

Original article

Kindergarten Language Experiences and Cambodian Generation Z Students' Perceptions of Learning Khmer

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Cambodia require all Cambodian students enrolled in international schools to study Khmer as a compulsory subject. However, little is known about how different kindergarten language experiences shape students' perceptions of learning their native language. This qualitative topical life-history study explored the perceptions of 19 eighth-grade students who had attended Khmer, English, or dual-language kindergarten programmes. Data were collected through unstructured interviews and analysed using conceptual content analysis. Six major themes emerged from the analysis. Four themes describe students' perceptions of learning Khmer: (1) preference for English over Khmer, (2) influence of kindergarten language experience, (3) the role of home language policy, and (4) linguistic challenges in Khmer literacy. Two additional themes explain students' learning behaviour: (5) communication strategies, particularly reliance on code-switching, and (6) perceptions of traditional Khmer teaching practices. Students who attended Khmer or dual-language kindergarten generally demonstrated stronger motivation to learn Khmer than those who attended English-medium kindergarten. Home language use further shaped students' language preferences and classroom participation. Students with limited early exposure to Khmer experienced greater difficulty with reading comprehension, pronunciation, spelling, and socially appropriate vocabulary, while many viewed code-switching as an effective learning support. The findings suggest that strengthening early Khmer exposure through kindergarten, increasing opportunities for Khmer language use at home, and adopting more interactive and bilingual-sensitive instructional approaches may improve Khmer language learning among students enrolled in international education programmes.

Keywords: Generation Z, Native Language Learning, Kindergarten Experience, Qualitative Research, Language Policy, Cambodia

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INTRODUCTION

Cambodia has been through different political changes and social developments to build its human resources for decades. It declares its ambitions of being an upper-middle-income and a higher-income country in 2030 and 2050 respectively. Education quality is one of the key foci of the Pentagonal Strategies in the Royal government of Cambodia, with the leadership of the new Prime Minister Hun Manet. In this, he suggested all private schools should be obliged to include Khmer (Cambodian native language) subject in their curriculum after observing that some Cambodian students at the international private school are more fluent in English than Khmer (Sunly, 2023). This suggestion was explained to promoting Khmer learning and to raise awareness of Khmer culture. The Khmer subject is obliged for all Cambodian students, enrolling in the international program at the private schools (TVJLC News, 2023; MoEYS, 2023a). This announcement may pose some challenges for students who have no experience in learning Khmer. Therefore, gaining insights from students in the international program, who experienced in learning Khmer, can contribute to the better implementation of teaching Khmer as a compulsory subject at the International School across Cambodia.

Expanding of Cambodia's Private School

Public school is still a primary option for many Cambodian families, yet private school is increasing its roles in offering general education (K–12) due to its alternative curricular, smaller class size, more and modern resources, and communication with parents etc (Soeung & Chim, 2022). Although private school has been recognized as a partner of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) in the human resources development in Cambodia since 1996, the school choice between private and government school is still a debate topic among parents (Muong, 2017; Hang, 2023). Still, data on private schools which runs either international or national or dual curriculum are not available for the research. Contextually, some students enrol in all-day international program, while their peers enrol in the half-day international program in the morning and the half-day local program in the afternoon or vice versus. These options can be in the same or different private school. Students can register in the local program at the government school in one shift, and in the international program in the private school in another shift. It should be noted that the students have only half-day schedule at the government school, so they are available to register for another program for their remaining shift.

The growth of Cambodia's GDP presents the increase of the middle-class and well-off families, who look for better quality of education for their children and wish to keep them on the up-to-date trend of education and society (Soeung, 2021). The number of enrolled students in private schools increased by 115,142 between 2017/2018 and 2023/2024 (MoEYS, 2018; MoEYS, 2024). As shown in Figure 1, the number of private schools have notably increased by 750 schools, starting from 1,426 to 2,176 in 2019/2020 and 2023/2024 respectively. The large growth can be seen in the kindergarten schools (by 313 schools). Of 2,176 private schools in 2024, one thousand and thirty-four schools (48%) are located

in the Phnom Penh capital. Of 48%, forty-one percent run kindergarten program; 39% offers primary education program, whereas 20% provides secondary education program.

