

A Study of Abhidhamma Teaching Methods in English of Abhidhamma Teachers at The University of Abhidhamma in Yagon of Myanmar

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Abstract

This study examines the Abhidhamma teaching methods in English employed by educators at the University of Abhidhamma in Yangon, Myanmar, and analyzes the associated pedagogical and linguistic challenges. As English becomes the global academic language for Buddhist studies, institutions in traditionally Theravāda countries are increasingly adopting English-medium instruction to meet international educational standards. However, the complex, analytical, and abstract nature of Abhidhamma—deeply rooted in Pāli and Burmese traditions—presents significant hurdles for accurate cross-cultural dissemination.

Utilizing a qualitative research design, the researcher employed purposive sampling to select five experienced Abhidhamma teachers. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations across six sessions, and document analysis of textbooks and lesson plans. Thematic analysis and data triangulation were used to ensure the reliability of the findings.

The results indicate that teachers predominantly rely on bilingual explanation techniques, introducing concepts in Pāli or Burmese before providing detailed English explanations to preserve doctrinal accuracy. Other frequently observed methods include the use of visual aids (charts and diagrams) to illustrate systematic classifications, and interactive questioning to maintain student engagement.

Despite these adaptive strategies, the study identifies several critical problems: the limited English proficiency of students, a lack of standardized English Abhidhamma textbooks, and the inherent difficulty of translating metaphysical Pāli concepts (such as paramattha dhamma) without losing nuanced meaning. Additionally, time constraints caused by the need for repeated clarifications often hinder curriculum completion. The research suggests the development of standardized glossaries, specialized teacher training in English-medium instruction, and the integration of digital tools to enhance the quality of global Buddhist education.

Keywords: Abhidhamma; English Teaching Methods; Buddhist Education; University of Abhidhamma

Introduction

In the contemporary global context, the dissemination of Buddhist teachings in English has become increasingly important due to the expanding international interest in Theravāda

Buddhism. As the world becomes more interconnected, English has emerged as the primary global academic language, facilitating cross-cultural communication and scholarly exchange within the field of Buddhist studies. Consequently, many Buddhist institutions in traditionally Theravāda countries, such as Myanmar, have begun to offer English-medium instruction to meet international educational standards and respond to the needs of a diverse range of global learners. This shift towards English-medium education is particularly evident in the study of the Abhidhamma, the systematic and philosophical framework of Buddhist doctrine.

The University of Abhidhamma in Yangon, Myanmar, stands as a prominent institution providing Abhidhamma courses in English for both international students and local practitioners. While this initiative significantly enhances the global accessibility of these profound teachings, it also introduces substantial linguistic and pedagogical challenges. The Abhidhamma is deeply grounded in Pāli canonical texts and Burmese exegetical traditions, involving highly technical, analytical, and abstract philosophical concepts that are notoriously difficult to convey accurately in a Western language.

One of the primary hurdles identified by scholars is the lack of direct or exact English equivalents for many Pāli technical terms. Scholars like Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2022) have pointed out that English renderings often fail to capture the functional and experiential meanings inherent in the original concepts. Furthermore, Sujato (2021) argues that literal translations provided without sufficient contextual explanation can lead to doctrinal misunderstandings or distortions. Beyond mere translation, the analytical and classificatory structure of the Abhidhamma itself presents a cognitive challenge for students who may be unfamiliar with traditional monastic learning frameworks.

Despite these recognized difficulties, a significant research gap exists. Most existing literature has focused on the textual translation of Abhidhamma works rather than the actual classroom practices of teachers. There is a lack of empirical data on how teachers practically implement English instruction in real-time settings. The University of Abhidhamma provides a unique context to address this gap, as it integrates traditional monastic learning with modern academic approaches.

This study aims to investigate the English teaching methods employed by Abhidhamma teachers in Yangon, focusing on how they adapt complex Pāli and Burmese concepts for English-speaking audiences. By examining the strategies used to navigate linguistic and pedagogical obstacles, the research seeks to provide insights that will improve the future development of English-medium Buddhist education and cross-cultural Dhamma dissemination.

Research Objective

1. To study the Abhidhamma teaching methods in English of Abhidhamma teachers at the University of Abhidhamma in Yangon, Myanmar
 2. To analyze the problems of the Abhidhamma teaching methods in English of Abhidhamma teachers at the University of Abhidhamma in Yangon, Myanmar
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Research Methodology

The methodology for this study was designed to qualitatively explore and analyze the instructional practices and challenges of teaching Abhidhamma in English within a traditional monastic educational setting.

Population, Sample, and Key Informants

The population for this research consists of all Abhidhamma teachers currently providing instruction in English at the University of Abhidhamma in Yangon, Myanmar. To select the specific participants for the study, a purposive sampling method was employed. This method allowed for the selection of five key informants based on the following specific criteria:

- Teaching Experience: Participants must have at least two years of experience teaching Abhidhamma in English.
- Active Involvement: Key informants must be currently engaged in English-medium instruction at the university.
- Willingness to Participate: The selected teachers were required to be willing to participate in both in-depth interviews and classroom observations.

