

A literature review on the effects of failure in the English subject in national grade 12 examinations on Cambodian students

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ABSTRACT

English plays a pivotal role in high-stakes examinations at both national and international contexts. This review article aims to discuss the effects of failure in the English subject in the national grade 12 examinations on Cambodian students. Drawing on secondary sources such as journal articles, conference papers, theses and dissertations, official documents or research reports, books, book chapters, and newspaper articles, the article highlights a number of effects of students' failure in national high school exams in general contexts, such as (a) increased school dropouts, (b) limited higher education enrolment, (c) limited job opportunities, and (d) compromised psychological well-being. The article also identifies several effects of failure in the English subject in national grade 12 examinations on Cambodian students. These include effects on (a) educational opportunities, (b) job opportunities, (c) communication ability, and (d) psychological well-being. The article provides some recommendations to help students who fail the English subject in the national exam deal with the consequences after exam failure. The recommendations focus on the roles of various stakeholders in general education in Cambodia, such as the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS), teachers, parents, students, and other relevant stakeholders. The article concludes with some suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Cambodian general education; Cambodian students; failure in the English subject; grade 12 examinations; literature review

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INTRODUCTION

Education plays a critical role in helping a country to enhance its national and international competitiveness (Afifah et al., 2022) and drives economic growth (Bonney et al., 2005; Dunaieva et al., 2017). It also plays a significant role in developing human capital needed to sustain development as well as to promote well-being and opportunities for better living (Farooq et al., 2011). The quality of education is driven by a good education system and the quality of teachers, who are one of the key factors in the teaching and learning process (Afifah et al., 2022). The role of education, particularly higher education, is indispensable. As Heng (2024) noted, higher education plays a critical role in

enhancing the ability of a country's research and development, which in turn contributes to its capability to generate, use, and disseminate knowledge for socio-economic development.

Given the significant role of higher education in contributing to national development, it is important for students to continue their studies after graduating high school. However, not all students are able to pursue higher education, as there are some requirements imposed on them, one of which is the success in high school examinations or the passing of entrance exams for universities. In many countries, students are required to pass national high school exams before they are allowed to pursue higher education in universities, colleges, or other higher education institutions (Machin et al., 2018; Meeter, 2023).

In the United States, for example, there are two main types of high school exit examinations: comprehensive exams and end-of-course exams (Hyslop, 2014; McIntosh, 2011; McIntosh, 2012). Some states use comprehensive exams requiring 3–5 subjects for the exam, while other states use end-of-course exams employing 3–4 subjects (McIntosh, 2011; McIntosh, 2012). If students cannot pass their high school exam, they are not allowed to receive a high school diploma or go to the next education level (McIntosh, 2011; McIntosh, 2012). Brown and Conley (2007) also noted that students need to pass their high school exams to pursue tertiary education.

In Asian countries like Thailand, students need to take high school exams covering several subjects, one of which is English (Wiyaporn & Raksapolmuang, 2017). In this national exam, English is considered one of the core subjects (Chamcharatsri, 2013). In Vietnam, Pham and Bui (2019) pointed out that Vietnamese students have to take the national high school exam with three compulsory subjects, one of which is English, and there are two optional subjects in natural sciences and social sciences. In China, there are 11 subjects for high school examinations, with English being one of them. Students need to pass their high school exam before they can enter universities or colleges (Li & Yan, 2012). It is interesting to note that of all the subjects in the exam, English plays a crucial role at all levels of education in China (Li & Yan, 2012). Overall, English is considered an important language for national high school examinations in many countries (Chamcharatsri, 2013; Li & Yan, 2012; Pham & Bui, 2019).

In Cambodia, in order to pursue their studies at tertiary levels, students have to pass national grade 12 examinations or have at least completed their high school education. Based on the Cambodian national curriculum (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport [MoEYS], 2015), high school studies after grade 10 are divided into two study tracks: science and social science. In the science track, students need to take seven subjects in the national grade 12 exam, including mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history, Khmer literature, and English. Students in the social science track also need to take seven subjects, including Khmer literature, history, geography, moral-civics, math, earths, and English (MoEYS, 2015; Soeung, 2020). English is required for both study tracks; however, its score is optional in the exam (Oeun & Heng, 2024). This means that the English score in the grade 12 exam is only counted when students receive the score over the passing point, which is 25. Thus, when students receive a score between 26 and 50, they will obtain extra scores added to their overall exam scores; however, when they get an English score below 26, they will obtain zero for the English subject, and no extra scores will be removed or added to their overall exam scores (Soeung, 2020).

