



Article Title

"Challenging beliefs in teacher development: potential influences of Theravada Buddhism upon Thais learning English."

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Abstract

This study has investigated the potential influences of Theravada Buddhism as practised in Thailand on the learning behaviour of Thai students studying English. It is a study which puts forward a proposal for teacher development and, as a model, needs to be challenged by those involved in the teacher development process. The tabulated developmental tools visually show the tentative inter-connections between religion, social behaviour and classroom behaviour, yet intentionally do not define the degree, or intensity, of the relevance between those factors investigated. Such a means towards teacher development has been proposed in order to provoke discussion and challenge beliefs, essential elements in raising teacher awareness about the context in which they teach.

Introduction

This study addresses the rarely discussed issue of how Theravada Buddhism may influence Thai learners studying English. It draws upon interview data collected in Thailand concerning learning strategies, seemingly a different purpose from the tools proposed but nevertheless useful in its insights into learner attitudes in the English classroom.

After a description of the origins of the study, I present the three foci chosen for the teacher development tools, after which I review the literature in the areas of Theravada Buddhism and social behaviour and their relation to education among Thais. After this review, the three areas investigated of religion, social behaviour and learner behaviour are amalgamated and framed into two reversible tabulated teacher discussion tools. The conclusions then look at the possible discussions emanating from the use of these two tools.

Origins of the study

The data referred to in this study emanates from twenty interviews which were held in 1999 at an English-medium vocational college in Thailand. These interviews were intended as a means of investigating the English language learning strategies of the mostly Thai students entering the English pre-sessional programme. Once collected and qualitatively analysed, the data for each student was disseminated among the language teaching staff to help them further their understanding of their students' learning behaviours. This dissemination of learner information involved discussions enabling

teachers to reflect upon their chosen classroom methodologies and simply 'know' their students' learning strategies better. Yet what also transpired was that the discussions moved beyond issues of language learning and teaching into issues of the socio-cultural and religious background of the students and Thai staff. I then decided that that it was necessary to formulate research tools for present and new teachers in the college to help to focus these extended discussions. It is the formulation of those tools which form the basis of this study, tools which investigate and challenge assumptions about the connections between the three foci of Thai Buddhism, social and classroom behaviours.

Three foci

In investigating the concept of how Theravada Buddhism may influence what occurs in the English language classroom, it is difficult to formulate explanations for classroom behaviour without also considering what happens in Thai society at large. A two-dimensional view alone, that of a direct religious to educational link, would require an intermediary stage of investigation - social aspects of Thai behaviour - as religion may influence behaviour patterns in everyday life from a Thai student's upbringing. Table 1 represents the three aspects under investigation. The selected aspects categorised have no particular ranking and are a collection of themes emanating from readings in Mulder (1996), Morris (1994), Marek (1994), Davidson (1992), Cush (1993), and Holmes and Tangtongtavy (1995). The choice to include them has been one based primarily on the perceived relevance to the classroom-related themes outlined in Hawkey and Nakornchai (1980), which is clearly open to the criticism of this researcher's subjectivity and bias. In response to this, I would suggest that both the inter-connections between the chosen

themes, as well as the actual choice of themes themselves, should serve as a source of debate.

Table 1: Three aspects of religion, social behaviour and learner behaviour

Theravada Buddhist aspects	Thai social behavioural aspects	Thai learners' behavioural aspects
Karma	Success/failure, ambition & motivation	Goal-oriented Novelty
The Self	sanuk	Face
Compassion	sabaaj	Large group classes
Detachment	Individualism	Plagiarism
Wisdom	The Group	Book-oriented
Self-reliance	Pragmatism/utilitarianism	Rote-learning
Respect for monkhood	Thinking Authority Responsibility	Lack of critical analysis Teacher-dependent Teachers' pastoral care

(see Appendix for a glossary of italicised terms)

