

Englishization of Secondary/Elementary Education in Expanding-Circle Asia: A Cambodian Case

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Abstract

Many studies have investigated the spread of English in the outer-circle countries, as well as Englishization of higher education in Asia. This article, instead, focuses on the Englishization of secondary/primary education in expanding-circle Asia, taking Cambodia as a case in point. Cambodia, being one of the most ethno-linguistically homogeneous countries in Asia, already has an established national language, Khmer. English, nevertheless, has been an important language in higher education since the end of the civil war in the early 1990s. By trickle-down effect, Englishization of secondary and elementary education is ongoing in the urban, private sector settings. Based on a visit to one such school in Phnom Penh, this study found that there was a separation of functions between Khmer and English, with the former used for maintaining national identity and expressing own culture internationally while the latter is seen to open the door to further studies and career opportunities. The study argues that a stable diglossic situation may ensue because of this situation.

Keywords: Englishization, expanding circle, Cambodia, language education policy

More than three decades have passed since Bautista (1997) exclaimed in the title of a proceeding for an international conference: “*English is an Asian Language*.” Since then, bulk of Asian Englishes studies has focused on the Kachruvian outer-circle Asia. However, the boundary between the outer and expanding circles has become increasingly blurred as English continues to spread to numerous domains in the latter. Yoshino (2014) called this expansion of domains of English across different Kachruvian circles *Englishization*. One domain where this is most salient is education (Kirkpatrick & Sussex, 2012; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2019; Yoshino, 2014). English has always been prominent in higher education in some expanding-circle countries such as Taiwan and

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Indonesia. But now, its importance is starting to be felt in secondary and elementary education, too.

Examples abound of secondary and elementary education in expanding-circle Asia becoming Englishized. For instance, Taiwan has been promoting the policy of *Bilingual Nation 2030 (BN30)* in which large part of secondary and even primary education is aimed eventually to switch to English (Executive Yuan, 2019). In Indonesia, despite the government's insistence on promoting Bahasa Indonesia as the sole medium of instruction (MoI) in schools, it had to make leeway for private schools demanding English-medium under the title of *National Plus Curriculum* (Hamied, 2012). In Bangladesh, where Bengali (Bangla) has a long literal history and established status, private sector education has largely switched to English (Hamid & Rahman, 2019). One thing these three countries have in common is, unlike many other countries in the region, each has had a singular, robust, well-developed, and stable national lingua franca, fully functional as the medium in specialized domains of higher education. Despite this, English is making its way into the higher education, and by trickle-down effect, secondary and elementary education. This trend has now reached even Cambodia, one of the most "monolingual" countries in the region with a well-established national language with ancient script and literal tradition. This paper will, therefore, discuss the spread of English in the context of secondary and elementary education in Cambodia, where Khmer has thus far held a well-established position as the MoI, based on an observation of a private school in Phnom Penh, the country's capital. I will argue that there is a separation of domains between Khmer and English, therefore the importance of Khmer is likely to remain despite the Englishization of ever lower levels of education, possibly resulting in a stable diglossia.

Englishization in Two Types of Asian Countries

Aside from the two Kachruvian concentric circles mentioned above, I would like to propose another method of classifying Asian countries into two different types according to their sociolinguistic situations, which may be more suited for the purpose of this study. Englishization may be manifested differently depending on which type of the society a given country is categorized into. In the first type, a country is a multilingual and multiethnic society with a weak national language. Even though the national language is tied to the distinct national identity of that country, its use is limited to certain domains such as schools, especially at early stages of elementary education. Either the national language or English may be used in higher education, depending on the level of elaboration of the national language. In a type two country, a clear majority belongs to a single ethnic group, often bearing the very name of the country.

Despite the presence of small minority ethnic groups, national language is sufficiently widespread mainly through primary and secondary education and mass media, so much so that it can be described as a quasi-monolingual society. Most books sold in bookstores are in the national language, and university lectures can be conducted in it too, although English-medium education may be becoming increasingly popular in recent years. Once outside of the classroom, though, it is the world of the national language.

In a country which belongs to the first type, Englishization is often met with high degree of identity-related anxiety. Paterno (2018) recounts an incident in which a letter to a newspaper, written by an urban upper middle-class Filipino expressing his identification of English as his effective mother tongue, caused a highly emotional uproar online. Many netizens felt that the writer's confession that English, not Filipino, was his mother tongue was tantamount to an act of betrayal to the Philippine nation. However, it is true for many urbanites like him that Filipino is just one of the subjects at school and the language to be used for informal purposes such as conversing with street vendors or domestic helpers, while English is the preferred language both for intellectual activities and socialization within the middle-class peer.

