



**CamTESOL Conference on
English Language Teaching:
Selected Papers
Volume 2, 2006**

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Foreword

With the rapid growth of the economy and human resources development in Cambodia, English is fast becoming adopted as the primary medium of communication. In recent years, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of English learning institutions and centers, which have been expanding throughout the country. This remarkable increase in number leads to the challenges of supporting and promoting good practice in English teaching and learning, including evaluating and incorporating new innovations in the field such as recent trends towards student-centered learning). CamTESOL was introduced by key English institutes, centers, and schools in Phnom Penh and has continued to play a very important role in supporting English instructors and English school managers both locally and internationally, who are interested and enthusiastically involved in the development and improvement of English teaching and learning.

The 2nd CamTESOL conference held at Pannasastra University of Cambodia focused on the theme of “Improving the Practice” and included a large number of presentations promoting innovations to English Language teaching. The CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching: Selected Papers, Volume 2, 2006, contains four papers that were considered to offer outstanding insight to improving English Language Teaching practice at the student, teacher/classroom and school management level.

Aimed at improving practice at the student level, the first paper by Keuk Chan Narith and Tith Mab is titled “Learners’ attitudes towards strategies for teaching literature at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, Institute of Foreign Languages: A Case Study.” This paper explores the impact on the learning of students of their attitudes towards reading literary texts.

At the teaching level, the paper by Stephen Moore and Suksiri Bouchan, entitled “Teaching, Testing and Researching: ‘The Good, the Bad and the Ugly’ dimensions of ELT?” argues that teaching, testing and researching are closely linked. When they are successfully integrated in the classroom, each can inform and provide opportunities to improve the others.

The third paper, “Utilizing a Communicative Teaching Approach: Increasing Communicative Opportunities through Pair and Project Work” by Ingita Panda and Richmond Stroupe also contributes to improving practice at the teaching level. The authors review some of the challenges to implementing student-centered communicative language teaching in the classroom and offer suggestions as to how to utilize pair and project work successfully.

The final paper in this series explores ways of improving the practice at a management level. “ESL Management Meetings: Workplace Role as a Factor in Meeting Discourse” by Andrew Foley analyzes the discourse of management meetings at a language school to identify whether workplace roles as well as cultural factors influence participation in the management process. Foley also offers suggestions to managers in multicultural settings.

On behalf of the CamTESOL steering committee and the host institution of the 2nd CamTESOL, I would like to express my appreciation to all the speakers for their insightful presentations, especially for the presentation topics selected for this volume, and also to participants locally and internationally for their attention and ideas shared during CamTESOL.

Finally, our sincerest gratitude goes to all the other supporters, too many to name, who took part in making this CamTESOL possible.

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Teaching, Testing and Researching: 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly' Dimensions of ELT?

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationships between and among English language teaching, testing and researching. Teaching is often viewed as the 'fun' part of ELT; testing as a 'necessary burden'. Researching, on the other hand, is usually seen as beyond the teacher's domain and, therefore, an 'unwelcome intrusion' in the classroom. Good teaching nurtures learning and good testing provides useful feedback on that learning. Good researching improves both teaching and testing. Thus are good teaching, testing and researching inextricably linked. This paper probes the discontent that many teachers feel about language testing and research, and suggests that disinterest in either domain can have detrimental consequences for language learning. Testing that generates positive washback and classroom-based action research that leads to informed teacher intervention are highlighted as two critical links in the teaching, testing and researching 'model' and, indeed, as 'good practice' in ELT whatever the international setting.

Introduction

While teaching and testing (or assessing) are activities that are central to the work of language teachers, it is harder to make the claim that research should also play a significant part in the work of language teachers. Indeed, the authors' own views on the relevance of research to language teachers have evolved over the years, in step with the context of their own work: initially as language teachers they were largely disinterested in research; as postgraduate students they became more interested; and now as university lecturers, the authors are committed to promoting the benefits of research to language teaching professionals (see, for example, Moore, 2007). This paper has been written with a view to de-stigmatizing the commonly held

perception of 'research' in language teaching circles, and clarifying how research can complement teaching and testing.

