

# Factors Contributing to Students' Failure in the English Subject in National Grade 12 Examinations in Cambodia: A Literature Review

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*Received June 27, 2024; revised August 16, 2024;*

*accepted August 17, 2024*

## Abstract

English plays a significant role in international education, especially examinations at both national and international levels. In Cambodia, the passing rates of Grade 12 students have increased year by year; however, many students, including those receiving overall Grade As, fail the English subject in the national exams. Therefore, this article presents a preliminary investigation into factors that could be contributing to students' failure in the English subject in the national Grade 12 examinations in Cambodia and provides suggestions for improving students' performance in national exams. Drawing on secondary sources and the authors' experience and knowledge of the topic, this article discusses several factors, such as English being an elective subject, limited teacher quality, students' poor English backgrounds, their lack of motivation, and other factors related to the Cambodian education system. The article offers some suggestions to improve students' performance in the English subject by focusing on the roles of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, school principals, teachers, students, parents, communities, and other stakeholders. The findings aim to contribute to the limited literature on English language education in Cambodia and provide a foundation for future research on addressing these challenges.

**Keywords:** English subject, grade 12 examinations, Cambodian students, English education in Cambodia, EFL in Cambodia

English is an international or global language (Crystal, 2003; Pennycook, 2017). There are about 400 million native English speakers and approximately two billion speakers of English (Crystal, 2008; Patel et al., 2023). These numbers indicate that English is widely used in many fields, such as education, business, and science and technology (Pandarangga, 2015; Pennycook, 2017). In education, English is compulsory for many students and most books are in English, a language used as a medium of instruction at universities across the world (Heng, 2017; Kirkpatrick, 2011; Moore et al., 2012).

In the context of Cambodia, English is used as a foreign language (Clayton, 2002; Hashim et al., 2014; Hum & Heng, 2024; Igawa, 2008). Its acquisition is crucial for educational opportunities, overseas education and scholarships, and research and publication (Ngel, 2022). Indeed, many Cambodian students study English because they want to get a good job, study abroad, or engage in international communication (Clayton, 2002); however, research has shown that the English language proficiency of Cambodian students is limited, resulting in poor English scores in national Grade 12 examinations—examinations that are organized annually by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) (Bredenberg, 2018). However, many scholarships, such as the Fulbright Foreign Student Program, offered by the United States, and the Australia Awards Scholarships, offered by Australia, require a high level of English proficiency for the applicants to be considered for the scholarships. Ngel (2022) pointed out that these scholarships are some of the most prestigious fully funded scholarships available to Cambodian people, but these scholarships require a good score on high-stakes tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

English is widely used in the education field in Cambodia (Chan, 2018; Hashim et al., 2014; Heng, 2017; Mao, 2015). For example, primary school students start learning English in Grade 4 in Cambodia (Hum & Heng, 2024; Zein, 2022). They study English in two sessions per week, with one session containing 40 minutes of study time. Mao (2015) also stated that English is integrated from Grades 4 to 12 so that

Cambodian students can be equipped with the English knowledge required for both study and work. The Cambodian Education Ministry even recommended that English be introduced in the national curriculum from Grades 1 to 6 as a core subject for study (MoEYS, 2015).

Every year, Cambodian Grade 12 students take the national examinations, which consist of seven subjects for science and seven for social science. The subjects for the science track include Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History, Khmer Literature, and English, whereas those for the social science track include Khmer Literature, History, Geography, Moral-Civics, Math, Earths, and English (see MoEYS, 2015; Soeung, 2020). Although English is one of the subjects for the national exams, its score is only considered a surplus score, meaning that when the students receive a score between 26 and 50 (with 25 being a passing score), they will get extra scores added to their overall exam scores. However, when they receive an English score below 26, they will obtain zero for the English subject, and no extra scores will be added to their overall exam scores. Even if the students fail the English subject, there is no effect on their overall exam results (Soeung, 2020).

According to the MoEYS (2016, as cited in Bredenberg, 2018), Cambodian students' pass rates in the national Grade 12 examinations have increased every year since 2014 when a reform to the national Grade 12 exams was introduced. This reform aimed to raise educational quality and efficiency in the secondary education sector, as students are no longer allowed to bring "cheat sheets" into national exams (Bredenberg, 2018). Despite the increase in the number of students passing the national Grade 12 exams, many of these students failed the English subject. For example, in 2016, only 28.17% of the students who passed the national exams passed the English subject. In 2019, of 79,052 students passing the national exams, only 14% passed the English subject (Bredenberg, 2022; Mom, 2019). Moreover, in the case of Cambodia's Kampong Cham province, in 2022, out of 5,799 students who passed the national Grade 12 examinations, only 512 students (8.82%) passed the English subject (MoEYS, 2022). Even

Grade A students failed the English subject, as eight (11%) out of a total of 73 Grade A students in Kampong Cham province received an F (fail) score for the English subject (MoEYS, 2022).

