

The Practice and Exploration of the Chinese-Myanmar Bilingual Teaching Model in Primary Chinese Language Education in Myanmar

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Abstract: Myanmar and China share a deep-rooted “brotherly bond,” with some ethnic groups sharing common origins and recognizing a shared language and culture. Additionally, as a key node country along the Belt and Road Initiative, Myanmar has seen an annual growth rate of 23% in demand for Chinese language education (Myanmar Ministry of Education, 2024). However, traditional monolingual teaching models face challenges such as cultural differences and language transfer effects. This study is based on a four-month bilingual education research project at the primary school department of Yangon Jasmine International School (pseudonym) in Myanmar, utilizing participatory observation (48 bilingual classes) and teaching experiments to explore the cultural interaction mechanisms in Chinese-Myanmar bilingual classrooms. The findings reveal: In elementary Chinese education, students' Chinese proficiency levels are generally lower than those of their peers in China, accounting for 70% of the sample; during cultural symbol negotiation, Myanmar-Chinese mixed sentences frequently appear (accounting for 37.2% of classroom discourse); cultural symbol barriers exist between Myanmar and Chinese cultures, such as students using the People's Education Press textbooks not recognizing poets like Li Bai and Meng Haoran. In response to this situation, the study proposes teaching improvement strategies, including the “China-Myanmar Shared Symbols” unit approach and a phased method for refining China-Myanmar mixed sentence structures.

Keywords: Education, Chinese, Culture Differences, Language Learning, Strategy Research.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Current Stage of Chinese Education in Myanmar

Myanmar shares a border with China that stretches over 2,000 kilometers. Along this lengthy border, 16 ethnic groups reside across the border. The Shan and Kachin (a branch of the Jingpo) ethnic groups in northern Myanmar share a common origin with the Dai and Jingpo ethnic groups within China.

Generally speaking, the cross-border ethnic minorities along the China-Myanmar border have a long history and possess distinct ethnic cultures and languages. Within their own ethnic groups, they use their own languages and scripts to communicate thoughts and emotions. At the same time, due to the deep historical ties between the cross-border ethnic minorities along the China-Myanmar border and Han culture, coupled with the deepening of China's reform and opening-up, the continuous enhancement of its comprehensive national strength, and the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, the enthusiasm of these ethnic minorities for learning Han culture and the Chinese language has continued to grow.

1.2. The Problem in Chinese-Myanmar Education

In the face of the growing demand for Chinese language learning, the traditional teaching model, which primarily relies on a single Chinese language, has begun to reveal some challenges in practice. The core of these challenges lies in the objective cultural differences between China and Myanmar, as well as the complex effects that may arise during the learning process when transitioning from the mother tongue

(Burmese) to the target language (Chinese). These factors make it difficult for the mere transmission of language knowledge to achieve optimal teaching outcomes in the Myanmar context, and also hinder students' deep understanding of the Chinese language and the culture it embodies[8].

1.3. Relevant Scholarship

Existing literature explores the development patterns and primary challenges of bilingual education in ethnic regions and proposes corresponding strategies and recommendations (Su De et al., 2020)[1]. It further delves into and analyzes the status of Chinese-Myanmar bilingual education in Myanmar border areas (Zhang Yunfeng et al., 2020)[2]. Against the backdrop of continuously deepening exchanges between Myanmar and China, conducting comparative studies between Burmese and Chinese to foster mutual understanding can promote language learning between the two peoples (Wei Yilan, 2015)[3].

2. Survey on Chinese Language Education in Yangon Region, Myanmar

2.1. School Distribution and Kinds

With the increasing popularity of Chinese, over 30 million overseas learners are systematically studying Chinese (as of 2023), and the number of HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) candidates has been growing at an annual rate of 20%, with over 810,000 candidates worldwide in 2024. Meanwhile, due to Myanmar's economic development, many Chinese people in central and northern Myanmar have moved to Yangon for development. In the Yangon region, 90% of Chinese language instruction is provided by non-governmental institutions

(such as Chinese schools and tutoring centers), with only Yangon Foreign Language University offering official Chinese language courses[7].

The scale of teaching is gradually expanding, with over 1,300 students at the Oriental Language School (Confucius Classroom) and 700 students at the Fuxing Academy. However, the high school department has only 35 students, a sharp decrease of 81% compared to the elementary school department (938 students), primarily due to academic pressure and insufficient practicality of the curriculum. School Distribution and Nature

2.2. Teacher Composition

Aging workforce: 65% of teachers are over 50 years old, and there is a shortage of young teachers.

