

Teaching English in Cambodian Secondary Schools: With a Special Focus on Teachers' Preferences Towards the Improvement of Their Professional Careers in Language Teaching

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(Received September 30, 2002)

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a study of the current situation of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Cambodian Secondary Schools (CSS_s). The main purpose of this study is to find out what Cambodian Teachers of English (CTE) really preferred in their language teaching. In other words, the study attempts to find out about teachers' preferences (TPs) on the improvement of their professional careers in LT in the present CSS_s. In order to discover exactly what the TPs were from those target classroom practitioners, it is first necessary to gain a deep understanding of the difficulties and challenges of CTE who have been faced by unbelievably rapid changes in the country's policy towards the learning and teaching of foreign languages (FL).

Key words: CSS_s (Cambodian Secondary Schools); TP_s (teachers' preferences);
CTE (Cambodian Teachers of English); MoEYS (Ministry of Education, Youth,
and Sports)

Introduction

English began to be officially taught as a FL in CSS_s only from 1989. Prior to 1975, the principal FL taught in schools had been French. But from 1975 to 1989, the study of FL had been forbidden due to the fact that this country had been plunged into civil wars. There was some anecdotal evidence from countless discussions with schools' directors, community of students' parents, and learners, that most students wanted to learn English but schools could not afford ELT to meet their demands because they lacked teachers, classrooms, and teaching and learning materials. However, as the MoEYS has realized that all strata of the Cambodian people had been willing to learn English, and without any more delays, the study of this language had to commence from a very low resource base, with no curriculum, no textbooks, and with a very limited number of CTE (Pit. 1996). That is why there have been lots of constraints which firstly need to be thoroughly studied, and analyzed before some appropriate solutions can be found out so that those constraints can subsequently be solved. As already mentioned in the Abstract, this study attempted to search for solutions to help solve problems faced by CTE in CSS, and to find out what those TPs towards the improvement of their professional teaching careers (PTC) in LT were.

本論文は、課程博士候補論文を構成する論文の一部として、以下の審査委員により審査を受けた。
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The Rationale

English language classes are provided in CSSs, but the MoEYS does not yet have a sufficient number of qualified teachers, facilities, and teaching resources to effectively prescribe English in the curriculum. From year to year, a number of aid projects have attempted to enable English to be implemented with a high or at least acceptable quality throughout CSSs. Most attempts have focused on upgrading English language skills and pedagogical skills of those teachers who have claimed some knowledge of the language (Pou. 1996).

In the past few years, several projects have focused on the production of an English language textbook appropriate for Cambodia. As the result of those attempts, a series of brand-new textbooks called English for Cambodia have been published. Now, all CSSs are using those textbooks replacing the foreign ones such as *Headway*, *English for Today*, and *Streamline*, which they had used prior to the publication of the new textbooks. The textbooks have six levels. One book is supposed to be used for the whole academic year, and each book is used for each grade. See Table 1 below for the details of new textbooks:

Table 1. Distribution of new textbooks

English for Cambodia						
Grades	7	8	9	10	11	12
Books	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Chapters	20	20 + RUs:	20 + RUs: 1- 4	20	20	20
RUs (Revision Units)		1-4; 1-8; 1-12; 1-16; 1-20	1- 8 1- 12			
No. of hours/week (For students)	LSS			USS		
	5			4		
No. of hours/week (For teachers)	18			15		
Years of publication	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002

Cambodia was subsequently under the colonization from many foreign countries. During those periods it was the case that the country's administrative structures, including the system of education, were under tough inspection from its colonizers. Under French colonial rule, the FL officially taught and studied was French. During the Vietnamese occupation, the FL officially taught and studied at schools were Vietnamese and Russian. Table 2 shows the recent history of the Cambodia Education Systems (CES), the study of FL, and the changes of FL in schools' curriculum when the country was in different periods of foreign colonization.

