



# RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

## **M.Ed. In TESL Program Language Group Specific Informational Reports**

Produced by Graduate Students in the M.Ed. In TESL Program  
In the Feinstein School of Education and Human Development

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# Cambodia

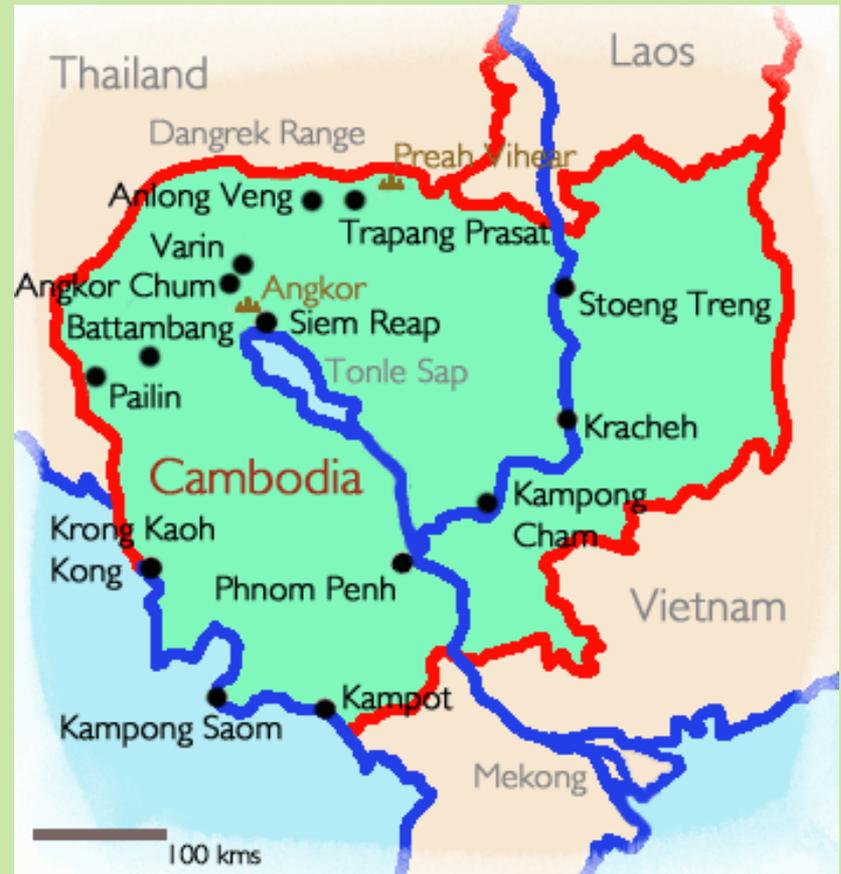


## **DIFFICULTIES CAMBODIAN STUDENTS FACE WHEN LEARNING ENGLISH**

Rosanna Mejia  
TESL 539  
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# History

- Cambodia was formally known as Kampuchea.
- Cambodia shares its borders with Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.
- Cambodian or Khmer is the official language of Cambodia.
- Khmer language derives from the Sanskrit and text which is the ancient language of India and Pali that is known to be Buddhist scriptures.
- Cambodian is an Austroasiatic language which means that it is a language spoken in southern and southeastern Asia.



No Author, Map of Cambodia.

# Language Background

- Cambodian is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asian language most commonly spoken of Asian languages.
- About 15 million people speak Cambodian around the world in various countries such as; Canada, China, Vietnam, Thailand, France, Laos, USA, and of course Cambodia.
- In the United States there are 181,889 Cambodian speakers.
- In Rhode Island there are 5,586 Cambodian speakers.
- This makes Cambodian the 5<sup>th</sup> most spoken language in RI.
- The majority of Cambodians are settled in Providence and in Woonsocket.



Lee, 2006

# Writing System

## Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in Khmer

- មាត្រា ១  
មនុស្សម្នាក់ៗ អាចប្រើប្រាស់សិទ្ធិនិងសេរីភាពទាំងអស់ ដែលមានចែងក្នុងសេចក្តីប្រកាសនេះ ដោយគ្មានការប្រកាន់បែងចែកបែបណាមួយ មានជាអាទិ៍ ពូជសាសន៍ ពណ៌សម្បុរ ភេទ ភាសា សាសនា មតិនយោបាយ ឬមតិផ្សេងៗទៀត ដើមកំណើតជាតិ ឬសង្គម ទ្រព្យសម្បត្តិ កំណើត ឬស្ថានភាព ដទៃៗទៀតឡើយ។
- All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

