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Development of Pāli Language and Learning Strategies for Buddhist Studies in Myanmar

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A B S T R A C T

Pāli language is very important for Theravāda Buddhism. It is the language of the Tipiṭaka, which contains the Buddha's teachings. Myanmar has a long history of Pāli studies that goes back more than one thousand years. This article examines how Pāli developed in Myanmar from the Pyu period through the Bagan kingdom to the present day. The research uses historical and textual analysis to understand the role of Pāli in Buddhist education. The findings show that Pāli was not only a religious language but also a symbol of prestige and learning in Burmese society. The article also explores different learning strategies used in Myanmar for Pāli studies. These include traditional methods like nissaya (word-by-word translation), grammar study, memorization, and monastic examinations. The article also looks at modern approaches using digital tools and online resources. The study finds that Myanmar has a rich tradition of Pāli scholarship, with important works like the Kaccāyana grammar and Aggavaṃsa's Saddanīti. Monastic examinations, which began in 1648, have played a key role in promoting Pāli learning. However, challenges remain, including the need to update teaching methods and make Pāli learning more accessible to all people. This article suggests that combining traditional and modern learning strategies can help students study Pāli more effectively. The research contributes to understanding how language, religion, and education work together in Myanmar's Buddhist tradition.

Introduction

Pāli is the sacred language of Theravāda Buddhism. It is the language of the Tipiṭaka, which is the collection of the Buddha's teachings. For Buddhists in Myanmar, Pāli is not just a language for communication. It is a holy language that carries the words of the Buddha. The study of Pāli has been central to Myanmar's religious and educational life for many centuries (Phyu Mar Lwin, 2025). From the early Pyu civilization to the present day, Pāli has shaped how Myanmar people understand Buddhism and express their faith.

The history of Pāli in Myanmar goes back to very ancient times. Archaeological evidence shows that Pāli was used in the Pyu period, around the 1st to 3rd centuries CE (Phyu Mar Lwin, 2025). Gold plates found at Śrīkṣetra contain some of the earliest Pāli inscriptions from the Buddhist canon (Phyu Mar Lwin, 2025).

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These findings show that Pāli was already important in Myanmar long before the Bagan kingdom. The Pyu people learned Pāli texts that came from South India (Phyu Mar Lwin, 2025). This early contact with Pāli laid the foundation for later developments.

The Bagan period (11th to 13th century) is often called the golden age of Buddhist culture in Myanmar. King Anawrahta adopted Theravāda Buddhism as the state religion and brought many Pāli texts from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) (Burmese literature, 2011). During this time, Pāli became the main language for religious and scholarly work. Stone inscriptions from Bagan show that Pāli was used not only for religious purposes but also as a mark of social status among the royal family and learned monks (Phyu Mar Lwin, 2025). The spread of Theravāda Buddhism in Bagan helped make Pāli the foundation of Myanmar's educational system.

Myanmar has produced many important Pāli scholars over the centuries. In the 12th century, Aggavaṃsa wrote the Saddanīti, a major work on Pāli grammar (Ruiz-Falqués, 2017). In the 18th century, Makāralopa created an encyclopedia of Pali grammar that is still used today (Ruiz-Falqués, 2024). These works show the deep tradition of Pāli scholarship in Myanmar.

The study of Pāli in Myanmar has traditionally taken place in monasteries. Monastic education has been the main way for people to learn Pāli and Buddhist teachings. Monks served as teachers, and students learned through memorization, recitation, and translation (Ven. Pannabhoga Herngseng, 2023). The nissaya method, where each Pāli word is followed by its Burmese translation, became a key teaching tool. This method helped students understand the meaning of Pāli texts while learning the language (Ven. Pannabhoga Herngseng, 2023).

In 1648, King Thalun introduced monastic examinations to encourage the study of Pāli (Monastic examinations, n.d.). These examinations, known as pathamabyan, became an important part of Myanmar's Buddhist education. Successful candidates received royal recognition and titles (Monastic examinations, n.d.). The examination system continues today under the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

However, Pāli education in Myanmar faces challenges in the modern world. The curriculum in many monastic schools includes only Pāli and Myanmar literature, which some see as limiting. There is a need to update teaching methods and make Pāli learning more relevant to contemporary students. At the same time, new opportunities are emerging. India's recognition of Pāli as a classical language in 2024 has renewed interest in Pāli studies (Buddhistdoor Global, 2025). International collaborations between Myanmar and other Buddhist countries are also helping to promote Pāli learning.

