

## CAMBODIAN EFL STUDENTS' INVESTMENT IN LEARNING ENGLISH: PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES

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**Abstract:** This article reports on a case study that explored the perspectives and practices of Cambodian EFL students regarding their investment in learning English at the University of Battambang (UBB), Cambodia. The study specifically investigated how the students perceived the role that learning English played in their lives. The study also examined community practices surrounding the learning of English amongst these Cambodian university students. A mixed method approach was employed to collect data in two stages. First, a survey was administered to a random selection of 80 university students. Then, four intensive group interviews were undertaken with a total of 20 students purposively selected through a theoretical sampling. Quantitative data from the survey was computerized and analyzed using SPSS while the qualitative data obtained from the intensive interviews was coded and interpreted to compare its similarities and differences with statistical data for generating theory. Findings of the study indicate that English has empowered Cambodian learners' perspectives to invest in EFL study as a means for improving their quality of life, gaining better positions, and advancing their salary and social status, which may, in turn, affect their identities and capital.

**Keywords:** investment, perspective, practices, Cambodian EFL students

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The evolution of English language education in Cambodia has been variously categorized. In the 1970s and 1980s, English language education in Cambodia addressed political and/or diplomatic concerns (Clayton, 2006; Moore &

Bounchan, 2010), whereas, during the Pol Pot Regime from 1970 to 1975, English was completely removed from Cambodia's education curriculum (Igawa, 2008; Neau, 2003). Moving into the 1990s, the presence of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) saw the English language education gaining value as a language for survival and work (Keuk, 2009; Moore & Bounchan, 2010), a view popularly endorsed by Kieng Ratan, a former translator for UNTAC, in the Phnom Penh Post: "You learn English to survive; it's a language you acquire for your stomach" (Tharum, 2010).

A decade later, Cambodia was integrated with the ASEAN Community Region and Globalized World, and English language education continued its prominence as a means of communication. It was subsequently endorsed as essential for Cambodia's professional and economic development (Moore & Bounchan, 2010; MoEYS, 2014; Tweed & Som, 2015). Consequently, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) introduced an English curriculum into primary education from grade 4 (MoEYS, 2014). This inclusion specifically aims to improve the quality of language education, in turn producing capable human resources for regional and international integration (MoEYS, 2014). Within this context, amounting to a reframing of the subject, significant numbers of students have enrolled to study English language as a major at the tertiary level. According to the latest enrolment data obtained from Department of Higher Education (DHE) (2016), the percentage of students who chose English as their major at university in 2014/2015 academic year is 10% (8,542 male students; 8,390 female students). These findings are similar to those of the World Bank (2012) whose figures show enrolment in English language at university in Cambodia in 2009/2010 academic year to be 11.30% (8,357 male students; 9,968 female students). In this context, it can be seen that the popularity of English has remained extremely strong in Cambodia over the last few years.

While these statistics point to the popularity of English language education in Cambodia and the key role it may play in Cambodian students' lives, further research is needed to explore motivational factors prompting students to invest in learning English as a foreign language and how community practices may have influenced students' English language development. Most research studies to date (Chan, 2014; Chea & Shumow, 2014) have tended to describe the contextual and surface features surrounding the motivation of English language learning situation in Cambodia, while other authors (Clayton, 2002; Igawa, 2008; Igawa, 2010) generally address the overall aspects of English language

education rather than construct a multifaceted model that considers and incorporates motivational factors for learning and studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Cambodia.

Further, several researchers have argued for contradictory motivations and, therefore, outcomes of the English language education. As pointed out by Tweed and Som (2015), the current practices of the English language curriculum have been constrained by resource shortages, a lack of qualified teachers, mixed-ability students, and inadequate financial support. As a result, Keuk (2009) argues that over 90% of foreigners communicating with Cambodians in English may experience significant misunderstandings due to intelligibility of pronunciation, word choices, grammar and cultural differences. Further, Chan and Srun (2016) point out that there has been a lack of accuracy and proficiency in writing among Cambodian EFL learners. D'Amico (2009) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2011) emphasize that the English skills attained by Cambodian graduates are limited. This situation, according to Madhur (2014), is due to learning gaps or lack of quality job prospects as perceived by Cambodian EFL learners (Asian Development Bank, 2015).

