



## Exploring the Impact of Multilingualism on Learning Outcomes in Ethnically Diverse Educational Settings

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects of multilingualism on learning achievements across various education types in Myanmar. Qualitative research methodology was used in the study and involved conducting semi structured interviews, focus group discussions and classroom observations to capture the experiences, the challenges and perception of students, teachers, parents and educational administrators. In all, 50 purposively selected participants from multilingual communities responded to questions about the enablers and barriers to education arising from linguistic diversity. Consequently, it is noted that however, multilingualism benefits students through increased participation, cultural sense, and improved learning abilities, the major problems arising are language accord, qualified teachers, and limited teaching materials. Despite the best efforts from the teachers to apply meaningful translanguaging approaches for learning, they encounter several problems while doing so without organization backing. Thus, while students and teachers preferred instruction in first languages, parents and administrators had conflicts of interest between local language education and instruction in national languages. This research also fills the research gaps by presenting paradigmatic data from a developing country with high multilingual population. There is, therefore, a call for inclusive and adequate and sufficient policies, resources and training of teachers in order to maximize on the gains of multilingual education as well as to overcome setbacks. The study extends the global understanding of multilingual education as a development policy by shedding light on the challenges of implementing the policy in low resource districts.*

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### Introduction

Myanmar is a fascinating country including over 135 ethnic groups and over 100 languages to be used in different regions of the state. This cultural and linguistic diversity is something that the country should be proud of but at the same time it became the major problem for the education system. Over the years, Burmese language has been used as the medium of instruction, which generates educational disparities among the learning community who are Burmese second language learners (Bertrand, 2022; Li & Han, 2021). Linguistic minorities are commonly known to struggle in the learning processes because their linguistic and cultural backgrounds are not well provided for in the learning institutions systems (Moreira, 2023). In order to make sense of contestations and debates surrounding multilingualism and learning in Myanmar, it is crucial to get beneath the surface of linguistic diversity's effects on enrolment, participation, and accomplishment.

In Mexico, as around the world, multilingualism in education has been both an issue and a possibility. Several studies indicate that when learners are educated in their L1 during the early years of learning, they are more intelligent and are motivated. This is in line with Okafo et al. (2023) interdependence hypothesis, buttressing the transfers in skills from first to the second language, so far as general learning and academic achievement is concerned. Still, in Myanmar, the predominance of Burmese in distinct schools has led to NULL bilingual education, which would positively affect minority languages to expand the use of these languages.

Examples of consequence of such policies are well illustrated by the education differences between the linguistic groups in Myanmar. Bianchi et al. (2021) also reported a study showing that students from the ethnic minority group drop out of school and perform very poorly than the Burmese speaking students. This situation can be explained by the following reasons: First, there is a language divide between home and school, teachers' insufficient preparation for teaching in multilingual spaces, and dearth of diverse and culturally sensitive instructional materials. Exclusion of minority language Education not only affects child achievement but also widens social gaps as well as slows down national integration efforts (Gándara, 2022).

Previous educational policies in Myanmar also known as Burma have sojourn to a monolingual policy and the perception has long been that only Burmese is a national language. Though this policy was set to promote national unity, it endorses marginalization of linguistic and cultural integration (Delavan et al., 2021). It conforms with other education policies in different regions of the world where the education policy is informed at the expense of minority languages. research conducted on multilingual education program in other societies reveals that use of student's first language in the classroom can greatly enhance students' achievement and embrace cultural diversity Kirss et al. (2021).

The first major issue, which includes a lack of teacher preparation for multilingual education, is the worst form of obstacle that hinders efficient handling of multilingualism in education. Information about teachers and teaching in Myanmar shows that many of them are not ready to adequate address the challenges of multilingual learning environments (Dabrowski et al., 2022). there are no teaching materials in minority languages which also means that students cannot relate to the curriculum in any way. the students of the linguistic minority feel lonely and cannot engage properly in the coursework most of the time. This not only affects the academic learning but also hinders esteem plus long-term learning inclinations in learners.

