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Challenges of English language learning and teaching in Cambodia: A case study of Kith Meng Brasat High School

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Abstract

English has been included in school curricula in many countries, but the challenges of learning and teaching English remain. This study aims to find the challenges of learning and teaching English and solutions to solve the challenges in secondary education in Cambodia. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. A total of 250 students (52.40% were females) participated in a survey. The students reported that teachers' qualities, study programs, learning and teaching materials, classroom activities, class size, and students' self-learning attitude were the main problems in learning English. A school principal, a deputy principal, and three teachers of English who were interviewed expressed similar concerns regarding the teaching and learning of English. They requested the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to provide them with school infrastructure, learning and teaching resources, and extra in-service teacher training workshops. This study recommends that future research with a larger sample size be conducted at other educational institutions across the country.

Keywords: English language learning and teaching; classroom activities; teaching techniques; teacher's qualities; challenges

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Introduction

English was introduced into Cambodia during the Khmer Republic or Lon Nol regime between 1970 and 1975, and at that time it was also included in the curriculum (Neau, 2003). Then it was forgotten at the start of the Khmer Rouge or Pol Pot regime between 1975 and 1979 (Neau, 2003). The Khmer Rouge regime collapsed in 1979, but English language teaching and learning were not encouraged immediately. Igawa (2008) noted that due to the influences of communism, the teaching and learning of English and French were forbidden. Those who learned and taught English or French were considered illegal and were arrested. During this period, the learning of Russian and Vietnamese was encouraged instead.

Neau (2003) and Moore and Bounchan (2010) noted that English reappeared in the curriculum in 1989, and it has been there until today. Currently, English has been included in the Cambodian curriculum from Grade 4 (MoEYS, 2015). There was an intention to include English in the curriculum from pre-school education levels (MoEYS, 2015). Although English has been included in the Cambodian curriculum for more than 30 years, the challenges of English learning and teaching are still a major problem for teachers of the English subject and Cambodian students, especially those who live in the countryside. The English language plays an important role in people's lives because it allows them to communicate not only with their friends and family members but with most people worldwide (Kim, 2020). Besides, it is the world's most widely used language for studying at all learning levels. Students benefit from learning English because it broadens their horizons, develops their emotional abilities, and improves their quality of life by giving them career opportunities. English is even more special when students pursue their studies at a higher education level in their own countries or abroad. At this level, students need to read a lot of documents in English to complete assignments and other school work, and if they are not good at English, they might not succeed in their studies (Ilyosovna, 2020; Rao, 2019a, 2019b). In addition, when students, teachers, or authors search for different sources of documents on the internet, most of those sources are in English (Ilyosovna, 2020).

Moreover, because English is the primary means of communication across nations, its usage as an international or a global language is increasing with

time, and most nations in the world need this language for different reasons (Ilyosovna, 2020; McKay, 2018; Rao, 2019b). English is also commonly used in literature and media; most authors write in English because the great majority of readers only know English rather than any other languages (McKay, 2018; Rao, 2019b). Furthermore, English is very important when writing articles for publication. If you write your articles in your native language rather than English, your work will only appeal to a small group of readers, most of whom will be your own nationals. In contrast, if you write your articles in English, your work can attract a global audience (Heng et al., 2021).

Even though English has progressed from its origins as a mother tongue to a second language, a foreign language, and a global language, and it has transformed into world Englishes, the challenges in learning and teaching it remain serious for many students in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts such as Cambodia.

To examine the challenges, Moore and Bounchan (2010) conducted a study at the Institute of Foreign Languages, Royal University of Phnom Penh. They found four challenges to learning and teaching English. The first was the development of an indigenous form of English in Cambodia. That means English was preferred by small groups of people. The second issue was the challenges of teaching standard English or English varieties because it had become an international or a global language. The third challenge was the attitude of the people in society towards those who spoke or wrote in English. Many Cambodian people view those who speak or write in English as arrogant. Finally, work opportunities were not frequently provided to those who knew English. Many Cambodian people valued those who know Chinese more than those who know English because job opportunities for those who know Chinese were much more accessible. Those who know Chinese could work in the garment factories as interpreters and receive a decent salary.

