From Theory to Practice: Mother-tongue based Bi/Multilingual Education Programme for Ethnic Children in Thailand

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0. Introduction

In countries with linguistic diversity, people who speak socially less powerful languages tend to be bi- or multilingual, speaking their own ethnic/local language, possibly a more dominant regional language and the official or national language. On the other hand, people who speak the dominant language tend to add only those national and/or international languages that are as or more powerful than their own. Simply put, people in power tend not to learn the languages of the less powerful. This is the scenario commonly observed in the kingdom of Thailand, as well as in other developing countries in the world.

For Thailand, this has led to two kinds of school programs. One is Thai-English bilingual education, initiated in 1996 and geared mostly for urban, middle-class children who speak Standard Thai as their mother tongue. The languages of the classroom are Thai and English, with initial emphasis on English language learning. The societal and educational aims of this program are pluralism and enrichment with biliteracy and bilingualism as the expected language-learning outcomes. Twelve years after this program was initiated, the expected learning outcomes need to be evaluated to see if children in this program actually are achieving the program's aims.

The second kind of education program in Thailand is found in mainstream schools throughout the country. In this program, Thai is the only language of instruction, regardless of whether the students are Thai or members of other ethnic groups.

Questions to consider with respect to languages and education in Thailand

1. Since Thailand is a multilingual country with over 60 languages spoken within its borders, what can schools do to improve the quality of education for children who do not speak Thai as their first language?

Schools or educators need to recognize that bilingualism and multilingualism are prevalent in Thailand but the degree of bi/multilingualism is different in different parts of the country. Bilingual communities tend to be situated near the country's borders and are often surrounded by other language groups. Most members of the communities are motivated to learn the prestige languages in order to secure a better future. For example, people in the western region of Thailand, where many ethnic people are bi-or multilingual, might use their own ethnic/local language (e.g., Mon or Pwo Karen), a neighboring or regional language (e.g., Burmese), or Standard Thai in their conversations, depending on the topic being discussed and their relationship with the other speakers. However, there are pockets in the north, northwest and west of Thailand which are remote, with poor media or communication systems, and where the people lack opportunity and motivation to learn Thai. In these areas, children speak only or mostly their ethnic language when they enter school. They are rarely exposed to Thai in their daily lives.

The emphasis in UNESCO's program of “Education for All” is not only about increasing children's access to schools but, equally important, it is also about the quality of education that the schools

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2 I wish to thank Susan Malone, Ph.D of SIL International, for her help with this paper and for being a consultant to this program.
provide. Schools should provide a good balance between meeting the learners' educational needs and serving the nation's social, cultural and political demands. When indigenous language minorities are perceived as a threat to national security, and language uniformity is perceived as necessary for national unity, education becomes a tool for social, linguistic and cultural assimilation. In diverse linguistic situations such as Thailand, monolingual education programs are likely to hinder ethnic minority children's ability to get a good education and lead to the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity.

According to the research\(^3\), mother tongue\(^4\) instruction is an important component of quality education, particularly in the early years. Schools can support multilingualism by employing the ethnic languages for instruction and including them as subjects in primary grades. In Thailand, however, no schools have yet developed a curriculum that would support maintenance bilingual education for ethnic minority children. Some attempts have been made to use mother tongue as medium of instruction but only the oral language is used and only for the first one or two years of school in order to help children enjoy being at school and understand what the Thai teacher is saying. Examples are 12 basic education mainstream schools in the south and several pilot schools in the north. The emphasis in these programs is on moving the children into Thai as quickly as possible.

2. How can multilingual education be implemented without a clear practical policy and plans to guide the schools that want to implement such programs?

