Local Perspectives on English Language Teaching in Private Tutoring in Thailand: Re-examining Roles and Implications

PATTRAWUT CHAROENROOP

National Institute of Development Administration, Bangkok, Thailand
Author email: pattrawut.cha@nida.ac.th

Article information	Abstract
	Private tutoring has, over the past decades, been a key educational phenomenon for Thai college-bound students, having received both praise and condemnation. This qualitative case study shows that private English tutoring in Thailand has expanded beyond the 'shadow education' discussed by Bray (1999). Five tutor-student pairs were interviewed via Zoom video conference and the interviews were analyzed by theme. Results indicate the social, educational, and economic benefits of private education, as well as its far-reaching effects on personal growth, professional development, and life prospects. Concerns about educational inequality introduced by the tutoring industry, and its uneasy co-existence with mainstream education, are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1991, when the governments relaxed restrictions concerning the opening of tutoring schools in Thailand, tutoring culture has become entrenched in Thai society. A major driver has been test-score based assessments used as the main determinant for education admissions (Akaraphanth, 2015). As cited in Katchwattana (2020), Nath Bhuribhatsiri, an independent researcher, further stated that there were too many competitive examinations for Thai students to take in order to pass on to higher education such as the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET), the General Aptitude Test (GAT), and the Professional Aptitude Test (PAT). Such examinations, as revealed in his study, require a higher level of knowledge than what is taught in mainstream education. This is when tutoring schools can help boost student confidence in taking such difficult examinations. Charoenkul (2018) argues that if entrance examinations remain the primary criterion of admittance to higher education, tutoring schools will continue to flourish.

Among the most studied subjects in tutorial schools is English, which has been the only compulsory foreign language in the school curriculum. Wongsothorn et al. (2002) admitted that Thai learners of English have been relying on 'shadow education' in English since they were young, hoping for a competitive edge. However, tutoring in English is only part of the larger phenomenon of private tutoring. The number of people relying on English tutoring is undoubtedly higher. A more interconnected world, and the opening of the AEC in 2015, have

intensified the need for Thai citizens to be able to converse in English. The ability to use English well will drive them to be 'human capital' for international competition with other countries (Thongsonkleeb & Suwanarak, 2017). Therefore, more Thai students and workers seek tutoring to improve their English skill.

'Private tutoring' and 'shadow education' are terms widely used to describe nonformal supplementary schooling. The terms are used interchangeably in many articles (e.g., Feng, 2020; Jansen et al., 2021; Javadi & Kazemirad, 2020; Kobakidze & Suter, 2020; Kshetree, 2020; Saengboon, 2019; Tarigan & Lasnumanda, 2020). This gives an impression that they are identical in meaning and scope. However, they are not interchangeable in some contexts, as the term 'shadow education' is narrower in scope than 'private tutoring'. According to Bray (1999), 'shadow education' has three primary attributes: (1) privateness—tutoring provided for a limited number of individuals in exchange for fees, (2) supplementation—offering supplements and/or additions to the school curricula after school hours, and (3) academic subjects—covering academic subjects taught in schools. 'Shadow education' is applied to private education that includes these three elements only. Private tutoring, on the other hand, is the term used to describe more encompassing private education. It may include lessons that are not taught in schools, and learners can be both students in mainstream education and anyone outside the mainstream education.

In addition, previous related studies (e.g., Feng, 2020; Jansen et al., 2021; Javadi & Kazemirad, 2020; Kobakidze & Suter, 2020) explored tutoring in general, without regard to subject. Exceptions include studies by Kshetree (2020), Saengboon (2019), Tarigan and Lasnumanda (2020), which examined English tutoring in Nepal, Thailand, and Indonesia. However, each approached the subject from the perspective of either tutors (i.e., Saengboon, 2019), or students (i.e., Kshetree, 2020; Tarigan & Lasnumanda, 2020), giving a one-dimensional perspective. The study by Saengboon (2019), for instance, interviewed two tutors who offered English tutoring only to students in mainstream education.

Research questions

To gain a broader perspective, this paper investigates the roles, implications, and future of private English tutoring in Thailand by interviewing more tutors and students from both mainstream education and outside. The researcher defined private tutoring based on Bray's (1999) definitions of shadow education. The term 'private tutoring' is used in this paper as it encompasses a broader scope than 'shadow education'. The data are examined in order to gain more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the roles and implications of private English tutoring, and to help envision its future. The paper addresses the following questions:

1. What are the roles and implications of private English tutoring in Thailand as seen by the study participants?
2. From their perspectives, what is the future of private English tutoring in Thailand?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shadow education in Thailand

