

*Thai Students' Encounters with English : Two Common
Situations Conductive to Improper Response*

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In his suggestions to adult learners of English, Charles Fries (1945) suggests that the student's mimicry of native speakers must extend to their tones, gestures, facial expressions and in general, their whole manner of speaking. This kind of unrelenting practice and use is at first extremely hard and students might feel as if they are bound in straightjackets. But the only way to attain competence in a new language is through this struggle.¹

Foreign students should then look beyond rules of grammar and a bilingual dictionary. They must learn about the English speech community's verbal and nonverbal behavior in order to participate appropriately and effectively in its activities. This kind of learning demands keen observation and perseverance in order to attain appropriateness. Along the line come unavoidable frustration, misunderstanding and overlearning in the foreign students' struggle.

This paper will discuss differences between Thai and English conversational structures. The first part of the paper will analyze American and Thai turn-taking rules in conversation including nonverbal as well as verbal behavior in the classroom. The second part of the paper will discuss differences between Thai and American sociolinguistics rules in using the expression "Why don't you?" A tentative contrastive analysis will be our main approach to both parts and finally, application for teaching such cross-cultural knowledge to Thai students will be suggested.

Turn-Taking

Most Thai students complain that in the American classroom they are not able to ask question that just comes to their mind. They hesitate, and their questions do not come out as easily and as naturally as those of their American classmates. Even when they have questions or want to discuss something, they do not know how to break into a discussion. Overlaps make them feel more frustrated. From these complaints we can conclude that Thai students have difficulty practising American turn-taking rules. Thai mother tongue rules still overshadow their interaction in American conversations.

Turn-taking in the classroom can be classified as speech event rules which are genre-specific. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) describe teacher-centered classrooms as structured events in which a clearcut task is central and knowledge testing is primary. In this formal classroom situation there is high role differentiation.² In her article, "Ethnography and Education Toward Defining the Essentials," Heath notices that classroom language is characterized by a special "register" or style appropriate to teaching. As a conversationalized way of speaking used in particular situations, a register differs in intonation, vocabulary, grammatical structure, and accompanying nonverbal features from other ways of speaking.³

Like Americans, Thais consider speech in classrooms as more formal speech communication. Unlike American teachers, however, Thai teachers, whose roles assign them extra authority, are the dominant speakers. Only they can select the next speaker and the exercise of this authority is expected by the students. Their audiences accept this power and status.

What is the role of Thai students then in accord with such role expectations of the teacher? We may conclude, from the Thai students' interaction in the American classroom, that :

1. Thai students ask well prepared questions. They make sure that their questions make sense and are meaningful. They will not annoy the teacher and waste the time of the class.
2. They respond only when the teacher calls on them.
3. Even when the turn order is fixed, they wait for signals from the authority. They gaze at the teacher whose signalling back can be kinesic such as nodding or repetitive instruction such as "go on", "next", etc.

Pauses or gaps between turns are usually long in the Thai classroom and silence is tolerable. Short overlaps are few and the breaking in is considered an interruption and is not encouraged.

In contrast to the Thai classroom, Schegloff and Sacks (1973) observed that there is a very low tolerance of silence between turns in the American classroom. Unintentional overlaps occur, frequently caused by self-selection. When the overlap is the result of two self-selecting speakers there appears to be a rule that the 'first starter' has the right to continue.

In spite of the differences, the Thai student in the American classroom feels obliged to conform with the American turn-taking rules. He has to change his attitude toward the acceptable overlaps and intolerable silence. He has to learn how to break in or select himself as the next speaker.

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) proposed a two-part system for the organization of turn-taking in American English conversation: a turn constructional component, which produces the unit types which make up a speaker's turn; and a

turn-allocational component, which operates through a set of rules to determine who will speak next.⁴ Sacks et al explained that turn-allocational techniques are distributed into two groups: (a) those in which next turn is allocated by current speaker's selection of the next speaker; and (b) those in which a next turn is allocated by self-selection.

As for Thai students they are familiar with technique (a) and expect the teacher to fill the turn by selecting the next speaker. In the Thai classroom the self-selection technique is not common because of the presence of authority. Our next question is, if the Thai student has to practice (b), is it possible to do so? Self-selection: how?

Sacks et al suggest that next speakers are concerned with points of possible completion. Speaker-change takes place at the end of sentences. If the current speaker has not selected the next speaker, any participant may self-select at the end of any sentence. This fact explains the low incidence of overlap and silence. However, the ability to come in as soon as a speaker has reached a possible completion point requires a high degree of skill on the part of the participants. They need to be able both to analyze and understand an ongoing sentence in order to recognize when it is possibly complete, and also to produce a relevant utterance immediately. Do speakers have this ability?⁵

Do foreign students have this ability?

