

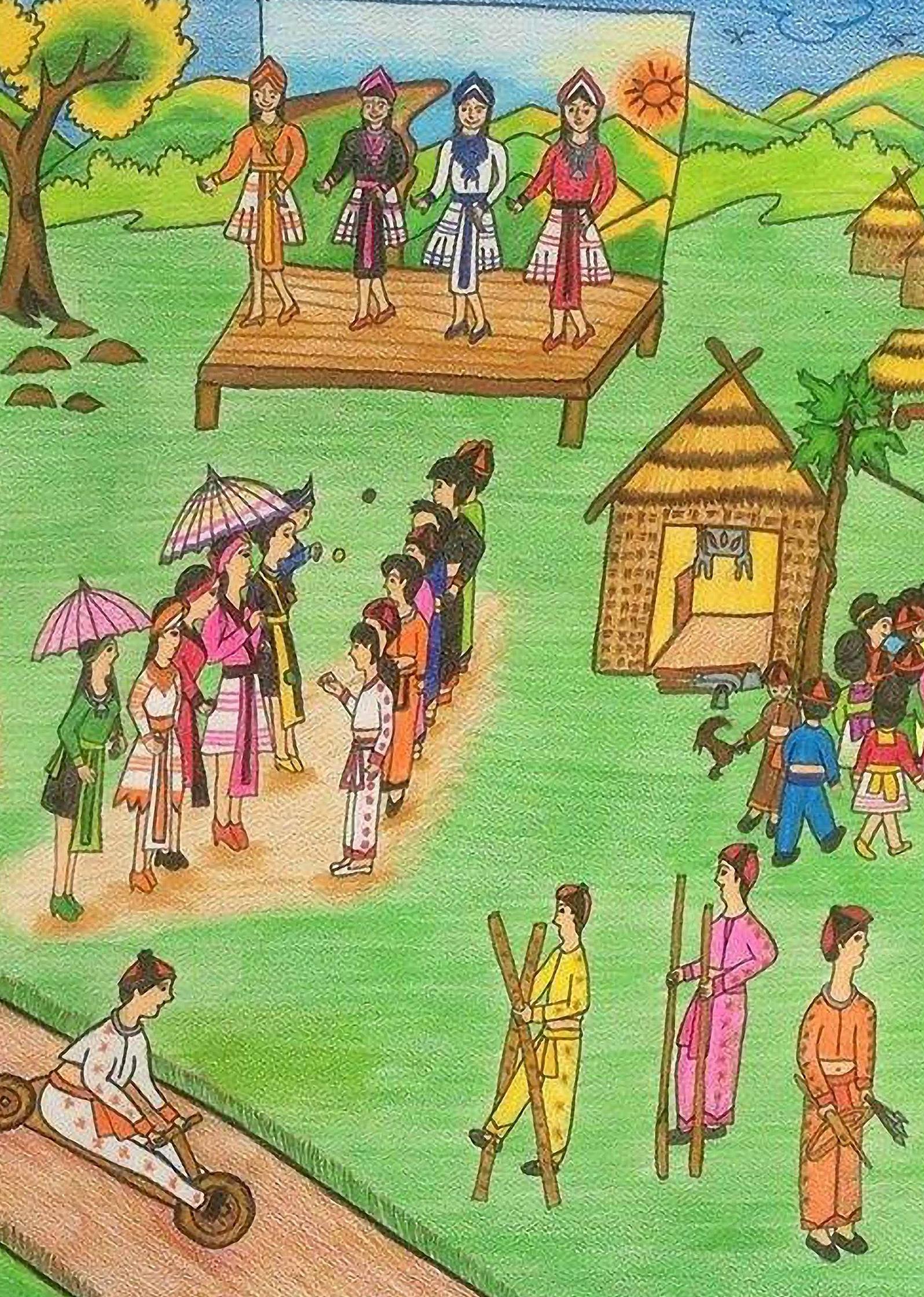


New Dawn Over the Mountains:

Improving Access and Equity through Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education for Thailand's Ethnic Children

Pestalozzi Children's Foundation





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Forward

In 2007, the Pestalozzi Children's Foundation (PCF) and the Foundation for Applied Linguistics (FAL) began a journey to transform the lives of ethnic children in Thailand by establishing sustainable, scalable mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) programmes in remote schools. It was a challenging adventure, requiring cooperation, patience, and trust-building among key stakeholders.

The road to success was rocky at times, rosy at others. When the project started in 2007, there was no national language-in-education policy. The idea of using ethnic languages in school was very new, both to the Thai government and to the participating communities. The key stakeholders came from different social backgrounds, reflecting divergent power relationships. PCF's experience in intercultural education for peaceful living came together with FAL's technical expertise in language development to enable productive cooperation with education officials, school directors, teachers and community leaders. The spirit of teamwork added value to the project, providing an ethos for future expansion.

The fruits of this cooperation are clear in the lives of thousands of ethnic children, in higher academic achievement and self-confidence. Materials and methods originally used in the full-model MTB-MLE programme have been adapted for use in other settings, including non-formal migrant education centers along the Thai-Myanmar border. PCF and FAL were key partners in the formation of the Highland School Directors Network, and helped the newly-established Council of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand (with representatives from 39 ethnic groups) understand the importance of mother tongue-based education for both cultural preservation and better learning. Crucially, the Thai Ministry of Education has become more open to using ethnic languages in school, as reflected in the Office of the Basic Education Commission's 2019 policy paper.

PCF would like to take this opportunity to thank Ms. Wanna Tienmee and her FAL team for their determination and committed long-term partnership with PCF. In addition, we kindly thank all organizations and alliances who contributed to the MTB-MLE initiative, including (but not limited to) SIL International, the Child's Dream Foundation, the Philanthropy Connections Foundation, the Chiangmai MTB-MLE Club/Working Group, the Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group (hosted by UNESCO Bangkok), the Indigenous Education Network, the Ton-Kia Indigenous Children and Youth Network, and others. Utmost thanks and appreciation go to the indigenous and ethnic communities for their passion, and for working together with us to show to the world how their knowledge, language and culture can come together to fuel their hopes and dreams for the future.

"New Dawn Over the Mountains" is both a collection of lessons learned and a practical guide for MTB-MLE implementation. We hope that it will be a useful tool, impacting many disadvantaged children in Thailand and beyond.



Suraporn Suriyamonton
Thailand Country Representative
Pestalozzi Children's Foundation

Introduction



On October 5, 2017, the Foundation for Applied Linguistics (FAL) received the “Merit Award for Social Innovation” from the Thai Ministry of Science for a new way to teach the Thai language to ethnic children.

What was the inspiration for this innovation? How can the knowledge gained and lessons learned be used to help other children—in Thailand and other countries?

During the Millennium Development Goal era, Thailand achieved near 100% primary school enrollment. Thailand built hundreds of schools in remote border areas, bringing thousands of ethnic and migrant children into its classrooms.

