

Tongue Twisters in Thailand: An ESL Adventure

by [Tim Torkildson](#)

One steamy tropical afternoon, as my classroom full of 12-year-old Thai public school students struggled to both stay awake and stay interested in our English conversation module, I had a break-out moment. Tired of drilling them on Mr. Brown's interest in knowing what time it was and where students lived, I suddenly turned to the nearest pair of students to ask: "Do you know Sally?"

There was a stir of interest in the classroom; the teacher was departing from the textbook! This didn't happen very often in Mathayom (Grades 7–12). I repeated my query, and the nearest pair of students, who had been reciting textbook English conversation to each other in a bored monotone, made bold enough to say in unison, "No, we do not know Sally!"

Now the fat was in the fire. I had abandoned the standard text to ask about some mysterious Sally, so now what would I do? I took the plunge, with the old American tongue twister.

"She sells sea shells by the sea shore!"

My students were transfixed by my unprecedented struggle to spit out that ancient tongue twister. In Thai culture, the teacher cannot make a mistake or show imperfection, or, rather, cannot admit to making a mistake or being imperfect—but here I was tripping all over my own tongue, in my own language! A few of the boys in class gave a clandestine giggle, and I decided to press forward into unknown (for me) territory.

I wrote on the board, "Rubber Baby Buggy Bumpers" and let the students absorb the words for a few seconds before repeating the phrase slowly and carefully. Then I asked them to repeat the phrase, which they did with perfect ease; Thais have no problems with voiced bilabial stops. When I tried saying it at a faster cadence, I completely blew it, and my students, who a moment before were wilting with disinterest in the English language, were now politely demanding what was the meaning of "Buggy" and "Bumpers," as well as pleading with me to teach them some more. This class was a 45-minute block, and we had but a scant 10 minutes left, so I abandoned my lesson plan to revel in my own childhood games of alliteration and shibboleths. First we did:

"How much wood could a woodchuck chuck, if a woodchuck could chuck wood?"

Then we moved on to:

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.
A peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked.
If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,
Where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?

The bell rang, and my students gathered up their papers and textbooks, happily telling each other about Peter Piper's pickled peppers as they exited.

Tongue Twisters for Motivation

For the rest of the school year, I had a great motivational tool at my disposal. I promised my ESL students that if we finished our regular lesson early, we could spend the extra time learning new tongue twisters. I rarely had to nag the children to do their set lessons after that. They were anxious to try their young tongues on “Roberta ran rings around the Roman ruins” or “There was a minimum of cinnamon in the aluminum pan.” It was always stimulating to see who would stumble first, one of my students...or me! Tongue twisters not only helped their enunciation but really expanded their vocabulary.

Following is a list of tongue twisters, in order of their difficulty, for you to try out on your class of ESL learners:

- Lovely lemon liniment.
- I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream.
- Six slippery snails slipped slowly seaward.
- An ape hates grape cakes.
- If a black bug bleeds black blood, what color blood does a blue bug bleed?
- Lesser leather never weathered wetter weather better.
- A skunk sat on a stump and thunk the stump stunk, but the stump thunk the skunk stunk.

Enunciation Difficulties

Of course, each native language has its own unique sounds and enunciation standards. This can make for some difficulties when using tongue twisters, if you are not careful to examine them prior to classroom use for difficulties. For instance, the Thai language includes the consonant “ng,” which non-Thais find very hard to use initially. And the Thais, in turn, find it all but impossible to pronounce the letter “z.”

One way to overcome this difficulty when teaching ESL students is to have several inexpensive hand mirrors available in the classroom, so the students may watch themselves forming the letters and words in English. I have also found it useful to assign certain individual words to students to take home with them and repeat to themselves 10 times in a row every day for a week. This has helped my Thai students with enunciating words like “zoo,” “buzz,” and “bazooka,” Bazooka, for the Thais, is a tongue twister all by itself!

Tongue Twister Activities

Drum Beats

Designate one student as the drummer. He or she sits at the front of the class with a stick and hollow container that can act as a drum. The drummer sets the cadence for the class (and the teacher) to declaim the designated tongue twister— starting slow and gradually beating a faster tattoo. You can divide the class into boys versus girls, or tall versus short, or in any other way that you want to create competitive teams. When one team can’t keep up with the beat, it is the other team’s turn to see if they can repeat the tongue twister even faster.

Tongue Twister Round Robin

Prepare a stack of cards with tongue twisters on them of varying complexity. Form the students into two circles, either sitting or standing, and give one card to a single student in each circle to start; when the student has said the tongue twister, he or she gets to point out the next student in the circle to receive the next tongue twister. That student, in turn, when he or she has successfully said the next tongue twister, points out the next reader in the circles. The object, outside of repeating the tongue twister, is to see how fast the students can make the cards go around the circle; the circle that has everyone repeat the tongue twister first wins.

Tongue Twister Songs

Help students find native tunes to sing the tongue twisters to. This shouldn't be too hard if you already have an open rapport with your pupils. In Thailand, we put "how much wood could a woodchuck chuck" to the tune of a popular Thai folk song about elephants. To get them used to this activity, you can start with an old American vaudeville routine, singing the words "George Washington Bridge" to the tune "[Over the Waves.](#)" This will introduce your students to what it is you want them to do with tongue twisters.

Tongue Twister Composition

Have students write their own tongue twisters. Results can be hilarious, as well as educational. One of my classes in Bangkok came up with "Twist your tongue so teacher talks too!"

I have found that tongue twisters are a great way to warm up a cold ESL class, and, once the students have bought into the game, it's a great, and greatly relevant, motivational gambit to help students of all ages get through their assigned lessons.

You can bet your "toy boat" on it!

Tim Torkildson received his TESOL certification in Thailand, where he taught ESL for 5 years. He currently works at Nomen Global Language Center, in Provo, Utah, teaching ESL and handling social media.