

The Perspectives of Foreign Language Teaching Assistants  
(FLTAs) from Southeast Asia towards the Classroom  
Culture of the Higher Education in the U.S.  
มุมมองของผู้ช่วยสอนภาษาต่างประเทศจาก  
เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ที่มีต่อวัฒนธรรมในชั้นเรียน  
ระดับอุดมศึกษาในประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา

*Piyathida Sereebenjapol*<sup>1</sup>

**บทคัดย่อ**

การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายในการศึกษามุมมองของผู้ช่วยสอนภาษาต่างประเทศ โดยเฉพาะจากเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ ที่มีต่อวัฒนธรรมในชั้นเรียนระดับอุดมศึกษาในประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา ทั้งนี้ มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อเพิ่มเติมองค์ความรู้ในเรื่องการศึกษาภาษาและวัฒนธรรมต่างประเทศ การสื่อสารทางวัฒนธรรมและระหว่างวัฒนธรรม รวมไปถึงการจัดการชั้นเรียนภาษาและวัฒนธรรม ผู้เข้าร่วมในการศึกษานี้เป็นผู้ช่วยสอนภาษาต่างประเทศจากประเทศไทย ประเทศอินโดนีเซีย และประเทศฟิลิปปินส์ ผู้วิจัยได้เก็บข้อมูลโดยการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกกับกลุ่มผู้เข้าร่วมการศึกษา และการสังเกตการณ์ในชั้นเรียน จากนั้นจึงได้วิเคราะห์บทสัมภาษณ์และกิจกรรมต่างๆ ในชั้นเรียน ผลการศึกษาพบว่า สิ่งที่ผู้เข้าร่วมในการศึกษานี้มีมุมมองร่วมกันต่อวัฒนธรรมในชั้นเรียนระดับอุดมศึกษาในประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา คือเรื่องของความสุภาพในชั้นเรียน วัฒนธรรมในการเรียนรู้ และปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างนักเรียนกับอาจารย์

---

<sup>1</sup> Doctoral Candidate at the Department of Educational Technology, Research and Assessment, College of Education, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois, USA.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of Foreign Language Teaching Assistants (FLTAs), particularly from Southeast Asia towards the classroom culture of the higher education in the U.S. The participants of this study were FLTAs from Thailand, Indonesia and Republic of the Philippines. The aim was to enrich the literature on culture and foreign language education, culture and intercultural communication, and culture and language classroom management. Data were gathered from person-to-person in-depth interviews and classroom observations. The FLTAs' narratives of their teaching experiences were obtained through interviews. They were then analyzed, along with the researcher's direct observations of classroom activities. The overarching themes that emerged from this study were politeness in the classroom, the culture of learning, and interaction between students and teacher.

**Keywords:** Perspectives, Foreign language teaching assistants, Classroom culture, Language classroom, Foreign language learning and teaching

## **Introduction**

According to Geertz (1973) and Abu-Lughod (1993), culture is the socially learned behaviors of people which can change across time and space and it is continuously energized from generation to generation and from one community to another. As a result, it is difficult to make a generalization about culture since it manifests itself in a particular place and certain time and involves a particular group of individuals. Additionally, Geertz (1973) emphasized that culture is like 'webs' or a collection of significant aspects

of an individual's actions. Culture is a socially established code for which systems of meaning are created mutually by a particular group of people to be used or shared in that community. For example, nodding can mean that one agrees to someone or with something in one country; however, it can mean quite opposite in another country. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), rules of human communication and relationships vary from one culture to another. Therefore, cultural values and backgrounds will differently shape people's behaviors, thoughts and reactions. Geertz (1973) and Abu-Lughod (1993) pointed out that culture should be viewed as a particular manner rather than as a typical aspect that all individuals in a specific environment are expected to share. It is impossible or very difficult to view culture as typicality since each individual has a different background and set of beliefs, although each might live within the same community. In terms of interpretation, Geertz (1973) suggested that culture can be generalized within cases but not across them due to various factors. On the other hand, Geertz (1973) used a metaphor of 'turtles' that rested on each other all the way down and we will never see the last turtle at the bottom to represent the idea and that we, as researchers, cannot provide a complete interpretation since we are outsiders and we all have our own lenses to view the world.

