

Intercultural communication in the Spanish language classroom in Thailand: Differences in Power Distance, Individualism and Expressiveness

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Abstract: This study aims to explore cultural differences between Thais and Spaniards in the classroom setting to identify problems caused by cultural differences and propose guidelines for coping with those issues. We interviewed forty Thai university students majoring in Spanish and ten Spanish teachers working in Thai universities about their expectations and experiences with regards to teachers' and students' behaviors and interactions in the classroom. The results highlighted the two cultures' stark differences in power distance, individualism and expressiveness and revealed insights that can help international teachers cope with the learning disposition of students from hierarchical, collectivist, and reserved cultures.

Keywords: intercultural communication, cross-cultural communication, cultural differences.

1. Introduction

According to Chastain (1988:298), language and culture are inseparably bound: language is used to convey meaning, but meaning is determined by culture. Speaking the same language does not mean people get the same message. Speakers of different languages with different cultural backgrounds see their realities differently according to the language and culture that shape their thoughts. Differences in language and culture influence interlocutors' perceptions and interpretations and lead to different ways of expression and communication.

Communicating in a foreign language requires intercultural competence. Linguistic competence alone is not enough for individuals to understand and interpret the meaning of an interlocutor's message unless one understands the culture and ways of thinking. As Allwright and Bailey (1991, cited in Leveridge 2008) remark, learning a new language involves the learning of a new culture, so it is important for learners of a foreign language to have intercultural competence, in order for communication to be successful.

Communication between a native-speaker teacher and local students in a foreign language classroom is far from perfect, not only because of the much-less-than-perfect mastery of the medium of communication by one end, but the different norms and expectations, which can further lead to unpleasant misunderstanding. When one expects certain expressions, behaviors or results but the reaction is the opposite, the experience can leave a bad taste in one's mouth. What is polite in one culture may be considered inappropriate in another. Those in contact with another culture – in this case, the foreign teacher and the local students – need to know the cultural differences to enjoy smooth and pleasant interactions in the classroom and achieve effective communication, as that is an essential factor for successful teaching and learning. The aim of this paper is to explore cultural differences between Thais and Spaniards in the classroom setting to identify problems caused by cultural differences and propose guidelines for coping with those issues.

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2. Literature review

Exploring and understanding intercultural communication in the foreign-language classroom is essential for both the teacher and student. In a study conducted on intercultural communication in the language classroom, Lai and Kato (2008) explored the communicative behavior of teachers and students in a Japanese-language classroom in Singapore. They found significant differences in students' and teachers' perceptions of good teacher/student interaction: how teachers and students are to behave in terms of character, professionalism (of the teacher), attitude toward studies (of the students), and general attitude. From the students' perspective, the Japanese teachers should be less soft-spoken and should teach outside the syllabus, while the Japanese teachers would prefer that the Singaporean students be more active, outspoken, and willing to ask questions in class. They should argue with the teacher. This difference between expectations and reality can hinder effective communication and learning in the classroom.

In another study, Zhao (2007) investigated differences in classroom behaviors of Chinese teachers and New Zealand students in a Chinese-language classroom and those of New Zealand teachers and Chinese students in an English-language classroom. One of the differences found is that Chinese students were not allowed to interrupt their teacher for whatever reason. If they had questions, they were told to raise their hands first and ask the question only with the teacher's permission. Most Chinese students are used to listening to the teacher and seldom ask questions in class. If they do want to ask questions, they would rather wait until after class. Chinese teachers might feel offended if a student interrupted their lectures with questions. The Chinese teachers in the study thought that Western students who get involved in discussion and presentation of personal views are less respectful and less disciplined, whereas the New Zealand teachers felt the Chinese students to be less active in answering questions and participating in activities. From the Chinese students' perspective, the Western teachers gave the impression of not working so hard and being conservative with their knowledge, because they asked the students to read books and discuss answers to questions among themselves; whereas the New Zealand students felt that the Chinese teachers paid a lot of attention to their own identities as teachers, including their attire, speaking manner, behavior in class, and dignity as a teacher. If asked a question by their students to which they did not have an answer, they would look embarrassed and appear to lose face.

