



# University English teachers' research conceptions and engagement: Insights from Cambodian higher education

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## ABSTRACT

Research into teacher research has received considerable attention in the last few decades. However, it still remains crucial to examine how teachers understand research and to what extent they engage in it. This study investigated how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Cambodian higher education perceived and engaged in research. The study employed a qualitative case study and collected data through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 16 EFL teachers from two universities (private, metropolitan, and provincial). Findings based on thematic analysis show that Cambodian university EFL teachers were positive about the value of research, yet their conceptions of research were mixed and contested. Their research engagement was markedly limited and was confined to conducting research to fulfill degree requirements; attending conferences, workshops, or seminars; and supervising students' research projects. There was almost no involvement in academic publishing due to various challenges to their research engagement endeavors, including time constraints, research knowledge deficiency, lack of funding and support for research, limited social recognition of research, and insufficient sources of research motivation. The participants offered a set of recommendations to improve the overall environment for research to enhance Cambodian EFL teachers' research engagement. The study concludes with a discussion and policy implications of the findings, as well as suggestions for future research considering the study limitations.

## 1. Introduction

Research engagement among language teachers, particularly English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, has been a topic of much interest for many years (Borg, 2007, 2010). Since the 1990s, research on teacher research has increased substantially, as evidenced by early works such as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990, 1999) and more recent works such as Borg (2013) and Banegas et al. (2022). Theoretical and practical questions related to the need for language teachers to engage in research (e.g., Atay, 2008; Borg, 2010, 2013), including action research (e.g., Burns, 2009; McNiff, 2013), participatory or collaborative action research (Burns, 1999; Kemmis, 2006; Kemmis et al., 2014), and classroom research (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Hopkins, 2014), have also received considerable attention. The growing scholarly interest in teacher research is also substantiated by the inclusion of the theme of 'teacher

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research' in many academic journals and publications (see Borg, 2010) and by the increasing number of recent research articles dealing with various aspects of teacher research (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2021; Gilliland et al., 2023; Willegems et al., 2017). Nevertheless, questions such as how language teachers perceive research and how they engage in research work continue to be posed, deserving urgent attention. As Borg (2010) argued, "globally speaking, language teacher engagement in research remains limited" (p. 399). Therefore, it is imperative to examine how language teachers, particularly EFL teachers, perceive, understand, and engage in research.

Over the last two decades, there has been a growing body of research investigating research engagement of language teachers in both school and university settings (Farsani & Babaii, 2019). Most of these studies have adopted Borg's (2010) definition of research engagement as a frame of reference. According to Borg (2010), 'research engagement' can be understood as "both engagement in research (i.e. by doing it) as well as engagement with research (i.e. by reading and using it)" (p. 391). Both meanings are incorporated into the term 'involvement' as in the phrase 'research involvement' (see Adebisi, 2022; Eam, 2015; Skinnider et al., 2018).

In the present study, we draw on Borg's (2010) definition of research engagement, focusing more on its first aspect (i.e., doing research) and conducting a case study involving EFL university teachers in Cambodia. Our aim is to understand how university teachers in higher education contexts in developing societies engage in research. We also utilize the definition of research engagement by Heng et al. (2020) who defined it as "involvement in various research-related activities including, among others, initiation of research ideas and projects, conduct of research, writing of research reports, and dissemination of research findings" (p. 965). Thus, in the present study, research engagement is conceptualized as involvement or engagement in conducting and publishing research.

The study seeks to contribute to the burgeoning body of literature on EFL teachers' research engagement by taking Cambodia as a case study to shed light on the research practices of university teachers in the Global South. Cambodia is an interesting case, as its higher education has significantly improved in recent years due to efforts by the Cambodian government and development partners (Heng & Sol, 2024). Such developments may have transformed how university teachers perceive research and engage in it; however, there has been almost no research to investigate this phenomenon, which leaves a huge knowledge gap. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring how Cambodian EFL university teachers perceive research and its value, and how they engage in it. The study is significant in that it is, to the best of our knowledge, the first empirical research that uses a qualitative design to investigate Cambodian tertiary EFL teachers' research conceptions and engagement. The study will bring to the spotlight the realities of academic life of Cambodian university teachers who operate in a precarious academic environment that may be unimaginable to their counterparts in the developed world (Chhaing, 2022; Heng et al., 2023). This understanding is crucial, as it provides valuable insights into how university EFL teachers in a developing country like Cambodia navigate their social realities and academic endeavors to increase their participation in the international research community. Moreover, findings from the study will be vital to policy making in the context of higher education in Cambodia, particularly regarding the need to gain a thorough understanding of the various challenges confronting Cambodian university teachers in their research practices and the need to identify evidence-based strategies to promote their research engagement.

