Teaching English to Lao adult beginners

Intercultural barriers in Western General English course books by the example of *Straightforward*

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Introduction

As part of the project "Teaching English in Laos", German volunteers teach English to Lao adults in Laos. Teaching and learning a foreign language can never be separated from the context it is taught in. This teaching in Laos is a very specific intercultural situation which is influenced by the teacher's culture, the learners' culture, and the local context. These variables are not the only ones influencing the teaching and learning situation, there are even more. One important variable is the course book that is used for teaching English to the Lao adult beginners. Since the context and culture in Laos differ greatly from Western cultures and contexts, intercultural barriers came up during the teaching process. The course book Straightforward Beginner which was used to teach is set in a Western context and relies on the learner's' knowledge of Western concepts and culture. The Lao learners are not familiar with most Western concepts and therefore, instead of supporting the learning process, the cultural content in the course book more often hindered the learning process. The Lao learners do not only have to learn the new language content but also get to know and understand a very unfamiliar cultural context without explicit explanations. The course book assumes that the learners who use it are familiar with Western concepts and therefore does not explain Western cultural content.

This thesis examines intercultural barriers that have been experienced by Lao adult beginners of English when taught by German volunteer teachers using the course book *Straightforward Beginner,* which is a Western General English course book. In order **t**o analyse the intercultural barriers and their origins, specific features of Laos and its culture will be described, such as the country, its history, politics and ethnical groups, the Lao language, religion, food, family, education, etc. The first chapter of this paper intends to give the readers a short insight into the Lao culture and the context that shapes the teaching situation in Laos. The description of cultural features helps the Western readers to understand how Lao culture differs from Western cultures and the reasons why intercultural barriers came up teaching with a Western English course book. In the chapter, not all aspects of Lao culture can be described. Therefore, a few aspects which became important in the teaching process in Laos are described. However, it is a sketchy overview of cultural variables and the Lao context. To understand it more holistically and in detail, further research is suggested or a longer stay in Laos.

Based on the cultural aspects described in the first chapter and Hofstede's dimensions of culture, the second chapter attempts to examine the effects of cultural aspects on

teaching and learning and the consequences the effects have for Western teachers teaching in Laos.

English has become more and more important in Laos since they joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In the ASEAN, English is used as a lingua franca, a language for communication between non-native speakers who do not share the same language. The use of English as a lingua franca in Southeast Asia suggest a different view on English language teaching. Different models and views on teaching English as a lingua franca or English as a global language are reviewed in the third chapter of the thesis. The changed view on English language teaching should have effects on design and adaptations of course books that are used in the ASEAN context. Not only language skills must be taught but also intercultural communicative skills to help the learners to become successful users of English in international situations.

Chapter four focuses on dimensions that influence cross-cultural communication and how intercultural differences in communication styles can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication. To prevent learners from not being able to successfully communicate in intercultural situations, they must develop intercultural communicative competence. A model of how intercultural communicative competence can be developed is described in chapter five.

All the different models of teaching English in Asia, as a lingua franca or a global language, by adapting content to fit the local needs, and by learning intercultural communicative competence are reasons why course books that are used in Laos should be adapted. These reasons for adapting course books are looked at in more detail in chapter 6.

To set the specific context in which the intercultural barriers were experienced, the project "Teaching English in Laos" by the foundation "Angels for Children" is introduced in the seventh chapter. This chapter also includes a description of the thesis' author's specific teaching situation.

After the context of teaching in Laos has been described in detail, the intercultural barriers which were experienced during a teaching period in Laos with the course book Straightforward Beginner are documented in chapter 8. The intercultural barriers are categorised into groups with specific topics, including: food, understanding visual aids, cities and countries, being a tourist, and much more. All the described intercultural barriers were experienced by three German volunteer teachers teaching Lao adult beginners in Laos over a period of two months.

In the following chapter, concrete ways to adapt course books for the Lao context are pointed out, giving examples on how some activities in the course book Straightforward Beginner were adapted to fit the Lao context and the learners' needs and interests. This, the ninth chapter, does not only show ways to adapt course books but also reveals factors that might hinder teachers from adapting the exercises, and lastly, it explains how intercultural barriers can be overcome through adaptations.

The thesis closes with recommendations for choosing, adapting, or writing a course book for the Lao context. This chapter uses a checklist to sum up important aspects that should be considered when dealing with course books for the Lao context. This checklist does not claim to be complete but it is a first orientation for teachers or course book authors who want to teach English to adult beginners in Laos.

However, to go back to the beginning, it is first of all important that a teacher, a course book author, or anyone involved in teaching English to Lao learners gets to know the Lao context and its culture.

1. Laos and its culture

Many Westerners do not know much about the small country of Laos or about other countries in Southeast Asia. Many do not even know that this country exists, not to mention, where it is situated. Vice versa it is the same: Many people in Laos do not know much about Germany or other countries in Europe.

The official name of Laos is Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) and it is situated in Southeast Asia. It borders China to the north, Vietnam to the east, Cambodia to the south, and Thailand and Myanmar to the west. It is the only landlocked country in Asia. With a total area of 236.800 km², it is about two-thirds of the size of Germany. From the far north to the south, it reaches about 1200 kilometres, but it is only about 200 kilometres in width. The capital city of Laos is Vientiane, which lays at the Lao-Thai border at the river Mekong. The Mekong forms a large part of the border between the Lao PDR and Thailand. Most of the population lives in the cities along the Mekong. One-third of the 6.5 million people living in the Lao PDR live in these cities. Around the capital, Vientiane, the population density is quite high (200 inhabitants per km²), but in the rest of the country, the population density is the lowest in all of Southeast Asia (24 inhabitants per km²). Laos is divided up into 17 provinces and the capital city Vientiane, which is counted as a province on its own (cf. Central Intelligence Agency 2013; Timmann 2017). Once one leaves the Mekong area, the land is characterized by mountains and forest. Agriculture still predominates in Laos. About two-thirds of Laos' population make a living through agriculture and are farmers (cf. Timmann 2017).

1.1   Ethnic groups

Laos is a culturally diverse country with the people of Laos belong to many different ethnic groups. Officially, there are 49 different ethnic groups recognised by the Lao government, but it is assumed that there are more than 200 different ethnic groups. Schultze (2013) describes it as an "ethnic-cultural patchwork" (24). The groups are shattered all over the country. The groups are scattered all over the country. The largest group is the Lao, who make up 53,2% of the population of Laos, followed by the Khmu with 11%. Other ethnic groups in Laos are the Hmong, Phouthay, Tai, Makong, Katong, Lue, Akha, and others (cf. Schultze 2013; Central Intelligence Agency 2013).

Other sources categorise the ethnic groups into four larger ethnolinguistic families which leads to the groups of the Lao-Tai (67%), the Mon-Khmer (21%), the Hmong-Lu Mien (8%), and the Chine-Tibetan (3%) (cf. King and van de Walle 2010). Between the ethnic groups there are great differences in living standards. Between the ethnic groups, there are great differences in living standards. Often the groups are summed up by the area

they live in: the Lowlands, the Midlands, or the Highlands. The villages usually consist of an ethnically homogeneous group. The Lao-Tai groups can mostly be found in and around urban areas or in the Lowland around Vientiane and the Mekong river. The Mon-Khmer typically live in the rural areas of the Midlands. The Hmong-Lu Mien, on the other hand, can be found in the Highlands of Laos, and the Chine-Tibetan predominate in the northern highlands (cf. King and van de Walle 2010).

Laos is so culturally diverse that it cannot be spoken of one Lao culture, even though the government tried to centralise the cultures into categories. Now they notice that it is not possible and rather try to treat the different traditions and cultures of the ethnic groups more cautiously. However, in Laos, there is the tendency that ethnic groups adapt traditions and values from seemingly higher developed groups. One indication is that women and girls in some of the ethnic groups start to wear *sins* which are traditional wrap skirts of the Lao people. The Lao, on the other hand, take the Thai as their role models, and cultural aspects coming from Thailand can be found more and more amongst Lao people (cf. Schultze 2013).

1.2   The Lao language

In 1975, with the formation of the first government in Laos, Lao was made the national language. Lao is the official language, but various languages are spoken by the different ethnic groups. There are 81 languages spoken in Laos, whereof 71 are indigenous languages. They all are still spoken even though two of these languages are about to die out (cf. Simons and Fennig 2017).

The Lao language belongs to the Tai-Kadai language family like the Thai language and the Shan language from Myanmar. Lao is also the only institutional language and is used in schools. Many children have to learn Lao once they join school because they have a different mother tongue. Many people of ethnic minorities, especially women and children, were found not to be able to speak the national language (cf. Lew 2014). Even though there are many different languages spoken in Laos as first languages, only Standard Lao language will be described below since it played an important role in the context of this paper in Laos.

Standard Lao is spoken in Vientiane and in the provinces around it. In other parts of Laos, various dialects of Lao and other languages predominate. The dialects vary from standard Lao regarding lexicon and tonal and vowel inventories. There is no real standard form of the spoken language because attempts to standardise the language

have failed. However, the standard for written Lao is the dialect of Lao spoken in and around Vientiane (cf. Lew 2014).

Lao is an isolating and tonal language most often with single stressed syllables forming words. It is a language based on syllables, with every syllable having a certain meaning. Through the combination of different syllables, new meaning is created. There are five different tones: level, high-rising, low-rising, high-falling, and low-falling. Other sources suggest that there are six different tones but two of them are very hard to distinguish from each other. Depending on the tone, the same sequence of phonemes can have very different meanings (cf. Enfield 2007).

Lao consists of 19 consonants and 12 vowels and the five or six tones. Some of the consonant phonemes have two graphemes, called high-class and low-class graphemes. The use of different graphemes marks the difference in tone. The 12 vowels are represented by 38 graphemes depending on vowel quality, length, and position in the syllable (cf. Lew 2014).

Morphemes are not inflectional but derivational. Word order and particles at the end of sentences carry grammatical information. To form sentences in different tenses, a specific context or a temporal adverb is used. The verb forms are not changed. There is an almost direct grapheme-phoneme correspondence in the Lao script. When learning the Lao language, it therefore, helps to learn not only spoken Lao but the script as well. The Lao language also adopts words from other languages but adapts them to Lao rules of spoken language, for example, there cannot be two or more consecutive consonants (cf. Enfield 2007; Lew 2014; Schultze 2013).

In the Lao language, there are different pronouns, but they are not differentiated between gender (i.e., he, she, and it). However, there are different pronouns that fulfil socially deictic purposes. The pronouns are first differentiated between singular and plural. There are four forms of the third person pronoun in the singular: bare, familiar, polite, and formal. In the plural, there are two forms: bare and polite. These pronouns function as levels of politeness (cf. Enfield 2007).

The Lao script has its roots in the Indian Pali script but has been adapted and changed over time. Written Lao was reformed in 1975 to make the script easier to teach since the traditional Pali-based script was difficult to learn (cf. Lew 2014). The Lao alphabet and the Thai alphabet are almost identical. However, they differ slightly in how the letters are shaped. Whoever is able to read Lao script can also read and understand most Thai words although their pronunciation may be different (cf. SEAsite Laos 2002). The script

is written from left to right in horizontal lines. A vowel grapheme is arranged around the consonant sound which means that certain vowel graphemes stand in front of the consonant (prescript), others behind it (postscript), again others have parts which come in front of the consonant and parts following the consonant (circumscript), or the vowel grapheme is placed underneath (subscript), or above (superscript) the consonant grapheme (cf. Lew 2014).

From a Western perspective, this feature and the fact that word boundaries are not indicated in the written script make it hard to distinguish the words in a written sentence. The missing inter-word spacing makes reading more difficult if one is not accustomed to it. However, spacing between words is found only to make reading easier if it is a feature in the written language of one's first language. Therefore, for Lao learners the missing indicated word boundaries do not make reading more difficult. Only different clauses are indicated through spacing but there is no use of punctuation (cf. Lew 2014).

1.3   Religion

The most dominant religion in Laos is Buddhism (64,7%). Nothing shapes the country and the life of the ethnic groups of the Lao and some Tai-Lao people like Buddhism does. In the 14th century, Buddhism became the state religion of the then Kingdom of Laos. In the centre of almost every Lao village, a *wat* can be found. *Wats* are Buddhist temple areas which serve, among other purposes, as a residence for monks.

However, Animism plays an important role in Laos as well. Even the Buddhist belief is often mixed with Animist ideas. Animism is the belief in spirits which can be found in elements like fire, earth, or water but also in animals, people, or in houses. The human body is believed to host 32 spirits and if one of these spirits leaves, it is believed to cause illness. The original meaning of the tying of strings around the wrists during a Baci ceremony is to call the spirits back inside the body and to keep the spirits inside the body. Whereas Buddhism is only shared by some ethnic groups in Laos, all the ethnic groups in Laos believe in spirits (cf. Schultze 2013; Matles Sevada 1994).

There are also other religions present in Laos, like Christianity or Islam but in very small percentages. The Constitution of Laos prescribes freedom of religion. However, this right is sometimes violated at the local level. There is another article in the Constitution which states that all acts that create tension and divisions between groups of people must be discouraged. This article is often used by the government to prohibit certain religious practices (cf. Schultze 2013; Central Intelligence Agency 2013; Hays 2008).

1.4   Baci ceremony

The Baci ceremony is an important ceremony in Lao culture, which mixes Animist and Buddhist traditions. It is held for various occasions like a wedding, a birth, an opening ceremony at a school, or if somebody goes on a longer journey. To sum it up, a Baci ceremony is held for almost every special occasion. The people participating in the Baci sit around an

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Baci ceremony

arrangement of banana leaves and flowers and everyone holds a string in her or his hands which is tied to the centrepiece. An elder or monk conducts the ceremony, reciting prayers. Following the prayers, food is placed in the hands of the participants that are being honoured with the ceremony. After that, first the elder leading the ceremony and then the other people participating in the Baci tie cotton strings around the honoured people's wrist. Every time a string is tied around one's wrist, good wishes for the person are expressed. The string should at least be kept around the wrists for three days (cf. Davidson and Davidson n.d.; Schultze 2013).

1.5   History and politics

Laos roots can be found in the 14th century in the kingdom Lan Xang. For 625 years, Laos was a conservative monarchy with a king ruling from Luang Prabang until the Lao People's Democratic Republic was established in 1975 as a communist state. In the late 19th century, Laos became a part of the French regime, which had been established in Southeast Asia. In 1945, the invasion of Japanese helped Laos to declare its independence from France. However, only one year later the French brought Laos under their control again. Losing their influence in Southeast Asia, the French abandoned Laos in 1953 and left behind a divided country. This division would go on to cause 20 years of civil war. Some parts of Laos were under the influence of the Royalist government while others were ruled by a pro-communist organisation. During the Vietnam war, the United States bombed large parts of Laos, especially the territory of the pro-communist organisations. In relation to its size and number of inhabitants, Laos was the country that was bombed the most. The many unexploded bombs and mines still pose a great danger to the population. When South Vietnam and Cambodia fell into the hands of the Communists in 1975, the Royalists left Laos and the pro-communist organisation took over the country. In the same year, the Lao PDR was established. First, Laos became a

fully communist state, but in 1988 it opened up to become a market economy. This caused the economy in Laos to increase rapidly. However, Laos is still a developing country and seen as one of the poorest countries of the world. In 1997, Laos joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and in 2013 it became a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (cf. Lambert 2017; Central Intelligence Agency 2013; Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung and BMZ 2017).

