

# Myanmar Youth and Impact of English Language Proficiency Towards Job Grabbing

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**Abstract.** As Myanmar moves towards further democratization, the country is rapidly emerging as an attractive travel destination in Southeast Asia. The pace of sustainable and inclusive economic growth in Myanmar is determined in part by the quality of its labor force. Youth human capital development requires a comprehensive and coherent strategy to capture the symbiotic relationship between educational attainment and continuous learning, labor productivity, and growth. The focus of human capital development policies is equity and quality of services, regulation of the labor market, and the development of a productive labor force that can adapt to new economic opportunities. This paper meant to discuss how English proficiency is crucial for the young generation to gain employment opportunities. At present, have seen unprecedented popularity of English in this former British colony where English proficiencies "lead to economic advantages, help in dealing with the outside world, and improve prospects of study abroad and employment. The qualitative data support the general conclusions from the quantitative analysis. The personal accounts would be collected during the interview phase not only highlight some of the problems faced by graduates as they seek employment in their field of study, but also identify ways in which policies and practices might respond to these issues based on the tools such as employment outcomes with low levels of ELP. This paper aimed to find out if the analysis of the longitudinal survey data would demonstrate whether oral English language skills are the key predictor of successful employment outcomes in Myanmar. Likewise, finding of this study intended to contribute to the aspect of various interviewees considered 'workplace-ready' ELP to include both general and specific occupation language skills.

**Keywords:** Myanmar, youth, ELP, employment, opportunities and growth

## INTRODUCTION

### Myanmar Youth

Based on the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR), youth are defined as young people between 15 and 29 years old, but Myanmar youth are defined as those between 16 and 35 years old young people [1]. This definition can be used at

the state and different regions in Myanmar. The department of social welfare, relief and resettlement in Myanmar also agrees with these youth definitions [1].

In Myanmar, people age from one to thirty-five make up about 60 per cent of the total population (UNFPA, n.d.) The national average age is 27 years old, and approximately 33% of the population is between the ages of 15 and 35 [2]. Myanmar youth, compared with developed countries in the world, they're more diverse. They come from a variety of realities, different areas, seeking for different needs and have diverse experiences. When they are looking for jobs, they will face up with both opportunities and challenges.

The 2015 Labor Force Survey found that 74.8 per cent of young men and 55.3 per cent of young women in Myanmar have jobs, while an average of 17 per cent is neither working nor in education [3]. Young people become a powerful factor in determining the country's future economic development, but with the arrival of Industry 4.0, it is increasingly difficult for young people to find jobs. According to Census, more than 60 per cent of young people have not completed high school education. Due to the lack of education and skills, Myanmar youth people will be more difficult to adapt to the automation and high skill demand society brought by industry 4.0.

Based on these situations, the Myanmar government has started to take various measures to create more job opportunities for the youth. Through education reform, strengthen the ties between youth, government, and enterprises, the Myanmar government has created more employment opportunities for the youth people. The State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi also emphasized the strengthening of vocational skills education for young people in Myanmar, including language skills training.

### English Language Necessity

Nowadays, it is found that the demand for oral communication is greater in Myanmar society. A research found the relationships between human capital investment and individual income distribution. According to the research, education improves individual productivity; the more educated people are, they will have more job opportunities and higher income in the labor market. Economist Marschak applies the choice of language in the labor market and the behaviour of learning a certain

language to microeconomics [4]. He believed that language, as an indispensable tool of economic activities, also has economic effects and benefits. To a certain extent, language can be regarded as a kind of human capital because language ability is basically the accumulation of intellectual capital and language skills can be on of the job skills.

It is a consensus that language skills have some impact on workers' employment opportunities and salaries. Another study found that highly skilled use of English in the workplace of German workers could bring a 12% wage premium. Other study took South Africa, a former England-dutch colony; they found that English proficiency had a wage premium of more than 50% for workers who spoke African languages.

Another researchers used the 2007 adult education survey (AES) to estimate the return on income brought by several foreign languages in the Turkish labor market, the data shows that English is the most valuable and important language in the labor market. It is analyzed the return of English ability in the Indian labor market and found that compared with non-English speaking workers, the hourly wage of skilled English workers and those who spoke a little English were respectively 34% and 13% higher than the former.

