

Chapter 2.4

An Overview on the State of English Language Implementation in Myanmar

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The Present State of English Language Teaching at Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Education levels in Myanmar

The present state of English language teaching in Myanmar is related to the current structure of basic education. The Primary Level includes grade 1 to 5 and the Secondary level is divided into the Middle School Level and High School Level. The Middle School Level is from grade 6 to 9, and the High School Level is from Grade 10 to 11, with a total of 11 years for teaching the English language before students continue their education at the tertiary level.

In the Primary Level of the Basic Education Sector, the prescribed instructional materials for grade 1 is the Primer containing 68 words for “look and say” letters of the alphabet and numerals one to ten for reading and writing, and songs and rhymes. For grades 2 to 5, readers are prescribed, containing graded patterns and language items, as well as songs and rhymes to promote oral fluency. As additional materials, a student book and a teacher’s manual that can be used to develop the speaking skills of students are also prepared and provided.

At the Middle School Level, textbooks consist of reading comprehension text, grammar and syntax sections, vocabulary reinforcement and development section, an oral fluency section consisting of pronunciation drills and/or short dialogues, and spelling and dictation exercises. In grades 6 and 7 texts, units usually begin with the grammar and syntax section followed by the comprehension section as the emphasis is on the acquiring and use of basic language items. In grades 8 and 9 texts, the order is reversed as the focus now shifts to the development of the reading skill.

At the high school level, the textbooks for grades 10 and 11 are made up of extracts from both literary and scientific texts for the reading, vocabulary, grammar, and writing sections, as well as selected poems. The syllabus for grade 10 also has a component to promote the speaking skill. The exercises in the texts are quite traditional and no communicative activities are found.

Few complaints have been registered about the course either from the students or from the teachers. The teachers appear to be handling the texts well, although data collected in 1989 reveal that 52 percent of the Middle School teachers were untrained. The students too appear to be quite satisfied with the course. A study of the responses by grade 7 and 9 students to the questionnaire on student characteristics reveal the following data: 30.4 percent said English was their favorite subject and only 6 percent said it was the subject they disliked most. The

course load was found to be just right by 60 percent and only 8.6 percent found it too heavy.

The test design for the Primary Level is quite traditional. About 50 percent of the marks are allotted to discrete point items on vocabulary, word forms, verb forms, and structure words. They are either supply or multiple choice type items. Students tend to abandon the text in favor of memorization of isolated words and their various forms. 15 to 40 percent of the marks are given to sentence construction or controlled composition depending on the grade. Grade 4 and 5 tests include a reading comprehension test to which 30 percent of the marks are given. The test design for the Middle School Level differs very little from that of the Primary Level. The minor differences are the inclusion of text-based short questions with 20 percent of the marks allotted to them. In the grade 9 test design, composition, and letter writing are also tested. The test designs for both the Primary and Middle School Levels ignore such areas as oral fluency and the listening skill, due to the fact that oral fluency and listening skills tests are difficult to administer in the present condition of the classes.

An important aspect of the test design for the high school level is that 65 percent of the marks are given to text-based questions and items in order to make students read and study the prescribed texts. However one drawback is that weak students tend to resort to memorization of huge chunks of the texts to be able to answer these questions. The second important aspect of the test is its emphasis on the “mastery of connected discourse” by allotting 35 percent of the marks to it. However, those students who are unwilling to exert the necessary effort to master it resort to memorization of prepared character sketches, essays, letters and even passages from the text for the cloze type item. Despite its drawbacks, the test design can be said to be an improvement as it requires a greater ability of the students in expressing themselves in English unlike the previous test design, which focuses on isolated language items.

The broad objectives of the course state that the course intends to develop all four language skills and the achievement aimed at is equal to that of GCE “O” Level. The main goal of the syllabus and the texts is to equip the learners with the ability to use English for academic purposes when they get into higher institutions of learning.