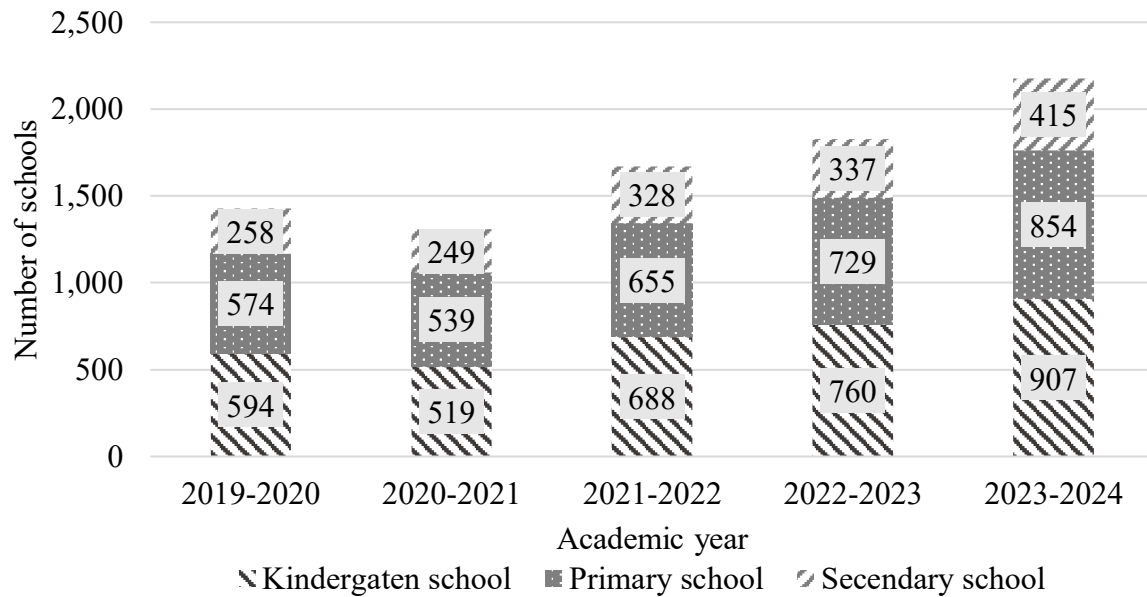


Figure 1. Number of private schools in Cambodia by academic year

Source: MoEYS (2020; 2021; 2022; 2023b; 2024); created by Authors

Motivating Facts to Invest in English Language

Around 1.52 billion people spoke English worldwide in 2024. Of these, around 75% learned English as L2 (Ethnologue, 2024). Also, English is a widely-spread language to 186 countries, and around 52% of websites in the world use English contents (Statista, 2024). All foreign language policies of the 84 countries, which were examined by Zein (2021), were found to officially allow children to learn English at their starting age of primary school. In Japan, 42.5% of Children, aged 10 – 14, studied English and the rates decline gradually in the elder age groups (Statista, 2022). However, Gawi's study (2012) revealed that the students who started learning English at the early age (i.e., 5-6) before the age of 9 is better than their peers who started at the older age (from 10 to 12) within the private school.

Cambodia is not exemption to the expansion of English. The raising in the children's education investment at the private school, mainly in the international program: English syllabus, rather than in the local program: national syllabus, can be viewed from different perspectives of English due to the active engagements of Cambodia in the regionalization and the globalization. Different empirical studies on English status in Cambodia revealed that Cambodian people views English as a passport, visa to work overseas, lifestyle and petty cash during their university (Soeung, 2020; Chan, 2018; Keuk, 2009; Igawa, 2010). Adding to these perspectives, English was found to have positive connection to the employability in Cambodian context (Chea & William, 2022). It is worth to note that English subject

was first put in the Cambodia's national curriculum of secondary education in 1990, and that in primary education in 2014; English became the most popular language for private tuition among Cambodian young people (Soeung, 2020). Also, Clayton (2007) marked this fast growth of English in Cambodia in two main causes: fundamental political reasons and Cambodia's admission as a member of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations.

Impacts of Kindergarten Experience on The Learning in The Next Levels

Generally, literature exhibits great benefits of kindergarten experiences in children's learning and development. Kindergarten experience positively prepared children for their next grade through assisting them to experience in not only structured learning environment, but also social skills (Kim & Umayahara, 2010), and it helped them adjust themselves easily in the next grade as well as stayed longer in the formal system than their peers who did not attend (Rao et al., 2012; Save the Children, 2015). Additionally, students with kindergarten experience outperformed their peers who did not experience that education in the next grade in both literacy and numeracy (MoEYS & UNIECF, 2017). Similarly, a study in Chinese context by Chen et al., (2022) explained that children who experience in learning English at the age of kindergarten perform better in both English and Chinese, and they showed positive attitude towards English when their socio-economy was controlled. However, when early exposed to foreign language, children had more anxiety thanks to pressure and insufficient instructional strategies (Nikolov & Djigunović, 2023). Although some literature explained about the learning English or foreign language at the early age, there are shortage of scholarly works, observing the impacts of the particular types of kindergarten program the children enrolled on their future learning of their native language. Therefore, this study aimed to bridge up this gap using an evidence of the Cambodian Generation Z (Gen Z), enrolled in kindergarten between 2010 and 2013 and started their first grade between 2013 and 2016. Gen Z preferred to connect themselves to the real-world contents through digital tools. So, to stay connected, they prefer foreign languages, mainly English. Gen Z was raised in the social movement and in collaborative learning/interactivities. Studies emphasized them as the digital native, so they preferred self-directed and using digital apps and online contents for language learning (Maqbool et al., 2020, Demir & Sönmez, 2021; Remizantseva & Ablyazov, 2019; Genç & Köksal, 2021). Therefore, understanding Gen Z's perceptions of learning native languages will be great contribution to educational policy makers to better prepare for the following generations and to develop a effective learning environment.

