KHMER CULTURE IMPACTING STUDENTS' ENGLISH-SPEAKING PERFORMANCE IN ETHNIC MINORITY BOARDING SCHOOLS

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Abstract:
This study aims to determine the main problems that hinder Khmer students' English-speaking performance. A quantitative approach was used to understand the factors influencing the poor English-speaking performance of Khmer students. In this work, questionnaires were employed as a research instrument to collect quantitative data. The sample was Khmer students, aged from 15 to 18 years old at ethnic minority boarding schools in a province in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The results from the questionnaire show that Khmer cultural factors, namely students' characteristics as well as the boarding school educational system could hinder students' English-speaking performance. Based on the problems found, this study gives suggestions to help bilingual students in Vietnam improve their English-speaking performance. It is believed that this research forms the basis for future studies on bilingual students learning English in Vietnam.

Keywords: Khmer culture, English speaking performance, ethnic minority boarding schools

1. Introduction

Learning English is key to entering globalization and we cannot separate language from culture (Brown, 2000; Jiang, 2000; Phillipson, 2008). This view implies that language can reflect our culture. More importantly, in teaching and learning English, speaking a foreign language is a productive skill– linguistic outcome–when learning a new language (Richards, 2008). Therefore, speaking proficiency is a tool to evaluate the English language level of learners. However, studies about Asian students' learning styles, experimental and interactive learning activities in class are limited, and students like to listen and take notes of what teachers guide them to do (Biggs, 2003; Lewis & Luangpraseut, 1989). Additionally, Nguyen and his colleagues (2005) state that in Asian

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countries such as China, Vietnam, Singapore, the Confucian heritage has been proven to share characteristics of collectivism. It means that people in these countries strongly perform in group working. According to Vo (2017), the cause of difficulty in learning English of the Khmer in Vietnam is due to differences in culture, learners' personalities, and living conditions. In Eastern culture, students were taught to give the utmost "respect" to their teachers (Hofstede,1986). It means that students will not speak up until they are called by their teachers. Furthermore, learners show their respect to their teachers by not calling the teachers first names. Hofstede (1986) further notes that learners' lack of confidence and fear of others' making judgments when mispronouncing is the cause of the inability to communicate in English.

In Vietnam, English is a compulsory subject from elementary to tertiary education. For most high schools, colleges, and universities, English is a requirement for students to complete their undergraduate studies. However, teaching and learning English as a foreign language in Vietnam is still based on traditional purposes, particularly, focusing on reading and writing skills. Meanwhile, speaking skills with the purpose of improving communication for learners are neglected. As a result, learners are likely to become hesitant and lack confidence while speaking English in classes. In fact, several English teachers who have been teaching in Ethnic Boarding Secondary School for ages realized that students have difficulties in learning English, especially speaking skills. On the one hand, English is the third language of Khmer students. The students are therefore limited in using English outside the class. They mostly speak the Khmer language or Vietnamese in daily communication. On the other hand, the psychology of lack of confidence, and fear of others making judgments when mispronouncing is the cause of the inability to communicate in English. Based on the above-mentioned problems, the study was carried out to investigate the Khmer culture impacting students' English-speaking performance within the context of learning in Ethnic minority boarding schools in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The research question that guided the study reported in this paper was: "Which Khmer cultural factors impact students' English-speaking performance in ethnic minority boarding schools?"

2. Literature Review

The literature reviews three key concepts: Khmer culture, English speaking performance, and ethnic minority boarding schools.

2.1 Khmer Culture

According to Vo (2017), Khmer is the mother language for students who live in the Khmer community, and it is totally different from Vietnamese. Khmer language has been significantly influenced by Sanskrit and Pali, while Vietnamese belongs to Austroasiatic language family. Khmer script is formed, mainly by Sanskrit and Pali while Vietnamese script is formed by Latin writing system. In addition, Khmer is stressed on the last syllable; therefore, Khmer words follow the typical Mon-Khmer pattern of a stressed

syllable preceded by a diacritic rhythm. Moreover, the clusters of consonants are presented in Khmer but not in Vietnamese. This reason helps explain why Khmer students do not have problems with the pronunciation of consonant clusters in English. Especially for Southern Khmer dialects, Minegishi (2006) described the vowel system of three dialects: Tra Vinh and Soc Trang dialect, Kien Giang dialect and An Giang dialect. Although there are different dialects, Khmer people can understand the content and meaning of Khmer people from other places in the Mekong Delta.

