

# The Contents of a Grade 5 National Language Textbook of Myanmar: Contents Analysis of 2020 Textbook

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## 1. Preface

In this paper, the contents of a Myanmarese textbook used in 2020 for Grade 5 (G5) elementary students in Myanmar are analyzed. G5 is the final grade of elementary school in Myanmar.

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 (known as the CREATE project) (Tanaka, 2015; Osada, 2016a, 2020). New textbooks for G1 to G4 have already been prepared based on this new curriculum.<sup>(1)</sup> To complete the project, from school year 2021, a new textbook for G5, the final grade of elementary school, will be used.

Regarding national language education in Myanmar, the old G1 to G4 Myanmarese textbooks have been analyzed to record the aspects of the old curriculum (Osada, 2016b, 2017, 2018, 2019). However, there are few studies on the G5 Myanmarese textbook.<sup>(2)</sup>

In this paper, the contents of a Myanmarese textbook for G5 students in the old curriculum are analyzed. This will clarify the contents of the former Myanmarese language education for all grades of elementary school.

## 2. Analysis of the contents of G5 textbook materials

### 2.1 Overview

Table 1 shows the results of the content analysis of a G5 textbook used in 2020. The analytical framework is basically the same as that for G1 to G4 (Osada, 2016b, 2017, 2018, 2019).<sup>(3)</sup> 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),” which contains 18 materials. One material is for “Characteristics and rules of language,” a subcategory of “Basics of language.” However, there are no materials in the categories “Speaking/Listening” or “Writing.” This textbook is designed solely for reading texts. First, let’s look at the contents of “Reading.” The breakdown is six poems, six stories, and six descriptive texts.

Table 1: The results of the analysis of an existing G5 Myanmar language textbook.

No.	Unit title	Speaking/ Listening	Writing	Reading			Basics of language	
				Poems	Stories	Descriptive texts	Characteristics and rules of language	Characters
1	Three Friends				○			
2	Irrawaddy River			○				
3	Shwedagon Pagoda					○		
4	A Fox Wearing Sheep Skin				○			
5	Sein Baydar (musician)					○		
6	Learning (Scholarship)		○					
7	School Library					○		
8	Riverside		○					
9	Hta-Ma-Ne Festival					○		
10	Mr. Owl				○			
11	Myanmar Man		○					
12	General Aung San					○		
13	Hero Leader				○			
14	Thoughtless Rabbit				○			
15	Jasmine		○					
16	Discipline Song		○					
17	Ten Kinds of Fine Art (Crafts)					○		
18	Thuwannatharma: The 3rd Story of 10 Greatest Jataka Tales				○			
19	Words Spelled Differently from their Pronunciations						○	
		0	0	6	6	6	1	0

## 2.2 Poems

Like the textbooks of previous grades, all the poems are short, with a length of less than one page. In a G5 class, the students are made to recite the poems and memorize the interpretation of the poem as explained by the teacher.<sup>(4)</sup>

Three of the poems are about nature and landscapes. “Irrawaddy River” (Unit 2) and “Riverside” (Unit 8) are about the scenery of rivers in Myanmar. “Jasmine” (Unit 15) tells not only of the beauty of jasmine flowers but also about the feelings of a girl who wants her elder brother to pick the flowers and put them on her head.

There are two poems about lessons.”Learning (Scholarship)” (Unit 6) tells of the importance of scholarship, as shown below. However, it seems that there are some problems from the viewpoint of modern values such as disdaining sailors as “hired people.”

Learning (Scholarship)

Become a learned person

Please learn, my sons

Parents and teachers tell their children and students repeatedly

Do not refuse, please listen

Follow the precept

Sailors lack of knowledge  
So they are just hired people  
If you are a learned person  
You will be praised all over the world  
Your good news will be praised all over the world  
You will be a better person than the moon in the sky

The other material is “Discipline Song” (Unit 16). It tells of the ten teachings to follow (do not overeat; do not believe everything you’re told; believe in your friends; do not lie; do not forget to worry about the safety of your friends and colleagues; do the right things; remember what you learned from a great teacher; think and act carefully; prosper by hating bad deeds and doing good deeds, and; love the right things and be contented with honorable poverty).

In addition, there is one song that praises the warrior. It is “Myanmarese Man” (Unit 11). The song tells about the growth of a young man and ends with the line, “You will go to the battlefield and fight boldly.”

