

Transformation of Primary History Textbooks in Cambodia through International Cooperation: Tension between Constructivism and National Identity

Research Overview

This study investigates the transformation of history education in Cambodia by analyzing primary textbooks developed via a JICA project. Through comparative analysis and practitioner interviews, it reveals the tension between constructivist learning structures and state-led historical narratives, elucidating the complex dynamics of "educational borrowing".

Purpose

The primary objective of this research is to examine the extent and nature of changes in Cambodian primary history education following the JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) Project, "Support for Social Studies Curriculum and Textbook Development for Sustainable Society Building in Cambodia" (2017–2020).

Social studies is an inherently context-dependent subject, deeply intertwined with a nation's politics, history, and culture. Consequently, international cooperation in this field often faces concerns regarding "educational colonialism"—the unilateral injection of external values or

cultural aggression. To address this, the presenter, as a practitioner in the JICA project, developed training programs based on adult learning theory and constructivism to ensure learners' autonomous engagement.

In post-conflict Cambodia, history education serves as a crucial symbol for the restoration of ethnic identity and national reconstruction. This study analyzes how the "constructivist" and "child-centered" pedagogical views introduced by the Japanese team were reconciled and re-contextualized within Cambodia's domestic political requirements, employing the framework of "Educational Borrowing".

Methods

A qualitative research design was employed, integrating the following two methods:

1. Comparative Textbook Analysis

The study analyzed the 2004 version (current curriculum) and two new history textbooks developed based on JICA training outcomes: *Journey to Khmer and the Glorious Angkor Era* (Grade 4) and *Journey to Khmer and Prosperity* (Grade 6). The analysis focused on the structural layout of "double-page spreads" and the placement of the "four elements" (Text, Resource, Activity, and Accountability) emphasized during the training. Furthermore, it categorized the textbooks into three types: content-oriented, concept-oriented, or competency-oriented.

2. **Continuous Field Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted over three years (2023–2025) with key stakeholders at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), including textbook authors and teacher educator at the Phnom Penh Teacher Education College. These interviews aimed to investigate how the knowledge gained from the training was utilized, adapted, or intentionally excluded during the actual development process.

Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed three significant findings:

First, a structural shift toward constructivist design was observed. The new textbook models adopted a full-color, double-spread layout, reflecting the "Text, Resource, Activity, Accountability" framework. Each lesson is designed to be completed within two pages, following a nested structure: "Key Question (Objective) → Inquiry of Resources → Activity → Summary". This indicates that the formal aspects of constructivist pedagogy intended by the training were received with high reproducibility.

Second, pedagogical hybridization and the persistence of "essentialism" became evident. Despite the inquiry-based structure, each lesson concludes with an "I remember!" section, explicitly stating the facts and keywords for students to memorize. While the overall curriculum structure appears constructivist, the lesson-level implementation remains anchored in an essentialist view that fixes "correct historical interpretations" and limits students' subjective interpretation.

Third, a "shrewd re-contextualization" driven by political intent was identified. The new textbooks incorporated political agendas prioritized by the current administration, such as the "Win-Win Policy" and "patriotism". While referencing the Japanese textbook structures as examples, the descriptions of modern history were strengthened to function as a narrative legitimizing the government's peace-building efforts.

Discussion: These results illustrate the concrete process of "Educational Borrowing" by the recipient side in international cooperation (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). Because the JICA training was constructivist—emphasizing the learners' autonomous meaning-making—Cambodian practitioners "shrewdly" selected and internalized Japanese expertise to align with their own practical challenges and political motives.

This suggests that in social studies, international cooperation can realize a process consistent with post-colonial ideals by avoiding "imposition" and ensuring learner autonomy. However, this autonomy also allows for the possibility of the results diverging from the initial project goals of democratization or peace-building through political utilization. Particularly in projects with government-linked counterparts, the dynamic of "government-led educational borrowing" reveals a fundamental tension with social studies education aimed at realizing a peaceful and democratic society.

Keywords

- History Education

- Textbook Development
- International Cooperation
- Cambodia
- Educational Borrowing

Reference

Steiner-Khamsi, G. (2002). Re-framing educational borrowing as a policy strategy. In M. Caruso & H. Tenorth (Eds.), *Internationalisation: Comparing educational systems and semantics* (pp. 57–89). Peter Lang.