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Uncovering the Benefits and Challenges of Shadow Education in English Language Education-A Phenomenological Exploration

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Abstract

Shadow education, also known as private tutoring, has gained popularity worldwide in countries where English is taught as a second or foreign language. In spite of its popularity, very little is known about the benefits and challenges of private tutoring in English language education. The aim of this study was to explore the benefits and challenges associated with shadow education in the context of teaching English. To achieve this, an interpretive phenomenological approach was adopted, focusing on Vygotsky's socio- cultural theory as a framework. The data for this research was collected through interviews with participants who actively sought shadow education to improve their English language skills. Three participants waiting for the 12th grade examination results were purposefully selected. Data collection involved conducting interviews, recording audio responses, transcribing the recordings, and taking field notes to capture observations and contextual details. The findings revealed that shadow education has an impact on students personal growth and empowerment by enabling them to explore their potential and shape their identity. However challenges such as workloads, financial burdens, and conflicts with existing curricula can impede its effectiveness. This study contributes to the existing knowledge on shadow education by providing an understanding of its dynamics within the context. The study provides insights for policy makers, educators, and researchers by examining the challenges and benefits experienced by individuals involved in shadow education for English language learning. It aims to develop strategies that address the needs and concerns of students engaging in shadow education in Nepal.

Key Words: Shadow education, English language education, challenges, benefits

Introduction

Shadow education, also called private supplementary tutoring, has seen global expansion since the turn of the century (Bray, 2009; Mori and Baker, 2010). This kind of education occurs outside the regular classroom to improve students' academic achievement. It has gained special attention for focusing on primary and secondary

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schooling in different countries in Asia, including Japan, Korea, China and others. It has received the name shadow as much private supplementary tutoring mirrors mainstream education (Stevenson and Baker 1992; Bray 1999b; Lee et al. 2009). Private tutoring has a long history in different parts of the world (Stevenson & Baker, 1992; Bray & Lykins, 2012; Kim, 2012) and become a multi-billion-dollar global service-industry offering many different and costly tutoring services from after-school classes to a host of on-line options.

Shadow education has been accepted as a global phenomenon. It is even more popular in asian countries. For instance, in Republic of Korea, nearly 90% of the elementary students receive some sort of shadow education. Similarly, in Hong Kong, China, about 85% of senior secondary students go to tuition centres whereas in West Bengal, India, the percentage of primary school students receiving shadow education is about 60%, and similar is the case in Kazakhstan (Bray and Lykins, 2012). This data proves how popular private tutoring is among students in Asia.

Shadow education offers support outside of a regular school setting to foster students' learning outcomes and performance in particular subjects where they feel difficulty (Bray and Lykins, 2012). For Crotty (2012), 'private tutoring is a highly effective way to ensure academic excellence'. It has seen a tremendous increase as both the students and the parents seek educational support beyond formal classrooms with the belief that they will gain a competitive edge and meet high academic expectations.

Shadow education celebrates its long history dating back to ancient times. Despite the fact that shadow education has evolved over the years, the main idea of seeking learning beyond the formal classroom setting has remained the same. In Greece, for example, great philosophers like Socrates and Plato gave instruction to learners who sought knowledge beyond formal education (Bray & Lykins, 2013). In Japan, after World War II, Cram schools, also known as Juku, came into existence, offering supplementary education to prepare students for highly competitive admission tests (Stevenson and Baker 1992).

In Nepal, the term shadow education simply denotes tuition or coaching. A large number of tuition and coaching centres have been run privately to provide extra tutorial classes to needy students. Limited research has been carried out to investigate the number of students taking private supplementary education in Nepal. One of the studies conducted by Thapa (2011) found that 68% of grade 10 students were receiving private tutoring. Similarly, in China, teachers offered supplementary education to students to prepare them for the imperial exams and obtain positions in public service. This educational

system, which has continued for centuries in China, has greatly contributed to the development of shadow education practices.

The increasing opportunities during the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries raised the demand for private tutoring in Europe. European aristocrats started to employ tutors to provide education for their children. This signalled the beginning of tutoring as a symbol of status, where affluent families would hire tutors to educate their children.

