

# Translating Thai Cultural Information into Language Learning Activities: the Case of English for Local Museum Personnel

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## Abstract

The generalization of transferring Thai culture into English content and teaching Thai people to communicate in English to the “English” world involves cultural awareness and translation from the Thai language (vocabulary transfer, sentence structure, and discourse structure).

*English for Local Museum Personnel*, in the form of a CD, was designed to enable local people to communicate in fundamental English about their own local culture. The course designer used local cultural information to write activities to suit the level of the learners who are local people—teachers, monks, volunteers, students and administrative officers. While having knowledge of Thai culture, the English ability of learners was of varying levels. From in-class training, the participants satisfied the 4.00 level ( $x=4$ ). 1000 CDs were distributed to local museums and community libraries. Also, the significant level of pretest and post-test was at .01.

Transferring this information into English involved translation to a certain extent—not only the translation of the language but also the culture attached to it. The information is in the form of words, phrases, sentences, and discourse- focusing on speaking skills. The language users have to understand the structure of English, while being confident about the local cultural content.

At the word level, vocabulary concerning local tourism can be seen as two main types: content and structure. The structure vocabulary has mostly been translated and used by the translators between Thai and English for some time; its word bank is constant with the addition of only some new technological words, so the translation of the “structure” vocabulary was not too difficult. But the transfer of the Thai cultural content required extra effort. The use of an English-Thai, Thai-English dictionary was helpful but when the words

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are not yet included in the dictionary, translators must use an equivalent, transliteration, loan words or further explanation. This may cause interruption in communication.

At the sentence level, the language users must be able to recognize the word order of both the Thai and English language. With the help of non-verbal language or face-to-face communication, miscommunication can be alleviated.

In discourse communication, translators must be concerned with the structure, cohesion and coherence of the text as well as the consistency.

**Keywords:** Translation, Thai Culture Information, English Language Learning Activities



**Figure 1** Multi Media CD. of Langage Learning Activiting

## Introduction

Translating in this context involves the source language (Thai) and the target language (English): from words to phrases, then to sentences and lastly discourse level. In this context the language focuses on listening and speaking skills for intermediate-level learners. The content covers the information on local culture represented and bound at all levels of communication. The making of these language points into language learning activities concerns knowledge of syllabus and course design, and the use of formulaic phrases and functional language.

This paper is an extended work on the CD *English for Local Museum Personnel*, which offers 15 modules on English language learning activities for intermediate English users in local areas. The paper focuses on the design of language learning activities which, at the basic level, are concerned with the translation of information on local culture into English. The paper covers the following main concepts: (1) Translators must understand the

information on local culture in-depth; (2) Translators can enlist help from Thai-English, English -Thai and specific dictionaries only when appropriate to the context and for the beauty of the language; (3) Translators must apply vocabulary translation effectively in the case of a non-equivalent context; (4) Designing language activities is based on language functions and formulaic language.

### **1. The information on local culture in the Thai language: Translators must have an in-depth understanding of the information on local culture**

Reliable resources for Thai local cultural information are numerous both in Thai and English: (1) There are websites on Thai culture such as *Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre's*, which offers comprehensive information from at least 1,375 local museums, (2) There are textbooks and encyclopedias on Thai culture (3) There is information from people who live in the community, teachers or wise men who know the culture well.

All of the information is interpreted through the translators' (or language users' in this context) eyes and world view. Translators must have an in-depth understanding (in Thai) of the information on local culture, where every word, phrase, sentence and discourse (concrete or abstract nouns) expresses the culture.

One example of a good resource is the following website, "Towards the Thai way" (my translation). It categorizes groups of words into beliefs, language and local literature, architecture, traditions and rites, local Thai wisdom and ethnics knowledge.



**Figure 2** A sample of the webpage on Thai culture in the Thai language.

Source : Reprinted from <https://thaiculturebuu.wordpress.com/> retrieved 22/2/2558

## 2. Translation with the help of dictionaries: Translators can consult Thai-English, English-Thai and specific dictionaries only when appropriate to the context and for the beauty of the language.