Phumchijarnan and Rangponsumrit (2018) studied expectations of Thai students and Spanish teachers in a Spanish-language classroom in Thailand with regards to roles and desirable traits of teachers and students. The most striking difference in the interviewees' expectations towards the teacher's quality was that most Thais students thought the teachers should dress politely: i.e., no revealing or flashy clothes; while half of the Spanish teachers did not appreciate the importance of proper attire. On the other hand, while respect toward the teacher was the quality of a good student that most of the Thai students mentioned, very few Spanish teachers considered this to be important.

All three studies reflect a common feature of Asian hierarchical cultures: teachers are expected to be the authority and students are to respect them. Placed within a broader framework of cross-cultural studies (Hofstede 1980, 1986; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010; Gesteland 2002), this falls into the cultural dimension of power distance (or formality/hierarchy in Gesteland's terminology). This concept is explained by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010:69-70) in a school setting in the following manner:

In the large-power-distance situation, ...teachers are treated with respect or even fear (and older teachers even more so than younger ones). ...The educational process is teacher centered; teachers outline the intellectual paths to be followed. In the classroom there is supposed to be a strict order, with the teacher initiating all communication.

Students in class speak up only when invited to; teachers are never publicly contradicted or criticized and are treated with deference even outside school....

In the small-power-distance situation, teachers are supposed to treat the students as basic equals and expect to be treated as equals by the students.... The educational process is student centered.... Students make uninvited interventions in class; they are supposed to ask question when they do not understand something. They argue with teachers, express disagreement and criticisms in front of the teachers, and show no particular respect to teachers outside school.

As reported by Hofstede and colleagues (2010:55-60), Spain is classified as medium to high on the *power-distance* scale (57 out of 100), whereas Thailand is classified as high on this dimension (64 out of 100). Although the countries' scores do not differ much, Phumchijzaman and Rangponsumrit (2018)'s work reveals that differences in this cultural dimension might hamper smooth interaction in the classroom between teachers and students of these two nationalities.

Another cultural aspect known to distinguish East from West is *individualism* vs. *collectivism*. Hofstede and colleagues (2010:117-118) describe this difference as follows:

...A typical complaint from [teachers from a more individualist culture who moved to a more collectivist environment] is that students do not speak up, not even when the teacher puts a question to the class. For the student who conceives of him- or herself as part of a group, it is illogical to speak up without being sanctioned by the group to do so. If the teacher wants students to speak up, the teacher should address a particular student personally....

In the collectivist classroom, the virtues of harmony and maintaining face reign supreme. Confrontations and conflicts should be avoided or at least should be formulated so as not to hurt anyone; students should not lose face if this can be avoided....

In the individualist classroom, of course, students expect to be treated as individuals and impartially, regardless of their background. Group formation among students is much more ad hoc, operating according to the task or to particular friendships and skills. Confrontations and open discussion of conflicts are often considered salutary, and face-consciousness is weak or nonexistent.

Another cultural dimension which strikingly differentiates East Asians from southern Europeans is *expressiveness* (as explained in Gesteland 2002) or *affectivity* (as explained in Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1998). This concept focuses on non- and para-verbal communication such as facial expression, vocal volume and tone, conversational overlap, interpersonal proximity, eye contact, touch behavior, and hand gesture. A culture in which these features are heightened in communication is considered expressive.

According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) and Gesteland (2002), Spain is a very expressive culture. Spaniards tend to speak loudly and frequently engage in conversational overlap, interrupting each other in mid-sentence. They indulge in frequent physical contact with people they know well and expect strong eye contact. Thailand, on the other hand, falls into the reserved type. Thais tend to speak softly and use almost no gesture. There may be long pauses between comments, on rare occasions extending over several minutes. Eye contact is very indirect (Foster 2000:116-118, Gesteland 2002:145).

Since the existing literature (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1998; Gesteland 2002; Lewis 2006; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010; Phumchijzarnan & Rangponsumrit 2018)

suggests that Thailand and Spain are significantly different in power distance, individualism and expressiveness, we will focus our analysis on these three dimensions.

Although this study refers to Thailand and Spain as national cultures, we by no means assert that each culture is homogenous or static. As many studies have pointed out (see, e.g., McSweeney 2009 & Yi 2018), there are variations within countries, either by geographic area, gender, ethnicity or level of education. Besides, cultural values change over time. Therefore, we refer to national cultures as loose categories. The relation between their members is more like that of family resemblance, where a common trait need not be shared by all members of the family. A national culture is a prototype each of whose features are shared not by all but by the majority of members.

