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Learning English in the ‘Shadow’: Patterns and Implications of English Private Tutoring in Vietnam

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Abstract

Private tutoring has grown in prominence on a global scale. While research in this area has increased in recent decades, there remains a lack of focus on English private tutoring. This gap is particularly evident in Vietnam, where research on English private tutoring has not kept pace with its growing popularity. This article sheds light on the prevalence of English private tutoring among students in public high schools in Vietnam. The study examines the rate, patterns of enrolment, the reasons for its popularity and the perceived effectiveness of English private tutoring. Based on questionnaire data collected from 583 urban, regional, and rural school students, the findings revealed an enrolment rate of over 75%, with notable disparities in enrolment patterns among students in different socio-economic areas. However, despite the prevalence of private tutoring, the research findings revealed a modest impact of such tutoring on student academic performance, evidenced by over 75% of the students reporting slight improvement in their communicative skills. Irrespective of academic achievement levels and backgrounds, private tutoring has been a widespread and normalised educational practice, reflecting the nature of social and educational competition. The study emphasises the need for

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more proactive measures to regulate the practice before it is well-engrained as part of the culture.

Keywords: English teaching and learning, private tutoring, shadow education, Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of globalisation and the spread of English as a global lingua franca have pressured governments worldwide to adopt initiatives to enhance English proficiency among their populations. This phenomenon has led to significant efforts at the national level, with a strong focus on innovations and renovations in school curricula, materials, and teacher training (Sayer, 2015; Spolsky et al., 2015; Vu, 2020). At the individual level, many parents and students choose to invest in private tutoring or after-hour lessons supplementary to their formal schooling.

Labelled as 'shadow' education, private tutoring is defined as fee-based instruction provided beyond regular school hours, offering students supplementary tutoring in academic subjects that they study in formal schooling (Bray, 2020, 2021; Dang & Rogers, 2008). Private tutoring, therefore, mimics and depends on mainstream schooling for its existence and sustenance, making it a parallel educational sector (Bray et al., 2022; Mahmud et al., 2017). Private tutoring consumes a substantial amount of household resources, occupies much of the time of young children after school hours, and has overarching social, economic, and policy implications (Bray, 2014; Bray & Kwo, 2014). In South Korea, national enrolment rates in 2019 were estimated to be 83% in primary schooling, 71% in lower secondary schooling and 68% in high schooling (Service, 2020). Hong Kong is also among the contexts where tutoring enrolment rates are "particularly high", with over 70% of high school students resorting to supplementary tutoring (Chan et al., 2014, p. 361). While these figures represent extreme cases, private tutoring is expanding and intensifying in many parts of the world.

Given its increasing visibility in various contexts, the literature on the privatisation of education has expanded significantly, with increasing attention given to different aspects of this phenomenon. Pioneering cross-country studies such as Bray (1999, 2009, 2013, 2020, 2021) and Bray and Kwo (2014) have contributed to a growing scholarly interest in this shadow industry. These studies examined patterns, determinants, effects on student achievement, and potential spillovers in different contexts. However, despite extensive research on private tutoring for various academic subjects, English private tutoring has yet to receive substantial attention (Chang, 2019; Hamid et al., 2018). In Vietnam, where English proficiency is strongly linked to employment opportunities and social mobility, research on English private tutoring has not kept pace with its popularity. To address this gap, this paper presents findings from a survey of high school students across locations in Vietnam. The study examines the rate, patterns of enrolment, the reasons for its popularity, and the perceived effectiveness of English private tutoring as a supplement to their regular schooling.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Widespread Phenomenon of Private Tutoring

The scale of shadow education appears to be “especially prominent” in East Asia, such as Japan, South Korea, and China (Bray, 2013, p. 346). However, shadow education is now becoming increasingly visible around the globe. It is prevailing, expanding, and intensifying in developed and developing societies worldwide. It is evident across countries of different sizes, of different levels of economic and social development, political landscapes, and geographical locations (Bray et al., 2022; Guill et al., 2019). Dang and Rogers (2008) have presented evidence on tutoring in 23 economically diverse countries, revealing that a substantial percentage of students, ranging from 25 to 90% of students at a certain level of education enrolling in private tutoring. Hartmann (2013), with reference to Egypt, remarked on the prevalence of this private industry:

Rather than a remedial measure for weak students, private and group tutoring have become a ‘normal’ and seemingly indispensable part of the education process..., and prevail across social classes and educational stages. (p. 59)

The growing volume of private tutoring reflects the increasing educational, social, and economic competition in the context of globalisation and greater mobility of skills and labour across borders. As part of the commodification and privatisation of education, private tutoring has become “more socially acceptable” within neo-liberal ideologies that education services can be privately and commercially purchased as a commodity (Mahmud et al., 2017, p. 300). In European countries where private tutoring used to be remedial and supplementary in nature, according to Bray (2020), shadow education has now “grown considerably in most parts of Europe” (p. 466). For example, in Greece, private tutoring has become “a normal practice” (Tsiplakides, 2018, p. 81), with parents extensively investing in supplementary tutoring to prepare their children for the highly competitive exams at top universities. Campani (2013, p. 123) described a “boom” in the tutoring market in Italy, with an estimate of “no less than 40%” of high school students participating in private tutoring.