The national entrance examination introduced in 1961 has made shadow education indispensable in Thailand. The Thai government tried to slow the growth of tutorial schools between 1969 and 1991, and to make the mainstream education system the core provider of education in Thailand (Lao, 2014). In 1991, however, the government loosened restrictions on the tutoring industry, and the number of tutorial schools has since mushroomed. The sharp growth of this business is seen by some as a sign that the formal schooling is inadequate. Charoenkul (2018), Dawson (2010), Kaur et al. (2016), Lao (2014), Trakulkasemsuk (2018), and Wongsothorn et al. (2002) concluded that the quality of mainstream Thai education has been low. Schools, according to these studies, especially in outlying districts, are substandard (e.g., Kaur et al., 2016; Khaopa, 2011), and students' performance on national exams reflects the poor quality of mainstream education in general (cf. Charoenroop, 2021). However, the poor quality of mainstream education is not the only factor responsible for students' reliance on shadow education. Schoolteachers may be diligent in performing their duties, and low test scores may, instead, indicate inadequate curriculum. Pinniam (2020) states that the examinations and the curriculum do not correspond. Fredrickson (2016) quotes a lecturer at the Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University, Sompong Jitradup, as admitting that many students, especially those who did not take any tutorials, find these examinations too difficult. According to the study by Bhuribhatsiri (as cited in Katchwattana, 2020), the tests require a higher level of knowledge than what was given at their school. In addition, the relatively small number of prestigious secondary schools and universities increases competition and the demand for private tutoring (Jones & Rhein, 2018). According to Akaraphanth (2015), only four percent of students could enter the top-five universities[1] in 2013, so students felt pressure to improve their academic performance. Lacking confidence in mainstream education, students have turned to private tutoring schools (Charoenkul, 2018) in hopes of boosting their test scores and gaining admission to prestigious educational institutions. Supplementary tutoring, then, becomes important not only to low-achievers, but also average- and high-achievers, which means additional expenses for families.

Private English tutoring in Thailand

English has always been included on the national entrance examinations. However, Thai students' English performance on these examinations has been far from satisfactory. Many students, therefore, turn to private tutoring. This is highlighted by the answers given by eighty high school students in Chan's (2017) study. When asked to rate the factors influencing them to take private English tutoring, they rated "to prepare themselves for the university admission" (pp. 22–27) the highest (i.e., the mean score of 4.61 out of 5). Wongsothorn et al. (2002) showed similar results.

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[1] They are (1) Chulalongkorn University, (2) Mahidol University, (3) Chiang Mai University, (4) Thammasat University and (5) Kasetsart University.

> *Thai learners of English have been attending tutoring schools since they were young, and their aim has been to get through the university entrance examination, which is focused on reading and a knowledge of English grammar. Productive language skills—such as writing and speaking—have never been tested in high-stakes examinations; …* (p. 111)

Wongsothorn et al. (2002), clearly showed that Thai students depend heavily on English tutoring from an early age. Since entrance examinations mainly test students on grammatical knowledge and reading skills, many English tutoring schools offer a wide range of test-taking strategies. Many learners of English also take English tutoring to prepare themselves for standardized tests such as the TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC. Chan's (2017, pp. 28–30) study indicates high demand—with the mean score of 4.09 out of 5—for this type of tutoring, which focuses on test-taking techniques. According to Saengboon (2019), this has far-reaching implications. Although students equipped with effective test-taking strategies may do well on entrance examinations, high test scores may not translate into high English proficiency. For some academics, this undermines the true spirit of the pursuit of knowledge. From the perspective of parents and students, however, high scores are all-important. Charoenkul (2018, pp. 647–648) admitted that if results from the entrance examination are the main criterion in the selection systems for higher education, there will be demand for English tutoring schools. Test-taking strategies will undoubtedly appeal to students seeking better test results.

According to the study conducted by Chan (2017, pp. 26–30), students rated "a better grade in English subject" as the second most influential factor in seeking private tutoring, with a mean of 4.33 out of 5. They rated all the language skills that they wanted to improve very high, that is, between 4.06 and 4.19. Likewise, they rated vocabulary and grammatical knowledge very high (4.06 and 4.01, respectively). These, together with language skills, are important for school performance. Unfortunately, these are the very skills they lack, and the shortcomings of English mainstream education have long been considered the cause (e.g., Baker, 2008; Kaur et al., 2016; Trakulkasemsuk, 2018).

The main factor contributing to the poor quality of mainstream education, many believe, is the low quality of many Thai English teachers. As cited in Kaur et al. (2016, p. 355), "Thai students' low academic performance can also be attributed to a lack of proficient [Thai English] teachers" (Baker, 2012). In the same vein, Saengboon (2019) cited 'unqualified teachers' as one of the two major factors plaguing mainstream English language education. This has shaken students' confidence in their English schoolteachers and as a result, many turn to English tutoring. This is underscored by the answers given by high school students in Chan's (2017) study. The sample students preferred studying English with English tutors for several reasons[2] illustrated in Figure 1.

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[2] In Chan (2017, pp. 33–35), there are seven reasons for students to rate. The one not appearing in the figure is 'Able to inspire the students.'
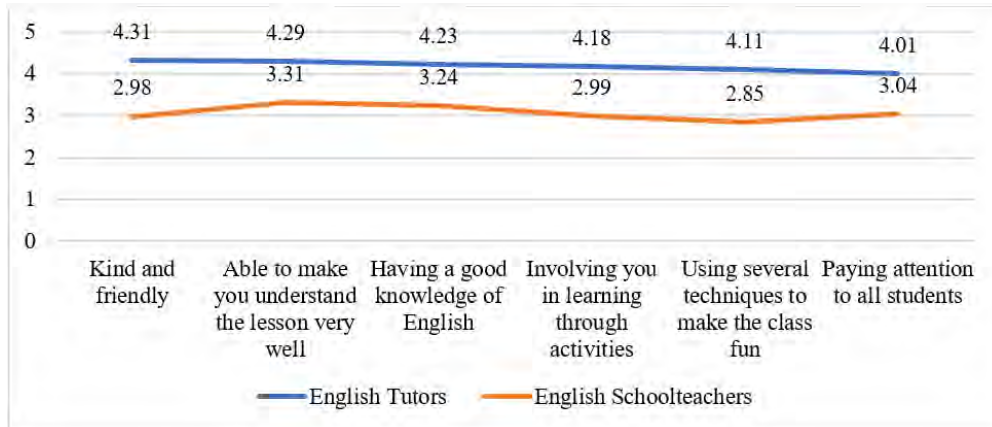
Figure 1 Students' levels of preferences for English tutors and English schoolteachers

