

Bilingual education in Cambodia¹

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Background

The Constitution of Cambodia guarantees the right of all persons in Cambodia to gain an education and the nation is committed to equitable development assistance for all sectors in all parts of the country. However, in reality, education and development in the ethnic minority areas lag far behind the rest of the country. In recent years the highland peoples (numbering about 100,000) have become increasingly marginalized as they face the influx of Khmer migrants from the lowlands and also the rapid transition to a market economy. The gap is widening as ethnic minority people fail to gain access to education and development initiatives. The linguistic barrier is the foremost challenge to accessing development and education as few people—especially women and children—from the ethnic minority communities speak the national language.

The Cambodian government has made an effort over the years to establish Khmer language schools in the highlands. However, minority people are failing to gain a good education in the government system, mostly because many of them do not understand Khmer, the national language and medium of instruction. This has resulted in successive generations growing up illiterate and unable to speak the national language. Prior to the bilingual non-formal education pilot project described in this paper, nearly all ethnic minority females and over 80% of the males were illiterate and most children had never attended school. Vocational training opportunities that provide skills in teacher training, community development, primary health care and agriculture extension are offered by the government but these are inaccessible to most minority speakers because basic Khmer literacy skills are required to attend the courses.

The bilingual education pilot project uses a model of instruction that begins in the vernacular and progresses to Khmer so that students learn to read and write both languages. The curriculum is functional and relates to everyday life. It is based on the needs identified by the communities, including health and hygiene, land planning and community forestry, agriculture and marketing. Local people are active in all stages and levels of the initiatives and a major emphasis is placed on building local human resources as teacher trainers, programme monitors, curriculum writers, illustrators and local teachers. The basic literacy and numeracy skills gained in both languages are foundational for further skills training and for promoting socio-economic development in their communities.

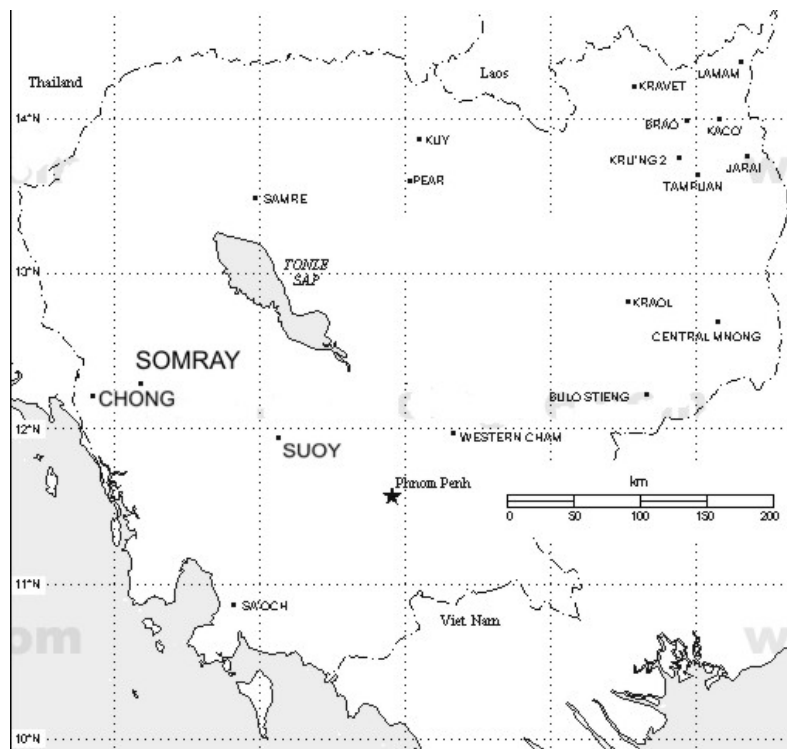
Use of the vernacular recognizes and affirms the ethnic minority people's cultural identity. For the first time in their history, they can have a written record of their own traditions and can preserve their indigenous knowledge for future generations. One of the traditions, common to many Mon Khmer cultures, is that the indigenous people were once literate and that their language was written on buffalo skin but that during a time of hardship the skin was lost and the written form of the language was lost with it. Through this project, five minority languages now have alphabets using the Khmer script, and the Cambodian government has recently approved all five alphabets. Hopefully, the result of these efforts will be that the indigenous people will once again be literate.

