Thailand

Bilingual Education in the Deep South

Dr. Darunee Jumpatong
The Office of Basic Education Commission
Ministry of Education

1. Introduction

The violent crisis in the Deep South of Thailand caused hundreds of schools to be set on fire, and a total of almost 100 teachers to be killed. This should be recognized and remind us of the powerful unique role of language and the power it has over world progress and peace. The crisis seemingly indicates ineffective communication by the government to its people in the sense that government education policies continue to be regarded as an intrusion into Malay-Muslim affairs and secular education fails to prepare Muslims for social and cultural functions in the community.

The Deep South refers to three southernmost provinces of Thailand: Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. There are two specific local issues that need to be addressed in public schooling in those three provinces (Arya, 2006).

a) teaching language
b) teaching religion

These two factors are closely linked to local identity.

This report aims to focus on the development of a bilingual education curriculum for Muslim students in the Deep South. Bilingual education is responding to local issues in education because language is a key to successful social, economic, political, and cultural development. It is believed that this is a step not only for academic achievement but also toward reconciliation in the region.

2. Background

There are about 1.8 million people living in the Deep South of Thailand: 80 percent of them are Muslim, and approximately 20 percent are Buddhist. The average number of years of education that people in those three provinces receive is 6.2 years while the average of the general population across the south of Thailand is 7.3 years. In addition, 17.4% of the population are illiterate in Thai (Office of Educational Inspector Area 12, 2006). Some social indicators classify the provinces as follows: (Suwannarat, 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators (%) in the three provinces</th>
<th>Narathiwat</th>
<th>Pattani</th>
<th>Yala</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim population</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>68.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population speaking</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>66.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patani - Malay</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>66.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave years of</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Schooling

There are three critical challenges in the present schooling in the Deep South: low attendance rate, poor working skills, and low achievement. 95% of children in the early primary years attend government schools. About 60% of 10-14yr olds remain in government schools, but only 25 percent stay in the government schools to the ages of 15-19 (Suwannarat, 2007), while the rest might attend pondoks to study religion. Low participation in government schools in these is a result of low value on secular education among parents and extreme poverty.

As a result of these limitations linked with weak Thai language skills, young people have fewer work-related skills and so it is hard for them to compete in the work market with others from different regions.

Test scores have consistently shown that the average performance of students in this region was worse than their peers in other regions in almost all subjects. Research has led to the conclusion that a major cause of that was poor Thai language ability. This disparity impacts other competencies, including math and analytical skills (Suwannarat, 2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject areas</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Pattani</th>
<th>Yala</th>
<th>Narathiwat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td></td>
<td>46.50</td>
<td>38.94</td>
<td>50.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td></td>
<td>36.41</td>
<td>33.18</td>
<td>38.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eng</td>
<td></td>
<td>29.64</td>
<td>27.55</td>
<td>31.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td></td>
<td>27.04</td>
<td>24.25</td>
<td>29.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
<td>31.79</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>34.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since 80 percent of the people are Muslim, they communicate in Patani-Malay at home and in their communities. They, thus, cannot be expected to comprehend lessons in state schools which are taught in Thai. Teachers have observed that many children simply refuse to go to school, particularly if speaking their mother tongue at school is punished or derided (Hantrakul, 2007). Only a few children manage to succeed while the majority struggle, resulting in the region producing the lowest scores in the national examinations. At the secondary education level, parents usually enroll students in religious institutes to study Arabic in order to understand the Quran rather than study Thai in public schools for secular subjects. It has now been accepted
that the 40 year ban forcing Muslim students in the Deep South to learn Thai has failed (Bunnag, 2007).

3. Bilingual education in the Deep South

The Ministry of Education recognized that, in order to improve the delivery of education, there is a need to redesign the school curriculum to balance the provision of courses on religion, vocational training, and general subjects. Language issues are considered to be an important reason for low achievement levels in schools (Suwannarat, 2007). Thus, bilingual education was recommended. For both the cultural and linguistic development of learners and in order to improve academic achievement, early education and initial literacy is being conducted in the learners’ first language or mother tongue. Shaeffer (2007) noted that it is impossible to teach the ethnic children to read and write in a language they do not understand.

The Ministry has introduced a pilot bilingual education project in 12 primary schools in the region. Under the scheme, the selected schools have a high proportion of students who do not speak Thai and teachers were asked to give most of their lessons in Patani-Malay. This approach would gradually convince students to learn Thai (Bunnag, 2007).

In addition, the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development of Mahidol University – is carrying out a research project in three primary schools in these three provinces called ‘Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education program for Patani-Malay speaking children in Thailand’s Deep South’. The project posed three major research questions:

1) Will bilingual education helps ethnic children achieve better academic performance?
2) Will bilingual education help ethnic minority children develop better Thai language skills?
3) How can various stakeholders contribute to the success and sustainability of the project?

Importantly, the project aims to develop Thai language skills of children in the Deep South in order to achieve improved long-term academic performance and develop security and quality of life while preserving their heritage language and their ethnic identity (Premsrirat, 2007).

The fundamental concept of the projects is the flexible school curriculum that uses Patani-Malay as the language of instruction from kindergarten to grade 1, then gradually decreasing Patani-Malay (Hantrakul, 2007) to an appropriate proportion in the later years. According to the projects, major practices have been employed as follows:

- The change in the language of instruction is the major part of the project aiming at promoting more equitable educational opportunities for Patani-Malay speaking children by providing better second language instruction after learners have a strong foundation in their mother tongue. This aims to ultimately end the chronic underachievement of learners in this region.
These approaches would spare kindergarten students the confusion and fear of having to learn in a language that is not their mother tongue (Hantrakul, 2007). Thus, it is necessary to learn how to read and write in the language spoken and understood by the learners (Shaeffer, 2007) particularly in their early years. Shaeffer (2007) noted that there are numerous researches overwhelming support bilingualism that it can produce better learning outcomes and higher rates of internal efficiency of schools.

- To use a bilingual education approach, the school curriculum has had to be flexible in order to adjust the language of instruction. New teaching materials for oral and written Patani-Malay have been carefully developed by a group of native speakers, including local teachers. Teachers have also been given detailed training, from planning lessons to teaching and managing bilingual classrooms.

- The study has been in progress for about a year, however, the preliminary findings of the project indicates that the children love coming to school, leading to a higher attendance rate which contributes to the considerable higher achievement. The approach is praised by both students and parents.

- It is interesting to note that the project is a participatory action research based on the cooperation between Thai Muslim – Patani Malay speaking communities, an academic institute, and the Ministry of Education. The project has been carried out by local people themselves and executed with enthusiastic cooperation.

4. Concluding Remarks

It is noted that the practice of bilingual education is responsive to the local needs. The public education participation among Muslim families in the Deep South is a positive step forward. However, the critical events in the South can not be ‘quick fixed’ and there are more activities that need to be reconsidered:

Teachers need to be trained by the Thai Ministry to recognize and create a positive language environment within the bilingual classroom. Successful bilingual education needs to create an equitable learning environment for language minority children. Therefore, bilingual education teachers are key factors in the education of language minority students (Flores, Keehn, and Perez, 2002).

Although bilingual education is not a new process - it is the well-known, and well-documented - but it is new in the Thai school system. Thus, there are concerns about social conflicts among people in the region particularly that those Muslim-Patani Malay speaking students may find difficulty in finding a well-paid job due to their inadequate Thai competency (Bunnag, 2007). Thus, effective communication about bilingual education is a significant issue that the Ministry must focus on in order to make understanding to the academics and the public.
References


