

# ONLINE LEARNING DURING COVID-19 AND KEY ISSUES IN EDUCATION

Edited by

**Kimkong Heng**

**with Sopheap Kaing, Dara Kao,  
Makara Muong, Bunhorn Doeur,  
and Tithchanbunnamy Lor**

CAMBODIAN  
**EDUCATION**  
FORUM

*A forum for education*

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**វេទិកាអប់រំកម្ពុជា**

Cambodian Education Forum

[www.cefcambodia.com](http://www.cefcambodia.com)

Published by Cambodian Education Forum

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Cover design and typesetting: Kimkong Heng

Cover image: Microsoft PowerPoint (Design Ideas)

ISBN 978-9924-9834-3-9

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# Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the interns and editors of the Cambodian Education Forum, particularly Koemhong Sol, Sovanncharya Ren, and Samnang Yen, who have contributed to this edited volume in different capacities as contributing authors, reviewers, or editors. Without their contributions, this volume would not have been possible.

Kimkong Heng and Sopheap Kaing would also like to respectively thank the Australia Awards Scholarships and the Swiss Government Excellence Scholarships for their financial support which has enabled them to complete this book and pursue their academic interests.

All of us are also grateful to our families and friends for their love and support. Without them, this book would not have been written.

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# Notes on Cambodian Education Forum

The Cambodian Education Forum (CEF) was co-founded on July 1, 2020 by a group of three emerging Cambodian scholars (Mr. Kimkong Heng, Mr. Sopheap Kaing, and Mr. Vutha Ros) who aspire to promote education research and publication in Cambodia. The team was later joined by Mr. Koemhong Sol, also an emerging Cambodian scholar. The common vision is to provide a platform for Cambodian researchers, educators, teachers, students, and administrators, especially novice and emerging writers, to express their views and share their perspectives, understanding, and research findings on topics relevant to education in Cambodia and beyond.

CEF strongly believes that Cambodian students, teachers, academics, and researchers have a wealth of knowledge and perspectives to share in shaping understanding, beliefs, and attitudes regarding education-related issues confronting Cambodia and other countries in the region and the world.

Although the focus is on education in Cambodia, CEF welcomes and publishes unsolicited short or full-length research articles on educational issues of interest to readers in different countries in the region and beyond.

CEF's main aims are as follows:

- To provide a publication platform for Cambodian researchers, educators, and students
- To share knowledge, research findings, and informed opinions about education in Cambodia and beyond
- To support Cambodian novice writers to publish through quality peer review, mentorship, and editorial processes
- To publish essays, opinion pieces, and research articles about education in Cambodia and beyond
- To offer insights from education experts through interviews, discussions, and publications
- To share education-related resources with students, teachers, academics, and researchers
- To promote Cambodia's image in the regional and international arena

CEF is still under development, but the vision behind this initiative is ambitious and inclusive. We seek to promote research and publication in Cambodia, particularly research conducted by Cambodians.

We are currently seeking funding, sponsors, donors, and volunteers to maintain and sustain this platform to offer common benefits to diverse users such as students, teachers, academics, and researchers.

We start as a small team, aim high, and aspire to make a positive impact on the education sector and the research and publication culture in Cambodia. Now the CEF team consists of 13 core members: seven editors and six associate editors. There are also several guest editors and a number of reviewers.

We believe each Cambodian has a vital role to play in shaping and improving Cambodian society and raise Cambodia's image on the global stage.

**We start small, aim big, and aspire to create a real positive impact.**

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# The Need to Support Novice Cambodian Writers to Write for Publication in English

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## Introduction

Writing for publication in English is a challenging task, especially for English as an Additional Language (EAL) writers. Research has shown that EAL or non-native English-speaking writers face numerous challenges when it comes to writing for publication in English (see Canagarajah, 2002; Flowerdew, 1999, 2019; Ma, 2021; Uzuner, 2008). Canagarajah (2002), for example, identified both discursive (i.e., language-related) and non-discursive (i.e., resources-related) challenges that scholars in the periphery or developing countries faced in writing for publication. Hanauer and Englander (2011) found that researchers who write research articles in English as a second language experienced 24% more difficulty, 11% more dissatisfaction, and 21% more anxiety than writing in their first language.

Studies from different contexts, including China (Flowerdew, 1999), Mexico (Hanauer & Englander, 2011), South Korea (Hwang, 2005), and Spain (Ferguson et al., 2011), just to mention a few, have shown that many EAL scholars felt disadvantaged vis-à-vis their native English-speaking counterparts when it came to writing for publication in English. For instance, Flowerdew (1999)

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(Eds.), *Online learning during COVID-19 and key issues in  
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found that about two-thirds of around 600 Chinese scholars surveyed believed that they were at a disadvantage compared with their peers who are native speakers of English. Ferguson et al. (2011) showed that the majority of the 300 Spanish researchers who participated in their survey felt that English gives advantages to native over non-native English-speaking researchers.

In the context of Cambodia, little is known about the challenges that Cambodian researchers face when writing in English. Much research has focused on the individual and structural challenges preventing Cambodian researchers or academics from conducting and publishing research. Some of the key challenges discussed in previous studies range from low academic salaries to limited institutional support to heavy teaching loads and a lack of research incentives and funds (see Cambodian Institution for Cooperation and Peace [CICP], 2016; Heng, 2020; Kwok et al., 2010; Moore, 2011).

Heng et al. (2020b) argued that one of the main barriers confronting novice Cambodian writers and researchers was their limited academic writing skills, particularly skills in writing for publication in English. They noted that major challenges that they faced when working with less experienced Cambodian writers were related to “language use, word choices, referencing and citation skills (both in-text and reference list), coherence and cohesion, and the use of reference sources” (Heng et al., 2020b, p. 127). They also suggested that ample opportunities should be provided to support young or novice Cambodian writers to help them develop their skills and confidence in writing for publication in English.

### **The Need to Support Novice Cambodian Writers to Write for Publication in English**

Considering the challenges that EAL writers face, as discussed above, and the limited research output produced by Cambodian universities and academics (see Eam, 2015; Heng, 2021; Kwok et al., 2010), there is, no doubt, a need to support novice Cambodian writers or researchers to write for publication in English. As Heng and Rautakivi (2020) noted, many Cambodian students are exposed to serious research courses only when they “reach the third year of their bachelor's degree program, and they generally study it for only one or two semesters” (p. 1). This indicates a need for further research training and support

to help Cambodian students and novice writers learn the ropes of academic publishing in general and writing for publication in English in particular. Heng et al. (2021) have also argued that many young Cambodians are keen on becoming writers or researchers, but they “need support and mentorship to develop into more experienced writers or young researchers” (p. 3).

A study by CICP (2016) also pointed to the need to increase research training and capacity-building opportunities for Cambodian university students and faculty members. Moreover, it was suggested that research training and capacity-building programs should also extend to other stakeholders, including government officials and high school students, to increase awareness and interest in research in order to nurture a healthy research culture in Cambodia.

Recognizing the need to support young or less experienced Cambodian writers, the Cambodian Education Forum (CEF), a newly established online publication platform dedicated to supporting Cambodian students, teachers, academics, and researchers to write and publish in English, has initiated a series of internship programs designed to offer academic writing and publication support to Cambodian youth and young aspiring writers. Thus far, CEF, of which I am a co-founder and lead editor, has published two edited volumes (see Heng et al., 2020a; Sol et al., 2021), which were mainly contributed by young or less experienced writers, including university students, recent graduates, teachers, and novice or emerging researchers.

This edited volume is the product of CEF’s second internship program involving 20 interns, most of whom were university students. During the internship, which lasted about six months from June to November 2021, each intern was mentored and supported by one of CEF’s 12 editors, associate editors, or guest editors. The interns’ book chapter drafts were reviewed, edited, and revised multiple times until they were deemed suitable for publication. There are two different edited volumes produced from the second round of the internship program. In this volume, we put together nine chapters written by six interns and four CEF editors. In the other edited volume, there are nine chapters contributed by nine different interns (see Sol et al., in press).

## **Organization of This Book**

This edited book consists of 10 chapters. Following the introductory chapter, the remaining nine chapters are divided into three parts. Part 1 presents four chapters contributed by two CEF interns and three CEF editors/guest editors. Part 2 has two chapters written by a CEF guest editor and an intern. Part 3 is composed of three chapters contributed by three CEF interns.

### ***Part 1: Online Learning During COVID-19***

This part focuses on online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Chapter 2, Sethi Cheam examines the advantages and challenges of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. He argues that online learning is “a blessing in disguise” and urges all stakeholders in Cambodian higher education to increase the adoption of online learning, particularly in the post-pandemic world.

In Chapter 3, Makara Muong discusses the impacts of COVID-19 on primary school children in Cambodia. He focuses on five aspects of the impacts of COVID-19 and then offers suggestions for parents or caregivers to ensure that they provide sufficient support to their children to help them successfully navigate online learning during the crisis.

In Chapter 4, Kimkong Heng and Koemhong Sol explore the challenges and opportunities that COVID-19 presents to Cambodian higher education. They discuss several challenges and opportunities before making some important suggestions to ensure the digital transformation of higher education in Cambodia continues even after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the final chapter of Part 1, Seavmey Meng argues why online learning is the future of education. She first explores the definition of online learning and looks at the rise of online learning in the context of the pandemic. She then discusses the benefits and challenges of implementing online learning, particularly in the Cambodian context, before offering some recommendations to relevant stakeholders in Cambodian education.

## ***Part 2: Technology and Teaching Strategies in ELT***

The second part of the book focuses on technology and teaching strategies in English language classrooms. In Chapter 6, Bunhorn Doeun looks at the role of digital technology in English major programs in Cambodia. He discusses the benefits as well as the challenges when it comes to technology use in English major programs. He then puts forward some recommendations to enhance the adoption of technology in English classes in the Cambodian context.

In Chapter 7, Sak Yeourng turns the discussion to the use of a teaching technique, called the Gallery Walk. He explains what Gallery Walk is and discusses how it is used before examining the effectiveness of the technique. He recommends that the Gallery Walk technique be put into practice more widely in English classes in Cambodia.

## ***Part 3: Key Issues in Education***

The final part begins with a chapter by Chhengleang Sok, who argues that critical thinking is an essential yet underdeveloped skill among many Cambodian students. In the chapter, he provides the definitions and characteristics of critical thinking and discusses why this skill is essential. He then discusses how critical thinking skills are utilized in the Cambodian context before making suggestions to promote this important skill among Cambodian students.

In Chapter 9, Kimputhevitheavy Vonn explores the concept of reading for pleasure. She discusses its importance and provides insights into the reading habits of Cambodian students. She then goes to great lengths to offer suggestions to promote reading habits among Cambodian students.

Finally, Thavrith Sara examines the issue of parental involvement in children's education. He discusses three key benefits of parental involvement in supporting children's education and looks at some challenges that prevent many parents from involving actively in their children's studies. He concludes the chapter with some suggestions to promote parental involvement in the context of education in Cambodia.

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## **Part 1:**

# **Online Learning During COVID-19**

# Online Learning Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Blessing in Disguise for Cambodia's Higher Education

**Sethi Cheam**

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## Abstract

COVID-19 has caused disruption and destruction to the whole world, and Cambodia is no exception. Specifically, Cambodian higher education has been impacted tremendously, as universities were ordered to temporarily close. However, the advancement of technology has made it possible for students to continue their academic journey through online learning or e-learning. Along the process of temporarily adopting online learning, it can be seen that this technology-based approach has brought advantages to Cambodia's higher education, including unprecedented opportunities for disadvantaged students, more spare time for extracurricular activities, self-paced learning, increased student-to-student engagement, and improved digital readiness. Considering these benefits, online learning can be considered "a blessing in disguise." This chapter argues that online learning is an educational approach that should be fully adopted and, if possible, upgraded in the post-pandemic era.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; online learning; e-learning; higher education; Cambodia

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K. Heng, S. Kaing, D. Kao, M. Muong, B. Doeur, & T. Lor  
(Eds.), *Online learning during COVID-19 and key issues in  
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## **Introduction**

The novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV), commonly known as COVID-19, is the world's predominant health crisis in the twenty-first century. It goes without saying that developing countries with limited resources and capabilities are undoubtedly the most vulnerable to this health catastrophe. Various aspects of these nations have been heavily affected directly and indirectly by the COVID-19 outbreak. The Kingdom of Cambodia, with no exception, has been tremendously impacted in almost all of its sectors, including the economy, taxation, tourism, and education. A countrywide closure of public and private educational institutions in response to COVID-19 was announced by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) on March 16, 2020 (Chet & Sok, 2020). This has arguably placed the education sector, including higher education, in the country in peril.

Amidst the pandemic, technology has made it possible for Cambodian university students to carry on their education through online learning or e-learning. However, due to a lack of experience on the part of university teachers and students, there are many challenges posed by online learning. Based on the Network Readiness Index or Technology Readiness 2019, Cambodia ranked 107 among the 121 countries surveyed, receiving a score of 32.29 out of 100 (Dutta & Lanvin, 2019). This limited technology readiness means Cambodian university students and teachers face many challenges in navigating online learning during the pandemic.

Despite the challenges, this chapter argues that online learning is a blessing in disguise. The chapter begins by offering the definition of online learning. It is then followed by the advantages of this new mode of learning, including unprecedented opportunities for disadvantaged students, spare time for extracurricular activities, self-paced learning, boosting student-to-student engagement, and digital readiness. The chapter also discusses the challenges to this technology-based method. It concludes with recommendations on how to tackle the challenges and better adapt to this new educational normalcy.

## **What Is Online Learning?**

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to online learning or e-learning.

However, the term online learning has been around for many years. According to Roblyer and Edwards (2000, as cited in King et al., 2001), online learning, e-learning, distance learning, or distance education is "the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance" (n. p.). The term has been correspondingly defined as an educational field that puts an emphasis on pedagogical methods accompanied by technology aimed at delivering education to students who do not attend physical classrooms (Bušelić, 2017). It also refers to "planned and organized teaching and learning in which learners are separated from teachers or facilitators in time and space" (Zafari, 2020, p. 6).

Despite being defined differently, this method of learning has made it possible for educators and learners to carry out their teaching-learning activities during the difficult times when traditional classrooms or lectures are not possible.

## **Advantages of Online Learning**

### ***Unprecedented Opportunities for Disadvantaged Students***

While schools and universities have been ordered to temporarily shut down, students are still able to access education through online learning, thanks to the support and collaboration among MoEYS, UNESCO, private and public universities, and many other non-governmental organizations such as Kampuchea Action to Promote Education, SeeBeyondBorders, CARE, and Aide et Action, among others. Online learning has made it possible for university students from all backgrounds to acquire a standard, if not quality, education during the pandemic. As one would expect, higher education is more likely to be offered or available to students living in the capital city and provincial towns. It is less accessible for students living far from towns or in rural areas. However, online learning has the aptitude to enable "students in small, rural, or low socioeconomic status school districts to take specialized courses" that they do not have access to in their locations (Chaney, 2001, p. 21). This is due to the fact that online learning offers flexibility to students as they are able to choose a place or a time of their choice to study (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014).

### *Spare Time for Extracurricular Activities*

Online learning also “offers the possibility to learn from anywhere, anytime, in any rhythm, with any means” (Dhawan, 2020, p. 6). With this benefit, students are granted more time as they do not have to travel from home to school back and forth. Also, students “can take online classes anywhere as long as they have access to the internet and they can do two things at once” (Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2020, p. 98). University students are, therefore, able to partake in extracurricular activities in order to unlock their potential, as there are certain self-development opportunities that can only be grasped outside the classrooms. Similarly, as Christison (2013) argued, partaking in extra-classroom activities “contributes to adolescents’ character development” and “is beneficial to students’ social development” (p. 18). Therefore, by studying online, students are able to continue their education and engage in other extracurricular activities.

