Speaking With A Stranger:
Intercultural Classrooms' Tensions
And Managing Strategies

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of Thai students are enrolling in international programs recently with the expectation of real-life intercultural learning experiences. Most teachers in intercultural classrooms in Thailand are native English-speaking teachers who come from different cultures and have different perspectives. These teachers' roles, teaching styles and relationships with their Thai students all impact instructional success and achievement in an intercultural classroom. Conflicts and tensions are expected in an intercultural classroom where diverse cultures meet. In order to enhance the quality of international education and explore classroom interactions, relationships, and conflicts; this study used qualitative in-depth interviews with 20 native English-speaking teachers and 20 Thai students at four international colleges in Thailand. The results indicate that when native English-speaking teachers and Thai students interacted, they encountered 3 dialectical tensions: stability/change, openness/closedness, and separation/connection. Additionally, they employed 6 different strategies; selection, cyclical alteration, segmentation, integrative reframing, integrative moderation, and indifference; to negotiate those tensions.

Keywords: Intercultural Classroom; Dialectical Tension; Native-English Speaking Teacher; Thai Student

INTRODUCTION

An effective educational system allows people to have a higher quality of life because higher educational attainment enables students to have more opportunities at their desired careers. Accordingly, most countries try to improve their educational system in order to help their people realize their desired career goals. The expected educational system must attempt to provide all levels of students with high-quality and valuable opportunities for education in order to enable them to acquire occupational competencies (Hamilton & Hurrelmann, 1994). Realizing the importance of job opportunities caused by the quality of good education, international programs in Thailand are emerging. International schools are believed to provide high quality education because they feature rigorous academic programs while at the same time exposing students to more global perspectives. Students who study at international schools are, therefore, expected to be good at cultural adaptation and proficient in the primary language taught at schools. In Thailand, the international education system has received a tremendous boost due to the Thai economic boom in the early 1990s (Monthienvichienchai, Bhibulbhanuwat, Kasemsuk, & Speece, 2002). Since then, international schools have been increasingly prevalent along with the continuing need for teachers who are native speakers of English. As a result, sojourners becoming teachers in international schools in Thailand are mostly from the native English-speaking countries: the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. However, not all foreign teachers teaching in Thailand understand the cultural differences. These cultural differences, therefore, lead to dialectical tensions native English-speaking teachers and Thai students have in their intercultural classroom.

Communication scholars have done extensive work exploring dialectical tensions. Given that most studies found similar dialectical tensions in interpersonal and organizational relationships (Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Montgomery, 1998; Chen, Drzewiecka, & Sias, 2001), scholars have begun to study dialectical tensions in other

contexts, including classrooms. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the dialectical tensions and managing strategies native English-speaking teachers and Thai students have in an intercultural classroom. When teachers and students from different cultures meet, they are likely to have contrasting expectations. Similar to the dialectical tensions, strategies used to balance the tensions were another main purpose of this study.

Dialectical Tensions

Dialectical or *dialectics* derived from a Greek word meaning *the art of debate* (Johnson & Long, 2002). Dialectics has been perceived as the use of contradictions to discover the truths. The word revived again in the 19th and 20th century as a means to study human social processes (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). Although the perspective of dialectics had shifted from debate to social phenomena, it still emphasizes inherent elements of opposition in human communication. In psychology, *tension* is used to refer to conflict which occurs when differing forces of equal strength affect a person simultaneously (Lewin, 1948). In dialectical perspectives, Jameson (2004) defined *dialectical tensions* as "opposing needs that appear mutually exclusive but must be met simultaneously" (p. 257). *Dialectical tension* is caused by any phenomena that are incompatible and negate each other either by definitions or functions. Therefore, dialectical tension refers to the opposing needs relational partners have in their relationships.

