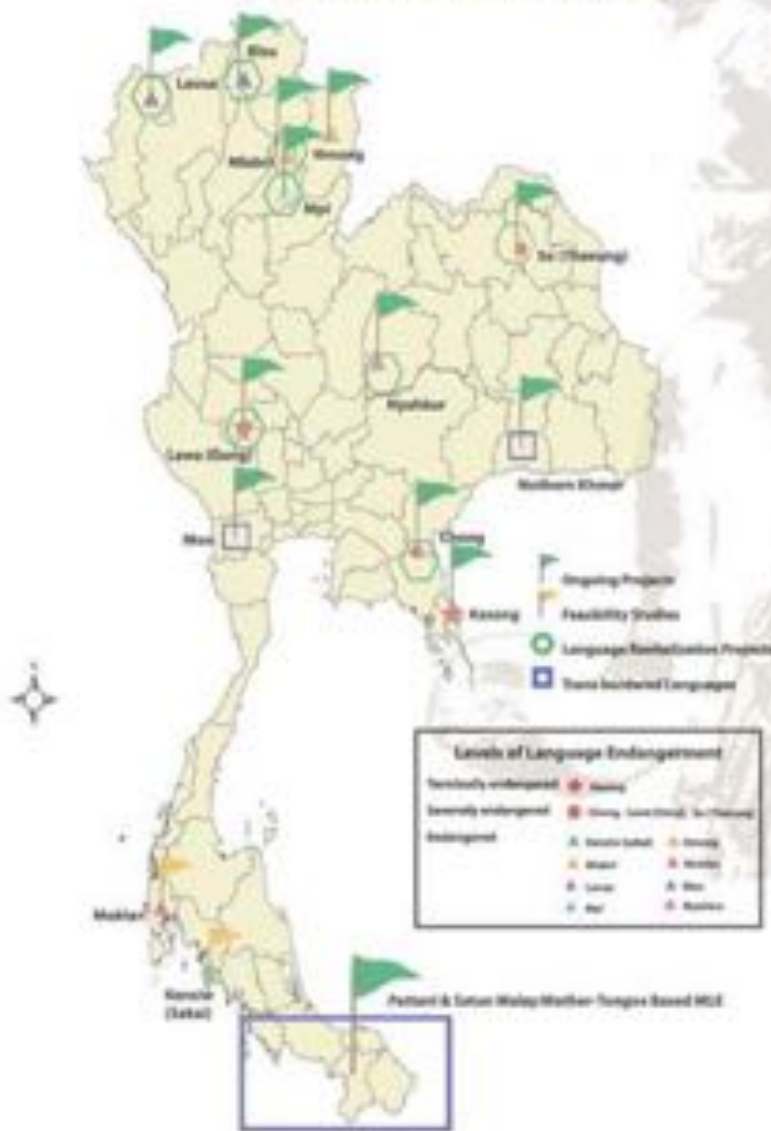
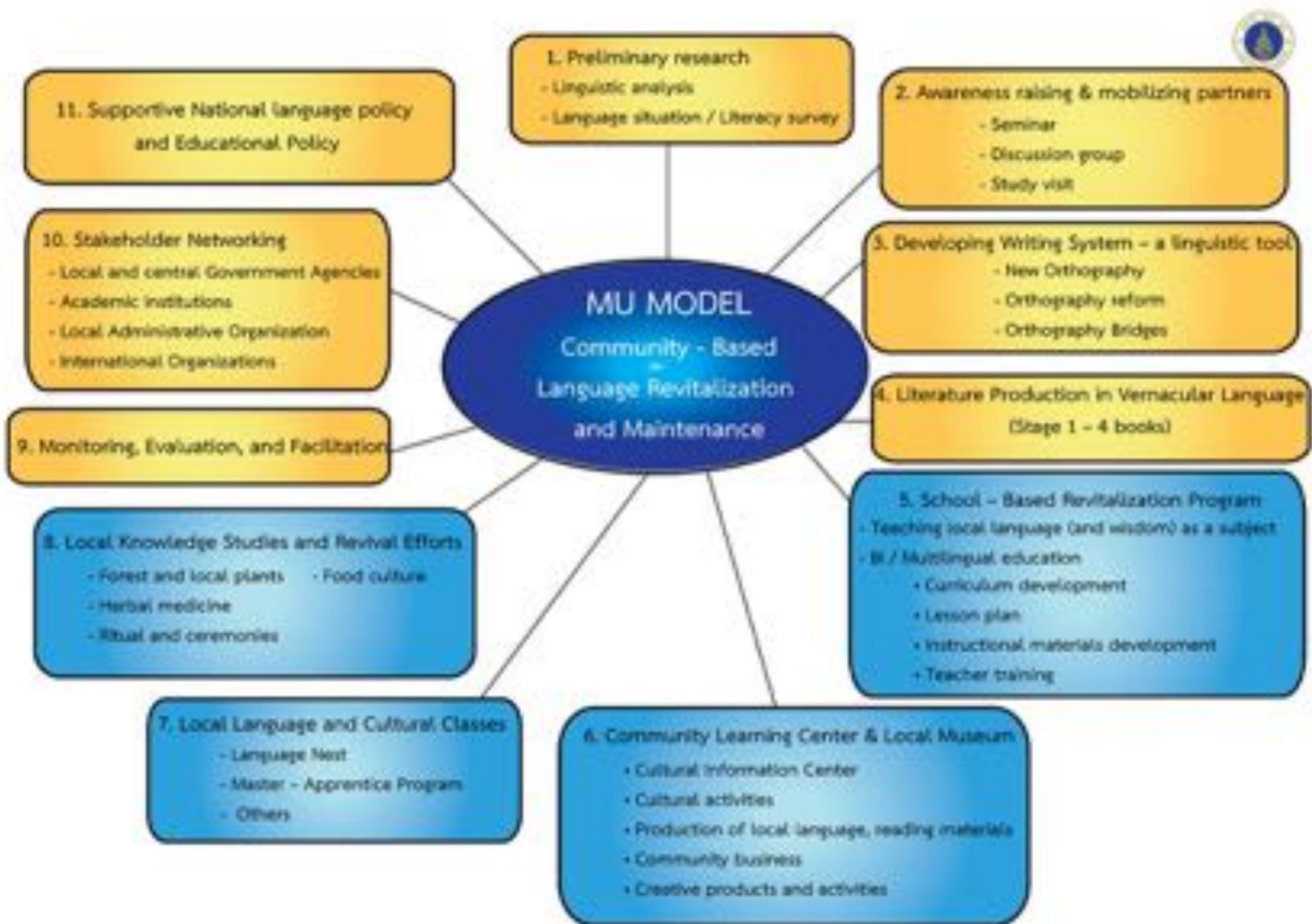


