

Dear New Reader: Factors Affecting Interest in Reading Prai

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Abstract

In Thailand, the Prai are an Austro-Asiatic ethnic minority group with an emerging community-based literacy program. Understanding factors that influence adult interest in Prai literacy is significant for all future language development efforts. This study examines factors that affect Prai adults' interest in learning to read Prai for themselves and their children. The following five factors are evaluated: participants' age, gender, religious affiliation, early Thai formal educational experience, and early Prai informal educational experience. Ethnographic research methods including participant observation and interviews were employed. Findings show that participants older than 40 years of age are more resistant to the idea of learning to read Prai and that two-thirds of all new Prai readers are women. While Prai literacy is closely connected to Christianity, there is a growing number of non-Christian parents and grandparents who value Prai literacy for their children and grandchildren because of successful Prai MLE programs. Thai formal education has had a severe impact on Prai perceptions of learning and conceptions of literacy. However, Prai informal educational experiences can overcome negative trends and give educated Prai positive attitudes toward their own language. The continuation and expansion of community-based Prai MLE programs using a culture-based curriculum is the best way to develop interest in reading for both this generation and the next.

Keywords: Prai, literacy, multilingual education, sociolinguistics, first language

Introduction

The Prai are an Austro-Asiatic minority group living in Thailand and Laos. In Thailand, there are many new readers of Prai over the past

seven years due to a successful community-based literacy program. Yet, while the number of readers has grown substantially, the proportion of actual to potential readers among adults remains low. This paper seeks to establish how salient factors affect Prai adults' interest in learning to read Prai for themselves and their children. Five factors for participants were evaluated: age, gender, religious affiliation, early Thai formal educational experience, and early Prai informal educational experience. Understanding these factors will help tailor literacy development to better serve members of the Prai community.

The Prai community-based literacy program has had great success with children, albeit on a small scale. While children are interested in learning to read Prai and attending Multilingual Education (MLE) programs, the vast majority of Prai adults are not interested in learning to read Prai. The proportion of actual to potential adult Prai readers has remained low within the Prai community. This research is a necessary step for literacy development and essential for understanding how factors influence adult interest in Prai literacy. It is significant for all future language development efforts among Prai adults. In addition, this study serves a wider academic audience by giving insight into literacy development and Multilingual Education for other minority ethnic groups in Southeast Asia.

Background

The Prai are a minority ethnic group living in Nan Province, Thailand and Sayaboury Province, Laos. They speak an Austro-Asiatic language, also called Prai. There are many alternate names for the Prai people and language, the most prevalent being "Lua." However, it is best to avoid using this designation since it is used to reference several distinct people and languages including Prai, Mal, Eastern Lawa, and Western Lawa. The Prai are categorized with other minority ethnic groups but they remain "culturally invisible" to many who are unfamiliar with Nan Province (Rischel, 1992).

The Ethnologue (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig, 2021) classifies the Prai as follows: Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Northern Mon-Khmer,

Khmuic, Mal-Khmu', Mal-Phrai. The Prai in Thailand have an estimated population of 20,000 and the Prai in Laos have a population of 28,700 according to a 2015 census (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig, 2021).

In the late 1980s, the Prai orthography was developed by linguist David Jordan using letters from the Thai alphabet. Subsequently, a series of primers for literacy instruction was created. Reading and writing Prai were introduced via individual instruction for many years. By 2006, Prai literacy had been taught through individual instruction and informal classes in four out of forty-nine Prai villages in Nan Province, Thailand. As a result, there were a total of twenty adult Prai readers (Diller, 2008).

Since 2006, Prai literacy practices have been researched to give a better understanding of the everyday uses and conceptions of literacy. New literacy practices were categorized to help literacy development fit into a culturally appropriate literacy schema (Diller, 2008). Attention was given to Prai literacy program planning and to understanding Prai perspectives on education and culture (Jordan-Diller, 2008). More recently, literacy practices with non-traditional texts have been explored (Diller, 2020).

