

Challenges and Strategies in Teaching English at Primary Schools: Perspectives of Novice Teachers in Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges novice Cambodian primary-school teachers face when teaching English and the strategies they use to manage those challenges. Guided by an interpretive phenomenological approach, the study prioritized teachers' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to daily classroom realities. Twenty novice EFL teachers (≤ 5 years of experience) from urban and rural primary schools across northwest Cambodia participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 30–60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded where permitted, transcribed, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis with inductive coding. Findings indicate that novice teachers encounter interconnected classroom-level, school-level, and systemic constraints. At classroom level, the most frequently reported difficulties were mixed-ability learners, weak foundations in speaking, pronunciation, and grammar (especially tenses), limited lesson time, and managing large classes. At school and system levels, teachers emphasized shortages of textbooks and teaching aids, limited technology, overcrowded spaces, minimal English exposure outside school, and pressure to complete the prescribed curriculum. Despite these constraints, teachers reported adaptive coping strategies, including pair and group work, low-resource communicative activities (games, stories, role-play), differentiated tasks for fast and slow learners, structured drilling and modeling, clear rules and routines, proximity and non-verbal management techniques, and motivational practices such as praise and songs. The study highlights a persistent policy–practice gap and underscores the need for practice-oriented pre-service preparation, structured induction and mentoring, and improved

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resourcing and realistic pacing to support communicative English teaching in Cambodian primary schools.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated novice primary-school English teachers' lived experiences in Cambodia. It documents key classroom, school, and system constraints (e.g., mixed-ability classes, limited materials, large classes) and the practical coping strategies teachers use, offering context-based evidence to strengthen pre-service preparation and in-service support.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, English has recognised as a crucial language for education, employment, and regional integration in Cambodia, especially as the country has become more involved in ASEAN and the global economy (MoEYS, 2015). English proficiency is increasingly linked to access to higher education, scholarships, and better-paid jobs, especially in tourism, business, and development sectors (Ngel, 2022). In response, the MoEYS has made English compulsory from primary school and has promoted student-centred and communicative approaches to develop learners' listening, reading and writing skills from an early age (MoEYS, 2015). However, the effectiveness of these reforms depends heavily on the competence and professional readiness of the English teachers in primary schools, who are responsible for translating policies into everyday classroom practice (Phorn, Hum, Meas, Chhen, & Hieng, 2026; World Bank, 2025).

Despite political efforts, the introduction of English language teaching in Cambodian schools still faces a number of challenges. Studies have identified systemic problems such as large class sizes, limited teaching and learning material, insufficient facilities and mismatches between curricula expectations and students' actual level of learning (Boy & Water, 2023; Em, 2022; Auliannisa, 2025). In primary schools, these problems are exacerbated by the fact that many pupils have little exposure to English outside their classroom, which means that the school is often their only source of exposure and practice (Chhen, Siek, & Loeurng, 2024). Teachers therefore need to create a rich linguistic environment and maintain learners' motivation in a time of limited teaching and limited resources (Em, 2022; Phorn, Hum, Meas, Chhen, & Hieng, 2026). These conditions are particularly challenging for new teachers starting their careers, often in remote and under-resourced schools (UNESCO, 2022; Fabrigas & Paglinawan, 2025).

The first years of teaching is widely recognised as a critical stage in the professional development of teachers, as they complete their pre-service training, establish teaching routines and develop a sense of self-efficacy (Ma, McMaugh, & Cavanagh, 2022; Karlberg & Bezzina, 2022). International and regional research shows that new teachers often struggle to reconcile theoretical knowledge from teacher training with the real world realities of classrooms, particularly in contexts of resource constraints and large class sizes (Vo, et al., 2025). In Cambodia, Phorn, et al. (2026) found that new teachers of English in North-West Cambodia reported only a moderate level of preparedness overall, with a relatively stronger preparation in content and general pedagogy than in context and practical knowledge. These new teachers reported less confidence in classroom management, in dealing with mixed-abled learners, and in keeping pupils engaged over time. At the same time, evidence suggests that many Cambodian teachers of English continue to rely heavily on grammatical translation and textbook-based instruction, even

though national guidelines promote communicative language teaching and learner-centered methods (Bunrosy & Vireak, 2025; Em, 2022).

