DOI: 10.1111/weng.12621

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WORLD ENGLISHES WILEY

EMI (English-medium instruction) in Cambodian higher education

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[Correction added on 14th April 2023, after first online publication: Another affiliation 'Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines' added to Kingsley Bolton.]

Abstract

This article is based on empirical research carried out at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), Cambodia, between 2018 and 2019. The research involved both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the case of the former, the researchers conducted a large-scale survey of students involving 956 respondents, of whom 79 were postgraduate students, while the overwhelming majority were studying at the undergraduate level. The qualitative data collected in this project comprised detailed interviews with undergraduates studying at RUPP. The results of both types of data collection indicated that, although many students faced difficulties in studying through the medium of English, there was widespread support across the student body for the use of English in Cambodian higher education.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article reports on empirical research carried out at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), Cambodia, between 2018 and 2019, involving both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the case of the former, the researchers conducted a large-scale survey of students involving 956 respondents, of whom 79 were postgraduate students. The qualitative data collected in this project consisted of detailed interviews with undergraduates studying at RUPP. The results of both studies indicated widespread support among the student body for the use of English in Cambodian higher education. This article begins with a discussion of the historical and sociolinguistic background in

FIGURE 1 Map of Southeast Asia 900 CE[1] [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Cambodia, and proceeds to review previous research on the language education before presenting the results of our own data collection and analysis.

2 | HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

The Kingdom of Cambodia is a largely agrarian society geographically located at the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, with Vietnam to the east and Thailand to the west (see Figures 1 and 2). The word 'Cambodia' is an anglicization of the French name 'Cambodge,' itself derived from the Khmer word 'Kampuchea,' a term used to describe the nation during the era of the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979 (BBC, 2018). Cambodia has a long and complex history, which has been shaped by its agricultural economy, hierarchical social structures, the Hindu and Buddhist religions, and a horrific history of political madness and mayhem. In 2021, Cambodia had a population of 17.3 million, and an estimated GDP per capita of USD 4,200, making it one of the very poorest nations in the Asian region (World Factbook, 2021).

2.1 | Historical background

The settlement of Khmer in the region of present-day Cambodia can be traced back to the second and third centuries CE. From the ninth to the 14th century, the famed Angkor (Khmer) Empire had its epicentre at the city of Angkor, but more widely comprised an imperial state that subsumed the whole of present-day Cambodia as well as major parts

FIGURE 2 Map of South East Asia today[2] [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

of Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Historians believe that, around 1000 CE, the city of Angkor was one of the largest urban conurbations in the world, with something like a million inhabitants in and around the city. Its social organisation, where the majority of the population lived life in the servitude of bonded labour and slavery was similar to that of other slave societies ruled by divinely-endorsed God Kings and Emperors, including 'ancient Egypt and […] the Maya civilization of medieval Guatemala' (Chandler, 2008, p. 63).

Following the decline of the Angkor Empire, during the 14th and 15th centuries, political power shifted from the Angkor region to that of Phnom Penh, when Cambodia began to participate in overseas trade, with China and elsewhere. By the 18th and 19th century, Cambodia's close neighbours Thailand and Vietnam took turns in gaining influence over the Cambodian royal family and dominating the politics of the country (Tully, 2005). In order to check the influence of these two aggressive neighbours, King Norodom turned to the French for help, and in 1863 Cambodia became an official French protectorate. French colonialism commanded a light touch at first, but by the late 19th and early 20th century, the French administration were levying swingeing taxes on the mass of the population, in an overwhelmingly agrarian economy.

In 1941, Norodom Sihanouk was crowned king, and later emerged as a leader of the pro-independence movement, and someone who would play a major part in national politics over the following six decades. In 1953, Sihanouk, himself an avowed Francophile, convinced the French government to grant independence to the nation, a decision ratified by a conference in Geneva the following year. At this time, however, there were other political players emerging, including various French-educated Marxist revolutionaries, among whom was Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), who had just returned from Europe. Despite this, Sihanouk was able to retain power until 1970, although his politics was often confusingly contradictory, with shifting alliances with France, the United States, Vietnam, and China, throughout a period dominated by the American war in Vietnam. Eventually, an army-led coup in 1970 deposed Sihanouk, who went into self-exile in

Beijing. The pro-American Prime Minister, Lon Nol, took over the leadership of the nation, which soon became a failing state, at a time when US bombing of the countryside reached new heights. Over the following years, the Communists succeeded in gaining control of most of the countryside, and by early 1975 had encircled Phnom Penh. The revolutionary faction that captured the city in April 1975 was known as Democratic Kampuchea (DK), and its leaders were members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). The revolutionary DK party itself, led by Pol Pot, was more widely known in the West as the 'Khmer Rouge' (Chandler, 2008).

