

EXPLORING THE TEACHER IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF EFL TEACHING

Inara Fatika Andjani ¹, Muhammad Khayan ², Julyan Hidayatullah ³, Fauzana ⁴
Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni, Universitas Negeri Semarang

SUBMISSION TRACK

Submitted : 20 Mei 2024
Accepted : 25 Mei 2024
Published : 26 Mei 2024

KEYWORDS

personal experience, based on the idea that teacher identity develops through experiences and interactions

CORRESPONDENCE

Phone: xxxxxxxxxxxx

E-mail:

inarafatika19@students.unnes.ac.id
muhammadkhayan3@students.unnes.ac.id
julyanhidayatullah104@students.unnes.ac.id
fauzana200206@students.unnes.ac.id

A B S T R A C T

This qualitative study investigates the dynamic creation of teacher identity in the context of English language teaching (ELT). The study examines the complex interplay of professional identity and personal experience, based on the idea that teacher identity develops through experiences and interactions. The study sheds light on the various features of teacher identity creation using semi-structured interviews with a non-native English instructor in Semarang, Indonesia. According to the findings, professional identity is shaped by a commitment to language fluency, adaptability to varied teaching roles, and a balance of academic rigor and student well-being. Furthermore, personal experiences, such as socioeconomic background and educational trajectory, have a substantial impact on teacher identity development. The study emphasizes the necessity of matching teacher training programs with the difficulties of diverse classrooms and addressing research gaps for non-native English-speaking teachers. Finally, this study contributes to a better understanding of teacher identity creation and the consequences for effective pedagogical practices in ELT contexts, particularly in the private course setting that demands flexibility and a student-centered approach to meet the specific needs of learners.

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Introduction

In general, identity refers to the aspects of oneself that one chooses to express in interactions, while teacher identity, though it reflects features of an individual's broader identity, is primarily associated with characteristics intrinsic to the teaching profession itself [2]. This encompasses the values, beliefs, and practices that teachers adopt and develop over time. Teacher identity is not static, it is constructed and continuously reshaped as part of the teaching-learning process [3]. This construction occurs through experiences in the classroom, interactions with students and colleagues, and engagement with educational communities and practices.

Therefore, teacher identity can be defined as how teachers perceive themselves and the characteristics they develop as they begin to teach and continue throughout their careers. It involves an ongoing negotiation between personal beliefs and professional demands, influenced by the educational environment and the broader socio historical and cultural context. As teachers gain experience and reflect on their practices, their identities evolve, incorporating new insights and adapting to changing circumstances.

In the field of education, teachers play a pivotal role, acting as the foundation for guiding their students to achieve their fullest potential [4]. Teacher identity is not an inherent characteristic but rather a continuous process of interpretation that integrates personal attributes with environmental factors to create a complex self-understanding [5]. This process is influenced by various factors, including ethnicity, sociocultural dynamics, political contexts, economic conditions, and institutional pressures [6]. Since a teacher's identity is inseparable from their teaching practices [2], the formation of teacher identity is a crucial concern in global

educational systems. It significantly impacts the effectiveness of both prospective and practising teachers and, consequently, the overall quality of education [1].

Teacher identity serves as more than a theoretical construct; it represents a pertinent paradigm that aims to guide educators, steering them toward upholding professional ethics and fostering their continuous professional growth [5]. The concept of teacher identity has introduced a fresh framework for examining the intricate processes where teachers acquire and develop their roles, evolve professionally, and implement their methodologies within specific sociohistorical, cultural, and political environments [7].

Being a teacher of culturally and linguistically diverse students requires specific knowledge and skills to provide effective learning. However, teacher preparation programs often do not give adequate attention or training to what is needed by prospective teachers [6]. Therefore, teacher preparation programs need to strengthen their understanding of teacher identity and adapt curricula and training to better support teacher candidates in dealing with the complexities of diversity in their classrooms.

There are significant gaps in current research on teacher identity construction and classroom practices in the context of English language teaching. These gaps include a lack of investigation into numerous factors impacting teacher identity outside of sociocultural pressures, as well as a gap between theoretical discussion and implementation, particularly in post-method pedagogy. Furthermore, there is a remarkable lack of in-depth investigation into non-native English-speaking teachers' experiences and the complexities of linguistic identities in the classroom. This study highlighted these gaps, emphasizing the need for additional research to overcome these limitations and give a more comprehensive understanding of teacher identity formation and its implications for classroom practices. This research focuses on teacher identity when teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in an EFL teaching environment in one of the courses in Semarang.

