

# AN EVALUATION OF CULTURAL CONTENTS AND ACTIVITIES IN THE *GENERAL ENGLISH* TEXTBOOK

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## Abstract

This is an evaluation of cultural contents and activities in the textbook, *General English*, published by the Curriculum Project, Thabyay Education Foundation, used in the migrant learning centers in the Thailand-Myanmar border. The evaluation was done to support Thabyay Education Foundation, a non-profit organization. *General English* has been adapted from *Language in Use* (1991) and developed for the post-secondary who are between the age of 16 to 25. This research was conducted to find out whether the materials were appropriate with regard to the social lives of the refugee students. The evaluation was done in four categories: topics, illustrations and activities. To evaluate these four categories, the researcher analyzed the textbook and interviewed the participants. The interviews were conducted with 15 participants from three different learning centers in three different refugee camps. The findings reveal that the subject content of the material is generally appropriate and potentially engaging to the young adult Myanmar migrant learners.

**Key words:** Materials Evaluation, Culture, Activities, Refugees

## Introduction

While Myanmar appears to be heading towards democracy and peace, there are more than three million displaced people and migrant workers in neighboring Thailand. Along the Thailand-Burma border in Tak Province, there are more than 30,000 school-age children from Myanmar migrant workers' families. They are from different backgrounds, situations, ethnicities, cultures and religions. The students' native languages are Karen, Karenni, Thai, Burmese and Bangladeshi.

There are nine refugee camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border that are predominantly Karen and Karenni. For young people who want to

get education, the MLCs (Migrant Learning Centers) which are aided by the Thailand Ministry of Education, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and individual donors provide education. There are 70 learning centers in the seven Karen camps and 11 learning centers in Karenni camps that have been established in the last two decades. These MLCs were built by migrant communities to ensure that their children are able to go to school and receive education.

One of the biggest challenges facing high level migrant schools is developing an appropriate curriculum and material for students. Since its beginning in 2001, the Curriculum Project has been developing textbooks and teacher's guides for schools in the nine official Thai camps for displaced migrant learners in border areas.

The Curriculum Project (CP) of Thabyay Education Foundation was established in 2001 to work with post-secondary (post-10) and adult education programs along the Thailand-Burma border. It is also known as "Educasia" inside Burma. Since 2001 The Curriculum Project has provided curricula, materials and teacher training to further education projects run by Burmese exiles, refugees and migrant communities on the Burma border. The CP support ranges from designing the locally relevant material together with the schools and community stakeholders, producing, implementing and evaluating context-appropriate teaching material. Currently CP is working on curricula, materials and teacher training for general and academic English language learning, social studies, math, science and community development.

According to the Curriculum Project, the *General English* coursebook was developed over a five year period between 2002 and 2007 by the Curriculum Project (CP). To get something ready as quickly as possible, the team of curriculum developers and teacher trainers developed an pre-intermediate English textbook based on the '*Language in Use*' coursebook that these schools had been using. Over the next three years, CP reworked these initial modules so that they were a complete course rather than a supplement to the '*Language in Use*' textbook.

The *General English* series is designed for Myanmar adult migrant learners and post-secondary school students. The main focus for the post-secondary program is to improve the students' English, increase awareness of Myanmar issues and teach general knowledge. English classes for the post-secondary students teach vocabulary, speaking, reading, listening and writing. The materials used are relevant for their situation as well as incorporating modern teaching methodology. They provide interactive lessons and foster critical thinking.

The course comprises Student's Books, Teacher's Books and audio recordings for Modules 1-4, 5-8 and 9-12. The book introduces students to community projects and was designed "to be sensitive to gender and

ethnicity so that all users of the book can hopefully find something to connect to.”

The *General English* coursebook includes:

- 12 modules, each focusing on particular topics, functions and structures
- 12 practice sections, one at the end of each unit
- 3 comprehensive review sections
- Detailed language reference sections
- Transcripts of all audio recording

This research evaluated the topic contents, illustrations and activities in the *General English* pre-intermediate coursebook to analyze whether they are appropriate for the migrant students from Myanmar, and to investigate whether the material reflects the learners’ social context.

