# LEARNING THAI DURING A FIVE-MONTH STAY IN THAILAND: A DIARY STUDY

## Richard S. Lavin

**ABSTRACT**

This paper provides a first-person account of a language-learning experience, using the author/learner's diary entries as primary data. The paper takes the form of a narrative account followed by a thematic account, during which the author's experiences are linked to relevant literature. It is hoped that the paper will make a contribution to understanding middle-aged (and later) language learning.

## 1. Introduction

This paper is an account of the author's recent experience living in Thailand for a little over five months during which time he attempted to learn the Thai language. It is inspired by, and imitates some aspects of, the pioneering work of Schmidt and Frota (1996), in which Schmidt's attempts to learn Portuguese are detailed.

The account takes the form of a diary-based case study. Flyvbjerg (2006) points to the importance of case studies for developing a "nuanced view of reality" (p. 5), where we can see situations and experiences not as bundles of disembodied phenomena but as embedded in the contexts in which they occur. Fielding and Warnes (2009) argue that "the in-depth investigation of single cases can contribute to the intellectual project of generalization by revealing relationships and processes" and mitigating against "spurious explanation in terms of simple association" (p. 273).

Ragin (2009) suggests that "casing" is actually a fairly routine research act and that, while "[e]mpirical evidence is infinite in its complexity, specificity, and contextuality", casing "focuses attention on specific aspects of that infinity, highlighting some aspects as relevant and obscuring others" (p. 523).

The term "contribute to" in the above quotation from Fielding and Warnes (2009) is worth emphasizing: no claim is made that this study in and by itself will

allow generalization as to how adults learn additional languages. It is suggested, however, that studies of this kind can give a valuable window into the thought processes and experiences of individuals; and, further, that viewing multiple case studies may give insights into important commonalities and differences between learners and situations.

Reflexivity and subjectivity are central to this first-hand account of additional language learning within the target culture. Bott (2010) discusses "the need for researchers to remain in 'flexible' dialogue with their research subjects and contexts, in order to preserve a sense of the researcher's own subjectivity within the process— and therefore avoid the tendency to become 'absent' from or 'above' our research contexts" (p. 159). Thus, in this article I make no claim to objectivity, but instead embrace my own unique identity as a researcher and as the experiencer of the experiences related herein and the unique perspective those experiences afford me. I also will avoid henceforth referring to myself as "the researcher" or "the author", since that would tend to reintroduce via the back door a view of myself as an objective observer of these experiences.

To assist the reader in contextualising the observations contained in this article, in the next section I offer a personal language learning history. I hope readers will forgive the length of this, since it contains various episodes that to some extent anticipate what follows in the remainder of the paper. It also omits a few key episodes, since these were not at the forefront of my mind before I had spent some time in Thailand. The reasons for this will become clear later.

I should also mention here that the body of the study will not be preceded by a literature review. Instead, in order better to relate the account to the literature, references will be positioned between the relevant sections of my account. The remainder of the paper is structured thus: After a personal language learning history, I offer a narrative account of my stay in Thailand (including pre-departure and post-return stages), followed by a thematic account that summarizes the challenges I encountered, the actions I took, and the lessons I learned.

## 2. Personal language learning history

Like most UK residents at the time when I was growing up, my first foreign language was French. I was fortunate that my primary school offered French in the final year just as I entered that year. That experience still affords me a vivid memory: after the first lesson, in which we had learnt the greeting "Bonjour", I happened

to meet the French teacher in the street on the way home. Greeting her with the "Bonjour" we had just learnt, I received extravagant praise from her, assuring me that I had a great talent for languages and would certainly experience great success in the future. I consider that a formative experience in my language learning career. Subsequent theoretical developments also afford the opportunity to interpret the event in terms of the importance of "output" or "interaction".

In secondary school, I studied French along with all the other pupils, and I consider that the year of French study in primary school helped me to make good progress. From the fourth year of secondary school, we were given a certain amount of choice in the subjects we would study to "O Level", the national exams given at the age of 16. I chose all the foreign language subjects, which were French, German, and Latin, the last two to be studied from beginner level. During these years, I had the opportunity to experience homestays in France and in Germany, and developed considerable confidence in speaking both languages and in reading French. (Latin was naturally a more academic pursuit; my chief memory thereof is of learning the concept of grammatical case.) In the two years to "A Level" (the national exams offered at 18 that determine prospects for entering university), I continued my study of French and German and determined to pursue a language-related course of study at university.

At university, I opted for a double major of linguistics and Chinese studies with a minor in French studies. One of the highlights of the course was learning a non-European writing system. We were supposed to learn 5,000 Chinese characters before graduation, and difficulties keeping up in the first year ingrained in me an appreciation for time spent in memorization. The course also required spending the second year studying at a university in China, sharing a room in a dormitory with a Chinese student. To prepare us for that year in China, we were given a fairly intensive program of speaking classes. I found that those classes, combined with chances to interact with Chinese students living nearby, enabled me to become reasonably fluent before my departure for China.

In China, we had formal language classes as well as ample time to interact with local people, and I found that I was able to progress steadily. I also had the opportunity to visit Guangdong several times and managed to learn conversational Cantonese there. Hong Kong pop songs and Cantonese opera, with the lyrics written in Chinese characters, were a great help since they exposed me to the Cantonese phonological system linked to a writing system with which I was already familiar.

