

# **Khmer Literacy Learning and Instruction in the Cambodian Community of Long Beach, California<sup>1</sup>**

**Susan Needham**  
University of California,  
Los Angeles

This paper is about literacy learning and instruction in a Cambodian Buddhist temple in Long Beach, California. Literacy has become a prime issue in studies on language learning attitudes and language maintenance among Cambodians in the United States. It has been reported that Cambodian parents want their children to learn to read and write in their native language (Bunte and Joseph 1991; DeVoe 1990; Smith-Hefner 1990), but parents consider language learning to be a very difficult undertaking (DeVoe 1990; Smith-Hefner 1990; cf. Welaranta 1988), and because of this notion of "difficulty" some parents are not inclined to push children who express an inability to learn Khmer (DeVoe 1990; Smith-Hefner 1990). Detailed analysis of the talk between teachers and students in literacy classes also shows difficulty to be an underlying theme of the learning process (Needham 1992).

That difficulty is an important cultural concept attached to formal learning is evident from its frequent appearance in learning situations as well as talk about learning. However, the concept of difficulty is highly subjective and, as will be argued, context dependent. Such a concept cannot be clearly understood until viewed in an interactional context, embedded within events where it not only has meaning for the participants, but is used to create meaning as well.

In Long Beach, literacy instruction in Khmer is pervasive. There are many different Cambodian groups offering instruction in Khmer such as Cambodian Christian churches, college student organizations, and the local Buddhist Temple. Highly visible public use of written Khmer on store fronts, community fliers, and billboards assume a certain level of

competence in literacy in the community. This fact taken together with the large number of literacy classes available demonstrates that although people may think learning to read in Khmer is difficult, they continue to use Khmer script - and they use it a lot.

This paper presents an interpretation of what difficulty in language learning means as expressed by Cambodians in the U.S. It is an interpretation based on analysis that shows difficulty to be a resource used by teachers and students to organize their participation in the learning activity.

The methodology used in this study is one that John Gumperz has termed *interactional sociolinguistics* (1986). The first section of this paper is a brief history of the Long Beach Community (who the people are and how they came to be there). This will be followed with a sketch of historical and traditional uses of written Khmer as found in Cambodia, followed by a description of uses in Long Beach, and finally, an examination of talk in literacy classes where the notion of difficulty is a relevant feature of the learning activity - the occasions when students and teachers are telling each other that this is difficult.

Data for the study come from 4 years of sociolinguistic and ethnographic fieldwork within the community. During that time open-ended interviews were made with Cambodian teachers, monks, nuns, parents, and students. Video and audio recordings were made in a variety of Khmer literacy classes. Segments presented for discussion in this paper come from classes taught at the Khemara Buddhikaram (Khmer Buddhist Temple) in Long Beach.

## Historical Background

There are an estimated 40,000 Cambodians living in Long Beach and neighboring cities. The community got its start in the late 1950s as the result of an educational exchange program that brought about 100 Cambodian students to California State University, Long Beach. The program was terminated in 1963 when relations between Cambodia and the United States began to deteriorate (cf. Whitaker, et. al. 1973).

Some students did not go back to Cambodia but instead remained in Long Beach where they had begun to establish a new home.

It was in 1975, shortly after the Khmer Rouge came to power in Cambodia, that the first significant numbers of refugees began arriving in the United States. At that time 4,600 individuals entered the U.S. Many of these people were caught outside their country on regular business or vacations. They had no idea that they would never be able to return and could not get back to their families. Others, with knowledge of the impending takeover (some with connections to the military or government), were able to arrange for their own and their family's escape.

The largest influx into the U.S. began following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia 5 years later in December of 1979. Between 1980 and 1985 nearly 120,000 Cambodians came to the U.S. The people who came in this second wave not only suffer the stress of being refugees unable to return to their country and way of life, but suffer tremendous psychological trauma from their life under the rule of the Khmer Rouge.

There are significant socioeconomic differences between those Cambodians who came in 1975 and those who came later. of the 4,600 who arrived in 1975 most were urban, educated professionals. Most spoke French, providing a basis for learning English. This contrasts greatly with the majority of the people arriving after 1975. Of these people most were farmers and laborers with less than 5 years education.

### **Literacy in Cambodia**

The Cambodians have had a writing system since AD 500 and a rich literary tradition, including epic poetry, folktales, historical accounts, and religious literature.

Until the 1950s the only source of literacy instruction for village males was the local Buddhist temple.<sup>2</sup> Since most men became monks for a limited time during their life (anywhere from a few months to several years), the majority of men were able to read.

To the Buddhist monks literacy was not a goal in itself. Reading was taught for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of Buddhist doctrine and therefore was more important as a way of making merit (Steinberg 1959; Whitaker, 1973).

The written characters of Khmer have historically held symbolic meaning and magical powers, and it was not necessary to be able to read the inscriptions to benefit from their power. Men were tattooed before going into battle hoping that the characters would protect them from death. People carry pieces of cloth inscribed by monks or practitioners of magic which bring them good luck and protection from danger (cf. Ebihara 1968:433). Cambodian origin myths credit writing as a primary force in bringing the people of Cambodia together into a single proper society (Ledgerwood 1990:67). People of the villages as well as urban centers had "...great respect for writing, both for its sacred origin and for its magical potency..." (Steinberg 1959:55).

### **Written Khmer in Long Beach**

In Long Beach uses of written Khmer include store fronts on Cambodian businesses, locally published community newspapers, fliers announcing community events, letters to and from relatives in Cambodia, and literature generated by the public schools and social service organizations.

There are three Khmer language newspapers published weekly. They generally contain a mixture of feature articles, editorials, and Khmer translations of stories from English language newspapers and books. The text is written in standard Khmer script with some English occasionally used. Business advertisements are written in Khmer and English.

Another source of public use of written Khmer is through the public schools and social service organizations. School information for Cambodian parents is written in Khmer as well as English. Schools display Khmer script in hallways and classrooms. Most classes have as part of their wall decor color terms spelled out in Khmer and placed below an object colored to match the term.