



Investigating professional identity construction of EFL teachers in informal language institutions through the lens of critical incidents

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Abstract

The professional identity of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in formal education has been widely studied, but research in informal education remains limited. This study explores the context of critical incidents (CIs) identified by informal language institutions (ILIs) EFL teachers and how EFL teachers in ILIs negotiate and construct their professional identities using the critical incident technique (CIT). Ten EFL teachers from an informal English course in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, participated through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Data analysis identified key themes in CIs affecting teachers' professional identity. Results show that within informal language institution, CIs for teachers occurred in the context of the teacher's professional development, students, and direct work environment. The positive CIs, such as student progression and collaborative support, significantly boosted teachers' confidence and teaching effectiveness, whereas negative CIs, such as absenteeism and perceived inequities, posed challenges to their professional growth. Despite its limitations, including small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, the study provides valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities of teaching in informal educational settings, offering directions for future research and practical implications for teacher development programs.

Keywords: critical incidents, English for foreign learners, informal English course, teacher identity construction, teacher professional identity

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Introduction

Teacher identity is dynamic and always evolving through the learning-to-teach process (Trent, 2010). It plays a crucial role in meaning-making and decision-making (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012), influencing both student outcomes and teacher's professional growth. Understanding teacher identity as an evolving construct underscores the potential for ongoing development (Wolf & Peele, 2019). Wenger (2000) proposed that identity is closely connected to practice, with a strong sense of teacher identity fostering motivation, engagement, and effectiveness in teaching. Therefore, teachers need to have a strong sense of teacher identity as it helps them to make decisions and choices in the classroom for the reason of students' improvement as well as for their own development.

Teacher identity construction is a critical aspect of the educational framework as it defines who teachers are and what they do. Higher levels of professional identity enable teachers to become transformative educators who can meet professional expectations (Alsup, 2018; Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Beijaard et al. (2000) propounded that teachers' perceptions of their professional identity significantly influence their adaptability to educational changes and their capacity for innovation in teaching practices. Thus, fostering awareness of professional identity is essential for sustained growth and adaptability.

Research on teacher professional identity has extensively examined how educators perceive themselves within their professional roles and how these perceptions evolve through experiences, interactions, and contextual factors. Researchers have explored some areas, such as the role of reflection and critical incidents in identity formation and professional growth (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009; Karim et al., 2024), the impact of social and relational interaction on teacher

professional development (Pishghadam et al., 2022), and teachers' professional identity is affected by institutional policies and discourses (Lewis, 2023).

This study explores EFL teachers' professional identity construction in informal language institutions (ILIs), an under-researched area despite ILIs' rapid growth in Indonesia. This study represents a significant research gap, as ILIs present unique challenges and opportunities that differ from formal educational environments, such as flexible working conditions, diverse student demographics, and varying pedagogical practices. ILIs provide an alternative to formal education for English learners and a platform for pre-service and novice teachers to gain experience. Unlike formal institutions with standardized curricula and rigid structures, ILIs offer flexibility, diverse student demographics, and varied pedagogical approaches, shaping teachers' professional development through peer collaboration and student feedback. Research in Vietnam found that while formal learning aids development, informal learning has a greater impact (Hai et al., 2024).

Given the abundance of informal language institutions that have grown in popularity in Indonesia as awareness of the value of learning the language has grown, this can be an intriguing niche to observe. EFL teachers may face different challenges and constraints in informal language institutions regarding their professional identity constructions, and it seems to be plausible for research. In filling the gaps in the previous studies, this present study provides two research questions:

- (1) What is the context of critical incidents (CIs) identified by informal language institutions (ILIs) EFL teachers?
- (2) How do EFL teachers in informal language institutions (ILIs) negotiate and construct their professional identities through the occurrence of critical incidents (CIs) in their unique setting?

Literature review

Theoretical framework: Teacher identity construction

Kegan (1979) explains teacher identity construction as the process of balancing and re-balancing the personal and professional dimensions. The process takes place when teachers construe and re-construe episodes in their lives as teachers (Kerby, 2021). The process of negotiating the personal and professional dimensions of the teachers is only feasible when teachers recollect the incidents that happened both in their personal and professional lives that might contribute to their identity constructions. Through the lens of discourse in shaping teacher

identity, Alsup (2018) investigated pre-service teachers' process of balancing and re-balancing the personal and professional dimensions and found that they struggle to balance their sense of authority and vulnerability. This process is influenced by internal and external factors, such as emotions and working environments (Flores & Day, 2006; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). In this present study, the authors are curious about how EFL teachers construct their teacher identities through the episodes of their teaching in informal education settings.

Studies on teacher identity construction

Over the past five years, numerous studies have documented investigations into the identity construction of both novice and experienced teachers (Florida & Mbato, Ke Lomi & Mbato, 2020; Wahyuningsih, 2021; Wijaya, 2022). This topic has gained attention because professional identity is crucial in teacher education, given its significance in shaping teaching practices and influencing teachers' motivation, self-reliance, and responsibility. In the context of English foreign language (EFL) teaching, a robust professional identity can help EFL teachers implement transformative education (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) propose that understanding the complexities of professional identity construction requires examining the context of practice, where identity shaping occurs.