The Center for Documentation and Revitalization of Endangered Languages and Cultures

Language Revitalization Projects



The Center for Documentation and Revitalization of Endangered Languages and Cultures



Our Inspiration

The Center for Documentation and Revitalization of Endangered Languages and Cultures originated from a commitment to preserve and revive languages and cultures in Southeast Asia that are in crisis and on the verge of extinction. The Center operates on the assumption that linguistic and cultural diversity, of which all linguistic minorities are equally a part, are the cultural heritage for all human beings and deserve to survive for future generations.

The center was established with seed money from the Japan Foundation and officially started operation on July 29, 2004 as a unit of the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University.

At the beginning, our mission concentrated on documentation and revitalization of 14 severely endangered languages in Thailand, namely, Chong (Saoch), Mlabri, Sakai, Nyahkur, So (Thavung), Lawa (Bong), Mpi, Bisu, Lua (Lavua), Moklen and Urak Lawoi.

From such a background, the center has extended its operations into other domains, both geographically and thematically. This has given rise to new developments in applied linguistics and new challenges

in the application of an interdisciplinary approach to document and revitalize languages in various states of crisis in Thailand and elsewhere.

Thus, the current goal and mission of the Center are not limited to documentation and revitalization of languages alone. In fact, members of the Center also train community activists to collect, and locally publish vernacular literature and local knowledge. Success is evidenced in certain ethnic languages such as Chong and Nyhkur that are being taught as subject in government primary schools. A major such as Patani Malay is used as the language of instruction in 4 primary schools as part of an initiative to introduce Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual / Multilingual Education in Thailand. The prestige resulting from the extended use of some ethnic languages in Thailand gives encouragement to other ethnic language groups, in a new way, as never before.

One of the Center's long-term goals is to use the results from past operations to advocate for government policy change, especially with regard to ethnic minority languages and language in education.

Our Inspiration

Writing the Unwritten

Principles used in developing orthographies for the above - mentioned languages include:

1. One sound one symbol.
2. The writing system being acceptable to the speakers.
3. The script being acceptable to the wider public.
4. Ease of print production and transfer to learners.
5. Linguistic accuracy.



Developing orthographies for ethnic language groups not only allows group members to avoid losing the "words" of the elders by writing them down, it also stimulates the younger generation to be creative and write new stories from their own perspectives.

Writing the Unwritten

In order to survive in an increasingly modernizing world, unwritten ethnic minority languages need to be put into written form. The Center supports orthography development, working with speakers of the ethnic languages to develop writing systems that are linguistically accurate and acceptable to the mother tongue speakers.