Private tutoring has seen a significant expansion in its scope and accessibility due to the constant progress of technology and globalization. Additionally, easy access to digital platforms and the internet has successfully connected students and tutors, regardless of their geographical boundaries (Bray, M., & Lykins, C., 2013). Further, this shift has made shadow education more accessible and flexible. It is important to acknowledge that the history of shadow education is complex and influenced by socio-economic factors. The practice has adapted to evolving landscapes and societal expectations, reflecting the changing needs of students and their families.

English language teachers and students encounter several challenges associated with shadow education. One of them is the potential for it to widen the achievement gap among students. Although shadow education enriches students with the benefits such as teaching and focused assistance, it unintentionally creates discrepancies between students who have access to these resources and those who do not (Kim, 2015). In this situation, some students can gain an advantage over their peers worsening existing inequalities. Additionally, students' heavy reliance on supplementary education can put a financial burden on families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As Bray (2013) points out that the cost of tutoring services can be substantial, posing a challenge for some families to afford it. It contributes to further disparities as certain students may lack access to shadow education.

Private tutoring, no doubt, has some challenges, but it offers a range of benefits. One significant benefit is the attention and customized instruction that tutors can provide, fulfilling the learning needs of each student (Park, 2011). Furthermore, shadow education catalyses an interactive learning environment. Tutors often maintain a good rapport with their students, fostering a sense of trust that facilitates learning (Bray & Lykins, 2013). This study aims to investigate shadow education in English language education by exploring the experiences of individuals engaged in this practice. By conducting in-depth interviews and analysing the narratives of participants, the study seeks to uncover the benefits and challenges of shadow education. The findings will offer insights for policy makers, practitioners, and stakeholders.

This research gains strong support from the socio-cultural perspective of Lev Vygotsky. In this theory, interaction with knowledgeable people, cultural tools, and the sociocultural context are mainly responsible for shaping an individual's learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). Socio-cultural theory proves its relevance in the context of shadow education as it perceives the influence of those factors on this phenomenon. Bray (2019) stated that shadow education occurs within a framework entailing interactions between tutors and students and the broader educational environment. Students are involved in private tutoring to support their education and enhance their language skills by seeking extra support outside the classroom.

For Vygotsky, learning always occurs within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). It refers to the situation where what an individual can do and what they can potentially achieve with the guidance of knowledgeable people differ (Vygotsky, 1978). In shadow education, tutors are knowledgeable people who provide students with guidance and support so that they can bridge the gap between their abilities and their desired learning goals.

This theory further states that cultural tools, like language, have an impact on cognitive development and learning. Language as a cultural tool facilitates and mediates learning experiences that enables the transfer of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of shadow education, the importance of language as a tool cannot be overstated when the focus is on English language learning. In such a context, students enhance their English language skills and obtain valuable opportunities to acquire and refine their abilities through communication with tutors and peers. It means the cultural and contextual aspects of learning are highly influential in socio-cultural theory within the corridor of shadow education. Various factors, such as norms, parental aspirations, and societal expectations regarding education, all shape these practices.

From socio-cultural perspective, we find shadow education dynamic and interactive by nature. Moreover, social and cultural factors influence both the benefits and challenges associated with them. So this study explores the real life encounters, lived experiences, view points and understandings of people engaged in shadow education. Actually, in this study, we gain insight into the social and cultural aspects of this phenomenon.

A significant number of studies have been conducted in shadow education. For example, Bray (1999) concluded that shadow education contributes to academic success and perpetuates inequalities within educational systems. Similarly, Kim (2012) did research in South Korea. He found that shadow education complemented language instruction enhancing students' proficiency in English. In a similar vein, Lee and Park (2017)

found that students involved in shadow education achieved noticeably better results on language proficiency exams in comparison to those who did not. Nonetheless, their research also figured out some drawbacks such as increased academic pressure and the perpetuation of unequal opportunities.

