

Determinants of poor academic performance in English among Cambodian high school students: A survey study

Chanthoeun Yung¹, Thach Ban¹

¹ National University of Cheasim Kamchaymear, Kampong Cham, Cambodia

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Abstract

English has emerged as a global lingua franca for numerous individuals across various nations. The various applications of English have rendered its instruction and acquisition a central concern for numerous scholars and educators. The inquiry into the motivation for learning English has garnered increased interest from scholars, as this element significantly impacts students' learning outcomes. This study sought to examine the factors contributing to inadequate performance in English among high school students at Hun Sen Oraing Ov High School in Cambodia. The study utilized a quantitative methodology through self-administered questionnaires to attain this purpose. Three hundred questionnaires were distributed to 300 high school students in grades 10, 11, and 12. Nevertheless, merely 256 students submitted the questionnaires. The data was quantitatively evaluated using Microsoft Excel to determine mean scores, standard deviation, and frequency. The findings indicated that the factors contributing to inadequate performance in English among students at Oraing Ov High School are associated with their perceptions of the English subject for the national grade-12 examination, the proficiency of teachers in English, family educational background, the English curriculum, and the teaching and learning resources. The study is constrained by the methodology employed and the participant count. Current findings suggest that the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) should mandate English as a compulsory subject in the national grade-12 examination, whereby any high school student who fails the English subject will receive a failing grade in the grade-12 national examination. Furthermore, the present findings indicate that the MoEYS should prepare a regular professional development program for Cambodian English teachers to enhance their pedagogical skills and ensure adequate resources are available in public schools for use in English language instruction.

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Corresponding author

Chanthoeun Yung

National University of Cheasim Kamchaymear, Kampong Cham Campus, Cambodia

Email: yungchanthoeun94@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The English language is used in the globalized world. The English language is a vital instrument for information and communication. It is the language of choice for many international communication purposes, such as investments, political alliances, diplomacy, and foreign affairs (Igawa, 2008). Moreover, being able to communicate in English means that a

person will get a better job with better pay. English is used to communicate with people, especially in business organizations from overseas. That idea makes English an important component to be included in education programs.

For the Cambodian context, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has introduced initiatives to enhance English language education in state schools, realizing the importance of English in connection with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Economic Community (AEC). English language educators believe that the opening of the AEC will have an impact on English language use and English language education in Cambodia. English is emerging as a necessary skill for those in domestic and regional job markets, and it is also important for Cambodian university students (Tweed & Som, 2015).

1.1 Research problem

Among the subjects tested in the examinations, many students, including those who obtained grade A, performed poorly in the English language (Oeun & Heng, 2024a). Below are some of the factors that cause low performance among Grade 12 learners in the English language in the National Examination, as illustrated by Oeun and Heng (2024a). They include knowledge of the teachers on the subject matter, activation of the subject by the teacher, effective teaching of the subject syllabus, interest and motivation of the teacher and students, availability of teaching and learning materials in the event of the English literature, and suitability of the training of teachers of that particular subject.

The main obstacles to learning English were the characteristics of the teachers, study plans, instructional resources, classroom activities, class size, and the attitudes of the students toward self-learning (Em, 2022). Though some literature has shown reasons behind the poor performance in the English subject among Grade 12 students, the previous studies have been conducted on a small scale. It is worth doing a survey to find out more reasons or factors contributing to poor performance in the English subject. To add to the literature, the current study will deeply investigate the reasons why Cambodian high school students perform poorly in the English subject. The current study will be conducted in Oraing Ov District, Tbong Khmum Province, Cambodia. The future findings will be localized to deal with the local issues concerning poor performance in the English subject.

1.2 Research objectives

This the study is to explore how students perceive the role of the teachers' ability as a factor behind poor academic performance in the subject of English. This will focus on classroom management, instructional strategies, the support and facilitation that the teachers provide for the learners, lesson explanations, and the knowledge that the teachers have concerning the English language at Hun Sen Oraing Ov High School, Cambodia.

