

Relationships between Thai language proficiency and livelihoods of Myanmar urban migrant workers

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Abstract

For decades, Thailand has been the recipient of foreign migrant workers from neighbouring countries, with the majority of these workers being from Myanmar. Myanmar migrant workers are employed in various job sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing factories, and service sectors. They usually earn an adequate wage, which provides a living that is not possible in their home country. However, their income and working conditions largely depend on several factors, including host language fluency. This paper is one of the first papers about migrants and Thai language fluency using Thailand as a case study. In this research study, open-ended questions were used to conduct semi-structured interviews with Myanmar urban migrant workers from different work sectors as well as a representative from a language academy in Bangkok. The results of this study show that Thai language proficiency affects the income of the Myanmar migrants as well as their career opportunities. The policy implications suggested by this paper include implementation of Thai language training for urban migrants by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and its non-formal education department.

Keywords

Thai language proficiency; Migrant workers; Urban livelihood; Myanmar

1. Introduction

1.1 Economic development in Thailand

Migration in Thailand is closely associated with the development of the economy. With rapid industrialization, Thailand's economy was booming in the mid-1980s and 1990s. Due to mass industrialization in large cities, people from the countryside moved to urban areas, triggering an internal migration in Thailand. Large cities, especially Bangkok, experienced the highest rates of population growth. Most notably, many young Thai women were employed as maids in wealthy households in these cities (Pangsapa, 2015).

The economic boom during the mid-1980s and early 1990s led rural migrants, including women, to enter the manufacturing sector and other occupations with higher wages (International Organization for Migration(IOM), 2019a). The key motivation for internal migration in Thailand was the wage differences between rural and urban areas. During that time, the income inequality in Thailand triggered the migration from the Northern regions to Central and Greater Bangkok Areas.

On the other hand, the economic boom in the Middle East and East Asia during the 1980s encouraged Thai workers to migrate and work in those regions (Chantavanich & Vungsiriphisal, 2012). According to Huguet and Punpuing (2005), approximately 40,000-60,000 Thai nationals per year moved to Japan for employment between 1988 and 1995. In addition, more than 100,000 workers were deployed to other countries in 2017 alone (IOM, 2019a). This outward migration is one of the reasons for the current labour shortage in Thailand (Chantavanich & Vungsiriphisal, 2012).

1.2 Cross-border Migration to Thailand and Myanmar Migrants

Thailand has been the recipient of migrant workers from neighbouring countries for decades. Foreign migrants in Thailand are the driving workforce of the Thai economy, working in diverse settings from agricultural sectors including crop and produce farms, rubber plantations, and livestock farms, to different sizes of manufacturing, small, medium, and large industries, and in-service sectors such as hospitality, local restaurants, shop houses, street food stalls, and vendor carts selling different items.

Chantavanich and Vungsiriphisal (2012) state that outward migration and the expansion of compulsory Thai education led to a serious labour shortage in the 1990s. Since then, Thailand has desperately needed migrant labourers to fill the low-skill labour force as Thai people have become more and more skilled and educated. By 1994, nearly 400,000 people from three neighbouring countries had come to Thailand to work in construction, fishing, rubber plantations, small-scale factories, domestic services, tourism-related industries, and the sex trade (Pangsapa, 2015).

Even though the Thai government deported nearly 250,000 migrants in response to the massive lay-offs of Thai workers during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, replacements for workers in 3D (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) jobs were unable to be found among Thai people as Thais are not willing to take these jobs (Pangsapa, 2015). In-depth interviews with employers from the agricultural sector showed that they were keen to employ Thais, but Thais were not interested in this kind of work (Pearson et al., 2006).

1.3 Host-language proficiency and immigrants – what the literature shows

According to Boyd and Cao (2009), having language skill of the host country increases the earnings of migrants in three ways. Firstly, language is the main component of human interaction and spoken and written

communication with customers, co-workers, and superiors increases productivity. Secondly, language correlates with other host country-specific human capitals such as education. Finally, knowing the language of the destination country enables migrants to have career opportunities.

Migrants with low language capabilities are generally concentrated in certain job sectors where language does not matter (Boyd & Cao, 2009). As employers in the destination country may use the host language to interview, fluency in the destination language can help migrants describe their qualifications to potential employers (Dustmann, 1993). However, despite being over-qualified for the job due to the rest of their human capital such as educational qualifications, those who lack fluency may be left no choice but to work in sectors where language fluency does not matter (Boyd & Cao, 2009).

The literature shows that host language proficiency can improve the income of immigrants (Boyd & Cao, 2009; Budría & Swedberg, 2012; Chiswick, 1998; Grenier, 1984; Shields & Wheatley Price, 2001). Others such as Chiswick and Wang (2016) claim that speaking the host language improves the likelihood of employment as well as higher earnings. Depending on the context, the improvement of income can be affected by different variables in different countries, for example, gender or language spoken since birth (native language). With a higher proficiency in the host language, migrants generally improve their income accordingly. The relationships between host language, immigrants, and income are observed in Europe, Israel, and North America. However, after reviewing the literature, similar research cannot be identified in the context of Thailand, especially with respect to Myanmar migrant workers. Most of the research studying the relationship between the host language and the immigrant such as Boyd and Cao (2009), Budría and Swedberg (2012), Chiswick (1998), Chiswick and Wang (2016), Dustmann (1999), Shields and Wheatley Price (2001) and Tainer (1988) use census data. Statistical analysis has been used to assess the relationship between the host language and immigrants by looking at the correlations between different variables of social, economic, and human capital factors.

1.4 Thai language and Myanmar migrants

According to the IOM (2019a), the main trigger for migration nowadays is associated with finding employment in Thailand, constituting eighty to ninety per cent of survey respondents. Other reasons include employment for a spouse (9%) and food and water insecurity (7%). Migrants from Myanmar go to Thailand for various reasons including 'easiest to access', 'access to jobs being easier', 'income being higher', 'working conditions are better', and 'having friends or relatives in Thailand' (IOM, 2019a).