Although several studies have explored the general challenges of teaching and learning English in Cambodia or analysed language and education policies, relatively few have specifically addressed the English teachers of the new primary school and their own experiences of the constraints and strategies they face (Em, 2022; Boy & Water, 2023). Understanding the perspective of new teachers is important, as their experience may reveal differences between policy intentions, pre-service training and classroom reality that may not be seen in the top-down evaluation (Farrell, 2019). Moreover, examining how new teachers cope with the challenges - whether by innovating with low-resource communication activities, turning to grammatical translation, or drawing on peer support - may provide valuable insights for designing more contextual support mechanisms (Boy & Water, 2023; Teast, 2026).

Against this background, the present study, "Challenges and Strategies in Teaching English at Primary Schools: Perspectives of Novice Teachers in Cambodia," seeks to explore how novice primary-school English teachers understand and navigate the realities of teaching English in Cambodian classrooms. By drawing on their lived experiences, the study aims to create context-based knowledge that can inform improvements in pre-service curricula, in the development of practitioners of English and in education policy related to the teaching of English at primary level (MoEYS, 2025). This study addresses a gap identified in the literature and contributes to the on-going efforts to improve the quality and equity of English-medium education in Cambodia.

1.1. Problem Statement

Although English is formally integrated into the Cambodian primary school curriculum and is recognised as a key competence for national development, effective implementation of the policy on the use of English remains uneven across regions and school types (MoEYS, 2015; Choi et al. 2024). Research shows that many schools, especially in rural areas, continue to be confronted with overcrowded classrooms, a lack of educational material, limited access to audiovisual resources and inadequate classroom infrastructure (Auliannisa, 2025). These conditions make it difficult for teachers to organise interactive lessons, monitor the progress of individual learners and provide sufficient opportunities for meaningful use of the language in the classroom (Boy & Water, 2023; Em, 2022). Moreover, most primary school pupils have little or no exposure to English outside school, which increases the workload on teachers to provide input and practice within the constraints of classroom time (Nigel, 2022; Teast, 2026).

In this wider context, novice teachers - commonly defined as those who are in their first few years of teaching - are particularly vulnerable. Studies show that new teachers in Cambodia are often only slightly prepared for the realities of the classroom, with particular concerns about their ability to manage large and diverse classes, adjust lesson plans to the actual level of students, and use communication methods within constraints (Phorn, Hum, Meas, Chhen, & Hieng, 2026). While pre-service programmes can provide them with basic content and pedagogical knowledge, there is sometimes less attention to contextual and practical knowledge, such as teaching in multi-disciplinary or under-resourced environments (Dy, Chhinh, Seak, Sin, & Men, 2018). This can lead to low self-efficiencies, stress and frustration in new teachers, which can negatively impact on the quality of teaching and long-term commitment to the profession (Lam, Kuok, & Sze, 2022).

Existing Cambodian studies focus mainly on either the general issues of English language teaching and learning or the context of secondary level education, with fewer studies exploring the teaching of primary level English through the experience of first-year teachers (Em, 2022; Phorn, Hum, Meas, Chhen, & Hieng, 2026). There is limited empirical evidence of the specific challenges that new primary-school teachers face in the classroom, at the school and system level, and even less of the strategies that they adopt to deal with or overcome these barriers. Little is known about how they adapt teaching approaches, select or modify materials and reconcile policy expectations with the needs of learners and school conditions (Banh, 2025). This gap in knowledge is problematic, because without a clear understanding of the perspective of new teachers, teaching institutions, school leaders, and policymakers may continue to design support programs that are not in line with the real needs of primary English classrooms (MoEYS, 2023).

A targeted study of the challenges and strategies of new English teachers in primary schools in Cambodia is therefore needed. By systematically examining their experiences and perceptions, the study aims to address the current knowledge gap and to generate evidence that can inform more responsive and contextually appropriate interventions in teacher training and continuous professional development.

1.2. Research Objectives

- i. To identify the key challenges encountered by novice primary-school English teachers in Cambodia at classroom, school, and system levels
- ii. To explore the strategies novice teachers use to cope with or overcome these challenges in their day-to-day teaching

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of English Language Education in Cambodia

Since the early 1990s, Cambodia has implemented a major educational reform, positioning English as an essential tool for social and economic development, ASEAN integration and global competitiveness. Around 1989, English re-entered the general education curriculum and gradually surpassed French as the most widely taught foreign language in schools and universities (Neau, 2003). Language The education policy, as formulated in the Constitution and the Education Act of 2007, retains Khmer as the language of instruction, while also recognising English and French as foreign languages, which play an important role in certain subjects, grades and specialised programmes.

