

## “Learning English Grammar on Sunday” !:

### Experiences of Adult Thai Learners in a TOEFL Tutorial Class

#### การเรียนรู้ไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษวันอาทิตย์ !:

#### ประสบการณ์ของผู้เรียนชาวไทยวัยผู้ใหญ่ในชั้นเรียนติวโทเฟิล

ศักดิ์สิทธิ์ แสงบุญ

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#### Abstract

This study examined opinions of Thai learners of English in a TOEFL tutorial class about their experiences in learning the TOEFL grammar through explicit grammar instruction. Participants consisted of 50 learners of mixed age ranges who had enrolled in a TOEFL class at a local university. The analysis of data collected by means of a survey questionnaire, email interviews and teacher's diaries revealed that the majority of the participants found explicit grammar instruction very useful and relevant. In addition, the test-taking strategies they received helped them to cope with a speed test such as TOEFL successfully. Additional key finding was that the tutorial nature of the course helped them to learn effectively, although pair work and small group work were not provided, thereby suggesting that teaching efficacy does not need to be restricted by any particular teaching method. Rather, the findings were reflective of the relevance of "situated pedagogies." In addition, pedagogical and research implications were provided.

**Keywords:** TOEFL tutorial class, Explicit grammar instruction, Test-taking strategies, Situated pedagogies

#### บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาความคิดเห็นของผู้เรียนชาวไทยที่เรียนติวภาษาอังกฤษโทเฟิลเกี่ยวกับประสบการณ์ในการเรียนรู้ไวยากรณ์โทเฟิลโดยวิธีการสอนไวยากรณ์โดยตรงแบบดั้งเดิม กลุ่มตัวอย่างประกอบด้วยผู้เรียนชาวไทยจำนวน 50 คนที่มีระดับช่วงอายุแตกต่างกันที่สมัครเรียนหลักสูตรอบรมโทเฟิลของมหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่ง การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลจากแบบสอบถาม การสัมภาษณ์ทางอีเมลและการจดบันทึกเกี่ยวกับการสอนของผู้วิจัย แสดงให้เห็นว่าผู้เรียนส่วนใหญ่เห็นว่าการสอนไวยากรณ์โดยตรงแบบดั้งเดิมนั้นมีประโยชน์และเกี่ยวข้องเป็นอย่างมาก นอกจากนี้เทคนิคการทำข้อสอบเอื้ออำนวยให้ผู้เข้ารับการอบรมสามารถทำข้อสอบที่จำกัดเวลาในการสอบแบบเน้นความเร็วและแม่นยำได้อย่างประสบความสำเร็จ แม้ว่าการสอนจะไม่มีกิจกรรมทำงานเป็นคู่หรือกลุ่มย่อยก็ตาม ซึ่งแสดงให้เห็นว่าการสอนที่มีประสิทธิภาพไม่จำเป็นต้องถูกผูกอยู่กับการสอนแบบใดแบบหนึ่งโดยเฉพาะ แต่ที่ว่า

ผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นว่าความเข้าใจในเรื่อง "การสอนที่เน้นบริบทเฉพาะกลุ่มเฉพาะประเด็น" นั้นเป็นประโยชน์และเกี่ยวข้อง นอกจากนี้งานวิจัยยังได้กล่าวถึงนัยยะทางด้านการสอนและการวิจัย

