Cambodian Journal of Educational Research
2023, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 91–103
https://doi.org/10.62037/cjer.2023.03.02.06

CAMBODIAN
EDUCATION
FORUM
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Review Article

Benefits of reading and how to promote reading habits among Cambodians

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Received: 7 July 2023 Revised: 23 September 2023 Accepted: 3 October 2023

Abstract

Reading is vital for expanding knowledge, improving critical thinking, and fostering creativity. It not only benefits academic, professional, and personal development but also contributes to sustainable development and social prosperity. However, in Cambodia, reading habits are underdeveloped due to the rising popularity of social media and other factors of historical, cultural, and economic nature. Collaboration between stakeholders, including the government, non-governmental organizations, schools, and parents, is essential to promote reading habits in the country. This will help turn Cambodia into a reading nation, foster cognitive development, and cultivate more well-informed citizens. Relying on secondary sources, this article aims to discuss the benefits of reading and how to promote it. The article first defines the term reading from different perspectives. It then illustrates the importance of reading and its relationship with national development. It also highlights the barriers to developing reading habits among Cambodians. The article concludes with suggestions to promote reading habits in Cambodia.

Keywords: Benefits of reading; reading habits; barriers; recommendations; Cambodia

Introduction

Reading is an indispensable tool to expand knowledge (Va, 2020). By reading books, articles, and other materials, people can absorb incredible insights and wisdom (Som, 2020). With insights and wisdom, readers become critical and creative thinkers and can solve problems more effectively than those who do not read frequently. In addition, reading is considered one of the main factors that contributes to providing people with intellectual resources and cognitive development, as it helps them obtain

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information, broaden their knowledge, and improve their critical thinking and creativity (Winter, 2023). Educated people or citizens will undoubtedly lead a country to sustainable development and social prosperity (Bansal, 2020).

By recognizing the importance of reading and literacy, the Cambodian government, together with relevant stakeholders, has launched the National Reading Day, Book Fair, and other reading initiatives in an attempt to encourage Cambodian people, especially students, to adopt reading as their routine (Ban, 2019). The government introduced the National Reading Day in 2015 (Meas, 2023). With the support of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) launched the Factory Literacy Program in January 2017 by establishing libraries and reading corners in factories. This program aims to help young Cambodian garment workers to acquire basic functional literacy skills and empower them to better understand their own fundamental rights (UNESCO, 2018).

In addition, the government, in collaboration with UNESCO, initiated the National Literacy Campaign to increase the literacy rate in the Kingdom. As a result, the literacy rate rose from around 78 percent in 2014 to 80.5 percent in 2015 (Hangchuon & Lemaistre, 2017). The government also organized the National Book Fair, which is attended by thousands of participants, especially young Cambodians, each year (Khy, 2018).

Despite these emerging positive initiatives, reading habits in Cambodia seem to be generally less prevalent (Ban, 2019; Vonn, 2021). Some Cambodian students tend to prefer using social media or playing online games to reading books in their free time, while others spend their time hanging out with friends. On average, according to a 2014 study by Room to Read, people in Cambodia read only 1.5 books per year (Nou & Prum, 2016).

In this regard, drawing on secondary data, this article aims to discuss the importance of reading, identify the barriers to developing reading habits among Cambodians, and provide suggestions to promote reading habits in Cambodia.

The definition of reading

The concept of reading is defined in various ways. Leipzig (2001) defines reading "as a multi-faceted process involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation" (para. 1). For Dadzie (2008), reading involves comprehending textual content, applying knowledge for personal growth, and digesting recorded materials

for pleasure, leisure, relaxation, information, and knowledge. The simplest definition of reading is the ability to decipher written language and comprehend printed content (Johnson, 2017). Also, according to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, a habit is "something you do often and regularly, sometimes without knowing that you are doing it."

