

# Students' Perceptions towards the Roles of Local English Language Tutors and Problems of Learning English in Preparation for the AEC

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## Abstract

This study investigates Thai students' perceptions towards the roles of local English language tutors and the students' English learning problems in preparation for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The data were collected by using a mix-method of an online questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The participants were 67 high school students from Wat Phrasri Mahadhat Secondary Demonstration School, Phranakhon Rajabhat University selected by the purposive sampling method. The questionnaire results showed that teaching materials and teaching techniques are the most crucial factors affecting students' motivation in learning English. The interview results revealed that the students considered Thai English language tutors helpful for improving the students' English skills. However, the tutors should improve their teaching styles and English accents in order that their language performance could be of good assistance in preparing the students for using English in the context of AEC.

**Keywords:** students' perceptions, local English language tutors, English learning problems

## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งสำรวจแนวความคิดของนักเรียนไทยที่มีต่อบทบาทของติวเตอร์สอนภาษาอังกฤษและปัญหาของการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษในการเตรียมความพร้อมสำหรับประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนซึ่งมีการเก็บข้อมูลด้วยวิธีการแบบผสมผสานโดยใช้แบบสอบถามออนไลน์และการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างประชากรที่ใช้ในการวิจัยได้แก่นักเรียนชั้นมัธยมศึกษาตอนปลายจำนวน 67 คนจาก โรงเรียนมัธยมสาธิตวัดพระศรีมหาธาตุ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏพระนครที่ได้มาจากการสุ่มตัวอย่างแบบเจาะจงผลการศึกษาจากแบบสอบถามแสดงให้เห็นว่าสื่อการสอนและเทคนิคในการสอนเป็นปัจจัยสำคัญที่สุดที่มีผลกระทบต่อแรงจูงใจในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียน ผลการศึกษาจากการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างได้มีการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลด้วยวิธีการลงรหัสข้อมูลที่แสดงถึงความเชื่อของนักเรียนว่าเมื่อประเทศไทยได้เข้าสู่ประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน โรงเรียนกวดวิชาภาษาอังกฤษจะยังคงมีความจำเป็นสำหรับนักเรียนเพื่อการพัฒนาทักษะและเตรียมพร้อมสำหรับการสอบ แต่ติวเตอร์ก็จำเป็นที่จะต้องปรับปรุงรูปแบบการสอน และสำเนียงการพูดภาษาอังกฤษในงานวิจัยต่อไปนั้นควรที่จะเน้นถึงปัญหาของการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทยควรมีการวิจัยในบริบทของติวเตอร์สอนภาษาอังกฤษและเน้นย้ำถึงแนวความคิดของกลุ่มเป้าหมายอื่นๆที่นอกเหนือจากนักเรียน

**คำสำคัญ:** แนวความคิดของนักเรียน, ติวเตอร์สอนภาษาอังกฤษ, ปัญหาในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ

## Introduction

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is the regional economic integration of ten ASEAN member states. These ten ASEAN member states consist of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (Burma) and Vietnam. The AEC may result in a substantial change in the economy, education, transportation and in earning a living throughout the region. The AEC, with the motto “one vision, one identity, and one community”, focuses on four goals as follows: 1) Free trade and service area including investment, labor, and capital; 2) Competitive advantages which include tax and policy development; 3) Sustainable economic development; and 4) the world economic integration with the FTA (Free Trade Agreement) with other countries, and production network (Muttanachai Suttipun, 2012). The forthcoming AEC plays an important role in the educational system in Thailand. According to the Ministry of Education (2010), preparing and improving Thai human resources are very important since the AEC will be implemented in the very near future. Apart from that factor, Thai people could rise and become equally competitive with the population of the other nine ASEAN countries due to education and reformation (The Ministry of Education, 2010).

As it was stated in the ASEAN Charter Article 34, the working language of ASEAN shall be English; therefore, Thai people have been heavily influenced by the AEC to improve English, especially most Thai students who cannot use English fluently because of their lack of motivation to study English. Proficiency in English is one of the most essential needs beyond the necessary working skills because language is a basic part of workers' human capital (Kitjaroonchai, 2013). Lacking language skills and experience is still problematic in Thailand. The roles of English language teachers and tutors in Thailand are considerably important to develop English learners to be prepared in order to use English in workplaces and business communication when Thailand enters the AEC. However, the shortage of qualified English teachers or tutors is still one of the main problems. Kaewmala (2012) stated that native speakers and foreigners who speak English are hired to teach English in many schools in Thailand, and most schools still depend on these unqualified Thai teachers who cannot speak the language well enough, or have knowledge in English and skills in teaching students. Unlike common teachers who teach only English as a required subject, English language tutors will therefore play a role in passing on English skills to students and other people who need to use English as a working language.

