The Relationship Between Culture and the Learning and Teaching of English: A North-Eastern Thailand Perspective Under a Socio-Cultural Lens

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Abstract

This qualitative study focuses on the adoption of learner-centeredness in the English language classroom, and whether it is mediated by culture. With the use of observations, and interviews, and using a socio-cultural framework, this investigation examines primary school teachers' perceptions of learner-centered teaching, how they implement that teaching in the classroom and how this is negotiated by culture. Students' perceptions of their learning are also reflected upon. The research findings reveal that most teachers were able to demonstrate aspects of learner-centered teaching; however, they were not proficient in explaining theory. They emphasised that their effectiveness was impacted by a lack of confidence, a perceived deficit of pronunciation ability, the lack of opportunities to use English outside the classroom, a shortage of qualified English teachers, and excessive extracurricular activities at schools. Students liked to learn English, although the teachers regard their students as lacking in confidence. Students particularly like playing games, singing songs, working in groups and prefer their teacher to mark their work. This research has possible ramifications for teacher training, as there may be a requirement for the local context and culture, and the involvement of all stakeholders in the education process when implementing successful educational change.

Introduction

The Thai government has instigated a change from a teacher-centered rote learning approach to teaching English, to a more communicative learner-centered methodology (Cheewakaroon, 2011), with the passing of the 1999 Education Act (Office of the National Education Commission, 2012). However, the results have been questionable, as Thailand continues to publish poor results in the national examinations (Kaewmala, 2012). Subpawanthanakun (2016) argues that the version of Buddhism promoted by the state is responsible for the population remaining compliant and ready to accept their socio-economic status. The predicament that Thailand finds itself in, is that promoting learner-centered teaching as well as the values of citizenship could produce a conflict of interest.

Learner-centered teaching may not be appropriate within the context of Thai culture, as it is a pedagogical approach deemed from the west (Frambach, Driessen, Beh, & van der Vleuten, 2014). As students are not taught to dispute or question their teachers in class (Pisuthipan, 2016), this could prove to be an obstacle to adopting learner-centered teaching, when students are required to reflect and make their own meaning out of content as part of the learner-centered pedagogical process (Blumberg, 2009). The time it takes to implement educational change has been called into question by Hallinger & Bryant (2013), if there is conflict between culture and educational reform.

This investigation hopes to contribute to the discipline of English language learning and teaching by comprehending teachers' perceptions of learner-centered teaching and how they execute it, mediated by culture. By exploring this implementation in the setting of Thai primary English language classrooms, relationships and connections may be made with aspects of learner-centered English language teaching and Thai cultural traits. Moreover, links could be made between the beliefs and values of Thai teachers of English regarding learner-centered teaching as well

as those of their students, under the umbrella of their shared cultural values.

By contrasting the degree of similarities and contrasts between the countries where the pedagogy of learner-centered teaching was developed and that of Thai culture, I will argue that there are certain aspects of Thai culture that influence the learning and teaching of English in north-eastern Thailand.

Background

Most Thai English language teachers in basic education graduated in subjects other than teaching English, for example, IT and physical education, and many have not been trained as teachers. This seems to have contributed to a general low level of proficiency in the English language perceived by English teachers in Thailand, which has possibly been compounded by large class sizes, heavy teaching loads and large amounts of administrative duties (Mackenzie, 2004).

Pongwat & Mounier (2010) believe that the 1999 Education Act could possibly exasperate the divided education system, where privileged families send their children to the premiere universities, and those in the lower social classes in both urban and rural areas send their children to institutions of poorer quality. This has fuelled a rural-urban divide in Thailand (Graham, 2012), which could grow due to the Matthew Effect (Walberg & Tsai, 1983), a biblical reference that explains how the distance between the wealthy and the poor becomes greater over time.

There is also the possibility of a digital divide (Reich, 2012), as new digital technologies accelerate the Matthew Effect, as disadvantaged members of society are not able to benefit from free technologies available, due to not having a reliable electricity supply (International Energy Agency, 2016), which limits internet use.

Foley (2007) explains that Thai teachers of English require a context that is localised if they are to succeed in teaching English to their students and not necessarily rely on expertise from native-speakers, who are from a different cultural background (Baker, 2012). When governments prescribe new pedagogy, in this case learner-centeredness, with one set of standards to be implemented

nationally, not taking into account the different requirements of individual regions, the results may not be as intended. When English is only used for academic purposes and not being used as part of people's daily lives, the real need for English may be questioned (Draper, 2012a).

Traditional values still play an important part in modern education. Boriboon (2013) explains how teachers in upper north-eastern Thailand see their accents and pronunciation as traits that set them apart from native English speakers. The teachers are more interested in producing 'correct English' for their students and are unconcerned about the ownership of the language. Incorrect pronunciation by teachers could result in a loss of face. This predicament is compounded by English native-speakers being the only model for pronunciation in Thai tertiary education (Jindapitak, 2014). When teachers feel that their face and ego are threatened, it is possible that they will experience a lack of confidence. Professional confidence is closely related to teacher proficiency and is particularly important as a foundation for English language teacher training (Burns, 2017).

This study will investigate the relationship between culture and the learning and teaching of English, from a north-eastern Thailand perspective and will ask the following research questions:

1. What are primary school teachers' perceptions of learner-centeredness?
2. How do teachers implement learner-centeredness and how it is mediated by Thai culture?
3. What are students' perceptions of their learning preferences in and out of the classroom?
4. How do these preferences relate to learner-centeredness and how are they mediated by Thai culture?

