

Cambodian Refugees: Factors Affecting Their Assimilation and English Language Acquisition¹

- In the U.S. today, there are approximately 140,000 Cambodian (Khmer) refugees who were forced to flee their country to escape the excessively traumatic rule of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. The vast majority of Khmer refugees came from an overwhelmingly rural, nonwestern background and many have not been successful in learning English, and in mainstreaming with the larger American public. This paper has two aims: (a) to present some of the connections among the history, worldview, social behaviors, and sociolinguistic patterns of the Khmer people, and, (b) to demonstrate how these features as well as the social and cultural setting of America affect their assimilation and English language acquisition. Findings are based on ethnographic research currently being conducted by the author which include: teaching of ESL to adult refugees in their homes while learning the Khmer language herself, participant observation, extensive family interviews, and community service activities.

Cambodians (Khmer)² as Refugees

When Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge gained control of Cambodia in 1975 and turned that once gentle land in Southeast Asia to one of the most horrifying criminal camps the world has ever known, thousands of starved, tortured, and abused Cambodian (Khmer) people were forced to flee their homeland in search of refuge in this and many other countries. This paper has two aims: (a) to present some of the connections among the history, worldview, social behaviors, and sociolinguistic patterns of the Khmer people, and (b) to demonstrate how these features as well as the social and cultural setting of America affect their assimilation and English language acquisition. Information is based on my ethnographic fieldwork in Santa Clara County, California, begun in 1987 and still in progress. My activities have included teaching ESL to adult refugees in their homes, community service, participant observation, and extensive family interviews. In addition, I am studying the Khmer language, to both conduct research and experience some of the difficulties an English speaker goes through in learning the language of her students.

In the United States today, there are approximately 140,000 Khmer refugees. Of these, the first wave of above 7,000 came in 1975, soon after the communist takeover, and were mainly well educated and Westernized military and government officials, other professionals, and their families. The second and third waves who came between 1979 and 1984, were primarily non-Western rural farmers from a cooperative social system, who had languished in refugee camps for several years, with very little preparation for resettlement in a technologically advanced, competitive society such as the United States. The third and largest wave of about 60,000 refugees consisted of those who suffered the most severe losses and trauma under Pol Pot and the famine that engulfed Cambodia as a result of the fighting between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese troops.

The vast majority of Khmer refugees have now lived in the U.S. for at least five years. How well have they adjusted and assimilated into this society? It is generally accepted that Khmer refugees have not mainstreamed successfully; many have not become citizens and have not been successful in English language acquisition. The two factors most frequently cited are lack of education and unfamiliarity with western ways.

Why have the Khmer refugees failed to assimilate successfully when other Southeast Asian refugees, particularly the Vietnamese, have succeeded? To understand, we must look at both Khmer refugees' background and their experiences as refugees here.

Historical Background

Historians believe parts of Cambodia were inhabited for the last 6 thousand years. The first important social transformation came at the beginning of the Christian era, when Indian culture and thought spread to Cambodia. "Indianization" continued for over a thousand years, affecting all levels of society. Among other things, India gave Cambodia a writing system, a pantheon, a social hierarchy, a hierarchical terminology, and Theravad Buddhism, which became the state religion. Significantly, none of these influences were imposed by force or colonization. Instead, the Khmer seem to have chosen the features they wanted (Chandler, 1983).

During the Angkor period (9th to 15th centuries), Cambodia was a powerful kingdom and pictures of Angkor Wat, (a village that became a Buddhist temple) are displayed in many refugee homes. The glory of the Angkor period provides them with a self-image they are proud of.

The Khmer have historically resisted attempts to change them by force; after Cambodia became a French protectorate in the 19th century, French attempts to introduce a Western style education system failed in the villages until traditional methods of teaching by the Buddhist monks were incorporated. As refugees here, the Khmer want the way of life the Khmer Rouge tried so hard to eradicate, which

shows that they value the life style they knew. A community leader expressed some of those Khmer ideals as follows:

The important thing for us is not to lose our heritage, our culture. We feel we have a unique culture that is right for us. We were born and raised from generation to generation in that culture. We cannot assimilate totally. We don't want to lose our ways; we want to add. We want to compare both cultures, and be careful to pick the good things and mix with ours.

