



English as a Lingua Franca in Cambodian Primary Education: Balancing Global Competence and Khmer Identity

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19477430>

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the integration of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) into Cambodia's primary education system as a strategic response to the country's demographic, economic, and regional development goals. Many Cambodians are young, and they will most likely be the ones to work in the country in the next years. This demonstrates the need of learning English early on if you wish to have the skills required in the twenty-first century. ELF differs from normal English language training in that it focuses on ensuring that everyone understands each other, that communication works, and that everyone is included in the language. Cambodia's school system has many languages but few resources, so these are important ideas for it. The paper discusses why ELF should be employed in early education, examines Cambodia's current primary school system, and discusses the cognitive, academic, and cultural advantages of using ELF from a young age. It also discusses how difficult it is to implement the plan, such as a lack of competent teachers, insufficient age-appropriate materials, and concerns that Khmer literacy may decline. In response, the study suggests strategic paths such as developing a multilingual curriculum, educating teachers in specialized areas, and promoting cross-sector partnerships, particularly with NGOs and ed-tech projects. In conclusion, this essay advocates for a long-term language strategy that focuses on children and strikes a balance between Cambodia's desire to participate in the global community and its need to preserve its unique language identity. It claims that if ELF education is done right, Cambodian children will learn about different cultures and be able to live and work in other countries.

Keywords: *Cambodian primary education, bilingualism, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), early childhood language learning, intercultural competence, Khmer language preservation*

I. INTRODUCTION

Cambodia's rapid population shift currently presents both an opportunity and a challenge. Over sixty percent of the population is under 30 - and of that number a third are under 18. Many development economists have labeled this phenomenon the youth bulge (UNFPA, 2020; UNICEF, 2022). This youth bulge has the potential to impact society and the economy positively but will require robust investments in training, education, and skill development (Bloom & Canning, 2004; ILO, 2023). As the world economy continues to

integrate and become more knowledge-based, countries with younger, more educated populations will gain a competitive edge. The Cambodian government has recognized this opportunity and integrated it into national programs such as the Rectangular Strategy Phase IV and the Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023 (MoEYS, 2019).

Development specialists (Filmer & Fox, 2014) argue that the window of opportunity for this youth bulge will result in a demographic crisis if they are not given quality, relevant, and future-oriented education. Schools are accessible for most children in the country. However, many also worry about the accessibility and the quality of the educational outcomes, especially concerning rural and marginalized communities (Benveniste et al., 2008; World Bank, 2021). The disparity in understanding between Cambodian educational institutions and employers is likely to increase. Cambodian economy is shifting from agriculture to service-oriented industries such as tourism, digital commerce and foreign investment. Therefore, English competency is a necessity and not an option. English is often viewed as the language of business, research, politics and global communication (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Phillipson, 2009). However, in the contemporary era, English has evolved beyond the language of colonization and the tongue of the native speakers. It has become an important communicative instrument, especially in Southeast Asia.

This transformation is aptly captured in the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) paradigm. The term English as a lingua franca (ELF) is used to describe English used for communication regardless of one's native tongue. ELF users do not prioritize the rules of a specific variety of English (Jenkins, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011). The ELF framework contextualizes English language usage for communication purposes; in contrast to English Language Teaching (ELT) frameworks which emphasize the use of English as a native language. Accent, grammar, and cultural expectations are not considered in the ELF framework. Jenkins (2007) comments that ELF speakers modify their speech in a way that enables pointers to be adjusted to help each listener achieve comprehension.

These features include a more flexible use of language, code-switching, speech, and repetition. Each of these features is positive in the context of Cambodia which is highly multilingual. In ASEAN, the necessity for people to be able to communicate in English has become increasingly important. The ASEAN Secretariat (2008) officially makes English the working language of the group. Programs like the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN University Network (AUN) compel people in the region to communicate in English (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Loch et al., 2025). Cambodia's involvement in these projects will depend a lot on its capacity to raise a generation of young people who are not only English speakers but also adaptable and culturally aware communicators. This can only happen through early and ongoing language education. The World Economic Forum (2020) and other international groups have always stressed the need for soft skills and global competencies. English proficiency is one of the most important of them. In the digital age, knowing English makes it easier to use online learning platforms, get jobs throughout the world, access academic resources, and work with people from other countries.

