



## The Impact of Early Childhood Mother Tongue Interventions on Grade 1 Literacy Skills of Ethnic Minority Children in Thailand

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### Introduction

Some 7000 languages are spoken in the world today. Nonetheless, the global push for early childhood education has been largely silent on the issue of language. This has unintentionally provoked a crisis of linguistic loss in ethnic minority communities throughout Asia, as children are placed in ECD centers where caretakers do not speak their mother tongue. Some governments actively promote national language or English language ECD as a “solution” to the language “problem” of minority children—violating a host of United Nations declarations related to the linguistic and cultural rights of indigenous and ethnic populations.

This paper examines the link between mother tongue preschools and national language literacy skills among Hmong speaking ethnic minority children in Northern Thailand. Four pilot “Multilingual Education” (MLE) program schools in which the Hmong language was used as the main language of instruction in preschool and the

early primary grades were paired with four comparison schools where Hmong children were taught exclusively in Thai.

### Thailand’s New Grade 1 Literacy Assessment

Like many Asian countries, Thailand places great emphasis on testing. Historically, the most important educational benchmarks have been the grade 3 National Test (NT) and the Ordinary National Education Test (O-Net) administered in grades 6, 9 and 12. The O-Net in particular has been subject to much criticism, as national averages for most subjects are far below the 50% mark (NIETS, 2015).

In 2013, NT and O-Net scores showed that 8% of grade 3 and 4% of grade 6 children in Thai schools were illiterate. This came as a shock to a country long accustomed to boasting about its 98% literacy rate. Most of the illiterate children were from ethnic minority groups (Khaosod English, 2013).



In analyzing the situation, MOE officials felt that grade 3 was too long to wait to test literacy; by the time tests results were available, failing third graders would have already been promoted to grade 4 (grade repetition is almost unheard of in Thailand) and the chances for successful intervention slim. Thus, in 2015, the MOE launched a new literacy assessment tool for grades 1-6. Unlike the high-stakes NT and O-Net exams—where student performance impacts teacher and administrator salaries and promotions—the literacy tests were to be used exclusively for diagnostic purposes, so that teachers could identify children who were behind and help them (although there are no policies on how—the burden is on the teacher).

The introduction of the literacy assessment is been part of a larger ongoing education reform process. And while MOE officials interviewed for this report were reluctant or unable to provide me with written policy statements related to early grade reading, they did give me copies of the first semester literacy tests for grades 1-6.

This provided a unique opportunity; while the Hmong students in the pilot MLE schools had done better than the control groups in testing initiated by the MLE program coordinators, this was a chance to see how they would measure up on a MOE-created national literacy assessment. Would the Hmong MTB-MLE students be on track? Would they be doing better or worse than other Hmong children in normal “Thai-only” schools? Would Jim Cummins’ contention that “Children...with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language” (Cummins 2000).

### The Grade 1 Assessment

The grade 1 assessment is to be given in June, roughly 1 month after the beginning of the Thai school year. It thus is more reflective of what the children learned in preschool than what they learned in grade 1—and thus serves as something of an indicator of academic readiness. It is divided into three parts, with a total of 30 points possible, as described below.

**Reading Section One: Sounding out words**

Students are presented with 10 simple Thai words. 8 are monosyllabic, 2 polysyllabic, and most are nouns, as shown below:

Thai	Phonetic	Cons class	Gloss
ตา	dtaa <sup>M</sup>	low	eye, grandfather
บา	baa <sup>M</sup>	mid	NM
งา	ngaa <sup>M</sup>	low	tusk
ขา	khaa <sup>R</sup>	high	leg
มี	mee <sup>M</sup>	low	have
สี	see <sup>R</sup>	high	color
ฟู	fuu <sup>M</sup>	low	fluffy
หู	huu <sup>R</sup>	high	ear
สาาคู	saa <sup>R</sup> khuu <sup>M</sup>	high, low	tapioca
ฝาชี	faa <sup>R</sup> chee <sup>M</sup>	high, low	conical lid

**Table 1.** Grade 1, Semester 1 National Literacy Assessment:  
words to be sounded out in the traditional manner (OBEC, 2016)

The children are to sound out the words, using the traditional, formulaic method. For *dtaa<sup>M</sup>*, a child would thus be expected to say “*dtaw-aa dtaa<sup>M</sup>*”; for *mee<sup>M</sup>*, “*maw-ee mee<sup>M</sup>*,” for *faa<sup>R</sup> chee<sup>M</sup>* “*faw-aa chaw-ee faa<sup>R</sup> chee<sup>M</sup>*,” etc. Note that an unwritten default vowel, *aw*, is always inserted after the initial consonant. Although children in Thai schools are very accustomed

to sounding out words in this way, this unwritten vowel could be slightly confusing: why “read” something that is neither written on the page nor pronounced in normal speech?

