

# Learning English in the shadows: Taiwanese students' reflections on their English private tutoring learning experiences

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**ABSTRACT:** Private tutoring has received increasing research attention as a global phenomenon, but awareness of its impact on students' language learning and pedagogical discussions is lacking. This study investigated 35 Taiwanese learners' English private tutoring (EPT) experiences based on their reflections on language learning after finishing their secondary education. A background questionnaire and one-on-one semi-structured interviews were administered to collect participants' data. The present study found that the participants had complex, inconsistent, and contradictory attitudes toward EPT. Although the interviews revealed the students' needs that could be met by private tutoring institutions, the students' reflections on EPT indicated that students were negatively affected in terms of language learning, educational experience, pressure, and values. Moreover, EPT was not considered an effective way to learn to use authentic English to communicate because of its overemphasis on examination skills. The effects of the contextual realities of learning for the purposes of assessment and achievement in language proficiency scores were explored to determine whether these realities undermined the aim of education. This study sheds light on the impact of private tutoring as it has become more than a form of shadow education and has emerged into the mainstream.

**Keywords:** shadow education, English private tutoring, experiences, reflection

## **Aprendiendo inglés en educación no reglada: las reflexiones de estudiantes taiwaneses sobre sus experiencias de aprendizaje con tutores particulares**

**RESUMEN:** Las clases particulares cada vez reciben mayor atención por los investigadores como fenómeno global, pero sigue faltando concienciación en lo que a su impacto en el aprendizaje de idiomas se refiere, así como en las discusiones pedagógicas. Este estudio investigó las experiencias de 35 estudiantes taiwaneses con tutores particulares de inglés (EPT), basándose en sus reflexiones sobre el aprendizaje del idioma tras acabar la educación secundaria. Se les proporcionó un cuestionario sobre su formación y se llevó a cabo una entrevista semiestructurada con cada uno de ellos para obtener los datos de los participantes. El presente estudio concluyó que los participantes presentaban actitudes complejas, inconsistentes y contradictorias frente al EPT. Aunque las entrevistas demostraron que las necesidades de los estudiantes podrían verse satisfechas por las instituciones privadas de clases particulares de inglés, las reflexiones de los estudiantes sobre el EPT concluyeron que los estudiantes se vieron afectados negativamente a efectos de aprendizaje del idioma, experiencia educativa, presión y valores. Además, el EPT no fue considerado por ellos como una forma efectiva de aprender utilizando inglés auténtico para comunicarse, dado su excesivo

énfasis en las habilidades para resolver el examen. Se exploraron los efectos de las realidades contextuales del aprendizaje a propósitos de la evaluación y el logro del dominio en el idioma para determinar si estas realidades perjudican o no el objetivo de la educación. Este estudio arrojó algo de luz sobre el impacto de la enseñanza de tutores particulares, dado que se ha convertido en algo más que en una forma de educación no reglada y ha encontrado su hueco en la educación.

**Palabras claves:** educación no reglada, clases particulares de inglés, experiencias, reflexión

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Private tutoring, also known as “shadow education”, has gained significant attention from both researchers and policymakers because it “demands considerable expenditure, consumes a great deal of the time of children and their families, provides extensive employment, and has a backwash on the operation of regular schooling” (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2014, p. 590). According to Stevenson and Baker (1992), the metaphor of “shadow education” is used because private tutoring duplicates and changes its shape according to the mainstream schooling.

In many contexts, English has become one of the major subjects offered by profit-oriented language institutes or private tutors, and students undertake English private tutoring (EPT) as one of the most important activities outside school with the intention of improving their English achievement in mainstream education and on high-stakes examinations (Bray, 2011). However, little research has been conducted about learners’ perceptions of and reflections on the needs that are not met by schools but can be met by private institutions. This dimension is crucial to investigate because perceptions drive students’ behavior, students’ learning is significantly influenced by participation in private tutoring (Yung, 2020), and students’ reflections on what does and does not work could be useful for improving teaching effectiveness (Ma, 2012). Because EPT has a major influence on students’ experiences, attitudes, and motivations in the English learning process (Hamid et al., 2009), it is important for TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) practitioners and researchers to understand and make precise statements regarding EPT. If we do not take learners’ perceptions and reflections into consideration, “we would only see a partial picture of learners’ real English-learning experience and proficiency” (Lee, 2010, p. 70), and we would fail to gain insights into language learning and teaching in settings beyond the classroom, which would provide alternative perspectives on social and cognitive processes (Chapelle & Sauro, 2017).

