**LLT Journal**, e-ISSN 2579-9533, p-ISSN 1410-7201, Vol. 29, No. 1, April 2026, pp. 301-317

*LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching*
https://ejournal.usd.ac.id/index.php/LLT
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

# NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND AGENCY OF AN ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENT-TEACHER IN AN EFL SPEAKING CONTEXT

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https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.v29i1.301
received 30 December 2025; accepted 10 April 2026

## Abstract
This life-history narrative inquiry reflects my commitment as an English teacher educator who values sustained professional learning through a deep engagement with my student's life story. Drawing on Anderson (1991) and Norton (1997), the study examines Noey's narrative to theorize the contexts I encounter as an English educator in postcolonial Indonesia. It traces Noey's life story alongside the (co)construction and reconstruction of his identity as a student in a teacher education institution, with particular focus on the challenges he has faced as a young man pursuing the aspirations that have shaped who he is today. Noey's narrative illustrates the central role of strong academic motivation and sustained perseverance in his pursuit of becoming a professional English teacher, despite significant economic constraints. It also highlights the critical role of confidence, patience, and courage that have enabled him to transform his life journey. Taken together, the narrative elements presented in this narrative study reveal three key motivating forces in Noey's development, namely a strong orientation toward achievement, an imagined future self as a professional English teacher, and the influence of significant others, particularly his mother, uncle, and lecturer (mentor).

**Keywords:** good EFL learner, identity (co/re)construction, narrative, professional English teacher

## Introduction
In recent decades, studies concerned EFL student-teacher identity has gained considerable scholarly attention. Most of these studies particularly foreground issues related to agency (e.g., Rasulova & Ottoson, 2022; Utami & Kuswandono, 2023), imagined identities (Meihami, 2025), investment, and professional formation (Sokhanvar et al., 2025). However, the majority of these existing studies have examined general preservice teacher development, female student-teachers, or institutional identity negotiation within educational settings. Relatively little attention has been paid to the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged male student-teachers especially in peripheral regions of Indonesia. Their identity development is likely shaped not only by pedagogical training but also by structural inequality, rural sociocultural expectations, and class-based marginalization.



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Additionally, much of the current scholarship emphasizes conceptualizing identity as negotiated within formal teacher education programs. Interestingly, studies that aim to reveal how economic precarity and gendered expectations intersect with imagined professional futures remain rare. In the Indonesian context in general, especially in non-urban areas, becoming a civil servant or university lecturer carries symbolic capital and social mobility implications influencing students' professional aspirations. More specifically, few studies have examined how economically disadvantaged male EFL student-teachers narratively construct their identities amid these structural pressures. This limited body of research matters because it risks overlooking how intersecting dimensions of class, gender, and temporality shape identity formation in underrepresented contexts, thereby limiting the explanatory power of existing frameworks. This study addresses this gap by examining how an economically disadvantaged male student-teacher in Banten province, Indonesia, constructs and reconstructs his identity, agency, and imagined future across time. Theoretically, this study offers insights into how identity work is embedded in systemic inequality, gender role expectations, and aspirations for upward mobility. Pedagogically, this study contributes to a more fine-grained understanding that can inform the design of context-responsive interventions in teacher education programs with the objective of fostering student-teachers' agency, enhancing professional development, and promoting equitable participation in the field.

Using narrative inquiry as its methodological framework, this research focused on a life story of a student-teacher in a government university in Banten province of Indonesia tracing his journey toward becoming a professional English teacher. The purpose of this research was to provide a better understanding of this student's struggles in achieving his dream that help inform and shape especially my pedagogies as an English teacher educator teaching students from various linguistic and economic backgrounds. This narrative study was driven by my commitment to professional development and my belief that examining students' experiences as future English teachers can deepen understanding of their views, agency, identities, and "sites of tension" in their life stories insights that are essential for teachers aiming to nurture effective and confident future educators. I also believe that a deeper understanding of my students' life stories can inform my pedagogical philosophies, decision-making, and classroom practices, particularly in the EFL Speaking class where I met Noey, the participant in this study (Ubaidillah et al., 2024; Webster & Mertova, 2020).