Hence, to be precise, we read to comprehend information from what we read, and to make it a habit, we need to do it frequently in our spare time. In this age of technology, we can choose from a variety of reading materials, such as printed books, e-books, articles, journals, handouts, newspapers, magazines, leaflets, and other reading materials online or offline, to enhance our knowledge or to master our academic fields.

Why reading matters

Undoubtedly, reading benefits us whether we read for academic purposes, professional development, or pleasure. It will help us to see development in ourselves, and we will become quick learners and critical thinkers if we read regularly (Ban, 2019). Reading will help us see beyond ourselves. Noticeably, written words convey knowledge, stories, experiences, thoughts, and feelings from writers to readers (Essam, 2018). In this sense, when reading a memoir about someone's experience overcoming adversity, we can gain insights into their resilience and apply it to address our own challenges. Furthermore, reading articles about scientific research can also enable us to broaden our knowledge base and stay updated on the most recent breakthroughs in our field (George, 2022).

Reading and academic achievements

A study by Erlina et al. (2019) has shown that there is a correlation between reading and academic achievements. Students who read well tend to succeed in their studies. Those who read a lot are more likely to perform well academically because they tend to develop their own ways of thinking with the help of the extensive knowledge that they receive from reading about various topics (Taha, 2021). Sometimes students read not only something in their fields of study but also in other related disciplines. Therefore, they are knowledgeable when they are given assignments to complete. Since they have broadened their knowledge through reading, they can complete academic tasks in various ways in a timely manner. Reading also helps them to be more confident, especially during exams (Sun, 2019). Moreover, reading English-language materials will help us build our lexical resources as we encounter new words in written texts. Obviously, we will also enhance our writing skills since we will immerse ourselves in various writing styles from different authors (Markham Public

Library, 2020). Reading can also make us critical and creative thinkers, so we will be able to handle problems effectively (Wang, 2012). Additionally, reading can help us strengthen our capacity for focus and concentration. It can also bring us a sense of tranquility, which enables us to get away from "all the hustle and bustle of everyday nonsense" (Winter, 2023, para. 31).

Reading and human resource development

There is also a correlation between reading and economic development. It is logical that human resources are a prerequisite for economic development, and reading makes students more knowledgeable (Erlina et al., 2019). More knowledge makes people a crucial asset for national development. As Cambodia's Education Minister Hangchuon Naron once said, "The education level of citizens tells a lot about the economic development of a country, and human resources that are more competent are a key factor for fostering the country's development (Hangchuon & Lemaistre, 2017, para. 1). In this sense, the low literacy rate in Cambodia can be considered a hindrance to human resource development, and as a consequence, the country tends to lack a talented workforce for its industrial development and economic progress. However, in a country where reading culture is nourished and education is highly valued, there is a higher likelihood of producing a well-educated and knowledgeable workforce that can contribute to its economic development through the expertise and skills of its citizens (Kingdom & Maekae, 2013).

Reading and mental health

According to Sima (2022), reading has been proven to have positive effects on mental health. It helps to reduce stress and anxiety by providing an escape from daily worries. Reading can also enhance our cognitive function and memory retention, keeping our brains active and engaged. Additionally, plunging ourselves into different perspectives and narratives through reading promotes our sense of empathy and emotional intelligence, leading to the improvement of our social interactions and relationships (Watts, 2023). Watts (2023) added that people with poor literacy skills were more likely to experience mental ill-health as reading could help improve sleep hygiene, whereas disturbed sleep could cause mental health issues. Thus, it cannot be denied that reading offers various benefits, including relaxation, sleep hygiene, and a sense of purpose. Reading can also help slow down heart rate and ease muscle tension; therefore, allocating our time to reading before bed can bring us a sense of relaxation as well as greater promotion of our mental well-being (Watts, 2023).

Reding and lifelong learning

When reading becomes our habit, we will become lifelong learners. Lifelong learning can help us discover a new area of interest that we had not thought of before. It can also boost creativity and innovation and help us to utilize our knowledge and skills in meaningful ways (Jasnani, 2021). Most importantly, in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and increasing competition in the job market, it is vital that we continuously educate ourselves to update our skills to meet the current demands of the market and increase our productivity in the workplace (Yen, 2021).

