

The “Middle Way Approach”: Harmonious Mediation and Intercultural Discourse in Thai University Students’ English Written Essays

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Introduction

Intercultural discourse has been much debated in the literature. In this regard, the Middle Way is one of the main principles identified in Buddhism which can be found in both Thai and English texts and discourses. It has been discussed in many disciplines such as economy and management (Runglertkengkrai and Engkaninan 1987, Chen 2002, Verhoeven, Chansakar, et al 2009.), Buddhist studies (Garfield 1995, Premasiri 2007), and intercultural discourse (Durkin 2008).

According to Buddhism, the middle way is one of the most significant principles taught by the Buddha. In this regard, he attained Nibbana by using the middle way approach as he delivered this principle to the group of five monks (bhikkhus) in that:

"Monks, these two extremes ought not to be practiced by one who has gone forth from the household life. (What are the two?) There is addiction to indulgence of sense-pleasures, which is low, coarse, the way of ordinary people, unworthy, and unprofitable; and there is addiction to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy, and unprofitable.

"Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathagata (The Perfect One) has realized the Middle Path; it gives vision, gives knowledge, and leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment and to Nibbana. And what is that Middle Path realized by the Tathagata...? It is the Noble Eightfold path, and nothing else, namely: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. This is the Middle Path realized by the Tathagata which gives vision, which gives knowledge, and leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment, and to Nibbana..." (Piyadassi, 2011)

It is observed that the middle way approach is important when describing the way things and actions are mentioned in a righteous way. Accordingly, this paper will demonstrate the way in which the selected students presented their argumentation which seems to conform the middle way which is identified in the core principles of Buddhism as discussed. The term ‘Middle way’ identified in this paper may not fully and exactly be used to conform the one identified in the Buddhist literature. However, it is argued that this term might be suitable to interpret harmonious and peaceful ideas and recommendations the students made in their essays. Therefore, this paper will attempt to indicate these characteristics in the students’ essays as for a preliminary investigation for further research.

Materials and Method

In this present paper, some essays based on a genre based course in the 2007 academic year at Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen campus were selected for the close analysis. The analysis focuses on the generic staging and the way in which the

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students presented their argumentation. The types of the essays analysed include pre-test essay, exposition and discussion. Briefly, to understand how the course was implemented, some details are provided as follows.

Before commencing the teaching and learning cycle (the first week of teaching) all students wrote essays as a pre-test in order to provide a ‘benchmark’ for the purposes of later comparison and as a sample for classification. Throughout this paper these are labelled the “pre-test” essays. The essays from the six students who were selected to participate in this project were graded according to an adjusted IELTS rating scale. The six were divided into three pairs. That is, two students were placed into a high group, two into the middle group, and two into the low group. The students have been given the following designations for the purpose of referencing in this paper: HGS1 (IELTS high group student 1), HGS2 (IELTS high group student 2), MGS1 (IELTS middle group student 1), MGS2 (IELTS middle group student 2), LGS1 (IELTS low group student 1) and LGS2 (IELTS low group student 2). It should be noted that there was nothing much at stake theoretically or analytically in this use of IELTS scaling in the data selection process. That is to say, it was never the intention to compare or contrast students by reference to their IELTS scale or to explore possibilities that those who were scaled higher might be better equipped with respect to the language features which were to be the focus of research. The IELTS scaling was basically just a matter of convenience – one way among a range of possible ways of selecting students and essays for close analysis. Accordingly, these IELTS scalings were not in any way the focus of the research reported on in this paper. The pre-test essay writing exercise was conducted as follows.

Instructions: Choose one of the following topics to write an argumentative essay of about 250 words. You have 45 minutes to prepare and write it.

1. At present, there is widespread concern that the price of petrol is increasing on a daily basis. Some people are advocating the use of gas (NGV and LPG) as a substitute for vehicles such as personal cars. Do you agree or disagree with this proposal? Give reasons to support your arguments.
2. There are some people who strongly encourage Thai students to travel abroad to study. They assert that foreign study has major advantages over studying at home. Do you agree or disagree with this position? Supply reasons for your argument?
3. There is a growing concern about the dangers supposedly associated with the Internet, for example as a source of crime, child abuse and pornography. Do you agree or disagree with the proposition that, accordingly, the government should censor or prevent access to inappropriate websites in order to protect people? Give reasons for you arguments.

