Teaching Thai Language to Thai Children in Switzerland
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Abstract

This study was on the instruction of Thai language for Thai children in Switzerland, a case study at the Sunday Buddhism School, Srinagarindraravaram Temple, 2010. The qualitative research design was used, and data was collected through complete participation observation, documentary study, and interviewing with monks, volunteer teachers, and parents.

The students at this school, who grow up in Switzerland, are classified into Level 1 thru Level 6 according to their Thai language competence and age. The school is administered by a group of monks, and teachers were Thai volunteers. The syllabus is composed of Thai language and culture. Classes meet every Sunday afternoon for one and a half hours for 40 weeks. The findings indicated that Thai parents are aware of the importance of Thai and want their children to be able to communicate and understand Thai and Thai culture and use Thai language effectively.

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1. Introduction (10 pt)

Language is human beings’ means for communication in all parts of the world. All humans use language for understanding each other in a community (Amara Prasithrattasin, 2005) and communication is a tool for people to hold an occupation and perform various activities in order to live their lives with happiness. Thus, a nation with its own language always enjoys the pride in having the national language. Thailand has our Thai standard language as the national language used in various communities and societies. The standard Thai used in Thailand belongs to a single word family, with a tone on each syllable (Pakasri Yenbut, Wallapa Thaijinda, and Supak Mahawarakorn, 2007). Foreigners like to say that Thai language is more difficult to learn because of the various tones (Edward M. Anthony, Deborah P. French, and Udom Warotamasikkhadit, 1968). Accent in each dialect also differs, making Thai language learning more difficult than English language learning. Learners have to pay regular attention to practicing the language in order to be successful and competent.

With the social changes that we are experiencing and people migrating to other countries, expatriates use their native language with their people in the country of residence. As a result, cultures and languages
become multiple. Thai people also migrate to other parts of the world, in Asia, Europe, and America. Thai people’s migration is for educational, occupational, and family purposes. They bring with them the cultures from the mother country to the new country, leading to exchanges of cultures in every part of the world.

Switzerland is a country in Europe where a number of Thai people moved and lived with their families. One reason Thais want to live in Switzerland is because of His Majesty the King’s history. HM King Bhumipol Aduljadech, the beloved King of Thai people used to live in this country with the royal family until he completed his bachelor’s degree in political science. Thai people therefore feel they are close to Switzerland. Those who went there to study have not returned to Thailand but hold an occupation there. Some were married to a Swiss and have children that grow up and go to school in Switzerland.

Thai children or half-blood children live in a western culture while learning eastern culture from their father or mother. In general, mothers of these children are Buddhists and have faith in visiting Thai temples. On Sundays, the wives usually take their Swiss husbands and children to make merit at a temple, especially at Srinakarinvararam Temple.

Srinagarindravararam Temple is the temple where Her Royal Highness Princess Srinagarindra Mahidol (or whom Thai people call “the Princess Mother”, the mother of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the present King) and Her Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana Krom Luang Naradhiwas Rajanagarindra (HM the King’s elder sister). Both patronized Srinagarindravararam Temple since it was constructed. Besides the Royal patronage, Thai people in Switzerland and the neighboring countries including Germany, France, Italy and Belgium donated for the construction cost through Phra Raj Kitti Molee, the abbot at that time who is now known as Phra Thep Kitti Molee.

Srinagarindravararam Temple is a beautiful construction with a conference room that can seat 500 people. Besides organizing religious rituals and cultural activities, Phra Thep Kitti Molee, with great awareness of the major role of Thai people as a good citizen of Switzerland, has opened the Sunday Buddhism School to teach Thai language and culture to children and interested individuals since 1996. Presently, the school offers many other courses, for example, Thai language for kids, Thai for adults, German language, Buddhism, Thai dancing art, Thai classical music, Thai boxing, carving, and Thai traditional massage.

