

NOTE SECTION

Report on the Chong Revitalization Workshops

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Chong belongs to the Pearic sub-branch of the Austroasiatic language family. Chong speakers are found in eastern Thailand and in western Cambodia across the Thai-Cambodian border. Chong is very famous for its four contrastive registers or voice qualities of clear, breathy, creaky and breathy-creaky. Phoneticians have been very much interested in investigating the articulatory mechanisms associated with these voice qualities (Edmondson 1996; Theraphan 1991). The majority of Chong speakers in Thailand live in Khao Khitchakut district, Chanthaburi province. Now only few speakers live in Pongnamron and other districts, but in the past they were relatively more numerous. It is rather difficult to state with any precision the current population of Chong speakers. According to the Mahidol University Ethnolinguistic Map Project (Suwilai and others 2002), there are about 4,000 Chong speakers. However, the ability of the people to speak Chong varies a lot. Most of the younger generation, especially those under 20 years of age, do not speak the language anymore. Even among the elderly people, Thai has become their first language in many social domains of daily life. Because of the rapid decrease in the number of Chong speakers, this language is considered to be endangered. Chong can be classified at stage 7 of Fishman's GIDS (Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) which is only one stage above the most severe stage (stage 8) of language endangerment (Suwilai 2001). The language is no longer spoken in the home with the children.

Aware that the language now faces difficult circumstances, staff members and students at Mahidol University and elderly Chong speakers initiated the Chong revitalization program following the successful class of M.A. Field Methods in Linguistics in 1999 in which elderly Chong speakers had joined to teach their language to the students and staff. As a result, Mahidol students and staff know the Chong language and its structure quite well. At the same time, the Chong people acquired a good idea that their language can be written down and taught to other people.

Foreseeing the loss of their ethnic language in the near future, the elderly Chong people cooperated with Mahidol staff and students in developing the Thai-based Chong orthography in November 1999 with the hope that it could be a useful tool for maintaining their language and culture. There were three follow-up meetings in August and November 2000.

The Chong revitalization program was officially established in 2000 with cooperation between the Chong community of speakers, Mahidol academic staff, SIL education specialists who provided technical support, the TRF (Thailand Research Fund) which granted funds to the Chong community to support their linguistic research work and the Japan Foundation which also granted funds to support Mahidol staff members for organizing workshops. The project is called “The Maintenance and Revitalization of Chanthaburi Chong Language.” The Chong people have carried out a literacy survey in two main sub-districts where the majority of the people are Chong speakers to determine the numbers of Chong speakers, as well as their ability and attitude toward the Chong revitalization project. Almost 2,000 Chong people participated in the investigation, and more than 90% of them support the Chong revitalization program. The Chong language committee also compiled a Chong dictionary from November 2000 to September 2001 by collecting and arranging Chong vocabulary by semantic fields. The first draft of the “village-version” of the Chong dictionary has been completed. (This dictionary was compiled by Chong people from Takkianthong-Klongplu area. Another version of Chong dictionary, *Dictionary of Chong Dialects*, is now being compiled by Mahidol linguistic staff members).

Since the elderly Chong people wish to have Chong taught in school, SIL linguists and education specialists were consulted and have joined this program. The tentative Chong orthography was then tested by SIL members and Mahidol staff and students, and it was found to be generally readable, usable and practical. With the cooperation of the primary school in the Chong community, language development workshops that will lead to the acquisition of vernacular literacy through the teaching of Chong as a second language have been carried out. They are as follows:

1. *Chong Writer Workshops and Literature Production Workshops (15-19 October 2001)*

A brief writer workshop was conducted firstly in August 2000 as a follow-up for the orthography development. From this workshop 15 stories about “personal experience” were written. Then the literature production workshop was organized during 15-19 October 2001 with two days of training staff (seven Mahidol staff members and students) to conduct the workshop. Twenty Chong men and women of various age groups participated in the workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to produce the stage 1 story or reading materials for Chong language beginners. The participants practiced writing easy stories for children and beginners, editing stories, and creating illustrations. From this workshop 35 stories were written and 27 booklets were

completed. Also, as a result of the workshop, more people decided to participate in the revitalization project by being co-ordinators and accountants; most of the middle-aged and elderly people are writers; and the teenagers make illustrations for the stories and books. This workshop has made the Chong participants feel very happy and encouraged about the steps they themselves can take to preserve their language.