Jefferson (in Coulthard 1976) argues that the recipient of an ongoing utterance has the technical capacity to select a precise spot to start his own talk 'no later' than the exact appropriate moment.⁶ We would agree with Jefferson that the native speaker undeniably possesses such a technical capacity. However, her argument is too abstract to put into practice for teaching foreign students. Duncan (1973, 1974) gives a more practical view when he suggests that the cues for speaker change can be grammatical, paralinguistic, kinesic or any combination of all three. A listener may claim the speaking turn when the current speaker gives a *turn-signal*, defined as the display, at the end of a phonemic clause, of at least one of a set of six cues. The cues are:

1. Intonation: the use of any pitch level/terminal juncture combination, other than 22.⁷
2. Paralanguage: drawl on the final syllable or on the stressed syllable of the phonemic clause.
3. Body motion: the termination of any hand gesticulation or the relaxation of a tensed hand position.
4. Sociocentric sequences: the appearance of one of several stereotyped expressions, such as 'but uh', or 'something', 'you know'.
5. Paralanguage: a drop in paralinguistic pitch and/or loudness, in conjunction with a sociocentric sequence.

6. Syntax: the completion of a grammatical clause involving a subject-predicate combination.⁸

Suggestions for application

TEFL teacher should not overlook sociolinguistic rules in the target language, whether they are alternational, co-occurrence or esquential rules. Different sequential rules, such as turn-taking between Thai and American, can create problems for the Thai student in the American classroom. The teachers' recognition of the problems will help them understand how frustrated their students can be in their attempt to use American turn-taking rules while they are still conditioned by Thai rules. Teachers can prepare their students to cope with the problem as follows :

1. To lessen the student's frustration growing from his interaction in the classroom setting, he should be informed that every language and culture has its own sociolinguistic rules. These rules can be learned and the learner can be flexible during his adjustment. As Ervin-Trip and Kerman (1977) state :

Sociolinguistic such as Goffman and the ethnomethodologists have emphasized that interaction is not deterministic. Social categories may constrain what can properly occur or what is likely to occur, but can not precisely identify what sequences or choices will be made. The (sociolinguistic) rules we describe might be regared as a resource speakers have to accomplish interactional goals and that listeners have to interpret intent and feeling. If interaction were totally predictable by a listener, it would not communicate. (p. 5)

2. To help the student recognize the elements of turn-taking rules, the teacher may point out that turd-taking can be both verbal and nonverbal. The non-verbal part in the turn-signal is the body motion knowledge of which is shared and universal. The Thai student can easily observe and learn this cue of the turn-signal.

3. To help the student learn the verbal part of the turn-signal, the teacher may explain the cues in sequences with examples and exercises following each cues :

3.1 Intonation

The teacher should review English intonation patterns with the student and point out that the cues of the turn-signal from a current speaker can be either the rising/falling intonation with the pitch/2 3 1 / or the rising intonation with the pitch / 2 3 3 /. If the speaker uses the nonfinal intonation i.e. his tone rises from pitch 2 to pitch 3 and then returns to pitch 2, the student should know that the speaker has not finished, that more is to follow.

3.2 Paralanguage

The teacher should explain to the student what paralanguage is and how it can be a cue of a turn-signal. The use of paralanguage as suggested by

Duncan (no. 2, 5) should be illustrated for the students in certain conversational situation such as in seminars and workshops.

3.3 Sociocentric sequences and syntax are perhaps the easiest cues for Thai students to recognise. Stereotyped expressions are found in most languages including Thai. The student may feel most comfortable to cut in when he hears this form of turn-signal.

4. To help students understand their own problem of turn-taking, the teacher may ask them to discuss in a group about their experience, struggle and techniques in developing self-selection skills. For example, some may practice a self-selection technique while informally conversing with a group of friends first. When they feel that they can handle the overlap, they can move to an informal setting in which authorities are present. Finally, they can attempt to use the proper turn-taking techniques in a more formal setting such as the classroom.

“Why don’t you.....?”