To this end, the present study explores Taiwanese learners’ reflections on their EPT learning experiences during their secondary school education in Taiwan. This paper first reviews the EPT studies to contextualize the discussion in terms of the sociocultural conditions in Taiwan. To fully understand learners’ experiences in language acquisition, we should take sociocultural contexts into consideration because culture is the primary determining factor in knowledge construction and because learning takes place via socially meaningful activities (Vygotsky, 1980). Then, the paper explains the research method used to collect participants’ data and to analyze participants’ reflections based on their perceptions.

## 2. LITERATURE ON EPT

According to Hamid et al. (2009), EPT is “of substantial interest to TESOL, applied linguistics, and language education” (p. 283); however, other studies do not exclusively focus on this issue. Hamid et al. investigated private tutoring in English for secondary school students in a disadvantaged rural area of Bangladesh. The study focused on student attitudes and motivations and established an EPT profile in connection with the school system, learning achievement, and parent and student expectations. The researchers selected 228 10<sup>th</sup>-grade students to answer a survey questionnaire and take an English proficiency test, and 14 students participated in one-to-one interviews at the students' homes. The results showed that students had clear, structured insights into EPT and regarded EPT as a crucial factor for learning achievement due to the unsatisfactory English teaching they received in their formal education system. In another study conducted by Lee (2010), the researcher examined students' preuniversity English educational backgrounds with tutors or other private supplementary institutions in Korea. A questionnaire and in-depth interviews were administered to 43 freshman students, seven of whom were selected to explore personal language learning. The findings revealed that students who had opportunities to receive private tutoring performed better in English than those who had been exposed only to mainstream schooling. Coniam (2014) investigated the perceptions of 17 public-examination retakers after attending a fee-based private tutorial institution in Hong Kong for a whole academic year. The results showed that the respondents had positive views of tutorial institutions, but overall, students desired to study at state-sponsored schools for a more well-rounded educational approach. Another recent study on EPT was carried out by Huang (2017), who compared English learning motivation between adolescent students who had received private tutoring and those who had not in Taiwan. A sample of 1,689 public secondary school students participated in a questionnaire survey. The study showed that students with private tutoring demonstrated stronger intentions and learning behaviors to learn English than those with only mainstream education.

Although the above studies explored students' attitudes, motivations, and academic improvement regarding EPT, they paid little attention to students' critical reflections on their perceptions of EPT. Such a focus is pivotal because, in the view of students, “effective teaching is both aiding their learning but also provoking further interest in their subjects and encouraging them to engage in independent learning activities” (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 40). Because each regression model accounted only for a small percentage of variability in Hamid et al.'s (2009) study, the validity of the results showing a correlation between EPT and academic achievement was limited. Additionally, the participants had not completed secondary education, so their reflections based on their perceptions might have limited the scope of application. Although Lee (2010) surveyed preuniversity students' exposure to extracurricular English instruction, he regarded the research as “rather explorative” (p. 72) because students' English learning backgrounds were his major focus rather than their perceptions of EPT. Coniam (2014) reported a case study of public examination retakers' perceptions of private tutorial schools, but he acknowledged that his study yielded a “rather minimal” (p. 387) amount of information because the data were collected from students who had not completed their secondary education and only one private tutoring teacher. Finally,

Huang (2017) investigated how English learning motivation differed between adolescent learners receiving and not receiving tutoring. Her study highlighted the importance of diverse learning experiences in L2 motivation research, but it lacked examination of learners' critical reflections on their English-learning experiences. Most of these studies revealed that learners' test scores did have an impact on the effectiveness of EPT, but they did not specifically explore learners' perceptions of and reflections on the effectiveness of EPT in terms of which needs had been met by their tutoring institutions that had not been met by their schools. Notably, improvements in test scores cannot be completely reduced to EPT, as mainstream English schooling coexisted with EPT in all of these studies.

The remaining research in this area has suggested that "the links between tutoring and academic achievement are not robust" (Zhan et al., 2013, p. 496) and that "the evaluation criteria for effective tutoring should fit the motivations of the consumers" (p. 496). Therefore, it can be concluded that learners' experiences of and reflections on EPT play an important role in evaluating the effectiveness of private tutoring.

The current study focuses on EPT as one of the most popular types of private tutoring and as a substantial area of language education.

The researcher

- (a) discusses the perceptions of learners who have finished secondary education;
- (b) builds on critical reflections on the EPT learning experience; and
- (c) investigates the needs that are met by tutoring institutions that are not met by schools.