This article aims to explore the development of Pāli in Myanmar and examine the learning strategies used for Buddhist studies. It will look at both traditional and modern approaches to Pāli education. By understanding the history and current state of Pāli learning, we can find ways to support this important tradition for future generations.

Historical Development of Pāli in Myanmar

The history of Pāli in Myanmar can be divided into several important periods. Each period contributed to the growth and development of the language in different ways.

The Pyu Period (1st - 9th Century CE)

The earliest evidence of Pāli in Myanmar comes from the Pyu civilization. Archaeological sites like Beikthano and Śrīkṣetra have yielded Pāli inscriptions on gold plates and other materials (Phyu Mar Lwin, 2025). The Pāli word 'samghasiri' was found on a stamp dating to the 2nd century at the Beikthano site (Phyu Mar Lwin, 2025). Twenty gold plates discovered at Śrīkṣetra provide further evidence of the use of Pāli. These plates are recognized as the earliest Pāli inscriptions from the Buddhist canon during the Pyu era (Phyu Mar Lwin, 2025). This early contact with Pāli laid the foundation for later developments.

The Bagan Period (11th - 13th Century CE)

The Bagan period was a time of great growth for Pāli in Myanmar. King Anawrahta and his successors supported Theravāda Buddhism and the study of Pāli (Burmese literature, 2011). Many temples and monasteries were built, and Pāli became the language of religious and scholarly life (Phyu Mar Lwin, 2025).

The Myazedi inscription, inscribed in 1113, is one of the most important pieces of evidence from this period (Myazedi inscription, n.d.). It contains the same proclamation in four languages: Old Burmese, Pali, Old Mon, and Pyu (Myazedi inscription, n.d.). This shows that Pāli was an important language alongside the local languages.

During this time, important works on Pāli grammar were written. Aggavaṃsa's Saddanīti, completed in 1154 CE, is one of the best-known examples (Ruiz-Falqués, 2017). This work shows the high level of Pāli scholarship in Bagan. Pāli grammar was studied with great care, and this tradition continues in monastic education today.

The Ava and Konbaung Periods (14th - 19th Century)

After the fall of Bagan, Pāli scholarship continued to flourish. The Ava period saw the development of Burmese literature influenced by Pāli. Poets and scholars used Pāli motifs and ideas in their work (Burmese literature, 2011). The Konbaung period brought further developments, including the work of Makāralopa in the 18th century (Ruiz-Falqués, 2024).

The monastic examination system, introduced in 1648, became a key institution for Pāli learning (Monastic examinations, n.d.). King Bodawpaya later standardized these examinations and introduced new ones related to the Vinaya (Monastic examinations, n.d.). This system helped maintain high standards of Pāli scholarship throughout the country.

The Colonial Period (1886 - 1948)

British colonial rule brought changes to Myanmar's education system. The monastic examination system was revived by the colonial authorities to encourage education in monasteries (Monastic examinations, n.d.). However, there was also resistance from the Burmese sangha, and the first colonial-administered examinations were not held until 1895 (Monastic examinations, n.d.). During this period, Pāli education continued in monasteries alongside new forms of secular education.

The Modern Period (1948 - Present)

Since independence, Pāli has remained important in Myanmar's religious and educational life. The government continues to hold monastic examinations. Universities offer courses in Pāli and Buddhist studies. For example, the State Pariyatti Sasana University offers BA, MA, and postgraduate diploma programs in Pāli and Buddhist Studies (SSBU, 2025). International recognition of Pāli, such as India's 2024 declaration of Pāli as a classical language, has brought new attention to the language (Buddhistdoor Global, 2025).

The development of Pāli in Myanmar shows a continuous tradition of scholarship and learning. From the Pyu period to the present, Pāli has been central to Myanmar's Buddhist identity.

Pāli in Myanmar's Monastic Education System

The monastic education system has been the main institution for Pāli learning in Myanmar for centuries. Understanding this system helps us see how Pāli has been taught and learned.

