

## **Shadow Education in Thailand: A Case Study of Thai English Tutors' Perspectives towards the Roles of Private Supplementary Tutoring in Improving English Language Skills**

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### **Abstract**

Shadow education, particularly tutorial schools, is a familiar yet under-studied educational phenomenon in Thai society. This exploratory qualitative case study aimed at gaining a better understanding of English tutorial schools through the lens of tutors. Specifically, two tutors in Bangkok, Thailand were selected via purposive sampling. Two rounds of interviews were conducted: 1) focus group and 2) individual. Key themes emerged from the two rounds of interviews, namely challenges in providing tutorial courses, tutorial schools and Thai society, the importance of motivation, tutorials and English teaching, success and failure in tutoring and English language teaching policy. Concluding remarks suggested that shadow education, in this case private supplementary tutoring, has a potential to improve English language skills of Thais through its motivating force and that dichotomous thinking about key components of English language teaching e.g., to teach or not to teach grammar; English native speaking vs. non-native speaking teachers should be avoided.

**Keywords:** shadow education, tutorial schools, motivation, success and failure in English tutoring

### **Introduction**

The English language left the Thai royal court in 1921 (Baker, 2008) to be enjoyed by commoners and has since been studied widely in the Kingdom of Thailand. According to Trakulkasemsuk (2018), English made inroads into the Thai territory at least two hundred years ago. That said, it has often been reported in Thai mass media that English language proficiency of Thais in general leaves a lot to be desired. According to Kaur et al. (2016), "... Thailand's English-language teaching and learning were falling behind other ASEAN countries" (p. 351). This lackluster English ability has become a cause for concern, resulting in much finger-pointing among those concerned—be they school administrators, parents, students, and employers, to name a few.

Many factors have been identified to account for this chronic problem such as a lack of quality language input, a limited opportunity to use English in daily life, poor instruction delivered by unqualified local teachers and so on (Nunan, 2003). This inauspicious situation has prompted parents and students to seek other educational alternatives that would give them immediate linguistic gains. Additionally, the Thai education system is tied closely with high-stakes examination at almost every level of education. In fact, the examination-oriented culture of Thailand implies, among other things, that the ability to do well on the English exam paper more often than not determines success or failure. As a corollary, English tutorial schools have

emerged in big cities in Thailand, a phenomenon that is not uncommon in many Asian countries (Mark and Lykins, 2012).

Thailand has witnessed a mushrooming of privately-owned tutorial schools across the country. This shadow education (Bray *et al.* 2013; Dawson, 2010; Hamid *et al.* 2009; Ireson & Rushforth, 2011) has been reported to prevail in the far east and has become an essential component of the education system and Thailand is no exception. One of the reasons for the popularity of shadow education, English language tutorial being a quintessential example, is that it helps many students achieve high scores on the high-stakes tests—the university entrance examination. While parents and students consider shadow education a sine qua non, educational authorities and the media appear to have disparaged its value. This is because they believe it has destroyed the essence of true education; tutorial schools are profiteering rather than genuinely empowering (Mahmud & Bray, 2017).

In addition, from a second language acquisition (SLA) perspective, shadow education is a type of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) (Loewen, 2015). However, research on ISLA so far has focused mainly on regular classroom instruction (e.g., Lee and Lyster, 2015; Long, 2016, 2017; Nakatsukasa, 2016; VanPatten, 2017) with relatively little focusing on shadow education (Hamid, Sussex and Khan, 2011; Wai-Ho Yung, 2014). I argue that research into ISLA with an emphasis on shadow education could shed light on the roles of implicit and explicit instruction on L2 development, thereby enriching extant SLA theories and hypotheses, given the fact that SLA and, in particular, ISLA are a young discipline with what has been known is dwarfed by what still remains unknown. In fact, research should be conducted to better understand this educational phenomenon that might stay in the Thai education system for years to come (Hayes, 2010; Hayes, 2017).

Given the dynamic nature of shadow education, especially English language tutorials, research questions that this study sought to answer are as follows:

RQ 1: What are the tutors' perspectives towards shadow education in general and English language tutorial in particular?

RQ 2: To what extent do the reported perspectives converge or diverge from second language acquisition and learning theories and hypotheses?

## **Focused Literature Review**

The literature review consists of three main parts: 1) shadow education or private supplementary tutoring; 2) 1) second language acquisition theories and hypotheses that inform second language (L2) instruction, and 3) prior studies concerning private tutoring.