During the years 2014-2020, Dr. Jordan-Diller, a Multilingual Education specialist, mentored a group of four Prai women who worked together as the Prai Literacy Team to write a Prai culture-based curriculum and teach literacy to children and interested adults. As a result, the number of Prai readers has grown over the past seven years. Today, there are an estimated 145 Prai adult readers (and many more children) who read Prai in five villages in Nan Province, Thailand.

Theoretical Approach

Barton and Hamilton (2000) lay a foundation for this study with their definition of literacy as a set of social practices—which, by their very nature, are specific to the society in which they are found. As a result, literacy for the Prai looks different from literacy elsewhere.

The concept of language hierarchies adds depth to our understanding of the situation, as there are pronounced differences in

language status between the minority Prai and dominant Thai. Brandt's (2001) definition of literacy as a set of skills, credentials, and relationships of obligation used to jockey and maintain class status, makes clear that indigenous literacies are part of a larger material system where literacies do not have equal value. Lewis' and Simons' (2016) use of the term "functions" to describe established language-use patterns of a speech community allows for specificity. For example, Prai is not taught in formal Thai education or used as a language of instruction for Prai students. The multilingual context of the Prai in Nan Province, with its unequal competition between the Prai, Thai, and Muang languages, limits the functions played by Prai literacy. Previous research has shown that Prai literacy functions are in competition with Thai literacy functions except for specific niches within particular speech communities (Diller 2008, 2020; Jordan-Diller, 2008).

As noted earlier, literacy is a *social* practice, and the adoption of literacy is likewise a social matter. Choices are often influenced by our interaction with each other even in the most impersonal societies (Christakis and Fowler, 2009: 3-32). Influence on linguistic choices is strong in societies like the Prai—where the same people interact frequently on a face-to-face basis.

Prai society is marked by strong group boundaries; however, social distinctions are minimal, resulting in what Culture Theory refers to as an Egalitarian society (Thompson et al. 1980: 5-6). Such cultures view deviant behavior as threatening the survival of the entire group, and hence place significant pressure on members to conform (Douglas, 1994: 4-6).

While Egalitarian societies are relatively "flat," even the simplest societies distinguish between their members on the basis of gender and age, giving those of a particular gender or age greater latitude in their choices (Adams, 1977: 395-396; Gross and Rayner, 1985: 6). In this regard, the characteristics of Prai clan structure are significant: the Prai are matrilineal and uxorilocal (Satyawadhna, 2001, 1991). Clan membership, identity, and property pass through the women, and when a man and woman marry, they live with the wife's kin. Villages therefore are comprised of a limited number of matriclans, with the most prestigious clan having the greatest influence.

Change also comes at a personal cost. Economists and anthropologists have long used cost-benefit analysis to explain why individuals and groups of individuals do or do not adopt a particular change. The concept must be used with due caution—as Henrich (2002) pointed out, people rarely have information needed to make even imprecise calculations of benefit vs. cost. Yet, it is evident that it takes considerable time to learn how to read and write, and this is an unavoidable obstacle at the personal level.

The tendency of societies to resist change, and the significant cost at the personal level of becoming literate, suggest that the backing of an established institution could play a crucial role in the adoption of mother tongue literacy. Adams (2014) noted that language development often occurs first in a religious environment. Such sponsorship can be expected to be even more important in societies that have been reliant on shifting cultivation—characteristic of the Prai until the onset of the Thai communist insurrection in the late 1960s, and still practiced as late as 2001 (Satyawadhna, 2001: 197). These societies typically lack permanent, organized groups which focus on a specialized effort (usually called "institutions" in more complex societies). This suggests that the sponsorship of exogenous institutions (schools, religious bodies, civic clubs, etc.) may play an even more pivotal role in the adoption of literacy in societies such as the Prai.

Objectives

We identified five factors that appeared consistently in previous research, our experience, and observations: learner's age, gender, religious affiliation, early dominant-language formal educational experience, and early mother-tongue informal educational experience (in the case of the Prai, consisting of the home literacy environment and the Prai MLE program offered by members of the Prai Literacy Team). As a result, this study examines salient factors that affect Prai adults' interest in learning to read Prai for themselves and their children. More specifically, the following research question is investigated: How do the factors of participants' age, gender, religious affiliation, early Thai formal

educational experience, and early Prai informal educational experience affect Prai adults' interest in learning to read Prai for themselves and their children?