The test guidelines state that points are awarded on an all-or-nothing basis: if the student reads the word correctly she get one point, if not she get zero. However, the guide



does not say what is to be done in partial cases, where the student may get the correct consonant but incorrect vowel or, more importantly, the incorrect tone.

The issue of tone could prove problematic to ethnic minority students whose languages either do not have tone (eg. Patani Malay) or have tones that do not match Thai's 5 tones (eg. Hmong, Akha, Bisu, Lahu, etc.). As shown in table 1, 7 syllables on the test carry mid tones and 5 rising tones. The tonal value is conditioned by the “class” of the initial consonant—each of the 3 consonant classes having a different set of tone rules. These 10 words mix consonants from all 3 classes. The Thai-based Hmong orthography used in the MLE pilot schools does not use the high class consonants, which are phonetically redundant. Rather, Hmong is written using mostly low class

consonants and a handful of mid-class ones that, for purposes of the minority script only, are allowed to function according to low class consonant rules. Thus, minority students in Hmong MLE programs might be disadvantaged on words 4, 5, 8, 9 & 10 due to lack of exposure to the high class consonants and the rising tones they produce in open syllables.

In addition, one word, *baa<sup>M</sup>*, has no meaning, although if pronounced with a different tone it could mean ‘shoulder’ or ‘insane.’ Thai early reading drills often use nonsense syllables, which may make it more difficult for students to realize that reading is supposed to be meaningful. By contrast, a child who had already made the word-meaning link could pronounce *baa<sup>M</sup>* with a “wrong” tone in trying to make it meaningful!

**Reading Section Two: Reading Words Out Loud**

In the second part of the reading test, students are again presented with 10 simple words (8 monosyllabic, 2 disyllabic), most of which are nouns, that the students are to read out loud (without sounding them out). Again, a correct answer gets one point, an incorrect one zero.

Thai	Phonetic	Cons class	Gloss
ดา	daa <sup>M</sup>	low	water bug
อา	aa <sup>M</sup>	mid	uncle/aunt
ซา	saa <sup>M</sup>	low	diminish
หา	haa <sup>R</sup>	high	seek, visit
ยี	yee <sup>M</sup>	low	crush
ผี	phee <sup>R</sup>	high	ghost
งู	nguu <sup>M</sup>	low	snake
หู่	hhuu <sup>R</sup>	high	NM
นาที	naa <sup>M</sup> thee <sup>M</sup>	low, low	minute
รูปู	ruu <sup>M</sup> bpuu <sup>M</sup>	low, mid	crab hole

**Table 2.** Grade 1, Semester 1 National Literacy Assessment:  
words to be read out loud (OBEC, 2016)

One word, *hhuu<sup>R</sup>*, is meaningless, although with a low tone it would mean “intimidate.” Nine words are mid tone, 3 rising. Again, there is a mixture of high, low

and mid class consonants, and no indication in the testing guide whether an incorrect tone would result in a zero for the word.



### Writing Section: Dictation

In this section, the teacher reads a list of 10 simple words (8 monosyllabic, 2 disyllabic), mostly verbs, for the students to write. Again, a correctly spelt word gets one point, and an incorrect one zero, with no indication whether partial answers are accepted (eg. correct consonant, incorrect vowel).

Thai	Phonetic	Cons class	Gloss
จา	jaa <sup>M</sup>	mid	speak
ปา	bpaa <sup>M</sup>	mid	throw
มา	maa <sup>M</sup>	low	come
หา	haa <sup>R</sup>	high	visit
ดี	dee <sup>M</sup>	mid	good
ชี้	see <sup>M</sup>	high	command word
ชู	chuu <sup>M</sup>	high	raise
ถู	thuu <sup>R</sup>	high	wipe
วาจา	waa <sup>M</sup> jaa <sup>M</sup>	low, mid	words
บูชา	buu <sup>M</sup> chaa <sup>M</sup>	mid, high	venerate

**Table 3.** Grade 1, Semester 1 National Literacy Assessment:  
Dictation words (OBEC, 2016)

All the words are meaningful, although one, *buu<sup>M</sup> chaa<sup>M</sup>* ‘venerate’, could be unfamiliar to students of non-Buddhist backgrounds. Ten syllables are mid tone, two are rising, and there is a mixture of all three consonant classes. The consonants used in three words—*haa<sup>R</sup>*,

*see<sup>M</sup>*, and *thuu<sup>R</sup>*—could be ambiguous because Thai has two consonants for /h/, two for /s/ and six for /th/. The child would either need to recognize the tone of the word to know which of the redundant consonants to chose, or recognize the meaning of the word and mentally link it to



its written form. At least these simple words *probably* would have been covered in class.