Despite previous studies about both AEC and teaching English, relatively few studies have been done in the context of the English language tutors in the AEC. As an attempt to fill this gap, this study aims to investigate the extent to which Thai students perceive the roles of English language tutors in the AEC and problems of students' English learning. English language tutors in the AEC may become more eager to develop their English skills, teaching strategies, or curricula so that English learners in Thailand may be prepared for the AEC.

## Objectives of the study

This study aimed to investigate Thai students' perceptions towards the roles of Thai local tutors teaching English in tutorial schools and the students' problems of learning English in preparation for the AEC. These questions were then developed to two research questions: 1) What are the students' perceptions of the roles of local English language tutors?; and 2) What are the students' problems of learning English in preparation for the AEC?

## Literature review

### *English language and its roles in the AEC*

The English language may become the most powerful communicative language when the AEC begins. The largest number of English speakers in the world is in Asia, and they use English as their second and foreign languages (Cheng, 2012, as cited in Poranee Deerajviset, n.d.). Kirkpatrick (2012) states the fact that English has become more and more important in ASEAN countries. Given that English shall be the working language of all ASEAN member countries after the arrival of the AEC, English language skills are very significant in this new approaching environment as well as communicative competence in English, which is extremely necessary for all people in ASEAN countries so that they are well-prepared for their jobs in the context of the AEC. Consequently, all ASEAN members should support the use of English and improve English learning in order to efficiently use English to communicate as a lingua franca and a working language.

As English is used as a working language in the AEC, like in many workplaces, language capability of workers could simplify communication with their colleagues and supervisors (Saraithong, 2013). Due to the importance of English language teaching and learning, the Thai government has attempted to promote educational improvement as Thailand is a core leader of ASEAN. Thai people should have communicative competence in English for good qualification in their work in the context of the AEC. Besides, developing and improving Thai students' English communicative skills is essential for their working lives in the future. This is the main reason to have tutors of English language and tutorial schools in the context of the AEC.

### *English language teaching and learning in Thailand and problems related to English language learning*

According to the Thai TESOL Association study (Durongphan et al., n. d.), English language in Thailand has been taught for over a century since 1824 in the reign of King Rama III. Until during the reign of King Rama VI, when Chulalongkorn University was established, English was made a compulsory subject in the mainstream school system. It was also a required subject in the National University Entrance Examination.

English has been taught as a foreign language and has been widely used for business communication and workplaces in Thailand. It is taught in schools and in higher education as a compulsory subject (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana and Chinnawongs, 2003). However, English curricula in Thailand especially in secondary schools and universities cannot meet the demand for English which is used in the workplace (Kitjaroonchai, 2013). Most teachers in Thailand are not able to teach their students to adapt the English they studied in schools to their daily lives. According to Geringer (2003), teachers are the most important factor in student learning progress, and the quality of those teachers covers other factors such as motivation, funding and class sizes.

Some studies were conducted in the context of problems of English language learning. Kakkar (2013) investigated attitudes and problems in learning English at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani campus, Thailand. He concluded that students had positive attitudes in learning English listening and speaking. However, they think that English instructors should have more pragmatic methods to teach them. Sun (2010, p. 889) reported that some teaching materials, such as listening text, pictures, or songs are practical to make the lessons more appealing. Moreover, language teaching materials play a very important role in language learning and teaching activities (Seven and Engin, 2007).

#### *Roles of tutorial schools and tutors of English in the Thai context*

The roles of tutorial schools and tutors of English today are significant to be observed for the purpose that Thai students who are studying English from both the mainstream school system and tutorial schools would prepare and develop themselves and their communicative English skill for the AEC. Even though Thailand lacks qualified English instructors, especially English language tutors, problems of English language teaching and learning in Thailand cannot be solved by employing native speakers only (Nagi, 2012). For this reason, the major roles of tutorial schools and tutors of English are helping students to be proficient in English in such a way that they can efficiently use English in every situation and in the context of the AEC. Also, this study reflects the important roles of English language tutors. In addition, tutors need to improve their English language teaching skills to be qualified.

