

Teaching in Thailand

Nava Language School

For Westerners, Thailand can be an intoxicating mix of exotic sights, sounds and color. Thailand is the only South-east Asian country not to be colonized, and this may be one reason for the relaxed, gentle and tolerant nature of the Thai people. Although Thais are very open to outside (often Western) influences, which they readily absorb, the real strength of Thai culture is that, despite these influences, it remains strong, vibrant, and distinctly Thai. As a western teacher in Thailand, you will find your students receptive to learning about your culture. The challenge for you is to reciprocate.

Changes in the education system

Thailand is currently undergoing widespread educational reform, and an important aspect of this appears to be a shift from traditional rote learning principles, to those which embrace critical thinking and analytical skills in particular. Certainly, in the past many Western teachers have expressed frustration at students' seeming unwillingness to express opinions and take part in discussions (which may also have been caused by the Thai cultural aversion to issues seen as confrontational). There is still a very strong belief that in order to succeed academically, you copy the "master." However, the need for critical thinking skills in the modern world is now widely recognized, and Westerners are seen as a ready resource for learning and developing these skills.

In addition, Thais are acutely aware of the need for English language skills, as communication across the global community becomes more widespread. Thailand was never colonized, a fact of which they are very proud, but it has left them lagging in English language ability when compared with nearby countries, and, therefore, the government, educational institutions, parents, students, and business are now demanding English language teaching at unprecedented levels.

The learning of English is increasingly widespread

The government has initiated its new "12-year" program, citing the length of time during which all Thais will be in formal education, and it includes a new emphasis on English language training, both in primary and secondary education. At the university level, there are a growing number of American, British and Australian university campuses in Thailand, teaching degree programs in English. Substantial numbers of Thai students also study at universities in these three countries, and pre-departure English courses are enormously popular, both for TOEFL and IELTS (English) test preparation for entrance to these universities, and also for English for Academic Purposes programs. All other universities have growing English language departments, as graduates are well aware that good English skills will greatly enhance their future employment prospects.

Even at the kindergarten level, there is a much-increased emphasis on English. Many kindergartens now have English programs in place, using Western teachers (often with Thai teaching assistants). Students will learn English from anywhere between one and ten times per week. The children learning five to ten times a week advance extremely quickly, as you would expect, and the inevitable result will be that the standard of English in Thailand will be markedly higher in years to come.

So, what is Nava Language School's position in this market place?

Across our 14 school branches, we teach in-house kindergarten, young learner, teen and adult classes. These are generally conversation classes, but there are some academic preparation and test preparation classes too. Nava teaches in-school as well, at kindergarten, primary and secondary schools, and we have a significant presence in the corporate English teaching market, the result being that Nava plays an important role in both the formal and informal education sectors.

The need for native-speaking teachers

It may be clear to you at this point that Thailand is on the crest of a wave of English language learning. As such, native-speaking English teachers are very much in demand—even more so when we consider that Thai teachers of English are still largely rooted in "traditional" methods of language teaching, which tend to emphasize the knowledge of a language rather than its effective use in speaking, listening, reading and writing. You will find that Thai students' knowledge of English grammar often exceeds your own—never mind! Your real mission is to give your students as much speaking practice as possible. At Nava Language School, we aim for a ratio of 50% of lesson time in which students are speaking to each other in English. This is achieved through the extensive use of pair work and group work speaking activities, milling activities, and even board games and card games. Certainly, the emphasis is on fun—a powerful motivating factor—but don't be misled. These kinds of activities have a proven theoretical foundation in language learning. Fun activities can result in "serious" learning.

Moreover, native-speaking teachers are also invaluable in teaching students correct pronunciation, which is often vital if communication is not to break down. Thai students need good modeling of sounds (for example, Thais pronounce "v" as "w"), word stress (Thais tend to stress the final syllable), and the flow of connected speech in English (in place of the rather "staccato-like" pronunciation of many Asian native speakers).

