

Free language choice?



Pretty much everyone I know wants to learn English or improve their English – with the exception of those who consider themselves native speakers, obviously. What is more, everyone I know knows that everyone else wants to learn English (the pretense of conservative politicians that they are combating an imaginary resistance movement to English notwithstanding). Additionally, most people think that choice is a good thing and so the fact that pretty much everyone on this globe wants to learn English becomes a good thing by implication. The fact that so many people clamor for English is particularly convenient for the TESOL industry because it allows us to collectively pretend that English teaching is not just a job or, heaven forbid, that we are actually little cogs serving the advancement of corporate imperialism. On the contrary, we like to think that TESOL is actually helping people to learn the language of their choice, and thus to achieve all the goodies that are supposed to come with it, be it democracy or development.

Because I know all of this, I was not surprised to learn (in Clayton 2008) that the good people of Cambodia, too, want to learn English; nor was I surprised that the good people of the West are doing their best to help them to exert that choice. In the mid-1990s, for instance, one British and two Australian aid agencies alone devoted around USD12 million to provide English language teaching aid for Cambodia so as to enable Cambodians to exert the choice for English.

But then I saw another figure and was surprised: during the same period the funds devoted by ALL external aid agencies to support basic literacy in Cambodia were USD5 million. Seeing that two thirds of the adult Cambodian population are functionally illiterate, USD12mio for English teaching from only three agencies against USD5mio for literacy from all external agencies is an interesting difference in spending priorities. It is this conundrum that is at the heart of Stephen Clayton's exploration of the meaning of "choice" when it comes to language policy and, specifically, English language spread in Cambodia.

Clayton's central argument is that "choice" is not free and that the demand for English in Cambodia has been constructed by international aid agencies, including those operating in refugee camps and the United Nations Transitional Authority. All these set up English as a way to lead Cambodia out of international isolation (an isolation which was, incidentally, forced upon Cambodia by the UN in its 1979 decision not to recognize the Heng Samrin government), as a way to access international aid, and thus the means for reconstruction and development. The need for English in Cambodia has thus been largely constructed by external agencies and is based on an external orientation to development.

Does it matter how a particular choice was structured and created in evaluating the choice? It could be argued that, no matter how, why and by who the demand for English was created, now it's there and Cambodians need English to be able to access aid, to participate in the emerging tourist economy, to develop and to become integrated into the global economy. If all Cambodians today had an equal chance to become fluent in English and to access all those supposed or real benefits, one would have to agree. However, the external orientation (to aid, tourism, the global) inscribed into English benefits only a tiny Cambodian elite. Those with proficiency in English can access external aid agencies and the model of externally driven "development" becomes entrenched.

At the same time, the external development model has been failing the majority of Cambodians, the rural and urban poor. Additionally, for all the rhetoric of choice, English is out of their reach. For instance, in the export trade, on an average garment worker's wage of USD45 per month, even English lessons at 2cents per hour as provided by some aid agencies are unaffordable. Not to mention that these workers probably have little time and energy left for English study. The vast majority of Cambodians are mired in poverty to such a degree that learning English is not a feasible choice for them – an impossible dream maybe. What is more, the development model of "free" global markets into which English is inscribed has actually removed another choice from the reach of most of these people: the choice to become literate in their own language.

Choice is a marker of privilege. For all [the neoliberal cult of personal responsibility](#), choice is only for those who are beyond the constraints of economic necessity. As Clayton shows, the choice of English in Cambodia was structured on the basis of external and internal socio-economic inequalities in the first place and the privileging of English within the free market model further widened those inequalities as an effect of the restructuring of local labour markets.

If "everyone" wants to learn English, it is not because English is so wonderful but because too many of us have no other choice.



Clayton, S. (2008). The problem of 'choice' and the construction of the demand for English in Cambodia Language Policy, 7 (2), 143-164 DOI: [10.1007/s10993-008-9084-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-008-9084-9)