

# A Content Analysis of Cross-Cultural Communication Problems between Chinese and Thai Students at the International College of Burapha University, Thailand

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this study is to explore the factors that cause Chinese and Thai students' misunderstandings in communicating in English. Moreover, this study will also investigate the strategies used by the Chinese and Thai students when there is a communication breakdown. To support this, 30 students were purposefully chosen for completing a questionnaire. Fifteen students among these participants were chosen for the role-play pair work. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and the qualitative data from the role play and the observation was content analyzed consulting a reference to communicative strategies and communicative competences. Results from the quantitative data revealed that Thai students had the most common problem in sociolinguistic competence; Chinese students had the most common problem in discourse competence. Results from the qualitative data revealed that the most frequent strategy used by Thai students was using gestures; only one Thai student used a method to check the meaning. Strategies used by the Chinese students were using gestures and changing the topic. Further research should call attention to intercultural communication in Asia. There should be some research on developing rating systems for teachers to assess Chinese and Thai students or ASEAN students' English oral communication competency with instructions that are clear and easy to use. Moreover, college English teaching and curriculum design should incorporate and promote how to address students' difficulties in discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence.*

## Background of the Research Study

Many researchers in Thailand have a false conception that only a quantitative approach per se is the only genuine research in the real sense of the term! Hence a Thai research scholar Gethin (1997) argues that it is 'Micchaditthi' or a wrong view. As early as, he calls for a 'qualitative-cum-quantitative research paradigm' (Brudhprabha, 2013), or what is known as 'mixed methods research' (Creswell 2010).

Because of a paucity of qualitative research in English language teaching (ELT) (Gan, 2013), we have decided to conduct our study by means of content or document analysis which is one of the most important techniques in the humanities and social sciences, according to Krippendorff (2004: xiii):

"The content analyst view data as representations not of physical events but of texts, images, and expressions that are created to be seen, read, interpreted, and acted upon for their meanings, and must therefore be analyzed with such uses in mind. Analyzing texts in the contexts of their uses distinguishes content analysis from other methods of inquiry".

Our principal supervisor is a distinguished researcher in the humanities who is very interested in this research method and has a wide range of experience in doing research on English language education in this country and overseas (Brudhprabha, 2013).

A review of related literature indicates that there is relatively meager qualitative investigation into ELT in Thailand in terms of content/ document analysis, and text analysis (Sriduandao, 2013). Hence, we have already completed our study using this research paradigm. The following research article explains what we have done for an international Master of Education degree in TESL at the HRD Centre, Faculty of Education, Burapha University.

## The Research Study Itself

The study intended to find out the factors involved in Chinese and Thai students' misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication in English. This study also aimed to investigate the strategies employed by Chinese and Thai students when there was a communication breakdown. In this case, the author designed this study using a mixed method approach. For quantitative approaches, this study used a preliminary interview and a questionnaire to find out the factors causing misunderstandings; role plays and observation were used to investigate the strategies for the qualitative approaches.

It was evident that Thai and Chinese students have many problems in cross-cultural communication. The situation in China and Thailand is that primary and secondary English Language Teaching (ELT) syllabi and teaching materials place more emphasis on vocabulary and grammar, and less emphasis on the other micro skills (pronunciation and discourse); less emphasis on macro skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), and without enough emphasis on the development of intercultural skills. Even the textbook which named MegaGoal whose series for international communication is designed for teenagers and young adults puts less emphasis on cross-cultural information. There is only one chapter called "Big Changes" that discusses global issues.

The problems in intercultural experiences have motivated many research studies examining the reasons for intercultural misunderstanding and cross-cultural difficulties (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2004; Jandt, 1998; Lustig & Koester, 2003; Samovar & Porter, 2001; Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

However, many early cross-cultural studies focused on comparisons between Americans and Japanese, Americans and Europeans, and Americans and Soviet cultural patterns. More recently, considerable research has emphasized contrasting cultural aspects of the Americans and Chinese or Chinese and other Westerners. Bond (2008) recommends that while these bicultural studies are useful, including those by cross-cultural psychologists, they use Western research methods to deal with indigenous cultural patterns. He urges cross-cultural researchers to move toward more pan cultural studies (Pan Culture means that it is innate to every person regardless of culture and race.), as Hofstede's (1984) studies had done, and that for serious reliability; at least 10 cultural groups are needed when standard social science statistical measurements are used.

