

A Clash of Learning Cultures? Expatriate TEFL Teachers in Brunei Darussalam

MARY F NICOL

Department of English and Applied Linguistics
Universiti Brunei Darussalam
gordon_nicol@hotmail.com

Abstract

There has been concern in recent years over the poor performance of the Cambridge O level English language paper of students in Brunei. Previous investigation of the problem reveals repeated concerns expressed by expatriate EFL teachers over, amongst other issues, a clash of values encountered particularly at the institutional level. This study seeks to uncover the nature of the clash and to consider whether it is an obstacle to improving the English language learning situation in Brunei. A group of expatriate teachers was surveyed and took part in a focus group discussion. The findings suggest that a clash of learning cultures exists, but within the classroom, and is manageable. In contrast, a picture emerges of a more intractable clash at the institutional level, which could be one of the factors hampering the effective learning of English in schools in Brunei.

Introduction

It has been for some years now a common practice for countries in the Asia Pacific region to introduce, into their schools methodologies, materials and sometimes teachers who are products of the Western learning culture. These are transplanted with the aim of giving local school students what is hoped to be the best possible opportunity to develop their English language skills. The methodologies and materials would have been developed in the West, with the learning culture of that part of the world in mind, and the teachers would share the values of that

culture. The question arises of what happens when the imports have to interact with a very different local learning culture? A number of studies explore the implications of transplanting materials and methodologies (e.g. Hu., 2002; Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). This study aims to explore the problems that arise with expatriate teachers in Brunei. It looks at the situation from their perspective only and therefore only tells one half of the story. These teachers, like most EFL teachers, come from a learning culture that is very different from that to which their students belong, and will therefore bring with them very different views and expectations of the language learning process. These differences could become obstacles to progress in their classrooms (Jin and Cortazzi, 1998). Research on mismatched cultures of learning has often focused on the different learning/teaching styles favoured in different cultural settings (e.g. Hu, 2002; Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Ha, 2004; Dogancay-Atkuna, 2005), and specifically on how this clash might play out in the classroom. This study, on the other hand, will focus on a clash that takes place outside the classroom, yet may well have a negative effect on the learning process.

English language teaching in Brunei Darussalam

Currently, Brunei has around 800 English language teachers, of whom around 200 are expatriates. Most of them are native speakers from Western countries, mainly the UK and Australia. Since 1985, the Centre for British Teachers has been recruiting such teachers on the government's behalf and a smaller number are recruited directly by the government. The Centre for British Teachers has been influential in highlighting the need for EFL specialists and Universiti Brunei Darussalam has been producing local graduates with a TESL specialization since the 1990's. In Brunei schools, students currently follow a bilingual programme of education, which was set up in 1985, with English being the main medium of instruction from late primary school onwards. Students take the Brunei Cambridge English Language O Level paper and the results have been very disappointing over the last twenty years or so. In March, 2003, the then acting minister of Education was reported in the local press (Azaraimy, 2003) as saying that over the previous five

years, the average rate of success (i.e. a credit or above) had only been 12.8%. There had not, then, been a significant improvement since 1984 and 1985 when the success rate had been 10-12.5%. This is despite the efforts that had been made to remedy the situation in the intervening years, e.g. the provision of native speaker and or TESL trained specialist teachers, the commissioning of text books specially written for Brunei since 1991 as well as other improvements.

All of this means that English teachers in Brunei are operating under a lot of pressure. While a certain amount of attention has been focused on the problems arising from concerns over the suitability of the exam as well as the poor exam results (e.g. Bourke, 1999; Nicol, 2004/5), it is possible that there are other factors that hamper the progress of Bruneian learners of English (e.g. Saxena, 2007). For example there are a number of significant “mismatches” between the various elements in the English language learning situation in Brunei. On the one hand, there is a somewhat outdated exam being taught by teachers (both local and expatriate) trained in contemporary Western EFL methodologies. There are text books and teaching materials in use that attempt to meet the expectations of current views on language learning, yet at the same time defer to more traditional Asian values as well as to Islamic sensitivities. Added to this is the fact that the learning process takes place in local schools that are managed by administrators with a fairly conservative, traditional view of education, and in which teachers of other subjects may also take quite conservative approaches (Ghadessy & Nicol, 2002; Saxena, 2007). The wider society, in which these schools operate, whilst placing great value on education continues to place considerable trust in traditional approaches to learning (e.g. Jones, 1992). All of this is unlikely to match the attitudes and values held by recently trained EFL specialists, whether expatriate or local. The result of these mismatches is a situation rife with the potential for misunderstandings and resentments. In the midst of this, the students must struggle to learn, coping with different approaches as they pass from one style of teaching to another during their school career and sometimes during a single school day.