Under this policy framework, the MoEYS has gradually reduced the starting age for English, so that it is now expected to be taught from the fourth year of primary school, although its precise implementation will depend on the availability of teachers and school resources (MoEYS, 2015). The general education curriculum framework and the English-subject syllabi highlight learner-centred learning, the integration of the four macro-skills and the shift from purely grammatical translation approaches to more communicative practices. Recent strategic documents, such as the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) plan 2024-2028, underline further the role of the English language in supporting Cambodia's human resources development and its aspirations in and outside of ASEAN (Choi, Clayton, Hum, Phommalangsy, & Oanh, 2024).

Despite these ambitions, research has consistently shown a gap between policy intentions and classroom practice, particularly in rural and disadvantaged public schools (Song, 2015). Limited resources, uneven teacher training and continuing structural constraints mean that the implementation of learner-centred and communicative English teaching remains challenging at primary level. This political-practical tension is a key background to understanding the challenges and strategies of new English teachers in Cambodia's primary schools (Diyanti & Madya, 2021).

2.2. Challenges in English Language Teaching in Cambodia

2.2.1. Systemic and School-Level Constraints

A significant body of Cambodian research has identified systemic barriers that shape the teaching of English at school level. A case study of Kith Meng Brasat High School in the Prefecture of Puyi found that teachers and students faced multiple challenges, including large class sizes, a lack of specialised textbooks and teaching materials, and inadequate school facilities. These limitations limited the opportunities for interactive activities and individualised support and contributed to low student achievement as well as teacher frustration (Em, 2022).

These findings are echoed in other studies and policy papers. National and international analyses link low educational outcomes to under-resourced classrooms, obsolete curricula and limited access to up-to-date educational material. The Boy and Water (2023) study on the teaching of English as an additional language in Cambodian secondary schools reported challenges such as outdated curricula, crowded classrooms, furniture, limited teaching resources, low teacher skills and limited opportunities for professional development. These conditions make it difficult for teachers to implement learner-centred approaches and provide adequate opportunities for students to practice.

The situation is aggravated by the pressure of time-sharing and curricula. English is often taught only two hours a week at primary level, which is insufficient to build communication skills, particularly if pupils have little outside exposure. The EM study found that teachers felt pressure to finish the book and prioritized textbook unit coverage over deeper skills development or communication practice. These systemic and educational barriers affect the experience of new teachers from the start of their careers.

2.2.2. Classroom-Level Challenges and Learner Factors

At classroom level, Cambodian English teachers face large, diverse classes and complex learning needs. Em's survey found that students identified teacher quality, study programmes, learning and teaching materials, class activities, class sizes and student's own learning attitudes as the main factors influencing English learning (Em, 2022). Many students, especially in rural schools, come from families with limited financial means and little exposure to the English language, which limits the opportunities for outside-classroom learning (Phon, 2017).

Learner-affective issues are also a challenge. Studies on the problems encountered by students in learning English language and grammar show high levels of anxiety, fear of errors, and difficulty understanding complex constructs (Boun, 2017; Sam & Tieng, 2024). A recent critical narrative review of Cambodian grammar problems for students highlighted recurrent problems with tenses, passive voice, prepositions, articles, subject-

verb agreement, and sentence structures, which may discourage learners and reinforce exam-oriented, form-oriented learning (Oeun & Heng, 2025). If teachers emphasize precision and correcting mistakes, students may be even less inclined to engage in communicative activities (Chin, Em, Chau, Seng, & Pen, 2024).

These problems at classroom level are exacerbated by the limited language and pedagogical skills of teachers themselves. Several studies have noted that the low level of English proficiency of some Cambodian teachers and the limited training in communication methods contribute to the reliance on more controlled and teacher-oriented practices. For new teachers, who are still developing self-confidence, this may lead to stress, reduced self-efficacy and a tendency to avoid risk-taking in their teaching (Lam, Kuok, & Sze, 2022; Phorn, Hum, Meas, Chhen, & Hieng, 2026).