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Ethnic minorities in the national context

The Cambodian government recognizes the following official categories for ethnic groups in the country: indigenous minorities, also known as highlanders or Khmer-Loeu; Cham or Khmer-Islam and foreign residents, or immigrants which include Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, etc. (Dareth, 2002). This paper will focus on the first group, the indigenous minorities. It will describe the bilingual NFE programmes piloted in Ratanakiri Province of northeastern Cambodia, and the relevance of the bilingual education strategy for other ethnic minority populations in the country.

The two highland provinces of Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri have a population of approximately 100,000 indigenous peoples who make up the majority of the population in the two provinces. There are also pockets of indigenous minority peoples scattered throughout the country, as illustrated in the following map, for whom the pilot project in northeast Cambodia may be relevant. Current bilingual efforts are concentrated in five languages in northeastern Cambodia, with additional linguistic research in several other languages which have populations scattered throughout the country. A listing of the minority language groups with population estimates is included as Attachment 1.



Source: Blench, 2002

Figure 1. Approximate locations of Cambodian minorities

Bridging the education gap for minority peoples

The Cambodian government has committed itself to “Education for All” by the year 2015 and government efforts have improved literacy rates for Khmer-speaking Cambodians in the lowland provinces through both formal and non-formal education programmes. However, the indigenous peoples living in the Cambodian highlands have felt little impact from the nationwide Education for All initiatives (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2000; MoEYS, 1999a; MoEYS, 1999b). A number of Education For All assessments have identified similar trends in many countries of the world; that is, they have noted the difficulty that special populations (such as ethnic minorities and women) have in accessing general EFA programmes (UNICEF, 1999; UNESCO, 2000a, 2000b). A chart with the findings of a national literacy

survey, below, illustrates the wide gap in literacy skills between the ethnic minorities of the Cambodian Highlands and those who speak Khmer as their first language. The small sample that was tested was found to have very low literacy levels, especially among females.

Table 1. Ethnic Affiliation and Literacy

ETHNIC AFFILIATION	Rates (%)					
	Male			Female		
	Illiterate	Semi-Literate	Literate	Illiterate	Semi-literate	Literate
Khmer	23.2	28.0	48.8	44.1	26.0	29.0
Highland Minorities	76.3	18.4	5.3	85.7	14.3	0.0
Others	53.8	23.1	23.1	65.0	19.4	15.0

Source: MoEYS 2000, 41

WHY BILINGUAL EDUCATION?

National Goals for basic education and human resource development

Cambodian government goals call for human resource development among local people in order to help them serve in all sectors in their home villages and provinces. This includes an emphasis on ethnic minorities, with special strategies to meet their specific needs and challenges, many of which differ from those of the lowland Khmer populations.

Basic education is foundational to all types of development. It helps to build the human resources necessary for community development and to address poverty alleviation and other emerging issues such as sustainable natural resource management, health, and livelihood issues. Using local languages—which the people understand—for basic education brings ethnic minorities closer to engaging in the national society and facilitates nation-building and decentralization. In addition, the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the minority peoples, which the government views as a valuable part of the national heritage, is maintained. An important foundation for nation-building is for all citizens to be engaged in development, to readily access and understand messages from the government, and to have the tools to communicate their own needs and goals.

The bilingual education strategy is important for meeting Cambodia’s national EFA goals. Pedagogically, we know that for effective education to take place, we must start with the known and move to the unknown. Khmer is a foreign language for the ethnic minorities. Therefore they need to start with their own language in order to access Khmer. To use only the national language (Khmer) for instruction in ethnic minority areas can be compared to education systems in the past that required Khmer-speaking peoples to access education only through learning French. The difficulties minority learners encounter because of the language barrier are similar to those experienced by Khmers studying French or English as a second language.