**คำสำคัญ:** ชั้นเรียนติวโทเฟิล การสอนเน้นไวยากรณ์โดยตรง กลยุทธ์การทำข้อสอบ การสอนอิงบริบท

## Introduction

One of the educational phenomena in the Thai education system is the prevalence of English private tutorial schools. In fact, the mere mention of English tutorial schools would alert not only educators and parents but also students themselves. This is because fierce debates have been waged whether English tutorial schools progress or impede proper education, broadly defined. Wai-Ho Yung (2015) argues that... “private tutoring has received increasing attention in research as a global educational phenomenon with significant implications for educational practices...” (p. 707). Dubbed “shadow education,” this aspect of contemporary education deserves serious scrutiny. For it is a phenomenon widespread in Asia and South-East Asia in particular. In addition, according to Kwok (2004), private tutoring results from an educational system that is examination-oriented, which is prevalent in the Thai education system as well. Further, Canagarajah (2016) suggests that the emerging trends in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) are from “prepackaged methods to situated pedagogies... [and] from “the generalized and global to specific and local” (pp. 30-31). In addition, Lochland (2012) argues that concerns have been raised regarding the “...insensitivity of English language teaching (ELT) methods to the linguistic, sociocultural, and political background of learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings” (p. 261). This line of argument is consistent with Kumaravadivelu’s (2001) assertion that “meaningful pedagogy cannot be constructed without a holistic interpretation of particular situations and cannot be improved without a general improvement of those particular situations” (p. 538). Apparently, English private tutoring should be researched to ascertain the advantages and disadvantages of this global educational phenomenon, one that has received disparaging remarks and yet seems inevitable.

Given the increasing influence of private tutorial schools, this study explores both the situated pedagogies and the local; that is, it attempts to elucidate classroom experiences as encountered by adult Thai learners of English in a TOEFL tutorial class at a local university in Bangkok, Thailand. Private tutoring, of which TOEFL tutoring class is an eminent example, has been a crucial yet under-studied component of education in general and Asian education in particular (Bray et al., (2013); Buchmann, et al., (2010); Forsey (2013); Hamid et al., (2009); Kwok, (2004); Ma, (2012); Zhan et al., (2013).

More specifically, English private tutoring (EPT) is a lucrative business in Thai society. In fact, it has become an almost inseparable component of the current educational trend in Thailand. EPT has been in existence for years and does not seem to show a waning influence. In this study, I want to learn about the experiences of a

group of Thai crammers who spend their Sundays learning English grammar and reading for the TOEFL test. The research participants (n = 50) enrolled in an English training course for the TOEFL test. The course has a two-pronged aim; the first aim is for the crammers to be taught English grammar focusing on the sentence level and general reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, reading for inferences, drawing conclusions as well as guessing meanings of difficult vocabulary items in context. Although the course covered both grammar and reading comprehension, more emphasis was given to grammar. That is, learners were taught how to do sentence analysis relevant to the grammar section of the TOEFL test. In so doing, they were taught how elements of the English sentence work. Specifically, they were trained how to identify parts of speech, the use of punctuation marks, subordinate clauses and whatnot. The second aim is to enable them to appropriately use test-taking strategies by looking closely at the test items revolving around grammar at the sentence level such as the use of a comma to separate between a main clause and a subordinate clause (e.g., noun clause) or a phrase (e.g., prepositional phrase).

## **Focused Literature Review**

### *Private Tutoring: Opportunities and Challenges*

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).

From the brief overview of the two studies above, it is clear that English teaching in Thailand has been oriented toward making Thai students communicate well in English. What is not extensively discussed, however, is the role of explicit grammar instruction. For example, English grammar teaching in a tutorial class such as the TOEFL class, the study focus. Next, grammar instruction will be discussed.

#### *Grammar and EFL Students*

Liamkina and Ryshina-pankova (2012) examined the extent to which explicit grammar instruction may or may not lead to communicative abilities on the part of the students. The authors argued that grammar could be taught explicitly successfully on the condition that categories of meaning that come with forms must be made clear to the students. The benefits of a meaning-driven explicit approach to teaching grammar were provided with a view to reiterating the argument that explicit grammar instruction does have a role to play in English language teaching. Specifically, the authors succinctly advanced that the functional approach to grammar teaching “...allows FL practitioners to center target language learning around content, and at the same time offer students a more meaningful account of how various grammatical choices are pivotal for the realization of particular communicative goals in specific social contexts” (p. 285).