Lack of professional qualifications: Most local teachers do not have a background in education and rely solely on experience to teach; Chinese teachers sent abroad have high turnover (1-2 year terms), making it difficult to maintain continuity in teaching.

2.3. Use of Teaching Materials

The following table summarizes the main issues with Chinese language textbooks in the Yangon area:

Table 1. Main issues with Chinese language textbooks in the Yangon area

Material Source	Main Material Titles	Grade Level	Existing Problems
Provided by Chinese Embassy in Myanmar	"Infant Chinese" "Chinese" "Speaking"	Preschool to Grade 9	Outdated content, disconnected from Myanmar's actual life context
School Self-Selected	"Developing Chinese" "Language Arts"	High School	Excessively difficult, lacks articulation/transition with lower grades
People's Education Press	"History" "Geography"	Grade 7 to Grade 12	Factual errors, low applicability

2.4. Curriculum

Chinese language school courses are scheduled during Myanmar school breaks (weekends or evenings), and students are often exhausted. At the same time, junior high and high schools often offer courses such as Chinese geography and history based on the People's Education Press textbooks, but Myanmar students are in greater need of practical skills (such as business Chinese and translation).

2.5. Teaching Methods

Traditional rote learning is the main teaching method, with 80% of classrooms using a “teacher lectures, students take notes” model, resulting in a lack of interaction. In addition, there is a lack of technology, with no multimedia equipment in classrooms and only 10% of teachers using projectors.

3. Students' Chinese Language Proficiency Lags Behind: Institutional Gaps and Imbalances in Chinese Language Cognition Teacher Composition

3.1. Policy Discontinuity and Reduction in Class Hours

Against the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative driving an annual growth rate of 23% in demand for Chinese language education in Myanmar (Myanmar Ministry of Education, 2024)[4], micro-level teaching scenarios face challenges due to institutional exclusion. According to Article 17 of Myanmar's National Education Law (2023 Amendment), the public education system fully implements English as the medium of instruction (EMI) after the ninth grade, with Chinese classified as a “non-exam subject.” Its instruction can only be carried out through three informal education channels: monastery-affiliated tutoring institutions (e.g., the Buttha Ditar Temple in Yangon offers two hours of instruction per week), private language centers operated by Chinese

community organizations (with an average monthly fee of 50 RMB), and temporary bilingual schools in border regions (e.g., the 2024 pilot project in the Rakhine State)[5]. This policy has reduced the annual Chinese language exposure for learners to below 120 contact hours, which is less than 20% of the Chinese public elementary school curriculum standard (600+ contact hours). More seriously, Chinese language courses are often scheduled at the end of the formal school day-observation data from the Jasmine School shows that students engage in Chinese language learning from 4:00 PM to 5:30 PM after completing Burmese/English courses, or from 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM on Saturdays and Sundays. At this time, their Cognitive Resource Depletion Index (CRDI) has reached a peak of 0.7 (the critical threshold is 0.5), directly hindering the internalization of grammatical structures. Control group experiments indicate that due to insufficient input intensity, learners experience cognitive resource depletion when acquiring “ba(把).” sentences, leading to impaired internalization of grammatical structures. CRDI) has reached a peak of 0.7 (the critical value is 0.5), directly hindering the internalization of grammatical structures. Control group experiments show that when learners acquire “ba (把)” sentences, due to insufficient input intensity, the probability of word order misplacement (e.g., “the book is placed on the table把书放到桌上”) reaches 70%, confirming that their neural cognitive networks have not yet established the conversion mechanism between Chinese SVO word order and Burmese SOV word order.

In private institutions, taking the Jasmine Chinese School as an example, only 20% of students reside on campus and live entirely in a Chinese-language environment. Another 10% have Chinese parents who prioritize Chinese language education, resulting in better Chinese proficiency. The remaining students at the Jasmine School have an average annual exposure to Chinese of only 120 hours, which is less than one-fifth of the exposure of Chinese elementary school students (over 600 hours), leading to delayed acquisition of key grammatical structures (such as “ba (把)” sentences).

3.2. The Vicious Cycle of Teacher Shortages

Through observing the types of teachers at Jasmine Chinese International School, the following conclusions were drawn:

Table 2. Summary of Teacher Types at Jasmine Chinese International School

Teacher Type	Percentage	Monthly Salary (RMB)	Mobility
Local Teachers	63.2%	800-1000	75% annual turnover rate
Chinese Teachers	10.5%	Owners of private schools ¹	Stable
Chinese University Student Intern Teachers	26.3%	800	Unstable

¹ Note. Chinese Teachers typically serve as owners/operators of private schools rather than receiving a fixed salary

Local teachers are switching careers to become translators due to low salaries (monthly salary of 2,000+). Chinese university students working as intern teachers face challenges due to the short duration of their exchange programs as transfer students, resulting in brief employment periods and disruptions in teaching continuity.

