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著者	OSADA Yuki
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# The State of National Language Education at Introductory Stage in Myanmar: Analysis of G1 Textbooks

Yuki OSADA

## 1. Preface

In this paper, the current state of national language education at the introductory stage in Myanmar is discussed based on the analysis of textbooks used in schools.

Myanmar had been under military rule for a long time before it transitioned to civilian rule in 2011. The National League for Democracy (NLD), the opposition party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, came to power in April 2016 after the general election held in November 2015. Htin Kyaw is now the President, and Myo Thein Gyi is the Minister of Education<sup>(1)</sup>. Myanmar is attracting worldwide attention, and massive educational reforms are under way.

Starting from June 2017, with assistance from Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the primary education in Myanmar will receive new standards and new textbooks sequentially from grade 1 (Tanaka, 2015). A project that aims to thoroughly reform Myanmar's primary education, including textbooks, by studying the primary education in Japan has been ongoing since 2014<sup>(2)</sup>. Students who are in grade 2 or higher when the new curriculum is introduced will finish all elementary school grades using the old curriculum. Only new grade-1(G1) students will be taught using the new curricula and textbooks as their grades progress<sup>(3)</sup>.

Makino (1991, 2001) studied Myanmar's national language education and outlined the educational history from the dynastic period to the period of military rule led by Khin Nyunt, the Chief of Intelligence. JICA et al. (2013) conducted a survey on the recent state of education in general, whereas World Bank (2015) provided an overview of the most recent Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). In addition, Osada (in press) partially outlined how JICA will support Myanmar's language education starting from 2014.

No previous study has examined the current textbooks on language education in detail. It is important to analyze the current textbooks to understand how national language education will change because of the ongoing educational reforms. Therefore, in this study, I will discuss Myanmar's current national language education at the introductory stage by analyzing grade-1 textbooks.

## 2. The state of national language education in Myanmar

The educational system currently consists of five years of primary, four years of middle, and two years of secondary school, that is, eleven years of school in total<sup>(4)</sup>. The net enrollment rate is 84.6% for primary school, 50% for middle school, and 30% for high school. Primary education has become compulsory from 2011 and is offered free of charge (Tanaka, 2015, p. 243). The dropout rates are 11.8% for grade 1 and 23.2% for grade 5 (JICA et al., 2013, p. 48). Many students drop out of school.

The linguistic situation of Myanmar is described below. The official language is Burmese. Although Burmese people constitute approximately 70% of the population, there are 130 or more ethnic groups, including the Shan and the Kachin, in Myanmar (JICA et al., 2013, p. 94). Therefore, it is believed that more than 111 languages are spoken in Myanmar. Moreover, there are differences between the spoken and written Burmese language. The pronunciation of some words does not always correspond to their spellings even though Burmese characters are phonetic (Kato, 2004). Language education in schools in Myanmar means education in Burmese.

According to the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Education (2012), the literacy rate was 95.01% for adults (in 2011) and 97.83% for people aged 15–24 years (in 2009; p. 26)<sup>(6)</sup>. There is also a difference in adult literacy rates among various regions (JICA et al., 2013, p. 97)<sup>(6)</sup>. According to World Bank's (2015) survey of children in early elementary grades in the Yangon region, the percentage of children who cannot read even one word is 37% for grade 1, 10% for grade 2, and 9% for grade 3. The percentage of children who cannot answer even one question on the text is 77% for grade 1, 27% for grade 2, and 12% for grade 3. The percentage of children who can read fluently is only 2% for grade 1, 32% for grade 2, and finally over 55% for grade 3 (World Bank, 2015). This shows that there is a significant problem in language education, at least in the early elementary grades.

### **3. Analysis of G1 textbooks**

#### **(1) Purpose and method of analysis**

I analyzed the current G1 textbook of introductory Myanmar language. The purpose of this analysis was to gain a basic understanding of Myanmar language education. The current textbooks were prepared in 1999; they have not been revised since, only checked for typographical errors.