This study especially focuses on how Noey (pseudonym) struggled with and negotiated multiple identities both as a learner and teacher candidate of English language. Noey's motivation to study and his strong persistence in pursuing his dream to become a professional English teacher despite his family's economic challenges are key aspects of how a young man today shares the values of confidence, patience and courage that enabled him to change his life for the better. Believing that education is power, Noey struggles even today to continue his education to achieve this dream. He believes that becoming a teacher in the future is both a noble way to contribute personally to his country and a potential path to professional development as he hopes to pursue his further higher education at master's and doctoral level through special scholarships, available to teachers from the Indonesian government.

The adoption of narrative inquiry as a research method enables an in-depth exploration of Noey's life story which offers invaluable lessons for other young men especially in similar socioeconomic contexts. Noey is a high achieving student and is an Indonesian government scholarship awardee that once joined my EFL Speaking class. After one such class, he shared with me about his difficult childhood and his dream of becoming an English teacher. My intention in this study is to illuminate the sociocultural dimensions of Noey's life struggles, new identities, and agency constructions. Specifically, this study examines the co-construction and (re)negotiation of Noey's multiple identities and agencies as articulated in his account of transformation from a socioeconomically disadvantaged child with limited self-confidence and early aspirations of military service to a confident young adult envisioning a professional future as an English teacher. In other words, this research looks at closely at the complex interplay of Noey's past, present, and imagined future experiences as "a professional English teacher." Accordingly, this research is not intended to produce generalizable findings; rather, it seeks to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of Noey's life story as narrated from his own perspective (Shahriar, 2012).

Building on these discussions, this study is theoretically informed by sociocultural perspectives on identity, especially concepts of identity as socially constructed, investment, imagined communities, and agency. According to this theory, identity is understood not as a fixed attribute but as continuously (re)constructed through interaction, discourse, and social positioning across time. This theoretical framework also draws on the notion of imagined professional identity, where future-oriented aspirations shape present investments and actions. Agency refers to the capacity to act within structural constraints, highlighting how individuals negotiate opportunities and limitations embedded in socioeconomic contexts. By integrating these constructs, this study examines how identity, investment, imagined future self, and agency intersect within a narrative shaped by economic hardship and educational aspiration. This study is framed by the following research questions:

1. How does an economically disadvantaged EFL student teacher narrate the (co)construction of his identity, investment, agency, and imagined future across time?
2. How do significant others (e.g., family members and community figures) and sociocultural contexts shape the participant's motivation and imagined professional identity as a future English teacher?

***Identity, investment, imagined community and agency***

Excerpts from Noey's narratives which reflect his changing identities and agencies in his past and present life have guided me to choose the identity theory, as proposed by Norton (1995, 1997). She is one of the post structuralist theorists whose work on identity and language learning serves as part of the foundation for this narrative inquiry. Norton said that both identity and language learning constructions are influenced by inequitable social relations of power. They change, Norton further said, over time and space. Her theory includes four important and interrelated concepts which frame this study, namely identity, investment, imagined community and agency.

Norton (1995) defines identity as one's understanding of his or her relationship to others in a community and how that relationship is constructed socially. This also deals with how one manages to understand possibilities for future. The term identity also refers to "an attempt to investigate and to theorise the role of language in construction and reproduction of social relations, and the role of social dynamics in the processes of additional language learning and use" (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 282). Extracting these two definitions, Kayi-aydar, (2015) defines identity as the representation of oneself through our actions influenced by the social context in which we live as also reflected in Noey's life story.

The word identity is related to other concepts of investment and imagined community (Norton, 1995, 1997). The former refers to "the signal the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes-ambivalent desire to learn and practice it" (Norton, 1995., p. 7). The latter, on the other hand, deals with groups of people not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination (Anderson, 1991). Finally, one last important aspect of theory worth mentioning in this study is agency, which is defined as an individual's will and capacity to act (Gao, 2010) or "the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world" (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013, p. 63). Thus, the four interrelated concepts are reflected in the life story of Noey such as on how people close to him (e.g., his mother and his uncle) influence his identity construction and agency.

To complement and further strengthen the analytical lens, this study also draws on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital (e.g., economic, cultural, social, and symbolic). This perspective enables a much deeper understanding of how Noey's identity and agency are shaped not only by discursive and relational factors but also by differential access to resources and power. In this study context, integrating Bourdieu's framework is useful in that it helps to illuminate how forms of capital are accumulated, negotiated, or constrained in the participant's life trajectory, thereby complementing Norton's focus on identity and investment within unequal social structures.

