

A Study of Contemporary Trends and Challenges of English Language Teaching in Myanmar

Thandar Soe
Department of English, Mandalay University

Abstract

This article details a mixed methods study conducted during the 2015 academic year at Mandalay University, Department of English in Mandalay Myanmar. It contributes to discourse examining contemporary patterns and challenges of English language education. Methodology from both qualitative and quantitative paradigms was systematically combined. A survey questionnaire was distributed to 70 participants and ten focus group interviews were conducted with 33 participants. A second set of participants included university students from institutions in the Mandalay region. Results suggest that English language teaching in Myanmar mirrors other Asian contexts in terms of the rising influence of globalization for English teaching, a concern for teachers' English proficiency, and the disconnect between policy and practice. Teacher confidence, disconnect between curriculum and preparation of students; low salary, overreliance on the transmission model, and large class size were also reported as challenges. Recommendations call for steps toward a foundation of reflective practice using action research as a starting point and secondly to encourage English language educators representative of the creative class, defined by Florida (2002) to align as a public group of professionals. Future research should examine the elements that make English an important language in the Myanmar context and based on this, consider what concept of English, what variety of English, and what methodologies of English language teaching are most productive for Myanmar as a nation in transition.

Keywords: teachers' challenges; English as a foreign language; mixed methods; Myanmar in transition

Introduction

Three men, an Italian, French and Spanish went for a job interview in England. Before the interview, they were told that they must compose a sentence in English with three main words: "green", "pink" and "yellow". The Italian was first: "I wake up in the morning. I see the yellow sun. I see the green grass and I think to myself, I hope it will be a pink day." The French was next: "I wake up in the morning, I eat a yellow banana, a green pepper and in the evening I watch the pink panther on TV." Last was the Spanish: "I wake up in the morning, I hear the phone "green...green..." I "pink" up the phone and I say "Yellow?" (CITE)

The anecdote above depicts the global expansion and linguistic creativity of the English language. It also reflects the views of scholars such as Kachru (1985), Crystal, (1997), Jenkins (2002), and

Seidlhofer (2004) whom note that English should not be defined by the migration of native speakers but rather by individuals acquiring the language for economic, social, and humanitarian incentives. Approximately 2 billion people communicate in English worldwide; 450 million speak English as a first language along with 500 million who speak it as a fluent second language, and another 1 billion use it as a foreign language. Nearly one-third of the world's population is studying English, and predictions suggest that by 2050, half of the world population will be proficient English speakers (Crystal).

The Southeast Asian nation, Myanmar, is a case in point. Since the first general election in 2010, Myanmar has emerged from decades of international isolation, natural disaster, civil conflict, and classification as one of the world's poorest nations. Myanmar is becoming increasingly integrated in the global economy and expanding as a key player in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2009 the 10 nations comprising the ASEAN, including Myanmar officially recognized English as the sole operational language of the organization (Kirkpatrick, 2014).

The increased status of English in the ASEAN as well as within major societal dimension such as economic, social, and political has meant that English language education is promoted as an important factor in Myanmar's continued development. Recognition is also noted for the role that English language education plays in helping Myanmar citizens increase ability to participate in the world economic system. As such English language teaching is popular and promoted as an essential profession for continued growth and expansion within all dimensions of Myanmar (Street, 2001; UNESCO 2005). Myanmar academics along with government decision makers agree that reform of English language pedagogy and its training implications are a necessary step to improve the national education system. This process, as noted by Myanmar stakeholders, folds directly into the urgency to rebuild capacity for political, administrative and legal entities, as well as for enhanced delivery of public services, especially education.

In response this article details a mixed methods study conducted during the 2015 academic year to examine contemporary patterns and challenges of English language teaching and learning in the Myanmar context. Methodology from both qualitative and quantitative paradigms were systematically combined (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) to enhance strength of data collection and advance insights surrounding patterns and challenges of English language teaching and learning. To begin, the theoretical framework of the study is presented along with a review of relevant literature. Highlights of this discussion include the importance of theories, knowledge, methods, skills, and technologies for classroom instruction models and for definition of English within specific contexts. Next, a description of the research setting is provided which leads into an outline of the methodological framework of the study. Findings are presented as national and international trends and challenges of English language teaching and learning as an international language. Recommendations for researchers and language educators are outlined with intent to inform English language pedagogy and equitable practices within the Myanmar context.

