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The Thai-Lao Mother Tongue: Teacher Needs, Competencies, and Conditions for Effective Instruction

Item Type	openaccess;article
Authors	Winfield, Lukas
Download date	2025-10-26 18:14:37
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/7618

The Thai-Lao Mother Tongue:
Teacher Needs, Competencies, and Conditions for Effective Instruction

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May 2016

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Glossary of Terms

Language of wider communication (LWC): a language used for communication by larger general population (e.g. primary language of a region).

Dominant language (DL): A language national institutions and groups who hold power within a country use and encourage the use of by other linguistic groups. Often the language the majority of the population uses (e.g. English in Singapore or Thai in Thailand).

Non-dominant language (NDL): A language not supported by national institutions or those with power in a country. Likely not taught in formal schools or recognized as a national language. A NDL can be spoken by a hundreds of thousands of people or a small minority. For example, Spanish or Navajo speakers in the United States.

Minority language (ML): A language spoken by a minority proportion of a country. Often a ML is also a NDL, however this is not always the case as demonstrated by the use of Bahasa in Indonesia as the national language. This gives the language a position of power and privilege even though it is only spoken by 34% of the country¹.

Mother tongue (MT): Mother tongue is generally refers to the first language someone learns or the language they speak at home. It can also refer to the language by which someone identifies with (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

¹ The government of Indonesia choose to adopt Bahasa as the national language in an effort to not give more power to any of the country's major ethnolinguistic groups. When the government choose Bahasa to be the official language of Indonesia only 3% of the country spoke it while the largest ethnolinguistic group, Javanese, made up 43% of the country's population (Kratz, 2006).

Introduction

The Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalization Program (ICMRP) in Northeast Thailand (a region also referred to as Isan) is one of the first attempts by major Thai municipality governments to recognize a mother tongue language (Thai-Lao) and integrate it into the formal education system. Previous attempts by the Thai government have been limited to a few Malay communities in the southern region of Thailand. Implementing a mother tongue-based program in Northeast Thailand presents teachers with challenges as Thai-Lao has never been taught in formal schools before. In addition, speakers of Thai-Lao have historically learned the language orally, but now are learning how to read and write due to the ICMRP's efforts to create an orthography of Thai-Lao using the ancient Tai Noi script from artifacts. Teachers of Thai-Lao report gaps in their knowledge of the language. Before the initiation of ICMRP, no teacher had training (preservice or in-service) in the newly standardized Thai-Lao language, nor were there readily accessible Thai-Lao teaching and learning materials. Rather than assuming what teachers needed, ICMRP needed research to gather input from teachers as to what they perceived their needs to be in order to effectively teach Thai-Lao.

The ICMRP partnered with four municipalities; Khon Kaen Municipality, Chum Phae Municipality, Ban Phai Municipality, and Muang Phon Municipality. However only three that participated in teaching Thai-Lao; Khon Kaen Municipality, Chum Phae Municipality, and Muang Phon Municipality. The vitality of Thai-Lao as a mother tongue can differ between age groups and rural versus urban areas. Generally, Thai-Lao is still the language of wider communication in rural areas of the Northeast and has higher usage among older demographics. In official spaces such as government offices and schools, employees use Standard Thai as the language of communication. In urban areas and among youth there has been a more rapid language shift to Standard Thai. Many of the students who attend schools that participate in the ICMRP, grew up speaking Standard Thai making Thai-Lao a heritage language rather than their L1. To complicate language policy efforts, other students still speak Thai-Lao at home and as their L1. The ICMRP for practical reasons and political reasons designed its project around the teaching of Thai-Lao as an elective subject in schools rather than using it as the language of instruction for the goal of language maintenance and revitalization (increased usage and prestige).

Research Questions

1. What do teachers perceive as their material and training needs in order to successfully teach Thai-Lao?
2. How do teachers perceive the current materials and training opportunities ICMRP has provided?
3. What additional key factors would support teachers in effectively teaching Thai-Lao?

Literature Review

Benefits of and Barriers to Mother Tongue Education

International development organizations and scholars have placed increasing importance on the role of mother tongue languages in education (World Bank, 2005; UNESCO, 2009; Kosonen & Benson, 2013; Trudell, 2007). Governments and scholars have called mother tongue education a human right (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) but often, this recognition is limited to progressive policies which receive little or no implementation (UNESCO, 2009). Mother tongue education can lead to significant educational gains (Cummins, 2001; Hovens, 2002), improve attendance rates (Mantero, 2008), create cross-cultural understanding (Thomas & Collier, 2002), and contribute to the preservation of local languages (Kososen, 2008a).

There are various types of mother tongue-based educational models. What model a NGO or government implements is often a negotiation of community interests, national language policy and the capacity of the actors involved (NGOs, ministry, schools, teachers etc.). The models are:

1. **Bilingual or multilingual education:** refers to the use of two or more languages in schools for the purposes of instruction and teaching literacy skills (World Bank, 2009)
2. **Mother tongue-based multilingual education:** specifies that a multilingual education program utilizes students' L1 (World Bank, 2009)

There are many variations to mother tongue-based language programs. In order to add more nuance, I will introduce three further distinctions:

3. **Transfer-based:** Learners focus on developing L1 as a foundation. Learners can then apply language skills learned in the L1 (such as literacy) to the learning of a L2. In this model, teachers continue to teach both the L1 and L2. Doing so will increase the literacy and cognitive skills transferred to learning the L2 and learning in the L2 (UNESCO, 2008). The more time schools give to L1 language development, the stronger students' language skills in their L2 and L3 will be. Benson estimates that the ideal time to spend on developing L1 language skills in school is 5-7 years (2008). During this time teachers can introduce the L2 as a subject and later as the medium of instruction.
4. **Transition-based:** Learners begin learning in L1 but with the explicit goal of transitioning to a L2 as the language of instruction. This can sometimes turn into what Benson (2002) calls a "short-cut" model where schools force students to transition after two years or less of studying their L1. This is before students are able solidify their L1 language skills. Governments might chose such a model order to address governmental or parental perceived concerns that teachers are wasting instructional time that they should use to teach the L2.
5. **Maintenance-based:** Learners study their mother tongue for the goal of protecting and preserving their cultural heritage. The language may not be developed enough for teachers to use it as medium language of instruction (e.g. the language has not been used in two generations so there are limited or no fluent speakers left in the community) or

national language policy does not allow for a minority language to be the medium language of instruction.

Not every program fits neatly into one of these categories but instead is likely a mixture different models.

Benefits of mother tongue education include significant educational gains. Studies on bilingual education have consistently shown that students can study in both their native language and a L2 at no sacrifice to learning gains. A student's literacy skills in their L1 provide an important foundation for linguistic and cognitive development (Benson, 2008). When students learn literacy in their native language not only do they develop linguistic and cognitive skills faster but they transfer their skills to the learning of a L2 or L3. The more developed their literacy is in their L1, the stronger their literacy is likely to be in a L2 or L3 (Cummins, 2001). Hovens (2002) found that in bilingual programs in Guinea-Bissau and Niger that students who able to learn literacy of their L1 had higher literacy skills in the L2 than students. Rural students and girls demonstrated the largest L2 gains.

Conversely, students who attend class in a language other than their own can experience multiple learning barriers. A study of Inuit students in Northern Quebec found that when taught in a L2 (in this context, French), students are not able to understand much of the content in schools (especially more advanced concepts) leading to detrimental effects on their learning. Their L1 (Inuktitut) language skills suffered as well with students, "losing or failing to develop their L1, especially in terms of literacy and language for academic purposes" (Spada & Lightbown, 2002, p. 229).

Sometimes teachers can mistake a students' lack of comprehension due to a language barrier as the result of mental disabilities. An UNESCO report of mother tongue education revealed that:

many have observed that minority children in monolingual Thai schools seem very "shy" — hesitant to speak and reluctant to participate in class activities. Many students feel perpetually confused, many teachers perpetually frustrated. In some cases, well-intentioned officials have classified groups of ethnic minority children as "slow learners" and placed them in programmes for the mentally challenged (2009, p. 156)

The language of instruction can also impact attendance rates. If students' language and culture are not represented in schools, students can develop a feeling that they do not belong at school, possibly exacerbating disengagement and later attendance (Mantero, 2008). For instance, linguistic minorities taught in their mother tongue in Mali were 5 times less likely to repeat and 3 times less likely to drop out of school (World Bank, 2005).