The horrors of the years between 1975 and 1979 have been graphically described in books and films covering the years of the DK (Khmer Rouge) government, but the scale of such horrors bears repeating, considering their legacy in contemporary Cambodia. Over these four years, it is estimated that as many as 2 million people (of a population around 7.7 million) died as a result of illness, malnutrition, overwork, and murder. At the notorious DK 'S-21' interrogation centre in the suburb of Tuol Sleng, at least 14,000 people were executed (Chandler, 2008, pp. 259, 265). The DK were particularly vicious towards anyone in possession of a higher level of education. In this period, it has been estimated that 90 per cent of the nation's schoolteachers were murdered, and that, out of 1,000 university teachers, only 87 survived (Clayton, 1998). Brinkley's disturbing account of the era suggests that a large section of the population has been directly affected by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result those events, noting that:

> Several research studies have demonstrated that one-third to one-half of all Cambodians who lived through the Khmer Rouge era have PTSD, borne of their traumatic experiences then. Watching as young soldiers executed family members. Waking to find the person lying next to you dead from starvation. In one clinical study of Cambodian refugees who came to the United States in the early 1980s and now live in Long Beach, California, 62 percent were diagnosed with PTSD – twenty-five years after their trauma. (Brinkley, 2011, p. 13)

The effects of these horrors, Brinkley asserts, continue to affect the younger generations born after the 1970s, as there is evidence that 'Cambodia is the only nation in the world where it has been demonstrated that symptoms of PTSD and related traumatic illnesses are being passed from one generation to the next' (Brinkley, 2011, pp. 13–14).

In January 1979, the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia and toppled the DK regime, which then retreated to the countryside. In this mission, the Vietnamese army enlisted the help of a number of former DK officers, who had defected to the Vietnamese in 1977. Among these was a DK officer named Hun Sen, who later gained the position of Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) in 1985, and who has retained political leadership ever since. The Vietnamese withdrew from the country in 1989, and, at a 1991 Paris conference, it was decided that the United Nations would rule Cambodia directly from 1992 until 1993, in order to supervise democratic and free elections. This brought about a boom in the Cambodian economy as the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) poured money and resources into Phnom Penh. By the time they left, UNTAC had spent a colossal 2 billion US dollars, and had also paved the way for numerous other agencies, from Australia, France, Japan, the United States, and the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, to distribute developmental aid in the country. Unfortunately, much of this aid has been diverted into the pockets of corrupt officials, usually at the highest levels of the civil service and government (Brinkley, 2011).

Since the early 1990s, the economy of the nation has grown substantially, not least as the result of the discovery of deposits of offshore oil, but, despite this, Cambodia remains one of the very poorest nations in the Asian region. In Brinkley's (2011) disturbing study of the corruption in the country, he notes that, in the early 2000s, malnutrition had resulted in the stunted growth of an estimated 42 per cent of Cambodia's children, and that child mortality was similarly very high compared with other Asian nations. Since the 1990s, Hun Sen, the leader of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), has sought to consolidate his power by all means possible, including the alleged assassination and imprisonment of political enemies, manipulation of elections, and various measures to control the mass media. In the last few years, it has been suggested that Cambodia, although theoretically a constitutional monarchy, is now 'descending into dictatorship' under the current leadership. In 2016, a report issued by the NGO Global Witness reported that Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's family had amassed a 'huge fortune,' with ownership of scores of businesses in such

key areas as energy, mining and trading firms, and telecoms, in contravention of the nation's (admittedly weak) laws on corruption (Turton & Seangly, 2016).

At the same time, China has now become the most generous donor to the country, as well as the closest military ally of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, during a period when Hun Sen is cutting ties with the United States and other Western governments (Croissant, 2018, pp. 198–199). Today, it has been suggested, Cambodia is increasingly a 'Chinese vassal state,' as evidenced by the exploitation of Sihanoukville, where Chinese businesses have constructed apartments, casinos, and hotels. In return for generous aid, Cambodia has supported Beijing's claims to virtually all of the South China Sea. Only three of the leaders of the Khmer Rouge have ever been brought to account by the special tribunal set up to investigate the horrors of the DK era, a body named the 'Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia' (Dunst, 2020; BBC, 2018). For the moment, Hun Sen, himself a former Khmer Rouge commander, appears to be going from strength to strength, not least through Cambodia's current chairing of ASEAN, which has given him an expanded opportunity to play the statesman at a regional level, even though his 'cowboy diplomacy' in establishing relations with the Myanmar military has disturbed some of his ASEAN partners (Mendelson, 2021).

2.2 | Sociolinguistic background

Khmer is a language in the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family, and the oldest written inscriptions in the language date from the seventh century CE, and the writing system is based on a form Devanagari script (Campbell, 1995). Examples of written Khmer date from the seventh century CE, and both Khmer culture and language were heavily influenced by both Hinduism and Buddhism. Before and during the Angkor period, many Sanskrit terms were incorporated into Khmer, and poetic literatures in Khmer and Sanskrit developed. From the 13th century onwards, Theravada Buddhism gained influence and Pali became a source of borrowing into educated Khmer. Traditionally, the major means of promoting literacy were monastery schools organized by Buddhist monks, where Pali was widely taught (Campbell, 1995).