### *Shadow Education*

Shadow education has three components as follows: 1) supplementation; 2) private-ness, and 3) academic subjects. In fact, according to Bray and Lykins (2012), shadow education "... is concerned with tutoring in academic subjects that is provided for a fee and that takes place outside school hours" (p. 1). As previously mentioned, shadow education is an educational phenomenon that is ubiquitous in Asia. Given the importance of private tutoring, Wai-Ho Yung (2015) conducted a study investigating the experiences and reflections of Chinese learners who had attended an English private tutoring class. After interviewing the 14 students, the author found that the participants had ambivalent attitudes toward the private tutoring school. That is, the participants did not find the private tutorial school a proper way of educating young minds,

although they had realized that the private tutoring indispensable. The researcher concluded that for the world of shadow education such as private tutoring to be thoroughly understood, more research should be conducted to address this issue that is tightly embedded in a particular socio-cultural condition.

In line with Wai-Ho Yung (2015), Zhan et al. (2013) reported on a study that they conducted with a view to examining Hong Kong students' perceptions of the effectiveness of private supplementary tutoring. Using survey and interview data, the researchers found that the participants found private tutoring more effective than mainstream schooling, especially in regard to high-stakes examinations, although those perceptions seemed vary from one participant to the next, depending on each individual participant's academic levels and motives for taking private tutoring.

As for the role of private tutoring in another Asian context, Hamid et al. (2009) conducted a mixed methods study delving into the roles of private tutoring in English in terms of its nature and practice in a disadvantaged rural area of Bangladesh. Specifically, the study focused on students' scholastic achievement in English, their attitudes and motivations and outcomes. A most prominent finding reported is that the participants found private tutoring as imperative for successful learning achievement; several factors came into play here such as social, psychological and institutional factors. The authors also suggested that if the teaching of English in mainstream schooling is to be successful, it must take into consideration the strengths of private tutoring.

On a more global scale, Ireson and Rushforth (2011) explored the views of English parents and students toward private tutoring. They did a survey study, administering a questionnaire to more than 3,000 students in England in hopes of finding the nature and extent of private tutoring at three points of transition in the English education system. Major findings reported are that the respondents believed there were clear relationships between tutoring and family socio-economic status and cultural background. Concerning the parents, they employed tutors to increase their child's confidence, improve their understanding of the subject and to help them do well in tests and examinations. Clearly, the respondents saw the value of private tutoring almost at the expense of mainstream schooling.

To provide a panoramic view of private tutoring in East Asia, Dawson (2010) examined private tutoring systems in Japan, South Korea and Cambodia, focusing on the systems with formal education systems well in place in those countries. It was found that, for each of the countries, private tutoring was meant to address the inadequacies of formal schooling in helping students to cope with high-stakes examinations successfully. Indeed, this study emphasized the importance of private tutoring in completely understanding mass education and equal opportunity.

Focusing on the Thai education system, Lao (2014) analyzed the Thai state policy on private tutoring through her qualitative study in which she investigated documents and carried out semi-structured interviews with Thai policymakers. Specifically, she analyzed texts about Thai education policy and interviewed Thai policymakers representing the Office of Private Education Commission and the Office of Education Council. It was found that while the cram schools provided learning opportunities to many a student, they did not pay much attention to such educational aspects as curriculum, quality assessment and qualifications of the tutors. This is because "...commercial issues take the central focus rather than educational issues" (p. 489).

This tendency underscores the "...free market ideology of public-private partnership, consumer choice and human capital" (p. 489).

#### *Private Tutoring and English Language Teaching in Thailand*

Wongsothorn et al. (2002) were very optimistic that English language teaching in Thailand would undergo a drastic change gravitating toward a more communicative approach to English teaching where Thai students would perform better in English communication. This is because "...English language classrooms of the future will be less teacher-fronted. Instead, the importance of cooperative learning will be heightened. The productive skills will receive greater emphasis than ever before" (p. 115). Overall, the authors' major argument is that Thai students would not be forced to do discrete grammar at the expense of communicative use of the language, for "conscious learning of language rules will be presented in the context of real use and will go side by side with actual communicative practice" (p. 115).

While the Wongsothorn et al. study reiterates the increasing importance of communicative language teaching, that of Baker (2008) critically examined English teaching in Thailand with a view to providing cautious optimism that, for Thai students to become successful English users, what they need is cultural awareness and that intercultural communication is the order of the day. In fact, the author aptly argues that "...it may be possible to devise culturally relevant teaching pedagogy and materials that are in tune with local learners' intercultural communicative practices" (p. 143). He further suggests that successful educational policy and practice "needs to be done in a way that is sensitive to local needs and values rather than wholesale importing of outside ELT practice and materials" (p. 144).

