



## Students' Lived Experiences in English Program in a Thai Primary School: A Phenomenological Study

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Thai primary school students who have studied in an English Program (EP) in a university demonstration school in Thailand. EP is regarded as one of Thailand's educational reform goals that will enhance Thai students' English competency through using English as a tool of instruction for teaching and learning in two core subjects, Science and Maths. The program started in primary level and continued to secondary level. A phenomenological methodology was employed to explore the students' lived experiences ( $n = 10$ ). Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and document analysis were used for data collection. The data was analyzed using Moustakas (1994)'s phenomenological analysis steps. The findings revealed the essence of the phenomenon. That is, studying in English Program (EP) entailed nine themes under four dimensions as follows: Academic Dimension; Social Dimension; Emotional Dimension, and Personal Dimension. Some implications are discussed concerning the appropriate EP program policy and the inclusion of the voices of teachers

	<p>and school administrators. Some limitations are also mentioned.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> academic English, English Program (EP), phenomenological study, primary school, student's lived experience</p>
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## Introduction

According to García (2011), contemporary society is becoming an increasingly bi- and multi-lingual society. A ramification of this global phenomenon is that the English language is deemed vital as far as education is concerned. In fact, it is argued that proficiency in English can secure a brighter future, more opportunities in higher education, a better career and a more fulfilling life. In this regard, the Thai education system has over the past two decades been influenced by the multi-lingual and multi-cultural forces. Pan (2015) argued that the Thai government has encouraged schools to establish bilingual departments where the core subjects are taught in English so Thai students can improve their English. In response to this policy, the Thai Ministry of Education set priorities and specific activities for improving English proficiency in Thai students.

As defined by Thailand's Ministry of Education, bilingual education is synonymous with an English Program (EP), in which English is used as a medium of instruction in at least four core subjects: English, Mathematics, Science, and Physical Education. Exception is made for Thai language and Social Studies with aspects related to Thai ways of life, Thai law, and Thai culture and tradition.

The Ministry of Education's prescribed curriculum requires two to four core subjects to be taught in English and the rest of the core subjects to be taught in the Thai language. However, in practice, different EPs appear to differ in their operations depending on the school's region, curriculum, and goals. The Ministry of Education has developed the EP curriculum with the assumption that this curriculum provides more opportunities for students to achieve academic competence in the use of English both as a content subject and as a medium of instruction.

It is not an overstatement to argue that ASEAN with its policy of mandating English as the working language has prompted Thailand's Ministry of Education to launch EP initiatives in hope of enabling Thai students to be able to communicate effectively in English on a par with their ASEAN counterparts. The advent of the EP program has been a rousing success, piquing the interest of an overwhelming number of Thai parents and their children. In fact, they are firmly convinced that an excellent command of English resulting from attending an EP Program will ensure ample career opportunities.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, whilst there is a plethora of research into EPs that span a spectrum of successful program administration, teacher satisfaction and so on, none of the research thus far has focused on students' experiences or their voices in the EP field. Given the dearth of literature on this aspect of the EP itself, the present study intended to explore the lived experiences of Thai students through a phenomenological lens. These students have studied in EPs. The study attempted to address the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What is the essence of the lived experiences of the EP students?

RQ2. How and to what extent does studying in an EP during primary school years prepare the EP students for the secondary school?

### Literature Review

This phenomenology study, a quintessential example of the qualitative research paradigm, aims to reveal patterns of human behaviors and activities, areas that should not be reduced to numbers following the quantitative research focus. Therefore, this study was conducted based on the principles of phenomenology.

According to Moustakas (1994), mundane human activities and behaviors are not to be taken for granted. This is because our everyday experiences and activities reflect expected patterns of social interaction. Those conducting research into phenomenology attempt to gain a better understanding of individual experiences, the so-called lived experiences. What really matters as far as phenomenology is concerned is that any behaviors and patterns of interaction must be subject to multiple interpretations. It should be noted that in interpreting human behaviors and activities, researchers must guard against relying on their own prior assumptions, preferences, and beliefs in the act of interpreting. This process called bracketing or *epoche* is to augment credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013).

