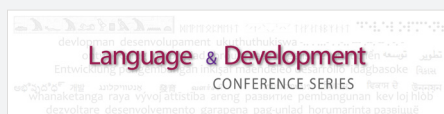# Spinning the Top: Translanguaging Pedagogy for Just Education for Students from Minority Language Groups in Northern Thailand

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Contents

Introduction

The paper is a discussion of why the present education practices are unjust for the students whose home languages are not the same as the medium of instruction, Thai, in the schools in Northern Thailand. We argue how translanguaging (TL) pedagogy could help overcome this uneven, sloped playing field of education. The TL Top Model is introduced and used to explain why the present education could be perceived as unjust for ethnolinguistic minority students, and how TL pedagogy can level the education playing field. This model also helps to understand why it is crucial for teachers to have a 'stance of amplification' (García, Ibarra Johnson and Seltzer, 2017) in order to leverage all of the linguistic repertoire of bilingual students and how various TL strategies need to be designed and applied for teaching these minority students. We then describe the various TL strategies that were used by teachers during the first semester of the academic year, 2020 to 2021 to show how the students from linguistic minority groups are encouraged to utilise their full linguistic repertoire to participate in the learning process as Thai monolingual students do. For an accurate understanding of the nature of multilingualism of linguistic minority students, two different ways of becoming multilingual (Son, 2016; 2019a; 2019b) are outlined in the first section.

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¹ 'Stance of amplification' adapted from García, Ibarra Johnson and Seltzer (2017) was introduced during the Translanguaging Education teacher training workshop held at Chiangmai, Thailand from 27 to 30 June 2020 as perspectives and attitudes that 1) bilingualism/home language is a resource to learn, not a problem, 2) language needs to be positioned in the lips and minds of students, not in external standards or regulations, 3) TL transforms subjectivity, making students more creative and critical, 4) bilingual students' different languages work together, not separately, 5) the classroom space must promote collaboration across contents, languages, people and places, such as home, school and community, 6) classroom is a democratic space where teachers and students together co-create knowledge.

Different process to become multilingual

Whether a speaker's home language (HL) is the dominant language in society or not is a crucial factor that helps us to have a better idea of multilingualism. If the language they use at home is the dominant one in their broader society as well as their local community, most people use the same dominant language in their both local and broader society. This HL is a sufficient condition for them to live their normal life in their country. The same HL is also mostly used as a medium of instruction in school. The students may learn a second language at a later stage of their education and the third language in high school or college. However, they seldom use the features from these second and/or third language(s) in their daily communication unless the people they talk with know these additional languages. They are taught in school that mixing languages is an error or a mistake to be corrected. So, they are likely to use only their HL, that is, the dominant language in school and in society for their common life. The additional languages may be used only during the language class at school. They tend to be taught not to mix languages at school and there is no need to mix language, as their HL is sufficient enough to live in their community. Since they learn a second language after having acquired a certain level of their first language, this kind of multilingualism is called *sequential* multilingualism. As they learn these additional languages through education, and the more highly educated they are, the more likely they become multilingual; this is also termed *elite* multilingualism. As they tend to learn these second and third languages as a subject, this can also be called *conscious* multilingualism. This scenario of becoming multilingual may include those whose home language is English and who live in their home countries, such as the UK, USA, Australia,

New Zealand, or those whose HL is the same as the standard variety of a national language of a country and who live in the same country, such as standard Korean speakers who live in South Korea and Central Thai speakers who live in Thailand.

If the HL, on the other hand, is a non-dominant language in their society, the nature of multilingualism of these people is very different from the one of *sequential* and *elite* multilingualism. Owing to their HL being a non-dominant language in their society, their HL alone is not sufficient to live their normal life. They need to learn the dominant language and use it along with their HL. Unless they are professionally trained to be able to use each of their languages equally well, they normally want to use both of their languages together in order to make full meaning when they communicate with those who share a common linguistic repertoire as themselves. They also know when to suppress which part of their linguistic repertoire when they communicate with someone who does not have the same linguistic repertoire as themselves (García, 2009; 2017). They are likely to become multilingual at the grassroots level even if they are not educated. Thus, this kind of multilingualism is called *grassroots* multilingualism. Since they are exposed to multiple languages and acquire these languages *simultaneously,* it is also called simultaneous multilingualism. In addition, as they are naturally exposed to and acquiring these other languages even without conscious effort; this is also referred to as *subconscious* multilingual. The students from the linguistic minority community that this paper deals with are closer to this second scenario of becoming multilingual.