Given the aforementioned studies regarding the roles of shadow education in the Asian context, this study strives to shed light on shadow education, especially English language tutorials in three tutorial schools. This might enable interested readers to better understand the advantages and disadvantages of this educational practice so prevalent in Thailand, especially Bangkok.

#### *Selected Second Language Acquisition Theories and Hypotheses*

The section below discusses selected second language acquisition (SLA) theories and hypotheses based on the fact that private supplementary tutoring regarding English language skills such as reading and writing involves tutees receiving input and producing output as required by lessons and exercises given by the tutor. That is, SLA theories that are directly related to instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) were deemed relevant. Moreover, certain linguistic interventions such as providing corrective feedback or negative input are relevant, especially when it comes to the writing skills development. Also, in some cases, the two tutors, the key participants in this study, often communicate in English necessitating a certain level of interaction between the tutors and tutees. This calls for the Interaction Hypothesis. Based on the foregoing, the following SLA theories and hypotheses are discussed below.

#### *The Input-Output Hypotheses*

Among the many SLA theories and hypotheses, Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis stands out. According to Krashen (1981), the most important factor contributing to successful L2 acquisition is for L2 learners to be exposed to input in the L2 that is not too difficult and that is given over an extended period of time, the so-called  $i + 1$ , where  $i$  refers to the current level of

knowledge and 1 refers to the next level of knowledge that is not too difficult. Based on this argument, all the L2 learner needs to do is to be exposed to rich, good-quality language input. One of the implications of the aforementioned statements is that explicit grammar instruction is discouraged, a position that has defied the long-standing belief and practice among Thai teachers of English who, more often than not, emphasize grammar instruction as a result of the grammar-translation method. Equally interesting is Krashen's position that error correction should be avoided (Hall, 2018) because such correction is believed to interfere with the acquisition process.

Notwithstanding its popularity among classroom teachers, the Input Hypothesis has been disparaged from the research point of view. This is so because the  $i + 1$  construct cannot be falsifiable, thereby becoming circular reasoning. The argument that L2 learners simply need to listen and read authentic materials without having to speak or write seems counterintuitive, especially when the goal of L2 learning is to develop not only fluency but also accuracy.

As a corollary, Swain (1985) proposed another hypothesis called "The Comprehensible Output Hypothesis" as an extension, not a replacement, to the Input Hypothesis. That is, input is insufficient, albeit important, in turning the L2 learner to become successful in using the target language. The L2 learner needs the opportunity to do something with the input. Doing something refers to speaking and writing using features in the L2. Swain and Lapkin (1995), cited in Kees de bot et al. (2005), further argue that "... in producing the L2, a learner will on occasion become aware of (i.e. notice) a linguistic problem... Noticing a problem 'pushes' the learner to modify his/her output. In doing so, the learner may sometimes be forced into a more syntactic processing mode than might occur in comprehension. Thus, output may set 'noticing' in train, triggering mental processes that lead to modified output" (168). In sum, input alone is insufficient for successful L2 acquisition; output must be available.

The computational metaphors of input and output discussed above, although of practical value, appear to dichotomize the issue. L2 learners are not machines waiting to receive input and product output. L2 learners need opportunity to interact with one another using the language. In the next section, I discuss the role of interaction.

#### *The Interaction Hypothesis*

Long (1980a,1983b) proposed a hypothesis that lends support to both the roles of input and output in L2 acquisition. His argument is that L2 learners need to take control of the L2 input to a certain extent through the process of negotiation for meaning. According to Long (1996), "... negative feedback obtained during negotiation work or elsewhere may be facilitative of L2 development, at least for vocabulary, morphology and language-specific syntax, and essential for learning certain specifiable L1-L2 contrasts" (p. 414). In this respect, L2 learners have the opportunity to receive input and corrective feedback which may help them to become more accurate in the L2 usage.

The metaphors of input and output are augmented by the interaction hypothesis. It is through interaction, particularly in the form of corrective feedback that L2 learners will have an opportunity to re-consider what they can do successfully and unsuccessfully using linguistic features in the L2.

### *Corrective Feedback*

Lightbown and Spada (2003) define corrective feedback as follows:

An indication to a learner that his or her use of the target language is incorrect. This includes a variety of responses that a language learner receives. Corrective feedback can be explicit (for example, ‘No, you should say “goes”, not “go” or implicit (for example, ‘Yes, he goes to school every day), and may or may not include metalinguistic information (for example, ‘Don’t forget to make the verb agree with the subject’). (p. 172-173).

