

# CAMBODIAN GRADE-12 STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC ENGLISH TEXTBOOK AND EXAM PAPERS

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## Abstract

English is a native language of some countries, a foreign language for many countries, and an international language for the whole world. English textbook is one of the most important learning and teaching materials in learning and teaching this language to succeed. This article aimed to examine students' perception of their high school English textbook toward high school national exam papers. The article also aimed to examine students' perceptions of English textbook that they want so that their needs for English, like daily activities and high school exams, are fulfilled. The study employed a qualitative design. 20 students participated in the study. The findings show that the current textbook is out of date. All the students wanted a new textbook providing them with the daily needs of English and the keys to passing their high school exams. A bigger sample size might be used in a future investigation. It is strongly suggested that the impact of English textbook on students' learning achievements be investigated. It is also suggested that teachers' attitudes toward English textbooks be examined.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, English Textbook, Grade-12 Student, High School Exam

## INTRODUCTION

English is a language that originated with the people of England. The United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and more than fifty other nations now speak English as their primary language (Qiong, 2004). Interestingly, English was not the official language of the United States until 2017, despite being the official language of various US states for many years (Angulo et al., 2021). English is spoken natively by roughly 400 million people worldwide, with another one billion speaking it as a second language (Zheng, 2018). After Mandarin and Spanish, English is the third most widely spoken language in terms of native speakers and the most widely spoken language in terms of native and non-native speakers (Prior & Gollan, 2011). As a result, English is frequently referred to as a world language or a global lingua franca. In worldwide commerce and telecommunications, newspapers and book publishing, scientific publication, popular entertainment, and diplomacy, it is the most extensively used language (Galloway & Rose, 2015; McKay, 2018).

ASEAN is an association of countries in southeast Asia. It is made up of ten countries. Those countries are Cambodia, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar (or Burma), Laos, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam (MoEYS, 2001; Nesadurai, 2008). ASEAN uses English as the language for all kinds of important communication. Because English is the ASEAN working language, it is regarded as one of the most significant keys to the growth of the ASEAN community (Deerajviset, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2008). The ASEAN states' language policies encourage their various national languages as well as English as educational languages. English's connection with a brief history of ASEAN contextualizes English's current vital

position as ASEAN's lingua franca (Kirkpatrick, 2020). Although English is recognized as ASEAN's primary working language, it has a varied status and has quite diverse functions in each ASEAN member state. Even though English is obviously important for socioeconomic growth, the question of whether each member country has equitable access to high-quality English teaching and learning deserves more investigation. The current age of the fourth industrial revolution, in which technological advancements have enabled breakneck speed in the transfer and creation of new knowledge and innovations, and in which English is the primary language used in a digitally mediated world, making it all the more critical that access to English is quickly and equitably distributed throughout the region. For this to happen, ASEAN as a network must unite on the problem of English access in ASEAN, ensuring that no nation is left behind and that the pursuit of sustainable development goals proceeds from rhetoric to reality in all ASEAN nations (Kirkpatrick, 2008; Low & Ao, 2018).

In Cambodia, English is used as a foreign language. Between 1970 and 1975, the Khmer Republic (or Lon Nol regime) brought English to Cambodia, and it was also incorporated into the curriculum during that time (Neau, 2003). Then, between 1975 and 1979, when the Khmer Rouge (or Pol Pot regime) government began, it was forgotten (Neau, 2003). Although the Khmer Rouge rule came to an end in 1979, learning English was not promoted initially. Igawa (2008) noted that English and French were restricted to learning and teaching owing to communist influences. Those who studied and taught English or French were treated as criminals and executed. Instead, the Russian and Vietnamese languages were encouraged to be learned in this period.

According to Moore and Bounchan (2010) and Neau (2003), English was reintroduced into the Cambodian curriculum in 1989 and has remained so till now. English is now taught in Cambodian schools beginning in Grade 4 (MoEYS, 2015). According to MoEYS (2015), English would also be included in the curriculum beginning with pre-school education. Despite the fact that English has been part of the Cambodian curriculum since 1989, challenges in English learning and teaching continue to be a major issue for teachers of English and Cambodian students, particularly those living in rural areas, with many students failing this subject in their high school exams.

