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FROM CHALLENGES TO FACILITATING FACTORS: THAI LANGUAGE LEARNING AMONG FOREIGN RESIDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Abstract— With the increasing number of foreign residents living in Thailand, the ability to use Thai has become essential for daily communication, social participation, and workplace interaction. Previous research on Thai as a foreign language has largely focused on identifying learner needs, motivations, or linguistic difficulties, often examining these aspects in isolation. This study moves beyond identifying challenges by examining how learner-perceived facilitating factors interact to support Thai language learning among foreign residents. Adopting a learner-centred perspective, the study investigates (1) the challenges foreign residents experience in learning Thai, (2) the facilitating factors they perceive as supporting more effective learning, and (3) the relationship between challenges and facilitating factors. Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered to 51 foreign residents living in Thailand. The questionnaire included two open-ended questions focusing on learning challenges and learner-perceived facilitating factors. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis, followed by a mapping analysis to examine the alignment between challenge categories and facilitating factors. The findings reveal that foreign residents face multiple interconnected challenges, particularly in relation to Thai tones and pronunciation, the Thai writing system, grammatical and lexical difficulties, instructional and resource-related issues, and contextual constraints such as limited time and practice opportunities. Learner-perceived facilitating factors include practice-based and experiential learning, instructional quality and teacher expertise, structured curriculum design, a focus on functional daily-life communication, access to learning resources, and exposure to Thai in everyday environments. The analysis demonstrates that effective Thai language learning is shaped by the combined influence of pedagogical, experiential, and environmental factors rather than by isolated instructional solutions. The study contributes a conceptual model that highlights the interaction between challenges and facilitating factors, offering implications for the design of Thai language programmes for foreign residents.

Keywords—Thai language learning challenges, Learner perceptions, Thai as a foreign language

INTRODUCTION

With increasing global mobility, a growing number of foreign residents live and work in Thailand, where the ability to use Thai plays a crucial role in daily communication, workplace interaction, and social participation (**Boonmee & Meekrua-iam, 2023; Tongboon, 2012**). For these individuals, learning Thai is not limited to formal classroom instruction but is closely connected to everyday experiences such as interacting with colleagues, accessing services, and engaging with local communities (**Boonmee & Meekrua-iam, 2023**). As a result, Thai language learning among foreign residents represents a complex process shaped by linguistic demands, instructional conditions, and real-life usage contexts.

Previous research on Thai as a foreign language has primarily focused on identifying learner needs, motivations, or specific linguistic difficulties, particularly in relation to the tonal system, the Thai writing system, and grammatical differences between Thai and learners' first languages (**Paicharoen, 2016; Sakchaisomboon, 2022**). While this body of research has provided valuable insights into the challenges encountered by learners (**Haruna & Klinkesorn, 2022**), it has tended to treat these challenges as isolated problems. Less attention has been paid to how learners themselves perceive effective conditions for addressing these difficulties, or to how challenges and supportive conditions interact in shaping Thai language learning in everyday contexts (**Sangounpong & Wichiranon, 2012**).

In response to this gap, the present study adopts a learner-centred perspective to examine both the challenges faced by foreign residents in learning Thai and the factors they perceive as facilitating more effective learning. This study moves beyond identifying challenges by examining how learner-perceived facilitating factors interact to support Thai language learning among foreign residents. Rather than examining challenges or facilitating conditions in isolation, this study conceptualises Thai language learning as an interaction between learner-perceived challenges and facilitating factors. This perspective reflects the complexity of language learning as a dynamic process influenced by pedagogical, experiential, and environmental elements.

Drawing on qualitative survey data from foreign residents living in Thailand, the study employs thematic analysis to identify key patterns in learner responses. The analysis focuses on major categories of challenges, including tonal and pronunciation difficulties, Thai script and orthographic challenges, grammatical and lexical issues, instructional and resource-related problems, and contextual and personal constraints (**Chen, 2019; Tanpraphan, 2019**). In parallel, the study examines learner-perceived facilitating factors such as practice-based and experiential learning, instructional quality and teacher expertise, structured curriculum design, a focus on functional daily-life communication, access to learning resources, and exposure to Thai in the language environment (**Paicharoen, 2016; Sakchaisomboon, 2022**). The relationship between these challenges and facilitating factors is further examined through a mapping approach, leading to the development of a conceptual model of Thai language learning among foreign residents.

