
A Study of Chinese University Students' Perceptions towards Thai Language in Yunnan Province, China

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ABSTRACT

Mixed-methods embedded research design was adopted to the study of Chinese university students' perceptions towards Thai language in Yunnan province, China. The study was carried out in three universities in Yunnan province of China. In the first academic semester of 2019, each of three universities, 100 Thai major students were selected for questionnaire survey, according to the accessibility and the given consent. In addition, 10 students from each university were asked to volunteer for a focus group interview.

The researcher conducted the questionnaire to gather quantitative data and focus group interview was employed to garner qualitative data. Descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative data showed that the total students' perception level items were considered as of a high level. The content analysis on qualitative data spelt out the students' positive perceptions towards Thai language and students' expectations and suggestions for Thai language teaching.

Considering the encouraging outcomes, future researchers are recommended to initiate further studies to improve the quality of Thai teaching and learning in China.

Keywords: perceptions towards Thai language, questionnaire, focus group interview

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of economic and trade relations between China and Thailand has presented an unprecedented favorable trend. In 2010, the China - ASEAN free trade area was fully established. Thailand implemented zero tariffs on 90% of the products imported from China and China exempted tariffs on 93% of the products imported from ASEAN. China became Thailand's largest exporter and its second-largest trading partner. China-Thailand bilateral trade has great complementarities and broad prospects for development. Under the principle of economic mutual benefit and equality, China and Thailand have established a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. High-level political exchanges have become increasingly frequent, cultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent, non-governmental contacts have increased, and tourism have become increasingly prosperous. This situation determines that the two countries must accelerate bilingual teaching, that is, China must

cultivate more professionals who are proficient in the Thai language, and Thailand must also accelerate the training of more professionals who are proficient in the Chinese language, so as to adapt to the development of the current situation (Duan, & Zhao, 2014).

In recent years, the Thai language has developed rapidly in Yunnan province due to its superior geographical and long historical links with Thailand. According to the development status of minority language talents in Yunnan province. The training of minority language talents in Yunnan province has achieved remarkable results, showing the features of fast growth of the learning scale, rapid improvement of teachers, rapid formation of disciplines and majors, rapid development of curriculum materials, rapid update of school resources, multiple training modes and strong social service ability. There have been 56 public foreign language teaching and research offices of minor languages in colleges and universities started, displaying the regional economic and social development of a large number of excellent personnel in minority language. Yunnan University, Yunnan University for nationalities and Yunnan normal university have successively set up a master's degree authorization center for first-level foreign language and literature (Deng, 2014).

Although the personnel training mode of Yunnan minor languages has made great achievements, it has also explored a talent training road with unique advantages and its own characteristics in the practice of education. However, the current development situation still has certain problems and predicaments (Qin, 2014). This has mainly manifested from the following aspects:

- (1) The number of students has increased dramatically, and the learning purpose of students is not clear.
- (2) Insufficient teaching staff.
- (3) It is very difficult for the undergraduates trained to quickly fit into the translation role, and the quality of graduates cannot meet the corresponding requirements.
- (4) Education is still in a starting state in the course setting, course arrangement and investigation.

In view of the above problems, it is an important direction and basic path of its reform to improve the quality of minority language talents and enhance their own competitiveness.

From the reasons mentioned above, the researcher would like to study the Chinese university students' perceptions towards Thai language in Yunnan Province, China. The study results would be beneficial in improving teaching and learning Thai language in the future. Also, these would help teachers and all stakeholders to design more suitable curricula and instructions of Thai language for more effective outcomes in the future.

2. Research Objective

To study the university students' perceptions towards Thai language in Yunnan Province, China.

3. Research Methodology

Mixed-methods was a type of research methodology which embedded qualitative data and quantitative data in a study. Regarded the research objective, the mixed research methods integrating both quantitative and qualitative

approaches were adopted in this study. The study adopted two types of technique: questionnaire and focus group interview. This was adapted from Motivation toward English Language Learning of Thai Students Majoring in English at Asia-Pacific International University by Nakhon & Tantip (2012). The questionnaire was used to collect data for answering the research question and the focus group interview questions were conducted in order to give insight into the thought processes underlying their learning reasons and objectives of choosing Thai language major.

