

សង្ខេបស្តីពី—Abstract

អត្ថបទទី៤៖ ទស្សនៈរបស់គរុនិស្សិតកម្ពុជាដែលពុំមែនឯកទេសភាសាអង់គ្លេស លើការសិក្សាភាសាអង់គ្លេសនៅវិទ្យាស្ថានជាតិអប់រំ

សង្ខេបស្តីពី

ករណីសិក្សានេះមានគោលបំណងឈ្លងយល់ពីទស្សនៈ និងបញ្ហាប្រឈមរបស់គរុនិស្សិតដែលពុំមែន ឯកទេសភាសាអង់គ្លេស ទៅលើការសិក្សាភាសាអង់គ្លេស ក្នុងអំឡុងពេលទទួលការបណ្តុះបណ្តាល នៅវិទ្យាស្ថានជាតិអប់រំ ក្នុងព្រះរាជាណាចក្រកម្ពុជា។ ការស្រាវជ្រាវនេះប្រើប្រាស់ពហុវិធីសាស្ត្របែប គុណវិស័យក្នុងការប្រមូលទិន្នន័យ។ គរុនិស្សិតឯកទេសផ្សេងៗ ក្រៅពីភាសាអង់គ្លេស ត្រូវបានជ្រើស រើសជាសំណាកតាមវិធីសាស្ត្រចៃដន្យតាមចំណាត់ថ្នាក់ ដើម្បីបំពេញកម្រងសំណួរចំនួន៤២នាក់ និង ដើម្បីការសម្ភាសន៍ជាក្រុមចំនួន៩នាក់។ លទ្ធផលនៃការសិក្សាបានបង្ហាញថា គរុនិស្សិតឯកទេសក្រៅ ពីភាសាអង់គ្លេសភាគច្រើន បានផ្លាស់ប្តូរទស្សនៈរបស់ពួកគេទៅលើការសិក្សាភាសាអង់គ្លេស ដោយ សារហេតុផលមួយចំនួនដូចជា កម្មវិធីសិក្សា វិធីសាស្ត្របង្រៀន ចំនួនសិស្សក្នុងថ្នាក់រៀន និងកង្វះខាត សម្ភារៈបរិក្ខារ។ អំឡុងពេលទទួលការបណ្តុះបណ្តាលនៅវិទ្យាស្ថានជាតិអប់រំ ពួកគេបានជួបប្រទះ បញ្ហាប្រឈមចម្បងពីរគឺ សមត្ថភាព ភាសាអង់គ្លេសខុសៗគ្នា និងការសិក្សាលើមុខវិជ្ជាច្រើនពេក។ លទ្ធផលនៃការសិក្សានេះ ស្របគ្នាទៅនឹងលទ្ធផលស្រាវជ្រាវកន្លងមកពាក់ព័ន្ធនឹងទស្សនៈចំពោះការ សិក្សាភាសាអង់គ្លេសរបស់គរុនិស្សិត-និស្សិត និងនិស្សិតសាកលវិទ្យាល័យ ដែលពុំមែនឯកទេសភាសា អង់គ្លេស។

ពាក្យគន្លឹះ៖ ផ្នត់គំនិតលើការសិក្សាភាសាអង់គ្លេស គរុនិស្សិតឯកទេសពុំមែនភាសាអង់គ្លេស គរុនិស្សិត សិក្ខាកាម ប្រទេសកម្ពុជា

Cambodian Non-English Major Trainees' Perceptions of English Learning at National Institute of Education

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Abstract

This intrinsic case study aimed to investigate the perceptions of Cambodian non-English major trainees (hereafter N-ETs) towards English learning and their perceived challenges during their training at the National Institute of Education. A multi-method qualitative approach was employed for data collection. Stratified random sampling was used to select N-ETs from different majors for questionnaire survey (n = 42) and focus group interviews (n = 9). As a result, the study found that the majority of N-ETs changed their perceptions of learning English owing to the syllabus, teaching strategies, class size and insufficient facilities. They encountered two key challenges – mixed level and too many subjects, in learning English. The findings of this study largely echoed previous findings on perceptions of trainees and university students whose majors are not English towards learning English.

