

Research paper The Contents of a Grade 4
National Language Textbook of Myanmar:
Contents Analysis of 2019 Textbook

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The Contents of a Grade 4 National Language Textbook of Myanmar: Contents Analysis of 2019 Textbook

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1. Preface

In this paper, the contents of a Myanmarese textbook used in 2019 for Grade 4 (G4) elementary students in Myanmar are analyzed.

Educational reforms are underway in Myanmar, with support from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), through the Project for Curriculum Reform at Primary Level of Basic Education (Tanaka, 2015; Osada, 2016a). With the reform of the education contents for G3 effective from the start of the new school year in June 2019, a new curriculum has been implemented for G1, G2 and G3, based on the new textbooks. However, as for G4 and G5, they still have the old curriculum since new textbooks have not been developed yet^①.

Regarding national language education in Myanmar, the old G1, G2 and G3 Myanmarese textbooks have been analyzed to record the aspects of the old curriculum (Osada, 2016b, 2017, 2018). However, there are few studies on Myanmarese textbooks except for these.

In this paper, the contents of a Myanmarese textbook for G4 students in the old curriculum are analyzed. The education contents are examined in more detail by examining the “Exercises” that come with the texts, but which have not been analyzed until now.

2. Analysis of the contents of G4 textbook materials

2.1 Overview

Table 1 shows the results of the content analysis of a G4 textbook used in 2019. The framework of the analysis is basically the same as that for the G1/G2/G3 textbooks (Osada, 2016b, 2017, 2018)^②. From left to right, “No.” is shown in the table, then “Unit title.” Materials are categorized into the following: “Speaking/Listening,” “Writing,” “Reading,” and “Basics of language.” Reading is divided into three subcategories: “Poems,” “Stories,” and “Descriptive texts.” “Basics of language” includes the subcategories of “Characteristics and rules of language (grammar)” and “Characters.”

The biggest category is “Reading (poems, stories, and descriptive texts)” and there are 20 items. There are no materials in the categories “Speaking/Listening,” “Writing” or “Language matters.” This textbook is designed solely for reading text. The breakdown of “Reading” materials is eight poems, five stories and seven descriptive texts. We will take a closer look at them below.

[Table 1]

No.	Unit Title	Speaking/ Listening	Writing	Reading			Basics of language	
				Poems	Stories	Descriptive texts	Characteristics and rules of language	Characters
1	Our School			○				
2	Good Friends					○		
3	Honeybee and Bumblebee			○				
4	A Leader of Myanmarese Drama, U Phoe Sein					○		
5	Good Will				○			
6	Chicken			○				
7	Preserved Fish					○		
8	Moral Lessons			○				
9	The Case of Anchoret's <i>Tama</i> Leaf				○			
10	General Aung San, the Martyr			○				
11	Fire Festival					○		
12	Moral Lessons			○				
13	Salt					○		
14	The Stag at The Pool				○			
15	The Bird That Helps People					○		
16	<i>Bagan</i>					○		
17	Drum Melody			○				
18	Dangerous Snake				○			
19	They Only Saw One Son				○			
20	Song of General Aung San			○				
	Total	0	0	8	5	7	0	0

2.2 Poems

The majority of the texts for reading are poems, of which there are eight. All of them are short, with a length of less than one page, and are intended to be read aloud. However, in a G4 class, the students not only read out or recite the poem, but also memorize the interpretation of the poem as explained by the teacher⁽³⁾.

One text, which covers school life and which is very familiar to children is “Our School” (No. 1). It describes how and what students do in school, teaches school manners, and assures that children will have mastered academic skills by the time they graduate school. A text that covers nature in the surrounding living environment is “Honeybee and Bumblebee” (No. 3).

Some poems are very rhythmic. “Chicken” (No. 6) is a song that children sing and act out physically at the same time. Myanmarese children often sing this song while at the same time performing a unique dance. (Multiple children dance together and those who can dance the longest win the game.) “Drum Melody” (No. 17) is a poem belonging to the genre of *danja*,⁽⁴⁾ which did not appear in the old textbooks.

