

WHAT RELEVANCE DOES INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION HAVE TO LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THAILAND?

WARRIN LAOPONGHARN and PETER SERCOMBE

Abstract

This paper argues for the importance of including salient aspects of intercultural communication (ICC) in the teaching of English as a foreign language, with particular reference to pedagogic contexts in Thailand. The paper begins by considering what is meant by intercultural communication and goes on to examine its relevance to language education. It continues by reflecting on the links between language, communication and culture, and then relates these to Thailand, with some examples to illustrate points made. The paper concludes by stressing that increased intercultural communicative competence (ICC competence) is likely to produce more proficient users of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: *Intercultural communication, intercultural communicative competence, teaching English as a foreign language, intercultural speakers, Thailand*

Part 1. Background

1.1 Introduction

English in Thailand is generally seen as a foreign language (EFL) rather than a second language (ESL), partly because Thailand has never been under colonial rule. However, English is increasingly being used in public domains of communication, e.g. administration, education and business. In particular, English is now taught in schools,

mostly from the first year of primary school. Although Thais have a long history of studying English, many demonstrate low degrees of proficiency, particularly in the productive skills of speaking and writing (Wongsothorn *et al.* 2002). It seems that English language pedagogy in Thailand is still in its infancy. In addition, some scholars, e.g. Holliday (1994), Li (1998), Nelson (1998), and Dogancay-Aktuna (2005) point out that in many contexts of language teaching and learning, students seem frustrated and subsequently fail in language learning where the curriculum and teachers fail to take intercultural communication (ICC) into consideration.

However, there appear to be some changes in English language teaching (ELT) generally and these may be filtering into Thailand. Among these changes is the notion that learning English is not simply about acquiring knowledge of its grammatical patterns but, more appropriately, emphasising learning a new language as a means of communication with others, as well as improving understanding of cultures with which learners were previously unfamiliar. Since communication is related to context, and culture is context dependent, communication cannot be culture-free (Cortazzi and Jin 1999). Consequently, it seems undesirable and impractical to separate language learning from learning about target cultures (Robinson 1988; Byram 1989, 1991, 1997; Harrison 1990; Kramsch 1993, 1998; Byram and Zarate 1997; and Baker 2003, 2008). Drawing on the interconnections of language and culture, this interrelationship, evidenced in ICC, will be considered in the Thai context.

According to Lustig and Koester (2006, p.46) ICC refers to ‘a symbolic, interpretative, transactional, contextual process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings’, or at least attempt to. ICC may break down, for example, ‘when large and important cultural differences create dissimilar

interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently' (ibid: p.52), although it is accepted that there are plenty of other definitions of ICC (e.g. Byram 1991; Bennett 1998; Byram and Fleming 1998; and Holliday *et al.* 2004) and these have implications for ways in which one approaches this field. Nonetheless, historically, ICC seems to focus on the purportedly challenging nature of the communicative process between people from different cultural backgrounds as pointed out by Piller (2007), among others. However, misunderstandings may also occur for non-cultural reasons as well as occurring between people from similar language and culture backgrounds.

The purpose of this paper is to provide some insights into the relationship between ICC and language education, in the Thai EFL context, with detailed reference to relevant literature. This paper proposes that the study of ICC should be integrated into EFL instruction in order to help facilitate both language learning and effective communication. Initially, this paper addresses the general relevance of ICC for contemporary education, focusing on ELT in Thailand where a primary goal of EFL learning is meant to result in a Thai learner being able to interact with first language speakers of English, as well as non-first language speakers, e.g. from neighbouring Malaysia (which was a British colony until 1957). This is followed by a discussion of aspects of ICC that can help to enhance the quality of ELT in Thailand. It should be noted that 'foreign language', in this paper, sometimes also includes the notion 'second language'.

