

## CULTURAL LITERACY AND LANGUAGE FLUENCY\*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines the relationship between second language fluency and the level of cultural literacy in the culture of the second language. Specifically, the paper discusses Thai speakers living in a Thai context in terms of English fluency and knowledge of Western culture. The results of an exploratory study show strong connections between the two notions. Popular culture, academic culture, humor and cultural imperialism are discussed. The paper tentatively concludes that cultural literacy is important in language fluency and should be emphasized in teaching and self-study alike.*

We have ignored cultural literacy in thinking about education ... We ignore the air we breathe until it is thin or foul. Cultural literacy is the oxygen of social intercourse. (Hirsh 1987)

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the late 1980s, two fairly academic books became surprise American bestsellers and started heated debates in academic circles. The books were Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* and E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*. Both books decry the deterioration of cultural literacy in the United States. Hirsch's definition of Cultural Literacy is "the fund of information possessed by all competent readers belonging to a certain culture." He adds that it is "shared knowledge that enables educated persons to take up any general text and read it with an adequate level of comprehension and to grasp the central message as well as the unstated implications of the underlying context that give full meaning to what is read." (Hirsh) The basic notion here is that understanding someone in any meaningful sense requires understanding the cultural context.

All this might seem fair enough and even obvious in some ways. Lurking in the shadows of what seems like a fairly benign claim, however, are some fairly serious political questions; the most pressing being "exactly whose culture are people supposed to be literate in, anyhow?" Many people attacked Bloom and Hirsch for promoting a view of culture that was dominated by white, European, upper class males. In other words, the critics believed that

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\* The author wishes to thank Dr. Ruja Pholsward, Ajarn Mark Jones, and Gary Labouseur for helpful suggestions and ideas. Thanks also goes to colleagues who participated in the study.

Bloom and Hirsch were racists, sexists and classists. It is not within the scope of this paper to address those claims directly but later the issue of cultural imperialism will be discussed.

The primary purpose of this paper is to take the concept of cultural literacy and ask the question of whether it is possible for a non-native speaker of English residing in their own dominant culture (in this case Thailand) to be fluent in English without being culturally literate in the culture of some English speaking country. More succinctly, can a Thai person be truly fluent in English without being knowledgeable about American (or English, Australian, etc.) culture?

To illustrate the importance of cultural literacy, consider the following story about Benjamin Franklin, the great American diplomat, inventor, physicist, politician, and printer.

On several occasions during the American Revolution, people had been dispatched to France to try to convince the French to assist the revolutionaries in their battle for freedom from England. No one succeeded. Finally it was suggested that Ben Franklin be sent. Someone pointed out that he didn't speak French, but it was finally decided to send him anyway. After all, the French had refused several times already and there was little chance that they would agree this time, so there wasn't much to lose.

On the journey to France in the year 1778, Franklin did his best to learn the language. He did manage to pick up bits and pieces, but not much. When he arrived in France, he met with the powers that be and asked their assistance. It wasn't easy and it took some time, but to everyone's surprise, Franklin succeeded where others had failed. The French agreed to help the colonists in their fight for independence and played a crucial role in their ultimate victory.

How, with his very limited command of the French language, did Franklin succeed? His biographers tell us that his success was due to several things. He was likable, easy to get along with and persuasive. But, more than anything else, he was very well aware of the politics, history, art and literature of France. In other words, he was culturally literate. (Mueller 1991)

### **KNOWLEDGE VS. VAGUE KNOWLEDGE**

For the purposes of this paper, it will be assumed that the vast majority of Americans have at least a vague knowledge of American culture.\* That is to say, they have the necessary epistemological rulebook to know what sort of ballpark they are in and what game they are playing. They may not know much about baseball, but they know what their friend means by "I went to the job interview but I struck out." They may not know much about the law, but they know what "Supreme Court to Hear Discrimination Case" means when they see the newspapers. They might not know much about music but they understand a review that says "the new group combines the intensity and precision of Beethoven with the whiny vocals of a country ballad."

