Celebrating our linguistic diversity

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If you are reading this, you are one of the 1.3 billion people who use English as a first or second language. Nonetheless, International Mother Language Day, celebrated annually on Feb 21, calls on us to remember the importance of all languages.

Breathing is natural, easily taken for granted. In the same way, people often overlook the importance of their mother language, or mother tongue, broadly defined as the first language acquired in childhood. This is particularly true when people mistakenly judge a well-known language like English, Mandarin Chinese or Thai as being superior to languages spoken by fewer people.

The mother tongue is the foundation of cognitive development. Through it we develop a sense of self and begin to explore the world. Children who are compelled to learn in a language that is neither their mother tongue nor a language they understand are educationally disadvantaged; they are more likely to repeat grades and less likely to go on to higher education. Indeed, the World Bank has found that half of the world's out-of-school children speak minority languages.

Consider the situation in Thailand's deep South. Ministry of Education statistics show that Pattani Malay-speaking children make up close to 100% of the primary student population in 758 government schools. Nonetheless, the children are expected to instantly adapt themselves to the same all-Thai learning environment as Bangkok students. The result is far from satisfactory. More than 60% _ two out of every three children in the South _ still have below-average Thai writing abilities at the end of grade three, compared to 16% of students nationwide.

Few Pattani Malay young people have sufficient Thai language abilities to gain entrance to Thailand's best universities, which is a key reason why only 12% of civil servants in the deep South are Pattani Malays _ despite the fact that they make up 80% of the local population.

The neglect of mother languages in education policies is often linked to creating misunderstanding and in some cases civil unrest in many countries including Bangladesh, Italy, Pakistan, the Philippines, Spain, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

This does not have to be the case. A massive body of evidence _ over 1,500 published studies _ has proven that well-designed mother tongue-based education dramatically improves the academic success of such children. Students who develop strong basic academic skills in their mother language and then systematically acquire the national language do much better in school than children who are forced to study in languages they do not speak.

Some claim that smaller languages that do not have alphabets cannot be used for education. Nonetheless, in the past century over one thousand languages have developed alphabets for the first time. Every year, books are being written in languages that never had books before.

in Thailand, Mahidol University linguists have cooperated with 23 ethnic minority communities to develop alphabets and produce hundreds of mother tongue books _ a process that has raised community self-confidence and boosted children's academic achievement. Mahidol and its local partners are also in the midst of a nine-year pilot bi/multilingual project in several southern schools; by the end of primary Grade 1, the Pattani Malay children in these schools are performing better in all subjects (compared to children in neighbouring villages in "normal" Thai-only schools), and many parents report that their younger children read and write much better than their older siblings.
This is a genuine victory for International Mother Language Day—a day proclaimed by Unesco in 1999 and observed every year since to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism. Achieving positive outcomes requires the development of language policies that enable each linguistic community to use its mother language, as widely and as often as possible, including in educational, administrative and legal contexts. Only if such multilingualism is fully accepted as an invaluable asset in the development process can all languages find their place in our rapidly globalising world.

In declaring “Books for Mother Tongue Education” to be theme for this year’s International Mother Language Day, Irina Bokova, Director-General of Unesco, states, “In some countries, the dearth of books and textbooks in local languages hampers development and social inclusion and represents a violation of the right to freedom of expression. Digital tools can help to fill this gap, but they are not enough. We must do more to distribute materials and books as widely and fairly as possible, so that all people—children above all—can read in the language of their choice, including in their mother tongue. This can also boost progress towards the Education for All goals by 2015.”

Unesco has declared Bangkok the World Book Capital of 2013. What better way to celebrate this honour than to feature books not only in Thai, but also in Thailand’s 70 minority languages—and to encourage the writing of even more!

Kirk Person and Sheldon Shaeffer work for the Asia Multilingual Education Working Group, comprised of UN agencies, NGOs and academic institutions set up to remove barriers of access to education for ethno-linguistic communities in Asia.

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