Building on this foundation, the present study explores professional identity construction in the context of informal language institutions (ILIs), an area that remains underexamined. While previous research has largely focused on novice and experienced teachers in formal education settings, this study extends the discussion by investigating how EFL teachers in ILIs navigate their professional identity through critical incidents. By examining the specific challenges and opportunities within informal education, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping EFL teachers' professional identity across different teaching environments.

Contextual factors in teacher identity construction

The studies on EFL teachers' professional identity construction in Indonesia have captured various educational contexts in formal educational environments, highlighting how teachers negotiate their roles, adapt to challenges, and reflect on their experiences. In teaching practicum programs, pre-service teachers develop their identities by navigating both contentment and challenges as they transition between their roles as students and educators (Triutami & Mbato,

2021). Similarly, in public senior high schools, teachers engage in reflective practices, using critical incidents to reshape and renegotiate their professional identities (Putri & Kuswandono, 2020).

In vocational high schools, teachers construct their identities by overcoming professional constraints and envisioning future aspirations, allowing them to remain resilient in their careers (Wahyuningsih, 2021). Meanwhile, teachers in special needs schools build their identities based on motivational factors shaped by the challenges and rewards of working with students with special needs (Upa & Mbato, 2020). In underdeveloped provinces, teachers must balance internal struggles, such as emotional control and self-efficacy, with external challenges like classroom management, limited resources, and professional relationships, all of which contribute to their identity formation (Ke Lomi & Mbato, 2020). Collectively, these studies highlight that EFL teachers' professional identity construction is a dynamic and context-dependent process influenced by reflective practices, personal resilience, and the ability to navigate diverse teaching environments.

Method

Research design

The study employed the critical incident technique (CIT) to examine how EFL teachers shape their professional identities in an informal language institution. CIT is a qualitative method that involves processes for observing, analyzing, and rating human behavior to maximize their problem-solving potential (Hughes, 2007). This technique was first developed and published by Flanagan (1954) and since then has been widely used across fields. Within the past five years in Indonesia, CIT has been used by a range of professionals, including education (Lubis, 2018), economic and business (Majid et al., 2019), engineering (Hidayat, 2020), social study (Rohman et al., 2020), and management (Wahyuni-TD et al., 2021).

In this study, CIT was applied to collect and analyze critical incidents—defined as specific events or situations that significantly impact the teachers' professional development, either positively or negatively (Flanagan, 1954). Ten EFL teachers from an informal language institution (ILIs) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, were asked to reflect on their instructional experiences through a structured questionnaire comprising both closed- and open-ended questions. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted to triangulate the data and provide deeper insights into their identity construction. The collected data were

then coded and analyzed to identify recurring themes in teachers' critical incidents, offering a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping their professional identities in informal educational settings.

Research procedures

The CIT offers a sequence of five steps systematic process, as follows (Flanagan, 1954): (1) establishment of general aims, (2) establishment of plans and expectations, (3) data collection, (3) data analysis, (4) data interpretation and report. Nevertheless, CIT is flexible (Hughes, 2007) and modifiable to meet the specific situation (Flanagan, 1954). The research was conducted in Yogyakarta in April-June 2022. The data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire, which was chosen to enable teachers to answer reflective questions. Sardabi et al. (2018) proposed that in establishing EFL teachers' identity development and assuring its evolvement in educational practices, critical self-reflection should be well-applied in all educational institutions. Therefore, the reflective questions were provided to allow teachers to make a critical self-reflection of their teaching experience and were hoped to help teachers recall critical incidents that happened that contributed to their identity shaping. Figure 1 shows the flowchart which shows the process of CIT that was adapted from Flanagan (1954) to fit the present study.

Figure 1

The process of CIT data collection was adapted in this study



(Source: Flanagan, 1954)

Participants

To recruit research participants, 13 EFL teachers from an ILIs in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, were initially invited to participate. These teachers were selected based on their involvement in teaching English within the institution and their willingness to share their professional experiences. Out of the 13 teachers approached, 10 agreed to participate in the study, resulting in a diverse sample of participants. Among them, three were male, and seven were female. The participants represented a wide range of teaching experiences, from newly

graduated teachers to those with several years of teaching EFL. This variation in teaching backgrounds allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how different levels of experience and perspectives contribute to the shaping of EFL teachers' professional identities in informal language settings. The teachers were provided with clear information about the study's aims and the process of participation, ensuring informed consent before proceeding with data collection. The teachers completed a consent form and were informed that pseudonyms would be used to keep confidentiality. They agreed that the data gathered would be used for the study. Table 1 shows the demographic data of the participants.

Table 1

The participants' demographic data

Participants	Gender	Education background	Years of teaching experience
P1	Male	English Literature	5 years
P2	Female	English Literature	5 years
P3	Female	English Literature	2 years
P4	Female	English Education	2 years
P5	Female	English Education	2 years
P6	Female	English Education	< 1 year
P7	Female	English Education	< 1 year
P8	Female	English Education	< 1 year
P9	Male	English Education	< 1 year
P10	Male	International Relations	< 1 year

Instruments

The study employed two instruments to collect data: an open-ended questionnaire and an individual in-depth interview. Both instruments were specifically designed to capture reflective insights into how critical incidents shape EFL teachers' professional identities in an informal language institution.