Large surveys, such as those done by IOM (2019a) are difficult to conduct due to financial and time constraints. Therefore, qualitative research employing semi-structured interviews with migrant workers will be used in this study. In-depth interviews with migrants included open-ended questions about the information they are given regarding the pre-migration conditions and procedures, migration process, their history in Thailand, attainment of Thai language fluency, and other aspects of their views on the impact of Thai language proficiency with respect to their economic and job mobility.

Albeit there is no empirical study about the relationship between language proficiency and economic mobility of the migrant workers in Thailand, various studies have been conducted with migrants in Thailand primarily by intergovernmental organizations such as IOM and ILO. Information about migrants such as pre-migration preparations, migration processes (contracts, channels, costs, problems during migration, and source of funding for migration), migrant working conditions (legal status, labour abuses, freedom of movement, and wages), and remittances, etc. are well documented in reports such as IOM (2019a), Pearson et al., (2006) and Harkins et al., (2017).

Thai language skills of Myanmar migrants are reported as one of the indicators for migrant vulnerabilities in IOM (2019b). This information about language fluency was collected in Tak province, which is a major migrant transit point from Myanmar. The data were collected from both incoming and returning migrants. However, IOM (2019b) does not establish any relationship between migrants' language skills to their income or working conditions.

Chantavanich and Vungsiriphisal (2012) show that workers believe if they speak Thai, they will have more chances to work in various sectors. This study also noted that workers felt the ability to speak Thai will help them with job searches in Myanmar, especially one with Thai companies. The economic mobility and career improvement of these people mean a lot to their livelihood and their families back home. Many studies, including Turnell et al., (2008), confirm that remittance is an essential source of income for families in developing countries.

The surveys done by the International Organization for Migration in 2019 IOM (2019b) show that more than 60% of returning migrants had sent money home while working in Thailand, and around 69% of the incoming migrants intended to send remittances back. On the other hand, according to the interviews by different media outlets, the job mobility of migrant workers relies mostly on their fluency in Thai.

These narratives lead to the question of how Thai language proficiency is playing a part in the livelihoods, especially economic and job mobilities, of Myanmar urban migrants in Thailand. Even though the relationship between the host-language ability and migrants' income has been shown in the context of Europe and North America, such a study does not exist in the Thailand context, particularly involving Myanmar migrants who are the largest group of migrants in Thailand. Hence, this paper could be viewed as one of the first on this particular relationship. The contributions of this paper include:

- Provision of exploratory research about Thai language proficiency and Myanmar migrant workers in Bangkok, using qualitative methods.
- Offering a better understanding of the urban livelihood of Myanmar migrants in relation to their Thai fluency.
- Revealing the relationship between the job mobility and Thai language proficiency of urban Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand.

2. Data collection and analysis methods

2.1 Interviewees

The interviewees consist mainly of Myanmar urban migrants in Bangkok. A total of 9 people volunteered to take part in this research. Even though this research study initially aimed to interview people from the 'service sector' to understand their employment history, choices, and their history of migration, the researcher recruited Myanmar migrants from other sectors such as manufacturing, maid, and construction sectors to see why they chose to work in such sectors. Moreover, one of the well-known language training academies in Bangkok was asked to give their opinions about the research question.

Job sectors were grouped according to the existing literature and the reports from the IOM and the ILO in Thailand. According to Figure 11 in IOM (2018), the top employment sectors for migrants in Thailand are categorised into manufacturing, construction, domestic work, and service sectors. Service sectors are, in turn, sub-divided into 'Hotel/Accommodation/Food Industry', and 'Wholesale and Retail'. Since the sample size in

this study is relatively small, the specific type of job is mentioned for those working in service sectors to provide a better understanding of the nature of their work and Thai language requirement.

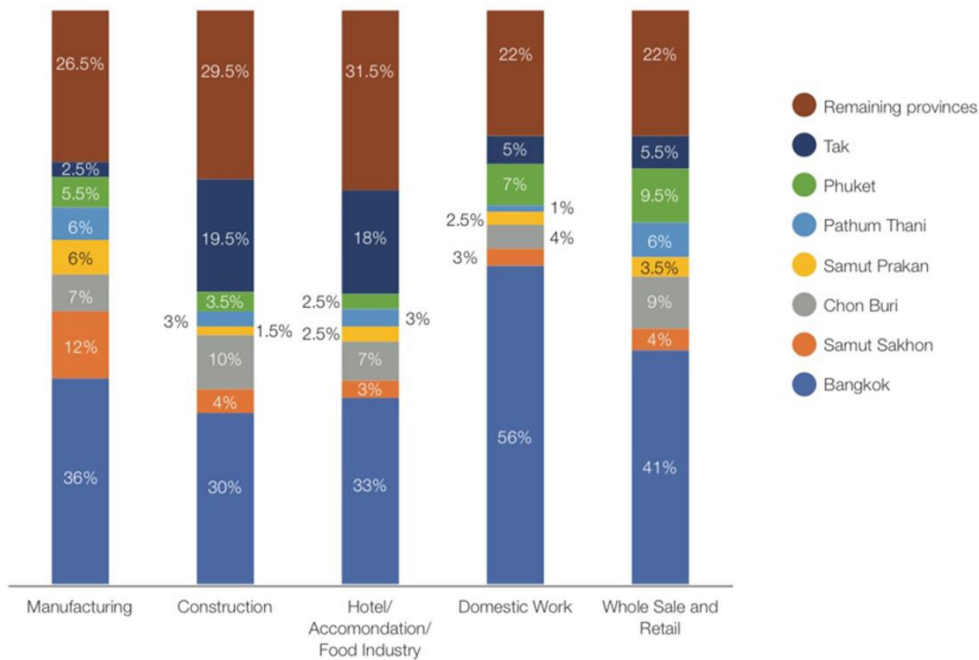


Figure 1 Top Five Employment Sector by Intended Province of Destination in Thailand (IOM, 2018).