Some governments voice concern that education that includes multiple languages will be divisive and lead to decreased national cohesion and stability (World Bank, 2005). However, research indicates that classrooms that use multiple languages have the potential to create cross-cultural respect and understanding. Thomas & Collier (2002) found that bilingual education can address negative perceptions towards speakers of non-dominant languages and cultures by normalizing

and valuing both languages and cultures while in a monolingual classroom, these negative perceptions can develop into social distance between students or prejudice (p. 3).

Despite the potential to increase learning outcomes by using mother tongue instruction, local community members do not always welcome mother tongue-based education. In multiple countries, parents were found to be less than enthusiastic about mother tongue instruction, preferring teachers to teach their children using national languages or “international languages” (e.g. English or French) (Trudell, 2007). Parents perceived these languages to increase their children’s prospects for employment, give them the ability to communicate to a larger section of society, and to increase their access to higher education (Muthwii, 2004, p. 22-31). Communities can be concerned about the preservation of their cultural heritage yet willing (or perhaps feel it is necessary) to sacrifice it due to socioeconomic pressures and the desire to improve their quality of life.

Fortunately, it is possible to both preserve local languages and increase the learning of national and international languages since mother tongue instruction is likely to improve later learning of national and international languages. Mother tongue literacy can act as a bridge, allowing students to more effectively learn L2 and L3 languages (World Bank, 2008). Yet it is the communities’ perception which is important and can have a lasting effect on education projects. Trudell argues that local community members’ (i.e. parents, teachers, villages leaders etc.) attitudes are key to the success of any language maintenance project (2007).

Conceptual Framework about Needs/Competencies and Conditions to Teach in the Mother Tongue

There is substantial research on what needs, competencies, and conditions teachers require in order to teach most effectively. Instead of discussing general needs, competencies, and conditions which produce more effective teachers, my research will focus more narrowly on the needs, competencies and conditions for teachers of mother tongue languages. These teachers often face unique challenges yet there is limited literature on what needs look like for teachers of mother tongue languages. These challenges include limited or no materials in the target mother tongue, lack of a standardized version of the language, incomplete knowledge of the language², ministry officials that perceive mother tongue based-education as a threat to national unity (Tupas, 2014), and lack of teacher preparation (Benson, 2004). Sometimes teachers must also contend with attitudes from parents, colleagues and community members that are dismissive, even contemptuous towards mother tongues (Tupas, 2014).

I have drawn upon research about the needs, competencies, and conditions needed for mother tongue education to construct a conceptual framework for teachers teaching a mother tongue in Northeast Thailand.

² Such as in the disuse of certain vocabulary over time in a community which leads the words ultimately becoming lost



Figure 1: Key Teacher Needs, Conditions and Competencies

Key Needs and Competencies

Literature regarding mother tongue-based education identifies three key competencies as necessary for teachers to effectively teach a mother tongue: (1) Sufficient content knowledge; (2) An open-minded attitude towards the mother tongue; and (3) Knowledge of relevant pedagogical skills for language instruction. I describe each of these in the section below.

Sufficient content knowledge

Since mother tongue languages are often excluded from schools, many teachers do not have the opportunity to formally study them. Educational projects that revitalize the orthography of a language or create the first orthography that exists for a language can present teachers with difficult challenges. This can create situations where teachers have gaps in their knowledge. Sometimes teachers do not know how to read or write in a mother tongue (Paulson, 2010).

Open-minded attitude towards the mother tongue

Teachers hold an instrumental amount of power over the success of a mother tongue education project (Trudell, 2007). Teachers need to have an attitude that values the target mother tongue

and sees schools as an appropriate space for its use and instruction (Stone, 2010; Benson, 2005). Otherwise, prejudice against mother tongue languages can manifest in teachers as a dismissive attitude towards mother tongues taught in schools. Such an attitude can negatively impact classroom practice (Karavas-Doukas, 1996).

Knowledge of relevant pedagogical skills for language instruction

Teachers who end up teaching mother tongues are not always experts in language acquisition despite it being vital to student acquisition of the target language (De Jong & Harper, 2005; Benson, 2005). Sometimes formally trained teachers are not available. For example, when a NGO rather than the Ministry of Education implements a mother tongue education project (often as a non-formal education project), they might not have access to formally trained teachers. Instead, they recruit community members and provide professional development training. Even in formal education contexts, schools might have to rely on volunteers from the community or formally trained teachers of a non-linguistic subject (such as math, science, social studies, etc.) due to a lack of professionally trained language teachers who are also proficient in the target mother tongue (UNESCO, 2008). This can create a knowledge/pedagogy gap where teachers may have one or the other but not both.

Key Conditions to Support Mother Tongue Instruction

The literature outlines three conditions in teachers' contexts necessary to support them to teach mother tongue languages, including: (1) access to professional development; (2) access to learning materials; and (3) supportive and consistent government policy. I describe these in the section below.

Access to professional development

Teachers of mother tongue-based education, whether in an informal or formal context, rarely receive training in the target language. Mother tongue projects need to provide pre and in-service and ideally, include long-term support such as supervision, coaching, monitoring and evaluation (Pflepsen, 2011).

Access to teaching and learning materials

Teaching and learning materials must be available in the mother tongue for both teachers and students to use (Pflepsen, 2011). Stone points out that mother tongue programs can survive without access to materials in the mother tongue since teachers can create their own materials (2009). While this is more manageable for smaller projects, for a large scale project, a lack of sufficient materials could severely degrade the quality of the education.

Supportive and consistent government language policy

National and local policy can support and facilitate the success of mother tongue projects. On the other hand, if they are contradictory to the aims of mother tongue learning (such as supporting the instruction of a single national dominant language at the exclusion of all other minority languages), they can inhibit and act as a barrier (UNESCO, 2009).

National Context

The Thai state has a long history of building a national identity centered on ethnic Thai culture and language. In order to protect itself from losing territory to European colonial powers in the 1800s, the Thai government asserted stricter control over its peripheral regions (i.e. specifically where the Lanna lived in the north, the Lao in the northeast and the Malay in the south) (Keyes, 1966; Winichakul, 1997) and projected an image of a cohesive and homogenous Thai nation. The Thai government took this approach to building a national identity despite that these peripheral regions had enjoyed a relative sense of political autonomy and had a cultural (including linguistic) distinctiveness from central Thais. Yet the Thai kingdom as a sovereign nation existed based on the argument that it was a homogenous Thai nation with one ethnicity, one culture and one language.

Language policy has been central to this process of building of national identity or *Thaiification* (Winichakul, 1997; Anderson, 2014). With the creation of the Thai education system in the late 1800s, the government adopted Standard Thai as the only national language and taught it in all governmental schools (Keyes, 1966). This was despite that there are at least 72 languages in Thailand (Lewis, et. al 2015). Government policies have largely ignored cultural distinctiveness and attempted to replace it with a monoculture. As Alexander & McCargo (2014) argue, “Not only do other languages lack recognition, they have been made, ‘un-Thai’ and thus a threat to national identity” (p.63).

In the 1970s, an armed communist insurgency in the northeast replaced the threat of colonialism. Again, building Thai national identity continued to be central to the Thai monarchy and military’s efforts to maintain social cohesion, a national Thai identity, and an allegiance to the Thai government in Bangkok (Glassman & Sneddon, 2003).

The shoes do not fit: Outcomes of a monoculture educational system

This one-language policy was part of the larger development of an unequal educational system. Schools in peripheral regions outside of Bangkok consistently perform considerably lower on standardized tests (Draper, 2011). Research suggest this could be a result of unevenly allocated resources (Glassman & Sneddon, 2014). Others have pointed to the fact that many students speak a language different than Standard Thai and are put at a disadvantage (Kosonen, 2008a; Alexander & McCargo, 2014). Kosonen (2008b) estimates that students who speak a language at home other than Standard Thai and have “poor” Standard Thai language skills receive “50% lower learning results” in science, math and language subjects than their Standard Thai speaking peers.

There have been more violent consequences as well. Some Malay-Thai in the south of Thailand have referenced the inability to study their own language and culture in school as a source of resentment (Connors, 2009). Many Malay males do not attend government schools and instead choose to study at *pondoks*, religious schools attached to mosques. Many finish school without being able to speak or write Standard Thai.

The role of dominate language media and rapid language shift

Technology has played a role in exacerbating a national language shift to Standard Thai (Premsrirat, 2007). As the accessibility of these certain technologies becomes more widespread, so does their potential to adversely affect usage of local mother tongue languages. The television is an especially important impetus for language shifts to Standard Thai. The industrial development of Thailand in the last few decades has placed televisions in most rural communities, even those far away from urban centers (Kososen, 2008a).

