

Classroom Libraries

Our lessons learned



Rationale

PEPY began working in Chanleas Dai commune in 2006, following a partnership project to fund the construction of a primary school building. The school was constructed through a partnership with American Assistance for Cambodia (AAfC). At that time AAfC also ran programs providing English and Computer classes at schools it funded. These classes ran outside the normal school day, and were supplementary to the government program. Through AAfC, PEPY began these classes at Chanleas Dai, first working through AAfC and later running the program directly. Through these programs PEPY realized that many children in primary school had very low Khmer literacy levels. Many could barely read and write their own name. To address this, PEPY introduced a focus on Khmer Literacy to complement its English/Computer programming.

In 2007 the PEPY team tested every child attending primary school in Chanleas Dai. Focusing on children in grades 4,5, and 6, the children were then divided into small groups dependent on their level – not on their age or their school grade. These groups (around 15 students per group) were then offered additional literacy classes 3 days per week. If students wanted to attend English and computer classes (which were very popular) then they also had to attend Khmer classes. PEPY hired teachers to teach these classes and scheduled the classes during the day when students had free time. These classes continued for around a year, and made a significant difference to the literacy levels of the students. The program was run with the support of the primary school.

During this time, the PEPY team was also developing the school library (you can read the Lessons Learned report for that project [here](#)). This “library” originally consisted of a locked container of donated books kept in an unused classroom. It was a requirement of the library donor that the room be locked when a teacher trained in library maintenance was not in the room. This, unfortunately, was the library “model” that seemed to be apparent throughout schools in Cambodia. When combined with the lack of librarians, and the teachers’ lack of knowledge on using books in the classroom, it was clear that this approach was rarely, if ever, successful. Teachers rarely used the books, and they were rarely accessible to students.

PEPY began by working with the school and community to develop a more functional library. This included providing books, rehabilitating the library into a more child-friendly space, and hiring and training a librarian to be present in the library full time during the school day. We worked with the school director to establish a schedule for library classes, where each class would come into the library for 1-2 hours per week and have time devoted to reading activities.

Through networking with other organizations, PEPY realized that our former “library”, which was largely unused, and took away a classroom from general use, was a typical way of funding libraries throughout the country. We became interested in working with other organizations to trial an alternative model, something that was already being developed by the Belgian Development Agency (BTC) and their Basic Education and Teacher Training project (BETT).

At this point Room to Read and PEPY came together to create a classroom library model. This was building on the work already being done by BETT, but adding significantly more training and follow-up to their program, which focused on providing early readers and teacher training and working to integrate reading activities into the government curriculum. PEPY and Room to Read agreed to work together in late 2008 and decided to pilot classroom libraries in 10 schools in rural Siem Reap Province. In selection of these schools PEPY partnered with another NGO, Caring for Cambodia, to work with some schools within their target areas.

Classroom Library methodology

What is a Classroom Library?

Classroom Libraries are small library units which are placed in all classrooms within a school. They are specially designed to have an open top shelf and a lockable bottom section. The original Classroom Library units for this project were designed by PEPY and custom built in Cambodia. The books included in the unit should be specific to the classroom where it will be placed – i.e. according to the class grades that use the room – and include teacher lesson materials.

The books are divided between the two areas:

Top area: books for students to access any time that the teacher is not teaching (between classes, when the teacher is not there, during class when the teacher has broken the class into groups and allows one half of the class to read while he/she works with the others, etc). The books in this area are NOT meant to be locked up.

The bottom area: books for the teacher to use. There are 20 copies of each of the books chosen for that classroom. These books are meant to be locked up so that they are taken out when the teacher decides to use them specifically for lessons. In the same scenario as above, if the teacher has broken the class into two and is working with one half, they can have the other half all read the same book and then ask the students what the book was about. These books can be used any time by the teacher as they like, but at the end of the day and when the teacher leaves for lunch, these books should be locked.

