Developing an online Thai foreign language (TFL) course:
A student survey on course content, pedagogy and online instruction

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Abstract

This article presents the design of the *Thai for Beginners* course conducted online during the spring semester of 2020 at Beijing Normal University. At the end of the course, a survey was distributed to students with the aim of assessing their views toward the course content and pedagogy as well as the online instruction format. Results indicate that while students were generally satisfied with the course, they preferred learning languages in a more traditional face-to-face manner. They also expressed a preference for pair practice activities as opposed to listening to the instructors' explanations and audio files, and preferred homework assignments that provided them with opportunities to create or discover new uses for the language. Of the several benefits offered through online instruction, among the most highly appreciated were the shared documents and recordings accessible for review. To meet the goal of acquiring skills for basic conversations, lessons that taught vocabulary, sentence structures and expressions frequently used in real-life situations were among the most highly rated by the students. Participants were divided, however, on whether Thai script should be taught in a beginner-level elective course.

Keywords: Thai as a foreign language (TFL), online language instruction, language pedagogy, course development, beginner

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1. Introduction

Developing language courses requires that educators not only have a systematic plan but also an ability to adjust the curriculum to the needs of learners and the environment in which the learning occurs. This article presents the key lessons learned during the development of a Thai foreign language (TFL) course from both the planning and feedback stages. In particular, I present rationales for the design of a remote beginner-level Thai language course for Chinese university students, the course content, and pedagogy. I also report results from a student feedback survey conducted at the end of the semester. With the goal of improving the Thai course design, the survey gathers students' insights on desirable course content and teaching techniques, as well as their views towards online language learning.

2. Issues with developing and teaching a TFL course online

2.1 Content of the beginner-level TFL course

Beginner-level language courses are crucial in language learning as they offer basic knowledge and skills to novice learners. As such, it is crucial for educators to have a systematic and detailed plan for such courses. In this study, I begin the design and planning phase for the course by reviewing criteria for foreign language proficiency as well as literature on the design of TFL courses.

According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR)*, beginner-level students should be able to "understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type ... [and] introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has." (Council of Europe 2001, 24) These goals, therefore, should be at the center of beginner-level foreign language education. For Thai courses in particular, researchers' views are consistent with CEFR and they generally agree that beginner courses should focus on the communicative aspect of the language as used in real life (Ploenchit 2003; Thitiya 2003; Wirat et al. 2006).

However, not all courses have such goals in their design. Wirat et al. (2006) analyzed introductory-level Thai language courses offered in Thailand and at foreign institutions and found large discrepancies in terms of their objectives, teaching standards, teaching activities, and assessment. For example, some course materials did not correspond to the communicative needs of students and were considered to be too difficult for learners at the beginner level (Lee 1977). In addition, some courses tend to focus heavily on the themes of Thai culture, history and tourism (Potter 1991; Montha 2016). In light of this variance in

beginner-level Thai curriculum design, it is important to establish a uniform standard and systematic design for Thai language courses.

Several studies have attempted to design Thai courses and assess them objectively (Duan 2020; Huang 2020; Trungta 2013; Ong-art et al. 2005; Nuanthip 2009; Wirat et al. 2006). Trungta (2013) designed a beginner-level TFL course containing 10 lessons, namely Thai sounds, self-introduction, basic grammar, colors, body, Thai food, date and time, family members, travelling, and a short dictionary. Based on expert assessment and a student survey, the course generally received a "good" to "excellent" rating. Wirat et al. (2006) reported that their Thai beginner course was assessed as excellent by experts. Moreover, students' test scores indicated that the course had been effectively designed. Nonetheless, these two studies did not provide specific details of their courses. Wirat et al. (2006) did not describe what was taught in their course, while Trungta (2013) only listed the abovementioned 10 topics without details on words and structures included in each lesson, making it difficult for other educators to follow or adopt the course design mentioned in these studies.

To allow for objective assessment of the curriculum used in this study, I present the design rationale as well as syllabus and other details of the proposed *Thai for Beginners* course in the third section of this article. I also conducted a survey focusing on the content of this course to serve as a foundation for improvements to future Thai courses. Specifically, the outstanding question in Thai language instruction is whether Thai script should be taught during the early stages of instruction. While textbooks for university students majoring in Thai often teach the Thai alphabet and writing rules from the start, several other books and courses use phonetic transcriptions (including the Latin alphabet) to present the language to beginners and then transition to Thai script at a later stage (Sumonta 2019; Wright and Wright 2011). Presenting the Thai language with phonetic transcriptions is assumed to be beneficial to students, allowing them to gain aural-oral communication skills quickly without the obstacle of Thai script. However, it is not clear whether such a practice is actually preferred by learners. The current study, therefore, aims to answer this question via a survey.

2.2 Pedagogy in online language instruction

I also address online language instruction. A few decades ago, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) emerged as a unique way for individual learners to use computers to improve their language skills, especially in the area of grammar drills in which the computer served as a tutor. At the turn of the century, however, the role of computers changed from tutoring to being a tool for communication (Hampel 2003, 23). Computers allow students to use software or conferencing systems to engage in real-time interactions with teachers and other students from a distance, which provides an opportunity for them to participate in meaningful communicative activities and thus enhance their language acquisition (Fleming, Hiple, and Du 2002, 50; Hampel 2003; Long 1996; Yaovarat 2017; Wang and Sun 2001, 554-555). Technology also facilitates

the practice of document sharing, such as the dissemination of files by the teacher that students can review after class (Rattanapian 2002, 6). Despite these benefits of online instruction, teachers and students face a number of challenges as they struggle to adapt to the technology. For example, through qualitative interviews with university teachers, McLoughlin and Northcote (2017, 1124) identified the following challenges and concerns associated with online instruction:

- Lack of interaction.
- Lack of visual cues.
- Lack of the synergy that exists in face-to-face teaching.
- Lack of student confidence and skill in using technology.
- Lack of student self-regulation and self-control.
- Lack of student engagement in learning tasks.
- Inability of teachers to identify students with learning difficulties.

Lack of interaction is one of the main issues discussed in online education research. Fleming, Hiple and Du (2002, 36) described the experience of face-to-face communication as the most difficult element to replicate in distance education. As students are usually familiar with face-to-face interactions with teachers and other students, they may feel a sense of isolation or lack of support in online environments, especially during language learning, when they must assume two cognitive loads, namely, learning new content and learning an unfamiliar language (Heiser, Stickler, and Furnborough 2013, 244; Oliver, Kellogg, and Patel 2012, 275). To ensure the success of technology-mediated communication, enhancing social presence by using, for example, video conferencing instead of audio conferencing is recommended (Heiser, Stickler, and Furnborough 2013, 228). However, it is important to recognize individual differences and realize that while some students may feel that video conferencing meets their social needs, others may prefer visual anonymity or find it easier to concentrate on aural input and output when they do not have to simultaneously interpret visual cues (Hassan et al. 2005, 11; Stickler et al. 2007).

Another way to promote interaction in online language learning is to arrange role-plays, pair practices or other similar activities that require student collaboration and interaction. During these activities, students have more control of the language-learning process, while the teacher plays the role of facilitator (Hampel 2003, 29; Vanijdee 2003, 75). It is assumed that the increased autonomy and control of the situation promote interactions and fosters a sense of community among students (Chou 2001; Fleming, Hiple, and Du 2002).

Related to the issue of interaction is the lack of visual cues (i.e., paralinguistic features and body language) in online learning (Hampel 2003, 28-29; Hampel and Hauck 2004, 69; Wang 2004a, 381). Although video conferencing allows students and teachers to see each other, it is common for people to focus the

camera on their faces and not their full body. As a result, students may miss the paralinguistic information that teachers express through hand gestures and body movements. Similarly, teachers may miss the paralinguistic information of students and fail to identify signals of struggling students (Hampel 2003, 30). For example, in face-to-face classrooms, more introverted students with questions may make eye contact with the teacher. However, in distance learning, it is virtually impossible for students to make eye contact or for teachers to scan the classroom looking for signs of problems. To compensate for the lack of visual cues and make teachers aware of students who could be falling behind, it is recommended that students are instructed to send chat messages or use a button to raise their hand, when available through the software, when they have questions.