1.2 What relevance does Intercultural Communication (ICC) have to contemporary education?

1.2.1 The salience of ICC to ELT

This section intends to show the salience of ICC to ELT. The dichotomy between language and culture no longer seems to be an entrenched feature of foreign language teaching around the world. This is likely to be a result of a greater focus in language learning on both communication and social interaction, in that basic aspirations for many learners include being able to use English authentically. Developments in language pedagogy have been made under Communicative Language Teaching approaches, in which the focus has been on the active use and social characteristics of language, as Kramsch (1993), Byram and Zarate (1997) and Brown (2004) suggest (see Brown 2004 for the case of Thailand). It is therefore worthwhile looking briefly at the notion of communicative competence because it underpins communicative language teaching approaches (see Appendix 1). In the well-known models of Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), communicative competence can also include ‘intercultural communicative competence’ (ICC competence). Communicative competence tends to entail norms of social interaction in one sociocultural community, while ICC competence is concerned with understanding differences in interactional norms between sociocultural groups, so as ‘to reconcile or mediate between different modes present in any specific interaction’ (Byram and Fleming 1998, p.12). Thus, ICC competence, typically applied in studies of communication and social psychology (see Hammer 1989; Kim 1991; Martin 1989; and Wiseman 2002), concerns the ability to create a frame of mutually understood meanings across cultural boundaries (see Appendix 2 for four dimensions of intercultural skills). ICC competence can also be considered part of competence in a foreign language or, as Meyer (1991) puts it,

the ability of a person to behave adequately and in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures. Adequacy and flexibility imply an awareness of the cultural

differences between one's own and the foreign culture and the ability to handle cross-cultural problems. (1991: 137)

This form of competence seems to fit with the concept of 'intercultural speakers' which, according to Byram and Morgan (1994), means those who understand more than one social identity and national culture, and who are capable of engaging in interaction with people from various cultural contexts. This is then the model proposed here and frames the discussion that follows. The following sections now turn to consider some of the issues of the interconnectedness of language and culture, drawing on the relationships between ICC and ELT.

1.2.2 The symbiotic nature of culture and language

"Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture." (Agar 1994, p.28)

A principal aim of ICC pedagogy in relation to ELT is to enable language learners to develop a wider view of cultures and societies in which the language they are learning is used. Byram and colleagues (1994, 1997, 1998), among others (e.g. Kramsch 1993, 1998), have contributed substantially to the study of language and culture, and indicated that it seems difficult for language teaching to occur without teaching about the cultures of the languages being taught, largely because language invariably connects to a speaker's knowledge about and perceptions of the world which are shaped by culture, among other influences. More specifically, to understand a text or an utterance, Thai learners of English should not only learn about relevant 'cultural features' but should also be able to share 'cultural knowledge' evoked by the language being used in the discourse (Byram 1989). This knowledge (*savoir interpretatif*) can help learners in understanding how, for example, a literary text embeds and reflects the cultural positions of its characters (Zarate 1991). On the other hand, in the process

of studying a text, learners will have to deal with their own frames of reference, which may well differ between non-native speakers, such as Thai learners, and native speakers of English. Thai students may approach other cultures from the position of their own Buddhist cultural background, a principal source of knowledge, values, beliefs and behaviour, underpinning Thai society and education (The Dhammakaya Foundation 2005). Saengboon (2004, p.24) states that Thai education seems to value ‘cooperation to preserve a natural, hierarchical, and social order’, which is founded on Theravada Buddhism to which approximately 95% of the population subscribes (O’Sullivan and Tajaroensuk 1997). In this respect, it seems appropriate that English language teachers, both native and non-native, are aware of these influences on language learning in order to enable them to acquire a sufficient understanding of Thai learners’ attitudes towards learning, as suggested by Adamson (2003, 2005) and Brown (2004) (see also a discussion of Buddhist culture in part 2). The process of using and expanding learners’ first culture for interpreting a foreign culture is simply part of their expanding knowledge of the world.

It can be claimed that teaching culture without language is perhaps defective, and separating culture from language teaching seems to imply that a foreign language can be independent of culture. As a result, language learners may assume that a foreign language is an epiphenomenon of their first language, and thus learn and use EFL through the prism of their first culture. Where this occurs, as it does in Thailand (Adamson, 2003, 2005; Brown 2004; and Baker 2008), learners cannot claim that they are learning EFL in the most effective way. They are likely to be learning ‘a codified version of their own language’ (Byram 1991, p.18). In other words, their learning of a foreign language may be an approximation of their own language and culture

acquisition. On the contrary, in primary and secondary socialisation, as Byram (1997; 2008) and Wiseman and Koester (1993) argue, if learners' schemata can be added to, they are likely to develop their ability to investigate new cultural phenomena, and thereby acquire higher levels of ICC competence.

