

What do we need in order to have good bilingual education?

When parents consider bilingual education for their children, they want to be confident that it will achieve their goals.

In choosing Thai-English bilingual education, parents usually hope that this form of education will enable their children to

- become capable speakers, readers and writers of English
- develop their Thai language and cultural competence to a high level, and
- become able to function easily in both Thai and English-speaking cultural settings.

Parents need to know, therefore, what features are necessary in a bilingual school or program that will assist the attainment of these goals.

In the Thai context, and informed by research from other countries, it appears that, for bilingual education to be really successful, the following conditions should be present:

1. Parents must believe in this kind of education and support the school in its efforts.
2. Teachers must believe in bilingual education and the need to make their students and themselves better bilinguals.
3. Teachers should be familiar with or given assistance with methodology of teaching in a second language.
4. The mother tongue (ie Thai) must be developed together with the second language (ie English).
5. Where possible, after an early intensive immersion in the second language, important concepts in Math, Science, Social Studies, etc. should be taught first in Thai and then followed up in English.

6. Evidence of the importance of both languages should be visible everywhere in the school, through signs, displays, printed matter, etc.
7. One should be able to hear both languages spoken throughout the school at any time.
8. Important Thai festivals and celebrations should be honoured and performed. Major occasions in the English-speaking world (eg Christmas, Easter, Fourth of July) should be acknowledged.
9. Activities for developing language competence should be frequently available – writing and speaking competitions, dramatic and musical performances, English camps, etc. These may be conducted within the school or together with other schools.
10. Where possible, communication with students and teachers in English-speaking countries should be made possible, eg through visits to and from overseas partner schools, teacher training institutions, scholarships and student exchanges.

These are among the criteria that we use at a good bilingual school to determine that we are providing a quality bilingual education for our students.

Of course there are other conditions that are important for a good education, whether it be bilingual or monolingual. For example, schools must have dedicated teachers who love their students. Schools must be pleasant and healthy places. Discipline must be appropriate to the age and circumstances of the students. Every school needs loyal and reliable cleaners, cooks, drivers, maintenance personnel, nurses and office staff. In the 21st century, students need access to information technology and library services. Emotional Quotient and Multiple Intelligences must be taken into account in planning and teaching and in organizing outside activities. At one school, Music is very important to the life of the school and in each student's life. Every student is expected to be competent on one instrument when they finish their schooling there.

As stated earlier, a most important guarantee of success for bilingual schooling is the belief and support of the parents. In actively encouraging bilingualism parents work together with the school in its mission. The school also invites parents to express their views and to notify the school if they become aware of any problems. We know that our parents are intelligent and well informed people, so we listen to them very carefully and try to act in such a way that they are satisfied at all times.