

CONFERENCE REPORTS

The Second International Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization, and Multilingual Education in Ethnolinguistic Communities, 1-3 July 2008, Bangkok, Thailand

Organized by SIL International, the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development of Mahidol University, UNESCO-Bangkok, The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), UNICEF, CARE International, and Save the Children UK

Reported by Susan MALONE and Kirk R. PERSON

SIL International

When our children go to school, they go to an alien place. They leave their parents, they leave their gardens, they leave everything that is their way of life. They sit in a classroom and they learn things that have nothing to do with their own place. Later, because they have learned only other things, they reject their own.

Parent, Laitrao Village, North Solomons Province. In Delpit and Kemelfield, 1985, *An evaluation of the Viles Tok Pies Skul scheme in the North Solomons Province. ERU Report No. 51*. Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea p. 29-30.

Until the beginning of this millennium, the educational problems faced by children and adults from non-dominant language communities were rarely noted in international literature or factored into most countries' educational plans. The quotation above, from a parent in Papua New Guinea, summarizes one of the consequences for many students and their families—the loss of their heritage language and culture. The good news is that, over the last eight years, increasing numbers of ethnolinguistic communities, NGOs, universities and governments in Asia and the Pacific have expressed interest in and/or have begun implementing mother tongue-based multilingual education (MT-based MLE) programs for children and adults who do not speak or understand the official language(s) of education. That trend now seems to be growing in Africa as well. The years since 2000 have also seen an increase in efforts to document, revitalize and sustain the heritage languages and cultures of non-dominant language communities through language development (LD) and language revitalization (LR) programs.

In spite of these efforts, the purposes and benefits of language development, language revitalization and multilingual education are still not widely understood or accepted. Many such efforts remain weak and do not build on what has been learned through research and practice in other parts of the world. Clearly, awareness-raising and advocacy are still needed. Also needed is more information about what works and what does not work in planning, implementing and sustaining strong language and education programs.

The first “Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization, and Multilingual Education in Ethnolinguistic Communities in Asia” generated a strongly positive response among participating international agency officials, language activists, educators, and scholars. This response, plus continuing worldwide interest in these issues, resulted in a second conference. The name remained similar (deleting “Asia” to emphasize that global scope of this movement), with additional international partners joining the organizing committee.

The purposes of the Second International Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Ethnolinguistic Communities, held in Bangkok from 1-3 July 2008, were to:

- Raise awareness regarding the threats to the world’s linguistic and cultural diversity and to the social, cultural, political, economic and educational injustices faced by the people who come from non-dominant ethnolinguistic communities
- Raise awareness regarding the purposes and benefits of MT-Based MLE programs that enable speakers of non-dominant languages to achieve educational success
- Learn about good practices in language development, language revitalization and MT-based MLE from the people with “on the ground” experience in such programs
- Encourage participants—especially members of ethnolinguistic communities—to develop and expand their networks of individuals and organizations engaged in and supporting these efforts

The **keynote presentation** and the six **plenary** and ninety-three **parallel presentations** were roughly divided into five main tracks relating to language, culture and education. These were:

1. Preserving intangible cultural heritage
2. Language development and revitalization efforts (with many papers focusing on orthography development)
3. Experiences in establishing mother tongue-based MLE programs
4. Language and language-in-education policies
5. Research studies relating to language and education

The conference attracted 388 participants from 33 countries and 6 continents. The truly global scope of these issues was reinforced by a wide variety of speakers, many of whom are members of ethnolinguistic groups. The panel discussion on intangible cultural heritage, for example, featured

Ik Pahon Joyik (Bidayuh community, Malaysia), Liezeil Zabanal (Agutaynen community, Philippines), Dr. Richard Littlebear (Northern Cheyenne community, USA), and Muhammad Shafiq Khalil (Punjabi community, Pakistan).

Work Sessions on the major Conference topics provided participants with opportunities to raise questions, share experiences and discuss specific issues in more informal settings. Of particular note were work sessions on Language and Education Policies (interacting with policy makers to create mother-tongue friendly educational frameworks), Research and Evaluation (developing academically rigorous studies of MT-based MLE in non-Western countries), and ICT (harnessing technology to benefit language development and language revitalization).

The conference also featured an **Exhibition Area** for displaying teaching and learning materials, photos, information brochures and other items relating to language development and multilingual education. One hour during the Conference was scheduled for participants to visit the displays and interact with colleagues from different areas of the world. The organizers were pleasantly surprised by the positive impact of the exhibition area, and were encouraged by the numerous productive conversations that occurred there.

Dr. Sheldon Shaeffer, Director of UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, received a standing ovation at the close of the conference, in gratitude for his tireless efforts to translate UNESCO's pro-mother tongue policies into on-the-ground action. The depth of Dr. Shaeffer's commitment can be gauged by numerous mother-tongue related UNESCO materials published with his support, many available online at <http://www.unescobkk.org/index.php?id=222>. In retirement Dr. Shaeffer will remain an important friend of the ethnic peoples of the world.