But were they learning?

Statistics from UNICEF and the National Statistical Office are disturbing. While over 98% of native Thai speaking youth aged 15-24 are literate, the figure drops to 65% among youth coming from households speaking a non-Thai mother tongue.¹ Some ethnic children have completed 8 years of Thai schooling, yet still cannot read and write.

Thailand is not the only country with this problem. UNESCO has found that 262 million children worldwide are *in school but not learning basic literacy and numeracy skills*.² Such children have a high risk of being exploited (trafficking, early marriage, forced labor) or turning to socially damaging behaviors (prostitution, drug addiction, crime). As Dr. Edilberto de Jesus, former Secretary General of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) stated, “If governments do not invest to solve these problems now, they will have to spend even more money addressing them later.”³

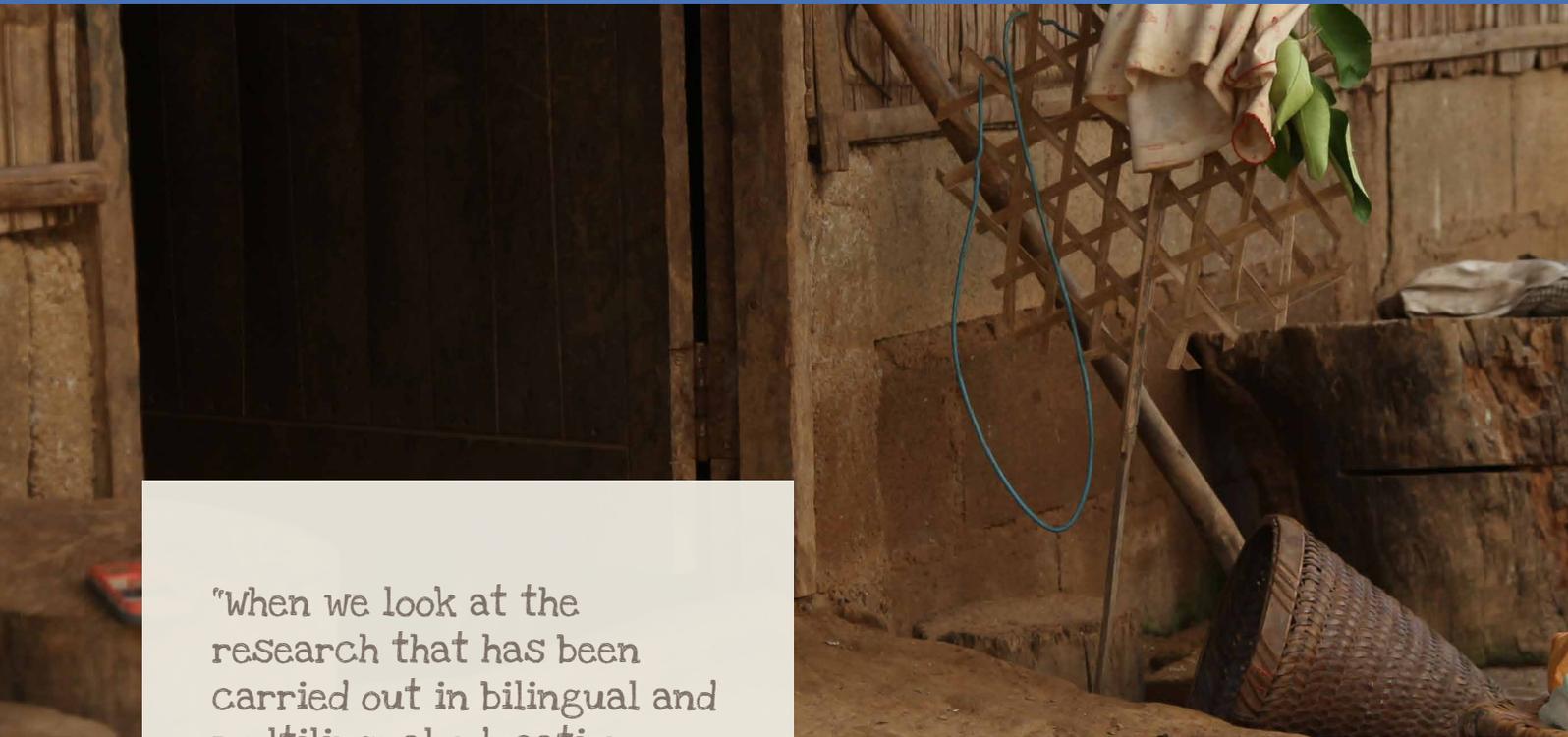
This document will describe FAL’s innovation, and explain what education policy makers, school administrators, and teachers need to know to effectively help children for whom language is a barrier to learning.

1 National Statistical Office and UNICEF, 2016

2 UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017

3 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for All, 2007

Language: the Forgotten Key



"When we look at the research that has been carried out in bilingual and multilingual education, what we see over the last 10-15 years is an accumulation of evidence that has become almost overwhelming...consistent across very different sociological and sociolinguistic contexts. So when we look at what we know and what should inform policy makers...it is not possible to credibly deny the legitimacy of multilingual education for minority and marginalized group students."⁴

Professor Jim Cummins
University of Toronto

Every minute of every day, humans breathe. If we stop breathing, we die. But most people don't think about breathing until they have a problem.

Language is similar. We use it all the time—to think, to communicate, to gain new knowledge. But we rarely think about it until we encounter a person, video, or document using a language we cannot understand.

For many ethnic children, language can be a huge problem everyday at school. They may find it very difficult or even impossible to understand their teacher. They may not understand how letters connect to sounds, or how letters are combined to make words. They may copy hundreds of pages of text, and repeat many things after the teacher, without understanding what they are writing or saying.

Research in "developing" countries in Asia, Africa, and South America, as well as in "developed" countries in Europe, North America, and Oceania, has shown that children learn best when their early education is in their mother tongue—the language they speak best. This is particularly true of literacy skills, which depend on an innate knowledge of sounds and vocabulary to develop letter recognition and word decoding skills.



Thus, special interventions are needed for children whose mother tongue is not the same as the “normal” school language.

In Melbourne (Australia) and Texas (USA) for example, S’gaw Karen children from Myanmar attend mother tongue language classes—which help them learn English better.⁵ Welsh-speaking children in the United Kingdom learn in both Welsh and English from pre-primary through university. In Finland, home to the best education system in the world, more than 300 primary schools in Swedish-speaking border communities use Swedish as a language of instruction, while other schools use the Sami or Romani languages (as well as Finnish). In the Philippines, a 2013 national policy established “Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education” (MTB-MLE) in more than 50 languages.⁶

The evidence showing the benefits of mother tongue-based education is so strong that UNESCO recommends it be used worldwide.⁷ Many large development agencies, including UNICEF, USAID, World Bank, SIL International, and Save the Children, believe that many countries will not achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)#4 “Quality Education for All” without mother tongue programs. To bring focus to the importance of teaching children in a language they understand, SDG#4 Thematic Indicator 4.5.2 asks countries to report on the “Percentage of students in primary education whose first or home language is the language of instruction.”