#### **(2) Results of the analysis**

Table 1 presents the Contents of the current G1 Myanmar language textbook and describes the learning in each unit.

The table is organized as follows. The first two columns list the materials used in the textbook as well as their corresponding numbers, as listed in the table of contents. The subsequent columns are titled Speaking/Hearing, Writing, Reading, and Items concerning traditional language culture and the characteristics of national language; these headings are based on the learning areas categorized in the Japanese ministry's curriculum guidelines for 2008. Reading is subdivided into Poems, Stories, and Descriptive texts, and Items concerning traditional language culture and the characteristics of national language is subdivided into Traditional language culture, Characteristics and rules of language and Characters<sup>(7)</sup>.

This table shows that the Myanmar language textbook teaches characters (alphabets) and how to read. In addition, I found significant problems in the writing style of the textbook. I will analyze these issues in the following sections.

#### **(i) Teaching characters**

Among the 46 materials in the textbook, 20 materials aim to teach characters; this shows that their main

purpose is for students to learn Myanmar characters. In materials 1–4, students learn the basics of Myanmar characters, including all of the consonant characters. The materials are organized so that they learn vowel characters in detail in lessons 1–14.

The structure of one of the lessons is as follows. In the beginning, students learn reading and writing at the character level; then, they learn words that include characters that they have studied. In the end, they learn short verses and phrases of 3–4 lines that include those characters along with corresponding illustrations. In summary, students learn the language in the following order: characters, words, sentences, and then texts.

Table 1. Contents of the current G1 Myanmar language textbook and the learning in each unit.

No.	Title of Unit	Speaking/ Hearing	Writing	Reading			Items concerning traditional language culture and the characteristics of national language		
				Poems	Stories	Descriptive texts	A. Traditional language culture	B. Characteristics and rules of language	C. Characters
1	Poem of alphabets								⊙
2	Alphabets, consonants and vowels								⊙
3	Name of alphabets								⊙
4	How to write alphabets								⊙
5	Exercise to read and write alphabets								⊙
6	Read aloud Clean your surroundings		○						
7	Read aloud Everyday life and a boy		○						
8	Read aloud Mingalaba (Greeting)		⊙						
9	Reading and writing practices								⊙
10	Let's read, write, read aloud, and sing		⊙						
11	Read aloud Let's go to bed early and get up early		⊙						
12	Lesson 1 Teaching vowels								⊙
13	Read aloud Phe Sa Loe (A consonant)		⊙						
14	Read aloud Our school		⊙						
15	Lesson 2 Teaching vowels								⊙
16	Lesson 3 Teaching vowels								⊙
17	Read aloud Small pigeon		⊙						
18	Read aloud (Let's join together)		○						
19	Lesson 4 Teaching vowels								⊙
20	Read aloud A gardener		⊙						
21	Read aloud Speak nicely		⊙						
22	Lesson 5 Teaching vowels								⊙
23	Read aloud Mingalaba (1) (Buddhist poem)		⊙						
24	Lesson 6 Teaching vowels								⊙
25	Lesson 7 Teaching vowels								⊙
26	Read aloud Jasmine flowers		⊙						
27	Read aloud The moon is getting full		⊙						
28	Read aloud Footrace		⊙						
29	Lesson 8 Teaching vowels								⊙
30	Lesson 9 Teaching symbols (vowels)								⊙
31	Read aloud Let's grow plants		⊙						
32	Read aloud Old farmer's shed		⊙						
33	Lesson 10 Teaching symbols (vowels)								⊙
34	Read aloud Hpo Thar Htoo (names of people)		⊙						
35	Read aloud Amusing jungle and forest		⊙						
36	Lesson 11 Teaching symbols (vowels)								⊙
37	Read aloud Mingalaba poem (2) (Buddhist poem)		⊙						
38	Lesson 12 Teaching symbols (pronunciation symbols for more than two vowels)								⊙
39	Lesson 13 Teaching symbols (pronunciation symbols for more than two vowels)								⊙
40	Lesson 14 Teaching symbols (pronunciation symbols for more than two vowels)								⊙
41	Read aloud Wishes		⊙						
42	Read aloud (Numbers from 1 to 10)		⊙						
43	Read aloud You can avoid sickness by being healthy and		⊙						
44	Exercises for review								⊙
45	Students' duties								
46	National anthem								
			Total		20				21

○ Slogan-like materials

There are two problems in this method of teaching characters.