### *Self-Paced Learning*

Apart from being able to engage interactively with their classmates via online classes, students also have the opportunity to control their learning and become self-directed learners through self-paced learning (Tullis & Benjamin, 2010). Self-paced learning is a learning technique that enables learners to study at their preferred speed and proceed to another topic when they have mastered the previous topic, or bypass topics if they can display mastery of the topic by a pre-test (Highland, 2015). Thanks to the convenience brought about by technology, lessons taught online can be recorded and watched by students at any time that they want. In the context of Cambodia, Chhoeurm (2020) noted that “Over 200 video lessons are available on MoEYS’ official Facebook page, YouTube channel, and other e-learning platforms, including its related partners such as Kru Cambodia and Komar Rien Koma Cheh” (p. 3). This makes it feasible for students to select how, when, and how long to study. In fact, “these self-regulated aspects of learning have important implications for the effectiveness of their learning efforts and achievement in education” (Dunlosky & Thiede, 1998, as cited in Tullis & Benjamin, 2010, p. 109). Furthermore, through online learning, students are also able to choose to study at their own pace, which “increases satisfaction and decreases stress” (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014, p. 401).

### *Student-to-Student Engagement*

Online learning also, surprisingly, creates an engaging atmosphere for students to interact with one another. Talking in front of others is a common phobia for students and shyness often turns their minds blank or makes them forget what to say (Baldwin, 2011, as cited in Putra, 2018). Through online learning, this issue tends to be reduced as students do not talk directly in front of their classmates. Arkorful and Abaidoo (2014) stated that “e-learning helps eliminate barriers that have the potential of hindering participation including the fear of talking to other learners” (p. 401). It also encourages learners to interact with one another, interchange ideas, and respect each other’s viewpoints.

### *Digital Readiness*

In preparation for the digitalized era, technological competencies are very important for individuals, especially when it comes to a demanding-yet-competitive labor market. As the Cambodian Supreme National Economic Council (2021) noted,

“Cambodia Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework 2021-2035” sets out a long-term vision to build a vibrant digital economy and society by laying the foundations for promoting digital adoption and transformation in all sectors of society – the state, citizens, and businesses – to promote new economic growth and improve social welfare in the "new normal" (p. ii).

This statement clearly demonstrates the Royal Government of Cambodia’s intention to integrate technology into its economic development trajectory. Consequently, it is essential for university students to prepare themselves and be ready for such a challenging journey. With the adoption of e-learning, university students are becoming familiar with the use of technology (see Sey, 2021). This helps build a foundation for them, which will be, in due course, beneficial for them when they use technology in their future careers.

## Challenges to Online Learning

Though seen to be rewarding, there are, undeniably, certain challenges decelerating the application of online learning, as students are forced to shift from a traditional learning approach to an online one in just the blink of an eye. Some learners, who do not have access to reliable technology and/or the internet, have a hard time partaking in e-learning; this gap is seen across countries and between income brackets within countries (Li & Lalani, 2020). A study conducted by Sarkar et al. (2021) on Bangladeshi university students' perceptions toward e-classes revealed that most of the students had difficulty gaining access to e-classes and interacting with their lecturers and peers during classes. It was also found that Bangladeshi students living in rural areas faced problems of low internet speed and blackouts. Another similar study conducted in Algeria demonstrated that students encountered obstacles attending e-classes because of the lack of technological devices (Blizak et al., 2020).

Similarly, as of 2015, only one-third of the Cambodian population (not limited to students) used the internet for reading and writing (Phong et al., 2016). This constitutes a great challenge, as the internet is a must-have component for implementing an e-learning approach. Moreover, a study conducted by Crews and Parker (2017) with 43 participants (40 students and 3 teachers) at one university in Cambodia showed that Cambodian students lacked technology literacy, especially for educational purposes such as creating and using email. Likewise, this does not only apply to learners but also to educators. The sophistication of educational platforms like Zoom or Google Classroom, along with the deficiency of digital literacy, has made it problematic for both students and teachers (Chhoeurm, 2020). Besides, the rapid and unexpected universities' e-transformation operations give huge workloads to the ICT unit of each university to construct e-platforms, incorporate current external applications into their systems, and complete migration into external applications (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Educators are also exposed to the burden of sharing additional workload as they are responsible for renovating course/subject contents, assessments, and learning resources to fit virtual platforms (Heng & Sol, 2020).

## Recommendations

Online learning is an educational approach that should be widely adopted and, if possible, upgraded even in the post-pandemic era. In order to ensure a progressive route for this adoption, more work is necessary to enhance both educators and learners' knowledge, skills, and confidence to get ready for effective online learning (Crews & Parker, 2017). In the Cambodian context, MoEYS should continue to provide training to its higher education personnel with the use of related technological tools so that they can better manage and utilize online learning. Besides, it is important to create and implement new university curricula that are symmetric with online learning patterns. MoEYS should also consider injecting digital-related courses into upper secondary education, so the students can prepare themselves for their post-secondary education and future work.

Other stakeholders such as the private industry, higher education institutions (HEIs), and development partners also have a vital role to play (Heng & Sol, this volume; Sam, 2016). However, as Heng (2021b) noted, "research has shown that stakeholder involvement in the higher education sector in Cambodia, and more likely in the whole education system, remains very limited, which poses severe impediments to the development of the sector" (p. 175). In this sense, the Royal Government of Cambodia should follow in the footsteps of other countries in the region, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, by offering financial assistance and policy implementation that stimulate collaboration among these stakeholders to pursue progression in the education sector. The government, through MoEYS, is duty-bound to grant HEIs increased independence vis-à-vis institutional governance and operation (see Heng, 2021b).

Moreover, students themselves also need to better prepare for this technology-based education. They should make use of their technological devices to explore, learn, and become more familiar with e-learning and online learning platforms so that there will not be many challenges when it comes to online learning in the future. Finally, for parents, they should be open-minded toward the adoption of technology in education and support their children in their learning progression, both emotionally and financially.

## Conclusion

Taking everything into account, COVID-19 appears to bring about the wider adoption of online learning in Cambodia and globally. Through online learning or e-learning, students who are disadvantaged due to their geographical areas can still access higher education like those who are in the city or provincial towns where the internet connection is more stable and accessible. Moreover, online learning allows students to choose their preferred learning pace and engage actively with their classmates, especially for those who fear talking in front of others in person. More importantly, online learning allows students to prepare themselves for the digitized era, in which technology literacy is a must-have skill. Hence, the adoption of online learning is a blessing for the Cambodian education sector and COVID-19 is, in a way, a catalyst for the digitalization of Cambodian education needed to contribute to the future development of this country (Heng, 2021a).

In the digital era, transforming the education system by integrating technology is a must-taken action for Cambodia, or else this developing country will continue to stay behind its neighbors and other regional countries “in terms of education quality, research and innovation capacity, competitiveness performance and human capital development” (Heng, 2020, p. 5).

Therefore, moving forward, all stakeholders in higher education in Cambodia need to embrace online learning. They need to invest in developing online learning platforms, including Learning Management Systems, to ensure that Cambodian students have ample opportunities to access e-learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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# The Impacts of COVID-19 on Primary School Children in Cambodia

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## Abstract

This chapter aims to illustrate the impacts of COVID-19 on primary school children in Cambodia. Not being able to attend physical classes due to school closures has caused devastation in education. Primary school children, particularly in low-income families, have been hit hard and faced numerous challenges ranging from limited access to online learning to impacts on learning quality, mental health, and the acquisition of communication skills. As no one could accurately predict the end of the pandemic and the return of conventional classrooms, parents or caregivers are recommended to work closely with class teachers and schools in order to facilitate online learning for their children. Homeschooling is also recommended as an additional option to supplement the inadequacy of online learning. Unquestionably, parents' active involvement in their children's education during the pandemic is extremely necessary and helpful for alleviating the learning loss and other impacts caused by COVID-19.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; online learning; primary school children; impacts

## Introduction

How much have primary school children in Cambodia been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? Since its first outbreak in early 2020 until now, COVID-19 has unquestionably devastated people's lives globally. The public health crisis, economic downturn, and restricted travel are some of the direct consequences of the pandemic. Without exception, the education sector has also been devastated by the pandemic.

The pandemic has led to the temporary closure of schools and universities globally (Bertling et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2020). In Cambodia, public and private schools nationwide were closed to prevent the spread of the pandemic throughout 2020 and 2021, affecting approximately 3.2 million students who had to resort to online learning to continue their education (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport [MoEYS], 2021).

According to OECD (2020), children from disadvantaged families have been more vulnerable to the consequences of the pandemic. This is no exception for Cambodia. A study by MoEYS (2021) indicated that primary school children lost a huge amount of instructional time and experienced mental health problems such as frustration and sadness, just to name a few. They were also confronted with challenges associated with online learning, such as not being prepared for the abrupt switch from traditional learning to online learning (Heng & Sol, 2020), not having the required technological devices for online learning (Sun, 2020), having internet connectivity problems (Uon, 2020), and facing inadequate parental supports as their parents lacked the time and content knowledge, including knowledge to use digital devices, to help their children's study online at home, and their inability to use learning devices (MoEYS, 2021).

This chapter aims to highlight the major impacts of COVID-19 on primary school children in Cambodia. It discusses five types of impacts, including interruptions to formal education, challenges associated with online learning, impacts on learning quality, impacts on mental health, and impacts on the acquisition of communication skills. The chapter then presents some suggestions for parents or caregivers to help their children continue their education during the pandemic.

## **Primary School Children and Their Characteristics**

According to Article 8 of the Education Law (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2007), education in Cambodia is classified into three levels, including primary, secondary, and higher education. Primary education is deemed the first priority, thus receiving the highest state funding (MoEYS, n.d.). Primary school children fall into this education level which ranges from grade 1 to 6. These children are normally from the age of 6 to 12 and are considered young learners. The Cambridge Assessment English (2019) defined young learners as children in their first six years of formal education and are usually from 6 to 12 years old.

Young learners have some noticeable characteristics. They are usually very active and have short attention spans, and they can get bored easily (Branden, 2012). Thus, various teaching activities and techniques are needed to draw their attention to the lessons. According to Levy (2020), young learners enjoy learning through play and prefer interacting and acting to passive listening. Although their knowledge about the world is limited (Brenden, 2012), young learners are very curious and enthusiastic to discover things through which they understand the world around them (Rhalmi, 2019). However, it is worth noting that learners in this age group are slow to learn but quick to forget (Cambridge Assessment English, 2019).

As schools in Cambodia have been closed due to COVID-19, a happy, engaging, supportive, and face-to-face learning environment that matches the characteristics of primary school children is not possible and is superseded by online learning, considered to be “a completely new experience for most children in Cambodia” (MoEYS, 2021, p. 8). There are numerous challenges that Cambodian primary school children face when schools are closed to curb the spread of COVID-19. In this chapter, five types of the impacts of COVID-19 on primary school children are discussed.

## **Impacts of COVID-19 on Primary School Children in Cambodia**

School closure in Cambodia has forced millions of Cambodian children to conform to a new way of learning and living that differs completely from the

traditional mode of learning. The children have undergone such an unprecedented experience since the beginning of 2020 when COVID-19 started to disrupt every aspect of life in Cambodia and elsewhere around the world. The resulting impacts of the pandemic on school children have been multidimensional, as discussed in the following sections.

### *Interruption to the Formal Education*

The education sector in Cambodia has been devastated by COVID-19 (USAID, 2021). The first and most direct impact was related to school closures, disrupting the formal education of primary school children across the country. As a result, about 2 million primary school children in Cambodia have been unable to attend school as normal and have lost a large amount of instructional time (MoEYS, 2021).

Schleicher (2020) highlighted that students from rich or middle-income families managed to access other learning options with their parental financial support; on the contrary, students who are from underprivileged families could not enjoy the same opportunities. After schools were shut down and conventional learning became impossible, students were practically shut out.

During the school closure, a lot of children from very poor families were found to work to contribute to familial income and help with extra household chores (Sun, 2020). Thus, they faced the risk of not returning to school and forgetting what they had learned when schools were allowed to reopen (MoEYS, 2021).

### *Challenges of Online Learning for Primary School Children*

Online learning is a completely new way of learning for most Cambodian students (MoEYS, 2021). Heng and Sol (2020) stressed that, due to resource shortages, Cambodian educational institutions, teachers, and students were not ready for the transformation from traditional teaching and learning methods to online learning. According to ADB (2021), there are three common distance learning modes in Cambodia, such as online platforms, educational television programs, and take-home lesson packages. For primary school students, these learning modes do not accord with their learning nature and previous learning

environments which are face-to-face, collaborative, engaging, and activity-based. Hence, online learning poses challenges for them to adapt to.

Another challenge for Cambodian primary school children was that they did not have the necessary learning devices required for online learning. According to a needs assessment by MoEYS (2021), parents of primary school children were unable to afford technological tools, such as smartphones, tablets, cable TV, and other expenses for their children to study online. Sun (2020) further emphasized that the challenge was worse for rural primary school children since their parents could not afford appropriate learning devices for them. As a consequence, many primary school students in rural areas have lost the opportunity to continue their education.

Internet access was also found to be a challenge associated with online learning. According to ADB (2021), households in Cambodia on average have more than 80% of mobile phones, 18% of computers, and 41% of internet access at home. This indicates limited internet access at home, which equates to a lower chance for students to continue their education through online learning. Without internet access, online learning is impossible. When the demand for the internet increased, problems about internet connectivity occurred (MoEYS, 2021). Uon (2020) argued that the internet speed in rural areas is slow and inadequate, making some Cambodian students unable to study online.

Another stumbling block to online learning is concerned with the inadequacy of parental support. It was found out by MoEYS (2021) that caregivers or parents did not have sufficient content knowledge as to what their children learned. They also did not have sufficient time to support their children's learning at home, not to mention their limited ability to use different technological devices and platforms. Without sufficient parental support, it is obvious that Cambodian children are in a difficult and disadvantaged position when it comes to online learning.

### *Impacts on Learning Quality*

Another deleterious effect of COVID-19 on education is that it has exacerbated the quality of education. The pandemic has aggravated the existing educational inequality, particularly for the underprivileged groups (USAID, 2021), and the

undone progress in children's education that Cambodia has achieved over the years (Save the Children, 2020).

Doubtlessly, MoEYS has worked hard to provide e-learning platforms for Cambodian students. However, amongst the available distance learning alternatives, worksheets and paper-based learning materials were found to be the most accessible to primary school children. Educational TV programs and free online educational videos on social media and other MoEYS' official platforms have also been beneficial (MoEYS, 2021). Despite this, these learning alternatives have not produced the learning outcomes that we long for because remote learning during the pandemic has been found to be less effective than physical classes (ADB, 2021).

In addition, the loss of instructional time also causes harm to students' learning quality. The majority of primary school students only accessed online learning between two and three days per week and spent from only 30 minutes to one hour in total for online learning. This is a huge difference compared to the amount of instructional time they had during the physical classes before the pandemic (MoEYS, 2021).

### ***Impacts on Mental Health***

There are also impacts on mental health. According to [www.mentalhealth.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.gov) (2020), mental health is concerned with the well-being of our psychological, emotional, and social aspects. It affects our thinking, feelings, and actions. How we handle stress, make choices, and relate to others is also determined by our mental health which is crucial for every stage of life. In addition, biological factors, life experiences, and family history can also contribute to mental health problems.

During the pandemic, mental health issues are on the rise. Nearchou et al.'s (2020) systematic review of 12 studies (seven conducted in China, two in Italy, one in Poland, and one in Turkey) indicated that the pandemic engendered mental health problems causing depression and anxiety among children and teenagers aged 18 years old or younger. Furthermore, measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, such as closing schools, limiting social interactions, imposing travel restrictions, halting sports activities, and transforming to

online classes, have also caused emotional distress, fear, and anxiety for children (Shah et al., 2020).

School closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have also had detrimental impacts on the mental well-being of students at all grade levels. Cambodian students were no exception. They experienced at least one of the 10 types of mental health and psychosocial stressors, including tiredness, frustration, loneliness, sadness, fear, nervousness, agitation, and anger (MoEYS, 2021). For primary school students, anger, agitation, and sadness were their three most predominant stressors, followed by frustration, fear, and loneliness (MoEYS, 2021).

### ***Impacts on the Acquisition of Communication Skills***

Students learn communication skills when socializing on campus and working with peers in classes through pair work and group work. Opportunities to acquire the necessary skills are greatly lost during school closures (ADB, 2021). Learning on the screen has been the sole means for students to meet and communicate with friends and teachers; as a result, lessons have become less engaging. Time to communicate also became less as most Cambodian students spent only 30–60 minutes per week on online classes (MoEYS, 2021). This situation negatively affects the development and acquisition of communication skills for many students. The situation will become worse when parents or caregivers resort to the use of smartphones, tablets, and other technological tools to keep their children busy so they can do some work at home.

