Teaching Practice

Khmer Learner English:
A Teacher's Guide to Khmer L1 Interference

Bounchan Suksiri
Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia
sbounchan@yahoo.com.au

Stephen H. Moore
Macquarie University, Australia
Stephen.Moore@ling.mq.edu.au

Abstract
Language learners who share a mother tongue (L1) typically face many similar challenges in learning the target language. Khmer speakers learning English are a case in point. Swan and Smith's (1987, 2001) classic work on "learner English" documents approximately 20 language case studies, each describing a different language and how it contrasts with English. For English teachers unfamiliar with the particular language showcased, this resource is enormously helpful. Unfortunately, Khmer is not covered in Swan and Smith's volume. The only publication directly approaching the topic of Khmer learner English is Huffman and Proum's (1983) which, though a comprehensive guide to Khmer speakers learning English, is pedagogically dated and too voluminous for a "quick guide." The present paper aims to fill the gap in the literature with an accurate, accessible overview of features of English that typically present difficulties for Khmer language speakers. It focuses on phonology, grammar, and orthography.

Review of the Literature
Before proceeding to examine specific issues that cause problems for Khmer speakers who are learning English, it is useful to survey the available literature that can inform such a study. In fact, very little work has been published in this area. Apart from Huffman and Proum's volume noted above, the Center for Applied Linguistics (1978) published a short volume providing a contrastive analysis between English and Khmer. However, this publication is not easily accessed. There are several English / Khmer dictionaries (e.g., Seam & Blake, 1991; Smyth & Kean, 1995) which provide useful lexical information, but these are not pedagogically focused. Other scholarly work of some relevance includes Jacob's (1968) introductory Khmer language course for English speakers. There may well have been accounts of Khmer learner English written "in-house" for use at individual English language institutions in Cambodia and elsewhere, but if so, none of these is publicly available.

Overview of Khmer Language

Khmer is the official language of Cambodia and is spoken by virtually all Cambodians. Its origins lie mainly in a local language from the Mon-Khmer family and the two ancient Indian languages, Pali and Sanskrit. Words of Khmer origin are typically "root" words and are

commonly found in the spoken language, whereas words of Pali and Sanskrit origin, in a Khmerized form, can be found in formal written language and literature, including poetry. Khmer has a small number of vocabulary items borrowed from Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, French, and, most recently, English (see Keuk, 2008; Moore & Bounchan, 2010). Unlike the languages of neighbouring countries, Khmer is not a tonal language. This might explain why few Cambodian students have serious difficulty in developing intelligible English pronunciation. This exploration of Khmer learner English will focus first on phonology, followed by grammar, and lastly, orthography.

Phonology.

Consonants. English has 20 alphabetic consonants (or 21, including the letter *y*), and an additional four consonant sounds consisting of combined consonants (e.g., *ch* in *teacher*). Khmer consonants are more numerous (there are 33 consonants and sub-consonants as shown in Table 1), and more complex (they make up just 21 individual distinctive phonemes as shown in Table 2). Moreover, there are three additional "invented" consonants in Khmer (see Table 3), bringing the grand total to 24 consonant sounds (i.e., about the same as in English).

Table 1
Original Consonants in Khmer

ក	យ	គ	យ	ង	ច	ឆ	ជ	ឈ	ញ
្ក	្យ	្គ	្យ	្ង	្ច	្ឆ	្ជ	្ឈ	្ញ
ដ	ឋ	ឌ	ឍ	ណ	ត	ថ	ទ	ធ	ន
្ដ	្ឋ	្ឌ	្ឍ	្ណ	្ត	្ថ	្ទ	្ធ	្ន
ប	ផ	ព	ភ	ម	យ	រ	ល	វ	ស
្ប	្ផ	្ព	្ភ	្ម	្យ	្រ	្ល	្វ	្ស
ហ	ឡ	អ							
្ហ		្អ							

Table 2
Distinctive Phonemes in Khmer

ក	ក្ក	=	K
ង		=	Ng
ឆ	ឈ្ញ	=	cʃ
ដ	ឌ្ឍ	=	D
ត	ទ្ធ	=	T
ប		=	B
ព		=	P
យ		=	Y
ល	ឡ្ហ	=	L
ស		=	S
អ		=	A