2.3. Teaching Approaches and Strategies in Cambodian English Classrooms

2.3.1. Prevalence of Grammar-Translation and Textbook-Driven Teaching

Despite curricula directives promoting learner-centered approaches, numerous studies show that grammatical translation and textbook-based teaching remain dominant approaches in Cambodian English classrooms. Em and colleagues report that teachers usually give lessons in front of the class, reading texts, translating them into Khmer, and explaining the grammatical rules while students listen, take notes, and complete the essay-writing exercise (Em, 2022). Earlier work cited by Em, such as that of Nea and Nith et al, as cited in Em's study also found that teachers often spoke Khmer rather than English as the language of instruction.

This pattern is connected with a number of factors. The teachers' own experience as students has largely been shaped by traditional methods, which make grammar-translations familiar and comfortable. Many teachers have limited access to in-service training on communication techniques and may lack practical guidance on how to apply CLT principles in large, low-resource classrooms (Oeun & Heng, 2025). The pressure to cover the content of textbooks and prepare students for grammatical rigors reinforces the emphasis on form, translation, and writing exercises. While these methods may help students remember the rules and pass the tests, they offer only limited opportunities to develop oral, listening and interactive skills (Chin, Em, Chau, Seng, & Pen, 2024).

2.3.2. Emergent Communicative and Low-Resource Strategies

Alongside traditional practices, there is increasing evidence of efforts to adopt more communicative and interactive strategies, particularly where teachers are targeted with training or given access to up-to-date material, in addition to traditional practices (Bunrosy & Vireak, 2025). The revised MEOYS syllabus for English promotes pair work, group work, role-playing, games and task-based activities to stimulate meaningful communication between learners. Practical guides to teaching Cambodian students and some classroom-based studies describe how teachers adapt CLT to local conditions using simple, inexpensive resources and non-verbal support (MoEYS, 2025).

For example, teachers can propose information tasks using hand-drawn images, use gestures and total physical response (TPR) to engage young learners, or organise simple dialogues and role-playing around everyday topics such as family, school, and the marketplace (Shi, 2018; Astutik, Aulina, & Megawati, 2019). International literature on

TESOL shows that such low-resource communication strategies can increase learner engagement, facilitate vocabulary retention and build up self-confidence (Anggraeni & Baskin, 2024). However, the research also finds that teachers often carry out these activities in a limited or inconsistent way, and revert to grammatical translation when time is short or when they are uncertain about the management of the class (Bunrosy & Vireak, 2025).

For new teachers, the adoption of communicative methods requires more than theoretical knowledge; it requires practical skills in organising pair and group work, monitoring large groups, and reconciling precision with fluency (Qasseras, 2023; Marinković & Pešić, 2025). The extent to which new staff can benefit from these strategies is therefore closely linked to the quality of their initial training and the support they receive during their first years of teaching (Flockton, 2026).

2.4. Novice Teachers, Teacher Education, and Reform in Cambodia

2.4.1. Novice Teachers, Preparedness, and Self-Efficacy

Research in the field of teaching defines new teachers as those at the start of their career, usually in their first three years of training. This early phase is marked by what Farrell and others describe as a reality shock, as new teachers face the complexity of real classrooms, which are very different from the scenarios in the pre-employment training (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). Faez (2011)'s study of ESOL new teachers found that, although overall readiness improved with experience, self-efficacy remained task specific and was strongly influenced by context factors such as class size, support and resources (Zhi & Yang, 2024; Mintz, et al., 2020). These findings highlight the importance of thorough induction and continuous professional development to maintain the self-confidence and effectiveness of new teachers (Phorn, Hum, Meas, Chhen, & Hieng, 2026).

Preparedness is often conceived along four dimensions: content knowledge, pedagogical skills, contextual knowledge and practical knowledge (Chinyama & Mpisi, 2025; Hepburn & Trompf, 2026). Studies in various countries, including Cambodia, show that pre-service programmes tend to focus more on content and general pedagogy than on context and practical knowledge, which leaves the new entrants less prepared for the reality of under-resourced and diverse classrooms (Dy, Chhinh, Seak, Sin, & Men, 2018; Pov, Kawai, & Nov, 2024). Self-efficacy, as assessed in terms of teaching strategies, classroom management and student engagement, is strongly correlated with perceived readiness and predicts how teachers will respond to challenges in a sustained way (Hoang, 2018; Duan, Bissaker, & Xu, 2024).