English is also a key ability for getting into entry-level jobs and moving up in your career in Cambodia's developing service industries, including as tourism, call centers, NGOs, and tech start-ups (Heller, 2010; Park & Wee, 2013). English is now a basic skill that everyone needs to have to be ready for the 21st century, not just at elite schools but also in everyday life. It must start with the most basic level of learning: primary school. Studies in applied linguistics and cognitive science consistently back up the idea that early exposure to language gives kids specific developmental benefits. When kids acquire a second language before they hit puberty, their brains become more flexible, they remember what they learn better, and they pronounce the words better (Bialystok, 2001; Singleton & Ryan, 2004). Also, being multilingual at a

young age is associated to cognitive flexibility, executive functioning, and cultural empathy, which are all becoming more important in today's connected world (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014).

In Cambodia, the most important time to establish fair language skills is in primary school. MoEYS (2018) points out that the number of students enrolling in primary school has gone up a lot, but it is still hard to make sure that all students learn basic reading, writing, math, and life skills equally across the country. Adding ELF to the primary curriculum can build on these foundations, help students become bilingual readers and writers, and get them ready for more advanced study in later years. Also, the sociolinguistic situation in Cambodia makes early ELF integration possible and necessary. Khmer is the official language of the country and the government, while English is commonly seen as the language of opportunity and progress (Clayton, 2006). Adding English as a Lingua Franca at the primary level does not mean giving up Khmer. Instead, it creates a model for language development where both languages play different but connected roles in developing students' cognitive, cultural, and professional futures.

Most importantly, primary school is also the best place to start fixing systemic disparities. Pritchett (2013) says that if basic learning does not work, higher education and job training programs cannot make up for it. So, if it is backed up by inclusive teaching and legislation, teaching communicative English early on, especially in rural and low-income areas, can help with language fairness and social mobility.

This study looks at the pros and cons of utilizing English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in Cambodian elementary schools and how to do it best. First, it explains about the values that ELF stands for and how they are different from other ELT systems. Next, it talks about the state of primary education in Cambodia right now and the institutional, pedagogical, and infrastructural problems that could make it impossible to completely integrate ELF. The report integrates science about how the brain works, global education policy, and ASEAN frameworks to support early ELF training. It says that learning English early makes you more ready for school, a more global citizen, and better able to travel around the neighbourhood. It also looks closely at the greatest problems that could prohibit it from happening, such as not having enough teachers, gaps in the curriculum, worries about language overload, and moving to a new culture.

There are deliberate, evidence-based ways to make integration last, such as creating an ELF curriculum that is appropriate for each age group, training teachers, employing technology to help kids learn, and using multilingual teaching approaches. It backs up a vision of language instruction that is equitable, focused on the kid, and open to various cultures. This point of view says that English is not taught as a language for the rich, but as a way for people in Cambodia who know more than one language to talk to one other. This study wants to add to the ongoing conversation about language planning in the Global South by supporting a model of language education that works in both the local area and around the world. Cambodia can help their kids get ready for a future where many languages are spoken and people are connected by giving them a good start in primary school.

II. UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA (ELF) IN EDUCATION

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is the idea that people who speak different languages can talk to each other in English, even if English is not their first language. According to Seidlhofer (2011), ELF is any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice. ELF is not like most English language teaching (ELT) methods, which try to get as close as possible to how native speakers talk. ELF is less about being accurate or following conventional native varieties like British or American English and more about being transparent, flexible, and helpful.

Jenkins (2007) says that ELF is a real-world thing that has gone beyond what traditional ELT thought, as most people who speak English across the world are non-native speakers talking to other non-native speakers. This change changes the goal of English education from being able to speak and write like a native speaker to being able to communicate well in a variety of multicultural situations. As a result, ELF contexts focus on practical tactics like clarification, negotiation of meaning, and accommodation, which help people communicate well across language and cultural barriers (Canagarajah, 2012; Kaur, 2014). In the classroom, the effects are huge: ELF changes the goals and techniques of teaching English.