The first instrument was an open-ended questionnaire, which was developed based on the critical incident questions (CIQ) framework, adapted from Gilstrap and Dupree (2008). The CIQ is designed to prompt participants to reflect on specific events or situations that have influenced their professional experiences. These questions were modified to align with the context of the study, focusing on incidents related to teaching practices, student interactions, and personal growth within the informal teaching environment. The open-ended format of the questionnaire allowed participants to provide detailed responses, enabling them to describe critical incidents and the emotional, cognitive, and professional

impacts these events had on their identities as teachers. This instrument aimed to provide initial insights into the participants' perceptions of key events that shaped their teaching practices and professional development.

To complement the questionnaire, the study also employed individual in-depth interviews. This second instrument was designed to deepen and enrich the data gathered from the first instrument by allowing for more personalized and detailed conversations. The interview framework was adapted from the work of van Lankveld et al. (2017) and Farrell (2013), with a focus on contextual factors that influence teachers' professional identities. This included exploring the teachers' reflections on the challenges and rewards of teaching in an informal language institution, their interactions with colleagues and students, and the institutional environment. The interviews provided an opportunity for participants to elaborate on incidents mentioned in the questionnaire, clarify ambiguities, and offer additional insights that might not have been captured in the written responses. By using both the open-ended questionnaire and in-depth interviews, we ensured a comprehensive approach to understanding the factors that shape EFL teachers' professional identities in informal educational settings. The research instruments blueprint is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

The research instruments' blueprint

Instruments	Aspects	Items
Open-ended questionnaire	Critical incidents (Gilstrap & Dupree, 2008)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. At what moment or activity in the ILIs did you feel most engaged with what was happening? 2. At what moment or activity in the ILIs did you feel most distanced from what was happening? 3. What action that anyone (academic advisors, teachers, parents, or students) took in the ILIs did you find most rewarding and helpful in your teaching job? 4. What action that anyone (academic advisors, teachers, parents, or students) took in the ILIs did you find most puzzling or confusing in your teaching job? 5. What about the moment in the ILIs that surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.)

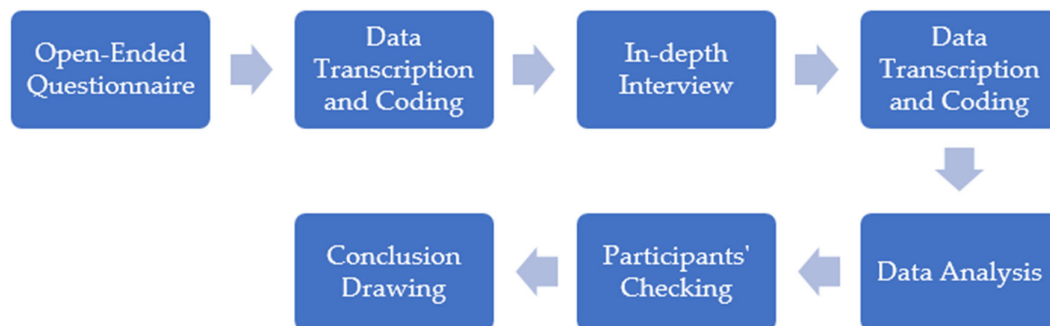
In-depth Interview	Identity shaping within contextual factors (Farrell, 2013; van Lankveld et al., 2017)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The most memorable incidents related to direct work environment, students, and teacher's development activities. 2. Their emotions and reactions toward the incidents. 3. Their takeaways from the incidents.
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Data collection

The data collection was done in two phases. In the first phase, utilizing the critical incidents technique (Gilstrap & Dupree, 2008), we distributed an open-ended questionnaire that contained five reflective questions from the critical incident questions (CIQ). In the second phase, an in-depth interview (Farrell, 2013; van Lankveld et al., 2017) was employed. To analyze the data, we first prepared data transcription, which was followed by data coding. Figure 2 depicts the data collection and analysis technique.

Figure 2

Data collection and analysis techniques



As shown in Figure 2, initially, all participants completed a questionnaire through Google Forms. The questionnaire contained two parts: survey of demographic and backgrounds open-ended questions. The data were gathered to gain information about the factors that contributed to teachers' identity shaping in the context of an ILIs. After the data from the open-ended questionnaire were collected, they were processed and transcribed to extract the key themes from the raw data (Ary et al., 2010). Some themes emerged from the data coding, which then were used to construct the questions for the in-depth interview. Next, we selected three teachers to do the individual in-depth interviews. The decision to select three teachers was made because we were

curious to dig deeper into their stories of how critical incidents occurred within the context of their teaching and shaped their professional identity as EFL teachers. These three teachers show similar salient themes, which were plausible to dig deeper.