Thailand has no explicit multilingual education policy or clear statement from the Ministry of Education that supports bi/multilingual education. The only support for bi/multilingual education was a verbal statement from the ex-Minister, Mr. Jaturond Chaisaeng, which was publicized on the Ministry of Education website. Those of us involved in planning for bilingual education in two language communities- Pwo Karen and Mon- took this as a policy directive that would legitimize our pilot. Without a clearly stated policy, however, these pilot projects are vulnerable to those who want a “Thai-only” education system or a weak or pseudo-form of bilingual education (BE) or multilingual education (MLE).

With respect to selecting the schools for the BE pilot program, the selection of the school for the Mon-Thai pilot project was based on the following points: First, almost 100% of the students in the school speak Mon as their mother tongue. Secondly, it is a mainstream school which represents the basic formal education system. Third, the school includes a 2 year pre-school and all primary grades. Fourth, school staff, recognizing the need for an innovative approach to overcome students' poor performance and low achievement, asked for our\(^5\) help in planning, preparing and initiating the program. Finally, the education official who first informed us that the community, including school officials, wanted to implement a Mon-based BE/MLE program, offered to coordinate between the school and the Office of Basic Education (OBEC).

The Pwo Karen (PK)-Thai BE project was initiated in Community Learning Centers (CLCs) rather than regular schools in the formal education system. CLCs are the official learning sites for children living in remote and/or difficult areas and are under the supervision of the non-formal education (NFE) system. The PK-Thai BE program was originally intended as an expansion of a PK-Thai BE program that had previously been initiated by the NFE department but then

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\(^4\) Mother tongue here means first or primary language.

\(^5\) Foundation for Applied Linguistics (FAL) is a Thai, non-profit and non-governmental organization established in 1989, with the purpose of enhancing the quality of life of the educationally disadvantaged in Thailand and neighboring countries, by promoting language learning and language development.

discontinued. Selection of CLCs for this project was based on several factors. One was that these CLCs are situated in PK villages and the children speak only Pwo Karen. In the selected sites, community members use only their language for communication within the community, an active way to maintain their cultural and linguistic heritage. Another factor in the selection of these six village sites for the PK pilot project was that the area has been educationally deprived, with a high drop-out rate in primary level and only a few students entering secondary level because of poor levels of language and academic achievement. Evidence of this is a statement by the Chiangmai NFE director\(^6\) that less than 10% of PK children in the non-formal education system, in Chiangmai Province complete their 6 year primary education. Last but not least, the NFE director of the district, together with NFE educators who had initiated the earlier project with UNESCO Bangkok, wanted to implement this program in their CLCs so as to improve the teaching and learning for these ethnic children and indicated that they would support it.

Both the Mon-Thai and the Pwo Karen-Thai bilingual education pilot projects are attempts to implement mother-tongue based bilingual education programs that are based on sound educational and language learning theories. The program's purpose is to enhance the students' cognitive development and to enable them to achieve success in school while also supporting language communities' efforts to maintain their heritage languages and cultures. In addition, we hope that these pilot projects will demonstrate to Thai government officials that Thai nationals can implement a mother tongue (MT)-based education program that leads to higher levels of academic achievement in communities that have formerly been at the bottom of the educational achievement charts.

3. What are the key factors which affect orthography development?

During the preparation phase of the program, we encountered several difficulties relating to the choice of script in both languages. At the time we began, two Thai-based orthographies had already been developed for the Pwo Karen dialect spoken in the northern and northwestern regions. One was the orthography developed around 2003-4 for use in the original NFE program that had been established in the nearby Omkoi district. The other Thai based orthography had been developed and used for almost 50 years by Christian Pwo Karen groups. We quickly recognized the need to foster discussion between the two groups to work out a standard Thai-based script that could be used in the northern areas of Thailand. Therefore, the process of dialogue through formal and informal meetings began in 2007 and led to subsequent discussions. Two formal workshops on the Thai-based script were organized, the first to focus on developing a standard version of the Thai-based script. The goal of developing an acceptable, standardized Thai-based script was reached through the use of sound linguistic theories and through putting the orthography to practical use in communication. The second workshop was an attempt to make the orthography acceptable to Thai scholars who strongly opposed adaptation of the script for PK, arguing that it would cause written Thai to deteriorate. Writing PK words using Thai based script makes PK words look different from Thai; that is, they use different combination of letters and marks from Thai. We had to explain and show the Thai educators, NFE representatives, who encountered the complaints of how and why the formation of words in PK had to be written differently from Thai. This helped them understand that it was impossible to write PK words using Thai orthography, it had to be PK orthography though the script used is based on Thai. Finally, the Thai-based orthography was revised and there was an attempt to adjust and conform to the Thai system as much as possible.

