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Teaching Ethnic Language as a Subject in Primary School to Enhance Access to Education of Children of Ethnic Minority Groups: A Case Study of Teaching Kayin Language at Primary Schools in Thandaunggyi Township, Kayin State, Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study gives an overview on the current state of Myanmar's policy and implementation of the teaching of ethnic minority language as a subject in primary schools. It examines how ethnic language is taught as a subject for primary school children under the new education policy launched in 2013, the benefits as well as the challenges faced by the schools in the implementation of such language policy. Two schools in Thandaunggyi township in Kayin state, where Kayin ethnic minority group forms a considerable portion of the town's population, were selected as the research

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settings. The study employs formal, informal and in-depth interviews which were conducted on 15 informants—education officers, school principals, teachers and parents—in Thandaunggyi township in June 2020. Key finding of the research is that the state's policy and implementation on teaching Kayin language at primary schools in Thandaunggyi has reduced language barriers for Kayin children, making them feel more comfortable attending the state-run schools. However, there is a weak linkage between having ethnic language classes and the increase in access to education among Kayin children. Teaching Kayin language at the state-run schools also promotes the preservation of Kayin children's ethnic identity and the consolidation of their dual (ethnic-national) identity. It also contributes to meaningful interethnic interactions and acceptance of ethnic diversity among the children. The key challenges in teaching Kayin language as a subject at school lie in the lack of better-quality textbook and teaching guideline, inadequacy of teaching aids, and the possibility of teaching staff shortage. It is crucial for the state to provide continuing assistance and support to schools and to regularly assess the strengths and weaknesses of this implementation.

Introduction

The right to education is one of the fundamental human rights under the international human rights standards. In Myanmar, every citizen has the right to education under national laws and policies. According to the National Education Law 2014, every person can access education and the ethnic groups have the right to preserve and enhance their languages, literature and culture. Since Myanmar is an ethnically diverse country with some 135 ethnic groups under the 2014 Census, language barrier would be one of the most significant factors regarding education development for ethnic people. On the one hand, the government is also attempting to reduce language barriers to access the education for ethnic groups by implementing the ethnic language teaching from the primary level. This research article will give an overview on how the new ethnic language policy is implemented in Myanmar and in Thanduanggyi, in particular and how teaching Kayin language as a subject at primary schools

has been carried out during the past seven years. It will also analyze the impact on access to education by teaching the ethnic language as a subject from the primary level in Thandaunggyi. Benefits of having Kayin language taught as a subject at primary schools will be explored and discussed alongside challenges faced by the schools in their attempts to create effective ethnic language class that contributes to social inclusivity for ethnic minority groups of Myanmar.

Research design and methodology

Qualitative research design and methods were used in this study conducted from March 2020 to July 2020 because it is the best approach to develop a better understanding on the situation of teaching ethnic language as a subject in primary school level in Kayin State, the implementation of it in those schools, and also its impact on access to primary education. The research setting, two state-run schools with the total of 211 and 138 students, was located in the suburb of Thandaunggyi Township. The reasons why this township was chosen as the research setting are several. First of all, Thandaunggyi, located in Hpa-an district, Kayin state, is where the considerable number of people belonging to Kayin ethnic group live. Secondly, the town is located in the valley, a little far from Hpa-an district center. This type of geographical challenge is likely to make the ethnic Kayin people keep close to themselves. Kayin language is widely spoken in the area and being regard as the key language of communication. Lastly and most importantly, we know very little about how primary schools in the area implement the teaching of ethnic language and the effect of it. There is no systematic research done by any party on this crucial issue in Thandaunggyi township up to date.⁴

⁴ Issues of teaching ethnic minority language in Myanmar are often covered in reports of NGOs, usually the international ones like UNICEF and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, that collaborate with the Myanmar governments on social development projects. Research done by local researchers are difficult to find and mostly are not in digital format. As our research was conducted during the time of Covid-19 pandemic, access to library for hard copies of those research was quite limited due to social distancing and lock-down measures. This poses as one of our major challenges.

The study used in-depth interviews as the key data-collecting technique. The interviews were conducted on 15 interviewees of Thandauggyi township.⁵ Two of the interviewees—an expert on education policy, government officers in charge of policy implementation in the area—offer a perspective on policy matter while the other nine—two school headmasters and teachers—help us develop a better understanding the complexity of policy implementation process as well as the challenges that come with it. Four parents of Kayin ethnicity whose children are enrolling at the schools and attending the Kayin language classes were also among the interviewees. They gave us feedbacks from the teaching program we should have retrieved from students. The view of these parents also represents that of Kayin people on the teaching of their ethnic language at primary schools.

After data were collected, they were analyzed with qualitative data collecting technique with three types of coding: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The themes for coding were set based on the research objectives. The primary source, secondary source, and other resources were reviewed to analyze the historical context, ethnic language policy, teaching Kayin ethnic language, and the learning process about Kayin ethnic language in primary schools.