When Laos became communist in 1975, it formed a partnership with the DDR, the German Democratic Republic, which was followed by a partnership with the Federal Republic of Germany when Germany was reunited. The partnership with the DDR is the reason why some Lao politicians and people with high education and social status used to speak German (cf. Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung and BMZ 2017).

Today, Lao PDR is still a communist and a single-party state. Only one party exists in the Lao PDR which is the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Other parties are not allowed (cf. Central Intelligence Agency 2013).

1.6   Technology

The opening to become a market economy increased the development of Laos and opened the doors for technology. However, according to the CIA Factbook (2013), only 18.2% of the population uses the internet, and although the mobile cellular network is widely spread, which makes communication much easier, it is slow. About 90% of the population already uses mobile phones and houses in Vientiane often have fixed landlines as well. Having a good smartphone is also a status symbol in Laos (cf. Timmann 2017; Schultze 2013).

Not only the phone has become a status symbol but also having a television. TVs are widespread in Laos, and through satellite technology, even in the more remote areas, people can watch TV. National TV has only two not very professional programs, but due to the similarities in language, many Lao people watch the more professionally designed Thai TV programs. In the north, it is more popular to watch Chinese channels. Some areas even have their own regional program. Through the means of TV, the Thai culture is promoted in Laos and younger people are no longer satisfied to live a rural life as a farmer but want move to the cities to make a living there. However, urbanisation has just started and is slowly taking place in Laos (cf. Schultze 2013).

Though the mobile network and the use of smartphones the internet can be accessed, but the access is still limited to the cities along the Mekong and the areas around it and it is quite slow (cf. Schultze 2013). However, with the internet access most of all Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, etc., are accessed and it is not common yet to use the internet for work outside the bigger cities. Almost no Laotians have laptops or computers. Most of the communication still takes place orally and the medium of e-mails is still not used often even on governmental level.

1.7 Family

Almost everything in Laos is based on family relationships and personal social contacts, for example, the information one has, the job one gets, or getting a driver's license. "The Lao have very close family and tribal relationships, which they value above everything else" (Boase 1997). Most importantly, relationships are based on family relations. The family is often the circle of closest relationships where everything is shared. Family is the centre of a Laotian's life. It is not uncommon for a whole family, this includes grandparents, siblings, and nephews, to live in the same house or close to each other in the same village. Belonging to a certain group and sharing is of utmost importance, and does not leave much room for individualism as it is known in Western countries. However, families provide support and a strong community. On average, a Lao family has four children. Children are seen as a sign of prosperity because they represent workforce for the family as well as a kind of old-age provision. Marriage, therefore, also has practical reasons: to enlarge one's family and to consolidate one's future. Divorce is not a common concept in Lao families, although the divorce rates in Laos are slowly increasing (Boase 1997; Schultze 2013).

The terms one addresses the family with, like mother, father, sister, brother, grandfather, or grandmother, as well as aunt and uncle are not only used for the true family. Other people in the close environment are addressed with these titles as well. An older woman in the circle of close acquaintances is also addressed as "grandmother" even though she is not the person's biological grandmother. A friend who is a bit older than oneself, he can be addressed with "older brother" even though he is not a biological brother. This way of addressing shows the close relationships within a community and the respect and authority that comes with age and is expressed through the title of (grand-) father or (grand-) mother.

1.8 Face

In Laos, as in other Asian countries, open conflicts and criticism are avoided in order to save face. Face is the public self-image a person has and wants to keep in social

interactions. If the self-image is threatened, the person is about to lose face (cf. Yule 2014). In Laos, it is most important to keep face in social interactions. There are different levels of face: the personal face, the family's face, and the community's face. For a Laotian it is not only important not to threaten a person's own public self-image, but also the family's and the whole community's face must be kept (cf. Stobbe 2015). On the other hand, in a social interaction a participant does not only try to keep her or his face but also tries not to threaten the face of the other participants in the interaction. Keeping harmony in every situation and thereby keeping everyone's face is an important aspect of cultural habits in Laos. Therefore, open confrontation and open criticism are avoided in social interactions (cf. Schultze 2013).

1.9   Housing

Traditionally, a whole extended family, with up to three generations, lives in one house. Traditional Lao houses are built out of wood or bamboo and on stilts. The styles of the houses differ between the different ethnic groups depending on the area they live in and, especially, on elevation. The tribes living in the highlands of Laos do not build their houses on stilts but on the ground. Today, the trend is changing and instead of building wooden houses it is becoming more common to build houses out of stones. A traditional house has a living room and several smaller rooms. Kitchen and toilet are most of the time outside under or beside the house. Owning their own house is an important goal for a Laotian (cf. Hays 2008; Schultze 2013).

In the houses, there is often not much furniture. A thin mat, that can easily be rolled up, is used as a bed, and if table and chairs are present they often do not have a certain fixed place inside the house but are moved around to where they are needed. The concept of having furniture for decorative purposes and to style the house is unknown. In many households, the TV has become an important piece of furniture. The house is also not the safe haven for the family but it is open for visitors all the time (cf. Schultze 2013).

1.10   Free time activities and travelling

Whereas hobbies and sports play an important role in Western culture, they have little to no role in the life of the Lao people. The people spend most of their time on guaranteeing the family's survival and well-being. When the children come home after school, they often help their parents with their work or do housework like feeding the chicken, cleaning the house, or cooking. They do not have much free time where they do not know what they should do. Therefore, hobbies have almost no place in the Lao society. Since there is still a lot of manual labour, Laotians generally do not feel the need

to do sports. When there are holidays, the free time is usually used to invite over family and friends or to pay visits to relatives. Most of the Lao people have never been outside of Laos, and the concept of going abroad for holidays is alien to them. Sometimes, they travel to visit relatives that do not live in the close neighbourhood. However, the attitude towards travelling and the concept of free time differ between rural areas, where they are more alien, and more urban areas, where people have fixed working hours and, therefore, more often pursue a hobby (cf. Schultze 2013).

1.11 Food

The Lao kitchen provides many traditional dishes like spicy papaya salad or laap, a kind of meat salad. The Lao are proud of their food dishes and love to share them. Often, the people at the table do not have their own plates but all the food is placed in the middle of the table and everyone takes what he or she wants using his or her fingers, chopsticks, or a Chinese soup spoon. In contrast to the Western tradition of serving several courses after one another, in Laos all food is served at once and everyone can take whatever he or she wants. There is usually more food provided than can be eaten by the guests because this indicates that the host is able to provide enough food. Therefore, it is also not impolite to leave food because this means that you could eat until you had enough. Sticky rice is served with almost every dish in small bamboo containers. Lao people like to eat spicy food and also sour food like green mangos or other sour fruits often combined with spices and chilli salt (cf. Hays 2008; Schultze 2013).

Besides sticky rice, steamed rice is eaten by all the different ethnic groups in Laos and is a staple food. In addition, corn, sweet potatoes, and various kinds of vegetables are often served and a lot of poultry and fish. Other kinds of meat like pork, beef, or buffalo meat are served at special occasions. The people in Laos also have dishes as delicacies that Westerners find peculiar including chicken feet or fried crickets. Milk products are traditionally not part of the Lao cuisine. They are a newer addition to the food known and eaten in Laos (cf. Hays 2008; Schultze 2013).

Coffee and tea are popular in Laos but *BeerLao* is the most popular drink in Laos. It is a beer made out of rice and it is drunk at all special occasions along with Lao rice liquor (cf. Schultze 2013).

1.12 Education in Laos

The education system in Laos is divided up into pre-school, primary, secondary, and tertiary education, as well as vocational education. In general, it is obligatory for children in Laos to go to school for at least eight years, five years to primary school and three

years to middle school. The most common language of instruction is the Lao language (cf. Kounnavongsa 2015). School is free but often there are high fees for books and other school supplies. The Lao government does not spend much money on education. Teachers are paid badly and therefore they often have to earn more money by farming. Naturally, this limits the teacher's attendance at school and lessons are therefore, irregular. Since they are paid very little money, there is a shortage of teachers, especially well-trained teachers. There is a great gap between the quality of education in urban areas and in rural areas. The National University of Laos is located in Vientiane and most secondary education is centred around the capital city. In rural areas, school quality and enrolment rates are lower than in urban areas because in rural areas the usefulness of a formal education is questioned. Why should one learn to read and write when living in a rural farming community? Another reason why education might not be adequate for the given conditions is that the teachers do not come from the same ethnic group as the students and do not have the necessary, culturally appropriate understanding (cf. Hays 2008).

All these aspects, family, language, food, education, etc., provide an insight into Laos and its culture with a focus on the ethnic group of Lao. This should give the reader an impression of Laos and the environment Laotians live in.

2. Contextual factors affecting teaching and learning in Laos

The aspects of Laos and its culture have been described because all these aspects have influences on how people in Laos learn and should be considered by foreign teachers teaching in Laos. Culture, which influences people and their learning, can be defined as "shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives that are transmitted across generations" (House 2004,15).

Joy and Kolb (2009) cite that cultural differences have major influences on how people think and how they interact and react in specific situations. Culture is also assumed to influence the way information is processed, which indicates that it influences a person's learning process. Culture can therefore not be left out when considering teaching in a specific context.

Religion, family perception, and many other factors impact attitudes towards certain content and on learning itself. The first language spoken is an important factor that influences learning a foreign language like English. Due to the ethnic variety in Laos, the learners can have different first languages. Not only the language but also other features of the ethnic group's culture impact learning and should impact teaching. However, since the culture of the ethnic groups of the Lao played an important role in the context of this paper, it is mostly referred to as Lao culture.

2.1   Hofstede's four dimensions of culture to describe Lao culture

To describe Lao culture, Dorner and Gorman (2011) used Hofstede's four dimensions of culture. These four dimensions reveal differences between contrasting cultures and reveal how cultural aspects affect the behaviour of people. The dimensions are categories that group prominent features of cultures, which are used to find similarities and differences between cultures (cf. Joy and Kolb 2009). The four dimensions are *power distance*, *individualism*, *masculinity*, and *uncertainty avoidance* (cf. Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). Hofstede measured the dimensions for many nations but not for Laos. Therefore, the values for Laos have been calculated by averaging Thailand's and Vietnam's scores, the two countries which have been influencing Laos the most in the past and present. When one compares the scores of Laos to those of Western countries, like Dorner and Gorman (2011) did, major cultural differences can be noticed.

2.1.1 Power distance

Laos' score for the first dimension, which is power distance, describes "the extent to which the less powerful members of institution and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005, 46). Laos' score for power distance is quite high in comparison to the scores of Canada and New Zealand. In nations with a high power distance, like Laos, younger people show great respect for older people and they value the elders' knowledge and point of views. This high power distance can be seen in the teacher-student relationship. Students address teachers with the title *ajarn* which "conveys high regard" (Dorner and Gorman 2011, 12). One of the aspects that indicates the high power distance in Lao culture is what people consider a good student or a good teacher to be. A good student is respectful, polite, follows rules and does not necessarily have to show knowledge and skills in the subject. A good teacher on the other hand is knowledgeable and a role model for the students in regards to being a good citizen (cf. Dorner and Gorman 2011). "Authority goes with age or seniority, position or status" (Boase 1997). Younger people show older people or people with higher status respect and their directives are not questioned.

2.1.2 Individualism vs. collectivism

Individualism and its opposite, collectivism, form the second cultural dimension. Individualism "pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everybody is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family", whereas collectivists societies are "societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005, 76). The estimated score for individualism in Laos is much lower than the scores for the two Western countries, Canada and New Zealand. In Laos, family and community are very important. In a culture with a high individualism score, students get educated to find their own place in society, to get a good job. In a culture with a low individualism score, the purpose of education is to help the students to become a good and polite community member (Dorner and Gorman 2011).

This dimension might also explain the different attitudes Western cultures and Lao culture have regarding tests. In high individualist cultures, tests are there to assess one's knowledge and achievement. The students are not allowed to share their solutions or to help each other during tests. In Laos, test situations are completely different. Students talk and share their ideas, they swap their test papers and finish each other's exercises. The different attitude towards the purpose of education might explain this finding. In

Laos, a culture with a low individualism score, it is important that everyone performs well in a group and that nobody is left behind.

However, Boase (1997) suggests that Lao people "are not as collectivist or conformist as most of their East Asian neighbours" due to the many different ethnic groups that make up the Lao people. In a nation with so many different cultures, real collectivism and conformism is impossible. However, a great solidarity and collectivism can be found within a community, for example the whole community comes together to build the local school.

Almost everything in Laos is based on relationships. In order to get things done relationships are needed. The relationships to family and close friends are valued very highly, and it are very important. In Western culture, people may have many acquaintances but relationships come and go throughout life. In contrast, once established, Lao people keep close friendships and relationships forever. It is normal to share everything even valuable items and private topics with close family and friends. "Friends are expected to share in most aspects of each other's lives" (Boase 1997).

2.1.3 Masculinity vs. femininity

Another dimension, where Laos' score differs from Canada's and New Zealand's scores, is masculinity. Cultures with a high masculinity score reinforce gender roles, such as men have to be tough and strong, but women have to be modest and kind. Laos has a lower masculinity score than Canada and New Zealand which means that the society is more feminine in which "emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life" (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005, 120). By constitution, Lao women are given equal rights as men. In contrast to Western cultures, Lao culture is matriarchal which means property is passed through the women from one generation to the next (Boase 1997).

2.1.4 Uncertainty avoidance

The last cultural dimension examined by Hofstede is uncertainty avoidance. Since the scores for Vietnam and Thailand differ greatly, low uncertainty avoidance and high uncertainty avoidance respectively, the average would not be an adequate representation for Laos. Dorner and Gorman (2011) suggest that Laos is closer to Thailand than to Vietnam regarding this dimension and they have a high uncertainty avoidance. People in high uncertainty avoidance cultures prefer clear rules and structures.

2.1.5 The dimensions' influence on learning

All these dimensions influence learning styles and learning situations. In their research, Dorner and Gorman (2011) point out the importance of considering culture and context when wanting to teach information literacy. They take the dimensions into account when thinking about how to develop information literacy in Laos. "These findings about the cultural characteristics of Lao society need to be considered by anyone who may be prompting or planning information literacy programmes in Laos" (Dorner and Gorman 2011, 20). However, these findings are not exclusively relevant for information literacy programmes but other programmes of education in Laos as well. Not only teaching and learning information literacy depends on contextual factors but also teaching a foreign language. The local context influences the whole educational system. The designed programmes have to be "appropriate for the local context, must take into consideration and use indigenous culture and knowledge, indigenous teaching and learning methods, indigenous contexts for genuine learning" (Dorner and Gorman 2011, 21).

They suggest that it is crucial for the success of teaching in a foreign country that the teachers coming from developed countries take the local culture and knowledge into account and cooperate closely with locals to understand the local context and its effects on learning and teaching better. A teaching program is only successful and effective if it is "contextually and culturally appropriate" (Dorner and Gorman 2011, 3). To teach effectively, it is important to understand the local knowledge. Dorner and Garman define local knowledge as "the body of knowledge, abilities and skills of local people accumulated through many years of experience, learning, development, and transmission" (Dorner and Gorman 2011, 4). A closer examination of context, the local knowledge in Laos and the different dimensions of Lao culture, is important to understand how teaching and learning can be designed effectively, and thereby, how a foreign language can be taught successfully. The resources used for teaching must meet the local needs and should relate to the student's everyday-life experiences.