Based on this definition, corrective feedback may take place during a teacher-student interaction or a student-student interaction. It is believed that corrective feedback is an important mechanism that potentially can help L2 learners to become more accurate. In this sense, corrective feedback is tied closely with the Interaction Hypothesis because corrective feedback occurs during interaction.

It should also be noted that corrective feedback—also known as negative evidence and negative feedback (Tatawy, 2002)—is a direct challenge to Krashen’s Input Hypothesis. This is because when L2 learners receive corrective feedback, they are given an opportunity to notice what they cannot do accurately, thereby bringing the learning process at a conscious level. However, as Tatawy (2002) put it,

... for corrective feedback to bring about interlanguage development, certain conditions have to be met. First, teachers need to be systematic and consistent in their provision of feedback. Second, the corrective feedback provided should be clear enough to be perceived as such. Third, the techniques employed should allow for time and opportunity for self-and peer-repair and modified output. Fourth, the feedback should be fine-tuned in the sense that there should be as close a match as possible between the teacher’s intent, the targeted error, and the learner’s perception of the given feedback. Fifth, the feedback provided should focus on one error at a time, over a period of time. Finally, the learner’s developmental readiness to process the feedback provided should be taken into consideration (p. 15).

Based on the conditions above, it is clear that whether, when and how to give corrective feedback requires careful consideration. But for certain corrective feedback is needed, especially when accuracy is cause for concern. As far as I am concerned, accuracy should receive no less attention than fluency. After all, communicative language teaching (CLT) which emphasizes language functions and communication premised on “grammatically correct sentences” (Hall, 2018).

The foregoing suggests that dichotomy may not be the right direction; when it comes to classroom instruction, L2 learners and the teacher usually do what they can do to try to learn, oftentimes resorting to improvisation. That said, it does not mean that the *laissez-faire* attitude or approach always prevails. Careful instruction calls for careful consideration.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

This qualitative case study involves two Thai tutors teaching in two different tutorial schools located in Bangkok, Thailand. The participants consisted of 1) Zackariya and 2) Tonnam aged 46 and 41, respectively. The two tutors were purposively chosen because the researcher had had some previous knowledge about them; they both were former graduate students at a Thai

university where the researcher taught. In addition, they were also willing to be interviewed because they had felt that they were relatively successful in their tutoring. Thus, they represented information-rich cases for this qualitative study (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

Educated in a premier university in Canada, Zakariya has taught English to mostly international students for approximately 20 years at a private tutorial school in downtown Bangkok. The school provides courses in major subjects necessary for college-bound students, especially universities overseas. His lessons are mostly one-on-one classes, and he uses English as a medium of instruction. As for Tonnam, he owns a private school and also teaches various lessons of English to mostly Thai nationals from all walks of life, but his classes are not intended for those planning to take standardized tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC and IELTS. Rather, the courses focus on conversation, grammar and vocabulary, especially for beginners. He has been teaching English for almost 15 years now. He also applied high standards in recruiting teachers at his school. Those applying to teach will have to produce a high score on a standardized test e.g., TOEFL, IELTS or TOEIC.

#### *Data collection*

Data was gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews with the participants. According to Richards (2009), the use of interview as a primary tool of data collection in qualitative research is appropriate because it can provide insights into people's experiences, beliefs and perceptions better than questionnaires. To achieve a certain level of trustworthiness, the interviews was conducted in two rounds: the first was a focus-group interview (lasting 45 minutes) in which the participants were asked both general and specific questions revolving around shadow education, its benefits and drawbacks (if any); the second was an individual interview (lasting 40 minutes each) with each of the two participants where probing questions were asked that delved into their respective ideas about opportunities and challenges usually accompanying shadow educational practices. The purpose of the probes was to triangulate the data sources because the questions were intended for the participants to reflect on what they did while providing tutoring. The language used in the interviews was Thai, first language of both the interviewer and participants.

#### *Data analysis*

The interview transcripts were analyzed focusing on salient themes that emerged from the data. Through open and axial coding systems (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015), they were scrutinized in order to uncover underlying threads that ran through the interviews.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The first part of findings and discussion centers around the participants' perspectives gleaned from the focus group interview, focusing on the participants' general opinions about English teaching in Thailand. The purpose was to generate the participants' holistic ideas about opportunities and challenges regarding English instruction. Therefore, the questions tended to revolve around English teaching in Thailand in general. For example, do you think English language instruction in Thailand has been in the wrong direction? What would you see as pressing problems regarding English teaching? Whether or not should Thai teachers of English be replaced by native speaker counterparts to guarantee quality language instruction? I discussed their answers below.

