

The Added Value and Financial Savings of Contextually-Relevant Assessments

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Abstract

Researchers assessed 260 students to determine language and vocabulary skills using the LAS-O Assessment Survey developed in the United States by McGraw-Hill publishing. Students in 4th, 5th, 6th, and 8th grades at Caring for Cambodia (CFC) schools, a nongovernmental organization located in Siem Reap, Cambodia, were tested to determine both language performance in English and also to examine the cultural and contextual relevance of the LAS-O assessment to the student's learning environments. As the team visited classrooms, conducted teacher observations, and administered the LAS-O, the misfit between this expensive exam and the school's learning goals became clear. Results indicated a lack of continuity between the concepts tested in the LAS-O assessment and the lessons taught during English instruction in CFC schools. Additionally, the team found that students in CFC schools performed at varied levels on the LAS-O, both within schools and across the sample, leading school administrators to a lack of confidence in the test's validity. Some results proved informative, but the lack of connection between the test and the instructional program led to uncertainty as to which program components led to the observed effects, both positive and negative: performance on the listening section of the LAS-O was significantly higher across the sample than vocabulary scores; students at one school (Kong Much School) scored twice as high on the LAS-O than their counterparts at another school (Aranh Primary School). While teacher interviews and classroom observations led the researchers to tentatively attribute some of the LAS-O results to teacher, student population, class size, and gender, better alignment between the classroom and the test is needed to interpret variations in assessment results. These team's research implies the need to create a valid and reliable assessment tool that recognizes the contextual relevance of the targeted population. In the next phase of the project, the team will create its own assessment to fill this need.