It is also noted that a substantial amount of private tutoring is recorded at multiple levels of education. As given in Table 1, the demand for supplementary tutoring is generally high among students preparing for school-leaving and tertiary admission exams. For example, in Vietnam, the closer students are to their final year of schooling, the more intensively they engage in private tutoring (Dang, 2011, 2013). Nonetheless, students at junior levels of education also display a high demand for private tutoring, aiming to seek help with “the heavy academic load of formal classrooms” (Lee, 2013, p. 9).

Table 1. The scale of private tutoring in some countries.

Country and territory	Year	Grade level	Rate of private tutoring	Source
Bangladesh	2017	Year 10	81.4 %	Hamid et al. (2018)
China	2004	Primary	73.8%	Xue et al. (2009)
		Secondary	65.6%	
		High school	53.5%	

Table 1 continued...

Czech Republic	2016	High school	47%	Šťastný (2016)
France	2016	All levels	14.1%	Galinié et al. (2016)
Hong Kong	2011-2012	Year 9 Year 12	53% 71.8%	Bray, Zhan, et al. (2014) Chan et al. (2014)
Italy	2013	High school	40%	Campani (2013)
Myanmar	2020	High school	84.9%	Bray et al. (2020)
South Korea	2010	Primary Secondary	86.8 % 72.2 %	Lee (2013)
Sri Lanka	2006	Year 5	78%	Glewwe et al. (2006)
Taiwan	2014-2015	Primary school High school	76.7% 34.9%	Chang (2019), cited from (MOET Taiwan, 2015)
United Kingdom	2018	Secondary school	41%	The Sutton Trust (2018)
Vietnam	2006	Primary Secondary High school	32% 46% 63%	Dang (2011)

Further evidence on household expenditure on private tutoring supports the fact that this sector is growing fast. In South Korea, expenditures on private tutoring, termed as *hagwon* or scam school, amounted to roughly 3% of the national GDP, with approximately 70% of Korean students at all levels receiving private tutoring in 2019 (Statistics Korea, 2019). Spending on children's education and tutoring in this country was estimated to increase sharply from 37% to 78% between 2005 and 2007 (Byun, 2008). In Japan, private tutoring, known as *juku*, or after-hour classes, established a billion-dollar industry with an estimated annual revenue of 14 billion USD in the mid-1990s and nine tutoring companies listed on the stock exchange market (Dang et al., 2008). Countries with rising incomes, such as China, host amongst the major tutoring markets, with the revenues of private tutoring estimated to increase from USD 75 billion in 2016 to \$163 billion in 2021 (Zheng et al., 2020). The national average rate of tutoring enrolment from pre-school to year 12 in this country increased from 37% in 2014 to 50% in 2020. However, Chinese authorities have implemented strong regulations on this sector, significantly reducing the scale of private tutoring. In a recent report by Zhang (2023), the enrolment rates for primary and lower secondary school students in China plummeted from 48% to 21%. Additionally, non-academic and home tutoring participation declined from over 50% to nearly 39%.

2.2 Desirable and Undesirable Dimensions of Private Tutoring

Private tutoring significantly impacts mainstream schooling, social stratification, and policy. Research on private tutoring has discussed at length both positive and problematic dimensions of this private industry. On a positive note, private tutoring provides more individualised instruction to students, using a more flexible delivery mechanism from one-to-one, small group, to large class tutoring (Boehm, 2018; Zheng et al., 2020). According to Bray (2020), when organised sensitively and effectively, private tutoring benefits students at low and mid-range achievement levels to keep up with their peers, and therefore, bridging the gaps and disparities in the classrooms. Private tutoring also offers extra income for its providers, who may be full-time, self-employed or retired teachers and tutors, university students and university lecturers.

Šťastný et al. (2021), in a study involving 494 Czech schoolteachers, revealed that 35% of the teachers in the study provided private tutoring to boost incomes.

