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Cambodian ELT University Practitioners' Use of Standardized Tests for Practice and Assessment

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Standardized tests, in particular TOEFL and IELTS, have been used widely in contemporary ELT education in Cambodia, and research has shown that Cambodians perceive IELTS as a key “gate-keeping mechanism” for gaining overseas scholarships and pursuing education abroad. However, understanding exactly how these tests are used by teachers has yet to be explored and is the subject of this investigation. Twelve teachers from six universities in Phnom Penh participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews to determine their perceptions of these tests and how they are used. The findings show that TOEFL or IELTS were viewed as desirable as classroom learning tools and as a valid and reliable tool for assessment, but were sometimes used erroneously as assessments for meeting course objectives. The authors argue that teachers require further training in assessments before the use of standardized tests in classrooms can be effective.

The recent growth of English language teaching in Cambodia has attracted attention from applied linguists, researchers, and teachers. Over the past decade, some studies, such as Keuk and Tith (2006), Keuk (2008, 2009), Moore and Bounchan (2010a, 2010b), Kea (2011), Keuk and Tith (2013), and Keuk and Lim (forthcoming) have shed light on ELT education and its development in this country. Regarding assessment, two key studies have been undertaken. The first was Nguon’s (2013) study investigating the use of in-class assessment, and the second was Tao’s (2014) study measuring the impact of assessment knowledge and assessment beliefs on in-class assessment practices and correlating the constructs that form assessment literacy. This present study aims to help better discern how university ELT teachers in Cambodia perceive two standardized tests, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the

International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and their use of such tests as practice and assessment tools in this context.

Literature Review

A review of relevant literature reveals two main types of assessments in ELT education: standardized tests and classroom assessments. While standardized tests are essential for schools, universities, businesses, and governments to identify who should be admitted, kept, or dismissed (Brown, 2004), classroom assessments aim to provide evidence of the effectiveness of a language program and success or failure of students' performances within an actual program. What follows is a brief review of the literature related to standardized tests and assessment.

Standardized Tests

In tertiary education, standardized tests are used worldwide for assessing the readiness of students with English as a second or foreign language to gain admission into university degree programs conducted in English (O'Loughlin, 2013). Two such tests most often used in various higher education settings are the TOEFL and IELTS, for they have "construct validity, reliability, impact, practicality, authenticity, and interactiveness" (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 9). The impact of standardized tests can be substantial on test-takers' academic and occupational lives since the test scores are used for admission and employment purposes (Derrick, 2013). The tests, besides being employed institutionally, are used in many language classrooms for assessing to what degree students have mastered the course content and for assigning grades (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 147). However, TOEFL and IELTS are viewed by many practitioners and researchers as unhelpful in that they might be irrelevant to the course aim and objectives if the tests are not properly adapted in terms of content (Brown, 2004).

In the Cambodian context, according to Moore, Stroupe, and Mahony (2012, p. 62), the number of IELTS examinees increased from a small number in 1992 to "more than 1,000" in 2010. Taking these tests has recently become prevalent among those who wish to win scholarships for overseas study and those who wish to further their education in an English-speaking country (Moore, Stroupe, & Mahony, 2012). To obtain sufficiently high band scores for fulfillment of the requirements for such overseas studies, Cambodian students need to master a great amount of "world knowledge" (Moore, Stroupe, & Mahony, 2012, p. 62).

Classroom Assessment

A review of related literature also reveals two main streams of classroom assessments: traditional assessment and alternative assessment (Brown, 2004; Genesee & Upshur, 1996). The former is comprised of proficiency, diagnostic, achievement, and placement testing (Hughes, 2003). It is basically used to measure students' declarative knowledge. The latter, used to assess students' performance, includes portfolio, journal, conference, interview, and observation skills (Brown, 2004; Genesee & Upshur, 1996). Other forms of alternative assessment are questionnaires, self-assessments, and peer-assessments (Brown, 2004). Within traditional assessment and alternative assessment, students can be assessed formatively and / or summatively (Brown, 2004). As for formative assessment, in which students are assessed on a continuous basis, Greenstein (2010) has proposed three principles: "student focused; instructionally informative; and outcome-based" (pp. 15-20). The first principle aims to evaluate students' knowledge, comprehension, and application. The second principle aims to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers' instructional design. The third principle focuses on whether the set goals of a course are achieved. Summative assessment, in which students are assessed at the end of a course or unit of instruction, is conducted to see if the course or unit objectives are met but not to contribute to students' future improvement (Brown, 2004).

