English Teachers’ Perceptions towards Upper Secondary Level English Textbook: A Case Study of Cambodia

Sovanchandara Sok¹

ABSTRACT

This is a small qualitative study of some Cambodian public school English teachers' perceptions on English for the Cambodia Textbook (EFC) used in upper secondary school. The purpose of this study (1) sought eight Cambodian public school English teachers' perceptions of English for Cambodia Textbook (EFC) used in upper secondary school, (2) asked for their suggestions regarding the future improvement of English for Cambodia Textbook (EFC). This study was conducted at four different high schools, one of which was from Kandal province and three of which were Phnom Penh City. The results of the study indicated that there was a mismatch or difference with the English for Cambodian Textbook (EFC) and the teaching and learning context in upper secondary schools in Cambodia. Moreover, there were major challenges in implementing the English for Cambodia Textbook (EFC) in upper secondary schools such as insufficient teaching and learning aids, students with an extreme mixture of learning ability, and outdated version of English for Cambodia Textbook (EFC). The study also revealed
the teacher's beliefs about the inability of many students to practice authentic communicative activities.

**Keywords**: English for Cambodia Textbook (EFC), perceptions, language, school, education
1. Introduction

Adding to the literature pool in the subject, this study seeks to understand the perceptions of eight Cambodian public school teachers on English for Cambodia Textbook (EFC) used in an upper secondary school in Cambodia and also studies their suggestions for the betterment of the English for Cambodia Textbook (EFC).

The Cambodian education system has undergone many twists and turns in its history; the education of the nation collapsed during the genocidal regime (1975-79). After the fall of the Pol Pot regime, however, the education system was reborn and has been continuously reformed to respond to economic and social development (Dom, 2019; Mak, 2006). Foreign languages were subsequently introduced to Cambodia education such as Russian, Vietnamese. As the cold war ended, French and English, after a long period of prohibition, were taught once again at Cambodia secondary schools (Igawa, 2008).

However, English became one of the most popular majors at the university level (Dom & Yi, 2018) popularity due to the presence of the UN peacekeeping force in Cambodia. In other words, the government and people of Cambodia understand that English is an international language for communication and business. In this respect, Cambodia
shows a clear example of language policy and its impact on the people’s life, education and future of a country in transition (Clayton, 2006).

To boost the language learning outcome, So far, MoEYS (1999) developed a series of books titled “English for Cambodia” which was first piloted in 1996-1997 in Lower and Upper Secondary school level. A series of textbooks such as Headway, English for Today and Streamline was introduced in secondary school before the publication of English for Cambodia (EFC) series was applied. The MoEYS English Language Textbook Writing Team supported by the British government through CAM SET (Cambodian Secondary English Teaching Project) made it possible for the English for the Cambodia textbook to be fully developed with 6 different textbooks applied in both lower secondary and upper secondary school. The MoEYS introduced English for Cambodia EFC book 1 in 1996, EFC book 2 in 1997, EFC book 3 in 1998, EFC book 4 in 1999, EFC book 5 in 2000 and EFC book 6 in 2001 respectively. All English for Cambodia Textbooks has its own teacher’s guide supervised by a MoEYS/CAM SET textbook specialist (Neau, 2002). A textbook should serve as a link between student’s needs and language objectives (Byrd, 2000).

2. Understanding Textbooks
A study pointed out the perspective of both students and teachers on EFL concerning the teacher's and students' negative feelings towards many characteristics of the textbook. The reading passage needed to be simplified in terms of both vocabulary load and structures. In other words, the presentation of vocabulary and grammar were at the students' level. In addition to the reading passage, the level of the textbook itself is not appropriate for the particular age group and the materials used failed to consider different learning style preferences (Cakit, 2006).

2.1. The textbook as Learning Resource

The textbook is the "curriculum material" devised by teachers and adapted by schools. They were based on academic purpose, accuracy, comprehensiveness, and detailed coverage Morris (1996). The textbook was regarded as one type of instructional material, providing the input of the language function to the students (Richards, 2001).