Data analysis

The open-ended questionnaire responses were reviewed, and key phrases or concepts were highlighted and grouped into categories. The data were then analyzed to identify critical incidents, their impact, and the context in which they occurred. Descriptive statistics were used for close-ended questions to quantify the responses, offering an overview of participants' experiences and attitudes. Combining both data types offered a comprehensive picture of the teachers' professional identities.

The findings were then presented narratively, as recommended by Creswell (2015). This approach helped explore the complexities of each participant's experience. The data analysis (Table 3) was then framed in theories on teacher identity and critical incidents, drawing on existing literature to deepen the understanding of the factors influencing EFL teachers' identity construction in informal educational settings.

Table 3

The example of the thematic analysis coding process

Data extract (participants' responses)	Codes	Themes
<i>I feel engaged in training, as it is why I chose to teach in an ILI. Weekly sessions show the institution values teacher development.</i>	Engagement in training	Teacher's professional development
<i>Feedback from students helps me to improve my teaching method or make teaching more enthusiastic.</i>	Student feedback as motivation	Student interactions
<i>My supervisor once did not give any comments and/or feedback after observing my teaching activity in the classroom.</i>	Lack of feedback from supervisors	Direct work environment

After conducting in-depth interviews, we transcribed the data verbatim. For both open-ended and closed-ended questionnaires, the coding analysis

technique, as described by Hoggan and Cranton (2015), was used to account for overlapping responses and recurring themes. Table 3 shows an example of the coding process. These themes were significant in identifying patterns in how critical incidents shaped the teachers' professional identities. This study predominantly follows an inductive approach. The thematic analysis is data-driven, where themes emerge from participants' reflections (Thomas, 2006).

Trustworthiness

This study ensures rigor and reliability by following Shenton's (2004) trustworthiness framework: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation via open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Transferability was supported by rich contextual descriptions, allowing readers to assess applicability to other informal language institutions. Dependability was maintained through a transparent research process and an audit trail documenting data collection, coding, and analysis. Confirmability was ensured by minimizing researchers' bias and grounding findings in participants' responses (Shenton, 2004).

Findings

The context of critical incidents (CIs) identified by informal language institutions (ILIs) EFL teachers

The ILIs teachers who participated in this study completed a form and an interview. The form consists of five questions that ask about the most interesting, rewarding, confusing, surprising, and distant moments or incidents that occurred during their time teaching at the informal language institution. The interview let the teachers reflect and share about those incidents. Based on the data collected from the teachers, it is found that the context of critical incidents identified by informal language institution EFL teachers are direct work environment, students, and teacher's professional development. This section presents the finding of research question number one, which is about the context of critical incidents (CIs) identified by informal language institution EFL teachers. Table 4 summarizes the contexts of critical incidents from the data collection.

Table 4*Consolidated contexts of critical incidents (CIs)*

Context	Themes	Associated questions	Responses (N)
Students	Positive feedback, advancement, misbehavior, frequent absences	Q1, Q3, Q4, Q5	10
Direct work environment	Inclusion/exclusion, collaboration, appreciation, unequal treatment	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5	22
Teacher professional development	Training, lack of follow-up after sharing experiences	Q1, Q4	4
N/A	Responses not explicitly tied to a specific context	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5	18

Direct work environment emerges as the most frequently mentioned context for critical incidents, both positive (collaboration, inclusion) and negative (unequal treatment, lack of support). Following that, student-related incidents often stem from behavior, feedback, progress, absences, or misbehavior. While the other two contexts emerge frequently, professional development incidents are less frequent but highlight areas like insufficient follow-up or training opportunities. Next, the unspecified or N/A contexts suggest that some incidents might be generalized or difficult to categorize within specific themes.

Salient themes emerged from all five items of open-ended questionnaire responses by 10 EFL teachers. We provide Tables 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 for each response to the questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. Table 5 responds to the first question about the moment or activity in the ILIs where the teacher most felt engaged.

Table 5*The moment or activity in the ILIs when the teachers felt most engaged*

Contexts	Themes	Responses	N
Teacher professional development	Teacher's training	P5, P7, P8	3
Students	In-class teaching and end-of-term activity	P2, P3, P5, and P4	4
Direct work environment	Sharing time and positive interaction	P6 and P10	2
N/A	N/A	P1	1
Total			10

Table 5 shows the moments or activities in the ILIs that made the teachers feel most engaged. From the responses, CIs happened within the context of the teacher's professional development (teacher's training), students (in-class teaching, end-of-term activity), and direct work environment (sharing time, positive interaction). The following are some of the excerpts of the teachers that show their perception of the CIs in the context of teacher's professional development (teacher's training), students (in-class teaching, end-of-term activity), and a direct work environment (sharing time, positive interaction):

I feel engaged in training, as it's why I chose to teach in an ILI. Weekly sessions show the institution values teacher development. (P5, Interview)

I feel most engaged during end-of-term activities, where staff, teachers, and students enjoy fun yet meaningful moments together. (P4, Interview)

The teacher-sharing session helps me discuss classroom challenges and gain solutions from others. It also provides useful teaching ideas. (P6, Interview)

The excerpts above show that teacher experiences in the ILIs highlight three key areas of engagement: professional development, student interactions, and the work environment. Teachers feel most engaged when receiving consistent professional development, reinforcing research that links ongoing training to motivation and job satisfaction (Kraft et al., 2020). For example, teachers like P5 find regular training sessions enhance their growth and sense of value. On the other hand, Table 6 (the response to the second question) shows the moments when teachers felt most distanced from what was happening in the ILIs.