## Literature Review

Teaching materials are important for ESL or EFL teaching and learning. According to Tomlinson (2010: 143):

Materials can be informative (informing the learner about target language), instructional (guiding the learner in practicing the language), experiential (providing the learner with experience of the language in use), eliciting (encouraging the learner to use the language) and exploratory (helping the learner to make discoveries about the language).

Materials evaluation is an integral part of almost all educational programs. There are various definitions proposed by different researchers. The empirical view of Hutchinson and Waters is “evaluation is a matter of judging the fitness of something for a particular purpose.” (1987: 96) Tomlinson defines, “the systematic appraisal of the value of materials in relation to their objectives and to the objectives of the learners using them.” (Tomlinson: 1998: xi)

To evaluate the topics, illustrations and activities, the researcher used McGrath’s (2002) in-depth method and Tomlinson’s (2001) localization criteria.

**In-depth Method:** The publisher’s and author’s claims to look, for instance, the kind of language description, beyond underlying assumptions about learning or values on which the materials are based or, in a broader sense, whether the materials seem likely to live up to the claims that are stated in the materials.

**Localization:** This consisted of 113 criteria, which are divided into two headings, 'overall course criteria' and 'coursebook specific criteria'. In the overall course criteria, there are eight sub-headings namely publisher's claims, flexibility, syllabus, pedagogic approach, topic contents, voice, instructions and teachability. In coursebook specific criteria, the appearance and design of the coursebook, the illustrations and reading texts presented in the book are emphasized (Tomlinson 2001: 80).

In this research, culture includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, custom, identity, and habits acquired by members of a society. The topics and illustrations are evaluated on the basis of socio-cultural issue as one element. According to Pulverness (2003), to be effective and to help students achieve intercultural competence, the teaching and learning of culture needs to become a dialogue between the source and target cultures. Both teachers and learners can only promote and have awareness of their own and others' identities that can then lead to better teaching materials and methods (cited in Tomlinson 2003: 427).

Malinowski's (1923) view is that in society, language performs certain functions in the everyday lives of people who live within a society. Malinowski's (1923) description of generic patterning or genre can be used to show how language as a social activity unfolds as a generic structure in a text (cited in Foley 2012: 109). Vygotsky's (1930) view on language is that, "Language is a Social Tool for mediation in learning" (Foley 2012: 104). According to their perceptions, socio-cultural background plays a role in language learning.

## Research Methodology

The study evaluated the *General English* pre-intermediate coursebook published by the Curriculum Project, Mae Sot, Tak Province, Thailand. Data for this study were obtained from the following sources:

- A. Textbook Analysis
- B. Interview

### A. Textbook Analysis

*General English* has three books which are used for post-10 level students in the refugee camps through the Thailand-Myanmar border. There are three semesters for post-10 level. Each semester lasts three to five months. Modules 1-4 (Book-1) are used for the first semester, modules 5-8 (Book-2) for the second semester and modules 9-12 (Book-3) for the last semester. Detailed analysis of the textbook (topics, illustrations and activities) helps to investigate whether the students' interests, needs, social and educational backgrounds and cultural knowledge are appropriate with the topics and illustrations in the book.

Topics, illustrations and activities or question types were analyzed i.e. *General English*. The data collection and analysis were done in March, 2015.

### B. Interview

After analyzing the textbook, the researcher interviewed 15 participants from three refugee camps, Mae La, Omphain and Nu Po camp, in Tak province, Thailand. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the views of students on *General English* and to evaluate whether the topics and illustrations are suitable for them. The interview had three parts (See appendix-1): students' personal information and their purposes for learning English, their interests in terms of topics and illustrations.

The interviews were conducted in Burmese and each lasted twenty to thirty minutes. It took a week to transcribe the interviews from Burmese to English.

## Findings

The students who were interviewed claimed that they have their own reasons for learning English. They admitted that English is an international language and there are benefits for learning it. The students' motivation to learn the target language is summarized in Table (2).

Table 2: Students' purposes of learning English

Further Studies	Social workers	English Teacher	Translators	For media	Total
4	5	2	3	1	15

## Topics

There were a total of 150 topics under the following groups: Myanmar specific topics (in Myanmar context), universal topics, Asian cultural topics and Global topics. The number of topics under each category is in Table (3).