In keeping with their rights to receive an education, all citizens of the country have the right to read and write the national language as well as their local language. These basic skills make them stronger citizens and facilitate their engagement in civil society. In summary, bilingual education helps highlanders engage more fully in development and nation-building and helps them to make development plans appropriate to their communities in order to ensure a positive future.

The Cambodian Constitution

The Cambodian Constitution guarantees education as a basic human right, as stated in article 58: “The state shall provide free primary and secondary education to all citizens in public schools. Citizens shall receive education for at least 9 years” (Nach, 2002). H.E. Pen Darith, Advisor to the Council of Ministers, states:

Persons belonging to ethnic and linguistic minorities have the right to use their own language. The policies must reflect these rights by assuring that the value of educational efforts by the ethnic groups themselves be recognised and that these efforts be integrated in to the larger framework of development of a Cambodian national education system that is appropriate for a multicultural society. Educational policy should stress the importance of tolerance for ethnic diversity as an important part of national reconciliation and the effort to build... Cambodia for the twenty-first century (Pen Darith, 2002).

International conventions

The United Nations Declaration on Minority Rights (adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992) affirms that ethnic minorities “have the right to enjoy their own culture...and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination.” Cambodia is signatory to a number of international human rights conventions which have ramifications for education policy, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention on the Discrimination Against Women. The Cambodian government has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children have a right to education as well as to use their own language.

Bilingual education endorsement

For ethnic minority people in Cambodia, the language of instruction is the most significant barrier to accessing any type of education or training. This is because most ethnic minority people have very limited, if any, knowledge of Khmer, the official language of instruction. In order to address the Education For All goals, key government officials have endorsed bilingual education. Prime Minister Hun Sen, in his address to the National Education Forum to review the Education Sector Support Programme (ESSP) for 2002-2006, noted the need for local languages in instruction in the highland provinces:

The overall enrolment and admission rates in Ratanakiri and Monduliri remain too low... This induces us to review and develop specific and viable strategies to address the unique access constraints in ethnic minority areas, such as the development of bilingual curricula and programs where Khmer is used as a core language, the provision of scholarships and the training of ethnic minority teachers (Samdech Hun Sen, 2002).

He also emphasized the role of education for nation building:

In short, the Royal Government of Cambodia considers education as an important pillar of the poverty reduction strategy... Specifically, the equitable access to basic education for every [sic] children and adults is an effective means to insert [sic] power, freedom and democracy to people and help them to become educated and skillful for earning their living as well as contribute to the defending, building, and developing of our nation (ibid).

National EFA plan

The second goal of the National EFA plan is to “ensure that by the year 2015, all children, especially young girls, children in difficult circumstances and children from ethnic minorities, have access to, and complete, good quality, free, primary education.” The EFA Secretariat of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, has stated, “The preparation and development of bilingual classes for minority ethnic groups is strategically important to ensure that by the year 2015, all children will receive good quality education” (Nach, 2002).

THE NON-FORMAL EDUCATION BILINGUAL PILOT

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has supported the piloting of a new strategy to meet the needs of the ethnic minorities—a trial bilingual education programme using the vernacular as medium of instruction, together with the national language. The Department of Non-formal Education of the MoEYS has been active in the bilingual education pilot projects since the initial stages in 1997, supporting two pilot projects, one sponsored by UNESCO, the other by the NGO, International Cooperation for Cambodia (ICC). The NFE Department has played an important role in facilitating understanding of the value of the new initiative as well as in coordinating technical expertise between local authorities and partnering agencies. The bilingual approach has emerged as an effective strategy to meet the national EFA goals.

Setting

The northeast highlands of Cambodia have been isolated from development for generations. Ratanakiri Province is home to a number of indigenous groups, including the Brao, Krung, Tampuan and Jarai. The Cambodian government has made a commitment to providing equitable development assistance in all sectors for all peoples in all parts of the country. Thus, programmes specific to the needs of ethnic minorities need to be developed to reach national development and education objectives.

Bilingual pilot projects have been conducted in Ratanakiri since 1997 and now cover a total of four languages: Tampuan, Brao, Krung and Kavet. Bilingual NFE pilots have recently begun in neighbouring Mondulkiri province in Bunong, the major language group of the province. As of 2003, bilingual education initiatives were being piloted in a total of three northeastern provinces, as illustrated in the chart below.

