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PROBLEMS OF USING OF THAI AS A SECOND LANGUAGE OF FOREIGN STUDENTS IN CHIANG MAI

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Abstrak

Thai language is the official language of Thailand. It is also the major language in Thailand. It is the first language of native Thai people and the majority of communities who historically settled in Thailand, like Thai people of Chinese descent, Indian descent, etc, who migrated to Thailand centuries ago. Thai is spoken approximately by 20 million people as the first language and around 40 million people as a second language throughout the world. Many researches are been conducted about, Thai language, Thai people, Thai culture, etc. Also, many universities and colleges in Thailand conducted researches in these areas. This article focusses on Thai language in Education. The objective of this is to study the problems in using Thai language of Chinese students taking courses in Thai Program at Chiang Mai University. Moreover, the findings will become guidelines for Thai program development for Chinese students who will take courses at Chiang Mai University in the future.

Keywords: Thai language, second language, Chinese students, Chiang Mai university.

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Introduction

Thai is the official and major language of Thailand. It is the first language of native Thai people and the majority of communities who historically settled in Thailand, for example, Thai people of Chinese descent, Indian descent, etc, who migrated to Thailand centuries ago. Thai is spoken by around 20 million people as the first language and around 40 million people as a second language.

Now it has become more popular for Chinese students to study Thai language, and their parents are interested to send their children to Thailand to study it in Thailand. Parents consider that their children should study Thai language because it will be an advantage after their graduation; they will be able to get a job in a company that Thai language is required, a tour company, being an interpreter or teaching in any universities that have some relationship with Thailand.

Originally, the International College of Chiang Mai University offered admissions for Chinese students to study in various fields in English Programs, and in 2018 there were 30 Chinese students to enroll in other subject departments in Thai programs at Chiang Mai University. For the first semester of the 2018 academic year Chiang Mai University offered them specific courses, so they could adjust themselves to study the subjects lectured in Thai language by Thai professors. However those students differed in their Thai language illegibility, for example some had studied Thai language during their high school period with some additional classes in Thailand for either 1 year or 6 months whereas some of them did not know any Thai words but enrolled to study Thai with a Chinese teacher at some tutoring schools in Thailand for a year, 9 months or six months respectively. As a professor teaching Thai language to Chinese students, the researchers became interested in studying problems in using Thai language of Chinese students enrolling at Chiang Mai University in order to develop educational efficiency and better curriculum arrangements more appropriate for students' language background.

Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to study the problems in using Thai language of Chinese students taking courses in Thai Program at Chiang Mai University, so the findings will become guidelines for Thai program development for Chinese students who will take courses at Chiang Mai University in the future.

Research Boundary

This research is about the problems in using Thai language of 15 Chinese students enrolling in Thai Program at Chiang Mai University in academic year of 2018. Studies of the problems in using Thai language were focused on the four language skills: writing, reading, listening and speaking

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative research, and the chosen population was the Chinese students taking Thai Program at Chiang Mai University in the first semester of the year 2018. One of them was from the faculty of Business Administration, two were from the Faculty of Mass Communications, twelve were from the Faculty of Humanities, and the entirety was 15 students from whom the data were collected.

Research Instrument

Researchers used the questionnaire of open-ended questions asking them about their personal information and four- skilled problems in using Thai language including:

1. Writing skill includes problems were word choice, ordering of words and ordering of phrases.
2. Reading skill includes problems in reading such as word reading, sentence reading and Thai passage reading.
3. Listening skill includes problems in word listening, content and sentence comprehension.
4. Speaking skill includes problems in consonant and vowel pronunciations.

The questionnaire consists of five questions on problems for each skill, thus there are altogether 20 questions by which three language experts: Associate Professor Saowapa Wichadee, and two Assistant Professors, Panithan Bunnatham and Suwana Tangthikharaksa examined the content validity of the questionnaire.

