College Student Involvement in English Language Learning in Cambodia: Trends and Patterns

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Abstract

This study examines (1) the extent to which students at one premier faculty of English in Cambodia exhibit their involvement level in academic activities under a new learning environment and (2) whether differential involvement patterns exist within certain groups of students. The data source was 215 sophomore students randomly selected from all study periods (morning, afternoon and evening) in the 2010 academic year. Student involvement was assessed by their engagement behaviors using selected items from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The results indicated students had high to moderate levels of involvement in assigned homework and tasks and whole class and out-of-class collaborative learning activities. Out-of-class student-teacher encounters and reading and class preparation were in that order the least common behaviors among students. Certain student involvement patterns were indeed embedded within students' gender and English performance dynamics and study periods. Some important implications were discussed for pedagogical orientations and further research.

1. Introduction

For decades, teaching and learning in Cambodia largely centered on "rote learning" and "teacher-centeredness". Under this paradigm, repetition drill, memorization, recitation, and for the most part teacher talks were portrayed as a more desired mode of learning and teaching respectively, while students were given less diverse modes of participation or tasks beyond individual work and classroom settings. These practices had become prevalent nation-wide regardless of classroom context. English language learning discourse is no exception as it is virtually dominated by Grammar-Translation Methodology (Neau, 2003). However, as a new paradigm of teaching (i.e., student-centered approach and independent learning) has gradually penetrated into classroom teaching in Cambodia (Bunlay et al., 2009), it appears that students today do not hold the same philosophy of learning as ascribed in the past. Their involvement and learning patterns are a case in point. The most noticeable evidence is the learning of English at college as student-centered approach and independent learning has long been put at the forefront in English language classroom contexts and apparently keeps evolving when compared to other programs and other educational levels.

The emergence of student-centered and communicative language teaching modalities at the collegiate level features a new challenge for both English classroom learning and teaching practices given that the whole context of learning and teaching in most programs and at all levels has been predominantly influenced by a long-lasting practice of Grammar-Translation Methodology and, if any, a so-called practice of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as in the case of the K-12 education (Neau, 2003). This mismatch has, in particular, had significant impacts on the current situation of student learning at college and has, thus, given rise to the quest among scholars to understand the emerging nature of student learning (see, for example, Keuk, 2008, 2009; Keuk & Tith, 2006; Khan, 2008; Ly et al., 2007). Unfortunately, none of these studies have extensively examined student learning beyond the classroom context. This practice, as implicitly challenged by Kuh et al. (1997), Kuh et al. (2007), Pascarella et al. (2008) and Terenzini et al. (1996), merely limits learning within the classroom context. Little is known about intact students' college experiences as viewed through their involvement both on and off campus. The paucity of empirical research as such is surprising given the growing demands from the public to account for the quality of student learning. Thus, providing information about the trends and patterns of Cambodian students' learning so that educators can be better informed when developing educational

programmes that can effectively mediate any imbalances in their students' learning is worthwhile. This study explores the extent to which Cambodian learners of English adapt themselves to the new given classroom conditions through examining their academic involvement in learning English in a broader context (in-class and out of class) at one prestigious higher education institute.

2. Literature review

Over the last few decades, much of the existing literature on college student learning has underscored student involvement in educationally purposeful activities as a reference point in understanding the quality of education. An apparent underlying concept lies in that successful learning occurs when students themselves are fully engaged in the educationally purposeful activities (see Astin, 1993 as cited in Kuh et al., 1997; Kuh, 2001, 2003; Pace, 1990; Tinto, 1975, 1987 as cited in Bruinsma, 2003). These scholars take a critical stance in positioning student success by pointing out that student learning processes as described by what they do in college is the most discernible aspect in which successful learning outcomes are situated. For instance, Tinto (1975) proposed that desired learning outcomes are a result of successful integration, both academic and social, to the college learning environment. He theorized that both academic and social integration is the critical pathway that promotes student learning, basically emphasizing the nature of student experiences as the precondition to college success. Pace (1990) supported this claim and documented further in his student development model that the quality of learning is favorably enhanced through the quality of student effort as characterized through their involvement in, among other seminal process indicators, three main areas: student-faculty contact, cooperation among students and active learning. Interchangeably, Astin (1993) attributed students' desired learning outcomes in college to the quantity and quality of student involvement, stating that the amount of time and energy invested in academic and non-academic activities related to campus (i.e., including involvement in class activities, relations/contact with peers and teachers and extra-curricular activities) plays an integral role in determining student learning and development. In accordance with previous researchers, Kuh (2001, 2003) documented five important involvement/engagement measures during college (level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment) that need to be taken into account if student learning is to be improved. On the whole, students' time and energy invested in educationally purposeful activities represents crucial elements that explain differences in student learning and development. Increasingly, literature showing the positive payoffs of student involvement efforts on learning has been largely consistent (for example, Carini et al., 2006; Davis & Murrell, 1993; Kuh et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 1997; Laird & Cruce, 2009).

