

‘Your Teacher is Kind, My Teacher is Mean’ Exploring Teachers’ Kindness from Thai Tertiary Students’ Perspectives

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Abstract

This article probes Thai tertiary students’ perspectives on *kind teacher* characteristics. The Thai word *jaidee*, which means kind, is commonly used by Thai students, in an institution under study, to describe a desirable quality in teachers with whom they select to enroll. While it is appreciable that empathy is a trait expected in good teachers in general, the question remains why such a quality is vigorously sought out by students at the higher education level. Focus groups and written reflections were employed to elicit the perceptions of ten students at entry and exit levels. Six themes have emerged from the data analysis which demonstrates that, to these students, kindness encompasses more than just empathy, care, and understanding. Findings from this preliminary study will form a basis for further quantitative study which will ultimately shed light on teachers’ roles, teacher-student relationships and student motivation in learning.

Keywords: Good Teacher, Teacher Kindness, Teacher-student Relationship, Student Motivation

Introduction

Drawing on findings from earlier studies about what makes a quality teacher, this inquiry explores one characteristic of good teaching; that is, a teacher’s perceived *kindness*. Kindness has been reported as a desirable trait of good teaching by a number of researchers such as Aksoy (1998), Arnon & Reichel (2007), Beishuizen, Hof, van Putten, Bouwmeester, & Asscher (2001), Bullock (2015), Krane, Nessa, Holter-Sorensen, Karlssona, & Binder, (2016), Meksopawannagul (2015) and Mullock (2010). This article aims particularly to identify the salient features of teacher *kindness* from the perspective of Thai tertiary students of an international university in Thailand. This focus was selected because *kind teacher* appears to be an overtly prevailing expression used by many Thai students in the institute to describe the ideal teacher with whom they opt to enroll. It would not seem exceptional for younger school students to look for sympathy, care, and empathy from their teachers who, in the Thai social context, often assume a teacher-parent double role. At the higher education level, however, to rely on teachers’ concern and nurturing appears to be at odds with the *student-centered* approach to the educational process advocated by the National Education Commission (1999) as the ideal model to promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as the development of learner autonomy. In addition, calling for teacher kindness in an internationalized setting would seem to be anomalous to the reasonable expectation



that students within such a context would seek to possess necessary confidence and independence. Contrary to this belief, need for teacher kindness is quite rampant at this tertiary international education institution. This incongruity therefore led to an interest in what constitutes teacher kindness to these students. A focus group interview method was the main research tool used to elicit students' attitudes to clarify what it means to them to be *kind* as it applies to the attitudes and practices of their teachers. Each participant also wrote a reflection on what s/he thought to be *kind teachers'* characteristics to confirm that the opinions coming from each participant. It is hoped that the study's findings will serve to inform the teacher-learner dynamic in both mainstream and language education. Understanding Thai students in these environments should shed light on teacher-student relationships, teachers' roles at an international university level and the subsequent implications for student motivation and ultimate success in learning.

Rationale

Reflection on Thai students' use of teacher kindness as a criterion for class selection flows from the researcher's very long teaching experience in an international university in Thailand. The word *jaidee* which directly translates the English adjective *kind* was commonly used among students discussing the qualities of teachers they like. This was detected through casual talk with students outside the classroom and also at advising and counselling sessions. Students often described their happiness in a current semester because *their teachers are kind*. Also, it was discerned that students usually plan to take courses with certain teachers because *they are kind*. More compelling, students also revealed that information about particular teachers' personalities and teaching styles was available through two main popular websites. Most, if not all, students visited the sites for *teacher shopping* before the enrollment periods. The teacher reviews were deemed reliable, coming from those who had first-hand experience with the so-named teachers. There were teachers reputed to be good and others whose names were on the *blacklist*. Generally speaking, the good ones were often referred to as the *kind* ones.

The researcher's subsequent visits to the identified weblogs also confirmed students' disclosure, i.e. teacher kindness seemed to play a major role as a teacher choice warranty. Further, while some writers give additional comments to describe what they mean by kindness, e.g. giving good grades, having an easy-going personality, many simply used the term as a well-recognized indicator for the right teachers to be with. Statistically, a high number of students electing the kind teachers' classes could suggest students' confidence in such information. By a similar token, those on the blacklist noticeably ended up with very few student enrollments. In this respect, the researcher therefore firstly set out to explore the notion of kindness from a Thai student's viewpoint and afterwards to inspect whether, in fact, kindness is used as a guiding factor in teacher selection.

