

EFL Students' Voices on Perspectives of Learning English-Speaking Countries' Society and Culture in the Southernmost Thailand

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Abstract

This study was conducted to explore the students' perspectives of learning English-speaking countries' society and culture in the deep south of a non-native English country as Thailand. It involved seventy-five EFL freshmen participating in expressing their opinions through reflective logs which were used as the research instruments. The results showed that all of them had positive attitudes towards the western culture teaching at the end of the class although most of them once felt worried about their English skill in understanding the content and few of them were uncomfortable and unsure whether learning the unfamiliar culture was against their religious principles. The introduction of the intercultural contents could broaden a wide range of cultural knowledge and increase the students' willingness and eagerness to step out of their own world and interact with different people without losing their local ideology.

Keywords: English- Speaking Countries, Learning Western Culture, Perspectives, Southernmost Thailand

Introduction

A question "Why do I have to study this course?" was burst out from an English major student sitting in a middle row of my class after being allowed to make any remarks before a discussion of course contents. The question sparked my interest to think whether the student really wanted to know the reasons why she had to take the course 'Society and Culture Backgrounds of English Speaking Countries' or there might be any hint or concern about the study. Also, there might be other students who kept quiet but had the same question in their minds. Actually, the western cultural contents have commonly been introduced to English

classes throughout Thailand and also included in the curricula of English programs for language undergraduate students. Is it important for Thai students to learn native speakers' culture? Can integrating the western culture improve their English skills? These questions were gradually taken into my mind especially while having to be in the role of the only instructor responsible for providing these tertiary students the intercultural elements.

According to Kachru's categorization of countries in which the English language is used as cited in Crystal (1997, p. 54), the group of 'Expanding Circle' has included English as a foreign language in the non-native speakers' daily lives like Thailand. The three circle models of Krachru have clearly represented how differently the language has been employed in the 'Inner Circle', the 'Outer Circle' and the 'Expanding Circle' countries. People in Thailand have used Thai which is a main national and official language and studied English as the first foreign language in their schools. As a result of this, there may be no real standard and natural model of using the language as a lingua franca in the country. Moreover, their motivation in developing the foreign language proficiency and the targeted culture has never been an immediate need.

Using a lot of English instructional materials such as books, newspapers, magazines, TV programs, films and songs, in turn, have been presented and related to westerners' lives. These supplementary teaching mediums have been frequently used in an effort to facilitate the students to reach the language acquisition, associating with the culture and language of the Inner Circle countries. They can differentiate seasons, see unfamiliar clothes and food and also non-verbal communication forms which are very different from theirs. Targeted cultures, customs, traditions, value of life, belief and ways of thinking have been introduced to the English language learners both directly and indirectly. However, developing the students' intercultural knowledge may face a big challenge; the learning seems superficial and impractical. McKay (2002) added that one common situation today which typically occurs in Expanding Circle countries is that both teachers and students come from the same cultural background while the materials used in class present cultural factual content from a target culture as shown in a classroom in Thailand where a Thai teacher using teaching materials relating to American culture.

At the higher education level, students especially English major undergraduates are also needed to directly take specific classes of the unfamiliar target language culture in order to fulfill the requirements of the program. Some important cultural aspects are selected and provided to them. The students have been equipped with some cultural insights of the native speakers' context. A dozens of research papers about including western culture to English classes have been differently carried out (Wang, 2011; Rajabi & Ketabi, 2012; Diallo, 2014; Liu, 2014). Conducting this research project challenged the researcher to investigate the English major students' perspectives towards learning the distinct and unfamiliar culture. What would the learners who were shaped by strong Islamic values and cultural identities think if some festivals like Christmas and Thanksgiving were illustrated to them in the

classroom? They might be interested in learning something new outside their familiar community or express cultural resistance to American or English people during the process of the study. The research results might urge educators to rethink towards whether the learning of western culture should be encouraged or discouraged.

