Chinese Language Teaching in Thailand at the Primary and Secondary Education Levels

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According to historical evidence, Thailand established relations with China since the Sukhothai dynasty. Since then, many Chinese migrated to Thailand and have become the biggest minority group in the country. Along with the migration of the Chinese people to Thailand came the study of the Chinese language. The study of the Chinese language was done by hiring a private tutor to teach at home, teaching at the temple, or sending children to study in China.

Through time political developments in both Thailand and China impacted the study of the Chinese language in Thailand, positively as well as negatively. Especially after the communist victory in China, Chinese language study was considered illegal in Thailand and anyone undertaking it was considered to be a communist or communist sympathizer. In 1975, Thailand and China re-established diplomatic relationship. The Chinese language gradually became more popular once again, and in 1992 the study of the Chinese language was made accessible to the public as China emerged as a major player in the world economy.

At present, Chinese has become as important as the English language. This is because China is fast becoming an economic powerhouse rivaling the US and Europe. At present, there are hundreds of millions of Chinese-speaking people. This reveals clearly why the study of the Chinese language is seen as more and more important today.

Chinese language study in Thailand has faced many problems or difficulties, which can be summarized as follows:

1. The high demand—judging from the number of newly opened Chinese language schools, both public and private, and from the number of Thai students studying in China.
2. The ineffectiveness of the teaching and learning—students cannot apply the knowledge to the real environment.
3. The lack of teachers. Currently, the Ministry of Education needs more than 1,000 volunteer teachers from China to facilitate in elementary schools, high schools, and universities.
4. The inappropriateness of the textbook used in Thailand, which is the same one that is being used to teach foreign students in China.
5. Teachers lack the competency to teach and attract students’ attention and enthusiasm

The Chinese Studies Center of the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, is well aware of the abovementioned problems and therefore has come up with the research project “Chinese Language Teaching in Thailand” with the support from Bangkok Bank Public Company Limited to study the state of the teaching situation, to make suggestions for solving the problems, and to contribute to the effective development of the teaching of Chinese in Thailand. All of these will lead to the country’s sustainable development.

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1. Number of schools and students

   In this research elementary and high schools that teach Chinese are categorized thus:

   1. “Chinese Schools” under the umbrella of the Office of the Private Education Commission (Questionnaire sent to 125 schools countrywide; 109 schools replied)
   2. Public schools under the umbrella of the Office of the Basic Education Commission, Commission on Higher Education, Bangkok Education Service Office and Thailand Local Administration. (Questionnaire sent to 458 schools countrywide; 354 schools replied)
   3. Private schools under the umbrella of the Office of the Private Education Commission, including Chinese schools. (Questionnaire sent to 138 schools countrywide; 111 schools replied)

   “Chinese schools” were the original and traditional teaching sites. Most of these schools have been teaching Chinese for more than fifty years and have a total of 78,700 students. Public and private schools have been offering courses on the Chinese language after it became a subject in the national entrance examinations in 1998. Currently, they have about 250,000 students. In all there are 328,700 elementary and high school students.

2. Chinese language teaching curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Chinese school</th>
<th>Public school</th>
<th>Private school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>compulsory</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>compulsory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>compulsory</td>
<td>Elective subject/club</td>
<td>Compulsory/elective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>compulsory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>compulsory</td>
<td>Study scheme/elective subject/club</td>
<td>Compulsory/elective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   All students are required to learn Chinese in the Chinese schools, beginning at the elementary level. On average, 2-16 hours per week (mostly 1 hour per day or 5 days per week) are spent on Chinese language teaching. The difference in the amount of hours spent teaching reflects the importance the school administrators attached to the study of the Chinese language.

   However, Chinese language study in public schools is optional. It generally begins in middle school. Schools that offer the Chinese language as a concentration will begin teaching it in high school, mostly two hours per week.

   Lastly, private schools generally follow the same pattern as Chinese schools. But some of them may offer Chinese language classes as electives during middle school.

   Since these schools do not give equal importance to the teaching and learning of Chinese, many problems are bound to follow. As mentioned above learning Chinese is a compulsory part of primary education in Chinese schools and private schools. On the other hand, public schools offer Chinese as a concentration during high school. Middle school thus constitutes the ‘missing years.’ As such, students are bound to lose their time and start...
Chinese language lessons anew when they change level or school. In other words, they cannot continue their lessons accordingly.

3. The Chinese textbook

The textbook is another significant factor affecting students’ ability to learn. If the textbook is appropriate for each age/level of learning, it will systemically develop students’ language skills and attract their interest. The research found that most schools use the Hanyu Jiaocheng textbook set, which is written and published by the Beijing Language and Culture University. This is one reason why students cannot learn new lessons; when they change class level they have to start the same lessons all over again.