As Brudhiprabha (2013, p.2) mentioned, "From the hay days of Teaching English as a Foreign language (TEFL) / Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) / Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) (1940s-1970s) to the presents decades of Teaching English as an International Language (TEIL) / Teaching English as a Global Language (TEGL) / Teaching English as a foreign language (TELF) (1980s-2000s), the English proficiency of the students are still far from satisfactory, their communicative competence is extremely limited."

Therefore, this study made a survey of Thai and Chinese first year students at the International College, Burapha University (BUUIC), Thailand. The survey included four parts: preliminary interview, questionnaire, role play and observation.

For quantitative approach, firstly, the researcher did a preliminary interview with six first year students at the International College to elicit some information about Chinese and Thai students' difficulties when communicating in English. Secondly, the researcher chose one model of communicative competence from Canale and Swain (1980, 1981) as a frame reference of questionnaire because this model is easy to understand, concise and conclusive. Thirdly, the researcher made the questionnaire items based on the preliminary interview information and the framework model. After developing and trying out the questionnaire, 15 Thai and 15 Chinese students were purposively chosen to complete the questionnaire. According to the differences of each first grade student's class, the researcher distributed the questionnaire over a two week period. The questionnaire was distributed to each participant personally, and collected during the period of 4th to 16th February, 2013 at BUUIC. Questionnaires in the native language of the participants were administered to the Chinese and Thai students. Thirty questionnaires (15 for Chinese and 15 for Thai students) were personally distributed; the coded aliases were subsequently used to purposively choose the twenty role-play participants for pair work. Due to the different courses that students took, the researcher distributed the questionnaire at different times at the college. The researcher gave them instructions in

Thai or Chinese language depending on the native language of the participants. However, the content of questionnaire was in English. To ascertain the validity of the questionnaire, the researcher asked three experts to check the language and content for validity. After the experts checked with an Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) form, the researcher tried out the questionnaire. The Alpha of reliability for both the Chinese and Thai language questionnaire = 0.714 > 0.7 which indicates a satisfactory level of internal consistency reliability (Nunnally & Berstein, 1994).

For qualitative approach, twenty students were purposefully chosen among the 30 participations for ten pairs of role-play pair work which was set during the period of 18th to 28th February, 2013. After the questionnaires were distributed, the study used role-plays to collect more information about Chinese and Thai students' difficulties communicating in English. During the role-play, only English was used. Students' dialogues were digitally video recorded and observed by the author. Each pair was given two functions and each pair's work lasted about 5 minutes. The functions of the role-play setting were selected from eight relevant sampling of source books. These eight books are the source of how to use different functions in different situations in cross-cultural communication. The researcher chose five functions among the eight source books because all the five functions are the most frequent functions in the eight books. The eight relevant sampling of source books and frequent functions are as follows: the details of each book listed in Appendix of thesis.

1. A Study Dictionary of Social English (International)
2. Interaction: Effective Communication in English (Thailand)
3. Communicating in English: Examples and Models --- 1 Functions (International)
4. Communicating in English: Examples and Models --- 2 Notions (International)
5. Communicating in English: Examples and Models --- 3 Situations (International)
6. English Conversation (International)
7. New Senior English for China (The People's Republic of China)
8. College Spoken English Course --- Developing Verbal Strategies for Communication (The People's Republic of China)

**Table 1-1** Frequent Functions of the Eight Books

|                         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Thoughts/ feelings      | √ | √ | √ |   |   | √ | √ |   |
| Requests and offers     | √ | √ |   | √ |   | √ | √ |   |
| Apologizing and Excuses | √ | √ | √ |   |   | √ | √ |   |
| Agreeing/ Disagreeing   | √ | √ | √ |   |   | √ |   |   |
| Sympathy/ no sympathy   | √ | √ | √ |   |   | √ |   |   |

During the role-play between the Chinese and Thai students, the author observed them and took notes in order to record the strategies they used. Since the author is Chinese, there might be limitations in recognizing some cultural behaviors; a Thai assistant, who is a graduate student at the Faculty of Education, was invited to observe the students. Both observers agreed on ways and methods of observing and recording before the role-play period began.

Moreover, the researcher also paid attention to non-verbal behaviors of students as Robotjazi (2008) suggested. Because nonverbal communication also has cultural meanings and is interpreted according to the cultural context in which it occurs. Cultural norms regarding kinesics vary considerably between countries; if you are not familiar with the local body language, you might be misunderstood, and sometimes misinterpret the local nonverbal signals.

The qualitative data from the role play and the observation was content analyzed consulting a source to the communicative strategies and communicative competences.