1. Learning Western Culture of EFL Students

What is ‘culture?’ According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Hornby (2005, p.357), ‘culture’ is the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group. From Brown’s point of view (1986 as cited in McKay, 2002), culture is vital for it is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life can be represented through language. Brown (2000, p.177) supported that “A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.” The relationship between languages and cultures seems inseparable and is very closely associated; in other words, languages are deeply rooted in cultures and cultures straightforwardly affect languages (Mahadi & Jafari, 2012; Gorjian & Aghvami, 2017).

In an EFL context, the language and culture of the learners also relate to the ones of native speakers. Jordan (2003) concluded that two languages and two cultures get involved in every language classroom; these refer to the native language and culture of the student (the base language/culture) and the language/culture being studied (the target language/culture). The language that is taught must always be culturally appropriate, specifically for the non-native learners who will be using it.

Referring to Cortazzi and Jin (1999) as cited in McKay (2002, p.88), there are three types of cultural information used in language textbooks and materials. Those are source cultural materials that draw on the learners’ own culture as content, target culture materials that use the culture of a country where English is spoken as a first language and lastly international target culture materials that use a great variety of cultures in English and non-English speaking countries around the world.

Teaching and learning the English-speaking countries’ culture has still been taken into consideration. It has caused arguments among teachers and students whether providing knowledge of western cultures should be done in English classes. As known that a culture is a part of language learning, the targeted culture has been often included in English lessons. However, the study of Uddin (2017) suggested that 260 undergraduate students from the department of English in Saudi Arabia preferred the target language culture to be separately taught, not with the English language.

Regarding how the culture should be taught, Yeganeha and Raeesia (2015) viewed the importance of comparing aspects of the students' own culture with those of the target language culture as the commonest way of developing cultural awareness. As the research participants, 291 secondary-school level teachers in Western Iran who taught English as a subject believed that EFL classrooms should enhance students' understanding of their own cultural identity. However, the main problem of teaching the culture was shortage of time, claiming that they had not been trained in how to deal with cultural content.

The study of Al-Sayyed and Dweik (2015) proved some benefits of the learning. Thirty female English major Jordanian students, who attended a course titled "Western Culture" as an optional course, had positive perceptions towards the learning of western culture, claiming that the learning could raise their awareness about history and its relationship to culture without losing their cultural identity. It also motivated them to learn more about the language. This was in line with the studies of Kitishat, Al Kayed and Allah (2015) which highlighted that having cultural knowledge could contribute to the better language acquisition. On the other hand, the research result of Jabeen and Shah (2011) manifested that 94 Pakistani learners from Government College University, Faisalabad had reacted strongly against the target language culture teaching and claimed that this might affect the rejection of the language itself. Their finding also highlighted that the students' attitude strongly related to their economic status. The participants from the low income group had positive attitude towards including the culture in the language class while those who had negative attitudes belonged to the higher income group.

Another research of Jabeen, Zahid and Sattar (2013) reflected another proven correlation between the students' perception towards the target language culture and the homelands they belonged to. Advanced English language Pakistani undergraduates were research participants from two different communities. They were from The Islamic University of Bahawalpur in a rural agriculture area and from Government College University, Faisalabad in urban industrial premises. The findings indicated that the learners from both areas have positive attitude towards the learning of the foreign language culture but the positive attitude level showed higher in those from the urban industrial community. However, they were unwilling to the teaching of some concepts such as homosexuality and funeral customs in the target language community.

In relation to English skills, Gorjian and Aghvami (2017) investigated perceptions toward the importance of western culture and its needs in reading comprehension classes of EFL university teachers and students at Abadan Azad University in Iran. With regard to the research results, there was not a significant difference between the teachers and learners' perception on the use of culture and English native materials in the classroom. Both groups realized that the use of cultural elements was important in teaching reading. They agreed to have authentic and culture-based materials as valuable and necessary tools in effective

reading comprehension classes and this could encourage language teachers to pay attention to the role of culture in teaching language skills.

As mentioned above, the introduction of the targeted culture yielded both negatively and positively to those related to educational communities. Some suggestions were given in cultivating the western culture in the classroom. In addition, some factors like social status and unequal incomes could affect the students' perspectives towards these related studies. Actually, there are still other elements such as gender, ethnic background and education level which can also influence how the individuals can perceive towards the western culture learning. Each research result thus depends on specific areas. On the contrary, it cannot be concluded that people from completely same origins, religions, beliefs, values of life or cultures are in accord with each other's thinking.