Another study conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 participants to find out the challenges faced by teachers and students in Cambodian tertiary institutions showed some challenges. These challenges included a lack of proper English for Specific Purpose (ESP) training for instructors, a lack of teacher motivation, limited English proficiency among students, and challenges in developing teaching and learning materials (Petraki & Khat, 2020). Neau

(2003) also noted that the lack of teaching and learning materials for Cambodian teachers of English was a key challenge to teaching and learning English in Cambodia.

Many of the difficulties that Cambodian students face are related to the resources that schools have. The absence of resources such as course books, tape recorders, and computers significantly influences learners' interest in language learning and teaching. Teachers' low wages may have an impact on their students' learning experiences, too. Due to the low wages, teachers may lack the excitement and good attitudes needed in the classroom to create a pleasant learning environment. As a result, students may become bored with their teachers and lack excitement in the classroom, resulting in issues with morale and rapport in the classroom (Pachina, 2020).

This article reports findings from a study that aimed to explore the challenges of learning and teaching English at a secondary school in Cambodia. The study also aimed to find solutions to the problems through discussions with a school principal, a deputy principal, and three teachers of English. In what follows, the article presents the research methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion and recommendations.

Methodology

Research design

This article is based on a study conducted by the author to fulfill the requirement of a master's degree in educational administration, which was originally written in Khmer (see Em, 2019). The study employed a mixed-methods design.

Mixed-methods design, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, was used in this study because the author and his advisors agreed that both a survey and discussions with key informants were essential to understand the issues under study. Creswell and Clark (2017) noted that the basic premise of the mixed methods design is that combining quantitative and qualitative approaches yields a greater grasp of research problems and complicated phenomena than either approach alone.

Setting and participants

The study was conducted at Kith Meng Brasat High School, a public high school located in Krangbroteal village, Doung commune, Bati district, Takeo province, Cambodia. There were only four grades (Grades 7-10) when the study was conducted because the high school was just upgraded from a lower secondary school. The total number of students was around 550, and there were four English subject teachers. To avoid bias in conducting this research, 98 students in Grade 10 were excluded from the study because the author was the subject teacher of English in that grade. Thus, the student participants were selected from Grades 7 to 9. Table 1. provides a summary of the demographic information of the student participants.

Because the study was the requirement to complete a master's degree in education, the author proposed a research proposal and defended it with the committee from the National Institute of Education (NIE) and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS). After the proposal was successfully defended, MoEYS issued a letter of permission for the author to conduct the study. Having received permission from MoEYS, the author informed all the related participants about the study, especially the target groups, including school principals, subject teachers, and students in Grades 7-9, about the study two weeks before the author met them face-to-face.

The study employed a purposive sampling technique for quantitative data, allowing the author to choose the participants with whom the author was sure he could conduct the study to meet the study objectives. Before the data collection proceeded, the author met the school principals and teachers of English to inform them about the objectives and the detailed information regarding the study. Then the author asked for permission from the school principals to meet the target students in order to explain the data collection process to them.

Data collection

The quantitative data collection process took three days to be completed by the students in Grades 7-9. Before every data collection process took place, the author reminded the student participants that completing the questionnaire

(see Appendix) was based on a voluntary basis, not a compulsory one. The author also informed the student participants that their names were excluded from the questionnaire, and their data would be kept confidential and used only for the study. Their data would also be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. Moreover, the students were also informed that they could exclude themselves from the study at any time if they had any concerns, including privacy concerns. Thus, they could withdraw from the study without having to provide any information.

