

Cross-Cultural Communication Process and the Thai Language Usage of International Students

By

Dr.Thamintra Benjatikul

International College, Bangkok Thonburi University, Thailand

Email: annieyo.info@gmail.com

Nattawirot Mahayot

Communication Arts, Bangkok Thonburi University, Thailand

Email: ohn.nattawirot@gmail.com

Krittheedech Putawatanaporn

Communication Arts, Bangkok Thonburi University, Thailand

Email: Kritteedech1979@gmail.com

Varintorn Jangroj

Communication Arts, Bangkok Thonburi University, Thailand

Email: vjangroj@gmail.com

Abstract

This qualitative research aimed to identify cross-cultural communication processes and the Thai language usage of international students at Thai universities. In-depth interviews were conducted to collect data from 32 international students selected by snowball sampling, and descriptive analysis was used to determine the outcome. The study identified 5 factors contributing to a better communication process and Thai language usage for international students as both message senders and receivers. They are communication skills, attitudes, knowledge, social systems, and culture. The international students with a positive attitude toward Thai people and culture generally were found to master the Thai language faster and to understand Thai culture better. The study also found that casual or informal conversations with Thai acquaintances or friends facilitated understanding of the nature of Thai people and Thai society. Having face to face conversations or conversations on social media were found to be the best communication platforms for fostering cultural understanding between Thai people and international students.

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication, Thai language usage, International students

Introduction

Communication is essential to our lives whether in the fields of education, economics, politics, society, or culture. It is a means to express and exchange thoughts and ideas and seek responsive information to reach our aims. It is interaction between human beings, and as society becomes more complex, the more important communication becomes.

Effective language use is responsible for clear communication that enables people to understand our thoughts and the knowledge we want to share and exchange. It is, therefore, essential to have adequate knowledge of the language and culture of people, particularly those with a different language and culture, if senders and receivers are to share a common understanding of a message. While language learning includes mastering grammatical

structure, it also involves the ability to use the language in its genuine and socially acceptable context (Apingamwong, 2014). Language for communication is, therefore, responding to the aims set. That is, the sender of the message knows what they want to deliver and what they want the receiver to receive and be able to respond accordingly (Terry Mohan et al., 2013)

Cross-cultural communication has become common in global society including in universities where an increasing number of international programs are offered and international student exchange programs have been adopted. Consequently, international students with varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds now living under the same or similar cultural conditions find it necessary to develop their cross-cultural communication skills in order to survive in cultural settings unfamiliar to them (Stier, 2009).

Cross-cultural communication encompasses two main different components: one relating to communication and one to culture. The components of communication include language use (verbal), and facial expressions, gestures and tones (non-verbal).

Cultural components include an understanding of the way of life and values of the people one communicates with, which can enhance or hinder the intended communication (Hall, 1959). It is important to learn the language and understand the culture of people different from oneself in order to achieve the intended communication aim. Consequently, it is rewarding to understand the cross – cultural process and the language use of international students in Thai universities. With this in mind, research on the subject was conducted with the sample represented by international students in universities in Chiangmai, Khonkaen, Songkhla and Bangkok.

Research framework

This study used Berlo's SCMR Model of Communication, which proposes a source, encoder, message, channel, decoder and receiver as the basic components in communication (Berlo 1960). A source and an encoder can be the same person called a message sender, and a decoder and a receiver can be the same person called a message receiver. Message senders and message receivers contain sub-features such as communication skills, attitude, knowledge, social system and culture. A message encompasses components, structure, content, treatment, and code, while a channel includes listening, watching, touching, smelling and tasting.

Research Methodology

This is qualitative research. In-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 32 international students from Thai universities in regional centers of education in Chiangmai, Khonkaen, Songkhla and Bangkok. The sample was selected using snowball sampling, in which international students living in Thailand for at least a year and capable of conversing in Thai were interviewed and asked to introduce other international students, who were later interviewed and asked to introduce more international students. The process was continued until 32 students were recruited to give adequate data for later analysis.

The interviews concerning cross cultural communication were structured using Berlo's SCMR Model of Communication. The interviews incorporated features of the message senders and receivers such as communication skills, attitude, knowledge, social system and culture, as well as features of the message such as components, structure, content, treatment and code, and of the channel such as listening, watching, smelling and tasting. The data were then analyzed and summarized in a descriptive analysis.