ខ	ឃ្យ	=	kh
ច	ជ្ជ	=	J
ញ	្ញ	=	gn
ថ	ឋ្ឋ	ធ្ម	=	th
ន	ណ្ឌ	=	N
ផ	ភ្ន	=	ph
ម		=	M
រ		=	r
វ		=	V
ហ		=	H

The three invented consonant sounds, shown in Table 3, correspond to phonemes borrowed from other languages, such as French. In fact, invented consonants use existing Khmer consonants in new combinations, hence the term "invented" rather than "borrowed."

Table 3
Invented Consonants and Sounds

ហ្វ		=	f
ហ្គ	ហ្ក	=	g
ហ្ស		=	z

Because of the differences between Khmer and English phonologies, some Khmer learners of English may have difficulty pronouncing certain English sounds. In particular, there are no sounds as follow in Khmer: ʃ [as in plea<u>s</u>ure], ʃt [as in tea<u>ch</u>er], Θ [as in <u>the</u>], and ð [as in <u>that</u>]. Thus students may produce:

$$/s/ \text{ as } ʃ \qquad /z/ \text{ as } ʃt \qquad /s/ \text{ as } Θ \qquad /d/ \text{ as } ð$$

Khmer speakers also do not instinctively voice the sound of final position consonants in words. Thus many students may drop /t/ and /d/ in *ant* and *and* respectively, and pronounce them as /an/. However, unlike Thai or Vietnamese speakers, it is rare for Khmer speakers to have any

problems with pronouncing initial or medial-positioned consonant clusters, i.e., /cr/, /pl/, /sm/, and /tw/, since Khmer also has a similar system of blending consonants together.

There are 18 voiced consonants and 15 unvoiced consonants in the Khmer alphabet. The next section discusses the influence of both types of consonants on the sounds of dependent vowels.

Vowels. Depending on the dialect, English has approximately 21 vowel sounds (Yallop, 1995, p. 42), while in Khmer, there are 23 dependent vowels and 12 independent vowels (see Table 4). The sounds made by independent vowels are constant, whereas the sounds of dependent vowels vary, depending on nearby consonants being either voiced or unvoiced. For example, the vowel ុ /aʊ/ when used with the voiced consonant ឌ /d/ (ឌុ), is sounded as /duː/, but with the unvoiced consonant ដ /d/ (ដុ) is sounded as /daʊ /.

Table 4
Dependent and Independent Khmer Vowels

Dependent Vowels						Independent Vowels		
ា	=	aː	ើ	=	ae	ឥ	=	e
ិ	=	e	ៃ	=	ai	ឦ	=	ei
ី	=	ei	ោ	=	ao	ឧ	=	u
ឹ	=	oe	ៅ	=	aow	ឨ	=	aow
ឺ	=	o̅e	ុំ	=	om	ឩ	=	roe
ុ	=	o	ំ	=	om	ឪ	=	r̅oe
ូ	=	o̅	ាំ	=	am	ឫ	=	loe
ួ	=	uo	ះ	=	ah	ឬ	=	lo̅e
ើ	=	aoe	ុះ	=	oh	ឭ	=	ae
ឿ	=	ua	េះ	=	eh	ឮ	=	ai
ៀ	=	ie	ោះ	=	aoh	ឯ	=	ao
េ	=	e̅				ឰ	=	aow

Adapted from Tonkin (1962).

Stress and intonation. Unlike English, Khmer does not have stress within individual words, partly because most Khmer words are monosyllabic. However, Khmer speakers can and do shift their pitch, stress, or tone to suit the purposes of their talk (e.g., making polite requests, showing surprise, expressing anger or sadness).

When reading aloud, Cambodian students tend to read texts with a flat intonation. As the Khmer script is written in uninterrupted strings of words, any space between two sequences of words indicates a pause. Thus Khmer speakers learning English may try to read aloud English

texts in the same way they learned to read Khmer texts. In other words, some may try to read the passage with a continuous flat intonational style, or some may try to pause at every word because of the space between each word, resulting in a "choppy" sounding reading.

