

TEACHING ENGLISH IN CAMBODIA

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English proficiency is becoming a requirement for success in our interconnected world. The ability to communicate in English is particularly important in the hospitality industry. Without basic proficiency in English, the generally accepted international language, communication between international guests and hospitality workers can lead to frustration and misunderstanding. Only 32% of Cambodian children entering primary education matriculate to secondary schools where English language classes can be taken (Clayton, 2002), which means only a small percentage of the Cambodian population has the opportunity to gain skills for employment in the rapidly growing hospitality industry.

The McMaster School for Advancing Humanity provides scholars with opportunities to facilitate change in the lives of individuals and families around the world. My project involved teaching basic English to people in the hospitality sector of Cambodia's workforce. Over several months, with the assistance of our learning community, I developed language manuals in Khmer and English containing useful English phrases, vocabulary, and workforce development skills necessary for men and women seeking employment in the high-end hospitality industry in Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, and Kampang Cham.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For my project, I developed three primary research questions. First, what circumstances require the teaching of basic English phrases to select workers in Cambodia? Second, what words or phrases must hotel and restaurant workers know in order to communicate effectively with English-speaking domestics and tourists? Third, how might I train my Cambodian learning community colleagues in Khmer words and phrases that would facilitate communication while in-country?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A lack of basic literacy skills is a major barrier to Cambodians learning a second language. Kosonen (2005) found that a significant portion of the adult Cambodian population did not receive basic education as children. Pheng (2005) emphasizes that in addition to the lack of basic literacy skills, most of the world's rural population cannot access the means to improve their education. "[M]ore than 80% of the population living in rural areas ... has little or no access to computers or the Internet," receiving information

mainly through radio and television (Pheng, 2005). With 30% of secondary teacher trainers in Phnom Penh City “who can understand English” teaching, the role of qualified teachers is essential to promoting literacy (ICT in Education, n.d.). As a result, various projects have been initiated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to promote literacy (K. Spike, personal communication, 2007).

Though literacy education may be at an early stage in Cambodia, “self-learning and lifelong learning” are essential to helping the nation overcome the challenge of illiteracy (Pheng, 2005). Oung Chanthol (2007), the founder of the Cambodian Women’s Crisis Centre (CWCC), remarked during our interview at Defiance College that approximately 79% of Cambodians cannot read and write Khmer, making the use of illustrations and small groups vital to building literacy. It was evident to me that with low levels of literacy in their native language, I would need to keep my instructional methods in Cambodia simple.

To decide how best to teach Cambodian English students, I visited with Kate Spike, the English as a Second Language director at Bowling Green State University, in July 2007. She suggested that the use of songs and props might be beneficial to retaining the meaning of new words. This technique is enhanced when all five senses are used because the senses make strong connections with the brain. Moreover, it is important to remember the cultural background in which the students understand and learn and speak regularly. She emphasized that speaking slowly gives a false impression of the everyday speech patterns that they will encounter when speaking with native English speakers.

Susan Needham (2003) differentiates between Cambodian and Western “language views.” While Cambodians view language as a “medium through which social reality is created,” many Western educators regard “language as a tool to identify and reference objects in the world” (Needham, 2003). Needham observed that Western education emphasizes the role of the individual in relation to group learning, which tends to change social relationships over time. By contrast, Cambodian education emphasizes group learning and tends to reinforce the primacy of societal mores over the importance of the individual (Needham, 2003).

In a conversation with Professor Needham (Needham, 2007), she explained that rote memorization and choral recitation continue to be valued in Khmer learning. Group recitation enables the student’s mistakes to be less obvious to others. With this new knowledge I decided to conduct a controlled study on the effectiveness of teaching Khmer students English according to two

methods: the traditional Khmer style of choral recitation, and the Western method of active learning and point and tell. After teaching both groups the same material, I would compare their learning acquisition with a pre/post evaluation to see which performed better.