Table 3: Categories of Topics in *General English*

Myanmar specific Topics	Universal Topics	Asian Cultural Topics	Global Topics	Total
44	55	10	41	150

**Myanmar specific topics:** The results show that 31 out of 44 Myanmar specific topics probably relate to the lives of refugee learners while 13 were not. On the other hand, because of the results of participants' opinions, 35 out of 44 Myanmar specific topics are likely to connect to their lives while 8 topics were not. The participants pointed out one controversial topic (*Story from the picture*) for them. One participant (S5) from Mae La camp said *"The topic Story from picture (Figure-2, p-11, module-9) is controversial for us. It's about a male manager who abuses a female staff. It can happen in real life, but our culture does not allow the public to know about that. I am shy when I learn about this topic with my peers."*

**Universal Topics:** A total of 55% of topics are universal and are neutral with regard to local cultures. With the exception of 8 out of 55 topics, the rest of the universal topics are likely to give opportunities for contextualization into different cultural contexts so that the learners can personalize and localize them. The topic on Signs (Figure-3, p-3, module-9)' is not related to learners' lives, the participants like to learn for knowledge sake.

S3: *We have never seen 'Signs' in the camp areas, but we can know what is the sign of 'No smoking', 'No litter'*

S8: *If we just learn the things we can see in the camps, I think we don't have many topics to learn. Because things are limited in the camps. I think we should know everything outside of the camps.*

**Asian cultural topics:** The perceptions of participants on Asian

cultural topics are different depending on their interests and personalities. They stated that Sabay's job (*Figure-4, p-12, module-9*) interested them and that they now know that people from other countries are doing similar things to them, i.e. handicrafts. Those topics provide Asian cultures and the ownership vocabulary of each country, where English is not a native language.

**Global Topics:** A total of 27% of the topics are in world cultures, especially the cultures of English speaking countries. The researcher's analysis shows that out of the 41 Global topics, 19 may not be applicable to the refugee learners' lives. For example, the topic *'Shopping around the world (p-11, module-5)'*, the participant (S10) said, *"We just listen to what the teacher teaches. We are unable to respond and personalize the information. It is easy to forget everything that we've learned."* The other 22 topics are likely to stimulate students to discover more about the content even though they are not connected to the lives of migrant workers. *'Famous people (Figure-5, p-50, module-4)'* lesson, for instance, as the learners have had problems either with involvement in civil wars and political conflicts or in natural disasters, they are interested in the lessons about politicians.

S7: *"I am interested in politics and want to learn about politicians and social activists"*.

On the other hand, the interviews show that 15 out of 41 Global topics are unlikely to be applicable with the refugees' real lives. The remaining 26 topics give general knowledge and are possibly appropriate to the learners' lives.

The researcher concludes that in terms of interest and appropriateness, 65% of the topics are possibly interesting and appropriate for them, 33% may not be in their areas of interest and 2% may be controversial. Eleven percent of the topics are likely to be related to the lives of migrants. Lastly, 63% can be adapted to their conditions and 26% may not reflect the lives of the migrant learners.

## Illustrations

There are a total of 251 illustrations (drawings, photos, graphs, maps) in the *General English*. Both the drawings and photos are in black and white. There are more drawings in local and Burmese culture than there are for international settings. Table 4 categorizes the illustrations and photos. The illustrations in *General English* are in black and white to keep the cost of the book low in order to make it affordable for the migrants.

**Table 4: List of illustrations in *General English***

	Cultural Illustrations	International Illustrations	Asian cultural Illustrations	Total
Drawings	85	61	0	146
Photos	12	62	31	105

A total of 58% of the illustrations are drawings. They are quite functional and supportive to learning by giving general ideas of the content and can also represent the learners' culture. However, the drawings *'In the city (p-21, module-2), signs (p-3, module-9), office and bedroom (p-24, module-2), pizza and pasta (p-41, module-3), hamburger (Figure-6, p-42, module-2), cinema, zoo, museum, etc.,* are likely to discourage the students to speak out about their ideas. They may not reflect their lives.

All of the participants admitted that most of the illustrations in *General English* reflect their situations. They can see their homes, schools, clinics, churches, temples, mosques, bus, etc. They can also see Karen people who are the majority in the refugee camps. However, they want to see not only Karens but also other minorities living in the camps. They like to see illustrations that they have never seen in their lives.

