

Original Article

Challenges of teaching English as an additional language in high schools in Cambodia

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Abstract

As English is a lingua franca in Southeast Asia, the teaching of this international language has been identified as an important educational activity in Cambodia. This study examined the challenges of teaching English as an additional language in four public high schools in Cambodia. It investigated the significance of various aspects of the school environment and the attributes of teachers toward English language teaching. A mixed methods design was employed, and data were collected through a survey and semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that a dated curriculum, classroom overcrowding, immovable furniture, limited resources, and a lack of professional development contributed to the challenges in teaching English in Cambodian schools. The study concludes with recommendations for the Royal Government of Cambodia and relevant stakeholders to provide schools with sufficient funds, facilities, and teaching resources; offer professional development opportunities to teachers and staff; and update English course books.

Keywords: English language teaching; English teachers; high schools; challenges; Cambodia

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Introduction

English is the most common language of shared communication globally and, as such, is commonly referred to as a lingua franca (East, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011). In Cambodia, the rise of English as lingua franca was reinforced when the country was integrated into the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) in 1999, with English being the official language for communication within the ASEAN community for business, diplomatic relations, and/or academic contexts (Crocco & Bunwirat., 2014; Uramoto & Lohani, 2014). In this context, Cambodians need English proficiency to study in higher education institutions either in Cambodia or abroad, especially when instructions and course materials are in English, to engage with an international community after graduation, and to be competitive in the ASEAN job market. However, according to Lim and Keuk (2018), high schools in Cambodia have not adequately prepared students for communication in English, a situation that persists today. Given the local and regional context, a key question is how well Cambodian citizens or students can communicate in English.

According to Neau (2003), ineffective teaching and learning practices in Cambodian public schools could be attributed to the Pol Pot regime and civil conflicts, particularly between 1970 and 1979, when Cambodian scholars were killed, school classrooms were converted into prisons, and textbooks and national archives were destroyed. There was an absence of any effective schooling during that time. While the current government has made sustained efforts to restore and improve the Cambodian education system, teaching and learning at Cambodian public schools still face enormous challenges (King, 2021). These challenges include a large number of students in each classroom and the expectation that teachers implement innovative methods and teaching styles without effective training or necessary resources (Fleming & Stevens, 2015). Other challenges include a lack of contemporary and innovative teaching resources, low English language proficiency among Cambodian teachers, lack of professional development, an out-of-date curriculum, inadequacy or a shortage of school buildings and classrooms, lack of motivation and commitment from teachers and relevant authorities, and students' negative attitudes toward English language learning (Karlberg & Bezzina, 2020; Neau, 2003; Nith et al., 2010).

English language teaching and learning in Cambodian public schools are far from effective. However, Cambodian students need English proficiency to further their studies in higher education either in Cambodia or abroad and to compete locally or regionally in the job market (Ngel, 2022). Against this background, this study aims to investigate the challenges of teaching English as an additional language in public high schools in Cambodia.

Literature review

Issues in English language teaching in Cambodia

The devastation and annihilation of the education system during the civil war between 1975 and 1979 resulted in Cambodia's poor education system today. One of the biggest challenges remains the lack of resources and inadequate funds for teachers' salaries and school operations (Corrado & Tungjan, 2019; Soeung, 2021). Cambodian teachers mostly live in poor conditions because of low salaries compared with other professions. This circumstance has resulted in a low commitment to teaching quality (Tandon & Fukao, 2015). In many cases, teachers must secure a second or even a third job to supplement their salaries in order to support themselves and their families. For reasons of time and motivation, there is a consequently low commitment to the quality of English language teaching (ELT). Lack of proper or adequate teacher training, teachers' limited English proficiency, and insufficient teaching resources have also impacted the quality of ELT in Cambodia (Phon, 2017; Tith, 2015). Resources such as textbooks are also chosen by teachers based on individual preference rather than by a standardized, acceptable quality. From the first author's experience as a teacher and a teacher trainer at Cambodian public schools, many English textbooks currently used today were introduced in 1997 and have been in use since then. They are now out of date and do not support contemporary ELT pedagogy.

Methods of teaching English reflect a lack of ongoing training, resulting in the use of traditional teaching practices that are less effective than contemporary best practices, as students have limited opportunities to practice their English language skills. Although Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has theoretically been introduced in Cambodia, the most common method of ELT in Cambodia's secondary schools is Grammar-Translation Method (GTM)

(Neau, 2003). The continued use of GTM reflects Cambodian students' preference for learning the written form of the language from the very beginning, and they eagerly want to know the meanings of those words, phrases, or sentences by doing the direct translation into the Khmer language. Another reason is that GTM is a relatively easy method with which teachers are readily familiar, so they do not have to spend as much time preparing the lessons for teaching as they would if they used more contemporary methods (Burns & Richards, 2012; Richards, 2010; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Moreover, the large class sizes in Cambodian schools encourage teachers to use GMT (Nith et al., 2010). The class size in Cambodian public secondary schools is usually between 45 to 60 students, and classroom tables for students are fixed to seat four to five students. According to Richards (2001), a big class size could affect teaching quality in language classes, so class size should be set to promote effective ELT. Consequently, it is challenging for teachers to implement CLT, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (Heng, 2014). The CLT approach emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning and often requires students to work in groups with movable chairs and tables (Heng, 2014).

