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**PRIVATE TUITION FOR ENGLISH IN THE KURUNEGALA EDUCATION ZONE:  
MOTIVATION METHODS AND MATERIALS**

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**Abstract**

Sri Lanka, as a country with one of the highest literacy rates in South Asia, boasts of free education from the beginning of primary school, right up to undergraduate degree level. There are no school fees charged, and students are given free textbooks; meals have also been provided free of charge at various periods in the history of free education, with the aim of making education accessible to all. However, there are many analysts and activists who claim that education is not free. This is because the private tuition industry is a lucrative business throughout Sri Lanka, and almost all school-going children, including those who come from families that can barely afford the fees for private tuition, attend these classes as a norm. This study investigates the factors that drive students and their parents to seek private tuition for English in the Kurunegala Education Zone, and explores the pedagogy employed by a sample of private English tutors. The study, which used questionnaires to stakeholders classroom observation of English tuition classes and materials used in such classes, found that contrary to the popular belief, it is not the appearance of the tutors or the attractive quality of advertising that draw students to English tuition classes, but the desire of students and parents to learn English in a 'freer' and humour-filled environment, to learn to speak fluently and to do better at school and national examinations by learning grammar explicitly. Students are also drawn to private tuition teachers who consistently use the mother tongue for instruction in the ESL classroom.

**Keywords:** Private tuition, shadow education, ESL pedagogical practices

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## **PRIVATE TUITION FOR ENGLISH IN THE KURUNEGALA EDUCATION ZONE: MOTIVATION, METHODS AND MATERIALS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Sri Lanka, as a country with one of the highest literacy rates in South Asia, boasts of free education from primary school to university. Not only are there no school fees charged and students given free text books, but at various periods of time, even free meals have been provided with the aim of making education accessible to all. However, the private tuition industry is a lucrative business throughout Sri Lanka, and almost all school-going children, including those who come from families that can barely afford fees, attend these classes as a norm. Sri Lanka, has "deeply engrained traditions of private tutoring that have been passed down for several generations" (Bray and Lykins, 2012:26). Private Tuition, as Pallegedara (2018) notes, serves to widen social inequalities specially in developing countries, due to the fact that it is only the relatively richer households that can afford more and higher quality private tutoring. Other studies (e.g., Herath, 2022) have found that in Sri Lanka, private tuition classes contribute significantly to enhance the academic performance of students in government schools.

Private tutoring could be defined as the lessons and related support obtained in academic subjects beyond hours of mainstream formal schooling for a fee (Bray & Lykins, 2012). It usually takes place after regular school hours, during weekends and during school holidays. Students attend private tuition to enhance their abilities for some particular purposes; for instance, to supplement school education, have better grades at school or prepare themselves for the university admission examination. Marimuthu et. al. (1991) termed private tuition as 'The Shadow Education System'. In Sri Lanka, the term 'Private Tuition' is popularly used to refer to this phenomenon. Henceforth, this paper uses the term "private tuition" (PT) to refer to supplementary education that parents pay for, to educate their children. The phenomenon of PT in Sri Lanka has been analysed from an economic point of view and its evolution has been traced from being a luxury, to being a necessity (e.g., Pallegedara, 2011, 2012, Damayanthi, 2017) and it is widely accepted that PT distorts the idea of equity provided through free education. Due to the sociopolitical context, globalization and "extra-linguistic value" (Parakrama, 2012) of English in Sri Lanka, as well as the heightened demand for learning English, Private Tuition for English (PTE) is a particularly widespread area of PT. PTE was once prevalent only in big cities, but is now commonplace even in more rural settings. Both professionals and apprentices engage in private tutoring for English. Originally, PTE was available mostly for school leavers and young adults wanting to enter the job market. However, today, it is a lucrative commercial business targeting school students at all levels. This phenomenon is present in many other Asian and South Asian countries. For example, Chan (2017) examined factors affecting students' choice in studying English at private tutoring schools in Thailand with the administration of a questionnaire to a sample of 80 upper secondary school students. The researcher investigated why Thai 'upper secondary' students attended such classes despite the formal schools being equipped with a staff teaching English. Her sample, though smaller than the one in the present study, had a wider geographical scope. The results reflect that the majority of participants attend private tuition for English expecting support for their university entrance. She also finds that the students had more positive attitudes towards their private tutors than their school teachers. Her



participants further agreed that their private tutors had more competence in English than the school teachers and they could understand the lessons taught by the tutors better.

Aloysious (2015) posits that teachers in formal schools do not sufficiently motivate students. Motivation plays an important role in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. It essentially promotes cooperation among mixed ability learners so that students may grasp the target language. Most of the teachers work only with a minority of capable children. Aloysious (2015) also points out that often, teachers implement only reading and writing activities that make the pedagogy imbalanced.