2.4.2. Novice English Teachers and Primary Teacher Education in Cambodia

A recent quantitative study of 195 new ESL teachers in North-West Cambodia by Phorn et al. (2026) examined their readiness and self-efficacy across four dimensions of readiness and three dimensions of self-efficacy. Overall, the study found a moderate level of preparedness, with higher scores for content knowledge and pedagogical skills than for contextual and practical knowledge. Younger teachers were more confident in using teaching strategies than in managing class sizes and student engagement, indicating that they felt less competent in dealing with classroom behaviour, large classes, and motivation. The study also documented significant urban-rural differences, with urban

newcomers reporting higher preparedness and self-efficacy than rural students, which the authors attributed to differences in educational resources and support.

A more in-depth analysis of teacher development in Cambodia provides a historical and structural context for these findings. Sot's review of four decades of teacher development shows how teacher training and retraining programmes have evolved from emergency, short courses after 1979 to more structured pathways of 12+2 and now 12+4 (Sot, Sok, & Dickinson, 2019). The document highlights the continuing problems, such as the limited duration of training, the variability of the quality of training centres for teachers and the need to modernise the teachers themselves. Similarly, a PhD study on primary school teacher training in Cambodia reports that pre-service programmes face challenges in terms of curriculum implementation, teaching and learning resources, quality of teaching and limited practical experience for teachers in the pre-service programme, with a fragmented and inconsistent CPD (Dy, Chhinh, Seak, Sin, & Men, 2018; Bo, Seak, Sin, & Souk, 2019).

Recent policy initiatives aim at addressing these shortcomings. The Teacher Policy Action Plan and related strategic documents outline the transition from two-year programmes of 12+2 to four-year programmes of 12+4 and call for systematic training of current teachers and teachers-to-be (MoEYS, 2023). The Strategic Plan for Teacher Education Reform 2024-30, launched by the MoEYS and UNESCO, provides a blueprint for a comprehensive reform of teacher education and professional development, including stricter entry requirements, more intensive training, support for new teachers and coherent CPD systems. However, these reforms are still being implemented and many of the new teachers are being trained in older models, which helps to explain the gaps in preparation and self-efficacy reported in recent studies (Sok & Heng, 2024).

2.4.3. Strategies and Coping Mechanisms of Novice English Teachers

International research shows that new teachers use different coping strategies, such as streamlining the content of the curriculum, relying heavily on textbooks, using highly controlled activities, and seeking informal guidance from peers (Nazari, Ghanizadeh, & Mirzaee, 2023). In language teaching, newcomers often turn to teacher-centred approaches and grammatical translation when they feel insecure about their own language skills or about the classroom management, even when pre-service programmes promote communication methods (Kilic, 2023). Over time, some beginners gradually expand their repertoire through experimentation, reflection and networking (Gregersen, Mercer, & MacIntyre, 2021).

The emerging evidence from Cambodia suggests similar patterns among novice teachers of English in primary schools. The Phorn et al.'s study shows that beginners typically rely on traditional practices such as translation, choral repetition and textbook exercises, but also try to incorporate interactive activities such as games, couples work and role-playing, if circumstances permit (Phorn, Hum, Meas, Chhen, & Hieng, 2026). Their choice of strategies is shaped by contextual factors such as classroom size, learning capacity, available material and school leadership aspirations (Gemink, Fokkens-Bruinsma, Pauw, & van Veen, 2021). Some new entrants seek support from more experienced colleagues or attend school-based seminars, while others have fewer mentoring opportunities and rely heavily on self-study (Sok & Heng, 2024).

Research on primary teacher education and reform in Cambodia underscores that the absence of a systematic induction process and coherent CPD has undermined sustained support for novice teachers (MoEYS, 2025). The qualitative case study by Chea (2024) on primary teacher education concluded that a well designed and coordinated CPD system, including mentoring and follow-up, is necessary to help new teachers adapt to new curricula, integrate ICT and improve student learning outcomes. Similarly, the policy briefs and the strategic plans call for structured probation periods and targeted support programmes for new teachers, recognising that their initial experience is crucial for the quality and retention of teachers in the long term (Bo, Seak, Sin, & Souk, 2019; Abdallah & Alkaabi, 2023).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Designs