Hence, within Cambodia's changing academic, economic, and political context, the aim of this study is to examine how these students perceive the role of learning English in their lives, as well as to understand the perspectives of Cambodian EFL students with respect to their motivation and investment in learning English at university level. Finally, the study investigates whether and how these students have also become involved in community practices as a means to improve their English language skills.

Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1977), Peirce (1995) has established the investment theory for examining the relationship between identities of language learners and social phenomena in our changing world. As argued by Peirce (1995) and Norton (1998, 2000), the motivation theory of Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Gardner (1985) primarily focused on the psychological domain and did not sufficiently address the complex relationship between language learners and the target language which the learners desire to speak. The investment model, according to Darwin and Norton (2016), is a construct of sociological and historical aspects, which can be used to investigate and understand the multiple, changing, and contradictory identities of language learners through transcending variables of identity, capital, and ideology (Darwin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2015).

Recent works by Darwin and Norton (2015, 2016) have extended their model matrix of investment to the realm of globalization and neoliberalism, addressing mobility. In their study, ideology has been defined as a dominant way of thinking (Darwin & Norton, 2015), a flow of ideas or beliefs under a systematic control or sites of control, such as public and private institutions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and/or workplaces, which examines the soft, invisible, and capillary force of power (Darwin & Norton, 2015). To this end, scholars have argued for an imagined community including sport clubs, workplaces, or academic study groups/peers and have formulated an ideology that delves into the desire of language learners to speak the target language (Anderson, 1991; Norton & Gao, 2008; Norton, 2015). Further, ideology, as asserted by Darwin and Norton (2016), is the mechanisms of power in linguistic exchanges in a broader context including the influence of global economy and technology. In this case, Crystal (2003) pointed out that the power of language depends on multifaceted aspects, for instance, an economy, technology and social power.

Borrowing from an extended definition of Darwin and Norton (2015, 2016), ideology has been used in the study to describe the power of a regional integration as well as the syndication of the ASEAN Economic Community that may bring forth changes in the political, economic, educational and employment aspects among ASEAN state members, including Cambodia (ASEAN, 2008, p. 4). Within the Cambodian context, ideology can be referred to as a systematic flow of business/trade, a cross-country employment market, educational opportunity exchange/scholarship and economic development. Under such a system of control, the present study has hypothesized that English may have reframed its roles in Cambodia; as endorsed by Kirkpatrick (2012), it is hypothesized that English may have emerged to replace some local languages as the official means for business communication, as well as educational and employment purposes in ASEAN region countries. Therefore, this new paradigm may have led Cambodian EFL learner perceptions to believe that good English skills are required to attain a better position and utilize various resources and/or capital more effectively.

Capital, another investment component, was initially defined by Bourdieu (1986) as a symbolic power comprising economic, cultural and social values. Capital has played a key role in inspiring students to invest in learning a target language (Norton, 1998). In the face of language education, Darwin and Norton (2016) argue that learners invest in a language because they perceive that it will

deliver certain benefits, such as meaningful employment, academic advancement, enhancement of existing skills, or development of new ones. As emphasized by Igawa (2010), English has become a foreign language of choice in Cambodia, as it is popularly believed to have stimulated economic growth in this nation. Such a notion may have inspired the government of Cambodia to adopt reforms in its education policies as evidenced by one of its priorities: to introduce the English language as a subject in the primary curriculum from grade 4 (Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) in National Strategic Development Plan 2014-2018, p. 172). By doing so, the government of Cambodia has aimed to promote human capital for competing regional and international labour markets (MoEYS, 2014). Hence, those students majoring in English language at university level may assume that English can help them gain a better standard of living through being able to access profitable opportunities such as employment and/or academic improvement. In essence, in the present study, capital has been referred to as a valuable symbolic material or affordable resource, which can help improve one's social status or enhance one's identity.

Identity, the last component of the investment model, according to Norton (1998, 2000), refers to multifaceted and dynamic traits that continually evolve over time and space. Similarly, Davin and Norton (2015) define "identity" as a struggle habitus, referring to a set of attitudes and values conceived by a particular group of learners as well as a desire incubated by ideology and capital. Bourdieu (1987) asserts that identity is metaphorically comparable to a sense of attachment to ambient surroundings such as place, time, relationships and associations of a particular cohort. This study specifically defines "identity" as the desire of Cambodian EFL students to reap the benefits of learning English for their academic and professional growth. Identity mainly refers to the repository of evolving resources held by Cambodian EFL students once they have decided to major in English language.

