

Chapter 1.1

The Current ELT Educational Practice in Cambodia

Tith Mab

English language teaching and learning has grown remarkably in contemporary Cambodian society over recent decades, and so has the use of English language, from official ministerial administration to daily communication, especially among young people. In this chapter, I will first briefly describe the historical background of foreign languages in Cambodia since 1953, and will also explain a general development of ELT education in present Cambodian society. Then, I will discuss current training of Cambodian English language teachers, and follow with current practices of ELT education in various settings. I will conclude by discussing achievements of ELT education within both public and private universities, and at all levels of ELT educational institutions.

Education and Foreign Language Education in Cambodia

Cambodia is relatively homogeneous, with about 90 percent of the population consisting of ethnic Khmer. Khmer is the national and official language of Cambodia. 95 percent of the population speaks Khmer as the mother tongue, and as the official language Khmer is used heavily at the national level.

After the withdrawal of the French in 1953, Cambodia reintroduced Khmer language into the curriculum, and gradually Khmer replaced French as the medium of instruction in primary and secondary school (Clayton 2006). French remained the first foreign language until 1975 when Pol Pot took over the country. From 1975-1979, education did not really exist. Education was only for children at the age of five to nine and the curriculum was confined to literacy and numeracy.

From 1979 to 1989, Vietnamese and Russian were the two foreign languages taught at Secondary schools throughout the country. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, they were replaced by French and English in the late 1980s. Given the role of French as the lingua franca of Indochina during the colonial period, and still spoken by some, mostly older Cambodians as a second language, French remained the language of instruction in various schools and universities that are often funded by the government of France. However, the number of students studying French has been declining since 1996, and in recent years French has not been used as much in Cambodia. More and more people are studying English. This could also be understood as part of a growing phenomenon, English as a global language.

In today's Cambodia, English is the most preferred foreign language as it is the language used in education, research, and international business. According to Clayton (2006), there are at least three events that promoted the use of English in Cambodia: the era of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), 1992-1993; the membership of Cambodia to the ASEAN community (1999); and the membership of Cambodia to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2004 (see Table 1.1-1).

Years	Period	Foreign Language
1953 - 1970	King Sihanouk's Government	French Only
1970 - 1975	Lon Nol Government	French and English
1975 - 1979	Pol Pot Regime	No use or study of Foreign Languages
1979 - 1989	People Republic of Cambodia	Vietnamese and Russian
1989 - 1993	State of Cambodia	English and French
1993 - Now	Kingdom of Cambodia	English and French

Table 1.1-1. Foreign Languages in Cambodia from 1953 to Present.

A General Development of ELT Education in Cambodia

In general, ELT education in Cambodia has rapidly developed for the last few decades. It has moved from its establishment in the late 1980s, when ELT education was made legal and official by the Ministry of Education (Moore and Bounchan 2010) and was described as teaching and learning English in a difficult circumstance (Neau 2003; Pit and Roth 2003). It has also moved from a past status, in which English was taught by international ELT professionals, to a present status, in which English is taught by Cambodian ELT professionals (Moore and Bounchan 2010). Clayton (2006) portrayed this rapid growth of ELT education as resulting from an ultimate choice made by both the Royal Government of Cambodia and its people, with influences from other factors such as economic and political reforms, and various international assistance. Particularly, according to Clayton (2006), thousands of informal ELT schools began to operate in the late 1990s in addition to formal ELT education in public schools.

Secondary schools formally began to teach English in 1989 with assistance from a few external agencies to the ELT program of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS). These agencies included Quaker Service Australia (QSA) and the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). The teaching and learning of English in Secondary schools of General Education in Cambodia was approved as a result of the agreement reached at the second conference of National Representatives of Civil Servants held in Phnom Penh in 1989. The Cambodian English Course (CEC) was created in 1989 by the English Language Committee under the supervision of the MoEYS with the support of the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB) and the professional assistance of QSA.

Originally, there were to be six levels of the CEC to be used for grades 7 through 12. Each of the planned six CEC textbooks was intended to be used in each of the 6 grades respectively in secondary schools (Kingdom of Cambodia MoEYS 1999). However, the project was suspended because there was no more international support after the first textbook was developed.

