Catching Fish with Two Hands:

Teaching English and Promoting Lawa language Use at Bo Luang School

Mark Holt

ABSTRACT

English speaking linguistic researchers in Asia are often requested to help teach English in local communities. The following paper briefly describes my personal endeavour to fulfil this request at Bo Luang School, Chiang Mai, Thailand, and to promote the community's indigenous language at the same time. A Thai proverb which can be translated as *Catching Fish with Two Hands* describes my desire to attain both goals and I have used it as the title for this paper.

A background to Eastern Lawa in Chiang Mai, Thailand, is given followed by my experience in using four techniques for teaching English with the mother tongue. Finally, a theoretical justification for the use of the mother tongue in English language classes. The appendices contain examples of English and Lawa language used in my classes.

CONTENTS

1. BACKGROUND

The Ethnologue (Gordon 2005) divides Lawa into two distinct languages: Western Lawa and Eastern Lawa. It is a Waic member of the Palaungic family of languages, which is a subgroup of the Mon-Khmer family (Hopple 1988). Palaungic languages are typically ancient languages existing at present in small isolated communities with little similarity to or comprehension of each other. Eastern and Western Lawa reflect this age, isolation and lack of mutual intelligibility.

Nahhas (2007) estimates that there are 7000 speakers of Eastern Lawa in Chiang Mai province (North Thailand) and 8000 speakers of Western Lawa in the neighbouring province, Maehongson. His survey work confirms that the two languages are not mutually intelligible. Western Lawa in neighbouring Maehongson province has an orthography developed from the 1960s, which is used by the Christian church. However, cultural, religious, geographical and linguistic distance have prevented this script from being used by the Eastern Lawa.

The Eastern Lawa language is centred around the township of Bo Luang (population 3,470) in the sub-district of Bo Luang, Hot, Chiang Mai province. Bo Luang school has a roll of around 630, with two years of kindergarten, six years of elementary and three years of secondary. It is estimated that 95% of all people in the town and students at the school are mother tongue Eastern Lawa speakers (Juwen & Juwen 2004). Six of the teachers at the school are locally born and speak Lawa fluently.

The school is supportive of Lawa culture and regularly uses Friday afternoons for community taught activities such as dancing, weaving and cooking. The national school curriculum gives responsibility to a school for including the indigenous culture of its location for up to 30% of the timetable. Apart from these activities, all other teaching is carried out officially using the medium of Thai language. However, informal explanation is often given by the Lawa teachers to students in Lawa. Students and Lawa teachers are often heard speaking Lawa with each other when Thai teachers are not present.

Bo Luang School commissioned two teachers (sisters and mother tongue speakers of Lawa) to write a foundational local curriculum document, which was supervised by the Education Department at Chiang Mai University (Juwen & Juwen 2004). In writing this document (in Thai) a number of Lawa words and phrases were used but there was no known system of putting these words into Thai (or any other) orthography.

The survey conducted by Nahhas (2007) led to an informal invitation to Payap University Linguistics staff to help the Lawa teachers at the school to decide on an

orthography for Eastern Lawa. My wife and I responded to this invitation but found that the school was also very interested in us helping to promote English language. I volunteered my services for approximately one day each week on the condition that I could promote Lawa language at the same time in the English classroom.   Section 2 describes the techniques which I trialled during 2008 to teach English language and promote the use of Lawa at the same time.

2. FOUR TECHNIQUES FOR INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE PROMOTION IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

2.1 Translation of popular English teaching songs into Lawa

Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes is a popular action song for students being exposed to English language. Six year old children were quickly able to translate the body parts for us into Eastern Lawa. With the help of their teachers, we attempted to write these in Thai characters to introduce the students and teachers to the idea that their language could be written. Another popular song was a counting song which students knew in Thai and English. They readily added a third language for Lawa. (Both songs are transcribed in Appendix A.)

The concrete content of the songs (numbers and body parts) makes translation easy despite the limited English of the students and my own limited understanding of Lawa. Other songs and games such as colours, directions, and days of the week may also be adapted in this way.

Although this technique sounds simplistic, the consequent result was profound. Students performed the two songs at the school assembly and then taught the rest of the students. To our knowledge this was the first time the indigenous language had been officially used during a school assembly. The desire to use English created a forum for the public use and encouragement of the indigenous language.

