Teaching in a bilingual education pilot project: Insights from public school and local teachers in Northern Thailand

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4th International Language and Education Conference
Bangkok, 6–8 November, 2013
Outline

- Context: Class teachers and local teachers
- Teachers in bilingual education (BLE)
- Research methodology
- What teachers find encouraging in project
- What teachers find challenging in project
- Recommendations from teachers
Context: Bilingual project in Chiangrai

- MTB–BLE pilot project in 4 schools in Chiangrai province
- Ministry of Education, Chiangrai 4 Educational Service Area and Foundation for Applied Linguistics (FAL)
- Project began in May 2009; first cohort now in Grade 3
- Community speaks Hmong
- Public school teachers speak Thai and Kammueang
- Local teachers hired for BLE project
Class teachers: trained, qualified teachers working in government schools. Speak Thai and Kammueang, but not Hmong. Commute from home area, or board at school during the week.

Local teachers: not qualified teachers. Bilingual in Thai and Hmong. Minimum of 9 years basic education, though some have 12 years or a degree. Live in local community. Employed for BLE project; modest salary.
# Role of class and local teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Class teacher (CT)</th>
<th>Local teacher (LT)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KG1 (4–5 yrs)</td>
<td>Plan lessons, mentor LT, teach oral Thai</td>
<td>Teach all subjects using Hmong</td>
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<tr>
<td>KG2 (5–6 yrs)</td>
<td>Plan lessons, mentor LT, teach oral Thai</td>
<td>Teach all subjects using Hmong, including literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 1 (6–7 yrs)</td>
<td>Plan lessons, mentor LT, teach oral Thai &amp; literacy, intro. concept words (Thai)</td>
<td>Teach all subjects using Hmong, including literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 2 (7–8 yrs)</td>
<td>Plan lessons, mentor LT, teach oral Thai &amp; literacy, intro. concept words (Thai)</td>
<td>Teach all subjects using Hmong, including literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 3 (8–9 yrs)</td>
<td>Plan lessons, mentor LT, teach oral Thai &amp; literacy, teach concepts and key words (Thai) in all subjects</td>
<td>Teach key concept words (Hmong) &amp; check understanding; teach Hmong literacy</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Demands on bilingual teachers

(Benson, 2004; based on Mozambique and Bolivia)

Intercultural communicator

Linguist

Community member

Pedagogue

Advocate
Demands on class and local teachers

- Intercultural communicator
- Community member
- Advocate
- Linguist
- Pedagogue
- Mentor
- Curriculum expert

Demands on Class and Local Teachers
I worked as trainer/coordinator with Hmong–Thai BLE project 2009–2012; then studied 2012–2013

Research: what have the teachers found most encouraging and most challenging in the pilot project?

In June 2013, 38 classes in the project schools:

- Interviews: 2 class teachers and 2 local teachers at each school (16 interviews)
- Interviews: 3 head teachers and 2 coordinators
- Questionnaires for teachers: 24 responses from class teachers and 22 from local teachers (Likert)
- Results of Grade 2 tests, arranged by Chiangrai 4 Educational Service Area in February 2013
Encouragement: Student literacy

- Both class teachers and local teachers interviewed identified literacy as a key success:
  - “The children have gained the most: they can read and write”.
    - (Local teacher, School A, Interview 3)

- Compare to older students in the school:
  - “If you take a Grade 1 child and compare them with a Grade 4 child..., the Grade 4 child won’t be able to read, but the Grade 1 child will. You can see the difference.”
    - (Local teacher, School A, Interview 5)
Cause for optimism: Tests of Grade 2 students in 7 bilingual, 4 Hmong control, and 2 Thai control classes

Grade 2 Thai language test

Data from Chiangrai 4 Educational Service Area, Feb 2013
Survey responses: Local teachers more positive about students’ Thai literacy than class teachers

Q.22 Students in the bilingual education project read and write Thai better than other students

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not sure
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Class teachers
Local teachers
Encouragement: Student understanding and learning

- All teachers see students can communicate better:
  - “…when we teach, the children understand… they have a better understanding of what we’re teaching, if you compare it to the old way…”. *(Class teacher, Sch.B, Int. 11)*