Respect for teachers in Thailand

Teachers are still regarded very highly in Thailand—approximately on the third level of society, below royalty and the monkhood, on a similar level with doctors. This becomes apparent when you experience first-hand the politeness and

general goodwill that Thais express towards their teachers. This is further highlighted by the "Pay respect to your teacher day," which occurs once a year and involves students "waiting" (holding their hands in front of them, as in prayer) their teachers in a special ceremony.

For teachers, the ramifications in the classroom are profound. Rather than working in an environment in which classroom control and discipline issues may distract teachers from developing and refining content and methodology, in Thailand, the reverse is true. You will find the teaching experience you gain in Thailand to be a rewarding and fulfilling experience. Teaching issues, such as the planning of well-structured lessons in which you present new language in clear contexts, and then provide a range of practice activities, are paramount. Speaking English is increasingly "cool" in Thailand, so your students will be motivated and eager to learn about you from the outset. This is a wonderful country for teachers to work in.

Person-oriented versus goal-oriented society

Western societies are very much goal oriented. This is perhaps an obvious fact, yet one I only gradually became aware of after living in Thailand for several years. Personal relationships are often (at least partly) sacrificed in order to achieve tasks, to "get things done." The boss bawling out the office worker who was responsible for a "foul up" is a scenario that we all know of and accept as normal. In Thailand, it is not. In fact, such an occurrence in Thailand would result in the boss losing the respect of all staff, angry at his/her treatment of another person.

There is a gentleness about Thais in their dealings with other people that, for a Westerner, is both delightful and perplexing. Perplexing, because it seems to sometimes lead to systems we take for granted, such as public transport, not working properly or efficiently. And yet, if we believe the notion that if you live in a culture for a time, you "take on" aspects of that culture, the net effect of living in Thailand will be to make you a more tolerant, patient, gentle and accepting person.

Life in Thailand

Living in Thailand can be both delightful and challenging. From the beautiful countryside, beaches, people, to the spicy, tangy, and sometimes pungent cooking, and from the noise, traffic and pollution of Bangkok, to the peace and quiet of a Buddhist temple in the country, teaching in Thailand will provide you with an experience that you will never forget. And if it all becomes too overwhelming, there is always a McDonald's or Burger King around the corner, a cinema showing Western movies, or a huge air-conditioned shopping mall to take refuge in.

As a teacher in Thailand, you will have the opportunity to experience Thai culture well beyond the stereotypical cultural shows and excursions that are the bread and butter of the package tour industry. Most students at Nava Language School come from Thailand's growing middle class, so

whether you have young learners, teens, adult or corporate students, you will develop a much more accurate picture of how Thais really live compared to what you could ordinarily learn on a visit to the country.

Thailand is aptly known as "The Land of Smiles." There is no better place to visit, to live and work, and to enrich your life with new experiences.

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NameProGuide: Web-based Name Pronunciation Guide

Students in today's classrooms come from a great variety of cultures. In a sample of 800 names in San Francisco Bay Area Foothill College's NameProGuide database, students list 74 different countries of origin and over 56 different languages or dialects. In fact, the changing population in the San Francisco Bay Area is exemplified by the statistics from the 2000 U.S. Census for one city in Foothill's enrollment area, Milpitas, CA. "The racial population for Milpitas has changed dramatically during the last two decades as the number of Asians has boomed and the number of Whites has dropped sharply."

Reflecting this high level of diversity, Foothill instructors reported at divisional and departmental meetings that they felt ill prepared to read the class rosters aloud on the first day of class. On a daily basis, instructors at all levels, from elementary to the university, face the challenge of making each student feel welcomed and empowered in their classrooms.

To address this problem, participants in Foothill's Diversity Seminars suggested that workshops to assist in the pronunciation of student names be held. They were quite successful, but retention of the information quickly evaporated. Because of that, it was suggested that an interactive, web-based guide for pronunciation of names from several languages and backgrounds be developed.

A proposal for this project was drafted and a grant in the amount of \$34,000 was awarded to Project Director, Nile Norton, by the California Community College Chancellor's Office fund for Improvement of Instruction. Collaboration between the Foothill's Office of Multicultural Relations and the Computers, Technology, and Information Systems Division resulted in the student development of three prototypes. The current web site is a direct result of the winning student design.