

Status Quo of the Professional Identity of Teachers: A Quantitative Study of College EFL Teachers in China

Zhang Xu

School of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Malaysia;
Foreign Language Department, Hebei Finance University, China

Noor Mala Ibrahim

Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Malaysia

Abstract—The professional identity of teachers has been a recurring subject of research in recent years with most of the studies being theoretical or qualitative. However, there is still a lack in the number of quantitative studies done on the professional identity of teachers using a measured scale or inventory. Aiming to find out the status quo of the professional identity of college EFL teachers in the context of college English teaching reform, this study attempts to establish and validate a measure of the professional identity of teachers' questionnaire. With good validity and reliability, the questionnaire consists of five constructs: occupational behavior tendency, value identity, English teaching reform, self-efficacy and job satisfaction. The findings of this study indicate that college EFL teachers have a relatively high level of professional identity with the constituting constructs of the professional identity of college teachers having scored from high to low as follows: English teaching reform, professional behavior tendency, job satisfaction, self-efficacy and value identity. Moreover, there is no significant difference in the professional identity level of college EFL teachers concerning gender. Finally, the implications of exploring the professional identity of teachers are also discussed.

Index Terms—gender, status quo, the professional identity of teachers

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching college English in China has undergone a series of educational reforms over the past 20 years. These reforms have had a great impact on college EFL teachers as they are the front-line education practitioners. As a result, there has been an increased focus on the inner world of teachers with more and more researchers attracted to the subject of the professional identity of teachers both at home and abroad. According to previous literature, the professional identity of teachers serves as an important factor in understanding their professional lives and career decision-making, as well as being an important factor in teacher motivation, effectiveness and retention (Berg, 2002; Day et al., 2005; Lasky, 2005; Day et al., 2006; Avalos & Aylwin, 2007). Therefore, it is worth studying the status quo of the professional identity of teachers in the context of college English teaching reform.

However, considering the previous research carried out on the professional identity of teachers, most studies can be considered theoretical (Korthagen, 2004; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; etc.) or qualitative (Walkington, 2005; Hamman et al., 2010; etc.). That is, there is little quantitative research that operationalized and measured the construct of teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Avraamidou, 2014; Izadinia, 2013; Van Lankveld et al., 2017). This lack lies in the absence of an instrument for measuring teacher identity (Izadinia, 2013; Avraamidou, 2014; Izadinia, 2014) in different contexts. Therefore, to conduct research that measures the status quo of the professional identity of college EFL teachers in China, this study attempts to create a questionnaire as the measurement instrument rooted in the previous literature on the professional identity of teachers. In this study, college EFL teachers refer to college English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who are responsible for teaching English to non-English major students in China's colleges and universities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity has long been a subject of study in fields as varied as psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, theology, and literature (Holland & Lanchicotte, 2007; Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Taking the initial step in the 1990s in the developed countries of the West, teacher identity has attracted widespread attention from social science research after 50 years of development (Martel & Wang, 2014). Moreover, research on teacher identity became a separate field of study in the first decade of the 21st century (Hao, 2014). Although there have been attempts to define the professional identity of teachers from different perspectives, no consensus on its definition has been reached. Scholars

hold diversified opinions and understandings of professional identity (Knowles, 1992). For example, from the individual lens, the professional identity of teachers refers to the teaching beliefs of foreign language teachers and the certainty of their social and cultural roles (Richards, 2008). Similarly, it is argued that professional identity refers to the perception teachers have about what a teacher is with full consideration of their understanding of constant interaction with their context (Kelchtermans, 2009). From the interaction lens, Beijaard et al. (2000) explained professional identity as something established and maintained through interaction in social situations and the negotiation of roles within a particular context. As for the constructs of professional identity, there are also no standards for the structure of the professional identity of teachers. Some argued that it consists of four dimensions: centrality, valence, solidarity and self-presentation (Kremer & Hofman, 1985) while Beijaard et al. (2000) suggested that teachers derive their professional identity from (mostly combinations of) the ways they see themselves as subject matter experts, pedagogical experts, and didactical experts. Besides that, it is argued that there are three key components of a teacher's professional identity, namely cognition, emotion, and action (Zembylas, 2003; Yuan & Lee, 2015; Han, 2017).

