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## **Comparison of Approaches for Language Revitalization of Northern Khmer in Thailand**

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### **Abstract**

Although 1.4 million people speak Northern Khmer in Thailand, they are aware that their language is still in decline. To deal with this threat, native speakers have cooperated with linguists from Mahidol University to work on a community-based research project since 2007. Teaching the Northern Khmer language as a subject in the formal school system was the first project which started at Ban Pho-kong school, Surin Province. Later, however, they realized that their children had enough potential in their mother tongue to teach a bilingual program from kindergarten 1, and there were teachers available who could speak Northern Khmer fluently. However, when they started the bilingual education program at the kindergarten level, the children could not use Northern Khmer language to communicate with the teachers. Linguists from Mahidol tried another approach to increase the use of the mother tongue by applying a language nest pattern at the pre-kindergarten level to prepare a strong foundation for the student's mother tongue, before they go on to kindergarten and then primary school.

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## 1. Introduction

Millions of people throughout the world are consciously engaged in efforts to reverse language shift (Hornberger, 2006). This is also true for the Northern Khmer community in Surin province, Thailand. More than 1.4 million Northern Khmer speakers (Premsrirat et al., 2004) have been confronted with language shift. Although they are a major ethnic group in Thailand, it does not mean their language is safe from language loss, since Thai is the only the official language. In fact, in some families, children live with grandparents who speak Thai with the children because they are afraid that otherwise the children will not be able to use good Thai with outsiders. Thus, local languages have no formally recognized function in the society, and if they were not used in other domains, especially the family domain, it is quite sure that they will be relegated to history and lost to the world. Inter-marriage is another reason for the language decline, as with other ethnic groups, especially those married with Europeans and residing in Thailand.

In order to raise their language status and preserve their culture, efforts at revitalizing endangered languages in Thailand such as Chong in Chanthaburi (Premsrirat, Ungsitipoonporn, & Choosri, 2007; Premsrirat & Rojanakul, 2015), Nyah Kur in Chaiyaphum (Ungsitipoonporn, 2018), and So (Thavueng) in Sakon Nakhon (Larparporn, 2018) by teaching indigenous languages as a subject in the formal school system have been made since 2004. Despite the large number of speakers, Northern Khmer people in Thailand realized that their language situation was not safe and needed revival. Although it is currently not classified as an endangered language, there are indicators that put it on the weak side of Fishman's GIDS for assessing language situation (Fishman, 1991). This scale grades language proficiency, language transmission from generation to generation, and domain of language use. Levels 1 to 4 are considered safer than levels 5 to 8 because at levels 1-4, the language is used in multiple domains such as education, work, and mass media, whereas at levels 5-8, the language is used within limited domains such as family or the local community with no inter-generation transmission.

The eight levels of Fishman's GIDS can be described as follows:

**Strong side:** Level 1– the language is used at the national level such as the work place, education system, mass media channel; level 2– the language is used in local or regional mass media and some government services; level 3– the language is used in the workplace for local area communication with both insiders and outsiders; level 4– the language is transmitted through the compulsory education system for literacy.

**Weak side:** Level 5– the language is used orally and sometimes taught at school, but is not compulsory; level 6– the language is used orally among all generations, and the children learn it as their first language at home; level 7– the middle-aged generation still use the language with their elders, but it is not transferred to the younger generation; level 8– only the grandparent generation can speak the language.

After an overview on different approaches towards language revitalization, this paper presents how different methods were applied to Northern Khmer in Surin Province, Thailand. Therefore, the research question is: what is the best approach for language revitalization of Northern Khmer in Thailand?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Efforts to reverse language shift in many parts of the world offer examples of different approaches to language revitalization (Fishman, 1991, 2001; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Hale, 1992; Hinton, 2001; Hoffmann, 2009; Okura, 2017; Onowa, 2006; Premsrirat & Malone, 2005), depending on the goals, limitations, and expected outcomes. Hinton (2001) proposed three main types of school-based language programs: 1) teaching a language as a subject, 2) bilingual education, and 3) full-scale immersion programs. Goals, benefits, limitations, and results associated with these three types vary according to the number of speakers with language ability, time limitation for teaching at school, and the need to produce fluent speakers or revive their ancestral language.

Hinton (2011) stated that schools have been an integral part of language revitalization since at least the 1970s. One example of school-based programs is the one-hour class taught five times per week. This type of language class can be taken in schools from pre-school to university. If more intensive programs are available, the results will be better in developing fluent speakers. Besides the formal curriculum, there are other options like summer and after-school programs. Examples of teaching language as a subject are related to local languages in the US, where local language courses can be taken at local colleges in districts that have a sufficient indigenous population.