3. Method

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with Thai students ($n=40$) and Spanish native-speaker teachers from Spain ($n=10$) from the Spanish-language major at two universities in Thailand: Chulalongkorn University and Khon Kaen University. We interviewed all Spanish native-speaker teachers from Spain who taught in either university and selected the Spanish-major students by systematic random sampling. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions related to expectations and reality with regards to teachers' and students' behaviors and interactions in the classroom, along with impressions of the Spanish teachers compared to Thai counterparts (for the students) and Thai students compared to Spanish students (for the teachers). Participants were allowed to tell anecdotes, resulting in very detailed information.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Interaction between teachers and students

4.1.1 Thai students

All of the interviewed students felt that Spanish native-speaker teachers were more friendly, less formal and less distant than Thai teachers. First, the use of respect-based personal pronouns and politeness final particles in Thai marking social distance between teacher and student were absent.

Second, many Thai students said they were afraid to argue or otherwise express disagreement with Thai teachers. One said that, in Thai culture, one has to respect a senior such that the senior is always right. The Thai teachers tended to keep distance and maintain serious and formal expression with students both in and outside classroom. The Spanish teachers were friendlier and more approachable; they treated students as their equals, yet the students still respected them. The students said that, when they felt relaxed and observed less distance with their Spanish teachers, they were more likely to voice their opinions.

Third, the general impression the students had of Thai teachers was they were uptight and strict, even with things not relevant to their studies, such as their uniform, appearance, and how they spoke. This made the students tense.

4.1.2 Spanish teachers

All of the interviewed Spanish teachers agreed that the Thai students treated their teachers with great respect. This, however, could sometimes become an obstacle in teaching and learning, as the students did not want to interrupt the teacher to ask questions or express views. In contrast, Spanish students would question the teacher: what the teacher said or even the way the teacher conducted the class. They always asked questions. Some Spanish teachers said that finding fault in others is a part of Spanish character. Irrespective of background or occupation, Spaniards tend to question and criticize.

4.1.3 Discussion

From the interview results, one can conclude that Thailand is a culture with considerably larger power distance than Spain, even though their scores are only seven points apart in Hofstede and colleagues' (2010) study (Spain scored 57 and Thailand 64 on the power-distance dimension). One can see significant power distance in the use of formal personal pronouns, respect for elders in Thai culture, the strict way of teaching and the highly strict and authoritative image of Thai teachers. All of the Thai students interviewed felt more distant to and more tense with their Thai teachers than with their Spanish teachers.

The use of formal personal pronouns and politeness final particles marks social distance between teacher and student. According to Prasithrathsint (1999:75), the use of address terms and personal pronouns is determined by interlocutors' social status. The Thai language has a wide array of first-person singular pronouns whereas in Spanish there is only one: *yo*. The speaker who speaks Thai has to pick a first-person singular pronoun appropriate to the social relationship or status one has with one's interlocutor: e.g., *chan* ("male"/"female", informal), *phom* ("male", formal), *dichan* ("female", formal), *nuu* ([mostly] "female", used when talking to an older interlocutor), and *khruu* ("teacher").

The second-person pronoun is also a great example in this respect. Thai speakers may address an interlocutor as *khun* (formal), *nuu* (addressing a younger interlocutor), or *aachaan* ("professor"). Prasithrathsint (1999:75) writes that Thai speakers change their language according to social context, and speaker attitude also affects language use: when the speaker feels serious, she will use formal language. In university-level classrooms in Thailand, Thai local teachers often call themselves *khruu* ("teacher") and address the students as *nisit* or *naksuksaa* ("student"), whereas Thai students call themselves *nuu* ([mostly] "female", used when talking to an older interlocutor) or *phom* ("male", formal) and address their teachers as *aachaan* ("professor").

The Thai language has the politeness final particles *khrap* ("male") and *kha* ("female"). Although the use of these hierarchy-based pronouns and politeness particles is more automatic than deliberate, it inevitably frames the relationship of student and teacher as hierarchical, according to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Sapir 1921, Whorf 1956), which states that the structure of the language one speaks determines one's thoughts and behavior.