Table 6

The moment or activity in the ILIs when the teachers felt most distanced

Contexts	Themes	Responses	N
Direct work environment	When not being included in what was happening	P5, P10	3
	When was not assigned to teach any class	P4	
	When an assigned class was retracted and given to another teacher without any notice	P6	2
	When an assigned duty was retracted and given to another teacher without any notice	P1	
N/A	N/A	P2, P3, P7, P8, P9	5
Total			10

Table 6 shows that half of the teachers stated that the most distanced feeling happened within the context of a direct work environment, which involves supervisors and other teachers. A direct work environment could be the strengthening and the constraining factor for teachers' identity development. Teachers in this scenario felt alienated and had few professional options (van Lankveld et al., 2017). Following are some excerpts that depict the feeling of disengagement described by the teachers in the context of a direct work environment (sharing time, positive interaction):

I was not chosen as the weekly training speaker. My employer chose another person who had just resigned. However, it did not negatively impact my teaching performance. (P1, Interview)

I was initially offered a teaching opportunity outside the outlet, but it was given to another teacher. Still, this did not affect my enthusiasm for teaching. I just see it as an experience. (P6, Interview)

As the above excerpts, the analysis reveals that a significant proportion of teachers in the ILIs experience feelings of distance and disengagement within their direct work environment, particularly in interactions with supervisors and peers. Although the direct work environment has the potential to support teachers' professional growth and identity development, it can also contribute to feelings of alienation and limited professional opportunities. This aligns with research by van Lankveld et al. (2017), which highlights how a work environment has the potential to foster professional growth and also be the source of disengagement and feelings of alienation among teachers when their contributions are overlooked or their opportunities are limited. Table 7 displays the responses to the third questions about the most rewarding and helpful actions received by the teachers in the ILIs.

Teachers found the most helpful actions in ILIs came from two key areas (Table 7). First, student-related moments, such as receiving positive feedback or seeing students advance to the next level, boosted their confidence in teaching. Second, support from the work environment, including advice and positive feedback from supervisors and colleagues, was highly rewarding.

The following excerpts illustrate these experiences in the context of students (in-class teaching, end-of-term activity) and a direct work environment (sharing time, positive interaction):

Table 7

The action taken by anyone (academic advisors, teachers, parents, or students) in the ILIs that the teachers found most rewarding and helpful in their teaching job

Contexts	Themes	Responses	N
Students	When a student continues to the next level	P5	5
	Positive feedback and appreciation from students	P4, P6	
Direct work environment	Positive feedback and appreciation from supervisors	P3, P8	
	Discussions with supervisors or other teachers	P9, P10	4
	When other teachers are being helpful	P1	
N/A	N/A	P2, P7	2
	Total		10

Feedback from students helps me to improve my teaching method or make teaching more enthusiastic. (P6, Interview)

Discussing my lesson plan with my supervisor gives me new insights and ideas. I enjoy learning from others, making this activity very helpful. (P9, Interview)

The excerpts highlight that ILIs teachers found student interactions and workplace support most rewarding. Positive student feedback and progress boosted confidence and enthusiasm, with teachers like P6 refining methods based on student input, aligning with research on feedback's role in teacher motivation (Cetin & Taskin, 2016).

Colleague and supervisor support also played a key role in professional growth. Constructive feedback, such as lesson plan discussions noted by P9, enhanced teaching strategies, reinforcing the value of peer collaboration (van der Lans, 2018). While these experiences fostered confidence and improvement, some teachers also faced puzzling critical incidents, as shown in Table 8 (the response to the fourth question).

Table 8

The action taken by anyone (academic advisors, teachers, parents, or students) in the ILIs that the teachers found most puzzling or confusing in their teaching job

Contexts	Themes	Responses	N
Students	Students missed class often	P7	1
Direct work environment	Lack of support from supervisors	P1, P4, P5	4
	Lack of support from other teachers in terms of providing details of materials for substitution	P9	
Teacher's professional development	When there was no follow-up after sharing moments	P2	1
N/A	N/A	P3, P6, P8, P10	4
Total			10

Table 8 shows that actions taken by anyone in the ILIs, such as academic advisors, other teachers, parents, and students, confuse teachers. In fact, the data shows that the most puzzling and confusing actions that teachers in the ILIs experienced occurred in all three contexts. Presented below are some of the excerpts reported by the teachers regarding the matters in the context of students (in-class teaching, end-of-term activity), a direct work environment (sharing time, positive interaction), and teacher's professional development (teacher's training):

I am most confused when students often don't come to the class as scheduled, it makes them behind the materials. (P7, Interview)

My supervisor once did not give any comments and/or feedback after observing my teaching activity in the classroom. (P1, Interview)

I feel puzzled when advisors treat lower staff or part-time teachers unequally. This creates job insecurity and makes me anxious, even over common mistakes. (P4, Interview)

I was most confused when we had sharing moments but then there were no follow-ups afterward. (P2, Interview)

The excerpts reveal that frequent student absences posed a major challenge, disrupting learning and making it difficult to cover essential material within short terms. P7 highlighted these gaps, aligning with research on absenteeism's negative impact on learning and teacher effectiveness (van der Lans, 2018).