Bilingual education is supported by the government in many countries around the world. The concept supporting this model is that teaching the child's native language followed by the dominant language in a suitable proportion of academic subjects, allows knowledge to be transferred to the dominant language. This model provides good opportunities for indigenous languages to survive and regain prestige, an example of which is the successful bilingual education program of the Hualapai in the United States. Lucille Watahomigie was a pioneer educator of the Hualapai tribe. At that time, about half of the children in public schools spoke Hualapai as their first language. Many native American languages did not have a writing system, thus they needed to develop a writing system and create teaching materials for literacy with contents specifically related to Hualapai daily life, history and culture (Hinton, 2011).

Immersion schools for endangered languages were introduced in the US in the 1980s. The concept of this model is to teach all subjects in the endangered language and for the dominant language to be taught as a foreign language. Language nest was the first immersion pre-school for endangered languages. The concept of the language nest is that the grand-parents are the last generation of speakers so they have to take care of and teach the young children using only their mother tongue. By the 1980's, the languages of the NZ Māori and the native Hawaiians in the United States had shifted almost entirely to English (Hinton, 2011). King (2001), reported that the results from the national language survey in 2001 found that there should be a focus on improving the

language ability of a large proportion of Māori adults, because they had at best weak speaking skills and no fluency. The effectiveness of the language nest revitalization model is known thanks to the Kōhanga Reo center's efforts to revive the Māori language (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; King, 2001) and the Aha Pūnana Leo system in Hawaii (Wilson & Kauano, 2001). Language nest or total immersion programs are accepted by most linguists and educators as the best option for revitalizing a language (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). The concept is to provide an environment where children will hear only that language and will grow up speaking it, so all instruction in the classroom is carried out in the target language (Hinton, 2001), creating a new generation of fluent speakers who have begun speaking the language from early childhood.

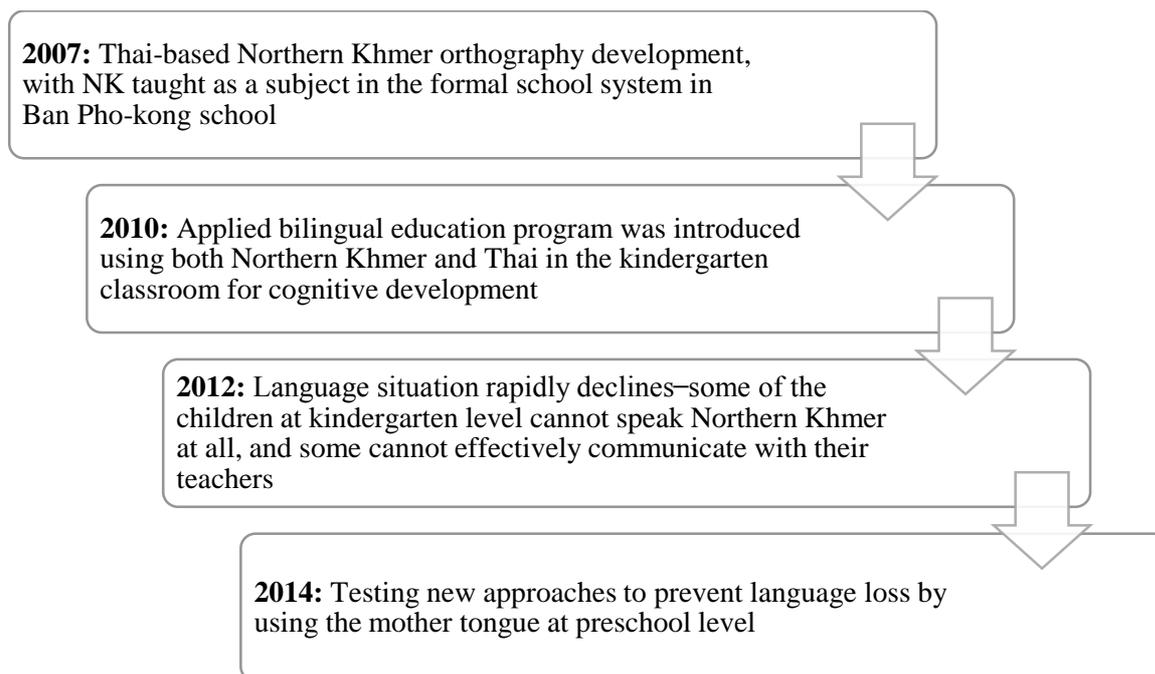
In Thailand, there are also examples of these three approaches of language revitalization according to the language situation and other factors such as the number of fluent speakers, formal schools in the community, teachers who are native speakers, etc. In 2002, the Chong ethnic group in Chanthaburi province was the first to be taught the Chong language as a subject at school (Doi, 2018) followed by a Nyah Kur group in Chiyaphum province who learned the Nyah kur language as a subject in formal education (Ungsitipoonporn, 2018). A third group, the So (Thavung) in Sakon Nakorn province, were taught the So (Thavung) language as a school subject in 2007 (Larparporn, 2018). Although all three groups had limited numbers of speakers in their communities, the need to revive their language and culture led them to select that approach. Other examples of groups using bilingual education from kindergarten are the Malay-Patani in Thailand's deep south (Premsrirat & Mirinda, 2018), and the Lavue in Mae Hong Son province (Thawornpat, 2018). In the Lavue case, they used the Lavue language 100% of the time in the family and had local scholars who could teach the language in school, whereas the implementation of bilingual education in the Patani Malay (PM) group was to help the students succeed in school and become quality citizens. The Patani Malay group is a large ethnic group in southern Thailand and many schools have 100% PM students so they are suitable for teaching the mother tongue from kindergarten to grade 6. They needed a strong