Besides the problem of different turn-taking rules, the Thai student also has the difficulty using a certain English expression due to differences between American and Thai sociolinguistic rules. The following story about a Chinese interpreter’s reaction will serve as an illustration :

Yang is an interpreter with the Chinese delegation at the Trade Exhibition of the Peoples Republic of China which opened recently at Navy, Pier, Chicago. During his first visit to the United States, Yang took careful notice of the way Americans speak their own language :

“What is this ‘Hi’?” He asked with good natured annoyance. “I was thinking it was ‘Hello’. People still say ‘Goodbye’, but more often it’s ‘take care’. How way ‘take care’? People are not feeling secure?”⁹

When an adult learner uses a foreign language, he wants his utterances to be not only grammatically correct but also meaningful. Sometimes certain expressions do not make sense to him. He becomes confused, perplexed and then he avoids using them in conversation. In Charles Fries’ terms, we may say that the adult learner has not acquired the socio-cultural meanings of the foreign language.¹⁰ According to the sociolinguists, Yang’s situation reflects differences between Chinese and English sociolinguistic rules.

In his article “On learning a Foreign Language as an Adult,” Fries (1945) observed that the more thoroughly educated an adult is, the more sensitive he is to fine discriminations in his own language. It therefore is harder for him to reach a satisfying level in a foreign language.¹¹

“Why don’t you...?” is an expression that the Thai student, as a speaker, hesitates to use while, as a receiver, he reacts differently to it. In his opinion, the expression in its interrogative-negative form conveys a negative connotation. As a result, the Thai student seems to set up different criteria from the American speaker as to who can use this expression to whom and in what context. From the Thai reaction we may form two hypotheses, as follows :

1. There are differences between English and Thai usage of “Why don’t you...?”
2. There is a sociolinguistic mother tongue interference from Thai to English.

Contrastive Analysis of English and Thai Usages of “Why don’t you?”

The illocutionary act of “why don’t you...?” can be classified under the speech act ‘directives.’ There are three classes of directives for this expression.

1. imbedded imperative e.g. Why don’t you leave the room?
Why don’t you get out of here?
2. suggestion e.g. Why don’t you leave the book on the table?
Why don’t you go to the movies tonight?
3. complaint e.g. I don’t like these cookies, Mommy, Why don’t you buy chocolate chip?
Why don’t you ever finish your work on time?

The three classes vary in degree of effect on a receiver. A speaker expects the listener to comply most when he uses ‘Why don’t you...?’ as an imbedded imperative. The degree of effect is neutral when he uses it as a suggestion. He expects least compliance from the listener when he uses it as a complaint. English speakers use this expression for all topics and in all settings.

There are three classes of directives in the Thai ‘Why don’t you...?’ Their functions are the same as the English ones in terms of degree of expected compliance. On the surface there seems to be no problem when the Thai student tries to use the English ‘why don’ you...?’ expression. A closer look at the Thai structure of ‘why don’t you...?’ and how it functions will help us understand more of this phenomena.

First, the ‘you’ in the Thai ‘why don’t you...?’ plays a great role in this expression; it is a significant variable. The number of Thai 2nd person pronouns is quite impressive. There are 20 forms of ‘you’. (see Palakornkul 1972, Table 6)

Distinctive Features of Pronouns Proper in Thai (emphasis on 2nd person pronouns)
 (Palakornkul 1972, pp. 46-47)

	<u>First person</u>	<u>Second person</u>	<u>Third person</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Near Sender</u>	<u>Human</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Monk</u>
³ caw	-	+	-			+	-	
¹ en	-	+	-			+	-	
^{2 2} faab ² aad/ ^{2 4 2} faap ⁴ ra ² baad	-	+	-	+		+	-	+
¹ kææ	-	+	+			+	-	
¹ khun	-	+	+			+	-	
⁴ i <i>i</i>	-	+	-			+	-	
² lon	-	+	+	-		+	-	
¹ m <i>ɨ</i> ŋ	-	+	-			+	-	
haay	-	+	-			+	-	
³ hii	+	+			+	+	-	
⁵ nuu	+	+				+	-	
^{4 2} pra ⁴ deed ⁴ ¹ prak ¹ hun	-	+	-	+		+	-	+
¹ raw	+	+	-			+		
³ taay ⁴ thaaw	-	+	-	+		+	-	
³ tham	-	+	+			+	-	
¹ thæ	-	+	+			+	-	
¹ tua	-	+	-			+	-	
¹ tua ¹ eŋ	+	+	-			+	-	
¹ yuu	-	+				+	-	

N.B. +sex = male, -sex = female, and those that are not marked can be used by male or female speakers; “-near sender” means that the referent is present but is not near the speaker whereas “+near sender” is used when the referent is near the speaker. “-number” means singular and “+number” means plural; unmarked number means that the form can be used in singular or plural number. “+monk” means the form is used by monks and in speaking to monks.

