

SUBMISSION: Language learning in Indigenous communities

I am currently involved in a longitudinal research project in Cambodia that investigates bilingualism and mathematical achievement. In the five highland provinces of North East Cambodia there are over 100,000 Indigenous people coming from over 10 ethnic groups, commonly referred to as 'ethnic minorities'. Most people live in remote villages with very poor or no access to health or educational services and extremely limited access to commercial activities. In Ratanakiri Province, where my research is being undertaken, the prominent groups are the Tampuan, Kreung, Jarai, Brov and Kavet who together make up around 57% of the 124,000 population of the province. The balance of the population is made up of Lao, Vietnamese and Chinese (13%), and Khmer (30%). The cultures and languages of the Indigenous ethnic minority groups are distinct from mainstream Khmer culture and language. All groups in this area speak their own languages and practice their own religions.

In 2003, through the funding auspices of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) an NGO opened bilingual schools in six remote communities in Ratanakiri province with a total enrolment of 278 students, all at the Grade 1 level and 45% of whom were girls. Benson (2005) lists a number of claims 'regarding positive effects of mother tongue use on girls' school participation'. These are that more girls enrol in school when they can learn in a language that is familiar to them; school use of the home language increases parent participation and influence allowing parents to participate in school activities and decision-making, with the resulting curriculum better meeting local needs with the effect that schooling becomes more relevant for girls; teachers from the same linguistic and cultural communities as their students are less likely to exploit female students; girls in bilingual classes stay in school longer; girls learn better and can demonstrate their learning in the mother tongue; bilingual teachers treat girls more fairly in the learning process; and, more women may become teachers, and thus role models for girls (Benson, 2005, pp. 4-5).

By February 2008 the original 6 schools had a total enrolment of 801 (44% girls) and were staffed by 42 locally recruited and trained, indigenous community teachers. The schools are all bilingual with initial literacy being developed in one of two vernacular languages, Tampuan or Kreung, with the national language, Khmer, being taught orally in the first year then phased in as the language of instruction over the ensuing 3 years. The Program adapts the state primary curriculum to the local context incorporating life-skills that draw upon the knowledge and culture of community people.

The irony here is that an expanding and successful bilingual program in a developing country, has its roots in the bilingual model once used in a number of Northern Territory Aboriginal schools! While gaining increasing acceptance with Governments in a number of countries around the world (except Australia), bilingual education remains a form of education surrounded by misconceptions and considerable scepticism. That children would learn to read and write more efficiently and effectively when the language of instruction and the language they are learning to read and write is their own, might seem self evident. What is less well understood is that this approach, learning the first language first, actually helps children learn a second language (the national language) more effectively than similar children who experience a form of education in the national language only.

Reference:

Benson, C. (2005) *Mother Tongue-based Teaching and Education for Girls*, (Bangkok, UNESCO).