**General dictionaries** such as a Thai-English dictionary can be used in the first draft of the translation of Thai vocabulary. Then translators should double check with an English-Thai dictionary and other resources. For structure words in the source texts, the translation may not be too difficult to discover because the dictionary provides many examples of their meanings; however, they should be aware of literal meanings so that the translation fits into the context. For content words, it is often difficult to find an equivalent word (in English) that matches the exact meaning and connotation of the Thai word. The target language will thus have to help the audience make an analogy to their world view, perspective and experiences. Translators should also look for reliable writers and publishers of dictionaries. Above all translators must have their own word banks for consistency in their translation.

Some of these dictionaries can be found online, which is a convenient way to consult them, such as the Lexitron dictionary by NECTEC ([http://lexitron.nectec.or.th/2009\\_1/](http://lexitron.nectec.or.th/2009_1/))



**Figure 3** Lexitron Online Dictionary

Soure : Reprinted from <http://lexitran.nectec.or.th/2009-1>

**Dictionaries on arts and culture.** Translators must seek meaning from a specific type of dictionary for specific words. For example in translating information about temples from the Thai language, especially terms concerning architectural structure, motifs and uses, dictionaries on arts and culture can help provide standard translations. However, when translating in the context of local tourism, translators may choose to not use specific terms excessively, favoring common words with added explanation. Considering this action occurs in spoken language and the translating is often happening in front of the piece of architecture,

the “here and now” principle can be applied. Also, the purpose may only be to enable the audience to understand general concepts.

### 3. Translators must apply vocabulary translation effectively in case of a non-equivalent context

#### 3.1 Vocabulary size and range on local tourism

**The vocabulary size and range on local tourism** covers (1) **structure words and basic language functions** plus (2) **content words** related to things such as temples, architecture, tradition, culture, food.

**Structure words and basic language functions.** **Structure words** are limited; they are pronouns, prepositions, and conjunctions. Many of these have been translated and used in the Thai context without any difficulties. However, the translator must be meticulous about the context of these words.

**Basic language functions** cover basic greetings, thanking, apologizing, giving directions, explaining in fixed expressions, and phrasal verbs. They also need to know grammar structure such as parts of speech (articles, question words, etc.)

**Content words.** The content words cover nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs. Content words are difficult to translate because they concern culture. In the context of local tourism, content vocabulary covers the following:

- 1) Concrete terms such as temples, *pagoda (chedi)*, *vihara*, *motifs*, *food (curry, fry, sauce)*; *clothes*.
- 2) Intangible concepts such as *traditions*, *festivals*, *rites*.
- 3) Proper names which refer to the history of places or people

These also include the concepts of the connotation of words and the **grammatical aspect** of the vocabulary, the parts of speech and language usage which translators must understand the most.

#### 3.2 Translation of non-equivalence

Since there are cases when there is no exact equivalent word provided in a dictionary, translators must find different means to communicate cultural information at all levels of words, phrases, sentences and discourse. The following are examples of non-equivalence translations.

- 1) No exact equivalence: Transferring the Thai meaning into English: non equivalence

In the case of translating ‘โถงใหญ่ โต โหล่ คุ้ม กระป๋อง’ into English, we can use the word “jar”. But that is not equivalent to the original. It depends on the context.

Also, the translation of ‘กระบุง ตะกร้า’ into “basket” is not equivalent. Translator can give more details such as:

“It’s a kind of basket but used with ...”

“It’s a kind of basket used to keep fish.”

One can apply Baker’s ideas of translation by cultural substitution – replacing a culture-specific item or expression by considering its impact on the target reader (Baker, 1992).

## 2) Further explanation

Another approach for non-equivalent translation can be seen in “Translation using a loan word or loan word plus explanation” (Baker, 1992).

The translators, then, in the aspect of being language teachers themselves, must be knowledgeable about the type of vocabulary, the nature of local information in Thai, the guidelines to transfer information into English, dictionary usage, analogy and word loans.

For example, translators can use the following fixed phrases to help translate and explain in further details.

- “In Thai (the Thai language), this is called “kratip” which means a container.”

- “This ceremony originated from ...”