3.3. Cognitive Imbalance in Chinese Language Learning

Concepts such as “snowy scenery” and “heating” in the People's Education Press textbooks conflict with students' experiences in Myanmar's tropical monsoon climate (average annual temperature of 28°C), requiring them to expend additional cognitive resources to understand these virtual scenarios. For example, when studying the lesson “The Four Seasons,” students directly translate “winter” as နှင်းရာသီ (frost season), but frost only occasionally occurs in the northern highlands of Myanmar, leading to a hollow understanding of the concept.

4. The Use of Burmese-Chinese Mixed Sentences in the Classroom

Based on a phonetic transcription analysis of 48 bilingual lessons (totaling 2,160 minutes) at Jasmine Primary School in Yangon, Myanmar, the study found that 37.2% of the discourse in the classroom exhibited the characteristics of Burmese-Chinese mixed sentences, i.e., both Burmese and Chinese components coexisted within a single turn. This linguistic phenomenon must be interpreted within the socio-ecological context of multilingual contact in Myanmar, with its core functions primarily manifested in three dimensions: cognitive assistance, cultural negotiation, and classroom interaction.

In terms of cognitive assistance, mixed sentences serve as transitional tools for syntactic understanding. Students frequently insert the Burmese object marker ကို (/gò/, equivalent to the Chinese object marker “把”) to deconstruct Chinese special sentence structures, such as forming mixed

structures like “book ကို put on table.” Teaching control experiments showed that such transformations reduced the error rate in learning “把” sentences by 29%. At the same time, the Chinese directional words “上/下” (up/down) are often used in conjunction with the Burmese three-dimensional spatial marker ပေါ် (/pǎ/, specifically referring to a contact plane) (e.g., “黑板 ပေါ် 写字” (blackboard ပေါ် write)). This effectively bridges the cognitive gap between the Chinese directional system and the Burmese spatial classification system.

At the level of cultural symbol negotiation, mixed sentences serve as a mediating mechanism for co-constructing meaning. When cultural-specific terms like “red envelope” appear in the textbook, students spontaneously generate mixed expressions like “ငွေအိတ် (ngwè ? e i ?/, money bag) red envelope,” grafting Chinese symbols onto the cognitive schema of Burmese wedding customs and gift money ကြေးမုံ (/tseémòuN/). The adaptation of kinship terms also reflects this function-the Chinese term “aunt” is expanded to “aunt ဒေါ်လေး” (/dǎo lé/, a term of respect for women), as the Burmese ဒေါ် (/dǎo/) encompasses terms for female elders on both the paternal and maternal sides. This type of culturally negotiated mixed sentence accounts for 32.1% of the total sample and is concentrated in cultural theme teaching units.

At the level of classroom interaction, mixed sentences reconstruct the power relationship between teachers and students. Students use honorific mixed sentences such as “Teacher ကျေးဇူးပြု၍ (/tseézú pju jwè/, please) say it again”

to actively initiate negotiation, replacing passive silence. Such interactions account for 17.5% of teacher-student dialogue. Teachers also employ bilingual verification strategies (e.g., “Do you understand? နားလည်သလား (/ná lè ð ə lá/) to increase classroom response rates to 89% (compared to 63% for purely Chinese-language questions), confirming the role of mixed sentences in promoting equal dialogue.

5. Cultural Symbolic Barriers between Myanmar and China

Research has found that Myanmar students using the People's Education Press textbooks have a significantly lower recognition rate of Chinese cultural symbols: only 8.3% of students can correctly identify the poets Li Bai and Meng Haoran, and the recognition rate for geographical symbols such as the Yangtze River and the Yellow River is less than 13%. This barrier must be analyzed within the context of Myanmar's social and cultural context.

The Chinese community in Myanmar has experienced a rupture in cultural transmission. The 1967 anti-Chinese incidents led to the closure of all Chinese schools nationwide, with gradual resumption only after 1988, creating a generational gap in historical memory. A survey by the Jasmine School revealed that 35% of Chinese-Myanmar students' families have abandoned the Qingming Festival tomb-sweeping custom, and the textbook phrase “During the Qingming Festival, the rain falls heavily” fails to evoke

emotional resonance. At the same time, local cultural symbols naturally filter textbook content: when textbooks emphasize the “Yangtze and Yellow Rivers as mother rivers,” students are more likely to associate them with Myanmar’s Irrawaddy River (ဧရာဝတီမြစ်); the “bright moon” imagery in Li Bai’s poetry is transformed into the Burmese Mid-Autumn Festival’s “man-eating demon lantern” ritual (ဘီလူးမီးပူဇော်ခြင်း).

