

Teaching values: interaction in a Cambodian classroom

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Every society teaches its children its values. These values are not only conveyed directly in messages such as "We Cambodians do not do that because . . ." but also and perhaps predominantly they are conveyed through linguistic choices that societal members make. In order to examine what values Cambodian teachers teach their students and the way societal values influence interactions between Cambodian teachers and Cambodian students, videotapes were made of a Cambodian private language school first grade class in California. This class, conducted in Cambodian and taught by a man who was a primary school teacher in Cambodia before 1975, is part of an afterschool school run by members of a Cambodian community in California for their children. The children in this class range in age from 6 to 10 years old and, although their first language is Cambodian, they are placed in this "first grade" class because of their inability to read and write in Cambodian. The subject matter of the class includes literacy (reading and writing) and comportment (what we call "school and community" and the Cambodians call *sophiavathoa*). The videotapes were examined and a transcript was made of one two-hour segment. What I would like to focus on in this speech is how the Cambodian values of collectivism (the importance of the group over and above the individual) and the value of respect for hierarchy is conveyed in the Cambodian classroom through the behavior expected of the students and most importantly, through the linguistic choices that the teacher makes or demands his students make.

Collectivism. The importance of the group as opposed to the individual can first be seen in the demand for uniformity in orientation, in dress, and in response. With regard to orientation, for example, students in class sat in rows facing the front of the class. The teacher was always quite

concerned that this orientation be maintained even when he walked around the classroom. Thus, when individual students would turn to look at each other, to watch the teacher who had moved to the back of the classroom or to look out the door or window, the teacher would shout out *mɔyɔl muk* "look forward" or *mɔyɔl tablo* "look at the blackboard". Although in this afterschool school, the Cambodian teachers felt they could not require uniforms, boys in the class were nevertheless required to wear a white shirt which had to be tucked into the pants and girls usually wore white blouses and skirts. Students were required to stand in unison to greet the teacher, when a visitor entered the classroom and before leaving the class. Whereas the teacher did ask questions and elicit responses individually, far more time was devoted to class recitation in unison: of letters or words written on the blackboard; of addition, subtraction and multiplication tables; of the process of addition or subtraction; and of memorized poems on good behavior. In sum, uniform group behavior was stressed.

Another indication of the importance of the group rather than the individual was in the way the Cambodian teacher addressed his students and the way he referred to himself. First, he almost never addressed or referred to a student by name (apart from calling the roll at the beginning of the class). Indeed, in his commands or questions, he preferred to leave out references to individuals altogether. In the table below, you can see ways the Cambodian teacher referred to his students in one 30-minute segment taken from the transcript. Thus, in this segment there were 224 places in questions, commands and statements made to the students where it would have been grammatically possible to include a referent to an individual student (i.e., in subject or object position). In 159 of these cases, there was no referent included.

The Way the Cambodian Teacher Referred to His Students

Cambodian	Translation	Number	Percentage
No reference	--	159	70.0
niəŋ	child	27	12.0
sɤh	student	18	8.0
yəəŋ	we/our group	13	5.8
komara/vy	boy/girl	3	1.3
individual's name	--	2	.8
other	--	2	.8
Total		224	99.6

Examples of this lack of reference in questions are:

1. yuəl tee?
understand polite particle

Understand?

2. sɔʔap ɓaan?
listen can

Can (you) understand?

Note that the 'you' which I have included for translation purposes is not found in the Cambodian. The absence of reference can also be seen in the following teacher's request:

3. yuəl cʰlaəy ʔəŋcɤŋ yuəl tʰaa mec
understand answer then understand say how

(You) understand! Answer then. What (do you) understand?

When the teacher did include a referent (see the starred terms in the table), he used the Cambodian terms niəŋ "child/ren," sɤh "student/s," komara/əy "boy/s-girl/s," yəəŋ "we." These were not marked as singular or plural and thus it was always unclear whether the teacher was referring to one or all of the students. The lack of reference to individual students

had interesting effects. First, because of the lack of reference to an individual in statements of praise (see 4 and 5 below), a student could feel that his or her answer brought honor to the class:

4. ʔaə svh look kruu yuəl mæn
agree student teacher understand true

Correct. My student (or -s) understand(s) correctly

5. hm yuəl haəy koon svh look kruu cʰap yuəl nah
hm understand already child student teacher quick
understand emphatic

*hm You've understood. My young student (or -s)
learn(s) quickly.*

Both responses (4 and 5) could mean that the class is correct or the class learns quickly or the individual student is correct or learns quickly. Second, criticism of behavior, being unmarked and thus not obviously directed at one student, appears deflected from one to the class as a whole. Finally, the typical command form could be and was a direct imperative, a form of command which Brown and Levinson call "clear examples of bald on record" face threatening acts (1987:95). These acts do not seem so face threatening, however, when no individual is singled out as the recipient.

Finally, it is noticeable that the teacher not only did not refer to students by name, but also did not refer to himself by his name, using instead the name of his role, look kruu "teacher."

Recognition of and Respect for Hierarchy.

The stress on hierarchy was evident in the gestures and the language register that the teacher demanded the students use with him and with their parents and also in the teacher's own response to students. In addition, it was evident in the directness of the commands. With regard to gestures and language register, the teacher required that the students use vocabulary and gestures which indicate respect. Students were taught to greet (and to say goodbye) using the honorific predicate cumriəp "to say" as in the polite greetings below:

6. som cumriəpsuə look kruu
please say/ask Mr. teacher

How are you, Teacher?

Children were also taught the correct gesture and posture during greeting and leave taking. The teacher referred to himself and taught the students to refer to him as look kruu "Mr. Teacher" and he taught the boys to refer to themselves with the pronoun of deference kɲom ɓaat coming historically from the terms "slave/foot or feet." Thus, when two boys arrived late, they were required to come to the front of the class and apologize saying:

7. cumriəpsua look kruu
say/ask Mr. teacher

How are you, Mr. Teacher.

ʔət tooh kɲom ɓaat mook ywt
Don't punish I come late

Excuse me for coming late.

The teacher insisted that the children's immediate response to his questions be ɓaat "yes" for boys and caah "yes" for girls (equivalent to "sir" in both cases) but he himself responded to children's questions or replies with the response particle ʔaə, a response typically found in replies to subordinates. Finally, the teacher emphasized social distance with his preference for direct commands and his comments to the students about "knowing their place" and "respecting the teacher" usually occurring after some particular behavior he found disrespectful. In contrast to the direct commands of the Cambodian teacher (which as I mentioned are somewhat softened by the custom of never referring to students individually), a colleague of mine, Estelle Lau, an American teacher whose class we videotaped and who devoted most of her time talking to students individually, avoided the use of direct imperatives. She usually commanded by referring to student's likes or needs or her own likes or needs. Thus, she would say:

8. *Angela, would you like to come up?*

9. *Bobby, I'd like you to stand right beside your desk.*

10. *When we come back...I will need you to go and look at the baskets and find a basket.*

Thus, the American teacher seems to be saying: "Do this because you want to or like to, or I want or need you to do it." The Cambodian teacher seems to say, "Do this because I am the teacher and I tell you to." He makes no reference to his likes or needs or to the likes or needs of his students in his commands.

In sum, in the study I conducted, the Cambodian teacher taught the values of collectivism and respect for hierarchy not only through comments he made about these values, but also through linguistic choices he made.

Reference

Brown, P. & S. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press.