In 1968, the Fulbright Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) Program was created with the aim of enhancing foreign language instruction at U.S. institutions of higher education (Institute of International Education, n.d.). Annually, the FLTA program provides an opportunity to young native-speaking teachers from over 50 countries to enhance their language teaching skills, develop their English language proficiency, and extend their knowledge and understanding about American people and culture while serving as resource persons of their native language and culture.

Undoubtedly, these Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistants (FLTAs) come to the U.S. with different preconceptions about American culture, especially culture in the classroom, which they primarily deal with from day to day as part of their responsibilities.

Keeping in mind the concepts of culture and its interpretation as stated by Geertz (1973) and Abu-Lughod (1993), the U.S. classroom culture in this study refers to a set of particular classroom behaviors performed by students and their interactions as perceived by FLTAs. In the case of FLTAs, encountering different classroom cultures was unavoidable since they participated in the program mainly to teach and deal with students in U.S. universities.

In this study, I explored the perspectives of FLTAs, particularly from Southeast Asia, towards the classroom culture of the higher education in the U.S. by examining the FLTAs' narratives of their teaching experiences offered in interviews as well as analyzing classroom activities that I directly observed. Emergent themes from the data illustrate how FLTAs' teaching experiences shaped their perspectives about classroom culture in the U.S.

## **Relevant Literature**

Culture plays a crucial role in education everywhere, particularly in the U.S. (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002). The relationship of language and culture is not a new focus of attention for language theoreticians and practitioners. Given that my study focuses on the culture in the language classroom, the following theoretical framework provides support for this phenomenon.

### *Culture and Foreign Language Education*

Learning a new language does not entail only any target language itself but include other components, one of which is building a new relationship with a new culture (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002). Consequently, establishing a new relationship with a new culture through language learning requires an understanding of both the target culture and students' awareness of their own culture. Oftentimes, this may lead to culture shock, if the teacher's philosophy is based on the Confucian model of teaching (teacher-centered), while students' philosophy of learning is based on the Socratic system (student-centered), for instance. There is no right or wrong answer as to which philosophy one must use because in learning foreign language, both teachers and students of foreign language bring their cultures together to share in the classroom. Being unaware of another culture could also cause inappropriateness in interaction and behaviors or breakdowns in communication.

According to Hadley (2000), cultural learning has been emphasized in the language curriculum for many years, since language is a part of culture and cultural learning will lead to cross-cultural understanding, especially when the world becomes borderless. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages or ACTFL (1999) developed the national standard (Five Cs) for foreign language learning to prepare for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 'Five Cs' standards are Communication (communicate in languages other than English), Cultures (gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures), Connections (connect with other disciplines and acquire information), Comparisons (develop insight into the nature of language and culture), and Communicative (participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world). These standards are required to be incorporated in the language

classroom. Foreign language learners, therefore, not only need to be competent in the knowledge and skills in grammar of the language, but also need to be aware of their identity and to be able to interact with the cultures of the target language (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). This approach is called intercultural communicative competence, and has become the main focus in the foreign language field (Sercu, 2005, 2006; Si Thang Kiet, 2009).

### *Culture and Intercultural Communication*

Intercultural communication can be defined as communication between members of different cultures (Gudykunst, 2003). According to Fries (2002), the term 'intercultural' implies interaction in which culture shock and cultural adaptation are included. Consequently, the experiences of students or teachers who move from one educational system to another can be examined under the concept of intercultural communication. Importantly, the FLTAs are required to gain more intercultural understanding to strengthen their competence in intercultural communication and to be able to teach, communicate and interact with their 'foreign' students effectively. One of the benefits of participating in the FLTA Program and becoming an FLTA is to be able to extend one's own knowledge of the cultures and customs of the U.S. while teaching his or her native language to American students. In turn, students at the U.S. tertiary level also obtain an opportunity to study a target language as well as its cultures with a native speaker. The situation that FLTAs are engaged in can be vividly described by what Wittgenstein (1953) stated that "...one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not understand the people...We cannot find our feet with them (p. 223)."

FLTAs are non-native English teachers in their home countries and have had many years of personal experiences with either British culture or American culture. However, this is the first time they came to the U.S. and encountered American society and culture physically and mentally. Accordingly, as Kramsch (1993) pointed out they finally have to find their “own place” at the intersection of multiple native and target cultures, i.e. classroom cultures in their home countries and American ones. Similarly, Tilghman (2004) stated that we might not be able to understand people in other societies or cultures easily and we have some difficulties to interpret the behaviors people perform because “...we are not sufficiently familiar with the situation in which [a person] finds himself (p. 202).”

