

## What is 'bilingual education' and is it the same as 'immersion'?

Bilingual education, as the term suggests, is education in two languages. This means more than just the inclusion of a foreign language in the school curriculum. For bilingual education to occur students must be studying **key learning areas of the curriculum in two languages**. Usually this means that core content areas, such as Mathematics, Science or Social Studies, are taught in both languages. **Immersion**, when it refers to students learning a subject in a foreign language, such as English, is a means of delivering bilingual education, but is *different from learning bilingually*. In a broader sense, immersion refers to the kind of experience a Thai student might have at a fully English-medium school, such as an International school. In this kind of education the Thai student's mother tongue is not developed at school. The student is immersed in English.

## Is bilingual education the same as 'English Program' (EP)?

The term '*English Program*' has come into use in Thailand because policy makers felt it may be easier to understand than '*bilingual education*' or '*bilingual school*'. In probably most cases EP schools are providing a form of bilingual education. However, if students are learning perhaps certain key subjects in English only, it is a limited form of bilingual education. It is also a limited form of immersion.

A **fully bilingual** program may have higher or lower levels of immersion at different stages of a student's progress through schooling. One school, for example, provides a high level of English immersion in the early childhood years and a lower level in the secondary school years. However, by the time a student at that has completed primary or secondary schooling, he or she will have learned all core content material in the key learning areas in both English and Thai. It is the school's belief that students should become literate and numerate in their first language before their second

language. Teachers and administrators also know the benefit of students learning important concepts, processes and terminology of key learning areas in Thai before they do so in English.

### **Isn't learning in two languages wasteful?**

You may well ask why a student would learn content, procedures and terminology in two languages. It may seem an unnecessary use of time. However, we know that students learn concepts, processes and key terminology best in their **first** language. We also know that students learn a **second** language best in a **meaningful context**. A key school subject is a very meaningful context for a child in school. It is a natural context for a school student to learn a second language in and that is why bilingual schooling around the world is done through key curriculum areas. There is also a substantial body of research, no longer contested, that demonstrates the benefits of learning a second language for both linguistic and cognitive performance in the first language. So if a student in Thailand learns important subject content in both Thai and

English it will not only help the student's English, but also his/her Thai language and cognitive development as well.

### **An example: a private bilingual school in Bangkok**

At one private bilingual school in Bangkok, core learning areas (Math, Science, Social Studies) from Pratom 2 to Matayom 6 are taught in both Thai and English. In Kindergarten 2 and 3 and P1, they are taught in English, with some daily review and reinforcement from their Thai class teacher. Immersion is provided in those years because the children are very receptive to the new language, they become comfortable with the foreign teachers, and they are given a good foundation for their studies in English in subsequent years.

**Thai** is an advanced and complex language with a rich literature and cultural tradition. It is the mother tongue of the Thai Nation and deserves to be maintained and developed at school. There is no reason why any school subject cannot or should not be taught in Thai. **English** is the language of international communication. Students at the school are taught to respect their own language and

culture, to read, write and speak Thai effectively and elegantly and, at the same time, to become proficient in English, the language of the international community. Both languages are equally important.