The study used a qualitative research design based on an interpretative phenomenological approach to understand the lived experience of novice teachers and the meanings attached to the challenges and coping strategies in the Cambodian primary school English-language education system (Robinson & Williams, 2024). An emphasis on interpretive phenomenology analysis (IPA) has been adopted to prioritise the perspectives of participants and how these perspectives are shaped by personal history and socio-cultural and school contexts (Noon, 2018). This qualitative phase was conducted as an in-depth follow-up to an earlier quantitative survey of 195 novice teachers from 188 primary schools in north-west Cambodia, allowing the researchers to move from broad patterns to detailed, context-rich accounts of experience (Phorn, Hum, Meas, Chhen, & Hieng, 2026). The study was therefore designed as a follow-up to an earlier, broader exploratory study, moving from broad to deep in a multi-phased research sequence (Lim, 2024).

3.2. Participants

The participants were EFL novice teachers in primary schools in Cambodia, defined as having less than 5 years of teaching experience in line with the common definitions in research on teacher development. Participants were originally identified through an earlier project, Exploring the readiness and effectiveness of novice teachers in teaching English as a foreign language in primary schools in north-west Cambodia, which involved 195 participants from 188 primary schools. Teachers were recruited from across the province (e.g. Battambang, Bantay Meanchey, Pursat, Siem Reap, Oddar Meanchey, Pailin) to capture the diversity of the school environment (e.g. rural-urban, mixed-sex, mixed-sex). The final quality sample consisted of 20 teachers (T1 to T20) in line with the IPA emphasis on smaller samples to support deeper analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

The study used a purposive sampling approach to select participants with a rich background of information who met the inclusion criteria relevant to the research questions (Samuel & Merkebu, 2025). Participants were initially drawn from contacts established at the previous stage, and snowball sampling was used as an additional strategy to reach out to other eligible teachers, especially in contexts of scarcity. The saturation of data informed the final sample size and the recruitment process was terminated when further interviews did not generate new substantive topics (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

| Variable | Summary |
|-----------------------|---|
| Age range | Early 20s to late 20s |
| Teaching experience | 2–3 years |
| Provinces represented | Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Siem Reap, and nearby areas |
| School context | Urban and rural primary schools |
| Grade levels taught | Mainly Grades 4–6 |

3.3. Research instrument

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide that supported a consistent coverage of key issues while allowing participants flexibility to elaborate and introduce unexpected issues (Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi, & Syam, 2022). The guide has been developed through (1) a literature review, (2) alignment with previous work, (3) peer review, and (4) pilot testing to ensure that it is clear and appropriate (Roberts, 2020). The questions were grouped in four areas: English proficiency and language knowledge, pedagogical skills and teaching strategies, contextual knowledge, and classroom management and student involvement.

Table 2: Interview Questions

| Domain | Focus | Interview Questions |
|---|---|---|
| English Proficiency & Language Knowledge | Teachers' self-assessment of their proficiency and challenging language areas | "How do you assess your current level of English proficiency for teaching primary students?" / "What aspects of English grammar do you find most challenging to explain?" |
| Pedagogical Skills & Teaching Strategies | Methods, differentiation, resource adaptation, and skill integration | "What strategies do you use to teach pronunciation effectively?" / "How do you incorporate all four language skills in your lessons?" |
| Contextual Knowledge | Cultural and contextual factors affecting student learning | "What specific challenges do your students face in learning English within their cultural context?" / "What role does students' native language play in your English teaching methods?" |
| Classroom Management & Student Engagement | Managing behavior, motivation, routines, and family engagement | "How much can you do to control disruptive behavior?" / "How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest?" |

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through individual in-depth interviews in flexible formats (schools face-to-face and remote, telephone or digital depending on access and the preferences of the participants). Ethical procedures included informed consent, voluntary participation and anonymisation through codes of the participants (for example, T1 to T20). The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, were recorded by audio if allowed and were re-written verbatim (Johnson, Liu, Rash, & Slusarek, 2025). Participants could

answer in Khmer or English, and translation techniques were used to preserve the sense of the language and the precision (Yunus, Hartman, & Sturgiss, 2022).

The study analysed the data using a six-phase thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2008) which progressed through: (1) introduction, (2) initial coding, (3) search for topics, (4) review of topics, (5) definition and naming of topics, and (6) reporting. The encoding is inductive (data-driven) and includes both semantic and latent encoding to capture the explicit content and the underlying meaning. The final report was based on a narrative summary supported by illustrative quotes from participants on evidence themes (Naeem, Ozuem, & Ranfagni, 2023).

