

Article

Going Bravely into Liminality: English Language Practitioner Agency in a Prison-Education Program in Sabah, Malaysia

Esther Jawing

Junaidah Januin

Daron Benjamin Loo*

Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

English language practitioners at the university often occupy a rather displaced position as they are seen as service providers rather than intellectual contributors. This study explores how three university English language practitioners enacted agency while working in a liminal space – a prison (hereafter ‘correctional centre’) in Sabah, Malaysia. Using collaborative dialogic reflection, the three practitioners documented and discussed their experiences of designing and teaching context-specific communication modules for incarcerated prospects. The reflections were analysed thematically, resulting in three themes becoming apparent. First, reconfiguring professional identity showed how engagement in prison education enabled the practitioners to challenge deficit views of English teachers and to reposition themselves as community-engaged professionals. Second, responsiveness to liminal communities indicated how listening to prospects’ aspirations led the practitioners to view English not merely as an academic subject, but as a resource for belonging. Third, risk-taking as situated praxis showed the process of co-constructing materials with those who were otherwise thought to be incapable. These themes illustrate how entering liminal spaces could foster praxis-oriented and morally grounded forms of agency that expand what English language teaching could be and do. The study also points to the need for greater institutional recognition for community-based work and calls for further research on teacher agency and moral responsibility in other liminal educational contexts.

Keywords

Teacher agency, liminality, professional identity, prison education, collaborative reflection

1 Introduction

English language practitioners in Asian universities are experiencing a rapid transformation in terms of the ever-shifting academic expectations. As argued by Bell (2023), English teachers at the university

*Corresponding author. Email: daronloo@ums.edu.my

still find themselves in a precarious position as their roles and contribution are still perceived as being unclear. Furthermore, English teachers are often viewed as being lower in status, and have been misunderstood as just a language or grammar teacher rather than offering any intellectual substance to the higher education environment. What contributes to this misconception is also the type of work that English practitioners do at the university, which is to offer language remedial assistance to students to meet academic expectations. This remedial role has led university communities and administrators to view English teachers as ancillary rather than central, especially in terms of achieving the university's goals and aspirations. In the Malaysian context, where this study is conducted, English teachers may be marginalized, given the focus of higher education on attaining tangible research and academic outcomes that can help boost university ranking and prestige (Baydarova, 2022; Ismail & Aljunied, 2024).

In such a circumstance, it may not be surprising for English language practitioners to find themselves caught in flux, which may be instigated by shifting policies and perceptions towards English language education. This is further amplified by broader shifts in the educational landscape, including the emergence of artificial intelligence and the changing expectations of language use. These may present competing language practices and ideologies, and may sometimes contradict the professional trajectory of an English language practitioner. This would necessitate the practitioner to reconfigure their professional identity – not just as someone who teaches the language but also who uses it (Ferreyra, 2025).

Given the issue of professional marginalization, English language practitioners have taken agentic actions to carve out a niche for themselves rather than waiting to react to changes as and when they come. At times, this agentic response may involve going into unknown territories that are not only new to them but also to the field and profession at large. This may be considered a liminal space where teachers would need to enact an extent of agency (Chang, 2018). For English teachers, this movement into unfamiliar spaces may be driven by their care for their students and an ethos for teaching (Thumvichit, 2021). With this as a backdrop, this present study aims to present and examine the agentic experiences of three university English language practitioners who had embarked on a collaborative effort in creating and teaching communication modules at a correctional centre in Sabah, Malaysia. Through dialogic reflections, this study demonstrates how despite the precarious position held by English practitioners, they are still creating meaningful opportunities for themselves. In particular, the research question that this study aims to address is, “How do English language practitioners enact agency when creating learning opportunities within a liminal context, and how does the process shape professional identity and practices?”

It is hoped that the findings would highlight opportunistic agency, understood as practitioners' capacity to recognize and act upon emerging possibilities within uncertain or marginal professional spaces. For English language practitioners, such agency is reflected in their willingness to enter into unfamiliar contexts and to transform uncertainty into meaningful pedagogical and community-based work. The discussion will also demonstrate how going into liminality should not be viewed as a negative experience; instead, it should be perceived as a chance to promote creativity and criticality in language practitioners' pedagogical perspectives and practices, as well as their sense of self (Lorenzi & White, 2019; French et al., 2023).

2 Literature Review

2.1 Teacher agency: Reconfiguration of practice

Agency should not be understood as an individual and fixed trait; rather, it should be viewed as a phenomenon emergent from the interaction between teachers, students, materials, and their wider working context. In this study, teacher agency is conceptualized as the capacity to make situated and purposeful decisions within conditions of uncertainty, constraint, along with potential possibilities.

Agency is not treated as personal autonomy alone, but as a relational process shaped by professional histories, institutional parameters, and interaction with others, which may include peers and students. This conceptualization is in line with Biesta et al.'s (2015) call for agency to be understood through an ecological perspective, where there may be various factors that prompt teachers to rethink and even reconfigure their pedagogical practice, perspectives, and even professional sense of self. It should be noted that when teachers enact agency, they are not doing so liberally; instead, they are aware of the extent to which they are permitted to make meaningful choices. Teng (2019) views this as an opportunity for teachers to develop a positive disposition towards their work and their working environment. Nonetheless, careful responses or changes may still need to be carried out, and these may be driven by their need to make sense of their current situation and to commit to certain actions (Groenewald & Arnold, 2025; Loo et al., 2017).

While agency may be a notion that appears to be personal to a teacher, how it is enacted may still be conditional upon the teacher's relational dimensions with those around them, such as students, colleagues, administrators, and even members of their community (Teng, 2019). For instance, if a teacher decides to introduce a new learning activity in the class, their students' response would be pivotal to its continuity in subsequent lessons (Thumvichit, 2021). Their peers' and superiors' feedback is also pertinent, as it would shape their sense of belonging with their immediate community (Kang, 2024). To be able to enact agency accordingly, teachers would need to carry out intentional reflection, either on their immediate teaching context or even past experiences (Bowen et al., 2021). As such, agency should not be perceived as an individual and isolated response confined to the classroom; it should be viewed as a navigation in light of contextual constraints and opportunities presented to the teacher (Gao & Cui, 2022).