Voluminous studies of investment have put much emphasis on the identities of language learners in the context of native English-speaking environments such as Canada, the USA and the UK (Davin & Norton, 2016; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 1998, 2000, 2015; Norton & Gao, 2008; Norton & Toohey, 2011). For the most part, these studies have confined their methodology to case studies using small sample sizes, generally selected from a minority and/or a migrant group which has resettled in new communities. Other studies have employed a similar approach, mostly using a qualitative method with few respondents (Haneda, 2005; Mingyue, 2006; Wharton & Eslami, 2015). These

studies have argued that once language learners have invested in learning a target language, they tend to do so with confidence and a drive to achieve expected benefits (Haneda, 2005). However, the benefits gained may vary depending on an individual learner's drive (Wharton & Eslami, 2015) or on a negotiation between self-identification and position held by the students (Mingyue, 2006). Although researchers have reported consistent findings about the relevance of investment in learning a target language, in other contexts, such as China and Singapore, the scope of their studies has been limited in terms of method and sample size.

In the Cambodian context, Hashim, Leong, and Pich (2014) have taken the lead in investigating the English language demand according to job markets and have analyzed the needs of Cambodian EFL students in the university context. However, these researchers have acknowledged research constraints in terms of time, resources, and methodology. In other words, this research study attempts to mine rich data mainly by relying on previous case studies and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital for analysis. Other studies (Igawa, 2010; Moore & Bounchan, 2010; Tweed & Som, 2015) have acknowledged the important roles that learning English can play in Cambodian lives; however, none of these studies has applied the concept of investment to examine the complex phenomenon of learning English in relation to the changing identities of Cambodian students due to the effects of the mutable political, educational and economic contexts. This points to a literature gap in the field of EFL research in the Cambodian context, which this study aims to address.

As discussed in the literature, a deep study of Cambodian EFL students' investment in learning English has not yet been undertaken. Hence, this study aims to answer three main research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of Cambodian EFL students on their investment in learning English in a complex and changing academic and economic context?
2. How do the Cambodian EFL students selected for this study perceive the roles that learning English plays in their lives?
3. How have these students involved themselves in community practices associated with English for the purpose of improving their English skills?

## **METHOD**

To answer these research questions, a mixed method approach was employed that involved quantitative-qualitative procedures (Creswell, 2003; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). First, a quantitative survey was administered to 80 respondents randomly selected from freshmen and sophomore students at the University of Battambang (UBB), Cambodia. Next, a qualitative method using grounded theory, developed by two sociologists, Glaser and Strauss (1967), was employed to investigate further into the perceived roles that learning English played, as well as the community practices associated with English, which may improve the students' English skills. Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasize that a grounded theory is a systematic approach which has been utilized to generate theory about a phenomenon. The grounded theory has also been used to complement data from the survey so as to learn and understand the world we study (Charmaz, 2006).

Since the study aimed to understand the perspectives and practices of investment in learning English among Cambodian students from rural communities, those students, whose education background were from the Battambang Town, where the services of English education have been widely provided, were not invited to participate in the survey. The study first targeted 80 randomly selected university students, roughly 70% of the 112 freshmen and sophomores undertaking a degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL), University of Battambang (UBB). Intensive interviews were then conducted with four subgroups, each comprising five students, purposively selected, based on a theoretical sampling for generating theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The selected university and students were considered important for the present study because they had specific characteristics. The university, located in the northwestern Cambodia, is the only public higher learning institution in the region providing English language education. The students were mostly from rural and remote communities where English is not used for daily communication. Some of them have recently been involved in an English-speaking environment such as working as university interns, working as part-time English teachers, and obtaining exchange programs overseas. Their involvement in the new surroundings may have reshaped their thinking and motivated them to invest in further academic work to better their lives.

Before administering the survey to students, consultations were conducted with the IFL Director and the Head of the English Department to gain an overall understanding of the students' situations and study programs. Then data collection was conducted via survey and intensive interviews. Questions for both survey and interview were replicated and then adapted from various tested sources; for example, Abu-Humos (2016) and Jaekeun (2014), to suit the research objectives. The sources were chosen because they have similar characteristics to the study context such as to understand the importance of English education and why the students enrolled for this major at the university.

The survey questionnaire and interview questions were piloted with eight students, selected from the same study cohort, and included in the current study. After piloting, some vague questions in both survey questionnaire and interview were modified and finalized for the current study.

