Challenges in ESL investment: Identity, capital and ideology of multilingual learners at a Malaysian university

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ABSTRACT

The significance of English has been established as the second language (ESL) in the Malaysian education system from pre-school until tertiary education context. The ESL learners are expected to continuously pursue their language investment for their academic achievement and future career. Theoretically, language investment happens at the intersection of identity, capital and ideology (Darvin & Norton, 2015). However, language learners often faced diverse challenges in pursuing investment as they may have the desire to learn a language but not fully engage in the learning process due to certain reasons. These would lead to diverse long-term issues that limiting ESL learners' academic growth when their English is not meeting the requirements assigned by their institution. Thus, this study aimed to explore the challenges encountered by multilingual learners when pursuing investment in ESL learning at a Malaysian public university. This study was conducted as an interpretive qualitative research at a Malaysian public university. Data was collected through five focus group discussions to gather insights and experiences. The emergent themes were further explored in semi-structured individual interviews with eight participants and classroom observations which allowed deeper exploration of personal narratives and contextualised meanings. This current study found that in navigating their investment, the ESL learners faced three main challenges. The first challenge was English speaking and writing skills which caused by their speaking anxiety, self-image, pronunciation, native accent, and writer's block issues. Secondly, they faced challenges in the teaching and learning process due to destructive feedback, examination pressure, unengaging teaching approach, and unclear first language policies. The third challenge was social challenges which comprised of their English teachers, peers and families who speak limited English. This study contributes a novel perspective to the field of language investment by positioning it within the multilingual realities. It uncovers how learners experienced different challenges in navigating investment based on their identities they construct, capitals that they own and ideologies that they hold. Overall, this study concludes that the multifaceted roles of English in multilingual English language learners' lives have shaped their investment in English language learning.

(340 words)

Keywords: Identity, capital, ideology, investment, multilingualism, ELT

INTRODUCTION

The significance of English has been established as the second language (L2) in the Malaysian education system from pre-school until tertiary education context. The English Language Education Reform in Malaysia (The Roadmap 2015-2025) that is grounded in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) necessitates Malaysian students in higher education institutions attaining either the B2 level as an independent user or the C1 level as a proficient user (English Language Standards and Quality Council, 2018). This is because CEFR levels are designed as language proficiency standards for use in higher education, employment, and particular professional certifications (Brunfaut & Harding, 2020). Afterward, Malaysia is anticipated to benefit from the international standards of its English education system through CEFR, allowing Malaysians to obtain international mutual recognition (Sahib & Stapa, 2022). This is in line with SDG4 on education for sustainable development and global citizenship. As Malaysia places a strong emphasis on English language proficiency within its education system due to its role as a global lingua franca, it also recognises the value of bilingual education to further enrich the linguistic landscape of the country (Chan & Abdullah, 2015). In view of that, Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015–2025) has highlighted its focus on students' knowledge acquisition, critical thinking abilities, leadership aptitude, bilingual proficiency, as well as ethics, spirituality, and national identity (Bakar, 2023).

Thus, ESL learners are anticipated to invest in their L2 learning for the positive impacts the language could have. Investment is defined as the "learners' will and endeavour to facilitate their language learning to obtain a good return, such as access to a wider range of symbolic and material resources which would in turn increase the value of their cultural capital, in contrast to the traditional unitary concept of motivation that ignores the role of socio-historical dimensions" (Norton, 1995). This definition was later expanded to include learners' commitment to the goals, practices, and identities which create the learning process and are continuously being negotiated in different social settings and power hierarchies (Norton & Toohey, 2011). A critical aspect that these researchers pointed out was that learners may be motivated to learn a language, but this does not guarantee their investment in a certain language learning environment especially when it opposes them. This makes the concept of investment beyond mere motivation as it posits that learners invest in learning a language to achieve meaningful goals, construct desired identities, and navigate their social worlds effectively.