Literature Review

The term *international language* was originally described by Smith (1976) who noted that an international lingua franca is one which is used by people of different nations for mutual contact. Smith emphasizes the relationship of English as an international language to culture and suggests that learners should not internalize cultural norms of native speakers. Rather its purpose is to communicate information and ideas as well as transmit culture within learners' respective contexts. As suggested by Brutt-Griffler (2002), the expansion of English in nations such as Myanmar has two important implications. Context is important, meaning that English language education in Myanmar should be defined by the use and acquisition of English primarily within communities of non-native speakers. And second, as a research focus, English language education in the Myanmar context should be shaped by English speech communities rather than individual language learners.

Defining development of English as an international language in Myanmar has four criteria (Brutt-Griffler, 2002). First, English is widely used as a communication tool for connection with the world market and business community, as well as for a global scientific, cultural, and intellectual presence. Second, English is used alongside local languages, such as Myanmar, within multilingual communities of bilingual speakers. Third, all levels and sectors of society use English. And lastly, English as an international language spreads not through speaker migration but rather by speech communities acquiring English.

Modiano (1996) emphasizes the democratic nature of English, noting that specific linguistic features are correct only if used and understood by a majority of proficient speakers of English. In this view proficient non-native English speakers are equipped to define and develop English as a tool for cross-cultural communication. This stance legitimizes non-native speakers and is in sharp contrast to other theorists, such as Kachru (1992) who suggests that norm production is restricted by geographical location of native speakers.

As noted, the creative use of English in Myanmar should be based on the generation of norms within English speakers in Myanmar communities. Yet English language educators worldwide face common obstacles that follow specific patterns and challenges. Lambon (2009), for instance, reports challenges of English language instruction in the Chad Republic. The overarching challenges were the limited ability of educators to teach English language skills, especially in the areas of speaking, listening, and reading. The second challenge was lack of a unified and context driven Ministry of Education curriculum. English language educators typically relied on English textbooks that were abstract and more importantly, were not aligned with the Chadian context.

De Segovia (2008) noted that patterns and dilemmas of English teaching in Thailand mirror those in other Asian contexts. The overarching issues included: exaggerated economic incentives for the English language teaching profession; a concern for teachers' low English proficiency levels and methodological training; and disconnect between curriculum policy and classroom practice. De Segovia referred to this disconnect as a loss of coherence and labeled it as a gap between *rhetoric and reality* (p. 28). The overarching problem, according to De Segovia, was English language policy

statements in Thailand that were limited in efforts to shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches. Teachers were actively involved in reform efforts, but nearly invisible in the decision-making process. Added to this were problems such as low teacher confidence and an unrealistic timetable for change. Students' lack of interest in learning English along with the perception of the low value of English further contributed to the breakdown of reform efforts.

According to De Segovia (2008) reform should be based on a concise definition of the language learning process in the Thailand context. The definition should account for constraints on achievement, particularly due to limited contact with English as the target language outside of formal classroom instruction. Additional considerations included lack of sufficient teacher training, resources, mentoring support, and the cost of in-service teacher training.

Nimmannit (2008) reported challenges in China with English language reforms. China has an estimated 1 million English teachers, as well as 200 million school students and 13 million university students learning English. Based on Nimmannit's investigation, the most expansive issues were large class size and high levels of pressure to perform well within the examination system. Reform efforts were stifled by these challenges as the national system attempted to replace the transition model with a communicative approach for English language education. Additional barriers included lack of available teaching material, shortage of qualified and motivated teachers and reliance on non-certified instructors.

Studies in other world regions mirror similar patterns and dilemmas. In the gulf area Syed (2003) noted that educational institutes were ineffective as well as inefficient. She reported that expatriates from Arab counties such as Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt typically taught English. As contracted teachers they were not motivated to critique the educational system or to initiate instructional change. More concisely, Peyton (1997) argued that the English language teaching profession was faced with increasing enrollments and a shortage of qualified teachers. A changing student population, national education reform, and the development of standards for foreign language learning also contributed to the challenges of English language teachers worldwide.

In a similar study McAllister (2009) stressed the importance of techniques, aims, and materials that contribute to a precise and more complete form of English language teaching. As noted by this scholar, reform must include sweeping changes in the attitudes of people interested in language teaching, a revolution of classroom presentation, retraining of teachers, and a comprehensive vision for global competence.