However, despite voluminous evidence providing such compelling portraits of student involvement as a key determinant of student learning and development, it is surprising that none of previous studies have taken into account the nature of student learning in an emerging context like that of Cambodia. That is, although effective involvement/engagement behaviors have been extensively examined in the last few decades as evidenced by the dominantly used survey instruments, the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) (Pace, 1990) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2001), research has paid little attention to its practicality and applicability in a broader context. This study addresses this gap, providing new evidence from a country with an emerging and troubled higher education system where students have, in particular, experienced an unprecedented change at the collegiate level from a historically dominant traditional and controlled modality of learning to a modern and less controlled one. More important is that although student involvement has been a sizable and growing area of research in higher education over the last few decades, less is known about its relevance and applicability to English language discourse, leaving its generalizability across disciplines in question. Drawing on this limited evidence, this study seeks to broaden empirical inputs pertaining to student learning in both context and discipline. Besides, given the complexities of students' profiles in Cambodian higher education, it is far from clear that students with such characteristics as being from rural areas, low in academic profile, and divided in different study shifts (morning, afternoon and evening) exhibit similar involvement if compared with their counterparts. Importantly, whether students' varying performance levels are associated with certain quantity of involvement is little known in a Cambodian context. This study tests these extensions. Understanding the nature of their involvement patterns will yield more fruitful knowledge for educational practitioners to enhance practices relevant to certain groups of students. Therefore, some new and additional evidence will be documented in this present research.

3. Purpose of the study

This study seeks to explore typical learning behaviours of students for the purpose of portraying the extent of their academic involvement at college and examine the patterns of their involvement across various cohorts (gender, geographical origins, English

performance levels, and study shifts). Two questions guide this study:

1- What is the typical academic involvement of students learning English at college?
2- How do different groups of students exhibit their involvement patterns?

4. Research methods

4.1 Participants

A total of 215 second year students (male= 103; female= 112) at the country's premiere institute, the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL) in Phnom Penh City participated in the survey. One important justification for this sample is that the selected institute has played a pivotal role in providing quality English language education since the 1990s. With technical support for subsequent capacity building from Australian projects during the late 1980s and early 1990s, it has functioned as the most prestigious English language teacher training higher education institute and strongly emphasizes the practice of learner-centeredness under its four-year bachelor's program. That is, although it has faced a number of pragmatic challenges regarding the predisposed traditional approach of learning among high school graduates (as noted earlier), the IFL has strongly prioritized the roles of students and their active participation as the optimal means for assessment. However, while in recent years student profiles are becoming complex, little research has been focused on the intact student experiences at the institute, leaving the extent to which they are supposed to be involved in good educational processes in question. It is premised on the mismatch between this lack of critical and empirical inputs on the evaluation of student learning and the active role of the institute in promoting student learning that it was chosen as the research site of this present study. Of special interest is that students majoring in English at the IFL can be somewhat perceived to be the best among students majoring in humanities and social sciences in terms of active learning and, more importantly, they are also likely to enroll in other programs (Chet, 2006). With these characteristics, the selection of this premier faculty of English seemingly provides rich empirical evidence on student learning experiences, not just at the research site.

Students were selected on the basis of random sampling from all study periods (morning, afternoon and evening). The sample consisted of 31.2% of students from the morning, 38.1 % from the afternoon, and 30.7% from the evening shift (a response rate of 77 per cent). Students ranged in age from 18 to 32 years, with a mean of 21.17 (*SD*=2.18). Seventy eight per cent of the students were city residents. Given that students pursuing two degrees at two different universities at the same time constituted more than 70% of the sample, the figure to a certain extent expands the sample representativeness in terms of involvement issues beyond the current site of research.