By explicitly aligning learner-identified challenges with facilitating factors, this study offers a conceptual account of Thai language learning that captures the interactive and context-sensitive nature of language development beyond the classroom. The findings contribute to applied linguistics research on Thai as a foreign language and provide insights for educators and programme designers seeking to support foreign residents' functional use of Thai in daily life.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

In line with this focus, the study addresses the following research objectives:

1. To identify the key challenges faced by foreign residents in learning Thai, with attention to linguistic, instructional, and contextual dimensions.
2. To identify learner-perceived facilitating factors that support more effective Thai language learning among foreign residents.
3. To conceptualise the interaction between challenges and learner-perceived facilitating factors in Thai language learning among foreign residents.

Research Questions

These objectives are addressed through the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What challenges do foreign residents face in learning Thai?
- **RQ2:** What facilitating factors do foreign residents perceive as supporting more effective Thai language learning?
- **RQ3:** How can the interaction between challenges and learner-perceived facilitating factors be conceptualised to explain Thai language learning among foreign residents?

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a questionnaire-based qualitative research design to examine Thai language learning among foreign residents in Thailand. The study focused on learners' perspectives by collecting qualitative data through two open-ended questions addressing (1) challenges experienced in learning Thai and (2) learner-perceived factors that could make Thai language learning easier or more effective. This design was selected to directly address the

study's three research objectives: identifying challenges, identifying facilitating factors, and conceptualising the interaction between challenges and facilitating factors.

Participants

The participants were foreign residents currently living in Thailand for at least six months. All participants were non-Thai nationals who had experience with or interest in learning Thai, regardless of whether they had studied Thai formally, informally, or independently. A total of 57 responses were initially collected through an online questionnaire. After screening for completeness and eligibility, 51 valid responses were retained for analysis. The participants represented a range of nationalities, age groups, genders, educational backgrounds, occupations, and lengths of residence in Thailand, providing diverse perspectives on Thai language learning among foreign residents. As participation was voluntary and the sample size relatively small, the findings are intended to provide exploratory and conceptual insights rather than statistical generalisation.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of two parts:

Part 1: Personal Information

This section collected background information to describe the participant profile and contextualise their responses. The information included nationality, age, gender, education level, occupation, length of stay in Thailand, prior experience studying Thai, and self-assessed ability to use Thai in daily life. These variables were used to confirm participant eligibility and provide descriptive context for the sample and were not treated as analytical variables.

Part 2: Open-Ended Questions

This section contained two open-ended questions that formed the core data for the study:

1. What challenges have you experienced in learning Thai?
2. In your opinion, what factors could make Thai language learning easier or more effective for foreign residents?

These questions were designed to elicit learners' own descriptions of challenges and learner-perceived facilitating factors, directly addressing the research objectives and research questions. The questionnaire was reviewed by the research advisor to ensure clarity and appropriateness for the research focus.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using Google Forms and distributed through online platforms, including social media channels and the researcher's personal and professional networks. Prior to participation, respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. The data collection period lasted 17 days, from 22 June to 8 July 2025.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a thematic content analysis approach.

First, responses to the open-ended questions were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively based on recurring ideas and patterns in participants' responses. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories.

To address **RQ1**, themes related to learning challenges were identified, including tonal and pronunciation challenges, Thai script and orthographic challenges, grammatical and lexical challenges, instructional and resource-related challenges, and contextual and personal constraints.

To address **RQ2**, themes related to facilitating factors were identified, including practice-based and experiential learning, instructional quality and teacher expertise, structured curriculum and learning design, functional daily-life communication focus, learning resources and accessibility, and exposure to the language environment.