In this study, the questionnaire consisted of two parts as follows: The first part included the participants' background information. This was used to collect the students basic information such as their genders, their nationality or ethnic group background. The second part of the questionnaire was for students perceptions towards Thai language. The questionnaire consisted of the questions regarding learning reasons and objectives of choosing Thai major.

After the questionnaire survey, the researcher conducted the focus group interview with 30 Thai major students from three universities in groups. The interview questions followed literature theoretical designed questions. The question included students' family background, attitudes towards Thai language, and learning reasons and objectives of choosing Thai major. Focus group interview questions contained 10 items and the students were asked to answer all the questions in details.

In this study, the researcher selected three universities as the research respondents according to the accessibility and the given consent. The three universities were: Yunnan Nationality University, Yunnan University Dianchi College, and Dianxi Normal University of Science and Technology. In each of three universities, 100 Thai major freshmen and sophomore students were selected for questionnaire survey. According to Sarah and Rosalind (2013), the most advantageous number of students for questionnaire should be more than 50 students since this number shows the experience of planning and structuring interviews. In addition, 10 students from each university were voluntarily selected for a focus group interview. Ten students from each university were divided into 2 groups, 5 students in each group. There were 6 groups in total.

4. Results

According to the research objective, the questionnaire was used as a quantitative data collection tool to study the university students' perceptions towards Thai language major in Yunnan Province, China. In this study, the questionnaire consisted of two parts, the first part was the student general information. The second part of the questionnaire was for students perceptions towards Thai language. A total of 300 Thai majors' students were investigated in this questionnaire.

The student general information included four parts: genders, level of study, nationality, birth place. The results as shown in Tables below:

Gender	Male	32
	Female	268
Total		300

Level of Study	Freshman	125
	Sophomore	175
Total		300

Nationality	Chinese	254
	Others	46
Total		300

Birth Place	Yunnan	208
	Others	92
Total		300

The questionnaire items for the university students' perceptions towards Thai language major were divided into two categories: Learning Reasons, and Learning Objectives. A total of 29 perception items were surveyed in this questionnaire and collected as one of the research data through the interpreting procedure designed by Degang (2010) with five points ranging from, strongly agree to strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = moderate, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree.

To interpret the mean score for students' motivational level, the researchers adopted the interpreting procedure designed by Degang (2010) as shown in Table below:

Scale	Answer	Perception Level	Score Range
5	Strongly agree	Highest	4.50 - 5.00
4	Agree	High	3.50 - 4.49
3	Moderate	Medium	2.50 - 3.49
2	Disagree	Low	1.50 - 2.49
1	Strongly disagree	Lowest	1.00 - 1.49

The results of quantitative data and interpretation of students' perceptions towards Thai language major of questionnaire items in Learning Reasons as shown in Table below:

No.	Items	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Level of Perception
5	I study Thai because it will make me a more knowledgeable person.	3.54	0.09	High
6	I study Thai because it will help me to better understand the ways of life of native Thai speakers.	3.44	0.10	Medium
8	I study Thai because it will help me to associate with foreigners and learn about their values and beliefs.	3.45	0.10	Medium
9	I study Thai because other people will respect me more if I know a foreign language.	3.34	0.12	Medium
10	I study Thai because it will help me to further my studies.	3.27	0.12	Medium
13	I study Thai because it will help me when I travel abroad.	4.00	0.17	High
15	I study Thai because Thai people are kind and cheerful.	2.83	0.12	Medium
16	I study Thai because I enjoy watching Thai news and movies.	3.54	0.12	High
17	I study Thai because I enjoy reading Thai books, articles, newspapers, and magazines.	2.70	0.09	Medium
19	I study Thai because it is an important tool for communication.	3.61	0.17	High
20	I study Thai because I like the culture and traditions of Thailand.	3.62	0.10	High
21	I study Thai because the employment prospect of Thai language major is very good.	3.56	0.14	High
22	My choice to learn Thai is the opinion of my parents.	2.49	0.19	Low
23	I study Thai because Thai language major is very popular in Yunnan.	4.10	0.17	High
26	I study Thai because I have friends who learn Thai.	3.44	0.12	Medium
28	Southeast Asian minority languages are developing increasingly prosperous in Yunnan, so choosing Thai major is in line with the development trend.	4.55	0.21	Highest
Total		3.47	0.13	Medium