To achieve these objectives, this study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of EPT in secondary education?
2. What are students' reflections on the effectiveness of EPT?

### 3. THE CONTEXT

Since the early 21st century, Taiwan has adopted a language policy of multilingualism. English has been learned as a second language and has been the only compulsory foreign language subject from elementary school to university since 2001 (Chang, 2019). Unlike other foreign languages in Taiwan, "English enjoys a unique status and prestige" (Oladejo, 2006, p. 149). To further promote the learning and use of English in Taiwan, the Taiwanese government has also initiated several measures to "create a bilingual environment in public institutions and in the community at large," to "make English the second official language of the country" (Oladejo, 2006, p.149), to "maintain the island's competitive edge," and to "connect Taiwan with the world" (Ko & Yeh, 2002). Focusing on "proficiency in international English" (Chen, 2010, p.90) and "communicative competence" (Chang, 2008), the new English language policy was designed to promote the use of English in all walks of life. Basic English conversation classes are offered to develop the speaking ability of Taiwanese people and help them engage in English, especially in their work domains.

As a result, most Taiwanese parents have been so in favor of their children's early exposure to English that they have enrolled them in English classes much earlier than the timeline suggested by the government policy (Chang, 2008). This phenomenon has led to

the popularity of private tutoring. According to a survey conducted by Liu (2012), 72.9% of seventh-grade Taiwanese students (12 to 13 years old) attended private tutoring. English was the most frequently studied subject at private tutoring institutions. In short, the rapid expansion of secondary education in the past few years has not lessened the popularity of private tutoring in Taiwan. In fact, not only are more parents willing to invest in private tutoring but more students also devote extra time and effort into learning after regular classes with the aim of improving future academic performance (Chang, 2019).

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

To explore students' perceptions of EPT and their reflections on their EPT experiences, this study adopted a qualitative and contextualized approach, which is less reliant on survey methods and more reliant on the analysis of the construction of learners' language-learning perceptions and beliefs thorough context than through other methods (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). That is, sociocultural contexts may influence learner beliefs in behaviors, attitudes, motivations, and expectations through various teaching and learning methods. Taking sociocultural contexts into account, the current research sought to investigate learners' language-learning perceptions and their reflections on their EPT experiences via narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is both a phenomenon and a research method that recognizes that "people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). This type of inquiry is achieved through different forms of data collection, such as interviews. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) regard education as experience and further emphasize the narrative aspect of experience. They state that because "narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience, educational experience should be studied narratively" (pp. 18-19). In the field of TESOL, Bell (2002) argues that narrative allows language educators and researchers to gain "explicit analysis and reflection" (p. 208), to "present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness" (p. 209) and to understand their students in the language-learning process through their own experience. Therefore, in this study, narrative inquiry was selected to elicit and reflect upon learners' EPT experiences through individual semistructured interviews. Students were administered a background questionnaire to survey their education backgrounds and EPT experiences.

##### 4.1 Participants

The participants in the study included 100 Taiwanese first-year undergraduates (18-19 years old). The participants were invited to complete the survey questionnaire (see Appendix A). The survey questionnaire was used to collect participants' demographic data and their EPT experiences, course schedules, durations, frequency, costs and GSAET<sup>1</sup> results. Thirty-five subjects who became first-year undergraduates in September 2018 were invited to participate in interviews because their perceptions of EPT would be fresh and appropriate to inform their reflections on their EPT learning experience, their needs for EPT that had not

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<sup>1</sup> General Scholastic Ability English Test (GSAET) is a nationwide test for college admission in Taiwan.

been met in schools and the effectiveness of EPT. All the participants had received formal schooling and grown up in Taiwan. They had studied English for approximately 12 years under the Taiwanese education system before entering university. They were all first-year undergraduates with different academic majors studying in national and private universities. According to the GSAET results on the questionnaire, they had different English proficiency levels, ranging from intermediate to advanced.

#### **4.2 Student interviews**

The interviews were semistructured and were conducted individually and face-to-face. They lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes and were video recorded and transcribed. To ensure the consistency of answers, the interviews were guided by structured questions that stemmed from the participants' responses to the survey questionnaire. Next, more open-ended questions were asked on certain topics (e.g., students' reasons for seeking EPT, students' perceptions of EPT, comparisons of teachers and tutors, students' self-assessed academic achievement, and students' reflections on the language-learning process). The interviews were conducted in Chinese and then translated into English and transcribed for analysis.