It is worth noting that, in the Cambodian education system, if students fail the national grade 12 exams, they can only enroll in an associate's degree if they want to pursue higher education, and after completing the associate's degree, they must study one additional semester before being able to enroll in a bachelor's degree (MoEYS, 2000). Alternatively, they can choose to study in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions to develop their skills needed for employment (Chhun, 2016). In order to enroll in TVET courses, students have to at least complete their lower secondary school (Madhur, 2014). TVET programs can provide students with five levels of training, including a certificate for short courses lasting a few weeks to less than a year, a diploma for post-grade 9 courses lasting from one to three years, a higher diploma for post-grade 12 courses lasting two years, a bachelor's degree for post-grade 12 lasting four years (4.5 years for engineering), and postgraduate two-year courses after a TVET bachelor's degree (Madhur, 2014).

The grade 12 examination is a high-stakes exam in Cambodia, as it determines the future of Cambodian students, especially their ability to pursue higher education after high school. Failure in the national grade 12 exams will, therefore, have consequences on students' lives. Recognizing the significance of the grade 12 examination, in this article, we examine the effects of failure in the English subject in the national grade 12 exams on students. There are three main reasons for this research focus. First, English plays a critical role when it comes to opportunities for education and employment after high school. Second, many Cambodian students fail the English subject in the national grade 12 exams (Oeun & Heng, 2024). For example, 89,05 % of the Cambodian students who passed the national exams in 2022 failed the English subject (MoEYS, 2022), while 86,86% of those who passed the national exam in 2023 failed the English subject (MoEYS, 2023). These results raise concerns over the consequences of students' failure in the English subject. Third, there appears to be no empirical research investigating why many Cambodian students fail the English subject in the national grade 12 exams, as only one review article examining this topic by Oeun and Heng (2024) was identified during the review. There is also neither empirical research or review article examining the consequences or effects of the failure in the English subject in the national exams on Cambodian students. In light of these reasons, this review article aims to bridge this knowledge gap by exploring the effects of failure in the English subject on Cambodian students. The study draws on secondary sources to address this research gap. Specifically, it is guided by the research question: *What are the effects of the failure in the English subject in the national grade 12 examinations on Cambodian students?*

This study is significant in that it sheds light on the effects of the failure in the English subject in the national grade 12 examinations on Cambodian students. It also contributes to the body of literature on this topic, particularly addressing the knowledge gap regarding the consequences of the failure in the English subject on students' personal and professional opportunities. This article is divided into three parts. First, it discusses the effects of students' failure in national high school examinations in the general context. Second, it examines the effects of Cambodian students' failure in the English subject in national grade 12 examinations on them. Third, the article provides a set of recommendations for concerned stakeholders to support Cambodian students who fail the English subject in the national grade 12 exams to cope well with the consequences of exam failure.

The increasing popularity of English

The increasing popularity of English is seemingly unstoppable because it is an international language (Canagarajah, 2014; McKay, 2002). Crystal (2003, 2012) claimed that English is a global language taught as a foreign language in over 100 countries in the world. It is used in various domains, such as international relations, business, education, travel, communication, and the media (Crystal, 2003). Likewise, Rao (2019) argued that English is used in many fields, including science and technology, education, employment, business, the Internet, travel and tourism, the press and media, communication, and entertainment. Mamadjanova and Malikova (2023) also noted that English as a global language plays an essential role in administration, education, industrialization, technological advancements, and commerce. In science and technology, many research findings are published in English (Kaplan, 2001; Lillis & Curry, 2010). English is, therefore, an important language and can provide a great deal of benefits for education, employment, business, science and technology, research and publication, and communication (Baker, 2012; Foley, 2005; Mamadjanova & Malikova, 2023; Pandarangga, 2015).