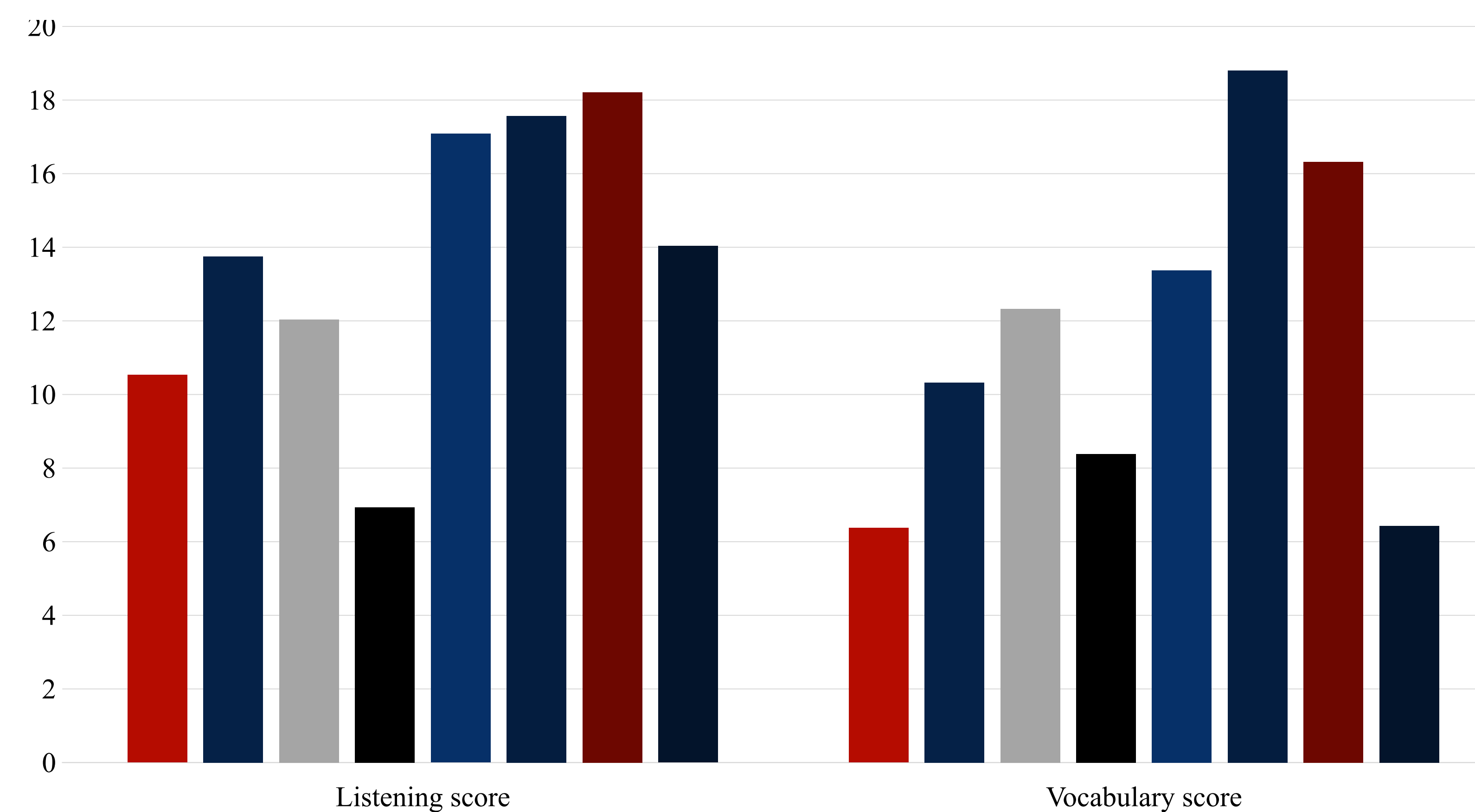
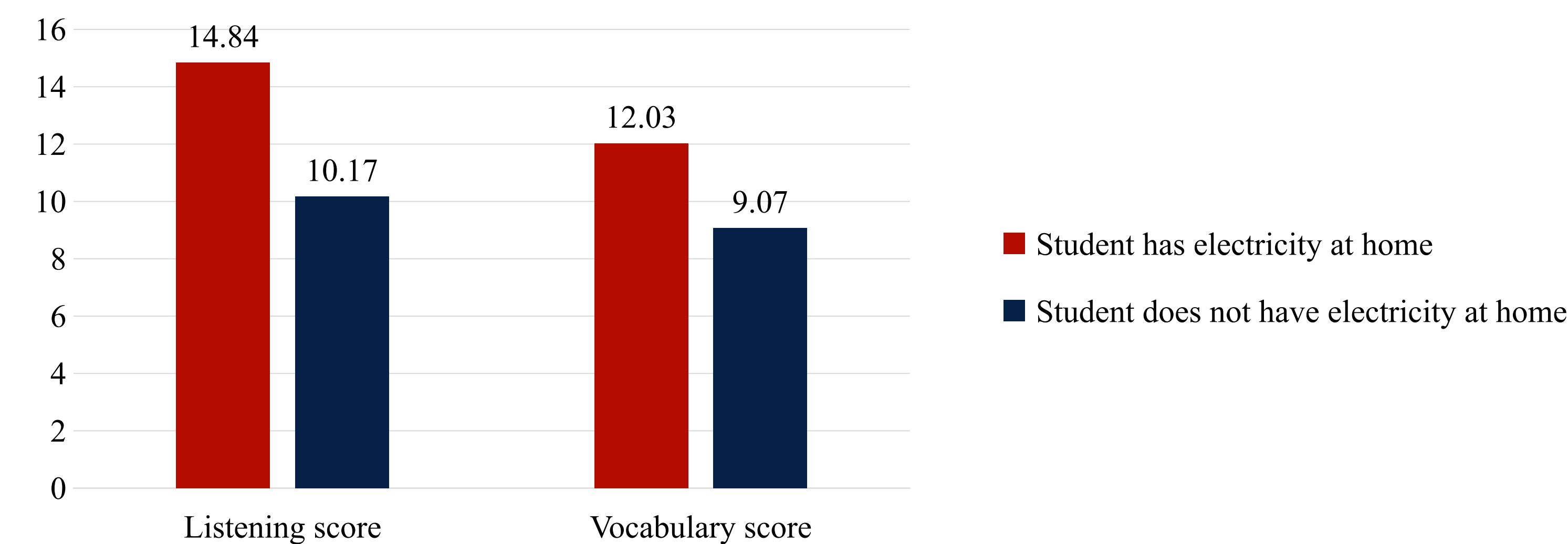
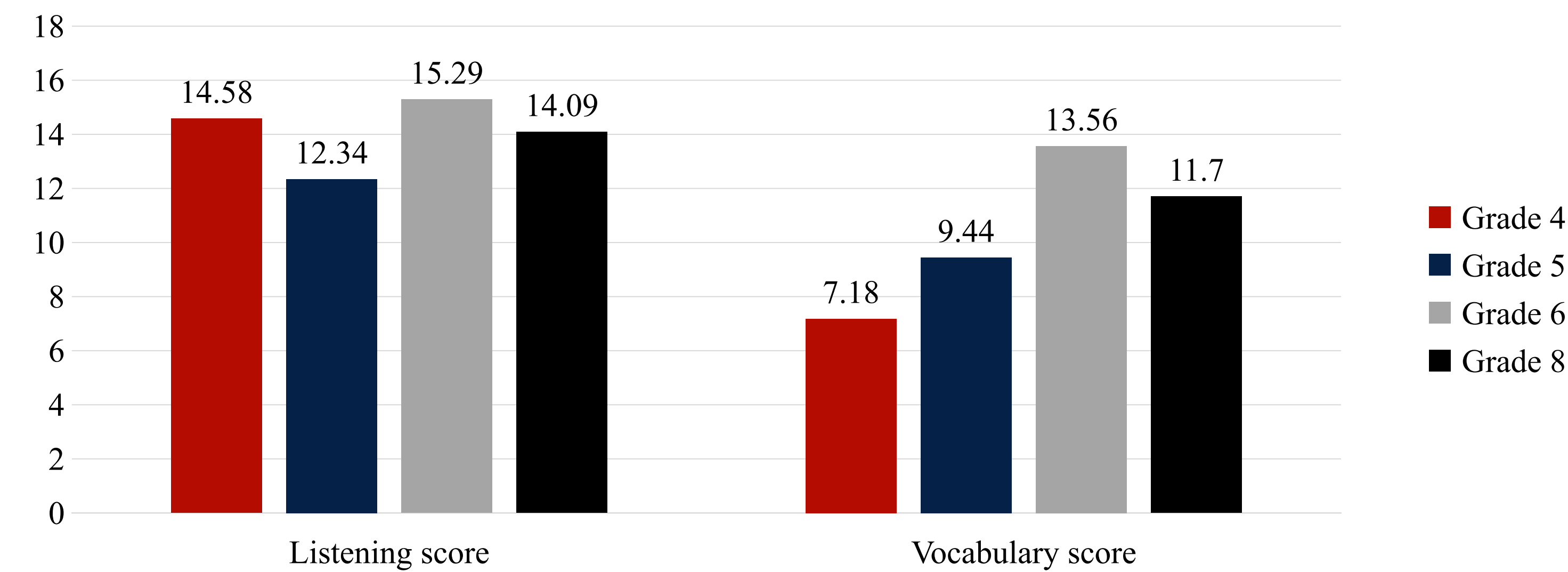
Background of the Study

