ANALYZING POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN AN ONLINE PLATFORM FOR THAI EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Thai students often face challenges in intercultural communication due to cultural differences and the lack of skills to communicate across cultural boundaries. Therefore, politeness strategies which are influenced by cultural dimensions are selectively used by Thai students to shape their linguistic presentation. This study examined the elements of Thai and Western politeness strategies and speech acts in computer-mediated communication between Thai students and their native English-speaking lecturer. Data was collected from their online entries which was required as an assignment during the teaching and learning of the English and American Cultural Background course. Besides, interviews with the students and observations during classes were also conducted. The cultural dimensions theory by Hofstede (1980) was used to describe the elements of Thai-Western politeness. Results of the study revealed that the students preferred to use politeness strategies from Western cultural dimensions more than Thai cultural dimensions, whereas some students preferred to use a mixture of hybrid Thai-Western politeness strategies. The cultural dimension of individualism vs. collectivism was most apparent in the students' online entries and the speech acts reflected a lot of respect for each other, which was significant in their culture. It was evident that Thai students were beginning to integrate Thai-Western politeness strategies during their interactions in the online forums with their native English-speaking lecturer. The findings clearly shared elements of cultural integration and could provide useful reference for future researchers, foreign language instructors and language teachers who are teaching English in a Thai intercultural context especially in a virtual environment.

Keywords: intercultural communication, Thai, Western cultural dimensions, politeness strategies, online forums

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication (ICC) refers to the confrontation and communication of people from two or more cultural groups and making meaning from the exchange in a particular cultural context. In this case, the interactional goals of ICC are achieved if the interlocutors are able to communicate with people from different cultures and be aware of each other's cultural norms (Klyukanov 2005). In the Asian classroom, cultural awareness between the students and the foreign educator is a primary concern especially when using English as a Foreign (EFL) or Second Language (ESL), because misunderstanding and offense may occur due to different cultural norms. Therefore, it is important for native English teachers to consider social, economic, political, and religious contexts when teaching English in Asian countries (Adamson 2005).

The influence of Thai culture in English language teaching and learning is complex because Thai cultural values and beliefs, which surface as classroom behaviours, could possibly lead to cultural misunderstanding (Baker 2008). As a matter of fact, there have been concerns nationally about intercultural encounters between Thai students and expatriate teachers who are hired as language experts, whose differences in cultural norms could possibly lead to intercultural difficulties (Hofstede 1991, Samovar and Porter 2004). Hence, in order to support multicultural encounters and the globalization of education, employment and business exchanges (Darasawang 2007), ICC skills have been included into the Thai educational plan for tertiary level education (Commission on Higher Education, 1999).

The current need for English Language Teaching (ELT) in Thailand is supported through the learning of English language with technology. This means, students and teachers are brought together by means of a borderless education through blended learning approach. As such, education can be planned anywhere and anytime with the aid of technology.

 "learners shall have the right to develop their capacities for utilization of educational technologies as soon as feasible so that they shall have sufficient knowledge, and skills in using these technologies for acquiring knowledge themselves on a continuous lifelong basis"

(Office of the National Education Commission 22)

At the tertiary education level, although the Thai national language is used as the official and primary language of communication and education, Thai students are exposed to the English language for academic purposes and as a compulsory course in the first and second year of study. In the universities, The English language is taught by both Thai lecturers and native English speaking lecturers. By using online technology in the teaching and learning of English language, expatriate lecturers allow the Thai students more opportunities to use English in their daily life apart from practicing English language skills in the classroom.

In the context of using online forums in English Language Teaching (ELT), Pramela et al. (2010) noted that online forums are useful learning platforms for student-centred learning methodology. They provide a channel for the teacher and students to interact with one another by posting messages on the wall at different times and places so that students are able to access the forum outside of the classroom.

