Each year, Cambodian schools struggle to recruit enough teachers to meet the growing school-age population. The average student-teacher ratio is approximately 46 to 1, with classrooms in some provinces exceeding 62 students per instructor. This high ratio generally consumes the time teachers need to test and score their students; especially on the topic of reading, which is required at several stages of testing for the whole curriculum. With paper based testing, scoring is more prone to error and it is hard for teachers to analyze and identify the weaknesses for each student.

Van Thak, a 37-year-old teacher who teaches grade 2 at Toul Roveang Primary School in Takeo province, remarked, “It takes me at least two to three hours for scoring and summarizing my students’ test result when using paper-based tests. It is really hard for me to analyze the strength and weakness for each student, unless I did a thorough analysis one by one, which even takes a greater amount of time.”

In 2014, USAID’s Development Innovations supported World Education Cambodia, an NGO, to develop a mobile application that automates student reading assessments using mobile tablet computers. It aims to mitigate the above mentioned problems and to promote strong foundations for literacy in the first and second grades. This application, Technology for Education Systems Transformation (TEST), was first piloted at 7 schools across three provinces in early 2015 in coordination with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport. It was highly valued by both teachers and students as a very helpful tool that helps teachers to assess their students’ needs and literacy levels more effectively and efficiently and also helps students improve their reading ability.

Van Thak praised the tool, saying, “The TEST app makes it easier for me to teach students and saves time for scoring and sending results to the Ministry of Education because the tool automatically does it. It takes only 30mn to process.” He added, “By using this TEST app, my students are able to recognize their own weakness after testing their reading and this makes them work harder.”

Other teachers had similar impressions about the TEST app and acknowledged that this tool made a big impact in improving literacy and the quality of their studies. It has even helped developed a love and confidence for reading among some students. “Students now like reading and they go to library more often to read book and play with tablets. They realized themselves about the reading and testing schedule at library without [being] reminded by teacher,” said Keng Sovannarai, a grade 2 class teacher at Ang Chong Ae primary school in Takeo province.

Students are supporters of this intervention too. “I am very happy and like going to the library to use the tablet and [am] reading book more often than before. Doing the test using tablet is also easier and [makes me] happier,” remarked Serei Vireak, a grade 2 student at Toul Roveang primary school.

Following the successful pilot of this tool, World Education Cambodia secured additional funding from World Vision Cambodia, and KAPE, and has expanded the program to 84 new schools across 8 other provinces in Cambodia. This tool has now reached more than 11,600 students and 280 teachers across Cambodia. With USAID’s Development Innovations’ support, World Education Cambodia is scaling up the application to reach Grade 3 students in 2017.