When examining agency among teachers in the Asian context, studies have indicated that there needs to be thoughtful navigation through a complex terrain; not only do teachers need to attend to their students' varied language learning needs, but they also need to reckon and reconcile with institutional demands that may contradict their classroom teaching practices (Loo et al., 2023). When managing institutional expectations, teachers may choose not to openly question or challenge them; nevertheless, this does not mean that they lack agency. To address these pressures or changes, teachers may look towards alternative responses, especially those that would not disrupt existing communal and even hierarchical structures at their work and teaching setting (Tran & Li, 2024). Being able to negotiate through this kind of situation may offer teachers a sense of legitimacy, as their ability to address and even resolve an issue would affirm how they perceive themselves professionally (Bowen et al., 2021). This renders the process of enacting agency as an emotional one, as it involves personal decision-making that may indicate a teacher's sense of confidence (or lack of) in addressing issues or challenges (Nazari et al., 2024). Furthermore, in the Asian setting, agency may be shaped by a sense of moral obligation and an ethical burden that teachers have for their students' welfare (Loo et al., 2023). This moral orientation was seen in Tran and Li's (2024) study as well, where Vietnamese teachers were found to enact agency in lieu of their sociocultural background rooted in Confucianism, collectivism, and a respect for order. Through the participants' narratives, pedagogical decisions and practices were found to be grounded in a conscious awareness that they were held as moral examples by their students and the larger community. This morally informed decision-making is reflective of teacher praxis, where there is deliberate use of reflection and action to be able to manage uncertain situations (Gao et al., 2024; Teo, 2023).

From observing related literature, it may be summed that teacher agency may be understood as practices that are situated, relational, and value-driven. Agency is situated because practitioners act within institutional and social conditions; relational because the actions taken by practitioners are shaped by their students, colleagues, other institutional stakeholders, and even materials they use. Agency is also value-driven because practitioners' decisions are informed by care, responsibility, and a concern for learners who may require additional support, or who may feel marginalized. Within this view of agency, responsiveness may be understood as a situated form of teacher action as it refers to the practitioners'

capacity to listen to learners' needs, interpret the conditions and shape those needs, and adjust pedagogical decisions in ways that are contextually and ethically appropriate.

2.2 Being in and going into liminality

According to Turner (1974), liminality refers to a space that is in 'betwixt and between', where there are uncertainties in knowing and shifts between new and old understandings. Liminality creates an environment that is uncertain when teachers find themselves between familiar professional expectations and unfamiliar demands; however, such uncertainty may also open up possibilities for agency and advocacy. For teachers, being in liminality may dislocate their sense of self, as they have to reckon with unfamiliar expectations and tasks. Being in liminality may also occur when there is top-down pressure for teachers to take on a new venture, even those that they may not agree with or relate to. This top-down pressure may create little space for navigation and prompt teachers to reevaluate their sense of professional identity and practice. Uncertainty may also occur when teachers find themselves in situations where their perceived professional identity is not acknowledged or legitimized. This professional uncertainty may be observed in the study of Chang (2018), where pre-service teachers, who even though had completed their teacher education degree, could not find a teaching job.

Within these constraints, teachers need to see the extent to which they could work with uncertainty (Loo et al., 2024). Furthermore, when teachers encounter such uncertainty, advocacy may emerge as they take actions based on the interest of their students, or on the learning conditions in their classroom, especially for those who may need additional support. When navigating this situation, teachers could make adjustments to how they view themselves, and this may include instilling a burden for advocacy, where they may pose questions or resist expectations not aligned with their pedagogical beliefs (Warren et al., 2025; Banegas et al., 2026). In other words, teachers would advocate for their students' access, dignity, participation, and learning opportunities, especially those whose language background, institutional position, or personal history pushes them to the periphery.

When in liminal conditions, teachers may feel challenged as they would be compelled to question existing perspectives and practices; however, being in a liminal space is also valuable as they may be prompted to rethink their sense of professionalism, their classroom approaches or even their relationality with their students and colleagues. This experience would also make them examine what they deem valuable in their teaching, as well as their students' classroom learning experiences. This reflective questioning could create conditions where advocacy may be integrated into their pedagogical practice and even their professional stance, as they become critically aware of values that drive their teaching and that which shape the broader educational structures (Banegas et al., 2026; Warren et al., 2025). In this context, advocacy refers to teachers' efforts to offer support to students who may be marginalized by creating opportunities for access, participation, and dignity in the learning environment. Recognizing that teachers can occupy a liminal space is an acknowledgement that teachers are always in the process of becoming, where they learn new perspectives and apply novel teaching practices (Keser Ozmantar et al., 2023; Yazan, 2023; French et al., 2023). While being in liminality may be frustrating, it offers an opportunity for renewal as well, where teachers may reframe how they perceive their professional identities. The experience may also help them build resilience and awareness, so as to better cope and face similar challenges in the future (Chang, 2018). This renewed confidence would give them praxis, comprising both the courage and confidence that they are able to function even when being in a liminal space (Gao et al., 2024).

For English practitioners, they might find themselves in liminality because what they were told, or how they prepared to teach did not coincide with classroom realities. With this in mind, we may understand liminality as the in-between professional space where teachers may not be able to fully rely on prior training or experiences, and have to develop alternative or new ways of understanding their role

in relation to their students. This mismatch may be observed in the study of McConn and Geetter (2020), where two of the case participants, who were English literature teachers, became jaded and disillusioned when they found out that their students did not reciprocate with student-centred teaching approaches, or recognize them as legitimate English teachers. The liminality experienced here was not just pedagogical, but also relational and professional where they felt uncertain with how they taught, how they related with others, and how they sustained a legitimate sense of self. While initially frustrated, the two teachers eventually came around to meet the students halfway. In adjusting their pedagogical approaches, the teachers also developed a more empathetic stance towards their students, and gained an understanding for their students' academic background, as well as the institutional culture that may have contributed to the challenge experienced. This adjustment demonstrated a situated advocacy initiated by the teachers, seen through the changes made in their pedagogical stance and practice. In particular, they supported and advocated for student participation, recognition, and access to meaningful learning by moving away from fixed ideas of what constitute student-cantered teaching and instead, responded to students' actual readiness and needs. Yet, at the same time, what is seen through the study of McConn and Geetter (2020) further supports the view that English language practitioners at the university may be occupying a liminal space, as their professional role and contribution are often questioned not just by other academics but by their own students (see also Bell, 2023; Loo et al., 2024).