Province	Bilingual Pilot Projects	Languages	Projects
Ratanakiri	UNESCO NGOs Provincial Government	Tampuan, Krung, Brao, Kavet	NFE (1997) Pilot Primary (2002) Government Information Service (2003) Community Health Extension bilingual posters (2003)
Mondulkiri	NGO	Bunong	NFE, Animal Health (2002)
Steung Treng	NGO	Kavet	NFE in context of community health project

Table 2. Overview of Current Bilingual Pilot Projects in Northeastern Cambodia

The initial bilingual NFE pilot was initiated through the efforts of the NGO, International Cooperation for Cambodia (ICC). The first trial project began in late 1997 and fully launched in 1998. A UNESCO-sponsored bilingual NFE pilot project was also trialed in Ratanakiri under the National Non-formal Education Department the same year. The linguistic research in reducing the languages to writing and producing instructional materials, largely supported through the ICC pilot, has laid the foundation for the development of the pilot primary education projects launched in 2002 through the NGO, CARE Cambodia. In 2003, the Ratanakiri Provincial Information Service began preparing a project for disseminating information to the communities in the vernacular languages, starting with the oral language in cassette form. Various development organizations are producing informational posters and extension materials in local languages to facilitate health and community development training at the community level.

In addition to bilingual education trial projects, MoEYS is supporting linguistic research in cooperation with ICC in two additional languages, Kuy (2002), and Western Cham (2003). Findings of the linguistic research will be published through the Royal Academy in Phnom Penh.

Bilingual NFE Pilot, Ratanakiri

The pilot Bilingual NFE Project in Ratanakiri province was initiated in three stages: linguistic research and material development at the local level, trial of bilingual pilots, and official government approval following the initial pilot. Following the successful beginning of the original pilot and with official approval, use of the vernacular is currently being expanded for use in other non-government and government development and education efforts.

Research and Base Line Survey

The initial baseline house-to-house survey, conducted by ICC, covered all residents in each of six villages in the target areas. It found that few people could understand the national language, Khmer. This was especially the case for women and children. The reading and speaking skills of respondents were classified in three categories: fluent, a little, and none ('not at all').

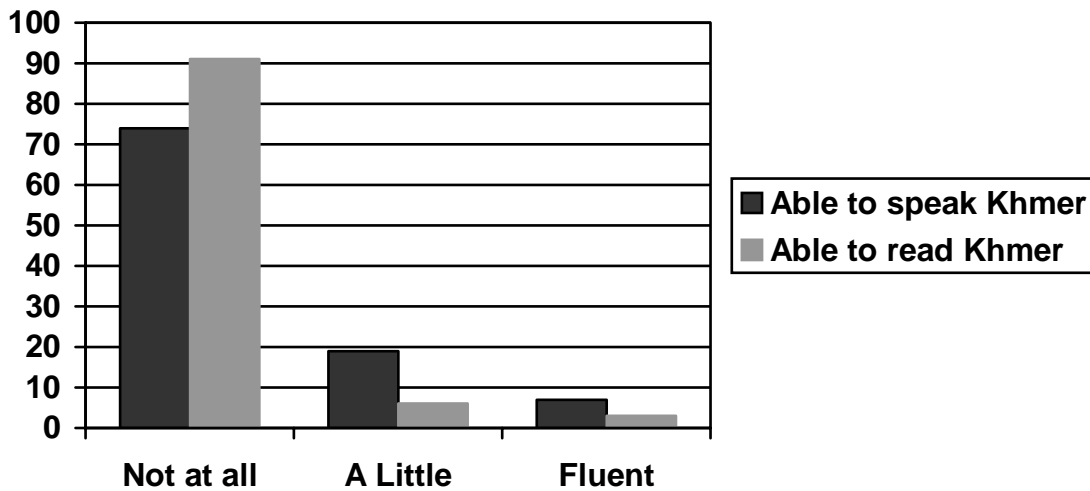


Figure 3. Khmer Speaking and Reading Ability (Thomas, 2002)

Very few of the population had ever attended primary school, as illustrated in the graph below.

