Panel session: Learning from existing practices to strengthen the development and implementation of language-in-education policy for Myanmar’s diverse school-community contexts

By Htay Ei Ei and Amanda Seel

Myanmar is in a period of rapid socio-political change that is bringing with it far-reaching education reforms, including progress towards national- and state-level language-in-education policies. From educational, sustainable development, and peace-building perspectives, the desirability of provision for children to learn through their mother tongues first, as well as for teaching of ethnic languages and cultures in schools, is increasingly understood and the new government brings opportunities for accelerated progress in these areas. Variations of a “trilingual” model of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is being adopted in a number of areas, so far most comprehensively in Mon State.

However, along with many countries of the Asia-Pacific region Myanmar shares very complex diversity and faces challenges in identifying appropriate policies and implementable strategies for its full range of sociolinguistic and school contexts. There will be a need to test various approaches for schools that serve linguistically diverse/heterogeneous communities, or for low population oral language groups who often constitute “minorities within minorities”. There will be particular challenges for small multigrade schools, which are concentrated in poor, ethnic, and remote areas where language and other educational challenges are often the greatest, but capacity and resourcing the least.

Making progress in these diverse contexts will depend, critically, on understanding and building on practitioners’ existing beliefs, understanding, and current practices. The panel will present four case studies that will explore in depth what are the common – and a spectrum of – MTB-MLE practices across a range of linguistic and school contexts (including early childhood settings) in a number of ethnic states and areas. In particular, the panel will explore examples of “positive deviance” in language practice: effective strategies already in use that could be systematized and reinforced and critical areas for teacher professional development and capacity-building for headteachers, local education managers, communities, and other stakeholders. This will lead to a discussion of the implications for elaborating flexible but systematic strategies for implementation of Myanmar’s evolving national policies for languages in education.

Panelists:

Htay Ei Ei: Introduction and summary/recommendations
Min Rot Ong Mon: Case study from an MNEC school
L. Aung Sen: Case study from a school in a Kachin Independence Organisation-controlled area
Salai Aung Ling: Case study from Dai literature and culture program