There are also issues with online learning related to technology and its use. For example, internet bandwidth and latency are critical factors affecting the consistency and reliability of audio and video conferencing (Chou 2001; Wang 2004a, 381; Wang 2004b, 105). Although network bandwidth has greatly improved since the 1990s, and providers of video conferencing tools are constantly reducing the bandwidth requirements of their products for faster performance (Wang 2004a), internet latency and stability issues persisted in 2020, which is when the online *Thai for Beginners* course was offered. Furthermore, when advanced technology or new software is adopted, both teachers and students must possess the technical expertise to operate it (Hampel 2003, 28). However, little technical training is provided to students, as institutions tend to rely implicitly on students' preexisting knowledge and competence as "digital natives" (Prensky 2001); however, this presumed digital competence may not be applicable, and some "digital natives" cannot advantageously use online tools for the purpose of learning (Heiser, Stickler, and Furnborough 2013, 228; Jeffrey et al. 2011; van Deursen, van Dijk, and Peters 2011).

Accordingly, in the current study, to gain a greater understanding of the benefits and obstacles of online language instruction from the perspective of students, I asked the students to describe their views and attitudes about the online delivery of the *Thai for Beginners* course. I also asked students to rate their preferences for the different teaching techniques used in the course to serve as a reference for improvement.

3. The *Thai for Beginners* course

The *Thai for Beginners* (Chinese: 初级泰语, pronounced: chū jí tài yǔ) course was designed as an elective course for Chinese undergraduate students who attended one lecture a week for a total of one semester. The course was conducted in a synchronous audio-conferencing online format in which the instructor and students were able to speak to each other and listen in real time rather than listen to recorded lessons (Hassan et al. 2005). Several tools and software programs were adopted to facilitate the

instruction, including Zoom for weekly online classes, QQ Documents (an online word processor similar to Google Docs) for real-time material sharing and editing, and WeChat for announcements and out-of-class communications (see Figure 1). The shared QQ Documents were continuously accessible to and downloadable by students throughout the semester. Due to unstable internet issues, the class agreed to use only the audio-conferencing function of Zoom without the video option. Audio recordings of the classes were sent to students when requested.

Figure 1 Screenshot of the instructor's computer screen with WeChat, QQ Documents, and Zoom windows opened simultaneously during online instruction.
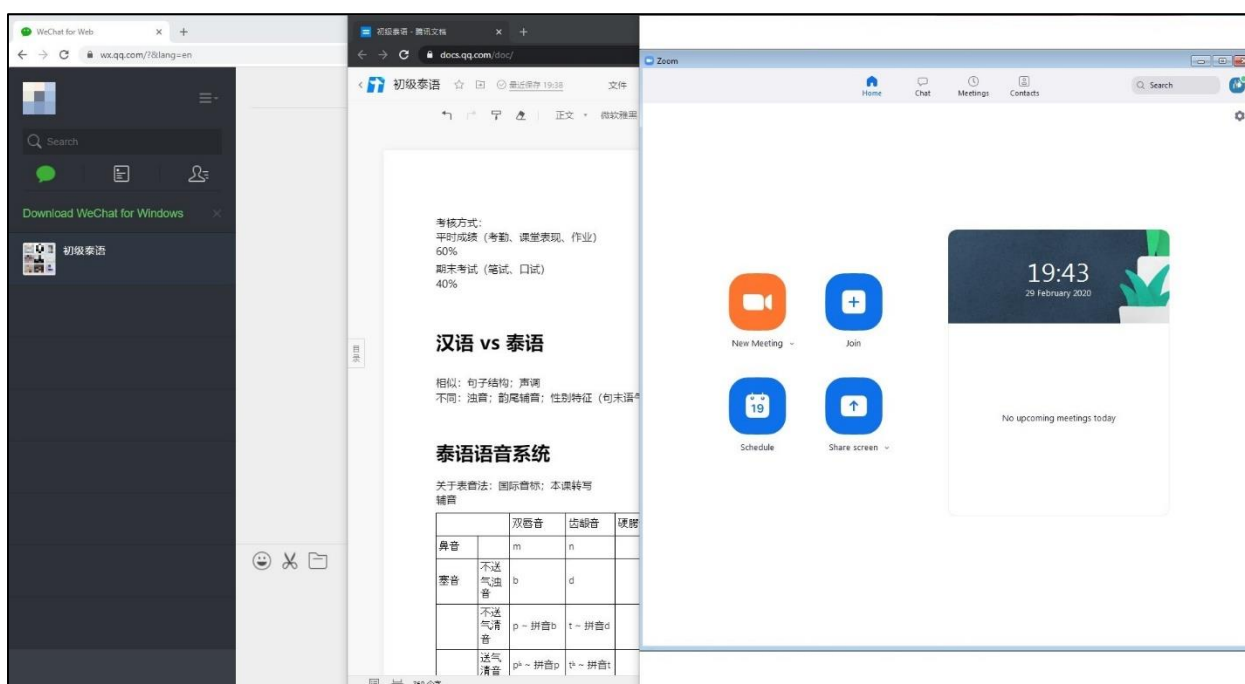
The syllabus and course materials were designed by the course instructor, i.e., the author of this article. Based on the CEFR criteria and studies on Thai courses described in the previous section, the objective of *Thai for Beginners* was to equip learners with basic skills to communicate in Thai, including using simple sentences to talk about themselves, asking questions, understanding the fundamentals of Thai grammar, and engaging in short conversations. The instructor consulted the book *Tài Yǔ Jiào Chéng* (Chinese: 泰语教程; translation: Thai Course) (Pan 2011) as a guide for vocabulary, language functions and structures to be included in the syllabus. However, *Tài Yǔ Jiào Chéng* was not used as a main textbook, as it was designed primarily for Chinese students on Thai majors.

The final syllabus of the *Thai for Beginners* course is presented in Table 1. Lessons 1 and 2 consist of an introduction to the Thai language, its phonetic system, and frequently used sentences. Here, frequently used sentences refer to sentences often used in the classroom such as greetings between students and teachers as well as common expressions in daily life such as "Hello", "Thank you" and

"Sorry." Visual aids such as tone charts and diagrams of speech production organs are used while teaching pronunciation.

Lessons 3 through 15 (taught during Weeks 3 to 11) focus on basic Thai vocabulary and sentence structures, where short sentences with repetition are used to reinforce student memory. Sentence structures in syllabus are chosen based on their functions. For example, the functional goals of Lesson 3 are to ask *yes-no* questions through the introduction of the ...ไหม (*... or not?*) structure and to answer using phrases such as ไม่... (*not ...*). Lesson 4 uses ...อะไร (*what is ...?*), นี่... (*this is ...*) and ...ใช่ไหม (*is this ...?*) structures to teach how to ask for specific information and to clarify understanding. Apart from the words in these structures, new vocabulary in each lesson mostly consists of concrete words. For example, in Lesson 3, the verbs and adjectives ชอบ (*like*), หิว (*hungry*), เหนื่อย (*tired*), ดี (*good*) and สวย (*pretty*) are taught and practiced with the ...ไหม (*... or not?*) and ไม่ (*not ...*) structures. In Lesson 4, the nouns เสื้อ (*shirt)*, กางเกง (*trousers*), รองเท้า (*shoes*), หนังสือ (*book*), ห้องเรียน (*classroom*) and ห้องน้ำ (*toilet*) are taught and practiced with the นี่... (*this is ...*) and ...ใช่ไหม (*is this ...?*) structures. The instructor chose these concrete words based on presumptions of students' expressive and communicative needs. Teachers adopting this syllabus can include other common words that suit their students' needs and interests.

Lessons 16 through 19 contain longer sentences in dialog format. Lesson 16 features previously taught structures such as ...อยู่ที่ไหน (*where is...?*) to serve as a bridge between lessons with short sentences and ones with dialogs. Lesson 17 and 19 teach new vocabulary and structures within a conversation between acquaintances, while Lesson 18 is a conversation between neighbors. The shift of focus from vocabulary and structures in Lessons 3-15 to dialogs in Lessons 16-19 is intended to introduce more sophisticated uses of grammar and vocabulary after students have learned the fundamentals of the language, thus allowing them to grasp nuances and variations in the practical use of the language (Lumprasert 2009, 316) and to practice comprehension skills.

Thai script was included in the original syllabus for in-person classes but was removed from the final syllabus due to the difficulty of teaching it in an online format. As a substitute, the Latin alphabet was used throughout the course to transcribe Thai sounds.

