

Title of Project:

Medium-of-Instruction Policies in
Higher Education in Cambodia

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Project Summary

In this dissertation, the medium-of-instruction policies in Cambodia higher education and its social, economic, and political contexts are examined. Guiding the study are the three research questions that follow:

1. What are the current medium-of-instruction policies in higher education in Cambodia?
2. How are English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English Medium Instruction (EMI) classes situated in and reflective of the larger language ecology of Cambodia University (CU)?
3. How are the medium-of-instruction policy choices in higher education practically and discursively connected to the social, economic, and political situations in Cambodia?

The current research raised interesting issues regarding mother-tongue medium, English medium, and bilingual medium education in post-colonial and developing countries, including issues of nationalism, modernism, hegemony and social inequality. Also, the research contributed to the increasing knowledge of the growing influence of foreign languages particularly English in Cambodia, of the potential inequalities caused by language policies, and of the social, economic, and political contexts that condition them. The knowledge in turns helps inform language policy actors from the top to the bottom levels, including legislators, rectors, administrators, instructors, and students.

The current research can be described as a case study of one flagship university in Cambodia. Data were obtained at different layers of the policies including legislations, institutions, and classrooms. At the legislation level, policy documents were analyzed to see how different languages are represented. At the institutional level, interviews with university administrators and job and scholarship announcements were examined for the contexts for the policies implementation. The contexts for implementation were also examined at the classroom level with data drawing from classroom observations and interviews with both students and instructors. Critical discourse and nexus analyses were done to uncover the discourses about language and the discourses intersected at the different layers of the policies.



An analysis of the policy documents shows that Cambodia Education Law 2007 does not have a clear mandate for a language of instruction in higher education, leaving this decision to individual higher education institutions. However, a movement towards English at universities is embedded in other legal documents, including the Policy for Higher Education vision 2030 and the Strategic Plans 2014-2018 of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS). These documents emphasize the importance of preparing students to live and work in the era of globalization and in a knowledge-based society and of bringing the quality of Cambodia higher education in line with regional and international standards. This movement towards English is also realized in the case study of CU. Many of the strategies in the MoEYS policy documents are also adopted by the Strategic Plan 2014-2018 of CU, including the plan to increase the number of international students, diversify the curriculum, and pursue staff and faculty professional development.

In practice, although Khmer is still widely used in many graduate and undergraduate programs at different universities in Cambodia, whenever resources allow, the programs are offered using English as a medium of instruction (EMI), and when the resources are short, effort is put into offering EFL classes instead. Whether the programs are offered in EMI or not, the desire to improve English proficiency is strong, illustrated by the English requirement in their entrance or exit exams. English has also dominated many important aspects of the programs including the textbooks and other instructional resources, information booklets, leaflets, and syllabi.

The Khmer language is promoted in the MoEYS Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018 through the translation and publication of educational materials and research papers; however, it has not been rigorously promoted at the practice level particularly in the case study of CU. Moreover, previous efforts in translating and publishing educational materials and research papers in Khmer language have met many challenges and are not practical.

Analysis of the interview transcripts and observation notes shows that English has an important status in Cambodia particularly in higher education. Although some participants express concerns over the lack of attention to Khmer language, all of them including administrators, instructors and students choose English as their preferred medium of instruction in higher education. Many of them link English proficiency to academic success, job opportunities and advancements, opportunities to obtain oversea scholarships, and a country development in general. This need for English is also evidenced in the job advertisements and the scholarship announcements, which constitute an important part of CU's language ecology. Many advertisements and all the announcements require certain level of English proficiency. This English requirement is a strong rationale for students to choose a university program with a strong English language component and for instructors and administrators of the university to tailor their instructions and programs to this need.

Although English is playing an increasingly important role in higher education in Cambodia, it is generally perceived as not threatening the existence of Khmer in the ecology. One given reason is the constitutional recognition of Khmer as a national language and its mandated use as a medium of instruction in public general education. Many participants believe that by the time students start university, their foundation in the Khmer language is already strong. Another reason is the discourse around the Khmer language is focused on the importance of Khmer as an identity and a symbol of culture in Cambodia; therefore, it needs protection and promotion. This discourse is shared in many of the interviews and focus groups. At CU, the increasing use of English is seen as a nice addition to the already existing programs in Khmer and as preparing students to become more competitive in the labor market as Cambodia is integrated into the ASEAN economic community. This is understood as a good condition for the co-existence between Khmer and English.