### Inventory of Letters Tested

Thai has 44 consonants symbols, 15 vowel symbols (which combine into 28 vowel forms), and 4 tone marks. The reading and writing sections of the grade 1 test together contain 23 consonants and 3 simple vowels. Eleven of the consonants are low class, 6 mid, and 6 high. Although roughly half of the consonants in the Thai alphabet are used, these are the most frequently occurring ones (with the exception of *kaw kai*, the first and most used letter of the alphabet, which is used for the examples only). Only three common vowels appear on the test: *aa*, *ee*, and *uu*.

### Reading, Writing and Meaning

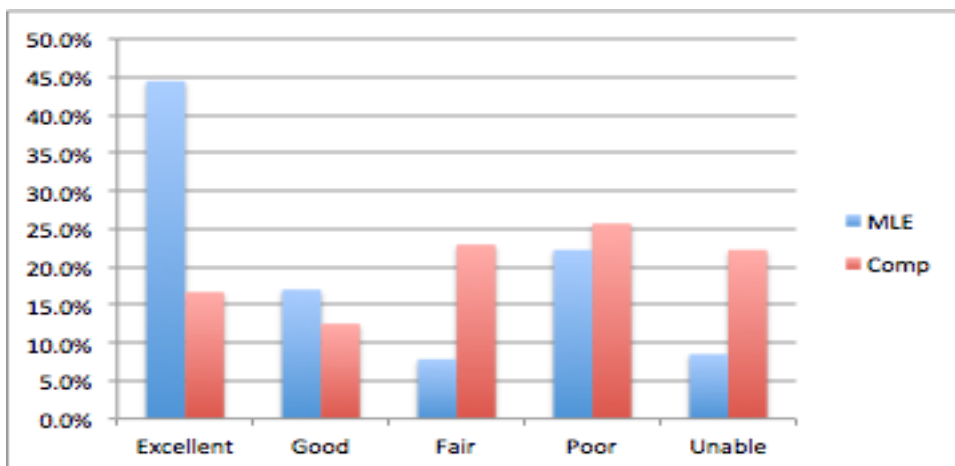
The assessment contains no link to meaning. For example, there are no exercises in which words and pictures are matched. The assessment is clearly designed to test the student's phonetic knowledge—the ability to

match sound and symbol—in accordance with the MOE's renewed emphasis on a bottom-up phonetic approach.

### How Did the Hmong Students Do?

My hypothesis was that the Hmong children who had two years of mother tongue pre-primary would do well on this assessment—even better than their Hmong peers in Thai only schools. This is because all the MLE programs in Thailand utilize Thai-based scripts. Thus, the students would be able to sound out, read, and write most of the words on the assessment without needing to know their meanings. They would merely transfer their mother tongue literacy skills.

This was confirmed by the test results. The graph below shows that ethnic Hmong children in MLE schools outperformed Hmong children in the Thai-only comparison schools by a wide margin on the reading assessment; roughly 60% of MLE students earned “excellent” or “good” marks, while most comparison students ranked “fair” or worse