2.2 Data Collection Method and Instrument

This research is qualitative. The data were collected via face-to-face interviews with participants, using open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview form. Verbal data were collected with an audio recorder after consent of the interviewees was obtained. There were two sets of interview forms, one dedicated to the migrant workers and the other dedicated to the language academy. Both of the interview forms were in Burmese and the interviews were conducted in Burmese. Additional questions were asked, depending on the job type of the interviewees, to determine the reasons why they were working in their specific sector.

As the interviews were conducted immediately after the 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar, many Myanmar workers in Thailand were not comfortable talking to strangers despite the assurance of the interviewer that the research was not related to politics or data would not be shared with the Myanmar embassy or Thai authorities. For that reason, interviewees were selected via the social connections of the involved researchers.

Once the possible candidates were identified, a brief explanation of questions in the interview was presented to these candidates. Afterwards, the participants were asked whether they were willing to participate in this research. Participants who agreed to be interviewed were then assured that their data would be kept confidential. Additionally, assurance of handling the data such that it would not be shared with anyone or any authorities and use of the data would only be for educational purposes, was given.

The interview questions for the migrants were designed to understand the pre-migration preparations, migration process, and post-migration situations, including the constraints that they faced in each stage. Apart from these, the interviewees were asked about their employment histories, including detailed information about types of jobs, salary range, duration of employment, Thai proficiency at the time of employment, and job

locations, which are important issues based on the literature reviews. The language proficiency was measured using 5 scale, with Level 0 and 4 representing the lowest and highest level of proficiency, respectively. Apart from that, basic information about the standard variables that can be seen in most of the literature was also obtained (see Appendix 1).

For the interviews with the migrants, questions were asked to help the migrants specify their answers more easily. For example, in relation to pre-migration preparations, the interviewees were asked about how they had secured a job, funded their trips, and the difficulties that they faced before migration. Questions about the migration process included how they had come to Thailand, which route they used, and what the difficulties were during the process. Regarding their situations while living in Thailand, they were asked about the difficulties that they faced in Thailand and their choices of particular jobs or locations (Appendix 1).

The questions for the interview with the representative from the language academy were different from those for the migrants. This interview form included four parts namely general questions about the academy, the structure of the organization, the outcomes, and miscellaneous questions on conducting language training, etc. The interview with the language academy intends to serve two purposes: to understand how a language academy operates and to know how the Thai language is affecting migrant workers. Data collection (migrants and language academy) was conducted in Wang Mai, Nong Khaem, Chon Phom, Wat Tha Phra, Thanon Phaya Thai, and Thanon Phetchaburi sub-districts of Bangkok from February 2021 to March 2021.

Self-assessed language skill was used to measure the spoken proficiency of Myanmar migrant workers. The language skill was measured on a 5 scale, with 0 being the lowest and 4 being the highest. In order to help assess their language proficiency, a qualitative description of language proficiency was provided to the migrants as shown in Appendix 2. The problem with self-assessed language skills is that interviewees may have difficulties in deciding what their self-fluency is, for instance, the difference between speaking a language well or very well (Dustmann, 1993).

On the other hand, test-based assessments of language abilities are very costly. Tainer (1988) discussed challenges related to self-assessed language proficiency, for example, considering whether respondents compare their language ability to that of their friends or relatives, or if they take into account how much they have improved over the years? The Spanish National Immigrant Survey released by the Spanish National Statistics Institute was also based on the self-assessed fluency question due to the high cost of test-based assessment of language ability (Budría & Swedberg, 2012). Since there is no standardized Thai language fluency test, self-assessed language proficiency is the only option in this case.

2.3 Data analysis methodology

The qualitative data collected from the migrant workers and the representative from the language academy were analyzed by thematic analysis to understand the patterns or themes in the data. Thematic analysis is a well-established method for qualitative data assessment and in this study we followed the methodology established by Braun and Clarke (2006). The interviews were conducted in Burmese and recorded with an audio recorder after the consent of each participant. Afterwards, audio recordings were transcribed in Burmese and translated into English for data analysis.

2.4 Limitations

The initial research plan intended to include more participants, but restrictions on travel and public interaction due to the Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand did not allow for a large number of participants to be

interviewed. Due to the risks of possible exposure to Covid-19, the number of participants was limited to eight Myanmar migrant workers and a representative from a language academy.

Moreover, collecting large data with a large sample size as IOM managed to do is not possible with the limited financial and human resources available to this research. With a large data set, the relationships between Thai language proficiency and Myanmar urban migrants could be explored statistically.

Because this qualitative research project had limited time and budget, a mixed method of convenience sampling and purposive sampling was used to select participants from different job sectors. For ease of research, cost-effectiveness, and to expedite data collection, convenience sampling was used for recruiting participants. In total, five Myanmar migrants from the service sector, one migrant from the manufacturing sector, a migrant working as a maid, a migrant working in the construction sector, and a representative from a Thai language program were recruited for this research.

3. Results

The results of the in-depth interviews indicate how the Thai language proficiency affects the livelihoods of Myanmar urban migrants in relation to their job opportunities as well as improvements in income. It also reveals the language acquirement of Myanmar workers in Thailand and hints at their barriers to accessing higher-paying jobs, for example, white-collar jobs. The first theme that we can observe is that 'knowing the Thai language is beneficial to Myanmar urban migrant workers.

1. Thai language proficiency is beneficial to Myanmar urban migrants' employment

1.1 Better chances of getting employed

In general, knowing the Thai language offers convenience to Myanmar migrants in their daily life. Migrants reported that they had difficulties understanding others without some Thai language knowledge. Better communication capability with Thai people is beneficial to their careers in both employment-seeking and in-job situations. Having the language skill to understand their employer allows them to get employed more easily, as they can understand what employers demand.

