

Enhancing Thai Language Learning for International Students in Higher Education: A Multicultural Educational Approach

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Abstract

This academic article explores effective strategies for teaching Thai as a foreign language in a culturally diverse environment. The findings are based on ten years of practical experience and observational analysis. The information has been academically analyzed and interpreted to support coexistence among students from various cultural backgrounds, including Myanmar, Korea, China, and Japan, who are increasingly interested in learning Thai.

This research article presents four key strategies: (1) Attitude Adjustment for Peaceful Coexistence of Students from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds, which focuses on creating an inclusive classroom environment that promotes freedom and fairness; (2) Language Selection in Teaching, emphasizing effective language use to support learning; (3) Promoting Cultural Exchange Through Peer Learning, encouraging collaboration among students to enhance language skills and cultural understanding; and (4) Active Learning, incorporating hands-on activities to engage students in diverse learning experiences which aim to foster an inclusive and dynamic learning environment where students feel connected to the curriculum and collaborate creatively to achieve their academic goals. The study highlights the instructor's role in guiding students to recognize and appreciate both their own and others' cultural identities. By implementing these approaches, teachers can facilitate peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among students.

Key techniques include incorporating discussions on cultural diversity into the curriculum and inviting guest speakers who can communicate in students' native languages to enhance comfort and motivation. Class materials are recommended to be in English to ensure mutual understanding, and experiential learning outside the classroom is emphasized to help students engage with the Thai way of life. These methods align with the principle that understanding other languages and cultures deepens our understanding of our own.

Keywords: Thai as a Foreign Language; Language Education; Foreign Learners; Cultural Diversity; Co-existence

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Introduction

Since Thailand's accession to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), interest in learning the Thai language has surged globally. Thai language courses have increasingly become part of university-level programs offered at institutions across the globe. Despite a decline in Thai language learners due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a noticeable increase in overall interest, particularly from individuals in Canada, Belgium, and the Netherlands (Jones, 2021). This heightened attention can largely be attributed to effective social media advertising campaigns promoting the language. Historically, the study of Thai was primarily motivated by tourism or economic pursuits. However, contemporary learners are increasingly drawn to professions such as medical translation and teaching Thai abroad (Brown, 2019).

The Thai Language as a Foreign Language Program, overseen by the author, attracts a diverse group of foreign students. While some enroll in the program as a major subject, others from different faculties participate to fulfill the university's requirement for basic Thai language proficiency in daily life. This diversity necessitates that teachers comprehend and accommodate the varied backgrounds of their students to ensure a supportive learning environment.

Diversity among individuals can be categorized into two main dimensions. Primary dimensions encompass factors such as age, gender, physical abilities, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation, which are inherent and typically less changeable. In contrast, secondary dimensions include variables such as educational backgrounds, values, traditions, cultures, careers, and life experiences (Chueabangkaew, 2022). Understanding primary dimensions serves as a foundational step toward comprehending and effectively addressing the complexities within secondary dimensions.

Francisco (2023) emphasizes a positive outlook on diversity, highlighting its role in broadening individuals' perspectives and exposing them to new experiences. This viewpoint underscores the importance of fostering cultural diversity in educational settings to facilitate enhanced learning through cultural exchanges. Such interactions reflect real-world scenarios where exposure to diversity challenges students to engage with and understand different cultures and ideas.

According to Madsen and Bowen (1978), language teaching must extend beyond mere linguistic proficiency to include proper language usage in diverse cultural contexts.

This approach enables students, particularly those in cross-cultural environments, to effectively communicate and interact with classmates from various cultural backgrounds within the language's native environment. However, accommodating cultural diversity presents challenges, as it entails diverse perspectives and ways of thinking toward the target language. Moreover, time constraints in classrooms further complicate efforts to integrate cultural diversity into lessons, potentially impacting students' learning experiences.

Failure to adequately address cultural diversity and allocate sufficient time for its inclusion may hinder teachers' ability to create inclusive learning environments, ultimately affecting the success of educational outcomes. Therefore, this article proposes techniques for teaching foreign students that promote peaceful coexistence amid cultural diversity. The techniques are as the follows:

1. Attitude Adjustment for Peaceful Coexistence of Students from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds: Environment of Freedom and Fairness in the Classrooms.