Towards an inclusive Thailand?

Recently the government's attitude has become more tolerant of non-dominant cultures and languages in Thailand. The Thai National Education Act calls for the preservation of "local wisdom" (local knowledge and culture) and allots 30% of formal school curriculum for local culture which can include the teaching of local languages (1999). In 2004, Foreign Minister, Surin Pitsuwan called for the Thai government to do more to support mother tongue speaking minorities and in 2006, Minister of Education, Chaturon Chaisaneg praised work by NGOs developing bilingual schools for Pwo Karen hill tribes in Northern Thailand and encouraged additional schools to follow suit (UNESCO, 2008; UNESCO, 2009; Kosonen & Benson, 2013). The first government education program that supported multilingualism in government schools was a pilot project in southern Thailand which used Central Malay, Standard Malay and Arabic in select schools (Connors, 2007). It remains to be seen how this will effect tensions between Malay armed separatist groups and the Thai government.

While not explicitly supported by the central government, the promotion and learning of non-dominant languages and cultures is protected under the 2007 Thai constitution, Section 46:

Persons so assembling as to be a traditional community shall have the right to conserve or restore their customs, local knowledge, arts or good culture of their community and of the nation and participate in the management, maintenance, preservation and exploitation of natural resources and the environment in a balanced fashion and persistently as provided by law. (p.33-34)

While the Thai constitution was effectively suspended in 2014 in a military coup led by General Prayut Chan-ocha, the junta has not completed its new constitution. It remains unclear what the new government's stance towards Thailand's non-dominant languages will be. The new junta appointed General Dapong Ratanasuwan as the new minister of education despite a lacking a background in education. While recent movement an inclusive National Language Policy is a step towards protecting and celebrating Thailand's diversity, the ministry has adopted a stance of promoting national unity through an increased emphasis of Thai culture and Standard Thai language in schools as tools to define "Thainess."

Local Context

The Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalization Programme (ICMRP), which ended in February 2016, was one of the two largest mother tongue projects that the government has undertaken (the second one being a project in southern Thailand introducing Malay into schools). The ICMRP's goals include increased visibility of the Thai-Lao language through the addition of

Thai-Lao signage added throughout the participating municipalities and the development of Thai-Lao curriculum, training and educational materials for schools in Khon Kaen Municipality, Chum Phae Municipality, and Muang Phon Municipality. The project worked with municipalities to teach both oral and written Thai-Lao.

Thai-Lao is taught as an elective subject and the language of instruction for all other subjects remains the national language, Standard Thai. The schools participating with the ICMRP are mostly urban where the language shift to Standard Thai is more rapidly occurring among youth. In more rural communities where people more commonly speak Thai-Lao, there is potential to scale up the ICMRP and adopt Thai-Lao as the language of instruction.

Before the implementation of a Thai-Lao curriculum, ICMRP took efforts to gauge the Khon Kaen community's opinion of Thai-Lao maintenance efforts. The project conducted multiple surveys of Khon Kaen proper and peripheral suburban/rural areas to assess the interest of the local community in preserving Thai-Lao. The results demonstrated a high level of usage by respondents with 87% reporting they used Thai-Lao listening to others speaking Thai-Lao, 82% speaking Thai-Lao themselves. Of the respondents and 81% reported that they thought in Thai-Lao. There was significant valuing of the Thai-Lao language by the community. Only 5% thought learning Thai-Lao was of no use while 95% were in favor of teaching Isan culture. In terms of schooling, 75% wanted their children to study at a multilingual school (Standard Thai/Thai-Lao/English). However, there was a drop in people who favored teaching written Thai-Lao with 65% in favor of doing so (Draper, 2015).

Overview of Languages in Thailand

The Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) is a useful framework for describing the vitality of languages.

Table 1: Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale

Level	Label	Description	Status
Level 0	International	The language is widely used between nations in trade, knowledge exchange, and international policy.	Safe
Level 1	National	The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government at the national level.	Safe
Level 2	Regional	The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government within major administrative subdivisions of a nation.	Safe
Level 3	Trade	The language is used in work and mass media without official status to transcend language differences across a region.	Safe
Level 4	Educational	The language is in vigorous use, with standardization and literature being sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education.	Safe
Level 5	Written	The language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable.	Safe
Level 6a	Vigorous	The language is used for face-to-face communication by all generations and the situation is sustainable.	Safe

Level 6b	Threatened	The language is used for face-to-face communication within all generations, but it is losing users.	Vulnerable
Level 7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation can use the language among themselves, but it is not being transmitted to children.	Definitely Endangered
Level 8a	Moribund	The only remaining active users of the language are members of the grandparent generation and older.	Severely Endangered
Level 8b	Nearly Extinct	The only remaining users of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.	Critically Endangered
Level 9	Dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community, but no one has more than symbolic proficiency.	Extinct
Level 10	Extinct	The language is no longer used and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language.	Extinct

*Adapted from Lewis et. al 2015

There are at least 72 languages in Thailand according to SIL International's Ethnologue on global languages. Table 2 organizes Thailand's languages using EGIDS and Lewis et. al's compilation of available research on each language.

Table 2: Thailand's Linguistic Diversity

Level	Language
Level 0 <i>International</i>	
Level 1 <i>National</i>	Standard Thai
Level 2 <i>Regional</i>	
Level 3 <i>Trade</i>	
Level 4 <i>Educational</i>	Lahu
Level 5 <i>Written</i>	Mandarin, Akha, Hakka, Min Dong, Min Nan, Yue, Hmong Yue, Hmong Daw, Iu Mien, Northern Pwo Karen, West-Central Pwo, S'gaw Karen, Northern Khmer, Khmu, Khün, Western Lawa, Lisu, Lü, Mal, Pattani Malay, Pa'o, Shan, Tai Dam, Thai Sign Language, Thai Song, Northern Thai, Southern Thai, and Parauk Wa.
Level 6a <i>Vigorous</i>	Ban Khor Sign Language, Blang, Western Bru, Hmong Njua, Phrae Pwo Karen, Kataang, Eastern Kayah, Lahu Shi, Lamet, Eastern Lawa, Satun Malay, Nyaw, Phu Thai, Phuan, Prai, Pray 3, Sô, Thai-Lao, Tonga, and Yoy.
Level 6b <i>Threatened</i>	Aheu, Bisu, Western Cham, Kuy, Moklen, Mon, Nyeu, Urak Lawoi, and Yong.
Level 7 <i>Shifting</i>	Akeu, Chiang Mai Sign Language, Jehai, Kensiu, Lua', Moken, Mpi, Nyahkur, Saek, and Tai Ya.
Level 8a <i>Moribund</i>	Chong, Mlabri, Pale Palaung, and Ugong.
Level 8b <i>Nearly Extinct</i>	Kintaq and Mok.
Level 9 <i>Dormant</i>	
Level 10 <i>Extinct</i>	

*Adapted from Lewis et. al 2015

Draper (2015), using the original 8 point Fishman's Graded International Disruption Scales, describes Thai-Lao in further detail. He describes oral Thai-Lao in rural and suburban areas as what would qualify as *level 6a vigorous* on the EGIDS. Residents use Thai-Lao as the language of wider communication and as an important indicator of cultural and ethnic identity. He distinguishes that spoken Thai-Lao remains at an equivalent of *level 6b threatened* in urban centers such as Khon Kaen. Finally, he grades written Thai-Lao separately at the EGIDS equivalent of *level 8b nearly extinct* with an inability of Thai-Lao speakers to use written Thai-Lao without assistance from linguistic experts to revive the written form.

A note on using the term Thai-Lao:

There are multiple terms that are possible to use to describe the Thai-Lao language including Thai-Lao, Lao, Isan-Thai, Isan and Northeastern Thai. Many of the region's residents use Isan to indicate their ethnicity, language and vicinity in the Northeast region. Its use to describe a geographical region can lead to confusion as there are many languages present in the northeast, in addition to what is colloquially understood as the Isan language. In an effort to be more precise I will use the term Thai-Lao in this paper which previous researchers have used to identify (Premsrirat, 2007) while acknowledging that the people of the Northeast use the term Isan to describe their language.

