



Conquering the Cultural Barriers of Teaching in Thailand

Guest post by Charles McKinney



I moved to Bangkok, Thailand, in January 2013 to earn my master's degree as a full-time student at Webster University Thailand. I needed to find work to support myself. After two months of hunting, I landed a job at a private language school teaching English, something I was qualified to do as a TESOL-certified American with two years of previous overseas ESL expertise.

Having never taught Thai students before, I initially struggled to satisfy their learning needs. The students expected me to teach by talking; they wanted to participate as little as possible. My boss told me that, unlike American students who take an active role, Thai students are often quite passive learners.

Classes were mostly one-on-one, a new format for me. A few lessons were cancelled after students griped about my teaching methods, disliking the fact that I was following the textbook lesson plan precisely rather than teaching from my knowledge of the topics and using the book minimally. I started out teaching academic writing and grammar to adolescents who found the material dry; thus my challenge was to make it more interesting for them.

Really, I had no lessons in technique: my busy boss usually gave me the necessary resources to teach and then left me to figure out the rest on my own with minimum advice. So, after nearly a month of floundering to improve my teaching performance my boss decided to give me a two-month hiatus (although I did not know this at the time). It turned out she was right: I needed more time to adapt to the culture and the students.

A few months later, I was called back to teach a new academic writing class for a mid-career professional who wanted to return to school. This time I brought my computer with me, using the Internet as an aid to my lesson plan. I prepared PowerPoint presentations to convey the material in an engaging and orderly manner. Throughout the two-month class, we managed to build rapport and exchange cultural knowledge that helped us to understand one another as individuals.

“Here are pictures of my Buddhist monk ceremony, a rite of passage that many Thai men experience,” my student shared with me one day. In return, I showed him a student newspaper from my college days. “This is my pride and joy as former editor-in-chief of the paper; you can learn about my culture through this medium,” I told him. It was one of those cultural insight moments I cherished. As our class progressed, he gave my boss positive feedback about me – and my confidence in my new techniques improved.

I was not only the first American, but the first African-American teacher this school hired. I have now taught students from Bhutan and Russia as well as Thailand. This experience has taught me the values of patience, flexibility, humility and effective cross-cultural communication. Teachers can make a difference in students’ lives, especially in cultures that are drastically different from their own, but students also make a difference in their teachers’ lives. They learned some English, but I learned about their cultures. Creating a comfortable space for students to be themselves, and remembering that teachers also learn from their students, can foster wonderful intercultural dialogues.

Charles McKinney is a recent MA media communications graduate from Webster University Thailand. Having embarked on a rewarding career of ESL/EFL teaching as an expat in East Asia, Charles is hoping to secure an English Language Fellowship with the US Embassy for the new school year and is making plans to possibly join the Peace Corps next year. CID’s website was helpful during Charles’s master’s thesis research, and he wrote this essay as a way of giving back. Contact him through LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/charles-mckinney/32/5a6/582/>).

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