Instead of correcting mistakes or learning how to speak with a local accent, teachers should emphasize intercultural communication, learner agency, and strategic language use. This method also lets teachers use localized teaching methods, which lets students use their cultural and linguistic identities in their English instead of hiding them to fit in with outside norms (Huot & Chheang, 2025; Pennycook, 2007).

Historically, native-speakerism has been the main principle behind traditional ELT. This idea sees native speakers as the best language models and judges of correctness (Holliday, 2005; Phillipson, 2009). This has affected how English is taught around the world, including what is in textbooks, how teachers are hired, how students are graded, and how schools make rules. No matter what their sociolinguistic background is, learners are generally taught to copy the pronunciation, grammar, and ways of speaking in British or American English. ELF pedagogy, on the other hand, understands that there are many different types of English and encourages teaching methods that take the situation into account (Huot & Hok, 2025).

Jenkins (2009) says that ELF is not a simpler or worse form of English, but a strategic, changing system that its users alter through real-time interactions. Canagarajah (2012) improves on this with the idea of translanguaging practice, which encourages students to use all their language skills to understand and communicate meaning, instead of strictly following monolingual rules. Also, ELF puts more emphasis on understanding each other than on being completely correct. For example, in ELF situations, pronunciation is more about being clear than copying how native speakers say things (Walker, 2022). Grammar allows forms that do not follow the rules, like how to make plurals or utilize articles, if they do not make it hard to grasp. These teaching styles can be especially helpful for students in places like Cambodia, where English is acquired as a second or foreign language and students do not often get to spend time in native-speaking surroundings. ELF also supports educational plurality, which means using local content, student experiences, and traditional ways of knowing (Huot & Em, 2025).

This decolonial approach questions the cultural domination of ELT textbooks and curricula that are centered on Western standards (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Pennycook, 1998). Cambodia is a multilingual and culturally rich country, so this kind of flexibility gives you a great chance to create an English education that reflects the country's beliefs and the needs of its students. It is not just a matter of language policy to include ELF in early childhood education; developmental and cognitive research also strongly supports it. Studies have shown time and time again that kids learn languages better and with fewer mental blocks when they start learning them at a young age (Lenneberg, 1967; Singleton & Ryan, 2004).

The Critical Period Hypothesis says that kids under 12 are better able to understand phonological systems and grammatical structures because of how their brains work. Bialystok (2001) and Cummins (2000) say that being multilingual as a youngster improves executive functions including paying attention, solving problems, and being conscious of language. In places where several languages are spoken, like Cambodia, learning English early on can help kids become more flexible in their thinking, which will help them learn how to transition between languages and points of view. These abilities are not just good for school, but they are

also necessary for 21st-century skills like working with people from other cultures and learning in a way that works for you. Early ELF exposure also helps people understand and empathize with people from other cultures. When kids read, listen to, and talk about different cultural texts, perspectives, and ideas in English, they learn to see the world in a bigger way and be more open to differences (Byram, 1997). This is especially useful in Cambodia, which is becoming more international and where students will work with peers, schools, and information systems from other countries. In addition, researchers like García and Wei (2014) support translanguaging pedagogies that make use of all a child's language skills in the classroom. This lets kids switch between Khmer and English without feeling anxious or ashamed (Loch & Huot, 2025). These kinds of initiatives improve language equity, which means that all kids, no matter what their socioeconomic background is, can engage in multilingual education with confidence.

Adding ELF to Cambodia's basic education fits well with the country's long-term development goals. The Ministry of Education and Youth Services (MoEYS) published the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2019–2023, which says that being able to speak English is a key skill for national competitiveness, especially in line with ASEAN frameworks and the Sustainable Development Goals (MoEYS, 2019). However, most policy implementation to date has focused on secondary and tertiary education, overlooking the foundational importance of primary-level language development. Introducing ELF at the primary level allows Cambodia to build a pipeline of communicatively competent students who are better prepared for international education systems, labour markets, and regional mobility programs such as the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) and ASEAN University Network (AUN) (Kirkpatrick, 2010). It also helps the Ministry keep its promise to teach people how to work together, use technology, and speak more than one language (UNESCO, 2022). The ELF method is also better for people from different cultures than past methods of teaching language that were more Westernized and dependent on rules. Pennycook (2007) states that ELF can help people in Cambodia become stronger by teaching them how to use and alter English in way that work for them.

