

A Farang Teachers Education...

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Ask any Thai student of English their opinion on farang teachers and most likely you will get the response that they are good for conversation but a Thai ajarn is better when it comes to learning grammar. However, many farang teachers might even doubt the willingness of Thai students to converse with them; the reluctance to speak is sometimes too obvious. Understanding the reasons why can help alleviate this problem for the farang ajarn.

Thai students are undoubtedly industrious, motivated and keen to improve their English language skills so what's the problem? First of all, a farang ajarn in Thailand has to understand something of the Thai school educational system and adapt his/her teaching style somewhat accordingly. Naturally, a Thai student is rather horrified if on the first introduction with a farang teacher--he, the teacher blazes into the classroom spouting English and soon after expects the students without any hesitation to freely start performing role plays or worse proffer personal opinions on subjects as diverse as the political situation in Thailand or the likely outcome of the raging war in an African nation.

Initially, the teacher needs to 'take it easy' and gain the students trust before any such things can be attempted. However, once the students feel comfortable with the teacher, activities such as a role play are a sure winner. It takes a little time for the students to get accustomed to a 'new

style' of teaching where active participation is the norm rather than the exception. Once the students realise that their English lessons are no longer going to be a series of dictations combined with grammar explanations in Thai (as in school) they become accustomed and grow to like the idea of being given the opportunity to really practise speaking English, which improves considerably as they gain more and more confidence.

The Thai reluctance to express a personal opinion on almost any topic due to fear of causing offence is of course a greater obstacle to overcome; the farang teacher has to forget any ideas of obtaining a straightforward reply to a question which demands a personal opinion. At university level in the West, the majority of students are at the most politically aware stage of their lives and are if anything far too willing to talk at length on any contentious issue. It's a mistake to assume the same of Thailand and consequently, a more subtle approach needs to be adopted when soliciting comments on an economic crisis or a revolution.

General topics of interest that appeal to all young people, like fashion, music or travel are possibly the most engaging for the majority of students but one should not underestimate the genuine interest a lot of students do have in participating in a serious discussion on more thought provoking issues. However, the farang

has to appreciate that whereas it may be considered 'de rigueur' in the West, Thai culture dictates discretion where the expression of opinions is concerned. These really are the essential points; evaluating the students needs accurately whilst recognizing the complexities of the Thai culture and being able to adapt one's teaching techniques to accommodate it.

The farang teachers objectives have to be clear. There is something amiss if the belief is still there that a passionate discussion on the tragedy in Yugoslavia is a necessity because it isn't. The farang teachers aim is better English for his/her students and if this is achieved through a discussion on pop music rather than AIDS, then so be it. All the same, it is rather satisfying to hear students use their English on more serious topics; for one thing it shows that they have found the confidence to speak on very wide ranging issues, which is indicative that they are likely to use English outside the classroom. As many undergraduate students plan to continue their studies abroad a wider basis of conversation is good for the student and the contact hours with a farang teacher (even through few) are indeed beneficial to them. Likewise, there are benefits for the farang who must remember above anything else that he is a teacher of English language and is not a politician or an environmentalist!

Patience is a key word concerning Thai students. Certainly they have an opinion on world issues but the farang must be patient if he wants to hear those opinions. One cannot underestimate the inherent difficulty of expressing oneself on complicated issues in a foreign language combined with the notion the 'voicing off' is considered peculiar in Thai culture.

Another reason for the seeming reluctance to speak out may at first be simply shyness.

This is why from the very outset, the pursuit of trust within the student/teacher relationship is so fundamentally important. Underlying the shyness is the Thai feeling of vulnerability in speaking English in front of their peers. As we all know from our own foreign language learning experiences-- it can be a lot of fun as long as we are laughing together and not at each other. Likewise, it's the same for Thai students of English, Thais are renowned for being fun loving and this is never truer than in the classroom where games and competitions as a medium of learning are always popular with students of all ages. In fact, they are a great incentive in language learning. Aiming for fluency rather than 100% accuracy encourages the students to keep talking and a smiling farang who is willing to freely participate himself/herself in the classroom activities and who has the ability to laugh at himself will obtain satisfying results.

I am sure there are very few exceptions amongst farang teachers who have experienced a lesson that has flopped and yet when its time for the lesson to end, has faced a barrage of questions from the students about what he/she did at the weekend, etc. This only goes to illustrate the genuine interest and concern Thai students take in foreigners and as such is an ideal basis for a continuous information exchange between student and teacher. This alone is a great advantage for the farang who can build upon the students interest in them and develop a very rewarding rapport.

Similarly, trying to speak some Thai in the classroom only has a positive result-- it lets the students see that learning any language is never easy and we all make mistakes, especially when it's a farang trying to speak Thai! It shows that there's no 'loss of face' in making mistakes--we all need to try and try our best. Being able to communicate is the priority, accuracy will come later.

When West meets East in the classroom the setting for many potential problems and misunderstanding is certainly set. However, a genuine appreciation of Thai culture will help eliminate

many of these problems. Remember that patience and perseverance will lead to positive results and a rewarding teaching career in Thailand.