Historical Background of Ethnic Language Teaching in Myanmar

Myanmar is one of the extremely ethnically diverse nations in the world. It has eight major national ethnic races which are recognized by the Government. They are Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Bamar, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. In addition, there are 135 ethnic subcategories to

⁵ These 15 interviewees are one expert in the area of state education, one Deputy Township Education Officer (DTEO), two headmasters from two primary schools, three language teachers, four subject teachers, and four parents of ethnic Kayin group. They aged between 21 to 67 years old. Although students are key stakeholders in this regard, we decided not to interview them for this research for ethical concerns. In order to interview children under the age of 18, a researcher needs to have their parents' consent and there are measures to observe when interviewing them in order to make sure they are not harmed physically and psychologically. Level of interpretation and judgement of children of primary school age is also to be taken into consideration. After a long deliberation, we decide to interview only adults. Teacher and parent interviewees can also provide information on how children react to the curriculum and in-class learning process.

these eight major national races (Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2015a). According to the Myanmar census 2014, the total population of the country is 51,486,253. According to the government, there are eight major national ethnic races (which comprise 135 distinct ethnic groups), which include the Bamar (68%), Shan (9%), Kayin (7%), Rakhine (4%), Mon (2%), Kayah, and Kachin. However, the government classification system ethnic groups under ethnic races by geography, rather than by linguistic or genetic similarity (e.g. the Kokang are under the Shan ethnic race although they are Chinese ethnic). Unrecognised ethnic groups including the Burmese Indians and the Burmese Chinese form 2% and 3% of the population respectively. The remaining 5% of the population belong to small ethnic groups such as the members of the Anglo-Burmese and Anglo-Indian communities, as well as the Lisu, Rawang, Naga, Padaung, Moken, and many minorities across Shan State (Burmese census planned in 2014, 2012).

Although English was set as the official language of Myanmar during British rule, indigenous groups were all allowed to speak and learn their languages. During that time, writing systems for many languages such as Chin, Kachin and Lahu were developed by missionaries. The first constitution of the Union of Burma (1947) guaranteed that all citizens could practice their own cultures and religions. In some public schools, some of the major ethnic languages such as Chin, Kayin, Kayah, Mon and Shan are taught, but one can find classes on some sub-minority ethnic languages being delivered at some Buddhist monasteries and Christian churches (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2016).

Teaching of ethnic languages was granted during U Nu's administration in the 1950s. However, after General Ne Win took over the power in 1962, the government imposed a tougher assimilation policy "Burmanization". The government banned the teaching of all non-Burman ethnic languages and literatures in both government and private schools (Mon, 2014). In 1962, Burmese became the only language of instruction for university and pre-university classes (except for English language classes). However, there was a permission for teaching of minority languages at the early primary level, with the Ministry of Education publishing textbooks in a small range of minority languages up until the early 1980s. While the

government was not against ethnic minorities possessing multiethnic identities, they were opposed to activities that impacted negatively on the national unity they were striving to create. As a result, by the 1980s many schools had stopped teaching in minority languages, owing in part to the complexities surrounding language, identity, compliance, a lack of education finances and an inability to staff the programs. In some instances, local officials were willing to continue to work for education in minority languages, along with some Christian schools and Buddhist monasteries. Some public schools in more remote areas continued to use the mother tongue such as Chin, Kayin, Kayah, Mon and Shan as the language of instruction (UNICEF, 2016).

After the 1988 uprising, the Ministry of Education (MoE) indicated that schools could choose to allocate up to 2 sessions of 30 minutes a week to the subject of ethnic languages, on the slot dedicated to physical education and school activities (Salem-Gervais & Raynaud, 2020). Changes began after the elections and the opening up of Burma to the world. Beginning in 2012, ethnic languages were allowed to be taught in government schools, but only outside school hours, and with no budget from the Education Ministry (Khur, 2017).

Following a shift in Myanmar's language-in-education policy in 2012, since upheld in the 2014-2015 National Education Law, the teaching of ethnic languages, as subjects, up to Grade 3 (and sometimes beyond), has already started, progressively, in government schools (Salem-Gervais, 2018). The law was eventually amended to allow the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) to recognize the need for ethnic languages to be utilized as 'classroom languages' throughout the curriculum, but not languages of instruction (Rwehera, 2017). In the 2014-2015 academic years, the MoE distributed books in ethnic languages to primary level schools to develop learning of ethnic languages and literature (Phyu, 2018). Over the past few years, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), working in cooperation with the government, has been conducting curriculum training for ethnic language associations so that they have the capacity to develop textbooks (Khur, 2017). History shows that the ethnic language teaching policy which started in Myanmar in 1950s has been experiences various changes under different administrations.

