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English language education in Myanmar: Diverse realities in a fractured nation

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Shorter Article

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Abstract

This article explores recent developments in English language education in Myanmar, situating them within the overlapping crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 military coup (the *Coup-vid* era). It begins by tracing the historical trajectory of English in Myanmar (the *when*) before examining its current place within a highly politicised and fragmented education landscape. The article then analyses the *where* and *who* of English language education, showing how provision has been reshaped across four spaces: state institutions, private-sector provision, ethnic and community education, and resistance-aligned parallel systems. It then examines how English is taught and learned across these settings (the *how*), before considering *why* Myanmar's experiences matter for wider discussions of English language education in conflict-affected settings.

1. Introduction

More than a hundred languages are spoken across Myanmar's regions and states, although Burmese remains dominant in public life (Eberhard et al. 2022). English has long occupied a complex position in this multilingual landscape. Introduced as a colonial language of administration, it was later downgraded to a foreign language before being re-elevated as an important medium for higher education, commerce and international engagement (McCormick 2019).

Over the past decade, however, the conditions under which English is learned and taught have been impacted by overlapping crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 military coup and subsequent escalation of conflict have created what Tun and Smith (2026) describe as a *Coup-vid* context, in which education is disrupted, unevenly available and highly politicised (Choo and Aye 2022; Htut et al. 2022). In such a setting, English is not simply another school subject, but is now entwined with questions of access, risk, mobility and survival for many teachers and learners.

Accordingly, this article explores the present-day realities of English language education in Myanmar in politically difficult circumstances (Tun and Oo 2026), where the primary drivers of educational disruption are political forces (e.g., armed conflict, coup, repression) rather than macro level constraints like large classes or limited materials as are common in Global South public education systems (e.g., Smith 2011). In Myanmar, these forces have produced school closures, militarisation of campuses, targeted attacks on schools, surveillance, internet shutdowns, severe electricity rationing and restriction of access to global platforms (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack 2024; Salem–Gervais et al. 2024). At the same time new (often fragile) educational alternatives have emerged online, in community spaces and in liberated areas.

Within this fractured landscape, English is learned and taught in diverse, but somehow, overlapping systems. Some students remain in schools and universities administered by the State Administration Council (SAC)[1], where post-2012 reforms have promoted new English textbooks and communicative approaches, but everyday practices often remain exam oriented and teacher centred (see Tun 2024). Others have moved into private and international schools, online language schools, ethnic and faith-based schools, or the Spring universities and virtual institutions aligned with the National Unity Government (NUG)[2] and ethnic armed organisations (Htwe 2026; Lall et al. 2025). In each of these spaces, English plays different roles – as a gateway to scholarships for oversea studies, a means of participating in transnational activism, a tool for community service, access to knowledge or simply a subject to pass high stakes exams – and these roles are shaped by who the learners and teachers are, where they are located and when they entered the system.

The aim of this article is therefore not to offer a single picture of English in Myanmar, but to ask a set of interrelated questions about English learning in politically difficult

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circumstances. It is organised around five questions, *when, where, who, how* and *why*. The historical section first briefly traces *when* the status and functions of English shifted. The next section maps *where* English is now taught and *who* can access these different settings. The following section explores *how* teachers and learners sustain English education amid insecurity and disruption. The conclusion considers *why* these patterns matter beyond Myanmar.

2. A brief history of English in Myanmar (Burma)

Over the last century, the status and functions of English in Myanmar have shifted repeatedly with political change. During the colonial era, English replaced Burmese in administration and the courts, and became the main medium of instruction in European and Anglo-vernacular schools, as well as at university (Lall 2021). Most of the population, however, attended vernacular schools using Burmese or ethnic minority languages (Cheesman 2002). Because access to elite schools, higher education and colonial administration largely depended on English-medium schooling, English became closely associated with prestige, power and social mobility (Simony 2023). As Tin observes, it 'became associated with higher socioeconomics status and privilege' (2024, 509).