Methodology

This ethnographic research is qualitative in nature, analysing under a sociocultural lens, allowing for the inclusion of the local context, personal circumstances, local culture and society. The use of teacher observations and interviews, as well as group student interviews will be utilised to investigate learner-centered teaching in the English language classroom.

From the sociocultural perspective, language learning is considered a developmental process mediated by signs and symbols appropriated in class, where students work within a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as they collaborate through interaction to negotiate meaning. At the same time, they bring their values, beliefs, duties, and obligations to the process (Donato, 2000).

Participant Selection

The teachers and their students have been chosen from multiple schools in one district and is a purposive sample (Cohen & Manion, 1994). The schools were selected because it was convenient for the researcher to use personal contacts consistent with Thai culture (Komin, 1991), to set up interviews and observations for research purposes. The personal contacts were able to arrange the schools and the teachers who were to be part of this study, something the foreign author would not have been able to do on his own.

Eight female and two male teachers participated in this investigation: their ages ranging from twenty-four to fifty-three years of age. Of the eight teachers who had Masters' degrees, five majored in Education Administration and three in TESOL. Two teachers had Bachelors' degrees, of which one was in English and the other in Computer Technology.

It is important to note that four teachers taught all eight subjects in the primary curriculum. Up to 80% of primary school teachers lack English language qualifications in Thailand and a further 50% of those teachers have low level proficiency (Baker, 2008); figures not reflected by the participants of this investigation. In addition, having sat the Common European Framework of

Reference for Languages (CEFR) test, the majority of civil servant English school teachers in Thailand scored 'A2' which equates to elementary level (Franz & Teo, 2018). OECD/UNESCO (2016) details how teacher training institutions in Thailand have shown no strategy in their approach to teacher education, resulting in inadequacies in teacher professional development, and multiple administrative duties that take teachers out of their classrooms.

Five students from each of the observed classes were chosen by their teachers and interviewed in groups. The students were very young and were selected as a cross-section of their class to reflect the range of ability of the students. The criteria used by the teachers to select the students was to have a fair representation of good, average and weak English language students.

Methods of Data Collection

The observation of the Thai teachers of English by the researcher in their classrooms was conducted for approximately one hour as a non-participant observer in their regular teaching environment to see how teaching and learning of English are conducted in the Thai context. Teachers' values and viewpoints are difficult to separate from their classroom practices (Woods, 1996) and these were investigated further using interviews.

The five dimensions by Blumberg (2009); the Function of Content, the Role of the Instructor, the Responsibility for Learning, the Purposes and Processes of Assessment and the Balance of Power have been adapted to make a grid that was used to analyse the classroom observations. An example of a completed observation grid is at Appendix I. The grid encompasses the learner-centered/teacher-centered continuum incorporating lower level and higher level transitions from Blumberg (2009), to capture what level of transition was taking place during the observations. The observations were videoed and coded using the aforementioned observation grid. Fieldnotes were also taken at this time for analysis (see Appendix II).

A semi-structured one-hour interview was chosen to give a more relaxed and natural approach to the teacher interviews, allowing for probes and the chance of a deeper understanding of

critical events (Wragg, 1994). The interviews were conducted in Thai and English with the help of an interpreter.

Questions were asked by the researcher in English; however, if the Thai teacher of English did not think they had sufficient English to participate in the interview using English, Thai was used which allowed for the use of familiar terminology which added to the atmosphere of local communication interaction (Briggs, 1986). The process was recorded on video, so that transcriptions could take place. Further interviews were conducted as social relationships developed and teachers felt more comfortable in expressing themselves in line with qualitative cultural psychological methodology (Ratner, 1997).

The teacher interview questions were based on the five dimensions by Blumberg (2009) and Hofstede's (1986) adapted student/teacher and student/student interaction frameworks of analysis. Fieldnotes were taken during the interview process detailing the answers given to the questions asked by the researcher, with comments and reactions by the researcher at the time of the interview to emergent themes.

The purpose of the student interviews is to investigate their learning preferences in the English language classroom in relation to learner-centered teaching to see if it is mediated by Thai culture. The group interviews took place in relaxed surroundings, with teachers present, although two teachers decided to leave their students' interviews for a while as they wanted to give the students more freedom to answer the questions.

The student group interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes and were recorded on video for ease of transcription later and for the additional benefit of seeing any non-verbal clues. A questionnaire by Nunan (1997) based on how to begin learner-centered teaching was used as a foundation for the group interview questions, focusing on the topics, methods, language areas, out of class activities and assessment preferences of the students having been observed in the classroom as part of the observation process. Fieldnotes were taken, with additional comments and reactions to the emergent themes when they appeared.