2.2 Teaching in Laos as a Westerner

As a Westerner cooperating and working together with Lao people or even teaching them, one should not assume anything Westerners have as basic knowledge to be basic knowledge for Lao people as well. As Dorner and Gorman (2011) have shown, Laos' culture differs greatly from Western countries regarding Hofstede's dimensions. It is best if nothing is assumed

> "not even what you consider to be the most basic of understandings. Sometimes what you see as abnormal, the Lao will see as normal. When you think you have an understanding, the Lao will surprise you by a statement which appears to contradict your understanding. Quite often, what you

take for granted, based on your cultural bias, is interpreted differently by the Lao, based on their cultural orientation" (Boase 1997).

This is a crucial aspect when teaching Lao people: Lao culture differs greatly from Western culture and the people coming from these different cultural backgrounds often do not share the same basic knowledge and understanding. Teachers should therefore, not expect the Lao people to understand or to appreciate Western knowledge, but should deal with it explicitly and the differences should be examined when learning English.

3. Teaching English in Laos

In Laos, English is taught as a foreign language in schools and other institutions, especially in tertiary institutions. Due to Laos' colonization by French and Americans, both French and English have been playing a role in Laos. For a long time, French was the language for official documents and in government, whereas English was limited. French was introduced in schools in the 1900s and it became the language of officials and the elite in Laos (Souriyavongsa et al. 2013).

However, since the Lao PDR opened its centrally planned economy and became a market economy, a more "omnidirectional foreign policy" was established. "Consequently, from 1980-1996, English gradually returned to important language due to Laos open[ing] its door to the world in 1994" (Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 182). English has replaced French, and English is viewed as the language of international interactions. The economical opening of Laos has increased the demand for people who speak English, and the English language is seen as the key to further development and international concerns (cf. Kounnavongsa 2015). After Laos joined in the ASEAN, English has gained more and more importance in Laos, and it has developed to be the "first priority foreign language" in Laos (Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 182). English is now taught as a compulsory course from grade three onwards and at secondary level. Other foreign languages like Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, German, Russian, or Korean are taught at some institutions as well, but English is seen as the most important foreign language in Laos at the moment (cf. Kounnavongsa 2015).

According to Kachru's (1986) model, Laos belongs to the Expanding Circle which describes countries where English is not traditionally spoken nor an official language, but it is learnt as a foreign language. Kachru divides the nations where English is spoken into three circles. The Inner Circle are nations that are traditionally English-speaking, like Great Britain, Australia, or the United States. The Outer Circle includes nations that do not traditionally have English as a native tongue, but English plays an important role in its institutions. Lastly, there is the Expanding Circle to which Laos belongs. The Expanding Circle has contributed to the spread of English and it being a truly global language (cf. Hu and McKay 2012). Nowadays in Laos, English is learnt as a foreign language, and its importance has steadily been increasing since Laos joined the ASEAN.

However, what Smith (1975) wrote about English language learning in Asia over 30 years ago still applies to English language teaching and learning in Laos today. Many students in Laos do not see a reason to learn English because they have no or little chance to

actually use it. Moreover, English language learning at secondary and university level mainly consists of grammar teaching, reading, and repetition. There is no focus on communicative skills (cf. Smith 1975, 134). There are many reasons why Lao students only show poor performances in learning English. On the one hand, this is connected to large and crowded classrooms and insufficient resources. On the other hand, this can result from an inappropriate curriculum and course design, a lack of quality English teachers, and a lack of students' motivation to learn English. Not only the teaching of language skills must be improved in Laos but also intercultural learning should be included to increase the learner's skills of using the English language in intercultural situations.

3.1   Hallet's model of intercultural learning

In foreign language learning, there should also be explicit intercultural learning. Hallet (1999) designed a didactical model for bilingual teaching: the bilingual triangle. It shows the importance of cultural aspects in foreign language learning, which can be applied to language teaching as well as bilingual teaching. He defines three target fields. First, students should be enabled to talk about their own experiences, their culture, and society in the target language. Second, they should be enabled to communicate about cultures and special features of the countries where the target language is used. Third, they should learn to discuss global phenomena and intercultural topics in the foreign language.

Hallet's model shows that learning a foreign language includes learning about the target cultures but it does not stop there. It should also include learning to express own experiences and local culture in the foreign language in order to communicate about one's own life and the special features of the society one lives in (Hallet 1999). When designing a curriculum or a textbook, all three different aspects must be considered. A course and its corresponding textbook should provide structures, vocabulary, and information to enable the students to communicate about their culture and their country in the foreign language. However, it should also provide the students with information on the cultures and society of the countries where the target language is spoken. To understand a culture also helps to understand a language better.

3.2   Culture in foreign language learning

Culture needs to be a taught in foreign language teaching because language and culture are directly related. "On the one hand, language is used to express people's cultural thoughts, beliefs and to communicate; on the other hand, culture is embedded in the language" (Hsin n.d., 2). Language and culture cannot be separated. To learn about the

foreign culture helps the foreign language learners to use the language successfully in specific contexts, and to understand different cultures and social norms enables them to communicate successfully across cultures and languages. It is not only important to know words and grammatical rules but it is important to know when and how to use language appropriately. Linguistically correct sentences can still cause misunderstandings if they are used in the wrong context. Therefore, culture should not be neglected in foreign language teaching but it should be an integral part of the language teaching (cf. Hsin n.d).

However, since English has developed to be a world language and is used as a lingua franca, the traditional way of teaching culture needs to be revised. "If communicating with a lingua franca, at least three cultures [are] involve[d] in the interaction: the culture of each interlocutor and the culture of the lingua franca" (Hsin n.d., 11). In English language teaching, most of all the mainstream cultures like North America, Britain and Australia were taken into account. Today, English should be looked at from a more global and international point of view. Instead of learning about the mainstream societies and cultures, cultural teaching in English language education should help the learners to develop intercultural awareness and sensitivity for other cultures. It is also important to investigate the forms of English developing in non-Western countries. Depending on the context where English is taught, the cultural contents of the English language teaching should be adapted and the local context and cultures taken into account. These steps are necessary because cultural learning means to reflect on other cultures using the basis of one's own culture. At an intercultural level, the authentic material is not only material produced by native speakers but material by people who use English as a lingua franca (cf. Hsin n.d).

Culture teaching is an important dimension of foreign language teaching because language and culture are interwoven closely. However, the focus should not only be on teaching aspects of the target language cultures but on teaching the language in the specific context. There should also be a focus on raising the learners' cultural awareness so that they can reflect on their own culture and compare it to other cultures, to develop intercultural awareness (c.f Hsin n.d).

3.3   Bi-directionality

Chang (2011) examines the roles of English Language Education in the Asian Context. He divides the general role of English Language Education up into three categories. The first category is interactions between two or more Non-Native Speakers (NNS) of English who use English to communicate with each other. The second category is

communication between Native Speakers (NS) and NNS. This category is often seen as the most important one. However, there are far more interactions using the English language between NNS than there are between NS and NNS. In the third and last category, Chang (2011) wants to acknowledge the effectiveness of Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNEST) in Asian countries. Many advantages arise by NNS being taught by NNEST. A good language teacher does not only have to have a high level of proficiency in English but should be able to offer different strategies and activities for the learners while keeping social and cultural factors of the learners in mind. Better than teaching a language from the point of view of its culture of origin is teaching it bi-directionally so that the language is also taught from the point of view of the learner's culture (cf. Chang 2011).

> "The teaching and learning direction and relationship should be bi-directional in that both NSE and NNSE should not only be aware of the differences in their use of English, but also recognize the differences and learn from each other. Successful global communication can be achieved by overcoming national and cultural barriers and by recognizing the equal status of NSE and NNSE. *So the purpose of English language education in Asian countries is to emphasize the bi-directionality in communicating among NS and NNS in globalized world"* (Chang 2011, 201).

Teaching English in Asia should not be focussed only on enabling the learners to understand the cultures of English-speaking countries or to communicate with NS. In the teaching and learning situation, it is crucial to have a bi-directional focus: emphasizing the equality of NS and NNS and crossing cultural barriers by getting to know the differences between the cultures and communicating about them bi-directionally.

Chang also points out three roles the English language has in Asia. The first role of English is to strengthen the cultural identity of the ethnic group along with the use of the group's mother tongue. The next role of English is as "a window to the world", getting to know and understanding different cultures. Lastly, the role of English is as a tool for international communication (cf. Chang 2011). This model is quite similar to Hallet's bilingual triangle and it again points out the three foci English language teaching should have.

3.4 Multilingual model of ELT

Laos as well as Myanmar, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Between and within these nations, there is a great variety of cultures and more than 1000 different languages are spoken. That is the reason why the ASEAN nations identified English as their lingua franca, as their working language. However, the English spoken as the Asian lingua franca uses many forms that are not features of standard English, like non-standard grammatical forms or pronunciation, as well as culturally-specific use

of vocabulary which include alterations of meaning or translations of local idioms into English.

This English differs from standard English. For a long time, the goal of English language teaching, even in Asia, was to teach standard English and its cultural norms.

> "...[I]t was common in language teaching circles to teach learners of English native-speaker cultural norms so that they could use these when learning English. After all, native-speaker proficiency was assumed to be the goal of language learning and this proficiency included a knowledge of the cultural norms of the native speaker" (Kirkpatrick 2011, 9).

However, things have changed and are changing still, and there are different developments that consider changing this attitude of learning the English language. It is being suggested that no longer a native-speaker-like English proficiency is the goal but the "ability to use the language successfully". This can also imply choosing to teach non-standard grammatical forms of English rather than standard forms (cf. Kirkpatrick 2011). The focus should shift from learning standard English to learning English as a lingua franca and to using it successfully. Many non-standard grammatical forms are not seen as to prevent successful communication. However, there are other non-standard features, like phonological ones, which can prevent the speakers from communicating successfully in English. Kirkpatrick (2011) argues that these features should form the base of the language teaching in Asia with the goal to enable the learners to communicate successfully in the ASEAN lingua franca English and not to acquire a native-like English proficiency. He calls this concept a "multilingual model".

The multilingual model implies that multilingual English teachers teach learners of English as a foreign language and not only native speakers because the multilingual teacher offers a successful multilingual role model and linguistic model. It also implies that the learners of English are measured against successful multilingual role models and not native speakers of English. The model does not only have implications for linguistic learning and assessment. The model can also be applied to the cultural content of language teaching. Instead of teaching and focussing on cultures of English-speaking nations, local cultures should be taken into account which in the ASEAN context implies studying the cultures and norms of the ASEAN nations. The curriculum and course books need to offer regional cultural studies (cf. Kirkpatrick 2011).

Taking Kirkpatrick's multilingual approach into account, the focus of teaching English in Laos, one of the ASEAN nations, is on enabling the students to use the English language successfully and not to gain a native like English proficiency. The approach also implies that the focus of cultural and social norm studies need to be on regional cultures rather than only on the British, American, or Australian cultures.

3.5   English as an international language (EIL)

Whereas Hsin and Kirkpatrick (2011) speak of English as a lingua franca in the Asian context, Seidelhofer (2003) uses the term "International English" in the context of the use of English in Europe. She defines it to be the language that is chosen in cross-cultural communication also arguing that it is often used interchangeably with the terms "English as a lingua franca", "English as a global language", "English as a word language", or "English as a medium of intercultural communication" (9). All these terms draw the attention to the various contexts English is used in and the purpose this usage has in specific situations. As she uses the terms "International English" and "World English" interchangeably, she applies Brutt-Griffler's "four central features of the development of global language" to English as an international language. Firstly, English as a global language originates from global developments of the market, science, media, culture, and technology. Secondly, English can be spoken of as a "World language" since it is no longer the language of the socio-economic elite. Thirdly, English does not tend to replace existing languages but co-exist with them. Lastly, English is spread because many people around the world learn it and it is not spread that much by English native-speakers emigrating and influencing other areas.

3.6   Target, Source and International cultures

Along with the idea of English as an international language, the view of culture connected to the English language changes. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) categorize cultural content into three different category, the target, source and international cultures. Target culture material refers to the cultural content dealing with the cultural features of countries of Kachru's Inner Circle, like the USA or Britain. Source cultural material includes the learner's culture. International culture refers to examples of English as a global language often from the Outer or Expanding Circle nations. The exclusive representation of target culture material in course books has been criticised strongly "since English does not belong solely to British or American culture any more" (Böcüa and Razı 2016, 223). It is not the only goal of English language teaching to familiarise the students with target cultural aspects (cf. Alptekin 2002). To make English language learning relevant to the learners and to increase their intercultural communicative competence, the source culture and international cultures must be dealt with as well.

3.7   The importance of context in language teaching

The importance of context in language learning has been pointed out by Byram and Feng (2004) who review recent literature on teaching language and culture. Citing Hymes (1974) they present his eight factors that influence communication. Hymes summed

them up in the acronym SPEAKING "which stands for setting (time and place), participants, end (purpose), act sequence (form and content of an utterance), key (tone and nonverbal clues), instrumentalities (choice of channel and of code), norms of interaction and interpretation, and genre" (Byram and Feng 2004, 154). These factors are all influenced by the cultural context and they influence communicative situations. These factors can be used to describe the intertextual context in a communicative situation in the foreign language.

By pointing out Gudykunst and Kim's (1992) distinction between external context, referring to the setting of the interaction, and internal context, referring to the interactants cultural backgrounds, Byram and Feng (2004) again depict the importance of context in intercultural communication. Language learning often presents situations where it must be communicated across cultures, no matter if it is between the foreign teacher and the language students or between a Western course book and the Lao learners. The interactions are shaped by the setting in which they takes place, the external context, and the internal context. Intercultural communication does not only depend on the language that is used and the content that is carried but also on the intertextual context.

Therefore, it is important not to neglect the context because it shapes the interactions, and it is necessary to understand each other in intercultural communication. This is why, in the beginning of this paper, there is an attempt to describe some of the features which are relevant in the Lao context. If the context is not considered, intercultural barriers and misunderstandings can arise which hinder effective and successful communication.

> "In intercultural communication, misunderstanding is much more likely to occur because the internal contexts, that is, the methods interactants use to perceive the situations and each other and the meanings they associate with the settings, can differ greatly from one culture to another. Thus, it is essential for language learners to be effective in culture learning" (Byram and Feng 2004, 154).

It is the teacher's task to help the learners explicitly explore the context of language material and find out the potential meanings. The learners must be made aware of the importance of the context and equipped with skills to discover clues that indicate potential meanings and the context (Byram and Feng 2004). However, first the teachers must develop the skills to consider the external context as well as the internal context of the learners, themselves, and the material. Only if the teacher is aware of the importance of intertextual context and culture, can she or he help the students to develop these intercultural competencies.

The teachers must move away from a perspective where they as teachers teach the learners cultural concepts and knowledge, and they should embrace a dialogic process

where both the teacher's and the learner's cultural knowledge are shared at eye level (cf. Byram and Feng 2004).

4. Cross-cultural interactions

Interactions between people from different countries are first of all just social interactions between people. However, these interactions can become troublesome if problems regarding communication, verbal and nonverbal, arise. Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2008) see the major problem of cross-cultural interactions in "inaccurate exchange of information and affect" (53). The Shannon-Weaver communication model has three parts: a sender, a message which is transmitted through a channel, and a receiver. In miscommunication, the message the sender intended to send may not have reached the receiver, or it reached the receiver incomplete or distorted. The receiver might not interpret the intended message correctly, or it is seen as ambiguous or offensive. As the receiver is again a sender this can turn into a vicious circle of misunderstanding and failed cross-cultural communication. Beamer (1992) defines intercultural communicative competence as the „ability to encode and decode meanings in matches that correspond to the meanings held in the other communicator's repository" (285).

