

# A Qualitative Study of Challenges Faced by Cambodian Teachers in Implementing Student-Centered Approaches

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the challenges faced by teachers of English in implementing student-centered approaches at the National University of Cheasim Kamchaymear (NUCK), Kampong Cham branch, the University of Heng Samrin Thbong Khmum (UHST), and Svay Rieng University (SRU). The research focused on the benefits, challenges, and potential solutions related to learner-centered instruction. A qualitative case study design was employed, and thematic analysis was used to interpret data collected from nine key participants through semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that student-centered approaches enhance students' critical thinking skills, improve engagement and collaboration, build confidence and motivation, and foster learner autonomy. However, several significant challenges were identified, including mixed-ability students, time constraints, language barriers, entrenched learning habits, and cultural factors. Despite these obstacles, teachers proposed solutions such as professional development, flexible teaching methods, thoughtful student grouping, small and structured activities, and enhanced motivation and support. These findings offer practical guidance for teacher training programs and inform education policymakers seeking to promote more effective student-centered practices in Cambodian higher education.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Quality teaching in language education involves using instructional methods that foster active engagement, meaningful communication, and the development of essential language skills [1]. In recent years, educational practices have increasingly shifted toward approaches that promote learner engagement, independent thinking, and autonomy. One such method, the student-centered approach (SCA), has attracted international attention, particularly in the field of English language teaching (ELT) [2]. Unlike traditional models

that prioritize the teacher as the central source of knowledge, SCA emphasizes student involvement in learning, encouraging deeper comprehension and the development of critical skills [3].

However, in Cambodia, the adoption of SCA remains limited and under-researched. The education system has long been dominated by teacher-centered instruction, and many English teachers face specific barriers such as limited training, rigid institutional frameworks, and cultural preferences for passive learning. Despite increasing global support for SCA, there is a notable lack of empirical research examining how Cambodian university teachers experience and implement this approach. This study aims to address that gap by providing context-specific insights into the realities of SCA implementation in Cambodia's public universities.

SCA is grounded in constructivist learning theories, which assert that learners construct knowledge actively. Piaget emphasized experiential learning and self-reflection [4], while Vygotsky introduced social constructivism, highlighting the importance of interaction and teacher support [5]. Wood, Bruner, and Ross developed the concept of scaffolding to describe how learners build knowledge through guided assistance [6]. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory identified autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key motivational elements in the learning process [7]. Additionally, Bloom's Taxonomy and its revision by Anderson and Krathwohl promote higher-order thinking skills, which are central to SCA [8], [9].

Empirical studies consistently show the advantages of student-centered learning, including improved motivation, collaboration, critical thinking, learner responsibility, and language development [10], [11], [12]. Nevertheless, many developing countries face barriers to implementation, such as insufficient resources, time limitations, overcrowded classrooms, lack of professional development, and inflexible curricula [13], [14], [15]. Cultural expectations that favor rote memorization and teacher authority may also limit student engagement [16], [17].

In Cambodia, these challenges are particularly evident. Teachers often rely on lecture-based methods due to entrenched pedagogical traditions and limited institutional support [18], [19]. Moreover, students unfamiliar with active learning approaches may resist participation, as student-centered learning often clashes with established passive learning habits in traditional classroom settings [20]. Sok and Heng [21] found that many Cambodian educators lack the training and resources to implement SCA effectively, highlighting a significant disconnect between policy intentions and actual classroom practices.

This study explores the lived experiences of English language teachers at three public Cambodian universities, NUCK, UHST, and SRU, focusing on the challenges they encounter and strategies they employ when applying SCA. It offers practical, locally grounded recommendations, such as professional development, differentiated instruction, small-group activities, and strategic student grouping.

Unlike previous international research, this study provides Cambodia-specific findings on implementing SCA in higher education, a context often overlooked in global ELT discourse. The findings are intended to inform teacher training, curriculum design, and

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education policy in Cambodia while contributing to broader discussions on adapting student-centered instruction in resource-constrained environments.