Methods

To explore more deeply the construction of teacher identity, this study uses a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews with a non-native English teacher who teaches at an English course institution in Semarang. As a participant, the teacher had more than two years of teaching experience and a bachelor's degree.

The steps in the data collection process included several stages. Firstly, we selected the type of data that suited our needs, which was about teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in an EFL teaching context. After establishing the type of data to be collected, the next step was to prepare the necessary instrument, which was a semi-structured, in-depth personal interview covering the participants' professional background, such as teaching experience, and aspects of their teacher identity, such as educational work routines.

Some of the key questions asked in this study to the participant were designed to understand various aspects related to their personal experiences as well as the motivations that drove them to develop the courses. These questions included an exploration of the participant's individual experiences in the context of course development, the factors that motivated them to engage in such activities, and the standards applied in the courses they developed. In addition, the study also examined the work culture at the course venue, to understand how the work environment and cultural dynamics at the venue influenced the process of course development and delivery by the participants. Through these questions, this study sought to gain a comprehensive picture of the various elements that impacted the participant's participation and initiative in creating and managing the course.

Once the research instruments were well developed, the next step was to contact the course to seek their permission and willingness to participate in the interviews. This process involved several stages of negotiation and careful coordination to ensure that the course fully understood the purpose and relevance of our research.

After the course gave consent to conduct the interviews, we then planned for the interviews. We arranged a schedule that suited the availability of the course owner, who also served as one of the teachers at the course. The interview location was set at a course located in Semarang, so we needed to prepare everything so that the interview process could run smoothly and as planned.

On the appointed day, we arrived at the course with all the needed equipment, including the interview instruments that had been prepared beforehand. The interview lasted for approximately forty-five minutes. We made sure to ask questions that had been designed with the aim of eliciting information that was relevant and important to our research. These questions were designed in such a way as to gain in-depth insights into the various aspects of the research focus.

During the interview, we used smartphone devices to record the entire conversation. This was done to ensure that every detail of information conveyed by the interviewee could be recorded properly and that no important data was missed. We also took additional notes during the interview to help in the data analysis process later. By doing so, we hope to collect accurate and comprehensive data, which will be very useful in supporting our research results. This process also allowed us to have complete and structured documentation.

After completing the interview stage, we proceeded to transcribe the data we had collected. This stage required a meticulous and structured effort, starting with carefully re-listening to each audio recording of the interview. Every detail of the conversation was carefully recorded in a written format using Microsoft Word word processing software. As the interviews were conducted in Indonesian, the next step was to translate the content of the transcripts into English to make it easier for the reader to understand.

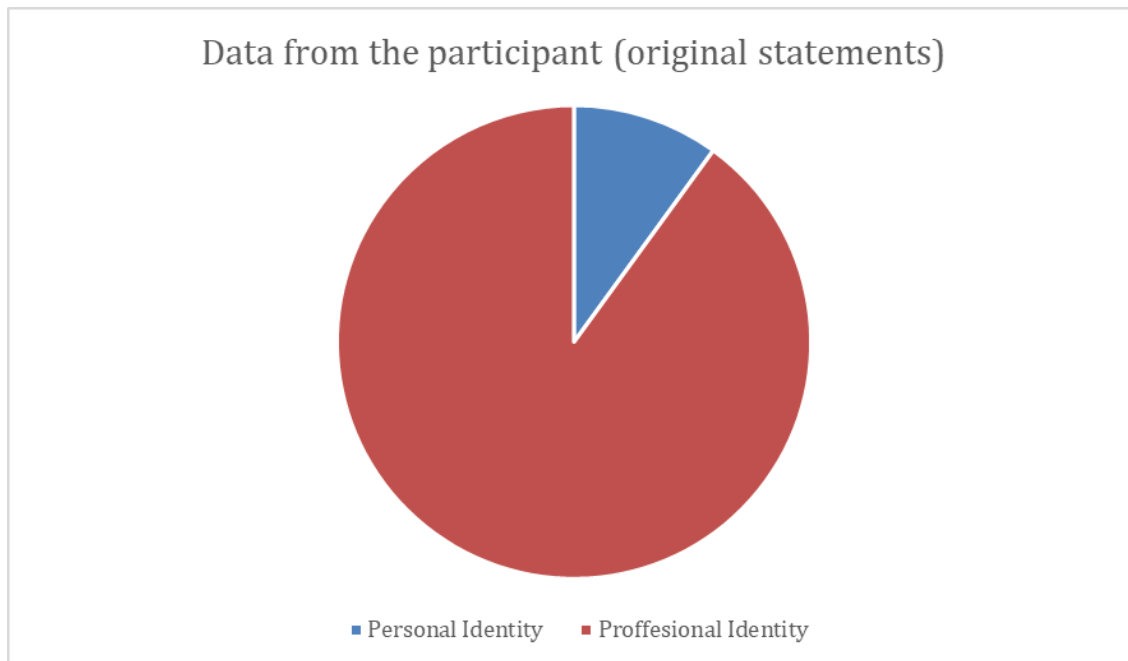
This translation process was not just about converting words from one Indonesian language to English, but also ensuring that the original meaning conveyed by the participants was preserved. We take great care and make every effort to avoid any misunderstanding of the translated information. We used various references and to ensure that the translation was accurate and reflected the original intent of the interview.