In 1911, under the French, it was decided that Khmer was to be taught throughout the kingdom, and the monastery schools operated alongside public schools until the 1950s, when they were incorporated into the national system. Otherwise, the colonial government attempted to promote French by establishing a number of Francophone primary schools. A French high school, Sisowath Lyceé, was established in Phnom Penh in 1911. By the 1930s, there were thus three types of school, 'the religious schools for Pali, the monastery schools for Khmer, and the public schools for French' (Thong, 1985, p. 107). Following independence in 1953, the influence of the French in education began to wane, although the former colonial language continued to retain prestige among the elite in Cambodian society. Since the 1990s, Khmer has continued to dominate public education and the mass media, although private education has seen the widespread promotion of English, which is now overwhelmingly the most popular foreign language in Cambodia, with French in second place (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2021).

3 | ENGLISH IN CAMBODIA

There is little doubt that English has been growing in popularity in recent years, although exactly how many Cambodians know English is difficult to estimate. The 2013 Cambodia population survey published by the National Institute of Statistics reported that 79 per cent of the population aged seven years and above (10.2 million) were literate in Khmer and/or other languages. Of this literate section of the population, 8 per cent were reported as being literate in both Khmer and English, which amounted to 5.2 per cent of the whole population (Cambodian National Institute of Statistics, 2013). In their recent study of the statistics of English across Asia, Bolton and Bacon-Shone (2020) similarly estimate a total of 5 per cent for the English-knowing population in the country, while Moore and Bounchan (2020) suggest that a figure of around 15 per cent is closer to the mark.

A major impetus for the spread of English was the arrival of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). Although, officially, French and English were designated as co-equal working languages for UNTAC's more than 20,000 staff, English quickly became preferred in most day-to-day operation. Most of the 60,000 plus Cambodians employed by the UN during the two-year period would have needed to have acquired at least some degree of proficiency in English. The UNTAC mission, it has been claimed, ushered in a 'new linguistic era' where 'English seems to have installed itself in an irrevocable manner' (Clayton, 2006, p. 73). The country's subsequent admission into ASEAN at the end of the decade then further enhanced the appeal of English. As the sole official working language of ASEAN, English is used exclusively, without translation, in all its documents, meetings, conferences, and exchanges. This required Cambodian officials and representatives who could function in English, and English has since then been vital for government ministries and their officials (Moore & Bounchan, 2020; Moore, 2021).

A second driver of the spread of English has been economic development, throughout a time when foreign enterprises, particularly from ASEAN and other Asian countries, sought to establish themselves in the country. Cambodia's entry into ASEAN has also had the effect of normalizing perceptions of the country, and opening it to mass tourism, which has further fuelled the need for Cambodian workers with English abilities who could support tourism and hospitality. A third factor in promoting the language was the arrival of international aid organizations, including aid agencies from Japan, France, the United States, Australia, and Sweden, as well as such multilateral organizations as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as various foreign NGOs, the vast majority of which used English as their working language. Many of these agencies continue to have a strong presence and influence in Cambodia today (Clayton, 2006; Moore & Bounchan, 2020; Moore, 2021).

3.1 | English in Cambodia's schools

Moore and Bounchan suggest that the state of public education in Cambodia might best be described as in a 'crisis,' and provide a graphic description of the defects of the system, noting that half of schools lack running water and one-third lack toilets, that class sizes often total 50, that corruption is rife, and that '[t]eacher salaries are not sufficient to support a family' (Moore & Bounchan, 2020, p. 661). The Cambodian Constitution of 1993 (Article 5) stipulates Khmer as the official language and the Khmer script as the official writing system, and since the 1990s Khmer has been the dominant language of instruction at all levels of education. Article 24 of the Cambodia Education Law (2007) prescribes the Khmer language as the official language in public schools, and also makes provision for the teaching of foreign languages (Chan, 2021). However, despite the fact that English is a compulsory subject from Grade 4, most public schools do not teach the language, and as a result 'most Cambodian children still live in a rather monocultural and monolingual Khmer environment' (Kosonen, 2019, p. 216). Given the shortcomings of public education, it is perhaps unsurprising that private education exists in a wide range of forms, including low-fee, medium-fee, and high-fee private schools (Brehm, 2021). Even public schools have been privatized, as their teachers often make themselves available for private teaching sessions with groups of their regular students. Many of the private schools specialize in teaching English language skills, as well as such other subjects as computer literacy and maths, as Moore and Bounchan spell out:

> One area in which private sector education has flourished is in its offerings of English-mediated education. A decade ago, parents who could afford it would often send their children abroad to study in high schools and universities. […] Today there are many choices of education provider in the private sector ranging across all levels of education in Cambodia. The courses and programs offered in private sector education may be taught by Cambodians or expatriates, or a blend of the two. (Moore & Bounchan, 2020, p. 662)

It remains to be seen what the effects of this educational apartheid will be. One obvious effect is the further exacerbation of social class and urban versus rural inequality, as the country continues to modernize.

