

Cambodian University Students' Attitudes toward English as the Official Language of ASEAN: Insights from a Survey Study

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Abstract

In an era of globalization, English has become increasingly important as a communicative instrument that brings people closer together, regardless of socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It has been adopted as an official language by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a linguistically diverse regional grouping. This study aims to examine the attitudes of Cambodian university students about the role of English as ASEAN's official language. The study utilized a quantitative approach, drawing on an online questionnaire survey to explore Cambodian university students' attitudes toward the role of English as the official language of ASEAN, particularly regarding education, employability, and communication. The study employed both descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data. The results revealed that Cambodian university students had positive attitudes toward the role of English as ASEAN's official language. It was also found that there were no dominant roles for English as ASEAN's official language in the three dimensions. This study suggests that English should be a required course in the curriculum, starting as early as possible. It should also be required in examinations in general education so that students will pay greater attention to it and develop a stronger interest in studying it.

Keywords

Attitudes toward English, Cambodian university students, ASEAN

Introduction

Globalization has made the world smaller and brought people closer to perform economic, social, and cultural activities (Rohmah, 2005). The forces of globalization have created a new phenomenon of multi-dimensional nature, requiring different people to use a common language for communication across borders and cultures (Perez-Amurao, 2019; Rohmah, 2005). For instance, when people of distinctive backgrounds meet each other, they need to communicate in a shared language, commonly known as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2009). As the demand for English has risen, it has become an international language (Mckay, 2018), or a global language (Crystal, 2003). The need to use the English language for communication among different people has made the language an international lingua franca (Mckay, 2011).

Two decades ago, Crystal (2003) noted that English had gained a lot of ground, being spoken by millions of people globally. This enormous demand for English as a language for international communication has significantly contributed to the rise of English as a global

language (Crystal, 2003). At present, there are 1.5 billion English speakers, accounting for 20% of the world's population of 7.7 billion people; among these, almost 400 million people use English as their first language (Salomone, 2022).

According to Salomone (2022), over the past 50 years, the rise of English can be understood by recognizing it as both the product and the engine of three interrelated forces. The first force is globalization, which is the flow of people, commodities, services, and capital influenced by an integrated world economy and information technology. The second is internationalization, understood as policies and programs used in response to globalization. The third force is the rise of a knowledge-based economy in which “the production and use of knowledge (rather than goods or services) are primary and in which language and languages have become strategic economic assets in themselves” (Salomone, 2022, pp. 7-8). In addition, according to Pacino and Qureshi (2022), it has long been established that “English is the business world’s lingua franca” (p. 67).

The use of English has spread globally, including in the West, South Africa, and the Asia-Pacific (Crystal, 2003), as well as in Southeast Asia (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Low & Ao, 2018). Home to over 660 million people (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022), Southeast Asia is a region of great linguistic diversity, with more than 1,000 languages spoken (Kirkpatrick, 2020). Countries in this region established the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, and today this association contains 10 member states, including the five founding members, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, and five newer members such as, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017). Timor-Leste applied to become the 11th member of ASEAN in 2011 (Seixas et al., 2019) after gaining independence from Indonesia in 2002 (Weatherbee, 2009). Although Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership application was considered, full membership was under discussion until the ASEAN Summits in 2022 in Cambodia, when ASEAN agreed in principle to approve its application for ASEAN membership and advised the ASEAN Coordinating Council to develop guidelines for Timor-Leste’s full membership (ASEAN, 2022).

Due to the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of ASEAN member states, English has become a lingua franca for ASEAN people (Kirkpatrick, 2020). As a result, ASEAN decided in 2007 that “the working language of ASEAN shall be English” (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008, p. 29). Kirkpatrick (2012) noted that the English language has appeared progressively important and shaped the language policies of all ASEAN economies; furthermore, ASEAN citizens are required to study not only their respective national language but also English. Moreover, the English language has been taught along with the national language, while indigenous and local languages that are not the national languages are being replaced by English in numerous school curricula and other domains (Kirkpatrick, 2012).

The adoption of English as the official language for ASEAN has facilitated cooperation among ASEAN governments and between ASEAN and its international partners, such as the International Labor Organization, the United Nations, and the World Bank, (Hashim & Leitner, 2021). English is considered an essential instrument for ASEAN integration, and with proficiency in English, graduates and workers are sufficiently prepared to compete with other citizens in the region (Stroupe & Kimura, 2015). As Bolton (2008) noted, having sufficient command of English is useful for better career prospects for young and middle-aged ASEAN citizens. In the face of ASEAN integration, mastering English becomes the major tool of communication to connect different citizens across borders, allowing them to experience many aspects of life, such as technology, education, economics, politics, and culture (Shobikah,

2017). Low and Ao (2018) argued that English is undeniably the key to social and economic improvement in the present era of Industrial 4.0, made possible by technological advances.