The mismatch between textbook content and local experience further exacerbates the divide. The narrative of agricultural civilization in the People’s Education Press textbook differs fundamentally from Myanmar’s rice culture: the ancient poem “Spring Dawn” (“Last night, the sound of wind and rain; how many flowers have fallen?”) causes confusion, as Myanmar’s monsoon season (မိုးရာသီ) prompts the blooming of sandalwood flowers (ဇီးကွက်), rather than destroying them; the “Double Ninth Festival” custom is often misinterpreted as a Buddhist flower offering ceremony (ပန်းတောင်းပူဇော်ခြင်း); the northern agricultural model of “auspicious snow foretells a bountiful” in the northern agricultural context loses its explanatory power in a tropical climate, and students spontaneously replace it with a cognitive model linking the monsoon rains to rice cultivation. This misalignment reflects the textbook compilation’s neglect of the local cultural context of learners.

A deeper contradiction stems from the complexity of identity. Myanmar citizens must simultaneously maintain their political identity as “Myanmar citizens” and their cultural roots as “descendants of the Chinese nation.” If textbook content fails to balance these dual attributes, it may trigger rejection. For example, after the mandatory implementation of the People’s Education Press textbooks in the Ruili region in 2023 sparked controversy, the switch to a bilingual system (with a 1:1 ratio of Burmese and Chinese class hours) in 2024 resulted in a 22% increase in the pass rate for Chinese language tests. This demonstrates that cultural symbols must respect the agency of learners-when the textbook selected Chen Yi’s poem “Gift to Burmese Friends” (“I live at the head of the river, you live at the tail of the river”-where “the head of the river” refers to the Ruili River shared by China and Myanmar), student acceptance reached 78%, far exceeding the 8.3% for Li Bai’s poetry.

6. Conclusion (Teaching Improvement Plan)

6.1. Three Practical Approaches

In terms of reconstructing historical memory, a new section titled “Shared Symbols Between China and Myanmar” could be added, such as juxtaposing Chen Yi’s poem gifted to Myanmar with the works of Burmese patriotic poet Deqin Gedu Mai (သခင်ကိုယ်တော်မှိုင်း), or incorporate facts from the Yunnan-Burma War to evoke shared memories. The localization and translation of symbols should be advanced on two tracks: in the physical dimension, replacing the illustration of “making dumplings for the Spring Festival” with scenes of making coconut rice (မုန့်လက်ဆောင်) for the Myanmar Water Festival (သင်္ကြန်) during the Myanmar

Water Festival (သင်္ကြန်) match the Chinese idiom “drink water and think of its source” with the Burmese proverb “those who know gratitude are good people” (ကျေးဇူးရှင်သားကောင်း).

Pedagogical innovation can adopt a dual-cultural annotation strategy, such as adding a Burmese Pali chanting scheme to the footnotes of Li Bai’s poetry, or organizing students to create Chinese zodiac models using Burmese bamboo weaving techniques (ချည်ထည်), thereby achieving the tactile internalization of cultural symbols.

The barrier of cultural symbols is a complex phenomenon intertwined with historical memory, local experience, and identity recognition. Textbook localization must transcend language conversion, transforming “brotherly friendship” from political rhetoric into tangible educational practice.

6.2. Two-stage Teaching Improvement Plan.

First, implement a phased guidance strategy: adopt a phased tolerance approach for cognitive-assisted mixed sentences (e.g., “书把桌子放”) and gradually simplify them into standard Chinese sentence structures; establish a bilingual symbol comparison table for culturally negotiated mixed sentences (e.g., People’s Education Press “Spring Festival” corresponds to Myanmar’s သင်္ကြန် Water Festival); for interactive functional mixed sentences, compile a “Classroom Common Myanmar-Chinese Honorifics Handbook” to standardize usage.

Second, develop teaching aids, including grammar conversion cards (comparing the cognitive pathways of Chinese “ba(把)” sentences and Burmese ကို markers) and cultural puzzle boards (juxtaposing “red envelopes” with ကြေးမုံ physical images), to promote symbolic mutual interpretation through visual anchoring. This finding aligns with Canagarajah’s (2011) theory of translingual practice [6], which posits that mixed sentences are strategic behaviors through which learners activate multilingual resources to construct pathways of understanding, rather than indicators of language proficiency deficits.

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