3.2 | English in higher education

Higher education was generally neglected during the French colonial era, when the children of elite and middle class families typically travelled to France for university education, as was the case indeed for Pol Pot and the other leaders of the DK revolutionary party. Nevertheless, the origins of higher education can be traced back to late French colonialism, when the National Institute of Law, the National Institute of Politics, and the National Institute of Economic Sciences were founded in 1947. The first full university was the Khmer Royal University (today the Royal University of Phnom Penh) which was established in 1960. In 1965, six other tertiary institutions were established: the People's University, the Royal Technical University, the Royal University of Agricultural Science, the Royal University of Fine Arts, the Royal University of Kompong Cham, and the Royal University of Takeo-Kampot (Williams, Kitamura, & Keng, 2016). The work of such institutions ceased completely during the Khmer Rouge years, but, since the late 1990s, both public and private higher education has expanded greatly throughout the country. According to the Cambodian government, by 2018, there were 121 public and private higher education institutions in Cambodia (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2019). Other sources quote rather different figures, with Williams, Kitamura and Keng (2016) stating that by 2014, there were 105 higher education institutions, 39 public and 66 private, while Dahles (2017) gives figure of 101 institutions, that is 39 public and 62 private colleges or universities. Of these, very few could be regarded English-medium institutions in the fuller sense. Exactly how many EMI programs are offered at Cambodian universities is unclear from the research literature. Sok and Bunry (2021) claim that EMI programs have been increasing in recent years in the private sector, and that four public universities have EMI programs, although more detailed information appears unavailable. It is also worth noting that very few of the country's universities meet international standards, and the QS university rankings organization includes none of Cambodia's universities in its Asia rankings (QS, 2022).

A relatively limited body of research has hitherto been published on the use of English in Cambodian higher education. Early work on this topic included that of Clayton (1995, 2006), which discussed the spread of English in Cambodia in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Empirical research on English language education includes that by Moore and Bounchan (2010), who conducted an investigation into the attitudes of faculty and students participating in a BEd (TEFL) program at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, who held generally positive attitudes towards the language and their program. Of direct relevance to the current research, Kerk and Tith's (2013) article reported on an empirical study on the use of English in Department of International Studies in the Royal University of Phnom Penh. Their study concluded that many students faced serious challenges in studying through the EMI program at RUPP and that more should be done to provide students with appropriate learning support. Chan's (2016) dissertation investigated EMI programs at an unnamed university in some detail. The research issues for his study included (i) medium of instruction policies, (ii) the role of EMI classes in the language ecology of the university, and (iii) the relationship of EMI policies to the wider sociopolitical context in Cambodia. Chan concludes that '[A]lthough English is playing an increasingly important role in higher education in Cambodia, it is not perceived as threatening the existence of Khmer in the ecology' (p. 129). Chan further adds that, '[i]n the current context of Cambodian higher education, academic programs may benefit more from some forms of bilingual model for medium of instruction, in which both Khmer and English are used purposefully' (p. 137). See also Bolton and Botha (2020), Chan (2021).

4 | METHODOLOGY AND THE BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH

The methodology for this study was based on empirical research carried out at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), Cambodia, between 2018 and 2019. RUPP is the oldest university in the country and is one of the largest

public universities, with more than 20,000 students in undergraduate and postgraduate programs across five faculties (Science, Social Sciences and Humanities, Engineering, Development Studies, and Education) and one institute (the Institute of Foreign Languages). It is one of only two universities that are full members of the ASEAN University Network, and is widely regarded as the most prestigious university in Cambodia. Neither the Times Higher Education or QS World University Rankings includes any Cambodian university in their lists, but the Australia-based uniRank, which describes itself as 'the leading international higher education directory and search engine,' ranks RUPP as the top university in Cambodia (uniRank, 2021). The main language of instruction at the university is Khmer, although teaching in the International Studies program is officially conducted through the medium of English. Otherwise, and unofficially, English is also used as a teaching medium for many other subjects in the university, including engineering, business studies, mathematics, science subjects, and tourism.

As of 2019, of its 535 teaching staff not including visiting teachers, only 10.3 per cent (or 55) held PhDs and only 3.2 per cent (or 17) were foreign nationals (Sok, Khan, & Bunry, 2019). The number of students with foreign nationalities enrolled in the university's undergraduate and postgraduate programs is negligible, comprising only a few whose parents may be working in the country. Otherwise, international students at the university comprise only in-bound exchange students, which numbered only 497 out of the total student population of 18,779, according to the university's 2018 prospectus (RUPP, 2018). Interestingly, except for those studying foreign languages such as Korean, Japanese, or Thai, such exchange students need to meet English proficiency requirements, even though the two largest groups forming the overwhelming majority, as reported in the prospectus, were from China (294 students) and Vietnam (102 students). Admission to undergraduate programs at RUPP is competitive and based on the students' results in the national general education or high school (Grade 12) exit examinations. In addition, some programs include specific English language requirements. For instance, the Department of International Business Management requires applicants to its programs to have passed English as a subject in their high school exit examination, while in addition to a good high school certificate, International Studies requires applicants to undergo and pass an entrance examination designed to assess both English language proficiency and general knowledge. As a leading public university, RUPP admits most of its students from public high schools, although one of the authors of this paper, a faculty member at RUPP, estimates that around 10 per cent of students come from private schools.