Choosing textbooks for ELT in Cambodian secondary schools has also been problematic. According to Neau (2003), between 1989 and 1996, English textbooks such as 'English for Today,' 'Streamline,' or 'Headway' were used widely in Cambodian secondary schools. Neau (2003) further mentioned that ELT was not standardized, and teachers chose the textbooks they personally preferred. In 1997, a new textbook series called 'English for Cambodia' was introduced locally and used in Cambodian secondary schools (Neau, 2003). These textbooks, consisting of six levels for each grade (Grades 7 to 12) are still being used today, particularly for Grade 12, although there are new English textbooks introduced to the curriculum (Em & Nun, 2022). In addition, as Em and Nun (2022) found, many teachers believed that the contents of the English textbooks were outdated, did not respond to new trends in ELT, and did not match students' English abilities.

The training of Cambodian English teachers

Despite the problems mentioned above, there has been a rapid growth in English language usage in Cambodia over the past few decades (Em & Nun,

2022). In response to this rapid growth of English language teaching and learning, the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL) at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), considered the premier institute in Cambodia, has continued to provide training for English language teachers in the country. IFL has played a key role in producing high-quality Cambodian teachers of English through its flagship Bachelor of Education (BEd) program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). It has also provided a Master's program – Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (MA in TESOL) since 2016. In addition, other public and private universities and institutes in Phnom Penh and other provinces have provided a similar four-year program in TEFL, aimed at developing professional skills in teaching English at secondary and tertiary levels (Mohd-Asraf et al., 2019).

According to Lor (2021) and the first author's experiences as a teacher and a teacher trainer for around ten years, the capacity of Cambodian teacher trainees to be effective English teachers remains low even though they will graduate from a four-year TEFL program. The reason for that could be attributed to some private institutes or universities accepting students without proper admission requirements, particularly with regard to the English language assessment. Some students cannot read or write standard English correctly when they enter the first year of the program. The training at some private institutes or universities is also limited due to inadequate training facilities and the limited capacity of lecturers. Thus, some students may graduate from a four-year TEFL/TESOL program without being adequately prepared to be competent to undertake English language teaching. This has resulted in poor-quality teaching.

Effective English language teaching

Becoming an effective teacher of English is not easy – even for those who are well-prepared and competent. Teaching is not just working with students on a set of key tasks or instructions to master a language; it also includes concepts about personal growth and how to develop clear thinking (Fleming & Stevens, 2015). Effective teaching is not just following a handbook of instructions but depends on how teachers are provided with supportive environments that help teaching to be effective (Richards, 2001).

According to Richards (2001), achieving quality teaching relies not only on how well teachers do but also on the contexts and work environments that can promote teaching quality. Richards suggested four key attributes in promoting teaching quality: (1) the institution, (2) the teachers, (3) the teaching, and (4) the learners. With regard to the institution, five factors should be considered: physical facilities, management and administration, teaching staff, curriculum, and resources. Concerning teachers and teaching, Richards paid attention to language proficiency, experiences, skills and expertise, training and qualifications, teaching styles/methods, and beliefs and principles regarding core issues in teaching. For the learners, there should be considerations for learners' English proficiency, understanding of the course, a variety of learning and learning styles, and motivation and support for learning English.

This study adopts Richard's (2001) framework as the means to evaluate the effectiveness of EFL teaching and learning in Cambodia.

Research objectives and questions

This study aimed to investigate the challenges of teaching English as an additional language by interviewing teachers from four public high schools in Kandal province, Cambodia. Drawing on Richards' (2001) framework, the study investigated aspects of the school environment such as physical facilities, management and administration, staffing, curricula, and resources; attributes of teachers: their knowledge, skills, qualifications, experience, and attitudes towards ELT; and other challenges in ELT.

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, two research questions were formed:

- (1) What challenges or issues do Cambodian teachers of English in high schools in Cambodia face?
- (2) How might the challenges or issues of English language teaching in Cambodian high schools be addressed?

