

CULTURE! CULTURE! EVERYWHERE

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According to Levy (1978) culture refers to "the broad matrix of a society, to those aspects of its life that govern the kinds of objects it has (its material culture) and that govern its characteristic language, morality, art and science." (p. 38) In this sense, studying a foreign language will not yield any fruitful result if its cultural elements are not taken into consideration.

EFL textbooks that are used in Thailand at the present time are mainly imported from either the US or the UK so while the students are learning the language themselves they have to understand also socio-cultural contexts embedded in the text. If the students cannot share the experience, thoughts, ways of thinking, way of living of those people who appear in the text book obviously, the problem of misunderstanding cannot be avoided. In other words if the students are not made aware of the socio-cultural aspects that do appear in their text book, they couldn't really master the language. I've looked through a number of EFL textbooks imported either from the US, UK and are currently used at the secondary or intermediate level and made notes of the common features that these textbooks share. I came up with 11 categories:

Holidays and Celebrations

The first cultural-domain that appear frequently in the textbooks, whether the secondary or intermediate level, is about particular holidays, festivals, or celebrations of the native-speakers of English. There's always time when the text mentions the Christmas party, Santa Clause and the turkey dinner. Some of these things might not be a problem to Thai students because they hear about it. But when it comes to Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, the Memorial Day, etc., the

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things that they are less familiar with, this can be a problem. How could they know the significance of these celebrations? How could they interpret correctly the message in the content that they never heard of?

Proper choice of word/sentences within certain situation

The imported textbooks always present a variety of situations in the unit. Usually there is a setting at the airport, at the zoo, at the telephone booth etc. These specific situations often call for the use of certain words, certain phrases or even certain sentences. These certain structures have to be understood and learned by the foreign students. Because there is no way to avoid the use of this particular language if the foreign student would like to be able to really *use* the language. Let's look at some of the situations whereby only certain words are required and not any other words.

"What gate is it, please?"

Gate 24, Miss. You can board at one"

the word 'gate' and 'board' here are very situation-specific. There is no other words to substitute them. If you are going to deal with arrival or the departure of the plane there is no way that you can avoid the use of these specific terms. Look at the following statement "Do you have anything to declare?" This sentence is also situation specific. It is a stock phrase which is used when the custom officer asks those who are travelling to or from the country.

Tones, feelings, attitudes

The tones, feelings, attitudes of the message that are being said is also important for those who interpret the language for its meaning. In order to get to know the 'use' of the language the foreign students should be made aware of these aspects and be able to interpret these messages. Look at the following letter as an example.

"Dear Mom,

Everything is fine. There are some photos so you can see how I'm doing at home. I empty the trash, make the beds, set the table, vacuum the rugs, make coffee for Dad, do my homework and go to bed early."

Love,

Buddy.

This letter can be classified as very informal, casual because it's the letter from the son to the mother. By looking at the salutation "Dear Mom" we can sense this informal overtone of the letter.

Take a look at this conversation.

Max : Do you have the tickets?

Donis : No, I lost them.

Max : What?

Donis : I'm only joking, Max. Let's go!

We can see that the tone in this conversation is quite casual.

- Excuse me, sir. Can you tell me where the Grand Hotel is?

- Sorry, I don't know myself.

From the way the speaker asked the question, it's clear that the tone of this conversation is quite formal.

Role Relationship

In a given context, sometimes it's the roles of those engaged in the conversation because the way people say things can also suggest what role or what position they are in. Look at the following example.

"- All-American Airlines. May I help you?

- Yes, I have a reservation for Flight 774 on Monday to Los Angeles. I want to change it to a later date, please.

- What day and time?

- Saturday the tenth at 3:40 p.m.

- Okay, that's Flight 786.

- Thank you."

This is quite clear that the conversation should be between a customer and a ticket officer because the way the ticket officer speaks is very typical and polite.

Look at the following dialogue.

Person A : Good evening, sir.

B : Good evening, I made a reservation-Joe Capp?

A : Ah, yes. A double, wasn't it?

