

Using Mother Tongue as a Medium of Instruction in Thailand: How does it affect Yunnanese children's behavior?

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This paper discusses the implementation and success of a “non-full fledged bilingual education system” among KG1 children of Yunnanese Chinese immigrants to Ban Mai Nong Bua village in the Chiang Mai province of Thailand. This minority community numbers 9,000 with most being children and the elderly. The Yunnanese language is used in daily home life, so students are challenged when they enter Thai state schools. Many also go to Chinese school in the evening and on weekends, where a Taiwanese curriculum is used. In this case, the Yunnanese don’t need to revive their mother tongue, but instead improve their grasp of Thai, the dominant language. The village wanted to arrange a bilingual education program at the kindergarten level, but lacked the financial resources to develop curriculum. With the help of Mahidol University, this program was developed and implemented.

The model developed uses Yunnanese as an oral medium of instruction, not written, to create a foundation for KG1 students before oral Thai is gradually introduced in the second semester. Oral use of Yunnanese continues till the second semester of KG2, during the second semester of which Thai reading and writing is also introduced. The teaching materials employ local knowledge and images. Because there are no Yunnanese speaking teachers, the school employs Yunnanese teaching assistants (TA). Most are alumni of the school and have been trained by Mahidol University prior to the start of the school year. The TA leads them in discussions of picture books, acting out stories, et cetera. The transition into Thai takes place gradually at the end of the first semester of KG1 when the Thai teacher begins to use Total Physical Response Technique, beginning with basic instructions such as “sit down” and “stand up”.

In the community, there was concern among parents that if children started learning Thai too late, they would not become proficient. They felt it was unnecessary to use Yunnanese at school since the children already use it at home.

On the other hand, teachers observe that students are enthusiastic, engaged and confident in the classroom as a result of the use of Yunnanese. Students are more willing to discuss what they learned with their parents and show an interest in purchasing more picture books. The parents have more confidence in the state school as a result.