Applying the principle and practice of two-way language immersion programs in pre-
primary and primary schools in Southern Thailand

By Vilasa Phongsathorn

The benefits of language immersion programs have been documented for decades, be it in terms of children’s academic achievement, language and literacy development in two or more languages, or in cognitive skills. The immersion model has also been used in the revitalisation of indigenous languages in regions across the globe, and has been found to contribute towards intercultural exchange and social change by bringing people from different communities together, and particularly by helping children from majority and minority groups to see themselves and each other as equal participants in school and society. This paper seeks to provide a rationale for the adoption of the principle and practice of two-way language immersion (TWI)—the use of the local language or mother tongue (L1) and the mainstream national language (L2) as the medium of instruction for ethnic minority and majority students)—in the context of Southern Thailand, namely the use of Patani-Malay and Thai for Patani-Malay-speaking students and Thai-speaking students in the early grades. The paper provides examples of program strategies, pedagogical and assessment frameworks, and ways in which language and content can be integrated in immersion classrooms, looking at successful models from around the world. It then outlines the challenges that must be overcome in order for the immersion program to have real positive impact on students and the society at large. The ultimate goal of this paper is to offer an alternative pathway to multilingualism in this restive region that will eventually lead to better integration and social cohesion.