After independence in 1948, Burmese was declared the national language and gradually took over as the medium of instruction in basic education. During the early 1950s Pyidawtha (Welfare State) era, the U Nu administration actively sought to democratise and Burmanise the sphere of education, which weakened English's former monopoly on higher education (Simony 2023). English nevertheless retained considerable importance in government and higher education mainly through the cultural diplomacy of the British Council (Simony 2023). It supported English language teaching, scholarships schemes to send Burmese students to Britain, and supplied British professors to the University of Rangoon to protect the British cultural legacy and maintain ties with the Burmese intellectual elite (Simony 2023). These initiatives maintained international links, but they also reinforced English as a gatekeeper of prestige and widened the educational inequality between the urban elite and the vernacular-educated majority (Simony 2023).

A more radical shift occurred following General Ne Win's military coup in 1962. The new regime enacted a xenophobic policy of Burmanisation centred on Buddhism and the Burmese language, with the purpose of stripping away the British cultural influence, while also repressing other ethnic minority languages (Simony 2023). English was officially framed as 'the language of the colonizer', private mission and ethnic schools were nationalised, and the language of instruction in state schools and universities was abruptly changed to Burmese (Tin 2024, 510). English was demoted to a foreign language taught only from Grade 5. This isolation also cut teachers off from international pedagogical developments. English teaching became heavily focused on reading, writing, grammar and translation, with little to no attention paid to oral communication skills (Aye and Sercombe 2014; Tin 2024).

By the late 1970s, however, the drastic decline in English proficiency among university graduates was recognized as a liability for international engagement and scientific study. In response, the New Education Programme of 1981 reintroduced English as a compulsory subject from kindergarten and restored it as a medium of instruction for science subjects in upper secondary and for most disciplines at university. This abrupt reversal was famously spurred by personal interests within the ruling elite as General Ne Win reconsidered the Burmese-only language policy after his daughter was unable to gain admission to a university in England because of her limited English proficiency (Kirkpatrick 2017). Still, this policy shift failed to resolve the shortage of teachers who were proficient enough to teach through English (Tin 2024).

From 2011, a decade of political opening and education reform again reshaped the role of English. A comprehensive basic education reform expanded the years of schooling, introduced new English textbooks and teachers' guides, and promoted child-centred, communicative approaches (Lall 2021; Tun 2024). In higher education, degree programmes were extended, and previous English course books were largely replaced by international course books. English was reaffirmed as the main medium of instruction in many disciplines, even though both staff and students often lacked the confidence and proficiency to use it effectively. The English-medium policy was 'fundamentally not working' for subjects like math and science because students were not grasping core concepts; instead, 'most teachers use a mix of Myanmar [Burmese] (for explanation) and English (for technical terms)' (Drinan 2013, as cited in Kirkpatrick 2024, 152). At the same time, private and international schools and language centres expanded in urban areas, offering intensive, communicative English programmes and preparation for international examinations (e.g., IELTS). This boom in private provision deepened the association between English, global mobility, and middle-class aspirations (Brown and Hung 2024).

The Coup-vid phase is different from these earlier periods. It has triggered both a dramatic reconfiguration of the education system and an unprecedented surge of interest in English. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, private and community-run online English classes expanded rapidly. Despite the severe infrastructural constraints of daily power cuts and poor connectivity, these digital spaces opened new opportunities for some students, making English more visible and desirable than ever before. Simultaneously, the 2021 coup and the ensuing Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) against the coup prompted mass boycotts of military-controlled schools and universities. With over 139,000 basic and higher education educators joining the CDM and facing dismissal or arrest (Wong 2024), teachers and students alike were prompted to seek alternative ways to educate themselves. They have done so through newly established federal schools, Spring Universities (Lall et al. 2025), online language schools, expanding ethnic education systems (South et al. 2024), and other grassroots community initiatives.

In these alternative spaces, English has again become a important gatekeeper language. However, it is no longer valued solely for passing state examinations. It is now considered as an essential lifeline for accessing international scholarships, engaging in transnational activist networks,

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and securing possible migration routes away from the conflict (Salem–Gervais et al. 2024).