Examples of some useful fixed phrases:

บอกว่าเป็นอะไร It is

เรียกเป็นภาษาไทยว่า It is called ... in Thai

ใช้ทำอะไร it is used for

ทำมาจากอะไร It is made from

วิธีใช้ To use it, you have to ...

อธิบายว่าคล้ายกับ It is a kind of ...

บอกว่าเหมือนกับ It is like

Examples of “further explanation”

In this case, translators use Thai words and explain in more detail.

- “For the pattern, the weaving process and the materials used in weaving.”

- “Lai nokkookinnamhuam tao (นกกินน้ำส้มเต้า) pattern represents two birds drinking from the same ‘tao’ or dried gourd.”

- “Jok is one way of making a pattern.”

An example of proper name translation:

In the case of proper names or words that the translators omit to keep the flavor of the source language; we can use loanwords and explain in detail. *This place is called “Kao Hong” which literally means nine rooms. Kao means nine; hong means room.*

3) Examples of Thai word loan vocabulary and dictionary meanings English.

Thai word	Dictionary usage	English words
วัด	Wat	Temple
ศาลา	Sala	Pavilion
โบสถ์	Ubosot	Temple
วิหาร	vihara	Vihara
เจดีย์	Chedi	Pagoda
พระเครื่อง		Amulet
พระพุทธรูป		Buddha images
แผ่นทอง		Gold leaves
บาตร		Monks’ alms bowl

Example: Explaining Thai concepts

In explaining about temples and Buddhism, translators need to have a large vocabulary bank, especially vocabulary about architecture. Translators can use the standard vocabulary from dictionaries combined with Thai words and explain further.

- “It’s called ... in Thai. It means ...”

- “In terms of Buddhist Era, we should compare with the A.D”.

- “The lunar month, the scale of Thai”

Ancient words or religious scripts must be translated according to academic standards, or summarize the main issues that the translators want to highlight.

4) Grammar concerns

When translating the history of places, people, and festivals, translators must be aware of the use of tenses, since in the Thai language, the verb form does change not when talking about different periods of time. Also, the use of active and passive voice must be paid attention to.

## 5) Limitation of machine translation

An example of machine translation: this shows the limitations of literal translation:

Thai text:

“พิพิธบางลำพู” ขุมทรัพย์ความรู้แห่งใหม่

เขียนโดย: ผู้จัดการ (133 เรื่อง) | เมื่อวันที่: 14 สิงหาคม 2557

“บางลำพู” ขึ้นชื่อว่าเป็นย่านการค้าเก่าแก่ทรงเสน่ห์ เป็นย่านของกินสารพัด มีความหลากหลายของวัฒนธรรมและผู้คนมายาวนาน ปัจจุบันบางลำพูยังขึ้นชื่อว่าเป็นย่านที่พัก แหล่งท่องเที่ยวและแหล่งบันเทิงที่นักท่องเที่ยวต่างชาติรู้จักกันดีอีกด้วย แต่แท้จริงแล้ว “บางลำพู” ยังมีอะไรมากมายกว่านั้น ถ้าได้มาชม “พิพิธบางลำพู” ก็จะได้อรรถรสแห่งของบางลำพูอย่างลึกซึ้งมากยิ่งขึ้น โดย “พิพิธบางลำพู” นั้น เป็นสถานที่ท่องเที่ยวแห่งใหม่บนถนนพระอาทิตย์ ซึ่งทางกรมธนารักษ์ผู้จัดสร้างได้ลองการเปิดใหม่ของพิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งนี้

**Translation by machine is still limited.** Mostly the machine translates words literally, such as the name of the road “Phra Atit” to its literal meaning – On the sun. Machine translation can be useful for initial translation of some sentences, but needs thorough editing.