Yung (2021) conducted research on 'Shadow education as a form of oppression: conceptualizing experiences and reflections of secondary students in Hong Kong' from a critical perspective. The study explored the role of private tutoring in a context of high-stakes testing through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. It explored 18 secondary, six (Grade 12) students' reflections on their learning experiences in private tutoring in Hong Kong for one year. Based on Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, the findings expose that shadow education further oppresses the students by (1) intensifying the "banking" concept of education, (2) teaching as the "authority", (3) emphasizing performativity and (4) offering "false generosity"

Together, these findings provide insights into both the pros and cons related to supplemental English language instruction outside of regular classes. While shadow education may lift academic performance, its role in intensifying pressure and inequities merits attention to promote learning opportunities available to all.

In a study titled "English Shadow Education, in China; Patterns, Motivations, and Implications, "Xiong (2020) examined the prevalence, motivations and implications of English shadow education in China. The findings reveled that many students engage in English shadow education to enhance their career prospects by improving their English language proficiency. Students reported experiencing benefits, such as increased confidence in using English, improved language skills, and better performance on exams.

Similarly, Gosh and Bray (2021), in their study conducted in West Bengal, India, concluded that students and their parents can choose forms of education that they consider better than formal schooling. However, the imposition of tutoring can limit the freedom of choice.'

Xiong et al. (2022), in their study titled 'Teaching English in the shadow: identity construction of private English language tutors in China' discuss how tutors in the private tutoring of English sector construct their professional identities in the market-oriented educational, institutional and socio economic settings. The findings revealed that 'tutors in private tutoring have constructed a range of hybrid identities, such a s, tutors as exam experts, tutors as salespeople, and tutors as underdogs. Additionally, the

instability and vulnerability of their identities have led to the tutors' deprofessionalization and identity crisis.'

Although shadow education has recently gained tremendous popularity in the field of education in Nepal, very few scholars have shown their interest in exploring this practice regarding its perceptions and practices, its acceptance, its appeal, and the impact it has on the students' academic outcomes. For instance, Adhikari (2022) conducted a qualitative study on the perceptions of teachers and students towards shadow education. The findings indicated that students prefer private tutoring to formal regular classes because private tutoring is more interactive and student- centric than formal classes.

Similarly, Sharma (2019) conducted research to understand why Nepalese parents choose shadow education for their children. The study identified factors such as dissatisfaction with the quality of public education, the belief that private tutoring improves academic performance, and the cultural notion that investing in education is vital for future success. Additionally, the author emphasized the role of peer pressure, as parents feel compelled to provide their children with tutoring opportunities to excel academically. Likewise, Subedi (2018) conducted a study titled 'Shadow Education: The Role of Private Tutoring in Learning' that examined how secondary level teachers and students from community schools perceive the process, reasons,and consequences of private tutoring. The article discusses how students choose tutoring to improve their learning. It mentions reasons like extra-focused education, insufficient classroom teaching, pressure from peers and parents, and indirect influence from teachers. These studies offer insights into Asian contexts, emphasizing the importance of shadow education in English language instruction.

There is a plethora of studies done by various researchers at home and abroad to examine shadow education and its demand, its prevalence, impact on academic achievement, motivations and aspirations, teaching and learning practices, and so on. However, there is a dearth of studies to investigate the specific benefits and challenges associated with shadow education in the context of Nepal. This is a clear research gap for this study. The researcher conducted a phenomenological study to provide a nuanced understanding of the benefits and challenges of shadow education from the students' perspectives in the context of English language education in Nepal. Such insights can contribute to the development of effective educational policies and practices, encouraging educators and policy- makers to address the challenges while exploiting the potential benefits of shadow education to enhance English language learning outcomes.

Methodology

For this study, I employed interpretive phenomenology as a research method that aims to understand individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences (Smith et al., 2009). For this study, I collected the lived experiences and the understandings of the participants to investigate the challenges and benefits of shadow education in English language education from students' perspectives. I conducted individual interviews with three students waiting for the results of their 12th-grade examinations from a tuition center in Ratnanagar municipality. I purposefully selected both the research sites and participants to ensure the relevance and richness of the data. The reason why the researcher selected a tuition center from Ratnanagar Municipality as the research site is that the researcher himself lives in this Municipality. According to Cohen et al. (2002), a sample selected for research studies should be based on participants' capability and efficiency to follow the research process which could bring sufficient data for researchers to understand a specific phenomenon. Therefore, the researcher believes that these participants could bring more reliable and efficient data for this study.

