

Chapter 2

Theoretical Overview

In this chapter, key terms and concepts relating to this thesis will be defined and discussed. Particular attention will be paid to terms which are often misunderstood or misapplied.

2.1 Terms and Concepts

Many terms surrounding education, multilingual education and language can be found in literature. The following pages seek to clarify and define the terms that will be used in this thesis.

2.1.1 Education for All and Millennium Development Goals

In 2000, when Thailand subscribed to the revised EFA goals in Dakar, they were there as part of a larger meeting of 192 member states of the United Nations, and 23 international organizations. The EFA goals were part of a plan to meet eight larger developmental goals, known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by the year 2015. These goals covered a broad range of international concerns, including halving extreme poverty and halting the spread of HIV. The second goal, and one which, in the long term, will be instrumental in achieving many of the other 7 goals, is providing universal primary education. It has long been established that a quality education is closely associated with human, cultural and economic benefits (UNESCO 2005(a):16-17).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, when Thailand subscribed to the EFA goals, it committed itself to providing “quality basic education for all children, youth and adults by 2015” (Pinnock and Vijayakumar 2009:7). The EFA goals make a subtle, yet important statement by expressing the need for *quality* education. Nations that have agreed to work towards the EFA goals recognize that simply going to school does not automatically qualify as receiving an education. Years of lackluster academic achievement in schools in minority areas show that attendance does not guarantee learning. It is clear that attendance is not synonymous with education, but there is as yet no consensus on what exactly does constitute a quality education.

This distinction between education and *quality* education is applicable to the situation in Thailand. For years, students from NDL communities have fallen well below the national average in academic outcomes. The regions in Thailand with the lowest literacy rates correspond to the regions with the highest number of linguistic minorities (UNESCO, 2008:98). In an effort to increase literacy and improve education in these regions, the Thai Ministry of Education (MoE) has been sending Thai teachers to some of Thailand's most remote regions since the 1970s. However, the results have remained "less-than-hoped-for" (UNESCO, 2007(a):148). Clearly, the problem is not simply one of access to education – the problem lies in the quality of education provided.

2.1.2 Mother Tongue or L1

Several terms, including mother tongue, first language (L1), vernacular, native language and home language are often used interchangeably when referring to the first language(s) a child learns. Confusion arises, especially for non-native English speakers, when deciphering some of these terms. For example, is the mother tongue literally the language spoken by a child's mother? Is the home language only spoken at home? Does the word vernacular correspond too strongly to slang, making it unsuitable for academic purposes?

For these reasons, the term L1 is preferred here, and mother tongue is used exclusively in the context of the common acronym MTBMLE which distinguishes mother tongue-based MLE from other forms of MLE as discussed in section 2.3. Although this distinction in terminology is deliberate, the definition used here for L1 adopts the Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:105-108) definition of a mother tongue "as a language that one (a) has learnt first; (b) identifies with; (c) knows best; and/or (d) uses most." In addition to this definition, the extension adopted by Benson and Kosonen (2012: 112) is also adopted here: "(e) speaks and understands competently enough to learn academic content at the appropriate age level".

2.1.3 National Language

A national language, according to Crystal (1999:227) is "a language that is considered to be the chief language of a nation state." In Thailand, the national language is Central Thai, and carries a great deal of cultural significance:

Standard Thai is not only the official language, but is also the national language, a symbol of identification for the Thai nation. Next to the King and along with the Buddhist religion, standard Thai may be the strongest such symbol, even for those who speak it as a second language, or barely speak it at all. (Smalley, 1994:14)

The Thai language is a strong cultural and national identifier, even for members of NDL communities within the nation. As a result, until quite recently, there has been neither agency nor incentive to formulate an official language policy, as “neither the nature nor the role of the national language has ever been seriously questioned” (Noss, 1984:94).

2.1.4 Language of Wider Communication (LWC)

A language of wider communication (LWC) “- also called a *lingua franca*, *regional language* or *trade language* – is a language that speakers of different local languages use to communicate with each other” (Kosonen, 2005: 133; Kosonen and Benson, 2013: 7). For the participants in this research, Northern Thai is the LWC. It is spoken in the market in Hot, where Pwo Karen villages do business, and as the L1 of the Thai teachers at Ban Pui Elementary school. Although the use of Northern Thai was not a focal point of this thesis, readers should be aware of its use and presence in the broader linguistic context of the participants.

2.2 Language in Education

The importance of language choices in education should not be underestimated. The definition of language in education here is quite broad, and refers to any language(s) used in the context of formal education. This definition equally encompasses the language(s) used in official curricula and teaching materials, and the informal oral use of local language(s) in the classroom. For policy makers, language choices can reflect positions of power and control. For educators, language used in education can be indicative of anything from an unconscious reflection of individual sociolinguistic attitudes, to a conscious disregard of policy in favour of expediency. Regardless of the rationale, or motivating factors, language choices in education have a lasting and demonstrable impact on a child's education.