#### *Related studies*

In Hong Kong, Yung (2014) investigated the learning experience and reflections of 14 Chinese learners who had received English private tutoring (EPT) during their secondary education. The findings indicate that in spite of the appearance of EPT to be sought after by many secondary school students in contexts to focus on examinations like in Hong Kong, there is no evidence of English proficiency acquisition for real communication. The term EPT can be adapted to this study as it is one kind of tutoring, and some students would prefer private tutoring to tutoring in tutorial schools. In Bangladesh, Hamid, Sussex, and Khan (2009) examined the nature and practice of private tutoring in English (PT-E), in an underprivileged rural area. The data collected from quantitative analysis shows some positive links between PT-E and achievement in

English, and the qualitative data shows that students had obvious and structured views about PT-E they saw as crucial for successful learning accomplishment. Nevertheless, the data collection of the research on private tutoring in English (PT-E) which used the mixed-method approach to investigate attitudes of students can be adjusted to the current study in order to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

In America, Bollin and Cai (2013) investigated the benefits of home tutoring of English language learners (ELLs) in the context of tutors' perspectives. This study reported the findings of content analysis of journal entries of 90 pre-service teachers who took part in home-based tutoring of Mexican immigrant children over the course of one semester. The findings showed that a home-based service learning experience became more successful than school-based and community-based service learning projects in leading to positive attitudes towards working with English Language Learners (ELLs).

Furthermore, Shin, Brudhiprabha and Surasin (2014) investigated the readiness of teaching English as a foreign language in Thailand. This research points out that Thailand is not ready to use English as a lingua franca in 2015. It is related to the study of students' perceptions towards the roles of tutors of English in the AEC in that the readiness of TEFL countries can reflect the roles of English language tutors in the Thai context which still lacks experience in using or teaching English, especially communicative English as well as English learners who study English as either a compulsory subject or a selective subject. Matthuchad (2012) explored the readiness of English language studies of high schools in Phitsanulok Province in the context of preparation to join the AEC in 2015. The results of this study indicated that both teachers and students were enthusiastic with the ASEAN Community in 2015. However, most students were weak in spoken and written English. Some teachers cannot speak English well. Some factors contributing to English language teaching and learning were also investigated. Pinnarote (2007) investigated the motivation, learning strategies, problems and needs for private tutoring in English of Matthayom 3 students of the two provincial high schools in Uttaradit. Three main reasons for students to attend private tutoring were found including the need of learning English, the significance of English for a future career, and the benefit of English. However, problems and needs for private tutoring in English can be the case for exploring problems of learning English in the context of the AEC.

## Participants

The participants of this study were 67 high school students (Matthayom 4-6 students) from Wat Phrasri Mahadhat Secondary Demonstration School, Pharmakon Rajabhat University selected by using the purposive sampling method.

## Research instruments

The online questionnaire was created with the application called Google Forms. This questionnaire was written in Thai and created into the form of a five point Likert rating scale adapted from Likert (1932) in order to show the level of agreement of students' perceptions. The semi-structured interview (see Appendix) was organized to support the data from the questionnaire and make it more explicit by asking students ten questions to obtain greater variation in answers and opinions which provide in-depth information about the roles of English language tutors and problems of learning English in preparation for the AEC.

## Data collection and analysis

The link of the online questionnaire was distributed to students by the teacher from Wat Phrasri Mahadhat Secondary Demonstration School, Phranakhon Rajabhat University, and the semi-structured interview was conducted by a Line call together with audio-recording. The data from the online questionnaire was processed and analyzed by means of the computer statistical software Microsoft Excel 2010. The statistical devices employed in this study were percentage, arithmetic mean and standard deviation. The data from item 5 in the first part of the questionnaire and from open-ended questions were analyzed by grouping the key words in order to answer the research questions. The data obtained from the semi-structured interview were interpreted by a data coding method. All coding data were further analyzed by grouping the appropriate keys which can answer the research questions.

## Results

The first table shows the general information of the respondents including gender, experience in tutorial schools of English and GPA in English.