The survey questionnaire was in a structured, close-ended and multi-response utilization (Appendix 1) of 3 Likert scale (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012). Questions were organized based on the research theme in four sections. These include Section A: Students' profile, Section B: The roles of English, Section C: Investment Factors and Section D: Practices of English. The utilization of survey attempted to characterize the informants' backgrounds in order to inform the qualitative interviews.

The survey questionnaire was randomly administered to students selected from the list, obtained from the Department of English. In 30 minutes, the students were invited to complete the survey in English in classes. However, an instruction in Khmer language was given during the survey process to ensure that the students understood the purpose of the survey, so they could provide accurate responses to each question.

To check the reliability, the researcher carefully read students' responses to ensure all responses were correct. After that, data was coded with cardinal number (1, 2, 3) and computed in MS. Excel for further analyses in SPSS 20.0. Then, the researcher discussed the draft results with the selected students in class as well as an invited experienced colleague for over-viewing the accuracy and relevance of the data.

An intensive interview has proven to be an effective way for researchers to maintain control through the process of data gathering (Charmaz, 2006). The interview questions were designed in an open-ended, semi-structured format and conducted to mine in-depth and richer data for the context study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).



Criteria for recruiting students for interviews were guided by students' profile in the survey (Section A. Students' profile). The selected students must be from rural-community background; less frequently involved in an English-speaking environment; studied English for less than five years, and had travelled overseas for experience exchanges.

To conduct interviews, the students were split into four focus discussion groups (FDG), each consisting of five members. First, each group was invited for a 15-minute discussion in English on the questions (Appendix 2) and a subsequent five-minute session to summarize their responses. At the same time, the researcher took field notes, asked further questions, and recorded their answers for comparative analysis.

Analyses of data were undertaken in the following steps. First, the quantitative data obtained from the survey were assigned cardinal codes and computed into data framework in MS. Excel in order to check errors or non-response questions. Then, the data was imported into SPSS 20.0 to generate means and percentages with respect to the students' responses to the survey.

Second, qualitative data such as written responses obtained from discussions, and the researcher's notes and records from the interviews were compiled and summarized based on research concepts (Appendix 2). Further, constant comparative analysis through critical reading was undertaken to compare the emerging themes from interviews with data from survey. This process helped the researcher to match the research objectives to the data themes (Charmaz, 2006). In this way the researcher can label summary data with selective/focused-code (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Students' Profile**

The results show that 66.2% of the selected students are females; the majority (65.1%) are between 18 to 20 years old. However, the selected students have different experiences in learning English; very few claim to have started English lessons from the early age of 5, while 77.6% of them started English lessons at a later age (10). Results also show that 34% of participants have spent less than 5 years studying English, whereas 68% have learned English for at least 10 years. This highlights the varying opportunities for English education available to the students in the study; 80% of them were originally from

rural and remote communities while 20% of them moved from other district centers in the selected province. Also, the study reveals a range of different economic situations among the selected students. Based on the results, 28.8% of participants have had to work part-time as teachers, receptionists, clerks and/or other occupations in order to cover their living expenses whereas the rest of the selected students have depended on financial support from their families. Generally, 82.5% of the participants assert that their parents cannot speak English and that they have never had any experience in learning from a native-speaking English teacher. Further, the study reveals limited opportunities for practicing English outside the classroom context: 90.5% of the participants claim that they had ‘no chance’ of going abroad. The findings show that the selected students’ backgrounds vary in terms of English education history, geographical patterns and economic status. Such differences may have impacted their responses with regard to the investment in learning English in the survey and discussions.

**Research question 1: How do the selected Cambodian EFL students perceive the roles of learning English in their lives?**

According to the students’ responses to Section B statements in the questionnaire, the majority of them think that English has played a key role in both their academic and their career lives. Over 95% of participants believe the role of English is to revitalize and help advance their education and career. Additionally, 67% of them strongly believe that English might become a second language of choice in Cambodia in the future. This suggests that English may have undergone a revolution in how it is used on a daily basis among Cambodian EFL learners. As the students repeatedly echoed:

“English has played a key role in lives. It can bridge us to the globalized world. We need English for traveling, studying or working” (Discussions & interviews: September 2016).