### **Suggestions for Parents or Caregivers**

The impacts of the pandemic are unavoidable. Nonetheless, all stakeholders can help alleviate the severity. The following are some suggestions for parents or caregivers to support their beloved children in continuing their education at home or online during this crisis.

First, parents should practice homeschooling to support their children's education. Ceceri (2019) argued that because of the concern for safety, religious preference, and educational benefits, some parents tend to homeschool their children. In this sense, homeschooling can be the best alternative to

complement online learning during the pandemic. Parents can choose to teach only key subjects like Khmer and mathematics while homeschooling their children. They can also decide what to teach, how to teach, and plan the activities based on their available time and the learning styles, interests, and preferences of their children.

Second, parents should also take advantage of free educational applications that are available online using their smartphones or tablets. They can download learning apps that can help their children practice math exercises, English words, puzzles, and many more. According to Ghara (2020), educational technology and digital platforms will continue to perform more significant functions in the education system. The educational apps which are fun and easy to use will keep children engaged and motivated. Therefore, homeschooling parents should set a specific timetable for their children to use those educational apps.

Third, when schools are closed due to COVID-19, parents' involvement is extremely important. Unquestionably, parental involvement helps improve children's academic achievement and behaviors (Chen, 2021). Thus, to contribute to their children's education during the pandemic, parents should engage in some activities that support their children's learning. They can spend time checking their children's work and helping them with classwork after coming home from work. If possible, parents or caregivers should stay near their children while they are learning online so that they can help them navigate online classes. Additionally, since stress is unavoidable during the school closure, parents should create fun times or activities at home for their children. Spending time together with children on joyful activities will help the children reduce their stress and build closer parent-child bonds. Parents should also create and maintain a good relationship with school and especially class teachers so that they can ask for effective and meaningful assistance. Parent-school relationships not only nurture children but also support their development (Hearron & Hilderbrand, 2007).

Finally, parents should consider creating a home-based independent learning habit for their children. In this learning habit, children are supposed to do self-study at home in the evening or at night. Without a doubt, children must clearly understand why they need it and what it will be like. Parents should also

organize a suitable learning space for their children. Self-study can include such activities as reviewing the lessons, doing math exercises, and completing parent-assigned tasks. The length of the self-study will depend on the children's age and grade level. These independent learning activities reflect parents' care, commitment, support, and future plans to help children build a solid foundation for being proactive and lifelong learners.

## Conclusion

Because of the nationwide school closures, Cambodian primary school children have unquestionably encountered pronounced impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. These multifaceted effects induced by COVID-19 include disruption to formal education, challenges associated with online learning, impacts on existing educational progress, issues of mental health, and impacts on children's opportunities to learn crucial communication skills. Given these impacts, all stakeholders need to work together with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to mitigate the learning loss and other impacts on Cambodian school children. Parents or caregivers in particular need to perform their critical roles at home for the sake of their children's education and well-being, particularly during the pandemic.

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# COVID-19 and Cambodian Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has, no doubt, caused great disruption to human life. The impacts have been multifaceted, ranging from health to economic and educational crises. In education, including higher education, COVID-19 has compelled millions of students to adopt online learning in order to continue their education when physical classes are not possible. In Cambodia, the pandemic has also caused disruption in all aspects of life, and education is no exception. Based on secondary data, this chapter shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges to the Cambodian higher education sector; however, the pandemic has also brought about some opportunities, one of which is the wider adoption of technology in Cambodian education. The chapter then discusses some suggestions to enhance the digitalization of Cambodian higher education. It argues that COVID-19 has offered a unique opportunity for stakeholders in Cambodian higher education to accelerate the digital transformation of higher education in Cambodia.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Cambodian higher education; challenges; opportunities; digital transformation of education

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K. Heng, S. Kaing, D. Kao, M. Muong, B. Doeur, & T. Lor  
(Eds.), *Online learning during COVID-19 and key issues in  
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## Introduction

The last two years have been about the outbreak of a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), a virus that causes COVID-19, declared by the World Health Organization in March 2020 as a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruption to all forms of life. Heng (2021a) argued that the impact of COVID-19 “has been grave and unprecedented, and the anxiety and unpredictability it has caused have far-reaching consequences beyond public health” (p. 3). Not only has it set the global economic recession in motion, but the pandemic has also exacerbated educational inequality around the world (Reimers, 2021). Many schools and universities across different countries have been ordered to close, and some have remained closed since 2020 as part of the measures taken by individual governments to curb the spread of COVID-19 (see Marinoni et al., 2020; UNESCO, n.d.).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health catastrophe. As of September 2021, it has infected over 231 million people and caused more than 4.7 million deaths (WHO, 2021), and the rate of infection and mortality is expected to increase as the world is currently grappling with new strands of COVID-19, such as the Alpha and Delta variants, which are found to be more contagious and transmissible than the original COVID-19 variant that was first reported in China’s Wuhan city (Kupferschmidt & Wadman, 2021). The pandemic is also an economic catastrophe. The global economies contracted by 3.5 percent in 2020 (IMF, 2021). In some advanced economies such as the United States and France, their economy contracted by 3.4 percent and 9 percent in 2020, respectively (IMF, 2021). For many countries in Southeast Asia, their 2020 economy contracted by about 3.7 percent on average (IMF, 2021), while Cambodia’s economy contracted by 3.1 percent in 2020 (World Bank, 2021). Thus, the pandemic is both a health and an economic crisis.

Despite this, COVID-19 presents both challenges and opportunities to the education sector globally (Marinoni et al., 2020). Key challenges are related to the closure of educational institutions, leaving millions of learners unable to continue their education in normal, face-to-face classroom settings (Marinoni et al., 2020; UNESCO, n.d.). To respond to these unprecedented challenges, schools and universities around the globe have resorted to online learning, creating a phenomenon called “the rise of online learning” (Heng & Sol, 2021;

Kayyali, 2020). This phenomenon is a good thing for some countries that do not have an advanced education system where the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) in education is limited. Cambodia is a good case in point. Although COVID-19 has created chaos and disruption to the whole education system in the country, it has presented some opportunities as well. As Heng (2020) argued, COVID-19 could be considered “a silver lining in the crisis” for Cambodia’s education sector (p. 4). In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a unique opportunity for Cambodia “to strengthen the integration of ICT in education, and foster the digital transformation of its education system” (Heng, 2021a, p. 2).

This chapter focuses on the challenges and opportunities that COVID-19 creates for Cambodian higher education. The chapter argues that, despite the challenges and disruptions posed by COVID-19, there are windows of opportunity for stakeholders in Cambodian higher education to accelerate the digital transformation of Cambodian higher education in order to strengthen the quality of higher education. In advancing this argument, the chapter first discusses the key challenges that the pandemic poses to the Cambodian higher education sector. It then highlights some opportunities induced by COVID-19 for higher education in Cambodia. The chapter concludes with a summary of key challenges and opportunities as well as recommendations to enhance the quality of Cambodian higher education through the greater integration of ICT and blended learning in mainstream classrooms.

## **COVID-19 and the Challenges for Cambodian Higher Education**

### ***Closure of Higher Education Institutions***

To curb the spread of COVID-19, the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) ordered all schools, including higher education institutions (HEIs), to suspend all face-to-face classes intermittently from March 16, 2020. This immediate closure without adequate preparation has posed enormous challenges to Cambodian HEIs, as they need to ensure the continuity of their education provision through online learning. The adoption of online learning requires the necessary digital infrastructure and learning resources, access to reliable internet connections and digital devices, as well as the digital literacy

of both faculty members and students, not to mention the pedagogical knowledge and skills needed for navigating online teaching.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education infrastructure and learning resources in Cambodia existed mainly for on-campus teaching and learning. Therefore, when educational institutions were ordered to close, the lack of digital infrastructure and learning resources emerged as a major challenge for most, if not all, HEIs in Cambodia. HEIs have decided to use open-source platforms such as Facebook Messenger, Telegram, Zoom, and Google Classroom to support the continuity of students' learning (Chet & Sok, 2020). Many HEIs in Cambodia, however, do not have in place a system for students to access library resources off-campus, so in addition to the meager learning resources provided by their teachers, students tend to look for additional online materials, often from less credible sources (Sol, 2021).

As HEIs were closed, access to reliable internet connections and appropriate digital devices, which are indispensable for online teaching and learning, has become another significant challenge, particularly for students from low socioeconomic families. Heng and Sol (2021) noted that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds could not afford broadband and appropriate devices such as computers, laptops, or tablets to support their online learning. In such cases, they are at great risk of being left behind in their learning endeavors. Chea et al. (2020) reported that because of their inability to afford appropriate devices, many students used smartphones to access their online classes and complete their assignments. Faculty members may also have experienced some connectivity issues as they are required to work from home. As Sol (2021) asserted, "even though many parts of the country are digitally connected, there are certain areas where a stable and fast internet connection is difficult to obtain" (p. 53). Thus, if teachers live in areas where access to stable and high-speed internet connections is limited, their online teaching can be sporadically and significantly interrupted.

For many years, Cambodian higher education has taken place primarily on campus. Faculty members and students have relatively little or no prior experience in online teaching and learning. The abrupt transition to online learning prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic left no time for all stakeholders to prepare. Faculty members and students were required to take on online

teaching and learning without enough guidance, training, and resources (United Nations, 2020). Faculty members were also reported to have limited ICT knowledge and skills and were not familiar with online teaching platforms; all of these were compounded by insufficient understanding of how to teach online (Chea et al., 2020; Leng et al., 2020). Therefore, the “learning by doing” approach is usually practiced (Sol, 2021, p. 53).

### ***Potential Bankruptcy***

In April 2020, the Cambodian Higher Education Association (CHEA) warned that 113 private educational establishments could face bankruptcy due to their inability to cover the costs of rent, utilities, and staff salaries if schools remained closed for an extended period (Khorn, 2020). Thus far, even though there has been no report on any HEIs going bankrupt, the potential bankruptcy of private HEIs in Cambodia cannot be overlooked or underestimated, as they are primarily dependent on tuition fees. Continuously falling enrollments and declining retention rates of students triggered by COVID-19 may have led some private HEIs to be cash-strapped. In such a scenario, some private HEIs may permanently shut down their operations if there is no bailout from the government or financial institutions.

### ***Undermined Quality of Teaching and Learning***

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the quality of higher education in Cambodia was regarded as relatively limited due to several interrelated issues such as the limited qualifications of faculty members and the ineffective delivery of lessons due to a lack of planning and resources (see Dahles, 2017; Hayden, 2019; Kitamura, 2016). When HEIs were closed as part of the government’s measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, a sudden shift to online teaching and learning took place, raising further concerns about education quality. Several factors are perceived to have affected the quality of online teaching and learning in Cambodian higher education amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of them include the lack of digital infrastructure and learning resources, connectivity issues, the digital divide among students, reduced student-instructor and peer interactions, and limited ICT skills and digital pedagogy among faculty members (Sol, 2021). These shortcomings and the immediate need to make online teaching and learning happen have

unarguably undermined the quality of teaching and learning in Cambodian higher education.

### ***Worsening of Skills Gaps and Educational Inequality***

The abrupt transition to online learning brought by COVID-19 has exacerbated the digital divide and educational inequality between advantaged and disadvantaged students (Heng, 2021b), potentially widening and worsening skills gaps among them, an issue of great concern since before the pandemic. As online learning is made possible by the use of the internet and appropriate digital devices, this means that not all students will be able to access online learning. For example, students from low socioeconomic families and areas with limited digital coverage may have their learning significantly interrupted due to a lack of access to digital devices and a stable and high-speed internet connection, not to mention their limited prior online learning experience. Furthermore, online learning has been found to be not applicable for particular disciplines such as sports, engineering, and medical studies, all of which require hands-on experiences as part of the instructional process (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). As Heng and Sol (2021) emphasized, teaching such practical disciplines online is indeed a challenge. To a considerable extent, these factors have taken away opportunities, particularly among disadvantaged students, to build up the knowledge and skills required for competition in the job market.

### ***Mental Health Issues***

In the Cambodian context, online teaching and learning is a relatively new phenomenon that took place suddenly and unprecedentedly during the pandemic, creating psychological effects for all stakeholders, particularly faculty members and students (Leng et al., 2020). From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty members were immediately tasked with implementing online teaching, often without adequate training and resources. Adding to the lack of online teaching experience, this has brought about an unexpected workload for faculty members who need to learn to teach online, use new teaching platforms, adapt teaching contents and resources, and replan learning assessments to fit the new context of online learning (Heng & Sol, 2021). This immediate requirement has caused a high level of stress and anxiety for faculty members (MacIntyre et al., 2020), not to mention the omnipresent concern for

their families and themselves during the pandemic. There were also reports of pay cuts among private educational institutions during the school closure (Khorn, 2020). In such a time of uncertainty, the decline in income has generated additional worries and insecurity among faculty members.

Students have also experienced some psychological issues, which can be expressed as stress, anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and frustration, among others. Some of the causes include the lack of online learning experience, the feeling of isolation due to reduced peer interactions and support, the increasing need for independent study, and technology-related issues (Heng, 2021b; Heng & Sol, 2021). These psychological issues, if not adequately recognized and addressed, could have long-term consequences for students' health and education (Browning et al., 2021; Lischer et al., 2021; Sahu, 2020).

## **COVID-19 and the Opportunities for Cambodian Higher Education**

### ***Digital Transformation***

Despite the enormous challenges posed by COVID-19, HEIs in Cambodia, to some extent, have been able to make online teaching and learning possible through a rapid digital transformation that was previously thought to be arduous or impractical for the Cambodian context. Considering the fast-growing context of a more digitalized world, COVID-19 has provided an excellent opportunity for Cambodian HEIs to integrate ICT into their education programs. As Heng (2021a) advocated, “the infrastructure and experience accumulated during the COVID-19 crisis will act as a strong impetus for the greater utilization of ICT in Cambodian education in the future” (p. 5).

Building upon the current momentum of digital transformation made possible by COVID-19, this initial digital transformation has also created a great opportunity for Cambodian HEIs to further develop their digital infrastructure and learning resources capable of offering both on-campus and online education. According to Sol (2021), digital infrastructure and learning resources “include but are not limited to a wide range of digital devices, e-learning platforms, technology-enhanced classrooms, high-speed internet connectivity, digital libraries, comprehensive learning management systems, data privacy

and security, quality digital contents and resources, and constant technical support” (p. 51).

In response to COVID-19, several HEIs, such as the Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia and the National University of Management, have begun digitalizing some of their services, ranging from enrollment applications to paying school fees and course registration. This digitalization induced by COVID-19 is argued to enhance the efficiency of service delivery among Cambodian HEIs.

### *Improved Prospects of Blended Learning*

Since educational institutions were instructed to close temporarily, online learning in Cambodia has gained remarkable momentum as an alternative to face-to-face teaching and learning, allowing education to continue for students. The growing investment in necessary digital tools and Learning Management Systems (LMS), the transformed learning resources developed and made available by HEIs and faculty members, and the experience gained through online teaching and learning during the school closure will improve blended learning in Cambodian higher education post-COVID-19 (Heng, 2021a). Considering the unexpected disruption caused by the global health crisis like COVID-19 and the context of Industry 4.0, blended learning will become ubiquitous as a vital part of modern education because the reliance on traditional face-to-face teaching and learning alone is no longer a viable modality. Therefore, online teaching and learning brought about by COVID-19 will provide a foundation to accelerate blended learning in Cambodian higher education.

### *Improved Collaboration and Partnerships*

Facing the widespread outbreak of COVID-19, the educational activities of most HEIs worldwide have been shifted online. With that being said, there are plenty of opportunities for HEIs in Cambodia to establish collaboration and partnerships with both local and international institutions, as they are also looking for opportunities to diversify their students’ learning experiences and involve their faculty members with the wider community, for example, through online exchange programs or webinars. Moreover, with grave disruption to the

entire education system, education stakeholders such as MoEYS, local and international development partners, and the private sector appear to shift more support to the education sector (see Heng, 2020). This trend has created more opportunities for Cambodian HEIs to collaborate with these key stakeholders to ensure that continuing higher education for students, regardless of the mode of delivery, is of high quality and capable of producing a skilled workforce for the future.

