A successful mother tongue-based ECCE in an ethnolinguistic community of Thailand: lessons learned and recommendations for scaling up

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Though Thailand is a multilingual country, with many ethnolinguistic communities scattered along the borders or clustered in pockets of different areas, education for children from early age to primary levels provides only Thai-based instruction. This includes the Early Childhood Development Center offered by local governmental administrations in ethnolinguistic communities. In typical centers, the teaching assistants try to use Thai-based instruction in the hope that the earlier children learn Thai, the better and faster they can speak and understand the language.

However, there are still many communities that do not even have an Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) center. Education for these early age children is not viewed as a priority and in many areas they are left without any education options if the number of children does not reach the required target size set by the provincial or local administration. In many areas, ECCE is combined with non-formal education.

Together with local communities, ECCE projects were developed in 2009. One of them is in Mae Tien village, a Pwo Karen community. The curriculum, teaching materials, and reading materials used in the ECCE center are developed based on not only the national standards and indicators but also on Pwo Karen knowledge, cultural heritage, and livelihood. Mother tongue is used as the language of instruction while Thai is taught as a subject and as a second language to prepare children for their primary schooling in other villages.

The result is the children can read and write when they are aged five because the literacy starts in their mother tongue first. They then benefit from a smoother transition going into the formal school system. Moreover, this project encourages some illiterate adults to learn to read and write and later become literate by using the same teaching methods.