

Chapter 1.2

Education and Policy on English Language in Cambodia

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Historical Background of English Language Education

To understand the current state of English language education and policy directions in Cambodia, it is useful to sketch the historical context of foreign language development in Cambodia since the nineteenth century. From 1864 to 1953, a French-based educational system was in practice in tandem with the traditional system. The French educational system did not touch the lives of Cambodia's peasantry, which continued to be educated at the temple schools (wat or pagoda) without such modern developments as curricula, timetables, inspections, or examinations. From the time of the French protectorate up to 1970, the foreign language in Cambodia was French.

From 1970 to 1979, the education system in Cambodia suffered tremendously due to the unfortunate social and political upheavals that had wracked the country over the preceding several decades. This culminated in the period 1975 to 1979, when the education system was completely destroyed. The Khmer Rouge destroyed educational facilities and killed students, teachers, and other scholars. Some schools were used as prisons.

From 1979 to 1989, under the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), progress was made in restoring education, and the situation was generally more improved. English language teaching and training was not taking place in a formal way, and indeed English was forbidden in Cambodia. Russian and Vietnamese were introduced into the system.

Beginning in 1989, Cambodia commenced the teaching of English as a foreign language from a very low resource base: no curriculum, no textbooks, and few teachers of English. Between 1989 and 1990 the government of Cambodia made the decision to change foreign language instruction from Russian and Vietnamese to English and French, but there were very few teachers. Over the next four years English classes were provided in some secondary schools, and in 1995 a learner-centered approach to teaching English was introduced, though the country had very few qualified teachers. Nonetheless English became the most popular choice among school-going Cambodians. From the early 1990s to present day under the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), after years of reconstruction, the education system has been rebuilt from pre-school to tertiary education. The policy of the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) is that English and French are the

foreign languages, which are taught in schools. English tends to be the first language of choice.

The Emergence of Foreign Language in Cambodia

The Paris Peace Accord, signed by the four main political parties in Cambodia in 1991, has thus far brought a tremendous change to Cambodian society as a whole. The arrival of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, known as UNTAC, has undeniably made Cambodian people view English as an internationally important language. More significantly, they are strongly convinced that anyone who can speak English will definitely have a fruitful chance to find good jobs, thus making much, or at least enough, money to support their living. For this very reason, most people start learning English; consequently, the number of classes, centers, schools, institutes, and universities very quickly has begun to mushroom throughout the nation.

With the formation of the Royal Government of Cambodia after the 1993 UNTAC-sponsored elections, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (MoEYS) started to introduce English in the curriculum from lower-secondary schools to tertiary education institutions. Many of the educational institutions have, up until now, used English in many of their subjects. And English has become very popular amongst Cambodian students ever since.

However, the majority of both students and teachers have not achieved language proficiency yet; and it will likely pose a danger if they are incapable of using their English language appropriately and accurately. This situation has been exacerbated by introducing and implementing the communicative language teaching approach on teaching and learning the English language, which is very new to both learners and teachers. It is the responsibility of both teachers and students to enhance their learning of foreign languages to benefit themselves and the nation. Teachers of English have complained that helping students become successful learners is a difficult challenge for them to deal with. With sufficient commitment and effort, satisfying solutions can be found.

Some Other Problematic Issues

Aside from many other subjects taught in the Khmer language at the pre-school, primary, and secondary level and in higher education, English also is included in the national curriculum. The English textbooks are basically designed by the MoEYS. Most secondary school students study English between two and four hours per week, while higher education institutions provide two to three hours of English instruction per week to their students. The textbook used at primary schools is provided by the MoEYS. There is no English teacher guidebook or workbook for grade 4. There are also no textbooks yet for grades 5 and 6 to link to lower-secondary schools. Textbooks used at secondary schools are titled “English for

Cambodia,” and students in grade 7 study Book I, those in grade 8 Book II, grade 9 Book III, grade 10 Book IV, grade 11 Book V, and students in grade 12 Book VI.

A common problem, which English teachers at the high school level frequently encounter, is that the English competency of students varies so considerably from one to the other. Some are at the intermediate or even upper-intermediate levels, while some are at pre-intermediate, elementary, or beginner levels. It is therefore hard for teachers to find effective strategies and methodologies to equally help students improve their knowledge of English. However, secondary school students in the city tend to be rather highly motivated, with expectations that they will have a good chance at finding good jobs after they are able to use English accurately and fluently, and so it is likely they will learn the language quickly if appropriate approaches are put into practice.

