

Sisaket Local Languages Preservation

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Abstracts

As appreciation of cultural diversity is listed as one of the SDGs goals related to quality education, the importance of acknowledging youth to learn about their language and cultural uniqueness is vital. This study, therefore, aimed at exploring how youth perceive the importance of their ethnic languages, so further language maintenance and teaching could be promoted. The youth speakers of Laos, Khmer, Suay and Yer ethnic groups residing in Sisaket, one of the provinces in the lower Northeastern part of Thailand were interviewed to investigate their attitude about their willingness to continue using their ethnic languages in different domains in life. Four participants, a representative from each ethnical language, were invited to join the focus group interview. Thematic analysis was taken place to revealed factors according to language usage and maintenance of the participants. The data identified nine codes related to language use among youth in Sisaket, including social context, language purpose, interlocutor evaluation, language ability, positive and negative response, theme selection, public attention, and pride. These codes were categorized into three main themes: social context and language use, purpose of conversation, and attitude towards a particular language. Results from this study can be useful for preparing lessons to include a topic for discussion such as language loss, and revival, so youth can become aware of cultural diversity in their area.

Keywords: Cultural Diversity; Linguistic Diversity; Ethnic Languages

Introduction

The phenomena of preserving world's linguistic diversity have received extensive attention in linguistics, both from language and cultural perspectives. It has long been accepted indigenous people around the world have an invaluable source of information about the plant, medicine, animals and living strategies which held in language they speak. Without language, it is an irretrievable body of knowledge (Hinton, 2001). What's more, according to Grenoble & Whaley (2005) language loss can have significant negative impacts on individuals, communities, and society as a whole, and those efforts to revitalize endangered languages can have numerous benefits, including preserving cultural identity and knowledge, promoting linguistic and cognitive diversity, and contributing to the broader goal of linguistic human rights.

One of the recent movements is found in 2019 during "The 18th session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII) convened on the overall theme of 'Indigenous Peoples' Traditional Knowledge: Generation, Transmission and Protection'. The major message of this forum is to highlight the importance of indigenous peoples' roles in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as there are growing concerns over the losing of world's indigenous languages which potentially lead to losing invaluable

knowledge. Barelli (2012) stated that indigenous peoples have a unique understanding of how 'human beings should live on the earth'. This brings the world to pay attention on both general topics such as language death and language revitalization to preserve local languages, as well as culture attached to the language.

Thai society is considered as the place containing linguistic diversity since the country is a multilingual community. Most Thais can use more than languages to communicate with each other in different domain in life especially those living in the borders. However, the use of some indigenous languages have been dramatically reduced as people tend not to utilize in different life domains, so 15 languages out of 70 Thai living languages are considered to be seriously endangered (Premsrirat & Burarungrot 2018).

There have been efforts of Thai institution, people and community to create language-learning programs and services to keep their language alive and flourishing culture as seen in the establishment of The Research Institute for Language and Culture of Asia (RILCA), Mahidol university where numerous projects have been carried out to continuously working to develop language revitalization scheme, as well as community improvement. Another government institution is Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center (SAC) where data base of more than 70 ethnic groups of Thailand are kept (Ungsitipoonporn et al. 2021). Accordingly, digital archive entitled "LangARhive-TH", which is the results of the project collaboration between RILCA and SOAS University of London, UK, can be found from www.lanarchive-th.org has been created to allow linguists, researchers and communities to explore language and cultural data aiming at transmitting of knowledge to ensure sustainable preservation of language diversity in Thailand. This community-based achieve is believed to become a stepping stone in promoting speaker community to recognize their own language and cultural identity that possibly leads to positive effects for the survival of endangered languages and for the people who speak them.

Furthermore, the creation of digital archives such as LangARhive-TH, which was developed through collaboration between RILCA and SOAS University of London, UK, is a significant step towards the promotion of language and cultural preservation. This initiative aligns with one of the current research objectives, which aims to examine the possibility of promoting the preservation of local languages in language classrooms as a means of linking youth to their cultural heritage. The digital archive serves as a platform for linguists, researchers, and communities to explore language and cultural data, ultimately promoting the transmission of knowledge to ensure sustainable preservation of language diversity in Thailand.

Research Objectives

The current study focused on exploring the attitudes and perceptions of youth towards their local languages as it is vital for promoting cultural identity. The research aims to achieve two primary goals, namely:

1. To investigate the current use of local languages among youth in Sisaket in different domains of their lives.
2. To examine the possibility of promoting the preservation of local languages in language classrooms as a means of linking youth to their cultural heritage.

