

# Learning Thai: A Comprehensive Guide for Foreigners Interested in Studying Thai Language in Thailand



If you have foreign friends, how do you introduce them to Thailand?

Take them on a tour of the beautiful tourist destinations?

Taste an array of delicious Thai food?

Or recommend engaging Thai films and series?

Thailand has a lot of charms to indulge in, but one of the appeals one cannot deny is the “Thai language” which, in any shape or form, is so melodious and pleasing to the ear.

“Lately, we are seeing more and more people from many countries around the world become interested in learning the Thai language. With this booming interest comes the advent of many things: the digital world, the end of language barriers, easier travel, the export of goods and drama series, and various soft power trends,” said **Assistant Professor Dr. Kiat Thepchuaysuk, Director of the Center for Thai as a Foreign Language (CTFL), Chulalongkorn University.**



*Assistant Professor Dr. Kiat Thepchuaysuk*



Whether you are studying for a career, doing business, learning to communicate with favorite stars, or even learning the language just for fun, most foreigners say the same thing: “The Thai language is hard.”

But for Dr. Kiat, a specialist in linguistics and teaching Thai language to foreigners, “Thai is easier to understand than you think, and can actually be a lot of fun if we know the basics, tricks, and tips.”

In this article, Dr. Kiat will give advice and easy-to-understand language tips for those who are thinking seriously about learning Thai. Native speakers will also learn fun facts about the language that will show that Thai is not as complicated as you think. It is actually a charming language that reflects the fun and creativity of the Thai people.

## **Is Thai language really easy?**

Most of the students who start learning Thai language often say that it is difficult. Dr. Kiat said that it is because of the characteristics of Thai language that are different from the mother tongue of foreign learners in various aspects as follows:

### **1. Writing, Grammar, and Tone Systems**

Thai language has its own writing system and unique alphabets that are not shared with any other languages. The grammar is also different from some of the learners’ mother tongues. Thai is also a tonal language and the different tones can confuse many Western foreigners such as the word “Kao” in different tones can either mean fishy, news, rice, or white. This is because tones are not present in Western languages.

### **2. A wide range of language hierarchy**

Although many languages have a hierarchy, it is very prominent Thai language.

In sentences that convey the same meaning, choosing words to communicate depends on many factors, such as whether the sentence is spoken or written, who we are going to communicate with, in what situations, etc. The vocabulary sets used are all different.

“If you want to write beautifully, you will use one set of vocabulary, while if you speak to your parents or your teachers, you’ll use another set of vocabulary. Even when you talk to your friend, sometimes you have to think whether this is a close friend, and the vocabulary also is different,” Dr. Kiat explained.

### **3. New words are coined all the time**

Every language has inside slang that are used within the group. But Thai people are born with linguistic creativity, especially teenagers and LGBT+ groups who always invent new words to communicate within their groups. And because these new words are for fun, they often become widely popular in society. It is the charm of Thai language that indicates the character of Thai people who are fun-loving and creative quite well.

### **Mastering Thai Language Grammar: Key Rules and Concepts**

Thai language of today is influenced by a combination of many languages such as Bali, Sanskrit, Khmer, Chinese, Javanese, Burmese, Malay, Persian, and some European languages such as Portuguese and English, etc. The vocabulary and grammar of Thai language, therefore, have certain traces of those languages as well. According to Dr. Kiat, a few grammatical points of Thai language that foreigners should know before starting their study to learn faster and understand the Thai language more easily are:

#### **Arrangement of words in declarative sentences**

Normally, when we learn different languages, we have to look at the basic sentence form of how the subject, verb, and object are arranged. Thai language uses the same structure as English or Chinese, i.e. subject > verb > object, for example, I eat rice. This is different from some languages which have the structure of subject > object > verb, such as Japanese or Korean, making it "I rice eat."

Although two languages may share similar basic sentence structures, the grammar of both languages is not necessarily identical. This is only one way to easily understand a simple basic sentence in speech. Although Thai and Chinese speak in the same pattern of subject, verb, and object, Chinese language has a different structure of noun phrases from Thai language. Therefore, instead of saying "I eat two plates of rice," a native Chinese speaker may misspeak and say "I eat two rice plates, for example."

Therefore, if you want to speak Thai like a native speaker using more complex sentences, you need to learn more grammar.

"Many Thai language grammatical features are quite easy to understand and straightforward compared to many other languages because we have no tense, no verb conjugation, no complicated grammar rules. In Thai language, you just memorize the vocabulary and string the words together, and you'll be able to communicate in Thai without difficulty," Dr. Kiat explained.

## Forming simple negative sentences and questions.

Now that you know how to write a simple sentence, if you want to use different forms of sentence, such as negative sentences, all you have to do is add the word “no (mai)” to the front of the verb, or for a question, add the word “mai (different tone)” to the end of the sentence. It’s very simple.

## Describing a noun – put the noun first, then the adjective

Describing nouns in Thai language is different from some other languages. In other words, in Thai, we usually say the main noun first and then the descriptive or complementary words. Let’s look at the words “hot tea” in English, Japanese, Chinese, or Korean. The word “hot” is said first, then the main noun “tea”. Therefore, if a foreigner who speaks these languages come to learn the Thai language and does not understand this grammar, they can easily make mistakes in the word order.

## Sounds of Thai Language: What to Watch Out For

Thai pronunciation has a few points to pay attention to. If students understand and practice well, they will be able to speak and understand Thai as native speakers without difficulty.