During my interviews and discussions with people in the field some people used Tai Noi to describe the Thai-Lao language. Tai Noi refers to the ancient script which existed 700 years ago, prior to modern day Thai-Lao, Thai or Lao. It is the equivalent of the Roman or Latin alphabet which is the foundational script for many European languages. The ICMRP used the Tai Noi script as a foundation to create a written form for modern day Thai-Lao. While interviewing teachers, some confounded Thai-Lao and Tai Noi, substituting one for the other. It appeared that Tai Noi became a vernacular label to describe both oral and written Thai-Lao. As an outside researcher I will distinguish between the two and use Thai-Lao to describe the oral and written language and use Tai Noi to describe the actual script used for writing (similar to using the Roman alphabet for English).

Methodology

I contacted John Draper, the Project Officer for the ICMRP to inquire what research would be beneficial to the project given my skills and areas of interest. We agreed on a needs assessment of teachers teaching Thai-Lao that emphasized Thai-Lao training and materials, which were two of the main deliverables of the project. We planned for the research to 1) give the project and municipality partners additional information of the experience of teachers and 2) give the funder (the European Union) an independent analysis of the project.

Data Collection Methods

I used a mixed-method design that gave me both qualitative and quantitative data. I used three data collection methods: (1) a survey completed by teachers, (2) classroom observations, and (3) interviews with teachers.

Table 3: Research Methods

Qualitative	Quantitative
Classroom observations (3)	Survey completed by teachers (36)
Interviews of teachers (13)	

There are three municipalities that fully participated in the ICMRP*. The number of schools and teachers per municipality are recorded below:

Table 4: Municipal Schools and Teachers

Municipality	Number of schools	Number of teachers
Khon Kaen	11	22
Muang Phon	3	10
Chum Phae	1	4

**Ban Phai Municipality also participated in the ICMRP but only in certain activities. It did not have any teachers teaching Thai-Lao in its schools.*

Survey

Using my literature review and past experience in the Thai public school system, I drafted a survey for current Thai-Lao teachers to complete. The survey included questions about:

1. Teachers' basic demographic information (number of years as a teacher, age, highest educational degree obtained, sex, mother tongue, and language spoken at home);
2. Teachers' perceived Thai-Lao skills using a Likert scale from 1-5 for writing structure and length, ability to write on a variety of topics, grammatical knowledge of writing, grammatical knowledge of speaking, speaking fluency, listening comprehension, and pronunciation;
3. The type and quantity of Thai-Lao professional development teachers received;
4. Thai-Lao educational materials and professional development teachers would like to have;
5. Teachers' attitudes towards teaching Thai-Lao.

The Likert scale included a description for each ranking so that even if the distance between categories is not necessarily equal, at least teachers can have a common understanding of each ranking. For example, ranking “1” for writing structure and length is described as “I can write zero or a few isolated words.” Compared to ranking “5” which is described as “I can write formal, long essays over 300 words.”

Once drafted, I sent the survey to the ICMRP where project staff made edits and changes. A translator then translated the surveys into Standard Thai while I arranged a second translator to conduct a back-translation to English in order to ensure accuracy. Once I arrived in the field I met with officials from the Khon Kaen Municipality and arranged a pilot of the surveys with six teachers. The pilot led to minor changes to the survey. The Khon Kaen Municipal government provided a list of all Thai-Lao language teachers involved in the project. A project assistant then delivered the survey to each school and selected a Thai-Lao language teacher who was responsible to disperse the survey the remaining Thai-Lao teachers at that school. The project assistant and the teacher agreed upon a deadline based on convenience and amount of time the teacher estimated was needed to have the surveys completed. Due to the small number of Thai-Lao teachers involved in the project, every Thai-Lao teacher in each municipality received a survey. Teachers returned every survey. As a result, the survey data represents the entire Thai-Lao teacher population rather than a sample. The final result was 10 surveys from Chum Phae Municipality, 4 from Muang Phon Municipality, and 22 from Khon Kaen Municipality.

Unfortunately, the survey did not have a space for teachers to write down what municipality they were from so it is not possible to disaggregate based on municipality. Due to the larger number of teachers in Khon Kaen Municipality, the results are skewed toward their experience. The full English version of my survey is in the Appendix.

Observations

I also conducted four observations at two different schools. The schools were a convenience sample. I selected School A in Khon Kaen proper due to having a strong relationship with the school’s vice principal. Here I observed a 6th grade class and 9th grade class. The project’s Project Officer arranged observations at rural School B in Muang Phon Municipality of a 9th grade and a 5th grade Thai-Lao class. For each observation I met with the teacher beforehand and discussed my research goals and intent to minimize my impact on their class. The agreed-upon routine was for teachers to briefly introduce me at the beginning on the class so students would not be distracted throughout the class. During the observations I sat in the rear of the class, took field notes and asked my translator for clarification when needed. My observations of School A were on 7/8/16 from 1 PM-2 PM of the 6th grade class and 7/9/16 from 3:30 PM- 4:30 PM of the 5th grade class. For School B, I conducted my observations on 7/11/16 from 1 PM-2:30 PM.

Interviews

The final source of data are interviews which I conducted at six different schools in the Khon Kaen Municipality and one in Muang Phon Municipality. I chose to primarily interview teachers from Khon Kaen Municipality due to limited time and logistical difficulty in traveling the other three municipalities. Khon Kaen Municipality is more urban and has a greater concentration of

teachers. Khon Kaen Municipality government officials gave me a list of 20 Thai-Lao teachers that served as my sampling frame. I used this to randomly select and arrange interviews with 11 teachers. I randomly selected 11 teachers and called them to arrange interviews. Three teachers did not pick up so I called them again later during the same day. They did not pick up the second time so I randomly selected three additional teachers to call from the sampling frame. I ended up calling a total of 14 of the 20 teachers on the sampling frame. In addition, the project director wanted to organize a trip to observe and interview teachers in neighboring Muang Phon Municipality. Two of my interviews were conducted with teachers in this municipality. I conducted all interviews between the dates of 7/8/16-7/14/16.

The questions I used in interviews were supposed to be informed by the results of the surveys. However, due to logistical barriers outside of my control, the surveys were not completed in time. Instead, I used information from my literature review, conversations with the project staff and initial observations to form the questions in my interviews. I used a semi-structure interview format. This more fluid approach allowed me to capitalize on new or unexpected topics brought up by interviewees and to get additional detail on various topics.

I interviewed teachers during their free periods at their schools, usually in an empty classroom or office. I conducted each interview with a translator. Interviews generally ran around 45 minutes long. Each interview began with us discussing my research goals and going over consent. I always emphasized that teachers did not need to participate and even if they did, they could skip any question that they did not want to answer. I made sure that my participants understood that their interview was confidential and would not be identifiable by name or include any other identifiable information. During the interviews, I frequently checked with the interviewee to ensure that data correctly reflected the ideas and thoughts of participants. I recorded interviews using the Dictaphone recording app on my iPhone. I then transcribed the interviews on Word and had a second translator check the translation in order to test the quality of the original translation of each interview. I compensated teachers for their time and the information they shared with me by giving out gift certificates to cafes. The interview protocol is in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

I typed up each interview and color-coded each interview based on the themes. I used themes from my conceptual framework as a starting point, but also looked for emergent themes not found in my framework. This resulted in me adding a new theme, “administrative support.” The key themes I identified were:

1. needs and current competencies of teachers teaching minority languages (content knowledge, positive attitudes towards mother tongues and pedagogical skills);
2. key conditions for improving competencies (access to professional development for mother tongue competency and teaching quality, correct mother tongue learning materials);
3. consistent government policy;
4. administrative support.

I coded the open-ended answers from my surveys similarly. I input the quantitative data from my surveys into SPSS and conducted descriptive analysis to identify significant themes and relationships between variables. In my Findings sections, all quotations from teachers are from interviews unless otherwise noted.

Limitations and Constraints

In conducting this research, I faced limitations based on language, cultural understanding, collaboration with other researchers, and my positionality.

Language

My first limitation is that I am an outsider to Thailand and that my language skills are not yet at a native level. This made it more difficult to pick up on nuances in answers during my interviews.

Limited Understanding of Thai Culture

I have spent only three years living in Thailand and as a result, I have a limited understanding of Thai culture. This means that there are cultural symbols which I potentially missed.

Collaboration with Research Associates

In partnering with the Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalization project, I worked with multiple Thai professionals who were able to give an insider perspective which is essential to mitigate any undetected biases or assumptions that I might be working with as an outsider. I hope my research supports the efforts of local teachers and the development of Thai-Lao curriculum in public schools.

