



## Editorial: Why the French language is getting less popular at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): A Case Study at Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)

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Two known sayings about foreign languages have inspired university students to improve their wisdom and thought. While Roger Bacon said, “Knowledge of languages is the doorway to wisdom.”, Karl Albrecht posited, “Change your language, and you change your thoughts.” It is an obvious truth that a foreign language is an essential tool for communication and information in the age of globalization. Meanwhile, [Gibney \(2013\)](#) reveals that internationalization is recognized by global HEIs as resulting in growth of broader and deeper

institutions. Foreign languages, such as English and French, are the bridges for students to international communication. According to [Green et al. \(2012\)](#), English has become widely used as a teaching language at universities worldwide. But, other than English, French is the only language that is used at universities in every country in the world. A total 1.35 billion speak English ([ODSEF, 2022](#)) and more than 300 million people speak French on the five continents, and this language is also used for international communication ([France Diplomacy, 2023](#)). In history, French and English are Coca-Cola and Pepsi; they do not appear to go well together. [Chaléa \(2017\)](#) argues that this complicated association is probably caused by the past relationship between the two nations, geographically separated only by a stretch of water ([Chaléa, 2017](#)). In this editorial, we discuss why French is getting less and less popular among university students as their first or second language during their studies at HEIs. The Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), the largest and oldest university in Cambodia, is used as a case study for this discussion. The National Strategic Plan (2019-2023) of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has adopted both English and French for teaching and learning at HEIs in Cambodia ([MoEYS, 2019](#)). But why do most universities or students prefer English as their first or second language? Since the 1960s, the French language was used for communication in Cambodia during the period of the protectorate and colonization between August 11, 1863, and November 9, 1953. During that time period, the French language was introduced and widely used at HEIs in Cambodia ([Rany et al., 2012](#)).

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France then changed the traditional Cambodian education system into a modern or Western form by importing the French education model (Im, 2020; Sam et al., 2012). In the 1990s, the MoEYS included English in the curriculum at HEIs after general education sponsored by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993 (Mao, 2015). Therefore, the question arises regarding how in Cambodia English has gained more popularity among HEIs and students as a medium for teaching and learning.

Today, French continues to be used for teaching and learning for some courses at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), Institute of Technology of Cambodia (ITC), University of Health Sciences (UHS), and Royal University of Law and Economics (RULE). Only a few private and public universities, including RUPP, provide a Bachelor of Arts in French. The Institute of Foreign Languages of the RUPP provides a four-year Bachelor of Arts in French. Fig. 1 describes the trends for undergraduate students enrolling in the French language at RUPP, by gender. A total of 1,169 students registered and completed the program, including 558 males and 661 females. In 2009, RUPP started offering private classes for students interested in continuing their bachelor’s degree in French. To date, 251 students have enrolled or graduated through such private classes, including 116 males and 135 females.

Between 1993 and 2022, 918 students enrolled in public programs through MoEYS scholarships, and 251 students enrolled in the private program with their own funds (Fig 2; Appendix 1). At RUPP, students can choose one of the electives in the fields of teaching and translation, which provides them with knowledge and experience in several professional areas, increasing their chances of finding satisfactory employment. But due to an insufficient number of students, the Department decided to give only one elective course, which is Teaching French as Foreign Language. The internal regulations of the Department of French Studies stipulate that these electives are open to any student that has finished their third year, and they can undertake the courses the last year of their BA program. Students with French proficiency B1 or another bachelor can undertake a one-year program for a certificate

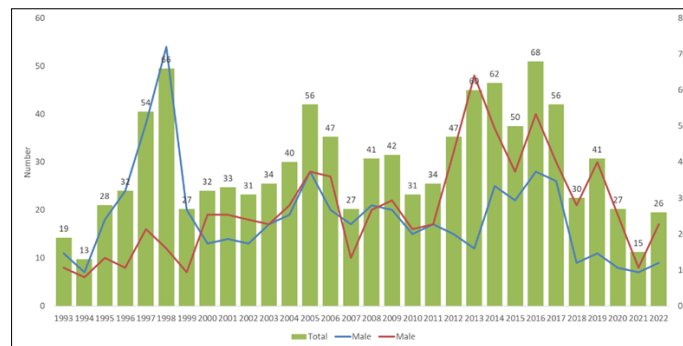


Fig 1. French language enrollment trends at RUPP by gender. Source: RUPP, 2023.