Frustration also stemmed from a lack of support and perceived inequities in the work environment. P1 struggled with the absence of feedback after a classroom observation, while P4 felt insecure due to the unequal treatment of lower staff and part-time teachers. These issues reflect broader concerns about how inadequate support contributes to teacher dissatisfaction (Collie & Martin, 2023; Johnson et al., 2008). Additionally, P2 noted that professional development lacked follow-up, limiting growth and reinforcing the need for sustained training support (Fletcher-Wood & Zuccollo, 2020).

Overall, the most confusing challenges involved student absenteeism, insufficient support, and gaps in professional development follow-up, creating uncertainty and hindering professional growth. Table 9 (the response to the fifth question) presents teachers' most surprising career moments, encompassing both positive and negative critical incidents.

Table 9

The moment in the ILIs that surprised the teachers the most, whether it was related to their own reactions, something someone did, or any other event that stands out to them

Contexts	Themes	Responses	N
Students	When students misbehaved	P6, P8	2
Direct work environment	Met a colleague with whom I can discuss this with	P7	6
	Greeted by coworkers	P1	
	Lack of appreciation for teachers' years of dedication	P4	
	Short socialization time for new rules and procedures for teachers	P2	
	When people made an effort to understand me or to make me understand	P10	
	When suddenly asked to substitute a class	P5	
N/A	N/A	P3, P9	2
	Total		10

Table 9 shows that the most surprising moments for EFL teachers in the ILIs stemmed from interactions with students and within the direct work environment, reflecting a mix of challenges and supportive experiences. The following are the excerpts to show the experiences of the teachers regarding the matter in the context of students (in-class teaching, end-of-term activity) and a direct work environment (sharing time, positive interaction):

I was shocked to teach a kids' class with disruptive behavior (screaming, teasing, etc.). It was my first time handling such students, so I sought advice from other teachers on managing them. (P8, Interview)

It felt special when everyone made an effort to communicate with me despite my limited Bahasa. They ensured I understood, which is rare, as people don't usually try that hard. (P10, Interview)

Teachers faced unexpected classroom challenges, such as P8 being assigned a disruptive class and requiring peer support for management. Handling such situations can be stressful and demands strategic intervention (Viac & Fraser, 2020).

Workplace surprises varied from setbacks to positive experiences. P10, for instance, was pleasantly surprised by colleagues' efforts to overcome language barriers, fostering a sense of belonging. Supportive interactions significantly enhance teacher satisfaction and efficacy (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Professional identities negotiation and construction by informal language institutions (ILIs) EFL teachers

This section presents findings related to research question two, which explores how EFL teachers in ILIs negotiate and construct their professional identities through critical incidents. Table 10 outlines engaging moments within the direct work environment that contribute to teachers' professional development and identity formation.

Table 10

Engaging moments in the direct work environment

Context	Themes	Responses	N
Direct work environment	Sharing sessions	P6, P10	2
	Positive interactions with colleagues	P5, P7, P8	3
	Total		5

Table 10 highlights how engaging moments in the direct work environment shape EFL teachers' professional identities through collaboration, emotional support, and professional growth. Two key themes emerged: sharing sessions and positive interactions with colleagues. Knowledge exchange and peer discussions (P6 and P10) help refine teaching philosophies and strengthen teachers' connection to the profession. Supportive workplace relationships (P5, P7, and P8) foster a sense of belonging, reinforcing professional identity. These findings suggest that identity construction is influenced not only by formal training but also by daily interactions. In contrast, disengaging moments in Table 11 create dissonance and hinder growth.

Table 11

Disengaging moments in the direct work environment

Context	Themes	Responses	N
Direct work environment	Unequal treatment from supervisors	P1, P4, P5	3
	Lack of feedback or support	P4, P6	2
	Total		5

Table 11 presents disengaging moments that hinder EFL teachers' professional identity development and job satisfaction. Two main themes emerge: unequal treatment from supervisors and lack of feedback or support. Feeling undervalued or unfairly treated (P1, P4, and P5) led teachers to question their professional standing, weakening their sense of identity. Likewise, the absence of feedback and guidance (P4 and P6) limited growth opportunities, leaving teachers feeling disconnected and uncertain. These challenges created professional dissonance, highlighting the need for fair treatment and consistent support. In contrast, Table 12 showcases the positive impact of professional development (PD) activities on shaping teachers' identities.

