

English Curriculum Development in Myanmar

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Abstract: This article reports on the design and implementation of an innovative primary EFL program in Myanmar. Begun in 2014, the program is part of the CREATE Project, a joint initiative between the Myanmar Ministry of Education and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The project has involved the planning, designing and implementation of new curriculum for primary school English in Myanmar, along with concurrent materials development and the design of both pre-service and in-service teacher training courses. To give an insight into this multifaceted process, this paper focuses on the development of the Grade 2 textbook and its subsequent adoption by primary school teachers across Myanmar. The challenges and solutions outlined in this article have both policy and pedagogical implications for curriculum innovation at the primary EFL level, particularly with respect to the issues facing less economically developed countries.

Key words : Myanmar Primary English Curriculum Development

1. Background: Myanmar and Primary School Education

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) is the largest country in south-east Asia with a population of approximately fifty-five million. It is an ethnically and linguistically diverse nation, home to some 135 ethnic groups. Burmese is the official language and spoken as a first language by about 70% of the population. Compulsory education is conducted through Burmese with the vast majority of primary school aged children attending state-run schools (Oxford Business Group, 2017). Primary education commences at the age of six and lasts five years. Secondary schooling is divided into lower and upper, the former being four years long with upper secondary being two years long.

Until recent reforms, education in Myanmar has been underfunded and neglected (Steinberg, 2013). While data on education in Myanmar is often limited and out of date, the most recent official figures show that primary education has a 97% intake rate (Ministry of Education, 2015). However, student completion rates belie the positive enrollment figures: only 70% of students graduated from primary school and by the first year of lower secondary school, only 50%

remained enrolled (Hayden and Martin, 2013). The Ministry of Education (MOE) attributed these underwhelming completion rates to a poor-quality learning environment - it has been estimated that about half of the primary schools include multi-grade classrooms with teachers responsible for more than one grade at a time (MOE, 2015). Compounding these problems are a lack of resources and an outdated teacher-centered pedagogy with an over emphasis on rote learning and memorization (MOE, 2015). In 2016 the government enacted a National Education Strategic Plan to reform all levels of education in Myanmar. The plan promised free primary school education and outlined significant changes in the overall primary curriculum. Children are supposed to learn '21st century skills', and teaching in all subjects is now based on a 'Child-Centered Approach' (CCA) (MOE, 2015).

1.1. A Child-Centered Approach in Myanmar Primary Schools

This was not the first time CCA had been made a policy priority in Myanmar. From 2000 to 2011, the MOE, in collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), introduced CCA for teaching the primary school subjects of science, social studies, and integrated studies. To facilitate the new approach, in-service teacher training courses and revised teachers' guides for the relevant subjects were provided (Tanaka, 2015). However, the fact that the CCA was only implemented in three subjects and existing textbooks were not revised to accommodate such an approach limited its effect. Reforms in 2014 addressed these issues.

In 2014, the Project for Curriculum Reform at Primary Level of Basic Education (more commonly known as the CREATE Project) was jointly initiated by JICA and the MOE. Its principal goals are to develop new curricula, textbooks, teacher's guides, and means of assessment for all elementary school subjects (JICA, 2019), all of which are designed to accommodate a CCA. Related aims include the redesigning of pre-service, undergraduate teaching programs in the country's sixty-six national Education Colleges, and conducting annual training programs for in-service teachers (JICA, 2019).

As with many less economically developed countries, the new teaching materials in Myanmar have to compensate for many teachers' lack of pedagogical training and inadequate access to educational resources. Textbooks, teacher's guides, and related instructional materials are created by subject teams comprised of Myanmar primary school teachers, officials from the MOE, and faculty from both educational colleges and national universities. JICA also provides specialist advisors for each subject whom, in the case of English, is the author of this paper.

2. The Primary EFL Curriculum

According to Brown (2015), curriculum development includes determining goals, content, sequence, procedures, and assessment. The primary school English CDT has tried to reconcile empirically proven teaching practices for teaching English to young learners with a pedagogical approach that is appropriate for the social context of Myanmar. However, as Myanmar has 135 ethnic groups with a large number of children who do not speak the official language of Burmese (Kyaw Htut Aung, 2019), it should be acknowledged from the outset that a single curriculum cannot meet the needs of all school children. In addition, the differing resources available to local governments, educational authorities, schools and teachers necessitated developing lessons, textbooks and teaching approaches that could minimize such disparities.