Methodology

In order to allow the data to “speak for themselves,” rather than promote a type of literacy development or prove the effectiveness of development efforts, we relied on an ethnographic approach, particularly the use of participant observation and individual interviews. Diller first visited the Prai in 1995 and continued contact, spending many months in 2001 and 2003. For all of 2006, Diller lived in Phae Klang village, and eventually returned to live in Knife Creek village from 2013-2017. Time spent among the Prai have proven to be incredibly insightful and helpful in building relationships and connections to the community. Fraiser first visited the Prai in 1979 with linguist David Jordan, and continued to learn more of them through Jordan's reports since that time. He again visited the Prai with Fraiser in 2016.

Prior to 2020 (before Covid-19 restrictions in Thailand), returning was uncomplicated and the community was welcoming our return to Nan Province to observe members of the Prai Literacy Team and the MLE program. Participant observation provided an understanding of day-to-day activities of Prai literacy work and those interested in learning to read Prai.

Informal and semi-structured interviews (which were guided by written notes) were conducted in Prai, which allowed for ease of communication and the ability to investigate additional areas of research. Since 2020, many of the interviews were conducted with members of the Prai Literacy Team over the phone. It was invaluable to have assistance from Dr. Jordan-Diller during the interview process, as it is more culturally appropriate for women to interview women. An added benefit was Dr. Jordan-Diller's well-established connections with, and understanding of, members of the Prai Literacy Team. The primary purpose of the interviews was to investigate what factors affect Prai adults' interest in learning to read Prai for themselves and their children.

Findings

Age

Age is a factor for the Prai who make the decision to learn to read their own language. According to Prai literacy teachers, age 40 seems to be the threshold for learning. As a trend, men and women under 40 are more open to Prai literacy, while those over 40 are more resistant and often closed to the idea of learning to read Prai.

Literacy teachers have indicated that the rate of learning is much slower for older learners and discovered that teaching is best in a one-on-one setting, requiring perseverance for both teachers and older students. They have also noted that many older students openly express a desire to learn only three basic literacy practices:

1. Read numbers
2. Read a few basic Thai words
3. Write their name instead of signing with an X or thumbprint

For example, in Boot Creek village, Nan Province one older Prai man lamented that he would have gone to the hospital when he was sick if only he could read, “Room #3” and sign his name. Without those basic literacy practices, he was too ashamed to go to the hospital.

It is interesting to note that this older man's literacy practices do not specifically involve the Prai language. For many older Prai men and women, Prai literacy does not have a desirable function. Prai literacy does not fit into their conception and use of desired literacy practices. Everyday goals for literacy are basic and distant from the goal of reading the Prai language.

Overall, motivations vary for older Prai men and women. Coupled with a learning style that requires perseverance, few older men and women learn to read Prai or even conceive of Prai literacy as having a desirable function in their everyday literacy practices.

Gender

Gender is another factor that affects who learns to read Prai. According to members of the Prai Literacy Team, two-thirds of all new Prai readers are women. This seems to hold true for all villages where Prai literacy

has been taught over the past seven years. 10 out of 14 Prai adult literacy students were women in classes that began in 2019 in Boot Creek village, Nan Province.

While the correlation is apparent, the reasons are not. One of the literacy teachers observed that learning to read Prai is much harder for men than for women, but offered no explanation. Further investigation is needed.

Clearer is the influence of men's and women's traditional gender roles. To begin with, there are discernible differences in attitudes toward literacy between men and women. Diller (2008) observed that female Prai readers are more assertive than their male counterparts in their uses of Prai literacy when marking Prai ethnic identity. More significantly, there are distinct differences in action. Women were the first to read Prai, the first to value education, and the first to earn high school and university diplomas. Not surprisingly, the Prai Literacy Team consists of four women. Prai women have also been the first to depart from their traditional system of beliefs to consider Christianity—a choice that comes at notable cost.¹

These differences may be due to the impact of the traditional matrilineal clan structure. The Prai have genuine lineages or clans – kin groups based on unilineal descent from a common ancestor. Each clan is headed by a “clan mother” (แม่หัว [me hi:t]), a position that is passed to the clan mother's youngest daughter. Clans are a prime determinant of identity and define rules for social interaction, resource management, house structure and building, and inheritance (Jordan-Diller, 2008; Diller, 2008; Satyawadhna, 1991).