To further elaborate, Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes economic capital as material resources, cultural capital as knowledge, skills, and educational credentials, social capital as networks and relationships, and symbolic capital as recognition and legitimacy. In the context of Noey's life, these forms of capital are unevenly distributed and dynamically interact to shape his opportunities for participation and advancement. For example, limited economic capital may constrain access to educational resources, while cultural capital such as English language proficiency and academic knowledge can become a key asset in navigating institutional expectations. At the same time, social relationships with significant others, such as family members and lecturers (mentors), may function as social capital that supports or limits his life trajectory.

Importantly, these forms of capital are not static but are continuously converted and revalued across contexts. Noey's investment in learning English, for example, can be seen as an attempt to acquire cultural capital that may later be transformed into symbolic capital, such as recognition as a competent English teacher. However, the value of such capital is mediated by broader social structures and power relations, which may either legitimize or marginalize his efforts. Thus, Bourdieu's framework, in this study context, provides a critical lens to understand

how structural inequalities are reproduced, while also highlighting the possibilities for agency as Noey strategically mobilizes available resources to reshape his identity and imagined future.

## Method

### *Research design*

In this study, I adopted a narrative inquiry design to explore the life story of Noey, a student-teacher at a government university in Banten, Indonesia. More specifically, I adopted a life-history narrative inquiry design offering me with chances to explore and dig-dive Noey's life story, a student-teacher at a government university in Banten province, Indonesia (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). This design allows me to capture the temporal and contextual dimensions of Noey's life experiences, focusing on how, for instance, his identity, agency, and imagined future are constructed and reconstructed across past, present, and anticipated trajectories (Barkhuizen et al., 2013).

Noey has been struggling to become a professional English teacher in the future. Drawing on the narrative inquiry tradition of Webster and Mertova (2020), I approached his life experiences as storied constructions shaped by sociocultural contexts, aspirations, and struggles over time. This enabled me to critically examine Noey's emerging identity, agency, and "sites of tension". This study seeks not only to explain how future English teachers negotiate professional becoming by understanding Noey's lived experiences as an example, but also to inform and reshape my pedagogical decisions when teaching students from diverse linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

### *Setting and participants*

Rangkasbitung, a city where Noey once stayed with his uncle family, is the capital city of Lebak Regency, Banten Province, Indonesia. It is one of historic cities in Banten and the fourth most important city after the capital city of Serang and the business cities of Tangerang and Cilegon. Rangkasbitung is also popular as an education city of Banten in the past, during the Dutch colonisation in Banten area. This is marked by the establishment of the first educational institution in Rangkasbitung city at that time named Setia Budhi. The education system in this city is diverse, as reflected in the coexistence of public and private institutions that operate in parallel, often with significant disparities in supporting facilities and the quality of teaching and learning.

Rangkasbitung appears to be a relatively small city, with an estimated population of around 6494, where many residents seem to be employed in the public sector, particularly as schoolteachers. Many young men from this city aspire to become teachers. They enter schools of education and teacher training in universities, including in the university where Noey, the participant of this study, is currently studying. In addition, many government officers and staff in Banten are reported to originate from this area. People in the city are often characterized as hardworking and disciplined, with a strong emphasis on education as a valuable asset. Therefore, it is quite likely that even children from labouring families, often perceived as lower status within this social context, are able to continue their studies to the university level.

Noey expressed his willingness to voluntarily become the participant of this research after I contacted him by email and told him that I was interested in inviting him as my research participant because his life story. I indicated to him the value of the inquiry lay in exploring his experience so other people may learn. I outlined the purpose of this study at a great length to Noey and said to him that I would explore aspects of his life stories which made him act in certain ways.

Noey is a second-year student teacher at the English Education department of a state university in Banten province in Indonesia. He once joined my Public Speaking class and was one of students that impressed me with his public speaking performance in English, during class meetings. He is an awardee of the *BIDIKMISI* scholarship that is a special scholarship from the government of Indonesia for those coming from economically disadvantaged background with good academic achievements, during their study in senior high school level. He is now a member of an English debating club at the university. He has participated several times in local, regional, and national championships on English debating. He can be categorised as above average student as proven by his current GPA which is 3.8 out of 4. He also has several times won public speaking competitions, such as English speech and debate.