Loewen et al. (2009) investigated the beliefs of second language learners regarding the role of grammar instruction and error correction. The participants consisted of 754 second language learners. In so doing, the authors focused on the following underlying factors: efficacy of grammar, negative attitude toward error correction, priority of communication, importance of grammar, importance of grammatical accuracy, and negative attitude toward grammar instruction. Major findings are, for example, the participants had a general view of the efficacy or usefulness of grammar instruction while some learners held negative attitudes toward grammar instruction and still some others preferred communication over grammar.

Considering the literature reviewed above, it can be argued that private tutoring may or may not serve as an effective arena for successful education in general and for practical English language teaching in particular, especially when it comes to grammar instruction. While studies have been conducted that focus on the issues of private tutoring and grammar teaching, relatively few studies have focused on the interface between private tutoring and English grammar instruction. I therefore attempt to fill this gap by investigating opinions of a group of adult crammers who had an urgent need to obtain a passing score on the TOEFL (paper-based) test. This is an area of English education in Thailand that should not be ignored because most, if not all, of the crammers take their lesson very seriously for an obvious reason that a high-enough score earned will enable them to enter the program of study of their choices. That is, attending a tutorial class on the TOEFL test has a tremendous meaning and ramification for their education future and, most likely, their future career advancement as well.

Given the purpose of this study, the following research questions will be addressed as follows:

1. What are participants' salient opinions toward learning English grammar to prepare for a standardized test, TOEFL?
2. To what extent do such opinions inform existing knowledge concerning shadow education in general and English standardized test tutorial in particular?

## **Methods**

This exploratory case study intends to ascertain opinions of a group of Thai crammers (n=50) who enrolled in a TOEFL preparatory course at a local university in Bangkok, Thailand. It addresses the controversial issues concerning whether or not explicit grammar instruction advances or impedes English language teaching in the EFL setting.

### *Participants*

Participants consisted of 50 Thai adult EFL learners who have received at least a bachelor's degree in both sciences and humanities and who enrolled in a 45-hour TOEFL preparatory course. The course fee was 5,900 Thai baht. The fact that they had to pay for the course might have led to higher motivation among the learners. These participants will need a certain TOEFL score in order to qualify them to apply for either a Master's degree or a doctoral degree study in Thai universities.

### *Data collection*

Data were collected using the following measures. First, a survey questionnaire, a 5-point Likert scale, was sent to the research participants. The questionnaires were administered to the participants immediately after the course ended. Second, after completed questionnaires were returned, descriptive statistics was used to report the results. Subsequently, certain self-selected participants (n = 6) were interviewed through email. The email interview questions, consisting of

four major questions asked the participants to reflect on their learning experiences in this course with a particular emphasis on their thoughts regarding the utility of the explicit instruction of various grammar points such as distinguishing between main and subordinate clauses. Finally, the researcher’s diaries as reflections after each teaching day were utilized in order to achieve triangulation of data sources.

#### *Data analysis*

The researcher first analyzed the survey data using descriptive statistics, searching for mean, S.D., frequency and percentages. This was followed by a report on the interview data from which salient categories were gleaned from the transcriptions. Further, to achieve a higher level of trustworthiness, the questionnaire findings were discussed in conjunction with the email interview data and the researcher's diaries.

### **Findings**

The overall results of the survey questionnaire were reported below with the demographics being first presented and patterns of responses to the way grammar was taught in the class were subsequently presented.

The research participants consisted of 21 male and 29 females with the age range between 23 and 56. The median age was 36.46. As for their education, ten received a bachelor's degree, 38 had a master's degree, leaving two with a Ph.D. And concerning their current occupations, twenty two were government officials and 19 of them worked in the private sector with eight not specifying their careers. In terms of years of English learning, four participants spent 12 years with thirty two mentioning more than 12 years and another fourteen participants did not mention the exact number. Finally, as regards the nationality of their previous English teachers, eleven participants had only Thai nationals as their English teachers; 38 had both Thai and non-Thai nationals as their English teachers.

It can be said that the participants were adult learners of English with a number of English learning experiences in Thailand. All of them received at least a bachelor's degree in both sciences and arts, even though some had a higher degree than a bachelor's degree. This, however, does not mean that they would differ significantly in terms of their English proficiency.

