

SUMMARY OF THE CONFERENCE

Submitted by
Susan Malone, Ph.D.
SIL International
Conference Chair

When our children go to school, they go to an alien place. They leave their parents, they leave their gardens, they leave everything that is their way of life. They sit in a classroom and they learn things that have nothing to do with their own place. Later, because they have learned only other things, they reject their own."

Parent, Laitrao Village, North Solomons Province. In Delpit and Kemelfield, 1985, *An evaluation of the Viles Tok Pies Skul scheme in the North Solomons Province. ERU Report No. 51*. Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea p. 29-30.

Until the beginning of this millennium, the educational problems faced by children and adults from non-dominant language communities were rarely noted in international literature or factored into most countries' educational plans. The quotation above, from a parent in Papua New Guinea, summarizes one of the consequences for many students and their families—the loss of their heritage language and culture. The good news is that, over the last eight years, increasing numbers of ethnolinguistic communities, NGOs, universities and governments in Asia and the Pacific have expressed interest in and/or have begun implementing mother tongue-based multilingual education (MT-based MLE) programs for children and adults who do not speak or understand the official language(s) of education. That trend now seems to be growing in Africa as well. The years since 2000 have also seen an increase in efforts to document, revitalize and sustain the heritage languages and cultures of non-dominant language communities through language development (LD) and language revitalization (LR) programs.

In spite of these efforts, the purposes and benefits of language development, language revitalization and multilingual education are still not widely understood or accepted. Many such efforts remain weak and do not build on what has been learned through research and practice in other parts of the world. Clearly, awareness-raising and advocacy are still needed. Also needed is more information about what works and what does not work in planning, implementing and sustaining strong language and education programs.

The purposes of the Second International Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Ethnolinguistic Communities, held in Bangkok from 1-3 July 2008, were to:

- Raise awareness regarding the threats to the world's linguistic and cultural diversity and to the social, cultural, political, economic and educational injustices faced by the people who come from non-dominant ethnolinguistic communities
- Raise awareness regarding the purposes and benefits of MT-Based MLE programs that enable speakers of non-dominant languages to achieve educational success
- Learn about good practices in language development, language revitalization and MT-based MLE from the people with "on the ground" experience in such programs
- Encourage participants—especially members of ethnolinguistic communities—to develop and expand their networks of individuals and organizations engaged in and supporting these efforts

The keynote presentation and the six plenary and ninety-three parallel presentations were roughly divided into five main tracks relating to language, culture and education. These were:

1. Preserving intangible cultural heritage
2. Language development and revitalization efforts (with many papers focusing on orthography development)
3. Experiences in establishing mother tongue-based MLE programs
4. Language and language-in-education policies
5. Research studies relating to language and education

Work Sessions on the major Conference topics provided participants with opportunities to raise questions, share experiences and discuss specific issues in more informal settings.

Another feature was the **Exhibition Area** for displaying teaching and learning materials, photos, information brochures and other items relating to language development and multilingual education. An hour during the Conference was scheduled for participants to visit the displays and interact with colleagues from different areas of the world.

The depth of knowledge and experience of the participants contributed to an over-all feeling of time well-spent, as evidenced by their comments and final evaluations. A post-conference note from one of the participants—a member of a non-dominant ethnolinguistic community—might sum it up for most of those who participated: *“The conference was really refreshing for me knowing there are others around the world fighting the same battle as we are. We are not alone.”*