II. General Overviews on Students in the Southernmost Thailand

The southernmost or the deep south of Thailand comprises of five southern border provinces, namely Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun, and four adjacent districts of Songkhla. Among these five provinces, however, four of them which exclude Songkhla are predominantly concentrated with the biggest group of Muslims in the country. Between 65-85 percent of the local population is mostly ethnic Malay (Liow, 2009). Ooi (2004) as cited in Wantanasombut (2014) stated that Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala including some parts of Songkhla were part of an ancient Malay settlement known as Langkasuka which was founded around the second century. Dorairajoo (2009) added that the present-day Thai provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat comprised an ancient Malay kingdom named Patani. Suwannathat-Pian (2008) expressed his opinions that Muslims in Satun and Songkhla still maintained various aspects of Thai culture and custom, most noticeable language, adding that most of them could not converse in Malay. They are in Thai-speaking Muslim community and this is likely different from those in the three southernmost provinces. Yusuf (2007) highlighted that although Muslims around the world come from different races and ethnic groups who speak different languages, the followers of Islam considered themselves as a brotherhood with strong emotional attachment as a compound unit merged by faith. Thai Muslims who live along the Thai-Malaysian border tend to have their own distinct and rich cultures which are different from those in other parts of the country.

With regard to the statistics of National Reconciliation Commission, in 2004, 270,771 or 75.21% of the students attended government schools and the rest of 89,205 or 24.78% attended private Islamic schools from the levels of kindergarten to high school. Muslim kids aged three years old were also sent to *Tadika* schools for additional Islam classes operating either in the evenings or over the weekends. With reference to Islamic Private School Association, it found approximately 1,343 *Tadika* schools throughout Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and Satun in the same year of May (Liow, 2009). During the day, while

students in public schools attend their regular classes, students at private Islamic schools spend time differently. They have three sessions of instruction: formal religious classes in the morning, academic and vocational lessons in the afternoon and official “study groups” in the evening. Islamic education in the country has traditionally revolved around the institution of the *pondok* (Muslim religious schools) which have a long tradition in Malay history. The *pondok* which mainly provides religious instruction assumes a vital role in the Malay society of the southern provinces of Thailand. Additionally, *pondok* are closely associated with Malay-Muslim identity and often act as the center for daily Malay social life. Beyond that *pondok* are also important sources of Malay language, history, and culture (Liow, 2009). Sateemae, Abdel-Monem and Sateemae (2015) added that it is estimated there are at least several hundred *pondok* throughout the three provinces and this kind of school has become the preferred educational institution for many Muslims in the south, especially in rural areas. Yusuf (2007) claimed that many young Thai Muslims also travel to the neighboring Muslim countries of Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and also India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Iran, and Egypt, seeking education to reinforce their religious and ethnic identities, referring to the approximate number of 200 Thai Muslim students who studied in Saudi Arabia, 2,000 in Egypt and 100 in Iran. Some who finished their education in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Sudan, Indonesia and Pakistan, returned home and become imams at mosques and teachers at *pondok* (Yusuf, 2007).

Taking a look at the languages spoken in the areas, Scupi, 1998; McCargo, 2006 as cited in Dorairajoo (2009) widely classified Thai Muslims in two categories. The first group is the Malay Muslims who speak the Malay language and reside primarily in Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and Satun. The other category of Muslims is the Thai-speaking Muslims who live in Central, North and Northeast Thailand. The study of Yamirudeng (2014) could well represent how important the Malay language was to Muslims' ethnicity in Yala province. The findings based on in-depth interviews indicated that the informants had strong feelings towards their ethnic identification, emphasizing on being the Malay-speaking citizens of Thailand. She added that ethno-linguistic identification firmly related to Islam and there was also a dynamic interdependent relationship between language and ethnic or cultural identity. Most of the population in Yala including Pattani and Narathiwat speak several local varieties of the Malay language while a lot of Muslims in Satun have begun using the local southern Thai dialect as their mother tongue (Dorairajoo, 2009). According to the surveys of Klein (2010), only 13% of southerners in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand speak the Central Thai dialect and 4% the Southern Thai dialect, whereas the vast majority or 83% of the population speak the Pattani-Malay dialect, which is one of many Malay dialects spoken throughout Malaysia and Indonesia. Among the three provinces, Narathiwat had the highest concentration of Pattani-Malay (89%) speakers and the lowest number of Central Thai (7%) and Southern Thai dialect (3%) speakers. On the contrary, Yala had the highest concentration of Central Thai speakers (22%) and Southern Thai speakers (7%). This was consistent with the