Once the translation was complete, we reviewed the transcripts. This process involves double-checking each section of the transcript to ensure that no typos or translation errors have been missed. We also check the accuracy of the information recorded, ensuring that every important detail has been recorded correctly and that no information is missing.

The final step in the process was to interpret the data according to our research objectives. We analyze the data we have collected to identify relevant patterns or findings. The results of this analysis are then used to form conclusions and recommendations in our research report.

In addition, we also created documentation related to the entire data collection process. This includes notes on the data collection process, interview transcriptions, and data analyses. This documentation is important to ensure the transparency of our research.

1. Findings and Discussion



From the interview, the researcher found that there are two types of identities that the participant has shown, and the categories are:

Professional identity

As the name suggested, professional identity usually referred to the self-concept that individuals developed in relation to their profession. It encompassed the values, beliefs, and behaviors that were characteristic of their role within a professional context. This identity shaped how teachers perceived their work, interacted with colleagues or students, and how they approached their professional responsibilities.

As the table/diagram showed, professional identity occurred in most, presumably because the interview took place in the participant's work environment. The participant began by stating that the reason students joined the course was to achieve fluency in English, which required the teachers in the course to have high English proficiency.

“People who come here certainly want fluency in English, and it is hoped that people who enter this course will be fluent in English.”

This statement underlined the importance of teachers' understanding of their role and responsibility in guiding students toward fluency in English. It was important because through the emphasis on language fluency, teachers showed their awareness of the need for in-depth knowledge and skills in guiding students in the language acquisition process. The dedication to ensuring students became fluent in English also showed resilience and a strong work ethic in providing the necessary effort to help students achieve their goals. In this case, teacher identity was demonstrated by a strong commitment to the outcome of learning fluency in English. The teacher demonstrated a clear focus on delivering high-quality language education, which was central to their professional identity.

Furthermore, the participant also revealed that they agreed if there were students who asked for help in doing their schoolwork that was not an English subject.

“There is (a teacher who teaches another subject), but more in English. For example, someone who wants to learn another subject can be accommodated.”

This statement demonstrated the teacher's ability to teach English while also recognizing their skills in teaching other subjects. By stating that the teacher concentrated mainly on teaching English but was also able to provide support to students in other subjects, it showed that the teacher had diverse skills and knowledge.

Although it might not have been ideal, this willingness to help students with non-English subjects highlighted the teacher's commitment to the overall academic success of their students. It suggested a holistic approach to education, where the teacher saw the value in supporting students across various disciplines, thereby fostering a more well-rounded learning experience. This kind of support could have been particularly beneficial for students who may have struggled with certain subjects, as it provided them with additional resources and guidance.

This approach could have helped build strong teacher-student relationships. When students knew they could rely on their teacher for help in various areas, they were more likely to feel supported and motivated. This could lead to increased trust and communication between students and the teacher, creating a positive and collaborative classroom environment. The teacher's ability to assist with different subjects also reflected their adaptability and resourcefulness. It demonstrated a proactive attitude towards continuous learning and professional development, as the teacher must have stayed informed about various subject matters to provide effective assistance. This versatility not only benefited the students but also enriched the teacher's professional practice.