Precision is not necessary in all communication and, indeed, there is a necessity for

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\* Since the author of this paper is American, that country will be used in examples like this. No slight toward other English speaking countries is intended.

vagueness both in speaking and in writing sometimes. Consider what Dr. Hilary Putnam (1987) says on the topic of vague knowledge.

Suppose you are like me and cannot tell an elm from a beach tree . . . Nevertheless, what is required for communication is often so vague and superficial that we can properly understand and use the word elm without being able to distinguish an elm tree from a beech tree. What we need to know in order to use and understand a word is an initial stereotype that has a few vague traits.

Also, for the purposes of this paper, it will be assumed that for most non-native speakers of English living in their own dominant culture, it is almost impossible to acquire a vague knowledge of American culture. As long as they live in their own dominant culture, the way that they can acquire knowledge about American culture is by studying, reading and exposing themselves to the English language media, including the Internet. That is, objective concrete knowledge, as opposed to vague knowledge, must be acquired. This is the case because vague knowledge of American culture can, for the most part, only be acquired by living in America for a very lengthy period of time.

In preparing this paper, exploratory research was done relative to the above assumption. That research clearly shows that language fluency is very closely related to cultural literacy. The research is discussed in more detail later.

### **WHAT IS CULTURE?**

Like many people, I am highly skeptical of lists of things or people or books that a person must have knowledge about in order to be culturally literate. Such lists remind me of what Simone Weil said in *The Need for Roots* in 1949: “Culture is an instrument wielded by professors to manufacture professors, who when their turn comes will manufacture professors.”

Having said that, I think that certain kinds of lists are not only perfectly reasonable, but helpful. Here, for example, are a few people that Hirsh says that the average American is assumed to have vague knowledge about: John Adams, Susan B. Anthony, Benedict Arnold, Daniel Boone, John Brown, Aaron Burr, John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, James Fennimore Cooper, Lord Cornwallis, Davy Crockett, Emily Dickinson, Stephen A. Douglas, Frederick Douglass, Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Fulton, Ulysses S. Grant, Alexander Hamilton, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. He says that while “most of us know rather little about these people . . . that little is of crucial importance, because it enables writers and speakers to assume a starting point from which they can treat in detail what they wish to focus on.”

In addition, many things are alluded to with no explanation, for example: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, David and Goliath, the Twenty-third Psalm, Humpty Dumpty, Jack Sprat, Jack and Jill, Little Jack Horner, Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk, Mary had a little lamb, Peter Pan, Pinocchio, Achilles, Adonis, Aeneas, Agamemnon, Antigone, Apollo, Robin Hood, Paul Bunyan, Satan, Sleeping Beauty, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Ten Commandments, and Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

I will leave it up to others to debate the question of whether objective knowledge of such

things is important for American native speakers living in America. The issue I am addressing is whether objective know of this type is helpful for native Thai speakers living in Thailand who wish to improve their English language communications skills.

### WHAT IS FLUENCY?

Over the years a number of definitions have been suggested for second language fluency. Fillmore (1979) names four different skills that might come under the term fluency: a) "the ability to talk at length with few pauses", b) "the ability to talk in coherent, reasoned, and "semantically dense" sentences", c) "the ability to have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts", and d) "the ability...to be creative and imaginative in ... language use".

I would add that the grammar of a fluent person is free from serious errors such as "Where you go?" rather than "Where are you going?" or "I want Coke two glass" rather than "I want two Cokes." However, fluency does not imply perfect accuracy totally free from pauses, grammar mistakes and restarts. If that were the case, even native speakers could not be considered fluent. The distinction between fluency and accuracy is a good one and is made by many authors including Miriam Eisenstein Ebsworth

In addition a native speaker listening to a fluent non-native speaker is totally at ease with the speaker and clearly understands everything that is said (assuming it is not technical jargon).

A fluent non-native speaker reads and writes with very little use of a bilingual dictionary. He or she can easily read and understand an English language newspapers including the editorials and cartoons. We might say that they clearly are *thinking in English*.

The definition given in the Longman's *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* is "the ability to produce written and/or spoken language with ease...speak with a good but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary and grammar...communicate ideas effectively, and produce continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown of communication." Longman's also notes that fluency "is sometimes contrasted with accuracy, which refers to the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but may not include the ability to speak or write fluently".