Table 1. Student Profile (*N*=215)

Variable	N	%	Variable	N	%
Gender			*Doing two full-time university degrees*		
Male	103	47.9	Yes	167	77.7
Female	112	52.1	No	48	22.3
Shift			*Place of origin*		
Morning	67	31.2	Urban	168	78.1
Afternoon	82	38.1	Non-urban	44	20.5
Evening	66	30.7			

4.2 Instrument and measures

Data was collected using a self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire measured students' background characteristics and engagement behaviors as measures for tapping their involvement. Students' background characteristics were specifically focused on gender (0=male; 1=female) and geographical origins (0= urban; 1=non-urban). Urban students in this present research were restricted to those having graduated high school from Phnom Penh City only; whereas those having experienced high school from other provinces were marked as non-urban in origin. One drawback of this classification is that a clearer distinction of students from various provinces in terms of more meticulous geographical breakdowns (such as urban provinces and suburban and remote areas) is not available for analysis. However, because this variable was solely used as a proxy for understanding differentials in student learning patterns in English rather than the socio-economic situation of students, and there is insufficient evidence on the Cambodian side regarding the classification of provinces on the basis of English language delivery modes and practices, no intent is made beyond this horizon.

Student English performance levels were assessed using the students' average scores of final English exams in four subjects

(Core English, Literature Studies, Global Studies and Academic Writing) (each total score =50). There are two explanations for this decision. First, using final exam scores greatly reduces disparity in the exam content coverage, weighting and difficulty level. Second, aggregating scores across the four subjects provides a more meaningful and reliable representation of academic performance since these four subjects cover a broad range of language skills and abilities such as reading, writing, thinking skills and so on. To facilitate group comparison, each student's average score was categorized into three distinct groups with one group centering around one standard deviation unit below and above the mean (M= 33.31, SD= 4.38) and the other two representing the lower and upper ends in the sampling distribution (*lower group<=28.93; middle-range group* [*from -1SD to +1SD*]*=28.94-37.69; upper group>=37.70*). The use of this binning method is more robust in that it provides better score classification that clearly distinguishes one extreme end from one another while preserving a sufficient sample for analysis contrary to the use of a quartile group division method, which theoretically demands large sample sizes.

Student involvement was operationally defined as the estimate of efforts as measured by the engagement behaviors that students exhibit in both in- and out-of-class academic related activities within one semester period, be it related to individual, peer or group work. The involvement constructs were adapted from Kuh's (2001) three scales of engagement model consisting of 25 items: the amount of academic challenge (10 items), active and collaborative learning (10 items) and student-teacher interaction (5 items). Overall, they were measured on a four-point Likert scale with 1 denoting a negative response and 4 denoting a positive response (1=never; 2=sometimes; 3=often; 4=very often). Since measures of student involvement were not fully developed from the existing validated instruments (i.e., Kuh's 2001 engagement model), its relevance and internal consistency within the context of this study were hardly guaranteed. To address this, an exploratory factor analysis using principle axis factoring and varimax in rotation was employed. The analysis produced six distinct factors with three items removed to ensure internal reliability of the scales: student-teacher interaction (5 items), whole class active participation (3 items), discussion with peers on performance (3 items), homework and tasks (4 items), discussion with peers on learning tasks (4 items), and out-of-class reading and class preparation (3 items) (see Appendix). These six factors explained 58.21 % of the total variance for factor analysis (with overall Cronbach's α=.814).

4.3 Data analysis

Data was analyzed in two stages. First, because the researcher is interested in canvassing student involvement trends in English in the Cambodian context, descriptive statistics using mean scores from students' original rating values on the scales was used as a main tool for an illustrative purpose. Second, to examine the patterns of involvement by student cohorts, independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA were used accordingly. It should be noted that because student involvement, as measured by student engagement levels, was mainly used for statistical testing in this study, each construct was standardized using factor scores derived from the exploratory factor analysis. These constructs were, thus, reported in the form of standardized scores similar to a Z-score metric with values ranging from approximately -3.0 to +3.0. To be more precise, these factor scores (as suggested in Field, 2009) were used as a criterion to evaluate whether different profiled students held differing amounts of involvement in academically driven activities. The use of factor scores facilitates bias resulting from using aggregate mean scores in that each item is treated in relation to its strength/weight of relationship with the underlying construct, as represented by its coefficient level, rather than the presumed original value or interval on the scale (i.e., four point Likert scale) (DiStefano et al., 2009). In doing so, items with relatively low or higher loading values are not given the same weight in the factor score, making the estimate of each item value connecting to each construct more accurate for any sophisticated statistical analysis contrary to what might be applied in the crudely summing score methods.