2.1 Objectives

The CDT established curricular objectives for English using the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). These descriptive scales (A1 – C2) are used widely by countries as a means of determining expected foreign language proficiency at different levels of formal education (Enever, 2018). For example, Vietnam has set the target level for children completing primary school as A1, while Colombia has mandated a level of A2 (Peña Dix and de Mejía, 2012). The primary appeal of the CEFR scales is that the assessment constructs on which the scales are based are easily understood. This enables the scales to be adopted and, where necessary, altered by countries for their own specific contexts. Another appeal is that CEFR is methodologically neutral: it does not stipulate how languages should be taught but rather emphasizes the acquisition of overall communicative proficiency.

North (2014), one of the original developers of CEFR, emphasizes that the scales are designed to be a general reference from which educators can create their own contextually appropriate objectives and methodologies. Thus, the English subject team, in designing the English curriculum, were guided by the CEFR as a means of referencing internationally accepted descriptors, but revised them so that they would be appropriate for primary schools in Myanmar. A considerable challenge was marrying innovative curricular approaches with well-established teaching methodologies and materials. An example of the extent of the proposed changes can be seen in a comparison between the former and new curricular objectives for Grade 2 (G2). Objectives and a note written in the preface of the former textbook are shown below.

All pupils must be taught and trained to be able to:

- 1 know and recognize the basic sentence patterns,*
- 2 read aloud with correct pronunciation and correct stress, rhythm and intonation, and comprehension,*
- 3 develop clear, well-formed and fluent handwriting and*
- 4 read and write the English numerals 1 to 10.*

Note:

- 1 Attention should be given on reading aloud.*
- 2 Must pay constant attention to the teaching and training of handwriting.*
- 3 Do the given exercises orally several times before asking the students to write.*

The former G2 curriculum focused on linguistic knowledge, accurate pronunciation, and penmanship with no mention of the communicative functions of the language. In contrast, the new objectives for G2 written in the Teacher's Guide are:

- 1 To listen to and understand stories, short talks, and songs*
- 2 To produce intelligible English and prosody in short talks and conversations*
- 3 To perform short talks in English such as describing pictures, presenting project work, or introducing classmates or oneself*
- 4 To make simple suggestions (e.g. using Let's ...)*
- 5 To demonstrate interests in communicative activities*
- 6 To read and write words and expressions in the textbook*
- 7 To use structures (e.g. He/She/It is...) learnt in class to communicate feelings, thoughts and information.*
- 8 To understand and use vocabulary related to the textbook topics (e.g. feelings, foods, etc.) in communicative situations*
- 9 To develop an interest in learning about other cultures through participating in language learning activities and understanding and discussing lesson contents.*

From these we can see that objectives 1, 3, and 4 refer to communicative functions. Objectives 2 and 6 are a diluted continuation of the objectives from the former curriculum. Objectives 7 and 8 refer to students being able to use learned vocabulary and structures in communicative situations. Lastly, objectives 5 and 9 are attitudinal, concerned with developing and maintaining students' motivation for learning English and understanding other cultures. The new curriculum is broader in its intentions, incorporating both the learning, and use of, English.

3. Textbook Content and Methodology

This new curricular approach is reflected in the revisions made to the textbooks used by students. The former G2 textbook had twenty-one lessons, with each lesson consisting of between four and six periods. The majority of the lessons focused on a discrete linguistic form, primarily grammatical. In contrast, the new G2 textbook is organized into themes. There are eight units with nine periods in each unit. After every two units there is a review section (two periods) for students

to consolidate what they have learned. Each review is then followed by a Project (three periods) which enables the students to expand their use and understanding of the reviewed language in a creative and engaging way. Figure 1 compares the table of contents for the first half of both textbooks.

Former G2 Textbook		Current G2 Textbook	
Lesson	Periods	Unit	Periods
1. a..., an ...	4	1. My classmates	9
2. It is a/an ...	6	2. People, animals, and things around us.	9
3. I am ...	4		
4. You are ...	5	Review 1	3
5. This is ...	5	Project 1: My friends	3
6. He/She is ...	4	3. The food I like	9
7. I have a ... He/ She has a ...	6	4. Fun and games	9
8. My ...	6	Review 2	3
9. Your ...	4	Project 2: What my friends like and can do	3
10. His/Her...	4		

Figure 1. A comparison of the contents in the former and current Grade 2 English textbooks.