Being in liminality may be even more pronounced when teachers find themselves in a highly disparate context, which is demonstrated in this current study that is set within the prison context. A similar situation was discussed by Baumgartner (2020), where teachers teaching in prison found themselves working in a distinct structure, where authoritative stance and processes were visible. As such, teachers coming into this setting intending to employ inclusive or anti-oppressive teaching strategies encountered difficulties, which caused uncertainty of what they considered effective pedagogical practice. Relatedly, in the study of Little and Warr (2022), university lecturers involved in prison education experienced the dilemma of creating egalitarian learning spaces where prisoners' contributions were valued but within a learning environment where compliance was mandatory. Nonetheless, by addressing abstract notions with the prisoners, the lecturers were able to suspend institutional identities to create a dialogic space where everyone's contributions mattered. In one of the activities, the lecturers had prisoners share their thoughts on what knowledge was. To facilitate the two-way process, the lecturers had to actively position themselves as someone with whom the prisoners could relate, so as to allow active listening to their perspectives. This relationship allowed for a temporal realm of belonging, where both the lecturers and prisoners were able to create a momentary space where their experiences and knowledge as humans were valued. The lecturers saw that they could move beyond traditional and formal educational settings while the prisoners saw that they had worthwhile opinions to be shared, despite being incarcerated.

Based on the literature on agency and liminality, it could be suggested that notions are not completely exclusive as agency may be a natural response when being in liminality, which further presents agency as a dynamic attribute that is emergent and relational, subject to contextual constraints, social interactions, and ethical stances. In liminal spaces, uncertainty may be heightened and thus practitioners may be prompted to engage in navigating and making sense of potential contradicting expectations and values. Furthermore, when practitioners exercise agency, they may be drawn towards advocacy works, either in supporting students marginalized due to their language background, or even their personal history. This connection between agency and advocacy exists because agency emphasizes practices that are value-driven, based on care. As a result, advocacy may emerge as a natural manifestation of agency where practitioners make conscious choices to challenge inequities (Warren et al., 2025). Such advocacy is enacted not only through explicit resistance, but also through everyday professional decisions. This advocacy work is not confined to just the personal stance of the practitioner, but it may spill into how curriculum is interpreted and enacted, as well as how interaction is managed with others. Practitioners would engage in curricular adjustments, task re-design, and mediate classroom activities and dialogues to promote equity and create a safe space for all to participate (Banegas et al., 2026). In this sense,

advocacy may be understood as agency that is situated within contexts requiring teacher engagement; in contexts that are liminal, they may interact with marginalized communities and in doing so, they may be confronted with inequities that require active and critical responses. When these concepts are considered together, advocacy becomes a bridge between agency and liminality, where agency explains the practitioners' capacity to act, while liminality explains the uncertain and marginal conditions from where they act, with advocacy providing reasons for the ethical direction of their actions. To capture these processes would require a qualitative approach that prioritizes experiences and intersubjectivity. This is explained further in the next section.

2.3 Conceptual framework: Advocacy-oriented agency in liminality

Drawing on insights from the notions presented above, the present study adopts a conceptual framework comprising liminality, ecological teacher agency, advocacy, and situated praxis. At the forefront, liminality refers to the uncertain institutional and professional conditions within which the practitioners worked. These would prompt an ecological agency, which is how practitioners interpret and act within these conditions through their relationships with colleagues, prospects, correctional officers, institutional procedures, and teaching materials. Next, advocacy provides the ethical orientation of these actions, particularly practitioners' concern with the prospects' dignity, participation, educational access, and reintegration. Situated praxis refers to the reflective and context-responsive actions through which these commitments were enacted pedagogically.

These concepts are treated as interconnected rather than sequential. Liminality creates conditions of uncertainty, but it does not automatically produce agency. Agency emerges through practitioners' engagement with the possibilities and constraints present within that environment. Advocacy gives this agency an ethical direction, while praxis makes it observable through pedagogical decisions and professional action. This framework guided the study's examination of how the practitioners interpreted their professional roles, responded to the prospects' circumstances, and developed context-specific teaching materials.

3 Methodology

The present study aimed to demonstrate the agency of university English teachers in creating meaningful opportunities for themselves through their work in a correctional centre, which was considered a liminal context. To study agency, the teacher's voice must be heard. Studying agency would require an approach that prioritizes the teacher's self-expression, where they may narrate their professional self (Bowen et al., 2021; Nazari et al., 2024). To this end, collaborative reflection would allow a sociocultural and constructivist examination of the lived experiences through the sharing of stories (Taggart & Wheeler, 2025). Furthermore, allowing participants to share and exchange stories would recognize the value of intersubjectivity, where there could be meaning-making through multiple perspectives, including that of the narrators' (Loo et al., 2023). Through dialogue with others, narrative agency may be supported whereby interaction could create opportunities for intersubjectivities, where participants reinterpret experiences, relationships, and possibilities for further action or consideration. In the present study, the shared reflective dialogue functioned as an intersubjective space, which allowed the three researchers to revisit their experiences, respond to each other's interpretation, and refine their understanding of agency, liminality, as well as advocacy (Kinnunen et al., 2024). Collaborative reflection would also be more receptive towards the context of a story, as teachers may be compelled to include pertinent material factors or social actors that shape their agentic actions, based on stories they hear from others (Kang, 2024). Moreover, to engage in collaborative reflection would constitute being involved with other members from the same community of practice, which could provide insights that a teacher may

have missed if narration was done individually (Thumvichit, 2021). More importantly, when researching agency, in particular advocacy, a collaborative reflective approach is deemed appropriate given the possibility of surfacing tensions, struggles, and even aspirations through dialogue. The reflective dialogue would support practitioners in recognizing and understanding better their own personal stance and how it may influence their professional practices (Warren et al., 2025).