Literature Review

Scholars seem to come with the consensus that language revitalization should be done within the group desire rather than depend heavily on outside-in alternative (Premsrirat & Malone, 2003). This idea has been clearly summarized in Dorian's (1998) statement that "Such rewards cannot be supplied from the outside. They are to be had from within the social web of the community itself or not at all" (p. 21). For this reason, raising awareness of local youth who will likely be using the prestige language should be plausibly way to support local language revitalization. One of central aspects of language revitalization is creating new speakers of that particular language for example families might play vital roles in transmitting the endangered language at home. Schools and universities can also become major venues for language learning, as well as cultural preservation.

There have been attempts to promote language and cultural awareness in Thai classroom such as mentioning importance about Thainess as a dominant identity (see Baker, 2008; Kaur, Young, & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). However, this is criticized as heavily focus on the identity of Central Thai, which might neglect presence of a multitude of languages and ethnic groups in Thailand (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2016). Therefore, it becomes vital to integrate both regional language knowledge and emphasize unique cultures to regain a sense of identity in Thai education.

Some may argue that language death is common phenomenon since nearly half of the 7,000 languages spoken in the world are expected to vanish in the next 100 years (Harrison, 2007). If new generations do not use that particular language due to socioeconomic conditions—language shift in community, urbanization, industrialization, and inexorable shift towards mainstream culture (e.g., Dorain 2016, Grenoble 2011, Nettle & Romaine 2000, Saydee 2014; among many others), language loss seems unconditionally and eventually leads to language death.

However, it is challenging to determine how to make a judgment of whether a language lives or dies. For this reason, precise responses are needed for further clarification. For practical reason in order to promoting new generations to learn a particular indigenous language, some questions are taken into consideration. For example, how much exposure to a language is required for children to acquire it? How frequently does a language have to be used in order to be maintained? These questions remain problematic in drawing argument to conduct studies in this field.

Given the amount of research done in this area, it is no surprise that significant results have been obtained. Studies aiming at enriching indigenous languages in Thailand has been done since 2004 at such as Chong in Chanthaburi (Premsrirat, Ungsitipoonporn, & Choosri, 2007; Premsrirat & Rojanakul, 2015), Nyah Kur in Chaiyaphum (Ungsitipoonporn, 2018), and So (Thavueng) in Sakon Nakhon (Larparporn, 2018). These studies have been conducted in different parts of Thailand. The first research was done in Central Thailand and the latter two studies have been conducted in the northeastern part of Thailand, regional area with its own cultural uniqueness. This area has had distinctive ways of life with that of the neighboring country of Laos and Cambodia. This affinity is shown in the region's cuisine, clothes, temple architecture, arts and languages.

Although previous research has revealed the need to understand the causes of the loss of heritage languages and the significance of heritage language preservation in northeastern part, no research has been conducted on Sisaket, located in the lower northeastern area, local languages. Despite prior observations of language revitalization has been done by educating

youth to cherish their indigenous languages in several parts in Thailand, it remains unclear how teenagers view their usage of local language to determine whether they will likely have desire to continue preserving their local language or not.

Consequently, exploring how language preservation is perceived by youth to reflect local identity. Thus, younger generation should be acknowledged about the literacy in their own language. For the current study, Sisaket province is known for its indigenous people who are broadly classified into four ethnic groups-namely, the Suai, the Khmer, the Lao, and the Yoe (Sisaket Provincial Office, 2014).

Research Conceptual Framework

The research conceptual framework for this study based on the socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social and cultural contexts in shaping individual attitudes and behaviors. The theory suggests that language is not only a means of communication but also a medium through which individuals construct their identities and make sense of the world around them. Therefore, the use and preservation of local languages are closely tied to the cultural identity of the community.

The study was drawn on the language revitalization framework, which highlights the importance of preserving endangered languages and promoting linguistic diversity. The framework suggests that language revitalization efforts should involve community participation, intergenerational transmission, and support from government institutions and educational systems.

Research Methodology

1. Participants and setting

Convenience sampling was used. Students studying in the Faculty of Education who have raised and lived in Sisaket were asked to volunteer to know their insights on their local language situations in their daily lives. Four volunteer participants are Thais but speak different local languages namely Loas, Khmer, Suai and Yoe. They were told that their identities would not be revealed in the study.