These five teachers were deemed appropriate informants because their direct involvement in adapting Pāli and Burmese concepts into English provides a rich source of practical data.

Research Tools

The study utilized a comprehensive set of qualitative research instruments to ensure depth and accuracy. The main research tools included:

- Semi-structured Interview Guides: Designed to elicit detailed perspectives from the teachers regarding their methods and challenges.
- Classroom Observation Checklists: Used to systematically record instructional behaviors and student-teacher interactions during live sessions.
- Document Analysis Frameworks: Applied to analyze lesson plans, textbooks, and supplemental handouts used in the curriculum.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through three primary channels to allow for a thorough investigation of the research objectives:

- In-depth Interviews: Conducted with the five selected key informants to gather qualitative insights into their pedagogical choices.
- Classroom Observations: Carried out over six teaching sessions to witness the practical implementation of English teaching methods in real instructional settings.
- Material Collection: This involved the gathering and analysis of teaching materials, including textbooks, handouts, and student notes, to understand the textual basis of the instruction.

Data Analysis

The research employed thematic analysis to process the qualitative data collected from interviews, observations, and documents. The analysis process involved:

- Categorization: Data were organized into specific categories focused on teaching strategies, language-related challenges, and pedagogical techniques.
- Data Triangulation: By comparing information from interviews, observations, and document analysis, the researcher ensured the reliability and contextual accuracy of the findings.
- Narrative and Tabular Synthesis: Results were synthesized into narrative descriptions and supported by tables to highlight patterns in teaching practices, such as the frequency of specific methods.

Research Result

Objective 1: To study the Abhidhamma teaching methods in English of Abhidhamma teachers at the University of Abhidhamma in Yangon, Myanmar

The study of instructional practices at the University of Abhidhamma revealed that teachers employ adaptive, student-centered methods to bridge the gap between traditional Pāli doctrines and English-medium instruction. The findings highlight several key practices:

- Bilingual Explanation Techniques: This is the most predominant method, used in all six observed sessions. Concepts are first introduced in Pāli or Burmese to maintain doctrinal accuracy, followed by detailed English explanations to aid comprehension.
- Use of Visual Aids: Teachers frequently utilize charts, diagrams, and tables to explain systematic classifications, such as mental factors and conditional relations. These tools were used in five out of six observed sessions.
- Interactive Questioning: Teachers actively use comprehension-checking questions in English to assess student understanding and maintain engagement during the lesson.
- Translation-Based Teaching: Observed in four out of six sessions, this method focuses on the direct translation of texts to help students grasp technical terminology.

Method	Frequency Observed	Teacher Preference
Bilingual explanation	6/6 sessions	5/5 teachers
Use of diagrams/tables	5/6 sessions	4/5 teachers
Translation-based teaching	4/6 sessions	3/5 teachers
Direct English instruction	2/6 sessions	2/5 teachers

Objective 2: To analyze the problems of the Abhidhamma teaching methods in English of Abhidhamma teachers at the University of Abhidhamma in Yangon, Myanmar

Despite the use of adaptive strategies, teachers face significant linguistic, pedagogical, and conceptual challenges. The analysis identified the following primary problems:

- Limited English Proficiency of Students: Many students possess strong Pāli backgrounds but lack the English vocabulary and grammar required for complex philosophical discussions. This often forces teachers to simplify expressions or switch back to Burmese.



- Lack of Standardized Textbooks: There is a shortage of English Abhidhamma textbooks tailored for Myanmar's monastic curriculum. Teachers must rely on self-prepared notes and academic translations, leading to inconsistent terminology across different classes.
- Difficulty Translating Metaphysical Concepts: Technical terms like *paramattha dhamma* (ultimate realities) and *citta vīthi* (cognitive processes) lack direct English equivalents. Teachers struggle to balance literal translation with the need for deep doctrinal nuance.
- Cognitive Demands of Abstract Doctrines: Subjects such as *Paṭṭhāna* (conditional relations) are difficult to teach in a second language. Students often become passive or disengaged during lengthy theoretical explanations in English.
- Pedagogical Tension: Teachers face a constant struggle to balance doctrinal accuracy with linguistic simplicity. Simplifying language to fit student levels may result in incomplete explanations of the Dhamma.
- Time Constraints: The need for bilingual clarification and repeated explanations significantly increases instructional time, making it difficult to complete the prescribed syllabus.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a detailed look into the pedagogical landscape of English-medium Abhidhamma instruction at the University of Abhidhamma in Yangon. The following discussion interprets these results in the context of existing literature and the specific objectives of the research.

Objective 1: To study the Abhidhamma teaching methods in English of Abhidhamma teachers at the University of Abhidhamma in Yangon, Myanmar

The results indicate that Abhidhamma teachers primarily utilize bilingual explanation techniques, a finding that underscores the importance of maintaining doctrinal integrity while navigating a second language. By introducing concepts in Pāli or Burmese before explaining them in English, teachers ensure that the technical precision of the original texts is not lost. This mirrors the assertions of Gethin (1998) and Zaw (2022), who identified bilingual strategies as effective for religious and content-based education.