3.1 Context and participants

The main context of this study is the correctional centre where the researchers were carrying out teaching and mentoring work since 2020. The correctional centre is located in Kota Kinabalu, the city of Sabah, Malaysia. The centre operates under the Malaysian Prison Department, whose responsibilities encompass both secure detention and the rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals. Rehabilitation is organised partly through the Human Development Programme (*Program Pembangunan Insan*), which includes orientation, behavioural and identity reinforcement, vocational skills development, and preparation for release (Januin et al., 2023; Januin et al., 2025). The initial preparation work, including getting approval from the prison department, was time-consuming. When the project was approved, the centre still required a new and separate permission application every time the practitioners visited the prison. The researchers, who are the authors of this paper, taught English, communication, and applied linguistics at the local state university. Although they shared a common professional background as university English language practitioners, their reasons for entering the correctional centre project were shaped by different experiences. Esther's interest in community-driven language education was informed partly by her previous involvement in educational outreach work in the United Kingdom, where she worked with prison inmates. This experience shaped her belief that language education could support aspiration and access among marginalized learners. Junaidah's involvement was shaped by her view that English language practitioners should not be confined to classroom-based grammar or general English teaching, but could contribute to communities in need through communicative-lessons and support. Daron's involvement was shaped by his interest in English language practitioner identity, teacher agency, and the social role of language education beyond conventional university teaching. With these diverse backgrounds, the researchers viewed the correctional centre not only as a teaching site, but a space where English language education could contribute to rehabilitation and reintegration into wider society.

The researchers themselves taught at the correctional centre, and at the same time, developed materials based on their interaction with the prospects (the prison inmates) and the officers. The project began with exploratory engagement with the correctional centre and with the prospects themselves. Through early conversations and the analysis of needs, the researchers realized that the prospects did not only need English as a language subject, but also as a communicative resource for confidence, job-seeking, and preparation for life after release. The courses offered to the prospects included basic English communicative skills, job-seeking skills, digital literacy, and socialization strategies. Later on, the researchers began training the correctional centre officers on the teaching of these courses. The training arrangement was done so that the officers themselves could teach in the future. Besides the researchers, there were others involved in the project, including a psychiatrist, a public health officer, and an IT lecturer. Since the researchers were the participants of this study, it was important for them to consider and enact reflexivity. They held multiple roles – being practitioners and also researchers who would analyse data derived from their own reflections. While this dual role may introduce potential bias in how experiences are interpreted, this was mitigated through continuous critical dialogue where they questioned assumptions, revisit past interpretations, and strived for multiple perspectives (Hernández-Johnson & Bendixen, 2025). In addition, given the sensitive nature of the context of this study, utmost care and caution was taken to ensure that information was confidential and anonymous. Any identifying details that were divulged in the reflections were anonymized or removed completely.

3.2 Data collection tool and analysis

Table 1

Thematic Analysis Process

Reflective excerpt	Initial code	Focused code	Final theme
“As English teachers, we are not just teaching languages, we can contribute to the community, not just to any community, but the community in need.”	ELT beyond language teaching	Reclaiming ELT contribution beyond the classroom	Reconfiguring professional identity
“This experience has allowed us to reclaim the relevance of ELT professionals and practitioners beyond the classroom. We become agents of transformation and facilitators who recognize and respond to complex social needs.”	Reclaiming professional relevance	ELT practitioners as community-engaged professionals	Reconfiguring professional identity
“Meaningful engagement for English language lecturers and practitioners does not just take place in the classroom... it may be even more fulfilling when it is brought to a context where people don’t expect English language practitioners to be, like the prison system.”	Teaching beyond conventional settings	Expanding professional identity through liminal work	Reconfiguring professional identity
“We interviewed the prospects before we started the project, and from the interview we found out that they need English... to prosper, to be taken seriously, to be respected.”	Listening to prospects’ needs	Responding to aspirations for respect and reintegration	Responsiveness to liminal communities
“Communication, basic English skills, job seeking skills, these aspects were not covered in the prison education.”	Identifying curricular gap	Responding to unmet learning needs	Responsiveness to liminal communities
“Language teaching should begin not with content, but with context.”	Context before content	Context-responsive pedagogy	Responsiveness to liminal communities
“All this while, I have been designing based on what I think the students need. This is the first time we have built something based on listening to the inmates.”	Moving beyond assumptions	Co-constructing materials with learners	Risk-taking as situated praxis
“We ask our students what they want and what they don’t want, and from there, we create something and we go back to them and check with them whether what was created is appropriate.”	Iterative material design	Shared curriculum-making with prospects	Risk-taking as situated praxis
“Risk-taker. Get your hands dirty. Taking the risk to be out of one’s comfort zone.”	Leaving comfort zone	Risk-taking in unfamiliar professional space	Risk-taking as situated praxis
“Without trust, the team would not be allowed entry to conduct programs. The team may also not be able to engage with the prison officers and the prospects.”	Trust as condition for access	Relational work as situated praxis	Risk-taking as situated praxis

Data for this study comprised collaborative reflections that involved all three researchers of this study. The collaborative reflection for this study was done on an online shared document, and was begun by Daron who asked Esther and Junaidah to share how this project with the correctional centre started. From the reflections they shared, Daron identified noteworthy incidents or meanings, and requested further elaboration. Although Daron initiated and facilitated the reflective dialogue, he was also a participant in the meaning-making process. He contributed his own reflections, particularly in relation to English language practitioner identity, teacher agency, liminality, and the role of English language teaching beyond the university classroom. The collaborative reflection went on for about three months, from May to July of 2025. During this time, Esther and Junaidah were also free to add details as they deemed fit, without waiting for follow-up comments or questions from Daron. In total, the data comprised three researchers' reflections and follow-up exchanges, amounting to approximately 18 pages or 9,500 words. The reflections were written primarily in English, with occasional Malay expressions when the participants referred to context-specific meanings.

