



# วารสาร นาคบุตรปริทรรศน์ Nakhabut Paritat Journal

ISSN 3027-7779 (Online)

ปีที่ 17 ฉบับที่ 2 พฤษภาคม - สิงหาคม 2568 Vol. 17 No. 2 May - August 2025

สถาบันวิจัยและพัฒนา มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏนครศรีธรรมราช 1 หมู่ 4 ต.ท่าจิว อ.เมือง จ.นครศรีธรรมราช 80280  
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Received: September 6, 2024

Revised: April 18, 2025

Accepted: August 1, 2025

## Perception of Common Challenges of Learning Thai as a Foreign Language of Master's Degree Chinese Students at a Thai Private University

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## Abstract

This study aimed to 1) identify the common challenges Chinese students encounter when learning Thai as a foreign language and 2) explore how students can overcome these challenges. A mixed methods approach was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data using a questionnaire and structured interview. Choose a Thai private university as a case to study. A total of 56 master's students from the school participated in the questionnaire survey, and 10 volunteers with more than two years of Thai learning experience were interviewed. The results from the quantitative research showed that the challenges students encountered when learning Thai as a foreign language were the challenges of vocabulary and expressions, the challenges of grammar structure, the challenges of pronunciation and phonetics, the challenges of cultural background and language environment, and the challenges of listening and reading comprehension. In addition, the findings from the qualitative research showed that students could increase their Thai vocabulary and overcome vocabulary challenges by making word cards, watching Thai movies and TV series, choosing topics of interest, and reading Thai books, newspapers, and magazines. Also, students could overcome their challenges in pronunciation, grammar, and other areas by increasing their grammar knowledge, learning Thai culture, and following podcasts and audio materials.

**Keywords:** Thai language learning; Chinese student; Foreign Language Learning

## Introduction

With the rise of China's economy and the continuous advancement of its internationalization process, the number of Chinese students studying abroad has increased day by day (Miao & Wang, 2017). As an emerging study abroad destination that attracts international students, Thailand has become an international education exchange platform that has received widespread attention at the beginning of this century. Thailand is one of the most popular study abroad destinations for Chinese students, attracting a large number of students to study abroad (Liu, Kamnuansilpa & Hirofumi, 2018). However, once international students set foot on Thai soil, they face a major and complex challenge: learning Thai in Thailand. Learning Thai in Thailand for Chinese students is a comprehensive issue involving language, culture, society, and academics (Guo, Shin & Shen, 2020).

First, language differences are one of the main challenges for Chinese students learning Thai (Xu, Zhang, Sukjairungwattana & Wang, 2022). Thai and Chinese belong to completely different language systems, including huge differences in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. For example, the Thai Language uses alphabet spelling, while the Chinese Language uses Chinese characters, which is a completely new challenge for Chinese students (Ramsey, 1987). In addition, the grammatical structure of the Thai Language is different from that of Chinese, such as the word order of sentences, changes in nouns, which requires students to spend more time and energy to adapt and master.

Secondly, cultural differences also bring challenges to Chinese students learning Thai (Teng & Bui, 2020). Thailand has a unique and rich cultural tradition, including religion, etiquette, dietary



habits, etc., which are obviously different from Chinese culture. While learning Thai, Chinese students also need to understand and adapt to the Thai cultural background in order to better integrate into the local living and learning environment (Chaiyasat, 2020). For example, in Thailand, respecting elders and maintaining humility are very important values, which are similar to Chinese cultural traditions, but have subtle differences that require Chinese students to adjust and understand.

Chinese students are increasingly valued for learning Thai, especially in a country as culturally and linguistically diverse as Thailand. In the process of learning Thai in Thailand, Chinese students face a series of challenges related to oral expression, which not only affects their academic performance but also has a profound impact on their integration into Thai society (Draper, 2019). However, a series of problems has often emerged during this learning process, including language difficulties, cultural differences, and social barriers (Gong, et al, 2021). These problems are believed to directly affect students' academic performance and ability to integrate into the local society. This paper aims to deeply analyze the difficulties and challenges faced by Chinese students learning Thai in Thailand and propose effective solutions.

### Research Objectives

1. To explore the challenges of Chinese students encounter when learning Thai as a foreign
2. To explore Chinese students' suggestions about how they can overcome challenges in learning the Thai Language.

### Research Questions

1. What challenges do Chinese students encounter when learning Thai as a foreign language ?
2. What are Chinese students' suggestions about how they can overcome challenges in learning Thai ?

### Research Methodology

This study was a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. Questionnaires are quantitative research tools, and structured interviews are qualitative research tools. Questionnaires and structured interviews were written by the researcher after reading a lot of literature related to second language learning.

#### Population and Sample

1. According to Taro Yamane's formula, 56 master's degree students enrolled in a Thai Language as a second language communication program were calculated as the sample size for this questionnaire survey.
2. The researchers selected 10 volunteers with more than two years of Thai learning experience through purposive sampling and conducted structured interviews.



## Research Instruments

1. Quantitative research instrument including 48 questions and divided into 6 parts. After the IOC experts, a total of 48 questionnaire questions will be distributed to participants. 1) The student's basic personal information. 2) The Challenges of Vocabulary and Expressions encountered by Chinese students when they learn to speak Thai. 3) The Challenges of Grammar Structure encountered by Chinese students when they learn to speak Thai. 4) The Challenges of Pronunciation and Phonetics encountered by Chinese students when they learn to speak Thai. 5) The Challenges of Cultural Background and Language Environment when Chinese students learning speaking Thai. 6) The Challenges of Listening and Reading Comprehension when Chinese students learning Thai. The questionnaire items were scored using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Respondents participated voluntarily and anonymously. The questionnaire and interview questions were evaluated by three Thai professors for the item-goal consistency index (IOC).

2. The qualitative research instrument consisted of seven structured interview questions.

### Data Collection

1. Questionnaire data will be collected through a web application, and the questionnaire has a total of 48 questions. The questionnaire was completed within 20 minutes, and all participants participated in it, a total of 56 people.

2. In order to obtain more intuitive information and enhance the authenticity of the data, the researcher adopted a sampling method to select 10 volunteers with more than two years of Thai learning experience for a 20-30-minute face-to-face structured interview. After the interview, the researcher organized the information provided by the interviewees and conducted data analysis.

### Data Analysis

This study used quantitative data analysis and qualitative data analysis. The data from quantitative research was analyzed by using SPSS 29.0 (Statistical Product and Service Solutions) for calculating of mean, variance, and standard deviation to analyze the data. In addition, the researcher also used content analysis as an analysis method for structured interview data.

## Research Results and Findings

This study aimed to investigate the common challenges encountered by 56 master's degree Chinese students in learning Thai as a foreign language in a cross-cultural context at a Thai Private University. using a questionnaire survey.

This study was based on two research questions:

1. What challenges do Chinese students encounter when learning Thai as a foreign language?
2. What are Chinese students' suggestions about how they can overcome challenges in learning Thai ?



## Responses to Research Question 1

What challenges do Chinese students encounter when learning Thai as a foreign language?

Through the data analysis of the questionnaire on common challenges encountered by Chinese students when learning Thai as a foreign language, it was found that the challenges encountered by Chinese students can be divided into five parts: challenges in vocabulary and expression, challenges in grammatical structure, challenges in pronunciation and phonetics, challenges in cultural background and language environment, and challenges in listening and reading comprehension. This result is in line with the study of (Poomcharean & Vijaya, 2020).

## Responses to Research Question 2

What are Chinese students' suggestions about how they can overcome challenges in learning Thai ?

In research question 2, based on the data analysis of structured interviews and some questionnaire results, the results show that Chinese students encounter many challenges when learning Thai as a foreign language, and some respondents also gave suggestions to overcome these challenges.

1) Suggestions for overcoming grammar and pronunciation difficulties - Some respondents said that learners can systematically learn the basics of Thai grammar by taking Thai courses or online courses, and doing grammar exercises regularly. They can also write short essays or diaries, try to use different grammatical structures, buy or download Thai pronunciation teaching materials and audio, and follow and imitate their pronunciation. Use online pronunciation dictionaries and pronunciation videos to learn standard pronunciation, practice reading aloud every day, and improve pronunciation accuracy and fluency. And communicate with native Thai speakers to overcome grammar and pronunciation difficulties.

2) Suggestions for practicing Thai and increasing Thai vocabulary - Some respondents said that learners can make or buy Thai vocabulary cards, memorize a few new words every day, and review them regularly, as well as supplement their vocabulary through learning applications and joining social groups, or choose a topic that you are interested in, read Thai books, newspapers and magazines, increasing the fun of reading, and expand their vocabulary knowledge.