A small number of Khmer students learn written Khmer at home or at Khmer pagodas. Some of them start to study written Khmer when they start learning Vietnamese. Others begin to study formal Khmer only when they are in secondary or high schools where there is Khmer community living. It is true that some of them hardly learn formal Khmer at all because of a lack of Khmer teachers or other reasons. Today, Khmer subject is included in some secondary and high schools for Khmer students to learn. All of them have studied both Vietnamese and Khmer in recent years. These schools are populated only by Khmer students, who were officially selected based on secondary and high school admission criteria. Although Khmer is currently taught as a credit subject at schools, Vietnamese is still being used as an official language of instruction for other subjects.

With regard to culture and cultural symbols, there are some noticeable differences between Khmer people and the mainstream Vietnamese people. For example, Khmer people celebrate their New Year's Day (Chol Chnam Thmay) when they complete their harvests, whereas Vietnamese people celebrate their New Year's Day in Spring. On the level of cultural norms, or ways of behaving and ways of talking, Khmer people are known for their shyness as well as silence. They rarely give opinions or raise questions in class or in public. The differences in culture on both levels make it challenging for Khmer students, especially those who are living in the countryside, to understand some reading lessons in Vietnamese as well as in English and to perform well without individualized attention and support from teachers.

2.2 Ethnic Minority Boarding Schools' System

Ethnic Minority Boarding School has a mission of educating ethnic minority children in some districts with extremely difficult socio-economic conditions, in order to contribute to the training of qualified staff and human resources. The schools are applying the current general education curriculum under the direction of developing students' competency from the 2017-2018 school year. Besides, the schools teach Khmer language to students from grades 6 to 8 at the lower secondary level, and from grades 10 to 12 at the upper secondary level with three lessons per week (Kim, 2019).

Ethnic minority boarding schools in the Mekong Delta mainly gather students who are Khmer, Cham, Nung, and Hoa communities. The students have been studying and living in school during their school years. Students mostly come from ethnic minority communities and remote areas. These students are bilingual since they can communicate in their mother tongue and Vietnamese. For example, learners use Chinese or Khmer for

daily communication and Vietnamese is an official language that is used in teaching and learning at schools.

2.3 Speaking Performance

The term 'performance' is defined as an individual's clear and specific competence in doing things (Brown, 2000; Tarone, 2005). With regard to language use, performance is used to refer to the actual production or understanding of linguistic facts in order to convey information, thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Brown (2000) notes that speaking skill is the process of receiving, processing information and giving feedback as a result of that process. Moreover, in four language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, speaking is perhaps the most important skill (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Nunan & Carter, 2001). Speaking is defined as a linguistic activity that consists of several elements such as sounds, words, grammar, discourse management, and fluency.

Although there have been many different definitions of speaking performance, in the current study, the researcher would like to use this term to mean the actual production of speaking. In other words, the researcher mainly focuses on participants' production in speaking English such as pronunciation, lexical, grammar, and fluency. Consequently, the question and questions for interviews were designed from these perspectives, mostly exploiting the transactional and interactional functions like fluency and coherence, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation.

Thai and his colleagues (2018) investigated some Vietnamese cultural obstacles and their influences on EFL learners' speaking skills. The findings revealed that face-saving, hesitation, high context communication, and conflict avoidance affected EFL students' speaking performances. In addition, the study suggested some solutions to help students reach their goals.

Phan and her colleagues (2022) conducted a study to find out the factors that students may encounter when giving speeches in English. The findings showed that participants have to face factors in background knowledge, language factors, psychology, and cultural factors as the main independent variables impacting learners' oral presentation ability.

Le and Le (2022) examined the factors affecting the English learning attitude of Vietnamese students in universities in the Mekong region. The findings showed that two main factors influence students' attitudes. In terms of internal factors, students' confidence, willingness to take risks, anxiety, curiosity, and awareness of learners significantly affected their attitudes to learn English. In terms of external factors, they are materials, curriculum design, and teacher-related factors.

Tong (2022) investigated factors affecting the speaking skills of students. The results showed the main factors affecting English speaking are namely confidence, listening ability, teaching and learning methods, and learning environment. The study suggested some solutions to help learners improve their speaking ability.

Despite several studies in the field of cultural factors affecting foreign language learning for EFL learners, little research has investigated Khmer culture that impacts

students' English-speaking performance in ethnic minority boarding schools. This paper, therefore, examines this area of interest.