In addition to the importance of bracketing, researchers' reflexivity is of utmost importance. This is because the researcher must necessarily bring forth his/her presuppositions about the phenomenon to be observed.

All the procedures involved in the phenomenology approach as discussed above will translate into the essence of the phenomenon under study. Essentially, phenomenology will turn something ordinary into something extraordinary worthy of serious scrutiny.

Research abounds regarding the EP in the Thai educational context. The research usually covers such topical areas as school administrators, teachers' perspectives, and parents' expectations. Below are representative samples of such studies.

Whenever a discussion about EP arises, a topic concerning state and problems of EP administration will be the first to be discussed. On one hand, the findings from Karuwan (2007)'s study revealed that the problems when setting up an EP administration stemmed from three sources; EP students (lack of learning skills and low competency), native English-speaking teachers (lack of mutual relationships with the local Thai teachers in the program), and the EP students' parents (high expectations due to high tuition fees which put stress on the program management team to comply with). The researcher used questionnaire as data collection tool and the respondents were 52 heads of EP department. The study employed a focus group technique (6 personnel from the EP department) to analyze the cause of the EP administration problem. Karuwan (2007)'s recommendations to alleviate the three problem sources were: setting up remedial classes to improve students' learning skills, organizing team-building activities to promote relationships for the native language teachers and Thai teachers, and providing a monthly progress report of the students to concerned parents.

The operation of bilingual school and EP played an important role in establishing a quality program. Based on Rasamimariya (2011)'s study of the administrative system for EPs, the administrative system for the EP schools should have the following input characteristics in order to provide a high-quality administrative system for the school. These characteristics were promoting students' learning in all aspects, providing various models of knowledge management and evaluation, and following the policy as prescribed by the Ministry of Education (Rasamimariya, 2011).

In terms of English Program curricula in a bilingual school, Jansong (2004)'s study found that in order to obtain a successful EP curricula, schools should focus on these organization aspects: curriculum organization planning ( providing proper teacher training courses, providing in-house training for foreign teachers, preparing weekly lesson plans, improving school premises, gathering overseas textbooks and materials needed for instruction, allocating budget appropriately, and preparing personnel staff with up-to-date information on staff and contracts), curriculum organization implementation and curriculum organization evaluation and monitoring (Jansong, 2004). The respondents in the study were project chiefs, academic chiefs and project secretaries.

Pan (2015) studied on the implementation of the models of dual language classroom instruction in bilingual school in Thailand and concluded that Thailand's model of dual language instruction consisted of three models: Language Immersion Programs, Developmental Bilingual Programs, and Two-Way Immersion Programs. The respondents were 4 administrators, 106 teachers and 712 students. Pan (2015)'s study revealed that the native English-speaking teachers and Thai Teachers used similar instructional methods and

strategies in the language immersion program at school. However, the learning environments in Thai teachers' classes were more positive and more student-centered (Pan, 2015).

Chandang (2015)'s study on foreign teacher management showed that the management of the foreign teachers based on their priority needs, in bilingual school lacked two aspects. The foreign teachers' priority needs involved the training courses of Thai language and culture for foreign teachers who were newcomers in the bilingual school, and secured contract employment. The strengths of the management of foreign teachers were providing teacher training courses and promoting relationship-building activities for foreign teachers in the program.

Chinasetawong (2010) and Ruengwatcharasak et. al. (2008) investigated the expectations of parents towards EP revealed that EP parents had high expectations towards EP in five aspects: teaching staff, students' opportunity to further study in secondary school, curriculum administration, opportunity for students to excel in English competency and EP tuition cost. The instrument used was questionnaire distributed to 375 parents of EP students in Basic Education Service Area 3 (Chinasetawong, 2010). Ruengwatcharasak et. al. (2008)'s study on parental expectation towards EP in Saraburi province. The study revealed three priority issues of expectation towards the program: disciplinary, courtesy and honesty, and unity (Ruengwatcharasak et. al., 2008).