Data Analysis

An entity view towards culture was adopted for this research, which allowed a deductive qualitative content analysis, adapted from a model by Elo & Kyngäs (2008), to be used to analyse the data collected (see Figure 1.). An entity view of culture is a concept which has a comprehensible structure, that remains relatively constant in the thoughts of its members (Dimaggio & Markus, 2010). This essentialist viewpoint allows cognitive structures or schemas to be determined and used for analysis in the deductive qualitative content analysis process.
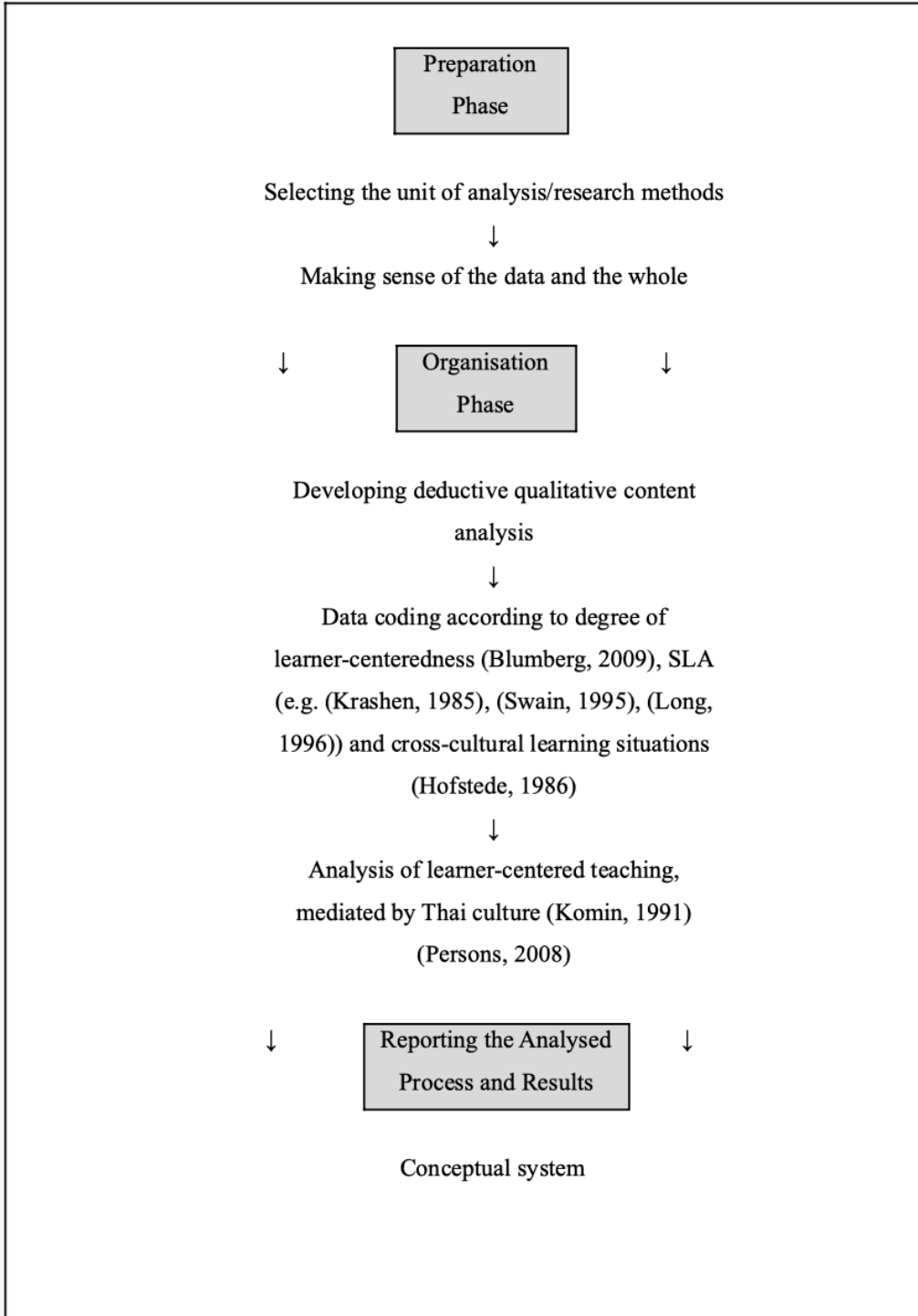
The deductive qualitative analysis was a modification of the Preparation, Organizing and Resulting Phases in the Content Analysis Process (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) to illustrate the amount of learner-centeredness (Blumberg, 2009) that was demonstrated in the classroom observations, teacher interviews and group student interviews, and cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1986) exhibited in teacher/student and student/student interactions. It is possible for this qualitative inquiry to work in a deductive way when using single cases as evidence for theory in general (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

When conducting the preparation phase, the units of analysis/research methods were teacher observations, teacher interviews and group student interviews. Once collected, they were analysed as a whole to identify emergent patterns (Richards, 2003), by analysing observations and interviews in tandem.

The observations and both teacher and student interviews were videoed, and the analysis took into consideration the videos, transcriptions of the videos, and additional field notes. To investigate how Thai culture interacts with the implementation and understanding of learner-centered policy, Blumberg's (2009) observation grid was used to analyse the interviews and observations to illustrate the transitions from teacher-centered to learner-centered activities, in conjunction with student and teacher interactions, mediated by Thai culture.

Figure 1.   **The Deductive Qualitative Content Analysis Process**

Preparation Phase

Selecting the unit of analysis/research methods

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Making sense of the data and the whole

↓   Organisation Phase   ↓

Developing deductive qualitative content analysis

↓

Data coding according to degree of learner-centeredness (Blumberg, 2009), SLA (e.g. (Krashen, 1985), (Swain, 1995), (Long, 1996)) and cross-cultural learning situations (Hofstede, 1986)

↓

Analysis of learner-centered teaching, mediated by Thai culture (Komin, 1991) (Persons, 2008)

↓   Reporting the Analysed Process and Results   ↓

Conceptual system

A Developing Structured Analysis Matrix (Figure 2.) adapted from the Qualitative Content Analysis Illustrated by Meaning Units Taken from the Patients Own Words in an Art Psychotherapy Session before Scribbling (Thyme, Wiberg, Lundman, & Graneheim, 2013) was initiated for the organisation phase. This allowed for the coding of data to occur according to the categories, allowing comparisons and contrasts with reviewed literature to answer the research questions, and the opportunity for further analysis of the different layers of learner-centeredness, cultural dimensions and classroom interactions.