To gather in-depth information, I used an interview guideline tool during the interviews. The research process began with my visit to a nearby tuition centre, where I established contact with the owner and clearly explained the purpose of my visit. I obtained the students' records and contact numbers from the centre, and I built a rapport with the teacher who taught them. I collected further academic information about the students, based on which I selected three participants who I believed would provide rich data.

Then I contacted the participants and informed them about my study, ensuring their voluntary participation. Before the interview, I built rapport with them having short conversations. After that, when they were ready for the interviews, I conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the participants' perspectives on the challenges and benefits of shadow education in English language education. Their responses were audio-recorded for further interpretation.

After that, I transcribed the audio data into written text. In addition, I took field notes during the interviews to record any additional observations and contextual details that emerged, enriching my understanding of the participants' experiences. To ensure their anonymity, I used the participants' pseudonyms in reporting the findings. I kept the data with password security in computer to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

Interpretation and presentation

I applied the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework developed by Smith et al. (2009) for the interpretation of qualitative data in this study. First of all, I read the transcripts a number of times to familiarize myself with the participants' accounts. Then, I gave initial codes to the important ideas in the transcripts. Later, those codes were transformed into emergent themes. Afterwards, those themes were revised and refined. Then, I developed a cohesive text that contained the real life experiences and view points of the informants. To make findings more credible and trustworthy, I analysed the audio recording by carefully listening to the information and reviewing the transcripts. This process was also supported by the field notes taken during the interviews. It helped me to maintain accuracy and consistency in the interpretation.

Discussion

The goal of this interpretative phenomenological study was to investigate the benefits and challenges of shadow education in English language education from students' perspectives. The research discussion is organized around four themes

Personal growth and empowerment through shadow education

This theme captures the participants' views on how shadow education contributes to their personal growth, empowerment, and self-improvement. The participants expressed how engaging in shadow education has positively impacted their confidence, knowledge, skills, and overall sense of agency in their educational journey.

Participant A stated, "In a tuition class, our sir checks our work in our notebooks. He always encourages us to do the work saying that 'You can do it.' He also gives us extra learning materials. During homework checking, he asks me about my parents, my future plan, my hobbies, my birthplace, and so on.... I feel more comfortable and confident in my English language skills." Participant A's account underscores the significant role of shadow education in fostering personal development and enhancing academic outcomes.

Participant B said, "In a tuition class, we can ask questions from anywhere we want. Our sir always persuades us to ask questions. When I ask a question, he comes to me and writes answers even in my notebook. For my work, he always says, Good job, keep it up". I never miss doing work in my tuition class.

Here, participant B accepts that he feels no hesitation to ask questions in private tutoring and he also gets focussed help and personal feedback from his teacher during the class.

Participant C opined, "I've grown a lot through shadow education. I learn at my own

speed, ask questions without worrying, and get special help. My English has improved, and now I feel more empowered and ... I think, now I'm capable of solving problems in English language learning."

From his accounts, it is clear that shadow education has provided him with the opportunity to learn at his own pace, ask questions without hesitation, and receive focused guidance. This has enhanced his English language abilities and empowered him to take charge of his learning.

The participants' accounts reflect how their engagement in shadow education, which involves additional support, personalized attention, and exposure to different teaching materials, has positively influenced their personal growth and empowerment. This finding aligns with sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interactions, cultural norms, and contextual factors in shaping individuals' development and learning experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). This theme also goes in line with previous findings. Research conducted by Kim (2012) in the South Korean context found that students perceived shadow education as a means of personal growth and development, enhancing their self-confidence and academic achievements. Moreover, the participants' accounts provided valuable insights into the transformative nature of shadow education in terms of personal growth and empowerment, contributing to the existing literature in this field.