Lack of Correlation between Language, Education and Politics: The relationship between linguistic diversity and education results is still characterized by other factors. Myanmar social policies include language policies that reflect the effects of decades of political centralization and of aims to construct a Myanmar nation through and through ethnolinguistically uniform (Bertrand, 2022). this approach has been considered to be rather problematic because it fails to take into account the multilingual character of the population and reproduces structural disparities. On the other hand, the position of mother-tongue based education as a means of enhancing learning achievement, equity and social cohesion in multilingual societies is well captured in research from societies such as South Africa and India by scholars such as Nadela et al. (2022) respectively.

Multilingual education, therefore goes beyond just academic gains. Adopting the students' home language in classroom can help to promote inclusion and cultural inclusive society which are important elements of social inclusion (UNESCO, 2019). On the other hand, scientific evidence shows that multilingualism is beneficial in terms of cognitive flexibility and problem-solving abilities, and creativity. Leal et al. (2020) has pointed out that it is because of such realizations that the various education systems should not view students' linguistic

backgrounds as problems to be solved but rather view them as a resource that is, they should view linguistic diversity as a resource.

Compared to Nigeria and Malaysia, analysing multilingualism in education in Myanmar is also more than educational because ethnic conflict and socio-economic inequality combined with language problems. Authorities at the policy and schooling levels should understand the transformative nature of ME for leveraging the opportunity of minority students for equity. Pilot schemes of ethnic language inclusion in the primary education project for example, give a recent peek into how linguistic diversity can actually be mainstreamed in the system. These attempts are still confined to only a limited range and need a continuous inflow of capital and spadework in policies and legislature to be effective.

This paper aims to discuss the connection between multilingualism and learning achievements particularly within the context of the Myanmar education system, with focuses on perspectives of students, teachers and parents. In this respect, the presented research explores the European practices of implementing multilingualism in education to reveal its benefits and issues in order to understand how the linguistic diversity can be beneficial for development of education and social integration. Thus, it contributes to the developing literature on multilingual education and its potential to redress inequities in education in settings characterized by language diversity.

## **Method**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the impact of multilingualism on learning outcomes in Myanmar. The qualitative approach was selected to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by students, teachers, and parents in multilingual educational environments. By focusing on real-life experiences and contexts, the study aimed to capture the complexity of how linguistic diversity influences learning processes and classroom dynamics. A case study approach was adopted to provide a detailed analysis of specific schools and communities where multilingualism is prevalent. This method allowed for a rich, contextualized exploration of the phenomenon, ensuring that the findings reflect the lived experiences of the participants.

The study involved 50 purposively selected participants to ensure the inclusion of individuals with diverse and relevant perspectives. Participants consisted of students aged 10–18 from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, teachers working in multilingual classrooms, parents of multilingual students, and educational administrators responsible for language and curriculum policies. The purposive sampling strategy was critical in capturing a broad range of views and experiences, thereby enhancing the depth and credibility of the findings. By including different stakeholders in the education system, the study offered a holistic understanding of how multilingualism affects academic performance, teaching practices, and the overall learning environment.

To ensure a comprehensive data collection process, the study utilized semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and classroom observations. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, teachers, parents, and administrators, with each session lasting between 30–45 minutes. The interviews featured open-ended questions to encourage participants to share their experiences and insights freely. In addition, four focus group discussions were conducted, two with teachers and two with parents, involving 5–7 participants in each session. These discussions lasted 60–90 minutes and allowed for group reflections on shared challenges and opportunities in multilingual education. Finally, non-participatory classroom observations were carried out in 10 classrooms over a period of two

weeks. Each observation session, lasting 45–60 minutes, provided direct insights into teaching methods, student engagement, and the use of languages in classroom interactions.