The use of Thai 'you' within a social context is the next consideration. In her article, "A Sociolinguistic Study of Pronominal Usage in Spoken Bangkok Thai", Palakornkul (1975) notes :

Pronominal strategy in Thai involves primarily communicating participants who are mutually initiating and responding in interpersonal communication process on the one hand and the strategy they employ in selecting a pronoun appropriate to the condition of their role relationship on the other... Further, participants are characterized by the social role(s) each occupies which is essentially determined by underlying social and cultural factors indicative of Thai society and its social structure. (p. 15)

Palakornkul suggests two types of sociolinguistic rules for normal pronominal usage: the base rules, which are underlying rules guiding and governing usage, are applied to match social and cultural factors to the abstract [+PRO] yielding a [+pronoun].

Base Rules (Palakornkul 1975, p. 27)

[+PRO] → [+pronoun] / $\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{social role of} \\ \text{sender, receiver} \\ \text{and referent} \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{the condition of role relationship} \\ \text{between sender and receiver, and} \\ \text{sender and referent.} \end{array} \right]$

Examples (Palakornkul 1972, pp. 89, 91)

[+PRO] → /¹k_{xx} // Sender : [+friend] [-male]
 Receiver : [+friend] [-male]
 Condition of Role Relationship : [+intimate] [+time]
 (CRR)

[+PRO] → /⁶nuu // Sender : [+adult]

[+II] Receiver : [-adult]

[+II] = 2nd person

The other type of rules consists of variant rules, which differentiate and discriminate one pronominal variant from another.

(Variant Rules and Examples (Palakornkul 1972, pp. 90, 92)

[pronoun] →

[+II]

/ ¹ Khun //	S [-acquaintance]	R [-acquaintance]	
	S [+friend]	R [+friend]	CRR $\left[\begin{array}{l} [-\text{intimate}] \\ [+ \text{intimate}] \quad [-\text{time}] \end{array} \right]$
	S [+teacher]	R [+student]	[+adult]
	S [+spouse]	R [+spouse]	

	S	[+ monk]		R	[- monk]		[+ adult]		
	S	[- monk]		[+ adult]		R	[+ monk]		CRR [+ intimate] [+ time]
	S	[+ colleague]				R	[+ colleague]		CRR [- intimate]
/ ³ than//	S	[+ monk]		R	[+ monk]		[+ superior]		[+ rank] CRR [+ respect]
	S	[- bureaucrat]		R	[+ bureaucrat]		[+ rank]		CRR [+ respect]
	S	[+ bureaucrat]		[- rank]		R	[bureaucrat]		[+ rank]
	S	[- superior]				R	[+ superior]		CRR [+ respect]
	S	[- acquaintance]		R	[- acquaintance]		[+ wealth]		[+ age]
	S	[- monk]				R	[+ monk]		
	S	[+ monk]		R	$\left[\begin{array}{l} [- \text{monk}] \quad [+ \text{title}] \\ \quad \quad \quad [+ \text{rank}] \\ \quad \quad \quad [+ \text{wealth}] \end{array} \right]$				CRR [+ respect]

S = Sender

R = Receiver

CRR = Condition of Role Relationship

In conclusion, when Thais use the Thai expression “why don’t you...?” their choice of ‘you’ indicates and represents the role sets and role relationship of the sender and receiver in their verbal interaction. According to Palakornkul, the choice of a pronominal variant is not made arbitrarily but according to variant rules that guide and govern a speaker’s choice. The variant rules are socio-linguistic rules which are context-sensitive and marked by socio-cultural characteristics of Thai society.¹²

When the Thai student uses the English expression “why don’t you...?”, he looks for the same socio-cultural information he gets from the Thai second person in the English ‘you’. But there is only one ‘you’ in English and its usage does not carry the same socio-cultural information as the Thai expression. Nevertheless, since the interpersonal relationship of the sender and a receiver influence the strategy of the Thai student’s choice, he carries with him the influence of interpersonal function to his usage of English “why don’t you...?” Sometimes the interpersonal function* is more influential than the textual function. Even when an English speaker uses the expression as a suggestion to the Thai student, the Thai student still looks for clues of interpersonal relationship to determine the position of the speaker, the social role of the receiver and the condition of the role relationship between the sender and the receiver.

