

Chapter 2.5

Current English Language Policy in Myanmar

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Introduction

While the focus of this chapter is current English language policy in Myanmar, it is important to first place it in the context of English language teaching (ELT) in Myanmar. The Republic of the Union of Myanmar is a very diverse nation, made up of more than one hundred ethnic groups who speak different languages. English has long been the only foreign language used in Myanmar and the teaching and learning of English in Myanmar has a long history. Ohn Pe (1976) claims that it came to be taught during the reign of King Bodawpaya (AD 1762-1819) whose uncle and father-in-law, Prince Mekhra, was apparently one of the first students of English. In 1885 after the Third Anglo-Myanmar war, the whole of Myanmar was colonized and English took the place of Myanmar as the language of law and administration, as well as the medium of education in European Code schools and the university. Thus from 1885 till 1948 when Myanmar gained independence, the status of Myanmar was second to English, though it continued serving as the lingua franca of the country for multi-ethnic, social, and commercial intercourse.

Developments

There have been many developments in the field of ELT in Myanmar. Some major developments that occurred in the field of education during the post-independence period had a major impact on the teaching of English in the country. The first took place in 1965 when all the private schools were nationalized, resulting in all the schools in the country being brought together under a single uniform system of education for the very first time. Due to the change in 1965, with all non-state schools now being run by the government, the practice of using English as a medium of instruction in private-run European Code schools and the system of teaching English from kindergarten on came to an end. The teaching of English in Myanmar then began from Standard 5, as had been the system in the Vernacular and National Schools since 1950. Moreover, Myanmar was also made the sole medium of instruction at the Basic Education level. This had already been done at the university level a year earlier in 1964 with the enactment of the 1964 University Act. The English language was then termed a foreign language, and since it was the foreign language with which the Myanmar were most familiar, there was no reason why it should not be used as a medium for the acquisition of knowledge, if not for

instruction. Thus the aim of teaching English during that period from 1965 to 1980 was to impart what Han Tin (1990) refers to as “literary skill” (reading and writing skills).

The second development occurred in 1981 when the New Education Program was introduced, which stemmed from the Seminar on Education held in 1979. The New Education Program, which was introduced to upgrade the standard of education in the country, deemed it necessary to expand the role of English in education. As a result, from 1981 onwards, English was to be taught from kindergarten and the aim was to develop all four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It also prescribed that English be used as the medium of instruction at the upper secondary level to teach the science subjects. At the university level too, English became the medium of instruction for all disciplines with the exception of the Myanmar language.

It has been over three decades now since the introduction of the teaching of English from kindergarten in 1981.

Starting from August, 2012, a Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR), the national education reform plan is being implemented at full momentum, led by the Myanmar Ministry of Education and supported by development partners, namely ADB, AusAid, Denmark, DFID, EU, GIS, JICA, Norway, UK Aid, UNESCO, and World Bank (Myanmar Ministry of Education 2013). In response to the recommendation of the first phase of CESR which is for rapid assessment, changes are being made to text books in the basic education sector, including English text books, which are outdated, in which there are overlaps, and which overload students’ ability to learn.

Another recommendation on English language teaching made by the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) is to delay the start of teaching English until grade 3 when children are nine or ten years old, and when Myanmar children have mastered their mother tongue and when children from the other national ethnic groups have mastered their mother tongue and Myanmar, their second language. However, the result of a survey carried out in 27 townships in Myanmar in 2013 showed that 75.5 percent of parents and teachers prefer their children to start learning English from grade 1. Therefore, the issue of whether to start teaching English from kindergarten or grade 3 is still under debate. However it is clear that there is a strong desire among today’s generation—young and old alike—to master English. Most people believe that a good command of English leads to better job opportunities both at home and abroad.

The current broad objective of Myanmar education is first to catch up with the education standard of the ASEAN region and then to attain quality education which is of international standards to develop the human resources needed for economic development of the state. However, the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) is still being carried out and the National Education Law being drafted, taking into consideration the opinions and suggestions of stakeholders. Therefore it is not yet certain whether the pendulum of the starting age for teaching English will swing from grade 1 to a later grade or not.

Current and Anticipated Language Program Initiatives of Significance

Several developments have made it imperative for Myanmar nationals to possess greater fluency in spoken English and to possess good writing skills in English. These include the introduction of the market economy in Myanmar, and more importantly by a greater influx of foreign companies and tourists into the country following the practice of Democracy, together with an increase in the number of Myanmar nationals travelling and studying abroad. The need serves as a spur for the English Department at the University of Yangon to be conscious of its role in providing the country with some of the manpower resources necessary for the economic and social development of the country. Hence, the English Department is using all its resources for the development of the English language proficiency of the students.