#### **4.3 Data analysis**

The questionnaire data provided an overview of participants' EPT experiences and the basis for analyzing the in-depth interviews. The qualitative data were coded, which led to the identification of the issues emerging from the interviews and further developed the arguments to respond to the research questions (Holliday, 2010). The interview data were coded as follows. First, each participant's period of EPT experiences was sorted in chronological order and was identified through the key words for the different thematic categories based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1943). Second, each participant's reflections were sorted into thematic nodes, such as language-learning process, educational experience, pressure, and values. Third, participants' experiences of and reflections on EPT were compared multiple times to reassess the data corresponding to the themes. To strengthen the reliability of students' narrative data, all the coding transcripts and excerpts pertaining to the themes were examined multiple times by three experienced researchers in education.

Throughout the process of co-constructing the English-learning experiences with participants, a research diary was kept by the researcher to record thoughts, reflections, and observations during/after interviews so that the analysis could begin with a process of "immersion" in the data and so the researcher could "become intimately familiar" with the dataset's content and "notice" details pertaining to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 204). The analytic framework was based on the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry, including temporality, sociality, and place, identified by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Temporality referred to the different stages of schooling in which the students existed. Sociality described the students' interactions with their peers, teachers and tutors. Place referred to the students' requirement to attend formal schooling or private institutions for learning. All three dimensions came into play in settings in and out of classroom.

## 5. STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR NEEDS REGARDING EPT

This section addresses the participants' perceptions and reflections on the effectiveness of EPT. Among other things, the participants reflected on what needs were met by tutoring institutions that had not been met by their schools. They also reflected on the needs that were created by the tutoring institutions for them to pursue.

To structure the analysis, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1943) was adapted. This analysis contrasted the repulsion of the tutored students who considered their schools to be inadequate with the attraction generated by the strategies of the tutoring institutions.

### 5.1 Basic needs in language learning

We adapted physiological needs such as breathing and hunger in Maslow's hierarchy theory to the basic needs in language learning through private tutoring. Students had needs regarding quality and learning approaches, arguing that their school teachers could not fully meet these needs. This pattern may be identified as repulsion. Some students remarked that their school lessons lacked relevance to examinations, teacher feedback on English writing, and comprehensive coverage of the curriculum. Participants T10, T16, and T28 said their teachers merely translated textbook content from English to Chinese and asked them to look up words in a dictionary for entire lessons, which they felt was meaningless and a waste of time.

Participant T28 criticized her teacher as not doing enough to prepare the students for exams, as seen in the following excerpt.

T28: I think teachers focus too much on content knowledge. They don't have time to cover the entire syllabus, let alone teach us critical thinking and writing skills, but tutors teach organization and content in English writing more. They teach you how to organize writing and how to think, but teachers always told us to just translate our intended meaning from Chinese to English.

Interviewer: There seems to be quite a difference between school and tutoring institutions. Which one do you prefer?

T28: It is hard to judge which one is better, but I think if school could focus on exam skills more, then I wouldn't need to spend money on tutoring. This is the best way.

The problem of discipline was raised by T15. In this excerpt, he discussed his feelings of being unable to concentrate in school.

T15: My class is always noisy. I know my teacher has tried a lot to teach us, but she spends too much time on disciplinary issues. She has to teach very quickly to catch up with the lesson. Sometimes, we don't have break time for the next class. But in the tutoring class, we have the same goal, and we are motivated.

A different perspective was presented by T5. She felt that her school lessons were too easy and therefore put her at a disadvantage for her General Scholastic Ability English Test (the GSAET is a nationwide test for college admission in Taiwan).

T5: I feel the school lessons are too easy for me. The teacher doesn't provide us with different materials to study, and he only teaches some easy vocabulary. He was too busy with so many students, and he couldn't pay full attention to me. But tutors taught more difficult vocabulary and grammar that I never saw with my teacher. And if I have questions, tutors can answer me immediately or after class, because we only have nine people. They can take care of us. This won't happen in school. And if you know more complicated grammar, when it shows up on the GSAET, you will know how to answer it, or you can use it in your writing. My tutor said it is good to use different complicated grammar patterns in your writing so you can get higher scores than with normal grammar patterns.

These critical comments reflect students' repulsion from schools. Although T5's teacher could have provided more complicated grammar, the teacher did not do so because of the tight schedules and different English levels of students in his classroom, leading him to teach only the basic required vocabulary and grammar in the textbook without providing instruction on additional relevant vocabulary or grammar.

