



The Angkor Tree Project

Siem Reap

Cambodia

Agenda 2025

A teacher's training program in Cambodia

Challenges

When the Khmer Rouge was in power, late 1970's, estimated 75 percent of teachers, 96 percent of university students and 67 percent of all primary and secondary school pupils were killed. Infrastructure was destroyed or abandoned.

In recent years, the demand for education increased firmly, and despite the ongoing efforts of the government, international organisations and NGO's, there is a long way to go.

Most surveys show that teacher issues are the major concern: teacher scarcity, placement of teachers in more remote areas, poor professional performance of teachers, lack of managerial capacities, poor teaching skills, too low teacher living standards..., these are just some of the major issues that the educational system in Cambodia is facing today.

And where this goes for all subjects in all schools, it is certainly a major issue for English teachers. These, besides the shortcomings above, mostly also lack a minimum proficiency in English.

Teacher profiles:

Less than a quarter of primary school teachers hold an upper secondary degree, while about one third even does not hold a lower secondary school degree. Educational attainment for secondary school teachers is greater. Almost two-thirds of secondary teachers have completed at least grade 12, while just 18 percent had some post-secondary education.

In-service training is almost inexistent, and teaching methods have been the same for many decades, and are rarely reviewed nor thoroughly evaluated. Hence, rather old-fashioned methods like classroom drill, endless repeating of the same sentence ... are prevalent. At the same time, research has shown that a larger focus on interaction between teachers and students, triggering student's own creativity, audio-visual aids ... exponentially boost students' capacity to acquire skills and knowledge in the long-term.

Teacher-student ratio:

Cambodia has an extremely high teacher-student ratio at around 50:1 in primary schools. That places Cambodia in the top 7 of worst performing countries in that area (source : World Bank) . These figures are country averages, in rural areas the concentration of students per classroom tends to be much higher than in urban areas.

Many schools try to overcome the shortage of teachers by a double-shift approach. Part of the children attend classes in the morning, and the second half attends afternoon-classes.

Teaching remains a highly attractive profession and there is great demand for admission into Provincial and Regional Teacher Training Colleges. Teacher shortages are not a product of constraints in the potential supply of teachers, but rather of central planning efforts to limit the growth of the civil service.

Teacher pay:

There is generalized discontent amongst teachers about teaching being poorly compensated. There is broad consensus amongst educators, union leaders, administrators and society in general that this is indeed the case. Cambodia has a flat teacher salary structure and salary increase scheme. After 15 years of service, a primary school teacher salary increases from 0.43 percent to 0.58 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita; while a lower secondary school teacher salary increases from 0.64 percent to 0.77 percent of GDP per capita.

Second jobs can be very important sources of income to compensate for relatively low teacher pay. About 68 percent of primary and 50 percent of lower secondary school teachers hold another paid job, such as farming or sales. A common second occupation, especially for urban primary school teachers (42 percent at the primary level and 87 percent at the lower secondary level), is private tutoring. Tutoring earnings can represent approximately two thirds of the monthly average base salary with basic allowances.

Although education is officially free, school staff oftentimes levies unofficial fees. Fees may be charged against registration and enrolment, classroom materials or examinations.

Teacher performance:

The quality of teaching is a key factor in keeping children in school. The legacy of the Khmer Rouge period represented a monumental setback to the education sector as the Cambodian teacher cadre suffered enormous casualties. During the reconstruction period, the number of trained primary and lower secondary school staff increased gradually and consistently, with an increased share of the teaching force having upper secondary education or graduate qualifications.

However, the quality of preservice training is low and the opportunities for professional development are limited. These are important barriers for acquiring mastery of curricular content knowledge or putting into practice pedagogically pertinent teaching practices. Distance from school, geographical isolation, a long rainy season as well as competition for time from other remunerated activities can also play a role in undermining teacher attendance patterns and reducing instructional time. All these factors combined, in turn, can have a negative effect on student performance and, directly or indirectly, affect student outcomes in terms of cognitive development, repetition and dropout.

Teacher absenteeism is troubling. Approximately 15.6 percent of teachers were absent on the day of a surprise visit and the availability of teacher substitutes is rare. Absent teachers usually translates into little or no learning taking place at school.

Student attendance is lower when teachers are absent more frequently, while the number of student absences is a strong predictor of weaker academic performance.

School teachers prepare inadequately for class. Only half of the teachers had lesson plans readily available on the day of an announced visit. Class time is mostly exclusively devoted to instruction or recitation. The time spent in applied individual or group work is low. Overall, classes tend to be highly structured with limited opportunities for interaction or

creative thinking. Teachers tend to dominate the time-on-task through frontal instruction or asking questions.