After the quantitative data were analyzed and key problems were found, the author met the school principal, the deputy principal, and three subject teachers of English to confirm the findings and to discuss the solutions to solve the problems through semi-structured interviews (see Table 2. for demographic information about these key informants). The three teachers of English were interviewed in English due to their requests, while the two principals were interviewed in Khmer because they could not speak English. The data obtained from the principals was then translated directly into English by the author. These target groups were also informed about the ethics of the study in the same way as the author informed the student participants.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 19. The analysis focused on the Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) of each variable, and all the variables were computed and analyzed by focusing on M and SD. Qualitative data were analyzed based on a content analysis suggested by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). Content analysis is a research method for determining the existence of specific words, topics, or concepts in qualitative data (i.e., texts). Using content analysis, researchers can measure and evaluate the existence, meanings, and correlations of certain words, themes, or concepts. They can infer the meanings of the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the society and historical period surrounding the work (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Findings from the qualitative data analysis are presented after the results of the survey data.

Results

Results from the survey

Table 1. *Demographics of the student participants (N=250)*

Demographic		Value	N	Frequency (%)
Gender				
		Male	119	47.60
		Female	131	52.40
Age				
		11-15	250	100
Grades				
	Grade 7	Male	42	16.80
		Female	48	19.20
	Grade 8	Male	38	15.20
		Female	42	16.80
	Grade 9	Male	39	15.60
		Female	41	16.40

As shown in Table 1, there were 119 (47.60%) male students and 131 (52.40%) female students who completed the survey. All the participants were 11-15 years old and from three different grades. There were 90 students (48 females) from Grade 7, 80 students (42 females) from Grade 8, and 80 students (41 females) from Grade 9. The total number of students who participated in the study was 250 (a 100% response rate).

Students' perceptions based on each variable and the sum of all variables

As shown in Table 2, the mean scores for variables 1, 2, and 4 were low, indicating teachers' qualities, study programs, and classroom activities were not good. In particular, variable 2 (study programs) had the lowest mean score, suggesting the existing English study program was not acceptable at all. Variables 3, 5, and 6 had moderate mean scores, meaning that learning and teaching materials, class size, and students' self-learning attitude were also parts of the challenges of learning and teaching English in the studied context. Overall, as the mean score for all variables was low (M = 2.39, SD = .40), it is clear that the challenges of learning and teaching English in the studied context

were considerable, requiring efforts from all stakeholders to seek solutions to address them.

Table 2. *Students' perceptions based on each variable and the sum of all variables (N=250)*

No.	Variables	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
1.	Teachers' qualities	250	1.90	0.46	1.00	3.67
2.	Study programs	250	1.60	0.12	1.50	1.75
3.	Learning and teaching materials	250	2.68	0.35	1.90	3.60
4.	Classroom activities	250	2.34	0.46	1.50	3.67
5.	Class size	250	3.22	0.45	2.00	4.50
6.	Students' self-learning attitude	250	2.62	0.56	1.00	3.75
7.	Sum of all variables	250	2.39	0.40	1.48	3.49

Note: Mean score of 1.00-1.80 = Lowest, 1.81-2.60 = Low, 2.61-3.40 = Moderate, 3.41-4.20 = High, and 4.21-5.00 = Highest

Findings from the interviews

Table 3. *Demographics of the school principals and teacher participants*

Participant code	Gender	Degree	Position	Experience	Discipline
P1	M	Bachelor	Principal	25 years	Biology
P2	M	Bachelor	Deputy principal	21 years	Geography
P3	M	Bachelor	English teacher (Grade 9)	15 years	TEFL
P4	M	Bachelor	English teacher (Grade 8)	14 years	TESOL
P5	M	Pursuing Bachelor	English teacher (Grade 7)	11 years	TESOL

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to obtain qualitative data for the study (Patton, 2015), considering factors such as gender, education degree, position, and work experience. A total of five participants (all were males) were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews. Overall, these participants had between 11 to 25 years of work experience, and their specializations were Biology, Geography, TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). These participants held positions as a school principal, a deputy principal, and teachers of English. Four of them held bachelor's degrees, and the other was pursuing a bachelor's degree. The participants' demographics are provided in Table 3.

