Research Article

THAILAND'S LANGUAGE POLICY: A PROPOSED CHANGE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Janpha Thadphoothon*

Faculty of Arts, Dhurakij Pundit University, Bangkok, Thailand

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijrsr.2018.0906.2264

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper discusses the current language policy of Thailand and reviews its historical development, current state, and the challenges Thailand is facing amidst the impact of globalization and regional integration. Under the dynamism of globalization and regional integration, Thailand begins to realize that maintaining traditional monolingual/mono-cultural paradigm seems less-efficient to address the diversity and complexity of the modern world and the growing cosmopolitanism of Thai society. Recently, the growing of movements for more rights and higher levels of engagement and participation from ethnic minorities and migrant workers has put more pressure on Thailand to open up a wider range of channels for negotiation and participation. On reflection, such movements often come under the Critical Theory's umbrella, starting from the traditional Neo-Marxist perspectives to postmodernism. This paper bases its discussion on both the state-building theory and the Critical Theory, in addition to highlighting the tension between the two metaphors: the melting pot and the mosaic. For a sustainable development, the author proposes that Thailand should formulate its progressive national language policy, giving rights to and supporting, national, local, and international languages.

INTRODUCTION

Thailand, like many other nations, is at the cross-roads in many fronts, politically and culturally. It is facing several challenges, and one of which is the management of the growing cultural diversity resulted from regionalization and globalization. What is evidenced is the growing numbers of migrant workers, foreign visitors, and expats, not to mention the existing ethnic groups and regional differences within the kingdom. There are regional and ethnic languages, not only Thai. So Thailand has to deal with this issue urgently and prudently. In Thailand, many local languages are in danger of becoming extinct. They certainly need preservation measures from the state.

Thailand's language policy has not formally been made explicit. Many scholars and critics have suggested that Thailand embraces the notion of multiculturalism and multilingualism.

Aim

The aim of this paper is to investigate the current language policy of Thailand and reviews its historical development, current status, and the challenges Thailand is facing amidst the impacts of globalization and regional integration. The author also attempts to propose a progressive language policy

paradigm for consideration. It calls for Thailand to formulate its national language policy, the one that would ensure sustainable development.

Language and National Building

What is perceived as language is not simply a system of symbols or signs. Language is a tool for communication embedded with cultural values, an essential tool in nation building. It is also perceived to be a part of culture. Language is thus related to many aspects of national formation and human identities. Most states have to deal with the issues of languages and diversity the best they can, realizing its significance and implications.

Myanmar and Indonesia, countries with diverse ethnicities, have implemented language policies to build their nations. In the case of the Republic of Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian) is adopted as the lingua franca, unifying peoples from different parts of the country. Likewise, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar promotes the use of its national language. In fact, the need to deal with languages and ethnicities is fundamental to every nation state, as a nation state, by its very own definition, involves peoples from many different ethnicities and languages.

Corresponding author: **Janpha Thadphoothon**
Faculty of Arts, Dhurakij Pundit University, Bangkok, Thailand

It should be noted that local languages juxtaposed in a conflict may open a way for an international language to function as a language for mutual understanding and international cooperation (Crystal, 1997). In Japan, at present, English, like in many parts of the world, is a world language which responds well to the practical needs of the business community (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). In Singapore, it is a means to pacify its multilingual society, an educational tool, and a vehicle of trade communication. In Thailand and Vietnam, English is an important foreign language.

There is also a case, however, between the need to foster its own identity and necessity. India is a good example. After gaining the independence, India planned to have an official language of the union by choosing Hindi to replace English, considered the imperial tongue. However, the prospect of the changeover, led to much alarm in the non Hindi-speaking areas of India, especially Dravidian-speaking states whose languages were not related to Hindi at all. As a result, India continues using English for official purposes along with Hindi. Namibia, colonized by Germany, is another example where English is selected to solve national conflicts. The country gives official status to English after its independence, as there are too many African languages (Putz, 1992, cited in Clyne, 1997, p. 305). Both countries welcome English as it brings some benefits, equality and communication ability with the rest of the world, and, yet, they use English with their own characteristics.

 is rich in its cultural heritage. There are many ethnic minorities. In terms of being a country with many cultures, Thailand is second to none. In fact, Thailand contains more than 30 ethnic groups varying in history, language, religion, look, and patterns of livelihood. Thailand is the matter of leveraging their potential and identity.