Within this context, as a member of ASEAN, Cambodia needs English to stay relevant and competitive; however, the country faces considerable challenges concerning the low English proficiency and limited skills of its citizens. According to EF Education First (2021), the English proficiency of Cambodians is relatively low, at 97th out of 112 countries internationally and 21st out of 24 Asian countries. Comparatively, Cambodia's English proficiency score is slightly better than that of Thailand (scored 100th internationally), yet behind Vietnam (66th internationally). Ngel (2022) has noted that the low English proficiency of Cambodians is concerning since the use of English is greatly needed for different purposes, be it professional, recreational, or educational.

Against this background, this study aims to explore Cambodian university students' attitudes toward the role of English as ASEAN's official language. Although many studies have examined topics related to the role of English in ASEAN (Bolton, 2008; Hashim & Leitner, 2021; Kirkpatrick, 2020; Low & Ao, 2018; Shobikah, 2017), students' perceptions and attitudes toward English (Herwiana & Laili, 2019; Ploywattanawonga & Trakulkasemsuk, 2014), and issues in learning and teaching English (Boy & Water, 2023), there is a gap in knowledge about how Cambodian university students perceive English as ASEAN's official language. Thus, the present study attempts to bridge this knowledge gap by examining the attitudes of Cambodian university students toward English as the official language of ASEAN. This study is guided by two research questions:

1. What are the Cambodian university students' attitudes toward the role of English as the official language of ASEAN, particularly in terms of education, employability, and communication?
2. Are there any differences in how Cambodian university students perceive the role of English as the official language of ASEAN by gender, levels of English proficiency, and academic degrees?

This study is significant in that it contributes to the growing body of literature on attitudes toward the role of English as a global lingua franca, particularly as the official language of ASEAN. The study also addresses the research gap regarding Cambodian university students' attitudes toward the role of English as the official language of ASEAN. It sheds light on how the role of English is perceived in education, employability, and communication. Additionally, it examines whether there are any differences in terms of students' gender, levels of English proficiency, and academic degrees when it comes to their perceptions of the role of English as the official language of ASEAN.

Literature Review

English as an official language of ASEAN

ASEAN is a dynamic grouping that consists of diverse cultures, races, political and economic systems, and particularly languages (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017). Due to past colonization, the languages in some ASEAN countries, namely Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, were influenced by the French language, while those of others, such as Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, were shaped by English (Kirkpatrick, 2020). Although Thailand was never colonized, and Indonesia was under the colony of the Netherlands, English has become a means of communication and the driver for education, business, and other purposes (Kirkpatrick, 2020).

The status of English as ASEAN's official language did not appear without reasons or controversy (Kirkpatrick, 2008). As Okudaira (1999, cited in Kirkpatrick, 2008) noted, there were a couple of attempts to introduce other languages, such as French and then Malay, as ASEAN's official language; however, both attempts failed, and no discussion about these languages occurred. Later, the acceptance of English as the official language of ASEAN was discussed (Kirkpatrick, 2008). At the ASEAN Summit in November 2007, the ASEAN Charter was established, and in Article 34 of the Charter, it is stated that English is the working language of ASEAN (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). All ASEAN members agreed to the legal binding of the Charter and, in the process, recognized English as the only official language of ASEAN (Kirkpatrick, 2008).

Nowadays, English plays an essential role in ASEAN countries, particularly in Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. For example, English has become the most important language at all levels of the educational system in Singapore (Kirkpatrick, 2020). It is the language for the ASEAN Summits and other official ASEAN meetings, as well as for education, business, trade, and communication in the Southeast Asian region (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017).

English proficiency as a window of opportunity for ASEAN citizens

English proficiency has become increasingly important (Estanislao, 2001). As Mouvet and Taverniers (2022) noted, non-native speakers of English are expected to possess a certain level of expertise in English proficiency in three different approaches such as formal, cultural, and social contexts. According to Syafitri and Artika (2019), English is seen as the most potential means to build connections between people; for example, people across ASEAN need to communicate with one another in English if they do not speak the same language. The 2015 ASEAN Economic Community was established with the purpose of creating ASEAN as a single market and production base to promote free mobility of goods, services, investments, and specifically freer movement of capital and labor (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017). This initiative has fueled the need to be proficient in English in order to succeed in intercultural and interlinguistic communication in ASEAN. This is not to mention the fact that ASEAN also established its Socio-Cultural Community to “promote and invest in education, life-long learning, human resource training and capacity building, encourage innovation and entrepreneurship, as well as to promote the use of English language” (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009, p. 2).