Classroom assessment stands at the heart of the educational process and is seen as closely related with the theories of teaching and learning: behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism (James, 2008). Classroom assessments promote learning if they conform to three principles (James, 2008). In the first principle, “assessing learning of what [has been] taught” (James, 2008, p. 21), assessment focuses on factual information which entails rote memory, and a comparison is made between what has been taught and the extent to which students acquire the knowledge (Berry, 2008; James, 2008). In this principle of testing, students are passive in learning (Berry, 2008). In the second principle, “assessing . . . as individual sense-making” (James, 2008, p. 21), assessment focuses on deeper understandings acquired through critical thinking (Berry, 2008; James, 2008). This testing principle sees students as active learners (Berry, 2008). In the third principle, “assessing learning as building knowledge as part of doing things with others” (James, 2008, p. 21), with knowledge acquired through interaction, assessment of group learning is needed to gain insights into how students learn, what they can do and cannot do, and what can be done to help them learn (Berry, 2008; James, 2008).

In a similar vein, Berry (2008) proposes that assessments are helpful for language acquisition if ELT practitioners:

align assessment to teaching and learning; explore multidimensional assessment methods; select assessments susceptible to learning; draw on joint efforts among colleagues; assess students continuously; allow students' participation in assessment process; use assessment to uncover learning; make marking criteria accessible; provide feedback; and analyze and report results. (p. 14)

Assessment in ELT in Cambodia

As stated earlier, two key studies have been undertaken in the context of assessment at the tertiary level in Cambodia (Nguon, 2013; Tao, 2014). These studies have shown that traditional assessment has been widely adopted in Cambodian ELT classrooms, although alternative assessment is endorsed by higher education institutions and practitioners. The practice of such traditional assessment is due to large class sizes, low teaching wages for nongovernment instructors, low salaries for government teachers (Tao, 2014), university requirements, and a passive learning culture (Nguon, 2013). In addition, Nguon (2013) stated that assessments in Cambodian classrooms are purported to identify underlying sources of learning difficulties, to monitor the progress of learning, and, most likely, to fulfill university requirements. However, Tao (2014) has shown that the majority of Cambodian ELT instructors have insufficient classroom assessment knowledge to ensure the validity and reliability of their assessments.

Given that teaching English in Cambodia is generally subjected to time constraints, large class sizes, limited resources, and limited assessment literacy (Nguon, 2013; Tao, 2014), tertiary ELT instructors are likely to use ready-made testing materials (e.g., the materials included in standardized tests) for assessing their students' learning achievements in classrooms. According to Keuk and Lim (forthcoming), when Cambodian ELT teachers use supplementary materials in teaching, they are likely to use materials that train students in test-taking strategies, that is, TOEFL or IELTS test-taking strategies. Some of the teacher participants in Keuk and Lim's (forthcoming) study believed that training their students in test-taking strategies would assist their students in attaining high scores in progress tests or final examinations.

Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the perceptions of Cambodian university teachers of English in using standardized tests (TOEFL and IELTS) as part of practice and assessment. The study thus seeks to address the following questions:

1. Are Cambodian university ELT practitioners aware of standardized tests?
2. To the extent that they are aware of standardized tests,
 - 2.1. what standardized tests have they experienced taking?
 - 2.2. have they used practice standardized tests to assess their students' learning achievement?
 - 2.3. have they trained their students in test-taking strategies in the classroom?
 - 2.4. what are their beliefs about standardized tests in relation to their students' learning achievement in the classroom?
 - 2.5. what challenges do they face in adopting practice standardized tests as part of learning and assessment?

