



REVISTA KRONOS

Bridging the gap: An autobiographical study on English learning experiences through private tutoring in Cuenca, Ecuador

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ABSTRACT This study explores the English learning experiences of students in Cuenca who turned to private tutoring after facing persistent challenges in formal education. Using a qualitative autobiographical approach, the author examined the learning journeys of teenagers aged 13 to 18 who received private English tutoring with the researcher between 2020 and 2025. The research aimed to contribute to the understanding of educational inequality and the need for more empathetic English language teaching practices in Ecuador. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and a reflective teaching journal that documented pedagogical practices and emotional dynamics. The theoretical framework integrates concepts such as motivation, learner identity, linguistic imperialism, and Global English to analyze how these factors shaped students' learning perceptions and decisions. The findings reveal that private tutoring serves not only as academic support but also as a space for emotional recovery, confidence building, and the reimagining of English as a meaningful learning tool.

KEYWORDS private tutoring, motivation, learner identity, Global English.

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Cerrando brechas: Un estudio autobiográfico sobre las experiencias de aprendizaje del inglés a través de tutorías privadas en Cuenca, Ecuador

RESUMEN El presente estudio explora las experiencias de aprendizaje del inglés de estudiantes en Cuenca que recurrieron a tutorías privadas después de enfrentar dificultades persistentes en la educación formal. Desde un enfoque cualitativo y autobiográfico, la autora examinó las trayectorias de aprendizaje de adolescentes entre 13 y 18 años que recibieron tutorías privadas de inglés con la investigadora entre 2020 y 2025. Esta investigación buscó contribuir a la comprensión de las desigualdades educativas y a la necesidad de prácticas de enseñanza del inglés más empáticas en Ecuador. Los datos se recopilaban mediante entrevistas en profundidad y un diario reflexivo que documentó las prácticas pedagógicas y las dinámicas emocionales. El marco teórico integra conceptos como la motivación, la identidad del estudiante, el imperia- lismo lingüístico y el inglés global, con el fin de analizar cómo estos factores influyeron en las percepciones y decisiones de aprendizaje de los estudiantes. Los hallazgos revelan que la tutoría privada no solo funciona como apoyo académico, sino también como un espacio de recuperación emocional, construcción de confianza y resignificación del inglés como una herramienta de aprendizaje significativa.

PALABRAS CLAVE tutoría privada, motivación, identidad del estudiante, inglés como lengua global.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores how long-term private tutoring relationships shape learner identity, motivation, and emotional well-being. Grounded in a narrative autobiographical reflection, the study focuses on the experiences of students who turned to tutoring after facing setbacks in formal education. Their voices were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed alongside the tutor-researcher's reflective journal to uncover how mutual transformation occurs within these educational spaces.

In Ecuador's educational and professional settings, English has been established as a core component of the national curriculum. This shows that this language is considered a critical path to global opportunities and academic achievement. Yet, despite its weight, many learners struggle to succeed in English instruction due to rigid curricula, overloaded classrooms, and a lack of emotional and personalized support in both public and private schools. These challenges often lead the students to experience anxiety, low self-confidence, and disengagement from language learning (Guerrero et al., 2025; Barre-Parrales & Villafuerte-Holguín, 2021). These challenges often lead the students to experience anxiety, low self-confidence, and disengagement from language learning. At the same time, private tutoring also reflects socioeconomic inequalities, since many students who would benefit from additional support cannot access it due to financial limitations.

In response to these problems, private English tutoring has emerged as an informal alternative that provides a support system to complement school English instruction. This growing phenomenon has been defined as *shadow education*, where private instruction complements the formal system by addressing both pedagogical and emotional shortcomings (Bray, 2022; Zumbuehl et al., 2022). Students often describe tutoring sessions as flexible, emotionally safe, and responsive to their personal needs, which have not been considered in school-based education (Escobar Fandiño & Silva Velandia, 2020; Chan, 2019). However, most research on this topic emphasizes that it can create structural inequalities, overlooking the lived emotional and motivational needs addressed unevenly, depending on who can access tutoring.