### ***Culture and Language Classroom Management***

According to Senior (2006), expectations of appropriate behaviors in the language classroom should be made clear to students early in order to avoid classroom management problems as well as miscommunication. In doing so, students will be placed into a comfortable classroom situation. Since learning a foreign language is learning about foreign culture where different expected behaviors or expressions can be displayed, language teachers are encouraged to manage the strengthening of students’ awareness of the culture in the target language. To effectively communicate with students along this line of thought, Louie (2005) emphasized that teachers themselves are also required to take the meta-cultural sensitivity into account since students might carry their own different cultures and backgrounds even though they are within the same umbrella culture. Therefore, it is important for teachers to gather cultural knowledge themselves, particularly when they and their students are from different cultures, e.g. a native teacher from Thailand teaching Thai to American

students. Similarly, Davies (2006) stressed that when teachers have a culture different from their students, it is crucial for them to learn about, for example, cultural communication cues in order not to provide incorrect feedback about learning. Trying to learn and understand these cues means that teachers care enough about students to learn about them and their cultural assumptions.

## Methodology

### *Setting*

I conducted this study with Foreign Language Teaching Assistants (FLTAs) who were awarded the Fulbright fellowship under the program of Foreign Languages Teaching Assistantship and were serving at a medium-sized public university in the Midwest U.S. based on two reasons. First of all, most of the foreign language teaching assistants have never been to the U.S. and definitely they have never exclusively experienced the American classroom culture. Therefore, it is interesting to learn how they have prepared themselves and managed to enter this new environment when they are from another part of the world. Secondly, these FLTAs are considered as ‘young’ teachers regarding their age and their working experiences in the teaching field, so I was interested to learn how their ‘young’ eyes viewed this classroom culture they were engaged with.

### *Participants*

The participants of the study included two male and one female Foreign Language Teaching Assistants (FLTAs): Suchart Wirun<sup>2</sup> from Thailand, Michael Lado<sup>3</sup> from Republic of the Philippines, and Nancy Isato<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonym



from Indonesia, respectively. They were identified through purposive sampling because they had the following characteristics. All of them won the Fulbright fellowship to serve as a teaching assistant to teach their native language at a public Midwestern university for one academic year. Their responsibilities included assisting the professors in teaching a beginning class, preparing materials, checking assignments, and grading quizzes. They shared some similarities and differences. Two of the participants, Suchart and Nancy, were non-native speakers of English while one of them, Michael, can be considered as a native speaker of English since English is one of the official languages in his country. All three participants were born and grew up in their home country. Their native language is their first language while the English language is considered as the main foreign language for two participants and as one of the official languages for the other one. Three of them graduated from universities in their countries with Bachelor and Master degrees in English, English teaching and related fields and then became English instructors. Suchart and Nancy have been teaching at a university for four years and Michael has been teaching at a high school for five years. One of them, Suchart, had experiences studying overseas. In terms of working, they are considered as young instructors because their age ranges from 27 to 29 years old and they have been following the career of English teaching not more than five years.

### ***Data Collection***

The data-gathering techniques that I used in this study were person-to-person in-depth interview and classroom observations. In-depth interviews served my need to explore each participant's detailed perspectives of the classroom culture. Meanwhile, the observations helped me gain insights as to how the participants managed and dealt with the

classroom culture which they experienced. Since the participants were serving as teaching assistants, I had to consult with their supervisors before conducting the interviews with them and observing their classrooms. Each participant was invited and contacted in person. When they agreed to be the participants for this study, two observations and two interviews were carried out for each of them. The time and days for observations and interviews were set up at participants' and their supervisors' convenience. The length of each observation was 50 minutes while the length of each interview ranged from 35 to 45 minutes. The observations were documented in field notes and some photos of the classes were taken as permitted. Each interview was basically recorded by two recording devices -- an MP3 voice recorder and a tape cassette recorder -- to ensure that the interview data were well preserved for analysis.

