

The Perceived Curriculum Development among EFL Cambodian Lower Secondary Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The issue of teachers' participation in school decision-making remains a complex and enduring topic of educational research. This study examines the extent to which English language teachers in lower secondary schools in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, engage in curriculum development. Adopting an exploratory design, data were collected through questionnaires administered to 40 Cambodian EFL teachers, followed by in-depth interviews with six participants to obtain qualitative insights. The findings indicate that teachers' involvement in curriculum development is limited and insufficiently institutionalized, with many respondents reporting low confidence in their decision-making capacities yet expressing a strong aspiration to contribute more actively. Namely, many teachers felt dissatisfied with their restricted role in curriculum-related decisions. The results also reveal the dominance of a top-down management structure and the absence of a collaborative professional culture that recognizes teachers as legitimate stakeholders in curricular decision-making. These findings suggest an urgent need for policy reforms that institutionalize participatory mechanisms, enhance teachers' professional agency, and foster a more inclusive and dialogic approach to curriculum development in Cambodian schools.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English plays a vital role in both academic and social spheres, a trend that has persisted for many years. As Neau [1] observes, English is the most widely taught foreign language across Cambodian schools and universities. English instruction begins in the first year of schooling and remains a core requirement for university entrance alongside Khmer [1], [2]. Despite this central role, limited research has examined how English language teachers in Cambodia participate in shaping the curriculum that guides their instruction. Previous studies have largely focused on language policy or classroom practices, leaving a gap in understanding teachers' perceptions of and engagement in curriculum development

processes. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how Cambodian EFL lower secondary teachers perceive their involvement in curriculum development activities [3].

Teacher preparation and professional identity play an essential role in shaping teachers' ability to contribute meaningfully to curriculum development, and teachers should engage in professional development [4], [5]. As Fox [6] notes, future teachers benefit from understanding the significance of integrating social and emotional intelligence, along with character development education, into their classrooms—an understanding best cultivated when teacher education programs model these dispositions. Historically, moral education emphasizing good character and responsible citizenship has been central to educational aims [7]. However, while moral and character education focus on shaping learners' values, teachers' agency in curriculum decision-making determines how such educational ideals are realized in practice [8].

The success of curricular innovation and implementation depends largely on teachers, who serve as the primary agents of change [9], [10]. Teachers are not merely implementers of prescribed content but also creators of pedagogical meaning. As Popham [11] and Marsh [12] emphasize, teachers are expected to approach curriculum development, implementation, and assessment with creativity, adaptability, and professional commitment. Their active involvement not only enhances curriculum quality but also strengthens professional identity and institutional belonging [4].

Conceptualizing curriculum itself remains multifaceted. Some definitions focus on practical application, describing curriculum as a set of performance objectives that specify the knowledge and skills students should acquire [9], [13]. While this perspective provides measurable outcomes, it captures only one dimension of curriculum practice. A more comprehensive understanding recognizes curriculum as a dynamic social process. As Carroll [14] explains, curriculum is “a social event engaged in by various groups,” reflecting both institutional norms and the diverse perspectives of stakeholders. Similarly, Carroll [15] underscores the importance of involving key actors—teachers among them—in shaping educational aims by articulating “what they think should happen or what they would like to happen.”

By exploring Cambodian EFL teachers' perceptions of their involvement in curriculum development, this study seeks to illuminate how teachers navigate the space between policy mandates and classroom realities, and the need for school leadership development for school directors to work closely with the curriculum [16]. The findings aim to inform educational policymakers and teacher education programs about the need to institutionalize participatory decision-making structures, strengthen teachers' professional agency, and align curriculum reforms with teachers' practical insights and classroom expertise.

2. METHOD

This study adopted an exploratory methodology to gain in-depth insights into Cambodian EFL teachers' perspectives on participation in curriculum development, aligning with Perry [17] view that exploratory research may employ both qualitative and

quantitative approaches to address “WHAT” questions. As Shilling [18] emphasizes, exploratory studies aim to examine topics comprehensively, generate new understanding, and familiarize researchers with emerging concepts, though they are not intended to produce generalizable results. In this context, the exploratory design provided a nuanced understanding of teachers’ views on decision-making and contributed to the existing body of knowledge on teacher participation in curriculum processes.