4.1   Perception of messages

If one focusses on the receiver of the message during intercultural communication, the task of the receiver is to decode the message she or he has received. The decoding process in intercultural situations can be more difficult because the sender and the receiver do not necessarily have the same social and cultural values to encode and to decode the message. Cultural aspects influence not only the process of structuring the received message and selecting important information, but they most of all affect the negotiation of meaning because the repositories of meanings depend on one's culture (Beamer 1992). "No two meaning reservoirs are identical, but the differences are pronounced when life experiences come from different cultures" (Beamer 1992, 286). Beamer points out that everyone obtains a different store of meanings, but the differences between the repositories of people from different cultures are greater than the ones of people who share the same cultural background.

A course book, or the authors behind it, can also be seen as a particular kind of sender because it delivers information. However, the content and information might not reach the receiver as it was intended. The receiver might not be able to correctly interpret or understand the sent message or the given information due to the cross-cultural differences. In this situation, the receiver cannot send a message back to the sender, being the author of the course book, and therefore the misunderstanding stays with the student. If there is a teacher, she or he might be able to help to deliver the content of the course book. However, the cross-cultural communication between the foreign teacher

and the students can also end up in a circle of misunderstanding. For example, the sender and the receiver could be unaware at first that differences exist, and do not realise that the intended messages are not communicated correctly. Often miscommunication and misunderstandings stay undetected until something goes wrong. To break the vicious cycle, intercultural learning is necessary (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2008). Before a model of intercultural communicative learning is explained, some more differences and dimensions that influence intercultural communication are presented.

4.2   Cross-cultural differences in intercultural communication

Some differences in how people encode and decode message can be traced back to one's culture. There are various differences between cultures in communication preferences and styles. Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2008) describe one to be the preference for high or low context communication.

> "Members of low context cultures convey information directly and rely heavily on verbal communication. Members of high context cultures convey limited information in coded messages; they are more apt to be influenced by situational cues and communicate in an indirect and often ambiguous fashion" (53).

Depending on whether people are influenced by a low or high context culture, their style of communication differs. In Laos, a high context communication is more common, whereas the Inner Circle of English-speaking countries are rather low context cultures (cf. Dingemans 2010). Other factors that influence the communication between people with a different cultural background are their cultural influence regarding self-disclosure or how important the negotiation of face is (cf. Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2008). As discussed before, face is a highly relevant concept in Laos and keeping face determines communication situations. In the UK, the USA, or Australia on the other hand, the negotiation of face is not as relevant in communication.

Not only content but also these differences in communication styles can cause difficulties and misunderstandings when people from different cultures meet and communicate. Often these differences and the consequent intercultural misunderstandings are not obvious in the beginning and the participants in the communication might not notice that the messages they send have not been received correctly (cf. Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2008).

4.3   Contextual dimensions influencing intercultural contact

Intercultural contact is further determined by certain dimensions. Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2008) list them in *The psychology of cultural shock* starting off with the place where the interaction takes place, whether it is the home of one of the participants in the

interaction or the place is foreign to both of the participant. Another factor characterising intercultural contact is the time-span over which the interaction and contact takes place, whether it is only a short term or over a longer period of time. The purpose and the type of involvement are also variables that must be considered, taking the reasons of the intercultural contact into account. These actors also include the frequency of the interactions between the participants, their degree of intimacy, their status and power, and their individual characteristics.

Foreign teachers teaching English in Laos are an example of cross-cultural contact. Most often the volunteers, who taught the Lao teachers, stay for about two to three months. This is a rather short teaching period, but, if the whole project is viewed as the intercultural contact, it is a long-term contact. In this particular cross-cultural contact, the Lao learners learn in their home environment but the English teachers teach in a foreign cultural setting. The purpose and type of involvement of the foreigners is clearly teaching English to Lao teachers. During the time the volunteers are in Laos, the interactions are daily. However, there are months in between the teaching periods where no foreign English teachers are present in Laos. The characteristics of the participants vary every time another teacher comes to Laos. However, the teaching situation in Laos is described closer when the project is described (see chapter 7).

An important aspect of the individual characteristics of each foreign teacher, which influences the interaction with the Lao teachers a lot, is their willingness to get to know the Lao context and thereon, build the teaching. On the other hand, the intercultural contact also depends on the willingness of the Lao teachers who learn English to engage in the learning situation, the interaction with the foreign teachers, and the course book they use. The contact between Lao learner and the Western course book can also be seen as a cross-cultural contact which is determined by some of the dimensions.

5. Learning intercultural communicative competence

Since cross-cultural differences can hinder successful intercultural communication, learning intercultural competence is necessary to prevent misunderstandings and overcome intercultural barriers. Beamer (1992) describes a model of intercultural learning assuming that culture can be learnt, that culture affects communication, and that communication affects culture. The model is divided up into five levels. Development does not have to be linear from one level to the subsequent, but it is rather cyclical because a level is not left behind but revisited again and again. The model was designed to describe the ability to decode messages from culturally different encoders in a business context. However, the model can also be applied to other contexts.

The first one of the five stages is *Acknowledging Diversity*. The first step of successfully communicating in intercultural communication is that an "intercultural sensitivity" is developed. The learners discover major cultural differences. It is an advantage to know or learn the language of the culturally different other in the conversation but linguistic skills alone do not produce cultural fluency (cf. Beamer 1992). In a language learning situation, the teacher can search for differences between the cultures together with the students.

The second level is *Organizing Information According to Stereotypes*. The discovered cultural differences are distinguished into various categories and seen as characteristics of the particular culture. The categorisation helps the learners to better understand the unfamiliar culture and the behaviour and concepts of people who come from that culture. One example of such a stereotype of Laotians is that they are over polite and smile all the time. Stereotypes are helpful in the beginning to comprehend the unfamiliar culture and to get an insight into the culture. Stereotypes might be accurate to a certain degree but they are only a limited part of a culture. Building up stereotypes does not equal intercultural competence and understanding. They can even hinder intercultural communication since they limit the communication and could make the participant inflexible (cf. Beamer 1992).

Therefore, it is crucial to move on to the next level of intercultural communicative competence: *Posing Questions to Challenge the Stereotypes.* In this stage, the "intercultural communicator asks questions about other cultures in order to break out of the stereotypes" (Beamer 1992, 294). Asking questions reveals real attitudes and reasons behind the stereotypes and it increases the knowledge about the particular culture. Answers can not only be found when talking to people from the culture but also by reading, watching, and comparing various sources.

After the learner has asked questions and has sought answers to comprehend the culture in more depth, "the understanding can be used to analyze communication episodes in actual cases" (Beamer 1992, 300). The fourth level is *Analysing Communication Episodes.* Only on the basis of a deeper and more holistic understanding of a culture, can intercultural communication be analysed correctly. The analysis can then explain why communication is successful or not successful and it might show the intercultural barriers that lead communication to be unsuccessful. The analysis of communication based on the developed cultural understanding gives further insight into and further understanding of the intercultural situation.

The final level of Beamer's model of intercultural learning is the level where the communicators can *Generate "Other-Culture" Messages.* The participant in an intercultural communication who is at this level of intercultural learning can encode and decode a message as if she or he was from the other culture.

This model of intercultural communicative learning can not only be used for business communication. It is also highly relevant for learners of a foreign language who want to use the language successfully in intercultural communication. Not only the language of the other participants has to be understood in an intercultural conversation but also the cultural concepts and differences. Beamer (1992) presents a model which educators can use to help their students to develop intercultural communicative competence. However, the teacher must also have developed this competence when teaching learners with a different cultural background than her or his own.

6. Reasons for adapting course books for the Lao context

All these models of teaching English in Asia and teaching intercultural competence do not only have implications for the language teachers and the content in English language teaching but also for the adaptation and the design of course books. In course books, often British and American cultural content dominates and, most of all, native-speaker norms are presented to be the goal. Tomlinson (2006) points out that the global market does not provide many global course books and that publishing a course book with a more global view of English is financially risky.

6.1 Representing local and international context

Nevertheless, it is important the multilingual model of English language teaching finds its way into course books so that the native-speaker and predominantly British and American culture centred view is no longer the only view represented in course books. Either the changed view should be considered when a new course book for ASEAN countries like Laos is designed or it should guide the adaptations which have to be made to use Western General English course books in Southeast Asian settings.

Many course books focus on presenting the target cultures and when they include other cultures the focus is mainly on European, also Western, cultures (Böcüa and Razı 2016). Like Alptekin (2002) argues, material should reflect the learner's local context as well as the international context and prepare the learners to be local but also global speakers of English. Text should not exclusively present discourse between native speakers but also between native speakers and non-native speakers, and between purely non-native speakers. Often the course book is the only opportunity the students have to access a specific culture.

Why is this change of view away from target cultures to source and international cultures and the following adaptation of course books important for the Lao learners?

Souriyavongsa et al. (2013) see one of the reasons for poor performance of Laotians in English language learning as the mismatch of the students' learning styles and the teachers' teaching. Poor performance can arise if the "English course does not relate to the students' needs and interests" (Souriyavongsa et al. 2013, 183).

The teaching of foreign English teachers often does not consider and match the student's needs and interests and it often does not fit the context. However, with teaching comes English course books. The course book used during the teaching periods in Laos were Western English course books for adult learners. One of the books for the beginners was

Straightforward Beginner. This book is not especially developed for the Asian context nor for the environment of Laos. There are not many books suitable and especially adapted for Southeast Asian contexts.

> "There is a shortage of well-developed sequential English language textbooks and materials even though there is an abundant supply of commercial textbooks which are culturally English or American oriented. The content of the commercial texts is sometimes usable but the costs make them prohibitive, especially in the rural areas" (Smith 1975, 135).

There are many course books for teaching English to adult beginners but many of these course books are Western based and England- or America-centred. *Straightforward Beginner* focusses on England and seems to be Europe-centred. There is a shortage of textbooks developed for southeast Asian countries and there is no English course book especially adapted for Laos and its cultural and social context. There are books used for English education developed by Lao institutions but they have huge weaknesses in content and design of the course and the teaching.

6.2   Taking the students' needs and interests into account

Souriyavongsa et al. (2013) postulate that the curriculum should take the students' needs and interests into account when it is being designed. The language teaching should encourage the students to study English and to develop their language skills.

To fit the particular needs of the students, a course book and its contents must be adapted. McGrath (2002) ums up four reasons why course book adaptations should be considered. The first is to localize the learning content by substituting Western concepts and settings with regional ones. This helps to keep the focus on the language and does not use up the efforts of the students to understand the cultural setting. he language objectives have first priority. In a later step, also new cultural information can be presented when it has been made sure that the language objectives have been achieved. This helps to not overwhelm the students with new language and new cultural content at the same time.

A second reason to adapt course books is to personalise them so that the activities and the content directly relate to the student's interests. Chea, Klein, and Middlecamp (2012) bring in the example to first let the students come up with an English menu containing local dishes before they study a Western menu with Western food. Another reason why course books sometimes need to be adapted is when its content is outdated. In this case, the outdated content needs to be substituted by more up-to-date content. When topics like technology or media are included this must happen very often because technology and media are changing and developing constantly and rapidly. The last and fourth reason McGrath (2002) points out is adaptation to simplify the learning content. A teacher

is supposed to know her or his students and their knowledge and learning level. According to this knowledge, the teacher decides whether exercises are too difficult, too easy, or not adequate for the students and, on this basis, adapts the exercises.

6.3   Reducing the cognitive load

A course book is supposed to support the students who study with it as well as possible with its content, structure, and visualisations by taking their needs and interests into account. In his book, Cognitive Load Theory, Sweller (1994) points out the importance of reducing the cognitive load for the learner's working memory by structuring the learning content, illustrating it, and presenting it clearly and comprehensively.

The working memory has a limited capacity and the more demanding the task or the learning content is and the less help received to solve the task or to learn a specific item, the more mental resources are demanded. According to this theory, unfavourably designed learning material increases the cognitive load and hinders the learning process by putting additional stress on the working memory. Such an additional load can be unstructured content, unclear explanations, inadequate images and visualisations, or badly written text books. Instead, if the learners' individual pre-knowledge is activated, it reduces the cognitive load, helps the learners to process the information and learning content, and to store it in there working memory where the information is processed into the long-term memory (cf. Gold 2015).

This theory suggests that the teacher, the textbook, and the selection of material has a great influence on the student's' ability to learn and the learning value of the language lessons. The right material and exercises support the learners and their learning process. Therefore, it is important to select material and a course book that promotes the individual learning process of the students and does not burden them with an additional cognitive load, in addition to that it should fit the context the students live in and their needs.

One aspect of additional cognitive load, can be intercultural barriers. Intercultural barriers stand in between the learner and the learning content. These barriers have to be broken through before the learner can understand the learning content and process it. During the teaching of Lao adult beginners with the course book *Straightforward Beginner,* many intercultural barriers were encountered that complicated the learning process, increased the cognitive load during the learning process and often drew the focus away from the language input onto cultural aspects (see chapter 8).

6.4 Developing intercultural communicative competence

To help the students to be successful communicators in the foreign language in intercultural situations, it is not enough to include local and international content and to consider the learners needs and interests, e.g., regarding pronunciation and content. A course book should also help the students to develop intercultural communicative competence to use the language successfully. This competence is complex and multi-layered and therefore cannot be learnt in a few units in a course book. The example of Beamer's (1992) model of intercultural learning shows that intercultural communicative competence is developed gradually and improved level by level.

Following Beamer's model, a beginner's course book can promote the intercultural learning process through explicitly pointing out cultural differences between cultures, like the target cultures or other international cultures. If the learners are more advanced, it should encourage the learners to ask questions about cultures and provide them with answers to challenge the learners' stereotypes of the people of a certain culture. Once the learners have challenged their stereotypical perceptions of a culture and developed a deeper understanding of the cultural aspects, the course books should guide them through analysis of intercultural communication so that the knowledge about the cultures can be applied and tested in actual communication. The teacher contributes to this development as well but the course book should provide a helpful framework so that teachers who are not experienced in teaching intercultural competence have a guideline for how to do it.

If foreign language teachers do not come from the same cultural background as their learners, it is especially important that the teachers themselves have developed intercultural communicative competence for the specific context of where they are teaching. The project "Teaching English in Laos" by the foundation "Angels for Children" is an excellent example of the necessity of intercultural communicative competence. The project consists of German students who are about to become teachers teaching in a setting where the learners do not share the same culture. This project is described in more detail in the next chapter.

7. Project description: "Teaching English in Laos" – Angels for Children foundation

In 2003, the foundation "Angels for Children", in German "*Engel für Kinder*", was established by Ingrid Engel in Laos. She wanted to support children and their education in Laos, which is one of the poorest countries in the world. The aim was to provide the children with the best education possible in the Lao context by providing them with adequate equipment, health care, an inviting school building, and an education based on the local needs.

At the moment, the Angels for Children foundation supports three government schools in the villages Sikeud and Ban Phang Heng, two primary schools and one lower secondary school. The villages are located around 15 kilometres north of Laos' capital city Vientiane. Besides renovating and maintaining the school buildings and providing a beneficial surrounding for learning, the foundation supports the schools financially and medically and works on improving the teaching quality at the schools in cooperation with the University of Education of Karlsruhe, Germany.