Conversely, private tutoring could exacerbate social inequalities and stratification (Guill et al., 2019; Ille et al., 2019). Financially, it can burden economically disadvantaged families, feeling pressured to invest in such services for their children. According to Tsiplakides (2018, p. 24), private tutoring undermines the free Education-For-All principle and may lead to the “social class” in education where well-off households can afford more and better quality tutoring. Private tutoring can weaken mainstream schooling and become problematic when schoolteachers neglect their school duties or decrease the input of regular lessons to increase demand for their services. The growth of shadow education may indicate that families may have less trust and confidence that schools can cater to their children’s needs (Hamid et al., 2018; Ille et al., 2019). In addition, private tutoring may have negative impacts on students’ well-being. Dang (2011) revealed that 49% of parents in Vietnam believed that private tutoring adversely affected their children’s physical and mental health. A recent study by Kim et al. (2022) in South Korea suggested that emotional pressure and anxiety generated by academic competition and private tutoring threatened the mental health of the children in the study. These findings raise concerns about the potential psychological toll that private tutoring can impose on young learners.

The response from governments and policymakers regarding private tutoring has been diverse and varied. While many legislators chose to overlook the existence ‘in the shadow’ of private tutoring, in other countries, private tutoring has been actively controlled and regulated. China stands out as a successful case in point, where robust measures were imposed to shape and steer private tutoring, resulting in a significant reduction in the scale of the sector within a short timeframe. However, Zhang (2023) highlighted that regulating private tutoring presents various challenges. Ongoing human and financial resources needed to maintain follow-up measures which also require close partnerships between national and provincial governments, local authorities and schools. Furthermore, when governments recognise the need to regulate private tutoring, they usually miss the timing for effectively steering the sector as it has become “a deep component of the culture” (Zhang, 2023, p. 110). As noted by Dang et al. (2008), once private tutoring evolves into a major industry, and particularly when parents perceive it as providing a competitive edge to their children, it becomes increasingly challenging for governments and authorities to enact and adjust policies that threaten its existence.

2.3 Learning English in the ‘Shadow’: English Private Tutoring

In tandem with the emergence of English as a global lingua franca, English private tutoring has established an expanding market-oriented industry with escalating demands and high participation rates. Hamid et al. (2018) conducted a study in Bangladesh involving 572 year 10 students, revealing a rate of 81.4% of students resorting to English private tutoring. Similarly, Mahmud et al. (2018) reported a high rate of over 84% among 354 students from years 6 to 10 subscribing to some form of English private tutoring. Interestingly, the enrolment rate of tutoring is not necessarily higher in urban areas than in rural contexts. Pallegedara (2012) presented Sri Lankan data from 2006-2007 indicating a slightly higher rate of tutoring participation in rural areas (64.4%) compared to urban settings (62.9%).

A frequently asked question is whether private tutoring ‘works’ in the sense of enhancing student command of the English language. Literature on the effectiveness of such tutoring on student performance has shown “inconclusive and even contradictory findings” (Bray, 2014, p. 381). Some studies asserted a positive link between tutoring and improved English language skills. For example, Chatterjee (2018), using data from the Indian Human Development Survey in 2011-2012, found that private tutoring helped improve students’ English by up to 16%. Lee (2010), in a study of 43 undergraduate students in South Korea, found that those who subscribed to these beyond-classroom tutorials had “significantly higher English proficiency” (p. 69). Studies by Candia et al. (2018) in Uganda, Hamid et al. (2009) in Bangladesh, and Zheng et al. (2020) in China highlighted a positive correlation between private tutoring and students’ achievement in English proficiency tests. However, several studies reported insignificant effects of English private tutoring on student performance. For example, Zhang (2013) revealed a trivial effect of English private tutoring on the exam performance of more than 6,000 school students in China. In Hong Kong, Yung (2015) found that students did not view private tuition as an effective method for improving their English competence. The excessive emphasis on examination skills rather than on communicative competence was cited as one of the limiting factors.

As highlighted by Bray (2014), the impact of private tutoring is controversial and inconclusive due to a complex interplay of factors. One major issue concerns the availability of data, the scope, and coverage of evaluation studies as well as the content, intensity, delivery mechanism, and type of tutoring. For example, large tutoring classes in cram schooling are significantly different from one-to-one and small-group tutoring. Furthermore, the effectiveness of private tutoring may also vary due to students with different levels of proficiency and motivations, making private tutoring a “complex research arena” (Bray et al., 2014, p. 382).

3. METHODS

3.1 The Context of the Study

Private tutoring in Vietnam is strongly linked to both the cultural and institutional contexts in this country. Culturally, Confucian values have remained prevalent in educational processes and practices in Vietnamese classrooms (Truong et al., 2016). The belief ingrained in the mind of Vietnamese people is that education is a gatekeeper to individual success and social mobility. This has put pressure on the education system to serve as a vehicle for personal and national development, as well as on households, including investments in private tuition. Institutionally, the two-tier organisation of ‘Normal’ and ‘Selective’ schools in Vietnam has resulted in a highly competitive system, with an excessive focus on high-stakes testing to determine academic success. Rewards and status are afforded to the most successful students in the system, which creates a ‘backwash’ effect at lower levels, where a culture of competition and success or failure in examinations is dominated (Vu et al., 2020). To gain or maintain a competitive advantage, parents and students are motivated to resort to private tutoring, and thus a ‘shadow’ industry of after-hours and weekend classes flourishes.