Table 2. The CES and the study of FL

1953-1970	CES (13 years) A French-based education system (6+4+2+1)		FL
	Pre-School	Not obligatory	"French" was the only language officially included in schools' curriculum, and it was used in all sectors in the then-Cambodia.
	Elementary School (ES)	6 years	
	Lower Secondary School (LSS)	4 years	
	Upper Secondary School (USS)	2 years	
		1 year	
1970-1975	The structure of education was the same as those described in the periods of (1953-1970)		
Because of American involvement (politics and military) in Indochina War, the study of "English" was also encouraged.			

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1975-1979	CES		FL
	No formal education was implemented		The study and use of FL were severely prohibited.
All previous systems including law, politics, and economics were abolished.			
1979-1986	CES (10 years) (4+3+3)		FL
	Pre-School	Not obligatory	"Vietnamese and Russian" were the languages officially included in schools' curriculum.
	ES	1, 2, 3, 4,	
	LSS	5, 6, 7	
	USS	8, 9, 10	
The study of "English/French" was prohibited. If one was found to be learning them, he/she would be severely punished and even imprisoned.			
1986-1996	CES (11 years) (5+3+3)		FL
	Pre-school	Not obligatory	- Vietnamese & Russian (1986-1989) - English & French (1989-present)
	ES	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	
	LSS	6, 7, 8	
	USS	9, 10, 11	
1996 - the present	CES (12 Years) (6+3+3)		FL
	Pre-School	Not obligatory	No FL provided
	ES	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	English/French
	LSS	7, 8, 9	
	USS	10, 11, 12	

Sources:

1. Interviewed Mr. Oum Khoeng, a former teacher in the Khmer Republic and he is now a teacher trainer at the Faculty of Pedagogy (MoEYS), in April 2002.
2. The MoEYS' Educational Planning (1997)

The above-mentioned causes have driven the present CTE to face thousands of problems in the process of implementing their teaching, due to the inadequacy and incompetence of human resources, poorly equipped facilities, and insufficient teaching materials. It is believed that with the findings from this study, some possible solutions will actually show alternative ways to cope with those negative impacts so that CTE will be able to improve their PTC.

Research design

1. The research sites and participants

Table 3. The research sites and participants

Schools' names (6)	Participants			
1. Boeung Keng Korng 2. Son Thor Mok 3. Toul Tom Poug 4. Bac Touk 5. Boeung Tror Beak 6. Phnom Doun Penh	Questionnaire Responders: 56			
	Interviewees: 39			
	LSS	USS	OS	MoEYS
	14	15	6	4

2. Data collection

a. Date

The visit to Secondary Schools, the Ministry, the Department of General Education, and the Faculty of Pedagogy was conducted during the months of April and May 2002. Before the preparation for the school

visits, appointments had been made and reasons concerning the visits had been explained to the schools' directors.

b. Subject

The intended findings of this study were very limited in its scope. In the framework of ELT in CSS, the study attempted to find out what preferences the teachers wished for in facilitating their PTC.

c. Methods

The research was based on a combination of data gathering techniques such as the provision of a written questionnaire, interviews, classroom observations, and information obtained from printed documents.

A set of questions was used at that time, (see Appendix A and B) for the details. The data for this study consisted of the responses to the written questionnaire, the notes taken during interviews, the classroom observations, the school documents, and other related documents from the country' MoEYS.

Out of eighty copies of written questionnaire given to CTE in six different CSS, only 62 copies were handed back with their responses. Among those received, only 56 were judged to meet the requirements, while the rest failed to make complete responses as required in the questionnaire. This means that the return rate was 70 % which could be used in this study. For the interviews, 39 education-related personnel were selected as interviewees. This number was made up of 14 LSS teachers, 15 USS teachers, 6 office staff, and 4 personnel from the MoEYS.

3. Data analysis

The data and the analysis reported here can be applied to all CSS_s. The schools and teachers selected to respond to the written questionnaire could represent the rest of the teachers teaching English. Their contributions would offer constructive suggestions for building effective teaching structures and establishing a friendly instructional environment that promotes higher levels of achievement among themselves and the students. Both the verbal and written responses obtained were carefully studied and subsequently analyzed qualitatively.

