

Classroom interaction in the thai context education essay



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1. Introduction

1.1 Classroom Interaction in the Thai context

This essay highlights classroom interaction of Thai students considering Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions and differences in behaviour in Thai students according to cultural patterns. Cultural contexts are an integral aspect of education and all educators will have to be aware of the cultural differences while training and preparing curricula for students in different countries. The factors that impact local curricula could thus be studied with the help of action research and several research studies use action research as the basis for school curricula and teaching studies.

1.2 Rationale

Despite adaptation of values in all cultures, there are basic differences, and there is a growing concern that educational reform could mean the central role of school leaders in implementing educational change and yet school leadership could be lacking where it is needed most. There is thus now a concern and a change in global focus in education with an urgent need to develop and train school leaders.

The key area for development and training of school leaders is the concern for transmitting and securing knowledge base in school leadership. School leadership for developing curricula for social change will have to consider cultural contexts in implementing and structuring learning outcomes. The topic is chosen with a special focus on learning situations within the Thai cultural context. This provides considerable insight on the Thai context and Thai cultural patterns and could help change educational models and

classroom interaction pattern for meeting educational and learning objectives.

1. 3 Literature Review: Insights

As Burnard et al (2000) suggest, while we try to understand other cultures, we are better prepared to understand our own and while dealing with other cultures and traditions we develop more insights on our own cultures. The development of local curriculum in Thailand was studied using action research conducted by 27 Thai elementary school teachers in three private schools in Fang District, Chiang Mai Province of Thailand (Sahasewiyon, 2004). The process of developing local curriculum through action research and the impact of action research on the professional learning of teachers was studied with the help of participant observation and informal interviews.

The role of the researcher is important as it is the researcher who monitors the progress of the project and acts as a facilitator. The teacher also learns as action research has a positive impact on the professional learning of the teachers and highlights the cycle of the action research process as implemented by the Thai teachers. Marcinkoniene et al (2007) reported experiences of changing cultures by means of action research. Culture change was measured with the help of a culture survey during the beginning and end of the three year project. Culture change was noted in general in total quality management, achievement and individual problem solving although fear of loss of position and power issues caused some teachers to resist change. However a change to an achievement culture is favoured.

Using Hofstede's cultural dimensions such change in achievement levels and quality management may not be generalized in all schools across all cultures

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making such changes incomparable across cultures. Cultural changes takes time as basic cultural habits are ingrained although an effective change programme would be needed to affect change within cultural-educational settings.

Other factors that affect educational and learning or teaching styles in different cultures are learning style differences between various cultural groups. Taylor (1990) pointed out variations exist in the rules for discourse in oral communication patterns. Teachers and students follow assumptions and rules that are part of their respective cultures.

Discourse rules of communication with cultural implications are:

Opening or closing conversations;

Taking turns or participating in conversations;

Interrupting or arguing on a point;

Using silence or non verbal expression as a device for communication;

Knowing appropriate topics and using appropriate responses for conversation;

Interjecting or expressing humour, sarcasm, laughter and other features at appropriate times;

Knowing the right speech and choice of words as used by participants;

Sequencing the discourse with the right direction of the communicative flow.

Upshur (1979) suggested that cultural differences in non-verbal communications can reduce or enhance effects of oral and verbal communication as well. This means that when cultural differences shape non verbal communicative patterns, this could affect the verbal exchange significantly. However as far as learning styles and teaching outcomes are concerned there has to be significant verbal and non verbal communicative flow and any hindrance to this would hinder teaching and learning outcomes as well. Reid (1997) and Peacock (2001) conducted and reported studies on lecturer-student mismatches in teaching and learning styles that can cause learning failure, frustration and demotivation of both students and teachers.

Hallinger et al's study (2000) highlighted change leadership in a Thai school and shows the salient features of multiculturalism in school learning and leadership development. However change in case of Thai schools relate to power and leadership and empowering change processes highlight the underlying cultural norms that may affect the balance of power within Thai society. Thus power and leadership as perceived in Thailand would be unique and based on cultural perceptions and the use of this power within educational settings for developing educational leadership will be in accordance with cultural norms showing the interrelationship between power and culture.

In another study on higher education in Thailand, Eldridge and Cranston (2009) examined the effects of national culture on provisions of transnational higher education in Thailand. The study used Hofstede's national cultural value dimensions as the analytical tool for the study of the impact of culture on education. Interviews were also conducted with managers who were

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responsible for provisions of higher education and the interviews aimed to elicit responses on how national culture affected their work and working environment. Considering transnational educational partnerships as in this case the interview responses show that managers tend to believe that national culture affects operational and academic management considerably both within Thai and Australian educational environments. Transnational educational managers who are involved in different cultural transactions and partnerships are especially responsible for considering cultural dimensions that might affect educational and operational management scenario.