3) Suggestions for overcoming challenges in cultural background and language environment - Some respondents said that learners can enhance their understanding of Thai culture by reading books and articles about Thai history, culture and customs. Watch Thai documentaries, variety shows, traditional performances, etc. to experience Thai culture firsthand. Learn common polite expressions and expressions in Thai, such as "thank you" and "sorry", and master their usage in different occasions. Understand Thai social etiquette and behavioral norms, such as how to put your hands together and how to respect elders, to avoid cultural misunderstandings.

According to the mean and variance analysis of the results, the challenges in vocabulary and expression, challenges in grammatical structure, challenges in pronunciation and phonetics, challenges in cultural background and language environment, and challenges in listening and reading comprehension are the most prominent ones as shown in Tables 1.



**Table 1: Results of Common Challenges**

challenges	Items	$\bar{X}$	SD	Interpretation
Challenges of Vocabulary and Expressions	8. I think is difficult to understand the homonyms that appear in Thai.	4.50	.739	Strongly Agree
Challenges of Listening and Reading Comprehension	43. Native Thai speakers may speak at a faster speed during oral communication, which may cause difficulty in listening comprehension for beginners.	4.38	.706	Agree
Challenges of Cultural Background and Language Environment	40. I think cultural differences have a great impact on Thai expressions.	4.23	.809	Agree
Challenges of Grammar Structure	17. I think the grammatical structure of Thai poses a challenge to my language expression ability.	3.49	.991	Moderate
Challenges of Pronunciation and Phonetics	33. I can distinguish between tongue and throat sounds very well, such as ร, ล, ฬ, อ.	3.43	1.158	Moderate

The highest mean score was found in the questionnaire item "I am very satisfied with the vocabulary I have mastered so far" for the vocabulary and expression challenges. This indicates that Thai vocabulary plays a vital role in common challenges encountered when learning Thai as a foreign language.

In the questionnaire of listening and reading comprehension challenges, the item with the highest mean score is "Native Thai speakers may speak at a faster speed during oral communication, which may cause difficulties for beginners' listening comprehension." This shows that when learners learn Thai as a foreign language, they can only start with simple and slow communication. If they encounter native speakers who speak very fast, learners will not be able to understand.

In the questionnaire of cultural background and language environment challenges, the item with the highest mean score is "I think cultural differences have a great impact on Thai expression." This shows that when non-native Thai speakers learn Thai as a foreign language, if they do not understand the environmental background and cultural differences of the language, they will have certain misunderstandings when learning.

The highest mean score was found in the questionnaire item "I could not express myself accurately before because I was not familiar with the grammatical rules of Thai." This indicates that



among the common challenges encountered when learning Thai as a foreign language, the grammatical structure of Thai can cause some trouble for learners.

The highest mean scores were found in the questionnaire item "I think the Thai tone system has a great influence on my pronunciation" and "I find Thai intonation (the rise and fall at the end of a sentence) difficult" for the pronunciation and phonetic challenges. This indicates that among the common challenges encountered when learning Thai as a foreign language, the pronunciation of Thai tones and consonants is very difficult for learners.

## Discussion

According to the research objectives, the most common challenges Chinese students encounter when learning Thai are vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and expression. This section will discuss the following:

### 1. Discussion on homophones in vocabulary

Chinese students think that vocabulary is difficult to understand when learning a foreign language. According to the analysis results of vocabulary and expression challenges, Chinese students have one item in this challenge that many respondents agree with, and this item has the highest average score in this analysis. This item is "I think it is difficult to understand homophones that appear in Thai."

There are many words in Thai that have the same or similar pronunciations but completely different meanings (Chanyoo, 1998) This situation may confuse confusion to learners in the process of listening, speaking, reading. and writing. For example, in Thai, "ขาว" (khao) and "ข่าว" (khao) have similar pronunciations, but the former means "white" and the latter means "news". Many homophones in Thai have specific meanings in specific contexts (Schmitt & Meara 1997). Chinese students need to learn to understand and distinguish these homophones according to the context. For example, "ไป" can mean "go", but its specific meaning and usage will be different in different sentences. This requires students to not only learn the language but also understand the culture and lifestyle of Thailand. For Chinese students, distinguishing these words requires a lot of practice and contextual understanding. Due to the existence of homophones, learners need to master the specific context and usage of vocabulary while memorizing it. It is difficult to achieve this goal by simply reciting a vocabulary list, and a lot of reading and listening practice is needed to enhance the sense of language.

