
Review Article

Cultural and language immersion tours in Cambodia and Laos as a strategy for English acquisition by Chinese students

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Abstract

The growing demand for English-language speakers in China presents interesting opportunities for education and tourism in the coming years. This article explores potential opportunities for English language immersion and cultural tours in Cambodia and Laos as a strategic approach to enhancing English acquisition among Chinese undergraduate business English students. It also considers the challenges encountered by Chinese undergraduate business English students in learning the English language, particularly within the context of limited English opportunities in China and the cultural factors contributing to Chinese individuals' reluctance to engage in English communication. The article proposes visiting major cities in Laos and Cambodia, as these offer significant benefits for Chinese students seeking to practice and improve their English-speaking and cross-communication abilities. This is due to their compact size and the relatively high number of English speakers within their local communities.

Keywords: Language immersion; English study abroad programmes; Chinese students; Cambodia; Laos

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Introduction

The burgeoning demand for English language teaching in China reflects how increasingly globalised China has become. While English language undergraduate programmes are offered at many Chinese universities, the quality of such programmes varies widely (Lei & Hu, 2014). For many learners, these undergraduate English programmes provide an affordable alternative to acquiring basic English language skills without the high costs of travelling to and learning English in the developed world (Xue, 2022). While learning English in a Chinese context may help with basic language acquisition, it also means there are often limited opportunities to use these skills in everyday settings (Wei & Su, 2012). A solution is required that encourages affordable language immersion while broadening learners' cultural and geopolitical understanding.

Language immersion programs are widely applied educational approaches to enhance second language acquisition by immersing students in real-life environments where the target language is spoken (Supriyono et al., 2022) in a preferably natural and engaging environment (Poon, 2016). These programs are designed to maximise language acquisition by creating situations where learners are compelled to use the target language for communication and interaction (Supriyono et al., 2022) and often combine classroom instruction with practical application so students develop conversational skills and cultural understanding. While few Southeast Asian nations have English as a native language, many societies and economies encourage the use of English in ways that present language immersion opportunities for Chinese students not available in China (see Moody, 2024).

This article explores one such solution and proposes that Chinese undergraduate programmes can enhance their English language acquisition through immersion tours and study abroad programmes in Southeast Asia, where proportionately more English is spoken, yet respect for traditional culture is maintained (Hashim & Leitner, 2020). The three city centres explored in this article are Vientiane (in Laos), Siem Reap, and Phnom Penh (both in Cambodia), which rely heavily on revenue generated by English-speaking foreign tourists (Cooper, 2008) and which present affordable options for international tourists. We conclude by offering some practical suggestions on

how this may be successfully applied to enhance education across China and Southeast Asia.

Language learning in China

Over the past 30 years, substantial changes have occurred within China that have encouraged English learning and use. The rapid economic growth and globalisation of China have played a pivotal role in this transformation (He & Chiang, 2016), as China's skyrocketing imports and exports required bilingual professionals to facilitate international trade and communication (Li et al., 2021; Su, 2011). This was also coupled with a burgeoning tourism industry that saw millions of Chinese travel abroad and foreigners visit China (Wang et al., 2022; Zahedpisheh et al., 2017). These sectors were supported by expansions within the higher education sector in China, where the proliferation of institutes has fostered a demand for English language instruction to prepare students for global opportunities (Marjerison & Yang, 2022; Wang et al., 2017). Lastly, the introduction and widespread adoption of the internet have exposed Chinese citizens to a wealth of English-language content and facilitated cross-cultural exchanges (de Seta, 2023; King et al., 2013). Each of these factors reinforces how English is the business lingua franca in our globalised world.

Foreign English teachers fulfil a critical role in addressing the contextual and linguistic gap among Chinese students (Fong, 2021). With their native fluency and cultural understanding, foreign teachers can foster an immersive English-speaking environment within the classroom through interactive discussions, role-playing activities, and group work, to name a few approaches (Saito, 2021). When organised well, these initiatives can bolster student confidence levels and fluency by improving overall communication proficiency (Wang & Lam, 2023). Despite having aspects of an immersive experience, classrooms are rarely an 'authentic' environment for language learning and represent only a microcosm within a broader non-English context (Fong, 2021). While Chinese learners can learn aspects of the English language, important opportunities are often missing from existing curricula.

One potential solution is to send Chinese students to locations in China where English is more widely spoken. While major commercial and educational centres like Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Macau can offer a relatively easy and hassle-free life for English speakers (Shen & Zhang, 2022), English is disproportionately used in the affluent segments of society (Wang et

al., 2017), which is beyond the reach of most Chinese. These gaps in social and cultural capital make it difficult for transitional or less-affluent students to meaningfully engage in English in ways that support their learning (Sulistyo et al., 2021). Furthermore, the discomfort of language learning (Fan, 2020) and the fear of making mistakes or losing 'face' (Chen & Chew, 2021) inhibit learners' willingness to engage in English conversation and may encourage students to revert to Mandarin or Cantonese. While being a more affordable solution than international travel, immersion in an English-speaking environment through domestic travel in China offers limited opportunities for improvement.

Use of English in Southeast Asia

An alternate solution is for Chinese language learners to travel abroad to Southeast Asia for English immersion experiences. While only 1% of the Chinese population in mainland China has a high level of English (Wei & Su, 2012), a barrier to international tourism (He, 2018; Ostrowski & Penner, 2009), Laos and Cambodia have supported international tourism by more widely adopting English (Cooper, 2008; Hum & Heng, 2024). Furthermore, while it is common for mainland Chinese to anticipate that English speakers possess a fundamental comprehension of their language (Wei & Su, 2012), no such expectation exists in Laos and Cambodia. The result is that English-language learners in China generally have fewer opportunities to interact with English-speaking individuals than in other Asian regions, a situation likely to persist in the foreseeable future (Stakanova, 2018).

We believe a practical solution that supports student learning, international tourism, and global trade is the creation of international immersion programmes in Laos and Cambodia for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students from China during their study breaks. As their breaks likely coincide with peak tourism periods, this will help foster opportunities and environments that encourage interaction with English-speaking locals and tourists. Interacting with these groups could provide an authentic language-learning experience for students, as conversations with English speakers can positively motivate students and enhance their language acquisition (Gurbuz, 2022). While English proficiency levels vary in Laos and Cambodia, locals in the tourist sector can often confidently communicate in English (Cooper, 2008) and will be encouraged by having English-speaking clients.

Opportunities in Laos

Vientiane, the capital of Laos, is a popular tourist destination that attracts many international English-speaking visitors. Despite a drop in tourism due to COVID-19, tourism in Laos has rebounded, with more than double the 300,000 expected tourists visiting Vientiane in 2023 ([Tourism Laos, 2023](#)). Given Laos hosted almost 5 million tourists in 2019 who stayed an average of almost eight days ([Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism, 2020](#)), there is also sufficient capacity for future expansion. This is further supported by the recent opening of the Boten-Vientiane railway which has seen more than a million people use this service in 2021 ([The Star, 2022](#)) and 24.2 million passenger trips by the end of 2023 ([The Star, 2023](#)). This suggests that there are significant opportunities for expansion in Laos-Chinese tourism in the coming years.

In their daily interactions with foreign tourists, Laotian people frequently use broken English. While only a relatively small proportion of the population speaks English fluently (i.e., less than 10%), many are based in urban areas and work in tourism ([Harrison & Schipani, 2007](#)). This figure is rising as English is taught in more schools ([Gutiérrez-Colón & Somsivilay, 2021](#)), and Laos seeks to further their development through tourism ([Harrison & Schipani, 2007](#)). Conversely, while Thai continues to be a popular language on account of its geographic proximity ([Gomez et al., 2011](#)), the use of French as a language has decreased since Laos' independence. With Mandarin not yet widely spoken in Laos ([Li & Bai, 2022](#)), Laos is a good opportunity for Chinese undergraduate students to practice English proficiency with locals and other tourists.

Vientiane can be a comfortable, meaningful, and culturally authentic experience for English students from China. The limited number and concentration of tourist sites make navigation and exploration hassle-free ([Waters, 2016](#)), and the popularity of LOCA, a local ride-hailing service, makes it easy and safe to travel ([LOCA, 2023](#)). Many local coffee shops and restaurants have English menus, and most motels have English-speaking staff ([Cooper, 2008](#)). Additionally, as Vientiane hosts the largest concentration of tourists and expatriates in Laos, there are many opportunities to engage with tourists or to secure short-term work in Special Economic Zones that exist to facilitate economic cooperation between China and Laos ([Menhas et al., 2019](#)). Authentic cross-cultural engagement with English as a medium encourages improved

English proficiency and learning in ways that promote Lao culture and improve student careers in Laos or in China ([Krumboltz & Levin, 2010](#)).

Opportunities in Cambodia

Cambodia is a popular tourist destination in Southeast Asia, with an estimated 4.5 million tourists expected to visit in 2023 ([Van, 2023](#)). While this is a sizeable increase since COVID-19 disruptions in 2020 and 2021, it is still down from the 2019 figure of 6.61 million international tourists ([Open Development Cambodia, 2023](#)). Of these, 2.3 million tourists in 2019 were from China, making China the largest ethnic group of tourists in Cambodia ([Open Development Cambodia, 2023](#)). This is set to continue to rise with the opening of a new airport in Siem Reap that can facilitate up to 7 million passengers per year ([Cripps, 2023](#)) and another airport in Phnom Penh set to open in 2024 that will handle up to 13 million passengers initially and up to 30 million by 2030 ([Khmer Times, 2023](#)). While future tourist numbers are hard to predict, some estimates predict up to 7.5 million international tourists could visit the Kingdom annually by 2028 ([Noble, 2022](#)), many of whom will be Chinese. These factors make Cambodia an attractive destination for many Chinese students.

Many Cambodians are learning English to communicate with international tourists. Out of the approximate 16 million people in Cambodia, it was estimated that approximately 3.5 million Cambodians speak a level of English ([Phorn, 2016](#)), a figure that continues to increase. Tourism is centred around Sihanoukville; the capital of Phnom Penh; and Siem Reap, host to Angkor Wat. As Sihanoukville has a large concentration of Chinese, Siem Reap and Phnom Penh are better cities for Chinese students to visit, as they are more likely to encourage the use of English than Mandarin and host a proportionately higher number of international tourists who are not Chinese.

Structuring an immersive experience

Creating an immersive English-language experience requires more than talking to random strangers or tour guides. As learners are likely to be in a new culture without social support structures, they need suitable pastoral care, cultural context, and authentic learning opportunities. This aligns with the four essential components that [Lee \(2009\)](#) noted: academic studies, field experience, homestay, and community and socio-cultural activities. [Poon \(2016\)](#) further identified how this must include a formal and informal curriculum with activities such as courses, school experience, lesson observation, homestays,

cultural visits, outdoor activities, and exploration trips. A good English immersion experience requires a clear structure, curriculum, and support so students have opportunities that encourage practice.

[Supriyono et al. \(2022\)](#) have proposed a model that suggests a structure to support this language learning (see Figure 1). This model has three dimensions: curriculum, proficiency, and language management. [Yalden \(1987, p. 29\)](#) defines curriculum as the “goals, objectives, content, processes, resources, and means of evaluation of all the learning experiences planned for pupils both in and out of the school and community through classroom instruction and related programs [to support English language learning]”. We define English language proficiency as “the ability to use [English] language in real-world situations in a spontaneous interaction and non-rehearsed context and in a manner acceptable and appropriate to native speakers of the language” ([American Council on the Teaching of Foreign, 2015, p. 4](#)) as developed through language acquisition methods, second language learning, and informal learning. Language management is a term we use to refer to policies and programme governance.

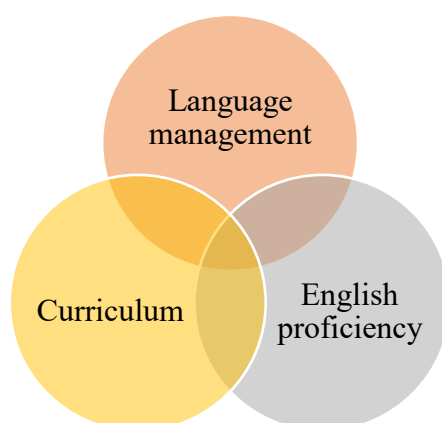


Figure 1. English immersion in a Southeast Asian EFL setting

Source: The authors

A programme that implements this model necessitates a well-defined framework to ensure that learners receive scaffolding and support throughout their development. This must start by providing learners with a programme that aligns with their university studies and is supported by local teachers familiar with the cultural context. Chinese, Laotian, and Cambodian institutions may support this programme by ensuring that there is sufficient

pastoral care based on clear agreements between providers on the services the learners will receive (see Table 1). These initiatives will help provide the holistic support required for language learning.

Table 1. *Application of English immersion*

Dimension	Broad application
Language management	Oversight by an academic board
	Appointment of relevant pastoral support staff
	Agreement between providers
Curriculum	English language classes
	Cultural and context classes
	Socio-cultural supporting resources
English proficiency	Visits to cultural centres (e.g., Angkor Wat and other temples or sites of historic importance)
	Visits to other places of importance. This could include tourist sites, business zones, and trade fairs.
	Exploration trips

Source: The authors

The programme must be further supported by good-quality resources and teaching staff. These staff should be familiar with the socio-cultural context and possess sufficient skills and abilities to support learners in developing good linguistic competencies and a cross-cultural understanding. In many cases, this may require teachers to develop an understanding of local cultures and nuances or a specific pedagogical approach so students can make meaning of a third culture while using only English. We propose that this happen through integrated and informal English classes that introduce the culture and context and then later reflect on current experiences – a process that can help create a positive learner identity and maintain motivation for learning ([Lamb, 2007](#)).

Lastly, as these experiences seek to develop English proficiency, it is important to arrange them so there are visits to cultural centres and places of importance. These field trips will help learners connect their classroom learning to their experiences and provide opportunities for practicing their English. Furthermore, these opportunities can help cultivate friendships or partnerships within the class and with collaborating organisations if learners visit business events or are encouraged to participate in networking events. [Gao \(2009\)](#) noted

how out-of-class learning experiences provide a friendly and supportive learning community and offer learners an opportunity for self-expression, enhancing their self-perception. This is particularly important when learners engage in activities that reflect regular life activities, like shopping or engaging with locals who are also learning English. Engagements like this can be enjoyable and authentic opportunities to practice language learning without losing face.

An informal assessment is recommended for this type of program. This could include setting certain tasks and then holding daily reflective discussions. This may be further reinforced by a reflective discussion with the class on returning to China. This approach encourages students to reflect on their language learning journey, foster critical thinking skills, and share their new knowledge. Moreover, students can analyse cultural differences between their home country and Southeast Asia and the cultural nuances and unique characteristics of the respective cultures. This approach also allows them to deepen their intercultural communication skills and broaden their perspectives. This further encourages other students to travel, and it promotes Southeast Asia as a tourist destination.

Conclusion

We believe that Laos and Cambodia are ideal destinations for Chinese undergraduate students seeking to enhance their English language skills through immersive experiences. While major tourist cities in Thailand and Vietnam might also offer similar opportunities, the compact nature of Vientiane and Phnom Penh and their relatively high levels of English usage compared with Chinese cities make them a favourable and affordable choice for overseas immersion experiences. Furthermore, current and future infrastructure projects like the Kunming-Vientiane high-speed rail connection make these destinations even more attractive and affordable for Chinese students seeking an immersive English language learning experience. To build these opportunities, we propose that English language educators in all three nations work together to facilitate these partnerships, so learners have an experience that significantly contributes to their linguistic skills and understanding of cross-cultural communication.

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