Every year volunteers, who are students at the University of Education in Karlsruhe and study to become teachers, go to the schools in Laos and work together with the Lao teachers to improve their English, their teaching skills and the quality of their lessons. In the beginning volunteers, mostly people who just finished high school in Germany, taught the Lao teachers. However, they mostly stayed just for a short period of time and the next volunteer almost had to start from the beginning again. To make the project more effective and lasting and to have pedagogically trained volunteers, the cooperation with the University of Karlsruhe was established.

The first team of volunteers of the University of Education went to Laos in autumn 2015 under the direction of Prof Dr Isabel Martin. Since then three more teams have been teaching the teachers at the three schools in Laos and a fifth team will start their teaching in September of this year. The volunteers give English lessons especially for the English teachers at the school but to other teachers and the directors as well to improve their English skills. Moreover, the volunteers will sit in on lessons held by the Lao teachers and, after the lesson, they analyse them together. The volunteers provide the Lao teachers with advice and methods of how to improve their lessons, how to make the lessons more varying, and how to improve the learning outcomes of the lessons. Even though the Lao teachers were trained at the teacher's college, they did not learn anything about didactics or methodology (Angels for Children - Engel für Kinder 2017).

One goal is the improvement of English lessons at the schools. This includes increasing the level of English of the teachers and thereby the level of English of the students. Another aspect is the development of science lessons. In 2016, an equipped science laboratory where teachers can work with their students was donated and established at Ban Phang Heng Lower Secondary School. The aim is to enable and encourage the science teachers to use the laboratory with their students and to improve the science lessons. An important goal is to establish the regular integration of experiments demonstrated by the teacher and experiments the students can do on their own. The students are given the chance not only to study scientific phenomena theoretically out of the textbook but to experience them practically and thereby develop a deeper understanding.

The focus of the project lays on the teachers. Improving their English knowledge and teaching quality will soon have positive impacts on the students, their learning and their knowledge. However, the goal is to improve education as a whole in Laos by improving the education of the teachers at the university and college level In order to do this, contacts were made with the National University of Laos, the Teacher Training College Dongkhamxan, the Research Institute for Educational Sciences, and the Ministry of Education and Sports in Laos. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education and the vice-president of Education of Laos, the project was developed to be a national education project and the three schools serve as model schools for further development of education and schools in Laos (Angels for Children & University of Education Karlsruhe 2016; Angels for Children - Engel für Kinder 2017).

During the time I spent teaching in Laos with other volunteers of Team IV, I worked together with the science teachers at Ban Phang Heng Lower Secondary School.

On the one hand, it was my task to sit in on two Lao teachers' science lesson and give them feedback about their lesson and their teaching. Since the teaching was in the Lao language, it was difficult to find out what the lessons were about. By using the Lao textbook and the images in it, it was mostly possible to find out the lesson's topic. However, the most important aspect was not to check the teachers' subject-specific accuracy but to help them to include material and other methods in their lesson. The 100-minute lessons most often consisted of ten- to twenty-minutes of teacher's lecture and the remaining time the students had to copy the text and images from the textbook into their exercise book. I encouraged the teachers to implement simple experiments into their lessons and practiced them with the teachers beforehand. Together, we went to the science lab with the classes and conducted some lessons there where the students could

do experiments on their own. Moreover, I showed the teachers how to create additional material to supplement the black and white textbook and I accompanied the teachers to the lessons where they tried to use the created material and experiments. For many, this would seem to be only a small step and achievement but for the Lao teachers, who have never done experiments with their students before or printed and laminated additional illustrations, it was a huge step. One could already see a great difference regarding the students' engagement and attention in the lessons.

On the other hand, I had a tandem English lesson with two Lao science teachers every day where I studied English with them using the book Straightforward Beginner. They could already express the most basic things in English because they were previously taught by another volunteer. Unlike the lessons for English teachers at the schools, the English lessons for the science teachers only started with the arrival of Team III. By learning English, the teachers could communicate with us volunteers. Moreover, in Lao, there are not many resources regarding teaching material and even the search results in google are very limited when you search in Lao. Therefore, English is helpful for the teachers to be able to improve their teaching.

8. Intercultural Barriers in the course book *Straightforward Beginner*

Teaching Lao teachers English is a challenging task. English has almost no similarities to the Lao language and even the writing system is different. Laotians often have very little prior knowledge of the English language before they start studying it. This is unlike Germans or other Europeans due to the greater influence of Western English-speaking countries. Laos, on the contrary, has barely been influenced by Western culture and the English language yet.

When teaching English to the Lao science and other non-English teachers with the book Straightforward Beginner, many intercultural barriers were encountered that hindered the learning process of the Lao adults. In the following part of the paper, the intercultural barriers that were encountered are described and summed up into different categories. These experiences were made by three German teachers teaching English to Lao adults over a period of two months in Laos.

For all the German teachers, it was their first visit to Laos, and therefore they had not experienced the Lao culture and context before. The Lao teachers, that studied English with the German volunteers, were all teaching at Ban Phang Heng Lower Secondary School. Ban Phang Heng is about 15 kilometres north of Vientiane, the capital city of Laos. Therefore, the area has urban influences but is not a true urban area since there is farming all around. Most of the Lao adults had had English lessons before, for at least three months. These had been held by other German volunteers. Therefore, they had had contact to Western people before. However, the Lao learners of English were still all at a beginner's level.

All the students of the three German volunteer teachers worked with the course book Straightforward Beginner in different units. One teacher started again from unit 1, since the students needed a review of the units that had already been done. The other students started from unit 5 or unit 8. The class sizes varied from only two students with a teacher to a smaller group of about 10 students with one teacher. The groups were formed depending on the student's' level of English.

All three teachers experienced intercultural barriers when teaching the Lao adult beginners with the course book Straightforward Beginner. However, the observations and experiences described in the following section cannot be generalised for all Lao learners since they were made in a very specific context with specific preconditions. The intercultural difficulties and barriers do not only differ between various cultures but also

between different regions and even different individuals. It is assumed that the present local setting and the prior knowledge of the individual students influence their experiences with the course book and the English language. In the context at Ban Phang Heng Lower Secondary School, adult teachers from Laos have been taught. It is important to consider that the Laotians had contact to other Western teachers before because their school has already been supported by the foundation Angels for Children for several years. Furthermore, the teaching situation is influenced by the area where the school is situated.

Nevertheless, the collected experiences give a first impression of intercultural barriers that might be faced when teaching English in Laos with Western General English course books. It can be assumed that in even more rural areas, the intercultural barriers might be even more numerous. The experiences show that difficulties with the content of the Western course book can come up where the Western teachers do not expect them, especially if the foreign teachers are not familiar with the Lao culture and context. The experiences also emphasised the need for adaptations which must be made to teach English in Laos.

Not only obviously integrated western cultural content creates intercultural barriers. More intercultural barriers are experienced when there are underlying western concepts behind the learning content, which are not explicitly explained. Often it is assumed that the learners are familiar with these concepts, and the concepts are supposed to help the learners to understand the learning content better. These underlying concepts pose much more challenging intercultural barriers since the foreign teacher does not expect them to come up and often does not even recognise them at first.

8.1 The Latin alphabet

A first obstacle Western people tend to forget is that Lao people are not as used to the Latin alphabet as they are. In their daily life, Lao people use the Lao script and Lao letters which have no similarity at all with Latin letters. One of the only similarities is that it is written from left to right and on horizontal lines. The different writing system does not only complicate the process of reading but also, and possibly even more so, the process of writing and producing letters by themselves. The usage of inter-word spacing is an especially foreign concept at first because it is not known in written Lao. Moreover, the usage of punctuation has to be learned in detail because in the Lao language there is no punctuation. In English, sentences are separated by spacing and full stops, question marks, commas, exclamation marks, etc., and their usages have to be explained to the Lao learners and practised with them. Once they have learned to use full stops, they

tend to overgeneralise and use them where no full stops are required, e.g., after they write the date.

Often it is not obvious concepts that constitute the biggest problems but small, inconspicuous incidents that hold up the carefully planned lessons.

8.2 Names and the distinction between "she" and "he"

"Douangdeuane, Houava, Khamphong, Souvankham, Sevinay, Xok, Sihn, Thongloun"

When one tries to read out these names, which are typical Lao names transcripted from Lao letters to English letters, one will not be sure from the written form alone how to pronounce these names.

In the first unit of Straightforward Beginner, the Lao learners of English are confronted with various English or Western names. The book does not limit the names to a few recurring ones but a vast number are mentioned on the first pages. The learners are confronted with names like Jack, Orion, Emily, Willy, Ben, Emma, Thomas, or Jessica. In chapter 1A, the learners are confronted with thirteen different English names. At first, from the written form alone, the Lao teachers find it difficult to read out the names and pronounce them correctly, similar to the way Western people, who do not speak Lao and are not familiar with Lao names, find it hard to pronounce Lao names. One should always keep in mind that an additional obstacle for Lao people can be the Latin alphabet.

The Lao names are not only hard to pronounce for Western people but it is also almost impossible to tell if the name is a name for a woman or a man. How can one tell whether "Houava" is a female or male name? Or if the name is even bound to a certain gender? With Western names, there is the rule that most names ending with "a" are female names due to the connection to Latin where a noun ending on "a" is feminine. However, how should the Lao learners of English know this rule if it is not explained? Once they understand this rule they can determine the gender of the names Emma and Jessica, but what about Emily? Furthermore, there are also exceptions to the rule: there are male names ending with "a". One can see that even dealing with names, if you are not familiar with them, can be a difficulty when learning a language.

The course book does provide some assistance in one exercise where three male names and three female names are listed. However, the book does not stick to these introduced names but many other names that have not been introduced are used and the Lao learners cannot know whether those are names for women or men or both, and they do not know how to pronounce them correctly.
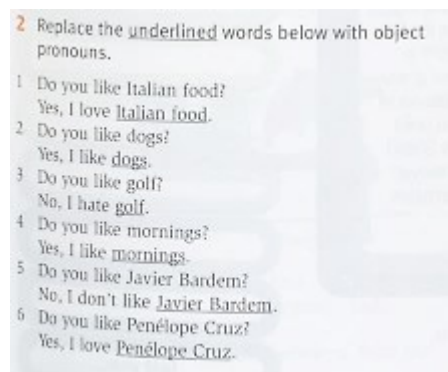

British names (Clandfield 2013, 7)

In the Lao language, there is no distinction between the pronouns "she" and "he". Therefore, exercises where the Lao learners should replace nouns with the personal pronouns "she" or "he" can be a challenge. However, once the concept is explained, it is not very hard to understand. In the teaching, it was experienced that the students could explain when to use "she" and when to use "he" but they had the students who still had trouble using the right forms.

It took a while until it was clear that the distinction between "she" and "he" was not the problem but instead, differentiating the male and female names caused the problem. An example of this can be found in grammar Exercise 2 on page 73 in *Straightforward Beginner*. The student is asked to replace "Javier Bardem" and "Penélope Cruz" with the object pronouns "her" or "him". The difficulty here was not where to use "him/he" or "her/she" but to

Replacing names with pronouns (Clandfield 2013, 73)

make out whether "Javier" and "Penélope" were names for women or men. Should a person not familiar to Asian or Lao names have to replace the names in this exercise with pronouns, he or she would have troubles as well, for the same reason as stated above.

- <u>Douangdeuane</u> is a writer.

- Do you know <u>Houava</u>?

- <u>Khamphong</u> is a teacher.

- Do you like <u>Souvankham</u>?

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- <u>Sevinay</u> goes to school by bike.

How should one know that "Douangdeuane" and "Sevinay" are Lao names related to women, "Houava" and "Khamphong" are names for men, and "Souvankham" can be used for both women and men?

Not all Western or English names are unknown to people from Laos. There are some names which exist both in English and Lao, e.g., there were girls at the school called "Alyssa". However, the Lao learners are not familiar with most of the English names, and they must learn them like they must learn new words.

Moreover, as a European citizen, one can distinguish roughly the country or area of origin of a certain name, or one can tell in which countries the names occur more frequently. Listening Exercise 1 in chapter 1B makes use of typically European names. In the exercise, one has to listen to a recording and fill in the gaps with the country the person mentioned comes from. Examples are: "This is Pierre. He's from _____." or "This is Nikita and Igor, they are from _____." To do the exercise successfully one does not need to know typically European names and their origin but it does make the exercise easier and it provides an underlying scaffold for the learner. However, it is not necessary to have this knowledge about names to do the exercise and it even familiarizes the learner with common names.

One should not forget that a Lao learner does not have the same background knowledge and if one does not have this knowledge, it cannot be drawn upon and used as an orientation. It is important to bear the differences of cultural knowledge related to names in mind when doing exercises with Lao adult learners.

8.3 Cities and countries

The more challenging intercultural barrier of the same chapter (1B) are the cities and countries named on the pages. This chapter has the topic "My country", and it is about expressing where one comes from. The cities mentioned in the chapter are Beijing, Moscow, New York, Frankfurt, Rome, Paris, London, and Rio de Janeiro. Five of the cities mentioned are situated on the European continent. Only one is an Asian city, along with one South American, and one North American city. These are all big cities with millions of inhabitants but some of them are capital cities and others are not.

The intention was most likely to include well known cities, but, for the Lao teachers, most of these cities were unknown. Therefore, an exercise like the vocabulary exercise in chapter 1B, where cities and countries have to be matched, can only be done by guessing. Beijing was the most familiar city in this exercise, and it could easily be matched with China but how can one match Frankfurt to Germany or Rome to Italy when it was not even clear where the countries lay let alone what cities are situated in these countries. One German teacher of Lao adults even experienced that the learners could not distinguish whether names stand for countries or for cities.

If European cities and countries are covered in the units, it should first be explained where these countries lay and which big cities are in these countries. The countries and cities mentioned are clearly Europe-centred. If the unit was more Asian-centred, cities like Shanghai, Tokyo, Dhaka, Jakarta or Seoul would be mentioned. Then many Western people would not be able to tell in which countries some of these cities are even though these cities are as big as or even bigger than the cities mentioned in the original chapter.
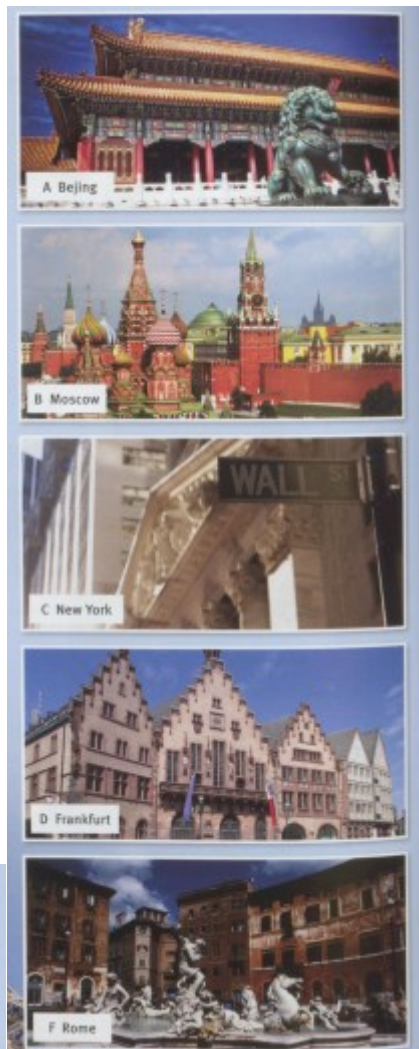
Matching countries and cities (Clandfield 2013, 8)

8.4 Overrepresentation of European/ Western people, cities and countries

In the first eight units of the course book there is a clear overrepresentation of Western and especially European countries and people.