Arunrat (2013)'s study on parents' satisfaction of education management of the EP of public schools revealed that the parents who participated as volunteers in EP were satisfied with the program management. Factors that contributed to the high level of parental satisfaction towards EP management were parents' occupation, family income, and relationship within the family. The study used questionnaire and the respondents were 273 parents of EP students in public schools under Office of the Basic Education Commission in central area.

Chotchaipong et al. (2020)'s study on best practices in promoting bilingual proficiency for early childhood students in Thailand indicated that the best practices for enhancing bilingual proficiency started at home (parenting) and continued in school (teaching and learning). Practices such as in-class activities and extra class activities such as after school classes in English and arts lessons that promote bilingual proficiency were expected to be provided by the schools in order to fulfill parents' expectation for quality bilingual education for their children. The researcher collected data through document analysis and in-depth interviews of four school administrators and twenty-four teachers.

Wei and Mhunpiew (2020)'s study on school choices in Thailand basic education focusing on international parents' perspectives revealed that

international parents and middle to high socio-economic status Thai parents had in common when making decision about their children' school choices. Academic performance, school safety, quality of teachers, and school reputation were the significant factors these parents based their decisions on. There were variety of school choices in Thailand that offered bilingual program, and English Program (EP) is the most sought after since the program tended to yield a better educational opportunity for their children' future employment.

## **Research Methods**

### **Phenomenology as Methodology**

Phenomenology focuses on gaining an understanding of social, cultural and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved, including careful and thorough data gathering on how people perceive something, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, and have conversations about it with others (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Phenomenology was the most appropriate for this study as it examined the lived experiences of students studying in the EP, an eminently researchable phenomenon. Through phenomenological inquiry, the study sought to obtain information and understanding of the phenomenon of studying in an EP. Thus, the inquiry process will most likely portray detailed descriptions of people's experiences through the researcher's interpretation (Patton, 2002); the use of direct quotes for specific experiences (van Manen, 2016); and the perceptions of the participants involved (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002).

### **Participants and Setting**

The participants were ten secondary school students studying in an EP in one university demonstration school in Bangkok, Thailand. The purposeful sampling technique was adopted. Several criteria were used for the selection of the participants: a) the students enrolled in an EP since primary 2 through primary 6 and planning to continue to secondary school at the same school, and b) the students' willingness to participate in the study, in which case they must return their consent form to the researcher in due course.

### **Instruments**

Three instruments following the dictum of qualitative research, particularly phenomenology, were employed in this study. There were a semi-structured interview, an observation form, and document analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect rich description of the thoughts and feelings experienced by the participants. According to Creswell (2013), semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in eliciting responses that potentially tap into emotions and feelings of the participants. This aspect of the semi-structured interviews, therefore, is most conducive to the present study, for lived experiences are, by their nature, context-bound and culturally specific.

An observation form was developed by the researcher and validated by the experts in the field of elementary education of a premier university. Records of observation were noted into descriptive data and the researcher added reflective information as deemed appropriate.

For document analysis, the researcher reviewed and looked through documents such as EP curriculum (translated version), lesson plans (science and math), textbooks, exercise books in order to gain a better understanding of how the teaching and learning materials are organized and thus equip the students' learning experiences during primary years.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

The interviews were conducted in Thai (each lasting 45 minutes) to ensure the participants would readily understand and be able to express their thoughts clearly. While the interviews were being recorded, the researcher listened to the participants' answers and took notes. After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher sent them via e-mails for the participants to check for accuracy and have them returned to the researcher to file them.

