Teacher Training in Myanmar Report #2: It's the People, Not the Tech

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Abstract

This report is an update of Ryan (2017) on the current situation in Myanmar for teacher training, technology and language learning. Our experience with teacher training sessions of the last four years have yielded many new views on Myanmar, language teaching, technology, and training. After a report on the experiences of summer 2017 a set of insights and suggestions follow about languages, teaching and technology as they pertain to this experience and how they relate to each other and to teaching students in technology rich countries.

Report: Account of Training 2017

On the heels of the four successful training sessions in Myanmar (Yangon, Thaton, Kalaw and Kungyangon) in 2016, our team made plans to amplify and standardize the training sessions for 2017. Instead of four sessions we expanded to six, each 4 days, with 2 days for travel and one day of rest, making the time commitment six weeks. This was not a problem because one trainer (Frank Berberich) was already living in Yangon, and I was able to get a business visa allowing me to stay more than a month from one of our organizers.

Standardization of the sessions was the result of an effort to eventually expand the training to other times of the year and to other trainers. One of the difficulties in August was that schools were all in full operation, and required significant planning by the school districts to free up teachers. Even though using the weekend, it still required teachers to miss two full days of teaching. A much better time for teachers would be in the spring, just after entrance exams to university had finished and before the second of three semesters began. There has also been a significant interest by other educators in volunteering for the training, and managing that expansion would require a framework and materials for new trainers to take advantage of the experience we have built up over the last 4 years of training.

Planning on training sessions began in the fall, when we communicated with our organizers our intention to take over some of the travel arrangements using an in-country travel agent, along with a more standardized schedule (beginning each week on Saturday, and traveling Wednesdays to Friday. This would reduce the effort needed by our organizers to arranging the groups of teachers and school districts. We even offered to defray some of the costs for teacher attendance stipends. Myanmar, and especially the National League for Democracy (NLD), were very busy building a democracy since their overwhelming ascension in November 2015. The day-to-day business of running a democracy while learning how to run a democracy meant that our

organizers in the NLD-EN (NLD Education Network) were stretched very thin.

Developing materials for the training session also became a priority, since we had learned that materials at the venues generally did not lend themselves to good training. These included non-moveable desks, whiteboards that did not erase very well, no photocopy facilities, and no other technical advantages we have come to rely upon in most other countries. We were also looking at going even farther afield this year, into more rural environments. So I wrote and developed a 20-page teacher training handbook to follow during the sessions. I also assembled a 40-page collection of sample materials to reduce our dependence on whiteboards. These we printed in Yangon upon arrival to reduce costs. We purchased a digital projector (with portable audio speakers) and assembled an online set of resources that we could share with teachers that could use technology in their classrooms. We purchased and provided USB or SD drives with these materials on them to the lead teacher of each session if no internet was available in the area.

By far, though, our most strategic advantage for success in sessions was to know our audience in time to customize content depending on the grade level of teacher. Students in Myanmar study English from the third grade. We focused on the high school level, culminating in the final year preparing for university entrance exams. Unfortunately, very little information was forthcoming from our NLD-EN organizers. Nonetheless, we continued to prepare using our experience, building enough variance into the session curriculum so as to appeal to as wide a variety of trainees as possible.

We had been in contact with other similar organizations in the year intervening, as our planning continued. Most of these organizations focused on teaching English directly to students, and only sometimes added participation of the local faculty, and usually as an afterthought. Most of these organizations focused on areas of trouble and strife, either up in the rebel area of northern Shan State, the Kachin, and finally the Rakhine State. We were able to begin setting up cooperative measures to share information and techniques, mostly regarding logistics of setting up programs, procuring adequate training sites and getting the word out to prospective attendees. Most interest from volunteers here in Japan has waned since the troubles with the Rohingya.

As the training sessions approached (August 1-September 15), and even though one trainer (Frank) was in Yangon, we only started to get a sense of the situation about a month before, when two of the six sessions were scheduled. We had been used to last-minute adjustments, but were hoping that using the experience of the previous year as a guide, and our providing more logistical support, that the organizers would be able to advise us of the schedule earlier. Not the case.

Our first session was scheduled, then cancelled, then rescheduled in a different location the week before we arrived. Two other sessions were cancelled at the last minute. A different type of session was requested for one other session. In the end, we ended up with the following schedule

(and on the map). The organizers cancelled sessions north of Mandalay, in Taunggyi, and in Mawlamyine.

8/5 (Sat) to 8/8 (Tue) Workshop at Pan Pyoe Latt Monastery near Bago. (4 hours by car from Yangon)

8/12 (Sat) to 8/15 (Tue) Workshop in Sittwe, capital of Rakhine state. (2 hour flight from Yangon)

8/19 (Sat) to 8/24 (Thu) in Yangon. Session cancelled.