percentage of the population in the three southernmost provinces shown by National Statistical Office (2009), there were 82.0% Muslims in Narathiwat, 80.7% in Pattani and 68.9% in Yala.

It can be clearly presented that most Muslims in the southernmost Thailand have lived and socialized in a distinct Islamic setting. The languages, educations, identities, stereotypes are some examples of the local Muslims which are considered different from other Islam worshippers living in upper parts of the country. The increasing number of Muslims in these Muslim-majority areas can help represent their strongly dominant and independent 'Islam being' of their culture. It seems that other cultures cannot easily engage and interfere in their 'own boundary'. With respect to this fact, the Muslim students' perspectives to learn the different and unfamiliar culture of native speakers of English seem likely challenging.

The research aimed to investigate the students' perspectives toward learning the target language culture in the context of a non-native English country with the research questions as followed:

1. What are the students' perspectives towards learning English-speaking countries' society and culture at the beginning of the western culture course?
2. Do they change their perspectives towards learning the western culture course after finishing the course? How?

Research Design

Participants

The current study was conducted with 75 first year students majoring in English at Yala Rajabhat University where there are no native English speakers in the process of their learning English. They took the course 'Society and Culture Backgrounds of English Speaking Countries' in the first semester of the 2018 academic year. This course is a compulsory subject within the English Liberal Arts' program structure. The major lessons of this course include cultural backgrounds and important festivals of the English-speaking countries with the hope that the students could express their ideas and have group discussion in each particular topic. Furthermore, they were grouped to verbally present information from each topic they were assigned together with the role-plays in front of the class. Any class activities were independently designed by themselves. The researcher, also the course instructor, used English as the teaching medium to deliver lectures and give comments.

Sixty-eight of them or 90.67% were females and seven or 9.33% were males who willingly participated in the study. Most informants' hometowns were in the three Southern border provinces: Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat which mainly contained the highest number of Thai Muslims; only six of them came from Sonkhla, Satun and Krabi which are also in

the southern part of the nation. Sixty-five or 86.66% finished their prior education from private Islamic schools and the rest were from public schools and a non-formal education center. All of them were Muslims and had never visited English-dominant countries where the English language is mainly used.

Research Instruments

To find the research participants' perspectives on teaching western society and culture and problems in studying the course, the results mainly came from the students' writing logs before and after finishing this subject. They could use either English or Thai to express their ideas on each topic as their preferences.

Research Procedure

The students took fifteen minutes to write a log relevant to their views towards studying this course on the first day of class after being informed of the course description. They did not need to uncover their own names but only identify themselves under pseudonyms (s1, s2, s3...) at the top of the paper. After 15 weeks when the course ended, they were assigned to express their feelings after learning the course.

Data Collection

After finishing their writing, the collected data from the students' logs before and after finishing the course were analyzed and compared. Any perceptions they had during their studies were also noted.

Findings

Regarding the students' perspectives towards learning the course of 'Society and Culture Backgrounds of English Speaking Countries', at the beginning of the course, the findings were categorized into three groups of opinions: negative, positive and positive and negative. The students' responses showed that 43 of them or 57.33% viewed learning the western culture quite negatively. The factors that affected their views were English proficiency, religious belief and background knowledge described as follows:

-Negative opinions

“As an English major student, I don't know why I have to study this course.” (S60)

“A question came to me why I have to study this course.”(S49)

“I feel very worried to study the subject. I never think that I have to learn culture which is not mine.” (S11)

“I wonder why I have to study the culture of other countries. It is not my culture.” (S73)

“I ask myself if I can learn the culture of westerners. Is this in conflict with my religion’s principles?” (S75)

“It seems difficult to study this course because I’ve never known such international culture.” (S24)

“I feel stressed and uncomfortable to study this course because of my lacking of basic knowledge about the unfamiliar culture.” (S14)

“I’m worried because I’m not good at English and the book is in English. I’m not sure whether I can understand all information.” (S32)

“I’m not sure that I can understand the foreigners’ cultures so I feel quite worried.” (S44)

-Positive opinions

Twenty-eight students or 37.33% of them expressed their opinions about learning western culture in the opposite way compared to the opinions above. All of them seemed willing to learn the foreign culture although it was new and unfamiliar to them.

“I feel excited to learn cultures of foreigners because I’ve never learned about it before.” (S48)

“I feel happy to study this course because learning new things is important and makes me know how to behave myself well in a foreign society.” (S54)

“I feel happy and hope to enjoy studying this course because I like the foreigners’ cultures a lot.” (S37)

“I feel happy and curious to learn other people’s cultures.” (S61)

“I’m really happy to learn new things about the foreigners’ cultures which are different from mine. I’m not worried and I know that learning other cultures is not against my religion.” (S62)

-Positive and negative opinions

These following points of view could show what the rest of them thought about learning the target language culture both positively and negatively. They seem willing to be challenged with new experiences they have never known before. They thought that the course could help open their world to probably get involved with other people and help them master English better. However, they were still worried about their ability to understand the course and some probable conflicts with their religion.

“I am excited to learn western cultures and think that I may have a lot of fun in class but I also feel worried whether this subject is difficult or not.” (S74)

“I major in English which isn’t my own language so I should know native speakers’ cultures. That’s why I have to study this course. I think that this can help better my study but

I also feel uncomfortable.... this subject seems difficult and may go against my religion. I keep telling myself that it's only learning so don't worry." (S76)

After finishing the course, all of them seemed more open-minded and had more positive perspectives towards learning the culture of native speakers. They realized the importance of the learning by themselves. Their concern about religious restrictions was lower and the course could cultivate their new cultural knowledge as follows:

"I can open my mind to accept the different culture which is not the same as what I feel familiar with." (S74)

"I learn more the English-speaking countries' culture in different aspects as how they live or how they do and this can make me have clearer perspectives about other countries. I viewed the western culture quite roughly at first but I can have deeper understanding and realize that it's really interesting to learn other culture." (S40)

"Now I think that it's normal to learn western culture." (S75)

"The more I learn, the more I want to know." (S52)

"I can accept any cultural differences." (S65)

"Western cultures and ours are very different in how to eat or how to express something. I can make use of what I get from the class in my daily life." (S27)

"Comparing to my previous knowledge, I don't know anything about the native speakers' cultures. Now I can understand their culture a little bit more and master more vocabulary and communication skill." (S66)

"I can understand more why a foreigner believes differently, what they like to do, eat and even their manners, gestures and body languages." (S43)

"I can understand people who aren't the same as me." (S67)

"I can find both bad and good things in a westerner. I choose to follow only their good habits." (S70)

"The culture is fascinating and makes me curious to know more even I've never learned it before." (S64)

"I once judged foreigners that they had bad manners from how they acted. I, however, change my views and try to understand other people and I can finally see how good they are." (S14)

Discussion

The study aimed to examine the perspectives of students in the deep south of Thailand towards the cultural instruction of English-speaking countries' society and culture. It was evident that all of them had favorable perspectives towards the target culture although, at the beginning of the course, more than half of them seemed unwilling to learn the culture.

The finding was in agreement with the studies of Fang (2011) and Salem (2013) that the students' perspectives became more positive.