In the Cambodian context, Hum and Heng (2024) mentioned that English is widely used as a foreign language. Many Cambodians, especially students, try to learn English because this language can provide many benefits and opportunities related to education (Oeun & Heng, 2024), employment (Clayton, 2002), communication (Morrow, 2017), and research and publication (Ngel, 2022; Heng et al., 2021). That is why Hum and Heng (2024) claimed that English is mainly utilized "in many domains ranging from education to business to communication and tourism" (p. 187).

In the education sector, English plays a pivotal role, particularly for higher education, research, online courses, and overseas educational opportunities (Ngel, 2022). It is introduced in the national

school curriculum from grade 4 (MoEYS, 2015). It is also widely used as a core exam subject for local and international scholarships as well as for university admission (Oeun & Heng, 2024). Additionally, English is a medium of instruction for some degree programs in higher education and almost all study programs in private international schools (Hum & Heng, 2024). It also serves essential functions in other domains, such as technology, business, tourism, and the media, making it “a language of choice, a language of transformation, and a language for enhancing living standards and social status” in Cambodia (Hum & Heng, 2024, p. 197).

METHOD

This study utilized secondary data to answer the research question. According to Webster and Watson (2002), an article relying on secondary data can be useful in contributing to knowledge advancement or theory development. It can also provide ideas for further research in a specific area. In a review article, both public and private documents can be reviewed to gain insights into the research topic because documents are “textual or visual devices that enable information to be shared and ‘stories’ to be presented” (Coffey, 2014, p. 369 emphasis in original).

To conduct our review, we used Google Scholar and Science Direct to search for relevant articles. No specific inclusion or exclusion criteria were used to select the type of articles for review, as we aimed to include as many documents as possible in this review study. Thus, a range of documents were collected for the review. They included journal articles, conference papers, theses and dissertations, official documents or research reports, books, book chapters, and newspaper articles. Specifically, this review was informed by 51 documents which are shown in Table 1. The following sections present the results of the review.

Table 1

Documents included in the review

No.	Type of document	Number
1	Book	1
2	Book chapter	4
3	Journal article	33
4	Conference paper	1
5	Doctoral dissertation	3
6	Master's thesis	1
7	Official document or research report	5
8	Newspaper article	3
	Total	51

RESULTS

Effects of students' failure in national high school examinations

Taking a high-stakes examination like the high school exam is essential for students at all levels. The results of the exam can provide test-takers with either success or failure depending upon their abilities. Students who pass the exam, such as the high school exam, can pursue their studies in post-secondary education (Hong & Meng, 2022). Those who fail may encounter many challenges for their academic journey and professional life (Reardon et al., 2010). Cornell et al. (2006) and Lincove et al. (2022) stated that students who fail the national examinations might face many challenges related to dropouts, disappointment, embarrassment, concern, frustration, depression, and other psychological issues. Many studies (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013; Martorell, 2005; Ou, 2010; Papay et al., 2010; Reardon et al., 2010) have shown a number of effects of students' failure in the high school exit exams. Key challenges included an increase in school dropouts (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013; Lincove et al., 2022), limited higher education enrolment (Martorell, 2005), limited job opportunities (Atemafac, 2014; Bussen, 2016; Machin et al., 2018), and negative effects on psychological well-being (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Ou, 2010). These effects are discussed below.

Increased school dropouts

Failure in the national high school exams can cause students to drop out of school. Hemelt and Marcotte (2013) found that failure in high school exit exams had negative effects on African-American students. When there was no alternate pathway to gain a diploma or alternative credentials, students decided to drop out of schools, resulting in high dropout rates for the 12th graders. Lincove et al. (2022) noted that high school exit exams can determine the quality of public high schools, but they can increase dropout rates, especially with a large effect on minority students. In the same vein, Papay et al. (2010) pointed out that an exit examination could stop students from graduating from high school in three ways: fear of failure, discouragement, and repeated failure. As a result, students who failed the high school examinations may feel really disappointed or discouraged with their performance and reduce their academic effort, leading to a higher rate of dropping out of school than those passing the exams (McIntosh, 2011).