## 2. Conceptual framework

Research into teachers' conceptions of research can be categorized into two lines of inquiry: university teachers or academics' conceptions of research and schoolteachers' conceptions of research. Brew (2001) was among the pioneer researchers examining how academics perceived research and why they engaged in it. Based on interviews with 57 senior academics in Australia, Brew (2001) found that academics' research conceptions could be classified into four broad categories: domino conception (solving one problem after another), trading conception (building academic profiles), layer conception (a process of discovery), and journey conception (a learning and transformational journey). On the other hand, Bruce et al. (2004) found five research conceptions held by academics which are related to goal attainment, service to the research community, knowledge generation, benefits to people, and real-world problem solving. Åkerlind (2008), Kiley and Mullins (2005), and Meyer et al. (2007) have also examined how academics perceive research. Åkerlind (2008), for example, found that academics' research conceptions could be grouped into four categories related to academic requirements, professional development, personal development, and social improvement. Overall, academics perceive research and engage in it because they believe that research could benefit individuals, communities, and societies.

The second line of inquiry is the examination of schoolteachers' conceptions of research. Borg's (2009) seminal work has been influential, providing an international baseline for other studies to make comparison. Specifically, Borg (2009) investigated the conceptions of research held by 505 teachers of English from 13 countries. Data from survey questionnaires and follow-up interviews showed that teachers shared a similar conventional conception of research. That is, research was perceived to be associated with "statistics, objectivity, hypotheses, large samples, and variables" (Borg, 2009, p. 374). The study also reported low to moderate levels of research engagement among the teacher participants. Key reasons why they did not read or did not conduct research were related to a lack of time, limited research knowledge, and limited access to books or journal articles. Many teachers also attributed their limited research engagement to the fact that their colleagues did not engage in research. For those who were involved in research, personal, pedagogical, and professional concerns rather than instrumental motives, such as promotion, were the main motivators. In particular, teachers engaged in research in order to find better ways of teaching, solve teaching-related problems, and enhance their professional development (Borg, 2009). Numerous researchers have adopted Borg's (2009) questionnaire to examine research conceptions and research engagement of language teachers in school or university settings (Heng, 2022). The findings have been mixed, indicating a low to high level of research engagement, depending on the research context (see, e.g., Banegas, 2018; Borg & Liu, 2013; Farsani & Babaii, 2019; Rahimi & Weisi, 2018).

### 3. Literature review

#### 3.1. EFL teachers' research conceptions and research engagement

Over the last decade, there has been a growing body of work investigating how teachers, particularly EFL teachers, perceive research (Bai, 2018; Bai & Millwater, 2011; Banegas, 2018; Borg, 2009; Moore, 2011) or engage in it (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2015; Borg, 2010; Borg & Liu, 2013; Farsani & Babaii, 2019). Many of the recent studies, in one way or another, have replicated Borg's (2009) survey in their own contexts (e.g., Banegas, 2018; Farsani & Babaii, 2019; Moore, 2011). Research on how EFL teachers perceive and engage in research has grown in recent years (Heng, 2022). In China, for example, a series of related studies by Bai and co-researchers (e.g., Bai, 2018; Bai & Millwater, 2011; Bai et al., 2014) showed that Chinese EFL teachers recognized the significance of research for teaching and professional development. However, their research engagement was constrained by both individual and environmental factors. In particular, lack of time, limited research and disciplinary knowledge, as well as lack of confidence and academic support (e.g., research training or mentoring), were cited as common hindrances to their active research engagement. Studies by Borg and Liu (2013) and Li (2023) have also reported similar findings about challenges to research and the limited research engagement of Chinese EFL teachers.

In Iran, Tabatabaei and Nazem (2013), Mehrani (2015), and Sadeghi and Abutorabi (2017) showed that Iranian EFL teachers, similar to English teachers in Borg's (2009) study, had conventional scientific notions of research; that is, they associated research with questionnaires, statistical analysis, variables, and hypotheses. Teachers in these studies also reported low to moderate levels of engagement in/with research. The lack of time, knowledge, interest, and institutional support were reported as major constraints that restricted their abilities to be research-engaged. Moreover, across these studies, professional development and pedagogical concerns were the main motivations for the teachers' research engagement, although instrumental incentives, such as salary raises and promotions, were also important.