Human rights legal framework on enhancing ethnic language and culture in schools

Under Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), everyone has the right to education. In the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the state parties agreed that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They further agree that education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups, and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. Myanmar is one of the parties of that convention and has also agreed to including the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Under Article 29 (1) (c) of CRC, State Parties have the duty that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values. Moreover, Article 30 of the that Convention mentions that in those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language. Similarly, Article 14 of the UNDRIP provides that Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. According to these international standards, States need to promote not only the right to education but also the preservation of the cultural identity, tradition and language of ethnic groups.

Accordingly, the Myanmar government is providing and supporting access to education of children under national legislation and policy in line with international human rights standards. Furthermore, it is taking steps to enhance access to education of minority groups through the teaching of ethnic language in primary school. Basically, Section 366 of the

Myanmar Constitution 2008 provided that every citizen has the right to education and shall also be given basic education as compulsory. Furthermore, everyone has the right to freely develop of their literature, culture, arts, customs and traditions under Section 365 of the Myanmar Constitution 2008. As well as, all ethnic groups can exercise the right to develop their language, literature, culture, religion and customs under Section 354 (d) of the Myanmar Constitution. However, the use of ethnic language in government schools was not implemented at that time. But there were some ethnic schools that were established and implemented by the civil society organizations in areas with ethnic populations.

After that in Section 3 (c) of the National Education Law 2014, it provided to develop union spirit and to nurture citizens who wish to value conserve and upgrade languages, literatures, culture, arts, traditions, and historical heritage of the ethnic groups and natural environment and so enable to relay on to the new generations. Furthermore, in Section 3 of the Law amending the National Education Law 2015, it supplemented the fact that every citizen can access the right to education and also amended about the fact that is to produce the teachers for the development of the language, literature, culture and traditions of all ethnic groups in Myanmar and the modern development of the nation under Section 7. Especially, Section 43 (b) of the National Education Law mentioned that if there is a need, an ethnic language can be used alongside Myanmar as a language of instruction at the basic education level. According to section 44 of that Law, the teaching of ethnic languages and literature must be gradually implemented by the Region or State governments. By this National Education Law, the teaching of ethnic language in the government schools as a classroom language is more expressly supported and recognized. Furthermore, regarding the teaching ethnic language, all ethnic groups have the right to learn their language under the Ethnic Rights Protection Law 2015.

In 2017, the government set up a plan to reduce the language barrier that concerns the dropping out of school for children from the ethnic groups under the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP). According to this plan, it is to implement the learning in the mother tongue by allowing the textbooks to be translated into them. The Basic Education Law 2019

recognizes that an ethnic language along with Myanmar language can be used as a classroom language like stated in the National Education Law. So, the government is implementing access to education for children from the minority groups by adopting laws and policies. However, it can be assumed that the laws and policies relating to the language right of the minority groups are more exactly implemented after 2014.

Teaching Kayin language as a subject at primary schools in Thandaunggyi township; an overview

In this section the data from our in-depth interviews will be discussed to provide answer to our first research questions: how has Kayin language been taught as a subject in Kayin state from 2013, the year that teaching ethnic language as a subject at primary schools was launched until mid 2020? How has the language been taught at Thandaunggyi township in particular? we will first try to understand the context of this policy implementation by looking at Kayin state's and Thandaunggyi's complex socio-cultural characteristics.

Kayin state, previously known as Karen state, is divided into four districts and sixteen townships. In those districts and townships, the people of Kayin ethnicity, the majority population of the state's total population of 1,574,079, live alongside people of other ethnic groups such as the Shan, Pao and Mon people (Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2015b, p. 10). Thandaunggyi is one of Kayin state's sixteen townships and It has a total population of 30,209 (Department of Population, Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, 2017, p. 6). It also has been regarded as one of the most ethnically diverse townships of the state. Most of our interviewees confirm that there are at least five sub-Kayin ethnic groups namely the Sgaw Kayin, Pwo kayin, Bwe Kayin and Paku Kayin found in the township. Each of these groups has its own distinct language and living localities. Thandaunggyi is also a home of non-Kayins such as the Shan, Burman, Mon and Pao people. These people and their ethnic communities constitute the multi-ethno/cultural trait of Thandaunggyi. Being ethnically diverse is not the only key characteristics of Thandaunggyi

township. It is also known as one of the most geographically challenging townships in Kayin state as most of its areas are hilly and covered with forest. It is also not a surprise for us to learn that Thandaunggyi is also the least economically developed among all of the sixteen townships of Kayin state.