Table 1 *Thai for Beginners* course syllabus

Week	Lesson	Main content *
1-2	1	Thai phonetic system
	2	Frequently used sentences, such as สวัสดีค่ะ/ครับ คุณครู (Hello, teacher.) ขอบคุณค่ะ/ครับ (Thank you.)
3-11 (Basic vocabulary	3	หิว**ไหม** (**Are you** hungry?) **ไม่**หิว (**I am not** hungry.)
	4	นี่**อะไร** (**What** is this?) นี่เสื้อ**ใช่ไหม** (**Is this** a shirt?) นี่**ไม่ใช่**กางเกง (These **are not** trousers.)

Week	Lesson	Main content *
and structures)	5	นี่เสื้อ**ของใคร** (**Whose** shirt is this?) นี่กางเกง**ของฉัน** (These are **my** trousers.)
	6	ขอโทษนะคะ/นะครับ คุณ**ชื่ออะไร**คะ/ครับ (Excuse me. **What is** your **name**?) คุณ**ล่ะคะ/ครับ** (**How about** you?)
	7	ห้องน้ำ**อยู่ที่ไหน** (**Where is** the toilet?) สมุด**อยู่ใน**ห้องเรียน (The notebook **is in** the classroom.) รองเท้า**อยู่บนพื้น** (The shoes **are on** the floor.)
	8	เขา**กำลังนอน** (He **is sleeping**.) คุณ**จะ**อ่านหนังสือ**ไหม** (**Will** you read?) เขา**จะทำอะไร** (**What will** he **do**?)
	9	เขา**กินข้าวแล้ว** (He **ate**.) เขา**ยังไม่ได้ล้างจาน** (He **hasn't washed** the dishes.) เขาอาบน้ำ**แล้วหรือยัง** (**Has** he showered**?**)
	10	พวกเรากำลังกินข้าว**ด้วยกัน** (We are having a meal **together**.) ไปห้องเรียน**ด้วยกันไหม** (**Let's** go to the classroom together.) **อยาก**เข้าห้องน้ำ (I **want to** go to the toilet.)
	11	ฉันไม่ค่อยชอบ**กางเกงตัวนั้น** (I don't like **those trousers** much.) **คน(คน)นั้น**ชื่ออะไร (What is **that person**'s name?)
	12	มีนักเรียน**กี่**คนในห้องเรียน (**How many** students are there in the classroom?) ฉันมีเสื้อ**เก้าตัว** (I have **nine** shirts.)
	13	ตอนนี้ที่ปักกิ่ง**กี่โมง** (**What time** is it now in Beijing?) ตอนนี้**หกโมงสิบนาที** (It's now **6:10 a.m.**)
	14	ฉัน/ผม**เป็น**คนจีน (I **am** Chinese.) ฉัน/ผม**เป็น**นักเรียน (I **am** a student.)
	15	ฉัน/ผมชอบทำงาน**กับ**เขา (I like working **with** him.) นักเรียนของฉันพูดภาษาไทย**ได้** (My students **can** speak Thai.) **ขอ**เข้าห้องน้ำ**ได้ไหม** (**Can I** go to the toilet**?**)
12-15 (Dialog)	16	Teacher: หนังสืออยู่ที่ไหนคะ (Where is the book?) Student: อยู่บนโต๊ะครับ (It's on the table.) Teacher: อยู่บนโต๊ะของใครคะ (Whose table?)
	17	Mr. Zhang: ให้ผมล้างจานไหมครับ (Do you want me to do the dishes?) Ms. Wang: ไม่เป็นไรค่ะ พวกเรายังไม่ได้กินข้าว กินข้าวเสร็จแล้วค่อยล้างจานค่ะ (That's okay. We haven't eaten yet. We will do the dishes after the meal.)
	18	Mr. Wang: คุณจางอ่านหนังสือพิมพ์แล้วหรือยังครับ (Have you read the newspaper?) Mr. Zhang: อ่านของเมื่อวานแล้วครับ แต่ว่ายังไม่ได้อ่านของวันนี้ (I read yesterday's newspaper but not today's.)
	19	Ms. Li: ตอนนี้หลี่กำลังเรียนภาษาอังกฤษอยู่ค่ะ จะมีสอบวันเสาร์หน้าค่ะ (I am learning English. There will be a test next Saturday.) Mr. Bai: ทำไมคุณหลี่ต้องสอบภาษาอังกฤษครับ (Why do you have to take the English test?)

Week	Lesson	Main content *
		Ms. Li: หลี่อยากไปสอนภาษาจีนที่ประเทศอังกฤษค่ะ แต่ว่าถ้าพูดภาษาอังกฤษไม่ได้ ก็ไปสอนที่ประเทศอังกฤษไม่ได้ค่ะ (I want to teach Chinese in England, but we cannot teach in England if we cannot speak English.)

* For Lessons 3-15, example sentences and their English translations are shown, with key grammar points in bold. For Lessons 16-19, excerpts of dialogs are shown.

With respect to instructional activities, each week began with a review of the words and structures from the previous week as well as a review of the students' homework. Approximately 15 minutes were devoted to this part of the lesson, after which a new lesson was introduced. For Lessons 3 through 15, the instructor introduced new words and structures for the lessons and gave full sentence examples and then asked the students to create their own sentences using the newly introduced linguistic elements. For example, Lesson 7 started with a review of the words เสื้อ (*shirt*), กางเกง (*trousers*), ห้องเรียน (*classroom*) and ห้องน้ำ (*toilet*), which had been taught in the previous lesson. The instructor also taught a new word, i.e., เขา (*he/she*), introduced the "…อยู่ที่ไหน" (*where is/are …?*) structure, and provided examples, including "เสื้ออยู่ที่ไหน" (*where is the shirt?*) and "กางเกงอยู่ที่ไหน" (*where are the trousers?*). The students were then asked to create sentences for "Where is the classroom?" "Where is the toilet?" and "Where is he?" While new words and sentences were being taught, the instructor typed the translations using the Latin alphabet and explained their Chinese meaning in a QQ Document that was shared with the students, thus allowing them to view the text while simultaneously listening to the explanation.

After the new words and structures for each lesson were taught and practiced, the instructor used the Zoom breakout room function to randomly assign the 20 students into ten pairs and posted an exercise in a shared document asking each pair to create a short dialog using the words and structures they had just learned. Figure 2 presents an example of the exercises for Lesson 7, which target the structures "…อยู่ที่ไหน" (*where is/are …?*) and "A อยู่ใน B" (*A is in B*). The pair practice exercise represented a combination of multiple language teaching approaches. It not only allowed students to practice the relevant structures by repeating them again and again (similar to the grammar-translation method), but also encouraged students to communicate with each other to achieve a shared goal, to discuss and to help correct each other (similar to the communicative approach). In addition, the instructor randomly joined a breakout room to monitor the activity. Following the pair practice exercise, which usually lasted approximately 10-15 minutes, the instructor chose a few pairs of students to demonstrate the exercise in front of the whole class and corrected any errors.

Figure 2 Example of materials for a pair exercise in Lesson 7. The instructions were originally written in Chinese.

Several different activities with the aim of improving students' general comprehension and listening skills were designed for Lessons 16 through 19. First, without teaching new words, the instructor played an audio file of a dialog (approximately 1 minute per lesson) twice and asked the students to listen for the meaning and take note of the new vocabulary. After confirming the overall meaning, the instructor taught the new words and structures presented in the dialog. Then, the students listened to the dialog again and practiced speaking in pairs using the Chinese translation of the dialog as a guideline. Finally, the instructor chose a few pairs of students to perform the dialog in front of the whole class and corrected any errors.

Four types of homework were assigned. The first homework task was assigned at the end of the second week, after the phonetics system was taught. The assignment required students to listen to a list of Thai words presented in audio format and write their phonetic transcriptions. The second type of homework task asked the students to translate Chinese sentences into Thai and record themselves speaking the Thai translations. These sentences consisted of previously taught words and structures, but they were different from the examples practiced during class. The goals of this audiolingual translation exercise were to encourage students to apply their existing knowledge in new sentences and to allow the instructor to evaluate their pronunciation. In the third type of homework assignment, students were asked to listen to an audio file that contained several short dialogs in Thai; they were then asked to translate the dialogs into Chinese and use the Chinese versions as sources to translate the dialogs back into Thai before finally

recording themselves reading the dialogs aloud. This exercise is a more complicated version of the second type of homework assignment, with a listening exercise added to the beginning. In the fourth type of homework, the students recorded themselves reading the Thai dialogs in Lessons 16 through 19, which they had learned during class. In some weeks, more than one type of homework task was assigned.

