

Analysis of the Contents of Grade 2 National Language Textbook of Myanmar

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1 Preface

In this paper, the contents of a national language textbook for grade 2 students in Myanmar are discussed.

Currently, educational reforms are underway in Myanmar, with international support from Japan; the national textbooks, guidebooks, and teacher training courses are being reformed.⁽¹⁾ As an accomplishment of the Project for Curriculum Reform at Primary Level of Basic Education (CREATE) implemented by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), textbooks were offered with assistance from Japan to grade 1 (G1) students who entered school during the 2017–2018 school year.⁽²⁾

The new education system aims to introduce the child-centered approach, and the national language textbook has been prepared accordingly (Tanaka, 2015; Osada, 2016).⁽³⁾ However, it is in 2018 that the new grade 2 (G2) textbooks will be completed and distributed, as new textbooks are prepared in step with the progress to the next grade. Therefore, the current G2 students are using the old textbook.

To grasp the picture of future educational reforms in Myanmar, it is necessary to record the contents of old textbooks accurately and compare them with the new textbooks. Research on G1 textbooks has already been conducted for this purpose (Osada, 2016). Therefore, in this study, the target of research is a G2 textbook. By analyzing the old G1 textbooks, I aim to find out how educational contents of Burmese are systematized.

2 Results of the analysis of a G2 textbook

Table 1 shows the results of the analysis of an existing Myanmar language (Burmese) textbook. The framework of analysis shown in the table is the same as that for a G1 textbook (Osada, 2016). From the left to right, “No.” is indicated in the table, then “Title of Unit.” Materials are categorized into the following: “Speaking/Hearing,” “Writing,” “Reading,” and “Items concerning traditional language culture and the characteristics of national language.”⁽⁴⁾ Reading is divided into three subcategories: “Poems,” “Stories,” and “Descriptive texts” (Information texts). Items concerning traditional language culture and the characteristics of national language include the subcategories of “Traditional language culture,” “Characteristics and rules of language (grammar),” and “Characters” (Burmese alphabet).⁽⁵⁾

Table 1: The results of the analysis of an existing Myanmar language textbook

No.	Title of Unit	Speaking/ Hearing	Writing	Reading			Items concerning traditional language culture and the characteristics of national language		
				Poems	Stories	Descriptive texts	Traditional language culture	Characteristics and rules of language	Characters
1	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (1)								◎
2	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (2)								◎
3	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (3)								◎
4	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (4)								◎
5	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (5)								◎
6	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (6)								◎
7	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (7)								◎
8	Read aloud "Moon God" (poem)			◎					
9	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (8)								◎
10	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (9)								◎
11	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (10)								◎
12	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (11)								◎
13	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (12)								◎
14	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (13)								◎
15	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (14)								◎
16	Accent symbol to combine with consonant (15)								◎
17	"Help Your Parents" (poem)			◎					
18	Reading material: "About Me"					◎		◎	
19	"Four Directions"					◎			
20	"Festivals of 12 months" (picture)					◎			
21	"Drinking Milk"					◎			
22	"Nation as a Family" (picture)					◎			
23	Read like a poem: "Child (Son, Daughter)'s Responsibility"					◎			
24	Read like a poem: "My Responsibility"			◎					
25	Reading material: "The Ant and the Grasshopper"				◎				
26	"Flower Present" (poem)			◎					
27	Reading material: "The Father and Three Sons"				◎				
28	"Jae" (poem)			◎					
29	"Six Reasons to Goof Off" (picture)								◎
30	"Our School"					◎			
31	Reading: "The Son of a Rich Man Who Did Not Study" (poem)			◎	○				
	Total	0	0	6	2	7	0	1	15

* ◎ indicates main purposes; ○ indicates secondary purposes. Only ◎ are counted.

(1) Disciplines covered in the materials

There are 15 materials pertaining to Characters in the G2 textbook; students receive the most instruction on characters. The number of materials on Reading is 15. The breakdown is six poems, two stories, and seven descriptive texts. There is one grammatical item entitled "Characteristics and rules of language." For Speaking/Hearing and Writing, there are zero materials.

