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Producing educational learning media resources for Karen children

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Abstract

To create appropriate educational learning media resources for the Karen community in Chiang Mai, Thailand, a project called 'The Research and Development Process of Multimedia Learning Resources' was initiated by a group of researchers from a top-ranked university in Bangkok. It consisted of picture books and an animation film derived from oral stories of the most respected elders in the Karen community. These materials were collated using surveys, photographs, videos, and locally produced arts to create visual representations of learning media resources suitable for Karen children. Of the 97 stories collected, only ten stories and one animation film were published as approved by the Karen elders and experts. Then the produced learning media materials were distributed to children and teachers in seven local cottage schools within the community. Accordingly, the children were 'very interested' in the materials as they are 'familiar with the sceneries and stories' and are able to relate it with their daily life. In addition, the teachers remarked the film as the 'best' multimedia learning resource produced as it incorporated cultural and local ways of life. As suggested by the community, future research projects may include other general to specific topics such as personal hygiene, pesticide effects, environmental science, skill development, among others. In the production of educational learning media resources for ethnic minorities, cultural and local ways of life should be highly considered.

Keywords: Karen Community/ Educational Learning Media Resources/ Animation film/ Stories

1. Introduction

A three-level hierarchy of language exists in Thailand composed of national, regional and community languages (Prapasong, 2009). Accordingly, the national language is Standard Thai, regional languages include Thai-language dialects such as Northern Thai, Northeastern Thai,

Southern Thai, and Central Thai, and community languages consist of non-local languages, market and urban languages, border area languages, and enclave languages.

The existence of community languages in the reported hierarchy is parallel to the recognition of multiple ethnic groups in Thailand. Schliesinger (2014) counted thirty-eight ethnic groups while the only nine are officially recognized by the Thai government. Some well-known ethnic groups are Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Lisu, Akha, Karen (Sgaw and Pwo), Lawa, Htin and Khamu.

Each ethnic group can be identified based on their spoken mother tongue (presumably fall into the community languages as described by Prapasapong, 2014). The mother tongue is used in daily life within their own communities (Rungsawang, 2003). It is therefore challenging for neighboring communities to attain mutual intelligibility. What is more, the use of Standard Thai is a daunting communicative task as the hill tribes are settled in places far from the city where social contact with Standard Thai speakers is very minimal.

While the use of mother tongue seems to be promoted by the Ministry of education in the education of hill tribes, the use of Standard Thai as a medium of instruction led to the difficulty in understanding the lessons (Dolphen, 2013). For example, in the survey conducted by the Office of the Basic Education Commission from 2006 to 2007, it was found that many children do not understand what the teachers are teaching due to the teacher's familiarity of using Standard Thai as a medium of instruction.

Recognizing the challenges of learning Standard Thai for the hill tribe children, this research was conducted to produce educational learning media resources, specifically for Karen children. The process of production as well as the description of the produced learning resources are presented in this paper.

2. Understanding the context of the study

Karen, one of minority ethnic groups in Thailand is one of the biggest tribes (FAO Regional Office, 2002). More than 46.18 percent out of 751,886 persons settled and spread in at least 20 provinces around the country. The majority of Karens live in areas between the border of Thailand and Myanmar. This study is situated in Omkoi, a high mountain range located in Chiang Mai. The tribe has their distinctive culture and tradition, for instances, music, poem and folklore. There are two

groups of ethnic Karens based on language - Pwo Karen and Sgaw Karen. Both groups have distinct spoken language but the former has a standard written form. Even though those two ethnic groups are categorized having the same ethnicity, they are unintelligible to each other.

Due to modernization, the new generation has to adapt to the changing landscape by learning Thai for the future. Higher education is also considered as a change agent for a better life. Kaewkanta (2015) found that lack of culturally-related educational learning media resulted to ineffective Thai lessons. Thus Keawsomnul (2016) recommended that provisions of basic education policy for ethnic groups must consist of knowledge from communities. For example, ethnic lifestyles should be integrated in the curriculum. In addition, a special education mechanism and process should be promoted for ethnic groups in the country.

Accordingly, the results could be overwhelmingly positive. Yusuf (2016) indicated that the use of folktales by teachers in reading comprehension had a significant positive effect on reading comprehension. The author further recommended that teachers should use folktales to enrich their reading comprehension lessons and to make such lessons more lively, interesting and meaningful. The curriculum should include reading comprehension passages that are based on folktales to teach moral lessons. Such moral lessons should be deeply rooted in the core values of the ethnic community.