Following a request from the government of Cambodia to the United Kingdom, a bilateral assistance program known as Cambodian Secondary English Teaching (CAMSET) was started in 1992. In 1995, another English Curriculum Committee was formed by the CAMSET Project that supported the development of a Secondary English Syllabus. The first outcome, which was intended for teacher use only, was the Pedagogic Syllabus in English for grades 7 through 9. Following use on a trial basis, the syllabus was found to be so difficult that teachers at secondary schools could not use it. Following this, another syllabus called Checklist Syllabus in English for Lower and Upper Secondary Schools was completed in 1997, and was developed and officially approved by the MoEYS for use throughout the country. Again this syllabus was meant for teachers only, and not for use by students (Kingdom of Cambodia MoEYS 1999).

In 1996, the Ministry created an English textbook writing team, supported by CAMSET. They are responsible for writing textbooks for both teachers and students and producing tapes for teaching purposes. The special feature of these books is that they integrate the four macro-skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

For English language teaching in Primary school, one textbook—*Grade 4 English*—was developed and published by the English textbook writing team of the Ministry in 2013 for primary students, grades 4 to 6. The Ministry also plans to develop the *Grade 5 English* and *Grade 6 English* to be used in the following year. However, teachers in primary schools were not well trained before the introduction of English as a subject, and are not ready to teach the newly introduced English. Moreover, many primary school teachers simply do not know English so it is not possible for them to teach this new subject to their students.

As stated in the Cambodia Daily on November 13, 2013, the Ministry announced the introduction of English as a subject to grade 4 students in primary school throughout the country starting in October 2013. However, due to some technical problems, English was not introduced to grade 4 students until the following year.

There are some problems with ELT in state secondary schools. The main problem is the lack of financial resources. There are no proper facilities for students to study in. Teaching materials and equipment such as classrooms, libraries, and self-study areas in school language laboratories, handouts, textbooks, video/audio tapes, projectors, and other modern equipment are not in place for teachers and students. In addition, tables and chairs are fixed in the classrooms making it very difficult for group discussion or pair work.

Recently, for the last few years, ELT education has been expanded to rural areas, especially in provincial rural areas. This ELT educational improvement has resulted from international support from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). For example, the “Teaching English by Radio” project, funded by the Nippon Foundation in collaboration with the MoEYS, has assisted rural students in learning the English language through listening and speaking skills (Henderson 2013, 20).

Other NGO organizations and charity centers have also assisted Cambodian rural students in learning English. However, Kenning (2009) argued that teaching English in rural areas has encountered serious challenges.

ELT Teacher Training

At the early stage of ELT education establishment in Cambodia, between the late 1980s and early 2000s, there was only one prominent tertiary ELT institution, the Institute of Foreign Languages of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, which offered a four-year bachelor degree program in English education. Between 1992 and 2013, 3,846 people graduated with a bachelor degree in education specializing in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) (IFL English Department 2013). A majority of these graduates have been teaching English at all levels of ELT education, both public and private, across Cambodia. By the late 2000s more than a dozen other tertiary institutions have also produced graduates holding the bachelor degree of education in TEFL.

As a result of a recent educational reform, graduates who desire to teach English at upper-secondary public schools are required to enter another one-year pre-service training at the National Institute of Education. In addition to this pre-service training, other support for in-service training is provided. There are also six regional teacher training centers (RTTC), which train Cambodian English teachers for teaching English at lower secondary public schools.

ELT Educational Practice in Cambodia

The information included in this section is based on my own working experiences and personal conversations with managers of private and public schools in urban areas, especially in Phnom Penh. While the information about ELT educational practices in rural areas is less detailed, it is clear that teaching English in rural areas is still problematic and lagging behind (Kenning 2009).

In all international schools in urban areas across Cambodia students from pre-school to primary school and through secondary school have been exposed to English used as an instructional language for all subject areas. These students are totally competent in English and communicate daily with their family members and friends in English.

However, students' exposure to English speaking is different and limited in various private and public schools. In public primary school, from grades 4 to 6, English teaching has been introduced to schools throughout the country. In early 2014, however, there is only one textbook—*Grade 4 English*—to be used for all grades 4 through 6 students, and teachers are not well trained for this new subject.

Students in lower secondary school (grades 7 through 9) and upper secondary school (grades 10 through 12) in public schools and some private school are using *English for Cambodia*, which was developed in 1997 by the MoEYS. The books have been in place for nearly 20 years, and there have been no revisions or updating of these textbooks to date.

