

Contemporary Issues in EFL Education in Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of issues related to English language education in Myanmar. Political reforms underway in Myanmar since 2010 have opened the country up to international influences and interest in English language education has been increasing. This paper examines the issues of motivation for learning English in Myanmar, the influence of Buddhism on education, the position of English in Myanmar from a World Englishes perspective and teachers' experiences.

Over the past several years, EFL education in Myanmar has been undergoing many changes, along with wider changes in the country's education system. After decades of decline due to underinvestment and civil disorder, the state education system is beginning to recover and develop as Myanmar has become increasingly open to international influences. There are many issues related to the development of EFL education in Myanmar. In this paper we discuss motivation for learning English, the influence of Buddhism on education in Myanmar, the role of English in Myanmar society, and teacher experiences.

Motivation for learning English

Historically, reasons and motivations for learning English in Myanmar have varied in accord with changing political, social, and economic circumstances. Today, about 67% of the population speaks Myanmar as their mother-tongue, while other languages are spoken among the 135 different ethnic groups in the country. English language instruction is compulsory at all levels of education. Prior to the colonial era, Myanmar, which has a long literary tradition, was the most widely spoken language. During the period of British rule (1886-1948) the status of Myanmar declined and English

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was adopted as the official language of public administration and the medium of instruction in education. However, in the 1920s and 1930s nationalist sentiment led to Myanmar being reinstated as the language of instruction at some universities. Upon gaining independence in 1948, the new government declared Myanmar to be the country's official language. In 1964 there was a major reform of the education system and Myanmar became the medium of instruction at all levels, with English taught only as a foreign language. However, it was soon recognized that standards of English were declining and in the 1970s English was again made a compulsory subject from kindergarten and also came to be used as the medium of instruction at higher levels of education (Wong, 2005).

As seen above, English has played an important role in Myanmar in educational, political, and social spheres. Accordingly, citizens of Myanmar have been motivated to learn English for academic and professional advancement. Furthermore, the recent political reforms, beginning in 2010, have opened the country up to international influences and have led to even greater interest in learning English. Students at the university level are required to study their subjects in English. One student explained that, "In our country we have to learn everything, like in engineering or medicine, through the English medium. If you do not know English you cannot be an expert in your subject" (Magistac, 2012). To meet this rising demand, new English language schools have been opened throughout the country. One teacher at such a school commented on his students' desire to learn English as follows. "Now we can deal with a lot of foreign companies and foreigners. Before, we could not deal this way, because the country closed the doors when we were young. The children now are very lucky" (Magistac, 2012).

Many younger Myanmarese in particular see the growing market in tourism as an employment opportunity and are consequently motivated to learn English (Takahashi, 2014). In his examination of language education policy in Myanmar, Lwin noted that, "learning the English language may lead to economic advantages, help in dealing with the outside world, and improve prospects of study abroad and employment" (Lwin, 2011). However, he also pointed out that, "a potential threat among rising generations is that they prefer the pragmatic value of learning English rather than the culture value of indigenous natural languages" (Lwin, 2011). Lwin's recommendation regarding this dilemma is to have elementary school students study in three languages: their mother-tongue, the official language (Myanmar), and English.

Buddhist Influences on Education in Southeast Asia

It is not possible to consider education in Myanmar, and neighboring countries of South East Asia such as Thailand, without considering the huge and important role that Buddhism has played and still plays in the system of education in this area. The importance of Buddhist teaching

and philosophy has formed the foundation of all teaching practices. For example, the first form of public education in Thailand was established in Buddhist monasteries as early as the 1300s. Thai monarchs and Buddhist monks believed that Buddha's teachings could help benefit society by helping people to adjust socially and morally to their growing communities. Wat arranikka, a Buddhist monastery, was the first place to be designated as a place of public education. Buddha's teachings, as well as knowledge of medicine, arts, law and astronomy were inscribed onto the walls of the monastery and the Wat was open to anyone to come in to study them (Wyatt, 1969). At this time, education was offered as a means of peaceful collaboration to teach a common code of conduct that emphasized the importance of kindness and compassion (Visra Vichit Vadakan, 2005). This form of education became adopted throughout the neighboring countries of South East Asia. For the centuries to follow, monkhood and monastic education have provided an opportunity for the poor to become educated and a way for them to move into well-paid working environments. Even today, many people throughout South East Asia are educated in monasteries.