The Setting

As this article accounts for Thai tertiary students' views on kind teacher characteristics, a note on the uniqueness of the setting in question is necessary. As Mullock (2010) pointed out, the learning and the teaching of mainstream subjects and language education can be two quite different situations. To teach subject

content, in classes teachers normally use L1 (shared by students) whereas language classes necessitates L2 as a medium. Difficulties in learning usually occur due to disparity between teachers and students' language and culture, in the latter case. However, in an international university such as the one under study, ALL subjects must be taught in English. Most students, Thai in particular, must struggle to learn every course and take exams in English, given the fact that the teachers from various nationalities may speak English with variable levels of proficiency. In this respect, students' insistence on kind and understanding teachers can result from the hardship incurred by the contexts. Although the investigation was not intended to link the two variables, namely the Thai students and an international university, findings from the study should form a basis for future studies either in similar or different environments.

An additional note on the setting is in relation to ELT and/or other language education. While ELT and language learning are not straightforwardly attended to in this paper, through the interviews, participants were encouraged to reveal their thoughts about teachers of various subjects, including English and other languages, who may be from various nationalities. The study findings should also be useful for ELT and language classrooms of a similar situation.

Previous Studies

In order to analyze the notion of teachers' kindness from a Thai tertiary student mindset, it is helpful to see how teacher kindness was approached in previous studies. Surveys of literature show that kindness, empathy and sympathy in teachers always emerge as idealistic qualities of teachers. Aksoy (1998), for instance, reported that good teachers were identified as kind, friendly, helpful and patient. Beishuizen et al. (2001) also found that positive personalities in teachers include kindness and enthusiasm. Krane et al. (2016) emphasized that teachers' kindness is crucial for the promotion of positive teacher-student relationships in upper secondary school. Kindness also revealed itself as an ideal personality trait in a number of other works such as Arnon & Reichel (2007), Nonis & Hudson (2004), and Ramsden (2003). The significance of kindness may vary in degree depending on different contexts and/or through different research questions and methods. However, Bullock (2015) accounted, in a comprehensive manner, for studies conducted on good teacher qualities and the author summarized that good teachers could be viewed from three different standpoints, i.e. *Ability*, *Personality*, and *Teacher-student relationship*. In view of Personality, characteristics that are encompassed in good teaching by a number of researchers are kindness, friendliness, helpfulness, patience and care. According to Bullock, seeking judgment on teachers' personalities implies that "good teachers are born not made" (p.3).

More relevant to the present study's context, however, are research works that found empathy and sympathy to be teacher attributes from Asian and Thai students' viewpoints. Mullock (2003), for instance, reported that empathetic teachers who provide nurturing and support were equally valued by her TESOL student-subjects with the more pragmatic ones. She noted that most of her subjects were from Asian countries. In the same vein, Pacek (2005) also maintained that Asian students, more than those from Europe and South America, appreciate personal qualities such as sensitivity, kindness, patience, sense of humour, and enthusiasm. Asian students in a



private education institution in Thailand, according to Lee, Sattayawaksakul, Wallasila, & Sriharat, (2009), also saw accessibility, friendliness, and caring as important for good teaching, as well. Similarly, the subjects of the research by Meksopawannagul (2015) valued the rapport qualities in EL teachers which include 'listening to student, not lose temper easily, and be kind' (p. 104). Mullock (2010) also collected data in a Thai private institution, where her respondents were all Thai students. Her survey uncovered Thai's perceptions towards good language teachers in particular. To her 134 students, good language teachers not only had good teaching skills, they also needed to be kind, friendly, understanding, and caring. Such qualities applied, according to them, to both Native and Non-native Speaker Teachers of English. The author opined that the qualities of caring and nurturing could stem from the origins of teaching in Thailand, where Buddhist monks provided education to young people (Mullock, 2010, p.100). This view is in line with observations by Wallace (2003) about Thai teacher roles as a moral parent on whom youngsters always rely for information, kindness and caring. Nonetheless, according to Mullock, such demand for kindness may seem to be *surprising* for many Westerners considering they were higher education level students.

The Study

Given the vital role of kindness in education, and particularly in the Thai tertiary educational context, the present study set out to explore what kindness means for Thai students. The objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To investigate Thai tertiary students' perceptions of the characteristics of kind teachers in an international university.
2. To explore whether Thai tertiary students use kindness as a criterion for course selection in their higher education.