3. Methodology

This study aimed to explore Khmer culture impacts on students' English-speaking performance in ethnic minority boarding schools. This study was a descriptive study that obtains the observed information from the participants (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The quantitative data using questionnaires were used to find out students' perceptions of Khmer culture impacting their speaking performance in ethnic minority boarding schools. Questionnaires are considered to be one of the most popular research tools to obtain a large amount of information from a large number of participants in a short time (Creswell, 2012). The 22-item questionnaire in this study includes two sections. The first section consists of background information of participants (age, gender, languages). The second section with 22 items is categorized into five clusters, namely Face-saving (Items 1-4), High context communication (Items 5-9), Interdependent attitude (Items 10-12), Conflict avoidance (Items 13-19), and Hesitation (Items 20-22). The questionnaire was adapted from the framework of a study by Nguyen (2016), and Thai and his colleagues (2018) regarding cultural barriers affecting students' speaking ability. The questionnaire items were scored from 1 to 5 on a five-point Likert scale (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree, designed in Vietnamese in order to make ease for the participants.

The data were gathered in the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022. Participants were 235 Khmer students in boarding schools in the Mekong Delta. At the time of the study, their ages range from 15 to 18, and they have been studying English since they were in the third grade.

The questionnaire was piloted to twenty-six Khmer students, who were randomly selected among students of similar background to the participants of the current study. The Scale test was then used to check the reliability of the questionnaire. The result indicates that the questionnaire was reliable with the Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.92.

4. Findings

The findings from the study focus on Khmer culture impacting students' English-speaking performance. Responses from participants to the questionnaires suggest that Khmer culture in communication affects the ability of learners in English speaking.

Section Two of the questionnaires has twenty-two items regarding Khmer culture impacting students' English-speaking performance in ethnic minority boarding schools. These items are divided into five clusters, namely Face-saving, High context communication, Interdependent attitude, Conflict avoidance, Hesitation.

A *Descriptive Statistics Test* was run to examine the overall Khmer culture impacting students' English-speaking performance. The results of the test are displayed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Khmer culture impacting students' English-speaking performance

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Khmer culture impacting students' English-speaking performance	235	1.92	4.88	3.21	.42

Table 4.1 shows that the Khmer culture impacting students' English-speaking performance was at an average level (*M* = 3.21). *One Sample T-test* was run to check whether the mean score is statistically different from the test value of 3.4, a high level of agreement on the five-degree scale. The results indicated that a significant difference between the mean score (M = 3.21) and the test value of 3.4 was observed (*t* = - 6.2, *df* = 234, *p* = .00 < .05). The results support the conclusion that Khmer culture impacting students' English-speaking performance was at an average level.

A *Descriptive Statistics Test* was conducted to investigate the mean score of five clusters, including Face-saving, High context communication, Independent attitude, Conflict avoidance, and Hesitation. Table 4.2 presents the results of the test.

Table 4.2: The mean score of five clusters of Khmer
culture impacting students' English-speaking performance

Clusters	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Face-saving	235	1.50	5.00	3.24	.74
High context communication	235	1.00	5.00	3.19	.65
Interdependent attitude	235	1.00	5.00	3.06	.93
Conflict avoidance	235	1.57	5.00	3.16	.63
Hesitation	235	1.00	5.00	3.54	.63

Table 4.2 shows that the mean scores of the aspects of the participants' agreement degree were ranging from 3.06 to 3.54, which indicates that Khmer culture impact students' English-speaking performance. Among five clusters, Hesitation got the highest mean score (*M* = 3.54, *SD* = .63), followed by Face-saving (*M* = 3.24, *SD* = .74). The mean score of High context communication (*M* = 3.19, *SD* = .65), Conflict avoidance (*M* = 3.16, *SD* = .63). Interdependent attitude (*M* = 3.06, *SD* = .93) were at an average level.

Independent Samples T-test was run to compare the mean score of male and female participants regarding their culture impacting their' English speaking performance. The results indicated that no difference between the two means was observed (*t* = - .06, *df* = 233, *p* = 0.95 > 0.05). Khmer culture impacting students' English-speaking performance was the same, taking gender into consideration.