A Buddhist education

Keown (1996) explains that Buddhist educational objectives are often referred to as "The Threefold Path". This education is supposed to release the learner from the suffering in Samsara and bring him/her to nirvana (enlightenment). This path is called the 'middle way' or The Eight Fold Path. The factors of the Eight Fold Path are separated into three groups known as the Threefold Training. According to Keown, it is important for everyone to learn and possess all three of the virtues in this Threefold Training. They are; *Sila (conduct)*, *Samadhi (concentration)* and *Panna (wisdom)*.

Sila (conduct) is the first step of the training. It is the moral discipline of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. Sila is connected to a person's actions and conduct in the world. It is how a student uses his/her knowledge, values and judgment to experience the education received and how he/she interacts with his/her environment.

Samadhi (concentration) contains the following three attributes; Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and right Concentration. One is said to have *Samadhi* when one is focused on the mind and aware and has a meditative attitude in daily activities. *Samadhi* includes a development of student's values that can be applied to his or her actions in the world.

Panna (wisdom) refers to developing wisdom that comes from Right Understanding and Right Thought. *Panna* is the wisdom that comes from using one's intellect to understand the world and to

contemplate true knowledge. In order to have *Panna*, a student must be able to gain knowledge of a discipline, assess the truth of that knowledge, and use critical thinking to judge it.

Buddhist teaching emphasizes *karma*; the concept of reincarnation and fate. This concept is crucial to the people of countries such as Myanmar and Thailand in their understanding of life, attainment and their judgment of others. A rich, successful person, for example, might be admired not for his hard work in this life, but for the merit he has carried forward from the previous life. This is the Buddhist concept of merit attained in one life being rewarded in the next and is fundamental to Buddhist beliefs.

The Buddhist way of teaching children

In Buddhist philosophy, it is acceptable for people to try to achieve a successful standard of living in the modern world. However, all people need to find a balance between material wealth and spiritual wealth. Therefore, according to Vajiragnana (2003), it is not enough for an educational system to simply provide children with the knowledge and skills to get worthwhile employment. This education system must also teach children how to become a good member of society and how to live a good and happy life. In Buddhist teaching, a good balanced educational system must develop the educational side of children as well as their emotional and spiritual side. Great emphasis has always been placed on this concept. Teachers and philosophers believe that the intellectual side is associated with the brain while the emotional side such as kindness and compassion are associated with the heart.

Parents are also seen as very important in the education of children in Buddhist thinking. According to Phrarajbhavanavisdh (2005) parents should be the first teacher and should be responsible for teaching children to distinguish from right and wrong and refrain from immoral behavior. However, there are of course situations where the parents themselves cannot differentiate between right and wrong or act correctly as role models. They may try to forbid children from doing what is wrong, but are not able to give reasons to explain these decisions. Therefore, in reality, many parents leave their expectations and needs with the teacher, and hope that the schools will educate their children to become virtuous and a good person. Unfortunately, in many cases it is the teachers who believe that moral education is the responsibility of parents themselves. It is a problem in the modern world.

Balancing the old and the new

According to Dhammananda Nayaka (2003), Western philosophy has a strong concern with obtaining knowledge but is less concerned with bringing such knowledge into daily life practices,

whereas Buddhism puts emphasis on practice and realization. This is to say, as explained above, that in Buddhist philosophy, the learning of skills and knowledge should be incorporated into the spiritual growth of the learner and a part of his/her overall development as a human being, and not simply learned for their own purpose. This Buddhist philosophy still forms the cornerstone of educational philosophy in countries such as Myanmar and Thailand. However, in the global world of today and in considering the teaching of such a global subject such as English, is it really possible to maintain these values and concepts?

As discussed above, in countries such as Myanmar and Thailand Buddhist teaching has formed the foundation of ethical and moral education to the young. Buddhist doctrine has been accepted for centuries and is at the core of culture in both countries. However in a case study of Thai students, Varunee Srilapung (2003) noted that the impact of globalization on youngsters in Thailand suggests that it is time to consider changes to the philosophy of education. Srilapung suggested that young people may even feel suspicion towards their own religion and heritage, and that it is time for parents, teachers and the government to seriously consider changes to how education and perhaps the teachings of Buddha are balanced with a more global approach to education.