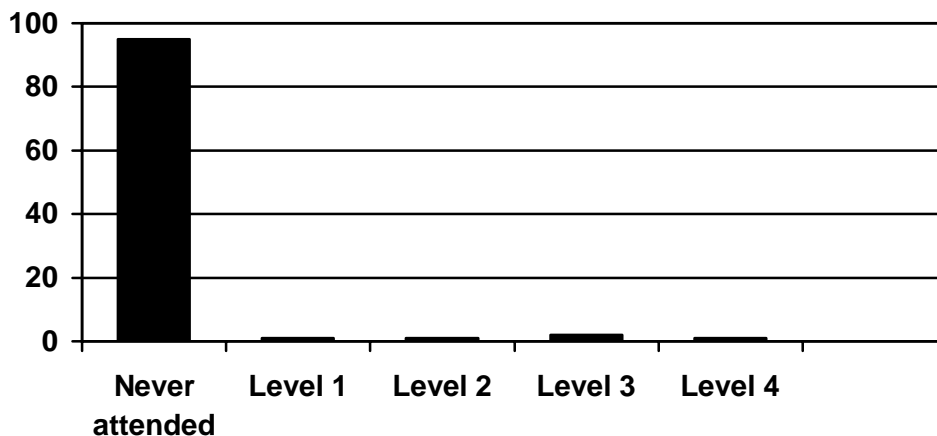


Figure 4. Attendance at Khmer Government Primary School (ibid)

Partnerships

The bilingual project has been characterized by strong cooperation between the central government, local authorities, communities, specialists, NGOs and international organizations. The original committee for the NFE bilingual pilot included central level government officials (Under Secretary of State for Education, H.E. Chey Chap, H.E. Bouthong, Member of Parliament, National NFE Department Director, Mr. In The), the Provincial Education Department including its NFE Bureau, and ethnic minority communities.

Results of bilingual NFE pilot

Assessments of the pilot projects revealed that the students are very interested in the bilingual approach and have progressed through the programme with increased comprehension, learning to read and write two languages rather than only one. The pilot projects have provided an opportunity to gather input through field-testing, which was useful in developing scripts and learning materials. The NFE and primary bilingual pilots continue to provide learning experiences for further planning and policy development. (For further details of students and teachers trained through the pilot bilingual project, see Attachment 2.)

Ministerial Committee for Vernacular Script Approval

Bilingual education is now implemented in both NFE and lower primary level pilots through the formal education sector. Five scripts, or alphabets, were officially approved in 2003 for four languages in Ratanakiri Province (Kavet, Krung, Brao, and Tampuan), and one language in neighboring Mondulakiri Province (Bunong).

Following linguistic research (Crowley, 2000; Keller, 2001) and field-testing of the scripts through the pilot bilingual NFE programmes in Ratanakiri Province, a national committee was established by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport in September 2002 to review and finalise the vernacular alphabets. The committee is chaired by the Under-Secretary of State for Education with both the Director of the NFE Department and Director of Pedagogy as deputies. The committee also includes linguistic advisors from other government institutions::

- HE Chey Chap, Under-secretary of State, Education-Chairman
- Ton Sayem, Director, Pedagogy Department

- In The, Director, NFE Department
- Iv Chan, Royal Academy
- Nou Son, Pedagogy Department, Linguist

In 2003 the Committee approved five vernacular alphabets, all of which are written using Khmer symbols. The following criteria were considered in finalizing alphabets for vernacular languages:

- The Khmer alphabet symbols (letters) should be used as the basis for the vernacular alphabets. Ancient Khmer symbols can be used to represent phonemes that are found in the vernaculars but are not common in Khmer.
- Only Khmer symbols and diacritics should be used.
- Script decisions should be based on the results of careful linguistic research and field-testing. Ease of learning is an important consideration and it is also important that the symbols selected also represent the sounds in the national language as much as possible in order to facilitate transfer of literacy skills from the vernaculars to the national language.
- The script should be readily typed using standard (Khmer) computer fonts.