Moreover, the textbook has several flaws. For example, there’s no color or illustration to attract students. The textbook contents are quite long. The lesson for each chapter can last more than 5 hours. However, they largely talk about Chinese culture, thus requiring teachers who are knowledgeable about China. Even teachers who are native speakers not infrequently find it difficult to explain this aspect of the contents to Thai students.

The Chinese schools have long been supported by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (侨办). They are given the “Hanyu” textbook set for free. The strong points of this textbook include its contents (e.g., pertaining to ethics) and colorful illustrations, which are attractive to children. However, the weak points include the fact that the textbook was created for American students, the concise substance without explanations, etc.

Recognizing these problems, the Thai Ministry of Education cooperated with The Office of Chinese Language Council International (HANBAN) to create a new textbook series called “Chinese Experience” for primary and secondary school levels. The advantages of this textbook series include its contents, which draw upon Thai culture, history, personalities, and society, the substance that emphasizes on students’ interaction, the colorful illustrations, the games to build language skills, and the opportunity for teachers to give their feedback to the textbook publisher via its website.

However, this textbook also has disadvantages: it is an incomplete series (2 books per level already released) so teachers are unable to make long term teaching plans; its overemphasis is on China; expensive software program (also schools without PCs cannot use it), and so on. Hopefully, the Ministry of Education will try to resolve these shortcomings.

4. Chinese language teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Chinese schools</th>
<th>Public schools</th>
<th>Private schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai teachers</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese teachers</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that the number of Chinese and Thai teachers in each type of school is roughly proportionate. Chinese schools have the highest ratio of 1 school to 4 teachers, private schools of 1 to 2, and public schools of 1 to 1.5.
In terms of certification, the research found that 30% of the teachers have a Chinese language teaching certification, 20% have a bachelor’s degree, 25% have no certification and the remaining 25% have other kinds of certification.

Interviewing Chinese language teachers, we found that in the first phase teaching was done by those who had previous knowledge on the Chinese language or those who took summer courses in both Thailand and China. They were pioneers who dared to teach the Chinese language even though they were not formally trained in this area.

5. The output of Chinese language teaching

Students’ knowledge estimation is one of the most important problems in public and private schools. Since their administrators often have no knowledge on the Chinese language, they don’t know the specific ways to carry out the estimation of their students’ knowledge. All they can do is to look at the teachers’ ability and the students’ assignments. On the other hand, the Chinese schools don’t have this problem because they have an administration style that is different from general schools; that is, they are run by two principals, Chinese and Thai principals. The former is in charge of Chinese language teaching.

The researcher tried to evaluate students’ knowledge by testing the number of Chinese vocabularies they know. On the whole, they can be divided into two groups: those with poor knowledge (less than 200 words) and those with good knowledge (400 words). The main factor contributing to such difference seems to be the number of hours spent learning Chinese each week—from 2 to a maximum of 16 hours (in Chinese schools).

Suggestions

At present, Chinese language teaching in Thailand has expanded widely. It is no longer restricted to Chinese schools as in the past. Many public and private schools have offered Chinese language courses. In this respect, Chinese is recognized as an important foreign language like French and Japanese.

Since there is no standardized curriculum, each school devises its curriculum autonomously. This causes a lot of inconsistencies and incompatibilities. However, many schools are offering Chinese lessons without having adequate expertise and carefully planned study schemes because they simply want to tap on the latest trend.

As a result of the abovementioned problems, the following issues need to be addressed.

1) Curriculum, textbook and media development

A standardized curriculum is required. And so are appropriate textbooks and an effective evaluation process and general system that enable students to pursue advanced levels more easily.
2) Faculty/staff development

Schools should recruit highly qualified teachers or those with high potentials, and provide them with job security.

3) Administration development

Although Chinese language teaching seems to be a rising trend, it appears that some schools that have jumped in the bandwagon are far from ready to undertake it. As a minimum standard, schools should emphasize quality over quantity. A committee on Chinese language teaching should be established to coordinate between teaching quality development units. We cannot always count on the support from China. Accordingly, Thai teachers need to improve their quality. Rajabhat University should seriously produce graduates to teach the Chinese language.

The “Chinese language teaching in Thailand” research project touches on primary and secondary education, vocational education, higher education, non-formal education, Thai-Chinese educational cooperation and practical meeting records in each level. For more information, please contact Chinese Studies Center, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Tel: 0-2218-7416-17, fax: 0-2255-1760, website: www.csc.iias.chula.ac.th, e-mail: csc_n303@hotmail.com