

*Web source: dukelanguage.com*

## **How to get Thai people to SPEAK THAI to you (without embarrassing yourself)**

Here's the scoop:

You want to speak Thai. You sign up for Thai classes.

After months of grilling, you finally find that courage to test your polite classroom Thai on a Thai person other than your understanding Thai teacher.

Where's a good place to start? Perhaps a cafe.

How difficult could it get ordering a sandwich in Thai? Should be easy, you assume.

A waitress walks to your table. You clear your throat, ready to prove yourself.

“Errr...phom aow neung sandwich khrup...” She giggles. But clearly, she understands what you said and scribbles down the order.

Then she asks, “ao khrâaŋ dùum àrai khá?” You freeze.

“Errr...errr...” Quick! Think of something to say! Any Thai word would save your life!

But before you know it, she giggles again and asks “WAT DRING YUU WAN???”

**GAME OVER.**

Thai Waitress 1 – 0 Farang



So...what went wrong? What happened to those months of training?

Here are some explanations and what you could do to help prevent this from happening:

## **1. Lack Of Exposure**

Thais have low tolerance for foreign accents. It's not intentional, but the Thai government does not promote regional dialects, so Thais have very low exposure to different accents.

If you speak to them with a thick accent, many will just shut down and everything you say will sound like white noise to them.

In most cases, you need to have acceptably comprehensible pronunciation to initiate a decent conversation with a Thai person.

## **2. Consider The Status Of That Person**

People from different backgrounds will react differently to how you speak Thai.

It's generally easier to talk in Thai to the working class, such as street vendors or taxi drivers as their English is limited and they are quite positive about foreigners making an effort to learn their language.

It is however, harder with educated Thais or those of the middle or upper class who can speak English reasonably well. It may also be because they see this as an opportunity to practice their English, or those who already speak English confidently may see it as a sign of defeat if they speak Thai to a foreigner.

With this group, you need to be straight with them that you want to improve your Thai. Just ask politely if they could speak Thai with you. If they're still adamant about it, work out a 50-50 Thai and English deal. But if they're stubborn enough to refuse your request, you may just have to give it a pass or find new friends!

Having mentioned all of the above, it's probably better to start by chatting with street vendors or taxi drivers first. This will help to improve your listening skills and pronunciation before talking to more educated Thais.

Speaking of pronunciation...

## **3. Good Pronunciation Is Almost EVERYTHING**

Good pronunciation will get you t-shirts at MBK for 199 baht versus the 500 baht farang rip-off.

Learn Thai from good teachers who understand what your problems are and know how to correct your pronunciation.

Record yourself speaking Thai and compare it with the way Thai people speak. It will help to iron out the kinks in your pronunciation.

## **4. Improve your listening skills**

If you don't understand what Thai people are saying, don't expect them to speak Thai to you...especially if they can speak English.

Whenever possible, get your Thai teacher to speak Thai to you the natural way. In most cases, you'll realise that how they talk to one another is often very different from what you learn from the textbook.

Take a step further and immerse yourself in the language by watching Thai movies or TV programmes. Even if you don't understand anything, it would at least help you get used to the way the Thai language sounds.

### **5. Find A Thai Speaking Buddy**

Schools are only given 1-3 hours of your time per lesson to teach you how to speak correctly. Unless you spend all your time in school, no school can control what you do during those 21-23 hours outside class.

Think of it as going to a gym to lose weight. 2 hours of hard exercise isn't going to make you lose weight instantly. It just doesn't stop after the workout. You need to follow up by eating the right food and getting lots of rest. The same goes to learning Thai.

You need to PRACTICE speaking Thai outside school and the best way to do it is with Thai friends you don't feel shy speaking Thai to.

Make sure these friends can help correct your pronunciation without making you embarrassed.

### **6. Learn How To Read**

Not all schools teach reading from the first day for a very good reason, and that's not a problem.

Once you're able to converse in Thai however, you should learn how to read in order to get the exact pronunciation of all the consonants, vowels, and tones.

"Karaoke English" is a good kick-starter to help build your vocabulary quickly, but for a better understanding of Thai pronunciation, move on to the next level and learn how to read.

### **BONUS: Have Some Problem-Solving Tools Up Your Sleeve**

Learn these essential phrases that will help you solve communication breakdowns...

1. “พูดอีกทีได้มั๊ย?” (Phûut ìik thîi dâai mái? – Can you say that again?)

2. “พูดช้าๆหน่อย” (Phûut cháa cháa nõy – Speak slowly please)

These 2 phrases will come to your rescue when you can't catch what Thai people are saying. Use them instead of going speechless on the spot.

Or try this for a quick response:

3. “อะไรนะ” (Àrai ná? – What?)

Make sure you say it softly and politely though, or it could come across as slightly rude.

Or try this if you really don't understand a particular word used in a sentence:

4. “\_\_\_ คืออะไร?” ( \_\_\_ khūu àrai? – What is \_\_\_?)

Use it when you don't understand the meaning of something, like an object or a single entity.

But if you don't understand a whole sentence or a phrase, try this:

5. “ \_\_ หมายความว่าอะไร?” ( \_\_ Mǎai khwāam wâa àrai – What does \_\_ mean?)

Now here's a sneaky one...you could also say “mǎai khwāam wâa àrai?” or even “mǎai khwāam wâa...?” on its own, and it would translate to “what are you trying to say?”



It'd sound like you sort of understand, but the person talking to you isn't clear enough. Use this if you want to look or sound smart while actually not understanding much or anything at all!

Last but not least, here's a phrase that will help build your vocabulary. It's not for face-saving, but it will certainly help add more Thai words to your basket.

6 “ \_\_ ภาษาไทยพูดว่ายังไง?” (Phāasǎa Thai phûut wâa yan̄ nai? – How do you say \_\_ in Thai?)

If you demonstrate to Thais that you can communicate independently despite knowing very little, you'll eventually gain their trust and they will stop patronising you by switching to English. Do understand however, that it is usually out of good intentions to help you through communication dead-ends. But of course, that doesn't always help to improve your Thai.

So, to summarise it all, focus on acquiring good pronunciation, and explain to people that you want to speak Thai as much as possible. Try solving communication problems independently using all the phrases above. This should well establish to people around you, be it your lover, friends, colleagues or strangers, that you need their help in your new linguistic journey. Who can refuse such an honest plea like this?