We are not arguing that all the multilinguals belong to only these two types. Different multilinguals may become multilingual along the continuum between the two types. If the multilingualism of the readership is closer to *elite, sequential* and *conscious* multilingualism, it is necessary to make an extra effort to truly understand who these *grassroots* multilingual students are and help them learn according to the nature of their multilingualism. If the policy and practices of language-in-education are influenced by the perspective of *elite* and *sequential* multilingualism requiring *grassroots* multilingual students to use only school language (SL) in school, this false expectation silences students when they are not able to demonstrate their ideas in SL without the support of HL. In such circumstances, the education playing ground is unfair for these multilingual students as compared to monolingual students whose HL is the same as SL.

TL top model[2]

TL is to use one's whole linguistic repertoire *freely*, regardless of the boundaries of language or dialect, and *appropriately* according to the communicative context in order to make meaning, whether the speaker is elite/sequential or grassroots/simultaneous multilingual.[3] If the multilinguals are from the first category, they can translanguage by using most of their linguistic resources both *freely* and *appropriately* to make meaning while using their HL alone as the dominant language in their society. The grassroots multilinguals, however, cannot truly translanguage when using their HL alone. They can *freely* and *appropriately* use all of their linguistic repertoire when they use linguistic features not only from HL but also from other language(s) they know since their HL is only part of their linguistic resources and a non-dominant language in their community.

TL for grassroots multilinguals is like a top that a child might play with that has different colours on it to represent different languages, as in Figure 1. Such a top is designed for spinning, so it is best appreciated when it spins. When it does spins, it shows a mixture of the different colours that are on it. While it spins, we cannot easily determine which colours are combined to show the mixture. We just enjoy the beauty of the mixture of different colours while the top is spinning, feeling as though it is 'alive'.

In a similar fashion, grassroots multilinguals show their true identity and knowledge when they use all of their language resources *freely* like a spinning top. Grassroots multilinguals also use only part of their language resources, one language out of several, to communicate *appropriately* according to the communicative context, which is represented by a static top. However, using one language is marked because they have to suppress the rest of their language resources except the one being used (García, 2009; 2017). Using the top metaphor, TL is using all of their language resources *freely* across boundaries of languages as a spinning top, and *properly* according to the communicative context as a static top in order to communicate effectively.

[2] Son (2019a) initially introduced translanguaging top as a metaphor to emphasise the fact that multilinguals are best appreciated when they are freely using all of their language resources like when the top spins. The reason it is now called a model is because this metaphor has been developed to be powerful enough to explain many aspects such as the concept of TL, language-in-education policy and practices, TL strategies, zone of proximal development, bilingual zone of proximal development, and so on. as described in this paper.

[3] This definition of TL has been developed to be easily understood by education practitioners, such as teachers, principals and education supervisors, and was influenced by Ofelia García and others (García, 2009; 2013; García and Wei, 2014; García, et al., 2016; 2017; Otheguy, et al., 2015). Here is an example of definition of translanguaging for academic audiences, 'the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages' (Otheguy, García and Reid, 2015:281).

Figure 1: (a) Static Top

(b) Spinning Top

Static top: sloped education playing field

The static top presents multilinguals as having multiple separate languages that do not influence one another. People with this view believe that only a single language should be used depending on the places, times and with people with whom the speaker interacts. According to the static top, the boundaries across the languages are clearly established and kept and a language should not be mixed with other languages that they know. Many schools around the world have this static top kind of language-in-education policy in their school. They allow only SL to be used in school. As a result, those students whose HL is different from SL, with this static top based language-in-education policy, have to inhibit much of their language resources when they learn and show their knowledge. If their SL is just emerging at the low grades of primary school, most of their language resources, consisting mostly of their HL, have to be suppressed (García, 2017) and buried. Their learning process is hindered by their limited knowledge of SL and they can show

only a limited part of their knowledge to the extent they are capable of using SL.