Moreover, 52% of the students feel sure that no other language will replace English in Cambodia, either now or over the next 10 years. Most importantly, 45% of the selected students think that English can be used as the formal language of instruction for all subjects in the Cambodian education system in the future. It can thus be inferred that, through its trajectory, English has become established, and the Cambodian may have perceived its role as a life-

changing language because, with English skills, they may hope to gain better jobs, higher positions and/or incomes. As supported by Kirkpatrick (2012), English may replace some local languages of ASEAN state countries such as Khmer/Cambodian to promote bilingual contexts in ASEAN community in order to promote the economy of Cambodia (Igawa, 2008).

**Research question 2: What are the perspectives of Cambodian EFL students on their investment in learning English?**

*Investment and Ideology*

Results in Table 1 show the perceptions of the selected students towards the relationship between investment in learning English and ideology which has been referred to as ambient influence of the changing world such education, employment and economic situations.

**Table 1. The Relationship Between Investment and Ideology Perceived by the Selected Students**

I have been motivated to invest in learning English as a major subject at university because ..... (N= 80)	Check one:		
	1= disagree		
	2= neither agree nor disagree		
	3= agree		
	1	2	3
1. English is a global language, so with English skill I can travel and work in any country in the ASEAN region and around the world.	6%	10%	84%
2. English is highly required by academic institutions for studying Master or PhD degrees overseas.	9%	10%	81%
3. English can give more opportunities such as academic exchange or overseas training.	3%	16%	81%
4. English can help to catch up with economic and technological advancement.	6%	36%	58%

As can be seen in Table 1, from the responses to statements 1 and 2, 84% of the students think that English is a global and regional language, so with English skills they can travel or work in any country in ASEAN and around the world. Additionally, 81% feel that English is in high demand for overseas

study and provides more chances for academic exchanges or training overseas. Finally, 58% agreed that English can help them catch up with economic and technological advancements. Supporting these results, the students reconfirmed through the discussion and interview that:

“We realized that English has been a core subject at the university because it can help us have more opportunities for better job or overseas education. It has been globally and regionally spoken, so knowing English is very important to widen the circle of communication” (Discussions and interviews: September 2016).

In this respect, Darwin and Norton (2015) emphasize that the mobility and fluidity of culture, goods, and technology have established ideologies that influence ideas, people and relations, allowing for the acquisition of capital and the transformation of identities and their integration into the new world. Chang (2011) has also argued that the role of English in the Asian context is to facilitate transformation of language learners so that they can connect with others in the globalized world economy.

### ***Investment and Capital***

Results in Table 2 below present the selected students' self-perceptions towards the relationship between investment in learning English and capitals that they have expected to gain in the future.

**Table 2. The Relationship between Investment in Learning English and Capital Perceived by the Selected Students**

I have been motivated to invest in learning English as a major subject at university because ____. (N = 80)	Check one:		
	1	2	3
English can help me earn promotion in workplace.	5%	9%	86%
English can help me get higher salary.	5%	35%	60%
English can help me improve lifestyle.	9%	40%	51%
English can help me gain better social and financial status in society.	5%	36%	59%

The responses indicate students' perceptions on the relationship between investment in learning English and negotiating capital. Eighty six per cent of the students agree that English helps people earn promotions in the workplace, while 60% identified the salary factor as their motivating desire for learning English. Consistent with these findings, 77% of them agree with Section C, statement 1.3 that English can help earn a salary ranging from US\$300 to \$400 per month. In addition, 51% agree that English may help them improve their lifestyles, while 59% think that, with good English skills, they may gain better social and financial status in society in the future. Bourdieu (1986, p. 37) explains that to learn a language, people must position themselves in such a way that they are able to perform beyond the usual acts so as to develop a valuable economy of symbolic exchanges. Additionally, the summary of all students' responses from the small discussion groups echoed that:

“Knowing English is very potential for employment – to work with a university as a lecturer, an interpreter for the government or international company, with a salary of US\$500 or more” (Discussions and interviews: September 2016).

### ***Investment and Identity***

Results in Table 3 present the selected students' self-perceptions towards the relationship between investment in learning English and identity in the desired workplaces that they have perceived for the future.