Figure 2.   Developing Structured Analysis Matrix

Details	Meaning Unit	Codes	Categories	Sub-Categories	Theme
Teacher: **Time:**	Observed Activity Teacher Interview Segment Student Interview Segment	Identify Transitions to Learner-centeredness using Blumberg (2009)	Identify Hofstede's (1980) Four Dimensions of Cultural Differences Thai Cultural Traits (Komin, 1991) Face (Persons, 2008)	Identify Hofstede's (1986) Adapted Problematic Cross-Cultural Learning Situations	Application of Categories and Sub-Categories to Transitions to Learner-centeredness Codes and SLA

During the organisation phase of the Deductive Qualitative Content Process, data is analysed by coding the quantity and different types of learner-centered teaching (Blumberg, 2009), cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980), and any possible relationships to Thai culture (Komin, 1991), (Persons, 2008), and cross-cultural learning situations (Hofstede, 1986).

These cross-cultural learning situations have been adapted for this research to take into account learner-centered teaching and a dissimilar pedagogical context, where the teacher and the students share the same cultural backgrounds; however, the teacher is using learner-centered teaching that may have different

cultural characteristics to what the teacher and students may be used to. Interactions in the classroom between the teacher and the students may be affected, in addition to student interactions. These interactions are an important part of Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

A thematic analysis of the teacher interviews (Burgess, Sieminski, & Arthur, 2006) took place looking for meaning units (Ratner, 2002). The results were compared and contrasted to the classroom action and interactions on the Blumberg (2009) observation grid to analyse the amount of learner-centeredness taking place, and Hofstede's (1986) adjusted problematic learning situations. Thai cultural traits (Komin, 1991) (Persons, 2008) were then referred to as part of the analysis process.

The student data was analysed to identify the meaning units from the thematic analysis to explore if the student preferences (Nunan, 1997) concerning their English language learning correlated with what their teachers believed they required as part of their learner-centered teaching (Blumberg, 2009). In addition, further analysis took place to see whether these outcomes could be related to Thai culture, for example Hofstede (1980), Komin (1991) and Persons (2008). The student data was also analysed to describe the teacher/student and student/student interactions (Hofstede, 1986) that took place in the classroom and student behaviour during the group interview process.

Results and Discussions

The first sub-section presents the primary school teachers' perceptions of learner-centeredness and relates to research question one. The second sub-section correlates to question two and shows how teachers implement learner-centeredness in their classrooms and how it is mediated by Thai culture. The third sub-section depicts the students' perceptions of their learning preferences in and out of the classroom and the last sub-section reveals how the students' preferences relate to learner-centeredness and how they are mediated by Thai culture.

Primary School Teachers' Perceptions of Learner-centeredness

Data from the interviews illustrates that the teachers in this study do not appear to have a workable definition of learner-centeredness. They managed to explain what they do for their students in their local context, who they deal with on a regular basis and how they cope in the classroom, emphasising the difficulties that they experience. Their idea is to try to make students happy, and for them to understand the main objectives of the lessons. This way the teachers can focus on what the students want and need to know, for example, vocabulary.

The teachers see themselves as both learner-centered and teacher-centered, as a result of the Balance of Power and the Function of Content (Blumberg, 2009) being teacher-centered most of the time. This is achieved by upholding high Power Distance and strong Uncertainty Avoidance (Hofstede, 1986) while in the classroom, particularly when teachers are focusing on comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985).

For example:

- *"I think student centered and both student centered before we teach them we have to…how to explain."*
- *"After then let them to think about what I say what let them do let them think themselves."*
- *"May be with just mind map about the topic for the vocabulary that has animals family member yeah let they do let them make mind map for themselves."*
- *"When I give the vocabulary give them to remember cause in every lesson they will get about ten or eight word to them for them to remember and use in the lesson."*

(T6)

Teachers with Masters' degrees were more conscious of the meaning of learner-centeredness, with two teachers asserting that they used PPP as their pedagogy in the classroom. This may well not be advantageous when trying to be more learner-centered as the drilling of lexis and structure imposed by the PPP approach is judged by some in the teaching profession as harmful to language acquisition (Tasseron, 2015).

For example:

- *"Translation the most and PPP lesson plan."*
- *"The way I think the way I learn English because the way I learn I learn as my natural that I have a basic, basic practice them."*
- *"Teacher centered last thirty years ago, ok at grammar."*
- *"From my study MA TESOL."*

(T8)

- *"I teach them three P [PPP]"*
- *"Because Dr. Ying teach me."*
- *"And she give the technique to how to teach student."*

(T10)

During their interviews, teachers focused on the areas of their teaching they found challenging and hindered their efforts to be learner-centered. These areas included the many different subjects teachers had to prepare for, and the classes which had to be combined, even though they were different years. In addition, there are substantial amounts of administrative duties and extra curricula activities, which encroaches on the amount of time spent teaching English. These other duties often take priority, and this influences the amount of the English language curriculum that can be completed each year. Teachers stated that English is not widely used outside of the classroom, so this impact on English teaching hours could affect the students' opportunities to learn, and the facilitation of future learning (Blumberg, 2009). In turn, this may well restrict the amount of interactional feedback (Long, 1996) and comprehensible output (Swain, 1995) needed for second language acquisition to take place (Krashen, 1982).