Limited higher education enrollment

Failing the high school exam can also reduce the rate of attending post-secondary or tertiary education. Before registering at university or college, high school students have to pass their high school exit exams, or they will not be allowed to study at university or college (Machin et al., 2018; Martorell, 2005). Martorell (2005) noted that students who fail to graduate from high school are not allowed to attend postsecondary education. Holme et al. (2010), examining the effects of high school exit examinations, pointed out that the exit exams could have a negative influence on students' achievement, particularly for those who fail the exams. That is, they may become discouraged and reduce their academic effort, leading to a loss of attending the next education levels and a higher probability of dropping out of school (McIntosh, 2011).

Limited job opportunities

Failing the national high school exams can also lead to losing job opportunities (Atemafac, 2014; Bussen, 2016; Klima, 2007; Machin et al., 2018). Machin et al. (2018) noted that English students who failed the high-stakes exams not only drop out of school but also get unemployed. Likewise, Atemafac (2014) found that students who failed their national exit exams were really depressed, isolated, and financially strained because they lost their employment opportunities. Klima (2007) stated that students who failed the high school examination, besides dropouts, could neither receive a high school diploma nor a job. The unemployment rate of men who did not pass the national high school exam was more than twice that of those passing the exam, while women's unemployment rate without high school diplomas was three times higher than those with ones (Klima, 2007). Thus, it can be evident that failing high school exams can indeed affect students' employment opportunities.

Effects on psychological well-being

Failure in their high school exams can also affect students' psychological well-being. Ou (2010) noted that students could be psychologically affected or feel discouraged after failing their high school examination. As a result, they decided to drop out of school. Likewise, Reardon et al. (2010) mentioned that students who fail the high school exams have little motivation or feel discouraged despite interventions by schools and teachers. They experienced psychological effects, such as lower self-esteem (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011), a lack of intrinsic motivation (Anderman & Wolters, 2006), and discouragement (Ou, 2010). Overall, failing the national high school examinations can cause many negative effects on students, such as increased school dropouts, limited higher education enrolment, limited job opportunities, and effects on psychological well-being.

Effects of students' failure in the English subject in national grade 12 examinations: A case of Cambodia

In the Cambodian context, many students fail the English subject when they take national grade 12 exams (Oeun & Heng, 2024). There are many reasons for this failure, such as (a) English being an elective subject, (b) limited teacher quality, (c) students' poor English backgrounds, (d) a lack of motivation, and (e) other factors related to the education system (Oeun & Heng, 2024). First, as English is not a core exam subject, the exam score for English does not affect the overall grade 12 exam score (Soeung, 2020). This makes many students not interested in studying it and therefore they tend to fail the English subject in the national exam. Second, limited teacher quality is another factor contributing to students' failure in the English subject in the national exam. Many teachers still have limited teaching experience and inadequate professional development (Em, 2022). Some of them do not take their duties or responsibilities seriously (Sun, 2019), while others still use old-fashioned teaching methods (Em & Nun, 2022). Third, many students, especially those in rural areas, have low English proficiency (Lay et al., 2017) because they miss English classes at the primary level, have inadequate time for self-study at home (Song, 2014), and lack reading skills (Chan, 2018). Fourth, many students are not willing or inspired to study English for the exam. They lack both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation due to various factors (Em et al., 2022). Finally, other factors also contribute to the issue. They include out-of-date English curriculum (Tweed & Som, 2015), old-fashioned textbooks with inadequate distribution to every student (Sok, 2019), insufficient instruction time (Bray et al., 2016), inconsistency between exam content and what the student have learned in class (Em & Nun, 2022), and large class sizes (Nith et al., 2010). Although there appears to be no research investigating the effects of failure in the English subject in the national examinations on Cambodian students, this review points to several consequences of failure in the English subject in national exams on students. These consequences can be grouped into four categories of effects on students, such as effects on educational opportunities, job opportunities, communication ability, and psychological well-being. These effects are discussed below.