There were three potential challenges for me in collecting data for this study. The first challenge grew out of the relationship between study participants and me since I was a co-worker with one of the participants. Therefore, this possibly led to certain types of interactions or anxiety which affected the procedures of data collection at times. Therefore, it was important for me to clarify the purpose of the study to the participant extensively in order that he would act naturally and would do as he wished to especially while assisting or teaching in the class. The second challenge also stemmed from my role as a teaching assistant and a former FLTA. This made the participants feel anxious or nervous from time to time and this led to their unnatural behavior. To avoid this problem, the participants were informed that the study and its findings would not affect their work or even lead to any evaluations. The last challenge came from the observations. Since I observed the participants' classes and their teaching, students in their classes acted differently than they normally did or they could have

experienced discomfort when they were aware of my presence. Therefore, it was necessary for me to clearly inform students who I was and why I came to their classes in order that my presence would affect their regular performances as little as possible.

### ***Data Analysis***

The interviews with the FLTAs from Indonesia and Republic of the Philippines were conducted in English. However, the interviews with the FLTA from Thailand were conducted in Thai and they were translated into English after the interviews were transcribed. Translating the transcripts from Thai to English became an issue. Due to the difference of the two languages, sometimes it was impossible to maintain the exact meaning of some words that the participants used because there were no equivalent English words. Inevitably, the original charm of the Thai language was lost in translation. However, most of the important messages which the participant was trying to convey were completely in the translations.

In terms of coding, two phases of open coding were conducted. The first phase was carried out by reading through the data line by line and coding the interesting ideas, e.g. friendly working environment, teaching techniques, perceptions towards American students, perception towards students in their country, learning motivation, qualifications of FLTAs, norm of behaviors, etc. After that, the second phase was done by analyzing the codes and sorting them into three main patterns which are politeness in the classroom, culture of learning and interactions between students and teacher. These patterns were described in detail in the section of findings.

### ***Researcher Role***

Although I was an FLTA from Thailand in 2006, this still made me become both an insider and an outsider for this study. As an insider,

I am a non-native English speaker who comes from the same region as the participants. Despite sharing these characteristics, I also turned out to be an outsider, since the participants and I have different cultural backgrounds that are unique to the countries and settings each of us is from.

## Findings

To enrich the literature on culture and foreign language education, culture and intercultural communication and culture and language classroom management, these following findings were presented by examining the perspectives of FLTAs in the language classroom of Thai, Indonesian and Tagalog at a medium-sized public university in the Midwestern U.S. Most of the students at this university come from a working class background. Many of them are the first generation of their family to attend college. Many of them are working, have families with young children, and in many cases commute long distances by car to attend classes. The typical class is multi-cultural, i.e. a mixture of Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Whites, and other ethnic groups. Each group has its own subculture that the FLTAs will find challenging to understand and adapt to. This limited study does not take into account the effect of social or economic class on the educational setting. The FLTAs' narratives of their teaching experiences at this institution of U.S. higher education can provide us with the unique perceptions of foreign language teachers from Southeast Asia about U.S. classroom culture. The overarching themes of the FLTAs' perceptions that emerged from this study were politeness in the classroom, the culture of learning, and interaction between students and teacher.

*Politeness in the Classroom*

Since the FLTAs are young language teachers from another part of the globe, i.e. Southeast Asia, they definitely carry unique preconceptions about the culture of the U.S. classroom. They have held some expectations which were influenced from what they experienced in their country and cultures. Oftentimes, it was difficult for them not to compare what they encountered in the classroom in the U.S. to what they experienced back home. One of the expectations they had was students' politeness. For example, Suchart who was an FLTA from Thailand shared his experience and described his perception towards American students' manner of coming in and going out from the classroom which was different from Thai students as follows:

I am surprised every time they [students] walk in and out of the class. Well, they would not enter quietly, you know... and they don't place their backpack gently but placed their stuff like bang boom, etc. on the floor. The same is true when they are dismissed from the class. They will start packing their bag and drag it out or start making noise.

The participant found this manner surprising as well as annoying since he has never experienced it with Thai students and it interrupted his teaching. He explained that this behavior can be interpreted in Thai eyes that the students were mad or upset at him. However, he did not share his feeling about this particular behavior with the students in his class, because he assumed that it was a part of their culture and their right to behave that way:

But I think this is part of their culture so I don't think I can change anything much... Well, I mean it's their right. If what they do doesn't bother other people or do any harm, then that should be

fine. I mean they didn't step on someone else's foot or touch other people, so they should be able to do it, right?