The research project at RUPP involved both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and comprised a research team drawn from RUPP, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The quantitative survey of RUPP students was conducted between April and November 2018. Unlike other Asian contexts where students could respond to the questionnaire online, at RUPP, we needed to distribute paper questionnaires, and later transfer the data to a computer database. In spite of this hindrance, the survey was successful in gaining a reasonable response rate, and yielded a total of 956 completed questionnaires. Of these, 877 were from undergraduates and 79 from postgraduates. In the survey results presented below, we include only the results from undergraduates. In our sample, 55 per cent of undergraduates were studying non-STEM subjects, and 45 per cent were studying STEM subjects. Non-STEM subjects included international studies (40% of non-STEM students), social sciences and humanities (31%), and development studies (29%). STEM subjects included engineering (60%) and computer science (40%).

The research issues for this project included the following: (i) to investigate the experiences of students in English-medium courses; (ii) to understand the challenges and difficulties that students face in this context; (iii) to examine students' use of English both inside and outside the classroom; (iv) to gauge students' attitudes to English-medium instruction (EMI).

5 | RESULTS OF THE UNDERGRADUATE SURVEY AT RUPP

5.1 | Background of students

Of the 877 undergraduate students, 54 per cent were male and 46 per cent were female. A total of 99 per cent of these students were of Cambodian nationality, and 91 per cent stated that their ethnicity was Khmer. Other

TABLE 1 Language(s) usually spoken at home

Language(s)	Overall
Khmer and English	15.0%
Khmer and other	3.0%
Khmer, English, and other	1.3%
Khmer only	78.3%
English only	0.6%
Other	1.8%
N = 877	

TABLE 2 Language(s) usually spoken with friends

Language(s)	%age
Khmer	58.6%
Khmer and English	32.8%
Khmer, English, and other	2.8%
English	2.3%
Khmer and other	1.0%
English and other	0.7%
Other	1.8%
N = 879	

TABLE 3 Self-rated English proficiency

	%age
Not at all	0.7%
A few sentences	4.6%
A little	34.9%
Quite well	38.7%
Well	18.8%
Very well	2.3%
Total	100%
N = 876	

ethnicities included Chinese (6%), Cham (1%), and Vietnamese (0.2%). When it came to 'mother tongue,' 98 per cent stated that Khmer was their dominant language. In the case of 'languages spoken at home,' Khmer was also dominant, but the results also indicated the presence of English in the home domain, as indicated by Table 1. There was even stronger evidence that English is used within the friendship domain by these students, with nearly 39 per cent of students reporting using at least some English when speaking with friends, as indicated by Table 2. With reference to self-reported proficiency, it is notable that the majority of students rated their own ability in the language reasonably well, with almost 60 per cent of students stating that they were able to use English 'Quite well,' 'Well,' or 'Very well,' as in Table 3.

TABLE 4 Claimed bilingualism in English and another language

	%age
Completely	6.2%
Very	12.1%
Somewhat	41.2%
A little	35.4%
Not at all	5.1%
Total	100%
N = 875	

TABLE 5 Percentage of participants experiencing different frequencies of classes conducted in spoken English

	All	About 75%	About half	About 25%	Less than 25%	Not applicable
Large classes	8.6%	26.6%	34.5%	16.9%	7.7%	5.7%
Small classes	9.1%	29.8%	32.9%	16.6%	7.4%	4.2%
Tutorial/labs	7.1%	21.2%	27.1%	16.4%	9.7%	18.5%

TABLE 6 Level of difficulty in writing about discipline in Khmer and English

	Khmer	English
Very easy/Quite easy	68.8%	37.1%
Quite difficult	25.0%	45.5%
Very difficult/Impossible	6.2%	17.4%
Total	100%	100%
	N = 837	N = 875

In addition, a sizeable proportion of students identified themselves as 'bilingual' in English and another language (overwhelmingly Khmer). The total of those claiming to be 'Completely,' 'Very,' or 'Somewhat' bilingual was 59.5 per cent, as seen in Table 4.

5.2 | Students' difficulties with English-medium instruction

In the survey, undergraduates were asked what proportion of their classes utilized spoken English, and the results indicate that this varied somewhat, although there were reports of a high proportion of spoken English used as the teaching medium for various types of classes. Around 70 per cent of the students reported that English was used at least half the time in the large classes, with percentages of 72 per cent and 55 per cent for small classes and tutorials/labs (see Table 5).

Students were asked about their reading habits, and which reading materials they needed most help with, in other words, which materials presented most difficulty. In response to this question, the academic genres that most students mentioned in this context included academic articles, books, textbooks, case studies, book chapters, course handouts, and PowerPoint slides. The undergraduates reported on their difficulties in academic writing, in both Khmer and English. The results for this question are set out in Table 6, which clearly indicates that many students, 68.8 per cent, found it relatively easy to write in Khmer rather than English, even though 31.2 per cent of students also reported

TABLE 7 Students' ratings of their own language proficiency in meeting the needs of EMI courses

	%age
Very good	11.5%
Good	30.3%
Fairly good	43.0%
Poor	12.1%
Very poor	3.1%
Total	100%
N = 875	

TABLE 8 Students' perceptions of language mixing by their professors

Frequency	%age
Always/Very often	24.5%
About half the time	31.7%
Sometimes	33.1%
Rarely/Never	10.7%
Total	100%
N = 877	

difficulties in writing in the national language. In the case of English, 37.1 per cent stated that it was 'Very easy' or 'Quite easy,' compared with 62.9 per cent who clearly stated that they had difficulty in writing in English for academic purposes. Students were also asked about their own language abilities in relation to their EMI courses, with 84.8 per cent of students stating that their level of proficiency in this context was either 'Very good,' 'Good,' or 'Fairly good' (Table 7). From table 7, 15.2 per cent of students, however, reported 'Poor' or 'Very poor' proficiency in this context.