Our main reason for using the Thai based script in the pilot project was that it would make it easier for children who had gained literacy in their mother tongue to transfer into Thai. The

\(^6\) From an informal meeting with Mr. Worapoj, NFE director of Chiangmai and Dr. Suchin Petcharak, NFE academic section of northern region center, on May 29, 2008.
orthography should be a supportive tool that helps children to attain better learning achievements but it should also help safeguard MT speakers from political pressure related to national unity or integration.

Another problem was that some PK speakers in the north wanted to restore a traditional PK script (Burmese-based script) that had become extinct in these areas. They strongly felt that their cultural identity was tied up with the traditional script which they wanted to develop and revitalize. In spite of our initial attempts to explain the rationale for using the Thai-based script, this group had opposed the MLE project from the beginning because of the script choice issue. This group primarily wanted to use the orthography from another group of PK people who speak different from them and lived in the western region of the country. They believed that these two groups, the north and the northern dialects were mutually intelligible and therefore could use the same orthography. A series of awareness-raising and mobilization workshops and meetings were held to explain the rationale for using the Thai-based script in the northern region. It took about eight months but gradually this group was convinced that the disadvantaged children in their own communities would be helped by a MT-based BE program. We agreed to assist them in developing the traditional script if they would form their own committee to work on this, which they did. The group is now actively involved in supporting their own program and exceedingly proud of their writing system which they feel reflects their unique cultural identity. The two scripts; Thai-based and traditional, are both acceptable and both used for different purposes. The national or Thai based script is for ease of transfer into the national language while the traditional Karen (Burmese-based) script represents their own heritage and reflects the uniqueness of their identity.

4. What are the current educational findings that relate to these ethnic children regarding literacy in Thai, the national language? Is it reasonable to expect schools in Thailand to implement MT based bilingual education?

While preparing for this project, we conducted research on reading proficiency and learning achievement among Mon students in grade (G) 2 to 4 at the pilot school. This school is situated in Wanga village, Nong Loo sub-district of Sangklaburi district. Nearly 100% of the population speaks Mon as their first language and since the village is on the border with Burma, there is an unavoidable influx of Mon from Burma into the village. As a result of immigration and a high birth rate, the number of people has outgrown the available space. The population of the village is more than 10,000 with a high percentage of children. A large number of children enroll in the mainstream government school each year, and this year there are over 120 students of year 1 pre-school level. This community is exposed to Standard Thai because of the different types of media in the village. People use Mon in their interactions with friends and others in the village but they use Thai (broken or fluent depending on how long they have lived in the village) with Thai government officials.

Most adult Mon in the village can speak and understand their language but can not read and write it (or any language). Recognizing the danger to their language and culture, several Mon adults in the community organized a Mon Culture Committee and initiated the idea of teaching Mon in the school. Others, especially younger parents and most Thai teachers, did not see the importance of preserving their mother-tongue. Their children had problems in achieving government learning standards. They thought that using Mon would be a waste of time and their children should start learning Thai as soon as possible.

Consequently, this group resisted the BE program and only wanted Thai in school. The school was in a difficult situation because of the conflict between these two groups. When the school brought in some Mon speakers to teach the Mon language and culture as recommended by some members of the school board, the school was criticized by many parents who were against

using untrained teaching assistants (TAs) and against teaching Mon in general. The argument was that their children's learning of Thai needed to be improved because their future depends on Thai rather than Mon so the schools should spend more time on Thai.