One of the pioneer studies on private tutoring in Vietnam was conducted by Ha et al. (2005), which involved over 1,000 primary school children nationwide. The findings showed a participation rate of 46%, with an average of nine hours per week spent on private tutoring, surpassing the legal limit of four hours per week. Dang (2007, 2008, 2013), analysing nationally representative data from the 2006 and 2008 Vietnam Living Standards Survey, found that 32% of primary school students received tutoring in at least one school subject, whilst the respective rates for lower-secondary and high school students were 46% and 63%. However, the effectiveness of such tutoring lessons is controversial. Although these students tended to feel “happier and more optimistic” about their studies and their future (Ko et al., 2009, p. 28), as argued by Huynh (2020), private tutoring did not have “any real impact on pupil’s underlying skills over time” (p. 3). The higher scores on school tests and exams by private tutoring attendees reflected the issue of transparency in teaching practice whereby teachers might pre-teach the test questions or exploit their arbitrariness in awarding grades to their tutored students.

The increasing popularity of private tutoring in Vietnam has sparked public debate over its merits and costs. In response, the Vietnamese Government has issued various legal measures in an attempt to regulate this shadow industry. As early as 1993, Decree No. 242/1993 and Circular 16/1993 were issued aiming to prohibit tutoring provision outside school hours. However, due to its high demands, private tutoring persisted and remained firmly in the shadows. In subsequent years, Circular 17/2012/TT-BGDDT was introduced in 2012, followed by a recent Decision 2499/QĐ-BGDĐT in 2019. These regulations prohibit schoolteachers from pressuring their students to take extra lessons with their service. However, the efficacy of these legislative measures remains indeterminate.

3.2 Research Questions

Although private tutoring in Vietnam began to receive more scholarly attention, little empirical research on English private tutoring has been available, leaving this growing sector under-researched. This study aimed to bridge the gap and contribute to the existing literature by identifying the scale, determinants, and perceived effect of English private tutoring among high-school students in Vietnam. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the participation rate, types, and reasons for taking private tutoring among Vietnamese high school students?
2. How do the students perceive English private tutoring in terms of its effect on their school performance?
3. Do the students’ perceptions of private tutoring vary across genders and locations?

3.3 Data Collection

The data for this study were obtained through a survey questionnaire administered to 760 year 11 students in nine selected public schools in Hanoi (urban), Bac Ninh (regional), and Lao Cai (rural), comprising three schools in each location. Random year 11 classes from each participating school were then selected for convenience in distributing questionnaires. While the sample of schools and classes could not have been nationally representative, our goal was to ensure that it

encompassed diversity in terms of geographical location and socio-economic conditions. Prior permission was sought from the teachers and school officials in the participating schools to select the sample and deliver the survey. A total of 583 responses were received, constituting a response rate of 76.7%.

The questionnaire consists of 18 question items, divided into two main sections. The first section collected information on students' demographics, such as gender, location, and academic performance. The second section focused on different aspects of students' engagement in English private tutoring, including the type, frequency, location, content, and tutoring provider. This section also included items sought to explore student perceptions of private tutoring in terms of its necessity, reasons for enrolment, effectiveness and outcomes, peer, parental, and teacher pressure. The language of the survey is Vietnamese.

3.4 Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, the data were entered, cleaned, and re-coded into categories. To provide an overview and identify patterns and frequency distributions of private tutoring enrolment patterns, descriptive statistics was used as a method of univariate analysis (Bryman, 2012). Inferential analysis was then conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between two variables using Chi-square statistic. The use of Chi-square test of independence is particularly appropriate in this context due to several grounds: (i) the variables in this study are categorical; (ii) each variable contains two or more groups, and (iii) the observations are independent from each other. These tests aimed at exploring the association between demographic variables (i.e., gender, location) and enrolment patterns, as well as students' perceptions of private tutoring.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Scale and Types of Private Tutoring

Table 2 summarises the percentage distribution of students across gender, academic performance, and demographic locations in terms of their engagement in English private tutoring. The table shows a rate of slightly over 75% of students enrolling in English private tutoring. Notably, the most passionate subscribers to private tutoring were those with mid-range and lower achievement levels, comprising 87.8% and 94.1%, respectively, surpassing their higher-achieving peers at 70.8%. Regarding the distribution of the students across geographic locations, it was statistically significant that private tutoring was considerably more popular amongst students in the rural setting, with a staggering 92.7% participation rate, compared to 72.1% in urban areas and 51% in regional locales.

Table 2. Participation rate of private tutoring (PT) in English.

	N	% of taking PT	% of not taking PT
Taking PT	583	75.1	23.8
Gender			
Male	302	74.1	25.9
Female	281	78.2	21.8

Table 2 continued...

