

**Exploring <sup>1</sup>Biliteracy Development among Refugees in Thailand:  
The Case of Imbalanced Biliteracy Learning between Thai and English  
Resulted in Continuum of Formal Schooling Interruption**

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*Abstract*—This paper considers practices of biliteracy in the context of humanitarian-based English language programs for refugee children and adolescents in Thailand. Conducted over a period of eight months, this inquiry into refugees in Thailand presents the findings of an empirical study investigating biliteracy learning by urban refugees. This study took a multidisciplinary perspective of biliteracy by examining socio-economic inequalities among urban refugee children and adolescents which resulted in interruption to their formal schooling and had a relationship to the languages taught in their humanitarian based language learning programs. A central finding of this research is the need for biliteracy development of these young refugee learners by giving attention to teaching Thai language, which will help formal schooling interrupted refugee children and adolescents to resume their study in local Thai schools, accompanied by teaching globally-oriented English language. By the same token, while the promise of English language teaching and learning might empower young urban refugee students, English language teaching cannot be at the expense of Thai language teaching because the latter is urgently required for these young urban refugees to continue their formal schooling and decrease inequalities. Thus, a model of Thai-English biliteracy teaching suited to these refugee students in Thailand is much needed and its development is highly recommended.

## I. INTRODUCTION

By drawing on perspectives from the fields of biliteracy as pertaining to teaching and learning of two languages—Thai and English—to refugee students, this current study seeks to shed light on the imbalances of biliteracy learning experienced by young refugees in

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<sup>1</sup> Biliteracy in the context of this study is interchangeable with learning and development of bi/multilingual and bi/multiliteracy, relating to bilingualism and literacy.

Thailand and how the imbalanced biliteracy development negatively affects them in regards to the discontinuation of their formal schooling. In discussing the relationship between foreign or second language teaching and societal inequalities resulted from the interruption of formal schooling, the foreign or second languages needed to be taught to marginalized minority groups such as young urban refugee students are frequently overlooked. A real example is as follows: Teaching English language is commonly seen as a crucial resource for English as a foreign or second language learners to access power, prestige, status, and socio-economic mobility. However, data obtained from urban refugee language learners in Thailand show otherwise, challenging traditional notions of teaching a powerful language such as English to decrease social inequalities. On condition that these young refugee language learners continue to study in English language programs provided by refugee shelters, they are in a disadvantaged position to not acquire needed Thai language competencies from their heterogeneous and linguistically diverse refugee peers and refugee English teachers, and are therefore unable to enroll in local Thai schools. Receiving English language education among these young urban refugees is at the expense of learning the immediately needed Thai language to terminate the interruption to their formal schooling.

One of the causes of inequality is lack of access to schooling. As evidenced by data in this study, factors acknowledged for their impact on socio-economic inequality include formal schooling interruption among urban refugee children and adolescents. Often socio-economic inequalities between mainstream groups and minority refugee communities can partially be caused by continuation of formal schooling with the former and continuation of formal schooling interruption with the latter. Ideally, formal schooling interrupted refugee children and adolescents should be entitled with Thai language courses as preparation to enroll in local Thai schools. Humanitarian based language programs designed for urban refugee children and adolescents organized by nongovernment groups, nonetheless, fail to offer regular Thai language courses in preparing young refugee students with Thai language proficiencies needed to continue their formal schooling in Thailand. When English language teaching and Thai language teaching are two competing orientations in language teaching markets, English language teaching often foregrounds Thai language teaching in humanitarian based language learning programs. This is the result of administrative decisions as well as urban refugee language learners' choices. Prioritizing English language teaching accompanied by discouraging Thai language teaching increases socio-economic inequalities for urban refugee children and adolescents in comparison to their Thai counterparts. To close this gap, this study suggests that beliefs and/or ideologies that promote English language

teaching only should be contested. Moreover, Thai as a second language course is recommended for formal schooling interrupted urban refugee students to enable their resumption of formal schooling in Thailand, ultimately lessening their socio-economic inequalities in comparison to their Thai counterparts. Therefore, the goals of humanitarian based educational programs should be to create conditions for learning and development of Thai-English biliteracy that are both additive for these refugee students under study.