Based on observation and research, Cambodian students are said to be poor or passive readers, who mostly prefer writing. The reading of books in Cambodia is still limited, due in part to the lack of books and other printed materials. Moreover, most teachers of English have not set good examples for students in reading or conducting research, and do not help them to create reading habits or educate their students about the importance of reading to achieve the major goal of becoming lifelong, independent learners. If both teachers and students of English realized this benefit, they would put more effort into reading in English. Cambodian teachers of English find it difficult to teach English because many of them are not properly trained in teaching methodology, pedagogy, or andragogy. For this reason, professional development and language supports would be useful contributions in assisting them to improve their teaching.

Another major problem, which hinders the success of teaching and learning, is the language proficiency of teachers. The knowledge of most English teachers is still limited and they are not highly qualified in teaching and transferring knowledge to students. For this very reason, most English teachers in Cambodia need to be retrained so that they will have the necessary capabilities. In this context, if they are competent, they will have confidence in teaching their students as well as effectively designing their teaching materials and lesson plans.

Most teachers of English in Cambodia are not very familiar with the latest trends of teaching methodology and pedagogy such as a communicative teaching and learning approach, task-based learning approach, project-based learning approach, cooperative language learning approach, and so on. They cannot effectively implement these approaches to benefit student learning, and are unsure about how to conduct their teaching so that students are actively and productively involved in the learning processes. Therefore, most English teachers still use the grammar translation method to teach students with unsatisfactory learning outcomes in which most students become passive learners who rely heavily on their teachers without furthering their own reading and research.

The failure to effectively implement some of these latest approaches in teaching and learning EFL negatively impacts student achievement and building a sense of learning autonomy. If both English teachers and students are good at using these approaches, they will become secure, creative, and curious in a foreign language. However the value of these new approaches seems ambiguous to them. Hence, they do not make considerable use of these approaches and they do not see the significance of self-study.

Delivering quality English language education depends upon establishing a good and standardized educational system. The mastery of foreign language in Cambodia plays an essential role in the development of the nation, employment creation, and therefore poverty reduction. This in turn is tied to improving and updating teaching and learning strategies and methodologies in the Cambodian education system overall, so that better and more satisfying results can be achieved holistically.

The System of Education

As a whole, the Cambodian Education System includes pre-school, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools, higher education, teacher training programs, and non-formal education. The system also includes the development of sport, information technology education, research development, and technical education. Both public and private education is within the MoEYS education objectives being implemented in order to reach the national educational policies, goals, missions, and visions. MoEYS objectives are to increase literacy throughout the country, improve the quality of education services, ensure equitable and equal access to education, and prepare students for vocational, technical, and higher education. To achieve these objectives it is implementing policies designed to universalize nine year basic education and develop opportunities for functional literacy; modernize and improve the quality of education through effective reform; link education and training with labor market and society; and rehabilitate youth and sport sub-sectors (MoEYS 2013). A brief description of each of the educational sectors follows.

Pre-School

Pre-schools are open to children ages three to five, but attendance is not compulsory. Its primary objective is to expand early child education services for children from poor families, ethnic minorities, and disabled children, and priority is given to community and home-based pre-schools. Another objective is to improve the quality of and provide more equitable access to these services. Both state and private pre-schools operate in Cambodia, especially in the cities.

Primary Schools

Primary schools, grades 1 to 6, are for the students from ages six to 11. They are intended to ensure that all school-age children go to primary school, receive a quality primary education, and remain in school through completion of primary education and continue on to the next educational level. Both state and private primary schools operate in Cambodia. The English Language is introduced only in

grade 4 and students are required to learn English four hours per week. For private primary schools, the policies regarding textbook use and number of instruction hours per week, and the like vary from school to school.

Lower and Upper Secondary Schools

Lower and upper secondary schools are for ages 12 to 14 (grades 7 through 9) and ages 15 to 17 (grades 10 through 12). The objectives of the schools at this level are to reduce access barriers for students, and to improve the quality and efficiency of educational services in order to increase grade 7 through 9 retention rates and grade 9 to 10 transition rates. The objective for upper secondary education is to assure equitable access to upper secondary education after students have successfully completed lower secondary education, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas. These students will comprise the human resource for enrollment in technical and vocational education and higher education. Both public and private secondary education is provided in accordance with the national education law in Cambodia that states that education from the private sector also plays an important role in human resource development and knowledge provision. Access to upper secondary education (Books I, II, and III) are taught as a subject in all grade levels in lower and upper secondary schools. These textbooks are designed to represent the English language in a Khmer setting.

Higher Education

The higher education sub-sector will continue to expand access to higher education while at the same time safeguarding quality to ensure that Cambodia market needs are met in the areas of intellectual development and human resource provision. Equitable access will be addressed through scholarship programs for priority students (outstanding students, students from the poorest families, students from remote areas, and female students). Some priority will be given to students enrolling for less market-oriented and more socially beneficial programs, especially education, health, agriculture, technology, engineering, science, and mathematics.