A sequential exploratory design was employed, prioritizing the qualitative phase. In the first phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers’ perceptions and experiences in depth. Insights from this phase informed the development of the questionnaire used in the second phase, which was designed to refine and extend the qualitative findings, following the QUAL → quan sequence outlined by Creswell et al. [19]. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data strengthened the interpretive depth and validity of the findings.

Regarding participants, 40 lower secondary EFL teachers in Phnom Penh were purposively selected. All held Bachelor’s degrees in English education and had a minimum of five years of teaching experience. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate due to its focus on selecting teachers with relevant expertise and professional knowledge rather than demographic representation.

The interview instrument consisted of open-ended questions exploring teachers’ roles, experiences, and perceived barriers in curriculum decision-making. The questionnaire included both closed- and open-ended items derived from the qualitative findings. To ensure validity and reliability, the questionnaire underwent expert review by three senior EFL educators for content relevance and clarity, followed by a pilot test with five non-participating teachers. Necessary revisions were made based on feedback before full administration.

Data analysis followed a two-stage procedure. Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed, allowing key themes and subthemes to emerge inductively. Quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to identify patterns and complement the qualitative insights.

All ethical considerations were strictly observed. Participants were informed of the study’s purpose, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Teachers were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, and ethical clearance was secured from the relevant institutional review body before fieldwork commenced.

Table 1. Summary of Research Participant Selection

Stage and Instrument	Sampling	Selection Criteria	Participants
Qualitative Stage: Semi-structured Interviews	Purposive Sampling	highly qualified and more experienced Cambodian EFL teachers.	6
Quantitative Stage: Questionnaires	Non-probability Convenient Sampling	Cambodian EFL teachers who did not participate in interviews	40

Interviews are the most important data collection tool in qualitative research [20]. Interviews allow individuals to express their experiences in their own words and foster personal interaction, building trust between researchers and participants [21]. Wellington [22] notes that interviews enable probing into interviewees' thoughts, values, and perceptions. Dornyei [23] identifies four types of interviews, with semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions being selected for this study to explore teachers' involvement in decision-making. The researcher designed an 18-question semi-structured interview guide based on research questions, literature, and interest areas, focusing on teachers' participation in assessment, curriculum development, and professional activities, as well as their perceptions of these roles [24].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 RESULTS

Results of the Research Question

What do Cambodian EFL lower secondary teachers perceive about their involvement in curriculum development activities?" The purpose of this study was to get participants to think about their involvement in curriculum development efforts. The researcher used the information gathered from questionnaires and interviews, which were categorized by topics, to address this question. Quotations and tables were utilized in this study to bolster the interpretation of the findings.

The researcher's personal interpretation of participant replies and comprehension of teachers' involvement in decision-making constitute the analysis of study data. Six teachers in total were interviewed, and forty of them answered the questionnaire. The letter "n" denotes the number of teachers who responded, and the symbol "%" denotes the corresponding proportion. Teachers' marginalized engagement in curriculum development activities and their discontent with their participation are the two subsections in which the findings are presented.

Marginalized Involvement of Teachers in Curriculum Development Five themes emerge regarding teachers' limited involvement in curriculum development: (1) limited or nonexistent involvement in needs analysis; (2) low involvement in curriculum goals and objectives; (3) lack of involvement in skill development; (4) limited involvement in teaching material adaptation; and (5) decision makers' unfavorable response to teachers' curriculum evaluations.

Table 2. Teachers' Involvement in Needs Analysis from Interviews

Area of Involvement	Level/Extent of Involvement	Sample Extract/Reasons	No. of Mentions
Needs Analysis	From limited to no involvement	Ratha: No needs analysis, just curriculum mapping. Socheat: very limited to nil. Rotana: No involvement Sreytouch: No involvement: decided by team leaders	4

According to Table 2, the majority of interviewees stated that their involvement in the needs analysis was either nonexistent or extremely limited. Restricting his involvement to curriculum mapping, Ratha remarked, “*needs analysis... not needs analysis as we say, but it was curriculum mapping.*” “*Just improving the syllabus that we had*” was the goal of this exercise, he continued.

Socheat said that he was “*very limited to nil*” in his involvement with the needs analysis. Additionally, he mentioned that his task was to enhance the curriculum rather than conduct a needs analysis.

What he saw: I am having some trouble with the new level I was given, and a group of Teachers has been requested to review the curriculum and create a design based on the standards (Socheat, Interview).