2. Literature review

2.1 English language in Cambodia

Though once used during the Cambodian Republic Regime (1970–1975), English was not spoken at all during the Genocidal Regime of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979), but reemerged in this country with the arrival of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) for the first national election in 1993. This event allowed a remarkable

increase in the use of English across the country, especially in the areas where UNTAC officials were located (Narith, 2008).

Even after the Khmer Rouge government collapsed in 1979, learning and teaching English were not immediately promoted. Under the effects of communism, it was illegal to teach or learn French or English. Learning and teaching French or English was forbidden, and anyone who did so risked incarceration. Instead, learning Vietnamese and Russian was emphasized during this time (Em, 2022).

Currently, English has been included in the Cambodian curriculum from Grade 4 (MoEYS, 2015a). There was an intention to include English in the curriculum from primary school education levels (MoEYS, 2015b). 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 English and Cambodian students, especially those who live in the countryside.

2.2. Importance of English

Crystal (2003) noted that English has become the global language because of the power and strength of the speakers of the language. The English language is important for people in many parts of the world for communication purposes, doing business, the media industry, the language of the Internet, and for enjoying different cultures (Aziza, 2020).

There are numerous advantages associated with English as far as development is concerned, including increasing the employment potential of people, enabling international collaboration, providing access to information and research materials, facilitating international travel and trade for individuals, supporting disaster management, and being the neutral language in conflict situations (Coleman, 2010).

Even though English is widely spoken today for business, politics, and technology, it is only our beginning point. Given that English is the language spoken in the majority of the globe today, its significance cannot be understated or overlooked. In addition to being a useful tool for communication, English can also help us work in the present and the future by facilitating environmental adaptation (Putra & Nopember, 2020).

Because it connects the East and the West as well as the North and the South, English has become the language of the modern world with the greatest rate of growth, earning its status as a commercial language. Almost every industry in the world, including science, technology, engineering, medicine, trade and commerce, scientific research, education, travel, the internet, banking, business, advertising, the film industry, transportation, and pharmacy, uses English. As a medium of communication for non-native speakers, English is crucial. These qualities of English as an international language highlight its use as a global instrument for cross-cultural communication (Chang, 2011).

2.3. Grade 12 exam pass and fail rates

As indicated by MoEYS (2015a), the national Grade 12 examination was reformed in 2014 for the improvement of the quality and efficiency of education in the secondary education sector. The passing rate of the national Grade 12 exam has increased annually (Bredenberg, 2018). However, the passing rate of the English subject in the national examination is very low. As noted by Oeun and Heng (2024a), although the passing rate in the national Grade 12

examinations has risen, many students could not pass English in the national examination. As an example, in the year 2015-2016, only 28.17% of students passed English in the national exam, while 71.83% did not. In the academic year of 2018-2019, only 14% of the total number of 79,052 students passed the English test, while the other 86% did not pass. Conversely, in Kampong Cham province, only 512 students (8.82%) from the total number of 5,799 students passing the national Grade 12 examination in the academic year of 2022-2023 could pass English (Department of Education of Kampong Cham, 2023). Furthermore, in Kampong Cham province, 11% of students in Grade A scored an F mark in the English subject.

2.4. English pass/fail rates (First Semester)

From the reports, the examination results of semester 1 for grade 10 students for the academic year 2022-2023, the number of students who failed was 60.17%, while students who passed stood at 39.83% out of 448 students enrolled in the English course. In respect of grade 11, students passed 75.31% while students failed 24.69% for the academic year 2022-2023. On the other hand, for Grade 12 students in the same academic year 2022-2023, the percentage of failed students stood at 18.39% while passed students were 81.61% among 164 students in the English subject (Hun Sen Oraing Ov High School, 2023).