B : No, a single.

A : And how many nights are you going to spend with us?

B : Just one. How much does the room cost?

A : Thirty-five dollars a night.

B : Oh, that's expensive!

A : Yes, I'm afraid so--well, you're in Room 342.

B : Thank you. Please send up some tea, too.

A : Yes, sir. Have a nice time here in Boston.

We can see that Person A : must be a desk clerk at one of the hotels in Boston because the way he speaks to the customer is very polite. He addressed Mr. Joe Capp as "sir".

Cultural specificity about names

In the texts, various names that are very cultural-specific are always used; names in this category include

1. proper name both US & UK names and names from other cultures such as Dave, Ron, Mike, Ernestito, Stavros, Taruko, Takeshi, Erica Wang
2. Food items such as celery, grapefruit, peanut butter, muffin
3. Place names such as Sacramento, Sears Tower, The Parthenon, Kennedy International Airport

It's quite hard for the foreign students to imagine or refer to anything beyond their frame of reference. Not only for the students that have problems, sometimes the teachers who teach that text also have problems. How can the teachers know about these foreign foods, or places? Some teachers may have a better opportunity because they have been to either the US or the UK so they should know or have some experience about grapefruit, or know where Sacramento is. But how about the majority of Thai teachers who do not share that experience and have to teach certain things that they themselves never been exposed to. It'll be very difficult indeed to teach something that you do not feel at ease with. For example, in one unit of one of the US textbooks, they mention places in New Orleans; the French Quarter, the Louisiana Superdome, Lake Pontchartrain Causeway. If you have never been to Louisiana, how could you imagine these places?, how would you know that Louisiana was influenced by the French?, and that's why some of the places are so named. The British know quite well about "the Lake District" but how many Thai teachers know about this: Will you feel comfortable to teach the things you don't know, or are not able to give any explanations to the students?

The teaching can be fun and much more enjoyable on the part of the learners and the teacher if the teachers have some frames of references to depend on or know something about.

Various communicative functions

EFL textbooks are oriented towards the communicative aspects of the language. As a result the units is often organized or presented in terms of the communicative function aspect of the language. Some units are devoted to how to make a request, others are devoted to how to ask for directions and so on. In order to extend an invitation, to ask for a change etc., there are some restrictions to use

the language. Foreign language learners have to learn to use these language functions. For example if you want to ask for direction you have to follow the following lines of argument.

- "Excuse me, sir
- Yes, can I help you?
- Can you tell me the way to the Ostriches?
- - - - -"

Association with places

Every communication takes place in a certain setting. Students should be able to identify the particular setting or the place when that conversation has taken place from the clues given in the contexts.

From the following dialogue, students should be able to deduce from the context that it is in the photo shop.

- "A - Hello.
- Hello, I want a picture of myself.
- A - Tomorrow at 4:30.
- No, that's too late.
- A - How about Wednesday, then?
- Sorry, that's my day off. Can you do it right now?
- A - Sure. What's the photo for?
- A passport.
- A - Oh, you can have it in an hour.
- How much do six copies cost?
- A - They cost four dollars.
- Okay, what do you want me to do?
- A - Sit on that chair, please. And say, "cheese."

Or look at this dialogue, it is clear that the setting is in the kitchen.

- " - That coffee smells wonderful.
- Wait until you taste it.
- What do you mean?
- It taste wonderful, too."

pastime

One of the topics that are often discussed in the Foreign Language textbooks is about the characters' daily life, their favorite pastime, their hobbies, sport activities, kind of recreation. Whenever the text mentions the familiar sport activities such as soccer, badminton, tennis there is no problem about the concept.

But when it comes to backgammon, American Football, hang gliding or croquet etc., all of which are not familiar to the Thais, it's quite difficult for both the teachers and of course the students. Some teachers might not have any idea at all about these recreational activities. Again they are beyond the frame of reference.