The students' level of perception in this category was regarded of the medium level with the total mean (\bar{x}) score of 3.47, and SD of 0.13. Among them, only one item was rated in the highest level, that was Item 28, (\bar{x})=4.55, "Southeast Asian minority languages are developing increasingly prosperous in Yunnan, so choosing Thai major is in line with the development trend." And in this category, the low level was rated for Item 22 (\bar{x})=2.49,

“My choice to learn Thai is the opinion of my parents.” Seven items (Item 5 (\bar{x})=3.54, Item 13 (\bar{x})=4.00, Item 16 (\bar{x})=3.54, Item 19 (\bar{x})=3.61, Item 20 (\bar{x})=3.62, Item 21 (\bar{x})=3.56, and Item 23 (\bar{x})=4.10) were rated in the high level. And the other seven items were rated in the medium level.

The results of quantitative data and interpretation of students’ perceptions towards Thai language major of questionnaire items in Learning Objectives as shown in Table below:

No.	Items	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Level of Perception
1	I study Thai because I would like to understand the Thailand culture and tradition.	3.87	0.15	High
2	I study Thai because I would like to read Thai stories, novels, and literature.	4.06	0.15	High
3	I study Thai because I would like to participate more freely in activities among other groups who speak Thai.	2.73	0.09	Medium
4	I study Thai because I would like to get an ideal job in the future.	4.07	0.16	High
7	I study Thai because I would like to easily make friends with foreigners.	3.52	0.10	High
11	I study Thai because I would like to search for information and materials in Thai on the Internet.	2.84	0.10	Medium
12	I study Thai because I would like to be open-minded and friendly like native Thai speakers.	3.15	0.10	Medium
14	I study Thai because I would like to achieve at school.	3.00	0.09	Medium
18	I study Thai because I would like to earn a university degree.	4.44	0.22	High
24	I study Thai because I would like to be a Thai teacher.	3.47	0.07	Medium
25	I study Thai because I would like to be a tour guide.	4.15	0.17	High
27	China and southeast Asian countries are developing increasingly closely. I study Thai because I would like to understand southeast Asian countries.	4.37	0.21	High
29	I study Thai for the purpose of entering the university campus. There is no special reason.	2.32	0.13	Low
Total		3.54	0.13	High

The students' level of perception in this category was regarded of the high level with the total mean (\bar{x}) score of 3.54, and SD of 0.13. Among them, seven items (Item 1 (\bar{x})=3.87, Item 2 (\bar{x})=4.06, Item 4 (\bar{x})=4.07, Item 7 (\bar{x})=3.52, Item 18 (\bar{x})=4.44, Item 25 (\bar{x})=4.15, and Item 27 (\bar{x})=4.37) were rated in the high level. And five items (Item 3 (\bar{x})=2.73, Item 11 (\bar{x})=2.84, Item 12 (\bar{x})=3.15, Item 14 (\bar{x})=3.00, and Item 24 (\bar{x})=3.47) were rated in the medium level. In addition, only one item was rated in the low level, that was Item 29, (\bar{x})=2.32, "I study Thai for the purpose of entering the university campus. There is no special reason."

According to the research objective, the focus group interview was used as a qualitative data collection tool to study the university students' perceptions towards Thai language major in Yunnan Province, China. For the interview section, interview questions contained 10 items, and 30 respondents were interviewed in a native Chinese language. The interview was recorded, then transcribed, translated, analyzed, and summarized by the researcher. The recordings of the interviews were without any alteration of the content, and the researcher translated them from Chinese into English.

The results of students' focus group interview were summarized and analyzed according to the thematic content as follows.