Later on, the participant informed the researchers that they also provided games for students. However, it was just on the occasion when their learning activities were finished before the bell rang, which could support the students' learning. By providing games when their learning activity had ended, it could have helped students build a healthy relationship with learning as it eased the pressure of being a good or smart student.

“In the case of the learning activity being completed before the bell rang, we provided the games for students until the bell rang.”

This statement showed participants' attention to student development and the need for improvisation in learning activities. By providing games after learning sessions, teachers not only help students build a healthy relationship with learning, but also provide opportunities for students to interact socially and develop interpersonal skills. When students play with their peers, they learn to get along more easily and develop the ability to cooperate and communicate effectively.

In addition, this strategy simply gave the teachers in this course the opportunity to observe the students in a more relaxed and informal setting. These observations could provide valuable insights into how students interacted with each other and how they used language in social contexts. For example, teachers could set rules where students had to use English while playing games. This method allowed students to practice their language skills in a fun and relaxed environment, which indirectly reinforced what they had learned during formal learning sessions.

As such, this strategy not only facilitated natural language learning, but also reduced the academic pressure that students often felt. They could feel that learning was a fun and rewarding activity, not just a stressful obligation. Teachers who encouraged play were also instrumental in creating a classroom atmosphere that supported students' social and emotional development, which was just as important as their academic progress. Through this approach, teachers demonstrated their dedication to creating a holistic learning environment.

By providing space for students to play and socialize, teachers helped students develop confidence and communication skills that would be useful throughout their lives. It was a student-centered form of education that considered all aspects of a child's development and encouraged a balance between learning and play. By integrating games into the learning schedule, teachers also showed that they placed importance on students' mental and emotional well-being. They understood that happy and relaxed students were more likely to absorb information well and perform better in class. This approach created a supportive environment where students felt valued and cared for, which in turn enhanced their overall learning experience.

This strategy reflected a deep understanding of student needs and dynamics, as well as the teachers' commitment to providing a well-rounded and fulfilling learning experience. By providing games after study sessions, teachers not only enriched the learning process but also contributed to the holistic development of students, creating a balance between academic education and life skills.

Additionally, incorporating games into the learning process could cater to diverse learning styles, making education more inclusive. Games could serve as a practical tool to reinforce vocabulary, grammar, and other language concepts in an engaging way.

“We already have our standards that this child can, at least their vocabulary can increase, which seems relevant today.”

The participant's statement regarding the standards that had been set demonstrated the commitment of the teacher in the course to maintain high expectations and clear goals in their teaching practices. By emphasizing and prioritizing vocabulary growth—which was very important when it came to language proficiency—as the primary outcome, it demonstrated the teacher's understanding of the basic components of language learning and showed their professional knowledge.

Moreover, this focus on vocabulary was not only about expanding the number of words a student knew or remembered, but also about enhancing their ability to use these words effectively in various contexts. Vocabulary acquisition was a fundamental aspect of language development that supported other skills such as reading comprehension, writing, and verbal communication. The teacher's approach reflected an awareness of the interconnected nature of these skills and the importance of a strong vocabulary foundation.

Setting high standards and clear goals provided students with a structured learning environment that could boost their confidence and motivation. When students were aware of the specific objectives they needed to achieve, they were more likely to be engaged and take ownership of their learning process. This methodical approach also allowed for more targeted and effective teaching strategies, enabling the teacher to address individual student needs and track progress more accurately.

“We accept the mandate of the students' parents that they want to be here and have fun here, so there is no sense of coercion.”

In the context of English language teaching, the role and identity of the teacher was crucial in creating an effective, fun, and engaging learning environment for students. This statement indicated that teachers at the course understood and appreciated parents' desire for their children to feel comfortable and happy during the learning process. As such, teachers demonstrated their willingness to work with parents to create positive educational experiences for students.

Understanding that successful education often required collaboration between the teachers and also the parents, the teachers were committed to ensuring that the children felt welcome and not overwhelmed by the pressure of learning. They recognized that a fun and

force-free learning atmosphere could increase student engagement and intrinsic motivation. By creating an environment where students could have fun while learning, the teachers not only met parents' expectations but also implemented teaching strategies that centered on students' needs and well-being.