Positionality

I conducted research in an area I have worked in and have established professional relationships. I worked in the Khon Kaen Municipality for two years and in the Khon Kaen area for another additional year. I believe my understanding of cultural norms and Thai language allowed me to interact with teachers in a manner which made them comfortable and allowed them to open up.

Findings

Here I have organized my findings based on the following themes:

Needs and Competencies

1. content knowledge
2. attitudes towards the Thai-Lao mother tongue
3. pedagogical skills

Key Conditions for Improving Competencies

1. learning materials
2. professional development
3. consistent government policy
4. administrative support

Needs and Current Competencies

Content Knowledge

When asking teachers to assess their own ability on a range of language skills (on a scale of 1=lowest to 5=highest), surveyed teachers ranked writing and grammar skills lowest while oral skills enjoyed higher rankings of proficiency with an average difference of 1 point (see Table 5 below). No skill received a mean of 5. This possibly indicates that teachers generally feel that they have room for improvement in all language skills. No writing skill, aside from “knowledge of writing grammar”, received an individual ranking of 5. However, since this data is a self-assessment, based on teachers’ perception rather than a true measure of their language skill (such as a language test) it is possible that teachers’ rankings are also influenced by feelings of confidence. Either way, this corroborates with teachers’ request in interviews, for additional training which they viewed as essential to being able to teach Thai-Lao effectively. I will discuss this in more detail later.

Table 5: Teachers' Self-Assessment of Thai-Lao Language Ability (n= 36)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Listening comprehension	36	1.00	5.00	3.6944	1.28329
Pronunciation	36	1.00	5.00	3.4167	1.31747
Speaking fluency	36	1.00	5.00	3.2500	1.38099
Reading comprehension	36	1.00	4.00	2.8611	1.04616
Knowledge of speaking grammar	36	1.00	5.00	2.7500	1.07902
Writing structure and length	36	1.00	4.00	2.6944	.85589
Knowledge of writing grammar	36	1.00	5.00	2.4444	.90851
Range of writing topics	36	1.00	4.00	2.1111	.85449

While speaking fluency had one of the highest means, it also had a high standard deviation of 1.38. Upon further disaggregation of the scores for speaking fluency, I observed two extreme

groupings of teachers. Of the teachers, 36% ranked themselves at a 1 or 2 while 30% ranked themselves at the highest possible score 5. This indicates very different needs for training.

Teachers substantiated the low ranking for writing skills in interviews. Teachers expressed a need to check their own spelling and sometimes vocabulary:

I don't speak [Thai-Lao] 100%, it has disappeared from the community. For certain words, we use [Standard] Thai substitutions. If we spoke 100% [Thai-Lao], people would not understand us. This is a problem when we teach students how to write. Sometimes I accidentally write [Standard] Thai words instead of [Thai-Lao].

- Teacher 3

Missing from the survey data but present in my interviews was confusion from one teacher on what was correct Thai-Lao. She assumed that she had an understanding of the Thai-Lao tones she was teaching to students but after attending a workshop, she realized that she had been projecting the tones from her local language onto Thai-Lao vocabulary during lessons. It is unclear from the data if this issues exists with other teachers who are teaching Thai-Lao and are not native speakers.

One teacher stated that in general, people's knowledge of Thai-Lao is incomplete. She explained that many people borrowed words from Standard Thai when speaking Thai-Lao and that many words had been lost throughout the last century. This was outside the scope of my study so it is unclear how extensive the practice of substituting Standard Thai words when speaking Thai-Lao is prevalent (if at all) among Thai-Lao teachers.

Attitudes Toward the Thai-Lao Mother Tongue

I collected data on teachers' attitudes towards Thai-Lao and its teaching, and the following themes emerged:

1. high levels of support for teaching Thai-Lao,
2. differences in how teachers thought Thai-Lao should be taught,
3. teachers positioning themselves as cultural guardians of Thai-Lao.

High levels of support for teaching Thai-Lao

Before the implementation of Thai-Lao as an elective class, Draper (2013, 2014) conducted multiple surveys to evaluate public interest in maintaining Thai-Lao and teaching it in schools. Draper reported 66% of surveyed participants within Khon Kaen city proper supported teaching Thai-Lao in schools and found 75% in a rural area outside the city were highly supportive of teaching Thai-Lao in schools along with Standard Thai and English (although only 65% supported teaching the written form of Thai-Lao). Until I conducted this research, there was no data on how teachers themselves felt about the project and using school time to teach Thai-Lao.

My data showed there were extremely high levels of support among interviewed and survey participants for the project and teaching Thai-Lao. One hundred percent of teachers favored the continuation of teaching Thai-Lao in some form. This was often apparent when I conducted

interviews; some teachers were not very interested interviewing, yet once they started discussing the topic of Thai-Lao they usually lit up and talked at length.

The most common reason teachers voiced when explaining their support was an identification with the goal of the Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalization Programme (ICMRP) to ensure Thai-Lao is preserved and to increase its prestige:

[Teaching Thai-Lao] is great because it revitalizes the language that belonged to the [Northeast] originally. It allows the younger generations to be able to study about this language and to study the culture through language, an ancient language, that is about to disappear. So, this helps preserve and maintain Thai-Lao.

-Teacher 21 (survey)

[Thai-Lao] is in the process of dying. I'm glad and honored to teach [Thai-Lao]. It's dying. Writing has already died out, speaking is in the process of dying out. So we are trying to rebuild it.

-Teacher 3

Such supportive attitudes can contribute to the “buy in” among beneficiaries and increase the overall impact of ICMRP. As Trudell points out, this “buy in” can be a determining factor of whether a mother tongue project succeeds (2007). If teachers do not have favorable opinions of a mother tongue-based project, this attitude can influence the quality of their instruction even though curriculum remains constant from classroom to classroom. For example, if a teacher who believes that Thai-Lao is not important enough to learn may think that students are better off spending instruction time studying Standard Thai (the national language and language of wider communication) and foreign languages such as English or Mandarin, they may spend less time preparing for Thai-Lao class compared to other classes perceived “more important”. Students may pick up on this attitude and internalize it, resulting in a reduction of their own effort in the class.

The data reaffirms that the ICMRP project was reflective of community’s interests and not imposing its own agenda. While Thai-Lao teachers supported the teaching of Thai-Lao overall, it is unclear if non-Thai-Lao teachers share this attitude since I did not include them in the sample.

Different Opinions about How to Teach Thai-Lao

While 100% of interviewed and surveyed teachers agreed that teaching Thai-Lao was a good idea, there was variability in how teachers thought it should be taught. One teacher thought that writing and reading should not be required. Two teachers were doubtful of the language’s practical use and thought it should not be taught as a subject but rather an after school club or non-required elective:

The teaching should allow students to be able to write in Thai-Lao their name and last name, name of locations, name of the teachers. This should be good enough because the students cannot use this language to communicate in ASEAN. I think it is enough for them to be able to read and write something.

-Teacher 10 (survey)

[Thai-Lao] exists in rural areas and those students who come from rural communities know [Thai-Lao]. [Thai-Lao] language class should be arranged for interested students, not for all.

-Teacher 13 (survey)

Conversely, the majority of teachers thought that Thai-Lao should continue as an elective course that all students took even if some students were not native Thai-Lao speakers. A few teachers voiced similar sentiment of wanting to increase the instruction time allotted to Thai-Lao:

We only teach 1 time a week. It is a short time and hard for the students to remember everything.

-Teacher 7

Teachers Identifying as Cultural Guardians of Thai-Lao

Teachers also demonstrated a strong connection with the Thai-Lao curriculum as something representing their cultural identity. Around half of interviewed teachers used their Thai-Lao class to position themselves as stewards of Thai-Lao and Isan (northeastern) culture:

I am happy that the municipality has done this project because a long time ago I didn't know where our language came from. Some things in Isan have already gone extinct but we are bringing it back, using it and restoring it.

- Teacher 4

Students need to be proud of their local language.

- Teacher 12

This cultural pride placed teachers in the position of confronting prejudice:

When students go to Bangkok they aren't confident to speak [Thai-Lao], people look down on them. The important thing is to fix this and make students proud. We don't need to be scared or embarrassed.

- Teacher 2

Mainstream Thai society has often associated Isan culture with backwardness. According to teachers, this view was reflected in the attitudes of some students. One teacher described her students' attitudes when they first introduced the subject explaining:

The students thought learning Thai-Lao is out of date and whoever speaks [Thai-Lao] is corny.