Research Conducting

1. Researchers asked the students to answer the questions of the questionnaire asking about their personal information, wholly period of time of their studying of Thai language, period of time of their Thai studying in the Republic of China and that in Thailand as well and also four*skilled problems in studying Thai. After that researchers analyzed the answers for their writing problems concerning word spelling, word choices, word ordering and massager in a sentence, Thai sentence structures, the uses of conjunctions, the uses of noun classifiers and message ordering in a paragraph.
2. Researchers observed pronunciation skills of the students in Thai classes of TH 111: The Usage of Thai language; wherein students were asked to read an essay on “Our University” one at a time, and after that the researchers analyzed the data of word pronunciation based on its spelling, pronunciation of words of cluster initial consonant, words that have a leading letter pronounced with a short vowel of “a” sentence reading, sentence spacing and drawing of conclusion.

3. Researchers interviewed them informally based on Errors Evaluation Form examined by the aforementioned three experts in order to analyze their speaking problems concerning consonant, vowel and tonal sound pronunciation, initial cluster words, appropriate word choices for the contexts, and analyze listening problems of word, sentence and passage comprehension.

Review of Literature

Many researchers had studied about foreign students' problems in using Thai language. Worapong Chairuek (2006)¹ who studied about the problems in teaching Thai as a foreign language to foreign students found that teachers did not know about their learning styles and learning strategies, and that led to less efficient teaching and learning. To teach them efficiently, teachers must prioritize students as the learning center regardless of their knowledge level. Teachers had to know and understand the students' learning nature very well because each student could learn well in a different environment using different learning strategies.

Dudsadee Kongsombut (2006)² studying experiences of teaching Thai to foreigners found that problems and solution to foreigners' using of Thai language were: unclear consonant pronunciation, pronunciation of long vowels, unpopular use of polite final particle such as "kha" or "khrap" and the use of greeting expressions all of which teachers solved those problems by making them practice each item repeatedly and learners could imitate successfully.

Jaroungsirawat (1999)³ studied about the teaching of Thai language and culture in Australia discovered that writing Thai alphabet was a challenge for the learners, and Thai syntax was an important problem for them because of tonal diversion and word spelling with using of 44 characters and 32 vowels really had great effects on learning Thai language as well. This is similarly to Rahim and Hamzah (2009)⁴ clarified the problems in learning Thai as a foreign language was entirely because of linguistic differences in phonology, morphology and syntax. Moreover, Wei and Suthummarangsi (2010)⁵ uncovered the most challenging parts for the Taiwanese to learn Thai were the tones and the writing of the alphabet due to the learners' confusion and boredom in tonal diversion and writing of alphabet.

However, teachers' good attitude could make them have a happier learning class which the teachers applied TESOL teaching method therein; in other words, the teachers moved around the class toward each learner and observed his pronunciation, giving reinforcement and compliment, and encouraged the learner to pronounce correctly. The method of assisting them individually, teaching method and class activities selected for the learners could help them feel learning Thai was not too difficult.

This cohere with the research findings of Sureewan Satiensukhon (2009)⁶ on the teaching of Thai language to Chinese students, it was found that Chinese students would understand new

words if it started from easy ones to the more difficult ones, so they can remember the words and could relate the words to conceptual ordering of a story. In addition, the content had to be presented from a simple one to a more complicated one, and the emphasized that the Chinese students would use effective language learning strategies of watching, listening, thinking, asking questions, and reviewing at home, yet the teachers had to be calm. For correct pronunciation, there needed to be basic practices based on phonological principles: for example, to indicate the position of the tongue in the mouth before the students utter each consonant. This included the uses of various media to enhance their learning: recording the teacher's voice on CDs and watching movies. For reading and writing, Chinese students had to practice these two skills regularly, and the teachers' roles were to give suggestions and correct the mistakes. Also, Chinese students should share common mood with the lesson content, and the teachers made use of the techniques and activities viz., singing, playing games, role playing, watching movies and TV series, so friendliness and trust were built up between the teacher and students. This would make the Chinese students feel like studying Thai language.