Goals of the project

The rationale and general goals of the project can be summarized as follows:

Old System	Enacting the Classroom Library concept	Make GOOD Libraries
Locked Rooms	ACCESS	Great TEACHERS
No Training on USING books (only fixing/filing books)		Great BOOKS
No Teacher Access	TRAINING	Great TRAINING
No Early Literacy Books		Great FOLLOW UP
<i>No Usage</i>	<i>Usage</i>	<i>Learning</i>

The goal of Classroom libraries was not to teach students how to read. Teaching students how to read is the job of the teacher, and the project was aiming to empower teachers to take responsibility for that by providing tools to help them. The key goals of the project were as follows:

- To encourage students and teachers to use books in the classroom
- To foster a love of reading amongst students
- To provide tools and ideas to teachers and librarians on how to use books within the classroom

Book selection

For the Classroom Library project, PEPY and Room to Read worked closely with BETT who had created Khmer Early Literacy Readers for grades 1 and 2. These were the first series of Khmer books specifically designed using standard practices of early literacy programs. These featured included:

- The "most common" vocabulary in the native language
- Images designed for Cambodia
- Repetition and "new words" in the back
- Books designed to be integrated into the grade 1 and grade 2 government curriculum
- Big books to match each title
- Flash cards to work on sequencing
- Matching cards for new vocabulary acquisition.

Grade 1 activities focus on speaking, listening and reading, while Grade 2 adds a writing component. Both are designed to engage children with books and develop skills of selection, response and research. Accompanying these books and classroom activities is librarian and teacher training offered by BETT to enable educators to be actively engaged in the selection of books and of matching activities to suitable books.

For grades 3 through 6, PEPY worked with BETT and Room to Read to develop a library of selected Khmer children's books that were supplemented with classroom activities to engage students and foster a love and enjoyment of reading. The activities for each grade level builds on one another, extending children's abilities to demonstrate understanding and strengthen their creative writing skills.

The final book selection was completed using a couple of processes. The PEPY team gathered ideas and advice about resources that were already available to complement the BETT books. In addition, the PEPY team hosted a workshop at Chanleas Dai primary school to evaluate the books currently available from schools in the area. The teachers and librarians sorted the books using the following criteria:

- Do students in the age group enjoy the story?
- Does it match with an interest of this age group?
- Does it match with a part of the curriculum?
- Does the level have a good range of styles and types (fact, fiction, etc)?
- Does the book lend itself to reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking activities?
- Does the book have potential for follow-up activities?

Remaining books were summarized (from Khmer to English) and evaluated by PEPY to determine a finished selection of books for each grade level that are most appropriate as they lended themselves to classroom activities. Some books were chosen for their topic, not their grade level, and were intended for the teacher to read aloud to the students. To create this list, PEPY reviewed grade-specific curriculum to match books to what the students would be learning in class when applicable. The team then checked with publishers and suppliers to make sure selected books were in stock and could be ordered in bulk.

Book management

Each book was given a sticker. The stickers had:

1. A number – the number of dots shows the grade it was chosen for
2. A color – every book in each classroom library was marked with the same color. That way, books could be easily returned to the correct library unit.

The bottom of the shelf (where there are sets of 20) only included books for the grades that actually use that class. This is because there are two lesson plans for each of the book included on the bottom of the shelf and those books are specifically chosen for classroom use.

On the top shelf, some books were included from higher and lower grades so that the students had variety when they are reading during their free time.

Literacy activities

Having selected and organized the book, the PEPY team then created activities for each of the books that the teachers could conduct in the classroom. To facilitate this process, PEPY created a working group made up of fellow education program administrators from a range of NGOs who were happy to exchange and develop resources. The goal of these activities was to enable the teachers to create many lessons using just one book – thereby maximizing the potential of the resources available to them. You can download many of these resources as part of the Classroom Libraries resource pack.

School commitment

Principals

PEPY worked with school principals to ensure their commitment to the project. The following responsibilities were agreed upon with the principle:

- Allow teachers to use the books and lessons in their normal classes for a minimum of 15 minutes each week. Encourage more if time allows.
- Report any problems with the system and your ideas for improvement
- Ensure teachers fill out the monitoring tools and ensure that they understand these tools.
- Give reports to PEPY/Room to Read when we make periodic checks about Classroom Library Usage.
- Ensure teachers to attend supplementary trainings on the Classroom Library project.
- Ask questions. Give suggestions.

Teachers

PEPY conducted ongoing training with school teachers as part of the Classroom Libraries (CL) project. However, responsibilities of CL Teachers were outlined clearly at the beginning of the project through introductory workshops. The expectations for the teachers were communicated as follows:

On the day you receive your books:

1. Make sure all books have labels, and if they do not contact PEPY to get labels.
2. Color the back of each label/book so that you know what books are in your classroom library shelf.

3. Take an inventory of your books (2 copies). Give one to PEPY and keep one in your shelf.
4. Make sure you understand the monitoring tools and ask questions if you do not.

