

Learning Languages

Since Babel, learning other languages has been a challenge for people all over the world. For me, I grew up in Germany from about age 6-11, so as a child that was not “easy” but “pretty easy” compared to an adult trying to tackle German. We spoke English at home, and initially I went to a British military school in Germany for one term and picked up a British accent. That wore off, and I got back to an American accent after going to a German school for several years. Then, I went to Costa Rica on a mission trip in high school for two months, but didn’t pick up much Spanish, except some basic phrases. I had a year of Greek in college (but it was Greek to me and to my professor), and then studied two more years of Greek during covid with our boys, and picked up much more than in college.

As for the Thai language, I taught English at a college in Thailand from 1997-99, but only learned very basic Thai-- enough to order food, and greet and thank people. Thai, like Chinese, is a tonal language, so one can say the same syllable, for example, “ma,” but in about 5 different tones (high, low, rising, falling, neutral) it can have five completely different meanings. The word “glai” in a different tone in Thai can mean either “far” or “near,” and for most westerners these tones are very difficult to discern whether hearing them or especially when speaking them! So, is it “far” or “near?”

Japanese

In spite of Thai having pretty easy grammar, the TONES are a huge barrier for many foreigners to get “far” (“glai”) in Thai. After two years in Thailand I thought Japanese would be easier, since it has no tones, so I went to teach English in Japan for two years at a college there. Indeed, the pronunciation was pretty easy, but the grammar was quite complex. So, again, I didn’t get very far beyond being able to order food, or greetings, and saying thank you, and other short phrases. One time in Japan, I tried practicing my Japanese, by asking a boy with his dog, “Anata no inu ga nan sai desu ka?” (How old is your dog?). The boy looked at his Dad and said, “Papa! Eigo wakarimasen” (Dad, I don’t understand English!).

I don’t think my pronunciation was that bad, but maybe the boy was “listening to my face” (seeing a foreigner and being a little shocked), rather than listening to my words.

Back to Thai

Anyway, after two years of complex Japanese grammar, I prayed, and decided I’d better give Thai another shot, studying it more earnestly and diligently this time. So, in 2003 I came back to Thailand and studied Thai for about 7 months. I get easily bored in classrooms (in total I studied Thai in classrooms for two weeks at two different places and times before that), so I made my own study program, which had 4 parts to it, give or take...

The first part was to buy Thai conversation books with cassette tapes (no CDs for that then). There were four books from beginner to advanced levels in this series, with tapes. I went through all four of those books and tapes.

Part two was to listen to Thai news for one hour per day, while taking notes of words heard frequently. I also tried listening to Thai movies or dramas, but there was too much slang, and it was spoken very quickly, so I decided on Thai news, which uses more standardized vocabulary and it was easier to catch some of the words spoken.

Part three was to listen to the Thai Bible on cassette tape. Here I had an advantage, because I knew the content of what they were saying from knowing the English of each chapter, so I could better guess what words fit with what meanings. My disadvantage there was that the Thai Bible uses the “royal language,” so it’s very formal, sort of like reading the KJV, but eventually I learned those formal words, too.

Part four was listening to popular music. Usually, I only like to listen to Christian music, but at that time I wanted to know the commonly used terms so I could communicate with people and share the gospel with them. I bought various VCDs (not DVDs at that time) of musicians. Many were too fast, or not very nice music to listen to, but I found one rock singer, named Sek LOSO (LOSO stands for “low society”, so music for the common people, not necessarily the “high society” folk), who sang very clearly, and the music was pretty good, too (though worldly in content). The VCD’s had subtitled words in Thai to go with the videos, so it helped me practice reading Thai, and also I could pause to look up new words in my dictionary, while listening to the right pronunciations as well.

At that time I did pray for Sek LOSO’s salvation, since I was listening to his music regularly, and learning Thai from him. Early this year (2025), I found out from a friend that Sek LOSO had been arrested and sentenced to about 3 years in prison. It was the final verdict from a case from about 2019, when LOSO shot a gun into the air during a New Year’s event, and I think there were drugs involved, and talking back to police, etc. Being in prison does tend to make people more open to the gospel, so please pray for Sek LOSO (and his family outside of prison) that his time in prison will not be in vain.

More on the 4-Pronged Approach

Using this “four pronged” approach I tried to learn 10 new words each day (in about a 7-month window), which I wrote down in both Thai and English spelling in a notebook. I would ask various Thai people I met how to pronounce these words, and sometimes recorded them saying the words onto a cassette recording, which I reviewed later.

There was overlap of vocabulary from 1. The language books; 2. Thai news; 3. The Thai Bible; and 4. Popular music. So, where there was overlap, I got much reinforcement and

review of those words. But, in each of those categories, there were also unique words—in the Thai news they would use words like “government,” or “prime minister,” which were completely absent in the Sek LOSO songs, just as there was “royal language” in the Thai Bible that was mostly absent in categories 1 and 4, but sometimes appeared in the Thai news. So, all in all I got a broad spectrum of vocabulary, while also learning more about Thai grammar (which is much easier than Japanese grammar—and though Japanese grammar was “tough,” I would have to say Greek grammar is “tougher still”).