Against this background, and within the context of limited research on what contributes to Cambodian students' failure in the English subject in the national Grade 12 examinations, a critical question has emerged as to why many Cambodian students fail the English subject when they take the national Grade 12 examinations? However, to the best of my knowledge, there is no empirical research explaining why many Cambodian students failed their English subject in the national Grade 12 examinations. Therefore, this review article aims to shed light on this issue by discussing key factors that may contribute to the failure of many students in the English subject in national examinations. This article intends to shed light on this issue to pave the way for further research into this intriguing topic. Drawing on secondary sources and the authors' extensive knowledge and experience as English teachers, the article also aims to offer suggestions for improving Cambodian students' performance in the English subject in the national Grade 12 examinations.

Two research questions are used to guide the review of various factors that may contribute to Cambodian students' failure in English in the national Grade 12 examinations.

1. What are the key factors contributing to students' failure in the English subject in the national Grade 12 examinations in Cambodia?
2. How can these key factors be addressed to improve students' performance in the English subject in the national Grade 12 examinations in Cambodia?

### **The Role of English in High-Stakes Examinations in Cambodia**

English is an international or foreign language widely used in high-stakes tests or examinations locally and globally. In the case of Cambodia, when Cambodian students want to win a scholarship to study in local universities or overseas, they must meet the required levels of English language proficiency, usually through the score of TOEFL, IELTS, or

other English tests (Hum & Heng, 2024). Moore et al. (2012) stated that IELTS is a gate-keeping mechanism to help students, especially postgraduate ones, access overseas scholarships. Thus, high-stakes tests like TOEFL and IELTS have been widely used in Cambodia for various educational and professional purposes (Hum & Heng, 2024). In Cambodia, English is also one of the core examination subjects for students who wish to study at prestigious public and private universities. For example, one of the departments of a leading teacher education institution, called the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL), Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), uses English for its entrance exam. Applicants must pass the entrance exam to enroll in degree programs there.

As for the national Grade 12 examinations, English is one of the subjects alongside other key subjects for both the science and social science tracks. Prior to 2014, the exam for the English subject covered five parts, including reading, language use, grammar, vocabulary, and writing. The score given for each part was 10 points for reading, 10 for language use, 10 for grammar, 8 for vocabulary, and 12 for writing (Em & Mao, 2024). There was no test for listening and speaking. The time allocated for the previous English exam was 60 minutes and the total score was 50 points. Since the 2014 reform, the exam format for the English subject has slightly changed. It now has only four parts: Part 1: Reading, Part 2: Grammar, Part 3: Vocabulary, and Part 4: Writing. The score given to each part is 10 for reading, 15 for grammar, 15 for vocabulary, and 10 for writing (Em & Mao, 2024). The time allocation and total score remain the same, while listening and speaking are still not assessed. Thus, the exam focuses on linguistic knowledge or competence rather than communication or performance.

## **Methodology**

This study relies on secondary data to answer the research questions. According to Wee and Banister (2016), a research article based on secondary data is called a literature review article. This type of review can have an empirical or methodological focus. It can contribute to theory

development, advance knowledge, and uncover areas for further research (Webster & Watson, 2002). It has been argued that an additional review may be needed “if a different literature is to be used, or if an existing review needs updating, or even if the same literature is used, but a new angle is being taken resulting in substantially different conclusions” (Wee & Banister, 2016, p. 280). In the present study, we focus on a specific angle concerning what contributes to Cambodian students’ failure in the English subject in the national Grade 12 examinations. To conduct our review, we searched Google Scholar and Science Direct to collect relevant research articles that could provide insights into our topic. We did not use any inclusion or exclusion criteria for article type, as we aimed to collect as many relevant documents as possible. As a result, various types of documents, including research articles, books, policy documents, and newspaper articles were included in the review. The results of the review are discussed in the following sections.