Methodology

Research design

This research drew on a mixed methods design, including a survey, observations, and individual semi-structured interviews. The mixed methods design allows the researcher to gather detailed descriptions and an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest rather than simply gathering numeric data from research participants (Creswell, 2014). A survey was used to ask the research participants to respond to a set of questions in numeric order; observations of the teaching classes were conducted at the participating schools; and teachers were interviewed to ascertain their experiences of teaching English in Cambodian high schools. Asking the participants about their experiences and the meanings attached to those experiences allowed the research to be embedded in a real world of teaching practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mutch, 2013). This study only presented the findings from the survey and interviews, as they are more relevant to the focus of the study.

Setting and participants

This research was developed from a master's thesis of the first author who pursued a Master of Educational Leadership at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. After obtaining approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (Reference number: 018003/2016), the first author approached the Provincial Department of Education (PDoE) in Kandal province in Cambodia to seek approval for accessing four high schools that PDoE supervises. They were randomly selected, and the principal of each high school was approached with a permission letter from PDoE requesting participation in the research. The principals then forwarded the approved Participant Information Sheet as an invitation to teachers who were teaching English as their first major at the schools. Out of 12 potential teachers who taught English as their major subject, 11 teachers (two females) volunteered to participate in this study. The teachers were all Cambodian. Among the 11 participants, eight had a bachelor's degree in TEFL, while three had a master's degree in TEFL/TESOL.

Teachers' names presented in this study are pseudonyms. Eight teachers were between 31 and 40 years old, and two teachers were aged between 20 and 30. One teacher did not provide his age. Ten participants were teachers of English, and one was a deputy principal who also taught English at his school. The participants' demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Participants' demographic information*

No.	Teachers' pseudonyms	Sex	Age range	School	Qualifications
1	Vitou	Male	20-29	A	BA in TEFL
2	Piseth	Male	30-39	A	MA in TEFL
3	Seyha	Male	30-39	A	BA in TEFL
4	Pisey	Female	30-39	B	BA in TEFL
5	Sarin	Male	30-39	B	BA in TEFL
6	Chamnab*	Male	30-39	C	BA in TEFL
7	Makara	Male	-	C	BA in TEFL
8	Vichet	Male	30-39	C	MA in TEFL
9	Ponleu	Male	30-39	D	MA in TEFL
10	Nipun	Male	30-39	D	BA in TEFL
11	Theary	Female	20-29	D	BA in TEFL

* He was a deputy school principal but also taught the English subject at his school.

Data collection tools

Data reported in this study were collected from surveys and semi-structured interviews conducted in 2016. The survey and interview questions were developed and adapted from Richards' (2001) framework of effective teaching.

The survey included 45 questions on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree). For scales 1 and 2, they were combined to show the level of Disagreement. For scales 4 and 5, they were combined to show the level of Agreement. Thus, there were three levels (Disagreement, Neutral, and Agreement) mentioned in the findings. The survey had three parts. Part I of the survey was to collect information about the teachers, including their teaching hours and classes, the average number of students in their classes, the teachers' qualifications, and

teaching periods at the schools. Part II questions were about physical facilities, management and administration, teaching staff, curriculum, and resources. In the final part of the survey, the questions were about teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards the qualities and competencies of a good English teacher.

The semi-structured interviews covered four domains, including the current situation of the school; identification of other challenges that could affect the quality of English language teaching in the target schools; teachers' knowledge of and attitudes toward the qualities and competencies of a good English teacher; and teachers' views toward possible solutions and recommendations to improve the English language teaching program in Cambodian high schools.

Data collection procedures

To collect data, first, the paper-based survey was distributed to all 11 teachers at their schools prior to the semi-structured interview. At the time of administering the survey, the time for the teachers to participate in the interview and return the survey was negotiated. Then, the first author conducted a face-to-face interview in English with each teacher, lasting from 45 minutes to an hour, at their schools. An interview guide was used to ask the teachers about the current challenges of English language teaching at their schools and how to address them. Using a semi-structured approach allowed the researcher to use prompts and ask follow-up questions to elicit further information. This approach contributed to gaining in-depth data for the study.

Data analysis

Survey data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet, analyzed using descriptive statistics, and reported as percentages. Data from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and returned to the participants for accuracy check. The participants were allowed to remove any data they did not wish to be included. Each transcription was reviewed by the first author line by line and then as a whole document to ensure familiarity with the data. Data was then coded and organized according to Richards' (2001) framework related to each school's physical facilities, management and administration, teaching staff, curriculum, resources, teacher's knowledge of and attitudes toward the

qualities and competencies of a good English teacher, any other factors affecting the quality of ELT in the school, and possible solutions and recommendations.