From the reports, the examination results of semester 1 of the academic year 2023-2024, the percentage of passed grade 10 students in the English subject was 81.61%, while failed students were 18.39% among 379 students. The percentage of failed grade 11 students was 32.01%, while that of passed students was 67.99% among 328 students (**Hun Sen Oraing Ov High School, 2024**).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The current study employed a quantitative approach using a survey research design to investigate students' perceptions of teachers' ability as a factor contributing to poor performance in the English subject among Cambodian high school students at Hun Sen Oraing Ov High School (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, the study focused on classroom management, teaching techniques, teacher support and facilitation, lesson explanation, and teachers' knowledge of the English language as perceived by students.

3.2 Research samples and sampling

To conduct this research, students from Hun Sen Oraing Ov High School were selected as the target population. The school has six classrooms at the upper secondary level, with approximately 300 students enrolled in Grades 10, 11, and 12. One important justification for selecting this sample was that upper secondary students have sufficient learning experience and interaction with English teachers to provide informed perceptions regarding teacher ability and classroom practices.

A total of 256 students were selected using a multi-stage cluster random sampling technique (Cohen et al., 2018). To ensure adequate representation of the student population, participants from both morning and afternoon study shifts were included in the survey. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in the findings section.

3.3 Research instrument

A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from students at Hun Sen Oraing Ov High School (Fraenkel et al., 2019). The questionnaire consisted of three sections: demographic information, classroom management, teaching techniques, and teachers' knowledge of the subject matter. The items were designed to examine students' perceptions of teacher-related factors, including classroom management practices, instructional techniques, lesson explanation, teacher support, and teachers' English language competence. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.4 Data analysis

The collected data were entered and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, means (M), and standard deviations (SD), were employed to summarize and interpret the responses (Field, 2018). The findings were then presented in tables and discussed in relation to the study objectives and relevant literature.

4. Findings

4.1 Demographic information

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

Information	Numbers, categories, and frequency (%)			
Total number of participants	N = 256	Female 157 (61.32%)	Male 98 (38.28%)	
Ages	14-15 years 51 (19.92%)	16-17 years 174 (67.96%)	18-19 years 30 (11.71%)	20-21 years 1 (0.39%)
Grades	Grade 10 94 (36.71%)	Grade 11 121 (47.26%)	Grade 12 41 (16.01%)	

Demographic data of the subjects included in the present research are provided in Table 1. Specifically, a total of 256 students of Hun Sen Oraing Ov High School took part in the survey. Of these, females amounted to 157 (61.32%), whereas males made up 98 students (38.28%). These figures show that more female students took part in the study.

Age-wise, most participants belonged to the age group of 16-17 years old, totaling 174 students (67.96%). Participants aged 14-15 years made up 51 students (19.92%), while students aged 18-19 accounted for 30 students (11.71%). In addition, only one respondent (0.39%) belonged to the age group of 20-21 years old. Consequently, the age range of most of the students involved was that of Cambodian upper secondary students.

Grade level-wise, the largest group comprised 121 students (47.26%) of Grade 11. Furthermore, 94 participants (36.71%) belonged to Grade 10, whereas the rest of the

respondents (16.01%) made up 41 students of Grade 12. The obtained results prove that students of all three grades of upper secondary schools took part in the research.

4.2 Teachers' ability

Table 2. Classroom management

No.	Items statement	Response distribution (%)						
		M	St.D	SD	D	N	A	SA
1.	My teacher doesn't pay attention to teaching students.	3.87	.96	2.73	6.64	17.18	47.26	25.78
2.	My teacher always arranges the students' seats well.	3.24	1.17	8.20	20.70	21.87	34.76	13.28
3.	My classroom environment is fresh.	3.72	1.01	3.90	9.37	17.57	48.04	20.31
4.	My classroom is an unsafe learning environment.	3.96	.92	2.34	5.85	12.89	49.60	28.12
5.	My teacher rarely reviews previous lessons before starting new lessons.	4.01	1.06	3.51	6.25	16.40	32.81	41.01

Rating scale point: 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree.