At the beginning of the course, most of them did not know even comprehensive reasons why they had to study this course. The data showed that learning the unfamiliar culture also made them worried whether it could go against their Muslim beliefs. As mentioned above, Muslims in the southernmost region especially in the three border provinces have their own distinct identity as shown by their preferable persistence of using local dialect. This was supported by Yusuf (2007) who emphasized that Muslims in the southernmost area were equipped with strong attachment on the ethnic aspect of their adherence to Islam. They have preserved their ethnic identity and viewed their life experience from within the context of the local practice of their religion. Moreover, they have eventually established broad relations with Muslim countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East in the areas of educational and socio-religious aspects. Regarding the students' logs, they considered the western culture as **'the culture which is not mine'**, **'the culture of other countries'**, **'the culture of westerners'** and **'the foreigners' culture'**. Their religious beliefs are deeply rooted in their identity and possibly influenced their willingness to discover the new world of other different people. As mentioned by a student, he felt uncomfortable to learn the western culture at the beginning of the course as follows:

"I ask myself if I can learn the culture of westerners. Is this in conflict with my religion's principles?" (S75)

However, the learning developed his understanding, and led him to accept the differences between the two cultures and realize the importance of learning as shown here:

"I feel excited to learn this subject and I'm not worried that what I learned may not be in line with my religious principles. It's just learning...no need to follow their styles. (S75).

This was in line with Kramsch (1993) as cited in McKay (2002) that knowing about a culture or gaining cultural competence does not mean that one has an obligation to behave in accordance with its conventions. McKay (2002, p.84) mentioned about the goal of EIL teaching that students do not need to accept the standards of Inner Circle countries, but to recognize pragmatic differences that exist between cultures.

Other opinions could show that the students developed their thinking as presented: "My views change a lot. From the first day of my study, I didn't want to learn and wonder why I had to take this course. Now I learn that this course is very important to my study as an English major student." (S60)

"I once wonder why I have to learn other people's cultures but now I think that learning can make me adjust myself to different societies easier." (S48)

“I can understand the reasons why a foreigner has different behaviors and ways of thinking compared to Thai people. Learning can make me understand people more.” (S44)

“I learn a lot from the course. I can't imagine how different western cultures and ours are, for example some different cultural awareness about heads and feet and using table utensils”. (S21)

The students could likely realize differences among people from different parts of the world. This course could develop their critical thinking and lead these English major students to learn how to be ready to interact with people who are not the same as them. They could understand and accept differences among people surrounding them as a student cited “Each culture is important, not only mine.” (S23) Learning about various cultures can be a great way of developing an understanding of cultural diversity. The research results were consistent with the studies of Al-Sayyed and Dweik (2015); Choudhury and Kakati (2017) that the western culture course helped them understand others and be more familiar with the western cultural aspects, increase their awareness of different cultures and help them learn new things. It could help them to not only relate to native English speaking community but construct their interest to learn about its society which is closely related to the language they were being taught. Choudhury and Kakati (2017) added that a discussion of differences and similarities between their native and the target cultures could affect the students' better understanding. Furthermore, it could enhance their interest and eagerness to learn more with better knowledge in learning and understanding the language. With respect to their mentioned points of view, realizing the benefits of learning the targeted culture by themselves was a possible key reason why their negative attitude became positive.

Another factor which had a great impact on their changing perspectives after finishing the course was how they were taught in class as stated by a student that “This subject can change my point of view. I can see how different other culture is.” (S50). Rajabi and Ketabi (2012) suggested that, in an English classroom, the most important thing was not whether cultural information should be included in the language classes but how culture should be taught. The students were provided a learner-centered and low-anxiety classroom environment by the Thai Buddhist teacher. They took the "active" role of presenting what they independently learned from the lessons in their own discovery process. They all worked in groups and connected some new information to their learning. Each cultural display was designed based on their interests. With this safe and comfortable setting, they could fully participate in classroom activities without losing their own Muslim ideology. This could thus increase their desire to learn and also affect their enthusiasm, willingness and importantly motivational change.