**Table 1 Patterns of responses to the way grammar was taught in class**

	n	$\bar{x}$	SD
1. Grammar helped me to better understand English sentences	49	4.49	.711
2. Grammar was useful for the TOEFL class only, but not necessary for communication	50	2.74	.899
3. Grammar tutoring made me realize that learning English doesn't mean just memorization	49	4.45	.614
4. It was difficult to learn English grammar	50	3.32	.978
5. To understand grammar, I must know the meaning of vocab	49	3.04	.763
6. I could tell the different parts of speech even though I didn't know the meaning of the vocabulary	49	4.29	.540
7. The instructor's teaching performance helped me better understand English sentence structure	50	4.58	.702
8. The instructor should have used English only in explaining grammar	50	3.08	1.007
9. The use of Thai in explaining grammar was appropriate and helped me learn better	50	4.22	.910
10. Had I been taught grammar the way the instructor did, I wouldn't be having the problem using English grammar now	50	4.16	1.095

As can be seen in Table 1, the overall picture of the role of grammar instruction is very positive. The majority of participants considered grammar and grammar teaching appropriate and conducive to their English learning. The mean scores of items 1, 3, 6, 7 and 10 all pointed to the importance of grammar and its teaching in the participants' attempts to understand academic sentence structures as usually found in such a standardized test as the TOEFL test. Even though item number 2 was attempting to mislead the participants into believing that a focus on grammar would deter one's ability to communicate efficiently in English, the patterns of responses indicated otherwise. Finally, when it comes to the language as a medium of instruction, most participants preferred Thai to English. This was not surprising because the nature of the course, a tutorial, is for them to understand the contents as much as possible. The use of Thai as a medium of instruction would certainly be sanctioned by them all.

The next section will delineate the participants' response patterns based on each of the ten items asked in the questionnaire. I begin with the first item.

Experiences of Adult Thai Learners in a TOEFL Tutorial Class

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1. Grammar helped me to better understand English sentences		
N/A	1	2.0
Agree	21	42.0
Strongly agree	27	54.0
Total	49	98.0

The pattern of responses for item 1 clearly indicates that the overwhelming majority of the participants (n = 48) were in favor of grammar teaching. This is understandable because the second section of TOEFL (paper-based) calls for a good understanding of English sentence features. Therefore, an explicit focus on grammar teaching certainly helped them to gain a better understanding of academic English sentences.

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
2. Grammar was useful for the TOEFL class only, but not necessary for communication		
N/A	1	2.0
Strongly disagree	23	46.0
Disagree	16	32.0
Agree	8	16.0
Strongly agree	2	4.0
Total	50	100.0

The response pattern for item 2, which was against the relevance of explicit grammar instruction for the communicative use of English, turned out to be somewhat surprising. This is because 78% of the participants disagreed that grammar was not necessary for communication, leaving only 20% agreeing. Basically, this means that most of the participants still found grammar relevant when it comes to learning English.

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
3. Grammar tutoring made me realize that learning English doesn't mean just memorization		
Disagree	3	6.0
Agree	21	42.0
Strongly agree	25	50.0
Total	49	98.0

The participants' answers to this item reveal an interesting point concerning English language problem in Thailand. That is, it has often been said that learning English means rote-memorize abstract grammar rules. However, 92% of the participants found that the grammar tutoring they had received was not just a matter of rote memorization. They found out that a lot had to do with a true understanding of sentence mechanisms.

4. It was difficult to learn English grammar	Frequency	Percent
N/A	1	2.0
Strongly disagree	9	18.0
Disagree	19	38.0
Agree	15	30.0
Strongly agree	6	12.0
Total	50	100.0

When it comes to a common perception that it is difficult to learn English grammar, the participants seemed divided in half with 56 % disagreeing and 42 % agreeing. This pattern of responses indicated that the concept of English grammar being difficult to learn is potentially ambiguous. The fact that 56% found that grammar was not difficult might have been the result of their training in this tutorial course; that is, once they realized that they could understand sentence structures better, then English grammar turned out not to be that difficult to learn. In other words, the effect of coaching might have led them to answer the way they did.