Keywords: Perceptions of English leaning; Non-English major trainees; Student teachers; Trainees; Cambodia

1. Introduction

The National Institute of Education (NIE) is the only institute which trains teachers for upper secondary schools across Cambodia. University graduates as well as experienced teachers at primary schools and lower secondary schools are eligible to participate in the training at NIE if they are bachelor's degree holders. NIE recruits its trainees through an entrance examination. The successful candidates attend a one-year training at NIE before they are certified as upper secondary school teachers and sent to their assigned school. During this training program, trainees are required to study three specialized courses and eight common courses, as well as undertake teaching practicum. This training program aims to provide them with concrete foundational knowledge of their specialties and teaching pedagogies of their major.

The Cambodian teacher-training program has been reformed for several times to improve its training quality and ensure the betterment of its impacts on the trainees. Notably, English was included in the Cambodian teacher training curriculum for all levels to equip future teachers with English ability to meet the fast growth of education and economy in the country and the region. Prior to this, English was embedded into the national curriculum for lower and upper secondary schools in 1990 (Neau, 2003), and it was added to the curriculum of the primary education level in 2014 (MoEYS, 2014). English has gained its popularity among Cambodian learners since the 1990s although it was banned for more than one decade. Clayton (2007)

pointed out two primary reasons for the fast growth of English learning in Cambodia, namely the presence of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia in the early 1990s and the admission of Cambodia into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1999.

Previous studies pointed out that Cambodians viewed English as a bridge for scholarship abroad, academic life and career growth (Igawa, 2010; Chan, 2018), as well as for improving their lifestyle (Keuk, 2009). Additionally, English is generally known as a main language used in online documents and websites which can be accessed for teaching and learning benefits. However, it is generally believed that non-English major trainees (N-ETs) do not seem to prefer to learn English during their training program, although English is one of the compulsory subjects for teacher trainees whose major is not English. Since this concern has attracted little attention by the local researchers and scholars, this paper aims to explore the perceptions of upper-secondary schoolteacher trainees in learning English after being selected for their training program at NIE in order to kindle better the quality of English learning and training in the Cambodian context by attempting to answer the following questions:

1. *What changes non-English major trainees' perceptions of English learning?*
2. *What do non-English major trainees perceive as challenges in learning English during their training?*

2. Review of literature

2.1 Defining perceptions in language learning

The 1969 pioneer work by Eleanor Jack Gibson on perceptions in the education field defined the concept of perception as a function of collecting information about one's surrounding and what one perceiver can do with it (Adolph & Kretch, 2015, p. 128). This definition is served as the conceptual foundation in many later studies. For example, in language acquisition, Ellis (2015) defined 'perception' as the way in which learners perceive the language being learned. Tse (2000) also defined 'perception' as a thought or point of view, which arises due to learning experiences (i.e., instructional activities and approaches), satisfaction with their progress in the classroom, or interactions with teachers and other learners.

Since this study focused on perceptions of English learning, it adapted Tse's definition for its conceptual design. Additionally, the definition was not restricted to integrate insights of perception in general as the importance of perception can be associated with understanding senses (Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981; Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 1998; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Samovar & Porter, 2003) and motivation (Williams & Burden, 1997).

2.2 Main determinants for perceptual studies

The remarkable concept about studies on perceptions was noted in the 1980s. Marx (1983) showed in a systematic review on perceptions of learning in the classroom that two main characteristics which captured the attention of many studies of perceptions were '*task demand*' and '*classroom organization*'. The task demand was referred to *instructional activities*, and *teacher behavior* in assigning and facilitating learning activities. Previously, the task demand

was used to refer to learners' achievement. An empirical study by Zhang, Kuusisto and Tirri (2017) indicated that there was no association between perceptions and achievement scores. Yet, the researchers did not seem to deny that perceptions could be viewed as learners' learning outcome. Meanwhile, low achievers tend to have lower perceptions in doing tasks than their high achieving peers (Stipek & Hoffman, 1980). Bossert (1979, as cited in Marx, 1983) defined the *classroom organization* as any organizing tasks, such as designing the structure of the task/activities in a classroom to create a learning environment in which the teacher and students could interact with one another during the learning process.