*S7: "I accept that the majority of refugee people are Karen, but there are other minorities in the camps. So I would like to see illustrations with different cultural things and costumes."*

They expect to see the photos in order to recognize things in the illustrations. Of course, most of the real photos in *General English* are the photos of famous people. All participants asserted, *"We have never seen or eaten pizza, pasta or hamburger. So it is better if the illustrations are realistic so that we can recognize what they are."*

Forty percent of the illustrations are real photos. With the exception of colorless images, the illustrations or pictures presented in *General English* are visually attractive to the migrant learners. They are set in refugees context that are funny and amusing to the learners. Moreover, the famous characters such as Ban Ki-moon, Nelson Mandela, Carabao and so on.

All of the participants claimed that the pictures of popular people real pictures are photos of famous people. Those photos do not offer new information about strange events, places and cultural things. They have a similar opinion that they would like to see real photos. They admitted that most of the illustrations try to represent real life situations, but are not



clear. The interviews implied that illustrations may be needed to aid understanding.

They pointed out that unclear pictures, lack cultural elements and controversial illustrations as a possible weakness of the material. For example, they say in unison that they are confused with the illustration 'Can you please pick up my friend?' (Figure-7). The task expects the students to pick up friends at the bus stop by describing the physical appearance of the characters. The people in the pictures are too confused to be sighted well. As a result, the activities do not work well.

In conclusion, 65% of the illustrations in *General English* may reflect the lives of the migrants and 35% are probably not representative. To sum up, approximately 17% of the pictures are in migrant cultural context and 83% are not related to the migrants' lives at all. Around 57% out of that 83% can probably support students' learning. For example, they can see photos of famous people, maps, and animals and so on, but the remaining 26% do not represent the migrants' culture or help them learn. The illustrations that do not reflect migrants' lives may be useful in giving them new input and educate them further in learning about the world.

## Activities

The activities and tasks are designed not only to improve the learners' linguistic competence but also to develop high-order skills of learners such as activating prior knowledge or schemata, guessing and making inferences and it is integrated with the other skills. The *General English* has 85 texts. The researcher analyzed types of questions that come during and after the texts. The 'before reading' questions were not analyzed because they are brainstorming and personal response questions. The researcher analyzed the dominant questions and connections between the text-types and activities. There are various post-reading questions. The questions are shown in Table 5. The question types are analyzed with Nuttall's (1982) taxonomy of questions.

Table 5: Types of questions

Types of question or activities of 85 texts				
Literal Comprehension	Reorganization Or Interpretation	Inference	Evaluation	Personal Response
72	20	17	20	29

Literal comprehension questions are the most dominant apart from gap-filling, cloze type, matching activities, and personal response questions.

The activities in *General English* include language-focused activities, and a variety of range of question types. The lower-order questions such as literal comprehension and reorganization types aid students' understanding. These questions provide a basis for higher-order questions such as inference, evaluation and personal response so that the students can possibly be critical, logical, reflective and creative in their learning.

## Conclusion

The findings of topics, illustrations and activities can be summarized as follows:

In terms of topics, *General English* includes potentially engaging subjects (e.g. social issues, future plans). There is a need for issues that are challenging enough for communication. It needs texts such as stories or poems. It does not contain information that is up-to-date which can stimulate students to go deeper into a subject. It was found that 11% of the topics are related to the migrant students' lives and approximately 63% reflect their real lives. As the *General English* is adapted for Myanmar migrant students, the subject content was generally realistic and appeals to the adult migrant learners.

In terms of illustrations, they are in black and white and not very attractive. The book has a number of texts and illustrations that are not clearly laid out but the illustrations in the book are functional. Approximately 65% of the drawings and 17% of the photos represent the migrant cultural context. The drawings and illustrations are ambiguous and difficult for the students to describe..

In terms of activities, there is a good balance of pre and post learning tasks, but they focus more on forms rather than real communication. There are a variety of question types, but 43% of them are literal comprehension types with Yes/No questions, gap-filling, matching and multiple-choice. The remaining 57 % are personalization, reorganization, evaluation and inference types of questions.

The findings indicate that the adapted coursebook *General English* is appropriate for the migrant learners, but it is necessary to revise the topics and illustrations in order to meet the learners' interests and needs. Although it includes a variety of text-types and activities, *General English* needs to have a balance of genres and question-types so that the learners can improve their critical thinking and communication skills for real life situation.

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