2.2 Translation of traditional Lawa songs and stories into English

A common method for teaching local literacy is the use of *big books* for classroom reading and *small books* for individual reading. Traditional stories and songs are often used for these books. Sometimes these books appear as diglots with the national language and the local language appearing on the same page. My personal experience of these diglots is that they are useful for students with little capacity in the national language but may cause problems for students already literate in the national language. Students already literate seem

to show a preference to read the national language and ignore the new orthography of their own mother tongue.

However, this was not the case when English was used with Lawa in a diglot. Students strove to decipher the Lawa language in order to help them understand what the English said.

The biggest problem with such a technique is that the vocabulary and grammar is not limited for pedagogical purposes (unlike the counting or body part songs). Secondly, if a book is to be created, there needs to be some type of working orthography for L1 (the child's first language). A major benefit is that culture and language are recorded in a book and then used by students during everyday English lessons.

By taking liberty with translation, the English sentences can be simplified in both vocabulary and grammar to make them more useful for teaching purposes. I tried to use the English translation as paradigms for basic English structures. Students enjoyed participating in the construction of small books by drawing their own pictures. A resulting book which combined drawings of various students is found in Appendix C. One interesting aspect of this book is that students did not need to use extra classroom time because it fitted with a class assignment of drawing pictures to celebrate Mothers' Day. The students were aged between 14 and 15 years old.

There is also scope for a computerized book using *Power Point* in this technique with oral recordings of both L1 and English on each page.

2.3 Adapting monolingual English teaching techniques to include L1

The days of L1 being seen as a handicap in English language learning are slowly drawing to a close. These theoretical changes are discussed briefly in section 3. Realising that L1 is actually an asset opens the door for its creative use in the English language classroom.

Total Physical Response (TPR) (Asher 1965) recognizes the importance of large amounts of comprehensible input before students begin to produce spoken or written English themselves. In order for students to process the English they hear, some kind of physical response is required. If the English teachers take the role of language learner, then the class can also take on the role of asking the teacher to respond physically to L1 instructions. I have found this quickly engages and empowers the students. The subtle message that is being conveyed is that Lawa language has the same value as English and it is my desire to learn it in the same way that the students wish to learn English.

A similar technique can be used for asking questions. Some of the first English words I taught were *who, what, where, why, when, how* (based on Kipling's poem about six honest serving men in *The Elephant Child*). Students were able to understand my questions but did not have the English capacity for answering in English. The technique I adopted was that the question was asked in English but students were encouraged to reply in Lawa. I took small groups outside and asked questions like *what is this, who is this, where is this, why is this here, how is this used, when is this?*

This technique was then extended to the construction of stories similar to the game of consequences. Each student would contribute another line to a story answering *who, what, where, why, when* or *how*. Initially, the line is said in Lawa and then translated by me into English. Each subsequent student has to repeat the story so far and then add another line. I would repeat the English translation with each line and then ask all the students questions about the story using English. I found that students increasingly answered in English as their confidence improved.

The critical factor with both of these techniques is that English input is being responded to with comprehension rather than meaningless repetition.

2.4 Building a basic corpus in English and L1 which can be used to describe and explain all other words and ideas

This basic corpus consists of what Wierzbicka (1996) calls semantic primes. It is listed in Appendix B. All cultures are unique and this uniqueness is embedded in the language of that culture. This makes translation from one language to another problematic. However, the idea of semantic primes is that they exist in all languages and can be used to describe the particularity of other words. This theory is further discussed in section 3.

The classroom application of semantic primes is that they empower students to express themselves in English using a very limited vocabulary (currently 61 words). This application radically changes the objectives of English language teaching from the cultural imperialism which has been critiqued in the past (Phillipson 1992). English is now being used to express the students' culture and identity to the outside world.

Without semantic primes, students are limited to model English sentences that have little cultural relevance. Semantic primes provide a *metalanguage* which allows a student to think first in their own language and culture, and then translate these concepts into English.

My application of this technique has been limited because of curriculum requirements for state examinations. However, a number of units in the Thai government English

curriculum echo the goal of expressing one's own identity. For example, Year 7 includes a unit on local culture describing local stories, history and sites in English. Year 8's unit includes local proverbs, beliefs, customs, traditions and handicrafts. True descriptions of these require both semantic primes and use of L1. At best the model sentences and vocabulary provided in Thai textbooks for these units will only reflect the national culture.