From the attraction perspective, tutors taught more complicated grammar and vocabulary, summarizing the notes and preparing other materials. They also provided a learning environment in which all students had the same goal and were thus more motivated. Students paid additional fees to attend tutoring, while mainstream school was free of charge, motivating them even more. Furthermore, students were placed within tutoring classes according to their English abilities, allowing them to learn at the same level as their peers, which was significantly different from regular schools.

## 5.2 Fulfilling sense of security needs

The introduction of multiple new entrance programs as alternative methods to enter universities has caused anxiety among students and parents, prompting them to learn exam skills and systems (Liu, 2012). Tutoring institutions have thus stepped in to address students and parents' concerns, further expanding their market.

Several interviewees were concerned about whether the criteria for English writing were objective, given that all English exam papers were graded by in-school teachers. Participants T2 and T10 were confused about how to compose English papers, and others were worried about the fairness of the criteria. This lack of trust and confidence caused students to seek clearer and more concrete guidelines.

Participants T13 and T16 said they did not believe their teachers could mark their papers objectively. They believed that their teachers had inadequate knowledge of the writing criteria. For example, T13 noted the following:

T13: Actually, my teacher only gave us marks without feedback or comments on our writing. I don't know why I should learn English writing from her.

Interviewer: Have you ever asked your teacher to give you more specific feedback on your writing?

T13: No way, we know her personality. If you ask for more, she will feel impatient, saying, "Do you know how many students I have to mark?" Because one of my classmates did that before, the teacher gave her lower marks than we ever imagined, even though she wrote it very well. You know, in English writing, it doesn't look like multiple choice, which has a specific answer.

T16 also raised concerns about grading criteria and insufficient feedback from teachers.

T16: My teacher only commented "unclear," but he didn't say which part was not clear. Sometimes, I think he focuses too much on grammar without paying attention to organization and content. For example, the writing topic was on the advantages of learning English. After writing the advantages, he said we should also write the disadvantages of not learning English, but the topic was advantages, not disadvantages. It was very confusing and contradictory.

The tutors presented themselves as official exam markers who could fill in the gaps of teachers' inexperience and uncertainties. Tutors said their friends were GSAET graders and knew the criteria for English writing; however, in reality, they could not know because the criteria would not be released until after the exam was over. Participants T21 and T28 indicated that after their tutors taught a lesson on the exam, they would provide students with additional resources to study to alleviate any uncertainty they had. The resources supposedly contained information on which grammar questions, vocabulary questions, and writing topics had appeared in each year's GSAET exam and which would reappear on that year's exam.

Tutors further promoted a sense of security via in-house mock examinations. They assured students that they had graded exam papers in a variety of different schools, so they had much more experience than teachers, who saw only a small portion of student papers. The students remarked that in-house mock examinations could better assess their abilities because they were compared with not only intramural students but also interscholastic examination candidates.

### 5.3 Social needs

The students stated that teachers were distant, while they received more attention from tutors through social media. Tutors created Facebook groups for students to discuss their questions, and students were able to obtain immediate responses via Line and even share life moments with tutors through Instagram. The students noted that tutors would arrive early and stay late for questions, which was an attraction of tutoring institutions.

T21: He cares about our performance and asks us to ask him questions no matter when. He is really close to students.... If you have questions, he will be very patient to explain again and again. He will stay after class until 10 p.m. every day if he doesn't have classes. If you can't meet him in person, you can still Line him, very convenient. Also, we have a Facebook group. We can post our questions first. If other students know the answer, they can answer it, and the tutor will respond to it later.

Another social dimension was found concerning peer support. The students studied in tutoring classes with other students, and to some extent, scaffolding was built between peers.

#### **5.4 Prestige and self-satisfaction needs**

Tutors distributed self-made tests to strengthen students' feelings of being privileged by enrolling in their lessons. Some students remarked that there were puzzles on the tests that could be understood only with knowledge from the tutors' lessons. In solving these puzzles, students not only gained a sense of distinction but were also retained by the tutors.

Interviewer: Something special on tutors' tests?

T15: Yes, you need to have passwords to solve them like crossword puzzles, missing letters, orders, mathematics, and chemistry questions. You can only know them from his lessons.

Interviewer: So that means you have to decode them after the lessons. You can't decode them by yourself?

T15: No way, it's too difficult but very interesting.

Students also obtained exam-related information from the tutors' materials. This content was not covered by teachers.

