

Best Practices in Promoting Bilingual Proficiency for Early Childhood Students in Thailand: Case Studies of Satit Bangna School and Plearnpattana School

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Abstract

This research aimed to explore the best practices studies of Satit Bangna School and Plearnpattana School in promoting bilingual proficiency for early childhood students in Thailand. Data were collected through documentation, archives, and in-depth interviews of four school administrators and twenty-four teachers. The data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti software. The results indicated that the best practices of Satit Bangna School and Plearnpattana School shared a theme: parental expectation. There were two categories: school and home. The first category obtained two codes: in-class practices and extra-class activities. The second category obtained two codes: extra classes and supporting resources.

Keywords: bilingual proficiency, early childhood education, school best practice

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Introduction

Bronfenbrenner (1979, pp. 8-11) proposed that human development unfolds in a nested set of systems, involving cultural, social, economic, and political elements, not merely psychological ones. These systems and their interactions can nurture or stifle optimal development. These systems and their interactions can nurture or stifle optimal development

Language is the most powerful tool in the development of any human being. It is undeniably the greatest asset we possess. A good way to grasp a language is by using synonymous with a sound ability to think. In other words, language and thought were inseparable' (Vygotsky, 1986, pp. 27-28). Language has a major role in supporting children's process of identity formation and in helping them understand where they fit in the new environment they were entering (Clarke, 2009, p. 8). It was argued that language learning was regarded as the cornerstone of human existence. Knowing languages can help us to express our opinions, hopes, and even our dreams (Tavil, 2009, pp. 331-340).

Honoring diversity, respecting and promoting the use of languages other than English and also ensuring all children acquired English as a second language, was fundamental to securing the rights of all children to an early childhood program that met their needs and provided them with educational and social outcomes that assisted them in attaining a high standard of education and a prosperous life in the future. The acquisition of language was essential not only to children's cognitive development, but also to their social development and wellbeing. (Clarke, 2009, p. 8)

Noam Chomsky (1965, pp. 48-49) proposed the language acquisition device (LAD) to explain how children, when exposed to any human language, are able to learn it within the first few years of life. Chomsky argued that all humans are born with an instinctual knowledge of what comprises a human language. Included in this innate knowledge must be the common characteristics of all the world's languages. Therefore, the acquisition of a second language should occur at the youngest age possible, in order to obtain optimal language development. Glenn Doman sums up this belief in his classic quote: "To a baby born in London tonight, English is a foreign language no more or less foreign than French, Chinese or Swahili. And yet, the baby will master that first (and most important) foreign language in a few short years" (Doman, 2005, p. 79)

The emerging need of bilingual proficiency in Thailand can be demonstrated by the mismatch between the Thai labor pools current language skills and that of the

knowledge level which is demanded by the employers, in the labor market. According to an employer survey conducted by the Ministry of Labor in 2015, a large proportion of both semi-skilled and skilled Thai workers demonstrated lower-than-expected proficiency in terms of various skills. These skills included English language, computing, mathematics, communication, management and occupational competency. Thais of all age groups tend to demonstrate age specific problems that may negatively affect the nation's overall market competitiveness, including age specific and intellectual/cognitive development from early childhood. More than twenty-seven percent of young Thai children demonstrated some level of delayed development, the most significant delay being that of language development (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2017, p. 13).

The Twelfth Plan constitutes a compatibility with the implementation of the 20-year National Strategy (2018-2037) which stated the following targets: "Thai society to have low inequality. Thai citizens to be of high quality, disciplined, alert to learning, active in lifetime self-learning, knowledgeable, highly-skilled human capital to drive Thailand to be a country of smart economy, society, and citizens." (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2017, p. 6)

In October 2018, Thailand's cabinet approved the Early Childhood Development Bill. Additionally, the National Standard for Early Childhood Care 2018 has been launched as assigned in the Bill. There is one standard mentioned in the Bill, namely, "Early child has appropriate communication skill at his/her age. Thai is the primary language. Young children should become familiar with other languages"