### ***Better Preparation for Future Crises***

Despite some considerable limitations, the digital transformation made possible by COVID-19, including technological infrastructure, digital learning resources, and online teaching and learning experiences, will not only enhance the relevancy and competitiveness of Cambodian higher education but also build digital resilience for future crises. In a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, on-campus teaching and learning are not possible due to restrictions on human interactions, requiring a sudden switch to online mode. With some digital readiness forged by COVID-19, the teaching and learning process will not be badly interrupted as recently experienced. As in many developed countries, their digital readiness and well-established blending learning practices have helped them cope well with the impacts of COVID-19 on their educational front (Cahapay, 2020).

### **Suggestions to Keep the Momentum of Digital Transformation of Higher Education**

To maintain the momentum of digital transformation in higher education, different stakeholders have an essential role to play. The following sections discuss how each key stakeholder in higher education in Cambodia can contribute to accelerating the digitalization of the Cambodian higher education system.

#### ***The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport***

First, as Heng (2021a) argues, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) needs to invest in the digital transformation of the education system, particularly the higher education sector. This investment involves the provision

of capacity-building opportunities to upskill higher education staff, the integration of ICT into education programs, and the allocation of technical and financial support to ensure the wider adoption of ICT and blended learning in higher education. MoEYS also needs to be willing to support research or projects that aim to understand how ICT can be effectively integrated into the classroom and how university students and academic staff perceive blended and online learning.

Second, MoEYS needs to find ways to engage other stakeholders, particularly the private sector, to mobilize resources to support higher education development post-pandemic. At present, government-university-industry relations, or the so-called triple helix model, are still weak (Sam & Dahles, 2017); therefore, it is vital to enhance the public-private partnership and collaboration in order to bring about critical forces to change the current higher education landscape, confronted by poor stakeholder involvement, limited research capacity, and limited quality of education and training (see Kwok et al., 2010; Sam & Dahles, 2017; Vann & Ziguras, 2017).

Third, MoEYS should work with individual universities to establish their own LMS to ensure that universities are equipped with necessary learning and teaching systems that can facilitate online and blended learning, particularly in the post-pandemic time. The establishment of the Centre for Digital and Distance Learning and the introduction of an e-learning application called MoEYS E-Learning are welcome initiatives (see Heng, 2021a). However, a lot more needs to be done to build a culture of independent learning among Cambodian students and to promote digital education.

### *Development Partners*

Development partners and donor agencies have played a pivotal role in supporting the development of higher education in Cambodia (Sam & Dahles, 2017). They serve as an important source of technical and financial support. Thus, given the many challenges posed by COVID-19, development partners and international organizations such as the World Bank and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) need to continue to provide unwavering support to help MoEYS and Cambodian HEIs to accelerate the digitalization of the higher education system. So far, various initiatives have

been introduced by the development partners to enhance research facilities and information technology infrastructure in Cambodian higher education (see SIDA, 2021), but more support on similar projects is needed to introduce positive changes to higher education.

### *The Private Sector*

The role of the private sector in supporting the development of higher education in Cambodia is undeniably vital. However, prior to the pandemic, this actor was less active in contributing to the quality of higher education and research (Sam & Dahles, 2017). Although the private sector, particularly major private companies, has increased their involvement and support to help MoEYS implement online learning effectively (see Heng, 2020), there is a need for more involvement and collaboration from this important player in Cambodian higher education. While the private sector needs to strengthen its partnership with HEIs, it also needs to be more willing to invest in LMS, professional development opportunities, and research.

Moreover, as research has indicated prevalent skill gaps among Cambodian university graduates (Madhur, 2014; Peou, 2017), the private sector, including wealthy people, needs to invest more in higher education to ensure that university graduates are equipped with the necessary skills needed in the workplace. In fact, private companies and industries are the users of graduates produced by HEIs. In this sense, they have a crucial role to play in supporting HEIs to train students to be ready for the job market. Due to skills gaps, some of the major companies have to spend a larger amount of money on skills training, including English language training. This investment can be channeled to universities in the form of scholarships, fellowships, or internships to help students with excellent academic or disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue higher education. These sponsored students can then be employed by the sponsoring companies on an agreed-upon contract or under specific employment conditions.

### *Higher Education Institutions*

No doubt, higher education institutions (HEIs) are key players in the process of digitizing the higher education system. Not only do they need to invest in LMS

and other online learning platforms, but HEIs also need to be proactive in engaging other actors such as development partners and the private sector. They also need to find innovative ways to encourage faculty members to integrate ICT into the classroom more widely. This can be achieved through improved library resources, internet connections on campus, and flexibility in teaching delivery. Also, as Heng (2021a) argued, the integration of ICT or blended learning in mainstream classrooms “requires effective leadership, strong commitment and institution-wide collaboration” (p. 6). Thus, HEIs need to ensure that administrative and academic staff are on the same page when it comes to promoting blended learning or ICT use in the classrooms.

Furthermore, there is a need for HEIs to offer training and professional development opportunities to their staff, particularly the teaching staff, to make sure that they have the necessary technical and pedagogical knowledge and skills required to deliver online lessons effectively. In designing online learning content, it is crucial that HEIs seek input from the academic staff who are key players in implementing and integrating ICT or blended learning in mainstream classrooms. In addition, HEIs need to consider revising their existing curriculums to make them more aligned with the teaching and learning model of online or remote learning. The curriculum revision needs to take into account the assessment tasks and techniques as well as the delivery of learning content. The goal is to ensure that the whole curriculum is compatible with the online learning model or blended learning.

### *Other Stakeholders*

Other key stakeholders, especially university lecturers and students, also have a pivotal role to play in facilitating the digital transformation of higher education in Cambodia. What lecturers can do is to improve their technological skills by familiarizing themselves with new learning tools and platforms, such as Edmodo, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Schoology, and Zoom, among others. They also need to introduce these digital learning tools and platforms to their students so that the students can take their time to explore and take advantage of these technology-based learning resources. In addition, lecturers need to be more open to change to adapt to new ways of teaching and learning more successfully.

For students, they also need to be more open-minded and view online learning positively. Although online learning poses many challenges to them, including stress, anxiety, and fatigue caused by prolonged exposure to screens, Cambodian students need to understand that online learning is the future of education (Meng, this volume). In developed countries, online or blended learning is not something new. University students are often required to log onto their university's LMS, such as Moodle and Blackboard, to engage in class discussions or submit their assignments. In Cambodia, these activities could be new to students before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, after two years of online learning, many students have become more familiar with this mode of learning (see Heng, 2021b). Therefore, students need to embrace online learning and develop positive attitudes toward it. They also need to seek any opportunities to learn to navigate online learning tools and platforms so that they can take full advantage of technology to facilitate their learning process and enhance their knowledge and skills required to succeed in the workplace.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter has discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped the higher education landscape in Cambodia. It has shown that the pandemic has posed great challenges to the higher education sector. COVID-19 has particularly forced Cambodia, as also true elsewhere, to temporarily close all educational institutions, creating many issues, including the potential bankruptcy of private educational institutions, the undermined quality of teaching and learning as classes are offered online, the worsening of skills gaps and educational inequality, and increased mental health issues. Despite the challenges it has created, the pandemic has offered a number of educational opportunities, such as the unique opportunity to digitalize the Cambodian education system, improved prospects for the integration of blended learning in mainstream classrooms, improved collaboration and partnerships between different higher education stakeholders, and better preparation for future crises.

This chapter has also discussed the lessons learned from the pandemic, focusing on what different stakeholders in higher education can and should do to support the digital transformation of Cambodian higher education. The

suggestions for MoEYS center around the need to invest in digitalizing education, providing capacity-building opportunities to enhance the digital knowledge and skills of higher education staff, and supporting research exploring the integration of blended learning and ICT in mainstream classes. Moreover, this chapter has put forward suggestions for other key higher education stakeholders, such as development partners, the private sector, HEIs, faculty members, and students.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has created both challenges and opportunities for higher education in Cambodia. While the challenges and problems are inevitable during the pandemic, all stakeholders in Cambodian higher education need to look on the bright side and take advantage of the pandemic to transform and digitalize the higher education system. As Heng (2021a) has argued, the COVID-19 pandemic has “brought the opportunity to not only deepen educational reforms but also strengthen the utilization of ICT and modern technologies in education” in Cambodia (p. 7). In this regard, the Cambodian government, through MoEYS, needs to find ways to build on the positive momentum induced by the pandemic regarding the wider integration of ICT and technology in education, especially in higher education. This is necessary as it not only contributes to improving the standard and quality of higher education but also promotes the digital education that Cambodia needs to equip its next generations with the necessary knowledge and skills required to compete and succeed in the digital era.

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# Why Online Learning Is the Future of Education

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## Abstract

Online learning has been adopted by many educational institutions as a method of delivering education to their students, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it appears to have a positive impact on students' education in the future. This chapter discusses not only the development and importance of online learning in the Cambodian context during the pandemic but also the challenges and opportunities that students have encountered while engaging in online learning during COVID-19. While some students may find it difficult to become accustomed to online learning, others seem to view it as an opportunity for their education. This chapter argues that the implementation of online learning has provided Cambodian students with the opportunity to continue their education and gain knowledge from anywhere with the support of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport, as well as other public and private institutions.

**Keywords:** Online learning; COVID-19; future of education; Cambodia

## **Introduction**

Different ways of learning, including offline and online learning, have played an essential role in helping individuals gain knowledge. Prior to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic which has caused disruption to education globally, many educational institutions have relied on physical education, a conventional and most popular style of learning, to deliver education to students. With the help of study materials such as books, journals, and other print materials, students have been able to learn independently and successfully. It was not until 1984 that the first online learning was introduced by the University of Toronto to cope with the increasing number of people who began to learn to use computers and other technological devices due to the revolution of technology and the increasing use of the internet (Sarkar, 2020). Over the years, online learning has become a new model of education with great potential that impacts the design and delivery of education at all levels (Joksimović et al., 2015).

Over the past 20 years, the development of technology for educational purposes has rapidly increased as many educational institutions across the globe have embraced online learning (Demuyakor, 2020; Murphy, 2020). The embrace of online learning has skyrocketed since the beginning of 2020 when educational institutions around the globe were forced to close to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus that has caused the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF, 2021). In fact, since the outbreak of COVID-19, first detected in China's Wuhan city, online learning has been a replacement for face-to-face teaching and learning.

Against this background, this chapter discusses the implementation of online learning in the context of the pandemic. It also examines the development of online learning as well as its role in the Cambodian educational context. It then analyzes the opportunities and challenges to online learning and discusses the importance of adapting online learning during the pandemic and in the future. The chapter argues that online learning will dominate the educational field in the future as it provides easy and affordable access for students.

## **Defining Online Learning**

Online learning has been around for years as a new way of learning, but the

term online learning has been defined differently. Based on the Cambridge University Press (2021), e-learning or online learning is described as “electronic learning: the business of providing courses online for students so that they can study and learn from home” (n.p.). Similarly, the Oxford University Press (2021) has given the meaning of e-learning (online learning) as “a system of learning that uses electronic media, typically over the internet” (n.p.). Online learning can also be referred to as “a form of distance education and a web-based learning, e-learning, and digital learning” (Sadiku et al., 2018, p. 74). Online learning is described as a type of education, training, or learning programs conducted through web techniques and electronic means (Liao & Lu, 2008; Li et al., 2009).

Overall, in this chapter, online learning is referred to as a form of education delivery over the internet from educators to learners through an internet-based curriculum, without having to attend face-to-face classes. Nevertheless, a few things are required for the successful delivery of online learning. They include internet access, knowledge on how to operate digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, and personal computers, and the ability to use online platforms well.

### **Online Learning in the Context of the Pandemic**

Since the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 has caused the greatest disruption to the education system globally, creating severe impacts on nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries in 2020 (The United Nations, 2020). Struggling to cope with the rapidly increasing number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, many countries in Asia (Rising, 2021), America (BBC News, 2020), Europe (BBC News, 2021), and other parts of the world have been forced to go into lockdown, affecting every aspect of life, including education. To keep the education system going, many countries have adopted online learning (United Nations, 2020). Due to the pandemic, online learning has gained popularity and has become the only means for students to continue their education. After almost two years, many students may have considered online learning their favorite way of learning during the pandemic. The pandemic has, in a way, created a great opportunity for learners to get used to learning online and allowed educational staff to be more familiar with online learning delivery (Heng, 2021).

According to Coman et al. (2020), as much as face-to-face learning does, online learning yields very positive results that are promising for the delivery of education during the pandemic and in the future. Online learning is also a convenient way for undergraduate and postgraduate students to continue their education amid the COVID-19 crisis (Orakci, 2020). As the outbreak of COVID-19 has left no choice for educators and learners but to embrace online learning, it has created a conducive environment for this type of learning mode to flourish now and in the post-pandemic era (Dhawan, 2020).

To put it simply, online learning has introduced a new modern way of learning for the future generation, particularly for those intending to pursue higher education. Online learning has also become a bridge for everyone to learn to become accustomed to using technological devices (e.g., computers, laptops, and smartphones), digital platforms, and the internet.

### **The Benefits of Online Learning**

Instructional technology is highly advantageous for students and those who pursue a professional course through online learning (Mehra & Mital, 2007). Online learning is beneficial in several ways. It enables students to learn from anywhere in the world irrespective of their geographical location; it guides students to design and determine their learning style; it improves their research and information and communication technology (ICT) skills; it provides unlimited information; it saves their expenses on traveling and textbook purchases; and it facilitates the process of publishing their work (Dhull & Arora, 2019). Online learning can also maintain the critical function of the interaction between teachers and students (Anderson, 2004). However, the online courses chosen by task designers and teachers have to be affordable and educational to create meaningful learning and educational experiences.

The flexibility and effectiveness of online learning are advantageous, allowing students to access learning materials easily and making them self-directed learners (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Online learning modalities also motivate student-centered learning, for it is manageable during a lockdown situation. The use of a plethora of technological tools and platforms to support online learning provides new methods that enable the learning process (Morales et al., 2021). Interestingly, innovation in software and applications for learning

facilitates the organization of online study groups and other learning and assessment activities such as quizzes as well as questions and answers (Feenberg, 2017). It is argued that these software innovations may show up in the future in standard Learning Management Systems designed for virtual classes, especially for college students (Feenberg, 2017).

### **The Development of Online Learning Platforms in Cambodia**

Many countries around the world have suffered from COVID-19, and Cambodia is no exception. To make education available for students, the Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) and E-School Cambodia, has introduced a free e-learning application that offers online learning opportunities for students from grades 1 to 12 (Ry, 2020). The e-learning app includes subjects such as maths, Khmer literature, and English for grades 1 to 6. Physics and chemistry are added to the previous subjects for grades 7 to 9, and biology is added for grades 10 to 12. In addition, the e-learning app was specially designed for students who are preparing for the grade 12 national examination so that they will not lose track of their learning (Ry, 2020). Both teachers and students will be able to keep in touch through MoEYS' Facebook page and YouTube channels. UNICEF has also assisted MoEYS in providing e-learning classes with key subjects and alternative learning opportunities to students (Long, 2020). Similarly, UNESCO has also played a crucial role in supporting education initiatives in the Kingdom amid school closures induced by the pandemic. Through support from these organizations, MoEYS, and other stakeholders, including parents, Cambodian students can access education through online lessons. They have also become more familiar with online learning, something that was more or less alien to them prior to the pandemic.

According to Khmer Times (2020, para. 2), "the extension of school suspensions covers all educational institutions at all levels, all forms, both public and private." In this situation, online learning has become more significant for students as MoEYS and the National Assembly are working together to promote digital education in the Kingdom (Voun, 2020). Put another way, online learning has made the teaching and learning of both teachers and students more accessible and convenient both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Online learning has begun to be widely used and has made lessons,

research studies, lectures, and many educational activities more accessible (Heng, 2020, 2021).