I have already observed one senior student from Bo Luang School using Lawa sentences and words in a local area English speech competition under the unit of local culture. English was being used as a vehicle for the promotion of Lawa identity in the wider community.

In the future I would like to pursue the idea of breaking cultural concepts into semantic prime definitions. Students only need to use a very limited English vocabulary, but they can produce insightful and complex definitions of terms in their own culture using English. The resulting dictionary would become an English dictionary of key Lawa terms.

3. THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATION

3.1 Theories from general education, multi-lingual education and English teaching

The American *Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education* (Bransford, Brown and Cocking 2000) synthesised research for the optimal conditions for learners. They discovered three conditions were of the highest priority for effective learning: engaging prior understandings and background knowledge, integrating factual knowledge with conceptual frameworks by encouraging deep understanding, and supporting students in taking active control over the learning process (Cummins et al. 2005).

Allowing students to use L1 when learning English addresses each of these conditions. Traditional Lawa songs and stories translated into English and interpretation of and response to English texts using L1 recognises the value of students' previous knowledge. The concept of a metalanguage of semantic primes for interpreting English and Lawa words provides a conceptual framework for language and culture learning. On a simpler level, so does the ability to ask and respond to the simple questions of *who*, *what*, *how*, *why*, *where* and *when*. The reciprocal role of teacher as language learner and democratisation of the classroom described in 2.3 are all means of empowering students to take a more active control of the learning process and avoid the *banker approach* to education critiqued by Freire (1970)

The movement for multi-lingual education has been based on a distinction made by Jim Cummins (1979) between two types of language proficiencies: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (CALP). This distinction explained why it may be possible to acquire a foreign language quickly for communicative purposes but it takes many more years to use that language for academic processing. An implication of this distinction is that the mother tongue can help students in academic tasks including the study of a foreign language (English). If a second language (i.e. Thai) is used to learn English, there is added difficulty for the student.

A recent article by Cummins et al. (2005) links these two sets of theories (general and multi-lingual education) with the description of immigrant students in Canada, producing dual language *identity texts* similar to the model contained in Appendix C of this paper. Another strength documented by Cummins et al. is the potential for high levels of community involvement in the construction of such texts. I also found that the use of a well known oral tradition for a small book allowed non-literate older family members to experience and contribute towards what their children were doing in the English classroom.

There is now an increasing body of literature in English teaching theory advocating the use of L1, especially in the early stages of language acquisition (Weschler 1997, Gill 2005). The landmark book for this is Widdowson (2003), which calls for an explicitly bilingual approach. The significance of this book comes from the status of its author, who is best known for his contribution to the communicative theory of teaching English (whose practitioners generally ban the use of L1 in the English classroom).

An observer of many Thai English language classrooms may object that there is already a dependence on translation of English back to Thai, which inhibits the development of student fluency. This is a common complaint in other Asian contexts. However, the type of bilingual language learning I am advocating is not the traditional grammar-translation method, which is generally characterised by an emphasis on grammar, word for word translation, culturally irrelevant English texts, one correct answer and absence of a native English speaker (Weschler 1997). Instead, the examples given have been on a contextualised, negotiated, meaning and communication-based idea-level translation needing co-operation between the English speaking teacher and the Lawa students.

3.2 Theoretical justification for collecting and using semantic primes

A semantic prime is a word that cannot be defined by other words and which appears in some form in every language. They may be used as a metalanguage for describing all cultures and vocabulary.

Wierzbicka describes her theory as combining in a sense, radical universalism with thoroughgoing relativism. It accepts the uniqueness of all language-and-culture systems, but posits a set of shared concepts, in terms of which differences between these systems can be assessed and understood (Wierzbicka 1996:16).

This idea may not be as radical as Wierzbicka suggests because a basic concept in ethnography is that there are universal semantic relationship categories by which words in other cultures may be explored (Spradley 1979:111).

Appendix B contains Lawa translations of semantic primes. They are listed as a foundation for a potentially rich field of future study with the goal of students fluently using a limited range of English words to express their own identity.

I have not been able to further exploit the power of these words, but I provide them as a theoretical justification for attempting to describe Lawa concepts in English or, alternatively, for describing English concepts in Lawa.