4. Findings

The qualitative findings from the 20 interviews are organised around three major areas: classroom-level challenges, school-level and systemic challenges, and strategies used by novice teachers.

4.3.1. Classroom-level challenges

Teachers consistently identified mixed ability classes, weak learning foundations, time pressure and speech anxiety as the main problems at the classroom level. Many explained that some of the students had no previous English experience and had to start from the beginning of the alphabet, while others were more advanced and it was difficult to plan lessons.

Table 3: Summary of classroom-level challenges reported by interviewees (N = 20)

| Theme | Frequency | Description |
|---|-----------|--|
| Mixed-ability learners | 17 | Wide differences in student proficiency within the same class |
| Weak speaking / pronunciation / grammar | 16 | Students struggled with speaking, tenses, and pronunciation |
| Limited time | 12 | Teachers reported difficulty covering lessons in 40–50 minutes |
| Classroom management in large classes | 12 | Difficulty monitoring all students and maintaining attention |

These findings show that learner diversity was the most common problem at class level. Teachers also often reported that students were shy, had poor pronunciation and had difficulty with grammar, particularly the concepts of tenses. Time constraints and large classes have further restricted the ability of teachers to provide adequate training and individual support.

4.3.2. School-level and systemic challenges

Beyond the classroom, teachers have pointed to material shortages, crowded classrooms, weak infrastructure, and poor English skills outside the school. These issues were particularly important in rural schools.

Table 4: Summary of school-level and systemic challenges (N = 20)

| Theme | Frequency | Description |
|--|-----------|---|
| Limited materials and technology | 14 | Lack of textbooks, audio tools, and teaching aids |
| Large classes and limited space | 12 | Overcrowded classes restricted movement and activities |
| Little English exposure outside school | 12 | Students rarely used English beyond the classroom |
| Curriculum pressure | 8 | Teachers felt pressure to complete lessons despite weak student foundations |

The findings suggest that school conditions strongly influence the way teachers teach. Some teachers reported that they had to make their own flashcards, draw on the board or use simple visual aids because they did not have enough material in the schools. Moreover, limited exposure to English outside school meant that teachers had to provide most of the language instruction and practice in a short time.

4.3.3. Instructional, management, and motivational strategies

Despite these difficulties, teachers described a wide range of coping strategies. These included group work, pair work, songs, games, low-resource communication, differentiated instruction, and clear rules and routines for the classroom.

Table 5: Summary of strategies used by novice teachers (N = 20)

| Strategy type | Theme | Frequency | Description |
|---------------|--|-----------|---|
| Instructional | Group/pair work | 18 | Used to increase participation and support weaker learners |
| Instructional | Low-resource communicative activities | 16 | Stories, games, role-play, and integrated-skills activities |
| Instructional | Drilling / phonics / I do-we do-you do | 12 | Used for pronunciation and grammar teaching |
| Instructional | Differentiated instruction | 10 | Adjusting tasks for fast and slow learners |
| Management | Rules and routines | 16 | Daily routines, clear rules, and transitions |
| Management | Group leaders / captains | 8 | Student helpers used in large classes |
| Management | Proximity / non-verbal cues | 12 | Signals, clapping, seat changes, walking around |
| Motivational | Games, songs, videos | 17 | Used to reduce anxiety and increase engagement |
| Motivational | Praise and encouragement | 14 | Positive reinforcement and personal support |
| Collaboration | Family communication | 10 | Guidance to parents for home support |

The most commonly reported strategy was group or pair work, which was used by teachers to cope with large classes and to give students more opportunities to practice

English. Games, songs and interactive activities have also been widely used to motivate timid learners and to reduce the anxiety of speaking. Teachers relied on routines, rules, and proximity control to keep order and keep the lessons going smoothly.

5. Discussion

The study aimed to examine the challenges faced by novice primary school English teachers in Cambodia and the strategies they use to overcome them. Overall, the findings show a clear convergence between the reported experience of novice teachers and the broader literature on Cambodian ESL: teachers work within constraints such as mixed-sex classes, weak learner support, large class sizes, limited teaching time, limited resources, and minimal exposure to English outside the school. These remaining constraints help to explain why the implementation of learner-centred and communicative approaches promoted in national policies remains uneven in the various contexts.