As mentioned above, more than half of the materials are for teaching characters. G1 students start learning each character in Burmese, one by one, until they learn all of them by mid-year G2. At that point, they will have completed the entire task of reading and writing Burmese. The basic structure of the unit for teaching characters has the same pattern as for G1s: "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" (Osada, 2016).

Basically, from Unit 1 to Unit 16, the materials require students to memorize characters thoroughly: Unit 8, a poem entitled "Moon God," is inserted between the materials for teaching characters, possibly to

ensure that students are not bored with the focus on characters. After the poem in Unit 17, “Help Your Parents,” a succession of descriptive texts from Unit 18 to Unit 23 follows; poems and stories appear alternately beginning in Unit 24. What is characteristic is that as many as seven descriptive texts are used in a series after the instruction on characters. The first material for reading prose is a descriptive text, which is followed by stories.

As for teaching grammar, there is a training section for reading paragraphs in the G2 textbook. This matter will be described in detail later.

(2) Genre of reading

The materials for teaching reading in the G2 textbook consist of poems and stories.

Among these poems, “Moon God” (Unit 8) and “Flower Present” (Unit 26) are cheerful and picturesque. On the other hand, nearly half of the poems, including “Help Your Parents” (Unit 17), “Child’s Responsibility” (Unit 23), and “The Son of a Rich Man Who Did Not Study” (Unit 31), aim to make students quote from memory in a rhythmic pace.

There are some descriptive texts including: “About Me” (Unit 18) in which sentence patterns such as “My name is...” appear. “Four Directions” (Unit 19) describes north, south, east, and west for children; “Festivals of 12 Months” (Unit 20) explains the names of the months; “Drinking Milk” (Unit 21) teaches the importance of drinking milk; and “Our School” (Unit 20) describes the place of and life in school. Clearly, the units of descriptive texts show basic sentence patterns and teach basic vocabularies by explaining directions and name of the months. Health enhancement (drinking milk) and other aims are accomplished with the materials.

Let’s pick an interesting example of descriptive texts. The prose of “About Me” (Unit 18) is as follows: “My name is Maung Hla. / My father’s name is U Ba and my mother’s name is Daw Aye. / We live in Htan Thone Pin village. / My parents work the earth. / I have an older brother and an older sister. / We study at an elementary school in the village. / I am now in the second grade.” (The virgule [/] indicates a line break.) One sentence is written per line. Immediately following this prose, the same text is written in the form of a paragraph without any line breaks. That is, the same texts are shown twice in two different patterns: one with line breaks, and the other without any line break. At the end, there are exercise questions such as “What is your name?” and “What is your father’s name?” This material aims not only to train students to answer questions about themselves after reading texts, but also to train them to read a “cluster” of sentences (a paragraph consisting of a series of individual sentences). Therefore, the material is not only for teaching reading but also for teaching grammar (discourse grammar).

There are two stories: “The Ant and the Grasshopper” (Unit 25) and “The Father and Three Sons” (Unit 27). “The Ant and the Grasshopper” is a well-known Aesop’s fable, as is “The Father and His Three Sons,” a story about three sons who learned the importance of cooperation by trying to snap a bundle of

three sticks of firewood, just to fail. This story is well-known in Japan as “Three Arrows.” All stories are exempla from *Aesop’s Fables*.

3 Analysis of the systematization between G1 and G2

Table 2 shows the differences in the number of materials between G1 and G2 textbooks. From this table, we can tell how the textbooks of Burmese for G1 and G2 are systemized.

There are no materials on “Speaking/Hearing” and “Writing” in G1 and G2 textbooks, which means that no attention is directed to these domains in national language textbooks.

For “Reading,” short descriptive texts and stories appear in the G2 textbook. Especially, there are as many as seven descriptive texts that teach vocabularies regarding daily life and knowledge. Two stories are both based on *Aesop’s Fables*. On the other hand, the number of poems is only 14 to make space for the descriptive texts. As for teaching how to read, we can tell that the selection of materials is gradually shifting from poems to descriptive texts and stories in the G2 textbook.

