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Challenges in Teaching Thai Writing Skills: A Case Study of Difficulties Faced by Chinese Teachers in Yunnan Universities, China

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Abstract

This study has employed a qualitative approach by semi-structured in-depth interviews to investigate the difficulties of teaching Thai writing skills at universities in Yunnan Province, China. The results show that sentence structures are the biggest difficulty in Thai writing, specifically Thai complex sentences writing.

Keywords: Thai Writing Skills, Thai Sentence Structures, Thai Language Teaching

Introduction

As the international economic and cultural exchanges between China and Southeast Asian countries become more frequent, learning Southeast Asian languages will be crucial for Chinese students. Thai language has become one of the most popular foreign languages among Chinese students, especially those from Southwestern China (Hou, 2019). By the year 2023, there are 48 universities in China offering Thai language teaching, of which 18 universities are in Yunnan Province, accounting for 37.5% of the country's total.

Dali University, a Yunnan-based institution, introduced its Thai language program in 2010, which was recently recognized as a first-class undergraduate major construction site by the Ministry of Education. (Thai Language Major Introduction, 2022). The writing skill, which is one of the four fundamental language skills, is essential for every student in the program as



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it assumes the highest order on a scale of hierarchy and develops only after the former three have been learned or acquired (Pitamber, 2019). However, through the analysis of the final exam results of the Basic Thai course at Dali University for three consecutive years from 2019 to 2022, it was found that most of the students had the lowest scores in the writing part. The percentages of the score show that no student gets the full point (20 points), accounting for 0.00%, and 81.94% of the students who scored are in the lower middle grades.

Writing is a multifaceted activity, and one of these facets is skilled sentence structure (Beers, 2007). Writing well-organized paragraphs requires proper sentence structures, which clarify and communicate ideas (Pinker, 2015). Mastering sentence structures is crucial for developing strong writing skills.

This study aims to find out what the biggest difficulties are that Chinese teachers in Yunnan universities face when they teach Thai writing skills to Thai major Chinese students.

Research Objectives

To analyze the difficulties of teaching Thai writing skills at universities in Yunnan Province, China.

Research Scope

This study investigates Chinese teachers at 18 universities offering Thai language majors in Yunnan Province, China, by the year 2023.

Methodology

1. Research Method

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study. The main research method for collecting the data is the semi-structured in-depth interview by phone, which provides detailed information, understanding, and reliability in understanding interviewees' views and attitudes (Boonsongsak, 2022). The interview guidelines were developed based on the seven basic elements of teaching: teacher, student, teaching objective, course, teaching method, teaching environment, and teaching feedback (Li, 1991) and the National Teaching Guide for Undergraduate Foreign Language Majors in Chinese Colleges and Universities (Ministry of Education Foreign Language and Literature Teaching Guidance Committee, 2020).

2. Research Process

1) Determine the objectives and scope of the study; 2) Identify the target groups for the semi-structured interview; 3) Design the interview questions; 4) Determine how, when, and



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where to conduct the interview; 5) Conduct interviews; 6) Transcribe the audio or videos from interviews; 7) Code the data; 8) Analyze the data, and finally; 9) Conclude the data.

3. Data Collection

The data was collected from the transcription of the semi-structured in-depth interviews to obtain Chinese teachers' views on the difficulties they face teaching Thai writing skills to Thai major Chinese students in Yunnan universities.

4. Data Analysis

A content analysis was applied to determine the presence of themes concerning difficulties in teaching Thai writing skills in the data. The steps of data analysis are as follows: 1) Transcribe the recorded interviews and organize the obtained data; 2) Identify common themes and notable insights; 3) Apply content analysis techniques through thematic analysis to extract difficulties in teaching Thai writing skills.

Results

By using thematic analysis to extract difficulties in teaching Thai writing skills from the interviews of Chinese teachers in 18 universities in Yunnan Province, the findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Teacher's Background

They had diverse backgrounds, with 88.9% of graduates holding master's degrees and 11.1% holding Ph.D. degrees, with varying majors in Asian and African Languages and Literature, Education Management, Linguistics, and Teaching Thai as a Foreign Language. Most of their teaching experiences were focused on improving teaching skills, with no content specifically related to Thai writing skills. Regarding teaching experience, 77.8% of the teachers have 5–10 years of experience, while 22.2% have more than 10 years of experience.