The final exam included two parts, namely listening and speaking. For the listening part, students listened to a recording of 35 Thai sentences (each sentence played twice before proceeding to the next sentence) and wrote down the Chinese meaning. For the speaking part, they were given 55 sentences written in Chinese. After translating them into Thai, they made a recording of themselves speaking the answers. Scores were given based on accuracy (i.e., using correct words and structures) and pronunciation.

4. Student survey

The *Thai for Beginners* course was offered in the spring semester of 2020 at Beijing Normal University, running from February 24 to June 12. Of the 16 weeks, the first 15 were devoted to teaching, and the last was dedicated to a final examination. It was an elective course for undergraduate students and was taught once a week for 100 minutes. The instructor was a Thai native speaker with 4 years of university-level teaching experience. Twenty Chinese students enrolled in the course, including six students with English language majors, six with Chinese language majors, three with accounting majors, and the remainder pursuing chemistry, mathematics, environment, geology or history majors. None of the students had studied Thai prior to taking the course.

At the end of the course, a survey was distributed to gather feedback on the following topics:
1. What do students want to learn and achieve in a beginner-level TFL course?
2. Which instructional strategies do students prefer?
3. How do students rate their experiences with the online *Thai for Beginners* course presented in this study? What can be improved?

Table 2 summarizes the questions in the survey and the types of answers provided by the students. The survey was written in Chinese and distributed to students during Week 14 of the course. Student participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. At the end of Week 16, fourteen responses had been received, which represented a 70% response rate.

Table 2 Questions in the student survey

Theme	Question	Type of answers
Course contents	1. What were the reasons you chose to enroll in this course? • To fulfill my course credits. • To communicate with my family/friends. • Because I like learning languages/foreign languages. • Because I like Thai culture/entertainment. • Because I want to travel to/work in Thailand. • Because the Thai language is useful for finding a job in China. • Knowing another language may be useful for me in the future, although currently I am not sure how.	Multiple choice, with multiple answers allowed
	2. What were your expectations of this course? What did you expect to achieve?	Open ended
	3. How useful do you think the lessons are?	5-point scale ranging from "not useful" to "useful"
	4. What kind of content should be added or increased?	Open ended
Pedagogy	5. How much do you like the following teaching techniques or types of homework?	5-point scale ranging from "don't like" to "like"
	6. In your opinion, what are the merits of the pedagogy in this course?	Open ended
	7. In your opinion, what are the shortcomings of the pedagogy in this course?	Open ended
Online instruction	8. What device do you mainly use to attend classes?	Multiple choice, single answer
	9. If one device is not enough, what other devices do you use?	Multiple choice, with multiple answers allowed
	10. In your opinion, what are the merits of taking this course online?	Multiple choice, with multiple answers allowed
	11. In your opinion, what are the shortcomings of taking this course online?	Multiple choice, with multiple answers allowed
	12. How much do you agree with the following statements regarding the online format of *Thai for Beginners*?	5-point scale ranging from "disagree" to "agree"

| Theme	Question	Type of answers
	• I am satisfied with the online delivery of this course. • I am willing to learn Thai in an online format in the future. • This course is suitable for online delivery. • This course is suitable for face-to-face delivery.	

5. Survey results

5.1 Content of the beginner-level TFL course

The goal of my first research question is to understand what students want to learn and achieve in a beginner-level TFL course. The survey first asks the students why they enrolled in *Thai for Beginners,* with the following options provided:

- To fulfill my course credits.
- To communicate with my family/friends.
- Because I like learning languages/foreign languages.
- Because I like Thai culture/entertainment.
- Because I want to travel to/work in Thailand.
- Because the Thai language is useful for finding a job in China.
- Knowing another language may be useful for me in the future, although currently I am not sure how.

The percentages of students who chose each of these answers are shown in Figure 3. Most students (93%) stated that they enrolled in *Thai for Beginners* because they liked learning languages or foreign languages, and 71% of them believed that knowing another language may be useful in the future. More than half of the students (57%) enrolled in this course because they wanted to travel to or work in Thailand, while 36% of the students chose this course because they liked Thai culture and entertainment. In addition, when asked about their expectations and what they wanted to achieve by the end of the course (Question 2), 11 students stated that they wanted to be able to have basic conversations in Thai. Examples of typical responses included, "to communicate in short and simple Thai" and "to use daily expressions fluently." Two students stated that they wanted to master Thai pronunciation and the Thai accent, while two other students wanted to gain a foundation in Thai in order to self-study in the future. Finally, one student wanted to enjoy Thai commercials and songs in the original language without relying on translations.

Figure 3 Responses to Question 1: What were the reasons you chose to you enroll in this course?
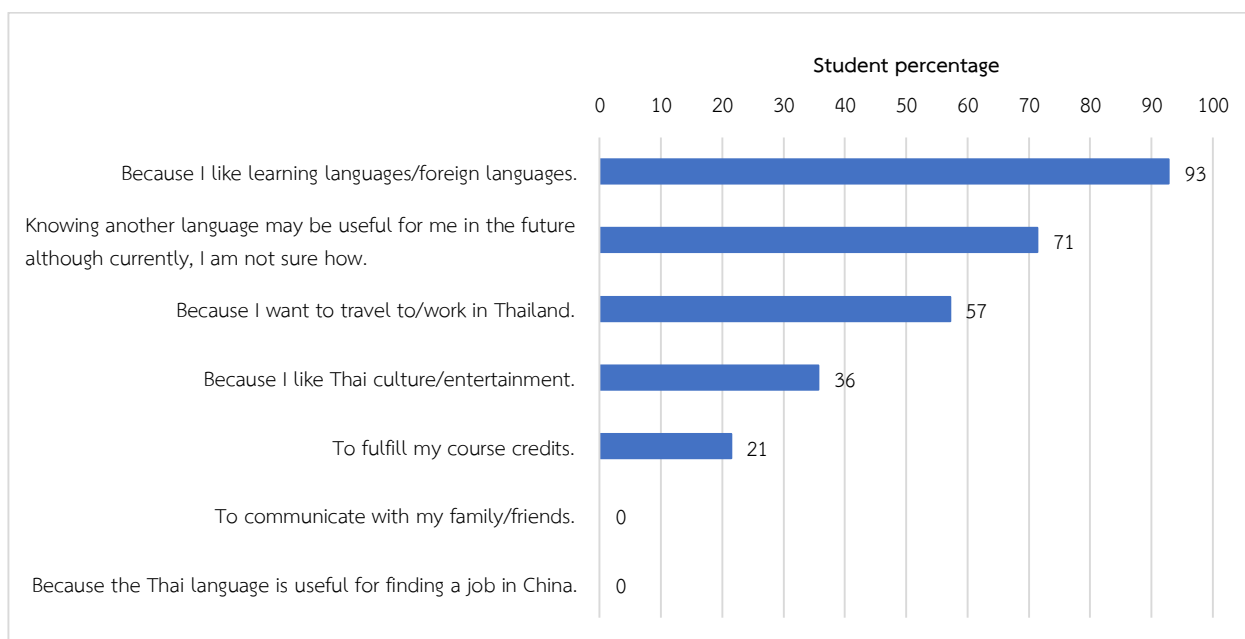
Question 3 asked students to rate the usefulness of Lessons 1 through 18 by rating their responses on a Likert scale with scores from 1 to 5, which represent "not useful", "not so useful", "neutral", "somewhat useful" and "useful", respectively. The survey did not cover Lesson 19 because they had not started that lesson when the survey was distributed. Figure 4 presents the average scores for each lesson. The lessons rated as useful by all students, i.e., with an average score of 5.00, were Lesson 6 (example sentences: "Excuse me. **What is** your **name**?"; "**How about** you?"), Lesson 7 ("**Where is** the classroom?" "The notebook **is in** the classroom.") and Lesson 12 ("I have **nine** shirts."; "**How many** notebooks do you have?"). In addition, the following three lessons received high average scores of 4.93: Lesson 3 ("**Are you** hungry?"; "**I am not** hungry."), Lesson 13 ("**What time** is it now in Beijing?"; "It's now **6:10 a.m.**") and Lesson 14 ("I **am** Chinese."; "I **am** a student."). In contrast, the lessons that received scores lower than 4.50 were Lesson 16 (dialog: Where is the book?), Lesson 18 (dialog: Have you read the newspaper?) and Lesson 1 (the Thai phonetic system). When a comparison was made between the lessons focusing on vocabulary and structures, i.e., Lessons 3 through 15, and the lessons focusing on dialog, i.e., Lessons 16 through 18, the former yielded a higher average score of 4.81, while the latter received a score of 4.51.