8/26 (Sat) to 8/29 (Tue) Workshop in Kalaw. (14 hours by bus from Yangon)

9/2 (Sat) to 9/6 (Wed) Tourism English training for hotel staff in Kalaw

9/9 (Sat) to 9/17 (Sun) Last session cancelled.

Fig. 1. Map of Myanmar. (Kettley, 2017)

In the end, we were able to do two fully productive sessions with our target audience, high school English teachers. One was in Sittwe, Rakhine state, just as the ethnic cleansing broke out. Teachers coming from the affected areas were often held up or distracted. The other successful session was in Kalaw, where we had been the previous year. Unfortunately, about a third of these 60 attendees were repeating, the others new, creating a new problem that we largely overcame with the new materials and using the experiences of the previous year as a lead-in to activities.

Other sessions were less productive. Our first session at a monastery in the middle of the jungle, an hour down a muddy road, was a valuable experience in organization for us, but a complete failure for the trainees as most were junior high teachers and only 20% were English teachers. We did discover though, that all teachers (English and other subjects) in that location

had about the same English level. Adapting the materials and activities for minimally capable English participants was a challenge. The session in Kalaw was to teach Tourism English to the hotel staff (others invited from around the city) and did not include any training. The participants were very focused as they saw an immediate need and a benefit as Kalaw was developing itself into a tourist destination, already known in Europe as a place for trekking, mountain biking, rafting and other outdoor sports. August was the rainy season and thus occupancies were at a minimum. We were able to visit classes in session on occasion and that has led to a further refinement of activities in our training sessions.

Upon arrival back in Yangon after our last session, we held a debriefing with the organizers. We reported that in all cases, requests for materials for entrance exam preparation were at the top of the list. The feedback was similar to last year, that teachers in Myanmar were usually very constricted and prescribed by the head teacher in each school as to the content of their lessons. Most are instructed to "follow the book" and many were even given daily page assignments to cover in their classes. This allowed little opportunity to use the activities and concepts from our workshop sessions. A few did recognize that some of our techniques could be substituted for book exercises, and that among the younger faculty use of technology was a possibility as a teacher tool, but that students were not yet ready.

When we voiced our disappointment at the cancellations, we learned that requests for exam prep materials and tourism English courses were much more plentiful than for teacher training in communicative methods. Calls to modernize the English education in national schools are just gaining traction. Because the current system has been entrenched for over 2 decades without update, the entropy needed to force a change needs to be much broader. We offered to continue sessions next summer but only if they could organize them in good time. The deadline has come and passed without any contact from our organizers. We learned that our contact group had taken over management of the sessions from the NLD-EN and did not consult the entire network last summer. The NLD is busy building a democracy and this long-term benefit took back seat to the considerable short-term needs at hand in Myanmar. We have developed other contacts in the country in Mandalay and Yangon and are looking at possibilities along those lines. The materials developed are freely available. Contact me at ryan@kevinryan.com for details.

Implications

Implications for Myanmar

Myanmar needs a "killer educational app." This software application (app) would drive people to use technology in a new way (killer) to learn English (education). This software application would help high school seniors study for the national entrance exams in English. It is easy to do, would be tremendously profitable, but would eliminate a lot of extra curricular work for English teachers (private tuition study).

Since English textbooks are mandated across the country there is only one series of study materials that would form the core of any new Course App. Since the exam is based on the text, and rewards memorization of key elements of the text, creating exercises for the app would be easy. Building a bank of sample questions from previous exams would also be trivial as these questions are published and in the public domain. Since no communicative knowledge is needed to get a high score on the exam, a simple behaviorist approach to the apps (drill and kill) would work well. Adding a bright facade onto a database of questions would make the preparation more palatable. Offer it free, and offer it as an Android app first, following up 6 months later with an iPhone adaptation. Think of it as a repurposed Duolingo application.

Current software offerings are crude and incomplete. Single-author apps for both iPhone and Android leave a lot to be desired. Most are still based on short memory tests of translations. The most successful of these types of programs is Duolingo, which has 22 language pairs, but has no current intention of localizing to Myanmar, even though there are requests to do so. Myanmar (Burmese) ranks behind Valaryan, a fictional language in the popular television show Game of Thrones (Duolingo). Test preparation in general has been moving online over the current decade, with Pearson leading the way. This move is a result in the changes noted by Alia Ray (2016) of new technologies for learning programs, increased enrolment in online courses, increased competition in the industry (along with significant new entries into the market), as well as the inability of traditional institutions to deliver learning to a large number of people. This last, in industry parlance, can be termed "scaling up to the masses."