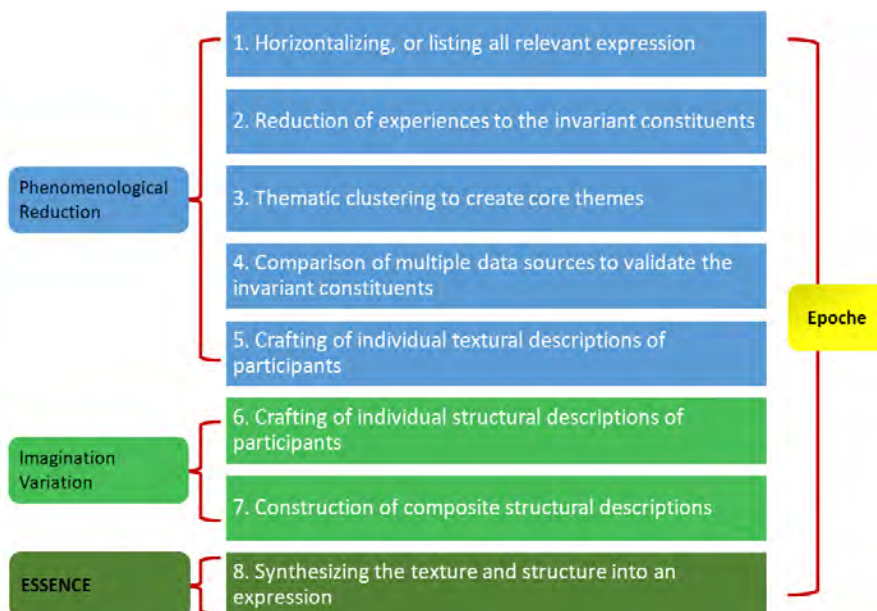
The data were organized using the phenomenological steps proposed by Moustakas (1994) (Figure 1). All interviews were read with the intention of obtaining a sense of what the participants had experienced in the phenomenon. Upon the completion of several rounds of reading of each interview, the researcher selected phrases or words that were not only relevant to the research questions but also lending themselves to appropriate interpretations of the data. Subsequently, they were organized under different headings. This is in line with the process of culling (Creswell, 2013). The next phase consisted of coding procedures in search of overarching categories under which salient themes were presented.

The researcher collected data through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and analyzed data through initial and axial codes (Saldana, 2013). From the codes emerged themes; some codes were overlapping so the researcher revised and arranged them into the appropriate categories. The researcher also identified excerpts from the transcripts to support the interpretations.

Figure 1 below illustrates key steps involving data collection and analysis.

**Figure 1**

*Monstakas (1994)'s data analysis steps*



### **Trustworthiness: Validity and Credibility**

From the beginning, the researcher acknowledged her own biases and formulated a subjectivity statement (or a reflexivity statement) to explicate the researcher's own pre-judgement and facilitate the bracketing process throughout the study. The researcher discussed biases, explained interview transcript coding process, and participant confirmations of analyzed data (Creswell, 2013). Next, the researcher provided a thick description for each individual participant (background information of individual participant participated). Member-checking was done by sending the original transcripts to the participants for verification. Imaginative variation was achieved by using rich, thick descriptions, using quotations from the transcripts wherever possible (van Manen, 2016). Additionally, to retain the authenticity of the transcript transparency, the researcher transcribed the transcript verbatim, with no changes made to the original transcript. Finally, the researcher used peer review to strengthen the quality of the qualitative data. The reviewer was



initially informed about the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the research procedure including the interview sessions. The interview transcripts were presented to the reviewer along with the audio recording of the interview. The reviewer reflected and wrote comments. Finally, the reviewer and the researcher discussed the emerging themes with the researcher. Several validation strategies were used in order to make the study transparent and to increase credibility.

## Results and Discussion

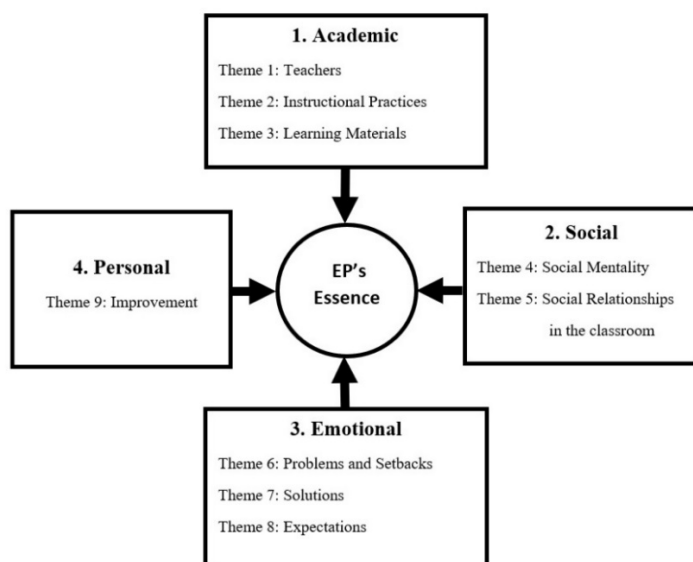
The findings provided a rich description of the experiences of EP students studying in an EP. In the study, individual students were given *voices* to describe their collection of memories, past feelings, incidents that they experienced, or any other relevant experience they had during their study in the program (primary years).

