Thailand Culture Research Paper

Shannon Barnson

October 9, 2008

ESL 320-Family and Community

Westminster College
Thailand, officially the Kingdom of Thailand, is located in Southeast Asia. This country is the only Southeast Asian country that has never been occupied by any European or other foreign country, except in war. Thailand is bordered on the west and northwest by Myanmar (formerly Burma); on the northeast and east by Laos and Cambodia; and on the south by the Gulf of Thailand, peninsular Malaysia, and the Andaman Sea. With an area of 513,115 sq km (198,115 sq mi) Thailand’s distinctive shape is often said to resemble an elephant’s head, with the “trunk” extending south into the slender Malay Peninsula.

About 75 percent of Thailand’s people are classified as Thai, despite this fact, Thailand contains many complex ethnic differences within its borders. The Thai people themselves may have considerable cultural differences from their fellow Thai countrymen. The people of the central plain of Thailand differ in culture and language from those of the north and northeast, known as the Lao. Many of the citizens of Thailand can also claim some Chinese ancestry, and Chinese constitute the largest single minority group in the country making up about 14 percent of the total population.

The mountains of northern Thailand are home to many different hill dwelling people, including the Hmong (also known as the Meo or Miao), the Akha, the Karen, and the Lua’. Farther south are the areas that are the home the Mon peoples as well as groups of Vietnam and groups of Khmer (Cambodian) refugees. The southern peninsula is home to ethnic Malays. Because there is such diversity in the ethnic differences, educators should not expect their
students with a Thai background to all have the same language and life experiences. They should also not expect students to instantly bond on the basis that they are immigrants from Thailand.

Just as in America, there are a wide range of languages spoken in Thailand. The Thai language, formerly known as Siamese, is the language which is spoken by about 40 percent of the population of people of Thailand. There are also several regional dialects of the Tai language as well, such as Lao, which is spoken in the northeast. Other languages spoken in Thailand are Chinese, Lao, Malay and Mon-Khmer. English use is becoming more widely used in Thai government and commerce. English is taught as a second language in secondary school and universities, English is also spoken by many of the more affluent members of Thai society. Because of this fact, some Thai students may be more familiar with English because they have either been taught some English or members of their family speak it in the home with some regularity.

The Thai language is a member of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages and is one of the oldest languages in East or Southeast Asia. Some experts have theorized that it may even predate Chinese. Thai, like Chinese and Vietnamese, is a tonal language and there are only 420 phonetically different words meaning that the same word can have a completely different meaning depending on it is pronounced. In total, there are 5 tones: Mid tone, high tone, low tone, rising tone and falling tone. The Thai word “mai”, for example, meanings can include "wood", "not", “not?”, "silk", "burn", "new", and" widow" depending on what tone is used to
pronounce it. This could be considered both a positive and negative in an American classroom. Students that speak Thai are familiar that a word the may look the same when written, such as such as the English word “close”. What may cause such a student is the fact that with these words meaning is often derived from the context in which they are spoken and not how they are spoken.

As in the English Language, the Thai language also uses a phonetic alphabet that was conceived by King Ram Khamhaeng in 1283. The signs of the alphabet have an appearance similar to Sanskrit; there are also separate signs for tones that operate like vowels and can be placed beside or above the consonant to which they belong. This alphabet is similar to the alphabets of the neighboring countries of Burma, Laos, and Kampuchea.

Education in Thailand is free and compulsory up to the sixth grade and 97 percent of Thai children of primary school age are enrolled. About 81 percent of students continue on to secondary education which usually ends at the age of 17. There are 39 universities and colleges and 36 teacher training colleges in Thailand to meet the educational needs of thousands of secondary school students who choose to move on to higher education. Perhaps the most striking educational fact pertaining to Thailand is that the literacy rate is estimated at over 90 percent, some estimates set the literacy levels of the country and 97%. This means that students coming from Thailand may be at a more academically advantaged because it has been shown that fluency in a first language transfers when students are learning a second language.
A large part of Thai culture is based upon hierarchical relationships, in other words, social relationships are often based upon one person being superior to the other. Some examples of how this may play out are: parents are considered superior to their children, teachers to their students, and bosses to their employees. When people of Thai decent meet a stranger, they will immediately try to place them within a hierarchy in order to know decide how they should treat this new acquaintance as well as how they should expect to be treated. This can often be done by asking what might be seen as very personal questions in other cultures. Status can also be determined by clothing and general appearance, age, job, education, family name, and social connections. Because of their respect of hieratical relationships, Thai students may not feel as comfortable asking questions or sharing their opinions as most Western students. Educators should try to avoid becoming frustrated at what may appear as unwillingness to participate in discussions or challenge your ideas.

