

## A VIDEO PROGRAMME ON READING THAI FOR MALAYSIAN LEARNERS

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### INTRODUCTION

The programme which I am about to describe to you draws its inspiration from the classroom situation.

For 18 years now, the Language Centre of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia has offered a course on reading Thai to its students. Because the Thai Language course is an elective and the precondition is that the reading course may be taken only after mastery of spoken Thai has been achieved, there are invariably few students who sign up. Those who do sign up display a high degree of motivation, bolstered by a classroom situation that is nearly ideal: a high frequency of one-to-one teacher-student contact. But in terms of education costs, it is extravagant.

This situation makes the prospect of self-study highly attractive. It is reinforced, furthermore, by the heavy and varied workload of university students which makes gathering them together at a certain time and place difficult.

The choice of video as the medium for self-study is obvious. Unlike self-study programmes for oral and listening comprehension skills, reading requires visual aids. Thus, while audio tape programmes have served learners of spoken Thai well, they certainly would not do for reading.

Another point I wish to emphasize is that mastery of spoken Thai is not necessarily a prerequisite for using this programme. This may be at odds with the university's precondition that the reading course should only be taken only after completion of the spoken course, but it is not contrary to the views held by those who insist on the need for comprehension of what is read. In this particular case, it does not much matter: such is its makeup that the programme can serve learners with mastery of spoken Thai and learners without any knowledge of the Thai language equally well. In any event, the words that are the targets for reading are given meanings as the programme progresses. Thus the programme can be used by the university's students who are its *raison d'être*, as well as by any other interested person. The sole proviso is that the learner must be literate in Bahasa Malaysia, as this is the language used throughout the programme as the medium of instruction.

In its present form, the programme comprises 25 video-taped lessons and a workbook which contains 255 exercises that correspond to the lessons. Each lesson

takes 50-60 minutes of viewing time which also incorporates practice time. In effect, the 25 lessons constitute a 25-hour course on reading Thai. Upon completion of the programme, learners are expected to be able to read Thai with reasonable competence and to grasp the intricacies of the Thai language in general and its writing system in particular.

The focus of this programme is the presentation of the Thai writing system, which is complex and filled with idiosyncracies when compared to that of Bahasa Malaysia, which uses the Roman alphabet.

From both the teaching and learning perspectives, "reading" in this programme is confined to the pre-reading period or the early reading level when the learner begins to develop necessary basic skills before they embark on a programme of formal reading instruction. At this stage, the learner attends to the mechanical process of reading which Coady (1979) categorizes as the lower-level or concrete process strategies. The learner is exposed to the sound-symbol correspondences and, through a variety of approaches and techniques, the learner acquires the skills of decoding and recognizing words written in Thai graphic symbols. But as comprehension in every reading activity is an important part of each skill learning, even at the beginning level considerable attention is given to the attachment of meaning to what has been decoded.

In regard to the approaches used in the introductory reading programme, Thonis deserves a full quotation:

*Today, one rarely hears serious debate about the one best approach to beginning reading. Though there is not complete agreement about the merits of various introductory plans, there does seem to be some general accord on two points. First, a combination of approaches which may emphasize both the sound-symbol correspondences (decoding) and the gaining of meaning is more effective than either of these methods alone. Second, the teacher's use of any given introductory approach is more important than the method itself. (1980, p.44)*

#### THE THAI WRITING SYSTEM: A TRAUMA FOR MALAYSIAN LEARNERS

The Thai writing system ranks as one of the most complex in the world. This makes learning to read Thai a formidable task for the Malaysian learner, the writing system of whose language is much more streamlined. There is practically nothing in the way of correlation to effect a smooth language transfer.

Nevertheless, Thonis maintains that regardless of whether the transfer is positive, zero or negative, it remains a function of the characteristics of the vernacular and the language proficiency of the learner. As the users of this programme are highly competent in Bahasa Malaysia by virtue of their chronologi-

cal age, we can expect the Thai writing system to appear more alien to them than to those less competent in the vernacular.

Thonis points out that "ideally, in the perfect writing system using the perfect of alphabets, each graphic form would stand for one spoken sound and each spoken sound would have only one graphic form" (1980,p.43). Based on Thonis' point of view, Bahasa Malaysia possesses a perfect writing system. It consists of 30 symbols which represent 31 sounds. In the vowel count, Bahasa Malaysia has 5 symbols representing 6 sounds. Each symbol, except for one, stands for one sound and each sound, except for two, stands for one symbol (Hassan, 1980).