However, they faced various challenges in pursuing investment as they may have the desire to learn a language, but they may not fully engage in a particular class. It could potentially be due to dissatisfaction with the teaching methodology, suboptimal classroom conditions, insufficient knowledge, social interactions issues, inadequate familial and peer support, engagement in part-time job and identity-damaging experiences, lowered self-efficacy, and negative perspectives on their own language abilities influenced by the prevailing ideology of native-speakerism in the local society (Annisa et al., 2023; Sung, 2023; Tajeddin et al., 2023; Yoo, 2025). Consequently, learners who were unable to pursue investment in ESL learning would encounter social barriers to engage with their peers and teachers (Bredtmann et al., 2021), marginalised feelings in academic participation (Darvin & Norton, 2023; Piasecka, 2019), and low engagement in the learning process (Razmjoo & Mavaddat, 2020; Soltanian & Ghapanchi, 2021). These would lead to long-term issues that limiting learners' future professional growth opportunities when their English proficiency is not meeting the expectations of potential

employers (Abdullah et al., 2015; Musa et al., 2021; Singh & Raja Harun, 2020; Zainuddin et al., 2019). Thus, further exploration was required to answer the following research question:

What are the challenges encountered by ESL learner in pursuing investment at a Malaysian university?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of investment proposes that language learners possess multifaceted identities that evolve over time, in different contexts, and are shaped by social interactions. Investing in the target language is essentially investing in the learner's personal identity. Norton's conceptualisation of investment seeks to encompass the dynamic interaction between individuals and their surrounding social environments (Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995). In fact, the concept of investment draws from Bourdieu's (1977) research that refers to the socially and historically shaped connection between learners and the target language, as well as their occasionally conflicting desire to learn and engage with it. The concept illustrates how learners "invest" in a target language with the expectation of gaining symbolic resources, such as language proficiency, education, and friendships. These are related to their identity, capital, and ideology (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Students invest in L2 with the expectation that it will offer them a broader spectrum of material and symbolic resources, consequently enhancing their cultural capital and social power.

According to this framework, learners "invest" in the target language with the expectation that they will gain a broader range of symbolic and material resources, which will thus enhance the value of their cultural capital. With a growing number of research studies utilising the concept of investment to investigate learner identity (Norton, 2015; Norton & Toohey, 2011), the model of investment has been expanded to encompass three interconnected elements: identity, capital, and ideology (Darvin & Norton, 2015).
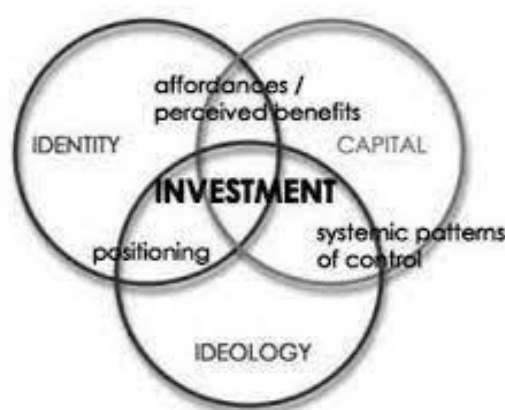

Figure 2.1: Model of Investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015)

Learners' identity

This expanded model explains that investment in language learning operates at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology. Capital represents a capacity with the potential to yield

various forms of profit, be it economic, cultural, or social. Meanwhile, ideology denotes a set of diverse and often contradictory ideas influenced by power dynamics. And identity encompasses an individual's perception of their relationship with the world, its evolution over time and space, and the possibilities it holds for their future.

Scholars have consistently been intrigued by the complex interrelationship of identity, investment, and interaction within various language learning communities as learners' investments are intricately tied to contextual identities and anticipated returns on those investments in the L2 context. Learners selectively invest in L2 driven by their aspiration to be part of an envisioned global community and to adopt an identity associated with a cosmopolitan lifestyle in the future (Sung, 2019). This is because being seen and respected for their own cultural values may motivate students, encourage their engagement and empowerment, and help develop rapport, thereby enhancing their investment in learning (Weekly & Picucci-Huang, 2024).

Language learners have identity flux within and between different communities that makes it as a critical factor influencing investment. They had three ways of connecting with the local English-learning community: through engagement, imagination, and alignment that varied as the learner took on roles like a master, novice, and non-participant, adjusting his or her investment in identity within the community. Various meanings, covering linguistic, social, and interpersonal aspects, were discussed, or shared in the learning system to gain both implicit and explicit knowledge from the interaction with the community (Zheng & Chai, 2019).