Research Design

The research was designed as a mixed method study. Methodologies from both qualitative and quantitative paradigms were systematically combined (Johnson & Christensen 2008) to enhance strength of data collection, and to advance insights surrounding the complexities of English language teaching and learning in the Myanmar context (Axinn et al. 1991). Beginning research questions included:

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- 1) What are the patterns and challenges that Myanmar educators encounter in the field of English language teaching and learning at university levels?
- 2) What are the reasons behind the respective patterns and challenges and what recommendations can be offered in the Myanmar context?

sources as a viable option for data collection (Pinar et al. 1995). In response the investigation was initiated with a review of sources to develop a contemporary reference for English language teaching and learning in Myanmar. The inspection of written documents such as books, periodicals, newspapers, and legal documents to gain a foundation for the history, geography, ecological needs, and community efforts at work in Myanmar were ongoing during all stages of investigation.

Procedures for both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analyses were completed in sequential phases by means of a convenience sampling technique (Stewart & Shamdasani 1990). Descriptions of the data collection procedures and analyses are outlined as Phase One and Two.

Phase One

The quantitative data set consisted of a structured teacher survey questionnaire designed to provide both descriptive and inferential evidence. Phase one data collection involved 73 participants. For the purposes of this research, participants were defined as full-time English language educators who (1) were Myanmar citizens and government workers; (2) held full-time positions as English language educators ranging from tutor to administrator; and (3) taught at various universities in the Mandalay region. A questionnaire was distributed to participants when they were gathered together in March and May 2015 to grade and evaluate the Myanmar high school matriculation English language exam for over 100,000 students. Data gathered from the survey questionnaire were encoded and analyzed using the Statistics Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 15. Internal consistency using Lee Cronbach's (1951) coefficient alpha (Cronbach's alpha) was computed at 0.89, suggesting a high level (Nunnally & Bemstein 1994). Descriptive analysis included the mean, standard deviation (SD) and cross-tabulation of participants' multiple responses for identified questions.

Phase Two

The qualitative data set included ten voice recorded focus group interviews, participant observation of formal university extracurricular student clubs and other school related activities, the upkeep of a focus group field log, and biweekly researcher debriefing sessions.

From April to June 2015 focus group interviews were conducted with 10 groups of participants. Each focus group included 4-6 participants. Interviews were conducted in English; participants responded using English but helping each other with some explanation in Myanmar was accepted. Development of the interview guide followed principles outlined by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) as the funnel approach; six unstructured, open-ended questions were ordered from general to specific as a strategy to engage the interest of participants. Interview procedures included an introduction of the group discussion, overview of the topic, ground rules, and the initial question. All interviews were videotaped and voice recorded.

Documentation and analysis followed Stenhouse's (1988) categorization style of case data. Key themes, reflections, and insights were summarized in a field log after each session. Minor adjustments were made for subsequent interviews based on review of field logs. Researchers independently reviewed field logs and focus group recordings to generate a list of key themes. Biweekly sessions were scheduled to individually present and discuss emerging themes. The aim of biweekly sessions was to identify trends and patterns that reappeared within either a single focus group interview or across them. A case record was established for each focus group interview. Data were kept intact as a way to illuminate meaning and insights in relation to case-by-case processes and to gleam themes and sub-categories across all cases under study. This approach limited the possibility of losing important themes of each case (Stenhouse 1988). Primary themes were determined after data were transcribed as case records. Topics and emerging themes were recorded and a master list was generated. A reexamination of case records was completed followed by formation of one case study.

Findings and Implications

Part I: Toward Reflective Practice

Participants explained the role of English as a valuable means for Myanmar citizens to access and participate on both national and global levels in all areas of their lives such as the educational, economic, social, and political. Beyond this, participants' beliefs about the role of English along with policies and decisions to promote contemporary English pedagogic practices in the Myanmar context are debatable, unfixed, and less focused. A theme generated from participants was the gap between English proficiency of educators and students; some students had obtained a high level of proficiency and fluency, in part, from watching Hollywood film and TV shows as well as attending private English language schools. These students were confident speakers who used English easily; in contrast some educators were less proficient and less fluent than their students. This gap created an imbalance of the teacher student relationship, revered and interwoven within the Buddhist philosophy for respect and honor of teachers. The imbalance was often compounded by disparity between curriculum policies and classroom practices based on the transition model and the new generation of students whom were born into a world of modern technology as digital natives.