Students in the sample rated English tutors better than English schoolteachers in every important respect. Among the six qualities, the largest difference is with respect to the first category—the friendliness and kindness of English tutors that generate a relaxed and pleasant learning atmosphere. In this learning atmosphere, students are not afraid to ask questions or to participate in classroom activities. This idea is in line with Baker (2008, pp. 138–140) who suggests a direct relationship between the unique Thai culture and the success of English language teaching. Thai learners prefer a classroom atmosphere that is *'sanuk'* (enjoyable) and *'sabaaj'* (comfortable). This obviously makes English tutors favored over school English teachers, who are often perceived as old-fashioned and strict. Kaur et al. (2016, p. 354) found that the teaching style of most Thai English schoolteachers was teacher-centered. Chan's (2017) study showed, however, that English tutors tended to make classes fun by using several teaching techniques. When students enjoy learning English with tutors, they pay attention and participate in classroom activities and their English skills improve. This highlights the important role of private English tutoring.

Private English tutoring is also essential because students' in-school exposure to English is low, English taught in class cannot be put into real use (cf. Noom-ura, 2013), and the focus on receptive skills and grammatical knowledge exacerbates the problem (Wongsothorn et al., 2002). Kaur et al. (2016) states that "Students are given limited exposure to real life learning and get [fewer] hands-on experiences" (p. 354). This motivates many Thai students to seek supplementary English education after school hours at tutoring schools in the hope of immersing themselves in English and acquiring practical English skill. The students in Chan's (2017, p. 1) study believed that "the knowledge obtained from tutoring school can be used for their everyday lives". The Thai Education Ministry has been well-aware of these problems, and has created programs using English as the medium of instruction, which includes international, English, and bilingual programs, for different grade levels (Darasawang, 2007; Kaur et al., 2016). Whether they have been adequate and effective is undetermined (Charoenroop, 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research participants

Five tutor-student pairs were selected to participate in this study, each of whom either provided or took private tutoring in English in one of five[3] teaching forms (Yung, 2015; Zhan et al., 2013). The convenience sampling method was used to select the tutors, and a snowball sampling method was used to recruit the students. The researcher, however, requested that the tutors take two conditions into consideration before selecting students: (1) teaching forms, and (2) social backgrounds. The tutors were between the ages of 38 and 40, with extensive English language teaching experience in formal and informal settings. Two of them have PhDs in English as an International Language, while the others earned Master's Degrees in English for Careers, TEFL, and European Studies. Four of them, who have 8 to 12 years of tutoring experience, own a tutoring business in Bangkok, Nan, and Khon Kaen. Two of them are university lecturers in English, while the others are not affiliated with any educational institutions. The students were between the ages of 19 and 43, including a high-school student, an undergraduate, a postgraduate, and two employees—one newly employed and the other a senior employee. Interviewing the tutor-student pairs using five different modes and from various social backgrounds yielded a wide spectrum of opinions and helped shed light on the roles and implications of English tutoring. Information regarding tutor and student pairing, teaching forms, learning objectives, and length of tutoring is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
A summary of tutor-student pairs

Tutor	Student	Teaching Form	Learning Objective	Length of Tutoring
A (male, 40)	A (female, 43)	one-to-one	To pass a standardized English language test	60 hours
B (male, 39)	B (female, 20)	small group	To pass a national English high-stakes exam	90 hours
C (male, 40)	C (male, 30)	live lecture	To improve English skills at work	60 hours
D (female, 39)	D (female, 22)	video-recording	To improve English for studying in an international program	45 hours
E (female, 38)	E (female, 19)	on-line	To pass a national English exam	45 hours

Data collection procedure

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews (see Appendices 1 and 2) via Zoom video conference. This method allowed the researcher and the study participants to see each other and to communicate more naturally and effectively. The researcher had participants read the information sheet, and after they signed the consent form, data collection began. First, the researcher put a list of questions on the computer screen—fifteen for tutors and eleven for students—which were adapted from Charoenroop (2021) and Saengboon (2019).

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[3] Five teaching forms are (1) one-to-one, (2) small group, (3) live lecture, (4) video-recorded lecture, and (5) on-line.

These questions are IRB-approved for human subject research. Each interview lasted 20–40 minutes, and was conducted in Thai. The participants' responses were audio-recorded. The data obtained in Thai was fully transcribed by the researcher and his research assistant. Only the chosen extracts were translated into English.