Trustworthiness of the research

The transcripts were returned to the participants to ensure the accuracy of the data prior to analysis. This method provided an opportunity for the participants to verify that the information written/transcribed reflected their opinions and the intention of what they had shared. After data analysis had been completed, the researcher engaged in member checking by sharing the preliminary findings with the participants, as well as the first author's supervisor and peers who were also undertaking a Master of Education. Member checking helped to ensure the credibility of the findings. Finally, the dependability of the research was upheld by documenting the research process/data collection on notes taken during the semi-structured interviews. All decisions were documented as the study progressed. Creswell (2014) and Ary et al. (2013) argued that these activities could help maintain a study's trustworthiness.

Ethical considerations

The first author informed all school principals, students, and teachers about the study. The ethical principles were discussed, and it was agreed and confirmed that the researcher would be respectful of participants and not share personal information with others (Mertens, 2018). With this understanding, the first author sought agreement from the participants who would contribute to this study. It was explained that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from this research study anytime. The names of the participants were kept confidential, and anonymity in reporting was assured. All participant and school names were replaced with pseudonyms. All data, including the interview transcripts and audio recordings, would be kept in a lockable cabinet in the office of the first author's supervisor at the University of Auckland for a period of six years.

Findings

The findings were presented based on Richards' (2001) framework and

categories of best practices in ELT. They were used to explore how schools could or could not effectively implement English language teaching and learning. The findings included the aspects of physical facilities, resources, management and administration, teaching staff, and curriculum for effective ELT. The first part of the findings presents relevant challenges from the participant surveys. The second part presents findings from the interview data regarding the challenges that teachers of English in the four high schools faced.

Findings from the survey data

Physical facilities

Table 2. *Physical facilities* (N = 11)

Items	Disagreement		Neutral		Agreement	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 No overcrowded classrooms and offices	4	36.4%	4	36.4%	3	27.3%
2 Movable chairs/tables	11	100%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
3 Sufficient classrooms in school	5	45.5%	1	9.1%	5	45.5%
4 Adequate electricity in school	5	45.5%	2	18.2%	4	36.4%

Table 2 shows the number and percentage of the eleven teachers who rated the level of agreement/disagreement on four items related to their school's physical facilities. Overall, more teachers disagreed with the statements that the classrooms were not overcrowded and that chairs/tables in classrooms were movable.

Management and administration

Table 3. *Management and administration* (N = 11)

Items	Disagreement		Neutral		Agreement	
	N	%	N	%	N	%

1	Trained and experienced management and administration team in ELT	4	36.4%	6	54.5%	1	9.1%
2	Attention to teaching quality, staff, and teachers	2	18.2%	6	54.5%	3	27.3%
3	Recognising the importance of salaries, benefits, and staff development	3	27.3%	5	45.5%	3	27.3%

Table 3 shows the number and percentage of the teachers who rated the level of agreement/disagreement on three items regarding school management and administration. Overall, more teachers were neutral about the three items. Four teachers thought the school was not under the direction of an appropriately trained and experienced management and administration team in ELT, with only one teacher agreeing. Regarding their school's attention to teaching quality, staff, and teachers, more than half of the teachers were neutral again. Three teachers agreed that the school paid attention to teaching quality, staff, and teachers, with two disagreeing. In addition, nearly half of the teachers were neutral regarding the statement that their schools recognized the importance of appropriate salaries, benefits, and staff development.

Teaching staff

Table 4. *Teaching staff* (N = 11)

Items	Disagreement		Neutral		Agreement	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 Sufficient well-trained teachers of English	3	27.3%	3	27.3%	5	45.5%
2 Support in the form of admin systems, office space, and teaching facilities	3	27.3%	7	63.6%	1	9.1%
3 Space for professional development seminars and workshops	7	63.6%	3	27.3%	1	9.1%
4 Support and engagement in continuing staff/teacher development	7	63.6%	4	36.4%	0	0.0%

5	A plan for staff development opportunities	4	36.4%	6	54.5%	1	9.1%
6	Membership support in professional organisations	7	63.6%	3	27.3%	1	9.1%

Table 4 presents the number and percentage of teachers who rated the level of agreement/disagreement on six items regarding the teaching staff in schools. Overall, about half of teachers agreed that there were sufficient well-trained teachers of English, but most teachers disagreed that teachers were provided with space and opportunities for their professional development.

Curriculum

Table 5. *Curriculum* (N = 11)

Items	Disagreement		Neutral		Agreement	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 Informed by an analysis of learners' needs and levels of proficiency	4	36.4%	5	45.5%	2	18.2%
2 Assessed student progress regularly	3	27.3%	5	45.5%	3	27.3%
3 School's acknowledgement of class size and course length	4	36.4%	3	27.3%	4	36.4%
4 School's engagement in regular evaluation of its curriculum	3	27.3%	4	36.4%	4	36.4%
5 School's seeking periodic external evaluation	5	45.5%	4	36.4%	2	18.2%

Table 5 shows the number and percentage of the teachers who rated the level of agreement/disagreement on five items regarding the school curriculum. Overall, teachers tended to be neutral regarding the English curriculum at their schools, with more teachers disagreeing that the curriculum was informed by an analysis of learners' needs and proficiency levels and periodically evaluated by an external evaluator. About 40% of the teachers disagreed that their schools implemented a curriculum informed by an analysis of learners' needs and an assessment of the learners' proficiency levels. In comparison, about 20% of teachers agreed, and about half were neutral.