The research questions as such were:

1. What are the characteristics that constitute teacher kindness from the perspective of Thai tertiary students?
2. Do students use kindness as a criterion to select a certain course?

Methodology

In an attempt to comprehend Thai students' viewpoints towards the conception of kind teachers, focus groups and written reflections were used for data collection. The interviews then were transcribed for thematic analysis. Since the data obtained were all in Thai, translation of both interviews and written data was a necessary part for the inquiry process. Following are the steps used in conducting the research.

Data Collection

1. Two focus group interviews were conducted using open-ended questions mainly to elicit what the participants perceived as the characteristics of kind teachers.
2. Each participant wrote a reflection on what s/he thought were the characteristics of kind teachers. This was to ensure that each of the participants had an opportunity to truly express his or her views. The students' responses also indicated whether kindness was used as a criterion for teacher selection.

Data Analysis

1. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and reviewed thoroughly.
2. The data from the focus group interviews and the reflective essays were translated into English.
3. The translated versions of both sources of data were counter-checked by a translation expert for accuracy.
4. Content analysis was applied to the data from both sources to determine keywords for categorization of themes.
4. The emerged themes were reviewed by the researcher and a student-moderator who acted as a data inter-coder.
5. The summary of the revealed themes was given to the participants for endorsement.
6. Findings in respect to what students perceived as teacher kindness were discussed and documented.

Participants

The researcher employed two focus groups consisting of ten students and one student-moderator. The first group comprised six students who were in their final year at the university whereas the second group consisted of four first-year students. The unequal number of participants in the two groups occurred due to circumstances beyond the researcher's control; two students were unable to participate in the freshmen's group on the interview day. Since the researcher was opting for the qualitative research method, the number of participants in the second group had to be accepted. Both group discussions were conducted on different days and both were video-taped for analysis at a later stage.

The recruitment of participants was made based on their willingness to take part in the discussion. Six participants from the senior-year group were approached by the moderator who was a final year student himself. The group comprised three males and three females. The freshmen group, however, was all female who were in the second semester of their first university year. They were all enrolled in the researcher's class and from the researcher's observation, all were considered to be participative and of an articulate type. The use of students at the entry and exit levels was also for comparative purposes. Each participant was assigned a number as an identification code. Table 1 below summarizes all participants' profiles and their assigned codes:



Table 1: Participant Demographic and Assigned Codes

Student	Gender	University Year	Major	Code (Interview)	Code (Written)
1	Female	4	Business English	P1-interview-G1	P1-writing-G1
2	Female	4	Business English	P2-interview-G1	P2-writing-G1
3	Female	4	Business Economics	P3-interview-G1	P3-writing-G1
4	Male	4	Business English	P4-interview-G1	P4-writing-G1
5	Male	4	Business English	P5-interview-G1	P5-writing-G1
6	Male	4	Business English	P6-interview-G1	P6-writing-G1
7	Female	1	Business Japanese	P1-interview-G2	P1-writing-G2
8	Female	1	Business Japanese	P2-interview-G2	P2-writing-G2
9	Female	1	Business Japanese	P3-interview-G2	P3-writing-G2
10	Female	1	Business English	P4-interview-G2	P4-writing-G2

Student-moderator for the Focus Groups

In lieu of the researcher herself being the group moderator, a student was appointed the moderator for the group members' exchange of ideas. The reason for this was to safe-guard possible intimidation caused by the presence of the researcher who is also a teacher. The researcher believed that participants would discuss their teachers more truthfully in such an environment. The research assistant who assumed the role of moderator was a student in his final semester. He was briefed about his role as a moderator beforehand.

Furthermore, a pilot session had been carried out prior to these two group interviews and, as anticipated, the student-moderator was initially unable to generate full discussion from students in the trial session. Therefore, the researcher and the student-moderator watched the video of the pilot study together and discussed possible reasons for the session's failure. For instance, it was observed that all the students seemed to answer the questions in chorus rather than taking turn to give their opinions. In most cases, this resulted in mixed and inaudible responses. In addition, as the questions given by the moderator were more of a close-ended variety, little opinion was elicited. Therefore, the student-moderator practiced again to use more *open-ended questions* and to allow, as much as possible, for input from every member. Two new groups of students were subsequently recruited for the study and upon inspection of the videos, the participants' exchanges were informative, to a certain extent. The groups' conversation duration was 28:46 minutes and 44:10 minutes, respectively.