The number of hours that students learn English every week, was also explained by the teachers, normally one hour a week for Grades One to Three and two hours a week for Grades Four to Six (The Ministry of Education, Thailand, 2008).

For example:

- *"Two, ….two."*
- *"Sometimes. [laughing]"*

(T10)

The teacher spoke later about other activities.

- *"Some activities, such as sports days and …."*
- *"Teacher days."*

(T10)

The teacher was asked if there were many of these days.
- *"Yes. [laughing]"*

(T10)

The teacher was also asked if there was much administrative work to do as well.
- *"Yes."*
- *"Very big. [smiling]"*
- *"[laughing] Everyone."*

(T10)

It was confirmed that many schools do not have sufficient English teachers, so students may not be able to learn the curriculum content for several years. Then teachers must attempt to make up that shortcoming whilst adhering to the no-fail policy that exists (Nonkukhetkhong, Baldauf. Richard, & Moni, 2006). When this happens, it will impact the amount of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985), as students would be at the incorrect English language level for their skills.

For example:

- *"Well, I didn't exactly graduate from being an English teacher, but the school has a lack of teachers to teach English. I graduated IT and I'm not good at it but I like it, I get to learn with the children but the knowledge about English to give for the children to be honest it's not more than my ability."*

(T2)

- *"Another problem is that in the whole school, there's only one English teacher and sometimes the Prathom One to Prathom Four [Grade One to Grade Four] children don't get to learn with the teacher. They barely learn any English and then*

they start learning in Prathom Five and Prathom Six [Grade Five and Grade Six]. They don't get to learn so they look backward if you compare them with other schools because there are less teachers."

(T7)

- *"Teacher at this school don't have English teacher for thirty years, since right at the beginning, they used to have two classes together. Just now, they like, they just start English, that's why ……"*
- *"The children don't have an English teacher for thirty years now and they haven't learned the basics since kindergarten, before there're only three teachers that have to combine the classes. So it seems like starting all over again."*

(T10)

The teachers believed it was difficult for their students to be responsible for their own learning (Blumberg, 2009) because they were very young, and also thought that they should not be allowed to learn as they wished. This illustrated the belief of some teachers that learner-centered teaching allows the students too much freedom and points towards their misunderstanding about scaffolding (Senior, 2011) and how to implement learner-centeredness. Moreover, the Thai assessment system was deemed problematic, as most of the teachers were influenced by the yearly standardized tests (Darasawang & Watson-Todd, 2012), which did not necessarily reflect what they had been teaching, and were considered by many to be too difficult for their rural students.

For example:

- *"Monday, Wednesday, Friday."*
- *"The students' problems are that they are all together."*
- *"All student in the school, the problem is the Prathom One, Prathom Two, Prathom Three [Grades One to Three], they do not know the words.*
- *"Not knowing the vocabulary, it makes the older class exhausted and also confuses them and they will be irritated and annoyed by the younger ones. But the intention of the teachers, is that they want the older ones to help the younger ones and teach them again but the older ones turn out to be*

impatient and sometimes the younger students are slower than the older students who get irritated and when they get angry of the younger ones, the younger ones don't want to come and learn. But we are always control it. These are the problems."

(T7)

Teachers recognise they have a lack of confidence speaking English, focusing on accents and pronunciation (Phothongsunan & Suwanarak, 2008). There was a perception by the majority of teachers in this study, that there was a requirement to sound like native-speakers and because they believed that they could not live up to this unrealistic expectation, it made them feel inadequate, which could threaten their ego (Komin, 1991) and give rise to a potential for loss of face (Persons, 2008). Compounded by the lack of opportunities for students and teachers to use English in an environment outside the classroom to aid acquisition (Krashen, 1982), the teachers deemed that they were not capable of performing their duties in the classroom as they hoped, which gave them a feeling of uncertainty, not conducive for a strong Uncertainty Avoidance society. This in turn, could lead to the presence of high Power Distance (Hofstede, 1986) in the classroom to reinforce the social hierarchy as a defence mechanism.

For example:

- *"Yes. I feel that I don't have confident to pronounce or the vocabulary which I didn't graduate English what I've learnt is just extra and I do know approximant but not deep, which teaching English has to be deep for example pronunciation what is the meaning of this word which I only know just the general vocabulary but if we teach we have to know the vocabularies in there which I use my time teaching by opening the dictionary all the time too. I'm not confident when I'm teaching but if it's my own subject I do have confidence which I can compare myself."*

(T2)

- *"This I do agree with because one even just not the students, but older people do lack confidence because we don't know the language don't know the vocabulary don't have the*

confident on am I saying it right or wrong? And so it gets nervous it's like we don't know anything and not assertive it out."

(T7)

A possible contributing factor to the teachers' lack of confidence may be a lack of clarity from the government as to the implementation process of learner-centered teaching and what Bernstein (2000) called an apparent weakening of learner-centeredness at the classroom level. This allows for a small amount of change, and in some cases only at a superficial level. If there is a concerted effort to build the confidence of these teachers, learner-centered teaching may not be a threat to face or ego and could be implemented in conjunction with local culture, and the renewed confidence will act as a motivating force for the students too.