Teaching, testing and researching: The stereotypical views

Although some readers might disagree with the following profile, based on the authors' decades of involvement with English language teaching in many different cultural contexts, we perceive a stereotypical language teacher to be one for whom teaching is fun; testing is burdensome; and researching is a luxury 'extra'. This typical teacher enjoys teaching, tolerates testing but avoids researching. Moreover, we believe that this profile would be typical of perhaps the majority of teachers

in many language-teaching settings, including in Cambodia. Complementing this profile are the perceptions of language learning students. Again, based on the authors' experience, students are likely to view teaching as stimulating (or boring); testing as fear-inducing; and researching as irrelevant. Not coincidentally, these student perspectives can be seen to echo the teachers' sentiments, and this suggests that how teachers' attitudes are perceived by students might have a significant impact on the development of students' own attitudes about language classroom experiences.

It is worthwhile exploring further what factors may be reinforcing these perspectives about teaching, testing and research. Knowing what they are could provide the key to unlocking their constraints on teachers' professional practices.

Reasons why testing and researching are not popular with language teachers

Let us first consider language testing. There are many reasons why language teachers may not like **testing**. Among the most common would be the following:

- It is difficult and time-consuming to design good language tests or assessments (i.e., balancing issues of validity, reliability and practicality).
- Marking tests can be very time consuming.
- Testing may be viewed as an imposition on teachers, especially if it is perceived as excessive and detracting from quality teaching time.
- Testing requires training and a commitment to continuous professional development to maintain good standards. It is not something that is simply learned once and then known forever.
- Testing may not be inherently interesting for many teachers, and it may be easy to defer an institution's testing responsibilities to one or two teachers who *are* interested in it.
- Quantitative and statistical techniques used in test analysis may frighten or confuse teachers.

- Teachers may have pre-conceived ideas of a normal distribution (i.e., 'bell curve') for their student cohort and not see the need to bother with formal testing.
- Test results may be overruled by management (e.g., management may not allow a student to fail), and this can be very de-motivating for a teacher who wants to design good and fair tests.
- Good testing practices might not be recognized by the institution and therefore the institutional rewards for good testing may not be distinguishable from the rewards for bad testing.
- Students who are unhappy with test results can be difficult to handle and/or can create problems for the teacher.
- Teacher-created tests pose risks to the teacher. For example, teachers may lose face if a student can identify a poor question and publicly challenge the teacher about it.

The combination and accumulation of these various factors constitute a considerable barrier to be overcome. It is no surprise therefore that testing is not popular among language teachers.

As with language testing, there are many reasons why a language teacher may not be interested in **researching**. Among the most common reasons would be the following:

- It may be difficult for teachers to see the relationship between research and actual ELT classrooms. Many teachers are happy enough with their status quo. For them, research may be seen as largely irrelevant, or an unnecessary 'luxury'.
- There may be very limited access to relevant research literature. Indeed, it may be too difficult to learn about research.
- Research, especially when it involves statistics, may be impenetrable to the majority of language teachers. Moreover, these teachers might question the validity of using quantitative techniques to measure educational outcomes.
- There may be no 'voice of authority' in the workplace that values and promotes

research. This means there may be no ‘culture of research’ possible.

- There may be no obvious reward at the workplace for being interested in research. Any time spent on research may be seen by colleagues as ‘wasteful’.
- There may be no time to conduct research or to read about it. Any interest in research that does exist cannot be nurtured.

These various factors influencing negative perspectives on testing and researching may make change difficult but certainly do not make it impossible. Indeed, many language teachers *do* ‘go against the flow’ and get involved in testing and research. Institutions can support these teachers and encourage others through the provision of professional development (PD) programs that address the various needs of professional language teachers (Bartels, 2005). Within a quality PD program, the positive benefits of developing knowledge and skills related to testing and

researching can be systematically presented and reinforced.

Teaching, testing and researching: Shifting the paradigm

Why should teaching be perceived as ‘good’, testing as ‘bad’ and research as ‘ugly’? A reconfiguration of these settings might be helpful in challenging stereotypes and therefore in changing teacher perceptions and attitudes. Indeed, the title of this paper questions the view that teaching is necessarily ‘good’, testing is ‘bad’ and that researching is ‘ugly’ (i.e., *worse* than ‘bad’). Let us consider, therefore, in what way testing and researching could be seen as ‘good’. Likewise, let us consider more critically the notion of ‘bad’ teaching and, indeed, the worst case scenario (i.e., the ‘ugly’) for all three domains.

