



THE FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS' CHOICE IN STUDYING ENGLISH AT PRIVATE TUTORING SCHOOLS: A CASE OF THAI UPPER-SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

*Chris Chan & Preechaya Mongkolhutthi

Language Institute, Thammasat University, 2 Prachan Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

*Corresponding author: chris.chan.tu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the factors leading Thai upper-secondary school students to study English at tutoring school. The students' perceptions of their EFL private tutors and mainstream school teachers are also a focus of this research. Drawing on statistical data from 80 upper-secondary school students, it shows that these students perceive EFL private tutors to be more effective in the provision of examination support, particularly regarding the university admission examination, compared with mainstream school teachers. Overall, these students have more positive attitudes towards their English tutors than their mainstream school teachers. They agree that tutors have higher English language proficiency and can make them understand the lesson better than their school teachers. The characteristic of the tutors and teaching techniques is considered a significant factor leading students to study English at tutoring schools, particularly the teaching techniques that allow them to do better on university examinations. These findings not only highlight the impact of private tutoring schools on language education systems, but also caution Thai educational policy makers and practitioners to further explore the pressure of the university admission examination on upper-secondary school students in the country.

Keywords: Examination support, English language proficiency, private tutoring schools, teaching technique, Thailand.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The space available in Thai public universities is limited. The most recent official statistic (Research Center, 2015) indicates that in 2013, there were only 80,130 seats, while the number of student applicants was 113,410 people. The competitive ratio increased in 2012, when the number of student applicants was at 122,169 while the number of available seats was only 64,000 (Research Center, 2015). These statistics reflect an opportunity for the tutorial industry. Many parents, not only in Thailand, believe if they send their children to tutoring school, their children will have a greater chance to get into a famous university. Private tutoring is defined as fee-based tutoring for students outside mainstream school hours as an extra class (Nath, 2006). Private tutoring usually starts after the regular classes, or held during weekends, or school breaks. The instructors are sometimes called "tutors" and the students are sometimes

called “tutees”. From 2012 to 2015, the number of tutoring schools in Thailand, and the number of students that studied at tutoring schools, rose. In addition to that, amongst the subjects that Thai upper-secondary school students studied at tutoring school, English is the most popular (Napompech, 2011).

Accordingly, the researcher aims to explore the reasons behind this phenomenon. In particular, the researcher investigated the factors leading Thai students to study English as a foreign language (EFL) at private tutoring schools. In the Thai context, private tutoring usually begins after the regular classes, or is held during weekends, or during school breaks. The instructors are called “tutors”. This study also places emphasis on the students’ expectations of their English teachers at school and at the private tutoring school (tutors). Other factors pushing these students to go to tutoring school were also in the researcher’s consideration. For instance, the researcher focused on the influences of parents, pressure from the university entrance examination, students’ intention to raise their grades at school, and preferences and learning styles. In particular, at the time of the study, the participants, 80 Thai upper-secondary school students, were learning English through both options: private tutoring classes and the mainstream school. In order to systematically investigate this situation, the researcher set three main research questions as follows:

1. What factors influence a group of Thai upper-secondary school students’ decisions to study English at tutoring schools?
2. What are their expectations of English private tutors at the tutoring school?
3. What are their expectations of English teachers in the mainstream schools?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Private tutoring situation in the Asian context and Thailand

Tutoring schools are pervasive amongst Asian students. There are a great number of tutoring schools in many countries in Asia, especially in the eastern and southern region (e.g., Japan, Taiwan, China, South Korea, Thailand). In these countries, students see tutoring school as a way to help them catch up with the class and not fall far behind other students or get a bad grade at school, while many students and their parents believe that study at a tutoring school will help them be able to get into a famous or top university (Jheng, 2015). Although the tutoring schools’ tuition fees are quite high, most parents are willing to pay for it with the strong belief that it will help their child to have a competitive advantage. Some researchers have given their reasons for this – that students want a shortcut to learning. However, many students get more pressure, and have less time for doing other things, because of the tutoring (Manzo, 2002).