Example:

"Banglumpu" reputed to be the oldest charming shopping area. The neighborhood of goodies to eat There are a variety of cultures and people for a long time. Current Banglumpu also noted a residential district. Attractions and entertainment of tourists were well known. In fact, "Banglumpu" A lot, if not hours. "Museo Banglumpu" will recognize the charm of Banglumpu more deeply by "Museo Banglumpu" is a new attraction on the sun. The Treasury Department created to celebrate the reopening of the museum

Improved version

"Banglumpu", reputed to be the oldest charming shopping area, is the neighborhood of goodies to eat. There are a variety of cultures and people, which is how it has been for a long time. The current Banglumpu area is also noted as a residential district. Attractions and entertainment for tourists are well known. In fact, "Banglumpu" now has a new attraction where you can spend a lot of time, if not hours. At "Musem Banglumpu" you will recognize the charm of Banglumpu more deeply. "Museo Banglumpu" is a new attraction on the sun, which the Treasury Department created to celebrate the reopening of the museum.



## 6) How to translate at the word level.

The following suggests approaches to translation of proper names and general vocabulary.

Types of vocabulary	How to translate
Proper names บางลำพู ถนนพระอาทิตย์	Study how to transfer the sound and spelling from the Thai language into Roman characters according to the Royal Institution of Language
General vocabulary ย่านการค้าเก่าแก่ ทรงเสน่ห์ ย่านของกิน ความหลากหลาย วัฒนธรรม ผู้คน ยาวนาน แหล่ง ท่องเที่ยว แหล่งบันเทิง นักท่องเที่ยว ชาวต่างชาติ สถานที่ท่องเที่ยว	Study general and specific dictionaries. Study cultural meaning of “ย่าน” – literally “places” Study parts of speech in English.

## 7) Sentence level and discourse level translation.

In translating at a sentence level, it is suggested that translators must divide the sentence into clear thought units with main ideas. They may combine these short sentences later. One must be aware that the Thai language has no clear boundaries, as suggested by punctuation marks like the “period (.)”, Translators must truly understand the content.

The example below shows the break of thought unit of the Thai text. Notice that it is not equivalent to the English sentence with main idea.

<p>“บางลำพู” ขึ้นชื่อว่าเป็นย่านการค้าเก่าแก่ทรงเสน่ห์ เป็นย่านของกินสารพัด มีความหลากหลายของวัฒนธรรมและผู้คนมายาวนาน ปัจจุบันบางลำพูยังขึ้นชื่อว่าเป็นย่านที่พัก แหล่งท่องเที่ยวและแหล่งบันเทิงที่นักท่องเที่ยวต่างชาติรู้จักกันดีอีกด้วย แต่แท้จริงแล้ว “บางลำพู” ยังมีอะไรมากมายกว่านั้น ถ้าได้มาชม “พิพิธภัณฑ์บางลำพู” ก็จะรู้จักเสน่ห์ของบางลำพูอย่างลึกซึ้งมากขึ้น โดย “พิพิธภัณฑ์บางลำพู” นั้น เป็นสถานที่ท่องเที่ยวแห่งใหม่บนถนนพระอาทิตย์ ซึ่งทางกรมธนารักษ์ผู้จัดสร้างได้ลดองการเปิดใหม่ของพิพิธภัณฑ์แห่งนี้</p>
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## 8) The translation of sentences and discourse level.

One must be aware of word order in English, such as modifiers being in front of head nouns.

Also, one can combine short sentences (with not too many modifiers) into a complex sentence for conciseness. However, if the text is to be communicated in speaking—short sentences are preferred.

Example :