EFL Teachers' views concerning the problems of learning and teaching English

The analysis revealed many concerns regarding learning and teaching English. The problems were the number of students in each class. The student center approach did not work because there were more than 40 students in each class, making group work and pair work come to a standstill. As a result, a lecture-based approach was used instead. The lack of learning and teaching materials was another major problem. Three EFL teachers for lower secondary shared only one audio player. The audio player was also sometimes used by upper-secondary teachers. There was also a limit to the number of English hours per week set by MoEYS. For lower secondary and Grade 10, four hours are allowed for English subjects, while there are only two hours per week for Grades 11 and 12. Besides, the core English textbooks, the *English For Cambodia (EFC)* series, were out of date, causing great concerns about quality. The textbooks contained some old and out-of-date vocabulary and information, causing challenges for the teacher and students alike. After learning, the students could not apply what they had learned in their real lives. The following quotes illustrate this point:

> Yes, there are many concerns with teaching English… I cannot teach them well because there are too many students in the class... and yes, the study hour for English is not enough. (P5, male, teacher of English)

> Sure… sometimes I don't see the audio player in the director's office, so I don't play the audio for the students… Yes, there are too many students, so I cannot teach them using many activities… Sometimes I only read and translate for them. (P4, male, teacher of English)

> A big class size just makes me dizzy. Sometimes I get lost… I cannot beat the students. They talk too much. Some of them sometimes don't know what I say. Besides, the textbook is very old. Most of my students always complain that what they learn in the class cannot be used in their society. (P3, male, teacher of English)

Teachers' suggestions

At the end of the interviews, all of the informants suggested that the number of students in the classroom should be reduced, English textbooks should be updated, teaching hours should be increased to 5-6 hours per week, and the school should be equipped with more teaching and learning resources. Besides, all of the teachers said that MoEYS should organize physical workshops or online training platforms on English language learning and teaching that would provide more opportunities for rural teachers to attend. As the three teachers put it:

> If possible, the number of students should be around 25-30. English textbooks should be updated regularly. (P5, male, teacher of English)
> I think 5 or 6 hours a week for English is much better than 4 hours. And it is even better if there is an English library and a listening lab. (P4, male, teacher of English)

> I think all the teachers and I should be assigned to join the workshop on English language teaching methodology more often… MoEYS should think about that…they can do it in class or online … it is better than not. (P3, male, teacher of English)

School principals' views concerning the problems of teaching and learning English

After the interviews with the three English teachers, the author went on to dig deeper into the challenges of learning and teaching English by requesting to meet the school principal and the deputy principal for the interviews. The request was agreed upon, the interviews were conducted successfully, and similar concerns were found, as shown in the following quotes.

> There were many challenges that usually happen in our school. There were many students. Thus, we need to squeeze the students. Some

> classrooms. there were 45-50 students… We don't have enough buildings. We need to borrow one building from the primary school nearby. (P1, male, school principal)
>
> We don't have a listening lab in our school. We don't have an English library… We don't have enough English textbooks. Some students need to share textbooks when they learn English. (P2, male, deputy principal).
>
> I think my teachers are qualified. I think they can teach the students well if the situation is good. They told me that the situation is not good because there are too many students in the class… if the situation goes better, all my teachers will work better than now. (P1, male, school principal)
>
> The students cannot learn well because they are very noisy in the class. They (the students) don't have… enough textbooks. We don't have an English library and we don't have a listening room either. (P2, male, deputy principal)

After interviewing both principals, the author found that the three teachers of English participating in this study were qualified to teach the English subject, given their educational backgrounds. It was also found that their school lacked buildings, so a number of students were assigned to study in one classroom. Both principals stated that there were around 45-50 students in each classroom. The principals were told by the subject teachers of English that teaching a large class was difficult because a lot of classroom activities needed to be practiced in order to prepare the students to acquire the language. A large class size made it difficult for all the teachers who applied a Communicative Language Teaching approach, group work techniques, students' presentations, and so on. Moreover, both principals stated that a lack of English textbooks was another big challenge because the school did not receive enough textbooks based on the students' enrollment rate, so the students were asked to share textbooks with their partners during class sessions. They also added that their school did not have a language lab, so the students could not come for listening activities when needed.