Methodology

This research is a qualitative study on current tertiary ELT practice and assessment through exploring teachers' perceptions of standardized tests and use of such tests as classroom assessments. Twelve teachers from six Cambodian universities (one public university and five private universities) in Phnom Penh agreed to participate in this study, and judgmental sampling was employed. At the time of the study, the participants (four females and eight males) ranged in age from 27 to 38 years and had more than four years of teaching experience at the tertiary level. These teacher participants taught Core English, which is a subject offered in the undergraduate degree program (i.e., a Bachelor of Arts in English) in all the selected universities. This course provides students with training of general English.

This research project had three phases. In the first phase, on receipt of participants' approval, the study was clearly explained, informed consent was obtained, and interviews were arranged. In the second phase, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which Burns (2010) describes as likely to offer deeper and richer information in light of diversity and flexibility. The one-on-one interviews spanned a total of six weeks, and only two participants were interviewed on separate days per week. Each interview was conducted at places the participants suggested, and ranged in length from approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The interview protocols consisted of five main questions and a number of subquestions (see Appendix). The interviews were conducted in English by one of the researchers (i.e., the same person) to ensure both internal and external reliability of data collection. Each interview was tape-recorded. In the final phase, the interview data were transcribed for content analysis, coded, and analyzed through NVivo 10 software. The data were thematically categorized under the six research questions. For data validation, a summary of key findings was distributed to all interviewees to comment on the accuracy of verbatim quotes and also to confirm if they agreed with the reported findings.

Findings

This paper focuses on the perceptions of Cambodian ELT practitioners in using standardized tests for practice and assessment. The interviews were conducted with only Core English teachers whose courses primarily deal with language proficiency, and thus standardized tests play a role. The findings will be reported based on each research question.

Research Question 1: Are Cambodian ELT Practitioners Aware of Standardized Tests?

All the teachers ($N = 12$) mentioned their familiarity with standardized tests in terms of names and measurements. TOEFL and IELTS were seen by the majority as prominent in various Cambodian schools, ranging from secondary to tertiary levels. However, the existence of Cambridge ESOL and GMAT in Cambodia, though not widely known among those interviewed, was reported by one participant.

Of the twelve participants, five explained how they had become familiar with standardized tests. First, a course on language testing and assessment was compulsory in a teacher training program or an MA (TESOL) program ($n = 2$). Second, TOEFL or IELTS was a precondition for the participants' scholarships for overseas study ($n = 3$). The rest ($n = 7$) indicated only that they were knowledgeable of standardized tests, but did not report on how they had been exposed to such tests.

To the extent that the teachers were aware of standardized tests, when asked which of the tests they preferred, the teachers, for example Lecturer 4 (L4), stated that the IELTS was more contributive to students' learning as the students needed to "learn hard" and practice the four macro skills before they took it:

IELTS test is a very good test I think because they require all the skills, speaking, listening, reading, and writing so that students have to study and practice very hard before they enter the test. For TOEFL [referring to paper-based TOEFL tests], I took one as well, but long time ago. There was no speaking skill to be tested. (L4)

Research Question 2.1: What Standardized Tests Have the Participants Experienced Taking?

When asked what kind of standardized tests the teachers had experienced taking, only seven indicated that they had taken the IELTS or TOEFL at least once with one of these two aims: to build their English language proficiency or to win scholarships for overseas study. One of the twelve participants reported that the choice of which test to take depended largely on those countries for which scholarships are offered:

. . . so for those who are interested in studying abroad or [those who wished to win scholarships], [for example, in the] UK, Australia, or New Zealand, [they] have to take IELTS, and those who are interested in studying in the States or Canada need to take TOEFL tests. (L1)

The rest ($n = 5$) responded that they had not previously taken any standardized tests. They were simply aware of them as a part of their academic journey. These teachers stated they had not taken the tests due to a lack of time for preparation and lack of confidence in taking the tests. Nonetheless, they predicted that they would take a standardized test in the future.

Research Question 2.2: Have the Participants Used Practice Standardized Tests to Assess Their Students' Learning Achievement?