By way of teaching approach, the researcher followed the five stages of the teaching/learning cycle proposed by Feez (1998). I (Udom) as the researcher established the learning environment and the various activities so that the students could learn together in class, and before composing any written work they were given the opportunity to debate the topics. The participants were divided into two teams; one would argue in support of a proposition while the other would oppose, and then they brainstormed their ideas for the topic. During this process, the researcher assisted them in terms of language development, and after that they presented their arguments to the class. The class could discuss the arguments together, and when they had finished making presentations and proposing arguments, each participant wrote his/her essay, and finally presented the written work to the class. During this cycle, the researcher gave feedback and the students

provided critiques for one another. In response to comments and advice the students could revise their work before submitting final copies to the teacher/researcher for evaluation.

The learning cycle took place over several months, and later in the project students wrote essays at the completion of two sections of the course; during mid-term when the Exposition topic had been completed (henceforth labelled the “mid-point” essay or the “exposition-exercise” essay), and again at the end of the section on Discussion (henceforth labelled the “end-point” essay or the “discussion-exercise” essay). Each participant wrote both a personal essay and a group essay for the mid-term evaluation, and this was repeated at the completion of the final session. To assist students to compose their Exposition and Discussion essays, model essays were provided in the syllabus. Then all essays were analysed in terms of the broad-scale staging structures employed by the students and by reference to the students’ deployment of the resources for construing what SFL terms “logico-semantic” relations – e.g. resources for establishing “logical” links between clauses and between clause complexes. The written work submitted for the mid-term and final exercise writing exercises were taken for analysis by the researcher. However, in this paper the analysis will focus only on the staging development.

As indicated above, the three essays (pre-test, mid-point and end-point) of six students were subjected to a close analysis. Ideally, of course, a greater number of essays would have been included. However, a number of 18 (three essays from each student) was felt to be a manageable compromise – being sufficient to provide the basis for conclusions about any trends in the writing of the students as a group, and not so much data as to be unmanageable in the context of the time limits of this project.

For the genre staging analyses, each essay was divided up into functional stages and then comparisons were made with the genre-staging prototypes set out in the Sydney genre-school literature. This was to seek to determine the degree to which the students’ essays could be seen as matching the Sydney-school structural schema. Texts which broadly matched any of the Sydney-school prototypes were classified as “conforming”, and those which did not were classified as “non conforming”. Accordingly, for the purpose of this close analysis, some examples of texts from the pre-test and exposition essays written by one student will be demonstrated.

The analysis and findings

In this section, examples of the genre staging analysis of the essays written by the selected students are provided as follows.

The pre-test essay by the IELTS high group student 2 (HGS2) is rather similar to the pre-test essay by the previous student. It too advances the position that, actually, it doesn’t matter if you study at home and abroad. What is important in life is the sort of person that you are – that you are a “good” person. It is different from the previous essay in that it begins, not by indicating that both sides of the debate have merits, but by seeming to mount an argument against studying abroad and in favor of studying at home. It is only the latter sections of the essay that the writer shifts to advancing the position that it actually doesn’t matter where you study.

A staging analysis of the essay is provided in the following table.

Table 1 Pre-test essay by IELTS high group student 2 (HGS2)

Part	Stages	Text
Introduction	Thesis: - <i>statement of position</i>	In my opinion, I don't believe that studying abroad has much more advantages for students than studying in the country.
	Preview of arguments against studying abroad and in favour of studying at home	There are 3 reasons that make me think it's not necessary to studying abroad.
Body	Argument 1 <i>Point</i>	First of all, I think Thailand's education has a standard and quality so, it's not necessary to studying abroad
	Potential counter argument – <i>acknowledged then refuted</i>	although if you go studying abroad, you'll get better in English language skills but there are a lot of people who is successful in their lives without go studying abroad.
	Argument 2 <i>Point</i> <i>Point elaboration</i>	Second, you'll waste your money, if you go studying abroad because there are a lot of expensive expenses such as high cost of living.
	Argument 3 <i>Point</i> <i>Point elaboration</i>	Besides, Almost of group that go studying abroad are teenagers, so it's too dangerous for them to go abroad alone and they will confront with some difficult problems that they have to solve but they are too young and they has less experience. So, they're solve the problems in the wrong way because they don't have anyone to give some advices for them.
	Argument 4 <i>Point</i> <i>Point elaboration</i>	Third, nowadays there are a lot of Thailand quality institutions that open the international programme. Thus, I think if you want to practice or improve your English language skill, it is better to studying in the international programme in Thailand institution.
	Repeat of argumentative point 2	Because you'll save your money
	Argument 5 <i>Point</i> <i>Point elaboration</i>	and you' ll stay close up with your parents. Therefore, if you get some troubles, you can tell your parents to suggest you to solve the problem in the right way.
Conclusion		In brief, you'll go studying abroad or not, it's not important.
	Statement of new "middle way" position (that where you study isn't important) <i>Elaboration</i>	The most important things is being a good person for your social. Because if you educated from abroad but you're a bad person who is cheating or corruption. You won't get any respects from everyone. In the other hand, you'll get a lot of respect, if you' re a good person who is honest, patient and diligent. Although you aren't graduated from abroad.

