

Khmer Literacy Learning and Instruction in the Cambodian Community of Long Beach, California¹

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.² 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.

After-school instruction in Khmer is offered at one of the elementary schools in the district. The class meets twice a week with an average attendance of 40 students. It is organized and taught by a young Cambodian woman who did not receive schooling in Cambodia but has learned to read and write in Khmer in the United States.

The several literacy classes offered by a variety of groups and tailored to different ages and backgrounds attest to an interest among community members to learn to read and write in their native language. All the literacy classes are organized and taught by Cambodians and are designed to teach reading and writing to speakers of Khmer.

Literacy instruction at the Khemara Buddhikaram

The temple offers 4 levels of literacy classes each Sunday. The ages of students in each of the classes range from five-year-olds to young adults in their early twenties. There are anywhere from 80 to 100 students in attendance each week.

Reasons for attending the classes varied among the students, but by far the most prevalent reason is because their parents feel it is important to learn to read and write in Khmer. Most of the younger children are there because their parents simply bring them, but they told me they like to come because they can play with their friends during break. The young adults all felt that learning to read and write was important for various reasons. Some wanted to write to relatives in Cambodia. One young man was there to set an example for his younger siblings.

Talk about "difficulty"

In classroom discourse there are many reasons given for why Khmer is hard to learn. Among them are the infrequent use of some of the characters and the constitution of the writing system itself. Example 1 (below) is a short exchange taken from a class in which the teacher has had trouble matching the vowel sounds with the characters. Earlier in this lesson the teacher had called these letters "strange" and "ancient". At lines 308–310 (—>) in this segment she says "this letter is not used much. That's why I forget." At lines 313 and 314 (—>>) one

of the female students assures her that "these letters are like that" implying they are inherently difficult. The student uses *baŋ* (meaning older sibling) to address the teacher rather than *nea' kruu* (polite address form for a female teacher). In using *baŋ* she invokes a closer relationship and one in which she can offer assurances that it is not the fault of the teacher, but the fault of the letters.

1) 307 (inaudible talk)

—> 308 T: 'aksaa nih min səw yook

—> 309 mook praə

This letter is not used much.

—> 310 daliŋ kñom tae plic

That's why I forget it.

311 'aw 'ao 'əy () h -

312 lii 'ae 'ay 'ao 'aw

—>> 313 FS: baŋ (.) tuə 'aksaa niŋ

—>> 314 wiə 'aŋcəŋ 'aen

Older sibling, these letters are like that.

315 T: 'aŋcəŋ 'aen ha'

Is it this way?

316 FS: caah

yes

317 T: kñom klaac khoh

I'm afraid it's wrong.

[

318 FS: ()

Later, the class is involved in a word search for a Khmer word that they know the English equivalent for, but no one can remember what it is in Khmer. In example 2 at lines 154 & 155 (—>) a male student jokingly says that this is Khmer *criw*, meaning that this word is part of something too deep or too profound to understand and requires great study.

2) 150 MS: **səntən khmer (thaa/haw)**

151 **səntən (ha yah)?**

Sentence in Khmer, how do you say
sentence?

152 T: () **səntən** ()
() sentence ()

153 **haəy bəy**
already three

—> 154 MS: **haw səntən (.) khmer**

—> 155 **criw ()**
sentence [is] called
Khmer too profound to understand

156 FS: **khmer criw(h)**
Khmer too profound to understand

Still later, when they've found the right word the teacher explains that she used to know the word, but she forgot. And after this she offers an explanation for forgetting: "I didn't write Khmer for a long time I forgot." This autobiographical information subtly shifts the student/teacher relationship by invoking an experience she shares in common with the older students: that of life under Pol Pot when those who could read were killed for possessing this skill. Under these circumstances it was better to forget in order to survive.

Another hint as to difficulty in writing is found in example 3 at line 164

- 3) 160 MS: **bəy səntəns**
three sentences
- 161 FS: **last last oh, I**
162 **forgot**
- 163 (5)
- 164 MS: **ooh, nice writing**
- 165 (1)
- 166 FS: **thank you=**
- 167 MS: **=see mine**
- 168 ?: ()
- 170 T: **haw tiət**
- 171 (2)

Here a male student compliments one of the female students on her handwriting. Students in all the classes frequently compare handwriting and comment on how well someone can write. They acknowledge the difficulty in learning to form the letters correctly by showing an appreciation for another's skill.

Talk about learning

In addition to discourse surrounding difficulty in doing Khmer there is talk about **how** learning to read and write is accomplished. Teachers provide students with a solution to learning in the teaching method used.

The organization of teaching in these classes follows closely with the method used in Cambodia, this being rote memorization and group recitation of the material. In both the temples and schools in Cambodia texts were memorized and chanted according to rhyme schemes. It was felt that in this manner the people not only learned how to read and write, but they also learned proper behavior and cultural values (Ledgerwood 1990:85; Steinberg 1959).