English and French are the only two foreign languages included in the Cambodian curriculum. Most of the students usually choose English as their foreign language for their high school exams. In 2016, only 28.17% of the total students who took high school exam passed the foreign language test (Bredenberg, 2018). This figure demonstrates that the pass rate remains low when comparing to other countries and the world. Because English is frequently utilized in higher education, students who continue their studies after Grade 12 face major challenges if they do not know English well.

Sovanchandara (2013) investigated high school teachers' opinions on the *English For Cambodia (EFC)* textbook series that is now being used in public schools. The findings revealed that textbook input and classroom practice were not matched. In other words, although being a well-developed textbook for the Cambodian setting, it was impractical and inapplicable in public school teaching and learning due to a lack of teaching and learning materials, an extreme mix of student capacity, and an outdated textbook edition. It was also revealed that there were complaints from the students, especially those studying in Grade 12, about the mismatch between what they learned from the book and high school exam papers. Furthermore, the majority of respondents underlined learners' lack of communication skills, claiming that

students, with the exception of those learning in private classes, were unable to engage in genuine communicative practice.

Currently, Em (2019) found that teachers' qualifications, learning and teaching programs, learning and teaching resources, classroom activities, class size, and students' self-learning habits were the causes of students' being unable to learn English successfully (see also Em, 2022b). The English textbook was among the learning and teaching materials that prevented students from successfully learning the language (Em 2022b). Students usually fail English subject, especially when taking high school exams (see Table 1). Em (2019) stated that the old and never updated English textbook could not meet the students' demands, such as daily usages of the language and a high pass rate when they take the exams (see also Em, 2022b).

**Table 1.** Percentage of English pass and failure rates of a high school students in 2021

No.	Grade	N	Percentage (%)
1	A	00	0.00
2	B	02	4.255319
3	C	01	2.12766
4	D	05	10.6383
5	E	02	4.255319
6	F	37	78.7234
7	Total	47	100

Note: A= Excellent, B= Very Good, C= Good, D= Fairly Good, E= Average, F= Fail

As revealed in Table 1, there was no student who got Grade A, two students (4.25%) who got Grade B, only one student (2.12%) got Grade C, five students (10.63%) got Grade D, two students (4.25%) got Grade E, and notably, 37 students (78.72%) got Grade F in English when they took their high school exams in 2021. These figures show that the failure rate is very high. The figures were requested from a government high school principal in a province by the author. However, to maintain privacy and confidentiality, the high school's name and location are kept anonymous.

The high failure rate of English along with the low pass rate worries the Education Ministry and education stakeholders. Because English is the language of higher studies and doing research, students will face many difficulties when they go to study at higher education levels. Therefore, this problem is an urgent one that needs to be solved. It is believed that Cambodian English textbooks for public schools, especially Grade-12 textbook, do not meet the needs of English used in general and for high school exams. Thus, this article aims to examine students' perceptions regarding their high school English textbook and the types of English textbook they want in order to meet their needs in English.

## METHOD

The current study employed a qualitative study. The first author asked for 20 students to attend an extra class. The school principal and the students agreed with the request. Thus, 20 students in Grade 12 were randomly selected from a high school in Takeo province, Cambodia, to attend an extra class from Monday to Friday in the evening after their public classes ended. The class was conducted for three months, from early February to late April of 2022. The materials were English high national school tests from 2014 to 2021. In total, eight paper tests were taught in the manner of an exam preparation course along with concise explanations. All the paper tests were in the same format and contained four sections: (1) reading, (2) vocabulary, (3) grammar,

and (4) writing. At the end of the course, all the students were asked to write their reflection papers in Khmer or in English as open-ended responses to the tests compared with their public school English textbook. The current textbook for the public Grade 12 is *English For Cambodia (EFC) Book Six* (see Em, 2022a). The names of the participants were not instructed to be written on the reflection papers in order to protect their privacy. Participants were advised that they could opt out of the research at any moment if they did not wish to participate anymore. To ensure the participants' privacy, they were also told that their information would only be utilized in the study and that the authors would keep it confidential. Finally, their information would be destroyed five years after the study.

