

Language Choice in Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities

Summary of a Workshop Discussion Organised
by the British Academy in Partnership with
the *École française d'Extrême-Orient*

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Executive Summary

Is English the best medium of instruction for higher education in Myanmar, and, if so, does the solution to current problems in local universities lie in introducing more intensive English-language teaching at the primary and secondary levels?

The British Academy and the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* brought together a group of distinguished experts from Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Australia and the UK, to consider these questions and promote the sharing of lessons among countries in the Southeast Asia region and beyond. This report summarises the outcomes of the discussion and puts forward a number of key messages, with a view to informing the ongoing Myanmar Comprehensive Education Sector Review process:

- The best language policy choice for universities in Myanmar may not be either English or Burmese, but some combination of the two.
- Language support in Burmese or in English should be extended to students who do not have sufficient language skills to cope adequately with the learning process.
- Professional development training for lecturers aimed at improving teaching techniques is needed, including strategies for Burmese and English.
- Language policy from the primary to the tertiary education level must stand on a firm foundation and be based on an integrated approach.
- Introducing more English-language teaching at the primary and/or secondary level may not necessarily help meet language-related challenges of higher education.
- The development of 'English-language' or 'international' tracks in a few universities for selected subjects is an option worth considering.
- While it may be appropriate to teach some subjects in one language versus another, policy makers and education reformers must remain wary of the danger of 'domain collapse'.
- Myanmar should invest in producing high-quality Burmese language textbooks for subjects deemed crucial to national development.
- National bodies, such as the Myanmar Language Commission, should work towards updating dictionaries, translation practices, and digital resources for Burmese.

Introduction

In Myanmar there have been several changes in policy relating to language choice in higher education over the past decades. Currently national law allows individual universities and departments to choose their preferred language of instruction, either English or Burmese, or some combination of the two. This has in practice resulted in virtually all higher education institutions in Myanmar adopting a policy whereby English is used as the sole medium of instruction, although ‘explanations’ of terminology and concepts *may* be given in Burmese. The prevalent view among local policy makers and university administrators when discussing the restructuring and revitalisation of the national education system is that instruction should be given in English. This reflects a widespread perception in Burmese society that English is the most important foreign language for university students to master, as it is seen as the dominant language of business, science and international affairs. The adoption of English in higher education institutions in Myanmar has, however, given rise to considerable challenges. On the one hand, the command of academic-level English among both students and lecturers is limited. On the other hand, the English-language teaching materials used are often decades out of date and many university departments are reluctant to rely on any Burmese language texts as auxiliary resources. Against this backdrop, the key questions which increasingly face local educators and policy makers are whether, at this juncture, English is the best medium of instruction for higher education in Myanmar, and, if so, whether the solution to existing problems lies in introducing more intensive English-language teaching at the primary and secondary levels.

This workshop, organised by the British Academy in partnership with the *École française d’Extrême-Orient*, aimed to facilitate informed, policy-oriented discussion about the importance of language choice in higher education, particularly in the context of Myanmar, and to promote the sharing of lessons among countries in the Southeast Asia region. It brought together experts in language policy, bilingual and multilingual higher education and sociolinguistics from Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Australia and the UK, as well as a select group of local policy makers and representatives of non-governmental organisations based in Myanmar and the wider region. The presentations focused on the extent to which the use of English in higher education can be said to serve the long-term interests of students, educators, broader society, or the national economies of countries with bilingual or multilingual heritage or aspirations. This report summarises the discussions that took place in order to inform a wider audience of Burmese educators and policy makers, as well as international education advisors, about the implications of language choice for higher education, with a focus on Myanmar. The report begins with a brief history of the use of English in Myanmar to help contextualise questions of language use. It continues with highlights and insights from the experiences of other countries in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Finally, the report offers some key findings and suggestions for further consideration.

The adoption of English in higher education institutions in Myanmar has given rise to considerable challenges.