The use of standardized ESL assessments created by U.S. publishers is a common practice among schools. However, for many international schools, particularly those with limited funding, incompatibilities between mainstream tests and the schools' own pedagogical values and goals may contribute to a lack of precision in testing. Often, acquiring the funding to administer these tests with sufficient levels of frequency can be challenging. Much international educational development happens on a small, grass-roots scale, through small voluntary groups and foundations working with limited resources and yet still seeking high-quality instruments to inform their practice. Our project aims to serve the broader educational development community by demystifying the process of assessment creation and providing an essential roadmap toward the development of affordable, relevant, quality ESL assessment.

Facts

- ❑ Unlike traditional Ministry of Education schools in Cambodia, where English language instruction begins in 7th grade, schools partnering with CFC begin teaching English in 4th grade.
- ❑ This early language instruction is implemented in the hopes that students will build a strong foundation of English language skills before they enter secondary school.
- ❑ The average class size in CFC schools is 45 (compared to 60 in non-CFC Ministry of Education schools).
- ❑ English teachers employed by CFC to teach 4th-6th grades are not formally trained teachers but have ongoing professional development and weekly team meetings with the director of teaching training.
- ❑ CFC uses the *Let's Go* series for instruction in 4th through 6th grades.
- ❑ English classes in Cambodia are required by the Ministry of Education.

Results



Methods

A mixed methods approach was used in the data collection and analysis. Participants in the program include five Cambodian English teachers in five schools, and 260 randomly-selected 4th, 6th, and 8th grade students in those schools. The team employed a pragmatic, sequential mixed-methods design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) which combines qualitative analysis of teacher methodologies with pre/post quantitative language proficiency measures of both the students and teachers to determine the interactive effects of these data. Teacher methodologies are assessed by team-designed teacher self-surveys and researcher observations. McGraw-Hill's LAS-O is an oral assessment of English language fluency, developed in isolation from the Cambodian classroom context. CFC schools use the *Let's Go!* Textbook series (Oxford University Press), and the LAS-O is not aligned to it in any way. In contrast, the team-developed instrument, Contextualized Oral Language Assessment (or "COLA"), will be an oral assessment developed on the basis of the team's qualitative on-site teacher methodology study. Both the LAS-O and the COLA are normed against native speaking populations.

Conclusion

CFC's English program is a frontrunner in language programs in Cambodian primary schools. Many schools, both international and Ministry of Education schools, struggle to provide competitive salaries to qualified native or non-native English speakers, adversely impacting the quality of teaching and learning. CFC's English teachers lack formal pedagogical training, and this deficit poses an obstacle to instructional effectiveness. Nevertheless, despite this challenge, CFC schools provide intensive, ongoing professional development in relevant and applicable teacher strategies for classroom instruction. These faculty development efforts should result in student learning gains, but, with the LAS-O, it is difficult to tell whether weaknesses are due to instructional methods or curricular deficiencies. Our research suggests the need for developing a contextually relevant assessment tool for CFC schools in order to properly assess teacher performance and student knowledge. By implementing a low-cost assessment which is connected to teaching materials and normed to a native speaking population, CFC schools will have the data needed to inform classroom practice and improve student learning.

