

Chapter 2

Theoretical Overview

This chapter reviews the theoretical background of the study. It provides the key concepts and issues. It begins by introducing the key concepts related to the study, and then proceeds to the studies of theories and the studies of current education programs for the minority children.

2.1 Terms and Concepts Related to the Study

Before reviewing the theories and the research about the language and education for the minorities, it is important to clarify the key concepts relating to this study. A set of key concepts are presented with their definitions as follows.

2.1.1 Mother tongue (MT) or first language (L1)

Mother tongue (MT) or first language (L1) can be defined as “a language that a speaker: (a) has learnt first; (b) identifies with; (c) knows best; or (d) uses most” (UNESCO 2003). In this study mother tongue and first language are regarded as terms that refer to the same concept. The Sgaw Karen children in this study speak Sgaw as their first language, and use it at home as well as in their environment in daily life. As a result, Sgaw can be considered their **home language** as well.

2.1.2 National language (NL) or second language (L2)

A **national language** is “a language that is considered to be the chief language of a nation state” (Crystal 1999:227), whereas an **official language** is a language that is “used in such public domains as the law courts, government, and broadcasting. In many countries, there is no difference between the national and official language” (ibid.). Generally, a **second language (L2)** is a non-native language that the speakers use for the purpose of communicating with other people who do not speak their language (UNESCO 2007). As it is discussed in Kosonen and Young (2009), in this thesis study,

A **second language (L2)** is a language that is not the mother tongue of a person, but one that the speaker is required to study or use. It may be a foreign language or a language of wider communication. A second language may be a language that is not spoken in the immediate environment of the learner, or it may be one widely spoken outside the home. For ethnolinguistic minorities, the second language usually is the national or the official language, employed in contexts such as schools, interaction with government agencies, or communication with other language groups (Kosonen and Young 2009:13).

The learners who are the focus of this study have to learn the national language as their second language. In this study, the term, 'second language' (L2) will be used to mean a second language learned at school for formal educational purposes, and should not be confused with a student's second or other languages learned informally outside of school. The official language in Myanmar is foreign to many of the learners and often only learned as a second language when they arrive at school. Similarly, English, for the Sgaw native speakers, is the **third language (L3)**, an auxiliary language which is taught as a subject in school, whereas for the Burmese native speakers, English is a second language.

2.1.3 Language of instruction (LOI)

A **language of instruction (LOI)** is "a language used for teaching and learning the school curriculum, also called **medium of instruction**" (UNESCO 2007:4). Medium of instruction can be divided into written medium of instruction and oral medium of instruction. Written language of instruction refers to the language used in written textbooks and other curricula (Kosonen & Young 2009). **Oral language of instruction** is a language which is used orally in a class to explain the lessons though the language used in the curriculum and the textbooks is in another language (ibid.). In primary education in Myanmar, all written textbooks: Burmese, Mathematics, and Science subjects are in the national language except for English textbooks. As a result, if languages other than Burmese are used in Myanmar schools, they are used as oral languages of instruction.

2.1.4 Bilingualism or multilingualism

"**Bilingualism or multilingualism** is the use of more than one language in daily life" (UNESCO 2003: 12). Lewis (2009) estimates that about 113 languages are

spoken in Myanmar. Some of them have writing systems for their languages but many languages are unwritten. Generally the speakers of the minority languages are bilingual or multilingual and speak the national language as a second language or third language. Sometimes, especially the ethnic minorities who live in rural areas where only their mother tongue is used dominantly do not speak the national language. In those areas the children grow up in monolingual communities except for school where the national language can be accessed. Minority peoples have to learn the national language since the national language Burmese is higher on the language hierarchy than minority languages. Mother tongue Burmese speakers normally don't learn minority languages. Smalley (1994: 69) has described the language hierarchy for Thailand, and a similar situation exists in Myanmar. In this study, the Sgaw-speaking teachers are ethnic Sgaw who are bilingual in Sgaw and Burmese; the learners are just beginning to try to become bilingual.