Women appear to have greater freedom to break with tradition, and this may be due to the tradition of valuing female leadership. Further research is needed to examine gender roles in Prai society and their relationship to interest in literacy and freedom to pursue it.

¹ When a Prai person departs from the traditional system, remaining family members ceremonially cut the person from the family. There are also economic repercussions, as Prai following traditional religion are often unwilling to work in fields that are not ceremonially protected from spirits.

Religious Affiliation

Inception of Prai literacy

Using a religious structure for language development is common and has found success in Southeast Asia. For example, Coluzzi (2017) highlights the Bidayuh and Mah Meri peoples of Malaysia. Both Christianity for the Bidayuh (with literacy) and a traditional form of animism for the Mah Meri (without literacy) differentiated their respective communities by using local languages and in turn held up the encroaching dominant Malay language.

Adams (2014) posits that when making language development decisions in Mainland Southeast Asia, it is essential to work with a religious body if one exists because they are often the strongest social institutions in minority language groups.

Thus, those villages which have already entered into some kind of religious organization are the best suited for language development. In fact, it is exceedingly rare that non-government supported language development succeeds outside of a religious structure (Adams, 2014: 246).

There is a strong connection between Prai literacy and Christianity because Prai literacy was introduced to the Prai through the Christian church. It could be argued that if Prai literacy were not first introduced through a religious organization, it would not have found a root in the Prai context.

Reading and writing Prai were first introduced to the Prai in a stable structure for language development where literacy could be adapted and sustained by local agents. Prai Christianity places an importance on reading and has the communal aspect required to withstand outside pressures. For example, the importance of literacy in the Christian church with its communal practices of reading have led many Prai readers to value reading Prai (Diller, 2008). It is important to recognize the communal aspect and social network needed to support new literacy practices, which need strong communal support in the Prai context.

The established domains of use for Prai literacy are primarily in the Christian literacy type (Diller, 2008). Today, all adult Prai readers are Christian. Religion is a key factor because literacy is important for Christians but undervalued by those Prai who hold traditional animistic religious beliefs unless they have seen a successful Prai MLE summer school program for elementary school aged children. Importantly, there are Prai who hold traditional or Buddhist religious beliefs who value Prai MLE programs for their children.

Literary corpus

Prai literacy was affiliated with Christianity not only because of being introduced through the church, but also because the literary corpus was almost exclusively Christian reading material. However, much has changed over the past few years. The Prai Literacy Team has successfully written, illustrated, tested, and printed 100 books, 50 listening stories, 40 songs, posters and other educational materials. The corpus is now quite varied and the majority of materials for new readers is non-religious. The display of new material was widely celebrated during the first annual Prai Cultural Day on December 25, 2018 in Thung Chang, Nan Province, and showed both Prai and Thai audiences that Prai has a written form and a small but growing literary corpus.



Figure 1 Presentation of Prai reading material at the Prai cultural day²

² Photo courtesy of Wanna Paengaut taken on December 25, 2018 in Thung Chang, Nan Province, Thailand

In summary, Prai literacy has been connected to Christianity because of its introduction to Prai society through the Christian church and its long-standing Christian corpus. Adults who read Prai are all Christian, although there is a small number of non-Christian parents and grandparents who value Prai literacy for their children and grandchildren because they have seen the success of Prai MLE programs.

Thai Formal Educational Experience

An important factor affecting interest in Prai literacy is Thai formal education experience. This factor was first recognized years ago in Boonprasert's (1988) study on language attitudes among the Prai in Nam Sord village which reveals that 75% of primary students who are currently in school have a negative attitude toward their own language as opposed to less than 10% of adults in the same village who have never attended school.