In short, a national plan that includes ELF in elementary school can help Cambodia raise a generation that is culturally aware, linguistically flexible, and able to work with people from all over the world. Cambodia may stop seeing English as a foreign imposition and instead see it as a tool for working together to promote development that considers both local identities and global realities.

III. PRIMARY EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA: CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

Cambodia's primary school system has changed and improved a lot in the previous 30 years, since the country got out of civil war and political instability. Since the early 1990s, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) has been collaborating with international donors and NGOs to make basic education available to more people across the country. Today, the official structure of primary education in Cambodia consists of six grades, typically serving children between the ages of six and eleven (MoEYS, 2019). Despite the increase in enrollment rates, with 97 percent of children participating in primary school in 2020 (UNESCO, 2022), significant challenges persist regarding student retention, academic outcomes, and the quality of instruction. Researchers such as Benveniste et al. (2008) and Pritchett (2013) assert that Cambodian primary schools continue to experience challenges with inadequate reading and mathematics proficiency, particularly in rural and impoverished regions. These fundamental issues complicate and increase the costs associated with the introduction of additional language courses, such as English.

Cambodia has made significant progress in access; nonetheless, issues of quality and equity persist. The World Bank (2021) indicates that many kids finish basic education without

competency in reading and writing Khmer or in mathematics. Multigrade instruction, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate lesson time all undermine educational quality, especially in rural regions (UNICEF, 2022). The insufficiency of trained educators exacerbates the issue. Many elementary school teachers lack extensive formal education and are unable to access continuous professional development (Benveniste et al., 2008).

Furthermore, dependence on rote memorization and the sporadic implementation of child-centered teaching methods obstructs children's involvement, especially in language development, where verbal interaction and practice are crucial (Huot, Hok, et al., 2024). These deficits obstruct certain individuals from achieving early English proficiency. Students from affluent metropolitan or private institutions often possess enhanced opportunities to acquire English, whereas youth in rural regions may not engage with the language substantively until maturity. This discrepancy obstructs the attainment of equitable ELF integration, potentially intensifying existing educational and economic disparities. There is no clear protocol for the formal incorporation of English into Cambodia's national basic curriculum. English is taught in lower secondary schools (Grade 7), although many elementary schools, especially public ones, do not teach it at all (Huot, Kuon, et al., 2024; MoEYS, 2019).

Usually, English is taught at the primary level through non-formal education programs, externally financed pilots, or fee-based supplementary classes run by NGOs or commercial companies (Choi et al., 2024; Igawa, 2008). This broken-up strategy makes the content of the curriculum, the way teachers teach, and the credentials of teachers all different. A lot of English teachers in the early grades are generalists who have not had any experience in teaching English as a second or foreign language, especially to young kids. Also, the materials are often old, foreign, or not in line with the language demands of Cambodian students (Huot, Hok, et al., 2024). This gap gets worse since there are not enough ELF materials that are appropriate for the setting. Schools still use native-speaker models that may not match how students communicate. Kirkpatrick (2010) and Jenkins (2007) say that early exposure to ELF instead of standard EFL could be a better way to move forward, especially in countries like Cambodia where most people speak more than one language and most English speakers are not native speakers.

There is a big difference between the education systems in cities and those in the countryside in Cambodia. Schools in cities, especially in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and province capitals, frequently have better facilities, more experienced teachers, and more involved parents. Many of them also teach English to kids in the early grades, either in regular lessons or through enrichment programs. On the other hand, rural schools often do not have essential things like clean water, power, enough classroom space, and teaching resources (UNESCO, 2022). Teacher absences, a high student-teacher ratio, and a lack of teaching support make it even harder to offer education. Clayton (2006) says that this uneven growth has led to a two-tiered education system. Urban and private school children get early access to global languages and digital technologies, whereas rural pupils have a hard time learning even the basics of reading and writing in Khmer.