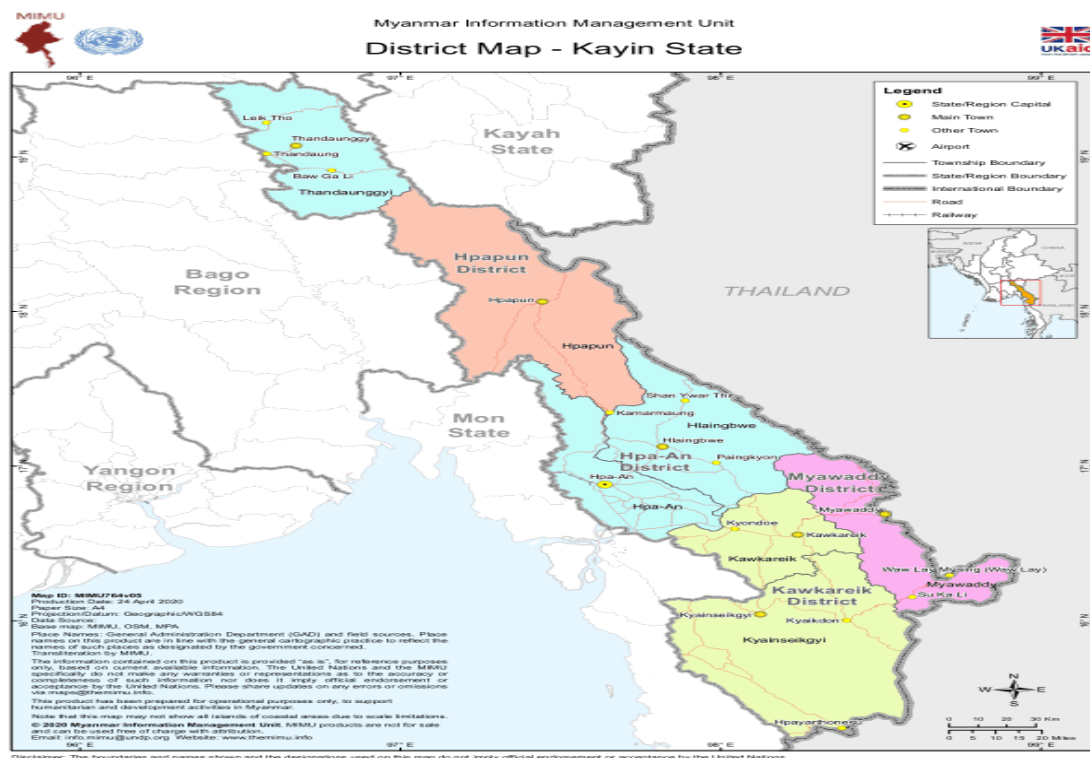


Figure 1: Kayin State Map

Source: Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2020.

Our research on various documents from the Ministry of Education and some other sources like Census enable us to understand that not all children in Myanmar have access to school and many children who are enrolled in school do not attend the class regularly, or drop out early partly due to difficulties of travelling to school. There is a pattern of dropping out of school of Myanmar children: dropout rates are at the highest during the transition from primary to lower secondary school, and from lower to upper secondary school. It is also interesting to learn that among all states in Myanmar, Kayin and Shan states have the lowest enrollment rate regarding children of primary school age. Only 65.2 % of children of primary school age were enrolling at the 1738 state-run schools found in Kayin state (Department of

Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2015b, p. 18). There are various possible reasons given to this phenomenon. Karen Human Rights Group-KHRG (2017, p. 154) reports that despite the attempt of Myanmar government to increase access to education to all the citizens throughout the country since 2014, children of minority groups like the Kayin (or Karen) still could not get access to quality and affordable education due to poverty and living hardship. KHRG also mentions that negative attitude and experience the Kayin people have towards formal education provided by Myanmar government can be regarded as a contributing factor towards low enrollment rate among Kayin children. To them, state-run schools do not serve as a good place for their children to preserve their ethnic identity as, prior to 2014, their Kayin language, history and literature was not allowed to be featured as subjects in the formal curriculum. This finding from Kayin villagers' testimony collected by KHRG also resonates with the report of 2014 census that language barrier is one of the significant factors contributing to low enrollment and dropping out rate among children of minority groups in Myanmar.

Our interviews with 11 out of 15 informants gave us a clear picture on how ethnic languages and Kayin language in particular are taught in Thandaunggyi. The state takes the lead in the policy implementation with helps of non-state actors. Since 2013 when the new policy was launched nationwide, the implementation of such policy was also strongly carried out in Thandaunggyi. Being a town with diverse ethnicity, five ethnic languages namely Sagaw Kayin, Pwo Kayin, Bwe Kayin, Kayan, Kayaw and Gaybar have been taught as a subject at 179 primary schools in Thandaunggyi. Sagaw Kayin language is mostly taught as a subject at these schools, catering to the majority Kayin community of the town while Kayan and Kayaw languages were also taught at 28 schools in the area. There are, however, a few schools which do not offer any ethnic language class. According to our interviews with government officials, there are 11,759 students learning the ethnic language in schools in Thandaunggyi and the teaching of these ethnic languages is carried out by 129 language teachers (LT) and 165 teaching assistants (TA). Student-teacher ratio here may not be ideal here but it is acceptable by MoE. "The state also tries to allocate more LT positions to schools in Thandaunggyi to make teaching ethnic language as a subject more effective.", says one of our interviewees

who has been engaged with the policy implementation in Thadaunggyi for the past five years.