Review of the literature: Theravada Buddhism in the educational context

This section reviews some of the main concepts of Theravada Buddhism as outlined in Table 1 in relation to their possible influence upon education. Due to the

limitations of this particular review, only selected aspects will be presented. One of the most important foci concerns Karma. Thai Buddhism emphasises reincarnation and fate - karma - a concept with far-reaching implications for Thai understanding of life, time, ambition and judgement of others. A rich or powerful person may be admired by Thais not necessarily for the hard work taken to achieve that status, but for the merit made in that person's previous life. This closely related concept of merit, attained by "moral and ethical excellence" (Fieg 1989:16) in this life, is rewarded by credit in the next. Westerners' view of time typically focuses on this life-time, whereas karma would suggest that time is more than "foreseeable" (Fieg 1989:24) and extends forwards to subsequent lives and backwards to previous ones. In terms of karma's relevance to motivation in education, Gardner's "chains of causation" (1985), despite its strong contextualisation emanating from "cultural beliefs", would be disputed by Buddhists since karma itself is regarded as the cause of events. Nevertheless, it may be argued that Thai Buddhists are possibly influenced by not only the karmic perspective of motivation related to previous and future lives, but also by the perspective of the western motivation/success argument in this current life (Gardner and MacIntyre 1992 and 1993 and Gardner 1985) which too has a past and future dimension.

In view of the fundamental beliefs associated with Theravada Buddhism, certain elements of its teachings have particular relevance in the investigation of wisdom. Marek (1994: 581) outlines three implications from the Dharmma: "moral development", "development of intellectual autonomy" and "development of mental discipline and proper will". Such development results in a state of 'detachment', seen amongst Thais as an unemotional condition. However, the western interpretation of detachment - possessing an

objective stance in order to make judgements untainted by subjectivity - is itself different to the Thai version, referred to as “bare attention” by Donaldson (1992:223). The Thai interpretation of detachment as an ideal neutral emotional condition in the “here and now” (ibid.), called *cai yen* (cool heart), is one which is intended as a way to prove oneself as a wise member of a community.

Further to the concept of intelligence and thinking, Thais are highly sensitive in inter-personal relations due to a desire to maintain harmony in the group as advocated in the Dhamma. That trait, combined with Buddhist precepts of deference to authority - represented by the monkhood or community of monks (*sangha*) - and compassionate living in previously mostly agricultural groups have theoretically led to Thais placing great emphasis upon inter-personal relations. Intelligence appears to be closely related to the extent to which a person is able to display “wisdom” in such relations.

The concept of self-reliance underpins the continuous necessity to put the Eightfold Path into practice. By doing so, one becomes an “*arhat*” (an enlightened person). Theravada Buddhism has in this respect been thought of by outsiders as encouraging followers to be selfish in nature, as the goal appears to only save oneself from suffering (Cush 1993:46). The counter-argument though is that concepts of “self” ultimately do not exist and compassion for others as a life-long precept is practised. This ensures “merit” and therefore good karma in the next life.

Marek (ibid.) notes that the Buddha gave sermons to various sizes of groups, similar to small contemporary “lectures” yet there is little evidence in Thai educational institutions of seminars and tutorials in the western sense where ideas are debated in smaller groupings (Hawkey and Nakornchai 1980:71).

Concluding the investigation into Theravada Buddhism, the transferability of present-day behaviour of Thai monks (or indeed nuns) or the influence of Buddha's teaching style over to educational practices is difficult to prove. Apparent contradictions to the western eye in Buddhist thought may be taken as an indication that there is a dynamic cultural complexity in interpretation of the Dhamma. This could be an embedded invitation to seek verification of those teachings which is in itself a means to constantly avoid static acceptance, challenge and then in turn develop Buddhism.

The following section addresses the intermediary stage of this discussion, that is, aspects of Thai social behaviour.

Thai social behaviour

Thai social behaviour will now be investigated in terms of its relevance to Theravada Buddhism and education. Looking firstly at the amalgamation of success and failure, ambition and motivation, they appear to represent the potential influences of karma in every day life. The common Thai phrase "mai pen rai" (never mind) seems to reflect the ease with which Thais accept failure and misfortune, signs of demerit from previous lives. Karma, if taken to its extreme interpretation, would determine these events so Thais may be predisposed as not to challenge it. Nevertheless, many Thais are motivated "instrumentally" (Gardner and Lambert 1972) to study to reap the rewards of better career prospects in this life. Viewed in terms of collecting merit, this would suggest that ambition for the purpose of success and the attainment of worldly goods is contradictory to karma and would be regarded negatively (Fieg 1989). At this point, karma would appear to be the main attributable factor to success, contradicting the attribution theory (Skehan 1989). This

theory regards effort and luck as “unstable” attributes yet Thais may consider luck to be more of a “stable” factor.