The complexity of the professional identity of teachers might lie in its ongoing and dynamic characteristics. The professional identity of teachers develops over time as an individual interpretation of disciplinary knowledge, standards (Pennington, 2014), and practices acquired through education and experience in work contexts (Pennington, 2014), and is closely related to the response of teachers to educational reforms (Beijaard et al., 2004; Tao & Gao, 2017). Additionally, it has a great influence on the teaching effect, the professional development of foreign language teachers and their attitude towards education reform (Tsui, 2007). Thus, it is worth exploring the professional identity of teachers in the context of college English teaching reform in China which brings huge changes to the teaching objectives, teaching methods, teaching materials, and so on, leading to a great challenge for college EFL teachers.

To measure the status quo of the professional identity of college EFL teachers in China, this study attempts to create and use a questionnaire as a measuring tool based on the previous literature. There have been many attempts to explore the different components or elements of the professional identity of teachers in China in the past decades which created and used instruments and scales for investigating teacher identity (Wei et al, 2013; Tang, 2013; Xun et al., 2014; Li & Yan, 2018). However, most of the research was concerned with primary school teachers, novice teachers and pre-service teachers. These instruments were used from different perspectives and lacked applicability to the research performed on college EFL teachers. For example, Xun et al. (2014) created the teacher identity inventory for measuring the identity of high school English teachers which included four categories with eight factors. Zhao and Zhang (2017) constructed a scale with mainland Chinese samples to measure the professional identity of pre-service teachers. The scale contained three dimensions of identity: intrinsic value identity, extrinsic value identity, and volitional behavior identity.

Based on previous literature about the professional identity of teachers and focused on the college English teaching reform context in China, this study suggested that the professional identity of teachers comprises five dimensions: occupational behavior tendency, value identity, English teaching reform, self-efficacy and job satisfaction. Occupational behavior tendency refers to college EFL teachers' behavioral engagement, willingness, tendency or input in college English teaching practice, academic research, and the implementation of college English reform in China. Value identity is a kind of inner belief system abstracted out by individual college EFL teachers in the process of teaching, including college EFL teachers' positive understanding and evaluation of the significance and function of the teaching profession. English teaching reform refers to the college EFL teachers' perception, understanding, practice and evaluation of their own professional knowledge and skills as well as the policies, methods and effects of English teaching reform under the background of college English teaching reform. Self-efficacy refers to college EFL teachers' belief in their capability to organize and perform their daily English teaching practice and other profession-related activities effectively. Job satisfaction refers to the college EFL teachers' attitude based on the evaluation of the college English teaching task and teaching context.

Given the increasing attention and need for understanding the professional identity of college EFL teachers, this study seeks to establish a questionnaire and measure the status quo of the professional identity of college EFL teachers. Therefore, the research questions of this study are as follows:

1. What is the status quo of the professional identity of college EFL teachers in China's Hebei Province?
2. Is there any significant gender difference regarding the professional identity of college-level EFL teachers?

III. METHOD

This study employs a quantitative method by developing a questionnaire to measure the status quo of the professional identity of teachers.

A. Instruments

This study employed a quantitative research methodology to measure the levels of the professional identity of college EFL teachers. It is argued in the previous literature that the interaction of professional identity manifests itself in the following five elements: occupational behavior tendency, value identity, English teaching reform, self-efficacy and job satisfaction, respectively. The five elements serve as the indicators of the professional identity of teachers which demonstrates how they engage in and convey a strong willingness to join the profession, the self-cognition and

experience of the professional meaning and identity of teachers, how teachers respond to educational reform, their competence of organizing and performing their daily teaching activities efficiently, and their thoughts after evaluating different aspects of their work and work situation. Based on the above five dimensions, this study managed to compile an adopted questionnaire and use it as the research instrument.