The relationship between student approaches to learning and learning outcomes, their perceptions or attitudes about the educational environment, and their academic achievement has been studied by Pimparyon et al (2010). For measures on educational achievements and attitudes, two measuring tools were used and these are Approaches to Studying Questionnaire (s-ASQ) and the Medical Education Environment Measure (MEEM). These were administered to 256 Thai nursing students who were enrolled at the Metropolitan Nursing College in Bangkok, Thailand.

The measures were on student approaches to learning, their perception of learning environments scores and academic achievement and their approaches to learning as dependent on meaning and reproducing orientation which studied methods of rote learning as opposed to meaning oriented learning. The results showed that learning environments were considered satisfactory and students with positive perception about their learning environments scored better and showed high achievement when compared with students who disliked the learning environment.

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1. 4 Objective

As Burnard et al. (2001) had said that when we are trying to understand other cultures, we should make every attempt to better understand our first. Hence the objective of this research is to understand and provide insights on the Thai cultural context and examine its impact on student-teacher interaction in the Thai classroom based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, apart from studying interaction patterns, the behaviour of Thai students is also analyzed in detail.

2. Thai culture – Hofstede

Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory is based on equations and relations as seen in power distance index, in individualism vs. collectivism, in uncertainty avoidance index, masculinity vs. femininity, long term vs. short term orientation and indulgence vs. restraint.

The PDI, the power distance index measures the extent to which members in institutions accept or expect unequal distribution of power. Culture with low power distance index are more democratic and all members demand equal contribution. Whereas cultures which are have higher power distance are autocratic and paternalistic with formal, hierarchical organizational and power structures (Hofstede, 2001). Thailand's cultural schema is such that power distribution is more unequal and autocratic and power distance index is high with low democratic participation of members. This suggests that people in Thailand are less participative and more shy or self conscious as also seen in the Thai students who are too shy to interact with the teachers. This would explain the students' reluctance to answer questions or discuss ideas in the classroom. Thailand thus has a collectivist culture, with long

term orientation of developing relationships and exercises restraint and is also less aggressive and more feminine in cultural orientation.

The dimension on individualism and collectivism shows the degree to which individuals feel integrated within groups. Individualistic societies are based on personal achievements and individual rights and most western nations are individualistic societies whereas Eastern cultures are collectivist as people are closer to their families and groups or organizations. Loyalty to families and groups seem more important than personal ambitions. Thailand could be considered as a comparably collectivist society and schools and such organizations are based on a collectivist culture where teachers, students and the community focus on objectives of learning rather than personal achievements.

The similarities and differences in education in a nursing school in Thailand and UK have been compared (Burnard et al, 2000) and whereas Thai culture is an integral part of Thai educational programmes, there is little emphasis on culture in the UK colleges and curricula. This could suggest that in Thailand and other Eastern schools, there is sufficient emphasis on the peculiarities of culture and an awareness of culture specific curricula when compared with schools and educational institutions in the West.

A study by McDonough (2004) elicited and studied teacher and student perceptions on use of pairing and small group oriented learning and activities in within a Thai EFL context. The study done on a small number of teachers and students examined whether the learning opportunities which were provided and attributed to the pairing and grouping technique was also

present within regular classroom situations. The sample being Thai EFL students, the main aim was to determine the efficacy of pair or small group activity in such contexts considering cultural dimensions of collectivism as prominent in Thai students.

The uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) reflects society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity and cultures in which there is uncertainty avoidance or high UAI, people are generally emotional (Hofstede, 2001). Such individuals are more careful and changes are implemented by laws. This is in contrast to low uncertainty avoidance in some western cultures where people are more tolerant of change. In Thailand, uncertainty avoidance is high and people are cautious of change so any change in educational settings, learning styles and curricula is expected to meet with some resistance. Considering this the teacher-student classroom interaction is also expected to be based on a power structure with less student participation and more structured but rigid.

Cultures which have dominant masculine values are assertive and materialistic whereas feminine cultures give importance to relationships, quality of life. The difference between gender roles and values are also more distinct in masculine societies whereas in feminine cultures men and women are caring and have similar values (Hofstede, 2001). . This has been described as emphasis on Quantity of life in western cultures as opposed to Quality of life in Eastern societies. The other dimensions are long term orientation where the importance is on the future so there is a capacity for adaptation and persistence. In short term oriented societies, values are related to the past and there is a respect for traditions and social obligations.