The first author analyzed the data obtained from student participants using the content analysis suggested by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). In qualitative data, content analysis is a research approach for identifying the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts (i.e., text). Content analysis allows researchers to quantify and analyze the existence, meanings, and relationships of certain words, themes, or concepts. Researchers, for example, can check for prejudice or partiality in the language used in a news story. The meanings of the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and historical time around the work may all be inferred by researchers (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

This section deals with the results of the study and the discussion of the results. Demographic information of student participants is also shown in this section.

### Demographic Information

**Table 2.** Students' demographic information

Participant code	Age	Gender	Grade
P1	16-20 years	F	12
P2	16-20 years	F	12
P3	16-20 years	F	12
P4	16-20 years	F	12
P5	16-20 years	F	12
P6	16-20 years	F	12
P7	16-20 years	M	12
P8	16-20 years	M	12
P9	16-20 years	M	12
P10	16-20 years	F	12
P11	16-20 years	F	12
P12	16-20 years	F	12
P13	16-20 years	F	12
P14	16-20 years	F	12
P15	16-20 years	F	12
P16	16-20 years	M	12
P17	16-20 years	M	12
P18	16-20 years	M	12
P19	16-20 years	F	12
P20	16-20 years	F	12

As revealed in Table 2, there were 6 male and 14 female students attended the study. They were all between 16 and 20 years old. All of them were in Grade 12 from a high school in Cambodia.

## Reflection Paper Results

All the participants were told to write the reflection papers in Khmer or in English regarding four points: reading, grammar, vocabulary, writing by comparing the exam papers they had learned with their current Grade-12 English textbook. The students, finally, were told to write about the types of textbook they want so that their needs would be fulfilled for the sake of their daily activities and their high school exams. The analysis shows that what they have learned did not match with high school national exam papers, and they wanted a new textbook giving them the four macroskills, grammar, vocabulary, daily usages of English, and a preparation chapter four their high school tests.

### 1. Reading

*There are still some mistakes in the reading sections of the textbook. Thus, I think I cannot learn how to write the correct sentences by using the present textbook. I have been learning to read from the textbook, but when I learn from the paper tests, most of the readings were not taken from the textbook. Hence, it seems like I am learning about is this, but the tests are often about that. That means what I have learned from the textbook does not match with the tests. The exam tests I have learned are always about using the clue words to fill in the gaps, but the readings in the textbook are mostly about reading and answering the questions. I find most of the reading tests as more difficult than those that appear in the textbooks.*

### 2. Grammar

*Grammar points in the tests are more difficult than those in the textbook. The tests are all multiple choices, but those in the textbook are not. Grammar points in the textbook are not clearly demonstrated, but those on the tests are far beyond. Grammar points in the textbook and on the tests are very different. I can find most of the tests on Google, not from the textbook. The grammar points in the textbook are only about the introduction of th grammar items, but the tests appear far beyond.*

### 3. Vocabulary

*Some words in the textbook are the same as those on the tests, but many words I have never seen in the textbook. Many words in the tests are more difficult than those in the textbook. The words on the tests are usually different from those in the textbook. There are no instructions on how to use the vocabulary in the textbook, but there are usually many words that are similar appear on the tests. Thus, I have no idea with those because I need to choose only one. I think vocabulary sections are always beyond my existing knowledge because I have never learned those from the textbook.*

### 4. Writing

*I don't see the writing sections in the textbook, but I always meet essay writing on the tests. I don't know how to write even a paragraph because I never learn, but essay writing usually appears on the tests. I used to study paragraph writing at school, but I never study essay writing, and it always appears on the tests. I have no idea about essay writing, but I always come across essay writing on the tests I have learned. I also have no idea about the essay writing with 80 words that I always meet on the tests. I think the writing section*

*should be about a paragraph, not an essay, because I have never learned how to write an essay from the textbook.*