Moreover, the textbook resource materials were developed after a curriculum was designed. The role of the textbook, therefore, must be consistent with curriculum design and serve as a tool to specify learning outcomes. This made the textbook important to be regulated and shaped concerning the common feature of the teaching and learning process.
The content of the textbook should further represent daily life reflecting the local context. Finally, the textbook should be evaluated to ensure its accuracy, appropriate topics, and balanced level of difficulty and students’ interest (UNICEF, 2000, pp. 19-23).

2.3. The Pros and cons of using a textbook

Although a textbook is developed for beneficial purposes, it is also a double-edge-sword. In other words, a textbook either could provide advantages or disadvantages. Textbook provided structure and a program syllabus, facilitated in standardizing instruction, maintained quality and offered various learning resources and effective language models. However, the textbook could contain inauthentic language, which does not reflect students' needs. It may also contain distort content and be expensive (Richards, 2001, pp. 254-256).

2.4 Variation in textbook evaluation schemes

William (1982) proposed an evaluative scheme based on four criteria namely linguistic, pedagogical, general, and technical principles. These introduced principles were to benefit teachers from state-of-the-art teaching methodology and the introduced guidelines in the textbook, especially for those whose native languages were not English. The provided guideline in the textbook was vitally important in
the context of second language learners since students studying together had various backgrounds of English ability. In addition to the evaluative scheme, the presentation of the vocabulary and grammar in the textbook should be in respect to students' socio-cultural norms to link their native language to the introduced target language.

2.5 Textbook Evaluation Criteria

2.5.1 External features

According to Littlejohn (1998), two main criteria were framed to evaluate ESL textbooks namely physical features and internal features. In physical features, he proposed two main target areas to be assessed: target audience and material in general. The physical features sought to assess textbooks based on the year of publication, format, text length, supplementary materials, and sequential and functional organizations. Similarly, the physical quality of the textbook played an essential part in textbook evaluation (Abdulrahman, 2008; Cakit, 2006; Fredriksson & Olsson, 2006; Sharma, 2005).

Sharma (2005) also mentioned that an effective EFL textbook should contain a sufficient number of illustrations linking to life-like situations. In other words, the textbook should contain color photographs and drawings that varied from lower to high grade. In lower grades, for example, the
presentation of pictures differed in quality and color, which provided more authenticity to the textbook compared to other higher grades (Sharma, 2005). Miekley (2005) pointed out that the physical features such as the attractive cover page with high visual and authentic quality in addition to simple illustration added meaning and interest to the reading text. Fredriksson and Olsson (2006) also stated the essence of layout because it contained color pictures contributing to stimulating new, fresh, impressive feeling of the learners.

2.5.2 Internal features

According to Littlejohn (1998), the second feature of a textbook evaluation was an internal feature. This aspect of the assessment referred to the in-depth analysis of a textbook contents areas, linguistic skills, and tasks or activities suggested by the textbook. In the content area, the researcher drew attention to the assessment on the target audience, socio-cultural awareness, conceptual context, and authentic texts.

Noboko (2006) observed that there were a greater number of people who use English in the outer and expanding circles. Therefore, it was good to include various cultural elements in teaching and learning English for students to have effective communication with other people from other
countries. To assess a textbook on the cultural aspects, two criteria were established: first, to identify nouns and adjectives for nations; second, to identify alternative words related to nations including expression regarding the products, cities, or geographical regions in particular countries.

3. Methodology

This study was qualitative research using a semi-structured in-depth interview with an attempt to seek answers to the research questions. Semi-structured interview questions have no predetermined and structured choice. Instead, the questions are open-ended, providing the opportunity for an individual to respond (McMillan, 2004).

The 30 minutes interview was recorded, with the consent of the participant for the purpose of transcription for coding. Data was transcribed, coded and translated for the purpose of analysis. The thematic analysis method was used in seeking to answer the research questions.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study sought eight Cambodian public high school teachers' perceptions of the EFC textbook. The questions were designed to seek the perceptions of the teachers based primarily on a checklist developed by Cunningsworth (1995). However, the researcher had adapted this checklist
to the Cambodian context. The analysis of the teacher responses to the questions was categorized into internal and external features, terms that were developed by Littlejohn (1998) as found in the study by Takeda, Choi, Mochizuki, and Watanabe (2006).