Thai text	English text	Principles in translating
“บางลำพู” ขึ้นชื่อว่าเป็นย่านการค้าเก่าแก่ ทรงเสน่ห์	Banglumphoo is well known as a charming old shopping area.	Use adjective – to be equivalent to “charming and old” placed in front of head noun. -The challenge is to find an equivalent to ทรงเสน่ห์
เป็นย่านของกินสารพัด	It is a center of a variety of food.	Use it as a referent to Banglumpoo. ภาษาอังกฤษไม่นิยมใช้คำซ้ำ
มีความหลากหลายของวัฒนธรรมและ ผู้คนมาช้านาน	It represents the diversity of cultures and people through history.	Use diversity of cultures.
ปัจจุบันบางลำพูยังขึ้นชื่อว่าเป็น ย่านที่พัก แหล่งท่องเที่ยวและแหล่ง บันเทิงที่นักท่องเที่ยวต่างชาติรู้จักกันดี	Nowadays, it is popular as a tourist and entertainment center <u>which</u>	Use relative pronoun “which” to modify center for conciseness.
อีกด้วย	<u>foreign tourists are well attracted to.</u>	
แต่แท้จริงแล้ว “บางลำพู” ยังมีอะไร มากมายกว่านั้น	In fact, it has more than that.	Again “it” for “Banglumpoo”
ถ้าได้มาชม “พิพิธบางลำพู” ก็จะได้ รู้จักเสน่ห์ของบางลำพูอย่างลึกซึ้งมาก ยิ่งขึ้น	If you come to see “Pipit Banglumpho”, which is a museum, you will experience the charm of Banglumpoo more deeply.	Use the loan word, then explain further. Actually, “Pipit” in Thai means “a variety”, which signifies the multitude of things in the museum.

Thai text	English text	Principles in translating
โดย “พิพิธภัณฑ์” นั้น เป็น สถานที่ท่องเที่ยวแห่งใหม่บนถนน พระอาทิตย์	The museum is a new tourist attraction on Phra Atit Road.	Translators can explain the meaning of Phra Atit Road that it literally means the sun – along with the nearby Pra Chan Road, which literally means the moon.
ซึ่งทางกรมธนารักษ์ผู้จัดสร้างได้ทดลอง การเปิดใหม่ของพิพิธภัณฑ์แห่งนี้	The Treasury Department has just organized the celebration of the opening of the museum.	Straightforward information

#### 4. The design of language activities is based on language function and formulaic language.

The CD on *English for Local Museum Personnel* consists of 15 modules focused on listening and speaking skills. The content can be divided into two groups: functional language and content language. Some modules are integrated. The language presented is based on formulaic phrases that can be memorized and used. The vocabulary is based on structure words and content words. The content words emphasize simple words, not excessive academic words. The strategies to explain further are also given.

The 15 modules' titles are as follow: “Hello and Welcome”, “Making Introductions”, “Telling Where Things Are”, “Asking and Answering Questions”, “Talking about Sustainable Tourism”, “A Museum within the Temple Area”, “History of a Place”, “A Legend and a Living Legend”, “A Hundred-year old Market and Historical Houses”, “Things Thai”, “Pottery”, “Thai Dishes and Sweets”, “Traditional Clothing, Festivals, and Arts and Performance: Nang Yai”.

The design of language activities is based on language function and formulaic phrases.

##### 4.1 Language functions

The basic functions such as greetings, leave taking, thanking and apologizing, giving directions are also given.

To explain a place such as a temple, we have to use language function for location, when it was built, by whom, renovation, details of the inside, anecdotes. For example:

- It is an old temple, built in the Ayutthaya period. It was abandoned since the second lost war with Burma.

- In B.E. 2317, King Taksin the Great allowed a Mon ethnic group to set up on Koh Kret.

#### 4.2 Formulaic phrases

In transferring meaning into English, language learning activities and formulaic phrases can be the most useful. Language learners can remember them and apply or use immediately.

Thai text	English expression
วัตรปฏิบัติที่งดงาม	Fine manner
โอกาสอันเป็นมงคล	auspicious occasion
วิถีแห่งปราชญ์	The way of life of a wise man
ไปบวช	Became a novice
พระไตรปิฎก	Tripikata

#### Fixed expressions for describing food.

Thai explanation of the phrases	English expressions
อาหารนี้ชื่ออะไร	This dish is called ... in Thai.
คล้ายกับ อาหาร	It's a kind of soup.
ประกอบด้วยอะไรบ้าง	Green curry with chicken consists of green curry and chicken
บอกส่วนประกอบของอาหาร	The ingredients are...
รับประทานอย่างไร	You shape the sticky rice into a small ball then dip into the sauce.
ใช้อุปกรณ์อะไรรับประทานอาหาร	You can use chopsticks.
บอกรสชาติของอาหาร	It's spicy/sweet/bitter/sour.