On the other hand, in a country that belongs to the latter type, the level of anxiety due to Englishization may be much less pronounced. It is true that English has taken over in many domains, both formal and informal, among the urban youth from middle to high economic backgrounds who typically received education in an Englishized private institutions. Like in the type one countries, the national language may be used in limited domains, and the young person may be more at home in English than his native language, which coincides with the national language. However, emotional conflict surrounding national identity described by Paterno (2018) is rarely experienced here. No matter how Englishized some elites may become, the status of the national language is quite secure and unchallenged; being proficient in English is seen as an asset, rather than a burden. For example, Guo, et al. (2021) found that very few Taiwanese parents were worried that Taiwan becoming a bilingual nation would threaten their children's cultural identity. This study, then, deals with a case in a type two country, namely Cambodia, and explores how Englishization manifests itself in a context of a private secondary-elementary school in a relatively affluent urban center.

Sociolinguistic Background of Cambodia

Cambodia is one of the most ethnically homogenous countries in Southeast Asia, with more than 93% of the population being ethnic Khmers (Bradley, 2019). Despite the presence of sizable Chinese and Vietnamese minority communities

in some areas of the country and thriving Chinese-medium education in urban centers, Khmer is the L1 of practically every Cambodian, and most of the citizens are monolingual Khmer speakers, except in remote mountainous areas (Kosonen, 2019). Teochew has traditionally been the most dominant Chinese dialect in the country, although its use is limited to the older people due to the total ban on all foreign languages during the Pol Pot era (1975-1979); Mandarin is now the medium of instruction in all Chinese schools (Kobayashi, 2020). Likewise, the use of French, the former colonial language, is largely limited to those who received education prior to the Khmer Rouge rule.

Cambodia holds a unique position in the multiethnic and multilingual Southeast Asia, as it has had one very clear majority language throughout its history. Khmer has held a well-established position as the literally language since the pre-colonial period, as inscriptions in Old Khmer dating back to Angkor period and even earlier have been discovered (Britannica, 2015). It was used in education of boys in Buddhist temples along with the sacred scriptural tongue of Pali. Even during the French period, elementary and secondary education was conducted in Khmer, except in elite institutions where French was the medium (Clayton, 2006). After independence, Prince Norodom Sihanouk promoted a vigorous Khmerization program, though French continued to hold sway in higher education and elite circles. The communists, led by Pol Pot, took power in 1975 and abolished education, destroyed school buildings and libraries, massacred scholars and teachers, and banned all non-Khmer languages, as they regarded those who were educated and thus spoke “foreign” languages to be bourgeois and therefore the “enemies of the people.” Cambodia came under Vietnamese rule after the toppling of Khmer Rouge in 1979. As part of the eastern bloc, Russian and Vietnamese were introduced as the media of instruction in higher education, although guest professors from the Soviet Union and Vietnam also lectured in French to those who survived communist persecution of intellectuals (Dickinson, 2019; Clayton, 2006). However, for the agricultural and non-educated populace, contacts with foreign countries were non-existent and they remained largely Khmer monolinguals.

Post-1992 Englishization

After the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) occupation and restoration of the kingdom in 1992-1993, an influx of western aid agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as economic boom fueled by international investments ensued. This also meant the beginning of an Englishization in Cambodia, whereby English gradually eroded the position of French as the primary international language for the country. Symbolically, Clayton (2006) recounted an episode of violent student protests against a

Francophonie-funded university, demanding it to switch the MoI from French to English.

The Englishization of higher education in Cambodia was preceded by the privileging of English in international aid agencies. According to Clayton (2006), most of the foreign aid agencies and their developmental programs required English proficiency, which made the French-medium universities subsidized by the Francophonie relatively unpopular. Many institutions switched to English as soon as the collaboration contracts with the Francophonie ended. It is worth noting that even developmental and educational projects led by expanding-circle countries like Japan and South Korea required their Cambodian counterparts to operate in English (Clayton, 2006).

Clayton (2006) reported the transition of Cambodian higher education from something similar to *content language integrated learning (CLIL)* to full *English as the medium of instruction (EMI)*. In the earlier days of the restored kingdom, foreign lecturers of all three of the Kachruvian circles often lectured in English, accompanied by a foreign-trained Cambodian assistant translating the contents into Khmer on the spot. This indicated at least two notable aspects of the Cambodian higher education during that period: First, there were not enough Cambodian lecturers who were able to provide specialist knowledge in Khmer so they had to rely on English-speaking foreign lecturers, often non-native speakers of English themselves; second, students needed to learn both the technical knowledge and English language in order to secure employment in international agencies or enterprises.

