

Bilingual Education *Baeb Thai* (Part One)

Over the past several months this column has discussed bilingual education and the conditions for its effectiveness; how much time should be given to the second language; bilingual education and intelligence; bilingual education and music; the significance of English as a language in Asia; and so on. However, there is still some uncertainty in the community about just what we mean when we talk about bilingual education (or, more specifically, bilingual schooling) in Thailand. What, in fact, happens in a bilingual school? Is a bilingual school like an international school, with an imported curriculum and method of teaching? Is it the same as “English Program” (EP)? Is bilingual education just an exotic plant that will always need special cultivation in Thailand or is it home-grown, ecologically in balance with the cultural, psychological and institutional environment of this country?

Let us discuss the nature and function of bilingual education by moving from the past to the present and from the general to the particular. To begin, it must be established that “bilingual education” is not an innovation.

Students in Ancient Rome studied both Latin and Greek. In medieval England, pupils studied both the vernacular languages (English and French) and Latin, the language of written texts and communication across borders. As recently as the early 20th century, many students in Europe were expected to know both their native language and at least one other European language, as well as to have strong reading proficiency in Latin and Greek. In Thailand, education for Buddhist monks and the sons of the nobility until the reign of King Rama V was in Pali, Sanskrit and Siamese. King Rama V himself was educated in all three languages as well as English.

Of course, one could say that these are examples of language education rather than bilingual education, and in one sense that is true. Whereas it can be said that any form of education that develops bilingualism is a form of bilingual education, nevertheless we usually have in mind when we use the term “bilingual education” a distinctive approach to and method of organizing the teaching of a native and a non-native language.

There are schools acknowledged in many countries as centres of excellence for teaching languages. They may teach a range of languages; they may employ only the most skilled and experienced of language teachers; they place special value on the learning of languages. However, they may or may not adopt a bilingual approach to teaching the languages. So, what is it that makes a school a bilingual school rather than a school that emphasizes the teaching of languages? I shall suggest a definition.

A *bilingual school* is one that:

- a. is a normal school with early childhood, primary and/or secondary students;
- b. teaches the core learning areas (subjects) in the native language and one non-native language; and
- c. teaches all students in both languages at all levels in the school.

This is a fully school, of which there are now many in Thailand. Of course, there are also schools that offer a teaching program that corresponds to the definition above, but as a component of a school that also offers a non-

bilingual (normal) curriculum. In these cases the school is offering an optional *bilingual education program*.

In what way is a bilingual school different, then, from an *EP (English Program)* school? Let us just pause a moment to note that the term “bilingual education” is used throughout the world, though with some varied interpretations. The term “English Program”, however, is used nowhere outside Thailand to refer to a bilingual school or bilingual program. It means either delivery of the curriculum in English-only or the teaching of English as a native or foreign language. To use this term to refer to bilingual modes of teaching the curriculum is confusing indeed.

To return to our question, we need to know what form an EP school takes. Is it bilingual in terms of the definition above? If it is, then it is a bilingual school. However, if it differs, for example where schools teach certain subjects in English-only either throughout the school or in certain year levels, it is not a bilingual school. True to its name in those cases, it is indeed an “English Program”. Malaysia has an English Program in regard to the teaching of

Mathematics and Science. The intention is that these subjects will be taught in English-only. This approach has been proposed for Thailand, but is not the preferred option for a bilingual school, particularly in our case where the Thai language has a rich Sanskrit-based conceptual and technical language for Mathematics and Science. To deny students access to this language would be to disinherit them from an important element of their language and culture.

There are schools, also, that would like to offer bilingual education, but cannot for one reason or another.

Constrained by lack of income or unavailability of English-competent teachers, these schools may offer some English-medium teaching, perhaps English-only, at some levels so that students get some exposure to content-based English instruction. As an attempt to enrich students' learning experience, such efforts are commendable. However, they do not constitute bilingual education and must be carefully managed by school administrators to ensure that the quality of English used in the classroom is satisfactory as well as the effectiveness of the instructional processes themselves. Bilingual

education in any form has to comprise both good language and good teaching.

Part Two of this discussion will take up the question of how and why bilingual education emerged in Thailand in recent years and whether it is a "native plant" or an "exotic" one.