#### 5. The Textbook I want

*I want a good textbook that has no mistake. I want a new or updated textbook because the current one was published a long time ago. All the information in the book is not about society now. I want a new textbook containing authentic usages of English. I want a new textbook with some reviews regarding high school exams or in the same format as high school exams. I want a new textbook that prepares me for high school exams and scholarship exams. I want a new textbook that has a lot of writing sections. I don't need the current textbook anymore. I need a new one. I want a new textbook that has a lot of grammar points. I need a new textbook that provides me with the four skills: grammar, vocabulary, and reading. It would be very good if the textbook had good conversations for the daily uses and it should also prepare me for the exams, especially high school exam.*

### **Discussion**

The current study shows that the students feel very frustrated with their high school English textbook. The students responded that there were some mistakes in the textbook, and the reading texts they had learned from the textbook were not along with the paper tests they learned. Besides, they also responded that the grammar points on the tests were much more difficult than what they had learned from the textbook. Moreover, many vocabulary words that appeared on the tests were not those taken from the textbook but from other sources. The students reported that the vocabulary on the test was much more difficult than those used in the textbook. Notably, the essay writing sections that appeared on the tests was not what the students had learned from the textbook. The students reported that there was no point in the textbook regarding essay writing. Based on the information from the students, it can be concluded that the current textbook is not standardized, and it is out of date. Furthermore, high school tests are not prepared based on the textbook that the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) of the Kingdom of Cambodia allowed public schools to use as the core textbook in teaching students English.

Finally, the students were told to write about the textbook that they want. All of the students wanted a new and updated textbook because they reported that the current textbook was published long ago, and it is out of date. They need a new textbook regarding their daily lives, and the book that also guides them to the right points for high school exams. A new textbook that provides them with the four skills, grammar, and vocabulary, was highly recommended.

The current study collaborates with the studies by Em (2019) and Sovanchandara (2013) showing that out-of-date textbook could not guide students to the high pass rates of the exams. The students using the old and out-of-date textbook are studying mainly about what is forgotten, but when they take the exams, it will be about the items with which are not familiar.

### **CONCLUSION**

The present study sheds a very new light on the causes of the high failure rates of English subject when the students take their high school national exams. It was found that because of

the old and out-of-date textbook, the students could not learn English well from the book. Hence, they often failed the exams for English subject. It could also be implied that many high school teachers of English need to be qualified, not only the salves of the textbook. They need to do more research to adapt their lessons to the real world and the real needs of the students (see Em et al., 2021). Besides, the study also reveals that the students needed a new textbook that meets their daily demands of English and their exams.

Nhem (2020) and Richards and Farrell (2005) stated that textbooks have a significant impact on the teaching and learning process. Because textbooks now regarded as an important part of every English course, the usage of English published textbooks is more common than ever. They provide teachers with syllabi, instructional strategies, and content to be taught. Besides, textbooks are important in every language classroom; they serve a variety of functions in the English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum and aid in the language teaching and learning process. In the learning and teaching of English, a textbook plays a very significant function.

Moreover, textbooks are the primary resource for conveying knowledge and information to students in a simple and orderly manner because they are one aspect that may either encourage or discourage students. Never updated textbooks make the students feel discouraged because what they have learned cannot be applied in their real society. Plus, they are a type of assistance for both teachers and students. Students benefit from textbooks because the textbooks give a level of uniformity. Moreover, textbooks have a significant impact on the educational process because they are nearly universally used in English language instruction, etc. (Nhem, 2020; Richards & Farrell, 2005). Thus, MoEYS and the education stakeholders must take the mentioned points into consideration and update the textbooks.

As a result, MoEYS and education stakeholders should take urgent action to solve the problems by updating the textbook that provides students with all the macro skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The new textbook should also have one or two chapters that prepare the students for different exams, especially high school exams. Besides, the updated textbook should use a lot of authentic materials so that the students learn the language at school and are able to apply what they learn at schools into their real lives (Em, 2022b). Moreover, due to the urgent needs of English for higher education levels and other such things, MoEYS should reform English learning and teaching at all levels and guarantee that all students can have the opportunities to learn the language equally and equitably. A future study can be conducted with a larger population size. The study of the effects of English textbook on students' learning achievement is highly recommended. A study of teachers' perceptions regarding English textbooks is also recommended.

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