Table 1 provides some suggestions in response to these questions and challenges.

Table 1. Reinterpreting Teaching, Testing and Researching

	Teaching	Testing	Researching
Good → Teacher satisfaction	-students participate and learn language; -teacher learns about teaching	-fairness of assessment; -positive washback; -diagnostic value for teaching	-taking valid action to address a significant issue; -useful feedback; -professional development for teaching
Bad → Teacher frustration	-students don’t participate or learn; -teacher doesn’t learn about teaching	-unfair assessment; -negative washback; -no value for teaching	-taking invalid action to address a significant issue; -useless feedback; -no professional development for teaching
Ugly → Teacher failure	-classroom chaos → harmful teaching	-‘good’ students fail; ‘weak’ students pass → harmful assessment	-‘wrong’ interpretation of results → harmful research

What Table 1 shows overall is that good teaching, testing and researching underlie teacher ‘satisfaction’; whereas bad teaching, testing and researching result in teacher ‘frustration’. ‘Ugly’ teaching, testing and researching would mean, quite simply, teacher ‘failure’. Within Table 1, there are clear parallels (i.e., mirror images) reflected between the criteria of good and bad teaching, testing and researching; while the ‘ugly’ dimension can be seen as extending beyond ‘bad’ to ‘harmful’

in each of these domains. What does this configuration of teaching, testing and researching suggest about how teachers’ practices might actively avoid falling within the undesirable categories of ‘bad’ or ‘ugly’?

There are many books available on language teaching methodology that deal quite effectively with ‘best practice’ in the teaching domain (see for example, Larsen-Freeman 1986; Ur 1991; Nunan

2000; Harmer 2001), and teachers do seem able and willing to read them and learn from them. However, in the domains of testing and researching, teachers are more reticent or even reluctant to pursue paths which could assist their performance as effective language teachers. Also, there seem to be fewer ‘user-friendly’ books to guide teachers in their quest for self-improvement, although Hughes (2003) and Brown (2005) are both highly accessible accounts of language testing and assessment for teachers, and Nunan (1992) likewise provides a clear teacher-friendly account of research methods in language teaching. In what follows we shall focus only on the testing and researching domains and, with a view to the Cambodian ELT context, briefly make one strong recommendation for each of them.

Positive washback: A focus for testing

As shown in Table 1, one feature of good testing is that it provides positive washback (or ‘backwash’) on teaching and learning. As Hughes notes, “backwash is the effect that tests have on learning and teaching....[It] is now seen as a part of the impact a test may have on learners and teachers, on educational systems in general, and on society at large” (Hughes, 2003, p. 53). Teachers can create conditions for positive washback in their testing practices by following the suggestions provided by Hughes (2003, pp. 53-55):

- Test the abilities whose development you want to encourage.
- Sample widely and unpredictably.
- Use direct testing.
- Make testing criterion-referenced.
- Base achievement tests on objectives.

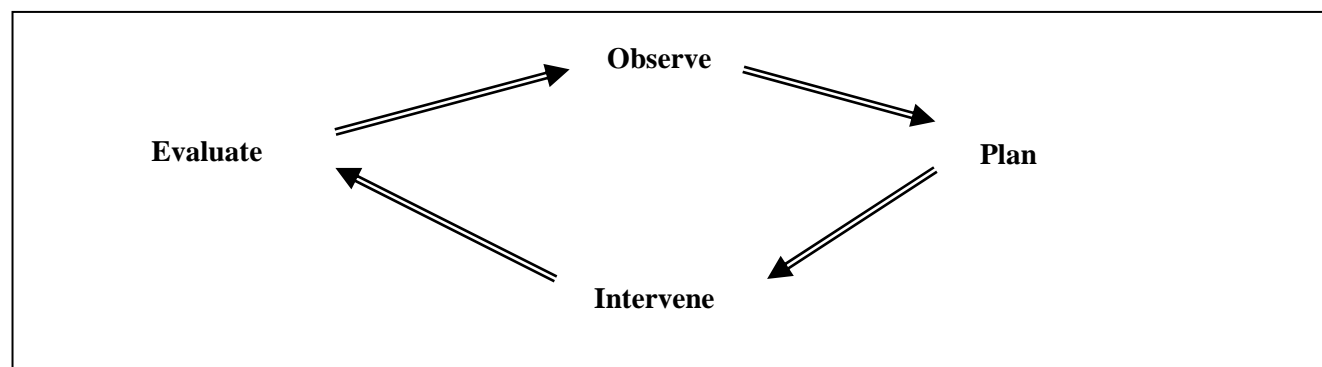
- Ensure the test is known and understood by students and teachers.