These two main characteristics of perceptions were later found to have an influence on learners' perceptions by Rosenholtz and Wilson (1980), Rosenholtz and Rosenholtz (1981) and Tammivaara (1982). Cray and Currie (1996) argued that to effectively understand about one individual classroom, the pedagogy as well as the social and personal interaction in the classroom should be integrated into the design. This concept was known as learning environment or psychosocial environment in later studies (Henderson, Fisher, & Fraser, 2000). Evidently, by employing a multi-method qualitative approach, Barkhuizen (1998) discovered that learners and teachers had different perceptions on most of the applied activities of communicative language teaching (CLT). Learners reported to prefer learning grammar and writing, but teachers tended to focus primarily on reading. Additionally, a teacher-oriented approach was not what the learners like; however, it was frequently used by teachers in the classroom. This created as unpleasant learning environment. It also created low motivation in both learning and teaching. Similar findings were also reported in the Turkish context by Bulut and Uguten (2003).

2.3 Trainees' perceptions of English learning

A mixed method study by Ulla (2017) in Myanmar showed that pre-service trainees' challenges in learning English were related to the communicative learning approach and the teaching style of English trainers. The trainees were, moreover, not familiar with these kinds of learning environment. They admitted that they needed more time to transform their conventional learning environment to which they get used to student-centered teaching and learning. More than participating in the class activities, the trainees hope to gain not only English knowledge but also teaching strategies from their language class. However, those techniques could not be applied in any subjects except in English. Ulla and Winitkun (2018) found similar findings with in-service trainees in Thailand. Likewise, a study using self-administered questionnaires and interviews with Lebanon pre-service trainees showed that trainees usually had expectations to learn more than the contents of the subject matter (Goff-Kfourri, 2013). However, this group of trainees felt that the syllabus and course evaluation were the source of their concerns and should be revised. In an Ethiopian context, it was found that trainees had positive perceptions towards the teaching strategies (action learning) used by their trainers. They were willing to employ them in their classes later (Engidaw, 2014). Ulla and Winitkun (2018) suggested that to make English class effective for trainees, trainers should engage them with classroom workshops and activities that could assist them to gain experience

in what and how to use teaching strategies/techniques in their real classroom setting after the training.

There were very few studies on the perceptions of N-ETs in the Cambodian context. Although the findings of the previous studies in other contexts shed light on trainees' perceptions of English training and learning, they tended to focus much on trainees' perceptions of one particular teaching method (e.g., CLT, student-centered approach, action learning) or classroom management rather than on understanding the causes of changes in their perceptions. Additionally, previous studies did not seem to include any effect from training institute.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research context and design

It is worth acknowledging that English plays a crucial role in future success and career growth in the Cambodian context. However, it is widely believed that N-ETs who graduated their bachelor's degree from various universities in Cambodia did not seem to prefer to learn English during their teacher training program. Similarly, English trainers have faced various challenges in teaching English to N-ETs, causing inefficiency and ineffectiveness in teaching and learning English. This concern should have been investigated and addressed on time, or it spawns unwanted role models for young students at upper secondary schools. Therefore, this study conveniently chose NIE – the only institute which trains teachers for upper secondary schools in Cambodia – to understand the central phenomenon of the issue. To realize this aim, an intrinsic case study design was employed to explore this unique issue (Crowe, et al., 2011) by adapting a multi-method qualitative approach for data collection and interpretation (Barkhuizen, 1998; Bulut & Uguten, 2003). Understanding learners' perceptions is proved to be complex by many researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, to develop a deeper and stronger understanding of such a complex phenomenon, the use of multiple data sources and/or multiple methodologies was used (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) to describe a complex phenomenon in the classroom (Geertz, 1973).

3.2 Participants and tasks

Table 1 precisely illustrates how the samples were recruited from the entire NIE's N-ETs population (N = 773), and how data for this study were collected. To achieve more reliable information, a stratified random sampling method was used. First, 5% of N-ETs were selected from each major except English. The total selected samples (n = 42; female (F) = 16, male (M) = 26) per major were manually divided into each achievement level, namely poor (P), average (A) and good (G). The real samples were randomly chosen from each major's achievement lists which were made based on their first semester results prior to the data collection process. Before starting the second step, three new achievement lists were made regardless of their majors. Then, 20% out of the real samples were selected. As a result, nine participants were selected in this stage. These numbers were divided into three achievement levels, so there were three participants from each achievement level (P = 3, A = 3, G = 3).