Rotana and Sreytouch, the other two individuals who spoke about the location, denied any involvement. Rotana clarified: Students’ needs analysis...I take no involvement in the process of analyzing students’ needs. There is no previous analysis, and I believe that applies to everyone else. (Rotana, Interview).

By clarifying that the coordinators examined the needs and produced everything in accordance with the criteria, Sreytouch was more forceful. She said: Well, from the perspective of curriculum development, that is intriguing. I was the main teacher when I started, and he essentially made everything from scratch based on his needs and the standards. He is trying to find the norms (Sreytouch, Interview).

Table 3. Teachers’ Involvement in Needs Analysis from Questionnaire

The Surveyed Questionnaires (n = 40)					
Area of Involvement	1	3	4	5	6
Needs Analysis	9 (22.5%)	12 (30%)	3 (7.5%)	10 (25%)	6 (15%)
	52.5%			40%	

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

According to the findings of the study (Table 3), 40% of teachers believe they take part in needs analyses (6 strongly agree and 10 agree). Nevertheless, eleven teachers (52.5%) believe that they are not involved.

Table 4. Teachers’ Involvement in Deciding the Goals and Objectives from Interviews

Area of Involvement	Level/Extent of Involvement	Sample Extract/Reasons	No. of Mentions
Deciding Goals and Objectives	No involvement because of the top-down approach	Ratana: I do not decide about this. Socheat: I have no participation. Rotana: Nobody sets them except for decision makers. Bopha: Predesigned. Handed to us. Sreytouch: Decided by the administration.	5
	Team Work	Thida: Has been done as a team.	1

The top-down strategy is the reason given by interviewees for this low involvement rate. While one respondent, Thida, stated that he participated in a team to determine the curriculum's aims and objectives, the other five interviewees concurred that they do not make such decisions. According to Ratha, his involvement was limited to carrying out a curriculum that was imposed from Table 4 above.

I do not make this decision. This is something custom-made that has previously been created by upper management, and I help with its implementation (Ratha, Interview).

Socheat supported Ratha's claim of the top-down approach and offered a reason for this marginalization in addition to confirming exclusion: When it comes to choosing goals and objectives, I do not participate. Unfortunately, I have no say in those because they were set many years ago and, from what I have heard, were completed by an outside team of advisors before I even visited this school (Socheat, Interview).

Rotana said the following and concurred with Ratha and Socheat that decision makers set the goals and objectives: What are the curriculum aims and objectives? We have instructional materials, but they are not ours. Our curriculum is exclusively designed and tailored in accordance with the instructional requirements that have already been established. No, we did not. Nobody, including teachers, has the authority to go beyond those, in my opinion. Decision-makers and likely the coordinators are the only ones who determine the development goals (Rotana, Interview).

Table 5. Teachers' Involvement in Deciding the Goals and Objectives from the Questionnaire

The Surveyed Questionnaires (n = 40)					
Area of Involvement	1	2	3	4	5
Deciding about the Goals and Objectives of the Curriculum	11 (27.5%)	14 (35%)	2 (5%)	13 (32.5%)	0
	62.5%			32.5%	

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Twenty-five teachers, or 62.5% of the interviewees, believe they are not involved in deciding on the curriculum goals and objectives, while only thirteen teachers (32.5%) believe they participate in this process, with 5% remaining undecided. The results, which are tabulated in Table 5 above, support the interviewees' statements.

According to the results of the questionnaire (Table 6), ten instructors, or 60%, feel that they are not involved in curricular decisions (10 strongly agree and 14 agree). Additionally, 28 teachers believe their involvement is limited (12 strongly agree and 16 agree). Additionally, just thirteen teachers (27.5%) believe that they have a significant level of involvement. Given that 28 teachers, or 70% of the teachers, reported unhappiness with their involvement in curricular decision-making, this low involvement rate may help to explain the teachers' discontent.