In other contexts, such as Bangladesh (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2015), Iraq (Mohammed, 2019), Libya (Jamoom & Al-Omrani, 2021), Oman (Alhassan & Ali, 2020; Behforouz et al., 2023), the Philippines (Tarrayo et al., 2021), Turkey (Kutlay, 2013), and Vietnam (Pham et al., 2023; Vu, 2020; Yen et al., 2018), researchers have also attempted to investigate EFL teachers' research conceptions and engagement. Even though the findings are mixed, with some reporting moderate to high levels of research engagement (Mohammed, 2019; Tarrayo et al., 2021), most reported that the research engagement of EFL teachers was low due to many challenges. Alhassan and Ali (2020), for example, found that Omani EFL teachers' research engagement was impeded by a lack of resources, including limited access to academic databases; time constraints; and a lack of funding and incentives for research. A study by Kutlay (2013) revealed four key challenges to Turkish EFL teachers' research engagement, namely time constraints, lack of knowledge about research methods, lack of interest in research, and lack of research engagement among other teachers. Vu (2020) found that Vietnamese EFL university teachers considered research as a "work pressure" (p. 8) or an "extra burden" (p. 9); additionally, they saw their roles mainly as teachers, not researchers. Their research engagement was limited by their heavy teaching loads, time constraints, limited research knowledge, and their conceptions of research as distant and irrelevant to their everyday teaching.

Despite the proliferation of research studies into EFL teachers' research conceptions and research engagement, empirical studies into how university teachers, including EFL teachers, in higher education settings in the developing world perceive research and how they engage in it remain limited (Heng et al., 2020). The lack of research in this area is even more notable in Cambodia where, with the exception of a few studies (e.g., Keuk, 2015; Moore, 2011), little is known about how Cambodian EFL university teachers perceive research and engage in research activities, particularly in the context of rapid progress in the Cambodian higher education landscape in recent years (Heng, 2024). This study aims to fill this knowledge gap and contribute to the literature on university teachers' research conceptions (Åkerlind, 2008; Brew, 2001; Healey & Davies, 2019) and language teachers' research engagement (Borg, 2010; Borg & Liu, 2013; Gironzetti & Muñoz-Basols, 2022; Pham et al., 2023).

#### 3.2. Cambodian EFL teachers' research conceptions and research engagement

In Cambodia, a few studies have investigated how Cambodian EFL teachers perceive research and engage in it. One of the first studies investigating this phenomenon was a survey by Moore (2011) who replicated Borg's (2009) influential study in the Cambodian context. The survey showed that Cambodian EFL teachers had a moderate level of research engagement. Moore (2011) called for future research to employ qualitative research methodology, using in-depth interviews, to investigate how Cambodian EFL teachers perceive and value research and how they engage in it.

Another study by Keuk (2015) also explored how Cambodian EFL teachers engage in academic research. Findings from interviews and case studies showed that Cambodian EFL university teachers were "unclear and confused" about research (p. 278). Their research engagement was limited, and it was constrained by their limited research knowledge, inadequate support from institutions, and a lack of access to research resources. The study involved EFL university teachers in Phnom Penh, the capital city; therefore, Keuk (2015) suggested that future research examine how Cambodian EFL teachers based in the provinces in Cambodia perceive and engage in research.

In a more recent study on Cambodian EFL university teachers, Moore (2023) examined research leadership of Cambodian scholars majoring in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). These TESOL scholars had completed their Master's or PhD degrees overseas and worked as EFL university teachers and/or academic leaders. The study employed a mixed-methods approach and revealed "a generally positive view of research" among the participants. However, their research engagement was limited to supervision of student research projects and presentations at conferences or workshops. Research outputs in the form of research

publications were scarce (Moore, 2023).

A few other studies have examined research conceptions (Heng et al., 2022) and research practices (Eam, 2015; Heng, 2024; Heng et al., 2023; Oleksiyenko & Ros, 2019) of Cambodian university teachers. Overall, these studies highlighted the limited research engagement of Cambodian university teachers, with Heng et al. (2022) showing that Cambodian university teachers had “mixed, varying, and contesting conceptions of research” (p. 4), and that their research engagement was limited, despite their positive views of research and its value. Likewise, Heng et al.’s (2023) study revealed that Cambodian university teachers based in public universities had a low level of research engagement, while their peers in private universities hardly engaged in research. Similar findings were also reported in Oleksiyenko and Ros (2019) and Ros et al. (2020). Oleksiyenko and Ros (2019), for instance, found that early-career Cambodian lecturers had “little understanding of what academic excellence entails” (p. 229), and their research endeavors, including publication efforts, were thwarted by the lack of support from their institutions and society at large.

Despite the above studies, none, except Moore’s (2011) survey, has specifically examined how Cambodian EFL university teachers perceive research. Thus, there remains a huge research gap in how Cambodian EFL teachers perceive and engage in research. The knowledge gap is particularly noticeable considering the recent developments in Cambodian higher education which may have shaped university teachers’ research conceptions and engagement. Moreover, except for Eam’s (2015) survey, no research has examined how university teachers from private universities in the provinces in Cambodia perceive and engage in research. The present study aims to address these knowledge gaps and shed light on the research conceptions and practices of EFL university teachers in a developing country like Cambodia—a context that remains underrepresented in the international literature.

The present study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Cambodian EFL university teachers perceive research and its value?
2. How do Cambodian EFL university teachers engage in research?