2.2 Language in Minority Children's Education

This section discusses the minority children's education as this study focuses on the impact of language on education for ethnic minorities. According to Benson, out of several factors that affect education outcomes, language use is the most important factor that can have an effect on education especially for ethnic minorities (Benson 2004: 2). There is much evidence for that claim from the international research showing dropout and repetition rates because of the difference between the language used at school and the children's mother tongue (Smits et al 2008: 6). According to Richard Martin, there is also evidence of this in primary education in Myanmar: dropout rates are high, maybe up to 50% (Asian Development Bank 2003: ix). In that situation, there is a risk that many children fail to develop the understanding of concepts and will face difficulties in learning subjects such as mathematics and science. According to Pinnock (2009: 6), a Nobel Peace Prize winner, Dr Rigoberta Menchú has argued that children's failure at school which causes frustration and disappointment is not caused by physical or monetary barriers but by the choice to teach in a language which the children do not understand.

In many countries of the world, children enter a school where they have to learn the subjects in a language that they don't understand (Save the Children 2009). Myanmar is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in Asia. Many ethnic minorities who live in rural areas speak their mother tongue and do not have access to the national language in their communities. However, only the national language, Burmese is the official language of instruction in school. In Myanmar ethnic

minority learners are submersed in the second language with little or no support for their mother tongue with the aim to replace the mother tongue with Burmese. Based on the researcher's personal experience in education in Myanmar, the education system is like submersion education. Kosonen and Young (2009) summarize Skutnabb-Kangas' (2000) concept of submersion education as follows:

Submersion education is the opposite of using the learners' mother tongue in education, and it refers to deployment of a language of instruction that the learner does not speak or understand. Submersion education commonly takes place when minority children with limited proficiency in the majority language (usually the official/national language) are put into majority language classrooms without any provision for accommodating or alleviating the learners' disadvantages caused by not knowing the language (Kosonen and Young 2009: 13-14).

In the classes, the teacher does not understand the children's mother tongue and the children do not understand the teacher's language. As a result, the ethnic minority children's education is negatively influenced by the language barrier in Myanmar. Pinnock points out that such children do not have a real learning opportunity since they don't know the language that is used in the curriculum.

Teachers start by communicating with children in their own language, but as soon as written words and numbers are introduced teachers use a language children don't understand. Children learn to copy and often memorize the words and numbers, but don't understand them and can't apply them usefully. In these situations, many children drop out of school altogether, while others fail their examinations and spend years repeating grades (Pinnock 2009: 1).

When the children do not understand the teacher's language, language is the greatest barrier. (Save the children 2007: 1). So it should be recognized that language is a key point to help the children do well in their life-long education process. For that reason, in many linguistically diverse countries, making the choice about languages in the education setting has been a key issue. The educators need to choose languages that offer better opportunities for minority children. The language used should be a suitable instrument for learning knowledge in the curriculum (Kosonen 2005: 87-95).

The lack of knowledge of the language used to deliver the school curriculum pulls down the educational performance of many of those who do not use it at home, particularly those who do not have regular access to it outside school. International learning outcomes assessments show that for children who manage to stay in education, there is a strong negative impact on achievement if their first language is not used for teaching and learning (Pinnock 2009: 8).

2.3 Mother Tongue-based Education

In this section, the current literature in international research regarding language in education is discussed. As there is little research on education for ethnic minority children in Myanmar, it is helpful to study mother tongue-based primary education in other countries to see what previous research has found.

2.3.1 Primary education through the mother tongue

Research shows that it is beneficial — at least in the early primary grades for children to be taught in their mother tongue which they know best. Language is an instrument for communication. Since the effective teaching and learning very much depends on communication, language of instruction is the key to the learning process. That is why children's mother tongue is essential to help children have early access to primary education and actively participate in lifelong learning (UNESCO 2007).

UNESCO has also stated that children's mother tongue is the most suitable language for their successful learning as follows.

It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium (UNESCO 1953: 11).

The meaning of mother tongue-based (MTB) education is outlined below.

MTB education is instruction in a child's first language (L1), usually with a planned gradual transition to a second language (L2) or foreign language at a specified time in primary school. MTB instruction usually takes place

exclusively in the language most familiar to children. In some cases, it may be provided as part of a bilingual or multilingual education program. In MTB programs, learners have the opportunity to learn core concepts primarily in a familiar language, and, later, they learn the labels or vocabulary for those concepts in a new language. MTB education is especially beneficial in early childhood programs, preschool, and the early grades (up to Grade 6), when children are learning to read and gaining new concepts (MTB-MLE Network 2011).