Putting ELF into this situation is both a problem and an opportunity. On one hand, resource scarcity and infrastructural limitations raise concerns about feasibility and sustainability. On the other hand, strategically designed ELF programs, especially those leveraging mobile technologies, bilingual resources, and community engagement, could help bridge the divide by offering inclusive, context-sensitive English education at scale (Canagarajah, 2012; García & Wei, 2014). ELF programs need to do more than just teach language; they also need to change the way the whole education system works, such as how teachers are trained, how resources are spread out, and how the curriculum is designed to

include everyone. If these changes do not happen, ELF might only make the problems worse instead of better, as indicated in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Cambodia's Primary Education

Subsection	Important Issues	ELF integration
Overview of Cambodia's Primary School System	After the war, more people could get in but reading and math scores were low.	ELF and basic skills must be taught together, which demands policy-level coordination.
Current Status of English Instruction in Primary Educations	Different learning results, teachers that are not qualified enough, and differences between cities and rural areas	Teacher training and curriculum revision must assist and make sure that early ELF instruction is fair.
Current Status of English Instruction in Primary Educations	There is no defined English curriculum for primary schools; they depend on NGOs and private groups.	Shows how important it is to formally integrate ELF using resources that are relevant for the setting
Urban-Rural Disparities and Resource Constraints	Rural schools have problems with their infrastructure, their staff does not have enough resources, and they do not have enough exposure to English.	ELF planning should focus on rural schools and use tech-based, all-inclusive methods.

IV. THE CASE FOR EARLY ELF INTEGRATION

Adding English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) to Cambodia's primary school system would be very good for students' brains. Research in developmental psycholinguistics has shown for a long time that being exposed to more than one language at a young age improves executive functioning, metalinguistic awareness, and working memory (Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2000). Young learners learn how to say words and use rhythm more readily, and they are better at understanding how language works. According to García and Wei (2014), being multilingual at a young age makes people more flexible in their thinking and better at addressing problems in all areas. In ELF, where being able to understand and adapt to other ways of speaking is more crucial than being accurate as a native speaker, acquiring a language early on becomes even more important. Instead of making sure that their grammar is always flawless, kids can be taught to use English in a flexible and creative way, which will help them communicate better in the real world. Jenkins (2007) and Seidlhofer (2011) both say that developing these skills early on makes people more confident and better at doing things later in life.

In Cambodia, where kids in rural and underprivileged areas generally start school without much exposure to reading and writing, introducing ELF early can also help them learn more about reading and writing and other things. It gives young learners a way to use multilingual resources, learn about the world, and practice talking to people from different cultures from a young age. These are important abilities in an ASEAN region that is becoming more global. There are a lot of long-term academic and economic benefits to integrating ELF early on. Being able to speak English is becoming increasingly important for getting into college, moving to another country, and finding job in Cambodia's developing sectors including tourism, business process outsourcing, and development work (ILO, 2023; World Bank, 2021). Early exposure gives kids more time to learn a language, which makes it easier for them to focus on advanced topic knowledge in secondary and university school (Hok et al., 2026).

Kirkpatrick (2010) says that using English as a regional lingua franca in Southeast Asia is not about following British or American rules; it's about making it easier for people to understand each other in a place where many languages are spoken. So, teaching ELF to Cambodian kids in the early grades gets them ready for both school and participation in ASEAN-wide programs like the ASEAN University Network and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) regional labor mobility programs. Also, learning a language early is linked to better success in other school subjects. Studies have found that bilingual or multilingual kids generally do better than kids who only speak one language on activities that require mental flexibility and attention control (Bialystok, 2001; Craik et al., 2010).

The pedagogical potential of early ELF instruction extends beyond cognitive and economic outcomes to the formation of global citizenship. In ELF classrooms, learners develop not just linguistic knowledge but intercultural communicative competence, a key 21st-century skill. According to Byram (1997) and Sung (2016), when young learners are exposed to multiple worldviews and communicative norms, they cultivate empathy, cultural curiosity, and the ability to navigate diversity with respect. Given Cambodia's integration into global networks through trade, education, tourism, and digital media, it is essential to prepare children to engage confidently with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. ELF education, particularly when implemented in an inclusive and context-sensitive manner, creates a classroom space where students can value their local identity while becoming global communicators (Canagarajah, 2012; Pennycook, 2007). Furthermore, the inclusion of ELF in primary education aligns with child-centred pedagogies that emphasize participation, curiosity, and creativity (Huot & Loch, 2025).