At the same time, using online interaction in learning supports users in distance learning, supplement learning and blended learning. Salmon (2011) mentioned that interacting in the online forums allows the users to be able to point out their ideas and attitudes openly. The use of blended learning in online context was more productive than the learning that takes place in the traditional classroom (Dhanarajan 2007). In addition, online forums can motivate and be used to develop students' reading skills because in order to keep submitting their posts, students need to read and comprehend various topics of discussion (Maslawati et al. 2012). The instructor's feedback can further support their learning effort in reading. Nevertheless, in order to achieve successful online learning, Dhanarajan (2007) suggested five elements which was required including computer proficiency by users, the design of contents to qualify as online materials,

easy accessibility of online channels, reasonable internet costs and the belief in human potential using computer-based learning.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of language by Thai students in written online communication. Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory was used to analyse the politeness strategies used by Thai and Western students in their speech acts in an online forum. The politeness strategies in Thai and Western communities were connected to the people's behavioural patterns that were influenced by the society they were brought up in. The use of the theory of cultural dimensions provided an overview of the politeness strategies used by Thai and Western students in the online platform.

According to Hofstede's (1980) theory, the five cultural dimensions composed of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, long-term vs. short-term orientation. For the purpose of this study, the researchers adapted Hofstede's (1980) theory by using three cultural dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and individualism and collectivism. The masculinity and femininity dimension was not used in this study because it was not part of the focus of the study while the long-term and short-term orientation dimension was not used because it was related to the cultural construct in the situation of the workplace (Hofstede 1980, Samovar and Porter 2004), whereas the context of this study took place in the context of online teaching and learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in a public university in southern Thailand which had a multicultural setting comprising diverse cultures, mainly Thai Buddhists, Muslims and Christians. The participants of the study were 146 undergraduate students who were in their second and third year of study, majoring in English Language studies at the Western Languages Department, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the English Language Department, Faculty of Education. These students have enrolled into four classes from the English and American Cultural Background course and were taught by a native English-speaking lecturer.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was gathered from online entries, focus-group interviews with selected students and classroom observations. The lecturer who was a native English speaker commenced the course by creating an online forum for four groups of students. The online forum was created as part of a combination of e-learning and face-to-face classroom meeting for the English and American Cultural Background course and functioned as a platform to communicate topics related to the content of the course. The topics comprised of four different questions which were posted up for the group's discussion (Table 1).

Table 1. Topics of discussion posted in the online forum

Group	Questions	Number of students
1 (Topic One)	a. I will be asking you for information and/or opinions about English/ American culture during this semester. You can post your replies here! b. Good morning students in group 1. If you won a prize to travel abroad for 3 months, unlimited expenses. Would you go to United States or to Great Britain? What would you want to see and do there?	23
2 (Topic Two)	a. I will be asking you for information and/or opinions about English/ American culture during this semester. You can post your replies here! b. Hello students in group 2. I am interested in education in this question. There are many good universities and colleges in the USA and in Great Britain. If you were offered an unlimited scholarship to study in either place, where would you go and why?	41
3 (Topic Three)	a. I will be asking you for information and/or opinions about English/ American culture during this semester. You can post your replies here! b. Hello members of group 3. Fast food is something which has come from Western culture. It is especially popular in America. What is your experience with fast food in Thailand? Do you enjoy eating it? How often and what do you like to eat?	44
4 (Topic Four)	a. I will be asking you for information and/or opinions about English/ American culture during this semester. You can post your replies here! b. So students in group 4, I would like to know about your experience with listening to spoken accents. Do you find it easier to understand a typical British or a typical American accent? What is you experience with learning spoken English?	38

The EFL undergraduate students' entries in the online discussion thread were used as data for this study. This data was collected over a period of one semester and altogether, there were 146 online entries from the four different groups of Thai students. Topic One was posted to 23 students from Group 1. Topic Two was posted to 41 students from Group 2, Topic Three to 44 students from Group 3 and Topic Four to 38 students from Group 4. Student 1 from Group 1 was labelled as S1G1 and so on.

Focus-group interviews with the student participants were arranged one week after the completion of the course. The purpose of the interviews was to find out the students' reasons on how and why they preferred a particular politeness strategy to interact with the native English-speaking lecturer. Only two groups of five to six students volunteered to participate in the

interviews. Classroom observations were also conducted by the researcher as a non-participant observer throughout the semester. All the field notes which involved interpretations of the classroom observations were transcribed for the analysis.