Ongoing research

The National NFE Department would like to conduct longitudinal studies of pilot bilingual initiatives in order to document their outcomes. Focus would be on:

- Assessment of the efficiency of bilingual programmes in terms of time/length of studies and also of the efficiency of bilingual programmes compared to Khmer-language-only programmes with respect to the time needed to move students through the respective programmes.
- Assessment of bilingual students' achievement to determine competencies gained through the bilingual programmes, especially comparing comprehension and retention of literacy skills among students in bilingual and monolingual programmes;
- Assessment of the programme's impact on livelihood (includes health, NRM, livelihood, behaviour change concerning hygiene, etc.);
- Student testing to determine grade level equivalencies and to assess the degree to which the program facilitates transfer between the bilingual NFE programmes and Formal Education systems.

CONCLUSION

The Cambodian government supports expansion of bilingual education to meet the EFA goals for indigenous minority peoples, both children and adults. Bilingual education pilots in Cambodia have demonstrated that using the vernaculars along with the national language facilitates access to education and development, which in turn has the potential to meet poverty reduction goals, strengthen human resources at the local level, and facilitate nation building. In particular, the bilingual approach is an effective strategy necessary to achieve National EFA goals for the ethnic minority peoples in northeastern Cambodia.

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Attachment 1 Minorities of Cambodia

Name	Population	Also in	Date/source	Province	Other names	Dialects	Classification
Brao	5,286	Vietnam (? 250: 1993) S. Laos	(1980 Diffloth)	Ratanakiri	Braou, Proue, Brou, Love, Lave, Laveh		Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Bahnaric, West Bahnaric, Brao-Kravet.
Cham, western	220,000	Vietnam Population total all countries 253,100 or more	(1992 govt. figure).	Scattered in many provinces	Cambodian Cham, Tjam, Cham, New Cham		Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, Western Malayo-Polynesian, Sundic, Malayic, Achinese-Chamic, Chamic, South, Coastal, Cham-Chru.
Chong	5,000 ?	SE Thailand Population total both countries 8,000	(1981 Wurm and Hattori)		Chawng, Shong, Xong		Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Pearic, Western, Chong
Chung	500		(1981 Wurm and Hattori)	Southwest near Kompong Som on the coast	Sa'och, Sauch, Saotch		Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Pearic, Western, Chong
Jorai	15,000 or more	Vietnam	(1998)	Ratankiri. Bokeo, Andons, Meas, O Yadou, districts along northeast border near Viet Nam	Djarai, Gia-Rai, Jorai, Cho-Rai, Chor, Mthur, Chrai, Gio-Rai.	Puan, Hdrung (Hdrung), Jhue, Aráp, Habau (Ho-Bau), To- Buan, Sesan, Chuty, Pleikly, Golar	Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, Western Malayo-Polynesian, Sundic, Malayic, Achinese-Chamic, Chamic, South, Plateau
Kaco'	2,000		(1992 G. Diffloth)	Rattanakiri	Kachah'		Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Bahnaric, Central Bahnaric.
Kraol	2,600		(1992 G. Diffloth)	Kratie			Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Bahnaric, South Bahnaric, Sre-Mnong, Mnong, Southern-Central Mnong.