Table 1: Number and percentage of senior high school students' responses on general information including gender, experience in tutorial schools of English and GPA in English

Biographical Data	Number of Respondents (N=67)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	11	16.4
Female	56	83.6
Total	67	100
Experience of studying English in tutorial schools		

Never		
less than 1 year	13	19.4
1-5 years	3	4.5
6-10 years	38	56.7
more than 10 years	13	19.4
Total	0	0
GPA in English	67	100
1	0	0
1.5	1	1.5
2	3	4.5
2.5	14	20.9
3	22	32.8
3.5	14	20.9
4	13	19.4
Total	67	100

Table 2 shows mean, standard deviation, students' perceptions of the roles of English language tutors and the students' problems of learning English. Students who are respondents of the questionnaire strongly agreed with the concept of tutor's teaching techniques and teaching materials and how tutors should manage them, as they are factors affecting students' motivation and learning.

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation, and students' perceptions of the roles of English language tutors and the students' problems of learning English

Statements	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Level of Agreement
<b>Curriculum</b>			
1. English language tutors should emphasize more on English for daily life communication.	4.48	0.78	Strongly agree
2. English language tutors should provide courses which give language knowledge to both students and people in general for their practical use of English in the AEC context.	4.43	0.65	Strongly agree
3. Activities to promote English language skills like AEC English camp between students in ASEAN member countries Should be provided.	4.22	0.69	Strongly agree
4. Apart from language knowledge, English language tutors should also give students knowledge about ASEAN countries' cultures.	4.09	0.82	Agree
5. In English class, English language tutors should teach students only in English.	3.91	0.91	Agree



<b>Teaching Techniques</b>			
6. Activities in class, such as role plays, games, or singing should be provided to improve both knowledge and enjoyment.	4.39	0.83	Strongly agree
7. English language tutors should emphasize describing the meaning of vocabulary in English together with giving real examples.	4.52	0.61	Strongly agree
8. English language tutors should have attractive instruction media, such as cartoon, movies, songs, or video clips.	4.61	0.62	Strongly agree
9. English language tutors should have a good personality and an attractive tone of voice.	4.63	0.67	Strongly agree
10. English language tutors should explain mistakes to students every time.	4.72	0.45	Strongly agree
11. English language tutors should instill positive attitudes towards English in students.	4.73	0.56	Strongly agree
12. English language tutors should provide new sources of knowledge to students.	4.66	0.53	Strongly agree
13. English language tutors should test students before and after lessons.	4.43	0.65	Strongly agree
14. English language tutors should prepare tests which are suitable for students' level.	4.58	0.52	Strongly agree
15. English language tutors should use tests that can evaluate all students' English skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.	4.52	0.72	Strongly agree

<b>Teaching Materials</b>			
16. English language tutors should use provide handouts which are easy for students to understand and can be studied more by themselves.	4.49	0.58	Strongly agree
17. English language tutors should provide e-Learning to students so that they can study and review their lessons more.	4.36	0.64	Strongly agree
18. English language tutors should have online tests with answers so that students can practice their skills.	4.39	0.73	Strongly agree
19. English language tutors should have attractive teaching materials, such as Power Point, video clips, and pictures.	4.40	0.73	Strongly agree
20. English language tutors can use students as teaching materials by having them use English in real situations.	4.43	0.63	Strongly agree



Statements	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Level of Agreement
<b>Problems of learning English with Tutors</b>			
21. Learners do not cooperate with instructors in their teaching.	3.79	1.02	Agree
22. Instructors do not have enough knowledge and cannot answer learners' questions clearly.	3.46	1.14	Agree
23. Instructors lack techniques in passing on knowledge to learners.	3.45	1.25	Agree
24. Instructors lack ability in using English for communication.	3.25	1.21	Neutral
25. Instructors have no confidence in using English language.	4.04	1.06	Agree
26. Parents lack funds to support students in learning.	3.73	1.13	Agree
Total	4.26	0.77	

The qualitative data from the questionnaire and the data coding from the semi-structured interview show that the mainstream school system focused on learning grammar and examinations. However, many students who experienced studying in English tutorial schools also found various problems, such as the problem of tutors' teaching which is sometimes very fast. Most students who are not good at English cannot follow students who already have good basic skills. Other students have difficulties with S.E.L.F (Student Extensive Learning Fitness) system; sometimes they cannot log in and students have to review lessons independently. Most students agreed that English is important because it is the main language in the AEC; it is important for competition between ASEAN countries as well as being necessary for business and trading. English language tutors should be fun, give students additional knowledge in addition to textbooks, and speak only English in class. Students should be surrounded with people who speak English and students should practice using English in their daily lives. Most students think that English language tutors should improve by teaching how to speak English in daily life rather than grammar, improving their accents, and speaking only in English in class. From most of the students' views, English tutorial schools and English language tutors will still be necessary after the AEC is in place.