Totalling 27 items, the questionnaire was made up of two sections: the first one was the personal data basic background demographics of the respondents which included their university, age, number of years teaching, salary, and educational background, among other information. The second section used a five-point Likert scale to rate occupational behavior tendency (items 1 to 6), value identity (items 7 to 11), English teaching reform (items 12 to 18), self-efficacy (items 19 to 22), and job satisfaction (items 23 to 27), respectively. A five-point Likert scale was used for all the items in the tool with the five points ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 equals “Strongly Disagree”, 2 equals “Disagree”, 3 equals “Neutral”, 4 equals “Agree”, and 5 equals “Strongly agree”. This questionnaire was designed based on repeated reading of the literature by different researchers. It was then reviewed by two experts and revised according to their suggestions. After it was revised, it was once again reviewed and found to be a sound and valid questionnaire that could be used as an official data collection tool in this study. Finally, it was trial-tested through a pilot study.

After factor analysis with an SPSS of 25.0, the KMO value reached 0.890 (Table 2) indicating that the sample size met the requirements and the data is suitable for factor analysis. The significance level value of Bartlett’s sphere test is 0.000, demonstrating that there is a significant relationship between variables and indicating that the structure validity is good. As shown in Table 3, the α coefficient of college English the professional identity of teachers and each dimension is higher than 0.8, which indicates that the reliability quality of the questionnaire is high and can be used for further analysis.

TABLE 1
KMO AND BARTLETT TESTS

KMO sampling suitability quantity		.890
Bartlett’s sphericity test	approximates chi-square	1874.032
	degrees of freedom	210
	Significant	.000

TABLE 2
RELIABILITY OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Dimension	Cronbach’s Alpha	Number of items
Total	0.967	27
Professional behavior tendency	0.866	6
Value identity	0.837	5
English teaching reform	0.96	7
Self-efficacy	0.902	4
Job satisfaction	0.853	5

B. Participants

To investigate the status quo of professional identities of college EFL teachers in China, this study targets college EFL teachers in the Hebei Province as the research participants who are of different ages, different titles and different teaching experiences. The study included 134 college EFL teachers (24 males and 110 females) as participants in this study. In terms of professional titles, more than half of the participants were lecturers and one-third were associate professors. As for years of work, 53.7% of the respondents had been working as college EFL teachers for 11 to 20 years, while 6.7% of them were novice teachers with less than five years of teaching experience. When it came to educational background, only 15.7% of the respondents held bachelor’s degrees while the others possessed master’s degrees, doctorate degrees or were Ph.D. candidates.

TABLE 3
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

	Classification	Number	Proportion (%)
Gender	Male	24	17.9%
	Female	110	82.1%
	Professor	6	4.5%
Title	Associate professor	45	33.6%
	Lecturer	80	59.7%
	Teaching assistant	3	2.2%
Years of work	Within 5 years	9	6.7%
	6 to 10 years	22	16.4%
	11 to 20 years	72	53.7%
	More than 21 years	31	23.1%
Educational background	Bachelor	21	15.7%
	Master degree	92	68.7%

C. Procedures

The questionnaire was compiled on the platform WJX (<https://www.wjx.cn/>) and distributed through WeChat and QQ (popular instant messaging applications in China) by sharing the link of the questionnaire. The selected faculties within each university were contacted, and the nature and purpose of the research were explained clearly and in confidentiality. Volunteers and anonymity were also ensured. This process took the researcher seven days to receive a sufficient amount of data for the research. After one week, 140 questionnaires were collected and 6 were eliminated as the respondents were teachers who had already transformed from college EFL teachers to administrative staff or English major teachers.

This study analyzed the data by using SPSS 25.0. By employing one-way ANOVA (analysis of variance), this research analyzed the differences among the professional identity of college EFL teachers within the five dimensions mentioned in the previous section (occupational behavior tendency, value identity, English teaching reform, self-efficacy and job satisfaction). Moreover, the differences in the professional identity of college EFL teachers were also analyzed in terms of their genders, teaching ages and professional titles. As the mean value reflected the central tendency of the sample and the standard deviation reflected the deviation tendency of the sample, the mean value (M) and standard deviation (SD) of each dimension of teacher identity were calculated.