During the first week you receive your books:

1. Get to know the books on your shelf! You as a teacher are responsible to have read every single book on your shelf. The better you know these books, the better you can do activities with them, encourage your students how to use them, and foster a love of reading in your classroom.
2. Do training with your students explaining why the books are there, when they can use the books, where they can read them, and how to take proper care of them. Make sure students understand that books cannot be removed from the classroom (or school yard if you prefer) but that they will always be available in the classroom.

During the year:

1. Use the books. Allow the students to use the books. Take care of the books.
2. Do not be afraid that the top books will be stolen. Do not lock the books meant to be on the top shelf.
3. Do not give keys for the units to students. Keep your key safe and do not lose it.
4. Write and record an inventory of your books using the monitoring tool in the activity book. Be honest when books are stolen, missing, or damaged.
5. Keep units away from doors and windows to avoid rain damage or cover them with plastic.
6. Write and record when you use the books in the bottom shelf in your lessons, including if you used the activity book and what notes you have about the lesson.
7. Ask questions. Give suggestions.
8. Participate in PEPY trainings and workshops. Give feedback openly. Honestly, and freely so that we can improve this program in the future.
9. Try your own ideas using the books to teach. Be creative and use the books as much as possible.

Key teaching methodology

During Classroom Library teacher training sessions, the PEPY team introduced a wide range of potential activities and lesson plans. However, there were 5 key points that were introduced at the start of the project and reinforced throughout. We called these the top 5 tips for teaching reading and writing.

provided further training in literacy activities and Child Friendly Schools methodology.¹ Teacher trainers from the Provincial Teacher Training College and BETT facilitated the Literacy Camp trainings. You can read more about Literacy Camp, as well as Chanleas Dai School Library, in our other Lessons Learned packs.

Peer-to-peer training

In addition to the formal trainings arranged by PEPY, the PEPY team also initiated a peer-to-peer monitoring initiative to support the development of the Classroom Libraries project. Teachers were invited to meet together to plan their lessons (incorporating the literacy resources) and share their ideas and experiences. PEPY then hired school teachers who were already strong at implementing these techniques to go and observe the classes of their colleagues at other schools. From this method, we found that teachers made more of an effort with their classes when they were expected a peer review. These observations were conducted on a monthly basis. While these peer observations were successful, in the last year of the project the PEPY team stopped them in favor of bigger trainings to enable bigger groups of teachers to get together and share ideas. Ideally, both kinds of trainings could be implemented, but the government teachers did not have the time available to dedicate to so many hours of training.

Project manual

Classroom Library trainings utilized a Classroom Library Manual created in partnership with BETT and Room to Read. This was submitted to the Ministry of Education for approval and was received favorably. However, it proved too expensive for the government to implement and so was not rolled out nationwide. This manual provides advice for teachers on using the Classroom Library units and how to teach efficient lessons using literature, as well as specific lesson plans for books included in Classroom Libraries. Trainings using these manuals were given in order to improve teacher's capacity to work with literature in their classrooms. PEPY developed their own version of this manual which is available to download as part of the Classroom Libraries Resource pack.

Transition and current status

In 2011 PEPY agreed on a new strategic direction and shifted from working with primary schools to working with high school and university students. As a result, in 2012, PEPY ended the Classroom Library program. All units were officially transferred to the schools, and additional trainings were conducted with the teachers to support the transition.

One year on, PEPY visited three of the participating schools to observe the classes and see whether the teachers used the library units. PEPY found that the bookshelves were well maintained and organized and that students were encouraged to read the books by the teachers – and did in fact read and borrow books regularly.

However, the teachers did not implement the library activities covered in the program, and did not show much commitment to including them in the lessons in the future. The main reason given for this was that they are focused on implementing other requirements from the Ministry of Education, and do not have time to include library activities.

¹ For more details on the Child Friendly Schools Policy, visit the National Education Partnership (NEP) [website](#).

Despite this, it is evident that while the teachers do not necessarily use the Classroom Library books as a teaching aid, they still implement the principles of some activities in their general teaching. For example, encouraging students to ask questions, and organizing the students to work in groups is now a more common practice among the teachers who participated in Classroom Libraries.

Challenges

Matching the Classroom Library units to the Classroom

Ideally, each classroom contains only one library unit that is relevant to the grade that uses that classroom. However, in rural Cambodia, often more than one grade would use a particular classroom. PEPY worked with school principals to try and make sure grades close to each other (i.e. 1 and 2) were scheduled in the same classroom. However, this did not always work so in some cases it was necessary to have two Classroom Library units in the same room, or to combine two sets of resources into one unit.