2.2 Private tutoring and language education

Language tutoring schools in Asia are largely for studying the English language, as it is a tool for international communication. In the Asian context, students also study English at tutoring schools with the hope of getting a good score on a national standard test and their school exams. Most of them also aim to get a good score on the tests required for further study in western countries, such as the TOEFL and IELTS. Many countries in Asia pay a great deal of attention to English tutoring school study. A large number of Japanese students study English at tutoring schools to get a good score on the university entrance examination, and learn languages (Lowe, 2015). The significance of English tutoring schools for education can also be seen in the Taiwan

context. Chung (2013) found that Taiwan students play a passive role in learning English at tutoring schools. They come to the tutoring school with the expectation that their tutors will be the center of learning and the tutors have to summarize important lessons, prepare notes, and provide extra practice. Specifically, the students just expect to be there and listen to what the tutors say.

Similar situations can be found in the Thai context. In Thailand, tutoring school study is popular at all levels, especially with high school students. This significance of the tutoring school in the Thai context can be clearly seen by the growth in market size and market share of tutoring schools in Thailand (Figure 1 and Table 1).

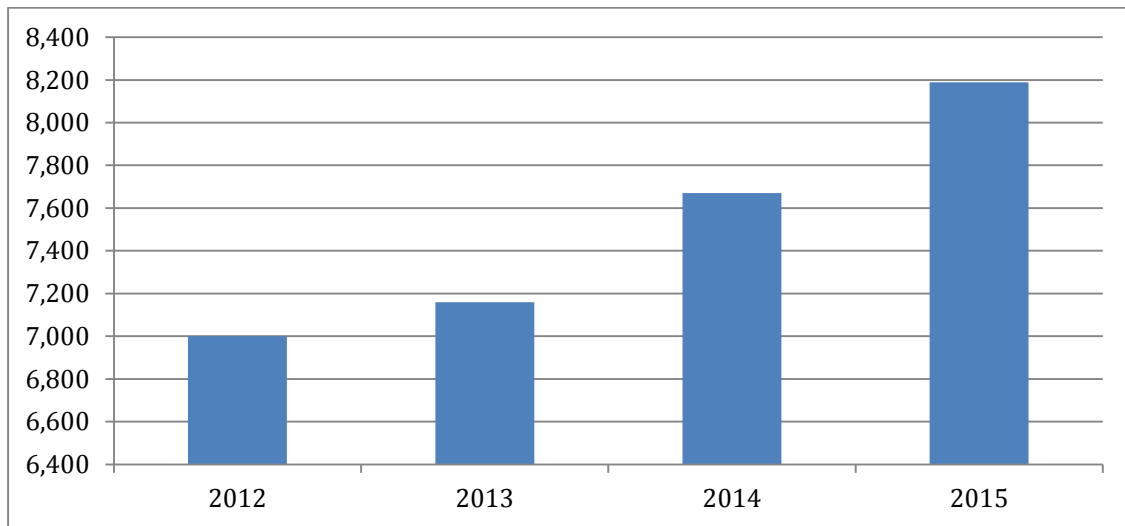


Figure 1: The growth rate of tutoring schools in Thailand, million baht (Research Center, 2015)

As shown in Figure 1, the growth rate of tutoring schools in Thailand grew from 2012-2015. In 2013, the market size was 7,160 million baht, which grew by approximately 2.30% from 2012. In 2014, the market size was 7,670 million baht, which grew by approximately 7.10% from 2013. In 2015, the market size was 8,189 million baht, which grew by approximately 6.80% from 2014. It is estimated that the market was still growing at around 5-8% in 2016 (Research Center, 2015).

In Table 1, we can see that in 2013, there were 2,342 tutoring schools in Thailand—565 schools in Bangkok and 1,777 schools in the region. The number rose from 2,005 in 2012, which was a 16.8% growth. The number of students studying at tutoring school was 535,695 in 2013.