In chapter 3A, which has the title "International workers", five of six workers come from European countries like France, Britain, and Italy, and the sixth worker is from the US, also a Western country. Only two people who come from an Asian country are mentioned in the first eight units. The first one is Jin from China in chapter 1B, and the second one

is Charri from the Philippines in chapter 5A. People pictured in images in the course book are mainly white, Caucasian looking. Some are black but only a few look Asian.

Not many of the cities and countries mentioned in the units are situated outside Europe and the USA. There are only a few examples of Asian and South American cities and countries. No African countries or cities are mentioned in the first eight units.

The overrepresentation of European or Western people, countries and cities can also build up subtle intercultural barriers. First of all, the Lao learners do not know many European cities or countries, and it was sometimes even hard for them to distinguish between city and country names. If more Asian countries were mentioned and more Asian people were pictured, it would help the students to identify themselves with the people and places in the book more easily and to situate it in their closer learning environment. When thinking of the perspective of learning English to use it as a lingua franca in the ASEAN nations context, it would be more important for the learners to familiarize themselves with countries in Southeast Asia.

8.5 Being a tourist

In Western countries, many people go on holidays and travel to foreign countries. Often, they go to places where other languages are spoken than the travellers' mother tongues. To communicate during their travels, English is used frequently because it is a lingua franca in many countries. Therefore, travelling situations present authentic settings where English is used, and learners of English are being prepared for situations where they might actually need English to communicate in real life. Travelling scenarios, especially where somebody travels to an English-speaking country, are situations where the adult learners of English will make use of the English they have learned so far. Since English is often used by Western people during travelling, it is important to equip them with structures and vocabulary they need in situations that often occur when one travels, e.g. checking in at an hotel, ordering food, asking for information at the visitor centre, or understanding tour guides.

The book Straightforward Beginner includes travel scenarios in its chapters. In unit 2, learners get to know vocabulary and structures to get along in a hotel. In unit 7, they learn important language items which are needed when touring through a city, which in this case, in chapter 7B, is situated in England. It is important for learners to learn language they can use while they are travelling. At least it is for Western learners. Western people often know typical processes that occur during one's travels because many Western people know the concept of being a tourist and many have been a tourist

in several places before. With the help of the course book, they now get equipped to handle these processes in English.

The Lao teachers that have been taught by German teachers have never been to an English-speaking country before. Most of them have never been outside Laos, and the ones that have have visited Thailand, which is just a few kilometres away. However, in Thailand people understand Lao and Laotians understand Thai because the languages are similar. If the Lao teachers travel somewhere, they mostly do so to visit relatives and family. They have never stayed at a hotel nor gotten to know what Westerners link with travelling. This difference was also be perceived when teaching the chapters and units which were built on the concept of being a tourist or staying at an hotel. If the Lao learners had been a tourist somewhere, Europe and cities like York, Barcelona, Prague or St Petersburg would not have been the cities they went to. When dealing with checking in at an hotel, not only the English vocabulary was new for the adult learners but also the process. In unit 7, the word "tourist information" is introduced, but only the word, not the concept behind tourist information. This had to be explained in the lesson because the Lao learners did not know the concept of tourist information. Or the word had to be left out, which was not possible due to two reasons. First, it comes up later in the unit and more exercises could not have been done. And second, the students have the book and if something was left out in a chapter, they often asked for it anyway because they discovered the word on their own.

Since travelling is an alien concept to most of the Lao learners, the whole content of unit 7 presents multiple intercultural barriers. Words describing what one puts in the suitcase when travelling are not relevant in the local context, neither is talking about a city tour in a foreign city. The topic of chapter 7C is a trip to York, England. Like Prague or Barcelona, York is a city the Lao students are neither familiar with nor are they likely to ever visit it. Again, it is about going to the tourist information to get information about the sights in the city. If the Lao people travel, most of them travel to visit relatives who live somewhere else. If one visits relatives or friends, there is no need for tourist information since they are locals and know the area and its sights and characteristics. Moreover, in chapter 7C, a castle is pictured, a typical Western sight. If the book was set in a more Asian context, it would maybe picture a temple since the Lao learners know what a temple is but not necessarily what a castle is.

For most Western learners, it is relevant to be enabled to use English to communicate in travelling situations, especially when travelling to English-speaking countries. It is not far-fetched that a Western learner of English might use the English language when

visiting an English-speaking country. However, for the Lao people this is much less likely, and they rather need English in situations with other non-native speakers of English, whom they cannot communicate in Lao with and therefore they need to use English as a lingua franca.

8.6   Understanding visual aids

Not only obvious underlying concepts that differ between Lao and Western culture or language interferences can pose problems and intercultural barriers but also smaller details one might not think of at first. In the chapter about spending holidays in an European city and where the word "tourist information" is being introduced, the new words in the beginning of the unit are being introduced by simple signs. The students must match the vocabulary and the signs. To teach this specific vocabulary to the Lao students, these signs, which the book suggests to use, were not used to introduce the new vocabulary. The signs were thought not to be precise

*Signs as vocabulary introduction
(Clandfield 2013, 60)*

enough to familiarize the students with the new words, so that they gain the right meaning of the English terms.

One example is a sign with two trees on it which is supposed to stand for a park, or a single bed standing for a hotel. These difficulties could have been the same for Western students. More intercultural barriers became obvious with some of the other signs. The signs were not used in the lesson but one of the students looked at the unit and the signs at home and tried to match words and signs after the words had already been introduced. With the sign which is supposed to represent a beach, the student had the most trouble. The sign shows a pile with a shovel and a bucket. The student was asked what he thought the sign should stand for, and he answered that it must stand for work or a construction area. Laos is a landlocked country and the Laotians who have never been outside Laos have never been at the sea. They have never seen a beach at the coast, only on pictures or in videos. For the student, a shovel and a bucket only stand for work or construction, whereas Western people also know that children play at the beach with shovels and buckets to build sand castles.

Another one of the signs which was not completely clear was the sign which theoretically stands for a bank. However, it does not show a bank but it shows a note with the number 100 on it and circles with different signs, which Westerners know to be coins with the euro, the pound, and the dollar sign on them. In Laos, they only have bank notes and they do not have coin money. Furthermore, the learners were not able to distinguish the signs to be currency symbols. Therefore, the sign was not recognised to stand for money you can get at a bank.

The representation of money posed a challenge at another point. In the same chapter, chapter 7, there is another visual representation of money. This time, it is 20 and 10€ bank notes folded in half. Through the fold, the bank notes do not have the typical form of bank notes, and in Laos they are not familiar with Euros. Moreover, the Lao currency, Laos Kip, start with the smallest note being 1000 Kip. There are a few older banknotes with 500 Kip but they are rare. Lao people are not used to see numbers smaller than 500 on their banknotes which adds another level of unfamiliarity to the printed bank notes in the book.
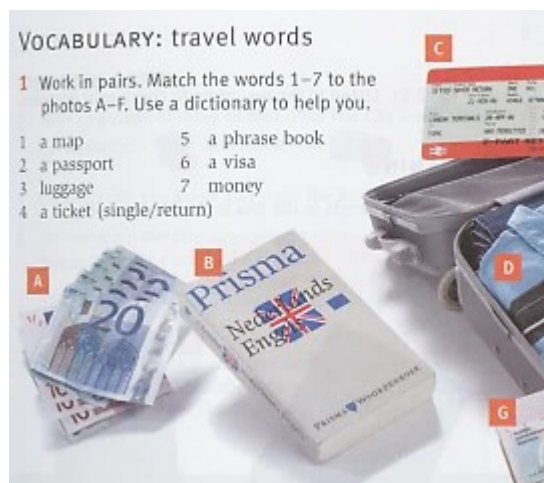
Folded Euro notes representing money (Clandfield 2013, 65)

To come back to the signs in chapter 7A, there is another sign with a building with an M in the middle. This sign is supposed to stand for a museum. A Western learner might be able to interpret the sign to stand for a museum because it is commonly known what a museum is, and many people have already been to a museum. Moreover, it is common knowledge among Western adults that many museums are located in old buildings sometimes with pillars like represented on the sign. In contrast, in Laos there are only a few museums and none of the teachers that were taught English at the secondary school have ever been to a museum even though they live fairly close to the capital city, Vientiane, where some museums can be found. The museum sign is one sign which can hardly be recognized by the Lao learners let alone help them to find out and remember the meaning of the word "museum". They are not familiar with museums and they do not know that many museums in Western countries are located in old buildings which look somewhat like the building represented on the sign.

The same applies for the sign that represents tourist information. It is simply a small "i" in a box. As mentioned in the paragraphs about being a tourist, the concept of going to

tourist information is an unfamiliar concept, and an "i" in a box does not help the learners to understand what tourist information is.

The only signs that seemed to be clear straight away to the Lao learners were the sign with the airplane and the taxi, even though the sign depicts a typical British taxi and taxis in Laos look different, and, more commonly, tuk-tuks are used as taxis.

Even in signs there are cultural aspects that need to be interpreted and understood correctly. To do this one needs to have the necessary cultural visual literacy. Visual literacy is defined as "the ability to recognize and understand ideas conveyed through visible actions or images (such as pictures)" (Merriam-Webster 2017). Serafini (2017) explains that originally, visual literacy was seen as a universal set of competencies that one needs to have to interpret visual images. Every person needs to develop visual literacy like one needs to learn to read written words. Some time ago visual literacy was seen to be a universal concept and universal skills that do not depend on the context or culture they were developed in.

However, in recent years this view has changed and the importance of the context and the social setting the competencies are developed in were acknowledged. Interpreting visual images requires "considering not only the visual image itself but the various contexts associated with visual images: for example their production, dissemination, and reception" (Serafini 2017, 7). Visual literacy develops in a context to fulfill the requirements of the particular setting and culture one lives in. Among other competencies the Adobe Visual Literacy White Paper set the following competence as an ability that one needs to develop to be visually literate: "analyze and interpret images to gain meaning within the cultural context the image was created and exists" (Serafini 2017, 5). This proficiency clearly points out the importance of the cultural context when "reading" images, the context where the image was produced and the context where the image is received.

With the signs in *Straightforward*, the cultural context needs to be considered when reading them. However, to consider the cultural context, one needs to have a certain knowledge about the specific culture. The Lao learners did not have the necessary cultural knowledge about Western culture to interpret the signs correctly. Laotians grow up developing a visual literacy that helps to fulfill the requirements for the setting they live in. Understanding a sign with a bucket and a shovel as a sign for a beach is clearly not one of the interpretations they come up with using their visual literacy skills which are shaped by the culture and society they live in.

8.7 Housing and furniture

The representation of houses in the course book also turned out to create intercultural barriers. The first house explicitly presented in the course book is an old English manor. It is definitely not a kind of house the Lao learners were familiar with, and what they expected it to be, was an official building. Right in the next chapter, 4B, another house is presented which, this time, is a cottage.

An old English manor (Clandfield 2013, 32)

A small cottage (Clandfield 2013, 34)

Since the Lao learners do not have a lot of furniture in their houses especially not beds but just mats or mattresses on the floor, it is an advantage that furniture words are introduced using a hotel room in chapter 2B. This way, the learners can get to know the vocabulary but they must not describe their furniture at home or list what they have since the list would be very short. To a hotel room, they can apply the vocabulary. Most of the Lao learners could only apply two or three of those words to their home.

8.8 Technical equipment

Chapter 5B in the course book is on "Technology life" where items like a computer, a webcam, a printer, a tablet, a phone, a digital camera, or a game console are introduced. Moreover, it is about email addresses, e.g. with the task: "What's your email address? Ask three people in the class" (Clandfield 2013, 44). First of all, Lao teachers do not possess most of the items mentioned in this chapter. The only thing almost all teachers have is a smart phone. Some of the teachers at Ban Phang Heng Secondary School own a laptop but only because of donations from Germany. Many of them do not know how to use a printer and have never used one before. There is only one printer at the school and not many teachers use it. It was a donation as well. In many other Lao schools, the teachers do not have access to a printer or a computer. The course book suggests to do a survey where the students find out which of these items they have at home, at work, or at school. For the Lao teachers, the answer to the possession of most of the items is "no" and it might be an uncomfortable situation when they ask the Western teacher as well and her or his answer is "yes" to almost all items. Why should they study a chapter on items they barely have or use?

The same applies to the email address. The Lao teachers did not have email addresses before German teachers came to teach them English and set up accounts together with

them because in Western culture it is considered necessary to have an email address for communication purposes. For the Lao teachers, it has not been important to have an email address, maybe only to download apps onto their smart phones. However, the email address is not used for communication, and they do not know their email address by heart to tell it to other people like they are supposed to do in an exercise in chapter 5B. If the cultural differences regarding this aspect would be considered, the chapter would explain why it might be necessary to have an email address when working together with Western partners or not talk about email addresses at all and just about phone numbers.

Phone numbers are already covered in chapter 1C. Most of the Lao people have a mobile phone and a number. However, the book provides another survey where the students should complete a table and fill in their home, work, and mobile phone number, and the numbers of two other students. As most of them only have one mobile phone and one number, they can only fill in one of the rows in the table and the exercises loses its justification. The concept of having a phone specifically for work is an unknown concept to the Lao teachers.
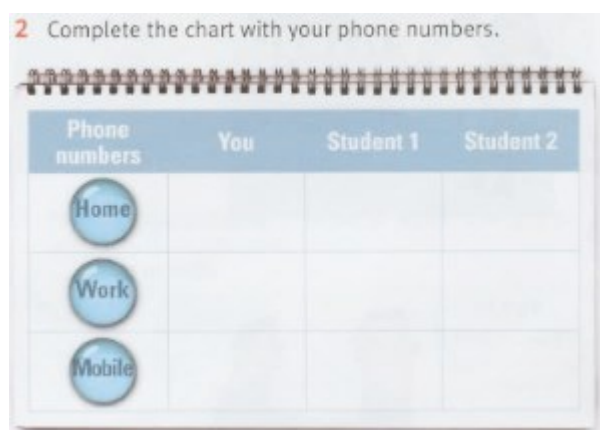
Phone numbers (Clandfield 2013, 11)

8.9 Social media and webpages

"Do you or your family have a web page? If so, describe it to your partner" (Clandfield 2013, 34). his is an exercise from chapter 4B, which has the topic "Personal web page". This chapter introduces family words through a family webpage of a family called "the Murphys". Not even many Western families have their own web page let alone Lao families. Dealing with this chapter with the Lao students, one could witness how foreign the concept of having a web page for the family was for them.

Another example of the underlying assumption that people use web pages, know blogs or are familiar with the typical Western social media is in the same unit in chapter 4D. In this chapter, a personal web profile of the author of *Straightforward* is presented. While having the students read out the small text in the beginning, it was noticeable that not only the words were unknown but also the concepts behind the words. The words "blog" and "tweet on & off" were unknown and not only the words but also what a blog is, what twitter is, and what "to tweet" means all had to be explained. For German learners, these

words present no difficulty at all because the concepts of blogs and tweets are familiar to most of the people and the English words "blog" and "tweet" have even been adopted into the German language. For the Lao teachers, these terms presented an even greater difficulty than other words.