By comparison, the Thai writing system has 78 symbols representing 46 sounds. In the vowel count, there are 38 symbols representing 25 sounds. The Malaysian learner will not only find that the number of sounds and symbols far exceeds that in his language, but he will also find it difficult to discriminate between  $\text{wan}$  /wan/ and  $\text{wan}$  /wa:n/, as the long vowel sound does not exist in Bahasa Malaysia. Thus the learner who misreads /wan ni:/ as /wa:n ni:/ and who is not familiar enough with the Thai language to glean the correct meaning from context may not fully understand what he has read.

Even at this level of basic categorization, idiosyncracies exist in Thai. Not only has it 4 tone marks but 5 tonal sounds, but the 21 sounds represented by its 42 consonant symbols apply only as initial consonants; as final consonants, these are reduced to merely 8.

Another area of difficulty is the number of Thai consonantal symbols which bear such close resemblance to one another that it requires considerable attention and perception to note the difference. The set of consonants  $\text{ก}$ ,  $\text{ข}$ ,  $\text{ค}$ ,  $\text{ฅ}$  and  $\text{ฉ}$ , for example, share the same basic form, their differences being in very minute details. The complete turning around of words like  $\text{ก}$  and  $\text{ข}$  and  $\text{ค}$  and  $\text{ฅ}$  serves as another example.

The difficulty becomes especially acute when the learner encounters the varieties of tones. Overlooking or misperceiving tone marks can mistake tiger for mat or clothes. Indeed, Brown (1979) remarked:

*The way the Thai shows its tones is complicated and illogical, and some students will constantly be wondering why anybody would ever devise such a system in the first place.*

However, he further added:

*But if we look at the Thai language at the time when the writing system was invented, we may understand the logic behind it and begin to think the system is simple and logical....even brilliant!*

Another formidable task for the Malaysian learner is to be alert to the position

of a particular vowel symbol. Apart from a conventional position -- that is, after an initial consonant -- some vowels are written above the consonants, some below and some before.

Then there is the matter of the directionality in reading. Although Bahasa Malaysia and Thai dictate the same rule that the words be arranged in a left-to-right sequence, the similarity ends there. Thai words are strung together without any space between each word, spacing being used only between clauses or sentences. The learner has to develop the skill of breaking up syllables and that comes only through practice.

Another formidable barrier is the discrepancy between the sound system and the written system of Thai. Linguists refer to this correspondence as the "fit" of the written to the spoken language (Thonis, 1980). Bahasa Malaysia is considered a language having a fairly good "fit", as a word is spelled according to the way it is pronounced and vice-versa. Not so the Thai language; in fact it is notorious for its lack of good "fit". For example, what is pronounced as /ban/ can be written in numerous ways, depending on contextual meaning.

At the phoneme-grapheme level, there are lots of bad "fit" in Thai. Take the sound /s/ as an example. One may assume that the Malaysian learner will find easy to perceive this sound in its visual form as this sound also exists in Bahasa Malaysia. But there are altogether 4 graphic forms in Thai which represent the sound /s/. And when these four consonants appear in syllables or words, they are not necessarily pronounced the same way.

Listen: สามี /sǎ: mi/ ศาสตราจารย์ /sǎ: la:/ ภาษา /pha: sǎ:/ ฟัน /fǎn sa:/

You will note that the first three /s/ + /a:/ syllables are pronounced the same way. Why? Because they belong to the same class of consonant and the formation of the syllables are the same. But the fourth syllable is pronounced differently even though the formation of the syllable is the same. This is because the initial consonants for the first three syllables are classified as high-class consonants whereas the fourth one belongs to the low-class group.

By now you may be wondering why any Malaysian might want to learn to read Thai at all! But Man's desire to acquire knowledge is naturally strong enough to transcend all barriers, and anyway 53 million Thais can't all be crazy. The consolation is, as Thonis puts it, word recognition skills grow and become part of the reading habit of learners when they are practised and practised.

## THE THAI LANGUAGE PROGRAMME AT UKM

As the video programme is the culmination of experience gained during my long years of service as a Thai-language instructor at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), it is proper to share some information pertaining to the Thai

language programme there.

The Thai language programme has been part of the Language Centre under the division of Foreign Languages since 1973. The programme offers 4 elective courses to undergraduate students who are exempted from the basic English proficiency courses. Each of the 4 courses is run for the duration of one semester or 48 contact hours.

The courses are offered in strict sequential order: Spoken Thai I, Spoken Thai II, Reading, and Writing. Under this arrangement the student who signs up for the reading course has acquired substantial proficiency in oral Thai. He is familiar with vocal symbols and the sounds -- of vowels particularly -- which do not exist in Bahasa Malaysia. On top of that, he is familiar with the tones and also possesses a stock of vocabulary. But in all my years of teaching, I have yet to come across a student who has not balked at the task of learning to read Thai.