English in Myanmar: a Brief Overview

Myanmar is an ethnically and linguistically diverse country. Burmese – which is the official language – is the native spoken language of approximately 30 million people, out of a total population of over 53 million. There are many indigenous languages in Myanmar but the discussion of language choice in higher education has centred primarily on the use of Burmese and English.

Although Myanmar has a rich intellectual and literary tradition based on the Burmese language, the gradual colonisation of the country, which started in the 1820s, established English as the language of government, business, and the ‘modern world’. The British brought in large numbers of settlers from the Indian subcontinent to work in the colonial administration in Rangoon. Together with Chinese immigrants, the non-Burmese communities became the backbone of the colonial economy, and English was the preferred, and sometimes the only, means of communication among, and with, the elites. Rangoon was in many ways unique at the time and did not necessarily reflect other cities and regions. Today, the situation in the now-renamed Yangon is central to language choice throughout Myanmar. Although now replaced by Naypyidaw as the political centre, Yangon remains Myanmar’s cultural, commercial and intellectual capital. The language choices of the Yangon elites thus have an influence on the rest of the country.

In Yangon, English is everywhere. Since the political changes of 2010, a multitude of new businesses have opened, often with English-language names or with Burmese designations rendered in Latin script. Myanmar passports, along with many other kinds of government paperwork and documentation, are entirely in English. Many Burmese mix English words into their speech, even in the case of objects and concepts for which common Burmese expressions exist. Furthermore, due to a lack of standardisation, using Burmese script electronically is exceedingly difficult. Despite the fact that Myanmar became independent from British rule in 1948, there appears to be a lingering sense that nothing is truly ‘official’ or ‘valid’ unless it is done in English. There is also a common assumption that English is the universal language of communication outside Myanmar. Many people feel that the country has been cut off from the rest of the world for a long time and that they now have to quickly catch up. One of the best ways to do this – it is often argued - is by using the English language.

Many inside and outside Myanmar may not realise the extent to which Myanmar is not an English-speaking country, in contrast to other former British colonies such as Singapore or Malaysia, where English is widely used as an official or recognised language. There remain enough people from the older generations educated in English under the colonial and post-independence governments to make the majority of Burmese society think of Myanmar as an English-speaking country. However, English-medium instruction in Myanmar has only ever been for the privileged elites. Younger generations have some basic communication skills but are mostly insufficiently qualified to effectively pursue higher education in English.

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English in Burmese Universities

Starting in 1964 under Prime Minister U Ne Win's government, a period of 'nativisation' saw textbooks and other university teaching materials translated into Burmese. Since English at the time was viewed as a colonial language, degrees were no longer taught in English, and the level of English-language instruction deteriorated. At the same time, the economy went into a steep decline, and many people seemingly began to associate Burmese with economic failure and insularity, or to think of the Burmese language as somehow 'not sufficient'. As a result, in the 1980s national policy changed again. Starting in 1985, English textbooks were reintroduced into the universities and by 1990 the exclusive use of English was widespread. In an effort to compensate for the inadequate language skills of the majority of students, the style of instruction at universities was altered, so that English would be taught alongside the substantive courses. Lecturers were given 'refresher' courses in English, and they soon began to make subject notes in the English language and distribute them among students, reinforcing already existing practices of rote learning. These notes eventually took precedence over the textbooks themselves.

Some Observations From Inside Myanmar

Workshop participants recounted their personal experiences and explained the consequences of using English as the sole or preferred medium of instruction and communication in higher education in Myanmar:

- One foreign educator, who had established an English literature programme at an English medium school, argued in favour of allowing students to speak Burmese for group work. In his view, this enabled students to have meaningful discussions about the content of what they had been reading. He also maintained that Burmese was indispensable to explaining substantive content during classes. His students consistently reported that the use of Burmese was immensely helpful to their learning process.
- A Burmese re-patriate, who had been educated in English both in Myanmar and abroad, expressed regrets about his lost ability to write notes or deliver formal presentations in Burmese. He pointed out that there was often a mismatch between the two languages, or how Burmese people would interpret English expressions. He also drew participants' attention to how the Burmese might find the use of the Burmese language in formal business conversations insulting, as it would be perceived as implying that they were unable to converse in English and that, therefore, they were not sufficiently educated.