**Sustainable
Development Goal #4
Thematic
Indicator 4.5.2**

"Percentage of students in primary education whose first or home language is the language of instruction."

5 Victorian School of Languages

6 UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, 2016

7 UNESCO, 2003

FAL and MTB-MLE



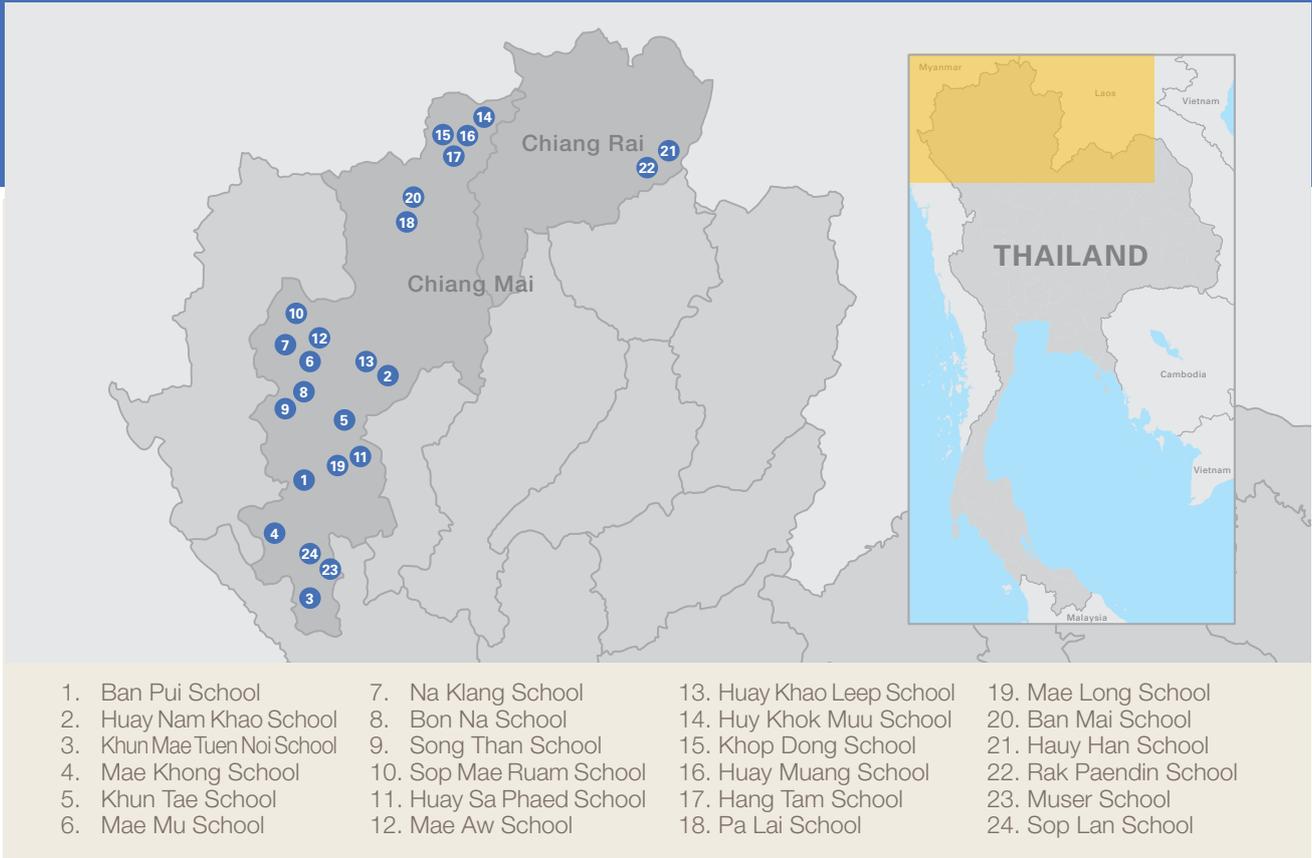
“The kids enjoy having a teacher who speaks their language. It helps them feel part of the learning process.”

Surasak Kaewthep, teacher
Rak Paendin School

In 2008, the Foundation for Applied Linguistics (FAL) and the Pestalozzi Children’s Foundation (PCF) began implementing Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in remote ethnic communities in Northern and Western Thailand. MTB-MLE was first used in 10 non-formal community learning centers (CLCs) serving Pwo Karen children in Hod District, Chiang Mai, as well as one large government school serving Mon children in Sangklaburi District, Kanchanaburi Province. In 2009, the CLCs were replaced by two formal schools—also in Chiang Mai and also serving Pwo Karen children. That same year, four formal schools serving Hmong speaking children in Chiang Rai Province joined the programme. FAL and PCF worked with these six schools to develop a full K1-G3 MTB-MLE program, creating nearly 2500 teaching and learning items and impacting a large number of students, training teachers and school committee members, and benefitting communities as a whole. An estimate of the project beneficiaries for this “First Generation” effort is shown below:

Figure 1 First generation MTB-MLE beneficiaries

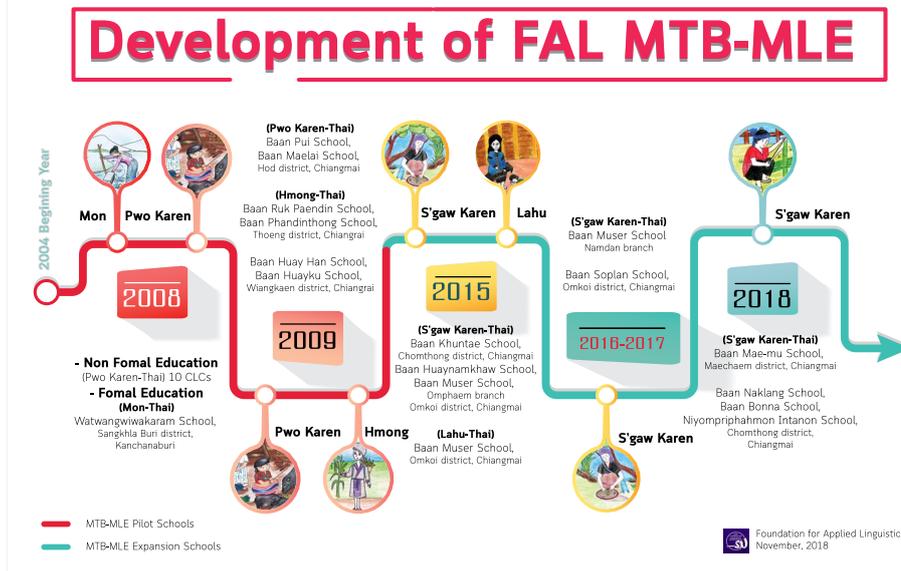
	School	Province	Language	Students	Thai Teachers	Local Teachers	School Committee Members	Total Village Population
1	Pui School	Chiangmai (North)	Pwo Karen	234	4	7	9	658
2	Rak Paendin School	Chiangrai (North)	Hmong	246	5	5	36	6918
3	Huay Han School	Chiangrai (North)	Hmong	394	5	5		
4	Paendinthong School	Chiangrai (North)	Hmong	261	5	5		
5	Huayku School	Chiangrai (North)	Hmong	255	5	5		
6	Watwang-wivengaram School	Kanchanaburi (West)	Mon	850	15	14	10	3700
				2240	39	41	55	11276