In terms of career prospects, ASEAN citizens who are fluent in English will be qualified for upper-level management positions, such as engineers, nurses, architects, accountants, doctors, dentists, and tourism professionals (Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014). Under the framework of free movement of skilled labor, considerable labor migration has taken place in ASEAN (Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014). For instance, the Philippines and Singapore have immensely benefited from their high proficiency in English. Filipinos can migrate to different countries across the globe, especially to richer countries, such as the United States, where they could earn up to US\$5,760 per month as nurses (Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014). Likewise, Singapore has become a business hub of Southeast Asia and has attracted many international organizations due in part to its citizens' high English proficiency (Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014).

According to Ngel (2022), English also plays an essential role in attaining educational opportunities for Cambodians. It is the language of the internet, where knowledge and information can be obtained. English is also a gateway to accessing free Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), offered by many universities and institutions around the world. Moreover,

English is a bridge for educational opportunities overseas. For example, many overseas scholarships are available for Cambodians, but a certain level of English competence, measured through test scores, is required (Ngel, 2022). In addition, as the language for research and publication (Lillis & Curry, 2010), English has become the language of choice for numerous local or international academic journals because publication in English can easily reach international audiences (Heng et al., 2021).

Research on students' attitudes toward English

According to Hafrizal et al. (2021), university students' attitudes toward the English language can be classified into three dimensions related to education, social interaction, and economy. Writing about the Indonesian context, they found that English was dominant in education, particularly in helping to promote Islamic teaching more effectively. For social interaction, most Indonesian students agreed that the English language was a means for enhancing connections and communication. It was also found that English language skills were perceived to increase students' income (Hafrizal et al., 2021). Another study by Mulia et al. (2020) about Indonesian students' perceptions of English-speaking ability showed that students believed speaking to be an important skill that they needed to master in English. It was also found that English was crucial in facilitating communication among people across the world.

Ahmed (2015) who examined the attitudes of Malaysian undergraduate students toward the learning and use of English found that students recognized the importance of English in different domains such as education, business, technology, and diplomacy, as well as the language of everyday life for many people in Malaysia. Students also thought that learning English would open more employment opportunities and assist them in achieving better academic performance. Likewise, Rana et al. (2020) found that English was considered to be important for Pakistani university students because it helped increase connectivity and gain international acceptance. It was also found that English was essential for finding a job and improving career prospects.

Ly (2022) explored Vietnamese EFL university learners' attitudes toward the importance of English as a global language and their motivations for learning English. The results showed that Vietnamese students had high motivation to learn English, as they believed that it could assist them in improving their career paths and enhancing their competitive advantage in their studies and work. It was also found that Vietnamese students wanted to study English because of their desire to communicate with foreigners and expand their international relationships.

In South Korea, Choi (2021) found that Korean university students had positive perceptions of their investment in learning English. They believed that English was essential for their socioeconomic advancement (Choi, 2021). Similarly, Lee and Green (2016) showed that South Korean university students had strong interests in learning English. They believed that learning English was like holding the key to future education and employment because English was believed to be beneficial for their studies and work.

Nowlan and Fritz (2022) explored Japanese university students' experience of diversity and English as a lingua franca in Bangkok, Thailand. The study found that the Japanese university students realized the essential role of English as a lingua franca, as they are exposed to the diversity and cross-cultural interactions. Using English as a tool for communication is not only advantageous during casual conversations, but it also enables them to realize potential benefits for future employment (Nowlan & Fritz, 2022).

Research from European countries (Germany, Turkey, and Romania) showed that young adult students in these countries recognized the need for English language proficiency as a lingua franca for study, employment, and communication. In addition, the students also emphasized the importance of English in online communication, as they use it to participate in many online activities, internet sites, and platforms such as Facebook, Google, and YouTube (Hall & Cook, 2015). Another study from Italy showed that EFL university students had a favorable attitude toward English, as they considered it to be both a prestigious and attractive language, and they regarded English as an important tool for social inclusion in a globalized world because English allows them to communicate with different people in inter-cultural contexts. The students also acknowledged that English language skills have a great potential for enhancing their chances of competitiveness at work, and they also regarded English as a functional language for higher education and research (Bagni, 2022).

In Ecuador, Criollo et al. (2022) examined the perceptions of university students about their English language proficiency. The students agreed that English language proficiency is extremely useful for university students. They believed that English is necessary for the future; in particular, English was found to be highly demanded in the workplace (Criollo et al., 2022). Another study from Cuba about Cuban university students' attitudes toward English revealed that students held a positive attitude toward the English language. The students also perceived English to be very important for their career prospects (Splunder & Pérez, 2018).

