Focus on Thailand

Capital: Bangkok
Populous: 60,609,046
Size: 198,456 sq. mi. (514,000 sq. km.)
Location: Southeast Asia, bordering the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, southeast of Burma
Climate: tropical, rainy, warm
Monetary Unit: baht
Urban/Rural Life: 18% urban, 82% rural
Religion: 95% Buddhism, 3.8% Muslim, 0.5% Christianity, 0.1% Hinduism, 0.6% other
Languages: Thai, English (secondary language of the elite), ethnic and regional dialects
Ethnicity: 75% Thai, 14% Chinese, 11% other
Government: constitutional monarchy

Personal Snapshot

When I first arrived in Thailand to teach English, I was eager to practice using the Thai way of greeting people, the wai. On my first teaching day, I greeted the teachers by pressing my hands together in front of myself and saying, Sa-was-di. Some people returned my greeting without hesitation, but many were clearly taken aback by my greeting. I asked one of my fellow teachers what I was doing wrong. She kindly explained to me that when using the wai, there are different levels of placing the hands. The higher you place your hands, the more respect you give the person you are greeting. Because I was placing my hands near my forehead, I was giving people the respect of the king.

Cultural Closeup

• The Thai people show great respect for the elderly. Young people should not look an older person in the eye and should sit with their head lower than the older person.
## Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level/Age</th>
<th>Hours/Calendar</th>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Required</th>
<th>Class Size</th>
<th>Exams</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Classroom Setup</th>
<th>Homework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool, ages 3–4</td>
<td>4–5 hours/day</td>
<td>Focus on language and character</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>38 maximum</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Self-contained rooms</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten, ages 4–6</td>
<td>May–Sept. and Nov.–Mar., 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m., Mon.–Fri.</td>
<td>Focus on character traits, such as morality, ethics, basic knowledge and ability. Literacy and arithmetic are also included in the curriculum.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>20–30</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Self-contained rooms, with desks in rows. Children’s work is displayed on walls beneath their photos.</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary, grades 1–6, ages 6–12</td>
<td>May–Sept. and Nov.–Mar., 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m., Mon.–Fri.</td>
<td>Basic skills, life experiences, character development, some concentration on skills that will help students when they join the workforce</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>25–40</td>
<td>Multiple-choice midterm and final exams given during the semester; exams at the end of grades 2, 4, and 6. The exam at the end of grade 6 is presented by the district authority.</td>
<td>Teachers record performance based on behavioral objectives. Number grades are given.</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td>1 hour/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower secondary, grades 7–9, ages 12–15</td>
<td>May–Sept. and Nov.–Mar., 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m., Mon.–Fri.</td>
<td>Needs and interests of the students are identified. Work ability is developed.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30–50</td>
<td>Multiple-choice midterm and final exams given during the semester. Some students take national exams to move to upper secondary grades.</td>
<td>Number grades are given.</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td>1 hour/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary, grades 10–12, ages 15–18</td>
<td>May–Sept. and Nov.–Mar., 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m., Mon.–Fri.</td>
<td>Moral, ethical, and social skills are taught as they relate to working. Both vocational and academic tracks are available to students.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30–40</td>
<td>Midterm and final exams given during the semester</td>
<td>Number grades are given.</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td>1 hour/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University, ages 18–22</td>
<td>Official time is 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m., but hours may vary.</td>
<td>Focus depends on field of study.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>national university entrance exam</td>
<td>Letter grades are given based on the courses taken.</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Varies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Closer Look

**Policy**

- Four ministries are responsible for the management of the education system in Thailand: the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of University Affairs, and the Ministry of the Interior. In addition, the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, the Office of the National Education Commission, and the Budget Bureau set the education policy.

- Elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools are the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Primary education is the responsibility of each municipality.