- Khmer is a symbol based writing language.
- Its alphabet originates from the Brahmi scrip of ancient India from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- The [alphabet](#) is composed of 33 consonants, 24 dependent vowels, and 12 independent vowels and several diacritic symbols, a special punctuation mark.
- Consonants can be pronounce in two different ways. [One with inherent vowel /o/ and the other with inherent vowel /a/.](#)

# Interesting Facts



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- It is disrespectful to touch the head of a person who is older than you are. This can also be interpreted as threat sign.
- Only men and older women are allowed to sit crisscross. Younger females are to sit with their legs sideways.
- Older people, or people who have established themselves within the community, are given a higher level of respect. They are to be greeted and fed first.
- It is still customary in the Cambodian culture to have arranged marriage even if you are living in the United States.

# Cambodian Communication Styles

- The man in the house hold is addressed as 'bong' meaning older or wiser, even if he is actually younger than the female. This term is also used for the older brothers or older sisters.
- If someone is younger, for example, a younger brother or sister they are addressed as 'own'.
- Children usually wait to be addressed by an older person. They will only initiate a conversation if there is a problem or they need something.
- Cambodian is a non-tonal language therefore it has no inflection expect at the end of the sentence where there is minimal variation in pitch. They carry this type of behavior when learning English, making it difficult to transmit the intended emotions to the listener.
- Cambodians prefer to keep their distance when speaking to others. Hugging, shacking hands, or kissing is not commonly seen. Instead they bow their hands to the person with both hands together as if they were pray.



Wikimedia Commons, 2007

# Challenges Cambodian Language Learners Face

- One of the main challenges Cambodian learners face when entering US schools is that many of them have had minimal schooling ,if any, in their native country.
- Cambodian children need to learn a whole new alphabet and writing system that does not involve symbols.
- In Cambodian writing a space is an indicator of the end of a sentence, verses in English, a space is added to indicate the end of a word.
- Punctuation can also be a struggling point for Cambodian learner. In English punctuation shows the end of a sentence and the tone in which something is being said. In Cambodian punctuation is hardly ever used.

# Syntax

- Cambodian words are mainly short with one or two syllables.
  - When writing Cambodian the writing does not have spaces between words except to specify the end of a clause or a sentence.
  - Cambodian writing follows the same writing pattern as in English that is, subject-verb-object agreement.
- cum riep  
sue/Hello



Even though Cambodian share some of the same syntax systems as English, there are a lot other areas that present a challenge for Cambodian English learners both speaking and writing.

## **Structure**

For example:

- Omission of copula
- Omission of articles
- Omission of conjunctions

# Phonetic and Phoneme Challenges of Cambodian Language Learners

- Cambodian learners make substitutions for incorrect letters that have similar pronunciation (jrink-drink).
- They have difficulties producing some nasal consonant sounds therefore they omit them (stap-stamp).
- Cambodians have a hard time identifying and distinguishing the difference between /k/ for /g/, /v/ for /w/, /f/ for /th/.
- Cambodian English learners will also drop or omit the ending sounds on words that end in /r/, /d/, /g/, /s/, /b/, and /z/. For example: “Bo” for “Bob”.
- They can also distort the /e/, /i/, /u/, and /ae/ vowel sounds (“hed” for “head”).

# Semantic challenges

- Cambodian learners use modifiers that represent gender such as 'son', 'daughter', etc., verses in English when pronouns 'her and him' are more commonly used.
- In the Cambodian language the quantity or the amount of something is inferred by the context of the sentence. This is truly hard for Cambodian who need to learn how to pluralize words in context (two birds).
- Cambodians also struggle with the idea of showing facial expression and body language that encompass what they are saying or feeling.

# Morphology Challenges

For example

- Omission of plurals
  - Omission of past tense
  - Omission of possessive
  - Misuse of pronouns
- Two dog – two dogs
  - She walk yesterday- walked
  - Mary dog – Mary's dog
  - His skirt – her skirt

# Pragmatic Challenges

- Cambodian learners have a hard time maintaining a conversation on the same topic for more than two or three turns. This can present a problem when learning English and can be interpreted as a lack of interest.
- Cambodians do not frequently ask questions to clarify their understanding. This can also be problematic when learning English if a confusion occurs and clarification is not made.
- Since Cambodian is a non-tonal language and the rate of speech does not change, nor does the tone, reading in English can present another problem. The learner may be seen as a monotone type of reader with minimal fluency.
- In English individuals take turns talking during a conversation. This is difficult for Cambodian learners since they do not expect to necessarily have a turn in a conversation.
- Cambodian children look down to show respect when they are being spoken to or reprimanded. In the US this is a sign of lack of interest and in some instances disrespectful.

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