The Experiences of Other Countries

In the age of globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education, English often acts as a gateway to higher education opportunities; those without English language skills stay – or fear that they run the risk of staying – on the periphery. Students around the world increasingly seek university education abroad when they have the financial resources to do so. Asian students, in particular, frequently opt for higher education degrees in either English-speaking countries or English-medium universities. However, not all countries in Asia emphasise English, use it exclusively, or have changed their policies in relation to its use in higher education.

Malaysia

Over the past 57 years, language policy in Malaysia has undergone numerous changes. As in Myanmar, English had been the sole medium of instruction in universities under British colonial rule. Starting in 1965, Malay was gradually reintroduced in higher education. Over the next 18 years, during a period of transition, Malay was used for teaching the arts while English was employed for the instruction of science and technology subjects. It was believed that English was necessary in order for students and lecturers to keep abreast of the latest scientific developments, whereas Malay was more suitable for subjects whose content and vocabulary were slower to change. In the 1970s, there was strong government support to translate scholarship into Malay and to create new Malay vocabulary, and eventually public universities opted for teaching subjects across the discipline spectrum in Malay only. However, in 2002, the language policy was reversed and English-language instruction was once again introduced for science subjects. At the time, this was a result of technical capacity issues; there were not enough skilled translators in Malay to keep pace with new scientific research published in English. Over the next decade it became increasingly obvious that the use of English in public universities was giving rise to considerable challenges. An outcome of Malaysia's earlier policy choices at the primary and secondary levels had been the creation of a generation of mostly monolingual Malay speakers. Due to a lack of sufficient language knowledge and the absence of additional training for lecturers, some students were, therefore, placed at a disadvantage. The government was subsequently called to provide more choice as to the language of instruction in public universities.

The experience of Malaysia illustrates the importance of language policy being developed thoughtfully, bearing in mind the real consequences which policy choices made now will produce in the decades to come. It is also indicative of how decisions at the primary and secondary levels are likely to produce 'ripple effects' inevitably affecting higher education. National language policies should be the result of an integrated approach, taking into account potential long-term implications and existing technical capacity to support the adoption of English as a medium of university instruction.

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Thailand

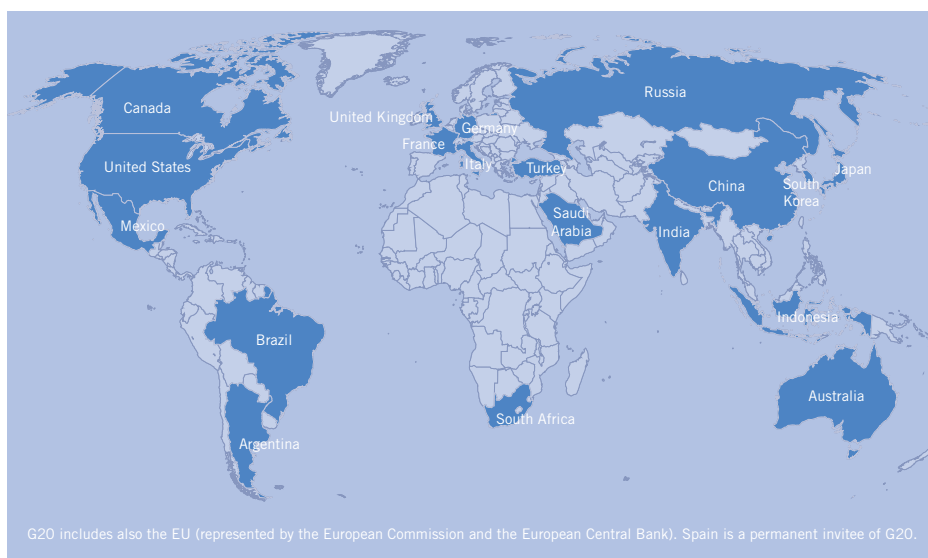
In contrast to Myanmar and Malaysia, no European power has ever formally imposed a foreign language on Thai government or education. The medium of instruction in Thailand is, therefore, mainly Thai, with English found only in some private institutions. In the Thai higher education system, English is but one subject among many others and students' level of English language proficiency does not serve to constrain their performance. This is a very different situation to that in Myanmar and, to a certain degree, in Malaysia. Nonetheless, there have been discussions about language policy in Thailand too. In border areas of the country, the Royal Institute of Thailand has been debating whether to suppress or encourage primary and secondary-level instruction in languages other than Thai. From the point of view of the government, encouraging pupils to become proficient in Thai is more important than promoting the uptake of English. At the same time, many teachers believe that compulsory English and/or Thai instruction in primary and secondary schools is contributing to poor educational performance among ethnic minority groups.