The Spanish teachers and Thai students both called themselves *yo* ("I") and addressed one another as *tú* ("you", informal). In Spanish, the first-person singular pronoun used to refer to oneself (*yo*) is neutral: neither formal nor informal; whereas Thai has a wide range of pronouns to be used according to social distance and the relationship between individuals. Spanish has formal and informal forms of the word "you" (*usted* and *tú*, respectively). The second-person singular pronoun *usted* is more formal and is generally used to express respect for those socially higher in status or those with whom one has no close connection or meets for the first time. *Tú* is informal and more familiar. It is used among friends, family and young interlocutors. In non-familiar settings, one would use *usted*, the formal "you", until the other person explicitly gives permission to use *tú*. One may conclude that the choice of *yo* and *tú* between Spanish teachers and Thai students made the students feel more intimate and relaxed with their Spanish teachers compared to their Thai teachers.

Our interview results are in line with the findings reported by Hofstede and colleagues (2010) who classify Thailand as high on the power-distance dimension, implying that Thai culture accepts an unequal distribution of power, with respect for elders and those of higher status: the latter is considered a basic virtue. Spain is classified as medium to high on this dimension, implying that Spanish culture also accepts that power is distributed unequally but not as much as in Thai culture.

The Thai students were afraid to ask questions when they didn't understand something, because it might mean interrupting the teacher. They were afraid to disagree because doing so

might cause the teacher to lose face. Because these behaviors could be considered disrespectful, the Thai students rarely interrupted the teacher with a question, they didn't express an opposing point of view, and they didn't object when the teachers made mistakes. This attitude was viewed by the Spanish teachers as an obstacle to teaching and learning.

Chamberlain (2005, cited in Salend 2008:285) remarks that cultures and individuals have different ways to show respect for elders and authority figures, such as teachers. In many cultures, teachers and other school personnel are viewed as prestigious and valued individuals worthy of respect. Respect may be demonstrated in many different ways, such as not making eye contact, not speaking unless spoken to first, not asking questions, and using formal titles (Salend 2008: 285).

4.2 Expressing ideas and opinions

4.2.1 Thai students

When asked about their behavior and participation in class, 39 of the 40 students answered that they usually avoided giving a different opinion because being in the minority could be viewed negatively. One Thai student who had been an exchange student in Spain commented that, before she went on a cultural exchange program, she had never given opinions or asked questions in the classroom. However, after she came back from the six-month-long exchange program, she was more courageous, more prepared to voice an opinion, ask questions or disagree with the teacher, because in the Spanish classroom students were encouraged and trained to do so. When she was back to Thailand, she still kept the habit of expressing opinions and asking questions.

The majority of Thai students indicated they would express their opinions with Spanish teachers but not with Thai teachers, because generally Thai teachers were not, they said, open-minded or accepting of different opinions. Thai teachers usually had an answer in mind and wanted students' answers to be the ones they expected. The Thai students commented that, when a student's answer was different from what the teacher expected, the teacher would not accept it and would give the student a stern look, showing that the teacher did not accept the student's idea.

In Thai culture, those who think differently get rejected. If a student says too much in class, it could be viewed as showing that she knows better than the teacher. Thai teachers take it as an offense if students point out their mistakes. When students notice anything wrong in what the teacher has said, they do not offer their opinions or point out the mistake. They let the teachers find out later by themselves. Most Thai students don't want to have problems with their teachers. They don't want to interrupt a lesson; when they see that other classmates have understood the material well, they don't want to waste others' time.

In some cases, in the Spanish-language classroom, the reticence was due to limited language proficiency. It took time for students to formulate ideas in Spanish, finding appropriate vocabulary and putting together sentences. Sometimes they didn't know how to form the interrogative sentence so they decided to keep quiet.

