Standing as tall as his name, Andrew Biggs is arguably one of the most famous farangs in Thailand. On big screens and small ones alike — or beaming from the covers of his many books and the pages of the Bangkok Post on Sunday — his humbly charming manner and easy smile mark him as a local who has earned his spurs.

Known as ‘Ajarn Biggs’ to his legions of Thai students, the Brisbane native first came to the country in 1989 on Valentine’s Day as a journalist and a traveller, not a teacher, but the latter is now his lifelong profession and true passion.

“After Rupert Murdoch bought the Sun and the Times of London along with the Queensland’s newspaper (the Courier-Mail) when he was making inroads 30 years ago, I was able to get a job in London and I decided to take two years off to go and work as a journo there,” he recalls of his original plan.

Little did he know that he was about to take a detour.

“I called them and they said, ‘Yeah, come on over.’ So I looked for the cheapest ticket I could find and it was Thai Airways, with a condition that I have to stop in Bangkok for two nights, which was something that I did not want to do, so I bought a novel.”

Not a novel, exactly, but Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, the acclaimed fictionalised autobiography and metaphysical tract by Robert Pirsig. Sitting in his hotel room, Mr Biggs was determined to stay indoors for two days while killing time by reading, but Bangkok changed his mind.

“‘I was going to read that book for two days and then continue on to London but then I got here and I kind of liked it; this is a weird place,’” he recalls. “Actually, I loved it as there don’t seem to be any rules anywhere. It was bustling and busy and interesting so I decided to stay.”

The first place he visited on his first morning in the capital was the Grand Palace which “blew my mind”, as he took in the splendours of a culture dating back many centuries, compared with the settler culture in his home.
country that was only 200 years old.

"I was trying to wrap my head around that so I read about Sukhothai and Ayutthaya and I really wanted to go and see them, which led me to extend my stay for two weeks," he says.

The news that her son was going to stay in Southeast Asia for another two weeks on an unplanned schedule did not thrill his mother. But like many young members of the farang khue-nok (cheapskate foreigner) tribe, he was determined to give it a go.

Back then, Southeast Asia was still in ferment: Vietnamese troops were still in Cambodia, the military regime in Burma refused to accept the electoral victory of Aung San Suu Ki, Malaysia was sparring with Australia, and Thailand was smack in the middle of everything.

"I had my backpack and I caught the train and I went up to Ayutthaya and then on to Phitsanulok before I arrived in Sukhothai," says Mr Biggs. "I did all of the North and all of Isan which took me two months instead, and every week I had to call my mother and listen to her yell at me through the phone as she would be freaking out."

FOREIGN TEACHER

After two months, his visa ran out so he left Thailand to stay with a journalist friend in London. But only three days into his stay in "civilised" Europe, his friend’s flat was broken into and he lost all his cameras and traveller’s cheques.

"After two months in Southeast Asia, here I am in the bosom of mother England and I had everything stolen, so I called my mother to say, ‘Well, I am here, and I’ve lost everything’ he recalls with laughter.

While the offer of a job in London was still open, he felt as a journalist that Southeast Asia was more vibrant and “radically different” from England, which was like Australia where “half of the newspapers were being run by Australians”, so he flew back to Thailand.

The first thing Mr Biggs did on his second trip to Thailand was to study the Thai language. If he was going to work in the Kingdom for two years — another original plan that changed along the way — he had better know the language.

"I did that (studying the Thai language) for six months before I needed some money if I was to stay on, so I got a job teaching English at a language centre on the corner of Lat Phrao and Batchada called LLC,” he says.

He went in there “very green” but as a journalist, he knew how to write and communicate effectively and became quite popular with students there. Shortly afterward, a job opening came up at The Nation newspaper, which he applied for and got.

At the English-language daily, Mr Biggs built his reputation with a magazine that he helped launched in 1992 with the aim of helping young Thais learn English, and it took off quite well.

"That was my life-changing moment where I did the two things that I love to do which was journalism and teaching — imparting knowledge while teaching a lan-
From my own experience of learning Thai, if you just think about the rules and how to conjugate correctly, you are not going to be able to speak it because you are too busy worrying about it in your head.

From his experience, Mr. Biggs believes that in the past, Thai people started out learning English the wrong way around by concentrating too much on grammar and rules rather than starting on listening and speaking first.

"First of all, you started way too late at grade 5 and 6 before it went back to the first grade, but even then it was about the rules and memorising them without any communication," he observes.

"From my own experience of learning Thai, if you just think about the rules and how to conjugate correctly, you're not going to be able to speak it because you're too busy worrying about it in your head."

"ENGLISH IN ENGLISH"

Nowadays, he says, Thai schools are starting to change, with more communication between the teachers and students, but Mr. Biggs still believes this can be taken another step further.

"If you want Thais to get good at English, any new teacher that is coming into the system has to be bilingual," he says. "They've got to be able to have a certain level of English and secondly, starting next year at grade one, we are teaching English in English, no Thai in the English classroom.

"In six years, those kids who will be in grade 6, they will all be able to understand and they will all be able to listen."

Another part of the problem is that there are too many students in a classroom. Around 10 students would be ideal in his view but he accepts that this is not going to happen because of budget constraints, even though the proportion of the government budget that goes to the Education Ministry is among the highest in the world, with 90% going to salaries.
“The testing system in Thailand is also absolutely flawed,” Mr Biggs continues, warming to his subject. “It is broken because we are still in this very old system where your whole future still depends on the 50 questions on the O-Net (Ordinary National Educational Test).

“I have found at least six mistakes on the grade 3 O-Net which have no correct answer, or more than one, or do not make sense. Why not send them to someone to check them? I would do it for free.”

He says that if Thai education policymakers still want to keep this outdated, centralised test method, the curriculum has to be more specific because the current one is too vague. Simply put, schools and teachers do not know what they need to know.

“The schools and teachers have to understand what they are teaching too, so that the students can do the test and hopefully they can get a good grade, but that is not happening in Thailand and the tests are terrible,” he adds.

Mr Biggs, who has travelled to 76 of the 77 provinces in Thailand, has written more than 20 books in his second language, also holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Mass Communication and the Thai language from Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok.

Not satisfied merely with being the first westerner to graduate from the university, he is now studying for his Master’s Degree in Education in Innovative Curriculum and Learning Management as well. It’s no surprise that many people these days no longer think of him as a farang, but only with the respectful title of Ajarn that he has richly earned.