The experience of Thailand demonstrates that an overemphasis on English at the primary and secondary levels can potentially have a detrimental effect on learning. This also holds true for higher education. Many linguists believe that if pupils are able to conceptualise knowledge in their native language first, they will perform better in their own language, in a foreign language (be it English or another language), and most importantly, in the subject matter of their intellectual enquiry. As in the Malaysian experience, Thailand also illustrates how language policy in higher education cannot be divorced from choices made with respect to language instruction at the primary and secondary levels.

Other Countries in Asia and Beyond

Many education reformers throughout the world, including Myanmar, believe that English is a 'magic bullet'. In this connection, it is noteworthy that the majority of the best-performing economies in the world do not use English as the sole, or even main, medium of instruction in higher education (see figure 1). China, South Korea and Japan are obvious examples. In Europe, the Scandinavian countries have good levels of English proficiency among pupils; however, teaching in universities is not entirely in English. The situation is similar in the Netherlands.

Figure 1: G20 Major Economies



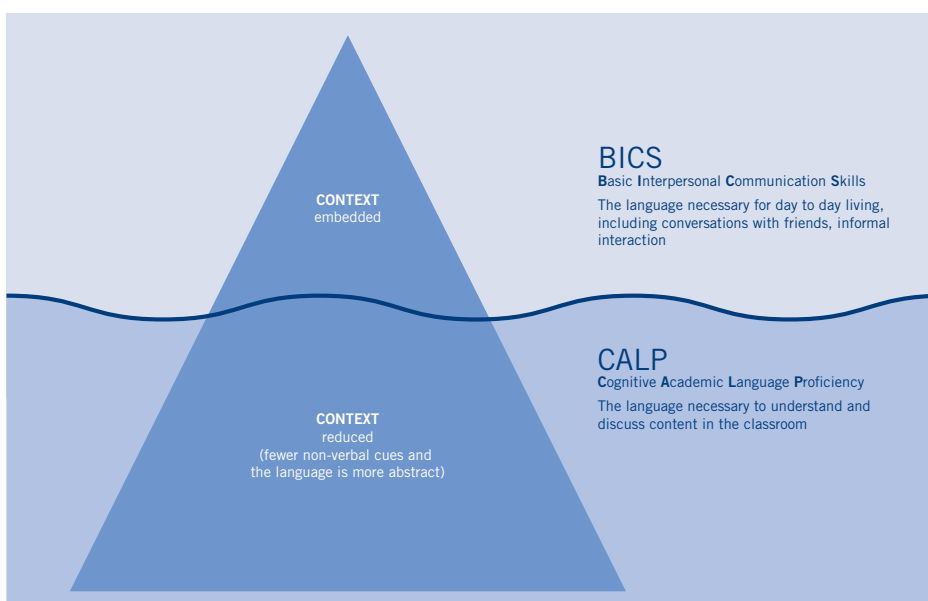
Myanmar could learn much from the experiences of other countries, and in particular countries in the Asia region. Comparisons should, nevertheless, be drawn with great care, taking into account different historical, political, economic, cultural and linguistic contexts. For example, many in Myanmar seem to aspire to the Singaporean model, which is seen as the epitome of modernity. Singapore shares a common history of British colonisation with Myanmar and is heavily Anglocentric, with English used widely, including as the official medium of higher education. Singapore is, however, a small, wealthy and highly urbanised city-state and as such, it does not constitute a suitable model for Myanmar with its large population and many languages.

