Cambodian Journal of Educational Research (2022)
Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 135–145.

English proficiency: Key to educational opportunities for Cambodian students

Kimcheng Ngel
Cambodian Education Forum
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Abstract

Cambodia has experienced some changes in the foreign language landscape in its recent history before having English as the most popular foreign language at present. However, research has shown that the English proficiency of Cambodians is low, which is troubling considering the role of English in educational opportunities. This article provides a brief historical background of foreign languages in Cambodia and explains how English opens doors to educational opportunities as it is the language of the internet and the Massive Open Online Courses. Moreover, as a global lingua franca, English serves as a language for overseas educational opportunities and research and publication. The article concludes with a word of caution regarding the embrace of English and the need to preserve the Khmer language.

Keywords: English; English proficiency; educational opportunities; Cambodian students

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 21 January 2022
Accepted 1 April 2022

© Cambodian Journal of Educational Research

Introduction

Cambodia has had a somewhat turbulent relationship with foreign languages in its recent history. Mao (2015) provided an overview of the historical context of foreign languages in Cambodia. During the French colonization (1863-1953) and the few decades after that, the main foreign language in Cambodia was, not surprisingly, French. When the Khmer Rouge took control of the country from 1975-1979, the whole educational system was practically destroyed. Ledgerwood (1990) stated that around 80% of written works in Khmer were deliberately ruined. The destruction was not just limited to books; intellectuals were also one of their main targets for mass killing (Quackenbush, 2019). Chigas and Mosyakoy (n.d.) noted that the Khmer Rouge aimed to eradicate the traces of what they considered Cambodia's imperialist past. The ability to speak French would associate a person with the education of the past colonial regime. Therefore, they were the target for execution. According to Filippi (2011), during this dark period, schools were all closed, and teachers were being criminalized. As a result, many teachers did not survive this brutal regime. Following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979-1989) mainly rebuilt the education system based on the Vietnamese model which introduced Vietnamese and Russian into the education system (Martin, 1986, as cited in Neau, 2003).

According to Mao (2015), it was only until 1989 that Cambodia started to include the teaching of English in its education system, albeit with awfully scarce resources, as there were no curriculums, textbooks, and enough teachers of English at the time. From the early 1990s to the present time, English and French are the official foreign languages taught in schools; however, English has become the most popular foreign language of choice for Cambodian students (Mao, 2015).

Despite the embrace of English, the English proficiency in Cambodia is very low, ranked 97th out of 112 countries globally and 21st out of 24 Asian countries surveyed (EF Education First, 2021). This rank is only slightly better than Thailand (ranked 100th globally) but far behind Vietnam (66th) (EF Education First, 2021). Cambodia's low English proficiency level is concerning as there is a great need for the use of English for various opportunities, including but not limited to professional, recreational, and educational possibilities.

This article discusses how English serves as the key to educational opportunities because of its status as the language of the internet and the medium of instruction for Massive Online Open Courses. The article also looks at the role of English as the language for overseas education and research and publication. The article concludes with a word of caution concerning the need to preserve the Khmer language in the midst of the popularity of English.

English as the language of the internet

English is the language of the internet. The internet is the gateway to information and knowledge. There are all kinds of educational content available online, from inspiring stories on TED Talks to math and science lessons on Khan Academy, and the number of books available online on websites such as the Internet Archive is more than any physical library could ever hold. In a joint report between the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) of Cambodia and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), one of the suggestions for quick and impactful intervention to improve Cambodian students' academic achievement is to create extra learning opportunities for them (MoEYS, 2018). If there is enough guidance or instruction from teachers, the educational resources available on the internet could be the answer for Cambodia to overcome the challenges of having limited educational resources. Moreover, as over 60% of the websites on the internet are in English (Bhutada, 2021), knowledge of English is essential. With good English proficiency, Cambodian students will be able to access learning resources online and use the internet as an essential educational tool.

According to The Phnom Penh Post (2021), Cambodia has one of the highest mobile penetrations in the world, with 20.8 million mobile connections (i.e., 124% of the population), and 10.7 million of those mobile connections are smartphones connected to the internet. Cambodia also has one of the youngest populations, with a median age of 25 (The Phnom Penh Post, 2021). As the young generation is widely known as being tech-savvy, navigating the internet for educational content would be within their forte. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the potential of digital education. In a joint needs assessment, it was found that the greatest hindrance to distance learning for Cambodian students during the pandemic was neither the ability to use technology nor the

internet but rather the lack of funds to pay for the technology or equipment to access online learning (MoEYS & The Education Sector Working Group, 2021).