Phra Thep Kitti Molee disclosed the fact that some Thai children growing up in the western culture usually face problems in their living. “Parents visiting our temple are worrying because their children want too much freedom. They also want to be accepted and praised and are highly ambitious. When these children cannot have what they want, they become desperate. Some even wanted to commit suicide,” Phra Thep Kitti Molee reported in the Commemorate Book of the 10th Anniversary of the Sunday Buddhism School, Srinagarindravararam Temple. “As these children need moral support, I had an idea to open the Sunday Buddhism School at Srinagarindravararam Temple to respond to the Princess Mother’s wish for Thai children to be well morally supported. Moreover, I would like Thai children and other interested people to learn Thai language and Lord Buddha’s Dhamma and Thai culture in order to prove to the world that Thailand has a good religion that teaches our people to understand themselves and their friends. This shows the goodness of Thai being. Those who learn here will be taught to live happily in this world.”

“After the Sunday Buddhism School was opened at Srinagarindravararam Temple in Switzerland, Thai people in this country and a lot of other people have gathered and met here, while many send their children to the school. However, there is a constraint in the number of teachers. Therefore, we recruited Thai children’s parents who lived here to help teaching in 1996.”

The Sunday Buddhism School at Srinagarindravararam Temple is the first Institute in Switzerland offering Thai language education in a non-conforming style. In 2001, the researcher who was a volunteer teacher during summer at Buddha Pratheep, England, had a chance to pay respect to Phra Thep Kitti Molee in Switzerland. In 2004 when I visited Switzerland again, I was assigned by Phra Thep Kitti Molee to meet with HE Julapong Nonsrichai, the Royal Thai Ambassador to Switzerland in Berne to integrate the distance learning system from Klai Kangwon School in Thailand, under HM the King’s patronage to the teaching at Srinagarindravararam Temple. The Thai teaching project was then written and proposed as a joint project between the Sunday Buddhism School of the temple and The Royal Thai Embassy in Berne (Pratanporn, 2004). I was invited by the temple as a consultant on Thai teaching so that it suited Thai children in Switzerland. During
the first stage, I found the instruction there not really appropriate in terms of course content, training of teachers who did not graduate in Thai language teaching, appropriate teaching activities, and levels of the courses. I therefore joined the monks and volunteer teachers to continuously improve the curriculum and the school until more and more people were interested to send their children to learn Thai and Thai culture there and felt more confident in the school (Phra Thep Kitt Molee, 2007). In 2007, There was much more Thai people communities in many cities interested in Thai language teaching and opened Thai courses to children such as Brazilian or Berne.

Teaching Thai to children growing in Switzerland can be classified as teaching Thai as a foreign language (TFL), which differs from Thai teaching in Thailand where learners are native speakers of Thai. Children growing in Switzerland have to take German or a European language as the main language. Then they come to learn Thai on Sundays. Additionally, volunteer teachers have different levels of understanding of Thai language content. In terms of the teaching approach and activities, some volunteer teachers teach and train students the way they were taught back home, making students feel reluctant to learn. Some teachers who have their own children in Switzerland rely too much on the laissez-faire approach because they lack the ability to control the class. From these problems, Phra Thep Kitt Molee had a great intention and strong determination to improve the teaching and learning at the temple. Hence, a working group was appointed including monks, the researcher, volunteer teachers, and parents to improve the school according to the set objectives.

2. Problem Statement:
The teaching of Thai for children growing up abroad requires personnel in the area so that the lessons will go on. After 7 years of the school development by the researcher, monks, and volunteer teachers, it became necessary in 2009 to assign people in the area to administer the school. Hence, the researcher was interested in studying what kind of instructional pattern should be used for Thai language teaching for children in Switzerland.

3. Research Questions:
What kind of instructional pattern should be used for Thai language teaching for Thai children in Switzerland, a case study at the Sunday Buddhism School, Srinakarinwararam Temple? What content, teachers, time frame, and activities should be incorporated in the instruction?

4. Purpose of the Study
This research was aimed at studying the instruction of Thai language to Thai children in Switzerland: a case study of the Sunday Buddhism School at Srinagarindravararam Temple.