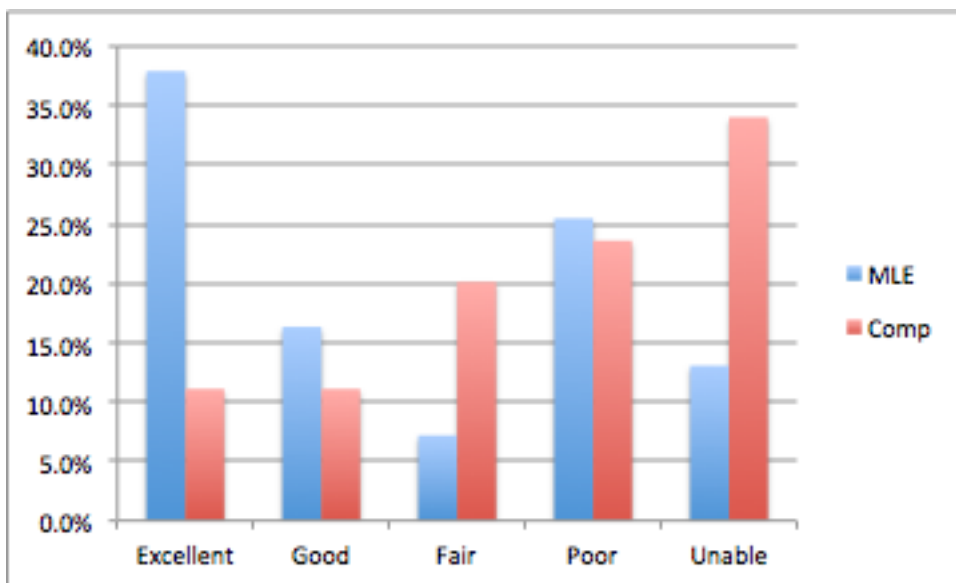


**Figure 1.** Grade 1, Semester 1 reading assessment for Hmong children in MLE and comparison (Thai only) schools (OBEC, 2016)

The difference between MLE and non-MLE students is even more dramatic on the writing test (below): while 38% of MLE students ranked “excellent,” 34% of

non-MLE kids were “unable” to write any words. This points to the failure of normal “Thai only” schools to teach basic Thai literacy skills to ethnic minority children.





**Figure 2.** Grade 1, Semester 1 writing assessment for Hmong children in MLE and comparison (Thai only) schools (OBEC, 2016)

### What is the long term impact?

The new literacy assessment does not end with grade 1; all students in grades 1-5 are required to sit for this assessment every year. Thus, at the same time that the Hmong grade 1 students discussed above took their assessment, their older peers (grades 2-5) were also being tested. And

while the mother tongue learning component of the MTB-MLE schools was mostly phased out by the end of grade 3, we can see that Hmong children in the MTB-MLE schools continued to perform much better than the comparison group throughout their primary school years.

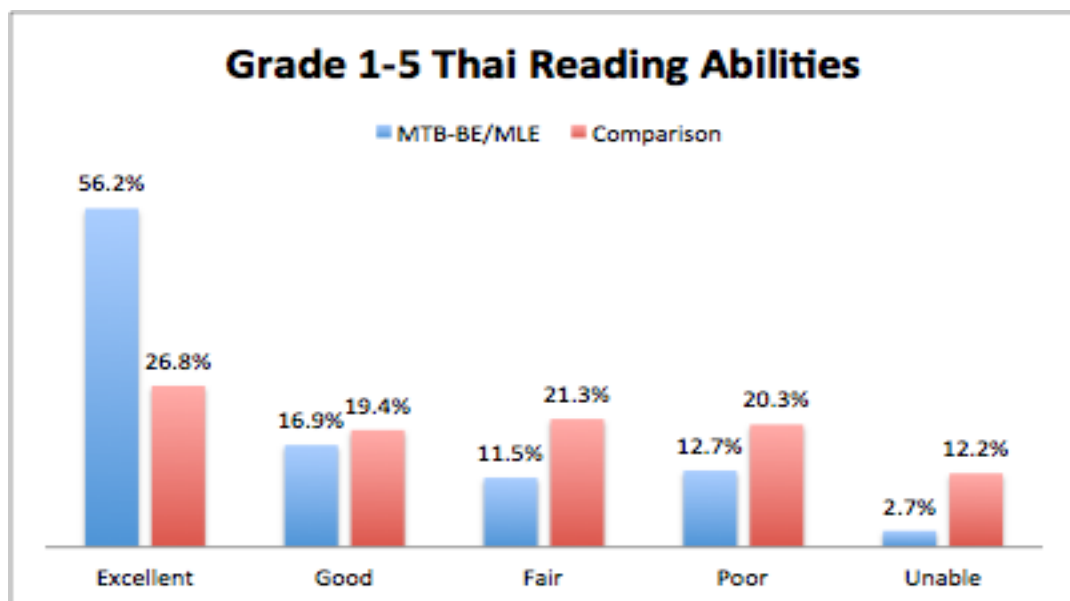


Figure 3: Thai reading abilities in Hmong MTB-MLE and Thai-only comparison schools (OBEC 2016)

เน้นความเป็นวั่ง ปฏักฝงองค้ความรุ้ ยดมน้คนธรรมให้เชิดชู เป็นองค้กรแห่งการเรยนรุ้ผู้สําคล