Sources of information

Given a piece of writing students should be able to identify what kind of writing it comes from. For example, they should be able to identify that certain excerpt is a part of a food recipe, a medical prescription from doctors, or a part of the want-ads column etc. Look at this excerpt "Real whipped cream is as much a holiday tradition as a real Christmas tree. And Reddi-wip is the Real Cream of Toppings. While many other toppings contain only some cream, Reddi-wip is 100% real cream."

So it adds a real holiday flavor to your pumpkin pies, holiday coffees, puddings and cakes.

Reddi-wip. It's the easy way to trim all your holiday desserts.

Reddi-wip. The Real Cream of Toppings.

From the way it is written, it can be identified as a piece of ad.

Or look at the following dialogue the context should provide enough clues that this must be a telephone conversation, not a department store where the store clerk can greet the customer with the same expression "May I help you?"

A - Hello, Adams Apple Store?

- Yes, may I help you?

A - You'd better. You sent me awful apples.

- Who's speaking please?

A - This is Mr. Calvin Cummings.

- Hold on. I can check on who wrote your order.

Distinguishing types of information

Reading a piece of writing, students should be able to make inferences from the text, to draw conclusion, to grasp the gist of the message or the main idea of what is being said.

Read the following story:

"The first balloon trip took place in France in 1783. It lasted only eight minutes. About a year later, an American and a Frenchman decided to cross the English channel in a balloon. High over the channel, they found a hole in the balloon. The hole got bigger and bigger, and the balloon got lower and lower.

The men threw everything into the water to make the balloon lighter. The balloon was still too low. Finally, they threw away most of their clothes to save themselves.

The crowd waiting for them in England was very surprised when the balloon landed!"

Although the story does not tell explicitly about what happened to the 2 men in the end, we can infer from the given clues that both of them are safe, and able to get back to England.

Or look at the following dialogue

“- Do you have an umbrella I can borrow?

- Is it raining?

- Yes, it's pouring.

- May be it's only a shower.

- Well, I hope it clears up soon.”

We can infer that the man who asks for the umbrella would like to go outside.

Rhetorical device in literature

To understand and fully appreciate any piece of literary writing, knowing the meanings of the words in the context is not enough. The person needs to have some clear associations of the life, or other references attached to those words. As Sapir in Mendelbaum article (1949) said that “the understanding of a simple poem, for instance, involves not merely an understanding of the single words in their average significance, but a full comprehension of the whole life of the community as it is mirrored in the words, or as it is suggested by their overtones.” (p. 112)

Believing that language teaching/learning/testing call for a sociolinguistic contexts of the language and their embedded social and cultural parameters. Research with Thai EFL learners was conducted. Then I construct a macrolanguage test that embodies these socio-cultural categories to see how Thai students perform when they have to call upon their socio-cultural competence.

It is an objective language test whereby the student required to choose the correct answers from the 4 choices given, or to match the corresponding parts of the conversation, or to anticipate the appropriate word or expressions to say in a particular context. After piloting the test, the improved version has been given to the 360 subjects consisting of undergraduates and graduates from different faculties at Chulalongkorn University by a stratified random sampling all of the students study English as a foreign language. The test has high content validity because the congruent coefficient is 91. (the test has stability because the T value is 0.805. The stability is of a moderate level since the correlation coefficient between the 2 tests is 0.418.)

The results of the test is as follows:

1. For the category of "Holidays and Celebrations" the average score of the students is 85%. This means that the majority of them know very well about this cultural aspect.
2. For the category of "Proper Choice of Words, Sentences within Certain Situation" the average score is 69. This means that the students can master this cultural aspect in a moderate way.
3. For the category of "Places" the average score is 80%. This means that the students can identify the setting where the language interaction occurs quite well.
4. For the category of "Tones, Feelings and Attitudes" the average score is 49%. This means that the students still have some problems in interpreting the message.
5. For the category of "Sources of Information" the average score is 64%. This means that the students master this cultural aspect in a moderate way.
6. For the category of "Role Relationship" the average score is 77%. This means that the students know quite well the roles of those engaged in communication process.
7. For the category of "Various Communicative Function." the average score is 70%. This means that the students can moderately cope with this cultural aspect.
8. For the category of "Distinguishing types of Information" the average score is 42%. This means that the majority of the students still have some problems with this cultural aspect.
9. For the category of "Rhetorical Device in Literature" the average score is 30%. This means that the majority of the students have very little awareness in this cultural aspect.
10. For the category of "Daily Pastime Use" the average score is 55%. This means that a number of students are not quite able to handle this cultural category.
11. For the category of "Cultural Specificity about Names" the average score is 59%. This means that some students are still having problems in this aspect.