Written Data

A week after the focus group interviews, each participant wrote a reflective essay on what he or she regards as kind teacher characteristics. This was to ensure that each of the participants had an opportunity to truly express his or her views. The participants also stated whether they used teacher kindness as a criterion for the selection of course enrollment. All the participants' writings were referenced and analyzed in the same manner as the data from the interviews, as accounted above.

Findings and Discussion

As indicated earlier, the data from the interviews and written reflections were analyzed using a content analysis approach. At the preliminary stage, key words are sought out for categorizations. For instance, the key words such as *understand*, *care about us*, and *listen to us* that occurred in both groups several times were eventually grouped under the **Empathy** theme. On the other hand, key descriptions such as *allowing us to have snacks in class*, *(being) relaxed when teaching*, *not being tough when marking oral presentations* were placed under the **Flexibility** theme. Through repeated and thorough processes of categorizing, six themes emerged that constitute teacher kindness from the participants' points of view. These include:

1. Empathy
2. Efficacy
3. Equanimity
4. Approachability
5. Impartiality
6. Flexibility

Discussion of each theme is made with the data presentation under the following headings:

1. Empathy

Of all the characteristics of a kind teacher, being empathetic seems to be most significant among all participants, both in verbal and written data. As the word signifies, empathy means the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. The participants actually disclosed this notion of kindness through the words *understand*, *care*, and *listen*. This held true for both groups. Below are examples from each focus group:

.. kind teacher is the teacher whom we can talk to, who will *listen to us*, trying to talk to us, *not ignoring*, be it a question or opinion from students. (P6-interview-G1)

A participant from Group1, the senior students, emphasized the power of listening, which would lead to understanding. The same idea was found amongst the participants in the first-year group as exemplified here:

Understanding. Must *understand* students because sometimes students can miss class for some reasons. Each student has his own reasons. Some teacher will just take that to mean one thing which is 'you don't take my class seriously, you skip classes on purpose, you do not work hard enough'. It's not always like that. Sometimes students may have car accident, sick relatives, or whatsoever. So I want to.. suppose.. well, I see kind teachers as those who *understand* when students *try to tell something*. (P2-interview-G2)

The expressed desire for understanding from teachers can actually highlight an attempt on the teachers' part to understand the language used by the students to explain. As stated, English is L2 or a foreign language for the Thai students, so problems about communication may give rise to students' feeling that the teachers are not kind enough to listen and understand them.



2. Efficacy

Not only did the participants need teachers to listen to, care for, and understand them, they also wanted some helpful actions which proved their teacher's kindness. From the researcher's perspective, the second theme therefore stands as a separate feature. Released from the group discussions were key terms such as *help*, *advise*, *talk*, *make things clear*, *explain*, *fulfill needs*. These were coded as expected teacher actions if they were to show kindness:

For me, (kind teachers are) ready to *give advice* and *help*. They will *help with anything at all* that they can help. (P3-interview-G1)

I feel that kind teachers should be aware of each student's needs. You know? You go to university for knowledge, so they have duties to *make things clear* for us. This includes when we have problems, be it study or whatever, when we approach them, they should *be prepared to help us*, *give us advice*, like *fulfilling needs* for us, I think. (P1-interview-G1)

Well, I see kind teachers as those who understand when students try to tell something. They *give advice*. So this is what I mean by kind teachers. (P2-interview-G2)

Interestingly, anticipation for counselling support in *all* matters was found more in the reflective essays of the senior group. Only one participant from the freshmen group mentioned *happy to answer* students' questions in her writing.

Understand. (Be) Open-minded. *Happy to answer* students' questions and will not get cranky easily with no good reasons. (P1-writing-G2)

Kind teachers do not accommodate students in every way, but they are *ready to give advice and counselling*. (They should) be the advisors not only for the academic matters but also personal problems too sometimes. (P3-writing-G1)

The reason for this senior student expectation could be that they have had longer experience in studying and have encountered more and varied problems. Throughout their four (or more) years, it is possible that they have sought assistance from their teachers with or without success. This could explain why they described helpful teachers as the kind ones although this quality in teachers may be referred to as *good* rather than *kind* elsewhere (Dershimer et al. 1992; Krane et al. 2016, Ramsden, 2003).