### **Online Learning: A Major Opportunity Created by the Pandemic**

Thinking positively, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for students and teachers to adapt to a new way of learning and develop their digital competence. The pandemic has also changed traditional learning approaches and accelerated the digital transformation of education in Cambodia (Chhoeurm, 2020). Thanks to online learning, students and teachers remain in touch with each other during the crisis, as many well-recognized schools, universities, and institutions have offered this new mode of learning (Ferri et al., 2020). Online learning has also provided Cambodian students with the opportunity to improve their learning autonomy through a wide variety of digital platforms. Moreover, students also have the opportunity to learn to manage their time wisely, arrange study schedules, prepare lessons, and control their learning strategies. More importantly, they can also benefit from this new mode of learning because online learning can save time and expenses, something that may not be possible in face-to-face learning. Students will be able to make good opportunities out of online learning, leading to more hybrid and transformative higher education at a global level (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Morales et al., 2021). In addition, the post-pandemic generation will be able to benefit from the digitalization of education, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic (Heng, 2021).

### **Challenges to Online Learning**

Despite the opportunities, there are challenges to online learning. In the context of Cambodia, MoEYS announced the closure of all educational institutions in March 2020. The school closure has rapidly driven students and teachers to embrace online learning. However, this transformation from face-to-face classrooms to online learning has posed many difficulties for both teachers and students (Chhoeurm, 2020; Heng & Sol, this volume). According to Heng and Sol (2020), most of the challenges to online learning are related to access to online learning platforms, low digital competency, and inadequate technological infrastructure. Not knowing how to use sophisticated online learning and communication platforms (e.g., Google Classroom and Zoom) and

poor digital literacy skills have also triggered burdens and anxieties, stress, and other psychological problems and difficulties for students and teachers (Heng & Sol, 2020).

A recent study by Em (2021), who investigated the challenges of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic at a provincial high school in Cambodia, found that access to internet connection was the most challenging problem preventing students from learning effectively. Other challenges included interruptions from their surroundings while learning from home and a lack of smartphones and money to recharge phone credits to access the internet. Overall, as Marinoni et al. (2020) aptly noted, “the shift from face-to-face to distance teaching did not come without challenges, the main ones being access to technical infrastructure, competences and pedagogies for distance learning and the requirements of specific fields of study” (p. 11).

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It is a possibility that online learning will be able to provide access to education for anyone, anywhere, and anytime, as long as access to the internet is available (Nguyen, 2015). Online learning has gained relevance and appeared to ensure its continuance even after the COVID-19 pandemic (Morales et al., 2021). As the future of online education will be characterized by the delivery of education over the internet, it is expected that online learning will take the reins in the future.

Regardless of how effective online learning can be, the environment and the people around the students are also factors affecting the efficiency of their academic performance. Therefore, in order to facilitate the educational needs of the students, not only during but also after the COVID-19 crisis, MoEYS should attentively focus on the possibility of students being able to access the required tools for online learning, maintain the momentum of their learning progress, and evaluate the results of their learning achievement.

As for educational institutions, they should use this unexpected opportunity to enhance and maximize the use of ICT for learning and teaching by investing more in the integration of ICT in the classrooms (Heng, 2020). In addition, assistance and involvement from parents are also an impactful factor affecting

students' performance because parents can help check students' learning progress directly at home, something that teachers cannot do. While parents play a crucial role in supporting students, teachers also play an essential role in making lectures trackable and accessible to students so that they can keep up with the lessons.

Finally, given the lack of research investigating how online learning is perceived and experienced by Cambodian students and teachers, it is recommended that research should be conducted to understand students' and teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward online learning. Such an understanding will be useful for policymakers to ensure that online learning will be effectively implemented and can serve its role as a new and effective way of learning in the future.

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## **Part 2:**

# **Technology and Teaching Strategies in ELT**

# The Role of Digital Technology in English Major Programs in Cambodia

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## Abstract

This chapter discusses the role of digital technology in English major programs in Cambodia. It highlights how technology has been or should be used in language learning. It also shows that various applications such as Facebook, Telegram, Quizlet, and Flipgrid have been utilized to facilitate language teaching, particularly in English major programs. The chapter also examines how digital technology has been applied in teaching English as a foreign language. The discussion of the use of technology in language learning in Cambodia is crucial as it will inform how other institutions can apply technology to teach foreign languages, especially English. The chapter discusses both the benefits and challenges regarding the use of digital technology and offers suggestions for the effective use of digital technology in English major programs in Cambodia.

**Keywords:** Digital technology; English major programs; English language learning; Cambodia

## **Introduction**

The digital revolution and advancement witnessed in the last century have made massive impacts on all dimensions of human life and made it easier for people to connect and share knowledge. The effect of digital technology on learning has also been immense, allowing greater access to learning resources and collaboration among learners across different parts of the world. Language teaching became more manageable and effective since necessary materials in any language, particularly English, could be accessed from digital spaces. Digital technology has enhanced language learning by blending foreign language courses into its platforms. In some countries where English is either the first or second language, learners are encouraged to utilize digital technology to learn more. In this chapter, the role of digital technology in learning a foreign language, particularly English, will be discussed.

This chapter is structured to address different aspects of the application of technology in language learning. The first section expounds on the digital technology used in Cambodia for teaching English as a foreign language. It addresses the role of learners and teachers in using digital technology for language learning and teaching. The second section highlights the role of digital technology in English major programs by describing how English as a foreign language was previously taught and how the teaching has been improved with the use of technology. The third section discusses the impact of technology on language learning in Cambodia by looking into how technology has changed the language learning landscape. The chapter then highlights some key challenges to the use of digital technology and provides some recommendations for the effective use of digital technology in English major programs in Cambodia.

### **Digital Technology in English Major Programs in Cambodia**

In Cambodia, the main languages used for official communication are Khmer and English. French used to be a major foreign language in Cambodia (Clayton, 2002, 2017). However, with the influence of globalization, English has become a major foreign language in the country. English is now widely taught in Cambodia, particularly in the capital city and provincial towns. The best way

to teach English to non-natives is to engage them in communication, influenced by a popular approach called Communicative Language Teaching.

Nowadays, various tools can be applied in teaching English as a foreign language. A wide variety of digital apps have been created to allow and encourage learners to speak, listen, read, and write in the target language. In Cambodia, digital tools in English language teaching have slowly been integrated into language programs (Heng, 2019). Fundamentally, digital apps are created in such a way to enhance classroom instructions and heighten the interest of learners in learning a foreign language. Facebook and Telegram are examples of technological tools that can be used to support language teaching and learning. They have been used widely in Cambodia for social networking, marketing, and learning, including language learning.

Meanwhile, in language education in Cambodia, Quizlet is a common application used (Clayton, 2017). This web-based tool allows learners to study a new language through games and interactive activities. It was created to assist learners and their teachers in practicing what they are learning and teaching. The information in this application is arranged into study sets, and users add it to their accounts. The learners log into their accounts and select a suitable study set for the concepts they wish to review. Either the teachers or learners can generate the study sets. The application has been widely used in English major programs in Cambodia due to its flexibility and user-friendly customization. Quizlet can also be used to teach a new language to different levels of learners, from beginners to advanced students. It is mainly preferred because the teachers can integrate collaboration and teamwork into their classes. Therefore, it is possible to apply Communicative Language Teaching, which is crucial in teaching a foreign language (Kwangsawad, 2017). New technologies such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams have also been used in teaching foreign languages. With these fast-emerging technologies, a teacher based in Britain, for example, can have language sessions with language learners based in Cambodia. Some Cambodian universities are also applying learning management systems (LMS) such as Neo LMS or Google Classroom to reach more learners (Tumskiy, 2019).

Another key digital technology that has been employed in language teaching in Cambodia is Flipgrid (Difilippantonio-Pen, 2020). This web-based

application from Microsoft allows the sharing of videos to assist teachers in monitoring each learner in the class. It also fosters fun and supportive social learning, which is critical in raising learners' interests in the foreign language. Teachers can post discussion topics, and learners are expected to respond with short videos and skits from their classes or home. The goal is to ensure that the learners become competent and creative in applying the target foreign language. Digital technology allows teachers to examine, describe, and review practices and perspectives of culture. They make interactive videos for the entire class, which are used to gauge the competence of a learner at a specific level of language acquisition. The learners create some videos using the app, which could be talking or singing. The videos are used to assess the depth of learners' understanding of the new language acquisition. The app will also be crucial in assisting the learners in setting targets and reviewing their progress in using the language for leisure, enrichment, and advancement.

### **The Role of Digital Technology in English Major Programs in Cambodia**

The role of digital technology in teaching and learning a language is based on the advancement of a foreign/second language in learners. Learners seeking to understand the basic communication skills of speaking and listening do not require complex levels of training. Therefore, the technology and language used need to be simple to serve the purpose. Learners are subjected to all the ways of acquiring a new language, including the use of digital tools. The use of technology in language teaching has rapidly shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered. Teachers are mandated to facilitate and guide learners to increase their knowledge. The use of technology has been proven to increase students' cooperation in tasks by enhancing their interest in the language, hence requiring more involvement in the learning process (Chak, 2014). Technology also assists learners in gathering information and interacting with learning resources such as video lessons. When learners play an active role in the learning process supported by digital technology, they can get more information and knowledge than when they are passively involved in the learning process. The learner-based materials offered by digital technology in English major programs help learners process and sharpen their language learning skills.

Research has confirmed that computer-based communication is crucial for second language acquisition (Abrams, 2012; Loewen & Sato, 2018). A computer-based discussion can have equal advantages to face-to-face discussion by providing a platform that is accessible to the learners with fewer hurdles and no limitations to engagement. The learners are therefore likely to achieve more when using computer-based communications. For successful language learning, learners must have more access to authentic materials that are readily available on digital platforms. In a country such as Cambodia, English is not heavily embraced in areas outside the city as many people in provincial areas mainly use Khmer (Moore & Bounchan, 2010). Therefore, learners from these areas may require input from digital media rather than relying on locally made teaching materials. Adequate access to course materials will allow learners and their teachers to hasten the learning process (Golonka et al., 2014). Incorporating digital platforms into language learning programs also allows teachers to share their materials with learners without necessarily attending physical classes. This opens the door for foreign-based teachers to engage learners, thus increasing their grasp of the new language (Igawa, 2008). In addition, the presence of technology in English major programs ensures that learners get first-hand experience from their teachers and peers.

Digital technologies such as social media and smartphones have been widely used in language learning. Social media platforms such as Telegram and Facebook, in particular, have been used to facilitate second language acquisition. Research has established that learners using social media platforms based on the target language improve their writing, vocabulary, word choices, and speaking ability (Cluggage, 2016). In addition, it has been shown that these platforms allow learners to engage with other users using the target language, hence improving the learning process (Cluggage, 2016). For instance, Aydin (2014), examining the role of Wiki technology in improving learners' writing skills, found that learners could improve their writing skills after engaging with Wiki pages. It was also found that learners could improve vocabulary, spelling, and sentence structures by reading their peers' passages on the Wiki pages.

### **Benefits of Digital Technology for English Major Programs**

Technological advancement has made it possible for second language learners to obtain skills from numerous learning platforms. Technology has also created

one of the easiest ways to learn a foreign language through interaction with peers from different language backgrounds. Traditionally, dictionaries with translations were published to translate the basic words from one language to another. However, it was challenging to use words taken directly from dictionaries to construct sentences (Vulchanova et al., 2017). Incorporating digital technology into language learning has created applications that translate one language to another with a simple click. Downloadable translations make it extremely easy to understand any foreign language. Learners can now translate single words or entire sentences and identify the correct sentence structures.

The digital age has transformed how individuals interact with each other, share stories, and present and perceive reality. Access to digital devices such as smartphones and televisions has increased by more than 90 percent in the past century (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). Social media, a significant highlight of the twenty-first century, has also impacted language learning massively. Users of digital technology can switch to a wide range of languages for broadcasting as they wish. Therefore, an individual with access to a digital device can easily access a foreign language and start the learning process from there. It requires the interest of a person to pursue the new language. For children, they are exposed to technology from a young age, making it possible for them to acquire the new language (Ilter, 2015). By the time one is enrolled in English major programs, he/she will likely have interacted with the language on different platforms.

With time, rapid technologies to be used in second and foreign language learning have been discovered. Some examples include computer-assisted language learning (CALL), robot-assisted language learning (RALL), or mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). These technologies have been crucial in facilitating learning or acquiring a new language (John, 2018). They enable multimodal language activities where reading, writing, speaking, and listening are integrated, hence accommodating the strengths of various students. They also assist in reducing language learning anxiety and increasing motivation and participation from learners. Most language learning technologies have game-based activities and opportunities that allow learners to be creative. Digital technology also enhances language learning by enabling learners to develop new social identities online, which provides them with confidence in

communicating with native speakers of the target language. Therefore, technology provides learners with a medium for learning between their first language and a foreign language. Digital technology in language learning also enables real-time feedback on assessments, thus making it easy to monitor the learning progress.

### **Challenges to the Use of Digital technology**

Despite looking like an interesting practice, digital learning has posed several challenges. It becomes even more difficult when digital technology is used for foreign or second language learning. Generally, the output fails to meet the expectations of both learners and their teachers (Rahman, 2015). The first impression is that the use of technology will provide practical and beneficial language knowledge to learners. However, without the correct safeguards and controls in the curriculum, digital technology does not become impactful in the classroom. This happens in English major programs in Cambodia because there are no specific guidelines on the use of digital technology to help teachers implement it effectively. Furthermore, classroom facilities are not well equipped for technological teaching and learning. On top of inadequate integration, teachers' lack of training or motivation can also become an impediment to language learning. Another challenge that is common in digital learning is related to administrative issues. In some cases, learners and teachers tend to forget their passwords to access the learning platform, making it difficult to continue with digital classrooms. Teachers are also sometimes forced to revert to analog teaching methods which have been proven ineffective compared to teaching using digital content (Rahman, 2015).

### **Recommendations for Adopting Digital Technology in English Major Programs**

Despite its integration into language teaching and learning, digital technology still has many unexplored potentials that can be tapped to smooth the teaching and learning process in English major programs in Cambodia which need successful integration of technology to allow learners to improve their foreign language skills. Teachers are, therefore, recommended to implement a technology plan that adopts a range of digital technologies to teach students in Cambodian universities bearing in mind that they are effective in different

ways. Digital technology should be a core element of the learning process through which knowledge is passed to learners (Ahmadi & Reza, 2018). Teachers in Cambodian universities should ensure that they use digital technology more often in the learning process to catch learners' attention and create more interactive classrooms. Teachers should also urge learners to utilize digital technology to develop their foreign language skills as technology also provides a platform where students can learn from each other. Furthermore, teachers play a crucial role in dictating the path used by learners to acquire their language skills.

Meanwhile, universities should embrace technology as an integral part of teaching and learning programs. English major programs can benefit massively if university departments or schools adopt digital learning practices to enable learners to consult digital spaces for more knowledge. Another recommendation is to ensure that any technology plan is closely aligned with the curriculum standards. Integration of digital technology in the learning and teaching process can only happen when the curriculum is considered. The digital technology applied should be aligned with the curriculum standards to ensure that learners are systematically taught as recommended by the education quality controllers (Matorerra, 2018). To ensure that technology is aligned with the curriculum, teachers should seek ways to assist students by applying a learner-centered rather than teacher-centered approach. A digital learner-centered educational approach can ensure that learners are given priority in the teaching and learning process.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter has identified the roles of digital technology in English major programs in Cambodia. It has been established that the programs utilize Quizlet, Facebook, Telegram, and Flipgrid, among others, as key digital tools for teaching English as a foreign language in Cambodia. The web-based applications are created to ensure creative and exciting interactions between teachers, learners, and digital technology. Developments such as CALL, MALL, and RAL have played a significant role in teaching foreign languages. The inventions have enabled students to collaborate, construct knowledge, and build communities. Learners are presented with opportunities to interact with other learners on a similar mission towards language learning. Digital

technology has also allowed real-time feedback on assessment procedures, making it easy to track progress. Digital technology continues to present ample opportunities to be explored in language learning and teaching. Therefore, using digital technology for language learning in Cambodia should be enhanced. No doubt, learners are likely to learn more effectively through the use of digital technology than through other traditional teaching methods.