Teachers Implementation of Learner-centeredness mediated by Thai culture

Data from the observations using the observation grid (see Appendix I) and field notes (see Appendix II) demonstrate that most teachers were able to demonstrate some aspects of higher-level transitions to learner-centered teaching, in addition to many lower level transitions (Blumberg, 2009). Most teachers used varied uses of content and managed to engage the students for some of the time (Blumberg, 2009). Moreover, some teachers were able to conduct assessments during the learning process and give students the opportunity to conduct self-assessment (Blumberg, 2009).

It was interesting to note there were two teachers with classes that had to be combined, who were observed demonstrating a more teacher-centered lesson, which possibly suggests that teachers who find themselves in this situation may have to try to maintain more control over the class, as they may feel under pressure to complete both sets of curriculum requirements, and also taking account of the non-curricula activities that are also required to complete. Whilst comprehensible input (Krashen S, 1985) may be achieved in some of these cases, there appears little opportunity for student/student and teacher/student interaction

(Hofstede, 1986), corrective feedback (Long, 1996), or comprehensible output (Swain, 1995) in a ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) environment.

One teacher demonstrated a very teacher-centered lesson. This was most likely because she graduated in IT and was not an English major. There were two teachers whose classes were Grade One, and these classes were very different from each other; however, they both demonstrated strong Responsibility for Learning and Balance of Power (Blumberg, 2009), most likely because of the age of the students, as they were so young.

The teachers with Master's degrees were able to demonstrate classes with higher level transitioning (Blumberg, 2009) towards learner-centered teaching. This may have been possible because of the pedagogy they were taught on their MA courses, even though there seems a stated preference for PPP pedagogy from two teachers, which is not recognised as being particularly learner-centered, but more for accuracy and correctness (Criado, 2013).

A more learner-centered grammar-translation lesson was observed for one teacher, illustrating how a teacher-centered activity, grammar-translation, could be used in a learner-centered way, by creating the type of environment which could accommodate different learning styles, using groupwork and pair-work during some of the activities and also using methods appropriate for learning goals (Blumberg, 2009).

The teachers that displayed more teacher-centered dimensions (Blumberg, 2009) during their observation appeared to display strong Uncertainty Avoidance by trying to maintain high Power Distance in their classrooms, which by default limits the amount of learner-centered student/student and teacher/student interaction (Hofstede, 1986) and the opportunities for corrective feedback (Long, 1996) to take place. This could ultimately limit the amount of comprehensible output (Swain, 1995) produced.

Questions remain concerning the confidence of both teachers and students when speaking English in the classroom, in particular pronunciation. If teachers were able to develop their values, beliefs and knowledge in the teaching of pronunciation, it is possible that their perceptions could change with their identity, which would allow them to be satisfied with their English language

pronunciation because of their increase in confidence. When teachers engage and invest in the course content, and see themselves as teachers of pronunciation, they will be able to affect their cognition by intertwining their identity with their cognitive development as they mediate with others (Burri, Chen, & Baker, 2017).

For this new-found confidence to be passed on to their students, the gap has to narrow between identity, theory and practice (Waller, Wethers, & De Costa, 2017). It may be possible for teachers to implement a new style of learner-centered teaching, based on local contexts and culture, that would allow them to adopt different degrees of learner-centeredness as they are able to transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered in stages on different aspects of learner-centeredness over time. This would allow teachers to implement learner-centered teaching at their own pace which may not be enough to achieve all of Blumberg's five dimensions of learner-centered teaching (Blumberg, 2009). Teacher training institutions would have to consider the needs of the teachers, whilst still adhering to government policy. Bax (2003) would call this the synthesis of context and methodology, where the emphasis is deliberately focused more on the context.

Students' Perceptions of their Learning Preferences

Most students stated that they liked to learn English; however, there were some students who were less enthusiastic. This may have been the result of teachers appearing teacher-centered in their observed classroom setting, something teachers admitted to during their interviews. Students overwhelmingly liked their textbooks, explaining that vocabulary was primarily what they liked the most, corresponding to the reported emphasis put on vocabulary by teachers.

For example:

Interpreter:	*"Do you like learning English?"*
S2T5:	*"It's normal."*
Researcher:	*"You can speak Thai if you want."*
Interpreter:	*"You can speak Thai."*
S2T5:	*"Normal."*

S1T5:	*"I like it sometimes."*
Interpreter:	*"Just like some not more?"*
	"Do you like it?"
S4T5:	*"Yes."*

Students also liked playing games; only one group of students disagreeing. Moreover, the majority of students liked singing songs, which is helpful in improving literacy (Paquette & Rieg, 2008) and the facilitation of the learning of English (Ludke, Ferreira, & Overy, 2014). Unfortunately, songs tend to be used more for entertainment, rather than used in coordination with learning goals and objectives (Prapinwong, Koolsriroj, & Bunnag, 2014) in Thailand. If used correctly, songs can be used to introduce, practice and confirm vocabulary in a learner-centered way, as part of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985), student/student and teacher/student interaction (Hofstede, 1986), corrective feedback during interaction (Long, 1996) and comprehensible output (Swain, 1995). As there is insufficient training for many teachers who teach English (Draper, 2012b), the effectiveness of songs being used in the classroom can be called into question.