In the course of research done over the last three years, a number of both expatriate and local EFL teachers, working in Brunei classrooms, have been surveyed and interviewed (Nicol, 2004). The teachers expressed strong concerns about the suitability of the O level examination and the disappointing level of English achieved by the students at upper secondary level. While this view was very much in the foreground, there was nonetheless a strong view amongst the expatriate teachers that there was a further obstacle to the learning of English in local schools. (What follows is written from their point of view. Obviously there is another view of the situation, but this has yet to be investigated). This was harder to pin down, but centred on the fact that the values held by school administrators and inspectors differed significantly from their own beliefs. This was a clash that was possibly hindering progress in their classrooms. This study aims to examine their claims more closely, and to answer the following questions:

- 1) Is there a clash of learning/teaching style that causes problems for teachers and students in classrooms in Brunei, and how well is this resolved?
- 2) Does a similar clash of values and beliefs about learning take place outside the classroom and how well is this resolved?

Methodology

Participants

A small number of expatriate EFL teachers took part in the study. A small group was preferred as it was felt that it would be easier to get participants to reflect in depth on their answers. In all, seven teachers completed a survey and six of them attended a focus group a week later. The teachers involved came from three different schools in the capital and did not know each other beforehand. They were all expatriate native speakers with a strong EFL background (i.e. qualifications at the Masters or Postgraduate Diploma level in addition to experience in other countries). They had spent an average of three years in Brunei. Six of the seven were women.

Research instruments

- a) A survey was used to:
 - i) establish that the group shared with one another similar core beliefs about language learning and teaching.
 - ii) confirm that the teachers had experience of different learning cultures from previous postings, and therefore had something with which to compare their experiences in Brunei.
 - iii) identify problems they encountered with the learning culture in the classroom in Brunei, at the institutional level and in the wider social setting generally.

- b) A Focus Group Discussion was held in the evening about one week after the survey was completed. It was held in a neutral location and lasted about 45 minutes.

The focus group discussion allowed participants to interact with each other as well as with the researcher to “reveal insights that might otherwise have remained hidden” (Ho, 2006). The focus group format enabled participants to build on, refine, clarify and support one another’s contributions, and they were able to “pursue their own priorities on their own terms and in their own vocabulary” (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). In short, this was an attempt to get to the bottom of comments and answers offered in the survey and informal conversations.

The findings

- a) From the Survey
 - i) Core beliefs in contrast with the local learning culture
Participants exhibited strong agreement with one another and basically described a learner-centred approach, placing great value on learners being actively engaged, materials and tasks being meaningful, and the environment being supportive of individual effort, regardless of exam success or otherwise. However, they perceived the local learning culture as having more or less the opposite values, perhaps

the phenomenon of “othering” described by Palfreyman (2005). The local learning culture was perceived as teacher-centred, dominated by a dull, outdated and inappropriately difficult exam, and very product/result oriented. Details of other perceived differences are listed in Appendix I.

ii) Teachers’ experiences in other postings.

Previous postings of the participants had been in a variety of countries i.e. Hong Kong, Romania, Japan, Swaziland and Jordan, as well as teaching immigrants and Aborigine students in Australia. Problems mentioned in these postings include the imposition of exams, teaching materials, methodologies, syllabus etc, inefficient administration, poor resources and cultural differences, all of which also feature in the list of problems they experienced in Brunei. However, all agreed that they found more obstacles to smooth progress in their present posts. They were asked to score all their postings on a scale of 1-5 for the amount of negative impact the local learning culture had on both them and their students. All rated the Brunei job as being around 20% more negative and difficult than previous postings. The question of why this should be the case was taken up during the focus group discussion.

iii) Problems with the Brunei learning culture

A number of problems were identified at both the classroom and the institutional level, with fewer mentioned at the level of the broader society (see Appendix II for lists). The focus group discussion would allow teachers to explore their reactions to the problems.