foundation in their first language through which to later transfer knowledge to their second language, Thai, which is also the national language.

### 3. The Approaches for Language Revitalization

This part describes how to implement each approach for language revitalization from

community-based research. To avoid confusion, the results from each project are explained immediately. Three community-based revitalization projects on Northern Khmer were launched in Surin Province, which involved school-based programs. Figure 1 indicates the timeline for the Northern Khmer language revitalization from 2007 to 2017. The remainder of this section will describe the purpose, methods and results of each approach.



**Figure 1**  
*Timeline for Northern Khmer Language Revitalization*

#### 3.1. Project I (2007): Introducing Northern Khmer at Primary School

The first research project was conducted in 2007 (Ungsitipoonporn, 2011), because the Northern Khmer people realized that their language situation was gradually shifting to Thai. One obvious trend was that the students at Ban Pho-kong school, who normally used Khmer in everyday communication, were speaking in a mix of languages (Northern Khmer and Thai). Sometimes they could not use any one language clearly and this made them confused as to the correct words to use. The results of a community research survey of language proficiency of students, parents, and teachers at this school found that they used

Northern Khmer 90-100% of the time (Sungnoi et al., 2009). The possible reason for this was that the students spoke Khmer at home but once they started school they had to use the Thai language for communication and, as a result, got confused as to the correct lexicon and syntax to use. With no effort to solve this problem, language use in Northern Khmer would stay weak and Thai proficiency would not improve either, so teachers at Ban Pho-kong school decided to conduct a community-based research entitled “Curriculum development and Northern Khmer education management for local language preservation and strengthen Thai language learning”.

The three main purposes of the project were: 1) to conduct a language survey and determine Northern Khmer characteristics by gathering content from local wisdom and culture; 2) to study the Thai language use of the students and evaluate the causes; and 3) to develop a local curriculum for Northern Khmer and Thai to teach the children correctly.

The qualitative research method emphasizes participatory action research by team members, local scholars and other people in the community and is designed step by step. Many activities and meetings within and outside the community were important to support the research team. These included:

1. Small group meetings of team members, linguists, and facilitators from the Research Institute for Languages and Culture of Asia (RILCA), Mahidol University in order to plan all project activities thoroughly.
2. Practical workshops such as data collecting content in the Northern Khmer language, curriculum production, and teaching material development.
3. Meetings to strengthen community-based research skills.
4. Study visits related to the issue of how to develop local learning and teach in the formal school system.
5. Observations, conferences, and seminars related to the project.

At least three components were needed for this project. First, a compilation of information on the Northern Khmer language and local culture was made. The most important aspect is the writing system which needs to be suitable for writing down everything in the local language. It should be noted that Northern Khmer is not the same as standard Khmer in Cambodia and has many sub-dialects which have a different phonology. A Northern Khmer writing system using a Thai-based script was developed in 1987 by the local people. They also follow linguistic principles like one sound-one symbol, written syllables, words and punctuation, but these were not well-known so

a practical workshop to learn the writing system was arranged. The research team also cooperated with people in the community to use Thai orthography to create a local story according to each person's interests—an activity that established good relationships between the school and the community.

A comparative study of Thai and Northern Khmer sound system was undertaken to evaluate the children's problems. Northern Khmer is known as a non-tonal language, which is different from Thai which is a tonal language. When the children learn Thai, some cannot pronounce the Thai tones, and although Thai and Northern Khmer languages have the same S-V-O word order—apart from some syntax—certain words in Northern Khmer are pronounced like in Thai, but have a different meaning. As a result, the children usually misunderstand when they use a mix of languages, and some cannot summarize the main idea after reading a text in Thai.