Structure of Monastic Education

Monasteries have served as centers of education in Myanmar since ancient times. In the history of Myanmar, Buddhist monasteries were traditionally the learning centres, where students acquired the knowledge of Buddhist Texts in Pāli (Shodhganga, n.d.). Monks are the teachers, and students include both novice monks and laypeople. Education in monasteries has traditionally focused on religious and moral development. Pāli is a core subject because it is the language of the Buddhist scriptures.

When a new student came to a monastery to study, the abbot gave him instruction (Shodhganga, n.d.). The curriculum in monastic schools has traditionally included Pāli grammar, Buddhist texts, and sometimes other subjects like numerical, medical, psychological, and astrological knowledge (Shodhganga, n.d.). Students learn to read, write, and understand Pāli. They also study the Tipiṭaka and commentarial literature.

The Nissaya Method

One of the most important teaching methods in Myanmar's monastic education is the nissaya method. In this method, each Pāli word is followed by its Burmese translation and explanation (Ven. Pannabhoga Herngseng, 2023). The word "*nissaya*" comes from Pāli and means "support" or "foundation." This method provides students with a clear understanding of Pāli texts.

The nissaya method developed over many centuries. Early forms of nissaya can be found from the 7th century CE (Ven. Pannabhoga Herngseng, 2023). By the medieval period, nissaya had become a mainstream learning method. Teachers used nissaya to explain Pāli texts in detail to their students. In the traditional Burmese monastic learning method, the nissaya plays an important role on account of the different levels of meaning that it can extract from a text (Ven. Pannabhoga Herngseng, 2023).

The nissaya method has several advantages. It helps students understand the meaning of Pāli words in their own language. It also shows how grammar works in context. For beginners, nissaya provides a bridge between Burmese and Pāli. However, some scholars argue that nissaya can become a crutch, preventing students from developing independent reading skills.

Memorization and Recitation

Memorization has always been important in Pāli learning. Students memorize Pāli texts through repetition and recitation. The ancient monasteries' teaching methodology encompassed systematic lecturing of literature, attending lectures, repeating what one had learnt from memory, learning lessons by heart, and teaching how to write. This practice helps students internalize the language and its rhythms. Memorization also has a religious dimension, as reciting the Buddha's words is seen as a meritorious act.

Monastic Examinations

The monastic examination system has been central to Pāli education since 1648 (Monastic examinations, n.d.). These examinations test students' knowledge of Pāli and Buddhist texts. The pathamabyan examinations are held over nine days, including six days for base texts, one day for Burmese language texts, and two days for Pāli language texts.

Successful candidates receive titles and recognition (Monastic examinations, n.d.). This system has motivated many students to study Pāli seriously. At present, Myanmar Sangha Pali study consists of two different systems: traditional and modern Pali study with university system (Myanmar Sangha Administration, n.d.). Traditional Pali studies are divided into three systems of examinations: Pali Pathmapya examination, Dhammacariya examination, and Tipitaka selection examination (Myanmar Sangha Administration, n.d.).

Traditional Learning Strategies for Pāli

Myanmar has developed many effective strategies for learning Pāli over the centuries. These strategies combine language learning with religious practice.

Grammar-Based Learning

Learning Pāli grammar is the foundation of traditional Pāli education. The Kaccāyana grammar, dating from about the 6th century CE, has been a standard textbook. Students learn the rules of Pāli grammar through systematic study. This approach helps students understand the structure of the language (Shodhganga, n.d.).

Monks compulsively learn Pali for writing and composing stanzas. Grammar is also learned by monks to grasp the language. A linguistic text, Kaccayana is suggested for the exams (Shodhganga, n.d.).

Myanmar scholars have made important contributions to Pāli grammar. Makāralopa's Encyclopedia of Pali Grammar is a bilingual Pāli-Burmese exposition of the Kaccāyana grammar (Ruiz-Falqués, 2024). This work includes chapters on hermeneutics and scholastic exegesis, making it more than just a grammar book. It provides a complete method for textual analysis.

Text-Based Learning

Traditional Pāli learning is closely tied to reading Buddhist texts. Students read the Tipiṭaka and commentarial literature. This approach helps students learn Pāli in its natural context. Reading texts also deepens students' understanding of Buddhist teachings.

Teachers often start with simpler texts before moving to more difficult ones. The Jātaka tales, which tell stories of the Buddha's previous lives, are often used for beginners. These stories are engaging and relatively easy to understand. As students progress, they read more complex texts from the Sutta Piṭaka and Abhidhamma Piṭaka.