The final aspect to my project was teaching Khmer for travelers to the Defiance College Cambodian Learning Community. I attempted to follow Needham's advice to speak primarily Khmer during class and not allow the students to speak English. Unfortunately, I used the Khmer choral recitation technique which seemed different to many of the Western-educated students. It was difficult to speak only Khmer as we were learning basic Khmer and time did not permit that we learn any more than rudimentary phrases.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In April, 2007, I began researching and learning to write and speak Khmer. In June 2007, I began my search for language assistance, creating a list of 12 basic Khmer phrases that I wanted to learn. Dr. Jo Ann Burkhardt, the McMaster Fellow, helped me reduce my original list of words and phrases to a manageable size. I also worked with Dr. Burkhardt to develop pre- and post-language training evaluations for the staff and clients at the CWCC. Because many of the women were illiterate in their native language, Khmer, we decided that both evaluations should be performed orally and be identical, using five simple questions accompanied by three images to gauge learning. I also created a certificate of completion to be handed to each Cambodian participant in my language training.

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After arriving in Cambodia, I identified my audience, set audience goals, developed a lesson with 15-minute intervals (making it possible to give mini-lessons if necessary), created a script to allow the clients and staff to participate, and finally, reviewed and recapped the key points of the lesson. Due to time constraints, I also shortened my list to 11 hotel words and 11 restaurant words with three useful phrases: "May I help you?" "Please," and "Thank you."

In preparation for teaching, I rehearsed my teaching script with a translator, organized my teaching aids and the contents of my 7-page basic English manual, and printed all of the necessary documents. On January 3, I taught my first session at the CWCC. It was amazing! For three and a half hours in the morning, I taught 11 female staff members, ranging from ages 50 to 70, in a small daycare center with many posters of beginning Khmer on the walls.



The pre-evaluation process seemed like utter chaos. Many staff members did not complete the evaluation independently, but in groups of two, making me realize that I should have been more explicit in stating that evaluations should be completed independently. After the pre-test, I wrote the list of words in Khmer on the board. Everyone seemed engaged and many even helped correct my misspellings. By about 10:00 A.M., the group seemed exhausted, so we had a 15-minute break, eating bananas and exchanging Khmer and English language translations. After break, we reviewed both the hotel and restaurant vocabulary. I then had them pair up into groups of two. One person practiced saying “May I help you, please?” and the other person would say the new word, for example, “water,” I walked around and helped answer pronunciation questions. I was unable to collect any post-evaluation results. However, the pre-evaluation results revealed that nearly half of the staff members had a strong understanding of English words prior to the training and more than half (6 out of 11 students) performed within the 70 to 80 percentile.

Later that afternoon I returned to teach 15 CWCC clients ranging from ages 12 to 79. I read each word aloud in English, which was translated into Khmer, and then said “Repeat after me.” We repeated each word in English about

five or six times instead of two or three, as was the case with the CWCC staff members. In unison, we repeated all 23 words. During the second half of the teaching session, the students role-played customer and server. The students seemed to enjoy the training. Many had difficulty pronouncing the *sh* sound in the word fish. In addition, thank you was pronounced “sank shoe” as the *th* and *yu* sounds were a struggle for many students.

Although the pre-evaluations indicated that the literacy level of the CWCC clients was lower than the staff members, the clients were more enthusiastic about my instruction. When we took a group photo, many requested a copy. In the pre-evaluation, six students, or 40%, of the 15 scored a 90% while 60% tied for 100% scores. Two students, or 13%, scored a 70% on the pre-evaluation and one student scored an 80%, which accounted for 6% of the class average. According to this data, it appears that the majority of the students were in the 90 to 100% range, but this is speculative as many of the students spoke to one another during the evaluation process. The post-evaluation scores were as follows: 16 of the 18 students (89%) received a 100%, one student (5.5%) received a 90%, and one student (5.5%) received an 80%. The same problems that we encountered with the pre-evaluation were also present, but the results did show higher scores after students had been taught my Survival (Basic) English Manual.

REFLECTION

My experience in Cambodia taught me how teamwork can best serve the needs of a community. Without the support of my learning community colleagues who collected props, participated in demonstrations, and informed my project from different angles, I would have been unable to complete my work. I also experienced firsthand the complexities of working with a translator to complete a lesson. I can also say that the process of completing my literature review enhanced my confidence as a scholarly researcher. Finally, the experience of recognizing student needs and then modifying my lessons to meet those needs has improved my problem-solving skills. Despite the short time that I taught, I believe the CWCC clients learned something beneficial.

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