Table 4. Results of the Questionnaire

		See Appendix A for the reference questions.								
		The counting is based on the number of responders who ticked in the boxes provided under each question.								
Items		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Q1	No.	56	56	49	30	37	56	23	34	49
	%	100	100	87.5	53.5	66	100	41	60.7	87.5
Q2	No.	53	39	53	28	27				
	%	94.6	69.6	94.6	50	48.2				
Q3	No.	39	55	41	43					
	%	69.6	98.2	73.2	76.7					
Q4	No.	39	55							
	%	69.6	98.2							
Q5	No.	56	52	51	51					
	%	100	92.8	91	91					
Q6	No.	40	47	47	33					
	%	71.4	83.9	83.9	58.9					

The findings, based on Qs 1-6 and Interviews, are expected to contribute to the overall understanding of how CSS_s can be improved in terms of effectiveness and quality assurance. By highlighting the CTE's preferences found from the study, it is believed that this study will definitely provide some concepts for future

development of CTE's teaching profession. With few exceptions, most directors and principals of CSS_s have given little attention to particular conditions, needs, weaknesses, and strengths of the CTE. If the barriers currently faced by many CTE were not seriously taken into consideration, and if appropriate measures could not be found to tackle those barriers, the objectives of the whole CTE's efforts in improving the quality of their PTC would not be realized.

4. Results and Discussion

1. Concerning the Impact of Schools' Environment (Based on Q1, Items 1-9)

100% of responders, based on data analysis, expressed their preferences concerning Items 1, 2, and 6 that the school's climate should be made pleasant and suitable for both LL and LT by means of providing basic necessities needed by classroom practitioners and target participants. Their preferences were based on the fact that the present CSS_s, in general, are in poor conditions. Almost school buildings left from pre wars (prior to the 1970s) are decayed and unattractive, and basic necessities such as qualified teachers, teaching resources, and all the like are in bad shortages. Schools' environment can really influence LT and LL, and it really has an effect on all the learning that goes on in the classroom, and certainly on LT. To make schools' environment pleasant, and to provide basic necessities to run schools effectively are ones of immediate priorities strongly preferred by the present CTE in CSS_s.

To make the school or room attractive is one thing, but to make collaborative work among teachers involved to ensure smooth working environment is even more important. In response to Items 3 and 9, 87.5% explained that teachers should be helpful and approachable; and there should be good relations and cooperation between school principals and teachers. They claimed that cooperative work had not been much seen in schools since, on the one hand, all parties involved were not highly encouraged to do so, and, on the other hand, most teachers were busy doing their second jobs (the detail of which will be fully described in Finding 3). In reference to Item 5, 66% put an emphasis on proper allocation of classrooms for ELT or ELL. They explained that mobile teaching classes have made not only teachers, but also students lose motivation in LT and LL since they have to move from one classroom to look for another available classroom whenever they have a language class. They said that they had realized the reality of classroom shortage, but these things should be well managed as soon as possible. For Item 8, 60.7% gave their focus on classroom cancellations. They explained that they could hardly finish the assigned-taught curriculum at the end of each academic year because there were too many cancellations of their teaching classes. They described that the floods in years 2000 and 2001 caused a long delay of schools teaching hours. Based on the Country Report dated October 3, 2000, amongst the country's total schools of approximately 4600, about 800 schools were temporarily closed. Apart from this, the teachers' demonstrations (from February 1-8, 2001) boycotted teaching led to a suspension of schools. Not less than 80% of the total 85000 teachers (based on the Country Report dated January 27 to February 3, 2001) attended those strikes demanded for fair salaries from their meager monthly payment of 20 US dollars to 100 dollars. While most other teachers held other jobs to earn the bulk of their monthly income, and students also joined teachers at the picket lines arguing classes were often poorly prepared as a result of low staff morale.