2. Student's Learning

According to 83.3% of teachers, Chinese students experienced difficulties in learning Thai sentence structure. 61.1% of teachers considered Thai sentence structure to be better for Thai language teaching at the primary level because lower-grade students were more interested in learning grammar than upper-grade students. In addition, 72.2% of teachers would advise students to preview the materials before class.

3. Teaching Objectives

The teachers' teaching objectives were to compare Chinese and Thai, to understand Thai sentence structures, to improve language and writing skills, to understand Thai word formation and classification. All the teachers wanted to compare Chinese and Thai grammar



The 16th National and International Conference
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20 March, 2024

and sentence structures. 61.1% of teachers wanted to teach language skills. Some of them understood Thai pronunciation norms, word creation, and classification as instructional goals. Most students met instructional objectives at a moderate level.

4. Course

According to interviews, 88.9% of colleges provide 24-hour courses, but only 11.1% offer 32-hour courses, which equals the hours that universities offer. All teachers thought the 32-hour courses were suitable, while the 24-hour courses were insufficient.

The problem with the textbooks, as noticed by teachers, was insufficient examples and tasks.

5. Teaching Methods

Teaching methods are mainly traditional, such as lecture, problem-based, discussion-based, and task-based methods. These methods emphasize basic knowledge, gradual progress, and normality and have been practiced for a long time. However, they lack innovation as they are based on board lectures, are teacher-centered, and focus on normative and disciplinary approaches.

6. Teaching Environment

The interviews revealed that 88.9% of teachers felt that the teaching atmosphere in the classroom was dull, even though the teaching equipment was available. 83.3% of the teachers used the Rain Classroom software for instructional assistance. Besides, they did not organize extracurricular technologies for students to learn grammar.

7. Teaching Feedback

All teachers collect teaching feedback in the following aspects: classroom performance, homework, exams, and teaching evaluation.

The teaching feedback for this course had six main issues: difficulty in understanding and applying sentence structure rules; confusion of terms; difficulty in correcting errors; lack of practice; and difficulty in memorizing sentence structure rules. 100.0% of the students had trouble understanding sentence structure rules, 100.0% had trouble applying them, 55.6% were confused about sentence structure terms, 55.6% had trouble correcting errors, 27.8% lacked practice, and 22.3% had trouble memorizing sentence structure rules.

On the other hand, according to interviews, the difficulties faced in teaching Thai writing skills are mainly due to students' difficulty recognizing Thai sentence structures. All students could not determine Thai complex sentence structures; 27.8% could not determine Thai compound sentence structures; and 11.1% could not determine Thai simple sentence structures. Thai complex sentences are considered the most difficult part of Thai sentence



The 16th National and International Conference
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20 March, 2024

structures to teach.

To sum up, the difficulties Chinese teachers face in Thai writing skills are centered on the lack of training for teachers, the low interest of students in learning, the lack of class hours, problems with teaching methods and teaching activities. According to the teaching content and teaching feedback, the biggest difficulty is learning Thai sentence structures, specifically Thai complex sentences writing.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study was conducted through semi-structured interviews about the difficulties of teaching Thai writing at 18 universities in Yunnan, China. The main challenge that Chinese teachers in Yunnan universities face when they teach Thai writing skills to Thai major Chinese students is teaching Thai sentence structures writing. Specifically, teaching Thai complex sentence structures writing is the most challenging part of this task.

The difficulty of teaching Thai sentence structures is also found in previous studies, as Wang and Liu (2021) pointed out that the challenges encountered in the process of learning Thai are the lack of basic grammar knowledge and the lack of understanding of Thai sentence structures, and Yang (2023) found that Thai has some unique characteristics that are different from Chinese grammar, which leads to Chinese students' confusion of some similar knowledge points in the process of learning Thai grammar, especially in the Thai sentences study.

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The 16th National and International Conference
"Global Goals, Local Actions: Looking Back and Moving Forward 2024"
20 March, 2024

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