5.3 | Mixing languages

Respondents were also asked a number of questions about language mixing. It was clear from the results that a great deal of language mixing (or 'translanguaging') took place within the classrooms, with 56.2 per cent of students reporting that their professors frequently ('Always', 'Very often,' 'About half the time') mixed languages in the classroom. If we include the percentage of students reporting that their professors mixed languages 'Sometimes,' the total percentage for language mixing then increases to 89.3 per cent, as may be seen from Table 8. Respondents were also asked about language mixing by themselves and other students. In response to this last question, we have a total of 49.5 per cent of students reporting frequent mixing, and if we factor in those reporting other students mixing 'Sometimes,' we have a combined total of 83.5 per cent respondents reporting language mixing by other students, as is demonstrated by Table 9. In the case of students' own language use, we find similar pattern with a total of 85 per cent of students reporting mixing languages themselves, at least some of the time, as shown in Table 10.

There was also strong evidence that spoken Khmer was widely used in both Non-STEM and STEM classrooms, as indicated by Table 11. This total also demonstrates the fact that language mixing is a major form of communication, not only for academic discussions, but also when socializing with classmates.

TABLE 9 Students' perceptions of language mixing by other students

Frequency	%age
Always/Very often	30.6%
About half the time	18.9%
Sometimes	34.0%
Rarely/Never	15.7%
Not applicable	0.8%
Total	100%
N = 859	

TABLE 10 Students' perceptions of language mixing by themselves (with other students)

Frequency	%age
Always/Very often	29.0%
About half the time	19.1%
Sometimes	36.9%
Rarely/Never	15.0%
Total	100%
N = 873	

TABLE 11 Spoken languages in interactions with classmates

	Language used			
All	**English**	**Khmer**	**Mixed**	**Others**
Discussing academic matters in the classroom	9.3%	54.9%	35.3%	0.5%
Socializing with classmates	10.3%	51.8%	37.7%	0.2%
Non-STEM	**English**	**Khmer**	**Mixed**	**Others**
Discussing academic matters in the classroom	12.3%	42.5%	45.0%	0.2%
Socializing with classmates	12.3%	42.0%	45.8%	0.0%
STEM	**English**	**Khmer**	**Mixed**	**Others**
Discussing academic matters in the classroom	6.7%	69.4%	23.9%	0.0%
Socializing with classmates	8.4%	62.1%	29.5%	0.0%

5.4 | The use of English outside the classroom

The questionnaire included a number of items related to the use of English outside the classroom, for both academic and leisure activities. The results indicated that a majority of the students use English quite extensively during their leisure time, with at least 50 per cent of respondents using English more than 75 per cent of their time for six of the 10 activities set out in Figure 3 below.

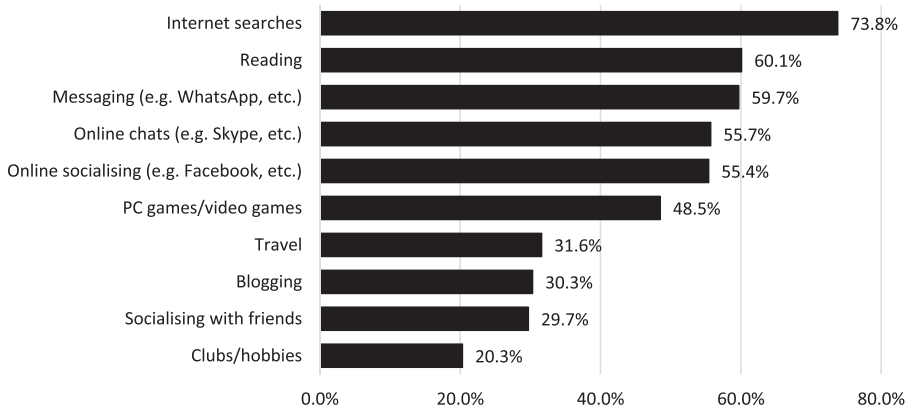

FIGURE 3 Students' use of English outside university

TABLE 12 Whether English should be a medium of instruction at RUPP

	%age
Strongly agree	25.5%
Agree	45.8%
Neutral	25.2%
Disagree	3.0%
Strongly disagree	0.5%
Total	100%
N = 860	

5.5 | Attitudes to English-medium instruction

Students were asked whether or not they agreed with the use of English as a medium of instruction at RUPP. The results set out in Table 12 indicate that a clear majority (71.3%) of students either 'Strongly agree' or 'Agree' with the use of English as the language of instruction, and only 3.5 per cent of students 'Disagree' or 'Strongly disagree.' In a separate question, students were asked whether they enjoyed studying through the EMI system at their university. In response to this question, a total of 55.9 per cent stated that they 'Very much' or 'Quite a lot' enjoyed studying these courses, with only 3.5 per cent stating that they 'Did not enjoy' or 'Strongly disliked' the use of English as a language of instruction.