## **Key Factors Contributing to Students’ Failure in the English Subject in National Grade 12 Examinations in Cambodia**

### ***English as an Elective Subject***

The review showed that one key factor that may contribute to students’ failure is the fact that English is an elective subject. However, based on previous research, many Cambodian Grade 12 students think that English is not a core examination subject, thus they perhaps do not see the value of studying it (Meng & Arsyad, 2022; Soeung, 2020). However, this mindset suggests that they are less likely to actively engage in learning English, thus they are more likely to fail the subject in the national exams. Indeed, according to Yim (2012), 79.73% of the students with low achievements in English had negative attitudes toward learning English, meaning that they did not like studying this subject. Meng and Arsyad (2022) note that students who have a negative opinion about the English language struggle to learn it successfully. Therefore, English being an elective for the national Grade 12 examinations, coupled with students’ negative attitudes toward it,

seemingly makes it less attractive for students to learn, especially during the last year of their high school when they need to take the national examination.

### ***Limited Teacher Quality***

The review also showed that another contributing factor pertains to limited teacher quality, referring to the fact that teachers of English are unable to provide students with good learning outcomes. This issue occurs because teachers may be unsure of how to teach the English major due to their limited English competence, lack of teaching experience, or lack of professional development, which are among the most influential challenges in the process of teaching and learning English in Cambodia (Em, 2022; Neau, 2002; Sun, 2019).

Sun (2019) pointed out that problems with the quality of teachers in Cambodia are caused by teachers' lack of effective performance of their duties and responsibilities in teaching English. One of the problems with these teachers is that they teach a subject that is not their major (Ingersoll, 2020). For example, Sun (2019) found that due to a lack of teachers, school principals sometimes asked geography or biology teachers to teach the English subjects to the students. Torff and Sessions (2005) noted that sometimes a teacher's classroom work was ineffective because he or she failed to demonstrate required content knowledge, write effective lesson plans, implement lesson plans skillfully, establish sufficient rapport with students, and maintain satisfactory classroom discipline. Neau (2003) also noted that Cambodian teachers tended to have difficulties in their English language teaching because of "their limited English proficiency, improper training to be teachers of English, and inadequate teaching resources" (p. 264). Additionally, Em and Nun (2022) argued that many Cambodian teachers in public schools still used the Grammar Translation Method and relied heavily on textbooks, making their teaching less effective. Thus, limited teacher quality and outdated techniques can certainly affect student learning outcomes.

### ***Students' Poor English Background***

Many Cambodian students in public schools have low English language proficiency at the primary level, so when they reach Grade 12, they face problems in the English subject. Their poor English background stems from multiple factors. First, many students, especially primary school ones, rarely self-study the English subject at home. Song (2014), for instance, reported that many rural children never had time to do homework or engage in self-study because most of their time was spent on helping their family. Moreover, they were not really encouraged to study English at home because their parents may not be able to help them with the language. In addition, due to financial constraints, children from poor families could not attend private language classes to improve their English; as a result, they had limited exposure to English and tended to not do well in English exams.

Second, many students lack reading skills (Chan, 2018; Doung, 2019; Mao, 2015), and they tend to be less interested in reading whether in Khmer or English, making it less likely for them to develop good reading habits. For example, Chan (2018) found that 46% of the Cambodian students surveyed ( $n = 80$ ) never read professional or academic literature, 45% sometimes read it, and only 9% always read it, indicating a lack of reading habits among many students. This is coupled with other issues. As Doung (2019) found, 65% of Grade 12 students ( $n = 223$ ) did not understand English reading texts due to various problems, such as complex grammar, vocabulary, technical words, and sentence structures. It was also found that many teachers did not provide their students with specific reading techniques and sufficient explanations for reading.

Third, many Cambodian students tend to have problems with English grammar. They usually find it difficult to use grammar well, making it difficult for them to understand English reading texts (Doung, 2019). For example, research has shown that Cambodian students encountered English grammar problems in their writing (Sor et al., 2017; Sou, 2010). It was found that Cambodian students could not write an English composition well due to three reasons,



including a lack of grammar knowledge, a lack of vocabulary knowledge, and a lack of constant writing practice (Sor et al., 2017). Moreover, Sou (2010) noted that some students could not write a good essay due to problems related to the use of vocabulary, sentence structure (grammatical issues), and essay structure.

Fourth, many Cambodian students lack sufficient English vocabulary (a lack of extensive vocabulary knowledge). Previous research points out that Cambodian students usually have problems with English words (Bon et al., 2022; Doung, 2019; Hem, 2017; Heng, 2011). Many Grade 12 Cambodian students were, for example, found to lack English words in their English writing (Sor et al., 2017). It was also found that students could not write a good composition due to being unable to use more academic terms. Doung (2019) found that most Cambodian high school students failed to understand the English reading text because of the high number of difficult words in it, leading them to have a lack of comprehension of the whole reading passage. Heng (2011) also revealed that the most common problems for Cambodian students in learning English terms were their inability to remember the spellings and definitions of new words, difficulties in pronouncing the words, and a lack of chances and ability to practice new words.