Academic performance (English)			
Distinction (8.5-10)	98	70.8	29.2
Good (7.0-8.4)	249	69.1	30.9
Average (5.5-6.9)	148	87.8	12.2
Below Average (4.0-5.4)	34	94.1	5.9
Region			
Hanoi (urban)	166	72.1	27.9
Bac Ninh (regional)	155	51.0	49.0
Lao Cai (rural)	262	92.7	7.3

Table 3 summarises the patterns of private tutoring participation among students. As presented in the table, large class tutoring was the most popular type in terms of gender, with roughly 60% of the student participation. Most students in rural areas opted for large class tutoring (92.6%), significantly higher than their urban and regional counterparts at 18.5% and 30.9%, respectively. The urban students favoured one-to-one tutoring at a rate of 10.9%, while the corresponding figures for regional and rural areas were just 1.2% and 0.8%.

Table 3. Patterns of English private tutoring (PT) in percentage.

	Gender		Region		
	Male	Female	Urban (Hanoi)	Regional (Bac Ninh)	Rural (Lao Cai)
Type of PT					
One-to-one	1.5	5.5	10.9	1.2	0.8
Small group (2-10 students)	14.2	12.8	37.0	11.1	2.5
Medium group (11-20 students)	26.5	23.8	42.9	60.5	4.5
Large class (>20 students)	62.3	60.4	18.5	30.9	92.6
Location					
At home	2.5	5.3	14.8	1.2	-
At school	63.9	59.6	13.0	14.8	98.8
At teacher's house	26.2	25.4	42.6	77.8	1.2
At language centre	11.9	17.1	49.1	12.3	-
Provider					
Private tutor	2.0	6.4	15.2	2.4	-
School teacher	67.5	60.1	17.0	24.7	98.8
Teacher from other schools	26.1	30.9	58.9	67.1	1.2
Native-speaker teacher	8.9	10.3	30.4	9.4	0.0
Frequency/week					
1 lesson	64.9	59.8	26.7	20.3	91.8
2 lessons	29.2	32.9	59.5	72.2	4.1
3 lessons	4.0	3.0	6.9	5.1	1.6
4 lessons	1.5	1.7	3.4	2.5	0.4
>4 lessons	-	1.3	3.4	-	-
Learning content					
Grammar and sentence structure	77.7	79.6	54.5	73.4	92.3
Written examination practice	18.8	15.0	32.1	19.0	8.9
Communicative skills	18.3	19.5	32.1	40.5	5.5
IELTS, TOFEL and other standardised tests	11.7	13.7	42.9	8.9	-

In terms of locations and providers of private tutoring, distinct enrolment patterns were observed. Among students in the rural region, the most prevalent venue for tutoring was their schools, delivered by their schoolteachers (98.8%). Conversely,

the students in urban areas favoured language centres (49.9%), and those in regional settings primarily chose to study at their teachers' premises (77.8%).

Exploring the content of tutoring, most students, regardless of their gender and region, reported that their primary focus was form-focused practice, including grammar and writing exercises. The rate was highest amongst rural students (92.3%), followed by regional students (73.4%) and urban students (54.4%). Interestingly, a focus on communicative competence, the goal of the new national English curriculum for schools, only attracted 5.5% of rural students. In comparison, the corresponding figures for urban and regional students were substantially higher at 32.1% and 19%, respectively. Remarkably, 42.9% of urban students opted to study for international English tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, while there were no records of rural students choosing to do so.

Table 4 illustrates the correlations between private tutoring, gender, and region. Statistically significant relationships were found in enrolment patterns among students from various socio-economic regions.

Table 4. Correlations between private tutoring, gender, and region.

Patterns of private tutoring		Region	Gender
Type	Chi-square	458.996	5.886
	df	8	4
	Sig.	.000 ^{*,b}	.208
Location	Chi-square	721.224	5.369
	df	8	4
	Sig.	.000 ^{*,b}	.251
Provider	Chi-square	615.287	9.235
	df	8	4
	Sig.	.000 ^{*,b}	.055
Frequency/week	Chi-square	238.865	4.567
	df	10	5
	Sig.	.000 ^{*,b}	.471 ^b
Learning content	Chi-square	285.712	1.791
	df	8	4
	Sig.	.000 ^{*,b}	.774

Note. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the .05 level.

b. More than 20% of cells in this table have expected cell counts less than 5.

There was no statistically significant relationship between gender and types of private tutoring ($\chi^2 = 5.886$, $df = 4$, $p = .208$), indicating no gender differences in private tutoring participation. However, substantial disparities were observed in enrollment types among students in different geographic settings ($\chi^2 = 458.996$, $df = 8$, $p < .001$).