When asked whether the teaching of English in Thailand over the past decades has been a misguided attempt, the participants expressed their ideas as follows:

*English teaching in Thailand and English teachers*

Zackariya and Tonnarn believed that problems that have plagued the teaching of English in Thailand may lie in these factors: 1) unqualified teachers, and 2) misunderstanding about grammar teaching. They both agreed that proper English instruction is multifaceted. Qualified teachers—whether native or non-native—must be top priority.

To elaborate, both Zackariya and Tonnarn agreed that English language instruction in Thailand has not been a misguided attempt. In fact, they argued that students today have more opportunities to be exposed to quality English. But some of the local teachers do not seem to be qualified because they are not well equipped with grammatical knowledge. Moreover, modern technology is a double-edged sword. Zackariya said, “... *just anybody could turn themselves into English teachers making use of social media to publicize their classes, although they never have any training in teaching approaches and methods.*” Tonnarn further argued that “... *the number of unqualified teachers is increasing tremendously. Technology helped them to market their courses easily, although they are not qualified to teach. This puts students in a precarious position because students will end up being taught by unqualified teachers.*” Tonnarn also went further suggesting that “... *some teachers are misled into believing that grammar can be dispensed with, whereas we know that grammar is so very important if we are to use English successfully.*”

When asked what qualifications a successful English teacher should have, Tonnarn asserted that, “*teachers should understand the difference between first and second language acquisition and learning processes. Premature conclusion that first and second language acquisition processes are the same is a serious mistake.*” On this point, Zackariya put it that “*apart from the understanding of the difference in first and second language acquisition processes, the teacher must have a solid knowledge of English; otherwise, he/she will end up wrongly explain the subject matter to students...and that is disastrous, to say the least. That is, know-what is a prerequisite of know-how.*” Zackariya emphasized that “... *the teacher does not have to have perfect knowledge of English, but at least he/she should not have a smattering of English and then become teachers.*”

Based on the findings reported earlier, the participants found shadow education and English tutorial of use. It all depends on the quality and responsibility of individual teachers or tutors. Shadow education in the form of tutorials does not have to be profiteering, which is in contradiction with a study done by Mahmud and Bray (2017). That is, some schools do care about quality teaching and strive toward producing qualified learners and users of English as in the case of Tonnarn, who insists that quality must prevail in his school, beginning with the recruitment of teachers as well as the curriculum.

As Zackariya suggested, tutorial schools in fact can help some students keep pace with their study in the regular or mainstream schools because students, in his case, receive intensive, one-one-one teaching, implying full attention is well in place. Further, both participants emphasize that studying English at their respective schools helps students to achieve high scores on standardized tests, which is in line with reported by Ireson and Rushforth (2011).

In sum, shadow education, in particular English tutorial, should be perceived as a viable option in the current ambience of consumer choice. Whether or not it will do more harm than good rests upon individual schools and teachers as well as students.

#### *The importance of motivation*

The participants agreed that motivation is the most important factor in the rate of success or failure in learning English. Zackariya said, “... *a good teacher must be able to inspire students to learn, to seek knowledge for themselves.*” And Tonnma put it that, “*motivation is always relevant in all of our endeavors, including learning English. Without it, one cannot become successful in whatever one does.*” He further explained that “*as important as motivation is, it is very hard to come by initially akin to kite-flying. That is, at the beginning it is rather difficult to get the kite fly because of the weather condition and wind power, but once it is airborne it can fly beautifully without efforts. The same holds true for English learning. Once the student can get started, he/she can sustain the knowledge and ability to use the language at will.*”

Toward the end of the focus group interview, both concurred that it is not only motivation but also passion—the love one has for learning English—that would turn one into a successful user of English. Therefore, it seems that motivation is a given and it is the responsibility of the teacher to motivate students.

The findings as reported above put a premium on qualified teachers willing to inspire their students to become self-reliant in terms of English usage. English education in Thailand has problems for certain, but they believe there is no need to despair. As long as the teacher keeps developing his/her know-what and know-how, success is not hard to come by.

