

English Project

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. As English (and computer) classes were so popular with students, these classes were continued, and actually used as an incentive for students to attend additional literacy tuition. For example, students could only attend additional English classes if they also attended additional Khmer literacy classes as well.

In addition, while PEPY was committed to improving Khmer literacy levels, the team was also aware of the value in English as a gateway to learning and development for all students. There are very few resources in the Khmer language, and Khmer Unicode for computers and texting was only just being delivered. Most information students could access in books or online was (and still is to a certain extent) in English. Unless students had some capacity to understand English, they would have little opportunity for self-directed learning, and a limited capacity to learn about the world.

Program development

PEPY ran English classes consistently from 2006, but in early 2008 took the additional step of hiring an English teacher, who conducted extra-curricular English classes for grades 4 to 6. Each class could attend 2 hours per week of English lessons. In 2008 the government funded the construction of a local lower secondary school in Chanleas Dai. PEPY supported this project by constructing a second building for the school, so that there would be sufficient classrooms. The building was delayed by one year, during which time students were housed in a temporary structure built by the community, school, and PEPY. Once the lower secondary school officially opened, PEPY decided to move English classes to the Junior High School and offer classes to Junior High School students (grades 7,8, and 9). The reasons for this were as follows:

- Incentive for school attendance. Many students dropped out of school around grades 6 and 7. The popularity of English meant that offering classes at this level provided an incentive for students to stay in school longer.
- Offering classes only at Chanleas Dai Primary School meant that students from that school had an unfair advantage over students from other communes who attended the Junior High School. PEPY teachers were beginning to find that Chanleas Dai students had a much higher level of English than the other students at Junior High School level, and not only was this not ideal for the students, but it was also challenging for the teachers.
- PEPY was looking to find ways to broaden impact and make programs more sustainable. In 2009 the team introduced an English teacher-training project at primary school level, so that English tuition for grades 1-6 was possible in all schools, and that government school teachers were able to hold the classes instead of PEPY staff. This also increased the impact of the project as building the capacity of teachers meant that more students could benefit. This project was called Traveling Teacher Support and ran for 5 years from 2009 – 2013. You can read the Lessons Learned [here](#).

PEPY's initial relationship with the Junior High School was challenging. It was much more difficult to schedule extra time for supplementary classes, and teachers showed less interest in working with PEPY. Thus, while we initially hoped for a partnership model, we instead ran our programs again as supplementary to the government curriculum. To begin with, these classes were conducted at lunch-

time or in the evening. Few students attended as often children would return home for lunch, and would have to return home straight after school to support their parents at home.

PEPY conducted a survey with the students to see if enough people were interested in studying English to warrant continuing the project in some way. The response was positive, but students requested that the classes were scheduled during the day. As a result, PEPY worked with the Junior High School principal to schedule classes in the students free periods. Students were offered 4 hours of English classes per week. These classes were optional, but many students still signed up to attend. PEPY ran English classes in the Junior High School in this way for 6 years from 2009 – 2014.

Transition and current status

In 2012, PEPY agreed on a new strategic goal, which was supporting students in our target area to secure employment. Due to this, the emphasis shifted from working with Junior High School students to High School and University students. As part of this shift, it became apparent that the extra-curricular classes offered at the Junior High School could not directly support this goal, and were also creating differences in the capacity of students attending High School (in a similar way to how English classes with only one primary school created students at different levels at Junior High School level). While PEPY still believe in the value of English in terms of employability, the immediate focus for the team has changed.

As a result, PEPY English classes ended in Chanleas Dai Junior High School in 2014. Due to the lack of interest and involvement from the teachers and principal, there was no possibility for transferring these classes to the school to run. As a result, from 2014, PEPY is only offering English classes to PEPY scholarship students based in Siem Reap.

English methodology

Background to the model

Global perspective

The PEPY team believes that learning English is not just about vocabulary and grammar, but also an opportunity to understand more about different cultures and the world as a whole. PEPY English classes were framed in this way, and curriculums and activities adapted and developed to encourage students to explore information and ideas from other countries.

Resources

At the beginning of the project, especially when working with primary school children, PEPY used the Let's Go series of books as a basis for the classes. On moving to work solely with Junior High School grades, these books were found to be too young for the students, and PEPY introduced the Headway series. While these books are well designed for language tuition, the vocabulary and examples used were not relevant to a Cambodian context. While the PEPY classes were focused around learning about other cultures and countries, it was very challenging for the students to be basing their language learning on words and ideas that were unfamiliar to them. In 2012 the PEPY team decided to devise a PEPY English curriculum for grade 7 students. This curriculum was drafted using specifically Cambodian names and examples and working with vocabulary that would be more useful to the students. The curriculum is still a work in progress, but is available for download as part of the English Project Lessons Learned resource pack.