As word of the success of the MBT-MLE approach spread, new schools joined the programme, even as others left due to budget or personnel issues. As of August 2019, FAL was providing technical support to 24 schools and 2 mobile classrooms. These interventions can be classified as one of three types:

1. Full MTB-MLE: 7 schools, 2 mobile classrooms, 4 languages (Hmong, Pwo Karen, S’gaw Karen, Lahu)
2. Partial MTB-MLE:⁸ 13 schools, 4 languages (Hmong, Pwo Karen, S’gaw Karen, Lahu)
3. Thai as a Second Language Immersion (TSL-I): 4 schools (students from different language groups studying together in the same classroom)

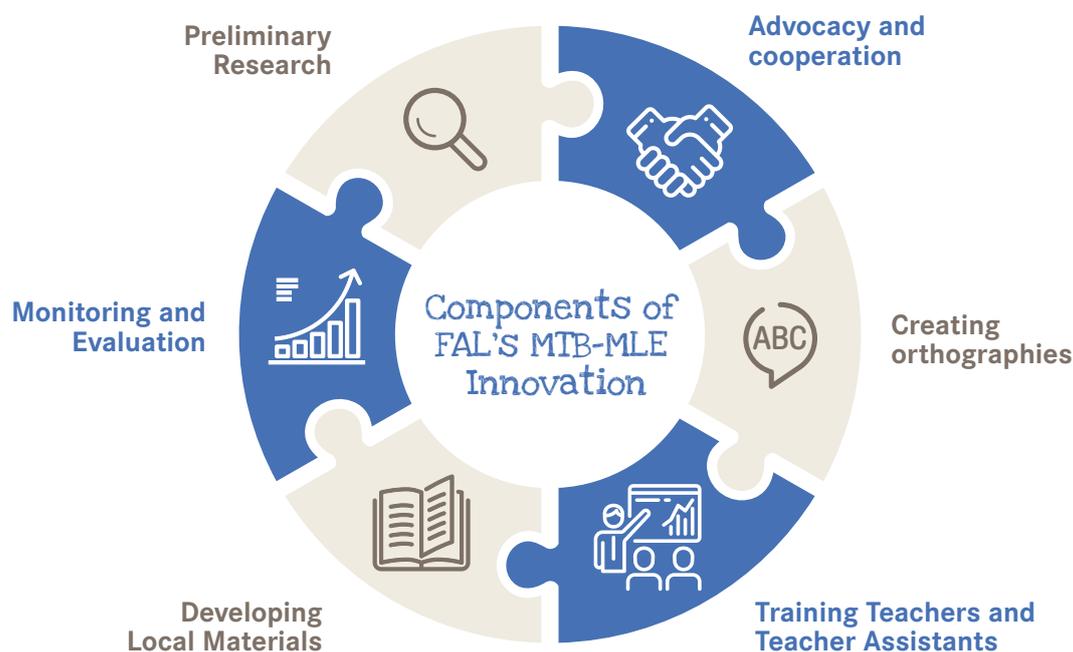
Figure 2 Development of FAL’s MTB-MLE programs



Components of FAL'S MTB-MLE Innovation

Successful implementation of FAL's MTB-MLE programs required careful attention to a number of key components, as shown in the jigsaw illustration below:

Figure 3 Components of strong MTB-MLE programs



Preliminary Research: Collecting socio-linguistic data about teachers, students and the surrounding community, to determine if a school is a good “fit” for MTB-MLE

Advocacy and cooperation: Helping parents, community leaders, and educators understand the benefits of MTB-MLE, while also engaging relevant Ministry of Education officials and international organizations. Whenever possible, participatory methods are used to ensure that all stakeholders are able to share their goals and concerns.

Creating orthographies: Linguists work with communities to agree on how to write the mother tongue using the Thai alphabet, to help the children more easily transfer their literacy skills from the mother tongue to the national language. This involves both detailed analysis of the language and discussions with all stakeholders, so that the new orthography is both technically accurate and acceptable to the community.

Training Teachers and Teacher Assistants: Recruiting and training educated local mother tongue speakers to work alongside Thai teachers (who rarely speak the mother tongue) in the MTB-MLE framework. Finding budget to support the teacher assistants (from government, NGOs, school budget, etc.)

Developing Local Materials: Bringing community members, teachers, teacher assistants, and educational experts together to create mother tongue and Thai instructional materials as well as graded reading materials that are relevant to the students’ life experiences while meeting Ministry of Education’s curriculum standards and indicators.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Checking the progress of the students through regular testing, as well as interviews with parents and teachers. This includes regular classroom observation of both government teachers and local teaching assistants, to build their confidence in using the innovative MTB-MLE teaching techniques so that they will not relapse into old, ineffective methods.

A Systematic Approach

A Bridge from the Mother Tongue to the New Language

The “MLE Bridge” shows how children begin their education by developing good listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in their mother tongue, and then transfer those skills to the second language. The order of the listening-speaking-reading-writing sequence is very important, especially when the children begin learning the second language. Sadly, teachers often try to teach a new language by starting with writing—they might hope that by copying letters and words the children will learn to read and then speak the new language. But this is the opposite of natural human language acquisition.