Interviewer: What do you like the most about your tutor?

T13: I like how she used the latest news. She summarized the news and taught vocabulary from it. For example, in the GSAET this year, one reading talked about mosquitoes. We did a similar reading before, so I knew the main idea of this reading and the difficult vocabulary. If you were not in my tutor's class, you wouldn't know this information. You couldn't know it from teachers or textbooks.

#### **5.5 Self-actualization needs**

Self-actualization needs include "the person's desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially" (Maslow, 1943, p. 382).

Some students found that their motivation to learn grew and became stronger. Although T10 regarded herself as a high achiever, she discovered an increased desire to have homework for practice. Participant T12 asked tutors to provide more challenging materials. Some students said their tutors' grading was very strict, indicating that their tutors gave them only 80–90% of their writing and translation scores. If there was a mistake in their translations, tutors would not give them a grade, while the GSAET would give them remaining marks that were correct. However, the tutors' strictness was greatly appreciated by these students, who believed in the tutors' abilities to grade fairly based on the GSAET standard and student ability. Students with high self-actualization needs were more comfortable accepting lower grades if they felt the grades were more objective. Tutors also told students that the grading scheme used in schools was not consistent with the GSAET standard. Participant T17's remarks provide an example.

T17: My tutor said, in public or private schools, the best marks in English were usually over 100, and teachers would give marks loosely because of pressure from parents or the headmaster. But for the GSAET, the standard is very strict, and my standard is the GSAET standard.

Interviewer: Is that so?

T17: Yes, at least, our full marks on the English test were more than 100 every time. And she read my test paper and homework. She said teachers were so generous. If she were a teacher, she would mark them fairly and objectively. It is better for our future.

Interviewer: Do you think so, too?

T17: Yes, of course. Why did we need the marks to be over 100? Those marks are fake. When we go to the battlefield, we are doomed to die because of our teachers' mercy.

## 6. STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON EPT

Students may improve their grades because of tutoring lessons, but they may also be negatively affected in terms of language learning, educational experience, pressure, and values. Each of these dimensions should be taken into account.

Beginning with the official English curriculum guidelines, mainstream schools pursue a set of learning objectives to develop learners' general and linguistic knowledge skills—language, communication ability, learning how to learn, logical and critical thinking, values, attitudes, and cultural and global awareness (MOE Taiwan, 2008). However, much of what tutors teach focuses on “examination competence,” contradicting the schools' learning objectives. Tutors emphasize exam scores, leading students to feel that the point of learning English is to earn higher test scores, which may be inconsistent with ideas regarding whole-person education development.

Twenty-six out of the 35 participants made similar remarks to T2's reflections on the EPT experience. Among them, T2's comments were the most significant.

T2: Although tutors teach you how to score well, at the end of the day, you are trained like a "test machine." Memorize vocabulary, grammar, and phrases day after day. EPT is beneficial when you are preparing for the GSAET. It is not helpful for you to learn how to use a language through EPT. Because you don't really use the language, I have forgotten all the vocabulary, grammar, and phrases I learned from the tutors. Also, if you don't learn it naturally, you lose it easily. When I talk to some international students in my university, I am not able to talk to them naturally. They think I use too many formal words found only in the dictionary but not used for normal conversations. The GSAET score doesn't equal your English proficiency. We only followed the tutor's way of thinking, so we were like robots. He pressed the button, then we moved. Tutors may have lots of great thoughts, but this is not the way for me to learn how to communicate. If I were given another chance, I would never choose to learn English in private tutoring.

The different pace between tutoring centers and schools also affected students' learning attitudes in school. Participant T6 refused to do school homework because she thought it was not the tutor's recommended method of learning. She concentrated only on the tutor's lessons rather than the teacher's lessons. When she found that school lessons were taught by tutors, she began to study other subjects in class. Participant T12 noted that tutors always told them that the school's teaching method was unsuitable for the GSAET and that his method was tailor-made to achieve higher scores. Such comments devalued school practices, which gradually made students lose confidence in mainstream education.

There is also the question of whether tutoring reduces or increases exam pressure. Participant T17 reflected on the pressures from himself, parents, teachers, and tutors.

T17: My pressure is from myself and my parents, especially my mom. She checked my grade report after my tests. I did worse before the GSAET. I tried very hard to keep them [my scores] up, but I failed. I have high expectations of myself, but they are very difficult to maintain.

Interviewer: Do teachers give you pressure?