Other MTB education personnel also mentioned that through the mother tongue learners learn the lessons best and education in their MT helps them to continue learning L2. The use of the learners' mother tongue helps the children learn the curriculum content. When the children have a chance to use their mother tongue they can easily express their thoughts and it is comfortable for them to communicate with others using their own language. If the school does not use the language that children know, it will have a negative influence on the children. There are no other languages that can replace the children's mother tongue to support their emotional and cognitive development process (Renou 1998).

It is important to note that the children's mother tongue should be the first language that is used in learning to develop their knowledge. Children build up new knowledge from the academic concepts they have learned through their first language. Afterwards they transfer everything they have learned to a second or third language (Pinnock n.d.: 2).

If the children are literate in their first language, they can gradually be able to deal with learning in their second language. The children can easily transfer what they have learned in their first language to their second language (Cummings and Tamayo 1994).

An emphasis on MT in education does not diminish the child's chance for further education in a second language in fact it enhances it. Children who are well educated in their first language are more likely to become proficient in national and international languages (Save the Children 2007: 4).

Children's first language should be used as the language of instruction in the early years of education. The first language is vitally important for initial learning to comprehensively understand the abstract knowledge in the curriculum. It is a basis

for the cognitive development that helps children in acquisition of the second language (Dutcher & Tucker 1996: 36).

2.3.2 Learning in L1 vs. learning in L2

In this section, the fact that learning in L1 is beneficial to the ethnic minority children is discussed from the point of view of the international ethnic minority education personnel.

Mother tongue-based education starts with the learner's knowledge and experiences. It provides the child with a foundation in their first language and builds a second language on this. Oral, reading, writing, and thinking skills are developed in the first language, while teaching the second language as a subject. Exposure to the second language gradually increases, without sacrificing children's literacy and cognition in the first language (Save the Children 2007: 4).

Ethnic minority children in different countries face difficulties in learning because they have to learn the lessons in L2 as soon as they begin school. The education officials often believe that teaching in the official language used at school from early stages could help the children learn faster and make progress in learning in higher stages. However in reality, a strong foundation in L1 will provide a smooth transition from L1 to L2 and L3 (Thomas and Collier 1997, 2004). For that reason, Kosonen and Young argue that a good bridge to L2 through L1 is essential.

Mother tongue as a 'bridge' language of instruction refers to situations in which an educational programme is organized so that mother tongue speakers of non-dominant languages can build a culturally and linguistically appropriate educational foundation in their home language first, and subsequently learn additional languages. They thereby gain the potential to use all their languages for life-long learning (Kosonen & Young 2009: 14).