We might see again some evidence of the “middle way” approach we mentioned above. Certainly the writer backs away from coming down on either side of the debate, even while originally seeming to be siding with those who oppose studying abroad and favour staying at home to study. In the end she seems to back away from this confrontational position, adopting the rather more conciliatory view that there really isn’t much at all at stake in this debate, since what is important is one’s moral character. In this, the essay is “non conforming” with respect the Sydney-school genre prototypes, since none of the models set out there allow for such a change of perspective. Personally, we can see that some readers might find this transition somewhat incoherent or disjointed, especially if they are expecting the type of argumentation which the Sydney-school literature (for example, Frances and Martin 1997, Martin 2001, Martin and Rose, 2008) described in the context of Western, English-language academic writing. From Thai cultural perspective, we find this aspect of the essay understandable. We find it plausible that the student writer has been influenced by a concern to avoid sounding too confrontational and too assertive or dogmatic with respect to a potentially contentious issue. She favours, instead, the conciliatory, balanced position by which “it doesn’t matter where you study”. Since I (Udom) too have grown up in this Thai, Buddhist tradition, I also have been exposed and may well have been influenced by this “middle way” mindset. Accordingly I suspect I may find this shift to a non confrontational, more conciliatory position in the conclusion of the essay to be more “coherent” or better motivated than would have been the case if I had grown up in different cultural context. Nevertheless, we still see the essay as problematic on account of this shift and can see that it can still be viewed as structurally disjointed, especially from the perspective of the conventions of academic discourse. This can, of course pose problems for how we, as English teachers, might assist students in such language learning contexts. To what degree do we expose students to just the repertoire of genre prototypes which has emerged from work largely in Western contexts? To what degree should we be going beyond these to include additional prototypes reflecting local cultural practices?

For the purposes of comparison, a staging analysis of the “conforming” Exposition produced by this student for the mid-point essay is provided in the following table.

Table 2 Mid-point essay by IELTS high group student 2 (HGS2)

Part	Stages	Text
Introduction	Orientation	The mass media is the most important way to attract the customers to believe in the quality of goods. So, I think if the government has proposed introducing laws to limit the advertising of cigarettes and alcohol in the mass media, the health of Thai people will be better. I have three reason to support my idea.
	Thesis – <i>statement of position</i>	
	Preview	
Body	Argument 1 <i>Point</i>	First of all, I believe that the advertisements have a lot of influences to the customers because the advertising is a way to present the advantages of products. Therefore, the goods are presented in a good way although they are not good. For example, the agencies of alcohol are present their products in the good way such as they present hat when you drink the alcohol, you will relax. Moreover, you will have a lot of friends when you drink. In fact, when you drink it, you will lose your conscious. You can't control yourself, so it is the cause of some problems such as perhaps you have the quarrels with other people. That is not the way to make friends but it is the way to increase your enemies.
	<i>Point elaboration</i>	
	Argument 2 <i>Point</i>	Second, I think if the government has proposed introducing laws to limit the advertising of cigarettes and alcohol in mass media, Thai society is better. Because these products make you waste a lot of times. You can do many things in stead of waste your time for drinking and smoking. If you take those times to read books or do something which is useful for you, your family, your friends and your society, I think this world is not boring and it is more interesting. Moreover, if everyone can do this, this world will beautiful because there are the good things all around us.
	<i>Point elaboration</i>	
	Argument 3 <i>Point</i>	In addition, smoking the ciggrate and drinking alcohol are the cause of many diseases. For example, cancer disease is the effect from smoking cigagrate. The liver disease is the effect from drinking alcohol. Moreover, these diseases don't have the way to cure but there are the ways to still your symptoms but you will have a lot of expenses from your diseases. The most important thing is the losing because the patients of the these diseases are the leader of the family or someone husband or the leader of the company or the son of someone. Although you have a lot of money, you cannot keep the life of your love person.
	<i>Point elaboration</i>	

Conclusion	<p>Reiteration / Reinforcement – <i>restatement of position</i></p> <p>Introduction of new perspective – that it’s up to the individual to take responsibility</p>	<p>In conclusion, I believe that limit the advertising of ciggrate and alcohol is a good way to solve the problem.</p> <p>But I think everything depends on you.</p> <p>Finally, I think the best way to solve this problem is teach the right things to Thai juveniles in order to have the accurate consciences because when they grow up, they will be the good adult and they will be the example person to the next generation.</p>
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In broad terms, then, this is obviously structured along lines which closely match those indicated for the Exposition in the Sydney-school genre. It is worth noting, however, that there is arguably something of the “middle way” perspective in the final few sentences, where the writer shifts from arguing in support of government action against advertising to promoting the importance of people taking responsibility themselves and the importance of cultivating ethical standards in the community. In this, the essay could be seen as involving some divergence from the Sydney-school staging model for Exposition.