By merging learners' perspectives with personal teaching reflections, this research seeks to contribute new insights into the emotional recovery, motivation, and identity negotiation that happen through tutoring. It examines how sustained private tutoring experiences can foster resilience and a renewed sense of academic agency in students who once felt excluded or unsupported in school. This study also highlights how trust, empathy, and adaptive teaching strategies, when consistently applied, can rebuild students' confidence and reshape their relationship with the English language. Ultimately, the research advocates for a more inclusive and learner-centered vision of English Language Teaching (ELT). An instruction that goes beyond grammar drills and standardized outcomes to prioritize connection, well-being, and student voice within the learning process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Across different educational systems, private English tutoring has grown where formal provision appears to be misaligned with learners' needs. In this context, parents of students who experience persistent gaps or low confidence in the subject, as well as anxiety during exam cycles look for extra help (Zeng, 2024; Hajar & Karakus, 2024). Yet, the literature does not present tutoring as a mere way to fill the gap. Instead, studies from diverse settings suggest that one-to-one spaces can reduce the social cost of trying, allowing learners

to ask questions they might avoid in crowded classrooms, and it also motivates students to speak with less fear of embarrassment (Chan, 2019; Černá, 2020).

Tutoring is generally managed as a different relational setting. It is not a remedy for «bad teaching» but a complementary education. People, in most cases, look for private tutoring because they see English as a plus in life. Unlike in formal education, where students need to approve English, private tutoring constitutes a space which is designed to reduce students' fear, allow them to make mistakes without falling behind in the subject, and try again until the language becomes usable and friendly. These benefits, however, come hand-in-hand with students' responsibility, if it is not handed back to students (Zumbuehl, Hof, & Wolter, 2022; Zeng, 2024). Therefore, the goals of tutoring are not automatic; they emerge when pedagogy, pacing, and agency are intentionally combined. Private tutoring is also known as shadow education. This type is described as a single service considered a «**jigsaw**» of local responses assembled when schools cannot fully meet students' academic demands (Bray, 2023).

The principal axis in the global work is the **relational aspect** of effective tutoring. Tutors need to act as instructors, mentors, or coaches. They need to pair empathy with effective teaching strategies, adjustable pacing, persistence, and a willingness to communicate with students (Werbińska, Bozyigit, Guerra, Ekiert, & Köse, 2019; Prastyo, Tinanti, & Farhana, 2022). In this sense, as in general education, tutoring has different modalities for example online and hybrid, and these modes can either reproduce passivity or purposeful tasks. Thus, tutors also need to innovate their classes by providing rapid feedback, **scaffolding receptive skills**, and maintaining engagement around school schedules (Escobar-Fandiño & Silva Velandia, 2020; Guerrero, Astudillo, Orozco Jurado, Robalino, & Salcedo, 2025).

As in the case of schools, private English tutoring also requires qualified tutors and consistent services to ensure that quality is professional rather than incidental (Alharbi, 2024). Although it is argued that tutoring works **because** it occurs in quieter, closer, and more intimate settings compared to most school classrooms, the reality is that tutors play a significant role in facilitating English learning. Hence, the difference is structural and relational rather than contextual. In **ELT** (English Language Teaching) private tutoring, tutors depict careers grounded in care and adaptation, with responsive teaching to learners' histories rather than prescriptive norms (Hua & Yung, 2024).

Despite the benefits of private tutoring, this practice can create uneven access for students who cannot afford them. This mirrors inequalities since, private tutoring sustains a support only for those able to pay (Islam, Hoque, & Hoque, 2021; Walker & Zhang, 2024). In these regards, the regional conversation revolves around the question of «does tutoring help?» to «**under what conditions** can it expand possibility without reproducing exclusion?». It is necessary to see it from a broader perspective that shows the ideologies of **Global English** and how these practices function as language policy, shaping what «good English» counts as and whose identities are centered (Yung, Entrich, & Bautista, 2023; Heron et al., 2024).

In Ecuador, these tensions are concrete. Advanced programs such as **CLIL** in some private institutions coexist with clear language policies and resources that are opposite to those in public schools, creating uneven opportunities for English learning (Barre-Parralles & Villafuerte-Holguín, 2021). Within this landscape, the freelance one-to-one practice examined in this article is pictured as a **complementary tool** for the school rather than a replacement. Private tutoring can be considered as an **autonomy-supportive and identity-affirming** process. This is because students' progress is organized around intelligibility, strategy use, and meaningful purposes, centered on learners' identities rather than native-speaker imitation (Yung et al., 2023; Heron et al., 2024; Hua & Yung, 2024).