D. Results

Aiming to figure out the status quo of the professional identity of college EFL teachers in China, this study analyzed the data collected from the first part of the quantitative study through SPSS 25.0. Using a one-way ANOVA and an independent t-test, this research analyzed the differences among the professional identity of college EFL teachers in the five dimensions mentioned in the previous section, namely, occupational behavior tendency, value identity, English teaching reform, self-efficacy and job satisfaction. The differences in the status quo of the professional identity of teachers were also explored in terms of their genders.

The total number of respondents who participated in the quantitative study was 134 – with 24 being male and 110 of them being female which is most likely in line with the current proportion of male and female EFL teachers at Chinese universities. According to the 2020 China Education Statistical Yearbook, there were 1.833 million full-time teachers in China's higher education institutions in 2020 with women accounting for 51.2 percent and an even higher percentage of them being female EFL teachers.

To find out gender differences in the professional identity of teachers, an independent t-test was used to analyze the data. A t-test compares the means of two independent groups to determine whether there is statistical evidence that shows that the associated population means are significantly different. As presented in Table 4.1, it seems that female teachers have a higher professional identity level than male teachers in four out of the five dimensions, the exception being self-efficacy. The significance (P) score of the five variables is greater than 0.05 indicating that there is no significant influence brought on by gender differences concerning the five dimensions of the professional identity of teachers. It also can be seen in Table 4.1 that the average score of the professional identity of male teachers is 3.94, and the professional identity of female teachers is 4.04 with a T value of -0.624 proving that the level of professional identity of female teachers is slightly higher than that of male teachers. The significance (P) score of this variable was 0.537 - greater than 0.05 - which reflects the influence of gender on the professional identity of teachers did not reach a level of statistical significance. Therefore, gender has no significant influence on the professional identity levels of college EFL teachers.

TABLE 4
GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COLLEGE ENGLISH THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF TEACHERS

Dimension	Gender (Mean $\pm$ standard deviation)		T	P
	M (n=24)	F (n=110)		
Total	3.935 $\pm$ 0.748	4.036 $\pm$ 0.570	-0.624	0.537
Professional behavior tendency	4.243 $\pm$ 0.750	4.253 $\pm$ 0.653	-0.060	0.952
Value identity	3.733 $\pm$ 0.886	3.975 $\pm$ 0.628	-1.575	0.118
English teaching reform	4.202 $\pm$ 0.962	4.349 $\pm$ 0.687	-0.710	0.484
Self-efficacy	4.115 $\pm$ 0.804	4.086 $\pm$ 0.673	0.160	0.874
Job satisfaction	4.042 $\pm$ 0.846	4.144 $\pm$ 0.666	-0.554	0.584

According to Table 4, the average score of the professional identity of college EFL teachers is 4.018, which proves that college EFL teachers have a high level of professional identity. The standard deviation of college EFL teachers' identity is 0.604, which indicates that college EFL teachers' cognition of professional identity is, to some extent, different. Among the five dimensions of the professional identity of college EFL teachers, the mean value of English teaching reform is the highest with 4.323, which shows that college EFL teachers who are involved in English teaching reform have a higher level of professional identity. On the contrary, as for the professional behavior tendency dimension, the standard deviation of the minimum is 0.668 - the smallest of the five dimensions - which proves that, compared with the other four dimensions, college EFL teachers have consistent views on professional behavior tendency. The mean value of value identity is the lowest at 3.931, which indicates that college EFL teachers have a

lower level of professional identity regarding value identity than any other dimension. In terms of self-efficacy, the mean value is 4.091, which is a median mean value but higher than the average data. This suggests that college EFL teachers have a relatively high level of professional identity when it concerns self-efficacy.

TABLE 5
STATUS QUO OF COLLEGE ENGLISH THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF TEACHERS

Dimension	Min	Max	Mean value	SD
Occupational behavior tendency	1	5	4.251	0.668
Value identity	1	5	3.931	0.6837
English teaching reform	1	5	4.323	0.742
Self-efficacy	1	5	4.091	0.695
Job satisfaction	1	5	4.125	0.699
Total	1	5	4.018	0.604

IV. DISCUSSION

The above provides the findings from the results of the quantitative analysis concerned with the research question, which is based on the status quo of the professional identity of college EFL teachers displayed.