Principals' suggestions

At the end of the interviews, the two principals made an appeal to MoEYS and

all concerned stakeholders. Their suggestions included requesting more buildings, more teaching and learning materials such as a language lab with electronic devices, more textbooks, and other useful resources.

> MoEYS should provide us with more buildings and English textbooks for students so that they can depend on their own books, not with friends. (P1, male, school principal)

> MoEYS should provide some teaching materials to our school. We are not qualified to build a listening lab. We don't have skills. We need more English documents. (P2, male, deputy principal)

Discussion

This study found that there were some challenges faced by the teachers and students in teaching and learning English. Key challenges were related to teachers' qualities, study programs, learning and teaching materials, classroom activities, class size, and students' self-learning attitude. These variables were considered challenges that prevented the students from learning and teachers from teaching English successfully. Through the interviews with the teachers, it was found that those problems were happening in the studied context. School principals also added that the lack of buildings, textbooks, and a language lab created problems for the process of English language learning and teaching in the school.

The findings of the present study corroborate those of Neau (2003) and Petraki and Khat (2020), who found that the lack of teaching and learning materials hindered the effectiveness of language teaching. Petraki and Khat (2020), for example, stated that many schools did not provide teachers with a variety of teaching and learning materials, and the teachers themselves did not produce the materials either.

The current study's findings also corroborate those of Pachina (2020), who stated that the lack of modern resources such as course books, tape recorders, and computers has a considerable impact on learners' enthusiasm for language learning, and teachers' low motivation may also have an influence on the learning experiences of their students.

Based on the results of the survey, teachers' qualities, including teaching techniques and teaching performance, were also found as the key challenges to learning and teaching English. Through the interviews, similar concerns were confirmed. Very often, a teacher of English only stood in one place (mostly next to his desk) to read and translate the texts or conversations into Khmer for his/her students. These findings corroborate those of Houn and Em (2022), who found that Cambodian teachers of English usually used the old instructional methods or the Grammar Translation Method to teach English. They usually spoke in Khmer and rarely used English to communicate with students.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has found some challenges faced by Cambodian secondary school students and teachers in learning and teaching the English language. As the survey results showed, teachers' qualities, study programs, learning and teaching materials, classroom activities, class size, and students' self-learning attitude were the key challenges in learning English. The interview data also revealed similar challenges faced by teachers in teaching English to their students.

In this context, the teachers could not perform their teaching well because there were too many students in the class, and there was a lack of learning and teaching resources. Moreover, textbooks were not up to date, and the study hours for the English subject were not enough. Due to a large number of students in the class, classroom activities did not work well. As a result, the students sometimes ignored their teacher's teaching and did not do their homework properly.

This study has some recommendations for the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and relevant stakeholders to work together to improve the situation of English language teaching in Cambodian schools. The recommendations are related to supporting teachers to pursue their professional development, providing enough learning and teaching materials, and updating the curriculum.

Teachers' professional development is essential in equipping them with new teaching techniques. Many teachers have extensive experience teaching English

in a variety of settings. Thus, if they have the chance to meet, they can exchange their experiences (Zein & Haing, 2017). Given the importance of teachers' continuing professional development, it is best if the teachers have a chance to exchange their teaching experiences (Em et al., 2021). Thus, MoEYS should allow and encourage all teachers to attend seminars and training workshops so that they can support one another and exchange ideas about teaching English.
Teaching and learning materials help the process of learning and teaching work smoothly (Vong & Kaewurai, 2017). Teachers need learning and teaching materials to teach their students the lessons properly since they allow them to better understand and appreciate the concepts, themes, and subject matter. Students can also experience tangible learning outcomes with the use of learning and teaching resources. As a result, teachers can use the materials to assist their students to learn quicker, retain memorizations longer, and get more correct information, which help to increase knowledge, curiosity, creativity, and thinking skills. Therefore, MoEYS and concerned stakeholders must find ways to offer sufficient learning and teaching resources for all schools in Cambodia.