The teacher participants were also asked whether they had used standardized tests to measure students' learning achievements in the classroom. Only one participant did not use these tests as tools for teaching and / or classroom-based evaluation purposes. Eight of the twelve participants mentioned the employment of TOEFL or IELTS with one of these three objectives:

to assess the extent to which students had learned from the course ($n = 3$); to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses ($n = 1$); or to promote the students' acquisition of the target language points specified in course objectives ($n = 4$).

The rest ($n = 3$) mentioned the use of standardized tests for both practice and evaluation, the latter of which constituted both formative and summative assessments. When using TOEFL, IELTS or other standardized tests, teachers re-evaluated, modified, and adapted their selected test materials with reference to course objectives, class sizes, learners' levels, and resources at their disposal:

As practice and assessment, ongoing assessment and final assessment. For example, for this year according to the agreement of all teachers, for the first semester we decided to use IELTS, and [for the] second semester we used TOEFL. (L11)

Sometimes I use it [a standardized test] as a tool of assessment like assignment . . . I asked them to work in pairs or groups, depending on the number of students in my class. I asked them to do the exercises that I selected from TOEFL and IELTS as the assignment. (L2)

Research Question 2.3: Have the Participants Trained Their Students in Test-Taking Strategies in the Classroom?

The interview further explored the teachers' practices of using standardized tests within classrooms in terms of whether they had trained the students in test-taking strategies when they employed standardized tests as assessment tools. Test experts have shown that examinees who use test-taking strategies while taking the TOEFL or IELTS are more likely to obtain higher scores than those who do not (Brown, 2004). However, only half of the participants ($n = 6$) mentioned the provision of in-class training of test-taking strategies for their students:

For freshmen and sophomores, I provided a lot [of training on test-taking strategies] for TOEFL, especially grammar and written expressions. And when they go to Year 3, I trained mostly the IELTS test-taking strategies because scholarships that are provided to Cambodian students now require IELTS scores. (L3)

[I]t was just a small practice. I selected some parts such as grammar, vocabulary, reading, and some parts in listening. I kept [this practice] as a [supplementary activity] to train [the students] and to help them improve their proficiency. (L9)

Those teachers ($n = 6$) who did not train their students in test-taking strategies pinpointed two main factors. First, some of the teachers stated that they had not gained sufficient knowledge of standardized tests due to a lack of practice and training they themselves had had. Second, the teachers asserted that the training of test-taking strategies was a time-consuming and daunting task. They did not have supplementary sessions to train the students' in test-taking strategies in class as they needed to complete the predetermined course syllabus, especially the textbook content.

Research Question 2.4: What Are the Participants' Beliefs about Standardized Tests in Relation to Their Students' Learning Achievement in the Classroom?

When asked about the in-class usefulness of standardized tests, half of the teachers ($n = 6$) believed standardized tests (i.e., TOEFL and IELTS) to be a valid and reliable means to check the extent to which their students had learned from the course with reference to the difference between pre- and post-scores. That is, TOEFL or IELTS were viewed as able to measure students' language proficiency more accurately and consistently than those progress tests designed based on the Core English Teacher Guide. The teachers stated that they used standardized tests in the classroom because standardized tests do not test their students' memory, which is the point of classroom progress or final achievement tests. In other words, the teachers believed that the students who learned by memorizing the lessons in the textbook were unlikely to obtain high scores on the achievement tests if they did not use standardized tests for classroom assessment.

One-third of the teachers ($n = 4$) reported that TOEFL or IELTS were incorporated into Core English because two implicit aims of university policy were to prepare students for overseas scholarships and for better employment opportunities upon graduation.

Of course, I could say that it provides benefits to the students who want to apply for scholarships abroad and even those students who want to apply to work if their English proficiency is good and they can get a well-paid job. . . . The management team cares about this. (L6)

Only two teachers mentioned the negative washback effect of standardized tests on their students' learning. One of them believed standardized tests to be least likely to help students to master real English but most likely to equip them with only test-taking automaticity. The other participant indicated that TOEFL and IELTS were beyond the students' current levels of language proficiency.