Table 1: The Number of Tutoring Schools and Number of Students Studying at Tutoring Schools Note (Research Center, 2015)

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
The number of tutoring schools	1,078	1,072	1,423	1,744	1,924	2,005	2,342
The number of students studying at tutoring schools	353,060	291,817	403,846	571,887	572,131	435,881	535,695

Although the tutoring schools' tuition fees tended to rise by 20%, the tutoring market has still continued to grow. This is because both parents and students pay attention to the ability to

compete with other students to get into famous public universities. There are several other factors, which make the students choose tutoring schools, such as to increase understanding of their lessons, engaging in efficient thinking methods and special techniques, developing confidence in exam preparation, and getting clear guidance for examinations (Napompech, 2011).

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

The researcher used quantitative method to collect data in order to avoid the inaccurate results caused by the researcher's bias, which may occur during the data collection and the data analysis period. It took approximately four months to develop the questionnaire and to approach nearly 100 upper-secondary school students from various schools to participate in the study.

3.1 Instrument

A questionnaire was employed in this study because the researcher aimed to reach a large number of students. Approximately 100 students were approached and 80 of them were willing to participate. The constructed questionnaire items concerned the factors influencing Thai upper-secondary school students to choose to study English at tutoring schools, focusing on the students' expectations of their instructors – the EFL tutors and EFL school teachers. Other factors such as the quality of teaching, pressure from university admission, the location of the tutoring school, mainstream school policy, and the people assisting with the decision making were also asked in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was constructed in the Thai language in order to make sure that the participant understood the questions and to avoid any problems that may occur due to language barrier. The questionnaire consisted of two parts – the first part concerned the background information of the students: sex, school grade, age, English grade, program of study, school area, and school type. The second part was divided into three sections leading to answers to the three research questions. The first section was about the factors influencing the participants in choosing to study English at a tutoring school. The second section was about the students' perceptions of their EFL tutors, and the last section was about the students' perceptions of their EFL school teachers. The questionnaire was adapted from Napompech's (2011). Thirty Thai upper-secondary school students were asked to complete a pilot questionnaire revealing their reasons for and expectations of English tutoring school study. All of the data from the pilot were analyzed via SPSS to find Cronbach's alpha coefficient and to see if the questionnaire was reliable (> 0.7); the result was 0.887.

3.2 Sample

The respondents of this study was 100 upper-secondary school students taking an English torturing class at a particular private tutoring school in Bangkok. Eighty of them were chosen using the convenience sampling method and the participants' willingness. In this type of sampling, no criteria are identified prior to the selection of subjects. All the subjects are invited to fill in the questionnaire.

These participants were upper-secondary school students that were studying in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades in both public and private schools and were from different schools

in Bangkok. They also had different levels of English skill based on the English grades from their latest semester (4 = A, 3.5 = B+, 3 = B, 2.5 = C+, 2 = C, 1.5 = D+, 1 = D.) The participants were taking an EFL private tutoring course in individual sessions, in small groups (1-4 students), and medium-size (5-10 students) and large groups (more than 11 students).

3.3 Data Analysis

Eighty completed questionnaires were analyzed through descriptive statistics using the SPSS software package. The data from the questionnaire were calculated in order to find the frequencies of the information – mean, mode, and standard deviation. There were five levels of agreement in the questionnaire:

- 5 = Strongly Agree
- 4 = Agree
- 3 = Unsure
- 2 = Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

After getting the statistical results from the SPSS, a five-point Likert scale was used as the criteria for analyzing the mean of each questionnaire item. There were five ranges of the scale with the 0.8 class interval being the criteria – very low, low, medium, high, and very high. The criteria ranges were as follows:

- 4.21-5.00 Very high level of agreement
- 3.41-4.20 High level of agreement
- 2.61-3.40 Medium level of agreement
- 1.81-2.60 Low level of agreement
- 1.00-1.80 Very low level of agreement

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the first research question (factors influencing Thai upper-secondary school students' decisions to study English at tutoring schools), most of the factors influencing the students' choice were related to university admission (see Table 2). The factors that were very highly influential on the students' decisions were preparation for university admission examinations, improving grades, gaining knowledge that is necessary for daily life, tackling exams, and as a preparation before moving to a higher grade at their regular school.

