

The Conference
on Language
Development,
Revitalization
and Multilingual
Education
in Minority
Language
Community
of Asia

What Have We Learned?



Partners in
Language Development

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It is obvious that language is a key element of education. But there are many questions to be considered:

- Should the official national language be the only language of education?
- What is the role of minority languages in education?
- What does research show about the relationship between language of learning and effectiveness of learning?
- What are some of the experiences of countries in Asia and the Pacific with regard to language of instruction?
- What are the main challenges to be addressed when considering issues in language and education?

Recognizing the importance of these questions for the development of education in the Asia-Pacific region. SIL, Mahidol University and UNESCO Bangkok believed that it would be useful to bring together minority group representatives, educators, government officials, researchers, academics, planners and policy-makers from the region and beyond to examine these questions and to share experiences in dealing with issues in language and education. In collaboration with two partners, both well-known for depth of experience and excellence of research on language and development—the Summer Institute of Linguistics

(SIL) International and the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development of Mahidol University (Thailand)—UNESCO co-organized an international Conference to discuss key questions and share experiences in language education and development.¹

- **Language development**
creating writing systems and written materials for previously unwritten languages
- **Language revitalization**
preserving and expanding languages faced with extinction
- **Multilingual education**
using both local and national languages for education

The purpose of this brochure is to present and discuss some of the main ideas and experiences from the Conference. It is important that these are shared with a broader audience of educators and policy-makers throughout Asia and the Pacific so that they can be applied as appropriate to improve the quality and relevance of education.

¹ The International Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Asia, held in Bangkok, Thailand, 3–6 November 2003.

What is bilingual education?

Bilingual education means using two languages of instruction.

In most cases, one of these languages will be the official national language and the other will be a regional or a local language. There are many ways to apply bilingual education. For example, the national language and a regional language can both be introduced at the beginning of primary school. Or only the regional or local language can be used in the lower grades while the national language is introduced in later grades after children have acquired literacy in their mother tongue. Or the local language can be taught as a separate subject while other subjects are taught in the national language. Experience has shown that the most effective approach is to use the local language for the first few years of schooling, then introduce the national language orally, followed by literacy in the national language, and later switch to instruction in the national language.

Why is bilingual education important?

The most effective approach to basic education is to teach initial literacy in the mother tongue and then to teach the national language.

Most countries in the region are multilingual. Often there are very large numbers of children whose mother tongue—the language learned and spoken at home—is not the same as the official national language. All citizens of a country need to be effectively literate in the national language if they are to participate fully in national economic and social development. But this does not mean that requiring all children to learn in the national language from the beginning of primary school is the most effective approach. A large amount of research in many situations clearly demonstrates that children learn basic skills in reading and writing most effectively in their mother tongue. These skills, acquired initially in the mother tongue, can then be transferred more easily to learning the national language. Research also shows that children

learn other subjects such as science and mathematics most effectively in their mother tongue in the early stages of their education. This suggests that the curriculum of primary school should begin using the local language and gradually switch to the national language after first introducing the national language as a subject.

Use of the local language has many advantages. Children's performance on examinations will be improved if they have started their education in their mother tongue. In addition, their parents are more likely to participate in school affairs and to encourage the learning process if the local language is used. The local community will be more supportive of basic education in the local language because it will reflect local culture and knowledge. Children who learn initially in their mother tongue are less likely to become frustrated and to drop out of school. Local language instruction also helps to preserve and to revitalize the local language.

How is bilingual education related to EFA?

An effective national EFA plan will identify the issue of minority languages and present a strategy to ensure that the learning needs of minority language speakers are dealt with effectively.

All countries in the region have committed themselves to achieving Education For All (EFA). But many challenges remain. Large numbers of children do not have access to school and large numbers drop out of school before finishing primary education. Large numbers of adults—especially women—remain illiterate. And even when children complete primary education, the quality of learning is often so poor that they have gained little in terms of improved quality of life.

Many—perhaps most—of the children who are not in school or who drop out of school early are children of minority groups. They tend to live in remote and inaccessible regions, and they speak languages other than the national language. They perform poorly on national tests because both learning

and testing are in a language other than their own. Bilingual education alone will not solve all the problems of quality and dropping out from school, but research and experience clearly show that it can make a significant difference. Achieving EFA goals can be greatly assisted by the use of bilingual education in primary schooling.

What needs to be considered when introducing bilingual education?

Introducing successful bilingual education requires careful planning and attention to many issues.

Culture

Language is an expression of culture. Preserving a language is an important part of preserving a culture. The use of a local language in education helps to strengthen aspects of local culture. Local crafts, art, stories, music and dance can all be taught using the local language.

Writing systems

Language development means improving the status and functions of a language. Developing a

writing system for unwritten minority languages is a difficult but essential step if the language is to be used for bilingual education.

