

Thai Reader Project Introduction

The authors have attempted to create effective lessons in the reading of Thai that will help learners progress from the level of basic literacy to reading at the advanced level. The lessons are based on authentic readings of the sort that learners of Thai will encounter in daily life in Thailand, ranging from basic informational texts such as menus, time tables, newspaper advertisements, and the like, to more complex texts such as news articles, editorials and short narratives.

Basing lessons on readings of this type is a departure from extant Thai texts, which were developed at a time when the aural-oral approach dominated language teaching. That view of language learning encouraged the use of a single textbook in which each lesson was designed to train the learner in all the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Lessons were structured around a dialogue or a reading that was generally written in simplified language and focused on what the text authors imagined would be the experiences of one newly arrived in Thailand. The lessons were convenient for classroom use but the material was not necessarily applicable to real-life needs. Instruction tended to focus on speaking and listening, with much less emphasis on reading. A significant shortcoming of this approach is that learners are not introduced to the sorts of reading that they will encounter in the real world. They face a difficult transition when they attempt to move from classroom readings to authentic materials.

The use of such lessons over many years, and recent research into second language acquisition have called into doubt many of the assumptions of the aural-oral approach and suggest strongly that relying a single text with lessons intended to cover all four skills is not an effective approach. What is most significant for the present text is the fact that research demonstrates that reading is best learned through work not with highly simplified texts created specifically for foreign learners, but with authentic texts created by and for native speakers of the language. The authors are convinced that working with authentic readings will better prepare learners to deal with both daily life, and also with complex academic, literary, or research texts, when they are ready to do so.

We have produced 76 lessons, each one based on an authentic reading of the sort that learners will likely encounter in daily life in Thailand. We have divided the lessons into two major sections that we have labeled Volume I, which is intended for novice to intermediate-high readers, and Volume II, which is intended for intermediate-high to advanced readers. We have assumed basic literacy on the part of the learner. The lessons in Volume I will thus be most useful for a second-year class, and the lessons in Volume II will be most useful for a third-year class. We do not expect that any class will use all of the lessons, and encourage instructors to pick and choose among the lessons that we have developed to find those that are likely to be of most interest to the individual class.

For those who have not yet mastered the Thai written system we recommend the text and workbook developed by J. Marvin Brown at the AUA Language Center in Bangkok. The US vendor for these books is Cornell University Southeast Asia Center Publications. They are currently listed on the Cornell web site as AUA Language Center Thai Course: Reading Workbook and AUA Language



Center Thai Course: Writing Workbook. Study of the first 30 or so lessons will give the learner a good conceptual view and practical mastery of the Thai written system, and provide the tools necessary to begin working with authentic Thai readings.

It is important for both teacher and learner to remember that what we have produced is a reading text. It is intended primarily to develop text interpretation skills, and is not intended to be the primary vehicle by which learners will also increase vocabulary and structural mastery. Consequently, these lessons must be used in conjunction with activities focused on speaking and listening skills if well-rounded mastery of Thai is to be achieved. It is important also to repeat that these lessons are a departure from the approach that is found in most Thai textbooks, in which all the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, are addressed, however effectively, in a single lesson.

Reading selections

In choosing readings for development into lessons we have taken into account three major factors:

- a.) **Appropriateness for class use.** We have endeavored to find readings that have subject matter of interest to the learner, are challenging enough to facilitate skill development, and have content that is appropriate for learning exercises.
- b.) **Length.** We have chosen readings that seem to us to be of appropriate length for classroom use. We have tried to avoid readings that would require long periods of time to work through, or that would require extensive dictionary work. Instead we have attempted to present readings that increase in complexity as the learner's skills develop, and so can be read in a relatively short time.
- c.) **Student suggestions.** We have been guided by the suggestions of the students in our Thai classes, both during the academic year and during the summer SEASSI sessions. It is our hope that focusing on topics of interest to the students will allow the readings to be of interest for a longer period of time than would otherwise be the case.

It has proven especially difficult to find readings that are appropriate for the early lessons. The requirements of good written presentation in Thai call for a level of formality that is well beyond normal spoken register, and is thus removed from the experience of most students of the language. We have done our best to provide sufficient readings for the beginning learner and hope we have succeeded.