On my return to the UK, I was able to focus more on my reading skills.

I also had the opportunity to work through some audiolingual materials in the university's new language laboratory. A few years later, I had the opportunity to work as a research assistant in a comparative phonology project, in which my area of responsibility was Asian languages, including the Chinese languages and Japanese. The addition of Japanese to my research area led to my moving to Japan in an attempt to master Japanese. My plans to return to the UK after a year—and then after two years—were abandoned and I have lived in Japan ever since.

Currently, I can converse in Japanese without much difficulty, and can take an active part in work-based or academic discussions. I can read most modern Japanese materials, though more slowly than native speakers. Writing is a comparatively weak area, with more formal genres such as reports and academic papers still presenting many problems.

Finally, I shall list two episodes in my Japanese language learning history to which I accord great significance:

After approximately one year, I made a habit of watching a specific TV drama at the same time each week. My impression was that I understood almost nothing the first couple of weeks, but that from about the third week I found I was catching many phrases and by the end of the 12-week season I understood around 70 or 80 percent, enough to find genuine enjoyment in the content of the drama.

After approximately five years, I had the chance to study at a Japanese language school full-time for three months. During this time, I was introduced to a number of modern authors and started reading novels. Reading the first novel, the first fifth or so was a slog with very limited comprehension, but, reading for an hour or so each day and taking care not to stop to reread pages or to look up words in a dictionary, my comprehension appeared to increase along with reading speed quite dramatically, and by the end of the book I was genuinely enjoying the experience.

## 3. Narrative account of my stay in Thailand

This section offers an account of my stay in Thailand, dividing it into two stages plus the pre-departure and post-return stages.

### 3.1. Pre-departure

My visit to Thailand was for a sabbatical, during which I planned to conduct a study of Thai learners' problems with English writing. Plans fell into place only

a few weeks before departure, and those weeks were largely filled with practical preparations as well as tidying up loose ends at work, so only very limited time was available for learning Thai prior to departure. During this time, a search of Internet forums and Amazon reviews revealed the most popular course in elementary Thai, and I purchased this along with another course. The first consisted of a textbook with accompanying CDs, and the second a set of CDs with no book. I copied the CDs to my computer and also to my iPad. I spent a few hours studying with them. I also purchased a bilingual (English–Thai–English) dictionary for my iPad.

**Journal entry, Week -2**

My main textbook is *Thai for Beginners*, by Benjawan Poomsan Becker. I had a bit of a shock studying Lesson 1: there's a section on counting, which is fair enough, but I was surprised to see it goes up to 1 million and beyond and also includes "point" and "to the power of". I also had a problem with one of the turns in one of the dialogues: it was of the form "My name is _____. Nice to meet you," which seems simple enough, but it's spoken at apparently normal speed with no pause before "Nice to meet you." I listened at least 10 times but was still unable to repeat it properly.

A couple of days later, the second set of course materials arrived. This was *Pimsleur Conversational Thai*. The Pimsleur materials are based on the idea that language is best learned through aural input, imitation, and controlled output.

**Journal entry, Week -2**

I'm not quite sure what to make of the Pimsleur materials. Sometimes I like the slow, methodical nature. It's certainly nice to get chances to repeat single words and very short sequences. But the long instructions and setups made me lose concentration once or twice. And I feel I could really benefit from having the materials in written form.

In due course, I left for Thailand knowing some greetings and just a few words, including some colors and numbers, and having done some pronunciation practice. I had also picked up the fact that adjectives came after nouns. In this respect, it is similar to French, so that aspect did not cause me any particular difficulties.

### 3.2. In Thailand: Stage 1

My stay in Thailand was approximately five and a half months in duration. The stay was punctuated by a visit from my family and a touring holiday after approximately three months, and I perceive the preceding and following periods as different in character, and therefore have designated them stages 1 and 2.

After arriving in Thailand, where I had the nominal position of visiting professor at a university in Bangkok, I started work right away. Much of my time was devoted to my own research project (unrelated to this personal project of learning Thai), and much of the rest to teaching English for academic purposes to individual students or small groups. I stayed at a hotel for the first ten days and then found an apartment, where I lived alone for the remainder of my stay. I was able to find some time a few days a week to do some Thai study in my office and most days to do a little study in the evening as well. I had no formal instruction during this time: I was confident in my ability to learn by myself, and I was unsure in any case where to look for a teacher and also whether I could afford the time for regular lessons. I purchased some additional learning materials during this time, which I shall describe later.

Having been met at the airport by a fluent English-speaking professor and eating on the first day at a restaurant where the staff also spoke fluent English, I had my first occasion for interaction in Thai on the second day.

> **Journal entry, Week 1**
>
> 2nd day in Thailand. The waitress at the place where I had dinner last night spoke fluent English, so tonight I tried one of the small eating places at the roadside (where I assumed English speakers would be less likely). I had papaya salad, which sounded like "song dum". Checking in my dictionary, I see that papaya is má~lá~gɔɔ, but I couldn't find "papaya salad". An Internet search threw up "Som Tam". I'll have to try to remember that in order to avoid it, as it was so hot as to almost be inedible. Or I could try the phrase "Mai pet" (I think), meaning "not spicy". At least I managed to order and pay without using English.