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Cultures with high indulgence allow hedonistic, materialistic behaviours as in the west whereas restraint and social norms define behaviours in eastern cultures where gratification of desires is regulated or postponed (Hofstede, 2001). Thai schools follow social norms and emphasize on quality of life with low indulgence and emphasis on social values and obligations. Hofstede (2003) defined culture as the collective programming of the mind and this programming or manifestation of the programming helps in distinguishing members of one group or category of people from another. Culture consists of visible manifestations of behaviour or verbal exchange or practices (symbols, and rituals) and invisible or underlying values that are not obvious; and cultural values are at the core of all its other components and inter-cultural interactions.

Hofstede (1994) has pointed out,

“ Values represent the deepest level of a culture. They are broad feelings, often unconscious and not open to discussion, about what is good and what is bad, clean or dirty, beautiful or ugly, rational or irrational, normal or abnormal, natural or paradoxical, decent or indecent. These feelings are present in the majority of the members of the culture, or at least in those persons who occupy pivotal positions.” (Hofstede, 1994, 10)

Signorini et al (2009) discussed Hofstede's model of cultural difference for exploring the impact and influence of culture in different educational settings. Signorini et al explored the limitations of using Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions to study all aspects of higher education when cross cultural contexts are considered.

3. Student /teacher classroom interaction

Student teacher interaction could be associated with culture as also personality patterns although such interaction would be expected to be more in participative cultures such as the developed Western nations and less in autocratic less participative societies. In describing change management within educational settings, Humphreys (1996) examined and compared values of senior managers involved in technical education in the UK and Egyptian cultures. For their study they used a model questionnaire based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the responses suggested the importance of cultural difference. Cultural differences could highlight change and management models and concepts that would not be transferable or relevant to other cultures.

However cultural differences could be complex and could be associated with religious and social beliefs of a culture (Humphreys, 1996) and thus western management tools and teaching or educational tools that are to be used in Asian or other societies needs to be adapted and refined so that they fit the cultural contexts. All management models will have to consider cultural differences and cultural dimensions for change in education, government or industry. However intercultural transfers of models and concepts would be most affected by communication patterns and in case of students and teachers, the student-teacher interaction process is the most important. This has been suggested by other researchers as well (Taylor, 1990).

4. Classroom interaction in the Thai Asian Context

Littrell (2008) has discussed several learning styles that teachers and students could adopt and this could be introverted learning, where

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knowledge is transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by the learners and the students are passive recipients of knowledge from the teachers. Closure oriented teaching styles involve students who dislike ambiguity and uncertainty and need conclusive points. Analytical learning styles are organized and sequential whereas in case of visual learning styles, students need a lot of visual stimulation (Hayes, 1996).

4. 1 Traditional Role of Thai Teachers and High PDI

The impact of high PDI in Thai society can be clearly observed in student-teacher classroom interaction. Education in Thailand has a strong tradition of teacher-directed instruction and it is very important that students show respect to their teachers in the classroom. In fact, it could be said that it is “ compulsory” behaviour for Thai students. According to The Dhammakaya Foundation (2005, cited in Laopongharn and Sercombe, 2009, p73), Buddhist teaching emphasises that “ teachers are to be esteemed as those who provide knowledge while students are the ones who receive them”. As a result, in cultures influenced by Buddhism, like Thailand, teachers are viewed as the givers of knowledge; students, in contrast, are inexperienced and hence not in a position to share or express ideas (Laopongharn and Sercombe, 2009).

Additionally, there is an expression in Thai culture that (Pagram and Pagram, 2006, p5) “ schools are the second home and teachers are the second parents to Thai children.” Since the relationship between teacher and student is so similar to the one between parent and children, students are required to obey their teachers as they do to their parents. As a result of how highly respected teachers are in the society, the Thai government has even

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created a special teacher day in which people have the chance to return and pay respect to their former teachers.

Because of the importance of hierarchical distinctions in Thai social relations and social identity, acknowledging higher and lower status or “senior/junior” relationship can be viewed as a fundamental part of Thai social interaction (O’Sullivan and Tajarroensuk, 1977, p31). Given the high status or ‘senior role’ given to teachers in Thai society, Thai students who take on a corresponding ‘junior role’ do not feel it is appropriate to speak up to question the teacher. Moreover, the pastoral roles teachers perform add to the ‘senior’ position of the teacher and a feeling of “krenjai” (respectful consideration) on the part of students. This perspective is embedded in the Thai students’ mind and therefore, it is customary that Thai students listen and keep silent until they have been called upon, their silence communicates respect (Laopongharn and Sercombe, 2009; Littrel, 2008).