Monolingual students whose home language is the same as the SL, on the other hand, can utilise most (if not all) of their language resources and inhibit just a minimal part of their linguistic repertoire. It is therefore no surprise that bi/multilingual students around the world whose HL is non-dominant in the society usually lag behind the monolingual students whose HL is the dominant language and medium of instruction. This is also true in most primary schools in Northern Thailand. Bilingual students from linguistic minority communities, such as Pwo Karen, Sgaw Karen, Hmong and Lahu, are not allowed to use their HL in school. They are expected to use only Thai, which is a language they have not developed as well as their HL. Their academic performance in school is likely to be lower than the students whose HL is Thai. We should not explain their low performance within the student, but from the language-in-education

policy and practices that limit their performance. This language-in-education policy and practice, like static top language use, makes the education playing field sloped. As shown in Figure 2, the static top seems to be standing on the ground, but it is actually lying down on the sloped playing field of education. On this sloped playing field, as symbolised with the slope of the lower triangle in Figure 2, it is easy for dominant language students to go downhill as opposed to non-dominant language students who simply trudge uphill. How then can we make this sloped playing field level? The answer is that we should also allow such bi/multilingual students to spin their TL top while most schools already have language practices of static top.

Spinning top: level education playing field

The spinning top presents the grassroots multilinguals as well as monolinguals as having a unitary linguistic repertoire. It deploys their linguistic resources fully, naturally and freely regardless of language boundaries, as the top does not show the boundaries of languages when it spins. It encourages students to use all of their language resources at a time. With this spinning top, both monolingual and bilingual students can use most of their language resources for their learning and showing what they know. By adding a spinning top aspect of classroom activities, the ethnolinguistic minority students can use most of their linguistic repertoire including their HL practices. In balancing between the static top and the spinning top, we make the playing field of education more equal. It helps both Thai monolingual and ethnolinguistic minority bilingual students learn under the same language rules of using most of their linguistic repertoire.

TL pedagogy does not mean having to always spin the top. It needs static top practices such as learning language and content using one language. However, static top practices need to be balanced with spinning top practices by allowing students to freely use all of their language resources to the extent that it is appropriate and strategic for learning, as seen in Figure 2. Only then does the education playing field become level for both bilingual and monolingual students. Who can make the playing field level? Unless someone spins the top, it remains static. It is the teacher who can, and it is the teacher who should make the top spin. Unless the teachers, however, are willing to spin the top, nothing will happen except for a static top on the sloped playing field. In order for teachers to spin the top, they must have a positive attitude towards the spinning top, which is discussed in the following section.
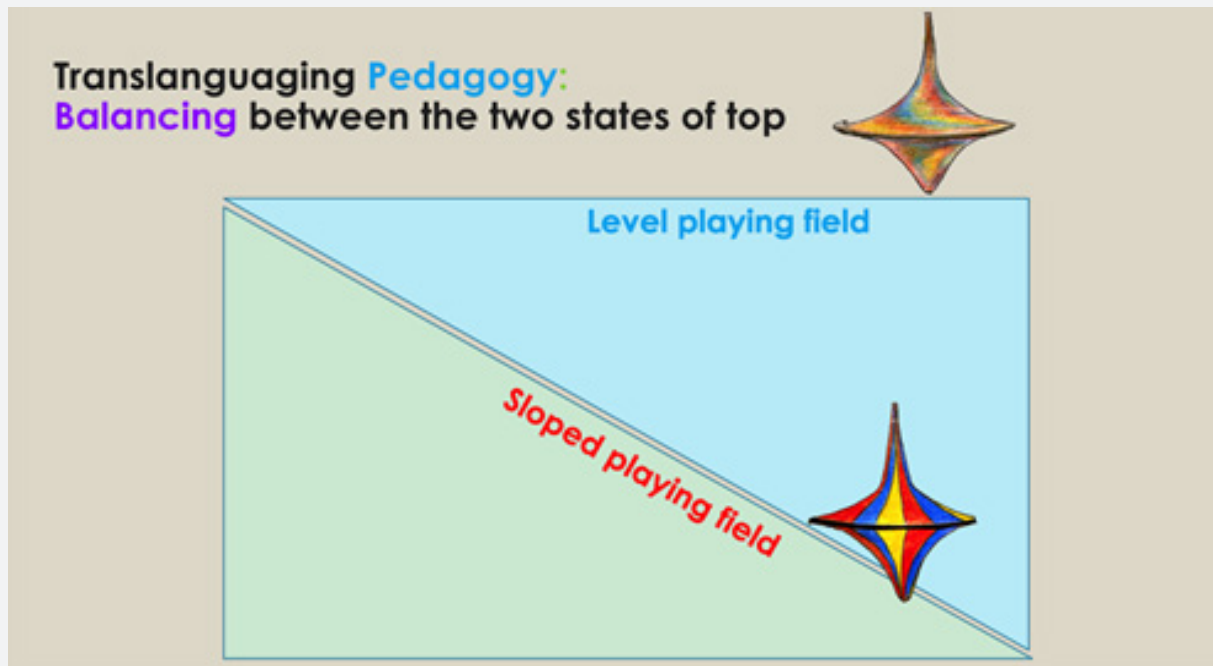
Figure 2: Balancing between two states of TL Top