#### *Individual interviews*

##### Tutorials and English teaching

Both Zackariya and Tonnma believed that their tutorials do great services to their students. They saw their teaching lessons as opportunities for them to better understand English and to become motivated. In this regard, Zackariya said that, “...*my lessons help them to learn those aspects they have not had a chance to learn in the mainstream schools. When I teach them, I teach both the contents and the techniques to help them understand language mechanisms and use. So there’s nothing wrong with that.*” This point Tonnma seemed to further elaborate that “...*in my school I don’t teach to the test. Rather, I teach them how to use English correctly and appropriately, starting from pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Because I don’t offer preparatory courses for standardized tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC, or IELTS, I don’t consider myself a tutor but a caring teacher.*” It should be noted that Tonnma strongly emphasized the importance of grammar teaching. He said, “... *grammar is very important. I’m not very happy hearing comments that grammar is not important as long as messages can be conveyed. Quite the contrary, I believe grammar is of utmost important; it’s a building block for a solid structure. I don’t succumb to marketing forces that one can learn English without grammar.*”

Based on the ideas of these two teachers, it can be concluded that shadow education, at least given their situations, does not destroy the value of education. It depends on how the teaching and learning are conducted and whether the teachers are concerned about student learning.

However, both expressed concerns regarding unqualified teachers of English. In so doing, they do not prioritize English native speakers over local counterparts. Zackariya puts it that, “ ...

*on some occasions, tutorial schools end up hiring teachers who are not qualified to teach. The recruitment simply relies on outward appearances; that is, the Caucasian look means the person is capable of teaching English, whereas we know that that's not true. Also, sometimes because of modern technology, those aspiring tutors—Thai and non-Thai alike—simply publicize that they can teach English, which may not be the case.”* Consistent with this assertion, Tonnam made it clear that “... *qualified teachers are very important. The teachers are qualified if they know the subject matter and teaching techniques. This, coupled with their love of teaching, is the best.*”

The foregoing points to the unhealthy dichotomy of whether to teach or not to teach grammar and whether the teachers should be native or non-native speakers. According to Walker et al. (2018), extant models of communicative competence e.g., Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Celce-Murcia et al.1995) have as the first component grammatical or linguistic competence. Given this argument, grammar definitely deserves serious and sincere consideration in English language instruction.

#### Challenges in providing tutorial courses

Both participants concurred that the most pressing challenge they have encountered in teaching English stems from a misconception of certain parents and students that their job is to make the students to obtain a high score only as if they could wave a magic wand and all of a sudden the students getting a very high score. Zackariya said, “... *some students had this misconception that he could turn them into a success overnight. They didn't cooperate. They didn't do their homework and came to class late. When the parents found later that their children could not get a high enough score, they complained. And I had to explain to them that their children didn't help themselves and cooperate.*” This sort of problem has also been encountered by Tonnam. As he put it, “... *some parents misunderstood my roles. They just wanted me to teach only techniques to earn a successful score on a standardized test. I had to emphasize that my teaching philosophy is to teach both contents and test-taking strategies. I believe that once students have a good grip of contents, they could succeed in taking any tests.*”

The ideas expressed above attest to the fact that both participants share more or less the same teaching philosophy. Earning a high score on a test should be a by-product of careful teaching and learning. It seems that the two participants actively play the role of caring teachers. It bears testimony to their passion and love they have for teaching English. Certainly, their careers are not rosy; parents and students sometimes want a quick-fix recipe—something they never promise.

#### Tutorials and Thai society

As regards the existence of tutorials in Thai society, both participants are convinced that tutorial schools will always exist in the Thai education system because regular or mainstream schools appear unable to serve students' purposes in passing high-stakes examination. Zakariya said, “*as long as the examination-oriented culture still exists in the Thai education system, tutorials still remain and this does not have to be worrisome. After all, fierce competition is existent. Students always want to excel, earning a high score. Tutorial schools serve that function.*” This is a pointed corroborated by Tonnam. He said, “... *unless we make regular schools teach both contents and test-taking strategies, tutorial schools will always be with us in the years to come. Parents and students are not to blame. It's only natural for them to seek the best opportunity. Rather, we should consider what works and what doesn't work when it comes to tutorials.*”

### Pondering over success and failure in tutoring

When asked to share their successes and failures in teaching English, both were eager to reveal both happy and sad stories. Tonnarn referred to a case where a Thai girl who was asked by her mother to study with him. Initially, the girl was utterly reluctant to speak English with him. He said, "... *the first encounter was an absolute failure. The girl ended up crying because she was so afraid to speak English with me. But I persisted and encouraged her to start speaking English little by little until eventually she could pass an examination to enroll in an international program at a reputed demonstration school in Bangkok.*" As for failure, Tonnarn gave this example. "*The student, a boy, was forced by the mother to study with me because he had been granted an athlete scholarship to study at an international school in Bangkok. But the boy did not want to study. So when he came to my class, he just slept through the period. Eventually, I gave up because the boy was not paying any attention at all.*"

These concerns are echoed by Zackariaya that "... *some students simply have a blasé attitude toward English. That's too bad. So they ended up skipping classes and not doing homework. So that's certainly a disaster. They wouldn't be able to improve their English skills.*" But I also have some good students, coming to class on time and doing homework. So success and failure are often determined by their behaviors, determination and cooperation. Sometimes it's beyond my control."