This recent phase makes especially visible the layered inequalities in who can reach English, what kinds of English practices they engage in, and how far the language can support or exclude learners and teachers in politically difficult circumstances. Indeed, a learner's experience of English language education in Myanmar remains deeply contingent upon intersecting factors of historical timing, geographic location, and learners' socio-economic and demographic circumstances. It is these pressing issues that the following sections explore, mapping *where* English language education now takes place and *who* is involved in it.

3. Diverse realities of English on the ground

In the Coup-vid period, English could no longer be confined to a single, state-led system. It is, instead, learned and taught in multiple, overlapping spaces that differ in governance, resources, safety, political alignment, and educational purposes. These *wheres* are closely tied to particular *whos*: different kinds of learners and teachers experience different educational realities of English (in terms of pedagogy, access, and ideological function), depending on where they are geographically located, their socio-economic status, and how they position themselves in relation to the regime.

3.1 State schools and universities under SAC

One major space is the network of basic education schools and universities still administered by the military-run SAC. Officially, these institutions continue to follow the post-2012 reforms, which introduced extended schooling, along with a progressive discourse of communicative, student-centred pedagogy supported by new, visually engaging English textbooks (Tun 2024).

In practice, however, the system has been weakened by mass boycotts and severe staffing shortages. Since 2021, an estimated 30% of teachers were dismissed for joining the CDM against the coup (Bhatta et al. 2023), while state-school enrolment fell by almost 50% as millions of students withdrew (South et al. 2024).

The political environment also narrows what can be taught and discussed in these institutions. The SAC has stripped curricula of potentially critical content, targeted academic departments studying politically sensitive topics (e.g., federalism or human rights) for suppression, and restricted academic freedom (Houtman et al. 2025). Recent policy changes have also reduced the possibility of using ethnic minority languages as classroom languages, enforcing instead a monolithic, Burman-centric narrative designed to instil a militarised 'union spirit' and patriotism (Salem–Gervais et al. 2024, 105). For English language education, this surveillance and repression can have a direct pedagogical impact. Because open discussion and free expression are effectively criminalised, open-ended communicative teaching activities (which require more student-centred roles) in such contexts may pose risks for teachers and students.

The who in this space includes students whose families support the SAC, who are pressured by the SAC to attend its schools, who feel they have no safe alternative, or who reside in areas where resistance-linked educational options are unavailable. They are taught by teaching staff who remained in post or by newly appointed, often minimally trained replacements (Salem–Gervais et al. 2024). Despite the official communicative curriculum, English here is usually taught in large, exam-oriented classes with a heavy reliance on rote memorisation, grammar explanation, and translation into Burmese (see Tun 2024). As Hong and Chun note, university education in these spaces remains 'teacher-centered, imposing memorization that impedes the development of critical thinking' (2021, 8). For many learners, this produces an English that is strongly tied to passing high-stakes exams and securing internal certification, but offers little in the way of authentic communication or critical engagement.

3.2 Private, international, and language centre provision

A second space consists of private schools, international schools, and language centres, largely located in urban hubs such as Yangon and Mandalay (Tin 2024). These institutions expanded rapidly during the reform decade and have, in various forms, continued or adapted their provision through online or blended modes during the Coup-vid period. These institutions are not all the same, of course, and there are considerable differences between them in terms of quality, cost, access and resources. They are grouped together here mainly to show how this largely urban, fee-paying sector differs from state schools and from many forms of education in rural, ethnic and community settings. They typically employ teachers with higher English proficiency and, in some cases, international qualifications, and provide English-intensive programmes linked to international exams, higher education and global mobility.

However, learners here are predominantly from middle-class or wealthier families who can afford steep tuition fees, digital devices, data, and relatively stable internet connections –significant luxuries in a country currently plagued by severe electricity rationing and military-imposed internet blackouts in several areas (Tun and Smith 2026). English in these settings is closely connected to international examinations (e.g., IELTS), study-abroad pathways, and employment in NGOs or foreign-owned companies (Salem–Gervais et al. 2024). This urban, fee-paying English is worlds apart from the English available in most state schools, starkly deepening the country's existing socio-economic and urban–rural divisions (Brown and Hung 2024).

