



Linguistic Equity And Practices In The School Education System Of Multilingual Myanmar

¹Manipabha, ²Om Prakash

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor in the Department of Linguistics, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong

¹Department of English and Modern European Language,

¹School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract: This research paper is the study of the situation of Myanmar's school education system, addressing the linguistic equality and practices in the schools of the country. Myanmar is a nation that has a large number of various ethnicities, and as a result, the multilingual students study in the classrooms of the schools of the country. As per the government record, there are totally 135 spoken languages in the country, and its official language is Burmese. Therefore, the country's school education system favors Burmese people's ideologies, which include the language and culture in the features of all public schools throughout the country. The ethnic students who have not had a Burmese background often struggle to catch lessons and knowledge in the classrooms of the schools.

This study focuses on the challenges, especially in the education of ethnic minority schools, and approaches strategies that can effect equal quality education for all students, although their language backgrounds are different. The paper highlights how mother language-based education, or multilingual education, is a way for achieving linguistic equality. By applying this based multilingual education, all students may study their basic education in their mother tongue. This may increase their learning results and affect their cultural identity. However, this education's successful achievement is based on the properly trained teachers who can teach in multiple languages and the supporting of teaching facilities and educational resources for the schools. The paper also emphasizes the participation of local organizations and support in the policy to get linguistic equality. Collaboration between local organizations and relevant authorities affects promoting educational policies that are inclusive of the needs of different language groups.

In summary, the implementation of mother language-based or multilingual education, training for skillful teachers, supporting of teaching facilities and resources, and the active involvement of local organizations are needed. These efforts are effective in getting linguistic equity and improvement of Myanmar's school education system.

Keywords: School education system, linguistic diversity, equity, multilingual school, mother language-based education, Myanmar.

I. INTRODUCTION

Myanmar is the nation-state that has a total of 135 different languages¹ spoken by various ethnicities throughout the country. 69 percent of the people speak Burmese, which is the national language, and it is also used as the language of medium in the schools. In Myanmar, the various ethnic groups live together, and they belong to their own linguistic and cultural identities. There are eight major ethnic nationalities in the country, such as the Burma, Shan, Karen, Rakhaing, Mon, Chin, Kachin, and Kayah. Out of them, the Burmans have 69%, the Shans 8.5%, the Karen 6.2%, the Rakhaings 4.5%, the Mons 2.4%, the Chins 2.2%, and the Kachins 1.4% (Lwin, Thein, 2011). The majority of people, the Burmans live on the plains, which are in seven states, while the other seven minority ethnic groups mostly live in the mountain regions.

Myanmar's multilingualism reflects the country's different cultural legacy, and thus the country's education system has challenges. The government applied the linguistic policy based on the Burmese language from 1962 to 2010 and prohibited the teaching of the languages of other ethnic nationalities in the public schools, and thus they tried to adopt other indigenous ethnicities in the unity of nationality (Lwin, 2000a). In Myanmar, there is a complex status about the language equality in the public schools because it still needs to balance the national language and the ethnic languages (Simpson, 2014).

In Myanmar, the Burmese language of the majority of Burmese people historically dominated in the system of school education. The ethnic students consider that it is unjust about linguistic rights for them. Those students face the academic barriers in the education and increase emotional and behavioral problems in the schools, and as a result, it leads them to a gap in educational benefits and social problems. Thus, the language equality is the issue about the preservation of language and affects all ethnic students to get the same opportunities in the schools.

Since 2010, the country's education system has been reformed by the government to promote the environment of all-inclusive education for the ethnic students. During the 2016-2021 period, the new democratic government has actively implemented a new National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) to get linguistic equity and to improve the educational benefits. This Education Strategic Plan is an evidence-based strategy and a long-term project to improve the education system of the country. The mother language-based or multilingual education system also has been implemented as one of the Education Strategic Plans to achieve linguistic equity and academic benefits for the ethnic students. However, the pathway to realizing the language equality is filled with the challenges based on political, social, and economic issues that affect linguistic policy and its practice in the schools (Premsrirat, 2015).

This research paper presents the current situation of linguistic equity and performance in the schools of Myanmar, studying education policies, language and culture variety, challenges, and opportunities based on the students' experiences in the schools of multilingual Myanmar. By analyzing the relationship between language and education, this article highlights how multilingual societies can build the inclusive and equal education environments in Myanmar.

II. SCHOOL EDUCATION SYSTEM IN MYANMAR

The education system of Myanmar has experienced major changes over the decades. The country's education system historically rooted in the monastic schools. The Buddhist monks primarily ran those schools for centuries with instruction in Pāli and Burmese. In the 19th century, the British colony introduced Western education and applied English and Burmese as the languages of medium in the schools. After getting independence from the British in 1948, the country's education system also developed. Hayden and Martin (2013) said that Myanmar was recognized as a nation that belonged to one of the best education systems in Southeast Asia before 1962. Missionary schools played a role in the development of education and taught English as the medium language.

However, after the country was undergone under the military coup of the Prime Minister U Ne Win in 1962, its education has gone down. The military government banned teaching with English in the schools and declared Burmese as the medium language. In the military government's reign, the country adopted the education of Burmese way to socialism (Lwin 2019). South and Lall (2016) also said that the military government failed with the educational mismanagement, distributed only a few budgets for education, did not create many opportunities for professional development, and used education as a political context. In addition, the military government is often in conflict with the armed ethnic forces. As a result therefore, Myanmar's education system has been left out of technological advances due to the situation of political instability in the country and has become lower quality in education.

¹ Although the government has recognized 135 ethnic nationalities as national races, many ethnic groups do not agree with this controversial number (Clarke, Myint, and Siwa, 2019).

In the school education, the Burmese language of the majority people of the country is used as the medium of instruction, although there is different linguistic diversity in the country (Lall and South, 2014). Burmese, English, and mathematics are the compulsory subjects at all levels of primary and higher education. At the university level, the subjects are learned in English except for the Burmese subject. Anui and Arphattananon (2021) said that Myanmar's education has emphasized the language, cultures, and traditions of Burmese people in schools' curriculums and promoted the use of monolingualism and monoculturalism at all educational levels, and the education system is a centralization of the government. Thant Myint (2006) said that the school's curriculums are strongly emphasized on memorized learning and integrate limited languages and cultural contents of ethnic nationalities.

According to Myanmar's Education Ministry, the new education system is structured with a kindergarten plus grades 12. The system is based on primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels (Ministry of Education, 2004). Primary education level is learned for 6 years, and it is from kindergarten to Grade 5. Secondary education level is also learned for 7 years in total, and it consists of two divisions, such as intermediate level and advanced level. The intermediate level is from the 6th grade to the 9th grade, and the three years of the advanced level are the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Tertiary education is college- or university-level, and it includes B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. courses, and its schooling years are based on courses. In Myanmar, kindergarten level is allowed for children aged five years old. The official age of children of grade 1 level is six years old. The examination of the fifth grade in order to complete the elementary level is examined at the district level. The ninth grade's examination for the completion of intermediate level is examined at the regional and state levels. The twelfth grade's examination for the completion of the advanced level is conducted at the central (Government Examination) level. In Myanmar, school education at the primary level is compulsory for all students. In addition to public schools of government in Myanmar, there are the schools of the armed ethnic nationalities and schools led by religious organizations, such as monastic education schools and church education schools. In the armed ethnic nationalities' schools, they apply their own education system in their controlled areas. The religious schools in the ethnic area are run by the religious leaders and civil societies. Lwin (2019) said most of the schools that are not under central government apply their ethnic students' language as the medium of instruction of classrooms.

In Myanmar, the government has been reforming and implementing the new national education system since 2011 in the reign of the semi-democracy government and during the 2016-2021 period by the civil democracy government. Anui and Arphattananon (2021) stated that, as an instance, the government implemented the local curriculum for the schools of ethnic minority regions to promote multiculturalism and social cohesion. In recent years, the ministry of education has been implementing a mother language-based education system for the ethnic students to promote linguistic equity, particularly in primary education. In addition, UNESCO (2015) reported that in some minority regions, the pilot programs have been introduced to teach young students in their local languages before the transition to Burmese and English.

The implementation of the new reformed education system is responsible for the government's education ministry to improve language equality, curricula development, training of teachers, supporting of teaching facilities and resources, and school administration. Smith (2020) said that despite efforts to decentralize in the educational administration, the education system is still highly remaining as a centralization under the control of the national government. The new reformed education's strategic plans are the long-term process to develop the education system in Myanmar.

Thus, Myanmar's education system is on the pathway to challenges to achieve linguistic equity and development of education. Although there has been progress in the new education system's policy, the needs and implementations still remain to be achieved in schools. The implementation of the challenges and strategies will need to apply continuous efforts to reform the development of curriculum, improvement of teacher training, and development of more inclusive policies that recognize and support the linguistic equity in the education of Myanmar.

III. LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

The research shows that there is linguistic and cultural diversity in the schools of Myanmar. In the findings, it reveals that the students of ethnic nationalities in the ethnic regions must follow their learning in a monolingualism, which is Burmese used in the schools' classrooms. The researchers view that language is a barrier for the students who have non-Burmese-speaking backgrounds. Although there is linguistic diversity in the schools, the Burmese students have no difficulty with Myanmar's education policy, which adopts Burmese as the medium language in the schools, but the students with non-Burmese backgrounds face linguistic difficulty and challenges under this language policy.

According to the experience of school administrators and school teachers who have served the duty in the ethnic regions, those teachers who can speak only the Burmese language struggle with the communication with ethnic students who cannot speak Burmese. But they teach the students the Burmese language and learn their language themselves and find the approach to the solution of the language problem. As a result, after learning the Burmese language, the ethnic students have better academic outcomes in the school education. However, some ethnic students encounter the linguistic problem in the schools. When learning the lessons, the students are difficult to understand and can't write properly in Burmese. In this situation, some teachers make replied the students the questions in their mother tongue languages and request the local teachers to translate their responses. Teachers view that the answers in their mother tongue languages are relevant to the question. Therefore, based on these situations, the education system should adopt the mother language in the schools' classrooms and should not have boundaries on the students in their learning capability with a language. The research finding also reveals that the students' mother language-based education system can achieve better academic benefits for the indigenous students.

In addition, the research papers have shown that current Myanmar's education excludes much of the cultural diversity, but the curricula, textbooks, and school education policies are found in the centralization. The students from the ethnic minority backgrounds do not learn their traditions and cultures based on the history and cultural tradition in the schools because the government has designed the school curricula within a monoculturalism and the ideologies of the dominant Myanmar. According to the reports of the school teachers, in the curricula enacted for the learning in the schools, they have seen about the information of Myanmar ethnicities, such as historically King Bayint Naung, King Kyan Sit Thar, etc., but have not found much about the contents of other indigenous nationalities, such as the kings, queens, and heroes of other ethnicities. Therefore, the school curricula do not much include the cultural contents and information of indigenous nationalities, and thus the ethnic students have no chance to study and preserve the cultural and traditional knowledge in their daily learning in schools' classrooms. The teachers also face the challenges when they teach the centralized curricula to the students from the different cultural backgrounds. The ethnic students learn the curricula and contents of the Myanmar government, which has no reflection on their cultures, and thus it makes it more difficult to understand for them. Thus, the indigenous students are more likely to encounter educationally and socially troubled situations as the national school curricula have neglected their cultural backgrounds.

In these findings in brief, using the monolingualism and monoculturalism in the school education can create the teaching and learning problems among the ethnic minority students.

IV. THE EFFORT FOR LINGUISTIC EQUITY AND PRACTICES IN MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

The equality of languages in the school education applies to the fair treatment of all languages spoken by the students, achieving the advantages of all linguistic groups in the educational process. In Myanmar, where there are 135 spoken languages, implementing linguistic equity has many challenges. The practices of implementation for the promotion of linguistic equity in Myanmar's school education system often reflect the complex relationship between national language policies, local linguistic realities, and the sociopolitical context.