Today, a stroll around Phnom Penh betrays the extent of Englishization, especially among the urban, upper-middle class residents. At new, glossy shopping malls, frequented predominantly by local residents, signs and notices are often monolingual in English, and bookstores carrying predominantly English books are found. It can be seen from this that the citizens of certain economic standing who frequent such malls are expected understand shop signs written in English; and that they prefer English when it comes to leisurely reading.

Spread of EMI in Secondary and Elementary Education

The development of language policies in secondary and elementary schools somewhat followed the footsteps of higher education. As has been stated above, French, along with Khmer in the lower echelons, was the main medium in secondary and elementary schools until the Khmerization in the 1960s and 1970s, when French was phased out and replaced with Khmer. Past the educational “near death” of the Khmer Rouge period, Vietnamese- and Soviet- trained Cambodian teachers managed to restore school education in Khmer. Those who excelled in this system would then move on to higher education where French

remained as the primary medium along with Russian and Vietnamese. In the post-UNTAC Cambodia, various western developmental programs from both Anglophone and Francophone countries introduced instruction and teacher training in their respective languages.

The rapid economic growth under the relatively stable political climate, especially in urban areas, led to the appearance of private schools which adopted English, the language of commerce and technology. Such schools attracted pupils from relatively affluent backgrounds. Advertisements and signboards abound on the streets of Phnom Penh of such schools that advocate American, European, Thai, and Singaporean curricula, promising opportunities for furthering studies in tertiary institutions in those countries.

A word of caution is necessary at this point about the huge disparity that exists between the rich and poor, urban and rural contexts within Cambodia in terms of private and public education. As Dickinson (2019) pointed out, although the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) stipulates that English should be taught as a subject from the fifth grade on, the effect has been dismal in rural areas due to insufficient number of qualified teachers. Those teachers with English proficiency prefer to work in private schools in urban areas that offer much higher pay than public schools do. As a good grasp of English determines the future prospect of further study abroad and career opportunities, parents with the financial means prefer to send their children to private schools in urban areas like Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, where English is fully or partially the MoI. This particular study concerns one such school, and the reader should bear in mind that the picture will seem completely different in rural, public-school settings.

The Site of Data-Gathering

For the site of data-gathering, I chose one of the so-called international schools mushrooming all over the capital city. I visited the Royal Palace branch campus of the Business & English International School (pseudonym, hereafter BEIS), located in central Phnom Penh, in September 2018. This school is directly operated by the B&E Group (pseudonym), which manages one international university and over 20 branch campuses of BEIS in and around Phnom Penh.

According to the prospectus of the school, the B&E Group is one of the leading private educational bodies in Cambodia with approximately 30,000 students altogether. It was founded in 2001, and still is chaired by, an ethnic Chinese member of the Cambodian parliament and the governing People's Party. It started off as a private center for instruction of abacus, mathematics, and Chinese. Today, the Group operates a university and 21 branches of the international schools that cover from preschool to Grade 12, offering programs

both in Khmer and English. All school buildings, equipped with own power-generators and scattered across Phnom Penh, were built by the construction company also belonging to the Group. The Group also directly operates all school buses. The fact that the prospectus emphasizes these points indicates how safety and stability were often lacking and considered important by parents when choosing a school.

The prospectus indicates that the Royal Palace campus is a typical site of BEIS. It is the sixth BEIS branch to be opened in June 2008, inaugurated by the then-mayor of Phnom Penh, who is also a close aide to Prime Minister Hun Sen. It is situated in a seven-story building with 63 air-conditioned rooms, including a cafeteria. The building houses levels from pre-school to K-12, with altogether approximately 2,000 students. All teachers and students are of Cambodian nationality. It is probable that many students are of Chinese ancestry, given their prominent presence in Phnom Penh. However, because of the sociolinguistic history I discussed earlier, all of the students are presumably Khmer L1 speakers, regardless of their ethnic origin. Some students are enrolled only half day, either morning or afternoon, while others are enrolled full-time. Many of the afternoon-only students go to another school, typically a Khmer-medium public school, in the morning, and augment their studies in English at BEIS. Likewise, many of the Khmer-medium teachers are public school teachers, working part-time at BEIS.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, I will describe the observation of the school, as well as comment on the interview with the principal. After that, I will comment on the results of the observation. My argument will be that there is more-or-less a clear separation of functions to each of the two languages involved in the bilingual education here, and it is possible that this may lead to somewhat stable diglossic situation, at least in the context of urban centers and private sector education, further propelling forward the Englishization process.