Curriculum development started in conjunction with the course structure to establish which grade the learners should be in, how many teaching hours for language per week, etc. and to determine the learning objectives, lesson plans, learning activities, and teaching material production. Finally, the teachers had to be trained on how to use the teaching materials and apply the teaching methods.

### *3.1.1. Results*

Activities and outputs achieved according to the objectives are the following:

- 1) Thirty one categories of local Khmer cultural knowledge were collected such as songs, folktales, lexicon and sentences, Khmer weaving equipment, patterns of silk design, numerals, shapes, colors, flowers, etc. They wrote down this Northern Khmer knowledge using the Thai-based script writing system with Thai meanings, examples of which are given in the appendix.

นิทาน	ภาษาเขมรถิ่นไทย	ภาษาไทย
	รีง มนีง นีอง มนี ซลาด	เรื่อง 'คนโง่กับคนฉลาด'
	งัย มูล เมียน เนิก นีอง ชาว	วันหนึ่งมีเต่ากับลิง
	เนือม คเนือ ใต้ว ริว ซี กนีอง ชาว	พากันไปหาถิ่นในสวน
	เคิน เจก คุม มา เคิม	พบกล้วยสุกคันหนึ่ง
	มัน จะ ชุน โม เคิญ	เจ้าของสวนมาเห็น
	เนิก นอง ชาว เนือม คเนือ ริวค	เต่ากับลิงพากันวิ่งหนี
	เนิก ริวค ออย เลิญ ชัง ชาว มัน บาน	เต่าวิ่งให้เร็วเหมือนลิงไม่ได้
	เลข เปือม กัน คุย ชาว ออย ชาว เนือม ริวค เคิว	จึงคาบหางลิง ให้ลิงพาวิ่งไป

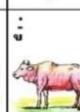
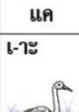
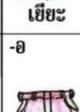
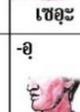
Figure 2

Example of a Northern Khmer folktale Written in Khmer and Translated into Thai. Adapted from “Curriculum development of Northern Khmer language learning for local language revitalization and support Thai learning at Ban Pho-kong, Tambol Chuephieng, Amphoe Prasaat, Cangwat Surin” by P. Sungnoi et al. Copyright 2009 by Thailand Research Fund.

2) Alphabet charts of consonants and vowels, including pictures and vocabulary for each phoneme were developed. Linguists cooperated with native speakers – research team members – to identify

content words and then drew pictures to depict the meaning of each word. If no picture could represent the words, then a new word would be chosen.

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ก  คิยเจาะ	ข  มคิย	ฅ  สิญ	จ  มูว	ฉ  ปิง	ช  ชปือ
จ  จิง	ฉ  มุช	ฅ  จรุก	จ  กู	ฉ  รเค็ย	ช  เจจ
แ-ะ/แ-็  แฉ็ย	แ-  แค	เ-ย  เย็ย	เ-ย  ปเค็ย	เอ-ะ  เซอะ	เ-  อาเป็ว
เอ  เซอ	เ-าะ  เกาะ	อ  คอ	อ  ครือบ	อ  กอ	

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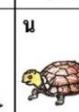
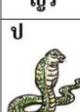
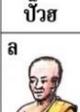
ก  กู	ค  คอ	ง  ทง	จ  เจจ	ช  เซอ	ซ  แฉ็ย
ญ  ญิว	ด  โดง	ต  เต็ย	ท  ทือง	น  เน็ก	บ  บาย
ป  ปิว	พ  เพอะ	ฟ  โฟฟา	ม  เม็น	ย  เย็ย	ร  รเค็ย
ล  ลือก	ว  เว็ค	อ  อาว	ฮ  สิญ		

Figure 3(a), Figure 3(b)

Northern Khmer Alphabet Charts of (a) Consonants and (b) Vowels

- 3) Teaching materials were produced in full. They comprised 25 small books, 24 big books, Northern Khmer TPR wordlists, Northern Khmer primer (20 lessons), six cultural scenes, 120 word cards from primer, curriculum and lesson