Motivation, if affected by karma, is also be viewed from the perspective of change, that is, a person’s willingness, or not, to instigate it. Fieg (ibid., 60) reminds us that in Buddhist thought change is natural, possibly the most certain aspect of life manifesting itself in “cycles of ubat (birth, beginning, springing up) and wibat (death, ending, passing away)”.

Sanuk - the concept of fun - appears to pervade most aspects of Thai every day life. Whereas westerners separate work from leisure, Thais wish to integrate sanuk into work; if not able to do so, it is not deemed worthwhile pursuing. Those not enjoying activities are thought to be “serious” (a Thai-English loan word which has negative connotations, meaning someone who cannot see sanuk and is unnecessarily strict or dull on the surface). Those who have integrated sanuk into their activities may then be viewed as having “intrinsic” motivation , standing as a contrast to the instrumental motivation as suggested previously. Sabaaj is the state of comfort Thais enjoy on a physical and mental level. Fieg (ibid.: 10) describes it as “present sensuous happiness” and it is, like sanuk, a manifestation of the acceptance of karma.

Turning to the concept of individualism, one of the difficulties of generalising Thai behaviour is the apparent “loose structure” of Thai society (Embree 1980). According to Fieg (1989: 25), this results in a lack of “binding rules which would lead to predictable behaviour”. As a consequence of this, Thais are regarded as being individualistic, a characteristic which seems to contradict their adherence to “the demands of social

hierarchy” (ibid.) and also to research by Hofstede (1986: 309) which suggests that there is “large power distance and low individualism” in Thailand.

This apparent contradiction is raised by Punyodyana (1980: 187) who points to the labelling of Thai society as “loose” as being based primarily on rural research and has not considered inter-village or urban socialisation over period of economic and industrial growth. Perhaps though, individualism as interpreted in the West is misleading in this context; individualism is considered to be “non-assertive” among Thais and is more associated with the idea of self-reliance, as expressed in the Buddhist saying “By oneself one is purified” (Fieg 1989:32). It may be a version of individualistic behaviour - or “norm blasphemy” (Stenhouse 1967: 24) - as a means to put the Eightfold path into practice (Cush 1993: 46), rather than part of the western, autonomous “sociocentric conception of the self” (Morris 1994: 194). Embree (1980: 165) furthermore points out that one cannot equate apparent “permissiveness of individual behavioural variation” amongst Thais with a lack of social integration. Integration in Thai society is upheld more by a desire to maintain deferential and harmonious social relations.

Issues concerning individual behaviour are inter-related with Thais behaviour in the group. Thais are thought to have three social circles in which they exist : “The family circle” (including relatives), “The cautious circle” (at work or school) and “The selfish circle” (outside the family or work/school) (Holmes and Tangtongtavy 1995: 42). The first two circles are concerned with groups in which there are hierarchical relationships to consider. Thais defer to senior figures in these groups but tend to show less strict adherence to filial piety or ancestors as do Mahayana Buddhists or those with Confucian thinking (Fieg 1989: 32).

In terms of the next aspects of pragmatism and utilitarianism, when performing as a group is considered in workplace and educational contexts, the Thai propensity to share knowledge can be confused as being intentional plagiarism by western observers. One western university professor summarises this co-operation by commenting:

“The group does as well as the best person in the group.”

(Fieg 1989: 34).

Redmont (op.cit.: 192) states that there is a tendency for Thais to regard the pursuit of education in a highly pragmatic fashion, quoting the Thai proverb “kwam rutam hua ao tua mai rot” (Knowledge up to his ears but he can’t save himself). This would suggest that Thais may not wish to undertake purely academic studies which would not lead to high-earning careers; indeed Redmont (ibid.) does note that it is rare for students to take studies “cultivated for their own sake”. “Intrinsic” motivation (Skehan 1989) for academic study would apparently be less common than instrumentally motivated study.