With this background, we needed to demonstrate that students in the Thai-only program were not performing satisfactorily in school even though Thai was the only language of instruction and Thai was taught as a subject from the first year of schooling. Our evidence was the result of G2-4 students’ reading scores that were taken from the reading proficiency test conducted by the mainstream schools as their baseline survey. These schools are located in the areas where there are students whose MT language is not Thai. The test was developed in one of our workshops sponsored by the Office of Basic Education Commission (OBEC) prior to the implementation of the BE program in order to evaluate the reading skill in Thai of the ethnic students in the Thai-only program. The mean scores in percentage of G2, G3 and G4 Mon students’ reading proficiency in Thai at Wat Wang school are 53, 55, and 53 out of a possible 100 points. But when we looked at the scores of the comprehension part only, the number of students who received 2 or less was very high. The test results demonstrated that the majority of students (67% in G2 and 79% in G3 and in G4) did not understand what they were reading in Thai. This showed that comprehension part was low and this would definitely result in low learning achievements.

5. How could we get support from the community, especially big ones like Mon, when there is conflict among groups on various issues?

The challenge in the Mon community was to generate support for the program among community members. Awareness-raising and mobilization were needed in the village. In cooperation with the school, we organized a meeting to introduce MT bi/multilingual education to all school teachers and administrators, some students in the higher grades, school board members, community leaders, district officials, administrators in other interested schools and regional supervisors. Participants at the meeting had many questions and doubts. Even the teachers had trouble understanding the rationale and purpose of MLE because they were Thai. We wanted them to experience what it was like to be in a classroom in which the teacher does not speak the students' language so we demonstrated that situation through a short skit, inviting them to participate by taking the role of young children in school whose MT is different from the language of instruction. We also held a workshop to develop simple reading material in the Mon language. Participants, who included preschool Thai teachers, Mon Teaching Assistants, supervisors and other interested persons, learned how to develop and create stories for small children in their language. These stories were put into Big Book and Small Book formats. When these books were made and displayed, community members could see the materials in their language. Interested individuals were allowed to visit and observe the literature development process. During this process, we tried to connect with the village head and his assistants. After a series of discussions with an influential village head assistant who is responsible for the community section leaders in the village, we took his advice by inviting all those section heads for dinner meeting. There are almost 80 section leaders in the village and each one is in charge of each community section. We presented to them what we had done at school and the expected benefits for the children in this village with respect to learning and culture. The project is now at least accepted and known throughout this big town-like community.

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7 This test is designed to evaluate students’ reading levels in accuracy, fluency, rate, and comprehension.
8 The scores of students’ reading proficiency test are calculated and converted into an average figure of percentage for each grade level.
9 There are five levels of comprehension in the test; 1= not able to recall the story; 2= can only recall little, not continuously, not the key point/concept; 3= just barely grasp the main points, no details; 4= can get the main points well but not all details; 5= can get all the main points and other details in the story very well. In this test, we require level 2 at least for students to be able to understand the text, and to pass the test.
village.

We also arranged a meeting with the school board in May of this year. We suggested that the school have an orientation meeting with parents whose children will be starting school, to share information about the new bilingual education (BE) program, introduce the TAs and inform parents of the preparations for the program. Parents were also informed of the projected benefits of the MT-based bilingual education and saw the display of materials developed in Mon. Parents seemed to be pleased about the idea of using Mon as language of instruction.

The geographical context for the PK project called for a different kind of program. The six PK villages in Hod district of Chiangmai provinces are in remote areas and with too few students to have a full-fledged mainstream school. Each of the villages has a Community Learning Center (CLC) with only one teacher to teach all grade levels. The MT-based bilingual education pilot project for PK has been established in these six CLCs, as part of the non-formal education system.

