

Use of mother tongue vital, studies show

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The Nation

Published on November 15, 2010



Ethnic minority children enjoy greater success and benefit from early native language instruction

The use of mother tongues "native languages" in early childhood education has boosted youngsters' confidence and academic performance, according to studies presented at an international conference last week in Bangkok.

It has also helped conserve ethnic languages, and restored pride and identity for minority people, while helping to boost their access to the fruits of development, the studies found.

The importance of mother tongues was emphasised at a forum on Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as they are a key factor for education and the success of other development efforts.

A professor at the School of Child and Youth Care at Canada's University of Victoria, Dr Jessica Ball, said that up to 50 per cent of 6,000 languages currently spoken around the world would be gone by 2100.

“One way to achieve equity in education, opportunities and [the goal of] Education For All, as well as to counter linguistic and cultural loss is to deliver early childhood education and primary education through mother tongues,” she said.

Various studies presented at the conference reaffirmed this.

Linguistic expert Siripen Ungsitipoonporn, from Mahidol University’s Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, and Chiang Mai’s Ban Mai Neong Bua schoolteacher Kanyapak Arthan presented details about the success of using mother tongues as a medium of instruction to teach Yunnanese children. They said children’s academic performances were rather low when they weren’t familiar with academic Thai used in the classroom.

Children of YunnaneseChinese descent at Ban Mai Neong Bua School were no exception. Trying to use the children’s first language, Yunnanese Chinese, as a medium of instruction from kindergarten 1 onwards, the school found they had no qualified teachers who could speak Yunnanese, so teaching assistants who speak that language were trained to teach the children.

Although the project only started in the first semester of 2010, the home room Thai teacher Kanyapak and her assistant working in an experimental KG1 classroom saw that the children’s behaviour had changed for the better. They were not afraid to come to school or express themselves as they had confidence in their language that their teachers also used, Kanyapak said. The kids also enjoyed learning and participating in class activities.

kidS more eager to learn

Older siblings of the students under this project also accepted their younger brothers/sisters’ positive change and even volunteered to prepare teaching materials for the projects, she said. The parents, who at first were worried their kids would face difficulty catching up with peers in reading and writing Thai, also responded positively after seeing their kids more eager to learn and talk to them a lot about what they had learnt, she said. Although the school lacks budget and resources, they weren’t discouraged and carried on the project the best they could, she said.

Meanwhile, Save the Children coordinator Bonna Duron presented her group’s work in piloting Mother TongueBased Multilingual Education since 2007 in Mindanao’s South Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat provinces " where are at least three languages spoken " Tboli, Iiongo and Maguindanaoan.

The Philippine educational system emphasised English and Filipino as the languages of instruction and textbooks, regardless of a child’s background, she explained. But a policy shift in 2009 opened the door for mother tongue based instruction in early primary years.

To put the policy into action for kids nationwide, the agency in February 2009 also conducted preliminary activities including a formative research on language perception and use in communities, a formation of Language Advisory Committees at the regional/community levels and other activities to raise awareness and prepare communities. They organised teacher training

on curriculum adaptation and materials development, as well as making “culturally appropriate” teaching materials such as alphabet primers, alphabet charts and books in the three languages.

In Cambodia, a study on ethnic Cham children in Kampong Cham by Save the Children Sweden and the Kampuchean Action for Primary Education (KAPE) was presented by KAPE official Kurt Bredenburg.

The study revealed Cham people’s complex attitudes towards mainstream Cambodian society as they wanted to blend in rather than being seen as an ethnic minority or as Islamic Khmers. But they often chose not to live in Khmer villages and not to speak Khmer as their first language.

Since the Cham language and Islam weren’t available in state schools, an Islamic school system emerged to run in parallel. So most kids attended state schools in the morning and early afternoon, then went to the Islamic schools in late afternoon or weekend, the study found.

KAPE’s “Minority Outreach in Education” pilot project, has been implemented for two years, to try to increase educational relevance for populations with a large number of Cham and work towards universal primary education.