Some students who were not afraid of giving opinions stated that expressing one's opinion depended on many factors, including teacher, classmates, classroom environment, and topic. Although they had the courage to offer opinions to their Spanish teachers, they still had to sound neutral and gentle when doing so. They said that the language used in expressing opinions had to sound like it was just a personal opinion. It shouldn't sound like imposing one's idea or criticizing anyone – the better to avoid conflict with their classmates. They would start by saying “personally, I think...”. They seldom expressed opinions or ideas because they were afraid their classmates would think ill of them or mock them. They chose to be silent and observe discussions quietly. Some said they would never express their opinions with Thai teachers because they were afraid that would lead to conflict and might

affect their grades. Other Thai interviewees said they would never voice their opinions with either their Spanish or Thai teachers if they were contrary to the class's prevailing opinion.

4.2.2 Spanish teachers

All of the Spanish teachers agreed that the Thai students adhered to the Thai concept of *kreng jai* ("being considerate of others' feeling or condition") and were reticent to express their emotions, feelings, and opinions. This was a major problem for Thai students. One Spanish teacher commented that, in classroom activities when he asked students a question or asked for opinions, the students often remained silent. If there was no leader who began to answer, no one would have the courage to speak. When one student started to answer, the rest would copy and give the same answer. No one would offer a different answer. This, said the Spanish teachers, was what Thai students should work on. Most of the Spanish teachers felt Thai students should be themselves more often and have their own ideas and their own ways of leading their lives. They thought that the Thai education system could be improved, as this learning style didn't help students have their own ideas or be self-reliant. It was very difficult to ask Thai students to give opinions or participate in class discussion. The Spanish teachers had to adapt their teaching techniques. It took them much time to get students to speak up or give opinions in the classroom. Spanish students, on the contrary, would ask questions or express opinions right away and wouldn't stop until the teacher asked them to do so.

One Spanish teacher said that, when asking questions to Thai students individually, if the student didn't understand or catch the question, she would turn to her peer for help; whereas Spanish students would ask the teacher to repeat the question again or, if they still couldn't answer, they would say "I don't know but I will try". When Thai students couldn't answer a question or didn't do their homework, they would ask their peer sitting next to them for help and copy the answer. From the Spanish teacher's perspective, this behavior was not good. The teacher felt that the student was irresponsible and lazy. "If I want to know the answer from the classmate next to you, I will ask that person, not you." "Copying homework right in front of the teacher is the behavior that Spanish students would never do. If they want to copy, they would do it before class, never right in front of the teacher."

4.2.3 Discussion

The differences between Spaniards and Thais in how they express their ideas and opinions in the classroom can be analyzed on the cultural dimension of individualism vs. collectivism. The Thai participants' behavior fits Hofstede and colleagues' (2010: 117) description of a collectivist classroom: "students do not speak up, not even when the teacher puts a question to the class". "The virtues of harmony and maintaining face reign supreme. Confrontations and conflicts should be avoided or at least should be formulated so as not to hurt anyone; students should not lose face if this can be avoided." (2010: 118) Such behavior is, in the Spanish teachers' collective opinion, a significant obstacle to learning.

In a collectivist society, apart from harmony, the concept of "face" is key. It is important to save face: both one's own and others'. Thais tend to avoid conflict. They avoid words and actions that might embarrass or shame someone, even unintentionally. This is evidenced by the Thai students' statement that they would evaluate the situation before expressing an opinion and choose neutral words that would not offend anyone. They indicated they would ask classmates who had similar opinion to support them if and when they expressed theirs. As Klausner (1993:253) puts it, "one of the most pervasive of Thai cultural imperatives is the avoidance of social confrontation". The Thai students waited for their classmates to ask questions; they listened for their classmates' opinions. They tended to evaluate situation and listener. They chose to give opinions to listeners who were open and supportive. If the Thai students saw that the teacher already had an answer in mind, they chose not to express their own views. They thought that expressing an opinion that differed

from the majority opinion was not good. As one of the students said, “students should participate in class activities without drawing attention to themselves” and “should give opportunity to other classmates to answer questions”. This highlights the collectivist character of Thai society. Thai students didn't like to stand out from their peers. They chose to maintain social harmony and emphasized group goals over individual desires and needs. Most of the time, this was why Thai students didn't ask questions or give opinions in the classroom.

The interview results are in line with Hofstede and colleagues' (2010) conclusion categorizing Thailand as a highly collectivist country, with a score of 20 out of 100 on the individualism index. In a collectivist society, people value group membership and cohesion over individualism. Thais are not confrontational and are very sensitive to showing shame in front of the group. They emphasize the needs and goals of the group over their own. Spain, with a score of 51 out of 100 on the individualism index, is a relatively more individualist country. This may be the reason why Spanish students feel free to interrupt their teachers in class with questions, points of clarification or even corrections.