2.2.1 Language of Instruction (LoI)

Language of instruction (LoI) is “a language through which the contents of the curriculum in a given educational system or a part of it are taught and learned” (Kosonen and Benson 2013:8). In Thailand, Central Thai has been used as the sole language of instruction for nearly a century (Prapasapong, 2009:104). Until recently, the practice has remained unquestioned, and progress in introducing an NDL as a LoI has met some strong opposition, due in part to the deep cultural identity associated with Central Thai.

In some NDL communities, elementary teachers may choose to use the local language orally, to help students understand the curriculum. However, even this limited oral use is dependent upon the teacher’s knowledge of the local language. In many cases, Thai teachers assigned to schools serving NDL communities do not speak the local language, so classes are conducted exclusively in Central Thai, posing a significant barrier to comprehension.

As Benson (2005:2) points out, “language is clearly the key to communication and understanding in the classroom.” Using a language the student does not know well as an LoI makes it extremely difficult for students to develop literacy skills, gain knowledge, and have access to accurate testing practices. The cognitive acumen required to learn academic content in another language is the first barrier children face:

Requiring any child to learn abstract or academic concepts through a process which expects them to first link new second language to the corresponding points in their first language, and then to process, retain and use that academic knowledge – all in the same amount of schooling time that another child would be given simply to learn the academic content in their first language – involves a huge cognitive demand. (Pinnock & Vijayakumar, 2009:13)

Even as children struggle with the joint task of learning academic concepts whilst learning a second language, they face the additional task of developing literacy skills. Since literacy comes from drawing meaning from the arbitrary symbols of an orthography, children need to be able to link those symbols to something they already know. “If a child does not understand the meaning of a word because it is in an unfamiliar language, learning to ‘read and write’ that word does not constitute literacy: it is simply repetition” (Pinnock & Vijayakumar, 2009:13).

Furthermore, when both the academic material and the L2 are new to the student, it is difficult for teachers to “determine whether students have difficulty understanding the concept itself, the language of instruction, or the language of the test” (Benson, 2004:4). Far too often, children risk being labelled as ‘slow learners’, or feeling like they lack the mental facilities necessary to succeed academically. However, “[t]he problem does not lie with mental facilities, but with language abilities” (UNESCO, 2007(a): 156).

When the above challenges are compounded by external factors such as poverty, poor nutrition, or parents who are also illiterate in the LoI and unable to assist students with their coursework, it is little wonder that children in these communities fall so far behind the national academic averages.

2.2.2 Multilingual Education (MLE)

The pitfalls of submersion education in students’ L2 have been laid out in the above section. MTBMLE has been espoused as a remedy for such obstacles, yet the idea of Multilingual Education is often misunderstood. The distinction between MLE and MTBMLE is important. Since, in the broadest sense, the term could refer to any instances of more than one language used in the classroom, the term has been misappropriated and applied to programs with even the merest whisper of a second language used in a classroom. For example, a teacher could teach children a folk song in a language other than the LoI, and believe it qualifies as multilingual education. Perhaps a school could advertise an MLE curriculum, using the national language as the LoI, and provide daily lessons teaching a global language. Again, simply using any two languages, in any capacity in the classroom seems to qualify as multilingual education. However, multilingual education is more than simple exposure to a different set of lexemes. It aims to produce students who are completely literate and academically proficient in two or more languages. The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) defines MLE as “the use of more than one language for instruction and attaining literacy” (Kosonen & Young, 2009:11). This definition goes far beyond the occasional use of a second language, or even teaching a second language as a subject. Instead, more than one language should be used to teach academic content. In addition to literacy, core subjects such as science, math, or geography should also be taught using more than one language as the LoI. In this way, students gain both academic and linguistic proficiency in each language used.

2.2.3 Mother Tongue-based Education

Even if the definition of MLE is fully comprehended and supported, the idea of MTBMLE adds a new dimension to the discussion. Especially for native speakers of dominant languages, the value of teaching and learning in a NDL is often dismissed, overlooked or underappreciated. Providing early education in a student's mother tongue (L1), is a key element in quality education. Students who begin school in a second (L2) language are faced with the dual task of learning new concepts and a new language simultaneously. In a MTBMLE program, the students' L1 is used to teach early literacy skills, along with academic content. The L2 is gradually introduced, allowing students to transfer their learned skills from a familiar language to an unfamiliar one (Benson, 2005). "Use of a familiar language to teach beginning literacy facilitates an understanding of sound-symbol or meaning-symbol correspondence; [furthermore], since content area instruction is provided in the L1, the learning of new concepts is not postponed until children become competent in the L2" (Benson, 2005:3). The clear distinction here, and the one of greatest importance for NDL learners, is that it does not simply incorporate two or more languages in the classroom. Instead, the learner's L1 is used as an LoI in all subjects, and the L2 is systematically introduced until students are both bilingual and biliterate, and should be able to participate fully in an L2 LoI environment.

2.3 Summary

According to a UNESCO Education Position Paper (2003:15), "[l]earning in a language which is not one's own provides a double set of challenges, not only is there the challenge of learning a new language, but also that of learning new knowledge contained in that language". However, this is the reality for thousands of schoolchildren around the world who do not have access to education in their mother tongue. Developing strong and sustainable MTBMLE programs will play a central role in providing quality education for children in NDL communities.