These excluded the cancellations caused by urgent meetings, societal insecurity, and other political movements. They wanted that without necessary reasons, classes should not be cancelled. 53.5%, based on Item 4, intended to have their classrooms well equipped. They complained that their present classrooms lacked everything counting from unattractive appearances to supplementary teaching resources. While only 41%, based on Item 7, were willing to have the number of students in the present class reduced from the present size which was in between 40 to 60 to only from 25 to 30. They described that they found it difficult to organize classroom interactions, and they were almost impossible to control their classes while teaching.

2. Concerning the Availability of Teaching Materials (TMs) (Based on Q2, Items 1-5)

According to Items 1 and 3, 94.6% expressed their preferences that TMs should be made available, and

accessible for daily use. Their complaints were based on the reality of unavailability and inaccessibility of TMs in their present schools. They claimed that they had not demanded electricity-used materials such as OHP, Video, or even cassette players because they knew that schools could not afford those items due to the shortages of budget. What they demanded was only simply made materials such as pictures, post cards, photographs, and some other teaching references in which they were not costly in making and preparing.

In Item 2, 69.6% stressed their preferences on accessibility of TMs for urgent or immediate utilization.

They pointed out that TMs are to be made not only for teachers, but also for learners to use as references in and outside class hours. Because of the difficulty in getting school's TMs, they explained that their teaching was mainly based on an authorized textbook, and with a limited number of their own prepared resources. The responders of about 50%, Item 4, put an emphasis on the sufficiency of TMs. They complained that insufficient TMs had driven not only the teachers, but also the students to have unsatisfactory achievements because necessary resources need to be explained and learnt are out of reach. Less than average of responders, 48.2%, referring to Item 5, wanted TMs to be upgraded from year to year. They expressed their concerns that the production of TMs was of course really crucial for effective teaching practices, but they should be produced with the basic ideas in mind that substantial TMs could work well only when they were relevant to the textbooks which they were using.

Based on this analysis, it can be summed up that the present schools now are facing serious shortages of TMs. So, the production of TMs should be one of other hot agendas for future discussions.

3. Concerning the Impact of the Teaching Colleagues (Based on Q3, Items 1-4)

The CTE complained that because of low salaries, most of the teachers working in the same school seldom had time to meet and discuss over teaching techniques with each other since they needed to work outside the school to get extra payment to supplement their meager salaries for their families' survival. That was one of the causes of unfavorable emotions among most teachers. About 98.2%, based on Item 2, suggested that the teachers who taught English should create the system of unofficial classroom observations (COs) for constructive correction and advice (for the details of which, see Finding 4). They said that COs not only from schools' principals, or officials from the ministry, but also from other teachers who shared the same subject was not much seen so far. Their preference concerning this matter was that teachers should take turn to do observations for constructive advice or feedback so that their teaching quality could be improved. Item 4, about 76.7% suggested that teachers should help each other to make course outline before each school year starts. Referring to this, they explained that if one looked back into the reality of LT in CSSs, he/she would realize that most teachers did not get together to discuss what they planned to do when the school year begins. They just simply followed the textbooks, and did whatever they wanted to since no one came to inspect their teaching.

73.2%, Item 3, expressed their preferences concerning teachers' problem solving. They said that the CTE should help each other to overcome minor or major obstacles in the process of implementing LT. This was based on the fact that there had been lots of problems in the course of LT, and when teachers encountered those problems they had to solve them individually, and sometimes they ended up with despairs since they could not get help from others. In association with Item 3, about 69.6% of the Item 1's responders explained that there should be regular meetings for discussing and exchanging ideas over various issues they had encountered such as methods to deal with problematic students, teaching methodology, teachers' personal matters, and basic necessities for LT. They explained that so far there had not been any regular meetings scheduled, no COs to be conducted, and no clear strategies for problem solving. They added that if these points could be taken into consideration, then the impact of teaching colleagues would really affect the quality of ELT in CSSs.