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Since the interpersonal function plays a greater role than the textual function (three classes of directives), the Thai student will restrain himself from using the English expression to persons with higher social status. In other words, he will set up some criteria using English “why don’t you...?” according to Thai sociolinguistic rules. Typically, he will go through three stages before he gets accustomed to the English alternation rule of “why don’t you...?”

The use of “Why don’t you...?” by the Thai student

Stage I	S	[+ friend]	R	[+ friend]	CRR	{ [- intimate] [+ intimate] [- time] }
Stage II	S	[+ friend]	R	[+ friend]	CRR	{ [- intimate] [+ intimate] [- time] }
	S	[- acquaintance]	R	[- acquaintance]		
	S	[+ acquaintance]	R	[+ acquaintance]	[+ age]	
Stage III	I, II and					
	S	[+ student]	R	[+ teacher]		
	S	[+ adult] [+ age]	R	[+ adult] [+ age]	CRR	[+ time] [- formality]

Suggestions for application

The contrastive analysis of English and Thai usage of “Why don’t you...?” in a social context is useful to TEFL teachers as follows :

1. It gives the teachers an insight into the nature of another intercultural communication problem the Thai student has. Although the problem is not a big one, the teachers should take careful steps to deal with mother tongue interferences, especially on a sociocultural level. In other words, TEFL teachers’ understanding of cultural relativism—the practice of perceiving and understanding any element or aspect of culture by relating it to its own cultural context¹⁸ will be helpful when they explain to the student how this attitude can be a stumbling block to his intercultural communication.

2. The contrastive analysis of the “Why don’t you...?” expression in terms of function widens TEFL teachers’ understanding of language function. They learn that the interference that causes trouble may come not only from that speech and language vary cross-culturally in function but also from the fact that some functions play greater roles than others in some languages. As Ervin-Tripp and Kernan (1977) state :

Natural conversations reveal that language is diverse in function, and that functions are not directly mapped by any structural features. (p. 3)

In the case of “Why don’t you...?” the difference in propositional function (structure) between English and Thai is not the cause of the problem. Neither is the textual function because there is no difference. Only when teachers widen their scope to include the interpersonal function and other sociolinguistic factors do we come to understand their dominant roles in the Thai student’s speech communication.

Notes

¹ Charles C. Fries, "On Learning a Foreign Language as an Adult" in *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1945, vi, p. 5.

² Susan Ervin-Tripp and C.M. Kerman (eds.), "Introduction" *Child Discourse*. New York: Academic Press, 1977, pp 4-5.

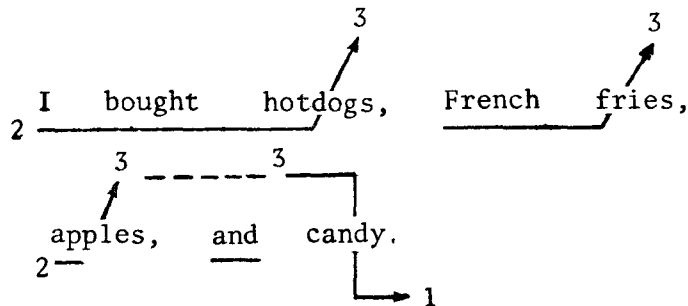
³ Shirley Brice Heath, (ms) "Ethnography in Education Toward Defining the Essentials" Draft materials: 1979, p. 14 To be printed in *Ethnography and Education: Children In and Out of School*. Edited by P. Gilmore and A. Glatthorn. University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁴ H. Sacks, E.A. Schegloff and G. Jefferson "A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation." *Language* 50/4 1974, p. 703.

⁵ Malcolm Coulthard. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* London: Longman 1979. pp. 54-55.

⁶ Coulthard, p. 55.

⁷ There are many variations of nonfinal intonation and one of them is a pitch level/terminal juncture combination 22. One use is when the speaker is telling several things in a series indicating that he has not finished, that more is to follow. For example:



⁸ Coulthard, p. 61.

⁹ Eric Zorn, "For Chinese, English is...hard to put into words." *Chicago Tribune*, October 23, 1980. Section 2, pp. 1, 5.

¹⁰ Charles C. Fries, "Meaning and Linguistic Analysis," *Language* 30, 1954, p. 67.

¹¹ Fries, 1945. p. 5.

¹² Angkab Palakornkul, "A Sociolinguistic Study of Pronominal Strategy in Spoken Bangkok Thai" *Linguistics*, 165, Dec. 1, 1975, p. 27.

¹³ R.B. Taylor, *An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1973, p. 64.

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