4. Findings
That the data analysis was done in line with the seven-question themes. The responses to each theme are discussed below from the perspectives of the eight participants (T1 as teacher 1, T2 as teacher 2, T3 as teacher 3, T4 as teacher 4, T5 as teacher 5, T6 as teacher 6, T7 as teacher 7, and T8 as teacher 8). Emerging patterns in responses are described and discussed.
4.1 Design and Organization

The external book cover of the EFC textbook has two different versions. One was the original and another is the copied and all participating teachers used. With regard to the original cover, T5 said that it is hard and not easy to bend. However, it is attractive, and according to the views of T1, T2, T6, and T4. From T1, T7, T3 and T8's view, the cover page of the EFC textbook was not attractive because it was out of date. "The cover is old and out-dated. It has not been changed since I was a student." (T8, T7, T1, T3)

There were different views concerning the pictures in the EFC textbook. The majority of the respondents expressed a strongly negative view that the pictures were inauthentic and several participants mentioned the authenticity of the pictures. There was also an emerging response in terms of the smallness in size and the presence of only a few pictures in the EFC textbook.

For me, from my experience. There are both real pictures and drawn pictures....for me picture should be changed. We can get the samples from the other international books like Headway. (T1)

There were strongly positive responses about the font size of the textbook. All participants mentioned the suitability of
the font size of the EFC text although there was a hesitation response mentioned by T5 as “I think it was a bit small”.

There were strongly negative responses to the availability of materials for learning. All participants mentioned the lack of learning materials in addition to the teacher-read-to-the-students. Several respondents also mentioned the extra commercially produced materials which were available in the market and the teachers' passiveness in using extra materials.

4.2 Language Content

Views on the appropriateness of the vocabulary were mainly positive. The majority of the respondents mentioned the appropriateness of vocabulary presented in the EFC textbook. Several respondents also mentioned the lack of idiom, phrasal verbs, keywords, society-based words and authors' awareness of the words in the textbook. In some lessons, there are fewer and more. If there are more words, students find it hard to remember. The authors know how to balance that. (T7).

The vocabulary is organized based on the level. Low level with low words. (T8)

4.3 Skills

All responses were positive about the four macro skills other than the teacher-read-to-student activity. All
respondents expressed concern about the listening skill. T5 was concerned about whether teachers were able to follow or not since it was difficult when they used their voice instead of a cassette player. T5 said that "For me, a bit difficult for my voice. If there is a tape player, students feel better". T1 also expressed concern about the lack of details in the listening skills, saying "one listening text is used for the whole lesson."

Responses concerning the design of speaking activities and dialogues were strongly negative. Each respondent mentioned different issues such as repetition of the activity, they were not well-designed in addition to student ability and carelessness.

Not well designed. The class contains lots of students. They are careless and only a few students do. The class is noisy. (T3)

When I asked students to have dialogue they just follow the book. (T2)

For the speaking part, it is like only one. There is repetition in the same activity. (T6)

4.4 Topics

There were both positive and negative responses to the topics in the textbook. Several respondents expressed positive views about the usefulness of the topics and other
mentioned teachers' role in making the topics interesting and students' prior knowledge about the topic. Some students, moreover, were not interested since they have already understood the topics.
The topics are good because they are related to our country. (T5)
When I get into the lesson, I make the students interested. (T7)
Some students are interested and some not. (T6)
Yes, when I see reality, students are not interested. This is because they understand all the topics. (T2)

4.5 Student Strategy for Self-study

There were very few positive responses to the learning methodology in the textbook. Although several respondents mentioned appropriateness, several others expressed negative views of learning methodology in the textbook. According to T2 and T3, the teaching and learning methodology was somewhat acceptable for teachers except for students. As T3 mentioned, "It doesn't have enough methodology to encourage students to study by themselves. They need me to help them. If I assign them to do at home, I need to make the exercises easier." T2 and T3 mentioned that only some students who could learn from the methodology provided by the book. The point was the students' current level was lower than that of the textbook.
4.6 Suggestions for Improvement

There were many suggestions to better improve the EFC textbook. Several respondents mentioned the textbook revision, several others mentioned about the change of the textbook. The majority of respondents also mentioned about the lack of detail in the content, and several others mentioned the addition of extra materials, time, exercises, grammar explanation, authentic pictures, useful phrases, and phonetic symbols.

