Myanmar National, International, and Ethnic Languages: Friends or Foes

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Paper sections

1. Introduction
2. Language in education in Myanmar
3. Myanmar stakeholders in language policy
4. Conclusion
1. Introduction: Background

- Myanmar (Burma) the largest country in mainland SEA – 51 million population - 8 major ethnic groups – 68%+ Bamar (National Census, 2014)
  - Peace: questioned military seats, hanging ceasefire agreement with 8 armed groups not signing yet (The New Light of Myanmar, Aug 2016)
  - Economy: Foreign debt US$8.742 billion (EMIS, 2016), 26% of population below the poverty line (UNDP, 2016)
  - Health: The lowest life expectancy in ASEAN and the second-highest rate of infant and child mortality (World Bank, 2016)
  - Successful political transition - an encouraging sign for further socioeconomic progress (ADB, 2016)
1. Introduction: Languages

- Burmese - the official national language (Myanmar Constitution, 2008)

- English – the official foreign language

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<th>Primary and lower secondary</th>
<th>Subject</th>
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<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>Medium of instruction for Science and Maths</td>
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<td>Tertiary or Higher Education</td>
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- The languages of the other main ethnic groups (7) and subgroups (135) (National Census, 2014) – internal use within each group and subgroup
1. Introduction: Languages (contd.)

- 135 ethnic groups (Language policy conference, NPT, 2016)
- Democratic Government in 2011 & a more inclusive government in 2016 (Cabinet of NLD government, 2016)
- Developments in language matters:
  - Recognitions of human rights
  - Efforts to address educational issues – Mother tongue-based instruction
  - Reexamining the use of English in the state education system
2. Language in education in Myanmar: Main issues

- BE – 45,461 schools, 8.7 million students (Minister, Ministry of Education, TE seminar Aug 2016)
- HE – 170 tertiary education institutions, 2 million+ fulltime & 4 million+ distance education students (NESP, 2016)
- Burmese as the main language/English as the foreign language
- Non-Bamar primary children? Unsatisfactory English?
- Three main issues:
  - The status of the National language
  - The teaching and learning of English, when and how
  - Children whose mother tongue is not Burmese
2.1 Issues in teaching and learning: Burmese as the National language

- Country wide use of Burmese – members of some ethnic groups negatively associated with the dominance of Bamar ethnic group
- Low literacy rates in the states and regions where not all children’s mother tongue is Burmese (Myanmar Literacy Report, 2015)
- Internal conflicts in the country – though language is not the sole or the only cause
2.2 Issues in teaching and learning English

▪ Basic Education
  ▪ Methodology: Not interactive, painful memorizations, largely encourage rote learning since young (Sann Myint, 2013)
  ▪ Teachers: Not proficient enough in English
  ▪ Students: fail the school-leaving exams mainly in English or subjects ‘so called’ delivered in English (Sann Myint, 2013)

▪ Tertiary-level teachers and students have similar issues. The graduates even at the doctorate level - poor in English and related research skills to make their studies worthwhile (Thant Sin Aye, 2016)
2.3 Issues in teaching and learning Ethnic languages

- Different interpretations of the Constitution and National Education Law
- Unclear lines of communication, responsibility and accountability
- Translations of Burmese National Curriculum into different languages (legitimacy, quality, sustainability, equity, assessment, marginalization of minorities within minorities)
- Not enough qualified non-Bamar ethnic teachers
- Government’s lack of resources
2.4 Issues narrowed down to questions

1) What should be the role of the current national language, Burmese, in Myanmar?

2) When should English be taught in Myanmar public schools and how? What should the status of English be at Myanmar Universities?

3) How can non-Bamar children at public schools be realistically supported?
3. Stakeholders in language policy and actions: Government

- Main objectives: (a) nondisintegration of the Union and (b) nondisintegration of National solidarity (Basic principles No 6, Constitution, 2008)

- The Parliament (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw) has the right to enact laws for Educational curricula, syllabus, teaching methodology, research, plans, projects, and standards (Principle 96, Constitution, 2008)

- The National Education Commission – free body - issues of ethnic minorities (National Education Law, Chapter 4, Clause 5)

- Likely review of current policies and practices (legitimacy, quality, sustainability, equity, assessment - feasibility)
3. Stakeholders in language policy and actions: Ethnic and community leads

- Recognize the role of a national language and the need for Myanmar to have Burmese as the national language (South and Lall, 2015)

- Aim for providing high-quality education to ethnic youths in their mother tongue (MNEC, 2016)

- Primary education in mother tongue, lower secondary education in Burmese with modules added for ethnic history and language, higher education in Burmese (MNEC, 2016)
3. Stakeholders in language policy and actions: Teacher Educators and teachers

- Not enough in numbers, lack in quality, most know only Burmese
- High professionalism but never adequately supported or prepared for policy shifts (Htut, 2016)
- Most of the teacher educators’ (general or specialised in English) level of English - A1 and A2 (EfECT, 2014)
- Huge concerns in using English or mother tongues other than Burmese within the limitations of the current system
3. Stakeholders in language policy and actions: Parents and students

- Parents - children well equipped for employability or survival (Lwin, 2011)
- Students - to get education based socio economic benefits (Tin, 2014)
- Majority - willing to be proficient in English but less so for mother tongues including Burmese (NPT Language policy conference, 2016)
4. Attempted answers

**Question 1:** What should be the role of Burmese in Myanmar?

- Remain as the national language - the language of law, education, administration, jurisdiction, and national discussions (In accordance with the Constitution and the Nay Pyi Taw principles)

- Strengthening internal communications are important

- Burmese is also a mother tongue – A Mon activist (Lall and South, 2015)
4. Attempted answers contd.

**Question 2:** When should English be taught in Myanmar public schools and how? What should the status of English be at Myanmar Universities?

- English at lower secondary or upper primary (Kirkpatrick, 2015), (Drinan, 2013)
- English teaching as a subject must be improved towards communicative use at all levels (Myint, 2014)
- Quality of teachers enhanced first for EMI at any level of education to be successful (Htut, 2016)

*Public and private education gaps. ASEAN working language. Higher Education pressures.*
4. Attempted answers contd.

**Question 3:** How can non-Bamar children at state public schools be supported realistically?

- Ideal situation will be every ethnic child learning in MTs in every state school through quality teachers. BUT resource limitations (dream and realities: Dr Khin Swe Myint, 2016).

- The state/regional governments – survey preschool population - take early childhood measures to anticipate and solve language problems (Cliff Meyers).

- Teachers trained to teach children to use Burmese as a language.

- Special Education Needs Coordinators/ Ethnic ancillary assistants in the classrooms.
4. Conclusion

▪ Myanmar National, International, and Ethnic Languages are Friends, not foes. All in the right combination in realistic measures contribute to the development of the nation and cultural enrichment.

▪ Government and policymakers - think of unity and preservation of languages. Restricting language rights can be divisive - lead to segregationist tendencies (Thomas, 1996: 129).

▪ Ethnic and community leads - consider feasibility, sustainability. Policies not related to the understanding of the realities of teachers’ lives in the classroom will fail (Flinders, 1989).

▪ Educators and teachers - help and support after planning and initial in service work (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991).

▪ Parents and students - attach more value to the national languages (Kirkpatrick, 2015).
Conclusion

• Opportunity costs

• Value added - but will it be the value valued by the current market?

• Balanced centralization and decentralization

• Locally-managed schools and autonomous universities

• BUT decentralization/ devolution/ deregulation comes with accountability and HR issues

• What educational outcomes?
Thank you.

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