Referring to Chung's (2023) study, the collaborative reflection was analyzed thematically. This was guided by the conceptual framework proposed, which supported initial coding. The analytical process started with the familiarization of data through iterative reading of the reflections, which led to an initial coding that was done based on the concepts relevant to this study. Next, the initial codes that were linked were consolidated to reflect themes representing patterns that emerged across the dialogic reflections, which were refined by means of discussion among the three researchers, where the boundaries of the themes were revisited and reconfigured several times (see Table 1). The refinement process involved relying on intersubjectivity, which involved allowing the self to experience the lived experiences of others through their stories (Ritivoi, 2016). The coding process was done collaboratively and iteratively to ensure alignment across subjectivities. Whenever disagreements or discrepancies arose, this was resolved through discussion and the consideration of possible alternative interpretations. For instance, on point of discussion concerned whether the development of the communication module should be interpreted mainly as professional risk-taking or as responsiveness to the prospects' needs. Through discussion, the researchers agreed that both meanings were present, but they operated at different analytic levels. The act of listening to the prospects and identifying their needs was coded under responsiveness to liminal communities, while the decision to move away from a pre-existing syllabus and co-construct materials with prospects and prison officers was coded under risk-taking as situated praxis. The collaborative resolution process was needed to enhance the credibility of the findings, and to allow the interpretation and discussion to remain grounded in the shared reflections while still allowing differences in interpretation to be examined (McGill et al., 2023).

3.3 Researchers' positionality

The three authors occupied multiple and overlapping roles in this study. They were English language practitioners at a Malaysian public university, members of the correctional centre project, developers of the communication modules, teachers or trainers in the project, and researchers analyzing their own reflective accounts. The researchers had been directly involved in the development and implementation of the English and communication modules with the prospects and correctional centre officers. Their reflections drew on their experience of entering the correctional centre, engaging with prospects and officers, and making pedagogical decisions in a context that differed from conventional university classrooms. Their positionality was further shaped by their professional investment in English language teaching, community engagement, and the belief that language education could support confidence, dignity, and reintegration. The reflective exercise was dialogic, which allowed for the researchers to clarify their relationship to the research context, including their insider-outsider position, balance of power, and lived experience in relation to the study (Goundar, 2025).

As insiders, the researchers had direct knowledge of the project, the correctional centre context, the module development process, and the relationships formed with prospects and officers. At the same time, their insider position was not absolute. In relation to the correctional centre, the researchers were also outsiders who had to negotiate access, build trust, understand institutional routines, and learn how to work within a rehabilitation-oriented environment. This shifting insider-outsider position is consistent with the view that researcher positionality is fluid rather than static (Adjei & Chan, 2025). To address this concern, the authors engaged in iterative dialogue, questioned one another's interpretations, revisited earlier assumptions, and considered alternative explanations before finalizing the themes. The aim was not to remove subjectivity, but to make the researchers' subjectivities visible and to use collaborative reflection as a way of examining how agency was understood across their different roles and experiences.

4 Findings

From the analysis, there were three themes that emerged: reconfiguring professional identity through liminal work, responsiveness to communities in liminality, and risk taking in liminal contexts. The themes were identified by examining how practitioners acted within the uncertainty of the correctional centre, how they responded to the prospects and prison officers, and how they made sense of their professional roles in a context beyond conventional university work. These themes will be explained in the following section, along with supporting excerpts.

4.1 Reconfiguring professional identity through prison education

Given the uncertainty of being in liminality, familiar academic roles and teaching practices may be disrupted. In this theme, agency was reflected in the practitioners' decision to interpret their professional role rather than withdrawing from an unfamiliar setting. Their agency was not expressed through direct resistance, but through the deliberate act of entering the correctional centre, identifying what English language teaching could contribute, and repositioning themselves as community-engaged practitioners. For the researchers, entering the correctional centre may be ambiguous, as it may not be immediately clear what English language practitioners could do in such a setting. The ambiguity encountered here may stem from the marginalized status of the prison community, as well as their own. Nonetheless, rather than withdrawing due to uncertainty, the practitioners pressed on in their work with the community. This agentic response is illustrated in the dialogue between the researchers below.

Junaidah: Getting involved in this project was an opportunity to show, not to show off, that as English teachers, we are not just teaching languages, we can contribute to the community. And this is not just to any community, but the community who really is in need.

Esther: Yes, doing this project shows that the identity of an English teacher is not unclear; instead, it becomes clear through possibilities that are still related to the profession.

Daron: And since our work is in helping people develop language skills for communication, where we can contribute is not just in the classroom. Many people, I think, especially at the university, think that English is only good as a general subject that students take. And also students want to do well so that they can get a good grade, and have a good academic record. But language is definitely more than this. Everyone needs to know how to communicate, so we can help with that.

From the exchange above, the English language practitioners' contribution may go beyond the classroom setting. The misperceptions referred to here are the views that English language practitioners mainly provide remedial language support, teach grammar or general English, and occupy an insignificant role in the university rather than an intellectual or community-facing role. These perceptions have also been

noted in prior research, where English language teachers in higher education are described as occupying a troubled or unclear professional status (Bell, 2023), while language teacher agency and identity are shown to be shaped by institutional expectations and professional legitimacy (Bowen et al., 2021; Kang, 2024). Engaging in this project offered the avenue for the practitioners to challenge such perceptions. Rather than accepting a narrow professional role, they used the liminal setting to show that English language teaching could support communication, rehabilitation, and community engagement. This is indicative of agency because the practitioners actively reworked the meaning of their professional through situated action.

Junaidah: The experience of working with the prospects, the prison officers and staff, all of this had allowed us to reclaim the relevance of ELT (English Language Teaching) professionals and practitioners beyond the classroom. But this also makes me wonder what had been lost. I think of other places [outside of Malaysia] where English language practitioners flourish, and it makes me wonder how can we achieve that in our context. I think this is one of those opportunities. What we are experiencing is how we have become facilitators who are involved in complex social needs.

Esther: To me, this project has offered the opportunity to adjust the professional mould of ELT practitioners. Many people think that ELT professionals just teach English, and they are surprised when they see that this group of professionals are versatile enough to function and contribute in other contexts.

Esther concurred with Junaidah's observation by highlighting that English language practitioners are able to change the normative way of people think about English language practitioners. Their reflections showed agency as professional reconfiguration: they did not abandon their identity as English language practitioners, but expanded it to include community engagement, communication support, and social intervention. Besides teaching language, this expanded professional role may involve engaging with the community, helping others communicate better. In the correctional centre, this meant using English language teaching as part of a broader rehabilitative and relational practice. This reframing of ELT work strengthened the practitioners' sense of professional self and also highlighted that liminal spaces, despite initially appearing uncertain, would be supportive of a practitioner's self-expansion.