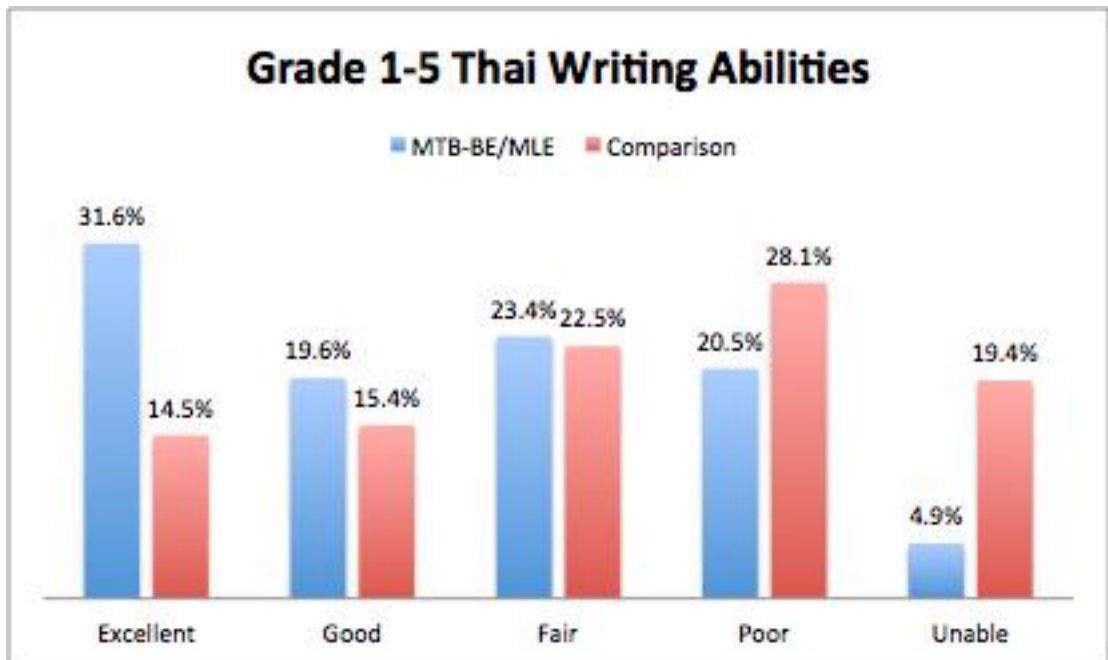


Figure 4: Thai writing abilities in Hmong MTB-MLE and Thai-only comparison schools (OBEC 2016)



The same trend can be observed when looking at the data by grade, as shown below:

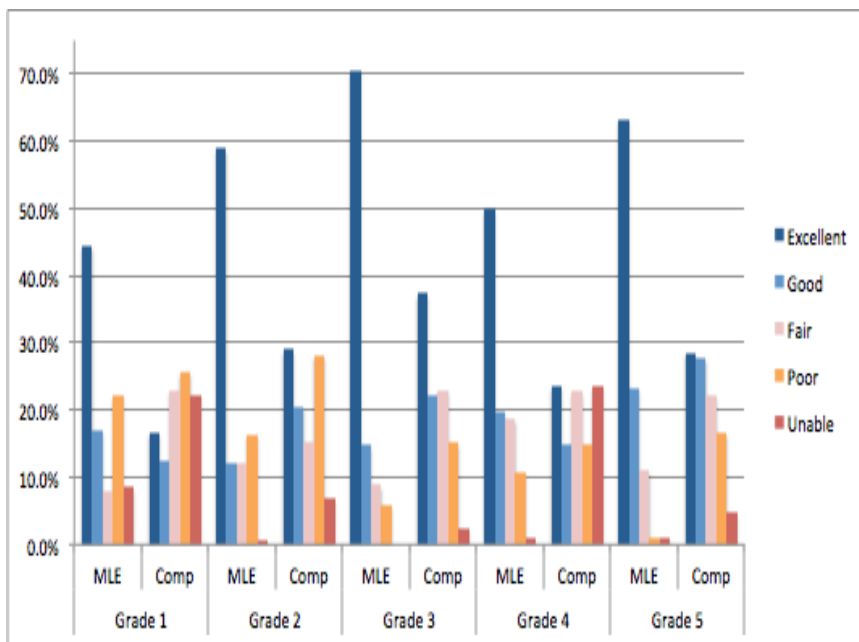
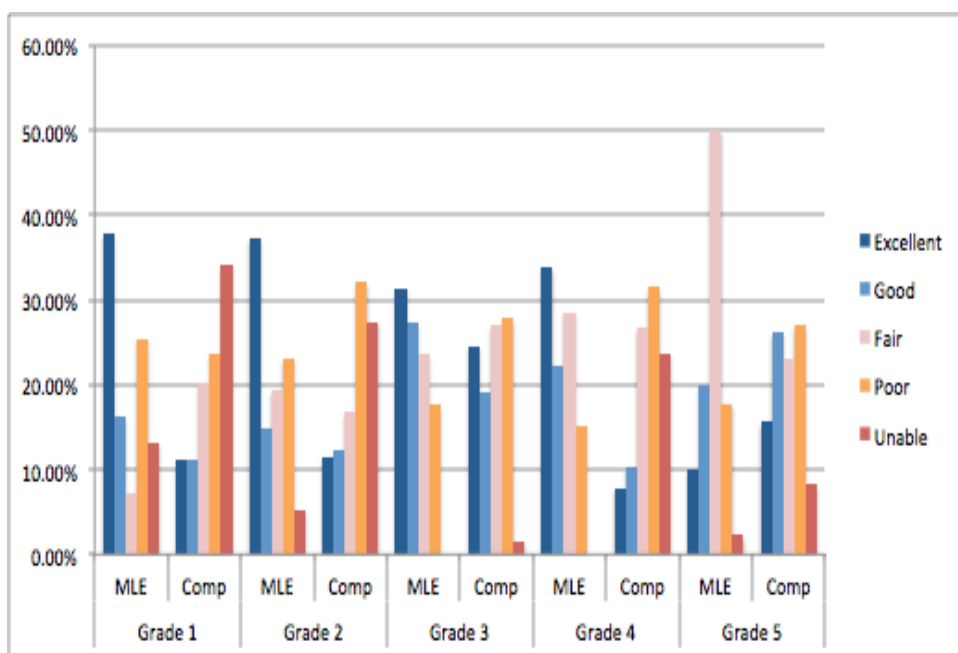


Figure 5: National literacy assessment results for reading:  
academic year 2015-16 (OBEC)

Similarly, the MTB-MLE students outperformed the comparison students on the writing section of the exam, although by slightly less margins (and with an

anomaly in grade 5); that is not surprising, given that writing is a more difficult skill to master than reading, and more difficult to assess:



**Figure 6:** National literacy assessment results for writing: academic year 2015-16 (OBEC)

This data shows that MLE helps ethnic minority students develop strong literacy skills in the national language (Thai). As a medical school professor who conducted two evaluations of MLE in Thailand concluded, “MLE is the medicine for the disease of illiteracy” (UNICEF, forthcoming)

### Conclusions

The new Thai Ministry of Education grade 1 literacy assessment does a good job of doing what it was designed to do: quickly

determine if a student has learned the most basic of reading skills by sounding out, reading, and writing simple words. The subsequent literacy tests, given twice a year through grade 5, should serve the larger policy goal of ensuring that children with reading deficits are quickly identified and helped.

The results from the grade 1, semester 1 national literacy evaluation demonstrate that Hmong students in the mother tongue preprimary program had significantly stronger Thai literacy skills than their peers in Thai only preprimary schools.

เน้นความเป็นวัง ปักฝังองค์ความรู้ ยึดมั่นคุณธรรมให้เชิดชู เป็นองค์กรแห่งการเรียนรู้สู่สากล



This corroborates similar research from Southern Thailand among Patani Malay speaking students (UNICEF 2018). The clear implication is that children in mother tongue ECD programs are better positioned for academic success in primary school. Jim Cummins' contention that "Children...with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language" is supported by these results.

What are the implications for early childhood globally? Many people, including the vast majority of policymakers, persist in believing that "children learn other languages easily" and that the best way to teach the national language to ethnic minority children is to "submerge" them in it. This myth is contradicted by extensive research in places as diverse as Melbourne Australia (where the Victorian School of Languages provides mother tongue support to children speaking over 160 languages), The Philippines (where a 2013 pro-mother tongue policy has spawned MLE programs in some 100 languages), Ghana, and many others. Governments and international development actors need to do more to raise awareness of the importance of the mother tongue—not as an obstacle to acquisition of other economically important languages, but as a crucial tool for all kinds of learning.

UNESCO has declared 2019 the "International Year of Indigenous Languages."

Let's make sure that every child's mother tongue is included in the early childhood agenda!

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