The textbook also contains ethical material, such as “Moral Lessons” (No. 8), which is a song that has a message encouraging people to work without drinking too much. In “Moral Lessons” (No. 12) the importance of learning and acquiring knowledge is emphasized.

There also are poems that glorify national leaders, such as “General Aung San, the Martyr” (No. 10) and “Song of General Aung San” (No. 20).

Overall, there are many poems in the textbook, but we occasionally come across some poems that

seem not suitable for G4. For example, “Our School” (No. 1) might have been selected for reasons of vocabulary and rhythm, but it is very open to question if G4 students need to learn the actual content, which is better suited for G1 students in terms of content. Likewise, “Moral Lessons” (No. 8) is intended to caution people not to indulge in drinking and it seems too early for G4 students to learn this poem. So as described above, there are some materials that seem to have been selected without considering the age of the students.

2.3 Stories

There are five stories, most of which have moral contents. In “Good Will” (No. 5) and “The Case of Anchorite’s *Tama Leaf*” (No. 9) a prince meets an old man and an anchorite, respectively, from whom he learns a moral lesson. “They Only Saw One Son” (No. 19) is a story about how only a quiet son helps his parents. “The Stag at The Pool” (No. 14) is one of Aesop’s Fables about a young deer being killed because of his gorgeous antlers. The last one is “Dangerous Snake” (No. 18) a text related to life, which teaches the danger of snakes through the story.

As described above, many of the stories have moral contents and clear messages. The main characters being a king or an animal. Material from Aesop’s Fables still appears in the G4 textbook, but there is no material in which a child is the main character or in which a world of fantasy is depicted. On the other hand, there is one material that teaches about risk in everyday life.

2.4 Descriptive texts

The textbook has seven descriptive texts.

“Good Friends” (No. 2) has moral content, while “Preserved Fish” (No. 7), “Salt” (No. 13) and “The Bird That Helps People” (No. 15) are scientific materials. “Fire Festival” (No. 11) and “*Bagan*” (No. 16) are local and cultural materials. “A Leader of Myanmar Drama, U Phoe Sein” (No. 4) is a biography of a great person.

Most of these materials consist of a brief explanation of the facts. The main purpose of teaching these materials seems to be to convey the knowledge contained in the contents through students reading them.

3. Analysis of Exercise

How are these texts supposed to be taught? There are exercises that come with the reading materials, except for the poems. Let’s analyze these exercises below.

3.1 Exercises for stories

“Good Will” (No. 5) is a story of a prince meeting an old man, and being impressed by his planting mango trees for a future generation of children, not for himself. There are exercises after the text as below:

1. Write the correct spelling in the blank.
 - (a) The old man gave a _____ mango to the prince. (A or B)
 - (b) The prince gave _____ to the old man. (A or B)
2. Make a sentence using each word.
fresh, fence, at once, good will, fun
3. Answer the questions below.
 - (a) Who is going to eat the fruits on the old man's mango tree?
 - (b) What did the prince give to the old man to show respect.
 - (c) How did the prince change his mind after listening to the old man's words? And which particular word was it?

Exercise 1 (spelling) is a question that asks students to choose the correct one from the two candidates in brackets at the end of the question. The two options have the same pronunciation, but different spellings, and the question is to choose the correct spelling for the word to complete the short sentences. Students are not asked to provide all the letters of a word, as part of the word is already written. The students use this as a clue to guess the spelling of the word as a whole and choose the spelling that fits in the underlined part from the option given at the end of the sentence. To show an example to help you understand using English words, it goes as follows: When asking the spelling of "apple," "apple" is written as " ____ ple" in the sentence and the options at the end is (a or ap). The answer is obviously "ap." The right answer for (a) is the word "fresh," but actually, the first word of the group of words in Exercise 2 (Making short sentences) is also "fresh." As the correct spelling is given just under the question, the exercises seem not to be well prepared as a whole.

Exercise 2 (Making short sentence) is an exercise in which the student makes a sentence using a difficult word that appeared in the text.

Exercise 3 is to confirm if the contents of the text have been understood correctly. Each question is a closed question, whose answer can easily be found in the text. That is, the questions are asking something written clearly in the text and there is no question that asks for something not written in the text or for which the learners have to use their imagination to answer.