At work, all the academics I interacted with could speak fluent English. Students' English level varied, but one of their purposes in interacting with me was to practice or seek advice in English, so there was no occasion to use Thai with

them. The only people at the university with whom I had a realistic chance to use Thai were the dean's secretaries, whose English was very limited, and they had been instructed by the dean to make use of my presence to improve their English. Outside the university, bus conductors and apartment managers were the obvious possibilities.

It soon became clear that I was in danger of falling into something of a vicious cycle, with a basic lack of knowledge restricting the things I could say or understand, and thus feeling less motivated or ready to create or leverage opportunities for interaction.

One major problem was the difficulty of Thai phonology.

> **Journal entry, Week 2**
> The sound system of Thai is pretty opaque to me. There are a lot of possible syllables, the tones are really difficult, and the vowels are also really difficult. I'm finding it hard to keep sequences of even two or three syllables in my short-term memory for long enough to be able to transcribe them to learn later.

In such cases, of course, it is natural for literate users to rely on written input. But that was also somewhat problematic.

> **Journal entry, Week 4**
> It seems that every textbook has its own transliteration system. Thai people don't seem to have any clear idea of how to transliterate Thai words. I even noticed the other night that two road signs about 100 meters apart had the road where I live written in two different ways.

The *Thai for Beginners* textbook contained quite strongly worded advice to begin learning the Thai script right away. I was also feeling the need to do so, since I was beginning to feel that my inability to read menus, notices, and the like was reducing the amount of comprehensible input I was exposed to. But that also was not an easy matter.

> **Journal entry, Week 5**
> The Thai script is really hard. I'm unable to link it to Chinese characters or western alphabets or pictures, despite the efforts of the textbook writers.

I remember how *Read Japanese Today* was a revelation, making Chinese characters accessible to me. I also remember how long it took me to learn katakana until I found a chart of the symbols' derivations from Chinese characters. I'm beginning to realize that my abilities with languages are much narrower in scope than I had thought: I constantly need to link what I'm trying to learn to some other set of already mastered knowledge, and doing that has often relied on serendipitous encounters with people, books, or other resources that make me aware of these links.

For a few weeks, interrupted somewhat by some trips, I tried to memorize the script, making less progress than I would have liked, and becoming more aware of why it was proving more difficult than I had expected.

### Journal entry, Week 8

I've been working on Thai script. It feels very alien to me, because it is unlike the alphabets used in most European languages and also unlike Chinese script, the basis of every other foreign language script I have learned. Strangely, seeing it around me in Thailand hasn't really helped that much: it's so difficult to learn that I think it's going to take a major investment of time.

Spoken interaction continued to present difficulties. Once, after staying very late at the office, a night watchman offered me a ride on a motorcycle to the university gate, where I would be able to catch a taxi. Although he was very friendly, I was unable to understand any of his questions and the extent of my utterances were "I don't understand" and "Thank you".

Numbers were also an ongoing problem. I took a bus to the university every morning, but there were at least four different bus lines, each with different prices, and I proved reliably unable to distinguish between them. The following are examples of the several problems I had.

### Journal entry, Week 9

Another bus ticket misunderstanding today. I asked the price, I heard a "ha" and made to pay 5. Unfortunately, I'd missed the "hok" [6] before the "ha" and the "sip" [10] afterwards, because they're both low tones and not very salient (at least to me). The real price was 6.50.

### Journal entry, Week 9

Another bus ticket misunderstanding, but this time at least I tried to pay too much rather than too little. I thought the conductor said Sip Ha. That would literally mean 15, but I figured that was way too much for the route, so I guessed he had said Sip Ha Sip, i.e. 10.50. In reality, he had said Sip Baht, "10 baht".

I was beginning, though, to have some limited successes. After learning to tell the time, I used any excuse to say the time, saying things like, "It's 1 o'clock. Let's get back to work" or "It's 4 o'clock. In one hour it will be time to go home." The secretaries and other colleagues were very happy to go along with these games.

In similar vein, once I had learned prepositions, I was able to announce, for example, that "the telephone is on the table". The secretaries played along by moving the phone between my visits so that it was, for example, "between the notebook and the stapler".

I was developing a few strategies to make sure that I got some minimal level of interaction in Thai, as illustrated by this entry.

### Journal entry, Week 8

Since I am still unable to take part in a natural way in Thai conversations, I've gradually developed a couple of ways to ease my way into taking some part:
Repeat a word or expression said by someone else if I recognize it;
Paraphrase in Thai [if I happen to know the expression] if people say something in English.
I recognize that these wouldn't be workable if people weren't tuned to my needs.
Sometimes, when people realize that something's within my grasp they direct a question (in Thai) at me related to the current topic, even though it may derail to some extent the flow of the conversation.

Another minor victory I was able to engineer is recounted in the following entries.

### Journal entry, Week 9

I got on the lift today with N_____. She was by the control panel and, when someone else got on, I heard her say, "Chan?", meaning "floor?", and the

person said "Jet" (7). I'll try to make sure I'm by the control panel next time I take the lift.

[later, same day]

I got on the lift and, according to plan, got myself by the control panel. A student got on, and I said, "Chan?" and she said, "Eight", and we both laughed, so I guess that was a qualified success.