Data and data analysis

The raw data from the semi-structured interviews lasted 301 minutes (189 minutes from the five tutors and 112 minutes from the five students). The researcher adopted Bray's (1999) theoretical framework of shadow education as the basis for analyzing the data. The definitions of 'shadow education' (i.e., privateness, supplementation, and academic subject) were applied. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), focusing on the 'recurring regularities' of the interview data, was employed to identify the common ideas or themes shared by both tutors and students. The same ideas were produced by at least three tutors and three students. Table 2 presents the five common ideas and the defining themes.

Table 2
Themes and defining themes

	Theme	Defining Theme
1	Students took private English tutoring to prepare themselves for high-stake examinations.	Examination Preparation
2	Students took private English tutoring to develop necessary English skills in order to improve their performance.	Improving English Performance
3	Students took private English tutoring to increase their exposure to authentic English.	Increasing Exposure to English
4	Expensive fees for private tutoring cause educational inequality among people of different socio-economic backgrounds.	Educational Inequality
5	Private English tutoring will continue to play a vital role.	Future of Private English Tutoring

The semi-structured interviews were the primary sources of information in the discussion of roles and implications of English tutoring. Relevant secondary sources (i.e., research and news articles) were also used to support the discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Roles and implications of private English tutoring

1.1 Examination preparation

Three of the students interviewed (i.e., Students A, B, and E) said that examination preparation was their main motivation for studying English with a tutor. They believe English taught in mainstream education did not provide them with the knowledge they needed for competitive examinations. This, however, does not always mean that the quality of mainstream education is poor, as it may simply reflect a mismatch between examinations and curriculum. Since the lessons are based on the curriculum, schoolteachers may not be entirely to blame if the

mainstream curriculum does not prepare students for what are commonly perceived as very difficult entrance exams. If the agency responsible for writing the exams, the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS), were to adjust the examinations to the curriculum, or the Ministry of Education to make the curriculum more challenging and to add a variety of admissions assessments, the problem could be solved and the reliance on tutoring lessened. In addition, schools do not teach test-taking strategies, so high-stakes English examinations can be quite challenging for students. Feeling that her school did not help prepare her for the English subject on the national entrance examination, Student B bought online self-study courses. However, she encountered certain points that she could not understand.

Extract 1

> *Sometimes, there are parts that I don't really understand why I get them wrong. There is no one to explain them to me. After going through several sets of examinations, I feel that there are some points that leave me clueless.* (Student B)

After discussing the matter with her mother, Student B took a private English tutoring course. Many of her Grade-12 classmates were also looking for tutoring to help them with exams. In Wongsothorn et al.'s (2002) study, practicing for English entrance exams is a main reason students take private tutoring. Student B's interview shows that a major role for English tutoring is preparing students for entrance examinations. Student D took private English tutoring for the same reason. As a junior at university, she turned to private English tutoring to help earn a good score on the TOEIC.

Extract 2

> *For example, when I wanted to take the TOEIC for my internship during my junior year, I had to look for an English tutor to get the score required for the internship. I couldn't find this kind of tutoring at the university.* (Student D)

TOEIC is not an academic subject taught in mainstream education. If the university does not provide tuition, students may study on their own. However, not everyone believes self-study can yield a satisfactory result. Many think tutoring is a better option. Student D was confident that English tutoring could help her qualify for an internship. Student A also turned to private English tutoring, confident that it could prepare her, in a short time, for an English standardized test. She had two months to achieve a required score on the TOEFL iBT as part of her PhD admissions requirements.

Extract 3

> *The reason I took private tutoring was because I had to take the TOEFL iBT, and I'd not been around standard use of English for a long time. If I have to study with other people, I'm afraid I won't be able to catch up with them because of my insufficient background knowledge. I studied in a Science program, so I didn't study a lot of English. I feel I need additional knowledge and some test-taking*

strategies. So, I decided to take one-on-one private English tutoring so that the tutor could provide me with deeper knowledge that met my needs. (Student A)

While English tutoring was optional for Students B and D, since mainstream education was still available for them, Student A is no longer in school. To get immediate results, private tutoring seemed to be the most viable option for her to fulfill her PhD admissions requirements. This is an important role of English tutoring, particularly for those who do not have mainstream education to fall back on. Although students need test-taking strategies to meet entrance requirements, the focus on test preparation is a concern for some academics who fear it diminishes the value of mainstream education. One academic, Saengboon (2019, pp. 46–47), believes it could ruin the whole education system, and the implications could certainly be far-reaching. Student C and Tutor C agreed with him. Student C believes that studying with tutors just for test-taking strategies could have a detrimental effect.

Extract 4

Most of the students, especially those still in school, seek tutoring for higher test scores. For me, this is a pitfall. If the main aim of running a tutoring school is to invite students to take the courses in order to get high scores, it will be a long-term problem, because the learners don't really want to improve their English. Instead, they just look for tips and tricks to use in the exam. (Student C)

Student C was concerned about the role of private English tutoring schools in spreading a misleading message. Instead of being a place to instill knowledge, a tutoring school becomes a place where students get quick-fix techniques to boost exam scores. This devalues the spirit of learning (cf. Saengboon, 2019). Tutor C also disapproved of tutoring school as a place purely for test-taking strategies, as high scores do not always translate into proficiency.