Perspectives on languages

In this section, I shall discuss an important debate within the discourse of language policy, the debate on whether we should regard languages as rights or public goods. Representing the language rights' movement is the tenet that language constructs society, championed by the umbrella of the Critical Theory. Based on the theory, a language has its rights to exist and prosper, and its peoples have rights to use and live in their cultures. According to Gulbahar and Gerard (2012), language is not just a system of codes and symbols, it is embedded with values and identities.

Under the classical Marxist theory, Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820 – 1895) proposed that languages are means of production. Languages are not equal due to human agreements. There are dialects and dominant languages functioning in different classes. Hence, inequality exists, so class struggle is needed.

The development and current state of minority language rights and the development of acceptance of linguistic human rights, according to Spolsky (2014), began in the latter part of the 20th century. He notes that language rights emerged as a major factor affecting national language policies, along with the pressures of the local sociolinguistic situation.

The rights argument has called for changes and policies, laws, and practices. A group of academics even proclaims that for indigenous people in Australia, a language is more valuable than a plot of land1. According to Zuckermann, when a language is lost, people also lose their intellectual sovereignty and their culture. As language and culture are inseparable, land or land rights should not be seen as important as language. Consequently, Zuckerman and his associates have called for compensation (Zuckermann, Ghil'ad, ShioriShakuto-Neoh and Giovanni Matteo Quer, 2014) from the Australian government.

However, there are those who view that the rights argument is too theoretical, confrontational, and thus less fruitful. They, alternatively, are comfortable to view language as being in a myriad of public utilities. What is relevant is not about whose rights are affected but who benefits. As discussed earlier, English, despite being a foreign tongue, has been adopted in many countries as a way to solve or ease internal conflicts.

Language and Education

Recently, in addition to being part of culture, languages of instruction have been cited as factors related to school achievement, One of the most cited research studies is that of the UNESCO, claiming that the use of the children's mother language is the best choice for them to learn literacy skills and learning during their primary education years (UNESCO, 2008)[2]. Students were reported to perform better when they were given opportunities to use their mother tongues at school.

There are movements around the globe calling for the use of mother languages, citing pedagogical benefits such as school achievement. One of such is the movement called "the Global Partnership for Education[3]," whose website has summarized the benefits of mother use in schools.

Researchers/ Agencies	Results / Recommendations
UNESCO (1953, 2008)	Mother tongue instruction should be used in primary education.
Kosonen (2005)	UNESCO highlights the advantages of mother tongue education right from the start: children are more likely to enroll and succeed in school.
Benson (2002)	Parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children's learning.
Hovens (2002) and UNESCO Bangkok (2005)	Girls and rural children with less exposure to a dominant language stay in school longer and repeat grades less often.
Bialystok (2001); Cummins (2000); King & Mackey, (2007)	Children in multilingual education tend to develop better thinking skills compared to their monolingual peers.

Source: "Children learn better in their mother tongue" From http://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/children-learn-better-their-mother-tongue

However, more research is needed, as there are issues states have to deal with such as implementation, costs, modes, and administration.

This paper begins with the rationale and the aim, followed by the historical development of Thailand's language policy. It then discusses the current status of the policy, flowed by the challenges Thailand is facing. It then discusses the two metaphors. Lastly, it proposes a framework for Thailand to deal

---

with the issues of languages in a sustainable manner, applying the middle path.

Historical Development of Thailand's Language Policy

From its onset, Thailand as a coherent and cohesive state began as a state with many different ethnicities. Perhaps the earliest mentioning of language in Thailand can be found in the inscription of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great, the first king of Thailand. Even though the inscription does not mention anything directly about language, it does however, indirectly mention the language the people use. We can clearly see that the Tai language and the Pali words are related to Buddhism.

On the day of the new moon, the eighth day of the waxing moon, the day of the full moon, and the eighth day of the waning moon [one of] the monks, theras or mahatheras goes up and sits on the stone slab to preach the dhamma to the throng of lay-people who observe the precepts. When it is not a day for preaching the dhamma, Lord Ram Khamhaeng, chief of the state of Sisachanalai and Sukhothai, goes up, sits on the stone slab, and lets the officials, lords and nobles discuss affairs of state with him[4].

According to the inscription, the peoples mentioned imply the use of other languages, other than the Tai.
To the son of Lord Si'Inthrathit, to Lord Ram Khamhaeng, who was the lord of the country of Sisachanalai and Sukhothai, all the Ma, the Kao, the Lao, the Tai of the lands under the vault of heaven and the Tai along the U and the Khongcame to show respect.