Private tutoring generally accommodates learners who are typically **failing** or very close to fail English in their schools. However, when they begin their private classes, their **relationship with the language changes**. In most cases, **English** shifts from an obligation to a tool, from something endured to something usable and personally meaningful. This change may be the result of the tutors' empathy and flexible pacing. Their relational moves are treated as mechanisms to increase students' participation and persistence (Werbińska et al., 2019; Prastyo et al., 2022).

Careful methodological choices aim to establish a durable relationship between tutors and students that extends beyond their sessions. Short listening and reading activities, brief message-based and quick speaking bursts create frequent, concrete and immediate feedback so, learners feel progress and can **carry** routines back to their schools (Escobar-Fandiño & Silva Velandia, 2020; Guerrero et al., 2025). Care works better through structure, such as having visible goals, simple progress markers, and predictable rhythms that convert comfort into **independent performance**. This orientation resonates with regional studies showing that emotionally committed teaching becomes transformative when it is paired with clear scaffolds from the tutors (Tamayo et al., 2025). Tutors need to develop students' autonomy since support **tapers** around assessment periods, and responsibility is **gradually released** so students do not come to believe that correct performance is only possible in the tutor's presence (Zumbuehl et al., 2022; Zeng, 2024). In other words, private tutoring aims to help learners **overcome their fear and errors** in a safe space. Once students are able to do that, they can **leave** that space and be ready to use the language properly in diverse spaces.

As discussed, global and regional authors share the view that private tutoring is a **relational, designed, and complementary** form of work. Its educational value lies in how empathy and pacing open for participation. Its ethical value lies in keeping access and autonomy among students. However, there is still limited research in Latin America examining private tutoring from rational, emotional and identity-focused perspectives, which leaves important regional dynamics understudied. In the Ecuadorian context, this means recognizing that students often seek tutoring because they are failing or about to fail English in their schools. When tutoring fosters a lasting relationship with English that outlasts the session, learners can begin to see the language as a tool rather than an obligation. The present review therefore situates one-to-one tutoring in Cuenca as a bridge rather than a bypass: a relational setting purpose-built to make confidence and control **portable**, complementing rather than competing with school-based EFL (Bray, 2023; Islam et al., 2021; Heron et al., 2024; Hua & Yung, 2024; Yung et al., 2023; Walker & Zhang, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, autobiographical design grounded in reflective practice and learner-centered perspectives. Drawing on the tutor-researcher's experience providing private English tutoring in Cuenca, Ecuador (2020–2025), the narrative approach valued participants' voices and personal stories to understand how meaning is constructed through experience. The study was guided by the following research question: *What are the experiences and perceptions of English learners in Cuenca who seek private lessons after struggling in formal educational settings?* This question oriented the participants' selection, data collection, and analysis. As Islam et al. (2021) note, «qualitative studies provide in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences and social realities» (p. 738), which supported the exploration of emotional and adaptive learning pathways.

To support credibility and depth, two data collection tools were employed: a reflective journal written by the author who was also the students' tutor and in-depth interviews with eleven participants. The reflective journal captured the tutor's ongoing reflections, personal reactions, and pedagogical evolution throughout the research process. As Tamayo et al. (2025) highlight, narrative inquiry enables educators to «reflect on their professional journey, emotions, and commitment to student learning» (p. 418). These journal entries also served as a form of data triangulation, offering context and continuity alongside the interviews.

The in-depth interviews were structured into three themes as follows:

- **Looking Back:** students described their school-based English experiences and what led them to seek tutoring.
- **During Tutoring:** students reflected on their progress, emotional responses, and academic confidence.
- **Moving Forward:** students discussed their readiness for independent learning and the personal impact of tutoring.

Participants included eleven teenagers, eight males and three females (ages 13–18). They attended private secondary schools in Cuenca. The shared characteristic of these schools is that their tuition was more expensive than the media for private institutions in the city. In all cases, parents or guardians initiated the search for tutoring after their children faced problems with English. Furthermore, all participants shared five common characteristics: (a) all were currently enrolled in secondary private schools; (b) parents/guardians initiated the tutoring; (c) all were between 13 and 18 years old; (d) expensive tuition; and (e) all were shy and lacked confidence at the beginning of the tutorials. Additionally, the majority of participants began tutoring shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Before attending the private tutorials, the participating students were unmotivated, frustrated, or disinterested in English. They also viewed tutoring as a necessary intervention rather than a choice. However, over time, they developed a better understanding of the language's importance and began to show signs of emotional and academic progress. This aligns with Walker and Zhang's (2024) findings that private tutoring can foster both emotional reassurance and improved confidence among students facing systemic challenges. To protect the participants' confidentiality, during the analysis, they will be referred to by fictitious first names; any potentially identifying details were generalized or removed. Interviews were conducted in Spanish (participants' native language) and translated into English for reporting. Quotations were lightly edited for readability without altering meaning.