Translation Practice

Translation is a key learning strategy in traditional Pāli education. Students translate Pāli texts into Burmese. This practice helps students understand the meaning of the texts and develop their language skills. Teachers often provide nissaya translations to guide students.

Translation practice also helps students identify areas where they need more study. When students struggle to translate a passage, they know they need to review the grammar or vocabulary. Over time, translation becomes easier as students become more familiar with the language.

Study with Teachers

The teacher-student relationship is central to traditional Pāli learning. Students learn from monks who are themselves skilled in Pāli. Teachers explain difficult passages, answer questions, and provide guidance. This personal instruction helps students overcome challenges and deepen their understanding.

The teacher is called "*ācariya*" in Pāli. This word shows the respect given to teachers in the Buddhist tradition. Students are expected to be humble and attentive. This relationship creates a supportive learning environment.

Community Learning

Learning Pāli is often a community activity. Students study together in groups. They recite texts together and discuss their meanings. This collaborative learning helps students stay motivated and learn from each other.

Study groups also provide opportunities for practice. Students can test each other on vocabulary and grammar. They can also help each other understand difficult passages. This community approach to learning has been part of Myanmar's Buddhist tradition for centuries.

Modern Learning Strategies and Resources

While traditional methods remain important, modern learners of Pāli have access to many new resources and strategies. These tools can make Pāli learning more accessible and effective.

Digital Resources

The internet has opened up many new opportunities for Pāli learning. The Digital Pali Reader is a tool that facilitates study of the Pali language at an advanced level. It contains the entire Myanmar version of the Pali Canon (Digital Pali Reader, n.d.). Online courses are available from universities and Buddhist centers. These courses allow students to learn at their own pace. Digital dictionaries make it easy to look up Pāli words. Online texts of the Tipiṭaka are freely available.

Mobile apps also support Pāli learning. The Pali Nissaya app allows users to view the Pali canon easily (Google Play, 2025). The HTUT Dhamma app describes how to pronounce Pali language and provides authentic Burmese pronunciations with audio files (App Store, 2025). These tools make it possible to study Pāli anywhere, anytime. For students who cannot attend traditional monastic schools, digital resources provide an alternative path to learning.

Modern Textbooks and University Programs

Many modern textbooks are available for learning Pāli. Universities now offer formal degree programs. The State Pariyatti Sasana University offers a BA in Pāli and Buddhist Studies. This program trains students to acquire fundamental knowledge in the Tipiṭaka through original Pāli texts and also develop critical thinking skills (SSBU, 2025).

The MA program in Pāli and Buddhist Studies aims to provide students opportunities to learn the Pali language from a diverse approach and to study meditation from theoretical and practical perspectives (SSBU, 2025). These modern programs use a more communicative approach than traditional grammar books. They focus on reading comprehension and practical use of the language.

Self-Study Strategies

Self-study is possible for motivated learners. Many resources are available for self-study, including textbooks, online courses, and study guides. Self-study allows learners to focus on their own needs and interests.

Successful self-study requires discipline and good strategies. Learners should start with basic grammar and vocabulary. They should then move on to reading simple texts. Regular practice is essential. Many self-learners find it helpful to set specific goals and track their progress.

Combining Traditional and Modern Approaches

The most effective learning strategies often combine traditional and modern approaches. For example, students might use traditional nissaya translations alongside digital dictionaries. They might study grammar with a teacher and practice reading with online texts.

This combined approach has several advantages. Traditional methods provide depth and cultural context. Modern tools provide convenience and access to resources. Together, they can help students learn Pāli more effectively than either approach alone.

International Collaboration

International collaboration is opening new opportunities for Pāli learning. Myanmar has been strengthening ties with India and other Buddhist countries. India's recognition of Pāli as a classical language in 2024 has renewed academic and spiritual interest in Pāli (Buddhistdoor Global, 2025). The International Buddhist Confederation has signed MoUs with Myanmar institutions to promote and preserve Pāli (Buddhistdoor Global, 2025). These collaborations include academic exchanges and cultural programs. They help promote Pāli studies and share best practices in teaching.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite its rich tradition, Pāli education in Myanmar faces several challenges. Addressing these challenges is important for the future of Pāli studies.