In my view, a non-native speaker who is fluent in English is aware of the subtle things in a conversation including: humor, sarcasm, irony, indirect messages, symbolism, and politeness. Suppose I am a Personnel Manager for a company and someone claims in their C.V. that they are fluent in English. I would *not* expect the following things to happen after hiring them:

1. If I said, "Give me a break!" I would not expect them to inquire as to where they could find one.
2. If I asked them to download some classical music from the Internet, I would not expect a tape with Bob Marley, Dolly Parton, Bob Dylan and the Sex Pistols.
3. If I said George W. Bush was more of a right-winger than Margaret Thatcher, I would not expect them to reply that they weren't aware that Margaret played soccer.

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURAL LITERACY AND FLUENCY

The author conducted an exploratory study on the relationship between cultural literacy and

English language fluency. It shows a very close relationship between the two notions. Because of the very limited nature of the study, no definite conclusions can be drawn. However, if after further study the results hold up, important lessons for teaching and learning English could be provided.

Thirty-two subjects were selected and divided into five groups according to their language ability and comfort level relative to interacting with native speakers. Traditional groupings (Beginner, Intermediate, etc.) were avoided. An approach more functional than judgmental was used. The groups were as follows:

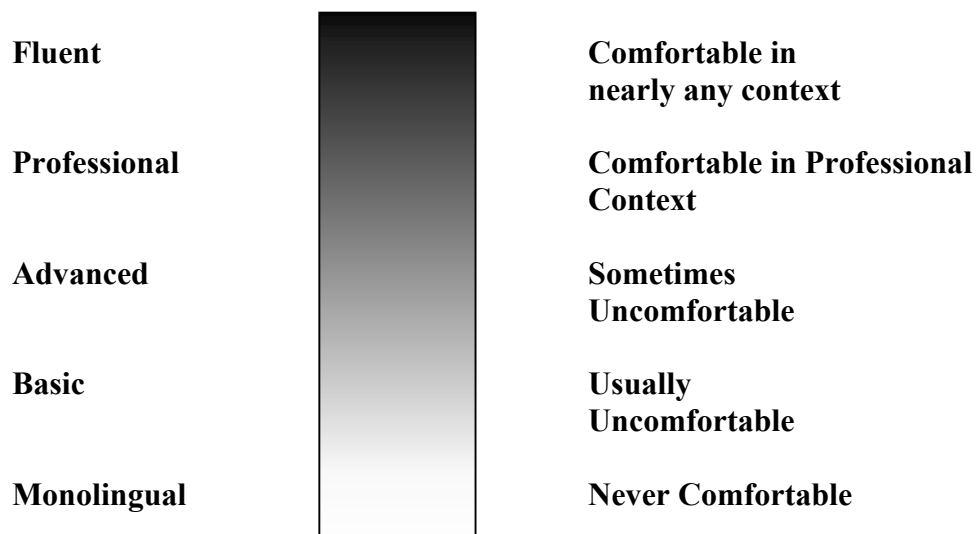
**Fluent** – Listen, speak and read at native speaker level including being aware of subtle nuances in English. Very high level of writing ability devoid of any serious grammar errors with an awareness of English thought patterns. Comfortable socializing and having informal discussions with native speakers.

**Professional** – Listen, speak and read at a very high level but incomplete understanding of many subtle nuances. Write well but sometime require help from a fluent speaker with important documents. Speak English mostly at work and on mostly a formal level. Comfortable in a professional context but sometimes uncomfortable socializing in an informal context.

**Advanced** – Listen, speak and read without too much difficulty but vocabulary is limited. Understand very few subtle nuances. Frequently have serious grammar problems especially in writing and thus are sometimes not understood. Heavy reliance on a bilingual dictionary. Sometimes uncomfortable in a formal context and usually uncomfortable in an informal context.

**Basic** – Survival English in speaking and listening. Unable to read or write except extremely basic things (e.g., C-A-T, D-O-G or “I go home.”) Uncomfortable in most contexts most of the time.