- Teacher 7

Teachers reported feeling responsible for changing their students' perceptions:

The students don't understand why we have to study [Thai-Lao] so we have to explain. Then they enjoy studying [Thai-Lao].

- Teacher 11

Several teachers see the Thai-Lao class as a place to “insert history”. One described it as an opportunity to offer an alternative historical narrative which conflicts with the Thai national history curriculum that incorrectly presents Thailand as a homogenous nation-state where culture developed from the central region. She adds information of Isan culture and history:

A long time ago the Thai kingdom attacked the Isan kingdom (which had belonged to Laos) then the Isan kingdom belonged to the Thai kingdom. But the Isan kingdom had a culture and traditions similar to Laos so the Thai kingdom did not want Isan to retain any documents or evidence that could be used to prove that Isan and Laos are of the same [ethnic] group. The Thai government destroyed everything. They did not want Isan language to remain... Now only monks can read Isan history from Bai-Larn³ which have been hidden so no one can destroy them. From the past until now, Isan has a lot of folk wisdom and Isan people are intelligent but some wisdom has disappeared, passed away with people or destroyed by other groups of people.

- Teacher 13

Another teacher voiced a similar approach to teaching Thai-Lao:

Isan was prosperous in the past and developed a language system before Standard Thai was developed...I have to tell the students about the Isan story.

- Teacher 3

Pedagogical Skills

Thai education chronically has poor pedagogy which is well documented in general (Abell, 2007, Noom-ura, 2013). Teacher-centered teaching is especially prevalent through the country (Phungphol, 2005). My literature review and previous experience in the Thai educational system gave me no indication that teachers teaching Thai-Lao would be different.

However, I did find specific pedagogical challenges specifically related to the implementation of the ICMRP. Teachers who expressed the highest amount of confidence in teaching Thai-Lao were native speakers of Thai-Lao and trained as Standard Thai language teachers. Standard Thai language speakers were more familiar with language acquisition theory and had a repertoire of activities used for teaching Standard Thai which they were able to easily adapt to teach Thai-Lao:

Yes, there will be a problem if the teachers who teach Thai-Lao are not Thai teachers. It is easier for Thai teachers teach Thai-Lao because it has a similar context (both being languages). They are of the same [linguistic] group. [Standard] Thai and Thai-Lao can use the same activities. But social study teachers have a different context. It would be hard for the social study teachers to create the activities for students in a limited time.

- Teacher 7

³ *Bai-Larn* refers to manuscripts made out of leaves. In this context the teacher is speaking of ancient artifacts created before the invention of modern paper.

I was surprised to find that some schools administrators had appointed or asked teachers to teach Thai-Lao who were not Standard Thai language teachers. These teachers had limited or no knowledge of language acquisition or how to teach languages. One social studies interviewed teacher was untrained in teaching languages but also did not speak Thai-Lao.

There may be a rationale for using Standard Thai language teachers to teach Thai-Lao as long as they are also proficient in Thai-Lao. Some teachers demonstrated an ability to teach in an interdisciplinary manner at times and reinforce Standard Thai, Thai-Lao and English in various activities; for example, asking students what a word was in Thai-Lao and English while conducting a reading activity in Standard Thai class. Such teaching techniques are a creative response to the underfunding of Thai-Lao classes and take advantage of the resources available when teaching Standard Thai. Students in the Northeast (as well as nationally) perform dramatically better in Standard Thai compared to other subjects on national tests (Mala, 2016). If these educational outcomes are related to the teaching skills of Standard Thai teachers then hopefully this can transfer to the teaching of Thai-Lao as well.

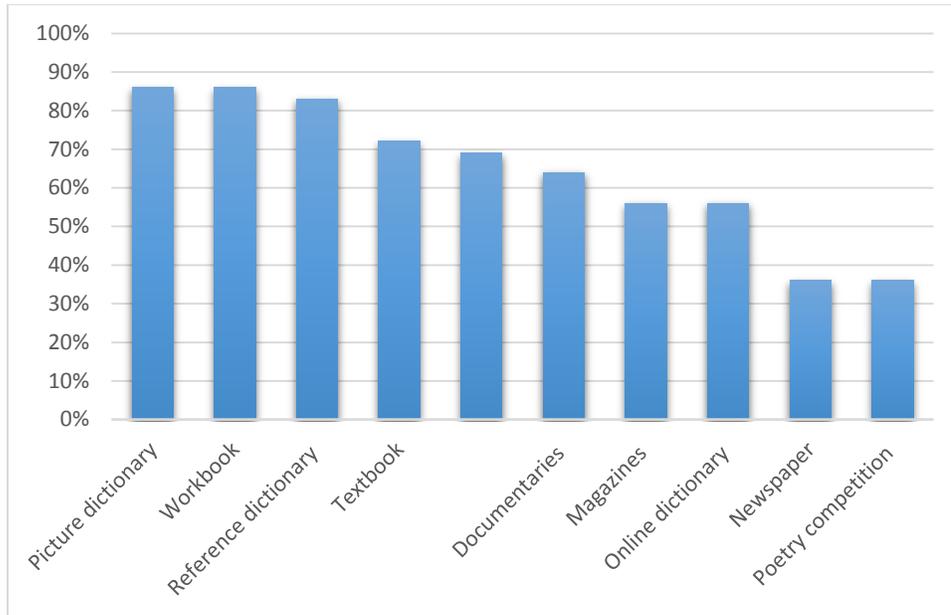
Key Conditions for Improving Competencies

Mother Tongue Learning Materials

During interviews, the majority of teachers expressed great satisfaction with existing posters, flash cards and handwriting workbooks that the ICMRP created. Teachers praised both the handwriting practice workbooks and the colored flash cards for their usefulness in classroom activities and for their attractiveness which was helpful for retaining student interest. However, these materials were insufficient in quantity throughout the district. For example, multiple schools had one class worth of the handwriting practice workbook (approximately 40-60) and were forced to share them among 6 classes and severely limit the number of students who had access to them.

Table 6: Specific Materials Teachers Want (based on survey data)

n= 36



Materials were also insufficient in variety. Four teachers from multiple sites expressed concern that students would lose interest if they used the same few materials year after year. Other teachers displayed impressive creativity and artistic skills with homemade materials, but it is not realistic to expect every teacher to have these skills. In addition, some teachers used their own money to purchase materials. While many expressed they were happy to do so, schools should not expect that this goodwill will last indefinitely.

The survey focused on identifying materials that could benefit teachers in addition to what the ICMRP already provided. There were sharp differences in how teachers responded to which materials would aid in their ability to teach Thai-Lao more effectively, as seen in Table 6 below. In surveys, teachers valued picture dictionaries, workbooks and reference dictionaries. In interviews, teachers pointed out that sometimes when students spoke, they were unsure whether a word was Standard Thai or Thai-Lao. On a pedagogical level, having sufficient dictionaries could aid teachers in using more student-centered activities where students could look up information on their own.

It is not surprising that teachers chose an online dictionary less often on the surveys (55% choose online dictionaries as important). While most schools have a computer lab, often the computers are not sufficient in number for an entire class to use. In some schools, the computer labs were reserved for computer science classes only.

In interviews, teachers also mentioned the following additional materials as potentially useful:

- A website with activities, including audio of proper Thai-Lao pronunciations;

- Books (short novels with progressing difficulty and with various topics to retain and increase student interest) and/or short reading passages;
- Posters (alphabet and vocabulary). Some teachers expressed that existing posters became outdated as researchers at KKU continued to standardize the language and made linguistic changes to official Thai-Lao;
- Plastic lamination machines to protect existing materials and increase their lifespan.

Professional Development

ICMRP conducted the overwhelming majority of training workshops that teachers attended, covering topics of reading and writing (starting with the alphabet, and scaffolding towards writing resumes and reading newspapers); the history of Thai-Lao; and creating and using Thai-Lao curriculum.

Training workshops did not include school visits or follow ups by trainers. However, workshops started with a review of content from previous workshops. The project and Khon Kaen Municipality provided all training free of charge. A few teachers organized their own trips to observe a school in Ubon Province that teaches a form of Thai-Lao, a few even took trips to Laos (the national Lao language taught in public schools there is linguistically very similar to Thai-Lao).

Unfortunately, there is no baseline data available of teachers' perceived Thai-Lao language ability so it is impossible to quantify any changes that the training might have made. However, data from interviews, shows that teachers generally view the project's Thai-Lao training very positively. Despite training taking away from teachers' free time, teachers consistently felt that they learned a substantial amount of content and that workshops were enjoyable:

I think [the trainers] have done a good job... I am happy to train on weekends I have friends and I enjoy it.