5. Findings

5.1 Student involvement trends

The results of research question 1 are shown in Figure 1. As can be seen, students exhibited high to moderate involvement in four academically purposeful activities: homework and tasks, whole class active participation and the two measures of peer learning—discussions about learning tasks and academic performance. The most common educational practices favored by all students was homework and tasks (M=3.24, SD=0.43), followed by discussions about learning tasks (M=2.77, SD=0.55), whole class active participation (M=2.74, SD=0.64) and discussions about academic performance (M=2.53, SD=0.60). The least common ones were reading outside class and class preparation (M=2.33, SD=0.51) and interaction with their teachers for academic purposes (M=1.92, SD=0.67). Overall, the nature of student learning within this study tended to be more diverse as expected. For example, while students were most likely to do the assigned homework and/or tasks, the initiatives to spare time for additional readings for self-development and class preparation were still not well developed among students. Independent learning remains questionable

among Cambodian students learning English at college even at the top-class university in Phnom Penh City. The same holds true with regard to students' limited shared dialogue with teachers. Although certain tasks demand further discussions or assistance from teachers, students appeared to seek support from their peers instead. Rather than approaching their teachers, students reportedly had comparatively higher involvement with peers through either pair or group discussions on various aspects of learning such as discussions about learning tasks and discussions about academic performance. Otherwise, they tended to use the classroom setting as one of the main platforms to communicate with teachers and peers via their self-induced whole class participation.

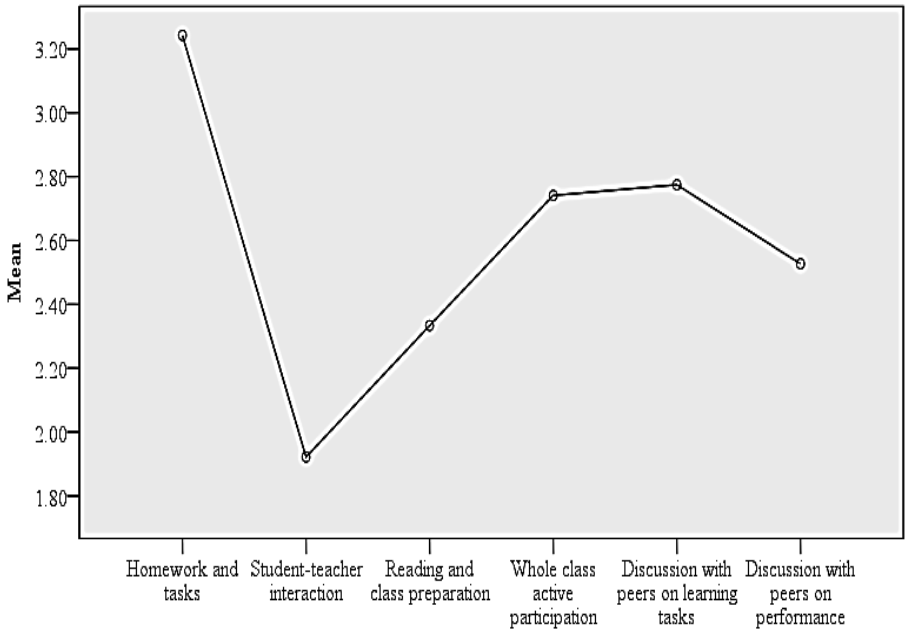

Figure 1. Mean of each involvement scale

5.2 Student involvement patterns

5.2.1 Gender

While overall student involvement was discovered in Figure 1, it is important to look into its possible discrepancies that can be masked between and among certain groups of students. Table 2 presents student involvement patterns by gender divide. As will be seen below, on most occasions, male and female students appeared to invest time and energy in the pursuit of their academic enhancement to about the same degree. Students' contact with teachers and reading and class preparation were not embedded within male and female cohorts. Rather they were the least common practices among all students irrelevant to gender divide. The

Table 2. Student Involvement by Gender

Involvement Construct	Gender	Mean	SD	*t*	Sig.
Student-teacher interaction	Male	0.07	0.99	0.94	0.351
	Female	-0.06	1.01		
Whole class active participation	Male	0.06	0.93	0.89	0.374
	Female	-0.06	1.07		
Discussion with peers on performance	Male	-0.17	1.00	-2.34	**0.017***
	Female	0.16	0.98		
Homework and tasks	Male	-0.16	1.07	-2.06	**0.041***
	Female	0.14	0.92		
Discussion with peers on tasks	Male	0.01	1.05	0.12	0.904
	Female	-0.01	0.96		
Reading and class preparation	Male	0.09	1.00	1.24	0.216
	Female	-0.09	1.00		

*p<.05

same was true given the fact that involvement in whole class interaction and peer learning on tasks was not much distinct between males and females although on many occasions males' participation in academically driven activities tended to outweigh that of females. However, males and females did, indeed, differ significantly with respect to their efforts spent on doing homework and tasks, t (204) =-2.06, p<.05 and peer learning on academic performance such as tests or the results of their homework or quizzes, t (204) =-2.34, p<.05 with females being likely a dominant group in both instances.