Finally, after about 7 months, I had a pretty good foundation in the Thai language, and then built on it from there. I’ve now been in Thailand for almost 24 years. I’ve read through the whole Thai Bible once now (which is more than many Thai Christians can say, sad to say), and maybe if I live another quarter century will try to read it again (for now I’m reading through the German for the second time).

Anyway, it’s amazing the varieties of languages that God has given people. In my first two years in Thailand I thought Thai was too difficult. Then, in Japan I thought that was too difficult. But, by God’s grace He helped me become “pretty” fluent in Thai, though the tones are still a challenge (Saying words in context I’m mostly understood well. But, if I have to say a single word I may or may not get the right tone—nonetheless even getting the wrong tone usually results in laughter rather than offense, so it’s mostly a “win/win” situation; and there are other words or phrases to express what I’m trying to say instead of the difficult to pronounce ones).

Over the years I have said some “offensive” or “startling” things unintentionally at various times. One example is when I translated for our friend Bill Cook, who in his testimony liked to say “I love riding horses.” The word for horse with another tone can be dog, and the word for ride with another tone can be “poop.” I’m not sure which combination of tones I communicated, but usually when I translated that phrase, there would be laughter! The rest of his testimony aside from that sentence was well understood though, without confusion, even in my imperfect translations!

Micah at age 10, is already an expert at the Thai tones. Learning as a child is a huge advantage. But, if God calls people as adults to communicate in another language, we trust He will help us, too.

Right now Isaiah is fluent in Thai and perhaps at about 75% in English and Lahu. He’s also currently learning Korean. Please pray for him regarding that. If it is God’s will then I believe he will understand and learn quickly. But, if not, then please pray for him to use the languages he already knows to speak the truth of God’s Word in love and with wisdom, wherever God calls him to serve.

Wherever in the world you are now, may God help you to “debabel/unbabel,” and understand rightly those around you, so that there will be no barriers to them coming to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

On the other hand, the anti-Christ will use languages against people to “unite” them under false banners, to have “unity” in false ideas.

Prison Ministry

From March until May we taught in 12 prisons in various provinces of Thailand. In September we made a trip to teach in 8 prisons, including 3 that we’d never been to before. Then, in October and November we had our first 5-day conference at a prison on both the men’s and the women’s sides, at a prison where only about 10% of them were Christians, but now there are many more who are interested to read the Bible and even some who have made a commitment to follow Jesus. One lady who raised her hand as someone who believes in evolution, the next month asked us what to do when they are called to do “chanting,” because now she wants to become a Christian! On the men’s side they had many good questions and interest in our five days there, too. Isaiah came with us for two of those days, and gave some very good, short messages.

Before that 5-day conference, we brought Micah into a prison which has many young and strong believers, and the Christian men there helped me to baptize him on September 22nd.

For the 5-day conference we printed out the books of Matthew, John, Ephesians, and Daniel for all of them (about 40 men and 30 women).

During the last week of November, Khae and I flew to another province, while Micah stayed with a friend so he could go to school. During that trip we were able to get into 3 prisons (one for the first time), and had about two hours to teach the Bible with songs in between, for 3 groups of about 80 people each time. One of those groups was only men, and for the two other groups they brought the men and women together to listen. Here’s a picture of Khae and I with some gospels of Matthew, and other books to hand out at one of those prisons. We also handed out a few full Bibles in these prisons.

Quarter Marathon

And, just after getting back from that trip, we took 5 of our Saturday/Sunday class children for a fun run. Three of them with Khae and I ran a 10.5 K, and Micah and one friend ran a 5K. One of these boys got a special prize for running the 10.5 K in under one hour. He was 3rd place in his category of 12-15 year-olds (and he did that running in flip flops!). On the same day, but in Bangkok, the queen of Thailand ran a half marathon (21 kms) with a very good time, and Kipchoge from Kenya, the world record holder for a full marathon ran in that, too, but for him 21Ks was probably just a “warm-up.” Our 10.5K started at 6 am, and

the 5K at 6:15 am. The boys stayed in one room together the night before and watched various episodes of Superbook in Thai, as well as Sean the Sheep; and then after the run on Sunday we went to church together. The Moms of three of these boys wear the long-neck rings. Their tribe (Kayan) is mostly unreached, but we have the privilege to teach them the Bible every week.

Mali and Jude

Mali and Jude are still active in reaching their own tribe, the Lahu people, as well as the Palaung tribe. They don't speak that language, but now have one young man working with them who is a young believer, and he helps them translate from Thai to Palaung. Here are some pictures.

Thank you for your prayers and support.

Grace and Peace in Christ, Scott, Khae, Micahberekiah, and Isaiah