## Discussion

According to Research Question 1: "What are the students' perceptions of the roles of local English language tutors?", the results of the study show how students perceive the roles of local English language tutors. They think that English language tutors should realize that their teaching techniques and teaching materials are important factors that affect students' motivation in English language learning. Hence, these factors should be well-prepared for tutors' English language teaching in preparation for entering the ASEAN Economic Community. These results are relevant to the study of Seven and Engin (2007) on the importance and effect of using aid materials in foreign

language teaching. Their results revealed the importance of teaching materials, which have a significant effect on the participation of learners of foreign languages and the learning processes and activities. Therefore, this study shows similar results to the related study of Seven and Engin (2007) that teaching techniques and teaching materials are the factors that motivate students to participate and pay attention in class.

Regarding the Research Question 2: “What are the students’ problems of learning English in preparation for the ASEAN Economic Community?”, the results show that most students encountered problems of learning English in tutorial schools in addition to learning in the mainstream school system. For example, tutors’ teaching is very fast. Most tutors cannot teach students to apply English to their daily lives because of focusing too much on grammar. Other factors which effect student motivation and learning are lack of confidence in using the English language, teaching techniques and teaching materials. This is in line with Noom-ura (2013)’s study of English teaching problems in Thailand and Thai teachers’ professional development needs. The study of Noom-ura (ibid.) illustrated teacher’s problems including their dislike of teaching English, their lack of English teaching qualifications, vocabulary teaching problems, and problems of teaching grammar. There were also problems of students who lack opportunities to practice language. In addition, there were problems of textbooks and other factors like lack of native speakers, or insufficient budgets for teaching materials. The current study also focuses on the problems of learning English and has yielded similar results.

## **Conclusion**

There are still many problems regarding English language teaching and learning in the context of the AEC. The main problem is that there is a shortage of qualified English language instructors and the English curricula in Thailand focus mostly on grammar and examinations which are impractical. Most students do not have the motivation to study languages because of unattractive teaching materials. As a result, English language tutors should help solve the problems of teaching and learning English by providing appropriate and effective teaching to their students who are not skilled in English. English tutorial schools are still necessary as Thailand is using the context of the AEC to help students improve their skills or English and be prepared for using the language in examinations and real lives. Nevertheless, the local English language tutors should improve their teaching styles such as focusing less on grammar and doing exercises, always speaking and explaining to students in English, and or improving accents. To some extent, the results of this study would help develop English language teaching in Thailand, especially in the context of English language tutors and English tutorial schools in Thailand as they are very necessary for not only Thai students but also all Thai people using English in the AEC context.

## Implications

All results in this study imply that in preparation for entering the AEC, the Thai government should focus more on English language teaching in Thailand, especially the roles of local English language tutors who play a very important role in developing students' English in order to communicate efficiently when the AEC begins. Further research studies should put more emphasis on English language teaching which should be more effective in developing learners when English has become the lingua franca of Thai people. In addition, further studies in the context of English language tutors should not be neglected as tutors teaching styles can still be improved so that students' English language learning will not depend solely on teaching by native speakers of English. Apart from this study which focuses on perceptions of students, more studies should be carried out by emphasizing various groups of participants, such as parents, university students, or people in general.

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## Appendix

### Interview questions investigating students' perceptions

1. How long have you studied English?
2. Have you ever studied English in language institutes or tutorial schools?
3. Why do you take extra English tutorial classes?
4. Which tutorial schools do you mainly choose to study? Why?
5. From your own experience, have you found any problems from studying English in language institutes or tutorial schools? How?
6. In your opinion, is English important when Thailand enters the AEC?
7. In your opinion, how should the roles of English language tutors be or what styles of English language teaching do you want in order to be different from the school subject?
8. What factors do you think they would make learners develop English usage for communicating in the context of the AEC?
9. How should English language tutors develop and improve their teaching to make students practically use English.
10. When entering the AEC, are language institutes or tutorial schools necessary? How?