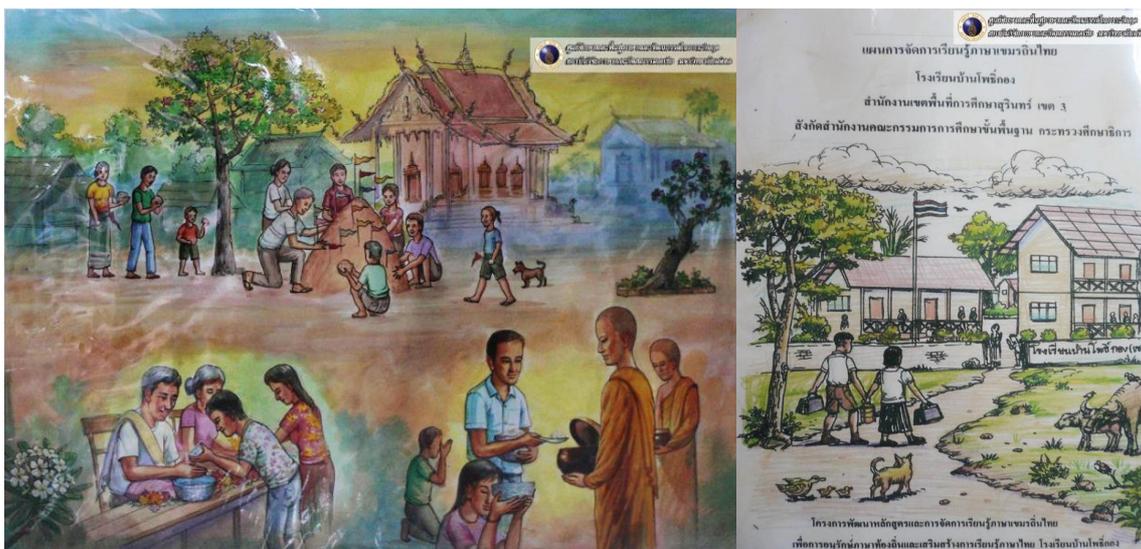
plans. The local Khmer subject was developed for teaching one academic year of grade 4 i.e., twenty weeks – two hours per week – for two semesters. In total, the children received 80 hours of instruction per year.



**Figure 4(a), Figure 4(b)**  
Example of Big Books



**Figure 5(a), Figure 5(b)**  
Example of Small Books



**Figure 6(a), Figure 6(b)**  
*Example of (a) Cultural Scene and (b) Primer*

4) The results of the language use survey identified several problems with using the Thai language by Khmer students at Ban Pho-kong school. For example, using a mix of Thai and Northern Khmer languages let to incorrect word order in Thai, and mispronunciation of Thai tones. Furthermore, a number of students did not understand how to use a suitable pronoun, and some Northern Khmer words have the same homophone as in Thai but with a different meaning, so the children always made mistakes when speaking Thai.

All teaching materials were developed by school teachers at Ban Pho-kong school in cooperation with elders and local scholars in the community.

Teaching the local language as a subject is the most common method described by Hinton in her book (Hinton, 2001). However, this approach is not useful for creating fluent new speakers because of the weakly time limitation; if the teaching time is insufficient to create fluent speakers, this method is not helpful. The Northern Khmer group, however, were taught two hours per week at grade 4 and students could soon speak their language quite well, which may have been due to the fact that they already had a foundation in their mother tongue. Moreover, the real advantage and benefit of this project was that the children felt proud and

appreciated their language and cultural heritage. This is the first community-based research project and the first time the local language was taught at school in this community. The teachers thought that the children had more potential to use the Northern Khmer language so they decided to continue to use the local language as a medium of instruction from the kindergarten level. They have also been inspired by the success of other ethnic groups such as Mon in Kanchanaburi province and Malayu Pattani speakers in the deep south of Thailand (Premsrirat, 2015).

### 3.2. Project II (2010): Introducing Northern Khmer at Kindergarten

The project using the mother tongue teaching from the kindergarten level at Ban Pho-kong school extended from the first project. The result of the experiment teaching Northern Khmer as a subject at Ban Pho-kong school indicated that the children could learn Northern Khmer, but still had problems using both the Thai and Khmer languages. The reason was perhaps that teaching in the local language at grade 4 could not combine their competency in the two languages because the children did not have a sufficiently strong foundation in the local language to transfer to Thai. Thus, the research team tried again by using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction from the kindergarten level. Using mother tongue-based bilingual education could help the children

overcome the language problem and also preserve the local Khmer language. The reason for using Northern Khmer as a medium of instruction at the kindergarten level was that this school starts classes from that level and 90-100% of people in this area speak Northern Khmer (from the first project survey). The research team was inspired by the Mon group in Kanchanaburi province after a study visit there during the first project. The teachers at Ban Pho-kong school had enough potential to speak fluent Northern Khmer, so they wanted to prove this by doing community-based research. The two research questions for the team were 1) What was the impact of using the mother tongue taught together with Thai from the kindergarten level on the children's learning development at Ban Pho-kong school? and 2) How effective was bilingual education from the kindergarten level on language revitalization?

The objectives of this project were: 1) to arrange an experimental learning trial using mother tongue-based bilingual education from the kindergarten level; 2) to study the effectiveness of teaching Northern Khmer together with Thai from the kindergarten level on the language development of children at Ban Pho-kong school; and 3) to study the impact of bilingual education on language revitalization at Ban Pho-kong community.