One interesting and valuable experience was watching a Chinese movie at the movie theater. I had assumed that the sound would be Chinese and that Thai subtitles would be provided, but in fact the dialogue was dubbed into Thai, and Chinese subtitles were provided. After about 15 minutes, I made a conscious effort not to rely on the subtitles and simply listened to the Thai soundtrack while watching the movie. The movie was an adaptation of a folktale with which I was fairly familiar and thus understanding the dialogue was not essential to at least basic comprehension. As I watched and listened, I gradually became aware of hearing words or short chunks with which I was familiar.

By the end of the term, I had also learnt some basic educational words and expressions such as "faculty", "classroom", "student", and "I have a class this afternoon". But the vast majority of my interaction was still in English, and interaction in Thai was of an artificial nature. I probably still knew fewer than 100 vocabulary items, and I was painfully aware that, with my stay reaching its halfway point, my attempt to learn Thai was largely a failure.

### 3.3. In Thailand: Stage 2

During the holiday between terms, my family visited me and we spent some time traveling. When they had left and I went back to the university for the new term, it hit me that there were only ten weeks left to rescue the rather discouraging situation.

During a short trip to Cambodia during the holiday, I had spent some time talking to a driver who couldn't speak English but had spent some years in Thailand. Although our conversations were very limited in scope, they did reassure me that I was making some progress and encouraged me that renewed efforts would pay off.

I belatedly realised that some formal instruction would be useful, and found and contacted a school. I was invited to go for a trial lesson.

**Journal entry, Week 17**

Went down to the language school today. It took more than 90 minutes to get there, but the teachers were nice. I got a full one-hour lesson with a teacher called J____, a woman probably in her thirties. It was one-on-one, with her sitting next to a whiteboard.

It was probably my first time to have an extended conversation in Thai, because she had already anticipated what words I would probably know. She asked me how long I had been in Thailand, how long I had learned Thai, my occupation and what I was doing in Thailand, some info about my University, whether I liked Thailand, whether I liked Thai food and what dishes, where I lived and whether it was far from the university, how long it had taken me to get to the language school. I was very hesitant, and needed lots of help, but I largely made myself understood.

Her English is fluent, so she was able to explain anything I didn't understand. She obviously had a clear grasp of what kinds of things I would likely be able to talk about, and what would stretch me too far. She immediately wrote down any words that I didn't know on the whiteboard for me to copy down. I could immediately see that learning those words before the next lesson, if possible, will likely have a major payoff, as we can have largely the same conversations again, and I can focus on providing the answers to her questions without intervention from her, and much less hesitantly than before.

Problems: I was hoping there might be a class that I could join, but it seems that only private lessons are available. They're cheaper than they would be in Japan, but rather more than my budget can comfortably accommodate. The other is that the place is so far away that she advised me against going for F2F lessons (and I had to agree); she's going to give me Skype lessons. I've never actually done one of these before and I wonder how it's going to go. I paid for a total of 15 lessons, which works out to about 1 or 2 a week if I use them all here in Thailand. I had toyed with the idea of going for 30 lessons and having three or more per week but that would cost a bit too much and I may not have enough time to do homework and so on for such frequent lessons.

As suggested by the entry above, starting the lessons lent focus to my study, and I began to make electronic flashcards with all the words and expressions she had

taught me, attempting to memorize them before the next class with a view to using them again the next time. I became preoccupied with finding extra pockets of time during the day to work in a few more flashcard sessions. The software kept track of my progress and the percentage of mastery of the flashcard deck would inch up until the next lesson, when a fresh batch of unstudied cards would take it back down.

I became familiar with the quirks of the software.

### Journal entry, Week 18

Made quite a lot of flashcards this morning after yesterday's lesson. I've come up with a method: look up the word in my Talking Dictionary, copy the transliterated word, switch to Notes, then paste. Add the English translation. Switch to the Mac, wait for the sync to finish, then Show Fonts and increase the size to about 23. Not doing this leaves the Thai text super-small on the flashcards.

Then open up AnkiApp, show cards, then add cards. Need to click on Front, then actually click in the field before pasting, then do the same on the Back. And in case of any mistakes, you need to delete the content of the field and start again: the software doesn't allow you to insert text at an arbitrary place.

In another entry, I reflected further on the benefits of flashcards and lessons, and also on the role of formulaic language:

### Journal entry, Week 19

Just learning vocabulary in the forms recorded on my flashcards is naturally not enough to allow participation in naturally occurring conversations, as the time taken to recall the words needed and formulate sentences is often too much. That's where lessons come in, because the teacher is able and willing to wait for me to finish saying what I want to say, and also able to judge when I might need some active help.

I should also note here that flashcards with lexical chunks are invaluable. Of course, fixed expressions like *Long time, no see* have to be learnt as chunks and can be used as they are. But semi-fixed expressions are also very useful, since filling in a couple of slots in a conversation is much easier than computing a whole new sentence.

As my time in Thailand wound down to a close I tried to memorize some Thai

songs. Torn between my other study activities and regular work duties, I found myself unable to fully memorize them.