Grammar. Khmer and English grammar are alike in one very important aspect – their typical word order of SVO: Subject followed by Verb, followed by Object. This shared "logic" enables even beginner language learners to make meanings in rudimentary English. However, there are many more ways in which Khmer grammar is dissimilar to English grammar. Below are nine of the most significant differences that impact on the accuracy of English produced by Khmer learners.

Plural nouns. Unlike English, Khmer does not have a distinctive plural form of nouns. Words that represent quantity (e.g., several, some, five, a few, a little) have to be added after the nouns to show the plural form:

(1) *kmeng klah leng knong suon* [some children play in the garden]

Sometimes the noun is repeated to show its plural form:

(2) *kmeng kmeng leng knong suon* [children play in the garden]

It should be noted, however, that there is no precise rule about repeating nouns, and not all nouns can be repeated to show their plural form. Generally, only one-syllable words are likely to be repeated in this manner.

Khmer learners of English also face difficulties in remembering to add *s*, *es*, or *ies* to form the plural form of regular nouns in English and to change the word forms for irregular nouns, especially in speaking. For example,

(3) *The girl are playing in the park.
(4) *Farmers live in small house.

Even with advanced learners, it is not surprising that they sometimes slip up by not changing nouns into appropriate plural forms, or that they add an *s* where it is not needed. For example,

(5) *Give me some waters, please.
(6) *She has a cats.

Pronouns and possessive pronouns. Unlike in English, in Khmer, there are no specific pronouns to show different forms of male and female or singular and plural. Context must be given or guessed at to understand who is being referred to. The common pronouns are:

- *kort* [he or she; him or her]
- *vea* [younger or more "inferior" person/people (male or female) or for animals]
- *puok kort; puok keh, puok vea* [they or them]

* We follow the common practice in linguistics of using an asterisk to indicate that a sentence is ungrammatical.

Cambodians normally address one another using terms to show the status and gender of the person they are referring to, e.g., father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, uncle, aunt, brother, sister (it is important to note that these terms are not necessarily for blood relatives but

are rather terms of address based on age), *lork* [Mr.], *lork/neak srey* [Mrs.], *neang* [Miss or female], and *preah ang* [His Royal Highness].

Cambodian students may have difficulty or face confusion when using pronouns in English in both objective and subjective forms. Thus, when a student with limited proficiency in English uses the pronoun *he*, the student may be meaning to say *he, she, they, it, him, her*, or *them*. Likewise, the pronouns *I* and *me* may mean *we, us*, or *our* depending on the context:

(7)   My mother works at the market. *He get up early everyday.
(8)   I and my brother and my sisters go to the same school. *I walk to school together.

The use of *there is* and *there are* is often troublesome for Cambodian learners of English, who usually adopt the Khmer syntax found with the usage of *me-uhn*. For example,

(9)   *On the desk it has a book. [There is a book on the desk.]
(10) *It have five people in my family. [There are five people in my family.]

Cambodian students may also add Mr., Mrs., or Miss to someone's first name (e.g., Mr. John, Mrs. Sally, Miss Carol), perhaps in an attempt to establish the person's status and gender.

To show possessive case in Khmer, the word របស់ /ro-bahs/ is positioned in front of a pronoun:

- *ro-bahs kort* for *his* or *her* / *hers*
- *ro-bahs preah neang* for *her* / *hers* (for a princess)
- *ro-bahs yeung* for *our* / *ours*
- *ro-bahs keh; ro-bahs vea* for *his, her* / *hers, its*, or *their* / *theirs*

Accordingly, Khmer learners may also face difficulties in learning to use *my* and *mine, its, their* and *theirs, our* and *ours,* and *her* and *hers*.

Verb forms and tenses. Khmer verb forms are constant; they do not change as English verbs do according to number and gender. This section will examine some of the significant differences between how Khmer and English verbs are formed and used.

Present simple. Cambodian learners of English may make mistakes in adding *s, es*, or *ies* to English verbs or in changing the verb forms for appropriate agreement in third person singular cases:

(11) *My mother work at the market.
(12) *He have 3 children.

