

# Thailand: Cultural Background for ESL/EFL Teachers

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'Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil'

Thai Saying

## Overview

The Kingdom of Thailand is situated in the center of Southeast Asia, bordering Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia. The country is shaped like the head of an elephant with the trunk pointing south. Covering a total area of 514,000 sq km (198,445 sq mi), Thailand is rich in agricultural and mineral resources, making it more prosperous than many other nations in the Far East. Thailand has a population of 64 million (2003), of which 75 percent are Thai – a Mongoloid subgroup with a light complexion. The largest minority is the Chinese (14%) and other minority groups include Malay, Khmer and Vietnamese inhabitants. The official national language, spoken by a large majority of the population, is Thai. Lao, Chinese, Malay and Khmer are also spoken in Thailand. English, a mandatory subject in secondary schools, is widely used in commerce and government, particularly in Bangkok and other major cities.

Although Thailand has an ancient civilization, with Bronze Age artifacts from as early as 4000 BC, it did not emerge as a kingdom until the 13th century under the first known King Mengrai. The country engaged in successive wars with Burma and Cambodia, and then was exposed to European powers, resulting in the loss of territory in the east to France (1893) and in the south to Britain (1909). In a bloodless coup d'état in 1932, the absolute monarchy was replaced by a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary form of government. During World War II, the country was occupied by the Japanese. Over the next several decades, the political arena was very unstable with violent student demonstrations, rampant coups and intermittent military governments. Consequently, Thailand suffered at the hands of all these political upheavals. While the nation's political situation has become more stable toward the end of the 20th century, Thailand has begun to face numerous social problems resulting from the rapid economic changes.

Thais are very proud of their nation - the only country in Southeast Asia that has never felt the yoke of foreign domination or colonialism throughout its long history. To this effect, Siam (as it was known to the world until 1939) was renamed *Prathet Thai* or 'Thailand' meaning 'Land of the Free.' Briefly, the main elements that have molded Thailand's cultural identity can be stated in the unswerving allegiance to independence, the sagacity of diplomacy, the loyalty to the monarchy, the deep-rooted belief in Buddhism and the love of family.

Buddhism, the national religion of Thailand, is the professed faith of 95 percent of the population. The rest of the population embraces other religions, such as Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. The basic tenets of Buddhism can be summarized as follows:

- One should show kindness and tolerance toward others.
- Everything a person does has an effect; hence, what a person is and what happens to him/her is the result of his/her own actions or karma.
- Buddhists believe in reincarnation, i.e., a person has other lives before and after this one; the next life one has depends on one's deeds in this life.

- Life is suffering, which comes from one's craving. Therefore, one should give up ambition or greed and do good deeds to improve one's karma.

Thai culture is closely associated with Buddhist teachings. One is expected to do *tum bun* 'good deeds' or make merit in one way or another. Thais are apt to support charities and social activities. Many Thai men spend several months as monks in their life for this purpose. Thais have been known to be very good-natured and easy-going. When something unfortunate happens, a Thai usually says *mai pen rai*, a phrase meaning 'no problem' or 'it doesn't matter.' This comes from Buddhist ideals of peace and harmony, of avoiding conflict or displays of emotion. It is true that smiling comes easily to most Thai people. That is why they have nicknamed their country *Muang Yim* - 'Land of Smiles.'

Like most other Asian cultures, Thai values are more or less influenced by Confucianism. They are chiefly: filial piety, respect for age, seniority and hierarchy, face, deference, dignity, honor, true friendship, dislike of pomposity and arrogance, interest in learning, and belief in moderation.

Family ties and filial piety play an important role in Thai society. Several generations may live in the same household and take good care of one another. Thais have a very high respect for parents and the elderly. Children are taught from childhood to follow the advice of their elders. They are not taught to talk back or voice contrasting views. Ancestor veneration is a hyphen between the dead and the living and a strong tie between members of the same ancestry. Familial respect and respectability is extended to respect for authority and status in Thai hierarchical society. For example, it would be very offensive to make a joke about the King and Queen or to lick a stamp with the King's picture. These respectful attitudes are evident in linguistic behavior. Thai abounds in kinship terms that can show the right degree of respect, deference and intimacy.

Thais highly value friendship and tend to seek friendships of a permanent nature. They distinguish between 'eating friends' who only appear when in good times and 'friends to death' who are always there in good or bad times. Good friends for Thais are reliable and tried-and-true friends. To perpetuate friendship, Thais use kinship terms (e.g., older brother, younger sister depending on age) to address each other, as if they were blood siblings. Specifically, Thai friends of mine are gracious, sensitive and considerate of others' feelings while still respecting each other's privacy.

As is true of most Asian cultures, public displays of male-female affection are not common among Thais, although members of the same sex may touch or hold hands with each other. The traditional and most usual form of greeting is the *wai* - each person puts the palms together, with fingers at the chest, and bows slightly to the other person. The higher the *wai* and the lower the head, the more respect is shown. The *wai* can mean not only 'hello', but also 'thank you,' 'good-bye' or even 'I'm sorry.' However, those who come in contact with Western culture have become accustomed to the handshake. Touching someone's head or pointing at something with the feet is a taboo. Beckoning should be done with the palm down while pointing at someone is considered rude.

Since education is free and compulsory for all children between the ages of 7 and 15, Thailand has a high literacy rate of 94 percent, compared to that of most other countries of Southeast Asia. Children go to either public primary schools or those operated by Buddhist monasteries. Nowadays, many people can afford to study at American high schools, colleges and universities on their own or through teacher and student exchange programs.