Name	Population	Also in	Date/source	Province	Other names	Dialects	Classification
Kravet	3,012		(1988 govt. figure)	Northeastern	Kowet, Khvek, Kavet		Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Bahnaric, West Bahnaric, Brao-Kravet.
Kru'ng 2	9,368		(1982 G. Diffloth)	Ratanakiri, Eastern Stung Treng	Krueng		Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Bahnaric, West Bahnaric, Brao-Kravet.
Kuy	15,495 or more	Laos	(1989)	N Cambodia, all districts of Preah Vihear, eastern Siem Reap, northern Kampong Thom, western Stung Traeng, and several areas of Kratie Province	Kuay (Souei), Yeu	Damrey, Anlour, O, Kraol, Antra, Na Nhyang	Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Katuic, West Katuic, Kuay-Yoe
Lamam	1,000		(1981 Wurm and Hattori)	Near northeast corner on the Viet Nam border	Lmam		Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Bahnaric, Central Bahnaric.
Lung	600?		own estimate	North of Banlung, Stung Treng		Lung and Lung Noi	Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Bahnaric, West Bahnaric, Brao-Kravet.
Mnong, central	19,000 in Cambodia	Vietnam	(1988 govt. figure)	Northeastern, 80% of Mondol Kiri Province, all districts	Phong, Phnong, Budong, Phanong	Biat, Preh, Bu Nar, Bu Rung, Dih Bri, Bu Dang	Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Bahnaric, South Bahnaric, Sre-Mnong, Mnong, Southern-Central Mnong.
Pear	1,300		(1988 govt. figure)	Kompong Thom	Por, Kompong Thom.		Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Pearic, Eastern.
Samre	200	SE Thailand	(1981 Wurm and Hattori)	Siem Reap			Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Pearic, Western, Samre
Somray	2,000		(1981 Wurm and Hattori)	West; north, east, and west of Phum Tansanh, and Tanyong River Phum Pra Moi; 2 areas			Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Pearic, Western, Samre

Name	Population	Also in	Date/source	Province	Other names	Dialects	Classification
Song	?		(1992 G. Diffloth)	C Cambodia Kampong Spoe			Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Pearic, Western
Stieng, Bulo	3,571 to 5,000 in Cambodia	Vietnam	(1992 G. Diffloth)	Eastern, Kratie Province, Snuol District, and Mondolkiri	Kajiang	Budip, Bulach, Bulo	Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Bahnaric, South Bahnaric, Stieng-Chrau.
Suoy	200		(1981 Wurm and Hattori)	Central, northwest of Phnom Penh			Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Pearic, Western, Suoy.
Tampuan	25,000		(1998)	Central Ratanakiri	Tamphuan, Tampuen, Tampuon, Kha Tampuon, Campuon, Proon, Proons		Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Bahnaric, Central Bahnaric.

Source. Blench, 2002

N.B. Serious inconsistencies between sources suggest that considerable further work will need to be done to make this table even reasonably accurate.

Attachment 2

Pilot NFE Project Results 2002 Cycle

Ratanakiri Bilingual NFE Pilot Classes, 2001 & 2002 cycles

Language	Year New Classes Launched	Total Classes		Students* Basic Literacy Course		Students* Post Literacy Level		Total Teachers*Trained
		2001	2002	2001	2002	2001	2002	
Krung	1997, 1998	12	16	300 (133)	419 (177)	170 (57)	187 (54)	24 (1)
Tampuan	1998, 2002	6	13	182 (54)	334 (130)	122 (36)	183 (54)	35 (3)
Brao	2002	---	14	----	327 (145)	---	---	21 (0)
Kavet	2002	---	9	----	144 (85)	---	---	22 (3)
TOTAL		18	52	482 (187)	1,224 (527)	299 (93)	370 (108)	102 (7)

Sources: Ratanakiri Provincial Education NFE Department, 2001 & 2002; ICC, 2001; ICC, 2000, as cited in Thomas 2002.

*Totals followed by number of females in brackets

The following table illustrates both Bilingual NFE and Khmer Language NFE provincial statistics for 2001-2002, with about 25% of NFE students province-wide participating in the bilingual programmes.

Non-Formal Education in Ratanakiri: Comparison of Khmer Language & Bilingual NFE Classes, 2001 & 2002

CURRICULUM	Total Classes All Levels		Total Students		Teachers	
	2001	2002	2001	2002	2001	2002
KHMER LANGUAGE NFE TOTAL (All NGO/ Government classes)	139	200	2,800	5,051	186	253
<i>BILINGUAL NFE TOTAL</i> (details below)	18	52	482	1,224	24	102
❖ <i>Krung-Khmer Bilingual</i>	12	16	300	419	12	24
❖ <i>Tampuan-Khmer Bilingual</i>	6	13	182	334	12	35
❖ <i>Brao-Khmer/Kavet-Khmer Bilingual</i>	----	23	----	471	---	43