FINDINGS

Table 2 presents the cultural norms of Thai and Western politeness strategies which surfaced in the student-teacher interactions in the online forum. The politeness strategies used by the Thai students with their lecturer in the online forum were analysed according to Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory which were Power Distance Index (PDI), uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) and individualism vs. collectivism (IDV).

Table 2. Cultural categorization of politeness in the online forums

Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions	Cultural Norms	
	Western	Thai
Power distance	"Equality" (high interpersonal relationship)	"Superior" (low interpersonal relationship)
Uncertainty avoidance	"Low uncertainty avoidance" (simply accepting and controlling external forces)	"High uncertainty avoidance" (ambiguity avoidance)
Individualism vs. collectivism	"Individualist" "I identity" (saying what you are thinking)	"Collectivist" "We identity" (avoiding close confrontations)
		"Indirectness" (impreciseness)
	"Directness" (preciseness and absolute)	"High-context communication"
	"Low-context communication"	

It can be observed that the cultural norms between Thai and Western speakers differed and these differing cultural dimensions in terms of politeness strategies were further elaborated below.

Power Distance

The online entries of S41G3 and S5G2 were the samples which represented power distance in the communication between the Thai students and their native English-speaking lecturer. The students' online entries illustrated low interpersonal relationship between interlocutors. There was a sense of subordination by the students in the organisation through the manner in which their entries were written. For example, students used "*Thank you*" at the end of their entries. For most people, saying "thank you" was a way to express their gratitude and this expression was used especially when they are acknowledging a gift, service, a compliment or refusing an offer. This expression in the Thai context could also usually be seen in many situations especially when the younger people are interacting with the older people who were considered their

superiors. Saying "thank you" functioned as expression of one's respect towards their superiors and it was considered rude or inappropriate if the younger people did not express their gratitude towards their superiors, who were seen as holding higher social positions.

Therefore, the expression "*Thank you very much, sir*" was used by S41G3. This student showed a high degree of appreciation towards the lecturer for his kindness through the use of "*very much*" and "*sir*". S41G3 used a quantifier "*very much*" to emphasize the respect she had towards her lecturer. In addition, S41G3 addressed "*sir*" which showed a respectful and formal address to the lecturer. It could be observed that she was very aware with the gap between herself and her superior and as a result, her word choices showed large power distance. Furthermore, the word "sir" meant "ka" or "krab" in the Thai language. Among the Thai people, this expression was used to increase the degree of politeness and respect when talking with anyone who was considered a superior. S1G1 shared that in the Thai language, sentences ending with "*ka*" or "*krab*" represented humility with the elders. Therefore, adding "sir" was considered a form of respect and politeness for a Thai. The excerpt below illustrated S41G3's entry.

> Personally, I like to eat "Fast food" because it's convenient to buy and they're tasty. My favorite fast food is KFC because I love chicken and KFC ecipe is very good , their chickens are soft inside and crispy outside. They're very yummy. There are many fast food shops in Thailand such as Burger king, Mcdonald's, and etc. And Thai people like them very much. However, I think there is a few bad things about fast food it has many calories. They contain fat if we eat them for a long time we may get unhealthy. So, we should do a lot of exercises after consuming fast food.
>
> **Thank you very much, sir.**
>
> Posted by S41G3

Besides saying *"thank you"*, many students also made "apologies" while writing their online entries to their lecturer. This was another Thai politeness strategy. S5G2 expressed his apology, probably out of guilt for possible grammar mistakes in his entries. The "apology" was made since S5G2 was worried that his post might irritate his lecturer and therefore "begged for forgiveness" from the lecturer. This was also because the student was aware that his lecturer held a higher social position.

> if I were offered an unlimited scholarship I want to study at the Nottingham University in England because this university is the best know for many of trees and top four beautiful University in Uk.The university has many facility such as library, computer center and shop store. Nottingham University had ever got award of Energy Globe in 2005.I know this university famous so i would like to study.
>
> **sorry for my mistake.**
>
> Posted by S5G2

Nevertheless, contrary to the previous Thai politeness strategy above, S10G1's entry revealed a high interpersonal relationship, using an "in-group language or dialect", "*gonna*" in

the online entry. The purpose of this strategy was to reduce the gap between the student and the lecturer.