Transformation of teachers' perspective

Teachers' attitudes about students' HL and bilingualism is crucial to make the sloped education playing field a level one. When teachers do not appreciate and value the students' HL and bilingualism, they do not utilise students' HL and bilingualism for learning and assessment, and students then bear the burden of learning with their limited SL and being assessed in their SL only. This results in minority bilingual students performing lower than SL-speaking monolingual students who are already proficient in the SL. If teachers look at bilingual students' low level of SL only, overlooking the fact that these students also speak their HL and are bilingual, they may not expect these bilingual students to perform as well as SL monolingual students. In these circumstances, the sloped playing field may continue to be sloped with the deception that the static top is alive despite the static top being 'dead' on the sloped playing field, as seen in Figure 2.

Teachers must transform their negative attitude towards students' HL and bilingualism into a positive one, especially if they are more familiar with sequential and elite multilingual perspectives. It is important for them to develop a deeper understanding of the importance of the HL and bilingualism as a resource rather than a problem. Valuing the bilingualism of learners and the use of their full linguistic repertoire allows students to leverage their HL and bilingualism for better academic performance. We designed our first translanguaging education (TLE) teacher training workshop (Son, 2020) in a way that the participants could have opportunities to reflect upon their present perspective and decide whether to transform that into 'stance of amplification' (García, Ibarra Johnson and Seltzer, 2017) or not.

From our recent interviews with teachers taken in the three TLE pilot project schools during the months of October and November 2020, we heard many stories of linguistic conversion from the stance of ignoring students' HL and bilingualism to leveraging those for just education on the level playing field. Teachers changed their perspectives on students' HL and bilingualism between pre- and post-TLE workshops. They changed their attitude from looking at HL and bilingualism as useless, forbidden and a hindrance, forcing students to use only Thai, to the perspective that Thai is not sufficient and that students need to develop both Thai and HL together for better understanding and active class participation for learning. The examples of TL strategies described below have been developed and used by the teachers who transformed their attitude and learned to leverage students' linguistic resources for just education.

TL strategies by four states of tl top

TL strategies consist of four different states: Static Top Alone; Spinning Top Alone; Static Top Together; Spinning Top Together, as shown in Figure 3.

Static Top Alone strategies represent the activities when a teacher alone or a student alone uses one language at a time. In many cases teachers do not speak the HL(s) of minority students and have no other choice but to use only the SL. Students also often have to use only SL when showing their knowledge in spoken or written form unless someone else, such as a friend, can interpret his or her HL performance in the SL. For the bilingual learners or teachers, however, using two languages at the same time is more common unless a single language use policy is strongly imposed on them. Even if students are prohibited from using their HL, they often 'smuggle in' their HL in the classroom.