The school

The school is facing a busy street in the center of Phnom Penh. There are several school buses parked outside, all painted with the school's name in English and Khmer. One such Toyota van bears a large Mercedes-Benz emblem on the grill.

Upon entering the main gate, one finds the portraits of the king and royal family. Underneath it, school's motto is posted in bold letters bilingually: Quality, Efficiency, Excellence, Morality, Virtue. On the side wall, posters in frames and acrylic plates are displayed, from top to bottom: A painting of

Angkor Wat illuminated in sunset; ISO certificates granted by Cambodian and British accreditation bodies bearing national flags of each country; the portrait of the founder and his wife in full formal gear; and the photos of visitors from overseas affiliated schools shaking hands with the principal and students. Also in the entrance hall are photos of Prime Minister Hun Sen, and other dignitaries shaking hands with the principal upon their visit to the school. On the other side wall, there is a poster showing a woman in traditional Khmer attire with different manners of putting palms together in salute, with her posture in budding lotus style. Next to it are pictures of different colors of the traditional Khmer dress worn on different days of the week. All are accompanied by explanations in Khmer on top and English at the bottom.

On the second floor, one finds the library, science lab and principal's office. In the science lab, white gowns are hung neatly next to lockers that bear names of different classes in Khmer first and then English. A female janitor was wiping the glass doors of the lockers. On the table there is an anatomical model of a human body. In the air-conditioned library, there are cubicles for students to study, but not many books except for teaching materials used in classes. The principal, taking me on a tour, showed me two types of teaching materials, one an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) textbook from an international publisher licensed specially for developing countries; the other an in-house English textbook with a lot of pictures and even comics. A teacher's notebook for keeping track of attendance records is also kept in the library; it is partially bilingual in Khmer and English, indicating that the use by non-Cambodian teachers is not really taken into consideration. On the corridor, the posters of school uniforms and graduation gowns from pre-school to high school are displayed, along with those of teachers. All female teachers are in suits while male teachers are in a long sleeve dress shirt with a tie. Both female and male teachers are wearing identification tags hanging from their necks. In front of the principal's office, there is a large banner that says monolingually in English "Student's Guardian Consultation," underneath the portraits of the king and his parents. Also on the wall, next to a framed photo of the principal receiving an award from Prime Minister Hun Sen, there also is a Khmer monolingual map of Cambodia. These two monolingual signs, one in English and other in Khmer, instead of equivalents in both languages, indicate a separation of functions of two languages, to which I shall return to comment on later.

Climbing up the stairs to the next level, one sees a sign that says monolingually in English "Young Learner Level." This is where the pre-school and lower elementary classrooms are located. Slogans on the walls and staircases like "Clean Environment Happy Life" and "Today a reader, tomorrow a leader" are in English only, while the notices on the bulletin board about extracurricular

activities are monolingual in Khmer. Again, one discerns a separation of functions of two languages. One interesting exhibit is a bilingual one of twelve Chinese zodiacs, each zodiac bearing a picture of Hindu deity, with large letterings in Khmer and small ones in English. This shows the school does not consider English as a vehicle for importing western culture, but rather as a means of explaining the local culture to outsiders through the medium of English.

Entering one of the elementary Level 2 classrooms, twenty pupils are seated in rows all facing the front in an airconditioned classroom. In front of the classroom, the whiteboard underneath the portrait of the royals is filled with neat writings in Khmer, except the theme of the day's lesson, "Lessen 1 Setting goal," in English. Even though the subject, social studies, is taught in Khmer, the male teacher in dress shirt and tie still makes an effort to include some English. As the teaching material is in Khmer, pupils' notes are in Khmer, too.

Ascending to the next floor, still the elementary level, one sees on the walls of the corridor pictures of children dressed in traditional Khmer costumes showing respect to their teacher and elderly by putting their palms together, with explanations written in Khmer only. From here, one can see that traditional values are instilled mainly through the medium of Khmer.

The top floor is an assembly-hall-cum-cafeteria, where a vendor is selling noodles and rice vermicelli in soup and pupils consuming their lunch on foldable tables. On stage, there is a banner for an English speech contest, with the national motto in English only: "Kingdom of Cambodia, Nation Religion King." On the online video platform of BEIS, there are many videos of English speech contests. Many of the topics are concerned with traditional Khmer culture and values. It can be seen from here, again, that the emphasis placed on using English as a means to express their own culture and traditions to the outside world.