Table 12

Engagement in professional development

Context	Themes	Responses	N
Professional development	Positive experience during weekly training sessions	P5, P8, P10	3
	Feeling valued and supported through training	P5, P6	2
	Professional development supporting career goals	P5, P9	2
	Total		7

Table 12 highlights teachers' strong engagement in PD activities, especially weekly training sessions. P5 noted that these sessions demonstrated the institution's commitment to teacher growth, fostering a sense of value and alignment with professional goals. This engagement played a key role in shaping a positive professional identity, supporting both immediate skill development and long-term career aspirations. However, alongside these positive experiences, teachers also encountered puzzling moments in PD activities, as shown in Table 13.

Table 13*Puzzling experiences in professional development*

Context	Themes	Responses	N
Professional development	No follow-up after training sessions	P2, P6	2
	The gap between training and actionable outcomes	P2, P8	2
	Disappointment in lack of feedback or progress	P2	1
	Total		5

Table 13 highlights the need for structured follow-ups, practical practices, and progress indicators in professional development activities. Teachers like P2 experienced confusion and disappointment when there was no follow-up after professional development sessions. The absence of clear feedback or actionable outcomes created a gap between the expectations of teachers and the actual institutional practices, leading to a sense of misalignment. This lack of continuity was seen as disruptive to their professional identity development. Table 14 shows the crucial role of students' feedback in reinforcing EFL teachers' professional identities.

Table 14*Rewarding moments from student feedback*

Context	Themes	Responses	N
Student	Feedback improving teaching methods	P5, P6	2
	Witnessing student progress as rewarding	P5, P6	2
	Direct reinforcement of teachers' value	P5, P6	2
	Total		6

Table 14 shows that teachers, such as P5 and P6, found student feedback and progress to be key sources of positive reinforcement. P6 highlighted how

feedback helped refine teaching methods, strengthening their sense of effectiveness and professional identity. Student progress served as a crucial indicator of success, validating teachers' efforts and boosting motivation. These rewarding moments reinforced teachers' roles, contributing to their confidence and sense of accomplishment. However, student interactions also led to puzzling incidents, as seen in Table 15.

Table 15

Puzzling incidents in student interactions

Context	Themes	Responses	N
Student	Disruption of learning continuity due to absences	P7	1
	Struggles to maintain teaching effectiveness with inconsistent student attendance	P7	1
	Frustration with external factors affecting teaching goals	P7	1
	Total		3

Table 15 shows that puzzling incidents in student interactions present challenges that disrupt teachers' sense of stability, effectiveness, and professional confidence. Teachers like P7 encountered puzzling incidents when faced with frequent student absences, which disrupted the continuity of learning and made it difficult to meet teaching goals. These moments force teachers to reevaluate their roles and adapt to external factors that impact their teaching.

Discussion

This section presents an in-depth discussion of the research findings, focusing on how English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in informal language institutions (ILIs) construct and negotiate their professional identities through critical incidents (CIs). The discussion is structured around two key research questions: (1) the context of critical incidents identified by ILIs EFL teachers and (2) how these teachers negotiate and construct their professional identities in response to these incidents.

Issue one: The context of CIs identified by ILIs EFL teachers

The study found that professional development was as critical incidents (CIs) identified by informal language institutions (ILIs) EFL teachers. The professional development activities were pivotal in shaping EFL teachers' professional

identities. EFL teachers in ILIs highly value professional development opportunities, particularly training sessions and sharing discussions. These findings align with previous studies emphasizing the role of ongoing training in fostering teacher motivation, competence, and confidence (Kraft et al., 2020). The engagement in the professional development activities was perceived as instrumental in shaping the teachers' evolving identities, reinforcing Wenger's (2000) theory, that identity is closely linked to practice. When teachers participate in structured learning experiences, they not only acquire pedagogical knowledge but also reaffirm their sense of belonging in the professional community. However, the study also highlighted gaps in professional development, particularly the absence of follow-up actions after training sessions. This lack of continuity created frustration among teachers, similar to findings by Fletcher-Wood and Zuccollo (2020), who argued that effective c requires sustained support and application. Additionally, research by Avalos (2011) highlights that teacher professional development should be a continuous, reflective process that fosters long-term improvements in pedagogical practices, reinforcing the necessity for ILIs to invest in ongoing training initiatives. These findings suggest that ILIs should implement structured follow-ups, mentorship programs, peer coaching, and continuous learning opportunities to maximize the impact of training initiatives.

The study revealed that the direct work environment was as the CIs. The EFL teachers' work environments significantly influenced their professional identity construction. Positive interactions, collaborative discussions, and recognition from supervisors and peers reinforced teachers' confidence and engagement. This aligns with Beijgaard et al. (2000), who posited that teachers' professional identity is shaped by their perceptions of competence and workplace relationships. On the contrary, disengagement and identity dissonance emerged when teachers perceived unequal treatment, lack of feedback, or minimal institutional support. Instances of withdrawn assignments or exclusion from key responsibilities created feelings of insecurity and undervaluation. These findings are consistent with Collie and Martin (2023), who demonstrated that workplace inequities contribute to teacher stress and reduced motivation. Similarly, research by Kelchtermans (2017) highlights how a lack of professional appreciation and job insecurity can lead to emotional distress among teachers, affecting their identity and commitment to the profession. The study suggests that ILIs need to adopt transparent, equitable policies and provide regular, constructive feedback to ensure a supportive work environment.