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# The Effectiveness of the Gallery Walk Technique in EFL Speaking Classes

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## Abstract

This chapter presents an overview of a literature review on the use of the Gallery Walk technique in English language classes. This chapter aims to review the steps of using Gallery Walk in speaking classes and summarize the findings of previous studies about the effectiveness of the Gallery Walk technique to improve students' English-speaking skills. To search for relevant literature, the researcher conducted a keyword search on Google, Google Scholar, Z-Library, and ResearchGate. Based on the literature review, the use of Gallery Walk in speaking classes has yielded positive effects, such as helping students gain knowledge, engaging them in learning, improving their confidence level, improving their speaking skills, and building up the learning community.

**Keywords:** Gallery Walk; speaking skills; EFL classes; effectiveness

## Introduction

According to Moore and Bounchan (2010), many Cambodian students thought that English is an essential language for the development of Cambodia and for the status of English learners. There are four skills in learning the English language: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Speaking is a very important skill that students need to master to ensure effective communication across languages. Hughes (2006, p. 144) stated that “speaking is the first mode in which children acquire language, part of the daily involvement of most people with language activities, and the prime motor of language change”. Bashir et al. (2011) also noted that “by speaking, we do not mean merely uttering words through the mouth. It means conveying the message through words of mouth” (p. 38). Bashir et al. (2011) added that speaking has played a pivotal role in human life. It is a process of expressing ideas.

Research has shown that many students face many difficulties when expressing themselves in English (see Heng, 2017). This is because “the teaching of English consists mainly of learning correct grammatical structures or forms, increasing vocabulary, working on exercises at the sentence level, and asking students to repeat similar structures over and over” (Katemba & Buli, 2018, p. 98). English is now a global language that spreads across the world. It is spoken by people around the world. In Cambodia, English is not only used for communication and work, but it is also used in the education system to prepare students for their future employment (Igawa, 2008). English is now introduced to the school curriculum as early as grade 4 (Amaro & Chheng, 2017). Despite this, many Cambodian students have been found to face many challenges in using English in speaking (Nhim, 2021).

Chamnan (2017) found several causes of difficulties for Cambodian students when they try to speak English. The difficulties were related to students' motivation, teachers' teaching techniques, a limited English environment, and students' lack of time to speak English. Chamnan (2017) also found that students' difficulties were related to their shyness to speak English, their lack of opportunities to use it, and their limited vocabulary. Furthermore, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) found that teaching a crowded class was one of the reasons that made Cambodian students less active in participating in classes. In a large class, not every student could speak at the same time because when one student is

speaking, others need to try to listen to him or her. According to Bailey (2003), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers used teacher-talking time from 50 to 80 percent during the lesson, leaving little time for students to practice speaking English.

Putri (2020) also found that students faced problems speaking English in classes because of their self-perceptions about the language. Specifically, they had the belief that it was hard to speak English. Moreover, other students said that they had a problem with their class performance, making them feel afraid of speaking in front of the class. Putri (2020) also showed that some students feared making mistakes because they felt nervous with English pronunciation and were afraid of being laughed at by their classmates.

Considering the challenges in speaking English faced by many students, this chapter aims to examine a speaking technique, called the Gallery Walk, to understand its effectiveness and the challenges in applying it in EFL classrooms. The chapter is based on a review of previous studies on the Gallery Walk and on the author's master thesis conducted to fulfill the requirements of his master's degree.

### **What Is the Gallery Walk?**

According to Dinata and Anggraini (2017), Gallery Walk is a technique in which the students have a chance to leave their seats, walk around the class to look at other students' work, give comments and ask questions to other groups, and share their ideas with the class. Based on Makmuna et al. (2020), Gallery Walk is a kind of strategy that can motivate students to learn actively, work within groups and peers collaboratively, and promote their critical thinking, as they are more likely to share their ideas with peers when engaging in Gallery Walk. Furthermore, the Gallery Walk technique provides students with time to work together in a small group, share their ideas or answers with other students, and enjoy moving around the class (Anwar, 2015).

## How to Use the Gallery Walk

According to Francek (2011), as cited in Anwar (2015, p. 77), to implement Gallery Walk in English classes, the following steps are necessary:

1. The teacher gives students the sheets or cartons, glue, and different colored pens and discusses questions as the learning materials.
2. The teacher groups the students into small groups of 4 or 5 students and provides each group with different colored pens.
3. Learners design their gallery and work on the question or topic provided.
4. Learners move from one chart to another as individuals, in groups, or by being assigned directions to move randomly by the teacher.
5. Learners have a small group discussion about their observations after they have responded to all the charts and taken notes on their observations on a worksheet.
6. Lastly, everyone discusses the activity as a whole class.

Bowman (2015, p. 1) provided general instructions for Gallery Walk as follows:

Before the training, tape a number of large sheets of chart paper to the walls of the training room. Space the chart pages so that learners have to walk from one chart to another. Label each chart with a question, statement, or issue related to the topic. While upbeat music plays (optional), learners walk around the room writing their responses on the charts.

In addition, Bowman (2015) mentioned that teachers can provide students with a direction to move or allow them to move randomly. Students can also engage in the Gallery Walk activity as individuals or in small groups. After they have “written on all the charts, they take a ‘gallery walk’ or tour of the room, reading the charts and jotting down their observations on a worksheet. Participants then spend a short period of time in small groups discussing their observations” (p. 1). Finally, teachers can discuss the activity with the whole class and ask students to share the discussion that they had during the activity. The following questions can be used in the whole class discussion:

- What interesting things did you notice as you read the charts?

- What written items were listed on more than one chart?
- What was something that you expected or didn't expect?
- What were some apparent patterns?
- What is a question you still have? (Bowman, 2015, p. 2)

## **The Effectiveness of the Gallery Walk**

Research has shown that Gallery Walk is one of the effective techniques that can enhance students' speaking skills in English classes. In fact, Gallery Walk provides a lot of benefits for English language students, as discussed in the following sections.

### ***Improve Students' Knowledge***

Namazandost et al. (2018) stated that students who focused on teamwork in the Gallery Walk activities learned better than those who did not. In other words, Gallery Walk helps students learn the target language more effectively. Similarly, Othman and Mohdrazzi (2020) found that when teachers used Gallery Walk in their speaking classes, their students could improve their knowledge by 25 percent and increase their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar by 19 percent. They justified that there was a lot of information that students learned through interacting with their group and visiting the galleries during the activity. Additionally, the students have improved their vocabulary and grammar through participating in Gallery Walk activities and listening to other students' presentations.

### ***Engage Students in Learning***

Othman and Mohdrazzi (2020) mentioned that Gallery Walk is an interesting teaching technique that allows students to have fun, communicate with others, and get to know each other well during the discussion; therefore, they liked and wanted to participate in Gallery Walk activities. More importantly, the class was well organized and more engaged when the Gallery Walk technique was used (Otoyo, 2018). The students could also remember the lesson easily and be actively involved in learning activities with their classmates during the repetition session. The Gallery Walk activities made students motivated, active, and interested in learning through speaking activities (Dinata & Anggraini,

2017; Otoyo, 2018). Dinata and Anggraini (2017), for example, stated that the students became involved in learning when they shared their ideas or communicated in English with guided questions and expressions. Otoyo (2018) added that the students were active and enjoyable in the learning process when their teachers used attractive teaching materials such as pictures, posters, and laptops in the Gallery Walk activities. Katemba and Buli (2018) also found that Gallery Walk engaged students in learning as they could move around the classroom and share their opinions about the galleries. Similarly, Namaziandost et al. (2018) claimed that the Gallery Walk technique attracted students' attention because they got out of their seats and moved around the class to visit the galleries.

### ***Improve Student's Confidence in Speaking***

Othman and Mohdrazzi (2020) showed in their experimental research that students improved their confidence level by 37 percent after engaging in Gallery Walk activities. They felt more confident in speaking because they were given time to express their ideas and knowledge without any fear. According to Namaziandost et al. (2018), Gallery Walk was not a formal class so that the students could enjoy and speak freely in front of the class. Puspitasari's (2019) research also revealed that Gallery Walk was a good technique that encouraged students to speak by using the target language to express their ideas and thoughts. Hakim (2019) also showed that the Gallery Walk helped students feel free to speak or express their views and communicate with others in the class.

### ***Build up the Learning Community***

According to Hakim (2019), by working as a team in the Gallery Walk activities, students found it easier to share their ideas, information, and knowledge with others because there was a learning community in which they could work together as a team to complete the task, teach each other, and learn things they had never encountered. In fact, Gallery Walk encourages teamwork among the students who help each other as well as gain knowledge in various ways (Othman & Mohdrazzi, 2020). Othman and Mohdrazzi (2020) also mentioned that when students worked in teams or groups, each member was excited to study and participate in class activities more collaboratively than in normal classes.

### ***Enhance Students' Speaking Skills***

Researchers who used the Gallery Walk technique in their experiment found that students' speaking skills had improved. For example, Anwar (2015) conducted classroom action research with first graders and found that the Gallery Walk technique enhanced students' speaking skills. Dinata and Anggraini (2017) also found that after implementing the Gallery Walk technique in speaking classes, there was a considerable improvement in students' speaking skills. Other studies (Katemba & Buli, 2018; Namaziandost et al., 2018; Puspitasari, 2019) also indicated that Gallery Walk had a positive impact on EFL students' speaking skills. Therefore, in general, the Gallery Walk technique helps students to improve their speaking skills.

### **The Challenges of Using the Gallery Walk**

Despite its effectiveness, Gallery Walk is a technique like any other teaching strategy that has its own weaknesses and strengths. Majiasih (2012) stated that Gallery Walk is a technique in which teachers need to expend more energy to monitor and control students' movements, while it is also time-consuming. Therefore, teachers will find it difficult to control students' movements in order to make the technique particularly suitable to the elementary level, where students tend to move around more often. Lack of student participation is also an issue as some group members may not take part in the discussion or talk about subjects other than what should be discussed.

In addition, as Otoyoy (2018) stated, some students are introverted and do not like interacting with others. Another issue is that this technique requires hard work on the part of the teachers who need to prepare for it well to ensure its effectiveness. Therefore, when preparing students for a Gallery Walk activity, teachers need to ensure that group leaders in Gallery Walk activities understand their responsibility to solicit responses from all group members during the discussion.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This chapter has discussed the effectiveness of the Gallery Walk technique in

EFL speaking classes. As the discussion shows, previous studies have indicated that Gallery Walk is a good technique that is helpful to improve EFL students' speaking skills. Specifically, Gallery Walk can offer some benefits, such as helping students gain knowledge, engaging them in learning, improving their confidence level, building up the learning community, and improving students' speaking skills. Despite some challenges, it is recommended that this speaking technique should be put into practice in the Cambodian EFL classroom setting.

Teaching and learning speaking skills are not easy for both teachers and students in EFL classes. Teachers may find it difficult to teach speaking skills because they have problems with teaching methods or techniques, and students may face various challenges in speaking, such as shyness, being stuck in sharing ideas, and having a limited vocabulary. Therefore, to overcome these challenges, teachers and all stakeholders involved in helping students to learn to improve their English skills should find ways to address the challenges.

To effectively implement this technique, English teachers should know clearly how to implement it before applying it to their classes. For example, they should prepare the teaching and learning materials beforehand and try to make the class enjoyable during the lesson. More importantly, they should understand that when using Gallery Walk, they are the facilitator, controller, and guide to help students engage in the discussion. Teachers should also keep motivating students to speak to help them overcome their speaking challenges and shyness.

In conclusion, as this chapter is based on a review of past studies, future research, including classroom research, should be conducted to explore how the Gallery Walk technique can be applied in Cambodian EFL classes and how effective it is in helping students to enhance their English-speaking skills.

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## **Part 3:**

### **Key Issues in Education**

# Critical Thinking: An Essential-Yet-Missing Skill Among Cambodian Students

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## Abstract

This chapter aims to examine the necessity of critical thinking skills in the Cambodian educational context. It starts by providing some definitions of critical thinking, demonstrating the demand for this skill, and explaining why critical thinking is important. The chapter also discusses the current status of critical thinking skills in the Cambodian educational context before offering some suggestions for policymakers, teachers, and students themselves to promote critical thinking skills among Cambodian students.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking skills; Cambodian students; Cambodia

## Introduction

Globalization, technological advancement, and communication evolution have improved our living standards; however, these developments have also brought about challenges for us to overcome. To stay current with these fast-paced developments and to tackle the pressing problems, we need to upgrade ourselves with flexible and advanced skills and knowledge. Critical thinking skills must be taken into account to generate well-informed decisions, minimize unintended consequences, and produce common social benefits. Apparently, lacking this type of critical skill will make it difficult to build the human capital needed to drive socioeconomic development.

This chapter puts critical thinking skills into perspective by discussing their importance in the 21st century. It also examines how this skill is learned and taught in the Cambodian context. The chapter argues that there is a lack of critical thinking skills among Cambodian students. Based on this argument, this chapter offers several suggestions on how to promote critical thinking skills among Cambodian students.

## Defining Critical Thinking

Critical thinking has been defined based on different contexts and perspectives by researchers in the field. According to the American Psychological Association (2020), *critical thinking* is defined as “a form of directed, problem-focused thinking in which the individual tests ideas or possible solutions for errors or drawbacks. It is essential to such activities as examining the validity of a hypothesis or interpreting the meaning of research results” (n.p.). Critical thinking can be about trying to solve a problem with logical thoughts and considerations for the consequences. In a philosophical context, Ennis (1987) defines critical thinking as “reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” based on five key ideas: practical, reflective, reasonable, belief, and action (p. 10). In a cognitive psychological context, critical thinking is defined as “seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms your ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth” (Willingham, 2008, p. 8). In the academic world, critical thinking can involve identifying links between ideas,

analyzing points of view, evaluating arguments, supporting evidence, reasoning, and drawing conclusions (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

Fisher (2011) considers critical thinking “critico-creative thinking” because of two specific reasons (p. 14). One is because it focuses on our only interest in criticizing people’s ideas and opinions, whereas the other considers it as thinking creatively and imaginatively by looking at alternative options, considerations, and possibilities beyond faults. The individual level of critical thinking ability can be recognized through various characteristics as seen in Table 8.1.

**Table 8.1**

*Characteristics of Critical Thinking (Baker et al., 2001, as cited in Rahmatina et al., 2019, p. 3).*

| No. | Indicator           | Sub Indicator                                                                |
|-----|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Analysis            | 1.1 Identifying unstated assumptions                                         |
|     |                     | 1.2 Identifying logical fallacies                                            |
|     |                     | 1.3 Identifying ambiguous claims or arguments                                |
| 2   | Inference           | 2.1 Distinguishing relevant from irrelevant information, claims, and reasons |
|     |                     | 2.2 Distinguishing between verifiable facts and value claims                 |
| 3   | Evaluation          | 3.1 Determining factual accuracy of a statement                              |
|     |                     | 3.2 Determining credibility of a source                                      |
| 4   | Inductive Reasoning | 4.1 Determining the strength of an argument or claim                         |
|     |                     | 4.2 Detecting bias                                                           |
| 5   | Deductive Reasoning | 5.1 Recognizing logical inconsistencies in a line of reasoning               |

## **The Demand for Critical Thinking Skills**

The demand for critical thinking skills among individuals has increased over the years. A report by the Foundation for Young Australians (2015) noted that the demand for critical thinking skills in new graduates has risen by 158% in three years from 2012 to 2015. The report also revealed that critical thinking has been anticipated to be an in-demand skill in the lead up to 2025 by employers (World Economic Forum, 2020). A study about the importance of critical thinking perceived by 189 European employers also found that critical thinking is valued not only for professional success but also for personal improvement and the common good (Penkauskienė et al., 2019).

However, not all countries have a better ranking for critical thinking skills despite the trend of having to equip students with the skills for employment or development purposes. Research has shown that 85% of teachers worldwide felt critical thinking skills were missing among students before the beginning of university (Stewart, 2014). In Thailand, there has been a concern that the country's competitiveness will continue to drop due to the lack of emphasis on the teaching of critical thinking skills (Chaitrong, 2019).