Dialectical perspectives have been developed as an alternative way of conceptualizing relationship maintenance (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, 1998). Most research on dialectical tensions has explored friendships and romantic relationships (see, for example, Baxter, 1988, 1994, 2004a; Baxter & Montgomery, 2000; Palowski, 1998). Dialectical scholars view relationship maintenance as an ongoing struggle of dialectical tensions. These tensions are caused by the continual presence of opposing forces in human lives (Montgomery, 1993). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) found that relational partners are constantly pulled by many different binary needs and neither need is more desirable than the other.

While many dialectical scholars use dialectical perspectives to explain interpersonal relationships, some researchers have applied them to study group communication. Based on dialectical perspectives, Johnson and Long (2002) viewed group communication process as the interplay between dialectical tensions that could be experienced by both individual and group level. Also, Barge (1996) examined the dialectics in group leadership. However, he did not study the whole group experience, but purely looking at leaders. Kramer (2004) similarly studied dialectics in community theater group and found that similar tensions occurred in both interpersonal and group relationships.

Strategies to Negotiate Tensions

Along with the studies on dialectical tensions, communications scholars had discovered approaches communicators employ to negotiate the tensions they encounter (Baxter, 1988; Pawlowski, 1998; Rawlins, 2000). According to Rawlins (2000), friends must negotiate their dialectical tensions with each other while they are communicating. However, to manage the tensions is to find a contented area between two forces instead of choosing one from the other. Since dialectical tensions, from dialectical perspectives, are in all relationships, examining the strategies relationship partners use to cope with each contradiction is important. Accordingly, Baxter (1988) proposed several strategic responses to contradictions. The first strategy is *selection*. That happens when partners select actions that support one polarity of their contradiction. The selection strategy can make a chosen action dominant, creating a dialectical transformation. The second strategy, temporal/spatial separation, can take two forms: *cyclical alteration* and *segmentation.* Cyclical alteration refers to a strategy of alternately responding to each polarity of the contradiction at different times, while segmentation occurs when partners mutually decide that some activities are responsive to one polarity of a contradiction. The last strategy is integration which consists of *integrative reframing, integrative moderation, and integrative disqualification.* Integrative reframing is an attempt to redefine a contradiction so parties do not perceive the polarities as a contradiction. Integrative moderation is the use of compromising messages in which both polarities of a contradiction are partially fulfilled while integrative disqualification refers to the use of ambiguous or indirect messages in order to avoid explicitly supporting or disagreeing with each polarity. The disqualification can involve content ambiguity, speaker ambiguity, target ambiguity, and context ambiguity (Baxter, 1988).

Even though most relationship partners encounter similar dialectics and strategies, the negation and equilibrium of dialectical tensions is managed differently within each relational turning point (Pawlowski, 1998) and relationship type (Baxter, 1994). Baxter (1990) studied how the three internal contradictions are managed by romantic relationship parties. The results indicate that the most frequent strategy to cope with the autonomy-connection contradiction is cyclical alternation while segmentation is the most frequent strategy used to manage the predictability-novelty and the openness-closedness contradiction.

The strategies used to manage dialectical tensions in interpersonal relationships and group contexts include a variety of explicit and implicit communication acts such as discussion or avoidance. However, those strategies might not be effective in every context including an intercultural classroom. Therefore, it is interesting to explore whether strategies native English-speaking teachers and Thai students use to manage the dialectical tensions in an intercultural classroom would be identical or dissimilar to those previously found in other contexts. The research questions of this study, consequently, were "What dialectical tensions do native English-speaking teachers and Thai students encounter in intercultural classrooms?" and "What strategies do native English-speaking teachers and Thai students use in order to manage those tensions?"

METHODOLOGY

The participants of this study were divided into two groups: 20 native English-speaking teachers and 20 Thai students. Both groups had to teach/study in an intercultural classroom at an undergraduate level in Thailand for at least a year. All 40 participants were interviewed individually. After the interviews, a coding process with constant comparison was used to analyze the data. In order to increase the confidentiality, pseudonyms were applied to all participants in this study.

FINDINGS

Based on interview data, native English-speaking teachers and Thai students encountered three main dialectical tensions which were stability/change, openness/closedness, and separation/connection.