T17: Yes, a few do. If you do well on a subject, they will praise you in class, but such encouragement is also a pressure. But tutors give even more pressure.

Interviewer: How do they give you pressure?

T17: Verbally, they say something ironic in class. Nonverbally, they just give you a look or a sigh after giving you exam papers.

From the teachers' perspectives, they may feel uncomfortable that tutors use their internal exam papers to develop their collection of practice tests. The most common way

tutors did this was to ask students to bring in their exam papers in exchange for tutors' self-made practice tests. This method is described in T16's comments below regarding how tutors created practice tests and what their self-made tests looked like.

T16: Tutors' practice tests are from either public or private schools.

Interviewer: How do they get them?

T16: They asked students to bring their exam papers after they finished their exams, so the tutors could keep a record and give them rewards like discount coupons for tutoring, money, or practice tests if students achieved certain scores. Some good students used these benefits without paying their tutoring fees. Of course, if you recruit a new student, you can get the whole package of benefits.

Interviewer: So, what is the content of the practice tests?

T16: They are all questions. But they are not easy to get.

Interviewer: Why not?

T16: Tutors will only give you some pages if you recruit a student, not all of them. Or tutors will use them in our lesson —really good and useful questions to trigger us to get more by introducing students or getting good grades on the exams. They won't give you practice test answers unless you finish all the questions. You can ask the tutors to check them for you.

Interviewer: Have you ever gotten a practice test?

T16: One time when I recruited a new student. It was difficult for me to meet the scores.

Some educators might doubt the controversial and market-oriented practices of tutoring institutions. However, participant T16 was quite accepting of these practices and blamed herself for not meeting the institution's standards. She also considered other reward strategies to be acceptable, such as, advertising the benefits of lessons and providing discount coupons for mock exam papers or tutoring fees.

Other students regarded these practices as common for recruiting more students. Participant T10, for example, attended math and physics classes and received an English class for free after recruiting two other students. Other students reported that if they recruited students, they could receive discounts on class fees.

## 7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper investigated Taiwanese learners' EPT experiences based on their reflections on language learning. The findings showed that the participants had complex, inconsistent,

and contradictory attitudes toward EPT. First, regarding pedagogical approaches, Taiwanese mainstream teachers' perspectives on English subjects may differ from students' perspectives on English learning. As reported by the students interviewed, English learning in mainstream schools mostly followed the syllabus and curriculum suggested by the Ministry of Education (MOE) guidelines. Learning exam skills for the GSAET was limited. The private tutoring institutions recognized this and filled in the gap between mainstream education and skills for the GSAET. The institutions created courses for drill practices, grammar teaching, vocabulary memorization, and writing training. These courses not only enabled students to achieve their desired GSAET scores but also became an efficient method of teaching exam skills. Therefore, students ultimately tended to depend on tutors to spoon-feed them examination skills in a short period of time, which, regarding the study's first research question, represented most of the students' EPT experiences. This finding largely coincides with the previous studies of Hamid et al. (2009), Lee (2010), Coniam (2014) and Huang (2017). The students were highly motivated by the goal of achieving higher scores and securing a place in a university. Some students experienced positive learning environments in EPT where tutors were supportive and peers were disciplined.

However, with respect to the second research question on students' reflections on EPT, students were found to be negatively affected in terms of language learning, educational experience, pressure, and values. The interviewees tended to discuss the effectiveness of EPT in two aspects in their EPT reflections: their scores on the GSAET and proficiency in English for authentic communication. This finding differed from those in previous studies of EPT (Hamid, et al., 2009; Lee, 2010; Coniam, 2014), which equated examination scores with English proficiency. Moreover, some findings were contrary to those of Hamid, et al. (2009), Lee (2010) and Coniam (2014). Hamid et al. (2009, p. 302) stated that "not a single interviewee was critical of EPT," while in the current study, most of the interviewees criticized EPT for overemphasizing examination skills rather than holistic language learning for communication. A possible explanation is that the students had completed their secondary education and could objectively reflect on their experiences after having encountered real situations at university. Although Lee (2010) attempted to reflect college students' EPT experiences in secondary school, these experiences were mostly related to their educational backgrounds rather than their perceptions of language learning. Although students had positive perceptions of private tutoring with only one tutor in Coniam's (2014) study, the current study generalized data from the students of 12 tutors, which shed light on students' language-learning process. Without the pressure from the GSAET, the students could express their perceptions of their ability to use English in real conditions.