The language ability of laborers may overcome the barriers caused by market segmentation to some extent, thus having a certain impact on the increase of final income. According to the human capital theory, the process of improving English ability is also the process of accumulating more human capital, and the increase of human capital will bring more employment opportunities and higher income.

English proficiency certificates reflect the abilities of workers. It is a tool for employers to identify and evaluate candidates for different positions. The English proficiency of laborers not only reflects relevant skills but also reflects their own abilities in the labor market, which may help them easier get job opportunities. If Myanmar youth have good proficiency in English, it will be of great help for them to search for jobs.

The literature review of this research is done on four main aspects: 1. Job opportunities in Myanmar 2. Young generation and potential Employment 3. Myanmar youth English language skills.4. Environment for learning English language.

## METHOD

For the purpose of the data collection, a questionnaire on YUFL students' learning needs was developed. It was distributed among the English language major students at the Yangon University of Foreign Languages (YUFL). The sample size was 20 students. Participation in this study was voluntary. The students were informed about the purpose of this research projects; returning the filled-in

questionnaire forms implied their consent to participate in the survey. A purposive sampling procedure was adopted, and the targeted population was current and/or prospective English language learners. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches to collecting and analyzing the data. The qualitative data were analyzed by thematic analysis, while the quantitative data analysis employed descriptive statistics.

### Preliminary Qualitative Findings

As the demand for oral English communication and employability tend to change cyclically over time in Myanmar, this study carried out the qualitative analysis for challenges for Myanmar youth as following.

#### Academic Difficulties in Learning English

- Ineffective teaching or learning environment; lack of effective English Language Development (ELD) instruction & support
- Interrupted formal language education
- Differences between mother-tongue and English language acquisition
- The ability to recognize how English words function grammatically in sentences
- The lacking in the competency of oral communication within Myanmar students

#### Employability vs English Communication

##### Necessity

- Tourism business development in Myanmar increasing
- More foreign employers in Myanmar industrial sector recently
- The exploitation of labor-force Myanmar especially by the foreign investors
- A need to match Myanmar youth English communication skills and industry needs

## RESULT & DISCUSSION

### Job Opportunities in Myanmar

As a country with demographic dividends, a great number of young people are often considered to be one of Myanmar's main strengths. There are also more opportunities and challenges in the labor market due to a large number of the young labor force.

So far, most of the labor force in Myanmar are engaged in productive work. But in the near future, due to technology development and the changing structure of the job market, high-skilled jobs will occupy the majority of Myanmar labor market, young people with higher skills will be more likely to find job opportunities in Myanmar.

A study mentioned that although the demographic structure of is young, there are many technical shortcomings in Myanmar's labor market structure. The labor force in Myanmar is relatively low in education and the skill level is low. At the same time, the construction of local labor organizations is still in an imperfect stage. Most

workers are engaged in various types of informal work, and the trade union has only recently resumed after years of suppression. Labor disruptions caused by strikes may raise concerns from foreign investors who are seeking to invest and take advantage of low-wage workers.

According to a survey by the Japanese foreign trade organization, workers in Myanmar are paid lower wages than those in southeast Asia. Employers often say that finding skilled and talented workers are challenges. Besides, because of these migrant workers' income expectations and adaptation for a different standard of living, attracting professionals to return can be difficult. To achieve sustained high growth, we need to improve labor productivity, also need to improve the skill levels of workers, and it is good for both sides.

According to the ministry of labor, in the present, the Myanmar government has conducted a different kind of methods to increase the employment of Myanmar youth. In different regions and states, the government has set up a total of 77 labor exchange offices. Meanwhile, matching facilities and training are being built now. For example, flow support team, the government vocational training centre (mainly in Yangon, Mandalay, and Baden), private vocational training centre already built in Myanmar. The government also conducted regular implementation of the Labor force survey (2015-2016), including the youth employment statistics.

A research paper pointed out that Myanmar is expected to experience significant structural changes of employment, an industry in promoting economic growth and job creation plays a more and more important role. This affects both skill development and Labor demand. A systematic analysis of potential changes in employment patterns associated with economic transformation would be a useful guide to investment in education, which will prepare the workforce and talent pool for future opportunities.