Additionally, in Thai culture, there is a gesture referred to as “Wai” which is used to show respect to those older or in positions of power or authority. Instead of shaking hands when meeting or saying good-bye to parents, grandparents or anyone who is elder, children must “wai” or place their fingers together in a prayer-like position at heart level and bow. This translates into the classroom with the ritual called “Wai Khru”. “Wai” is the gesture just explained and “Khru” means teacher. So at the start of the school day, all the students are required to “Wai Khru” or show respect to their teachers.

With this high view of the teacher, one would assume that Thai students “are more ready than European students to accept the traditionally dominant role of the teacher” (Littlewood, 2001, p21). But contrary to Hofstede’s suggestion that the characteristics of high power distance are accepted by those in high PDI nations, Littlewood finds that many East Asian students feel that this tradition is imposed on them, and actually prefer a different teaching or learning style. Although they do behave in more “conformist, non-questioning ways than their European counterparts,” they do so because they have been influenced that way but when given a chance to express their desires, East Asian students, as Littlewood’s study suggests, express preferences contrary to the Thai tradition style.

4. 2 Thai Learning Style and High UAI

Umemoto (2001), by examining Japanese students studying in the United Kingdom and the impact that uncertainty avoidance makes on their learning process, finds that Japanese students are reluctant to ask questions and are unwilling to respond to questions in the classroom. In Japan, students are expected to listen and to take notes but not to speak up. Similarly to Thailand, Japan has a high UAI and thus Japanese and Thai students exhibit some common characteristics in the classroom, such as being passive, being reluctant to speak, avoiding risk and highly valuing accuracy (see Table).

Weak	Strong
Uncertainty	Uncertainty
Avoidance	Avoidance
Students	Students
are active	are passive

participants

recipients

.

Teachers

Teachers do

expect

not expect

interaction.

interaction.

Students

Students

are eager to

are

speak.

reluctant to

speak.

Teachers

Teachers do

expect to

not expect

be

to be

questioned.

questioned.

Risks are

Risks are

confronted.

avoided.

Creativity is

Accuracy is

valued.

valued.

Table: Uncertainty Avoidance in Classroom Interaction (Umemoto, 2001: 4)

Because the Thai education system emphasises a closure oriented teaching style and tends to rely on rote memorisation of information, students learn to dislike ambiguity and expect that every question has a correct answer (Hayes, 1996). For example, Thai students' 16 years of English language

classes tend to be teacher-directed and involve a great deal of rote memorisation with a minimum amount of free conversation and without much responsibility for “ their own learning” (Suk -a-nake et al., 2003 , cited in Tharawoot, 2009: the diversified method has been used and provide the student with unique learning 5). Since a strong UAI indicates an emphasis on accuracy and risk avoidance, Thai students tend to fear getting the answer wrong and thus are reluctant to speak up (Littrel, 2008).

Students in Thailand consider “ knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by the students” (Suk -a-nake et al., 2003, cited in Tharawoot, 2009, p5). The rote acquisition of knowledge is given priority over independent creative thinking (Laopongharn and Sercombe, 2009). As a result, Thai students only want to answer a question that they feel certain about. Because they are not accustomed to thinking independently, they tend to be shy and feel that they lack ability to synthesise information and answer. The research of Jittisukpong (2005, cited in Tharawoot, 2009, p5) shows that Thai English as a Foreign Language students struggle with feeling too shy to use English with their classmate. They have a sense of passivity and lack of control over their own learning.

Furthermore, the nature of Thailand’s saving face culture impacts classroom interaction. Park (2000, p246) explains that because of the saving face culture “ the learning style preferences of South East Asian students tend to be non verbal in class and they are unlikely initiate the discussion until they have been called on.” Pagram and Pagram (2006) also say that the fear of losing face hinders students speaking because they want to avoid answering incorrectly.

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4.3 The Thai National Curriculum and Low IDV (Collectivism)

Burnard et al. (2001) compare nurse education in Thailand and the United Kingdom and find an interesting difference in that Thai nurse education programmes include the teaching of Thai culture in their courses. The importance of teaching Thai culture is not only evident in nursing programmes, it is an intricate part of all education in Thailand. The national curriculum itself is designed to ensure that national development through education is in line with the Thai way of life and Thai culture. It addresses Thai cultural values and students' human rights, morals and ethics as indicated in the National Education Act of B. E. 2542 (1999) (Office of the Nation Education Commission (2000, p11-12) section 23 and 27 of the ' National Education Guidelines': Education through formal, non-formal and informal approaches shall give emphases to knowledge and morality. Learning processes and integration of knowledge such as knowledge about oneself and relationship between oneself and society such as family, community, nation and world community, knowledge about religion , art, culture , sport, Thai wisdom and the application or wisdom (section 23)... and... for the purpose of preserving Thai identity; good citizenship; a desirable way of life; and livelihood....(section 27).