Finally, another reason contributing to students' poor English background is a lack knowledge of organizational structure when it comes to writing a composition or essay (Hem, 2017; Sor et al., 2017). In the Cambodian context, many students tend to write English paragraphs or essays using the Khmer writing style, which is contrary to an English paragraph format consisting of three main components, such as a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2008; Oshima & Hogue, 2006). According to Hem (2017), many Cambodian students write long paragraphs with many main ideas because of their misunderstanding of English essay organization and the fact that they follow the Khmer writing style. For example, they may write their English essays with an introduction without the thesis statement, a body with only one

paragraph, and a long conclusion. This is not to mention the fact that the body section has many main ideas (Hem, 2017).

### ***Lack of Motivation***

Another factor contributing to students' failure in the English subject is a lack of motivation, which refers to a situation where a student does not feel inspired or enthusiastic to study English for an examination. In other words, it is a lack of passion – no goals, no desire, or no willingness to work on the English subject. Ranjha et al. (2021) stated that there were many main demotivating factors in learning the English language, such as teachers' teaching methodologies, attitudes, behavior, competency, choice of class activities/tasks, and teaching materials. This is in addition to students' negative attitudes toward the language, lack of self-confidence, their classroom environment, peer pressure, and the school facilities, nature of the subject, evaluation criteria, limited exposure to the language, difficulties in learning vocabulary and grammar, poor student-teacher relationships, and a lack of self-study. Doun (2019) also showed that a lack of motivation was a big problem for Grade 12 students in Cambodia to comprehend reading tasks. In learning English, the outcome of class activities is related to student motivation, which can encourage them to obtain better learning outcomes (Bon et al., 2022).

There are many reasons leading to students' low motivation, such as low self-esteem, a lack of support at home, low expectations in the classroom, and high pressure, which results in poor academic performance (GreatSchools, 2022). Bon et al. (2022) noted that Cambodian high school students should be motivated to study English to achieve success in their English language learning. Em et al. (2022) also noted that students with a positive attitude – intrinsically motivated to learn English – can learn English as a foreign language successfully, but those with a negative attitude – a lack of intrinsic motivation – might find it hard or less tempting to improve their English. Similarly, Doun (2019) noted that high school students had English reading problems due to many factors, one of which was a lack of motivation.

### ***Other Factors Related to the Education System***

Student's failure in the English subject in the national Grade 12 examinations in Cambodia can also be linked with factors related to the Cambodian education system. Based on the current review, there are at least five contributing factors. First, the curriculum in Cambodian high schools is, to some extent, contributing to students' failure in the English subject in national examinations. As Tweed and Som (2015) noted, the curriculum in secondary schools needs to be revised to reach the goals of English language education in Cambodia. When the curriculum is designed in response to the learners' needs with the focus on reading, vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills that are required for the national examinations, students would have a higher chance to pass the exams (Nhem, 2020). However, if the curriculum is not effectively designed for the students, it will be difficult to reach the goals of language education (Sun, 2019).

Second, English textbooks are important materials for the success of teaching and learning English, but if they are old-fashioned, they will affect students' performance and achievements (Em, 2022; Em & Nun, 2022; Sok, 2019). Em (2022) found that textbooks used in Grade 12 in Cambodian high schools, called *English for Cambodia*, contained some out-of-date information, affecting the quality of the English teaching and learning process because students could not apply what they learned from the books to their real lives (see also Sok, 2019).

Third, there is insufficient instruction time or study hours allocated to the English subject in the general education curriculum in Cambodia (Bray et al., 2016; Em, 2022). Currently, primary school students start studying English from Grade 4, and there are two hours per week for the English subject (Chilmonik, 2018). Keo et al. (2022) noted that, for the English subject in Cambodian general education, there were two study hours per week for Grades 4 to 6, four hours for Grades 7 to 10, and two hours for Grades 11 and 12. Since teaching time for the English subject is only two hours per week for Grade 12 students (Em, 2022; Sun, 2019), the process of teaching and learning English does not respond to the students' needs for the language,

particularly in preparing them for the national exams. As Sun (2019) stated, many Cambodian teachers in secondary schools were not pleased with the teaching hours (two hours per week) for the English subject because they could not complete the lessons as outlined in the syllabus.

