

## Chapter 1.8

# An Overview of the State of Language Policy/Practice in Lao PDR

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Lao PDR is a landlocked country bordering Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Lao PDR's population of 6.8 million represents a rich and interesting mix of 47 ethnic groups (Lao PDR 2005). While Lao is the national and official language, it is estimated that 86 languages are spoken in Lao PDR (Liddicoat 2007)

The country's education system includes pre-school, general, vocational, and tertiary education. General education begins with primary education, which comprises five years of learning. The goal of this level of education is to guarantee that the learners are able to acquire general knowledge in natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, and also develop listening, speaking, reading, writing, and numerical skills (Lao PDR 2008a). The medium of instruction is in Lao, however minority languages are used to assist minority students in their learning (Lao PDR 2008b).

With Lao PDR's shift towards a free market economy, foreign investment has increased, as has the demand for English language speakers. The need to develop English language speakers is further intensified with Lao PDR's entry into ASEAN in 1997 and the anticipated integration into the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015. Among all foreign languages, English is considered the most important and the teaching and learning of English has gradually been developed with national, regional, and international assistance.

Official guidelines related to language policy include introducing English in schools from year three onwards and teaching it at all levels of the national education system. English and other foreign languages can also be used as a medium of instruction. This has provided an opportunity for students to gain access to English language learning and it has also improved the teaching and learning activities of the English language. There is support in providing teaching and learning material to assist the teaching and learning of English.

Other foreign languages such as French, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, German, Russian, and Korean are taught where appropriate, in vocational and in tertiary educational institutions. The French language has had a much longer history in Lao PDR compared to English. Introduced in schools in the 1900s, the French language peaked between the 1910s and World War II and spread throughout the nation. French was the language of government officials and the elite. French began its decline at the eve of the Indochina War. The opening up of Lao PDR in the 1990s reintroduced French into Laotian society and French language centers were established. Currently about 35 percent of students receive education in French. French is a required course in many schools, particularly in the areas of medical sciences and law. French is also used in government offices and is a language of

diplomacy and of the elite classes, higher professions, and elders. While French has a healthier status in Laos than the other Francophone nations of Asia, it has been displaced by English, which is now seen as the language of international commerce and communication. Many schools have made English a mandatory subject and English is accepted as the key to future cooperation and development of the country.

The Russian language was also introduced to Lao during the post 1975 period and introduced to educational institutions in big cities. It had a short length of influence before its status declined.

Some challenges with Lao PDR's language policy are that it is framed broadly, with policies relating to teaching and learning of English not precisely illustrated. Nevertheless, it is felt that the teaching and learning of English in Laos has been well developed beyond the existing guidelines.

## References

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