The decision to adopt EMI and to integrate as much English as possible into the teaching of content subjects illustrates the exercises of agency ([Canagarajah, 1999](#)) of the instructors and administrators of CU. They have shown awareness of the benefits and consequences of their decisions. All the participants see the movement towards English in higher education as an unavoidable trend and as providing benefits at both individual and societal levels. However, this agency is performed in specific social, economic, and political contexts.

The nexus analysis ([Hult, 2007, 2010](#); [Scollon & Scollon, 2004, 2007](#)) of all the data shows three important mediational layers for the decisions. First, these policy decisions are mediated by the historical body of policy actors, many of whom obtained their undergraduate and graduate degrees in EMI programs and in English-speaking countries. The English proficiency and experiences with English of the instructors in their specialized areas make it easier for them to provide instructions in English. Moreover, according to my insider knowledge of the MoEYS, those who are involved in the policy-making process are mostly Cambodian scholars who are returning from Western universities, and the process is usually strongly influenced by foreign experts from the English-speaking countries such as Australia and the U.S. ([Ford, 2003](#)). Therefore, the promotion of English in higher education embedded in many of the lines in the policy documents and the practices at the university may have been informed by the academic and ideological backgrounds of these Cambodian scholars and foreign experts. Secondly, these policy decisions are also mediated by important discourses in place including English as crucial for a good job, for academic successes and scholarships, and English as a competitive advantage for Cambodian students and not a threat to Khmer language. Finally, the policy decisions are mediated by important social, economic and political contexts including the development scholarships provided to Cambodian students, the ASEAN economic integration, and the internationalization of universities. Many students make it their academic goal to obtain scholarships and pursue their education particularly in Western countries, and the high English language requirement of the scholarships has significantly influenced the language choices of students, instructors, and the designers of many of the academic programs in higher education in Cambodia. Also, ASEAN has adopted English as its working language, making proficiency in English a competitive advantage for both individuals and a country in this single market when they were integrated economically at the end of 2015. Moreover, the internationalization of the universities will mean that they will need to have a stronger English language component to each of its academic programs.

In the current study, the growing influence of English in Cambodia higher education confirmed previous studies on the global spread of English ([T. Clayton, 2006](#); [Phillipson, 1992](#)). All of the participants perceived English to be a prestigious language, allowing a person to have access to more advance aspects of life. This perception reflects certain aspect of linguistic imperialism, “in which the minds and lives of the speakers of a language are dominated by another language to the point where they believe that they can and should use only that foreign language when it comes to transactions dealing with the more advanced aspects of life” ([Ansre 1979, cited in Phillipson, 1992, p. 56](#)). This is even more evident in the preferences for EMI among all the instructors, many of whom reported that it is easier to give the instruction in English with their areas of specialization. Many of their professional trainings and their scholarships from English speaking countries such as the U.S. and Australia suggested the active promotion of English from the governments of these countries. This case may be an example of a weaker form of linguistic imperialism, in which the center countries such as the U.S. and Australia ([Kachru, 1992](#)) are indirectly involved in the promotion of English in the periphery countries ([Phillipson, 1992](#)).

Although English has increasingly been used in higher education in Cambodia, many participants do not consider it a threat to Khmer. They see it as being used in day-to-day communications and having



the status of a national language in the Cambodian Constitution. However, many of the participants expressed concern that the increasing use of English in higher education was limiting different aspects of Khmer language proficiency among the instructors and students. In addition to this concern, the limitation in the availability of Khmer words for use in particular content areas, as perceived by the instructors and students, reflects a lack of language planning and policy, particularly in the area of corpus planning in Cambodia. Although effort has been made in translating documents and compiling key terminologies in some areas at Cambodian universities and the Royal Academy of Cambodia, this effort has not been sufficient since its focus has been largely on the formation and standardization of new words in different content areas, but little on promoting their status in different domains of language use. Language policy makers and planners, therefore, may need to think in terms of how they could integrate new Khmer terminologies into different content areas and into different domains of language use, particularly in different curricula at all levels of Cambodian schooling.

The findings of this dissertation have important pedagogical implications. Programs and universities should not assume that the adoption of EMI program will be effective just because EMI is the current trend. They should consider the level of English proficiency of their students and instructors and the potential loss of content knowledge without the use of students' native language. In the current context of Cambodia higher education, academic programs may benefit more from a focus on some forms of bilingual models for medium of instruction, in which both Khmer and English are used purposefully.

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