Research Findings

Problems in writing skill

Using content analysis of Chinese students' answers to the questionnaire, findings were collected as follows:

Problems in wording

Fifteen Chinese students (100%) had problems of wording such as incorrect spelling, word choice with wrong meaning, using of pronouns to substitute the previous nouns, nouns for action, usage of conjunctions and noun classifiers. The most problem found was-

Incorrect spelling

Nine out of fifteen students (60%) had the problems of incorrect spellings- using of wrong consonants for the final positions, wrong pronunciations of the short or long vowels which caused the incorrect spellings and writing of wrong tonal marks.

Word choices with wrong meaning

Five out of fifteen students (33%) had the problems of using words with wrong meaning.

Problems in word order and message order

Fifteen students (100%) had the problems in word or message order. The errors founds were incorrect word order in sentence structure especially in long sentences modifiers were put in the wrong order, wrong use of sentence conjunctions and incorrect order of messages in a paragraph.

Problems in reading skill

Based on questionnaire data analysis and pronunciation problems during Thai class of TH 111-Thai language usage, the researcher found the following problems:

Problems in vocabulary reading

Fourteen out of fifteen students (93%) had the problems in reading the vocabulary. Problems found were: little knowledge of vocabulary, incomprehension of difficult words or lexical terminology, vocabulary for specific names. Words with initial cluster consonants or words with a leading letter pronounced with a short vowel of “a.”

Problems in reading a sentence or a longer message

Five out of fifteen (33%) had this problem. This was due to lack of understanding of vocabulary, so students did not understand the sentence meaning and it made them read slowly and did not know where to pause their reading. Also the structures of Chinese sentence differ from those of Thai language, so students became confused.

Problems in reading a passage or story content

Five out of fifteen students had the problem in reading a passage or story content. Problems found were lack of understanding of message order in a sentence, so this made them unable to understand the paragraph. While reading, students were not able to comprehend the main idea right away if the paragraph contained difficult words or profound content.

Problems in listening skill

Using casual interview data analysis and natural observations, the researcher found the following results:

Problems in listening to words of vocabulary

Nine out of fifteen (60%) had the problem. Problems found were small amount of vocabulary words, lack of difficult word meanings, and unfamiliar words all of which caused them unable to understand what they were listening to; for example, the Thai word for “background” 80-90 % of them could understand it, but 10-20 % did not.

Problems in understanding the content body and sentences

Six out of fifteen students (40%) were not able to understand the sentences and body content. Problems found were that when a Thai spoke fast, Chinese students could not catch it or could not figure it out, so they did not understand Thai speaking especially if the word was a kind of homophones or words of the same sound but the spellings and the meanings differ. This made them misunderstand.

Problems in speaking skill

Based on the informal interview data analysis of and used the natural observations, the researcher discovered the following findings:

Problems of unclear pronunciation

Thirteen out of fifteen students (86%) were not able to pronounce clearly. Problems found were problems in consonant pronunciations and the inability to pronounce the initial cluster consonants, plus the Chinese students wrongly pronounced the “r” for they pronounced the clusters with the “r” as the “l” sound. These errors were not understandable for the listeners; for example, they pronounced “*khai*” for “*kh lai*”

Problems of not having enough vocabulary

Five out of fifteen students (33%) had this problem. It was revealed that their ignorance of how to use some words which made them use the wrong words and did not know what to say, including pronunciation of words and use of words appropriate for the context.

Problem of lack of courage to speak

There were three out of fifteen students who had this kind of problem due to the fact that they thought wrong speaking was a shameful thing caused by lack of fluency and clarity in speaking.