Table 2 depicts students' perceptions about classroom management issues in the English class of Hun Sen Oraing Ov High School. The results show various classroom management issues that can affect the poor achievement of students in English class.

"My teacher does not pay enough attention to teaching students" received a mean score of 3.87 (SD = 0.96), meaning that many students agreed that teachers did not pay sufficient attention to the students in their teaching. Similarly, the statement "My teacher always arranges students' seats properly" gained a mean score of 3.24 (SD = 1.17), meaning that many students agreed that the arrangement of students in class was appropriate.

"My classroom environment is fresh" received a mean score of 3.72 (SD = 1.01), meaning that many students agreed that the classroom environment was pleasant enough to study. However, the statement "My classroom is not a safe learning environment" received a relatively high mean score of 3.96 (SD = 0.92).

In addition to this, the item "My teacher rarely reviews previous lessons before starting new lessons" was given the highest average score of 4.01 (SD = 1.06). It indicates that many students agree that their teachers did not usually review their previous lessons before teaching new lessons. This might have a negative impact on the students' comprehension of the lessons in the English language.

Conclusively, the research findings suggest that classroom management problems such as lack of attention from teachers, inadequate lesson review, and unfriendly environment are among the reasons for low scores in the English subject.

Table 3. Teaching techniques and the teacher's knowledge of the subject matter

No.	Items statement	Response distribution (%)						
		M	St.D	SD	D	N	A	SA
1.	My teachers use different techniques to help me and other students learn English better from session to session.	3.24	.83	1.17	4.29	30.07	46.48	16.79
2.	My teacher gets my friends and me to work as a group.	3.73	.11	3.90	13.67	14.06	41.40	26.56
3.	My teacher explains English lessons unclearly.	4.07	.82	0.78	3.12	15.62	46.87	32.03
4.	My teacher seldom supports and facilitates me when I don't understand English lessons.	4.11	.85	0.78	2.73	17.96	40.62	37.5
5.	The teacher uses learning and educational strategies that are suitable for students' learning abilities.	3.82	.90	2.34	5.46	20.31	50.39	20.70
6.	In general, my English teachers of English have limited knowledge of the English language.	4.49	.70	0.39	1.95	3.90	34.76	58.59

Table 3 shows the students' perception of teaching techniques and the teacher's knowledge of the English language. From the results, there appear to be several areas of concern regarding teaching techniques and teachers' competence.

The statement "My teachers use different techniques to assist other students and me to improve our knowledge of English throughout each session" had a mean score of 3.24 (SD = 0.83). This implies that students had some level of satisfaction with the varied teaching techniques used by teachers while teaching English.

The statement "My teacher makes me and other students do activities in groups" had a mean score of 3.73 (SD = 0.11). This implies that there were group work activities in English lessons. Such group work activities may facilitate interactions among students.

On the contrary, the statement "My teacher does not explain English lessons clearly" had a high mean score of 4.07 (SD = 0.82). This means that most students agreed that English lessons were not clearly explained.

Likewise, the statement “My teacher seldom helps and guides me whenever I fail to grasp English lessons” scored highly with a mean of 4.11 (SD = 0.85). This implies that students generally felt a lack of guidance and assistance from teachers whenever they were having problems in learning.

Moreover, the statement “The teacher applies strategies of teaching that suit learners’ level of learning ability” was rated with a mean score of 3.82 (SD = 0.90), which indicated that students generally agreed on some teaching strategies applied to match students’ learning abilities.

Significantly, the statement “As a whole, my teachers of English do not know much about the English language” was recorded with the highest mean score of 4.49 (SD = 0.70). This indicates that many students perceived that their English teachers knew less about the English language. It is a critical factor that could negatively impact English education and the students’ performance at schools.

Overall, the results indicate that poor teaching techniques, ambiguous teaching approaches, lack of teacher guidance and help, and lack of English knowledge by teachers are the main reasons for poor performance in the English subject of Cambodian secondary students.