5.2.2 Students' geographical origins

Part of the process of exploring how students from different backgrounds exhibited their engagement levels to the new and dynamic classroom environment is investigating the place of residence prior to entering the university. A basic assumption is that those being from areas other than the capital city of Cambodia would be less integrated to the given learning conditions than their counterpart in terms of involvement levels due to the presumed marked differences in teaching styles of teachers in the city and that of teachers in the provinces. Nonetheless, this hypothesis was not supported (p>.05). This finding suggested that whether students were less or more involved in certain aspects of learning was not determined on the basis of their places of origin.

5.2.3 English performance levels

Inquiry into how different groups of students exhibited their involvement efforts was also made with reference to their English performance levels. One-way ANOVA was used to test for student involvement differences among three separate cohorts (see Instrument and Measures section). This analysis revealed three involvement patterns which were significantly masked within students' English performance divide (see Table 3). The most apparent evidence was on their efforts in doing homework and tasks. Although homework and tasks was on average rated the highest among other academically driven activities, the post hoc analyses using Scheffé post hoc criterion for significance indicated that students from the lower end group were by far less engaged in the assigned work than the upper end one. The contrast holds true in the case of student involvement in discussion with peers on performance and learning tasks. Even if such activities were one of the most prevalent practices at the research site (as noted earlier), they were not as highly favored by those from the upper group as the others. In both instances, high-performing students reported less contact with their peers compared to other counterparts. Conversely, these two forms of collaborative learning appeared to be more desirable among those from the middle-range and the lower end ones. Taken together, student involvement patterns tended to vary in different directions after taking into account students' English performance variations.

Table 3. Student Involvement by English Performance

Involvement Construct	**Mean (SD)**			***F***	**Sig.**
	Lower (*N*=31)	**Middle-range (*N*=154)**	**Upper (*N*=30)**		
Student-teacher interaction	0.29 (1.00)	-0.02 (1.02)	-0.23 (0.88)	2.08	0.127
Whole class active participation	-0.21 (1.02)	-0.01 (0.97)	0.26 (1.08)	1.71	0.183
Peer learning (performance)	0.09 (0.83)	0.09 (0.98)	-0.55 (1.10)	5.47	**0.005****
Homework and tasks	-0.28 (1.06)	-0.02 (0.98)	0.39 (0.96)	3.66	**0.027***
Peer learning (tasks)	0.50 (0.88)	-0.09 (1.03)	-0.10 (0.85)	4.70	**0.010***
Reading and class preparation	0.22 (1.08)	-0.07 (0.94)	0.10 (1.19)	1.21	0.299

*p<.05; **p<.01
Note: Lower group<=28.93; Middle-range group=28.94-37.69; Upper group>=37.70

5.2.4 Study time

Differences in student involvement in the educationally purposive activities by the split of study time (morning, afternoon and evening) are shown in Table 4. Overall, the effects of study time were statistically significant in three academic activities at p<.05 or beyond. As can be seen in the table, students in the afternoon and evening shifts were likely to have lower contact with their teachers regardless of any academic purposes involved and to have minimal discussion with their peers on their current academic performance. While the group means suggested the afternoon group was more likely to spend more time on these activities, the post hoc analyses indicated the two means did not differ significantly (p>.05). Stark differences were, however, found between the morning and evening groups. In both cases, students in the morning session reported having higher contact with teachers and were more likely to spare more time reflecting on their own academic performance with other peers. With regard to activities involving discussion with peers on various learning tasks, marked difference was instead on those in the morning and afternoon groups with the former being more likely to make use of this mode of collaborative learning. Overall, these findings

suggested that students in the morning group availed more time and energy on academic activities both in- and out-of-class compared to their counterparts.

