



Stressing the importance of language

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Abhisit vows to protect diversity, give ethnic kids right to use mother tongue

As legendary statesman Nelson Mandela said “if you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head ” but if you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart”.

This importance of language is being highlighted in an international event in Bangkok as more than a communication tool but the identity of individuals and groups, and a key element in social integration and cultural development.

Some 400 educators, state officials and advocates have gathered for a “Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)” conference which began yesterday until November 11. Its aim is to exchange information, raise public awareness, inspire delegates into meaningful action and inform decision makers on ways to effectively incorporate language and education into strategies and policies to achieve MDGs and Education For All (EFA).

As countries head at their own pace towards achieving MDGs and EFA before 2015, minorities are in fear of being left behind. Their concern is greater disparity that would hinder efforts to overcome poverty, illiteracy and disease; as well as increasing the likelihood of conflict arising from exclusion.

Keynote speaker Professor Suzanne Romaine from Oxford University emphasised language should be at the centre of development towards the ambitious MDGs. She said, however, children couldn’t learn if taught in languages they didn’t understand ” and the poor would not benefit from assistance offered in a language foreign to them.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva presided over the opening ceremony, saying that, despite positive progress by many countries "including Thailand" towards MDGs, there were millions of people they still had to reach. As they included the poorest and most vulnerable and those living in the remotest areas, it was essential to ensure development efforts were widespread and equitable so that everyone could benefit.

Since their little-known languages put small groups at a disadvantage, governments should embrace minority languages wherever possible, he said, “by understanding and respecting differences in languages, we can better bridge the communication and cultural gaps and more effectively meet MDGs.”

Abhisit affirmed the Thai government had worked hard to protect and promote cultural diversities, as evidenced at schools where the curriculum included the study of local languages. He said he would soon appoint a cabinet-level committee to ensure the recently-approved Royal Institute of Thailand’s National Language Policy. It maintained that the right of ethnic children to have their mother tongue included in a school curriculum was put into practice in education as well as in healthcare, regional commerce and human security.

He said the Education Ministry had cooperated on programs to encourage Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education, especially in border areas such as those in the Deep South. Students in pilot schools there learned to read and write in their native Pattani Malay which served as a bridge to the national language of Thai. He had been told the students had improved greatly academically.

The event’s talk sessions were divided into three tracks; Language and Universal Primary Education, Language and Gender Equity, Language and Sustainable Development. In the first track yesterday, studies on Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education programmes, using ethnic languages (along with national and international languages) in early childhood education, were presented to help improve educational achievement, confidence and access.

The conference was co-organized by UNESCO, UNICEF, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), SIL International, the Royal Institute of Thailand, Mahidol University’s Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Save the Children, CARE, and the Asia South Pacific Association For Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE).