



Karen Education Department's multilingual education for language maintenance

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Abstract

The choice of language of instruction and language policy in schools is a recent issue of concern with the maintenance of linguistic diversity through structured education in Myanmar. When multilingual societies adopt single-language-in-education policies, the trend is to assimilate different language speakers into that dominant language and their languages and cultures gradually decline and are lost. This sociolinguistic problem of the need to protect ethnic languages and cultures by integrating those languages and cultures into the education system is a significant one confronting Myanmar. In this study, the focus was on micro-level practices along with the community-established policies to contribute to the current and ongoing national language in the education policy development process. This study drew on findings from documents review, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. The study included in its scope those Karen Education Department (KED) schools exclusively functioning in the Karen National Union (KNU)-controlled area in Myanmar. The study concerned the monolingual Sgaw Karen and did not investigate multilingual and multicultural student populations. This study showed that implementing language policies in education and applying strong mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) programs in the communities where there are predominantly ethnic people could result in the enhancement of the maintenance of ethnic languages for ethnic minorities.

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Introduction

The sociolinguistic problem of the need to protect ethnic languages and cultures by integrating those languages and cultures into the education system is a significant one confronting Myanmar. Myanmar is a country comprised of approximately 135 ethnic groups. The nation has been known for its democratic transition in the past few years. The truth of the matter is that the issue of language planning has become a major concern in a country undergoing the processes of social, economic, and political change.

Myanmar is facing the problematic consequences of not providing proper education in the ethnic languages area. In fact, education and language policy and practice are at the essence of the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. Meanwhile, attempting to work constructively towards building social cohesion, the government gives priority to national education reform and the development of a comprehensive inclusive education policy as a key element of its overall socioeconomic development strategy.

Here a question arises: What kind of education best serves all ethnic peoples in the formal education system? KED schools devoted to the protection and promotion of the historical, cultural, and linguistic heritage of Karen people have been in existence in the KNU-controlled areas since the end of World War II. The actual teaching of

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mother tongue language and cultures has been occurring in communities over a long period with different approaches. In this regard, the overall research question of this thesis was developed: how is language-in-education policy aimed at language maintenance practiced in KED's schools? KED's schools have been opened mainly in the Sgaw Karen community that this current study was mainly concerned and the word "Karen," in this paper, refers only to Sgaw Karen.

Literature Review

A language and education policy and planning (LEPP) which supports the language community is usually initiated at the community level and either agrees with or opposes the LEPP determined by the top level. On the other hand, LEPP is oriented towards political and social aspects other than the real situation at the bottom and positively or negatively impacts LEPP. This phenomenon happens in society and can be seen from the view of the ethnography of language policy (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007). It looks into all the situations of each social process in language policy impacting on using languages in teaching and learning curriculum in the school. Other sociolinguistic aspects in the frame are considered in the ecology of language. Hornberger (2002) discusses the ecology of language to address the issue of having one language ideology which breaks apart rather than develops social cohesion in a multilingual society.

"Language policy is the primary mechanism for organizing, managing and manipulating language behavior as it consists of decisions made about languages and their uses in society. It is through language policy that decisions are made with regard to the preferred languages that should be legitimized, used, learned and taught in terms of where, when and in which contexts" (Shohamy, 2006).

Normally people assume that language policies are meant to be in documents, laws, regulations, or policy documents that specify the language behaviors. Actually, language policy is often implemented from a top-down approach in which a national governing body makes decisions to be implemented at a local level. These top-down approaches are typically prescriptive and generalized across multiple contexts. As Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) stated, top-down policies are developed by the people who have power and authority in making decisions for a particular group without consulting the grassroots members of the language group. They are paid attention because they reach out into society broadly by legislation or executive orders and political power (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). However, Shohamy (2006) comments that perceiving language policy should not always rely on the national political level but rather count all layers of the social network for decision making about language policy.

Malone (2007) describes the purpose and goal of MTB-MLE as helping students to achieve their educational goals. She also contends that MTB-MLE programs can be established from "top-down and bottom-up" within a whole education system. The government establishes that all children—in mainstream schools and in MTB-MLE programs—must achieve by the end of primary school so that

they can continue their education (in mainstream secondary schools). In local language communities, alone or working together, competencies are developed at the top to incorporate the knowledge, skills, stories, songs, and culture from the communities into the curriculum.

Subsequently, identifying a suitable program for the bilingual students is a fundamental principle for their educational benefit. The program types are identified with respect to the variables, namely the type of child (minority or majority), the language used in the classroom (minority or majority language or both), the educational aim (assimilation, enrichment, or pluralism), and the linguistic aim (monolingualism, limited bilingualism, or bilingualism) (García, 1997). It is important to note that a certain type of multilingual education program along with a proper implementation go with a particular language policy goal. In a weak multilingual education program, the use of the mother tongue of the learners has two main purposes such as temporary use to explain lessons and superficially keeping cultural values. The former applies the model of limited use of the mother tongue in the early grades and the latter refers to the program that teaches the mother tongue only as a subject. Coming from a monolingual approach, most countries have come to accept integrating the mother tongue language, but only in the form of weak bilingual education, which involves a reluctance to use the mother tongue as a resource. In this situation, language is viewed as a problem. Actually, a program that does not take the mother tongue as the main medium of instruction in education, impairs the children's education and eventually, exacerbates the ethnic children's educational and social problems. Therefore, including the mother tongue as an integral part in education is essential—instead of using the mother tongue as a temporary support for learning the national language-based curriculum and for symbolic preservation of culture by teaching the language in a limited way.

Methods

The methodology for this research was determined by the overall purpose of the study. This study sought to achieve an understanding of the situation of language-in-education policies developed at the ethnic community level, and also of the practices used in promoting mother tongue medium education. Methods to be able to reach the research objectives included document review, in-depth individual interviews with the KED Director, Curriculum and Training Coordinator, two school principals, and two teachers, focus group discussions with nine teachers, and class observations. The ethnography of the language policy method was employed to look into the process of language-in-education policy development and the critical works for the policy impacted on the education program model of MTB-MLE for the ethnic children. The data analysis was done using thematic analysis based on the research objectives and was manually analyzed. The resources from the national reports, documentations of KED and Number (1) State High School of KNU, and other outside resources were reviewed to analyze the historical context, policy statements, teaching and learning materials, and students' achievement.

Results and Discussion

The principles stated in the KED education policy along with details for implementation express the main goal as Karen language and culture maintenance and fostering respect for other languages and cultures. The contents of the statement focus on mother tongue-based education, giving particular attention to the use of Karen language and culture. Though the KED policy aligns with the National Education Law to preserve the languages and cultures, in reality, the existence of KED represents competition to the government implementation of this law in regions where KED is operating because the government schools allow teaching mother tongue for an hour per day outside the school system while the KED system uses Karen as the main medium of instruction.

Karen education in the Karen language has been significantly affected by history. The language attitudes have been influenced by the cultural beliefs. The language policy and planning of the Karen community are constrained by the impact of historical, social, and political changes. Given the wider sociolinguistic context influenced by the historical, social, and political issues, Karen medium education has steadily developed within a framework as below:

- 1) Language and cultural maintenance and promotion: The ethnic leaders struggle to protect their own culture through the generations by providing programs for children's education.
- 2) Karen national autonomy: KED administers the education that they themselves developed in the KNU areas, implementing their own education policy which aims to teach their own culture, language, history, values, and traditions.
- 3) Community Ownership: The local communities take ownership of the education program and operate the schools at their own initiative under the supervision of KED. The local people make efforts to provide effective education by developing the curriculum content and seeing to the proper running of schools.

4) Organizational provisions: The schools in the KNU area are basically community-based, but KED with the enormous help of other Karen community organizations regulates the formal educational system to give support in educational services providing mother tongue-based education.

5) Multilingualism: The Karen children in the KNU area grow up in a monolingual setting but schools include Burmese and English for a multilingual learning context with the purpose of improving opportunities for communication, further education and economics, and targeting to live in harmony with other language communities speaking Burmese and English.

The five point framework and language use in instructional materials can be understood from document reviews. Facts related to student contact with the different language and language of instruction, however, were found by interviews and focus discussion groups. According to the reviews of the textbooks of the subjects with the assistance of the Karen Curriculum and Training Officer, a table of language use in graded instructional materials was produced (Table 1).

Table 1 shows that the languages used in instructional materials were according to the grade. Generally, Burmese languages are only used in the Burmese subject's textbooks and it does not increase use in a higher level of classes as do English and Karen. Burmese is used in an equal amount from Grades 1–12 in accordance with textbooks but for L3, English is used increasingly in secondary school. It is certain that children are more in touch with the English language available in textbooks used in schools. The textbooks for the subjects (except for the language subjects such as Karen and Burmese) for G10-012 are in English, G7-9 mixed English and Karen, and G 1-6 mostly Karen. However, the language of instruction is Karen for G1-12. Nonetheless, in G10-12, some teachers use English to let students get more practice in speaking and listening to English.

How much the students have contact with languages in their learning in schools examining the time allocation of

Table 1
Language use in graded instructional material

Level	Subject	Grade	K	E	B	M	S	H	G	Hy
			Languages of instructional material							
Primary	Lower	1	K	E	B	K	—	—	—	—
		2	K	E	B	K	—	—	—	—
		3	K	E	B	K	—	—	K	K
	Upper	4	K	E	B	K	—	—	K	K
		5	K	E	B	K	—	—	K	K
		6	K	E	B	K	—	—	K	K
Secondary	Lower	7	K	E	B	K	E	K & E	E	—
		8	K	E	B	K	E	K & E	E	—
		9	K	E	B	E	E	K & E	—	—
	Upper	10	K	E	B	E	E	E	E	—
		11	K	E	B	E	E	E	E	—
		12	K	E	B	E	E	E	E	—

Note. K = Karen, E = English, M = Mathematics, B = Burmese, S = Science, H = History, G = Geography, Hy = Hygiene

Table 2

Time allocation per subject

Grades	Period of subjects in a week								Weeks in a year	Minutes per period
	K	E	M	B	S	H	G	Hy		
1–2	7	8	7	7					29	45
3–6	5	7	7	6			5	4	34	
7–12	4	5	5	5	5	4	5		34	

Note. K = Karen, E = English, M = Mathematics, B = Burmese, S = Science, H = History, G = Geography, Hy = Hygiene

each subject per year, is described in [Table 2](#) showing the language subjects taught from Grades 1 to 12 (see [Table 3](#)).

Karen is the main medium throughout primary and secondary schools with strong second and third language teaching as a subject. The first language is never removed as a medium of instruction. Therefore, the target is high-level proficiency in the first language plus high-level proficiency in the added two second languages. In KED, mother tongue education is used throughout with strong second languages taught as subjects. Basically, all subjects are taught in the Karen language.

Thus, learning subjects in languages can have a significant effect on children language competencies. Language use results in educational benefits and the education system strengthens language for the promotion of both language and education as well in the KED formal education system. The use of the learners' own language in teaching is the basic and practical application of the child-centered approach. There is a link between curriculum and teaching method for child learning ([Cummins, 2009](#)) Using the mother tongue as a foundation assists in learning additional languages and previously unfamiliar content.

The policy of promotion targets maintenance of the Karen language and culture but also other necessary languages (Burmese and English). The schools are established by the local communities supported by their local governance. The policy statements were announced in the Karen educational declaration of the Karen National Union as de facto government. In fact, the policy is practically applied in real situations because it was developed by practitioners at the grassroots level.

KED's policies and practices will enable the Karen language and culture to be maintained. In addition, multilingualism is encouraged in the KED education system. The fact that the KED education system includes Burmese and English in the curriculum throughout the school years' manifests that it encourages multilingualism. The students

can learn other languages and cultures without leaving their own languages and cultures and instead preserve, maintain, and develop their own language and culture, which embrace local values and wisdom. However, the implementation of this education system cannot be carried out without challenges. The challenges found out in implementing mother tongue-based multilingual education that would take considerable effort to overcome.

- The KED education system has been affected by a long political conflict and thus has been limited in its efforts to support Karen children.
- In relation to the practical experiences, there have been challenges in developing and using teaching methods for smooth transition between languages, which is different from the teaching methodology of teaching other subjects.
- Lack of bilingual teachers who have sufficient language proficiency in Burmese and English (and sometimes in Karen for those who come from outside and are not familiar with the local language, even though they are ethnic Karen).
- There are not enough textbooks and teaching aids.
- There are inadequacies in the teaching methodology for teaching languages; mother tongue, second language, and third language and using additive languages as the medium of instruction throughout the curriculum in accordance with the level of the classes.

To boost the program's strengths and overcome the challenges, policies supportive of ethnic language-based education needs to be affirmed at the federal level.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The policy and a suitable program model were suggested for the national education system to better serve all children of ethnic nationalities in Myanmar. Specifically, the KED's strong additive MTB-MLE is applicable in areas where the population contains predominantly ethnic language speakers. The government education system has not adequately allocated time and focus to ethnic languages, resulting in an immersion program intended to assimilate the ethnic children into the dominant language. The concessions which have been made for ethnic languages are just a supplementary program which teaches mother tongues as a subject rather than using mother tongues as languages of instruction; thus, it will not result in the successful ethnic education that the policy statements expect.

Table 3

Teaching time per language

Teaching time per language and activity			
Year	L1, Karen as subject and Mol	L2, Burmese as subject	L3, English as subject and Mol
1	100%	0%	0%
2	90%	5%	5%
3–5	80%	10%	10%
6–8	80%	10%	10%
9–11	60%	25%	15%
12–14	50%	25%	25%

Note. L1 = first language, L2 = second language, L3 = third language, Mol = medium of instruction

To promote ethnic languages as the 2014 National Education Law dictates, the education system has to make room for ethnic languages to be taught as subjects and used as the languages of instruction. National level policy planning is underway but has not yet solidified, so it has been set aside and is not yet being put into practice. Thus, little forward motion is apparent and the current policy will continue to act as an obstacle as it has been in the past for ethnic education.

Taking the example of the KED education system, the type of maintenance recommended for a multilingual program is one that appropriately meets the needs of the community and is applied in government schools attended by children of a single ethnic group. The MTB-MLE policy framework should be identified and accomplish the necessary tasks to successfully reach the national education goals—Education for All, Inclusive education, No Child left behind, and use of the Child-Centered Approach. The KED example provides a model program in order that the country can reinforce ethnic language maintenance through mother tongue-based multilingual education. As Myanmar has diverse ethnic nationalities who have been hoping to preserve their own languages, it is good to take KED's system of mother tongue-based education as a relevant example for other ethnic communities. The following recommendations are made from the research results. These recommendations should be disseminated at workshops and meetings among the language community members, ethnic education providers, and the governmental bodies who have been charged with the development of state level language and education policy.

Recommendations for the Government

In the light of this study's research results, the researcher sets forth recommendations for nationwide language-in-education policy and implementation as follows:

- 1) Mother tongue-based multilingual education based on the additive bilingual model should become a common feature of education for national development and a common feature of education and development across the country.
- 2) Participation from the top level in MTB-MLE is most effective not when focusing on details but in providing recognition. For example, KED schools at the community level affirm and put into practice the KED high-level policies.
- 3) The national and regional governmental bodies need to systematically make a plan to implement pilot projects in ethnic majority areas, especially where existing ethnic education systems are in use, as an initial step toward the wider implementation of MTB-MLE.
- 4) The national and regional governmental bodies need to develop a communication or advocacy strategy which both informs and engages each language community in language and education discussions. The purpose is to

ensure that civil society is provided with the information about the critical role of both ethnic languages and other languages of wider communication for successful and sustainable development of MTB-MLE, success in education, and national development.

- 5) The government should adjust its systems by way of decentralization, posting local teachers in their own communities, and developing a curriculum that supports the policy implementation nationwide.

Recommendations for KED

- 1) The declaration of the Karen education policy from the KNU in 2015 should be re-expressed as more specific policy statements, clearly identifying language teaching practices for teaching Burmese and English as subjects and using English as one of the languages of instruction in higher grades.
- 2) KED needs to build up a better formed and structured MTB-MLE program, implementable among Karen people across the country, reaching out to all Karen communities systematically.
- 3) KED needs to form relationships and improve cooperation with other related ethnic group organizations to share ideas and distribute the workload to produce more productive and collective work within a short time. This should be done immediately due to opportunities to fill the gap in the current shortfall of school infrastructure (experienced by KED and others) and for the initiation of systematic education programs in other Karenic language groups and other ethnic groups.
- 4) The results suggest conducting a revision of the curriculum for teacher training programs, including multilingual and intercultural initiatives, in-service teacher training, and the training of trainers and supervisors which reinforces the linguistic knowledge and mother tongue and second language learning theories.
- 5) Teaching methodologies need to be developed which support the integration of multilingual and intercultural education.

Recommendations for Ethnic Communities

- 1) The existing ethnic education programs should take the KED's MTB-MLE program as an example to promote their respective language and culture for the maintenance and use of multilingual education.
- 2) Specifically, for the regions where the population is predominantly respective ethnic language speakers, the KED's MTB-MLE language in education model should be

learned and adapted for appropriate programs according to the other ethnic groups' contexts.

3) Prior to the application of KED's MTB-MLE, sociolinguistic research on the ethnic communities should be undertaken to identify whether it involves a similar situation to the KED's students. Otherwise, the ethnic communities would use the KED's MTB-MLE program model in the wrong situation.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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