English for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

Social distancing has limited many face-to-face learning opportunities; however, that does not mean education or professional development has to be halted. The rise of online learning all over the world, including in Cambodia, is the result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many schools and universities in Cambodia have been scrambling to turn their classes online. Even the Education Ministry is working hard to provide distance learning resources such as mobile applications and video lessons to students (Heng, 2021; Khmer Times, 2021; Tum, 2020;). While many students might not be familiar with online learning in the past, the current pandemic has introduced them to digital education, allowing them to be more familiar with online learning.

While English is essential for online learning, it is even more important for accessing the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). MOOCs are online learning courses that are available for free to the public or anyone with access to the internet (The Oxford Review, 2020). Many universities, including some of the top universities in the world, such as Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of Cambridge, and Stanford University, offer MOOCs classes. It is a flexible and free way to acquire new skills virtually in almost every subject. MOOCs were already quite sensational even before the pandemic. It is expected that their popularity will grow even more due to the impact of the pandemic. Because of the quality content and accessibility, one can still continue to benefit from MOOCs courses even after the pandemic. Even if they may not completely replace formal face-to-face education, they could still be great educational resources, especially for students in countries with limited online educational content, such as Cambodia.

However, MOOCs are not for everyone. Students with limited English ability will find it difficult, if not impossible, to access them. For example, on Class Central, a search engine and review site for MOOCs, nearly 90% of the MOOCs courses available on this search engine site are offered in English (Class Central, 2022). This corresponds with data in an Insider Higher Ed article stating that two of the most popular MOOCs providers, namely Coursera and edX, have

English as the language of instruction for over 80% of their courses (Agudo, 2019). A study by Finardi and Tyler (2015) also suggested that English proficiency is necessary to reap most of the benefits that MOOCs provide. In this sense, Cambodian students should not let the lack of English language proficiency be an obstacle to accessing these valuable educational resources. They need to try to improve their English proficiency.

English for educational opportunities abroad

Cambodia's education still has a lot to improve. Hence, going abroad may be a valuable opportunity to further one's education, but possessing a high English proficiency appears to be a prerequisite for an overseas academic journey. For example, in the QS World University Rankings 2022, nine of the top 10 universities in the world are in English-speaking countries. Moreover, 16 of the top 20 universities are in countries that have English as their official language (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2022). Besides, even if a student wishes to study at universities in countries whose official language is not English, the chances are that English would still be useful. According to Breen (2019), while around 400 million speakers learn English as a first language, there are approximately 1.5 billion English speakers. Thus, English is solidifying its position as the global lingua franca, a language spoken between people from different nations even if it is not even their native language (Abdullah & Chaudhary, 2012).

Even though studying abroad is a dream for many, not everyone can afford it. Fortunately, there are scholarships available for this very reason. However, many scholarships expect a certain level of English competence in addition to skills and experience. For example, some of the most prestigious fully-funded scholarships annually available to Cambodian people, such as the Fulbright Foreign Student Program and Australia Awards Scholarships, have English proficiency requirements. For the 2023-2024 intake, the Fulbright Scholarship requires a minimum of 88 on the internet-based TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or 7.0 on IELTS (International English Language Testing System), whereas for the Australia Awards Scholarships, Masters by coursework applicants must have at least 60 on internet-based TOEFL or IELTS Academic result with an overall score of at least 6.0, with no band less than 5.5 to be eligible to apply. For a masters by research, the same scholarship requires applicants to have at least 79 on internet-based TOEFL or IELTS Academic with

an overall score of at least 6.5 with no band less than 6.0. Thus, without having a certain level of command in English, it will be much more difficult to find a scholarship to study abroad.

English for research and publication

Research is an important part of students' academic endeavors. It helps students with writing essays for classes or something more significant such as a thesis or dissertation. As students venture through their academic journey, it is inevitable that they will be obliged to do some research or at least read some research articles. Cambodia, unfortunately, is lagging behind many countries when it comes to research performance. Of the ten countries in ASEAN, Cambodia is ranked 8th in terms of the number of publications indexed in the Scopus database (Heng, 2021; Heng et al., 2020). In 2013, the Voice of America (VOA) stated that research is not prioritized in Cambodia. The country invested so little in research that the World Bank did not even rank it (Khoun, 2013).

Fortunately, there have been some positive developments in recent years (see Heng, 2020b; Heng & Sol, 2021). For example, there are some new research journals for Cambodian researchers, such as the Cambodia Education Review (published by MoEYS); Insight: The Cambodia Journal of Basic and Applied Research (Royal University of Phnom Penh), the Cambodia Journal of Public Health (National Institute of Public Health of Cambodia), the Cambodian Journal of Educational Development (Hiroshima University and Cambodia's Japan International Cooperation Center), and the Cambodian Journal of Educational Research (Cambodian Education Forum) (see Heng & Sol, 2021, p. 10). Even if the number of articles published in these journals is still limited, it is great to see such progress. Nevertheless, almost all the articles published in these journals are still in English. This means that the English language use in the Cambodian academic sphere is quite prominent.