It is also learnt that Kayin language teaching at the two schools selected as research settings has started since 2014 and from grade 1 onwards. Children learn Kayin language for an hour per day, five days a week. When we conducted our interviews in mid-2020, the schools have incorporated a class for Kayin language into regular school hours. This is a huge shift from the 2012 regulations of teaching ethnic language by MoE stating that ethnic languages were to be taught after school hours and not listed in the standard timetable. Most of our interviewees felt that the change in this regard reflects that the state has positive attitude towards ethnic language learning and views these languages as of equal importance as Myanmar, the national language and English. Moreover, by allowing students of non-Kayin ethnicity to join the class alongside their Kayin classmate, the sense of equality and mutual respect of one's tradition has somehow grown among students. One of the interviewed LT said that non-Kayin students also enjoy learning the new language and understand ethno-cultural differences between themselves and their Kayin classmates as in some of the lessons Kayin culture, history and literature are also featured.

The two schools also seem to stress on the quality education for Kayin language classes by applying the same standard set for other regular courses to the Kayin language course. Our LT interviewees mentioned that, similar to other subjects like Mathematics, History and English taught at the school, Kayin language was taught as a subject and LT need to submit lesson plan for approval prior to the start of the semester. The lesson plan has to indicate clearly how teaching aids would be used and how they would help enhancing the learning experience of the students. MoE had before 2015 come up with curriculum and syllabus for teaching Kayin language as subject with strong assistance from the Ministry of Kayin Ethnic Affairs at the capital. It is learnt from our interviews that MoE monitored closely from 2013-2015 how effective the curriculum and syllabus and after some trial periods MoE decided to revise them.

The Kayin language textbooks and teaching materials currently used at the two schools are distributed from the State Education Department with the cooperation of the Ministry of

Kayin Ethnic Affair. At first the children in primary schools were taught only by the textbook distributed by the Ministry of Education for Kayin ethnic language teaching.⁶ In 2019, the new textbook was written with the cooperation of the Kayin Literature and Culture Associations from Kayin, Mon, Yangon, Bago, Thaninthayi and Ayeyarwaddy regions. During the time we conducted this study the new textbook was used in those stated regions and for Kayin state, only in Thandaunggyi township in the 2019-2020 academic years. Other primary schools in other townships in Kayin state used only the textbooks given by the Ministry of Education. It is unclear why Thandaunggyi is selected for the use of this new textbook of which UNICEF also gave its support in its content writing. However, it is clear that the state has tried very hard to collaborate with non-state actors, both local and international ones, with relevant expertise and experience in the production of standardized textbook for Kayin language teaching. At the two primary schools we selected as research settings, one is using the textbook which is distributed by the government and the other school is using that textbook together with another one (new textbook) that is produced with the support from UNICEF. In the school that is using both the government textbook and new textbook, the language teachers teach the new textbook outside the school hours (one hour in one day) and the teaching assistants teach the government textbook during the school hours according to the instruction of Township Education Office.

Benefits of teaching Kayin language as a subject at primary schools in Thandaunggyi township

Once it is clear on how Kayin language teaching is carried out at primary schools in Thandaunggyi from 2013 until the mid-2020 and how non-state actors participate in the policy implementation, next issue which are worthy of our further investigation concerns the impact of this education policy implementation to the access to education of children of minority groups. It is also crucial to explore whether there is any other benefit from this

⁶ Initially, the textbooks were printed in color, but for the 2016-2017 academic years, they were reverted back into black and white, and were in a smaller size.

implementation. The data we collected point out that 1) there is a weak linkage between teaching ethnic language as a subject at primary school and the increase in access to education of children of minority groups and 2) this ethnic language policy and implementation can serve as means to enhance ethnic identity of minority group and sense of belonging as Myanmar citizens among children of ethnic minority groups and to promote better ethno-cultural understanding among children at the same time.

Can teaching Kayin language as a subject at primary school serve as means to enhance access to education of children Kayin minority group in Thandauggyi area? This question requires us to investigate the enrolment rate and dropout rate among students of Kayin ethnicity of the two schools at two points in time: the period before the implementation of this new ethnic language policy (before the year 2013) and the period after the implementation of such policy (the year after 2013 until mid-2020 which is the time that the interviews were carried out). According to Census 2014 and the data from our Deputy Township Education Officer, enrolment rate of primary students in Thandaunggyi has been quite high (see a figure 2 below) and the rate of the period from 2015-2020 is close to 100%. This corresponds with data received from our interviews with two headmasters: there were some students dropping out from their schools during the past years. But the number is still quite low and not so alarming.