The principal

Returning to the principal's office on the second floor, the principal, seemingly in his forties, shared his background. After 1992, he taught himself French and was offered a Francophonie scholarship to study engineering in France. Upon his return to Cambodia, though, he discovered that most of the jobs offered by international aid agencies required proficiency in English. So, he started learning English, which was relatively easy for him, being proficient already in French. This opened a door for him to enter the private education sector, in which he eventually became the principal of one of the over twenty branch campuses of BEIS. This is a typical example of the situation described by Clayton (2006), namely, the effort of the French government to maintain the importance of their language in the post-civil-war Cambodia unwittingly turned

out to be the basis for subsequent Englishization of the country.

Prospects for Students

According to the principal, many well-to-do parents in Phnom Penh send their children to his school in the hope that they can further their studies abroad. Due to the massacre of intellectuals during the communist era, many disciplines are not adequately covered in universities within Cambodia, so a degree from abroad is highly valued (Dickinson, 2019). The principal explained that many of successful graduates from BEIS go on to study at universities in neighboring ASEAN countries where English is the MoI, for instance Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, although a handful of them go to western countries such as Canada. BEIS provides scholarship for some of such graduates.

Comments on the Findings

What can be gleaned from the observation of this Cambodian private school is the separation of functions assigned respectively to the national language and English. Studies in language policy and planning (LPP) have observed in many cases all over the world that two languages cannot coexist stably in the same domain (Wright, 2016). Therefore, in many outer-circle Asian countries, English is the sole MoI in secondary education onwards. In such contexts, massive shift towards English is inevitable, leading to the attrition of local languages. For example, in Singapore, nearly half of all families have shifted to using English as the home language, despite the government's effort to maintain heritage languages (Lin, 2021). As for expanding-circle countries, adoption of English in higher education means a shift away from the national language. However, in the context of BEIS where all teachers and students share the same L1 (Khmer), an interesting phenomenon of separation of function was discernible. It was clear that the bilingual education at BEIS is what might be called "Khmer Plus." Khmer is still valued as the base language to instill Cambodian national identity through its traditional culture and value system. This is usually accomplished monolingually in Khmer. On the other hand, English is assigned with two functions. The first, especially at the earlier levels, is that of explaining the local cultural heritage to the outside world. The second is as a means of transmitting content knowledge, especially in higher levels, in preparation for further studies, possibly in institutions abroad. Given that there is little overlap in the functions of the two languages, both Khmer and English are likely to remain vibrant in the context of the bilingual education at BEIS. It remains to be seen, though, if urban areas in Cambodia will eventually become a stable diglossia described by Wright (2016). Supposing this phenomenon is happening all over the burgeoning private education sector in Phnom Penh, this scenario seems quite likely; the scenes I

reported earlier of local shopping malls may be a sign of this.

Conclusion

I have argued that there are two types of expanding-circle Asian countries. In the first type, there are many ethno-linguistic groups coexisting. In such contexts, the national lingua franca may be relatively weak. It has been observed that such countries are more susceptible to Englishization. In the second type of Asian countries, the ethnic composition is relatively homogenous, and it has a well-established common language; so much so that the national language and the language of the homes often correspond. Since the national language is so well-rooted in most domains, it has been thought that Englishization may not occur as easily in the latter type.

The case study I conducted in Cambodia, a second type country, has shown, however, that Englishization does seem to be happening in the context of private sector education in urban centers. I have argued that there is a possibility that even Cambodia, one of the most ethno-linguistically homogenous countries in the region, may become a stable diglossia as a result of this Englishization, because there is a separation of functions between Khmer and English. The former is used mainly for nurturing national pride and expressing it internationally while the latter is associated with further studies (possibly abroad) and improved career prospects.

It should be born in mind, however, that this phenomenon is limited to the urban areas of the country, where relatively affluent families send their offspring to private schools that attempt to recruit students by appealing their English-medium programs. For the vast majority of Cambodians who are living under the grip of poverty, the everyday reality is ineffectual English education constrained by lack of infrastructure and satisfactory teacher-training (Dickinson 2019).

Implication for Other Expanding-Circle Asian Countries

Other second-type countries in Asia are currently attempting to further Englishize their educational system. I already mentioned the example of Taiwan's Bilingual Nation 2030 policy. The policymakers, educationalists, and other stakeholders can learn an important lesson from the bilingual education at BEIS in Cambodia; namely, that there has to be separate functions assigned to different classroom languages, if they intend both languages to survive and thrive. Based on the historic LPP studies, no two languages can coexist stably in the same domain (Wright, 2016). Instead of trying to accomplish the same tasks using two languages, the prescribers of language education policies can consider making clear demarcations between the different roles played by each language

involved in bilingual education.

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