To analyze the data, the author used a thematic analysis. Following Islam et al. (2021), the interview transcripts and journal entries were examined to identify emerging categories including motivation, emotional support, identity, and learner agency. The coding process was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data without imposing preconceived categories. As Sadhu (2024) emphasizes, «narrative accounts reveal the emotional depth and transformative moments that statistical data often overlook» (p. 12).

Reflexivity was maintained throughout to acknowledge the tutor-researcher's positionality and ensure ethical engagement with the data.

FINDINGS

This section is presented in three narrative blocks that mirror the students' experiences attending private tutoring in Cuenca as follows: *Before Tutoring*: examines why teenagers and their families sought extra support, addressing, limitations of school-based English,

initial motivations, and emotional barriers and learner identity. *During Tutoring*: traces the transformative role of one-to-one work and personalized pacing, a safe climate, and visible micro-wins. And, *Looking Ahead* consolidates the outcomes, showing how English moves from an obligation to a useful tool. Throughout, the students' narratives, the author weaves the students' interviews, reflective journals, and brief literature to interpret the patterns and position her practice. Considering the research methodology previously described, this analysis will be presented in the first person.

To guide the reader and clarify this section's purpose, I begin with a brief autobiographical account that explains how my background and teaching experience shaped the way I interpret the students' narratives in this study. This personal context helps position my role as the tutor and frames the lens through which the findings are analyzed.

I hold a Bachelor's and Master's degree in International Relations but back in 2019 I discovered a deep passion for teaching English language and I started teaching English as a freelance teacher. At that moment, my knowledge in the language came from my previous academic and personal experience with language since school, high school, a year exchange program all the way to United States in order to improve my English language skills until studying a bilingual bachelor's and master's career at the University, with that foundation I started to teach basic English classes for children in which learning focused on mastering the basics of English language, focused not so much on the traditional way of teaching English, but rather making my students learn from the interaction with the language by creating a relationship with it, in the same way I learned, then with time, the number of my students became to arise and in order to improve to be better for my students, I decided to study something already focused clearly on teaching English as a foreign language and to be able give my students the best from me.

Before Tutoring

Limitations of school-based English instruction

When families first come to me, they rarely discuss about English. Instead, they often talk about the excessive activities their children have in their schools, a pace that never slows down. Regarding how English is taught in the participants' schools, Maria said, «I would describe them as very repetitive, with little real progress». Francisco added that most days, they spend their time «copying worksheets... they hardly explain anything». To better understand this situation, I asked Pedro to exemplify this practice, he said that in his class at school «there was no speaking... the teacher spoke mainly in Spanish». As I listened to my students, I could already identify the pattern that I had been writing about in my notes. Diego reinforced this by saying, «In school we just fill in books; the teacher talks, but we don't really use English», while Daniela noted, «My English classes were only grammar and worksheets. We never practiced speaking», which mirrors what I found in my reflective entries. Renato summarized it clearly: «Sometimes I didn't even know what we were supposed to be learning; we just copied». It seems that the perception about language progress and learning in schools revolve around homework compliance mostly. Thus, when students come to my tutorials, they generally want me to help them complete their homework and this activity has been reducing my time needed to repair the basics (Reflective Journal, Student Daniel, 2025).

Helping students complete their homework lesson after lesson started to produce fatigue and it was difficult for me to move forward in teaching the language. This practice shadowed what was happening in my students' schools. Bray and Ventura (2024) mentioned that «the shadow follows the curriculum of the mainstream», which means that when pacing rises and leveling never happens, the language gaps simply accumulate. Henceforth, I tried to change this practice and, as a fixer move, I slowed the pace in each

session, since I wanted the tutoring to work. Aiming to improve the quality of my tutorials, what I did during each session was two tiny checks to see the gaps, help a bit in completing my students' homework and we focused more on writing two short sentences the students can make and utter with confidence. This initial move helped students noticed their progress and loosened their fear around grammar. When progress is visible like that, something they can point to, the fear around grammar and language use begins to ease.