### 2.3 Stories

There are six stories, five of which are fables that feature animals as main characters and give strong lessons. Specifically, the theme of “Three Friends” (Unit 1) is helping each other, “A Fox Wearing Sheep Skin” (Unit 4) is an admonishment to slickness, “Mr. Owl” (Unit 10) is about helping each other, “Hero Leader” (Unit 13) is about self-sacrifice, and “Thoughtless Rabbit” (Unit 14) tells the importance of careful consideration.

The remaining story is “Thuwannatharma: The 3rd Story of 10 Greatest Jataka Tales”(Unit 18), in which humans are the main characters. This teaching material is a story from the Buddhist narrative, Jataka.<sup>65</sup> It is a story of Buddha’s previous existence, which depicts filial piety for his parents.

Looking at the originals of these teaching materials, the five comprising “Three Friends” (Unit 1), “Mr. Owl” (Unit 10), “Hero Leader” (Unit 13), “Thoughtless Rabbit” (Unit 14), and “Thuwannatharma” (Unit 18) are taken from the Jataka. However, only “Thuwannatharma” (Unit 18) clearly states that the source is Jataka. In Aesop’s Fables, there is almost the same story as “A Fox Wearing Sheep Skin”(Unit 4)

As described above, even in the final grade G5, many of the stories have moral contents and clear messages. Most of the characters are animals. Only one story features a human as the main character, and that person is not a child. No teaching material allows children to freely use their imagination in the fantasy world. Moreover, the texts are only two pages long at the longest, and they are not intended to let students practice reading long papers.

## 2.4 Descriptive texts

The textbook also has six descriptive texts. These are commentaries and explanations, and can be divided into those that target things and those that target people.

Those that explain things are: “Shwedagon Pagoda” (Unit 3), “School Library” (Unit 7), “Hta-Ma-Ne Festival” (Unit 9), and “Ten Kinds of Fine Art (Crafts)” (Unit 17). The subject matters are important cultures and customs of Myanmar, such as Shwedagon Pagoda, which is a representative temple of Myanmar, the widely held Tamane Festival, and 10 kinds of famous art crafts of Myanmar.

On the other hand, “School Library” (Unit 7) describes how to use the school library, the etiquette there, and the importance of reading. This material deals with reading, an important subject for language education. Unfortunately, it seems that many school libraries do not have enough books for their students in some areas and schools, and it is unclear how this teaching material will be used. However, the significance of donating your own books to the library is also mentioned, perhaps because of such circumstances.

The material “Sein Baydar (musician)” (Unit 5) profiles a person. In the G4 textbook, the biography of a famous theater director, UPhoe Sein, is presented (Osada, 2019). The G5 textbook also contains a biography of a musician named Sein Baydar, with the intention of continuing to publicize great achievements by cultural figures. In addition, it presents “General Aung San” (Unit 12), a material about General Aung San, the father of Myanmar’s independence. The introductory part of this teaching material is in an explanation style, but after that it is characterized by being written along the lines of a principal talking to children. In the G4 textbook, the materials about General Aung San were in the form of a poem (“General Aung San, the Martyr” (Unit 10)) and a song (“Song of General Aung San” (Unit 20)) (Osada, 2019). In the G5 textbook, the material about him is a descriptive text in the form of a biography.

Many of the above G5 descriptive materials are concise explanations of facts. It seems that the main purpose is to convey the contents of the texts as knowledge rather than to teach materials to improve abstract thinking skills and reading comprehension.

## 2.5 Characteristics and rules of words

In the G5 textbook, the teaching material “Words Spelled Differently from their Pronunciations” (Unit 19) in the category of “Characteristics and rules of words” appears at the end. In Myanmarese, spelling basically corresponds to pronunciation, but there are some exceptions. This material explains these exceptions by pattern.

## 3. Analysis of Exercise

How are these texts supposed to be taught? As with G1 to G4, the stories and descriptive texts among the reading materials are accompanied by exactly the same type of exercise. It can be said that, also in G5,

it is not supposed to change teaching methods between stories and descriptive texts. There is no exercise for poetry.

Here, let's take a look at the exercises for a descriptive text, "School Library" (Unit 7).