Research on Cambodian university students' attitudes toward English

In Cambodia, English has increasingly become popular in communication, education, and business after the 1993 general elections supervised by the United Nations (Seng, 2015). Since then, many universities in the country have started to incorporate English courses into their curricula (Seng, 2015). English has also been included in the school curriculum since Grade 4 (MoEYS, 2015; Tweed & Som, 2015). It is also a required subject in Grades 9 and 12 national examinations, although the English subject exam score is not counted toward the overall score if students receive their English subject score lower than the passing score of 25. The English subject score, however, is added to the overall score as an extra score when students receive the English score above the passing score. Thus, even if students do not perform well in the English subject, considered an optional exam subject, their overall score is not affected by their English score (Meng, 2023).

There have been several studies examining Cambodian students' perceptions about the role of English (e.g., Seng, 2015; Hum, 2018). Seng's (2015) survey (n = 166) found that speaking and reading skills were much needed by Cambodian undergraduate students among the four English sub-skills. It was also found that most students perceived vocational or work-related English to be more important than general English courses. They believed that vocational or work-related English was most likely to prepare them for employment in the future (Seng, 2015). Another survey by Hum (2018) with 80 Cambodian university students indicated that 85% of them believed that mastering English skills could allow them to travel and work in any ASEAN country and around the globe. It was also found that 81% of the students thought that English skills were necessary for pursuing overseas graduate studies, such as master or PhD degrees, and for increasing opportunities for overseas training or academic exchanges. Moreover, 58% of the students believed that English could assist them in catching up with technological and economic development (Hum, 2018).

A recent study (n = 60) by Em et al. (2022) showed that Cambodian high school students were more extrinsically than intrinsically motivated to learn English because they believed that

English could assist them in improving career prospects, pursuing higher education, traveling abroad, and communicating with foreign people. The study also demonstrated that Cambodian students were relatively motivated to study English because it was essential for their personal development.

Despite these studies, there is a lack of research about the attitudes of university students in Cambodia in relation to the role of English as ASEAN's official language. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining Cambodian university students' attitudes toward English as the official language of ASEAN, with a focus on education, employability, and communication.

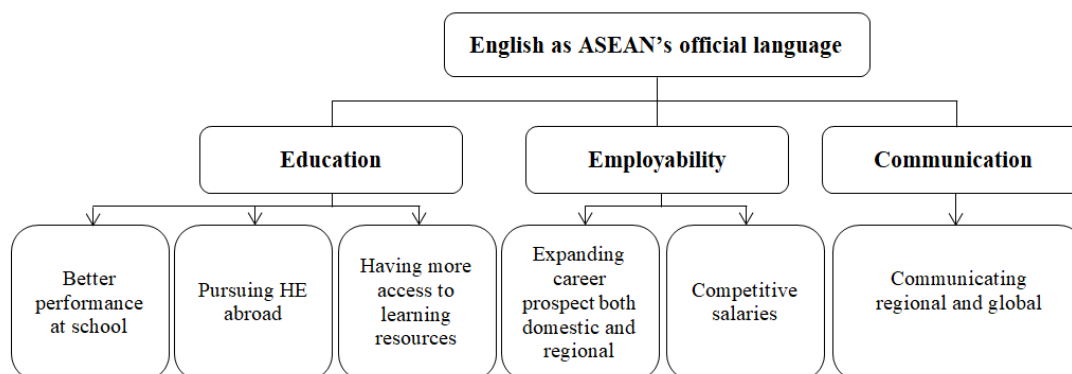
Conceptual framework

A review of the literature suggests that university students recognize the importance of English for various purposes, particularly for education, employability, and social communication (Hafrizal et al., 2021). The present study adopts these three main attributes to explore the attitudes of Cambodian university students toward the role of English as the official language of ASEAN. As enshrined in Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter, English is the official language of ASEAN (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). It has become an indispensable instrument that brings people closer together (Lee et al., 2023). In addition, because all documents about ASEAN are published in English (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017), the language also plays an important role in raising awareness of ASEAN among ASEAN citizens (Lee et al., 2023).

As ASEAN's official language, English is crucial for education because it can help improve students' performance at schools or universities, open more opportunities for them to pursue overseas higher education, and provide access to learning resources (Ahmed, 2015; Em et al., 2022; Hafrizal et al., 2021; Hum, 2018). English is also crucial for employability, expanding students' career prospects (Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014; Ly, 2022; Rana et al., 2020; Seng, 2015). Furthermore, English proficiency is useful for communication with different people in the ASEAN region and beyond (Em et al., 2022; Hafrizal et al., 2021; Ly, 2022). Thus, English plays a critical role in many domains, particularly in education, employability, and communication. The role of English in these three domains forms a conceptual framework for this study, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework (Adapted from Hafrizal et al., 2021)



Research Methodology

Research design

This research was designed as a quantitative study using an online questionnaire survey and convenience and simple random sampling methods for data collection. The survey aimed to examine the perspectives of Cambodian university students about the role of English as the official language of ASEAN. It also aimed to examine Cambodian EFL university students' attitudes toward the roles of English as the working language of ASEAN for education, employability, and communication, as well as to examine whether there is dominance in the roles of English as the official language related to the three dimensions.