Washback has also been the subject of a significant number of research studies (see, for example, Cheng et al., 2004), which have attempted to measure its impact, but with mixed results. Washback appears to be a simple notion in theory, but it turns out to be a complex issue to investigate in practice (see Alderson and Wall, 1993). Nevertheless, implementing Hughes’ suggestions identified above will help toward generating a positive impact on language teaching and learning; Cambodian teachers should embrace them.

Action research: A focus for researching

While much of language-related research can seem impenetrable and far-removed from classroom reality and needs, there is one kind of research which is particularly well-suited to educational environments: action research. Action research in language education is typically a classroom-based research involving an iterative cycle of observation, planning, intervention and evaluation (see Figure 1). It can lead to improved teaching (and learning) through facilitating appropriate interventions in classroom practices (Burns, 1999; Wallace, 1998). There are many published accounts of this sort of research, often depicted as “teachers’ voices”, which show how informed interventions have improved the quality of the language learning and teaching experience in specific classroom settings. Interestingly, Watanabe (2004) also recommends action research as an appropriate method for investigating washback in language testing.

Figure 1 Action Research ‘Cycle’



Action research is highly appropriate to the Cambodian ELT environment (Moore, 2006) and Cambodian teachers who adopt it will stand to reap considerable benefits not only in terms of their teaching but also in terms of their students' learning. Let us briefly consider four possible action research projects that could be investigated in Cambodian language classrooms.

1. Classroom management: A teacher might notice that students sitting at the back of the classroom do not fully participate in lessons and tend to disturb other students. An action research study could be conducted in which the teacher investigates the effect of giving task instructions from a position in the centre of the classroom rather than from the front. This could enable students who sit at the back to more clearly hear the instructions and, along with the proximity of the teacher, help encourage these students to get 'on task' rather than talk and disturb other students.

2. Teacher-student interactions: A teacher might notice that during group-work tasks, some groups are much more active than others. An action research study could involve the teacher creating specific groupings of students which are used repeatedly for an extended period of lessons. The groupings might involve combining a strong student, a weak student, and two students at an in-between proficiency level. Improvements in negotiating meaning among student members could be measured and thus the project could have implications for testing as well.

3. Teaching reading: A teacher might notice that students read too slowly in class and refer too frequently to dictionaries. An action research study could involve the teacher introducing a top-down approach to the reading of all texts used in class, and restrict access to dictionaries. Again, student progress could be measured and this project could link with language assessment.

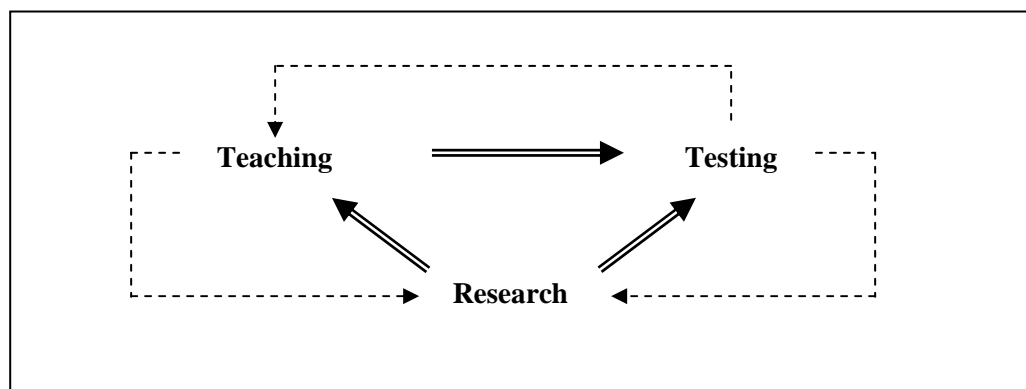
4. Formative assessment: A teacher might notice that he/she has insufficient time to provide feedback to all students on their written work. An action research study could be designed which involved regular peer assessment of student writing. Students would of course need to be taught how to assess one another's writing, based on clear, formative criteria.