***Data sources***

The primary data sources in this narrative study consisted of in-depth narrative interviews and reflective conversations with the participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008), focusing on significant life events, educational experiences, aspirations, and challenges in pursuing his dream of becoming a professional English teacher. To complement these narratives, I incorporated my own written autobiographical reflections as a teacher educator as a secondary data source. This approach is useful to facilitate dialogic and reflexive analysis which is central to narrative inquiry and researcher positioning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Etherington, 2004). I also employed some other supporting data including field notes taken during informal discussions with the participant, interactions during class sessions, and reflective memos that I wrote throughout the research process. All these data sources facilitated me as the researcher in gaining an in-depth exploration of identity formation, agency, and sites of tension within the participant's professional journey.

***Data collection***

In this narrative study, I collected data through a series of in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews that I designed to elicit the participant's life stories. This is especially focused on critical events, personal struggles, educational experiences, and future aspirations of Noey as a future English teacher. I conducted the interviews over several sessions to allow the participant to recount his life experiences in a holistic and meaningful way. I audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim all these conversations to preserve the authenticity of his voice. I also further engaged in an ongoing self-reflective writing to document my own autobiographical memories, emotional responses, and pedagogical reflections that emerged throughout the research process. I wrote field notes and analytic memos during and after each interaction with the participant to help me capture both contextual details and emerging insights.

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis in this narrative inquiry was conducted concurrently with data collection through an iterative and interpretive process characteristic of narrative research (Riessman, 2008). All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to gain a holistic understanding of Noey's life story. I engaged in narrative coding by identifying significant episodes related to critical events, personal struggles, educational trajectories, and future aspirations as a prospective English teacher, following the view that narratives are constructed through temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Tsedendamba, 2016). These episodes were organized chronologically to construct a coherent life narrative while attending to turning points and tensions that shaped his identity development. Simultaneously, I analyzed my self-reflective writings, field notes, and analytic memos as part of an interpretive and reflexive process that acknowledges the researcher's positioning in co-constructing meaning (Richardson, 2000). Through constant comparison across interviews and reflective texts, I generated interpretive themes concerning identity negotiation, agency, and imagined professional futures, ensuring that the participant's voice remained central while situating the narrative within broader sociocultural contexts.

### *Trustworthiness*

To ensure trustworthiness, I employed several strategies consistent with qualitative and narrative research principles. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement and multiple in-depth interviews. These helped Noey, the participant, to clarify and elaborate on significant experiences over time. Member checking was conducted by sharing narrative reconstructions and interpretations with Noey to confirm the accuracy and resonance of the account. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the research process to critically examine my positionality, assumptions, and emotional involvement as both researcher and teacher educator.

Given my dual role, I explicitly acknowledge the potential influence of power relations, familiarity, and prior pedagogical interactions on the co-construction of Noey's narratives. This includes, for example, what Noey as the participant in this study chose to share, emphasize, or leave unspoken when recounting his life stories (Berger, 2015; Merriam et al., 2001). My current academic position may have also shaped Noey's responses which potentially lead to alignment with perceived expectations. This insider status, at the same time, provided me with in-depth contextual understanding and facilitated trust allowing for richer accounts (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Therefore, reflexivity in this study context was not treated as a procedural step but as an ongoing critical practice to interrogate how my interpretations, authority, and relational proximity shaped both the research process and the representation of Noey's experiences (Pillow, 2003).In addition, thick description was used to provide detailed contextual information so that readers may determine the transferability of the findings. Together, these strategies enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Findings*

Closer examination of Noey's life story, in the light of the narrative analysis of the interviews conducted with him, brings to light the following three themes: 1) Noey's miserable childhood, 2) his new life in Rangkasbitung, the turning point in his story, and 3) Noey's life today as a student teacher of English in a state university in Banten, who can picture himself as a professional English teacher in the future. All these themes emerging from Noey's narratives were analytically interpreted through Norton's (1995, 1997) framework complemented by Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital (e.g., economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital), particularly in terms of how Noey's investment in learning English evolves, how imagined communities shape his aspirations, and how his agency is both constrained and enabled across different stages of his life. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital helps to capture how Noey's identity and agency are shaped not only by discursive and relational factors but also by differential access to resources and power. In explaining each theme, I will discuss the influence of other people such as Noey's mother, and his uncle on the co-and re-construction of his identity until he finally became convinced that becoming a teacher of English is the best option for his future. As Kayi-aydar (2015) has observed, "while individuals construct identities as they wish to be perceived by others, they may also take on identities imposed or assigned to them by other people" (p. 3).