In example 4 the teacher of the beginning class explicitly tells her students how to learn:

- 4) 89 **T: Twəə mec ‘aoy ceh haa**
 What do [you] do to learn?
- 90 **dal tɲay sokkka’ yɔɔk**
 91 **mɔɔk riən?**
 Do you take Friday to study?
- 92 **yɔɔk mɔɔk read laəŋ wiñ**
 Take the book and read it again.
- 93 ()
 94 **suə ‘əwpuk mdaay ()**
 Ask [your] parents.
- 95 **‘eyləw teəŋ ‘əh riən**
 96 **rɔəp sra’ riən**
 Now all together recite
- 97 **sra’ ‘ɑɑ sral’ ‘aa**
 vowels

These directions are followed with what, in these classes, is considered the appropriate way to learn: a direction to recite the lesson altogether.

A great deal of class time is spent getting everyone to recite in unison. Routines are repeated several times until they are performed correctly. For example, part of the opening routine of the beginning class is for the students to read the date. The goal is to have the students say the date clearly and in unison. In order to accomplish this they will have to perform it together at the same speed, with the same intonation. In one instance it took six tries before they were finally able to accomplish the task. Example 5 is what the teacher told the class when they had finally spoken the date in unison:

- 5) 130 T: **l'aa. khəəñ tee.**
Good! See?
- 131 **teəŋ 'ah kniə**
All together.
- 132 **teah day muəy**
Applaud yourself.
- 133 **rəəp sroh kniə**
You recited all together
- 134 **tɕay kraoy rəəp 'aoy baan**
135 **l'aa 'əñcəŋ**
So next time you'll be able to recite it
as good as now.
- 136 **tɕay kraoy mək 'aoy tae**
137 **khəəñ yəəŋ ceh haəy**
The next time if you do it the same as
now you will learn.

She congratulates them and has them applaud themselves (line 132) and tells them that when they recite together they will learn (lines 133–137).

Repetition and group performance are two central elements in the teaching method in these classes. Unlike U.S. classrooms where knowledge is demonstrated through individual performance at the initiation of the teacher (Mehan 1979), these classes stress learning by means of teacher directed group rehearsal and performance. Individual performance is available to those who feel they are competent enough, but it comprises a small portion of the class process and receives the least amount of time and attention.

Discussion

Socially organized activities, such as the literacy learning event discussed here, use talk as one resource to build the form of an activity (other resources include arrangement and use of objects in the area, body placement, etc). Through talk people can make known to each other how they conceptualize and understand the interaction they are participating in (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). The interactional work between students and teacher in this class uses the belief that Khmer is difficult as a resource to "*provide for* social organization" (M.H. Goodwin 1990: 286 italics in original). It is employed as a discourse tool that helps to shape social alignments and social identities in the classroom. In this setting the notion of difficulty allows participants to use mistakes and forgetfulness as resources for organizing social features of literacy learning.

Although it is understood that mastery of literacy in Khmer is difficult it is not believed to be impossible, nor is it conceived of as an indication of an individual's inherent ability (or inability) to learn. Rather, it is the writing system that is presented as being difficult, and one's ability (or inability) to perform writing is affected by social circumstances. Although Khmer is considered hard to do, a solution is provided in the teaching method used and the structure of the lessons: through proper recitation and memorization of the material students will learn to read and write in Khmer.

Given this conclusion it appears that difficulty is a culturally appropriate explanatory device, a complex notion that

when used signals a shared understanding of how learning is accomplished.

The notion that Khmer is difficult has not diminished its usefulness or importance to individual members of the Cambodian community. Historically, written Khmer has had significance not only for the sacred knowledge it transmitted, but also as a cultural symbol of Cambodian culture, tradition, and social cohesion. In Long Beach, it continues to be used as a symbol of "Cambodian-ness" as it is used by members as well as non-members to identify this group. Because the written characters are part of a symbolic system that is recognized as being Cambodian it is not necessary that everyone be able to read the script, only that they recognize it. However, an ability to read and write in Khmer provides members of the Long Beach community with additional opportunities to participate in a Cambodian identity in the United States. Included in this identity is an ongoing relationship with the country of their origin. Knowledge of how to read and write in Khmer gives access to political debate about the future of Cambodia and the development of the community in Long Beach. It provides a means for continued contact with relatives in Cambodia who cannot read English, and a way for participating in traditional Buddhist festivals and ceremonies here in the U.S. As a resource used for communication and identification both within the community and to the larger dominant society, literacy in written Khmer is an essential component of an individual's identity and sense of place within their family and the community. For the children in these classes, their parents, and teachers literacy classes provide a vital and additional link to their cultural heritage.

Notes

1. This community is identified as Cambodian rather than Khmer for the reason that not all refugees from Cambodia are ethnically Khmer. Many Cambodians are of Chinese, Lao, or Vietnamese ethnic descent. The national language of Cambodia

is Khmer and that is the language spoken and taught in these classes.

2. Females were not allowed to enter the monkhood, having other social responsibilities, and so did not have the need, nor the opportunity, to learn to read and write (Ebihara 1968:411–412).

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