

2. **Stories from Madison, Wisconsin:** The Thai Table for teaching the Thai language to farangs [westerners]

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Although many states in the U.S. currently are experiencing snowstorms, the residents of Madison are used to snow, so their lives continue on normally. There are relatively few outdoor activities on campus because it is the winter season, but the university at Madison still has many interesting indoor activities for students including teaching music, teaching languages, arts, dancing, etc.



The Thai Table has been operating for some time, an activity where Thai students teach the Thai language to international [non-Thai] students free of charge. Every Monday at 12:15 at Memorial Union beside Lake Mendota is where Thai and other students meet to talk.

Today there were only two, Anthony Irwin and Jackie Wice, both masters degree students. Piyanut Sripanawongsa or "La", a graduate of UW-Madison helped with the teaching. If students have class conflicts, they just don't show up that time. Sometimes there are many students; sometimes there are few.

Anthony Irwin, a 27 year old graduate student in Asian Studies is fluent in Thai. He related that, "I became interested in Thai five years ago when I was a volunteer teacher of autistic students at Chiang Rai where I worked for a year. It was necessary for me to practice Thai with the teachers, students, and other Thai friends. It was like an exchange with people who could not speak much English. The house where I stayed was at an orchard. A gardener who lived there, too, a man I respected like a father. He could not speak English, so I had to talk to him in Thai. I had to practice speaking Thai so I could communicate with him. Even though I did not study speaking, reading, and writing Thai in a classroom setting I learned to speak relatively well just by listening."

"When I returned to the U.S., I was interested in studying Thai seriously, so I applied to the University of Wisconsin-Madison masters degree program. I admit that although I can speak Thai, when I really started studying speaking, reading, and listening it was difficult, especially the writing and reading. Now I still make errors when I write. When I complete my masters degree this year, I will study for a Ph.D. I have applied to the Department of Cultures and Religions of Asia at the University of Pennsylvania. I plan to be a university instructor on graduation."

Anthony also told me that what he liked about Thailand was the flexible character of Thai people. When there is a difficult problem, they are able to overcome it. That is different from American people who, when they are faced with a problem, tend to get anxious. In addition, he likes the Thai culture, especially festivals like Loy Krathong [the Boat Floating Festival].

"I am particularly interested in Buddhism. When I begin studying for my Ph.D., I will have to conduct research in Thailand and I plan to ordain as a monk for one season at Chiang Rai. Although I am Jewish, I think that Buddhism is very interesting."

"I am shy. I don't talk much," said Jackie Wice or "Jaenjira", a 24 year old graduate student currently doing research on education in Thailand. She said she is very interested in the Thai language. She had been a high school exchange student in Thailand for one year. When she returned to the U.S. and went to college, she studied the Thai language. She also applied for an exchange program at the International College, Mahidol University for an additional six months. That gave her the opportunity to travel around many Thai provinces, and to learn more about Thai culture and the Thai language.

"What first got me interested in the Thai language was when at 16 I went to compete in a sports tournament at Ohio. There I ate at a Thai restaurant and I liked it. That inspired me to study the Thai language, so I applied to be an exchange student in Thailand."

Jackie added that when she completes her bachelors degree, she plans to study further in the field of education so she can be a teacher. She plans to apply to teach in Thailand.

"La" added, "I have joined this group only two times. There are many Thai students helping teach Thai to international [non-Thai] students who are studying Thai. The focus is mostly on speaking. The international [non-Thai] students are already interested in Thai culture. Most have been to Thailand before. Having international [non-Thai] students study Thai is good because learning languages is very beneficial."

In addition to the Thai Table, the University of Wisconsin-Madison has also offered courses in the Thai language and Thai history for many years. There are Thai teachers and not a small number of international [non-Thai] students who are interested in studying. Kanikar Changprasert Elbow from the Department of Language and Culture of Asia, College of Letters and Science, said that she had been teaching Thai for 5 or 6 years, with 30 to 40 students each year on average. Some years there are more than 50. In the past, most were graduate students, both masters and Ph.D., but now there are more undergraduates because the university requires them to study a foreign language for two semesters. Students think that Thai is easier than other languages; but when they take the course, they find it is difficult. Some have to switch to another language.

The curriculum there is different from Thailand, as the students are interested in specific issues. The instructor has to design a lesson plan that stimulates their interest, like Thai history and Thai culture. As to reading, writing, speaking, and listening, those are lessons everyone must study. Students have to learn to create sentences. They learn by making mistakes rather than by memorizing material.

Kanikar said further that she was happy to be teaching Thai to international [non-Thai] students because Thai is our language. She wants more international [non-Thai] students to know the Thai language as sometimes foreigners have a negative image of Thailand. When students study the Thai language, they will tell others about the positive aspects of Thailand.

Living abroad, when I hear someone speak the Thai language I feel warm and comfortable. When the person speaking is a foreigner, I am even more proud of being a Thai!