## II. BACKGROUND

### *A. Refugees and Asylum Seekers Resettle in Urban Areas of Thailand*

In the world we are living today, approximately eleven million people are displaced at a domestic level or transnational level (UNHCR, 2006). More often than not, wars and civil wars generate enormous death tolls, disrupt accumulation of physical capital and properties, and erode civil freedoms. Transnational migration occurs when these horrors displace a population from their home country to resettle in a new country. Because civil conflicts, political unrest, and religious persecution by and large continues for many years, these forced migrations have been frequent and on the rise in several regions of the world. Those seeking asylum hope for refugee status being granted and individuals “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear is unwilling, to avail himself of the protection of that country” are categorized as refugees by the United Nations (Huguet & Punpuing, 2005).

Many countries have acknowledged an ethical responsibility to admit refugees and render humanitarian assistance to these extremely vulnerable persons. The Kingdom of Thailand is one of the largest shelters in the world for displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers. Millions of displaced people flee their homelands to escape war, long-term economic privation, political or religious persecution, and violence by the military settle in Thailand (Huguet & Punpuing, 2005). Some asylum seekers from different countries come to Thailand and take up residence in urban areas because of Thailand’s comparatively easy to meet visa requirements in comparison to other countries (Jesuit Refugee Service, n.d.). Most asylum seekers come from Afghanistan, Congo, Mainland China, Myanmar, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Sociolinguistically transnational refugee resettlement should be seen as a life-long process in biliteracy development. Language

teaching and learning among urban refugees is essentially a moral imperative to help asylum seekers resettle in Thailand.

### *B. Issues of Language Teaching in Humanitarian based Language Learning Programs in Thailand*

Despite Thailand's status as a prominent receiving country for refugees and asylum seekers in worldwide migration and resettlement, there is an increasingly significant gap between humanitarian based language learning programs in Thailand and the actual language needs among refugees, particularly with regard to the need to learn and develop biliteracy between Thai and English. Data in this study show that these language learning programs at urban refugee shelters are at risk of contributing to the creation of ever larger social inequality for urban refugee children and adolescents in comparison to their Thai counterparts, because of languages they are not given the opportunity to learn. On the one hand, formal schooling interrupted refugee children and adolescents do not receive regular Thai language assistance, but they are entitled to enroll in local Thai schools nearby their domicile. As a result, they continue their formal schooling interruption and are thus not ready to enroll in local Thai schools. On the other hand, the extreme focus on English language teaching in a number of urban refugee language learning programs disregards the immediate need for young refugee students to learn Thai language. Compounding the problem, English language teaching focused programs designed for young urban refugee students fail to provide a comprehensive curriculum with balanced developments in different subject matters suited to refugee children and adolescents in primary and secondary levels. In any case, teaching English language alone cannot possibly compensate for refugee children and adolescents' needs in learning other subjects, i.e., mathematics, science and social studies.

### *C. The Call to Teach Thai Language Regularly for Urban Refugee Children and Adolescents in Thailand*

Despite the fact that learning English language has become a critical resource for gaining power, prestige, status, and socio-economic mobility in this age of globalization, the need to teach a local language to urban refugees in countries where they resettle cannot be ignored. Only when refugees become functionally communicative in Thai language do they begin to enjoy the rewards of living in the Kingdom of Thailand. Data from this present inquiry

reveal that learning Thai language can surely assist urban refugees satisfy their fundamental needs and empower their self-esteem. Mastery of Thai language can help individual and communal refugees to integrate into the Thai society while waiting for a third country to adopt them. There is emerging evidence from data in this current study to show that the attainment of any medium of wider communication, a nature language acquisition to its native speakers, turns out to be a challenging task for transnational refugees if they do not receive any language education to learn common media of communication in their resettled countries. The lack of mastery over a common language is widely perceived as a frustrating limitation faced by cross-national refugees trying to adapt to a new environment. Learning a second language as medium of wider communication in a host country adds life difficulties to these urban refugees. Ideally, language teaching programs provided for unwilling migrants should cater to meet their different language, communication, bilingual, multilingual, biliteracy and multiliteracy needs. These language and communication needs might vary significantly from those other immigrants who are willing to move to Thailand. Despite occasional Thai language training courses being provided, rarely do humanitarian based language learning programs in Thailand consider urban refugee children's needs to learn Thai language in a regular Thai language program for 1-2 years before they are competent to enroll in nearby Thai schools.