It is useful, but sometimes you do not teach the students the real skill, but you teach them for the test, just for the test. My main concern is that [if] we include the standardized tests in exercises, students will remember it only for the testing but not for their real proficiency. (L5)

This view indicates that the teachers had unclear perceptions about standardized tests and progress tests and their respective roles in classroom language teaching. Standardized tests are supposed to assess students' English proficiency, which is not based on any training in a particular course (Brown, 2004). However, such tests have been used to replace progress tests, which are supposed to measure students' mastery of course objectives within a particular ELT program (Brown, 2004).

Research Question 2.5: What Challenges Do the Participants Face in Adopting Practice Standardized Tests as Part of Practice and Assessment?

The teachers were asked whether or not they had encountered any challenges when they adopted standardized tests as part of practice and assessment. The teachers who reported they had used standardized tests in teaching raised three main constraints on using TOEFL or IELTS in classroom-based teaching and evaluation: (1) TOEFL and IELTS were incompatible with the students' level; (2) the teachers were not qualified enough to adapt TOEFL and IELTS; and (3) the teachers had not been test-takers.

With regard to the first constraint, the majority ($n = 8$) reported that it was difficult to incorporate standardized tests into their Core English courses, for the tests were beyond the proficiency levels of a number of students. Those students who could not follow the test materials seemed scared, bored, and demotivated. The teachers thus suggested that more effort (e.g., additional training sessions on testing strategies outside classroom) was needed to assist the students with taking the tests. Lecturer 2 described often meeting students outside of class time to discuss grammar points. Lecturer 12 reported adopting relevant parts of standardized tests that fit with the classroom practice to assess the students' learning.

As for the second and third constraints, some teacher participants indicated that they did not have sufficient topical knowledge or assessment literacy to adapt TOEFL or IELTS and that they need to be qualified examiners as well as test-takers.

To use the standardized tests, you need [to be a] qualified examiner. I would say that most teachers here have never tried the standardized tests themselves, so it is impossible for them to give standardized tests if they have not tried them first. (L10)

Discussion

Drawing from the analysis of the data, the study reveals that the majority of the participants were aware of standardized tests (i.e., TOEFL and IELTS). The teachers held a firm view that standardized tests had a great potential for measuring the students' learning in the classroom, and thus adopted such standardized tests for practice and assessment in teaching. However, teachers who were familiar with the tests had not taken them unless they needed scores to apply for overseas scholarships. Another possible explanation for not taking the tests is that the teachers would need to spend what is considered a significant amount of money in Cambodia on such tests (Moore, Stroupe, & Mahony, 2012).

The findings yield some important concerns about teachers' adoption of standardized tests for classroom practice and assessment. The first is related to the participants' misunderstanding of the purpose of these standardized tests. As the literature review shows, standardized tests are valid and reliable assessment tools for assessing students' English proficiency for the purposes of decision-making on admitting students to a particular program or granting scholarships, especially for overseas studies (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brown, 2004; Moore, Stroupe, & Mahony, 2012). In contrast, the current study reveals that the participants employed standardized tests to measure the students' learning achievements in the classroom, thus pointing out the mismatch between the purposes of assessment of classroom practice (i.e., testing students' learning progress or achievement) and those of standardized tests (i.e., testing students' general English proficiency).

Another important issue is the participants' treatment of test-taking strategy training as part of English language teaching. The current study shows that there was a balance between teachers who trained their learners in test-taking strategies and those who did not. Corroborating this finding is a research study conducted by Keuk and Lim (forthcoming), reporting that the participants were likely to supplement teaching materials with those taken from standardized tests; training of test-taking strategies was believed to enable learners to acquire higher scores in formative or summative assessment (Brown, 2004; Keuk & Lim, forthcoming). As standardized tests do not run parallel to learners' levels, course objectives, class sizes, and available resources (Brown, 2004; Nguon, 2013; Tao, 2014), Brown (2004) claimed that when used in ELT classrooms, standardized tests might be irrelevant to the predetermined course aim and objectives. Therefore, standardized tests used for language classroom practice could, to some

extent, produce a negative impact on classroom instruction, teaching approaches, and especially course objectives, unless teachers are able to adapt such test materials to appropriately achieve course objectives. Furthermore, taking into consideration the goals for teaching English in the context of globalization (i.e., to enable students to widely communicate with different people from diverse cultures, backgrounds, and languages), such training in test-taking strategies could prevent students from achieving successful communication skills across a wide range of contexts.