Table 6. Teachers' Involvement in Adapting Teaching Materials from a Questionnaire

The Surveyed Questionnaires (n = 40)					
Area of Involvement	1	2	3	4	5
No involvement in deciding about the curriculum	6 (15%)	10 (25%)	10 (25%)	14 (35%)	10 (25%)
	40%			60%	
Limited involvement in deciding about the curriculum	2 (5%)	8 (20%)	2 (5%)	16 (40%)	12 (30%)
	25%			70%	
Major involvement in deciding about the curriculum	12 (30%)	17 (42.5%)	0%	7 (17.5%)	4 (10%)
	72.5%			27.5%	
Satisfaction with involvement in deciding about the curriculum	14 (35%)	14 (35%)	3 (7.5%)	6 (15%)	3 (7.5%)
	70%			22.5%	

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 7. Teachers' Involvement in Adapting Teaching Materials from a Questionnaire

The Surveyed Questionnaires (n = 40)									
Area of Involvement	Wishes: Involvement	Level of	1	2	3	4	5		
Deciding about the curriculum	More involvement in deciding about the curriculum		0	2 (5%)	3 (7.5%)	17 (42.5%)	18 (45%)		
			5%			87.5%			
	Full involvement in deciding about the curriculum		2 (5%)	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	15 (37.5%)	17 (42.5%)		
			10%			80%			

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

The questionnaire answers are consistent with the interview results (Table 7), as 35 teachers (18 strongly agree and 17 agree) or 87.5% of the total stated that they would like to have more say in curricular decisions. Thirteen of the thirty-two instructors (17 strongly agree and 15 agree) expressed a desire to be fully involved in curricular decisions.

3.2 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that English teachers' involvement in curriculum-related activities in Phnom Penh lower secondary schools is largely limited to the implementation of decisions made by higher authorities. Most teachers reported having minimal influence over key stages of curriculum work, including needs analysis, setting aims and objectives, selecting teaching skills, choosing themes and materials, and conducting curriculum evaluation. This limited participation reflects a top-down approach to curriculum development, in which teachers serve primarily as implementers rather than contributors to curricular design.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with frameworks on teacher empowerment and participatory decision-making, which emphasize teachers' autonomy, professional agency, and shared responsibility in educational reform. The current situation in Phnom Penh suggests a centralized and hierarchical system that restricts teachers' agency, echoing the challenges identified in the curriculum decentralization literature. Scholars such as Popham [11], Shilling [18], Glatthorn [9], and Fisher et al. [2] have

argued that without institutional mechanisms enabling teacher voice, policies risk becoming technocratic, overlooking the classroom realities teachers navigate daily.

When compared with similar studies in other EFL contexts in Southeast Asia, the results display both similarities and distinctions. For instance, research in Thailand and Vietnam has also documented teachers' limited participation in curriculum decision-making due to centralized governance structures and prescriptive national syllabi. However, in more decentralized systems, such as Indonesia's school-based curriculum initiatives, teachers have gradually gained greater agency and professional confidence. The Phnom Penh context, by contrast, remains characterized by restricted teacher participation, suggesting that Cambodia's education system continues to face barriers to effective decentralization and empowerment.

Analytically, these findings can be interpreted as a consequence of both institutional culture and structural policy design. Teachers' marginal roles may result from insufficient professional preparation in curriculum theory, a lack of institutional support for collaborative practices, and the dominance of policy-driven accountability frameworks that prioritize compliance over creativity. The small number of teachers who reported participating in curriculum decisions further illustrates how systemic practices—such as school regulations and ministerial mandates—limit teachers to an implementer role, reinforcing a culture of dependency rather than initiative.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how Cambodian EFL teachers in Phnom Penh engage in decision-making processes related to curriculum development, assessment, and professional growth. The findings clearly indicate that teachers perceive their role in these areas as minimal and externally controlled, with limited opportunities to influence key educational decisions. Although teachers expressed a strong desire for greater involvement, their participation remains largely constrained by hierarchical administrative structures and the absence of supportive institutional frameworks.

To enhance teacher agency and professional ownership, the study recommends promoting bottom-up participatory mechanisms, organizing capacity-building workshops, and establishing school-level forums that allow teachers to contribute actively to curriculum planning and evaluation. Strengthening collaboration between policymakers and practitioners could also foster a more inclusive and responsive decision-making culture.

However, the research is limited by its sample size (40 teachers) and its focus on Phnom Penh, which may not fully represent the experiences of teachers across Cambodia. Future studies could expand the scope by comparing teachers' participation across different provinces or educational levels and by employing longitudinal designs to examine how teacher involvement evolves.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of recognizing teachers as central contributors to educational reform, whose active participation is essential for sustainable and contextually relevant curriculum development.

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