The “middle way” approach

Given that this notion of a “middle way” approach has arisen at a number of points in the previous discussion, it seems timely to consider it in some more detail. As indicated, we see this as involving the writer in avoiding being too confrontational, in backing away from too forcefully advancing one position over opposing viewpoints, in being seen to recognise the merits of different perspectives on the current issue, and in ultimately seeing ethical concerns and moral good standing as being at the heart of such matters. These aspects have all emerged in the discussion of the essays of the last two writers. Interesting, when the essays of the 72 students involved in the course were reviewed with this issue in mind, it was found that at least six students produced pre-test essays which showed the influence of this “middle way” approach. We have suggested that, in these essays, these writers have possibly been influenced to adopt structures other than those indicated by the Sydney-school models for persuasive writing as they sought to follow this more balanced, more harmony-oriented “middle way”. We have even suggested that this approach or mindset may have its origins in longstanding Thai practices and attitudes. We now consider these possibilities in more detail.

In tentatively proposing this notion, it is our own view that this idea of a balanced, harmonious “middle way” or “middle path” can be seen as having origins in the Buddhist culture which is still influential in the lives of many Thais today. The religious scholar, Payutto (2003, pp.343) describes the “middle way” in the following terms.

The whole of Buddhist ethics is contained in the doctrine of the Middle Way and its prerequisites. This doctrine of the Middle Way teaches that both the extreme of asceticism and the extreme of sensual indulgence are to be avoided ... these two extremes can be seen as the most individualistic and selfish ways of life.

In similar vein, Vachiramathée (2008) states that “A middle way in Buddhism is concerned with the rightness or goodness of Dharma, therefore being in a middle way means putting oneself in the rightness that is without all kinds of evils or bad things.”

Some evidence that this mentality is still strongly present in Thai culture is provided by a survey which was recently conducted in some provinces in Thailand. The ABAC (then Assumption Business Administration College, now Assumption University of Thailand) poll (2009) reported that 53.4 percent of the late-teenagers surveyed rejected the notion of choosing political sides, preferring to be “in the middle”.

It is certainly a notion which is referenced quite frequently in the contemporary Thai mass media. Take by way of example the following extracts. In an article published in the *Bangkok Post* (an English-language newspaper) in 2009, Mr Limsamanphun (2009) interviewed Dr. Sumet Tantivejchakul, the Secretary-General of the Chai Pattana Foundation, who expressed his views on some social and political issues. At a number of points in the article, the socially prominent and highly respected Dr. Sumet Tantivejchakul alluded at several points to “middle path” principles. Some relevant extracts from the article are provided below.

A man of the middle path

Dr Sumet Tantivejchakul warns mankind to beware of Mother Nature's wrath and to maintain the balance by taking the route of sufficiency.

Dr Sumet Tantivejchakul, 70, secretary-general of the Chai Pattana Foundation, had no hesitation in sharing his belief that overpopulation, environmental degradation and extreme capitalism were the culprits behind the current global economic crisis, climate change and other illnesses affecting the planet.

"In terms of the current economic crisis, it's ironic that we're trying to rescue the economy with even more consumption by handing out money to people to buy even more in the name of stimulating the economy.

"In my opinion, the solutions should be in the realm of sufficiency economics. Take the middle-path. It's either dharma or nature.

"In other words, we need to save our natural resources to slow down the approaching catastrophes instead of exploiting them at the rate we have for many years.

"The initiatives on sufficiency economy are not completely new, but they're practical. *The philosophy is neither anti-growth nor anti-business. It's simply about moderation, which means not doing too little or too much.*

Another instance of a reference in the mass media to this principle is provided by the following extract from a press report of an interview with leading Thai business executive who was interviewed by Changson (2009).

Thai boss more 'farang' than foreigners

Reverse culture shock for SAP Thailand chief after years in US. Patara Yongvanich is the first Thai boss for many years at SAP Thailand, but for many of his staff at the local branch of one of the world's leading business software companies; he is more farang than many of his predecessors.