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research design

This study was designed as a qualitative case study, guided by a social constructivist approach that views realities as a product of social construction (Crotty, 1998). As the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of EFL teachers’ research conceptions and engagement in a natural setting, a qualitative research design was deemed suitable (Yin, 2014).

### 4.2. Research settings

This study took place at two Cambodian private universities, coded University A and University B. University A is located in Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, while University B is based in Siem Reap, one of Cambodia’s major provinces, which is attractive to local and foreign tourists because Angkor Wat, the world’s largest religious monument, is located there. University A is home to six colleges and four schools. It is relatively famous for using English as a medium of instruction. Thus, students graduating from this university generally have high levels of proficiency in English. Like University A, University B is also known for its use of English as a medium of instruction. It has three faculties providing degree programs in social sciences. Both universities are comprehensive, offering various degree programs and short courses, particularly certificate courses in English for general or specific purposes. University A offers programs ranging from bachelor’s to doctoral degrees, while University B has yet to offer doctoral degrees.

Both universities have research offices and graduate schools. However, they do not have institutional requirements for research and publication for their faculty members, something that is common in many universities in Cambodia (Heng, 2024). Grants for faculty

**Table 1**  
Profiles of the research participants.

Participant code	Gender	Position	Qualification	Overseas master’s degrees	Teaching experience	University
K1	Male	Dean	Master	–	20 years	A
K2	Male	Research Coordinator	PhD	Yes	2 years	A
K3	Male	Senior Lecturer	Master	Yes	7 years	A
K4	Male	Senior Lecturer	Master	Yes	12 years	A
K5	Female	Lecturer	Master	–	13 years	A
K6	Female	Lecturer	Master	Yes	6 years	A
K7	Male	Lecturer	Master	–	13 years	A
K8	Male	Dean	PhD	–	16 years	A
K9	Male	Lecturer	Master	Yes	5 years	B
K10	Male	Lecturer	Master	–	7 years	B
K11	Male	Senior Lecturer	Master	Yes	7 years	B
K12	Male	Lecturer	Master	Yes	10 years	B
K13	Female	Lecturer	Master	–	2 years	B
K14	Male	Lecturer	Master	–	10 years	B
K15	Male	Senior Lecturer	Master	Yes	12 years	B
K16	Female	Lecturer	Master	–	3 years	B

research are scarce or non-existent at the time of data collection for this study. There are also no well-defined institutional research policies, leaving faculty research to chance and individual faculty members' research interests and agency.

#### 4.3. Research participants

To select participants for the study, purposive and stratified sampling strategies were used (Creswell, 2008). The goal was to select participants from different backgrounds to ensure that diverse views were represented in the study—an important criterion for data triangulation (Creswell, 2013). Accordingly, consideration was given to the participants' gender, educational qualifications, teaching experiences, and interest in the study. Sixteen EFL teachers (eight from each university) were purposefully selected for the study. Among them, four (25 %) were female, two had a PhD, eight (50 %) obtained their master's degrees from overseas, two served as faculty deans, one was a research coordinator, and three also taught in a general English program at their university (i.e., University B). To protect their identities, all participants are identified by codes (K1 to K16). Table 1 shows the profiles of the participants.

#### 4.4. Data collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews for data collection. The first author was responsible for collecting data from EFL teachers in University A, while the second author collected data from participants in University B. This task division was based on convenience and accessibility, as the two researchers had previously worked at the two universities. Permission from the relevant executives of both universities was requested and received. The researchers then sought support from the Dean of the School of Foreign Languages at University A and the Coordinator of the Department of English at University B to identify the potential participants.

The researchers contacted potential teachers one by one through Facebook Messenger, Telegram, and/or phone calls to inform them about the research and invite them to participate. Of the 19 invitees, two from University B and one from University A rejected the interview invitation due to their busy schedules. Fifteen interviews were carried out on the campuses of both universities and one in a coffee shop. The interviews were conducted in Khmer, the native language of both the interviewers and interviewees, to allow the participants to express themselves with ease. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and were later transcribed and translated into English by the first and second researchers who are Cambodian English lecturers. The interview lengths were between 25 and 60 min, with an average of around 35 min.

#### 4.5. Data analysis

To code and analyze the data, both deductive and inductive strategies were utilized, as they are complementary (Gibbs, 2007). The deductive coding was informed by previous research on research conceptions (Borg, 2009; Brew, 2001; Bruce et al., 2004) and research engagement (Borg, 2010; Heng et al., 2023). The data coding was facilitated by qualitative software NVivo 12, and the analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which involved six steps, namely (1) familiarizing ourselves with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for or developing themes based on the codes, (4) reviewing themes to develop major themes, (5) defining and naming the major themes, and (6) producing the research report. In the data analysis process, the interview transcripts were imported from Microsoft Word into NVivo 12 and were read and reread many times to develop key themes.