Learners' ideology

Further exploration into learner identity explains that it is a dynamic and intricate construct, shaped by factors such as learners' cognitive awareness or ideology; perceptions of affordances in English learning community; learners' sense of agency; and mismatches between the practiced community and the imagined community (Teng, 2019). Thus, individuals' perceptions of belonging and social acceptance significantly impact their language investment. Specifically, those who feel a strong sense of belonging tend to integrate more easily into broader communities, fostering higher language investment. Conversely, individuals facing perceived rejection may seek connection and investment within more familiar or supportive communities. This highlights that social acceptance plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' language investment behaviours and preferences (Crowther, 2020).

Investment is not always a deliberate and proactive action; it can also be an obligatory and routine behaviour, occurring with less conscious awareness. While individual endeavours contribute to sustaining bilingual investment, achieving biculturalism necessitates a collaborative effort. Multilingual students who navigate various linguistic discourses, may endorse ideologies that promote the superiority of a dominant language, alongside valuing specific dialectal forms. The awareness of language hierarchies and dominance becomes evident in their linguistic choices. However, individuals may exhibit contradictory ideas, where the perceived usefulness of a language, may vary depending on contextual factors like location (Massó & De Costa, 2023).

This is related to multilingual investments that were mediated by the learner's ideologies of sociolinguistic competence and flexible multilingualism, which contributed to the development of their identities as competent multilingual speakers. Learners embraced the ideas of neoliberal multilingualism and viewed multilingualism as a sign of cosmopolitan membership.

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These beliefs influenced their decisions to invest in learning multiple languages, broadening their envisioned identities for the future. There is an intricate interplay between identity and language ideology in shaping individuals' multilingual investments. Importantly, the concept of 'multilingual investment' from a sociological perspective, emphasising the social and ideological factors influencing language learning choices (Sung, 2023). It could be understood that learners' ideologies, shaped by their sense of belonging, social acceptance, and perceptions of language hierarchies, play a crucial role in guiding their investment in multilingual language learning.

Students' learning experience

Students' learning experience is another major factor influencing students' investment in English language learning. The students' agency and positive past experiences in learning English, empower them to employ various voluntary strategies in achieving both personal and national objectives (Hajar et al., 2024). Thus, many studies were conducted focusing on learning approach in language classroom specifically on the learning strategy (Hajar et al., 2024; Nasmilah, 2018). Studies were conducted on the impact of student centered learning on their construction of investment (Park, 2023), the implementation of digital multimodal composing program (Jiang, 2018; Jiang et al., 2020a), creative writing as a learning strategy (Yang & Reynolds, 2022), the use of learners' L1 and L2 were also studied in relation to the role of identity and capital (Özdil & Kunt, 2023), plurilingual task in a classroom-based research project (Cutrim, 2022), and literary texts such as stories translated to the students' L1 and L2 (Shahidzade & Mazdayasna, 2022).

The level of students' investment in language learning varies depending on the characteristics of the specific language learning tasks including the authenticity, meaningfulness, and relevance of the tasks. It further explains that plurilingual approach has a positive impact on students' investment in their language learning. In fact, this approach supports the acquisition of the target language when students can make use of their complete linguistic repertoire for the purpose of learning. A strong investment in learning emerges when students find the topic itself engaging and when they are encouraged by their teacher to actively contribute to the creation of knowledge. This happens when they are given the freedom to utilise both their cultural and linguistic knowledge, drawing from aspects of their own identity and heritage. It is also evident when they are more open to interacting with their peers, using all available linguistic resources (their L1, l2, or other languages) to exchange meaningful and relevant information (Cutrim Schmid, 2022).

Thus, it is necessary to regard the L1 and multicultural knowledge of L2 learners as valuable assets since learners' investment and agency are shaped by multiple perspectives. This approach can enhance learners' self-confidence, positioning, and investment. If L2 learners perceive English to access to different forms of capital and resources, they will likely remain committed to invest in the learning process. Language instructors should consider the various capitals that English language learners possess and actively involve them in the learning journey to aid learners in shaping positive identities and appreciating the value of the learning experience (Amin et al., 2024; Kwok, 2024; Özdil & Kunt, 2023). These ideas suggest that learners' past learning experiences, including agency and the adoption of various classroom strategies, significantly shape their investment in English language learning. An important consideration is that learners' linguistic and cultural resources are valuable capitals in fostering their investment in English language learning.

