

Bilingual Education in Thailand: What can we expect?

An interesting article appeared recently in the Education section of one of Thailand's English language daily newspapers. It was on the topic of bilingual child raising and bilingual education.

Parents (an English dad and Thai mum) were asked about their experience of raising two children bilingually and they described how mother speaks to the children in Thai and father speaks to them in English and how the children manage in home and school environments where either language may be spoken. Basically, their experienced confirmed the value of the one parent-one language approach for domestic bilingual development. The child's language competence is then extended through educative resources at home and exposure to wider language experience in Thai or English speaking contexts outside the home.

The next part of the article, however, took up the question of education for bilingualism – what we generally refer to as “bilingual education”.

A visiting overseas professor at one of Bangkok's outer suburban universities had proposed the introduction of a Master's degree in Bilingual Education – an admirable project, one might think. “Bilingual education in Thailand makes sense as there's a great need for it”, our visiting professor declared, and who would disagree? However, he then went on to say, as quoted: “Genuine bilingual schools are practically non-existent in Thailand”. This would come as a shock to the 200+ private and government bilingual and English program schools that are currently offering education through content in two languages, many of them in the form advocated by our professor: “You've got to give equal weight to both languages – have lessons in both languages, have announcements, signs and information in both languages”, all of which Thai bilingual schools have been doing in growing numbers since 1995 (when the Ministry of Education formally approved bilingual schooling).

One must always be cautious if someone tells us that a model or procedure we have chosen (because it seems appropriate to the context) is not “genuine” – not “the real thing”. The issue may simply be about terminology. We have discussed in previous articles the idea of “authenticity”, and the question is perhaps better asked whether a model is “authentic” rather than “genuine”. “Genuine” (as in “Is it a genuine Picasso?”) implies that it can only be one thing (“genuine”) or the other (“false”), whereas “authentic” suggests that something is valid in its context and for its purpose, which is what we mean by “authentic” language. A model of bilingual education, likewise, is authentic if it fits the context in which it functions and serves a worthwhile and realistic purpose. So, in Thailand, what is the context of bilingual education and the purpose it has been established to serve?

Let us revisit the situation as it was in the early 90s before the Sarasas Extra Class Program began (in 1992) as a pilot program in bilingual schooling.

Before 1992, Thai parents who wished their children to have a school education where curriculum content was

taught in English had two choices – international schools or overseas schools. As we know, these choices were available to only a very small percentage of the community because they were very expensive. In addition, many Thai parents were uncomfortable about sending their children abroad or to schools in which Thai culture and language were given very little attention.

Since 1992, through bilingual schools, the option of education in two languages has become available to a much greater number of students and the study of content through English has become possible without loss of attention to Thai language and culture.

So the *purpose* of bilingual education in Thailand, whatever model is used – *alternative immersion* (eg Maths in English, Social Studies in Thai) or *parallel immersion* (core subjects in both languages) – is threefold

1. to give greater numbers of Thai children access to learning English through subject content at school,
2. to give parents who want an enriched English language education for their children the chance to

have it without having to send their children away from home, and

3. to enable an enriched English language education without loss of Thai language and cultural development at school.

The context of bilingual education in this country is one in which most parents are not wealthy, students are likely to speak or hear very little English outside the classroom and not many Thai teachers are able to provide consistently authentic models of English of the kind required for a bilingual program. As a result we have the bilingual education models we have. These models have to operate within limited budgets (fees can't be very high), with a lot of English language activities outside the classroom as well as in it (because school is often the only place where students will hear or speak English) and with a heavy dependence on the use of foreign native or near-native English speakers (because we do not yet have enough Thai teachers who can teach content in English).

Are these models "genuine"? Of course they are, as long as students are learning subject matter through two

languages, however it is organised. (There is no "pure" form of education that exists regardless of context and purpose.) Are they "authentic"? Of course they are, as long as they have been developed in conformity to the Thai situation and for the purpose of providing education in two languages for Thai children.

Bilingual schools in Thailand, current and future, if they are to be successful and effective, must be not only visionary, but also in tune with the expectations of Thai parents and future employers. To the extent that they are pioneering, seeking out new ways of educating Thai children and learning from their experience as they go, they are creating pathways for the future. If they do so within the parameters of core Thai values and beliefs, they are as authentic and genuine as anyone can realistically hope for.