Due to the positive gains of using culturally-related learning materials, this paper aims to investigate and collect Karen folklores to produce educational media resources for Karen children.

3. Methodology

In the production process, this research collected and categorized the Karen folktales and cultural heritages in terms of visual elements to create the picture book, organized a workshop for Karen children to understand their learning mechanism and for them to draw pictures from their own perspectives integrating their cultural views and imagination, and surveyed the real landscape and Karen's way of life. In the description of the produced media resources, published stories, an animation film and the reactions of the students and teachers were also detailed.

3.1 Participants of the study

There are three groups of the participants in the study. First are three elders who acted as informants about the Karen's culture, traditions, and ways of life, among others. The second groups consisted of 150 children from seven schools. They were divided into two groups – the first group of 50 pupils created artworks while the other group evaluated the effectiveness of language learning. Lastly, a group of 30 local teachers evaluated the produced materials for further improvement and its appropriateness to the Karen's way of life.

3.2 Research setting

There are a hundred and eleven Karen communities located in Omkoi, Chiang Mai. This project selected eleven cottage schools based on Karen ethnicities. Five villages of Sgaw and six villages of Pwo were included to represent the rest of Karen communities. The former consisted of Pi Tu Klee, Huang Hang, Huang Tong Noi, Bra Gro and Ler Kla villages. The latter composed of Mae La Meet Noi, Mae La Meet Luang, Khoi Por Nher, Tong Loi, Rang Bee and Yong Lhar.



Figure 1 A Karen traditional house



Figure 2 A traditional Karen family

3.3 Research instruments

The following instruments were used. To collect the oral folktale from the elders, voice-recording, interview and observation were used. To understand worldview and life-perspective of Karen children through their artwork, a workshop was conducted. The children were asked to produce artworks in three topics such as my house, my family members and natural spirits. To study the characteristic in folktale and compare it with real-life culture, survey of the Karen communities was conducted. Pictures and videos were taken and compiled accordingly. And to evaluate the learning materials, teachers (local and outsiders) and Karen children in different age groups were asked.

3.4 Data collection process

3.4.1 Folktales' collection

A half of folktales were gathered from literature review. These were never published in the form of illustration books. The others folktales were collected by a team of ethnographers and researchers. Traditional folktales were narrated by Karen elders at night. Of the seven folktales were collected by a group of KMUTT lecturers and students, two were collected from Mae Ra Meed Luang and Tung Loi and the rest were compiled from five other villages. The folktales were validated by comparing stories told by Sgaw and Pwo elders.



Figure 3 An elder narrating the folktales in the house

3.4.2 Survey and field work

In Sgaw and Pwo communities, a group of Karen children was assigned to accompany the researchers to observe, to record video and to take photos around their community. Simultaneously in the classroom, some students drew artworks that represented Karen's culture such as houses, landscape and household objects.

3.4.3 Art workshop activity

In order to create suitable elements of artwork, an art workshop was initiated. Karen children were divided into three age groups such as 3-5 year olds, 6-9 year olds, and 10-14 year olds. They were requested to draw the components of folktale stories, for examples, people, houses, living activities and beliefs (see sample of artworks in Figures 4-6).



Figure 4 'My family members' is a sample artwork from children during the workshop

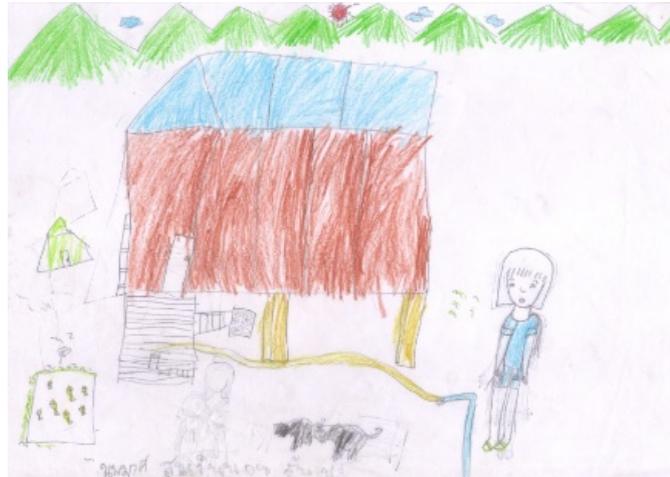


Figure 5 'My house' is a sample artwork from children during the workshop



Figure 6 'Spirits' is a sample artwork from children during the workshop

4. Educational learning media resources

Ten of ninety-seven stories were selected in order to create illustration books. In addition, Jo-Poo-Kui (see 4.1), a common story derived from Sgaw and Pwo communities was produced as an animation film. Summaries of the produced learning materials are written in the succeeding sections.