- Preschools are mostly private, although a few government-run preschools can be found. Government-run elementary and lower and upper secondary schools are mostly free, and the majority of the population attends these schools. Students pay about U.S.$100 per year for tuition, books, transportation, and uniforms. Only about 35 percent of the student population attends school between the ages of 12 and 17 (lower and upper secondary grades). National entrance exams are required to attend upper secondary schools. About six percent of the population attends private schools.

- A very small percent of the population attends universities. The vast majority attends vocational schools or teaching colleges.

**Teaching Style**

- Teachers lecture to students.

- Questions are allowed, but discussion is limited.

**Learning Style**

- Students usually work individually, but they are occasionally placed in pairs or small groups.

- Rote memorization is the most common learning style in Thai schools.

**Instructional Setting**

- In elementary school, the desks are arranged in rows, and the classrooms are self-contained.

- In upper and lower secondary schools, the desks are arranged in rows, and the students remain in their homeroom throughout the day unless they are going to a special class, such as science or music.
Activities

- Students participate in optional after-school activities, such as sports, English, or math and art clubs. Attending cram schools is common among students who plan to go to upper secondary school or university.

Discipline and Class Management

- Students are told to leave the room when they misbehave. For serious offenses, the parents are called.

Teacher-Student Relationship

- The teacher is considered the most important person in one’s life besides the parents. Although students do not have very close personal relationships with their teachers, they show their teachers great respect.

Student-Student Relationship

- Students have close relationships.
- Social groups are primarily separated by gender, but it is not uncommon to see small groups with both girls and boys.

Protocol

Nonverbal Behavior

- When greeting someone, press the hands together in a prayerlike position in front of the chest. This gesture is called the *wai*.
- Do not point with one finger or with your foot. Do not show the bottom of your foot to someone. This is considered impolite because the foot is the lowest part of the body.
- Do not touch a Thai person’s head, because this is where they believe a person’s soul is.
- A spoon and a fork are used during meals. The fork is used to push food onto the spoon.

Images

- The word *Thailand* means “Land of the Free.” The Thai people are very proud that they have been free for many years.
- Thailand is known as “the smiling country.” Thais smile to show happiness as well as embarrassment. Thai women smile because they believe it makes them look prettier.
The Garuda (half bird, half human) is the symbol of Thailand as well as of the royal family. This image can be seen on government signs and documents. Companies or institutions may be recognized for exceptional service or accomplishment by the awarding of the Garuda.

The elephant is considered an important icon to the Thai people.

There are no official colors for Thailand, but its sports teams often use red, white, and blue.

**Forms of Address**

- Teachers are addressed with *ajan* (more formal) or *kloo* (less formal), both meaning “teacher.”
- Being addressed as *Mr. John* or *Ms. Kimberly* is not unusual. People are often addressed by their first names.

**Dress**

- Students wear white shirts and black or blue pants or skirts.
- The *pasin*, the traditional dress for Thai women, is a long cloth wrapped around the body like a sarong. Both the *pasin* and the blouse that accompanies it is usually made of silk. The traditional dress for men is the *suaphra ratchathan*—a shirt with no collar and a high neck—that is worn with long pants.

**Polite/Impolite Topics and Behaviors**

- It is impolite to talk about politics, religion, and the royal family.
- It is acceptable to ask a person his or her age.
- The king of Thailand is greatly respected. It is inappropriate to criticize or otherwise speak negatively about the king.

**Gift Giving**

- It is common to bring a gift when invited to someone’s home. The value of the gift is unimportant.
- Wrap a gift carefully. Bright colors and beautiful ribbons are appreciated.
- Do not unwrap a gift in front of the giver unless invited to do so. Unwrap the gift carefully, making an effort not to tear the paper.

**Problem/Solution**

**Problem**

One of my Thai students wants to know exactly how sentences are formed. He is more concerned with getting a formula for an answer than with practicing what he has learned in class. How can I shift his focus from the formulaic?
Thai students are taught in a very formulaic way. As a result, they find it difficult to adapt to a teaching style that does not stress memorization. Encourage your student to practice at home what he has learned in class. Having him work with another student—one who does not exhibit this problem—may help.