This approach reflected the teachers' professional dedication to creating optimal learning conditions, where students felt supported and motivated to learn without pressure. They strove to foster students' interest and enthusiasm for English learning through creative and fun methods.

The teachers in this course also understood that creating a positive learning environment could have a long-term impact on students' attitudes towards education as a whole. They strove to build good relationships with students, listened to their needs and wants, and tailored their teaching approach to suit individual learning preferences. Through caring and empathetic interactions, teachers contributed to students' holistic development, both in academic and social-emotional aspects.

By prioritizing the students' comfort and happiness, teachers demonstrated their commitment to inclusive and responsive teaching practices. They understood that when students felt happy and free from coercion, they were more likely to actively engage in the learning process and achieve better results. This approach not only improved learning effectiveness but also helped students develop positive skills and attitudes that would serve them well in the future.

The participant said that the teachers in the course used language that was easy to understand and also used bilingualism to maintain communication with the students.

“Because most of the students here are children, we (the teachers) have to use language that is easy to understand and still bilingual as well.”

This statement underscored the importance of applying age-appropriate teaching methods to the children who made up the majority of the course students. The use of simple and easy-to-understand language by the teachers in this course showed that they recognized the need to simplify communication to suit the students' level of understanding. This was very important as the students needed clearer and more direct explanations in order to understand the material well. In addition, the teachers' use of bilingual instruction demonstrated an inclusive and accessible professional approach that aimed to accommodate students' diverse language backgrounds.

This approach was implemented with the realization that not all students had the same level of English proficiency. By utilizing two languages, the teachers in this course strove to ensure that every student could follow the lesson well, understand the material taught, and actively participate in the learning activities. This was important to ensure that every student, regardless of their primary language, could receive a fair and equal education. This practice also reflected the teachers' commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment, where every student felt valued and treated fairly.

Furthermore, the ability of the teachers in this course to adjust the language used according to the age and language proficiency level of the students demonstrated their flexibility and responsiveness to the learners' needs. It also illustrated a level of professionalism in teaching practice, where teachers focused not only on delivering the material but also on student understanding and engagement. By customizing the language of instruction, the teachers in this course helped students develop their overall language and social skills. It also showed that the teachers understood the importance of ensuring that every student could fully benefit from the learning process.

Thus, the teaching approach adopted by the teachers in this course not only enhanced the effectiveness of learning but also supported the holistic development of students. This approach helped students build confidence in using different languages, understand the material better, and interact effectively in diverse learning environments. The teachers in this course demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusive and student-centered teaching practices, ensuring that all students had equal opportunities to succeed in their education.

“If this seems to force them to follow the curriculum, the most important thing is that our delivery is fun for them so that they enjoy it more.”

This statement highlighted how the teachers in this course had a very important approach to delivering the curriculum in a way that was engaging and fun for the students. This indicated that, although there were elements of the curriculum that may have been perceived as compulsory or forced by students, the teachers in this course strove to change this perception through fun and innovative teaching methods.

By using a variety of creative teaching strategies and methods, teachers demonstrated their ability to innovate in the learning process. They understood that creating an enjoyable learning environment was critical to increasing student engagement and motivation. Therefore, they focused on making every learning session a positive and exciting experience for the students.

This approach reflected the teachers' strong commitment to the principle of student-centered learning. They strove to ensure that students' needs, interests, and comfort were top priorities in the learning process. Teachers strove to make a curriculum that may have seemed rigid and boring into something more lively and interesting so that students felt more enthusiastic and motivated to learn.

Although they were aware of the possibility of students feeling forced to follow the curriculum, the teachers in this course still emphasized the importance of delivering the material in a fun way. They believed that by creating a positive learning atmosphere, students would enjoy the learning process more and feel more engaged. This in turn would help students to understand and remember the material more easily, as well as reduce any feelings of compulsion that may have arisen.

Therefore, the approach used by the teachers in this course focused not only on delivering the curriculum, but also on creating a learning environment that supported and empowered the students. They strove to ensure that each student could learn comfortably and enjoy the process, so that learning objectives could be achieved more effectively. This approach demonstrated the teachers' dedication to optimizing students' learning experiences and creating an atmosphere conducive to their development and growth.