4.2 Responding to incarcerated learners' aspirations and reintegration needs

The second theme was concerned with the responsiveness of the practitioners towards communities who were themselves located in a liminal space. Responsiveness is understood here as an agentic practice because it involves the practitioners' deliberate effort to listen to the prospects' needs, interpret those needs within the correctional centre context, and adjust their pedagogical decisions accordingly. Rather than applying a fixed university-oriented model of English language teaching, the practitioners exercised agency by responding to the prospects' aspirations for communication, employability, confidence, and social reintegration. For the prospects, it was not clear what their future would be like. While they would have needs and aspirations, how they may fulfil them remain ambiguous, especially due to their prior conviction history. For the practitioners, they would need to be deeply engaged with the needs of the prospects. In this sense, responsivity should be intentional to ensure that support rendered would address the lived realities of the prospects. As such, responsiveness became a form of advocacy-oriented agency, where the practitioners acted for learners whose educational and social needs were not fully addressed by existing prison education, and they did so by reinterpreting English as a resource for dignity, participation, and reintegration. In the dialogue below, this responsiveness was observed by how Junaidah responded to the circumstances she was in, where she realized how English may constitute a different kind of commodity, compared to others who are in a different situation. Daron, on the other hand, presented a cautious approach, as he deliberated on the 'guarantee' that English would have in securing one's future.

Junaidah: We interviewed the prospects before we started the project, and from the interview we found out that they need a form of English, and not just the language skill. They needed English as a way to have some confidence in themselves. I think that they saw English as one way that would help them prosper, and to be taken seriously, and to be respected. Actually, to regain respect.

Daron: This is a very important point, because to me, I would be cautious when it comes to promoting English. I don't want to come across as one who proclaims how English is the ultimate tool that would help someone climb up the ladder. In the world today, any tool can help someone climb the ladder. But I think this belief is grounded in how English is – in many context – viewed as a form of privilege and even a guarantee.

From the dialogue, it may be seen how being in a liminal space compelled the questioning of issues associated with the English language. For instance, many critical scholars view the language is a symbol of status and privilege, and it diminishes or marginalizes other languages and even perspectives, especially that of non-native English speakers. Nonetheless, perhaps the critical view of English may not be entirely relevant in the prison context, as English would actually be a pivotal factor that could support the prospects reintegration into society once they are released.

Junaidah: However, we feel, when we went in there for the first time, in order to make, to help the prospects more marketable, more communicatively capable, to secure jobs, to make people see them as those who can communicate effectively, appropriately, we feel that what we are doing right now can help them. Communication, basic English skills, job seeking skills, these aspects were not covered in the prison education.

Esther: For me, this reminds me of my earlier work with underprivileged students in the UK. Believe it or not, many of them needed English not just to study, but to actually see for themselves that it was possible for them to go to university. Here in the prison, I see the same thing. English becomes a bridge between who they were and who they could become. That is why being aware of their needs is so important. And I think this is why going outside our usual teaching environment matters. When we meet learners who have been overlooked, the meaning of our work changes. What we do is no longer about exams or finishing the semesters. It becomes about helping someone gain a bit of confidence and maybe a bit of hope. For the prospects, English is one of the few tools they feel they can hold on to when they try to return to society.

From the dialogue between Junaidah and Esther, it became clear that there was a reconsideration of their roles as English language practitioners. The teaching of the English language for communicative purposes was not necessarily for academic achievement; instead, it was considered a tool to rebuild a sense of belonging among those who may feel like an outcast. From here, agency grounded in morality may also be discerned, where actions were taken based on how they may benefit a marginalized community. In this theme, agency was reflected in the practitioners' willingness to suspend their own assumptions about what English teaching should prioritize and to respond instead to what the prospects considered meaningful for their lives after release. Their responsiveness was not a passive accommodation of the circumstances of the prospects, but rather an intentional pedagogical and ethical decision. In a liminal space, being responsive to what is found in the surroundings is necessary to make sense of what needs to be done. As such, for the practitioners, responsiveness became a way of advocating for the prospects' access to communication, confidence, and social recognition.

4.3 Co-constructing prison-education materials as situated risk-taking praxis

The third theme relates to the responsiveness that allowed for risk-taking, which reflected the practitioners' advocacy-oriented agency in a liminal context. Even though they were working with

a community that occupied a space of liminality, the practitioners were still able to utilize familiar preparation processes and pedagogical practices that helped them work optimally. This was also supported by being cognizant that constant adjustments had to be made, and that decisions had to be taken with courage and accountability. In this theme, advocacy was reflected in practitioners' willingness to take pedagogical risks to create learning opportunities that were respectful of the prospects' voices, needs, and possible futures. An example of this risk-taking was the development of a module from scratch; rather than relying on pre-existing syllabus, the practitioners and their team members, along with the prospects and prison officers, worked together to produce materials that were contextualized and also attended to the perceived needs of the prospects. This was advocacy in practice because the practitioners did not assume that incarcerated learners were passive recipients of instruction; rather, they treated the prospects as contributors whose experiences and aspirations mattered in the design of the learning materials. This is reflected in the dialogue below between Junaidah and Esther.

Junaidah: We need to reimagine who we are. Not just because we are creating a syllabus, but because we are teaching a very unusual group of students.

Esther: Teaching university students is what we are so used to. We teach them every semester. But doing this project is very different. We are taking risks by entering into this project. And to work with the prospects in developing the materials also assumes that they know what they want for themselves. This forces us to let go of the idea that we already know what is best. We are also not only teaching but we are constantly negotiating and adjusting, and sometimes unlearning. This can be quite empowering, because it shows that the prospects matter and that we trust them enough to shape the learning together.