**Monolingual** – Essentially no English at all. Always uncomfortable. There are, of course, gray areas from one spot to another. The level of fluency can be illustrated as below:



**Degree of English Language Fluency and Comfort Level**

The author assigned a level based on personal observation, i.e., the author personally knows each individual.

After being assigned a level, each person was given a “Cultural Literacy Test.” The subjects were told that how well they did was not a reflection of their intelligence but that the researcher was interested in how aware of western culture they were. The test was divided into two parts of ten questions each. The first part pertained to popular culture and the second to intellectual culture. In both cases, participants were shown pictures of people or things and asked if they knew who or what they were. If they knew, they were given two points. If they didn’t know, they were told who or what it was and asked if they had ever heard of the person or thing. If they had, they were given one point. They received no points for not knowing. Below is a list of the images they were shown.\*

### POPULAR CULTURE

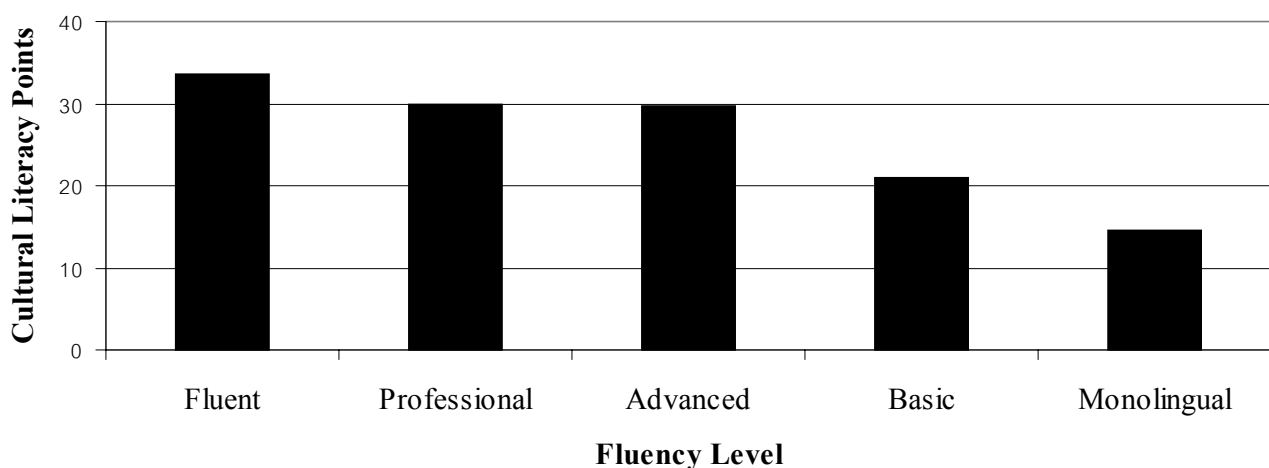
Princess Diana  
David Beckham (soccer star)  
Nike logo  
Elvis Presley  
Michael Jackson  
Leonardo DiCapria  
Jesus Christ  
Madonna (the singer)  
Mickey Mouse  
McDonald’s logo

### INTELLECTUAL CULTURE

Sigmund Freud  
Albert Einstein  
Margaret Thatcher  
Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Mark Twain  
Socrates  
Ludwig van Beethoven  
Vincent van Gogh  
Eleanor Roosevelt  
William Shakespeare

The graph below shows the results of the survey.