A Khmer proverb advises people: "Don't choose a straight path and don't reject a winding one. Choose the path your ancestors have trod."

Khmer Society

Cambodia relied on a subsistence economy throughout history, with about 90% of the Khmer, the major ethnic population, living generally self-sufficient but overwhelmingly rural lives as rice farmers. Even after the country became a French protectorate, it was only the elite minority in the city who had some Western influence. Since the Westernized elite were the targets of the Khmer Rouge killings, the vast majority of the refugees who arrived here came from rural areas, without suitable job skills for a technologically advanced country such as this and without knowledge about Western life styles.

The remaining urban dwellers were Chinese and Vietnamese. The Chinese influenced the urban Khmer, but again, this influence did not filter down to the isolated villages due to poor transportation and communication methods. The Vietnamese, invasive enemies of the Khmer for centuries, were looked upon with hostility and mistrust. There is evidence that this mistrust still exists among refugees and, although racial segregation should not be a motive, these feelings should be considered when planning programs for the Khmer.

Education for boys in the villages was provided by monks. Girls were taught by their fathers. Boys usually lived in the temples for a few years and learned Buddhist doctrines, the Khmer and Sanskrit languages, Khmer history, and math. Most became monks for a short period. Although the monks' education prepared the men for a useful life in the village, it did not give them a global perspective, nor a system of learning in the Western sense. Learning was done by rote, using long leaf books. Even today Khmer refugees try to commit to memory the ESL lessons they learn. This often presents problems: Refugees do not always understand what they try to memorize, and the problem is compounded because many refugees believe their memories are impaired by the excessive trauma inflicted on them by the Khmer Rouge. Thus, the holocaust and the excessive mental and physical torture inflicted on the people by the Khmer Rouge cause problems for Khmer refugees which affect their assimilation and language learning in a manner that is not common to all Southeast Asian refugees. Other Southeast Asian refugees have experienced war and

flight traumas; the Khmer have experienced a collective autogenocidal holocaust that is distinctive to them and not shared by others.

Since monks were teachers as well as spiritual and religious leaders in Cambodia, they were shown immense respect. They were seldom contradicted and were given every right to discipline students. Khmer refugees in the U.S. also greatly respect their own and their children's teachers and rarely display disagreement or dissatisfaction with them. Unless a teacher was particularly sensitive, it would be easy to overlook instances when undemonstrative Khmer may actually need some assistance or clarification.

After independence in 1954, the Sihanouk government greatly expanded primary and secondary education and also started a massive literacy program for adults. Although French was taught as a second language for many years in government schools, English was introduced only in the late 1960s and available only in the cities. Civil servants provided basic education for adults, and after six months of instruction, those able to read a short paragraph, take six or seven lines of dictation, and do simple arithmetic were given a "certificate of literacy." Many Khmer refugees have no more education than this. Moreover, the Khmer Rouge completely eradicated education and killed the majority of highly educated males. As a result, most refugee households are headed by females who are illiterate or minimally literate in their own language yet who now have to grapple with the task of learning not only a foreign language but also a foreign culture.

Khmer society was hierarchically structured by age and/or social status in urban and rural areas and both verbal and body language denote these distinction. Royalty and monks were addressed by special registers and others were accorded respect according to status. The form of address is still of great importance to the refugees. Older people are called not by their first names, but by kinship terms. Most adults here find the casual form of addressing people by first names rather uncomfortable. They are especially offended when children call them by their first names. When Khmer children use the direct style of American communication, or when they talk back, their parents become angry about the children's apparent disrespect towards them. They refer to such children as *gorn athpuy* (subhuman; without human parentage). Such strong feelings about respectful speech are based on cultural values, as expressed by one refugee: "It fosters feelings of love, harmony and goodwill towards others. When one speaks nicely, others do the same, and no one has to regret afterwards."

English and Khmer differ in body language also. For instance, the refugees find the American way of summoning someone by motioning with a finger extremely offensive. In fact, before they realized this was a common gesture in this society, they believed Americans did this because they looked down on the Khmer. One refugee said, "At first I thought they called me like that because they thought I was lower than them—like an animal. Now I know it is a way they call anybody, but I still don't like it." When refugees are turned off by the

mannerisms of their teachers, however unintended, it diminishes the respectful feelings towards teachers and discourages them from attending classes.