To promote ELT in Myanmar, an English Language Task Force was formed in 2000 and it was upgraded to the National Center for English Language (NCEL) in 2004 with the vision to fulfill the English language skills requirements of a lifelong learning society. Since then, NCEL has introduced new learning materials at all levels aimed at developing all four skills, using the new methodology based on the concepts of team teaching, activities such as group and pair work, role play, and simulation to give students more opportunities for language practice. In addition, more stimulating activities such as play reading and performance, impromptu talk, debate, and round-table discussion in English have been used in schools and universities and state level competitions held every year.

In the 2004-2005 academic year, an undergraduate BA degree course (English for Professional Purposes) was introduced to meet the human resource needs of the government and private organizations, and offered to students who would like to prepare themselves for their future careers. English for Professional Purposes students study such modules as Business English, Presentation Skills and Public Speaking Skills, English in the Media, Translation and Interpretation Skills, English for Tourism and Hospitality, as well as English for Meetings and Negotiation Skills, so that they would be ready to face the challenges demanded by their workplaces.

In 2006, the curricula and syllabuses in the higher education sector were reviewed. In doing so, and realizing the need to have more integration with ASEAN nations, the English Department introduced “ASEAN Literature in English” as a module in the curriculum of the English literature course. However, in planning the syllabus of ASEAN literature in English, only a very limited number of short stories written by writers in the ASEAN region are available. Nevertheless the dissemination of one ASEAN member nation’s literature to other member nations would be of great benefit in helping member nations to have a better understanding of each other’s social and cultural characteristics. Furthermore, it will help in creating awareness of what they have in common and in what aspects they differ or do not share the same ground.

In 2012, the higher education sector curricula were reviewed again. To bring the higher education curricula and syllabus in Myanmar in line with the courses in most ASEAN nations, three-year degree courses were extended to four-year courses. Therefore, the syllabuses including those for English specialization

were also revised and redesigned. A significant development was that at the tertiary level the foundation English course-books written locally were replaced by course-books published by McMillan Publishers Ltd. In order to make use of the course-books effectively, the English faculty received training on how to deal with the course-books as well as suggestions and assistance in writing tests.

Another endeavor of the Ministry of Education was to address class size. Until 2013 in some universities, class sizes could be as large as 100 to 150. However, to make English language teaching more effective, the class size in most universities was reduced to a maximum of 50 students, so that the communicative approach and student-centered learning could be used in teaching English. To fulfill this aim of reducing the class size, at present new infrastructures are being built in almost all the universities that need more classrooms.

A remarkable reform that has taken place in the higher education sector, starting from the 2013-2014 academic year, is that Yangon University has resumed its undergraduate program after a break of 16 years. Among the first batch of 617 students who have enrolled in various disciplines, 40 students who received very high marks in the national matriculation examination chose to specialize in English. This change has enabled the English Department of Yangon University to have the opportunity to nurture talented students specializing in English.

English language training opportunities for faculty have been promoted since 2002 to the present. Because the medium of instruction at the tertiary level is English, whenever new faculty for universities are recruited the new teachers from all disciplines have been given two months training in English by the National Center for English Language. Furthermore, more experienced lecturers from the English Departments of the Arts and Sciences universities in Myanmar are also provided with training not only to further develop their English language proficiency but also to ensure that they can use modern language teaching methodologies. In addition, whenever new modules are introduced, training programs are given to the English faculty. For that reason when a new module, "Interpretation," was introduced for English specialization students in 2012, lecturers were also given training courses in the module.

Focused on the Basic Education Sector, training courses on ELT Methodology to promote English teaching efficiency of teachers are provided in various forms, some of which are cascading courses. To increase the use of English in the classrooms, a course in maximizing the use of English was given to all faculty from the English Departments of education colleges in Myanmar in 2012.

With respect to international collaborations, as Myanmar has become more open to the world since 2010, there has been short-term as well as long-term assistance to Myanmar to enhance ELT in Myanmar. Assistance is provided through awarding scholarships to students and the English faculty to study in English language speaking countries, and by dispatching English professors and teacher trainers to Myanmar universities. Assistance in English language teaching is provided to Myanmar by the governments of Brunei Darussalam, Japan, the US, and Singapore, and by such institutions as Australian Volunteer International, the British Council, Temasek Foundation, and SEAMEO Regional Language Center.

Apart from training programs, workshops, conferences, and seminars have been conducted for English faculty and students. English faculty are not only trained to strengthen their capacity in teaching, but workshops are also held to help

them develop their students' higher order thinking skills, such as critical thinking, analytical ability, problem solving, synthesis, self-study, decision-making, and communication.