## OVERALL CULTURAL LITERACY

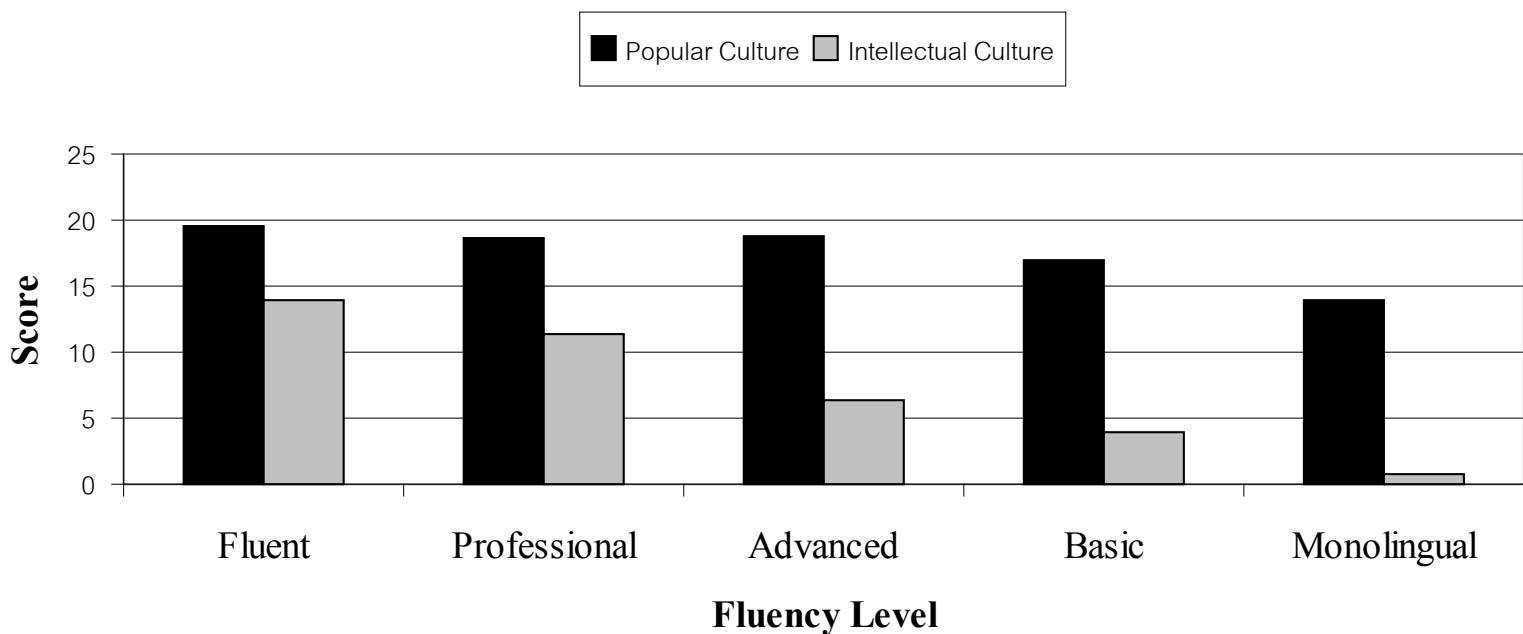


\* While Beethoven, Freud, Socrates, van Gogh and Jesus Christ were not native English speakers, they clearly had a significant influence on all Western Culture.

You will notice that there is a fairly strong correlation between language ability and cultural literacy. The difference between the bottom two groups (who are illiterate in English) and the top three (who are literate) is the widest. The top three groups scored thirty or higher while the bottom two groups averaged less than twenty. At the same time there are not wide gaps between the top three groups

There was very little difference between the top three groups in terms of popular culture and, indeed, even those with only basic English scored high in terms of popular culture. However, the gap is far more dramatic if we break the cultural literacy test down in awareness of popular culture (the first ten questions) and intellectual culture (the second ten questions). That comparison is shown in the graph below.

## POPULAR VS. INTELLECTUAL CULTURE



When we consider the average score for intellectual cultural awareness, the differences between the groups are far more remarkable.

There is a gap of nearly three points between the top two groups. After that, the gaps are far more significant. There is a five point drop from the Professional to the Advanced Group. Interestingly, the gap between the Advanced and the Basic group is only about two and a half, perhaps indicating how much awareness even basic English can provide. Those who speak essentially no English did not average even one point. With the latter group it is important to note that their average score was 14 in terms of Popular Culture. We can see then, that Pop Culture is penetrating Thailand to a much greater extent than Intellectual Culture.

## HUMOR, CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

One of the things mentioned above in terms of awareness of knowledge of subtle aspects of culture is humor. I'm inclined to agree with H.B Paksoy's (1988) contention that "the highest level of language competency, native fluency, is attained when the humor is understood." Robert Solomon (1997) would concur as well. He claims that "all humor is to some extent 'racist', not in the vile sense of demeaning some ethnic or racial group but rather in the innocent . . . sense that all humor is to some extent context and culture-bound." He adds that "humor is probably the most difficult feature of another culture . . . . Humor is the last frontier to be crossed in the complete understanding of another culture."