1.   Stability/Change

The first dialectical tension that native English-speaking teachers and Thai students encountered in intercultural classrooms is the contradiction of stability/change which is the dilemma between the need for a classroom to be stable, unchangeable and predictable and the need for it to be flexible, novel and unpredictable. Some native English-speaking teachers and Thai students preferred the orderliness of the class. Thai students liked an intercultural classroom because the class was well-organized and everything was stated in the outline. Ben was one of the teachers who preferred having a planned class. He said, "The beginning of my class, I had PowerPoint and I go through step 1 to 3, how I do my schedule, how I do my testing, when midterm is, when final is. I put the makeup ahead of time." Similarly, Nitipong also liked a predictable classroom. The following statement shows his great appreciation of a planned class:

The teacher gave us the course outline since the first day of the class and he explained everything to us. Native English-speaking teachers strictly follow the outline. They try to control the content, start and stop the class on time. They've never made up the class just because they couldn't cover the content in time. This is what I like. They're very punctual so I know exactly when the class will be done. Nitipong

Even though some students accepted that stability made a classroom more structured, some Thai students preferred having a flexible and fluid class where teachers were less strict about the rules. Vanida said that native English-speaking teachers were kinder and less strict compared to Thai teachers. Apart from the flexibility, native English-speaking teachers and Thai students also looked for creativity and novelty although a nice and orderly classroom requires some routine and structure. In spite of the high praise for predictability, some Thai students found that it is boring. Kittipan said, "His [My teacher's] class strictly adheres to the course syllabus so he tries to cover everything he planned. He has never been off the topic. I like him to deviate from the planned topic because the lecture is sometimes boring." William is another teacher who realized the boredom of predictability. As a result,

he did not need a course syllabus for his class. Consider his statement:

There is no official printed syllabus. I do announce at the beginning what I'm gonna do. I try not to do any lectures in that class, but it comes up with other types of things that require students to be prepared for. William

2. Openness/Closedness

The second dialectical tension encountered by native English-speaking teachers and Thai students is openness/closedness which is the opposing poles between the need for disclosure and secrecy within the teacher-student relationships. Native English-speaking teachers and Thai students had to balance between how much privacy they shared between each other. Some native English-speaking teachers revealed that their relationship with Thai students were professional because they did not share their personal issues to each other. Consider Trent's statement:

My relationship with my students is purely professional and not personal…I am comfortable with our professional relationship. I think it is most appropriate. If they have personal issues, they should talk about those with a guidance counselor who is trained to help with those kinds of issues. Trent

Another form of the openness/closedness tension is when native English-speaking teachers and Thai students have to balance between how direct they should be to each other. Pongsak chose not to be open to his native English-speaking teachers because it might affect his grade. He said, "No way, I will never tell my teacher I have something I don't like about them because my grade is in his hand." As opposed to Thai students who were very protective in terms of expressing their true feelings towards the teachers, most native English-speaking teachers were very direct and expressive when it came to the needed time. Consider Surasak's statement:

He will say what he thinks even if it's not a good thing. He told me what I should change. He gave me advice. I know this is a college level, but I still want to have some advice. I don't like a teacher who criticizes but doesn't advice. I don't mind being criticized, but at least let me know what I should do next. Surasak

3. Separation/Connection

Native English-speaking teachers and Thai students also have the separation/connection tension which is the contradiction between whether to be close or stay distant to each other. Many native English-speaking teachers were trying to find the reason why Thai students usually remained distant from them. Some teachers proposed some possible explanations of the distance which are culture, language, age and personality. The following are their statements:

That possibly would have to be farang, possibly cultural. Outside the class, I never got any e-mails from students asking about anything outside the lesson. But I forced myself to talk to them after class. I give them a project to do here on a campus and they were down in the canteen, clumped together on the table so I got the coffee and sat in the middle of the group whether they like it or not. It didn't last long. We all found an excuse and got up and left. Oliver