Furthermore, the frequent use of visual aids, such as charts and diagrams, was observed in nearly all sessions. Because Abhidhamma involves highly abstract and systematic classifications of mental factors and conditional relations, visual representation serves as a cognitive bridge. This aligns with Smith (2015) and Pathmasiri (2023), who emphasize that visual tools help students organize complex philosophical structures that might otherwise be overwhelming when delivered solely through verbal English instruction.

Finally, the adoption of interactive questioning reflects a shift toward learner-centered strategies. By inviting student participation, teachers can assess comprehension in real-time and adjust their instructional pace. This practice is consistent with modern pedagogical frameworks that suggest active participation is crucial for second-language content acquisition.

Objective 2: To analyze the problems of the Abhidhamma teaching methods in English of Abhidhamma teachers at the University of Abhidhamma in Yangon, Myanmar

The analysis of Objective 2 reveals that significant hurdles remain despite the use of adaptive teaching methods. The limited English proficiency of students was identified as a primary barrier. While students often have deep foundational knowledge in traditional Buddhist studies, their lack of English vocabulary for abstract philosophical discourse slows the instructional pace and necessitates frequent code-switching back to Burmese or Pāli. This finding supports Pathmasiri's (2023) observation that language barriers often limit higher-level analytical discussion in monastic settings.

Another major issue is the lack of standardized English textbooks. Teachers currently rely on a fragmented mix of academic translations, self-prepared notes, and Burmese commentaries. As noted by Hallisey (1993) and Zaw (2022), the absence of a unified curriculum leads to inconsistent terminology across different classrooms, which can confuse students trying to master a highly technical system.

The inherent difficulty of translating Pāli metaphysical concepts creates a persistent tension between doctrinal accuracy and language simplicity. Concepts like paramattha dhamma or citta vīthi lack direct English equivalents, and as Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2022) and Sujato (2021) have argued, literal translations often fail to capture the functional meaning of the doctrine. This forces teachers into a difficult position where simplifying the English may inadvertently lead to doctrinal distortion.

Lastly, time constraints intensify these challenges. The need for dual-language explanations and constant clarification means that the prescribed syllabus is difficult to complete within the allocated period. This supports previous research suggesting that English-medium instruction in content-heavy subjects like the Abhidhamma requires significantly more instructional time to achieve the same depth as native-language instruction.

New Body of Knowledge

This study establishes a significant new body of knowledge by bridging the existing gap between theoretical Abhidhamma translation and actual classroom pedagogy within an English-medium monastic context. It formally identifies and documents a specialized Bilingual-Visual Instructional Framework, where educators at the University of Abhidhamma synthesize Pāli doctrinal precision with English accessibility through the systematic application of bilingual explanations and schematic representations such as charts and diagrams. A critical contribution of this research is the conceptualization of the unique "pedagogical tension" inherent in global Buddhist education: the constant negotiation between maintaining metaphysical accuracy and simplifying language for non-native English learners.

The findings further reveal that the lack of standardized English instructional materials forces a reliance on fragmented, self-prepared resources, highlighting an urgent need for institutionalized, cross-cultural glossaries and curriculum development. By shifting the research



focus from rote textual analysis to interactive, learner-centered methodologies, the study provides a foundational model for the effective global dissemination of Theravāda philosophy in the 21st century. Ultimately, this research offers a rare "insider perspective" on how traditional monastic institutions in Myanmar are evolving to meet modern academic standards, providing a strategic roadmap for future curriculum design, teacher training, and cross-cultural Dhamma outreach in multilingual religious settings.

Suggestions

1. Suggestions for Practical Application

Based on the research findings, several strategies are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of English-medium Abhidhamma instruction:

- Development of Standardized English Glossaries: Academic institutions and senior scholars should collaboratively produce standardized glossaries that include Pāli terms, Burmese explanations, and accepted English translations to ensure terminological consistency across different classrooms.
- Specialized Teacher Training Programs: Implementation of training workshops for Abhidhamma teachers is recommended, focusing on pedagogical skills such as scaffolding complex concepts, managing bilingual environments, and utilizing academic English for classroom communication.
- Systematic Integration of Visual Materials: Institutions should encourage the design and use of standardized digital and printed visual tools, such as charts and schematic representations for *Citta*, *Cetasika*, and *Cittavīthi*, to reduce student cognitive load.
- Application of Comparative Teaching Strategies: Teachers should systematically compare Pāli, Burmese, and English explanations side-by-side to help students understand conceptual continuity and reduce reliance on rote memorization.

2. Suggestions for Future Research

To further advance the field of English-medium Buddhist education, the following areas of study are suggested:

- Quantitative Studies on Student Learning Outcomes: Future research should employ quantitative measures, such as test scores and comprehension assessments, to provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of specific teaching methods compared to traditional native-language instruction.
- Cross-Cultural and Comparative Institutional Studies: Investigations involving Buddhist universities in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia could identify global best practices and innovative solutions that may be adapted to the Myanmar context.
- Investigation of Digital Tools and Technology: Research is needed to explore the effectiveness of online platforms, interactive applications, and multimedia resources in improving student engagement and supporting distance learning for international students.

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