"If you can speak Thai, the chances of getting hired are greater since you can understand what they are asking you to do." (Interviewee 5)

1.2 Working in less labour-intensive jobs

Moreover, Myanmar migrants with Thai language proficiency were given lighter job tasks compared to those who do not speak Thai in the same job sector. They may serve as the interpreter between Thai supervisors or employers and their Myanmar colleagues. This result is consistent with the findings of Pangsapa (2015).

"Basically, I had to translate what my superiors asked my fellow Myanmar colleague. In Burmese, you could say 'all-rounder'. My work tasks were lighter in comparison to those who don't speak Thai." (Interviewee 1)

1.3 Reading and writing Thai skills are important

In addition, Thai reading and writing skills are important for some jobs and better job opportunities. Even in the same job place, migrants with those skills have better salaries and benefits. Jobs in service sectors, waiters and waitresses, for example, require the ability to read and write Thai due to the nature of their job. Such jobs are less labour-intensive than jobs in manufacturing or construction jobs.

"I applied for a job at a food court. I can write fairly, but my spoken skills were not that fluent. '...' Only two of us among all can write Thai. '...' They test the writing skills by asking them to fill out a form. '...' I passed the writing test and I was hired. The salary and benefits were different between those who can write and those who can't write Thai." (Interviewee 2)

Another theme emerging from the data is how migrants acquire the language and what it means to their lives while working in Thailand.

1.4 Easier to communicate with others

Even after being employed, understanding the Thai language can help the migrant workers to communicate with their employers or supervisors directly without waiting for someone to interpret for them. Thus, they can be more confident and less dependent on others in their work.

"That's really great! I can talk with my boss. If not, I have to wait for others to translate for me." (Interviewee 3)

2. Thai language acquirement of Myanmar migrants

2.1 Myanmar colleagues as interpreters

All the respondents in the semi-structured interviews came to Thailand without any fluency in the Thai language. They had worked in different sectors in different provinces of Myanmar. Depending on the nature of their jobs and their co-workers, the methods of Thai language acquirement are also different. Generally, most of the respondents benefited from having Myanmar colleagues in their workspace. This is the case predominantly in industries of the manufacturing sector where a large number of Myanmar migrants are employed. Myanmar workers in such industries do not have to communicate much in Thai as instructions are given by an interpreter.

"I didn't speak much when I started working in Chonburi. They were all from Myanmar. I can speak some basics." (Interviewee 3)

Some Myanmar migrants from the service industries, such as restaurants and mobile phone accessories shops, have a similar way of solving their language barrier at their first jobs, even though in the service industry, they had to work in positions that do not require them to speak in Thai. One interviewee was tasked to prepare the components for Shisha smoking.

"There were many Myanmar co-workers. Only one or two of all were Thais. So, I can ask them (Myanmar colleagues)." (Interviewee 2)

2.2 Seeking help from friends and relatives

Other ways of overcoming the language barrier include getting help from relatives by calling relatives in Thailand to explain something or ask them to teach them how to say something. An interviewee who has been working as a maid reported, "When I wanted to talk about something, I have to call my sister or brother to ask how to say several things." Body language was used in the case of when no Myanmar co-workers were in the workspace.

2.3 Learning by speaking Thai

The incoming Myanmar migrants usually have little or no Thai language proficiency at the time of their migration. Almost all of the interviewees reported that they had no fluency before migration. Likewise, the reports by IOM (2019b) indicate that 79% and 14% of the Myanmar migrants working in Thailand for the first time have the lowest level (Level 1) and Level 2 of Thai fluency respectively, using a 5-level scale measuring.

On the other hand, IOM (2019b) also shows that the lowest language level proficiency (Level 1) was reduced to 15% and increased to 25% for Level 2, respectively, in migrants who worked in Thailand before, while the rest of the participants had higher language proficiencies, within the sample of 8,023 Myanmar migrants. The migrants in this research study also stated that their language proficiency has improved over time.

2.4 Learning from social circles

Even though there are migrants who formally took Thai language training classes, their language acquirement was greatly dependent on the types of job they had been doing as well as their daily exposure to the Thai language. The majority of study participants learned Thai by speaking Thai in the workspace without a specific effort to learn it. Some of them learned from their social circle, that is, their boss, co-workers, or friends and relatives. For example, migrants learn basic words and vocabulary relating to their jobs from Myanmar co-workers.

“I had conversations with him and gradually learned from him.” (Interviewee 7)

Thai employers are usually supportive in helping their employees gain a language ability. In a workspace without any Myanmar workers, a boss may help to teach his or her employee the Thai language. Sometimes, employers help to improve the workers’ Thai language by correcting and suggesting the usage of words, phrases, and sentences to the migrant workers.

“I taught Burmese to my boss and he taught me Shan (Thai) to me.” (Interviewee 8)*

“Now I live with my boss and she teaches me how to speak properly.” (Interviewee 3)

*(Myanmar migrant workers usually refer to standard Thai as Shan language, which is the Tai Yai language, native to the Shan state of Myanmar and similar to spoken Thai.)

2.5 Learning from entertainment

Migrants had reported in their interviews that they have learned their Thai language from entertainment channels. Myanmar workers who have access to television watch Thai movies and dramas, thus learning from the films. Social media plays a part in this too. Thai language lessons have been uploaded on Facebook social media, and some migrants have learned from this source.

“I watched dramas and movies. If there is something I don’t know, I would call my relatives and note those words down in my book.” (Interviewee 6)

“I watch movies and learn from mobile phone (social media) as well.” (Interviewee 3)

2.6 Practising with Thai speakers

Communicating with Thai-speaking people is a way to improve Thai language skills for Myanmar migrants too. Therefore, the nature of the job is related to the chances of speaking with many people as well. This is the reason behind some migrants preferring to work in service sectors in Bangkok where they can have more opportunities not only to improve language ability but also job skills.