Thinking as an area for discussion clearly permeates other, if not all, social behavioural issues. It has, as investigated earlier, connections with the Buddhist concept of detachment, yet this connection is fundamentally a misleading one if considered from the western perspective of objective, scientific detachment since knowledge is, in the Buddhist sense, more affective, experiential or even intuitive in nature (Donaldson 1992 and Cush 1993). Furthermore, the “unity” and “consistency” associated with developing an argument in the west are less relevant in Buddhism where more emphasis is placed on the pragmatics of the present context, rather than abiding by precedents made in one’s rationale (Redmont 1998:44).

In terms of the criticism made by western observers that Thais fail to think critically, Davidson (1988:121) terms critical thinking as a western “approach to life” itself, largely unpractised in cultures that value “silence, imitation, submission and conformity”. Resnick (as cited in Atkinson 1997:75) regards it as “common-sense social practice”. Furthermore, the definition of Burbules and Berk (in Popkewitz and Fendler eds. 1999:46) that critical thinking requires, on an intra-personal level, a pre-disposition to seek out irrationalities and “exercise control over our own destinies”, and, on the group level, to participate in oral exchanges which are also critical of their own values and assumptions extends the scale of difficulty that Thais may have to conform to the ideal required. The abilities nurtured in Thai schools would seem to be not focused on this same kind of introspection, yet perhaps the instrumental motivation of Thais to meet course requirements and enter chosen study programs could lead to an adoption of viewing critical thinking as a temporary new learning strategy in the “weak-sense” (Paul as cited in Popkewitz and Fendler eds. 1999:49), whereby one can think critically when the task requires. This weaker version could perhaps be better suited to Thai pragmatism, even appealing to their sense of “functional” survivalism (Embree 1980: 170) without the continuous challenge to embedded Buddhist values.

Thinking as a social concept may be affected by Buddhist thinking concerning compassion, authority and attitudes to knowledge, all of which define the Thai as a contextually aware person, rather than a highly specific time-conscious westerner.

Authority, as previously mentioned with reference to thinking, has a relationship with, primarily, respect and, in turn, compassion. Unlike western concepts of equality and social justice though, Thais additionally regard it as having connections with

karma as those in power in the present have earned such prestige and responsibility from merit in a previous life. Fieg (ibid.: 75) points to the traditional “pen rabiab” (top-down) hierarchies often in place in public institutions as a mirroring Thais have of the inclination throughout society to regard themselves hierarchically in a position or status relative to others. This authority focus is accompanied by the expectations of paternalistic compassion and deference between juniors and seniors respectively (Hofstede 1986). This propensity to stratify relationships may suggest then that western concepts of social equity are understood differently in the Thai context.

Finally, the responsibilities, or sense of responsibility, that individuals possess whilst operating as a member of society are potentially affected by authority-related awareness. Responsibility, as interpreted as duty, is clearly connected with Thai hierarchies. However, responsibility in terms of a cause of an event is more related to karma in the sense that people in this existence are “neither “sources” nor “causes” of events in the karmic system of dependent origination..” (Redmont 1998: 64).

Potential influences in synthesis

In synthesising the potential influences, table 2 represents discussion tools to explain how Theravada Buddhism is inter-connected with social behaviour and then, in turn, Thai learner behaviour. Table 3 traces those influences in reverse, commencing with the learners’ behaviour and resulting in various religious concepts being listed in several cases. In both cases I will present an example of how I perceive the three foci to be interconnected. The other aspects in each table remain, due to the limitations of this study, open to the reader’s interpretation.

Potential influences from Theravada Buddhism to learner behaviour

From table 2, karma may be inter-connected with five aspects of social behaviour and subsequently eight aspects of learner behaviour. Its influence particularly upon the four social aspects of success/failure, ambition and motivation, pragmatism/utilitarianism, sabaaj and authority may create the traditional stereotype of Thai learners who are examination-oriented (goal-oriented), teacher-dependent and more accustomed to rote-learning than western concepts of critical thinking. In contrast, the social aspect of sanuk may counter this stereotype by enabling students to appreciate new methodologies.