Turning to the west, India's choice to make English its de facto *lingua franca* and a common medium of instruction in higher education may seem appropriate to the situation in Myanmar but only at first glance. India has many official languages, but none of these is considered a majority language. English thus serves to facilitate communication among different ethnic and linguistic groups. In contrast to the situation in India, Myanmar has a clear ethnic and linguistic majority, and despite shared colonial history, the English language has not developed as deep roots in Myanmar as it has done in India.

Many countries in the Southeast Asia region have re-thought policies that have previously put a high priority on English-medium instruction at the primary and secondary levels because of long-term negative consequences on student performance, including in higher education. In 2013, the Philippines, for instance, introduced legislation supporting mother-tongue education in fifty indigenous languages. This change recognises the importance of students learning key concepts in their native language first; this serves to enhance the depth of their learning in the subject matter over superficial English-language fluency. The Philippines' business sector has been largely supportive of the new policy, acknowledging that basic communication skills in English are not sufficient to ensure, on their own, competitiveness on the international stage. In Thailand, a pilot project in 2006 demonstrated that mother-tongue education can enhance considerably performance rates among students. For similar reasons, Indonesia has removed compulsory English in grade 1.

Research findings and the experience of countries in Southeast Asia suggest that a policy promoting English as the medium of instruction at the expense of local languages will actually work to the detriment of learning.

Figure 2: Cummins' 'Iceberg Theory'



Source: J. Cummins (1984), *Bilingualism and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy*, Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Research into the effects of using English as a medium of instruction in contexts where it is not spoken natively show that students often learn *less* because they are learning the subject *and* English at the same time, or neither particularly well. Cummins' 'iceberg theory' (see figure 2) is relevant here: at the tip of the iceberg are basic interpersonal communication skills; below that, in a much greater measure, is cognitive academic language proficiency. In other words, superficial communicative English skills are *not* the same as having developed sufficient English skills for academic use. Academic skills are usually best formed in a local language.

The findings of existing research and the experiences of various countries in Southeast Asia suggest that a policy that promotes English as the medium of instruction at the expense of local languages will actually work to the detriment of learning. Students may learn to speak English well, as in the case of the Philippines; however, they will develop only limited ability to learn, understand and internalise new concepts. Many educators and policy makers in Myanmar seem to assume that increasing the amount of English teaching at the primary and secondary levels will serve to counteract the challenges posed by English as the sole medium of instruction in higher education. Thus, there has been a marked increase in the number of years of English instruction starting early in primary education. The experiences of Indonesia and Thailand, however, suggest that this early exposure may have little effect on educational outcomes at the tertiary level.

Observations and Issues for Further Consideration

Currently, a number of organisations are involved in developing language policy and education reform recommendations for Myanmar. In addition to the Ministry of Education of Myanmar, key players include UNICEF, the Myanmar Indigenous Network for Education (MINE), the Pyoe Pin programme (partly funded by the UK Department for International Development and implemented by the British Council), the University of Melbourne and local 'language and culture committees' of the Mon, Karen, Kachin and Shan communities. The recommendations are partly feeding into the Myanmar Comprehensive Education Sector Review, a process geared towards taking stock of the current state of education in the country and intended to support the assessment of policy options as well as the implementation of priority reforms across the Myanmar education sector. Consultations, dialogues and specialist input are already taking place at various levels. The overall policy under development will integrate state and union-wide perspectives. It will also include sign language and communication issues related to visual impairment as well as spoken languages.