5. To understand grammar, I must know the meaning of vocabulary	Frequency	Percent
N/A	1	2.0
Strongly disagree	9	18.0
Disagree	27	54.0
Agree	11	22.0
Strongly agree	1	2.0
Total	49	98.0

Seventy-two percent of the participants disagree with this statement. This could have been because in doing the grammar section of the test, the participants relied more on word order and the use of punctuation marks such as a comma as clues to the right answer. Therefore, they did not have to know exact meanings of difficult

worlds in the sentences. That is one of the reasons why only 24 percent of the participants agreed with this statement.

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
6. I could tell the different parts of speech even though I didn't know the meaning of the vocabulary		
Strongly disagree	2	4.0
Agree	31	62.0
Strongly agree	16	32.0
Total	49	98.0

In line with their responses to the previous item, the majority of the participants (94%) agreed that vocabulary knowledge was not always a prerequisite for them to get right answers for the grammar section questions. They could rely on test-taking techniques. This implies that the participants could understand the teaching points and that they could apply the skills and techniques to the test.

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
7. The instructor's teaching performance helped me better understand English sentence structure		
N/A	1	2.0
Agree	17	34.0
Strongly agree	32	64.0
Total	50	100.0

With 98% agreeing that the instructor's teaching performances helped them to better understand English sentence structures, the participants' responses, once again, pointed to the usefulness of this kind of tutorial. As was always the case, the instructor was paying close attention to detailed grammar points found the TOEFL test. This, coupled with explicit grammar instruction, could have enabled the participants to find their learning experience fruitful. So they came to appreciate the way the class was conducted.

8. The instructor should have used English only in explaining grammar	Frequency	Percent
N/A	3	6.0
Strongly disagree	9	18.0
Disagree	24	48.0
Agree	9	18.0
Strongly agree	5	10.0
Total	50	100.0

Almost 70 percent of the participants disagreed with this statement, leaving merely 28% agreeing. This could have been because they were not good at English to begin with; therefore, there was no reason why they should have wanted to learn grammar through English whereas the instructor could speak Thai, their first language. Besides, they wanted to learn clearly within the time constraints they had in the course key grammar points and practical techniques they could use in doing the test.

9. The use of Thai in explaining grammar was appropriate and helped me learn better	Frequency	Percent
N/A	2	4.0
Disagree	4	8.0
Agree	23	46.0
Strongly agree	21	42.0
Total	50	100.0

Eighty-eight percent of the participants agreed that the use of Thai was appropriate as a medium of instruction. This pattern of responses was consistent with that of the previous item. This also suggests that whether to use Thai or English as a medium of instruction was a matter of practicality and must be reflective of the reality in a particular instructional context.

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
10. Had I been taught grammar the way the instructor did, I wouldn't be having the problem using English grammar now		
N/A	4	8.0
Disagree	2	4.0
Agree	22	44.0
Strongly agree	22	44.0
Total	50	100.0

The response pattern for this item reiterated the points previously made in the preceding items that the majority of the participants found explicit grammar instruction very helpful with 88% felt confident that if they had been taught grammar the way the instructor did in this course, they should have fewer problems in learning and, more importantly, understanding English grammar.

In conclusion, the patterns of responses as discussed above indicate that the majority of the participants lent strong support to explicit grammar instruction. The format of the grammar section of the TOEFL (paper-based) Test was conducive to such instruction. For the participants, having to learn grammar explicitly was not a problem in itself; they did not deny the roles of grammar in helping them understand and use English better (at least as far as sitting the TOEFL test is concerned). The experiences they had in this tutorial class were amenable to their better understanding of the test and hence led to a higher level of confidence in taking the test.

Next will be findings from the email interviews I had conducted with self-selected participants (n=6) as follows.

