight into American life as well as enrich his or her language and personal development as a person.

In the next section of this article I provide suggested readings for educators in Thailand and ESL/EFL texts for students which are specifically designed to provide cultural awareness. I offer these texts and readings as a way for educators in Thailand to prepare the America-bound Thai student with the means through which to successfully adjust to the American values and behaviors he or she will encounter in the United States.

### **Recommended Texts and Readings**

Through my experience as an ESL/EFL teacher in EAP programs and teacher educator I have been able to experience a variety of texts through which to teach students how to read, write, speak, and listen to American academic English, as well as adjust to American culture. Below I present a few of these books:

1. Academic Reading Texts
 

Long, Michael, et al. (1980). *Reading English for academic study*. New York: Newbury House.

Sirother, Judith B. (1987). *Kaleidoscope: academic readings for ESL students*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
2. Academic Reading and Study Skills Texts
 

Postman, Robert D. et al. (1985). *College reading and study skills*. New York: Macmillan.
3. Academic Reading and Writing Texts
 

Currie, Pat and Cray, Ellen. (1987). *Strictly academic: a reading and writing text*. New York: Newbury House.

Kaplan, Robert B. and Shaw, Peter A. (1983). *Exploring academic discourse: a textbook for advanced level ESL reading and writing students*. New York: Newbury House.
4. Academic Writing Texts
 

Kennedy, Mary L. and Smith, Hadley M. (1986). *Academic writing: working with sources across the curriculum*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Lyons, Liz H. and Courter, Karen B. (1984). *Research matters*. New York: Newbury House.

Weidenborner, Stephen and Caruso, Domenick. (1986). *Writing research papers: a guide to the process*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
5. Academic Listening Texts
 

Mason, Abelle. (1983). *Understanding academic lectures*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Ruetten, Mary K. (1986). *Comprehending academic lectures*. New York: Macmillan.
6. Classroom Oral Communication Texts
 

Porter, Pat et al. (1985). *Communicating effectively in English: oral communication for non-native speakers*. Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth.
7. Cross-Cultural Communication Texts
 

Genzel, Rhona B. and Cummings, Martha G. (1986). *Culturally speaking: a conversation and culture text for learners of English*. New York: Harper & Row.

Levine, Deena L. et al. (1987). *The culture puzzle: cross-cultural communication for English as a second language*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Zanger, Virginia V. (1985). *Face to face: the cross-cultural workbook*. New York: Newbury House.
8. References for Teachers (in English): Thai and American Culture
 

Fieg, John P. (1980). *Thais and north Americans*. Chicago: Intercultural Press.

Klausner, William J. (1983). *Reflections on Thai culture*. Bangkok: The Siam Society.

Klausner, William J. and Klausner, Kampan. (1979). *Conflict or communication*. Bangkok: Business Information and Research.

Mulder, Niels. (1979). *Everyday life in Thailand: an interpretation*. Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol.

Rajadhon, Phya Anuman. (1968). *Essays on Thai folklore*. Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol.

Segaller, Denis. (1979). *Thai ways*. Bangkok: Allied Newspapers Limited.

Segaller, Denis. (1982). *More Thai ways*. Bangkok: Allied Newspapers Limited.

Stewart, Edward C. (1972). *American cultural patterns: a cross-cultural perspective*.

9. References for Teachers: Readings on Cross-Cultural Communication  
 Luce, Louise F. (1987). *Toward internationalism*. New York: Newbury House.  
 Robinson, Gail L. (1985). *Crosscultural understanding*. New York: Pergamon.  
 Valdes, Joyce. M. (1986). *Culture bound: bridging the cultural gap in language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
10. References for Teachers: Cross-Cultural Awareness Activities and Simulations  
 Gaston, Jan. (1984). *Cultural awareness teaching techniques*. Brattleboro, Vt.: Pro Lingua Associates.  
 Hoopes, David S. and Ventura, Paul. (1979). *Intercultural sourcebook: cross-cultural training methodologies*. Chicago: Intercultural Press.  
 Hoopes, David S. et al. (1979). *Overview of intercultural education, training and research*. Yarmouth, Main: Intercultural Press.  
 McGroarty, Mary and Galvan, Jose L. (1985). Culture as an issue in second language teaching. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Beyond basics: issues and research in TESOL*. New York: Newbury House.  
 Shirts, Gary. (1977). *BaFa BaFa: a cross culture simulation*. Del Mar, Ca.: Simile II.  
 Weeks, William H. et al. (1979). *A manual of structured experiences for cross-cultural learning*. Yarmouth, Main: Intercultural Press.
11. Organizations Teachers Can Write to for Information and Lists of Publications on Cross-Cultural Training  
 The Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research. 1414 22nd Street, Washington, D.C. 20032 U.S.A.  
 Simile II. 218 Twelfth Street, P.O. Box 910, Del Mar, Ca. 92014 U.S.A.  
 Intercultural Press. P.O. Box 768, Yarmouth, Maine 04096 U.S.A.

## Conclusion

In this paper I reported on what it means to be a Thai student at a mid-sized American university. I discussed, based on my own research, the way Thai students perceive academic work and the processes many Thai students go through in their adjustments to American cultural behaviors and values. And, I presented ideas about what educators in Thailand can do to better prepare the Thai student for life at an American university.

Thai students seem to have problems with all areas of academic work, especially with academic writing, comprehending lectures, taking exams, and talking in class. Students seem to find strength in their abilities to read academic English, using reading as a way to compensate for other academic problems, such as in comprehending lectures.

Thai students, as with other international students, go through stages of cultural adjustment, including an initial "vacation" stage, in which everything seems intriguing, and a "cultural shock" stage, in which all the small differences between Thai and American culture weigh on the Thai student, making everyday tasks and academic work difficult to cope with. It is quite obvious that Thai students handle this situation by taking refuge with each other. A majority of Thai students live together, helping



each other with academic work and social interaction rather than reaching out to the American population of students and faculty. It was emphasized that Thai students would greatly benefit from turning their cultural shock, and subsequent problems, into a positive way to learn more about themselves and American culture. Their language would become richer from the experience of interacting more with Americans as well.

Educators can do much to prepare the Thai student for life at an American university. Students with low TOEFL scores can be advised to wait until they can do better on the test. Students with both low and high TOEFL scores can join EAP programs in the U.S., as most major universities have such academic preparation programs. Institutes in Thailand are advised to start such programs as well, or at least add EAP courses to their present programs. It is further advised that as part of an EAP program, students study cross-culture communication, especially about what it means to live in another culture and the processes of adjusting to a culture with different values and behaviors.

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