

# MY CLASSROOM BURMA

If you are an English teacher in Upper Burma, particularly in Mandalay, you probably know Nyein Ei San. Ms. San has been active in the English language teaching (ELT) community in Burma for the past decade, teaching English as a foreign language and training English teachers in her local community. Ms. San works as what is commonly considered a private teacher. Being a private teacher in Burma means that she is not affiliated with a single school, but instead teaches at multiple institutions.



Nyein Ei San teaches her Access class in Sagaing.

Ms. San realized she wanted to teach English when she was a university student, through an unusual situation. “Most of my friends were my students, as they did not understand the lessons our teachers taught,” she said. “And from that time on, I tried to find teaching methods to make my friends understand more. It was then that I realized that I wanted to become an English teacher.”

Still, even though she had chosen her career, Ms. San had to overcome many obstacles on her professional journey. For example, during her time at Mandalay University, the university was frequently closed down, so often that it took her more than ten years to finish her bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Yet Ms. San persisted; during the multiple university closings, she instead visited the local American Center in Mandalay to work on her English. No challenge could have changed her goal of becoming an English teacher.

Now, having taught for over ten years, Ms. San is an English Access Microscholarship Program project director; she also co-teaches with an English Language Fellow for the Lower Mekong Initiative’s Professional Communication Skills for Leaders program. Ms. San teaches a diverse range of students. Some come from government ministries, some are in the parliament, and some—the Access program participants—are high school and university students. She also conducts teacher-training and capacity-building workshops for community leaders and local businesses.

Due to the variety of students she teaches, Ms. San focuses her planning and teaching on meeting the unique needs of each class. For instance, in her professional communication skills class, where students are middle-level civil servants in the Burmese government, she teaches skills such as how to chair a meeting and how to use diplomatic English. Her students often tell her that learning these skills greatly increases their confidence in using English in multicultural and professional settings. She said, “I am very proud of it, as they said if they have a chance to be a chairperson, there will not be any

problems if they are asked to do so in the future.”

Ms. San also commented that her teaching, while remaining fun and carefree at all times, does shift when she moves from teaching young people to teaching adults. “The younger students prefer to be very active and to play language games,” she said, “while the adults, who also like to be active, want to have a specific purpose for the activities and more structure.”

When Ms. San teaches the Access students, her classroom erupts in consistent laughter and fun. Most of these students are in their first year of university or their final year of high school. They represent the diverse range of ethnic and religious groups in Burma. She focuses on preparing the students in the program to become future leaders in their communities, so her class topics generally focus on volunteer work, community development, civil engagement, and academic skills.



**Ms. San (left) talks to two Lower Mekong Initiative Education Seminar participants about their digital poster on education development.**





**Ms. San's Access students planting trees in Sagaing as part of an environmental awareness project**

Ms. San's class sizes vary greatly, with some as small as nine students and others with 40 or more. Usually, depending on the resources available, she prefers to arrange her students in small groups, and then in a half-circle. "I try to arrange the seating so that the students can stay active and share with each other," she said, "because students in Burma have had little or no opportunities to communicate in English."

In Ms. San's classes, seating students in groups helps develop their communication skills by facilitating interaction and information sharing. Ms. San's classrooms tend to be large and spacious, with plenty of space for students to stand up and move around. "I really like to do activities where I ask the students to stand up and share with each other, such as a gallery walk," she said. "They love to move around, and it really energizes them. Also, I find that they tend to lose some of their inhibitions when they are standing up, which helps them speak more English." Ms. San is also a resourceful teacher. She is used to regular power outages and teaching with no Internet connection, so she needs only a blackboard to teach effectively.

She also focuses on developing her students' leadership skills. Each year, Ms. San and her Access students organize a Youth Forum, a

two-day gathering for young people from Burma's Sagaing Region. They learn about approaches for mitigating the issues facing their communities, including pollution, poor education, corruption, and public health, while promoting values such as civil engagement and volunteerism. For the 2015 Youth Forum, which had over 500 attendees, Ms. San organized the event around several topics related to youth, such as Youth and Democracy, Youth and Education, and Youth and Environment. For the Youth Forum, she uses her far-reaching connections to invite both foreign and local speakers from across Burma to discuss these issues and mentor the audience in how to become productive members of their communities.

As the Youth Forum demonstrates, Ms. San is passionate about helping the youth of her country develop into community leaders. "They have to become the leaders of their communities and share with each other," she said. "These students will be the ones that others will look to for advice in the future." Following up on the effects of her work, she mentioned that several participants in the 2015 Youth Forum are currently working together on volunteer projects in their local communities.

Ms. San is always looking for new ways to develop her teaching skills, and to do so she has taken advantage of online resources. She participated in the English Access Microscholarship Program Summer 2008 Teacher Workshop provided by Oregon State University. More recently, she completed the E-Teacher Scholarship Program course on English for Specific Purposes, and she is enrolled in the American English Webinar Series.

Ms. San believes that ELT in Burma faces many challenges, such as outdated methodology, lack of resources, and teachers' low-level English proficiency. When asked what advice she would give the future English teachers of Burma, Ms. San said, "I would tell them to go get as much exposure [to English] as possible. Our country is now receiving a lot of help from local and foreign organizations, and there are many opportunities for them. I would tell them that they should do their best, even to take an online course. When they tell me that they cannot because they do not have an Internet connection, I encourage them to do everything they can to do those courses, and I give them advice on how to use the resources available to complete the courses. I have done two online courses, so I know that it is possible. I also

tell teachers to seek out help and advice from everyone around them so they can get lots of new ideas to improve their teaching."

As the Burmese ELT community continues to grow and evolve, Nyein Ei San's developing legacy will be one of consistent mentorship and support for her colleagues and her students. She looks forward to the future of education in Burma, as she will surely play a role in the evolution of effective English language education in her country. Moving forward, she sees herself taking on greater roles in local educational institutions and potentially volunteering with the government to assist in educational policy development and training. Ms. San would like to use her wealth of experience to develop the educational system and to provide more opportunities for the people of Burma to develop into independent learners.

This article was written by **Marie Snider**, a returning English Language Fellow in Burma who works on the Lower Mekong Initiative's Professional Communication Skills for Leaders project. She also conducts teacher-training workshops and events for teachers.

Photos courtesy of Nyein Ei San



**Ms. San (right) in front of the Access classroom building in Sagaing with her Access co-teacher, Zar Thiri Myint (left), and Thuzar Thwin, a Cultural Affairs Assistant at the U.S. Embassy in Rangoon**