Present continuous. To express a continuing action in Khmer, the word កំពុង *kampoung* or

កំពុងតែ *kampong tae* is added in front of a verb. For example,

(13) kort kampoung tae tveur kar [He is working].
(14) yeay Chan kampoung meul touraktuos [Grandma / Old woman Chan is watching television].

Sometimes, however, the word *kampoung* is not used at all, in which case the exact meaning or tense must be derived from context. Hence, Cambodian students may make mistakes in using the present simple form to express continuous tenses:

(15) Look! *She come(s) to us.

Or they may remember to use the *–ing* form, but may not use an auxiliary verb with it:

(16) Look! *She coming to us.

Past tense. To express that something happened or had happened in the past in Khmer, the word បាន *barn* is added in front of a verb:

(17) kort barn touv leng Sydney bei dang huey [He has been to Sydney three times].
(18) kjom barn touv Siem Reap kal pi chnam touv [I went to Siem Reap last year].

However, most of the time, especially in speaking, the word *barn* is not in fact used only context clues and time references can identify when the action happens. Thus, Cambodian students are known to make grammatical mistakes by not changing verb forms in affirmative statements for appropriate past tenses, especially with irregular verbs:

(19) *I see him yesterday.
(20) *We went shopping and buy some shirts.
(21) *He bring a lot of fruits when he came to see us.

Future tense. Like the word *will* in English, the word និង *nueng* in Khmer is added in front of a verb to express an action that happens in the future:

(22) kjom nueng touv leng kort knong pel chahb chahb nihs [I will / I am going to visit him soon].
(23) kort nueng min vil mork vign teh [He will not come back].

However, Cambodians normally tend to omit the word *nueng* and just use the verb to say what they will or are going to do by adding a time reference or a time frame in which they are going to do the action. Thus, common mistakes made by Cambodian students when they try to express future action or future plans can be:

(24) *I do my homework soon.
(25) *I finish my study next year.
(26) *After I pass the English test, I apply for a scholarship to study overseas.
(27) Look at all those dark clouds. *It rain soon.

Auxiliary and copula verbs. Unlike English, Khmer does not use auxiliary verbs to form questions or copula verbs to link nouns with adjectives. With questions, either the word តើ *teu* is added at the beginning of a sentence or phrase to form the question, or the speaker may

simply use a rising intonation at the end of a declarative phrase to indicate a question is being asked:

(28) teu lork chmoh ey? Or, just lork chmoh ey? [What is your name?]
    Direct translation: *teu* (question word) you (for a man) name what?

As a result, Cambodian learners may not use copula or auxiliary verbs to form questions in English:

(29) *What that?
(30) *How you use this word?
(31) *Why she not come to school?

Moreover, there may be inappropriate or incorrect word order in question construction:

(32) *She said what? (for: What did she say?)
(33) *Why he didn't like that book? (for: Why didn't he like that book?)

Adjectives are used directly after nouns in Khmer. For example,

(34) kmeng l'ar [good child / children]
    Direct translation: child / children good

(35) neang nouhs s'art nahs [That girl / woman / female is so beautiful].
    Direct translation: girl / woman / female that beautiful so.

This feature of Khmer often results in Cambodian students omitting copula verbs in sentence construction in their English:

(36) *The tree so tall. (The person may mean "The trees are so tall.")

Adverbs. Normally in Khmer, an adjective is placed after a verb to create an adverb. However, in addition to this, sometimes a special word, យ៉ាង *yang,* is added between the verb and adjective to emphasize the adverb (*deur yang yuert* [walk slowly]). Sometimes the adjective is repeated to similarly emphasize the adverb use (*deur yuert yuert* [walk slowly]). As a result, some Cambodian students may transfer this grammatical knowledge of adverb formation to English. For example, they may say something like this:

(37) *I speak slow slow, but she still can't understand me.