## **Why Are Critical Thinking Skills Necessary?**

Critical thinking skills can have positive impacts on individuals and societies. When individuals are well-aware of how to apply critical thinking skills in their lives, challenges can be viewed as opportunities. Considering how decisions are made on a daily basis, critical thinkers will not reach a decision that is hasty or based on inadequate details. They usually collect as much relevant information as they can and then analyze the data to weigh the risks against the benefits so that they can make informed decisions. Another instance is that we can look into how different it is between critical thinkers and people with less critical thinking when making decisions on any issue. In classes, critical thinking has been found to be strongly associated with academic performance (Ghazivakili et al., 2014). With critical thinking skills, students can think effectively and rationally to find the best actions or solutions possible, which is vital for academic success (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). In workplace settings, even though critical thinking is not usually explicitly required for recruitment, people with critical thinking skills are desired because this skill

can increase the productivity and capabilities of employees (Murawski, 2014). In essence, this skill is helpful for individuals' success, problem-solving skills, readiness, decision-making, and competitiveness to match the future job markets.

Moreover, when people have a good understanding of critical thinking in their daily lives, they will help foster a healthy social environment. Current social problems might occur due to misunderstanding and confusion among individuals or groups, potentially leading to chaos in society. It is possible to say that unclear assumptions and fallacies are often committed when people do not think critically or have an in-depth understanding of an issue before reaching a decision. Noticeably, the so-called bandwagon effect, a tendency in which people primarily follow the majority on certain beliefs and behaviors (American Psychological Association, 2020), often happens in Cambodian society where fake news is relatively rampant. This cognitive bias can cause damage to society if many people consume fake news without considering the credibility of the sources of information. Thus, using critical thinking skills is considered to be the most important tool to fight fake news (Machete & Turpin, 2020).

In addition, emphasizing critical thinking in education can potentially increase society's effectiveness in addressing national and international issues. It is believed that utilizing critical thinking skills helps people know how to deal with the challenges in their lives. They will become logical and rational people who can take part in solving problems together through critical analysis. Critical thinking also promotes economic dynamics and can strengthen individuals' competitiveness for employment opportunities. Moreover, the interconnection between STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and critical thinking is undeniable because critical thinking is related to analyzing information to discover alternative solutions or ideas. In fact, critical thinking matches the nature of STEM which actively involves students in applying concepts and knowledge from various disciplines in an integrated way to solve problems (Hafni et al., 2020).

## **Critical Thinking Skills in the Cambodian Context**

The Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) has integrated some strategies into the policy plan to develop the human capital required to support Cambodia's vision to become an upper middle-income country by 2030. For example, MoEYS developed the Teacher Professional Standards Guidelines to encourage all educators to give students opportunities to learn about problem-solving as well as critical and creative thinking skills to expand their capacity to match the trend of globalization and the demand for quality human resources (The Phnom Penh Post, 2016). In the Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023, MoEYS mentioned that it has continued to minimize skills gaps by encouraging the development of teaching methods that favor high-order thinking skills (i.e., critical thinking and creative thinking), inquiry-based learning, and STEM approaches to strengthen the quality of education (MoEYS, 2019).

Despite these efforts, students may not be really interested in cultivating this important skill because of the practice of traditional teaching methods which center around memorization and rote learning rather than critical thinking and inquiry-based learning. There is a Cambodian conservative idea that education means introducing traditional beliefs and disciplines (Chea & Chen, 2021). Many teachers still have weak curriculum knowledge, deficient pedagogical skills, and limited professionalism and professional development opportunities (King, 2018). The concern about the lack of critical thinking among Cambodian students is also felt in higher education. It has been reported that some university lecturers have expressed concerns that students are unable to think critically and express their ideas clearly (The Phnom Penh Post, 2020). In consequence, actions should be taken to promote critical thinking skills among Cambodian students.

### **Suggestions to Promote Critical Thinking Skills Among Cambodian Students**

First, the government and relevant ministries, specifically MoEYS, should consider improving the school curriculum to introduce the concept of critical thinking skills as early as possible. By promoting the study of critical thinking skills in the school curriculum, students will have ample opportunities to learn

and develop the critical thinking skills needed to succeed in higher education and in the world of work in the future (Kenney, 2013). There is also a need to promote extracurricular activities in schools to provide students with hands-on experience that can help them connect their thinking to a real-world context. MoEYS should also continue to invest in teachers' capacity development to enhance their skills, including technical and pedagogical skills, to ensure the lessons can be effectively conducted and students can learn to develop their critical thinking skills successfully.

Second, teachers should promote thinking-based discussion, self-assessment, and reflection in delivering their lessons. Walker (2003) has provided three instructional methods applicable to promoting critical thinking and problem-solving in the class. They include questioning, classroom discussion and debates, and written assignments. Some positive attitudes toward students from teachers such as encouraging students to question and challenge existing beliefs, structures, and practices will also help them to develop critical-thinking skills (Smyth, 2000).

Third, students themselves can improve their critical thinking skills by learning to ask questions, identify assumptions, gather as much information from credible sources as possible, and draw out implications when analyzing context or making a decision. In fact, these skills can be practiced even in our daily lives when we need to make a decision. Training ourselves to be critical thinkers takes time because this skill is built on self-practice and experience, but once we can apply it, it is certain that we will possess one of the most valuable treasures in our lives.

## **Conclusion**

Indeed, the need to promote critical thinking is necessary for the future of Cambodia because of its immense contribution to the growth of individuals and society. As STEM education is promoted, critical thinking should be considered as a basis for the improvement of the education system. Promoting critical thinking will help increase opportunities for students or individuals who later serve as catalysts for development and solutions to the challenges that may arise in the near and far future.

In conclusion, this chapter has not only discussed the importance of critical thinking in this ever-evolving society but also identified the current challenges and suggestions that should be considered to ensure that students can improve their critical thinking skills. However, as the arguments in this chapter are extracted from secondary sources, future research should be conducted to explore strategies that can be implemented to promote critical thinking skills among Cambodian students.

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# The Importance of Reading for Pleasure for Cambodian Students

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## Abstract

Reading is a skill to gather knowledge. It involves a process of thinking, evaluating, judging, imagining, reasoning, and problem-solving. All reading creates change; however, reading for pleasure makes the most effective change. Reading for pleasure is not just something practiced in schools, but it is a skill that can provide more opportunities for students to become lifelong readers. However, many Cambodian students seem to lack a reading habit, for they only read when it is required by their teachers. This chapter attempts to highlight the concept of reading for pleasure and its importance. It also provides insights into the reading habits of Cambodian students. The chapter concludes with a discussion of suggestions for promoting reading habits among Cambodian students.

**Keywords:** Reading for pleasure; reading habits; Cambodian students

## Introduction

Reading is one of the skills needed to gather knowledge (Sadiku, 2015). According to Balan et al. (2019), the ability to read is essential to self-education and lifelong learning. In the context of a student-centered teaching approach, especially at the tertiary education level, students are supposed to do a lot of reading. That is why excelling in reading skills matters for their academic performance and their ability to learn independently. In this regard, universities are now demanding greater sophistication in reading skills from students because reading can help them improve their academic performance. Sadiku (2015) noted that spending time to read for at least an hour a day helped students expose themselves to various writing styles and new vocabularies.

There is a relationship between reading habits and academic achievement in university. That is why many educators such as professors, lecturers, instructors, and teachers tend to encourage their students to develop good reading habits to improve their understanding and critical thinking skills. Bridges (2014) mentioned that “a good leader always has a good reading habit or is known as a good reader. Indeed, it is hard to find successful people who are not good readers” (p. 7). One of the benefits of reading is that it plays a critical role in broadening our knowledge and understanding.

Previous studies have shown that students’ reading habits have decreased in recent decades (Gambrell, 2005; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007, as cited in Sun, 2019). According to Iftanti (2012), most students were not so interested in reading because there was less motivation from their parents and teachers. For example, some parents do not value reading because they are busy with their jobs and do not have time for their children.

According to Rohmatilla (2014), various factors can cause readers have difficulty in reading. They include new vocabularies, different forms of written and spoken language, the complexity of word usage, and the limited knowledge of readers, among other factors. Consequently, some readers give up on their reading, while others cannot even finish reading a book. In addition, it was found that students who had difficulties with reading could not perform well within their academic year (Akyol et al., 2014). However, students are likely to be able to improve their reading habits if they read for pleasure because

they will be able to choose any reading materials that fit their level of understanding and areas of interest.

This chapter attempts to highlight the concept of reading for pleasure and its importance as well as provides insights into the reading habits of Cambodian students. The chapter also offers suggestions for promoting reading habits, particularly in the Cambodian educational context.

### **The Concept of Reading for Pleasure**

Many scholars and researchers have made attempts to define the term “reading for pleasure.” Nell (1988) defined reading for pleasure as a form of play that enables readers to gain new experiences and imaginations from other worlds. Similarly, Clark and Rumbold (2006) defined reading for pleasure as “reading that we do of our own free will, anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading. It also refers to reading that having begun at someone else’s request we continue because we are interested in it” (p. 6). The process of reading for pleasure has also been described by other researchers as a type of play that allows readers to experience different roles in their imagination as well as develop creativity (Holden, 2004; Nell, 1988). In short, reading for pleasure could be defined as a kind of reading in which readers are free to select any reading materials based on their preference, and they usually do it in their free time. This can help them to develop a good reading habit.

### **The Importance of Reading for Pleasure**

Reading plays a central role in education, and it prepares individuals to be victorious in different areas of life and in every aspect of education (Owusu-Achew & Larson, 2014). Reading involves the processes of thinking, evaluating, judging, imagining, reasoning, and problem-solving (Palini, 2012). It can help promote healthy behaviors of the readers by improving their academic success and, at the same time, it helps in reducing depression (Dowrick et al., 2012, as cited in Mak & Fancourt, 2019). I believe all types of reading can create change; however, reading for pleasure may make the most effective change. For example, reading for pleasure is not just something needed in schools, but it provides students with the opportunity to become lifelong readers (Lurie, 2018), as they not only read for school requirements but also as part of their

reading habits. In addition, they have more choices when selecting books to read based on their preferences and interests. As a result, they seem to learn more rather than just review lessons in class. Moreover, as Djikic et al. (2012) found, reading for pleasure enabled young people to change their minds, obtain more knowledge, and open up to different imaginary worlds. Reading for pleasure has been found to make significant progress in learning vocabulary, spelling, and mathematics among children who like reading (Sullivan & Brown, 2013).

### **Reading Habits of Cambodian Students**

Since Cambodia is still a developing country, some Cambodian people are not really interested in reading (GlobalGiving, n.d.). One reason that lies behind this problem is Cambodia's tragic past as the country went through prolonged civil war and a genocidal regime, called the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979). During that period, about 90 percent of scholars and teachers were killed, and libraries and documentaries were destroyed (GlobalGiving, n.d.). Consequently, many educated people were killed, and reading is not part of everyone's daily activity. Unlike people in some developed countries, such as Japan, South Korea, the United States, and many countries in Europe, Cambodians do not seem to have a culture of reading while traveling and sitting on a plane or a bus (Sen, 2015).

According to Ban (2019), a lot of young Cambodians only read when given tasks by their teachers. They often read to prepare for examinations, while few young Cambodians spend their free time reading for pleasure. An article published by the Sydney Review of Books that was cited in Ban (2019) showed that Cambodian people do not like reading books, and they seem to spend more time on social media platforms, especially when more and more people have access to social media. In fact, by January 2021, the number of social media users in Cambodia has increased to 12 million which is equivalent to 71.3% of the total population (Kemp, 2020). This is understandable because entertainment is a major reason for people to use social media.

Likewise, Sun's (2019) study has shown that while the frequency of reading among students in Cambodia is high, the number of books they have finished is still low. In addition, some Cambodian students tend to give up on their

reading when they get bored and have difficulties with their reading materials. For instance, foreign languages like English are seen as a big challenge for Cambodian students to develop a reading habit (Sun, 2019). Sun also suggested that students should find their favorite reading materials with a level comparable to their current level of knowledge and a good reading environment to read in. They should continue reading until it becomes a habit.

### **Suggestions for Promoting Reading Habits Among Cambodian Students**

No doubt, literacy is considered one of the most important elements contributing to national development. However, there is a lack of reading culture in Cambodia, especially among students from primary to high school levels. This issue requires interventions from concerned stakeholders such as government agencies, non-governmental organizations, teachers, librarians, parents, and students themselves (The Cambodia Daily, 2010; Siv, 2016, as cited in Sun, 2019).

To promote reading habits among Cambodian students, three ministries, such as the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, the Ministry of Fine Arts, and the Ministry of Information, have initiated an event called the Cambodia Book Fair since 2011. The event aims to promote a reading culture among Cambodian youth. The Cambodia Book Fair is held annually for three days at the National Library of Cambodia. This event has drawn the public's attention to reading (Ban, 2019). In fact, the number of people who joined this event quickly increased, from around 1,000 attendees in 2011 to around 160,000 attendees in 2019 (Mark, 2019). Besides holding this annual event, the Cambodian government, especially MoEYS, should pay more attention to libraries in schools across the country by ensuring that the librarians are active, and students have easy access to those libraries. Moreover, more books such as historical, fictional, educational, or motivational books should be put in school libraries, so students will have the opportunity to read different types of books and reading materials. This helps develop their reading habits.

Encouraging students to love reading involves actions not only from the government but also from other stakeholders such as schools, parents, and the community. The availability of school or public libraries across the country plays a crucial role in motivating students to read as well. According to Iftanti

(2012), most children do not possess a reading habit due in part to a lack of motivation from their parents and teachers. In this sense, parents play a vital role in encouraging and motivating their children to read and develop a reading habit. Children will be able to adopt a reading habit if their parents like reading because they will likely follow their parents who serve as their role models (Ban, 2019). Baker and Scher (2002) also noted that children would spend their free time reading at home if books and reading activities were valued by their parents. Hence, parents should spend some time encouraging their children to read more and adopt a reading habit at home. To achieve this, home libraries are very important because they can help children to develop a culture of reading and learning at home. Moreover, parents can observe how their children learn and read and offer support when needed.

As a key factor in motivating students to read, schools should also pay more attention and offer more support to promote a reading culture among Cambodian students. In particular, schools should provide convenient libraries where students can freely access different kinds of reading materials and resources. In addition, schools should establish some opportunities to encourage students to read more in their free time, such as by initiating reading competitions for them to challenge one another. Meanwhile, school teachers are supposed to provide students with more reading materials and handouts to help them learn more and broaden their knowledge rather than acquire only what has been taught in class.

Furthermore, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also play a crucial role in promoting a reading habit among students in Cambodia, especially among school children. Room to Read, for example, was founded in 2000 and brought to Cambodia in 2002 with a commitment to help Cambodia rebuild its educational system through a partnership with MoEYS (Room to Read, n.d.). Room to Read Cambodia has published many children's books in Khmer. Similarly, American Corners has also endeavored to encourage a reading habit among Cambodian people. At present, there are four American Corners, which feature a diverse collection of English-language books and materials focusing on the United States. These American Corners offer opportunities for Cambodians to access various documentaries and many other reading materials. Thus, given their important roles, NGOs in Cambodia should offer more programs to encourage youth who are passionate about reading to

promote reading habits through training projects or any reading campaigns. Furthermore, NGOs should provide funds to build village libraries in rural areas to help students or children who find it hard to access libraries.

For students, they need to be aware of the importance of reading as it will contribute to their academic success. They should try to develop a reading habit in their free time. Moreover, they should find other reading materials besides school textbooks and what has been required at schools. Similarly, as Owusu-Acheaw and Larson (2014) recommended, students should read magazines instead of reading only textbooks because reading magazines helps to cool and relax their brains and make them live a disciplined life in school. Furthermore, students should have clear expectations and purposes for learning something from what they are reading. For example, they are likely to read for pleasure if they have the ability to read and have positive expectations from having the right book selection (Nell, 1988).

## **Conclusion**

Reading for pleasure is something that people do in their free time with their preferred reading materials. It is very important for students as it helps them to obtain more knowledge and develop a reading habit. However, in Cambodia, many students do not have much interest in reading; most tend to read only when it is required by their teachers or lecturers. To promote a reading culture, the Cambodian government has introduced some initiatives, including the Cambodia Book Fair, to encourage young Cambodians to engage in more reading. To further promote reading among Cambodian students, all stakeholders have a crucial role to play.