4.1 Jo-Pu-Kui the orphan is a story that teaches children positive characteristics such as perseverance, patience and being helpful to the elderly

Jo Pu Kui is poor and lived with his grandmother. During the rice growing season, Jo Pu Kui's grandmother told him to find a suitable land, to cut grasses and to cultivate it for the season's crop. A rich man chased him away while Jo Pu Kui was tilling the land. Jo Pu Kui was told to grow his crop in a place full of rocks and stones. Jo Pu Kui went back to home and consulted his grandmother. Together with his grandmother, they enriched the land by topping it with soil so crops can be grown. With perseverance and patience, the crops have grown and were harvested fruitfully.



Figure 7 A sample page of the book

This story was produced as an animation film since it is known in both Karen communities in Omkoi (see Figure 6 for the story board design).

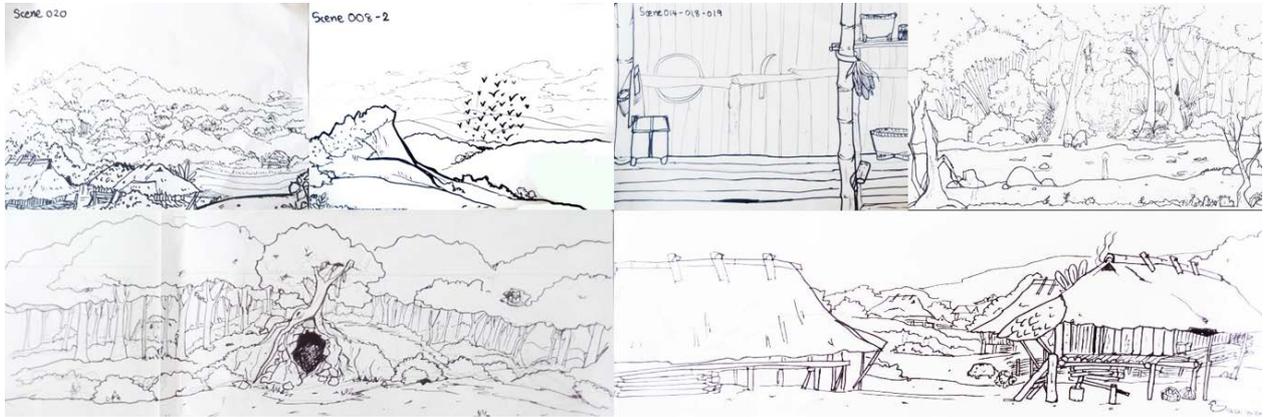


Figure 8 Storyboard and scene design for animation

4.2 The Bamboo Princess

Long time ago, there was an old couple who earned their living by weaving bamboo baskets. One day, the old man went into a forest to collect bamboo trees. He saw a glowing bamboo so he cut that bamboo down. Amazingly, there was a pretty infant inside. The old man believed that the infant might be an angel. The couple decided to adopt the girl as their daughter. Due to poverty, the old man went back again to the forest when he heard a noise from a bamboo tree. He cut it down and alas a ton of golden coins fell. He was very delighted. They became rich and able to raise the girl comfortably.

As time passed by, the girl grew up to a beautiful lady. In spite of several marriage proposals, she turned all of them. Knowing that she is bamboo princess, wherein she has to return to the moon at the age of 20, she did not want to leave her parents. Her fate was heard by a charming prince who wanted to marry her. He tried to save her by fighting the warriors who took her back to the moon. Nevertheless, the story of the bamboo princess flourishes in the village for generations.