Effects on educational opportunities

First, failing the English subject in the national exam indicates that students may have low English language proficiency. This makes it difficult for them when they pursue higher education (Meng, 2023). Their low English proficiency can cause many challenges related to understanding English reading (Doung, 2019); understanding grammar, vocabulary, and English paragraph or essay writing (Oeun & Heng, 2024; Sor et al., 2017); speaking with foreign lecturers (Ork et al., 2024); suffering from a lack of confidence and nervousness (Huon & Em, 2022); completing assignments requiring English knowledge (Meng, 2023); and functioning well in classes in which English is used as a medium of instruction (Hum & Heng, 2024). Moreover, students could lose opportunities to enroll in prestigious universities or miss out on opportunities for overseas scholarships and participate in projects or programs in which English proficiency is required (Ngel, 2022).

Effects on employment opportunities

Second, with a low English proficiency, students may fail the English subject in the national exam. This has an effect on their employment opportunities where English language proficiency is needed. For example, many foreign companies or industries, international agencies, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Cambodia require their employees to have good English language proficiency (Clayton, 2006; Igawa, 2008; Lim, 2012; Mao, 2015). Without good English skills, students may not be eligible for the job.

Many Cambodian high school students, particularly those in rural or provincial areas, tend to have low English proficiency (Lay et al., 2017). After passing their national grade 12 exams, they usually find it difficult to get a good job. This is not to mention their limited English knowledge, which makes it even harder for them to find employment during their university studies. Hum and Heng (2024) pointed out that there were many essential functions of English in Cambodia, "from education

to business, from tourism to technology, and from traditional media to social media” (p. 195). This means that a lack of English knowledge could lead to a lack of opportunities for education and employment.

Effects on communication ability

Third, failure in the English subject can affect students’ communication ability. Due to an influx of foreign tourists visiting Cambodia (Morrow, 2017), Cambodian people, especially students with limited English language knowledge, may find it hard to make a conversation with foreigners, most of whom use English for communication. Clayton (2002) stated that English is crucial for communication in Cambodia because Cambodia is also one of the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that use English as its official language (Kirkpatrick, 2008). Moreover, English is utilized as a communicative language on social media (Lin et al., 2023) and in international conferences (Hum & Heng, 2024). This means that a lack of English language proficiency can affect students’ communication abilities. As Heng (2017) pointed out, English-speaking ability is one of the most important skills for communication. Limited English knowledge can, therefore, limit students’ communication ability, particularly in an environment where English is required.

Effects on psychological well-being

Finally, when students fail the English subject in national grade 12 examinations, they may experience negative effects on their psychological well-being. Chhoeurm (2021) and Pan (2017) noted that mental health issues or psychological problems often happen to students, particularly Cambodian university students. When they have poor academic performance, they tend to experience psychological problems, such as depression (44.6%), stress (37.5%), and anxiety (54.2%) (Pan, 2017). When students fail the English subject in the exam, they may give up improving their English skills as they lose both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation in learning English or pursuing their academic journey (Oeun & Heng, 2024). Bon et al. (2022) stated that motivation is one of the most crucial factors influencing second or foreign language learning, but students with less motivation or demotivation could not actively participate in learning activities.

Similarly, Chhuon et al. (2010) explained that intrinsic motivation plays the most important role for students to do a task. If students have high intrinsic motivation, they tend to enjoy doing the task (Sor et al., 2022). They also tend to complete it successfully because they are “more likely to persist in school, hold higher academic aspirations, and experience increased emotional well-being” (Chhuon et al., 2010, p. 3). However, if the students experienced a loss of self-esteem, a lack of confidence, and depression, resulting from their failure in the English subject in the national exams, they would face many challenges related to their mental health. As a result, the psychological effects on them could be serious, potentially affecting their present and future lives.