Table 1
Stratified sampling and data collection methods

| Majors | Total Pop. | 1 st Sampling (5%) | | By achievement level | | |
|---------------------------|------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|---------|------|
| | | Questionnaires | | Poor | Average | Good |
| French | 10 | 0.5 | 1 (not limited to achievement) | - | - | - |
| Mathematics | 117 | 5.9 | 6 (2P, 2A, 2G) | - | 1 | - |
| Khmer | 95 | 4.8 | 5 (2P, 1A, 2G) | - | - | 1 |
| Literature | | | | | | |
| Information | 50 | 2.5 | 3 (1P, 1A, 1G) | 1 | - | - |
| Technology | | | | | | |
| Physical | 6 | 0.3 | 1 (not limited to achievement) | - | 1 | - |
| Education | | | | | | |
| Social | 191 | 9.6 | 10 (3P, 4A, 3G) | 1 | - | 1 |
| Science | | | | | | |
| Science | 304 | 15.2 | 16 (5P, 6A, 5G) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Total N: | 773 | | P = 13, A = 16, G = 13 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Samples (n) per approach: | | | (n = 42) | (n = 9) | | |

Note¹: ≤ 6.00 (poor); ≥ 6.25 - <8.00 (average); ≥8.00-10.00 (good)

Survey questionnaires were distributed to 42 participants in Stage 1. They were given one week to complete this task, and all questionnaires were collected by the due date. The questionnaire consisted of three parts – selected responses, composition writing and open-ended questions. The selected responses comprised two questions to seek for their perceptions of English learning before (*do you like learning English before participating in this training program?*) and after (*Do you like learning English after one semester in your current training?*) joining the NIE course. Participants were asked to select one of the choices (i.e., *definitely, quite a bit, just a little, and not at all*) that applied to their perceptions. Additionally, they were asked to write one composition about ‘*What I like and dislike about English class at NIE? Please finish your composition writing with recommendations for improving the English teaching at NIE*’. In the third part, there were four open-ended questions such as (a) *What challenges have you faced learning English at NIE?* (b) *Have you done somethings to deal with your challenges?* (c) *Do you think you trainers helps you learn/improve English?* and (d) *Do you think learning English at NIE will be useful to you one day when you completed your training?* All questions were mainly adapted from Barkhuizen (1998) and Bulut and Uguten (2003). The questionnaire was used to collect N-ETs’ perceptions of English learning before and during their training at NIE, their learning experiences and learning environment, the challenges they face and their views on how to improve English training.

¹ According to NIE’s scale guideline, the original scale (*out of 10*) is divided into four grade levels: *poor* (<5.00), *average* (5.00 – <6.50), *fairly good* (6.50 – <8.00), *good* (8.00 – 10.00). However, the scale is purposively adjusted to realize the research objective owing to the fact that trainers tend to pass their trainees to minimum of original scale in their real practice.

After creating sub-themes and themes through reading the responses in questionnaires, questions for the next data collection phase were developed using a guideline for the focus-group interview suggested by Anderson (1990). The interviewing length was adapted from Dilshad and Latif (2013) and Rice and Ezzy (1999). Dilshad and Latif (2013) recommended that the number of informants for focus group interview should be between six to nine; however, this study purposively created groups with smaller size – 1st group = 5 participants (F = 3) and 2nd group = 4 participants (F = 2) – by considering gender and the achievement level in each group. The focus group interviews provide participants with more time to express their viewpoints and interactively discuss with other members as well as to allow the moderator to probe into the bottom line of each concerned point. Both questionnaires and interviews were conducted in participants' native language, Khmer, to make it easier for the participants to express their points of view (Rice & Ezzy, 1999).

To analyze the data, conceptual content analysis by grouping information according to words, word sense, phrases, sentences was first employed. Manual coding was also used for identifying themes and subthemes. Then the rational analysis was used to investigate the relationship between concepts and identified thematic issues (Busch, et al. 2012).

The focus-group interview was employed not only to probe for the central phenomenon or any unique findings but also to triangulate the answers obtained from the questionnaires in order to ensure the reliability and validity of the obtained information.