Our first step was to hold several awareness-raising meetings and workshops with local stakeholders: school board members, teachers, school administrators, community leaders, school supervisors and others from the village. They worked in groups, discussing the educational, academic, and socio-economic requirements for implementing the project in the six CLCs. Later, to raise awareness and mobilize others in the PK communities, we held open meetings in each of the six villages to learn from community members what they understood about the project and what they expected from it. Initially they indicated their desire for their children to be able to use Thai well, even if that meant that the children would have to abandon their own language. However, when they were asked if they would like their children to be bi-literate and bilingual, they replied that if they could choose, they would go for bilingualism and bi-literacy. The meetings, first with the leaders and then with parents and others, seem to have helped the community in general understand the purposes and potential benefits of the program.

6. How would instructional materials for MT-based bilingual education enable students to achieve the national curriculum standards?

The plan for teaching the two languages--mother tongue/local language and Thai--in the pilot school and CLCs was first discussed with the teachers and other relevant persons. Although it is known that a good foundation for children's cognitive development requires ample time to develop their first language before moving into the second one, the language progression plan for the pilot project depended upon two factors. One is the amount of exposure the village children have to Thai and the other is the requirements of the Ministry of Education as outlined in the national curriculum standards. After analyzing the national curriculum standards for preschool and primary levels, it was decided to use only the mother tongue for instruction at preschool level. However, since the schools are required to begin reading and writing in Thai in Grade 1 of primary school, the children in the pilot schools would need to begin literacy in their mother tongue even earlier, that is, in their second year of preschool.

The plan is to introduce oral Thai in the 4th quarter of Year 1 of preschool and continue through Year 2 of pre-school and primary grades. MT literacy will begin in Year 2 of pre-school, to give the children 1 ½ years to gain a foundational level in reading and writing in their mother tongue before they are introduced to Thai literacy in the second term of Grade 1. In pre-school and Grade 1, the mother tongue will be the primary language of instruction, but key Thai terms for academic subject will be introduced so the children become familiar with them. In primary Grades 2 and 3, concepts will be introduced in the mother tongue, taught in Thai, and summarized in the mother tongue. From Grade 4-6, the language of instruction will be Thai with some explanation of key concepts in the mother tongue. The mother tongue will be taught as a subject throughout the
Since at this time there is no flexibility in adjusting educational standards for children who do not speak Thai when they begin school, and since it will take longer for the ethnic students to achieve a level of fluency in Thai that will enable them to achieve grade level standards, the decision was made to start the program already in pre-school. The MLE-specific curriculum standards for the pilot pre-schools are the same as the national standards. We realized that the learning outcomes must also coincide with national outcomes although we needed to make some adjustments to suit the ethnic community contexts. Once they were satisfied with the MLE outcomes, the pilot project working group, which is composed of all relevant Thai teachers, supervisors, some local scholars and some TAs, developed indicators and activities for each outcome. The indicators will be used regularly to assess the degree to which the children are achieving the learning outcomes. The next step was to prepare lesson plans according to the theme of the week or according to the monthly cultural calendar.

The learning contexts for the Pwo Karen NFE students and the Mon mainstream formal education students are different. The NFE students learn at the CLC in the village 3 weeks a month, from Monday till Saturday, and are out of school the last week of the month. They normally have only one teacher per CLC so they study less hours because the teacher has to deal with other level students. They are normally grouped into 3 or at the most; 4 grades: for example, preschool plus some grade 1 makes one cohort, grade1-3 form another cohort and grade 4-6 the third cohort. For the NFE preschool students, the teaching time is only 2 hours a day and the rest of the day, they just play outside or go back home after lunch. On the other hand, the Mon students study 5 days a week in school. They have a semester school break twice a year in October and in March/April. They are classified and set into preschool year 1 or 2 according to their age, 4 and 5 respectively. They have their own classroom with some educational visual aid and toys. They come to school from 9 am to 3:00 pm, spending three hours per day studying and the rest for their nap in the afternoon and lunch.