The strategies of the *Spinning Top Alone* represent those activities that allow learners to use all of their language resources, such as looking up words in a bilingual dictionary, using key terms of SL in home language default sentences, pre-writing in either language and writing in the other language, and so on.

Static Top Together represents the activities when students are using only one language at a time for their small group or classroom work. These cases are found more often among the bilingual students at lower grades of primary school when their performance level of SL is still very low, and they have to use mainly HL as well among the monolinguals who use SL at home. They learn better within the space between what they can do alone and what they can do with their friends or teacher with more knowledge. This space is called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and learning occurs in this ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978:86). If monolingual learners learn better in their ZPD, the same is true for bilingual learners, but only when they are allowed to use all of their bilingual resources within a Bilingual Zone of Proximal Development (BZPD) (Moll and Dias, 1987).

If bilingual students are forced to use only SL, they cannot fully show their true knowledge until their SL is fully developed. Thus, various activities of *Spinning Top Together* are crucial for bilingual students to learn better, as they can leverage all of their language resources from both SL and HL to learn academic content and to develop each of their languages as they work together.

Performance levels tend to differ according to the different states of TL top. In the case of static top, where the language that students are allowed to use in classroom is their weaker language (as in the case of minority students using Thai or English at their low primary grades), the students' performance level for each state of TL top is most likely to rise in the left to right ascending order in figure 3. When students are allowed to use only SL while their performance level in SL is still lower than their performance in HL, they are likely to perform the best when they work together with peers using all of their language resources (spinning top together), followed by when they work alone using all of their language resources (spinning top alone), when they work together using only SL (static top together), and when they work alone using only SL (static top alone) where they are likely to perform the worst. This was demonstrated during the five different TLE workshops held in Chiangmai, Thailand from June 2020 until January 2021.

The participants in the workshops, such as teachers, principals and education supervisors, were asked to write a story in English, in their weaker language, based on their observation of a village picture of their students in the following order: writing in English alone (static top alone); writing in English together with their peers but using only English while discussing about what to write (static top together); writing in English with the help of Google Translate and the Internet for looking up unfamiliar words (spinning top alone); and, lastly, writing in English with their peers utilising all of their language resources (spinning top together). As expected, the length and richness of their story was found to be in the ascending order from static top alone via static top together, spinning top alone, to spinning top together. All the participants indirectly had an opportunity to imagine that their students must have the same challenge as themselves and started designing the kinds of strategies of spinning top alone and together for teaching their students.

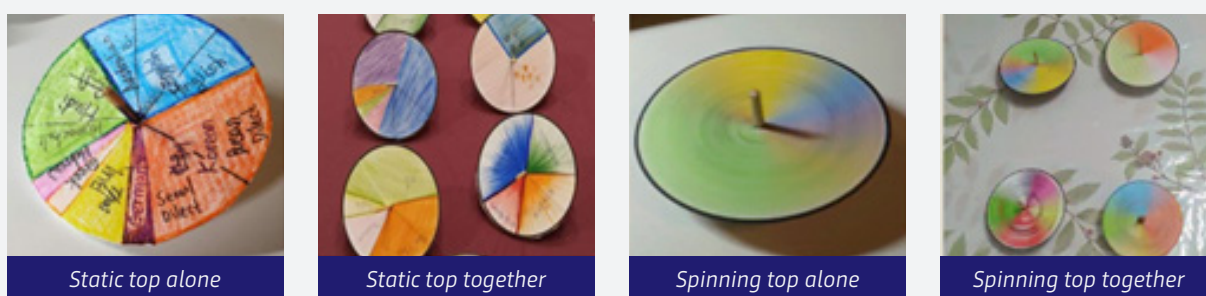| Static top alone | Static top together | Spinning top alone | Spinning top together |

Figure 3: Various states of TL top for TL strategies

Currently, what is missing in most schools are TL activities of Spinning Top Alone and Spinning Top Together, thus enabling bilingual students to learn on the sloped playing field of education. The teachers may begin their instruction with static top alone strategies while using SL. However, once they realise that the students find their static top alone instruction challenging their students to understand because of less development of SL, they should design the lesson in ways that the bilingual students could utilise their whole language resources, including their home language, whether alone or together with other peers who have the same