The depth of knowledge and experience of the participants contributed to an over-all feeling of time well spent, as evidenced by their comments and final evaluations. A post-conference note from one of the participants—a member of a non-dominant ethnolinguistic community—might sum it up for most of those who participated: *“The conference was really refreshing for me knowing there are others around the world fighting the same battle as we are. We are not alone.”*

Papers from this conference will be posted on the conference website http://www.seameo.org/_ld2008/document.html. An extensive conference report, including an executive summary, will be published by the organizing committee and distributed in both print and electronic form.

Papers from the 2003 conference may be viewed at <http://www.sil.org/asia/ldc/>.

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The International Conference on National Language Policy: Language Diversity for National Unity. 4-5 July 2008, Bangkok, Thailand

Organized by the Royal Institute of Thailand, in cooperation with Australian Education International, UNESCO-Bangkok, The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, UNICEF, and SIL International.

Reported by Kirk R. PERSON

SIL International and Payap University, Thailand

In recognition of the United Nation's declaration of 2008 as the "International Year of Languages," the Royal Institute of Thailand hosted an international conference on language policy July 4-5, 2008, at the Twin Towers Hotel in Bangkok. This conference sought to bring scholars, government officials, and language practitioners from around the globe together in Bangkok, as part of the Royal Institute's efforts to draft a national language policy for Thailand.

As was the case with the Second International Conference on Language Development (LD Conference), several international partners encouraged and supported this conference: Australian Education International, UNESCO-Bangkok, The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, UNICEF, and SIL International.

The conference was held immediately following the LD Conference, which made it convenient for many people to enjoy both conferences. While total attendance at the two conferences was comparable, Royal Institute conference attracted more local attention, with 257 Thai participants and 87 international attendees from 22 nations. While the LD Conference focused almost exclusively on issues related to ethnic minority groups, the RI conference expanded the scope of their conference to include a wider range of language policy issues.

The opening ceremony featured opening remarks from all the cooperating organizations, including:

- Sheldon Shaeffer, Director, UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education
- Dato' Ahamad bin Sipon, Director, SEAMEO
- Aya Aoki, Education Specialist, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office
- Anne Reynolds, Counsellor (Education, Science, and Training), Australian Education International Australian Embassy, Bangkok
- Carolyn Miller, Former President, SIL International

These were followed by a report from Royal Institute Secretary General Chintana Bhandbufalck and the inaugural address by Royal Institute President Chai-Anan Samudavanija.

The tone for the conference was set by a series of keynote addresses:

- Renowned language policy scholar Bernard Spolsky explored “an acceptance of multilingualism in society and the encouragement of plurilingual citizens” in his “Life after Babel: Prospects for Acceptance of Multilingualism.”
- Joseph Lo Bianco, author of Australia’s *National Policy on Languages* (1987), linked language research and real-world results in “The Benefits of Explicit Languages Policies: What Thailand Would Gain.”
- Linguist David Bradley’s “Language Policy for Transnational Minorities of Thailand” suggested policy options for Thai ethnic minority groups “in the light of policy successes and failures with the same groups in adjacent countries.”
- Swedish-American educator Carol Benson returned to the theme of multilingual societies and plurilingual individuals in “Can Language Policies and Practices in Europe Offer Ideas for Language Policy in Thailand?”
- SIL literacy specialist Kimmo Kosonen addressed education for ethnic minority groups in “What is Multilingual Education and How can it Benefit Learners and Societies?”

Five panel discussions, each organized by one of the Royal Institute’s language policy subcommittees, highlighted the different facets of a national languages policy:

- Translation and Interpretation: Accessibility to the World of Knowledge and Understanding (ICT and translation, training and certification for translators)
- Access Means Opportunity (language policy for blind and deaf communities)
- Strengthening National Languages in an International World (national languages in the face of globalism)
- Ethnic Minority Languages: an Urgent Call for Action (preserving ethnic minority languages while providing equal opportunity for their speakers)
- Language Policy and Implementation Issues: Economic and Social Perspectives (strategic thinking about Thailand’s future foreign language needs)

Panel participants included linguists, educators, UNESCO officials, economists, business people, and NGO representatives, thus providing a wide range of converging opinions on the importance of language policy to national social and economic development. Of special note was Thein Swe and Paul Chambers’ joint presentation on the social impact of recently completed transnational highway networks, which have dramatically accelerated the flow

of people and products from China, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia into Thailand.

Some 49 papers were presented in the parallel sessions, most of which related to the themes of the panel discussions. These papers, along with the keynote presentations, will be published by the Royal Institute of Thailand.

Dr. Udom Warotamasikkhadit, Chair of the Royal Institute's Language Policy Drafting Committee, was very pleased with the width and depth of all the presentations, and plans a series of follow-up forums, press releases, and small-group discussions to continue the language policy conversations sparked by this conference.

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