In addition, another factor influencing learners' investment is the educational policies and the availability of language learning resources that will influence the student's choice of language learning strategies, as well as their development of identity (Hajar et al., 2024; Hajar 2017). It explains the significance of educational and institutional policy despite the idea that English language learners invest at their learning institute due to a variety of ideological, cultural, and economic factors, as well as their envisioned futures (Tajeddin et al., 2023). The educational and institutional policies, along with access to language learning resources, significantly shape learners' investment in English language learning by influencing their strategies and identity development.

Challenges in pursuing investment

However, there are still limitations on knowledge related to challenges in pursuing investment experienced by these learners. It was found that L2 identity negotiation in a local context is an intricate process. It involves consideration of L2 identity empowerment or disempowerment due to difficulties in employing English locally, the deliberate choice to use or avoid language for assimilation or differentiation from the local community, and the occurrence of natural L2 expression and identity primarily in private or professional settings (Vasilopoulos, 2015). Therefore, it is essential to understand that the roles of identity can influence investment in English language learning, learners' investment and their learning process may face added complexity due to their varied academic and professional identities (Shi & Guo, 2021). This complexity arises from various English language learning purposes including those for personal growth, economic considerations, and the desire to acquire knowledge.

Furthermore, being a multilingual can be challenging for some learners. The learners' negotiations of their multilingual identities are constrained by the local students' deficit perspectives on the participants' multilingual competences because of the influence of the ideology of native-speakerism in the local society (Sung, 2023a). In addition, the diverse gender ideologies contribute significantly to the challenges faced by language learners in their investment in L2. As highlighted by Sung (2023b), these ideologies introduce complexity and contradictions, shaping the learner's agency and investment in L2 practices within specific contexts. The impact goes beyond mere interaction, extending to the accumulation of gendered capital and influencing expectations. This impact poses an additional layer of challenge for students. Moreover, the negotiation of gendered identities intertwines with the pursuit of imagined professional identities, further complicating the landscape of challenges faced by learners in effectively investing in their L2.

The repercussions of these challenges become evident in the case of a learner's low literacy in the English language. This literacy deficiency, influenced by gender norms, is socially constructed to assert dominance, and position the learner in subordinate roles as a mother, wife, daughter-in-law, and language learner. The influence of gender ideology extends beyond mere language practices and shapes the learner's self-perception, influencing her views on language learning and personal identity (Al-Dhaif et al., 2022). It is within this socio-cultural framework that differences in investment, language-related beliefs, and identities emerge across proficiency levels. It could be implied that challenges related to identity, including multilingualism, native-speakerism, and gender ideologies, intricately influence learners'

investment in English language learning by shaping their agency, self-perception, and interaction within various social contexts.

When learners show low investment, evidenced by their low enthusiasm in the classroom and subpar performance in English, it can be linked to various socioeconomic factors, including the geographical location of the school, the learning environment in the classroom, and the level of support from parents (Muslim et al., 2020). Similarly, there are several other obstacles impeding learners' investment in learning English, including challenges related to limited family and peer support, and the added burden of part-time jobs (Annisa et al., 2023). In certain contexts, economic factors and religious considerations are among the obstacles (Mustafa & Hamdan Alghamdi, 2020). Thus, it is important for educators to recognise that students' personal identities and the emotional facets of their personal lives are deeply intertwined with their school identities, affecting their overall engagement and investment in learning (Chang & Chiang, 2024). Learners face significant challenges in investing in English language learning due to teaching methods, classroom environments, lack of knowledge, and insufficient institutional or governmental support.