8.10   Food and drinks

In comparison to technology and social media, food is a very important topic for Lao people. The first time food is introduced in *Straightforward Beginner* is in unit 2, in chapter C. The whole unit is about hotels, and this particular chapter is on a "Hotel café". It introduces vocabulary for food and drinks you can get in a hotel café, such as orange and apple juice, a coffee, a tea, a mineral water, a croissant, an omelette, a cheese sandwich. These are food and drink items that many Western people have for breakfast. It is also often called continental breakfast. Most of the Lao adults have never been abroad or in a hotel. Furthermore, the typical Lao breakfast consists of noodle soup, fish, rice,

Hotel breakfast (Clandfield 2013, 18)

or other salty dishes. All this vocabulary will not be used by the Lao adults when they talk about their eating habits, but it might help them to understand what people from Western countries eat.

Chapter 6C has the topic "Meal time". In this chapter a variety of basic foods are introduced including eggs, soup, vegetables, salad, fish, meat, and chicken, all foods and dishes that are eaten in Laos as well. However, the most important food is missing – rice. Instead of including pasta and toast, which are typically Western foods, it would be more suitable for a Southeast Asian context to include rice, either steamed rice or sticky rice, or both. The selection of foods represented in this chapter is quite universal

but for it to be more suitable for Laos it should include rice. Both fruits and vegetables are imaged though the fruits and vegetables that are eaten in various countries differ enormously.

Another striking experience regarding food and breakfast was made when teaching chapter 6D. In this chapter, two menus are presented: a breakfast menu and a lunch menu. The aim is for the students to use the structure "What would you like for lunch/breakfast?" and answer with the structure "I'd like…". While doing the exercise, one student asked the other one "What would you like for breakfast?" and the other student picked dishes from the lunch menu. First, it was thought that the exercise or the terms breakfast and lunch had not been understood but then it became clear that the dishes listed on the breakfast menu mostly are things Lao people do not eat for breakfast. On the

Breakfast and lunch menu (Clandfield 2013, 57)

breakfast menu, there are eggs, toast, fruit, or croissants. They rather have dishes listed on the lunch menu for breakfast, like soup or fish. This explained why the students picked items from the lunch menu even though they were asked about breakfast.

Western concepts regarding food are also included more sub-textually. In the review of unit 6, images of daily actions are shown. In the image which represents having breakfast, the man eats cereals. One can spot the cereal box next to a bowl filled with cereal. Having grown up in a Western society, one knows what cereal is and that one usually has it for breakfast, and therefore it is obvious what is shown in the picture. However, in Laos having cereal is not common and, as mentioned earlier, it is not a food Lao people usually have for breakfast.

Another Western concept in the same exercise is having dinner with a knife and fork. In Laos, most of the dishes are eaten with one's fingers, especially sticky rice. For more liquid foods a Chinese soup spoon is used. Although it is not traditional to eat with chopsticks, in Laos, many people eat with chopsticks and in restaurants one usually gets a pair of chopsticks for every person. When some of the Lao teachers visited a Western country for their first time, they were unsure about how to hold and use a knife and fork because they were not used to it. They asked the German tandem teachers about how to do it properly. Many Laotians might know that knives and forks are cutlery, but they do not use it, and they have to learn how to handle it, just as Western people have to learn how to eat with chopsticks. It might not cause trouble for the Laotian to understand the picture because the man eats with a knife and fork, but it still shows the cultural difference between the concepts of the book and the local culture. It creates a certain distance between the Lao learners and their course book. For Western learners on the other hand, it would be unfamiliar if the people in the pictures ate with chopsticks.

8.11   Abbreviations

For learners of English, it can make the access to the language easier, if they experience that they already know some things in English. An example where the course books wants to build on the learner's' prior knowledge of English is a box with abbreviations in chapter 2A. The exercise is described with the category "English around you", and in the box several English
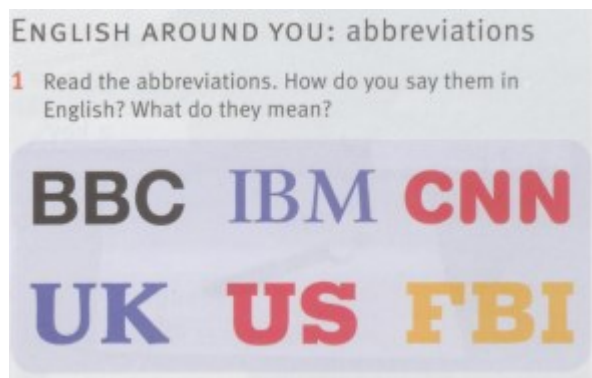
Abbreviations (Clandfield 2013, 15)

abbreviations are listed: BBC, IBM, CNN, UK, USA, FBI. For Western learners, this might provide a point of connection to the English language, because they notice that they already know some English since the presented abbreviations are commonly known in Western countries. From the point of view of Lao learners, these abbreviations are mostly unknown. Many of the Lao learners did not know where Great Britain was, not to mention that it can also be called the United Kingdom or abbreviated UK. Whereas BBC, CNN, and even FBI are known in Western countries through television, Lao learners commonly do not know these abbreviations, because, if they watch TV, they watch Lao or Thai channels.

In the Lao language, there are some loanwords from the English language, even though they are often adapted to fit Lao pronunciation. These words could be a point of

connection of Lao learners to the English language, and they can be used instead of the abbreviations which are not known and cannot be counted as "English around you" in the Lao context. Many technical and scientific terms were adapted from English into Lao, like oxygen (ອົກຊີເຈນ - ok si chen) or computer (ຄອມພິວເຕີ - khomphiuatoe). In the Lao context, English loanwords can be found and used in exercises in the category "English around you". However, the influences might not be so obvious as in Western languages and cultures, which have strong influences in media from English-speaking countries.

8.12 Family

The topic of family is only presented in one chapter in the course book. In this chapter, a family from Great Britain is presented by the means of a personal web page of the family. For Lao people, the family is of high importance and they like to talk about their family a lot, since most of them live together with their extended family in the same village or even in the same house. As family is of such great importance to Lao students, the topic should be included more extensively, and as they like to talk about their families, they should be provided with more language material to do so.

Laotians use the family terms, that in Western countries usually only refer to the biological family and the family related by marriage, more freely for other people in the closer community as well. Therefore, the usage of the terms is an intercultural difference. It has to be explained that usually the terms like mother, father, sister, and brother are only used for people who are actually related in the English language. An older woman in the community who is not the actual mother but has a certain authority would be addressed as mother in Laos but not in English-speaking countries. Not only terms have to be learnt but also their usage in the specific context.

8.13 Free time

Talking about free time and hobbies plays an important role in Western small talk. Therefore, free time activities are included in almost every Western English course book and the learners are enabled to express what they like to do in their free time. Since a Lao learner does often not have free time, this competence and learning material is not very relevant for the learners. Most of the Lao people work and when they have finished work they do housework or spend time with their families. As mentioned in the section about free time in the remarks on culture in Laos (see 1.10), the Lao people visit or invite family and friends over if they happen to have free time. In urban areas, it is different, there people have fixed working hours and free time afterwards. People who live in one of the cities are more likely to have hobbies and free time activities which they do regularly.

Chapter 6B focusses on free time activities and presents a pin board with free time activities a community centre offers. The Lao learners did not know what a community centre was, neither did they know that community centres can offer free time activities for the people living in the community. For the adult learners at Ban Phang Heng Lower Secondary School, the concept of free time activities might not have been as alien as it would have been for other Lao learners since the foreign partners established a one-hour activity time after school, where the students can pick what they want to do. The activities range from playing volleyball or other sports, having Lao dance lessons, to an English conversation club. However, these activities are obligatory for all students and therefore do not count as free time activities but the Lao teachers at that school at least know the concept of playing sports together or going to a special club in the afternoon.

8.14   Film sequels and famous people

Another set of intercultural barriers while teaching with the course book *Straightforward Beginner* was experienced connected to famous people, especially from the film industry.

Often, names mentioned in the units are allusions to famous persons, examples from chapter 2A being "Tom Crewes", "Kate Middeldown", "Mr and Mrs Bickham", or "George Clunie". The Lao learners are not familiar with the famous Western people these names allude to and therefore do not make the connection. In these exercises in chapter 2A, it is not of relevance if the learners know the famous people. However, the learners also do not get the humour hidden in the exercises.

The entire unit 8 does not only deal with famous Hollywood actresses, like Jennifer Aniston and Glenn Close, but also with famous Hollywood movies and TV series. At the beginning of the unit, posters of the movies *M:i:III*, *James Bond- Dr.No* and *The Dark Knight* are presented and the students are asked to talk to their partner about which of these movies they know. The Lao adult learners did not know any of these movies. Therefore, the exercise was not suitable to use in the Lao setting.

Film posters (Clandfield 2013, 68)

If Lao people own a TV and watch TV, they watch Thai channels, which often feature Thai movies and series. The Laotians are usually not familiar with most of the Hollywood movies or the series listed in chapter 8B including "Big Brother", "Grey's Anatomy", "Lost", or "House". Again, these series were listed under the category "English around you", and the series, as well as the film posters, were included in the course book to activate and include the learner's' prior knowledge, which might be a Western learner's prior knowledge but not a Lao learner's. The exercises had to be left out because the Lao adult learners could not talk about series and films they did not know and had not seen before.

However, not only famous people connected to the Hollywood film industry are mentioned in the book. In chapter 7A, one teacher was asked the question: "What is Mozart?". This was a question by a Lao teacher after reading the short article about Prague. This question shows that the learner did not know who Mozart was not to mention that it is a person. Similar questions came up with the short text about Barcelona where Picasso and Gaudi are mentioned.

Gaudi, Mozart and Picasso are famous people who contributed great artwork to the Western culture. Therefore, they are widely known in Europe. In addition to not knowing the people, the Lao learners also did not know their artwork mentioned in the text, like the Sagrada Familia, Mozart's opera The Magic Flute, or Picasso's art. The short texts on the European cities contain many aspects which were new for the Lao learners and the lesson planned around this chapter went completely differently from how it was designed since the content needed to be explained. For the explanation, the teacher used the internet to show pictures of Picasso and his work, of Gaudi's buildings, as well as music samples from Mozart's opera.

If the teacher is more familiar with the Lao setting, she or he might know people that are famous in Laos, films and series that are watched by the Laotians, or famous cities. These aspects can be included in the lessons instead of only dealing with Western famous people and European culture. Even if the teacher does not know the setting well enough yet, the students are experts for their learning context and they can contribute the content they find important to the lesson. Later in this paper, it is described how course books and exercises can be adapted to fit the Lao context and examples are presented, which show how it has been done with the chapter 7A which deals with Prague, Barcelona, and St Petersburg (see 9.1).

8.15   Not only intercultural barriers

Even though a lot of intercultural barriers are explained in detail in this paper and there might even be more depending on the group of learners one works with, the students did not experience difficulties with all the content in the book. Most of the activities not mentioned in this paper did not cause problems. However, it should be pointed out that there are also some examples where the content or the activities were well suited to the Southeast Asian context.

The first activity that is set in Southeast Asia, is the hotel in chapter 2A. The hotel is situated in Bangkok and as Thailand is Laos' direct neighbour and from the school it is only about 30 kilometres to the Thai border, the Lao teachers are familiar with Bangkok. Another exercise in the book is set in Southeast Asia. In chapter 3C, the topic is international schools and the international school described is in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, another Southeast Asian country, which is also part of the ASEAN.

A chapter where almost no difficulties regarding content and cultural differences were experienced, was chapter 5A about "Working life". The chapter enables the students to talk about their jobs, where they work, how they get there, and where they live. This is also a relevant topic for Lao teachers. The only tiny difficulty, again, was city and country names that were mentioned in the chapter. However, it did not distract from learning the content and the concepts of the chapter, and the students enjoyed being able to talk about their jobs and homes.

The second chapter in which no important intercultural barriers were experienced in the teaching and learning process was chapter 6A, which deals with daily routine and adverbs of frequency. Again, the learners could relate to the topic and seemed interested in learning about how to talk about their daily routines and compare them. The daily routine presented in chapter 6A is kept quite general, therefore it fits even in the Lao context and it can be extended individually. It was very interesting for the learners to compare their daily routines and to compare them to the routine of their German teacher.

In the short time teaching in Laos with the course book Straightforward Beginner, many intercultural barriers were experienced and had to be overcome. In this analysis of experiences, only the first eight chapters of the book were looked at in more detail. The teachers and the students had to speak about the challenges that came up in the lessons. Often the teachers did not expect that certain content would pose a difficulty for the Lao learners and only after some time, after the teachers got to know the local context better, could some intercultural barriers be avoided.

In general, there is an overrepresentation of European and Western culture in Straightforward Beginner. Most of the examples include Western countries and the mention of Asian countries is the exception. The people pictured in the book mainly look Caucasian. More unsuitable for the Lao learners than the obvious overrepresentation of Western countries and people are the underlying Western concepts, which are not explained but the learners are expected to understand them. Instead of supporting the learning process these concepts present intercultural barriers which must be overcome before the learning process of the content can take place. Perhaps the original intention behind the underlying concepts was to provide Western learners with concepts they know and therefore make the learning content easier to access.

However, for non-Western learners, these presented concepts did not facilitate the learning process of the foreign language but imposed additional new learning content. The Lao learners must not only learn to understand the foreign language but also Western concepts. The problem is, that most of the time only the language content is explained in the course book but the underlying cultural concepts are not. The teacher must take over and explain the concepts once she or he notices that the students do not understand it. The intercultural barriers formed by Western concepts, which can differ greatly from concepts in Lao culture as shown with the report of the experienced intercultural problems when teaching Lao adults with Straightforward Beginner, put additional cognitive load onto the learners, which can slow down or hinder their learning of the English language.

Of course, culture plays an important role in language teaching because culture and language are closely interrelated. However, since English has developed to be a global language and is used as a lingua franca in the ASEAN, the focus of English-related culture does not solely lay on target cultures anymore. Taking Kirkpatrick's (2011) multilingual model for ELT and other current approaches into account, focus should be placed on the regional culture and the use of the English language in an international context as a lingua franca. There can be cultural aspects from the British or American target cultures but if they are included they have to be explained and introduced properly so that they do not present intercultural barriers to the students.

To overcome these barriers in the course book, a teacher who is familiar with Western culture and concepts but who is also sensitive to the local needs and the regional cultures is needed to mediate between the course book and the learners. The teacher needs to adapt the material in the course book to facilitate the Lao learners' language learning process and to circumvent possible intercultural barriers. Otherwise, they must explicitly

talk with the students about the underlying concepts they do not understand. When choosing a course book for a learning context like these schools in Laos, the books must be looked at from the point of view of a non-Western learner. If there is no course book for the specific learning context yet or no adequate one, the teacher should adapt the material at hand as well as possible because foreign aid that does not fit the local needs and culture is known to be ineffective (cf. Kim and Jeong 2013).

9. Adapting course books to fit the Lao context

As just described, a way the English language teaching can be made more effective and suitable for a local setting is by adapting a course book and its activities and exercises. Adaptations must be made in almost every learning situation since the content in the course book stays the same but the individual learners, their specific learning context, and their preconditions change. However, if the course book does not fit the general learning context, much greater and deeper adaptations have to be made to make the learning situations fit the students.