For the practitioners, praxis also involved unlearning conventional practices that may be viewed as legitimate or correct in their common setting, but would be otherwise unsuitable in their current context. This unlearning was not just a professional adjustment; it was also an advocacy-oriented stance because it required the practitioners to give up the authority of deciding in advance what the prospects needed. This, according to Esther, could be a source of empowerment as the practitioner was successful in introducing and using materials in a novel context. More importantly, the empowerment was not limited to the practitioners, as the process also affirmed the prospects' right to be heard and to participate in shaping their own learning. This also shows that risk-taking is an essential experience when being in liminality, where the practitioner may find themselves in the wrong, being challenged, or experiencing shifts.

Another form of risk-taking may be seen in the specificity needed to design lessons that were appropriate for the prospects. The level of depth needed would mean that the practitioners had to let go of what they knew as being valuable, which may be shaped by their conventional setting – their workplace, the university. Producing something new and specific would require a sense of accountability on the part of the practitioners, as elements found in the lessons would require justification. In this regard, advocacy was enacted through the design of materials that responded to the prospects' circumstances, which included their need for communication skills, job-seeking preparation, confidence, and social reintegration. Being able to do this not only indicates professionalism on the part of the English language practitioners, but also their capabilities of functioning and surviving even in liminal spaces.

Junaidah: That this group will be given the chance to learn. And this was because of their own effort of communicating with us what they were interested in. The lessons that were created and implemented were the results of this sort of collaboration. It is not something that we were able to pull off on our own. This is also a risk, because we trust our counterparts enough to provide us with information that we can use to create the lessons.

Daron: I think this is what makes the work so meaningful. In our usual university context, we often design materials based on assumptions of what the typical students need. Here, we cannot

rely on assumptions. What is being prepared also becomes a form of intervention, not just instruction. And designing it requires us to take risks, because we are stepping into a space where the conventional markers of success or teaching expertise don't apply. And that is also where professional growth happens.

The exchange between Junaidah and Daron illustrates how risks had to be taken due to being in a liminal space, which may be compounded in contexts where the target language is infrequently used. Nonetheless, practitioners may be able to manage the ambiguity of being in a liminal space, as they are able to leverage on knowledge and personal experiences of language use, as well as empathetic listening and relational skills. Their advocacy was not expressed through direct confrontation, but through the situated decision to listen, trust, co-design, and create learning materials that recognized the prospects as capable participants in their own rehabilitation.

While these themes are presented separately, they are interconnected and should be read and understood in light of one another. The collaborative reflections illustrated a constant renegotiation and reconfiguration of professional identity, which actually prompted a more responsive stance and practice when interacting in the liminal space with the marginalized community. This experience created conditions that encouraged risk-taking among the practitioners, demonstrating how they engaged in situated praxis by navigating uncertainty through adaptation to competing expectations, values, and contextual constraints. Their actions here may be deemed an ethical stance and as such, advocating for a more inclusive approach to take into account the voices and needs of the prospects. Throughout the themes, advocacy was reflected in the practitioners' willingness to take pedagogical risks in order to create learning opportunities that were more respectful of the prospects' voices, needs, and possible futures.

5 Discussions

The present study examined the reflections of practitioners working in a context of liminality, and how this experience demonstrated the enactment of proactive agency. Through collaborative reflections, it became apparent that the agentic actions of the practitioners were spurred by an array of elements; besides the practitioners' own perspectives and experiences, there were also colleagues, the prospects and the prison staff, the materials they were working on, and the larger ELT community. This finding affirms the view that teacher agency is not bound to the individual self; rather, it is something that is constantly shaped by objects, processes, and social actors present in the wider environment (Biesta et al., 2015; Gao & Cui, 2022). Furthermore, the findings indicated that the agency of the practitioners was influenced by their own personal reflection and their subsequent situated action. This situated action reflects how a practitioner's work involves the process of sense-making of the situation they are in, and how they are committed towards the teaching and learning moment (Groenewald & Arnold, 2025). Within TESOL scholarship, these findings extend the understanding of agency by illustrating how it is not confined to the classroom but socially embedded in a practitioner's wider context (Porto, 2023). More specifically, the three themes presented earlier showed that agency was enacted through professional reconfiguration, responsiveness to the prospects' needs, and risk-taking in material development. Across these themes, advocacy was not expressed as direct opposition to an institution, but as an ethical orientation towards creating more inclusive, dignified, and contextually meaningful learning opportunities for a marginalized group. In particular, the present study contributes to the discussion on critical pedagogy and teacher advocacy by demonstrating how instructional roles of a language practitioner may be in a flux, as they move into issues of educational access and community belonging (Wichaidit, 2025).

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate that being in liminality may not be entirely detrimental, as it prompts the practitioners to think about what they might do, or where they might head. The first theme, reconfiguring professional identity, shows agency as the practitioners' ability

to reinterpret who they were and what their profession could contribute in an unfamiliar setting. This liminal experience would then facilitate the reconfiguration of their professional identity, which, in turn, enabled them to move beyond the conventional boundaries of university-based English language teaching. In the case of this study, English language lecturers at the university were capable of both teaching in the traditional classroom setting, but also other contexts where language and communication are used and needed. This community-based contribution also positions English language practitioners as professionals who are engaged with their community, and are capable of rendering intellectual and social support (Kang, 2024; Loo et al., 2024). Agency, in this theme, was therefore reflected in the practitioners' refusal to accept a narrow view of ELT work as remedial or ancillary; instead, they repositioned themselves as community-engaged educators whose knowledge of language, communication, and pedagogy could serve a rehabilitative purpose. This repositioning also carried an advocacy dimension because it challenged deficit views not only of English language practitioners, but also of the prospects as learners capable of growth. It also affirms the argument that agency is closely linked with a practitioner's sense of belonging. Knowing that they are capable of contributing would not only offer a sense of legitimacy, but it would also empower and elevate their status as being comparable to other subject content lecturers at the university (Bell, 2023).

Being in liminality also coincides with the professional identity of English language practitioners. Literature has indicated how English language practitioners are always undergoing changes in their sense of self and the process of professional becoming was observed in the study, where the three practitioners were constantly involved in the process of becoming – seen through the adjustments they constantly made to the materials and teaching practices, and also the shifts in mindset about who they are and what they can do (Yazan, 2023; French et al., 2023). In this regard, what may be considered a liminal and even marginal space was leveraged by English language practitioners as a valuable experience that was supportive of their professional identity expansion. From here, it makes sense for the practitioner to reside in a state of flux, as there may be transformative opportunities that shape their roles and the expectations set out for them. These would subsequently call into question the assumptions associated with the English language teacher identity, that is, if they are just meant to teach the language in a formal, classroom setting according to a pre-determined curriculum. Professional identity was thus not merely an outcome of the correctional centre experience; it was also a form of agency because the practitioners actively used the liminal space to expand the meaning and social reach of their profession.