2. Research instruments

A semi-structured individual interview was used as the main instrument, the interviewer had a list of questions prepared in advance, but also asked follow-up questions or probe for more detailed information based on the participant's responses. This allowed for a degree of flexibility in the interview process, which could be useful for exploring unexpected topics or gaining deeper insights into the participant's experiences.

3. Data collection procedure

First, the study employed a semi-structured individual interview format. This means that the interviewer had a list of pre-determined questions to guide the conversation, but the interview was flexible enough to allow for follow-up questions or elaboration on specific topics. Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research, as they allow for a degree of standardization in data collection while still enabling participants to provide rich and detailed responses.

Second, the interviews were conducted one-on-one via Zoom, which is a video conferencing platform that allows for remote communication. This method was likely chosen due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which may have limited the ability to conduct in-

person interviews. Zoom interviews have become increasingly popular in research due to their convenience and accessibility, as they allow researchers to connect with participants from anywhere in the world.

Third, the questions asked during the interview were focused on the participants' routine usage of languages. This suggests that the research was interested in understanding how participants use different languages in their daily lives, such as at home, at school, or in the community. By focusing on routine language use, the researcher may have been able to gain insights into the role of language in shaping participants' identities and cultural practices.

Finally, the individual interviews lasted for 45 minutes. This suggests that the researcher allocated a specific amount of time for each interview to ensure consistency across participants. The length of time chosen for the interviews may have been based on factors such as the complexity of the questions, the availability of participants, or the desired depth of the data collected.

4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to elicit the themes or topical ideas (Patton, 2002) from the interview data. The use of thematic analysis in this study suggests that the researcher was interested in gaining a deep understanding of the experiences, attitudes, or perspectives of the participants by identifying the common themes or topics that emerged from their responses. Thematic analysis is a commonly used method in qualitative research, as it allows for the identification of meaningful patterns and themes in the data that is useful for understanding a particular phenomenon or topic. After the researcher was immersed with the data from the participants in this study, codes were generated, bearing in mind that the voice of the participants was prioritized. Before the final themes were finalized, initial themes were created and defined. The initial themes were then submitted to two colleagues for the inter-reliability check, which yielded acceptable results.

Research Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study is interpretative in nature and aims to know the situations related to teenagers' perception towards local language usage. This study was conducted in a public university in Thailand. Implications of the findings through the lens of language preservation will be used to help empower youth to realize their local language and wisdom.

The interpretive framework has been employed in this study since it may be helpful to understand the narratives of students participating in this study. To understand how they view the existence of local language usage, their voices should be heard in order for researchers to delve into their personal experiences. It is also believed that the interpretative approach stresses the feedback between the discovery and the creation of knowledge of individuals (Sułkowski, 2009). The author bear in mind that the participants' reality has formed from several components such as social, linguistic, and cultural factors. In this sense, the context of each incident is taken into consideration while interpreting the data.

Research Results

1. To investigate the current use of local languages among youth in Sisaket in different domains of their lives.

Nine codes emerged, such as choosing a language according to social situations, joking about each language ability, perceived negative acts when speaking a certain language, getting positive response from interlocutors, evaluating interlocutors before choosing a certain language, choosing themes, sharing opinions with the use of a certain language, gaining public attention, and feeling pride. These are categorized into three themes: Social context and language use, purpose of conversation, and attitude towards a particular language.

Social context and language use

Social context plays vital role in choosing a specific language to use. If the participants are in the group of people who speak local language, they tend to speak that particular language too. In a collectivist culture, students will never be able to entirely escape their feelings of wanting to be part of a group. It might be true that it is an inevitable part of being human, but students seem to switch their central Thai to local language when they stay among others speaking local tongue.

Extract 1

I tend to speak my local language with people in my family or people spoken Khmer. I know they can understand the language. Apart from that, I feel somehow “close” to those sharing the same language. In the university, there is a senior who is also speaking Khmer, so I always speak to him by using Khmer. Every time I talk to him, I feel like I am home already.

The above extract presents the reality in choosing the language where students realize that the chosen language depends heavily on social context. In everyday life, students tend to refrain from making their friends and teacher speaking Central Thai uncomfortable since it might end up with a rejection. In situations where students feel uncomfortable speaking their own language, such as in a classroom or with friends who primarily speak Central Thai, it can be challenging to preserve and promote the use of their local language. This can be particularly difficult for younger generations who may not have had as much exposure to their local language or culture.

However, efforts to promote language preservation can help address these challenges by creating opportunities for students to learn and use their local language. This can include language education programs, cultural festivals, and other initiatives that celebrate linguistic diversity and promote the use of minority languages.