Strategies to enhance the rigor of qualitative research, such as member checking and reflexivity, as suggested by Cope (2014) and Houghton et al. (2013), were used. Ethical conduct of research, including protecting the confidentiality of data and participants' identities, were also observed throughout the research process and writing.

#### 4.6. Findings

Based on the data analysis, four key themes were developed from the dataset: (1) EFL teachers' conceptions of research and its

**Table 2**  
Cambodian EFL teachers' conceptions of research.

Teachers' conceptions of research	Exemplary quotes
Research as solving problems	We do research to respond to current problems... Research findings can help solve a lot of current issues in related fields. Simply, we cannot always deal with today's problems using tips found in the old days. Therefore, research findings must also be up-to-date. (K11) To me, research is a full investment of time and intellect on a topic of interest about the subject matter that one is teaching, or it is an attempt to find a solution to a particular problem happening in a classroom or an educational institution. (K15)
Research as finding something new	Research is a systematic search to answer specific questions. We do research in order to reveal unknown things—something that we don't know and want to know or try to answer questions. (K12) Research is for everyone who wants to know, to find something new, to catch up with new updates, to study previous experience. To search for new knowledge to be clear in mind. (K13)
Research as reading books, articles, or materials on the Internet	Every lecturer needs to do research (small or big) to update the content knowledge about what they teach... They should do it because they need new teaching methods, new teaching materials. They should do research on the Internet. They should read journals to gain new knowledge, but if not, they will teach the same old things for a long time from year to year. (K9)

value; (2) research engagement; (3) challenges facing their research engagement; and (4) suggestions to enhance EFL teachers' research engagement.

4.7. Cambodian EFL teachers' conceptions of research and its value

The interview data showed that the Cambodian EFL teachers' conceptions of research fell under three categories: (1) research as solving problems; (2) research as finding something new; and (3) research as reading books, articles, or materials on the Internet (see Table 1). Among these three categories, the understanding of research as solving problems was most frequently mentioned, followed by the understanding of research as activities to find something new. As Table 2 illustrates, the Cambodian EFL university teachers who participated in this study mainly viewed research as an activity conducted to solve problems and find something new.

However, the conceptions of research as reading books, articles, or materials were contested by a few participants (K2, K11, and K15) who argued that reading materials or books to prepare for teaching was not research. K11 said, "I could define it wrong, but I think it's not research by simply reading the literature to complete assignments." To him, research needed to go through different steps of the research process, from conducting the literature review, collecting and analyzing data, and writing the research report. These findings indicate contested and varying conceptions of research held by Cambodian EFL university teachers.

Regarding how they perceived the value of research, the participants tended to link research value to improvement in teaching. Many of them mentioned that research could "enhance the effectiveness of teaching" (K1), "improve their teaching" (K2), "improve the teaching profession" (K11), "gain knowledge in teaching" (K14), and "play an important role in teaching" (K15). In addition, they mainly saw the usefulness of research in solving problems in the classroom or in society, gaining new knowledge, and contributing to society. The following quotes illustrate their common understanding of the value of research:

If lecturers don't do research, they won't improve their teaching skills and share new knowledge with their students. (K9)

We do research to respond to current problems, but research findings need to be shared among colleagues. (K11)

It is always important to discover new and up-to-date techniques and methods in order to ensure that the new generations can learn how to deal with [problems] and adapt themselves in the constantly changing world. (K16)

The EFL teachers also saw the value of research in terms of making evidence-based decisions (K1, K2, K4, K12, and K13), broadening knowledge (K3, K6, K8, K15, and K16), generating profits from research (K4, K7, and K9), enhancing professional credibility (K2, K11, K15), building confidence in teaching (K7, K13), increasing chances for career promotion (K8, K15), and acting as role models for students (K2). Below are examples of quotes illustrating their understanding of the value of research:

... we serve as a role model for students in the next generation to follow... To motivate them that we can do [research] so they can do it too. (K2)

Yes, it (i.e., research) is very important. When we take action, we base it on reliable information. That means we have enough evidence to take action, not based on opinions. We have data, we work based on data, because it's so important. (K12)

Yes, I think research is very important for teaching because teachers can know better about the subject they are teaching or broaden their knowledge to teach better. (K15)

Overall, these Cambodian university teachers were unanimously convinced of the value of research, yet their understanding of what constitutes research varied, with some regarding their teaching preparation activities as research. This research understanding reflects their limited knowledge of research, which may have affected their research engagement endeavors.

