

Chapter 1

Introduction

This Study investigates the situation of minority children's education with respect to language of instruction and its impact on the achievement of the learners, mainly in the context of pre-primary and primary education in Myanmar. The primary aim in doing this study is to discover the effects of using the national language and mother tongue in teaching and learning. Myanmar is the one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world with 113 language groups recognized by the government. The study mainly focuses on the Sgaw Karen language group living in Ayeyarwady Division. The outline of this chapter begins with background information of the people, languages, and the national education system of Myanmar. Section 1.2 describes the focus language group, the background problem this study seeks to address and the research questions. Section 1.3 provides a summary of the benefits of the study and section 1.4 presents the scope and limitations of the study. Section 1.5 provides an overview of the study with a brief description of the remaining chapters.

1.1 Background

Myanmar, the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia with a land area of 678,500 square kilometers, lies between China and India. It is also bordered by Laos and Thailand to the east and by Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal to the southwest. Myanmar consists of seven states and seven divisions as is shown in the map, in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Map of Union of Myanmar and Neighboring Countries
(Source: United Nations 2008)

1.1.1 People and language

Myanmar has a population of 55 million consisting of different ethnic groups. The government recognizes 113 ethnic groups, known as Nationalities, although more research is needed to clarify language development needs as the officially recognized groups often include several mutually unintelligible language varieties. Bamar is the majority group and the other main ethnicities are Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan. They have their own states, their own languages and many of them have their own writing system. The languages of the main ethnic groups mentioned above often function as a language of wider communication (LWC) which is commonly used in their communities. The literacy rate of Myanmar, according to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2005) stands at 89.7% (males: 93.7%, females: 86.2%). Burmese (Myanmar) is the official language of Union of Myanmar (Burma). Burmese belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. About 34.5 million people (63% of the total population) speak it as their first language and almost all the educated people in Myanmar speak it as second language if their mother tongue is another ethnic language.

1.1.2 National education system

The structure of basic education is 5-4-2 with five years of primary school education, four years of middle school education and two years of high school education. There are eleven years of education. The children go to kindergarten for three years at the age of 3-6. Kindergarten (KG) is regarded as part of the primary education cycle and called Grade 1. The official language of Education from primary level to secondary level is Myanmar (Burmese). Every school uses the curriculum developed by the Education Ministry. There are four subjects to study, namely Burmese, English, Mathematics, and Basic Science. English is taught as a subject from Grade 1. From tertiary level the science subjects are taught in English. The administrative hierarchy comprises: seven states and seven divisions, a total of 14; each state or division is divided into districts; townships; villages and wards. At the Basic Education level, there is at least, one high school in every township and a primary school for every two villages in general.

Education in Myanmar is mainly under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Basic education in Myanmar is almost totally financed by the Ministry of Education. However, there are affiliated schools in the rural areas where schools are funded by the local community. Schooling is compulsory until the end of primary school, probably about 9 years old. The typical class size is 30 learners with one

teacher in a class. The teachers receive the pre-service and in-service training monthly or annually. Being a teacher is a good work and highly respected by the society but they do not earn a good salary.

1.2 Scope and Focus of the Study

This section provides a short introduction to the focus language group, Sgaw Karen particularly those who live in Pathein Township, Ayeyarwady Division. It describes the background problem this study seeks to address and the research questions.

1.2.1 Focus language group

This study was conducted in schools where the learners are all from the minority ethnic group whose mother tongue is Sgaw. Sgaw is one of the main Karen language groups. Karenic languages are one branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family. While other Tibeto-Burman languages have a basic SOV structure, Karenic languages have an SVO structure. Although Burmese and Karen have a few cognate words they are very different languages in sound system, vocabulary, and grammar structure and are not at all mutually intelligible.

There is a Karen state in Myanmar where most Sgaw Karen speakers live, but there are also many in other parts of the country, particularly in the Ayeyarwady delta. Although Sgaw is a minority language group in Myanmar, it is the majority language group of the Pathein Township in Ayeyarwady division of south central Myanmar. Ayeyarwady division covers, 18,089 square Kilometers of delta area, west of Yangon, as shown in Figure 2. It has over four million acres of cultivated fields. The chief crops are rice and jute. Pathein, a seaport situated on the bank of Pathein River, is the capital of Ayeyarwady Division and the fifth largest city in Myanmar. It is surrounded by a major rice-growing area that produces the best rice in Myanmar. The population of Pathein Township is 5,670,760 including 1,815,320 Pwo Karen, 1,807,400 Sgaw Karen 1,680,000 Myanmar, 165,300 of Chinese, 111,410 of Indians, 51,100 of Rakhine, 39,830 of Chin, 300 of Kachin, and 100 of Kayah (Pathein Diocese, the Catholic Church of Myanmar, and South East Asia 2008). More detailed information about the research areas will be described in chapter four.