The research team conducted a study visit to Pattani province, which was the site for an ongoing research project on bilingual education (Pattani Malay-Thai) at that time, before starting curriculum development. They had to understand how to manage the learning process so as to conform to brain based learning (BBL) standards for kindergarten students. They then developed a curriculum using Northern Khmer for kindergarten1 class with content using local culture and knowledge to supplement the standard curriculum of the Ministry of Education. Both Northern Khmer and Thai languages were used in teaching based on several teaching methods, such as Total Physical Response (TPR), storytelling techniques, asking questions according to Bloom's taxonomy (1956), etc. Local people and school teachers pooled their efforts to develop teaching materials according to pre-designed lesson plans.

### 3.2.1. Results

Material development resulted in a bilingual education curriculum. It was designed for the kindergarten level and taught using Northern Khmer and Thai local cultural content. Furthermore, 46 big books, 23 songs, and cultural scenes were produced in addition to those from the first project. The pre-test and post-test forms of language abilities—listening, speaking, and second language acquisition skills—were prepared for the children as tools for evaluation.

The results showed clearly that the learners were more self-confident, more talkative, and could give creative opinions. The children were interested in many of the teaching materials which prompted them to enjoy reading. They tended to use Northern Khmer more with family members when they were at home. Importantly, the school and community formed a close relationship with better cooperation. Ban Pho-kong school received a higher status as it has become a learning center for bilingual education and Thai. International outsiders go there for study visits. Teachers appreciate that they have learned several new teaching methods and obtained many teaching materials which they could use in other classes.

In 2010, the kindergarten children were using Northern Khmer quite well, so much so that the teachers could use the local language to communicate with them and succeeded in using the bilingual program for KG1. Unexpectedly, the language situation changed rapidly in the following years. In 2011 and 2012, KG1 at Ban Pho-kong school came under Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) program and in the community they preferred to use Thai rather than Northern Khmer. This was a major problem, because children could not use Northern Khmer to communicate with their teachers, even though some children spoke or could understand Northern Khmer, they would reply and speak in Thai instead. Teachers could not use the full bilingual education program so they adapted the methodology while speaking Northern Khmer in class as much as possible. Finally, when KG1 progressed to KG2, the children could use Northern Khmer to communicate better, but were not fluent like the first group.

After the research project was completed, the school teachers continued to use Northern Khmer in the classroom. The curriculum, lesson plans, and teaching materials were still used as much as possible, though not as much as in the original program. Sometimes the teachers felt dejected, but they did not give up because they still spoke their local language in everyday life. They thought that the students could at least hear Northern Khmer words, and some families also spoke it at home.

In 2017, one teacher of a class of 23 students could not use Northern Khmer to communicate with them because most of the children did not have enough vocabulary and could not understand Northern Khmer well. However, she adapted her lessons by using teaching materials to teach it as a local language subject in order to increase their word bank. Then she tried teaching it for one period per day, using only Khmer and not allowing children to speak Thai so, as to develop their Khmer listening and speaking skills. The Total physical response (TPR) technique was used to teach the Thai subject, which is helpful for non-Thai speakers. Based on the learning assessment at the end of the 2017 academic year, the children could respond and communicate in Northern Khmer better than the previous year's group even though those earlier students had Khmer backgrounds. The children had the potential in Northern Khmer, so the teacher promoted one child to recount and act out stories in Northern Khmer in a contest among eight schools. In the end, that child won the competition.

The creep of globalization together with other factors such as the school director retiring, some teachers trained in bilingual education moving to other areas, and the changing attitudes of parents were obstacles beyond reasonable control. The new school director at Ban Pho-kong school was not interested in language preservation, thus the former research team could not continue. Furthermore, the main sponsor, the Thailand Research Fund, was unable to offer long term support, so if the school wanted to continue its bilingual education, they needed governmental or other

type of assistance, or else it would have been difficult to obtain the goal of sustainability.

### **3.3. Project III: Applying a Language Nest Pattern at Preschool Level**

The causes of the rapid language decline in KG1 during 2010-2012 were: Northern Khmer people relocated and moved out of the village—some parents went to bigger cities for work and others preferred that their children not speak Northern Khmer because they felt ashamed when certain Northern Khmer words were used in the media as jokes, resulting in their attitude toward the local language changing for the worse. Teachers at Ban Pho-kong school became extremely worried about this situation, so linguists from Mahidol University came to help them and work with community members who wanted to try another approach for preserving the language. The language revitalization program was designed to start before the kindergarten level, and the teachers at ECDC at Ban Pho-kong agreed on this approach. As a result, the language nest pattern was implemented at ECDC, the goal being to revive the Northern Khmer language in early childhood in an appropriate community context. The research team applied for funding from TRF again and eventually received it.

