Challenges and lessons learned: a decade of implementing MTB-MLE in northern Thailand

By Grégory Häuptli and Hugh Delaney

Thai is used as the country’s language of instruction in schools. For ethnolinguistic minority areas, the practice bears the risk that children are taught in a language that they do not master when they enroll at school, leading to poor learning achievements and high dropout rates.

Aiming to address these issues, a project was developed to introduce the benefits of multilingual education in northern Thailand. Children start literacy in their mother tongue first before bridging to Thai. Only mother tongue is used as a language of instruction in kindergarten, and the use of Thai gradually increases in parallel throughout primary levels.

The results are outstanding. Children are well literate both in Thai and their mother tongue and achieve improved learning outcomes. They score higher in the national test results than children receiving Thai-only teaching. They are happy, confident, and enjoy learning. The relationship between children and teachers improved. It is recognized by Thai teachers that these children’s competence in Thai is far better than the ones in the Thai-only approach.

However, prevailing language policies, a centralized education system, an inadequate teachers’ recruitment system, lack of relevant teaching and learning material, and methodology and pedagogy not adapted to teach in mother tongue, impede the scaling up of MTB-MLE into the national education system and thus raising the quality of education.

To pave the way for multilingual education, along with the development of guidelines, there needs to be sustained advocacy work to integrate MTB-MLE in the education system in order to improve equity access to quality education for ethnolinguistic minority children.