Statistically significant relationships were found between regions and venues of private tutoring ($\chi^2 = 721.224$, $df = 8$, $p < .001$) and between regions and tutoring providers ($\chi^2 = 615.287$, $df = 8$, $p < .001$). Similarly, there was no gender difference in choosing the location and provider of tutoring. Regarding the content of tutoring, a statistically significant relationship was found between regions and the learning content of private tutoring ($\chi^2 = 285.712$, $df = 8$, $p < .001$).

4.2 Reasons for Taking English Private Tutoring

Table 5 provides insights into the students' perceptions regarding the motivations behind their enrolment in private tutoring, including factors such as school instruction, peer influence, and parents' and teachers' pressure.

Table 5. Reasons for taking English private tutoring in percentage.

Statements	Gender		Region		
	Male	Female	Hanoi (urban)	Bac Ninh (regional)	Lao Cai (rural)
1. I take private tutoring as I want to have a better command of English					
Agree	72.4	82.0	78.9	82.7	74.5
Disagree	5.8	2.5	5.3	3.8	3.4
Neutral	21.8	15.6	15.8	13.5	22.1
2. I take private tutoring because the English program at school was not good enough					
Agree	15.0	19.1	22.9	24.7	10.3
Disagree	60.5	60.0	38.2	41.2	81.7
Neutral	24.5	20.9	38.9	34.0	8.0
3. I take private tutoring because the classroom teacher is not good enough					
Agree	6.0	3.4	3.9	9.3	3.1
Disagree	75.6	76.3	61.2	57.7	92.4
Neutral	18.4	20.3	34.9	33.0	4.4
4. I take private tutoring because my friends take it					
Agree	9.2	9.5	7.7	3.1	13.3
Disagree	71.6	75.0	65.4	62.5	82.3
Neutral	19.3	15.1	26.9	34.4	4.0
5. My parents want/force me to take private tutoring					
Agree	9.3	6.4	9.2	8.1	6.8
Disagree	69.9	77.7	60.8	65.7	85.6
Neutral	20.8	15.9	30.0	26.3	7.7
6. My teacher suggested me to take private tutoring					
Agree	16.1	14.4	9.2	7.2	22.3
Disagree	59.0	63.3	51.9	50.5	71.8
Neutral	24.9	22.3	38.9	42.3	5.9

Most students agreed with statement 1 that they opted for private tutoring to improve their proficiency in the English language. Statistically significant relationships in perceptions were found both in relation to gender ($\chi^2 = 13.002$, $df = 2$, $p < .005$) and location ($\chi^2 = 20.276$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$).

Statements 2 and 3 explicitly focus on school instruction and teacher quality. Most of the students disagreed with the statement that they enrolled in private tutoring due to the inadequate English program and input at school. Similarly, most students also disagreed with the statement that their English teacher at school was not proficient enough.

Statements 4, 5 and 6 centre on the influence of peer, parental, and teacher pressure on the students' choices to engage in private tutoring. The data shows that over 70% of the students disagreed with the statement that they took private tutoring because their friends did so. Similarly, parental pressure was not a significant determinant shaping the student's decision to take private tutoring, with 69.9% of male

and 77.7% of female students disagreeing with the statement. Regarding pressure from teachers, 59% of male and 63% of female students disagreed with the statement that their teachers recommended private tutoring. About 22% of students in the rural area reported that they took private tutoring due to pressure from their teachers, which was significantly higher compared to urban and regional settings at 9.2% and 7.2%, respectively ($\chi^2 = 79.089$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$).

4.3 Perceived Effectiveness of Private Tutoring on Academic Performance

As seen in Table 6, around half of the students endorsed the benefits of private tutoring in relation to their English achievement at school (statement 7). Over 43% of rural students reported that private tutoring did not help them attain higher achievements. Regarding the impact of private tutoring on the ability to use English communicatively (statement 8), about 82% of students in the regional area and 77% in the rural setting reported no improvement in their English-speaking skills.

Data also reveals different patterns concerning the correlation between confidence levels and enrolment in private tutoring (statement 9). Approximately 52% of female students reported feeling more assured and optimistic when taking extra English lessons, slightly surpassing their male counterparts. While 64% of urban students perceived that such tutoring contributed positively to their feelings, 41% of rural students did not share the same sentiment.

Table 6. Perceived effectiveness of private tutoring in percentage.

Statements	Gender		Region		
	Male	Female	Hanoi (urban)	Bac Ninh (regional)	Lao Cai (rural)
7. PT helps me to have higher achievements in English tests and exams at school					
Agree	50.2	54.0	59.1	53.8	47.2
Disagree	34.7	26.4	14.4	22.1	43.7
Neutral	15.1	19.7	26.5	24.0	9.1
8. Those who take PT are able to speak English more fluently					
Agree	6.4	6.1	8.5	3.0	6.3
Disagree	75.3	74.7	66.9	82.0	76.9
Neutral	18.3	19.2	24.6	15.0	16.7
9. Taking PT helps me to feel more self-confident					
Agree	48.4	51.7	64.1	48.0	43.2
Disagree	28.3	23.3	6.1	15.0	41.9
Neutral	23.3	25.0	29.8	37.0	14.9

Table 7 displays Chi-Square tests examining the relationship between private tutoring and its perceived effectiveness among students. It indicates no statistically significant correlation between gender and the perceived effectiveness of private tutoring. However, a statistically significant relationship exists between location and the perceived effectiveness of private tutoring ($p < .001$).