3.3 Ethnic, monastic and faith-based/community schools

A third set of spaces comprises ethnic education systems, and faith-based or community-run schools. Education departments affiliated with ethnic armed organisations run schools and teacher education programmes in areas under their control. These ethnic basic education providers often use local languages as the main media of instruction, reflecting mother tongue-based multilingual education models, while teaching English as an additional language (South and Lall 2016).

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Monastic and religious schools, on the other hand, generally follow the state curriculum to varying degrees while integrating religious instruction and community values alongside English and Burmese. Historically, these monastic institutions have served as a vital 'social safety net,' acting as the 'main vehicle for inclusion in education by offering schooling to poor and disadvantaged children' (Lall 2021, 101).

Learners in these settings often come from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds, including rural and conflict-affected borderlands (Salem–Gervais et al. 2024). They are mostly taught by teachers who are strongly rooted in local languages, identities, and faith communities. In these contexts, English can be considered more than a simple school subject. It is often framed as a powerful resource for future service to the community, access to wider faith networks, and engagement with peace and social justice discourses (for insights on seminary teachers, see Wong 2017). Even when material resources are scarce and teaching methods occasionally draw on more traditional, teacher-centred practices, English retains a important moral and social purpose. These local meanings of English sit uneasily with mainstream, state-led policy narratives that commodify the language merely for economic growth, but they are crucial for understanding how English is enthusiastically appropriated 'in the periphery' (Tin 2014, 95).

3.4 Parallel and alternative education spaces

Parallel and alternative English learning spaces emerged after the 2021 coup as alternatives to military-controlled education. They now operate both on-ground and online. In liberated or mixed-control areas, many schools linked to the NUG Ministry of Education use any spaces available, including church or monastery compounds, village halls, temporary bamboo structures and, in some cases, underground or bunker-style classrooms, as permanent school buildings are vulnerable to military airstrikes and raids (GCPEA 2024; No 2025). Online, basic-education schools and universities linked to the NUG, student unions, and allied ethnic organisations connect learners across the country and abroad (Lall et al. 2025). Some digital classes are run from liberated areas using shared Starlink satellite internet connections in villages, while others serve students in junta-controlled towns who quietly boycott SAC schools but can still access the internet.

Participation in these spaces can carry considerable risk. Teachers, students and, in some cases, parents have faced arrest, imprisonment and other forms of persecution for involvement in resistance-linked education (see Salem–Gervais et al. 2024). At the same time, these alternative systems have created educational routes for learners who might otherwise have been excluded from schooling or higher education after the coup.

In NUG basic education, English remains part of a Basic Education Completion Assessment (BECA)-oriented curriculum, although schools also adapt materials to local needs and priorities (Salem–Gervais et al. 2024). Re-used national textbooks may be modified to remove content considered incompatible with federal democracy and to make space for local languages and civic education. English therefore remains part of formal schooling, but within a wider attempt to provide education outside the military-controlled system.

In alternative higher education institutions (e.g., Spring University Myanmar) English appears both as a standalone subject and as a medium of instruction for courses, for example, in federalism, human rights, sciences and the social sciences (Htwe 2026). These institions serve learners across Myanmar and even abroad, including those who cannot or choose not to participate in military-controlled higher education. Classes are delivered through a combination of Zoom, recorded lecturers, audio files, social media channels, and written transcripts, allowing students with weak internet connections to download materials and study offline.

The people in these spaces are largely those who have stepped away from SAC institutions: CDM teachers, student activists, ethnic educators, and young people whose families reject junta-controlled schooling (Maber and Zar 2025). Many teachers also take on several roles at once, as educators, learners, activists, and community organisers (Wong 2024). Learners include school-age children in liberated areas and displacement sites, young people living in junta-controlled cities, and students in border areas or neighbouring countries (Rinehart et al. 2024). For many older teenagers and young adults, continued English study in these parallel systems is closely linked to hopes of future mobility, including possible study or work in neighbouring countries, as they seek to escape both civil war and the risks of forced conscription under junta law (Htet 2025). In all of these diverse contexts, they are using English both as a school subject and as a critical tool to connect with international networks, explore future study options, and articulate their own stories of resistance (Wong et al. 2024).