Cambodia has only one formal four-year state program to generate English language teachers, known as English Language Teacher Training, based at the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL), which is part of the Royal University of Phnom Penh. It aims to provide teachers for high schools and the tertiary level throughout Cambodia. This program has been conducted since 1988 to provide degree-graduate teachers of English, who earn a Bachelor of Education in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Outside of this state university program, many private universities and institutes in Cambodia provide training for English language proficiency in response to the requirements of the labor market and society.

At the higher education level, different English textbooks are introduced

depending on the area of interest and need. To benefit Cambodian students as a whole, MoEYS advocates a change from traditional and habitual use of rote learning and memorization to communicative language teaching methodology. English is taught only three hours per week at higher education institutions.

Teacher Training Programs

In Cambodia, the National Institute of Education (NIE), under direct supervision of MoEYS, is the only upper-secondary teacher training Center. Its mission is to train personnel required at the upper secondary school level including teachers for all subjects, education inspectors, educational officers, researchers, assessors, trainers with modern pedagogy and andragogy, education leaders, managers, and school principals. The NIE vision is to be internationally recognized as a leading educational institution in producing the full range of human resources required at the upper secondary school level, from teachers and officials to educational leaders, from planners to evaluators.

In this context, the Teacher Training Department under the supervision of MoEYS, is in charge of supervising six Regional Teacher Training Centers (RTTCs—whose mission is to produce lower secondary school teachers), 18 Provincial Teacher Training Centers (PTTCs—to produce primary school teachers), and one Pre-School Teacher Training Center (PSTTC), whose mission is to produce pre-school or kindergarten teachers (Figure 1.2-1).

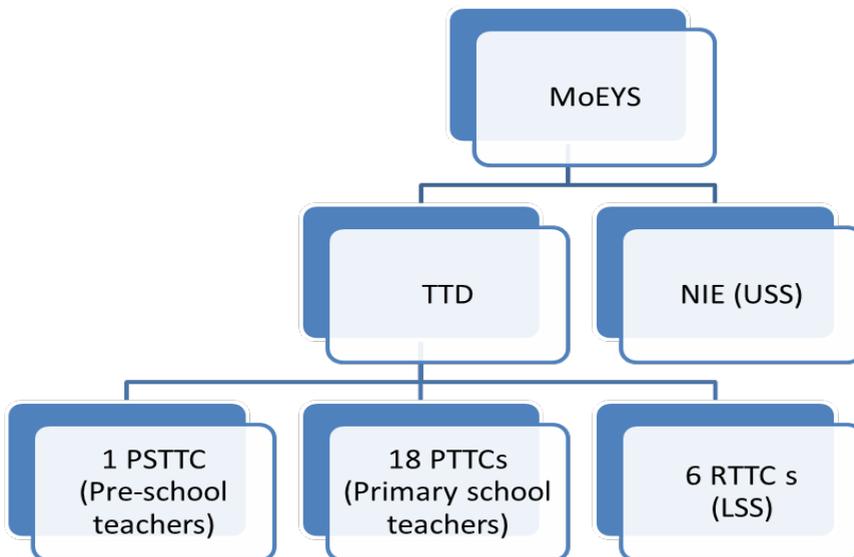


Figure 1.2-1. Teacher training structure in Cambodia.

The primary objective of this design is to ensure an effective supply of teachers for all education levels, in response to the needs created by education

system expansion. The Teacher Training Department does this through upgrading the competencies of the Teacher Training Centers (TTCs) managers and education administrators, teacher trainers, school principals, and other key staff of the MOEYS. The second objective is to ensure a steady supply of new intakes of all TTCs and the NIE and the subsequent deployment of new teachers, favorably responding to the growing demand for teachers in rural/remote and disadvantaged areas by recruiting and training teacher trainees from these targeted areas as well as from the areas inhabited by ethnic minority people. The third objective is to improve the quality of teaching through expansion of in-service teacher training.

Non-Formal Education

Finally, non-formal education also plays a vital role in human resource development in the country. Non-formal education aims to ensure that all children, youth, adults, poor people, and those with disabilities realize their rights to a basic education and lifelong learning. It also seeks to provide opportunities for youth and adults to access life skills and to become literate.

English Language Policy in Cambodia

Pertaining to national language policy, article 96 of Cambodia's constitution states that "the state shall protect and promote Khmer Language as required." Despite the chaos in the previous decades, Khmer has always been used as the national language in government, parliament, and public schools. On the other hand, foreign languages are used in international communication between the Cambodian government and agencies and international organizations and United Nations agencies.