“I gained my language skills when I started delivering ice. I got to speak with a lot of customers and they helped me to correct my mistakes” (Interviewee 5)

“I can speak with customers and improve my Thai. Every day is productive.” (Interviewee 3)

4. Discussions

4.1 Discussion on the analysis of the data

Based on the open-ended interviews with Myanmar migrants from various job sectors, it was found that Thai language proficiency affects the economic mobility of the Myanmar urban migrant workers in various ways. At the time of their migration, all interviewees had very limited or no Thai language ability, but their income can be seen to have improved over time, as well as their Thai language proficiency

Table 1 shows that the Myanmar migrants participating in this study are earning in Category 4 and Category 5 levels, which is more than 10,000 baht per month (as categorised in Appendix 2). Most of them have seen an improvement in their salary from the time of migration to the current time. However, some migrants might not see such a jump in salary, especially if the time they have spent in Thailand is relatively short. For instance, interviewee 3, who has been in Thailand for only three years, experienced a salary increase of only 2,000 baht. However, her language ability and working conditions had quickly improved in this short time.

Table 1. Income, job sector, job location, and language fluency relationship.

		Language fluency	Salary	Job Sector	Job Location
Interviewee 1	First Job	Level 1	Category 1	Manufacturing	Tak
	Current Job	Level 3	Category 4	Service (Waiter)	Bangkok
Interviewee 2	First Job	Level 0	Not mentioned	Service (Helper)	Chonburi
	Current Job	60% out of 100%	Category 4	Service (Waiter/Helper)	Bangkok
Interviewee 3	First Job	Level 1	Category 4	Manufacturing	Chonburi
	Current Job	50% out of 100%	Category 4+	Service (Baker/Cashier)	Bangkok
Interviewee 4	First Job	Level 1	Category 2	Construction	Chaing Mai
	Current Job	Level 4	Category 4	Manufacturing	Bangkok
Interviewee 5	First Job	Level 0	Category 2	Manufacturing	Prachinburi
	Current Job	Level 3	Category 5	Service (Waiter/ Helper/ Delivery)	Bangkok
Interviewee 6	First Job	Level 0	Category 3+	Domestic work	Bangkok
	Current Job	Level 2	Category 4	Domestic work	Bangkok
Interviewee 7	First Job	Level 0	Category 4	Service (Store helper)	Bangkok
	Current Job	Level 3	Category 3	Service (Sale staff)	Bangkok
Interviewee 8	First Job	Level 0	Category 2+	Service (Car wash)	Not specified
	Current Job	Level 2	Not mentioned	Construction	Bangkok

(+) behind the salary category indicates the accommodation provided by the employer

Initially, Myanmar migrants worked in more labour-intensive jobs. Those whose first jobs were in the service sector performed jobs that did not require communication with other people. Over time, they have moved to workspace and job sectors where they think it is more 'favourable'. In the case of choosing a job location, social connections play an important role, as the migrants secure jobs via their networks in Thailand. Gradually, they moved to Bangkok, as it offers better job conditions and it is easier to find jobs there.

With Thai language proficiency, various choices become available for them. Migrants with computer skills and Thai language proficiency who can read and write Thai can even shift to white-collar jobs. This is confirmed by the principal of the language academy who indicates that a number of Myanmar migrants with computer skills have been able to shift to white-collar jobs after achieving proficiency in the Thai language.

Since an MOU between Myanmar and Thailand has been signed, recruitment agencies hire bilingual Myanmar workers who can speak both Burmese and Thai.

To conclude, Myanmar migrants believe that Thai language proficiency enables them to access a wider range of job opportunities, as well as have more chances to get employed, better working conditions, and easy communication in their daily and work life. Even in the construction sector, which we presume is an unfavourable workspace compared to the jobs in service sectors, workers reported that they have more freedom in their job. However, it is important to note that the choice of a job by the individuals is highly subjective. No matter how fluent they are in Thai, migrants may choose their jobs according to their personal preferences, salary, freedom, familiarities, working conditions, etc.

4.2 Different aspects of Thai language proficiency and its relation to different job sectors

The assessment of Thai language proficiency in this study mainly focuses on the speaking and listening abilities of the participants. Questions were asked about how fluently they can speak Thai in their jobs from the time of migration to the day of the interview. However, there are other aspects of Thai language proficiency such as writing and reading skills that can affect their income, working conditions, or choice of job. Even though Thai reading and writing skills are not the primary focus of this research, the responses from the interviewees reveal that such skills can be important for job mobility of migrant workers in Bangkok.

For all job categories, listening and speaking skills are the basic requirement to be independent, that is, to not require a translator for communication or work. The inefficiency of waiting for a translator can be eliminated by directly communicating with supervisors or employers. Understanding Thai is crucial to workspace safety in manufacturing and construction jobs. Failure to understand Thai may result in serious injuries or even death.

Consequently, it is important to notice the different magnitude of the impact of Thai listening and speaking skills versus reading and writing skills on different jobs. Listening and speaking skills are the bottom-line communication skills for migrants. Such skills not only enable migrants to easily communicate with employers, colleagues, and customers but also play an essential part in looking for employment, as employers will likely hire migrants with a listening capability.

Thai listening and speaking skills have a different impact on different jobs. As mentioned above, for the jobs in the service sectors, migrants can have immediate advantages by speaking Thai. Being able to listen means being able to understand the job tasks asked by the employer. In other words, labour productivity is better with Thai fluency since various job tasks can be given or taught. For instance, the job of a migrant worker in a restaurant will not be limited to labour-intensive cleaning or washing dishes where language proficiency is not required.

For manufacturing jobs, even though language proficiency is not required generally as migrants have to do the same job task repeatedly, those who have language fluency work in higher positions or are production line leaders who will also serve as the translators between their superior and fellow migrants. Migrants who can listen or speak Thai well can take part in skill improvement training as well. Nevertheless, manufacturing jobs are greatly diverse from specific sector to sector. Therefore, the increased productivity of the Thai language proficiency of migrants can be varied too.