Student performance is higher when teachers hold a university degree or have stronger pedagogical skills.

Overall, research suggests that it is imperative that preservice teacher training as well as in-service professional development systems are bolstered to raise teacher subject and pedagogical content knowledge. Better lesson planning and classroom preparation must be encouraged and regularly monitored.

Pathways to reform:

Whilst it is primarily the government's responsibility to take initiative and conduct severe reforms, the private sector did not wait for the government. Private companies, whether disguised as NGO's or not, and real NGO's have started schools (kindergarten, primary schools, high schools, universities ...), pre- and afterschool initiatives and much more.

Commercial initiatives:

These provide education for money. The tuition fees vary, generally starting at around US\$ 30 per student per month, and fees of over US\$ 300 are no exceptions. Knowing that approx. 45 % of Cambodia's population lives on an income below US\$ 1,25/day, it is clear that these fees are inaccessible to most families.

We do not express an opinion on the appropriateness of these initiatives, but it is certain that they only benefit the happy few, and therefore their contribution to building a solid and general school system is rather limited.

Unfortunately, many well-intentioned initiatives by western governments seem to fall under this category: they aim the more well-off families, and it is mainly the (foreign) teachers that reap the rewards.

The 4th United Nations Sustainable Development Goal states: "*Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning*". This is translated into a number of targets, and the first one is: "*ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes*".

Paid and commercial education initiatives don't have their place in this context!

NGO's:

Hundreds of NGO's are active in Cambodia, running a multiple fold of projects. Some of these projects were initiated by Cambodian citizens, other are the result of foreign initiatives. And although sometimes controversial, for the time being, these initiatives are urgently needed to overcome the shortcomings of the public education system.

NGO's often lack structure, duplicate work, do not always work very efficiently, many times show lack of measurement of effectiveness, hardly cooperate with other NGO's ... These are just some of the most frequent issues.

Many NGO's get their funds in Western countries, and therefore some tend to align activities to what is expected by the donors, rather than what are local needs. Sometimes projects are even initiated without local involvement, resulting in extremely poor results. It's not very difficult to find an empty school building, built with generous donations (and it's easy to find sponsors to build a new school), but not reflecting any local need other than the needs perceived by the foreign initiators, and not having considered that a school does not only require to be built, but also to be run. And for the run a continuous and long-term funding (salaries, school materials, supervision, ...) is required, but often forgotten!

Another source of controversy is the comparatively high salaries received by NGO workers. For their expatriate staff, NGOs need to compete against commercial organizations in Western labour markets. To attract experienced professionals, that means offering their employees competitive (by Western standards) wages and career development prospects.

Last but not least there is the lack of financial transparency. More and more sources point to cases where NGOs have turned into for-profit structures. Tax exemptions and the absence of an effective regulatory system make it relatively easy to do business under the guise of humanitarian activities. There are numerous ways to do this, starting with the straight-out misuse of donor funds for private purposes and ending with more elaborate schemes, such as company owners setting up an NGO that uses the products their own company makes. Often, this is less malfeasance than simple ignorance. There is in Cambodia a general misunderstanding on what is a non-profit and what is a for-profit organization."

Some donors try to minimize the risks of dealing with "for-profit NGOs" by requiring the submission of an audit report by a credible audit firm as part of the grant application process. However, high audit fees make this requirement a serious challenge for local NGOs operating on tiny budgets. A simple on-line financial statement (for example quarterly) of income and expenses would be a good first step, for many NGO's even this seems difficult.

Despite these issues, it is certainly true that many NGO's fulfill their mission professionally, with enthusiasm and in an ethically correct way.

The role of volunteers:

Every year thousands of well-intentioned, mostly young people come to Cambodia to volunteer. And here is no doubt that most of them only have the best interest of the children in mind.

Most volunteers choose to work with Cambodian children, often by teaching English in orphanages. These orphanages exist only to cater to foreign tourists. In fact, the clear majority of children who are placed in orphanages in Cambodia are not orphans and have at least one living parent. But demand from foreign tourists to visit Cambodian orphanages and work with Cambodian children is so high that parents are often offered powerful financial incentives to place their children in these so-called orphanages, or are promised that they will be provided with a great education, which is often not the case.

Cambodian kids are being taken out of their homes to give foreigners the chance to post photos of themselves hanging out with Cambodian orphans on Facebook. Children are being kept out of school so that they can instead learn to dance and put on orphan dance performances on the streets.