It was evident from the interviews that those more individualist Spanish teachers who fail to understand the collectivist nature of their Thai students could interpret some of the students' behavior negatively, yielding dissatisfaction. One Spanish teacher was annoyed when a student who could not answer his question turned to a peer for help. He labeled this behavior – the student did not do the homework as assigned – “copying”, “lazy”, “irresponsible”. In a collectivist-oriented classroom, this is viewed as collaboration, not cheating: students belong to the same group, helping one another carry out group tasks and achieve the group's goals.

That Thais students do not usually interrupt class with questions or comments can be explained with another cultural dimension: *expressiveness*. Gesteland (2002:71, 143, 260) writes that, in expressive societies, people regard interruptions as a normal part of conversation, even as it is considered rude by people from reserved societies. For expressive Spaniards, it is normal to interrupt each other in conversation. Thais, however, have a reserved communication style. Thai students might be afraid to interrupt a teacher with a question.

One significant obstacle that the Spanish teachers reported, teaching in the Thai classroom, was the silence and general inexpressiveness of the Thai students. The Spanish teachers were unable to tell if the students understood what they explained.

Lewis (2006:472) reports that Thais are docile, obedient listeners. They rarely interrupt a speaker and give no feedback unless requested. Thais are not confrontational; their “yes” might not mean acceptance or agreement (Hofstede Insights n.d.).

One can analyze the cultural differences using yet another cultural dimension: *power distance*. As discussed in 4.1, Thai culture has higher formality and greater power distance than Spain. Thai students do not ask questions when they do not understand or point out when teachers make mistakes due to the highly hierarchical Thai culture. To cope, teachers need to find techniques and tailor activities to the Thai learning style. Teachers still have room to make the classroom environment more relaxed and less formal. Our interviews showed that students were courageous expressing opinions when they were more relaxed and when they found the teacher to be open-minded, supportive, and welcoming to different opinions.

There was another, non-cultural factor that discouraged Thai students from asking questions or giving opinions as much as the Spanish teachers would expect: language proficiency. Some students reported that they needed time to think before they could formulate questions or worried that they couldn't state their questions in correct Spanish. Sometimes they didn't know the vocabulary required for the situation or how to formulate the interrogative sentence. The Spanish teachers should adopt appropriate tactics to encourage their Thai students to express themselves more in class: e.g., by making questions into a

game. The teacher should teach how to formulate questions, then have the students play a game in which they must ask questions. This way, the students learn how to form interrogative sentences and get practice asking questions. This can help them be more confident asking questions in the classroom. To increase student participation and expression of opinions, one could also take Hofstede and colleagues' (2010: 117) recommendation to create small subgroups, with each group appointing a spokesperson. In this way, individual answers become group answers, and those who speak up do so in the name of the group. In other words, the teacher should deal with the student as part of a group, not as an isolated individual.

As noted by Bui and Turnbull (2003), humility is important in cultures that value group solidarity. Students from cultures that view achievement as contributing to the success of the group may perform better on tasks perceived as benefiting the group. They may avoid situations that bring attention to themselves, such as reading out loud, answering questions, gaining the teacher's praise, revealing problems, or demonstrating expertise (cited in Salend 2008: 286).

Some of the Spanish teachers offered insights into how they coped with Thai students' dispositions. They found that they needed to be friendlier, smile more, got closer to each student, and attend to students' questions. They found that most students were afraid to ask questions in front of their classmates but were more likely to ask questions when the teacher was standing near them. The teacher had to develop a positive classroom climate, promoting positive peer relationships, making students get to know each other better, support and be kind to one another. Arranging chairs in a circle so that all students can sit facing each other can help for easy communication. When they felt relaxed with their teacher and peers, students were more comfortable asking questions in front of their classmates. The teachers found it important to teach students to form a question: the vocabulary and grammatical structure necessary. When students learned to ask questions properly, they began to ask when they didn't understand. In this way, the habit of not asking questions can change.