The learning environment in a culturally diverse classroom significantly influences students' attitudes toward language acquisition. Positive attitudes, such as openness, curiosity, and mutual respect, can enhance Thai language learning, while negative attitudes, such as prejudice, ethnocentrism, or fear of making mistakes, may hinder progress. For example, in a classroom where Thai, Korean, and Burmese students learn together, those who embrace cultural diversity and actively engage in discussions tend to develop stronger communication skills and confidence in using Thai. Conversely, students who feel isolated due to language barriers or cultural differences may struggle with participation and motivation.

The Child and Youth Development Promotion Act, B.E. 2550 (2007) highlights the right of all children and youths to participate in education without discrimination based on race, religion, origin, language, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, physical appearance, health, or social and economic status (Thai Government, 2007). Teachers, therefore, play a crucial role in fostering an inclusive and fair learning environment where students from diverse backgrounds feel valued and respected. Encouraging active participation, regardless of students' hometowns or nationalities, can build confidence and promote a sense of belonging.

Cultural competence among teachers is essential for effective attitude adjustment. By expanding their multicultural knowledge, educators can create a classroom atmosphere that embodies fairness, justice, democracy, and acceptance. This approach helps students appreciate the benefits of learning about other cultures while deepening their understanding of their own

cultural identity. Through real-world classroom examples and proactive teaching strategies, instructors can bridge cultural gaps and create a supportive learning space where all students thrive.

2. Language Selection in Teaching

Good education should be grounded in principles of social justice, as education that impacts the masses inevitably leads to diversity in educational settings (Nieto, 2014). While the use of a specific language, such as the target language, in classrooms may initially encourage students to gravitate towards peers who speak the same language or seek translation assistance, it remains paramount for teachers to exert maximum effort in using the target language consistently. For instance, in Thai language classrooms, Thai should be the predominant language of instruction, chosen by students who have willingly chosen to study it irrespective of their previous language backgrounds.

Despite varying levels of language proficiency among students, teachers should refrain from using any student's native language and instead employ a common language that is understandable to all, alongside the target language, to ensure equitable education. Before deciding on a language medium, teachers can reach consensus with students or conduct language proficiency assessments to gauge their foundational knowledge and tailor lessons accordingly. Employing diverse expressions and effective teaching media is crucial to accommodating students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Creating a participatory classroom environment where students feel relaxed and secure is essential.

3. Promoting Cultural Exchange Through Peer Learning

Pairing Thai students with foreign students learning Thai as "buddies" offers a powerful means of fostering cultural exchange and mutual learning. This arrangement enables both groups to share their unique experiences and diverse perspectives, thereby enriching their language acquisition journey.

Furthermore, this peer learning model empowers foreign students to participate more confidently in class discussions. Rather than relying solely on teachers or a few familiar classmates, they benefit from the direct and supportive interaction with their peers. This inclusive learning environment not only sharpens language skills but also cultivates a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, ultimately encouraging a more comfortable and engaged classroom experience.

4. Active Learning

Active learning is a dynamic approach to teaching and learning, as it allows students to engage with lessons through various methods and perspectives. Teachers assume the roles of facilitators or coaches, guiding students closely and encouraging practical learning experiences. According to Kuha, Puti, and Nochi (2019), teachers also play a crucial role in fostering reflective thinking among students. Active learning not only enhances student engagement beyond passive listening but also cultivates skills such as analysis, integration, and critical evaluation, tailored to meet students' individual needs.

Moreover, active learning encourages students to freely exchange cultures and deepen their understanding of diversity and differences. McKinney (2008) categorizes numerous active learning techniques, some of which are particularly pertinent to fostering cultural diversity in classrooms.