In English teaching and learning process, learners encounter certain challenges in pursuing their investment due to teaching methods, inconvenient classroom environments and lack of knowledge (Annisa et al., 2023). Additionally, there is a potential risk of the learners being overly influenced by a globally oriented pedagogy or native-speakerism (Tajeddin et al., 2023). The issue is even worse due to lack of support from the government and certain countries need the Western support for learners to invest in English language learning. When the support received is marginalised, it reduces the capacity of the learners to engage in English language investment. This situation is a challenge for the learners to continue investing (Rabbidge & Zaheeb, 2022).

The above literature explains that learners face significant challenges in investing in English language learning due to teaching methods, classroom environments, lack of knowledge, and insufficient institutional or governmental support. Thus, further exploration was required to uncover challenges of investment from the ESL learners' perspectives. This study addressed a critical gap in literature to provide a deeper account of the lived realities of ESL investment.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

This study employed interpretive qualitative approach to explain the experiences of involved participants in pursuing investment in ESL learning. In the context of this study, this was intended to comprehend the way these participants constructed their worlds and to uncover meanings that were given to their experiences (Merriam, 2009; 2014).

Research context

This study was carried out at a Malaysian public university which possessed a diverse student population comprising approximately 5,815 postgraduates and 21,418 undergraduates from

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various states across the country. That made the university as an ideal setting for this current study as it fostered a rich linguistic and cultural environment conducive to studying language practices. The university encompassed of 10 faculties that offered a wide range of programs in the science and art fields. This diversity in academics ensured a heterogeneous mix of students with varying language backgrounds and program specialisations for the purpose of this current research. Moreover, despite this diversity, English language proficiency is a mandatory requirement for all students. The undergraduates must fulfil English course requirements prior to graduation. The enrolment in English course depends on the students' performance in the Malaysian Certificate of Education and Malaysian University Entrance Test (MUET).

Research participants and sampling procedures

This study employed purposive sampling to obtain information-rich cases to ensure that the data collected was able to answer the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Palinkas et al., 2015; Suri, 2011). The participants in this study were the undergraduates aged of 19-21 years who were enrolling in a compulsory English course at a Malaysian public university. This course offered under the university language development program that aims to equip the students from all programs with English before graduation. Students were streamed to enroll in this course based on their CEFR level in their Malaysian Certificate of Education English examination that was taken for higher education entry.

The participants were selected to reflect Malaysian multilingual diversity from heterogeneous mix of ethnic backgrounds; Malay, Chinese, Indian and Bumiputera. They spoke a diverse range of languages including Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, Kadazandusun, English, Arabic, Spanish, Japanese, Korean and French. The L1 such as Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, Kadazandusun were acquired at home, English as the L2 was acquired at home and school depending on their backgrounds as some participants speak English at home but some others did not, and foreign languages such as Arabic, Spanish, Japanese, Korean and French were learned through a formal language learning.

Data collection

The data collection procedures of this current study involved focus group discussions, semi-structured individual interviews, and classroom observations. Five focus group discussions with 20 participants were conducted to collect data through a dynamic group interaction on a research topic that generates rich and relevant data based on participants' lived experiences (Chang & Hsu, 2006; Graves & Bowers, 2024). The sessions were conducted online via Google Meet as preferred by the participants. The duration of each session varied between 35 minutes to 67 minutes depending on the participants' responses. During the focus group discussions, one of the researchers acted as the moderator of the discussions and was responsible in facilitating the discussion to ensure that the participants could confidently express their views and ensuring that all group members feel assured and comfortable engaging effectively in the discussion, with an emphasis on allowing everyone to interact (Doody et al., 2013; Fusch et al., 2022; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Classroom observation was also conducted as it provided natural occurring data directly from the research context (Farid, 2022). The researchers could gain insights on investment by directly observing participants, which offered a distinct advantage over the other methods as it captured instances where participants engaged in investment. During the observations, one of the researchers acted as a non-participant observer who did not involve in the class activities but writing field notes (Moug, 2007). This was planned to minimise the interference in the natural setting and refrain influence on participants' behaviours to enhance data validity and reliability.

Then, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted as this study aimed at delving deeper into the topics discussed during focus group discussions in exploring ESL learners' investment. Semi-structured individual interview was chosen because this technique allowed the use of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, also permitted the interviewer or interviewee to diverge to pursue an idea or response in more detail as the questions can be added, skipped, or adapted based on the participant's responses (Britten, 2014; Longhurst, 2009). The interviews were conducted via Google Meet which lasted around 70 minutes for each session.