Reading and writing Thai are important to the jobs in the service sector, especially in urban areas. These skills are also essential for migrants in shifting to non-labour-intensive white-collar jobs or office jobs. According to the interview with the language academy, migrants with reading and writing proficiency can work in offices,

jobs requiring Burmese-Thai bilingual skills, and in hospitals for medical tourism for Myanmar customers. Hospitals select bilingual workers and give training on specific job skills.

Similar stories can be seen from the interviews by the IOM studies noted above, where a Thai employer expressed her opinion about how Thai language proficiency in migrant workers can improve efficiency at work as well as benefit Thai businesses in the long run. In addition, Thai businesses can benefit from the tax deduction for the expenses of sending migrants to language training according to the Department of Skill Development's scheme.

4.2.1 Service sector jobs and Thai writing skills

Service sector jobs are diverse too. For example, in Table 1, Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 8 started their journey in Thailand by working in the service sector. However, the nature of their jobs were labour-intensive and did not require Thai language proficiency. Interviewee 2 worked in a restaurant with a Shisha smoking bar, and Interviewee 8 worked in a car spa, washing cars. With the help of Myanmar co-workers interpreting for him, Interviewee 7 also did not have to communicate directly with customers or employers during his early days in Thailand.

Even in the same job, for example, being a waiter in a restaurant, migrants with reading and writing abilities can choose to work in a higher-paid restaurant such as a restaurant in a shopping mall, whereas those who lack such abilities may be limited to working in a lower-paid restaurant. Although the necessity of Thai reading and writing proficiency does not seem significant in jobs such as working in agriculture, as a maid, in construction, or even in manufacturing, it is a necessity in urban jobs, particularly for some service sectors and office jobs.

4.2.2 Thai writing skills and language training

As reported by the participants in the interviews, speaking and listening skills can be obtained by residing in Thailand for a period of time. Most of the respondents acquired their Thai language fluency by speaking Thai with employers, colleagues, and Thai-speaking people around them. The only reported respondent with writing and reading fluency, Interviewee 1, had proper training in the Thai language and attended schools and classes.

In order to improve the livelihood of the migrants in Bangkok, in other words, integrate them into the Thai formal labour market, proper training of migrants in the Thai language is crucial. As the Thai language is basic to all skill development, equipping migrant workers with the Thai language can improve labour productivity and efficiency. This is the case, especially in urban areas where service sector jobs are concentrated compared to the sub-urban areas where manufacturing jobs are usually located.

Interviewee 1 and the narrative from the language academy reveal that language training classes are beneficial to Myanmar migrants in their careers and workspace. Although Thai speaking skills can be acquired by practising speaking Thai in the workspace, reading and writing Thai requires specific training and effort to achieve. Such skills are essential for certain jobs as mentioned above, especially to shift to white-collar jobs. Therefore, easy and affordable language classes can improve economic and possible social mobility.

4.2.3 Constraints of the migrants in accessing language training

Migrants can spend hours of time commuting to a language class on their holiday. As mentioned by the language training academy, migrants travelled up to 2 hours to take a class. Since migrants spend much of their time commuting, classes open between 10 AM and 2 PM have full enrollments, as students have to commute from a long distance, sometimes requiring changing two or three buses. Thus, early morning classes and late evening classes usually have lower enrollments.

Similarly, the interviewed migrant workers described their tight schedules, which makes it difficult to take part in any language training. Therefore, opening classes at the district level or in regions where migrants can easily access classes within a shorter travel time may encourage more migrants to take part in these classes and improve their Thai language proficiency. So far, migrant workers acknowledge that improving Thai language proficiency can offer more convenience and job opportunities to them. The strategy in the following section is the result of the analysis of current provisions for migrant language training and the discussion with the representative of the language academy.

4.3 Urban strategy for improving the livelihood of Myanmar migrants in Bangkok

From the discussion with the language academy and the results from the various studies noted previously, it has been shown that Thai language training is effective in improving migrants' language fluency and serves as a medium for employment, integration, and governmental administration. Such language training requires a lot of resources, including financial resources and human resources. Using the discussion with the experienced manager of the language academy and extending these ideas to the existing infrastructure of government institutions, this section provides a strategy for the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration to address the issue.

The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration is the local authority that operates informal education in Bangkok under its Division of Adult Education, through the direct supervision of the Department of General Education. The BMA office is the administrative body for promoting non-formal and informal education in Bangkok, having 50 locations within six zones, according to the website of Bangkok Office of Non-formal and Informal Education. It also cooperates in skill development with the Office of Vocational Education Commission for training labour workers in general.

Nevertheless, the current official agenda of BMA does not include language training for migrants or skill upgrade programs offered by the city government. As in Sweden, BMA could be the main authority to train migrant workers through the non-formal education and school infrastructure under its jurisdiction. The community learning centres or Kor Sor Nor Tambon across Bangkok could be the new sites for the "Thai for migrants" program. Using the school infrastructures of BMA can eliminate the financial burden of current players in renting or maintaining a site for the classroom because doing so can maximize the usage of public infrastructures.

By operating the classes under a city-level authority, BMA can bring in volunteers to assist with language instruction, such as volunteers for teaching entry-level classes or interpreters for native instructors in basic-level classes. Since the city government both conducts skill development for labour in general and operates informal schools in Bangkok, it should extend its scope of skill development to migrant workers by training them in the Thai language as a major strategy in integrating the crucial workforce of Thailand into the Thai labour market. In such a way, migrants in Bangkok can participate in further training intended for Thais. Upgrading the labour skill of migrant workers is vital in transforming the Thai economy into Thailand 4.0.