To address **RQ3**, a mapping analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between challenges and facilitating factors. This analysis highlighted the many-to-many interactions between challenges and facilitating factors and informed the development of a conceptual model of Thai language learning among foreign residents.

Frequencies and percentages were calculated to indicate the prominence of themes, supporting transparency in the qualitative analysis. Several limitations should be acknowledged. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, which may limit the representativeness of the sample. Although respondents came from diverse national backgrounds, the sample size was relatively small. In addition, the study relied on self-reported data collected through an online questionnaire, which may vary in depth and detail. Finally, while the questionnaire was reviewed by a research advisor, it was not formally validated by a specialist in Teaching Thai as a Foreign Language (TTFL), which may affect the reliability of the findings.

RESULTS

RQ1: Challenges in Thai Language Learning among Foreign Residents

Analysis of responses to the open-ended question on learning challenges revealed five major categories of challenges. Table 1 summarises the frequency and percentage of responses for each challenge category.

Table 1 Challenges in Learning Thai Reported by Foreign Residents (N = 51)

Challenge Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Tonal and pronunciation challenges	32	62.75
Thai script and orthographic challenges	19	37.25
Grammatical and lexical challenges	14	27.45

Challenge Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Instructional and resource-related challenges	11	21.57
Contextual and personal constraints	10	19.61

Note: One response may include more than one challenge; percentages exceed 100%.

The most frequently reported challenge concerned Thai tones and pronunciation, mentioned by nearly two-thirds of the participants. Learners described difficulty distinguishing tones when listening and producing accurate tones when speaking. Many participants noted that the tonal system of Thai differs substantially from that of their first languages, resulting in confusion and reduced confidence in communication. Difficulties with intonation and accent were also frequently mentioned, particularly among learners whose native languages are non-tonal. The second most prominent challenge related to Thai script and orthography. Participants reported difficulty memorising Thai characters, distinguishing visually similar letters, and understanding the placement of vowels and tone marks. Reading without spaces between words was also described as problematic. These challenges were often linked to difficulties in reading, writing, and pronunciation development. Over one-quarter of the participants reported grammatical and lexical difficulties, including unfamiliar sentence structures, problems forming sentences, and difficulty remembering vocabulary. Learners indicated that differences between Thai grammar and the grammar of languages they already knew made comprehension and sentence production challenging. Some participants identified challenges related to instruction and learning resources, including difficulty finding qualified teachers, inconsistent teaching approaches, and a reliance on memorisation rather than explanation. Limited or inadequate textbooks and dictionaries were also reported as obstacles to effective learning. Finally, contextual and personal constraints such as limited time due to work commitments, high learning costs, lack of practice opportunities, and reliance on English in daily life were identified as factors that hindered sustained Thai language learning.

RQ2: Learner-Perceived Facilitating Factors

Participants were also asked to suggest factors that could make Thai language learning easier or more effective. Analysis revealed six main categories of facilitating factors, summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Learner-Perceived Facilitating Factors for Thai Language Learning (N = 51)

Facilitating Factor	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Practice-based and experiential learning	30	58.82
Instructional quality and teacher expertise	22	43.14
Structured curriculum and learning design	17	33.33
Functional daily-life communication focus	16	31.37
Learning resources and accessibility	14	27.45
Exposure to the language environment	12	23.53

Note: One response may include multiple factors; percentages exceed 100%.

The most frequently mentioned facilitating factor was practice-based and experiential learning. Participants emphasised regular speaking practice, interaction with native speakers, and learning through real-life situations. Many learners expressed that active use of Thai in daily contexts was more effective than classroom-based memorization. Participants also highlighted the importance of qualified teachers who understand how to teach Thai as a foreign language. Clear explanations, structured guidance, and the ability to explain linguistic features in accessible ways were perceived as critical to effective learning. A structured learning plan was perceived as important for supporting systematic progress, particularly in learning tones, script, and grammar. Learners expressed a preference for well-organised lessons that build progressively and consistently. Many participants suggested that Thai instruction should prioritise practical communication, such as everyday conversation, service encounters, and common daily-life situations. Learning content that directly relates to real-life use was seen as motivating and useful. Participants noted the importance of accessible learning resources, including textbooks, digital applications, videos, and worksheets. Flexible resources were viewed as particularly helpful for learners with limited time. Finally, increased exposure to Thai in daily life was perceived as a key facilitator. Learners emphasised frequent interaction with Thai speakers and reduced dependence on English as important conditions for improving proficiency.