### 2. Discussion on grammar

Chinese students think that grammar is difficult when learning a language. According to the analysis results of the grammatical structure challenge, Chinese students have one item in this challenge that the respondents think is moderate, and this item has the lowest score in this analysis result, that is, "I think the grammatical structure of Thai poses a challenge to my language expression ability." The basic word order of Thai is subject-verb-object (SVO), which is similar to the word order of Chinese. However, in some cases, the word order of Thai changes due to factors such as emphasis and questions.



There are many particles in Thai, which are used to indicate tense, mood, honorifics, etc. (Hudak, 2018). Common particles are "จะ" (indicating future tense), "กำลัง" (indicating ongoing), and "แล้ว" (indicating completion). When Chinese students learn Thai, they use particles improperly, resulting in unclear sentences or misunderstandings. For example, Chinese does not use particles to indicate tense, which requires Chinese students to pay special attention when expressing tense in Thai (Jirapas, 2019) showed the Thai negation structure is more complex, and the negation word is usually placed before the verb, such as "ไม่" (not). In addition, Thai has a variety of negation forms, which are used in different contexts and tones, which are different from the negation form of Chinese, and learners are easily confused when using it.

The structure of Thai interrogative sentences is different from that of Chinese, and the interrogative word is usually placed at the end of the sentence. For example, the Thai expression of "Where are you going?" is "คุณไปไหน?" (Where are you going), and the interrogative word "ไหน" (where) is placed at the end of the sentence. Chinese students need to master how to use these conjunctions correctly to express complex meanings, such as "และ" (and), "แต่" (but), "เพราะว่า" (because), etc. This is similar to the findings of (Xu et al, 2022).

### 3. Discussion on Thai pronunciation and expression

Chinese students think that pronunciation is difficult when learning a language. According to the analysis results of the grammatical structure challenge, Chinese students have more respondents in this challenge, and this item has the lowest score in this analysis, that is, "I think I can distinguish tongue and throat sounds well, such as ร, ล, ห, อ"

Chinese students may find it difficult to learn Thai because there is no completely corresponding sound in Chinese. Tongue sounds are sounds made with the tongue, such as ร(r) and ล(l). When making sounds, the position and movement of the tongue play a key role in the formation of sounds. Glottal sounds are sounds produced by the throat, such as ห(h) and อ(o). When making sounds, the vibration and shape changes of the vocal cords and larynx determine the formation of the sound. For example, there is no sound in Chinese that is exactly the same as the Thai ร, so special practice is needed to vibrate the tip of the tongue. Although Chinese students think they can distinguish between tongue sounds and glottal sounds, they still confuse them in actual pronunciation. For example, ร is pronounced as ล and ห is pronounced as อ. This is similar to the findings of (Poomcharean & Vijaya, 2020). They also found in their research on Chinese students that Chinese students' consonant pronunciation is unclear, and vowel pronunciation is too long.

### Suggestions for Future Research

This study investigated the common challenges encountered by Chinese students learning Thai as a foreign language at a private university in Thailand, and further research is needed with other nationalities and universities. In addition, the relationship between the common challenges encountered when learning Thai in English and factors such as nationality, learning style, and learning machines also needs further research.



## Research Limitations

This study is limited to the common challenges encountered by Chinese students learning Thai as a second language in terms of vocabulary and expression, grammatical structure, pronunciation and phonetics, cultural background and language environment, and listening and reading comprehension. Future research can focus on other aspects, such as the common challenges encountered by studying with Thai students who are learning Thai as a foreign language in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to all those who helped me complete my research and thesis writing. First, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Assistant Professor Dr. Anchalee Chayanuvat, who has been patiently accompanying me, constantly encouraging me, giving me inspiration, and meaningful advice. Second, I would like to thank my friends who accompanied me through the difficult moments in the thesis. In addition, I would like to thank my dear family. Behind my growth are the expectations and love of my parents. Finally, thank you to all those who directly or indirectly supported me in completing my thesis. Thank you!

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