According to the findings above, it can be concluded that college EFL teachers have a high level of professional identity with different levels in terms of gender within the five dimensions of the professional identity of teachers, namely occupational behavior tendency, value identity, English teaching reform, self-efficacy and job satisfaction. The specific details follow.

First, among all five constructs of the professional identity of teachers, college EFL teachers have the highest level of professional identity in terms of English teaching reform. This is of great possibility because college English teaching reforms are prevalent in higher educational institutions in China, and have been conducted since 2002 (Cai, 2004). This brought with it a series of profound changes to college English teaching and served as an inevitable part of the teaching practices of college EFL teachers. The changes brought on by the constant reforms created more requirements for college EFL teachers but also made them increasingly better qualified (Tsui, 2007; Xu & Liu, 2009). This indicates that college English teaching reforms within Chinese universities have put college EFL teachers at an advantage. They show a distinctively high level of professional identity, which made them active participants in college English teaching reforms. This is also in line with the view that the shielding and releasing of teachers' subjective power has become the key to the success or failure of education reform (Wu & Li, 2015).

Second, as for the occupational behavior tendency dimension, which ranks second only to English teaching reform, the level of the professional identity of college EFL teachers is relatively high when it comes to teacher engagement, willingness, and input in the practice of teaching college English. Occupational behavior tendency constitutes a state of preparation for a teacher's professional identity. It estimates the possibility of the occurrence of college EFL teachers' specific behavior and is the subjective intention of teachers to adjust and rationalize a certain behavior. In addition, with the smallest standard deviation among the five constructs, it proves that, compared with the other four dimensions, college EFL teachers have a consistent willingness to be involved in college English teaching in terms of professional behavior tendency.

Furthermore, as indicated in the findings above, the professional identity of college EFL teachers is at a moderate level when it comes to job satisfaction and self-efficacy. In this study, job satisfaction refers to the college EFL teachers' attitudes based on the evaluation of the college English teaching tasks and teaching context. It suggests that college EFL teachers are satisfied and possess the fulfillment for the job of being a college English teacher in the context of college English teaching reform in China. Self-efficacy refers to college EFL teachers' belief in their capability to organize and perform their daily English teaching practice and other professionally-related activities effectively. Due to the influence and challenges brought by English teaching reforms, there are different types of responses from college EFL teachers (McCulloch, 2000) which contribute to their moderate professional identity level. This is also in line with the view that job satisfaction and self-efficacy are key factors in the formation of the professional identity of teachers (Canrinus et al., 2012).

When it comes to the last construct, value identity, the level of the professional identity of college EFL teachers is the lowest when compared to the other four. Items related to value identity from the questionnaire are statements concerned with the social status and importance of college EFL teachers as a specific occupation. With the lowest score being value identity, this means that college EFL teachers are not sure of their high social status, which is actually true in the current situation. Compared with other faculties in the same university, they are usually at a disadvantage and even marginalized because of managerial reforms that have taken place in Chinese universities (Huang & Guo, 2019). Although their practical knowledge and skills are valued, their services are typically viewed as supplementary to university-generated knowledge (Xu, 2014). To some extent, they are in the dilemma of being college teachers but lacking in organizational support.

After introducing the comprehensive status quo of the professional identity of college EFL teachers from the five constructs, the specific situation of the professional identity of teachers concerned with gender difference is presented.

First of all, it is inferred from the findings that there is no significant difference in the professional identity level of college EFL teachers in terms of different genders. However, it is a prominent fact that there are more female teachers than male teachers in many countries, and this is especially true in China. Teaching is a highly gendered profession (Tašner, 2017). Data from the countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that, on average, women make up more than two-thirds of teachers from pre-primary to tertiary education. Several reasons have contributed to this historical problem. First, from the perspective of feminism, Fromkin and Rodman (1983) suggested that the increase of female teachers resulted in occupational inheritance such as the influence of a parent's or siblings' profession which would lead to them entering the teaching profession. Moreover, it is influenced by the thought that, starting from birth, the female brain is more situated for language learning (Dionne et al., 2003).