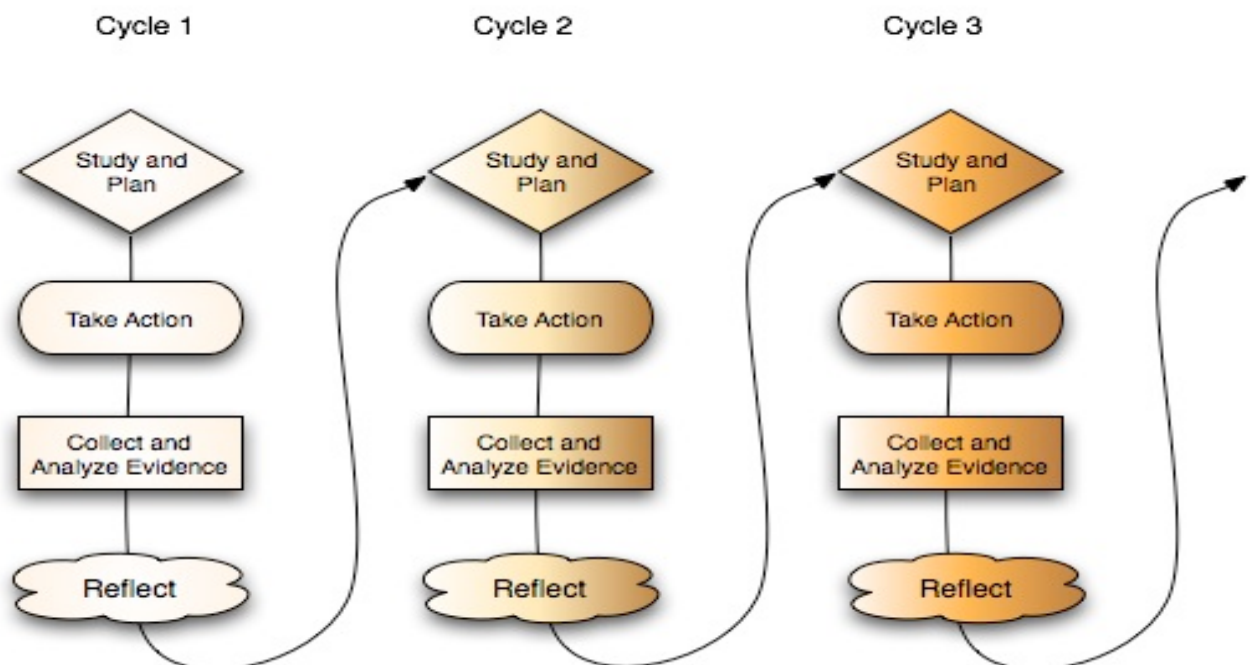
The transmission model that stresses hierarchical learning of knowledge and conventional teacher-centered classroom organization often defined participants' personal experiences of the teaching and learning process. In-service training moreover often involved participants attending workshops and then cascading or disseminating information to colleagues in their respective colleges and departments. This strategy is referred to as the cascade model of training and is useful especially when resources are limited. Critics, however, argue that it lacks transferability to the classroom and is limited in terms of reflection and critical enquiry.

Reflective practice is designed to ensure that educators are supported to reflect upon their own beliefs and classroom practices through observations, coaching, and feedback to improve the quality of teaching. A challenge recognized by many participants was an overloaded daily schedule without dedicated time to reflect on practice. For participants, the notion of reflective practice was missing

from their professional lives. Participants agreed that setting aside time in their teaching schedules to monitor and reflect on the effectiveness of classroom practice would be beneficial and useful to address many of the current challenges faced as Myanmar English language educators.

Scholars suggest that implementing opportunities for classroom based action research encourages educators to become more motivated which in turn leads to improvements in the instructional process. Involvement with action research provides a personalized process for educators to identify their professional learning needs as well as those of their students. Through the research process participants assume leadership roles for setting goals and monitoring progress towards them. In this way, Myanmar English language educators could have sustainable opportunities to collaborate on issues of instructional planning, to learn from one another, and to conduct research on the outcomes of classroom practices in their own classrooms during scheduled work hours. A research framework of participatory action research (PAR) is suggested as a viable option. The PAR framework positions all participants as equals with outcomes that are deliberately shaped to benefit the immediate environment; respective courses, Departments of English and university communities.

Action research is defined as an ongoing series of cycles with dedicated time for planning actions, acting, observing effects, and reflecting on observations that lead to sharing in a scholarly format. The action research process can be introduced to educators with the following diagram:



Progressive Problem Solving with Action Research

These cycles form a spiral that results in refinements of research questions, resolution of problems, and transformations in the perspectives of participants. The end goal--improvement of professional

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practice through continual collaborative learning and progressive problem solving can be realized through action research.