Research setting and sample

This study took place in Phnom Penh, a capital city of Cambodia. Nowadays, there are 132 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Cambodia; these HEIs are supervised by 16 ministries and state institutions. Among all the HEIs, 84 (13 public and 74 private) are under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS). In the 2021-2022 academic year, there were 209,059 students (45.73% were females) enrolled in Cambodian higher education, including 9.68% in associate's degrees, 84.2% in bachelor's degrees, 4.54% in master's degrees, and 0.58% in doctoral degrees (MoEYS, 2023). Most of the bachelor's (69%) and master's degree students (83%) pursued their degrees in social sciences and humanities (Heng et al., 2023).

In this study, there were 125 participants (40.8% were females). About 50% of them were bachelor's degree students, 43.2% were master's degree students, and 7.2% were PhD students. Their ages varied considerably, with those aged 20 or below making up about 15% of all the respondents. Those aged between 21–25 were 28.8%, aged 26–30 were 20.8%, aged 31–35 were 21.6%, and aged 36–40 or above were around 13%. Their English proficiency levels were mainly intermediate (27.2%), upper-intermediate (28%), and advanced (32%). Those in the elementary and pre-intermediate levels made up 4% and 8.8%, respectively. The participants were mainly enrolled in social science and humanities majors (71.2%), with those enrolled in STEM majors making up 28.8%. Table 1 provides demographic information of the participants.

Table 1
Participants' Demographic Information (n = 125)

Demographic	Value	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	74	59.2
	Female	51	40.8
Age	20 or below	19	15.2
	21–25	36	28.8
	26–30	26	20.8
	31–35	27	21.6

	36–40	5	4.0
	41 or above	12	9.6
Level of higher education	Bachelor	62	49.6
	Master	54	43.2
	PhD	9	7.2
Level of English proficiency	Elementary	5	4.0
	Pre-intermediate	11	8.8
	Intermediate	34	27.2
	Upper-intermediate	35	28.0
	Advanced	40	32.0
Main subject of study	Social science and humanities	89	71.2
	STEM	36	28.8

Research instrument

The study utilized an online survey questionnaire administered through *Google Forms* to gather data from the student participants. The questionnaire was written in English and the language was simplified to ensure a clear understanding by the participants. The questionnaire was developed based on the information from the literature review, particularly studies on the perspectives and practices of Cambodian EFL students' investment in learning English (Hum, 2018), highlighting the high requirement of English by academic institutions for pursuing master or PhD degrees overseas, giving more opportunities as academic exchanges abroad, helping to catch up with economic and technological advancement, and helping to get a higher salary. The survey used a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1. Strongly disagree to 5. Strongly agree. It was open for responses for about six weeks, from September 2023 to November 2023.

The questionnaire was categorized into four main parts consisting of 23 questions. The first part comprised five questions related to students' demographic information. The second part had eight questions regarding students' attitudes toward the role of English as ASEAN's official language for education. The third part contained six questions about students' attitudes toward the role of English as the ASEAN's official language for employability. The last part consisted of four questions related to students' attitudes about the role of English as the official language of ASEAN for social communication.

Data collection procedure

This study employed an online survey as the data collection tool. Creswell (2014) noted that online surveys have become increasingly popular because researchers can quickly design their surveys utilizing custom templates and share them on social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, or Messenger for prospective respondents to complete. To collect data for this study, a survey link, including information about the aim of the study and research ethics, was sent to potential respondents through different communication platforms, including Telegram, Messenger, and Facebook.

There were 131 responses to the online survey; however, five responses selected “others” as a level of higher education, and one response was not a university student from Cambodia, so they were not included in the data analysis. Consequently, the analysis included a total of 125 responses from Cambodian university students.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* version 26. To analyze the data, the responses from *Google Forms* were imported into *Microsoft Excel* for data cleaning. They were then imported into SPSS for coding and analysis. An internal reliability analysis was conducted, producing an overall Cronbach’s alpha score of 0.87 (Table 2), indicating good internal consistency across all the questionnaire items. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data by comparing mean values (M) and standard deviations (SD) to answer the research questions. In addition, the independent sample T-test was used to compare mean scores to determine whether there is a significant difference in the role of English as ASEAN’s official language for education, among male and female Cambodian university students. Furthermore, a one-way ANOVA was also employed to test if there is a significant difference between the participants’ levels of education and their English proficiency with regard to the role of English as an official language in ASEAN in education, employability, and communication.

