

## The Benefits of Bilingual Education

May is here again. The Wet Season has arrived and students in Thailand are returning to school. Parents are hoping they have made the right choices for their children's education. Some have chosen bilingual schooling. They have done so in the hope that this will provide a good education in two languages and that it will improve their children's chances in an increasingly bilingual (or multilingual) future.

### What is bilingual education in Thailand?

Bilingual programs in Thailand are widely referred to as "English Programs" and these may take different forms. At our school, we still prefer to use the term "bilingual education" because it carries the essential meaning of "education in two languages". The term also acknowledges that Thai is as important as English in a Thai-English bilingual program.

Another term used by educators is "immersion". This refers to the teaching of a subject in another language (an

"L2") – not the students' first or home language (their "L1"). Immersion is part of bilingual education, such as when Thai students are learning a key subject (e.g. Science) in English, but bilingual education following the two-way model requires students to learn that subject in both English and Thai, not just in English. This model has been labeled "parallel immersion".

### What are the benefits of bilingual or immersion education?

At a forum conducted by the Royal Institute at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University recently, Professor Joe Lo Bianco, a world-renowned expert on language and literacy education, reported that 1,200 reliable studies into immersion programs have found that:

- Immersion students have home language skills that are equal to or better than those of non-immersion students (i.e. those who have studied only in their home language;
- Immersion students attain academic standards equal to and sometimes better than those of non-immersion students; and

- Immersion students attain superior ability in English to that of non-immersion students.

These findings are not surprising to those who work in bilingual immersion programs in Thailand. Some bilingual schools have been able to demonstrate for several years now that students graduating from Year 12 (M6) attain significantly higher than national and district average scores in Thai and academic subjects and much higher scores in English. Student results show that there is no disadvantage – in fact there is a clear advantage – in using both Thai and English as the medium of instruction. Yet, at least one of these school, the writer's school, is not just an "academic" school. It has a very strong music program and actively cultivates all the different abilities ("multiple intelligences") found in students – not just "academic" ability. A bilingual program of instruction together with a broad (academic and non-academic) curriculum has been found to enrich students' life-competence with no ill effect on their academic attainment.

### **The need for Thai teachers in English immersion**

At present the main constraint on effectiveness of immersion in Thai education is the shortage of Thai teachers with high English proficiency. Schools can do a certain amount to raise the linguistic and professional standards of their teachers and the Ministry of Education does what it can with limited resources. The solution to the problem, however, is a planned and graduated national program to upgrade the language ability of selected current teachers and a targeted scholarship program for suitable university students who will become English teachers in bilingual programs. These teachers can be placed on graduation in elite schools where they can teach immersion classes.

### **Parents in bilingual education**

Where do parents fit into the picture? Parents are their child's first teacher and can have the best effect of all on a child's education. Studies have shown that a caring adult (a parent or grandparent?) who reads together with a child and takes a genuine interest in his or her schooling (not just the child's report card!) has a beneficial impact on the child's development and school success, even if the adult has had little school education. Most parents who send

their children to bilingual schools have had a good education. However, many may lack confidence in English and be unsure how to help their children with English-language development. The evidence is strong, however, that interest and involvement in your child's English-language studies will have a positive effect on your child's progress regardless of your own ability in English.

### **The importance of Thai**

In all the discussion of English, however, let us not forget that Thai language development is just as important in bilingual education. Not only is good interpersonal and academic competence in Thai important for any Thai citizen, but development in Thai is important for development of English ability. The research is quite clear that an age-appropriate level of competence in the first language is necessary for effective development of the second language for academic purposes. It is not advisable to begin a child's education in an L2 if the child's L1 is not being developed as well. As the child progresses through school in a bilingual program, it is important that his or her Thai language keeps pace with (and preferably

remains ahead of) the English language demands of the academic program. This is necessary both for the student to finish school with a good Thai education and for the English program to be built on a solid foundation of concepts, terminology and content knowledge already mastered in Thai. Hence we try to ensure that students learn the content of a subject first in Thai and then in English.

In summary, parents who send their children to bilingual schools or schools with immersion programs can be confident they have made a good choice if the following conditions are present:

1. Thai and English (language and culture) are equally fostered.
2. Core subjects are taught in both English and Thai.
3. Good academic standards are expected and maintained.
4. Teachers are cheerful and courteous.
5. Children are happy at school.

Happy new (school) year!

not only experience both Thai and Western pedagogies in their daily experience, they are better equipped for a future that requires them to see the world from different points of view.

Program and supports the teaching of drama, dance and the visual arts to the point that students and teachers could not imagine an education without a major contribution from music and the arts.