

In uphill battle, Isaan language taught in schools

written by Sally Mairs | February 10, 2014

KHON KAEN—It has been banned from Thai classrooms for over 100 years, but the local language of the Northeast, referred to as “Thai Lao,” “Isaan,” or often just plain “Lao,” is making a comeback.

Eleven municipal schools in Khon Kaen have started teaching students how to read and write in Thai Lao, thanks to an E.U.-funded project known as [The Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalization Program](#) (ICMRP). Two years after receiving a 20 million baht grant, ICMRP has achieved some notable successes, but formidable challenges lie ahead.

Starting last May, Khon Kaen municipal schoolteachers began teaching the script of Thai Lao, known as Tai Noi, to students ranging from grades four to eight.

The principal challenge so far has been most teachers’ unfamiliarity with the written form of the language. Although the majority of people in the Northeast still speak Thai Lao, the literacy rate of the language is close to zero, save for a few elders, academics, and monks. There have been no new major works of literature written in Thai Lao for almost a century, and scholars have just embarked on the complicated process of adapting the antiquated alphabet, Tai Noi, to modern times. As a result, many teachers in Khon Kaen’s municipal schools have recently learned the alphabet for the first time themselves.

“I was trained for only a month before I started teaching my own class,” said Udomsarp Lurngubol, a Thai language teacher at Suansanook Municipal School who started teaching Tai Noi to his seventh grade students this semester. Mr. Udom stopped the class in December to make time for boy and girl scout activities, and he has already forgotten how to write the ABC’s in Tai Noi script.

Mr. Udomsarp said he would like to see the program continue, but he doesn’t feel confident in his ability to teach the subject. “It would be better to have someone else come to my class once a week and teach it than to have a rookie like me who is starting at the same level as the students,” said Mr. Udom.

Some teachers, parents, and children in the Khon Kaen community have asked why it’s necessary to learn Tai Noi script in the first place.

For Professor Chob Desuankok, who studies the history of Northeastern Thailand, teaching children how to read and write in Thai Lao is about more than achieving literacy. It’s about reclaiming the cultural roots of the Northeast.

“People in Bangkok who say that their 300,000 votes are better than one million votes in the Northeast are looking down on our intelligence,” said Professor Chob. “But revitalizing Tai Noi will show that we have our own literature, our own teachings, our own ethics. Our voice will be made equal by this.”

Professor Chob added, “We want our kids to understand who they are, and why they have to keep on being Isaan people.”

Others see the promotion of Thai Lao literacy as way to increase academic results across the board. On national education tests, the Northeast is consistently one of the country’s lowest-scoring

regions. ICMRP project officer John Draper said this could be because most Northeastern children are taught in a language that is not their mother tongue.

At this early stage of language revitalization, the teachers in Khon Kaen lack basic resources like an instruction manual on how to teach Tai Noi, or a standard-reference dictionary, which is still being created. Progress has been stalled by disagreement among academics over the spelling of many words, and on issues like whether or not tone marks—which weren't included in ancient manuscripts, but are used in the spoken language—should be included.

Khon Kaen University linguistics Professor Rattana Chantao doesn't think it is possible to reach agreement on these issues any time soon, so she has decided to forge ahead on developing a 600-word dictionary for primary school students in Khon Kaen. In her opinion, tone markers must be added to make the Tai Noi script accessible to young people.

"Without tone markers, it's too difficult to learn," said Professor Rattana. "Revitalization encompasses many concepts, and I think it means adapting to changes in the culture and the language."

Although the project relies heavily on backing from the E.U.'s External Action Service, which funds 90% of the project, coordination between the Thai municipalities and the foreign agency has proven difficult.

Mr. Saran Paonariang, who works in Khon Kaen Municipality's Education Department, said that adjusting to the European style of accounting has been a challenge.

Furthermore, E.U. funding has been temporarily delayed because of uncertainty over an internal audit, said ICMRP project officer Mr. Draper. Mr. Draper attributes the delay in funding to cross-cultural differences between the two agencies.

"The municipalities know little about the E.U., and the E.U. has little experience working with Thai municipalities," said Mr. Draper. "I would describe the slippage in terms of problems with the socio-political interface that results from any principal-agent contractual relationship between two entities who do not really know each other."

The delay in funding, as well as numerous changes in staff on both the E.U. and the Thai side of the project, have had an even more detrimental impact on other parts of the program financed by the grant. There has been only marginal progress in the municipalities of Chum Phae, Ban Phai, and Phon, which were tasked with designing and installing signs in Thai Lao, manufacturing traditional Isaan-style school uniforms, and curating an online database of Isaan cultural performances.

This bureaucratic stagnancy is not just a consequence of the difficulties posed by international collaboration. A draft of a National Language Policy, which was approved by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, recognizes Thai Lao as a regional language and supports bilingual education for children of ethnic groups, like many in Isaan, whose mother tongue is different from Central Thai. Yet, all progress on implementing the policy has been frozen since the dissolution of the government in December.

Revitalizing Isaan language literacy is proving to be an uphill battle. But for ICMRP project officer Mr. Draper, the biggest achievement has been a small, but essential one: the creation of a community of activists, historians, and linguists in Khon Kaen who are united around the cause of promoting Isaan culture, language, and identity.

The new sign to the entrance of Khon Kaen University, which was erected last month, captures the

budding community-mobilization around this goal. It has the name of the University written in Standard Thai, English, and for the first time, Tai Noi.

“Thousands of people are going to ask, ‘what is that language doing there?’ Mr. Draper said.

“Sooner or later that is going to have a positive effect on promoting Thai Lao identity and the real history of the Northeast.”