The notion of capital may have influenced the students' identity, as seen in their responses to the various workplaces (Section C). Larger percentages of students expressed desires to be teachers of English or a tourist agency (65%), International Relation (IR) officers in private companies, government officials, and a reporter or journalist (55%), while others expressed their desire to work with NGOs (58%). Careers such as journalist or writer seem to be of less interest; the responses for these were comparatively low, i.e. between 35% and 40%, respectively. These percentages may also reflect the current job market; applicants with the necessary requirements for these jobs are relatively scarce in Cambodia. The students recognize salary and employment as key factors for investment in learning English; summary data from the discussions and interviews reveals that:

“One of the struggle and barrier of English education in Cambodia concerns the job market since we find it hard to find a well-paid job, and most after graduating,

have worked as teacher of English, regardless of their career dreams. We need more job diversity” (Discussions & interview: September 14, 2016).

**Table 3. The Relationship between Investment and Identity in the Desired Workplaces Perceived by the Selected Students**

I have been motivated to invest in learning English as a major subject at university because English can help me to work as _____. (N = 80)	Check one:		
	1=disagree	2=neither agree nor disagree	3=agree
	1	2	3
1. an official of the government	20%	25%	55%
2. a worker at international/local organizations	6%	36%	58%
3. a translator or interpreter	12%	25%	63%
4. an English teacher/educator at (schools or universities)	11%	24%	65%
5. a public or international relations officer with a private company	9%	36%	55%
6. a tourist agency or company	10%	25%	65%
7. a reporter or journalist	53%	27%	55%
8. a writer (story, novel or song)	41%	24%	35%
9. a market officer or customer service employee	21%	29%	50%

With this data in mind, it can be argued that the students in this study expect returns in the form of symbolic materials or affordances from learning English that they hope will help them transform their identity into an imagined community such as a workplace in the future. In essence, investing in learning English may be a pathway to help Cambodians earn higher positions and salaries, obtain opportunities for higher education, and widen their communication circles in today’s globalized world economy.

Drawing on the investment model of Norton (2000) and Darwin and Norton (2016), as discussed above, ideology, capital, and identity have had a great impact on language learners. In this study, under the impact of ASEAN integration on the mobility of education, economic and employment and the connection with globalized world, Cambodian EFL learners seem to be aware that becoming proficient in English may help them gain more power in linking their changing identities to the twenty-first century world. With English skills, they expect to gain positions that will enrich their economic, cultural, and social capital and identity. As argued by Crystal (2003), the power of language de-

depends on how it connects not only to an economy, but also to technology and social power in the world. Without the consideration of these variables, learning a second or foreign language does not seem to have much value. Data emerging from this study has confirmed that Cambodian EFL students have been inspired by a variety of investment motivations to learn English.

It can also be reasoned from the present study that Cambodian EFL learners have been quite positive about their investment in learning English, and seem to be confident that English can bring changes in their lives. Bourdieu (1986) maintains that language is a symbolic interaction and embodies the structure of the linguistic market between linguistic habitus and the market. Hence, it can be asserted that Cambodian EFL learners have recognized the value that the role of learning English can play through its trajectory in Cambodia. English has earned a place in the lives of Cambodian people who wish to improve their standard of living and to benefit from capital regardless of cultural, social, or financial differences. This may explain and justify why some scholars have echoed the idea that English can be a life-altering language (Tharum, 2010), a language used for political dialogue (Clayton, 2006), and/or a language to improve one's lifestyle (Keuk, 2009).

**Research question 3: How have these students involved themselves in community practices associated with English for the purpose of improving their English skills?**

Relating to the students' involvement in community practices of English, the responses to Section D question 1.2 presented in Table 4 further indicate that university or private language schools are the places for learning English—showing high responses of 50% and 30%, respectively. In addition, the students seem to view practicing English in public, at home with family members, and elsewhere outside schools as rare opportunities. These results suggest a lack of student autonomy in learning English, or it may relate to the scarcity of resources for building language skills. In other words, the students seem to have a perception that teachers or schools are the only sources of knowledge, and the main purpose of learning is to pass tests in order to graduate.

However, the discussions groups further highlight that:

“The curriculum does not seem to appreciate our needs for the job markets. We need more practices like community-based programs, volunteer teaching jobs, or

TOEFL or IELTS preparation courses. We need to study other subjects like translation and critical reading” (Discussions & interviews: September 14, 2016).