Moreover, cultural differences in terms of learners' and other cultures can be addressed directly. Kramsch (1993) highlights the potential social and cultural conflicts that can arise from personal meanings individual learners or teachers are attempting to convey, and the social context in which the meanings are carried. In other words, it is necessary that teachers recognise 'culture lessons to be learned for what they are ... making the most of them enhances the learning experience' (Valdes, 1990, p.20). Therefore, part of a teacher's responsibility is to 'teach culture as it is mediated through language' (Kramsch 1998, p.31). Promoting intercultural speakers tends to allow language teachers to see themselves as 'brokers between cultures' (ibid, p.30), and they may find that they 'learn as much as their students' (Dunnett *et al.* 1986, p.156). Teachers can also take other aspects of culture, such as age, gender, class and ethnicity into account, since these factors can have an effect on learners' interpretation of discourses. If teachers are prepared to include explicitly aspects of culture in language lessons, from both learners' and others' cultures, this may lessen conflict and misunderstandings that can arise in interpreting a text or an utterance in ICC encounters.

In summary, it is not intended that learners should imitate native speakers of a target language and culture, but rather they can study target cultures related to a language they learn or of the interlocutors with whom they wish to communicate. Since a language cannot be fully learned without an understanding of the cultural

contexts in which it is used, it seems fundamental that language learners are also culture learners. By using the foreign language as a medium for extending socialisation and acculturation of learners, the integration of language and culture is a process that can develop ICC competence.

1.2.3 The interconnected nature of communication and culture

“Communication is inseparable from culture.” (Agar 2007, p.13)

Perhaps it is the development of ICC competence that can help ensure learners have the requisite pragmatic knowledge and skills for successful communication in intercultural contexts. With ever-increasing globalisation in international business, the increasing movement of people around the world, and with English, rather than the official language of Thailand (Standard Thai), as the (inter)national language of tourism, music and the media, the need to mediate between languages and cultures seems to be on the rise, which appears to make the study of ICC even more relevant nowadays. This is likely to lead to new notions of transnational and intercultural literacy which recognise that ‘communication with others who do not share our background’ and ‘exposure to and contact with other modes of thinking’ (Cook-Gumperz 1986, p. 43) are becoming more common in our lives.

Consequently, one of the tasks of language teachers is to guide their students to achieve not only linguistic competence but also ICC competence. Nevertheless, it should be noted that language teachers are not expected to teach only a specific society and culture. An emphasis should be placed on developing language learners’ own awareness of the nature of intercultural interaction, as well as skills and competences that can enable them to enquire into different beliefs, values, cultural differences and practices with which they were previously unfamiliar. In other words,

it is fundamental that learners' understanding of the nature of ICC (itself) as well as intercultural interaction be made explicit, as far as possible. This can enable learners to look beyond English in order to consider how the language is used within a broader cultural framework (Bowers, 1986). Bowers (ibid), in fact, seems to reject the notions of language that ignore the social and cultural contexts of language use, and the learning objectives of language that disregard ICC.

It can be argued that a failure in language use can arise, as much if not more, from a lack of cultural knowledge, rather than a lack of language knowledge, according to a study by Xiao and Petraki (2007). They observe that non-native speakers can show inappropriate language behaviour and be unaware of what they have done, leading to sociopragmatic failure, a mismatch arising from cross-cultural differences, and a breakdown in communication (Thomas 1983; Xiao and Petraki 2007). It seems that through knowledge of ICC, learners are able to enhance their interpersonal and interactional effectiveness. To meet the goal of being intercultural speakers, it seems salient that Thai learners of English acknowledge the importance of ICC and intercultural awareness, benefiting not only those students who are planning to study abroad and need to adapt to a new cultural environment but also those who live in Thailand and who may have a chance to engage in international business and communication where English may often be the preferred medium of interaction.

In sum, raising awareness of ICC seems to be an efficient way to avoid culture shocks and misunderstanding due to the lack of intercultural awareness, and to promote effective relationships and interactions among people from various cultures. Such knowledge could enable learners to accomplish their goals in ICC. Overall, developing learners' skills in ICC can be appropriate as part of language pedagogy,

which is to say a worthy aim of education in general. Thus under Thai circumstances the disciplines of ICC concerned with language and culture seem to be urgently required.