#### **Email interviews**

Overall, the six participants who responded to my email interviews felt very positive about explicit grammar instruction. In fact, none of the participants found the grammar points being taught utterly useless. So instead of dichotomizing the issue whether to teach or not to teach grammar, the participants were very cautious and realistic in arguing for the roles of explicit grammar instruction relative to their work. For example, Participant A, upon asking whether the grammar points being taught were relevant to her work, explained that "...in my work, I needed to write minutes of meeting in English, so being able to tell apart main and subordinate clauses really helped. The grammar knowledge from this course helped, especially with reading at work. This is because I needed to write critically. What I learned made me feel confident and could help with understanding" Or as put forth by Participant B that " The grammar points taught in class helped me to figure out parts of speech and sentence structures in academic papers much more easily. However, the grammar taught may not be that very useful in

communicating with non-Thai friends because it's conversational English rather than written English." These are the points also briefly mentioned by Participant D. Further, Participant C put it that, "The grammar learned in this class could be directly applicable to my work e.g., writing email messages or official memos in English. I could now do all these with more confidence and encouraged me to think about sentences more systematically. For example, why is there no finite verb in this sentence?"

Additionally, Participant E pointed out that, "the grammar knowledge gained from this course was useful. Grammar, when used appropriately, could help with proper understanding when communicating with other non-Thais." Finally, Participant F put it that, "grammar was relevant. Dissecting sentences as we did in class enabled me to read with a much better understanding, especially when reading academic papers."

When asked about the state of English education in Thailand, all the participants lamented that the teaching of English right from the beginning level to higher ones has left a lot to be desired. That is, several problems could be identified, ranging from local culture and misunderstanding about speaking English. For example, Participant C said, "many Thais are afraid to speak English in public because they have been indoctrinated that speaking English improperly is shameful and that Thai teachers of English are often unqualified." Participant D said that, "the way English has been taught in Thailand is wrong. Grammar should be emphasized right from the start." Also, Participant E pointed out that, "a native speaker of English should be hired to teach in conjunction with local teachers, but I understand that might involve unaffordable, expensive tuition fees."

In short, the six participants unanimously supported the role of explicit grammar instruction for the many reasons above, although the extent to which grammar should be emphasized varies depending upon the language skills involved.

### **The researcher's diaries**

While teaching the course, I admitted that I seemed to have most ideas about problems that the students would have. For example, many of them should not have a good grasp of grammar; otherwise, they should not have enrolled in my class. Besides, the grammar section of the TOEFL test puts a premium on academic English sentences more than conversational English. In other words, I felt I was prepared for the challenges in teaching the course. The information from the diaries below portrays what I considered key observations I had made during class.

Most of the students paid close attention to the explanations. But none had dared asked any questions, especially during the first two weeks of the 8-session class. Probably, they were not used to my teaching styles and performances and might feel somewhat intimidated by the fact that they did not know one another yet. Asking "silly" questions might have made them ashamed. However, after the fourth week, I noticed that several students were willing to ask the so-called "silly" questions. There are some reasons for this. First, while teaching I was

trying to lighten them up by using some humor by joking with some of the answers they had given me. According to Richter and Herrera (2016), "teachers and students agree that instructors should be enthusiastic, energetic, patient, motivating, humorous, warm, kind, and flexible" (p. 4). Besides being humorous, I considered myself having those descriptive adjectives as used in the quote. Moreover, I also diverged from the main contents from time to time, sharing with them my own experience of being a doctoral student in an American university. This diversion, nevertheless, did not seem to bother them because the experience I had shared with them was something they might be able to relate to, namely, the experience of being a postgraduate student. Some seemed to get so engaged in a study in the U.S., asking me questions such as what American Ivy League schools mean. This diversion took not more than 10 minutes as a break for them to relax a bit.

Furthermore, my observation suggested that adult learners such as my students preferred explicit explanation of grammar rules. They did not care whether they would have the chance to communicate with one another in English. They wanted me to rattle off those grammar rules conscientiously. I noticed that many of them jotted down profusely all those rules. Indeed, the set format of the grammar section and reading section of the test helped me teach with ease; all I had to do was to follow the set format, coupled with test-taking strategies.