We can also infer from the historical evidence that the rise of the Sukhothai kingdom did not come in a vacuum, it came into power as it broke away from the influence of the Khmer empire during the 11th century. We can notice the names of different ethnicities: the Ma, the Kao, the Lao, and the Tai. This shows that during the 13th century A.D., the present day Thailand was the land of many different nationalities. It has been the land full of peoples from different languages and cultures.

The above discussion and evidence suggests that Thailand has attempted to assert itself as a unified kingdom under the auspice of Buddhism. Later kings of Thailand began to seek out its own cultural identity. One of an attempt was the use of the Dhmma language. Prior to King Rama IV, the Pali language, the language of the Buddha teaching, was in Khmer script, as seen in many of the ancient texts such as those found in the book on the "Three Planes".

During the reign of King Mongkut Rama IV of Siam (1804-1868), there was a significant change in the use of Khmer scripts in the religious texts. The king directed Thailand to use the Thai scripts to record the language of Dharma or Buddhism, replacing the Khmer scripts. The king was cited to reason that the Khmer scripts were found to be too complicated to record the Pali sounds. This policy change resulted in the use of Thai script in the Buddhist discourse ever since.

During the reformation during the reign of King Rama V (AD 1853-1910), English was welcomed as the language of modernity and development. However, its accessibility and status has been limited. Certainly, it was not readily available for the general public. Only a few groups of people could access the English instruction. In Thailand, even today, English is seen as a language with a high status.

Thailand has never explicitly stated its language policy. This observation has been supported by the evidence as well as the previous studies such the study by Prof. Kirk R. Person who wrote that the language status or policy is not mentioned in Thai constitution. However, an attempt to address the issues of language policy in Thailand has been made.

In December 2006, a committee was set up to draft the national language policy for Thailand, which was commissioned, under the Royal Institute. The move was perhaps the first of its kind. According to Person (2016), six sub-committees were set up, namely:

1. Thai for Thai Students and Thai Nationals
2. Regional Languages (including ethnic minority languages)
3. Languages of Commerce, Neighboring Languages, and Working Languages
4. Teaching Thai to Migrants Seeking Employment in Thailand
5. Language Needs of the visually and hearing Impaired
6. Translation, Interpretation, and localization standards

The most controversial area, as one might expect, is the second sub-committee, the policy of regional languages, including the ethnic minority languages. Thailand, as discussed earlier, has been very sensitive when it comes to the mentioning of any languages, other than the national language, Thai.

However, the subcommittee did offer some policy recommendations to the government. There should be language revitalization projects in endangered languages. There is also a call for the use of mother-tongues in schools where it is suitable and applicable.

The second most important policy is perhaps the policy on Languages of Commerce, Neighboring Languages, and Working Languages English in paramount position, with Chinese gaining in importance, alongside Japanese and Korean

The policy statement has been proposed for consideration. It is: "The government shall encourage the populace to attain abilities in the use of important languages, including such official and national languages that offer occupational benefits."

In October, 2010, there was an English controversy in Thailand. The Minister of Education declared he would make English the official "second language" of Thailand and dated its effective date on October 22, 2010.The plan was to import thousands of native-speaker teachers to teach high school math and science in English. The brilliant idea invited storm of protests in the kingdom.

The Current State of Thailand's Language Policy

Like the previous ones, the current constitution does not explicitly state the language policy for Thailand. The first mentioning of the word 'language' can be found in the following articles on rights and freedom:

Article 27 stipulates that all Thais are to be treated equally regardless of their genders (male and female), regions, race,

---

[4]http://www.reihe-gelbe-erde.de/rge/bilder/005.pdf

language, age, political orientations, religion, and educational background[5].

Article 43 states that an individual Thai and/or community has the right to conserve, revive, and promote local wisdom, arts, traditions, cultures of their community and the country.

Article 70 stipulates that State shall promote and protect the Thais and other ethnicities so that they can live in their cultural society with traditions and traditional ways of life as they prefer with peace without interferences, provided that such does not contradict with the order and peace or threatening the security and order of the State.

Reading between the lines, we can see that the three articles deal with the languages under the cultural umbrella.