5. Discussion

The findings of the current study indicate that poor performance in the English subject among Cambodian high school students is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including teachers’ ability, classroom management, students’ attitudes, family educational background, curriculum implementation, and the availability of learning materials. These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted in Cambodia and other developing educational contexts, which suggest that student achievement is shaped by a combination of teacher-related, learner-related, family-related, and institutional factors (Em, 2022; Oeun & Heng, 2024b).

Regarding teachers’ ability, the findings reveal that many students perceived their English teachers as having limited knowledge of the English language. The respondents also agreed that teachers often explained lessons unclearly and seldom supported students when they faced difficulties in understanding English lessons. These findings support the study by Oeun and Heng (2024b), who emphasized that teachers’ subject-matter knowledge and instructional effectiveness are major contributors to students’ poor achievement in English subjects. Similarly, Simuchimba (2016) highlighted that inadequate teacher preparation and inappropriate training negatively affect students’ learning outcomes. Research has consistently shown that teacher quality is one of the most influential school-based factors affecting student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2009). When teachers lack sufficient pedagogical and linguistic competence, students may become confused, demotivated, and less engaged in classroom learning activities.

In terms of classroom management, the findings show that students believed teachers rarely reviewed previous lessons before introducing new content. Moreover, many respondents perceived the classroom environment as unsafe and inconducive to learning. Effective classroom management is important because it helps maintain student attention, discipline, and participation during lessons. Poor classroom management may reduce students’ concentration and motivation to learn English effectively. These findings are aligned with Em (2022), who found that classroom activities and teachers’ characteristics significantly affect English learning outcomes among Cambodian students. Likewise, Marzano et al. (2003) argued that

effective classroom management contributes significantly to students' academic achievement and positive learning behaviors.

The findings also suggest that teaching techniques play an important role in influencing students' performance. Although some students acknowledged that teachers used various teaching techniques and group work activities, many still believed that English lessons were not clearly explained. This indicates that the application of teaching methods alone is insufficient if instructional delivery remains ineffective. Teachers need to employ learner-centered and communicative teaching approaches that actively involve students in speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities. Rao (2019) argued that English language teaching should encourage interactive communication practices because English functions as an international language for global communication. Similarly, Richards (2006) emphasized that communicative language teaching promotes meaningful interaction and improves learners' language proficiency.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that students' attitudes toward English learning contribute to poor performance. Students with negative attitudes toward English often lack motivation, self-confidence, and interest in learning the language. Such students may not spend sufficient time practicing English independently outside the classroom. Positive attitudes, on the other hand, encourage active participation, attention, and willingness to learn. This finding supports Putra (2020), who explained that English learning requires personal motivation and awareness of its importance for future education and employment opportunities. Gardner (1985) similarly noted that positive attitudes and motivation are among the strongest predictors of success in second-language learning.

Family educational background and parental support are also important factors influencing students' achievement in English. Students whose parents provide encouragement, educational guidance, and learning support tend to perform better academically. In contrast, students from families with limited educational support may face challenges in developing strong learning habits and academic motivation. This finding demonstrates that learning English is not influenced solely by school factors but also by home environments and parental involvement. Epstein (2011) emphasized that parental involvement positively influences students' academic achievement, behavior, and educational aspirations. Likewise, Fan and Chen (2001) found a significant positive relationship between parental involvement and students' academic performance.

The findings regarding the English curriculum and teaching materials also reveal several concerns. Although English has been integrated into the Cambodian curriculum since primary school, students in rural areas still encounter difficulties in learning English effectively. Limited access to learning materials, educational technologies, and supplementary resources may reduce students' opportunities to practice and improve their language skills. These findings are consistent with MoEYS (MoEYS, 2015a), which acknowledged the challenges in English language teaching and learning despite curriculum reforms. Previous studies have also highlighted disparities in educational resources between urban and rural schools in Cambodia (Dy, 2013; Hayden, 2014).