Although previous studies have demonstrated that kindergarten education positively influences children's later academic achievement and foreign language development (Chen et al., 2022; Kim & Umayahara, 2010; Rao et al., 2012), little is known about how different kindergarten language experiences shape students' perceptions of learning their native language in multilingual educational settings. In Cambodia, where English-medium education has expanded rapidly alongside recent policies requiring Khmer instruction in international schools, empirical evidence remains scarce. Existing studies

have focused primarily on English language learning and educational investment rather than students' experiences of learning Khmer after different kindergarten language pathways. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how kindergarten language background influences learners' motivation, classroom behaviour, and perceived challenges in learning Khmer. Therefore, this study explores students' perceptions of Khmer subject learning by comparing their different kindergarten experiences: English, Khmer, and dual kindergarten, by addressing two questions: (1) how do they view native language (Khmer) learning? (2) how does different kindergarten experience impact on their learning behaviour in native language class?

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative case study design because it sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Cambodian students whose primary language of instruction is English while simultaneously learning Khmer as their native language. The case was bounded by one educational context, namely students enrolled in English-medium international schools in Cambodia. Within this case study, a topical life history approach (Ward, 2003) was employed because the purpose was not to document participants' entire life histories but to explore one specific aspect of their educational experiences: learning Khmer as a native language in an English-dominant educational environment. This design allowed the researcher to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and language practices in depth.

Face-to-face unstructured interviews with probing questions were employed to collect data from the participants because the purpose of this study was to explore their experiences, perceptions, and practices of learning Khmer while enrolled in English-medium educational programs. Unstructured interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words and at their own pace, thereby generating rich and in-depth qualitative data. Given that the participants were eighth-grade students aged 12–13 years, this flexible interview format helped create a relaxed and conversational environment in which they could speak freely without feeling restricted by predetermined questions. Nevertheless, the interviews were guided by the two research questions of the study, and the researchers used probing and follow-up questions whenever clarification, elaboration, or further explanation was required. Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 minutes and was conducted primarily in Khmer, although English was used whenever participants preferred. With participants' and their parents' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes.

The eighth-grade informants were selected through a snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling was selected because no publicly available list of students enrolled in English-medium international schools can be approached. Consequently, participants recommended classmates and peers who met the study criteria. The first sample was the author's 13-year-old niece, who started English kindergarten program at the age of three, and enrolled in a dual program starting from 1st Grade at six.

Then she suggested her classmates and schoolmates to take part in this present study, and next requested them to seek other informants.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim into English. Each transcript was sent to each informant to verify or to add any information if needed. This process is important for a qualitative study to ensure accurate and complete information about the focused issue before proceeding to the data analysis (Hagens, Dobrow, & Chafe, 2009). However, only 19 transcripts were returned. Six (25%) were considered as the lost samples after being followed up twice. As seen in Table 1, 68.42% of the study's informants started the Khmer program since they were in 1st Grade (G1), although only 11 out of 19 informants, accounting for about 58%, engaged in the Khmer program since K-level.

Table 1. Educational background of the present-study's informants

Types of kindergarten (K-) program (pro.)	n	Grade (G.) enrolled in Khmer subject			
		G.1	G.2	G.3	G.4
1. Khmer K-pro.	5	5 (100%)	-	-	-
2. English K-pro.	8	4 (50%)	-	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)
3. Dual (English-Khmer) K-pro.	6	4 (66.67%)	-	2 (33.33%)	-
Total samples (N) =	19	13	-	5	1

After receiving 19 transcripts, the researchers repeatedly read each transcript to become familiar with the data before conducting manual open coding. Words, phrases, and sentences relevant to the research questions were highlighted and assigned initial codes. Similar codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories, from which recurring themes were identified. These themes were then interpreted in relation to the research questions and existing literature.

Five informants were contacted for clarification of some unclear pieces of information, but not limited to probing for more, during the analysis process, to discuss with them more about the language used at home. A coefficient of agreement for the content analysis was used to ensure the validity and reliability of the study's qualitative data. Two researchers independently coded all transcripts before comparing coding results. The coefficient of agreement was calculated following Miles and Huberman (1994), yielding an agreement of 87%. Coding discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

FINDINGS

This present study reports Gen Z students' perceptions of learning Khmer through observing their experiences in three different types of the kindergarten. The findings were reported in two sections to address the study's objectives.

Gen Z Students' Perceptions of Learning Khmer

There are three main themes: English preference, communication language at home, and linguistic challenges, emerged within this category. Additionally, there are other four sub-themes: pronunciation, spelling, grammatical rules, and synonym and social-registered vocabulary, in the last main theme, linguistic challenges.