Sometimes revising is difficult than getting a new one. Sometimes editing is difficult then get a new one...the revision is expensive and complicated than a new one...and the content is not trusted and it doesn't support many years in the future. The textbook should tell students the vision. What is in ten years from now when the society changes so students can prepare themselves. Because soon we will get into ASEAN. (T1)

I think the writer should include the topics students like to study. (T2)
5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 The External Features of the EFC textbook

A textbook overall is acceptable in terms of font, print quality, size, cover page, and durability. The textbook also contained authentic pictures like Angkor Wat. The textbook cover page was not attractive (Sem, 2012). It was thin and easily torn apart. It is not clear that his finding referred to the original or copied version since the cover page of EFC, as mentioned earlier, maybe one of two versions. Also, durability is dependent on the user.

The majority of the participants expressed their negative perceptions towards the pictures, number of pages, lack of extra materials and list of difficult words. Most pictures were drawings rather than a photograph. The number of pages were reported to be more than enough for learning for the whole academic year in public schools The book had too many pages that students could not learn for the whole school year, thus the length and the reading of a textbook should be appropriate with the pre-determined time (Fredriksson & Olsso; 2006; Littlejohn, 1998; Sem, 2012).

5.2 The Internal Features of the EFC textbook

The evaluation of the internal features of the EFC textbook was based on six categories: language objective, design and organization, language contents, skills, topics and student
strategy for self-study. Concerning the learning goal of the textbook, the majority of teachers indicated that the goals were useful. One teacher valued the textbook because of its "individualization", meaning the textbook allowed leaners to be more knowledgeable about themselves and the country. Thus, comparison cannot be made among internationally published textbooks. A good ESL textbook should meet the needs of learners and suit the aims and objectives of the program, whether the stated objective and learning objective is matched is an important part of language objective (Cunningsworth, 1993; Dedley-Even & John, 1998).

5.3 Negative Views

Despite the positive views mentioned above, the lesson objectives and instructional directions of the book were felt to be unclear. The textbook did not explicitly state the aim and the lesson objective in the student book, which may contribute to more dependent learning. In other words, students found it difficult to perceive the lesson objective and teachers make no difference from the students sometimes. In terms of instruction, it appeared that it required students to do many things at the same time. Therefore, students found it hard to self-study. For this reason, the textbook lacks methodology that might encourage students to conduct self-learning at home. Many
participants suggested the usefulness of a grammar summary in the textbook especially for use with the student in self-study. Ur (1991) viewed that a good textbook shall contain clear instructions. Miekley (2005) also claimed that students should have a chance to conduct self-learning with practice exercises or activities after they finished their instructed activities.

5.4 Teachers’ Suggestions for Improvement

The participating teachers made many suggestions concerning the improvement of the EFC textbook. The first mention was the need for supplementary materials such as CD, cassettes, tape, workbook, grammar summary, and word explanation. Sem (2012) found out that the EFC textbook did not contain enough materials for listening practice; therefore, listening activities had been switched to reading ones.

For speaking, the EFC textbook also fails to include the pronunciation section, in which students lack the opportunity to be trained with the right accent or intonation (Sem, 2012).

This study is not an attempt to generalize teachers' perceptions but a mirror to reflect some of the teachers' opinions as they directly engage in teaching the textbooks. There is a mismatch between textbook input and the actual
practice in the classroom setting. In other words, despite the rather well-developed textbook for the Cambodian context, it is impractical and inapplicable in the public school teaching and learning context because of its insufficient teaching and learning materials, the extreme mixture of student capacity and old version of a textbook. This would be up to future researchers to further explore the issue to a larger extent with a larger sample.

Bibliography note

1 Sovannchandara Sok is a Ph.D. student in Public Policy at TechoSen School of Government and International Relations, The University of Cambodia. He can be reached at chandaraifl@gmail.com

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