Table 7. Correlation between private tutoring and its perceived effectiveness.

Statements		Region	Gender
1. I take private tutoring as I want to have a better command of English	Chi-square	20.276	13.002
	df	4	2
	Sig.	<.001 ^{*,b}	.002 [*]
2. I take private tutoring because the English program at school was not good enough	Chi-square	87.633	1.795
	df	4	2
	Sig.	.000 ^{*,b}	.408
3. I take private tutoring because the classroom teacher is not good enough	Chi-square	73.129	1.750
	df	4	2
	Sig.	<.001 ^{*,b}	.417
4. I take private tutoring because my friends take it	Chi-square	61.081	2.280
	df	6	3
	Sig.	<.001 ^{*,b,c}	.516 ^b
5. My parents want/force me to take private tutoring	Chi-square	35.756	3.567
	df	4	2
	Sig.	<.001 ^{*,b}	.168
6. My teacher suggested me to take private tutoring	Chi-square	79.089	.881
	df	4	2
	Sig.	<.001 ^{*,b}	.644
7. PT helps me to have higher achievements in English tests and exams at school	Chi-square	47.290	4.322
	df	4	2
	Sig.	<.001 ^{*,b}	.115
8. Those who take PT are able to speak English more fluently	Chi-square	8.245	.074
	df	4	2
	Sig.	.083 ^b	.963
9. Taking PT helps me to feel more self-confident	Chi-square	70.647	1.495
	df	4	2
	Sig.	<.001 ^{*,b}	.474

Note. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the .05 level.

b. More than 20% of cells in this table have expected cell counts less than 5.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Prevalence of English Private Tutoring among Vietnamese Students

This paper explored perceptions of English private tutoring among year 11 high school students in urban, regional, and rural schools in Vietnam. The findings revealed a rate of over 75% of students enrolling in English private tutoring, which was significantly higher than the overall rate of tutoring in all subjects reported by [Ha et al. \(2005\)](#) and [Dang \(2007, 2011, 2013\)](#). The high enrolment rate of private tutoring indicates that private tutoring is a common and popular rather than an elitist educational practice. The prevalence of private tutoring can be seen as an educational reality in Vietnam and strongly reflects the nature of social and educational competition.

The data presented in this study indicate that a substantial proportion of private tutoring was received by the students in the mid and low range of achievement who were lagging and wanted to keep up. Interestingly, tutoring is also highly prevalent among high-achieving students, with over 70% of students with distinction levels resorting to private tutoring. The high enrolment rates among students across levels of academic achievement can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, private tutoring is

driven by the examination culture, which features the Vietnamese education system. As discussed earlier, the reward, status, and rank are afforded to the most successful students in the system who achieve high marks in tests and exams. Additionally, the strong connection between education and employment fosters intense competition for higher achievements. Therefore, even high-achieving students are motivated to engage with private tutoring to enhance or maintain their competitive edge. This finding aligns with [Bray \(2020\)](#) on the purpose of private tutoring in contemporary society:

Shadow education is much less about support to those who are in real need of learning support that they cannot find at school, and a lot more about maintaining competitive advantages within schools for students who are already successful and privileged. (p. 452)

The geographic patterns of enrolment in private tutoring in this study suggest that private English tutoring is more common outside the capital city. The popularity of private tutoring in rural settings points to several factors. The primary reason is that English learning options are usually limited beyond the classrooms in rural regions. Language centres and tutoring businesses tend to proliferate in densely-populated urban areas, creating a geographical barrier for rural students who wish to enrol in such centres. This explains why urban students in this study were more inclined to enrol in language centres, while 98% of the rural students received tutoring at their own schools, delivered by their own teachers. The lack of alternative English learning resources made English tutoring the most popular and convenient choice in these disadvantaged areas. Additionally, the cost factor played a significant role. The research findings show that nearly 92% of these students took one tutoring lesson per week in large classes at schools. This is the most affordable option compared to one-to-one and small group tutoring. Economic disparities became notably evident when urban students could afford more personalised options such as one-to-one and small group tutoring and even had access to native-speaker teachers. In contrast, rural students did not have those choices, highlighting the financial inequalities in private tutoring opportunities.

