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Thai Language and Culture for Beginners, By Yuphaphann Hoonchamlong. 2007. Vol. I, 275 pp. + 1 DVD-video and 1 Audio (*mp3*) and Video clips; Vol. II, 175 pp. + 1 DVD Video and 1 Audio CD and Video clips. Manoa: University of Hawaii Press (distributor). Vol. 1 \$95; Vol. 2 \$85.

Thai Language and Culture for Beginners represents an ambitious effort to produce a much-needed, up-to-date, basic text for young college-age adults wanting to learn Thai, hopefully to use it for their own immediate purposes in Thailand. The U.S. Department of Education International Research and Studies Program Grant Award funded the materials produced during 2003-2006. The focus is mostly on the development of a learner's listening and speaking skills. The video clips of speakers in action also provide nuanced instruction in "body language" and how to negotiate social interactions and the challenges of living in Thailand, particularly in Bangkok. The cast of characters who act out the filmed dialogs include young college students (American, Vietnamese-American) learning to speak Thai with native Thais in many of the lessons. This all-in-one package is a rich offering of Thai language and culture contextualized with media and graphics—beautiful to the eye, and inviting to the ear.

The lessons are based on proficiency guidelines, i.e., daily life challenges such as how to dress appropriately in public, rent a place to live, use the "sky train," order and pay for food, etc. Book 1 has a lexicon of 910 Thai-English items and, in the reverse, 780 English-Thai. Book 2 has 1,495 Thai-English entries and 1254 English-Thai. Using this word count as an assessment metric, one would conclude that a beginning level target audience is pushed well beyond the beginner's stage and firmly into an intermediate level. The length and complexity of utterances in the dialogs tend to be somewhat difficult. Any instructor still would have the liberty of breaking longer sentences down into shorter speeches for the raw beginner. From a learning theory standpoint, many of the lessons amount to cognitive overload. This potential problem could be remedied by shortening the lessons and conversations (e.g., the 3-person, full page exchange on p. 60) into smaller chunks and focusing on fewer language points and functions, e.g., using

“*thâwray*” to deal with time, age, or money in a self-contained module. In the lesson vocabulary sections, which seem inordinately long for beginners, grouping the words according to syntactic categories, such as nouns and verbs, or semantic domains such as fruits, vegetable, clothing, etc. in a market lesson, would assist the learning process. The Vocabulary Index itself departs from the usual practice of indexing according to page number and sends the reader to the unit instead, which requires further searching for the exact page.

Video clips from commercial sources (TV ads) provide “authentic” use of the language. It is not clear from the credits who produced the media, which are of mixed quality. Moreover, the CD/DVDs are not user-friendly in that if you want to stop a segment, go on to the next segment, or back to the Main Menu, there is no arrow to click. It would be quite simple to insert these basic navigational aids to render the media easier to use.

In some of the lessons, the illustrations do not follow language lesson design principles when it comes to selecting a graphic relevant to the vocabulary being taught. For example, a picture of Kermit the Frog (p. 49) is supposed to be an example of someone who is “thin” in contrast to a “fat” Miss Piggy. The cultural notes are really superb and add to the pleasure of learning an “exotic” language like Thai. The grammar notes, which are often lacking, minimal, or inaccurate in many Thai language learning texts are a marked advance here. In the “Language Notes” sections (e.g., p. 120), examples of complete utterances are needed to show how the items are used in full, authentic contexts.

Because this is a brand new production, we can anticipate updates and supplements to these materials, either in print or on the author’s web site. Among the useful additions would be 1) a teacher’s guide, 2) a learner’s guide, 3) a variety of student exercises, such as interactive, online exercises, graded writing exercises, and task-based activities to use in the classroom or for outside practice. A summary of the goals of the course expressed in terms of task-based proficiency and/or the finer points of phonology and syntax would be very useful for teaching and assessment, especially for the OPI.

Not to be left out of the equation are the “returning” students of Thai who want to revive or brush up their rusty Thai, to see what’s new in Bangkok, to listen to a fairly recent pop song, or to fill in the gaps in their previous learning. For them, this two-volume set would be a most welcome companion. For the teacher and learner, the books are more than a simple series of lessons; they border on the encyclopedic. They are packed with information on the Thai language and culture and presented with evident forethought, judicious planning, and ambitious proficiency achievement goals. We are impressed and pleased!

Reviewer:

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