First, nearly all participants perceived English as easier to learn than Khmer. Eighteen out of nineteen participants expressed this view, regardless of their kindergarten experience. However, seven of the eleven participants who had attended Khmer or dual-language kindergarten reported enjoying Khmer learning, whereas none of the English-kindergarten participants expressed similar enthusiasm (Table 2).

Table 2: Gen Z students' view of learning Khmer by type of K-program

Conceptual themes (N = 19)	Type of kindergarten program		
	Khmer n = 5	English n = 8	Dual n = 6
I enjoy learning Khmer subject. (n = 7)	4 (80%)	-	3 (50%)
I don't like learning Khmer, but I have to (n = 8)	1 (20%)	6 (75%)	1 (16.67%)
Khmer sentence is so complicated. (n = 9)	1 (20%)	7 (87.5%)	1 (16.67%)
I can't get the meaning well when reading. (n = 13)	1 (10%)	8 (100%)	4 (66.67%)
English is easier to learn than Khmer. (n = 18)	5 (100%)	8 (100%)	5 (83.33%)

Table 2 shows that seven out of 11 informants (63.64%) who enrolled in the Khmer and Dual K-program stated that they enjoy learning Khmer, whereas none of their peers registered in the English K-program felt the same. On top of this, those whose kindergarten experience was in a non-native language do not prefer learning their native language, even though they began learning it in their early grades. They also expressed that if they could make their own decision, they would not enrol in the Khmer program. Table 2 exhibits that six (75%) of eight informants, in the English K-program explained that they have no choice but to follow their parents' decision to learn the native language, Khmer.

Second, language use at home can be one of the factors that affect Gen Z students' preference in choosing the language to learn. English used to be a part of the language for communication at home for some informants. It seems to be common among families whose kids are enrolled in the English K-program, while English is used as a code-switching language in most families (Table 3). However, this study has failed to identify whether language for communication at home caused parents' decision to enroll their children in the English K-program or vice versa. Simply put, their registered K-program seems to identify their language for communication at home, whereas about 29% of the total informants in English and the Dual K-program seem to set family language policy at home, and use different languages with different family members (Table 3).

Table 3. Language(s) for communication at home

Language(s) for communication at home (N = 19)	Type of kindergarten program		
	Khmer n = 5	English n = 8	Dual n = 6
Khmer only	3 (60%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (50%)
Mostly Khmer with partly English	2 (40%)	1 (12.5%)	-
Mostly English with partly Khmer	-	4 (50%)	1 (16.67%)
Use different language with different person at home	-	2 (25%)	2 (33.33%)

Last but not least, the participants reported four major linguistic challenges when learning and using Khmer: pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. These challenges were particularly common among participants who attended English-medium or dual-language kindergarten programs and had limited exposure to Khmer during early childhood. Most participants reported that these linguistic features made Khmer more difficult than English.

First, most participants stated that they experienced difficulties with Khmer pronunciation because the pronunciation of many words differed from their written forms. They reported feeling confused when trying to pronounce words based on their spelling, particularly when they had limited opportunities to use Khmer at home. Participants also explained that Khmer vowel and consonant sounds were inconsistent across different words. They found it difficult to remember when a vowel or consonant changed its pronunciation depending on the linguistic context. One participant (DK-11) illustrated this challenge by explaining that:

“... [There are] so many characters (vowels and consonants). I cannot remember when one (vowel/consonant) changes its sound. For example, ហ[har] means ‘open’, but it is pronounce [hear] in the word វិហារ[vihear] means ‘church’.”

Second, ten out of fourteen participants in both English and dual K-program consistently described Khmer spelling as one of the most difficult aspects of learning the language. They explained that Khmer words require multiple character positions, including upper and lower script forms, and in some cases follow Sanskrit spelling conventions. Several participants compared Khmer spelling with English and felt that Khmer spelling was considerably more complicated because they had to remember various combinations of consonants and vowels rather than simply matching letters with sounds. One explicity explained her view when the researcher requested for an example:

“Sure! There are so many words. One just comes into my mind right now is the word that means ‘music’ (តន្ត្រី). The sound of ត[t] changes to ដ[d] although it is spelt [tantrei] in its phonetic.”

Third, all participants enrolled in English K-program (n = 8) reported difficulties in constructing grammatically correct Khmer sentences. They explained that they frequently confused word order and

experienced uncertainty when using adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions appropriately. These grammatical challenges also affected their reading comprehension because they found many Khmer texts difficult to understand due to complex sentence structures. One participant (EK-06b) stated that they often became confused while writing Khmer and struggled to comprehend lengthy passages because of their complicated sentence patterns.

“... I always get confused when writing Khmer. You know? I always make mistakes in word order, especially ways to use adverb, adjective and proposition. ... [S]ometimes I cannot comprehend the meaning when reading because it is so wordy.”