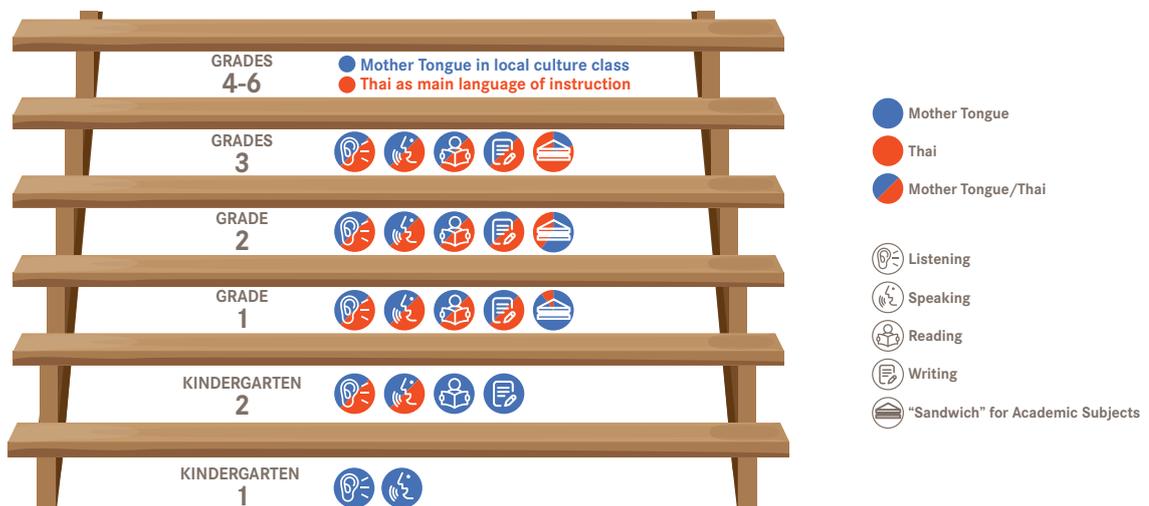
Figure 4 The MTB-MLE language bridge



A Step-by-Step Language Sequence

The “MLE Stairway” shows how language is used in each grade to build the bridge. Children begin by developing listening and speaking abilities in each language, before moving on to reading and writing.

Figure 5 Step-by-step language sequence in FAL’s MTB-MLE programs



Materials for MTB-MLE



FAL worked closely with teachers and community members to produce culturally-relevant mother tongue and Thai teaching and learning materials, guided by the Ministry of Education's grade level indicators and outcomes for kindergarten through grade 3.⁹ For the first generation of students 2458 items were created in three ethnic languages and Thai, of the following types:

Picture Stories with which a story can be told with a series of 4-6 pictures, without the need for text. Students are able to put the pictures in a logical order based on their own ideas and tell (and later write) stories by using the pictures as a guide. The same picture stories can later be used for second language learning.

Big Cultural Scenes (also called "Big Busy Pictures") which are designed to give students lots of things to talk about to promote speaking, creative thinking and critical thinking skills. They reflect cultural themes that are familiar to the students. As many as 20 activities can be shown on one poster, corresponding to many themes. The posters are usually about 1 meter wide and 70 or 80 centimeters long so that everyone in the classroom can see the details in the picture.¹⁰ Additionally, they can be used for second language learning, as students link familiar concepts to new vocabulary.

Big Books to be used for shared reading activities for students learning to read. Big books have predictable content, repetition of simple sentence patterns and may have a surprise ending. The color illustrations should be easily recognizable, taking up a full page. The text should be in a large font on a facing page, so that the whole class can see the picture and read the text at the same time. Most FAL big books are 12-28 pages long.

"I liked the big cultural scenes, because there were many pictures and we could understand things immediately. For example, the Hmong New Year poster showed many activities, and the teacher helped us make sentences from the pictures, in Hmong and later Thai. This helped us become better writers."

Thirawut Kotwekham
MLE Alumnus now in Grade 9

⁹ The Thai government schools in the programme area offer 2 years of kindergarten, so FAL's K-G3 programme lasted 5 years.

¹⁰ Adapted from Foerster and Saurman, 2013

Small Books to be used for shared and individual reading activities. Unlike big books, they do not need to have predictable content or repetition. They do need to be interesting and fun for the reader. For beginning readers, the pictures need to be very self-explanatory, to help the students decode the written text. Often each student gets a copy of the book to keep and take home. The illustrations can be black and white line drawings, so the students can color the pictures themselves.

Listening Stories in the mother tongue to be read aloud by the teacher. Listening to stories helps children become better readers and writers.

Songs in the mother tongue—composed by community members and integrated into the curriculum.

Primers used to teach letter recognition and word building skills in the mother tongue, and to transition to the national language (beginning with sounds and symbols shared by both languages).

"I loved the Hmong language small books, because we could read them, color in them, and take them home to read later."

Kanwida Sawwang
MLE Alumna now in Grade 8

Figure 6 Teaching and learning materials produced by language, grade

Language	Grade	Picture Stories	Cultural Posters	Big Books		Small Books		Listening Stories	Proverbs	Songs	MT Primer Lessons	MT-Thai Transitional Primer Lessons	
				MT	Thai	MT	Thai						
Pwo Karen	K1	38	18					36	20	20			
	K2	38	18	36		36		36			87		
	1			36	18	36	18						15
	2			36	36	36	36						28
	3			36	14	18	18						18
Hmong	K1	36	18					36	30	58			
	K2	36	18	36		36		36			98		
	1			36	18	36	18			30			15
	2			36	36	36	36						28
	3			36	14	18	18						23
Mon	K1	36	18					36	30	30			
	K2	36	18	36		36		36			88		
	1			36	18	36	18						15
	2			36	36	36	36						28
	3			36	14	18	18						23
Total		220	108	432	204	378	216	216	80	138	273	193	2,458

Developing Thai Language Skills



There are many books, DVDs, websites and smartphone apps to teach Thai to foreign adults. Unfortunately, similar teaching tools have never been created for Thai ethnic children! Therefore, FAL developed a special “Thai as a Second Language (TSL)” course.

The TSL course follows the MTB-MLE “Bridge” by first developing strong Thai listening skills through Total Physical Response and other modern second language acquisition techniques before moving on to Thai speaking. Special attention is given to Thai sounds that the mother tongue does not have—such as final consonant sounds and tones—which are very difficult for ethnic children to pronounce properly. After the children have mastered Thai listening and pronunciation, Thai literacy is taught using a “transfer primer” which begins by teaching the letters found in both the mother tongue and Thai before teaching letters not used for the mother tongue.¹¹

¹¹ FAL’s TSL curriculum has been adapted for Thai immersion programmes (TSL-I), suitable for linguistically mixed classrooms and migrant learning centers. TSL and TSL-I could thus impact tens of thousands of students in places where MTB-MLE is not feasible.

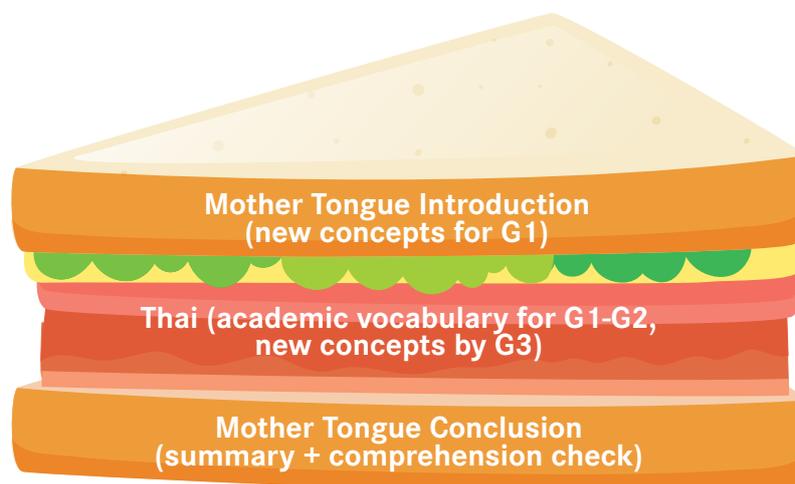
Developing Academic Knowledge in Both Languages

MTB-MLE teachers do NOT translate everything into both languages: translation is inefficient for learning and leads to student boredom. Instead, lesson plans specify which language is used when, so that the children's language and academic development follow a clear, pedagogically valid order.