#### *Noey's miserable childhood*

Noey's narrative story revealed that his family's 'money troubles' began in this phase as they were forced to move to a small village, Sajira, and build a smaller house with what remained of his mother's savings. He recalled this as an unforgettable moment as at this point in his life he began to think about working part time even at the very young age (7 years of age) simply to help his mother keep the family alive with his low monthly wage of 30,000 IDR (USD 1,77). Noey clearly recalls that his family had no money at all during this time. His stepbrother then decided to leave the house and worked as a sailor on another island called Batam. This stepbrother eventually agreed to support his junior high school education by allocating half of the money he sent to their mother. During this phase of his life, Noey describes his identity as that of a poor village boy with very low self-confidence.

As reflected in the excerpt below, this phase of Noey's life illustrates his limited opportunities for investment (Norton, 1995). This occurred because Noey's access to education and English language learning was severely constrained by economic hardship and unequal social conditions. His sense of being a "nobody" reflects not only a marginalized identity but also restricted agency in which his ability to act and aspire was shaped and largely limited by structural inequalities.

> *When my father passed away, I just hoped that other people would help me continue my studies. My stepbrother, who ignored me at that time, finally extended his hand and was ready to pay for my school tuition through junior high school but gave up when I said I would like to continue my education at a senior high school. He stopped supporting*

> *my education because he decided to continue his own studies in Batam at a sailing academy. I just thought at that time that I was a poor boy from a poor family, who could only dream of studying at school but did not believe it would really happen due to financial difficulties.*

In the current narrative research project, the account above served as an initial point of departure that encouraged Noey to elaborate further on his life experiences, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of his story. In the course of our conversation, Noey recounted his decision to work in an illegal coal mining industry close to his village, a pursuit he eventually abandoned due to his health-related problems. His poor health forced him to leave the mine, which led to further poverty for him and his mother until she finally got a new job as a labourer in the same coal mining where Noey previously had worked. There she earned enough money to support their daily life but could not save even one rupiah (1 IDR). Up until this point in his life, Noey repeatedly characterized himself as a "nobody" and that he lacked the courage even to hope for something better in his life. This trajectory began to shift when his uncle, who lived in the small city of Rangkasbitung, requested permission from Noey's mother for him to stay with him and encouraged him to continue his studies there. This eventual support from both his stepbrother and uncle could be viewed as an enabling condition that help to reopen Noey's possibilities for investment. This demonstrates how access to resources and social support facilitates identity shaping and opportunities.

*A new life in Rangkasbitung: The turning point*

Noey began his new life in Rangkasbitung with new optimism. It is in this town that Noey found new motivation to achieve his dream of being an English teacher, an occupation that, as his mother kept reminding him, "is a noble profession and a way to contribute to the country." In relating his story, Noey also said that moving to this small city which was considered the education city of in Banten marked a "turning point" that helped illuminate the direction he wanted his life to go in, including the idea of continuing his study at the university level:

> *I am grateful to' the people in Rangkasbitung, especially my uncle who has indirectly shown me how to be a successful person, especially a good teacher. I saw at that time that for teachers (including Pak Isak, my uncle), both at school and in the community in general, education is the top priority in their lives. Most young men of my age were supported by their parents to pursue higher education like some who are here studying with me at the same university. At that time, I said to myself that God would help me find the way to go to university, study in an English department and become a teacher of English, as my mom wanted me to be, and which is the profession that I really want for myself in the future.*

The above sample of Noey's narratives obviously reflects the emergence of imagined communities (Anderson, 1991; Norton, 1995). In this case, Noey begins to envision himself as part of a well-educated individual's community. Such imagined affiliation plays a crucial role in building Noey's motivation to invest in

education and English learning. It is also clear that Noey starts to see a plausible future self-aligned with this 'high-ranking' individual community.

The narrative excerpt also highlights the positive role played by the people of Rangkasbitung in fostering his confidence in the possibility of a brighter future, while simultaneously strengthening his determination to become an English teacher. According to Noey, most people in this small city work as government employees, with teaching being the dominant profession. This community also has shaped his belief that he can 'achieve happiness' by becoming an English teacher. He said "I saw at that time that teachers seemed to feel happy with their life, with the salary they had, and with the time they had after teaching that they could use for something else like gardening." This excerpt indicates clearly that investment becomes more visible and intentional because Noey demonstrates such a high commitment in learning English and pursuing higher education for both future economic gain and social mobility.