Resources

Table 6. *Resources* (N = 11)

Items	Disagreement		Neutral		Agreement	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 School provides instructional/teaching materials to facilitate successful language learning.	8	72.7%	2	18.2%	1	9.1%
2 School recognises computerised language instruction and self-accessing resources or language labs as important for effective language learning.	10	90.9%	0	0.0%	1	9.1%
3 School maintains a collection of relevant books, journals and other materials.	6	54.5%	3	27.3%	2	18.2%

Table 6 shows the number and percentage of the teachers who rated the level of agreement/disagreement on three items regarding school resources. Overall, the majority of the teachers disagreed that schools provided resources for English language teaching and learning. This suggests that a lack of resources is a big challenge for ELT in Cambodian public schools.

Teachers' knowledge and attitudes toward the qualities and competencies of a good English teacher

Table 7. *Teachers' knowledge and attitudes toward the qualities and competencies of a good English teacher* (N = 11)

Items	Disagreement		Neutral		Agreement	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 Teachers believe learning English is vitally important for students' future success.	0	0.0%	1	9.1%	10	90.9%
2 Teachers see English language learning as part of a larger process of promoting	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	11	100%

	international contacts and interest in other cultures.						
3	Teachers consider students' cultural background to be of great importance when preparing an ELT lesson.	1	9.1%	3	27.3%	7	63.6%
4	Teachers believe they should empower students to become increasingly more responsible for their own progress	0	0.0%	1	9.1%	10	90.9%
5	Teachers are prepared to experiment and carry out classroom research in order to improve their teaching competence	1	9.1%	2	18.2%	8	72.7%
6	Teachers make a constant effort to maintain/develop their own English communication skills	0	0.0%	2	18.2%	9	81.8%
7	Teachers are aware of the value of professional development activities and make full use of available professional support	0	0.0%	4	36.4%	7	63.6%
8	Teachers are enthusiastic about working with colleagues to raise the quality of ELT programmes	1	9.1%	4	36.4%	6	54.5%

Table 7 shows the number and percentage of the teachers who rated the level of agreement/disagreement on eight items regarding their knowledge and attitudes toward the qualities and competencies of a good English teacher. Overall, the majority of the teachers expressed positive attitudes toward English language teaching and learning. For example, 90.9% of them agreed that learning English is vitally important for their students' future success, and all of them saw learning English as part of a larger process of promoting international contacts and interest in other cultures. Many teachers (63.6%) also agreed that they considered a student's cultural background important when preparing an ELT lesson.

Moreover, a majority of the teachers (90.9%) agreed that they empowered students to become increasingly more responsible for their own progress in learning. About 72% agreed that they were prepared to experiment and carry out classroom research in order to further improve their teaching competencies. In addition, most teachers (81.8%) agreed that they constantly tried to maintain or develop their English communication skills. Many of them (63.6%) agreed that they were aware of the value of professional development activities.

Findings from the interviews

Physical facilities

Overcrowding in classrooms was a common theme expressed by all teachers. Although their expectation was that there would only be 30–40 students per classroom, the reality was that most teachers had to contend with 40–60 students crowded into a classroom. Teachers stated that while 30 to 40 students in a classroom were still manageable, any more than this became stressful for teachers. The classrooms became difficult to manage, and teaching English became ineffective. For example, one participant said:

The classrooms are overcrowded, there are about 50 to 60 students. The offices are ok, not overcrowded. (Chamnab – School C)

Immovable chairs added another challenge for teachers. Almost all teachers noted that the chairs in their English language classes could not be easily moved for class activities. Vitou from School A was particularly concerned about this. He doubted he could assign students to work in groups. He questioned how he could move chairs with so many students and with fixed tables in place. He needed tables and chairs that could be moved easily to assign students to work in pairs or groups. Immovable chairs impacted not only the classroom setup but also the teaching styles and learning activities they could undertake. One teacher said:

Some classes, the chairs/tables can be moved, but some classes the chairs/tables are fixed for two or four students. (Makara – School C)

Management and administration

Nine out of the 11 teachers said that their schools were not under the direction of a management and administration team appropriately trained and experienced in implementing and evaluating ELT. A director who does not have experience or knowledge of ELT is likely to be less committed to the need to teach ELT effectively, nor does he or she understand the importance of resources to teach English.