Teaching techniques

All PEPY classes prioritized developing critical thinking in students. As such, students were encouraged to ask and answer questions, and work in groups to complete projects. In English class, a common teaching technique was to set students project and presentation work. When studying a topic, students would be encouraged to work in groups to conduct their own research and exploration and then present their findings in English to the rest of the class. Working like this developed students' skills in self-directed learning, critical thinking and presentation as well as English language. In addition, it helped build confidence in the students.

Class registration

As with all supplementary PEPY class, students were required to register at the beginning of term. Following registration, PEPY invited all parents to the school for a presentation to learn about what their children were going to be learning, and what the benefits of the class were. Parents were required to sign an agreement with PEPY to support their students in attending class. This was also an opportunity for PEPY to receive feedback and ideas from the parents

Attendance rules

As with all supplementary PEPY classes, students were expected to meet certain attendance requirements. These were explained to both students at teachers at the beginning of the year during registration process. If students did not attend class 4 times in a month, then PEPY would conduct a meeting with the student to find out the cause of their absence. If students continued to have poor attendance – for up to 8 times – PEPY would meet with the parents to discuss the viability of their continuation in the class.

Home visits

If students registered in the class had poor attendance, or were causing problems in the classroom, the PEPY team conducted home visits to talk to their parents. These home visits were very useful for the team to understand a little more about the students home life, and the level of support they received from their parents with regard to their education. It was also a good opportunity to discuss

with parents more generally about education in the community. Following these visits, the PEPY team often found that students' attendance improved – either because they received more encouragement from their parents, or because they were motivated by the level of the interest the PEPY staff took in their learning.

Partnering with international schools

PEPY has formed relationships with schools in other countries, to facilitate exchanges between the students. The students write to each other and send photos of themselves and their communities. A very popular activity, this enables the students to form tangible connections with people from other cultures, via the medium of the English language.

Staff training

The PEPY staff originally hired to teach English in the Primary School and Junior High School received training at ACE (Australia Center for Education) in Siem Reap. However, the team found these trainings very difficult as they were more aimed at native English speakers. In 2009, PEPY worked with an education consultant who spent time conducting teacher training and supporting the team in developing resources. In addition, some key members of the PEPY management team had previous international teaching experience and drew on their background and resources to support the development of the PEPY English teaching team. PEPY also sent English teaching staff members to participate and present at the CAMTESOL conference in Phnom Penh and to visit Cambodia P.R.I.D.E's extra-curricular projects in Preah Vihear. PEPY team members also benefitted from attending the PEPY Literacy Camp and learning Effective Teaching and Learning techniques that they could incorporate into their lessons.

Challenges

Sustainability

The Ministry of Education in Cambodia requires that English is taught in primary schools. However, the majority of teachers in Cambodia, both at primary and junior high level, do not speak English themselves. They have no real capacity to teach English and so the classes rarely happen. PEPY designed the Traveling Teacher Support program to meet this need in primary schools, however, it was not practical to run this project at a Junior High School level (due to the limitations of our target area and the level of engagement from the teachers). As a result, the PEPY extra-curricular classes at the Junior High School level could not be economically sustainable. They would only continue as long as PEPY were funding teachers to teach them. While the impact of the project was sustainable (i.e. the students were building skills that would be useful throughout their lives) there was no real way to continue the project following PEPY's withdrawal.

Support from the school and teachers

PEPY met continual challenges working with the principal and teachers at the junior high school. Weak leadership meant that the government teachers at the school were not invested in their work and had no interest in being involved with PEPY projects or understanding the benefit to the students.

Migration to Thailand

In the Chanleas Dai community, there has been an increasing trend in illegal migration to Thailand for seasonal labor. When PEPY first started working with the community, it was relatively common for adults to migrate to earn money, but this did not have a great deal of impact on the students. However, since 2010, potentially due to improved diplomatic relations between Thailand and Cambodia making illegal border crossings safer to navigate, the numbers of people migrating has massively increased. Once students finish primary school, large numbers leave for Thailand to earn money either for themselves or their families. Sometimes their parents encourage them to go, or pull their children out of school to look after relatives while they migrate themselves. Other parents want their children to stay in school, but the children, having seen their friends with disposable income, decide that working is preferable to education and so drop out of school disregarding their parents. The following table shows the yearly decrease in registration for Junior High School. Having discussed this phenomenon with community members, PEPY can realistically attribute this change to increased migration to Thailand.

Grade	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
7	119	119	98	84	76
8	78	74	69	46	44
9	49	45	49	38	18
Total	246	238	216	168	138

PEPY's rationale of offering English and computer classes at a Junior High level to encourage students to stay in school did perhaps help with student attendance for a couple of years. However, as evidenced by the numbers above, attendance at Junior High School is in sharp decline. In addition, the numbers of students registering at the beginning of the year (the figures shown above) are very different from the numbers that actually complete the year. In 2013 – 2014 the team is expecting approximately 40% of students to drop out before the end of the year to migrate to Thailand. This of course means that far fewer students attend PEPY English classes.