Ultimately, aside from the findings outlined above, the study demonstrates a "repulsion" effect in which students felt their needs were not met by their schools. The findings also indicate an "attraction" effect in which tutoring institutions met students' needs with market-oriented strategies to maintain and increase demand. Such factors may explain the wider expansion of commercialized shadow education at the global level.

EPT may not be able to effectively improve students' overall English proficiency, especially in spoken English. However, the students all knew that the primary aim of EPT was to develop their examination skills rather than their English speaking competence. Interestingly, even from this viewpoint, the students still noted that EPT did not provide

them with sufficient speaking practices, ignoring the aim of EPT. Furthermore, the students seemed quite accepting of the contradictory views of EPT. The students asserted that the overemphasis of examination skills in EPT may undermine English learning for speaking competence. However, they considered EPT to be indispensable to prepare for the GSAET because mainstream education could not meet those needs. Therefore, EPT fills a gap between mainstream education and the skills necessary for the GSAET. Ironically, the participants emphasized the importance of English speaking competence, while at the same time they felt their needs in preparing for the GSAET could be met only by EPT.

Teaching, learning and assessment may be confined by contextual realities. Ideally, learners are "lively youths capable of international dialogue and adept at using information and English skills to their advantage" (MOE Taiwan, 2015, p.1), but in reality, learners may sacrifice their time to study examination techniques for the GSAET and neglect the practical use of English language in authentic contexts. Studying for the GSAET may disturb learners' processes of language learning and interests in a language. When mainstream education sets a series of educational goals for students to achieve, the result is that students achieve success by pursuing high examination scores.

The teacher-centered approach in EPT may render English learning inefficient and superficial. When the participants reflected on their EPT experiences, they noted that they had forgotten the vocabulary, phrases and sentence structures they had learned from the tutors. This practice echoes the long-existing culture of teacher authority in Asian countries and therefore reinforces passive learning by memorization and rehearsal, in which learning stops at the surface rather than taking place at deeper levels (Hattie, 2012). Such a learning approach in EPT deviates from the goal of student autonomy and student-centered learning classrooms. However, notably, in this study, the participants accepted their passive roles because their needs could be met. This finding reveals the students' ambiguous attitudes toward EPT and the internally discrepant nature of EPT per se.

Noting the existence of both positive and negative dimensions of EPT, this study may provide insights for policymakers and TESOL educators in deeply-rooted high-stakes examination-oriented Asian contexts as well as Western settings such as Spanish-speaking communities, which increasingly emphasize assessment (Rodriguez, 2018). First, policymakers need "to recognize the existence, nature, and implications of shadow education" (Bray & Lykins, 2012, p.71) and consider methods to reduce students' reliance on private tutoring and de-emphasize the focus on learning for assessment, which has led to the popularity of EPT. As the students viewed some dimensions of EPT positively, teachers, policymakers and other stakeholders should develop innovative ideas to meet students' needs as outlined in this paper, clarify the examination criteria, consider the impact of EPT on students' language learning, and take the existence of EPT into consideration in curriculum planning and development.

Given its popularity and expansion, EPT has become a method for students worldwide to learn English language, and it is affecting students' learning in both mainstream and private tutoring, which may cause conflicts between the two methods. As Dam (1990, p.17) stated, "learner autonomy is characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes," but EPT seems to deviate from the track of language learning by adopting a teacher-centered approach and a spoon-feeding strategy to secure and retain students. The profit-making purposes of shadow education, where learn-

ing has been dominated by a utilitarian approach, may have subverted language learning in mainstream education. Although the current study contributes some useful insights into language education, the complex intertwining relationship between mainstream and private tutoring should be investigated in an international context. It should be acknowledged that the findings do not necessarily reflect the general perspectives of the corresponding body of research because they are limited to the Taiwanese context. Further studies can extend their scope to Western settings. This study may raise stakeholders' awareness that the contextual realities of high-stakes examinations and an overemphasis on academic achievement should not replace the aim of education in students' language-learning process.

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## 9. APPENDIX A

### Questionnaire

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#### Demographic information

Name:

Gender:

Age:

Senior high school:

Mobile phone number:

#### EPT experiences

How long have you received EPT for the GSAET?

How many days and how many hours a week do you receive EPT?

How long is the EPT class per day?

How much do you need to pay for EPT per month?

What types of EPT do you participate in? One-on-one tutoring or large group in tutoring centers? Please specify:

#### After graduating from senior high school

What is your GSAET result?

What is your current university?

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