Noey's new community in Rangkasbitung, like his mother previously, encouraged his dream of becoming a teacher. Noey referred several times to his mother's words when telling his story, and that message has been embedded in his mind since he was a very young boy. Noey's account of his mother's determination to support him to continue his education and achieve his dream of becoming an English teacher also shows her understanding of the importance of education. Noey's mother, in this sense, seems to understand that educating Noey is the only way to improve their lives. This is evidenced by his mother's persistence in encouraging her son's dream to continue his study at a higher level. This persistent encouragement from his mother and uncle further enables Noey's agency that illustrates an agency construction as social rather than purely individual (Norton, 2013). In this context, their endless support expands Noey's capacity to act, make decisions, and sustain his long-term educational goals despite ongoing constraints, as reflected in Noey's statement below:

> *Before meeting Pak Isak, my uncle in Rangkasbitung, my mom and I went to Serang city, which is the capital city of Banten, to enrol in a general high school there. But I went back home to the village because the money my mom brought was not enough even to pay for the enrolment fee.*

It is not only Noey's mother who is committed to his education, but Noey himself also believes that education is the key to overcoming his difficulties. He has said that it is through education that he can help his mother to have a better life in the future. He further noted that becoming an English teacher would not only provide him with a means of earning a livelihood, given the relatively competitive salaries of teachers in contemporary Indonesia, but also offer opportunities for personal and professional development, including access to government-funded master's degree programs through various scholarship schemes for schoolteachers and lecturers. He believes that there are many opportunities for him to get a scholarship and study abroad as a postgraduate student. He admitted "I want to pursue the highest degree possible, a master at least or even a doctorate." This statement shows that his motivation to study is both internal and instrumental in the sense that it is directly linked to his desire to be a teacher (Atmadja et al., 2022;

Çolak, 2025; Fitriana, 2023; Norton, 1997; Rahaman, 2025). It is highly likely also that Noey is ready to bear the strain involved in pursuing his education for the sake of his family's future. It is also noteworthy that Noey demonstrates a high level of motivation. Throughout the conversation, his discourse is marked by statements such as "I have been very keen to study since I was a child" and "I love learning," which clearly reflect his strong determination to study diligently and perform to the best of his ability.

Noey chose to focus on English language education because, as he explained, English is a global language that can open many opportunities, including the possibility of going abroad and pursuing further education. His views on the benefits of mastering English are also shaped by broader Indonesian societal discourses, as well as by the local community in Rangkasbitung, where he spent his adolescence with his uncle's family. It is a common belief among people in Indonesia that a good mastery of both written and spoken English is the greatest asset one can have. Therefore, many Indonesian children and young people, especially those living in urban areas, study English both at school and English language training centres. Having a good command of English commonly boosts young men's confidence among their peers. This reality was, as Noey put it, "echoing in my mind." Therefore, he is convinced that he would have a sound career path as an English teacher in the future. This belief has fuelled the construction of Noey's new identity and agency as someone who is more confident in reaching his dream (Fauziah et al., 2025; Kayi-Aydar, 2015).

*Noey today: A student teacher of English in a state university in Banten*

Noey is currently a student teacher in the English department of a state university in Banten province. He is considered a bright student with several academic achievements such as a high GPA (3.8) and a winner of several national debating competitions. Describing the factors that encourage him to do his best, Noey referred to lessons he gained from his experience that he tries to apply in his daily life as a student and his imagined self as a professional English teacher in the future. At this stage, Noey's agency is more fully enacted, as seen in his strategic efforts to balance academic responsibilities, part-time work, and professional development.

Noey described two important values that he gained from his past time experience, namely being optimistic and keeping a low profile. He said that his mother always reminds him to be optimistic because God will always help him during periods of hardship. This includes his life as a student, which in fact is not easy because he must constantly think about how to earn extra money to survive. This reflects sustained investment Noey chose to do as he continuously making time for learning English and aspiring to become an English teacher despite financial pressures. Noey's willingness to work in order to help supporting his family amidst his study pressure as a university student shows the complex interplay of personal aspiration and social responsibility.