Adjectives. As mentioned above, adjectives are normally placed after nouns, except in formal writing, literature, or poetry when used with words borrowed from Pali or Sanskrit. In the latter case, adjectives that describe the state of a noun are placed before the noun. For example,

(38) oudam pheakriyea [super wife]
(39) kompool borohs [super man]
    Direct translation: top man

Sometimes the adjective is repeated to emphasize its meaning, or to show the plural form of noun that it describes. For example,

(40) orkun jreun jreun [thanks so much]
(41) kmeng tauj tauj [small / little children]
(42) arkea kpuohs kpuohs [tall buildings]

Cambodian learners may transfer this knowledge into English, and thus end up saying something like:

(43) *It same same, sir. (When the speaker may mean to say "They are exactly the same, sir.")
(44) *I have only small small money. (I only have a little bit of money.)

Comparisons with adjectives. In Khmer, when an adjective is used to compare something, the word ជាង *jeang* is used after the adjective. For example,

(45) l'ar jeang [better]
(46) s'art jeang [more beautiful]
(47) teab jeang [shorter]

Since *jeang* is similar to *more* in English, Cambodian students may overgeneralise the use of *more* to express comparison instead of changing the word to –*er* form. Thus they may say, for example,

(48) *more strong (instead of "stronger")
(49) *more fast (instead of "faster")

Or they may use *more* and –*er* at the same time:

(50) *more bigger
(51) *more poorer
(52) *more better

Articles and prepositions. Unlike in English, there is no article use in Khmer. Thus, Cambodian students are likely to struggle with the appropriate use of the article *the*, either omitting it or using it where it is not necessary. Similarly, they may also struggle with the correct use of prepositions as a result of the direct transfer of prepositions used in Khmer:

(53) *jealous with
(54) *interested with
(55) *stay on bed
(56) *married with

Subordinate clauses. Khmer speakers commonly use subordinate clauses inappropriately in English. For example, they may use a subordinate clause as a sentence:

(57) He can't come to school. *Because / Cause he is sick.

They may incorrectly use *but* to show contrasting ideas and *therefore* to show cause and effect:

(58) *Although he is sick, but he still come to school.
(59) *Since he wanted to be a lawyer, therefore he went to law school.

Khmer speakers might not use a comma to separate a main clause from a subordinate clause:

(60) *If I were rich I'd buy you a big house.

They might use *on the other hand* in place of *but*:

(61) *Driving fast is fun, on the other hand it can be very dangerous.

Responding "yes" when meaning "no." Khmer-speaking learners of English may reply "Yes" to most questions directed to them, even when they may actually mean "No." The explanation for this practice is that *yes* in Khmer can convey additional meanings to *yes* in English. For example, it may mean *I hear you, I'm with you, I agree with you*, or *That's right*. Some examples of this use of *yes* are:

(62) A: Would you mind if I opened the window?
     B: Yes. (What the person may mean is "No, I wouldn't mind at all. Go ahead and open the window.")

(63) A: You don't have any questions, do you?
     B: Yes. (No, I don't have any questions.)

(64) A: This car isn't bad.
     B: Yes. (I agree with you. It isn't bad at all.)

Orthography

As noted in Nakanishi (1980), Khmer language is horizontally written in a form of alphabetic script, from left to right. Words are normally strung together continuously without any spaces between in a clause or sentence structure. A full stop or period (។) indicates a complete idea in a sentence. A space is used to indicate a break of ideas or connection to another idea (i.e., in a clause or phrase), or is used in place of a comma (i.e., in a list). This practice may result in some students constructing run-on sentences in English, where the whole paragraph contains only one full stop. Khmer writing is quite complicated because, as we have seen in the phonology section above, there are both consonants and sub-consonants in use. In fact, there are three levels of writing formation (see Table 5): an upper level for upper vowels and special punctuation, a middle level for middle vowels and consonants, and a lower level for lower vowels and sub-consonants.

Table 5
Examples of Three Levels of Writing Formation in Khmer

កណ្ដឹង /kɒndəŋ/ (bell)	Consonants: ក ណ ង		កន្ទេល /kɒnteil/ [mat]	Consonants: ក ន ល
	Sub-consonant: ្ដ			Sub-consonant: ្ន
	Vowel: ឹ			Vowel: េ
កន្ត្រៃ /kɒntrai/ (scissors)	Consonants: ក ន		កណ្ដូប /kɒndaʊb/ [grasshopper]	Consonants: ក ណ ប
	Sub-consonants: ្ត ្រ			Sub-consonant: ្ដ
	Vowel: ៃ			Vowel: ូ

Although there are rules in spelling Khmer which correspond to Khmer phonology, there are also numerous exceptions. Thus, competent writers of Khmer tend to feel very proud of their command of the language's complicated orthographic system.