RQ3: Relationship between Challenges and Facilitating Factors

To address RQ3, the identified challenges and facilitating factors were examined together to explore how they relate to one another. Table 3 presents the alignment between challenge categories and facilitating factors.

Table 3 Alignment between Challenges and Facilitating Factors in Thai Language Learning

Challenges	Practice-Based Learning	Teacher Expertise	Structured Curriculum	Functional Communication	Learning Resources	Language Exposure
Tonal and pronunciation challenges	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
Thai script and orthographic challenges		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Grammatical and lexical challenges	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Instructional and resource-related challenges		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Contextual and personal constraints	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The results indicate that learning challenges are not addressed by single facilitating factors in isolation. For example, tonal and pronunciation challenges were associated with practice-based learning, teacher expertise, structured instruction, functional use, and exposure (Paicharoen, 2016; Sakchaisomboon, 2022). Script-related challenges were primarily associated with instructional quality, curriculum structure, and appropriate learning resources (Paicharoen, 2016; Sangounpong & Wichiranon, 2012). Grammatical and lexical challenges were linked to a combination of structured learning, teacher support, functional communication, and learning materials (Sakchaisomboon, 2022; Lapyai, 2016). Contextual and personal constraints were primarily addressed through flexible resources, real-life practice, and increased exposure to Thai in daily environments (Boonmee & Meekrua-iam, 2023; Tanpraphan, 2019). Overall, the findings suggest that effective Thai language learning among foreign residents depends on the combined influence of pedagogical, experiential, and environmental factors (Chen, 2019; Tongboon, 2012).

DISCUSSION

Building on the alignment presented in Table 3, this study shows that challenges in Thai language learning among foreign residents are addressed through a combination of pedagogical, experiential, and contextual facilitating factors rather than through isolated solutions (Paicharoen, 2016; Sangounpong & Wichiranon, 2012). In particular, tonal and pronunciation challenges were associated with practice-based learning, instructional quality, structured curriculum design, functional communication, and exposure to Thai in daily environments (Sakchaisomboon, 2022; Boonmee & Meekrua-iam, 2023). This suggests that phonological difficulty in Thai requires both systematic guidance and sustained opportunities for meaningful use, especially for learners whose first languages are non-tonal (Paicharoen, 2016). Script and orthographic challenges were primarily linked to instructional quality, structured learning design, and access to appropriate learning resources (Paicharoen, 2016; Sangounpong & Wichiranon, 2012). These findings highlight the importance of clear sequencing and consistency in teaching the Thai writing system, especially for learners unfamiliar with visually complex scripts (Lapyai, 2016). Grammatical and lexical challenges were similarly associated with multiple facilitating factors, indicating that grammar and vocabulary development are supported when structured instruction is combined with functional language use and accessible materials (Sakchaisomboon, 2022; Chen, 2019). Instructional and resource-related challenges were closely aligned with teacher expertise and curriculum design, underscoring the role of pedagogical quality in shaping learner experiences (Lapyai, 2016; Sangounpong & Wichiranon, 2012). Contextual constraints, such as limited time and opportunities for practice, were associated with flexible resources, real-life communication, and increased exposure to Thai, reflecting the realities of language learning beyond the classroom (Tanpraphan, 2019; Tongboon, 2012).

Overall, the findings support a conceptual view of Thai language learning as an interactive process shaped by the relationship between challenges and facilitating factors. For Thai language programmes targeting foreign residents, the results suggest the need for integrated

instructional approaches that combine explicit teaching, practical use, and flexible learning conditions to support functional language development in daily-life contexts (Boonmee & Meekrua-iam, 2023; Chen, 2019).

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