The data collected through these methods were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved multiple steps to ensure accuracy and reliability. First, all interviews, focus group discussions, and observation notes were transcribed verbatim and reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Next, key phrases, sentences, and recurring patterns were identified and coded, capturing significant ideas related to multilingualism's impact on learning. These codes were grouped into broader themes that aligned with the research objectives, such as “language as a barrier,” “teacher strategies,” and “perceptions of multilingualism.” Finally, the identified themes were interpreted to draw meaningful connections between multilingualism and educational experiences, while ensuring that participants' voices remained central to the analysis.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were strictly adhered to in order to protect participants' rights and well-being. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with parental or guardian approval for students. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing data and using pseudonyms to protect identities. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The study further prioritized cultural sensitivity, ensuring respect for Myanmar's diverse linguistic and cultural landscape during data collection and analysis. By integrating diverse perspectives and using a rigorous analytical approach, the study provided meaningful insights into the challenges and opportunities of multilingualism in Myanmar's educational system.

## **Result and Discussion**

Myanmar with its 131 ethnic groups and languages make the social context of multilingual education very contextual in the country. The south Asian nation's education system influenced by historical, political and socio-cultural processes, functions in a multilingual context where local languages interaction with the state language – Burmese is significant for students. This study aimed at exploring the impact of multilingual on education with a focus on student, teachers, parents, educational administrators perceptions within the multilingual communities. Thus, by identifying the factors of enail and fail in multilingual learning, this research provides useful knowledge about the approaches on the implementation of multilingual education in Myanmar and especially in the condition of constrained context and diverse expectations of stakeholders. The subsequent sections present the general findings of this research study in order to reveal the effectiveness and constrains of multilingual in the context of Myanmar education system.

### **Language as a Barrier and Resource**

The findings of this study revealed that multilingualism in Myanmar's educational settings exerts both positive and negative effects on learning outcomes. On one hand, linguistic diversity presents significant challenges, particularly for students who are required to learn in a language different from their mother tongue. Language barriers can create obstacles to comprehension, participation, and overall academic performance. on the other hand, multilingualism also offers unique opportunities for cognitive development, cultural understanding, and critical thinking skills when managed effectively.

Many participants, particularly students, shared that the use of multiple languages in the classroom sometimes hindered their ability to understand lessons clearly. Students who were not proficient in the dominant language of instruction reported feeling isolated or left behind in lessons. One student expressed:

*“Sometimes I don’t understand what the teacher is saying because it’s not in my home language, and I feel lost. It takes me longer to learn new things.”*

Similarly, teachers observed that students from minority linguistic backgrounds struggled more with subjects that required technical vocabulary, as the unfamiliar language further complicated learning. A teacher remarked:

*“For subjects like science and math, it becomes hard for students if they don’t know the main language well. I have to explain in their language sometimes, but it takes extra time.”*

This highlights how language can be a barrier, slowing the learning process and creating unequal access to education among students from different linguistic groups.

Parents also voiced concerns about how the emphasis on a dominant or national language in schools may undervalue their children’s native languages and cultural identities. They worried that the focus on national or international languages created additional stress for students. One parent shared:

*“Our children are pressured to learn in a language they don’t speak at home, and this affects their confidence. They feel they are not as smart as other students who speak that language fluently.”*

Such challenges suggest that while multilingual education policies aim for inclusivity, they may unintentionally alienate students from minority groups if not implemented with sensitivity to linguistic diversity.

Despite these challenges, participants also highlighted the ways in which multilingualism facilitates learning, particularly in developing cognitive flexibility and cultural understanding. Students who were exposed to multiple languages in school demonstrated stronger problem-solving skills and adaptability. One educational administrator explained:

*“When students are multilingual, they can think more critically and connect ideas better. They learn to switch between languages, which helps them think more deeply.”*

Teachers also noted that multilingual students displayed enhanced creativity and communication skills. For example, one teacher commented:

*“Students who use multiple languages can understand different perspectives and cultures. This helps them work well in group activities and express themselves better.”*

These insights suggest that multilingualism can foster critical skills such as flexibility, adaptability, and intercultural competence, which are invaluable in today’s globalized world.