Part 2. How can aspects of ICC help enhance the quality of language education in Thailand?

2.1 The aim of this section is to demonstrate how Thai learners and teachers of English can benefit from ICC in ELT, given the support for ICC as a fundamental component of language learning and teaching as, for example, Rampton (1990), Byram (1991, 1997, 2008), Prodromou (1992), Byram and Zarate (1997), Byram and Fleming (1998), Kramsch (1998), Nelson (1998), Cortazzi and Jin (1999), Modiano (2001), Alptekin (2002), Davcheva (2003), Tsou (2005) and Nault (2006), among others, propose,

While it is possible for the study of ICC and English language to be studied independently (cf. Alptekin and Alptekin 1984), there are obvious advantages for the relationship between ICC and English language teaching and learning to be made integral and explicit, as is examined in the following discussion.

2.2 ICC and cultural awareness

One of the components of the notion of ICC competence is cultural awareness, which involves not only some understanding of cultural features associated with the language being studied but also of learners' own cultures. In other words, English can be taught in relation to Thai culture, since Thailand has a range of different beliefs, value systems and educational doctrines to those of English speaking countries. Cultural awareness can, for example, include knowing something of the practices linked to food, clothes, greetings, pastimes, forms of politeness, and so on, as manifestations of cultures in learning a language and its communicative functions (Jones, 2000). Key features for gaining cultural awareness, according to Baker (2008),

include knowledge of and about roles of culture in communication, the nature of cultural norms, and the kinds of relations that exist between people and cultures.

There is an increasingly wide range of intercultural contexts of English language use and a greater awareness of cultural diversity is useful for Thai learners. Kramsch (1993), Zarate (1995) and Byram (1997) point out that cultural awareness and the learning of a foreign language seem to enable learners to attain greater language proficiency since culture tends to permeate, implicitly or explicitly, spoken and written language as dimensions of social interaction. Another advantage of stimulating awareness is that it can enable learners to predict, tentatively, where problems might occur during the process of ICC and, thus, to circumvent or avoid such difficulties. Adamson (2003, 2005) suggests that, in Thailand, language teachers and learners' own cultures can provide a background for learning about other cultures and styles of communication. With regard to this, the following strategies present a range of opportunities for Thai people to raise their awareness of ICC:

- a. The more that Thais can articulate their own cultures, the more likely they are to recognise similarities and differences between Thai and other cultures. As stated earlier, Thailand is a predominantly Buddhist nation, so the role of Buddhism could be taken into account as part of ELT in the Thai context (see Brown 2004 for a discussion of Buddhist teachings relevant to ELT in Thailand).
- b. Thai learners of English can approach other cultures explicitly in order to build cultural awareness in many possible ways such as through:
 1. English textbooks: most of the language textbooks used in classrooms are likely to be imported from native-speaking countries of English (Greil 2004), and may

be used as sources of cultural representations and references and compared to their own cultures in order to increase intercultural awareness.

2. Media and arts: there are a variety of English language media both local and international, e.g. TV programmes, newspapers, magazines and films, that can be exploited for their cultural content.

3. Electronic media, e.g. Internet resources, e-mail, chatrooms, etc.: they can provide direct communication with participants of other cultures, both native and non-native speakers of English, which can provide intercultural experiences for Thai students.

4. Thai or native language teachers: on the one hand, students might have direct experience in studying the language with native speakers of English who can present information about their respective cultures, as well as being cultural representatives themselves. On the other hand, students may learn English with Thai teachers who have had experience in studying or living in English-speaking countries, and who can be informants providing students with intercultural perspectives.

A study of ICC by Wannaruk (2008) reveals that there can occur, for example, sociopragmatic failures between Thai EFL graduates, Thai EFL teachers and native speakers of American English in speech acts of refusals. Al-Issa (2003) also suggests that refusals can be more complex when social factors, including age, gender, education, social distance and power are salient. Thai people seem to face certain problems in attempting to use English refusals appropriately; for instance, if they express gratitude while rejecting offers or invitations, Thai people are likely to use less language than American speakers of English. Moreover, utterances such as: 'Sorry. Now I don't have enough time'; or 'I will next time' (Wannaruk 2008, p.330),

can be seen as sociocultural or pragmatic transfers directly from L1: *aw wai khraw nah*, which would employ the strategy ‘future acceptance’ in Thai and may lead to ICC failure. For example, some native speakers of English may find such utterances impolite, they may appear somewhat over-assertive and direct.