Thus, many students and parents are of the opinion that this alternative English education immensely benefits them despite the cost incurred. However, there is also much criticism levelled against the mobilization of private English tuition as there is no mechanism for it to be supervised by the Ministry of Education or any other authority; the quality of teaching in these classes is not monitored and payments are not formalized. Further, it is commonly believed that PT teachers make use of flashy advertising to popularize their classes, that they focus on their appearance and are mostly young, and it is these factors that attract students. Since it is such a pervasive phenomenon and hard to ignore, PTE needs to be investigated in terms of impact, effectiveness and other factors.

### **Objective of the Study and Research Questions**

Since there is such a significant private tuition industry for school children to learn English, this study aims to investigate specific reasons why school students are motivated to attend PTE classes despite the well-structured English language learning programmes in the formal school system. The specific research questions asked are as follows:

1. What are the general factors that guide the choice of parents and students to attend private tuition for English (PTE)?
2. What type of pedagogies do the PTE tutors employ to teach their learners English?

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study incorporated both qualitative and quantitative data to enhance reliability. The research design included questionnaires and classroom observation of tuition classes. The participants in the study were drawn from the stakeholder population related to the Private English Tuition industry in the Kurunegala Education Zone<sup>1</sup>. Thus, this research focused on a sample of 640 students between Grades 6-11, 57 parents using the cluster sampling technique and 33 private tutors using the convenience sampling method in order to obtain answers to the research questions. The Kurunegala Education Zone of which the centre is the Kurunegala town, furnishes both large scale and small-scale institutions offering private tuition, and specifically, tuition for English. Three questionnaires were administered to the three groups of participants to obtain quantitative data, and further, classroom observation of PTE classes and checklists were also used as well as observation of documents (teaching material).

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

With regard to the factors that influence the students and parents to choose private tuition, the most significant finding was that which showed 96% of students attending PTE classes

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<sup>1</sup> The latest informal survey conducted by the North Western Provincial Council in the Kurunegala administrative district has revealed that there are more than 8,200 large-scale and small-scale institutions offering private tuition at present and nearly 175,000 school students attend these classes regularly in the weekends. (Wijayaratne, 2019).



because they need to improve their knowledge of English grammar. The next most important motivation of the students to attend PTE was to obtain better marks for the English examination in school; this is demonstrated by 86% of the participants. The vast majority of parents, most importantly, need their children to acquire the ability to *speak* in English by attending the PTE class. 87% of them need their children to attend PTE and improve their English since fluency in English is considered to be a main qualification for employment. Further, although 66% of them admitted that they send their children to a PTE class because the children's competence in grammar is unsatisfactory, most of the parents (70%) denied that the reason they select PTE for their children is low marks obtained at school exams. Thus, it might be discerned that it is the competitiveness in examinations that compel parents to send their children for PTE, to not only improve their English but to be good in it and do well in examinations. This conclusion is supported by the fact that almost half of the PTE teachers (47%) indicated that the parents of students request their children to be coached using the test paper model. This clearly shows that the parents need their children to acquire more marks at the school term tests using practice gained from the PTE class.

The expectations of participants (parents and students) of their formal school English teacher too shed light on reasons for choosing PTE. The majority of the students indicated that they do not have sufficient time to learn English in school. 66% of parents were also not satisfied with the allocation of time for students to learn English at school. However, although a vast majority of the students indicated that they were satisfied with their formal school English teachers, a majority of the PTE teachers (55%) in response to the questionnaires in this study said they receive negative and unfavourable responses from the students about their school English teacher. It is possible to speculate that student participants were being cautious about saying anything negative about their school teachers in response to our questionnaire, but felt more secure about answering honestly in the context of their tuition class. Further, a majority of the PTE teachers said that according to students, the school text book was not effective, and they are not satisfied with the way English is taught in schools. According to this data, the students do not seem to be satisfied with the English education in school, pointing to another reason for choosing PTE.

Both parents and students disagreed that they are influenced by friends and peers in deciding on PTE as well as choosing the tutor. They also indicated that they are not influenced by the flyers, posters or advertisements when selecting PTE teachers. A little less than half of the parents in the sample indicated that they decided to send their children for PTE based on the marks obtained for English by their children in the previous term tests. Further, neither the appearance, gender nor (young) age of the PTE teacher was a factor in choosing them for both the parents as well as students. However, the participants agreed that one reason for choosing PTE was that the environment was less formal and "free" compared to that of the schools.

Quite a high percentage of the parent-participants agree that their children showed a considerable improvement in English after he/she was admitted to the PTE class. They further denoted that their children are interested in learning English because of their PTE teacher. Further, the parent-participants agreed that they send their child to the PTE class because the PTE teacher works with more past/model papers and revision activities. Further, students expect to solve their problems related to English language through their PTE teacher and receive simpler lessons from him/her than those of the formal school. 60% of the student-participants agreed that they attend the class because the lessons of the PTE teacher are simpler than those of the school teacher. Students receive more revision activities from the PTE teachers before the test in schools. A majority of the students indicated that the teachers always complete the school syllabus before the formal school teacher does.