4. Results and discussion

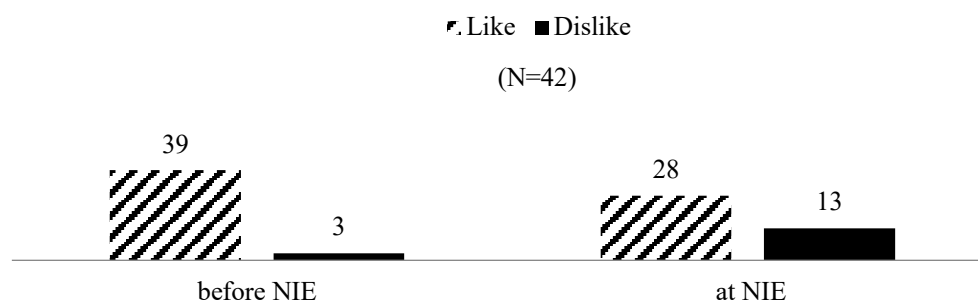


Figure 1. Comparison of trainees' perceptions of English learning

According to the results from the selected responses, Cambodian N-ETs seemed to change their perceptions of English learning after joining the training course at NIE for one semester. Figure 1 illustrates that almost all trainees (92.9%) preferred learning English prior to joining English classes at NIE while only three (P = 2, A = 1) did not. However, the number of trainees who disliked learning English increased from three to 10 trainees after they started their course at NIE. Precisely, twelve of them (30.8%) who used to like English changed their mind after taking a course at NIE. Two (P = 1, A = 1) out of three trainees who disliked English turned to like learning it in NIE. It should be noted that the majority of trainees who switched their mind from 'like' to 'dislike' were good achievers (6), following by 4 and 2 in average and poor

achievers, respectively. This showed that English learning at NIE was, on the one hand, not good enough to attract its learners across different achievement levels. On the other hand, it provides some trainees with some benefits (i.e., teaching strategies).

4.1 Determinants of changes in trainees' perceptions

This current study found four main determinants that made N-ETs changed their perceptions of learning English after joining the training program at NIE. Two were embedded in the first input of learning experience such as *teaching strategies* and *English syllabus*. Other two determinants, namely *class size* and *insufficient facilities*, were in the second input of the classroom learning environment.

4.1.1 Teaching strategies

Teaching strategies were the only determinant found to inspire N-ETs to enjoy and participate in classroom learning activities and encouraged some of them to prefer learning English at NIE. Trainees from across achievement levels expressed their preference to learn various teaching strategies used by their trainers during English classes. They were willing to apply those strategies in their real classroom later. However, it is worth highlighting that imparting teaching strategies is not the aim of the English subject at NIE.

I really like the ways my trainer teaches and leads learning activities. It is absolutely learner-based approach [...]. (Q.P10)

I think what I've learned the most from my English class is teaching strategies and [learning] games. I noted [the steps] and I will use it with my students. (Int.A04)

This finding was in line with Engidaw's (2014) study in the Ethiopian context. However, it seemed to contradict Ulla's (2017) findings in Myanmar and Ulla and Winitkun's (2018) findings about trainees in Thailand. Cambodian N-ETs were also trained by the same teaching methodologies – a learner-based approach – in their teaching pedagogy classes for their major. Therefore, they may be familiar with a variety of teaching strategies which were being used in their English classes. Thus, the trainees might feel that they could extend their ability to use those strategies during the English lesson beyond what they could learn in their teaching pedagogy classes. Despite the time required to adjust themselves, N-ETs enjoyed practicing the activities with peers.

I met different teaching techniques in my class that I have never seen in my major class especially task-based, and cooperative-learning approach. This is what the only benefit for me. Also, my trainer is always on time and kind. He is my idol [role model]. (Q.G06)

This empirical study revealed that N-ETs did not play a role as English learners, but as so-called '*teaching-strategies compilers*'- who participate in activities and take notes of how each

activity was conducted. Moreover, they tended to view their trainers as a *'methodology-using role model.'* This role was like being a 'coach' or 'mentor teacher' as suggested by (Lunenberg, Dengerink, & Korthagen, 2014, p. 44).

[...] we take note [each step of] how our trainer leads and introduces lesson or activities. Then we share and note in our notebook for future use [when we teach our students].
(Int.P04)

4.1.2 English syllabus

English syllabus was another key determinant which contributed towards the perceptual change of the majority of N-ETs, especially those who were high achievers. The NIE syllabus, to them, seemed to overlap with what they had learned at their universities. The level of English was lower than their university level. Therefore, they felt the English syllabus could not provide them with any benefits that they expected. Although average achievers' perceptions of the English syllabus were similar to their high achieving peers, they named this syllabus as a 'revising syllabus.' They humbly admired that English at NIE could help them revise what they had learned, or they may forget.