Table 4. Student Involvement by Study Time

Involvement Construct	Mean (SD)			*F*	Sig.
	Morning (*N*=67)	Afternoon (*N*=82)	Evening (*N*=66)		
Student-teacher interaction	0.25 (1.01)	-0.03 (0.93)	-0.22 (1.03)	3.60	**0.029***
Whole class active participation	0.03 (1.00)	-0.06 (1.00)	0.04 (1.02)	1.19	0.830
Peer learning (performance)	0.26 (0.92)	-0.02 (1.06)	-0.23 (0.96)	3.88	**0.022***
Homework and tasks	0.05 (0.89)	0.12 (0.99)	-0.20 (1.10)	1.93	0.148
Peer learning (tasks)	0.26 (0.98)	-0.27 (0.99)	0.07 (0.96)	5.40	**0.005****
Reading and class preparation	-0.10 (0.83)	0.14 (1.08)	-0.06 (1.05)	1.20	0.302

*p<.05; **p<.01

6. Limitations

There are a few limitations in this study. First, although students were selected at random from all shifts, it appeared that the sample overwhelmingly represented city residents. Thus, to an unknown degree, the findings of this study may not be representative of all students from the provinces. Had more students been selected from various provinces specifically those from lower socio-economic conditions, one cannot be sure that this group of students would respond in the same fashion as would those who were included in the present study. The inclusion of more samples from non-urban areas may have boosted or even changed the results in unknown ways. Second, while the use of the current research site is advantageous in that the representation of the sample can, to a certain extent, go beyond its original scope as a majority of students were also taking another degree at other universities, its reliability as well as generalizability and that of the use of multi-institutions or inter-subjects in analysis are not, by any means, exchangeable. Finally, this study was limited by the fact that subjects were observed at a single moment time. Therefore, the fact that changes in student involvement associated with changes in educational practices of the institute is not concretely documented. Further studies should extend their observation period beyond this current study.

7. Discussion

This study points to a few, but emerging findings with respect to the realities of Cambodian students' involvement in academically driven activities. Contrary to what has long been perceived of with regard to the passive role of students under the traditional teaching approach, the results of this study indicated that students appeared to be readily integrated into a wide array of learning activities both in-and out-of-class (as noted in Figure 1). Of these, self-study at home (i.e., assigned homework and tasks) and out-of-class discussion with peers on reading/other assigned tasks were the most outstanding activities. That students reported high involvement in these two key activities was discernible given that class assignments were the more frequently used tools in which this premier faculty of English employs to track how much students have devoted to learning, and more directly because the tasks involved especially homework were the main part of on-going assessment criteria and particularly assigned in parallel with exam content, thereby prompting all students to compete at best in order to get satisfactory results. In addition to these most frequently involved activities, students also became more interactive in whole class activities and were, at the same time, likely to make use of out-of-class discussion with their peers to reflect on their academic performance. Though moderate in magnitude, these growing trends present a crucial turning point in Cambodian students' learning behaviors as, for instance, reflected in students' enhanced questioning behaviors, sharing of ideas and class presentation frequency (see Appendix), a move that places students' active roles at the forefront and, thus, deviates from what Neau (2003) reported a decade ago regarding students' passive roles in learning. Of particular insight is a tendency among students to consult learning difficulties or assess their performance with their friends. This finding suggests an emerging key feature of collaborative learning among students and, of course, a need among students to find alternative ways to enhance their learning in addition to support from teachers.

The only two exceptions were students' low out-of-class contact with teachers and less involvement in out-of-class reading and preparation. The lack of consultation with teachers gives support to the findings of Chen et al. (2007), who have attributed this to limited consultation time provided by teachers at Cambodian higher education institutions. Thus, although students were in need of support from their teachers for the betterment of their learning and study skills, students would resort to discussion with peers, a

factor that best accounts for heightened academic cooperation among students. Meanwhile, the fact that students appeared to pay negligent attention to additional reading beyond class and class preparation is largely consistent with Chet (2006) although he did not specifically point to English language programs. This result is not surprising as students may not have had well-developed reading habits outside of class when the study took place. That Chet attributed this to low quality of many programmes at Cambodian higher education institutions in general may, to an unknown extent, reflect the contextual view of students in this current research towards readings and preparation. Otherwise, this may be due to a lack of reading habits among Cambodian learners even in the Khmer language (Cambodia's mother tongue) as stimulating reading materials and libraries are not widely available (Pit & Ford, 2004). Another possible reason is because the tasks or activities students are required to fulfill might have been more summative or exam-oriented in nature. As a result, students tended to have higher involvement in mere score-assigned activities as discussed earlier, neglecting other necessary extensive or intensive readings outside the class. On balance, although additional research is needed to provide empirical inputs with regard to these disengagements, the finding of this study is fairly clear that out-of-class individual and self-induced reading activities remain less focused among students.