I reflected on what my ideal learning schedule would be:

> **Journal entry, Week 21**
>
> With classes and other research projects going on, it's difficult to find enough time to really make progress in Thai. My ideal daily learning schedule, I think, would be:
>
> 45 minutes with the Benjawan Poomsan Becker book (for fairly comprehensive covering of vocabulary and sentence patterns);
>
> 45 minutes with the Pimsleur Thai book (for greater mastery of a small selection of sentences and patterns)
>
> But both have their drawbacks that make them less than fun to use. This would be in addition to studying the flashcards and perhaps half an hour practicing writing the script. The learning basically deserves to be the main task of a stay here rather than something to do on the side.

I also had a couple of chances to have conversations with non-English-speaking Thai people, mainly taxi drivers.

> **Journal entry, Week 23**
>
> Took a taxi down to the Sanam Luang area. It took about 45 minutes, and the driver spoke with me almost constantly. He covered almost every area that it was possible for me to converse in: where I was from, what I was doing in Thailand, which places I had been in Thailand, when I was going back, how long the flight would take, my salary in Japan, the best places in Japan, traffic in Bangkok, his work hours, etc.

By the end of my stay, I began to feel that I had started to make real progress and was on the cusp of entering a virtuous cycle of accelerated learning, in which the larger number of words and expressions that I knew meant that I had a greater number of "hooks" on which to grab as I listened to people speak. Having a basic frame of understood words and expressions meant that I was also able to identify other words and expressions that were clearly key to understanding the topic. My short-term memory had improved to the point where I was able to remember them long enough to ask someone to repeat them or write them down, or simply to note

them down myself in sufficient detail to be able to find them later in the Talking Dictionary. I was also finally beginning to make progress with learning Thai script, having come up with a method to get the characters into my electronic flashcards, and I felt that a little more progress on that front would start to open up a world of visual comprehensible input. I would certainly have welcomed the opportunity to stay for longer to test out my sentiment.

### 3.4. Post-return

After my return to Japan (in March 2015), I spent some time every day reviewing vocabulary for the first few weeks, and also listening to the CDs that I had bought a few times a week. The demands of work started to intrude on this time, though, and currently I study only two or three times a month.

I do hope to make more time in future for language study, but, absent a concrete plan to go to Thailand again, I find it surprisingly difficult to do so. Nevertheless, I am keen to explore implications of my Thai learning experience that may aid me in future language-learning experiences, as well as serve as useful reference for other language learners.

## 4. Thematic account

In this section, I describe various themes that emerged from reflection on my own learning experiences. In general terms, I describe challenges encountered, actions taken, and lessons learned.

### 4.1. Memorizing lexis

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that almost all my favorable learning experiences were connected in some way to learning vocabulary. The difficulty of the language meant that quickly noting down a word in a notebook for later review was pretty much essential to learn anything substantial from interaction. But, because I was unable to hold a sequence of sounds in my short-term memory for long enough to write it down, for several weeks I was learning very little vocabulary.

Ellis (1996) suggests that the "ability to remember simple verbal strings in order" (p. 92) determines a wide range of language learning abilities. This certainly accords with my experience, and can be expressed in terms of the bootstrapping

problem (Oller, 2005): without learning some forms, the process of form–meaning mapping cannot begin.

It was only when I acknowledged frankly the difficulties and set up a system to address it—buying spaced-learning flashcard software and spending the time needed to make flashcards for almost every word or expression I wanted to learn, then setting aside copious amounts of time to review them every day—that I began to make clear progress.

Spaced learning or spaced retrieval methods for learning vocabulary were recommended as long ago as Spitzer (1939), who observed that "more is forgotten in one day without recall than is forgotten in sixty-three days with the aid of recall" (p. 646). Pimsleur (1967), labeling the process "graduated interval recall", noted the exponentially increasing nature of the intervals between forgettings of learned items, and proposed a system that would decrease the total amount of time needed for learning items while ensuring maximum recall. The principle has been reaffirmed countless times since, e.g., Baddeley (1997).

This preoccupation with vocabulary echoes that found in Jones (1995), a diary study on learning Hungarian, as does the emphasis on laborious intentional learning: "my productive and receptive command (of lexis, at any rate) appeared stubbornly restricted to those items whose meaning and form I had consciously processed and, for the most part, consciously internalized" (p. 101).

In addition to individual words, I also found it useful to memorize phrases or sentences or productive patterns. One early example that I learned in my second Thai lesson was:

aa-jaan tîi má-hǎa-wít-ta-yaa-lai sɔ̌ɔng kon
*professors at university two (classifier: people)*
two professors at the university

This enabled me to say things like "two people living in my condo". Another example was:

verb + mɯ̌ɯan-gan
too/as well

This enabled me to take part in exchanges such as:

A: I don't like papaya salad.

B: Nor do I.

or

A: I enjoyed the Hunger Games.
B: So did I.

The importance of learning formulaic language of various kinds is amply supported in the literature. Jackendoff (2002), among many others, emphasizes the ubiquity of idioms and other kinds of fixed or semi-fixed expressions, suggesting that "there are thousands of them—probably as many as there are adjectives". Sag et al. (2002) point out that 41% of the entries in WordNet 1.7 were multi-word entries and that that figure is probably an underestimate of the true picture. Beyond this, some research (e.g, Ellis, 1996) suggests that grammatical knowledge emerges from knowledge of formulaic language and thus that broad knowledge of such language is absolutely central to acquisition.