Among the tasks the student has to perform in the course of developing his word-recognition skills are:

- (1) Discriminate the visual differences among the 42 consonant forms.
- (2) Identify each consonant form according to its class.
- (3) Recognize initial sounds as well as the final sounds of consonants.
- (4) Discriminate visually among the 32 vowels.
- (5) Discriminate between the short and long vowel sounds.
- (6) Know the diphthongs, their sounds and written forms.
- (7) Know the position of each vowel form in a syllable.
- (8) Discriminate among the 4 different tone marks.
- (9) Recognize the 5 different tonal sounds.
- (10) Know the tone rules, including those that govern a particular syllabic pattern.
- (11) Discriminate between open syllables and closed syllables.
- (12) Discriminate between live syllables and dead syllables.
- (13) Recognize words which sound the same but have different meanings.
- (14) Recognize words which have different forms but sound the same.

As the task is demanding and time-consuming, the allotment of 48 contact hours is mostly spent on the mechanical process of reading. Students cannot move on to the higher-level process, namely purposeful reading.

Coady comments on the lower-level process strategies:

*It is tempting to emphasize the more concrete process strategies because they are better known and more amenable to attention. But such emphasis*

*can easily mislead the learner into concentrating on those lower-level process strategies instead of the higher ones. The basic problem with such a concentration is that the lower-level process strategies typically deal with the symbols which carry the meaning message. Spending too much time on them can lead to an overall loss of meaning. In short, too much emphasis on concrete process strategies such as letter-sound correspondences can leave the student with a poor priority of strategies.*  
(1979, p. 11)

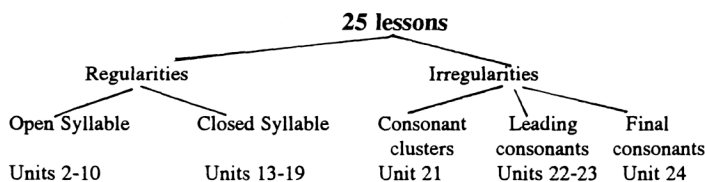
This 25-hour video programme is hopefully a remedy to the problem of having to spend too much of contact time on the mechanical process of learning to read Thai.

## THE VIDEO PROGRAMME

We now accept that language learning is essentially a highly individualised activity. Each learner proceeds at his own pace. Of all the aspects of language, one which is truest to this precept is the writing system. In this, the visual and aural benefits afforded by the medium of video enable the learner to establish the relationship between tangible symbols and significant entities of sound more easily than any other means.

In this video programme, a combination of approaches has been utilised. It may be seen as programmed instruction by virtue of the method of presenting small doses of information in very short steps, and by providing the learner with the correct answers to questions immediately after he has digested a particular small segment of material. It may also be seen as a linguistic approach in that the sound-symbol correspondences are presented in an organised manner. The regularity features are learned first, followed by the irregularities.

The diagram below illustrates the breakdown of all 25 lessons in terms of content:



Unit 1: Introduction

Unit 11: Revision - Open Syllable

Unit 12: Introduction to tones and tone marks

Unit 20: Revision - Closed Syllable

Unit 25: Miscellaneous

Throughout the programme, transcription is used but merely as a tool for teaching and for checking the accuracy of the learner's reading.

On the matter of introducing consonants, surveys of some materials on reading Thai for non-Thais reveal that there are a variety of approaches. Tontraseney (1981) follows the conventional way, that is, via alphabetical order. Anthony (1965) and Allison (1969) present the consonants according to their classes. Anthony begins with a group of middle-class consonants, followed by low-class consonants and lastly high-class consonants. Allison starts off with low-class consonants, then middle-class consonants and finally high-class consonants. Brown (1979) presents the consonants according to their utterance, that is, sonorants, plain stops, low aspirates, high aspirates.

For this programme, the introduction of consonants is based on similarities in their basic forms. In other words, their alphabetical orders or class classifications have been totally ignored. Thus, the letters ก , ฅ and ฌ are introduced together, while ค , ฅ , ฆ , ง and จ in another lesson.

As the purpose of this programme is also to enable the learner to go beyond the decoding stage, words, groups of words, sentences and short paragraphs are gradually introduced with the help of pictures, graphics and other teaching aids. The pool of words selected includes those that will help the learner gain some insight into Thai culture and general knowledge on Thailand.

I would like to conclude by saying that this programme is in the process of being tested and that it cannot therefore be considered to be in its final form. But based as it is on sound linguistic principles and on years of material gathering, I believe that its effectiveness will be quite considerable as it stands. But while this programme certainly does not claim to be the best in introducing the Thai writing system to the Malaysian learner, in its use of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction, it is the first programme tailor-made for the purpose.

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