Thai full names have the same order as Western names: given name + surname, with no middle name. Two typical names, for example, are *Malee Amatayakul* and *Somchai Sookmahk*. In addressing, Thai people use the given name or, more politely, a title plus the given name. In this case *khun*, meaning Mr., Mrs. or Miss, is put before the given name, e.g., *Khun Somchai* or *Khun Malee*. A kinship term (e.g., older brother or uncle) or professional term (e.g., Dr.) may also be placed before the given name in addressing when the relationship is clear. As a traditional practice, Thai wives take their husbands' surnames, as do their children.

While Thai people still believe in Buddhist philosophy of life and Confucian values, many of the practices are changing as people are adopting new fashions, customs, and ways of living from the West. However, many Thais do not see this development as a need to change their religious and traditional values. For many Thais, to be westernized is not always complimentary.

In the United States, Thais make up a smaller community than those from other Southeast Asian countries. Thai immigration to America did not start until the Vietnam War, during which time the U.S. established army bases on Thai soil and Thais became aware of immigration possibilities to the U.S. Unlike people from other countries in Indochina, Thais did not come to America as refugees. The largest groups of Thai immigrants have settled in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, D.C, Houston and New York City. One of the most common Thai businesses in the U.S. is their cuisine. Thai people who moved to America as adults often have trouble learning to speak English. A language problem often results when their children may not like to speak English at home and they do not speak English well enough. One of the biggest concerns facing Asian immigrants is the question of how to maintain their cultural identity as reflected in their way of life, behavior, customs and language while blending in mainstream American culture.

### **In the Classroom**

- As in most other Asian countries, traditional Thai culture places a very high value on learning. Because of this, teachers are highly respected and are typically considered as being knowledgeable and authoritative.
- Out of respect, Thai students may not feel as comfortable asking questions and/or voicing their opinions as Western students. Don't be frustrated at their unwillingness to participate in discussions or challenge your ideas. Eliciting a response can be difficult sometimes, but this should not be taken as non-cooperative on the part of the students.
- A teacher of English can expect to find Thai learners admirably industrious and well behaved. They listen attentively and take notes very carefully.

### **Teacher Comments**

- Some basic knowledge of Thai history, language and culture is always useful in order to make your teaching more pleasant or at least to avoid certain faux pas. It may help you understand or predict your students' problems or behavior.
- A salient feature of Thai learning style is rote memorization. Students tend to spend considerable time memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary at the expense of oral practice. As a result, most Thai learners of English have better reading and writing skills than listening and speaking abilities. A more active communication-oriented method may help balance their performance.

- Thai is a tonal language with five different tones. As such, the meaning of the same word may change depending on which tone is being used. Thai is written in the Thai alphabet (one derived from the Indian alphabet Devanagari) that runs across the page from left to right. Because English is taught in secondary schools, most Thais are familiar with the Roman alphabet.
- Thai speakers learning English often have problems pronouncing /ð/, /θ/, /ʃ/, /z/, /ʒ/, and /v/ because these are absent in the first language. They often find it hard to pronounce the initial consonant clusters that do not occur in Thai, such as /dr/, /fl/, /fr/, /sl/, /sp/, /st/ and /sw/. In addition, Thai learners tend to drop final consonants (e.g., *light* is pronounced as *lie*) or reduce final consonant clusters (e.g., *lunch* becomes *lun*). English rhythm also presents another problem to Thai learners. Specifically, they have difficulty speaking English with correct stress patterns in polysyllabic words due to their tendency to give equal stress and timing to each syllable. More practice in the reduced or weak forms is also necessary.
- Thai grammar is very different from that of English. Because Thai is an uninflected language, nouns and verbs do not change their forms for Number, Gender, Case or Person, but instead separate words are used for such purposes. Therefore, English inflections are generally confusing and cause frequent errors to Thai learners in terms of number, agreement, tenses, aspects, and irregular verbs. These differences should be taken into consideration when teaching classes of mixed nationalities.
- Although Thai also has a Subject-Verb-Object structure, the subject and object are often left out within clear contexts. Thai learners often carry this pro-drop feature to English, wrongly producing subjectless or objectless sentences. The use or non-use of articles in English often confuses Thai learners since there are no articles in Thai noun phrases. Adjectives occur after the noun they modify. However, since many adjectives in Thai can behave like verbs, this can lead students to omit the copula *be* in English (e.g., *\*That book good*).
- Because having fun is an important part in Thai lifestyle, a 'learning while having fun' approach can be very effective to most Thai students.
- To their annoyance, some teachers note that Asian students tend to help each other during tests or look over others' shoulders. It is a good idea to give several variations of the test, give an open-book exam, or assign group work and grade them according to it.
- Face is important in the classroom. Therefore, in classes of mixed ages, to make sure that older learners are not to be cornered or made to lose face, give them more opportunities and encouragement.

### **Student Comments**

- American people in general and teachers in particular are very friendly and helpful. Many students observe that American teachers are much more informal in the classroom with regard to addressing, dress, and even teaching style.
- Some Thai learners feel more comfortable having everything written down on the board and having more structured lessons. Some think that American teachers speak too fast.
- Some Thai students have difficulty adapting to a new environment. They are not used to the weather, food, social behavior, cultural customs, language, learning methods, laws,

etc. They are often shocked by American freedom of speech, divorce rates, gun and crime issues.

- One Thai student mentions that corporal punishment (e.g., whipping) can be used in Thai schools to discipline children and their parents support this. Because teachers are revered in their country, Thais don't understand why students can be disrespectful to teachers.

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\* A first version of this paper appeared in a multicultural project at Northeast ABLÉ Resource Center (Ohio).

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