

The Role of MTB MLE in ECD and Education: Experiences and Challenges in Southern Thailand

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General Backdrop: Language identity issues are a key issue in Thailand's deep South, where there has been ongoing political unrest and violence. The local language and mother tongue of children in the area, Malayu or Pattani Malay (PM), is spoken by some 83% of the million-plus population, but is not officially accepted or used in the education system. Ethnic language and culture are declining at a rapid rate. Local communities have low self-confidence and no security; there is also fear that education is being used as a means to destroy their language and religious identity. There is chronic underachievement in school, where 35% of children are illiterate in Grade 3, because of compulsory education in the Thai language only.

Background on scripts in the region: There are three main script usages in the region; a) Jawi, an Arabic-based script used for writing central Malay, not Pattani Malay, but widely used and seen as key to people's language identity b) Rumi—a Romanised script which is popular only among those educated from Malaysia c) Thai-based Pattani Malay—this is widely used in non-formal education and in Pattani-Malay lessons for teaching Thai government officials, or as a tool for documentation of cultural texts such as local poetry, folktales, and songs.

Pilot Project: The general social-political backdrop described above provided the rationale for a project to introduce bilingual education, using the mother tongue as the language of instruction, along with the official language (Thai).

The pilot project aims to provide children with more equitable educational opportunities; to spare children from confusion and fear; to help them learn the second language or official language more easily by building a foundation of literacy in their mother tongue; and to end chronic underachievement.

Further specific goals include to facilitate Pattani Malay-speaking children to develop their cognitive skills as well as to speak, read and write well in both Pattani Malay and Thai; to retain their Malay identity at the local level and Thai identity at the national level; and to be able to live with dignity in the wider Thai society to foster true and lasting national reconciliation.

The project is being implemented in four pilot schools in four southern border provinces. It will be of nine years duration, taking children from KG1 to G6, (including one year of preparation). It uses a Thai-based writing system for Pattani Malay. This has been developed and standardised based on academic, as well as native speaker acceptance and technical feasibility, and also for pedagogical and political reasons.

The project's curriculum development is based on Ministry of Education standards/competencies, in addition to MLE principles. Language learning and literacy is conducted 'step by step' as follows; *Kindergarden 1 (S.1)*– begin with oral PM; *Kindergarden 1 (S2)*; Oral Thai; pre-reading/pre-writing; *Kindergarden 2*: Oral Thai and begin literacy in PM; *Grade 1*—Begin literacy in Thai; *Grades 1-6*; Continue Oral and Literacy in Thai, Pattani Malay, Central Malay (Jawi, Rumi), English etc.

CURRENT SITUATION; Students in the pilot are now in grade 1. Preliminary evaluation of the project is very positive and all stakeholders are pleased with results so far as seen from pre and post tests, on-site evaluation (by the Thailand Research Fund), and local and national media coverage.

According to the pre-test and post-test analyses, the Thai language skills of Kindergarten 1 and Kindergarten 2, show a dramatic improvement (more than 45% on average) among children in the MTB-BE/MLE pilot schools. In a recent on-site evaluation conducted by the TRF, parents gave the project a 99% grade.

Successes to date

- The project has earned the trust and confidence of the local communities involved. Local research teams including teachers, educators, linguists, Islamic committee members, village scholars etc have been actively involved in all activities such as orthography development, curriculum, lesson planning, production of materials, etc.
- The teachers, school director and parents are happy with the students' performance. Students can read and write their mother tongue and can understand and speak some Thai and are starting to read and write some simple Thai words.

Challenges

Due to fear and a lack of understanding of the importance of MT, some find it hard to accept the concept of using the local spoken language in education as a way to promote development, peace and prosperity.

- There is controversy among Thai-Muslim teachers and intellectuals regarding the using of the Thai-based PM writing system, as some prefer the Arabic-based Jawi script (used widely in the religious schools and important documents.)
- Teachers are required to learn new methods to facilitate the changing of the language of instruction, new curriculum, new teaching materials, etc.
- The project is being carried out during a time of political unrest and violence and is also quite far from the administration--it is difficult to establish a careful monitoring process.

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