As indicated by the lesson titles in Figure 1, the methodology of the former G2 textbook consisted of students practicing and mastering the given expressions. In the current textbook, teaching methodology varies depending on the lesson types, which are shown below:

- 1 *language focused lessons*
- 2 *reading and writing lessons*
- 3 *skill focused lessons,*
- 4 *alphabetic letter review lessons*
- 5 *language review lessons*
- 6 *project review lessons*

Language-focused lessons introduce new language in a Presentation, Production, and Practice method. In *reading and writing lessons* the focus is on literacy; students practice reading, writing, and chanting words that begin with letters of the alphabet. A *skill focused lesson* can be reading a story, or learning a song. After the end of every two units, the students revise the language they have learned in the *Review* lessons. This is then followed by the *Project* lesson. The lesson sequence for each unit is shown in Figure 2.

	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3	Lesson 4	Lesson 5	Lesson 6
Type	Language	Reading & writing	Language focused	Reading & writing	Language	Skill
Periods	1	2	1	2	1	2

Figure 2. Lesson sequence in a unit in the new G2 textbook

Development of the English curriculum was influenced by what is termed the ‘principled communicative approach’ (Arnold and Dörnyei, 2015). Such an approach represents a necessary compromise between established “traditional techniques” - such as oral repetition and handwriting practice - and innovative communicative activities for conveying information. The current curriculum attempts to retain the teaching methods that were valued in the old curriculum while emphasizing meaningful oral and aural activities.

4. Teachers’ reactions

Designing a new curriculum is, in a sense, the ‘easy part’ of the process. The much more difficult challenge comes with its implementation. The new curriculum has to be taught by thousands of teachers in a vast range of classroom contexts all across Myanmar. CREATE held a number of focus-group discussions across Myanmar (JICA, 2019) which provided an insight into some potential areas of difficulty and some benefits from the adoption of the new G2 curriculum. We would like to acknowledge that schools’ access to resources (audio equipment, materials, etc.), the reliable distribution of textbooks and teacher’s guides, and opportunities for teacher development are a prerequisite for successful curriculum implementation. However, addressing these important areas is beyond the scope of the present paper.

The focus-group discussions were conducted in four locations across the country. Forty-six teachers from a mix of urban and rural primary schools participated. The discussions were conducted in Burmese and the audio recordings were subsequently translated into English for analysis. Topics included: changes in students’/teachers’ learning, interests, attitude, etc. after the introduction of the new curriculum; student assessment; and challenges implementing the new curriculum. Using thematic content analysis, the teacher’s comments were coded and analyzed. This process yielded the following six main themes:

- Methodological appropriacy
- Vocabulary level
- Decline in students’ reading and writing abilities
- Lesson content and allotted class time
- Insufficient preparation time

- Positive changes

4.1 Methodological appropriacy

For effective learning using the communicative approach there needs to be a balanced combination of pair, group, and whole class work. Teachers in the focus group did not explicitly discuss group work in the English class, but there were positive comments about group work in general. These included “students know how to help and improve communication”; “students are better at communication skills”; and “students are interested in lessons which include play activities.” One teacher explained how she modified the group work activity detailed in the teacher’s guide for a storytelling activity that resulted in a much more effective learning outcome for the students.

On the other hand, teachers also expressed reservations about the suitability of the new communicative methodology with their own established teaching practices. For example, one teacher said that “classes are noisy under the new curriculum”, while another stated that “children cannot understand if [a] teacher [teaches] according to the Teacher’s Guide.” The teacher said that she must conduct repetition for pronunciation “again and again” so students will understand. This highlights a fundamental issue for teachers in Myanmar: should students be taught the language or how to use the language.

A broader issue with both the new and former curricula is the suitability of teaching English as a foreign language for all children in the lower primary school level in a country as ethnically and linguistically diverse as Myanmar. For many students entering primary school English is their third language after their mother tongue and Burmese. Fitzpatrick (2010) argues that introducing English language education could be developmentally detrimental to children who do not speak the mainstream language (in this case Burmese) as their first language. A detailed examination of this issue in relation to the English curriculum is beyond the scope of this paper, but the author feels that it should at least be mentioned.