Discussions

Based on the research result, it was uncovered that Chinese students had the most problem in writing skill because this skill emphasizes consideration, editing, and transmitting of thoughts or ideas in order to make the receivers understand the desired meanings of messages. Not only correct spelling can make the communication successful, but also word choices with appropriateness to the language level and contextual accordance. The most crucial problem for the Chinese students was the knowledge in vocabulary of Thai language which includes insufficient knowledge of Thai vocabulary, incorrect spelling, and ignorance of meaning of words, unawareness of how to use the words, and word structures that caused them misuse of vocabulary especially difficult words or unfamiliar special words. The problem related to insufficient vocabulary crucially affects foreign language learning achievement and can lead to continual learning problems to come. It is because vocabulary is the basic to learning of every language. Thus, no matter how smart the teacher is if a learner knows a small number of vocabulary words, it is hard for the learner to reach a greater achievement. For incorrect spelling that resulted in using words with wrong meanings was the problem and challenge to them as well because there are more tones patterns of tonal marks in Thai language than in the Chinese plus the combinations of 44 consonant letters and 32 vowel characters that all in all are confusing and become the writing problem in the future; and this is in accordance with the researches of Jaroungsirawat (1999)³ and Rahim and Hamzah (2009)⁴.

In addition, based on the using of natural observation techniques, it revealed that the Chinese students' vocabulary learning behaviors did not occur from a deep understanding of the vocabulary words because the students own an assisting gadget- a talking-dictionary from which they can instantly get the word meaning. Hence it became their problem in learning the vocabulary, incorrect word spelling, not knowing how to use the words correctly, the unsuitable chosen words for the language levels and the context. In the teaching and learning, the teachers should motivate their learners to memorize as many words as they could without forgetfulness and boredom of using technology and media (Sompong Wittayasakphan, 2002)⁷. After that teachers should let them expand a word to a phrase, following by grammatically correct short and long sentences respectively, so this will make it easy and enjoyable for the Chinese students to learn Thai language.

For the problems of wrong word order or message order in sentences which would cause incorrect ordering of messages in a paragraph and problems for the whole story, and it may possibly be due to differences in word ordering, grammatical structures and sentence forms of Thai and Chinese languages. As Chinese students did not understand Thai grammar, this led to incorrect word usage and wrong order of words in sentences as well (Liu Yi Yuan, 2004)⁸. Moreover, Chinese students' study of Thai language was merely the basic one, they did not have a lot of writing skill yet that could possibly cause them writing problems.

For the reading skills, it was found that there were problems in reading vocabulary words, insufficient knowledge of Thai words, ignorance of difficult words, specific words or individual person's names, words with initial clusters of letters or words with a leading letter pronounced with a short vowel of "a." words that were not pronounced as written including words of low class consonant with a tone mark over it. All of these may come from the fact that most of the Chinese students started to learn Thai language in Thailand and spent least time of study, and maybe they had studied Thai language with Chinese teachers/professors, so students did not know about Thai grammar which is different from Chinese grammar in terms of phonology, vocabulary and syntax, and in accordance with the study conducted by Rahim and Hamzah (2009)⁴. For this problem, using the method of natural observation, it was found that most of the Chinese students generally spent their time among their group members which caused them mispronunciation of Thai words, also their reading aloud was not developed properly.

For the speaking and listening skills, the researchers discovered that Chinese students did not use Thai language in their daily life, so this made them unable to speak or pronounce, and they were also embarrassed to speak up for fear of unclear speaking. When they did not have a chance to practice often, they could not fluently speak Thai. Thus, Chinese students have to create challenges in using Thai language by practicing of tonal diversion and practice writing Thai words with Thai alphabet as proposed by Wei and Suthummarangsi (2010)⁵ stated that foreign students who are capable of using Thai language must be "automatically use it" or processed and efficiently expressed in Thai.

Conclusions

Based on the research findings, it was found that outstanding problem which all of the Chinese students (100%) confronted was in the writing skill. This included word choices, wrong spelling of words, use of words with wrong meaning, and wrong order of words or messages in sentences. For the reading skill, fourteen out of fifteen students (93%) and their problems included reading of vocabulary and incomprehensible of order of messages in sentences. For speaking skill, thirteen out of fifteen students (86%) faced this problem especially problem in clear pronunciation/speaking, and they also lacked knowledge of vocabulary in Thai language. The skill that the Chinese students had the least problem was listening skill; that is, there were nine out of fifteen students (60%) encountered this due to the insufficient vocabulary and incomprehension of difficult words used in the text.

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