“If it happens to be short of time and I have to finish the book, I will give homework to the students, but we tend not to give homework because they will be burdened with their assignments from school.”

In the statement above, the teacher reflected a professional identity. By saying those statements, the teacher highlighted a responsibility on two competing priorities which were fulfilling the curriculum requirements and considering the well-being of the students.

By stating “If it happened to be short of time and I had to finish the book,...” the teacher showed a commitment to fulfilling the educational requirements by assigning additional homework to students if necessary to cover the curriculum. As an educator, the teacher was responsible for delivering the materials in the curriculum within the designated time frame. The statement showed dedication to meeting academic standards and ensuring that students received the necessary skills and knowledge in the curriculum.

However, alongside the commitment and dedication to the academic goals, the teacher also showed a compassionate understanding of the students' circumstances. By acknowledging the potential burden of additional homework on students who already had assignments from school ("we tended not to give homework because they would be burdened with their assignments from school"), the teacher showed a thoughtful consideration for the student's well-being. It highlighted a caring and empathetic approach while dealing with students, recognizing the importance of supporting students' overall health and managing their workload to prevent them from stress and exhaustion.

Personal experience

Personal experiences had a very significant impact on shaping and developing a teacher's identity. Each teacher brought a unique set of life, educational, and professional experiences, which collectively contributed to how they saw themselves and their role as educators. A participant in the research interviews recounted experiences that illustrated this process very well:

"Initially, I was still in the village in the Barito area. There were many children who seemed to need English, but at a price they could afford, so I held courses at home. Over time, I was able to save money, and finally, I registered with the Education Office and continued to get an official license."

This participant's experience illustrated how the experience of living in a village that may have had limited access to quality education encouraged the participant to take the initiative in meeting local needs. In Barito village, the participant saw that many children needed English language skills for their future but might have been deterred by high costs. By organizing affordable home English courses, the participant showed deep empathy and concern for their community. It was not just about providing educational services, but also about empowering children and giving them better opportunities in the future.

Moreover, the decision to save money and eventually register the course with the Education Office to obtain an official license reflected the participant's dedication to professionalism and improving the quality of teaching. This process was not easy and required commitment and sacrifice. With an official license, the participant not only enhanced her credibility as an educator but also demonstrated a commitment to meeting higher educational standards. This allowed the participant to provide better and more structured services, which in turn could have a greater impact on the children they taught.

This experience also showed the journey of transformation from an individual who may have initially only had good intentions to help, to a recognized and respected professional in the field of education. Each step in this journey—from conducting courses at home, to saving money, to finally obtaining an official license from the Education Office—illustrated how life and professional experiences were intertwined in shaping a teacher's identity.

The participant who is sensitized to the needs and challenges faced by children in his/her community demonstrates that being a teacher is more than just delivering the curriculum; it is about building a meaningful relationship with students and the community and striving to make a real difference in their lives.

With an official license, the participant not only enhanced her own capabilities and professionalism but also contributed to the development of the wider community. This participant's experience illustrated an inspiring journey of how personal and professional

commitments could come together to create a significant positive impact within the field of education.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The study revealed that non-native English teachers showed a strong commitment to guiding students toward English fluency, reflecting a deep understanding of their necessary role in language acquisition. Their versatility in teaching, extending beyond English, showcased a comprehensive professional identity. The teacher employed innovative practices, such as using games to create an engaging classroom environment, and maintained high standards, particularly in vocabulary growth. Collaboration with parents was emphasized to foster a positive and enjoyable learning experience for students.

The teacher's adaptable and inclusive approach, using easy-to-understand language and bilingual instruction, accommodated students with varying proficiency levels. Balancing curriculum requirements with students' overall well-being highlighted the teacher's compassionate and empathetic nature. Additionally, the teacher's personal experiences, including starting a course to meet community needs and obtaining an official license, significantly influenced their professional identity, reflecting a proactive and empathetic commitment to education.

We suggest that other researchers undertake further studies on this topic. Future researchers might observe the same topic, but with different data. We collected data from one participant who was both the owner and teacher at the English course, but our investigation lacked data from students participating in receiving need analysis due to visiting untimely before the class schedule. A higher number of participants is strongly needed to create comprehensive data.

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