Myanmar ethnic, national and international languages: friends or foes

By Khaing Phyu Htut

Myanmar has a population of 51 million with 135 ethnic groups (Government of Myanmar, 2014) indicating a great potential to be a multilingual society. General language principles termed “Naypyidaw principles” (Synthesis report, 2014) have been agreed on. The Government of Myanmar has enacted the National Education Law (Government of Myanmar, 2014), but clear national language and national education policies (ETWG, 2016) are in need. While attempts are being made towards that goal (Lo Bianco, 2015), it is timely to reflect on local conditions to make positive contributions.

This paper aims to highlight the need for a peaceful and realistic coexistence of the three languages: ethnic, national and international. From an education perspective, the wider context must be taken into account; what will pupils need to learn to know, to do, to be, and to get along with others in order to deal with economic, technological, social, environmental, and political forces (Stoll et al, 2003).

Based on this wider context and the dialogues taking place in Myanmar, the paper discusses the need to (a) re-formalise Burmese as the national language, (b) redefine the status of English, and (c) strengthen and give rightful place to ethnic languages. The roles of the key stakeholders (governments, community leads, teacher educators, teachers, and parents) in relation to the needs are explored and suggestions are made for each of the stakeholders.