HL background. It is when bilingual students have chances to use all of their language resources that the education playing field becomes level. Some successfully implemented examples of TL strategies of *Spinning Top Alone* and *Together* are introduced in the following

Examples of TL strategies

The following are a few examples of TL strategies[4] that we have applied in Grade Three through Seven classes in two multilingual schools in the town and the villages in Chiangmai Province, Thailand in August and September 2019, and that 12 Grade Four teachers developed in three different schools in the villages of Chiangmai province, Thailand from July to November 2020 after participating in the first TLE workshop[5] we prepared and facilitated in Chiangmai Province in June 2020. These three schools joined the pilot TLE operational and research project, and the teachers of four subjects (Maths, Science, Thai and English) of Grade four to six are implementing TL strategies in their respective subject in each of the three schools.[6]

Working in the same HL group: spinning top together

Students talk more

We found that there was a big change of classroom atmosphere between when students sat facing toward the front of the classroom (as in Figure 4(a)) and when they were organised to make a small group according to the same HL (as in Figure 4(b)). As soon as they were arranged to sit together according to the same HL group, we noticed freedom, more talking, energy and joy at each HL-based table group.

With a forward-looking arrangement, they were restricted in their communication with those peers whose HL is different from themselves, as they had to use only Thai, which they are still not comfortable in using. Even Grade Seven students from both town and the village schools told us that using HL together with Thai is much easier than using only Thai and helped them to understand the content taught more deeply.

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[4] For more examples of TL activities, visit https://www.translanguagingeducation.org/translanguaging-activities and https://www.translanguagingeducation.org/translanguaging-top-activities.

[5] Visit here (https://www.translanguagingeducation.org/workshop-teachers)for the report of the first TLE workshop.

[6] Visit here (https://www.translanguagingeducation.org/projects) to know more about the project.

Figure 4: (a) Front-facing arrangement

(b) HL-based table group arrangement

Any student can contribute

At their HL-based table, they were able to exploit all of their language resources freely to communicate freely among themselves. They understood better within their BZPD as more knowledgeable students helped less knowledgeable friends at their table. Those students with better knowledge in HL, for example, helped those with better knowledge in Thai and vice versa. It was a great joy to observe those students with stronger knowledge of HL contribute a lot at their HL table. Otherwise, they were rather quiet in class, as they had to speak only in Thai with which they are not confident. They appreciated the chance to use all of their language resources together with their friends while spinning their TL top together.

Let a fast learner explain to other students

Once one student, with a better understanding of Thai, understood a difficult concept in Grade Four Maths from the teacher's Thai explanation, the teacher asked that student to explain the point to other members in the group using all of her linguistic repertoire. In that way, the teacher was able to move to other HL table groups to explain the same concept. They were spinning their TL top together freely using all of their linguistic repertoire within the same HL group to acquire deeper understanding.

Elicitation of both common and academic languages in students' HLs: spinning top together and alone

The teachers in Grade Four made sure their students understood various examples taught in Thai by giving them the opportunity to name those examples in their HL(s). They also often instructed students to find the academic key terms in their HL by giving an opportunity to process the key academic terms taught in Thai using all of their language resources. Figure 5, for instance, shows students' HL-based table group work on different names of categorisation of animals, such as piscine, avian, reptile, mammal, and so on, with examples of each category. They worked together to look for the names for these categories and examples in their HL as written in red on the image below.

Through this process, students internalise the important concepts in both SL and HL, and develop both languages. By the end, students develop both Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills and Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (Cummins, 1984a; 1984b) in both the SL, Thai and various HLs such as Pwo Karen, Sgaw Karen and Lahu. This process helps students to develop their thinking skills (Cummins, 1976; Toukomaa and Skutnabb-Kangas, 1977) and to perform better in their studies.