4.8. Cambodian EFL teachers' limited research engagement

The data showed that the research engagement of the EFL teachers in this study was considerably limited. All but three of them

**Table 3**  
Cambodian EFL teachers' research engagement activities.

Types of common research engagement activities	Exemplary quotes
Conducting research to fulfill degree requirements	I have done a research project. It was for my bachelor's degree. (K10) I have conducted one study as it's a requirement for my master's degree. (K12)
Attending academic conferences, workshops, or seminars	Recently, I attended a workshop at [name of his university] related to action research shared by one lecturer from [name of university] in Phnom Penh. (K9) I attended many conferences when I was in Japan... I also attended one conference on peace development organized by [name of his university]. (K12)
Supervising students' research projects	I supervise students to conduct research. I supervise those from IR (International Relations) but not TESOL. Recently, I have been supervising new students too. One related to Chinese investment. The second one is about migrant workers in Korea and Thailand... (K9) At some universities I have taught, I have supervised major reports of about 30–50 %. [I read journal articles] approximately 3–4 times per week as I am an advisor so I have to read. (K14)

stated that their research involvement was limited to their experience conducting research during their bachelor’s or master’s degrees; attending conferences, workshops, or seminars; and supervising their students’ research projects. For the two teachers who held PhD degrees, only one of them (K2) had published three articles. The other PhD holder did not have any publications. Two other participants had each published one journal article (K15) or a book chapter (K12). The rest of the participants only had experience conducting research to fulfill the requirements of their undergraduate or graduate degrees (e.g., K3, K5, and K11). Thus, their research engagement, particularly in terms of writing for publication, was extremely limited. The types of their common research engagement activities are shown in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, most of the research engagement activities of the Cambodian EFL university teachers interviewed for this study evolved around supervision of students’ research projects, participation in conferences and research-related workshops or seminars, and completion of research projects to fulfill degree requirements. Except for three participants (K2, K12, and K15), there was limited research involvement in terms of conducting research and writing for publication.

#### 4.9. Challenges facing Cambodian EFL teachers’ research engagement

The most frequently mentioned challenges facing the participants in their academic endeavors were related to a lack of time, knowledge, funding, and support for research; limited social recognition of research activities and outputs; the absence of a reading culture; and limited English language proficiency. Other challenges that were also mentioned, albeit less frequently, included the lack of academic freedom; inadequate copyright protection; limited access to academic literature; the absence of research mentors; insufficient sources of motivation for research; a general lack of interest in research; an absence of institutional research requirements; limited academic writing skills; inadequate collaboration opportunities; and limited participation from potential research participants. Some of these challenges are illustrated by the following conversation excerpts:

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*Conversation excerpt 1*  
 Researcher: What prevents you from engaging in research and publication?  
 K9: There are no requirements at [name of his university] to publish in either local or international journals. There’s no support. There are no rules that require teachers to publish.

*Conversation excerpt 2*  
 Researcher: So, what prevents you from doing research and writing for publication?  
 K10: First, it’s time. Second is related to language use which is a concern. We are not native speakers [of English], so our language use is limited or cannot be matched with [native speakers of English].

*Conversation excerpt 3*  
 Researcher: What factors motivate or prevent you from doing research?  
 K12: If we want to do research, we need two things: time and funds. If we can have funds from the government, NGOs, or university, we can do research because we need funding to do research... One more thing is skills. Sometimes we have interest [in research] but have no skills. If we don’t have research skills, how can we do research?

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These conversation excerpts highlight key challenges to Cambodian ELT teachers’ research engagement, indicating personal and structural barriers to research, particularly the precarious situation (i.e., limited support, heavy teaching loads) in which they were operating. However, among the many barriers, the lack of research skills, the lack of requirements for research, and the lack of institutional support, especially funding, for research were most frequently mentioned by the participants.

**Table 4**  
 Suggestions to promote Cambodian ELT teachers’ research engagement.

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Suggestions to promote research engagement	Exemplary quotes
Providing research funds	Both (i.e., time and funding) are equally important, but funding is more important than time in order for me to be able to do research. If we have funding, we can allocate time to do research. (K12)
Improving research facilities	First, I need facilities [for research]. Second, I need some funding for research. Third, I need motivation from the university. (K14)
Providing motivation	I need inspiration or motivation from the management of the university. (K10)
Introducing research-promoting policies	[The Education Ministry] should make research compulsory for undergraduate and graduate students. The Ministry should also introduce laws or rules requiring lecturers to do research. (K9)
Providing fixed or higher salaries	If possible, [name of his university] should consider paying a full-time salary so I can be more committed to research. (K15)
Providing research skills training	One more thing is skills. Sometimes we have interest [in research] but have no skills. If we don’t have research skills, how can we do research? (K12)
Providing research mentors	Of course, I need funds, mentors, resources, and motivation from my family and friends [to engage in research and publication]. (K16)
Reducing teaching loads	If we teach only for a maximum of 15 h a week, we will have enough time to do research. Teaching for too many hours leaves us no time for research. (K9)
Establishing a functional research center	[Name of his university] should establish a research center, allocate some budget for research, and invite research experts to share research skills in workshops. (K12)

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#### 4.10. Promoting Cambodian EFL teachers' research engagement

In addition to challenges, the participants were also asked to make suggestions to improve their research engagement and that of their colleagues. Various suggestions were offered; however, the most frequently mentioned ones focused on the introduction of research-promoting policies; the provision of research funding and motivation; and improvements in research facilities. Other suggestions that the participants made to enhance research engagement included the provision of fixed or higher salaries, research skill training, and research mentors; a reduction in teaching load; and the establishment of a functional research office. Table 4 provides a summary of the suggestions made by the participants to promote their research engagement.