Table 2: Potential influences from Theravada Buddhism to learner behaviour

Theravada Buddhism aspects	Thai social behavioural aspects	Thai learners' behavioural aspects
Karma	Success/failure, ambition & motivation	Goal-oriented
	sanuk	novelty
	sabaaj	large group classes, lack of critical analysis
	Pragmatism/utilitarianism	Goal-oriented, lack of critical analysis
	Authority	Book-oriented, rote-learning,

		teacher-dependent & teachers' pastoral care
The Self	The Group	Face, large group classes & plagiarism/copying
	sanuk	novelty
Compassion	The Group	Face, large group classes & plagiarism/copying
	sanuk	novelty
	Thinking	Book-oriented, lack of critical thinking
Detachment	sabaaj	large group classes, lack of critical analysis
	Thinking	Book-oriented, lack of critical thinking
Wisdom	Thinking	Book-oriented, lack of critical thinking
Self-reliance	Responsibility	Teachers' pastoral care
Respect	Authority	Book-oriented, rote-learning, teacher-dependent & teachers' pastoral care

Potential influences of the language classroom to Theravada Buddhism

Reversing the perspective from the previous section now provides us with the focus upon the learner rather than Theravada Buddhism. In this process, the more abstract nature of the discussion surrounding primarily religion may be shifted to one which has a more practical classroom base.

Table 3: Potential influences for learner behaviour from Theravada Buddhism

Thai learners' behavioural aspects	Thai social behavioural aspects	Theravada Buddhism aspects
Goal-oriented	Success/failure, ambition & motivation and pragmatism/utilitarianism	Karma
Novelty	Sanuk and the group	Karma, the Self and compassion
Face	The Group	The self & compassion
Large group classes	Sabaaj and the Group	Karma, detachment, compassion and the self
Plagiarism	The Group	The self & compassion
Book-oriented	Thinking and authority	Compassion, detachment, wisdom, respect and karma
Rote-learning	Authority	Respect and karma

Lack of critical analysis	sabaaj, pragmatism/utilitarianism and thinking	Karma, detachment, compassion and wisdom
Teacher-dependent	Authority	Respect and karma
Teacher pastoral care	Authority and responsibility	Karma, respect and self-reliance

Referring to table 3, in terms of goal-orientation of Thai students, their instrumental and resultative motivation may be seen through karma's influence upon pragmatism and ambition, yet may be accompanied by a nonchalant and fatalistic view to failure. Novelty may counter this goal-orientation through enthusiasm for new methodologies, for example in group tasks; however, novelty is in itself a temporary concept and teachers may need thereafter to instigate methodological changes to maintain intrinsic motivation. Care should also be taken in the induction of students into autonomous learning modes.

Conclusions

In conclusion, both tables 2 and 3, if used as teacher development tools, may be utilised effectively as a foundation for discussion of Thai learners' characteristics. In terms of limitations, they do not present solutions per se but could be helpful to teachers (and students) not explicitly aware of the potential relation to and between Theravada Buddhist traits and social behaviour.

Clearly, the term "influence" is not necessarily appropriate in every case investigated, as is seen in the study concerning self-reliance in table 2. The terms

“relation” or “inter-connection” are at times better employed. Furthermore, the representations do not express the relative degree in which Buddhism or a social characteristic “influences” or is related to learner behaviour, for example, in table 3, book-orientation can be related to five Buddhist and two social aspects, yet rote-learning to only two and one respectively.

In defence of this, though, the number and nature of related aspects is naturally to be disputed and falsified, that process in itself acting as a catalyst for discussion. The teacher development tables created are intended as a pragmatic, yet incomplete means for further exploration into the relationship between Buddhism and classroom issues. This process is one which constantly encourages inquiry into the context in which the teacher and Thai learners find themselves, similar perhaps to the calls for verification of Buddhist teachings themselves (Marek 1994, and Gurugé as cited in Husen and Postlethwaite eds. 1994).

Appendix: Glossary

arhat: an enlightened person

cai yen: cool heart

Dharmma: the teachings of Buddha

karma: fate

kwam rutam hua ao tua mai rot: knowledge up to his ears but he can't save himself

Mahayana Buddhism: Buddhism as practised in China, Taiwan, Japan

mai pen rai: never mind/it can't be helped

pen rabiab: top-down hierarchy

sabaaj: "present sensuous happiness" (Fieg 1989, 10)

sangha: the community of monks

sanuk: fun, enjoyment

Theravada Buddhism: Buddhism as practised in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar

ubat: "birth, beginning, springing up" (ibid., 60)

wibat: "death, ending, passing away" (ibid.)

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