In the context of this study, the *English For Cambodia* (EFC) textbook series published between 1997 and 2002 were still used, and even worse, the students did not have enough textbooks for their learning. Outdated textbooks make the students feel discouraged because what they have learned cannot be applied in their real society. Therefore, a new and updated textbook is urgently needed. The new and updated textbook should include easily accessible extra materials such as audio or videos that teachers and students can download from the internet. Besides, the updated textbook should also include some aspects of intercultural communication because the world has become a global village, and English is a global lingua franca. Along with updating the textbook, MoEYS and education stakeholders need to provide enough textbooks for all public schools in Cambodia.

Finally, this study has some suggestions for future research. In particular, future research should be conducted with a large sample size and involve other grade levels. Studies examining the effectiveness of learning and teaching English in the Cambodian context are highly recommended. Moreover, because English has become an international language, research on English as a global

language by examining the actual implementation in Cambodian classrooms is desirable.

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Appendix

A Master's Degree Questionnaire for Data Collection

Dear student participants,

This is a study on the challenges of learning and teaching English at your school level. The study aims to examine the challenges faced by Cambodian students and teachers in learning and teaching English at lower secondary education levels, and it also aims to find solutions to solve the problems by interviewing school principals and teachers of English. The researcher values your input into the study. The questionnaire contains seven parts, as shown below. It will take you only around 20 minutes to pick up your choices. Please be assured that your responses are the strictest confidence and will be used in this study only. With respect to your privacy, you are not required to fill in your name. Besides, your information will be destroyed 5 years after the study.

Please be aware that your honesty is the only best way that your school principals and your teachers of English can discuss with the researcher to find the solutions to solve the existing problems. Thus, please think critically before choosing each choice.

Part I. Demographic information

1. Please choose your gender
   1. ☐ Male 2. ☐ Female
2. Please choose your age range
   1. ☐ 11-15 2. ☐ 16-20 3. ☐ 21-over
3. Please choose your grade
   1. ☐ Grade 7 2. ☐ Grade 8 3. ☐ Grade 9

Please note that from part II, you are required to choose the most appropriate numbers by ticking under only one choice: 1 2 3 4 or 5. The rating scales are 1. Strongly disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Not decided, 4. Agree, and 5. Strongly agree.

Part II. Teacher' qualities	1	2	3	4	5
1. My teacher's knowledge is very good.					

2. My teacher's teaching technique is very good.					
3. My teacher's teaching performance is very good.					
4. My teacher always encourages me to learn.					
Part III. Study program	1	2	3	4	5
1. My textbook is in line with my existing knowledge.					
2. My textbook is very interesting.					
3. My existing English hour is enough in a week.					
4. I don't need additional hours for English sessions in a week.					
Part IV. Learning and teaching materials	1	2	3	4	5
1. Teacher uses a textbook all the time is the best way to teach.					
2. My teacher always plays audio records for students to listen to.					
3. My teacher always takes me to the listening lab.					
4. My teacher always takes me to the English library.					
Part V. Classroom activities	1	2	3	4	5
1. Individual work is very good.					
2. Whole class work is not very good.					
3. Pair work is not very good.					
4. Group work is not very good.					
Part VI. Class size	1	2	3	4	5
1. A class with too many students is very good.					
2. A class with too many students does not affect my study.					
3. A class with a lot of students makes me happy.					
4. I like being noisy because of the large class size.					
Part VII. Students' self-learning attitudes	1	2	3	4	5
1. I am very punctual for class.					
2. I always pay attention to whatever my teacher explains.					
3. I always participate in the class activities my teacher assigns.					
4. I always do my homework.					

Thank you for your cooperation!