3.3. Equanimity

Through the written reflection by P1-writing-G2 above, it can be deduced that kind teachers are needed to be calm and have self-control. When discussing teachers' patience and composure, participants use the word *calm* to describe this token of kindness. However, the need for teachers to have equanimity was also detected when participants talked about characteristics that suggested negative traits. One of the participants used a term that can mean *stupid* or *ridiculous* in English to

describe a teacher who did not try to be patient with one of her class fellows:

.. *Stupid* means those who do things *based on their moods*. They are egocentric. I never had first-hand experience, but I witnessed it. One of my classmates asked the teacher some questions about something that she just finished explaining. “Weren’t you listening to me?” (She said). So, I felt bad. If students ask you questions, you should try to explain. At least they tried to ask questions, right? It’s not like they waited until a day before the exam and asked questions, then the teacher could be mad. But that was right at the end of the class, and the teacher thought she had given clear instruction. On students’ part, some are not very good, some can be slow. They may slip, they may not understand that particular part, or they may not know the vocabulary ‘coz everything is taught here in English, right? Their English proficiency may be different. So, the teacher should *not be to uptight and do things based on their own feelings*. (P2-interview-G2)

As observed by researcher Mullock (2010), *face* is of great significance to Thai people. It is not usual for Thai students to ask questions in front of others for fear of getting humiliated or feeling insufficient. The above transcription was from the freshmen’s group, yet similar observations were also seen in the senior group when participants raised examples of unkind teachers during their discussions. To illustrate this, a part of the dialog from the senior year group is given below:

P4: Actually, we all should have come across teachers like this. When you approach them for answer, they give you *scornful remarks*.

All: Yes. Yes. Yes.

P4: Instead of getting an answer, you get ‘How come you don’t know this?’

All: Yes

P2: I taught you.

P3: Taught you, yes.

P4: But there can be points that we didn’t quite get but they asked us ‘Why don’t you get it?’

Weren’t you listening?’

(P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6-interview-G1)

To the participants of both groups, it seemed unacceptable for a teacher to express negative feelings or vibes. Notwithstanding that equanimity is a quality of a *good* teacher in general, to these participants, self-control and patience were part of being kind in nature.

4. Approachability

One outstanding trait of a kind teacher seen from the two groups’ interviews, as well as the essays, is their teachers’ availability and friendliness. This applies to appearances, facial expression, verbal communication, and even attire. Kind teachers are those whom they want to interact with because they *always smile, speak with soft voice, not looking tense all the time, dressed in casual way, not having ferocious-looking face, and up for casual talk*. Friendliness was in fact an



attribute seen in many earlier works, e.g. Beizhuizen et al., (2001), Voss & Gruber (2006), Lee et al. (2009), and Mullock (2010).

The following excerpt from the study serves to illustrate the theme:

P1: Kind teachers always smile. They look friendly.

P2: They greet students, like, Hi!

P3: They may not recognize us right away, but if we greet them, they should at least say *Hi* back.

P2: We wai (Thai greeting gesture) them and they respond. Wai back or acknowledge our wais.

P3: At least smile back.

(P1, P2, P3-interview-G2)

The written data by P3-writing-G2 below confirms the established theme of approachability.

Kind teacher gives the impression of being friendly and can give advice about lessons and other things. They always listen to students when students have made mistakes. They do not deduct marks or punish students based on their emotion. (P3-writing-G2)

Friendliness and approachability were expected qualities found noted in the data of every participant of the freshmen group, yet it was by contrast not detected in the writings of the senior group at all. The senior participants only discussed a friendly personality outlook during the focus group interviews. This suggests that approachability was more meaningful for younger than senior students.

Discussion relating to the personality of kind teachers also brought up the question of whether nationality, age and gender had any impact on their perceptions. Participants saw nationality and age as influential in an impression about teachers' kindness while gender seemed to pose no significant bearing on the personality. To both groups, teachers from India seem to look particularly harsher than others and being Thai does not guarantee a kind personality in any regard.

5. Impartiality

One particularly noteworthy finding in the study was that while the above four qualities are admissibly related to kindness, both groups indicated that impartiality in teachers was a part of kindness. Kind teachers should attend to all students alike, not just the good ones. No students should be left behind. The kind teachers should also grade students fairly with no bias.