These four examples are just a few among dozens of potential action research projects that could be undertaken in Cambodian English language classrooms. They serve to illustrate how action research is a very useful type of research for language teachers to engage with.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to sketch out and simplify some aspects of the complex relationship linking language teaching, testing and researching. To summarize, good teaching is fundamental to nurturing good learning. Testing (or assessment) is equally important for the feedback it gives on learning (and teaching). Researching too has a distinctive and necessary role in improving teaching, testing and ultimately language learning.

Figure 2. Research Informing Teaching and Testing



As shown in Figure 2, while teaching leads sequentially to testing; research findings can directly impact both teaching and testing. Moreover, while testing provides feedback to teaching, teaching and testing both provide feedback to research. Thus, these three dimensions of ELT are inextricably linked. Attention to any one of them should therefore involve consideration of the other two as well. A language teacher who aspires to be the *best* teacher he/she can be cannot afford to ignore the domains of testing and researching.

Stephen Moore is a Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at Macquarie University, Sydney. He has been involved in ELT in Cambodia since 1994, initially through English teaching and teacher education, and more recently through research. His research interests span TEFL in Asian contexts, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and language assessment.

Suksiri Bounchan is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Foreign Languages, Royal University of Phnom Penh. She has taught across the BEd (TEFL) curriculum, but specializes in Literature Studies. Her research interests include language teacher education, intercultural communication and gender studies.

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About CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching: Selected Papers, Volume 2, 2006

Background Information

CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching: Selected Papers is a publication of exceptional papers presented at the CamTESOL Conference series. The members of the editorial board select papers that were submitted from each conference in the series. Each paper is blind-reviewed by two editors and accepted by both before final editing and publication. The current publication includes papers presented at the 2nd CamTESOL Conference held on 25-26 February, 2006. Publication will proceed with one volume for each of the past years' conferences (Vol. 3, 2007; Vol. 4, 2008), all published in 2008 and early 2009. Initially, publication of Vol. 1, 2005 is online for public viewing, on the CamTESOL website <www.camtesol.org>, and on CD, which was distributed to participants at the 4th CamTESOL Conference held on 23-24 February, 2008. From 2009, selected papers from each conference will be published on an annual basis.

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Notes to prospective contributors

Participants at the CamTESOL Conference series are comprised of local Cambodian and expatriate educators as well as those from international institutions. Submission of papers which present innovative approaches in the conference streams and which would be of interest to both local and international conference participants is encouraged. When preparing their papers, authors should consider the context of Cambodian TESOL where most schools have limited resources and teachers often have to contend with large numbers of students in their classrooms. As a result, the Editorial Board, when selecting papers for the publication, takes into account the local context as well as the areas of interest for international participants. Within the conference streams, successful papers may consider both the interests of the international participants and the local needs of the Cambodian participants.

To submit a paper for consideration, one electronic and one printed copy of the paper should be submitted to the Conference Program Committee by the time of the annual CamTESOL Conference. The electronic copy should be in Microsoft Word or Rich Text Format and may be submitted by e-mail prior to the Conference <camtesol.selected.papers@gmail.com>, or it may be presented on CD upon registration for the Conference in Phnom Penh. Papers submitted in only printed form will not be considered for publication.

Papers should not exceed 5,000 words, including references, but not including abstracts or appendices. Papers should be preceded by an abstract of 150 words or less. The abstract should summarize the methodology and major claims or conclusions of the paper.

For more details concerning specific guidelines and formatting, please refer to Selected Papers on the CamTESOL website <www.camtesol.org>.

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