

Mueang Thai: A land in a world of languages

How many languages do you think are spoken in Thailand? (Don't count foreign languages that are spoken by non-Thai nationals or by Thai nationals as a second language.)

The writer asked 10 Thai colleagues and one foreign colleague who has many years' residence in Thailand. Of the 11 respondents, 10 said there were between 1 and 7 languages spoken in this country as a native language. The other person had worked in several different provinces and knew there were more. Her estimate was 20.

The correct answer is between 74 and 86. I suspect most people – the writer included – would not have come up with a number anywhere near that.

It is not always easy to discriminate between a language and a dialect; hence there is a difference between the numbers. The UNESCO survey says 86. Professor Suwilai Premsriratana, an ethnolinguist from Mahidol University, has counted 74. The languages include those from the Tai family (Thai, Lao, etc.) as well as introduced languages

such as Khmer, Jawi, Mon, Karien, Vietnamese, Punjabi and the like, but also small ethnic or tribal languages such as Hmong, Lahu and Chong, of which there are many – some with as few as 10 speakers. You may like to read more about Thailand's language diversity and some current initiatives to assist minority languages at

<http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/10/23/features/lang.php>

This rather surprising information about the extent of Thailand's linguistic diversity was provided by Professor Suwilai and Dr Kimmo Kosonen, a Finnish researcher at Payap University, at a seminar organized recently by the Royal Institute (*Rajabanditsathan*) at Suan Sunantha Rajapat University on the place of bilingual education in the development of a national language policy for Thailand.

Visiting speakers included Professor Joe Lo Bianco from Melbourne University, who wrote the Australian national language policy, and Dr Pamela McKenzie from the International Network for Development, who has worked in India for many years on bilingual education for minority language speakers.

It is encouraging to see that Thailand is giving thought to a national language policy and that this policy will consider the rights and needs of minority languages as well as the status of the official national language (Thai) and foreign languages. Bilingual education has a key role to play in all of these concerns because

- it places great importance on the mother tongue – the student's first language
- it incorporates the second language within the curriculum as an equal or near-equal partner, and
- it teaches content through the medium of the second as well as the first language – i.e. it teaches *through* language not just *about* language.

However, there is clearly a difference between a bilingual program designed for minority language speakers needing to become competent in Thai (such as a Hmong-Thai bilingual program) and one that is designed for Thai speakers wishing to become academically bilingual in Thai and English. Professor Lo Bianco referred to the first kind of program as *bilingual* education and the second as *immersion* education.

Whatever it is called, the kind of bilingual education most Thai parents – at least those in urban centers – are concerned about is that which maintains and develops their children's Thai language competence while developing effectively their English language competence. This was not addressed, however, at the Suan Sunantha seminar. Why? Perhaps it will be taken up at a later forum. However, it was not even referred to at Suan Sunantha, and yet this is the educational model of choice for hundreds of thousands of Thai parents and the only model that provides large amounts of instruction per week in both Thai and English.

It seems that there is either a "conspiracy of silence" or an unwillingness to come to terms with the fact that perhaps 300,000 students are taught in Thai-English bilingual programs in Thailand. This may not be a large percentage of the total number of school students in the country, but it represents an influential stratum of Thai society – those whose families can make the choice for bilingual schooling in the national and international languages.

One speaker at the seminar referred briefly to CLIL (content-language integrated learning), a model that seems to have come to the attention of Thai foreign language educators since the British Council sponsored a conference in Bangkok on the future of English last September. A form of CLIL has been at the core of many Thai bilingual schools' model since 1992. It differs from the European models in that we cannot, with a few exceptions, employ Thai nationals to teach subject content in English. Hence, in the Thai parallel immersion model, the Thai teacher introduces the subject in Thai and the foreign teacher follows in a later period in English. Some Private bilingual school administrators became familiar with the European CLIL model through attendance at an international language education conference in New Zealand in 2003.

There are many issues that will need to be considered if Thailand is to have an authentic national language policy – authentic in the sense that it is actually implemented, not just proclaimed in a document. The importance of English is one; the status and development of Thai language and literature is another. Planning for and funding of education

within the guiding framework of the *sufficiency economy* also needs to be addressed. Is a model of bilingual education that is dependent on expatriate teachers consistent with “living within one’s means”? If not, surely the government is going to have to invest a serious amount of money to develop Thai teachers’ English language ability to the point that they can realistically start teaching subject content in English as well as in Thai. This investment, though large at first, will stay in the country and build cultural capital for the future.

Whatever language policy options are considered for Thailand, bilingual education is too good an approach to be left mainly to private education providers and then ignored by policy-makers outside the private sector. It must be incorporated into national policy and planning.

Maths, Science and Social Studies in English (and, preferably, in Thai also). The context is the subject matter – the purpose is to learn the subject (and pass the exam).

In the next article I shall talk about some things we have learned from the experience of bilingual education in

Thailand. From these learnings, a strategy becomes clear for English language development in this country. After all, we can't just focus on catching up with the English of other nations at their current level. They are moving ahead, too, and if their progress is more rapid than ours, we will be even more disadvantaged.