### RQ1. What is the essence of the lived experiences of the EP students?

Figure 2 represented the multi-dimensional perspectives of EP's essence consisting of four dimensions: academic, social, emotional and personal. A total of nine multi-dimensional themes emerged from the analysis.

**Figure 2**

*Multi-dimensional Themes of EP's Experiences*



## **Academic Dimension**

### *“The Driven Individuals and the Effective Teachers”*

The first three themes of the EP students’ lived experiences were: (1) Teachers (foreign teachers and Thai teachers), (2) Teachers’ instructional practices (science, math, and advanced English), and (3) Learning Materials, all of which were discussed and categorized under the Academic Dimension.

#### ***Theme 1: Teachers***

The EP students viewed their native English-speaking teachers as the language model with high credibility when compared to their non-native English-speaking teachers (Thai teachers). Medgyes (1994) gave reason to this incident that the native English-speaking teachers used English with more confidence in the classroom when compared to non-native English-speaking teachers because the native English-speaking teachers demonstrated high level of proficiency in English. Brown & Heck (2018) noted that the foreign teachers have a more prestigious identity in the classroom than the non-native English-speaking teachers because of the role the foreign teachers were responsible for in the classroom.

“The foreign teacher had more responsibility than Thai teacher. The main teacher was the main teacher in the classroom.” (CSJ)

That said, Norton & Tang (1997)’s study highlighted the benefits of having Thai teachers. They can relate better to their students’ challenge of learning a second language via content teaching such as Math and Science in EP classroom. Thai teachers have ability to use the students’ first language (L1) as a valuable instructional tool.

“Thai teachers translated the difficult vocabulary for us. If the students do not understand, Thai teacher will repeat another round so the students understand.” (Obake)

From the foregoing, it might be the case that local and foreign teachers can play complementary roles in the EP classroom.

#### ***Theme 2: Instructional Practices***

Through the engaging in-class activities, the participants came to realize the benefits of the highly positive attitude of the teachers. That is, the

teachers managed to create a positive learning atmosphere in a classroom. The teacher who harbors a positive attitude that all students can learn is likely to increase the probability of providing better learning for students. This kind of attitude creates a positive environment that enhances student achievement (Wasicsko, 2007). Teacher's attitude impacts their practices in the classroom because their attitudes are inevitably connected to their actions. Teacher's choice of instructional practices is also positively related to students' achievement. The participants reported that they were able to learn a great deal in the lesson since they were actively engaged as a group.

“The foreign teachers can explain the content well. If we don't understand, we can ask the teachers and they will answer and explain until the students understand.” (Fish)  
“I like science because I got to have hands-on experience in class.” (Dakota)

Based on the data above, it is apparent that engaging the participants through meaningful activities is the way forward.

### ***Theme 3: Learning Materials***

#### ***Textbooks***

Materials such as textbooks, supplementary materials, workbooks and worksheets are commonly used in a language classroom. Commercial teaching materials that were produced for mass market may not be suitable for all instructional contexts.

For the EP under study, the school textbooks were in the Thai language (following the prescribed curriculum) so EP teachers translated regular Thai program textbooks into English in order that the EP students learn exactly the same contents as the regular Thai students. Teachers in the EP Science and Math subjects teach the same content as the regular Thai program. EP teachers designed and adapted their own teaching materials (apart from the textbooks) to create a learning environment in which there is a proper match between teacher-prepared materials and commercial textbooks. Various kinds of teaching aids and materials are introduced in Science and Math classrooms to make lessons interesting and effective. The use of materials was considered important in driving the dynamics of teaching and learning for both teachers and students in the classroom.