Village social values emphasized cooperation rather than competition. Cooperation was essential for a rural subsistence economy that did not have modern mechanized agricultural methods. If people did not work together, irrigated rice could not be grown. Since proven ways were considered safer than new experiments, village life continued with little change over centuries. Widespread use of money, banking systems, or credit cards were not part of village or urban life. In urban areas only businessmen or *big people* (the very rich) used banks. Family members generally helped one another by providing both emotional support and goods and services. Generosity toward family as well as outsiders was highly valued. Indeed, it was largely through cooperation, especially between family members, that refugees overcame their ordeals under the Khmer Rouge, escaped from Cambodia, and now manage to survive here. May Ebihara (1985), the first American to have done an anthropological village study in Cambodia, and a prominent expert on Cambodian refugees says:

Mutual aid may occur, first, at the level of the household. In prerevolutionary Khmer society, extended families were as common as nuclear ones, and households might include a married child and his or her family; needy relatives, such as a widowed sister or an orphaned nephew . . . Such patterns have persisted among Khmer refugees and provide a crucial means of coping with loss of family members and strained socioeconomic circumstances . . . Refugees help one another through exchange and sharing of material resources, information, services, advice, contacts, and so forth. (p. 140)

Even though they are now in a country where individual freedom of speech and action is valued highly and competitive and aggressive styles are the norm, Khmer refugees continue to want to keep their cooperative life style because these behavior patterns worked successfully in the past.

World View

Buddhist refugees and immigrants from other countries seem to adjust well in America, so why should Buddhists from Cambodia not do so? Buddhism is no more a unified religion than is Christianity. Until large numbers of Theravada Buddhists came from Southeast Asia, the Buddhism that was generally known in America was Mahayana Buddhism, practiced in some Asian countries such as China and Japan. Although Mahayana Buddhism contains a theory of reincarnation as does Theravada Buddhism, it is closer to Judeo-Christian religions in that it looks towards a God or an ultimate savior. Theravada Buddhism, on the other hand, tells its followers that salvation from reincarnation can be achieved only through an individual's own efforts. People are told that individuals are responsible for their actions, all

of which have reactions. They are advised to think critically and to follow the right path. This is what the Khmer refugees do when they question to what extent they want to be American, as previously shown in the quote by the community leader.

Since Buddhism was developed in a search to end reincarnation, it teaches its followers to develop habits which will aid this process. One is taught to be generous by way of goods or service to others so that one will be rid of worldly desires. This is seen as the way to end the cycle of rebirths. This ideal was demonstrated vividly in "Career Choices of Southeast Asian Students," presented at the 1987 San Diego Asian Pacific Conference³, with Khmer students choosing social service as a future vocation over other types of careers, even though they are now in this technologically advanced country.

This process of gaining purity of mind through giving is commonly referred to as "acquiring merit," and was a large part of Khmer life. Donations to monks are considered especially meritorious. It is believed that by making donations to monks in memory of the dead, merit can be transferred to them, which will help them in their rebirths. In the case of the Khmer refugees who lost so many loved ones to the inhumanities of the Khmer Rouge, this ability to help the dead to earn a better life, contributes significantly to their emotional welfare.

Khmer patterns of giving affect refugee adjustment. Numerous solicitors come to refugee households with motives ranging from recruitment as church members to collecting monetary donations for various "causes." Since many refugees are welfare recipients, they can hardly afford to contribute money to these causes. But, they find it difficult to say no to unwanted solicitors since it goes against their social ethics. This leads them to be easily exploited by unscrupulous people with obvious implications for their adjustment to life here.

As Theravada Buddhists, the Khmer believe that the fortunes or misfortunes of their present lives are results of actions, or *karma* (fate) they acquired in previous lives. This concept again has tremendous implications in the treatment of refugees who suffer not only from memories and internal and/or external injuries inflicted by the Khmer Rouge, but also in dealing with guilt at having survived at all, or at having survived better than others. Since Buddhist teachings provide refugees with an explanation of life they understand and believe, those with emotional problems are helped by discussions with monks. Theravada Buddhism, then, stresses the continuance and impermanence of life, as well as the relationship between action and reaction.

