

Ei (Eve) Thin Zar

Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship Report
Myanmar (2019)

Burma, one of Southeast Asia's multilingual countries, is composed of 51.4 million people, 30% of which are ethnic minorities. Although there are 135 recognized ethnic groups speaking 111 languages and regional dialects, Burmese, the language of the majority ethnic group which comprises 70% of the country's population, is embraced as the national language of educational instruction. If language is understood as the umbilical cord of the identity and culture of a group, ignoring ethnic languages and marginalizing them by way of the imposition of a national language during the course of education severs this connection and fails to recognize the critical role of identity formation in relation to language.

During British colonial period (1824-1948), English was the dominant language for educational purposes. After the colonial period, the role of English declined although it then became a school subject again in 1982. All the while ethnic languages have continued to be discriminated against in-school instruction. Under dictatorship for over half a century since independence, civil wars between ethnic armed groups (EAGs) and the government military have been ongoing. Due to these ongoing conflicts and the continuation of Burmese as the sole language instruction, there has been a significant increase in student drop-out rates in ethnic minority areas. As a result of this repression of ethnic social identity through *Burmanisation*, members of ethnic minority populations have sought alternatives to the mainstream national education system. The EAGs such as Kachin, Karen, and Mon have established ethnic nationality education systems, in their respective areas where public education was not accessible, with the use of mother-tongue based (MTB) medium of instruction beginning in the 1950s and 1960s. They attempted to standardize these systems after the 1988 student uprising in Burma.

With the rise of nationalist sentiment during the British colonial period in Burma, *Burmanisation* emerged in opposition to colonialism, specifically in the 1920s during the Rangoon University student uprising. After independence, although it was formulated in resistance to the imposition of English language and colonial education, *Burmanisation* as state policy was experienced by many ethnic minority communities as oppressive. As a form of national assimilation and nation-building, *Burmanisation* tends to be a force working against ethnic languages. My study investigates the forms of *Burmanisation* over time and how this notion has changed since colonial times down to the contemporary period, observes the responses of the educational institutions (mainstream and marginalized) to different forms of *Burmanisation* in planning language education policy, and examines regional and local perspectives on contemporary language education policies.

With the generous support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson preliminary research travel fellowship, I spent my summer 2019 from June 3rd to August 15th in Burma and the Thailand-Burma border. That trip allowed me to determine the viability of my project, identify the colonial documents that I will be working with in my project, make a number of important contacts, interview some local educators, and locate potential study sites. During that time, I traveled to

Yangon (the capital city), Mawlamyine (a city in Mon state), Kawkaeik (a city in Karen state) and Mae Sot (Thailand-Burma border).

To familiarize myself with colonial archives and educational documents, I began my summer research in Yangon for the first five weeks of my trip. I explored the colonial archives and documents at the National Archives Department and at the University Central library of Yangon University. By exploring the colonial archives at the National Archives Department, I was able to identify documents that are available to the public, which could assist me to answer my research questions; such as reports on *public instructions* in British Burma, the exchange of letters about grants and scholarships, the speeches of education commissioners, and other miscellaneous items. At the library, I was able to access the first Burmese newspapers, educational journals, and earlier research done on Burma's educational system and its history. The readings at the National Archives Department and University Central Library assisted me to spot the materials that I could explore to trace the forms of Burmanisation over time.

In the following weeks of my trip, I traveled to Mon State, Karen State, and the Thailand-Burma border. To understand the ethnic educational institutions' responses to the different forms of Burmanisation and to examine the local perspective on the contemporary notions of Burmanisation, I met educators who work for the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) and the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD). I had a chance to volunteer to teach English at a school in Umphang village on the Thailand-Burma border. That volunteering gave me a chance to work closely with Karen educators, education officers, and students, and to observe the KECD education system. I traveled with an education officer of KECD across the Thailand-Burma border, both on Thailand's side and Burma's side, and also to the refugee camps.

KECD was established in the 1950s by Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen ethnic armed group, and standardized their education system with the mother-tongue based instruction after the 1988 student's uprising. There are 1573 KECD schools in Karen state, 800 schools are mixed schools (KECD funded- mainstream curriculum schools) and the rest are KECD funded-ethnic curriculum schools. In the refugee camps, the education system is administered by the organization named Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE), which also practices KECD's curriculum with mother-tongue based multilingual education. After Karen National Union (KNU) signed the ceasefire agreement with Burma's government in 2012, the KECD began to join with the mainstream education system.

During my last two weeks, I went to Mawlamyine and met the educators and consultants from the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC). In contrast to Karen education, Mon ethnic education system is already engaged with the mainstream national curriculum, as the ceasefire agreement between the Mon ethnic armed group and the government was signed in 1995. MNEC also practices mother-tongue based multilingual education. During the six weeks of my summer, spending time in ethnic areas allowed me to interview educators and education officers from the two ethnic educational organizations, and retired mainstream school teachers. These contacts were able to put me in touch with more and more individuals, organizations, and policymakers of ethnic educational institutions.

Once more, I would like to express my gratitude to the Scott Kloeck-Jensen as well as the University of Wisconsin-Madison Institute of Regional and International Studies for their generous support of funding for my preliminary research. This opportunity has greatly contributed to positioning me well for my upcoming dissertation and fieldwork, as well as for my professional development for my future career. Being Burmese, I am already deeply familiar with the country and its people. However, with this opportunity, I have been able to more clearly focus on my research by locating study sites and identifying important historical documents. The networks that I made in Burma and the Thailand-Burma border will be very useful for my future research.