Research results

The study included 32 international students in Thai universities in Chiangmai, Khonkaen, Songkhla, and Bangkok in academic year 2020, of whom 24 were undergraduate students and 8 were master's degree students; 12 were male, and 20 female. It was found that 46.88% of the subjects were Chinese followed by Cambodian (21.88), Japanese (15.63), Myanmar (9.38%), and German (6.25%). They ranged in age from 18-32 years and had been living in Thailand from 1-8 years. The study also revealed the following communication components:

Message senders and receivers

For communication in daily life to be effective, international students as message senders and receivers need to have clear communication aims, adequate Thai language reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills. They should have a positive attitude to things Thai and be willing to understand and carry on conversations in a social and cultural manner acceptable to their Thai counterparts. Inadequate knowledge and skills in the Thai language, and unfamiliar social situations may make them nervous, uncomfortable or even frustrated when trying to express or exchange ideas and thoughts. They need to be able to quickly grab the intended message from the senders to respond appropriately. The study identified the following sub-features of international students as message senders and receivers to make their communication more effective.

Communication skills

Communication skills refers to the ability to listen, speak, read, write, think, and reason, and to interpret messages. The study revealed the students' ability to communicate with Thais on topics ranging from general daily life to specific opinions on particular topics.

The language used was found to range from basic language to formal or written language. Some have taken or are taking Thai language courses prescribed by their programs of study, and some have taught themselves the language from lesson books, from the internet, or from actual real life encounters with Thais. Most students who have taught themselves Thai could not read or write Thai, except some easy, familiar words common in daily life such as ภาษาไทย (phasaa thai/Thai language), มหาวิทยาลัย (mahavityalai/university), กินข้าว (kin khao/eat), ราคาเท่าไหร่ (rakaa thaorai/how much does it cost?) or โทรศัพท์ (thorasap/telephone).

90% of the students who taught themselves Thai were enrolled in international programs taught in English. When they were in situations where they could not express their ideas or opinions on subjects such as politics or religion, they were found to resort to using gestures or simple English because many Thai students have very limited English. The differences in their pronunciation or accent also made it more difficult to understand each other. In addition, it was the students' assumption that the most effective way to learn Thai was to spend time chatting, partying, and eating out with Thai students. Most of their gathering places were buffet places and entertainment venues, places where casual or even careless or rude language is used. This is the kind of language they have most often encountered and many were not aware that it may not be acceptable in certain situations or with people they do not know well. The misuse of the language may cause some misunderstanding or even resentment with the people with whom they are conversing.

Attitudes

Attitudes refers to feelings or opinions toward certain people or events. Positive attitudes toward oneself, content, or message receivers contribute to successful communication. The study revealed that most current international students in Thai universities are those who had been in Thailand previously as tourists or short-term exchange students. They were so impressed with Thai hospitality, culture and the relatively low cost of living that they wanted to return to the country and be able to speak Thai to fit in more with Thai culture and society. Having positive attitudes to Thai people and Thai society motivated them to come back to Thailand to study.

The international students found Thai language and literature difficult due to changes in register and to the fact that the changes in tone cause changes in word meanings. They also found Thai students often do not observe punctuality even when attending classes or keeping appointments. Thai students, according to the international students, often do not follow traffic regulations, and are not in the habit of sorting garbage, even though garbage cans for each type of garbage are available. However, Thai students are admired for their respect for their teachers and their hard work even though they rarely question or rarely share their opinions in class, and they prefer searching for information online rather than from books.

Knowledge

Knowledge refers to information or content which message senders and receivers are exchanging. Knowledge can be obtained from inside or outside the classroom or from personal experience. The study revealed that international students obtained academic knowledge from these three sources of academic knowledge and spent more time than Thai students on trying to understand texts written in Thai, sometimes seeking help from their Thai friends. They spent at least 3-4 hours reading and reviewing the texts. The study found that websites in English or in their mother tongue were more frequent sources for news about Thailand since according to the students, the Thai language used in the news was more difficult to understand or too fast to follow.

The international students from ASEAN were found to be more informed or more aware of customs and Thai ways of life than those from Western countries because of shared or similar ASEAN customs such as showing respect to elders and eating customs. Prior to their arrival in Thailand, they learned general facts or information about the country. These were: a hot tropical country, smiling people, low cost of living, more open concerning alternative genders, less convenient traveling outside Bangkok, the need to be more conscious of cleanliness concerning food or drinking water, main tourist attractions in Bangkok, Chiangmai, Phuket and Pattaya.