Factors affecting the reading habits of Cambodians

Historical factors

Despite the numerous benefits of reading, the reading habits of many Cambodian people appear to be less common (Vonn, 2021). Historically, during the Khmer Rouge or Pol Pot regime (1975-1979), the entire education system was completely destroyed, and many educated people were killed (Chigas & Mosyakov, 2023). About 90% of teachers and scholars were executed, resulting in a high illiteracy rate afterward (Headley, 2018). According to Headley (2018), nearly 40% of Cambodians were illiterate following the liberation after the genocide. In 1994, 47% of Cambodians lived in poverty (Asian Development Bank, 2011). Living in such a condition, food or survival was the top priority for Cambodians (Rodas, 2015). Thus, people were busy earning a living without much attention to nourish their food of thought. According to Hem Borith, a Khmer literature teacher at Sisowath High School who was quoted by Kaing and Kim (2010, para. 4), "Parents went through the civil war and didn't read because they were trying to survive and now their children follow that routine."

In today's world, due to the boom of the Internet, including social media, people find it more convenient to watch videos on Facebook or YouTube than to read books or other texts (Kaing & Kim, 2010). Furthermore, as the popularity of social media has grown in the country, more and more Cambodians tend to spend their time on social media, especially Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. In 2022, Cambodia had an average of 12.3 million monthly active social media users, with an annual growth rate of 5% in 2021-2022, representing about 73.9% of the total population (OOSGA, 2023).

Psychological and cultural factors

Furthermore, there is a common misconception that reading is a headache or that learning is maddening (Rodas, 2015). A lack of reading culture is considered another obstacle to growing the seed of reading habits in the Cambodian context because the

lack of the reading culture creates a less conducive environment for questioning and critical thinking, making it difficult to assess progress in students' academic comprehension. Also, this culture encourages memorization instead of sense-making and critical thinking, resulting in the discouragement of questioning and efforts to clarify lessons as well as participation in class discussions (Chako, 2021). There is also an overreliance on teachers' oratory and presentation skills, which negatively impacts students' critical thinking skills. Furthermore, some teachers do not like reading and researching to improve their teaching skills, and as a result, it will be hard to promote reading in schools (Chako, 2021).

Economic factors

As an emerging country, Cambodia still has a high poverty rate, which is 17.8 percent of its population (World Bank, 2022). Thus, Cambodian parents must be busy earning a living without having enough time to assist their children's homeschooling. Furthermore, the majority of Cambodian children lack the necessary educational resources at home (Mullis et al., 2016, as cited in Crawford et al., 2023). This implies that dealing with a household's economic difficulties can lead to a shortage of parental support for children's home education. In general, when books are not valued at home, it is unlikely that children will read even in their free time and instead spend their time on social media or play online games.

Conclusion and recommendations

Reading is crucial for broadening knowledge, gaining new insights, and improving critical thinking. The Cambodian government and relevant stakeholders have promoted reading through various programs and initiatives such as the National Reading Day, Book Fairs, and the Factory Literacy Program. However, the reading habits of many Cambodians remain underdeveloped due to various factors, including the consequences of the destruction of the Pol Pot regime that took place about five decades ago, causing the lack of reading culture in the country. Misconceptions about reading and financial burden, along with the rising trend of social media and online games, have also been a hindrance to the development of the reading habits of many Cambodians.

Therefore, in order to enhance the reading habits of Cambodian people, the following suggestions should be considered by relevant stakeholders:

The government

The Royal Government of Cambodia plays a vital role in promoting reading habits in the country because the government can lay a strong foundation for the development of a reading culture in the long run. Despite the aforementioned positive initiatives and programs, the government should increase the annual budget for education to make it higher than the current education expenditure of 2.2 percent of its GDP. With more budget, the government can introduce additional initiatives to encourage reading among its citizens, especially in remote areas, by establishing more public libraries and community reading centers at least in every commune throughout the country. These libraries are useful not only for providing access to a wide range of books but also for organizing reading programs and events to engage people of all ages.

Educational institutions

The role of educational institutions in promoting reading habits is essential because they are venues where students come for education. In this sense, schools or educational institutions across the country should host regular book fairs and author visits where students can explore a variety of books and interact with authors. In addition, they can establish reading clubs or programs that encourage students to read independently and discuss their favorite books with their peers.

Besides, educational institutions should have libraries, passionate teachers, and high-quality Khmer-language publications and make the library space magical by transforming it with colorful displays and comfy seating (Hawthorne, 2021). By establishing a well-stocked library with translated literature, science, history, and geography, students can access world classics in their native language. Passionate teachers can organize book clubs and literary events to foster a love for reading and inspire novice writers to showcase their talents in exceptional Khmer-language publications (Rodas, 2010). This initiative provides students with access to world classics, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation for their subjects. By fostering a love of reading, educational institutions can help students develop a lifelong habit that will benefit them academically, personally, and professionally.

Non-governmental organizations

The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) cannot be taken for granted. Some NGOs like Room to Read, World Literacy Foundation, and Pratham are working to minimize the illiteracy gap by providing training and resources to disadvantaged

children globally (Fernandez, 2019). NGOs, in collaboration with government agencies, can help foster reading habits in Cambodia through the establishment of community libraries in rural areas as well as mobile libraries. These libraries can provide access to books and educational resources for children and adults who may not have access to formal education or public libraries (Hossain, 2013). Additionally, NGOs can organize reading programs, including storytelling sessions, book fairs, and workshops on literacy skills, and book clubs to engage the community and cultivate a love for reading among Cambodians, particularly youth. NGOs can also work hand in hand with local schools and relevant grassroots government institutions to incorporate reading into the curriculum and provide training for teachers on effective reading instruction methods. Through these initiatives, they are not only promoting a reading habit in Cambodia but also empowering individuals with knowledge and skills that can improve their lives and contribute to the development of their communities.

The community

The community can also play a crucial role in promoting reading in Cambodia. With limited access to educational resources, community members can work together to establish local libraries and organize reading campaigns such as reading sessions and storytelling events so as to engage local residents, particularly children, and encourage them to read. A study by Boonaree et al. (2018) showed that rural people of all ages generally read when given access to a variety of quality reading materials aligned with their interests. Therefore, by providing opportunities for everyone to access books, the community will empower individuals, especially children, to develop a love for reading, leading to improved academic performance and future employment opportunities.

Parents

To develop a good reading habit, the participation of parents is essential. Parental involvement with children's intellectual growth and positive outcomes are strongly correlated (Harris & Goodall, 2007, as cited in Ahmad, 2020). Hence, parents should be role models for their children. On some special occasions, parents should give books to their children as gifts. In their free time, they should spend some time reading books with their children. This way, children will feel more comfortable and warmer when reading books at home.

Furthermore, parents can also create a reading-friendly environment at home by setting up a cozy reading corner or a bookshelf with a variety of age-appropriate

books. This not only encourages children to engage with different genres and authors but also makes reading a visually appealing and accessible activity. In doing so, parents can foster a love of reading and create a positive association with books in their children's minds (Hamilton, 2021).

Conclusion

As reading is the source of wisdom and new insights, Cambodians should spend their spare time reading, particularly about something interesting to them. They can begin with a small daily reading activity until it becomes their routine. They will then realize that reading is part of their intellectual appetite that they cannot live without.

All in all, cooperation from all stakeholders to improve the reading culture in Cambodia is important. With close cooperation and concerted efforts from relevant stakeholders, a reading culture will develop and flourish, which will in turn help Cambodia become a nation where people highly value reading.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Dr. Kimkong Heng and Mr. Koemhong Sol, Co-Editors-in-Chief of the *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research*, for their editorial support and constructive feedback. The author also wishes to thank two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this article.

Conflict of interest

None.

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