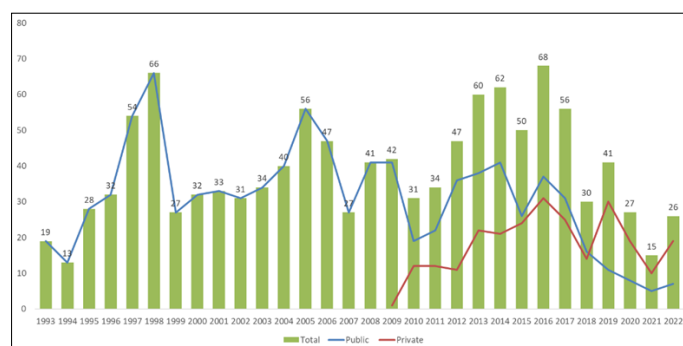


Fig 2. French language enrollment trends at RUPP for publicly and privately funded students. Source: RUPP, 2023.

program. University students who pass the recruitment application for the electives and meet all the course requirements will receive a certificate indicating their successful completion of the elective components of this degree. After successfully completing the 3rd-year core curriculum in French, Cambodian students are offered two options for a tourism specialization in the 4<sup>th</sup> year: (1) a 20-credit specialization course, for which successful graduates will be granted a Bachelor’s Degree in Tourism of the Royal University of Phnom Penh; and, (2) a 60-credit specialization course, for which successful graduates will be awarded a Bachelor’s Degree in Tourism from the University of Angers (France) and a Bachelor’s Degree in Tourism from the Royal University of Phnom Penh. Due to an insufficient number of students, the Department has postponed this offer but is studying the possibility of offering a one-year program for a certificate.

The Professional Bachelor’s Degree in Foreign Languages Applied to Tourism requires students to complete 60-credits of compulsory modules, including specific classes enabling students to examine the theoretical and conceptual issues facing the industry, and critically analyze and apply these concepts. The modules

focus on the relationship between scholarship and industry applications. Students are required to undergo 2-months of compulsory vocational training. Most modules are taught in French, but the course includes one English module, and some professional seminars are also held in English. Teachers are primarily international tourism experts, RUPP or partner universities professors, or local hospitality and tourism professionals (Apsara National Authority, Sofitel, Sunway Hotel, Asian Trails...) that provide continued substantial support for the course.

Cambodia is one of the Francophone countries, but the French language is not very popular among university students. We can categorize such changes in terms of three waves: the first wave (1988-1997), the second wave (1998-2001) and the third wave (2002-present). During the first wave, French was a competitive language and popular, with students highly motivated to learn. Moreover, all students received scholarships to enroll at RUPP, plus various opportunities to take study visits to Francophone countries, such as France and Canada. In addition, most graduates received a scholarship for further studies in those countries. Graduates who earned a Bachelor of Arts in French had significant opportunities for employment at government agencies. Many French graduates were then appointed as high-profile government officials. In particular, RUPP's mission was to produce human resources for government agencies. All students admitted to RUPP had to sign contracts to work at government agencies after graduation. As such, students did not worry about finding a job and were interested in working at government agencies after graduation.

The second wave fell between 1998 and 2002, and during that time French became a complementary language. Therefore, the Department of French Studies established specializations such as teaching French as a second language, translation, tourism, journalism and linguistics. By doing so, students were provided with opportunities for jobs at private companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). From 2002, graduates from the French course started to face difficulties finding employment. Some students were interested in French because they expected to receive scholarships from French

universities in France or Canada. The French language became more challenging in the third wave (2002-current) when competition increased with other languages such as English, Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Thai. Students who graduated with French as their only foreign language could not easily find decent employment, and further education specialization was required. As a result, students became more hesitant to pursue studies in the French language at HEIs.