For me, a mean teacher is the one that has bias against a particular student. That's a mean teacher. (P5-interview-G1)

For the freshmen group, *fair grading* was discussed as a part of a kind teacher's characteristics. However, this quality emerged only after the question was raised whether leniency in marking should constitute kindness in teachers. To them, good and kind teachers should grade in a fair way. Impartiality as found in the written data is also given as an illustration below:

Kind teacher should give an impression of being friendly and helpful (can give advice about lessons and other matters). They always listen to the students' reasons whenever they make mistakes. They do not deduct marks or make

judgement about students based on their temper. They should make fair judgement on all counts. (P3-writing-G2)

6. Flexibility

This last trait appears to be the most controversial point among the participants. The senior-year group brought up issues about whether the rules and regulations ought to be relaxed sometimes if their teachers were to be called *kind* and opinions of both *yes* and *no* surfaced.

You know, in this university, there are rules that ban phone using, and drinks in class rooms but students still do so. Some teachers will not allow food but some will. Students will then define the ones who don't allow as the mean one, well, not really mean but too strict. But for those who allow us to use phones, we will think 'hey, this one is kind, (cool) chill. But rules are actually there and the majority of students are like.. they think of what it seems on the surface level, right? Because they (teachers) pamper us, they seem okay. (P6-interview-G1)

P6-interview-G1 above opined that it was natural for most students to prefer the more flexible teachers. However, another member raised a question that challenged P6-interview-G1:

Then (what) if they create their own rules. The rules that are not the university's, like no restroom during class, is it reasonable? Some teachers ban restrooms during class time, you must ask for permission first, although this is a university. Do we have to ask for permission to visit restrooms? (P5-interview-G1).

The case introduced by P5-interview-G1 above was debated, and the group participants did not seem to come easily to accord. Similarly, the freshmen group had long discussion over the same issue. Some admitted that certain teachers would be considered *kind* if they allowed *having snacks in class* (P3-interview-G2), or if they were *not too tough in marking or criticizing when students do oral presentations in English* (P1-interview-G2). Other participants, on the other hand, pointed out that such teachers were not kind but rather inattentive. In the written responses, the word *flexible* prevailed in the younger participant group but was not found anywhere in the senior year group's submissions.

Positive and Negative Kindness

One summary point in the findings related to the six themes above is that, for these participants, there can be *positive kindness* and *negative kindness*. Positive kindness appeared to be empathy, efficacy, equanimity, approachability, and impartiality. Flexibility, however, may pose problems related to student discipline and it can even be interpreted as a particular teacher's recklessness. It is notable that for Thais, the same word *jaidee* encompasses both positive and negative kindness.

As a Thai, the researcher also observes that the six qualities of kind teachers disclosed from the interviews correspond, in an interesting way, to the four sublime states of mind or *Brahma Vihara* as preached in Buddhism. Those four include



benevolence, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. From the research, teacher kindness includes the ability to love, care, share, and remain impartial, having self-control and being flexible. Friendliness may not apply directly to the Buddhist four sublime states but the rest match quite well. Being in a Buddhist environment may have implications to the reference to kindness based on these concepts.

Kindness as Decision Criterion

In encouraging the focus group talk, the appointed moderator was asked to address the question of whether or not the participants use teachers' kindness as a criterion for course enrollment. Each participant was also requested to confirm their answer in the reflective essay. These results are worth mentioning. The consensus of the freshmen group was a resounding *yes*, while the seniors almost unvaryingly said *no*. In fact, only one participant from the senior-year group admitted, with reservation, that it was part of his criteria. For this group, kind teachers could not always fulfill their needs. They could make things easy but sometimes so easy that they *learn nothing*. The first-year members, on the contrary, explained that kindness helped with the classroom ambiance and their learning motivation. Some even said that unkind teachers had led to student drop-out, in many cases. For the younger group, participants wanted to *learn with happiness*. They therefore needed to be constantly checking with each other through the word-of-mouth availability via peer and social networks.

Effects of Kindness on Students

Teacher kindness can result in both positive and negative effects on students. As seen from the findings, not all participants endorsed kindness as a significant factor for learning achievement. Older participants identified the negativity of kindness if it took to mean too much relaxation about class rules, inattentiveness, or leniency. Such kindness, according to P5-writing-G1, could *indirectly sabotage students' quality and institution's reputation*. Experience in the university may play an important part in coming to such a judgment. As Dershimer et al. (1992) found, sophomores held *flexibility* and *enthusiasm* as an important teacher quality whereas senior students in their study looked for *specific aspects of the instruction process* in teachers.