#### Young Generation and Potential Employment

With technical development in the era of industry 4.0, future employment faces many changes and challenges. Emerging technologies such as automation, robots, artificial intelligence and computerized algorithms threaten jobs in Myanmar.

In the past, cheap labor in Myanmar attracted a lot of foreign investments and which provided many low-skilled jobs in Myanmar. But by using automated machines and artificial intelligence such as robots, many kinds of jobs could be automated. Low-skill labor forces are no longer required, which will cause massive unemployment in the future.

Morikawa pointed out that artificial intelligence has accelerated in recent years, and due to the improvement of big data processing capabilities, deep learning and other technologies have made breakthrough progress [5]. As a core driving force

for a new industrial reform, it will reconstruct activities such as production, distribution, and consumption.

During the six-year period from 2010 to 2016, the number of global robots has increased to 2.1 million units, achieving an average annual growth rate of 17%. With the advent of the industry 4.0 eras, robots and automation have been used in many fields, especially in the field of manufacturing, production and service areas.

Schumpeter believes that economic prosperity ultimately means that the production process is further mechanized, which inevitably reduces the amount of labor required per unit of product, and that prosperity often includes the reduction of labor demand for such industries, and technical unemployment is inevitable. It is a component of cyclical unemployment.

According to Bowles, although the technology was destroying jobs, but also creating new and better ones in a long time [6]. Now, the evidence is that technology is destroying jobs and indeed creating new and better ones but also fewer ones.

Technological advancement reduces production costs, and productivity increases create huge wealth, and enterprises will gain extra profits and expand reproduction, thus stimulating new employment growth points create more job opportunities in various fields than previously lost jobs [7]. At the same time, technologically advanced employment creation mechanisms can create new jobs.

After the robot replaces the manual jobs, it will lead to changes and adjustments in the management mode and production process of the whole industry. The positions replaced by the robots are currently limited to repetitive operations or high-risk operations. Low-skilled jobs will be replaced, resulting in lower demand for this part of the employment, but the demand for high-tech jobs is constantly increasing.

The use of robots also has a certain impact on the job market. From the initial handling of the robot to the development of the education and medical industry, the robot using gradually moves from the low-end operation to the middle and high-end operation [8], and the application of robots will inevitably gradually replace more and more jobs.

Frey and Osborne (2013) suggest that in the areas of management, business, finance, computing, engineering, science education, law, community service, art, media, health care, the risk of jobs replaced by new technology is low [9]. Jobs in services, sales, offices, administrative support, construction, manufacturing, transportation, and logistics will be greatly occupied by automation and robots. Jobs such as engineering and science will not be occupied by emerging technology because these positions make creations that are not easy to be replaced.

### Myanmar Youth English Language Skills

Compared with previous generations, this new generation of Myanmar youth's English proficiency has improved significantly, mainly due to the education policies of Myanmar government, the increasing English proficiency demand of labor market, and the enthusiasm of young people in Myanmar for learning English. Fen mentions that: Today, the only local language taught in schools is Burmese, and English is the only foreign language taught at this basic education level [10]. From kindergarten onwards, Burmese and English are compulsory subjects. He pointed out that Burmese is the only language of instruction up to standard 8. In standards 9 and 10, English is the language of instruction for science subjects, while Burmese is used for the rest.

Kirpatrick indicated that in order to improve young students' English proficiency, high schools in Myanmar have built multimedia English classrooms and interactive English language LABS [11]. "The talented student project", launched by 38 high schools across the country, allows students to take after-school English classes taught by college professors. In universities, English is still the language of instruction. According to the Myanmar Ministry of Education, interdisciplinary courses such as English for professional purposes are open to undergraduates and graduate students. With the emphasis on information education, the university has built learning centres and language LABS equipped with information technology facilities, which have promoted the reform of English teaching. Under the call of the national human resource department, the university has set up the human resource development centre, which offers a variety of full-time and part-time courses to build a lifelong learning society with an open education system, including English courses. Myint pointed out that as well as learning English in public schools, a growing number of Myanmar youth are learning English in private schools [12]. Influenced by the democratization process in Myanmar, the demand for employment and study abroad has been increased year by year.