Using the lessons

Each of these lessons is based on an authentic reading, created for real world use by native speakers of Thai. Our intention is that the learners will master the structures and vocabulary of these readings by repeated encounters with what are standard items normally found in Thai writing. The lessons are designed to facilitate the transfer of first language reading skills to the study of Thai reading. These skills include:



- a.) The ability to anticipate and predict the vocabulary, structures and content of a text based on global cues such as the title of the reading, accompanying illustrations, the visual layout of the reading, and so on;
- b.) The ability to skim a reading for global understanding and to identify main ideas and the ability to scan a reading to find more specific details. In this type of work the learner must develop a tolerance for unknown words, and master unfamiliar word boundary cues;
- c.) The ability to apply background knowledge to the text;
- d.) The ability to draw inferences of meaning both at the global level and also at the level of individual lexical items.

The move to this style of reading instruction is likely to be initially frustrating to learners who are not accustomed to it as part of the foreign language curriculum. But we have found that with patience learners do become accustomed to this type of work, and make good progress with it. Exercises to develop these skills are not normally found in Thai language lessons, designed as they were at a time when it was felt that students should never be asked to deal with unknown vocabulary words, or be allowed to approach texts that contain unfamiliar syntactic patterns. But experience has shown that learners of a foreign language will have to deal with such situations when they attempt real-world reading, and practicing these skills with a qualified instructor is extremely helpful.

Teaching activities

The activities created for each reading attempt to move the learner from the global to the specific, from a general focus on a given topic to the level of detail. Each lesson follows a general plan that includes a pre-reading activity, during-reading activities, and post-reading activities. Given below are some details of what is found in each lesson:

- 1.) **Pre-reading activities.** Prior to working with a given reading the learners are asked to predict the content of the reading based on its title, on accompanying pictures or other illustrations, or on verbal cues provided by the instructor. This activity is very challenging in the beginning; learners are aware that it requires the ability to conceive of the topic of the reading in Thai, a skill that they have not yet developed. But the ability to predict is essential to effective reading, to moving beyond the stage of deciphering in a letter-by-letter fashion to looking at the reading in a holistic manner.
- 2.) **During-reading activities:**
 - a.) **Skimming.** As the learners engage the reading they are asked to find the main idea contained in it, to look for a global understanding. The learner is thus asked to move as quickly as possible beyond the pattern of looking from the most detailed perspective, that of the individual word, or even the individual letter, to a larger perspective. Learners in the college setting are generally familiar with doing so in English but need help in learning to do so with the unfamiliar script and structures of Thai texts.



- b.) **Scanning.** Once the main idea is determined, the learner is asked to look for specific details, to see the parts of the text within the whole. Scanning requires that the learners move quickly through the text, again not deciphering but working to determine what is relevant to the particular task at hand.
- c.) **Verifying predictions.** These exercises are intended as comprehension checks, and the learners are asked, for example, to compare and contrast their expectations with the actual content of the text. Exercises include:
 - i. Restatement of the main idea
 - ii. Fill in the blanks
 - iii. Matching
 - iv. True or False questions
 - v. Multiple choice questions
 - vi. Short answer questions, and so on.
- d.) **Post-reading activities:** The final portion of each lesson calls for the learners to expand their skills by employing newly acquired knowledge in a new context, sometimes in speaking sometimes in writing. The reinforcement of the points learned in the reading can be done in class or as homework.

The authors thank you for your interest in our work and hope that the lessons we have created will be of use to all who are interested in studying Thai. We have chosen to make our work available without charge for your non-commercial use. We ask that no changes be made to the lessons, and that proper credit be given if the need arises to refer to them. We also ask that the user not distribute the lessons to others, but instead refer all interested parties to the web site and ask that they download the lessons directly. We ask this so that we can have a measure of the interest in our work. Finally, an answer key is available; teachers who wish to have a copy may request one through the email address given below.

These materials were developed with funding provided by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Title VI International Research and Studies Program. We gratefully acknowledge this support, without which our work would not have been possible.

Web access has been made possible by support from the UW Madison International Institute, (<http://www.intl-institute.wisc.edu>) and by SEALang Projects (<http://www.sealang.net>), under the direction of Mr. Doug Cooper. We gratefully acknowledge this support, as well. It is due to the funding we received from DOE and the assistance from the UW International Institute and from SEALang that we are able to make these lessons available at no cost.

Comments are welcome and can be directed to the project Principal Investigator:

Prof. Robert J. Bickner

Department of Languages and Cultures of Asia
University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI USA
rbickner@wisc.edu



Robert J. Bickner
Madison, Wisconsin
February 2010