The research project started in 2014 and ended in 2015. The research activity design was similar to the second project but had a different content. For example, the language nest concept was introduced to team members, and a course structure for the pre-kindergarten level was developed, including teacher training approaches for small children which emphasized listening and speaking skills. Several types of teaching materials were produced and tested for implementation in the second academic semester of 2014. An evaluation form was also drawn up with five basic development indicators (Physical, emotional, social, intelligent, and Northern Khmer language skill).



**Figure 7(a), Figure 7(b)**

*The Children were Excited When the Teacher Used the Story Pictures to Teach and Communicate in the Northern Khmer Language*



**Figure 8(a), Figure 8(b)**

*The Teacher and her Assistants Taught Pre-Kindergarten at Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC)*

### 3.3.1. Results

Results from the third project show that a language nest approach for revitalization is suitable for Northern Khmer in Thailand in an area where Khmer is predominantly spoken. The main principles of the methodology are: arrange an environment in the ECDC similar to that of the child's home; create a learning-oriented atmosphere using the mother tongue to talk with the child; and not using a mix of languages. The teachers adapted a former lesson plan by adding Northern Khmer and separating teaching times into Thai and Northern Khmer, making sure not to use both languages at the same time. Then they selected a suitable teaching method and teaching materials.

The concrete results include numerous types of teaching materials such as big books, picture stories, picture and word cards, cultural scenes,

puzzle pictures, and others. The teachers and local scholars developed many of these teaching materials, of which they are proud of.

Besides that, teachers at ECDC learned more teaching techniques from the teaching materials. The TPR technique is used to teach the Thai language and sometimes also used to teach Northern Khmer vocabulary in order to increase the students' word bank. Cultural community learning is also useful in this program because the children can learn from real situations and practice by themselves.

Furthermore, the teachers informed and helped parents understand about using the mother tongue in class from language survey activities. From the language survey at the beginning of this project, it became clear that the children used Thai up to 64% of the time, meaning they used Northern Khmer less than Thai. When parents realized the risk that this posed, they

chose to support the language nest program at ECDC.

However, even though teachers at ECDC are fluent in Northern Khmer and use it to communicate with children, not all children could understand it in the first semester. After implementation of the immersion program in the second semester, the children improved in their use of Northern Khmer. This is beneficial for when they advance to the kindergarten level at Ban Pho-kong school, where the teachers can use their mother tongue continuously to strengthen their language foundation.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

As mentioned in the previous sections, the three community-based research projects of Northern Khmer in Surin province had several challenges and obstacles. When considering the advantages and disadvantages of these three programs, the results are as follows:

##### 4.1. Language Nest at Pre-School Level

- 1) Children have unequal language abilities. Some are able to recount Khmer stories but others are limited to the word level only. Even though the first group of children at ECDC had better language skills, the teachers wondered whether this was just because some students were more gifted at languages.
- 2) Some parents in the community still do not understand why it is important to teach Northern Khmer in school and refused to be persuaded.

##### 4.2. Bilingual Education Program at Kindergarten Level

- 1) Students from ECDC in the language nest program have better speaking skills in Northern Khmer. The teacher who taught in KG1 is happy because she can use her mother tongue to communicate with the students.
- 2) No teachers can use the mother tongue to teach KG2 because only three Khmer teachers have been trained in the bilingual education program, and one of them has retired recently. Also, the

school director is not interested in the mother tongue-based program.

##### 4.3. Teaching Northern Khmer as a Subject at Primary School

- 1) This program is a possible way for language revitalization but more classes should be organized, as many as five times per week.
- 2) Several objectives and methodologies can be planned step by step such as single word to connected speech, and passive to active skills leading to full literacy. This program can be taught at any level in the formal education or in the summer or after-school programs.
- 3) The important goal of teaching the local Khmer subject is to preserve the local language in the community. If as much local knowledge as possible can be accumulated, that content can also be transferred on to the children who learn the local Khmer subject.

##### 4.4. Problems or Obstacles for the Three Programs

- 1) More teaching materials cannot be produced because of the cost, and there is no budget for teachers to develop more.
- 2) At present, there is significant intermarriage among ethnic groups, which is normal but it also leads to less use of the mother tongue in the family domain and more use of Thai and indeed foreign European languages.

##### 4.5. The Impacts of These Three Programs

- 1) The outstanding point of the Northern Khmer project is the strong community cooperation. Teachers at Ban Pho-kong school and ECDC are able to work well with people in the community because most of them are Northern Khmer speakers and have the same goal, namely to preserve and revive their language and culture (Thawongdee et al., 2015). The research team developed not only research skills, but also teaching

approaches. One important activity in school-based language teaching is teacher training. Even though the Northern Khmer at Ban Pho-kong school were already native speakers in the school system, they also received special teacher training. Teacher training and teacher education are sometimes terms used interchangeably in the literature to refer to the same thing, but the word “training” over-emphasizes skills and techniques (Ur, 1996). The teachers like the TPR technique very much because it is a good method that makes children understand meaning and pronounce sounds correctly. Teachers love to sing local songs and they feel that the children can learn Northern Khmer better and easier. Students are more self-confident, and some have participated in a storytelling with gestures competition and received recognition and even awards.