The original aim of the Center's orthography development efforts is to facilitate documentation of language materials such as stories, folktales, songs, and various forms of local knowledge.



However, after many years of work with various languages, such as Chong, Nyahkur, So (Thavung), Mlabri, and Pattani Malay, we have found new orthography to have a significant influence on the people who start to write. The writing is not just a tool for putting the words of the elders down on paper: it encourages those who master their writing systems and the writing craft to create new stories themselves and to recount new experiences they have encountered. This is not what the Center's members expected to see so soon after the orthographical development projects were initiated.

Productive Creation

The most salient consequence of newly developed orthographies and writer's workshops facilitated by the Center is the emergence of vernacular literature production in various ethnic languages. In each language community, emerging writers, illustrators and book producers have been successful in expressing their thoughts and experiences, illustrating stories, and putting them together in book form.

So far, the beginner - level reading materials supported by the Center for developing literacy in ethnic language communities include:



Big Books

- Large formatted books with clear, colored illustrations and bold texts.
- Aimed for shared reading, to facilitate a pleasant and successful reading experience, thus making the beginning readers at ease and without stress.
- Fun stories to stimulate creative thinking and motivate new readers to read more.
- Simple and repetitious sentences to make it easier for readers to arrive at "meaning" by matching pictures and read - aloud texts.

The emerging role of ethnic languages in Thai schools

Apart from language development projects in various ethnic languages, the Center has worked with some communities on the language - in - education issue. Although the Thai - only formal education system (use of Thai as the only language of instruction) is considered crucial in providing gross national literacy, it has been perceived as one of the primary causes of the decline in the use of ethnic languages in Thailand. The introduction of ethnic languages in formal schools is one antidote to this situation, in the opinion of many ethnic language activists. So far, the Center has conducted or provided consultancy on two types of projects involving the use of ethnic languages in Thai primary schools.



- Ethnic languages as a subject
- Pilot Mother Tongue - First Bilingual Education (MT - First BE) program for Malay speaking children in Thailand's 4 Southern Border Provinces

Ethnic languages as a subject

In many communities where bilingualism between Thai and ethnic languages is a norm, the likely situation is that the spread of Thai language leads to ethnic language contraction. Equipped with new orthographies and the first batches of local writers, some ethnic language communities have attempted to teach their own ethnic language as a school subject. This kind of school-based project starts with curriculum development, to teaching materials production, to teacher training, to teaching vernacular language in the classroom by community teachers. So far Chong, Nyahkur, So (Thavung) languages have been introduced as subjects in their community schools. Other ethnic languages such as Mon and Northern Khmer are in the process of developing curriculum to start teaching their languages in classroom.



Pilot Mother Tongue-First Bilingual Education

(MT-First BE) program for Malay-speaking children
in Thailand's 4 Southern Border Provinces

This project originated from an attempt to help Malay-speaking students in southernmost provinces of Thailand, namely, Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun, to attain better academic achievement in the formal education system. Language of instruction is mostly Satun and Pattani Malay in early levels. Oral Thai is introduced at the end of the first year (KG 1) and gradually increased so students become fluent in both oral and written Malay and Thai. Students learn to read and write first in their mother tongue (Malay), then transfer or "bridge" to literacy in Thai. The process is meant to develop fluency, confidence and creativity in listening, speaking, reading and writing both languages.

This project's activities span a period of 9 years from 2007-2016. The first year is for preparation and will continue for 8 years until the first cohort of students have completed Grade 6. Yearly assessments are meant for students' achievement monitoring.

The project findings will be used to advocate for government policy that will support improved education for students in the southern border provinces and in other provinces where students do not speak Standard Thai as their first language.

Local Knowledge Representation and Utilization

Orthography development and introduction of writing craft in various ethnic language communities have also led to local stories collection and knowledge representation, for instance, beliefs, rituals, and songs. Action research projects run by local activists, funded by the Thailand Research Fund and facilitated by the Center, include subjects in addition to the development of writing system, vernacular literature production, and school-based language teaching programs. Such projects include a wide range of topics:

- Chong people of Chanthaburi province conducted an "ecological" study about a local "fiber" plant and its use in handicrafts: they also did a study on how to develop a "community learning center" to promote Chong ethnic culture.



Local Knowledge Representation and Utilization

- Pattani Malay communities in Pattani province conducted a participatory study about Malay lexicon on herbs and a study about Za-ngi singing.

- Mlabri people in Phrae province conducted a survey of Mlabri population and genealogies and started a project on turning "memories" of the Mlabri into writing.

- So (Thavung) people in Sakon Nakhon province conducted a survey of medicinal herbs and medicine men.

In the near future, the Center expects more operations of this kind to take place in ethnic language communities where there have been language development efforts and school-based programs.