Resources

As mentioned previously, many of the English language resources available were intended were not ideal for a Cambodian context. The team realized it was important for students to be able to learn how

to talk about their own lives in English first, before they began to learn vocabulary relevant to other countries. However, at the time of writing, there aren't any comprehensive Cambodian resources available for teaching English. While PEPY has developed a curriculum for grade 7 to address this, it is only a basic curriculum, designed by our team, and is not necessarily structured in the best way for grammar progression etc, and does not include any listening activities. It is very much a work in progress, and something we use to supplement our current resources, rather than being a final solution to the problem.

Impact

English ability

PEPY English classes were successful in improving students ability at written and spoken English. The PEPY team conducted beginning and end of year tests to monitor the students' progress. Here are results for the school year 2012 – 2013 as an example of the improvement of the students during a year of English tuition:

Pre-Tests				Post-Tests		
Grade	Total Students	# taking the test	# passed the test	Total Students	# taking the test	# passed the test
7A	42	32	75%	23	20	95%
7B	44	35	89%	23	23	87%
8A	34	30	63%	21	20	100%
9A	35	33	100%	24	24	100%
Total	155	130		91	87	

The principal of Kralanh District High School also noted that the level of English of students coming from Chanleas Dai was markedly different from students who had attended other Junior High Schools with no access to PEPY English classes.

Love of learning

PEPY students taking English were aware of their improvement during the course of the year, and this helped foster an excitement about learning, and a pride in achievement. Language learning can be particularly useful in fostering this feeling, as it's a skill that students can demonstrate to others, and can understand clearly themselves (in comparison to something like critical thinking which students often don't notice they are acquiring!). Their excitement about learning English contributed to a greater interest in learning in other lessons.

School attendance

As mentioned previously, migration to Thailand PEPY's target area means that many students drop out of school. At the beginning of this project, English classes were certainly an incentive for students to continue to grades 7,8, and 9 after primary school. While in later years, this impact was greatly reduced as the pull of Thailand became stronger and stronger, the PEPY team believe that English classes are still a motivating for many of the students that still choose to attend school.

Lessons learned

Less students, more success

One of PEPY's greatest lessons learned for English and other extra-curricular activities, is that having a greater number of beneficiaries does not necessarily mean you have a greater impact. In fact, there can be a very negative impact in having a large number of students attending a project such as additional English classes, and then most of those students dropping out of school in later years and never using those skills. If PEPY was starting a similar project in the future, the team believes that a more effective approach would be to select a small number of students and support them throughout the learning process to demonstrate achievement and change as a result of their studies. While this may mean spending more per student, and working with a smaller target group, the actual ripple effect of creating role models and achieving students is much greater in the community as a whole.

Easy to join, easy to stop

Any student could enroll in a PEPY class, as long as they registered and secured their parents' agreement. This meant that just as many students enrolled, many students dropped out through the year, usually because they were dropping out of school altogether to go to Thailand, or because their parents were in Thailand. Some students would drop out for a month or two for this and other reasons, and then wish to return to class. It was very difficult in these cases to then turn away students who wanted to return to their studies. PEPY took the approach that all students who wanted to study were welcome, and that the team would not turn away students who showed a willingness to learn. However, the fact that it was easy to join PEPY classes, and that we welcomed back students who dropped out, meant that students didn't necessarily feel a strong commitment to the classes. In the future, the PEPY team would advocate a very rigorous selection process, choosing only students who can demonstrate commitment, and whose parents are proved to be invested in their education.

Sustainability

Once PEPY started working directly with students through offering extra-curricular classes, we made it very difficult for ourselves to design any kind of sustainability into the program. If teachers see something as being outside of their immediate responsibilities, it is very difficult to encourage them to take on that role in the future. In addition, if the teachers do not really have the skills to teach those classes as well, then it is hugely difficult to train them to do something new AND take on extra responsibilities to pass that knowledge onto the students. Running extra-curricular classes can be a very successful project in terms of impact on student learning, but if run directly by the organization, it will always struggle to be sustainable. If sustainability is a goal, then the project should never work directly with students, and begin by working with teachers and community members, ideally through existing power structures such as the Ministry of Education.

Talk about your culture first, then learn about another

While PEPY English classes still believe in the benefits of learning language through a global lens, it was apparent that students needed to be able to talk about their own lives in a different language first before learning how to describe unfamiliar cultures. This was made apparent through the language resources available, which might teach students all the words to talk about soccer, but none to talk about the most popular sport in Cambodia – volleyball. Students gained confidence by being able to talk about what they knew and what was familiar to them, and so the PEPY teachers incorporated these lessons into the curriculum, as well as encouraging them to learn language associated with other cultures.