"London"
First place,I would like to go to the Big Ben & House of Parliament there was the symbol of England. Next, I'm **gonna** go to Kensington Palace because I'm interested in fashion in the royal palace.

Posted by S10G1

S7G3's online entry also expressed the degree of friendliness through hedging phrases "*I kind of like…*" and "*And if you ask me…*". In addition, the student wrote "prosodic and kinesics hedges" "*Yum!*" with an exclamation mark when sharing opinions with the lecturer. The use of informal language helped to reduce the gap between the student and the lecturer.

I **kind of like** fast food. My family, we love to go out and spend a good time during the meal together. So, I have a chance to eat fast food quite often. And **if you ask me** what do I like to eat. I like hamburger, chicken hamburger with fried egg, double cheese and bacon with extra sauce. **Yum!:**

Posted by S7G3

Uncertainty Avoidance
Another Thai politeness strategy established in this study was "high uncertainty avoidance" which included ambiguity avoidance. This "high uncertainty avoidance" could be observed from online entries with high context and indirectness.

S29G4's online entry showed a high degree of uncertainty avoidance through "hedging opinions". Examples of hedges used were phrases which showed personal opinion such as "*In my opinion…*" and "*I think…*" in the sentence, which showed hesitation and indirectness. In addition, the student used the word choice "*familiar*" which implied her concerns on English accent.

In my opinion, I think American accent is easier to understand because the words of American English are shorter and I'm familiar with American accent.

For my experience I usually listening American song and repeat it. I like to speak with foreigner when I met them.
^____.^

Posted by S29G4

Additionally, S1G1, S4G1 and S2G2 expressed their anxiety in preparations for formal writing which they felt was crucial. From the interview it was confirmed that S2G2 made revisions to the written entries by using an online dictionary to check for errors and did peer review before posting the entries.

Contrary to "high uncertainty avoidance", S6G4 was an example of "low uncertainty avoidance" with little concern over English language learning in new circumstances. This was

present through the opinions he posted to the lecturer in the online forum. S6G4 presented positive attitudes towards English language learning. For example, he eagerly looked for challenges to practice speaking the English language with foreigners. He was not concerned about unexpected experiences which he might possibly encounter while learning. The participant showed the ability to accept external forces or uncontrollable factors. The language of S6G4's entry related a certain degree of friendliness and flexibility through the use of a smiley emoticon "😃".

> **Actually,I sometimes speak English with native speakers such as presentation by speaking English in class. I mean speaking with teacher and also when I journey to somewhere that have foreigners I try to speak with them and I love it**. Most of Foreigners are friendly and they try to speak Thai too. 😃And I think American accent is easier than British accent to understand, but I don't know why it must be American. Maybe pronouncing of American is clear and more understandable than one such as "r" in American they usually stress every words that have "r" and some soft "d" from t …
> Thank you
>
> Posted by S6G4

Individualism and Collectivism

It was observed that the context of communication was of primary importance compared to content achievement in the students' entries. Therefore, it was noted that the cultural dimension involving individualism vs. collectivism appeared the most in the students' online entries. Individualism vs. collectivism was related to family types. Hofstede (1980) explained that individualism involved a nuclear family structure while collectivism is related to an extended family structure. He asserted that individualism held the principle of being independent, while collectivism referred to the principle of being dependent.

The Thai students demonstrated three elements of collectivism as part of Thai politeness strategy which were "we identity", "indirectness" and "high-context communication". S6G1 used "we identity" to avoid close confrontation while communicating with the native English-speaking lecturer. Hence, he shared his experience using "visitor" instead of "I".