Initial motivations for tutoring

There is not a single motive for students to start their extra tutorial English classes. Generally, parents come to me when their children have low grades in their English tests, which causes worry, and they want to help their children improve their English language learning. However, the motives are diverse, for example, Veronica mentioned that her teacher at school told her parents to find a private teacher. Another student, Mauricio who arrived in the 2023 break said in our first class «My mom signed me up on vacations, because my grades were low». Santiago expressed the same pressure at home: «My parents were scared I was going to fail English again, so they looked for help», while María said, «I wanted to improve because I felt stuck; I wasn't learning anything in school». For Pedro, the trigger was the new school's placement exam: «My level is very low, but I want to learn». Other students had changed to a tougher private school without leveling and felt the jump immediately. Francisco explained, «I changed schools and everything was harder... I felt lost in English». In my own notes from Daniel's first week, I wrote, «First goal: avoid remedials while we start leveling». (Reflective Journal, Student Daniel, 2025). A different page from that same period reads, «Parents want stability now and a plan for later». (Reflective Journal, 2025, Intake notes).

All these motives to enroll in private tutorials align with the broader picture; families lean on tutoring as a «stopgap» to repair unfinished learning (Yung, Entrich, & Bautista, 2023) in their children's schools. At the same time, tutoring must keep pace with schoolwork, as mentioned before, because tutorials echo school teaching «the shadow follows the curriculum of the mainstream» (Bray & Ventura, 2024). In other words, tutorials need to reinforce what students cannot learn in their regular English classes.

Once the students star the sessions, I can feel their stress the moment they walk in, their parent's tight voice from their worries and the teenager looking down without knowing whether it will work or not. I slow everything and say, «we're starting fresh». I want them to keep an open mind, so my first step is to find a hook they actually like. For example, music, football, a series, a game and connect it to English. With Mauricio, it was music: «Songs and writing made me like English more», he said. With Pedro it was goals, he said «My level is very low, but I want to learn». Once we have that link, motivation shows up, and we try one small, doable task to get a first win. This calm, interest-first start is why tutoring so often builds «increased confidence and greater motivation» (Walker & Zhang, 2024) and why the tutor's role is to be «the guide... the engine that will encourage and help students» (Escobar Fandiño & Silva Velandia, 2020).

Emotional barriers and learner identity

The first thing I felt in many intakes was fear. Thus, I usually slow the pace and say, «we try first, we fix after». In this sense, when I was recalling with my students what they thought when they started the tutorials, Mauricio told me, «There was a time I said it wasn't important and I wasn't going to get motivated», Verónica also remembered, «At the beginning I didn't think English was important; I didn't want to answer». Santiago added that his first weeks were the exact two phrases, «I don't know... I keep forgetting». (Mauricio's, Verónica's and Santiago's Interviews). María echoed this fear saying, «I was nervous to speak because I thought I would say everything wrong», and Pedro recalled, «At first I

felt dumb in English class; I thought everyone else understood except me». Daniela also mentioned, «I didn't want to read aloud; I was scared people would laugh».

Regarding students' first impressions of my tutorials and English learning, I wrote in my Reflective Journal «They aren't anti-English; they're afraid of getting it wrong». So, I gave sentence formulas, «Yesterday I ____; I usually ____; I want to ____» and we kept a small «mistake budget». We spent it together and celebrated the first messy answer. One visible win, something they could say and write, made them feel they were actually learning and understanding, something they thought was impossible.

What follows matches the current evidence: tutoring frequently brings «increased confidence and greater motivation» when support is individualized to the students (Walker & Zhang, 2024). Therefore, tutors should not be only instructors; they also need to act as «mentors» and «emotional supports» for learners (Werbińska et al., 2019). In practice, that means that an error is a tolerant routine. The phrase, first try it, then fix it has helped my students improve significantly by the end of each class. So, as anxiety softened, teenagers risked longer turns, and only then did the language learning start to appear.