Considering the academic nature of research, one would need to be proficient in English to fully comprehend the content published and even more so to write and publish research in English. Furthermore, English has been the language of choice for many international scholarly journals. According to Curry and Lillis (2018), around 27,000 journals included in the Web of Science are mostly published in English. Even if more than 9,000 peer-reviewed scholarly journals

are being published in other languages, with the highest contribution being French, German, Spanish, and Chinese, most of them are not included in prestigious journal indexes. This clearly shows that English is the global lingua franca of the academic world (Curry & Lillis, 2018). Therefore, to read various research or published findings, whether in local or international journals, one needs to be proficient in English.

Concluding remarks

English can bring immense educational benefits by allowing students to make use of a wide variety of educational content offline and online. It provides them with the chance to further their education abroad and pursue their research endeavors. With such a strong foothold, English is unlikely to dwindle in the foreseeable future. Cambodian students should therefore work hard to improve their English proficiency to reap all these advantages. On the other hand, students also need to take caution in preserving their own language and not neglect it. Despite Cambodia's limited proficiency in English discussed above, there is seemingly a contradictory report on how some of the younger generations of Cambodians, albeit being Cambodian natives, struggle with Khmer and appear to be more competent in English (see An & Mom, 2020; Heng, 2020a). This inconsistency might be linked to the disparity between people of different socioeconomic or geographic backgrounds. For instance, there are many more international schools in Phnom Penh, the capital city, compared to other provinces. This suggests an alarming development.

Although being fluent in English might bring the aforementioned rewards, the loss of one's language is detrimental to one's identity and culture. If we lose our own language, we will not only risk losing our culture but also our social bonds and networks, which will in turn affect our social, mental, and physical well-being (Dastgoshadeh & Jalilzadeh, 2011). Hence, we need to be careful to prevent language loss to avoid these negative consequences. Even if English is important, Khmer should not be neglected.

The reason for the need for English regarding educational opportunities is largely due to the fact that Cambodia lacks high-quality educational resources. This can be attributed to the brutal Khmer Rouge regime and the combination of a weak reading culture along with the problems of piracy and limited

protection of copyright of books, which demotivates many Cambodian authors from publishing (Duncan, 2021; Ellen, 2013). This makes it even more difficult to recoup the loss of that wisdom. While the legacy of the Khmer Rouge remains even now, we must try our best to recover our wealth of knowledge, both written and unwritten. With that mindset and vision, even if we are embracing English as a vehicle for educational opportunities, we need to also work hard to rectify what we are lacking: well-made educational content in our very own language, Khmer.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express appreciation to Mr. Kimkong Heng and Mr. Koemhong Sol, Co-Editors-in-Chief of the Cambodian Education Forum, and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments, suggestions, and assistance in improving this article.

The author

Kimcheng Ngel is currently an English teacher at the Australian Centre for Education (ACE) and a research intern at the Cambodian Education Forum (CEF). She has been teaching English since 2018. She holds a B.Ed in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from the Institute of Foreign Languages, Royal University of Phnom Penh. Her areas of professional interest lie in learners' autonomy, lifelong learning, and digital education.
Email: ngelkimcheng@gmail.com

References

Abdullah, S., & Chaudhary, M. (2012, December). *English as a global lingua franca* [Paper presentation]. International Conference on Education, Applied Sciences and Management (ICEASM'2012), Dubai, United Arab Emirates https://psrcentre.org/images/extraimages/27.%201412116.pdf

Agudo, R. (2019, January 9). *MOOCs' overwhelming dependence on English limits their impact (opinion)*. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-

learning/views/2019/01/09/moocs-overwhelming-dependence-english-limits-their-impact-opinion

An, K., & Mom, S. (2020, January 10). *Fluent in English, awkward in Khmer: A generation is growing up with a mixed bag of language skills*. Newsroom Cambodia. https://newsroomcambodia.com/en/2020/01/10/fluent-in-english-awkward-in-khmer-a-generation-is-growing-up-with-a-mixed-bag-of-language-skills/

Bhutada, G. (2021, March 26). *Visualizing the most used languages on the internet.* Visual Capitalist. https://www.visualcapitalist.com/the-most-used-languages-on-the-internet/

Breene, K. (2019, November 15). *Which countries are best at English as a second language?* World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/11/countries-that-speak-english-as-a-second-language/

Chigas, G., & Mosyakov, D. (n.d.). *Literacy and education under the Khmer Rouge*. Yale University Genocide Studies Program. https://gsp.yale.edu/literacy-and-education-under-khmer-rouge