4.1 Student debates: This activity provides students with a platform to articulate their personal experiences and accumulated knowledge, empowering them to formulate arguments either independently or collaboratively within a structured debate format (McKinney, 2008). By engaging in debates, students not only develop critical thinking skills but also enhance their ability to communicate effectively and persuasively. This activity encourages active participation and fosters a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives on various topics discussed in the classroom. For instance, in a Thai language class with international students from Myanmar, China, and Japan, a debate topic such as "Should Thai slang and informal expressions be included in Thai language curriculums?" prompts students to engage with cultural and linguistic nuances. Chinese students might argue that informal language is crucial for real-life communication, while Burmese students could highlight the challenge of balancing formal Thai with colloquial expressions. Through this exchange, students gain insights into how different cultural backgrounds influence language acquisition and usage.

4.2 Think-Pair-Share: In this structured learning activity, students are given a specific issue or question to consider within a designated time frame, typically ranging from 2 to 3 minutes. Following this individual reflection period, students pair up with a classmate to exchange their viewpoints and insights for approximately 3 to 5 minutes. This collaborative phase allows students to broaden their understanding through the exploration of differing perspectives and the synthesis of ideas (McKinney, 2008). Finally, each pair shares their conclusions or solutions with the entire class, promoting active engagement and facilitating a

collective learning experience that integrates diverse viewpoints. For example, when discussing the question "How do cultural gestures and body language affect communication in Thai?", a Korean student might share that in Korean culture, bowing is a sign of respect, while a European student might note that handshakes or direct eye contact play a key role in their culture. As students compare these perspectives with Thai norms, such as the Wai gesture, they become more aware of the non-verbal aspects of communication and how cultural context shapes interaction

4.3 Case Studies Analysis: This activity involves assigning students case studies relevant to the topic being studied. Students begin by individually reading and analyzing the case studies, identifying key issues and possible solutions. They then collaborate in small groups to discuss their findings, share perspectives, and collectively develop comprehensive solutions or strategies (McKinney, 2008). Finally, each group presents their analysis and recommendations to the entire class.

These four activities collectively encourage students to showcase their unique perspectives and abilities, fostering an environment where classmates can freely question and comment on each other's ideas. By engaging students from diverse backgrounds, these activities promote a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. They challenge students to contribute their best efforts, drawing on their varied experiences and insights to enrich classroom discussions.

Thus, these activities foster an environment where students can express their authentic selves and engage in meaningful dialogue. They promote active participation and encourage classmates to question and provide constructive feedback to one another, thereby enhancing mutual understanding and respect across diverse cultural backgrounds. By challenging students to perform at their best regardless of their backgrounds, these activities contribute to building inclusive learning environments that celebrate cultural diversity.

While active learning methodologies significantly enhance student engagement and cultural exchange, integrating external voices into the learning experience can further enrich students' perspectives. Guest speakers and educational tours can serve as vital tools in this regard. These approaches not only introduce new viewpoints but also provide students with tangible, real-world applications of their language skills. By directly interacting with experts and experiencing language in natural contexts, students can deepen their understanding in ways that traditional classroom settings may not always allow. The following sections will explore

how guest speakers and educational tours contribute to fostering an engaging, inclusive, and culturally diverse Thai language learning environment.

Speakers or guest instructors invited by the main teacher serve as powerful communicators who can significantly captivate their audience. Students generally exhibit a heightened interest when exposed to new speakers, often paying closer attention than usual (McKinney, 2008, p. 110). Moreover, speakers who can communicate in or understand some students' native languages contribute to creating a more engaging classroom environment, where students feel understood amidst a multicultural setting. When inviting speakers, it is essential for the teacher to clearly communicate the lecture's purpose, duration, and any expected activities or interactions. It is crucial to ensure that the speaker remains focused on the designated content and refrain from promoting unrelated topics, which could distract students. Additionally, invited speakers should possess proficiency in English as a common language, facilitating effective communication and enabling all participants to engage in discussions and exchanges equally (McKinney, 2008). This approach not only enriches the learning experience by providing diverse perspectives but also reinforces understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity among students.

Incorporating educational tours into Thai language study for foreign students is crucial as it provides opportunities for practical application of the language with native speakers. Unlike traditional classroom settings, these tours allow students to immerse themselves in real-life contexts, enhancing their language skills authentically (Francisco, 2023). Despite the significant preparation required for such activities, the benefits to students outweigh the classroom-bound learning experience.