MTB-MLE also emphasizes the development of academic knowledge in subjects like math, science, and social studies. Beginning in grade 1, this is done through the “sandwich” approach. The “bread” represents the mother tongue, used to introduce and conclude the lessons,

while the “filling” is the Thai language. The thickness of the “filling” grows with time. In grade 1, much of the lesson is presented in the mother tongue, with a thin layer of “filling” to help the students connect Thai academic vocabulary to the concepts learned in the mother tongue. By grade 3, this is largely reversed, with the students able to learn new concepts in Thai, with supplementary mother tongue introductions and conclusions. Where a teacher does not speak the local language, a local teacher assistant will present the “bread” parts of the lesson.¹²



¹² For detailed information on the “sandwich” approach, see Tienmee 2019.

Academic Results

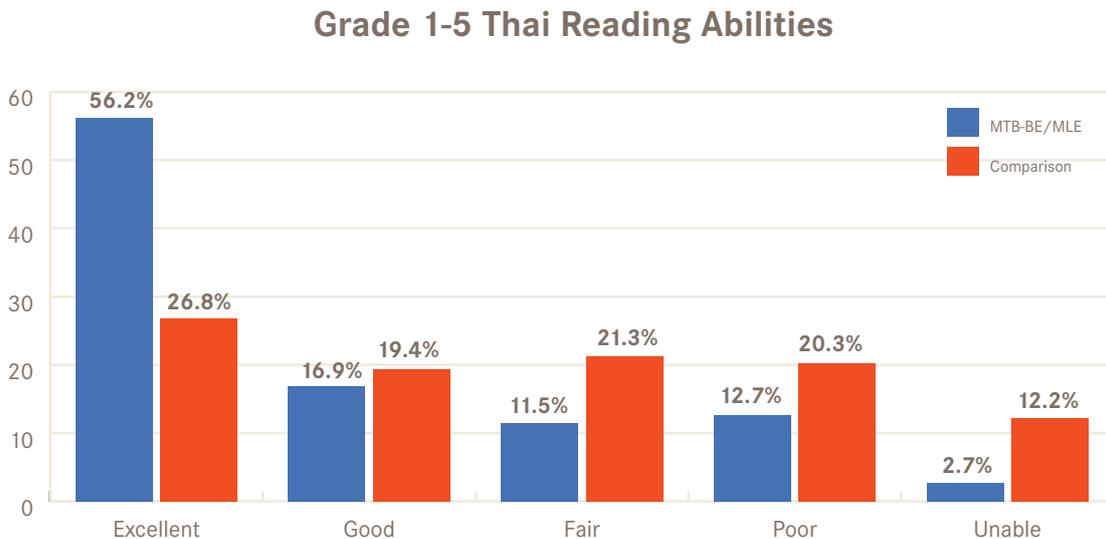
FAL developed multiple instruments to measure student progress in the MTB-MLE schools. These included pre-tests, post-tests, and other types of assessments done in both the mother tongue and Thai. These assessments made comparisons with non-MTB-MLE schools possible, and also helped the project staff identify strengths and weaknesses. Teachers provided feedback on the materials and class activities, so that the curriculum could be improved year-by-year. FAL staff regularly visited MTB-MLE classrooms to ensure that the teachers and teacher assistants were using the correct teaching methods—a challenge, since MTB-MLE pedagogy is so different from the “normal” rote-based approach of Thai education. On these site visits, FAL staff also interviewed teachers, school directors, and parents—with the goal of improving the program through hearing their feedback.

The impact of MTB-MLE can be clearly seen by comparing the results of Hmong students in programme schools to Hmong students in “normal” classrooms on Thailand’s national literacy assessment. All students in grades 1-5 are required to sit for this assessment every year. In the graphs below, we see that the majority of MTB-MLE students scored in the “excellent” or “good” range, while the majority of Hmong students in the Thai-only comparison schools scored “fair,” “poor,” or “unable to answer.”¹³ Clearly, MTB-MLE has a positive impact on these Hmong students’ Thai literacy!

“I have four children. The first did not study in the MLE program. My three younger children, who learned with the MLE method, read much more fluently than their older sibling.”

Bunchai Sudchon
Parent, Huay Han School

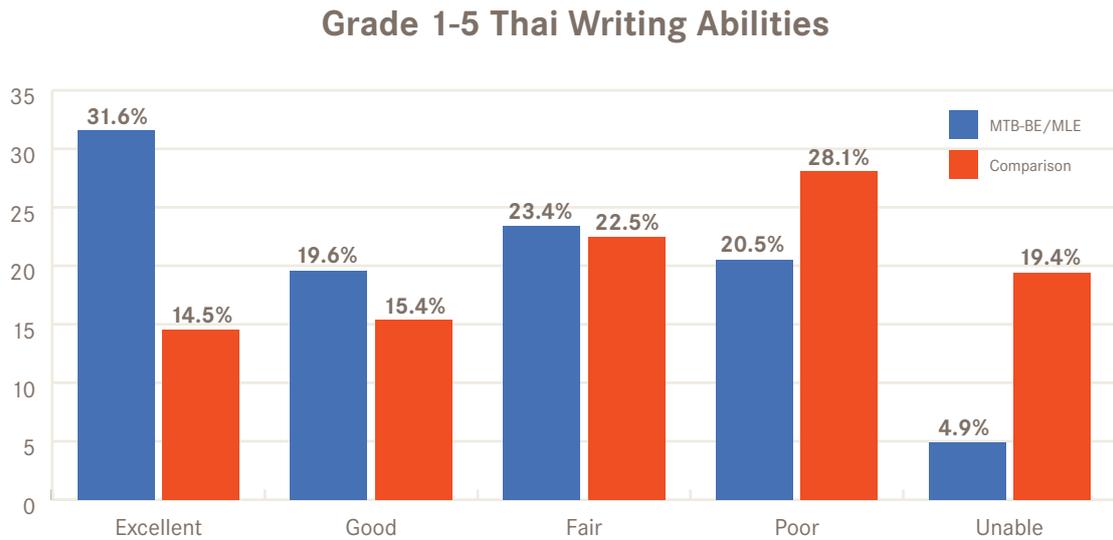
Figure 7 Thai reading abilities in Hmong MTB-BE/MLE and comparison schools¹⁴



¹³ The few children who were “unable to answer” in the MTB-MLE schools seemed to have had learning disabilities.