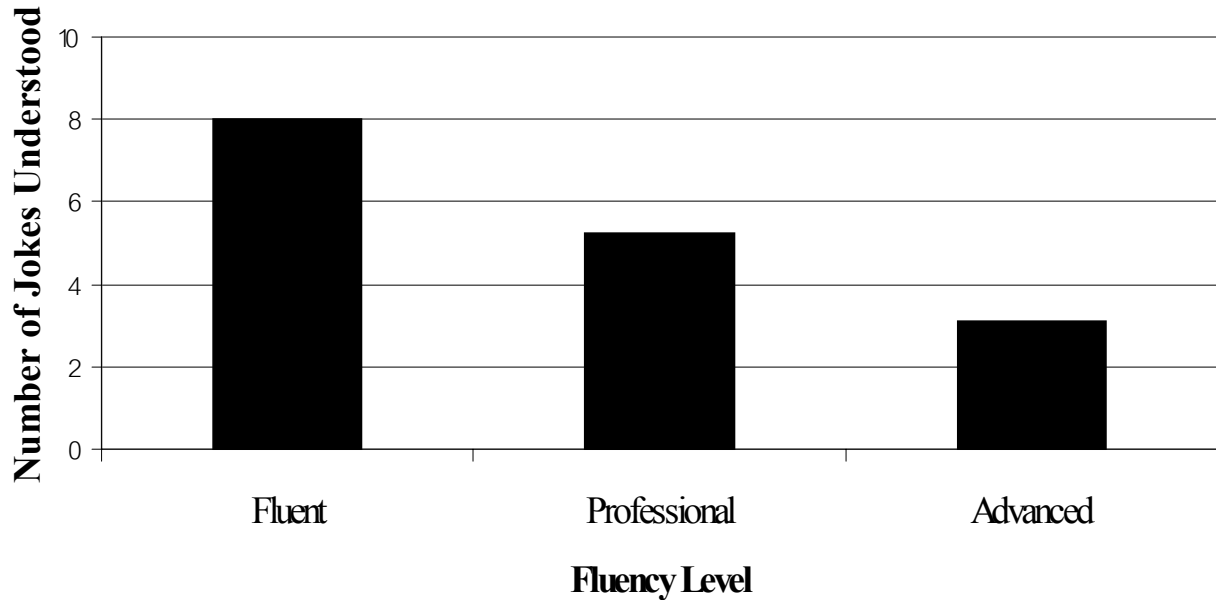
If fluency is at least partly about understanding what others are trying to communicate, the understanding of humor must necessarily be a part of fluency. Understanding humor requires a number of cultural reference points, including history, customs, games, religions, current events, taboos, kinship structures, traditions and more. That is to say, in order to understand humor, one must be culturally literate.

Thomas C. Veatch (1998), author of "A Theory of Humor", recognizes the relationship between language and humor.

Language is often implicated in humor. Humor may play off of lexical ambiguity (as in puns), or make use of linguistic ill-formedness or stigmatized forms, dialect features, etc. (as in ridicule using mimicry), or may use linguistic arguments (that is, logically fallacious lines of reasoning whose apparent sense is derived from linguistic factors like ambiguity, metaphor, idioms, formal similarities), etc. Mimicry for humorous effect may make specific use of linguistic features characteristic of a dialect or of an individual's speech pattern, or may impose artificial or exaggerated intonation patterns or voice quality. Listeners who view the speech patterns of another as unusual or different may laugh at them. Grammatical errors or differences can be the focus of humorous expression.

The exploratory study for this paper included a test regarding humor. Ten jokes were taken from the Internet (See the Appendix.) Twenty people in the Advanced, Professional and Fluent Categories were asked to read the jokes and indicate whether they understood them. (The other two groups could not read English or even understand it well enough if it was read to them) The results below clearly show that there is a very strong correlation between language fluency and the understanding of humor, i.e., cultural literacy. In fact, there is a significant gap between each level. Those in the fluent category understood, on average, 80% of the jokes, while those in the professional category understood about half and in the Advanced Category about a third.