Nine teachers also believed that their schools recognized the importance of decent salaries and benefits, but the teachers noted that decisions regarding the salaries and benefits of teachers were made by MoEYS. Chamnab from School C was among the nine teachers who believed that his school recognized the importance of salaries and benefits. However, he said all teachers knew that their salaries were insufficient to support their families, so they looked for other jobs to supplement their incomes. This significantly affected the time they could make available to prepare lessons and materials for effective teaching.

When considering schools' recognition of the importance of staff development, Chamnab from School C and Theary from School D agreed that their schools recognized the importance of staff development but did not elaborate further. By contrast, seven teachers reported that there was no professional development at their schools at all to update or improve their teaching capability. One of them expressed that:

There is no staff development program here at this school to improve teaching methodology. (Pisey – School B)

Professional development opportunities for teachers

Most teachers said that there was no provision for professional development seminars or workshops, nor did the schools support membership of any professional organizations or even attendance at conferences or workshops outside the schools. This had an adverse impact on their teaching since teachers did not have opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and skills in TEFL or share ideas with their peers. One participant said:

...there's no workshops and seminars for the English subject. There's no continuous, ongoing in-service training for teachers of English. There's a monthly meeting, but it's not specifically related to training on teaching methodology. There's no teaching demonstration, and I'm not sure if the school has a plan in place to ensure that staff development opportunities are made available. I'm not sure if the school support membership in professional organisations, attendance at workshop and conferences, and participation in professional activities outside the school. (Ponleu – School D)

Curriculum

The curriculum is also part of the problem. Eight teachers reported that the implementation of the English curriculum was not informed by an analysis of learners' needs or an assessment of the learners' levels of proficiency. This presented a challenge to the scaffolding of English language teaching and learning at Cambodian public high schools to meet students' needs. Vichet (School C) mentioned that the textbooks used in ELT had been used since 1998 or 1999 and were mostly about English reading skills.

In School D, Nipun and Theary mentioned that MoEYS designed the curriculum at a time when there was less focus on learners' needs and assessment of learners' levels of proficiency. Another teacher from School D said:

The curriculum is not consistent with students' level of English proficiency. However, I've heard the Ministry is developing a new curriculum, new textbooks. I think it would be better. (Ponleu – School D)

Resources

Instructional/teaching materials

All the 11 teachers agreed that the school where they were teaching did not

provide sufficient instructional materials to facilitate successful language learning. One teacher said:

The teaching materials that school provided are only the textbooks. There aren't print materials, video or CD players, audio/cassettes, or realia provided for teachers. (Seyha - School A)

Another teacher used only one technique when it came to the listening aspects of ELT due to insufficient materials:

... For the listening part, I copy the transcripts for students as reading texts instead. (Theary - School D)

Language labs

All teachers said that there were no self-accessed resources, computerized language instructions, or language labs available at their schools, which would contribute to a more effective language learning experience. In School A, Piseth and Seyha added that students preferred learning English at private schools due to the lack of these resources in public schools. Another teacher from another school said:

There're no language labs for making effective language learning. There's a general library, but there's no library session for students. (Theary - School D)

Resource collection

Nine teachers reported that their schools did not maintain a collection of relevant English books, journals, and other materials that teachers and students could easily access. In School A, Vitou added that not only did the school not have enough English books, but it also did not have enough books for other subjects. Pisey and Sarin from School B said that there was an English language library for teachers and students. However, the problem was that the books were out of date. Pisey even said that the students were not interested in the library. Sarin agreed and added:

... There's no journals for teachers. (Sarin – School B)

Teachers' knowledge and attitudes toward English language teaching and learning

The data from the interviews showed that almost all of the teachers expressed positive attitudes toward English language teaching and learning. They believed that learning English was vitally important for their students' future success. They also viewed learning English as part of a larger process of promoting international contacts and interests in other cultures. Vitou from School A believed that learning English would enable students to communicate with people within ASEAN and others worldwide. In addition, Sarin from School B believed that having knowledge of English enabled students to learn about other cultures. Nipun from School D also believed that once students could use and understand English, they could promote their culture and learn about other cultures.

Seyha from School A and Sarin from School B believed that students' cultural background was not really a problem when preparing an English lesson because the textbook was mainly developed in a Cambodian context. Other teachers considered students' cultural backgrounds to be of great importance when preparing an English lesson. Chamnab from School C and Ponleu from School D also believed students' cultural background to be of great importance when preparing a lesson as they considered Cambodian students shy and reluctant to express their ideas.