Most of the time I had a cycle wherein I would learn the formulaic and other lexical items from previous lessons, approach mastery of them, and then start dealing with a new batch after the next lesson.

## 4.2. Using commercial [or ready-made] learning materials

Despite many problems with the design of the learning materials I was able to obtain, I found I made steadier progress when I set aside times to study with textbooks and supporting materials. *Thai for Beginners* and *Pimsleur Conversational Thai* both featured conversations that I listened to repeatedly and attempted to shadow. Midway through Stage 1, I also found another course, called *Speak Thai*. This consisted of a textbook with accompanying DVD. Although the DVD generally consisted of still photos rather than video, it made a nice change, as did the rather laconic-sounding British voice that gave the explanations. The book was written in a conversational style with entertaining illustrations, which made it suitable for casual reading and meant I did not always have to be fully alert and intent on studying to gain some benefit. In this sense, it is reminiscent of the book *Read Japanese Today* that kickstarted my study of Chinese characters.

The necessity to strike a suitable balance between consolidation of previously learned material and the learning of new material has been pointed out countless

times, at least as far back as Palmer (1921). This was a difficult balance to strike, because, although I had not mastered the early lessons in the courses I studied, at times I found them a little tedious and wanted to forge ahead. This was not necessarily a bad thing, and I feel that at times this served to prime words or phrases that I would eventually meet multiple times and master. At other times, I became a little obsessive about mastering material perfectly, and at those times the advice in the Pimsleur course to treat 80% success as a signal to move on was helpful.

Another book I bought during Stage 2 was *Khian Thai: Thai Writing Workbook*. This book featured illustrations of the archetypal objects associated with each consonant, with the consonant worked into the drawing. I found this enough of a hook to make me spend more time than I had hitherto on learning the script, though not enough to actually master all the symbols.

Since Thai is a less-studied language, the range and quality of materials is disappointing compared to English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL) materials or to those designed for native-English learners of major languages such as French or Japanese.

As mentioned above, there is no universally accepted transliteration system, and learners are likely to have to learn multiple systems if they use a range of materials.

There does not appear to be any visual system for teaching the tones comparable to that used in Mandarin Chinese, where, for example, a rising tone is described as moving from 2 to 5 on a scale of 1 to 5 representing a standard speaking pitch range. The American commentator in the Pimsleur course often refers to a "high level" tone before a demonstration by the native speaker which is clearly high and rising. For the tones, the best course was Speak Thai, because tone drills constituted the first part of each lesson.

I mentioned earlier the cramming of information into *Thai for Beginners*. This course has been a bestseller for more than two decades, and it is unfortunate that new editions with improved audio recordings have not been brought out over the years.

## 4.3. Increasing the amount of comprehensible input as a trigger for further learning

As mentioned elsewhere, I became keenly aware early on in my stay of my inability to read menus, road signs, karaoke subtitles, and the like. I feel that, if I had somehow managed to learn the script before my departure, my whole learning experience would have been transformed, as the total amount of comprehensible

input available to me increased considerably. Learning even a few symbols meant that I was able occasionally to recognize menu items.

Likewise with aural recognition vocabulary, I found that knowing even a small number of vocabulary items that I was likely to hear in a situation turned the situation from one where I was a passive observer—who would often tune out—to one where I would eagerly wait to hear further known items and would be generating hypotheses about what I was hearing. Again, I feel that, if I had somehow managed to make greater progress through one of the courses before setting foot in Thailand, progress on arrival would have been much smoother.

### 4.4. Enhancing learning by making use of formal instruction

It will have become clear by now that I found Thai lessons invaluable. The structure of most lessons was quite similar. I would call the teacher on Skype at the appointed time, and after exchanging greetings, she would ask me what I had been doing since the last lesson. This allowed me to utter sentences such as "I saw a movie", or "I visited my faculty's coastal research station". In most cases, I had made an attempt to find the keywords needed for these sentences in advance. When I hadn't done this, or when the words I had found were not the ideal ones, she would say a more natural or clearer version and also type it in the Skype textchat window (in transliterated Thai, with an English translation). I would attempt to repeat what she had said a few times, then we would move on. Occasionally, she would send me (as an attachment) a worksheet related to a point that we had studied, with the expectation that I would finish the worksheet before the next lesson. In those cases, the lesson would start with me speaking my answers to the questions on the worksheet and getting feedback as appropriate.

Thus, it appears reasonable to characterize the lessons as valuable in three main ways:

(1) They provided general motivation to study through encouragement and enforcement of a learning schedule.
(2) Since the teacher was accustomed to teaching Thai to foreign learners, she always understood what I was trying to say even if my pronunciation or tones were incorrect (although she would nearly always give me feedback in the form of recasts). This served as very necessary encouragement, since many of my interlocutors in daily life would simply answer in English when

I spoke Thai, or not immediately grasp what I was saying.

(3) They provided specific words and phrases for memorization.

Of course, I could have taken these specific words and phrases from one of the courses I was learning, but those materials I was using were far less tuned to my own specific context. The things I was learning with J____ were things I could potentially use right away in my daily life. Even when I didn't have any occasion to do so, the possibility was always there, and in any case I could talk about them again in my next lesson.

After each lesson, I would copy the contents of the text chat window into the Notes program on my Mac for safekeeping, then make flashcards from these notes. I'll explain flashcard development in the next section.