Many Western volunteers believe that they are different. Unfortunately, they're wrong. Most Westerners would be horrified at the idea of dozens of Cambodians flooding their child's classroom, especially if these 'volunteers' had no qualifications to teach, had no teaching experience, underwent no background checks, and proceeded to post photos of the children all over Facebook. Can you imagine a Western school allowing that? Or any parent?

Most reputable organizations no longer accept volunteers who are not willing to stay for at least 3 or 6 or sometimes 12 months, unless for very specific jobs. Think about it: students don't learn English when their teachers are coming in and out for two-week stints. They learn the same things—like the alphabet and how to count to ten, over and over again, but never get a deeper understanding of the language. Again, imagine if your whole childhood education had been in the hands of short-term substitute teachers.

On the other hand, the presence of volunteers and native-speakers is extremely useful when it comes to teaching English. Cambodian teachers are in general not the best English teachers: they lack proficiency in the language as well as proper teaching techniques. A role as an assistant-teacher, under supervision of the local teacher, focusing on pronunciation and conversation skills is valuable. But that's something different than putting an unexperienced tourist in charge of a class!

A good, comprehensible framework with clear expectations, guidance and follow-up might help to resolve this issue.

Unfortunately, many of the schools and "orphanages" that use volunteers do so to avoid having to pay for permanent teachers. More generally, organizations that welcome short-term volunteers are all too often in it only for the money. Not all luckily, but some caution is highly advised!

Which brings us to the money. Many organizations that charge you to volunteer with children are highly suspect and often do not have the best interests of the children in mind. Organizations that do not require background checks most definitely do not have the best interests of children in mind.

A back-ground check, a strict code of conduct, an in-place child protection policy and clear understanding of the volunteer's responsibilities and tasks are a minimum requirement. We strongly favorize longer-term commitments (3 months or longer) for any responsibility that goes beyond the role of teacher-assistant. And these volunteers are harder to find.

Conclusion:

Education in Cambodia has a few major challenges ahead. Most of these challenges need to be addressed by the government, but NGO's can play an important role, providing they accept to work against a number of standards that meet concerns about ethical behaviour, professionalism and financial transparency.

Especially in the field of teacher training the needs are high and urgent. Having well-trained teachers will decrease the dependence from and need for foreign volunteers, will of course improve the quality of education, and will, in the longer term, be the most important lever for social change.

Secondly a strategy to decrease dependence on short term foreign volunteers, and a switch to well trained and coached long term co-operators needs to be implemented.

2018 - The Angkor Tree Teacher Training Program Teaching English⁽¹⁾

1. Objective.

The objective of the Angkor Tree Teacher Training Program is to provide free training to Cambodian teachers, mainly those working in NGO's and informal education projects, covering English language proficiency and pedagogical skills.

2. Approach.

The Angkor Tree Teacher Training Program runs as short modules, allowing the participants to continue their current (often teaching) jobs.

Every module (around 20 hours per module) offers students (groups of no more than 15 students) the possibility to attend the weekday program (one half day/week during 10 weeks) the weekend program (Saturday or Sunday, full day during 5 weeks), or the all in one week program (for remote students, 5 full days where the students are offered compensation for transport and accommodation). The practice training is done during regular school hours, in cooperation with the schools where the students are currently teaching.

3. Curriculum.

The curriculum used for the Angkor Tree Teacher Training Program contains two elements: knowledge of the English Language and English Language Teaching skills. Both parts are developed in cooperation with reputed universities and Language centres across the world.

4. Teachers and coaches.

A local, highly skilled teacher trainer is available for the classes of pedagogy. The modules aiming at language proficiency are based on self-study, with proper coaching.

5. Follow-up.

Graduate students from the Angkor Tree Teacher Training Program are followed-up before and after completing their course. A teacher coach visits all students at their respective schools to observe current practice (before attending the courses) and to help implementing the acquired skills (after completing the courses). Moreover, regular follow-up meetings are held where experience and best practices can be shared.

A website will soon be available for all students and graduate students. Lesson-plans, documentation, lesson materials will be available. On this website and users will be able to share comments, suggestions, experiences and even post their own contributions.

6. Partners.

The Angkor Tree Teacher Training Program works in close cooperation with local NGO's, international NGO's, universities and Child Safety Programs.

7. Timing.

The first group of Cambodian students started Q1 2018.

For 2018 8 modules are planned. The remote students cycle will only take place 3 times a year.

For 2019 there will be at least 12 modules.