It is not surprising that both participants have shared experiences in teaching English. Success or failure is comparable to a tango dance. That is, it takes two to tango. In fact, when failure is detected. Blames might not be placed on the teacher but on students.

### Thailand's English language teaching policy

In order to enable the participants to reflect on English language teaching policy, I asked them to discuss the English language teaching policy. This they responded in different ways. For example, Zackariaya said that "*the policy itself which is focused on the communicative use of English is admirable, but the stark reality is there is a wide gap concerning quality English teaching between schools in big cities and their rural counterparts. Further, English should be mandated across the board, especially in the English class. This means that teacher training must be provided to equip local teachers with both language knowledge and teaching techniques.*" While Zackariaya found the communicative language teaching policy appropriate, Tonnarn cautioned that "*if explicit grammar instruction is neglected, that will make English teaching in this country backward. I believe there must be a proper balance between fluency and accuracy. You see...that has always been my teaching philosophy. Besides, there's been a lot of hype around this idea of not teaching grammar. We must stop that.*"

Also, both of them believed that tutorial schools, especially good ones, will reign supreme because competition is getting more intense. They implied that consumer choice should be a deciding factor whether tutorial schools should continue.

### General remarks about English teaching

The participants, in attempting to encapsulate key points about success and failure of English teaching in Thailand, viewed the following points as crucial. For example, Zackariaya suggested that "*student be made acutely aware of the important role of English. English is a bridge or a stepping stone toward something better in life—more opportunities in terms of careers, advanced education and whatnot.*" Tonnarn also pointed out that authorities concerned with this business

of English teaching “... *must not jump on the bandwagon, pressured by cheap marketing strategies that one can master English without grammar.*” *Bifurcation regarding the role of grammar instruction is to no avail.*”

The participants, in the main, still believe that there is every reason for all concerned to hope for the better if we cooperate and that tutorial schools will still remain in Thai society unless the whole educational structure is revamped (i.e., a policy that scraps the entrance examination).

It should also be noted that one of the prominent themes emerging from the interviews is that a proper balance must be struck between fluency and accuracy. Both participants concurred that there is no point in dichotomizing the issue here. This is consistent with current teaching tenets pivotal on communicative language teaching that learning English means learning to speak it appropriately in a given social context. The adverb “appropriately” is telling in the sense that it refers to both accuracy and fluency in language use without recourse to becoming perfect or native-like users of the language” (Hall, 2019).

Further, the participants also emphasized the importance of quality language input and opportunity to produce English in speech and writing. This is consistent with the input (albeit no mention of comprehensible following the Krashenian perspective) and output hypotheses mentioned above. Although the participants did not delineate details of actual teaching performances, their responses to the interview questions suggested that they situate their lessons that would give students chances to receive feedback in terms of their use of English, especially in one-on-one classes taught by Zackariya. It should be noted also that although both participants focused on grammar instruction, they did so in ways that did not preclude interaction where students had a good chance to use English.

The different ideas shared by the two participants suggested that what they have been doing in their roles as English tutors align with major SLA theories and hypotheses. For example, the participants appeared to emphasize the importance of good quality language input as a point of departure. The input must be contextualized. The participants taught lessons revolving around tasks (Skehan, 2018)—both real world and academic; the former done mostly by Tonnam and the latter by Zackariya. One of the reasons is that Tonnam, in his tutorials, focused more on developing English language skills for everyday use, whereas Zackariya emphasized English language skills preparation for advanced study or standardized tests such as IELTS or TOEFL. Moreover, both put an emphasis on correction of mistakes and/or errors. Again, this lends strong support to the roles of corrective feedback in L2 development.

Moreover, it seems that the participants shuttled between implicit and explicit language instruction depending on the purposes of the lessons involved. As far as interaction is concerned, Tonnam, on the one hand, put a premium on meaningful interaction considerably because of the nature of the courses taught e.g., communicative English where his tutees were given ample opportunity to interact with him and classmates. Zackariya, on the other hand, was primarily concerned with academic English conducted through English as the medium of instruction. Therefore, the interaction transpired more between the tutor and tutees rather than between and among the tutees themselves. In this regard, the findings suggested that interaction is context-specific. That is, the amount of interaction varies between the tutor and the tutees or among the tutees themselves. One other important corollary is that SLA and, ISLA in particular, will benefit from contextualized studies such as this case study. In fact, as Loewen and Sato (2018) argued, “... research has found interaction to be effective in promoting L2 development; however, there