## **2. METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research design. A case study approach was adopted to provide in-depth insights into teachers' experiences, perspectives, and challenges. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing participants to share their views while enabling flexibility in exploring emerging themes.

### **Research Site and Participants**

This study was conducted at three Cambodian public universities: the National University of Cheasim Kamchaymear (NUCK), Kampong Cham branch, the University of Heng Samrin Thbounng Khmum (UHST), and Svay Rieng University (SRU). These institutions were chosen due to their diverse student populations, varied teaching contexts, and commitment to improving English language education.

A total of nine English language teachers participated in the study. They were purposefully selected based on their teaching experience, expertise in English language instruction, and familiarity with student-centered approaches. The participants were distributed across the universities: four from NUCK, two from UHST, and three from SRU.

### **Sampling Method**

Sampling is crucial in determining the number of participants fully engaged in this research study. The strategy used for sampling focuses on identifying participants who can provide the most valuable and comprehensive information [22]. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants with direct experience with student-centered teaching methods. This approach ensured that the selected individuals could provide rich, relevant data regarding the challenges and benefits of implementing the approach. Although the sample size was limited to nine, it was sufficient to achieve data saturation; no new themes emerged in the final interviews, indicating adequate depth and breadth of information for thematic analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on the study's conceptual framework and focused on three main areas:

1. Teachers' perceptions of the benefits of student-centered approaches
2. Challenges encountered when implementing the approach
3. Strategies and solutions used to overcome those challenges

An interview guide was used to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions. The guide included open-ended questions such as:

1. In your opinion, do you think implementing the student-centered approach in the classroom is beneficial? Why or why not?
  2. How often do you use student-centered teaching approaches in your classroom? Can you provide some examples?
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3. What do you perceive as the main importance and benefits of student-centered approaches in language teaching?
4. What specific challenges or barriers have you encountered when implementing student-centered approaches in your classroom?
5. Based on your experience, what suggestions or strategies do you have to overcome these challenges and adopt student-centered approaches more effectively?
6. What kinds of support or resources (e.g., training, materials) have you received from your institution to help implement student-centered approaches? How adequate do you find these supports?
7. Do you think the cultural context of Cambodia influences the implementation of student-centered approaches? If so, how?
8. What suggestions or recommendations would you give to your university to better support the implementation of student-centered approaches?

Due to geographical constraints between the researcher and participants, interviews were conducted online via Google Meet. Each session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, depending on participant availability and engagement. Around 5.5 hours of interview data were recorded and transcribed verbatim, ensuring that all verbal nuances were preserved to support a comprehensive thematic analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data. The researcher followed Creswell's [23] six-step approach:

1. Preparing and organizing the data.
2. Exploring and coding the database.
3. Identifying key themes.
4. Representing and reporting findings.
5. Interpreting the meaning of findings.
6. Validating accuracy through member checking and triangulation.

NVivo software assisted in coding and identifying emerging patterns and themes from the data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Formal approval was obtained from the selected universities before conducting the study to uphold ethical research standards. Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, procedures, potential benefits, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Informed consent was obtained before participation, ensuring voluntary involvement. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, participants' identities were coded and excluded from the final report, with all personal information securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. Data handling and storage followed institutional ethical guidelines, ensuring integrity and compliance with research ethics. These measures

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enhanced the study's credibility and trustworthiness, providing a responsible and respectful approach to investigating barriers to student-centered teaching in Cambodian universities.

### 3. RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the interviews with nine English language teachers. Four major themes emerged: teaching profile, perceived importance and benefits of the student-centered approach, challenges in implementing the student-centered approach, and solutions to overcome the challenges. Each theme is presented in detail below.

#### 3.1 Teaching Profile

The following table provides an overview of the teaching profiles of the nine participants from the three Cambodian universities: the University of Cheasim Kamchaymear (NUCK), the Kampong Cham branch, the University of Heng Samrin Thbounng Khmum (UHST), and Svay Rieng University (SRU). These profiles highlight their academic teaching subjects and years of experience, which are crucial to understanding their perspectives on implementing student-centered approaches in their classrooms.