- Local teachers refer to their own school days:
  - “…if we didn’t understand what the Thai teacher was teaching, we wouldn’t dare to ask the Thai teacher. But now that there’s a Hmong teacher, if the children don’t understand they’ll come and ask.” *(Local teacher, School B, Interview 12)*
  - “…I regret all that time that went by without my understanding anything. They focused on us being able to read it, read it, read it, but we didn’t understand what it meant.” *(Local teacher, School C, Interview 15)*
The Grade 2 Mathematics test results indicate that students are learning concepts well:

Data from Chiangrai 4 Educational Service Area, Feb 2013
Survey responses: Local teachers more confident than class teachers that students are learning

Q25. Using Hmong language to study helps students learn better in all subjects

![Bar chart showing survey responses to Q25.](chart.png)

- **Strongly disagree**
- **Disagree**
- **Not sure**
- **Agree**
- **Strongly agree**

- **Class teachers**
- **Local teachers**
Encouragement: Student enjoyment

- Teachers see their students settle more quickly:
  - “…when (the children) meet a Thai teacher they’re scared – but when they come to the bilingual classes, we can take care of them – it’s good.” (Class teacher, School A, Interview 2)

- Head teachers have noted improved attendance:
  - “Students aren’t stressed anymore, and they want to come to school. The teacher can understand the students; the students can understand the teacher. So they are happy….” (Head teacher, School B, Interview 10)

- A local teacher commented that:
  - “…the children love to read. So when they’ve finished this story, they want to find a new story…. The children like writing, as well, writing the Hmong language.” (Local teacher, School C, Interview 16)
Encouragement: Local language gains in status

- Using the Hmong language in school validates the cultural identity of students:
  - “I think it’s good. It’s valuable because they won’t forget their own language. Secondly, their culture... is not lost – it remains part of their identity.”
    (Class teacher, School A, Interview 4)

- Head teacher argued learning should begin with home language:
  - “…the language they speak, the thoughts, the beliefs, the culture, the customs they have – and then teach them that this is a part of Thailand.... The language that they speak is also a part of Thailand.”
    (Head teacher, School A, Interview 1)
Encouragement: Majority of parents now accept bilingual project

- Parents initially opposed to using Hmong in school:
  - “At first the parents didn’t agree with it. They said their child would not learn Thai.” *(Class teacher, Sch. A, Int. 4)*

- Opinion is still divided, but majority now in favor:
  - “One group (of parents) likes it, the other group doesn’t. …at the moment, there are more people in the group that like it.” *(Class teacher, Sch. B, Int. 11)*

- Parents observe their child’s progress closely:
  - “When we went to work in the fields together, there was… one parent who said, ‘Before, I used to say that you didn’t teach well, but I don’t say that anymore now. My child can read and write, can read so well that it makes me ashamed that I can’t read yet, when my child can read.’” *(Local teacher, School C, Int. 15)*
Summary of encouragements

- Student literacy skills
- Student understanding and learning
- Student enjoyment
- Local language gains in status
- Majority of parents accept bilingual project
High turnover of class teachers in rural schools – often at short notice in the middle of term time

High turnover of local teachers due to low salary
- “…the local teachers… don’t earn very much, so they can’t live on it, so they have to leave, and we have to find new people. And when you’ve got new people, you have to train them again. If you don’t train them they can’t do it.”
  
  (Class teacher, School C, Interview 14)

Both class and local teachers are concerned that the lack of stability affects student learning:
- “I would like more money for the teachers in the project, so that there is greater continuity for the children.”
  
  (Class teacher, Survey no.5)
Because the agreement for the BLE pilot project is to write the Hmong language using Thai script (rather than the more popular Roman script orthography), any new local teachers have to learn this new orthography:

- “When they hired me it was nearly the start of term.... So I went straight to the teacher training workshop. Then I came back to teach the children, though I still didn’t know how to read and write Hmong.”

(Local teacher, School A, Interview 5)
Local teachers have little training and much responsibility:
- “The first day I came in, the teacher didn’t give me any advice on how to teach... She just left me, and I couldn’t manage the children, and the first day I couldn’t cope.”
  (Local teacher, School C, Interview 15)

They must find appropriate Hmong terms for the academic topics they teach:
- “The difficult thing is... when (the Hmong vocabulary) is more academic... I have to think of it myself.” (ibid.)