Community readiness and involvement

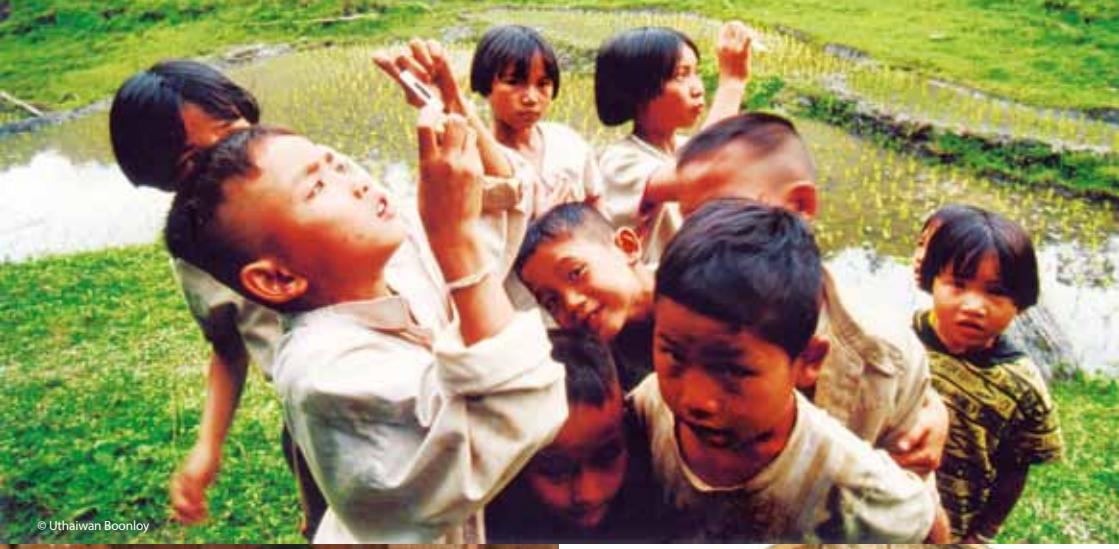
Language belongs to a community. If a minority language is to be used for education, the community must be involved in developing the curriculum and the learning materials. The local community of speakers must help to set the standards for language use.

Curriculum

Children learn better in their own language and when they study things that are familiar to them. The initial curriculum should include topics drawn from their experience—songs, stories, oral histories. Their interest and thus their achievement will be enhanced by use of local language and context in the curriculum.

Teacher training

Teachers who speak the local language may not be available. Therefore, persons drawn from the local community will need to be given special training to enable them to become teachers. They will need continuing in-service support.



Learning materials

Available learning materials will probably be in the national language. Extra effort must be made to prepare local language materials suitable to the needs of young learners. Preparing such materials requires additional training and additional funds.

The community has been carefully consulted in all matters and has contributed to the development of the curriculum and teaching materials. Preliminary evaluation suggests high attendance and retention rates and extensive community support for the bilingual approach.

What are some “best practice” examples of bilingual education?

There are many examples of successful efforts to introduce bilingual education in primary school. Few of these, however, have led to the nationwide application of bilingual approaches as national policy.

Cambodia

The Highland Children’s Education Project, being implemented by CARE with AusAID support, has introduced bilingual education in the first three years of primary education in six remote cultural minority villages. The local language has been written in Khmer script and teaching materials developed. Local teachers have been identified and trained.

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea developed a model using local languages as the initial medium of instruction. The model relied on training local teachers, developing local language teaching materials and incorporating local cultural content into the curriculum. Initial successes and popularity led the government to adopt the model nationally. All children use their local language as the medium of instruction for the first three years of schooling, followed by a “bridging” year as the national language is introduced. Early national results show better academic achievement among children who have experienced initial local language instruction.

Philippines

A local language program developed over six years in the Philippines with SIL support resulted in better reading comprehension, more creative approaches to teaching, greater pupil

participation in learning, improved teacher-parent relationships, and improved attendance. On the other hand, the workload of the teachers was greatly increased, preparation of learning materials in the local language was very time-consuming, and some parents felt that the time would have been better spent learning English.

How can bilingual education be developed?

Experience shows that bilingual education is feasible and will contribute to achieving EFA goals but requires a supporting policy framework and carefully planned education programs.

The Conference identified three types of action to be taken:

Develop new language and education policies that protect language diversity and provide linguistically and culturally appropriate education for ethnic minority communities

Use new development models that encourage integration rather than assimilation of minority groups

Create new education programs that enable ethnic minority learners to achieve their educational goals without sacrificing their language and cultural heritage. Such education programs will

- **Provide a strong foundation** in the local language building on learners' knowledge and experience
- **Establish a bridge** to learning more effectively the national language
- **Enable children** to use both the local and the national languages more fluently as the basis for further learning

If national commitment to achieving EFA goals is taken seriously, the special needs of ethnic minority language speakers need to be considered. The Conference explored a number of issues related to developing bilingual education programs, language development and language revitalization. Participants in general felt that they had learned from the ideas and experiences of others.

Several countries reported that they intend to conduct follow-up meetings and workshops. This is an important step that can lead to greater recognition of the role of bilingual education in achieving EFA goals. Among the remaining steps that need to be taken are:

- **Developing a national policy** that promotes bilingual education and links it to EFA goals
- **Experimenting on a small scale** with different approaches to bilingual education at the community level
- **Evaluating experience and gradually expanding** successful approaches until all children of minority language speakers can learn in their own language

Copies of detailed Conference reports can be obtained from:
www.sil.org/asia/ldc

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