



RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

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

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Khmer: The People, the Language, and the Journey towards English Proficiency

Theresa Drumm
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Who are the Khmer?

The Khmer people are concentrated in Cambodia.

Cambodia is located on the Indochinese Peninsula of Southeast Asia.



The country is bordered by the Gulf of Thailand, and the countries of Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.



Quick Facts about the population of Cambodia



- Cambodia has a population of about 11 million, of which 90% are Khmer.
- Women constitute 64% of the adult population as a result of the high mortality of the men during recent wars.
- Khmer is the official language of Cambodia (95%); followed by French, and English.
- The state religion is Buddhism (95%).
- Adult literacy rate is only about 50%.



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- Khmer belongs to a linguistic group known as Mon-Khmer.
- Spoken by about 8 million people in Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, China, France and the USA.
- Khmer shares many features and vocabulary with Thai as a result of centuries of two-way borrowing. There are also borrowings from Sanskrit, French and Chinese in Khmer.
- It is an alphabetic and phonologically-based system.
- Khmer alphabet consists of 47 letters. This is syllabic alphabet in which each consonant has two forms, one with an inherent /a/ (first series) and one with an inherent /o/ (second series). All consonants have a subscript form which is used to write the second consonant of a cluster.
- Khmer is a language that is devoid of inflection in either nouns or verbs; this type of language is sometimes referred to as “isolating”.
- Vowels are indicated using either separate letters or diacritics, which can be written above, below, in front of, after or around consonants. The pronunciation of the vowels depends on whether a consonant they are attached to is of the first or second series.

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- Basic word order is Subject-Verb-Object, although the subject or object is often dropped in context.
- Noun phrase is different from English.
- Order is : head noun + adjective + numeral + classifier + demonstrator.
- Number is usually inferred from context.
- There are modifiers--such as words equivalent to "some," "all," and the numeral "two" in English--which can be used to indicate plural.
- Verbs are unmarked for tense.
- Grammatical functions are expressed by function words and word order.
Example: Past Tense is expressed by the use of such words as 'yesterday' or 'already.'
- Gender is unmarked but distinctions can be made by using the kinds of modifiers that reference gender, such as words for "son," "daughter," "male," and "female."

មនុស្សទាំងអស់កើតមកមានសេរីភាពនិងភាពស្មើគ្នាក្នុងសិទ្ធិនិងសេចក្តីថ្លៃថ្នូរ ។ មនុស្សគ្រប់រូបសុទ្ធតែមានវិចារណញ្ញាណនិងសតិសម្បជញ្ញៈ ហើយត្រូវប្រព្រឹត្តចំពោះគ្នាទៅវិញទៅមកក្នុងស្មារតីរាប់អានគ្នាជាបងប្អូន ។

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.
(Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

- The Khmer writing system is derived from Sanskrit script.
- It is written from left to right across the page.
- In a Khmer text there are no spaces between words, instead spaces indicate the end of a clause or sentence.

Free Khmer fonts and translation supports are available @
<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/khmer.htm>

Common Difficulties for Khmer Students in English Acquisition



<http://www.picturesofplaces.com/Asia/cambodia.html>

- Due to a lack of tenses & agreement in Khmer, ELLs often use the unmarked base form of English verbs. English tenses often cause confusion for the ELL. They fail to add the –s in the third person singular, or the –ed in the past tense form.
- As Khmer does not have a system of articles, students often drop them or use them in correctly. (a, an, the)
- Due to the difference of word order between the two languages, Khmer ELLs will often drop the subject or object in their English.



Common Difficulties for Khmer Students in English Acquisition –Con't (b)

<http://www.picturesofplaces.com/Asia/cambodia.html>

- Cambodian speakers of English struggle with pronouncing sounds that do not occur in their first language. Some of these include [th] and [sh].
- Learners often drop the [s] sound from or add the [s] sound to the ending of words.
- Students often over generalize adverb/adjective linguistic forms.
- Khmer ELLs tend to over generalize the meaning of lexical items which can lead to wrong word choice.
Example- apology-sorry-forgiveness

Common Difficulties for Khmer Students in English Acquisition –Con't (c)



<http://www.picturesofplaces.com/Asia/cambodia.html>

- Khmer ELLs often drop the final consonant sounds from words as they do not pronounce them in their native language.
- Students often stress the wrong syllable in words in English.
- Khmer students are likely to use passive and active voices interchangeably when writing in English.

Sociocultural Aspects & Communication Style

- * Family is extremely important to Cambodians.
- * Mutual assistance among family members is highly valued.
- * Showing respect or deference to the elders is an integral part of the upbringing , and this transfers to the society at large.
- * Expression of contradictory ideas by the youth is considered inappropriate.



Friendship is valued right after family.
Becoming angry, shouting or displays of envy
are considered bad manners.
Direct confrontations between individuals is rare.

- * Cambodians greet each other by putting the palms together in a pray-like position.
- * Hugging, kissing, and shaking hands are not common greetings amongst Cambodians. Public displays of affection are frowned upon even amongst married couples.
- * Cambodians consider the head to be sacred, so touching the head is threatening a persons well-being and should be avoided.

Important FYI about the Cambodian Student

- Cambodian students are usually eager to learn. However they are often shy and reluctant to speak. Teachers must survey students about previous academic experiences, and be aware of sociocultural aspects aforementioned in this presentation.
- Teachers hold high status in Cambodian society. Students are to be quiet and obedient.
- Many Cambodian students will address the teacher with the title “Teacher” as it is a title of respect. They are not accustomed to using a teacher’s name .
- Do not misinterpret a lack of eye contact as disrespect; avoidance of eye contact is a sign of respect in their culture.
- Cambodians’ learning style is mostly rote memorization. It will take time, and patience to acclimate students to American classroom activities, especially cooperative work and debate formats.

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