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Student-Perceived Factors Associated with English Proficiency Challenges in a Cambodian High School: A Descriptive Survey

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examined factors perceived to constrain English learning among English as a foreign language (EFL) students in a provincial high school in northeast Cambodia and identified practical measures that may support their learning.

Methodology: A descriptive quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted using a structured, paper-based questionnaire. The closed-ended items were translated into Khmer from the source instrument and adapted for the local context. Fifty-five high school students in grades 10, 11, and 12 were selected through simple random sampling; the target sample size was guided by Yamane's formula. Data were analyzed in SPSS version 27 using descriptive statistics.

Main Findings: Students most often identified family-related constraints, particularly limited household support and learning resources, as contributors to English-learning difficulties. School-related conditions, including traditional teaching approaches and large classes, were also commonly endorsed. At the individual level, respondents reported low self-confidence and fear of making mistakes when using English. Students nevertheless rated personal effort and responsibility as the most important perceived route to improving English skills.

Novelty/Originality: The study provides evidence from a rural Cambodian high school, a setting that remains underrepresented in EFL research. Comparing student perceptions across academic levels shows how family, institutional, and individual conditions may intersect in a provincial high school setting. The findings offer context-sensitive guidance for communication-oriented instruction, accessible, equitable learning support, learner confidence development, and family–high school collaboration. Because the survey assesses perceptions rather than objective proficiency or causal effects, the results should be interpreted as descriptive evidence to inform future mixed-methods research and local support planning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English plays an important role in higher education, employment, and access to international knowledge. In Cambodia, however, English-language learning is shaped by local institutional conditions, unequal access to resources, and opportunities for meaningful use beyond the classroom [1]-[3]. Understanding the conditions that students themselves associate with English learning challenges is therefore important for designing contextually appropriate support in provincial high schools. Research on English as a foreign language (EFL) indicates that achievement is influenced by interconnected contextual and individual conditions. Family socioeconomic status, parental education, home resources, and learners' access to technology can shape opportunities for English learning [4]-[6]. At the institutional level, instructional practices, learner engagement, and teacher motivational

strategies influence students' participation and achievement [7]-[9]. These factors should be understood as associated conditions rather than universal or deterministic causes of proficiency outcomes.

Affective and motivational factors are also central to EFL learning. Foreign language anxiety can restrict language processing and participation [10], [11], while self-efficacy and motivation are closely related to English achievement [12]-[15]. Anxiety, attitudes, strategy use, and listening-related cognitive and affective conditions may interact in complex ways [16], [17]. Conversely, motivation, persistence, and sustained engagement can support learners' efforts to develop English competence [18]. Learner autonomy and self-regulation are particularly important in high school settings, where progress depends partly on students' capacity to plan, monitor, and evaluate learning outside formal lessons [19]-[22]. Self-determination theory further highlights the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for sustained motivation [23]-[26], while current work emphasizes the connection between language learning, identity, and learners' social contexts [27].

Many students in provincial high schools have low English proficiency. Several studies have shown that high school students in Cambodia have lower levels of English proficiency than those in other countries [31]-[33]. This issue may lead to low academic achievement, limited employment opportunities, increased dropout rates, continued inequality in Cambodian high schools, or even a lack of job promotion if it remains unaddressed [34]-[37]. Although several studies have been conducted with high school students, few have examined their perceptions of family, school, and individual factors related to English-proficiency challenges at a provincial high school in northeast Cambodia [38]-[40].

Accordingly, this study employed a descriptive survey to examine high school students' perceptions of family, school, and individual factors associated with English-proficiency challenges at high schools in Tboung Khmum province, northeast Cambodia. It also identified the supports that students considered most useful. The study does not measure actual English proficiency or establish causal effects. Instead, it provides a localized account of student perceptions intended to inform future instructional and support initiatives.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a cross-sectional descriptive survey design [28]. The design was selected to describe students' perceptions of potential family, school, and individual influences on English learning, as well as possible support strategies. It does not permit causal inference or provide a direct measure of English proficiency. The study was conducted at the high school, located in Tboung Khmum province, Cambodia.