In the Tertiary Education Sector, students have to learn English as a foundation course for four years before they get their first degrees. Until 1995, students attended the university for four years to get their first degrees and learned English as a compulsory subject. For 16 years, (between 1996 and 2011), students had to attend for three years for their first degrees and learn English as a foundation course. During that time, nearly 40 years, the same reading texts were used and the main emphasis was on reading, while speaking and listening were ignored. Testing at that time included reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and writing. In 2012, a new course book was adopted for the undergraduate students. The course book aims to develop communicative skills. The test design for this level covers all components of the course except pronunciation, listening, and speaking although they form an important part of the course.

Trends or Developments in Language Proficiency

The focus of English language teaching used to be on reading and writing, but after 1981 the focus shifted to the development of all four language skills. With an influx of foreign companies, international nongovernmental associations, and tourists into Myanmar, and the reforms in the economic system, it has become imperative for Myanmar nationals to possess greater fluency in both spoken and written English.

Methods Used to Teach English

With respect to English language teaching methodology, the child-centered approach is used to teach all subjects. However, as teachers mostly translate and put an emphasis on the acquiring of Myanmar meanings of words and sentences by students, rote learning and memorization has become the primary model of learning. Students have also come to regard the study of English as mere learning of words and sentences together with their Myanmar equivalents and not as the acquiring of a language, which can be used as a means of communication like their native language. Both students and teachers alike need to be more aware of the roles of teachers and learners in using the communicative approach. As there are many ethnic groups in Myanmar, students whose mother tongue is not Myanmar may find it even more difficult to learn English because teachers use Myanmar as the medium of instruction when they teach.

The course has achieved limited success due to three reasons: (1) the use of inappropriate teaching techniques and methods, (2) the limited utilization of teaching aids, and (3) the existence of a large population of untrained teachers. The course aims to impart basic communicative skills right from the beginning. It advocates for the practice of language items in communicative situations in the form of meaningful interactions between teachers and pupils and among pupils themselves, language games, and activities. However observations of language classes reveal that very few teachers make use of the activity-based methodology. Instead, they spend most of the time teaching by reading aloud and spelling and providing students with Myanmar meaning of words and sentences in the textbook which students are expected to copy in their exercise books and memorize and regurgitate when demanded.

The teaching method requires an abundant use of teaching aids. Most of these can be produced by either the teacher herself or are readily available in the environment. However, either due to the teachers' ignorance of the value of and need for teaching aids in language classes or due to lack of resources for producing them, in most language classes, no teaching aids are used. Teaching without them turns language classes into boring sessions for drilling words and sentences. Therefore, both students and teachers alike need to be more aware of the roles of teachers and learners in using the approach.

Level of English Language Proficiency of Instructors

It is not easy to evaluate the proficiency of instructors as their levels vary enormously. Only a general impression can be given. There does not seem to be any correlation between the age or seniority of the instructors and their level of competence. Many of them lack necessary English language skills and practical teaching skills. About 60 percent of the teachers had not attended any courses on the teaching of English. Among all the subjects they teach, English is the subject they need training in most. To teach the course successfully, they need to be clear about the aims, familiar with the teaching method and techniques devised for the course, and have an adequate command of the language. Although most have sufficient academic qualifications, their English is by no means at the level required of an English teacher.

Measuring the Level of English Language Proficiency of Instructors

No standardized test is used to measure the English language proficiency of instructors, and therefore, it is difficult to judge the proficiency level of instructors. In the Basic Education Sector, Primary teachers, who teach grades 1 to 5, require a teacher-training certificate and to be promoted to Junior teachers who teach grades 6 to 9, they need a diploma in teaching. Graduates from the Institutes of Education are also appointed as Junior teachers and after serving as Junior teachers for about one year, they are promoted to Senior teachers, who teach grades 10 to 11.

In the Tertiary Education Sector, only those who have a master's degree in English can apply for tutorship in the English departments and to be appointed, they first have to sit for a written examination administered by the Ministry of Education. If they pass the written examination, they will have to appear for personal interviews. In the written examination, the candidates have to take a test for their proficiency and a paper that tests how much they know about the English language, English language teaching, English literature, and Applied Linguistics.