Social system

A social system includes laws, government, religious beliefs, values and general social conditions. A social system plays a direct role in determining the communication behaviors of an individual. The study revealed that most international students received information about Thai social affairs particularly about the political conflicts between red shirts and yellow shirts, and violence in the south from lecturers in their home universities. The students themselves reported no impacts on their daily activities from these conflicts or unrest. Initially, their parents did not even try to stop their children from coming to Thailand and to the southern region. They were just advised not to get involved in conversations concerning sensitive issues.

According to the study findings, international students viewed Thai people as non-law abiding. They often did not wear safety helmets while riding motorcycles, and did not stop or

park their vehicles in the designated areas. They did not form obvious lines whether in front of cashiers or in front of elevators. These habits made students initially uncomfortable and unsure as to how to react, though later they felt more relaxed and even enjoyed the freedom of not strictly complying with rules.

Culture

Culture refers to customs, festivals, values, beliefs or ways of life of people in society. The international students viewed the Thai traditional way of greeting, smiling and complex system of kinship terms as the most distinctive characteristics of Thai society, followed by willingness to give help to those in need, observing the Buddhist practice of giving alms to monks, giving money to beggars, and tending to support the elderly by buying things they sold. They also found that Thai universities deemed it important to encourage students to hold traditional events or celebrations, of which there are many.

In terms of values, Thai students were viewed as group-oriented. They tended to go out together in groups, whether to eat, to shop or to take a walk and often chose to stay home if no one was available to accompany them. This group behavior made them appear to lack self-confidence. They were reported to be lacking in social responsibility and to be poor work group members. However, they were viewed as caring individuals, ready to give help to international students.

In addition, Thai behavior was reported to be influenced by their (superstitious) beliefs. They tended to pay homage to “sacred” beings on their university campuses during exam times for either moral supports or even for magical power to help to pass the exam. They also seemed to believe spirits dwell everywhere in universities, whether in dormitories, classroom buildings, and recreation parks.

Message

Message refers to meaningful stories either in the forms of ideas or behavior intended to express to message receivers. It includes words, tones, facial expressions, and manners. Message contains sub features such as message code, content, treatment, element, and structure.

The Thai language is found to be difficult to master due to its 5 different tones, its blended consonants, and ending consonants. These features often do not exist in their mother tongues, making learning Thai a struggle.

Thai students were found by international students to prefer talking non-serious things to serious or of academic matters, such as topics concerning sex, food, gossiping, which made international students unable to follow because the slangs or colloquial language was predominantly used for such topics. The spellings on line messages were revealed to be sub-standard, which was intended to show the intimacy or close relationship between senders and receivers. This kind of their own spelling often confused and mislead international students when they tried to learn writing Thai.

What surprised international students were the message that appeared in facebook, tiktok, or Twitter. Most of the messages posted were about themselves such as what they ate, their activities and what they plan to do. They had to take and post photos of the food and with themselves on social media before they started eating, and when in group, they were found

to be more engaged in social media than in paying attention to or socializing with group members sitting next to them.

Channel

A channel serves as a message carrier from senders to receivers using 5 senses (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting), air, light, human beings, printed media, and electronic media.

The study revealed that in addition to learning language face to face or in small groups, it is very effective for international students to learn the language through social media using mobile phones, a popular channel for communication among both Thai and international students. Many used the Line messaging app or Facebook from the time they woke up until they went to bed, and even when senders and receivers were in the same dormitory or the same classroom at that time. The specific, personalized jargon or slang with its own sub-standard spelling understood only by the group often confused the international students. The study revealed the advantages of communicating online, where both parties do not have to meet face to face: they were more comfortable in openly expressing themselves without feeling *kreng jai* (เกรงใจ), culturally restrained when facing one's superior or elder. This faceless communication is, however, sometimes used as a mask to cover the true feelings they have for the conversation partners.