Extract 5

Learners can memorize test-taking techniques and use them to raise their scores. For example, they may score 750 or 800, and since companies only expect 500 to 550, they immediately offer the job. But when the new employee begins working, their performance isn't as good as their scores advertised. I think using tutoring to boost scores by giving test-taking strategies exploits the learners and the employers. (Tutor C)

Clearly, the use of mere techniques to score well on exams has an even greater impact than academics are concerned about. The exam-oriented learning culture in Thailand motivates both the tutors and students to focus on test-taking techniques (cf. Kaur et al., 2016). Not only can mainstream education be devalued, but companies can be negatively impacted, as their new employee may not have the proficiency their scores suggest. In the long run, this throws the trustworthiness and reliability of test results into doubt.

The concerns are well-founded. For some students, however, this does not seem to damage

the true spirit of learning. Using tutoring for test-taking strategies and achieving high test scores may have an entirely positive outcome. Tutor B told such a story.

Extract 6

> *Many years ago, I gave IELTS private tutoring to a woman whose English was extremely poor. It was clear from her pre-test that she had very little background in English. Had she taken the IELTS test then, she wouldn't have passed. She needed a band 5 to qualify as an assistant nurse in Australia. This job was essential for her, because she had children to support, and she planned to leave them with her husband and work in Australia and send the money home. She took two courses with me. I went through the sample exams with her, giving her many test-taking techniques for all the skills needed. After she finished the courses, her score improved, but I wasn't sure she could pass the exam. It turned out she got a band 5.5 on her first try. I was surprised and so was she. Now she is an assistant nurse in Australia and will soon become a nurse. Her English is so much better now. She mingles with the locals. If she has to take the IELTS now, she should get a band 7.* (Tutor B)

We see in this example that test-taking strategies leading to desirable scores may not always have negative implications, or devalue the spirit of learning as mentioned by Student C, Tutor C and Saengboon (2019). In the case of the assistant nurse, the required score was essential for her life plan. With limited preparation time and little background in English, this method was appropriate and effective. Knowing test-taking strategies was not the only reason for her success. She was determined because she needed to pass the IELTS to support her family. Student A is another who got good scores by applying test-taking strategies learned in private tutoring.

Extract 7

> *Once I got the test-taking techniques, my performance was better. I could pass the TOEFL iBT from the first time. I got 550. I submitted the result to the faculty and could begin my study without taking any English foundation courses, which would take two semesters to complete. Now that I'm in an international program, I have to do everything in English. This forces me to keep developing myself. Without the score on that day, I wouldn't have been able to enter this program for sure.* (Student A)

The role of English tutoring in giving guidance and techniques is pivotal, particularly for those who are no longer in the regular school system. In this example, tutoring served as a springboard for her studies and her career. Like the case of the assistant nurse, focusing on techniques in Student A's case does not disparage the essence of learning. Being able to enter the program of her choice helped boost her self-esteem. She was grateful for this opportunity and was determined to keep developing herself.

1.2 Improving English performance

According to experts (e.g., Baker, 2008; Kaur et al., 2016; Saengboon, 2019), students' low performance in English is usually attributed to substandard mainstream education. Four interviewed students (i.e., Students A, B, D, and E) were of the same opinion that years of schooling did not seem to help them understand English.

Extract 8

> *The truth is that since I began studying English, I never understood it. I don't know whether it was because of me or the materials, but I don't know how to apply English in real life. We are taught to memorize words and not how and when to use them.* (Student D)

This represents an extreme case where mainstream education has failed to make the student understand English. Student D blamed it on the teaching methods focusing on rote learning, and not putting English into use. These "[o]ut-dated teaching methods" according to Kaur et al. (2016) "fail to engage students for deeper learning because teachers mainly rely on reading and writing exercises for teaching English" (p. 354). This presents a problem in regular schools, where some Thai English teachers are unable to make their students understand English or show them how to apply it in real life. These are major reasons students seek English tutoring. After tutorial, students saw remarkable development in their English skills. In Student E's opinion, the tutorial was more effective than mainstream education.

Extract 9

> *Private English tutoring enables us to see our weaknesses and areas for improvement. It makes us understand English better in all aspects. My English is better than when I studied it in school. With speaking in particular, I got to study it one-on-one with a private tutor. This was completely different from what I studied in class where I had no opportunity to speak. To develop English skills is to have a chance to use it in our daily lives. It's not just about grammar in the textbook. I learned more things relevant to real life that aren't taught in school.* (Student E)

Student E's experience in private tutoring and school was completely different. Taking English with the tutor increased her English proficiency because the tutor spent more time with her, went into greater detail, and made lessons more relevant to real life. These strategies were barely used at her school. Student D also shared positive experience about her tutor.

Extract 10

> *Tutor D was friendly and laidback. She was kind, and made the content easy to understand. She laid the foundations for my English skill. Usually, tutors would make a good summary of what to teach, and this is easy to follow. Schoolteachers, however, often just teach whatever they want.* (Student D)

Student D had more faith in her tutor than her schoolteachers. Her tutor structured the teaching systematically, which helped her understand the lessons better. Twelve years at school had failed to lay the needed foundation for her. It was the tutor who provided her this foundation in English during her freshman year. The disposition of tutors also plays a crucial role. Tutor D's friendliness helped her stay engaged. Baker (2008, pp. 138–140) cited this as an ideal class environment for Thai EFL learners. Both students agreed that their tutors were able to teach more effectively than their schoolteachers, and credited their achievement to their tutors. These students confirmed Chan's (2017) study showing why students preferred tutors to schoolteachers, and many choose private tutoring schools. Not only did the students report improvements, the tutors also saw their students' English performance improve.