One of the most prevalent social customs of the Thai people is the wai; the common form of greeting that adheres to strict rules of protocol based on age and social status. The wai is performed by raising both hands, palms joined with the fingers pointing upwards as if in prayer, lightly touching the body somewhere between the chest and the forehead; the wai is usually accompanied by a slight nod or bow of the head and may be made while sitting, walking, or standing. This custom is used as both a sign of respect as well as a greeting; respect and courtesy are demonstrated by the height at which the hands are held and how low the head comes down to meet the thumbs of both hands. The person who is
younger in age or of a lower social status is the first one to offer the wai. The senior person returns the wai, with their hands raised to somewhere around their chest. If a junior person is standing and wants to wai a senior person who is seated, the junior person will stoop or bow their head while making the wai. If there is a great social distance between two people, the wai will not be returned and when adults are greeting children, a simple nod and a smile is sufficient enough response to their “wai”.

There are social and physical actions that are considered rude or taboo in Thailand that may be viewed in the same manner by people of a western cultural background. While these actions may seem innocuous to people of many other cultures, they could make people who immigrated from Thailand feel very uncomfortable if they are carried out in their presence. One example of these cultural differences is present is the way the people of Thai and American people feel comfortable communicating with one another. People with a Thai cultural background prefer standing at least an arms length or more from others when conversing, if they are speaking with friends, family and close acquaintances this distance is a bit shorter. When friends of the same sex are conversing, there is some touching during conversation, but not to the extent of hugs, backslapping or “high-fives”. Conversely, there is almost no touching between men and women while speaking in public, even couples tend to keep space between each other while having a conversation in public. The People of Thailand tend to favor direct eye contact over indirect when speaking with peers, however people may use indirect eye contact when speaking with their elders or superiors as a sign of
respect and deference. This aspect of Thai culture should be taken into account when communicating with students so as not to misinterpret students of this backgrounds avoidance on direct eye contact as a sign of disrespect or other assign this behavior other negative connotations.

In American culture little attention is paid to how we point at something, someone or in a particular direction. This is not the case in Thailand, beckoning or pointing with the index finger is considered rude and bad form. People are expected to beckon one another by extending an arm, palm up and making a scratching motion with their fingers. Using your chin or whole hand, palm flat, is also an appropriate way to point to something or show someone direction. Furthermore, People of a western cultural background do not assign importance to what hand they choose to use while handing or passing something to another person. As an educator, this is something that will be done great frequency throughout the day and could be offensive or uncomfortable to a person who was raised in Thai culture. In their culture, people from Thailand are expected to use their right hand to pass or receive an object. Furthermore, one should never pass an object over the top of anyone’s head, as it is viewed as the most sacred body part. These are examples of how the simplest classroom activities could cause a student raised in a Thai culture unintended discomfort.

People who were raised in a Thai culture consider certain body parts sacred or taboo in nature, and will find it very rude if they are touched on or with these body parts. In American culture, these types of touching limitations are
usually based on sexual taboo. This is not the case in Thai culture. For example, it is considered taboo to touch anyone’s head as it is considered one of the most sacred body parts. This is an issue that could arise in a classroom for teachers with a western cultural background because it is quite common for adults to casually tussle a child’s hair while expressing affection or encouragement.

People with a Thai background consider the foot to be the lowliest body part. Because of this, the people of Thailand are expected to never point toes, heels, or any part of the foot at any person. It is also considered very rude to show the sole of your foot, use the foot to move anything, and especially put your feet up on a table or any furniture. Great care is also taken to avoid stepping over anyone sitting on the floor; instead, one is expected to go around the person sitting on the floor. This cultural difference could cause discomfort to a student from Thailand during “carpet” activities that are very common in American elementary classrooms.

Thai culture is quite different from our own but these students can easily be accommodated in the western classroom if teachers take the time to do some basic research about the customs and taboos of Thailand.
References


[http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/thailand-country-profile.html](http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/thailand-country-profile.html)