Interesting previous studies of practical and proven strategies for teaching young dual language learners (Espinosa and Magruder, 2014, pp. 76-113) mentioned that best practices for dual language young learners were the same as best practices for native English-speaking young children. The younger students required a special classroom and instructional enhancements and attention to their background knowledge as they develop proficiency in two languages. Early childhood teachers need to make specific instructional adjustments for dual language young learners included: supporting the child's home language; spending time getting to know each child and family; creating as much individualization and small group instruction as possible; setting up the classroom and including materials that are culturally familiar and represent children's home

languages; incorporating and building on each child's prior conceptual and language knowledge; using specific personalized oral language strategies that enhance comprehension; frequent and continuous monitoring of the child's stage of language development; building effective partnerships with parents; and finally, using a general high-quality, intentional curriculum.

A study of scientific knowledge highlights the benefits of bilingualism and included a concurrent increase in parents' selecting to have their children learn a second language. The California State Department of Education (2015, p. 224) has stated: "Being exposed to two or more languages at a young age is a gift. It is a gift because children who are able to learn through two or more languages benefit cognitively, socially, and emotionally." Therefore, this research seeks to explore the "best practices" in early childhood schools and promote bilingual proficiency in Thailand.

Research Objective

This research aimed to investigate the best practices of schools in Thailand to promote bilingual proficiency for early childhood students.

Research Methodology

1. Population and sample

1.1 The population included twenty private schools in Thailand that registered an early childhood education curriculum with the Office of Private Education Commission, the Ministry of Education. Further, two schools: Satit Bangna School and Plearnpattana School, were selected because of their outstanding performances, awards, positive reputation, and high levels of social acceptance. The criteria used to select the best practice schools included: private school, early childhood education, outstanding performance, award winning, reputation, renowned and prominent among peers. The highest score gained from three experts was considered in selecting two best practice schools.

1.2 The research sample consisted of 4 school administrators and 24 English language teachers of Satit Bangna School and Plearnpattana School.

2. Research instruments

Semi-structured interview questions adapted from Smith and Lynch (2010, pp. 43-45) concept of Learning Management, Cummins (2005, pp. 4-5) concept of

Bilingual Proficiency, and Gort (2014, pp. 9-10) concept of Types of Bilinguals. The first draft of the semi-structured interview questions were reviewed by the advisers. Then, five experts reviewed the first draft of the questions, using the Index Objective Congruence (IOC) for the content validity. The adjustment of the research instruments was made based upon the experts' advice. The final interview questions were shown below:

Table 1 Interview questions

Learning Outcome	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How does Thailand's educational policy in promoting student's bilingual proficiency affect the learning outcome?2. How does the expectation of parents and community of the student's bilingual proficiency affect the learning outcome?3. How does the school provide professional support and development services of the student's bilingual proficiency affect the learning outcome?
Curriculum Development	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How does Thailand's educational policy affect the school curriculum planning to enhance student's bilingual proficiency?2. How does school provide social activities to develop student's bilingual proficiency?3. How does school provide extra-curricular activities to develop student's bilingual proficiency?
Pedagogical Strategy	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How do the teacher's design a pedagogical strategy to improve the student's bilingual proficiency?2. How does the school provide professional support and development services to encourage teacher's pedagogical strategy?

Note: For each question, the researchers ensured that the interviewees provided any related thoughts, feelings, and environmental conditions. If an item was omitted, the researcher probed the interviewees to provide the missing details.

3. Data collection

Subsequent to receiving permission from the Satit Bangna School and Plearnpattana School to visit the campus, the researcher was appointed to visit Satit Bangna School first. At the beginning of the interview, standardized instructions were read aloud to each participant. The respondents were informed that the premise of the interview was not to “test” the respondent for “right” or “wrong” answers. Rather, it was to understand their individual thought process and understanding of the questions as well as to explore any suggestions or comments they had about the questions. Following the second interview, six groups, each consisting of two early childhood education English teachers were interviewed. The teachers were of both Thai and Filipino ethnicity. All interviews of the teachers were audio-recorded and photographed with the permission of the participants. Plearnpattana School was later visited, the first session interview with the deputy director. Following the interview six groups of Early Childhood English teachers were interviewed. Each group consisted of two teachers of either Thai or Filipino ethnicity similar to the first school, all interviews were audio-recorded and photographs were taken for visuals, subsequent to receiving permission from each individual interviewee.

4. Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed by a certified transcriptionist. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interviews by combining the notes pertaining to each evaluated survey item, exploring and aggregating common themes across the interviews, and identifying key findings that may indicate differences between the intended interpretation and that of the respondents. The data analysis was completed utilizing a qualitative data analysis program—Atlas.ti software (Muhr, 2020, p. 1).

Conclusion and discussion

Conclusion

The conclusion from the detailed interviews of the four administrators and twenty-four teachers from the selected schools were transcribed by a certified transcriptionist and shown below:

Question 1. How does Thailand’s educational policy in promoting student’s bilingual proficiency affect the learning outcome?

The respondents stated that it did not have any educational policy to promote student's bilingual proficiency currently. There were some key performance indicators to ensure that students should be exposed to some foreign languages. However, nothing was mentioned in the Thailand's educational policy to promote student's bilingual proficiency affecting the learning outcome.

Question 2. How does the expectation of parents and community about the student's bilingual proficiency affect the learning outcome?

The respondents informed that parents and community expected the improvement of student's bilingual proficiency which shown in the students' overall learning outcome.

Question 3. How does the school provide professional support and development services of the student's bilingual proficiency affect the learning outcome?

The respondents mentioned that schools provided professional support and development services to improve student's bilingual proficiency or gave permission to the organizations offering professional services to the students. They believed that these support and services would enhance the overall learning outcome of the students.

Question 4. How does Thailand's educational policy affect the school curriculum planning to enhance student's bilingual proficiency?

The respondents mentioned that the private schools had the school curriculum based on the educational policy and normally suggested some alternative or elective courses to improve the student's bilingual proficiency. Especially for school advantages, English Program—EP or extra-class activities to develop students' proficiency were needed.

Question 5. How does school provide social activities to develop student's bilingual proficiency?

The respondents mentioned that there was a social impact on improving student's bilingual proficiency. For example, the school excursion provided students to expose to the English signboard by the street that would be able to help develop students' reading and speaking skills. Also, social values on students who can get into

the famous schools. Therefore, schools provided supported social activities to improve student's bilingual proficiency to increase the acceptance rate.

Question 6. How does school provide extra-curricular activities to develop student's bilingual proficiency?

Schools always provide extra-curricular activities to support improvement of the student's bilingual proficiency. If school did not provide needed activity, parents were looking for it from other places such as playgroup.

Question 7. How does teacher's design of pedagogical strategy improve student's bilingual proficiency?

The respondents revealed that pedagogical strategy was important to any learning experience students might have. Students would be attracted to the interesting design and consequently led to better bilingual proficiency.

Question 8. How does the school provide professional support and development services to encourage teacher's pedagogical strategy?

The respondents mentioned that teachers should be trained to use appropriate lesson plans for the early childhood students.

Thematic analysis of the 28 interview transcripts were completed by using the computer software to analyze qualitative data was used. The emergent themes, categories and codes analyzed from Atlas.ti computer software was shown below:

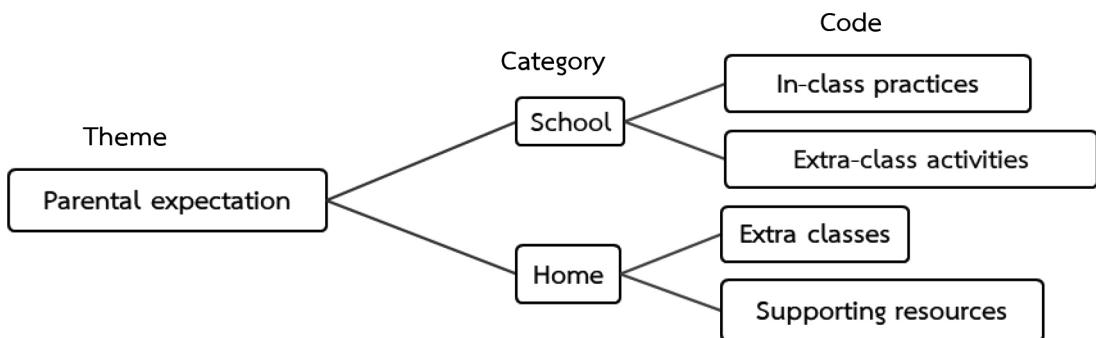


Figure 1: Best practices in promoting bilingual proficiency for early childhood students in Thailand: case studies of Satit Bangna School and Plearnpattana School

From Figure 1, theme was “Parental expectations”. There were two categories: “School” and “Home”. The category “School” had two codes—“In-class practices” and “Extra-class activities”. The other category “Home” also had two codes—“Extra classes” and “Supporting resources”.

Theme: Parental expectations. The respondents discussed the parents’ desires and expectations regarding their children’s second language ability with the researcher. All of the respondents are in agreement that it requires the efforts of teachers in the school and the efforts of the parents in the home, to effectively improve the children’s bilingual proficiency.

There were some suggested activities to promote bilingual proficiency within school. In-class practices might be related to games such as building blocks, animal sounds and color islands. These activities would provide language practices for the students while they also enjoy playing games. Regarding extra-class activities, teachers may take students outdoors and let them look for tree leaves, interesting rocks and insects in the garden. They can discuss about the items seen in the classroom.

Also, there were some interesting activities to promote bilingual proficiency at home. Parents normally brought students to attend Arts and Crafts, Science Playgroup and Music lessons. These activities would enhance bilingual proficiency of the students while they were attending. As for supporting resources, parents may use online resources from YouTube or Netflix which have plenty of learning resources for early childhood children. In addition, some offline resources from books and toys were also important to improve student’s languages.

Discussion

Best practices in promoting bilingual proficiency for early childhood students through the activities done at home was a key success factor. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 14) believes that the primary relationship needs to be with someone who can provide a sense of caring that is meant to last a lifetime which was reflected from the surroundings of both best practice schools were safe, healthy, and support learning. This was an additional attractive motivation for the parents. Early childhood policies and programs can play a major role in shaping these systems, thus potentially promoting human health and

well-being. The family is the smallest but most influential unit in society. How parents in each family raise the child, will affect the human capital of the entire nation that compatible with the interview that parents and community expected the improvement of student's bilingual proficiency which shown in the students' overall learning outcome.

Bilingualism is one of the core requirements in the global society of today. Being Trilingual and multilingual might very well be a necessity in the near future. Best practices in promoting bilingual proficiency for early childhood students through the activities done in the school was another key success factor. Noam Chomsky (1965, pp. 48-49) proposed that second language acquisition should be accomplished at the youngest age possible in order to obtain optimal language development. Therefore, most private early childhood institutions in Thailand provided EP programs or after-school English lessons. Some of them have the comparative checklists between potential schools they may intend to send their children to. This same idea was expressed by Glenn Doman (2005, p. 79) who said: "To a baby born in London tonight English is a foreign language no more or less foreign than French, Chinese or Swahili. And yet, the baby will master that first (and most important) foreign language in a few short years". Thus, some parents and some early childhood institutions, especially the private ones, believe in implementing bilingual environments to educate their children. The private schools had the school curriculum based on the educational policy and normally suggested some alternative or elective courses to improve the student's bilingual proficiency.

Recommendations

1. The next step in this research is to validate the research result in this study with other groups of school administrators and teachers.
2. It should be further use more nationally representative sample of school administrators and teachers of early childhood students. If validated, the results of this research may be used to develop early childhood learning management policy on bilingual proficiency.

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