1. Write the correct spelling in the blank.

(a) Do not dr \_\_\_\_\_ pictures on the walls of school . (A or B)

(b) Please cover the book \_\_\_\_\_. (A or B)

2. Make a sentence using each word.

Knowledge, advice, intelligence and good deeds, tidying up, satisfaction and happiness

3. Answer the questions below.

(a) What kind of books are there in the school library? Make a list.

(b) How do they display books in the library?

(c) Write about your school library.

(d) Write about the benefits of using a school library.

Exercise 1 (spelling) is a question that asks students to choose the correct one from the two options 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 the 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." As with the G4 textbook, the exercises of the G5 textbook also presents a sentence that is slightly different from the text in the guide. For example, the exercise 1 (a) is written as "Do not dr \_\_\_\_\_ pictures on the walls of school," but the corresponding text in the material is "Do not write down anything in a book."

Exercise 2 (Making short sentences) is an exercise in which the student makes a sentence using a difficult word that appeared in the text. This practice is exactly the same as that in the G4 textbook.

Exercise 3 is to confirm if the contents of the text have been understood correctly. Clear answers can be found in the text for many of the questions, while there are some questions for which a direct answer cannot be found in the text. For example, the exercise (c) "Write about your school library" asks the student to write something about their school library. The student has to answer the questions not only by copying the words and phrases from the text, but also by writing a certain number of sentences of their own.

#### 4. Characteristics of G5

Table 2 shows the difference in the number of materials in G1 to G4 textbooks with those in the G5 textbook to ascertain the characteristics of the G5 textbook.

Table 2: The differences in the number of materials between G1– G5 textbooks.

	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
G5	0	0	6	6	6	1	0

The number of materials for “Speaking/Listening” is zero for G5, just like in the G1 to G4 textbooks, which indicates that no attention has been paid to this area. The number of materials for “Writing” is also zero in G5, which is almost the same as in G1 to G4. However, as mentioned above, the task of writing a certain number of sentences is given in the exercise in G5, and in that sense, it can be said that writing is taken up in the textbook. Only one material for “Basics of language” is in the G5 textbook, which means that this point is not emphasized.

In G5, “Reading” materials consist of six “Poems,” six “Stories,” and six “Descriptive texts.” Compared to the previous years, there are fewer “Poems” and “Descriptive texts,” but more “Stories.” There are the same number of “Poems,” “Stories,” and “Descriptive texts” in the G5 textbook. We cannot tell if it was intended or not, but in the final grade, the textbook contains well-balanced teaching materials for each genre of reading.

As observed above, we can say that the textbook for G5, the final grade, is also a textbook for reading.

#### 5. Summary

In this paper, we analyzed the contents of a Myanmar textbook for G5, the final grade, in the old curriculum. We found that the G5 textbook is totally geared toward reading, while the content of the selected genre is well balanced. Regarding the exercises for guiding learning, just like the previous years, they have exactly the same pattern for both stories and descriptive texts, and it is not assumed that the teaching method would change depending on the genre.

The old curriculum will be completely eliminated from 2021 in elementary schools in Myanmar, and new textbooks based on the new curriculum will be used in all grades. It is necessary to clarify in what points the new textbooks have improved compared to the old ones.

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- (1) Normally, the new school year starts in June every year, but in 2020, the school year has not started due to the spread of COVID-19. Some high schools (G10 and G11) started their new school year in late July, but were closed in late August due to the spread of COVID-19. As of September 2020, no schools have been reopened.
- (2) For an overview of the textbook system after the educational reform, see Osada (2020).
- (3) We partially changed the framework for G3 and up. “Matters concerning traditional language culture and characteristics of national language” was changed to “Basics of Language,” and its subdivision “Traditional language culture” was eliminated. See Osada (2018) for details.
- (4) They say that, in G4 and G5, they are doing not only reading aloud and recitation, but also such activities in class (Osada, 2019).
- (5) Jataka tales were “originally apologues that had been passed down among the people in the Ganges watershed area of Central India from long ago, but when Buddhism became popular, it was adopted and linked to the previous births of Buddha. It preaches that Buddha did these good deeds in the past as a good king, good vassal, merchant, or as a monkey, deer, elephant, pigeon, quail, etc. (Nakamura, 1984, p. ii). Jataka is very famous not only in India but also in South Asia and Southeast Asia. It has been pointed out that a considerable number of Aesop’s Fables originated from Jataka tales or their common origin.