While certain aspect of kindness can bring about unpleasant effects on students, students under study, particularly the younger ones, still maintain that kindness was necessary. P3-writing-G2 revealed that teacher kindness can be rated at 70% of classroom success for her. Kind teachers make a positive classroom climate, which in turn *promotes positive developmental outcomes among students* (Jennings & Greenburg, 2009). Intrinsic motivation is crucial for learning success, particularly in a rather complex situation where both subject content and language barrier can create students' adversity. Empathy, efficacy, equanimity, approachability, impartiality and flexibility are qualities of good teaching in general, though Thai students in this context rather translate them all as *kindness* in their own language.

The Role of Online Word-of-Mouth

The students of the university in question seem to depend on information available on the informal weblogs for their course enrollment. The sites known among them serve as their communities and the use of online word-of-mouth (eWOM) proliferated. This behavior is also worth monitoring. In general, people turn to online word-of-mouth for reasons such as information exchange, friendship, social support, and recreation (Ridings and Gefen, 2004). e-WOM in fact plays a crucial role for decision-making not only in business but also in the socio-cultural realm. Research conducted on online word-of-mouth has increased in recent years but an insightful study, also in a Thai academic setting, was carried out by Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, (2006). This study confirms the central role of eWOM in an academic environment, which is not significantly dissimilar from other socio-economic zones. Though the current study does not focus on eWOM in its own right, the fact remains that students do *teacher reviews* in a similar manner to consumers conducting online shopping.

Conclusion

In response to the first research question, *what are the characteristics that constitute teacher kindness from the perspective of Thai tertiary students?* the study revealed six teacher qualities; i.e. empathy, utility, equability, approachability, impartiality, and flexibility. While the two groups did not achieve harmony of agreement on the issue of flexibility, the remaining five reached consensus. To Thai students, teacher kindness incorporates more than just empathy and sympathy as may be interpreted from other cultural viewpoints.

Responding to the second research question, *Do students use kindness as a criterion to select a certain course?* participants from the freshmen group acknowledged the significance of kindness as their key criterion for an enrollment decision. Yet, all but one participant from the seniors group indicated that kindness was never a useful factor for an enrollment choice. Both groups' participants however said they would continue visiting the websites as sources of information about good teachers.

Since the research is qualitative in nature, generalization has never been claimed at any point. However, the six qualities obtained through *student voice* where students were 'informants of their own lives' (Cook-Sather, 2014) can shed light on understanding teacher kindness. To the participants, good teaching alone does not entail successful learning. Care and understanding along with other aspects related to kindness can foster good student-teacher relationships and stimulate a classroom climate that serves as student motivation. Students want to learn *with happiness* and they can do so if their teachers are kind. A kind teacher, as interpreted from a Thai perspective, can have a more profound impact on Thais than students from other cultures may imagine.

Limitations of the Study

The researcher remained absent from the discussions in order to facilitate the participants' free expression of opinion. Use of video-taping devices can compensate for this to some extent, yet there were limitations caused by the moderator's impatience to complete the task, not allowing more time for some responses to



gradually emerge from the group conversations.

An unequal number of participants in the two groups needs to be included in this study's constraints but, as explained, the circumstances were beyond the researcher's control. In addition, the all-female gender composition of the younger group's participants may or may not affect the discussion. Any possible implications of this remain to be uncovered in a future quantitative research investigation.

Finally, inequivalent syntax and vocabulary of Thai and English can hinder the deep meanings of the interviewees' answers. Difficulties were also heightened by the fact that the younger participants were talking amongst peers of the same-age group, thus leading to a prevalence of Thai slang. Thus, for this reason, the true temperament and interpretation of the discussions may not be totally captured in this article.

Recommendation for Further Studies

Further to this study, quantitative research on the topic using the emerging themes as a point of departure should add to the topic findings. Also, investigation of the perception of kindness from the perspectives of different nationalities other than Thai in the same university would certainly be insightful. By a similar token, exploration of Thai students in other tertiary settings, namely in all-Thai universities, or in an international program within a Thai university could also be undertaken for comparison. Teachers' views on necessary kindness in those contexts can also form a topic for examination. Finally, on top of these, investigation on the role and impact of eWOM on academic settings are also worthy of future inquiry.

About the Author

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