Fourth, participants identified Khmer vocabulary as another major challenge, particularly the use of synonyms and social-register vocabulary. They explained that they were often unsure which words should be used with different people, such as monks, elders, parents, or members of the royal family. Because they feared choosing inappropriate words, many participants reported hesitating to speak Khmer unless they were communicating with people they knew well. One informant (EK-10b) in English-medium instruction at school and exposed to most English communication at home expressed his perceptions that:

“I don’t always know which words are appropriate for elders or monks. I’m afraid of using the wrong words, so I usually avoid speaking Khmer unless I’m talking to people I know well. One simple example, Unlike English, we use ‘you eat ...’ for everyone, but it is different in Khmer when you want to talk to your elder, your parents, or others. You should know the appropriate word, or it may sound impolite or rude.”

Impacts of K-experience on The Behaviour of Learning Native Language

This study found that learning behavior is the main impact in this category. Participants with English-medium kindergarten backgrounds frequently reported difficulties understanding classroom communication conducted entirely in Khmer. Most indicated that code-switching or translation helped them follow classroom instruction. Participants also perceived Khmer lessons as passive learning, test-oriented, and heavily focused on discipline. Several explained that such practices reduced their engagement and motivation to learn.

These findings suggest that participants intentionally used code-switching as a practical strategy to overcome limitations in Khmer proficiency rather than as a substitute for learning the language itself. For these learners, alternating between Khmer and English reduced communication barriers and supported their classroom participation.

The interview data revealed that code-switching emerged as an important communication strategy among participants who had limited exposure to Khmer during early childhood. This issue was

particularly evident among students who attended English-medium kindergarten (75%) and, to a lesser extent, those who attended dual-language kindergarten (50%). In contrast, participants whose primary language for communication at home was Khmer did not report similar difficulties in understanding classroom instruction.

Most participants explained that they experienced difficulty comprehending classroom communication conducted entirely in Khmer, particularly when teachers used unfamiliar vocabulary or complex sentence structures. Although they gradually adapted to classroom interactions, many reported relying on classmates or teachers for clarification. Several participants indicated that they had to wait until break time to ask friends for explanations when immediate support was unavailable. Others stated that they understood lessons more effectively when teachers translated key concepts or alternated between Khmer and English.

As shown in Table 4, all ten participants who reported communication difficulties agreed that code-switching facilitated their understanding of classroom instruction, whereas seven participants also indicated that direct translation was helpful when available. Code-switching enabled them to follow classroom explanations, participate in learning activities, and communicate more confidently with teachers and peers. One informant (EK-08b) overtly expressed:

"... I cannot follow my teacher's instruction unless the teacher use some [key] terms in English. Sometimes, I asked my friend to translate it [instruction] to me."

The interview findings indicate that participants generally perceived Khmer classrooms as being dominated by traditional teacher-centred instructional practices. This perception was reported mainly by students who had limited exposure to Khmer at home, including those who attended English-medium and dual-language kindergarten programs. As shown in Table 4, eight out of ten participants (80%) described Khmer lessons as passive and less engaging than their English classes.

Participants explained that Khmer lessons involved few interactive activities and provided limited opportunities for discussion or collaborative learning. Instead, lessons were characterised by teacher explanation, individual seatwork, and routine classroom exercises. One participant (coded KK11) compared Khmer lessons with English classes by stating:

"Unlike in the English classes, there are fewer activities and no challenging games in this [Khmer] subject. Almost everyone, I guess, feels bored and sleepy."

In addition to passive classroom instruction, participants viewed frequent paper-and-pencil tests as a dominant feature of Khmer teaching. Nine out of ten participants (90%) who experienced limited Khmer exposure reported that teachers regularly used dictation, composition writing, and written tests to encourage learning. Rather than motivating them, these assessments often created anxiety and pressure. One participant (coded DK09) explained:

"My teacher [of Khmer] almost always scared us with the paper-and-pen tests like Khmer dictation and composition."

Participants also reported that disciplinary practices remained common in some classrooms. Fifty percent of the participants indicated that teachers used punishment as a response to mistakes or incomplete work, whereas none of the participants who attended Khmer-medium kindergarten reported similar experiences. One participant (coded EK07) described this practice as follows:

"...[The] teacher [of Khmer] is so strict and blames us, [and] punished us to copy the same text about 10 to 20 times."

DISCUSSION

Native-language attitude, and Family Language Policy

One of the key findings of this study is that kindergarten language experience appears to shape learners' attitudes toward their native language. Participants who attended Khmer-medium kindergarten demonstrated greater enthusiasm and confidence in learning Khmer than those educated exclusively through English. This finding supports previous studies showing that early educational experiences influence later language development and learning motivation (Kim & Umayahara, 2010; Rao et al., 2012). It also extends the work of Maqbool et al. (2020) by suggesting that Gen Z students' language preferences are influenced not only by their digital characteristics but also by early language exposure and home language environment.