3.3 Pragmatic Justification

Regardless of the scientific justification for using L1 in the English classroom, there are several important practical considerations.

Affirmation of a child's cultural identity is a reasonable educational goal in itself, and research shows that it will benefit that child's progress in the school environment regardless of the language medium of instruction (Bishop and Glynn 2003).

Linguistic research may not be considered a justification in itself for a linguist to have access to a language community. Providing English language instruction is a legitimate and valued service to a language community.

By encouraging the use of the local vernacular in the school domain, the researcher / teacher is helping to reverse language shift and language extinction. It is my hope that the previous theoretical justification will help erase qualms many of us have about using L1 in the English classroom. It is also my hope that a linguist in such a position will see that their collection and use of L1 data during English teaching time can benefit the students' English

learning, both through a shared corpus of semantic primes and a more democratic and empowered learning environment.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

My original goal in undertaking this project was that I would be able to promote literacy in L1 through the English language class. I abandoned this goal because I discovered that I lost the participation of the Lawa teachers at the Bo Luang school as they were not involved in English teaching. Moreover, a working orthography had still not been agreed on by the community and I felt uncomfortable promoting a non-official orthography through the English language class.

As a consequence, I have initiated an action research project in both orthography and dictionary development with a central goal of ownership, participation and initiation of research being increasingly from within the community.

However, the initial circumstances which caused my proposal remain. Although there may be limited resources and enthusiasm for indigenous language development within Thailand's formal education system, there is much enthusiasm for English language education. My initial proposal capitalised on this enthusiasm by using English language as a vehicle for the promotion of vernacular literacy.

In conclusion, I would recommend the use of English teaching as a limited vehicle for community engagement and research into a minority language and culture. These techniques are no substitute for community ownership and participation, but they provide a strategic initial position by which a foreign linguist may influence, encourage and inform future development.

APPENDICES

The phonemic transcriptions shown here are gathered mainly from students and teachers and then checked against word lists transcribed by four different linguists during the 1970s (Mitani 1978, Lipsius 1974, Diffloth 1980, Shorto 2006). I consider my transcriptions reasonably accurate, but the purpose of these appendixes is to demonstrate the possibilities of promoting Lawa in the English classroom. It is not my purpose to provide a definitive phonemic list of Bo Luang Lawa words.

APPENDIX A: BILINGUAL TEACHING SONGS

Head, shoulders, knees and toes

Head, shoulders, knees and toes

/kain səwuak tuʔ-cuaŋ ʔdoih- cuaŋ/

knees and toes

/tuʔ-cuaŋ ʔdoih- cuaŋ/

Head, shoulders, knees and toes

/kain səwuak tuʔ-cuaŋ ʔdoih- cuaŋ/

knees and toes

/tuʔ-cuaŋ ʔdoih- cuaŋ/

And eyes and ears and mouth and nose

/təʔŋea ləsuak ʔəbɔm təmaɨh/

Head, shoulders, knees and toes

/kain səwuak tuʔ-cuaŋ ʔdoih- cuaŋ/

Counting Song

One, Two, Three

/tiʔ ləʔa ləʔoi/

One, Two, Three

/tiʔ ləʔa ləʔoi/

Four, Five, Six

/paɨŋ phoan lɛh/

Four, Five, Six

/paɨŋ phoan lɛh/

Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten

/ʔa-lɛh sətaiʔ səʔtaiɲ koa/

Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten

/ʔa-lɛh sətaiʔ səʔtaiɲ koa/

Start again.