Extract 11

> *Several students whom I taught scored better and their English grades also improved.... They improved a lot academically, and got praise at school. A student who took a speaking class with me told me his English teacher said his accent was better and his friends also admired it. This has changed his attitude. He overcame his limitations. He wants to study English more. He wants to develop English further and practice it more often.* (Tutor E)

Tutoring in English can also help students overcome their threshold and boost their confidence, promoting self-directed learning and self-reliance, which are crucial in learning a foreign language. When a tutor helps a student become more motivated, it is more likely that his or her English proficiency will improve. This, in turn, will benefit him or her academically and professionally. This is underscored by Tutor B.

Extract 12

> *Feedback from my students is good. Many of them told me they understood English in class better.... Their understanding of English was deeper. They could apply what I taught when they did their tests. So, their test scores were higher. Their confidence rose.* (Tutor B)

The students could see their own improvement after taking private English tutoring. Better understanding of English in class and higher test scores indicate their success. Like in the case of Tutor E's student, this success also increases the confidence of Tutor B's students. Private tutoring serves the needs of the students. It can help improve English learning in Thailand, especially given the substandard English instruction sometimes found in public schools (cf. Kaur et al., 2016). This has led many to perceive that English tutoring overshadows mainstream education. Tutor C expressed his concern over this situation.

Extract 13

> *Tutoring schools play a bigger role than primary and secondary schools, and I think this is wrong principle and wrong practice. Tutoring schools should be*

just for tutorials, while the main responsibility for education should be in the hands of regular schools. If they do their job, it should be sufficient. (Tutor C)

Tutor C believes the mainstream educational institutions should do their duty and provide quality fundamental education for students (cf. Koonprasert, 2019). When mainstream education fails, students naturally find tutors. English tutoring attracts those seeking examination preparation and English lessons, while students with good backgrounds in English also go to English private tutors, believing that with a good tutor they would be even better.

Extract 14

> *Students believe taking private tutoring will make them better at English. In fact, these students might already have enough knowledge from school, but they think they will benefit from private classes, even though the tutoring schools teach the same content as the schools.* (Tutor B)

Students striving to excel in English want more practice in order to get an edge over the others. They see only the plus side of tutoring, even if tutors only repeat school lessons. Tutor B believed going through the same lessons helped students understand them better. Even someone with a strong background in English thinks private tutoring is useful. Student C, for example, acquired a good command of English when he was young. He attended a bilingual primary school and Triam Udom Suksa School. This is an example of a student whose mainstream education had already equipped him with good command of English. With a sufficient background, Student C thinks he does not need private tutoring. Taking private English tutoring for him is only to "refresh" his knowledge. In his opinion, there is "still new knowledge" for him to "harvest". English tutoring is not limited only to those who have problems with English. It seems to be an attractive option for a wide range of skill levels.

1.3 Increasing exposure to English

Experts agreed that students get little exposure to English in classroom. Kaur et al. (2016, p. 354), for example, said that "[s]tudents are given limited exposure to real life learning and [fewer] hands-on experiences". All the study participants saw it the same way. Student C captures the problem succinctly.

Extract 15

> *We get very little chance to use English in daily life because most public schools don't even have foreign teachers. To acquire English, we need to develop skills. To be able to use it well we have to practice all the time. So, when there's no opportunity to practice, no matter how much we've learnt or how difficult or deep the knowledge is, I don't think most people can actually use it in real life because we need to use it every day.* (Student C)

Teaching difficult content does not guarantee the students can use English well in their real

life. In Student C's opinion, being exposed to English is the key. Without it, effective communication is impossible. Unfortunately, this seems to be lacking in mainstream schooling for various reasons, including large class size, limited teaching and learning time, and the traditional teaching approach. Intensity of interaction is also important in developing English ability. Student C believes that without frequent exposure, one cannot speak fluently. Student A agreed with Student C that in mainstream education, students lack the opportunity to use English. To develop English skills, Student A feels one has to use them.

Extract 16

> *Actually, schoolteachers and lecturers already do a good job. They can teach English grammar well, but students don't have a chance to use it. This may be because of the large number of students or the limited amount of class time. To be good at English, one needs to use it, read it and listen to it regularly. Taking tutorials may help because students will have more chance to use English.*
> (Student A)

In Student A's opinion, using English is the key for acquiring the language. The nature of typical classrooms, however, limits students' exposure to English and their chance to use it. Both students and tutors view with concern the limited classroom exposure. Tutor B, for example, stated that regular schools do not emphasize communicative skills. Whether students can use English in daily life, or apply it to their future career, does not seem to be the focus of the teaching.