Unlike traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) models, which may rely on memorization or native-speaker ideals, ELF allows learners to construct meaning collaboratively, drawing on their multilingual repertoires. This process fosters not only language development but also democratic classroom values such as equity, voice, and intercultural understanding. The rationale for early ELF integration also lies in aligning Cambodia's national education strategy with ASEAN educational frameworks and broader 21st-century learning goals. The ASEAN 5-Year Work Plan on Education (2021–2025) emphasizes regional collaboration, multilingualism, and workforce mobility, all of which are supported by early ELF adoption (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). Moreover, Cambodia's own Education Strategic Plan, MoEYS (2019) underscores the need to improve foreign language competence and 21st-century skills from early education onward.

ELF is uniquely positioned to contribute to these goals because of its emphasis on intelligibility, cross-cultural communication, and linguistic inclusivity. As Kirkpatrick (2010) notes, ASEAN Englishes are already distinct from inner-circle varieties, shaped by local influences and used primarily among non-native speakers. Early ELF education helps normalize these varieties, reducing linguistic insecurity and preparing Cambodian learners to participate confidently in the regional knowledge economy. Incorporating ELF at the primary level also aligns with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. By beginning language education early, and designing it to reflect local linguistic realities, Cambodia can move toward a more just and future-oriented model of multilingual education.

V. IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

One of the most pressing obstacles to early ELF integration is the severe shortage of trained English teachers, particularly those equipped to teach young learners. While Cambodia has made progress in recruiting teachers for basic education, English language instruction remains peripheral at the primary level, with most teachers lacking specialized training in either

language pedagogy or age-appropriate methods (Igawa, 2008; MoEYS, 2019). Many English teachers in primary settings are generalists, assigned to teach English without formal preparation. As Hu and McKay (2012) argue, the introduction of English into early education requires not only linguistic competence but also a deep understanding of child language acquisition, classroom management, and curriculum adaptation. Without this, early exposure to English risks being superficial, rote-based, and counterproductive. Moreover, existing teacher training institutions in Cambodia seldom offer modules specifically focused on ELF or on early childhood second language pedagogy (Clayton, 2006). The lack of alignment between national teacher education standards and the pedagogical demands of ELF represents a fundamental barrier to quality and consistency.

The success of early ELF education depends significantly on the availability of culturally relevant, age-sensitive teaching materials. At present, Cambodia faces a scarcity of such resources. In most classrooms where English is taught informally, teachers rely on outdated textbooks or materials imported from other countries, many of which reflect native-speaker norms, foreign cultural references, and inappropriate difficulty levels for young Cambodian learners (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2011). This mismatch is problematic not only pedagogically but also ideologically. ELF scholarship emphasizes the importance of developing materials that promote intelligibility, cultural inclusiveness, and communicative competence rather than mimicking native-speaker models (Jenkins, 2009; Kaur, 2014). However, in Cambodia, there has been limited investment in localized ELF-aligned resources that reflect Khmer values, settings, and learner needs. The development of child-centred, ELF-informed materials would require inter-institutional collaboration between the Ministry of Education, local publishers, NGOs, and teacher educators. Without such resources, efforts to expand ELF instruction may reinforce inequities or fail to engage students meaningfully (Huot & Em, 2025).

A commonly voiced concern among educators and policymakers is that introducing English too early might undermine Khmer language development, especially for students already struggling with literacy in their first language. This issue, often referred to as language overload, is particularly salient in contexts where primary education already faces challenges in achieving basic learning outcomes (Pritchett, 2013; UNESCO, 2022). Bhola (1987) has long cautioned against the erosion of indigenous languages due to the dominance of colonial or global languages. In Cambodia, this caution takes on urgency given the centrality of Khmer to national identity, cultural transmission, and social cohesion. If ELF is introduced without a bilingual or additive approach, it risks contributing to linguistic displacement or elitism. However, ELF does not inherently conflict with Khmer literacy. Scholars such as García and Wei (2014) advocate for translanguaging pedagogies, in which students are encouraged to draw on all their linguistic resources to make meaning.