Fourth, the content of the exam papers is another contributing factor for students' failure in the English subject in the national examinations. Research has shown that the exam papers had many items not found in the English textbook for Grade 12, which had limited reading texts, out-of-date grammar and vocabulary lessons, and few essay writing exercises (Em, 2022; Sok, 2019). Therefore, when students take the national examinations, they must complete exam questions that test their knowledge of reading, grammar, vocabulary, and writing, many of them are new to them; consequently, they may not be able to complete them correctly since the content of the exam goes beyond what they have learned from the textbook. As Em and Nun (2022) showed, many secondary school students found the exams difficult to complete. The reading section in the exams included texts not relevant to what was covered in the core textbook. The grammar section included multiple-choice questions that were difficult for the students, as they were not introduced in the textbook. The vocabulary was not related to what the students learned in the class, and the writing section asked students to write an essay – a task that they are not often asked to do during class time (Em & Nun, 2022). This situation is aligned with what Yibrah et al. (2017) have noted; that is, when the degree of relationship between the content of the test and textbook is divergent, the exam papers may not have a valid and reliable design, which may lead to unsatisfactory learning outcomes.

Lastly, large class sizes are another potential issue that may contribute to students' failure in the English part of the national exam. This issue is more prevalent in Cambodian schools in rural areas (Em, 2022; Nith et al., 2010; Sun, 2019). For example, a class in public schools in rural Cambodia can contain 40–70 students (Nith et al., 2010), making it difficult to have effective teaching and learning. Em (2022)

noted that teachers might not teach students effectively and efficiently because of the large number of students per class. This is worsened by a lack of teaching and learning resources, such as poorly equipped facilities and insufficient teaching materials (Neau, 2002). Doung (2019) found that Cambodian teachers of English complained about having a lot of students (40 to 48 students) in one class, making it extremely hard to teach English effectively. Likewise, as Sun (2019) stated, in many classes in rural areas in Cambodia, there are a lot of students (over 50), making it hard for teachers to implement effective teaching. Therefore, large class sizes are indeed one key factor we should consider when examining students' failure on the English subject in the national exams, as it impedes effective English language teaching and learning (Hasanah & Utami, 2019).

### **Suggestions for Improving Students' Performance in the English Subject in National Grade 12 Examinations in Cambodia**

This section discusses strategies or suggestions to improve Cambodian students' performance in the English subject in the national Grade 12 examinations. Drawing on secondary sources, the suggestions focus on enhancing the role of various stakeholders in Cambodian general education, such as the Education Ministry, school principals, teachers, students, parents, the community, and other stakeholders, to help Cambodian students achieve success in their English subject examinations.

#### ***Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS)***

It appears that the MoEYS is the most influential actor when it comes to addressing poor exam performance in English. First, MoEYS should introduce the English language into the curriculum as a core examination subject whose score affects the overall exam score. This means that the MoEYS need to design a new English curriculum and examination papers that are aligned with the content of the core English textbooks (Sok, 2019). It also needs to provide adequate resources, including teacher professional development activities (seminars, workshops, or conferences), teacher training, and updated textbooks (Em, 2022; Em & Nun, 2022). The MoEYS should also provide technological

support to encourage the use of innovative teaching methods from primary to secondary levels of education. Such an approach can help teachers apply new teaching techniques in their classrooms and improve their teaching effectiveness (Bonney et al., 2015; Em, 2022; Nhem, 2020).

Second, the MoEYS should update the examination format to make it consistent with the textbooks every two–three years to ensure that this examination is valid and reliable. When exam papers are updated regularly, students will develop confidence in their English competence because the content of the exams is consistent with that of the textbooks they study in school. This will possibly result in a higher percentage of English passing rates due to the content validity of the exams (see Brown, 2004). Em and Nun (2022) have suggested that the national Grade 12 examinations should embrace the content of the textbooks that the students have studied. If the exam content does not align with that of the textbooks, it may produce potential biases for exam takers (Yibrah, 2017).

Third, the MoEYS should address the issues concerning insufficient instruction time or low number of teaching hours allocated for the English subject for Grade 12 students, which might hinder students' learning outcomes. Teaching hours for English in Grade 12 should be at between three and six hours per week, like other core examination subjects (Em, 2022). As Sun (2019) has noted, two hours for the English subject per week are too short for the teaching and learning process, implying that the more teaching hours for the English subject, the better the students' learning outcomes will be.