Exploring research perspectives that frame the issue of language teaching for formal schooling interrupted refugee children and adolescents in Thailand, the literature evidently show a positive effect on transnational refugees who receive second language education before they are placed in mainstream classrooms in a host country. Australia (Settlement English, n.d.), Canada (Adelman, 1990) and USA (Ellis, 2010), for example, prepare refugee children and adolescents with needed English as second language courses in enabling them to continue their formal schooling in their resettled English speaking countries. Nevertheless, data from this inquiry show that Thailand has produced little evidence of improvement in these humanitarian based language learning programs to help urban refugee children and adolescents learn Thai language regularly.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *A. Biliteracy*

Biliteracy is defined in this paper as a compound and multifaceted configuration. Knowledge, reading strategies, and literacy skills can be transferred from one language and literacy to another. The final result of this mutually reinforced literacy development between L1 and L2 is frequently termed biliteracy. To be biliterate is more than just being bilingual. Biliteracy can be seen as a combination and a conjunction between bilingualism and literacy (Hornberger, 1989, pp. 272-273; Hornberger, 2003, p. 4). Instead of contrasting L1 and L2 literacy, biliteracy should be seen as a continuum and viewed as a dynamic wholeness (Hornberger, 2003, pp. xiii-xiv). Returning to Hornberger's view, biliteracy can be defined as literacy instances, whereby communications are delivered by biliterate actors and actresses in two or more language varieties and in or around written literacy (Hornberger, 1990, p. 213 cited in Hornberger, 2003, xiii). Hornberger's continua model of biliteracy can help clarify biliteracy context, media, content and development. Her model is especially useful in considering bi/multilingual and bi/multi-literacy activities performed by immigrants such as the refugees under study in Thailand. Therefore, Hornberger's continuum of biliteracy becomes the theoretical lens that illuminates the data and facilitates filling literature gaps. Biliteracy in the context of this study can be inter-exchangeable with learning and development of bi/multilingual and bi/multiliteracy.

TABLE 1. HORNBERGER'S CONTINUA OF BILITERACY (1989, 2003)

Conventionally less dominant, influential, and prevailing		Conventionally more dominant, influential, and prevailing
1. Context of biliteracy: Where biliteracy is employed, taught and learned?		
Micro	a. ←————→	Macro
Oral	b. ←————→	Literate
Bilingual and multilingual	c. ←————→	Monolingual
2. Media (Communicative Repertoires) of biliteracy: What aspects of biliteracy are employed and learned; Forms biliteracy takes; In which languages biliteracy is taught?		
Simultaneous exposure	a. ←————→	Successive exposure
Dissimilar structures	b. ←————→	Similar structures
Divergent scripts	c. ←————→	Convergent scripts
3. Content of biliteracy: Types of meanings articulated in specific contexts, through particular media, and during certain points of biliterate development; Analyzing what is taught		
Minority	a. ←————→	Majority
Vernacular	b. ←————→	Literary
Contextualized	c. ←————→	Decontextualized
4. Development of biliteracy: How is biliteracy employed and learned; What is the effect and ending result of the biliteracy instruction?		
Reception	a. ←————→	Production and performance
Oral	b. ←————→	Written
L1	c. ←————→	L2

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

To develop an understanding regarding factors that lead to the emergence of imbalanced biliteracy learning, that is, English language teaching at the cost of Thai language teaching for formal schooling interrupted refugee children and adolescents in urban areas of Thailand, this study pursues the research question: what factors shape and influence biliteracy development through foreign or second language learning among formal schooling

interrupted urban refugee children and adolescents in Thailand and how can the needs of Thai-English biliteracy through language teaching practices be met?

### *A. Urban Refugee Sites and Young Refugee Language Learners in Thailand*

Two main types of refugees and asylum seekers currently resettle in Thailand—urban refugees and camp-based refugees. The scope of this inquiry has been limited to investigating urban refugee children and adolescents particularly in regard to their language learning experiences in humanitarian based language learning programs and the relationship to social inequalities created by extension of their formal schooling interruption resulting from what languages are taught in these programs.