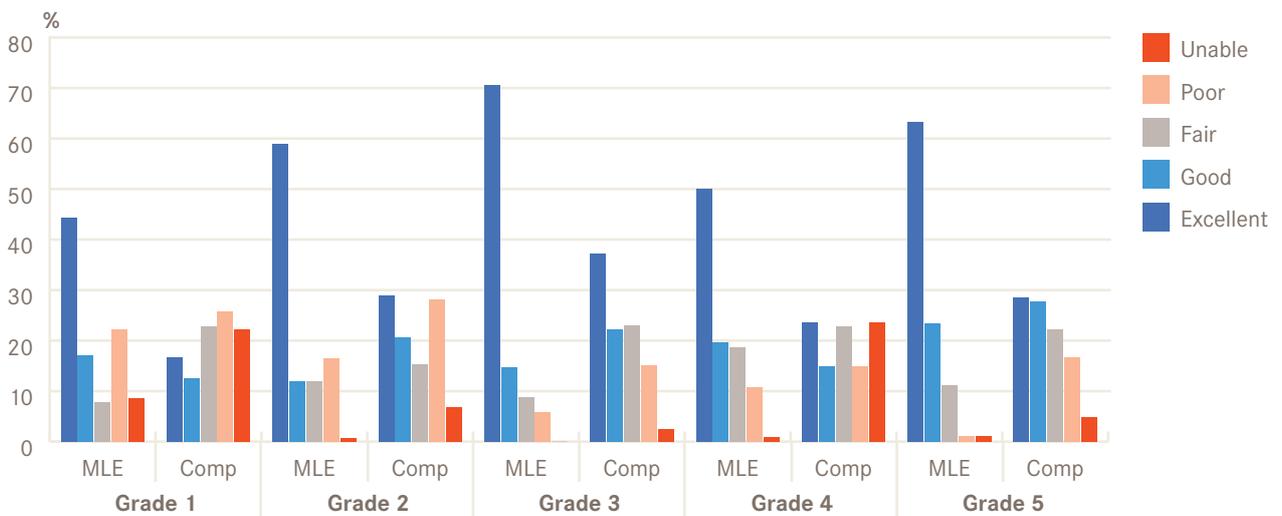
¹⁴ All literacy assessment data extracted from reports generated by the Office of the Basic Education Commission, Chiang Rai Education Service Area Office #4

Figure 8 Thai writing abilities in MTB-BE/MLE and comparison schools



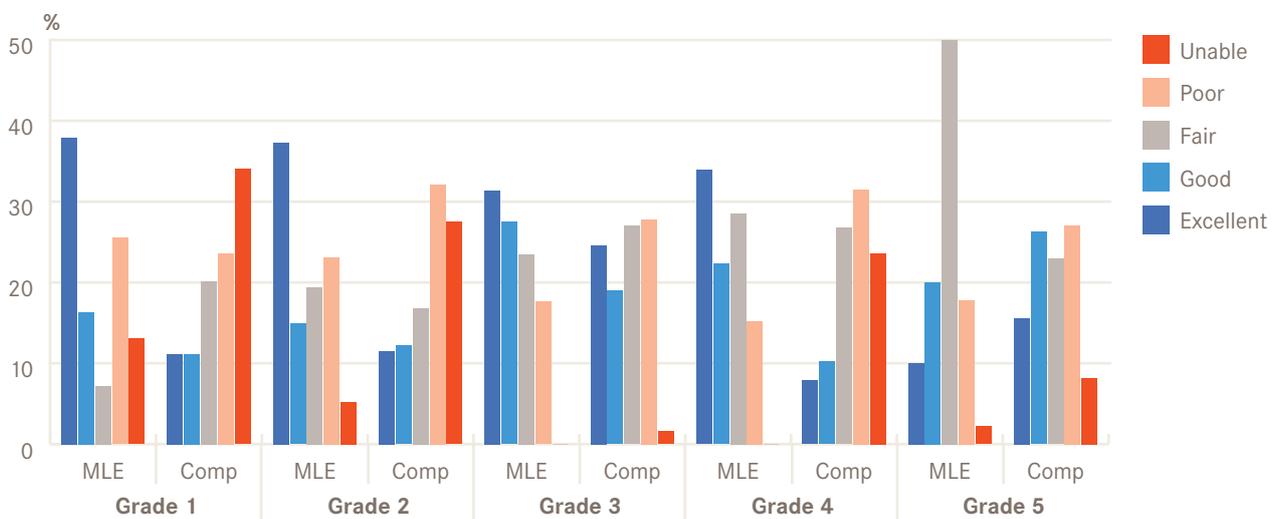
The same trend can be observed when looking at the data by grade, where MTB-MLE students had many more “excellent” marks, as shown below:

Figure 9 National literacy assessment results for reading, academic year 2015-16, in MTB-BE/MLE and comparison schools



Similarly, the MTB-MLE students outperformed the comparison students on the writing section of the exam, although by slightly less margins; that is not surprising, given that writing is a more difficult skill to master than reading, and more difficult to assess:¹⁵

Figure 10 National literacy assessment results for writing, academic year 2015-16, in MTB-BE/MLE and comparison schools



This data shows that MTB-MLE helps ethnic students develop strong literacy skills in the national language (Thai) despite spending fewer class hours in the Thai language. MTB-MLE thus offers a much more efficient way to learn the national language well. As a medical school professor who conducted two evaluations of MTB-MLE in Thailand concluded, “MLE is the medicine for the disease of illiteracy.”¹⁶



Students in the Hmong-Thai MTB-MLE Program at Rak Paendin School placed 3rd in their ESAO, and 9th overall in Chiang Rai Province on the 2018 Primary Grade 3 National Test, achieving higher scores than pupils at many large, urban schools.

¹⁵ The grade 5 writing assessment contains one anomaly, in that the MTB-MLE schools show very few “excellent” scores and many “fair” ones. A data entry error is suspected.

¹⁶ UNICEF, 2018

Lessons Learned



What has FAL learned from 10 years of MTB-MLE work? Here are some of the lessons learned about working with communities, teachers, school administrators, and local education officials.

Working with Communities

No MTB-MLE project should begin without consulting the local community, including parents, village leaders and government officials. All of these stakeholders need to understand the purpose of the MTB-MLE project, and how it will benefit the students. All stakeholders should have the opportunity to ask questions and share their opinions.

Whenever starting MTB-MLE in a new place, parents and teachers from existing MTB-MLE projects should be invited to community meetings, and given the opportunity to share about their MTB-MLE experiences.

Communities can play an important role in orthography (alphabet) development, giving input on how they would like their language to be written and helping to test the proposed orthography

Community members can help develop MTB-MLE teaching and learning materials. They can help write stories, create songs, draw pictures and highlight local wisdom that could be used in the program. For example, students could learn about the shapes used in traditional weaving, or about how to know when it is time to plant or harvest crops based on phases of the moon and weather patterns.