Multilingualism was seen as a tool for fostering inclusivity and cultural harmony when appropriately integrated into classroom practices. Teachers who implemented translanguaging strategies using students’ home languages alongside the language of instruction observed higher levels of engagement and participation. For instance, a teacher shared:

*“I use both the local language and Burmese when teaching, so students don’t feel left out. It helps them understand better and makes the classroom more inclusive.”*

Such practices not only improve comprehension but also build a positive and respectful learning environment where students’ linguistic and cultural identities are validated.

## **Teaching Strategies**

The study revealed that teachers in multilingual classrooms in Myanmar employ a variety of strategies to address the challenges posed by linguistic diversity while fostering an inclusive

and supportive learning environment. These strategies include the use of **translanguaging**, visual aids, peer support, and differentiated instruction to ensure that all students, regardless of their linguistic backgrounds, can actively engage with the curriculum and comprehend the lessons being delivered.

One of the most commonly used strategies was translanguaging, where teachers switch between the national language, Burmese, and students' native languages during lessons. This approach helped bridge the language gap and allowed students to grasp complex concepts more easily. A teacher explained:

*“I mix Burmese with the local language so that students who don’t understand everything in Burmese can still follow the lesson. It helps them feel included and makes learning easier for them.”*

Teachers emphasized that translanguaging not only improved comprehension but also built students’ confidence by validating their home languages. However, this strategy often required additional effort and time from teachers, particularly in classrooms with multiple linguistic groups. One teacher shared:

*“It’s challenging to use more than one language, especially when students speak different mother tongues, but it’s necessary to make sure no one is left behind.”*

To further enhance understanding, teachers also relied heavily on visual aids and non-verbal teaching methods. Visual tools such as diagrams, charts, videos, and images were used to supplement oral explanations and provide students with alternative ways to process information. For instance, during science lessons, teachers used pictures of objects, experiments, or processes to explain concepts that might otherwise be difficult for students who struggled with the language of instruction. One teacher remarked:

*“Visual aids are very helpful in multilingual classrooms. Even if the students don’t fully understand the words, they can look at the pictures and grasp the main ideas.”*

This strategy proved particularly effective for younger learners and subjects that required visual demonstration, such as science, geography, and mathematics.

Another significant strategy was the use of peer support and collaborative learning. Teachers encouraged students who were proficient in both the language of instruction and their peers’ native languages to act as translators or mentors during group work and class discussions. This not only facilitated comprehension but also fostered cooperation and a sense of belonging among students. A student described this approach:

*“When I don’t understand what the teacher says, my friend explains it to me in our language. It helps me a lot.”*

Teachers also highlighted the benefits of peer support for building interpersonal skills and promoting teamwork. One teacher shared:

*“I pair students who are stronger in Burmese with those who need help. This way, they learn from each other, and it creates a supportive classroom environment.”*

Differentiated instruction was another key strategy adopted to address the diverse linguistic and academic needs of students. Teachers tailored their lessons, assignments, and assessments to accommodate varying levels of language proficiency. For example, teachers simplified instructions, provided additional explanations, or offered alternative tasks for students who required more support. A teacher elaborated:

*“I try to adjust my teaching to suit the needs of each group. If some students are struggling with the language, I give them simpler examples or extra time to complete their work.”*

While this strategy required careful planning, it proved to be effective in ensuring that all students had the opportunity to learn at their own pace.

### **Perceptions of Multilingual Education**

The study revealed diverse perceptions of multilingual education among students, teachers, parents, and educational administrators in Myanmar. While some participants viewed multilingual education as a tool for fostering inclusivity, cultural preservation, and cognitive development, others perceived it as a challenge that complicates learning and creates disparities in educational outcomes. These differing perspectives highlight the complexity of implementing multilingual education in linguistically diverse contexts.