> *I am now working as a part timer, teaching in an English language training center in this city [Serang, the capital city of Banten province, where his university is located], not only to get teaching experience but also to earn money. I send my Mom 500,000 rupiahs per month from*

*my scholarship and the money I earn from this teaching job is for my living expenses*

In addition, Noey prefers to keep a low profile. This is not only because of his religion, which forbids arrogance, but also because of his belief that keeping a low profile now will help him be successful in the future. He said "I like making good friends with anyone not because my religion teaches me so but also because I am sure that a friend means a network." Noey also repeatedly said that he always remembered his mother's suggestion about being helpful to others because she believed that God had been so helpful in making Noey's life path run smoothly so far. He articulated "My mom always reminds me again and again to be thankful to Allah and that is why I have to be good to others, and because so far many other people have been so helpful in my life." He also said that he used appropriate learning strategies to learn effectively, such as creating opportunities to practice English in and outside the classroom. Noey also loves to read, which likewise, has provided him with many useful experiences He also expressed his agreement that everyday knowledge should be valued.

Noey's belief is not only shaped by his mother, who keeps reminding him to be a good person, but also by his religious beliefs and the values to which he adheres. In this sense, religious values play an important part in Noey's life. Additionally, his view 'that making friends helps to build a network' is valid and relevant to the current realities of modern life. Here too Noey seems to understand the obligation to network apart from his belief that making friends and expanding his social circle is worth doing for its own sake.

In terms of learning strategies, Noey describes himself as someone who takes learning very seriously because he does not want to disappoint the people who have helped him, like his uncle, Pak Isak, and his mother. He said that he has tried to do his best and get as high score as possible, not only to achieve the GPA required by the scholarship donor but also to prove to himself that he could be the best. He repeatedly said that to be a good learner of English, he has created as many opportunities as he can to practice his English skills. He admitted "as an English teacher I feel like so much urged that I have to master the four skills of English-reading, writing, listening and speaking." These steps clearly show that Noey's agency is not only influenced by his personal motivation to perform to the best of his ability but also by his social context, and especially the people who have been so helpful in his life. Thus, Noey's deliberate efforts to improve his English skills and participate in academic communities (e.g., debating club) further demonstrate his agentive engagement with available opportunities, showing how agency is exercised through strategic actions within given social contexts.

In the pursuit of learning, Noey makes maximum use of student organizations that he finds helpful in improving his English. To develop his speaking and writing skills, for instance, Noey joined the English Debating Club, which he says has given him many opportunities to take part in public speaking activities. The routine exercise of public speaking in English that his membership in this club entailed was, he said, one of the things that has boosted his confidence as an English language learner and improved his command of spoken and written English. Noey has pursued an undergraduate degree in English education to have a higher education in English education because he wants to be an English teacher, as he said. To

achieve that dream, Noey also routinely practices for the TOEFL exam because the scholarship sponsor and overseas universities require a high TOEFL score for admission. He said "becoming a good teacher of English is my future goal and therefore I prepare for it from today by mastering any important skills related to English and any related teaching skills."

Overall, Noey's narratives illustrate how investment, imagined communities, and agency are dynamically interconnected and evolve over time, shaped by both structural constraints and enabling social relationships. His life trajectory showcases the complex process through which identity is continuously negotiated in relation to shifting opportunities, aspirations, and social contexts.

***Discussion***

Noey's life stories begins long before he joined the English Education Department where he is now studying. Long before he imagined himself standing in front of a classroom as a professional English teacher, he described himself as a poor and silent child with a fragile confidence. Viewed from the sociocultural lens, Noey's early life struggles were not simply a personal hardship. They represent formative identity experiences shaped by social positioning and material conditions. Noey's childhood context, poverty was not merely an economic conditionit was a mediational force. It shaped how others saw him and, gradually, how he came to see himself. Repeated experiences of marginalization have put him into inferiority. His low self-confidence was not an inherent trait but the internalization of structural inequality.

Noey's life story has also indicated that alternative identity possibilities were being constructed even in this difficult phase. Noey's mother's belief in education functioned as a powerful mediational discourse. She did more than encourage him; she narrated him differently. For example, while his environment positioned him as limited, Noey's mother positioned him as a capable child. In sociocultural perspective, she used symbolic tools encouraging Noey to reinterpret his situations and reconstruct his new identity. Kayi-Aydar (2015) reminds us that identity is shaped not only by how individuals wish to be seen but also by how they are positioned by others. Through his mother's words and sacrifices, Noey's identity was gradually repositioned from that of a "poor child" to a "child with potential."