Fourth, as the large class size is an issue of concern when it comes to the quality of teaching (Akoto-Baako & Kissi-Abrokwah, 2021), it is essential to find ways to reduce the number of students per class. Em (2022) suggested that a maximum of 25–30 students per class is a good choice. Akoto-Baako and Kissi-Abrokwah (2021) also showed that smaller class sizes and a good psychological classroom environment are essential to help students study effectively because teachers could have more time to give students class exercises,

assignments, feedback, and teacher-student interactions. In addition, students can also find it easier to learn through small group work and other collaborative class activities (Hwang, 2018; Laal & Ghodsi, 2012).

Fifth and finally, the MoEYS should increase collaboration between teachers, students, schools, and other stakeholders to share best practices and develop comprehensive strategies for English language improvement. Laal and Ghodsi (2012) found that collaborative learning offered students numerous benefits, such as higher achievements and greater productivity, more care, and more supportive and committed relationships, as well as better psychological health, social competence, and self-esteem. Hwang (2018) also argued that teamwork was a skill highly valued in the workplace that usually had a positive relationship with team performance, indicating that when teachers, schools, students, and other stakeholders work together, they will be able to help students achieve better learning outcomes. Thus, it is important to encourage and promote stakeholder collaboration in general education in Cambodia.

### ***School Principals***

School principals are also key agents of change who have a significant role in setting the direction for successful schools and creating an environment in which students can learn English successfully (Davis et al., 2005; Elfers & Stritikus, 2014; Munguia, 2017). As Munguia (2017) has noted, there are four major types of support for school principals wishing to help teachers teach the English language effectively and efficiently. They include (a) implementing a culture of high expectations and trust; (b) supporting teachers with lesson development and monitoring daily English instruction; (c) providing various collaboration structures; and (d) supporting teachers with practicing the strategies learned in professional development sessions. These aspects can accelerate the effectiveness of students' English language learning (Munguia, 2017).

Likewise, Elfers and Stritikus (2014) have argued that there are four support systems that school leaders can create and manage. These include (a) helping teachers make connections between their students

and instructional practice, (b) offering staff support, (c) providing greater access to appropriate curriculums and materials, and (d) offering opportunities for collaboration. Davis et al. (2005) also noted that successful school principals can influence student achievement via two crucial pathways: the support and development of effective teachers and the implementation of effective organizational processes. This means that school principals can provide teachers with various resources and professional development training opportunities for improving teaching quality, and then teachers can impart knowledge, especially the English language, to their students effectively.

### ***Teachers***

Teachers also play a crucial role in ensuring effective teaching, which in turn helps students achieve good learning outcomes. Many studies (e.g., Dugošija, 2024; Hartina et al., 2018; Khalil & Semono-Eke, 2020; Mollaei & Riasati, 2013; Nedeva & Dimova, 2010) have provided various suggestions for teachers to support their students. First, teachers should implement more effective teaching methods or techniques by moving beyond traditional lectures or the Grammar Translation Method (Em & Nun, 2022). Khalil and Semono-Eke (2020) showed that, to teach students effectively, English teachers should use more than one teaching method, update and train themselves to be more competent, and be particularly flexible to adopt suitable teaching pedagogies to meet students' needs. There are many teaching methods that teachers can utilize to teach students, including lectures, discussion and dialogue, practical demonstration, group learning, investigation, problem solving, and online teaching methods (Al-Rawi, 2013). Other popular teaching methods such as Communication Language Teaching (Littlewood, 2007) and Task-Based Language Teaching (Nunan, 2004) should be increasingly used to enhance students' English language proficiency. Additionally, instructed second language acquisition or instructed learning should be embraced to facilitate effective learning in the classroom. Specifically, the 10 principles for successful instructed learning, suggested by Ellis (2005), should be integrated into the classroom.



Second, teachers should incorporate interactive activities and modern technology in the classroom to teach English to their students (Keo et al., 2022). Mollaei and Riasati (2013) showed that computer-assisted classrooms used as student-centered learning environments can help students learn English better because those students become self-directed and independent. Moreover, Dugošija (2024) argued that AI-powered tools, in this modern technology era, can help teachers a lot, particularly in terms of preparation of learning resources, improvement of language practice, comprehension, fluency, and overall language proficiency with interactive AI applications. Hence, using information technologies – either computer-assisted classrooms or AI-tools in teaching English – is vital and can provide students with high education quality leading to better English learning outcomes (Nedeva & Dimova, 2010).

