



Seven-year-old Trae Sims, left, and Daratin Tin, 8, learn Khmer from teacher Sophal Suy during a Cambodian literacy class Thursday at United Cambodian Families in Stockton. The classes help bridge a communication gap that goes beyond generations -- a linguistic divide.

Culture caught in language limbo: Cambodian literacy classes preserve heritage

By Jennifer Torres
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STOCKTON - During the first session of the Cambodian literacy classes recently launched by United Cambodian Families, teacher Sophal Suy taught children how to write their names in the Khmer alphabet.

Suy speaks some English but isn't fluent. His students, meanwhile, can understand a little Cambodian but not well enough to read or speak comfortably.

That kind of linguistic limbo, said Savong Lam, who helped organize the classes, is increasingly common in Cambodian homes.

"There is a huge communication gap right now," she said. "Not just culturally but also linguistically."

Teaching children to speak, read and write Cambodian offers a means of preservation, she said. Not just of culture, but of communication within families.

More than 10,000 Cambodian people live in San Joaquin County, many of whom fled the Khmer Rouge forces that killed more than 20 percent of their country's population from 1975 to 1979.

About 9,000 of those residents speak Khmer. Nearly 60 percent of them speak English, too.

But some don't.

Parents often come to United Cambodian Families for translation help, Lam said.

When staff workers ask why their children aren't assisting, they say, "Well, I can't talk to my kids. I talk to them in Cambodian, and sometimes they look at me like, 'What are you saying?' "

For now, the 16 students enrolled in the Cambodian literacy program are starting with basics - Suy went over consonants on Thursday afternoon.

"Our goal is to progress, not just stop with basic literacy, but to move forward, to continue filling in the gap," Lam said. "For the kids to really understand who they are, where they came from."

The program is similar to an effort organized by the nonprofit Apsara organization, which also serves Cambodian residents, but focuses mainly on those living in the Park Village Apartments community.

Chinda Nhep sat behind her children during one of this week's lessons at United Cambodian Families.

"With these kids, they don't really speak their language, but they understand some things," said Nhep, who was born in a Thai refugee camp. She is sitting in on the classes to learn how to write and read Cambodian.

In a room nearby, other students - classes are divided by age - waited for their lesson. Randy Bun, 11, said he wants to learn Cambodian "so I can sing karaoke and read the Cambodian newspaper."

Channasabrina Ros, 14, said, "It's good to know Cambodian so you can translate for your parents."

"And understand your people," 12-year-old Randy Chhay said.

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