I think English at NIE does not provide me with any benefits [...]. However, it helps revise what I have learned at university. (Q.A04)

[...] helps me remember what I have learned, or I may forget it as I have no time to learn on my own [...]. (Int.A13)

However, poor achievers thought the English syllabus was not friendly to them although the NIE syllabus was at A2 level² of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR). Consistently, all N-ETs thought that the English syllabus should be re-evaluated and revised for the sake of future trainees' benefits. This finding was similar to the English training in Lebanon by Goff-Kfoury (2013) and in Pakistan by Tasdemir, Asghar and Tahir (2019). It should be highlighted that the overall goal of the NIE English syllabus is to build foundation of English knowledge for N-ETs in order to assist them to develop themselves to understand and communicate in English in their lives and future professional development (NIE, 2017).

4.1.3 Class size

Class size showed negative effects on N-ETs' perceptions of English learning at NIE in this study. Regardless of their achievement, trainees felt that studying English in a large class size was so distractive and even more demotivating in the learning process. N-ETs who were

² A2 level of CEFR = TOEIC (255 – 400), TOEFL PBT (397 – 433), TOEFL IBT (30 – 40), IELTS (3.0 – 3.5) retrieved January 18 2019

<http://www.englishcollege.pl/userfiles/file/TOEFL%20Equivalency%20Table%20-%20TOEIC,%20TOEFL,%20IELTS%20Score%20Comparison%20Chart.pdf>

studying in a large class pointed out that the trainers did not seem to pay more attention to the classroom discipline. This distracted them from hearing the trainer's instructions or explanation and made them feel demotivated in learning English.

My trainer does not seem to care much about the classroom rules. S/he never blames my classmates who misbehaved (i.e., chatting) during the class. I felt frustrated sometimes because I could not hear trainer's voice [explanation or instruction]. I sometimes got lost. [...]. They worked [on assigned tasks or exercises] so fast and started to chat. This is very annoyed to other [classmates who are still working] including me. (Q.P10)

This finding was in line with Al-Jarf's (2006) study on large class in Saudi Arabia. Although the size of class – whether large or small – varies according to the context and the individuals' perceptions (Hayes, 1997; Ur, 1996), in the context of the Cambodian teacher training college/center/institute, the maximum class size is 25 (MoEYS, 2018). However, the size of the class at NIE is flexible in the real practice owing to the shortfall of English trainers. Unexpectedly, some trainees especially the average achievers complained about the small class size (5 or 6). They said that they had less motivation in learning since the class is so quiet. They thought that learning in larger class could help them learn from their peers whose English was better than them.

I get tired of working with the same peers in both groups and pair work. The class is so quiet. I prefer to learn in a larger class so I can learn from other students. I think the class will be more active and enjoyable. (Int.A07)

4.1.4 Insufficient facilities

N-ETs in the current study expressed their negative perceptions of learning facilities at NIE. They referred to the library, language lab and reliable internet connection. Evidently, good achievers felt that these facilities could help them become independent learners and learn more than what was taught in the class. N-ETs in other achievement levels thought that these facilities could help reduce class size and promote effective monitoring and positive attitudes towards pair and group work. This could be implied that when the training institute could not offer enough facilities that support learning and teaching, the learners did not feel to be part of learning, and they felt restricted to actively participate in the learning process (i.e., pair/group work) (Hang, 2015; Köksal & Çöğmen, 2013).

[...] it will be helpful if NIE has [language] lab to practice exercises such as grammar, reading, and listening rather than keep us (good achievers) in class when the syllabus is for elementary level. (Q.G09)

There are many trainees in the class. So, any trainees whose English is better should be doing the tasks in library. So, there is enough space for trainers to monitor during doing [pair or group] work. If the trainer cannot walk around, some trainees will not focus. So, this [pair or group] works are boring. In fact, this [pair or group] works are good

because we can learn from each other. Thus, if some trainees (good achievers) can do self-study in the library or language lab like at IFL [Institute of Foreign Languages], the learning environment will be even better.” (Int.A11)