Educational tours also serve as effective ice-breaking activities, fostering camaraderie among students. However, it is essential for teachers to adhere to school regulations and obtain parental consent before organizing any tour. Activities during the tour may include attending art performances, visiting museums, and watching movies—all aimed at exposing students to Thai culture and language in diverse settings. Teachers can assign students to take notes during these activities for further discussion and reflection in subsequent classroom sessions. By integrating educational tours, teachers enrich the learning experience, allowing students to engage deeply with Thai language and culture beyond the confines of the classroom environment.

The exploration of Thai language education in the context of global interest and cultural diversity underscores its multifaceted significance in contemporary education. As Thailand's integration into ASEAN catalyzes global interest in Thai language learning, diverse motivations ranging from career aspirations to cultural immersion have reshaped educational pursuits. This manuscript has critically examined the evolving landscape, emphasizing the pivotal role of educators in fostering inclusive environments that honor diverse cultural backgrounds. By addressing primary and secondary dimensions of diversity and employing innovative teaching strategies, educators can effectively nurture language proficiency alongside cultural understanding. The manuscript has meticulously examined various educational strategies, including attitude adjustments, language selection in teaching, active learning methodologies, guest speaker engagements, and educational tours. These approaches not only enhance language acquisition but also promote mutual respect and appreciation among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. By encouraging interactive cultural exchanges and immersive learning experiences, educators empower students to navigate global challenges with sensitivity and competence. This comprehensive scrutiny underscores the imperative of integrating cultural diversity into educational frameworks, ensuring that Thai language education remains responsive to the dynamic needs of global learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this manuscript has underscored the transformative impact of cultural diversity on Thai language education within a global context. As Thailand's integration into ASEAN has propelled interest in learning Thai worldwide, the landscape of Thai language education has evolved significantly. From being primarily driven by economic motives and tourism to encompassing broader aspirations in medical translation, teaching abroad, and cultural immersion, learners today are drawn to Thai for diverse personal and professional reasons (Smith, 2020; Brown, 2019; White, 2018; Anderson, 2022).

The Thai Language as a Foreign Language Program discussed herein attracts a heterogeneous group of students, necessitating educators to embrace and accommodate diverse backgrounds effectively. Understanding both primary dimensions (inherent traits like age, gender, and ethnicity) and secondary dimensions (educational backgrounds, values, and cultural experiences) of diversity is crucial in creating inclusive learning environments (Chueabangkaew, 2022). This approach not only fosters mutual respect but also enriches educational experiences through cross-cultural exchanges that broaden perspectives and deepen understanding (Francisco, 2023).

The techniques proposed in this manuscript—such as fostering an attitude of acceptance and fairness among students, strategic language selection in teaching, active learning methodologies like debates, think-pair-share, and case studies analysis, as well as incorporating educational tours—aim to cultivate a supportive environment where students from diverse backgrounds can thrive (Nieto, 2014; McKinney, 2008; Francisco, 2023).

Moreover, the inclusion of guest speakers proficient in English and capable of engaging with students in their native languages enhances classroom dynamics, promoting a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity (McKinney, 2008). Similarly, educational tours provide invaluable opportunities for practical application of the Thai language in authentic settings, fostering not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural understanding (Francisco, 2023).

Looking ahead, the integration of these strategies into Thai language education ensures that students are equipped not only with linguistic competence but also with the intercultural skills necessary to navigate a globalized world with empathy and respect. By embracing diversity as a cornerstone of educational excellence, institutions can prepare students to become global citizens capable of thriving in diverse environments.

In conclusion, this manuscript advocates for a holistic approach to Thai language education—one that celebrates diversity, fosters inclusivity, and prepares learners for meaningful engagement in an interconnected world. By addressing the complexities of cultural diversity within educational settings, educators can create transformative learning experiences that empower students to contribute positively to a multicultural society. This conclusion aims to highlight the significance of cultural diversity in Thai language education, offering actionable insights for educators and stakeholders committed to fostering inclusive learning environments

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