Although the participants generally have Khmer as their native, their actual exposure to Khmer differs according to their family communication practices. This indicates that being a native Khmer speaker does not necessarily guarantee a comparable level of Khmer language proficiency. Rather, language proficiency is also shaped by the frequency, quality, and context of language interaction within the family. The finding is consistent with Noiray et al. (2019), who argue that insufficient early exposure and continued interaction can affect subsequent language development, particularly pronunciation and literacy.

From the perspective of Family Language Policy, the language used at home can be understood as more than a matter of personal preference; it represents a set of implicit or explicit decisions concerning which language family members use, with whom, and for what purposes. Pagé and Noels (2024) demonstrate that language practices established during childhood can influence individuals' later multilingual experiences and their future language choices. This practice highlighted concerns about Cambodian young people who may become more fluent in English while feeling less confident in Khmer (Khema & Sa Oeun, 2020; Yalirozy, 2024).

Linguistic Complexity of Khmer

While English-medium education provides extensive exposure to English from an early age, opportunities to develop systematic Khmer literacy may be comparatively limited, particularly among learners who attended English or dual-language kindergarten program. This imbalance appears to influence learners' confidence and proficiency in Khmer pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. These findings are consistent with recent concerns in Cambodia that some young people educated primarily through international program demonstrate greater confidence in English than in Khmer (Khema & Sa Oeun, 2020; Meng, 2024; Yalirozy, 2024).

Participants' difficulties with pronunciation reflect the complexity of the Khmer writing system, in which written forms do not always correspond directly to spoken forms. Although inconsistencies between orthography and pronunciation occur in many languages, limited early exposure to Khmer appears to intensify these challenges. This finding supports Noiray et al. (2019), who argue that insufficient language acquisition and continuous exposure during early childhood can affect later pronunciation and literacy development. Likewise, Marian et al. (2022) explain that bilingual learners may experience cognitive interference when orthographic representations conflict with actual pronunciation, making word recognition and pronunciation more demanding. The participants' experiences therefore suggest that early and sustained engagement with spoken Khmer is essential for strengthening phonological awareness.

The reported difficulty in remembering changing vowel and consonant sounds also corresponds with existing literature on phonological variation. Treiman et al. (2003) argue that learners often expect stable sound-letter correspondences, whereas many languages require sensitivity to contextual phonetic variation. Participants' perception that Khmer pronunciation is more difficult than English may be attributed to the contextual nature of Khmer phonology, where pronunciation depends not only on orthographic forms but also on speech mechanisms, as discussed by Povilonis (2025). These findings indicate that learners require explicit instruction that integrates pronunciation with authentic spoken language rather than relying solely on written forms.

The challenges related to Khmer spelling further demonstrate the complexity of Khmer orthography. Unlike alphabetic writing systems with relatively predictable spelling patterns, Khmer orthography requires learners to understand the structural arrangement of consonants, vowels, superscript and subscript characters, and historical spelling conventions. This finding aligns with Kong et al. (2025), who argue that successful Khmer spelling requires understanding the structural rules governing script combinations rather than simple memorization. Furthermore, Khoy (2024), and Srisomsak and Boonyarith (2025) suggest that instructional design plays an important role in supporting learners' mastery of Khmer orthography and grammar. Within the Cambodian context, strengthening

instructional approaches that provide greater exposure to Khmer reading and writing may help learners develop these foundational literacy skills.

Grammar-related challenges similarly reflect the reduced opportunities some participants have had to develop formal Khmer literacy from early childhood. Difficulties with sentence structure, word order, and grammatical functions affected not only writing but also reading comprehension. Because Khmer literacy instruction often emphasizes understanding complex sentence structures and authentic texts, learners with limited foundational exposure may require additional support to bridge these gaps. The findings therefore reinforce the importance of sustained Khmer language instruction throughout primary education, particularly for students enrolled in international program.

Participants' difficulty selecting appropriate vocabulary highlights an important sociolinguistic characteristic of Khmer. Unlike many languages in which vocabulary selection primarily depends on semantic meaning, Khmer requires speakers to adjust lexical choices according to social hierarchy and interpersonal relationships. As Khoy (2024) explains, mastery of Khmer involves understanding socially appropriate registers as well as lexical meaning. Participants' hesitation to communicate in Khmer suggests that vocabulary knowledge alone is insufficient; learners also need opportunities to practice socially appropriate language use in authentic contexts. This finding supports recent initiatives by the MoEYS to strengthen Khmer language and cultural instruction within international private schools so that learners can develop both linguistic competence and cultural understanding.

Teaching Practices Influence Engagement

A major finding of this study is that participants perceived Khmer classrooms as relying heavily on traditional teacher-centred instruction, frequent written assessments, and disciplinary approaches. Although these practices may reflect long-established instructional traditions, they appeared to conflict with the learning preferences of Gen Z students, who generally favour active participation, collaboration, and learner autonomy.