APPENDIX B: SEMANTIC PRIMES

Substantives:	Evaluators and Descriptors
YOU /paʔ/ (younger) /maʔ/ (older)	GOOD /taumaic/
SOMEONE /pu/	BAD
SOMETHING /pi/	BIG /raʔ/
PEOPLE /pui/	SMALL /tiə?/
BODY /kɑuʔ/	
Mental Predicates	Time
THINK /kɨt/	WHEN/TIME /ʔmat/
KNOW /yoŋ/	NOW /pəʔdiə/
WANT /kuat/	BEFORE /ka/
FEEL /yoŋ ʔaphaum/	AFTER /mah thɔh/
SEE /yoʔ/	A LONG TIME /ʔdɨŋ/
HEAR /hmang/	A SHORT TIME /
	FOR SOME TIME /
Speech	MOMENT /
SAY /ah/	
WORDS /khrɛiŋ/	Space
TRUE /naum/	WHERE/PLACE /kənom/
	HERE /kərɛi/
Actions, Events and Movement	ABOVE /kəduəŋ/
DO /yuh/	BELOW /kəsaih/
HAPPEN /pien/	INSIDE /nɨŋ/
MOVE /hɛo/	ON /kəroə/
	(WHAT) SIDE /kaŋ/
Existence, Possession	NEAR /sədaiʔ/
THERE IS /mah/	FAR /səŋia/
HAVE /kai/	
	Logical Concepts
Life and Death	BECAUSE /ta/
LIVE /ʔaiɲ/	IF /u/
DIE /yum/	NOT /tɛoh/
	MAYBE
Determiners	CAN /kɛh/
THIS /hɛi/	
THE SAME briŋ /	Intensifier and Augmentor

OTHER	VERY /loan/
	MORE /liə/
Quantifiers	
ONE /tiʔ/	Taxonomy and Partonomy
TWO / ləʔa/	KIND OF /jaŋ/
MUCH/MANY /həɨŋ/	PART
SOME /oan/	Similarity
ALL /ɛɨk/	LIKE /mɨən/

Please note these Lawa primes are definitely a work in progress, both semantically and phonologically.

APPENDIX C: LAWA BOOK

โดย
นางวันดี คำมูล

<u>ภาพ</u>
ด.ญ. กาญจนา คุเมา
ด.ญ. ดลพร จุแวน
ด.ญ.อรุณี เทิมปัน
ด.ญ.นัทวรรณ คุเบ้า

<u>ภาษาอังกฤษ</u>
อ. มรรค ฮอด
พระภูวดอินทร์จันทร์

นิทานเพลงพื้นบ้าน

A Lawa Song for Mothers Day
Bo Luang School
August 2008

อาม แมฮ มุ่ มะ

Oh, Mothers!

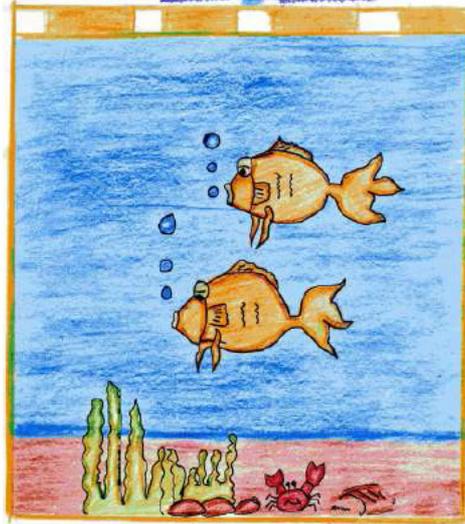## อา เปน ทอฮ
อาม มาม ปี รอฺก

Who are you?
What do you want?

รอฺก กวน กีต ด่าง ซะตะ

Do you want a baby bird?
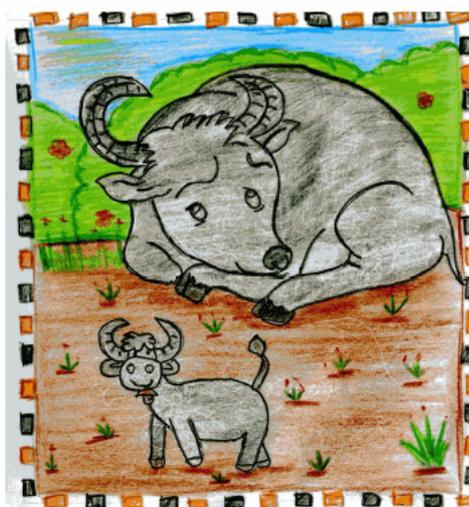Long Tail.

รอฺก กวน กะ โพยต อะบอม

Do you want a baby fish?
Pointy Mouth.

รอฺก กวน ซาง ด่าง อะโปย

Do you want a baby elephant?
Long Trunk.

รอฺก กวน โมย ด่าง อะดีต

Do you want a baby buffalo?
Long Horns.

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Mark Holt
Chiang Mai, Thailand
mark_holt@sil.org