

Learning to be happy

A pilot project in the South uses the students' local Malay dialect as the medium of instruction as they assimilate the national language through fun activities.

Nuraza-heeda Waehayee was not feeling well but she still insisted on going to her school, which is within walking distance from her home in Prajan village in Yarang district of Pattani province.

Why did this six-year-old girl, who hears nothing but the local Malay dialect at home, want so badly to attend classes at the Thai school?

The answer is that the kindergarten student has fun there. Nuraza-heeda enjoys the lively teaching system at the school. Since she started classes last year she has had many chances to express herself, and ask questions about the lessons in her own language. It is not the "chalk and talk" system that students normally experience. The learning comes through as part of the different approach.

The Baan Prajan School introduced new teaching methods three years ago as part of a pilot project under the Centre for Documentation and Revitalisation of Endangered Languages and Culture, at Mahidol University's Institute for Languages and Culture of Asia. Besides the kindergarten class, the project has also been implemented in a Grade 1 classroom. Before initiating the project the centre spent a year researching the special problems of students

whose mother tongue is not Thai and preparing the new learning system for them. The Baan Prajan school is one of four schools in the pilot project.

According to the Ministry of Education's 2008 National Standard Test, 25.50 % of Grade 3 students in the deep South cannot read Thai at all, and 17.08% need improvement. This compares to the national averages of 4.18% and 3.52%, respectively. Thai writing skills are even worse— 42.11 % are unable to write and 20.86% need improvement, comparing to the national averages of 5.81% and 10.53%.

The 2008 test also reveals that students in the South need to improve their analytical skills. For example, of the total 2,611 Grade 6 students in Pattani province, 40.77% were determined to need work in this area, and only 0.94 % were rated as "good".

"I have to insist that students in the southernmost provinces are not stupid _ they are as smart as any others _ but the language difference causes learning and thinking barriers," said veteran educator Waeyousoh Sama-ali, whose own first language was the local Malay dialect. Mr Waeyousoh is on a local committee overseeing the pilot project and has been teaching in the South for more than 40 years. "If students can overcome language barriers they will be able to master their studies," he insisted.

When the project was first introduced into schools, there was a lot of resistance from both parents and educators. But after three years of operation this has fallen by the wayside, as the students' achievements speak volumes.

Students in the pilot classes at the Baan Prajan School are full of energy to learn, and they are not afraid of expressing their thoughts or of participating in the classes. This is in stark contrast to the situation in most classrooms in the South, where students can almost literally be seen sinking into a culture of silence— shy to speak and afraid to express themselves in Thai, and asking no questions even after class. The pilot project aims to replace this system.

In schools across the country students are taught to identify and relate the sounds of the Thai alphabet with certain words, starting with ``Kor-kai", or chicken, and ending with ``Hor-Nok hook" (owl). In the pilot classrooms the process reflects the differences in culture and experience. Nuraza-heeda learns to associate these sounds with Malay words she is familiar with _ ``Kor-kujing" (cat) and ``Hor-hairma (horse).

She did not jump straight into reading and writing Thai, but was first allowed to familiarise herself with the school and make friends, using her own language (see graphic). After a few months she started learning six Thai words a day, with the local Malay dialect serving as the medium of instruction.

Nuraza-heeda and her friends learn their second language in lively and interactive ways, such as by singing songs. When teacher Tuanyoh Nisani asked for volunteers to write the words they had just learned on the whiteboard many students jumped up and raised their hands.

In using the students' mother tongue as a bridge for learning the national language, the pilot project has introduced a new way of teaching and learning, one that is actually fun for the students. It has also changed the old teacher-centred method into a child-centred one, and gone from imposing to guiding the education process. Reprimands have been traded for rewards, and black-or-white for open-ended answers.

Students learn Thai through songs about flowers, animals and other things in nature, as well as through story-telling, word cards and play-acting. The teacher usually has the students repeat new words after her at least three times before asking them to write them. She sometimes asks them to incorporate the new Thai words into stories they compose in their own dialect, allowing their imaginations to grow and glow.

In a Grade One mathematics class students not only worked out the solutions to word problems, but also discussed them and did some role-playing. The teacher used one problem to teach a lesson on social ethics, asking students what they would do if a vendor gave them more change than they calculated they had coming. "We have to return the change," was the ringing answer.

Most parents at Prajan village express satisfactory with the achievements of their children. "I think my daughter is happy, and she shows her curiosity all the time. She asks everything that she does not understand," said Sianong Waehayee, Nuraza-heeda's mother. "When I took her to Pattani town, she read all advertisement banners to me in Thai."

She said that her son, who is now in Grade 5 at the same school, has never been such an eager student.

"I can see that the new teaching system has made a difference," she added.