The participants' descriptions of passive classroom instruction are consistent with previous studies indicating that Gen Z students become disengaged when classroom activities are dominated by teacher talk and rote learning. Research has shown that these learners prefer interactive, task-based, and technology-supported learning environments that encourage exploration rather than passive knowledge transmission (Maqbool et al., 2020; Ivenz & Polakova, 2024; Suyitno et al., 2025). The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that similar preferences are evident among Cambodian students learning their native language. Participants consistently compared Khmer lessons unfavourably with English classes, which they perceived as providing more games, classroom interaction, and opportunities for active participation.

The findings also suggest that the heavy reliance on written tests may unintentionally reduce learners' motivation. Participants associated dictation and composition exercises with fear rather than

learning, indicating that assessment was often experienced as a mechanism for control instead of formative feedback. Although previous studies have not specifically examined assessment practices in Khmer language classrooms, Bunrosy and Vireak (2025) similarly observed that teachers working within traditionally instructional approaches tend to depend heavily on written exercises and examinations to maintain students' attention. The present study adds learners' perspectives to this discussion by showing that such assessment practices may generate anxiety among students with limited Khmer proficiency rather than increasing their engagement.

Another important finding concerns participants' experiences of punishment. Although corporal punishment is prohibited under the Child Protection Policy (MoEYS, 2016), several participants reported that teachers continued to use punitive practices, such as repeatedly copying the same text, as a disciplinary measure. These accounts are consistent with reports indicating that punitive disciplinary practices remain evident in some Cambodian classrooms despite policy reforms (World Health Organization, 2024). Rather than encouraging learning, participants described these practices as creating fear and discouraging classroom participation, particularly among students who already lacked confidence in using Khmer.

Taken together, these findings suggest that improving Khmer language learning requires not only strengthening students' language proficiency but also reconsidering instructional approaches. For students educated primarily through English, greater use of interactive learning activities, formative assessment, constructive feedback, and supportive classroom management may better align with Gen Z learning preferences while simultaneously promoting confidence and sustained engagement in learning Khmer. Such pedagogical changes may be particularly important in international school settings where students have had comparatively limited exposure to their native language before entering formal Khmer classes.

Code-switching Role in Learning

One of the significant findings of this study is that code-switching functions as an effective instructional support for students whose early educational experiences and home language environments provide limited exposure to Khmer. Participants consistently reported that alternating between Khmer and English enabled them to understand classroom instruction, clarify unfamiliar vocabulary, and participate more actively in classroom interactions. Rather than reflecting linguistic deficiency, the findings suggest that code-switching serves as a strategic communicative resource that helps learners bridge gaps between their two languages.

This finding is consistent with previous studies that regard code-switching as an indicator of bilingual competence rather than language inadequacy. For example, Yow et al. (2018) argue that bilingual children use code-switching strategically as evidence of developing vocabulary and grammatical competence across languages. Similarly, Kuzyk et al. (2020) suggest that flexible

movement between two languages can facilitate cognitive processing and support bilingual language development. Wang (2019) further explains that code-switching plays an important role in language socialization by connecting learners' home language, school language, and cultural identity. The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that, within Cambodian international schools, code-switching also serves as an instructional scaffold that enables students with limited Khmer exposure to access classroom learning more effectively.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal an important tension between classroom practice and broader language policy in Cambodia. Although participants viewed code-switching positively as a learning support, its widespread use has generated concerns regarding the long-term development of Khmer proficiency. Previous Cambodian studies have argued that excessive reliance on English in daily communication may contribute to declining competence in Khmer and weaken cultural and linguistic identity among younger generations (Khema & Sa Oeun, 2020; Yalirozy, 2024; Meng, 2024). These concerns have also been reflected in national policy discussions, where the Royal Government of Cambodia and MoEYS have emphasized strengthening Khmer language learning in international schools.

Taken together, these findings suggest that code-switching should not be viewed simply as either beneficial or detrimental. Instead, its effectiveness depends on how it is used within the classroom. When employed strategically to explain difficult concepts and gradually increase students' exposure to Khmer, code-switching may facilitate learning while supporting the transition toward greater proficiency in the native language. However, excessive dependence on English without systematic opportunities to develop Khmer may undermine the long-term goals of native language maintenance. Future research should therefore investigate how teachers can use pedagogically planned code-switching to balance immediate learning support with sustained Khmer language development in English-medium educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how different kindergarten language experiences shape Cambodian Gen Z students' perceptions and experiences of learning Khmer as their native language in English-medium international education settings. Drawing on the experiences of 19 eighth-grade students who had previously attended Khmer-medium, English-medium, or dual-language kindergarten programmes, the findings indicate that early language experience is an important factor in students' subsequent engagement with Khmer. Students who had experienced Khmer or dual-language kindergarten generally demonstrated greater interest and motivation to learn Khmer, whereas those who had attended English-medium kindergarten were more likely to prefer English and reported greater difficulty engaging with Khmer learning. At the same time, the findings suggest that kindergarten experience alone does not determine later Khmer proficiency. Language practices within the family, subsequent educational

experiences, classroom pedagogy, and opportunities for meaningful Khmer interaction also contribute to learners' language development.