The second theme, responsiveness to liminal communities, shows agency as the practitioners' capacity to listen, interpret, and respond to the prospects' lived realities. From the reflections of the practitioners, the importance of relational and moral orientations was also observed. For English language practitioners, these aspects are important to ensure that appropriate materials may be developed, and suitable teaching practices may be utilized. It is worth noting that having a sense of moral obligation towards the profession also allowed the practitioners to consider seriously what the prospects have in mind, and how they view the learning experience, despite possibly contrary perspectives that may be found elsewhere (Canagarajah, 2023). For instance, English was seen as a valuable commodity that may have positive implications on the prospects once they are released and work towards rejoining society; however, in the everyday common world, the dominant status of English has been questioned in light of wanting to empower local linguistics and sociocultural practices. This contextual difference indicates that the correctional centre presents a space that is distinct from the rest, and the perspectives – mainstream or otherwise – may not necessarily apply (Bennalick et al., 2026). In this case, agency was enacted through responsiveness because the practitioners did not impose a fixed critical position about English or a pre-existing university syllabus. Instead, they attended to how the prospects themselves understood English as a resource for confidence, communication, employment, and social recognition. This responsiveness was also a form of advocacy because the practitioners acted for the prospects' access to communicative resources that could support dignity and reintegration.

The third theme, risk-taking as a form of situated praxis, further shows how agency and advocacy were connected in the liminal context. This contextual difference then compelled a risk-taking behaviour and the courage to do something that is different yet applicable in the highly distinct context. It is through these liminal circumstances where practitioners are then able to determine their willingness and perceptiveness towards opportunities presented to them. Risk-taking became agentic because the practitioners had to move beyond familiar indicators of teaching success, let go of assumption-based syllabus design, and trust the prospects and prison officers as contributors to the learning process. Risk-taking also became advocacy-oriented because the practitioners took those risks to create materials that recognized the prospects' voices, needs, and possible future.

The three themes emergent from the data show that agency in liminality was not a single act, but a dynamic process that moved from identity reconfiguration to responsive engagement, and subsequently to risk-taking praxis. In brief, the findings of this study support an advocacy-oriented model of agency in liminality, which was emergent through uncertain contextual conditions within which the practitioners worked. Within this situation, ecological agency was afforded to the practitioners, which gave them the capacity to interpret and act accordingly. This agency was manifested through three mutually reinforcing processes: reconfiguring professional identity, responding to the prospects' aspirations and circumstances, and undertaking situated pedagogical risk through the co-construction of learning materials. Recognizing the need to advocate for these learners led to the practitioners to be cognizant to the curating a relevant learning experience. This was seen through the redesigning of materials, which subsequently expanded their understanding of their professional identity. This expanded identity strengthened their willingness to remain responsive to the correctional community, which turned out to be a productive space where professional identity, agency, advocacy, and situated praxis were continually negotiated and co-constructed.

6 Conclusion

This study aimed to explore agency enacted by three English language practitioners in a liminal context – a correctional centre. The findings indicated that the practitioners experienced shifts in their professional identity, were productively responsive in their situated practice, and were engaged in risk-taking. More broadly, the findings demonstrate that agency could take place in a space of liminality, as there would still be experiences where professional identity may be reconfigured based on the pedagogical responses taken. Furthermore, the observations drawn from these findings counter the deficit view towards English language teachers at the university (Bell, 2023). At a broader level, the findings demonstrate how practitioners in the Southeast Asian region constantly engage in processes that reframe and expand their professional identities, not necessarily to be noticed, but because they have a moral sense of obligation towards their immediate community (Loo & Sairattanain, 2024).

While the findings of this current study may be insightful, the data was concentrated on the practitioners. It is also acknowledged that the interpretation of the data was done based on the intersubjectivities of the researchers. While this encouraged insights into their lived experiences, it may have limited the breadth of perspectives. Other studies in the future may consider including other data sources, such as feedback from correctional staff or from the prospects themselves. Including these additional data sources would allow for triangulation and improve the reliability of the findings and discussion. Moreover, given the highly specific context of this study, the findings should be understood and treated cautiously. To extend the scope of research on liminal English language teaching contexts, a larger cohort of practitioners involved in this study should be involved. A comparative approach may also be employed to examine how English language practitioners function in other spaces of liminality (e.g., alternative learning centres; refugee camps; halfway homes). Future research may also consider other dimensions of professional identity, such as emotional labour and moral agency. The latter may be examined deeper to determine its distinct place in the Southeast Asian context. Finally, studies may also

explore how institutions view community-based engagement, such as the correctional centre engagement reported in the present study. More studies on experiences being in liminality would only elevate the professional standing of English language practitioners, especially those working in the Asian context. These studies would affirm their ability to take principled and context-responsive actions, besides having the courage to support others in developing communication and language skills. More than just their ability to contribute academically, they are also able to leave a positive social impact through community-based work.

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Dr. Esther Jawing graduated from the University of Warwick and is a senior lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. She specializes in teaching English as a second language, prison education and English language teaching for technical and vocational education and training. She is also active in several social innovation projects in education.

Junaidah Januin is a senior lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sabah and is currently pursuing her doctorate in academic discourse competence. She has more than twenty years of teaching experience and specializes in academic writing, learner autonomy, ethnic language preservation and prison education.

Daron Benjamin Loo received his PhD in applied linguistics from King Mongkut's university of Technology Thonburi, Thailand. He has taught English, applied linguistics, and TESOL courses in Thailand, Australia, Singapore, and Malaysia. Currently, Daron teaches academic literacy and workplace communication to undergraduate students. He is also supervising research that examine the intersection of language and society through discourse and corpus analysis approaches at the postgraduate level. Daron has published papers on teacher identity and professional development, as well as discourses on language in the educational context.