4. Concerning Official Classroom Observations (COs) (Based on Q4, Items 1-2)

Some teachers expressed their concerns over COs that they felt very anxious to have been officially

observed. They explained that their insecure feelings while being observed were caused by being unconfident in handling the class, or they might not be accustomed to that kind of system since the observation was not regularly done. However, when asked what they would prefer concerning this matter, 98.2% responding to Item 2, stated that since they were keen to work out more effective ways to teach English, and their teaching experiences were still limited, they preferred COs to be regularly done, while about 69.6%, based on Item 1, stressed that constructive comments should be given after the work of observation was over so that their weak points could be improved. They explained that if they were regularly observed with the provision of constructive comments, their work of teaching would be much improved, and their confidence towards LT would be widened and strengthened. Based upon this analysis, it has been seen that although the CTE wanted their classrooms to be observed, and feedback should be given afterwards, their preferences concerning observers were summarized like these: observers should respect and support the teacher, even if they think the teacher is performing badly. Observers should give their comments for feedback after observing. They are not there to criticize, but to learn from the teacher, and share experiences. Observers should inform the teachers of their observation dates in advance. Observations should be also done among teaching colleagues, and they should be treated as part of LT.

5. Concerning the Presently-Used English Textbook (Based on Q5, Items 1-4)

Almost all CTE in CSS_s expressed their satisfaction over the new textbooks being used in their schools because those textbooks are interesting (100% of whom responded, based on Item 1), appropriate to the students' levels (92.8% of whom responded, according to Item 2), relevant to the reality of Cambodian daily life (responded by 91% of responders, in accordance with Item 3), and they contain a variety of activities for the students to do practice (91% of whom responded, in reference to Item 4). They explained that the textbooks' main methodological characteristics are to make students have constant practice of the four macro-skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They also ensure that the students have sufficient practice of grammatical structures and new vocabulary, which are introduced regularly and systematically within appropriate and meaningful communicative contexts. Those textbooks also clearly contain a variety of effective teaching and learning techniques which are presented within each unit. They have been designed to provide regular opportunities for interaction between teachers and students, and more specifically, students and students in pair and group work.

6. Concerning the Chance to Have Further Training (Based on Q6, Items 1-4)

Only a small number of the CTE in CSS_s are specialized in ELT. Some teachers, whose specialization was not English, but they could only speak it, were chosen to teach English, and some others had spent three years learning Russian or Vietnamese, but due to the collapse of the communist bloc, they were shifted to learn English for about a year and had also become teachers of English in high schools. These teachers did not have proper training to be teachers of English, but were appointed to teach English due to the shortage of CTE.

Because of these, they demanded proper training in all skills and techniques regarding ELT. When asked what they would prefer to do if they had chance to get further training, they claimed that they had enthusiasm and energy, and could take on all challenges. They knew their weaknesses and strengths in their LT. 83.9%, in reference to Items 2 and 3, said that they would learn how to make effective lesson plans, and how to teach the four-macro skills in a communicative way. About 71.4%, responding to Item 1, put their desire on learning new things related to LT such as how to assess and evaluate students' performances, and about 58.9%, based on Item 4, pointed out that they would learn how to deal with students effectively and successfully.

Conclusion

The study was designed to examine, in the framework of ELT in CSS_s, what difficulties CTE had been confronting from the impact of rapid changes of the country's policy towards ELL and ELT, and what

preferences the teachers wished for in facilitating their PTC. The findings, based on qualitative analysis, show TPs in six aspects in which some implications can be drawn. The first implication shows that the first priorities to be urgently solved are to make classroom climate pleasant and to equip those classrooms with basic necessities. Because of the shortage of teaching materials in the present schools, the second implication stresses that the production of teaching materials should be one of other hot agendas for immediate discussions. The third implication emphasizes that collaboration among teaching colleagues is one of the determined factors in succeeding desirable achievements of language teaching. Thus, this aspect should be taken into serious consideration. The fourth implication indicates the importance of classroom observations by suggesting that observations should be treated as part of language teaching, they should be definitely scheduled, and they should be regularly done with the provision of feedback afterwards. For the presently-used English textbook, the fifth implication shows that the CTEs have shown no negative reactions, except they are showing their overwhelming preferences with it. The sixth implication shows that the present CTEs really need a wide range of information concerning English teaching to function well in their classrooms. So, any challenge of providing on-going teacher development is desperately needed by them.