A particularly important finding concerns the role of language use at home and Family Language Policy. The study indicates that students' exposure to Khmer varied considerably across families and that some families used English or different languages with different family members. Students with more limited exposure to Khmer at home tended to report greater difficulties in pronunciation, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. However, the findings also show that using Khmer at home does not automatically ensure strong Khmer proficiency. This suggests that language maintenance requires not only the presence of Khmer in family communication but also sustained opportunities to use Khmer meaningfully across different communicative situations. Family language practices should therefore be understood as an important complement to, rather than a substitute for, formal Khmer language education.

The study further demonstrates that students' challenges in learning Khmer extend beyond motivation. Participants identified pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary as major areas of difficulty, particularly among those with limited early exposure to Khmer. Difficulties with pronunciation and the relationship between written and spoken forms highlight the importance of developing phonological awareness alongside literacy. Challenges with vocabulary also extended to the use of socially appropriate Khmer according to the age, status, and relationship of the interlocutor, suggesting that effective Khmer proficiency involves sociolinguistic competence as well as grammatical and literacy knowledge.

Another important finding is the role of code-switching. Rather than interpreting students' movement between Khmer and English simply as evidence of inadequate Khmer proficiency, the findings suggest that code-switching can function as a strategic communicative and instructional resource. Participants used English to clarify unfamiliar concepts and vocabulary and to maintain classroom participation when their Khmer proficiency was insufficient. However, the findings also point to a potential tension: when English becomes the dominant language of communication without sufficient opportunities for sustained Khmer use, code-switching may become a long-term substitute rather than a temporary scaffold. Thus, the educational value of code-switching depends on how deliberately it is used to support learning while gradually increasing students' opportunities to communicate in Khmer.

The findings also highlight the importance of pedagogical practice. Participants perceived Khmer lessons as more teacher-centred, test-driven, and discipline-oriented than their English classes and expressed a preference for more interactive, collaborative, and engaging learning activities. These perceptions are particularly significant for Gen Z students, who are accustomed to interactive technologies and learner-centred forms of engagement. The findings therefore suggest that

strengthening Khmer education should not be limited to increasing instructional time or making Khmer a compulsory subject. Equal attention should be given to how Khmer is taught, including the use of interactive activities, formative assessment, constructive feedback, meaningful communication, and supportive classroom management.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings set light for education policy and practice in Cambodia. First, Khmer language development should begin with sustained exposure from the early years. However, this should not be interpreted as an argument against early English education.

Second, policy makers and school leaders should recognize the family as an important language-learning environment. Schools may encourage parents to maintain meaningful Khmer communication at home regardless of whether their children attend Khmer-, English-, or dual-language programmes. Such support could include storytelling, reading Khmer books, discussing daily experiences, and encouraging children to communicate with older family members in Khmer.

Third, international schools should strengthen the quality, rather than simply the quantity, of Khmer instruction. Making Khmer a compulsory subject is an important policy measure, but compulsory status alone may not generate positive attitudes or strong proficiency among learners who have had limited previous exposure. Schools could therefore consider differentiated Khmer programmes based on students' prior language backgrounds, particularly for learners entering school with limited Khmer literacy. Diagnostic assessment at entry could help schools identify differences in students' Khmer proficiency and provide appropriate instructional support.

Fourth, teacher preparation and recruitment deserve greater attention. Khmer teachers working in international or English-medium settings need to be able to communicate effectively with students who may have stronger English than Khmer proficiency. Teachers may therefore benefit from professional development in bilingual and multilingual pedagogy, including strategically planned code-switching, differentiated instruction, communicative Khmer teaching, and formative assessment. Code-switching should be used deliberately as a bridge toward greater Khmer participation rather than as a replacement for Khmer.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study involved a small qualitative sample of 19 students, which limits the generalizability of the findings to Cambodian students more broadly. Second, the study was bounded within an English-medium international education context. Students attending public schools, national private schools, bilingual schools, or international schools with different curricula may have different experiences. Consequently, the findings may not fully represent the diversity of language-learning environments across Cambodia.

Comparative research involving different types of schools and geographical locations would provide a broader understanding of how educational context influences Khmer language development.

Third, the study relied primarily on students' self-reported perceptions and retrospective accounts of their kindergarten experiences. Because participants were reflecting on experiences that occurred several years earlier, their recollections may have been influenced by subsequent educational and family experiences. Future research could therefore employ longitudinal designs that follow learners from kindergarten into primary and secondary education to examine how early language exposure develops into later language proficiency and attitudes.

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