Similarly, Cummins (2000) emphasizes that strong first language skills can support second language acquisition, rather than compete with it. Thus, the real issue is not whether to teach English early, but how to design bilingual environments that nurture both Khmer and ELF competence. The final implementation challenge lies in the attitudes and anxieties of parents and communities. While many Cambodian families view English as a tool for upward mobility, there is also apprehension that early English instruction may disconnect children from their cultural roots or burden them with excessive academic demands (Choi et al., 2024; Clayton, 2006). Parental resistance often reflects broader sociocultural debates around identity, globalization, and educational priorities. As Phillipson (2009) warns, the global spread of English can be perceived as a form of linguistic imperialism if not carefully contextualized. Cambodian parents, especially those in rural or traditional settings, may fear that prioritizing English will diminish the status of Khmer or lead children to devalue local knowledge.

To address this, early ELF education must be framed as a complementary, not competing, part of a holistic education. Transparent communication with families, involvement in curriculum planning, and visible integration of Khmer culture and language into English instruction can help mitigate fears and foster community buy-in (Canagarajah, 2012). Furthermore, evidence-based public education campaigns highlighting the cognitive, academic, and social benefits of bilingualism can play a key role in shifting public opinion. Ultimately, successful ELF integration depends not just on classroom logistics but on building sociolinguistic trust between schools, parents, and policymakers.

VI. CONCLUSION

The integration of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) into Cambodia's primary education system presents a transformative opportunity to equip the nation's youth with the linguistic and intercultural competencies essential for thriving in a globalized world. As this paper has shown, early exposure to ELF can offer cognitive, academic, and socio-economic advantages, including enhanced executive function, increased access to higher education and regional employment, and greater participation in ASEAN and international networks. However, the path to realizing these benefits is not without complexity. Cambodia's education system faces persistent equity gaps, particularly in rural and underserved areas, where resources, teacher qualifications, and infrastructure are limited. Cultural and linguistic anxieties, particularly the fear of undermining Khmer identity, must also be acknowledged as legitimate concerns. These tensions underscore the need for a nuanced, balanced, and inclusive strategy to implement ELF education sustainably.

One of the central tensions in language policy, and indeed in Cambodia's broader development strategy, is the balance between global competitiveness and local cultural integrity. The adoption of ELF must not be perceived as an act of linguistic replacement but as one of linguistic expansion. It should allow young learners to gain access to global discourse while remaining deeply rooted in Khmer language and values. Drawing from postcolonial and sociolinguistic scholarship, this paper advocates for a bilingual and additive approach, in which ELF complements rather than displaces the national language. Khmer should remain the foundation of identity, community, and national pride, while English, particularly in its lingua franca form, becomes a tool of opportunity, connection, and adaptability. Respecting this balance is not only culturally essential but educationally sound. Research has shown that strong first-language development enhances second-language acquisition and leads to more equitable learning outcomes. Therefore, the incorporation of ELF must be framed within a broader vision of multilingual education, where linguistic diversity is not a barrier but a strength.

In closing, this paper issues a call to action for policymakers, educators, development partners, and communities to co-create a sustainable, inclusive, and child-centred ELF policy. This policy should be grounded in Cambodia's socio-cultural context, attuned to pedagogical best practices, and aligned with national and regional development goals. Such a policy must prioritize:

- Teacher preparation and support, including ELF-oriented training for primary educators.
- Curriculum reform, emphasizing communicative competence, cultural relevance, and age-appropriate materials.
- Equity of access, particularly for rural and marginalized communities through technology and NGO collaboration.
- Bilingual literacy development, ensuring that Khmer remains strong while English is gradually acquired.
- Stakeholder engagement, involving parents, local leaders, and students in shaping the vision and implementation of language education.

Cambodia stands at a critical juncture in shaping the linguistic future of its youngest citizens. By embedding ELF in primary education thoughtfully and inclusively, the nation can lay the groundwork for a generation of learners who are not only globally ready but also locally grounded, capable of navigating the complexities of a multilingual world with confidence, identity, and purpose.

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