During Tutoring

Transformative role of tutoring

Change does not start with a worksheet; it starts when the room gets quiet and the students and I find a pace that fits both of us. María told me, «It's just the two of us... more connection, trust, and tailored plans». Daniel noticed the feeling: «Here I'm less afraid of mistakes; personalized classes help me improve a lot». Verónica mentioned the environment: «Private classes at my pace; big classes are noisy». (María's, Daniel's, Verónica's Interviews). It seems that once the pressure drops, progress becomes visible. Nicolás said, «When I learned the irregular, I felt proud», and J added, «Testing myself with irregular verbs helped me learn». Francisco described what it felt like outside the lesson: «Before... I didn't understand anything; now I understand practically everything». Meanwhile, Mauricio showed a strategy shift: «Now I try to answer before going to a translator». (Nicolás, Verónica, Francisco, Mauricio). Santiago added something similar during his interview: «Here I don't feel embarrassed. I can stop, ask, and try again without people looking at me». Daniela expressed relief saying, «I can finally speak without panicking; in school I stayed quiet». María emphasized the contrast: «Here you actually teach me... you don't just pass slides».

From my side, the mechanism was steady and simple. In my Reflective Journal about Pedro (2025) I wrote: «One topic per class; bite-sized tense work; visible feedback so errors become information, not risk». With Verónica, I leaned on attention first: «Writing to focus; then read-aloud plus short speaking to connect form and meaning». (Reflective Journal, Student Verónica, 2025). With Santiago, the note is even more concrete: «Two micro-tasks, one breath, one tiny win; save it in the notebook». (Reflective Journal, Student Santiago).

Once the fear subsided, we could finally practice grammar, another language skills purposefully without freezing. Here is how I handle it. First, I explain the point with very easy examples, then I let them try and make mistakes because it is normal to make mistakes. This is something students do not feel when they are being graded at school, that of course, is important, but more important is that students learn. When errors occur, we correct them together. I often remind my students that there is a linguistic order to follow, and we practice that order in short lines about their own lives. When stress rises because they don't understand, I do a quick explanation in Spanish (grammar only) to calm them, and then we return to English. If, after several tries, the form is still challenging, I share a little hack (a list, a rhyme, a color code) so it feels more manageable. Francisco described

this moment well: «When you explain it slowly, I finally get it... in school they move too fast». Renato mentioned, «I like that we repeat until it sticks. I don't feel dumb anymore». Pedro added, «When I understand the rule, English feels easier... not like a punishment».

In Ecuador, focused, meaningful support has been linked to receptive-skills gains and higher student engagement, precisely what our teenagers began to describe as listening and reading felt less like a wall and more like a door. «In Ecuador, focused, meaningful tutoring has been associated with measurable improvements in EFL receptive skills and higher student engagement (Guerrero et al., 2025)». In other words, the skills-and-confidence turn we observe is not accidental—it is the expected outcome of focused tutoring in our context

Looking Ahead

Outcomes: From obligation to useful tool

By the time the panic softens and routines are established, the talk changes from passing to purpose. María said: «I've improved a lot, but I want to keep progressing to reach bigger goals». Mauricio was specific about what would help: «Even if I'm leveled, I'd like more classes to speak fluently». Francisco named a concrete horizon «I want to study in the United States; if I don't know English, I won't be able to» while Pedro set a nearer ladder: «Level with my class and then reach a high level». (María, Mauricio, Francisco, Pedro). In my Reflective Journal for María (2025) I noted how weekly speaking goals replaced crisis homework; in Mauricio's journal (2025) I wrote that he began bringing his own topics for «conversation days»; Francisco's journal (2025) shows a growing personal word list for college tasks; and Pedro's journal (2025) records a simple «high-level» checklist he ticks after each unit. The question shifted from Can I survive the test? to What can I do with English next?

Over the interviews and in my notes, a clear pattern appeared. Most students came because parents were worried about failing, so we began with a light maintenance frame: short daily input, spaced review of the one form that still slips, and a small chance to speak on the first try. In the tutoring room, the relational setting is quieter, slower, and more flexible than a classroom, allowing students to try, make mistakes, and try again. With time and steady routines, English started to feel like a **tool**, not an obligation. That doesn't mean everyone suddenly loved English or that stress vanished; we still face busy weeks before exams and sometimes adjust to the school timetable, because school stays important. What changed is that students did not live in constant stress: they knew we would work at their pace, and the two ways of learning, school and tutoring, coexist. As Pedro put it, «Here I feel like I can ask without feeling dumb; in school I stay quiet». Daniel added something similar during his interview: «When I practice here, I don't feel rushed. I finally understand what I'm doing». And Mauricio reflected: «Before, English was something I had to pass. Now I use it — I even watch videos and try to understand».