Additional research examined the use of Prai literacy practices and Prai ethnic identity (Diller, 2008). As a trend, Prai readers who have six or more years of Thai formal education do not use Prai literacy to display language pride. In contrast, Prai readers who have five or fewer years of Thai school use Prai literacy to display language pride. In sum, there is an inverse correlation between years of Thai formal education and Prai language pride.

These two previous studies highlight the impact of Thai formal education on Prai learners. Furthermore, Thai formal education has had a severe impact on Prai perceptions of learning and conceptions for the use of literacy.

Jordan-Diller's (2008) research shows that some Prai adults, "... consider reading Prai to be difficult since reading is associated with Thai education." And the conception of functions for Prai literacy (how or where Prai literacy can be used) is severely limited by Thai formal education experience.

The longer a Prai student remains in Thai school, the more rigid his or her ideas for uses of Prai literacy become. After all, teachers have shown the "correct way" to use literacy, which entails conceptions of the domain for Prai literacy. Many Prai

readers with multiple years of Thai school did not see any reason for village parade signs to be in Prai, in contrast to some Prai with only a few years of Thai school who understood the implications of contesting given Prai identity in the public sphere (Diller, 2008: 114).

The invalidation of the Prai language by the Thai formal educational system sends a powerful message to Prai students. McCarty's (2002) research among the Navajo is comparable because both the Navajo and Prai have internalized a devastating message about their language and culture through the educational system.

Prai Informal Educational Experience

McCarty (2002: 18) states, "I proceed on the assumption that schooling constructed by and through indigenous communities can be a counter-force to the myriad forces that seek to marginalize and erase Indigenous voice and identities."

The Prai informal educational experience is an important factor that can offset the Thai formal education factor. As previously stated, Prai with six or more years of Thai formal education are more likely to have a negative attitude toward their own language. In contrast, all members of the Prai Literacy Team have over twelve years of Thai formal education, yet have positive attitudes toward Prai and are proud of their language. The salient factor for them is Prai informal education experience. When each member was a child, their parents read and valued Prai in its written form. In addition, both parents and children participated in church where new functions of literacy were encouraged, taught, and practiced. Prai informal education experiences reverse the clearly defined trends set by formally educated Prai.

In accordance with valuing the Prai language among children, the Prai Literacy Team held community-based informal Prai MLE classes in April and October during Thai school breaks from 2014-2019 until Covid-19 restrictions were enforced.³ Prai MLE classes were held

³ The Prai MLE program was "informal" in that it was not recognized by either the formal Thai school or non-formal Thai education systems.

in three villages in Nan Province. Prai was the language of instruction for the MLE program which focused on Prai reading and writing but also covered subjects such as science, math, and English.

As previously stated, there are Prai who hold traditional beliefs yet value Prai Multilingual Education for their children. This is evident in the village of Knife Creek and presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Prai literacy classes in Knife Creek village in 2019⁴

Child	Gender	Grade	Attended Prai MLE	Household religion
1	Female	1	Yes	Christian
2	Female	1	No	Traditional/Buddhist ⁴
3	Male	2	Yes	Traditional/Buddhist
4	Male	2	Yes	Traditional/Buddhist
5	Female	3	Yes	Traditional/Buddhist
6	Female	4	Yes	Traditional/Buddhist
7	Female	4	Yes	Traditional/Buddhist
8	Female	4	Yes	Christian
9	Female	4	Yes	Traditional/Buddhist
10	Female	5	Yes	Traditional/Buddhist
11	Female	6	Yes	Christian
12	Female	6	Yes	Traditional/Buddhist
13	Female	6	Yes	Christian
14	Female	7	Yes	Traditional/Buddhist
15	Female	7	No	Traditional/Buddhist
16	Male	7	Yes	Christian

Table 1 lists all Prai children in grades 1-7 who were residents of Knife Creek village in 2019. The program was well attended with 14

⁴ Prai traditional religion is concerned with avoiding giving offense to clan and territorial spirits, and on offering sacrifices to undo any offenses and the resulting harm. While belief in spirits alone—labeled สวดมนต์ (satsana phi) in Thai—is often looked down upon by the majority culture (e.g. Satyawadhna (1991: 364) and Satyawadhna (2001: 209)), belief in spirits is consistent with Thai Buddhism, which typically acknowledges the existence of deities and spirits and has practices for dealing with them. Thus, followers of Prai traditional religion usually identify themselves as Buddhist when asked.