**Table 4. Places where the Selected Students Have Been Involved Most in Learning English**

Where have you spent most time in order to learn English?	Percentage (%)	N = 80
a. only at university	50%	40
b. at private schools	30%	24
c. outside school	13%	9
d. only with the family	1%	1
e. only with friends/classmates	6%	6

Because of limited resources, more students tend to access online websites, for example, *YouTube* in order to improve their English skills. As shown in Table 5, at least 42% of the students have used Internet websites or *YouTube* on a daily basis, while 47% of others have accessed *YouTube* ‘sometimes’ for practicing English skills. Surprisingly, very few students have used reading materials such as comics or short stories, professional or academic literature, newspapers, magazines or product advertisements for improving their language skills.

**Table 5. Materials Used by the Selected Students for Enhancing English Skills**

The materials that I use for practicing English	(N=80)		
	Always	Sometimes	Never
a. newspapers	11%	38%	41%
b. magazines	11%	38%	41%
c. comics/short stories	4%	5%	46%
d. professional/academic literature	9%	45%	46%
e. product advertisements/manuals	8%	47%	45%
f. internet websites/YouTube	42%	47%	11%



These findings may point to several reasons; for example, the students may have limited vocabulary, or they may not have interests in English reading, or they may not be able to frequently access reading materials which are suitable to their language levels. In small group discussions, the students responded to the question:

“The university should create English clubs and more online resources, or invite native English teachers so that we can improve our proficiency in English” (Discussion & interview: September 14, 2016).

The findings imply a lack of authenticity in the practices of English education, as well as social context, since most students do not spend sufficient time in learning or engage in both extensive and intensive reading activities. As argued by Tweed and Som (2015), the quality of English education in Cambodia has remained poor and may be sidestepped by financial and resource shortages.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The first objective of the study has been to examine how the selected students perceive the role of learning English in their lives. As indicated in the findings, the students viewed that English has been growing in importance in Cambodia and transforming its role through Cambodian changing contexts. As they have said in their responses to Section B statements, English has a vital role in academic and career lives. Therefore, a conclusion from the present study points out that, through educational processes, English has empowered Cambodian learners' perceptions to invest in EFL study as a means for improving their quality of life, gaining better positions, and advancing their salary and social status, which may, in turn, affect their identities and capital.

However, it can also be observed from the present study that the community practices of English in Cambodia have been constrained by a lack of resources and an overwhelmingly ambient context such as the lack of job opportunity or the engagement between English education and social recognition in Cambodian society. As indicated by the responses of students, there seems to be a bottleneck in the job market for English graduates since the study highlights that most students expect to be a teacher of English at a university or a private institution rather than to become a journalist or a writer.

Future researchers may consider conducting similar studies using a larger number and variety of respondents such as teachers, teacher trainers, or graduate students, alongside more sophisticated research methods. These may generate different or confirmatory results. A longitudinal or ethnographic study may yield a richer understanding of the investment and language learning in the Cambodian context. In addition, a comparative study may also help provide more in-depth views of students' investment in learning English.

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## APPENDIX 1.

### Survey Questionnaire

**Topic: Investment in Learning English: Study the Perspectives of Cambodian University Students**

The aims of this survey are to look at the:

- *perceived role of learning English in the lives of young Cambodian learners;*
- *perspectives of young Cambodian EFL students on the investment in learning English in the complex and changing context;*
- *community practices involved by young Cambodian learners to enhance their English skills in the future.*

#### **Section A: Students' Profile**

1. Gender (Please check one)      a. Female \_\_\_\_\_ b. Male \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age (Please fill in the blank)      \_\_\_\_\_ years old
3. Where is your hometown? (choose one)  
a. Battambang Town    b. district center      c. rural area  
d. others (please, verify) \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Which grade are you in college? (Please check one)  
a. Freshman \_\_\_\_ b. Sophomore \_\_\_\_ c. Junior; \_\_\_\_ d. Senior \_\_\_\_
5. How old are you when you started learning English? (Please fill in the blank) \_\_\_\_\_ years old
6. How many years have you studied English? (Please fill in the blank) \_\_\_\_\_ years
7. Have you had any English teacher(s) who is (a) native speaker(s) of English?      a. Yes \_\_\_\_ b. No \_\_\_\_
8. Can your parents speak English?      a. Yes \_\_\_\_ b. No \_\_\_\_
9. Do you have any friend(s) whose mother tongue is English?  
a. Yes \_\_\_\_ b. No \_\_\_\_
10. Have you spent time in an English-speaking country?  
a. Yes \_\_\_\_ b. No \_\_\_\_
11. Do you have a part-time job?      a. Yes \_\_\_\_ b. No \_\_\_\_