The decline in the popularity of the French language at HEIs does not exist only in Cambodia, but is also happening in other Francophone countries. Today, many Cambodian parents do not want to encourage or sponsor their children to enroll in French because they do not expect their children to get desirable jobs after graduation. Simultaneously, students did not gain a solid foundation in the French language during their general education. Although, French was also an option provided in public education for a foreign language, students did not gain sufficient proficiency for continuing their studies in French at HEIs. In particular, most students perceived the French language negatively because it is considered a complex subject and because it is difficult to find jobs for French speakers.

French has been supported directly by the MoEYS and indirectly by Conseil pour la promotion de la Francophonie (Committee for promoting the Francophonie which worked collaboratively with other institutions to promote learning and teaching French as foreign language, but there has been a lack of finances and facilities to promote it. At the same time, the Ministry has announced a considerable lack of French teachers (approximately 1500) in general education, and the recruitment of those teachers was slow. Some teachers of French in public education are reassigned to teach other subjects, such as English and Khmer literature. If French classes continue at schools, they are generally provided on Saturdays. Teachers allocate their time from Monday to Friday to do other work outside the school. As a result, some schools have already closed French classes and replaced them entirely with English. Before 2014, The French Embassy, through Institut français du Cambodge, was the primary source of financial and technical support for the program at

RUPP. The center played an important role in improving education quality, including the provision of professors from France and other necessary materials and equipment. In addition, at least six outstanding students took part in exchange programs at various universities in France. With such full support, studying in the French language was very popular. Since 2014, the Institut français du Cambodge has shifted its policy to providing only private services. Thus, RUPP has mainly depended upon scholarships from the MoEYS and school fees to operate the program. At the same time, French NGOs for humanitarian aid and private companies in the pharmaceutical or construction sectors from France also opt not make it compulsory that workers are French-speaking. Given that English is an international language, French NGOs and private companies in Cambodia have decided to recruit English-speaking workers. Therefore, employment for French speaking workers is declining as well.

Today French has become a language to be taken for specialized studies, for example, in medicine, technology, law, and arts. At RUPP, students are required to take their specialization and pedagogy in one year. If they wish to be a teacher of French, they must pass the national examination at National Institute of Education (NIE) for another year of education. However, students have reported that the courses provided at NIE are similar to those already taken at RUPP.

Every year, approximately 40 students were enrolled at the beginning of the program, but only between 15 and 20 students remained at the beginning of year 4. Therefore, students were challenged to take two specializations during their fourth year to expand their job opportunities. There are two reasons: first, they are required to pay even if they have received a scholarship. For those in the private program, they have to pay double if they wish to take two specializations. Also, students did not have time because other courses already occupied them full time. As a result, they may need to take the course during the weekend or after their graduation.

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#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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**Appendix 1.** French language enrollment trends for undergraduate students at RUPP.  
Source: RUPP, 2023.

Year	Public			Private			Total		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1993	11	8	19				11	8	19
1994	7	6	13				7	6	13
1995	18	10	28				18	10	28
1996	24	8	32				24	8	32
1997	38	16	54				38	16	54
1998	54	12	66				54	12	66
1999	20	7	27				20	7	27
2000	13	19	32				13	19	32
2001	14	19	33				14	19	33
2002	13	18	31				13	18	31
2003	17	17	34				17	17	34
2004	19	21	40				19	21	40
2005	28	28	56				28	28	56
2006	20	27	47				20	27	47
2007	17	10	27				17	10	27
2008	21	20	41				21	20	41
2009	20	21	41		1	1	20	22	42
2010	8	11	19	7	5	12	15	16	31
2011	10	12	22	7	5	12	17	17	34
2012	10	26	36	5	6	11	15	32	47
2013	9	29	38	3	19	22	12	48	60
2014	14	27	41	11	10	21	25	37	62
2015	11	15	26	11	13	24	22	28	50
2016	10	27	37	18	13	31	28	40	68
2017	8	23	31	18	7	25	26	30	56
2018	3	13	16	6	8	14	9	21	30
2019	2	9	11	9	21	30	11	30	41
2020	2	6	8	6	13	19	8	19	27
2021	1	4	5	6	4	10	7	8	15
2022		7	7	9	10	19	9	17	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>442</b>	<b>476</b>	<b>918</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>251</b>	<b>558</b>	<b>611</b>	<b>1169</b>