9.1   Techniques to adapt course books

Harmer (2007) describes a set of techniques that can be applied when adapting a course book. The first way is to keep but re-order the content in a unit or lesson depending on the individual level of difficulty the different aspects and tasks have for the students. If they struggle with listening exercises, start with a vocabulary introduction or a reading exercise.

If the material is not adequate and not necessary for the students to achieve the learning objectives of the unit or chapter, activities can be cut out. If the activities cannot be left out because they are crucial to achieve the learning objectives, the activities must be replaced or re-written. For the adaption of course books for the setting in Cambodia, Chea, Klein, and Middlecamp (2012) present the example of taking articles that were originally about the subway as a transportation system and rewriting them using the transportation of the local setting, in this case, tuk-tuks.
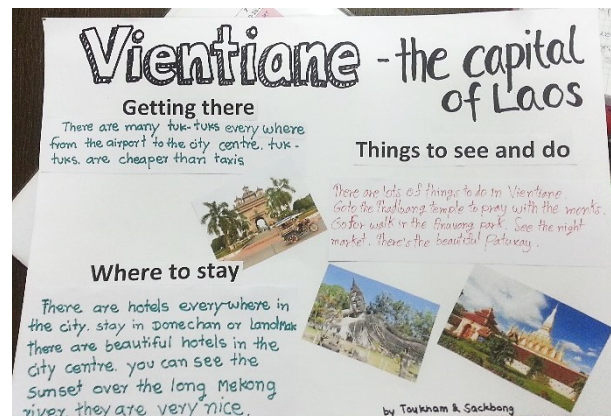
An adaptation of an exercise in a lesson with the Lao students was that they had to create a poster with information on Vientiane similar to how the information on Barcelona and Prague is presented in *Straightforward Beginner* in chapter 7A. This was done to

The students' poster on Vientiane
© Rebecca Dengler (2017)

localise the content of this chapter for the students and make it more relevant because Barcelona and Prague are not cities the Lao students are familiar with or ever likely to visit.

Where it is necessary, additional material or exercises can be added depending on where the teacher notices that the students need another explanation or more practise.

In one lessons with the Lao students, it became obvious when the words "chicken" and "soup" were introduced in unit 6 in *Straightforward* that they needed a pronunciation practise, because the students had difficulty producing the sounds [ʃ] and [ʧ]. At first it was hard for them to produce these two sounds because they do not exist in the Lao language. Once they had learned how to do the [ʃ]-sound, they overgeneralised it and used it in places where a simple [s]-sound should be used, like in the word "soup". Therefore, it was necessary in this teaching setting to add additional exercises to practise these sounds and their distinction even though there was no particular exercise in the book.

9.2   Justifying adaptations

However, the adaptations must be justifiable and teachers or other people who adapt course books must be able to express the reasons why the changes were made. Students often want to understand the reasons for the change. When omitting certain exercises from the book in the lessons with the Lao adult learners, they sometimes asked why the particular exercise had not been done. One time, a game at the end of the unit was skipped because the content did not seem adequate for the local setting. It is called "The City Game" and can be found in the review of unit 7 in *Straightforward Beginner.* The teacher decided to skip the game because it mainly dealt with questions a tourist asks at a tourist information centre and the answers the staff there give. The students would have had to ask and answer questions like "What time does the museum open?" or "Is there a castle?" (Clandfield 2013, 67). Since the concepts of travelling, being a tourist, and going to a tourist information centre were so alien to the Lao students, the teacher decided to leave out this exercise and used another board game with this question-answer-structure instead. However, the Lao students asked why this game was not done, thinking the exercise was just not done because it was a game. The teacher needed to explain why she thought this game did not fit the local setting and had to justify why she substituted the game in the book with another one. Instead of substituting the whole game, the prompts in the game in the book could have been changed, e.g. so that the students ask "Is there a temple?". Though the whole setting of the game was rather unsuitable for the Lao context, it was decided to skip it and the reasons therefore had to be expressed to the Lao students.

9.3   Factors hindering teachers to adapt activities

Unfortunately, many teachers do not adapt the content and activities in course books they use because they have assumptions that hinder them making any adaptations. Richards (2000) collects some of these assumptions which are also mentioned in Chea,

Klein, and Middlecamp's (2012) article. Many teachers are hesitant to adapt course books because they think that everything in the course book is of importance for the students or that one is not to doubt the explanations and cultural concepts in the book. Another assumption is that teachers think they do not have the authority or knowledge to change the learning content of a text book, or they assume that the activities in the course book are more important than their adaptations. However, teachers usually are the experts in the certain setting and only they know their students and the specific needs. Therefore, they should learn to adapt activities and thereby "contribute greatly towards student success in local and international contexts" (Chea, Klein, and Middlecamp 2012, 220).

Before adapting or leaving out an activity, it is beneficial to answer the questions Chea, Klein, and Middlecamp (2012) formulated to help the teacher to decide whether and how to adapt the exercise:

- "What is the objective of the activity?",
- "Is the material at an appropriate level for the students?",
- "Is the activity important?", and
- "Is the activity interesting for the students?" (223).

When adapting an activity, it is important to keep the original objective, for example the grammar aspect dealt with in the activity. If the activity is not appropriate, the level of the activity must be adapted or the time spent on the exercise should be reduced or increased. If the activity is not important, it can easily be skipped as long as it can be justified towards the students. If the activity is not interesting but cannot be left out due to its importance, the teacher should find a way to make the activity relevant for the students, e.g. by localizing it. Activities could be set in the ASEAN context, for instance by replacing unknown city names with names of Lao cities and places. Many units and exercises in common Western books include cities that are unknown to the students in ASEAN countries or they contain cities where it is very unrealistic that the learners would visit them one day (cf. Chea, Klein, and Middlecamp 2012, 222f.).

"A final point for teachers to remember, however, is that there is nothing inherently wrong with using the textbook as is; only when a text lesson does not adequately reflect the needs and interests of learners must changes be considered" (Chea, Klein, and Middlecamp 2012, 22). The course books are there to guide through the learning content and to help the students to understand and learn the English language, but if an activity is not helpful at all and might even hinder the learning process, e.g. because of an intercultural barrier, it must be adapted. Since there are no English course books adapted

for adult beginners in the Lao context yet, the teachers should customise the material they have on hand as effectively as possible for their Lao students.

9.4   Adaptations to overcome intercultural barriers

Adaptations of course books and adaptations of the English lessons are ways to overcome intercultural barriers. In their arguments about the effectiveness of foreign aid, Kim and Jeong (2013) describe that there is often a gap between the foreign help that is offered and the actual needs of the local people. This gap prevents the foreign aid from being effective. It does not only apply to practical medical or financial aid but also, and especially, to helping improve education.

> "Unlike other kinds of aid, education is unable to set up a universal standard across the world. External standards of donor countries that may accompany the aid are hard to generalize across the educational systems of individual recipient countries that are, in turn, restricted by their own histories and cultures" (Kim and Jeong 2013, 175–76).

The help brought to another country by a donor country has to fit the local needs and circumstances to be effective. Kim and Jeong (2013) see the greatest source of ineffectiveness of foreign help in the inappropriateness for local needs. The gap can best be closed by a close partnership between the local people and institutions and the foreign donors who familiarise themselves with the local conditions, society and needs. To achieve effectiveness, partnership and cooperation are necessary (cf. Kim and Jeong 2013). This applies to the English language teaching of Lao adults as well. It cannot be assumed that curriculums and course books that work for Western learners are equally effective for Lao learners who are coming from a completely different cultural and social setting. When transferring and using material without further reflection of the Lao setting, it cannot be expected to be effective and adequate. "Uncritical transfers of western-style modern education systems are more likely to result in half-hearted acceptance or neglect by the recipients, rather than to be treated as a valuable opportunity" (Kim and Jeong 2013, 189). Instead the local needs and circumstances must be considered and lessons and material, such as course books, must be adapted in close cooperation with the local people. Hu and McKay (2012) put it like this:

> "Sensitive to the social, cultural and historical context in which teaching takes place, an ecological approach jettisons the assumption about the existence of a universally appropriate and effective methodology, values pedagogical choices that are grounded in a solid understanding of various macro and micro contexts and promises to foster a socially sensitive pedagogy" (358)

They point out, again, that there is no universal methodology and teaching that fits everywhere, and therefore, pedagogical choices must be made by taking the local context into account.

10. Recommendations for choosing, adapting, or writing a course book for the Lao context

Taking the local context into account is one of the first steps. First of all, some aspects of the Lao culture have been displayed to show the difference between Western and Lao culture. Hofstede's dimensions, power distance, individualism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance are especially used to describe differences between Western and Lao culture (cf. Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). Dorner and Gorman (2011) point out that in Lao culture there is a much higher power distance and uncertainty avoidance, collectivism is more prominent than individualism, and femininity has also a higher value. These aspects of culture influence teaching and learning in Laos, and they should be considered by every Western teacher who teaches in Laos.

With language teaching in Laos also comes culture teaching because language and culture are closely interwoven (cf. Hsin n.d). However, many researchers argue that the traditional teaching of target culture from the Inner Circle countries does not fit the English language teaching and the culture teaching in Laos. Kirkpatrick (2011) as well as Chang (2011) say that the view and the goals of English language teaching in Southeast Asia must change. Chang (2011) claims that one must consider bi-directionality when teaching, that is: not only teaching the target culture but also teaching the language from the point of view of the learner's culture. Kirkpatrick (2011) suggests a multilingual model of English language Teaching, which implies that the goal of teaching English in ASEAN nations is no longer to acquire native-speaker like proficiency but to become successful users of English as the ASEAN lingua franca. This entails that the linguistic goals and also the cultural content must be adapted in English language teaching. Kirkpatrick would rather see the Southeast Asian learners become familiar with local cultures than with cultures from the inner circle. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) add that international culture must also be part of the English language teaching since English has become a global language.

In accordance to the claim to take local culture into account in English language teaching, Byram and Feng (2004) point out the importance of context. The context shapes interactions and therefore it must be payed attention to with all its variables and dimensions. If the context is not taken into account, intercultural barriers can come up and hinder the language learning. The teacher and the learners should embrace a dialogic process where they share their cultural knowledge at eye level.

If a Westerner teachers English to Lao learners, it is a cross-cultural interaction. As Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2008) point it out, cross-cultural interactions can hold many

problems because people from different cultures encode and decode messages differently. Even between a Western course book and the Lao learners, it is a cross-cultural interaction, and as showed by describing the intercultural barriers, many problems can arise in such interactions. How meaning is negotiated also depends on one's cultural experiences (cf. Beamer 1992). Therefore, it is crucial that learners, who want to use the English language successfully in intercultural situations, develop intercultural communicative competence step by step. A good course book should help the learners to develop this competence.

All these views on English language teaching and learning in Southeast Asia, and especially in Laos, imply that course books and teaching must be adapted for this context.

When teaching Lao adult beginners with the Western General English course book Straightforward Beginner, many intercultural barriers were encountered because the course book is not adapted or made for the Lao or Southeast Asian cultures. Western cultural knowledge is assumed and this causes problems that hinder the learning process of the Lao learners. Not only obvious cultural content presents intercultural barriers but also illustrations, names, underlying concepts, and certain topics. There are only a few exercises and chapters that include content from Southeast Asian nations.

To avoid intercultural barriers that hinder the learning process and put unnecessary cognitive load onto the learners, a course book should be adapted for the local context. This can be done by re-ordering and re-structuring the content depending on the learners difficulties, by cutting out non-adequate exercises that are not necessary for the learner to achieve the language goals, by adding activities and content that include local and international culture, and by adding more practise where the learners need it.

As a conclusion of this paper, a checklist has been put together. The checklist is a summary of the arguments of the paper, and it should help teachers and educators to know what to look for in a course book or to consider when adapting or writing a course book for the Lao context or the broader ASEAN context.

- Integrate the source/ local culture to enable the students to speak about their daily experiences in English in an intercultural exchange or localise the given content.
- Include information and learning content about other ASEAN nations into the course book so that the students get to know the countries and the cultures they are likely to meet people from or visit themselves.

- Integrate international cultural aspects with examples where English is used as a lingua franca (global language) in situations where non-native speakers of English communicate.
- Make sure to enable the students to get to communicate about their own cultural experiences and compare them to other cultures to increase their intercultural competence.
- The course book should provide them with a wide range of English vocabulary of local and global importance.
- Target culture may be included as well but the cultural content has to be explained explicitly.
- Choose topics that are relevant for learners in Laos. Specific pronunciation exercises and drills should be added as long as pronunciation is important for understanding. The goal is to communicate effectively and not to have a native-speaker-like pronunciation.
- Take out some grammar that is not relevant, especially in the beginning when English is used as an Asian lingua franca.
- Pick illustrations that do not expect the learners to have Western visual literacy skills.
- Consider language differences between the learner's first language and the English language, e.g., letter system, punctuation, etc.
- Include explanations and practises on punctuation and spacing between words.
- Since most Laotians have a high uncertainty avoidance, provide them with clear structure and tasks.
- Be careful not to undermine power distance.
- Work closely together with local partners to make it more effective and relevant.

The most important aspect of making English language education successful in Laos is to work closely together with Lao partners. It is vital to get to know them and their needs and interests better and not to assume any cultural knowledge that Western people see as universal. Most English course books are produced by Western countries which have significantly different cultures than Laos and other ASEAN nations. The English language is becoming more and more important in Laos, but to make Lao people successful local and international speakers of English, the issues on the checklist should be regarded when teaching English in Laos. Intercultural barriers will still arise at some points in foreign language teaching, but taking the pointed-out aspects into consideration will help to reduce the intercultural barriers, to promote intercultural competence, and to train successful users of English as a lingua franca in Southeast Asia.

The intercultural barriers described in this paper arose from teaching with the course book *Straightforward Beginner* because it was the course book that was available for teaching in the schools in Laos. There is no course book specifically adapted or designed for Lao adult beginners yet. However, with further research, other course books could be looked at as well and tested for their suitability to the Lao context. The checklist can be used to identify whether a course book might be more suitable for the Lao context than *Straightforward Beginner* is.

Macmillan has already adapted an edition of *Straightforward Beginner* for Myanmar's Ministry of Education but only minor changes were made. The units were restructured and some content was taken out that might have been offensive in the context in Myanmar.

> "We split each level and combined the Student's Book and the Workbook into one book. The biggest content change was to replace the "Britishness" unit with "Identity" (Unit 1C, Level 2B, Myanmar version), as requested by Myanmar. We also made other smaller changes to avoid issues which the market might be sensitive to, but these are not documented as that was just part of the editing process" (Customer Service Team Macmillan Education, August 3, 2017, E-Mail).

For the Ministry of Education, Macmillan made minor changes in the book. A next step would be to look at this book in more detail, but the changes do not match the many intercultural barriers that were experienced in Laos.

In addition, other English course books for adult beginners should be examined in more detail to determine whether they are more suitable course books for the Lao context or easier to adapt, e.g. New Cutting Edge, Top Notch (which is supposed to be more Asian based), or New Language Leader by Pearson, or New English File by Oxford University Press. Of course, other course books can be examined and tested as well.

To confirm or disconfirm the intercultural barriers that were experienced during the teaching period in Laos, scientific studies should be conducted that focus on the intercultural barriers in the English language learning processes in Laos and the local interests and needs with regards to the English language. The aim is to reduce intercultural barriers, to adapt English language teaching for the Lao context, to help the Lao learners to develop intercultural communicative competence, and to help them to become successful users of English in local and intercultural situations.

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