### 1. Consonants

The first stage that Thai language learners need to learn is phonetic sounds. In terms of writing, there are 44 consonants, but only 21 sounds (English has 24 phonetic sounds). Some Thai consonants have the same sound. And if we look closely, Thai phonetic sounds are quite systematic, and are grouped in pairs as well, such as *“g for gai”, “kh for khai”, “Dt for dtao”, and “Th for thoong”* *“Bpaaw for bplaa”, and “Ph for phaan”* In the beginning, it may be a little difficult to tell the difference of all the sounds, but if you listen often, it is not as difficult as you think.

Another caution, especially for Westerners, is the ending consonant. In English, when pronouncing the ending consonant, we usually aspirate at the end. But in Thai, we don’t do so. For example, in the word *“rak”* (love), the ending *“k”* is not pronounced.

### 2. Vowels

The vowels of Thai language are another point that foreigners are not familiar with. As previously mentioned, the Thai language has fewer consonant sounds than English. But on the other hand, English has 20 vowels, while Japanese only has 5 vowels, /a/ /i/ /u/ /e/ /o/. But in Thai, we have 24

vowels. Not to mention the special vowels /am/ /ai/ /ai/ /au/ and /reu/ /reu:/ /lü/ /lue/ which are compound sounds with the consonants. There may seem a lot, but these are simply a pair of short and long sounds, as well as combinations of vowel sounds as well. So, it can be linked and learned without much difficulty.

### 3. Tones

Tones in Thai language are the most challenging for foreign learners. Of all the learners' mother languages, only a few have tones, such as Chinese and Vietnamese, but their tones are not exactly the same as Thai tones.

Try having a foreigner say, ***"New wood doesn't burn (Mai mai mai mai)."*** If the tones are pronounced off-key, then the listener may not understand the meaning or may feel that the speaker is repeating the same word 4 times.

"Tones are very important. Some words, when changing the tone, the meaning changes," said Dr. Kiat, reiterated while giving an example of the word ***"pa"*** which can mean 5 things with the 5 tones. So one needs to be mindful of pronouncing the tones correctly to avoid miscommunication.

*Pa (mid-tone) means to throw*

*Pa (low tone) means forest*

*Pa (falling tone) means aunt (mom's older sister)*

*Pa (high tone) means father for Thai-Chinese people*

*Pa (rising tone) refers to a rich man*

"Tones are difficult for beginners, and they may have to use different methods for help, such as using a clear sound file to practice listening or having students speak to the instructor who can correct them. They may compare words with the same tone, such as "ga (falling tone)" and "pa (falling tone)" and practice pronouncing them with different vowels. Although they may be meaningless words, students will be more familiar with the tones," Dr. Kiat suggested.

## How to Learn Thai Language Fast: Tips and Techniques for Foreigners

### 1. Remember language basics from the fundamental level.

Those who start learning a new language, no matter what language, usually start by translating the sentence literally from their native language, which will mix up the sentence structure, said Ajarn Kiat.

“Knowing the language fundamentals, and trying to create words based on Thai grammar without having to translate from the native language will make you understand the language faster. When compared between people who learn to listen or speak by themselves, to those who learn basic principles and then apply them to create sentences, this latter group of people often learn the language faster.”

## **2. Let language be a part of your everyday life.**

Just like learning other languages, making Thai language a part of your everyday life is another method that works quite well. You may practice by watching movies, listening to music, or watching Thai programs. Another great way to learn is to try living in Thailand to use the opportunity to observe things around you, such as reading billboards, listening to Thai people talk frequently, or trying to make Thai friends and speaking Thai language together every day. This will definitely help you learn faster.

“Thai people are famous for being good-natured. Most of them are ready to be friends with foreigners. Therefore, do not be afraid to make friends with Thais,” said Dr. Kiat.

Or better yet, if you seriously study Thai language in Thailand, in addition to having Thai friends to help, you will also get help from teachers who are experts in teaching Thai to help adjust the basics and correct mistakes making the learning more effective as well.

## **Thai Language Immersion: Advantages of Living and Learning in Thailand**

For foreigners who are interested in living and studying in Thailand, the Center for Thai as a Foreign Language (CTFL) offers a variety of Thai language courses to meet each person’s learning goals.

### **What are the advantages of living and studying in Thailand?**

#### **1. Study directly with expert professors**

Studying in Thailand with Thai professors is a better experience, especially at Chula, which is a center of qualified and experienced professors in Thai language and linguistics. You can be sure that all the professors are fully capable to pass on their knowledge and train students to be successful in Thai language usage.

#### **2. Learning Atmosphere**

Most students who have studied Thai language at Chulalongkorn University love the atmosphere of the campus which is in the heart of the city, but tucked away amidst beautiful greenery, with architecture that is a blend of old and new together perfectly. And of course, in addition to education, there are also various activities, workshops, and clubs in which Thai language students can participate. There are also occasional organized tours around campus, the city, or nearby provinces.



### **Key Takeaways**

For those who feel that Thai language is difficult, do not be quick to give up. Dr. Kiat concludes that the key to learning Thai language is to “just start properly with the basic principles of the language, from the pronunciation, writing, and grammar. The Thai language is systematic, so if you understand these basic principles and remember the vocabulary, then just put the words in the right place and you can communicate in everyday life.”

Studying the Thai language at CTFL, Chulalongkorn University will make learning Thai easy, fast, and fun with experienced Thai language professors, friends from many countries, and languages, as well as fellow Thai students who will help to be your language coaches, while opening up the experience of learning Thai language through art, culture and Thai lifestyle... and you will find that Thai language is easy and beautiful.

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