## UNDERSTANDING OF HUMOR



There is, of course, at least one exception in relationship to humor and culture and that is slapstick comedy. It is an exception because it is non-verbal and probably universal as the popularity of people like Charlie Chaplin and others clearly indicate.

### CULTURAL IMPERIALIAM AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM

As early as 1801, the British philologist William P. Russell proclaimed that ...the English language...is already the most general in America. Its progress in the East is considerable; and if many schools were established in different parts of Asia and Africa to instruct the natives, free of all expense, with various premiums of British manufacture to the most meritorious pupils, this would be the best preparatory step that Englishmen could adopt for the general admission of their commerce, their opinions, their religion. This would tend to conquer the heart and its affections; which is a far more effectual conquest than that obtained by swords and cannons: and a thousand pounds expended for tutors, books, and premiums, would do more to subdue a nation of savages than forty thousand expended for artillery-men, bullets, and gunpowder. (Bailey citing Russell 1991)

I would be remiss if I didn't briefly discuss the notion of cultural imperialism and cultural nationalism in this paper. While, as a matter of necessity, certain assumptions were made in this paper, it would be a mistake to assume that cultural literacy relative to another culture is always good.

Cultural imperialism refers to the idea that dominant wealthy nations impose their cultural values on “weaker” nations. We might think of it as the “Disneyfication” of the world or the “McWorld” – a place dominated by Disney, McDonald’s, Nike, baseball caps, soccer jerseys; a place where everyone listens to western pop music and watches the latest Hollywood blockbuster while eating Baskin-Robbins Ice Cream.

In the case of Thailand, a person who believed in cultural imperialism would hold that traditional Thai values were being replaced by western values – that Thai people were no longer Thai in their worldview, values and aspirations.

In colonial days, of course, cultural values were forced onto others. Thailand, never having been colonized, did not suffer from such racist paternalism. But there are some who decry the “invasion” of Western Culture – especially in the form of Seven-Elevens, KFCs, Pizza Huts and the like. Farish A. Noor (2000), a Malaysian scholar has this to say on the topic:

If we look at the phenomenon of cultural imperialism today, we see . . . in many parts of Asia . . . countless elites who condemn cultural imperialism as a threat to the identity and integrity of their societies. Yet these very same elites have chosen to develop their own societies in exactly the same ways that Western society has developed. They condemn the West for its crass consumerism, its materialism and the absence of ethics in the political system. Yet in many parts of Asia . . . we see numerous cases of development that are clearly based on Western models. We see the same degree of consumerism and materialism, and we also see a significant degree of corruption.

. . . .

McDonald’s and Kentucky Fried Chicken” are easy targets. However, it is ironic that these [people] do not attack other cultural influences that are more prominent among the elite of their own societies. If we want to condemn Western fast food and pop music, why do we not then condemn the importation of foreign luxury cars, luxury clothes, luxury household goods and the lifestyle of the foreign elite? Is driving a Mercedes, smoking Dunhill, playing golf and flying to London for holidays better than eating a Big Mac or listening to Massive Attack?

In the cultural literacy test for this paper, scores for the pop culture section were much closer between the different groups than for the intellectual culture section. What does this say in terms of cultural imperialism? To me it means that economic interests in the form of pop culture have had a far greater impact on Thai culture than the Western intellectual tradition. I believe that Dr. Noor’s comments about crass consumerism directly relate to this. That is to say, the Western “culture” that is being taken on in Asia and elsewhere has very little intellectual content. It is almost purely economic and perhaps even exploitative.

Dr. Noor, quoted above, would seem to agree. Consider the following comments.

Cultures and civilizations have always developed via interaction with one another. Cultures are therefore never “unique”, “pure” or “authentic.” They are

all hybrid collective entities . . . Culture imperialism . . . comes into being when some cultures try to impose their values . . . on others by force . . . But cultural imperialism is often aided and abetted by the elite powers that are in the weaker societies as well. They do this because they fail to see the contradictions in their own relationship with the West, and because they are serving their own interests while doing so.