5.6 | Interpreting the RUPP survey results

Generally speaking, the undergraduate survey results indicated that most students taking EMI courses at RUPP claimed rather high levels of proficiency in English and were coping reasonably well with the demands of the system. A total of 60 per cent of students claimed to speak English 'Quite well,' 'Well,' or 'Very well,' and 59 per cent reported that they were 'Somewhat,' 'Very,' or 'Completely' bilingual. However, smaller percentages of students did report significant difficulties in studying through the EMI system, with a total of 17.4 per cent asserting that it was either 'Very difficult' or 'Impossible' to write about their discipline in English, and a rather worrying 40 per cent of students claiming to know English 'A little' or 'A few sentences.' Despite this, there was a high level of agreement with the use of

English as the major teaching medium at RUPP, with some students (in open-ended questions) explaining their views with reference to the fact that 'Khmer still lacks technical words which exist in English,' 'There is a lack of resources and textbooks available in Khmer,' and that 'Khmer translated documents make me struggle to understand with the wrong wording or interpretation.' Another factor contributing to students' opinions on such matters was their own previous histories of study, given that many of the students studying at RUPP had studied at various private schools before coming to the university. In order to find out more about the students' own experiences, we also conducted face-to-face interviews with a number of undergraduates.

6 | INTERVIEWS WITH UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

A number of interviews were conducted with RUPP students in 2018 and 2019. In all, a total of 17 recorded interviews were conducted with undergraduate students, each lasting an average of 30 to 40 minutes. In these interviews, students were asked about their own experiences of EMI at RUPP, as well as their own use of English inside and outside the classroom.

6.1 | Students' experience of EMI instruction

The students' own experiences of EMI varied according to their chosen discipline. One program in particular, International Studies, utilizes English for almost all aspects of instruction, and are also selective in admitting students, who are required to pass an entrance test, which includes an English language competency test designed to identify those with superior proficiency.

The necessity of private education before entering university

One student reported that it was necessary for her to attend private school before applying to RUPP for admission to this course:

> When I study in high school we only have English only 1 hour per week. […] so my family encourage me to study, take the other courses outside of my Khmer school. So I study at home of English ever since I was 3 even before I started my Khmer school, and, at grade 7, I decided to change to ACE [private school, Australian Centre for Education] and […] when I take an entrance exam, we have to have a like kinda strong English in order to get into this school. (KT, 1st year, female, international studies)

The necessity for using English language materials

A number of students also commented on the shortage of textbooks in Khmer. BM, a business studies student, reported that in business studies, English was the usual language of textbooks, but Khmer was the default choice for spoken communication. BM commented that most of the teachers 'hardly talk English in class,' but preferred to mix English and Khmer.

> Actually from the first year to the third year now, there are only one subject that is study in Khmer which is statistic and beside that, it's all in English. And actually most of the textbooks, handouts and the material that study are conduct in English. […] So, in order to make the student understand the

> lesson well, the teachers try to mix both English and Khmer to teaching. And actually I think this is the best choice to study business in English because as an international business student, we have to do business internationally. (BM, 3rd year, female, International Business Management)

Similar comments came from a number of other students, including those studying STEM subjects, such as KS and DP below.

> Well the course that provided in engineering faculty, the textbooks, they're all written in English […] and I think it's mandatory that we have to be proficient in English in order to study in this field. And I think it's hard for the faculty to have a translation of the textbook in Khmer because it might use a lot of resource, money and time. So I think every student must know English, […] in order to learn in engineering field. (KS, 1st year, male, computer engineering)

> [When]I read any journal like research article, I research in English, and also when I study. My teacher explain in Khmer language but the slide presentation of the teacher is write in English. And I also take note or my book is also I write in English too. Because my major have a lot of technical words that difficult to write in Khmer, so we need to write in English too. And one more is my assignment, like my teacher when they put assignment, we need to research in English. (DP, 4th year, biological engineering)

Difficulties studying through English

Despite the fact that the students we interviewed were generally positive about studying through English, the students identified a wide range of difficulties related to their EMI studies. These included the varying abilities of their classmates, as noted by BM:

> [Our] level of English in class is not the same so somehow we need to like, for example, I need teachers to explain in English but my friend needs teacher to explain in Khmer so like they have a conflict in class. (BM, 3rd year, female, International Business Management)

Others, like TP, also reported that many of their classmates had major problems because their previous education, particularly in public schools, had left them ill-prepared for higher education through English.

> For that, most of my classmates have difficulty understand the lesson. The first problem is that they don't understand English very well […] most of my classmate really find it hard because some of them come from province […] So when they come to class, they really find it hard and I think that sometime they even feel bad about themselves, and some of them drop out from even the very first semester. (TP, 1st year, female, international studies)

Other students mentioned difficulty in mastering the technical terminology of various subjects.