If these academic terms had been explained only in Thai, and if teachers had told students to use only Thai to discuss these key concepts in their small groups, the students would have been challenged and limited on the *sloped playing field*, as their linguistic features from Thai still occupy only part of their linguistic repertoire. On top of the teacher's Thai-only instruction on the *sloped playing field*, by giving freedom to utilise all of their language resources during the group work, the students were able to process the concept fully and to show their true knowledge, as in this chart on the *level playing field* by spinning their TL *top together*. Once they finished their group work together, their work was displayed on the wall of the classroom for any student to read. While they are reading these bilingual word walls, they could compare the two languages as a *spinning top alone* activity.
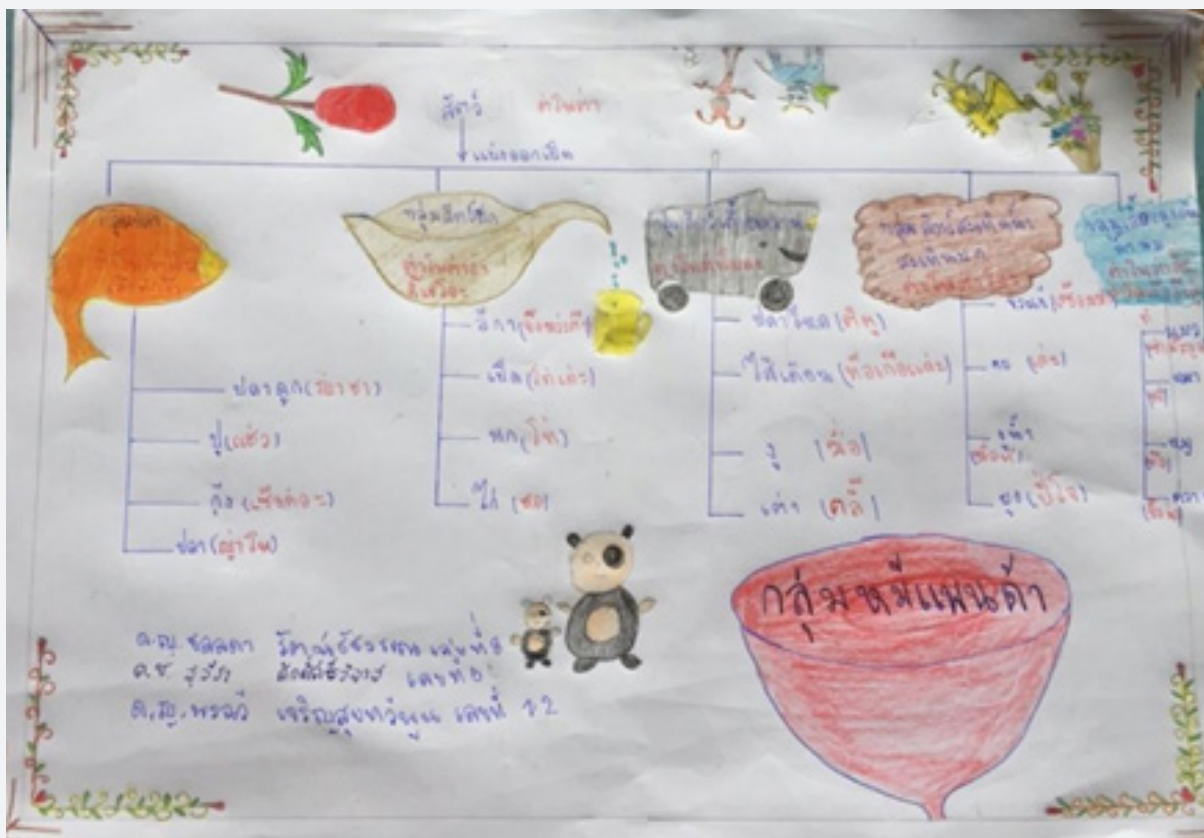
Figure 5: Bilingual chart for academic terms and common names in SL and HL