Table 2
Reliability Statistics

	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
Role of English for education	0.71	8
Role of English for employability	0.86	6
Role of English for social communication	0.74	4
Overall	0.87	18

Ethical considerations

In this research, ethical standards were observed throughout the research process. The respondents were provided a clear explanation about the objective of the study. They were also informed how their responses to the survey would be used for analysis and future publication. Specific personal information, such as names, phone numbers, and email addresses, was not collected, for it could lead to the identification of the respondents. The identities of the respondents remained confidential, and the collected data will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. Participation in the online surveys was voluntary, and the participants could complete the survey at their convenience.

Results**Students' attitudes toward English as ASEAN's official language for education**

Table 3

Cambodian University Students' Attitudes toward the Role of English as ASEAN's Official Language for Education (n = 125)

Statement	Mean	SD	Min	Max
English should be ASEAN's only official language.	3.82	1.06	1	5
English plays an important role in education.	4.57	0.63	1	5
The use of English as the official language helps you perform better at school.	4.23	0.74	1	5
Low competency in English as the official language decreases my performance at school.	3.67	0.97	1	5
The use of English as the official language opens more opportunities to pursue higher education or academic exchanges abroad in general and particularly in the ASEAN region.	4.50	0.70	1	5
English is highly required by academic institutions for studying Master or PhD degrees in Cambodia.	4.18	0.82	1	5
English is highly required by academic institutions for studying Master or PhD degrees in the ASEAN region and around the world.	4.38	0.75	2	5
The use of English as the official language provides more access to learning resources.	4.38	0.66	3	5
Overall	4.22	0.79		

Note: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

As shown in Table 3, the students reported a high level of agreement in all statements, with an overall mean score of 4.22, SD = 0.79. These results showed that Cambodian university students had a positive attitude toward English as ASEAN's official language for education. They believed that English plays an important role in education (M = 4.57, SD = 0.63), and the use of English as the official language opens more opportunities to pursue higher education or academic exchanges abroad in general and particularly in the ASEAN region (M = 4.50, SD = 0.70). In addition, the results showed that the students had positive views of English as a lingua franca. They believed that English is required for studying Master or PhD degrees in the ASEAN region and the world (M = 4.38, SD = 0.75) and that the use of English as the official language provides more access to learning resources (M = 4.38, SD = 0.66). However, when it came to the statement 'English should be ASEAN's only official language', the participants tended to agree, but to a lesser extent (M = 3.82, SD = 1.06). Overall, the results indicated that Cambodian university students who participated in the study acknowledged that English as the working language of ASEAN plays a very important role for education.

Students' attitudes toward English as ASEAN's official language for employability

Table 4

Cambodian University Students' Attitudes toward the Role of English as ASEAN's Official Language for Employability (n = 125)

Statement	Mean	SD	Min	Max
The English language is important for employment opportunities.	4.36	0.65	3	5
Competency in English can help you catch up with technological advancements.	4.38	0.64	2	5
Competency in English can help you catch up with economic improvement.	4.11	0.71	1	5
Competency in English will expand your career prospects in Cambodia.	4.14	0.70	2	5
Competency in English will expand your career prospects in any country in the ASEAN region.	4.23	0.76	1	5
Competency in English will help you get a competitive salary.	4.27	0.70	2	5
Overall	4.25	0.69		

As shown in Table 4, the students reported a high level of agreement in all statements, with an overall mean score of 4.25, $SD = 0.69$. These results showed that Cambodian university students had a positive attitude toward English as ASEAN's official language for employability. They believed that English plays an important role for employment opportunities ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.65$), and competency in English can assist them to catch up with technological advancement ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.64$). In addition, the students believed that their competency in English as an official language would expand their career prospects in any country in the ASEAN region ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.76$) and also help them get a competitive salary ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.70$). Overall, the results indicated that Cambodian university students who participated in the study recognized the significance of English as the official language of ASEAN for employability.

Students' attitudes toward English as ASEAN's official language for communication

Table 5

Cambodian University Students' Attitudes toward the Use of English as ASEAN's Official Language for Communication (n = 125)

Statement	Mean	SD	Min	Max
English as the official language is important for communication.	4.04	0.72	2	5

English allows you to communicate with different people in the ASEAN region.	4.37	0.68	2	5
English allows you to communicate with different people globally.	4.44	0.68	3	5
English is useful for social media communication such as on Facebook or others.	4.06	0.75	2	5
Overall	4.23	0.71		

Table 5 shows that students had a high level of agreement in all statements, with an overall mean score of 4.23, $SD = 0.71$. These results showed that Cambodian university students had a positive attitude toward English as ASEAN's official language for communication. They believed that the use of the English language allowed them to communicate not only with different people in the ASEAN region ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.68$) but also with different people globally ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.68$). Overall, the results indicated that Cambodian university students who participated in the study recognized the significance of English as the official language of ASEAN for communication purposes.