ของหวาน	Sweets
ขนมนี้เรียกว่าหอยกมณี ในภาษาไทย	It is called "yok manee" in Thai.
ชื่อหมายถึงเพชรพลอยและหยก	The name means jewels and "jade".
ทำด้วยแป้ง น้ำตาลมะพร้าว และกะทิ	It's made from flour, palm sugar, and coconut milk.
ห่อใบตองเป็นรูปร่างต่างๆ	It's wrapped in banana leaves of different types.

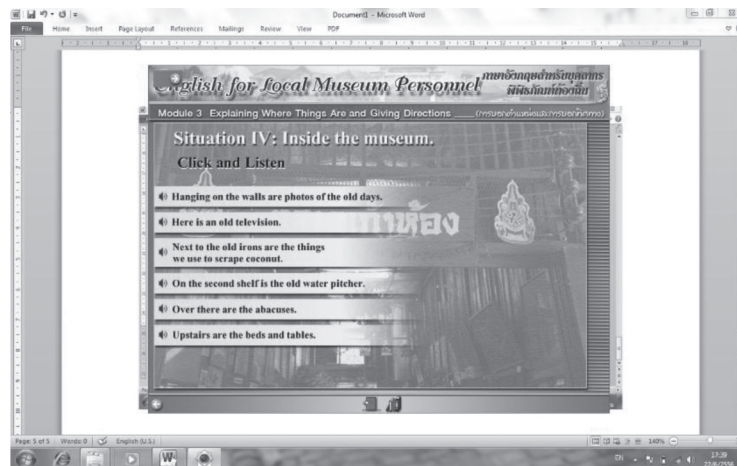
### 4.3 A summary of the CD:

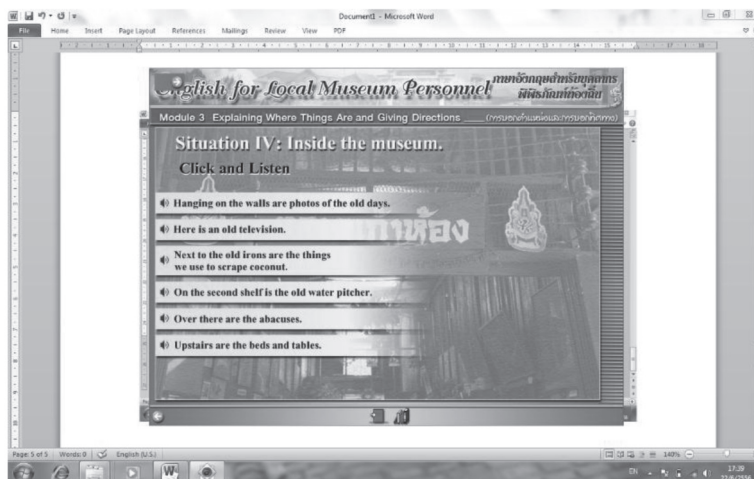
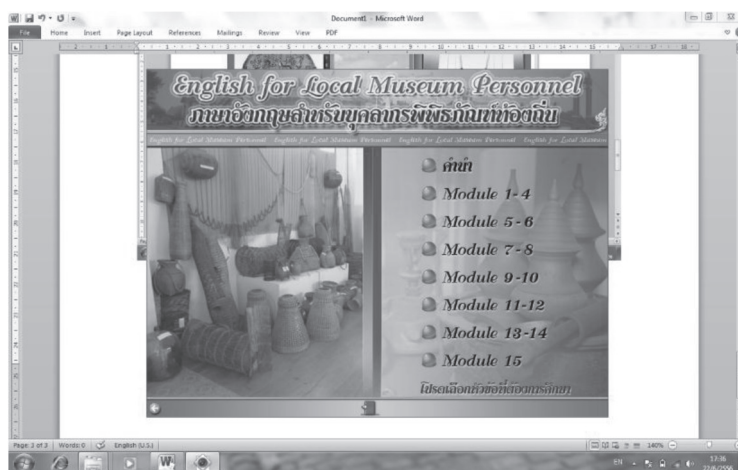
This research and development project was aimed at (1) studying the need for an English training package for local museum personnel; (2) developing a self-study multimedia English training package; (3) improving the basic-level English capability of personnel involved in local museum administration and operation.