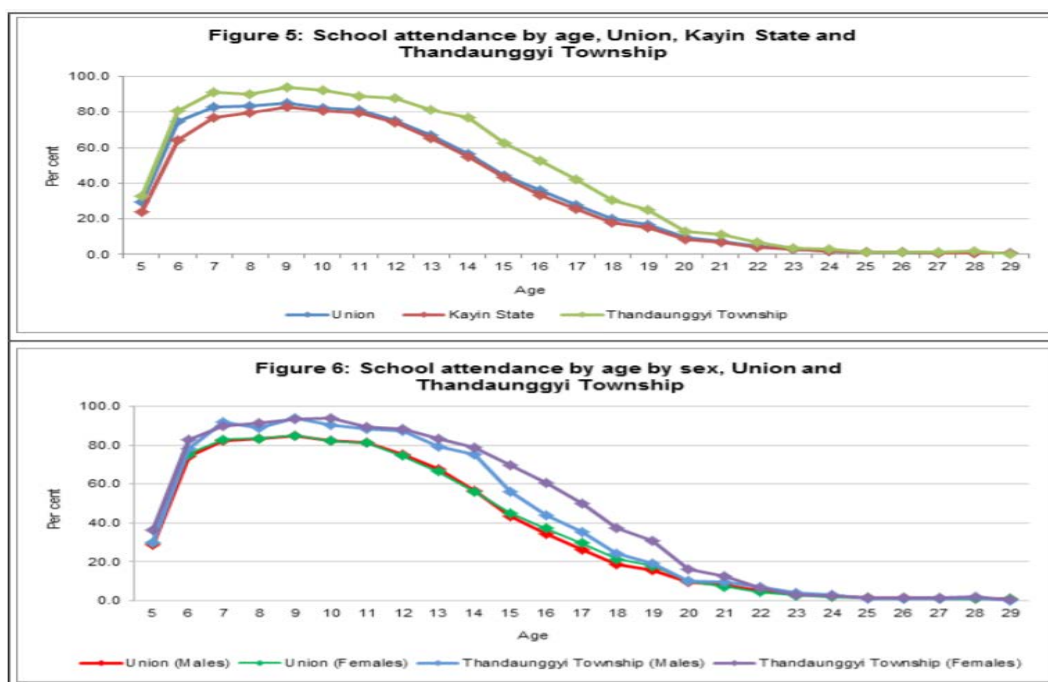


Figure 2: School attendance rate of Thandaunggyi

Source: Department of Population Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, 2017, p. 12.

Language barrier is not regarded as the reason for dropping out of schools among Kayin primary school students at the two schools. Those who dropped out from school usually face difficulties in travelling to school from their homes. “Transportation can be the main issue when the family of a student decide to pull them out of schooling. According to my experience, some students stay very far from the school and to commute to attend classes daily become a bit of a challenge.” said a headmaster of one of the schools. Actually, when we look at enrolment and dropout rate of the period before 2013 and after 2013 at the two schools, there seems to be not much difference. Therefore, it is difficult to establish a firm conclusion that teaching ethnic language do enhance enrolment rate and reduce dropout rate among children of ethnic minority group at primary school level. However, it should be noted here that Kayin children has greatly enjoy learning their own language and language barrier has somehow reduced with the introduction of these classes as one of the standard subjects for all students.

To increase access to primary education among children of ethnic minority groups as

well as Myanmar children in general, having ethnic language classes added to regular schedule may be not enough to tackle the root cause of the problem. When asked to identify the reasons for dropping out of school of the Myanmar children in general, most of our interviewees stated that the children of poverty-stricken families have to leave school to work and earn extra income for the family. Their insight into the dropping out phenomenon resonates what have been reported before on the situation by both the state and non-state agencies. According to the 2018 Myanmar Report on Out of School Children Initiative (OOSCI), poverty of the family was cited as no. 1 barrier for children to attain education in Myanmar along with some barriers of economic root like the participation of children in ‘workforce’ at early age (UNICEF, 2018, p. xix). The KHRG report, *Foundation for Fear*, which is built on testimonies of Kayin villagers also highlighted family poverty, high cost of education and inadequate supply of early childhood development and basic education schools as major reasons serving as obstacles for Kayin children living in the southeast region of the country to attain education.⁷ The report states that:

Financial barriers and livelihood struggles have acted as impediments to villagers accessing education over 25 years. Free and compulsory primary education is not accessible to all children in southeast Myanmar due to both upfront and hidden costs in the education sector. During conflict, financial demands were often made on villagers separate to education, which affected the extent to which they could pay for schooling. Middle and high school education is particularly hard to access as there are less schools and the fees are higher. These costs create a heavy financial burden for villagers, many of whom continue to face livelihood and food security issues (Karen Human Rights Group, 2017, p. 101).