In private schools, however, English language teaching is offered from grade 1 in primary school through upper secondary school. From my observation and discussion with some private school principals, students in primary school take English as a subject for five hours a week, and textbook selection varies from school to school. Most of them choose the *English for Children* textbooks from MacMillan, Cambridge or Oxford University Press. Private schools in both lower and upper secondary schools choose their own textbooks for their English subjects. However, they also follow the English language curriculum and textbooks set by the MoEYS in grade 9 and grade 12 since the students will take the same examination as those studying in government public schools. Table 1.1-2 illustrates ELT educational practice in both public and private schools.

School	Grades	Public schools			Private schools		
		Offer	Hrs/w*	Materials	Offer	Hrs/w	Materials
Primary	1 – 3	No	None	None	Yes	5	Each school's own materials consisting with levels***
Primary	4 – 6	Yes	None	Grade 4 English	Yes	5	Each school's own materials consisting with levels***
Lower Secondary	7 – 9	Yes	2 – 4	English for Cambodian Books 1-3 **	Yes	3	English for Cambodian Books 1-3 and/or their school materials/Textbooks **
Upper Secondary	10 – 12	Yes	2 – 4	English for Cambodian Books 4-6	Yes	3	English for Cambodian Books 4-6 and/or their school materials/textbooks **
Grouping students in each class		The students are mixed up. The arrangement is based on a general classification of the enrolment.			The students are mixed up or the students are classified according to their merits of English proficiency. (Vary from school to school)		

Table 1.1-2. ELT practice in both public and private schools.

*The period of time offered per week.

**The textbook was published by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport.

***The materials used in private schools vary according to individual private school curriculum.

At the level of tertiary education, ELT practice seems different from one department to another and from one university to another university. Through my observations, even throughout one university there seem to be different ELT practices. The first kind of practice is teaching General English (GE) to non-English major students. For example, at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), there is an English Language Support Unit, which offers GE to various non-English major students. In other universities, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is taught to non-English Major students. The second kind of ELT practice is the use of

English language as a medium of instruction. For example, the Department of International Studies and Department of Media Communication of the RUPP use English to teach students in all courses.

Seeing the need of ESP for non-English major students, the Department of Higher Education of the MoEYS has done studies at different public and private and universities in Cambodia to determine the needs of English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) of non-English major students. A series of meetings, discussions, and seminars have been held with relevant individuals to develop the ESAP curriculum for all universities throughout the country. A workshop on Developing English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) Curriculum in Cambodia Higher Education Institutions was conducted February 25 - March 1, 2014 for participants from different higher education institutions in Cambodia. The aim of this workshop was to introduce ESAP to the English language curriculum at their respective universities rather than the GE program. All participating universities will have the option to revise their current GE program or introduce the ESAP to their curriculum.

Conclusion

Current practice of ELT education in schools and universities in Cambodia does not reveal a standardized system of practice among the public schools and universities. It is clear that students in private schools and universities are more exposed to English language teaching and learning than those in public educational institutions. English seems to be a prominent determinant, second to a student's specialization, of future employment. Therefore, the students who perceive their English language learning in schools and universities is insufficient may seek additional English language tutoring or attend courses designed for English majors.

References

- Clayton, T. 2006. *Language Choice in a Nation Under Transition. English Language Spread in Cambodia*. Lexington, VA: Springer.
- IFL English Department (2013). "IFL graduation report." Institute of Foreign Languages of the Royal University of Phnom Penh.
- Henderson, S. 2013. "Students Hone Their English Skills Thanks to Lessons by Radio, National News." *The Cambodia Daily*, Monday June 3, 2013.
- Kenning, M.-M. 2009. "Globalization and the use of volunteers in ELT: Enhancing volunteer impact." *CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching: Selected Papers*, 5: 36-44.
- Kingdom of Cambodia, Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS). 1999. *Education in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh: Author.
- Moore, S., and S. Bounchan. 2010. "English in Cambodia: changes and challenges." *World Englishes* 29(1): 114-126.

- Neau, V. 2003. "The Teaching of Foreign Languages in Cambodia: a Historical Perspectives." *Language, Culture, and Curriculum* 16(3): 253-268.
- Pit, C., and H. Roth. 2003. "English Language Teaching Development in Cambodia: Past, Present, and Future." In *English Language Teaching in East Asia Today: Changing Policies and Practices*, eds. H. W. Kam and R. Y. L. Wong. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press. 111-129.