Myanmar youth people are eager to improve their English level, and there are many learning classes in English-Burmese bilingual teaching. Some private schools offer English classes and employ native English speakers. For example, there are about 40 private schools or training centres in Yangon that offer English course and teach English as a second language.

In addition, Guan and Suryadinata also mentioned that there are foreign-funded international schools that adopt foreign teaching materials and models [13]. They also offer long-term primary school courses. There are summer English classes that offer one to three months of language training. The fees vary from each other, but parents

still try to send their children to these private classes to help them improve English proficiency because English is a necessary stepping-block for exams related to management.

### Environment for Learning English Language.

Fen mentioned that after Myanmar's independence, the dominant concept of language policy is further maintenance Burmese status as the official language, and lower the status of the English [10]. 1964 the government closed all missionary schools, announced Burmese as the language of instruction in universities, and planned to create a new Burmese alphabet to replace the old English one.

Wei wei pointed out that in order to eliminate the influence of the British colonial government in Myanmar, the status of English has been reduced again [14]. In 1964, English courses were cancelled in primary schools in all regions and could only be opened in junior middle school, which caused a decline in English teaching level to some extent. In 1970, Burmese became the only language of instruction in primary and secondary schools. It was not until the late 1970s when English was once again emphasized as a modern language that English became the main medium of instruction in high schools and universities.

Tin pointed out that after 1988, with the development of economy and international cooperation, English was valued and emphasized again in Myanmar [15]. Basic education in public schools required both English and Burmese. In high school, English was used to teach science courses such as chemistry, physics and biology. The government has conducted educational reforms, offering "The talented student project" in 38 secondary schools across the state, students in this program took two extra classes a day taught by universities, including information communication technology and English, mathematics or science. The aim of the reform was to improve the practical application of English. English was also the teaching language in these universities. The selection of English textbooks strengthened students' reading and writing skills. English newspapers and TV programs provided an environment for people to get in touch with English easier.

According to Myo Myint and Poe Poe, most of the English teachers in Rangoon university and Rangoon institute of foreign languages have obtained master's degrees in English language, literature or education from the United Kingdom and the United States [16]. In English teaching, in addition to explaining the necessary language knowledge to students, teachers in public universities focus more on training students to communicate in English, so that students can continuously improve their language ability through language practice, expand their vocabulary and

broaden their horizon of English culture. The successful use of communicative English teaching methods in universities in Myanmar shows that it is very necessary to use some effective teaching methods in English teaching, such as communicative English teaching method.

A growing number of private language schools in Myanmar now offer both full-time and part-time English language courses and English-related vocational training. For example, there are about 40 private schools or training centres in Yangon that offer English as the second language of instruction. Such schools may adopt the Singapore curriculum or employ native English speakers as teachers. According to the Ministry of Education, the working language of ASEAN is English, so the Myanmar government is trying to improve the English of senior officials. Since Myanmar joining the ASEAN, senior government officials in Myanmar have also started to receive English training, and some have participated in training programs in foreign countries, such as Singapore, to grasp the working language of ASEAN better.

In addition, according to the research paper of Guan and Suryadinata, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the United Nations development program (UNDP) have provided English language training to Myanmar citizen for tourism development [13]. UNICEF organizes workshops for the development of early English language skills in local children; China, India, Vietnam, Israel, Germany, Japan and other countries are also cooperating with Myanmar to provide education assistance.

### CONCLUSION

English is perceived as a permit to get employment opportunity and upward social mobility in Myanmar. Hence, there seems to be a positive relationship between students' socioeconomic status and their proficiency in English, probably due to the difference in opportunities available outside the home and community for learning and using English. This indicates the urgent need for developing relevant and high-quality English language programmes for learners in public sector universities too. We knew well that Myanmar is not alone in facing these challenges. These and similar challenges abound in the majority of African countries and many other countries in Asia. However, the environment for learning English in Myanmar is getting better than before, and students have more opportunities to learn English, whether in public or private schools. Myanmar government and international organizations have also provided a

more accessible English environment for young people in Myanmar.

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