A comparison of students' attitudes toward the roles of English as ASEAN's official language for education, employability, and social communication

Table 6

Cambodian University Students' Attitudes toward the Role of English as ASEAN's Official Language for Education, Employability, and Communication (n = 125)

	Mean	SD
Education	4.22	0.79
Employability	4.25	0.69
Communication	4.23	0.71

The results shown in Table 6 indicated that the participants believed that English as ASEAN's official language plays very important roles in all sectors, including education, employability, and communication. By comparing the mean score values between education ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.79$), employability ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.69$), and social communication ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.71$), the participants perceived that English played similarly significant roles in the three main domains of education, employability, and communication in ASEAN.

Students' views of the role of English as ASEAN's official language for education, employability, and communication by gender

Table 7

Students' Views of the Role of English as ASEAN's Official Language for Education, Employability, and Communication by Gender (n = 125)

					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Gender	n	Mean	SD			
Education	Male	74	4.27	0.45	.06	123	0.95
	Female	51	4.28	0.43			
Employability	Male	74	4.22	0.53	.80	123	0.42
	Female	51	4.29	0.52			
Communication	Male	74	4.21	0.55	.55	123	0.57
	Female	51	4.26	0.48			

An independent sample t-test was performed to compare the students' views about the role of English as ASEAN's official language in education, employability, and communication by gender. As shown in Table 7, there were no statistically significant differences in how male and female Cambodian university students perceived the role of English as ASEAN's official language in education, employability, and communication ($p > 0.05$).

Students' views of the roles of English as ASEAN's official language for education, employability, and social communication by degrees

Table 8

Students' Views of the Role of English as ASEAN's Official Language for Education, Employability, and Social Communication by Degrees (n = 125)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Education	Between Groups	2.59	2	1.293	7.086	0.001
	Within Groups	22.26	122	0.182		
	Total	24.84	124			
Employability	Between Groups	1.00	2	0.500	1.777	0.173
	Within Groups	34.31	122	0.281		
	Total	35.31	124			
Social communication	Between Groups	0.39	2	0.196	0.697	0.500
	Within Groups	34.24	122	0.281		
	Total	34.63	124			

An ANOVA test was performed to compare the students' views about the role of English as ASEAN's official language for education, employability, and communication by their degrees. As shown in Table 8, there were no statistically significant differences in how bachelor, master, and PhD degree students perceived the role of English as the official language of ASEAN for employability and communication ($p > 0.05$). However, there was a statistically significant difference in how bachelor, master, and PhD Cambodian students perceived the role of English as the official language of ASEAN for education ($p < 0.05$).

Students' views of the roles of English as ASEAN's official language for education, employability, and social communication by levels of English proficiency

Table 9

Students' Views of the Role of English as ASEAN's Official Language for Education, Employability, and Social Communication by Levels of English Proficiency (n = 125)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Education	Between Groups	3.28	4	0.819	4.556	0.002
	Within Groups	21.57	120	0.180		
	Total	24.84	124			
Employability	Between Groups	5.35	4	1.338	5.361	0.001
	Within Groups	29.96	120	0.250		
	Total	35.31	124			
Social communication	Between Groups	2.85	4	0.712	2.689	0.034
	Within Groups	31.78	120	0.265		
	Total	34.63	124			

An ANOVA test was also computed to compare the students' views about the role of English as ASEAN's official language for education, employability, and social communication by their levels of English proficiency. Table 9 shows that there were statistically significant differences in how bachelor, master, and PhD degree students perceived the role of English as the official language of ASEAN for education, employability, and social communication ($p < 0.05$).

Discussion

This study was conducted with the aim of exploring Cambodian university students' perspectives regarding the roles of English as ASEAN's working language in three main sectors, such as education, employability, and communication. Based on the data gathered through the online survey, the study showed that most Cambodian university students had a positive view about the status of English as the only official language of ASEAN. The results of this study indicate that Cambodian university students support the status quo of English as the official language in Southeast Asia.

Regarding the role of English for education, the study revealed that Cambodian university students had a positive attitude toward the role of English as an official language of ASEAN. The results further showed that Cambodian university students agreed that using English could improve their performance at school, while low competency in English could lead to a decrease in their learning outcomes. These results provide insights into students' performance at school, as reported by Ahmen (2015) in Malaysia, Bagni (2022) in Italy, Hafrizal et al. (2021) in Indonesia, and Lee and Green (2016) in South Korea. The results of this present study also indicated that the use of English as ASEAN's official language is required by academic institutions for pursuing Master or PhD degrees highly in the ASEAN region and the world, as well as in Cambodia; these results are consistent with previous studies, such as Hum (2018), who found that English skills are extremely necessary for continuing graduate studies such as master or PhD degrees abroad. This present study also showed that the use of English as the official language of ASEAN could provide more access to learning resources. The results aligned with Ngel (2022), who found English is a gateway to access free online courses offered by many prestigious global universities and allows students to search for knowledge and information on the Internet.