In 2011, the civil government of the Union Solidarity and Development Party has implemented reforms to the new education system for the promotion of equality of languages for every student. In June of 2012, the Education Ministry started implementing the adoption of ethnic minority languages and cultures in education and permitted the teaching of the ethnic languages and literatures at the primary level (Jacques Bertrand, 2021). In the part of the Karen region, the government allowed the teaching of Zgaw and Po-Karen at the early primary level. However, it is before or after schooling time. In the Chin region, their ethnic language is allowed, but it is also in after-school hours. By 2013, the government allowed Chin languages and curriculum in government schools. In the Kachin region, their mother tongue language is allowed to be taught in early primary levels starting from 2015. Moreover, the ministry of education worked on the translation and compilation of school textbooks for the minority ethnic nationalities. But the permission has limitations for the teaching of their ethnic languages, mostly before or after schooling times. The new textbooks are also allowed to produce as per the government's expectations.

In 2016, the NLD democracy government allowed the application of the ethnic languages together with Burmese in the ethnic regions at the primary level. According to the National Education Amendments, state and regional governments are responsible for the development of local curriculum contents of the education. As evidence of changes in the ethnic regions, in Chin state, the Chin language is permitted for teaching, and local curriculums developed. In 2019, the organizations such as Chin's Christian Association in Ha-khar and the Baptist Union in Falam printed the textbooks in Chin's local dialect up to grade 5 and planned for the

development of materials for language and culture and local curriculums for history and geography till grade 12. In the educational management, the central government provided the teachers who were assigned to the Chin state with the costs of traveling. The officers of the township also manage directly to monitor and report quarterly. The authority of educational planning, budgeting, and decisions is decentralized to the local districts and townships for the promotion and transferring of educational staffs such as educational officers, school heads, and teachers. These measures are allowed to adopt the native contexts of the indigenous regions. The research has shown that state governments do not support much contribution, and thus overall judgments remain under the central government. Although the state's ministry of social affairs plays an important role in decision-making, the central government continues to hold the power. The practice of decentralization of the decision-making is different from one to another based on the leadership of states' ministers. Therefore, although the changes have been developing, the implementation of the new curriculums and language teaching still has limitations.

In some ethnic regions, the mother tongues-based education remains difficult for the ethnic nationalities. In the ethnic minority regions such as Kachin and Karen, the churches teach the students in their languages after schooling time and in the programs of the weekend. After the government adopted the new education policy, some have worked with local communities and printed the textbooks with local languages for the primary schools (Bertrand, 2021). In the regions of Rakhine, Mon, and Shan, Buddhist monasteries also teach their students in their mother tongues. However, they encounter the difficulty of teaching their languages because of the lack of educational resources. Therefore, the teaching of their languages is based on religious organizations and volunteer teachers. Although the educational reforms have been implemented, the teaching of ethnic languages continues to be taught mostly after schooling times and days.

In the Kachin region, the Kachin Independence Organization runs the schools in Laiza and Mai Ja Yang, which they have controlled. They established schools in 1964 and founded their own education department in 1976 (Jolliffe, 2014). The central government had a cease-fire with the Kachin Independence Organization between 1994 and 2011. The central government allowed teaching with the Jingpaw language, which is their mother tongue, following the curriculum of the government in the schools of their region. The students who pass the exams enrolled for university level are also allowed to learn in the universities of the country. After the breakdown of the ceasefire in 2011, these allowances have been limited.

In the Mon region, after having the ceasefire with the New Mon State Party, the central government allowed some schools of NMSP as the official government schools in the area of government. First, the students did not receive the education with the Mon language in the schools. Later, the schools are permitted to teach Mon language and its curriculum at the primary education level. This curriculum is adopted at the primary level and shifted in the curriculum of the government's system in post-primary education. Moreover, the government has allowed the Mon national schools, which teach with the Mon language based on a mother-tongue-based curriculum consisting of Mon history and language lessons, where the young students are taught in their mother tongue.

In Myanmar thus, the actual practice of linguistic equity in the school education system remains with many challenges. Although the educational reforms have been implemented, the government's limitation on the ethnic minority languages and its mother-tongue-based curriculum, and the purpose of the influence of the Burmese language and the centralization of the education system remain to affect significant barriers for the development of education. The development of Myanmar's linguistic equity and educational success will require cooperative effort to implement more inclusive policies that recognize and support the country's linguistic diversity. For that, the government should support the adopting mother tongue-based education system, skillful teacher training in the ethnic languages, and promoting more inclusive national dialogues on the significance of language in education and society.

V. STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING LINGUISTIC EQUITY IN MYANMAR'S EDUCATION

In Myanmar, there are many challenges in implementing the quality education system for the achievement of linguistic equity in the multilingual schools based on the diversity of languages, cultures, and traditions, and the country's political, social, and economic problems. Despite these challenges, the research papers have proposed effective strategies with the real implementation of the country's new reformed education system. Smith (2020) said that the ministry of education should apply the decentralization in implementing the education system. If the central government cooperates with the local ethnic authorities and empowers them in planning, decision-making, managing, authority, etc., about curriculum, textbooks, materials, teacher training programs, etc., the education system will be more equitable and achieve more beneficial educational outcomes for the multilingual students. Moreover, the government should adopt the mother tongue-based education system, especially in the ethnic schools. It makes sure to improve educational benefits for the indigenous

students. It includes printing textbooks and training teachers in minority languages (UNESCO, 2015). The government also should support teacher training programs. If teachers are skillful in various languages, the students will get language equality in their classrooms and thus develop their educational outcomes. Furthermore, the government should also practice a bilingual and multilingual education system in the schools. It can promote the diversity of languages and provide national unity. In this policy, students can apply their mother tongue language and the national language in the schools. In addition, the government should also apply multiculturalism in the education system. If the curricula and school materials include the cultural knowledge and contents, the students are more interested in school lessons, and as a result, they will achieve more educational outcomes. Therefore, the decentralization of the education system, adopting a mother tongue-based education system, applying a multilingual education system, training skillful teachers, and promoting multiculturalism can make the country realize the destination of linguistic equity and educational development in the school education system..

VI. CONCLUSION

This research paper studies the implementation of the ministry of educational government in the new reformed education system during the period 2011-2021, particularly in the schools of ethnic minority regions. In addition, the paper also presents the situation of school administrators and teachers in the ethnic schools and the difficulty and needs of various ethnic students in multilingual and multicultural schools' classrooms in the multifaceted education system that dominates the monolingualism and monoculturalism in the education in Myanmar. This study finds that the students who belonged to ethnic minority languages mostly did not get the chance to learn the lessons with their mother tongues and struggled to get the educational knowledge from the teachers in the classrooms. Those students encounter the hardship in their daily learning, and in return, the teachers who cannot speak in the local students' languages experience the difficulty in teaching the students. Therefore, teaching and learning only with the monolingual language in the multilingual classrooms wastes valuable schooling time and cannot achieve the educational benefits for the students in the education system that does not recognize the diversity of languages and cultures. Moreover, the ideologies of monolingualism and monoculturalism in the schools' curricula and teaching-learning process create inequality among the multilingual and multicultural students (Amina, Barnes, and Saito, 2022). This study shows that the ethnic students who are not from a Burmese language background should be more supported and taken care of in the classroom to handle their daily challenges in the schools (Due and Riggs, 2016). This research shows that although Myanmar's principles based on language, culture, and tradition are dominant in the education system, some school administrators and school teachers recognize the dominant nationality's social reproduction, which is well arranged and organized, and the active implementation of the government to reduce the difficulties of local ethnic students in the classrooms and to promote linguistic equity and practices with meaningful ways in the schools.

This study also finds that the ethnic students who have minority linguistic environments encounter difficulty preserving their cultural and social resources in the education system of Myanmar. Therefore, the policymakers of the government should recognize linguistic, cultural, and traditional diversity and promote more responsive and inclusive educational systems and policies. Mother tongue-based education systems and multilingual education systems are more beneficial for educational outcomes for the ethnic students, and thus they should be adopted in the indigenous states and regions. In addition, the finding suggests that the teachers should be trained to be skillful in various languages and cultures for the multilingual and multicultural schools' classrooms. If the teachers are able to understand the languages of local ethnic students, they may play a significant role in communicating with the students and reduce their difficulties, needs, and inequalities among them in the schools. Additionally, most teachers do not have knowledge about the cultures and traditions of the local students, as the government's school curricula and textbooks do not much include the contents of indigenous nationalities. For that, this study suggests that the ministry of education should add in the curricula the cultures and traditions of ethnic nationalities. Also, the government should organize the professional development programs for the development of teachers' knowledge in other cultures and religions. Arphattananon and Anui (2021) said that those programs ensure the benefits of training and effect in action for the implementation of education systems and policy.

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