Improving the Proficiency and Teaching Methods of English Language Instructors

In order to enhance the proficiency and teaching efficiency of English teachers, a significant task carried out is the provision of courses on ELT methodology for both teachers in the Basic Education Sector (grades 1 to 11) and the Higher Education Sector (tertiary level).

For teachers in the Basic Education Sector, an ELT Methodology course for High School teachers, Training of Primary, Middle, and High School Teachers of English, and Training on Maximizing the Use of English in Teaching English for trainees at Education Colleges were conducted by local trainers. Temasek

Foundation, Singapore and SEAMEO Regional Language Center are jointly providing English language training programs for teacher leaders—25 English teachers from Education Colleges and 25 from English Departments from Universities—to further cascade the course to 1,000 English teachers. In this program, lecturers from SEAMEO RELC provided training for two weeks in Myanmar and five weeks in Singapore.

For teachers from the Higher Education Sector, whenever new tutors and demonstrators are recruited they are given training courses so that they will be able to conduct their classes using English as the medium of instruction. There are two types of courses for the new recruits. The first type is an eight-week course known as the Upskilling Program for Freshly Appointed Tutors of English (UPFATE), and since 2002 a total of 424 newly appointed English tutors have been trained. The course components of this program include Developing Communicative Skills of Trainees, Teaching Communicative Skills, Teaching Pronunciation, Vocabulary, and Grammar, Familiarization with Teaching Materials, Classroom management and Classroom Language, lesson planning, use of teaching aids and ICT in English language teaching, action research, presentation and public speaking skills, assessment and question setting, microteaching, and activities to promote language fluency. The other type of course is also an eight-week course for new recruits from disciplines other than English. So far more than two thousand newly appointed tutors and demonstrators have been trained. As a retraining program, 88 lecturers from all 47 universities under the Ministry of Education were given training to promote their proficiency as well as to update them with language teaching methodology and techniques that are currently in use. In addition, as an international course book has been adopted for the tertiary level foundation English course for teachers to effectively teach English, two workshops on teaching English have been held.

At present realizing the need to review the education policy, the curricula, and the course books being used, a Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) is being carried out with the assistance of local and international organizations. The first phase, which started in August 2012 and lasted 8 months, focused on Rapid Assessment, and now curriculum experts are in the second phase of CESR, which is an In-Depth Analysis to be finished in December 2013. The third phase will be the Development of Costed Education Sector Plans and will finish in June 2014.

Achievements

The English course for the Primary Level in general may not fully realize its primary aim of imparting basic communicative skills in the language. Yet, it produces pupils who can read with a fair amount of comprehension and when reading aloud with intelligible pronunciation, write legibly, and sing songs and recite nursery rhymes fairly fluently. On completion of the Middle School Level, the majority of students can read simple English sentences quite well and can write them grammatically.

By holding different kinds of English competitions for students, an increasing number of students are becoming more interested in participating in such competitions, leading to a more positive attitude toward learning. While preparing for the competitions, they have to do a great deal of self-learning. As a result, they have become better informed and have developed their higher-order thinking skills and public speaking skills.

As English teachers receive training and retraining, they have become more confident in using English in their class and the proficiency level of most has improved enormously. Moreover, efforts like constructing new buildings and recruiting more teachers have been made to reduce the class size as much as possible.

Challenges that Remain to be Faced

The first challenge is that as the present course books used in the Basic Education Sector have been used for about three decades, it has become crucial to come up with curricula of international quality and then write or adopt course books that will suit the needs of Myanmar students.

The second challenge is to build the capacity of English teachers at all levels, by providing training on English Language teaching methodologies, so that they will be able to use English with confidence and teach English, using the communicative approach.

The third challenge is providing students opportunities to use English to communicate rather than as a subject to be memorized and reproduced.

The challenge with teaching English in Myanmar revolves around the perception of teacher and student roles, and shifts towards a more communicative methodology entails a degree of learner autonomy, which is alien to traditional education cultures and the attitudes towards teaching and learning on the part of Myanmar teachers and students.