By valuing and promoting linguistic diversity, individuals can help ensure that local languages are not lost or marginalized, and that they continue to play an important role in the cultural heritage and identity of the community. This can help create a more inclusive and diverse society, where individuals from all linguistic backgrounds can feel valued and empowered.

Purpose of conversation

The second theme shows the possibility of choosing a local language because they want to achieve certain conversational goals.

Extract 2

I always speak Yer when I go to local market especially when I want to bargain to get a cheaper price and it has been successful. Some of the merchants are surprised when I start talking to them by using Yer because only small numbers of people can do that in my community. Then, I just need to observe if the sellers speak the same local language with me or not when I visit other market.

In this case, the “language negotiation” is used for increasing chances for speakers to get what the person wants. Language negotiation involves a number of factors, such as the relative status and power of the speakers, the social and cultural context of the interaction, and the goals and expectations of the speakers. In some cases, language negotiation may involve code-switching, or the use of multiple languages or dialects within a single conversation or interaction.

Attitude towards a particular language

Attitude can imply how people of one language group view the personal character and social status of speakers of another language and how they switch between their local or other languages. Therefore, each participant language attitudes affects their choices of using their local language in certain place and situation.

Extract 3

I'm not so sure if people can understand my native language. Not many people speak Suay nowadays, so I am a bit reluctant to speak the language in public because it might make other feel uncomfortable. On the other hand, I tend to feel proud when I speak English because I look cool. This is why when I practice presenting my script, I tend to speak English loudly.

This excerpt has shown that individual attitudes towards language can also influence language preservation efforts. If individuals view their local language as important and valuable, they may be more likely to support language preservation initiatives, such as language education programs and the creation of language resources. However, if individuals view their local language as unimportant or inferior to other languages, they may be less likely to support these efforts, which can make it more difficult to preserve the language over time.

2. To examine the possibility of promoting the preservation of local languages in language classrooms as a means of linking youth to their cultural heritage.

From the data, the participants have expressed their views in which language classrooms can be used to promote the preservation of local languages and link youth to their cultural heritage. Here are some examples:

1. Incorporate local language materials and resources into classroom instruction: Language teachers can use a variety of local language resources such as literature, songs, and videos to make the classroom more engaging and culturally relevant for students. This can help students to develop an appreciation for their linguistic and cultural heritage.

2. Develop language learning materials that reflect local culture: Language teachers can also create their own teaching materials that reflect local culture and history. For example, teachers could design language learning exercises that incorporate local folktales or historical events, thereby connecting language learning to local cultural heritage.

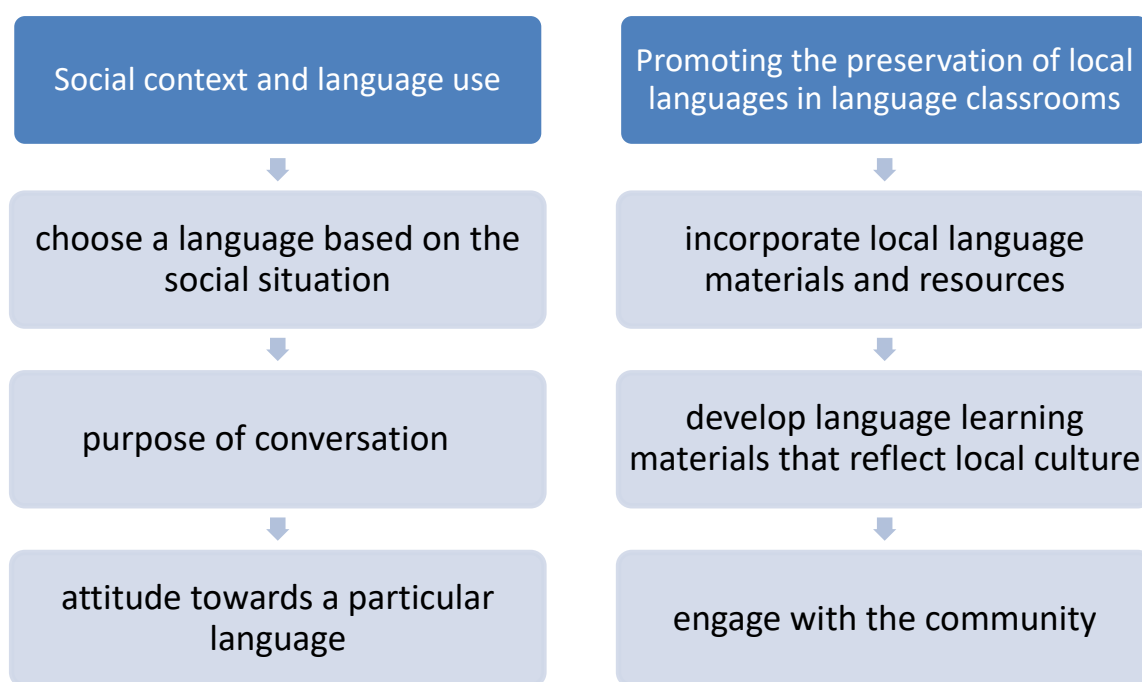
3. Engage with the community: Language teachers can involve local community members in the language classroom by inviting elders or native speakers to share their knowledge of the language and culture. This can provide students with firsthand experience of the language and connect them to the broader community.