Different stakeholders tend to approach language diversity differently, depending on their vested interests and understanding of the issues at hand. Generally, language diversity can be seen as *a problem*, as *a matter of rights*, or as *a resource*. The 'language as a problem' position sees too many languages as generating unnecessary expenditure and confusion. At times, it can also be fuelled by fear that minority languages might promote anti-unity sentiments. The 'language as a right' approach accords equal standing to each and every language, be it minority or majority, official or indigenous. This approach risks overlooking what might be constructive or realistic, given a country's context and the varying sizes of language communities. The 'language as a resource' viewpoint regards language as an intellectual and cultural resource. Not every language is treated the same, but rather according to its function. There is much to be considered from this point of view in relation to language policy for education in Myanmar.

Workshop participants agreed on a number of key messages, which they hoped would help local policy makers, university administrators, as well as those involved in the Myanmar Comprehensive Education Sector Review process, to take discussions pertaining to the role of English in higher education further:

- The best language policy choice for universities in Myanmar may not be either English or Burmese, but some combination of the two. Policy makers and university administrators should encourage the use of Burmese as at least an auxiliary means of instruction in higher education.
- Language support (in Burmese or in English) should be extended to students who do not have sufficient language skills to cope adequately with the learning process.
- Professional development training for lecturers aimed at improving teaching techniques is needed, including strategies for Burmese and English.

Different stakeholders tend to approach language diversity differently, depending on their vested interests and understanding of the issues at hand.

- Language policy from the primary to the tertiary education level must stand on a firm foundation and be based on an integrated approach. The choices made at the primary and secondary levels should work towards the needs of higher education.
- Introducing more English-language teaching at the primary and/or secondary level may not necessarily help meet language-related challenges of higher education. The length of language study rarely equates with the quality of acquisition. Myanmar should focus on developing strong mother-tongue language education in Burmese or in indigenous languages in primary and secondary schools.
- The development of ‘English-language’ or ‘international’ tracks in a few universities for selected subjects is an option worth considering. Decisions as to which subjects are to be offered in English and which ones in Burmese should be the outcome of society-wide discussions and take into consideration labour market needs.
- While it may be appropriate to teach some subjects in one language versus another, policy makers and education reformers must remain wary of the danger of ‘domain collapse’, a situation in which those who pursue a university degree in a foreign language are no longer able to discuss certain subjects, or perform certain activities, in Burmese.
- Myanmar should invest in producing high-quality Burmese language textbooks for subjects deemed crucial to national development. International partners could assist in selecting topics that should be covered, recommending foreign language textbooks that could be translated or adapted into Burmese.
- National bodies, such as the Myanmar Language Commission, should work towards updating dictionaries, translation practices, and digital resources for Burmese, which is currently lagging behind the English language and cannot effectively meet societal needs.

This document is a summary of the views expressed by speakers and participants at the event and does not represent the established position of either the British Academy or the *École française d'Extrême-Orient*.

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The British Academy is the UK's independent national academy representing the humanities and social sciences. For over a century it has supported and celebrated the best in UK and international research and helped connect the expertise of those working in these disciplines with the wider public. The Academy supports innovative research and outstanding people, informs policy and seeks to raise the level of public engagement with some of the biggest issues of our time, through policy reports, publications and public events. The Academy also represents the UK's research excellence worldwide in a fast changing global environment. It promotes UK research in international arenas, fosters a global approach across UK research, and provides leadership in developing global links and expertise.

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About the *École française d'Extrême-Orient*

The *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) is a French institute dedicated to the study of Asian societies. The EFEO Yangon office, which has been operational since the early 2000s, supports research into the history, linguistics and ethnic diversity of the people and cultures of Myanmar. EFEO works not only with other French research institutions around the world, but also with UK higher education organisations through the European Consortium for Asian Field Study (ECAFS).

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