- Learning reasons -

Most of the participants chose to study Thai major on their own initiative or on the recommendation of others, and parents of them supported their children in learning Thai. Most of them chose to major in Thai because they were interested in Thai, liked Thai, their first impression of Thai language are sweet-sounding, and they wanted a better career in the future. And another participants chose to study Thai for other reasons, for example, participants knew that learning Thai would not require them to study math, or they were forced to choose Thai major.

- Learning objectives -

Most of the participants want to engage in Thai related jobs after graduation, such as Thai teacher, Thai translator, guide and so on, most of them believed that Thai would help them find a job related to Thai in the future, but a small number of participants said that only knowing Thai would be limited for future development, and they lacked some skills in other aspects. And in addition to the work related to Thai after graduation, some of the participants expressed their intention to pursue a master's degree after graduation.

- Expectations and suggestions -

Some participants expressed that the current learning pressure was relatively high, which had a negative impact on their learning. They hoped that the teacher could change the teaching method, study in a relaxed and interesting learning environment, and reduce the learning pressure. And they also hope that teachers could create more language environment by playing audio, communicating in Thai or organizing professional activities in class, so that students can know more about the culture of Thailand, deeply understand the language thinking of Thai people, and achieve the purpose of enhancing students' interest in learning.

In addition to, in universities in Yunnan province, the teaching model of Thai major adopts the "2+1+1" training mode, that is in the third year, students will exchange to study in a university in Thailand for one year. For this mode, most participants expressed satisfaction, and hope to have more time to study in the university of Thailand, deeper into the Thai language environment. They would prefer to study in Thailand for two years.

5. Discussion

Based on the findings in this section, these perceptions included the reasons why students chose Thai major and the goals they wanted to achieve in learning Thai. In addition, the participants gave valuable suggestions on the current Thai language learning environment and teachers' teaching methods, which would be of great reference value for Thai teaching in the future.

According to the results of questionnaire survey, the above finding would be corresponding to the study by Xiang (2015). With the frequent trade between China and Thailand, education cooperation between China and Thailand is flourishing, and more and more Chinese students choose to study in Thailand. With the favorable geographical position of Yunnan province and the policy support of the government, the Thai language major has mushroomed and grown rapidly in Yunnan province. As a new emerging minor language major, more and more people are optimistic about the employment prospects of Thai language and choose to study it. Although the Thai language major has a short history, it has developed rapidly, and the scope of expertise is very broad.

According to the results of focus group interview, the above findings would be corresponding to the study by Qin (2014). Although the personnel training mode of Yunnan Thai language have made great achievements, it has also explored a talent training road with unique advantages and its own characteristics in the practice of education. However, the current development situation still has certain problems and predicaments.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Since this study discovered the university students' perceptions towards Thai language major in Yunnan Province, and the following suggestions were given to the school administration office of Thai major in Yunnan universities based on the suggestions given by the participants.

1). Recommendation for School Administration

- Administrators shall strengthen the recruitment requirements for Thai teachers and introduce more high-quality talents. For example, introducing more Thai teachers with doctoral degrees and rich teaching experience.
- Administrators should improve the Thai major course setting, course arrangement and investigation.
- The administrators considered changing the teaching mode of Thai major to 2+2 mode, that is, students can study in Thai schools for two years.

2). Recommendation for Teachers

- Teachers should pay more attention to students' learning feedback, timely find problems and deficiencies in teaching, improve their teaching methods and improve their teaching skills according to the actual situation of students.

• Teachers should pay more attention to the learning situation of students after class, increase the amount of professional course activities, improve students' learning interest, and deepen students' understanding of Thai culture.

• Teachers should constantly improve their knowledge level to adapt to the rapid development of Thai teaching.

3). Recommendation for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends future studies to be considered in the following areas:

1) The study was limited to universities in Yunnan province. Future studies could be carried out in other provinces of China.

2) The study was limited to the Thai major students' perceptions towards Thai in Yunnan province. Future studies can focus on other aspect, such as the current problems in Thai teaching and so on.

3) The study was limited to the Thai major students' perceptions towards Thai in Yunnan province. Future studies can focus on the development and innovation of Thai teaching methods.

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