The results also showed divergent features of student involvement that emerged within students' gender dynamics. Females tended to be more involved than males in doing homework and tasks and discussion with peers on their performance, the two activities that were more likely to put females at an advantage in academic performance. These differences may in part be due to better time management skills (Jansen & Bruinsma, 2005) and peer relations (Berger & Milem, 1999) among female students. Higher work discipline and socialization could have reinforced their respective study time and motivation to learn and thereby increased their involvement accordingly. Better time management could, in particular, have allowed females more opportunities to learn beyond tasks or activities assigned by teachers and, thus, to reflect on their study progress and pitfalls with other classmates. However, gender difference was not clearly observed with regard to discussion with peers on tasks. This finding is discernible since tasks typically involved cooperative activities required by teachers such as class discussion and other assigned group work and readings outside class, while the discussion with peers on performance was mostly done on a personal basis (see detailed items in Appendix).

Students of diverse English performances also differed in involvement levels. The most illuminating findings were the two measures of peer learning and homework and tasks. While low and medium groups were likely to come from those who favored peer support, high-performing students appeared to be those who, in turn, preferred more individual work such as homework and assignments. Independent learning, of course, remains a real challenge for the former groups of students. These results are specifically self-evident for those who performed below par. With insufficient support from teachers and their limited learning experience if compared to their counterparts, F (2, 208) = 9.68, $p<.001$, friends have played a crucial role in supporting their learning even though their academic gains within this study remain to be seen. These results are somewhat unexpected and contrast with previous literature (Carini et al., 2006; Kuh et al., 1997; Zhao & Kuh, 2004) that, for the most part, collaborative learning was more common among high-performing students. However, because the practice of learner-centeredness can be relatively new to students, the nature of collaborative learning must be noted. A separate t-test analysis showed that despite being engaged in learning with other peers, especially the low-performing ones, high-performing students did not usually have serious discussions with students of different levels of abilities, t (59) = 2.29, $p<.05$. This may in part have accounted for such an opposite involvement tendency among students of diverse English performances in this present research. Thus, further studies should explore the nature of peer learning and its impact on low-performing students with caution.

While students from all shifts (morning, afternoon and evening) shared very similar academic participation levels in terms of homework and tasks, whole class active participation, and out-of-class reading and class preparation, noteworthy differences in student-teacher contact and peer discussion on tasks and academic performance were significantly entangled between those from the morning group and the evening one. In all these differential instances, students in the morning appeared to be a more participative cohort. These results suggest that morning grouped students were likely to be more engaged in the long run provided that more measures to promote student involvement are readily in place, whereas serious disengagement tended to persist among other groups of students especially those from the evening. This result holds true given that most of students in the evening simultaneously have a full-time job or are pursuing another degree at a different university. As a result, out-of-class hour encounters with peers or teachers for them is truly challenging. Largely, unlike students studying in the morning, those in the evening were more likely to engage in in-class activities in order to compensate for their reduced learning opportunities, which were thwarted by the lack of out-of-class encounters with other peers (see Table 4). Altogether, it seems logical that the amount of involvement was also largely varied by study shifts.

In contrast to all these findings, differences due to students' place of origin were not clearly observed. Both rural and urban students did not differ significantly in their academic efforts. These results come as a surprise as the former group is presumed to be at a disadvantage given their overall lack of learning experience compared to their counterpart. However, through rigorous

screening, selection and assessment by their school at the onset, it is possible that the gap could have been reduced. Also, provided that this study was conducted with sophomores, obvious differentials could have been compensated by their one-year exposure to the given learning and teaching environment at this current research site. Further studies should include more samples from rural areas across different universities in analysis if a comparison between the two cohorts is of particular attention.

8. Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for pedagogical orientations and further educational practices to cultivate a sense of independent learning/learner-centeredness among students at least at the current research site. First, although students have, to some extent, become integrated into collaborative learning activities, they are practically challenged by independent learning orientations, of which out-of-class reading activities remain low. One clear implication of this evidence is the need for educational programs that promote reading activities beyond the classroom context. Integrating workshops on extensive reading as well as reading skills into educational repertoire of the institute could have positive payoffs in terms of students' reading attitude. Placing an emphasis on these activities in assessment module is, in particular, critical if reading culture is to be developed. Further, knowing students were likely to seek support from peers other than their teachers sheds new light on how intervention programs should be initiated. This information is useful for teachers to take a pragmatic approach by focusing more on activities that necessitate peer interaction and emphasize scaffolding modeling in classroom teaching. This down-to-earth adaptation is imperative as cost burden on the part of higher education institutions in Cambodia, both public and private, to offer extra consultation hours to students is still far from being concentrated.