Figure 4 Responses to Question 3: How useful do you think the lessons are?
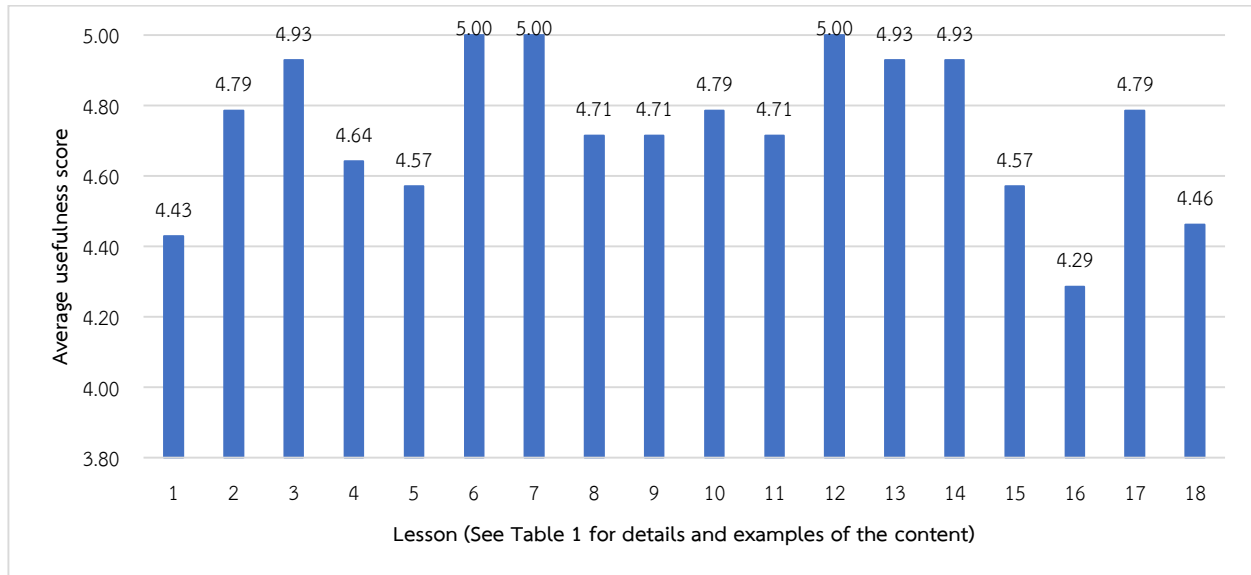
Question 4 of the survey was an open-ended question about content that should be added or increased. Seven students, i.e., half of the respondents, stated that the course should teach Thai script. The comments included the following: "You could introduce some knowledge about the Thai alphabet. I think the Thai alphabet is unique and charming, so I want to learn more about it"; "I still don't know what the Thai alphabet looks like"; and "It would be nice if you could teach us how to write basic words in Thai, such as 'hello' and 'thank you.'" In addition to teaching the Thai alphabet and writing, one student suggested that more vocabulary should be included in the course. Two students recommended adding travel-related expressions, while two other students expressed a desire to learn more about Thai culture.
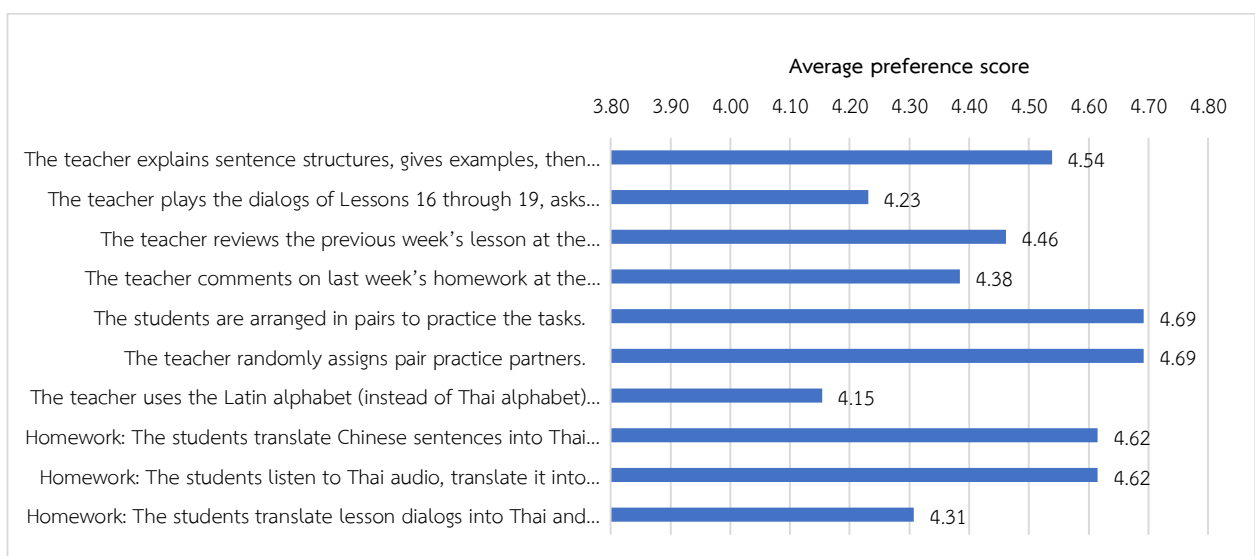
5.2 Language pedagogy

The second set of survey questions addressed the instructional techniques used and the types of homework preferred by students. In Question 5, the students were asked to rate the degree to which they liked each teaching/learning method on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 consisting of "don't like", "don't like much", "neutral", "like some" and "like", respectively. Seven aspects of classroom activities and three types of homework were rated, as follows:

- The teacher explains sentence structures, gives examples, then asks students to create original sentences.
- The teacher plays the dialogs of Lessons 16 through 19, asks the students about their general comprehension, and then explains the dialogs.

- The teacher reviews the previous week's lesson at the beginning of each week.

- The teacher comments on last week's homework at the beginning of each week.

- The students are arranged in pairs to practice tasks.

- The teacher randomly assigns pair practice partners.

- The teacher uses the Latin alphabet (instead of Thai alphabet) to represent Thai sounds.

- The students translate Chinese sentences into Thai and record their voices (homework).

- The students listen to Thai audio, translate it into Chinese, then translate back into Thai and record their voices (homework).

- The students translate lesson dialogs into Thai and record their voices (homework).

Figure 5 presents the average scores of the student ratings. Among the choices for classroom activities, the most preferred type of activity is the student pair practice, which receives an average score of 4.69. Similarly, they like the fact that the pair practice partner is randomly assigned and changed every week. In contrast, the activity for Lessons 16 through 19, which is the activity in which the instructor plays dialogs before explaining the vocabulary and structures, receives lower scores, i.e., an average score of 4.23. The students also rate the homework for these lessons, i.e., in which they translate the lesson dialogs from Chinese into Thai and record their voices as they read the dialog, lower than other types of homework. However, interestingly, the teaching technique that receives the lowest score, with an average score of 4.15, is the use of the Latin alphabet to represent the Thai sounds.

Figure 5 Responses to Question 5: How much do you like the following teaching techniques or types of homework?

Average preference score

	Score
The teacher explains sentence structures, gives examples, then…	4.54
The teacher plays the dialogs of Lessons 16 through 19, asks…	4.23
The teacher reviews the previous week's lesson at the…	4.46
The teacher comments on last week's homework at the…	4.38
The students are arranged in pairs to practice the tasks.	4.69
The teacher randomly assigns pair practice partners.	4.69
The teacher uses the Latin alphabet (instead of Thai alphabet)…	4.15
Homework: The students translate Chinese sentences into Thai…	4.62
Homework: The students listen to Thai audio, translate it into…	4.62
Homework: The students translate lesson dialogs into Thai and…	4.31

The survey section on pedagogy also included two open-ended questions regarding the merits and shortcomings of the teaching techniques applied in the course (Questions 6 and 7). Two students expressed their preference for a variety of teaching techniques, which would make the course more interesting and engaging. Seven students, i.e., half of the respondents, specifically praised the pair practice activity, stating that the practice "allows me to have a real communication in Thai," "helps me gain deeper understanding of the language," "allows everyone to get practice," and "is relaxing but also makes my partner and me push each other forward.". One student suggested expanding the pair practice into homework, i.e., the instructor assigns a topic and each pair creates a unique dialog and presents it to the class.