In addition to using the existing infrastructure to equip the migrant workers with Thai language skills, BMA should consider conducting online classes considering the Covid-19 situation in Thailand and better accessibility for Myanmar migrant workers. Besides, the interviewees indicated that short video lessons uploaded on social media are useful in improving their Thai language proficiency. Through social media platforms, workers can enjoy flexibility by watching clips during their leisure time, unlike the traditional classes. IOM has been working on such video uploads to Youtube under their PROMISE program. BMA and other stakeholders can develop language training videos for strengthening the Thai ability of Myanmar migrants.

5. Conclusions

This exploratory qualitative research shows that Thai language proficiency is the basis of improved urban livelihood opportunities for interviewed Myanmar migrant workers. This paper focused on how the Thai language ability is contributing to the livelihood of Myanmar workers, especially to their income and job opportunities. It highlights the increment of income for Myanmar migrants, as well as their Thai language improvement over time during their stay in Thailand. The ability to speak the Thai language brings convenience to Myanmar migrants as they can communicate with employers, colleagues, and customers.

Moreover, speaking the Thai language allows them to access a wider range of jobs and increases chances of employability, as they can understand their employers. Thai reading and writing skills can be important for migrant workers, especially in the service industry in terms of lighter job tasks or better benefits. Myanmar workers acquire the Thai language primarily from the workspace by speaking with Thai-speaking co-workers. Exposure to the Thai language is important in acquiring fluency for migrant workers.

On the other hand, this paper also explores the potential role of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration in improving the livelihood of migrant workers by offering language training as part of the skill training development of the Thai labour force. The city government of Bangkok should consider using its existing institutions, infrastructure, and human resources to extend its policies to migrant workers. Even though the strategy is focused on Myanmar urban migrants in Bangkok, the boundaries can be extended to other migrants such as Cambodians and Laotians. The geographical boundary can be extended to other provinces as well.

6. Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.K.M., N.T. and S.A.; methodology, A.K.M. and S.A.; validation, A.K.M. and S.A.; formal analysis, A.K.M. and S.A.; investigation, A.K.M.; resource, A.K.M. and S.A.; data curation, A.K.M., N.T. and S.A.; writing – original draft, A.K.M. and N.T.; writing – reviewing and editing, A.K.M. and N.T.; visualization, A.K.M.; supervision, S.A.; project administration, A.K.M. and S.A.; funding acquisition, S.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Appendix 1: Semi-structured Interview Form for Myanmar Migrant Workers

1. Personal Information

- Age
- Birthplace (State or Region)
- Native language
- Educational status
- Marital status
- Total duration in Thailand
- Age at Arrival

2. Pre-migration

- How did you get the idea to migrate?
- Preparation before migration
- Did you secure a job in advance? How did you get a job?
- Other preparations such as financial, documents, etc.?
- Constraints in pre-migration?

3. Migration Process

- How did you get into Thailand? Which route did you use? E.g., Myawaddy-Mae Sot
- How much did it cost you to migrate? Who bears the costs?
- Difficulties faced during migration

4. Acquirement of Thai Language

- How was your Thai before migration? How is it now?
- How did you learn
- How does the Thai language help you in your employment/on your employment (e.g., salary, recruitment, choice of work)

5. Language Training (If applicable)

- About the language training (duration, cost, instructors, etc.)
- How do you feel about these courses? Can it help your job?

6. Post-migration

- Constraints in Thailand (from day 1 to current)
- Why did you choose to work in Bangkok instead of other provinces?
- Summary of jobs that you've done, the approximate salary that you earned, and your Thai language proficiency according to appendix 2

Appendix 2: Self-assessment of Thai Language Fluency and Salary Categories

Self-assessment of Thai Language Fluency

- 0. Not at all
- 1. Very limited (Knows very basic words such as eating, drinking)
- 2. Fair (Able to communicate with employer and co-workers to a certain extent)
- 3. Good (Able to perform daily job-related conversations such as taking orders, and selling products, might not be able to speak unfamiliar content)
- 4. Fluent (No difficulties in speaking Thai at length in daily life)

Salary

- (1). Less than 3,000 Baht
- (2). 3,000 Baht to 7,000 Baht
- (3). 7,000 Baht to 10,000 Baht
- (4). 10,000 Baht to 15,000 Baht
- (5). More than 15,000 Baht

Appendix 3: Socio-economic data of interviewees

Interviewee 1	
Gender	Male
Age	29 years
Highest education	High School
Current job location	Pathumwan, Bangkok
Type of job	Waiter
Total duration in Thailand	12 years

He used to work at a factory in Mae Sot during school, where he can easily pass the border and work. After moving to Bangkok, he was studying at an informal school while he was helping his mom with her work in Pratunam. His first job in Bangkok was in a factory. Although he worked in a factory, his work tasks were lighter compared to other Myanmar workers in the factory. Having the advantage of his Thai language skill, he primarily worked on some documentation and interpretation for his supervisors. Afterward, he worked at a food court restaurant where he worked for 3 years in various positions. His main task was to take orders since he can write Thai. Gradually, his Thai language got better, and his income shifted from category 2 to category 5 gradually working in this job. With the closure of the food court, he moved to a phone accessories shop where he served as a salesperson for a year. He was earning category 5 until the first Covid outbreak in Bangkok and he lost his job due to the pandemic. His current job salary is in category 4 but he accepted this job due to the limited job vacancies by the Covid hard time. .

Interviewee 2	
Gender	Male
Age	27 years
Highest education	Middle School
Current job location	Pathumwan, Bangkok
Type of job	Waiter/Helper
Total duration in Thailand	10 years

His first job in Thailand was at a bar and restaurant in Pattaya where he worked for 4 years. Since he does not speak Thai, he mainly prepared Shisha such as putting Hookah squeeze and coal, etc. Even though he cannot speak Thai, his co-workers who were mostly from Myanmar, helped him with the language barrier. He moved to Rayong for some construction work as well. However, there were constant verbal abuses by the employer. Thus, he decided to quit after a week.

He moved again to Pattaya and then to Bangkok to work at a retail shop in Platinum. By the time he was in Bangkok, he believed that he can speak Thai to a certain extent. He had to communicate in Thai for Thai customers and English to English customers (referring to English-speaking customers). He worked in many other jobs in various places too. He can speak relatively well now as he mentions he can understand “60% out 100%” in Thai.

Interviewee 3	
Gender	Female
Age	23 years
Highest education	Middle School
Current job location	Pathumwan, Bangkok
Type of job	Baker/Cashier
Total duration in Thailand	3 years

Her first job in Thailand was at a large pineapple factory in Chonburi. Her primary tasks were to measure the weight of the pineapples, remove the seeds, and pack. Despite her lack of Thai language fluency at the time of migration, most of the co-workers in the factory were from Myanmar. Since they communicate in Burmese, she was able to speak only very basic words in Thai. Later, she moved to a timber mill where she worked for a few months.

Afterwards, she moved to Bangkok and worked as a janitor. Since she found the job did not suit her, she has moved to her current job at a bakery in the Pathumwan district of Bangkok. She particularly loves this job as she can learn bakery which she believes, may be effective if she returns to Myanmar and runs a business. Moreover, she can communicate with customers which will help to improve her Thai language skill. As of now, she can speak well enough to operate the business in Thai.

She earned around 10,000 baht in the jobs in Chonburi. Her salary improved by 2,000 baht in her current job. However, the salary in her first job combines all the overtime and other benefits. As her job today is in the city centre, she believes she is more open-minded and her chances to improve her Thai are better

Interviewee 4	
Gender	Male
Age	29 years
Highest education	Middle School
Current job location	Nong Kham, Bangkok
Type of Job	Factory Worker
Total duration in Thailand	6 years

He firstly painted buildings working in the construction sector in Chiang Mai. He worked there for a few months and earned around 200 baht per day. Afterwards, he moved to Lat Krabang, Bangkok. Later, he moved to his current job at a plastic factory in Nong Kham with the help of his friend working in the factory. He initially earned around 350 baht per day. Currently, he earns around 400 baht per day.

Interviewee 5	
Gender	Male
Age	28 years
Highest education	Primary education
Current job location	Tha Phra, Bangkok
Type of job	Waiter, Kitchen helper, Delivery man
Total duration in Thailand	8-10 years

He lacked fluency in Thai when he first moved to Thailand. He had worked in a factory that produces rubber end products in Kabinburi, Prachinburi. He was earning just over 100 baht per day at that time. After being detained and deported, he moved again to work in a factory that produces toilets in Chonburi for less than 300 baht per day. Later, he moved to Phetchaburi to work in a phone manufacturing factory. He started to earn over 300 baht there and he picked up some Thai fluency by that time.

In his first job in Bangkok, he delivered ice for five months. He earned just around 6000 baht per month with accommodation provided by the employer. He worked various jobs in a car spa and restaurant. He has been working as a delivery person who delivers soda and beer to the restaurant around the Tha Phra area for 7 years now. In recent months, he is working as a waiter and also a kitchen helper at a local shophouse at the same time. Additionally, he washes dishes in another restaurant after the closing time of the first restaurant.

Interviewee 6	
Gender	Female
Age	24 years
Highest education	Primary education
Current job location	Lat Phrao, Bangkok
Type of job	Maid
Total duration in Thailand	8 years

She started as a maid in a house in Bangkok with her sister earning 7,500 baht with food and accommodation provided. She worked there for over a year until her sister resigned to go back to her hometown. Benefiting from having relatives in Thailand, she usually takes shelter at one of her relatives' places in between jobs.

She moved to a factory that processes watermelon seeds in the Om Noi district, Samut Sakhon. In this job, she earned 250 baht per day and got a day off every week. In the factory, accommodation was provided. Even though the income was low in the factory, she enjoyed more mobility and freedom compared to being a maid.

Then, she moved again to a house to work as child care as well as a maid with the suggestion of her relatives. It was an exhausting job and she could barely sleep 4 hours a night. After 6 months, she resigned and moved to her current job at a condominium as a cleaner. She currently earns around 400 baht a day but has to pay for her own rent.

Interviewee 7	
Gender	Male
Age	30 years
Highest education	Not disclosed
Current job location	Ratchathewi, Bangkok
Type of job	Sale staff
Total duration in Thailand	7 years

He started working in a phone accessories shop where phone cases and screen protectors are sold. As he cannot speak Thai, he worked together with a Myanmar colleague who had been working there for a decade. This colleague also taught him the Thai language. He earned around 12,000 baht per month at this job. Later, he resigned and returned to his hometown.

After his first job, he gained some fluency in the Thai language such as basic communication. He has come back to Bangkok to work as a vendor in the Pratunam area. He has been working in his current job for around 6 years now. As of the interview, he is the only person in the shop and he claimed he can speak Thai well without difficulties in selling things. He used to earn around 15,000 baht per month before the global pandemic.

Interviewee 8	
Gender	Male
Age	23 years
Highest education	High school
Current job location	Ratchathewi, Bangkok
Type of job	Construction
Total duration in Thailand	6 years

In his first job, he lived with his employer who owns a car spa. He earned around 5,000 baht per month by washing cars, with accommodation and food provided. He did not speak Thai at all and he was the only employee from Myanmar at this job. After working for around a year, he went back to Myanmar.

His second job was on a chicken farm where he worked for 6 months. He returned to his hometown due to his mother's health condition. Later, he migrated again legally and is working in his current construction work. As of now, he has been working in this construction job for around 4 years. Currently, he can speak Thai to a certain extent and has to speak with his Thai supervisors on a daily basis. Even though construction work is exhausting and labour-intensive, he enjoys more freedom as well as income in his construction job. There were limitations on what you can do, wear, etc. in a manufacturing job. As there is a conflict between shareholders of the construction site, his income is significantly reduced. Thus, he is eyeing moving to another job.