In Thailand, the implicit language policy seems to suggest that Thai (standard Thai) is the national and official language of the Kingdom. In Thailand, there are local languages under the umbrella of 'languages of other ethnicities'. There are also 'foreign languages' such as English and Chinese.
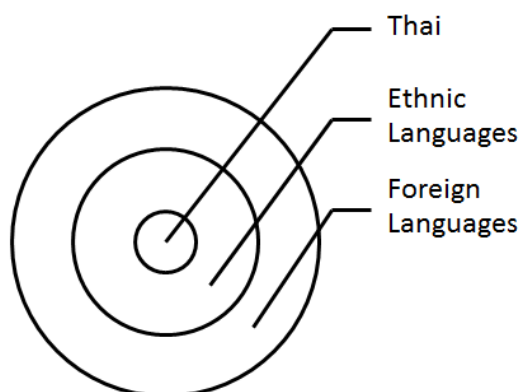
Under the existing paradigm, teachers in the southern part of Isan in Surin or Buriram could develop the learning materials and curriculums to teach ethnic Khmer Thai to their students. The 'ethnic languages' are adjectives describing characteristics of Thai. For example, the Khmer spoken in the southern part of the Isan region is referred to as the Khmer Thai (the Khmer with Thai characteristics). Another example is the identity of the Malay language in Thailand known as Yawi or Pattani Malay or Malay with the characteristics of Pattani, a province in the southern part of Thailand.

The Challenges

Thai governments have consistently stressed the homogeneity of the peoples of Thailand. Unlike Myanmar, Laos, Malaysia, or Indonesia, modern Thailand has never had an official discourse on multiculturalism (Jory, 2000). The predominant government policy towards cultural diversity has been one of assimilation. However, under the dynamism of globalization, Thailand begins to realize that maintaining its somewhat monolingual/mono-cultural paradigm seems ill-adapted and insufficient to address the diversity and complexity of the modern world and the growing cosmopolitanism of Thai society.

Thailand has to change its stance. There are both inside and outside factors. One of the outside factors is the ASEA integration, which means that peoples from different towns and neighboring countries can come and live and work in Thailand. Recently, the growing of movements for more rights and higher levels of engagement and participation from ethnic minorities and migrant workers has put more pressure on Thailand to open up a wider range of channels for negotiation and participation.

The United Nations and NGOs represent the outside factors:"Education is a central factor in the ability of individuals, families and communities to achieve their development goals. But for education to be truly effective, it needs to be offered in the language that students understand best.[6]"

There has been a push for the use of mother tongue in education. "Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) allows students from minority language communities to gain foundational skills (reading, writing, basic math) in their mother tongue. Languages of wider communication (regional or national languages) are introduced gradually allowing students to develop fluency in multiple languages so that they are equipped to engage in the different areas of life and education7"

At home, John Draper and Peerasit Kamnuansilapa criticized Thailand that deep-rooted discrimination still exists. All 62 ethnic minorities within Thailand should be recognized and rights should be respected (Bangkok Post, March 21, 2016, p. 10). The call for more rights and freedom of expressions come under the banner of the so-called Critical Theory, starting from the traditional Neo-Marxist perspectives to postmodernism.

Takahashi (2012) mentions that Thailand lacks the language policy and focusing on English alone is a big mistake. What is needed is a long-term policy, which will be sustainable.

The biggest challenge of Thailand is to move from the traditional model of assimilation to the acceptance and appreciation of diversity. The real challenge is how to balance the two forces: the desire to maintain and enhance its cultural identity and the need to embrace cultural diversity. Can the two forces be reconciled?

The next part is a discussion of the two metaphors representing the two ideologies regarding the management of cultural pluralism.

The Melting Pot and the Mosaic

Generally, when it comes to identity building and national building, two often cited approaches/metaphors are the melting pot metaphor and the mosaic metaphor. The American approach to cultural management, especially the movement during the early 20th century, has been perceived as 'the melting pot' approach. Under this approach, different cultures and languages are put into a pot and then they are metaphorically melt to form a new pot, through the use of

---

[5]The Draft of Thailand's Constitution. Retrieved July 12, 2016 from http://cdc.parliament.go.th/draftconstitution2/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=429&filename=index%E2%80%9C

[6]SILL (2015) LEAD Community of Practice: Advocating for Multilingual Education .Retrieved April 19, 2016 from http://www.sil.org/about/news/lead-community-practice-advocating-multilingual-education

[7]SILL (2015) LEAD Community of Practice: Advocating for Multilingual Education . Retrieved April 19, 2016 from http://www.sil.org/about/news/lead-community-practice-advocating-multilingual-education

English and Anglo culture[8]. The new pot comes from the elements of all the cultural elements. The final product is a new pot or the new culture. In the United States of American, Americans may come from different cultural origins such as Germany, Japan, Poland, and Mexico, but their identities have been neutralized and function under the constitution with basic rights and freedom.