b) From the focus group discussion

Discussion mainly explored the problems encountered with the local learning culture as manifested at the classroom, institutional and wider social levels.

i) Clash of cultures within the classroom

Teachers agreed they had adapted their style of teaching in a number of ways, for example accepting less oral interaction of any kind as well as a greater focus on writing and grammatical accuracy, spending more time adapting unsuitable materials, and generally providing their students with an unnaturally high level of support to enable students to appear to be coping with unrealistic demands. They also described giving less time and attention than they considered appropriate to student needs and more to administrative requirements. However, generally the language in the part of the transcript, where they talk about their students and the classroom, is positive. (Sections in italics are quoted from the transcript of the discussion.)

“...there’s a naivety and responsiveness you don’t get in our hardened cynical old western classrooms...”

The only criticisms of students concerned their willingness to copy from the whiteboard, or from one another, and their unwillingness to take risks or question anything.

“...so whereas I guess we’re used to students in western culture who will take a chance...they don’t lose so much if they’re wrong...”

However, they all described some success in getting their students to go along with more learner centered approaches, with the general feeling that the older students were more willing to adapt.

“...they don’t mind pair work, everybody’s got a friend...”

“...they all go into groups and they’re happy and they work....”

“...I find that fine and they love it....”

In short, they describe the building of bridges rather than meeting barriers, with teachers and students adapting to one another's ways and neither side totally rejecting the other side's beliefs. Each side is able to assimilate something of the other group's culture without feeling that their own beliefs are threatened. While the two cultures of learning differ from one another, it seems it is not impossible to find mutually acceptable common ground.

- ii) At the institutional level
- a) Policy makers

The participants spent some time considering their perceptions of the policy makers. The language in this part of the transcript is neutral and uncertain. On the one hand there was a feeling that the policy makers shared some of the values of the teachers and this set up expectations about how things would be in schools. These expectations tended to turn out to be false.

".....I know I heard a speech by somebody in the ministry, I don't know who he was, making all the right noises about creativity..... which is totally not practiced in schools."

However, on the other hand, they felt that policy makers must see that what was happening in schools did not seem to match the rhetoric:

".....I don't know whether it's right at the top in the ministry, because I'm not sure that the people right at the top know what goes on in the classroom...."

".... but they must see the conditions in the school and...."

"...somebody's got to be aware..."

"....remember when he came? There are levels of the school that they wouldn't let him go near..."

There was a feeling that when the policy makers used terminology familiar to the teachers either the policy makers had a different view of what the terms meant, or alternatively the terms were interpreted differently by school administrators.

b) School administrators and inspectors

By far the biggest clash comes with administrators in schools and representatives of the inspectorate. The language in this part of the transcript is very negative. The major grievances were as follows:

i) Job insecurity

“.....there’s a continual pressure that kind of tends to build...a fear, yes, about the contract....that it doesn’t matter whether you do right or wrong...it could be one little thing, just like that.....”

ii) Layers of scrutiny

“...I’m very uncomfortable with the system of assessing us...”

“...it can be very frustrating....it’s like being in a straitjacket isn’t it?”

“...like I’m down to have something like six observations in the next two weeks...I mean, please...I’m kind of on the edge of madness...”

“.....I’ve never minded people coming in.. .but you get the feeling that they’re just looking for that thing....to get you.... they’re not looking for....”

iii) Clash of values

A further aspect of this situation is that teachers feel that their true worth (i.e. their work in the classroom) is seriously undervalued by administrators. This seems to contrast with their experiences elsewhere.

“...90% of it is not about your teaching...” “...totally obsessed with the record book...”

“...there’s no recognition of your professionalism...”

“...in other places...I had much more control over what happened in my classroom...”

“...yeah in other places we could teach round all that and you could be yourself...”

“...you felt very valued for your experience...”

iv) They often feel isolated in their schools

“...we felt isolated and, you know, under a lot of pressure...”

“...we are separated, we are isolated and we don’t have the opportunity to really get together...”

“... it’s the level of control in our school, it’s a divide and conquer,...we are literally separated,...we are physically separated as well..”

v) Concern with appearances

This feature of the local school culture was returned to many times during the discussion in connection with a range of topics and was always mentioned in contrast to the teachers’ own values.