Having spent most of his life abroad, Patara returned late in 2007 to assume the top post at SAP Thailand at the age of only 32. Prior to this, he was vice president for global accounts at SAP America, taking

care of big customers on the US West coast, including Intel, Chevron and Disney.

Patara said it was a really hard decision to make, when he was approached to move back home from the US. Married, with an Indonesian wife he met while studying at Stanford University, Patara's daughter was only three years old.

"For me it's been a reverse culture shock," said Patara, whose Thai speech is still clearly accented from his years overseas.

He explained that even though he was of Thai blood, he saw the world through the eyes of a person who had gained all of his primary education, college and career experiences in the United States.

Therefore, there were big differences for him in handling staff, in business procedures and in culture.

"I try to use a mixture of US and Thai styles," he said.

However, for many of SAP Thailand's 50 staff, the arrival of the Thai-blood, foreign-groomed Patara has meant a greater cultural impact on the company than that imposed by many of his farang predecessors.

In an exclusive interview with The Nation, Patara acknowledged that he had come home to take the top job because a totally foreign boss - out of uncertainty of his understanding of the Thai culture - would either "lean himself towards the local culture" or simply let things continue in the way they had been going.

"For me, I'm trying to be in the middle and adjust myself to the situation," he said.

Patara said the speed of decision-making and execution in US companies was faster than that in most other countries. In Japan, decision-making speed lags, but once a decision is made, the execution may be faster. *In Thailand, the speed of both decision-making and execution are in the middle,* he said.

The examples cited above reference these "middle way" principles of compromise, balance and non confrontation.

We are certainly not alone in suggesting that Asian students are subject to cultural influences different from those experienced by their Western counterparts. A number of scholars working within the field of contrastive rhetoric have argued that different cultural contexts can result in different approaches to writing about contentious issues and mounting arguments. One such scholar, Durkin, explored the learning experiences of East Asian students in dealing with Western academic norms of critical thinking in classroom debate and assignment writing (Durkin 2008). Durkin found that the majority of students interviewed rejected full academic acculturation into Western norms of argumentation and preferred a middle way that blended the traditional cultural and academic values held by many East Asian students with those elements of Western academic norms that they deem to be compatible with these.

We are obviously not in a position to assert with any certainty at all that these "middle way" principles have been influencing the students involved in our own study in their approach to essay writing. Nevertheless, we would argue that it is valid to at least entertain the possibility that such attitudes may have a role in conditioning how Thai students tackle such tasks and could, possibly, result in different staging structures as the students set about dealing with potentially contentious issues in their writing. There would seem to be the possibility of some form of cultural interference, or at least

interaction, as Thai students construct persuasive texts while being guided by models of textual organisation derived from analyses of Western, English-language writing practices.

Conclusion and recommendations

For future research, we suggest some points about a “middle way” approach to argumentation as follows. As already discussed, one way of responding to this phenomenon is to be alert to differences in the cultural context and to allow students to adopt their own, culturally-located voice, where appropriate. In this regard we recall Paltridge’s observation (2001, p.45) that the context of culture includes the attitudes, values, and shared experiences of people living in a particular culture and that the context of situation represents situation-specific variables that combine together to produce the particular register of a text. He notes that these variables include the topic, or content, of the text (its field), the relationship between participants in the event (its tenor) and the channel of communication (its mode). In order to support this from a social perspective, Hyland (2003, p.21) argues that a writer’s choices are always context-dependent, motivated by variations in social activity, in writer–reader relations, and by constraints on the progress of the interaction. Also, as suggested by Paltridge (2001, p.122) genre knowledge not only entails textual knowledge but also includes social and cultural knowledge. This is supported by Feez’s explanation (in Johns 2002) that

Genre theory was not only used to identify the generalized text based – outcomes of the framework but also to identify the key language features of the text types to be studied as learners worked to achieve an outcome. These features are elements of the outcome. Performance criteria for assessment are based on the elements. Thus the criteria performance for each outcome draws on what genre theory told us about the predictable language features of that type of text. Elements and their related performance criteria, are organized, using Halliday’s stratified language model, into features relating to the whole text, lexical and grammatical features and the phonological or graphological features.

Considering cultural-context issues arising in connection with the “middle way” leads us to acknowledge the possibility that cross-cultural mixings may be in play and might need to be taken into account when students produce their texts. Accordingly, teachers should not be too abrupt and too constraining in introducing western modes of expression. The teacher should acknowledge the possibility of cultural differences in the way persuasion is conducted and awaken students to the possibility that they may choose from a range of communicative options, according to the cultural context and the intended audience. This can equip students to make their texts more rhetorically effective as they adapt them to different circumstances and draw on different cultural traditions.

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