Table 1. Teaching profile

Participants	Sex	Teaching subjects	Teaching Period in Higher Education
T1	Male	Research Methodology/ Writing Skills	11 years
T2	Male	Core English/ Teaching Methodology	16 years
T3	Male	English Literature/ Listening Skills	8 years
T4	Male	Writing Skills/ Core English	12 years
T5	Male	Communication/Teaching Methodology	10 years
T6	Male	Core English/ Applied Linguistics	7 years
T7	Male	Communication/Writing Skills	18 years
T8	Male	Teaching Methodology/ English Literature	11 years
T9	Male	Teaching Methodology/Core English	6 years

As shown in Table 1, all nine participants were male and taught various subjects, including research methodology, core English, applied linguistics, teaching methodology, English literature, communication, and writing skills. While some participants specialized in a single subject area, others taught multiple courses across different skill domains. The participants also had diverse levels of teaching experience, ranging from 6 to 18 years. Three participants had been teaching for over 15 years, with T2 having the most experience at 16 years and T7 at 18 years. Meanwhile, T3 and T6 had between 7 and 8 years of experience, while T9 had the least experience, with 6 years in higher education. Moreover, their academic qualifications varied, with two holding PhDs and the remaining seven holding Master's degrees in English education or related fields. This background information provides context for understanding their perspectives on student-centered teaching, as their teaching subjects and years of experience may influence their views on implementing the approach.

### 3.2 The Perceived Importance and Benefits of Student-Centered Approaches

Based on the interview, the findings revealed that all participants identified several key benefits of student-centered approaches. Some participants indicated that implementing the student-centered approach will help students become autonomous learners because they do self-study, increasing student engagement and motivation (T1, T2, & T3).

*"I believe that this approach is beneficial because it helps students become autonomous learners and extroverts. Moreover, it increases student engagement..." (T1)*

*"For me, student-centered approaches can help students build 21st-century skills and lifelong learning, especially learner autonomy. Students learn by doing better than being passive receivers" (T2)*

*"I assume that adopting the student-centered approach in classroom teaching is beneficial...Secondly, we can increase students' engagement with the teacher and their classmates to build strong relationships between students and teachers, or student and student..." (T3)*

Besides, Participants 1 and 3 believed that it developed critical thinking skills. Participant 1 stressed that implementing the student-centered approach is beneficial because it develops students' critical thinking skills. At the same time, Participant 3 reported that by using this approach, he can help students develop critical thinking skills so it will be easy for them to deal with problems, not only with the providing tasks but also in their daily lives.

Moreover, some participants noted that students will be confident and responsible for their learning if they utilize the student-centered approach (T4 & T6).

*"First, students are confident, and they can find the answer or search by themselves.... Moreover, students become more active, and they can express their thoughts" (T4)*

*"..... Second, they are confident to speak or present something. Moreover, they become the ones who have a high responsibility" (T6)*

On the other hand, Participant 1 said that implementing the student-centered approach encourages students' collaborative work with high responsibility. Participant 3 also assumed that adopting the student-centered approach in classroom teaching is beneficial because it reduces the teacher's talking time. He continued that the teacher does not talk too much and can be a facilitator when the students need it, giving them more time to practice or learn new things independently. Participants 6, 7, and 8 believed that students become more active and can express their thoughts. Moreover, several teachers, including Participants 4, 7, and 9, indicated that teachers are less tired and can guide students more effectively with proper preparation. This approach shifts the responsibility from teachers to students, allowing teachers to facilitate rather than dominate the classroom (T7 & T9).