“The textbooks that we used were the translated version from Thai to English, you see, it contained misspelling, and incorrect grammar.” (CSJ)

“The textbook did not tell us the specific science terminology in English.” (Dakota)

Obviously, classroom materials must be carefully prepared or selected. The participants appeared to rely on them as sources of linguistic input, even though they were placed in the EP program.

### ***Social Dimension***

*“Inner-group Socialization and mutually exclusive Interrelationship between peers”*

The participants’ feelings and issues concerning friendships, group mentality, relationships among EP classmates and class synergy are mentioned. EP students’ perceptions of their group mentality were very strong; they were very close to one another because they stayed as one class since primary 2 throughout primary 6.

### ***Theme 4: Social Group Mentality***

According to Vygotsky & Cole (1978)’s social development theory, humans interact with each other in response to learning how to behave in a given social environment. Having social skills helps build relationships with others in society. Social skills can be developed through social activities in school such as classroom activities, playing sports, and attending after-school activities.

The experiences of many participants revealed that having peers/friends made the participants feel confident and motivated to study in school. EP students strengthened each other’s self-esteem and formed a strong bond of friendship and connection. As a united group of motivated and confident students, they helped each other and wanted to maintain relationships because they grew up together.

“We have known each other for so long. We know each other’s personality very well.” (Dakota)

“I feel that staying with the same people you know is much more comfortable.” (Ice)

Some participants admitted that talking to his EP friends was more comfortable than talking or starting a conversation with a friend outside their EP class.

“I couldn’t socialize well with others because I am used to with having the same group of friends for many years.” (Ice)

“I didn’t feel connected with friends outside EP class. I don’t know what to talk about.” (Megumi)

“Outside friends rarely start a conversation with any of us.” (Fish)

The comments and explanations mentioned above point to the importance of cooperative learning experiences, ones that helped the participants to learn from one another, and to share relatively the same emotions and feelings as they were journeying through this lived experience. All these contribute to esprit de corps among the participants.

### ***Theme 5: Social Relationships in EP classroom***

#### ***Positive classroom synergy***

Even more uplifting motivation and learning patterns can be found when schools emphasize mastery achievement and knowledge acquisition rather than competing for high grades. As the participants looked to the teachers for help and support in order to build their confidence and trust throughout studying in each new academic year, it is the responsibility of the teacher to build rapport and create trust with the students in the classroom. The teachers supported the participants emotionally by listening to problems, helping with their homework, giving advice and guidance when necessary. Kent & Fisher (1997) pointed out that teachers and students are responsible for creating safe learning environments that are free from ridicule, sarcasm and physical aggression. In the present study, the students’ experiences bore a powerful testament to the positive comments and mentorship provided for them by their teachers.

“I felt close to all the teachers. Some teachers, I met when I was in primary 2 and again when I was in primary 6. I was close to every teacher who taught me in primary school.” (Obake)

The participants found that their foreign teachers gave them mental support and made them feel confident about themselves as did their peers. This finding was consistent with research by Fields (2002); Kohut (2000); and Newmann (1998) that emphasized the key role teachers play in helping students feel confident about themselves to become successful in academic setting.

As for EP students, the way the foreign teachers built the students’ confidence to use English in daily conversation reaffirmed this point. Tonelson (1981) identified the interconnectedness of teacher personality and the learning atmosphere in the classroom. That is, teacher personality affects

student learning outcomes through the psychological environment of the classroom. Characters of teachers resulted in their behaviors and actions. These behaviors influence students' academic success either by promoting positive atmosphere suitable for learning or inhibiting positive learning environments.

“The foreign teachers were quite funny, kind and social. They got along with the students very well.” (Ice)

“The Thai homeroom teachers that I have since P.2 to P.6 were always kind and supportive.” (Obake)

### ***Emotional Dimension***

*“The well-being and self-resilience”*

The participants described their problems and setbacks that occurred during their primary school years, including their feelings about certain experiences and situations they encountered as they recalled their past experiences during their primary school years.