Srilapung interviewed a group of students at Don Muang Jaturajinda school in Thailand. The students were all in grade 10 and 11 and all had good grades in school. The survey was designed to learn what students thought should be taught in terms of moral and ethical discipline and also how it should be taught. At the time of the survey, all of the students were receiving classes in religion and moral discipline.

When asked about how this education should fit into the curriculum, students' answers showed a clear pattern of thought on how they feel about this. Generally speaking, they all seemed to feel that this is a necessary part of the curriculum, but also that there need to be changes in integrating this into the modern curriculum. Below is a set of sample excerpts of some of the answers given. The answers are translated from the original Thai answers.

Student 1

For teaching ethical and moral discipline as well as the Buddhism in schools, I think it will be better if the teacher can gradually blend them into each lesson. I think one hour of moral lesson is too much. It is so boring for us if the teacher only gives us a presentation without any enjoyable activities or any humor at all.

Student 2

Morality teaching at school should be conducted. For me, the teacher is our second parent that the students are likely to obey and act as what they teach. Religious discipline can be taught by integrating it in every subject. The teacher should create ethics and discipline as if they are common matter. Do not make it so serious. Do not force the students to accept and behave because it is the “must do” regulation. On the other hand, should try to make it as natural stuff that everyone should practice to each other.

Student 3

Schools should have the role in teaching virtue and religion subject at least one hour a week. I think it should be settled, although sometimes I feel bored with it. However, the teacher can make it more attractive by inserting some enjoyable activities in the lesson or any case study about the Law of Karma, which can help the teacher convince the student that each action has its corresponding result.

Student 4

In my thoughts, it is essential to having virtue teaching in school. However, one-hour lesson is so boring for me. I think it will be great if the teacher insert search teaching in the academic teaching instead. Besides that, I love to have some activities outside classroom, for instance, bring us to the temple occasionally. It is learning by doing and I can get some fun from interaction with many people in the temple. Moreover, I have the chance to practice meditation that I think it can help me to control my emotion.

Student 5

I do not think religious subject is boring, as it is something near ourselves and we can apply its concept to our daily life. Take for example, telling a lie. My teacher explains its consequences and raises some authentic samples that make it more credible. In addition, his teaching is quite lively and full of humor. I think moral discipline can be inserted in every subject. For instance, English language teaching, the teacher can show us some vocabulary in terms of morality and maybe some short essay about Law of Karma. Therefore we can learn the language and the morality.

Student 6

For me, it is very crucial to have moral or Buddhism subject in the school's curriculum. Only studying academic knowledge is not enough to build us to be a good being of the society. About blending of moral discipline and Buddhism into every subject, I think we cannot blend into

scientific subject, as there are some conflicts in between these two.

Student 7

I do not take it serious whether there is virtue or religious subject in the curriculum. Actually, insert just a little knowledge about moral discipline in each academic subject is fine. In my Thai language class, the teacher often teachers are is about this issue together with the lesson. Sometimes it is quite interesting but sometimes it is not.

Student 8

Buddhism subject should be included in the curriculum since it is the tool in cultivating children to be a good person for our society. In order to avoid boredom of the students, the teacher may employ CD and VCD Dhamma teaching in the class or invite a Buddhist monk who has a technique in preaching to teach us instead of the teacher. Sometimes the teacher may arrange some activities in the classroom, which everyone can participate, for instance, performing are moral play, telling Jataka stories in front of the class and sharing good deed experience to our classmates.

It is clear from these responses that students do feel that there needs to be change in how Buddhism, virtue and moral teaching are integrated into the modern curriculum. However, it is also refreshing to see that all of the students feel that this knowledge is still essential. It is also pleasing to see that several comment on the importance of being a good person in society. It is also clear that globalization and outside influences are indeed changing the attitudes of young people to religion and education. In this area, Thailand is a long way in front of Myanmar in its economic and international development and its exposure to globalization. In many ways, it is a leader in internationalization among countries of South East Asia. However, with the changes in its political status and development in recent years, it is clear that Myanmar will probably come to the same crossroads in balancing its philosophy of education in the not so distant future.