Moreover, the findings concerning pass and fail rates demonstrate that English remains one of the most difficult subjects for Cambodian students. Although the overall national examination passing rates have improved over recent years, failure rates in the English subject remain considerably high. The reports from Hun Sen Oraing Ov High School show fluctuations in passing and failing percentages across Grade 10, Grade 11, and Grade 12 students during the

academic years 2022–2023 and 2023–2024. This situation reflects broader national concerns regarding English language competence among Cambodian high school students and supports previous observations regarding persistent challenges in English language education across the country (MoEYS, 2015b; Oeun & Heng, 2024a).

Overall, the findings of the current study demonstrate that poor performance in English is not caused by a single factor but rather by a combination of teacher-related, student-related, family-related, and institutional factors. Addressing these issues requires cooperation among schools, teachers, parents, and educational policymakers in order to improve the quality of English language education in Cambodia. Strengthening teacher professional development, improving classroom management practices, promoting positive student attitudes, increasing parental involvement, and providing adequate learning resources may contribute significantly to improving English language learning outcomes among Cambodian high school students.

6. Conclusion and recommendation

6.1. Conclusion

This study aims to analyze the causes of poor performance in English among the students of Cambodian high schools located in Hun Sen Oraing Ov High School of Oraing Ov District, Tbong Khmum Province. Poor performance in the English language is attributed to different interconnected factors, including teachers' knowledge, classroom management skills, teaching methods, students' attitudes towards English, family education background, curriculum implementation, and availability of teaching/learning materials.

The study showed that most students thought that their English teachers had inadequate knowledge and ineffective methods of teaching. Teachers' inability to give clear explanations and adequate support for the students made students encounter problems in comprehending English lessons. Moreover, some of the problems encountered in classroom management and students' participation were among the issues identified in the study.

In addition, the attitude of the students towards English lessons was identified as one of the factors influencing their performance in English lessons. Some students did not have interest, motivation, and confidence in learning the English language. As a result, they performed poorly in their studies. Likewise, family support and educational background were other factors influencing the students' performance in their English lessons.

In addition, the study has shown that the lack of teaching materials continues to impede effective learning of English in both urban and rural schools. Even with curriculum changes and the introduction of English in the Cambodian education system for decades now, it is clear that there are still many students who fail to perform satisfactorily in English subjects.

Lastly, the results of the passing and failure rates show that English continues to be a difficult subject for many high school students in Cambodia. While it is true that the country's overall exam results have improved in recent times, the fact remains that there are still very high failure rates when it comes to English.

6.2. Recommendations

From the outcomes of the research, several recommendations are suggested in terms of how students' performance could be improved in the English subject.

First, it is recommended that English teachers develop their competence continuously through professional development programs, workshops, and training activities. Teachers need to enhance their English language proficiency and improve their skills in order to give quality lessons to meet the needs of the students.

Second, it is recommended that a learner-centered approach of teaching and interactive lessons be encouraged so that students can actively participate in learning English.

Thirdly, the schools' administrators and educators ought to improve the study environment through the provision of secure, friendly, and student-friendly classrooms. Adequate teaching and learning materials, such as books, dictionaries, audio-visual media, and digital learning technologies, should also be provided in order to assist in the process of learning the English language.

Fourthly, parents and the family environment in general should be involved more actively in helping their children's studies through encouraging the children to learn English at home, keeping track of their progress, and inspiring them to understand the importance of the English language in higher learning and in their jobs later.

Fifthly, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport should continue developing its English language teaching policies and implementation, especially in the rural areas where the English language is not developed properly. Moreover, adequate assistance should be provided to schools that have problems with hiring English teachers and a lack of educational resources.

Lastly, future researchers should carry out further research on the same topic, but involving several schools and provinces of Cambodia. In addition, the methods of future research may include qualitative or mixed-methods research.

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Declaration of AI usage

The authors used Grammarly to polish the language in some parts of the article. However, they declared that the article's content is entirely theirs and not generated by any means.

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