Families observed the progress, and many chose a **reduced, purpose-focused cadence** rather than stopping, which aligns with regional work showing tutoring opens opportunities once confidence and routines take root (Yung, Entrich, & Bautista, 2023) and can build motivation over time (Walker & Zhang, 2024). At the same time, I stay alert to **dependence**: if a learner only performs with me present, we **taper** support and hand responsibility back step by step, so gains **travel back to class** and do not rely on the tutor (Zeng, 2024).

DISCUSSION

The findings across the three narrative blocks—Before Tutoring, During Tutoring, and Looking Ahead—show a clear shift in how teenagers in Cuenca reposition English when supported through one-to-one tutoring. At first, students' struggles reflected what the literature has repeatedly documented in mainstream EFL classrooms: limited feedback, fear of error, lack of participation, and a focus on grammar that rarely translates into communicative use (Zeng, 2024; Walker & Zhang, 2024). These conditions not only affect performance but also shape learner identity, often producing avoidance, frustration, or the sense that English is only about passing tests.

The patterns observed in During Tutoring align with research showing that personalized, relational, and low-pressure learning environments open opportunities for students to build confidence and regain control over their progress (Yung, Enright, & Bautista, 2023). Inside tutoring sessions, diagnostic clarity, slower pacing, visible micro-wins, and repeated chances to try again without penalty helped students reinterpret what learning English could feel like. This mirrors evidence that when students can take risks in a safe climate where errors are treated as part of learning, their agency grows and participation increases (Barre-Parrares & Villafuerte-Holguín, 2021).

The Looking Ahead narratives show the most significant transformation: students began imagining long-term goals, such as studying abroad, improving fluency, or preparing for college-level tasks. This future-oriented mindset reflects what the literature describes as the link between sustained support and the development of motivation that goes beyond course requirements or grades. When learners perceive progress, relevance, and trust in the process, English becomes a meaningful tool rather than an obligation.

Taken together, these findings reinforce broader evidence from Ecuador and Latin America: when support structures are personalized, relational, and consistent, students who previously struggled in school-based English can recover confidence, engage more deeply, and build forms of agency not always possible in crowded, test-driven classrooms (Zeng, 2024; Walker & Zhang, 2024). In this study, tutoring became the context where teenagers could re-enter English learning with less fear and more purpose, resulting in visible changes in identity, participation, and long-term orientation.

CONCLUSIONS

This autobiographical study answers the research question by showing how teenagers in Cuenca's high-fee private schools experience and make sense of private English tutoring after struggling in mainstream classrooms. Families usually arrive because repetition, limited feedback, and fear of error have eroded confidence; diagnostics make the gaps visible and parents initiate help. Inside tutoring, the moves that matter are simple and human: slow the pace, make progress visible, and protect an error-tolerant space. One-to-one work allows us to anchor lessons according to the student's interests and apply what was explained before, using the «try first and fix after», and turn grammar into small formulas that students can use in real-life situations as they advance. As small wins accumulate, teenagers shift from silence to participation and from completely avoidance to actual agency. Ultimately, English is no longer just a requirement; it has become a useful tool, for passing courses, speaking with less fear, imagining studying abroad later, and setting personal fluency goals for the future.

A final reflection is born from the context the research has been made, these gains are happening to teenagers who come from families that can afford private help. It is encouraging that even reluctant learners in fee-charging schools can change their view of English when support exists and is even personalized, but it also raises an equity question. If stu-

dents in well-resourced private schools need this kind of scaffolding, what happens to their peers in public schools who cannot purchase this help and often face weaker school-based English instruction? The ethical horizon of this study points to a simple principle: opportunities to build confidence and control of core related to education should not depend on a family's ability to pay. Ecuadorian evidence shows that public and private schools do not benefit equally from EFL innovations; implementation differences tied to connectivity, resources, and teacher preparation widened during the pandemic, with public schools even regressing in some indicators, underscoring the need for school-embedded, low-cost supports so access does not depend on family income (Barre-Parrales & Villafuerte-Holguín, 2021) This study centers on one tutor-researcher and a small, purposive sample from fee-charging private schools in Cuenca; voices from public schools students and lower-income families are absent and need to be captured in future studies.

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ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

The authors state that there are no ethical implications associated with this study.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest that could have influenced the work presented.

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