Although some discourses seen from their logs clearly presented their strongly-related identities, after finishing the course, it was surprising that only a few of the discourses representing individual separation were found. The decreasing number of words like ‘other

people', '...which is not mine', or 'the foreigners' culture' evidently indicated that the students were more open-minded to learn something different. They knew what they should do or avoid as stated by a student "I realize that western culture is very different from Thai culture. Now I have to be more careful to call a foreigner 'Farang'." (S59). This change could show that they became more aware of interactions among people and ready to adjust themselves to make friends with outsiders.

However, the students' English ability particularly vocabulary was their main challenge that affected their understanding of the course information. As a matter of fact, their ability to master vocabulary related to each lesson made them primarily stuck in trouble. Moreover, it was assumed that English word barrier could affect their confidence to discuss or express their own ideas on each topic. Vocabulary knowledge is the fundamental vital tool in the process of language learning. David Wilkins (1972) as cited in Thornbury (2002, p.13) said that "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." Barzegar and Rahimy (2012, p.1) added that "Vocabulary is one of the most difficult aspects of learning a foreign language, particularly in an EFL context." Insufficient vocabulary knowledge caused the students' failure to acquire existing information which consequently hindered their understanding and make them lack confidence in the production of language communication. Consequently, they could not get a clear and complete overview of the course and express their ideas during group discussion.

Their religious beliefs also affected their confidence to express their ideas. Some students dared not share all of their ideas due to possible Islam restraints. As mentioned above, southern Muslims have adhered to their ethnic identity very closely. Lewis (1998) stated that "primary" identities can be acquired by blood such as the family, the clan or tribe, and acquired by place such as the village, neighborhood, district or quarter" and added that religion was considered as an attachment between the family and place in identity formation. As a result of this, persisting adherences of the religion of Islam could shape their ideas, beliefs, ways of life, traditions, cultures and lastly identity. This might also possibly lead them to be ethnocentric.

Furthermore, the students had insufficient cultural background so they could not relate their prior knowledge to the new cultural elements. As mentioned above, most local people in the remote southernmost provinces of the nation lack real language learning environments and cultural sources of native speakers of English. This could directly affect their learning outcomes. Generally, people may first think about continuing violence in these border provinces from everyday news reports. Since the unrest situation first took place in 2004, a lot of violent incidents like bomb attacking and daily killing have often occurred. This has affected local people's lives in different aspects especially their educational opportunities. English, also the main foreign language, has been mostly taught by Thai and

non-Thai teachers from the Outer Circle countries. There are only few English-speaking instructors in the area, so the people in the region have little chances to have a real face-to-face communication with native speakers of English. As a result of this, some seem awkward and unconfident to spontaneously communicate with the language they have learned for a long time. Also, learning the western culture seems restricted.

The findings of Liaw (2012) proved that learning authentic English with the native speakers could help students able to present their language ability, compare their own culture with the target culture and finally find similarities and differences between the cultures. Having a native speaker of English as a language teacher can lead students to experience how truly different western manners, etiquettes, festivals and traditions are, however there are some concerns. Palmer (2015)'s study proposed that Western, native English-speaking instructors and their Arab undergraduate students in the UAE confronted with some cultural conflicts in English classes. Inappropriate materials/discussion topics, mixed-gender issues and disrespect for religious customs were three main barriers found during the process of study.

In conclusion, the culture course seems to be a subject that affects the students' eagerness to step out of their world to discover a new one. They can learn both cultural similarities and differences which can make them more flexible to accept and understand foreign people although the latter are different.

This change can urge English teachers, content providers and curriculum designers to take into account the importance of diversity, and cultural sensitivity should be seriously promoted. Although a teacher can lead students to realize the benefits of learning the target language culture, they should be aware of how they express their opinions in terms of different cultural aspects. Cultural sensitivity can imply that people should understand and respect each other's characteristics. Each needs to accept differences and learn to live with them in harmony especially in a multicultural society. Furthermore, it seems useless to compare what culture is better than any other culture. Also, any hate speeches and critics about cultural differences should not be spoken out and publicized.

Lastly, it is showed that the results from this project can reflect why students in the Expanding Circle countries should study the culture of 'other western nations' and finally answer the previous question "Why do I have to study this course?" of the female student in the researcher's class.

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