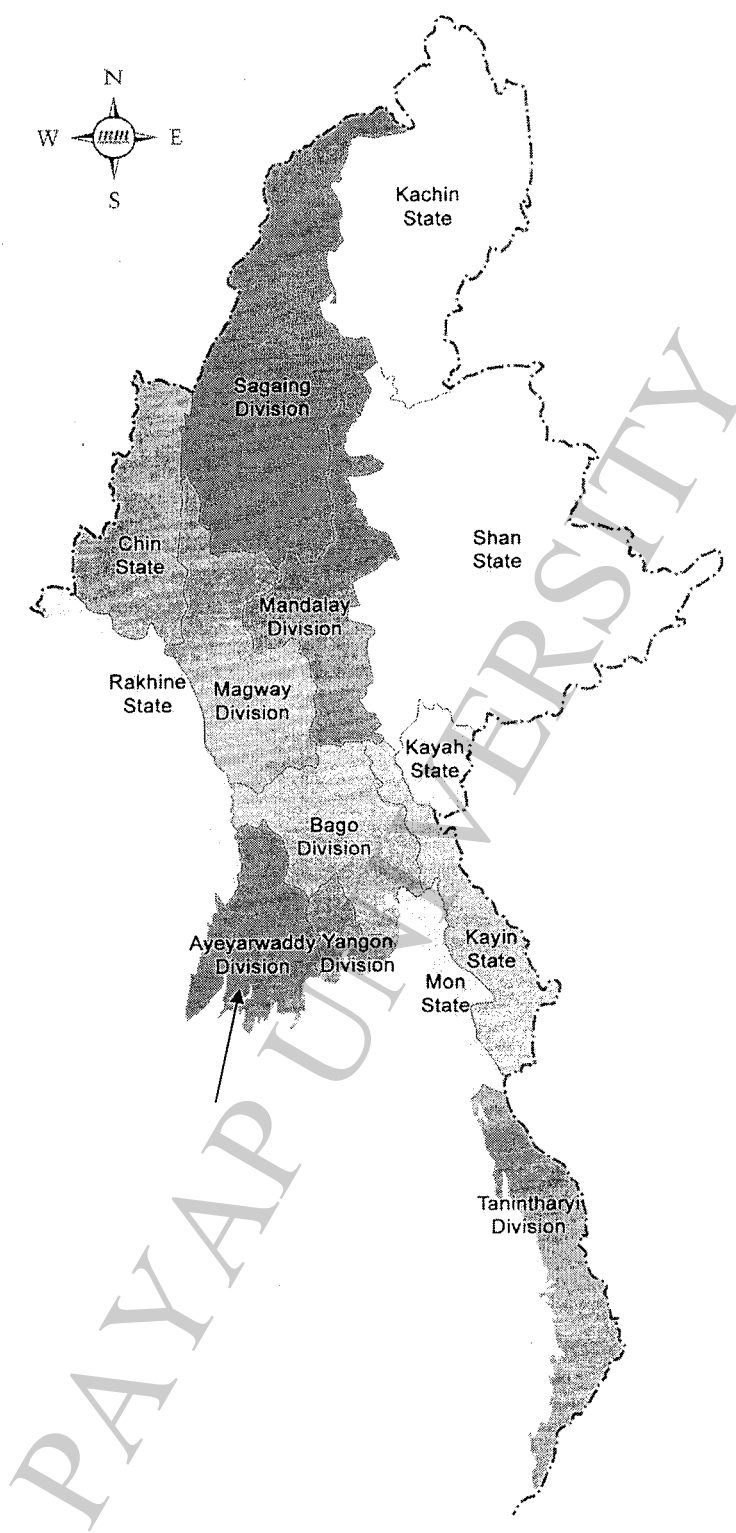


Figure 2 Myanmar Map showing internal administrative boundaries
(Source: Myanmar's Net)

1.2.2 Background problem this study seeks to address

When children from a minority language group in Myanmar begin school, they often have to learn the subjects of the curriculum in the national language, a language that they never used in their home. This has created a “language barrier” for many ethnic minority children who have a limited understanding and proficiency in Burmese or in some cases do not understand the language at all. The language barrier is the biggest problem at school especially for the children who live in an area where the ethnic language is used in almost all language domains. The research for this study was conducted in such an area. It is very difficult for both the teachers and the learners who do not speak the national language as their mother tongue to achieve their educational goals. There are no published statistics or anecdotes available that can show the evidence of the previous statement since this study is the first research of this kind in Myanmar. However as a member of the Sgaw community, the author has firsthand experience of the education system described in this study.