“...the value of what we do is so minimal compared to ...as long as it looks good...”

“... as long as it looks beautiful, what goes in it is basically rubbish (the record book)...”

“... they only pay lip service to English in schools.....no signs, no notices, no announcements....., assemblies in Malay...”

“.....It looks OK but it’s just not true....”

“...I think that’s what gets me....that it’s just a show,...it’s like a ceremony”

“...again, it’s a show..... it’s used for meetings, for makans, for exhibitions, talking to students. It’s not used for reading or looking for reference materials...” (the library)

“...it’s appearances again, isn’t it.....it looks like a library...’

“...it’s lip service to reading culture without providing the structure for it to actually happen...”

The cumulative effect of these grievances was to compound pressure and lower morale.

“.....sometimes you’re on the edge of giving up and becoming totally disheartened....”

“.....this is the thing I find so demoralizing...’

“...I’m very uncomfortable with it....”

“...I get the feeling they don’t really want us here.....they’ll be very glad to see the back of us....we are barely tolerated....”

vi) Wider social setting

A lack of reading culture and lack of parental support were the main issues raised as well as the students’ lack of real world knowledge and experience and complacency about their future.

The teachers’ understanding of the local learning culture

The group spent a considerable proportion of the discussion time (20%) exploring their understanding of the local learning culture. They acknowledged that they were looking at the situation from a Western perspective and that this was not the best way to make sense of it. Their main conclusions were:

- i) They felt that Brunei had a long tradition of very strong community ties and jointly held values which has a strong influence on schools to this day. This was something they felt had been lost in modern

Western society. In fact, they viewed this feature positively and found it helpful in understanding the local culture. They agreed that the fact that the education system did not have a long history was also a factor.

“.....and I think that if we imagined...that if we imagined our school as being in a village, a lot of things would perhaps make a lot more sense....”

- ii) They mentioned the false expectations raised by the fact that Brunei was undoubtedly wealthy and had the appearance of being a modern society, but in fact its education system was relatively young and perhaps not yet fully developed:

“...Well, we look at the buildings and we know in our minds that Brunei is a very rich country and so we immediately have expectations, but I think if we took away those expectations some things would start to ”

“..sometimes we forget that education system hasn't been up and running all that long..”

- iii) They acknowledged that schools had a role in promoting social unity and inculcating the values of the wider community and of national importance. Politically, it would be important for Brunei to avoid having too much dissent from educated young people.

“.....as I say, any education system's political and there's often reasons why the education system is the way it is.....so maybe a political perspective would help to explain some of the difficulties we have.”

- iv) They felt some problems were a result of a situation where students stayed on in school, but were not being prepared for a normal range of vocations. To some extent it was felt that students and parents had false expectations of what the school system had to offer them.

“... it’s a social control thing because there is nothing else for these kids to do... there is no other avenue.....that vocational stuff is just not there.....so while they have this thing about O levels the reality is something completely different.....”

Discussion

As the introduction of Western methodologies, teaching materials, and teachers has resulted in a number of mismatches between different elements in the English language teaching situation in Brunei, this study aimed to examine the clash between the learning culture of the teacher and the prevailing local learning culture both within the classroom and at the institutional level. To address the research questions specifically:

i) The clash of learning cultures in the classroom

The study confirms that the expatriate EFL teachers bring with them to their posting a shared set of beliefs and values about how languages are best taught and learnt. These teachers tend to view the local learning culture in Brunei as consisting of features that are very much the opposite of their own values. The teachers in this study accept it as normal that, with overseas postings, this type of clash is likely to occur and that they will have to adapt in response. They make adjustments on the pedagogical front to accommodate the local learning culture, partly, by accepting changes in conflict with their own views, and partly, through negotiation with their students, having some success in persuading their students to try doing things differently. This supports the findings of Littlewood (2000), which indicate that Asian learners are more open to accepting Western classroom practices than was previously thought. (His study included some students from Brunei). The typical Brunei learner will pass through the hands of a number of different teachers during his/her progress through the school system, and perhaps, as a result, will become more open to other approaches to language teaching and learning. This is similar to the “accommodation” described in McDevitt (2004)

although she cautions that this is harder to achieve in societies where to give way is seen as to lose face. And also seems to bear out the claim of the “inherently dynamic nature of (sub) cultures (Guest, 2002; Littlewood, 2002 cited in Dogancay-Atkuna, 2005). At this level then the clash seems to be handled successfully or at least this was not the main focus of teacher concern.

ii) The clash of learning cultures at the institutional level

The teachers made efforts to understand the local learning culture, including those aspects that caused them most frustration, and even identified a few areas judged superior to their own. Many of the difficulties they faced in Brunei were ones they had dealt with in previous jobs. Yet this posting was more problematic for them and distinctly negative feelings simmered.