### 3.3 Challenges in Implementing the Student-Centered Approach

After analyzing the participants' interviews, a significant barrier highlighted across all interviews was the presence of slow learners, students' levels, and mixed-ability classes. They noted that the diverse proficiency levels among students can create difficulties in group work (T2, T4, T5, T6, T8, & T9). Participant 8 expressed that stronger students dominate discussions, leaving weaker students reluctant to participate. Participant 2 stated that:

*“I think mixed-ability classes, slow and poor language background students are challenging in implementing student-centered approaches....” (T2)*

*“The main problem that I always encountered is slow learners. For students who are weak or have a low background. Therefore, the teacher has to support them a lot...” (T4)*

*“There are many problems related to implementing the student-centered approach, but I raise only some...Second, it involves students’ knowledge, as we know that teaching in rural and provincial areas is hard because the students’ level and their knowledge of English are different. Therefore, teaching is difficult if their knowledge is far different....” (T5)*

*“I think what I have found when implementing the student-centered approach is slow learners and mixed-ability classes. Their English knowledge and level are low, so it is hard for them to learn independently. I think that it is due to their background and habit of study.” (T6)*

*“The first challenge is relevant to the level of students and mixed-ability classes. Students’ levels are different. Some of them are active learners, but some are passive. So, it is difficult to work in groups or do other activities....” (T9)*

Besides, Participants 1, 4, 5, and 7 also mentioned time constraints. Participant 1 said that time constraints and lack of resources, such as materials, training courses, and so on, hinder the implementation of the student-centered approach, while Participant 4 stated that if students are familiar with the student-centered approach, the process will be faster. Nevertheless, we must take more time if they are unsure about their work. He said that it was a waste of time to teach. Participant 5 stated that it requires us to spend much more time preparing the lesson before teaching, and we plan what we need to do if we use the student-centered approach. Similarly, Participant 7 noted the challenge of time management. He said students often require more time to complete tasks, leading to delays and difficulty maintaining lesson pacing.

On the other hand, several participants indicated a language barrier. Particularly in English language teaching, Participants 6, 8, and 9 noted that students’ language proficiency was a major challenge, especially when weaker students lacked the confidence to speak up and dared not share their ideas or thoughts (T8 & T9).

Moreover, Participant 2 and Participant 3 indicated that the habit or background of students’ learning was also one of the problems that caused the implementation the student-centered approach. Participant 2 said previous learning experiences also cause barriers because students do not want to try something new and different. Similarly, Participant 3 showed that it is difficult for some students to adopt the new teachings and learning approach because some students are used to the old or traditional teaching method used by their previous teachers, so they may feel that adopting this new approach is not easy. There is more responsibility for them during their classroom learning and as their work research. Some students do not like to speak out. They only prefer sitting and learning when it is presentation time, and they do not feel enjoyable with their learning. This makes it difficult for him to apply this new method to teach them.

Cultural factors also played a critical role. Participants indicated that Cambodia's entrenched habit of rote learning hinders the transition to more interactive, student-centered

practices. Participant 5 observed that students learn by memorizing rather than explaining and understanding, reflecting a broader resistance to changing traditional teaching norms.

### 3.4 Solutions to Overcome the Challenges

After encountering challenges in implementing the student-centered approach, participants offered various strategies to overcome the challenges in real practice. To manage varying student abilities, Participants 1 and 9 emphasized creating mixed-ability groups where stronger students can support weaker ones. Participant 1 said we should arrange a group with students with good, medium, and poor English language proficiency to help each other. Participant 9 stated that grouping students requires different levels of students. So, we should have some methods for grouping students and providing clear instructions. This approach encourages collaboration and ensures that all students participate in group tasks (T9).

Participants 7 and 9 suggested breaking tasks into smaller activities that allow weaker students to engage without feeling overwhelmed. Clear instructions were also essential to improving classroom outcomes (T7 & 9). Participant 9 stressed that providing clear instructions is important because giving instructions is a factor that affects students' activities. Participant 7 stated that:

*"To me, we should break down into small activities to allow slow learners to join and express their thoughts because it is also a motivation. Low-competency students cannot attend if the task is too big; sometimes, they will get depressed. Moreover, we should find activities that fit their ability and instruct them clearly on what and how to do..." (T7)*

Motivating both strong and weak students was another key solution proposed by Participants 8 and 9. Teachers should inspire confidence in weaker students while keeping stronger students engaged (T8 & T9). Participant 8 indicated that students are different. Some students are strong, and some are weak. We always face it, so we should motivate them a lot. Similarly, Participant 9 said we should inspire them more when encountering slow learners and motivate both strong and slow learners to work together.