-Teacher 13

Despite teachers' high esteem for the training they attended, teachers repeatedly reported they did not feel confident of their grasp of Thai-Lao. Teachers routinely recommended that there be workshops repeating previously learned content:

If we have the same trainings then we won't forget and can teach students correctly. Sometimes I'm not sure [and think], how do I write this? If we train often will won't forget, and will teach correctly.

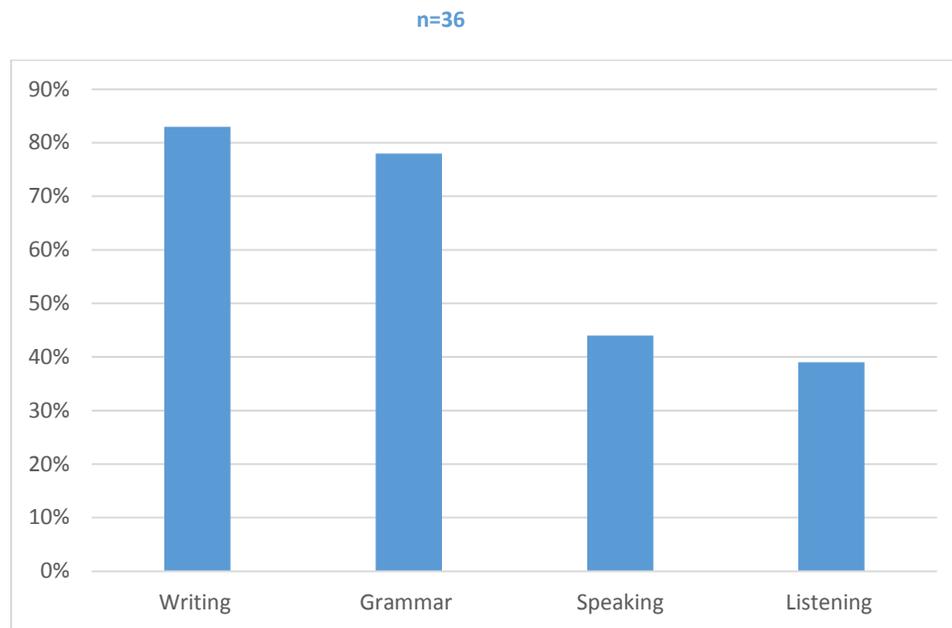
-Teacher 8

When asked what new type of training they would like to receive, teachers stated they wanted to learn how to produce their own learning materials. Their primary reason for wanting to learn was so that they could be more self-dependent and not have to be completely dependent on the project or the municipality government to supply materials. Teachers were also concerned that using the same few materials would cause students to become bored and disinterested in Thai-

Lao class. They felt being able to produce their own materials would allow them to use a more diverse range of materials.

In line with their low self-assessment of their writing ability, teachers overwhelmingly identified writing and grammar training to be more beneficial than training that focuses on developing speaking and listening skills, as shown in Table 7 below. This is not surprising, given that only until very recently, Thai-Lao did not have an orthography.

Table 7: Types of Thai-Lao Professional Development Teachers Want (based on survey data)



Professional development on developing oral Thai-Lao skills will have to be separated into beginner and more advanced groups. Of the teachers, 36% ranked themselves at a 1 or 2 while 30% ranked themselves at the highest possible score 5. Designing separate trainings for oral skills will likely maximize their effectiveness.

Supportive and Consistent Government Policy

Two teachers brought up government education policy as an important factor outside the classroom that influenced teachers' ability to teach Thai-Lao. From my literature review, I assumed that government policy that influenced the teaching of Thai-Lao would be limited to general education policy that allowed for non-dominant languages (non-Standard Thai) to be taught and provided appropriate funding. However, teachers suggested that national educational testing policies were conflicting with Thai-Lao maintenance efforts.

Thai-Lao was introduced as a subject through municipality government policy while testing is a national policy. The importance and pressure the central government puts on the national education test, ONET, contributes to some directors and teachers' hesitancy to support or completely embrace teaching Thai-Lao in schools. Thai-Lao is not on the ONET exam and

schools are not held accountable to how well students score on the subject. However, there is heavy pressure for schools to perform well on the subjects that are tested on ONET (i.e. math, science, Standard Thai, social studies, religion and culture, and foreign languages). Without clear support from directors or there being an equally important Thai-Lao exam, teachers may feel conflicted and unsure how much time to give to Thai-Lao:

Teachers get worried, I haven't taught this lesson but the [ONET] exam is coming up. If the director has a good vision of teaching Thai-Lao then we can take teaching Thai-Lao seriously... if we focus on [Thai-Lao] too much it will effect ONET scores test.

-Teacher 2

Administrative Support

School administration (i.e. school directors and vice directors) emerged in interviews with teachers, as a factor that could have a beneficial or detrimental effect on teachers' ability to teach Thai-Lao effectively. The majority of teachers felt their school administration supported them in teaching Thai-Lao. Teachers defined this support as verbal support, increased Thai-Lao class budgets so teachers could pay for additional photocopies of materials, and making sure teachers' schedules were free to attend Thai-Lao workshops. One vice director provided transportation for teachers and contributed to gas expenses since the school was two hours away from Khon Kaen proper where training workshops were generally held.

Conversely, a few teachers from two different sites stated that their school directors did not take Thai-Lao seriously as a subject:

There are not a lot of people who have authority that do not take Thai-Lao seriously... At our school [the director thinks], if we don't have it, no problem.

-Teacher 2

Such views among school administration may affect how seriously teachers are in teaching Thai-Lao.

Conclusion

The organization of this section is a list of summarized key findings with recommendations for practice, policy, or further research.

Implications for Practice

Create more teaching and learning materials in Thai-Lao

Materials for teaching Thai-Lao were insufficient in quantity. Stone contends that mother tongue programs can survive without access to materials in the mother tongue by teachers creating their own materials (2009). While this is perhaps more manageable for smaller scale projects, for a mother tongue program run on a larger scale such as the ICMRP, a lack of sufficient materials could severely degrade the quality of the education. I found that teachers were overwhelmed with full teaching loads with little extra time to create new materials. Every Thai-Lao teacher also taught another subject (or multiple subjects) four or five days a week while Thai-Lao classes met once a week. So even if a teacher is creative and capable, they may not be able to spare the time. Policy makers at the Ministry of Education should allocate funding to support the local production of Thai-Lao materials. They should prioritize producing materials that teachers see as most useful for improving Thai-Lao. These materials are:

1. Picture and reference dictionaries (dictionaries are essential for teachers to check and develop their own content knowledge. Currently teachers are dependent on workshops, district curriculum and teaching manuals to reference how to spell a word. Students in turn can only reference teachers.)
2. Workbooks
3. Movies
4. Books
5. Posters

Provide teachers with continued access to professional development related to Thai-Lao

While teachers supported the idea of continuing Thai-Lao as a subject, they required continued access to professional development. Policy makers should work with a local university (such as Khon Kaen University) to develop a preservice program which includes training of Thai-Lao. A preservice program would need to emphasize literacy skills since there is a general deficiency in these skills among teachers as well as the general population.

Continuing access to professional development for teaching Thai-Lao will be necessary to support teachers and for the success for language maintenance efforts. Similar to a preservice program, literacy skills will need to be emphasized since most teachers are still learning the orthography of Thai-Lao using the Tai Noi script.

This is consistent with best practices presented in literature that state long-term professional development and follow up (e.g. a review of content in consecutive workshops, coaching, site

visits by trainers, etc.) provide potential for greater teacher learning and development (Smith & Gillespie, 2007).

Implications for Policy

Need for policy changes that support both Thai-Lao maintenance and student performance on national tests

Policy makers should explore ways to address the dilemma placed on teachers: to use instruction time to teach Thai-Lao while ensuring students still perform well on national tests. Options could include adding a local language portion to the test (for schools district offering such a subject), or decreasing the high stakes of the test.

Classroom support for a more multicultural and potentially inclusive Thailand

Policy makers should support and utilize language maintenance efforts as part of strengthening national social cohesion and stability. Education which includes local languages and cultures can potentially combat feelings of alienation by non-dominant ethnicities (e.g. disillusioned Malay-Thai insurgents in southern Thailand).