4.2 Vocabulary level

Many of the target words in the new G2 textbook are different to those in the previous textbook, and in the focus group discussions teachers mentioned problems with the difficulty and appropriacy of the vocabulary students were supposed to learn. Teachers themselves did not know the meaning of some the new words and commented that these words were difficult for children to remember. For example, a number of teachers found the word ‘yogurt’ difficult to pronounce. Other teachers questioned the appropriacy and relevance of some of the vocabulary for Myanmar learners. Examples included: ‘alligator’, ‘frisbee’, ‘hopscotch’, ‘kangaroo’, ‘igloo’, ‘quilt’, and ‘unicorn’. It is interesting to note that the majority of the vocabulary words teachers deemed inappropriate came from the reading and writing lessons. For these lessons the main

objectives were to become familiar with the sounds of letters and to practice reading and writing words, but not necessarily use them in communication. Some words like ‘alligator’, ‘igloo’, ‘kangaroo’, and ‘quilt’ can be found in standard English phonics teaching materials to teach letter sounds, but these words were deemed culturally unfamiliar. One teacher commented that the new words for G2 English were of a much higher level than the old textbook and that the students were not interested in them. It is hoped that these difficulties will dissipate once teachers become familiar with the new vocabulary over time. However, if problems persist with the new vocabulary, then certain lexical items will need to be reconsidered.

4.3 Purported decline in students’ reading and writing abilities

The former G2 textbook prioritized early literacy and its associated teaching methodology emphasized accuracy in reading and writing. The updated textbook has shifted the emphasis to oral communication with a concomitant increase in listening and speaking activities. One prevalent theme in the discussions was that children had become weaker at reading and writing. One teacher commented that under the old English curriculum students had more reading and writing activities and had to take regular tests; in her estimation such students had better literacy skills than current students. Another teacher remarked that children have increased trouble spelling words correctly.

It should be noted that the new English curriculum does not diminish the importance of literacy. Rather, where it differs from the old curriculum is in its sequencing. At the lower grades the focus is on building students’ vocabulary primarily through oral communicative activities. As students progress through primary school, they are gradually exposed to more reading and writing activities based on the spoken vocabulary they have already learned. In addition, literacy teaching has shifted from sound-sight word recognition and lexical meaning to an emphasis on reading for comprehension and task-based writing. It is not known whether teachers in the focus group were aware of this broader curricular change.

4.4 Lesson content and allotted class time

In the focus groups, teachers commented that they could not teach the English lessons according to the allotted time given in the Teacher’s Guide. This resulted in teachers having to teach extra English classes before the start of school, or on weekends. One teacher reported teaching the same content again the next day because her students did not understand the initial lesson. More surveys and classroom observations are necessary to determine the underlying factors. In addition to the amount of linguistic content and number of activities in a period, another factor could be that teachers are teaching language with a methodology with which they are not familiar (nor comfortable with). It is hoped that as teachers gain experience in both lesson content and teaching approaches, class time will become more manageable.

4.5 Insufficient preparation time

Related to insufficient lesson time, teachers also spoke of a lack of sufficient preparation time. This wasn't a problem solely specific to English; the introduction of the new primary school curriculum meant that they, as generalist teachers teaching all subjects, needed considerably more time preparing for all their classes. In the group discussions teachers emphasized the importance of preparation; one teacher succinctly summed up the situation when she said that if teachers do not prepare in advance, they cannot teach the new curriculum well. For English, issues impacting on preparation time included teachers having to learn the meaning and use of target vocabulary words with which they were not familiar; and the increased use of a variety of new teaching materials as compared with the old curriculum. Pronunciation also proved problematic, both in terms of effective classroom teaching and its effect on teacher's sense of their professional identity. One teacher mentioned that students would compare her pronunciation with their families, which put pressure on the teachers to speak with accurate pronunciation.

4.6 Positive changes

Among the positive changes were that students were demonstrating better proficiency in listening and speaking, and that they were using "English words in their daily life." In addition, teachers were expanding their English language vocabulary from teaching the new curriculum, one example being the names of non-Myanmar fruits. Also, there was an anecdote of children telling teachers what kind of juice they liked using fruit the teacher had not heard of. Therefore, it should be further investigated what the potential positive effects can be of conducting a curriculum emphasizing listening and speaking.

5. Conclusion

Myanmar is undergoing an intense period of profound educational change. This paper has examined this change on the primary school English language curriculum. It has done this through comparing and contrasting the learning objectives and overall contents of the previous and current Grade 2 textbooks. The old textbook emphasized literacy, predominantly focusing on teaching students accurate reading and writing. In contrast, the revised textbook incorporates a communicative approach based on the use of the CEFR scales. Although this approach is more compatible with recent global trends in language teaching, comments from teachers highlighted how it is not universally welcomed. Some teachers prefer the former established teaching methodology based on memorization and rote learning. Rather than a 'clean break', more research is needed in how to amalgamate both approaches in a contextually suitable methodology for primary schools in Myanmar.

NOTES

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