Curriculum Limitations

One major challenge is the limited curriculum in many monastic schools. The curriculum often includes only Pāli and Myanmar literature. This narrow focus may not prepare students for the modern world. It may also limit students' ability to apply their Pāli knowledge in new contexts.

Some educators are calling for curriculum reform. They suggest adding subjects like English, science, and social studies. A broader curriculum could help students develop more skills while maintaining their Pāli studies. However, any changes must respect the religious nature of monastic education.

Teaching Methods

Traditional teaching methods, while effective, may need updating. Some methods focus too much on memorization and not enough on understanding. Students may learn to recite texts without truly understanding them. This can limit their ability to use Pāli for deeper study.

New teaching methods could address this issue. For example, teachers could use more discussion and analysis in their classes. They could encourage students to ask questions and think critically about texts. These methods could help students develop deeper understanding.

Accessibility and Language Barriers

Pāli education is not equally accessible to all. Traditional monastic education is mainly available to boys and men. Girls and women have fewer opportunities to study Pāli. People in rural areas may also have limited access to Pāli education.

There is also a language barrier issue. Pāli learning in Myanmar has been comparatively isolated, and the traditional field of Pali studies has developed more or less independently of outside influences. Unfortunately, the language barrier has prevented modern scholars from taking advantage of many contributions of Myanmar towards Pali studies.

Efforts to make Pāli education more inclusive could help. Online courses and distance learning can reach people who cannot attend traditional schools. Women's monasteries and study groups can provide opportunities for female students.

Modern Relevance

Some people question the relevance of Pāli studies in the modern world. They may see Pāli as an ancient language with limited practical use. This perception can discourage young people from studying Pāli.

Showing the relevance of Pāli studies is important. Pāli provides access to the Buddha’s teachings in their original language. It also develops skills in analysis, memorization, and translation. These skills are valuable in many fields. Highlighting these benefits could attract more students to Pāli studies.

Preservation of Tradition

While updating Pāli education, it is important to preserve its traditions. The rich heritage of Pāli scholarship in Myanmar should not be lost. Traditional methods like nissaya and memorization have value. They connect students to centuries of Buddhist learning.

The challenge is to balance tradition and innovation. Teachers and students should respect traditional methods while also embracing new approaches. This balance can help Pāli education remain vital and relevant.

Opportunities for Growth

Despite these challenges, there are many opportunities for Pāli studies in Myanmar. International recognition of Pāli is growing. Digital resources are making Pāli learning more accessible. There is increasing interest in Buddhist studies around the world.

Myanmar can build on its rich Pāli tradition to become a leader in Buddhist studies. By combining traditional scholarship with modern approaches, Myanmar can contribute to global understanding of Buddhism. This contribution can benefit both Myanmar and the wider Buddhist community.

Conclusion

This article has explored the development of Pāli language and learning strategies for Buddhist studies in Myanmar. The study shows that Pāli has been central to Myanmar's religious and cultural life for more than a thousand years. From the Pyu period through the Bagan kingdom to the present day, Pāli has served as the sacred language of Theravāda Buddhism.

The history of Pāli in Myanmar is a story of continuous scholarship and learning. Important works like the Saddanīti and Makāralopa's Encyclopedia of Pali Grammar show the depth of Myanmar's Pāli tradition. The monastic education system, with its nissaya method and examinations, has preserved and transmitted this tradition.

Learning strategies for Pāli in Myanmar include both traditional and modern approaches. Traditional methods like grammar study, text reading, translation, and study with teachers remain valuable. Modern tools like digital resources, online courses, and new textbooks provide additional opportunities. Combining these approaches can help students learn Pāli more effectively.

However, challenges remain. Curriculum limitations, outdated teaching methods, and accessibility issues need attention. At the same time, there are opportunities for growth. International collaboration and digital resources are opening new possibilities.

The future of Pāli studies in Myanmar depends on finding the right balance. It is important to preserve the rich tradition of Pāli scholarship while also embracing innovation. By doing so, Myanmar can continue to be a center of Buddhist learning and contribute to global understanding of the Buddha's teachings.

Ultimately, Pāli is more than just a language. It is a bridge to the Buddha's words and a connection to centuries of Buddhist tradition. For students in Myanmar and around the world, learning Pāli is a way to deepen their understanding of Buddhism and participate in its living tradition.

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