Extract 17

> *In my view, the aim of learning and teaching English in Thailand is mainly for testing. This is probably due to the large class size … It's impossible for teachers to give all the students the chance to use English. So, the students aren't prepared to use English in their daily lives. Taking private lessons can help solve this problem to a certain extent. They may get a better chance to listen, speak, read, and write.*
> (Tutor B)

Both Tutor B and Student A believe that tutorial schools could help increase exposure to English allowing the students to use it more often. Tutor D agreed with Tutor B and Student A, stating that mainstream schools do not provide lessons or an environment that promote practical learning, but tutors emphasize this.

Extract 18

> *When I tutor my students, I focus on making lessons as natural as when they learn their first language, so they can really use it in their daily life. The lesson is designed to promote real communication and usage. This makes them feel English isn't difficult. Since English is a tool, hands-on and experiential activities are incorporated into the lesson, and students have an opportunity to practice the*

*real language. In so doing, they can be immersed in English. I don't focus on tests
but on how to apply English in real life. The class is usually small.* (Tutor D)

Tutor D's techniques are completely different from those used in regular classes, which are usually teacher-centered and focus on grammar and rote learning (cf. Chan, 2017; Kaur et al., 2016). Class size is also important in giving learners more exposure to English. As cited in Wright et al. (2019, p. 51), a small class has many benefits. Students engage more, take a more positive attitude to the subject, and learn more. The small size makes tutoring classes more manageable and interactive than large classes in mainstream education, where opportunity to be exposed to English is reduced.

2. Educational inequality

The key role of private English tutoring discussed in Section 1 suggests that English tutoring is beneficial for those in and outside mainstream education. However, tutoring is expensive, and not all can afford it. Research (Buchmann et al., 2010; Hannum et al., 2019; Zwier et al., 2021) shows that students from high-income families take private tutoring more than students from disadvantaged families. None of the students interviewed had any problem paying for tutoring, and could turn to a private tutor whenever they needed one. They thought it was worth the money, creating opportunities in higher education and opening future prospects. As cited in Pinniam (2020), Venussa Poovudhikul stated in her research on Thai admissions policy that "households which invest more in private tutoring have substantially higher education outcomes than those which spend less". Students who cannot pay do not get access, and cannot compete with those with 'abundant resources' (Pinniam, 2020). Most tutors (i.e., Tutors A, B, and E) pointed out that these discrepancies result in education inequality.

Extract 19

> *I think the tutoring schools create educational stratification. Financial status that
> varies from family to family can result in this inequality. Typically, only people
> from middle- and high-income families can take courses at famous private
> tutoring schools. This group enjoys the privilege of getting into renowned schools.
> It's like the fame of these schools is tied to the social status of students.* (Tutor E)

Differences in financial status are a major cause of education inequality in Thailand, where the gap between the rich and the poor has been wide (cf. Serechetapongse & Udomkerdmongkol, 2020). Wealthier parents have no trouble paying tutors to teach their children. In contrast, those who cannot afford it can be profoundly affected in many ways. This is, certainly, not a 'fair fight' for low-income students.

Education inequality poses an exigent threat to societal well-being and to name it a public enemy is not an understatement. It not only impedes academic outcomes and life prospects of the disadvantaged, but it also engenders untapped talents, perpetuates intergenerational poverty, and amplifies socio-economic divisions. (Kertbundit, 2020)

The lack of access to private tutoring has more far-reaching and complex implications than one might imagine. The underprivileged are affected academically and professionally, and their potential may not be discovered or developed. Poor education makes it difficult to get a well-paid job and break the cycle of poverty. This aggravates social inequality.

3. Future of private English tutoring

The findings reveal that the tutoring industry will remain in demand whether the quality of mainstream education improves or not. Student D, for example, believes that English tutoring will continue to be important as learning English in the classroom is "certainly not enough", especially for "those who have difficulty understanding it" like her. Student E agreed.

Extract 20

> *As long as students don't understand the English lessons at school, they will find someone to help them. Tutoring schools help provide what students are missing or lacking. They see tutoring schools as a refuge. As a result, tutoring schools will remain important. (Student E)*

English tutoring is a lifebuoy for a number of students, providing what formal education lacks. Without it, a lot of students will struggle. Tutor E also believes that private English tutoring will remain important, even though English lessons are available on the Internet. For her, lessons available on YouTube or other social media platforms are "only supplementary, not tutoring". Ready-made materials online might not be suitable for every learning style. She believes that English tutors can provide individual attention and "a tailor-made class that matches an individual's learning style". For Tutor C, "one needs a guide in learning a language as one cannot succeed through self-study, except for those with exceptional talent". He thinks English tutoring schools are useful for those out of the school system, such as adult workers. Without formal education to fall back on, they may find it difficult to study on their own. This is where private tutors can help.

Student C believes that "even if mainstream education improves, many will still take private tutoring". It is possible to see a shift in learning objectives. Individuals may not turn to tutoring schools in order to do well on English examination or to improve their classroom performance. In his opinion, they may want to "improve English skills for work and daily communication". This is beyond the traditional characteristics of private tutoring.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The examination of private English tutoring in Thailand through the lenses of the five tutor-student pairs reveals its multi-faceted roles and far-reaching implications. The five students, whose English backgrounds vary, said that private tutoring helped improve their English. Three of them stated that mainstream education was insufficient and did not teach test-taking strategies. They used tutoring schools to secure their future. Even students with good English proficiency may not score high on the national entrance examinations without test-taking

techniques as the examinations might be too difficult, primarily due to the mismatch between the exams and the curriculum.