Teacher participation

Probably the biggest challenge in the Classroom Libraries project was the participation and motivation of the government school teachers. Teachers in Cambodia have a very low salary, and combined with the fact many communities do not strongly value of education over other alternatives (particularly contributing to the household economy), teachers have little motivation to improve the quality of their work. As a result, when expectations are placed on them to increase their workload, or learn new skills, that is often met with resistance. In addition, the Ministry of Education also has an agenda for teacher training which the teachers understandably prioritize over any external trainings. As a result, while the project was successful in establishing functioning library units in 10 schools, and teachers did allow and encourage students to read books, their engagement with literacy activities and related trainings was inconsistent.

Teacher turnover

Teachers often only stay in rural schools for one or two years, and so turnover can be high. Often one teacher leaves without the school being able to find a replacement. This was a challenge for the project, as while it was a good opportunity to introduce a new teacher to Classroom Libraries and literacy activities, it required additional trainings to be scheduled for new teachers during the project.

Evaluation

While Classroom Library goals were clearly stated from the start of the project, evaluation of the improvement in literacy skills from the students was difficult to ascertain. In most of the schools, students were exposed to other literacy activities (such as PEPY's Literacy Camp), which also had a bit impact on their ability – and the teachers' capacity. It was difficult to evaluate what contribution the Classroom Library units themselves, and the literacy activities from the teachers in the lessons had to the improvement in student literacy levels.

Teacher payment

When PEPY was running the peer sharing meetings, as part of the peer-to-peer observation scheme, initially teachers were given a 10,000 riel contribution to attend the trainings, and the cost of their transport to the meetings was covered. However, during the course of the project PEPY ended this contribution, as the team was keen to encourage teachers to attend the meetings for the sake of their professional development, rather than to earn extra money. This decision had quite a big impact on regularity with which teachers would participate in the meetings.

Integration with Ministry of Education

While literacy and library classes are aligned with the Ministry of Education's strategic plan for primary education in Cambodia, the fact that this project was being delivered independently by PEPY and Room to Read was in itself a challenge to the success of the project. The PEPY team found that if the school did not need to be accountable to the Ministry of Education to complete activities, then the activities were never prioritized, regardless of how useful they may be. Running this project independently of the Ministry of Education meant that the PEPY and Room to Read team could implement it quickly and with flexibility, but it provided other challenges in terms of the investment of the school and teachers in the success of the project.

Impact

Access to resources

Through this project, PEPY and Room to Read installed 50 Classroom Library units across 10 schools in rural Siem Reap, giving nearly 3,000 students access to books, and training over 40 teachers.

	School Name	Rooms	Total Students	Total Teachers
1	Tram Kong	3	187	3
2	Hun Sen Run	3	305	3
3	Kna Cho	2	89	2
4	Preah Lean & Rolom Svay	5	295	6
5	Kambao	7	250	3
6	Sen Sok	9	398	6
7	Chouk Raing Sey	8	392	9
8	Seila Romduol	3	282	3
9	Smatch	2	228	2
10	Prasat Khna	8	571	9
	Total	50	2997	46

Culture of reading

The availability of books in the classroom brought about a change in students' attitude towards books. Previously donated books would be kept locked away and treated as something that students were not allowed access to in case of damage or theft. Giving students access to books resulted in the development of reading cultures at the schools, and students were found to borrow books in their break-time to read rather than playing outside.

Teacher capacity

During the lifetime of the Classroom Library project, teachers in many of the schools received a variety of trainings, from PEPY and other organizations. Due to this, it is difficult to attribute the increase in teaching capacity to any one particular program. However, teachers in participating schools do have increased capacity in terms of their teaching style and technique – especially in encouraging critical thinking among their students. In addition, even though the teachers did not always implement literacy activities with books in their classes, they do still encourage students to borrow and read books and make use of the resource.

Lessons learned

Successful activities

Participating teachers reported that the most successful and popular literacy activities with the students were the ones that involved drawing pictures based on ideas in the stories. Activities that allowed students to be creative were generally the most popular. In addition, students enjoyed acting out the stories, and making stories come alive by using different voices.

Working with existing power structures

In many ways, the Classroom Libraries project was a successful pilot project to test out the feasibility of installing library units in classrooms and supporting teacher training around literacy. The project gave us a clear idea of the potential impact and challenges of the project if done on a broader scale. The PEPY team strongly believes that if this project was piloted again in another commune, but as a Ministry of Education project, with specific accountability of the schools and principals to the Ministry of Education, the results and impact would be much greater. As PEPY changed strategic direction and stopped teacher training projects to focus on working with young people, conducting a secondary project like this was not feasible for the PEPY team.