With respect to the homework assignments, one student stated that "the listening homework is great. It is very important to practice listening when learning a language. Although I found it difficult at first, I learned a lot afterwards." Another student liked that the instructor started each week by commenting on grammatical and pronunciation errors in the previous week's homework. One student further added that the instructor should specifically point out who made such errors so the students would become more aware of their own errors.

The students were divided as to their preferences for certain activities. For example, while three students appreciated that the instructor provided numerous examples and often asked them to create their own sentences after teaching new vocabulary and structures, one student stated that the activity took too much time and that the sentences were quite repetitive. Regarding the use of the Latin alphabet, two students applauded it, stating, "using the Latin alphabet is suitable for beginners," and "I was a little worried about learning a new writing system at the beginning. However, because you introduced the Latin alphabet transcription in the first week, I decided to stay in this course." However, another student commented that not learning the Thai alphabet was a drawback.
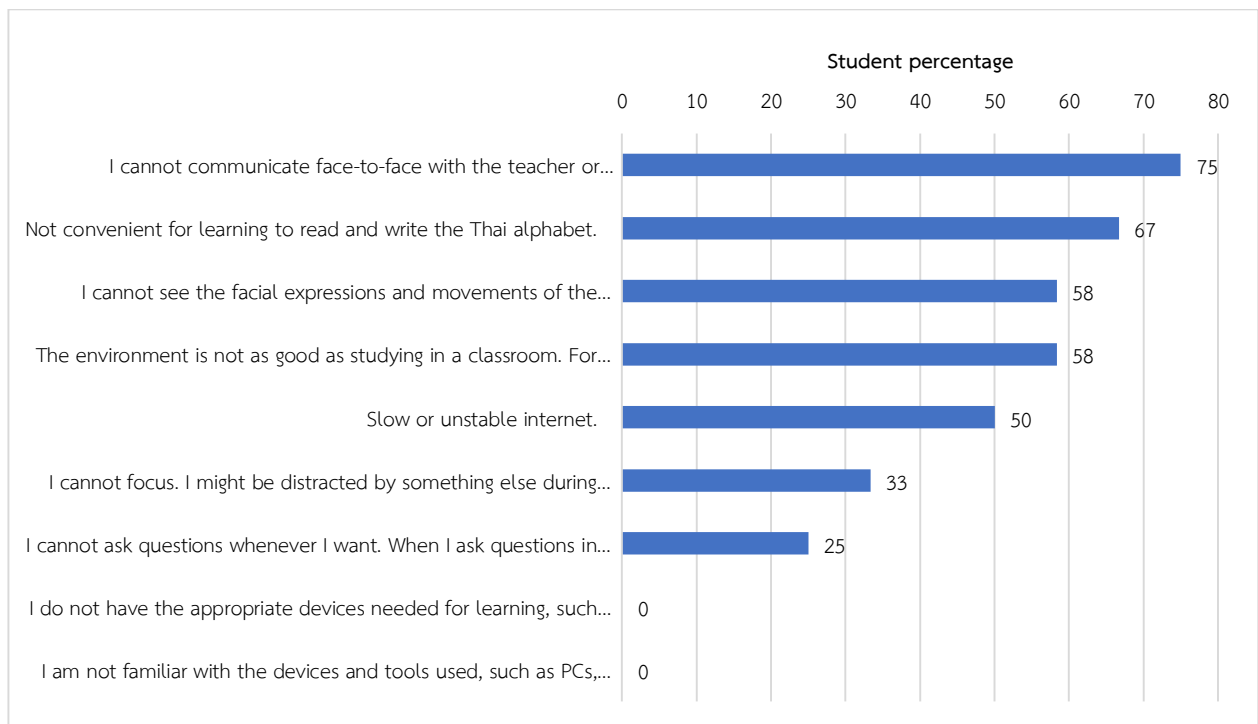
5.3 Online language instruction

The third research question involves the students' online learning experiences in the *Thai for Beginners* course. When asked which device they mainly used to attend classes (Question 8), nine students (75% of the 12 valid responses, as two students did not answer the questions about devices) stated that they used their personal computer (PC), while two students mainly used mobile phones, and one student used a tablet computer. Question 9 asked whether the students used other devices in addition to their primary device, and all 12 students responded affirmatively. In particular, eight of the nine students who mainly used a PC also used a mobile phone, while the remaining student used a tablet. The two students who used mobile phones as their primary device used a PC as a complement. The student who mainly used a tablet used a mobile phone as a secondary device.

When assessing the students' opinions about the course's online instructional format, the following options were presented, and the students were asked whether each of the options was a shortcoming of the course.

- Slow or unstable internet.
- I do not have the appropriate devices needed for learning, such as a PC, mobile phone or tablet.
- I am not familiar with the devices and tools used, such as PCs, mobile phones, tablets, WeChat, QQ Documents or Zoom.
- Not convenient for learning to read and write the Thai alphabet.
- I cannot communicate face-to-face with the teacher or classmates.
- I cannot see the facial expressions and movements of the teacher.
- I cannot ask questions whenever I want. When I ask questions in a chat, sometimes the teacher does not see them immediately.
- I cannot focus. I might be distracted by something else during the class.
- The environment is not as good as studying in a classroom. For example, I can be disturbed by family members or neighbors.

Student responses are presented in Figure 6. The students used multiple devices to participate in the class, and the results indicate that none of them had problems obtaining or using the tools. The greatest problem, as identified by 75% of the students, was the lack of in-person communication with the instructor and classmates. Similarly, they also indicated that not being able to observe the facial expressions and body movements of the instructor was a problem (58%), while 67% considered the inconvenience of not learning the Thai alphabet online a shortcoming of the course, and 58% thought that the distance learning environment was not as supportive as a physical classroom. Finally, one-half of the students indicated that having a slow or unstable internet connection was a drawback.

Figure 6 Responses to Question 11: What are the shortcomings of taking this course online?

Student percentage

Response	Percentage
I cannot communicate face-to-face with the teacher or…	75
Not convenient for learning to read and write the Thai alphabet.	67
I cannot see the facial expressions and movements of the…	58
The environment is not as good as studying in a classroom. For…	58
Slow or unstable internet.	50
I cannot focus. I might be distracted by something else during…	33
I cannot ask questions whenever I want. When I ask questions in…	25
I do not have the appropriate devices needed for learning, such…	0
I am not familiar with the devices and tools used, such as PCs,…	0

I also asked the students about the merits of online learning, providing the following response options:

- I can study anywhere.
- I can ask questions by sending private messages to the teacher, so I do not have to speak in front of other students.
- I can use the shared document to review after class.
- I can record the class and listen to it again for review.
- I have better concentration.
- It saves time and the cost of commuting to the university and the classroom.
- It reduces the use of paper and saves resources.

According to the results, which are shown in Figure 7, the major advantage of online learning is the convenience of obtaining course materials and recordings digitally for review after class, as indicated by 83% of the responding students. Online learning also offers the flexibility to learn wherever students want, thus saving time and the costs associated with commuting (58%). Finally, one-third (33%) of the students considered being able to ask questions privately to be a benefit of the online format.