Taken together, these four spaces show that there is no single English learning trajectory in Myanmar today. Learners and teachers encounter different forms and purposes of English depending on the inisitutions available to them, their location, socio-economic circumstances and political position. Having mapped these *wheres* and *whos*, the next section turns to *how* English is currently taught and learned under these conditions.

4. Teaching and learning English in politically difficult circumstances

Across these fractured spaces, teaching and learning English in Myanmar are shaped by disruption, restrictions, fear and severe resource constraints. What is possible can vary considerably across settings, and teachers and learners often have to work with what is available at a particular time and place. This section looks at how English is taught and learned across the four settings discussed above. The aim here is not to judge one approach as better than another, but to show how teaching and learning are shaped by the conditions in which they take place.

4.1 Teaching in SAC-run settings

In these schools, English instruction centres primarily on preparation for high-stakes examinations. Officially, schools are still expected to follow the pre-coup reforms,

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which promoted child-centred and communicative teaching (Tun 2024). In practice, however, teachers work within an exam-oriented system while also facing staff shortages, large classes, limited materials and little pedagogical support. As a result, classroom practie often looks quite different from what the curriculum intended.

Even prior to the 2021 coup, communicative language teaching was already difficult to implement in many state schools because of heavy workloads, limited training and long-established teaching routines, with teachers often resorting to repetition drills and direct translation (Tun 2024). In the post-coup era, these more controlled forms of teaching may offer a safer option under military rule when open discussion of sensitive issues can attract scrutiny (Houtman et al. 2025). Lessons may therefore stay close to set texts, with grammar explained in Burmese and much of the work focused on reading, writing and examination preparation. Similar practices have been reported in higher education, where lecturers may read English-medium texts aloud and explain them in Burmese to support students' understanding (Brown and Hung 2024; McCormick 2019).

Recent studies also report teacher-led instruction with more attention to reading and writing than to active communication (e.g., Hpawdaw et al. 2025; Lankara et al. 2024). Some describe these practices as the Grammar-Translation Method (see Maung et al., 2025; Yadanar Thein 2025). However, applying this label to any teaching that involves grammar and translation can be too broad and theoretically imprecise (Kirk 2018). I would argue instead that teachers try to navigate these constraints by relying on safer ways of teaching with more of teachers input and less (or no) critical classroom dialogue. The result is often a bilingual mode of instruction in which teachers use Burmese to support understanding while still preparing students for examinations conducted through English. This can be understood as a practical response to teahers' own experiences as learners, pressure from the examination system, heavy workloads and present reality of political surveillance.

4.2 Teaching in private-sector settings

Teaching practices in private schools, international schools and language centres vary considerably according to the type of institution, its location, fees, class size and available recources (Tin 2021). Some well-recourced urban institutions have greater access to digital technology, international course books and programmes linked to international examinstions. This can provide more opportunities for communicative activities, English-medium instruction and other forms of classroom interaction (Tin 2024). However, greater resources do not necessarily mean that teaching is consistently more communicative or student-centred. Teacher-led practices and examination preparation remain important in parts of the private sector (Muta 2025; Tin 2021).

Practices also differ outside these better-resourced settings. Studies from private schools and language centres report teachers working with mixed levels of English, large classes and limited technology, while adapting activities to their particular learners and purposes (e.g., Khantisara 2025; Zaw 2022). These settings therefore should not be treated as a single pedagogical model. What distinguishes them from much of the state sector is perhaps less a particular teaching method than the different resources, institutional expectations and learner goals within which teachers work.

4.3 Teaching in ethnic and faith-based settings

In ethnic and faith-based schools, teaching is shaped by local priorities as well as resources available. Ethnic education systems commonly use local languages as the main medium of instruction and introduce English as an additional language, utilising curriculum content that reflects local histories and identities (South and Lall 2016). Monastic and religious schools, which serve low-income and displaced communities as a vital 'social safety net' (Lall 2021, 101), follow the state curriculum to varying degrees but heavily incorporate religious and moral education, often teaching Engish through songs and dialogues connected to religious life.