Second, the evidence that males and low-and medium English performing students were less involved in doing homework and other assigned tasks lends credence to the importance of pedagogical adaptation on the part of teachers to reduce such differences. Rather than disproportionately opting for after-class work, teachers should reemphasize in-class activities to compensate for these imbalances. Of similar importance is the implication that peer learning or support is not inevitably fruitful provided that independent learning culture remains least developed among students. The finding that peer learning was more highly observed among low and medium English ability students speaks to pedagogical shortcomings teachers have to take into serious consideration when working with them. Thus, additional research emphasizing the nature of peer learning in both quantitative and qualitative terms is needed to yield insightful evidence pertaining to its impact on student learning and development. Furthermore, the findings highlighting low involvement among those from the afternoon and evening shifts call for more practical actions from school to get them more engaged with other peers. In regards to this point, heterogeneous groupings of students at the onset of an academic year with consideration for a student's English abilities are worthwhile. Teachers should also offer more pedagogical and technical diversity in order to readily engage the low-engaged to the given learning processes. All in all, schools should reconsider incorporating training programs through the implementation of a learner-centered approach that goes beyond classroom setting into the system if pedagogical robustness among teachers and student involvement is to be realized.

9. Conclusion

This study attempts to illustrate overall student involvement in academically driven activities at one premier faculty of English in Cambodia. Overall, the results showed that students have become readily adapted to some aspects of a learner-centered approach at the institute as reflected in their affirming behaviors in some guided collaborative learning activities and whole class participation. However, there remain questions in terms of their out-of-class reading habits and encounters with teachers. Also, it appeared that part of student involvement was not straightforward, yet dependent on gender, English performance, and study shift divides. Of noteworthy evidence was that, in particular instances, high involvement in academic activities did not necessarily translate into productive ends. In turn, it represents academic difficulty among students, particularly those performing below par, and their disputed endeavors to pursue better academic gains. On the whole, the findings of this study add an additional battery of knowledge pertaining to the trends and patterns of student learning to college success literature suggesting that students within a new learning context become more engaged in mere guided academic activities, be it individual or collaborative work, and the intensity and quality of involvement is a more realistic matter for student learning and development.

Further studies should seek to provide more concrete contextual evidence that depicts student learning patterns beyond this case study and, of course, contextual underpinnings of student engagement and disengagement and its relationships with students' academic gains. In essence, additional research should take into account the analysis of interaction terms to provide clearer and more generalizable findings given that large subsample sizes relating to students' gender, geographical origins, English performance levels and study shifts are available.

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Appendix

Construct	Measure	Mean	SD
Student-teacher interaction	- Discuss with your teacher(s) how to improve your study skills.	2.26	0.697
	- Ask your teacher(s) for comments about your academic performance (e.g. homework, tests or assignments).	1.76	0.784
	- Work with teacher(s) on other activities like organizing study clubs or other school events.	2.12	0.867
	- Discuss ideas from your readings or classes with your teacher(s) outside the class.	2.00	0.880
	- Discuss ideas for doing assignment(s) or other academic tasks.	1.81	0.925
Whole class active participation	- Contribute ideas to whole class discussions.	2.70	0.739
	- Ask questions in class when you don't understand.	2.80	0.808
	- Make a class presentation from your group work.	2.72	0.748
Homework and tasks (*These items were reverse-coded.)	- Turn in the assignment(s) late*.	3.58	0.664
	- Turn in the assignment(s) or homework with poor quality*.	3.18	0.611
	- Come to class without completing readings or assignments*.	3.18	0.620
	- Do all the homework problems.	3.02	0.652
Discussion with peers on academic performance	- Have reviews of test performance with other students.	2.52	0.802
	- Have discussions with other students about learning difficulties.	2.66	0.799
	- Ask other students to proofread your work or assignments.	2.41	0.710
Discussion with peers on learning tasks	- Work actively with other students on the assigned task(s) in small group activities in class.	3.07	0.686
	- Try to help other students who have learning problems during class discussion.	2.68	0.725
	- Discuss ideas from your readings or classes with other students outside class.	2.89	0.884
	- Work with classmates outside class to prepare class assignments.	2.44	0.914
Reading and class preparation	- Make outlines from your readings.	2.07	0.695
	- Read assigned materials as a preparation for the next class.	2.51	0.710
	- Did additional readings on topics that were introduced and discussed in class.	2.41	0.774