English is a subject included in the schools curriculum from grade 4 onward. It is learned and taught as a foreign language (EFL). However, the instruction of English in primary schools is dependent on the availability of English instructors. In addition, foreign languages are also used at certain higher education institutions depending on the language used by the lecturers available at those institutions. Khmer language is used as a medium of instruction for all subjects at public education system.

With the formation of the Royal Government of Cambodia in 1993 (after the prolonged civil war ended), the official policy concerning foreign language was that there would be two languages, French and English, which were equal in status. However the internal atmosphere within Cambodia since then has led to increasing demands for English to be the first language of choice. Several factors have been driving the needs and demands for English. First is the presence of NGOs and international aid agencies whose common language is English, generating the need for Cambodians working in these agencies to be capable of using English. In addition, the government also needs to communicate with donors and other foreign agencies, which almost all use English as their official language. This requires all

levels of the domestic authorities to learn English to work with those agents. Beyond these internal drivers, the government needs to communicate with the countries in the region, ASEAN, all of whom use English as their medium of communication. This demands the local people, especially relevant personnel, to be familiar with English in their domains of responsibilities. Economically, the transformation from a command to a market-oriented economy is one of the causes in which English has gained its popularity among business people. And as higher education and information technology develop, the needs and demands for English as a means of research increases among Internet users, university students, and researchers.

In conformity with these facts, and in the framework of the present Cambodia, the needs and demands for the English language cannot be underestimated. At every level, for academic and social purposes, the command of English opens new possibilities. For academic purposes, it can be the opportunity to take up a study grant abroad, to meet school requirements for being promoted to the next grade, to pass university entrance examinations, and to attend local or international conferences. For societal purposes, a command of English can be the opportunity to gain well-paid employment with foreign companies, NGOs, or international agencies, to have a chance for a job promotion, and to get benefits from daily entertainment such as watching TV, listening to the radio, or reading books in English, among other things.

The Challenges of English Language Teaching and Learning in Cambodia

As noted earlier, currently, only two languages, English and French, are formally taught in public schools and in tertiary education. Therefore, French and English play an important role in higher education since higher education institutions in Cambodia have been adopting foreign curricula models, contents, and textbooks, and more indirectly they influence the rest of the education system. Given the prominence of English, it is particularly important to summarize and come to terms with the reality of the challenges facing the teaching and learning of English in Cambodia:

1. Policies on English language teaching and learning are not in place, and its implementation is based upon the availability of teachers and resources;
2. Policies related to English language teaching and learning in the second cycle of primary school are still not implemented;
3. English Teachers in primary schools do not go through proper training;
4. The Department of Curriculum Development in MoEYS does not have enough qualified English curriculum and materials designers;
5. Textbooks and teacher qualified English curriculum and materials are lacking;
6. There are not enough textbooks, teacher guides, teaching and learning materials;

7. Most English teachers are not properly trained or sufficiently qualified;
8. Cambodia still lacks English teachers in throughout the education system;
9. English classrooms are not well-equipped and comfortable;
10. English classes are large with widely mixed proficiency levels;
11. There are still many unmotivated and demotivated learners;
12. The quality of teaching and learning English is still limited.

Recommendations and Suggestions

Given the high motivation of Cambodian students towards the learning of English, and the considerable economic demand for the language to develop the country's economy, the need for improvement in the teaching of English is all the more pressing. Therefore, a flexible and durable organizational response is required taking into consideration current demands, and requirements of the language teachers of English. One of the many things that all teachers should do is to participate in training courses. By taking part in local, regional, and international conferences, seminars, workshops, and debates, teachers can meet and discuss with scholars from different educational and cultural backgrounds, who bring with them specialized knowledge and skills as well as updated and well-tested ideas concerning the latest trends in language teaching and learning. In other words, participating in training courses can simultaneously help teachers improve both their language proficiency and professionalism in teaching.

Conclusion

The Cambodian people generally, and present Cambodian students specifically, regard the English language to be a potentially crucial factor in their lives, and vigorously pursue acquiring it as a target. They regard a person with knowledge of English as having many opportunities for survival and job success.

In addition, it seems clear that English and French will remain the two major foreign languages to be taught in public schools in the future because of Cambodia's historical experience, its strengthening relationship with countries in Southeast Asia through regional goals such as ASEAN's economic integration in 2015, and the continuing realities of globalization. In higher education, it is likely that English and French long will continue to be the medium of instruction and of research, while Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese will be used as well for the purpose of business communication and work.

As far as the status of the national language is concerned, it seems certain that Khmer will remain the language to be used by all Cambodians in the foreseeable future, since it has always been the language of day-to-day communication at all levels. Furthermore, the Royal Government of Cambodia has always expressed the need for Khmerization of education at all levels. Despite

strong foreign influences on Cambodian affairs and the education system, Khmer has always survived as a national language.

References

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