Yet they sometimes feel belittled in their workplace:
- “There are some Thai teachers who don't respect the authority of the local teachers.... When the local teacher doesn't know or doesn't understand things they'll complain or speak to them like they don't respect (them).”
  (Local teacher, Survey no. 9)
Challenge: Motivation of class teachers

- Class teachers initially not convinced about BLE:
  - “I thought that... the children are coming here to learn Thai, as they’ve already got a foundation in the Hmong language. They use that already, they can speak it, they’ve used it since they were born, they should already have those skills.”

  (Class teacher, School C, Interview 14)

- One head teacher highlighted the impact of teachers’ beliefs about BLE:
  - “If (the teachers) have a negative attitude towards (the bilingual project), they will have little acceptance of the bilingual activities, or they won’t do it according to the bilingual model.”

  (Head teacher, School B, Interview 10)
Class teachers have other (non–teaching) duties in school, which take them away from the classroom. One class teacher expressed his concern:

- “...if you want (the bilingual project) to be better, ...then the teachers, Thai and local, have to be able to just teach. Without other duties or things interfering. If they’re just teaching, following the steps, and they are giving it full attention, the children... will definitely succeed.” (Class teacher, School B, Interview 11)

A minority of class teachers do not teach Thai lessons as regularly as they should – which is a cause of anxiety for local teachers:

- “If the Thai teacher teaches wholeheartedly, then the children will learn. But if they don’t teach, then the children really won’t learn.”
  
  (Local teacher, School B, Interview 8)
The BLE curriculum and lesson plans for each semester are the responsibility of class teachers.

BLE project is known for frequent workshops out of term time, so is unpopular with some class teachers:

- “…they don’t want to join the project, because you have to go to workshops so often.”
  
  (Head teacher, School A, Interview 1)

The system for producing teaching materials does not always run smoothly, so materials are not ready at start of term – and the resulting stress may cause tension between class and local teachers.
Parents were not consulted before project began—some still opposed to the local language in school:

- “‘They learn Hmong language at home every day, and then they come to school and study Hmong again! Why don’t you teach them Thai?’ The parents say things like that.” (Local teacher, School A, Interview 5)

Some parents further confused by use of Thai script:

- “‘And if they’re going to teach it, why don’t they teach the Hmong language, why do they teach reading Hmong that uses Thai letters?’” (Local teacher, School B, Interview 12)

Some parents just do not see the value of BLE:

- “(they) still don’t understand the principles of the project, so they’re still opposed…. Because… what they want… is for the children to know Thai, to write Thai.” (Local teacher, School C, Interview 16)
Summary of challenges

- Staff turnover and salary of local teachers
- Qualifications and status of local teachers
- Motivation of class teachers
- Teaching materials and lesson plans
- Lack of parent and community support
Teachers’ recommendations: Policy

- Bilingual education...
  - “ought to become policy of the Ministry of Education, in order to manage it systematically for quality results.” (Class teacher, Survey 25)

- Policy on training and deployment of BLE teachers
  - “It would have to be people from (the Ministry of Education) … who set the criteria, saying that… schools involved in bilingual education… need teachers… with certain characteristics.” (Class teacher, School C, Interview 14)

- Policy should be sustainably funded
  - “If there isn’t enough funding, and they’re just thinking of doing it for a year or two, then I’d say it would be better not to do it. … Because it won’t get results… there would be negative consequences for the children… for the teachers and for the community.” (Local teacher, Sch. C, Int. 15)
Teachers’ recommendations: Parents and community

- Parents should be consulted before bilingual education starts in their local school:
  - “I’d want them to build understanding with the parents first…. In the very first place. ...if the parents don’t understand, if community doesn’t understand... it’s a very big obstacle.” (Local teacher, Sch. C, Int. 15)

- In order for bilingual education “to be successful it must involve the school, community, parents, including leaders and people who have knowledge of local cultures from each community.”
  (Class teacher, Survey no. 17)
Questions and comments welcome

Thank you!
Further reading