All the stories have exercises prepared in the order of 1, 2, and 3 as above.

3.2 Exercises for descriptive texts

"Salt" (No. 13) is a description of the way salt is manufactured and used in Myanmar. There are exercises after the text as below:

1. Fill the blank with the correct spelling.

(a) In Myanmar, they _____ ocean water to manufacture salt. (A or B)

(b) Wild animals _____ salt. (A or B)

2. Make a sentence using the words below.

traditional medicine doctor, say, laborer, sports, evaporation

3. Answer the questions below.

(a) How does salt support the human body?

(b) What type of people need more salt ?

(c) Write out the regions which produce salt.

Exercises 1 and 2 have the same pattern as the exercises for the stories. Likewise, Exercise 3 is only intended to confirm the contents of the text. All the descriptive texts have the same pattern of exercises. As in the case of the stories, there is no question that causes students to think about something not contained in the text after reading it.

3.3 Problems with the exercises

There is no exercise for the poems, while the stories and descriptive texts are accompanied with exercises. It was found in the analyses above that exercises are constructed using the same pattern for both the stories and descriptive texts. That is, it is not supposed that the stories and descriptive texts require different method of instruction.

Specifically speaking, students are intended to learn at the level of words and contents in reading classes. At the word level, the goal is to learn correct spellings and acquire the meaning to use it in a sentence accurately. In the content level, it is required to confirm the content written in the text. There is no exercise in which the students can put themselves in the content and develop their imagination freely.

Exercises are all in the form of questions. There is no exercise in the form of instruction that leads the students to engage in some type of language activity, such as making a brochure.

4. Characteristics of G4

Table 2 shows the differences in the number of materials in G1 to G4 textbooks.

The number of materials for “Speaking/Listening” is also zero for G4, which indicates that no attention has been paid in this area since G1. The number of materials for “Writing” become zero in G4, too. A material for writing, “Writing a letter,” appeared for the first time in G3, but has disappeared in G4. Also, there is no material for “Basics of language.”

[Table 2]

	Speaking/ Listening	Writing	Reading			Basics of language	
			Poems	Stories	Descriptive texts	Characteristics and rules of language	Characters
G1	0	0	20	0	0	0	21
G2	0	0	6	2	7	1	15
G3	0	1	10	4	10	0	0
G4	0	0	8	5	7	0	0

“Poems” consist in the main of “Reading” materials and there are eight items. “Poems” are one of the genres that are sequentially and frequently used since G1. There are five materials for “Stories,” a number that is almost the same as in G3. There are seven “Descriptive texts,” somewhat reduced from the 10 in G3.

Based on the information above, the proportion of categories in G4 materials does not seem to be greatly different from that of G3; however, it can be pointed out as a problem that the category of “Writing” is eliminated after it appeared in G3 for the first time.

5. Summary

In this paper, we analyzed the contents of a G4 Myanmarese textbook used in 2018. We found that the textbook is totally geared toward reading, as is the case with the G3 textbook. The contents of the materials are almost the same, too. In addition, it was found that there is no consistency in the method in which textbooks are prepared: For example, the writing material that appeared in G3 has been eliminated in G4. The exercises in the textbook were also analyzed in this current paper. As a result, it was found that there is no exercise for poems, and all the other materials have exercises in exactly the same format. Therefore, it can be assumed that they do not teach students in a different way depending on the material, but teach exactly in the same way regardless of the material, be it a literary sentence or a descriptive one.

As further study, it is necessary to subsequently analyze the G5 textbook, which is the last grade.

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- (1) ADB (Asian Development Bank) supports the reform of middle school and the first year of middle school (G6) is scheduled to have a new textbook in June 2019.
- (2) The framework of analysis was partially changed for G3 and following grades. “Traditional language culture and the characteristics of national language” was changed to “Basics of language” and the subcategory “Traditional language culture” was eliminated. See Osada (2018) for details.
- (3) Based on an interview with teachers at a teacher’s training school.
- (4) This is a unique type of song often sung on an occasions such as festivals. Its characteristics are as follows: it is sung to with Myanmarese music; there is an introductory part and an ending part following a set pattern; and the poem consists of two parts, the “calling part” and the “responding part.”