World Englishes

Various researchers and educators have taken different approaches to defining the role of English and the position or status of English in Southeast Asia. In recent years the most common terms applied to the use of English in countries where it is not the predominant mother-tongue are English as lingua franca and World Englishes. The term World Englishes refers to local varieties of English, especially those that have developed in areas that have been influenced by the United States or the United Kingdom. The most widely accepted description of World Englishes

is Kachru's classification of different varieties of English into three groups. Those groups are the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle refers to areas where English developed and is today the most common mother-tongue, the Outer Circle refers to areas where English was spread through colonial expansion and is in widespread use, and the Expanding Circle refers to areas where English has been widely adopted, usually for some specific purpose, particularly for communication in business or academia. Despite its history as a British colony, Myanmar is usually considered a member of the Expanding Circle (Kachru & Nelson, 2006).

Canagarajah has proposed an alternate description of English language use in South Asia. He pointed out that the concept of World Englishes "deals with a highly systematized and stable variety of English in postcolonial communities." In contrast to this view, Canagarajah positions English language use in South Asia as part of a plurilingual tradition in the region. In a plurilingual perspective a speaker's proficiency is not viewed in terms of competence in individual discrete languages, but is seen as an integrated competence embracing a number of languages. Typically, different languages will be used for different purposes, and language use emerges as a function of the interlocutors' individual repertoires. (Canagarajah, 2009). Canagarajah's account of plurilingualism has implications for English language teaching. He suggested that, "What we need is a paradigm shift in language teaching. Pedagogy should be refashioned to accommodate the modes of communication and acquisition seen outside the classroom" (Canagarajah, 2009). Such a focus entails a refocusing of the goals of language learning. Rather than aiming for native-speaker-like competence in a single target language, the learner must develop strategies for coping with a repertoire of different codes in various plurilingual settings. Proficiency is not defined by the learner's knowledge of second-language form, but by one's ability to accomplish communicative goals. Canagarajah pointed out, however, that defining competence as the ability to shift between codes does not preclude the ability to produce standard language when the situation requires it (Canarajah, 2009). He also noted that this focus on practice still leaves a place for classroom language learning. He recommended that pedagogy focus on language awareness and learner strategy training (Canagarajah, 2007).

Lwin's recommendations for language pedagogy echo Canagarajah's, without specifically referring to plurilingualism as Canagarajah has described it. For Lwin, the issue of language education in Myanmar is related to culture, national identity, and politics. In his consideration of the various ethnic/linguistic groups in Myanmar, Lwin suggested that "ethnic educators and political leaders promote their languages for use as a medium of instruction. Students whose mother-tongue is not Myanmar would learn Myanmar and English as second languages. Students whose mother-tongue is Myanmar would learn English and another ethnic language as second languages (Lwin, 2007).

Teachers

Education in Myanmar suffers from a lack of trained teachers. Many teachers begin their careers without any training at all. Primary school teachers have often only completed primary school themselves and many secondary school teachers have only secondary school degrees. Teachers in refugee camps are often self-appointed volunteers from those camps (Lwin, 2007). In addition, teaching is a low-status profession and there is frequent turnover in teaching staff. Remuneration is inadequate, leading many teachers to operate outside the formal public education system (Han, 2007).

There is a wide variation in the level of teacher training and in the context within which teachers are employed. There are some private schools that operate with the help of volunteer teachers. Lall (2010) reported on a school teaching English in a suburb of Yangon run by a Myanmar teacher and five volunteers. Students at the school ranged in age from three to five years. The school was opened in order to give young children a chance to start learning English from an early age.

In recent years the government of Myanmar has made efforts to develop a system for training teachers. There are at present 20 Education Colleges and two Institutes of Education that produce about 10,000 teachers each year (Aung, Hardman, & Myint, 2013). However, much of the training that takes place in the Education Colleges has been found to be ineffective. Among the problems that have been identified are inadequate subject knowledge and teaching skills of teacher educators, an overcrowded curriculum, lack of supervision, and poor facilities and equipment. In addition, despite recommendations to promote a more learner-centered classroom, a transmission model of teaching persists. Trainee teachers are strongly influenced by their own experience as learners, and consequently rote learning and recitation dominate class time (Redden, 2007).

Conclusion

It is evident that education in Myanmar is undergoing rapid and extensive change. As Myanmar increases its ties to the international community and develops its economy the pace and number of these changes will also increase. All levels and categories of education will be affected, including the teaching of English as a foreign language. As EFL teachers in Asia, we hope to learn more about these changes taking place in Myanmar.

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