The research participants completed the questionnaire on a voluntary basis and took part in the role play, no real names or personal information were publicized, and there was no physical or mental suffering to the participants.

The result from the quantitative data shows that for discourse competence, the Chinese students feel that they have difficulties in discussing topics with Thai students because the Thai students cannot express their ideas very well. Thai students cannot give a concise explanation; they cannot organize and combine their sentences. As a listener, Chinese students have difficulties understanding Thai students' main points when they tell a story in English. As a listener, Chinese students have difficulties understanding thinking of the Thai students when discussing these in the class. These findings accord with the results from the qualitative data which shows that Thai students are weak at discourse competence which, in turn, causes difficulty for Chinese students.

For sociolinguistic competence, the Thai students feel that the Chinese students have no motivation in communicating with them. As speakers, Chinese have no self-confidence in communicating with Thai students and they lack understanding of Thai culture. As speakers, Chinese always use their mother tongue during spoken communication.

In the role play and observation part, the researcher found that the most frequent strategy used by Thai students was using gestures; only one Thai student used checking the meaning. Strategies used by the Chinese students were using gestures and changing topics.

The average time of each pair work was 1.71 minutes, silence, embarrassed smiling and gestures often occurred in all the conversations. Both Chinese and Thai students are weak at asking about feelings and thoughts, apologizing, making excuses, requests and offering interpretations. Chinese students failed to ask about other's feeling and thoughts, and they did not make any responses to the offered apologies. The Thai students failed to offer interpretations and show personal feelings. They were also weak at organizing and connecting sentences. Pronunciation as one factor of the grammatical competence seems have no effect on either Chinese or Thai students' conversation but it was a problem, which is indicated in the quantitative results. There were some grammatical mistakes in the conversations, but the mistakes did not affect their normal conversations.

The reasons why Thai students could not give a concise explanation and could not organize and combine their sentences may be because Thai people do not like showing their feelings directly. One of the factors that make it so difficult for Thai students to acquire sociolinguistic competence is the large amount of variance in cultural rules of speaking. Thai students may focus less on Chinese culture when communicating with Chinese just like Chinese students may also know little about Thai culture. Thai students are often unaware of the differences in using the rules of speaking regarding their culture when communicating in English.

A lot of aspects in Chinese and Thai culture are quite similar, and that is why it is well-understood that both Chinese and Thais are afraid of losing face and are shy. The concept of "face" is most important in Thai culture. Keeping one's "face" is equivalent to keeping one's self-respect and dignity intact. Thais will go great lengths to ensure that, as much as possible, neither you nor they will lose "face". Lovacs(2008). According to Smithies (1984, p.11):

Consequently most Southeast Asians have to make a very considerable effort to be outgoing at international social functions, because the way they are expected to behave is completely the reverse of that demanded by traditional values. Secretly too they are extremely concerned about the problem of face, which is a very Asian concept; they do not want to appear publicly foolish by doing the wrong thing. Perhaps no one does, but Asians worry more about it.

Therefore, Thais are weak at asking about feelings and thoughts in the situation of giving and opening presents.

"Mai-pen-rai", "kreng jai" and "jai yen yen" in Thai language and culture make the Thais not show their real feelings in order to avoid embarrassing others. These attitudes also make the Thais an easy-going and compromising people. The Thai desire for smooth interpersonal relationships means they have the talent of remaining calm and in control of their emotions even during difficult situations. (Komin, 1991)

When Chinese and Thai students could not finish the role play nor do the test very well, they were silent and embarrassed. Smiling and gestures often occurred in all the conversations. Silence may mean agreement, but also disagreement in communication in Chinese culture. So, sometimes, the Chinese keeping silent may make the Thais embarrassed, because they do not know whether others agree or not; or whether they understand or do not understand him/ her. In China, although, in some situations, one does not understand or agree with a speaker, he/ she may also keep silent. This is just a gesture of respect to speakers, especially, to the elder person who is speaking (Edward, 1973). Smithies (1984, p. 87) also has this to say:

A silent person is dismissed as a social disaster, while one who is at the same time witty, pleasant, interesting, charming, appropriate and intelligent is a social success. For many persons, particularly in Southeast Asia where the cultural convention is for younger people or those at a lower social level to be deferentially silent before older or more important people, it is no easy thing to shake off one's own traditions and blossom into a liberated and clever talker, but the effort has to be made.