Part II: Educator Resilience, Skill, and Creativity

We traditionally think of creativity as an attribute of an artist or the arts. Yet creativity is a broad, fundamental notion . . . [that] encompasses innovation, entrepreneurship and expression. It connotes both the art of giving birth to new ideas and the discipline of sharing and applying those ideas to the stage of realized value. (Collaborative Economics 2001, 4)

Human capital is a popular concept wedded to discourse of the Myanmar capacity for the 21st century global knowledge economy; scholars note that the economic and social prospects of Myanmar depend on the quality of human capital, defined by participants in terms of how well educated Myanmar citizens are in the 21st century. Participants noted that the quality of educational institutions and systems at all levels of education, from pre-school to university significantly impact the present and future status of the Myanmar economy.

Reich (1991) argues that the economic well being of society is contingent on individual skills rather than corporations. Now more than ever the success of contemporary economies are dependent on new and different skill sets from workers who are directed by creativity and have capacity for innovation. For success workers must have talent to manage dynamic and information-rich environments (Castells 2001). In this line of reasoning the reconfiguration of educational, economic, and community institutions to better generate and take advantage of the individual creativity demanded by contemporary and globalized economies is essential (Robinson, 2001).

Florida (2002) emphasizes the rise of a class of occupations, and the individuals who hold them, rather than a special sector of the economy. He argues that society stratifies into four main occupational groups: the agricultural, working, service, and creative classes. The creative class includes *a super-creative core* of “people in science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music, and entertainment . . . [whose] job is to create new ideas, new technology and/or new creative content.” These people engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of human capital” (p. 8).

The creative class as defined by Florida (2002) is useful to capture a snapshot of participants who share commonality by way of their creative ethos that values creativity, difference, and merit. These participants go beyond classroom and system conditions; as a group they devote a good portion of their lives to common ethos and their importance in many contexts. The extremely low salaries do not deter these participants as Myanmar educators nor are they tempted to supplement their low salaries with the option of adding private lessons, tuitions, to their already overloaded schedules. Participants representing the creative class are English language educators for the challenge, the responsibility, and for the recognition and respect their work brings. Commonality among the creative class of participants was evident by their descriptions and ideas:

We are English teachers because we want to work in exciting area with people who are excited about what is occurring in Myanmar (FG-5-3)

We do it because as creative teachers, it is central part of who we are or want to become (FG-6-3)

We are always motivated to work harder rather than be told what to do by superior or by extra income from tuitions (FG-8-2)

These participants are imbued with a creative ethos, connecting all aspects and manifestation of creativity—in all its various facets and dimensions—technological, cultural, and educational.

Fostering Myanmar English educators as a creative group provides strategy to address challenges and opportunities for educators to assume leadership roles within their professional communities. These educators have the capacity to serve as models and mentors and assume positions to coach, mentor, and participate in the decision making process for curriculum, policy, and program reform. As such the Myanmar English language teaching profession can be further harnessed for productive purposes with acknowledgment of the pockets of educators representative of the creative class of Myanmar English language professionals.

Yet, creativity by itself is not the answer to the challenges faced by the Myanmar English language teaching profession. Rather the creative class of Myanmar educators have to step up to the responsibility, to transition and evolve from an unstructured group of self-directed, high- achieving, individuals into a cohesive, more public assembly.

Conclusion

Key implications stress the importance of reflective practice using action research as a starting point and secondly to encourage the pockets of English language educators representative of the creative class to align as a public group. These implications focus on teaching English but also on changing pedagogy and in this way supporting quality pedagogic standards across the field of English language teaching in Myanmar. The broad array of patterns and challenges and the factors behind them raise questions as to next steps for the English language teaching profession in Myanmar. What is needed, and what should universities and the Ministry of Education together with the local communities do to improve the instructional process and maintain quality of teaching among English language professionals?

Research dedicated to English language teaching and learning in the Myanmar context is likely to produce many positive results; yet future research should explore the discourse that promotes English in the Myanmar context along with the expectations and claims that are made about competence in the English language in the context of Myanmar in transition. Scholars note that (Wedell, 2007) the type of English promoted is often unsuitable for the priorities and sociolinguistic realities of the communities served. Future research should examine in depth what it means for

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English to be an important language in the Myanmar context and based on this, consider what concept of English, what variety of English, and what type of English language teaching in practice is most productive for Myanmar in transition.

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