The other approach is known as the mosaic approach, said to be embraced and practiced in Canada. Ideally, under this approach, different cultures and languages co-exist on an equal basis and together they help create a unified and beautiful picture or society. Like the melting pot metaphor, the mosaic one needs to conform to the basic principles and laws of the state. For example, a Chinese family migrated to Canada needs to function within the Canadian laws.

The global trend regarding the language policy seems to be the latter approach, supported by the economic imperatives and the notion of glocalism. Many states begin to see the benefits of multi-culturalism and view of cultural diversity as an opportunity. Under this view, cultures are consumer products for consumption. Another force is the critical movement which maintains that humans have rights to preserve and promote their cultures. In the educational discourse, much talk has been on how to ensure quality education, and one of the matters is the need to make sure that quality education is distributed evenly and in a fair manner.

A Progressive Language Policy for Thailand

As discussed, language and culture in intertwined. Economic development needs to integrate the cultural elements, to be sustainable. UNESCO, for example, believes that no development can be sustainable without a strong culture component and has called for a human-centered approach to development based on mutual respect and open dialogue among cultures can lead to lasting, inclusive and equitable results9. If Thailand were to progress in suitable manners in the 21st century, it needs to plan and implement language policy prudently. In this paper, I would like to propose the middle path as seen in the 2016 proposed Charter of Thailand.

In Article 43, it is stated that an individual Thai and/or community has rights to conserve, revive, and promote their local wisdom, arts, traditions, cultures of their community and the country. Similarly, Article 70 stipulates that State shall promote and protect the Thais and other ethnicities so that they can live in their cultural society with peaceful traditions and ways of life, provided that such does not contradict with the order and peace or threatening the security and order of the State. The two articles open space for communities and ethnic groups in Thailand to get together to revive and protect, or even promote their cultural heritages, including languages. The two articles deal with the issues of cultural diversity is a constructive way, gearing toward the middle path, the path that is not too extreme and soft or lenient.

The two articles allow Thailand move forward in a sustainable fashion. I would like to propose that Thailand should implement the middle path of language policy. That is, not too extreme or lenient. In a more specific suggestion, I should like to propose the comprehensive language policy model as follows:
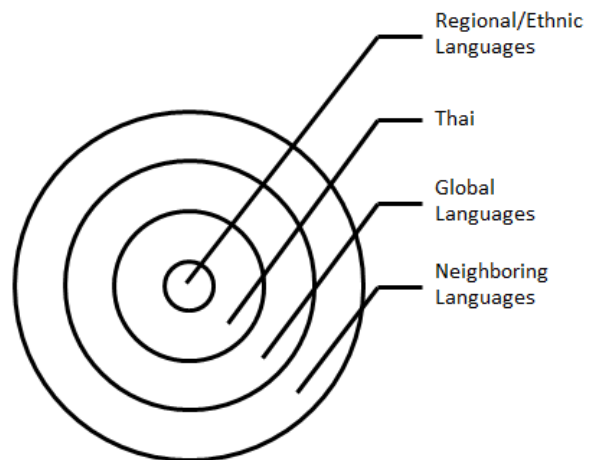
In line with Diversity UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural (2001),by laws sanctioned by the proposed Charter, Thailand shall support the cultural diversity of its citizens, and Thai citizens have the duty to revive, protect, and promote their regional/ethnic languages within the laws. They should be competent in Thai, and able to use the global languages, and communicate in the neighboring languages. Schools and higher educational institutions should allocate adequate resources to promote Thailand's cultural diversity.

In the sphere of education, Thailand has opened space for schools and communities to exercise their creativity and autonomy. In fact, Thai schools are entitled to devise their own curriculums under the guidelines of the nation curriculum, highlighting the student-centered approach. In fact, according to Jory (2000), the use of regional dialects in Thailand is much more open now than in the past. With the coming of Asean integration, Thailand begins to adjust its policies to harness the wealth of its cultural diversity.