Participant 4 advocated a hybrid approach, combining student-centered and traditional teaching based on students' needs and backgrounds.

*"For me, we must be flexible in teaching using mixed methods, depending on students' ability and real situations. We must use all methods, including both student-centered and teacher-centered, and provide more tests to help slow learners." (T4)*

Participants emphasized the importance of ongoing training for teachers to stay updated with effective student-centered strategies and teaching materials.

*"...Second, it is a digital era, so teachers must study more specifically about technology to search for new techniques and methods to develop themselves using the student-centered approach..." (T5)*

Participant 5 also suggested that understanding students' English proficiency levels is essential for effective teaching, while Participant 1 mentioned the need for clearer time management strategies during lessons. On the other hand, Participant 3 and Participant 6 mentioned similar perspectives that students should change their previous learning habits.

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*“To deal with the problem that I mentioned, I always encourage all of my students to start changing their previous learning habits...” (T3)*

*“For me, students should change their habits of learning because the student-centered approach requires students to be active, not passive” (T6)*

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

This section discusses the study’s findings in the context of existing literature, examining how the experiences of Cambodian university English teachers reflect, support, or contrast with previous research on the implementation of student-centered approaches in higher education.

This study examined the benefits, challenges, and potential solutions for incorporating the student-centered approach (SCA) in English language teaching. While educators acknowledged its value in enhancing student autonomy, participation, and critical thinking, several barriers complicated its practical implementation.

Participants emphasized that SCA promotes student involvement, enhances self-confidence, and fosters collaborative learning. These outcomes are consistent with previous studies, such as those by Darsih [15], who found that student-centered methods increase engagement and promote learner independence. Similarly, Rao [3] observed that these approaches improve autonomy, motivation, and critical thinking. Moreover, shifting responsibility from teachers to students empowers learners while potentially reducing teacher workload and mitigating burnout [24], [25]. Research has also indicated collaborative learning environments help students develop communication and social skills [13].

Despite these benefits, several challenges emerged. In mixed-ability classrooms, dominant learners may overshadow their peers, limiting equitable participation [12], [26]. Teachers noted that implementing student-centered activities is time-consuming and requires advanced classroom management skills [14], [27]. Language proficiency issues and deeply ingrained learning habits hinder adoption, especially in contexts where teacher-centered methods and rote learning dominate [21], [28]. Learners accustomed to passive learning may initially resist taking responsibility, requiring educators to transition gradually using adaptive techniques [16], [18].

In Cambodia, sociocultural norms pose significant challenges to adopting the student-centered approach. The education system is strongly influenced by traditional values emphasizing hierarchy and seniority, with teachers commonly regarded as the primary source of knowledge and authority in the classroom [18]. Consequently, instruction is typically delivered through teacher-centered methods such as lectures and demonstrations, with students primarily engaged in passive learning activities like listening and note-taking. In such environments, students often avoid questioning teachers or speaking up in class for fear of making mistakes and appearing disrespectful. Additionally, because Cambodian culture values getting along with others, students may stay silent in class to avoid feeling embarrassed or making others uncomfortable [18], [28]. These norms contribute to passive classroom behavior and inhibit the development of student autonomy and critical thinking. Furthermore, national exams and curriculum policies prioritize memorization and accuracy,

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reinforcing teacher-centered practices and marginalizing innovative, interactive approaches [21], [29].

To address these challenges, teachers proposed several strategies, including careful student grouping, small and structured tasks, ongoing encouragement, flexible teaching techniques, and professional development. Differentiated instruction helps accommodate varied proficiency levels [30], while flipped learning maximizes classroom interaction time [31]. Grounded in Vygotsky's [5] zone of proximal development and Krashen's [32] input hypothesis, scaffolding strategies can gradually guide less proficient students toward independent learning.

