

## Bilingual Education Baeb Thai (Part Two)

Many, if not most people in Thailand, especially in Bangkok and the regional cities, are familiar with the term roangrian sorng pasaa (two-language/bilingual school) and many have a general understanding that this kind of school teaches some of the curriculum in a non-native language – usually English. However, few people could be expected to know just how and why bilingual education emerged in the 1990s, even though it has experienced extraordinary growth since – from one trial bilingual program in 1992 to about 190 private and government bilingual schools and programs at present.

From small beginnings it may not be easy to see big results; however, as big oak trees from little acorns grow, so a seeding program in education can flourish to an unexpected degree. For bilingual education there is something in the Thai soil that generates and nurtures the bilingual plant so that it grows into a fine and durable tree. Before considering what it is about bilingual education that has led to such a flowering in this country, we might take a

moment to examine where it came from and why it was introduced in the first place.

For something to have a beginning there must have been a time when it was not. And the questions must be asked, “Why was its absence no longer endurable? What was introduced to fill the vacuum and why did it take that form?”

Bilingual education filled the space between the relatively ineffective approach to teaching English before 1992 and the kind of education provided by the international schools at the time. The former was not succeeding in producing substantial numbers of Thai students with communicative competence in English and the latter was far too expensive for all but a small segment of Thai society. The growing middle class with some surplus money to spend on private education was becoming concerned that their children would miss out on the opportunities emerging with Thailand’s growing interaction with the global economy – opportunities to which the access key was English. Even where they had the money to enroll their children in international schools or send them abroad parents found

these options unattractive because of the fear that their children would lose their culture and possibly also lose the benefits of friendships and networks that can only be cultivated in Thai schools and institutes of higher education.

The answer was not to introduce yet another foreign option. There is nothing “foreign” about bilingual education, though it draws on foreign personnel (teachers), particularly in its earlier stages. To be sure, bilingual education is a means by which a foreign language is learned and a foreign culture modeled, but the purpose for doing so is not to adopt foreign ways or to replace the national language with a foreign one. Bilingual education in Thailand is a means whereby Thai language and culture is promoted while English language is developed so that students will participate comfortably in international (ie English-speaking) contexts as well as familiar (Thai) ones. These aims and values are unquestionably “Thai”.

Bilingual education in the 1990s was introduced by Thai educators. Thai foresight, ingenuity, organizational skill, finance and courage created the bilingual schools to fill the

vacuum in Thai education referred to in previous paragraphs. Thai educators identified a means by which the frustrated demands of Thai parents could be met and their children given the key to the global community.

To be sure, ideas from other countries, such as Canada, who had already pioneered bilingual schooling, were examined and taken on board where they suited the Thai context. Teachers and administrative support were drawn from western and other English-speaking countries. Partnerships were developed with school systems abroad. The resources of the international community were drawn upon to support a two-way education program. After all, in bilingual education the child faces in two directions: (1) toward his or her own country, culture and language, and (2) toward the world beyond Thailand. There are great opportunities in both directions and one has to be well equipped for both – hence the emphasis bilingual schools place on both Thai and English language development and cultural competence.

Bilingual schools are proud to be educating students to be loyal and capable Thai citizens, but in addition we are pleased to be able to prepare students for a world that

requires global competence (beginning with competence in the international language) – the ability to act in your country's and your own interests and to respect and learn from others, no matter how different they may appear to be.