4.3 Emotions and non-verbal communication

4.3.1 Thai students

Almost all of the Thai students described that their Spanish teachers as expressing their feelings more than their Thai counterparts. The Spanish teachers didn't hide their emotions; the teachers expressed their feelings explicitly, through facial expressions and gesture. When the teachers were glad, they would smile, raise their hands, and speak with a loud voice. They expressed their anger or displeasure instantly and openly. They would frown or speak with a raised voice; some even threw papers or pounded the table. The Spanish teachers had the common behavior of speaking directly and frankly when they were not happy.

The Thai students reported that their Spanish teachers expressed their displeasure through careful choice of words: they would talk as though they were joking but, in fact, they were criticizing. Some of the Thai students were fine with this. Others did not like this way of expressing annoyance or displeasure. The students said that while both their Spanish and Thai teachers expressed anger, the Spanish teachers did so through words and facial expression, whereas the Thai teachers used only words. Some students found their Thai teachers' emotions easier to read; they couldn't tell if their Spanish teachers were happy or not when the teachers were quiet.

All 40 students affirmed that they preferred the Spanish teachers' tendency toward instant expression, the better for them to know how they should behave and improve themselves. However, they didn't like the facial expressions or raised voice. They preferred words without emotions.

All of the Thai students liked the Spanish teachers' enthusiasm. They said that the teachers showed their enthusiasm through vocal expression and gesture. The Spanish teachers got closer to the students than their Thai colleagues and moved constantly around the classroom. They did not remain seated. When they were excited about teaching, their positive energy made students feel more motivated and willing to participate. The students' energy, participation and eagerness to learn depended on the energy of the teacher. When the teacher was tired and spoke slowly, the students felt that their energy and motivation decreased. All of the students said that when their teachers were friendly and made caring gestures, they felt encouraged to ask questions and express opinions. They said that they liked it when the desks were arranged in a circle so they could sit facing their classmates and not need to feel shy giving opinions.

What the majority of the students didn't like was when the teachers spoke with a loud voice, spoke too fast, stared into a student's face while speaking, pressured students to answer, frowned incredulously, or made a surprised face when students gave wrong responses. The students said that these facial expressions made them feel bad, so that they didn't want to answer questions ever again.

4.3.2 Spanish teachers

The Thai students' silence and their habits of never asking questions, hiding or controlling negative feelings, and smiling in every situation posed real challenges to their Spanish teachers. All of the teachers commented how Thai students always had the same facial expression. It was hard for the teacher to tell what was on a student's mind: if she was curious, happy, or unhappy, if she understood or didn't understand the lesson. The teachers affirmed that it took time for them to get to know their students before they could tell what the students were thinking. When the Thai students felt more intimate with the teacher, they were more willing to express their opinions, but still not as much as Spanish students would.

Thai students control their emotions and feelings a lot. They try to avoid showing negative feelings or emotions. They express emotions more freely when they are happy and having fun. It can be difficult to know Thai students' feelings because the only emotions they express are when they are having fun and laughing a lot.

It seemed to the Spanish teachers that their Thai students tried to make themselves look happy all the time. The teachers said that the students often teased classmates who were sharing a story with the class by making sounds or saying things: something that Spanish students wouldn't do.

The teachers pointed out that, while their Thai students would smile in every situation, smiling didn't necessarily mean agreement, understanding or satisfaction. Students replied *sí* ("yes") or otherwise agreed to every question, even when they didn't understand the question. They would say *sí* even when the question wasn't yes or no. Understanding their Thai students required time and effort. The teachers had to guess whether the students understood what they explained. It took time for the teachers to learn to read students' gestures implying a lack of understanding.

The classroom atmosphere in Thailand tends to be more silent than in Spain because of the reduced participation. Thai students rarely ask questions. They try not to draw attention to themselves.

The teachers had to learn from the students' limited expressions how the students felt and if they needed more explanation. One Spanish teacher said that expecting Thai students to say "I don't understand" or "there is a problem" is impossible. When the students were asked if they understood, no one would raise a hand to say she didn't understand. There was always a question at the back of the teacher's mind whether students really understood what was being taught. Everything looked perfect and, in the exam, every student could answer correctly. It was possible that they memorized the answers for the exam but didn't truly

understand the lessons. One teacher said that, even now, she doesn't know if students do well on the exam because they understood the lessons or because they memorized the answers.