Nine teachers advised that they had done some small-scale research and observation in their classes. Piseth from School A said that teachers in his school carried out class observation and sought comments in order to improve their teaching. Makara from School C said that he conducted some surveys by asking students about his teaching practices and his students' learning needs. Similarly, Nipun noted:

I have my own observation on my teaching practices in the class. I know which one is more effective. The student-centered approach is more effective, but it's time-consuming.
(Nipun – School D)

Eight teachers said they constantly tried to maintain and develop their English communication skills. Vitou from School A said he communicated in English with his colleagues and friends. Pisey from School B said that she was able to develop her English communication skills because she taught English every day. Chamnab from School C and Nipun from School D said they spoke English to their students and listened to English radio programs.

I speak English with students and listen to the radio in English.
(Chamnab – School C)

Six teachers also noted that they were enthusiastic about working with colleagues to raise the quality of ELT in their schools. In School A, Vitou, Piseth, and Seyha agreed that they joined in meetings and worked with colleagues to share ideas and experiences in order to improve the quality of ELT in the school. In School C, Chamnab said he encouraged his colleagues to improve the quality of ELT. Ponleu and Theary from School D commented that they worked with colleagues to raise the quality of ELT in their schools.

Discussion

The discussion is organized into themes as articulated in Richards' (2001) framework, which includes physical facilities, resources, management and administration, teaching staff, and curriculum for effective ELT with the additional challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Providing conducive physical facilities and resources for successful ELT

Poor physical facilities and inadequate resources are challenges to effective ELT in Cambodian public high schools. It was evident from this study that the lack of appropriate classrooms and large class sizes are key challenges. According to Nith et al. (2010), the class size in Cambodian state or public schools is usually between 45 and 70 students, similar to the class size found in the current study. Nith et al. asserted that it was difficult for teachers to apply the communicative approach when teaching English with so many students in a class. In addition, the large number of students resulted in a failure to stimulate students' interest and an inability to apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills in learning (Matsepe et al., 2019; Sevy-Biloon et al., 2020). Richards (2001) suggested that

the ideal class size should not exceed 15 students for most language classes. Richards also argued that class size could affect the quality of teaching in language classes, so limits to class sizes should be set to promote effective language teaching and learning.

The teachers surveyed in this study agreed that non-movable classroom furniture was also an obstacle to effective ELT. All teachers reported that the chairs and tables in their classrooms were fixed in place and, therefore, not movable for group work activities. It has been suggested that language classes with movable chairs would allow students to move, more freely communicate and interact with peers, and thus practice their speaking skills (Albore, 2019; Mayher & Brause, 1986). Alboare (2019) also noted that the ways teachers organized students to work in small groups, rather than teaching the workbook as a whole class, are favored by learning and teaching theory developed through research into how students learn to read and write. Working in groups is very important for social interaction, and greater volumes of information are discussed, questioned, or answered amongst learners (Alfares, 2017; McGregor, 2003). In addition, it has been noted that arranging chairs or tables for students to work in groups is best for CLT because students can more readily collaborate and support each other in learning (Adedokun et al., 2017; Baldinger, 2019; Mohd-Asraf et al., 2019).

Support from school management and administration

Active support from the school management and administration team is essential for the success of ELT in public schools. In this study, most of the teachers said they were not sure how seriously their schools paid attention to teaching quality and the quality of staff and teachers, as evidenced by the lack of well-trained teachers, limited resources, and insufficient funds to support training. Studies have shown that funding (e.g., decent salaries) to support teachers is vital for the national planning of language programs (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Cochran-Smith et al., 2020). It is widely known that teachers in Cambodia must teach at private schools, give private tutoring lessons, and/or work a second or even third job in addition to their regular teaching jobs at state/public schools to supplement their low salaries. In these circumstances, it is hard to maintain teaching quality (Corrado & Tungjan, 2019; Nith et al., 2010; Soeung, 2021). This issue continues to persist until the present.

Another issue is that schools were not under the direction of an appropriately trained and experienced management and administrative team who was knowledgeable about the implementation and evaluation of ELT. Emery (2012) and Nomnian et al. (2018) pointed out that English language teaching and learning programs could be affected by those who moved into leadership positions without receiving proper training and with inadequate knowledge of the leadership of ELT. According to Coombe (2008) and Nomnian et al. (2018), many educators moved into leadership roles before they were ready to address these expanded responsibilities, and teachers who moved into a leadership position often had to learn about the job through trial and error. Studies show that schools need a management and administrative team with skills in ELT leadership to lead ELT programs effectively (Christison & Murray, 2012; Uddin & Ferdous, 2020).

Providing professional development

Professional development is essential for teachers as they need to update their teaching skills and approaches to meet students' different and changing learning needs. According to Timperley et al. (2007) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), effective professional development could provide teachers with many learning opportunities to improve and expand their skills. In addition, teachers need opportunities for career development as a long-term goal because their roles and responsibilities can be expanded over time.