Adopting new techniques takes time

As mentioned, the initial scope of the project was to establish the libraries and conduct a three-day training for teachers on how to use the units. It quickly became apparent that introducing teachers to new resources and new ideas did not mean that they suddenly had the confidence, skills, or motivation to implement these ideas in the classroom. The PEPY team realized that further trainings were needed for the teachers to fully grasp the new methodology and ideas, and yet further trainings to encourage them to incorporate them into their general teaching. Considering many teachers had never worked with books before, and had little access to them when they themselves were at school, the expectations at the start of the project were too high.

Peer-to-peer observation

PEPY experimented with various models of training and observation during the project, but definitely found that peer-to-peer observation was a useful method for the schools in general – regardless of the project they were connected to. If a teacher knew they were going to be observed, they put more energy into their planning and the delivery of the lesson.

Payment to attend trainings

A tricky issue that PEPY struggled with across a range of other projects, payment to attend trainings was one way to motivate teachers to attend. However, if teachers were attending trainings for money, rather than professional development, it did not necessarily follow that the teachers would go away and implement what they had learnt.

Ideas for further development

The PEPY team had many ideas for how to make Classroom Library activities even more engaging for students. Many of these ideas PEPY implemented successfully in the School Library project in Chanleas Dai school and hope to transfer these ideas into classrooms in general (you can read the Lessons Learned report the School Library project here) We're shared some of these ideas below:

- **“Good Reader” Posters:** These posters would be included in all classroom library units and could be designed to be image based rather than text based for grades 1 and 2.
- **“Good Reader” Book Inserts:** Similar or identical to the “Good Reader” poster, these stickers or book inserts would remind se students how they can get the most out of reading.
- **Words for the wall:** These laminated words (including blanks, a permanent marker, and tape) are for the teacher to put words on the walls of the classroom. With a print-rich environment, students will be better able to learn to read and to want to learn to read.
- **Words on the desks:** These laminated words of inspiration could be general education words and phrases, quotes from famous local representatives, or anything interesting and encouraging for students to read. Students will WANT to read what is on their desk, so this will further encourage reading. The teacher can rearrange the placements of the words periodically to exposes students to new phrases.
- **“I liked it!” Bookmarks:** These bookmarks remain within the book. One side of the bookmark has a smiley face and the other a frown. The student writes their name on the side they decide and then the reason that they feel this way about the book. In this way, the teacher can track who has read which books, how they feel about them, and why. This also serves as a type of “book review”, helping other students make educated choices about which book they want to read next. (This can also help to monitor usage)
- **Question Worksheets:** These sheets would be attached to the back page of the book and include model questions. Then teachers and students can add their own fact, opinion, and experience questions to the list to help other readers understand, analyze, and relate to the book. (This can also help to monitor usage)
- **Asking Questions Poster:** This poster would be for the walls of the room explaining different types of questions (fact, opinion) and why we ask each other questions about books (to help promote understanding and learning)
- **Fiction/Non-Fiction Poster:** This poster could explain the difference between fiction and non-fiction books.
- **Storybook Questions Poster:** This poster could explain the ideas of main character, setting, theme, problem, introduction, conclusion, etc. and could be used on the walls of upper level classrooms.
- **Book Tracking Chart (Individual):** This chart would be the personal tracking system for each student to keep track of the books they read that year. It would include the books title, dates, and comments from the student about the book. The teacher could check this list with the student, ask questions about the book to ensure understanding, and then put a mark on the Classroom Tracking Chart to mark each additional book read. (This can also help to monitor usage)
- **Book Tracking Chart (Classroom):** This chart could go on the classroom wall and is used to track how many books each student has read by placing a sticker or mark for each book read. (This can also help to monitor usage)
- **Book Report Sheets:** These sheets could be available to students at any time or introduced periodically by teachers. Alternatively, there could be a small bound version of these sheets bound into book format for each student in the class in older grades. The book report form could have spaces to add: book name, author/printer, date, student name, grade, checkbox for “fiction/non-fiction”, theme, book overview, favorite part of the book, and a recommendations section. These could be kept by the student themselves or available for other students to read. (This can also help to monitor usage)
- **If you like this book, you might like...:** The teacher could add comments to each book recommending other similar books