In these contexts, teachers and learners often view English not solely as a route to individual upward mobility, but as a vital resource for community service. For instance, Karen seminary students desired English proficiency not for personal gain, but to help 'refugees, orphans . . . and villagers who fall far behind' (Tin 2014, 111). Similarly, ethnic seminary teachers view themselves as peacemakers, advocates, networkers, and active citizens, utilizing English to access peacebuilding materials and connect with global faith networks (Wong 2017). Classroom practices reflect this communal focus, combining translation and repetition with pair work and simple projects when meaningful for students (Lall 2021).

4.4 Teaching in resistance-aligned settings

In resistance-aligned spaces, teaching often has to be adapted to unstable and unsafe conditions. In physical schools in liberated areas, teachers may work with few materials and hand-copy downloaded recources for classroom use (Salem–Gervais et al. 2024). Lessons may combine grammar explanation and translation with short reading tasks that can be interrupted if there is an air raid, artillery fire or a need to move to a safer place (GCPEA 2024; No 2025).

Online teaching brings different constraints. Power cuts, internet restrictions, weak connectivity and complete shutdowns during periods of fighting can make long synchronous lessons difficult. Teachers therefore use low-bandwidth platforms such as Telegram and Facebook, keep Zoom session short, and rely more on audio messages and downloadable worksheets that students can acess when connection allow (Tun and Smith 2026).

In alternative higher education (e.g., Spring University Myanmar, Karenni National College), locally designed curricula may have an explicitly civic and political focus (Htwe 2026). English-medium content is often supported through explanations, peer discussion and the use of Burmese and ethnic minority languages, helping learners with different language repertories follow complex topics (Wong et al. 2024). This can be understood as a form of translanguaging (Anderson and Kerr 2026). English instruction is integrated

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with discussions of democracy, federalism, human rights, and civic responsibility (Htwe 2026; Wong et al. 2024).

Across both physical and digital resistance spaces, teachers may also adjust content, pace and expectations where learners are affected by conflict or displacement. Tun and Smith (2026), for example, show how one teacher used English vocabulary activities and humour to check on students' wellbeing and ease stress during disruption. In these settings, such adjustments are often what make continued learning possible.

5. Conclusion: Why Myanmar's experiences matter

English language education in Myanmar cannot be understood as a single system. Its present forms reflect a long history of colonialism, military rule, educational reform and, most recently, the overlapping effects of COVID-19 and the 2021 coup. Where English is taught, who has access to it and what it is used for now differ considerably across SAC institutions, private-sector provision, ethnic and faith-based education, and resistance-aligned alternatives. These differences support that English language education can 'differ not only in terms of time (when), but also in terms of location (where) and persons/agents (who)' (Tin 2024, 508).

The differences are also visible in how English is taught and learned. In SAC institutions, examination demands and political constraints can favour more controlled, teacher-led forms of instruction. Private and international provision offers different possibilities depending on resources, institutional expectations and learners' goals. In ethnic and faith-based education, English is often taught alongside local languages and connected to community purposes. In resistance-aligned spaces, teachers may need to adjust materials, language use, delivery and expectations in response to disrupted internet access, displacement or immediate security risks. These practices do not represent a single alternative model of good teaching. They, instead, show how teachers and learners work with the conditions available to them.

Therefore, Myanmar's experience raises a wider question about what counts as appropriate English language education in difficult circumstances. Practices developed in peripheral or non-state settings should not automatically be viewed as deficient simply because they differ from internationally promoted models. Some are necessarily 'designed for disruption' (Rinehart and Tyrosvoutis 2023, 19), while others reflect local languages, educational purposes and community needs. For research and support in other conflict-affected settings, this suggests the need to pay closer attention to political context, local agency and what is realistically possible in particular places.

Notes

1. State Administration Council (SAC) is the military regime that seized power in Myanmar in February 2021, acting as the de facto government and controlling state institutions, including the Ministry of Education.
2. The National Unity Government (NUG) is a parallel government formed by elected lawmakers, ethnic representatives and civil society actors opposing Myanmar's 2021 military coup, operating outside the military controlled state structures and claiming democratic legitimacy.

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