Writing summary in two languages

Teachers did not stop at developing academic terms in both SL and HL. They asked students to write sentences with the key terms in them in both SL and HL. In the right-hand side of Figure 6(a), the teacher wrote down a maths problem in Thai about the addition of time units of years and months and asked a volunteer to solve the problem. Then, she asked another volunteer to write in HL a similar addition problem using different time units that they had learned. The student solved the problem with hours and minutes in HL, as in the left-hand side of Figure 6(a). Finally, the teacher gave group work to each HL-based table to make another addition problem of time units, but wrote the problem in both SL (first line) and HL (second line), as in Figure 6(b).
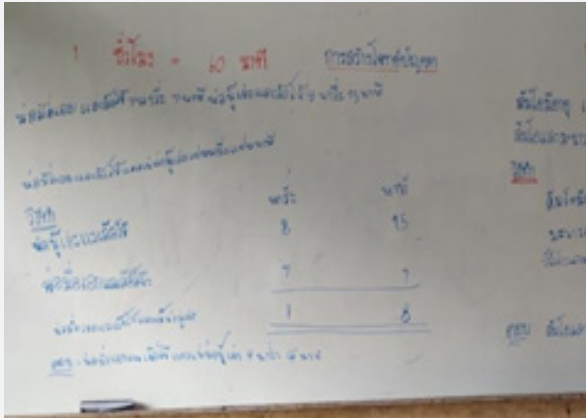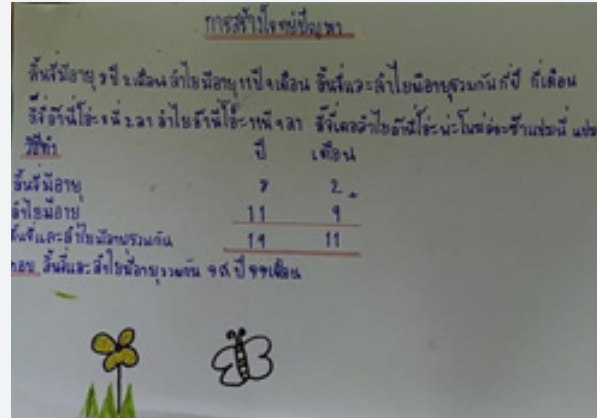
Figure 6: (a) Maths problems in Thai and Sgaw Karen

(b) Creating a Maths problem in SL and HL

In Figure 7, below, a science teacher asked students to write the summary of what they had learned about four different categorisations of physical materials after they processed all the names of categories in both SL and HL. Students wrote the summary sentence in whichever language they felt more comfortable with and translated it into the other language.

By using Spinning Top Alone while working alone using two languages, as in Figure 6(a) and 7, and by Spinning Top Together, as in Figure 6(b), the teachers made sure that the students understood the academic concepts in maths and science by teaching them through their HL as well as the language of instruction, Thai, which they felt less confidence with. Through writing first in whichever language the students feel more confident, they could write more richly in less-confident language by translating the one in more-confident language to the one in less-confident one. Otherwise they may not have been able to write that level in the less-confident language.
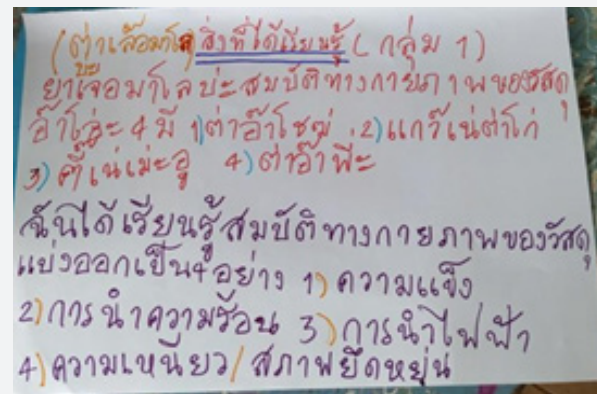

Figure 7: Summary of the lesson in science

Conclusion: spinning the top

If students' TL Top is only Static in class, and if they are forced to use only Thai, bilingual students have to suppress much of their language resources as opposed to Thai speaking monolingual students who can use most of their language resources. In such cases, linguistic learning conditions for both kinds of students are unfair. They are learning on the sloped playing field. It is time to spin the students' TL Top so that both bilingual and monolingual students can use most of their language resources so as to place learning on the same level playing field. It is crucial for teachers to understand this unjust learning condition for their students in the classroom, to see students' bilingualism and HL as resources and to make the playing field of education level.

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