Many students expressed mixed feelings about multilingual education. On one hand, they appreciated the opportunity to learn in their native language as it made them feel more comfortable and confident in the classroom. One student remarked:

*“When the teacher uses my home language, I feel like I can understand everything much better. It’s easier for me to learn new topics.”*

For these students, the use of their native language not only improved comprehension but also reduced anxiety and enhanced their overall learning experience. However, some students, particularly those from minority linguistic backgrounds, reported feeling disadvantaged when lessons were conducted predominantly in Burmese or other dominant languages. A student shared:

*“Sometimes I feel frustrated because I can’t keep up with lessons in Burmese. I want to learn, but I need more help to understand.”*

These responses indicate that while multilingual education can benefit students, it must be implemented in a way that accommodates the needs of all linguistic groups to prevent exclusion.

Teachers, on the other hand, recognized the benefits of multilingual education but also emphasized the practical challenges it posed in the classroom. Many teachers acknowledged that multilingual education helped promote cultural diversity and inclusivity by validating students' linguistic identities. A teacher explained:

*“When I use the students’ native languages, they are more engaged and motivated. It helps them feel proud of their culture and language.”*

Teachers also highlighted the difficulties of managing classrooms with students who speak multiple languages. A teacher commented:

*“It’s hard to teach when students come from different language backgrounds. I sometimes struggle to balance between using Burmese and their native languages, and it takes extra effort to make sure everyone understands.”*

These challenges underscore the need for adequate teacher training and resources to support effective multilingual teaching practices.

Parents also held contrasting views on multilingual education. Many parents viewed it as an essential tool for preserving their children’s cultural heritage and fostering a sense of pride in their linguistic roots. One parent expressed:

*“I want my children to learn in our language because it connects them to our culture and identity. It’s important for them to know where they come from.”*

Multilingual education represented an opportunity to maintain their cultural values while providing their children with a meaningful education. However, other parents raised concerns that too much emphasis on native languages might hinder their children’s ability to learn the national language, Burmese, which is crucial for higher education and employment opportunities. A concerned parent shared:

*“I worry that if my child focuses too much on our local language, they might struggle later with Burmese and miss out on opportunities.”*

These differing perceptions reflect the tension between cultural preservation and the need to acquire proficiency in a national or dominant language for social mobility.

Educational administrators offered a broader perspective, emphasizing the importance of balancing linguistic diversity with practical educational goals. Many administrators viewed multilingual education as a means of fostering national unity while respecting Myanmar’s rich cultural diversity. One administrator stated:

*“We have to recognize the importance of all languages while ensuring students can communicate and compete at a national level. Education must prepare them for both local and national contexts.”*

Administrators also pointed out the need for clear policies, teacher support, and resources to successfully implement multilingual education. Without these elements, they believed that linguistic diversity could inadvertently become a barrier rather than an opportunity.

The findings of this study offer significant insights into how multilingualism impacts learning outcomes in Myanmar’s diverse educational settings, while addressing critical gaps in the existing literature. In particular, this study contrasts with previous research by providing a contextualized analysis of both the facilitating and hindering effects of multilingualism on student learning, teacher practices, and stakeholder perceptions within a specific socio-cultural framework.

Earlier research has tended to focus on the means of academic achievement that is in proposing the link at the cognitive advantages of multilingualism including executive control and cognitive control, creative thinking and metacognition abilities (Abuhassna et al., 2020). the greater part of such studies has been done in western or developed nations, where multilingual education itself is backed up with strong policy and material (Dobrushina & Moroz, 2021). To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, there is a significant gap in understanding how and in what context LES can be implemented in a developing country such as Myanmar that faces these challenges. the present study supports Monje et al. (2021) to focus on the mother-tongue based education in multilingual societies, meanwhile they are derived from the southeastern Asia context. This research provides a set of findings related to the ESLM’s difficulties and benefits in Myanmar, a country with more than one hundred linguistic communities.