The study also indicated that student interaction as as the CIs. The student-related incidents significantly shaped teachers' professional identities. Teachers felt a strong sense of achievement when students advanced or provided positive feedback, reinforcing motivation and self-efficacy (Cetin & Taskin, 2016; Collie & Martin, 2023). Conversely, challenges arose from student absenteeism and disruptive behavior, disrupting lesson continuity and teaching goals (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Student engagement plays a key role in teachers' emotional well-being and motivation (MacIntyre et al., 2019), highlighting the need for ILIs to implement structured attendance policies and behavioral interventions to foster a stable learning environment.

Issue two: Professional identities negotiation and construction by ILIs EFL teachers

The identity constructed by informal language institution EFL teachers was through reflection and adaptation. The critical incidents acted as catalysts for EFL teacher reflection and adaptation, aligning with Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning framework. Teachers responded by adjusting instructional methods, seeking peer advice, or engaging in self-reflection, reinforcing the dynamic nature of professional identity (Alsup, 2018). However, the absence of institutional mechanisms for addressing these incidents left some teachers feeling unsupported. Unlike structured educational settings with formal mentoring and policies, ILIs often lack these resources. Implementing mentorship programs, reflective practice sessions and peer learning communities could bridge this gap, enhancing teachers' professional identity construction (Farrell, 2016).

The EFL teacher identity negotiation was a response to institutional structures. The teachers negotiated their professional identities through institutional policies and workplace interactions. Recognition and support fostered engagement, while inequitable treatment led to identity struggles. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) highlight identity negotiation as a continuous process shaped by social and institutional contexts. The findings suggest that ILIs prioritize equitable treatment, structured feedback systems, and clear professional development pathways to ensure teachers' engagement. Similarly, Day et al. (2006) emphasize the impact of institutional culture on teacher identity, highlighting that professional identity construction is shaped not only by individual agency but also by broader organizational policies and support systems.

To enhance EFL teachers' professional identity in ILIs, stakeholders should implement structured professional development with follow-ups, ensuring training leads to practical improvements. Mentorship programs and peer coaching can provide ongoing support, while fair workplace policies and regular feedback systems can reduce job insecurity. Addressing student challenges like absenteeism through clear attendance policies and behavioral support will create a more stable learning environment. ILIs can boost teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and overall teaching quality by prioritizing these strategies.

Conclusion

This study examined how critical incidents (CIs) shape the professional identity of EFL teachers in informal language institutions (ILIs). The research aimed to explore the types of CIs teachers encounter and how they navigate these incidents in constructing and negotiating their professional identities. By focusing on professional development, student interactions, and work environment, this study provides insights into the challenges and growth opportunities EFL teachers experience in informal educational settings.

Findings revealed that teachers encountered CIs in three primary areas: professional development, student interactions, and their direct work environment. Teachers reported high engagement levels when they received positive feedback from students and support from colleagues and supervisors, reinforcing the significance of feedback and collaboration in teacher motivation and job satisfaction (Kraft et al., 2020). Conversely, challenges such as student absenteeism, lack of supervisor feedback, and perceived workplace inequities contributed to professional disengagement, aligning with concerns about the adverse effects of insufficient institutional support on teacher well-being and performance (Collie & Martin, 2023). Teachers responded to these incidents through reflection, adaptation, and continuous skill development, demonstrating the evolving nature of professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

The findings highlight the need for structured professional development, equitable policies, and strong support systems in ILIs. Sustainable feedback mechanisms, mentorship programs, and peer collaboration can enhance teacher engagement and job satisfaction. Additionally, tackling student absenteeism and improving classroom management through parental involvement and targeted training can lead to better student outcomes and a more stable teaching environment (Cetin & Taskin, 2016; Nagro et al., 2019).

This study expands the literature on teacher identity construction by focusing on informal educational settings, an area less explored compared to formal institutions. It highlights the unique challenges EFL teachers face in informal language institutions and their strategies for identity negotiation. By examining how critical incidents serve as turning points in professional identity development, the findings offer valuable insights for educators and policymakers in the informal education sector.

This study reinforces identity construction models by highlighting the interplay between individual agency and institutional influences. The findings support Wenger's (2000) community of practice framework, highlighting the role of social interactions and workplace dynamics. For practice, ILIs should implement structured professional development, clear policies, and mechanisms for addressing teacher concerns. Consistent feedback and fair treatment are essential for job satisfaction and retention (Basalamah & As'ad, 2021; van der Lans, 2018), fostering a more supportive work environment that enhances teacher effectiveness.

Despite its contributions, this study has at least two limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research could employ larger and more diverse participant groups to enhance representativeness. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may introduce subjective biases. Future research could employ longitudinal studies incorporating observational methods or institutional reports to provide a more comprehensive understanding of teacher identity construction over time. Finally, by addressing these areas, ILIs can cultivate a more supportive and effective teaching environment that enhances teacher engagement and student success. Through structured policies, professional support systems, and continued research, institutions can foster teacher growth and resilience, ultimately contributing to a more sustainable and motivated teaching workforce in informal educational settings.

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