A Frequency Test was run on the percentage of four items of Face-saving (Items 1, 2, 3, 4) to investigate what items of Face-saving were agreed upon by participants. The results are shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Percentage of Face-saving
impacting students' English-speaking performance

Items		Strongly disagree / Disagree		Neutral		Strongly agree / Agree	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
1	When speaking English, I am afraid of being laughed at by my classmates because of pronouncing incorrectly, using incorrect words, and so on.	84	35.7	55	23.4	96	40.9
2	When expressing my own opinion, I am afraid that there are some gossips around my opinion.	63	26.8	50	21.3	122	51.9
3	When speaking English, I try to be more knowledgeable than my classmates to prove my foreign language competence.	100	42.6	32	13.6	103	43.8
4	I like to speak English, but I don't have many interesting ideas to share to my classmates.	38	16.2	42	17.9	155	65.9

Table 4.3 shows that almost all of the students (65.9%) agreed that they liked to speak English, but they did not have many interesting ideas to share with their classmates (*n* = 155). Approximately 50.9% of the participants (*n* = 122) affirmed that they were afraid that there was some gossip about their opinion when they were speaking English. Approximately 43.8% of the students (*n* = 103) agreed that they tried to be more knowledgeable than their classmates to prove their foreign language competence. Meanwhile, 40.9% of the students (*n* = 96) agreed that they were afraid of being laughed at by their classmates because of pronouncing incorrectly, or using incorrect words.

To examine which items of High context communication gained a high level of agreement a *Frequency Test* was run. The results are presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Percentage of High context communication
impacting students' English-speaking performance

Items		Strongly disagree / Disagree		Neutral		Strongly agree / Agree	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
5	Before getting to central issues, I will introduce the topic by mentioning the relevant incident first	32	13.6	72	30.6	131	55.8
6	Instead of talking directly about the issue, I like others to understand my hidden meaning	47	20	65	27.7	123	52.3
7	I prefer using long English sentences to express my ideas because it will make others admire me rather than using short sentences.	112	47.7	54	23	69	29.3
8	I think using complex sentences while speaking English is better than using simple sentences.	110	46.8	59	25.1	66	28.1

9	When speaking English, I like to talk directly about central issues instead of talking in a roundabout way to open the speech	36	15.3	66	28.1	133	56.6

Table 4.4 shows that a majority of the students (56.6%) respond that they liked to talk directly about central issues instead of talking in a roundabout way to open the speech ($n = 133$). Approximately 55.8% of the students ($n = 131$) said that before getting to central issues, they could introduce the topic by mentioning the relevant incident first. Approximately 52.3% of the students ($n = 123$) agreed that instead of talking directly about the issue, they liked others to understand their hidden meaning. However, 29.3% of the students ($n = 69$) agreed that preferred using long English sentences to express their ideas because it could make others admire them rather than using short sentences. Approximately 28.1% of the student ($n = 66$) agreed that they thought using complex sentences while speaking English was better than using simple sentences.

A *Frequency Test* was performed to examine which items of Interdependent attitude gained a high level of agreement. The results are presented in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5: Percentage of Interdependent attitude
impacting students' English-speaking performance

Items		Strongly disagree / Disagree		Neutral		Strongly agree / Agree	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
10	During English speaking class, I prefer to use Vietnamese or Khmer to express my opinion instead of using English.	79	33.6	61	26	95	40.4
11	I don't express my opinion because I think some of my classmates will have the same opinion as mine.	85	36.1	50	21.3	100	42.6
12	I think my opinion which differs from others will not be as good as the opinions that are approved by the majority of my classmates.	83	35.3	62	26.4	90	38.3

Table 4.5 shows that 42.6% of the students ($n = 100$) said that they did not express their opinion because they thought some of their classmates could have the same opinion as them. Approximately 40.4% of the participants (n = 95) agreed that they preferred to use Vietnamese or Khmer to express their opinion instead of using English during English-speaking class. Approximately 38.3% of the students ($n = 90$) agreed that they thought their opinion which was different from others could not be as good as the opinions that were approved by the majority of their classmates.