For example:

- *"Pictures, vocabulary." (S2S3T1)*
- *"There would be vocabulary and let us choose correctly." (S4T1)*
- *"It is a game." (SallT4)*
- *"Dictation in English." (S3T2)*
- *"And hints." (S2T2)*
- *"Matching." (S2S4T4)*

The teachers observed as being more learner-centered in this study, tended to show more fun orientated videos in the classroom, whereas more teacher-centered teachers, were less prone to show videos. Students from the more teacher-centered classes wanted to see videos which they thought would help them learn English, rather than movies and songs. Students explained that they watched vocabulary videos frequently which confirms the focus on vocabulary by teachers which emerged frequently in this study.

For example:

- *"I would like to watch about foreign education learning." (S1T6)*
- *"And the history of England." (S3T6)*
- *"And I would like to watch greetings in English." (S2T6)*
- *"English vocabulary." (S5T6)*
- *"English songs." (S4T6)*

How Student Preferences Relate to Learner-centeredness, Mediated by Thai Culture

The students stated they liked their textbooks, which possibly demonstrates a preference for a structured learning environment, in line with strong Uncertainty Avoidance (Hofstede, 1986). Textbooks have been viewed as cultural artefacts and not only as educational devices, teachers must take care to ensure students can identify with the course-book material they use in the classroom, in all the different contexts and tasks they will be asked to perform by their teacher (Kullman, 2013). This is important for teachers as they may feel a sense of security as they maintain strong Uncertainty Avoidance (Hofstede, 1986) themselves.

For example:
- *"Vocabulary, pictures, colours are interesting." (S3T1)*
- *"Get to see get to know." (S3T2)*
- *"The content." (S5T4)*
- *"It has interesting vocabulary." (S2T4)*
- *"There're questions and answers, vocabularies in channels, questions, vocabularies in the sentence and separate them out to make sentences." [multiple choice] (S2T5)*
- *"Knowing how to create a question sentence." (S2T6)*
- *"It helps with studying." (S2T8)*
- *"It gives knowledge." (S2T9)*
- *"Use it in our daily life and helps us to read." (S1T10)*

Playing games was also stated by the students as a preference. Having fun is an integral part of Thai culture (Klausner, 2000); but, it is important to understand that playing games in class should be part of the planned lesson, to vary the use of content, or assessment within the learning process (Blumberg,

2009). It should not be used to just keep the students occupied during class time (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2006).

For example:

- *"Present, answering questions."(S2T4)*
- *"Bingo." (S3S4S5T5)*
- *"Games that we can play and get knowledge from it." (S1T10)*
- *"Guessing English vocabularies." (S1T10)*
- *"Dancing Exercise." (S1T10)*
- *"Singing." (S2T10)*

When students were singing songs in class, it was used by all teachers in this study as a whole class, allowing for strong Uncertainty Avoidance and can be classed as Collectivist (Hofstede, 1980) in nature. Furthermore, interdependence, fun-pleasure and smooth interpersonal relationships were evident (Komin, 1990), although it is important to monitor task achievement as there may be a tendency to stifle the teaching objective by the over emphasis of social relationship values (Komin, 1990).

For example:

- *"Yes." (SallT4)*
- *"English songs." (S5T4)*
- *"Chicken Dance." (SallT4)*
- *"This only has sound." (T4)*
- *"Only has music." (SallT4)*
- *"Can't remember the name of the song." (T4)*

The more teacher-centered teachers were prone to show less videos in class, and their students wanted to see more videos about English language learning than fun entertaining videos. This could possibly be because of insufficient training (Draper, 2012b) in the understanding of how the use of more entertaining activities could be used in the English language classroom. If teachers were to use more academic videos, the lessons would appear more structured and so would maintain the strong Uncertainty Avoidance (Hofstede, 1986) required to keep the harmonious environment (Komin, 1991) in the classroom.

For example:

- *"The teacher let us do the O-net test I think. To help with the test." (S1T1)*
- *"Hero." (S4S5T1)*
- *"Songs." (SallT4)*
- *"Counting numbers too."(S5T4)*
- *"Stories." (S2T7)*
- *"Elsa." (S1T8)*
- *"Cartoons." (S3T9)*
- *"English dancing songs." (S1T10)*
- *"Chicken dance." (S4T10)*

Strong Uncertainty Avoidance, Collectivist traits and close student/student interaction (Hofstede, 1986) was illustrated by students wanting to work in groups or in pairs, as well as smooth interpersonal relationships, interdependence and fun/pleasure orientations (Komin, 1990). These are major components of learner-centeredness (Blumberg, 2009).

Most students wanted their class work marked by their teacher, demonstrating the requirement by the students for strong Uncertainty Avoidance (Hofstede, 1986). Conversely, many students found the Collectivist nature and student/student interaction (Hofstede, 1986) of peer marking was not a preferable way of marking and that the teachers' authority, high Power Distance and teacher/student interaction (Hofstede, 1986), with corrective feedback (Long, 1996) more preferable. There was one group of students who favoured their friends marking their work, as they wanted real time spoken feedback. One other group preferred their friends to mark their work and then have their teacher give the final grade to confirm if they had passed the assignment or not.