Discussion and Conclusion

Message senders and receivers with different linguistic, racial and cultural backgrounds need to be aware of the importance of adjusting their communication processes and narrowing the individual and cultural differences between them in order to achieve their communication goals. Communication cannot be successful if the two parties involved choose to ignore the need to try to learn and understand each other's culture (Eumamornwanich, 2017). An awareness of cultural and linguistic backgrounds may reduce the potential for some embarrassing situations, such as making fun of international students whose pronunciation of Thai is unclear or incorrect. It may also increase the possibility of international students building good relations with local students (Chaiyapun, and Suksawaddi, 2017).

Message is what a sender wants to deliver to a receiver. However, successful and accurate delivery of the message depends on the knowledge and experience of the individual participants. Worldview, thinking system, family role, religion, and climate, for example, all contribute to communication through language, whether verbal or nonverbal (Apiwongngam, 2014). This corresponds to the findings of Chaiyapun and Suksawaddi (2017), which examined difficulties experienced by Muslim students in adapting to different cultural environments. Some found it hard or impossible to verbally communicate about daily and academic matters with fellow students of a different religion, and some considered socializing with the opposite sex taboo. They were unfamiliar with academic settings that included students of all genders, which some may have judged as unacceptable.

Choosing a channel appropriate to the message being sent is essential if delivery of the content is to be accurate. In the present study, face to face communication was the preferred communication channel since it allowed subjects to question or read the message from facial expression, tones, and other manners. Learning Thai from friends, teachers, and media such as

Thai dramas, movies, or the internet, all contributed to better understanding of Thai social and cultural practices (Peunchote and Eumamornwanich, 2014).

This study of cross-cultural communication and the use of Thai language by international students has helped facilitate understanding between people of different languages and cultural backgrounds and also among international students themselves. The findings can also be used to improve the teaching of Thai to international students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the study of cross-cultural processes and the use of the Thai language by international students in Thai universities, the researcher would like the readers or those involved in creating cross cultural understanding to be aware of the following:

1. Understanding the cross-cultural communication process leads to communication success and positive attitudes among people. This awareness is valuable to people involved in communicating with non-Thai people Including teachers, fellow students, international affairs personnel, and academic service providers.
2. Those involved in communication should be aware of the importance of language skills, knowledge, attitudes, social system and culture because those who can adapt to a new cultural environment tend to fit in better.
3. A study of religious and cultural differences between people from the East and the West may shed light on a specific cross-cultural process that may benefit diplomatic, economic and academic affairs.
4. A study of 'message' in cross-cultural processes may create better understanding of the message code, content, treatment, and structure that may improve the teaching of Thai as a foreign language, which will promote Thai culture and arts, and lead to the creation of cultural networks.

References

- Apiwongngam, Aradee. (2014). Learning languages through Cross Cultural Learning. Maemo University Liberal Arts Journal.
- Berlo, David K. (1960). *The Process of Communication*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Bonvillain, Nancy. (2003). *Language, Culture, and Communication the Meaning of Messages*. 4th ed. New Jersey: Upper Saddle River. 11
- Chaiyapun, Maitai, and Suksawaddi, Jirasuk. (2017). Cultural Adaptation to Accommodate lifestyle of Islamic Undergraduate students, Songkhla Rajabhat University. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University of Education. 10(1); 191-213.
- Devito, J.A. (2007). *The Interpersonal Communication books*. 11th edition. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Eumamornwanich, Wacharapa. (2017). Communication under Cultural Diversity following Geert Hofstede Communication through Multi-Cultural Dimensions. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. 25(47); 1-8.
- Hall, E. T., & Hall, T. (1959). *The silent language* (Vol. 948). Anchor books.
- Lindh. (2013). *Comu1030 Communication Skills: Spoken Language & Interpersonal*. Victoria: Ligare Pty Limited.
- Osgood, Charles E. (1974). *Nature of Communication Between Humans*. Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press.

- Peunchote C, Duangtip, and Eumamornwanich, Wacharapa. (2014). Self Adaptation of Chinese Students in Thonburi Rajabhat University. *Journal of Communication Arts Review* 18(1);75-86.
- Stier, J. (2009). Internationalisation, intercultural communication and intercultural competence. *Journal of intercultural communication*, (11).
- Terry Mohan, Ray Archee, Myra Gurney, Julia T.Wood, Carol T. Tamparo and Wilburta Q. Lindh. (2013). *Comu1030 Communication Skills: Spoken Language & Interpersonal*. Victoria: Ligare Pty Limited.
- Wiwattanakul, Metta (Krittawit). (2005). *Cross Cultural Communication*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press.