Examining their experiences in Brunei led them to consider that the problem may lie at least partly with the expectations they had of Brunei being a wealthy, developed and modern country, the expectations raised by hearing policy makers use a discourse suggesting familiar values, and perhaps even the presence of an organization like CfBT. The clash with administrators differs from the clash in the classroom in that, for some reason, neither side seemed willing to accommodate the other's values. It seems that administrators remain faithful to traditional educational values, while the students, perhaps as a result of first hand experience of other approaches, are more open to change. The expatriate teachers find ways to accommodate the values of their students, but, for some reason, struggle to do the same with the school administrators.

This study did not set out to discover the views of the local administrators regarding this situation, but further study should be undertaken to uncover them. However, an earlier study of organization in a Brunei educational institution (Blunt, 1988) found features of the local culture that coincide with some of the findings of this study. For example, Blunt found that the Brunei culture shows “a high level of power distance” (as defined by Hofstede, 1980 cited in Blunt, 1988). In other words authority is not normally questioned and there may be

low levels of trust. This is confirmed by the comments teachers made in this study. Another feature identified by Blunt is “strong uncertainty avoidance” defined as a dislike of unstructured, unclear or unpredictable situations, often resulting in the adoption of “strict codes of behaviour and attention to detail”. Again, this was one of the main grievances noted by teachers in this study.

A study by Tomlinson (1990) describing efforts to alter the way English is learnt in Indonesian classrooms found that although local teachers and their students took on new approaches with some success, there was considerable opposition to new practices from school administrators who feared that any changes might undermine exam performance, cause students to deviate from “the norms of school culture” or in some other way be “socially pollutive”.

There is evidence here of a similar and potentially damaging clash on the administrative rather than the pedagogical front, with teachers expressing deep frustration and insecurities, feeling not only isolated in their schools, but under threat, under scrutiny and under-valued by the school administrators. It may be that there is a clash of learning cultures at work in schools in Brunei, being played out not so much between teachers and students, but rather between teachers and administrators. The concern is that this could be one of the factors hampering the learning of English in the schools in Brunei.

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Appendix I

Main differences between teachers' learning culture and host learning culture as perceived by expatriate teachers

EFL Teacher Culture	Local Learning Culture (as perceived by EFL teachers)
1. Expect a more democratic approach i.e. discussion with/ feedback to decision makers	Autocratic approach. Teachers expected to comply unquestioningly with decisions taken by superiors/ administrators.
2. <u>Expect focus to be strongly on students</u> , their learning and the teaching process	<u>Focus often seems to be elsewhere</u> e.g. on appearances, making classrooms look nice, an overemphasis on record keeping
3. Believe <u>feedback to students should be constructive</u> e.g. positive comments, recognition of progress	<u>Numerical feedback preferred.</u> Main interest exam results/ statistics
4. Concerned with the <u>individual</u>	Concerned with the <u>community</u>
5. View education as a <u>process</u>	Concerned with the <u>product</u> (exam results)
6. High value placed on <u>oral work and reading</u> in language learning	Little value placed on anything other than <u>written work</u>

Appendix II

Problems identified by teachers,

a) at the classroom level:

- an inappropriate and difficult exam
- poor resources/facilities
- passive and dependent style of learning
- large classes and tired students
- poorly motivated students

b) at the institutional level:

- unrealistic targets and expectations set
- unpredictable interruptions and inefficiency
- no flexibility for teachers to make decisions
- lack of support for teachers
- low status of English within the school
- clash of values (see Appendix I)

c) at the wider social level:

- lack of parental support
- lack of reading culture
- lack of world knowledge on part of students
- complacency among students about their future
- social conventions e.g. making girls sit at the back of the class