out of 16 children participating. All parents in Knife Creek village paid a small fee for their children to attend. It is noteworthy that 9 children from non-Christian homes attended this Prai MLE program. Parents of these children do not read Prai and have no interest in learning to read Prai themselves yet wanted their children to learn to read Prai in the MLE program. This is a new segment of Prai adults who value Prai literacy for their children even though their religious affiliation is traditional or Buddhist. These adults value Prai literacy because of the Prai MLE summer school program and are interested in Prai literacy for their children.

There is a clear trend in line with Thai formal education; however, families who place a value on Prai literacy in the home can overcome the negative trend set by Thai formal education and give educated Prai positive attitudes toward reading their own language.

Discussion

Intersection of Age and Thai Formal Educational Experience

This paper focuses on five separate factors that influence Prai adults' interest in learning to read Prai. However, it is necessary to address the interplay between the factors of age and Thai formal educational experience.

Older learners had difficult experiences with Thai formal education because they were less proficient in Thai language as compared to their younger counterparts. A 2006 study reveals that younger Prai readers were more proficient in Thai and Muang than older Prai readers when they first attended school (Diller, 2008). This was attributed to increased exposure to Thai and Muang through contact with neighbors, television, radio, and pre-school. Starting Thai formal education without proficient Thai language ability negatively affected their classroom experience.

(Prai) Women older than thirty years of age expressed that having to learn both Thai and Muang in school made their experiences very difficult. In contrast, younger women portrayed more positive experiences in Thai school (Diller, 2008).

In addition, Prai readers younger than thirty years of age attended school on average five years longer than older Prai readers (Diller, 2008). The factors of age and Thai formal educational experiences intersect negatively among the older generation of Prai readers.

Functions of Literacy

As Lewis and Simons (2016) observe, "The niche of a language is identified in terms of the Functions that it has within the life of a community." In 2006, Prai literacy found a niche among adults who said they read Prai for two reasons (Diller, 2008: 99):

1. They want to understand the Bible and learn about God.
2. They read Prai because it is their own language.

At the same time, Prai adults expressed a desire for Prai culture and language to be taught to their children (Jordan-Diller, 2008: 119).

In response to these expressed desires, Prai literacy found a niche identified in the domains of home and/or church. In addition, Prai literacy functioned as an identity marker and symbol of Prai language pride for a select few Prai.

Today, members of the Prai Literacy Team and trained literacy teachers report that Prai adults (who have an awareness of Prai MLE) recognize that Prai MLE classes help pass on Prai culture and language to children. Literacy teachers have received positive feedback from Prai parents for teaching Prai songs that highlight aspects of Prai culture. For example, one song used in the Prai MLE curriculum details the kinds of wood that make suitable cooking fires. Prai adults also appreciate the true-to-life stories that depict actual events such as cutting firewood, fishing, or gathering mushrooms.

In addition, several Prai adults recognize that Prai MLE classes help their children succeed in Thai school because the skill of reading is transferable. These parents recognize that Prai literacy functions as a bridge between Prai and Thai languages without leaving Prai language or culture behind. As one Prai woman who studied to become a public-school teacher declared, "Prai people can make connections

after learning Prai as a first language. Learn what is close to you first” (Diller, 2008).

Looking ahead, it is essential for any future community-based language development work to address community desires when developing new functions of Prai literacy. Prai speech communities need to consider where to use Prai literacy and how to expand its functions where it competes with Thai. Successful literacy material production responds to a community’s interests. Any subsequent material production should fit desired functions of Prai literacy for Prai communities.

Conclusion

When we began this study, we knew that some segments of the Prai community have shown more interest in becoming literate in their own language. The study has confirmed that interest is related to five factors: age, gender, religious affiliation, early Thai formal educational experience, and early Prai informal educational experience. More importantly, though, it has elucidated the nature of those correlations, and the interests of each demographic group defined by those factors. This knowledge can help guide the communities and literacy teachers as they seek to develop new functions of Prai literacy.