Figure 7 Responses to Question 10: What are the merits of taking this course online?
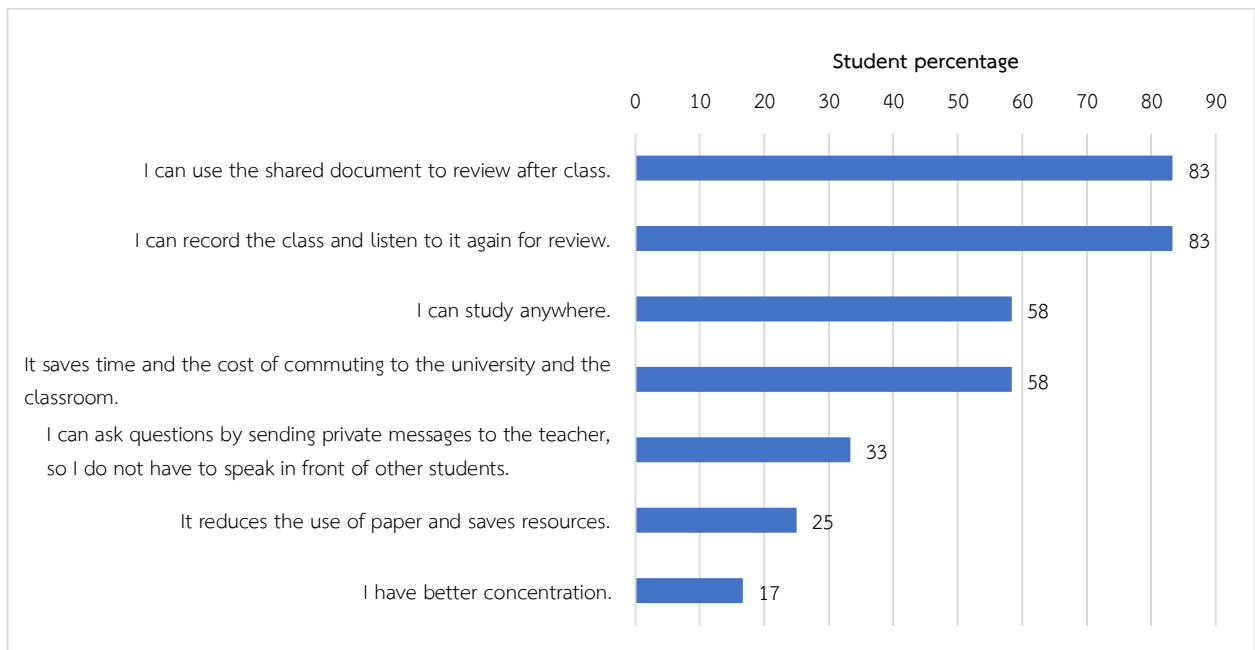

To evaluate their overall experience with the online course, Question 12 asked the students the degree to which they agreed with the following statements based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 representing "disagree", "somewhat disagree", "neither agree nor disagree", "somewhat agree" and "agree", respectively, to evaluate their overall experience of the online course:

- I am satisfied with the online delivery of this course.
- I am willing to learn Thai in an online format in the future.
- This course is suitable for online delivery.
- This course is suitable for face-to-face delivery.

Based on the results presented in Figure 8, the students were satisfied with the online delivery of the course, which received an average score of 4.67, and were quite willing to continue learning Thai online in the future, based on an average score of 4.08. However, when a comparison was made between in-person and online formats, it became clear that the former was preferable, with in-person averaging 4.50 and online averaging 3.42.

Figure 8 Responses to Question 12: How much do you agree with the following statements regarding the online format of *Thai for Beginners*?
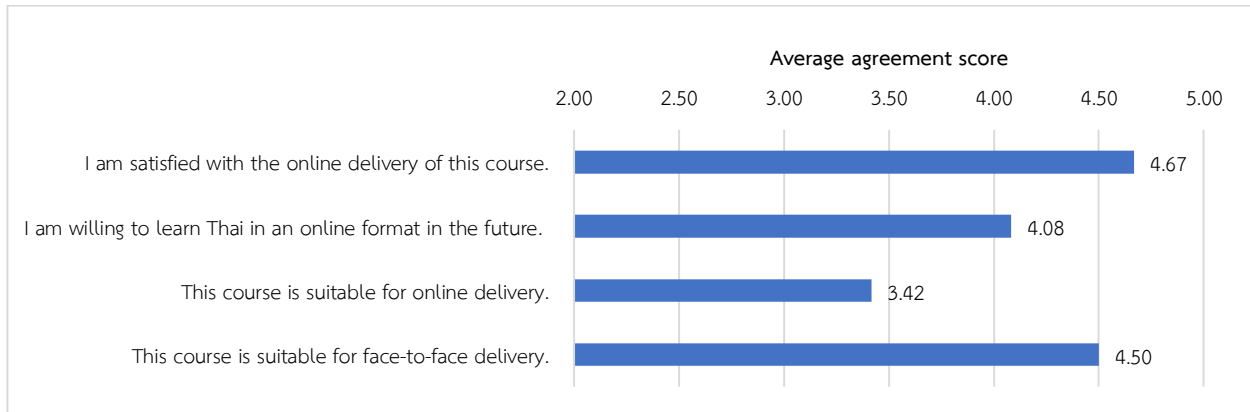
6. Discussion

6.1 Content of a beginner-level TFL course

One of the goals of this study was to understand the actual needs of students in order to improve the design and development of TFL courses suitable for beginners. Responses to Question 1 indicated the top three motivations for student enrollment in the *Thai for Beginners* course were 1) they enjoy learning languages, 2) they think knowing another language will be useful in the future, and 3) they want to work in or travel to Thailand. These responses and the fact that every student chose multiple reasons for their enrollment reflect the complexity and diversity of learning motivations. While it may not be possible for educators to design a language course that incorporates all student needs, through Question 2, we learned that students in the *Thai for Beginners* course shared similar learning outcome expectations. Specifically, an overwhelming majority of students (11 of 14 respondents) stated that they wanted to gain the skills necessary to have basic conversations in Thai.

With Question 3, I asked the students to rate the usefulness or value of each lesson. Notably, Lessons 16 through 18 of the *Thai for Beginners* course were presented in a dialog/conversation format. As we learned from Question 2, most students wanted to become conversant in the language. Therefore, it was expected that the students would rate Lessons 16 through 18 highly. The results, however, indicated the opposite trend, with students preferring Lessons 3 through 15, which focused on vocabulary and sentence structures, (4.81) to Lessons 16 through 18 (4.51). This unexpected result led us to consider a distinction between "conversational skills" and "conversational format". That is, while "conversational skills" are undoubtedly the goals of most students and should constitute a focus of the course, these skills should

be cultivated by suitable means, which may not necessarily be through lessons presented in dialog or "conversational format".

To gain these skills, students expressed the desire to master vocabulary, sentence structures and expressions applicable to and useful in real-life conversations. Students did not mind learning these linguistic elements by practicing sentence structures, as can be observed by the fact that Lessons 6, 7 and 12, which were all rated highly, had vocabulary and sentence structures as their primary foci. For example, the sentence "ห้องน้ำอยู่ที่ไหน" *(Where is the toilet?)* in Lesson 7 was taught by drilling and substituting ห้องน้ำ (*toilet*), เขา (*he/she*) and other words in the sentence pattern "...อยู่ที่ไหน" (*where is/are...?*). As the expressions covered in these lessons were highly relevant to daily life, they were useful to the students regardless of the teaching technique. In other words, as long as the content of the lesson advances the students' communicative needs, it can be presented in any suitable format, not only in conversation/dialog form.

Comparing Lesson 7 and Lesson 16, both of which covered the communicative function of asking for a location, we see a stark contrast between their preference ratings with Lesson 7 receiving an average score of 5.00 and Lesson 16 receiving a score of 4.29 which was the lowest among all lessons. The low rating of Lesson 16 was likely due to the fact that the same language structures had already been taught in the previous lesson. The repetition was deliberate, presenting previously learned contents in a new format in order to help students get used to the new dialog format quickly. But from the survey, it seems that students preferred not to learn the same structures repeatedly once the linguistic knowledge had been covered (Thitiya 2003).

The issue of whether to teach Thai script to beginners who are not majoring in Thai was addressed. Responses to Question 5 indicate that using the Latin alphabet to represent Thai sounds was the least preferred teaching technique in the *Thai for Beginners* course. In fact, when responding to Question 4, which was an open-ended type question, half of the students suggested that the course should teach the Thai alphabet. I propose that there are at least two reasons for this preference. One is curiosity. As we learned from Question 1, nearly all the students in the course stated that they liked learning languages. Thus, it is likely that their curiosity for the Thai language was not limited to its sound and structures, but included the alphabet and how sounds are represented in Thai writing. Knowing the Thai alphabet allows students to gain a more complete picture of the Thai language. Another reason is the importance of the Thai script to further study. Notably, although the Royal Thai General System of Transcription is the official system for rendering Thai words in the Latin alphabet ("Prakat Samnak Naiyokratthamontri" 1999), there are many systems for the romanization of Thai (Kanchanawan 2006; Wikipedia 2019), and a number of Thai dictionaries do not include romanization. As a result, students who only know Thai sounds through transcription systems, but not the writing, will face challenges when using dictionaries and other written materials (Hoonchamlong 2017, 296).