All in all, failure in the English subject in the national grade 12 examinations could lead to several negative effects on students, including (a) effects on educational opportunities, (b) effects on job opportunities, (c) effects on communication ability, and (d) effects on psychological well-being. This shows that English proficiency is critical to students’ personal and professional lives. Limited English knowledge can affect students’ bright future as they need English to function in different settings, including in education, employment, communication, and life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section discusses recommendations to help Cambodian students who fail the English subject in the national grade 12 examination to deal with the consequences of the exam failure. The recommendations focus on the roles of various stakeholders in general education in Cambodia. First and foremost, MoEYS, as the supervising ministry, has a pivotal and influential role to play in supporting Cambodian students. It should introduce mechanisms to provide psychological support to students before and after the exams. MoEYS should also increase its collaboration with relevant stakeholders to offer additional support to students who have a low English proficiency level by

offering training or short courses to improve their English. [Chhun \(2022\)](#) stated that grade 12 students who fail the exams could pursue vocational education and training to study practical skills that would help them in their future careers. Such programs may focus on electronic mechanics or electric skills, agricultural skills, and other essential skills to help students in their career development, employability, and income generation ability.

Second, teachers also play a crucial role in encouraging students' growth mindset despite their failure in the exams. For example, they can help students see the value of effort, perseverance, and the ability to learn from mistakes. It is also important to encourage students to learn to turn challenges into opportunities for their growth. Thus, teachers should try to look for effective ways to explain the value of education for job opportunities, family reputation, and scholarships to the students. They can also provide emotional support, including being empathetic and showing care and understanding toward students who are struggling ([Lei et al., 2018](#)).

Third, parents are also important actors in addressing this issue. In fact, they are the key influential factors when it comes to supporting students. They should help encourage and support their children who fail the English subject or fail the exam to be hopeful and look at the bright side. In addition, they should encourage their children to study other practical skills such as electronic, mechanic, or electric skills to help them lead their lives after high school if they cannot pursue higher education. It is important that parents should provide both mental and social support to students who lose hope due to their failure in the exam or in the English subject.

Fourth, students themselves are the key to making a difference in their lives after high school. They should not lose hope and develop disappointment due to exam failure. Instead, they should consider pursuing higher education via an associate's degree pathway or pursue vocational education and training to equip themselves with knowledge and skills needed for their future. They need to understand that high school education is only the beginning of their academic journey.

Finally, other stakeholders, such as the communities and NGOs, should also offer support to students ([Oeun & Heng, 2024](#)). They can extend their support directly to students or provide support to programs or initiatives that aim to help those who fail the English subject in the national exam or fail the national exam altogether. They can provide free counseling or career guidance services, offer peer support or peer-assisted learning programs, and provide workplace-oriented, professional development, or communication skill training programs. These will help students develop their life skills needed beyond the classroom. Overall, a collaborative approach involving all stakeholders, such as MoEYS, teachers, parents, students, and other concerned stakeholders, including the communities and NGOs, is essential to support students who fail the grade 12 examinations, particularly those failing the English subject.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that there are many challenges faced by Cambodian students who fail the English subject in national grade 12 examinations, which emphasizes the need for a comprehensive support system involving all stakeholders. The consequences of failing English extend beyond immediate academic outcomes, impacting students' educational opportunities, career prospects, the ability for effective personal and professional communication, and psychological well-being. These challenges indicate the profound implications of the failure in the English subject and highlight the need for targeted interventions to mitigate the consequence of exam failure. Thus, the recommendations are needed and should focus on the roles of concerned stakeholders, such as MoEYS, teachers, parents, students, and other actors, especially the communities and NGOs. By fostering a collaborative, multi-faceted approach, Cambodian students will be better supported to overcome the challenges of failing the English subject in the national grade 12 examination and work toward achieving their full potential despite exam failure. This supportive and collaborative approach will not only benefit the students individually but also contribute to developing a more skilled and resilient workforce that can meet the demands of a changing society in a globalized world.

To further advance knowledge in this area, this review article calls for future research to empirically investigate the significance of these effects on students' failure in the English subject in the national grade 12 examinations in Cambodia. Future research should also focus on providing more research-informed suggestions to help students deal with the various issues concerning national grade 12 examinations and their English language proficiency, which is essential for them to succeed in both their personal and professional endeavors. It is also essential to find mechanisms to assist them in developing themselves into human capital with the necessary knowledge and skills that allow them to meaningfully contribute to achieving Cambodia's long-term development goals.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT:

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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