Class Central. (2020). *About Class Central*. https://www.classcentral.com/about

Curry, M. J., & Lillis, T. (2018, March 13). *The domination of English-language journal publishing is hurting scholarship in many countries (opinion)*. Inside Higher Ed. www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/03/13/domination-english-language-journal-publishing-hurting-scholarship-many-countries

Dastgoshadeh, A., & Jalilzadeh, K. (2011). Language loss, identity, and English as an international language. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, *21*(4), 659-665. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/289304322_Language_loss_identity_and_English_as_an_international_language

Duncan, K. (2021, March 18). *Once a necessity, book piracy today holds Cambodian literature back*. Southeast Asia Globe. https://southeastasiaglobe.com/book-piracy-cambodia/

EF Education First. (2021). *EF English proficiency index.* https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/regions/asia/cambodia/

Ellen, R. (2013, June 27). *Book bound: publishing trap*. The Phnom Penh Post. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/7days/book-bound-publishing-trap

Filippi, J. (2011, June 17). *Cambodia's turbulent educational history*. The Phnom Penh Post. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-plus/cambodias-turbulent-educational-history

Finardi, K., & Tyler, J. (2015). *The role of English and technology in the internationalization of education: Insights from the analysis of MOOCs* [Paper presentation]. 7th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies, Barcelona, Spain.

Heng, K. (2020a, November 7). *Embracing English while preserving Khmer identity*. Cambodian Education Forum. https://cefcambodia.com/2020/11/07/embracing-english-while-preserving-khmer-identity/

Heng, K. (2020b). *New hope for a research culture in Cambodia.* Cambodia Development Center. https://cd-center.org/2020/10/23/new-hope-for-a-research-culture-in-cambodia/

Heng, K. (2021). *Steps to promote academic research in Cambodia*. Cambodia Development Center. https://cd-center.org/2021/03/13/steps-to-promote-academic-research-in-cambodia/

Heng, K., & Sol, K. (2021). Academic research in Cambodia: Progress, challenges, and ways forward. *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research*, *1*(2), 6-23. https://cefcambodia.com/2021/12/30/academic-research-in-cambodia-progress-challenges-and-ways-forward

Heng, K., Sol, K., Kaing, S., & Ros, V. (2020). Introduction: the need to promote a strong research and publication culture in Cambodia. In K. Heng, S. Kaing, V. Ros, & K. Sol (Eds.), *English Language Teaching, education, and online learning in Cambodia during COVID-19: Perspectives from practitioners and researchers* (pp. 1-10). Cambodian Education Forum. https://cefcambodia.com/2020/12/29/english-language-teaching-education-and-online-learning-in-cambodia-during-covid-19/

Khoun, T. (2013, April 10). *Cambodia lacks research enough to tackle its problems, analysts say.* VOA Cambodia. https://www.voacambodia.com/a/cambodia-lacks-research-enough-to-tackle-its-problems-analysts-say/1638656.html

Ledgerwood, J. (1990, September). *A building full of books*. Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine. https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/building-full-books

Mao, S. (2015). Education and policy on English language in Cambodia. In T. W. Bigalke & S. Sharbawi (Eds.), *English for ASEAN integration: Policies and practices in the region* (pp. 22-31). Universiti Brunei Darussalam. https://silo.tips/download/chapter-12-education-and-policy-on-english-language-in-cambodia

MoEYS, & The Education Sector Working Group. (2021). *Needs assessment helps to understand the impact of COVID-19 on education stakeholders*. UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/reports/needs-assessment-helps-understand-impact-covid-19-education-stakeholders

MoEYS. (2018). *Education in Cambodia: Findings from Cambodia's experience in PISA for development*. https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-for-development/PISA-D%20national%20report%20for%20Cambodia.pdf

Neau, V. (2003). The teaching of foreign languages in Cambodia: A historical perspective. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, *16*(3), 253-268. https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310308666673

Khmer Times. (2021, May 8). *Official launch of a self-learning mobile application.* https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50853462/official-launch-of-a-self-learning-mobile-application/

Quackenbush, C. (2019, January 7). *40 years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia still grapples with Pol Pot's brutal legacy*. The Times. https://time.com/5486460/pol-pot-cambodia-1979/

Quacquarelli Symonds. (2022). *QS World University Rankings 2022*. https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2022

The Oxford Review. (2020, April 16). *MOOCs, cMOOCs and xMOOCs: Definition and explanation*. https://oxford-review.com/oxford-review-encyclopaedia-terms/moocs-cmoocs-and-xmoocs-definition-and-explanation/

The Phnom Penh Post. (2021, June 30). *Cambodia's digital economy.* https://phnompenhpost.com/financial/cambodias-digital-economy

Tum, M. (2020, April 23). *Education ministry pushes for online classes, as school closures extended*. VOA Cambodia. https://www.voacambodia.com/a/education-ministry-pushes-for-online-classes-as-school-closures-extended/5388208.html