5.1. Classroom-level challenges and learner readiness

The most frequently reported difficulty at classroom level was mixed ability learners, which made it difficult for new teachers to design lessons that were both accessible to weaker learners and sufficiently challenging for stronger ones. This finding is in line with research showing that Cambodian primary school students often have limited exposure to English and therefore enter the classroom with very different levels of proficiency (Ngel, 2022). The weak language skills of learners - particularly the problems with tenses - are also consistent with previous research describing the common problems with the language development of Cambodian learners and their fear of making mistakes (Em, 2022). In this context, new teachers can experience a reality shock, as the complexity of the classroom requirements exceeds what they have been trained in during their initial training (Farrell, 2012).

5.2. School/system constraints and the policy–practice gap

Teachers' descriptions of material shortages, technology constraints and overcrowding of classrooms confirm that systemic problems at school level and in rural areas (Auliannisa, 2025), remain the main obstacles to effective ELT. These limitations reduce the possibilities for interactive activities and continuous monitoring of learners, which are essential for the communication-based learning of languages and for learner-centred teaching (Kilic, 2023). In addition, concerns about curricula pressure (e.g. to finish a book) reflect previous findings that teachers often prioritise content over communication practice when time is limited and assessment expectations are formative (Em, 2022).

5.3. Strategies: adapting communicative teaching to low-resource realities

Despite the limitations, teachers reported a broad range of teaching, classroom management and motivation strategies, which suggests the development of professional autonomy. The frequent use of pair and group work and games shows that new teachers are not relying exclusively on grammatical translation; many are trying to adapt communicative and interactive activities to local conditions, echoing the recommendations of the MOEYS and research on adapting CLT to low-resource settings (Boy & Water, 2023). At the same time, the use of exercises, phonics and structured modelling by teachers (e.g. I do - we do - you do) suggests a pragmatic balance between

fluency-oriented scaffolding and precision-oriented scaffolding, which is often needed for learners with weak foundations and teachers who are still building their self-esteem (Zhao, 2024).

Classroom management strategies (rules, routines, proximity control, group leaders) seem to work as enabling conditions for more interactive learning in large classrooms. This supports the argument that the self-efficacy of new teachers is strongly influenced by context factors (Jiang, Guo, & Tomek, 2024). When teachers can hold attention and reduce disruption, they are more likely to do pair work and communication tasks rather than return to teacher-centred teaching.

5.4. Implications for teacher education and professional support

The findings highlight the importance of strengthening support for new teachers in three areas. First, pre-service curricula should better prepare new teachers for blended learning, large-group teaching, and practical classroom management strategies appropriate for Cambodian primary schools (Phorn, Hum, Meas, Chhen, & Hieng, 2026). Second, induction and mentoring schemes are needed to reduce the pressure of early career pressure and to promote the progressive expansion of the learning repertoire, particularly in rural under-resourced settings where support may be limited. Thirdly, investments at the system level in basic resources (textbooks, audio materials, visual aids) and more realistic learning sequencing would make learner-centred approaches more feasible and reduce the pressure for teachers to focus on content rather than learning.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the challenges and coping strategies of newly-qualified teachers of English in Cambodia. The findings show that new teachers face interrelated classroom, school and systemic challenges, particularly mixed learners, poor language and grammar skills, limited teaching time, large classes, lack of materials and technology and minimal exposure to English outside the school. These constraints contribute to the continuing gap between national political aspirations for communicative, learner-oriented English teaching and the reality of classroom practice in the day-to-day classroom.

However, teachers reported a number of strategies to address these challenges, including pair and group work, low-resource communication, differentiated instruction, structured instruction and modelling, clear rules and routines, and motivating techniques such as play and songs. These strategies suggest that new teachers actively adapt their teaching to the context rather than simply copying traditional methods, although sustained implementation depends on classroom management, resources, and professional support.

In conclusion, improving the early English education in Cambodia requires coordinated action: more practice-based training for new teachers, structured introductions and mentoring, and investment in schools and systems that make communicative teaching possible. Supporting new teachers in their early years is crucial, as this is the period in which their self-efficacy, teaching quality and long-term commitment to the profession are shaped.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study has strictly adhered to all ethical procedures involving the use of human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents who were informed of their anonymity, with their responses kept strictly private and confidential. They were also informed that the study was at low risk and that they could stop participating at any time without any repercussions.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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