

Project on research study and materials development of a literacy programme for ethnic minority in Omkoi, Chiangmai (Thailand)¹

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Abstract

This paper describes current efforts to implement a bilingual education program in Omkoi District, Chiangmai Province, Thailand. The program was initiated by the Department of Nonformal Education (NFE Development Division, Northern NFE Regional Center, Chiangmai NFE Provincial Center, Omkoi NFE District Center) with the cooperation of SIL International. The paper focuses on the cooperative relationship (government, INGO, community) in planning the program, producing a writing system, developing teaching and reading materials and developing a community-centered curriculum and teaching materials.

Introduction

This project, called the “Bilingual Project”, has been undertaken by the Office of Non-Formal Education Commission through the Non-Formal Education Development Division, Northern Regional NFE Center, Chiangmai Provincial NFE Center and Omkoi District NFE center.

One of the main tasks of the Office of Non-formal Education Commission is literacy promotion. At present the literacy rate of Thailand is 95.5 %, with the number of illiterates being about 3,300,000. Among these are hilltribes and minorities in different regions and along the border areas. These people have their cultures and identities that should be preserved and promoted and this can be done through literacy promotion.

The “bilingual approach” is a very challenging approach for literacy promotion. In Thailand, this approach enables ethnic minority groups to use their own language for initial learning and also helps them learn Thai in order to communicate with the majority of the people in the country. The approach, therefore, can provide a social and cultural linkage between tribal groups and the majority Thai people in order that they can live together peacefully. The problem is that the bilingual approach is new to Nonformal Education specialists in this country. Most of the literacy programs currently use the curriculum and guidelines designed for majority language (Thai) learners. Even though there have been efforts to initiate literacy at local level, the bilingual approach is rarely used.

When UNESCO organized the Regional Workshop on Functional Literacy for Indigenous Peoples (26 November-1 December 2001), 2 NFE personnel from northern Thailand participated. When they returned to Thailand, they initiated the bilingual project for Omkoi District, Chiangmai Province. They spent time learning as much as possible about the bilingual approach by consulting SIL International in Chiangmai. They also made a study visit to the Chong community’s language revitalization program in Chantaburi province.² In November 2002, the Office of Non-Formal Education Commission proposed the project to UNESCO for financial support. The proposal was to do action research with the aim of developing literacy materials and learning strategies using the bilingual approach. From January to September 2003, the Office of Non-Formal Education Commission (NFE Development Division, Northern NFE Regional Center, Chiangmai NFE Provincial Center, Omkoi NFE District Center), with the cooperation of SIL

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² See Suwilai and D. Malone paper in the Plenary Papers section on this site for a description of the Chong project.

International, Thailand, have made steady progress in this project. This includes project planning among NFE personnel, assisted by SIL International, and community studies and base-line data collection by Pwo Karen teachers. Literacy materials for Pwo Karen have been developed through several workshops including the following:

- Workshop on the Examination and Analysis of the Pwo Karen Sound System;
- Workshop on Word List Checking (in Nong Ung Tai village with the Pwo Karen);
- Alphabet Design Workshop for Omkoi Pwo Karen;
- Curriculum and Materials Development Workshop.
- Writers workshop.

Literacy materials were developed by Pwo Karen teachers and by Pwo Karen students from NFE community learning centers at Omkoi , with the cooperation of Pwo Karen leaders and under the leadership of experts from SIL. The following materials have been produced:

- alphabet chart
- picture dictionary
- spelling guide
- posters
- “The Rabbit and the Snail” booklet,
- six big books (also duplicated for small books)
- card games for developing literacy skills.
- fifteen booklets generated by NFE staff
- thirteen booklets generated by learners.
- Level One primer
- writing workbook (for writing Pwo Karen)
- ten bilingual songs.

Teachers guides and planning for bilingual approach

The Pwo teachers agreed to initiate the bilingual approach to implement these materials in the village with the cooperation of the ‘Language Committee’ in September and October 2003.

Follow-up, June 2004

This project has been established in two community learning center—Nong Ung Tai village and Hauy Kwang village—and in June 2004, the staff developed a plan to expand the project to six additional Pwo Karen villages Omkoi district. The expansion plan needs to be approved and will require support for training teachers and producing more materials.