Panel session: Eight years of MLE in southern Thailand: reflections, results, and future directions

In 1947, Patani Malay-speaking Muslims in Thailand’s Deep South petitioned the Thai government for their mother tongue to be used in education. That wish was not granted until 2006, when the Thai Ministry of Education gave permission for bilingual education to be used in response to violence in the region which saw dozens of schools burned and over 165 education personnel killed.

In 2007, linguists from Mahidol University conducted preliminary research that would become the basis for the Patani Malay-Thai Bi/Multilingual Education Project. The first cohort of kindergarten students entered the program in May 2008 and graduated from grade 6 in March 2016. Partners for the program would eventually include UNICEF, SIL International, the Thailand Research Fund, Yala Rajabhat University, and the Delegation of the European Union to Thailand.

The purpose of this panel session is to reflect on the experiences, results, and lessons learned from this eight-year program. Topics and presenters include:

- Project overview and future directions
- Orthography issues
- L1 to L2 transfer
- Evaluation

This panel is coordinated by Kirk Person and Hugh Delaney
The Patani Malay-Thai bilingual education pilot in the restive south of Thailand: successes, challenges, lessons learned, and recommendations for scale up

By Suwilai Premsrirat and Hugh Delaney

The Patani Malay-Thai bilingual education project is an action-participatory research that began in 2007. It was implemented in three schools in the southern Thailand conflict zone from kindergarten through primary grade six. The goal is to enable Patani Malay speaking children to obtain quality education while offering their cultural and linguistic heritage with a view to make a significant contribution to reconciliation efforts and meeting UN sustainable goals.

From the beginning, the Patani Malay-Thai project prioritized engagement with government and community stakeholders. It is guided by a steering committee that includes respected Thai Muslim people, local linguists, officials from the Southern Border Province Administrative Center, the Ministry of Education, the Thailand Research Fund, and project leaders from Mahidol University, Yala Rajabhat University, and UNICEF. Community members have been deeply involved in the program, from helping to develop a Thai-based orthography to developing learning materials such as big books, small books, cultural posters, songs, and games.

Key outcomes have included:

- Curriculum, lesson plans and instructional materials in both the L1 and L2 developed and tested;
- Preservice and in-service training for teachers conducted to build a sustainable foundation for the approach;
- Annual assessments conducted to determine student progress;
- Directly reached 1000+ children in the original pilot schools and 12 expansion schools.

The presentation will provide results from the program, challenges, lessons learned from several years of implementation, and recommendations for scaling up the approach.
Language, script, and identity in Thailand's Deep South: implications for educational planning

By Uniansasmita Samoh

For MLE to be successful, it is important for the minority language to have an orthography that is easy to learn. Some languages already have orthographies, while others need newly developed or revised orthographies. As Smalley (1994) said, a good orthography should be linguistically accurate and also be acceptable to the stakeholders, especially the local people for whom the project exists.

The purposes of this presentation are to (1) To describe the languages, scripts, and identity issues in Thailand’s Deep South, where people daily experience different scripts including: Patani Malay (written in Thai script), Standard Thai (written in Thai script), Classical Malay (written in Jawi or Arabic-based script), and Standard Malay (written both in Jawi and Rumi (Roman-based script), and (2) To propose solutions and accommodations for script issues in education planning in Thailand’s Deep South.

The study found that the languages and scripts used in the region all reflected part of the identity of Patani Malay speaking Muslim people in the region. Namely, the Patani Malay language reflects their Patani Malay (ethnic) identity, Standard Thai reflects their status as Thai citizens, Classical Malay (written in Jawi script) reflects their Islamic identity, and Standard Malay (written in both Jawi and Rumi scripts) reflects their Malay world/Nusantara identity. Hence, education planning in the region needs to be aware of language and script issues because these are directly related to the identity of the people in the region, and problems related to identity have contributed to more than a decade of violence in this area.
Transferring writing skills from the mother tongue to the national language: a case study of primary grade Patani Malay students in southern Thailand

By Mirinda Burarungrot

Many ethnic children speak a mother tongue (L1) which differs from the national language or the language of instruction in schools (L2). This situation leads to a big problem for educational development in many places. In Thailand, for example, when most Patani Malay students begin school, they only speak and understand Patani Malay. As a result, they are unable to comprehend their school’s Thai language lessons, resulting in substandard academic performance.

This research used both quantitative and qualitative research methods to test whether the initial development of literacy skills in Patani Malay improves the ability of these students to develop writing skills in Thai. The qualitative data came from classroom observation in four MLE pilot schools and four “normal” (Thai-only) comparison schools. To gather quantitative data, five specialized assessment instruments designed to measure the development of writing skills were developed. These were administered to children in primary grades 1 and 3, both at the beginning of the school year (term 1) and close to the end of the school year (term 2) in both the MLE schools and the comparison schools. The resultant data was scored using a customized scoring rubric and analyzed using standard statistical methods.

The results clearly showed that the Thai writing skills of MLE students, who learned in both Patani Malay (L1) and Thai (L2), were much better than comparison-school students who learned only in Thai (L2). This supports the hypothesis that developing literacy skills in the mother tongue improves the ability of ethnic minority students to master literacy in the national language.
Has the implementation of bi/multilingual education improved student achievement in the three southern border provinces of Thailand?

By Suppaluk Sintana

Long term evaluations of student performance are important to show whether MLE students are making good progress, as well as to show what changes are needed to make MLE programs more successful. This purpose of this presentation is to describe a six-year study of MLE students in southern Thailand.

In 2007, the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University (RILCA-MU) initiated the Patani Malay-Thai Bi/Multilingual Research Project in four schools in Southern Thailand. In 2011, Yala Rajabhat University (YRU) staff began biannual student evaluations of both the experimental (MLE) schools and “normal” Thai-only comparison schools, when the first cohort of students were beginning primary grade 1. YRU followed these students through to primary grade 6.

The learning achievement for students in the experimental (MLE) schools was found to be significantly higher than that of students from the comparison schools at the level of 0.01. The number of students who met basic educational criteria was higher for the MLE schools than the comparison schools, at a rate of 65.15% to 38.02%. MLE was found to be very helpful for low- and mid-level performing students (who make up the majority of students in the South) helping them to achieve satisfactory performance at a rate much higher than similar students in the comparison schools. Finally, scores on the critical thinking skills assessment of the MLE students were higher than the comparison schools.

Thus, this six-year research project has clearly shown that MLE can help solve the problems of teaching and learning in Thailand’s three southern border provinces. This approach to long-term evaluation can be helpful to projects in other countries also.