Chinese students who did not make any responses to the offered apologies may be because most Chinese think there is no reason to respond to others' apologies because they thought Thai students had made an apology already. Chinese take gestures as a normal presentation of physiology. Moreover, Chinese are shy to show their real feelings; "it doesn't matter" may mean it does matter. The Chinese person who says "yes", while lowering the eyes may mean "no", because sometimes they feel reluctant to disrupt the harmony of relationship by directly saying so (for example, when your father ask you to do something which you do not want to do, you may also say "yes" in order to keep the harmonious relation with your father). (Fast, 1971)

## Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research & Development

The factors that cause Thai and Chinese students' misunderstandings in using English language, and the strategies they use when there was a communication breakdown during the role play may not show students' real difficulties and problems adequately. Because the kind of instruments such as a questionnaire and a role play might make them uncomfortable. And both Chinese and Thai students are shy to show their real feelings. But the most common problems for Thai and Chinese students are lack of communicative competence especially sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence. The most frequent strategy used by Thai and Chinese students was using gestures. Few students can use the other strategies such as checking meanings or changing the topic.

Considering the problems of Thai and Chinese students, there should be good curriculum planning and syllabus design in intercultural communicative competence for both Chinese and Thai students. At the same time, the English language curriculum should ensure a prominent place for the teaching of communicative strategies.

There also should be some textbooks, which focus on the usage of sentences in different situations and provide some interaction about cultural differences between China and Thai. Though cultural issues seemed not to affect either Chinese and Thai students' normal conversation, cultural awareness is worth taking into consideration in cross-cultural communication.

The teaching and learning process should be revised to develop skills that are identified as students' problems. And the assessments should be conducted on the basis of the necessary levels of competency required for the students.

Techniques for teaching sociolinguistic rules in a cross-cultural communication course should be suggested for teachers, such as giving model dialogues, a speech acting situation, role-play activities and discussions on cultural differences in speech act behavior. Moreover, there should be some guidebooks for improving students' skills in sociolinguistic competence. In order to learn about appropriateness of speech in the target language culture, it is necessary for students to study culture and cross-cultural differences so that they can see where their native culture differs from the culture of the language they are learning.

Discourse competence is the element of the communicative competence which involves the development of texts in language learning. It is related to notions such as cohesion, coherence, genres



and text types, among others, and it is deeply linked to the integration of the four skills in language teaching. Thus, there should be some English reading materials for students to improve discourse competence. The reading materials should take into consideration the cultural background and should address the qualities of “coherence” and “cohesiveness”.

There should be some school training programs before students go to study abroad. Furnham & Bochner (1986) suggested the main training techniques should include information giving, cultural sensitization, attribution training, learning by doing, and culture-based social-skills training. He argued that the more practical and less abstract the techniques are, the more effective they will be. Neuliep (2003) suggested cross-cultural training programs should accomplish four goals: assisting people in overcoming cultural obstacles; teaching people how to initiate and develop relationships with people from other cultures; help people accomplish job-oriented tasks; assist people in how to deal with the stressing in intercultural communication. The content could be various, including lecture or discussion, self-assessment instruments, case studies, simulation role-plays, videos, and a variety of homework assignments. Cushner and Karim (2004) suggested trainers and educators facilitate the development of overseas sites for internships, practical field experiences, educational travel, service learning, and other educational options.

There should be research on developing rating systems for teachers to assess Chinese and Thai students or ASEAN students' English oral communication competency with instructions that clear and easy to use. Intercultural communication has become a noticeable sub-area of Asian communication studies only in the 1990s. The limited number of Asian countries that have generated relevant research has hampered awareness of Asian intercultural communication scholarship. In dealing with these situations, recent research trends in intercultural communication in Asia should call attention to: 1) the complexity and increasing heterogeneity of Asian communication style; 2) the traditions of Asia as sources of concepts in intercultural communication; and 3) the reconsideration of the Western research paradigm. (Min, 2010, p.166-180)

Due to the limitations of this study, there should be further interviews of Thai and Chinese students. Both Thai and Chinese students should be aware of the importance of using English but not only for school tasks. Besides having linguistic knowledge, we should improve our interaction skills and cultural knowledge also.

Last but not least, when we talk about intercultural competence, Rose (2005) has this to say

Intercultural competence comprises a set of practices requiring knowledge, skills and attitudes. First, we should observe, identify and recognize it. Second, we should compare and contrast it. Third, we should negotiating the meaning and limit the possibility of misinterpretation. Students should have a good understanding of their own culture, know how their own culture is seen from outside. Besides, students should understand the target culture from its own perspective, and be aware of how the target culture is seen.

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