As reported in my previous report (Ryan, 2017), the conditions are ripe for online learning to develop in Myanmar as mobile communications proliferate with both cellular networks and smartphone adoption (mostly Android) at an astounding rate. A number of smaller companies are interested in this market, which I am helping to advise. Following are a number of suggestions made.

To monetize the software, you can add extra features such as peer group interaction, quiz contests, sharing of content among users, specialized features for vocabulary acquisition, and then charge for them. Once the initial free app is widely distributed, preparation for this software in earlier years (high school, then junior high, then elementary) would round out the suite of apps. The majority of costs would be in promotion, marketing and distribution. Start in Yangon and Mandalay with a campaign promoted by famous language educators, move to medium-sized cities and finally to rural areas through half-day teacher training sessions followed by a meal, or through language teaching conferences.

The advantage of the software is that it would provide more exact language samples and points than the teachers themselves. Even though unnecessary to pass the exam, audio examples of language could be an add-on for students wishing better pronunciation models than their teachers can provide. Indeed, if the software were successful, students would use money normally spent on tutors (a common practice) after school and use that on "any-time, any-

where" study through their phones. There have been some apps already developed, but are still rudimentary. Thus we could see a leap-frog situation as indicated in my 2017 article. It would have a devastating effect on teacher income for tutoring after school.

Implications for Learning Languages

This application of technology would be ultimately counterproductive in the long term. The possibility of creating a college entrance exam prep application and the fact that it could replace what teachers are doing in class would have a deleterious effect on English language instruction in Myanmar.

High school English is seen as test prep in Myanmar, especially during the final year of study. A whole industry of books and references has grown up around the national entrance exams, similar to other countries like Japan, with English proficiency exams like TOEFL or IELTS. Indeed, among these test prep industry companies like Pearson, Cambridge and ETS are now worth billions of dollars.

As the effect of the language test preparation industry shows in Pakistan, large chains dominate the market for more affluent schools. However, many smaller individual operators of local establishments are involved and provide their testing services to less affluent clientele (Memon & Umrani, 2016). This has affected the curriculum in previous years. It would also add to the burden of the student to equate entrance exam prep with language learning. This does show that my assertion last year (Ryan, 2017) of "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" is sadly true in this case. Myanmar will probably have to go through the "drill and kill" stage of Programmed Learning and Instructional Systems Design (ISD) just as it occurred in the late 1980's in the US and the late 1990's in Japan.

A discussion needs to be raised, not so much about technologies but the assumptions behind them. Technology is neutral, but it is being applied in two very distinct ways. The argument continues.

> "Commentators are stuck arguing whether tech is good or bad, whether personalized learning is synonymous with robot teachers or high-touch teaching, whether technology is under-researched or offers a high payoff. I worry that these debates draw false dichotomies. They risk entrenching different camps in their feelings about the *form* a tool takes rather than its *function*. I suspect that the deeper tension undergirding these debates may have less to do with technology itself and more to do with competing behaviorist and constructivist philosophies." (Fisher, 2018)

We see this played out in the development of MOOCs. Originally developed as a tool for collaborative research and constructivist (and connective) learning, these were renamed "cMOOCs" when behaviorist principles and large institutions (Stanford with Coursera and Harvard with EDx) became involved and changed the model, now called xMOOCs. Myanmar is

ripe for the behaviorist model, but will need the constructivist kind of learning to catch up to the rest of the world. An opportunity is here for an extremely positive change in Myanmar, but from my time on the ground there, the will is not strong enough yet.

Implications for EdTech

It is important to establish a firm online presence and early dominance in any new market. This leads to advantages such as,

"Which program the customer tries first is a fight publishers want to engage in; it's important for them because a user can become "captive" to a particular product, and reward the company with high lifetime value. How is customer captivity established for language apps?

Habit -- You get hooked on how the program works, it's little musical themes and psychic rewards.

Search costs -- It may cost you money, and it definitely costs you time to research which foreign language programs are out there and how they differ.

Switching costs -- Once you get started on a program, you can't bring your "levels" to another program.

Network effects -- Some of these programs have communities of like-minded learners that you can check in with regularly." (Seave, 2016)

But dealing with language training and language teacher training in a situation like Myanmar, one with a new democracy with large entropy to overcome, with an uncertain situation that frightens most large investment, the technology is not the only consideration. There are many cases such as the Betamax video format and the QWERTY keyboard layout that demonstrate social and personal factors dominating the most efficient technical capabilities.