The number of materials on characters is reduced by six compared to the G1 textbook, and all instructions on characters end midway through the G2 textbook. Burmese characters consist of vowels, consonants, and symbols.⁽⁶⁾ In G1, students learn the basic alphabet consisting of 33 consonants and vowels. Then, they learn simple combinations of alphabets and symbols. In G2, they learn accent symbols—somewhat complicated symbols that can be combined with consonants.⁽⁷⁾ After learning these, students should be able to read and write Burmese without problems. However, according to a survey conducted by the World Bank in 2014, even in the largest city—Yangon—, 40% of G1 children and 10% of G2 children could not read any characters, and as much as 80% of G1 students and 30% of G2 students could not correctly answer any questions about a certain text (World Bank, 2015). The method for teaching characters based on memorization does not seem to be effective.

Grammatical points appear in the G2 textbook: here, materials for reading texts are divided into paragraphs.

Based on the findings mentioned above, it can be said that descriptive texts and stories begin appearing gradually in the G2 textbook, and the instruction on characters ends. Poems are still

Table 2: The differences in the number of materials between G1 and G2 textbooks

	Speaking/ Hearing	Writing	Reading			Items concerning traditional language culture and the characteristics of national language		
			Poems	Stories	Descriptive texts	Traditional language culture	Characteristics and rules of language	Characters
G1	0	0	20	0	0	0	0	21
G2	0	0	6	2	7	0	1	15
Increase or decrease	0	0	-14	+2	+7	0	+1	-6

emphasized but are greatly reduced in the G2 textbook. Apparently, the focus is moving from verse to prose. Only one grammatical point is included, so its importance is clear.

4 Summary and agenda

This paper records and analyzes the contents of the G2 national language textbook for primary school education in Myanmar. Thus, it was found that the focus is teaching characters in G1 and G2. From G1 to mid-year of G2, instructions on all characters (Burmese alphabet) are given. All materials for reading are poems in G1. Descriptive texts and stories do not appear until G2. Materials tend to teach vocabularies, knowledge useful for daily life, and moral lessons (i.e., not stories merely for entertainment). There is no material on speaking, hearing, or writing in G1 and G2 textbooks.

I will continue to conduct the survey for G3 and successive grade levels.

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Footnotes

- (1) The plan to transform the Teacher Training Course from the current two-year course to a four-year course is in progress.
- (2) The new academic year begins in June in Myanmar.
- (3) Burmese is an official language and a language of the Bamar, who make up 70% of the population. In Myanmar, 130 ethnic groups including the Shan and the Kachin are living side-by-side. Myanmar is a multilingual country in which more than 110 languages are estimated to be spoken. For about 30% of the population, the mother tongue is not Burmese. This project is presented on JICA's home page (<https://www.jica.go.jp/myanmar/english/office/topics/press170526.html>: Accessed on August 1, 2017).
- (4) This table uses the domain framework used in the Elementary School Teaching Guideline for the Japanese Course of Study (revised in 2008). Currently, there is a revised Elementary School Teaching Guideline for the Japanese Course of Study (2017), which uses a different framework and array. However, I formatted the table to maintain continuity with the analysis of Osada (2016).
- (5) The subdivisions of "Items concerning traditional language culture and the characteristics of national language" were created following the Elementary School Teaching Guideline for the Japanese Course of Study (revised in 2008), while those for "Reading" were created by checking Myanmar language teaching materials.
- (6) There are patterns as follows: consonants only or a combination of consonants and symbols, vowels only or a combination of vowels and symbols.

- (7) I made a supplementary note or correction to Table 1 (Osada, 2016) as follows: for Lesson 1–11 (No. 12 and after), I revised to “Combination of vowels, consonants, and symbols.” For Lessons 12–14 (No. 38 and after), I revised to “Combination of consonants.”

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