Teaching English
To
Cambodian Learners

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Introduction

The purpose of this work is to present both native English speaking and Khmer instructors of English with classroom tasks designed for the learning preferences of Khmer EFL students. To this end research material published by both Khmer and foreign scholars on the behavioral and social-linguistic factors influencing learner behavior and communicative competence in the Khmer EFL classroom were examined. Research by international linguistic scholars on the ethnologic mental processes (e.g. cognitive, psychological, and analytical) as well as the socio-linguistic characteristics of Khmer learners engaged in second language acquisition were examined. The combination of these two constituents was employed to design motivational tasks applicable for Khmer primary, secondary, and tertiary level students. Though the task models presented in the proceeding chapters are gauged to intermediate-level learners, adaptations can be made to orientate the material to higher or lower proficiency levels.

The tasks were designed with the knowledge that students in different countries have diverse learning preferences. For example, Thai students prefer auditory and kinesthetic learning in a pair/group format. Koreans students favor visual learning, Arabic learners value tactile learning while English and Indonesian learners respond well to individual learning. There is a generous amount of overlap and weaving of these multi-cultural learners within the various learner preference models, nevertheless, primary motivational characteristics are apparent and were considered when designing the classroom tasks presented. With much of the classroom research available centered on Western-style educational approaches to task-based learning, it follows that most of the academic material available has been generated in Anglo-American facilities with a slant toward the learning demeanor of Western students.

In Cambodia, English as a second language research is at a premium since educational practices, procedures, and implementation lack the standardization found in most other ASEAN nations. Schools can vary from one-room sheds to modernized high-tech facilities; class sizes from 5 to 60, and teachers from traveling volunteers to experts in the field of second language acquisition. Students can vary from those educated in a proper school setting to those who only recently stepped foot into a classroom for the first time. It is hoped that this book has assembled the available research both academic and governmental to produce a systematic approach to the teaching of English in Cambodia. Khmer students of English face a number of logistical challenges that compound the problem of receiving appropriate second language education. Much of what is needed nationwide is concentrated in the larger cities, leaving smaller towns and villages to fend for themselves. The rapid demand for higher education has outpaced the nation’s
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capacity to provide quality instruction for learners and economic incentives for its graduates. Those entering the workforce are finding their options limited and multiple degrees are often necessary to better the chances of finding employment. Leng (2010:30) describes the typical university student attitude towards higher education in Cambodia:

Complicating the situation is the current privatization and expansion of higher education without clearly regulated mechanisms. The growing annual high unemployment rate, mainly among graduates from the private higher education sector, has greatly increased concern for the future quality and sustainability of higher education in Cambodia.

English offers all manners of employment possibilities and is seen as a commodity for work both home and abroad. Yet the English education system and its transformation from the grammar-translation methodology to communicative language teaching have come under great scrutiny. Khleang & Chomdokmai (2012:16) reflect on the rigors of providing modern teaching applications to the Khmer classroom:

It is difficult for the trainees to apply what they have learned from NIE because of two reasons. First, some teaching methodologies require rich resources. Thus, the learning would not be applied successfully. Secondly, since the number of students in schools is relatively large, some teaching techniques will not be applicable. In this regard, to be more successful and effective in applying these methodologies, the number of students should be somewhere around 30 or less.

Native English speaking instructors, trained and experienced in the methods of language teaching and classroom behavior, may find their students and surroundings a challenge. Khmer students have recurrently finished near or at the bottom in international English proficiency examinations. This point of fact is known to all concerned yet those presiding over educational agendas seem unwilling or unable to address the issue with conviction. Cambodia’s inability to compete in the ASEAN community and the global stage bears some relationship to the low English fluency level of its people.

Alongside an emerging economy and global recognition comes a greater need for proficient English speakers. With Vietnam and Myanmar gaining technological ground and other Asian nations on the rise, Cambodia can ill afford to remain complacent. This verity lingers in the mind of politicians, administrators, parents, and students. The deficit has not been in the message, but rather the strategy needed to bring Cambodia on board. It is hoped that the following chapters will give both teachers and students an avenue that leads to greater success in the teaching and learning of the English language.
Introduction

Chapter I, ‘The Khmer Education Experience’, begins by exploring how historical, economic, and cultural conditions have influenced English language study in Cambodia. Statistical information from both governmental and non-governmental agencies as well as EFL researchers regarding the difficulties of implementing communicative English language teaching is presented. The section ‘Cultural Awareness’ discusses the international dominance of the English language and its effect on Cambodian educational reforms while the section ‘Motivating Khmer Learners’ examines what motivates Khmer learners to study English. Intrinsic/extrinsic and instrumental/integrative motivations are discussed and the benefits of group/pair learning on motivation levels are probed.

Chapter II, ‘Primary Linguistic Concerns’ discusses the three major concerns and difficulties in English acquisition (pronunciation, grammar, and writing) for most Khmer and ASEAN learners and the particulars of the Khmer language that are transferred into English. The ‘Khmer-English Pronunciation’ section compares Khmer and English phonemes and stress patterns as well as common pronunciation errors and the causes behind them. The ‘Grammar Comparisons’ section examines L1 interference and the resulting common English grammatical errors. English sentence formation and parts of speech are also covered. The ‘Writing Basics’ section begins with a list of errors common to Khmer essay writers of English followed by a brief description of paragraph, narrative, descriptive, and comparison/contrast writing styles. The section ‘Khmer Learner Preferences’ explores the style of learning preferred by Khmer learners.

Chapter III, ‘Formulating Tasks’ opens with a description of the task-based approach and the relevant literature and research that supports the construction of task-based models in lesson plans and curriculum design. The three task-based types (information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap) represent the categories individual tasks fall under. This chapter offers research perspectives on the oral narrative style of delivery as well as the linguistic benefits of video and music as extra-linguistic support.

Chapter IV, ‘Lesson Plans’, offers abbreviated lesson plans for each task. The examples include notes on the goal, strategy, and classification types of each lesson as well as a procedural guide (introduction, during the task, and after the task) for instructors. Task material for each class is presented along with suggestions on how lessons can be altered to fit various target groups.
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