While the Western way to improve one's future is by becoming materially wealthy, the Khmer or Buddhist way to improve is by giving wealth away. "Although refugees would find various material goods desirable and quickly assimilate them into their lives," (Ebihara, 1985) Buddhist teachings encourage a person to grow inwardly rather than outwardly. This is why the Khmer are less aggressive and less competitive than other refugee groups and are less ambitious when judged by conventional American standards. Since Western cultural and

Christian religious influences were minimal, Buddhist ideas as a way of life seem to have been stronger in Cambodia than in other Theravada Buddhist countries. Moreover, since Khmer refugees have been here for only 13 years at the most, their social behaviors and sociolinguistic patterns have not yet been subject to strong cultural changes.

Impediments to English Language Acquisition and Some Solutions

In *Background Notes for Teachers in the Adult Migrant Education Program* (1984, p.i), J. Brick and G. Louie point out that teachers present English language students with three tasks: acquiring a new syntax, a new lexis, and a new set of cultural concepts. They claim it is the cultural concepts that present the most difficulty. This observation is the first step to successful language acquisition. The thesis of this paper carries this idea one step further: The new set of cultural concepts to be taught first have to be those that are experienced by the students and not by the teachers.

Some teachers note that speakers of many different languages can learn English, and hence, dismiss the structural features of particular languages as factors impeding the learning of English. Others disagree. Ebihara (1985) observes, "There are a number of differences between Khmer and English, such that there is no easy transfer from one language to the other." Some of these differences are:

(a) *Khmer verbs are not inflected for such categories as tense, number and gender.*

(b) *In Khmer, once a subject has been introduced, or is clear from the context, it may be omitted from predication.* For example, the question *Lok tiw salaa?* (Are you going to school?) can be answered with the sentence *Tiw* (Going).

(c) *Although the basic word order in Khmer sentences is subject-verb-object, as in English, Khmer relies heavily on syntactic, rather than morphological mechanisms.* For instance, modifiers generally follow the nouns they modify, and specifiers follow numerals:

<i>cheik</i>	<i>tum</i>	<i>pii</i>	<i>snet</i>	<i>nih</i>
bananas	ripe	two	hands	this

(these two bunches of ripe bananas) (Huffman, 1970).

However, a focus solely on the structure of language does not adequately address English language learning problems faced by the Khmer. It is a combination of structure, sociolinguistic factors, and cultural factors both of refugees and the host culture that, as a totality, affect the degree of success or failure of English language learning. Analytically, these can be separated; in the classroom they cannot be separated.

In his article on cooperative learning, Kagan (1986), characterizes U.S. public schools as "generally competitive, individualistic, and autocratic" (p. 238). These are the opposite of Khmer social ideals. According to Kagan, research on cooperative learning shows positive outcomes in academic achievement, ethnic relations, prosocial development, and liking for class, school, learning and self. With the Khmer refugees' cooperative social background this type of learning obviously is more suitable than the traditional structured setting. Cooperative learning, integrated with cooperative teaching, should prove to be even more successful.

As previously noted, the Khmer place great importance on the manner of communication, both in speech and body language. Although such respectful behavior is not the norm in American society, by following the proper rules of behavior so important to the Khmer, it is possible to put them at ease. Since such cooperation will demonstrate that the intention is not to change them but only to teach them English, the refugees will change when they choose to do so, after understanding our ways. It will also be a valuable service to encourage Khmer children to be attentive to their parents' wishes at home, since it will ensure harmony among them.

Even in their own homes, where they feel more comfortable than in a classroom setting, students remain self-conscious about speaking in English in front of others. Cooperative learning methods can be used to overcome this problem. For instance, teamwork in which all students are engaged in conversation (a shopping expedition or a visit to the doctor) will ensure that attention will be removed from a single speaker. Another useful method to overcome problems of self-consciousness is to have students focus their attention on a picture or other object rather than on the speaker. Pictures are also useful when presenting subjects that might cause embarrassment, such as parts of the body. Eye contact between Khmer students and teachers is minimal; to look a teacher straight in the eye is considered disrespectful. Furthermore, students look away if they do not feel comfortable talking about a particular subject.