In an intercultural classroom, teachers and students are from different cultures so they may not feel comfortable to be close to each other. Wanchai admitted that in a classroom, he was trying to keep distance from his teacher especially when he chose his seating. Wanchai said:

I will try to stay away from the teacher as much as possible (laugh). I think we've trained to not be too confident. So in class I prefer sitting in the back row. Sitting in the front is too close to the teacher. If the teacher doesn't have anyone answer, there is a high chance for the frontage to be called. Wanchai

In order to improve an international classroom and the relationships between native English-speaking teachers and Thai students, tension management is needed. Six strategies were found to be used by native English-speaking teachers and Thai students to balance their dialectical tensions. The 6 strategies consist of selection, cyclical alteration, segmentation, integrative reframing, integrative moderation, and indifference.

4.   Selection

The first strategy native English-speaking teachers and Thai students used to manage the dialectical tensions they encountered in an intercultural classroom was selection. Selection is used when individuals repeatedly select actions consistent with one pole of the contradiction. Some native English-speaking teachers used selection to negotiate the stability/change tension. Chris revealed the dominance of only predictability in his teaching. His class was much planned even for the exam. He prepared his students with the questions so they would know in advance what they would see in the exam. Look at Chris' statement:

I have to prepare my students very carefully for their exam because I had samples of students who obviously don't understand the questions. They couldn't read. So I work very close with them so my students do very well in the exam because they've seen the questions before. I don't want to make somebody have a bad mark because they don't understand the questions. Chris

Another example of the use of selection strategy was when Surasak admitted that he emphasized concealment in his relationship with the teacher because he had never trusted any teacher enough to talk about his personal life. Similarly, Atita selected closedness to be dominant when she managed the openness/closedness tension. She made protectiveness dominant in her relationship with her native English-speaking teacher because she did not want to be direct with him. Consider her situation:

I've not told the teacher to use PowerPoint or let him know I don't understand his lecture. I just borrow my friend's note. When he speaks too fast, I don't tell him to slow down. I don't think it's appropriate to tell him directly. Atita

5.   Cyclical alteration

Cyclical alteration was another strategy that native English-speaking teachers and Thai students used to manage their dialectical tensions. This strategy is used when individuals alternate the response to each force of the contradiction over time. The native English-speaking teachers and Thai students might balance their tensions by switching both poles through time. Ben used cyclical alteration to manage the stability/change tension when he was strict and predictable at the beginning of the class while he became more flexible and fluid later on. He said, "In Thailand, I would suggest be a little bit tough and strict at the beginning. If you're too nice at the beginning, they're taking advantage. But if you're tough at the beginning, you will have no problems." Piya is another participant who revealed the use of cyclical alteration with his stability/change tension. He thought that native English-speaking teachers should be strict in class and be flexible after class. The following is Piya's statement:

Native English-speaking teachers should maintain their western standard in class so Thai students will realize the difference between Thai and international program. There is no need to come to international schools if everything in the classroom is the same. If they set a higher standard, students will be more active. However, teachers should be more flexible after class so Thai students will be more comfortable to talk to them. Piya

Apiradee is another participant who also used cyclical alteration to manage the separation/connection tension. She revealed that she was close to her native English-speaking teacher only after class and maintained the distance from him while she was at school. Apiradee said:

My close friend used to ask the teacher out for dinner and a drink and I went with her. I think it's ok because when we weren't at school, he's not a teacher and we're not students. But at school, we shouldn't be so close. Apiradee

6.   Segmentation

The third strategy used by native English-speaking teachers and Thai students to balance their dialectical tensions was segmentation. Segmentation is used when individuals tie one force to a specific activity rather than consistently responding to it in all situations. Although native English-speaking teachers thought both stability and change were important, they decided to be flexible in some situations and retained their stability in others. Louis used segmentation strategy to manage the stability/change tension between how fixed and fluid he should be with

his students' language. Here is Louis' statement:

On the exam I realize one you have a small amount of time. Secondly, their English varies so I don't really… as long as I can understand you. There is a certain level you have to read and I have to understand. I try to understand them but sometime the word may be not right but I try to give them credit or partial credit if I don't understand it. On the written assignment, I expect a better…On those projects, good English is more important but on the exam I don't care. Louis

Louis was extremely rigid regarding the correctness of English only if it was the written assignment while he was flexible if it was an exam. Similarly, Nicolas revealed that the level of freedom he offered to his students depended on the subject. Here is Nicolas' statement:

They do have complete choice on their term projects. They can choose whatever they want as long as it's within the context. The business plan research that they do is completely their choice and that is worth 100% of their grade. And I think also the course itself dictates how much freedom the students have. Like the research class, you can't constraint them that's what research has to do. You let them go to find something interesting and they want to chase for. I don't even care if they come to class as long as they get the work done. It's very different from class to class. Nicolas

7.   Integrative Reframing

The fourth strategy was integrative reframing. This strategy is used when individuals attempt to redefine the contradiction and transcend it. The native English-speaking teachers and Thai students also used integrative reframing strategy when they redefined the tension in order to avoid supporting or disagreeing with either contradictory pole. Atita managed her separation/connection tension by using integrative reframing. Instead of defining her relationship with the teacher as either distance or intimacy, Atita redefined it as a respect relationship. Using integrative reframing strategy, separation/connection was no longer a tension for her. The following is Atita's statement:

I want our relationship to be respect. If native English-speaking teachers are too intimate with their students, some students will be rude to them. But if the relationship is too formal, Thai students who have poor English skills won't talk to native English-speaking teachers. I love to have a respect relationship with them. Atita

8.   Integrative moderation

The fifth strategy to manage the dialectical tension used in an intercultural classroom was integrative moderation. This strategy is used when individuals use neutral messages to support both forces. Some native English-speaking teachers made an effort to partially fulfill both stability and change. Consider Oliver's statement:

If the class is too flexible, they will fall all over the place and you would get nothing back. So I find structure will work best because first of all the Thai students have directions. They know how to build on. They're allowed certain freedom and I think they're very happy having a form to fit to…I'm not just like another teacher who just got off the airplane, is here to revolutionize the world and he's going to change you. I'm very accepting of Thai culture, Thai ways, Thai thinking, however, I got a job to do too… I think if you come to Thailand with an attitude of wanting to learn and to adapt, just more than being a teacher, the students will respond a lot to that too. Oliver

Oliver allowed both stability and change in his class. He offered his students' freedom within his fixed structure. Also, Oliver realized he had a job to teach, but was also willing to adapt to his students.

9.   Indifference

The last strategy native English-speaking teachers and Thai students used to manage dialectical tensions is indifference. Rather than viewing both poles as equally important, an individual just ignores them. Ben unfolded his situation when he had to manage the stability/change tension whether he should be strict or flexible about the language used among his Thai students in the classroom. He said:

I just ignore when they speak to one another whether it's in Thai or English. It's like two Americans try to speak French to each other. It's like they try to be hi-so or something and they don't feel comfortable with. I quit trying to fight getting them to speak. Ben

In order to manage the stability and change tension, Ben chose to ignore the situation so it would not be a tension anymore.

Likewise, some Thai students did not pay attention to whether the class was predictable or flexible. They only came to class and did not care how the class was structured. Apiradee said, "I don't want to suggest anything to the course because teachers should teach what they want to teach. They have the absolute right to design their course. Students are expected to study what they teachers have prepared." Surasak is another student who used indifference as a strategy to manage the stability/change tension. Consider his statement:

He gave the course syllabus in the first class, but I lost it already. I don't need the course syllabus because I go to every class and I can study in class. I don't have to prepare for anything. I will just listen to what he teaches each week. Surasak