Similarly, the number of female teachers is increasing in China. In this study, male teachers accounted for 17.91% while female teachers accounted for 82.09%. Although the scale of participants in this study cannot be representative of the whole country, it also reflects that the gender imbalance among college EFL teachers is prominent. However, this significant gender difference barely poses an impact on the professional identity of college EFL teachers. Overall, female teachers possess a higher level of professional identity than male teachers. However, in terms of self-efficacy, the professional identity level of the male teachers is higher, indicating that male college teachers are more confident in their ability to organize and perform their English teaching practices. Although female teachers behaved better than male teachers in the constructs of professional behavior tendency, value identity, English teaching reform and job satisfaction, the imbalanced gender ratio of college EFL teachers deserves notice and the generation of stereotypes of college EFL teachers should be prevented.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, based on the analysis of the data collected via the questionnaire, the status quo of the professional identity of college EFL teachers was revealed. It can be inferred that college EFL teachers have a relatively high level of professional identity, with the constituting constructs of the professional identity of college teachers scoring differently, from high to low, English teaching reform, professional behavior tendency, job satisfaction, self-efficacy and value identity. According to the definition of the five constructs of the professional identity of teachers mentioned in this study, the findings of this study indicated that college EFL teachers are increasingly engaging in college English reforms, are making significant inputs into college English teaching reform, are generally satisfied with the current teaching task and teaching context, are maintaining their belief in their capability to perform general English teaching practices, and are possessing a relatively positive understanding and evaluation of the teaching profession as college EFL teachers. Moreover, although there is a prominent gender imbalance among college EFL teachers in China, there is no significant difference in the professional identity level of college EFL teachers in terms of different genders.

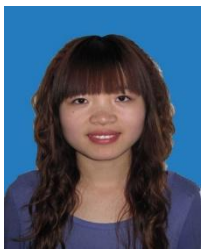
There are benefits contributing to the study on teacher professional identity such as how positively it affects teaching behavior (Zhao & Zhang, 2017), how it enhances their confidence in their decision to work as teachers and proves their commitment to the profession (Rots et al., 2010; Hanna et al., 2019). This study is valuable for understanding college EFL teachers' behavior, values, beliefs and interpretation of knowledge and teaching practice. Therefore, the professional identity of college teachers is worth exploring more in future research. Moreover, the results from this research are preliminary and further study on other factors that might possess different levels of professional identity, such as teaching years, professional titles, educational background, and the like has not yet been verified. Furthermore, the influential factors and development of the professional identity of teachers are also worth exploring in specific contexts with a growing appreciation of the need to situate teachers' identities in their own sociocultural contexts (Day, 2013; Edwards & Edwards, 2017).

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Zhang Xu was born in China, 1984. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree majoring in English from Dalian Minzu University, Dalian, China. She received her Master degree in English language and literature from Dalian Maritime University, Dalian, China. Since 2019, she has been attending Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program in School of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Malaysia.

She is a senior lecturer in the Department of Foreign Language Education and Teaching in Hebei Finance University, Baoding, China. She has 11 years of work experience in teaching college English course in Hebei Finance University, China. She has participated in several educational training programs and has published several articles concerned with college English teaching and teacher development. Her academic interests are college English teaching, teacher identity, teacher development.



Noor Mala Ibrahim was born in Malaysia, 1965. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration (BBA) majoring in Finance in 1987 from Eastern Washington University, Spokane, WA, USA. She then enrolled in a Post Graduate Diploma Program and graduated with a Post Graduate Diploma in TESL, in 1990 from Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia. In 1994, she graduated with a MSc (TESP) from Aston University, UK. She completed her Phd. (TESL) from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) in 2015.

Currently, she is a senior lecturer in Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor, Malaysia. She has vast experience teaching the undergraduate and TESL postgraduate students. She is supervising PhD students in areas of her interests namely, linguistics, genre and text analysis as well as English for Specific Purposes and lecture discourse. Several of her publications include: Ibrahim, N. M., & Ahmad, U. K. (2020). Content-organizing meta discourse in Malaysian undergraduate engineering lectures: Towards improvement of lecture delivery. *LSP International Journal*, 7(2), 89-105 and Ibrahim, N. M., & Ahmad, U. K. (2021). Personal Pronouns as Guiding Strategies in Academic Lectures across Two Institutions. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 21(4).