are numerous factors that impact its efficacy” (p. 285). One such factor is the context specificity of interaction in a specific learning situation such as the tutorial school.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain perspectives of two local Thai teachers of English teaching at tutorial schools in Bangkok. The in-depth interviews revealed several practical perspectives of the participants. The findings reported above underscore important considerations as regards the roles of shadow education in general and tutorial schools in particular. For example, the participants realized that shadow education itself is far from being a culprit of education problems Thai society has endured. Quite the contrary, tutorial schools as far as their experiences are concerned enable a number of Thai students to improve their English and as a result their high scores on standardized tests. However, they admitted that shadow education, especially for some tutorial schools, may widen the gap in the access to knowledge because of high expenses involved.

Regarding teaching quality, both participants were strongly convinced that their teaching performances were instrumental in helping many of their students to improve their English skills. They have had a fair share of both success and failure as would be expected in any human endeavors. Both Zackariya and Tonnam have invested both energy and emotion in inspiring their students to learn. They love what they do and they care about their students—key ingredients for instructional success (Cowie, 2011).

According to Zackariya and Tonnam, to truly improve Thai students’ English language skills, all parties concerned—be they parents, students, teachers and policy makers—must combine efforts in making it happen. Shadow education and tutorial schools should be perceived as another learning opportunity. This is because well-administered tutorial schools provide quality teaching and hence quality learning. They also argued against dichotomous thinking prevalent in Thai education.

## **Limitations of the study**

A number of limitations might be identified. First, a specific focus on English-medium instruction (EMI) might provide another research angle relating to private tutorials, results of which could potentially inform existing EMI theories. Second, in terms of data collection, teaching observations might help confirm or refute some of the asserted teaching practices by the participants. Third, views from parents and students could elucidate the participants’ arguments about the roles of shadow education.

## **Implications**

### *Implications for future research*

Given the limitation of this study that consisted of two tutors, future research might center around private supplementary tutoring on a wider scale, taking into consideration both large and small tutorial schools in the country. Also, data should be garnered from other stakeholders such as students, parents and the general public. A large-scale comparative study focusing on private tutoring in other countries in the region might contribute to a better understanding of shadow education in Thailand. In terms of data collection, a mixed-methods approach might yield more fruitful results, shedding light on other subtleties that are inherent in this educational phenomenon.

Furthermore, a study emphasizing a specific SLA construct such as interaction might yield further insights into English private tutoring. The fact that a typical tutoring class consists of a tutor imparting content knowledge to a number of tutees might deprive the latter from learning properly due to its lack of rich peer interaction typical of regular L2 classrooms across contexts through task-based language instruction (Skehan, 2018).

#### *Pedagogical implications*

As far as English instruction is concerned, the results reported in this study, especially those concerning formal instruction, suggest that dichotomous thinking is uncondusive to proper learning. Teaching is first and foremost instilling a sense of possibility among students. What transpires in each teaching performance is as important as the end goal of education. Teachers should be well armed with content knowledge as well as teaching techniques. Private supplementary tutoring, like meticulous teaching, has the potential to help young minds learn. As long as teachers teach with passion and as long as students learn with eagerness, private supplementary tutoring is capable of providing excellent education. After all, good teachers do whatever it takes to help their students learn. It is as simple and straightforward as that.

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## Appendix A

Question items for the focus group interview:

1. What is your general impression of English teaching in Thailand?
2. What do you see as advantages and/or disadvantages of shadow education and tutorial schools?
3. How do you perceive English language teaching policy of our country?
4. What are key factors that may help students to become successful in learning English?
5. Who are better teachers between English native speakers and Thai teachers of English?
6. Do you see the role of tutorial schools as simply profiteering and perhaps destroying the value of true education?
7. Could you share with me any other idea regarding tutorial schools?

## Appendix B

Question items for individual interviews:

1. What is your teaching philosophy?
2. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of your teaching style?
3. It has been reported in Thai mass media that shadow education, especially tutorial schools do more harm than good and thus destroy the value of education. What do you think about this comment?
4. How does your school operate in providing tutorial classes?
5. What challenges have you encountered in tutoring all those lessons to many students?
6. Do you believe Thai society will ever dispense with shadow education and tutorial schools? Why?
7. Could you share with me some incidents that indicate success and failure in your teaching so far?
8. What do you think should be the best English language teaching policy?
9. What do you see as opportunities and/or perils in the current English curriculum that underscores communicative language teaching?
10. Do you have any other idea or concern regarding shadow education and tutorial schools?