This emphasis on teaching Thai culture appears to reflect Thailand's collectivist values. Thailand is a country with deeply embedded cultural rituals and traditions and educators play an important role in impressing children with the importance of these. Cherry (2000) found that Thai children have very different attitudes, values and behaviours than Western children. Because Thai people " are social learners, they learn in a group and have a

very close relationship with friends in their villages and classrooms” (Cherry, 2000 p20-23). The impact of this strong value on classroom interaction is that the students are reluctant to do or say anything that might go against the collective values they have been taught. As Littlewood (2001, p5) states about people in collectivist societies, they do “ not claim rights which would affirm individual interests in opposition to those of the ingroup.”

McDonough (2004) studied teacher and student perception on the use of pairing and small group orientated and activities within Thai context. The study investigated whether participating students in these group activities showed improved learning and achieved the learning outcomes or produced target activity faster. Sixteen Thai EFL learners were involved in the study and they completed the learning within pair and small groups and completed the activities asked as part of their schedule class in foreign language within a large public university of Northern Thailand. The results definitely highlighted a favour or tilt towards collectivism as students who participated in pair or group activities were more successfully in completing target activities even if they did not perceive these learning activities as useful for their goals of the teaching program. This would suggest that within a Thai context teacher-student interaction would be successful only if teachers encourage group discussion and elicit responses that are based on collective thinking.

4. 4 Low MAS (Feminism) and Harmony in the Classroom

Another strong value in Thai culture is “ kengjai.” As mentioned earlier it means giving respectful consideration to others. This value necessitates having a sense of empathy when interacting with others. In other words,
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one should speak kindly and be sure to express one's ideas in a manner which does not hurt another's feelings. These values are consistent with Hofstede's concept of feminine cultures, such as Thailand, which place a stronger emphasis on relational harmony. Therefore, considering the impact of this in the classroom, whatever the teacher communicates in the classroom, even if it is something that makes the students uncomfortable, they tend simply to accept it in order to maintain harmony (Laopongharn and Sercombe, 2009).

Striving to keep harmony is not necessarily unique to Thailand or East Asia. Littlewood (2001, p24) found in his cross nation study of students in both low and high MAS countries that actually " students everywhere may like to keep their groups harmonious but they may have different perceptions of what kinds of behaviour disturb this harmony." Thus how communicative behaviours such as those identified by Taylor - opening or closing conversations, participating in discussions, interrupting or arguing a point and using silence or non verbal expression as a device for communication - are viewed depends on the students' cultural perception. For example, Niehoff et al. (2011, p291) compared collectivistic Taiwanese with individualistic American students and found that " debating the teacher in class was more acceptable for U. S. students than for Taiwanese students."

4. 5 Education Reform in Thailand

Recently in Thailand, education policy changes have led to attempts to implement " more student-centred pedagogies in the Thai classroom" (Carter, 2006, cited in Nutrakune and Nason, 2009 p4). Puacharearn and Fisher (2004) indicate that the changing of the Thai classroom environment

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is reflected in the method of teaching called “ Cooperative Learning Strategies”. The implementation of cooperative learning in the Thai classroom involves promoting positive interdependence, face to face interaction, individual accountability, social skills, group processing, peer tutoring, peer relationship, peer assessment, and group roles (Johnson and Johnson, 2004; Johnson and Johnson, 1993; Johnson and Johnson, 1999; Clare and Susan, 1998, all cited in Nutrakune and Nason, 2009 p7). Topping (2005) confirms when students are challenged to speak and express their ideas through peer tutoring, learning is enhanced and positive interdependence is encouraged. Furthermore, Tippawan et al. (2009) finds that although the teacher is indispensable in cooperative learning strategies, at the same time the teacher should decrease teacher talk time in order to encourage students to participate more in classroom interaction.

Considering these ‘ modern’ changes in Thailand’s education policies, Hallinger and Kentamura (2000, p191) set out to “ explore how Thai school leaders successfully respond” to these changes. They found three stand-out administrators who went against the cultural grain of the top-down management approach and chose to use a participatory management style to implement t