In general, the character of the lessons appears to have been similar to those described in Kozar's (2015) study of language education through teleconferencing: the lessons were student-centered in terms of topic but generally teacher-directed in other respects, and there was no fixed syllabus. Like the learners in Kozar's study, my satisfaction with this model was high.

## 4.5. Making use of technology

It is interesting to consider the degree to which technology aided me in my quest to learn Thai.

Starting with what is now mundane, the ability to store all the audio and video files from the course CDs and DVDs on my iPad was extremely useful, making it possible to study at home, in the office, and on trips, without having to take my computer with me.

Fortunately, computing devices these days are much more international than they used to be. A few clicks were enough to install Thai keyboards on both my Mac and iPad, though my knowledge of the script is still not enough for me to make full use of them.

The iOS app Talking Thai–English–Thai Dictionary was useful beyond my expectations and I considered it very good value at ¥3,000. It was possible to look up words in Thai script (an option I could not use but that Thai friends could), transliteration, or English. Each entry in the dictionary came with the Thai pronunciation, and the audio files were all internal to the app, meaning that effective use did not depend on being online. Tapping and holding on any item in

the dictionary allowed me to copy it, giving me a means of getting Thai script or any unusual symbols in the transliteration system into other software.

Cobb (2007) points out that technology can be particularly useful in supporting vocabulary learning. The AnkiApp flashcard system was probably the most valuable contributor to my learning during the second half of my stay (Stage 2). With its spaced retrieval system, I was able to study vocabulary in a relatively efficient way. The software allowed me to include graphics in the flashcards, which meant that I could use it to learn the Thai script. The paired Mac and iOS versions of the software meant that I could make the flashcards on the Mac and then study on my iPad. In connection with spaced retrieval, it should be noted that it is perfectly possible to create such a system with analogue flashcards, but in practice the degree of organization and discipline required make it very difficult, and I am sure that I would not have done so without the functionality being built into the software.

Even though both my teacher and I lived in Bangkok, my university was on the outskirts of the city, and thus distance learning became necessary. It was Skype that made that possible. Furthermore, Skype lessons including glosses and transcriptions and attachments from the chats made it much easier for me to convert the material covered in the lessons to flashcards than face-to-face lessons would have done.

Beyond the individual benefits of these tools, the combination of Skype, the Talking Thai–English–Thai Dictionary, and AnkiApp was key to my progress in Stage 2. My teacher's notes in Skype's text chat window were always in transliteration, sometimes without tone marks, and occasionally in a non-standard form. After copying all the notes into the Notes program on my Mac, I would look up any problematic items in the dictionary and copy the transliterated forms from there as necessary. For simple words, I would also sometimes copy them in Thai script. After increasing the text size to one suitable for flashcards, using the Mac version of the AnkiApp flashcard program, I would make a flashcard of each word or phrase, with the Thai on the nominal front and an English translation on the back. I would then sync these to the iPad version of AnkiApp so that I could study anywhere.

To gain the maximum benefit from Skype, it may be beneficial in future to purchase a Skype capture tool, which would allow me to play back my lessons, repeating key sentences after the teacher and also monitoring my own language production.

There were some technology-related problems. The first of these was that the sound quality on Skype was often quite poor, and we sometimes had to quit the

software and then reestablish contact.

I was originally aiming to use The Talking Thai–English–Thai Dictionary's history feature systematically to go back over any items that I had looked up, on the assumption that I was likely to meet the same items on multiple occasions. Unfortunately, however, this feature had a bug whereby the first letter of every item was recorded as a search before I had had the chance to input the whole item; thus, the history quickly filled up with items such as "a".

Over the last two decades, it seems fair to say that there has been a move from emphasis on computer as tutor to computer as tool (Levy, 1997). This is in many ways a positive development as it tends to involve more use of technology as a medium for real communication. In the case of novice learners, however, a tutor can be very welcome, so I regretted the absence of Thai from the list of languages covered in Duolingo (see, e.g., Cunningham, 2015), a free and increasingly popular intelligent tutoring system (ITS; see, e.g., Walker & White, 2013) that I now use to learn Spanish.

## 4.6. Understanding, controlling, and leveraging my own attitudes, expectations, experience, and knowledge

I realised soon after arriving in Thailand that learning Thai would be a forbiddingly difficult undertaking, but it took several months for the full magnitude of the task to dawn on me.

I had set out for Thailand with a strong self-image as a successful language learner, since I had learned two European (French and German) and two Asian (Mandarin Chinese and Japanese) languages to an advanced level and two additional languages (Cantonese and Latin) to a lesser degree, and these learning experiences had encompassed three writing systems (Chinese characters and the two Japanese syllabaries) beyond the alphabet with which I was familiar from English.

I had rather failed to take into account that I had learned all of these in my teens and twenties, and learning in my fifties was always likely to be a more difficult experience, since a large body of research (e.g. Newport et al., 2001) suggests that aging has a negative effect on all aspects of language learning, largely due to decreased brain plasticity (Werker & Tees, 2005) and probably also partially due to affective factors (Schumann, 1975).