Regarding the type of pedagogies employed by private tutors of English, the data showed that there is a high frequency of using L1 (mother tongue) when teaching the lessons in PTE classes. According to most of the students, the PTE teachers always or frequently translate English texts into their mother tongue and explain them to them before they start the activity. Further, a majority of the student-participants indicate that PTE teachers make interesting jokes when teaching lessons. Further, PTE teachers moderately use the mother tongue when giving the students instructions and when talking to students. A high percentage of them approach the lesson with the mother tongue and use it for instructions and talk. Thus, the students feel comfortable with how teachers talk in the PTE class. Every teacher in this study focused more on the reading and writing skills in the two lessons that were observed. The Grade 10 and 11 teachers worked with the worksheets modelling the G.C.E. O/L examination. They always reminded the students of the “O/L Examination”. They seemed to be able to hold the interest of the students with this mode of teaching. Tutors also make use of alternative materials in the PTE classes. Over 60% of the student-participants receive the supplementary handouts such as attractive worksheets covering the lessons, model papers and printed notes. Moreover, 18% of the student-participants are either frequently or always given supplementary materials such as stories, poems comprehension passages and newspaper articles as learning materials. Accordingly, the PTE teachers seem to create an easy learning environment with these supplementary materials. These findings are further supported by the responses of the PTE teachers. Over 80% of the PTE teachers agree that they design the supplementary materials because they believe it is needed to attract children. Many of them also use different textbooks/lessons because they believe that the school textbook is not effective enough.

With regard to interaction in the PTE classes, observations revealed that a majority of the PTE teachers in the sample interacted well with their students. When speaking to the students, they mostly used the mother tongue (MT). Further, they used casual and informal even intimate words to address the students: “Kolla” (boy), “mage kella” (my girl), “sudu” (fair one) and “duwa” (daughter). They also use informal language which can be classified as slang, such as “aniwa, enna”, (definitely, come) which were observed by the researchers. The students were seen to be quite happy with this way of talking by their PTE teachers. This may be a factor that directly influences students to attend and stay in the classes regularly. Further, three of the PTE teachers were very friendly while the other two were moderate in mood. This made the learners more confident in the classroom.

It was also observed that the PTE teachers’ teaching style have a rich usage of gestures and humour. They use facial expression to convey meaning in lessons. Only one teacher had medium level of gestures and use of humour. Two PTE teachers of this sample moved beyond the ethical limit of teachers in terms of jokes. Moreover, most of the jokes did not directly relate to the content or subject of the lessons. The students were found to be comfortable and enjoying the teachers’ behaviour. Thus, attractive use of gestures and use of humour also influenced the young learners to be attracted to PTE classes.

## CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings showed that several reasons influence parents and learners’ preference for private English tuition. There is a correlation of the responses between and among the parent-participants, student-participants and PTE teachers. The high level of agreement by participants, on the factors such as gaining more knowledge in English, improving grammar and obtaining more marks for the examination paper indicate that the PTE has adapted to the students’ desires. Next, completion of lessons before the school, provision of more revision, chances for problem solving and PTE teacher’s dedication for teaching increase learners’ preference for PTE. The quality of worksheets and the PTE teachers’ approaches further



increase their preference for PTE. The school time table for English also leads students to PTE. Another important finding is that, according to the PTE teachers, the learners disfavour the formality of the school English classrooms and their teachers' instructions for English. Further, neither the participants' intimates nor the appearance of the PTE teacher influences them to choose the PTE teacher. Moreover, the observation revealed several important aspects of the PTE classes. A majority of the classes are teacher-centred but the students receive plenty of support from the teacher via interactive behaviour and humour. However, PTE does not use advanced technology and the learning environment lacks sophisticated facilities; thus, it comprises only the teacher and effective worksheets. A majority of PTE teachers attract learners through their free and friendly classroom atmosphere, their speech and mood in the classroom. The study also suggests that there is competition among parents to further push their children to gain higher marks for English in school as well as learn grammar and speaking skills. However, there is some degree of mismatch in terms of the need to learn speaking since the PTE teachers use L1 (mother tongue) substantially in the classroom, and focus more on reading and writing, just as the school English teachers do. Private tuition teachers are not accountable to any institutional norms and have the freedom to use various pedagogical strategies and also make use of these strategies to gain popularity with few restrictions. School teachers on the other hand, are more restricted, and have no need of being motivated to retain or recruit new students. More research perhaps in the form of classroom observation is needed to investigate the pedagogical strategies of school English teachers in order to make any solid recommendations. However, the following tentative suggestions can be made:

Even while it is acknowledged that teachers in school function within an institutionalized context, the findings of this study suggest that it may serve well for English teachers to attempt to use some degree of humour which is related to the content as well as create a friendly and interactive environment in the English classroom in order to improve students' affective aspect. Further, they need to refrain from limiting their teaching to the textbook and should bring in other interesting material to their classrooms in order to facilitate the syllabus. Grammar too can be taught in interesting ways using a combination of inductive and deductive methods. Changes such as these may serve in retaining the students' interest in learning English in school and curb the mass exodus of students from school to private tuition classes for English.

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