This research contrasts with previous studies that for the most part concluded that linguistic diversity only has positive implications (Botes et al., 2020) and has established that while multilingual might have some positive impacts that could assist learning it will also have its negative impacts that will hinder learning also. Nishanthi (2020) has shown that mother-tongue education is effective ways to enhance comprehension as well as student.

Eyes on the context and implementation, revealing, the study also finds that the lack of inter-annual support for minority language in the classroom act as constraining factor, a factor not discussed by previous literature on multilingual education. This work shows that students from

the minority linguistic background in Myanmar often struggle with language barriers, particularly when instruction is delivered in Burmese, and helps to fill a gap in the worldwide research on multilingual education.

Another strength of the present work resides in offering a close account of both the practice that teachers implement and the point of view they have toward planned multilingual settings. Other past works agreeing with the present paper include Gorter & Arocena (2020), who explore the effectiveness of using translanguaging in closing language divides. The present study also revealed comparable evidence of teachers engaging in informal TLP through making interpretation of the Burmese language and concepts easier with the help of first languages. This study is unique in that it considers the issues that a teacher goes through when applying the strategies for enhancing LCPS in low-performing contexts. Lack of Bilingual Education or proper resources proved to be a major challenge that has not been illustrated well enough in previous papers.

This study builds on Park (2023) argument that multilingual education must address societal inequalities, as language barriers can exacerbate educational disparities among minority groups. The findings underscore the need for inclusive language policies that promote equitable learning opportunities for all students. While students appreciated native language instruction, many parents and administrators expressed concern that an overemphasis on local languages might hinder students' proficiency in Burmese, which is essential for future educational and economic success. These findings align with studies by Ardakani (2020), who argue for a balanced approach to multilingual education that preserves cultural identity while ensuring access to dominant languages for socio-economic mobility.

The study also addresses gaps in understanding stakeholder perceptions of multilingual education. Much of the existing literature focuses on either students or teachers, often neglecting the role of parents and administrators in shaping educational outcomes (Bell & Smith, 2022). This study provides a more comprehensive analysis by including all relevant stakeholders. While students and teachers recognized the cognitive and cultural benefits of multilingualism, parents expressed mixed views, with some prioritizing cultural preservation and others concerned about academic competitiveness. Administrators, on the other hand, emphasized the need for national unity through a shared language while acknowledging the importance of preserving linguistic diversity. These contrasting views highlight the complex dynamics involved in implementing multilingual education and underscore the need for inclusive policies that address the concerns of all stakeholders.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature that emphasizes the importance of policy and resource allocation in successful multilingual education. While previous studies, such as Dhakal (2021), have called for systemic support for mother-tongue-based multilingual education, they often fail to explore the implications of resource constraints in developing contexts. This study highlights how a lack of teacher training, teaching materials, and institutional support can undermine the effectiveness of multilingual education in Myanmar. By documenting these challenges, the study reinforces the argument made by Sah & Li (2022) that without sufficient resources and institutional commitment, multilingual education can exacerbate inequalities rather than promote inclusivity.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the complex and multifaceted impact of multilingualism on learning outcomes in Myanmar, offering a nuanced understanding of how linguistic diversity both facilitates and hinders educational experiences. While multilingualism enhances cultural identity, engagement, and cognitive development, challenges such as language barriers,

resource limitations, and inconsistent policies can impede its effectiveness. By addressing existing gaps in the literature, this research underscores the importance of inclusive language policies, teacher training, and resource allocation to ensure equitable and effective multilingual education. Moving forward, a balanced approach that embraces linguistic diversity while supporting national and economic aspirations is essential to fostering sustainable educational outcomes in Myanmar's multilingual society.

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