The language used in teaching the course was Thai, the first language of both the researcher and students. There is no point in using English as a medium of instruction; in fact, had I used English I would have jeopardized the course myself. Most students, especially those who were rather weak in English, would have protested.

In a nutshell, my observation of the students' learning "performances" was that most paid close attention to the tutorial, that they came to class with clear objectives of passing the TOEFL test, so every bit and piece of the lessons should have interested them considerably, and that they realized that mastering the test meant they would need to practice regularly. The students appeared to be satisfied with the tutorial because the teaching techniques and explanations provided by the researcher did not seem to disappoint them.

To answer the first research question as to the participants' opinions toward their learning in the course, it can be said that most, if not all, were very satisfied with the contents, the teaching performances and test-taking strategies they had been taught. Even though some might have come to the class with less basic knowledge of English grammar, they managed to follow the lessons well. This is because the set format of the TOEFL test made it possible for the researcher to reiterate key grammar points as well as test-taking strategies. The reiteration enabled the students to have more chances to learn and understand those grammar points, which is important if one wants to gain a higher score on the test. Some of them believed that they had made considerable progress and become more confident in doing the test, although they admitted that they might need to take the test more than once in order to obtain a score they wanted.

The opinions the students had made it all the more important that shadow education in general and English standardized test tutorial in particular were useful, enabling them to gain the kind of knowledge many of them thought should have had long ago. Shadow education and tutorial lessons do not do a disservice to the students generally; on the contrary, they provided them a viable alternative to access practical knowledge and test-taking strategies. These were the essence of student-centered education, one that allowed the students to partake in usable knowledge to achieve real-life goals.

## **Conclusion**

For the participants, learning English grammar on Sunday turned out to be satisfactory, useful, and practical. Instead of being merely an instant gratification, their learning experiences in the course cultivated in them a sense of self-initiated linguistic achievement and, more importantly, confidence. Attending the course allowed them to seize on opportunities to learn not only grammatical contents but also test-taking strategies that many of them found practical and applicable to their work. While boredom might have set in during a 45-hour tutoring session, 6 hours a day for 8 full weeks, quite a number of them were willing to learn. Although success in a second language learning is a moving target, they realized that they would need to apply themselves systematically when it comes to improving their TOEFL scores because language skills development does not occur overnight. Shadow education, this TOEFL course being a case in point, can potentially do a great service to students. It is not shadow education generally or a tutorial class in particular that provides the much sought-after quality education; it is what transpires in the class that makes a big difference.

## **Pedagogical and Research Implications**

The findings of this study were clearly in support of explicit grammar instruction. This should not be surprising, although the purported ESL/EFL teaching method, over the past three decades, has been the Communicative Approach, which seems to consider explicit grammar instruction inappropriate and not conducive to proper learning. To this end, Larsen-Freeman (2015) asserted that "[Grammar instruction] remains traditional for the most part, with grammar teaching centered on accuracy of form and rule learning, and with mechanical exercises seen as the way to bring about the learning of grammar." Therefore, in teaching English to Thai students, Thai teachers of English should try to strike a proper balance between explicit and implicit grammar instruction vis-a-vis their instructional goals. That is to say, the teachers should not dichotomize the issue. Furthermore, as the Graus and Coppen (2016) study reported, "... when learner level is taken into consideration students show a distinct preference for for-focused instruction and FonFs [explicit grammar instruction] for teaching the higher-level pupils [and that] explicit and deductive approaches are clearly preferred for teaching complex grammatical structures" (p. 594).

In addition, further research into the role of grammar instruction in tutorial schools should be conducted that focuses on pedagogical beliefs and practices of Thai EFL tutors. Oftentimes, these tutors are said to be very successful in preparing college-bound students for high-stakes examinations such as the national entrance examination. For example, observation studies might be conducted to elucidate effective teaching or tutoring techniques that could potentially be emulated in the regular EFL class. Finally, in terms of foreign language policy research, a study might be done that sheds light on the complex social, cultural and educational factors that come into play in the EFL tutoring context such as Thailand.

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