5. Research Methods:
Since the researcher participated in the development of Thai language teaching at the Sunday Buddhism School at Srinagarindravararam Temple from 2004 to 2009, the qualitative research study was applied.
1. Field survey was conducted from April to May, 2010 by complete participation observation (Ongart Naiyapat, 2004) of the following: meetings of monks, parents and volunteer teachers; cultural activities organized for the children on Mothers’ day, and Songkran; and the Level 6 students’ assessment carried out by the monks and volunteer teachers.
2. Study was conducted on relevant documents in Thai language teaching, schedules informed to the parents, and teachers’ teaching plans.
3. The abbot and the monks involved, volunteer teachers, parents, and children were interviewed.

6. Findings:
The findings indicate the following for the 2010 model of Thai teaching at the Sunday Buddhism School:
1. Syllabus
The Sunday Buddhism School at Srinagarindravararam Temple still divided the instruction of 2010 into 6 levels as in 2009 and used the syllabus written by the researcher in 2005 to follow Thailand’s curriculum.
Assessment by interviewing the monks and volunteer teachers showed that they were satisfied with these level classifications. The researcher expected that the Sunday Buddhism School at Srinagarindravararam Temple would be under the non-conforming educational system and the specific group of informal education of the Ministry of Education. Under this system, the learners would receive a certificate of achievements. They would also be able to participate in the Ministry’s activities. In terms of psychological effect, the children and their parents would feel they have learned the curriculum parallel to Thailand and achieved Level 6. However, in reality, the foundation syllabus of Thai language in Thailand is more difficult. Nevertheless, the Sunday School incorporates Thai cultures into the language so that learners understand the lexical meaning and are able to apply the language appropriately in their social roles (Wiput Sopawong, 2011) and be able to benefit from knowledge and competence in Thai and lead their lives in Switzerland happily.

2. Learners

The Sunday Buddhism School at Srinagarindravararam Temple, Switzerland enrolls students whose ages would not be too young for the school to take responsibility of. The minimum age is 7 years old and the first level is Level 1. When completing the level and the student achieves 50% of the assessment, he or she is entitled to continue to the next level. The research findings indicate that the parents are much interested in Thai learning of their children as can be seen from the increasing number to 114 students from 2009.

3. Instruction

The school was founded in 2004 with the temple monks appointed to take responsibilities in different positions, namely the director and heads of the various sections. The administrative group continues until today. What has been changed is the volunteer teachers who take responsibility in other work. Each year, these volunteers may have their own household burden that prevents them from working at the school. They therefore take turn assisting. These volunteer teachers are able to communicate in Thai to a certain extent. Hence, the school organizes teacher training at the beginning of the new semester every year so that all understand the working system and the syllabus. The monks are knowledgeable in different fields and hold at least a bachelor’s degree. They are responsible to teach the children to become a good person. The monks also teach Buddhism principles. It can be said that instruction at this school is collaboration between the monks and community people who see the importance of Thai language and culture.

4. Time frame

The Sunday Buddhism School at Srinagarindravararam Temple, Switzerland opens on Sundays. The school was founded in 1996. The first semester starts in September and ends in May of the following year. Classes meet every Sunday and only stop on Switzerland’s national holidays such as Christmas. One lesson is 1.5 hours and one course lasts 40 weeks or 60 hours.

7. Conclusions

The study on the Sunday Buddhism School at Srinagarindravararam Temple was aimed at determining an appropriate model and syllabus of Thai language teaching to Thai children in Switzerland. In 2010 the teaching and learning was organized in 6 levels. Parents sending their children to the school agree that the system is similar to the system in Thailand. The classes are taught on each Sunday which is a holiday. Therefore, Thai people taking their children to the classes see the importance of Thai language and the necessity to conserve the culture and Thai language. In addition, the parents have an expectation for their children to be able to communicate in Thai with Thai relatives and others both in Switzerland and in Thailand. This shows that Thai people, no matter where they are, are closely knitted to the Thai ways of living and lifestyle.

The teaching of Thai language at the Sunday Buddhism School in 2010 still incorporated collaboration from the monks, volunteer teachers, and parents. This instruction can be said to be successful at a certain level, but the efficiency should be developed and improved for the future as volunteer teachers change all the time.
8. References:


