

# A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO MIDDLE TIBETAN. DEVELOPING READING COMPREHENSION & TRANSLATION SKILLS FOR ‘CLASSICAL’ TEXTS BY SPEAKING TIBETAN\*

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## Abstract

*Tibetan translation today is deeply tied to the academic field of Tibetan Studies and Tibetology. This entails a particular historical legacy, as well as a particular set of long-standing institutional and pedagogical practices – in both methods and materials – for teaching Tibetan. After exploring the background of these current practices, I put forward an alternative to learning and translating Middle Tibetan (or ‘Classical Tibetan’). This comprehensive, collaborative, and community-centred approach is inspired by work in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and translation studies; this article seeks to elaborate what we stand to gain from those fields, and how we can apply it to the Tibetan language-learning context. Within, I argue that adopting such an approach is not only justified; it also provides tangible benefits to both scholars and Tibetan speech communities, which still hold invaluable indigenous, living-tradition perspectives on textual meaning. In other words, rather than seeing the text-as-object from which we extract a translation-as-product, the aim within is to uncover a translation-as-social-practice that is constructive, inclusive, and reciprocal.*

**Keywords:** *Classical Tibetan, Colloquial Tibetan, Middle Tibetan, Modern Tibetan, translation, reading, speaking, integrated approach, applied linguistics, second language education, Tibetan Studies, SLA, second language acquisition*

## 1. Introduction

In the field of ‘Tibetan Studies’ (or sometimes ‘Tibetology’), there are texts and institutional practices aimed at ‘learning’, ‘reading’, and ‘translating’ a language called ‘Classical Tibetan’ as a second or foreign language. The methods and materials found in these high-prestige, official settings dominate the way

‘Classical Tibetan’ is taught, studied, and learned in both formal and informal spaces. This paper begins in Section 2 by asking *what* ‘Classical Tibetan’ is in the first place (2.1), and *where* it comes from and *who* uses it (2.2), before finally asking what those existing teaching practices are, and where *they* come from (2.3). After reviewing what the field practices, I then ask *why*? Why *these* practices, methods, and approaches? With this big ‘why’ question in mind, Section 3 proposes an alternative approach to learning ‘Classical Tibetan’, drawing on research from applied linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA), and translation studies. It is organised by the main benefits of this kind of approach, as I see them, in that this alternative is: (3.1) *comprehensive* in the language skills it seeks to develop, and their scope; (3.2) *collaborative* and cross-cultural; and (3.3) *community centred*, and bottom-up (rather than top-down). I conclude with some thoughts on how these ideas may shape our own scholarship and practices, and future directions Tibetan language learning may take.

## 2. Tibetan Studies: A brief history

### 2.1 What is ‘classical’ Tibetan?

#### 2.1.1 A literary register of Middle Tibetan

The classic[al] language of Tibet differs as much from the modern colloquial as does the English of Chaucer from the English spoken to-day; but whilst English literature has kept pace with the changes of speech that time induce, Tibetan literature has stood still for many centuries. (Henderson 1903:i)

Written Tibetan is not an ancient language. The earliest Tibetan writings date to its inception in the 7th century, at the behest of Emperor Srong-btsan sgam-po, for the administrative and religious<sup>1</sup> purposes of the Tibetan Empire (Hill 2010). In the following centuries, the government convened special councils for the purposes of language maintenance (Hill 2015).<sup>2</sup> The Middle Tibetan language

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the *dKar chag 'phang thang ma*, the Tibetan imperial catalog listing translations of Sanskrit Buddhist texts into Tibetan (compiled in Central Tibet).

<sup>2</sup> The reforms primarily focused on orthography (updating spellings to reflect current pronunciations, e.g., removing consonant clusters that had undergone cluster reduction, example: *gnyis-bcu* to *nyi-shu* ‘twenty’) and vocabulary (e.g., removing Sanskrit loanwords in favor of nativised terms, or replacing outdated terms with new ones, example: *te-por* to *rab-tu* ‘very’). They had the explicit goal of making text more comprehensible for the contemporary reader. For more details, refer to the second volume of the *Mahāvīyutpatti* (Lo-ke-sh 1981); sKa-ba dpal-brtsegs’s terminology handbook, the *Chos-kyi rnam-*

that they codified, and the literary production that came after – especially that of the 12th to 19th centuries – is what’s often referred to as ‘Classical’ Tibetan (Tournadre 2003:27).<sup>3</sup> Modern Literary Tibetan, too, conserves the standards of that era, to the point that “a non-specialist can read texts going back as far as the 12th century and even earlier” (Tournadre 2003:27).

In other words, Modern Tibetan texts are written in a register that is heavily influenced by the ‘classical’ language. Standardised spellings are used; traditional vocabulary is preferred; and ‘classical’ grammar rules are followed. To this day, for example, school children still memorise the *legs-bshad ljon-dbang*, or “Wish-fulfilling Tree”, an early 19th-century poem that acts as a mnemonic for the traditional *sum-cu-pa*, or “Thirty Verses”, a grammar treatise held to have been written in the 7th century.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Tibetan is prototypically diglossic (Ferguson 1991), with distinct registers for common speech (‘low’, vernacular) and literature (‘high’, prestige). But the gap between speech and writing is not insurmountable. Since speakers of Modern Tibetan languages regularly become fluent readers and writers in this Middle-like Literary Tibetan register, it stands to reason that second-language learners can, too.

After all, with practice, educated speakers of Modern English are also able to access Middle English texts. Coming back to the opening quote for this section, in the preface to his “Tibetan Manual”, Henderson (1903) writes that the “classic language of Tibet differs as much from the modern colloquial as does the English of Chaucer from the English spoken to-day; but whilst English literature has kept pace with the changes of speech that time induce, Tibetan literature has stood still for many centuries”. It’s a perfectly apt corollary, as the two – Middle English and Middle Tibetan – overlap quite neatly in time. The onset of each Middle Literature is the 11th century CE. Chaucer (1343–1400) would have been contemporaries with rJe Tsong-kha-ba (1357–1419), whose works helped define the influential dGe-lugs-pa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, while the Fifth Dalai Lama – himself a prolific writer – was born in 1617, the year following Shakespeare’s death:

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*grangs-kyi brjed byang*; the *dKar-chag 'phang-thang-ma*; and 'Jam-mgon kong-sprul's *Shes-bya kun-khyab* (p. 220).

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I prefer the term “Middle Tibetan” to “Classical Tibetan”, and the following section makes clear why.

<sup>4</sup> For example, it appears in the Tibetan Department of Education’s middle school curriculum (cf. DOE 2017).

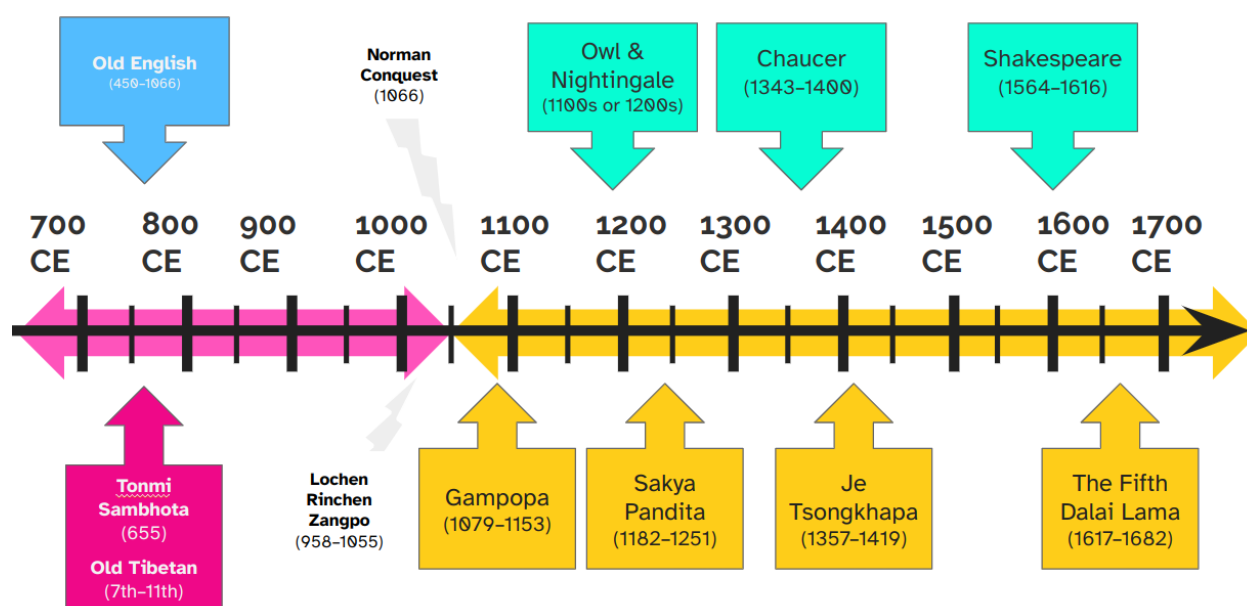
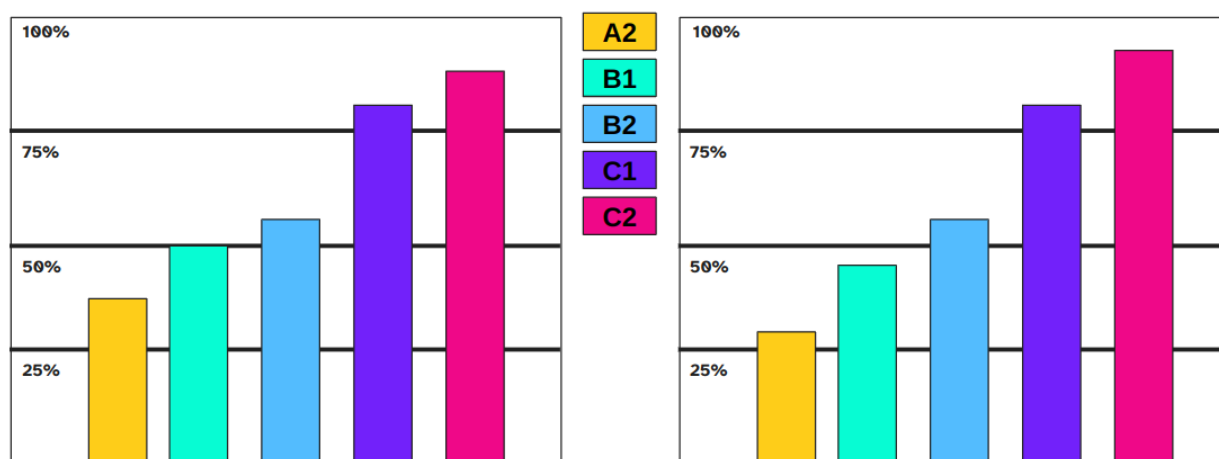


Figure 1: A timeline showing the overlap of ‘classic’ literature from Middle English (top, blue) and Middle Tibetan (bottom, yellow). The 11th century marks the onset of each Middle Literature’s era, and the active literary production that followed into the Early-Modern period.

So while the comparison is often made that ‘Classical Tibetan’ is to ‘Modern Tibetan’ as ‘Classical Sanskrit’ is to ‘Modern Hindi’, Middle English is actually a *much* better corollary for this type of comparison. That’s because ‘Classical Tibetan’ is, again, *not* an ‘ancient’ language. Instead, ‘Classical Tibetan’ is to ‘Modern Tibetan’ as ‘Middle English’ is to ‘Modern English’. And a closer look at the specific vocabularies of these registers clearly supports this. For example, a student with a B2 level in Modern Tibetan speech will have a bit more than 55% coverage of the vocabulary found in Middle Tibetan texts (*blue, right plot below*). This is roughly comparable to the vocab coverage a B2 level English speaker has for the King James Bible, at around 60% (*blue, left plot below*).<sup>5</sup> By C1 level, a full 80% of vocabulary overlaps. This means that quite a lot of work a student does in modern, spoken Tibetan (or English) is directly applicable to reading comprehension of the earlier ‘classical’ literature:

<sup>5</sup> Defining B2 as the top 3,000 headwords found in everyday speech.



Figures 2, 3: Plotting Modern English coverage of Early Modern English texts (left) against Modern Tibetan coverage of Middle Tibetan texts (right). The plots show the percentage of the Literary variety's vocabulary that should be familiar given an A2-through-C2-level Modern vocabulary.<sup>6</sup>

There is no question that speaking Modern English, for example, helps me read a Modern English text written today. It also helps me read a text written yesterday; last year; last decade; or even last century. Yet there are also clearly diminishing returns: At some point in time, the text becomes difficult; then more difficult; then even more difficult. The question 'classical' language teachers and learners must wrestle with is, at what point in history is a text so old and incomprehensible to speakers of the Modern variety that learning it is not worth the effort? I will not seek to answer that question for every classical language in this paper. However, given the advantages of speech that I will outline below, I would personally err on the side of speaking rather than not. The potential returns are large enough, it seems, that some are motivated even to *revive* speech for some of the other classical and ancient languages. Lloyd (2021), for example, provides an invaluable resource for teachers and learners of languages like Latin and Ancient Greek who are interested in active, immersive, and communicative approaches.

For Tibetan in particular, however, I hope to show that we have not yet crossed that arbitrary line in history where Modern Tibetan is not useful for

<sup>6</sup> These calculations were performed using Esukhia's Nanhai corpus (Modern Tibetan) against the Kangyur (Middle Tibetan); and the Brown corpus (Modern English) against the King James Bible (Early Modern English). The Nanhai Corpus was transcribed and compiled by Esukhia in 2018, and the natural speech sections record diaspora speakers in India. While a corpus of later and more native-like writing would be a better representation of Middle Tibetan, the Kangyur was chosen as a corollary to the KJB because of its similarity in domain (as translated religious literature), and ease of access (it's a large, digitised corpus that is pre-compiled).

reading Middle Tibetan. As I've shown above, Middle Tibetan (a.k.a. 'Classical' Tibetan) is a thousand years or more *younger* than many other so-called 'classical' languages (that is, Middle Tibetan is *much* closer to us in time than the classical era of Sanskrit). So while both Tibetan and Sanskrit have 'Buddhist texts', their 'classical' time frames are significantly different (starting from 6th century BCE for Sanskrit versus the 11th or 12th century CE for Tibetan). While the literary register must be *learned*, even by native speakers, quite a lot of Modern Tibetan knowledge is transferable to that process. There is a high overlap in linguistic features of the varieties, such as spelling, vocabulary, and grammar. And rather than being a 'dead language', Tibetan texts exist within the context of a living tradition.

### 2.1.2 *The Living Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism*

From the earliest Tibetan writings until today, one of the primary institutions for engaging with Middle Tibetan texts has been the monastery. Some six thousand monasteries were built in Tibet between the 11th and 20th centuries (Jansen 2015:5); some of them are still active. Outside the PRC, in the North Indian state of Himachal Pradesh alone, there are more than 40 active Tibetan monasteries (Handa 1987), while South India is home to some of the largest, housing thousands of monastics, including branches of the 'great three' monasteries of Sera, Drepung, and Ganden. The knowledge contained in the 'classical' texts – especially those in the core curricula – are actively pursued in these living-tradition contexts: they are read, recited, and studied. Lectures, oral teachings, and modern commentaries are still given. It would be difficult to argue that Tibetan speakers themselves do not have anything of value to say about their own textual heritage, especially in places where lifetimes are spent studying the material.



Figure 4: Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims attend 'classical' teachings given by H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama in Ladakh, India, July 2014 (photo by author).

It would clearly be better for many of the learners who study Tibetan to speak a Tibetan language. It allows one to engage meaningfully with members of these kinds of Tibetan speech communities in a way that prioritises listening to Tibetan voices. This can be true even for those who are focused on ‘classical’ texts. Again, Middle Tibetan is not a ‘dead language’, but a living tradition that “intertwines oral and literary orientations” (Klein 1994:282). Within this living tradition, a clear, graduated path to literacy already exists – from speech skills, to literary-like oral teachings,<sup>7</sup> to reading comprehension. While this was actually the goal of some of the early textbook materials in the West (cf., for example, Sopa 1972), today, “speaking Tibetan” is not generally a requirement in university programmes for Tibetan Studies – particularly those focused on Buddhism – a structural component of the university programme that prioritises texts over voices.<sup>8</sup> So how did it come to be that studying Middle Tibetan would look so much more like the ‘classical’ languages than the ‘modern’ ones? The answer, I think, lies mainly in the prestige of Buddhist texts, and their Sanskrit-inherited pedagogy.

## 2.2 Tibetan Studies in the West

### 2.2.1 Foundational pedagogy & materials

The earliest “Tibetologists”, whose works were foundational to the field, were first the missionaries on the ground in Tibet, and later the scholars who had the support of the British Empire in the colonised Western Himalaya. The earliest of these scholars included Francesco della Penna (1680–1745) and Ippolito Desideri (1684–1733), while Agostino Antonio Giorgi’s (1711–1797) *Alphabetum Tibetanum* is perhaps one of the earliest influential works on Tibetan (cf. Jackson 2001). Later, the grammars and dictionaries of A. Csoma de Körös (1834), H. A. Jäschke (1881; 1883), and Chandra Das (1902) would also prove to be highly influential. The majority of these scholars spoke a Tibetan variety themselves, having lived and studied in Tibetan speech communities for many years. Their work was primarily descriptive rather than pedagogical. Yet the descriptive

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Tournadre (2003), where he notes that while literary Tibetan is not generally used for conversation, “some lamas or lay intellectuals use a form of expression which is virtually Literary Tibetan... there is therefore a real diglossia in their speech” (p. 27).

<sup>8</sup> This points to a larger discussion that is needed regarding the field’s legacy, practices, goals, and impact (cf. Avalos 2020, for a start).

divisions found in those early works – of ‘classical’ and ‘colloquial’<sup>9</sup> Tibetan – have become divisions that have defined language studies in the field ever since. And while many of the ‘classical’ grammars they produced would also become fixtures of Tibetology, those on ‘colloquial’ (like Sandberg, 1894; Amundsen, 1903; and Bell, 1919) do not seem to have been widely used.

The earliest of these university programmes had clear ties to Buddhist Studies, and Sanskrit in particular. In 1950, for example, David Snellgrove was invited to teach what was perhaps the earliest official course for Tibetan in the West at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London; and in 1961, Richard Robinson convinced the University of Wisconsin to start a dedicated doctoral programme in Buddhist Studies that included Tibetan (with both Snellgrove and Robinson having had a background in Sanskrit; cf. Agsar 2019). As the field branched out from there,<sup>10</sup> while *some* programmes incorporated native-speaking scholars and/or coursework in spoken Tibetan,<sup>11</sup> the clear focus of the field was textual, and specifically Buddhist, given that many works are retained in Tibetan that were lost in Sanskrit. Pedagogically, grammar translation has been dominant since the earliest days, with some of the more widely studied works on ‘classical’ Middle Tibetan grammar including: Lalou (1950) in French; Hahn (1984) in German; and Jäschke (1883) in English (Rachael Griffiths and Renee Ford, personal communication).

### 2.2.2 Pedagogy & materials today

Contemporary texts for the teaching of foreign languages at the college level often reflect Grammar-Translation principles. These texts are frequently the product of people trained in literature rather than in language teaching or applied linguistics. Consequently, though it may be true to say that the Grammar-Translation Method is still widely practiced, it has no advocates. It is a method for which there is no theory. There is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology, or educational theory. (Richards 2001:7)

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<sup>9</sup> Look no further than the title of Hannah’s 1912 work: *A Grammar of the Tibetan Language, Literary and Colloquial*. Many other works of the era explicitly cover one or the other of either the standard literary ‘classical’ or the standard vernacular ‘colloquial’.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Jeffrey Hopkins, a student of Richard Robinson, arrived at the University of Virginia in 1973, and started the UVA Tibetan programme soon thereafter (cf. UVA Tibet Center).

<sup>11</sup> In the 1970s, the University of Wisconsin, for example, had Geshe Lhundup Sopa; Geshe Lobsang Dargyay at Vienna; and Geshe Gendün Lodrö at Hamburg (Rachael Griffiths and Renee Ford, personal communication). However, the vast majority of scholars of that era who learned to speak did so outside the official curriculum of the university.



The textbooks and coursework of today very much build on these foundational works. They are either ‘classical’ or ‘colloquial’, with ‘classical’ being the prestige variety, and ‘colloquial’ being optional (a “plus but not a must”, as I’ve heard it put). Modern textbooks for ‘Classical’ Tibetan include: Bialek (2022); Hackett (2019); and Hodge (2021), among others. These are more detailed than the early works of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and are clearly more ‘pedagogical’ – with more “lessons” and “exercises” supplementing the descriptive text. Broadly speaking, however, they *are* descriptive in nature, and ‘grammar translation’ in pedagogy (for more on grammar translation as a pedagogy, cf. Richards 2001; Coady 1997; and Harmer 2007). The referential frame is grounded in English; vocabulary is memorised; the sentence is the basic unit of teaching and practice; and grammar is taught deductively through explicit presentation and study.<sup>12</sup> ‘Reading’ or ‘translating’ by decoding word-by-word, grammar-particle- by-grammar-particle – is the focus, with little to no speaking, listening, or writing.

While textbooks for Modern Tibetan often add ‘listening’ (in the form of audio files) and encourage ‘speaking’ (in the form of dialogues or exercises), ‘writing’ appears to be exceedingly rare. I would venture that this is perhaps because ‘writing’ would require bridging registers. These – like Tournadre’s “Manual of Standard Tibetan” (2003) – also appear to be heavily influenced by grammar-translation methodology. They are heavily descriptive, containing translated vocabulary to memorise (or look up in the glossary), and sentence-level translation exercises. Others include Samuals (2015); Oertle (2019); Chonjore (2003); and the audio-lingual inspired Napper (2016), among others. The closest thing to an attempt at bridging registers – like Youne’s “integrated approach” does for the similarly diglossic Arabic (2014) – may be Geshe Sopa’s 1972 intermediate textbook for Tibetan. The vast majority of classes and textbooks, however, are either one or the other – ‘reading’ classical or ‘speaking’ modern – and not both.

Since the default mode of study and instruction is ‘translation’, supplementing these textbook grammars (and their internal glossaries) are a host

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<sup>12</sup> Rockwell (1991), for example, admits in the preface to his primer that “the fundamental approach of [his] text is descriptive” and based on sentences removed from a larger context. Beyer (1992) similarly asserts on the first page of his introduction that his work is descriptive in nature, and explicitly states it is not his intention to address language production.

of translation dictionaries.<sup>13</sup> Das (1902) is still in use, while Jäschke's 1881 dictionary has been republished many times, perhaps most recently in 2003. For Modern Tibetan, Goldstein's 1984 dictionary has also been republished (Goldstein 2001). Perhaps more commonly used today are the online and app-based resources available, like Rangjung Yeshe's "Dharma Dictionary",<sup>14</sup> THL's "Translation Tool",<sup>15</sup> Duff's "Illuminator",<sup>16</sup> and Christian Steinhart's "Tibetan-English Dictionary",<sup>17</sup> where results from lookups can span multiple words, dictionaries, and/or include other resources. These act as important references for students in grammar-translation-led coursework where the professor chooses a text that isn't specific to an existing textbook, or during other 'translation' tasks.

### 3. The Alternative

The alternative I will put forth in the following pages is the ideal vision of the pedagogy and materials development philosophy followed by Esukhias<sup>18</sup> a non-profit organisation and network of teachers and researchers for Tibetan language education. That education philosophy is primarily an attempt to synthesise advances from a range of modern research areas like second language education, applied linguistics, and translation studies, and apply them to Tibetan. These resources were not available to early Tibetology, but they are available to us today – we believe that we should learn from them, and apply their lessons to our own field. Philological and text-centred programmes may not find these proposals feasible or applicable to their goals. To be clear, what is presented here is not a replacement for that work (which is important), but an alternative or a supplement – especially for those learners and programmes that are primarily interested in reading and translating Tibetan. Specifically, the approach we propose is:

**Comprehensive:** The method aims to be comprehensive in skills, especially foundational language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing;

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<sup>13</sup> The examples listed show my English-speaking bias, and are notably *not at all* comprehensive. There are also resources in other European languages, such as the "Wörterbuch der tibetischen Schriftsprache" for German (<http://wts-digital.badw.de/suche>), and other Asian languages, such as Chinese and Japanese, among others.

<sup>14</sup> <https://rywiki.tsadra.org/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.thlib.org/reference/dictionaries/tibetan-dictionary/translate.php>

<sup>16</sup> <https://pktc.org/tibetan-dictionaries/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://dictionary.christian-steinert.de/#home>

<sup>18</sup> <https://esukhia.net/>

**Collaborative:** Because learners have a comprehensive set of language skills, it allows for collaborative relationships with native Tibetan speakers; and

**Community-centred:** Collaborative relationships foster cross-cultural understanding and sensitivity to community goals, increasing the reach and impact of scholarship.

### 3.1 Comprehensive

#### 3.1.1 *Language skills*

Speech is as old as our species and is found in all human civilisations; reading and writing are newer and less widespread. These facts lead us to expect that readers would use the visual representations that are provided by print to recover the phonological and linguistic structure of the message. Supporting this view, readers often access phonology even when they are reading silently. (Treiman 2003:9)

The first and perhaps most important form of ‘comprehensiveness’ is that, for language study, this approach promotes skills in all four foundational language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. That’s because we recognise that these skills are interdependent. The simplest way to put it is that letters represent sounds, and writing represents speech. I am, in a sense, *speaking* to you, the reader; and you are *listening* to what I have to say. If your mental processes are anything like mine, you probably even ‘hear’ a voice in your head as you read these words. That’s because our mental lexicon is stored phonologically, even if it’s accessed orthographically, and we rely on re-producing speech patterns to read (Richards 2001; Treiman 2003). Speech patterns – or prosody – are thus key to comprehension processes, like resolving ambiguity, and there is a lot of research linking speech skills to reading skills.

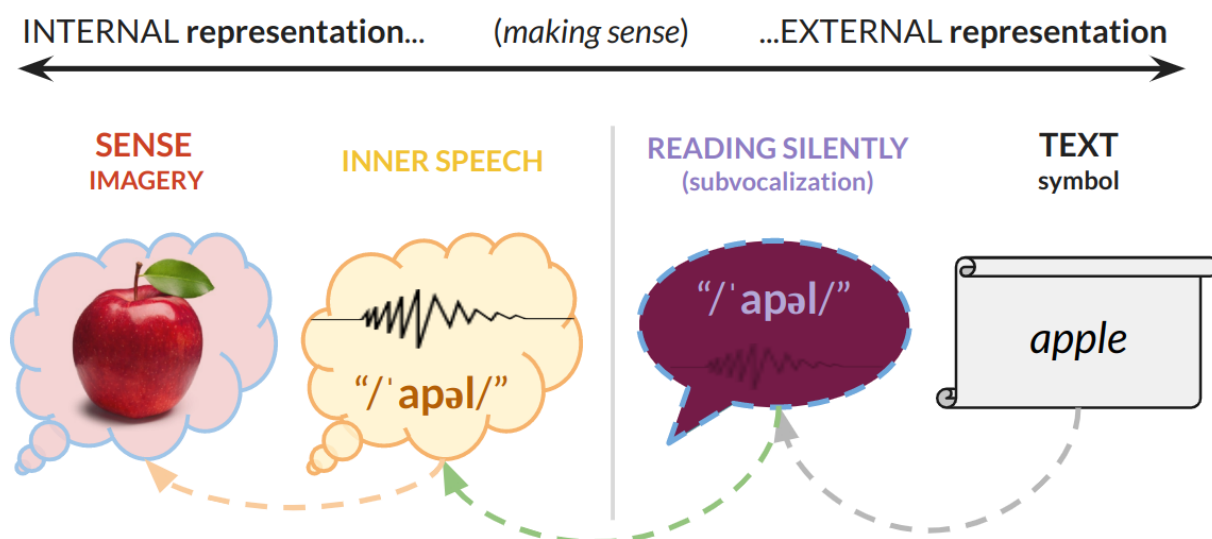


Figure 5: Text is decoded phonologically, even during silent reading. The sound of a word is linked to a mental lexicon of sense imagery. These sense-imagery associations – of feelings, experiences, and other words – are what make up ‘meaning’. Thus the word “apple” brings to mind experiences of “apples”. And a “crisp juicy apple” invokes a different experience than a “mushy wormy apple”.

The consensus of psycholinguistic research on the matter has also concluded that the processes of production and comprehension are pervasive, cooperative, and carried out using the same representations (Treiman 2003; Macdonald 2013; Pickering 2013). That is, ‘producing’ language on the one hand, and ‘comprehending’ it on the other, are not distinct, separate mental processes. They are interdependent, even *simultaneous* processes – while listening, for example, we are constantly producing an internal speech model in order to understand what a speaker is saying, and predict what they’ll say next (Pickering 2013). Learning to listen or read, then, supports our ability to speak or write; less obviously, however, speaking or writing *also* supports our ability to listen and read. If you get better at speaking Tibetan, in other words, you will also improve your reading. This is a key insight for learners aiming for reading comprehension of their target language.

### 3.1.2 Graduated path to Middle Literary Tibetan

As discussed above, a final goal of ‘old’ literature, or of ‘high’ literature does not necessarily imply the starting point needs to be old, high literature. Athletes train before competing; runners stretch before a race; and mountain climbers acclimate to higher altitudes before their final ascent. The preliminary work of learning to speak Modern Tibetan may not be the goal, but that doesn’t mean it

can't be a really good first step on the path. Add to that that language learning is a marathon, not a sprint, and we can understand that a first step is one of many thousands of steps required to reach that final goal. For example, it takes thousands of hours of study to attain even the most modest level of proficiency in any language; for a language like Tibetan, even a five year PhD programme cannot provide all the learning hours needed to reach fluency:

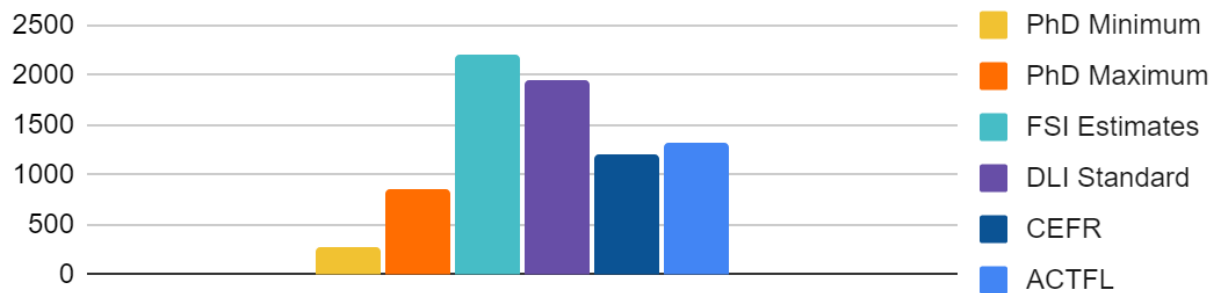
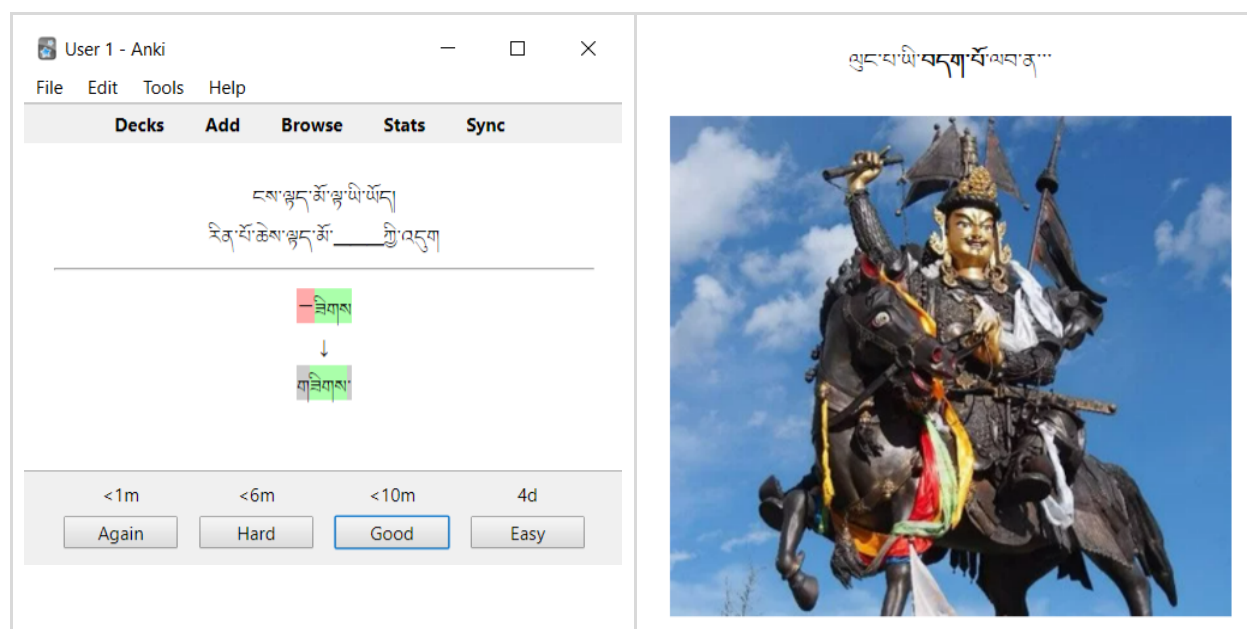


Figure 6: A chart comparing the minimum and maximum classroom hours of Tibetan language instruction possible for a Religious Studies PhD at UVA (as an example, in yellow and orange), alongside the class hours required for basic proficiency (B2 level), as suggested by a few international standards. This chart includes numbers from the US Department of State's Federal Service Institute (FSI, teal); the US Army's Defense Language Institute (DLI, purple); the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, dark blue); and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, royal blue).

A commonly repeated refrain for 'classical'-only study is that Modern Tibetan is a "waste of time" for someone who only wants to read Middle Literary texts. But if 1,000 classroom hours isn't enough for a Modern Language learner to reach fluency in reading Modern Literature, is it reasonable to expect it to be enough for fluency in Middle 'Classical' Literature? Given that language skills are interdependent, and that there is a very high overlap between Modern and Middle vocabulary and grammar (and a nearly 100% overlap in spelling), it seems to me that the best way to maximise each classroom hour is to *start* with speech as the foundation, recognising that a learner's language skills will require supplemental effort *no matter what* (see again plot above).

In a flipped-classroom inspired model, for example (for more on flipped classrooms, cf. Sams 2012; Scheg 2015), that supplemental effort might take the form of individual vocab study or level-appropriate reading. For that, we can use tools and techniques of corpus linguistics (cf. Schmidt 2016 and 2020 for more on applying corpus linguistics to Tibetan language learning). In the example flashcards below, we have used frequency data to help us identify level-

appropriate Literary vocab specific to the ‘classical’ text the learners were reading. Rather than providing a ‘translation’, we have written a level-appropriate definition in Tibetan – a definition that *only* uses words the learner already knows (*below, left*). Supplemental audio, pictures, or video can also provide additional context or meaning, standing in for mental imagery (*below, right*):



Figures 7, 8: Example flashcards show how we can move from Modern Tibetan to Middle Tibetan in a stepwise fashion, by introducing frequent literary vocab in fully-understandable contexts. Left: the literary *gzigs*, “to watch”; Right: a clue for “king” (*rgyal-po*).

For extensive level-appropriate reading, children’s stories can be adapted in multiple registers to give readers experience reading across registers. Below, rather than translation into English, the clickable text provides a ‘translation’ into Modern Tibetan. This not only bridges the gap between Modern and Middle Tibetan, but ensures the materials are accessible to any learner, no matter their mother tongue or second language knowledge. After all, Tibetan language learners aren’t exclusively English speakers; in fact, non-English speakers might even be the majority. There is worldwide interest in Tibetan learning materials, and a learner’s first language might be anything from Korean to Chinese to Vietnamese to Portuguese to Spanish to French to Swahili to literally any number of languages, standard and non-standardised, majority and minoritised. Another benefit of the comprehensive path is that it is *inclusive*:



Figures 9, 10: A sample children's story, written in a Middle Tibetan style. The interactive text (highlighted in green) provides a popup 'translation' into Modern Tibetan.<sup>19</sup>

Middle Tibetan vocabulary can be introduced from the earliest levels in these kinds of ways. By learning in this inclusive and comprehensive context from the start, learners are able to build up their sense of meaning in sociocultural contexts, exposed to the prosody of native speech, with a mental lexicon linked to mental imagery, with speaking, listening, reading, and writing all supporting one another. The method can be further supported by work done in other fields: There is no need to reinvent the wheel for standards in measuring vocabulary, proficiency, curriculum goals, or classroom hours needed. We may adapt the CEFR, for example, with an additional column (*below*, "Vocab+") recognising the bridgework we need to do between registers of Middle and Modern:

Raw #	ILR	CEFR	Vocab	Vocab+	Vocab	Hours	Hours+	Total HRS	Year
5	2+	B2	4,000	2,000	6,000	2,200	1,100	3,300	Year 5
			3,500	1,750	5,250	1,980	990	2,970	
4	2+	B1+	3,000	1,500	4,500	1,760	880	2,640	Year 4
			2,500	1,250	3,750	1,540	770	2,310	
3	2	B1	2,000	1,000	3,000	1,320	660	1,980	Year 3

<sup>19</sup> Cf. <https://esukhia.online/stories/L2-108172v2/p00> and <https://esukhia.online/stories/L2-108172/p00>

			1,600	800	2,400	1,100	550	1,650	
2	1+	A2+	1,300	650	1,950	880	440	1,320	Year 2
		A2	1,000	500	1,500	660	330	990	
1	1	A1+	800	400	1200	440	220	660	Year 1
	0+	A1	500	0	500	180	110	290	
	0	A0	200	0	200	40	0	40	

Figure 11: A chart showing the level progress, in terms of vocabulary acquisition, a student should be making through a sample 5-year study programme. Cf. Milton (2009) for vocab measures by level, and FSI (2020) for class hour estimates for a modern, Category IV language. As these estimates exist for modern languages, as we'll see below, we'll require extra hours to account for reaching older texts, which require further language skills.

## 3.2 Collaborative

### 3.2.1 Collaborative learning

To start with, language learning is, by its very nature, collaborative. Language is a social tool, and its primary function is communicative. To underline this point, recent research suggests that language is a function of the social brain, and that social interaction is essential to learning one (Kuhl 2007). The experiences, imagery, and messages that language conveys depend, inextricably, on a shared mode of discourse, on a lived experience of language that is socioculturally embedded (Bruner 1990; Lantolf 2000). Learning a spoken language in a living, sociocultural context provides this kind of background knowledge, along with the interpretive skills that are key to comprehension (cf. Grabe 1991). Further, the richer this backdrop is, the more resources can be shifted to other processes; thus, the richer the understanding of textual meaning can be.

Not only is language necessarily collaborative at the level of an individual person using it within a sociocultural context, it is also necessarily collaborative at the level of the individual *word* acting within a *textual* context. The comprehensive understanding of a text relies on many interpretive processes, like using prosody to parse or disambiguate; recognising figurative or idiomatic



language; or interpreting subtextual messages, associations, and connotations (Jones 2011). Meaning within a text may also rely on the broader cultural, sociopolitical, or historical contexts of which it is a part; the tenor, mode, or style in which it is written; and its textual components or discourse-level structure. These considerations are perhaps especially important for Tibetan, where “the classical language is characterised by its conciseness and by the corresponding importance of context and cultural background” (Tournadre 2003:395).

This backdrop of context and culture is best obtained through immersive language acquisition in living speech communities. And it is especially important for learners coming from cultures that are psychologically ‘distant’ from the texts they are hoping to understand. Simply put, the larger the culture gap is, the more important the comprehensive approach becomes. The cultural distance between Modern and Middle Tibetan is inarguably much smaller than the cultural distance between, for example, any Modern European language and either of those varieties (for more on cultural distance, cf. Hofstede 1980; Henrich 2020). Speaking Tibetan is a tool that helps bridge this gap by providing the learner with direct experiences of Tibetan culture and worldviews – but also opportunities for learning with, and from, Tibetan speakers who read and understand the same texts that they are hoping to access.

### 3.2.2 *Collaborative reading & translation*

Literary translators must be able to grasp not only the basic informational meaning of texts, but also fine shades of meaning as expressed by subtle choices of words and expressions, as well as by their rhythm, music, and images – and be highly aware of cultural facts, norms, trends and atmospheres. (Gile 2009:8–9)

For Tibetan especially, there is no reason readers and translators shouldn’t read collaboratively, alongside native-speaking experts. The speech skills provided by the comprehensive approach do not only help one to understand text directly by providing things like prosody, an active mental lexicon, a sociocultural background, and reading speed. It also allows the reader to discuss meaning, in depth and detail, in a common language with other readers of those same texts. Speaking Tibetan gives readers and translators access to *other* interpretations; voices; backgrounds; and experiences. Just as reading and discussing Chaucer with a native English speaker who has an expertise in Middle English texts provides depth, clarity, and understanding that wouldn’t otherwise

be possible, reading Middle Tibetan texts with native-speaking scholars who understand them is an invaluable resource for the reader of Tibetan.

It is notable here that there are no undergraduate, graduate, or professional Tibetan language TTPs (Translation Training Programmes) in any universities at all in the West (Raine 2011). A modern TTP is training *above and beyond* language learning – in the context of translation, we may think of this kind of collaborative reading as using Modern Tibetan as a ‘working language’. If we were to reimagine Tibetan in this context, with training specifically for translation, we might envision a curriculum something like what is laid out in the Figure 12. Here, language skills are supplemented by translation and intercultural communication; linguistics and technology; literary and text analysis; and domain-specific knowledge. In this model, ‘translation’ is a devoted skill to be developed *after* language skills are already in place, separately from the process of language acquisition (for more on modern Translation Studies, cf. Bassnett 2013; Bell 2016; and Gile 2009). Meanwhile, the expert translator collaborates with team members for textual expertise (that is, the model is highly inclusive of Tibetan voices):

Curriculum	Outcome
<b>1. Language Skills – L2/SL Tibetan</b>	Upper intermediate–Advanced level Tibetan in 3 registers (the working language plus source language, spanning oral & literary skills)
<b>2. Language Skills – L1/TL Mother Tongue</b>	Target language writing & literature expertise
<b>3. Translation &amp; Intercultural Communication</b>	Expertise in multiple modalities for translation; skill in translation strategies; knowledge of theory and interpreting linguistic messages cross-culturally
<b>4. Linguistics &amp; Technology</b>	Knowledge of language science; high-level proficiency in software tools & lang. technology
<b>5. Literary &amp; Text Analysis</b>	Ability to analyze both source and target-language texts using a variety of frameworks
<b>6. Domain-specific Knowledge (Buddhism)</b>	Subject-matter expertise (Buddhism) in two languages

Figure 12: A sample modern translator-training curriculum for Tibetan, based on international frameworks and standards for translation (cf. Bassnett 2013; Bell 2016). While the table above (Figure 11) shows cumulative vocabulary in the second language (L2) across a five-year programme, this table attempts to give a sense of the breadth of study in modern translation training. Identified here are six domains relevant to the translator: The L2 (second language); the L1 (native language); Translation & Intercultural Communication; Linguistics & Technology; Literary & Text Analysis; and Domain-specific knowledge.

### 3.3 Community-centred

Finally, a comprehensive approach that values the input and collaboration of Tibetan speech communities in the learning, translating, and research processes is one that gives value back to those communities. It is able to provide direct, tangible benefits in the form of jobs, education, and professional training to speakers. It is also inclusive of voices that might otherwise go unheard, but who have valuable knowledge and experience in language and literature, such as ex-monastics. Before the covid-19 pandemic, for example, Esukhia was providing some 3,000 total hours of lessons per month, and employing around 40–50 Tibetan teachers full time. In summers, when students would attend en masse, those numbers doubled. Individual students, in other words, also value the opportunities this method provides.

However, without institutional structure and support (in the form of resources, like funding, or respect, like accreditation), these kinds of open, inclusive, collaborative endeavors often do not have the stability needed to become long-term or widespread solutions. On an individual level, what can we, the community of ‘classical’ language learners, do? As much as it is within our power, I think we should strive for the sorts of community-centred, comprehensive approaches in language education and curriculum within the institutions, organisations, and programmes we are involved with. That means at the level of programme requirements; of curriculum components; of syllabus contents; and of individual classes, we work to provide comprehensive and inclusive opportunities to our students. That might be as big as pushing for structural change, or as small as including writing exercises where students *produce* something original in the written language they are learning, or give an oral presentation (in the Source Language) about the content they are reading (cf. again Lloyd 2021 and Ørberg 2003).

Whether or not we are part of a formal institution, I think we also can be pushing for improvements by voting with our eyeballs, clicks, dollars, and feet. We can seek out and support other learners, resources, and programmes that share our values. We can build community-based resources, interactions, and activities that benefit the speakers and groups to whom our textual languages belong, and form symbiotic relationships with them. For Tibetan specifically, that means learning to speak a Tibetan variety, and engaging with Tibetan speech communities. Technology has broken some of the traditional barriers that earlier

generations of scholars faced. We are not constrained by geography: We can communicate via iTalki for language learning or Zoom for collaboration. We can educate the public online, too, or find and publish resources that are accessible worldwide. While our institutions hold the power and prestige of official language curriculums, I believe it's important to recognise, too, that they aren't the only sources of value on our language-learning journeys.

## 4. Conclusion

For the goals of reading and translating, a comprehensive approach to Middle Tibetan texts is both possible and preferable. Middle Tibetan is not a 'classical' language in the sense that it is a dead language of antiquity; it is, instead, a literary register akin to Middle English. Middle Tibetan shares a significant overlap in orthography, vocabulary, and grammar with the Modern Tibetan varieties. Beyond that, there is a living tradition within the speech communities of Modern Tibetan wherein the 'classical' texts in question are read; studied; and taught. While the founding texts of Tibetology in the West divide themselves into 'classical' and 'colloquial', it does not necessarily follow that division ought to be practiced as a language pedagogy for learners of the Tibetan languages. Instead, modern curriculums based on sound pedagogies and international standards, like the CEFR, can be applied directly to the Tibetan context.

Again, a graduated path to Middle Tibetan texts, with modern speech as a foundation, is possible. It provides opportunities for collaboration and community. This comprehensive path recognises that languages consist of *skills* we develop, not a set of knowledge that we can memorise. Language consists of complex layers of implicit and automatic mental processes that require acquisition, not exposition. These skills are primarily (and, I believe, unavoidably) social, cultural, and communicative; they require speech, inclusion, and interaction. The belief that 'reading' is a silent, individual activity is weird (Henrich 2020; Saenger 1997). Reviving the orality of Tibetan texts is necessary to provide prosody; cultural context; mental imagery; and a native-like, intuitive sense of meaning that is key to understanding what you read as you read it. This is the goal of the comprehensive and collaborative approach to reading and translating Middle Tibetan texts.

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