What we have been witnessing is the opening up of the space and modes for non-Thais to engage in many communicative events. On May 1, 2016, we witnessed a group of Myanmar migrant workers marching and demanding higher wages and better benefits. Students and teachers in many schools and government offices have been encouraged to wear traditional clothes[10]. It seems that the Thai government begins to shift its stance on mono-culturalism. Another obvious policy is on the teaching and learning of Chinese language, which was almost non-existence during the Cold War. As Thailand is engaging the dynamics of globalization and regionalization, it begins to see that diversity is wealth and cultures can function as capitals. Indeed, multiculturalism and cultural diversity are beginning to take their roots in Thailand.

---

[8]CAL Center for Applied Linguistics. (2016). *U.S. Educational Language Policy*. Retrieved August 5, 23016 from http://www.cal.org/areas-of-impact/language-planning-policy/u.s.-educational-language-policy
[9]UNESCIO (2015).Protecting Our Heritage and Fostering Creativity. Retrieved September 20, 2016 from http://en.unesco.org/themes/protecting-our-heritage-and-fostering-creativity

[10]The Isan Records.(2015). Wearing local clothes, promoting local people, embracing multi-culturalism. Retrieved July 21, 2016 from http://isaanrecord.com/2015/05/25

Summary

For Thailand, the language policy is still more or less functioned in the traditional assimilation paradigm. We need to read between and above the lines to see the policy in action. However, Thailand is opening up more negotiation space and opportunities for regional and ethnic languagesto assert their identities, which can be seen in the Articles 43 and 70 of the 2017 draft constitution. In the sphere of education, more work needs to be done to encourage schools to develop their own local curriculums to revive and promote their cultural heritage, including local languages. On a final note, having a language policy is only the beginning of the long road. Without a concerted effort to put it in practice, the wish to achieve the state of more sustainable would only be on the paper.

References

Abercrombie, N., Hill, S., and Turner, B. S. (1988). *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (4th Edition).Penguin Books.

Center for Applied Linguistics (2016).U.S. *Educational Language Policy*. Retrieved from http://www.cal.org/areas-of-impact/language-planning-policy/u.s.-educational-language-policy

Clyne, M. (1997).*Multilingualism in The Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (Florian Coulmas, ed.) Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 301-343.

Crytal, D. (1997). *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Draper, J. and Kamnuansilpa, P. (2016, March 21). Tackling trenchant discrimination. *The Bangkok Post*, p. 10.

Fitzgerald, J. (2015). Views on Bilingualism in the United States: A Selective Historical Review. Retrieved September 15, 2016 from https://ncela.ed.gov/files/rcd/BE021540/Views_on_Bilingualism.pdf

Gulbahar H. B. and Gerard A. P. (2012).*China's Assimilationist Language Policy: The Impact on Indigenous/Minority Literacy and Social Harmony*. London: Routledge.

Jory, P (2000). Multiculturalism in Thailand: Cultural and Regional Resurgence in a Diverse Kingdom. *Harvard Asia Pacific Review*. Retrieved September 2, 2016 from http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hapr/winter00_millenium/issue.html

Person, R.K. (2015).The Royal Institute and Thailand's new national language policy: A work in progress. Retrieved August 10, 2016 from http://www.jseals.org/seals21/person11royalp.pdf

Radio New Zealand (2012). Language more important than land-academic. Retrieved September 3, 2016 from http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/115509/language-more-important-than-land-academic

Spolsky, B. (2014*). Language policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Takahashi, K. (2012). English and ASEAN. In *Language on the Move*. Retrieved August 6, 2016 from http://www.languageonthemove.com/english-and-asean/

The Thailand Research Fund.(2016). The Khmer Thai Folktales…Instructional Media Reflecting Self…New Educational Dimension of the Khmer Thais in Surin Province. Retrieved September 4, 2016 from http://www.trf.or.th/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=313:2013-12-03-07-42-52&catid=63&Itemid=212 (in Thai)

UNESCO (2001).*The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. Retrieved August 25, 2016 from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001271/127160m.pdf

Yoon, B. (2015). Cultural Capital, Agency, and Voice: Literacy Practices of Middle School English Language Learners *Middle Grades Review*. Retrieved September 30, 2016 from http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/ vol1/iss2/4

Zuckermann, G., Shiori, S., and Giovanni, M. Q. (2014). 'Native Tongue Title: Proposed Compensation for the Loss of Aboriginal Languages'. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* (AAS) 2014/1, 55-71.

****