For example:
- "Because it will get Grade Point Four." (S2T1)
- "If it's our friend, they might be afraid that we will complain their work." (S2T1)
- "Because we will get points if we do it correctly." (S3T3)
- "In case our friends might make a mistake." (S4T3)
- "Because we get stickers." (S5T4)

- "Because ticking them correct makes us know that we have done it correctly." (S3T6)
- "A lot of times, my friends cheat." (S2T6)
- "The teacher mark then I don't get to mark it so just let the teacher mark it." (S5T7)
- "It's comfortable." [It's easy] (S2T7)
- "To get points." (S4T10)

English is a foreign language in Thailand, with very little opportunity for students to use the language outside the classroom (Noom-ura, 2013). English is not used as part of people's daily lives, especially in the northeast of the country due to a lack of development (Fry & Bi, 2013). Due to economic migration to the capital and the social issues that are part of that, many students do not live with their parents, they live with grandparents who have had even less experience in using English, resulting in a lack of opportunities to learn (Blumberg, 2009).

For example:
- *"With brothers and sisters and cousins." (S2S3T1)*
- *"Speak with friends." (S2S3T6)*
- *"Speak with friends and parents." (S1T6)*
- *"It's fun and a good strange." (S1T1)*
- *"Greetings." (SallT1)*
- *"Good morning." (SallT1)*

When answering the interview questions, most students would answer in unison maintaining a harmonious environment (Komin, 1991), allowing for strong Uncertainty Avoidance (Hofstede, 1986) and restricting the possibility of a loss of face (Persons, 2008). The students are very young, so alternatively this may be a normal reaction to answering questions by students so young.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the field of English language learning and teaching in three ways: by attempting to understand teachers' perceptions of learner-centered teaching, by looking at how Thai teachers of English implement learner-centered teaching

mediated by Thai culture, and students' perceptions of their learning preferences and how these preferences relate to learner-centeredness and culture. This was achieved by conducting an ethnographical qualitative study using observations, teacher interviews and group student interviews in a sociocultural framework.

There are several implications of this research. This study corroborates that the rules of society hold sway over the law of the land and Thai people in general (Mulder, 1979). The low priority given to task completion, a fear of failure, and the focus on ego seem to be inconsistent with productive failure (Kapur, 2008) and the implementation of learner-centeredness. The umbrella of culture may play an important part in whether Thai teachers of English could benefit from a more appropriate pedagogy which would be both global, but takes into account local requirements (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996).

One way this could be envisaged, would be to have communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where communicative competence could be achieved by scaffolding, appreciating culture and through student engagement. Lave & Wenger (1991) explain that legitimate peripheral participation is a social activity, so the importance that Thai people put on social order, does not necessarily have to be in conflict with the implementation of learner-centeredness. What could emerge, is a new variety of learner-centeredness where teachers are trained in their pre-service training to initiate characteristics of learner-centered teaching piece by piece, gradually transitioning from teacher-centered to learner-centered. When implemented in the classroom, the students would also have to be aware and to appreciate the changes that were underway (Nunan, 1988).

In order to try to boost the confidence of the teachers, a different model of language competence could be adopted that is more attuned to local conditions and contexts, allowing for more flexibility in the use of English when teaching, with no concern for their perceived lack of native-speaker like skills. (Freeman, 2017). Language proficiency and teaching ability are not the same (Richards, 2017), and Freeman (2017) explains that the ideal of

native-speakerism does not equate to language competence and that effective classroom teaching can still take place.

There are limitations to this research. In order to increase the validity and reliability of this investigation, it would have been desirable to have more random participants from other districts in the north-east included in the sample, more than one observation would also have been beneficial. The children interviewed as part of this research were extremely young, so the reliability and validity of their data is also questionable.

It is not easy for teachers and their students to learn from their mistakes (Kapur, 2008) through corrective feedback (Long, 1996), because of a lack of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). This is a result of the reported reduced teaching hours, having classes of different levels combined, and the existence of minimal English language practice available outside the classroom for real language acquisition to take place (Krashen, 1982). The resultant apprehension to produce comprehensible output (Krashen, 1998) may be influenced by Thai cultural traits (Komin, 1991), as a result of the implementation of learner-centered teaching being thwart with difficulties in the Thai context.

About the Author

Dr Steven Graham is an Assistant Professor and the English Preparatory Program Director at the American University of Phnom Penh (AUPP), Cambodia and a founding member of Udon Education Foundation (UEF) in Udon Thani, Thailand. His main interests are in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), teacher training, primary school teaching and learning materials, and speech recognition development and implementation. Steven has published extensively and is a frequent presenter at national seminars and international conferences. He reviews research articles and books, as well as having been a regular contributor to the Bangkok Post in Thailand.

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Appendix I: Completed Observation Grid

Teacher: Time:	Teacher Centered	Lower Level Transition	No Evidence	Higher Level Transition	Learner Centered
The Function of Content	1 2√ 3 4	1 2 3√ 4	1 2 3 4√	1√ 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
The Role of the Teacher	1 2 3 4 5√ 6√	1√ 2 3√ 4 5 6	1 2√ 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4√ 5 6	1 2 3 4 5 6
The Responsibility for Learning	1√ 2√ 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3√ 4√ 5√ 6√	1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4 5 6
The Purposes and Processes of Assessment	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3√ 4√ 5√ 6√ 7	1√ 2√ 3 4 5 6 7√	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
The Balance of Power	1√ 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2√ 3√ 4√ 5√ 6√	1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4 5 6

Appendix II: An Example of the Fieldnotes