The move to Rangkasbitung marks a pivotal narrative shift in Noey's story. This was more than geographical relocation; it was an expansion of relational space. In this city, as Noey narrated, both teachers and peers supported his academic ability to develop. In this phase, recognition by his new communities became transformative and Noey began to experience legitimacy. In this sense, his story resonates with Wenger (1998), who conceptualizes identity as negotiated participation within communities of practice. In his new environment, Noey's confidence emerged not from isolated self-motivation but from social validation. Up to this point, it is clear that the construction of Noey's identity and agency has been much influenced by other people in his new community (see Abdusyukur, 2022; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Sudarwati et al., 2022; Sugianti, 2025; Tran, & Luong, 2021; Wirza, 2018; Zhang, & Huang, 2024).

It was also during this period that imagination began to mediate his development more powerfully. He no longer imagined himself merely escaping poverty; he began imagining himself as an educated professional. English, in his

narrative, became symbolic capital associated with prestige, mobility, and opportunity. As Norton (2013) argues, learners invest in language learning when they can imagine themselves as members of desirable future communities. Noey's investment in English was deeply tied to his imagined future self. His aspiration to become a professional English teacher reoriented his present. Studying more diligently, applying for scholarships, and participating actively in class were not merely discrete academic behaviours; rather, they constituted actions aligned with his emerging identity.

Noey's life story reflects how identity is shaped through socially mediated experiences within conditions of economic constraints. Noey, grew up with significant financial constraints. At a younger age, he could not have imagined pursuing university education in English. In Noey's case, significant others particularly his mother and uncle played a crucial mediating role by offering encouragement and support that reoriented his sense of possibility. Through these relational influences, Noey was repositioned not merely as a child constrained by economic hardship, but as a prospective educator with meaningful aspirations. As Kayi-Aydar (2015) argues, identity is co-constructed through interaction; accordingly, family members in Noey's narrative functioned as symbolic scaffolds that reshaped his self-perceptions and future trajectories.

Noey's life story also indicates how imagined professional identity facilitates agency and investment. Despite facing challenges related to confidence and adaptation, his imagined future as a professional English teacher sustains his commitment and persistence in pursuing his goals. This process aligns with Wenger's (1998) notion of negotiated participation, in which identity is continuously shaped through engagement with evolving communities of practice. In Noey's case, his aspirations are not merely individual ambitions but are socially grounded and future oriented. His motivation and perseverance emerge as the outcomes of relational support, cultural values, and the capacity to envision a meaningful professional trajectory.

## Conclusion

As part of my professional development as a teacher educator, this narrative study of a student's life story as both a learner and a prospective English teacher offers insights into how achievement motivation, imagined professional identity, and significant others shape his developmental trajectory, with implications for my own teaching practice. The narrative presented in this paper highlights the complex interplay of self-motivation, competence, classroom practices, community membership, socioeconomic status, and power in the (re)construction of my student's identity. Such accounts provide valuable insights for fostering students' sense of belonging in diverse language classrooms, for instance, through more differentiated instruction, responsiveness to individual needs, and the creation of an inclusive and supportive learning environment. A deeper understanding of my student's perspectives, agentive identities, and "sites of tension" within his life story is therefore essential, as it can inform my pedagogical practice in nurturing students' potential and supporting their future trajectories.

This brief narrative inquiry, centred on a single participant, contributes to research on an EFL learner identity by examining a high-achieving EFL learner's past, present and imagined future narratives. In this life-history narrative inquiry, I

have discussed a language learner's life story alongside the (co)construction and reconstruction of his identity as a student teacher in a teacher education institution. I present elements of Noey's narrative, in which he describes himself as a poor child with low self-confidence who, over time, becomes a confident young man through sustained support from significant others and the community of Rangkasbitung a small city that afforded him opportunities to observe the social value and lived realities associated with the teaching profession. I also present Noey's current trajectory as a student teacher in the English Department, where he has been recognized as an outstanding student based on his academic achievements, including a high GPA and multiple awards in regional and national debating competitions. His imagined future self as a professional English teacher has served as a powerful source of motivation, sustaining his commitment to excellence in his learning trajectory. Taken together, the narrative elements presented in this study point to three key factors underpinning Noey's sustained efforts: his achievement motivation, his imagined professional identity as an English teacher, and the influence of significant others in his life, particularly his mother, uncle, and mentor.

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