

Thai Language Profile

Spoken Thai is soft and musical, and the script is graceful . If you learn to read it, you will be alternately praised and doubted by your fellow westerners, but appreciated by Thais, many of whom speak passable English, especially in Bangkok.

Introduction

Usefulness Apart from traveling in Thailand or on the borders of its neighbors, speaking Thai is not particularly useful, but if you love Thai cuisine, you can find it along with native-speaking Thai staff in cities throughout the world: Tokyo, New York, Paris, Los Angeles, etc. Even in Bangkok, you do not really need Thai to get around, but it is more rewarding and useful in the rest of Thailand. Also if you ever want to learn the language of Laos, you are already ¾ of the way there, since the languages are so close.

Beauty The script, of south Indian derivation, is beautiful, featuring graceful loops and rounded characters, and the lilt of Thai is easier on the ear than the sing-song of Mandarin, Cantonese, or the staccato syllables of Japanese. At first listen, you will not realize even if someone is angrily scolding you in Thai because the smiles and tones convey a kinder sound than the meaning of the utterance.

Chic factor Being an Asian language, and being quite difficult, Thai should be very chic in the west, but not many non-Thais speak the language unless they are married to a Thai or of Thai descent. For this reason, you will probably be considered unusual, suspicious, and/or chic if you speak it for no other reason than that you love Thailand.

Speakers About 50 million

Countries Total Countries: Thailand, border areas of Laos, Burma, Cambodia, and small communities in North American cities, particularly in Los Angeles, Portland, Atlanta, Toronto, and New York City.

Regional Variations There are several variations especially in the north (Isaan dialect) and south, but the Bangkok dialect is understood throughout Thailand and is the national standard for schools, TV, newspapers, etc.

Travel Thailand is a beautiful, exotic, and exciting country, from breath-taking mountains and rain-forests to clean, sandy beaches. One of the best reasons to learn Thai is the warm, friendly people, and the opportunity it provides you to get out of the tourist-targeted Bangkok area and into the smaller towns and villages where you can learn spoken Thai relatively quickly through a combination of self-study, staying in a Thai home, and avoiding the use of your mother tongue. Thailand offers entertainment, a raucous nightlife, spicy, exotic food at bargain prices, and great bargain shopping, be it jewelry, silk, etc. Also worth enjoying are the beautiful, ancient temples. Knowing the language enables you to visit sites on your own and at your own pace, without relying on tourist guide interpretations in English or French. I highly recommend that the language learner not spend the majority of their travel time in Bangkok or Pattaya, because it is too easy and non-challenging to find ! shop and hotel owners that speak English, Japanese, or German. You also will meet far more fellow foreign travelers (who you will inevitably speak to in English or German) and will not be motivated to learn Thai as well as if you were in a smaller town (i.e.;Hat Yai, Phuket) which requires you to learn Thai to get around town.

Culture Knowing Thai lets you appreciate a rich and beautiful culture and a long literary tradition.Learning to read Thai is a long process but its rewards are great: being able to read the following gems even slowly are a good enough reason to learn this language: The short stories of former Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj, considered to be the best in modern Thai Literature, the 19th century works of Sunthon Phu, considered a poetic genius in Thai communities.Phya Anuman Rajadhon, who died in 1969 and was a major influence for the current crop of authors in Thailand, as are the novels of Suwanee Sukhontha and the short stories of Khansing Sinawak, with his tales of ordinary villagers braving impossible elements.

Difficulty

Phonemes The vowel sounds are different from English and take some practice in shortening their sounds and in the diphthongs found in Thai (eua, euai, aui, uu, etc). Some of the vowels are closer to French sounds and are not found in English at all. The consonant sounds do not always correspond directly to English values and are differentiated between voiced and unvoiced (with or without a puff of air). Failure to pronounce these correctly can change the meaning of the word completely. There are also several letters representing the same sound (6 for F', 3 for P' and 3 different K'). And finally, there are five tones in Thai, an aspect found in several Asian and African languages that often confuses learners. There is also a distinction of live and dead syllables pertaining to certain consonants which is difficult to grasp.

Syntax One of the easier things about Thai is its simple word order, much like Chinese. Verbs do not change forms and nouns do not have genders or plural forms. There are no definite articles. Helper words such as *ekaung* show relationships between words, including tense of verbs, so there are no possessive forms of a noun, nor verb tenses to memorize. Many common verbs are combinations of two short words which are easy to learn. For example, au ma=bring (literally, take come) and au bpai=take away (take go), au=take, and bpai=go.

Vocabulary Not easy, but also not as difficult as you may expect, at least 25% of the words are recognizable as borrowed words from English and French, as well as some from Japanese and Chinese. Not every word in Thai carries a tone, which makes them easier. The remainder of the vocabulary is as difficult to learn as any non-Indo-European language because they bear no resemblance to words you already know, plus you have to remember which syllables use which tones. The use of noun classifiers for counting certain objects, (dishes, animals, etc.) which is found in several Asian languages, and complex rules governing politeness forms and how to tell time are also difficult for the beginner. You also need to learn the numerical order of the Thai alphabet in order to look up words in a good Thai dictionary.

Ortograph Thai is not particularly orthographic because some letters are pronounced as completely different sounds (i.e. Y or N, S or silent, S or T) depending on whether it is at the beginning or at the end of a word. These difficult rules are even more confusing when you look at a Thai text, because the words are not separated, so unless you already recognize the word, you do not know where it begins and where it ends, and thus you do not know how to spell it. The only solution I have found for this catch-22 is to get used to seeing the most common vocabulary in script, so that you recognize it by the context of the sentence, this will help you isolate the new words that you do not know, and how to spell them.