From this data we can summarize and group the students performance on how well they cope with these socio-cultural categories in the following table.

High	Middle	Low
Socio-cultural categories that students can handle very well	Socio-cultural categories that students can handle moderately	Socio-cultural categories that students still have problems
1. Holidays 85%	Various Communi- 70%	Daily Pastime Use 55%
2. Place 80%	cative function	Tones 49%
3. Role-Relationship 77%	Proper choice 69%	Distinguishing types 42%
	Sources of Infor- 64%	Rhetorical Device 30%
	mation	
	Names 60%	

These are 3 categories that students seem to handle quite well namely

1. Holidays and celebrations
2. Association with places
3. Role-relationship

These are 4 categories that students are able to cope with in a moderate way. They are

1. Various communicative functions
2. Proper choice of words/phrases in a certain situation
3. Sources of information
4. Names

and there are 4 categories that the students still have some problems. They are.

1. Daily pastime use
2. Tones
3. Distinguishing types of information
4. Rhetorical device

By using the SPSS Processing Program of the Computer to determine the importance of these socio-cultural categories, the following result is derived in rank order of importance.

1. Various communicative functions
2. Proper choice of words/phrases within certain situation
3. Holidays & celebrations
4. Distinguishing types of information
5. Tones/feelings/attitudes
6. Daily pastime use
7. Association with places
8. Sources of information
9. Role relationship
10. Rhetorical device in literature
11. Cultural specificity about names

Comparing this list with the data from the student's performance, it reveals that the two most important socio-cultural categories (1,2) from the rank order list the students can perform only moderately. They can perform quite well on the third most important category in the ranking.

Using the variance rotated factor matrix program of the computers, these 11 cultural categories can also be grouped into 4 major categories. In each category there is always one socio-cultural domain that (more factor loading) is more important than the rest. These 4 groupings are as follows :

Category I	- Holidays
	- Proper choice
	- Tones
	- Role
Category II	- Places
	- Various communication
	- Names
Category III	- Daily pastime use
Category IV	- Sources of information
	- Distinguishing type of information
	- Rhetorical device

Recommendations for material preparation, syllabus design and teaching strategies.

Thus it is no doubt that this so-called "socio-cultural" competence (termed used by Canale and Swain) should be taken into consideration when teaching, learning and testing EFL. There are a number of things that I'd like to state here in terms of teaching strategies and recommendations.

1. It guarantees the absence of the misunderstanding of communication between the senders and the receivers. The two parties have to agree not only on linguistic meanings but also on the social values embedded in that particular choice of expression.

As Franklin Fearing (1971) stated "Communication may be conceived as a pattern of interpersonal relationships occurring in a social field possessing certain specific properties. The important characteristic of these relationships is that both the communicator and the interpreter must be able to perceive the other as capable of reacting in certain ways to a particular kind of stimulus material (symbols) produced by one of them. Further, the individuals participating in this transaction must perceive each other in specific ways. -- In other words, it is here postulated that for communication to occur both the producer of the communication and the interpreter must be in each other's field, if not physically at least psychologically and share the social experience that the native speakers already have (are innately born with)" (p. 76) Finocchiaro (1980) also emphasized this beneficial aspect of sharing the value and experience of the native speakers by citing an example of an emigrant living in a foreign society who "does not understand facts stemming from social or cultural factors or events in which he has not been intimately involved. He may misunderstand or ascribe a mistaken value to an oral or written communication simply because he has not shared the experience of the speaker or writer." (p. 3)

This situation is very true for Thai students who learn English as a foreign language. The problem of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the language does not arise because the Thai students do not know the particular syntactic structure, or its semantic structure. Instead, it is due to their "insufficient exposure of the systems of values attached to the language". (Aksornkool 1983, p. 3)

It tunes the foreign language learners to the same channel of the native speakers. That is to say, the foreign language learners can get to the "values" that are attached to the language. It won't make the foreign language learners socially cripple.