Table 2: Factors Influencing Thai Upper-Secondary School Students' Decisions to Study English at Tutoring Schools: Very High Level of Agreement

	Questionnaire Items	Mean	SD	Mode
2	You decided to study English at tutoring school to prepare yourself for the university admission examination.	4.61	0.703	5
4	You study English at tutoring school to get better grades in English.	4.33	1.028	5
14	You study English at a tutoring school to get more knowledge of English that is necessary for daily life.	4.28	1.113	5
15	You study English at a tutoring school to know how to analyze an exam and to do the exam more quickly.	4.33	0.808	5
17	You study English at a tutoring school to prepare yourself before moving to a higher grade at school.	4.25	0.879	5

Other factors affecting the students' decision are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Factors Influencing a Group of Thai Upper-Secondary School Students' Decisions to Study English at Tutoring Schools: High Level of Agreement

	Questionnaire Items	Mean	SD	Mode
11	You study English at a tutoring school to focus on some specific lessons for a specific test, such as the TOEFL, IELTS, TU-GET and CU-TEP.	4.09	0.983	5
28	You study English at a tutoring school because you can choose the size of the class that suits you, such as individual class or small classes, and you can also choose to study in an online class in order to choose a convenient time for your class.	3.80	0.999	4
1	You decided to study English at a tutoring school because the mainstream class duration is not enough to get all of the important content.	3.74	0.924	4
4	You study English at a tutoring school because the difficulty level of an exam is higher than the content that the teacher teaches you in class.	3.68	1.016	4

Furthermore, the factors that had a lower influence on the students' decision to study English at a tutoring school were being admired by friends or society and the positive image of joining a tutoring school; being cool and fashionable. It is noticeable that these factors are all socially-related. This means that the student's decision is more driven by their concerns regarding university admission and the quality of the lesson rather than the influence of friends or parents (see Table 4).

Table 4: Factors Influencing Thai Upper-Secondary School Students' Decisions to Study English at Tutoring Schools: Low Level of Agreement

	Questionnaire Items	Mean	SD	Mode
23	You study English at a tutoring school because it is cool and fashionable.	2.44	1.311	1
19	You study English at a tutoring school because your friends are studying there.	2.30	1.354	1
24	You study English at a tutoring school because you want to be admired by friends and society.	2.29	1.314	1

Regarding the second and third research questions (students' expectations of their English private tutors and school teachers), the statistical data suggested that these sample students were more satisfied with their English tutors than their school teachers (see Table 5).

Table 5: Students' Expectations of Their Tutors and School Teachers: Very High Level of Agreement

	Questionnaire Items	Mean	SD	Mode
31	The English tutor is friendly and kind, so you can ask him/her about the lesson without fear.	4.31	0.880	5
29	The English tutor can make you understand the lesson very well.	4.29	0.830	5
30	The English tutor has good knowledge of English, so he/she can teach you a sophisticated lesson.	4.23	0.795	4
34	The English tutor creates activities that include you as part of the class.	4.18	0.823	5
33	The English tutor has several techniques to make the class fun.	4.11	1.031	5
35	The English tutor can take care of the whole class thoroughly.	4.01	0.893	4
32	The English tutor inspires you.	3.98	0.993	4

When comparing the students' perceptions of their EFL tutors and teachers, it was found that the students wanted their instructors to have competency in the content of the lesson and to be able to convey it well to them. They wanted their instructors to have teaching techniques and activities that make the class fun, and they wanted kind and friendly instructors to create a good learning environment, which would allow them to feel free to ask questions. They also wanted the instructor to inspire them and to take care of them thoroughly. These characteristics of the desirable instructors are some of the reasons behind the rising trend of joining tutoring schools.