To summarise, a variety of opportunities for learning English in Thailand can give new perspectives to cultural features embedded in the English language, and allow Thai teachers and learners a chance to engage in ICC practice and thus stimulate awareness of different sociocultural norms in ICC, while being cautious of stereotyping cultures and peoples associated with them.

2.3 ICC, face and politeness

One would expect EFL textbooks to reflect a diversity of cultural contexts and to include intercultural components that can raise Thai learners’ awareness of intercultural issues and thereby involve them in communicating effectively and appropriately in a wide range of ICC situations. In English language textbooks, for example, issues relating to ‘face’ and ‘politeness’ can be raised, as these are highly salient aspects of social interaction in, for instance, negotiating requests or refusals. Specific strategies people use are likely to be shaped and modified by cultural values (Saville-Troike 2003; Myers-Scotton 2006; and Samovar *et al.* 2007).

Corpus-based research by Prodromou (2003, 2005) reveals that the speech of native speakers of English can be distinguished from that of advanced non-native successful users of English (SUEs), by the presence or absence of core chunks. There are a number of clusters in English; items, such as ‘and things like that’, ‘that sort of thing’, ‘you know’, seem to enable native interactants to make deictic references without having to be explicit because they can assume discourse participants share

cultural knowledge or have viewpoints and experiences in common, to complete oblique references. In English, an absence of vague language and fillers can make utterances appear blunt and pedantic (McCarthy and Carter 2002; and Evison *et al.* 2007). Moreover, some chunks, e.g. ‘I don’t know if...’, ‘do you think’, can play an important role in the protection of face, and can thus make discourse seem less assertive (and, hence, more polite), in certain contexts.

O’Keeffe (2003) and Adolphs (2008) argue that it seems to be pragmatic categories, the different ways of understanding speaker meanings in context, rather than syntactic or semantic functions, that show the value of repeated use of ‘chunks’ (such as those given above). Thai learners of English might not understand hidden meanings conveyed in discourse, and wonder why a speaker says: ‘I don’t know’. This might support Clyne’s (1993, p.958) claim that ‘cultural value systems play an important role in patterns of communication across different cultures’. In Thai cultures there seem to be ways of showing interpersonal politeness and face-saving that can sometimes be at odds with politeness forms employed in English. To be polite, Thais may express an utterance, usually with an accompanying explanation, as well as showing empathy with their addressee(s) through non-verbal communication. In expressing refusals, some Thai people might say, succinctly: ‘Sorry, I can’t help you today’, as this is an adequate form of refusal in many contexts. In some ICC situations, this might seem less than polite. According to O’Sullivan and Tajaroensuk (1997), Thai people may place high value on the attitude *krang jai* (literally ‘constricted heart’), which describes being considerate. For this reason, Thais may feel *krang jai* when seeking someone’s help; if they really need help, they may give an indirect indication, through hints, allowing another person the opportunity to offer his/her

assistance instead, such that help comes as an offer (from the helper), rather than a request from the person seeking assistance. In Thai society, for example, senior students are expected to help their juniors; when juniors request help, a senior should not refuse (Wannaruk 2008). When requests are refused, however, Wannaruk's (ibid) research suggests that senior Thai students may maintain relations by offering juniors some help in the future. Thus deferral can and does minimise the impact of refusal in Thai contexts.

In addition, Thai students' silence in ICC can be attributed to strategies of face-saving and politeness. Silence as a feature of Thai students' behaviour in classroom activities is another area of potential intercultural misunderstanding, in that Thai learners may appear passive, possibly leading to a negative stereotype of Thai students (Adamson 2005). This kind of behaviour may arise from the Buddhist belief of showing respect to seniors (The Dhammakaya Foundation 2005). Teachers in Thai society are generally ascribed high status, and viewed as givers of knowledge, while learners are considered inexperienced and less knowledgeable. Therefore, Thai learners may be reluctant to express opinions and ask questions of teachers in classroom contexts, for fear of appearing to challenge their positions of authority, displaying a lack of etiquette, and showing disrespect (cf. Liu 2001).