4.2 Perceived challenges

This study found that N-ETs paid less attention to the English subject than their major subjects. This finding was similar to the study in the Vietnamese context on non-English major university students (Hang, 2015). N-ETs in this study faced two common challenges – *mixed ability* and *many subjects* in their entire training program, in learning English at NIE. Their primary purpose in the English class was to obtain the passing mark in this subject to gain an eligibility to sit for their final examination by the end of the training program rather than to accumulate knowledge of English for future and professional development benefits. This could suggest that English learning at NIE was for the sake of examination only. Soeung (2020, p. 326) suggested that to increase participation in learning English, the ‘*exam-career balance*’ syllabus should be developed to ensure learners’ success in both examination and prospective careers. The following quotes illustrate the trainees’ attitudes towards the English subject.

This one-year training program is very essential for my future career as a(n) [upper] high school teacher. I expect that NIE will train and coach me specifically on my major because I am going to spend the rest of my life with it. [...]and for English, I just learn some to ensure that I can pass in every examination. (Q.A12)

[...] First, I have to pass this [English] subject, and second, I cannot miss class more than twenty times, otherwise I cannot sit in the final exam. (Int.G01)

There is limited time during this training program. I think we should focus on our major. Every subject has its importance, but I have to be better in my major. Getting better grades in the major must be a better record than on others because it is our specialty. (Int.G03)

These findings showed that mixed ability class affected the trainees’ commitment to learn, as it was the case with the findings by Lee (2007) in South Korea. The current study found that learning in a mixed ability class caused boredom to learn especially for good achievers. It was also a barrier for N-ETs in either average or poor achievers to express their viewpoints during discussions as well as to participate in any learning activities. They felt ashamed or were afraid of being mocked. Regardless of any teaching strategies, none of the trainees raised the benefits from learning in this heterogenous learning environment (Ur, 1996).

Moreover, having too-many subjects in their training program was a burden for them because every subject had its assessment tasks. Trainees had to spend most of their time to fulfill the requirements of their major subjects rather than to invest their time to improve their English. Despite the English subject, none of the other subjects affects the results of their final examination.

5. Conclusion

The intent of this study was to discover the perceptions of Cambodian non-English major trainees towards learning English at NIE by attempting to understand reasons of change in their perceptions and the challenges they perceived. This study found that English learning at NIE could not provide N-ETs with as many benefits as they expected. This caused many trainees to change their mind from 'like' to 'dislike' learning English after participating in their training at NIE. This change was caused by the English syllabus, class size and insufficient facilities. However, the majority of the trainees tended to gain more benefits through picking up teaching strategies during their English classes which was not the aim of the English syllabus in this institute. In addition, mixed ability in the English class was seen to be a main challenge for them to learn or to improve their English competency. Furthermore, trainees thought that NIE should minimize the number of learning subjects during the training course and revise the English syllabus to increase enjoyments and benefits for future N-ETs.

The study also found that the trainees' crucial role in the classroom is no longer as learners who are curious about the contents, but as someone who collects teaching strategies/techniques (*teaching-strategies compliers*) for future benefits in their teaching career. Additionally, they viewed their trainers as *methodology-using role models*. This is like one of the six roles of teacher educators, namely a 'coach' or 'mentor (teacher)'. This suggests that English learners who are future teachers put their concentration on what can contribute towards their professional career rather than unrelated contents/subjects.

Moreover, it was found that English learning at NIE did not seem to provide trainees with English competence as stated in its training program. The study found that the English syllabus was one of the main causes among other determinants. When the syllabus does not match with its learners' proficiency level, learners tend to focus only on passing a grade rather than improving their English knowledge and skills as expected by the ultimate syllabus goal. This suggests that the NIE English syllabus should not be designed from the perspectives of a 'one-size-fits-all' but that of an 'exam-career balance'.

The findings of this study largely echoed previous findings on perceptions of teacher trainees and university students whose majors are not English, although they also indicate the context-specific pattern of determinants of N-ETs' perceptions. However, this study is not without limitations. First, the trainers' and administrators' perceptions of English learning and syllabus should have been obtained for triangulation purposes. Second, the results would contribute even more towards English courses at NIE or other teacher training institutes/colleges in Cambodia if this study could expand its investigation into the perceptions of N-ETs who were from different streams (i.e., experienced teachers – primary and secondary school teachers and students from state and private universities). Future research, therefore, should address these limitations.

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