Negotiating Identity and Social Expectations in Shadow Education

This theme explores the intricate interplay between shadow education and the construction of identity among the participants. It delves into how their involvement in shadow education has shaped their sense of identity, including their role as students, their interactions with peers and teachers, and their aspirations for the future. Regarding this, participant A stated,

"Being part of shadow education has influenced how I perceive myself as a student. It has made me more aware of my academic capabilities and given me a sense of pride in my achievements. However, at times, I also feel the pressure to meet certain expectations and standards set by my peers and teachers."

Participant B stated, "Engaging in shadow education has allowed me to explore different facets of my identity as a learner. It has given me the opportunity to interact with students from diverse backgrounds and learn from different perspectives. It has also shaped my aspirations for higher education and my future career path."

Participant C: "Shadow education has profoundly impacted my sense of identity. It has made me more ambitious and motivated to excel academically. However, there are moments when I struggle to balance the expectations of my parents, teachers, and

peers, which can sometimes lead to feelings of stress and self-doubt."

The excerpts from the students interviews provide insights into how shadow education affects their sense of identity in various ways. Participant A mentions that engaging in shadow education has made them more aware of their abilities and proud of their achievements. However, he also acknowledges feeling pressure to meet expectations set by peers and teachers. Participant B emphasizes how shadow education has transformed them, allowing them to explore aspects of their identity as learners through interactions with students and exposure to different perspectives. It has also influenced their aspirations for education and future careers. Participant C describes the impact of shadow education on their ambition and motivation to excel academically. He also figures out the challenges they face in balancing parental, teacher, and peer expectations, which can lead to stress and self-doubt. These excerpts collectively demonstrate how shadow education shapes students' perceptions of themselves as learners, influences their aspirations, and presents complexities in navigating expectations while striving for growth.

Students' experiences in shadow education impact their perceptions of themselves as learners, interaction with classmates and teachers, and future goals. This is consistent with the focus of socio-cultural theory on the function of social interactions and cultural context in determining individual development and identity(Vygotsky,1978)

The findings of this study are also consistent with previous research that supports the sociocultural perspective. For example, Chen and Wong (2017) conducted a study in the Hong Kong context and found that shadow education can contribute to a student's academic identity and motivation for excellence, highlighting the role of sociocultural factors in identity negotiation. Similarly, Bray (2019) conducted research on shadow education in various global contexts and emphasized the impact of tutoring on students' self-perception, educational aspirations, and the pressures they may encounter, providing further support for the sociocultural framework.

By aligning with sociocultural theory, the study acknowledges the significance of social interactions, cultural influences, and contextual factors in shaping students' identities within the context of shadow education, reinforcing the sociocultural perspective on identity formation and learning.

The Complementary Role of Shadow Education

Complementary role of shadow education emphasizes how it serves as a supportive and complementary component to formal education. It suggests that shadow education supplements and enhances the learning experience provided by schools by addressing individual learning needs, offering personalized attention, and providing additional resources and guidance. This theme aligns with previous studies that have recognized the complementary nature of shadow education and mainstream schooling. Participant A talked about the importance of shadow education. He said that shadow education helped him understand difficult concepts that he couldn't grasp in the regular classroom. He further said, *My tutor provides individualized explanations and examples that make the learning process much clearer*." This example demonstrates how shadow education fills gaps in understanding and provides personalized instruction that complements classroom instruction.

Participant B also acknowledged the complementary role of shadow education and said, "In school, we usually don't have enough time to cover all the topics thoroughly. But, in tuition classes, we get even extra time from our tutors. They help us understand the subjects more deeply and... we gain a better understanding." This statement reflects the idea that shadow education complements school education by allowing students to explore subjects in more depth and at their own pace. Participant C has a similar idea to Participant B.

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs through social interactions and the cultural context, and shadow education serves as a supportive component that complements formal schooling. This finding is in line with socio-cultural theory and supports the previous research that emphasizes the sociocultural perspective. Stevenson and Baker (1992) conducted a study highlighting how shadow education fills gaps in the regular curriculum, offering customized instruction to address students' individual learning needs. This supports the notion of shadow education playing a complementary role. By recognizing the complementary nature of shadow education to formal schooling, this study aligns with sociocultural theory emphasising the influence of social interactions, cultural context, and educational practices on learning and development. It highlights how shadow education addresses individual learning needs, offers personalized instruction, and provides additional resources, aligning with the sociocultural perspective on the role of social and cultural factors in learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Challenges in Shadow education

This theme explores the various challenges that students face in their engagement with shadow education. It delves into the difficulties, barriers, and limitations encountered during their pursuit of additional academic support outside the regular classroom setting.