First, these materials do not evoke the learners' interest or fulfill their needs, as they require learners to only memorize characters in a series. The examples provided to explain the characters are often not relevant to the learners' daily lives.

Second, students do not finish studying all the Myanmar vowels by the end of grade 1. Even though the characters are phonetic, they do not finish learning all of them until the end of grade 2.

#### (ii) Teaching how to read

Twenty-three out of the 46 materials aim to teach reading. Most of these 23 materials are poems, although materials 6, 7, and 18 appear as slogans. The contents of these slogans, such as material 6 "Clean your surroundings," intend to develop students' lifestyle habits. In the first half of the textbook, most poems also have the similar intention of improving students' lifestyles, as seen in materials 8 and 11. Materials 23 and 37 include poems on lifestyle habits based on Buddhism. The latter half of the textbook has more materials that may attract learners' interest such as material 35 "Amusing Jungle and Forest."

There are two problems in this method of teaching reading.

First, using this method, learners cannot acquire the competency to read sentences in various categories such as literary or explanatory texts. Poems are the only type of materials used in grade 1. Additionally, the length of the works is very short. Students may acquire very limited reading competency with these materials. The reason such poems are used may be that students do not finish learning all the characters in grade 1. There is an underlying educational philosophy that children must learn language in the following order: characters, words, sentences, and then texts. The idea of learning characters using practical and expressive texts has not been incorporated into the materials.

Second, the poems are often about virtues and developing a lifestyle habit. The poems in the first half of the textbook are generally about discipline and rules; therefore, it is difficult to use them to invoke interest and creativity in learners. This is a significant problem for a textbook of language education at the introductory stage — a stage at which learners should experience, read, and write the language a lot.

#### (iii) Problem of literary style

The literary style is problematic for the entire textbook, including regarding teaching characters and how to read (as described above). Myanmar has both colloquial and literacy styles of writing; however, the textbooks are written using only the literacy style. Grade 1 learners, who are at the introductory stage of language education, have to start learning with the literary style. At the introductory stage, it is better to begin teaching characters based on the learners' pre-existing knowledge, that is, based on something they know or speak about. This is hard to accomplish using textbooks written in the literary style.

## 4. Conclusions

In this paper, I analyzed G1 textbooks to examine a part of the current state of national language education in Myanmar. As a result, I pointed out the problems in the methods of teaching characters, reading instruction, and writing style. I would like to continue examining grade-2 textbooks and higher.

\* I wish to show my appreciation to the people from the Project for Curriculum Reform at Primary Level of Basic Education in Myanmar by JICA and the interpreter Soe Soe Myint, for their cooperation in writing this paper.

- (1) Although Aung San Suu Kyi was planning to become the Minister of Education, Myo Thein Gyi become the minister.
- (2) The reform of kindergarten education is handled by UNISEF, whereas the reform of secondary education is handled by the Asian Development Bank.
- (3) The old grade 1 will be reformed into the new kindergarten, and new grade-1 students will start school at the age of old grade 2.
- (4) Tanaka (2015) discussed reform trends, such as extension of primary education, in detail.
- (5) The change in literacy rate from 1886 to 2011 is also indicated (pp. 15–16). It was 85% in and before 1886 and declined to 35% in the colonial period; it has risen every year since 1954.
- (6) The data indicate that the adult literacy rate is 95.8%.
- (7) The subcategories of Reading were developed by Osada (in press). The subcategories of Items concerning traditional language culture and the characteristics of Myanmar language are based on the ministry's curriculum guidelines.

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