### ***Theme 6: Problems and Setbacks***

In the present study, the problems and setbacks were the participants' inability to manage the overwhelming amounts of assignments during weekdays, struggling to understand terminology in core subjects, stress from acknowledging hefty tuition hikes and test anxiety due to a lack of time management skill.

“When I have a lot of homework, I couldn't manage the time to complete all my work.” (Obake)

“Science has specific vocabulary that have to be remembered. ...When I was in class, sometimes I didn't know the vocabulary.” (Mint)

“About the increased tuition fee made me ask myself whether to stay or quit the EP.” (Fish)

“Tests are in English and it takes more time to read and translate the questions in my head. I need more time to think.” (Zen)

### ***Theme 7: Solutions (to their problems and setbacks)***

The participants described the way they managed the problems and setbacks that they experienced during primary school years. The said

problems had to do with the inability to manage assignments during weekdays, the struggle to understand core subject terminology, financial concerns arising from hefty tuition hikes, and test anxiety due to a lack of time management skill. To solve these aforementioned problems, the participants resorted to the following strategies:

Those who lacked time management skill found themselves became increasing stressful in the classroom situation where everyone seemed to excel very fast and was competitive when it came to learning. Still, they knew they were friends. They helped each other by talking to one another. Once they found an outlet to talk and discuss their problems and frustration, they became more organized to meet their deadlines, project due dates and know how to study for examination.

The students who came across a financial concern arising from a hefty tuition hike found a solution by taking a scholarship opportunity and received partial funding.

“I used to write a petition for the scholarship when I was in P.6” (Ice)

“I tried not to overthink about the increased tuition because the incident has passed. If I overthink too much, I will be stressed and it would affect my grades.” (Fish)

The EP students were motivated to learn because they understand the value of learning and what that learning will lead to. If there is a discrepancy in learning and assessment, the EP students were very quick to locate the origin of the problem and try their best to fix it. The EP students emphasized the primary necessity for vocabulary building in all areas of core content instruction.

The problem of unsuitable allocation of time during examinations was alleviated by strengthening vocabulary and subject revision

“If we had not attended tutor school on weekend, we would not understand the lesson at school.” (Mint)

“When I am in EP, I have to take extra class in math, to improve my grade and made my parents satisfied.” (Obake)

### ***Theme 8: Expectations***

Some of the examples of the EP students' expectations were to use an international textbook and workbook for Science and Math, to have a more challenging English class (more difficult in terms of content), to have more speaking practice time, and to have more classes taught in English, for example, Social Studies and History.

“I want the textbook to be *real* textbook.” (CSJ)

“I want more classes taught in English, for example, Social Studies and History.” (Fish)

According to Ramos (2001)’s study, the elementary school students had the ability to improve their speaking skill in the school environment and outside the school environment. Factors that enhanced the ability for the children to speak came from the family environment, the community setting and varieties of speaking styles of family members. That is, these factors helped shape the ability of speaking skills for an elementary school-aged child. Essentially, Ramos (2001)’s study lent support to the assumption that EP students’ English-speaking ability improved due to the input from their family, classroom environments, friends and the community surrounding the students. The following remarks by the participants reaffirm Ramos’s study:

“I want to have more presentation in front of the class.” (CSJ)

“The time when I feel that I improved my competency the most was when I studied English with the foreign teachers.”  
(Obake)

### ***Personal Dimension***

#### *“Feeling of Success and Competent Individuals”*

The participants perceived the development of their English-speaking skill as improvement since they joined English Program (EP) in primary 2. EP students are highly motivated and who have passion to use English in everyday life. For most, if not all, of them, English became part and parcel of their daily lives, made possible by high accessibility to language and their motivation to keep using English.

### ***Theme 9: Improvement***

The students’ social and academic language proficiency have improved tremendously because they were exposed to the target language in Math, Science and Advanced English classes during the day. The EP students managed to considerably improve their English proficiency, which outpaced that of their peers in the regular program. This linguistic advantage was in evidence considering the academic language they had acquired, which was much greater both in quantity and quality compared to those in the regular program.