One of the key findings of this study concerns the identities of the tutors, highlighting less desirable aspects of private tutoring. Mainstream schoolteachers delivered the highest number of tutoring classes, becoming the largest providers, particularly in rural areas. Given that teacher wages in the public school system in Vietnam have always been low, private tutoring served as a significant source of complementary income. As [Huynh \(2020\)](#) reveals, private tutoring fees have become the primary income source for many public school teachers. Although these full-time, government-employed teachers are often overloaded with teaching and non-teaching duties, this economic factor, as argued by [Le \(2015\)](#), is the major driving force for teachers' engagement in providing private tutoring. However, the practice of classroom teachers offering private tutoring for their own students can be problematic. It risks the temptation for teachers to decrease the input of regular lessons in exchange for tutoring fees. It is also likely to lead to the elements of favouritism over tutored students, or discrimination against non-tutored students, or transparency in the process of marking and assessment ([Nguyen et al., 2021](#)). As argued by [Hamid et al. \(2018\)](#), this practice may breach the professional code of conduct and ethics regardless of

whether teachers' engagement with private tutoring due to low wages or desires for material success or both.

Regarding the question of why the students participated in private tutoring, most students in this study, regardless of gender or location, engaged in tutoring with a genuine intent of improving their command of English. However, the research findings on its effectiveness provide thought-provoking insights. Despite the high participation rate, these tutoring sections appeared to have a modest impact on student performance, particularly in using English for communication. This can be explained by the fact that most students in this study reported a strong focus on grammar and sentence structure, aimed at preparing for the written, high-stakes exams in their final year of high school.

Indications from this study also raise concerns about the role of the public education system. Vietnam is currently embarking on a national foreign language project, featuring a major innovation in school English language curriculum and textbooks. The curriculum reform is expected to reduce the demand for private tutoring by enhancing the quality of public education. However, the prevalence of private tutoring in this study indicates that the school curriculum alone may not fully meet the needs of students and their parents. The global demand for English proficiency has intensified the need for English tutoring in the private sector. When this demand is not fully and satisfactorily met in mainstream schooling, it leads to the increasing scale and intensity of the shadow industry.

5.2 Policy Implications

The findings in this study suggest that private English tutoring is a widespread phenomenon, which has useful implications for the government and policymakers. If private tutoring remains unregulated and subject to market forces, shadow education may grow further. As marketised shadow education spreads, it is likely to aggravate social inequalities and stratification, and families and children will lag behind in the competition.

Managing the shadow industry poses a significant challenge. A strong case can be made for banning teachers in the public system from providing private tutoring for their own students. However, this can only be applied to those who are on the government payroll. Lessons from South Korea demonstrate that strict prohibition of the practice can lead to "an increase in black market activities" (Choi et al., 2016, p. 19). This is also apparent in Vietnam, where private tutoring becomes a 'hidden' agenda and appears 'invisibly' in private tutoring homes when authoritative responses are intensified (Dang, 2013).

As Bray (2020) suggests, effectively regulating the private tutoring sector requires greater attention from researchers and policymakers. Its increasing scale and intensity need to be recognised and evaluated. It is significant to gain large scale, statistical data on different dimensions of shadow education to construct a solid understanding of the sector. The goal is not to eradicate shadow education, but to allocate resources to monitor and regulate, rather than banning private tutoring. Empirical evidence can support policymakers in deciding what dimensions of private tutoring are positive and beneficial and to be encouraged, as well as what aspects are undesirable and discouraged. With a solid understanding of the sector, legislators can devise and adjust regulations, and identify strategies to engage with, control or harness the forces within the tutoring market.

Private tutoring is more prevalent in countries with deficient public education systems. In Vietnam, there have been public debates over the years on the quality of public schooling. Therefore, rather than merely addressing the symptoms in the shadow, authorities should also heed the signals that shadow education sends about mainstream schooling and work to improve the quality of the public education system. If teachers' low salaries are the primary incentive for offering private tutoring, the government should consider implementing a more efficient wage policy. This means allocating sufficient financial resources to enable the school systems to cater to their teaching staff and students, thus reducing the need to go to the shadow for supplementation.

6. CONCLUSION

This study presents survey results on the phenomenon of English private tutoring among high school students in Vietnam. Research findings reveal a high enrolment rate in private tutoring among students across various levels of achievement. Despite the modest effectiveness of these sections, private tutoring has become a popular learning space beyond school hours. The study highlights the expansion of private tutoring in rural areas, where large class tutoring has become a popular and convenient option for learning the global language. This article calls for a sense of urgency for private tutoring to be on the agenda of researchers and policymakers in Vietnam. Further studies on various aspects of private tutoring in Vietnam are crucial for gaining practical and empirical insights into the increasing scale and significance of the thriving tutoring market in the country.

It should be noted that this paper does not claim statistical representation for the entire country, as it involves only limited schools in selected provinces. The findings in this study can serve as a starting point or as a reference for further research on a larger scale, involving more stakeholders and in more diverse settings.

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