Interestingly, this manner of coming to the classroom was not experienced only by the Thai FLTA because Nancy, who was an FLTA from Indonesia, also shared it and I observed this in her class. One of her student came to the class late and closed the door very loudly when she was teaching. Nancy told me that this was not the first time it happened in her Indonesian class and she managed to talk to that student several times about this unpleasant manner instead of being quiet and letting it go. She emphasized the reason she had to talk to the student: "Banging the door isn't appropriate in an Indonesian class. It's not very good in Indonesian culture and it's considered impolite." Unfortunately, this behavior still happened in her class, as Nancy recalled, because the student forgot what she reminded her of.

Another example of unexpected behavior which the FLTAs encountered was when students put their feet on the seats while they were lecturing. One of the participants, Suchart, described his view on this conduct:

I was shocked at first... You know? When you are teaching in class if you see their feet, you would feel that it's not appropriate and they should not do that. It's kind of strange. But I think once you tell them, they will change. I still remember there was one time I told students here [in America] that feet are considered impolite and should not be used to point at something. I told them about my experience and they seem to be more careful.

From his view, it was essential to talk to the students whether or not they were allowed to behave in a way that they might have taken it for granted. In doing so, students will be encouraged to learn and adjust

themselves to the pattern of politeness expected in the foreign language classroom. Similarly, the other participant, Nancy, agreed that students should be informed about this matter since she also experienced this unacceptable behavior in her class. She emphasized the reason of her practice: "So I talked to them and said that it's not a good idea to do that. When you learn the language, you have to follow the culture." This highlighted the idea that culture and language are inseparable and intertwined. Students are expected not only to be competent in the target language but also to behave in an acceptable way in the target culture. Although students' sensitivity towards the target culture should be strengthened, Suchart provided an interesting thought that language teachers also need to adjust themselves to the new setting they are staying and teaching:

I also have to adjust myself to the new culture, new environment, and new setting. I am a minority in the classroom here so I need to adjust myself to the new culture. Although I do feel that I should make the classroom setting here resemble that in Thailand, you know... the Thai setting. Everybody should then adjust himself or herself to Thai culture because they are in the Thai class. But this is only my thought. If I focus too much on this issue, then I don't think I can cover the main content. But maybe I'll do it more next semester because this is only the first semester. I will start from something that is easy to grasp.

His perspective on adjustment pointed out that students and teachers alike are required to be sensitive to different cultures in order that cross-cultural communication would be carried out successfully and expected behaviors would be displayed.

### *Culture of Learning*

In addition to the patterns of politeness that the FLTAs perceived in their classroom as mentioned, the culture of learning is another issue about which they had vivid impressions. Since the U.S. educational system emphasizes engaging students in learning, students have been accustomed to the learner-centered classroom culture. With this particular learning culture, students are usually encouraged to express perspectives, participate in discussion, and demonstrate understanding explicitly in order to establish an interactive learning environment. Nancy, the FLTA from Indonesia, expressed her positive perception of her students in this learning culture as follows:

I really appreciate what students do in the class especially when they don't understand; they just ask you right away.... So I do appreciate them the way they ask me and also having a motivation in learning. Their motivation is higher, well, than students in my country. Not the motivation that they want to go to the class everyday but the way they want to know is high. I like that they have a lot of curiosity, like they would ask, "Can I do this, do that; is it possible to do it like this?" You know those kinds of questions push me to read again and again although I don't bring a lot of resources. But in Indonesia, whether they [students] understand or not, they just sitting quietly and waiting. Even when I ask, "Any question", they just keep silent.

The other participant, Suchart, also experienced this learning phenomenon in his class and he was impressed that his students were confident in asking questions when they did not understand and needed more explanations. This active learning environment rarely happened in



Thailand from what he experienced in teaching. He recounted the different culture of learning in Thailand in the following excerpt:

Well, for Thai students if you explain to them and they don't understand, they would sit quietly in class, which, sometimes that is a good thing. I mean, if you don't ask whether they [Thai students] understand the lesson, they would not say anything or raise their hands. But here students are more active and can ask you questions anytime they don't understand or want more explanations.

Although the participants viewed students' curiosity and motivation in learning as an active learning style, the participants were also concerned about the students' way of expressing curiosity or perspectives. Two of the participants, Suchart and Michael, shared the same views on this matter, since they found that it was different from the way which students in their country conducted. Suchart described the different ways that students had for asking questions of the teacher as follows:

They [students in Thailand] are polite and use appropriate words. But here [in the U.S.], it seems like it's the teacher's fault for not making them understand the lesson. Sometimes they [students in the U.S.] express their feeling on their face, telling me that they don't understand and confused, or maybe even disappointed. This in turns hurts my feeling too.