Like some academics, some research participants feared that mainstream education might be devalued. They were also concerned that companies might find new employees not as proficient in English as their scores suggested. Although test-focused tutoring could have damaging results in some cases, it may not be so in many others. For some, tutoring is a key to opportunity. They work to acquire skill in English in the course of their study or employment as in the cases of Student A, who prepared herself to fulfill the PhD admissions requirements, and the assistant nurse, who took the IELTS courses with Tutor B to meet the employment requirements in Australia. Whether its implication is positive or negative, it depends entirely on the test-takers themselves.

Most of the students in this study felt that tutors made their class atmosphere more engaging and relaxing, and the student-centered teaching method was stimulating and interactive. Tutoring is, thus, a solution they turn to whenever needed. Students' preference for and reliance on private tutoring are, however, seen as a failure of mainstream education. Both of the interviewed tutors and students were of the same opinion that education should be in the hands of mainstream educators. Private tutoring should be supplementary only. As English is important even after formal schooling, many students use English tutors even after completing compulsory education. Study participants believed that the key to achieving language proficiency is exposure to it. The large class size also makes it impossible for schoolteachers to pay close attention to every student within a short teaching period. Both groups of research participants believed tutoring schools provided a more effective environment that increase the exposure to English and the intensity of interaction lacking in mainstream schooling.

Most tutors agreed that socio-economic status plays a vital role in allowing the students to enjoy a better chance in life. This obviously perpetuates inequality. Students who can afford private tutoring like all the students interviewed often go to renowned schools, get a better education, and oftentimes, secure a better future. Impacts for those who cannot afford tutoring are profound in many areas of life. Their career development and life prospects can be hampered, and they may not be able to break free from poverty. If the test-score based assessment is still the main criterion for admissions, all the tutors and students in this study believed that it is inevitable that a large number of Thai students will rely on private tutoring. This will exacerbate inequality as socio-economic status will determine access to private tutoring. This is the reason why Tutor C stressed that mainstream education should provide sufficient quality education.

Regarding the future of private tutoring, the study participants believed private English tutoring will remain vital. The focus on test results as a main criterion in the academic and professional selection process intensifies the need. Even if the mainstream education system improves, learners will still seek tutoring for school-related purposes and beyond. Many students will also seek help from tutors after their formal schooling is finished, in order to develop English skills for work or everyday life. Although affordable English lessons are offered online, with some offered at no charge, they cannot replace a tutor who caters to the needs of individual students. Some students need guidance and assistance, and find it difficult to study on their own. For these students, English tutoring will continue to play a crucial role.

Since socio-economic status determines access to private tutoring, future studies might select students from disadvantaged families to see how this variable affects their perceptions. Interviews might also be conducted with English schoolteachers, some of whom are also tutors, whose firsthand experience gives them a unique perspective.

THE AUTHOR

Pattrawut Charoenroop, Ph.D., is a lecturer of English at the Graduate School of Language and Communication, National Institute of Development Administration. His research interests include intercultural pragmatics, cross-cultural communication, and teaching English as a global language.
pattrawut.cha@nida.ac.th

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Questions for the Tutor

1. What is your opinion of English language teaching and learning in Thailand?
2. Media often report the unsatisfactory quality of English language teaching and learning. In your opinion, how much truth is there in those reports?
3. What are the factors that help promote English language teaching and learning among Thai people? How so?
4. What roles do tutorial schools play in improving English language learning and teaching?
5. Some think tutorial schools are profit-driven and, thus, neglect to provide appropriate education. What is your opinion on this?
6. What will English education in our country be like in the future? What makes you think so?
7. Some say studying English with an emphasis on grammar is the reason why Thais aren't good at English. What is your take on this?
8. To achieve excellent results, schools should use successful tutorial classes as models and apply them to their classes. Do you agree with this idea?
9. Can you give an example of a tutorial that you consider a success, and one you consider a failure?
10. Do you think tutorial schools should have a central role in improving Thai people's English language skills, or should this be the responsibility of regular schools?
11. In your view, does your teaching help your student study better?
12. Do you think studying at school is sufficient?
13. Is there a future for the tutoring business, or has it already reached maturity?
14. When technology is available, should there be tutorial schools in the remote areas?
15. In your opinion, how different is it teaching students in Bangkok as compared to teaching students in remote areas? Is it very different?

APPENDIX 2

Interview Questions for the Student

1. Why did you decide to study with tutor (A/B/C/D/E)?
2. Does the fact that you choose to take a tutorial class mean that what you've received from regular school is inadequate? If so, why do think it is inadequate?
3. What are some advantages and disadvantages of a tutorial class?
4. Do you take a tutorial class because of the pressure from your family, friends, or colleagues?
5. What problems do you see concerning English language teaching and learning in Thailand?
6. What are some solutions to the problems with English education in our country?
7. Do you think tutorial schools focus more on making a profit than providing knowledge? How so?
8. Did your past tutorial classes help you understand and use English better? Please explain.
9. Do you think tutorial schools will continue to play an important role in Thai education in the future? Why?
10. Do your tutor(s) teach grammar? What do you think about teaching grammar?
11. What qualities should a tutor possess? Explain.