

Bilingual Education Baeb Thai (Part Three)

When thinking about bilingual education in the Thai context one must be careful about comparing it with the experience of other countries.

Certainly, there may well be similarities between the Thai experience and those of some countries where English is a second language. However, to seek comparisons with English speaking countries such as the United States, where there has been some effort – sometimes unsuccessful – to cater for both first and second language development among non-native speakers of English (in many cases economically depressed Hispanics) can be quite misleading. Likewise, to look to European examples may reveal some insights, but one must also take into account the situation and circumstances in these cases. In some, there is extensive bilingualism among the teaching staff, parents and broader community; there may be frequent opportunities to use the second language outside school, and so on. To compare Thailand with these scenarios is not to compare “apples with apples”, but apples with pineapples or oranges.

It is clear, then, that before forming conclusions based on overseas examples and applying them to Thailand, one must be confident that conditions are similar and criteria for defining a school or program as “bilingual” are consistent.

One of the problems with research studies done on “bilingual” schools and programs is that they vary in their understanding of what bilingual education actually is. To begin with, if one includes in a definition of bilingual education any language program that has as its goal competence in more than one language, then many schools with foreign or second language instruction can be called “bilingual”. That is perfectly OK as long as both speaker and listener (or writer and reader) both understand that. However, if one’s definition requires that curriculum content be taught in both languages, then the definition above is not adequate. For example, one may teach a second language in one’s school, but as a separate subject (ie TESOL/TEFL), or one may teach almost the entire curriculum in the student’s non-native language (eg international school). In both these models the outcome

will be greater bilingual competence, but the models are not bilingual education as a process.

As a result of this confusion – bilingual education as outcome vs bilingual education as process – much of the reported research from overseas, particularly the United States, is very questionable and not applicable to Thai conditions. Indeed, Professor James Cummins, from the University of Toronto – probably the world’s most experienced writer and researcher in this field – has claimed that

The only thing that academic opponents and advocates of bilingual education [in the US and Canada] seem to agree on with respect to the policy-related research is that [this research] is of almost universally poor quality.

(Cummins, Alternative Paradigms in Bilingual Education Research, 1999)

So, the obvious conclusions one can draw from this for bilingual education in Thailand are:

1. We can’t depend upon the findings of overseas research to assist us in planning or evaluating bilingual programs unless we are confident that the terms and definitions of the research are consistent with our own;
2. There is a need for continuing locally-directed and “ground roots” research into bilingual education in this country, supervised or monitored by Thai universities and research institutes;
3. There is a need for clarification of the term “bilingual education” in Thailand and the consistent adoption of the clarified definition by those who advise parents, government agencies and universities.

Regardless of how fully one understands the models of bilingual education that are available in Thailand – how they work, what their purposes are and how much they can be expected to achieve under the circumstances – it is clear that parents are “voting with their feet”. They are choosing this form of schooling wherever it becomes available. They are not discouraged by academic or bureaucratic conservatism (well-intended though it undoubtedly is) or the occasional negative report about

“bilingual” experiments in a place like California. They can see the benefits of bilingual education here and now in this, their own part of the world.

Top bilingual schools have had to maintain a very high level of effort and efficiency in order to keep up with the demand for bilingual schooling in different parts of Greater Bangkok. They have learned from experience, and this experience has been supported and supplemented by investigation. School administrators must research and evaluate methodically what happens in bilingual teaching and learning within their school as well as further afield. This is necessary to provide a knowledge platform from which one can make changes and improvements to organization, teaching and curriculum, provide parents with up to date information, and answer questions posed by parents, government and the educational community.

Parents who are considering bilingual education for their children are well advised to contact one of the bilingual schools and speak to administrators and teachers there. It is most important that parents be as well informed as possible before embarking on bilingual education. Being

well informed will enable them to know what is achievable, how it is done, what has been tried, what has been changed, and how they can play an effective role in their children’s bilingual education. Indeed, one of the conditions that have been found necessary to effective bilingual education is that parents are informed and supportive.