Figure 9 A sample page from the book

4.3 The Moon

In the old times, the moon and earth are close to each other. People can eat the moon for nourishment. They will cut the moon according to their wants. One day, there was a greedy devil who wants to have the whole moon for him. Realizing the devil's intention, the moon flew away from earth. The moon's escape made people to live in poverty. Due to this, a man in the village volunteered to bring back the moon close to the village. Thus, he and his wife made a very long bamboo ladder to reach the moon. The devil knew about the plan and tricked the man's wife to destroy the bamboo ladder after ten days. The man disappeared and was never seen forever.



Figure 10 A sample page from the book

4.4 The cat and dog

One upon a time, a cat and a dog were living together. One day they found a fish but did not want to share the fish. The cat asked the dog to find a smarter animal to share the fish with. So the dog went

to meet many animals and even some objects such as the sun and the wind. Eventually, a group of mice suggested a cat is the smartest animal due to their inability to defeat it. Eventually, the dog brought the fish back and shares it with the cat.



Figure 11 A sample page from the book

4.5 Temae and Yapho, the boys

Long time ago, there were two brothers living with their old grandmother. One day, the grandmother got seriously ill and the doctor is needed. So the brothers went to find the doctor. On their way they met a monster, which attempted to eat them. They ran as fast as they can and climbed up onto a tree. The boys were very wise to set a trap, which eventually killed the monster.



Figure 12 A sample page from the book

4.6 Golden Book and Silver Book

In the old days, a god was dying and had asked his seven sons to see him to get his books. However, Karen, one of his sons, did not join as he was working in the rice field. So the god asked his youngest son to hand a golden book to his elder brother. The youngest son liked the book so much that he wanted to keep for himself. So he switched his book that was made from leather to his elder brother. He put it on stump. When the elder brother stopped from working, he saw that the book was destroyed by dogs and a chicken. He thought that the chicken ate the book and had the knowledge. Thus, he killed the chicken and used its bone as a tool for foretelling. Suddenly, many chickens got killed. The surviving chickens ran to the angels and asked for help. The angels discussed and agreed to create a language for Karen to stop chicken slaying. Eventually, the language is used by the Karens to date.

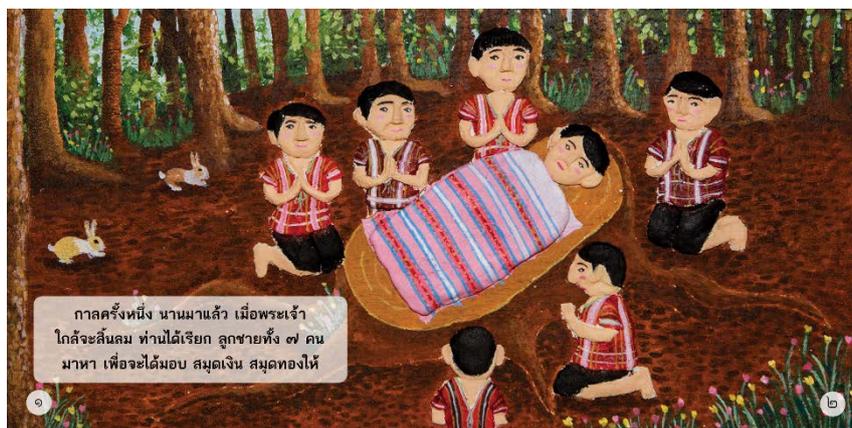


Figure 13 A sample page from the book

4.7 Nor-Mu-Ae, a wife

There was a couple who lived in a village. The wife's name is Nor Mu Ae. One day, her husband had to travel very far away to work in another village. He demanded his wife not to let the pigs out from their pen. After her husband left, the wife forgot about the order. The pig was caught by a giant snake, which dragged it to its hideout. Nor Mu Ae, afraid of her husband's anger, tried to take the pig back from the snake. Sadly, the snake caught her and later fell in love with her. She got stuck in the snake's hollow. She thought about how to let her husband to rescue her. She heard a bird's voice and begged it to find her husband and let him know about her situation. The bird flew for seven days and nights to find the husband. As soon as he got the message, the husband went to the snake's hollow and fought. As the snake is very strong, the husband was defeated and died. Upon learning of her husband's fate, Nor Mu Ae committed suicide.