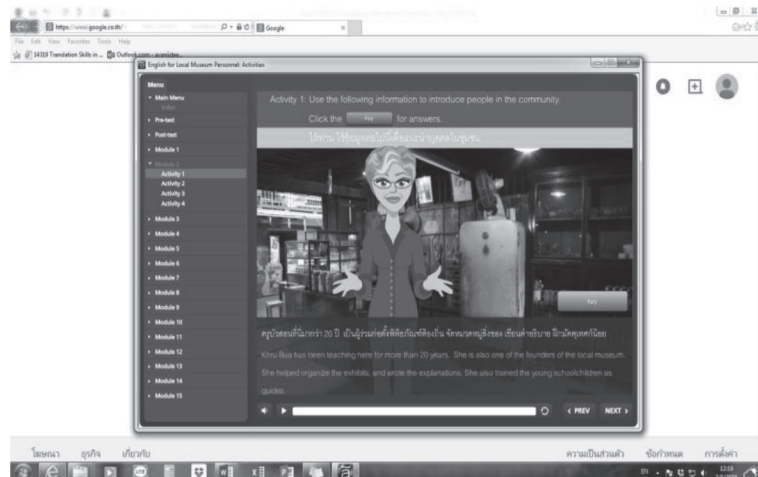
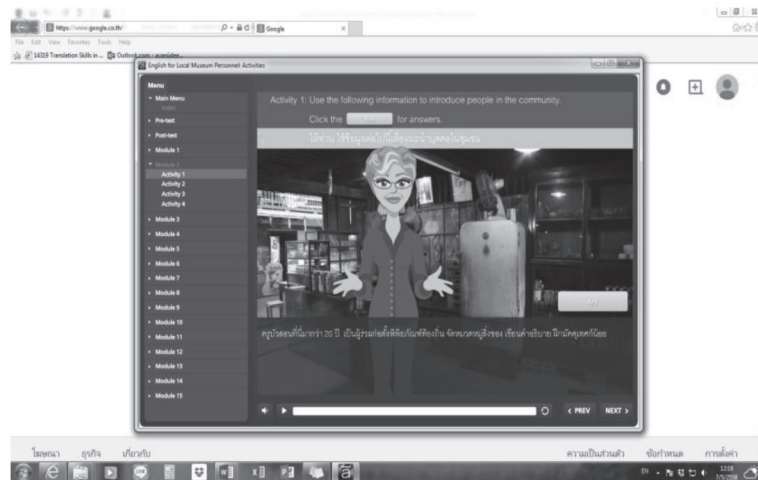
The 30 informants included officials, teachers, and volunteers from local museums. Research instruments used were (1) the English training package; (2) a pre-test; (3) a post-test; (4) an interview form for first trial; and (5) a questionnaire for satisfaction assessment.

The results were as follows: (1) the self-study multimedia training package on a set of 2 CDs. The first consists of a content of 873 MB, 675 frames with 1,489 pictures and were presented in Adobe Photoshop. It also contained 9 moving cartoon characters in Flash program. The CD on Activities is based on *Articulate Storyline* software of 200 MB. (2) The training package is effective in line with the research objectives; the satisfactory level of the informants is at the level of most ( $\bar{X} = 4.00$ ); the users approve the training packages useful and applicable. (3) The CDs were contributed to 1,000 local museums and libraries. (4) the comparison of pre-test and post-test scores showed that the informants gained more knowledge and skills significantly at .01 level.

Examples of language learning activities:







## Conclusion

The creation of language learning activities by using formulaic languages and an interesting format helps learners to learn and apply the language. The local tourism content is in fact the cultural information which the translators or the writer of the language lessons seek from texts, encyclopedias, websites or those living in the cultures themselves. This information must be translated by the interpretation from the translators' world view and experience into the English language. They must understand the nature of vocabulary and the culture attached to it, as well as the translation principles of equivalence and non-equivalence. The non-equivalence principle is very useful because each culture is unique and can only represent themselves in analogy to others.

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