All of the Spanish teachers stated that Spanish students are open and direct: no matter how they feel, they express their feelings through facial expression, voice and gesture. They speak loudly in high-pitch voices making it clear that they are dissatisfied or disagree.

4.3.3 Discussion

Thailand is described as one of the world's most reserved cultures. Thais generally speak in soft, hushed tones. They use almost no gestures and are emotionally restrained (Foster 2000:114, 116-118; Gesteland 2002: 145; Lewis 2006: 473). Spain, on the contrary, is among the world's most expressive cultures (Gesteland 2002: 69). As the two cultures are at opposite poles, one could expect a considerable amount of displeasure caused by differing expectations. On one hand, many of the Thai students said they didn't like it when Spanish teachers spoke loudly or used too many hand gestures while speaking. Although the students liked the instant feedback of the Spanish teachers – so that they could adapt themselves accordingly – some teacher expressions made them uncomfortable. Those include criticizing with a joke or sarcasm, making an incredulous face, and frowning at a wrong answer. The teachers explained that facial expressions like frowning were to show students that they gave a wrong answer so that they could try again, but the Thai students said they didn't like that. The Spanish teachers viewed criticizing in a joking manner as a way of indirectly expressing anger or annoyance. They tended to express emotions through voice, face and gesture, which sometimes led to displeasure or anxiety, as Thais think all negative emotions should be kept inside. The Thai students hardly ever showed negative states of mind – even doubts or uncertainty – and would smile in almost every situation. The Spanish teachers, who were used to getting feedbacks and questions, found these behaviors an obstacle to teaching.

It is interesting that, while some students commented they couldn't figure out the meaning of their Spanish teachers' nonverbal expressions, the same was said of them by the Thai teachers. Such cultural differences are a barrier to smooth communication. As Sriussadaporn (2006:339) points out, expatriates should learn to read accurately the true meaning of such nonverbal actions as smiling, nodding the head, and being silent. The teachers had to take time to learn their students' nonverbal language, to understand what the students were thinking. They had to adopt a different teaching approach suitable to the Thai learning style: e.g., building good relationships between teachers and students and among students, or arranging chairs in a circle so students can sit facing each other for ease of communication and reduced classroom tension.

The teachers should avoid using a raised voice or expressing negative emotions likely to create an uncomfortable situation. They should use words to express their feelings because their students like when they are direct, letting them know how to improve their language skills. Students should learn to understand and respect differences in ways of expressing emotions.

5. Conclusion

Even in the age of low-budget travel, Internet and social media, classroom instruction still plays a major role in foreign-language learning and teaching. Understanding the differences in the ways teachers and students think, feel, and act is a condition for successful learning and teaching. This study shows striking differences between Spaniards and Thais in the classroom setting, especially in terms of power distance, individualism and expressiveness. Although we analyzed answers from just a small sample, we nevertheless achieved strikingly similar answers from two geographically distant areas: Chulalongkorn University in central Thailand and Khon Kaen University in the northeast. The answers we found are in line with Thai traits

pointed out by numerous previous studies (Hofstede Insight n.d., Gesteland 2002, Sriussadaporn 2006), implying that the patterns can be applied at the national level.

It is common in Thailand, being a hierarchical society, to see students treat teachers with a lot of respect inside and outside the classroom. Students rarely ask questions or offer opinions, partly because of the respect they have towards teachers and partly because they don't want to stand out from the group. Expressing opinions is even less likely in a collectivist culture when they differ from those of the group. Spanish teachers enter the classroom expecting students to speak out and have their own opinions and ideas. Some Thai students find it uncomfortable to see their Spanish teachers using lots of facial expression, a loud voice, copious gesture and intense eye contact while teaching – even more so when the teachers express anger or displeasure.

Differing value patterns in the cultures from which the teacher and the student come are one source of problems. When the students' learning behavior and the teachers' expectations diverge, this affects the relationship between teachers and their students. The findings of this study can help both sides understand what the other side thinks and why they behave as they do. By acknowledging differences in behaviors and expectations, smoother communication and more pleasant classroom interaction can be achieved: essential factors for successful teaching and learning.

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