“Studying in EP had helped me improved my skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing, tremendously.” (Mint)



“Because we studied in EP, it helped in terms of writing, presentation, and discussion.” (Dakota)

According to the social development theory (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), the role of social interaction played an important role in learning. As EP students used English as a tool in making conversation with their friends and teachers every day, their confidence grew and their speaking skill improved, voluntarily. Some EP students may seem to acquire native-like fluency for social language. However, caution should be made against overgeneralization that they have acquired academic language at the same level as the social one because academic language tends to be more cognitively demanding than conversational English.

## **RQ2. How does studying in EP during primary school years prepare the EP students for the secondary school?**

The lived experiences discussed so far indicated that effective instructions such as doing hands-on experiments, introducing educational games, using active learning strategies in EP classes were appreciated by the EP students. This also pointed out the necessity for EP teachers to demonstrate accessibility e.g., kind and down-to-earth personality and availability (devoting their time to help the students during the day) to build strong rapport, and mutually exclusive trust from the EP students are also mentioned. The interactions in the primary classrooms created a warm and amicable learning environment conducive to proper learning. In view of the foregoing, it can be argued that these activities are likely to serve as a springboard, one that is educationally positive and emotionally supportive, which in turn strengthens the EP students' confidence when transitioning into the secondary school level.

In summary, the students' lived experiences in the EP program speak volumes of the multidimensional aspects of this education innovation. The tripartite cooperation among the teachers, the students and the educational environment appears a sine qua non of the phenomenon. The educational stories unfolded by the EP students strike at the core of the phenomenological nature of the study.

### ***Implications of the Study***

The participants' voices concerning their experiences in the EP program will most likely add to the existing literature on EP in Thailand. This present study represents those voices truthfully. As such, the study should be valuable to researchers and practitioners interested in the EP field.

Specifically, the findings will most likely help the policymakers, school principals, EP administrators, EP teaching staff members and parents to better understand the experiences of what EP students had during their primary school years. In addition, by shedding light on how the participants made meanings of their experiences in the program, this study can, in all probability, inform administrators on how to manage administrative work associated with growing numbers of EP classes in the future.

Additionally, future research should be conducted with a larger population affiliated with EP. For example, secondary school students in government schools and private schools in different provinces. Further studies regarding the EP program should be more encompassing, considering different EP contexts. This will enable all stakeholders to have a bird's eye-view of this EP phenomenon.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the students' experiences of studying in EP. The researcher employed a phenomenological approach to unfold the multiple layers of meanings of students' experiences in EP. Through semi-structured interviews, the students' experiences were elicited, captured, analyzed and interpreted. The researcher reflected on the narratives of the lived experienced shared by the participants. The participants' responses are provided to reveal their lived experiences, thoughts and feelings (Moustakas, 1994). Their "voices" represented real stories of experiences from the program; how studying in English Program in primary years affects their life ("academic" and "social" dimensions) teacher's roles, instructional practices, teaching materials, social mentality and social relationships among their peers; their emotional state of mind ("emotional" dimension) problems and setbacks, solutions to their setbacks, and expectation and; the improvement they see within themselves at the end of their primary years ("personal" dimension) improvement.

Based on the findings, the commonly known characteristics of EP students are as follows: being passionate about learning the English language, showing strong potential in learning autonomy, goal-driven personality, being well-prepared and well supported by family, and understanding the value of education where English plays an important language variable which leads to successful learning.

In order to create a better understanding of the phenomenon of studying in an EP, the study should have been conducted with those who were involved in the program such as teachers and administrators who took part in the program from the beginning. The current study only looked at students who reported having the experiences in the program. Neither the

teachers nor administrative staff were examined in order to give a full picture of the EP environment. The usefulness of the study is limited by a lack of data on teachers' and administrative staff members' lived experiences that could be complementary to the English Program.

Expanding the research scope to include a focus on teachers and administrative staff might shed additional light on the overall topic of English Program. Information regarding the psychological support, scholarship and academic guidance provided by the program as mentioned in the participants' interviews could strengthen the effectiveness of the program in the future.

The complexity of human experiences, in this case of the EP students, was reflected in the themes discerned in their interviews. Far from being judged right or wrong, their experiences were reported in situ, revealing what the participants had encountered in this educational phenomenon.

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