

Thailand Setting the Pace for Bilingual Education

The 2006 annual meeting of directors of private bilingual schools in Thailand was addressed by Associate Professor Angel Lin from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Associate Professor Lin has researched bilingual education and language immersion programs in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei and spent two weeks at our school in 2005 observing bilingual teaching and learning at the school. She is currently completing a book to be published by University of Hong Kong Press early next year on bilingual education in Southeast Asia. This book will contain a chapter on Thailand, with particular reference to the models she has observed here.

Associate Professor Lin told the gathering of bilingual school owners and directors that Thai educators and parents are not only heading in the right direction by choosing bilingual education, they are “setting the pace” for East Asia.

Although there are some differences among bilingual schools in Thailand, there is a general awareness that bilingual education is not just about learning English. Rather, it is about development of competence in both the first language (Thai) and the second language (usually English). And competence in both languages, according to full bilingual Thai-English education, requires academic competence in both languages. Fully bilingual schools aim at a level of language competence in both the first and second language that will enable the student to undertake successful further study in either Thai or English. The aim, in brief, is academic bilingualism.

Of course, full academic bilingualism takes time to achieve, perhaps as long as 11 or 12 years for a Thai student beginning bilingual schooling in kindergarten, living in Thailand and using Thai for most of the time outside school. That estimate also takes into account that Thai and English are quite different languages, from different language families (Thai is from the Sino-Tibetan family; English is from the Indo-European), so there is not much similarity in vocabulary, pronunciation or grammar. Students who start bilingual education later can make

rapid progress towards academic bilingualism if their Thai is strong prior to starting, but will possibly have less native-like pronunciation than students who start early. Generally speaking, an early start is recommended where possible.

Thailand is setting the pace in East Asia by aiming for academic bilingualism rather than unbalanced or domain-specific bilingualism. Academic bilingualism means that if a student wants to undertake further education in, say, Physics, that student can do so in either Thai or English. Unbalanced or domain-specific bilingualism is where a student is academically competent in one language for one subject and another language for another. For example, where a student studies Chemistry in Thai only, he or she will not be academically bilingual in that subject. If she studies Mathematics in English only she will not be academically prepared for further study of Mathematics in Thai. She will have to learn the terminology and discourse language necessary before she can proceed.

According to Professor Lin, much of what is called bilingual education or “immersion” in East Asia is not successful.

Singapore is successful in its English-immersion education because English is such a strong language in the Singaporean community. In Malaysia, Hong Kong and China, however, English-immersion for Maths and Science – mandatory in Malaysian schools – is simply too difficult for many teachers of those subjects, as well as for their students. As a result, teachers mix languages in the classroom according to their ability, switching from one to another in order to be sure their students understand. Often they will just teach in their native language and add some English vocabulary. When they see that students do not understand the content of those subjects in English, teachers naturally switch to the native language. Students have to learn this content somewhere and they don't have another opportunity in the unbalanced or domain-specific model.

One significant Thai bilingual model provides what has been called “parallel immersion”. In a parallel immersion bilingual program, after the early years, students learn the content and language of the core subjects first in Thai. Then they learn the same general content in English, but to less depth: there is more focus on the language of the

subject and less on content knowledge, because they've already learnt key concepts and content in their mother tongue. There is no need to mix languages or switch codes in the English-medium lesson in order to be sure students don't miss essential learnings, because they get those from their Thai teachers. Indeed, many if not most teachers in English-medium classes in Thai bilingual schools are not able to code-switch because they are not speakers of Thai.

In aiming for academic bilingualism, in ensuring that students learn essential concepts and content in their first language, and in organizing their teaching and learning in a way that students get genuine and full immersion in both languages, Thai bilingual schools are setting the pace. They have developed a model in a very short time – about 12 years only – that serves as an example for the rest of East Asia. The very rapid pace at which bilingual education has grown in this country has meant that decisions have had to be taken very quickly. There has been little time for bilingual educators to acquire the wisdom that usually comes with long experience. That is growing with time, however, and a good platform of knowledge and

achievement has been built for the future benefit of Thai students.