2.1. Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Technique

The target population comprised 121 high school students enrolled during the 2024–2025 academic year: 63 in grade 10, 33 in grade 11, and 24 in grade 12. Using Yamane's sample-size formula with a 10% margin of error [29], the required sample size was calculated to be 55 students. The sample was proportionally allocated across academic years, resulting in 55 participants, 29 from grade 10, 15 from grade 11, and 11 from grade 12.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

N = 121

e = 10% = 0.1

$$n = \frac{121}{1 + 121 \times (0.1)^2} = 54.75 \approx 55$$

Where, n = the sample size
N = the population
e = the acceptable sampling error

Table 1. Proportional allocation of the study sample by academic year

Grade	Number (students)
10	29
11	15
12	11
Total	55

Participants were selected using proportionate allocation by academic year. The manuscript reports simple random sampling within each academic cohort, ensuring that eligible students in each cohort had an equal opportunity to be selected. Because the study was conducted at one institution and involved a modest sample, the results should not be generalized beyond the study setting without further evidence.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

A paper-based structured questionnaire was used to collect data. To reduce language barriers, the questionnaire was translated into Khmer. Part I contained 11 demographic and self-rated English-learning items. Part II contained 39 closed-ended items addressing students' perceptions of family, school, and individual factors associated with English proficiency challenges. Part III contained 39 closed-ended items addressing possible solutions. Parts II and III used a five-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Questionnaires were administered in person, and the research team was available to clarify procedural questions. The manuscript does not report pilot testing, expert content validation, or an internal consistency estimate (e.g., Cronbach's alpha) for the translated instrument. Accordingly, the scale-based results should be interpreted as descriptive perceptions rather than as validated latent-factor scores [30].

2.3. Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses were coded on a Likert scale, with "strongly disagree" as 1 and "strongly agree" as 5, and analyzed in SPSS version 27.0. The analysis was descriptive, using frequencies and percentages by age and gender, and combined agreement percentages by dividing agree and strongly agree by two. No missing values and inferential tests were reported. Consequently, comparisons among academic years are descriptive and should not be interpreted as statistically significant differences. Results are presented in tables and narrative form to summarize participant characteristics and student-reported perceptions. All quantitative results were presented in tables and charts that provided comparisons across academic cohorts [2].

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Institutional permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant high school authority before data collection. Participants received information about the study's purpose; participation was voluntary, and responses were treated as confidential and anonymous. The authors should verify, before submission, whether a formal ethics review reference number was issued and add it if applicable.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section summarizes the student-reported findings and discusses their implications. Results reflect respondents' perceptions and are not objective measures of English proficiency.

3.1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The study involved 55 high school students from grades 10 to 12. Most respondents were aged 14-15 years (52.73%), 72.7% were female, and 27.3% were male. The sample included 29 from grade 10 (52.73%), 15 from grade 11 (27.27%), and 11 from grade 12 (20.0%).

Table 2: Age and Gender of Students

Variable		Frequency	Valid percentages
Age valid	14-15 years old	29	52.73
	16-17 years old	15	27.27
	18 years old and over	11	20.00
Gender valid	Female	40	72.70
	Male	15	27.30

3.2. Student-Perceived Factors Associated with English Proficiency Challenges

Family-related constraints received the highest combined agreement among perceived contributors to English proficiency challenges: 57.36% of respondents agreed, and 22.14% strongly agreed, for a combined 79.50%. Students associated these constraints with limited English use at home, limited parental experience with English, and insufficient home learning resources. Individual factors received 61.12% combined agreement (49.37% agree; 11.75% strongly agree), while school factors received 59.04% combined agreement (45.33% agree; 13.71% strongly agree). Individual factors included low motivation, limited study habits, shyness, and fear of making mistakes. School factors included students' perceptions of traditional teaching approaches, limited classroom interaction, and constrained learning resources. These figures represent student perceptions and do not demonstrate that any factor causes lower proficiency.

3.3. Student-Perceived Supports for English Learning

All three solution domains received high agreement. School-related measures received the highest combined agreement (85.23%; 62.56% agree and 22.67% strongly agree), followed by student-related measures (83.22%; 68.82% agree and 14.40% strongly agree) and family-related measures (76.36%; 55.35% agree and 21.01% strongly agree). Students, therefore, viewed improvements in teaching approaches, classroom resources,

and opportunities for meaningful communication as especially important, while also endorsing self-study, confidence-building, and family encouragement. The results indicate broad perceived support for multilevel intervention rather than support for a single solution.

Table 3. Student-reported agreement with factor and solution domains

Domain	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Combined agreement (%)	Interpretation
Family-related constraints	57.36	22.14	79.50	Perceived contributor
Individual-related constraints	49.37	11.75	61.12	Perceived contributor
School-related constraints	45.33	13.71	59.04	Perceived contributor
School-related supports	62.56	22.67	85.23	Perceived support
Student-related supports	68.82	14.40	83.22	Perceived support
Family-related supports	55.35	21.01	76.36	Perceived support

3.4. Descriptive Comparison by Research Objectives

The findings show that respondents perceived English proficiency challenges as multilevel rather than as the product of a single deficit. Family-related constraints attracted the highest combined agreement (79.50%), while school-related supports attracted the highest agreement among the proposed solutions (85.23%). This pattern is important because it suggests that students may view the home environment as a major constraint while still looking principally to the high school to provide effective opportunities for improvement. These findings should not be interpreted as evidence that family, school, or individual factors cause low proficiency; the study measured perceptions through a cross-sectional questionnaire and did not administer an objective English test.