12. If yes, what do you do? \_\_\_\_\_  
 13. If no, how can you afford your living expenses? \_\_\_\_\_

**Section B. Perspectives of Students on the Roles of learning**

This section aims to survey your perspectives on the role of learning English for your lives. Put a check on the options that represent your opinions:

1= unimportant, 2= neither important nor unimportant, 3= important

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Options</i>		
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
1. Comparing to French, Chinese or Thai languages, the role of learning English is _____ in my academic life.			
2. Comparing to French, Chinese or Thai languages, the role of learning English is _____ in my career life.			
3. In the next 10 years, English in Cambodia will _____.			
a. be used as a Second Language			
b. be replaced by another foreign language.			
c. be officially used everywhere.			
d. be used for all subjects in Cambodian education curriculum.			

**C. Perspectives of Students on their Investment in Learning English**

In this section, please read each of the following statements carefully; and then check (✓) the number that best represents the level of your agreement to the statement. Level of agreement: 1=disagree, 2=neither agree nor disagree, 3=strongly agree

<b>C1.1 I have been motivated to invest in learning English as a major subject at university because</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
1. English is a global language, so with English skill I can travel and work in any country in ASEAN region and around the world.			
2. English is highly required by academic institutions for studying Master or PhD degrees overseas.			
3. English can give more opportunities such as academic exchange or overveas training.			
4. English can help to catch up with economic and technological advancement.			
5. English can help to gain better social status in society.			



**C1.2 I have been motivated to invest in learning English as a major subject at university because .....**

1. English can help to earn promotion in workplace.
2. English can help to get higher salary.
3. English can help to improve lifestyle.
4. English can help to gain better social status in society.

**C1.3 I have been motivated to invest in learning English as a major subject at university because English can help to get the salary between \_\_\_\_\_.**

1. below 200 US dollars
2. 200-300 US dollars
3. over 400 US dollars

**C1.4 I have been motivated to invest in learning English as a major subject at university because English can help me to work as \_\_\_\_\_.**

1. an official of the government
2. a staff of an international/local organizations
3. a translator or interpreter
4. an English teacher/educator at (schools or universities)
5. a public or international relation officer with private company
6. to work with tourism agent or company
7. to work in the media as reporter or journalist
8. a writer (story, novel or song)
9. to work with the bank as a market officer or customer service staff

***D. The Practices of English***

This section aims to understand how often you have involved in community practices of English so that you can improve your English skills. Please put a check on the number that represent true information about you.

Level of frequency: 1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=always

**Questions and Answers**

**Frequencies**

**1      2      3**

**D1.1 Where have you spent most time to learn English?**

- a. Only in English lessons at the university
- b. Mainly in English lessons at private schools
- c. Mainly outside the school
- d. Only with my family members
- e. Only with my friend/cliq

<b>Questions and Answers</b>	<b>Frequencies</b>		
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>D1.2 In your free time, how often do you practice the following English skills?</b>			
a. listening			
b. reading			
c. writing			
d. speaking			
<b>D1.3 How often do you use the following materials to improve your English skills?</b>			
a. English newspapers/magazines			
b. stories/comic books			
c. academic articles/ literatures			
d. manuals or product descriptions			
e. the Internet Websites or You Tube			

**APPENDIX 2.**

**Selective/focused code of data category**

<b>Main categories</b>	<b>Subcategories</b>	<b>Data codes</b>	<b>Participants</b>
The role of learning English	The role of learning English for academic life	a global/international language to pursue MA or PhD in US/AUS.	Four groups of 20 students
	The role of learning English for career life	a potential language for employment, get well-paid job, with high salary of \$500 or more	Four groups of 20 students
Perspectives of Cambodian EFL students on the investment in learning English	The relationship between investment and ideology	a globally and regionally spoken; widen the circles of communication.	Four groups of 20 students
	The relationship between investment and capital	a potential ; earn more money and promotion	Four groups of 20 students
	The relationship between investment and identity	to work as lecturer at university, interpreters for the company; a narrow job market	Four groups of 20 students
Involvement in community practices	What do they need to improve their English skills?	practical programs/ relevant courses; community-based programs/volunteer teaching jobs; courses for scholarship (IELTS/TOEFL)	Four groups of 20 students