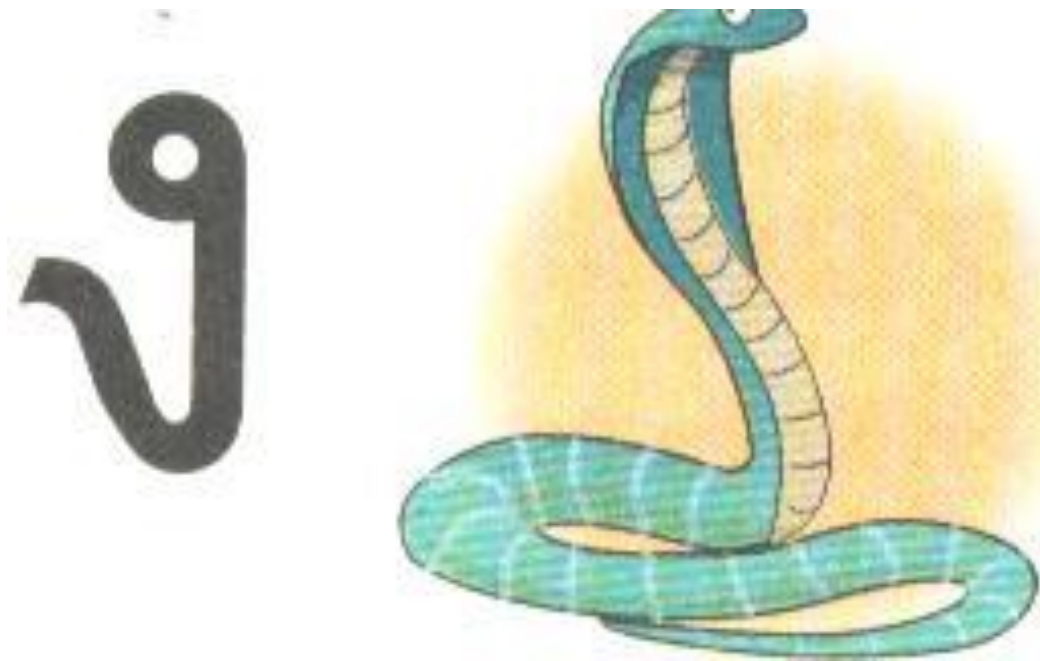


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Say it like a Thai: Ngor Ngoo

Steven Layne

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PHUKET: For many Westerners, and other speakers of non-tonal languages, Thai can prove to be quite a difficult language to pick up, let alone master.

This is perhaps even more true in a place like Phuket, where nearly everyone speaks some basic form of English, and the Thai you do hear out and about is often a strange Southern (Dtai), if not Northeastern (Isaan) or Northern (Neua) dialect.

Still, these are just minor obstacles for the determined learner and lover of language.

Though mastering the five basic tones is probably the most common area that foreigners learning Thai struggle with, another just as important, but often overlooked area that consistently stands in the way of clear communications between Thais and foreigners (and not to mention Thais and Chinese or Myanmar nationals) is the pronunciation of certain consonants – beginning and ending.

For one, several Thai consonants don't have exact equivalents in the Roman script, and to mimic, require some mixing of similar consonants (ต Dt, or ป Bp, for example). Add to the lack of a single, logical, standardized transliteration system, and the result is thousands of farang murdering the Thai language day after day, fueling the laughter of thousands of more Thais (who are laughing both with and at the farang).

But not to worry, once one learns to shrug it off, and becomes numb to all that harmless ridicule, speaking Thai properly can be quite fulfilling, and we're pleased to point you in the right direction.

Today, we're going to introduce the "Ng" consonant, which in Thai classrooms is referred to as Ngor Ngoo (ง งู). The Thai character itself (ง) kind of resembles a snake and its reference vocabulary word is exactly that (งู ngoo means snake).

To pronounce, it requires some nasal sound generation, but it's not as difficult as at first may seem. After all, you pronounce it in English all the time as an ending consonant in words like "sing", "bring", "thing", "long", "dong", "bong" (fact: the word for this smoking device was imported into English from Thai), and others.

In Thai, the consonant is used both as an ending and beginning consonant. One of my first Thai friends and teachers, Khru Boy gave me a good practice tip for this consonant, and now I will share it with you. He told me to simply hold my tongue and then try to pronounce it. It worked wonders! Also, just pronounce the English "ng" ending words but without sounding out the initial consonant or vowel. For example, for "sing", whisper si but speak out ng. For "bong", whisper bo ... speak out ng. Now hold your tongue and get to it. You'll get it, keep trying!

Below are several real Thai words you can practice, some of them arguably the most important in the language. If you can't read Thai script yet, sit down with someone who can and ask them to read out the Thai script for you to mimic.

Ngor Ngoo vocabulary

Ngiep เงียบ = (be) quiet

Ngoang งง = confused

Ngoen เงิน = money or silver

Nguang ง่วง = sleepy

Ngao เหงา = lonely (rising tone)

Ngao เงา = shadow (middle tone)

Ngaam งาม = beautiful (formal/ poetic)

Ngeua เหงื่อ = sweat

Ngoh โง่ = very low intelligence (colloquial)

Ngien เจียน = the way a dog feels on a full moon (colloquial)

Ngai ง่าย = easy / not difficult

Nngor Ngae แง = to tempermental / throw a fit

Ngon เงอ = the way an angry girlfriend gives the 'silent treatment'

Ngor ง้อ = the way a boyfriend who've been given the silent treatment try to reconcile

Thai Tips: Script is scripture

Many learners of Thai procrastinate learning to read and write the Thai script, if not skip it all together. Sure, it is possible to learn how to speak and understand most basic Thai without ever needing to read or write.

However, if/when you do decide to learn the script, you will be amazed at how much more Thai you can learn, and how much quicker your speaking and understanding will

progress. Since there is no single, standardized, consistent or reliable Thai-English transliteration system, relying only on Roman script makes much of the learning process a guessing game.

Due to ancient old habits, Thais spell words in English nothing like they actually sound, resulting in mispronunciation of countless words. Imagine being able to pronounce any Thai word with the perfect tone and pronunciation, but without ever having heard the word.

This is possible, but you have to start with learning the Thai alphabet – 44 consonants, 28 vowel forms and four primary tonal marks.

The rest is just basic math.

So, what are you waiting for, get to the book store and buy your Kindergartener friendly alphabet book.