> We study mathematics in English, and it's so very difficult because the word in algebra, a lot in English so we need to remember this word and the difference of it, and the meaning in of English word in algebra is not the same meaning in general English. […]We need to choose a dictionary in mathematics, and some exercise that have the word in English, so very very difficult to solve it. (VC, 1st year, male, mathematics)

Use of English outside the classroom

Many students reported using both Khmer and English outside the classroom, although the extent to which this occurred depended very much on the educational and social background of the particular students. Based on our interviews with students, it is fair to assume TP's experiences, described below, are not untypical of many of the students at RUPP.

> I also use English when I'm using social media. If I want to post something, sometime in Khmer, sometime in English, but the platform of the app is in English […] if I communicate with my friend, for the friend like my classmate, I communicate with them in Khmer but sometime we also talk in English like when we discuss about something. I also have my international friends so when I communicate with them, we talk in English. (TP, 1st year, female, international studies)

Attitudes to English-medium instruction

As in the results of the quantitative survey, undergraduate student attitudes to the policy of using English as the medium of instruction for various courses at RUPP were generally very positive. Some students, like VC, mentioned the need for English across ASEAN, and also in order to find good employment.

> For my idea, I think English is very very important for all student in Cambodia because we need to use it for communicate with foreigners, especially in ASEAN integration. […] For me, I think we should try to study English to communicate with foreigners and have opportunity to find a good job too, and can get a scholarship to study in a foreign country, but we don't give up the first language because it represents our country. (VC, 1st year, male, mathematics)

Another student, AA, also mentioned the need for English inside the ASEAN association, as well as the global utility of knowing English.

> English is one of the most important language in the ASEAN region. So in order to find work, or in order to communicate with the member states inside ASEAN, English is very important. And also English is very important for each individual himself because when you travel, if you do not know the language of the country […] English is an important language that everyone should know how to speak. (AA, 3rd year, male, international studies and English)

A number of other students also explained that they had chosen EMI programs, because they wanted to improve their command of English as well as study a particular academic discipline, as was the case with SP:

> Honestly, I wanted the English language included in my major because our major is bioengineering, but I want to study also English. I want to improve my English knowledge and my skill about bioengineering, because like when I graduate, I can improve both my English knowledge and my major, so it can have two benefit at the same time. (SP, 4th year, female, biological engineering)

Overall, the interviews with undergraduate students highlighted a number of issues, including the role of private education in preparing students for university-level EMI education, the necessity for using English language materials,

the various difficulties encountered by students, and their generally favorable attitudes to English inside and outside the classroom.

7 | CONCLUSION

This article has reported on a research project carried out at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) between 2018 and 2019, involving both quantitative and qualitative research. In the case of quantitative research, which took the form of a questionnaire survey of undergraduate students throughout RUPP, the results generally indicated a rather positive attitude to English on the part of the students. In broad terms, EMI education was seen as improving their proficiency in English, as well as contributing to their education in a particular discipline. For many students, however, this was not unproblematic, and those students that seemed to cope best in the current system had invariably attended bilingual or international schools on a full-time or part-time basis before entering RUPP. One way in which teachers attempted to deal with such problems, a strategy often approved by the students, was to adapt a 'parallel language' approach in the classroom, mediating translingually between English language textbooks and PowerPoint slides, and switching frequently from Khmer to English, and vice versa. It seems only reasonable to accept the adoption and adaptation of EMI in this fashion in the Cambodian context as a rather sensible solution to a cluster of obvious educational and linguistic problems.

At the same time, it is not possible to fully understand the context of EMI education in Cambodia without considering the wider history of this poverty-stricken Southeast Asian nation, where 75 per cent of the population still live in the countryside, under conditions that, until recently, had barely changed for hundreds of years. If we add to this the continuing impact on the national psyche of the horrors of the Khmer Rouge era, it is not difficult to understand the appeal of the English language, with its connotations (deserved or otherwise) of education, employment, and internationalization. Many of the RUPP students interviewed discussed their desire to go abroad for postgraduate education after completing their first degree. The intended destination for most students was typically an English-speaking university, possibly in Asia, for example, in Singapore, but more frequently in the United Kingdom, United States, or Australia. If Hun Sen's current courtship of China continues, it may well be that more Cambodian students will be attracted to study in the People's Republic of China, but for the moment at least, the allure of Western countries and universities seems as strong as ever and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. In this context, or in the context of gaining employment with an international company or international agency in Cambodia, the English language and English-medium education is typically seen as the key to self-advancement. Again, however, this is not unproblematic, given the social stratification of all forms of education throughout the country, and the perceived benefits of a command of English may prove to be illusory for large numbers of students from less privileged and rural backgrounds. For the young students we interviewed at RUPP, however, such concerns were not uppermost in their minds, and, like other students in many countries throughout the world, the use of English in their social media, their laptops, and smartphones is now a staple feature of their everyday lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research project discussed in this article was supported by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, under its Academic Research Fund Tier 1 (Grant number RG164/17NS).

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How to cite this article: Lin, B., Bolton, K., Bacon-Shone, J., & Khan, B. (2023). EMI (English-medium instruction) in Cambodian higher education. *World Englishes*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12621