The high requirement for success in standardized tests is another important concern. As stated in the literature review, Cambodian test-takers should possess a wealth of “world knowledge” to achieve good scores on the IELTS (Moore, Stroupe, & Mahony, 2012, p. 62). Such a requirement may not be achievable through classroom practices due to constraints such as time, students’ levels, and preset goals in English language programs.

Finally, the participants’ insufficient assessment literacy and knowledge about adapting standardized tests for classroom use is also an important issue. Nguon (2013) and Tao (2014) pointed out that the majority of Cambodian ELT teachers lack the necessary assessment literacy to ensure a valid and reliable assessment. It is important that ELT teachers are trained to tailor in-class standardized tests to accomplish this.

Limitations

This study presented some limitations. First, given that the study only investigated the current practice of standardized tests as classroom assessment tools from Cambodian university ELT teachers’ perceptions about standardized tests and employment of such standardized tests in the classroom, the study was based on one source of information. Therefore, future research undertaken in this area should be grounded in multiple sources of information. The perceptions of ELT management teams, administrators, and students on standardized tests and their use as assessment tools should also be investigated. Second, this study only examined teachers’ perceptions of the use and practice of standardized tests. Therefore, future research conducted in this area should make classroom observations to explore teachers’ actual practice and employment of standardized tests within classrooms as well as alternative assessments (Brown, 2004; Genesee & Upshur, 1996) in classrooms.

Conclusion

The present study has shed light on use of standardized tests (TOEFL and IELTS) in practice and assessment in the context of tertiary English language education in Cambodia despite the limitations identified above. The study reveals that the participants were aware of standardized tests and had employed such tests for classroom practice and assessment. The participants held a strong view that these tests were valid and reliable assessment tools for measuring students’ in-class learning progress and English proficiency. They reported that they have taught test-taking strategies to help students improve English competence and achieve good test scores. As such, this practice of providing test-taking strategies could mismatch the expected classroom practice, including teaching instructions and approaches, the course’s predetermined objectives, and the students’ level of English proficiency, among other important issues. To enhance the quality of classroom assessment and to develop valid and reliable classroom (progress) achievement tests to meet the actual practice, it is important to help teachers reconceptualize different kinds of assessment (standardized tests, classroom tests, and alternative classroom assessment). As employing standardized tests in classroom assessments has become part of classroom practice, training on assessment in English language teaching

should also be provided to teachers to enable them to adapt standardized tests to meet classroom practice.

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Appendix
Interview Protocols

1. Would you mind telling me your teaching experience?
2. Have you heard about “standardized tests”?
If YES:
 What are they?
 Could you please describe some standardized tests?
3. Have you ever taken any of the standardized tests?
If YES:
 Why did you take the test?
 How did you find the test?
If NO:
 Why did you not take the test?
 Have you ever self-practised the test? If YES, why have you self-practised the test?
4. Have you used any standardized tests in your class?
If YES:
 What is / are purpose/s for using the standardized tests in your class?
 How did you use the standardized tests?
 Have you trained your students in test taking strategies? If YES, how did you train your students test taking strategies?
 Were there any challenges or constraints when you used the standardized tests in your class?
If NO:
 Why do you not use the standardized tests in your class?
 If you do not use the standardized tests, what do you use to assess your students' learning achievements?
5. Do you think standardized tests are useful for classroom teaching and assessments?
If YES:
 Why do you think they are useful for classroom teaching and assessments?
 Would you recommend any standardized tests to your colleagues?
If NO:
 Why do you think they are not useful for classroom teaching and assessments?

Thanks for your time.