As Table 4 shows, there are many suggestions for promoting Cambodian EFL university teachers' research engagement. Most of them focus on improving the environment for research, such as providing research funds, ensuring higher salaries, reducing teaching loads, and providing research training. Unless the situation for research is improved, it is hard to imagine how the research engagement of Cambodian EFL university teachers can be encouraged and enhanced.

### 5. Discussion

This study showed that most of the Cambodian EFL teachers who participated in the interviews had positive views of research and its value. They considered research as an activity to solve problems or find something new. However, there were also those who held a less critical understanding of research, viewing it as a general reading activity they often did as part of their class preparation activities. This conception of research may have negatively impacted their research engagement, as they were not actively involved in meaningful research activities such as identifying research problems, data collection, analysis, and research report writing. This finding partly corroborates the literature on academics' research conceptions, particularly in terms of the understanding of research as a process of solving problems and discovery (Brew, 2001; Bruce et al., 2004). The finding is also in line with previous research across different contexts, such as Bangladesh (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2015), Iran (Mehrani, 2015), and Vietnam (Vu, 2020). It also echoes research findings emanating from Cambodia, such as Keuk (2015), Heng et al. (2022), and Nhem (2023). For example, Keuk's (2015) study revealed a vague understanding of research held by Cambodian EFL university teachers, whereas Heng et al. (2022) found that Cambodian lecturers had "mixed, varying, and contesting conceptions of research" (p. 4).

The present study revealed that Cambodian EFL university teachers had limited research engagement, as their experiences with research activities were confined to completing research to fulfill their degree requirements; attending academic conferences, workshops, or seminars; and supervising student research (see Table 3). Only a few of them had experience in publication. These findings highlight context-specific challenges facing EFL teachers in a developing country, corroborating previous studies examining EFL teachers' research engagement in different contexts, such as Bangladesh (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2015), China (Bai et al., 2014), Turkey (Kutlay, 2013), and Vietnam (Vu, 2020). The findings also echo previous research in Cambodia, which has shown a low level of research involvement among Cambodian university teachers (Eam, 2015; Heng et al., 2023; Ros et al., 2020). Eam (2015) particularly found that about 65 % of Cambodian lecturers surveyed ( $n = 444$ ) did not engage in research within the last five years prior to their participation in the survey. Ros et al. (2020) showed that Cambodian lecturers' roles were mainly limited to knowledge consumers, as their involvement in research activities was distinctively limited. These findings, however, are different from studies emanating from China (Xu et al., 2021) and a group of Asian countries, such as Iran, Indonesia, Japan, and Thailand (Farsani & Babaii, 2019; Rahimi & Weisi, 2018), where university teachers were found to have a higher level of research engagement due to enabling factors, including the availability of incentives and requirements for research and publications.

The present study further revealed a number of challenges limiting Cambodian EFL university teachers' research engagement. The challenges, ranging from the lack of time to limited knowledge about research to the lack of support for research, have been identified by previous research (Heng, 2024; Heng et al. 2022, 2023; Kwok et al., 2010). It is, however, worth noting that these challenges may not be unique to the Cambodian context. Other developing higher education contexts, particularly those in the Global South, have been facing similar challenges, such as heavy teaching loads, limited resources, and a lack of support for research, among other barriers (Canagarajah, 2002; Chankseliani et al., 2022; Demeter, 2020; Fussy, 2019; Horta & Mok, 2020). Thus, this study's findings attest to the numerous discursive and non-discursive challenges, placing researchers in the Global South at a disadvantage (see Blicharska et al., 2017; Canagarajah, 2002).