It should be noted here that from 2015 onwards there has been an improvement in

⁷ In some other parts of Kayin state, the ongoing armed clash between Kayin army with the Myanmar government also prevent children from attending school. KHRG also reported from the year 1992-2012, there was a militarization involving Tatmadaw and Kayin armed groups, resulting in destruction of villages, property and premises including schools. The situation has been improved slightly after 2015. However, since the coup of February 2021, the nation-wide demonstration against it and clashes between the military and ethnic minority armed groups in Kayin state, a lot of people have to flee and become internally displaced. This will surely affect the livelihood of the people and disrupt the education of children living in the area.

terms of facilities and services provided by the state in Kayin state, making it easier for children to get access to education as compared to the 1990s and 2000s. KHRG reports that Kayin villagers are satisfied with the attempts by Myanmar government in building schools and facilities that allow their children to acquire proper education and future life opportunities. However, a lot more has to be done in terms of making sure that rural and urban children in the state have equal access to education in Kayin state. According to OOSCI report, children living in rural areas are more likely to be excluded from access to education as sometimes there is no school located nearby and commuting long hours to school can discourage them from enrolling (UNICEF, 2018, p. viii).

Is there any other benefit of this ethnic language policy implementation? Although there seems to be no strong linkage between teaching ethnic language at schools and the increase in access to education of children of ethnic minority groups, our data shows that the ethnic language classes have contributed greatly to the preservation and consolidation of the students' ethnic identity. Prior to the new ethnic language policy in 2013, traditionally Kayin people could learn their mother tongue only at places of worship namely Buddhist monasteries or Catholic churches. At these places of worship Kayin language lessons are not properly designed. Teachers are also not well-trained or equipped with teaching techniques and class materials are usually inadequate. Making Kayin language classes available at state-run schools means better access to the learning of the language in a more standardized manner for Kayin children. They are taught by a trained teacher and teaching assistant and get to enjoy good textbooks and class materials. As textbooks used for Kayin language classes usually cover lessons about Kayin history, culture and literature, the children then learn not only their mother tongue but also other key features of their ethnic identity. Kayin parents we interviewed said that they were happy to see their children getting know more about their historical and cultural root by attending these classes. 'I wish to see more lessons on Kayin literature as it is slowly disappearing from our society. Kayin literature should be featured more in the lessons.' said a 35-year-old mother who is a farmer. Some parents hope that in the future their children should learn key subjects like Mathematics, Sciences and Social

Sciences via Kayin language instead of Myanmar language. But they also acknowledge that this is rather difficult to achieve and it may not yield better result in their children's academic performance if the children are to compete with other children from other ethnic groups at national level. It is not an overstatement to say that this ethnic language policy and implementation has become one of the most formal and systematic means for ethnic minority groups to preserve and consolidate their ethnic identities among their younger generation.

We also notice from our interviews with teachers of the schools that by attending these classes Kayin children could simultaneously enhance their ethnic and national (Myanmar) identity. In 60% of the time in class teachers use Kayin language as medium of instruction. However, as Kayin language skill among Kayin students is still at the beginner level and there are non-Kayin children attending the class, teacher deem it necessary to switch to Myanmar national language from time to time for more effective class. At primary school level most Kayin children in general are also comfortable with speaking Myanmar language. They are at the stage of building up their vocabulary both in Kayin and Myanmar languages. Through this way of teaching, Kayin students learn an equivalent word of a Kayin word in Myanmar language and vice-versa when in other classes they cannot do so. If the state has a goal to create citizens with dual (ethnic and national) identity, making them internalize both the pride in their ethnicity and the sense of belonging as a citizen of Myanmar, these Kayin language classes can contribute in a small but meaningful way to the achievement of such goal.

As mentioned earlier, at the two schools Kayin language classes are opened to non-Kayin children too. The classes then serve as a platform for non-Kayin children to learn about their country's ethno-cultural diversity. Some teacher interviewees state that non-Kayin children enjoy learning Kayin language and often ask questions to learn more about Kayin culture too. Kayin children are also interested to speak about their language and culture to their non-Kayin classmates. Ethno-cultural understanding among the children of different ethnicity can emerge from this classroom interaction. The non-Kayin children will soon be equipped with Kayin language and cultural knowledge that is likely to help them be better engaged in interethnic interaction in the future. It can be said that these classes become a

platform in promoting among young children a cultural literacy and a respect for ethno-cultural diversity, two crucial traits for citizens of multicultural society to co-exist harmoniously.