Mastering (mastering a language involves more than linguistic competence) grammatical or linguistic competence is not enough for successful language instruction. It does not guarantee that the person will have the cultural awareness attached to that language. Grammatical linguistic forms and functions can be taught to the foreign language students over a time expand depending on the students, age, their language level, the skill of the teachers etc. but the fact that the students master these grammatical elements doesn't guarantee that the students have acquired the socio-cultural knowledge to enable them to participate fully in a particular language transaction. That's why knowledge about the historical background, geographical events, or any other aspects of the culture of this language comes into play in order to be called a full master of the language.

Teaching the grammatical rules or the usage is not enough. Students need to be taught how to *use* foreign language that is appropriate in a certain social context. If the student knows how to *use* the language in different situations that will signify his "communicative competence ability in the language." Carroll (1980) stated clearly that teaching students how to *use* the language is the goal of language teaching and the teaching the "usage is only a medium or an aid in order to reach this specific goal".

Widdowson stated that to acquire communicative competence is the ultimate aim in language learning whatever language skills one wants to acquire: whether it is the production skills or the receptive skills. He made it clear that to know a language means to acquire both grammatical competence and communicative competence so the teachers should also teach the rules of use apart from the rules of grammar especially those whose cultural background in language are so different. Widdowson (1971) "In my view, the communicative competence which this presupposes does not come of itself, especially not to those learners outside the European cultural tradition. Rules of use have to be taught with as much care as do rules of grammar-- --this is a need to shift our attention away from an almost exclusive concentration on grammatical competence and to give equal

attention to communicative competence. Knowledge of a language involves both, and whether we are concerned ourselves with both.” (p. 36)

If we accept that communicative competence is the ultimate goal in language teaching, we cannot deny that socio-cultural competence is a building-block lays an important part in that communicative competence.

4. It is the direct responsibility of the teacher to teach the language as well as its cultural embodiments. Culture can be learned the same way as language. Beverly McLeod (1976) emphasized that teachers should teach culture overtly. She said that teacher can't take chance by letting the learner learn it implicitly because foreign students do not have enough time exposure, or contact to the language the same way or the same amount of time like the native speakers. Therefore teachers can't afford to lose the limited amount of time they have to let the foreign students learn culture implicitly, on their own way which will create more problems. As Li-Li (1982) stated :

Language teaching inevitably leads to the teaching of the culture in which the language is used for communication. In his book The Silent Language Edward T. Hall put it very well: culture is communication and communication is culture. Without the cultural background information, people will sometimes find it difficult to get their idea across. (p. 92).

Therefore providing cultural information and showing how to use language in certain contexts and situations are necessary in language teaching.

5. Besides, Tucker and Lambert (1973) found that culture itself is the factor that attracts the foreign language learners attention to learn the language rather than the mere learning of the linguistic aspects themselves.
6. The last thing may be called a plea from Thai teachers to the publishers or those who write the text. We would like to have some kind of teacher's notes or manual that explain cultural elements as in some textbooks that have the section on "culture capsule" provided for teachers who have never been abroad. I'd like to end the paper by citing an example from other field of study that regards culture as an important element. In marketing studies, "culture" is one of the factors that the marketing managers have to study. According to Levy (1978) "to study a foreign market is to study a foreign culture, to encounter its strange customs, its novel laws, its different way of thinking and talking. The cultural context can provide the marketing manager with perspective. The organization, the product, the sellers and the buyers are all "embedded" in this context, which governs their marketing actions". (p. 39)

And we can see that the same thing is true in our language learning situations.

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