The major finding of this study is the very high influence of students' concern about university admission examinations, which leads them to go to a tutoring school. It is consistent with the Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Lester, 2013) in that the students feel esteemed and confident when they can get into the university, especially the ideal university. The students' high concern about the university admission examinations was not only evidenced in the Thai context. Considering previous studies in the field (e.g. Nath, 2006; Manzo, 2002; Manzoor, 2013; O'Donnell, 2003 as cited in Lowe, 2015; Chung, 2013), upper-secondary school students in many other Asian countries share a similar motivation. This phenomenon has spread to many countries, especially in parts of Asia, such as China, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and India. For example, 342 of 365 Taiwanese final-year senior high school students (93.70%) revealed that they decided to attend tutoring schools with the hope to get into an ideal university (Chung, 2013). On top of that, more than 86% of them also indicated that their decision was more driven by concerns regarding university admission and the quality of the lessons rather than influence of friends or parents. In addition to the university entrance examination, these Asian students' choice of private tutoring was also directly affected by their concerns about school grades and test-taking skills. This comparable situation was also clearly evidenced in Bangladesh (Manzoor, 2013). Similarly to Thai students, more than 80% of Bangla primary school students stated that they were more pleased with the classess conducted by the tutor than their school English teacher because of the teaching techniques. Bray, Hallak, and Caillods (1999) suggested that the students will crave more help from a tutoring school when there is "a transition from one stage to another but in which major differences exist in the prestige of institutions and courses to which students can proceed" (p. 44).

5.0 CONCLUSION

It is clear that this specific group of Thai secondary school students was under a lot of pressure because of the examination for university admission. This pressure had clearly driven them to invest their time and energy, including their parents' money, in private tutors. Considering the major finding of this study and those evidenced in other Asian contexts, this specific study demands the attention of Thai educational policy makers and other related stakeholders regarding two main issues: the pressure of the examination on students and social inequality. The pressure from examinations normally leads to longer hours of study in both private tutoring and mainstream schools, which eventually leads to students' physical and psychological exhaustion. Wijetunge (1994) highlighted the negative consequences on students' physical and psychological wellbeing in the following passage:

Immediately after school the child is rushed to tuition class after a hasty snack. At tuition, his skills and abilities are relentlessly pitted against those of his age mates, for competition is the name of the game and the prowess of the tutor rests on the results he produces. The age-appropriate developmental tasks such as building wholesome attitudes towards oneself, learning to get along with peers, developing conscience, morality and a scale of values stand a very poor chance in this climate of cruel competition (p. 16).

In addition to students' physical exhaustion, such extreme pressure from the examination has been found to be related to a number of cases regarding student depression and eventually suicides in many Asian countries such as Japan, Hong Kong, China, Indonesia, and Taiwan (e.g., Ho, Chui, & Borschel, 2017; Liem et al., 2015; Wei & Chen, 2014). Another point of concern regarding the major finding is the inequality of school children in Thailand. It is a fact that these private tutoring schools are more available to those that are financially ready. Accordingly, the students from rich families can obtain greater amounts and a superior quality of tutoring than those that are financially limited. This inequality could possibly lead the financially disadvantaged groups of students becoming frustrated with their economic status and possibly jealous of those with access to private tutoring. This threat is clearly noticeable in Asian and other countries where English is a foreign language (Bray, Hallak, & Caillods, 1999).

This study has shown that this specific group of Thai upper-secondary school students had more positive attitude towards their English tutors than their school teachers mainly because they believed that the tutors would help them do well on the university admission examination. This set of findings can help Thai education policy-makers and related stakeholders realize the reasons behind the widespread of tutoring schools. Since attending EFL private tutoring schools has far-reaching impacts on students' physical and physiological wellbeing, as well as social equality, the researcher would like to highlight that the situation deserves much greater attention by the policy makers and educational researchers in Thailand than it has currently received.

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