Additionally, Suchart commented about the different linguistic aspects of English and Thai which made him feel uncomfortable when the students in his Thai class asked questions. In Thai language, there are specific polite particles used by males and females. These particles always come at the end of a statement or a question conveying politeness as well as showing a respectful manner of students. Undoubtedly, Suchart has

been accustomed to the polite way of asking questions specified by these particles which Thai language has. When English does not have such polite final particles, Suchart sometimes felt that students made a command to him instead of a request: "There is no polite particle in English, I just feel like I am not used to it yet."

Michael, the FLTA from the Philippines, also shared his perception towards these differences which he experienced from the two settings:

When students [in the U.S.] disagree with the teacher, they just say it. In the Philippines, students would be more cautious to say things. You will find your way to professors. Here [in the U.S.], you can just say no, I don't think so. In the respect category for us, it would be not very good for us Asians. We don't see it's like as respectful. Maybe for them...you know...they just want to say that.

According to these observed situations, politeness is considered as an important courtesy that the FLTA participants expected from the students in the U.S. They expected the American students would display appropriate, i.e. polite and respectful, classroom behavior, even though they were simultaneously impressed with the American culture of learning, i.e. a learner-centered approach, which establishes the active role of learners and requires an interactive learning environment. Perceptions of the FLTA participants towards the culture of learning reflect their different cultural background which, in turn, framed a set of expectations for politeness and respect.

### ***Interaction between Students and Teacher***

Since one of the major requirements for FLTAs specifies that FLTAs must be no younger than 21 and no older than 29 years old, their age is basically close to that of undergraduates who are the main group

of students they are responsible for in the U.S. This qualification of FLTAs helps develop a beautiful friendship between them and their students with ease. Michael, an FLTA from the Philippines, mentioned the fact that the students in Tagalog class felt more relaxed to talk or say what they had on their minds to him. He realized that this was not the thing which students in the Philippines generally did:

One of the good things is...some of them are Americans and some are Filipino-Americans...they are very close to us right now. I think they like us. I think because they know you are young so they can say anything. Maybe, our culture...why do they say that? And then we understand that oh, they see you as...like their level, so they just can tell you like... 'Oh, that's crap' ...for example. In the Philippines, you might say that outside the class, but here [in the U.S.] students will say that.

Similarly, Nancy and her students of Indonesian class also established a close friendship which enabled a relaxed and less formal learning atmosphere to take place. She shared her experience and described her perception towards this circumstance as follows:

Sometimes, I try to make them move in order that they can practice speaking to other partners but they don't want to...and they always tease me and that might be because our age is not too different compared to the other professors who are teaching them. That's why they might sometimes think that I'm their friend, not their teacher. However, that's a good thing, because I can understand the reasons...or they can ask me a lot rather than the other two professors, e.g. 'I need your help.' And I like that because...you know...we get closer in an appropriate way.

Such friendly relationship in part helped constitute a nice setting

for effective teaching and learning of a foreign language where students are pursuing not only its target linguistic aspects but also its embedded cultures.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, I particularly focused on ‘micro-interactions’ (Abu-Lughod, 1993) in that I explored the perspectives of FLTAs who were serving at a medium-sized state university in the Midwestern United States where particular norms, background, environment, and characteristics could inevitably affect students’ behaviors in the classroom. In addition, I explored ‘particulars of individuals’ lives’ at a particular time (Abu-Lughod, 1993) since my study was conducted with only students from three different foreign language classes in Fall 2009, i.e. Thai, Indonesian and Tagalog. Regarding these ‘particularities’ of FLTAs, students and their university, it is unlikely that I have conveyed all of the unique perspectives of these FLTAs and that my study represents the most typical things encountered in the American classroom across the U.S. with a language of generalization.

Additionally, my intention in this study was to collect their perspectives and experiences of teaching at a university in the U.S. for a particular group of audiences, i.e. the Institution of International Education (IIE), which organizes the FLTA program under Fulbright Fellowship, FLTAs’ supervisors at their host university, and the incoming batch of new FLTAs. In the final analysis, the perspectives of these three FLTAs who participated in my study mirror particular stories of individuals in this small setting. Consequently, different stories might be told by different groups of participants, and they will also reflect various aspects of the U.S. classroom culture.