Challenges in teaching Kayin language as a subject at primary school in Thandaunggyi township

It has been reported that for the past five years local authorities and schools have faced a lot of challenges when trying to implement the new ethnic language policy and to make the ethnic classes effective. Some major challenges in this regard are, for example, a lack of teachers, negative perceptions by both parents and educators towards the benefits of ethnic education, and students' inability to attend classes outside regular school hours (Khur, 2017). At the two primary schools in Thandaunggyi some of these major challenges are present. It is, however, worth noting here that both teachers and parents bear no negative perception towards this ethnic language policy. Both of them see the benefits of having the Kayin language classes. Our interviewees mentioned that they face challenges in these following areas:

- **A struggle for better-quality textbooks:** the MoE has tried from 2013-2017 to collaborate with various parties in the production of textbook for ethnic language classes. There are two textbooks being used right now in teaching Kayin language at primary schools in Thandaunggyi. The textbook produced by MoE, the old textbook they called, though is a product of collaboration from the ministry and some Kayin ethnic and literature associations, is still a direct translation from other Myanmar textbooks. Our interviewees from the school that use this textbook said that the content is a bit too difficult for children to understand. *"This textbook is too advanced for children to learn. We cannot teach the course completely as there were a lot of catching up classes to fulfil the knowledge gap for the students."* said an interviewee. We observe that the teachers use the textbook

meant for grade 1 students for their grade 2 students. It is clear that the content of the old textbook needs to be revised to suit the Kayin language skills of the student. For the new textbook introduced in 2019, the content is much more interesting and easier to follow. It is not a direct translation from any Myanmar textbook. The problem is that it has yet to be a part of curriculum for all schools in Thandaunggyi and there are not enough copies for every student in class. More budget needs to be allocated to the printing and distribution of the new textbook. Some interviewees noted that there are still rooms for improvement for Kayin language textbook. One of the ways to develop a better-quality textbook for Kayin language classes is to allow local ethnic and literature association, cultural organization or some Kayin language experts to participate more in the drafting process.

- ☐ **Lack of teaching guideline for ethnic language curriculum and teaching aids:** according to our interviews, ethnic language subject, similar to any other subjects offered by the schools, comes with proper curriculum. However, Kayin language teachers are not provided with teaching guideline. Teachers use their own judgement and interpretation of the lessons and when to use teaching aids and materials. Some teachers come up with their own guideline and use it for their own reference in each academic year. With teaching guideline sent from MoE, teachers could be able to perform better as educator as well as class facilitator, encouraging interactive learning process. When we interviewed language teachers about the difficulties, they face in teaching Kayin ethnic language, one of them said, *"There are difficulties in teaching the ethnic language. There is a need for teaching aids. In the new curriculum, there are insufficient teaching aids."*
- ☐ **The possibility of teacher staff shortage:** the lack of teacher who can teach Kayin language has increasingly become a major concern in Thandaunggyi. The language teachers are 165 teaching assistants (TA) and 129 language teachers (LA)

in the township. TA position is newly approved for ethnic language teaching in 2017-2018 through the collaboration between the MoE and the newly created Ministry of Ethnic Affairs (MoEA) (Salem-Gervais & Mael, 2020). Generally, according to the current policy the appointment of 1 TA requires a minimum of 20 children of a particular ethnic minority present in a school. Student-teacher ratio in Thandaunggyi, similar to other areas in Myanmar, needs to be improved. Recruiting new LA and TA for Kayin classes is also difficult for one crucial reason. With relatively low salary, the position is not attractive among Kayin-speaking graduates with a degree in education.⁸

Concluding Remarks

The Myanmar government is working the obligation concerning access to education of children under the international human rights standards. Moreover, it provides to enjoy the right to education and to develop the cultural identity, language and values of a child belonging to ethnic group by following the commitments of ICESCR and CRC. There are provisions regarding access to education for ethnic groups under the national laws and policies in Myanmar. When the implementation of the existing laws and policies by the government, it is attempting to fulfill the education which is accessible and available for the ethnic people. It is trying to remove the language barrier issue. According to the study, the increased numbers of enrollment is not obviously changed by teaching Kayin ethnic language in schools although children are becoming more understanding of the lessons. Similarly, it can be presumed that teaching of Kayin ethnic language in schools is not specifically effective in reducing the proportion of the dropping out of school. However, the problem of students not attending school because of the language barrier is decreased. The Ministry of Education works together with the respective State/region governments as well as the Literature and Culture

⁸ We learned from our interviews that the TA are appointed by daily wages of 4,800K per day while language teachers (LA) receive the regular amount of 30,000 Kyats per month (about US\$23) as salaries.

Associations of the ethnic groups for the development of ethnic language teaching. In the Kayin State, apart from teaching the Kayin ethnic language as a subject in schools, teaching other ethnic languages is being implemented for other ethnic people. But it still has weakness in implementation of these tasks by the government because of the ethnic diversity and the geographical features of Myanmar. Specially, the national and regional governments need to systematically coordinate regarding the implementation of the ethnic language teaching. Besides, the government should provide the specified law and policy for that to do the curriculum development and to improve the teaching methods systematically. The teaching staff for ethnic language teaching should be more appointed to reduce the insufficient teaching staff in some schools located in the rural area.

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