DISCUSSION

For the first research question, "What dialectical tensions do native English-speaking teachers and Thai students encounter in intercultural classrooms?," the interview data exposed 3 dialectical tensions including stability/change, openness/closedness, and separation/connection. These 3 dialectical tensions have been repeatedly identified as important dialectics in human relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). Although these three tensions were previously found in interpersonal relationships, they are also prevalent in a classroom. The dialectical tensions native English-speaking teachers and Thai students encountered in an intercultural classroom are one relational force against the other force, rather than a teacher against a student. A relational tension is conceptually located within an interpersonal relationship. Rather than being a source of antagonism between relational partners, relational dialectics reside in the relationship and indicate a connection, born through relational tensions, between the two people (Baxter & Montgomery, 2000). These forces result in teacher-student relationships. They are like turning points determining new directions and divergent paths for relationships. There is no finite set of contradiction found in relationships. The infinite possibilities, for relational contradictions, depend on cultural and relational contexts. Consequently, dialectical tensions found in this study might not be the same as those found in other settings.

For the second research question, "What strategies do native English-speaking teachers and Thai students use in order to manage those tensions?, the study indicated that both native English-speaking teachers and Thai students applied six strategies to negotiate different dialectical tensions as shown in Table 1.

The interview data revealed that different strategies were used to manage different dialectical tensions. For the dialectic of stability/change, participants employed selection, segmentation, cyclical alteration, integrative moderation, and indifference to manage the tension. For the openness/closedness tension, selection, and segmentation were used whereas every managing strategy except indifference was used to manage the separation/connection tension.

Table 1: Intercultural classrooms' dialectical tensions and managing strategies

	Selection	Cyclical Alteration	Segmentation	Integrative Reframing	Integrative Moderation	Indifference
1) Stability/Change	■	■	■		■	■
2) Openness/Closedness	■		■			
3) Separation/Connection	■	■	■	■	■	

Among the six strategies, selection and segmentation were used the most by native English-speaking teachers and Thai students. The possible explanation for the extensive use of selection could be its explicitness. Individuals who only need one polarity of the dialectics may experience less tension than those who need both ends (McGuire, 2001). In order to encounter less tension, there was a need to make one action dominant. Gollwitzer (1987) found that individuals use several strategies to prevent one end from the other's interference. That is to say, people try to push their need to one end of a contradictory pole to reduce tension. Native English-speaking teachers and Thai students, therefore, repeatedly selected actions consistent with one polarity of contradictions and eventually made it a dominant condition. Similar to selection, segmentation is another strategy that native English-speaking teachers and Thai students used to manage all found tensions because individuals like to tie one pole to a specific activity and apply it to all situations as it is easier to remember.

In addition, the study found that individuals manage the tensions differently. This is perhaps because the individual is situated in a temporal-spatial location that provides them a specific perspective which is not available to others (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). Very often, native English-speaking teachers and Thai students did not employ the same strategy even though they encountered the same tensions. The stability/change tension, for example, could be managed by different strategies. Furthermore, the same person also used different strategies to manage the same tension.

CONCLUSION

The study of dialectical tensions between native English-speaking teachers and Thai students and their managing strategies can benefit teaching and learning in an intercultural classroom. A small tension in an intercultural classroom may affect the international education system as a whole. The study of dialectical tensions in an intercultural classroom implies several applications. International universities can use these findings to improve their international programs, particularly in the training preparation for native English-speakers who have come to pursue their teaching career in Thailand. Coming to the country with the notions of plausible tensions they may encounter could help native English-speaking teachers prepare themselves for the cultural differences. In addition, the findings also benefit Thai students who are going to study with native English-speaking teachers. Thai students could realize the difficulties that may arise when they are in an intercultural classroom. More importantly, both native English-speaking teachers and Thai students could use managing strategies to negotiate their dialectical tensions in order to maintain their healthy relationships inside and outside the classroom.

Researchers could further this study to other intercultural contexts such as family or organization. In a family context, researchers could explore dialectical tensions and managing strategies cross-cultural married couples have. Similarly, a study of dialectical tensions could be conducted in an international organization where colleagues are from diverse cultures. In addition, a quantitative research methodology could also be applied to further studies.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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<u>NOTES</u>