Despite some of limitations mentioned above, the findings of the study provided various beneficial insights for both foreign language teachers and students. The most prominent observable phenomenon emerging from the study is the cultural-bound politeness which the participants of the study expected from their students. Although the participants expressed their concerns on this issue, their first-hand experiences can help put more emphasis on the significance of culture learning and understanding for foreign language learners and the FLTAs alike. This also corresponds to what Brière (1986) mentioned about the fact that cross-cultural awareness should be established right from the start of the language class, because it will never come out as an automatic by-product of language study. It is likewise important to note that language teachers also need to learn to understand the students' culture, e.g. the culture of learning, in order that effective learning and teaching will be enhanced.

Another significant finding of the study revealed that the age of FLTAs positively affected atmosphere of learning at some point as indicated by Michael and Nancy who were participants of this study. The teacher-student interaction was transformed to "friend-to-friend" interaction, which created a more relaxed learning environment. Therefore, it implies that their closeness in age does not hinder the recognition of being a qualified and experienced instructor. Instead, it helped FLTAs be connected with their students more easily.

Since all three participants in this study are from Southeast Asia, FLTAs who are from other regions, e.g. Europe, should be included in future studies to compare and contrast the perspectives reflecting the U.S. classroom culture. Future studies should also focus on the process of culture learning in a particular language class in order to find out a practical approach for culture learning and teaching.

## References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (1993). **Introduction**. In *Writing women's worlds: Bedouin stories*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (1999). **Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**. Retrieved October, 7, 2009, from <http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3324>
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S.K. (2007). **Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods**. Boston, MA: Pearson Education.
- Brière, J. F. (1986). Cultural understanding through cross-cultural analysis. *The French Review*, 60(2), 203-208.
- Buzzelli, C., & Johnston, B. (2002). **The moral dimensions of teaching: Language, power, and culture in classroom interaction**. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Byram, M., Gribkova, B., & Starkey, H. (2002). **Developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching: a practical introduction for teachers [Electronic Version]**. Retrieved October, 3, 2009, from <http://www.lrc.cornell.edu/director/intercultural.pdf>
- Davies, B. M. (2006). **How to teach students who don't look like you: Culturally relevant teaching strategies**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Fries, S. (2002). **Cultural, Multicultural, Cross-cultural, Intercultural: A moderator's proposal [Electronic Version]**. Retrieved October 7, 2009, from <http://www.tesol-france.org/articles/fries.pdf>
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Towards an interpretive theory of culture. In *The interpretation of cultures* (pp. 3-30). New York, NY: Basic Books.

- Gudykunst, W. B. (2003). Intercultural communication. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), **Cross-cultural and intercultural communication** (pp. 163-189). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Hadley, A. O. (2000). **Teaching for cultural understanding**. In **Teaching language in context** (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 345-389). Boston, MA: Heinle.
- Institute of International Education. (n.d.). **Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program**. Retrieved November 4, 2009 from [http://flta.fulbrightonline.org/about\\_program\\_history.html](http://flta.fulbrightonline.org/about_program_history.html)
- Kramsch, C. (1993). **Context and culture in language teaching**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Louie, K. (2005). Gathering cultural knowledge: Useful or use with care? In J. Carroll & J. Ryan (Eds.), **Teaching international students** (pp.17-25). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Senior, R. M. (2006). Establishing learning environment. In **The experience of language teaching** (pp. 79-102). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sercu, L. (2005). Foreign language teachers and the implementation of intercultural education: a comparative investigation of the professional self-concepts and teaching practices of Belgian teachers of English, French and German. **European Journal of Teacher Education**, 28(1), 87-105. doi: 10.1080/02619760500040389
- Sercu, L. (2006). The foreign language and intercultural competence teacher: the acquisition of a new professional identity. **Intercultural Education**, 17(1), 55-72. doi: 10.1080/14675980500502321
- Si Thang Kiet, H. (2009). Addressing culture in EFL classroom: The challenge of shifting from a traditional to an intercultural stance [Electronic Version]. **Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching**, 6(1), 63-76. Retrieved October, 10, 2009 from <http://e-flt.nus.edu.sg/v6n12009/ho.htm>

- Tilghman, B. (2004). Literature, human understanding and morality. In P. B. Lewis (Ed.), **Wittgenstein, aesthetics, and philosophy** (pp. 201-214). Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). **Philosophical investigations**. G.E.M. Anscombe (Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.