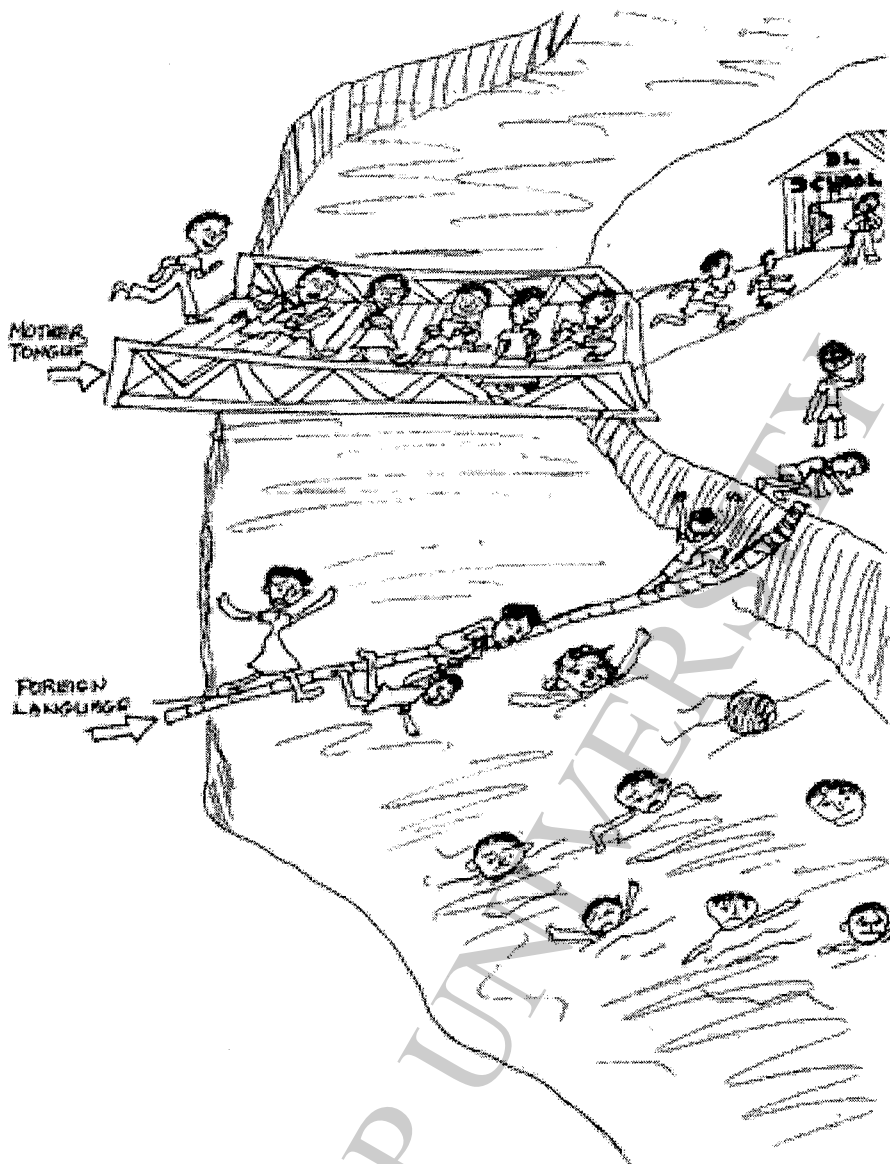


Figure 3 Comparison of learners learning through their first language and an unfamiliar language (UNESCO 2007: 7)

Figure 3 was created by Dennis Malone to show the comparison of learners learning through their first language and an unfamiliar language (UNESCO 2007: 7). In the figure, there are two kinds of bridges: one is built by mother tongue; the other is built by a foreign language or a language unfamiliar to the learners. The children who go over the bridge built by their mother tongue can easily pass the river that represents the abstract concepts of the curriculum and reach the other side of the bank and the school in which L2 is used as a medium of instruction. On the other hand, there are only a few children who go through the bridge built by a language

they do not know, they struggle to reach the other side of the bank with exhaustion but most of the children could not make it, instead they fall into the river.

Using the mother tongue first for the development of basic literacy skill enables learners to build on and transfer these skills to the second language (Gonzalez 1996: 218). CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) should be developed in both languages. Numerous studies around the world indicate that when learners learn to read and write in their mother tongue before learning to read and write in a second or third language, they progress more quickly both in literacy skills and in second language acquisition. The learners need time and support to become proficient in academic areas (Baker 2006; Cummins 2000, 2001; Thomas and Collier, 1997, 2002). As a result of CALP development, the bilingual learners appear fully proficient in formal academic learning.

Tucker (1996: 316) says that, “the development of the child’s first language with its related cognitive development is more important than mere length of exposure to a second language.” Moreover, Tucker argues that the development of the mother tongue is vital to cognitive development and as a foundation for learning the second language. If the mother tongue is not sufficiently developed, the second language cannot be mastered because of the lack of cognitive skills required for mastery of other languages. The development and fostering of the mother tongue facilitates transfer of skills across the languages. Pinnock (2009: 10) also highlights that mother tongue-based education is the most appropriate approach for the ethnic minority children’s educational achievement. “Mother tongue based education represents one of the biggest gateways to achieving quality education and the opportunity of a better life.”

2.4 Summary

This chapter gave an overview of language factors that have an effect on ethnic minority children’s education, starting with an introduction of key concepts and definitions in their broadest sense relating to the present study. It then proceeded to highlight language issues in minority education and mother tongue-based education that need to be considered to give the background to this thesis which examines the impact of using the national language instead of learners’ mother tongue in primary education.