Some Implications for Teachers

While the features of Khmer learner English are of interest from a linguistics perspective, they are most useful in a practical sense if English language teachers have some idea of how to put this knowledge into practice in their classrooms. We offer here a few ideas which we feel would be useful to teachers, but we expect that their own engagement with the topic would lead them to develop their own teaching applications specific to their particular teaching contexts. In terms of phonology, we suggest that teachers focus on developing reception and production activities that highlight consonant sounds in English which do not exist in Khmer: ʃ (as in pleasure); ʃt (as in teacher); Θ (as in the); and ð (as in that). In addition, final position consonant pronunciation activities would be very helpful to Khmer-speaking learners of English. Any of the grammar points discussed in this paper could be the focus of grammar practice activities. A contrastive approach between the way Khmer and English grammatical systems deal with the same grammatical issue would be particularly helpful, but would need to be followed up with extensive practice activities to be most effective. Our suggestions concerning orthography are that teachers should focus on helping their students develop an ability to accurately write short sentences. Only when that achievement has been reached should longer, more complex sentences be learned and practised. Punctuation and capitalisation should also be highlighted as a significant feature of meaning making in written English, more so than in Khmer.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of some of the key aspects in which the Khmer and English languages differ. The account provided is not meant to be comprehensive — indeed such an account would need to be book length and extend to covering topics not dealt with here, such as Khmer morphology and discourse – but it has tried to strike a balance between highlighting differences in the key areas of phonology, grammar, and orthography on the one hand, and providing a quick and accessible guide to teachers of English who are unfamiliar with native Khmer speaking background students on the other. The paper thus represents a useful starting point for English teachers new to teaching Cambodians, and one that can be built upon as these teachers gain direct experience with Khmer-background speakers in their language classes or develop their own proficiency in Khmer. Indeed, as Medgyes (1992) argues, the best native-speaker English teachers are those whose proficiency in the L1 of their learners is greatest. This paper has offered guidance on the first steps of this journey.

Biodata

Bounchan Suksiri is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Foreign Languages, Royal University of Phnom Penh, and a PhD candidate in the Department of Linguistics at Macquarie University, Australia. Her teaching and research interests centre on literature studies and literacy development.

Stephen Moore is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics at Macquarie University in Australia. His teaching, research and publications extend across the fields of discourse analysis, pragmatics, TESOL teacher education and language assessment. He has maintained strong links to ELT in Cambodia since the mid-1990s.

References

Center for Applied Linguistics. (1978). *Teaching English to Cambodian students* (Indochinese Refugee Education Guides No. 18). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Huffman, F., & Proum, I. (1983). *English for speakers of Khmer*. Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press.

Jacob, J. (1968). *Introduction to Cambodian*. London, England: Oxford University Press.

Keuk, C. N. (2008). English language variety in Cambodia. *CamTESOL Selected Papers, 4*, 98-107.

Medgyes, P. (1992). Native or non-native: Who's worth more? *ELT Journal, 46*(4), 340-349. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/46.4.340

Moore, S., & Bounchan, S. (2010). English in Cambodia: Changes and challenges. *World Englishes, 29*(1), 116-128. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2009.01628.x

Nakanishi, A. (1980). *Writing systems of the world: Alphabets, syllabaries, pictograms*. Rutland, VT and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle.

Seam, U. T., & Blake, N. F. (1991). *Phonetic English-Khmer dictionary*. Bangkok, Thailand: Seam and Blake Books.

Smyth, D., & Kien, T. (1995). *Practical Cambodian dictionary*. Rutland, VT and Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company.

Swan, M., & Smith, B. (Eds.). (1987, 2001). *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Tonkin, D. (1962). *Modern Cambodian writing*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Université Buddique Preah Sihanouk Raj.

Yallop, C. (1995). *English Phonology*. Sydney, Australia: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, Macquarie University.