2. Chong Curriculum Development Workshops (21-26 January 2002)

As a result of the discussion with the local primary school principal, the Chong language will be taught as a part of the "local studies" curriculum for grade 3 students who have already learned to read and write Thai. The time devoted to this program is two semesters per year. The teaching is for three hours per week (one hour in a day) for 20 weeks per semester. About 20 Chong language committee members, the school principal, and the teacher of the grade 3 students attended the workshop. The material used in teaching and learning is based on the Chong cultural calendar.

The committee agreed to devote the first semester to listening and understanding Chong and the second semester to reading and writing Chong. For the first semester one hour of Chong language teaching is divided into three components: listening to stories, singing songs, guessing riddles, and reciting poems (15 minutes), Total Physical Response (TPR) or listening and doing according to the commands (30 minutes), and shared reading activities and reading big books (15 minutes). Through this workshop some teaching materials were prepared, and these comprised 30 stories (including songs and poems), 10 big books, and some vocabulary for TPR. The teaching materials were also illustrated and tested so that the people could get some idea of what to teach and how to teach.

3. Editing Training Workshops (11-12 February 2002)

This workshop was organized so that all the teaching materials prepared in the previous workshop could be rechecked and edited. In addition, some Chong speakers were trained to edit the written materials produced by their fellow Chong writers in the future since the Chong are being encouraged to write as much as they can. This workshop will produce the manual for editing Chong stories and the spelling of Chong words will be written up.

4. Chong Teacher Training Workshops (18-23 February 2002)

Since the Chong language will be taught in school as a pilot project in May 2002, the Chong teachers must be trained. Two Chong men are willing to take up the duty to be Chong teachers. They are well qualified to be Chong teachers since they have good pronunciation, good understanding of the Chong language and culture, can devote time to teaching for the whole year, and are accepted by their families and communities. The two men have decided to teach together as a team. One teacher will serve as the main teacher the first 10

week and the other teacher will serve as the main teacher for the second ten weeks. The instructional materials for listening to stories and singing songs, TPR guidelines and big books have been prepared. The teachers have intensively practiced reading and telling stories, giving instructions which require the students to respond with actions, and reading big books (sharing the reading of stories) which is a teaching technique developed for the “whole language” approach to early literacy acquisition and which provides a very good mechanism for participation and stimulating the interest of the new teachers.

5. *Chong Teachers Refresher Workshop* will be organized during 13-15 May 2002 just before the teaching starts for the purpose of more intensive teacher training and to make the teachers feel confident in their jobs.

6. *Chong Primer* is also being developed over the past year and a half.

Lessons learned from the on-going project

The following lessons have been learned from the Chong workshops:

1. Friendship and trust are essential for promoting cooperative work and community based research.
2. Small successes gained step by step can be encouraging to the people engaged in difficult work.

Impact of this project

The Chong literacy workshops have had the following six-fold impact:

1. This project has contributed significantly to strengthening the community. Ethnic language revival is closely tied to the revival of the people’s ethnic identity.
2. This project can serve as a model for establishing revitalization programs for other endangered ethnolinguistic groups in Thailand and other countries.
3. This project has contributed to the promotion of minority language education in the formal school system.
4. This project will hopefully lead to the reconsideration of the education policy and the language policy in the future.
5. The younger generations of minority ethnolinguistic groups will be proud to play a role in revitalizing their own languages and cultures.
6. The Chong language is the first minority language in Thailand to receive official approval for being taught in the formal education system.

Note

The author hopes to stir up curiosity and interest among other Mon-Khmer Studies readers.

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