The teaching method is mostly rote learning, not student-centered and there is not much student participation. Learners are afraid of asking questions, since the children cannot speak Burmese well, so that they could not have a chance to practice their critical thinking or learn to reason. Finally, benefits such as understanding meanings, general application of skills, language competence, knowledge empowerment, numeracy, literacy, improved communication skills, and creativity cannot be developed in learners who do not speak the language used at school.

Many teachers and principals believe that early use of Burmese can facilitate the children to go through the higher levels easily. The teachers think that using national language, L2 as soon as the children begin their education is the best way to help them in their learning process. Sgaw-speaking teachers are asked to use more or only Burmese in the classes when they teach. Nevertheless the Sgaw-speaking teachers are more likely to use Sgaw because the learners do not understand the lessons if they only use Burmese to explain. Teachers are told to use Burmese, but their experience tells them using Sgaw is more effective. They are confused about what language they should use in the classroom to best serve their learners.

1.2.3 Research questions and hypotheses

In order to investigate the above-mentioned issues, the following research questions were formulated for this study:

- (1) How do test scores reflect the effect of the language of instruction on children's learning achievement in school?
- (2) How does classroom interaction demonstrate the effect of the language of instruction on children's experience of learning in school?

The hypotheses of this study are:

- (1) The use of learners' mother tongue facilitates greater learning achievement.
- (2) The use of learners' mother tongue provides more positive experience of learning.

1.3 Benefits of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the language issue in primary education by carrying out the comparative studies of learning achievements between children taught in the national language and those taught in their mother tongue.¹ The targeted audience comprises local educational organizations, parents, teachers, persons and other stakeholders who are concerned with providing a better education for the children. A study of language in education has not been done before in Myanmar so this study will help stakeholders to consider the importance of the language factor in education. This study provides them with the information about the language in education of the ethnic minorities. It promotes awareness and consideration of language issues in education raised among the different language communities in Myanmar. It helps the stakeholders gain a deeper understanding of the importance of mother tongue as a language of instruction that helps the children have a good foundation for their life-long learning process. This study should help to enlighten all who are concerned about language in education for the ethnic minority children as to the importance of mother tongue-based education and make them more sensitive to consider the particular problems the teachers and the learners face in the classroom.

¹ Although Sgaw teachers are able to give explanations in Sgaw, the formal curriculum and all tests and assessments are in Burmese, so the mother tongue is used as an ancillary oral language rather than as a real language of instruction by Sgaw-speaking teachers.

More importantly, this study shows the need of using mother tongue in early stages of education in order to improve the quality education. It could be an example for other language communities who are in a similar situation. The study therefore aims primarily to assist in enabling people to recognize the actual situation and be aware of the challenges of language use in education.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study is based on the test results of learners in 19 Sgaw villages and observation of teaching in two classes, one with a Burmese-speaking teacher and one with a Sgaw-speaking teacher. There are restrictions when doing educational research because of the unstable political situation at the time the fieldwork was conducted. The researcher could not do formal interviews using questionnaires with the informants since they were not comfortable with working with the paper. Based on those limited collected data this study emphasizes the languages of instructions used in teaching and learning in monolingual/monocultural student populations. This study does not investigate the multilingual/multicultural student populations. Furthermore, it investigates only the effects of oral instruction in the mother tongue; it does not consider the effects of using curriculum and teaching/learning materials in the mother tongue or teaching literacy in the mother tongue.

1.5 Outline of the Study

To be able to do the analysis of language in education of the minority children, three fieldwork trips were undertaken in Patheingyi Township in Ayeyarwady Division, Myanmar. In February 2010 an initial survey was conducted to get test results of two types of children: those taught using Burmese, and those taught using Sgaw. In August 2010 the second trip was made to conduct classroom observations of the two different classes: one taught in Burmese and one taught in Sgaw. After having done the statistical analysis based on the data collected from the first survey, it was essential to check the learners' test results that had been collected in previous survey and collect more detailed information on the test and more learners test results. For this purpose the third fieldwork trip was carried out in May 2011. This fieldwork aimed to discover the use of national language and mother tongue in the classes in the Sgaw villages.

The rest of this thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the main issues regarding language in education and it reviews the theories of

mother tongue use in education. Chapter 3 presents the methods of research. Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of the research areas. The analyses of the data are included in Chapters 5 and 6. Quantitative analysis of the test results is presented in Chapter 5 and qualitative analysis is presented in Chapter 6. This study concludes with a discussion on the findings of the analyses in Chapter 7. Chapter 7 also includes the implications for education and language development in other ethnic communities in Myanmar and suggestions for further research.

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