This study identified a number of suggestions that can be considered to promote Cambodian EFL teachers' research engagement. As shown in Table 4, to encourage research among Cambodian university teachers, attention should be paid to providing funding for research, improving research facilities, creating a conducive environment for research, and developing research knowledge and skills, among others. These suggestions are vital to making a difference in the research landscape in Cambodia and in similar higher education contexts. For example, to promote research engagement of Cambodian lecturers, Heng et al. (2023) suggested revisiting national research policies, implementing policies on academic promotion (i.e., professorial titles), and reforming institutional research policies to establish a well-defined system for academic promotion, research incentives, and research requirements. Writing about Tanzania, Fussy (2018) suggested categorizing universities into research- and teaching-oriented universities and implementing a research performance-based funding model instead of a direct funding allocation to universities irrespective of their research performance. Bai (2018) suggested providing support and encouraging positive views about research among Chinese EFL teachers to improve their research engagement. Kiatkheeree (2014) recommended that Thai EFL lecturers should build up their research skills and increase their English proficiency to enhance their research engagement. Universities and policymakers in Thailand were also suggested to create a reward system, provide sufficient support, including research funding, to EFL teachers, and establish a system requiring lecturers to publish (Kiatkheeree, 2014). Other researchers, such as Fussy (2018), Heng (2022), and Vu (2020), have also



provided various recommendations to promote research among university teachers, including EFL teachers, in developing countries. The recommendations pointed to a similar goal: creating enabling factors across different levels, national, institutional, and individual, to support and promote research engagement.

## 6. Conclusion and implications

This study has examined Cambodian university EFL teachers' research involvement via the analysis of qualitative data gathered by semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that most EFL teachers were convinced of the importance of research; however, their understanding of research was mixed and contested, with some holding less critical views of what constitutes research. The study brought to the fore the limited level of research engagement practices (conducting and publishing research) of Cambodian EFL teachers—generally confined to merely completing research to fulfill the requirements of postgraduate studies, attending academic conferences or workshops, and supervising students' research projects. Their limited research engagement seemed to be perpetuated by a host of challenges impeding their research interest, motivation, and aspirations. In addition, the study provided suggestions for promoting Cambodian EFL university teachers' research engagement, emphasizing the need to create a conducive environment for research by taking into account various influential factors, such as funding, facilities, motivation, policies, and skills for research, among other factors. These suggestions may be applicable to other social contexts with similar sociocultural and economic characteristics to Cambodia.

In light of the findings, the present study has three key implications. First, there is a need for reforming Cambodian higher education that can pave the way for developing a truly supportive research ecosystem in the sector (Heng, 2024). Such an ecosystem needs to be built on a clear research investment plan, a well-defined incentive mechanism, a functional institutional requirement policy for research, a meritocratic system, and a unified and effective higher education governance model. Building a research-enabling ecosystem certainly takes considerable time and effort, and requires a clear and powerful vision and commitment, particularly political commitment. Without collective efforts, strong commitment, and a clear and ambitious vision, the outlook for an improved research ecosystem in Cambodian higher education and in Cambodia at large will remain bleak.

Second, there is a need for encouraging research activities at the classroom level. One strategy is to make research a major component of any course or assessment in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Research courses should, therefore, be introduced earlier in the undergraduate degree programs (i.e., first year), while in the postgraduate programs, the conduct of research and the completion of research reports or theses need to be one of the requirements for graduation. Cambodian university teachers also need to try their best to contribute to the development of a new generation of young researchers by facilitating or requiring individual or group research projects among their students. Encouraging research at the classroom level is undoubtedly difficult, considering the fact that many Cambodian lecturers are not research-competent or lack practical experience in research and academic publishing (Eam, 2015; Heng et al., 2023); however, a change to the current practice needs to be introduced to foster the development of a healthy research culture in Cambodia.

Third, as this study offers insights into how EFL university teachers in a Global South context perceive and engage in research, and what prevents them from meaningfully contributing to the international research community, it uniquely adds to the existing body of literature on EFL teachers' research conceptions and engagement, particularly by providing context-specific challenges and solutions for promoting EFL teachers' research engagement. The study also contributes to the broader understanding of how EFL teachers in developing countries perceive and engage in research. Such an understanding is crucial for future research that aims to enrich our understanding of the diverse needs, experiences, and perceptions of EFL teachers across the globe when it comes to research and academic publishing.

Given the limited scope and the qualitative nature of the present study, our findings are not intended for generalization. To address the present study's limitations, future research should examine the nature of the research engagement of Cambodian university teachers in other types of educational institutions, particularly teacher education colleges or centers, as these institutions play a significant role in training a new generation of teachers in Cambodia, including those who will become university teachers. Comparative studies examining the research practices and research motivation of Cambodian university teachers from both public and private HEIs or from universities with different characteristics, such as comprehensive and specialized universities, would be helpful in advancing our understanding of how to promote Cambodian university teachers' research engagement. Another potential venue for research would be to examine how a vibrant research ecosystem can be developed in a resource-limited higher education context like Cambodia. Finally, studies exploring the research engagement practices of university teachers, including EFL teachers, across multiple countries in the Global South are needed to provide more insights into the challenges and opportunities for research and academic publishing by teachers or researchers in this part of the world.

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## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Kimkong Heng:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization, Visualization. **Bunhorn Doeur:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Visualization. **M. Obaidul Hamid:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology,

Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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