Lesson plans for the pilot program call for child-centered activities, each lasting from 10-20 minutes. At first it seemed difficult for the teachers to plan these learner-centered activities because they were used to a more teacher-centered approach (although they claimed that the old approach was child-centered). Preparing the lesson plans has taken a lot of time and still requires a lot of adjustment. However, the teachers are learning and have already improved their lesson plan activities.

Lesson content for year 1 of pre-school is drawn from the local context and is based on the educational principle that children learn best when they use what they already know to learn new concepts. Traditional forms of measurement and traditional art forms have been incorporated into the curriculum. Many things such as herbal medicine, types of cultural art forms, musical instruments, songs, and cultural games, that have not been valued and are in danger of being lost, are being brought into the curriculum. Equally important, this “cultural or local curriculum” is also school-based and follows the national curriculum standards.

7. Is pre-service and in-service teacher training necessary to the success of the program?

Teacher training was beneficial not only to the mother tongue teaching assistants (TAs) but also to the Thai teachers. It is best if both the Thai teachers and the TAs take part in the training workshop because the interaction helps them build a good relationship so they can benefit from and complement one another. At the training workshops, trainees learned how to use the teaching methodology with different activities and different types of instructional materials. When it came to practice teaching in groups, they realized that this “new” way was not easy. The TAs kept forgetting the steps for the activities and the teachers kept slipping back to their old teacher-centered
methods. In the Pwo Karen training workshop some of the teachers were hesitant to do the practice teaching exercises in front of others in the group, especially when some of their “students” were the TAs with whom they would be working. We found that teachers lacked experience in asking the kinds of questions that help children to build higher level thinking skills. They found it helpful to practice asking questions and analyzing them into categories; information question, open-ended question and imagination questions. The TAs had to study and follow the daily lesson plans that had been prepared, mainly by their Thai teachers. This was done before the TAs started teaching this academic year. It was agreed that this year the Thai teachers will be in the back of the class, supporting the TAs. Mainstream teachers and TAs paired up in each class but the teaching role will be the TAs. Thai teachers will observe in class and help document children’s attitudes and participation in class. They plan to meet together every Friday.

After classes had been going for about one month, we went to visit the projects to observe classes and talk with TAs and the Thai teachers. The feedback was positive. For the NFE project, we were informed that more small children come to the CLC and in some villages almost 100% more children came to study. Furthermore, children participated well in class and they enjoyed the learning very much. In the past, these children never wanted to come to school, they just sat around outside. Now the children are eager to learn, they urge the TAs to start class and look forward to coming to the CLC. And equally important, parents are happy because their children tell them what they learn during the day.

Information from the Pwo Karen project (in the formal education system) is also positive, Thai teachers reported that the children interact much more than last year because they understand the language used in class. Children have more confidence and express themselves much better than last year. Children in both projects like the teaching materials but in different degrees, and find them very attractive and interesting.

8. Conclusion

Both projects have just started and, of course, still have a long way to go. Even so, the implementation team hopes that reports from this project will help to encourage the Ministry of Education to promote and support mother tongue based bi/multilingual education in the areas that need them. Hopefully, the program will also provide information about good practices that will be helpful to others who want to start and implement this kind of project. Fluency in two or more languages (their own and the dominant language) must be one of the goals of education in non-dominant language communities so that learners (children and adults) are able to obtain the basic necessities needed for survival. Supporting children’s use of their mother tongue also supports their psychological, cognitive, and spiritual development. Access to the other languages, including an official language of the country in which the children live, should be recognized as a social, economic, political, and civil right.

This program will change over time and much is yet to be learned. What we have already found is that there will be plenty of challenges, including from the people most closely involved at every level, but that challenges can be met over time if we have patience, an eagerness to learn and understand, no single agenda, and flexibility.
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