Regional examples of successful SCA implementation provide further insight. In Vietnam, Pham and Renshaw [33] observed that Vietnamese higher education institutions faced significant obstacles to adopting student-centered learning rooted in long-standing teacher-centered norms and a strong focus on examinations. Integrating student-centered elements into traditional practices effectively eases resistance and supports a gradual pedagogical shift. Learner-centered education was advanced in Thailand through teacher training programs and curriculum reforms emphasizing active learning [34]. In the Philippines, Lesson Study and collaborative teaching strategies have proven effective in supporting student-centered instruction, especially when sustained by continuous professional development and adapted to local educational values and contexts [35]. In Malaysia, Benlahcene et al. [36] found that students responded positively to the student-centered learning approach, noting increased engagement, critical thinking, and participation. Their findings indicate that, when thoughtfully implemented, SCA can enhance the learning experience in higher education contexts. These examples illustrate that long-term success in implementation is more achievable when changes are made gradually and customized to align with the local cultural and institutional environment.

This study explored SCA's benefits, challenges, and practical strategies based on insights from UHST, SRU, and NUCK university teachers. However, the limited sample size of nine English teachers and the sole use of teacher interviews means that the findings may not reflect the full diversity of experiences across different educational settings. Future studies should include a broader participant base and explore how these challenges manifest in various educational levels, such as primary and secondary schools. Incorporating student perspectives would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the student-centered approach's impact on engagement, learning outcomes, and long-term academic development.

## **Implications**

The findings of this research have significant implications for English language teaching, particularly in contexts like Cambodia, where the student-centered approach (SCA) is being introduced. At the classroom level, teachers must be equipped with the necessary training, tools, and resources to implement student-centered strategies effectively. This includes addressing time constraints, managing mixed-ability classes through thoughtful grouping and differentiated instruction, and designing structured activities that encourage active participation. Teachers should also be supported in creating classroom

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cultures that promote student autonomy, risk-taking, and collaborative learning, key elements of the SCA.

Moreover, education ministries could draw lessons from successful models in neighboring countries by promoting culturally responsive reforms considering local values and classroom dynamics. A gradual, well-supported shift that balances innovation with tradition is more likely to result in sustainable adoption. Finally, involving teachers in curriculum design and reform discussions could ensure that policies are practical and grounded in real classroom experiences.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study confirm that while the student-centered approach in English language teaching fosters learner autonomy, critical thinking, engagement, and collaboration, its implementation is hindered by various challenges. As expected, teachers highlighted the positive impact of this approach in making students more responsible for their learning and building confidence and motivation, which aligns with modern educational goals.

However, teachers face significant barriers, including mixed-ability classrooms, time constraints, and students' language proficiency issues. Additionally, traditional learning habits and cultural expectations in Cambodia make the transition to student-centered learning more complex, requiring substantial adaptation by educators.

Several practical strategies were identified to overcome these obstacles, including differentiated instruction, small structured activities, flexible teaching methods, and professional development. These solutions highlight the importance of institutional support and teacher training in making student-centered learning sustainable.

Future research should explore the long-term effectiveness of SCA on student outcomes in Cambodia, including academic performance and learner motivation. Additionally, investigations into the role of technology in supporting time management and differentiated instruction could provide useful insights. Studies focusing on policy-level interventions would also help identify how educational institutions can better equip teachers to adopt and sustain student-centered practices.

To ensure broader adoption, policymakers should allocate funding for continuous, context-sensitive professional development, focusing on rural and under-resourced schools. Curriculum reforms should explicitly incorporate flexible student-centered frameworks and provide accessible teaching materials tailored to local classroom realities. Moreover, routine teacher feedback and classroom-based monitoring mechanisms should be implemented to align policy and practice and adjust reforms based on teachers' experiences and needs.

Ultimately, these findings improve English language instruction in Cambodia and offer actionable insights for other low-resource educational contexts seeking to implement student-centered approaches amid systemic and cultural constraints.

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