Technology infrastructure is practically non-existent in Myanmar, a lesson hard learned during our initial training sessions. Instead of relying on tech there, we decided to bring our own this year. These would include:

- An upgrade of my website of audio support materials for the national textbooks (years 3-11)
- A recent model laptop computer (MacBook)
- A high-resolution wi-fi capable digital projector
- 2 Bluetooth speakers capable of sound output in a large open room
- A 60-page teacher manual with sample activities (200 copies printed in Yangon)
- A set of Captur Paddles (http://captur.me/) for classroom response by students
- Vocabulary (単語) cards (200 sets, printed in Yangon)

Relying on our own equipment allowed us to present at different locations in a more similar

manner. Indeed, the whole purpose of this year was to develop a standardized approach with methods that can be reused with other locations and by other trainers. We were seeking to develop habits and network effects of the training content.

It's Not about the Tech, It's about the People

As we received many compliments in the feedback for our session, we started to see a pattern. The interactions we had *between* sessions were more appreciated than the sessions themselves. The comments have led us to believe that even for teachers in Myanmar, the ability to follow inference, use critical thinking and discussion techniques for small group work may have been asking too much. Cooperative learning techniques were new to most teachers, making the sharing of analysis in small groups a real challenge.

Some of the sessions would have sporadic attendance. Rainy season meant torrential downpours. Teachers usually came on small motorcycles, meaning a late start. We used these times for more individual support. Teachers thought these ad-hoc discussions of their situations with specific suggestions for activities and methods were the most valuable. Yoon et al. (2007) would conclude from an overview of 9 students selected from 1,300 total that, "Studies that had more than 14 hours of professional development showed a positive and significant effect on student achievement from professional development." (p.4) While our sessions intended to deliver 16 hours, the sporadic attendance would mean that for many members, this threshold was below the recommendation by Yoon.

One of the other goals this year was to extend the Workshops by developing online activities before, during, and after the workshop, allowing for more interaction and follow up for application. This is essential for success of applying these ideas in class. Because of the lack of preparation by our organizers teachers were not selected for workshops until shortly before, making any kind of background reading or preparation impossible. Likewise, contact information among participants distributed after the workshop only included mobile numbers. Attempts to set up even a Facebook group (or Viber channel) were ignored by the participants. This could have been a linguistic barrier, but could also be a preference for face-to-face communication about these sensitive matters; an unwillingness to risk exposure to other teachers in an online forum. We had not built up enough trust, which is understandable with only 4 days. Yoon et al. (2007) pointed out that most professional development (PD) workshops in education have follow-up.

> "All nine studies employed workshops or summer institutes. In all but one study follow-up sessions supported the main professional development event. ...In all nine studies professional development went directly to teachers rather than through a "train-the-trainer" approach and was delivered by the authors or their affiliated researchers." (Yoon et al. 2007, p.4)

Lessons Learned

After our first session of professional development of language teachers in Myanmar in 2014, we were acutely aware of the limitations of any kind of program like this would have. Previous research into elements of effective training allowed us more success. Higgins et al. (2015) did a meta-study of global teacher training practices and came up with 8 factors that lead to increased adoption of content. 1) While we were above the minimum acceptable **duration** of 14 hours, our workshop was condensed into too few days, and did not have any follow-up. 2) While **needs** of the trainees were addressed this year with content related to exploitation of the national textbook, test preparation for entrance exams was not. 3) **Aligning** the training with the professional development was mixed, with more small group activities, but the proportion of lecture time was still too high. 4) The **content** was very well accepted and teachers noted both a need and a want for the materials we covered. 5) **Activities** we included for professional development were also well accepted. Activities for online and technical aspects were deemed less useful unless they were aimed at exam preparation. 6) We were very much **external providers**, and that was both the major draw and the major drawback of the training. Having longer sessions to develop Myanmar-based trainers could have led to better outcomes. 7) Developing **collaboration and peer learning** among teachers was generally unsuccessful, with some teachers attributing it to cultural influences and the lack of experience with these methods. 8) The **leadership** for these sessions was very uneven, with our national organizers failing to make long-lasting connections. In only one session (Sittwe, Rakhine) were we able to work around this barrier to develop a direct relationship with some of the faculty there. Professional Development among faculty is very unusual among Myanmar public school teachers.

We did learn, however, the role of technology in teacher training is important only after other elements like communicative language teaching, small group collaborative work and some kinds of critical thinking can be addressed. The primary barrier to improvement for language teachers in Myanmar is not access to technology, but the framework to use it. These principles can be applied across the world. As William Gibson so aptly put it in 1993 in an interview on Fresh Air, "The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed" (Wikiquote). It is up to us to ensure that the future arrives in each of our classrooms on the best footing.

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