

Bilingual Education Baeb Thai (Part Four)

If bilingual education is the answer, what is the question?

There have now been several articles in Metro Life about bilingual education, mainly in regard to its benefits and suitability to our situation here in Thailand. On reading these articles, one could conclude that *bilingual education is the answer*. Indeed, the writer would agree, but ... the answer to what? If bilingual education is the answer, what, we may ask, is the question?

Thai parents who choose bilingual schooling for their children have agreed to a process of education that uses two languages to teach the curriculum. In bilingual schools, this means that the core curriculum areas, apart from Thai, are taught in both Thai and English. The core curriculum areas other than Thai are usually Mathematics, Science and Social Studies. Parents have agreed to this model of education because, basically, they are satisfied that it meets their expectations at an affordable price.

In forming their expectations and deciding whether bilingual schooling provides what they want, parents have a number of very important questions in mind. Let us consider what those questions are and the answers bilingual educators give to them.

1. *What is the best way for students to learn English at school?*
2. *How well do we want our children to know and use the Thai language?*
3. *How can our children get an effective English language education at a cost that we can afford?*
4. *How can we be sure that our children are educated in an environment that is sensitive to Thai values and conducive to Thai expectations?*
5. *How can we ensure that our school will be conducted by people whom we understand and who are sensitive to our needs?*
6. *If we need to use native English speakers, how can we ensure that they will be reliable, understanding and familiar with our wishes?*
7. *How can we be sure that academic standards will be maintained?*

8. *Will I feel uncomfortable speaking to teachers and administrators if I don't speak English well?*

In response, bilingual educators would make the following points:

1. The best way to learn English in a classroom and school setting is through content; that is, through the subject matter of each learning area, not as a set of skills in isolation from content. This is at the core of bilingual education. Language is learned best *in a context for a purpose*. The curriculum forms the context for the purpose of learning language bilingually.
2. In the belief that Thai people treasure their native language and culture, bilingual schooling gives as much emphasis to the native language as to the second language. The learning of the second language is *additive*, not *subtractive*. Children learn a second language to add to their competency as global citizens. There is no agenda to replace the native language or diminish its importance.

3. Although at present bilingual education is still expensive compared to non-fee paying education (that is, it costs more than nothing!), it is cheap compared to international schools.
4. Bilingual schools in Thailand are Thai schools. Close to 100% of the students are Thai-speaking Thai nationals. The ratio of Thai to foreign staff at my school is about 3:1. The cultural and social environment is Thai.
5. Bilingual schools are Thai schools; hence, they are conducted by Thai administrators and teachers, who are sensitive to parents' needs. They are also aware of their responsibilities to meet national educational aims and expectations.
6. The reliability, sensitivity and adaptability of foreign staff depend on how carefully they are selected and how well they are inducted and trained by the school. In a good bilingual school, much care is taken in recruitment of foreign staff. Once staff are

appointed, they should attend an orientation programme at the school followed by an induction programme of weekly seminars until their 3-month probationary period is completed. During this time and at all times they should be visited while teaching by Foreign and Thai administrators to ensure that their lessons are properly planned and recorded, that they are following the curriculum, and that they are teaching in a suitable manner. Reliable and competent foreign teachers are an essential resource for a bilingual program, so these teachers are cared for and encouraged to remain with the school for as long as practicable.

7. Bilingual schools perform well on national tests. At our school in 2003-2004, students in P6 scored 21-29 points higher than the national average in each tested area other than English. M3 students scored 17-19 points higher. M6 students scored 7-43 points higher than the national average. The difference in English for each year was 47, 48 and 42 points higher in these year levels. Students do well also in acceptance at the universities of their choice.

8. Parents who do not speak English well do not have to worry at a bilingual school. Most administrators and teachers in the school are Thai, so parents have no problems in making their voices heard and their wishes understood.

This has been a very short summary of

- the questions parents may ask in making decisions about education for language development, and
- the answers given by bilingual educators based on their experience and research.

I hope it has been of some interest and assistance to you in understanding more about this exciting new era in Thai school education.