Furthermore, teachers ought to employ differentiated instruction in their teaching process (Langley, 2015; Talain & Mercado, 2023; Touch, 2023). Since students have various learning styles and abilities, teachers can provide personalized support and differentiated materials to cater to individual needs (Chilmonik, 2018; Langley, 2015; Talain & Mercado, 2023). More importantly, in the Cambodian context, teachers should teach students to practice the exam papers of every national Grade 12 examination from the academic year 2014, when the examination reform was introduced to the current academic year. This approach can be used to teach students some good techniques or strategies to complete those exam papers correctly before the actual exam takes place. There are many techniques or strategies that teachers could utilize to teach Grade 12 students to succeed in their exams, two of which are among the most effective ones. They include (a) the format and test-taking strategies as well as paragraph and essay writing format (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2008; Defitri & Bukhori, 2023) and (b) vocabulary learning strategies (Heng, 2011). In this sense, teachers can serve as great resources for their students (Ingersoll, 2020) and can potentially help them achieve their goals of passing the English subject in the national examinations.

### ***Students***

Students themselves are no doubt one of the most important actors in ensuring success in the English subject in the national exams. They should be both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to study English. Chandrella (2023) noted that students should be encouraged to study English at an early age because they could gain more exposure to English at the primary level. They should also engage in self-study to improve their English, especially by watching videos on YouTube and other platforms. Likewise, Heng (2017) revealed that there were many strategies that Cambodian students of English could utilize to enhance their speaking skills. They included (a) speaking with friends, classmates, relatives, teachers, and native speakers; (b) speaking alone in front of the mirror; (c) listening to radios/ music in English; (d) watching either TV, movies, or YouTube videos in English; (e) taking risks by speaking to different people; (f) reading and imitation; and (g) chatting to friends or relatives on the internet, in particular via various social media, such as Facebook Messenger. Hartina et al. (2018) also noted that there were many techniques that teachers could utilize to teach young learners effectively, such as using songs, games, presentation, practice and production (the PPP model), drilling, demonstration, storytelling, reading aloud activities, and dictation. Moreover, students should read English materials outside of the core textbooks (Kruy, 2023). By doing so, they are immersed in the language, which can enhance their vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (Kruy, 2023).

Moreover, students should develop test-taking strategies by familiarizing themselves with the examination format and time management techniques, especially by practicing past exam papers and analyzing mistakes for improvement. Boardman and Frydenberg (2008) and Oshima and Hogue (2006) have pointed out in their books on paragraph writing that there are three main points to succeed on the TOEFL test, one of which is that test-takers ought to learn the format and test-taking strategies used in the TOEFL test.

In addition, students should seek additional support by using available resources such as private tutoring, online learning platforms,

and group studies to strengthen their English language proficiency. Soeung (2020) and Soeung et al. (2019) have found that students who attended private English classes, commonly known as private tutoring or shadow education, attained better learning outcomes in terms of English learning. Moreover, despite issues concerning private tutoring, Edwards et al. (2020) noted that students could find it more convenient during private tutoring because when they have questions, they can ask their teachers privately and, in turn, the teachers tended to explain the lessons to them in detail, which is often contrary to what they do in public school sessions. Furthermore, students should also engage in more activities requiring English use in real-life situations, such as role-playing, debates, or presentations, which can result in better English competence and performance. Hence, students are the best actors to enhance English language proficiency on their own (Rohila & Malika, 2024). They should study English not only for the examinations but also for their real lives or situations in the future.

### ***Parents***

Parents are also important actors in influencing the success of their children's English language learning. Some parents want their children to be fluent in English, so they motivate or encourage them to study English at an early age (Chandrella, 2023). Sometimes, even though parents are not good at English, they can provide their children with a supportive and encouraging environment (GreatSchools, 2022). Research has shown that parents' involvement in children's education is positive for their learning endeavors (Hosseinpour et al., 2015; Indriati, 2016; Kalaycı & Öz, 2018) as well as learning motivation and achievement (Bond, 2019). Thus, parents can encourage their children to learn English at school or in private courses to build the necessary English skills for exam success (Indriati, 2016).

Hosseinpour et al. (2015) noted that parents' involvement, attitudes, and motivation play a vital role in children's achievement in learning English. In this sense, it is crucial that parents explain to their children about motivation factors, such as job opportunities, family

reputation, and scholarships, so they can be more motivated to learn English, especially by trying to improve their English vocabulary (Heng, 2011) and English-speaking skills (Heng, 2017). Similarly, based on what Kalaycı and Öz (2018) have found, when parents want their children to gain a good education, they should have a positive attitude and curiosity about their children's learning outcomes. Hence, parents should try to build a good relationship with the teachers so that they can follow up on their children's study progress and other issues concerning their children's education.