Multiple urban refugee research sites across Thailand are characterized as having English programs focused on young children that seem to exist comfortably with adult refugee English teachers and some American volunteers who teach English language courses. This study undertook to research 80 young refugee students' language needs and the correlation between these needs and what languages are taught in their humanitarian based language learning programs and their resumption of formal schooling. Informants were aged from 6-7 years old to 18-19 years old. The methodology utilized in the research of these young refugee language learners in urban shelters included qualitative approach and comprised of interviews, a questionnaire, and observation notes. Adult urban refugees volunteer to teach young students in their language learning centers. Their language learning classrooms are where linguistically and culturally diverse urban refugee children and adolescents are taught in English language isolated from the daily activities of neighboring Thai speaking residents. These English language education programs for urban refugee children and adolescents are also conducted in instructional settings where young refugee students learn to competent to please refugee English teachers. These urban refugee children and adolescents' learning takes place in classroom language domains that are in particular socio-cultural and linguistic groups.

### *B. Data Collection and Analysis*

Through interviews, observations and questionnaires, this paper investigates what languages are needed to be taught to urban refugee children and adolescents to end their formal schooling interruption in Thailand. The researcher carefully triangulates data collected from

individual interviews, group interviews, follow-up interviews, participant observations, non-participant observations, and responses from questionnaires.

## V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that it is incorrect to consider English only as the right way to help these disadvantaged refugee children and adolescents in Thailand. First, data indicate a strong desire to learn English among young refugee students. Not surprisingly, data reveal that almost all urban refugee children and adolescents (98%, N=80) see a need to learn English language over Thai language. The powerful role of English language is influencing and shaping the remaining possibilities for languages other than English to teach in urban refugee settings in Thailand. Data point out that some urban refugee children and adolescents (60%, N=80) do not see a need to learn Thai language, because they do not want to enroll in a local Thai school but wait for a third country to adopt them. However, this paper argues that lack of Thai language speaking proficiencies among these refugee children and adolescents might put them in a disadvantageous position and prolong their length of formal schooling interruption. Data report (estimated) 3-4 years in average of formal schooling interruption for English language learning focused participants. By marked contrast, urban refugee children and adolescents (30%, N=80) who intend to enroll in local Thai schools see a need to learn Thai language. Data report (estimated) 1.5-2 years in average of formal schooling interruption for Thai language learning focused refugee children and adolescents. However, there are unfortunately no regular Thai language teaching programs provided for these urban refugee children and adolescents who need to enroll in local Thai schools and terminate their formal schooling interruption, because Thai language learning programs are only provided periodically or occasionally as non-formal language education.

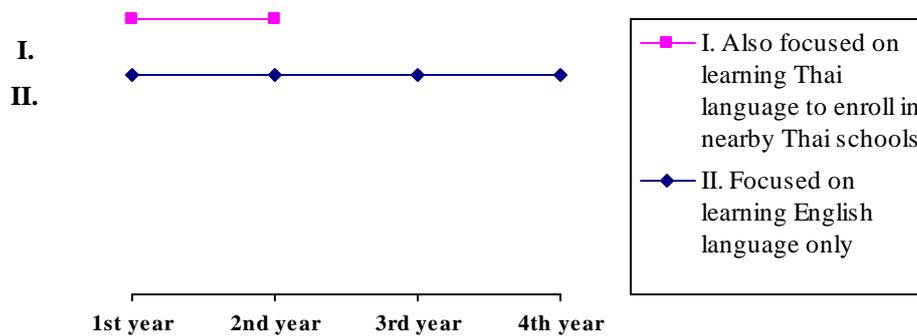
Note that different language learning programs at urban refugee shelters across Thailand differ in the size of their student body and teaching staff, and available language teaching and learning resources. Thus, data gathered in this present inquiry cannot be generalized and/or applicable to every language learning program in urban refugee shelters across Thailand. Data presented below in Table 2 and Figure 1 are merely estimated numbers extrapolated from the limited data.

**TABLE 2:**  
**RESPONSES OF INFORMANTS WHEN ASKED WHAT AFFECTS THEIR THAI-  
 ENGLISH BILITERACY LEARNING**

Factors	# of responses from 80 informants	% of responses from 80 informants
Seeing a need to learn English language	78	>90%
Heterogeneous and linguistically diverse refugees see a need to use English language as a common medium of communication	60	75%
Thai friends and Thai neighbors live close to refugee's residence Media: Newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio	20	25%
No opinion/unclear/neutrality		

Note: informants can choose more than one factor.