- 2) The local language curricula developed at Ban Pho-kong school received a great deal of attention from the community, so now the local education administration would like to expand to other areas with ethnic Khmer people such as secondary schools. Another concrete outcome was the creation of a dictionary produced by local people. Northern Khmer speakers now have a chance to reappraise and revive their mother tongue, and the school and community have developed a better relationship. All age groups can join in the project and participate in language revitalization, however the present socio-economic situation has had an effect on the well-being of Khmer people, some of whom need to find new jobs outside the village, and some remain shy to use Northern Khmer. Therefore, they do not have all that many opportunities to speak their mother tongue.
- 3) A workshop on teaching material developed for the project made speakers feel proud of themselves. The benefit is that children can learn and understand easier than using materials available for the mass market, although it took more time to devise items such as big books,

cultural scenes, and picture stories. The children love the beautiful pictures included in the books, and this motivates and stimulates their curiosity to read and write by themselves. Each item of teaching material has a precise learning objective so the students learn systematically, step by step. They obtain a strong basic foundation in their mother tongue before learning a new language and gaining new knowledge. In the end, they are able to determine and distinguish Northern Khmer from Thai and use both languages correctly. Moreover, the Khmer writing system using Thai-based script also drives students' love of reading because the Khmer dialect has been invented by native speakers themselves, and now that they have their own writing system they can transfer their literacy skills to the national language.

Although the parents worried about their children at the beginning, later on they understood and accepted using the mother tongue in the classroom. They thought that if the teacher taught Khmer, then their children would not be able to speak Thai. However, most parents agreed with teaching the local language at school because their children were happy and more talkative with the parents. If teachers assign students homework to collect Northern Khmer knowledge from their relatives, the children will have a chance to talk within the family domain and learn from the local wisdom.

Three programs for teaching Northern Khmer in formal school and ECDC are based on three language revitalization models, namely, language nest, bilingual education, and teaching local language as a subject. However, this group did not start from pre-school, but from the primary level instead. This is because the local people could not correctly appreciate the language situation, and the research project depended on academic funding. Therefore, they had to experiment and implement the program step by step.

Following the implementation of the three community-based research projects, we suggested that the Northern Khmer of Ban Pho-Kong village start with a language nest model at ECDC followed by bilingual education (not full

program) at the kindergarten level at Ban Pho-Kong school—provided they could find teachers who were Northern Khmer speakers. Finally, they should continue to teach Northern Khmer class at the primary school level (grades 1-6).

Northern Khmer language as a subject is limited to teaching grades 1-6 one hour/week at Ban Pho-kong school. Teachers are concerned about this short duration and have added their free time at noon or in the evening after school to teach children through conversation so that they could learn more vocabulary. Because KG2 has no teacher to teach the local language, the children lack regular practice, so teachers have started teaching grade 1 again in the middle of the first semester. In grades 1-3 they emphasize language for communication (listening and speaking skills), and grades 4-6 will focus on reading and writing skills to build their vocabulary enough to tell a story. All teaching materials are used in the classroom, for example, primers, big books, small books, cultural scenes, picture stories, etc. Creative writing techniques are used as a follow up to the main activity. The Northern Khmer language is used in the classroom more than outside because the children prefer to use Thai to communicate outside the classroom. The number of students per class is around 27-30, which is the preferable size.

One problem is that each year new students move into the district from other areas and join the class. An unexpected result of migration into the community is an increase in the number of half-blood students, usually Thai-Lao or Thai-European. Currently, the student population is comprised of around 70% Northern Khmer and 30% from other areas, and this situation will obviously affect the educational management of teaching the local language into the future.

As for method, the TPR technique should continue to be used to teach both Thai and Northern Khmer languages, but separately so that the children learn more Khmer words.

New teachers should be clearly informed about teaching Northern Khmer as a subject in this school and encouraged to speak the mother tongue with the children as much as possible.

Sub-district Administration Organization officers have developed a project aimed at expanding Northern Khmer usage and to that end have invited the teachers to be lecturers. Teachers have also been invited to the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) to teach the local culture. Those who teach Northern Khmer at this school and ECDC are proud to be involved and are celebrated both within and outside the community as pioneers, and role models regularly call on to teach the Thai-script based on the Northern Khmer writing system.

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