There is a strong correlation between age and interest in acquiring literacy in Prai, with interest being much less after age 40. The reason is unclear. Some may have internalized the perception that “an old dog can’t learn new tricks,” and view acquiring a new and challenging skill to be beyond their ability. Others had limited exposure to reading through the Thai formal education system, but their negative experience has discouraged them from further effort. The lack of interest may also be due to age simply making the process of learning slower and more difficult. Perhaps this has led older Prai to limit their expectations from literacy, typically wishing only to read numbers, to read a few basic Thai words, and to write their name instead of signing with an “X” or thumbprint.

Accepting age and personal goals as fact, the question is, how might literacy teachers modify their approach so that Prai literacy becomes more attractive to those in older age categories? One solution would be to develop teaching methods that are more effective with slower learners. Another is to direct literacy training for older adults to meet their expressed goals of basic numeracy, reading a limited number of Thai words, and signing their name. The class would have these as its explicit goals. Prai orthography (which uses the Thai alphabet) would be used to introduce the values of the characters, with the statement that it is easiest to learn to read first in one’s own language, and that the actual goal is learning to read a limited number of words in Thai.

Gender also exerts a strong influence on interest in mother-tongue literacy—women outnumber men 2:1 among adults learning to read Prai.⁵ While gender roles may be malleable, the strong, multiplex relationships found in Prai communities make transformation of gender roles a daunting goal—even should Prai communities desire to do so. However, there is considerable room for developing literacy materials and offering classes that are particularly relevant to the lifestyles and interests of men, who are less interested in literacy.

The relationship between religion and interest in Prai literacy is more complex. Prai literacy has a historical association with Christianity, as it was introduced through the Christian church and finds its greatest use in reading the Christian Scriptures and song books. Almost all adult readers of Prai are Christian. However, religion has not been a barrier to parents being interested in their children participating in the Prai MLE programs.

Closer examination of the effects of age, gender, and religion on interest in Prai literacy reveals that it is not the factors per se, but rather the experiences associated with them, that have affected interest in Prai literacy by decreasing the scope in which literacy is seen as useful. This suggests that, for interest to increase, the community must develop a broader concept of the functions of mother-tongue literacy and decide on specific ways of implementing their new vision.

⁵ Literacy teachers note that considerably more men than women drop out of classes after completing the second primer. Further research is needed to determine why.

Discussion between literacy teachers, community leaders, and community groups will be essential for stimulating the consideration of new possibilities. Expanding the corpus of Prai literature could help support whatever efforts the community decides, so long as materials are developed in response to actual interests. Discussions will be essential for literacy teachers and communities to identify the topical areas that are of greatest use and interest.

The continuation and expansion of Prai MLE is of paramount importance. Since 2014, many Prai students have benefited from Prai MLE classes during Thai school breaks. Children who attend MLE classes see novel uses for Prai literacy. For example, children appreciate Prai literacy functions in the educational domain when Prai literacy teachers use Prai to explain math or science. This domain of language use is an area where Prai has traditionally competed (and lost) with Thai. Prai MLE allows children to (re)conceptualize new functions for Prai literacy.

Affirming Prai cultural identity for children with a positive view of culture reflected in beautiful literacy materials, constructive experiences learning in their own language, and teaching methods that work for Prai culture expands conceptions and opens children to new functions of literacy. Prai MLE success results in the proliferation of childhood Prai home literacy experiences. Children who benefit from Prai MLE programs are likely to create a home learning environment where Prai literacy is used and favored for future generations of Prai children. The enlargement of Prai informal education continues to positively change the conceptions and use of Prai literacy while overcoming any negative trends set by Thai formal education.

In conclusion, Prai community-based MLE programs and early Prai educational experiences help children keep their connections to Prai culture and language while transferring literacy skills that give them a chance to succeed in Thai formal education. Prai adults value their children's connections to Prai culture and in turn appreciate Prai MLE. The best way forward for the Prai is through community supported culture-based MLE programs where Prai literacy values Prai culture

and education. As research shows, even small scale MLE programs in remote villages will have lasting benefits for literacy development among the Prai.

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