The strong salience of family-related constraints is consistent with research showing that socioeconomic conditions, parental education, parental expectations, and home learning resources can influence opportunities for foreign-language learning [4]. In the present study, however, such conditions were reported by students rather than measured directly. The result should therefore guide future inquiry and support planning, not be used to assign responsibility to families. A practical implication is that the high school can partially compensate for unequal home resources by expanding access to English-language materials, supervised self-study, digital learning support, and low-cost opportunities for on-campus English use. Cambodian research on learner autonomy and reading in basic education likewise highlights the importance of contextualized, institutionally supported learning opportunities [2], [3].

Students also identified school-related conditions, including limited interaction and traditional teaching approaches, as important. Research indicates that instructional practices that promote engagement, interaction, and motivational support are relevant to English learning and achievement [7]-[9]. The very high agreement with school-related supports in this study suggests that students see the high school as an actionable site for intervention. Rather than simply replacing one method with another, the upper secondary school could introduce structured pair and group speaking tasks, formative feedback, guided reading and listening activities, and teacher-development opportunities focused on communication-oriented lessons. Blended and flipped learning approaches may also expand practice time when implemented with adequate access and support.

Individual-level results point to anxiety, shyness, limited confidence, and insufficient self-study. This is consistent with a substantial literature showing that foreign-language anxiety can constrain participation and cognitive processing [10], [11], and that anxiety is related to lower self-efficacy and motivation [17]. The implication is not that learners are solely responsible for their difficulties. Instead, classroom conditions should be designed to reduce the perceived cost of making mistakes. Low-stakes speaking tasks, peer collaboration, supportive corrective feedback, and repeated opportunities to rehearse may help students participate more confidently. At the same time, students can benefit from goal setting, self-monitoring, and reflection strategies that support self-regulated learning [21], [22].

The study also supports a stronger emphasis on learner autonomy. Research with upper secondary school EFL learners shows that autonomy, self-regulation, motivation, and social support are interrelated [27]. At this high school level, autonomy-supportive measures could include learning plans, vocabulary and reading logs, peer study groups, guided use of digital resources, and consultations that help students set realistic language goals. These activities should be accompanied by institutional support, because autonomy is not simply an individual trait; it is enabled by opportunities, feedback, resources, and a sense of competence and belonging [24], [25].

Several limitations should frame interpretation. The study involved a small sample from one upper secondary school, relied on self-report data, did not directly assess English proficiency, and did not report formal validation or internal-consistency evidence for the translated questionnaire. The descriptive analysis also does not support causal statements or statistically significant comparisons among academic years. Future research should combine an objective English proficiency measure with a validated questionnaire, include teacher and parent perspectives, report reliability estimates, and use a larger multi-site sample. Qualitative interviews could further clarify why students perceive particular family, school, or individual conditions as influential.

4. CONCLUSION

This descriptive survey provides a localized account of how a rural upper secondary school in Tboung Khmum province, Cambodia, perceives English proficiency challenges and potential supports. Respondents most frequently identified family-related constraints as a perceived contributor, while they most strongly endorsed school-related supports, followed closely by student-related supports. The results, therefore, support a coordinated response: the high school should strengthen communication-oriented teaching, opportunities for English use, learning resources, and student support; students should be supported in developing self-regulated learning habits; and, where feasible, families should be engaged through practical encouragement and awareness of available learning resources. Because the study is perception-based and descriptive, these conclusions should not be treated as causal claims or as direct evidence of English proficiency levels. Future multi-site research should include objective language assessment, validated instruments, and the perspectives of teachers and family members. Schools should facilitate interactive learning, innovative pedagogy, teacher professional development, and relevant institutional supports to provide more opportunities for English use beyond the classroom. The family should encourage children to attend regular classes and provide academic support by allocating household work. Moreover, students should spend appropriate time on self-study, attend regular classes, and practice exercises individually or with their peers.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, Z.H., N.U. and L.L.; Methodology, Z.H., N.U. and K.T.; Software, T.V. and K.P.; Validation, L.L., K.T. and T.V.; Formal Analysis, Z.H., N.U. and K.P.; Investigation, Z.H. and N.U.; Resources, T.V. and K.P.; Data Curation, Z.H. and N.U.; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Z.H., M.S. and N.U.; Writing – Review & Editing, L.L., K.T., M.S. and T.V.; Visualization, T.V. and K.P.; Supervision, L.L., M.S. and K.T.; Project Administration, L.L., Z.H., M.S. and N.U.; Funding Acquisition, L.L.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. The authors should verify that the consent procedure and the institutional permission statement accurately reflect the approved study protocol.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

Generative AI-assisted language editing was used during manuscript preparation. The authors reviewed and edited the revised text and remain fully responsible for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

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