Concerning the role of English as ASEAN's official language for employability, the present study showed that Cambodian university students had a highly positive attitude about the role of English as ASEAN's official language. The results showed that competency in English as the official language of ASEAN could enhance career prospects, help to catch up with economic and technological advancement, and earn better wages. These results were consistent with previous studies in different contexts such as Cambodia (Em et al., 2022; Hum, 2018; Seng, 2015); Cuba (Splunder & Pérez, 2018); Ecuador (Criollo et al., 2022); Indonesia (Hafrizal et al., 2021); Italy (Bagni, 2022); Malaysia (Ahmed, 2015); Pakistan (Rana et al., 2020); South Korea (Choi, 2021; Lee & Green, 2016); and Thailand (Nowlan & Fritz, 2022).

In terms of communication, the results of this study are generally aligned with previous studies. For example, this study found that the use of English as ASEAN's official language allowed students to communicate with different people both in the ASEAN region and globally. It could also be used as a means of communication on social media sites such as Facebook. These results corroborate those of Bagni (2022), Em et al. (2022), Hafrizal et al. (2021), Hall and Cook (2015), Ly (2022), Mulia et al. (2020), Nowlan and Fritz (2022), and Syafitri and Aritik (2019), who have found similar important advantages of the role of English for communication purposes.

This study also indicated that English plays similarly significant roles for education, employability, and social communication in ASEAN. These results seem to contradict those reported by Hafrizal et al. (2021), who found that English played a dominant role for education. In addition, this study revealed that there were no differences in how male or female Cambodian university students perceived the role of English for education, employability, and social communication in ASEAN. There were also no differences in how students from different educational backgrounds perceived the role of English as the official language of ASEAN for education, employability, and social communication. Overall, the Cambodian university students participating in this study had positive attitudes toward English as the official language of ASEAN. They believed that with English as a common language for ASEAN, there are more opportunities for cross-border education, employability, and social communication.

Conclusion and implications

This study has explored the perspectives of Cambodian university students about the role of English as the official language of ASEAN, as well as their attitudes toward the role of English for education, employability, and social communication. Overall, the study has revealed Cambodian university students' positive attitudes toward the role of English as ASEAN's official language. It also showed that Cambodian university students had positive attitudes toward the role of English as ASEAN's official language for education, employability, and social communication. In addition, the study revealed that there was no perceived dominance regarding the role of English as ASEAN's official language for education, employability, and social communication. There were statistically significant differences in how students with different levels of English proficiency perceived the role of English for education, employability, and social communication. There were also statistically significant differences in how students from different education backgrounds perceived the role of English for education. However, there were also no statistically significant differences in how male and female students perceived the role of English for education, employability, and social communication in ASEAN.

In light of these findings, this study has a few implications. First, Cambodian students should continue to pay close attention to English, given its pivotal role as the official language of ASEAN, facilitating education, employability, and social communication within and beyond the region. Second, there is a need for reform to the curriculum and assessment in Cambodian general education to mandate English as a compulsory subject for high school students to foster their future educational and occupational prospects. When the Cambodian government, particularly MoEYS, includes the English language as a mandatory subject into curriculum and assessment, students will put greater efforts to study English, and upon the completion of high school, they may have a high proficiency in English. This will help increase the proficiency score in English of Cambodia in the region and around the world.

Third, it is imperative to institutionalize English as a mandatory subject for Grade 12 national examinations, with a designated weighting in the overall passing score, thereby incentivizing students to prioritize English studies. Currently, English is considered an optional subject in the high school national exam so students tend to pay less attention to the subject because the English score will not affect their overall exam score. Moreover, it is also important for teachers of English at public schools to encourage and raise awareness about the significance of the English language to the students. In doing so, students will study harder for English subjects throughout the years, and when they successfully complete high school, they can possess a good command of English skills, which will help them perform well in university and assist them in competing for scholarships both in Cambodia and abroad.

Finally, this study is not without limitations. To address the limitations and contribute to a more profound understanding of how Cambodian university students perceive English's role as the official language of ASEAN for education, employability, and social communication, future research may expand the sample size or employ qualitative or mixed-methods approaches to garner more nuanced insights. Future investigations may broaden their scope to include participants from diverse backgrounds and roles, such as university lecturers, administrators, educational leaders, and policymakers. Additionally, comparative analyses involving participants from across the ASEAN region could offer valuable insights into how English is perceived as the official language of the region.

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