It is believed that if these implications are seriously reconsidered, and if strong measures are taken, then the teachers' preferences will be satisfied. Without any doubt, the professional careers of CTE in CSSs will definitely be improved, since their demands and preferences can be met.

Further study

To add to the current study, for more effective outcomes and alternative solutions in helping the CTE at the CSSs to overcome all teaching impediments, it is believed that further study should be conducted. One immediate area of study should focus on the principles (suggested by the classroom practitioners, the office staff in charge of curriculum and schedule designs, and the policy makers) which will lead towards the improvement of ELT in CSSs.

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Appendix A: Written Questionnaire

Q1 What are your preferences concerning the atmosphere of your school? Please tick where appropriate.

- | | | |
|----------------------------|---|---------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | The school should be made pleasant for both: language learning and teaching. | (100%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | The school should provide basic necessities for language learning and teaching. | (100%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | The teachers should be helpful and approachable. | (87.5%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | The classrooms should be well equipped. | (53.5%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5 | The classrooms should be properly allocated for English language teaching. | (66%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6 | The classrooms should be made suitable for language learning and teaching. | (100%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 7 | The number of students should be reduced, preferably from 25 to 30. | (41%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 8 | The classrooms should not be cancelled without any reasons. | (60.7%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 9 | There should be good relations and cooperation between the school principal and the teachers. | (87.5%) |

Any others? _____

Q2 What are your preferences concerning teaching materials?

- | | | |
|----------------------------|--|---------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | The teaching materials should be made available and accessible. | (94.6%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | The teaching materials should be accessible for urgent or immediate use. | (69.6%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | The teaching materials should be made available for daily use. | (94.6%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | The teaching materials should be sufficient. | (50%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5 | The teaching materials should be upgraded from years to years. | (48.2%) |

Any others? _____

Q3 What are your preferences concerning your teaching colleagues?

- | | | |
|----------------------------|---|---------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | Regular meeting among teachers should be scheduled. | (69.6%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | Take turn to do observations for constructive advice. | (98.2%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | Helping each other to solve problems. | (73.2%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | Helping each other to make course outline. | (76.7%) |

Any others? _____

Q4 What are your preferences concerning classroom observations?

- | | | |
|----------------------------|--|---------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | The classroom observations should be regularly done. | (69.6%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | After doing observations, constructive advice or comments should be given. | (98.2%) |

Any others? _____

Q5 How do you like the presently-used textbook?

- | | | |
|----------------------------|--|---------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | It is interesting. | (100%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | It is appropriate to the students' level. | (92.8%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | It is relevant to the reality of the Cambodian daily lives. | (91%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | It contains variety of activities for students to do the practice. | (91%) |

Any others? _____

Q6 What do you prefer to do if you have chance to get further training?

- | | | |
|----------------------------|---|---------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | To learn new things related to language teaching. | (71.4%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | To learn more about how to teach a language in a communicative way. | (83.9%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | To learn how to make effective lesson plans. | (83.9%) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | To learn more of how to deal with students. | (58.9%) |

Any others? _____

Appendix B: Interviews (Its results were used to add to results obtained from the Questionnaire)

I. Introductory questions

1. Would you mind telling me your name?
2. What is your present position?
3. What are your job responsibilities?

II. Interviewees' general concepts on ELT in the CSSs

4. What are your preferences concerning the:
 - atmosphere of CSSs?
 - teaching materials?
 - teaching colleagues?
 - classroom observation?
 - English textbook?
 - chance to get further training?
5. Do you think the teachers in CSSs have difficulties in their teaching? If you do, what are those difficulties?
6. What factors affecting the present ELT in CSSs?

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