Parents as role models can encourage their children to develop a reading habit. Schools should also provide students with more reading materials and handouts to encourage them to read. At the same time, non-governmental organizations should contribute to developing reading habits among Cambodian students by offering programs aimed at promoting reading in similar ways to what Room to Read Cambodia and the American Corners have done.

Overall, while these stakeholders need to do more to help Cambodian students develop reading habits, students themselves should be convinced of the benefits of reading for pleasure and try to engage in reading as much as they can. They need to be proactive in seeking opportunities to develop their reading habits, and they should understand that through reading, they will be able to develop the knowledge needed to function and compete in the ever-changing society of the 21st century.

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# Parental Involvement in Children's Education: Benefits, Challenges, and Ways Forward

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## Abstract

Parental involvement is one of the most effective strategies for developing the quality of education. Many research studies have pointed out the many benefits of parental involvement in enhancing children's academic achievement. Nevertheless, this is not yet widely discussed in the Cambodian context. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the key benefits and challenges of parental involvement. It also discusses ways forward to promote the practice of parental involvement in children's education in Cambodia. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to raise awareness that there is a need to promote parental involvement to support Cambodian children's education.

**Keywords:** Parental involvement; children's education; benefits; challenges; Cambodia

## **Introduction**

It is quite appealing that parental involvement plays a pivotal role in students' academic performance. Parental involvement, in general, has been believed to have a great deal of positive influence on students' academic success. According to Ngoun (2012), students' achievement is strongly linked to their parents' engagement in their study, regardless of their economic capital or social backgrounds; additionally, the presence of parental involvement is more important than their economic capital because parents' capital does not automatically guarantee students' academic success. Hence, to ensure children's future well-being, parents have to be involved in their children's studies, no matter how little they might be able to.

This chapter focuses on the advantages of parental involvement in children's education. It raises three main benefits: (a) improving children's study motivation, (b) enhancing education quality, and (c) fostering children's academic success. The chapter also discusses key barriers to parental involvement and provides some useful suggestions on how parental involvement can be encouraged in the Cambodian educational context, especially in the context of children's education.

## **What Is Parental Involvement?**

First of all, a definition of parental involvement is necessary. Balli (2016) mentioned that parental involvement is a broad concept, but parents have responsibilities for their children's improvement in education and social aspects. Parents may have different strategies to assist their children's learning. Though it might be challenging to keep their engagement with their children's learning, they should be more than ready to offer their help when their children need it. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) also noted that parental activities may vary from parents to parents, ranging from simple responses to teachers' requests to more engagement in school programs designed to increase students' learning time at home. Their involvement in their children's learning usually shows their own expectations and beliefs about what should be done in school. Moreover, they are involved in their children's studies because it is wanted, and they are convinced that their involvement may make a difference.

According to Driessen et al. (2005), there are two kinds of parental involvement: school-initiated and parent-initiated. The former is when schools provide extra resources in order to support students' learning and keep parents in contact, while the latter is when parents provide their own support for their children. However, Fan and Chen (2001) argued that the definition of parental involvement is unclear and inconsistent across different studies as it is very complicated to draw a general conclusion on its meaning, especially with the differences in operational definitions and measurements of parental involvement. To sum up, parental involvement is when parents offer their support and help physically and mentally whenever their children need it, no matter how little their support might be available to them.

### **The Importance and Benefits of Parental Involvement**

Parents can be involved in some small tasks such as checking homework, persuading children to join extracurricular activities, being active in parent-teacher meetings, and assisting their children in developing future learning plans. These can tremendously help their children to achieve academic success (Khajehpour & Ghazvini, 2011). There are a lot of benefits that can be gained from parental involvement in children's learning. Three main benefits are discussed in this chapter.

#### ***Improving Children's Study Motivation***

Gonzalez-DeHass et al. (2005) argued that when parents took part in their children's education, the children were more likely to be responsible for their learning. In addition, they were able to adopt a mastery goal orientation where they could take on more challenging work and get a sense of satisfaction from their work. For example, when parents got involved in their children's reading activities, the children could read more effectively and efficiently. Children were also likely to participate in the activities voluntarily, and they felt more motivated to work on their tasks. Yulianti et al. (2019) also mentioned that parents could provide motivational support to enhance their children's academic success despite their limited educational levels and socioeconomic status. Some parents are not well educated, and they might have some financial problems. However, parents can give their children praise when they do well

in school, and if they do not do well, parents can convince them to try harder and do better next time.

### *Enhancing Education Quality*

Werf et al. (2001) claimed that parental involvement is a useful initiative and an important factor in improving the quality of education, especially in developing countries. In Singapore, parental involvement used to be seen as unnecessary; however, since the late 1990s, it has received support and promotion from schools, parents, and the community (Khong & Ng, 2005). This has contributed to the success of the Singaporean education system. Likewise, it is particularly fascinating to look at parental involvement in Japan, where children consistently achieve good academic achievement. Japanese parents are highly motivated to assist their children's academic development, and various forms of parental involvement take place during their children's studies (Holloway et al., 2008).

In Cambodia, however, parents have been found to pay less attention to their children's learning, resulting in a high dropout rate among Cambodian students (Eng et al., 2016). Without sufficient parental involvement, many Cambodian students had to rely on their own individual motivation. Nonetheless, parent investment and interaction with schools were considered additional reasons facilitating Cambodian students' academic success (Inman et al., 2019). Therefore, as one of the developing countries in the world, Cambodia has to increase the quality of its education. It needs to take into account the role of parental involvement in education.

### *Fostering Children's Academic Success*

According to Herrell (2011), in spite of sharing some similar and different thoughts on the effectiveness of parental involvement, both parents and educators believed that in order to foster academic success for all students, they needed to enhance parental engagement in various ways. An educational partnership can foster mutual respect, advance shared interests, and facilitate communication between parents, teachers, and schools; moreover, this partnership can improve and support each other's skills in order to produce a

significant result for children's improvement (Driessen et al., 2005). Sapungan (2014) also stated that

[...] parent-teacher partnership makes tremendous impact on children's education. Conversely, the strong collaboration of parents with school authorities can create "tsunami of improvements" in both physical and academic performance of the school. Hence, school administrators have to boldly encourage parents to get involved and make "storm surge of contribution" to help achieve the school's missions and goals. (p. 45)

Cole (2008), similarly, noted that language students are likely to have better academic performance when they receive more parental input and involvement. Students can be more exposed to the target language, both in quality and quantity, when their parents also try to use the language with them at home. In short, students' academic success can be achieved when parents get involved in their children's learning. Despite this, there are many barriers to parent involvement in children's learning.

### **Challenges to Parental Involvement**

Most parents would like to help their children learn, but they may not be able to do so due to various challenges. First, there are financial problems and limited access to learning materials considered key barriers that obstruct parental involvement. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) argued that parental involvement is a complicated matter as it is shaped and limited by many barriers related to parents and families, children, teachers, and social issues. In order not to affect the effectiveness of parental involvement, educators should clearly understand these underlying factors. Second, Yulianti et al. (2019) noted that parents with a low level of education tended to see themselves as incapable and not self-efficacious as they did not have flexible working hours and faced financial issues, preventing them from being actively involved in their children's learning. The researchers also pointed out that working-class parents might have many troubles in their lives, especially an economic struggle, as they tended to think that their primary life task was to fulfill their children's basic needs such as providing food and accommodation. As a result, children of working-class parents tended to spend their leisure time doing fun activities that were arranged by themselves or by their friends because their parents did

not have much time and resources for them. For Cambodian parents, they also faced financial challenges, as they had to pay for private classes and additional fees frequently charged by teachers for test booklets and other study materials used in class (Inman et al., 2019).

Lastly, as Öztürk (2013) claimed, limited English proficiency and cultural differences could also be barriers to parental involvement. Therefore, teachers and schools have to find appropriate methods to get parents more involved in their children's learning because children can overcome different barriers by working collaboratively with their parents. Cultural beliefs can also be a great barrier to parental involvement in the context of Cambodia. According to Eng et al. (2014), for example, the main reason for low school participation and limited involvement of Cambodian parents in their children's studies is a cultural belief rather than ignorance. Many parents tend to believe that their children's academic success is controlled by fate, so they do not want to engage in their children's studies. This is not the correct way of thinking. In the past, many parents used to believe that girls should not pursue higher education and should just be good housewives. This kind of belief needs to be gotten rid of in order to promote parental involvement in children's education.

### **Ways Forward to Promote Parental Involvement**

According to UNICEF (2018), regardless of the limited financial resources, Cambodian parents can play an active role in guaranteeing their children's participation in school and ensuring their children's devotion to self-study at home. The report by UNICEF (2018) also pointed out that Cambodian parents valued parent-teacher meetings. Around 88% of them attended the meeting, for they believed that they could understand their children's academic progress throughout the meeting. This clearly shows that Cambodian parents have relatively high aspirations for their children's academic participation or performance. Balli (2016) also noted that parents knew that they should be more involved in their children's studies instead of just signing documents required by their school.

Additionally, some parents might not ask for cooperation, but schools should try to empathize with them and understand their perceptions. Procedures and practices should be implemented to inform and involve parents as a crucial part

of school structures (Balli, 2016). Schools can have extracurricular programs in which parents can participate with their children. Regular parent-teacher meetings should also be conducted. Having parents involved in school decision-making can give them a sense of responsibility for their children's learning.

Additionally, parents should be regularly informed of their children's academic progress. Sapungan (2014) strongly believed that when a school can conduct well-planned activities that parents can be involved in, it can provide a lot of positive and substantial benefits to children, parents, educators, and the school itself. It is of utmost importance that parents are given enough support from the school so that they can fully assist their children's education. Sothan (2018) also argued that Cambodian schools should implement programs that contribute to the enrichment of parent-school relations to promote students' academic performance, for schools alone are not enough to promote student learning. In this regard, parental involvement is a potential prerequisite for guaranteeing students' academic success.

Furthermore, parental involvement should be effectively done. Werf et al. (2001) claimed that there are some activities that parents could undertake to be effectively involved in their children's studies. These include assisting their children's homework completion, convincing them to read more, developing their children's attitudes toward learning and school, having their children attend school daily, helping the school financially and materialistically, maintaining the school order, and supporting the school policy. These activities can be easily done by parents. As Herrell (2011) stated,

To ensure effective parental involvement, schools may have partnership programs in place that continually develop, implement, evaluate, and improve plans and practices encouraging family and community involvement. There must be mutual trust and respect between the home, school, and community. Partnership programs within the school could train volunteers on specific ways and strategies to assist in the classroom or school. With this type of training, all volunteers would know the expectations and have a better understanding of the operations of the school. Schools need to attempt to involve numerous parents and community members in the education of students through effective

partnership programs in an effort of expressing the importance of education. (p. 99)

In sum, schools should let parents know that collaboration between schools and parents has to take place to benefit children's education. According to Arias and Campbell (2008), policymakers are recommended to (1) encourage the implementation of traditional parental involvement programs that are culturally and linguistically appropriate, (2) fund the programs that show a reflection of reciprocal involvement of school and parents, (3) support the professional teachers' preparation for curriculum design and improvement, and (4) foster community-based education programs that give parents information on school values and expectations. These could help parents become advocates for their children's learning. Therefore, in the context of Cambodia, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport shall initiate a campaign that can encourage all stakeholders and the local community to put in more efforts to encourage parents to actively engage in their children's studies, which can promote lifelong learning and contribute to improving the Cambodian education system (Nhek, 2021). To promote better parental involvement, the above approaches should be considered by the Education Ministry and other relevant stakeholders.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, parental involvement can greatly benefit the education of their children. Therefore, in order to ensure its effectiveness and bring about the best learning outcome for their children, parents should always have good partnerships with their children's teachers and school. They should also free some of their time to contribute to their children's learning by assisting their children in doing homework, joining parent-teacher meetings, and praising their work. For schools, they need to be aware of parents' diverse backgrounds and other barriers preventing them from being actively involved in their children's studies. Schools should also find ways to facilitate communication with parents to ensure that the latter are on track with their children's learning progress. Last but not least, as many parents in Cambodia are faced with different challenges, including the economic challenge and the many challenges induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and other concerned stakeholders, such as private companies, should offer scholarships or other

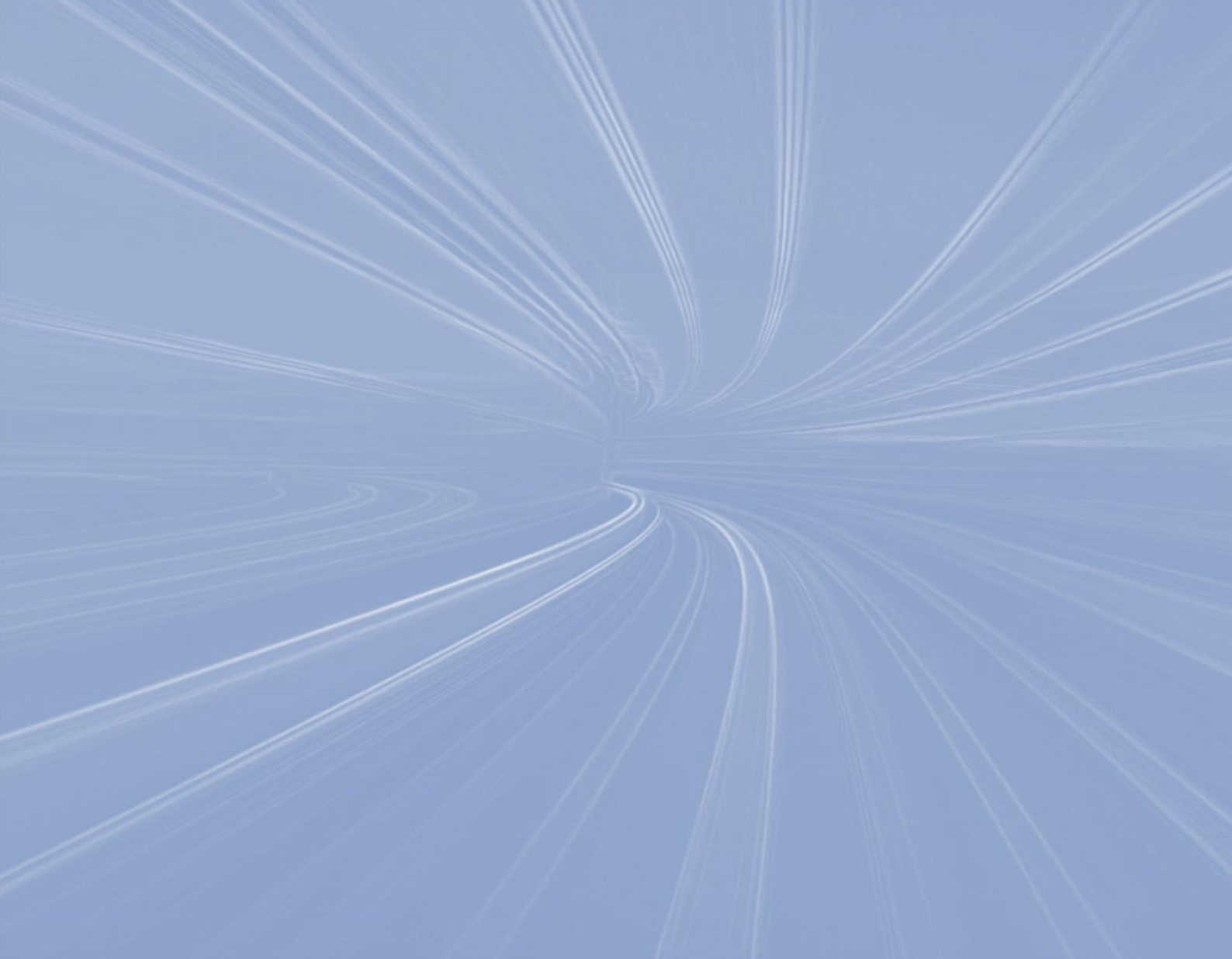
support to mitigate the struggle faced by Cambodian parents. The aim is to ensure that parents of Cambodian children, particularly those with low socioeconomic status, are supported and empowered so that they can actively participate in shaping and ensuring the success of their children's education.

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ISBN 978-9924-9834-3-9