> I will go to London there is my dream town, the first place i will go to the Buckingham Palace there was the one of great palace in the world, in summer there allow **visitor** to visit inside some part of the palace after that i will go to the Stamford Bridge there is my favourite place and then the last place that i will visit is big ben it is the world's famous clock.
> Thank you
>
> Posted by S6G1

S7G3 also used "we identity" while sharing the opinions with the lecturer through the use of pronouns "*My family*" and "*we*" to avoid close confrontation. Additionally, S7G3 used hedging phrases such as "*I kind of like*" and "*if you asked me*" to emphasise indirect communication.

> I **kind of like** fast food. **My family, we** love to go out and spend a good time during the meal together. So, I have a chance to eat fast food quite often. And **if you ask me** what do I like to eat. I like hamburger, chicken hamburger with fried egg, double cheese and bacon with extra sauce.   Yum!
>
>   Posted by S7G3

The examples above highlighted Thai's cultural dimension of collectivism. Stewart (1972) believed that the Thais were dependent on the family (34) and the "we identity" concept connected and supported the individual to function as a group. Additionally, it was observed that many decisions were usually made as a group in Thai society. Thai children were also taught to consult the elders when they encounter problems. They were not encouraged to solve problems by themselves. The Thai's believed that people who were older could solve problems better than the younger ones because they had more experience.

Moreover "indirectness" was also apparent in S31G3 and S41G3's entries. Both S31G3 and S41G3 used adverbs as hedging phrases to begin their opinions. "*Sometimes*" and "*Personally*" were used at the beginning of the messages they posted.

> **Sometimes** I eat fast food such as KFC, sandwich and hamburger. I like to eat hamburger because it easy to find, prety of nutriets and delicious. When I bored Thai food this hamburger is fist choice for me. I always feel happy when I eat hamburger.
>
>   Posted by S31G3

> **Personally**, I like to eat "Fast food" because it's convenient to buy and they're tasty. My favorite fast food is KFC because I love chicken and KFC recipe is very good, their chickens are soft inside and crispy outside. They're very yummy. There are many fast food shops in Thailand such as Burger king, Mcdonald's, and etc. And Thai people like them very much. However, I think there is a few bad things about fast food it has many calories. They contain fat if we eat them for a long time we may get unhealthy. So, we should do a lot of exercises after consuming fast food.
> Thank you very much, sir.
>
>   Posted by S41G3

This kind of "indirectness" in Thai writing was confirmed by S1G1 and other students of Group1 who stated that during communication, saying something indirectly to the elders was considered polite and respectful. Direct confrontations were usually strongly discouraged as it was considered a sign of aggression is which was unacceptable in Thai society.

Another collectivism element which was "high-context communication" was demonstrated by S2G4. S2G4 shared his experience in English language learning in his online entry but mentioned irrelevant information on the topic of the discussion.

-I think American English is easier to understand because the consonants are clearer and softer. The vowels are usually longer than British English.
"This experience"
In high school, I studied English subject with teacher from America.
He is kind. I liked to talk and play games in his class.
I went to the beach in Phuket a year ago. I talked with foreigners.
I recommended places to stay and travel to them. It's pretty good.
In addition, English songs are melodic.I like to listening and singing.
It's a good choice to learn and speak English.

Posted by S2G4

Nevertheless, contrary to the Thai cultural norm, S18G1 showed high degree of individualism by using the "I identity" element repetitively. This was demonstrated through the use of the verb "want to", eight times. This kind of communication style was precise and absolute and S18G1 was confident in stating what he wanted and what he was thinking about.

If I won a prize to travel abroad for 3 months. I would like to go to England. **I want to** get on the London bus to see around the history place in London. And **I want to** use the phone in London to call it to my family or friends in Thailand. And then **I want to** take a photo with them. **I want to** look around the Backingham palace that I know it from some fiction that I have read when I was 16 years old and see the changing of the guard, **want to** see a red suit of them. But the most important, **I want to** follow the harry potter scene, **I want to** go to the Christ church college that appear on the harry potter movie. **I want to** get on Hogwarts express that harry potter have use it before, but I do not know where is the place, however, I believe I can find it.
Thank You!!! I Love Super Junior Hanhyuk very much!!!! kikikiki~~>[]<

Posted by S18G1

In relation to American individualism, S2G2 revealed that being straight forward was acceptable in the American culture. The students suggested that "*they are easy-going and flexible*", and therefore, saying something directly when interacting with the Americans was preferable. Stewart (1972) stated that American children were brought up to be able to make decisions by themselves and were encouraged to manage with their own problems. They were trained to be able to publicly speak their opinions and believed in taking part equally when it came to decision-making. In addition to the concept of individualism, Fieg (1976) supported the fact that the Americans were straightforward and direct.