Overall difficulty I rate Thai as ****, quite difficult to learn, but not as difficult as some languages (Chinese, Japanese, etc). Thai has five tones and has complex rules governing which sounds use which tones, but the Thai script is easier to learn than Chinese or Japanese because there aren't 2,000 to 3,000 ideographs that you have to learn, and Thais are quite friendly to someone trying to learn their language. I suppose the more difficult task is to have Thais successfully correct your mistakes, because you can get along fairly well while making quite a few.

Time needed If you are exposed to hearing and seeing Thai for nine months to a year, you will be able to speak and generally understand what is being said and to read signs, but to read and write it properly will take at least another two to three years. Reading the irregular script is difficult, but it is not as difficult as Thai people may tell you, I have had several people in Thailand (native and westerner) tell me that the written script is too difficult/different for a non-Thai to learn, which is an exaggeration and of course, not true.

Learning material

Books and tapes To learn the script quickly I suggest:

Easy Thai, by Gordon H.Allison, Charles E.Tuttle Publishers, 1995.

Thai System of Writing, by Mary R. 1971, she is also the editor of the best Thai dictionary available for learners (see below).

For a good introduction of the spoken and written language:

Teach Yourself Thai, with cassettes, by David Smyth, Hodder & Stoughton, 1995.

Colloquial Thai, with CD, by J. Moore and S.Rodchue, Routledge, 1994.

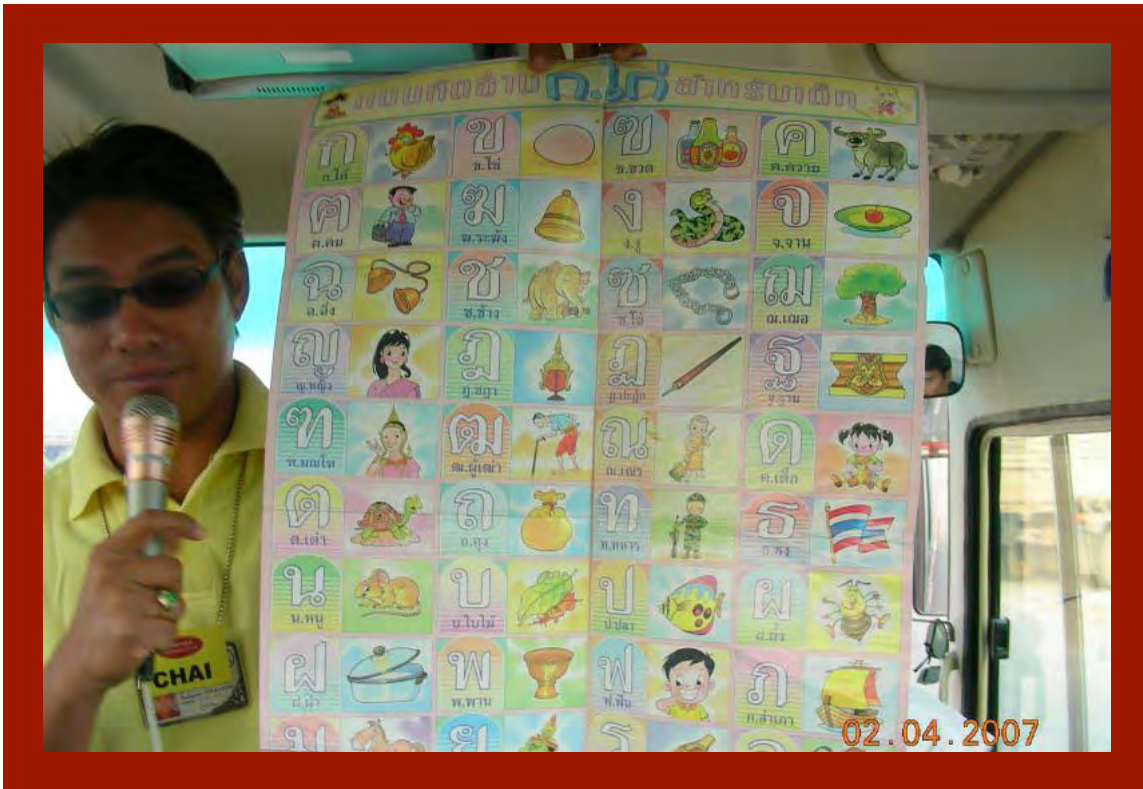
For a fun introduction to Thai slang:

Making Out in Thai, by John Clewley, 1994.(slightly explicit vocabulary)

Two indispensable dictionaries for the learner are:

Robertson's Practical English-Thai Dictionary, Charles E. Tuttle Publishers, 1995.

Thai-English Student's Dictionary, by Mary R.Haas, Stanford University Press, 1964.



Schools I would recommend a good home-stay program where you would live with a Thai family. There are several available, including some that you can set up while in Thailand yourself, but whether you study at a school or stay with a family, make sure you stay in Bangkok or the central provinces area, so that you do not pick up a regional variety of Thai. And make certain that you will stay with a Thai family and not an ethnic Chinese family, as happened to an acquaintance of mine. You want native speakers of Thai as your homestay family. I know of one program which will set you up with a Thai family in Bangkok and enroll you in Thai classes five days a week for 4 to 6 weeks with longer stays available. From what I have heard, they are quite reliable, but you may want to shop around first: Languages Abroad, 502-99 Avenue Rd, Toronto, ON, Canada, M5R 2G5
This school will also arrange for you to study Thai in Thailand and/or arrange a homestay with a Thai family:

Taiyo Schools: <http://come.to/studyThai>

I personally advise against simply hiring a native speaker to tutor you in Thai, unless you know exactly what and how you want to learn it. You also need to make sure the tutor has taught Thai before, because speaking a language and teaching one are quite a world apart.