For these two reasons, it seems reasonable to introduce the Thai alphabet and writing system in beginner Thai courses. Nonetheless, since Thai script comprises 44 consonants and 32 vowels, memorizing them is a challenge for beginners, not to mention the complexity of Thai orthography, which requires time and effort to master. Hence, further study is required to determine how to effectively teach Thai writing to beginner learners. Topics that may warrant future research include when to introduce the script, whether all symbols should be taught at once or split into smaller segments and taught alternately with other content, which content should be omitted from the current syllabus to make time to teach reading and writing, and how to maintain a balance in the event some students find learning Thai writing too difficult or excessive for their needs while others want to learn it.

6.2 Language pedagogy

Students seem to prefer activities in which they have an active role. According to Question 5, students preferred participating in pair practice more than listening to the instructor's explanations or listening to audio files. Part of the reason for this preference is likely the online nature of the course. Specifically, the students' spatial environment often centered around digital screens, which threatens their sense of physical and psychological engagement, possibly making them feel isolated (Fleming, Hiple, and Du 2002, 51). To mitigate these feelings, pair work gives them the opportunity to interact with other people and allows them to actively engage as a communicator rather than a spectator, thereby increasing their sense of participation (Fleming, Hiple, and Du 2002; Oliver, Kellogg, and Patel 2012).

The students' preference for pair activities can also be explained by the Output Hypothesis (Swain 1985), which proposes that, for successful second language acquisition, learners must not only receive comprehensible input (Krashen 1981) but must also generate output that reflects meaningful use of their linguistic resources. In the *Thai for Beginners* course, several strategies were employed to trigger language output from students. First, after explaining a new word or structure, the instructor asked the students to create sentences using the newly learned feature. Second, as an exercise for each lesson, students were assigned a peer with whom they then practiced short dialogs. Third, some weekly homework assignments required that students create original sentences and record their voices. The goal of these activities was to encourage students to move from passively comprehending input to actively generating output. Further, as students were implicitly forced to focus on the means of expression, including but not limited to using the correct vocabulary and proper grammar while generating output, their existing knowledge and skills were further strengthened during the process.

Based on the above analysis, it is recommended that language classes include tasks that require the active participation of students. In addition to pair practice, students in the *Thai for Beginners* course also recommended activities such as group discussions and group assignments that would have allowed them to create their own dialogs on related topics. Teachers can also adopt other student-centered

communicative tasks (Hampel 2003, 29; McDonough and Mackey 2000; Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun 1993), such as "jigsaw/spot the difference" in which students are given a picture that is similar but not identical to that of their peers and must work with each other to determine how the pictures are different. With respect to homework, the students in this study preferred assignments that required active engagement, such as working on translations of novel sentences and discovering the meanings of Thai recordings on their own.

6.3 Online language instruction

For the most part, students were satisfied with the online teaching of *Thai for Beginners*. However, when given the choice of in-person or online delivery, they clearly showed a preference for the former, with an average score of 4.50, compared to the latter, with an average of 3.42. I propose that several factors may account for the lower preference for online learning. One involves the internet speed and stability problems that have continued since the early adoption of online synchronous learning (Chou 2001; Wang 2004a; Wang 2004b).

The plan at the beginning of the semester was for the *Thai for Beginners* course to be conducted in a video-conferencing format. However, due to the internet issues previously discussed herein, it was agreed that the course would be conducted using audio only. This resulted in a few drawbacks, including students not being able to communicate face-to-face with classmates or observe the instructor's body language and facial expressions. The negative responses to Question 11 regarding the lack of video images confirms the previous findings, i.e., visual cues, such as paralinguistic features and body language, are important in online learning environments (Hampel 2003, 30; Hampel and Hauck 2004, 69; Wang 2004a), and the reduced sense of interpersonal relationships in web-based courses affected students' level of comfort (Fleming, Hiple, and Du 2002; Heiser, Stickler, and Furnborough 2013). It will be worthwhile to investigate whether the students' rating of online learning in Question 12 would have been higher had they been able to engage in visual communication.

The difficulties of learning the alphabet and writing are also key issues with online Thai language instruction. In the current semester of the *Thai for Beginners* course, the limitation of internet speed for screen sharing and the lack of materials and equipment, such as writing pads, led to the removal of Thai script from the online course syllabus. As this decision did not seem to be welcomed by some students, and the university and the instructor are working to resolve these problems by increasing the internet speed and providing the necessary digital writing instruments.

Responses to Question 11 show that more than half of the students perceived the online learning environment to be less effective than an in-person, classroom learning environment. Sometimes students were interrupted by noises from family members or neighbors and became distracted. Therefore, it is

important for teachers to remind students to find a quiet space for learning and to let them know that they can ask the teacher to repeat sentences when they are momentarily distracted by the environment.

In contrast to the previous finding that obtaining and using advanced technology or new software may cause problems for students (Heiser, Stickler, and Furnborough 2013, 228; Jeffrey et al. 2011; van Deursen, van Dijk, and Peters 2011), in the current survey, none of the students indicated this difficulty. In fact, based on Questions 8 and 9, all the students who responded to the survey reported using two devices during the course. I think the following reasons may explain the discrepancy between the existing literature and the current finding. (1) First, the previous studies were conducted in the early 2010's, while the current study was conducted in 2020. During this period, "digital natives" (Prensky 2001) likely gained more competence in the use of technology. (2) Second, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the university shifted the learning to online platforms, forcing students to get familiar with online learning and the use of technology. (3) Third, the students live in Beijing, China, which is a modern city; hence, they are generally technologically literate and can afford the necessary devices. These results may be different for students from different backgrounds.

Despite the potential shortcomings of online learning discussed herein, several advantages were revealed through the responses to Question 10. More than half of the students indicated that the flexibility of learning wherever they were and the savings in time and cost normally associated with commuting were benefits of online learning. Furthermore, a third of students liked the fact that they could ask questions by sending private messages to the instructor, and 17% reported that they could focus better in the online environment compared to an in-person classroom environment.

However, the greatest advantage, as indicated by 83% of the students, is that they could obtain full lesson materials and class recordings. For example, in the current course, the instructor uses QQ Documents (a web-based word processor) to present materials and notes during the class. The application additionally provides a function for viewers to download the file for review without any extra action required by the instructor. With respect to recordings, software programs such as Zoom allow the host and attendees to record sessions; therefore it is virtually effortless for students to generate class recordings in an online learning environment. Because students seem to appreciate having extensive materials for review, I recommend that teachers make a point of sharing resources with their students. This also applies to offline and in-person classes; i.e., teachers should share slideshows, notes and extra materials with their students.

7. Conclusion

Through a student survey administered to the students enrolled in an online *Thai for Beginners* course, we gained a deeper understanding of students' attitudes towards course content, pedagogy and

online instruction. In general, the students' goal for the 16-week one-semester course was to gain the necessary skills for basic Thai conversation. This is likely why they found lessons that taught vocabulary, sentence structures and expressions frequently used in real life particularly useful. Diverging views were found regarding the teaching of Thai alphabet and writing. Specifically, half the students actively suggested that it should be included, while others stated that using the Latin alphabet was more suitable for beginner learners.

Regarding classroom activities, students favored pair practice exercises, especially when partners were randomly assigned each week. This may be because the pair practice exercises provide opportunities for students to interact with each other, thus increasing a sense of social presence in the online learning environment, giving them an opportunity to take an active role in communication and to practice what they had learned. Their preferred types of homework included translation of novel sentences and deciphering the meaning of Thai recordings.

Students preferred learning languages in person to learning online, possibly because in-person learning would allow them to communicate directly with their teachers and classmates, see the teacher's facial expressions and body language, avoid internet connection issues and learn Thai script more conveniently. A proper classroom also provides a better learning environment than a student's home. However, students also acknowledged that it was easier to access documents and recordings using the online learning environment, and they also liked the flexibility and convenience of learning from any location.

Finally, several limitations of this study should be noted. First, the survey data were collected from a class of only 20 Chinese undergraduate students. Students' individual preferences and cultural background may affect this article's conclusion. It is recommended that a similar survey be conducted with a larger group of learners from varying backgrounds. In addition, I did not conduct a follow-up interview after collecting the survey data in this study. Because the survey was anonymous and the semester had ended when data were analyzed, I was unable to get in touch with the students. In future studies, I suggest that researchers conduct an in-depth follow-up interview or prepare a more detailed questionnaire to find out reasons behind the students' ratings, such as why they gave lower scores to certain lessons or how they would like the course to be taught.

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