Jones (1995) points out that many English-native-speaker learners of foreign languages tend to learn the better-known European languages, which have many

English cognates and loanwords. He found learning Hungarian an arduous process because of the absence of such cognates. I had weaned myself off dependence on English cognates but was not fully aware until experiencing difficulties with Thai how much I had come to depend on relationships with Chinese. Later, I looked back on my first few months in Japan and remembered what a comfort the Chinese characters I saw around me had been. I also recalled having had problems learning to write the katakana syllabary until a Kokugo (the Japanese language subject taught in Japan's schools to native speakers) teacher kindly showed me a table detailing the derivations from Chinese characters. Seen in this light, nearly all my experiences with foreign languages since the age of 20 have piggy-backed on Chinese in one way or another. The lack of any obvious way to do that for Thai was clearly a major root of my difficulties.

I gradually came to realize that, in general, I had filtered out negative language-learning experiences from my memories. On reflection, I had found my first few months in Japan (where I also learned Japanese from beginner's level) rather arduous, even with the support of a Chinese-based script. In addition, despite a number of short visits to Spain and the similarity of Spanish to French, I had also failed to make any progress in Spanish (and this continued to be true until I started daily study with the Duolingo software mentioned elsewhere).

A certain amount of such filtering can no doubt serve to prevent learners from shrinking away from a difficult task at the first stage. Dörnyei (2002; cited in Van den Branden, 2007) shows that, in most cases, greater self-confidence translates to better performance. My experience suggests, however, that too much can prevent them from making adequate preparation in terms of deciding how to study and making an adequate time commitment. Plous (1993; cited in Moore & Healy, 2008) claims that "[n]o problem in judgment and decision making is more prevalent and more potentially catastrophic than overconfidence" (p. 217).

### 4.7. Avoiding vicious and cultivating virtuous cycles

The notion of vicious or virtuous cycles has appeared a few times in this account. It is an easy one to describe. What risked becoming a full-blown vicious cycle was the situation where I was unable to remember elements in the input sufficiently to write them down, and thus my vocabulary—at least from interaction with Thai speakers—failed to progress. This made me less keen on seeking such interaction opportunities, making such learning less and less likely.

One activity that helped me out of such a vicious cycle was working with language-learning materials: though progress was slow with the course materials, I could generally remember a few things from each study session, and there was always the potential for opportunities to use these items in subsequent interaction.

Using flashcards and taking language lessons were the major activities that turned my language-learning experience into a virtuous cycle. The lessons gave me a safe environment in which to use Thai, and those uses of Thai led to specific learning tasks, involving learning vocabulary with flashcards. The flashcard method was effective, and the clearly perceived effects were motivating. The accelerated learning led to greater confidence and ability, which meant that I was able to achieve some successes in regular life outside the context of the lessons. This in turn encouraged me to study further.

It is also worth noting that my methods of learning vocabulary were not a result of advice from my teacher but rather ones I had devised as suitable ways of leveraging the lessons and the tools available to me. In this sense, I was in what Nakata (2013) would describe as a virtuous cycle of self-regulated language learning.

Segalowitz and Freed (2004) pointed out that students in study-abroad contexts "may be overwhelmed by the amount, delivery rate, and complexity of the language that surrounds them" (p. 2). Rivers (1998) suggested that "experienced language learners may be more adept at managing the ceaseless flow of Target Language input than inexperienced learners" (p. 492). In my case, although I can fairly be categorized as an experienced language learner, much of that experience was anything but fresh. More importantly, my level of Thai specifically was so low on my arrival in Thailand that in retrospect the difficulty I would experience should have been obvious.

By being aware of such dangers, I feel it should be possible for learners to reduce the risk of vicious cycles.

## 4.8. Becoming aware of the power of key experiences

I have described elsewhere some experiences which, even if objectively or on the surface quite quotidian, had great significance for me as a language learner, such as watching my first TV drama in Japanese or being praised by my primary school French teacher. In Thai, I would characterize the accident of encountering a Thai soundtrack at the movie theater when expecting a Chinese one in this way. Although

the total amount of words or sentences fully comprehended was negligible, the experience of being able to follow a story while perceiving words and expressions that I understood or that felt familiar was a significant one for me. Another one was a conversation with a taxi driver.

This notion of key experiences is no doubt connected to that of virtuous cycles, since they can serve to reinforce already existing positive behaviors or serve as an encouraging push to start engaging in them.

## 5. Conclusion

It seems to me unfortunate that diary studies of foreign language learning are not more commonplace than they are, and in this sentiment I echo Meara (1995), who points out that they "allow experimenters to be much more speculative and exploratory than they can be under normal circumstances" (p. i). Elsewhere in that paper, he remarks that researchers are often regrettably unwilling to write about themselves. Studies by researchers or language teachers, although they may bear some risk of reifying theoretical constructs, can be inspiring for learners, or at least give hints regarding how to approach the task of language learning or what detrimental practices to avoid. For scholars, they may be even more important. The results of experimental studies, even when statistically significant, may satisfy an analytical part of our brain, but are difficult to interpret across contexts. The Schmidt and Frota (1986) study is well-known for generating research into the notion of "noticing", and it is possible that a wider range of diary studies would yield other important insights of the kind that can shape research agendas. While more diary studies would be a positive development, it is nevertheless important to bear in mind that we should not accept their findings at face value, since "(t)he subject's observation of his own processes is itself an activity that requires capacity, cognitive structure and the like" (Neisser, 1975, p. 161).

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