4. Use language learning as a way to connect with other subjects: Language learning can be integrated with other subjects such as social studies, history, or geography to help students understand the broader cultural context of the language they are learning.

5. Use technology to support language learning: Technology can be used to create interactive language learning resources that engage students and provide them with additional opportunities to practice the language outside of the classroom.

Overall, promoting the preservation of local languages in language classrooms requires a multifaceted approach that involves incorporating local culture and history into language learning, engaging with the community, and using technology to support language learning.

Synthesize the overall finding as diagram



Discussion

The participants' excerpt that they tend to speak their local language with people in their family or those who speak Khmer highlights the emotional connection and sense of belonging that language can provide. This supports the argument made by Dorian (1998) that the rewards of language revitalization must come from within the social web of the community itself. Moreover, the excerpt underscores the importance of promoting local languages and cultures, particularly among local youth who can play a crucial role in supporting language revitalization efforts. By incorporating diverse perspectives and languages in education, Thai society can become more inclusive and diverse, ultimately contributing to the success of the creative economy in Thailand.

The results stating that individual attitudes towards language can influence language preservation efforts can be linked to the previous study by Premsrirat & Burarungrot (2018) that highlighted the decline in the use of indigenous languages in Thailand, with 15 out of 70 Thai living languages considered to be seriously endangered. If individuals view their local language as unimportant or inferior to other languages, they may be less likely to support language preservation initiatives, which can worsen the decline of endangered languages. Therefore, it is essential to raise awareness and emphasize the value of local languages and cultures to promote language preservation efforts, especially for endangered languages in Thailand. By doing so, it is possible to foster a sense of pride and identity among the communities who speak these languages, which can ultimately lead to the preservation of their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Additionally, the results from the participant excerpt highlight the importance of individual attitudes towards language in language preservation efforts. When individuals view their local language as important and valuable, they are more likely to support language preservation initiatives, such as language education programs and the creation of language resources. This is particularly important in the context of Thailand, where many indigenous languages are endangered. Therefore, incorporating regional language knowledge and unique cultures in Thai education is crucial to preserve these languages. Additionally, collaboration with members of the local community, as emphasized by Premsrirat and Malone (2003), can ensure that language revitalization programs are guided by the community's priorities and goals, leading to more successful preservation efforts.

Recommendation

1. Theoretical Recommendation: One theoretical recommendation for research about youth and language revitalization is to explore the role of language acquisition and use in shaping cultural identity and social relations. This could involve examining the ways in which language is linked to cultural practices, beliefs, and values, and how language revitalization efforts can support cultural preservation and renewal. Additionally, researchers could explore the impact of language loss on individuals and communities, including the psychological and emotional effects of losing a language.

2. Policy Recommendations: Policy recommendations for youth and language revitalization research could focus on identifying best practices for language revitalization programs and policies that support youth engagement and participation. This could include researching the most effective methods for language teaching and learning, as well as identifying strategies for increasing youth interest and involvement in language revitalization efforts. Additionally, researchers could explore the potential role of government policies and funding in supporting language revitalization efforts.

3. Practical Recommendations: Practical recommendations for youth and language revitalization research could focus on identifying effective strategies for engaging and empowering youth in language revitalization efforts. This could include researching the role of technology and social media in supporting language learning and use, as well as identifying ways to connect youth with elders and other fluent speakers who can serve as mentors and role models. Additionally, researchers could explore the impact of community-based language revitalization efforts on youth development and well-being, including the potential benefits of language immersion programs and other immersive learning experiences.

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