Use the findings in this report to more effectively support teachers in a the scaling up of the ICMRP to the regional level

If the government scales up the ICMRP model, specifically to more rural areas in the Northeast, and allows teachers to use Thai-Lao as the language class of instruction there is great potential for the improvement of student learning outcomes. While there are many students, specifically in Khon Kaen city who do not speak Thai-Lao as their L1, there are still millions of students in the Northeast who do speak Thai-Lao as their L1. For these students a bilingual or multilingual educational model can increase their literacy in Thai-Lao, but also Standard Thai (as their L2) and English (as their L3) and increase their ability to understand concepts taught in class.

Implications for research

Studies on Thai-Lao proficiency and factors that depress proficiency in the mother tongue

While 82% of adults surveyed by Draper reported oral Thai-Lao proficiency, teachers whom I interviewed estimated that the percent of students who spoke Thai-Lao fluently ranged from 20%-80% (varying school by school) (2015).

Research should examine, what the actual proficiency is among youth and attempt to understand the main factors contributing to the language shift to Thai in the Northeast. Likely factors include the role of Standard Thai in the media (especially media that has strong appeal to youth), the use of Standard Thai as the language of instruction in classrooms, the lack of places youth can study local languages (formally and non-formally), and stigmatization of local language (also how this

stigmatization appears in popular television and movies). This can inform future policy and projects that can produce more media in mother tongues.

Studies on students' opinions of studying Thai-Lao

For future research, it would be insightful to know how students' attitudes are similar or different from teachers' attitudes towards studying Thai-Lao. Do they see it as important to learn? What attitudes do they have which may be different from adults? How are these attitudes influencing their studying of Thai-Lao?

Studies on language-in-education policy and national stability

Future research should further examine the ways in which language-in-education can influence positive cohesion and feelings of belongingness in students. Conversely, how can the lack of non-dominate languages in school exacerbate tensions between different groups in society and risk increasing fragility?

Closing Words

With the ICMRP ending in 2016, it will be up to either local municipalities or the Ministry of Education to continue to fund the teaching of Thai-Lao in schools. I found that teachers were overwhelmingly supportive of teaching Thai-Lao in schools which is consistent with Draper's finding that a majority of community members want their children to study in a multilingual school which includes Thai-Lao (2015). This demonstrates that there is certainly the political will and interest among the local community to have schools teach Thai-Lao. However, according to my findings, either the Ministry of Education, local municipalities or both will have to increase the amount of funding to finance the production of a sufficient number of learning and teaching materials for each school and continued access to training.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations' integration efforts are already accelerating the push towards international languages like English which allow different countries to collaborate and for workers to seek work outside their country (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Often this push towards international languages has come at the expense of local languages which receive less and less emphasis in curriculum. Studying Thai-Lao in formal schools creates an effective mechanism for the preservation of Thai-Lao. It is hopeful that students can learn languages like Standard Thai and English to increase their competitiveness while still retaining their cultural heritage. By continuing the efforts of the ICMRP, the government of Thailand will be joining other Southeast Asia neighbors that are active in similar efforts such as Cambodia, the Philippines, and Singapore (Chua, 2008) in creating more inclusive, educated societies.

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Appendix

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How many times is Tai Noi taught at your school?
2. How many teachers teach Tai Noi?
3. Do you speak Tai Noi at home?
4. How do you like or dislike teaching Tai Noi compared to other subjects?
5. What learning materials do you have access to? Do you actual use?
 - a. What do you wish you had? (list examples if necessary)
6. What training for teaching Tai Noi have you received? Which has been the most useful?
 - a. What training do you wish you would have received?
7. Do you feel that teaching Tai Noi is important?
8. How is your spoken Tai Noi? Listening? Writing reading?
9. What are the challenges of teaching Tai Noi?
10. Do you have any comments or suggestions about how to develop the teaching of Isan, including the Tai Noi script? What additional supports are needed?

SURVEY

Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalization Programme Teacher Training Needs Survey

1. Years as a teacher _____
2. Age _____
3. Gender M / F _____
4. Education level (please circle):
a) Upper secondary/vocational b) Diploma c) BA d) MA e) PhD
5. What is your mother tongue? (e.g., Isan, Phu Thai, Khorat etc.) _____
6. What language do you speak at home? _____
7. How would you rank your knowledge of the Isan language and *Tai Noi* script? (Circle one number per skill)

Skill	No knowledge	Beginner	Low intermediate	High intermediate	Native
Writing ability using Tai Noi – structure and length	1 I can write zero or a few isolated words.	2 I can write basic sentences or phrases.	3 I can write sentences and small paragraphs.	4 I can write informal, short essays under 300 words.	5 I can write formal, long essays over 300 words.
Writing ability using Tai Noi - topics	1 I can write about simple topics like family or parts of the body.	2 I can write about everyday topics.	3 I can write about everyday topics as well as feelings and opinions.	4 I can write about most topics, e.g., the news.	5 I can write about any topic, e.g., religion.

Grammatical knowledge in writing	1 I have little or no understanding of Tai Noi grammar.	2 I understand some basic grammar rules but commonly make mistakes.	3 I can use elementary constructions quite accurately but do not have thorough or confident control of the grammar.	4 I make only rare and small errors of grammar. I understand and can teach basic grammatical concepts.	5 I fully understand grammatical concepts.
Grammatical knowledge in speaking	1 I have little or no understanding of Isan grammar.	2 I understand some basic grammar rules but commonly make mistakes.	3 I can use basic grammar quite accurately but do not have thorough or confident control of the grammar.	4 I make only rare and small errors of grammar. I understand and can teach basic grammatical concepts.	5 I fully understand grammatical concepts.
Speaking ability	1 I can ask questions or make statements with reasonable accuracy only with memorized phrases and sentences.	2 I can use Isan vocabulary correctly to ask questions and answers for simple topics within a limited level of experience.	3 I can communicate in routine social situations and limited work situations, for example by making detailed statements.	4 I can speak participate effectively in most conversations on practical, social, and professional topics.	5 I speak as a native without any accent and can engage in any conversation or give a speech.
Pronunciation	1 I cannot speak like Isan people and they don't understand my Isan accent.	2 I cannot speak like Isan people and sometimes they don't understand my Isan accent.	3 My accent is usually good enough for Isan people to understand.	4 I speak with a good Isan accent.	5 I speak like an Isan native speaker.
Listening comprehension	1 I can only	2 I can	3 I can	4 I can	5 I can

	understand a few words or memorized phrases.	understand basic sentences and conversations. I often have to ask for things to be repeated or for people to slow down.	understand many sentences and conversations. I sometimes have to ask for things to be repeated or for people to slow down.	understand almost everything said at a normal spoken speed.	understand mass media in Isan such as Isan radio and TV programs.
Reading comprehension	1 I can read and understand a few words but not complete sentences.	2 I can read and understand basic sentences.	3 I can read paragraphs.	4 I can read short stories or folk tales.	5 I can read original palm leaf manuscripts.

8. What training have you received to teach the Tai Noi alphabet? (e.g., basic, intermediate)

9. How many times have you attended Tai Noi training? _____

10. How many hours of training in Tai Noi have you received in total? _____

11. What learning materials do you have for teaching the Tai Noi alphabet (please circle)

a) books b) worksheets c) videos d) posters e) flash cards f) other _____

12. What is challenging about teaching the Isan language and Tai Noi? (please circle)

a) pronunciation b) writing the alphabet c) cannot understand materials d) spelling

e) cannot understand vocabulary f) students not motivated g) school not motivated

h) not an Isan speaker i) no knowledge of how to teach languages j) other: _____

13. What additional support would improve your ability to teach the Tai Noi alphabet?

(check all that apply)

Materials:

a) Reference dictionary _____

b) Picture dictionary _____

c) Textbook _____

d) Workbook _____

e) Online dictionary _____

f) Multimedia videos of cultural performances with Tai Noi subtitles _____

g) Isan-language movies _____

h) Isan-language documentaries _____

i) Tai Noi magazine _____

j) Tai Noi newspaper _____

k) Tai Noi poetry competition _____

Training in:

a) Writing _____

b) Grammar _____

c) Speaking _____

d) Listening _____

Other resources: _____

14. Overall, how do you feel about teaching Isan literacy using Tai Noi?

15. Overall, how do you feel about teaching the Isan language?

16. Do you have any comments or suggestions about how to develop the teaching of Isan, including the Tai Noi script?

Would you be willing to be interviewed?

If yes, please provide your phone number _____