When the researcher asked about the challenges they were facing in shadow education, participant A replied, "One of the challenges I face in shadow education is the heavy workload. Trying to balance school assignments, exams, and the extra study materials provided by my tutor can be very challenging at times. I should manage my time very well and stay dedicated to keep up with everything."

Participant B mentioned, "A major obstacle to shadow education is the financial burden it imposes. Private tutoring can be quite expensive, and not all students can afford it. This creates disparities and unequal access to additional educational support, which can be discouraging for those who are unable to participate."

Participant C said, "One challenge I often face in shadow education is the teacher does not follow the course of study which is followed in school. It means …the additional material I learn from my tutor may not always match what we are taught in class. It's hard to deal with the differences and make sure I'm keeping up with both things."

The students' statements highlight three main challenges and obstacles encountered in shadow education. Participant A emphasizes the heavy workload associated with balancing school assignments, exams, and additional study materials provided by the tutor. Effective time management and dedication are required to cope with this workload. Participant B identifies the financial burden as a major obstacle, pointing out that private tutoring can be expensive, leading to disparities and limited access for students who cannot afford it. This creates inequities in accessing additional educational support. Participant C raises the challenge of the conflict between shadow education and the school curriculum. The additional material learned from the tutor may not always align with classroom teachings, making it difficult to reconcile the differences and stay on track with both sets of materials. These challenges highlight the need for effective time management, financial accessibility, and alignment between shadow education and the formal curriculum.

The finding of challenges in shadow education also goes in line with socio-cultural theory as it reflects the influence of social and cultural factors on students' engagement with supplementary education. According to Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, individuals learn and develop through social interactions and cultural tools within a specific socio-cultural context. The challenges faced by students in shadow education, such as the heavy workload, financial burden, and conflicts with the school curriculum, are shaped by these sociocultural factors. Research by Zhang and Bray (2017) supports this alignment as it highlights the financial burden as a common challenge faced by

students engaging in shadow education, indicating the influence of societal and economic factors. Additionally, Bray and Lykins (2012) identify time management and workload as challenges encountered by students in the context of shadow education, emphasizing the role of cultural expectations and academic demands. These findings demonstrate how socio-cultural theory provides a framework to understand the obstacles in shadow education by considering the influence of social, cultural, and economic factors on students' learning experiences and opportunities for academic support.

Conclusion and Implications

The researcher conducted this study to uncover the benefits and challenges of shadow education in English language education from students' perspectives. Through phenomenological exploration, the research delved into the lived experiences of students engaged in shadow education for English language learning. The findings shed light on the complexities of shadow education and have important implications for English language education policy and practice. The study identified four main themes based on the participants' narratives: personal growth and empowerment through shadow education; negotiating identity and social expectations in shadow education; the complementary role of shadow education; and obstacles in shadow education.

In this study, shadow education in English language education has been found to positively impact students' confidence, knowledge, skills, and sense of agency. It allows students to explore their potential and experience transformative growth. Shadow education also shapes students' identity and ambition but presents challenges, such as discrepancies among students, heavy workload, financial burden, and conflicts with the school curriculum. Although shadow education provides support for formal education by fulfilling individual learning needs and providing personalized attention, some challenges, such as heavy workloads, financial burdens, and conflicts with the school curriculum, can reduce its effectiveness. This study focuses on the significance of integrating shadow education practices into educational policies, working with providers, and informing parents about the potential benefits and challenges of shadow education. By providing a detailed understanding of the function of private supplementary education and its implications for policy and practice, the findings add to the body of existing literature. Recognizing the benefits of shadow education for learning outcomes, identity negotiation, and personal growth, stakeholders may collaborate to create an educational ecosystem that is inclusive and supportive, maximizing the benefits of both formal and shadow schooling.

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