Starting in 2002, ELT Conferences were held at the National Center for English Language on various themes such as: *New Paradigms for Teaching and Learning English in Myanmar*; *Effective Teaching, Effective Testing*; *Teaching Literature, Learning Literature*; and *From Theory to Practice: Linguistics Studies for Language and Literature Teaching*. Moreover, seminars on experiences gained from courses attended abroad and within the country were held so that those who have attended training courses could share their experiences, knowledge, and skills gained with their colleagues. Subsequently to strengthen English language capacity in Myanmar, NCEL has developed short and long-term plans for training for teachers, school principals, and education officers from all educational levels, including providing opportunities to attend workshops, seminars, and conferences in ASEAN nations and in English speaking countries.

Another effort made to promote ELT in Myanmar is broadcasting TV lessons aimed at students, faculty, and the general public. The National Center for English Language produces lessons and they are telecast through learning centers located in universities and through public TV channels and local TV stations.

To make higher education institutions "more attuned to the manpower needs of the nation and to establish a more flexible alternative mode of education delivery," the Human Resource Development Program for the Higher Education was initiated in 1998 (Myanmar Ministry of Education 1998). One of the most successful courses is a post-graduate, five-level English Proficiency Course for staff from Ministries in Myanmar and the general public, which was initiated in 2002 by the National Center for English Language. Over the ten years leading up to 2013, over 8,322 civil service personnel graduated from the Post-graduate Diploma Course in English run under this program.

The English Departments have also provided English language proficiency training to civil service personnel of various ministries. Some courses for the Ministry of Education are on- demand courses, including English for Effective Presentation, a Masters of Ceremonies Training Course, and training programs for liaison officers to prepare them to handle visits by foreign dignitaries and other important events.

Successes and Challenges in English Language Policy Development and Implementation

Throughout the long history of English language teaching in Myanmar, efforts have been made to address English language teaching capacity and quality. Systematic efforts were stepped up after the English Task Force was formed in 2000 and upgraded to the National Center for English Language in 2004. To promote the quality of English teachers at all levels, training and academic programs including workshops, seminars, and conferences have been conducted for them. Such programs, conducted in collaboration with scholars from international organizations

have also provided exposure for the faculty who never had such an experience previously.

With the improvement in the economy of the country, the government is now able to invest more in the education sector including English language teaching. The increased spending on education also means having the funds to provide better facilities, to increase the number of faculty, and to spend more on research and development leading to improvement in the quality of higher education. As Myanmar is undergoing social, economic, and political reforms and as it has become more open to the world, many more scholarships are being awarded to the country's students and faculty, and therefore more students specializing in English and the faculty have opportunities to receive training abroad.

With the emergence of a new multiparty democratic political system, rapid developments are taking place. Just as there have been successes in ELT, English Departments in Myanmar also are facing numerous challenges. A major challenge is a shortage of qualified faculty. Few graduates in English can resist the lure of lucrative opportunity these days. They are being enticed away from teaching by the very attractive salaries offered by private organizations. Thus, ways and means will have to be found to make the profession of English language teaching more attractive.

English Departments also need to keep their staff abreast of the latest developments and language teaching methodology in English language and literature teaching in order to meet the demand for more effective English language instruction. In other words, more opportunities for training and further studies both at home and abroad will have to be created for teachers in the basic education sector as well as in the higher education sector.

Staff development is an important issue that needs to be addressed. In addition to providing pre-service and in-service training to teachers, teachers will be more motivated to develop their capacity if their language proficiency and teaching performance is evaluated in some ways, for promotion to a higher level in their career or to continue with their profession.

At present, it is imperative for the English departments to develop quality English literature and English language curricula and teaching materials suited to the needs of the learners, their learning environment, and to the challenges they will be facing in the twenty-first century. Due to the enormity of the task, it is necessary for English Departments to set up a curricula and materials development unit, comprising staff well-versed in curriculum planning, materials design, and language teaching methodology.

Having large classes, resulting in ineffective English language teaching, is another challenge that has yet to be resolved. To reduce class size, more English teachers need to be recruited and infrastructure constructed at the basic and the higher education sectors. And just as more classrooms are needed, they also need to be equipped with modern technology.

What is more fundamental than the utilization of modern technology is the effective use of teaching aids and libraries. At the basic education level, teachers need to be aware of the use of teaching aids in introducing new vocabulary, concepts, and ideas and at the higher education level, activities and projects for students should require the students to make use of the resources modern libraries can offer them.

Another important challenge to be faced in the implementation of language policy in Myanmar is the fact that the present assessment system does not reflect the actual performance of the students and the goals of language teaching, which is to be proficient in all the four language skills. It is, therefore, crucial to change the assessment system at all levels of learning, moving away from examinations that encourage rote learning. Instead, assessment systems should be adopted that really measure the student proficiency in the four language skills, and promote higher order thinking skills.

In conclusion many changes have taken place in the long journey of English language teaching in Myanmar, and there also have been many successes. However, it is very necessary for English Departments in Myanmar to try their utmost to create a path to sustainable development in the field of ELT.

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