Richards (2001) and Karlberg and Bezzina (2020) asserted that a quality institution or school provides teachers with professional development opportunities to enhance their careers. Richards (2001) also suggested that ELT is a rapidly changing discipline that requires teachers to have opportunities to update and expand their knowledge and skills. These opportunities included conference participation, workshops, in-service seminars, reading groups, peer observation, writing about teaching experiences and ideas, project work, and action research. To that end, the lack of professional development opportunities for Cambodian teachers found in this study is an issue that needs to be resolved in order to promote effective ELT in schools in Cambodia.

Evaluating and updating the curriculum

Teachers noted that there was no regular evaluation of the curriculum in response to the changing needs or new trends in ELT and the changing global context. The textbooks called 'English for Cambodia' were developed in the 1990s. According to Richards (2001), Ma (2017), and Mwanza et al. (2020), appropriate curriculum development requires the identification, realization, use, evaluation, and revision of learners' needs. These researchers also suggested that material development should be done to meet the practical needs of teachers, learners, and society.

The English for Cambodia textbook series used by teachers and students focused on reading skills, and the contents in the reading were outdated and not well-aligned with students' proficiency levels. One of the reasons for such a mismatch between the curricula and students' levels could be that the curriculum developers were not Cambodian and did not understand Cambodian culture or Cambodian students. Breen and Candlin (1980) and Heikkilä (2021) suggested having teachers involved in the curriculum development process to update and improve the contents within the different levels of language achievement embedded in the textbooks. Thus, the curriculum, instruction, assessment, and learning materials needed to be consistent to respond to student needs, new trends in ELT, and the ever-changing global context.

Additional challenges brought about by COVID-19

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cambodia in March 2020, the government closed all educational institutions across the country (Heng, 2021b). This nationwide school closure disrupted students' learning for nearly a year. MoEYS, therefore, strongly encouraged schools, universities, teachers, and learners to fully embrace online learning and teaching, despite the limited resources and knowledge of the management, administrators, teachers, and learners about online learning and teaching (Heng, 2021a). Although all educational institutions were allowed to reopen at the end of 2020, they were encouraged to introduce blended and flipped learning. This development has brought about additional challenges to English language teaching and learning and, indeed, the whole education system in Cambodia (see Em, 2021; Heng et

al., 2021). König et al. (2020) showed that teachers needed to immediately adapt to online teaching during COVID-19. They argued that to teach online effectively, teachers needed school computer technology, reliable internet availability, competence in technological pedagogical content knowledge, and training in the specific skills necessary to deliver sound online teaching and learning. Thus, EFL teaching in Cambodian high schools encountered even more problems, from poor school infrastructure, out-of-date curriculum, and limited pedagogical and technological knowledge.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has shown that Cambodian English teachers were concerned about not having enough resources, poor physical facilities, out-of-date textbooks/curricula, and a lack of professional development for teachers. Moreover, the arrival of COVID-19 has brought about even more challenges to teaching English in Cambodian high schools. Teachers were forced to teach online while they were not adequately trained on how to use the technology for teaching.

This study contributes to the field of ELT, particularly regarding the leadership and management of ELT in schools. School leaders should consider the factors that allow English language teaching and learning to be more effective for the benefit of students' learning achievements. The quality of teaching is not only achieved by how well the teachers teach but also by their work environments. School principals and leaders should consider many factors – institution, teachers, teaching, and learners – when implementing ELT at their schools or institutions. This study's findings have shown that poor physical facilities, limited capacity of school leaders, lack of professional development for teaching staff, outdated curriculum, and limited resources contributed to the challenges that Cambodian English teachers faced in public high schools.

While English and English language teaching and learning are important, the subject of English is not compulsory in Cambodian public schools. If students fall below a 25-point average on an English test/examination, the score is not included in their final score report. The consequence of this policy is that students do not really care about studying English or other foreign languages. From this perspective, teachers and students see little point in focusing on

English language teaching and learning at Cambodian state schools. Thus, Cambodian policymakers and MoEYS should consider this point.

The key recommendations to improve ELT in Cambodian public schools that could be made based on the responses of the Cambodian teachers participating in this study are that the Cambodian government should invest more in the education sector by:

- providing more funds, facilities, and teaching resources to schools;
- providing teachers and staff with more opportunities for professional development (through MoEYS) by sponsoring more teachers to join relevant workshops/seminars or having exchange programs with other countries;
- prioritizing English as a subject and improving the score policy for the English subject.

In conclusion, this is a small-scale study of four schools in the Kandal province. There are indeed limitations that call for further research into this topic. Future studies should be conducted on a larger scale with data collection from many schools throughout Cambodia. Future research should also include data from class observations to better reflect teaching activities. It is even better to collect more data by surveying and interviewing students regarding the learning and teaching of English in Cambodian high schools.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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