

Attitudes towards, and self-perceived ability in, English in an ethnic minority village in Thailand

What this research was about and why it is important

The spread of English as a global language has had a serious impact on the educational policies of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Developing English language proficiency is now seen as key to accessing professional or academic opportunities, especially now that English has been adopted as the working language of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. English language courses are now compulsory in many Asia-Pacific primary educational systems, starting from an ever-younger age. However, fears exist that considerable disparities in the quality of educational provision and resourcing across both the urban-rural and public-private divides mean that children from poorer backgrounds are being disadvantaged. This study explored how inhabitants of an ethnic minority village in Thailand related to English. It was found that villagers between the ages of 20 to 29 reported the highest level of English ability and usage, but that in general the villagers did not value English to a high degree in their daily lives.

What the researcher did

- The researcher selected a semi-rural village in the Northeast of Thailand, populated by members of the ethnic and linguistic minority group the *Lao Isan*. This group has historically been disadvantaged socially, educationally and economically, and has been noted frequently to underachieve in English study relative to the rest of the country.
- A survey was used to investigate factors such as demographic information, attitudes towards the Thai and English languages, self-reported proficiency in these languages, and future aspirations regarding language use. The English language section was completed by 103 people, all of who were over the age of 20.
- Additionally, interviews were conducted with two teachers at the village school, as well as a number of other figures including the mayor, a local religious leader, and two elderly residents, in order to understand how language education and usage had developed in the village over time.

What the researcher found

- In terms of writing, the majority of respondents perceived themselves as being at best of medium proficiency, with many judging themselves at low proficiency. However, younger respondents typically felt more capable of writing English.
- The respondents generally read very little in English. The majority of the reading they did was confined to English language text books, either for themselves or for helping their children.
- Age and education had the greatest effect on English ability. Furthermore, respondents who expressed 'less Isan identity' typically expressed a more positive view of reading English, possibly suggesting they felt a more 'global' identity.
- Very few respondents reported being able to read newspapers in English, and those that did were largely in 20-29 range, suggesting the younger generation have developed stronger language skills than the older residents, possibly benefitting from having started learning English earlier.
- The 30 to 39-year-old group, who were mainly agricultural workers, made little use of English literacy. The 20 to 29-year old group worked in a much broader range of occupations, and generally had better language skills. However, they did not report an increased affection for the language, suggesting their motivation was mainly instrumental.
- In terms of future aspirations, 97% of all respondents wanted their children to learn English in bilingual or multilingual (Thai, English, Lao Isan) schools, suggesting some value was placed on English in the village.

Things to consider

- The low number of respondents to the English section of the questionnaire means the results are inconclusive
- Given that some respondent reported helping their children with their homework, it is suggested that introducing mother-tongue literacy (i.e., Lao Isan) to the education system could help parents take part in the formal education system, so possibly improving their children's results. This further suggests a need to focus efforts on raising levels of maternal education, which are currently too low.
- Governments should take care to promote equality of educational provision to prevent already established societal inequalities becoming further entrenched.

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