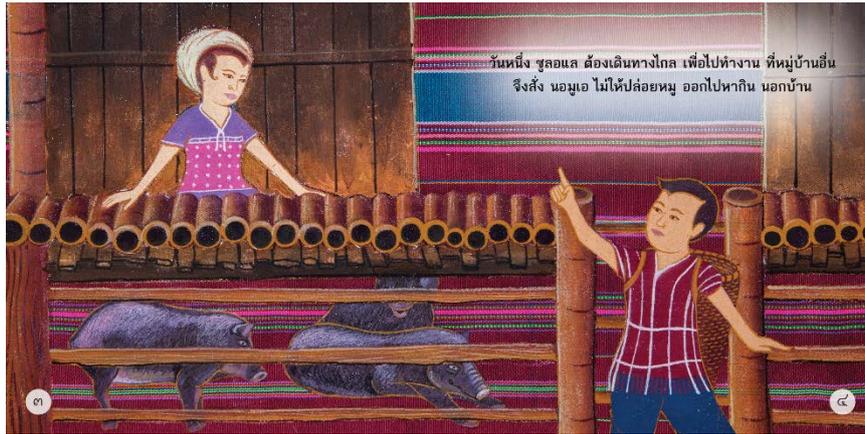


Figure 14 A sample page from the book

4.8 Two brothers

A long time ago, there were two brothers who love to tease each other. One day, when the elder brother was planting vegetable, the younger brother went back home early. Upon arriving home, the younger saw a grilled fish on the table for dinner. As the skin fish has the best taste, he peeled and ate it. When the elder brother got back home, he was so hungry. He was thinking about eating the fish skin but was upset that his younger ate it. Next day, both boys went to work in the field. The elder brother pretended to be sick and got back home early. He saw sweet potatoes on the table and he thought to revenge by eating the potato skin. When his young brother got back home, he was happy to eat those peeled sweet potatoes. The elder brother tried many ways to beat his young brother but never won.



Figure 15 A sample page from the book

4.9 A carpenter and an angel

One upon a time, there was a young carpenter who lived with his old mother. Every day, he goes into the forest to cut a wood to make furniture. He loved singing and he had a beautiful voice because of that many animals in the forest walk along with him. One day while he was cutting down a tree, there were seven angels who appeared. The man got afraid thinking that the angels might get angry for cutting the tree. The angels complimented his voice and asked him to follow them to live in heaven. Although he was excited of the idea, he refused the offer due to his mother. The angels appreciated his character. He was asked to think what gift the angels could give to his mom. He got back home with a very beautiful sweater for winter.



Figure 16 A sample page from the book

4.10 Thor-Mae-Pha, boar teeth

There was a village threatened by a giant and fierce boar. No one is brave to beat the boar except for an old man who lived in an isolated part of the village. He fought and killed the boar for seven days and nights. Then he went back to a village and proclaimed his victory. When he got back to the place to find the boar's body, a three colored teeth boar was there. The old man used it to comb his hair. Suddenly, he turned into a young man. Everyone in the village heard about magic comb and used that comb to get young. As the time passes by with no deaths, the village got crowded so they needed more space to live in. To extend their living space, an old man decided to walk with his family without stopping day by day. Feeling tired, the man's family rested while he went to look for a place on his own. After resting, his family followed a man but without a trace. Without the magic comb, many people in the village got sick and died. They still believed that an old man still alive somewhere in the world with the magic comb.



Figure 17 A sample page from the book

5. Feedback from community stakeholders

Ten Folktales books and a cartoon animation were evaluated by teachers and students in seven local schools by using a questionnaire, observation, and activities. Due to the use of locally produced learning media resources, the results have shown that there is a significant improvement of student learning reported by the teachers. Also, students were attracted by the illustrations depicting real images. However, there are some difficulties in learning some words such as rich man (เศรษฐี) and basket (ถั่ว).

Accordingly, the children were interested, enthusiastic and understood an entire story with its illustration. It can improve reading skill as compared to other general materials as it increases motivation through the use of local folktales associated with cultural context that appeared on artwork elements. Further, a group of local teachers who uses these learning media found that students got inspired by their own cultural value and identity. Next, the production of the materials allows community stakeholders to share their identity and knowledge for future generations.

As requested by the communities' stakeholders, future research projects may include other general to specific topics such as personal hygiene, pesticide effects, environmental science, skill development, among others. In the production of educational learning media resources for ethnic minorities, cultural and local ways of life should be highly considered.

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