Some groups fear cultural imperialism so much – especially America’s influence – that they pass laws in an effort to limit outside influences. Indeed even Canada, America’s friendly neighbor to the North, has a Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission to regulate the “foreign cultural products” shown on Canadian TV and radio stations. France, of course, is notorious for being particularly xenophobic and often anti-American. This kind of attitude can be regarded as cultural nationalism – something I regard as rather unpleasant, to say the least.

Finally, some have argued that there is a new “global culture.” Their argument runs something like this:

What we are seeing today is not actually a hegemony of American culture, since there is little in that culture that can be called inherently “American.” What’s really happening is an “internationalization of material culture throughout a world that has truly become a global village. Because the United States is itself a hybrid nation, made up of immigrants from many nationalities, it is acting as a “crystal ball” for the rest of the World. (Robin 1990)

This all sounds cozy enough, but I’ve always been a bit skeptical of this notion of “a global village” and I don’t care much for the idea of “American as crystal ball,” either. While “global village” might have a kind of quaint ring to it, I am much more in tune with scholars like Schiller and Hamelink who essentially see the present information society and its technology as remaining “in the hands of the economic elite.” They broke this down according to “core” or rich First World Nations and “periphery” nations. That isn’t really necessary, especially in regard to Thailand. We can simply think of it in terms of the “haves” and “have-nots.” The haves control information and technology and it flows uni-directionally from them to the have-nots with little input from the latter at all.

The topic of cultural imperialism relative to Thailand needs far more space than I have given it here. The role of the English language dominated Internet alone could be a topic for a paper. I did feel however, that it was important to mention cultural imperialism because I didn’t want to give the impression that I was advocating blindly absorbing as much Western culture as possible in order to attain English language fluency.

## CONCLUSION

You might recall that Benjamin Franklin spoke very little French but that his awareness of French culture allowed him to succeed where others had failed. Franklin, however, had many other things going for him as well. He was a likable, friendly and extroverted person. These things were surely as important as his awareness of French culture. There is no doubt that personality and other factors played a role in the results of the exploratory research done for this paper as well. Even so, that research does show that there is a strong connection between language fluency and cultural literacy. This was particularly true in the area of academic culture. Deeper, broader and more objective research needs to be done before any real conclusions can be drawn. In the meantime, it would seem clear that improving the cultural literacy in the area of an English speaking country can improve not only people's English but, indeed, their quality of life.

In terms of teachers incorporating cultural aspects in the classroom it should be very strongly encouraged. It's fine and it's fun to have students sing along to pop songs. But perhaps a bit of Beethoven or Aaron Copeland wouldn't hurt either. It's fine to use examples from business and current events. On the other hand, a bit of Steinbeck or Dickens wouldn't hurt either. Only the most strident of cultural nationalists – indeed cultural isolationists – could object to students having a well-rounded education. Everything need not be serious, however. Humor, as we have seen, is a vital element in both language and literacy.

## THE AUTHOR

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## APPENDIX

The following sheet was given to subjects literate in English in order to measure understanding of humor.

Please put a tick by the jokes that you understand. It doesn't matter whether you think they are funny. (Please be honest. This is not an intelligence test or anything like that. It is for a research project I am working on.)

1. Whose son was Edward, the Black Prince?  
Old King Coal!

2. Why was the ghost of Anne Boleyn always running after the ghost of Henry VIII?  
She was trying to get ahead!

3. What was Camelot famous for?  
It's knight life!

4. How did the Vikings send secret messages?  
By norse code!

5. What English King invented the fireplace?  
Alfred the grate!

6. Why did the Romans build straight roads?  
So their soldiers didn't go around the bend!

7. Teacher: When was Rome built?  
Pupil: At night.  
Teacher: Why did you say that?  
Pupil: Because my Dad always says that Rome wasn't built in a day!

8. What's the moral of the story about Jonah and the whale?  
You can't keep a good man down!

9. What did Noah do while spending time on the ark?  
Fished, but he didn't catch much. He only had two worms!

10. Why did Eve want to move to New York?  
She fell for the Big Apple!