A *Frequency Test* was run to examine which items of Conflict avoidance gained a high level of agreement. The results are presented in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6: Percentages of Conflict avoidance
impacting students' English-speaking performance

Items		Strongly disagree / Disagree		Neutral		Strongly agree / Agree	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
13	I don't want to make an opinion that contradicts the opinion of many people.	85	36.2	66	28.1	84	35.7
14	To avoid tension with my classmates, I do not like to argue about whose opinion is right or wrong.	72	30.6	63	26.8	100	42.6
15	I only use English when the teacher asks me to speak up.	60	25.5	56	23.8	119	50.7
16	I don't like being a famous person when I have different ideas from everyone.	66	28.1	71	30.2	98	41.7
17	I completely agree with the teacher's opinions because I think a teacher is a knowledgeable person.	66	28.1	70	29.8	99	42.1
18	To avoid the teacher's "attention", I do not dare to contradict the teacher's opinion.	73	31	61	26	101	43
19	I don't want to argue with my classmates even though I know it's unreasonable and incorrect.	86	36.6	55	23.4	94	40

Table 4.6 shows that 50.7% of the students ($n = 119$) affirmed that they only used English when the teacher asks them to speak up. Approximately 43% of them ($n = 101$) reported that they did not dare to contradict the teacher's opinion to avoid the teacher's "attention". 42.6% of the participants ($n = 100$) said that they did not like to argue whose opinion was right or wrong to avoid tension with their classmates. Approximately 42.1% of them ($n = 99$) responded that they agreed with the teacher's opinions because they thought the teacher was a knowledgeable person. Approximately 41.7% of the students ($n = 98$) agreed that they did not like being a famous person when they had different ideas from everyone. 40% of them ($n = 94$) said that they did not want to argue with their classmates even though they knew it was unreasonable and incorrect. Approximately 35.7% of them ($n = 84$) agreed that they did not want to make an opinion that contradicts the opinion of many people.

A *Frequency Test* was performed on the percentage of four items belonging to cluster Hesitation that was agreed most by participants. The results are shown in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7: Percentages of Hesitation
impacting students' English-speaking performance

Items		Strongly disagree / Disagree		Neutral		Strongly agree / Agree	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
20	I feel uncomfortable and unconfident when I alone present an issue in English in front of my classmates.	54	23	50	21.3	131	55.7
21	I feel much more confident and comfortable when I and my group members present an issue in English in front of my classmates.	50	17	66	28.1	129	54.9
22	I have to think and practice for a long time when I want to say something in English.	26	11.1	53	22.6	156	66.3

Table 4.7 shows that 66.3% of the students (*n* = 156) agreed that they had to think and practice for a long time when they wanted to say something in English. Approximately 55.7% of them (*n* = 131) agreed that they felt uncomfortable and unconfident when they alone presented an issue in English in front of their classmates. Approximately 54.9% of the participants (*n* = 129) agreed that they felt much more confident and comfortable when they and their group members presented an issue in English in front of their classmates.

5. Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study in relation to the relevant studies to answer the research question.

The findings indicate that Khmer students had difficulty in English speaking performance because of Khmer culture in communication. Interaction existed between teachers and learners to make progress. This finding is in line with prior studies by several scholars (e.g., Le & Le, 2022; Phan et al., 2022; Tong, 2022). These authors contend that cultural factors affect learners in speaking a new language in terms of confidence. The findings show that Khmer students had difficulty in English speaking performance because of their face-saving, high context communication, interdependent attitude, hesitation, and conflict avoidance. In other words, they are afraid of losing face in making mistakes while participating in English-speaking performance activities. In terms of English knowledge, the participants hesitated to express ideas in English because of lacking grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Besides, respondents expected to avoid conflict with their teachers and classmates. These findings are consistent with a study conducted by Thai and his colleagues (2018) who found that Vietnamese culture was the main factor preventing students from speaking English.

6. Conclusions

The main aim of the study was to explore Khmer culture's impacts on students' English-speaking performance. The findings indicate that some factors, namely face-saving, high context communication, interdependent attitude, conflict avoidance, and hesitation impacted students' English-speaking performance in ethnic minority boarding schools. Specifically, the environment has a crucial factor influencing students' attitudes toward learning English as a foreign language. The findings of the present study have implications for teachers, school administrators, and ethnic minority students.

For teachers, they should design effective lesson plans to help the students achieve their goals. Moreover, studying the student's culture is one of the essential things to understanding the psychology of learners. Cultural exploration includes learning the language of ethnic students. This language helps teachers and students have a closer relationship. As a result, teachers could motivate learners to overcome difficulties in learning and achieve their goals.

School administrators need to design English teaching curricula that meet the English learning needs of ethnic minority students in Vietnam. The authorities should have policies that help ethnic minorities in Vietnam develop their education and literacy.

The findings of the study could serve as a reference for students to improve their speaking skills or overcome difficulties while learning English. What is more, the study could raise students' awareness of the importance of English in the 4.0 era in ways that English is a potential tool that supports ethnic minority students to have job opportunities after graduation from schooling.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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