

Linguistic Citizenship in Borderland Classrooms: Intersections of Multilingual Education and Agency Among Displaced Populations in Mae Sot

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Abstract

Thai language programs for Burmese migrants in Thailand often prioritize 'submersion' approaches, with limited attention to how learners' home languages might support their learning. This implementation study examines an alternative approach where a dual-teacher model pairs instructors from both Thailand and Myanmar to prepare migrant adults for Thailand's Department of Learning Encouragement (DOLE) certification. Grounded in Stroud's (2001) concept of 'linguistic citizenship' this study examines participants' capacity to navigate host-country systems while maintaining multilingual identity. This study investigates how such agency is cultivated through pedagogical practice and program implementation, which leverages multilingual education (MLE).

Drawing on a mixed-methods design, this research combines five months of classroom observation using the MLE Teacher Competency Standards Framework with learner surveys examining Thai language motivations and future aspirations and semi-structured interviews with program staff. The findings reveal how multilingual teachers employ translanguaging strategies: dynamic, integrated deployment of multiple languages as a unified communicative repertoire strategically mixing Burmese, ethnic languages, and Thai to facilitate learning while valuing students' multilingual repertoires. In this way teachers function as language brokers, using Burmese to demystify Thai grammar and metalinguistic concepts. Identified classroom practices demonstrate how inclusive, pluralistic education can support protracted displacement populations while challenging assumptions about language learning in contexts of migration.

Students experienced competing pressures between accessible, identity-affirming instruction and governmental Thai examination requirements. Linguistic citizenship and opportunities for greater mobility could be within reach with key policy flexibilities. This model offers alternatives to binary frameworks of assimilation versus return, instead preparing learners to navigate transnational lives between borders.