As mentioned earlier, the traumas inflicted by the Khmer Rouge cause various problems for Khmer refugees. They sometimes find it painful to sit in one place for too long, due to physical injury resulting from beatings and other abuse. Many suffer from digestive disorders caused by starvation. When they see students sitting together, some men are reminded of the Khmer Rouge indoctrination sessions; this upsets them so much they must leave the room.

Since Khmer refugees are worried about their retentive powers, techniques should be developed to help them discover that they can remember what they learn. One successful method is to have students memorize names of objects in picture cards, distribute an equal number of cards to each student, and then, for all to take turns at collecting as many cards as possible by asking for them. Clues can be given instead of actually naming the object, which not only expands refugees'

vocabulary, but also demonstrates that they are able to remember more details than just a name. This recognition enhances their self-esteem, and accelerates their learning.

Even though the Khmer blame their memories for their learning difficulties, the problem appears more to be with the subjects taught than with the refugees. Khmer refugees came to America from a non-Western rural background, with little or no education. Many now depend on welfare assistance and live in economically and socially depressed areas among other low income groups. Thus, their needs, experiences, and problems are vastly different from those of the Americans with middle class lifestyles who are portrayed in ESL lessons. For instance, as mentioned, banks were not a part of refugees' lives in Cambodia. They are not here either, if refugees are on welfare. However, ESL lessons are often about matters such as banking, a practical need of middle class people, but not of the refugees. Since banking is not a part of their daily experiences, lessons about the subject have no application or meaning to the refugees, and so do not provide stimulation for learning or retention. Although it is necessary to teach unfamiliar concepts such as banking to Khmer refugees since they now live here, it is much more important to teach them concepts that meet their survival needs first. What they need now is social communication skills applicable to their daily lives.

When Khmer refugees are harassed by various solicitors, they do not know how to respond; in addition to not knowing English, they avoid face-to-face confrontations and open competition between individuals. Even in troublesome situations, Khmer generally do not assert themselves, complain, or fight for their rights as Americans might do. They usually try to solve social problems by moving away. However, until they learn English and its social uses, they cannot deal with these problems effectively. Khmer community leaders and personnel in organizations dealing with refugees are good sources to discover refugee needs.

Conclusion

It should be emphasized that none of the impediments discussed above individually prevent English language learning. It is the combination that discourages Khmer refugees and prevents them from learning English.

Without communication between refugees and American society, there can be very little growth or change. The importance of being aware of the client culture for successful communication has long been recognized by anthropologists and also by ESL teachers. In the case of ESL teaching, the recognition must be extended to developing an awareness of how our own cultural habits might interfere with or enhance the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. A project that successfully dealt with both sides was The Tribal Lao Training Project⁴, designed by anthropologist James M. Freeman, and social worker Huu Nguyen in Santa Clara County, California. This

project was adapted to the needs of the people served: the curriculum was designed specifically to deal with nonliterate people and students were taught how to cope with various resettlement crises in the cultural setting of the U.S., such as auto accidents, hospital crises, family disputes, and evictions by landlords.

Khmer refugees are not less able or less motivated than other refugee groups to learn English. However, given their distinctive cultural and historical experiences, including the holocaust, they have learning problems that may not be present for other groups. They can be helped to overcome many of their problems if we (a) plan lessons to meet their present needs, (b) develop teaching techniques with the distinctive Khmer history/holocaust in mind, and (c) present lessons in a manner that demonstrates an understanding of, and consideration for, Khmer cultural values. With the successful acquisition of English, communications between the Khmer and the American public will improve, social adjustment will follow, and the Khmer refugees will become a productive segment of the larger American community. ■

FOOTNOTES

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² Khmer is the ethnic name of the people of Cambodia and their language.

³ See charts on Southeast Asian refugee youth educational attainment from the Southeast Asian Refugee Youth Study (SARYS), Department of Sociology, San Diego State University.

⁴ See Freeman, J. M., Nguyen, H., Hartsell, P. (1985). The tribal Lao training project, *Cultural Survival Quarterly*.

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