

**Reference Document on Language Situations in the Seameo Countries  
for the UNESCO-RELC Conference on Language Teaching Issues :  
A Report from Thailand**

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**ABSTRACT**

Thailand can be divided into 4 major dialect areas :

Northern Thai (Kam Mueng, Yuan)

Northeastern Thai (Isan, Lao)

Central Thai (Siamese)

Southern Thai (Pak Tai)

Standard Thai which is based on a prestigious social class accent of Bangkok is the official language of the country. It is also the medium of instruction.

Besides the Thai dialects, there are approximately 49 other minority languages spoken by ethnic minority groups in the countries. These minority languages may be grouped into 7 language families: Tai, Mon-Khmer Malayo-Polynesian, Tibeto-Burman, Karen, Miao-Yao, and Chinese.

Foreign languages in Thailand are in two streams: classical languages consisting of Pali, Sanskrit, and Arabic and modern languages consisting of English, Chinese, French, Japanese, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, and Modern Arabic. The languages of all friendly nations have equal status. However, English is the most widely used language for both academic and occupational purposes.

Concerning minority languages, Thai based scripts or Roman based phonetic scripts have been used. The move to the Thai script has been encouraged by the Thai government. The process may be easier among the groups that do not have a long history of literacy in their own language. For the group with a history of literacy in their own language, however, the process may be quite difficult.

With regard to educational policies, the State is responsible for education at all levels. The State is to promote, provide, advance, support, and manage the education of the country through its various offices and agencies. The cabinet deter-

mines the educational policies under the supervision of the National Educational Commission. The Ministry of Education and the Office of University Affairs also determine the policies for particular educational issues. At present the 1977 national educational scheme implemented by the 1978 curriculum which replaces the old curriculum of 1960 channels the school system into 6 years of primary education, 3 years of lower secondary education, and 3 years of upper secondary education. Vocational education and pre-service teacher training are the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education. University education and education in private colleges are under the supervision of the Office of University Affairs.

With respect to language in education, language teaching and learning in Thailand consists of standard Thai education which is the native language and the foreign language education. The curriculum for the native language is normally divided into three main streams: language and skills, literature, and linguistic integrating career education with liberal and humanistic education.

The foreign language curriculum generally starts in the first year of secondary education. The curriculum for English begins earlier at grade 5 because of social needs. The foreign language curriculum may be classified into 3 main categories: language and skills for communication, literature for arts and humanistic values, and linguistics for scientific study of language. Foreign language education is in 3 streams: liberal education, humanistic education, and career or utilitarian education. General English and literature courses are examples of language education in the first and second streams, whereas English for Special Purposes courses are in the last stream. Other foreign languages Pali, Sanskrit, and Khmer are mainly in higher education. These classical language are studied for their linguistic and historic values especially for their relationships with Thai.

Concerning language methodology the learner-centered approach is encouraged. Individualized mode of instruction and ability grouping are recommended. Considerations for local requirements and identities are provided for in terms of method and materials construction. In higher education the individualized mode in the form of self-study and ability grouping/peer tutoring are quite common. The lock-step approach in the form of lectures and tutorials are widely used.

The language materials come from 3 main sources: (1) materials construction committees of experts and language teachers appointed by the Ministry of Education, (2) commercial sources-after the approval of the screening committees also appointed by the Ministry of Education, and (3) especially in universities and teacher training colleges materials are prepared by Thai teachers and contract teachers who are native speakers of a foreign language.

For primary and secondary education, the teachers and the schools are responsible for evaluating student progress and achievement. The Testing Bureau of the Ministry of Education is responsible for developing standardized language tests

for student external evaluation and school accountability purposes. In higher education, the Office of University Affairs annually appoints a committee to construct screening tests for selecting students for seats in various universities. Each university is conducting its own tests and evaluation. In the like manner, each teacher training college is responsible for screening and evaluating the students.

The main problems of language education in Thailand are lack of suitable instructional materials, teachers' inexperience in language use and lack of a clear understanding of methodology, testing and evaluation. Lack of research and evaluating instruments constitutes another major problem. To solve these problems, closer teacher supervision by local and central educational authorities is recommended. A recommendation is made to set up a clearinghouse to assemble and disseminate information on language research, to analyze research needs, to organize seminars, workshops, courses and conferences and to provide consultancy services for language teachers. More funds for both pre-service and in-service teacher training should be obtained to enable the language teachers to become fully efficient in language instruction.