"At first the parents were skeptical because MTB-MLE was not a government project. But then they saw that their kids were learning and thinking better, that they loved to read and even read to their parents at home. The parents saw the difference MTB-MLE was making for their children's development, so they accepted it."

Phokporn Santi, teacher
Rak Paendin School

Working with Teachers

UNESCO has identified teacher training as a key challenge in many countries. Teachers need training in subject content (math, science, English, etc.) as well as teaching techniques. Otherwise teachers often “teach as they were taught,” using both the good and bad practices they experienced as children.

MLE programs use new learning materials and new teaching techniques. The teachers and teacher assistants need to understand why they are being asked to teach in this way, and how to use the materials properly.



In FAL’s experience, the best way to do this is to include the teachers and teacher assistants in material development workshops. This helps them better understand the goals of the MTB-MLE project. Also, the teachers will learn how to use the materials they are creating in the workshops—and practice using them with each other (peer teaching) before taking them to the classroom. The teachers feel a sense of pride from producing big books, small books, posters, games, etc.

Still, because MTB-MLE is so new, project staff should make regular on-site visits to MTB-MLE classrooms, to make sure that the teachers are using the correct teaching techniques and to help the teachers solve any problems they have. The teachers should see the project staff as friendly coaches helping them to succeed, not supervisors.

Working with School Administrators

School administrators are very important to the success of any educational innovation, especially MLE. In FAL’s experience, all of the “best practice” MTB-MLE schools benefited from strong school administrators who understood MTB-MLE and gave encouragement to MTB-MLE teachers and teacher assistants. In many cases, MTB-MLE school directors worked very hard to find additional budget to support the teacher assistants.

To help school administrators excel at their work, FAL organizes training workshops specifically for them. These are shorter than the teacher training workshops, but contain some similar information about MLE. Whenever possible, local education officials are also invited to these workshops, so that they can support the school administrators.

Working with Local Education Officials

In FAL’s experience, district and provincial education officials are very important to the success of MTB-MLE projects. These officials are responsible for supervising the schools in the area and collecting data on student and teacher performance. They also play a role in budget allocation, as well as insuring that national education policies are implemented.

It is important for MTB-MLE project staff to work closely with these officials, keeping them informed about the progress of the MTB-MLE project and seeking their advice. The MTB-MLE project staff can also cooperate with the local officials to interpret the results of national testing. This type of data is very helpful for the project planning cycle.

Challenges for MTB-MLE Projects

Implementing an MTB-MLE project can bring many challenges. Some of the challenges, and suggestions for overcoming them, include:

Teacher recruitment Because few ethnic people are able to finish university, there are few mother tongue-speaking teachers. To overcome this challenge, FAL recruits teacher assistants—members of the local community with some secondary school education who are trained to work alongside certified teachers. An ideal long-term solution would be for the Ministry of Education to create a special pathway by which teacher assistants could receive additional training that would enable them to become certified teachers, and to allocate special scholarships for ethnic youth to study to become teachers.¹⁷

Teacher attrition Many teachers in remote areas are recent university graduates who are required to spend 4 years in a small school, before they have the right to request transfer to a “better” school (which most do). Sometimes teachers leave in the middle of the school year, requiring school directors to find replacements very quickly—and there is no time to train the replacements in MTB-MLE teaching techniques. Again, the solution for this would be for the Ministry of Education to open new pathways for ethnic people to be trained as teachers and assigned to their home areas.

Budget MTB-MLE requires an initial investment to train teachers and produce new materials. Sometimes outside donors are willing to help with start-up costs, with the hope that, as the benefits of MTB-MLE become clear, the government will provide additional budget. This is especially important for teacher assistants, who, in Thailand, have no job security. Some schools had to leave the MTB-MLE project because they could not find funding for teacher assistants due to budget changes at the Ministry of Education.

Supervision Site visits are important to ensure that the MTB-MLE program is running well and encourage the teachers and school directors. However, this can be difficult for schools in remote areas, especially during the monsoon season. Special effort is required to “keep in touch” with MTB-MLE schools through site visits and other forms of communication (mobile phone, Skype, etc.).

National testing Thailand places great importance on standardized testing. Student results from the grade 3 National Test and Grade 6 O-Net exam have an impact on salaries and promotions for teachers and school directors. The new system for testing literacy at every grade level can be an important tool for identifying weak readers. However, education officials need to understand that MTB-MLE students might have low scores, especially in the early primary grades, because the tests are in the national language—not the mother tongue. If possible, testing for early primary children in MTB-MLE programs should be done in their mother tongue—so that the tests will measure their true knowledge, not just their Thai language abilities.



“The government should prioritize developing local MLE teachers.”

Bunchai Sudchon
Parent, Huay Han School

¹⁷ In 2019, the Thai government's Education Equity Fund proposed a 5-year project to recruit and train 500 young people from remote areas to serve as teachers in small primary schools near their home villages. PCF and FAL stand ready to help with the implementation of this ambitious and much-needed project.

Conclusion



Over 7000 languages are spoken in our world today (Ethnologue 2019). With 192 countries in the United Nations, it is clear that multilingual nations are the norm, not the exception! Evidence from UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank and many other organizations shows that children who speak ethnic languages often have difficulties in schools where their home languages are not used for classroom instruction.

For more than 10 years, FAL and PCF have cooperated with the Thai Ministry of Education, provincial and district officials, and local communities to bring mother tongue based multilingual education to ethnic children in the remote border regions of Thailand. The results speak for themselves: children in the MTB-MLE programs are active learners whose academic results in all subjects (especially the Thai language) show that MTB-MLE works. Teachers, school administrators and parents are pleased with the results; many parents say they wish that MTB-MLE had been used when they were children!

The lessons learned from FAL's work can be used to guide MTB-MLE expansion in Thailand, as well as in other countries.

"I think that MTB-MLE would benefit all the ethnic groups in Thailand, wherever they are."

Khru Surapong, teacher
Rak Paendin School

Additional MTB-MLE Resources

Bloom Library.

<http://bloom.palaso.org/>

Free computer program designed to help build big books, small books, and graded readers, in both print and electronic form, including support for “karaoke style” highlighting of audio books viewable on mobile devices.

Producing Culturally Relevant Language

Development Materials for a Mother Tongue-Based Education Program.

<http://tinyurl.com/pyxszna>

A how-to guide for leading materials development workshops.

Resources for Literacy and Education.

<https://www.sil.org/literacy-and-education/resources-literacy-and-education>

Useful links to online MTB-MLE resources.

Including the Excluded: Promoting Multilingual Education.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002462/246278E.pdf>

A series of booklets designed to help community member, implementers, and policy makers understand MTB-MLE. Includes case studies of successful MTB-MLE programmes in Asia and Africa.

Multilingual Education Working Group (UNESCO Bangkok)

<http://www.unescobkk.org/education/multilingual-education/>

The online home of the Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group (MLE WG), containing links to key MTB-MLE resources in multiple languages plus past and current editions of the Multilingual Education E-Newsletter.

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