**FIGURE 1:**  
**RELATIONS BETWEEN FOREIGN OR SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING CHOICES  
 AND TIME LENGTH OF FORMAL SCHOOLING INTERRUPTION**



**I.** Young urban refugee language learners see a need to learn Thai language and intend to enroll in Thai schools nearby their residence:

1.5-2 years (estimated) of formal schooling interruption

**II.** Young urban refugee language learners stay in English language learning programs and do not see a need to learn Thai language:

3-4 years (estimated) of formal schooling interruption

Secondly, data show a need to use English language as a common medium of communication among heterogeneous and linguistically diverse refugees from Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Congo, and other countries. The data indicate that heterogeneous and linguistically diverse urban refugees converse to each other in English language as a common medium of communication and as a medium of instruction in language learning programs. This contrast is dramatically lost in rural refugee camps, especially those who live with homogenous peers from Myanmar. In contrast to rural refugees who maintain their native languages within their homogeneous camps, urban refugees stated that heterogeneous and linguistically diverse peers have effects on their ever increasing use of English language as a common medium of communication when they cannot understand each others' native languages. Data indicates that learning English language or Thai language could be highly specific to refugee's language learning programs accessible to them. However, this study cannot go beyond its data to infer the expected outcomes when Thai language learning programs are regular, available, and free to urban refugee children and adolescents.

Thirdly, the analysis shows that an immediate language contact with a predominant Thai language domain in Thailand has little effect or almost no effect on shaping everyday practices of English language among urban refugee communities. The Royal Thai Government did not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention and therefore does not have laws and permanent systems to decide whether a person is a refugee (see legal services in Bangkok Refugee Center, online). Moreover, the 1979 Immigration Act states that illegal immigrants, i.e., those without a passport, a valid visa to stay, and a work permit to get employed in Thailand, are subject to arrest, detention and deportation. Thus, urban refugees are struggling and in desperate need, seeking out a life in a hostile environment as they are not recognized as refugees by the Royal Thai Government. As illegal aliens, they confront abuse, exploitation, hostility, language difficulties, prejudice, threats, and ambiguous legal status, and hence are subject to arrest, detention, deportation and human warehousing. Limited or

no speaking proficiency in Thai language is dependent on the frequency of language contacts with linguistically diverse refugee peers as well as speakers of the predominant Thai language outside the refugee shelters. Within a predominantly Thai language environment, informants assert that their less frequent language contacts with Thai language speakers outside their refugee shelters may have, nonetheless, negative impacts on their Thai language learning. Note that Thai administrators and Thai social workers communicate with urban refugees in English language. The subjects reported that, for security reasons, the majority of urban refugees have limited language contacts with outside Thai native speakers. Although the Thai government allows non-government religious organizations in collaboration with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide shelters for illegal immigrants such as refugees and asylum seekers, the Thai police can arrest them. Because some urban refugees rely on non-profit organizations and humanitarian assistance for their food supply, they might not see a need to learn Thai language and make a living in Thailand. However, other urban refugees who need to make a living in Thailand have a significantly higher frequency of language contacts with Thai language speakers. Relatively isolated language socialization within diverse linguistic refugee communities greatly hinders urban refugee children and adolescents from acquiring needed Thai language proficiencies to continue their formal schooling in local Thai schools. However, to assume that young urban refugee children can be placed into mainstream Thai speaking schools without preparation of their Thai language competencies and proficiencies is beyond the scope of this current inquiry.

The data from this study strongly suggests that the predominantly Thai language domain plays a minimal role and has little effect on the dominant English language learning occurring among urban refugee children and adolescents in Thailand. In other words, most informants assert that they do not see an immediate need to acquire Thai language despite its demands, but data indicates that they see a desperate need to learn English oral and written discourse.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The qualitative results from this paper add to our current understandings of young urban refugee's language learning issues and the relationship to formal schooling interruption in Thailand. Based on the results of this research it is urged that Thai as a second language program should be established by UNHCR in meeting the needs of formal schooling

interrupted urban refugee children and adolescents to continue their formal schooling in Thailand. English language only curriculum and English language focused programs accessible to refugee children and adolescents could be problematic, because English language courses alone cannot cover the full range of urban refugee children and adolescents learning needs in other subject areas and skills. Simply because these urban refugee children (> 90%, N=80) express a strong desire to only learn English language does not mean that they do not need to develop other knowledge and skills from a variety of subject contents. These urban refugee children and adolescents are too young to make their own decisions on whether they should be only entitled to learn English language alone or they should be entitled also to learn subjects, especially Thai language, other than English language in helping them end formal schooling interruption. These educational language policy decisions should be given to UNHCR and grass-root religious groups who organize urban refugee services to make.

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