### ***The Community***

The community can be a good actor and resource for assisting students to learn English more effectively. For example, if students have good opportunities to use English outside of the classroom or in real-world contexts, they will understand how English is applied naturally. Chandrella (2023) found that exposure to the English language could help improve students' pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and listening skills, which in turn helps them enhance their English mastery. Thus, when the community creates opportunities for exposing students to such learning activities, students will be provided with appropriate scaffolding that can help them improve English communication and other important language skills (Nget et al., 2020; Sriwigati & Musharyanti, 2022).

In addition, the community should create ample opportunities to allow students to learn from each other via peer learning. Sriwigati and Musharyanti (2022) noted that peer learning or peer-assisted learning is pivotal and can provide learners with a lot of benefits, such as increasing knowledge and self-confidence, enhancing skills, and being able to improve communication skills. For example, students in English classes can help each other improve their target language (i.e., English) by engaging in various activities, such as writing skills (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2008), grammar, vocabulary, and English speaking skills (Nget et al., 2020). Thus, the community should take these learning activities into account and find mechanisms to provide

opportunities to students in the community to interact with one another, share tips, and offer encouragement and peer support in an effective and collaborative learning environment (Hwang, 2018; Laal & Ghodsi, 2012; Munguia, 2017).

Moreover, the community can offer learners other additional resources such as conversation clubs, English language tutoring, or some language-focused events for them to practice English in a fun and friendly way. When learners practice English often, their English language proficiency will get better. The community should also find ways to instill in students the benefits of having a good level of English proficiency to encourage them to have a positive attitude toward the language, which would in turn improve their learning motivation. As Rohila and Malika (2024) have noted, having increased English language proficiency provides a lot of benefits, spanning career advancement, knowledge acquisition, effective communication, enriched travel experiences, and personal growth, substantiating the importance of English beyond classroom settings.

### ***Other Stakeholders***

Other stakeholders, such as local or international companies, telecommunication companies, and other institutions, also play a significant role in helping students learn English. First, local or international companies can help students with internships, exchange programs, or voluntary work in which English is the language of communication to allow students the opportunities to learn English in real life settings (Rao, 2019). Second, telecommunication companies that are internet providers can provide schools with Wi-Fi access, which enables students to take advantage of the internet for self-study and other learning purposes. As Heng (2021) has found, the greater utilization of information and communication technology in education can promote independent learning. Students could learn their lessons via videos available online or on television, which provides them with the opportunity to engage in self-study and self-directed learning. Third, other institutions such as universities or colleges should also

support high school students. Those universities can promote university-school collaborative work, offering students English language courses or programs, such as field visit or short training courses, which can help them improve their English language proficiency, especially for their future tertiary education in which English is the medium of instruction (Heng, 2017; Lin et al., 2023).

## **Conclusion**

This review article has shown that English is one of the most important languages for everyone in this global village, including those in Cambodia, where English is used as a foreign language and is introduced in the school curriculum from Grade 4. English is also one of the seven subjects appearing in the national Grade 12 examinations in Cambodia. However, as discussed above, many Cambodian students were found to not do well in the English subject in the national Grade 12 exams. Various factors have contributed to their failure in the English subject. They included (a) English as an elective subject, (b) limited teacher quality, (c) students' poor English background, (d) lack of motivation, and (e) other factors related to the education system.

This article has provided some broad suggestions for improving Cambodian students' performance in the English subject in the national Grade 12 examinations. The suggestions focus on the role of seven key actors, such as MoEYS, school principals, teachers, students, parents, the community, and other stakeholders. It is also suggested that these stakeholders need to work together to create an environment that fosters students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for and positive attitudes toward English.

This article is not without limitations. First, it is limited to secondary data and the documents available to the researchers during the review. Future research should address these shortcomings. Thus, as the way forward, this review article calls for future research to investigate the effects of these five major factors or variables, including (a) English as an elective subject, (b) limited teacher quality, (c) students' poor English background, (d) lack of motivation, and (e) other factors

related to the education system, on students' performance in the English subject in the national Grade 12 examinations in Cambodia. Future research should also focus on offering suggestions to deal with the issues concerning the national Grade 12 examinations to ensure that the process of teaching and learning English as well as the examination process in Cambodia, from primary to secondary schools, can contribute to improving Cambodian students' English competence and performance. It is essential that we help these students become human resources with the necessary knowledge and skills that allow them to meaningfully contribute to improving Cambodia's competitiveness and relevance in the regional and international stages.

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