Besides the "I identity" element, S41G2 used "low-context communication". The online entry below demonstrated a written body that was short but precise, and absolutely related to issue that the lecturer required the students to answer.

I choose Harvard University because As one of the famous universities of the world. One of the oldest and one of the United States. Harvard University and has a strong reputation for academic quality. The quality of teachers and students.

Posted by S41G2

Discussion

The study showed that although Thai politeness strategies were present in the Thai students' online entries, surprisingly, more of the Western politeness strategies were being followed throughout the students' online entries and there were also some students who had a mixture of hybrid Thai-Western politeness strategies. The cultural dimension of the Western individualism ("I identity") and Thai collectivism ("we identity") were both equally used as much. But the cultural dimension of the Western power distance (equality) was seen more than the Thai power distance (superior), and the Western uncertainty avoidance (low uncertainty avoidance) was seen more that the Thai uncertainty avoidance (high uncertainty avoidance).

Hofstede (1980) considered power distance as the focus in a Western family and school setting. However, in the Thai educational setting, it was observed that the students were more focused on the dimensions of individualism and collectivism when communicating with their native English-speaking lecturer. The "I identity" and "directness" that was present in the students' written entries showed the speaker's independence. Nevertheless, this independence was evened out and softened through expressions of gratitude like online smiley and emoticons which were placed at the end of the entries.
At the same time, the Thai dimension of collectivism presented dependence when students used "we identity" and "indirectness" in their online entries. However, this influence was also evened out by the dimension of low power distance from the Western culture when students employed the "use of in-group language or dialect" amongst themselves.

Next, the second most common cultural dimension in the Thai educational context was power distance. Hofstede (1980) insisted that in any society, treating each other respectfully was expected and it did not matter if there was a small or large power distance. Initially, students' entries demonstrated a large power distance with their lecturer, viewing him as a "superior". However, towards the end of their written online entries, the "equality" element from the Western power distance was observed in student-teacher interaction through words which marked high interpersonal relationship. This was achieved through the "use of in-group language or dialects" while interacting with their lecturer to maintain a small power distance in their online entries. However, this intention might be accidental due to the lack of the students' communication skills or politeness knowledge. This was because effort to maintain large power distance by the students in their online entries could still be seen through expressions of gratitude and forgiveness.

The element of uncertainty avoidance was the least common cultural dimension used by the Thai students compared to other Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions. The use of "low uncertainty avoidance" from the Western norm by the students demonstrated low context and direct communication due to the use of online smiley and emoticons when sharing the opinions with the lecturer. Instead, "high uncertainty avoidance" of the Thai norm denoted high context and indirect communication through the use of hedges. The prominent use of smiley and emoticons were to soften a statement and to emphasise respect for the listener, both in "low and high uncertainty avoidance" cultures.

Conclusion

The study provided the overview of the politeness strategies used in the online entries of Thai students' in an intercultural online platform. The Thai politeness strategies influenced the direction of the classroom interaction and this in turn might influence class assessments if misunderstood. Therefore, it was important to examine the students' cultural dimensions in order to create mutual understanding between the native English-speaking lecturer and the students. This would enable us to further understand the complexities of intercultural communication involving Thai and Western cultural norms from the Thai students' perspectives. Only then the language of instruction, learning environment, selection of appropriate content and materials, and assessment criteria could be designed in accordance to the target learners. Besides, the findings of this study lead to the mutual understanding of multiculturalism in southern Thai classroom behaviours where social conflicts partly appear in society. The findings could entirely assist the policy makers of tertiary education in Thailand to implement functional curriculum for the multicultural region.

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