ICC breakdowns are probably more likely in instances where face and politeness are significant; and a lack of ICC knowledge is a potential cause for estrangement in intercultural contacts. 'When two participants differ in their assessment of face strategies, it will tend to be perceived as a difference in power,' as Scollon and Scollon (2001, p.58) claim. This means characteristics of communication of face are likely to make it inevitable that power has some part to play in the

expression of politeness. Communication difficulties indicate that knowledge of ICC may be relevant for language learners to become competent EFL users (see, for example, Wierzbicka 2006).

It can be argued that Thai learners of English should develop broader sets of face-saving and politeness strategies in order to try to ensure successful interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. As mentioned, it is not being proposed that Thai learners should become clones of native speakers of English; rather they need to learn pragmatic aspects of language use in order to know and be able to employ cultural awareness in the target language.

Part 3. Conclusion

The paper has underlined the importance of ICC in the study of EFL, with reference to the Thai context. By presenting Thai learners of English with an opportunity to increase their understanding of the relationships between language, communication and culture in the process of language learning, this can enable them to link their acquisition of language skills with their understanding of target cultures. Thus, successful learners of EFL, as is argued here, can widen their existing horizons, rooted in Buddhist culture, as well as increasing their knowledge and functional competence in other cultures. It seems reasonable to include among language teaching goals the study of ICC in order to inform ELT in Thailand and help Thai learners to become interculturally competent users of EFL. Such an approach might help Thai students become more efficient interpreters of the utterances of their English-speaking interlocutors, as well as users of EFL. To meet this end, teachers of English can

embrace the value of ICC competence, and try to enable students to become more proficient users of the target language, surely the ultimate goal of EFL pedagogy.

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Appendix 1

Communicative competence

Hymes' theory (1972) of communicative competence comprises four basic types of knowledge related to the interaction of grammatical, psycholinguistic, sociocultural and probabilistic systems of competence. Hymes' model therefore recognises not only linguistic competence but also the social and pragmatic context of language use. Since then, attempts have been made to specify the components of communicative competence and their role in language performance, to implement changes in language teaching and testing. One of the most influential theories in applied linguistics was proposed by Canale and Swain (1980); the theoretical framework underlying their model of communicative competence consists of three fundamental aspects of knowledge:

1. grammatical competence: knowledge of lexis, syntax, morphology, phonology
2. sociolinguistic competence: knowledge of sociocultural rules and rules of discourse in terms of appropriateness in different circumstances and a variety of topics
3. strategic competence: verbal and non-verbal communication strategies which occur when there is a breakdown in communication due to lack of competence or varying degrees of fluency.

Discourse competence, the fourth component which was later included by Canale (1983), is relevant to the knowledge of how to construct sentences with cohesion and coherence.

Appendix 2

Four categories of intercultural skills

There are four dimensions of sociocultural competence, according to Byram and Zarate (1997: 14-21), that language learners need to develop as part of intercultural communicative competence, as follows:

1. Attitudes and values (*savoir-être*): an affective capacity to relinquish ethnocentric attitudes towards and perceptions of others and a cognitive ability to establish and maintain a relationship between native cultures and foreign cultures

2. The ability to learn (*savoir-apprendre*): a capacity to devise and operate an interpretative system which sheds light on unknown cultural meanings, beliefs and practices associated with either a familiar or a new language and culture

3. Knowledge (*savoirs*): a system of cultural references which structures implicit and explicit knowledge gained in linguistic and cultural learning, taking into consideration the needs of learners in their interaction with their interlocutors. This skill tends to rely on the learning of the target language and a specific context of use

4. Know-how (*savoir-faire*): an ability to combine the three skills in particular situations of bicultural contact, that is, between the culture(s) of the learner and of the target language.

About the authors

Warrin Laopongharn (warrin.laopongharn@ncl.ac.uk) is a second year Integrated PhD student in Educational and Applied Linguistics at the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, at Newcastle University. Her research interests include corpus-based approaches to language teaching and learning in both spoken and written language, and approaches to intercultural communication (ICC) in ELT. She is specifically looking to investigate how all these issues fit in the Thai context.

Peter Sercombe (peter.sercombe@ncl.ac.uk) is a lecturer in Applied Linguistics, at Newcastle University. He has taught mainly in Brunei, Malaysia, Turkey and the UK. His academic research interests are mainly in sociolinguistics, and Austronesian languages and cultures.