Data analysis

All the data sources in this current study that comprised of field notes, transcripts of critical episodes in classroom observations, transcripts of focus group discussions and transcripts of semi-structured individual interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The analysis followed a six-phase process that began the researchers getting familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finally producing the report.

FINDINGS

This current study found that in navigating investment, ESL learners faced various challenges including their English language skills, teaching and learning process, and social environment.

English language skills challenges

ESL learners experienced various challenges related to their speaking and writing skills. In speaking they faced challenges related to speaking anxiety as these are all related to their personal self-image, pronunciation issue and native accent issues. While in writing, most of their challenges were due to limited vocabulary.

Challenges in speaking: Anxiety

The ESL learners in this current study frequently encountered speaking anxiety, expressing their experiences of nervousness and a lack of confidence when communicating in English due to various reasons. Hana shared that she startled a lot when she was nervous as she said, *"I also struggle in speaking because sometimes when I get nervous, I startle a lot"* (P1/FG3). Naim

also experienced the same particularly when he was worried to commit mistakes when he said that *"Sometimes when I want to present or maybe talk to people, I get a bit nervous, that I would maybe get my words wrong anyway"* (P1/FG5). Sara went through the same situation as she disclosed that *"I think maybe to speak in front, like impromptu activity"* (P5/FG3).

Challenges in speaking: Self-image and pronunciation

Discussing public speaking further, Hana shared her nervousness as she was afraid of her peers' judgements about her English competency, particularly her pronunciation, even she was a proficient ESL speaker. She said that *"I think because I am scared of how they look at me because I don't want to make them feel like I'm not competent enough in talking English. And that just really makes you feel, become less confident (Hana/SSIV6)."* The other ESL learners expressed the same idea about being judged by their peers regarding their pronunciation regardless of their English language proficiency. Hairul shared, *"The person that have mispronounced words may be scared to actually go into the front again and speak"* (P4/FG3). Which was like Nasha who said *"When I pronounce a word wrongly, people judge me easily. It really lowers my desire"* (P5/FG1). It could be understood that the ESL learners are concerned about their pronunciation when speaking English, especially in public, in front of their teachers, lecturers or peers who are categorised differently. Some are their good friends, some are their not-so-good friends, and some are special to them.

Challenges in speaking: native accent

Native was another challenge for ESL learners to continuously pursue their ESL investment. The participants shared their frustration when they could not understand the native accent which hindered their comprehension, particularly for lower proficiency students. Afham shared, *"I'm not understand the accent English suggest such as Britain, such as British English"* (P3/FG5). Faisal confessed the same idea that difficulties in understanding native accent had demotivated him from learning English, *"When the first time I heard from them talking I feel like, is it some kind of new language or is it just like English in advanced level and it feels like why I am still learning the basic. It pushes me down a bit"* (P4/FG4). These portray different issues in ESL learning particularly speaking anxiety due to fear of judgement, pronunciation and accent issues which have hindered confidence and engagement. These were very much associated to their identity as an ESL learner, capital that they bring to learning environment, and ideology they hold regarding the correct version of English language.

Challenges related to writing skills

During the observation, the researcher witnessed writing challenges faced by some learners.

During their writing task, one of the group members advised, *"Don't leave sentences hanging. Think first about the context of what you want to say."* They then tried to construct a simple sentence, *"My favourite subject is science because I want to be a scientist. At school, I also play sports."* They confirmed with a classmate, *"Is that the end of the sentence?"* After getting

a yes, they continued, *"I also play sports, like football."* As they attempted to describe their experience, they hesitated and asked, *"How should I say it? Last week was my first…competition, my first netball competition I ever attended. At least try to make it longer… Yesterday was my first competition."* This illustrates their uncertainty and their attempts to build more complex sentences, showing both their efforts and the challenges they face in English writing (Class A3-GD1).

This underscore the psychological and practical barriers that hinder students' writing performance in English which are different to individual, but the root would mostly be due to the limited vocabulary.

Challenges in teaching and learning process

This current study found that ESL learners faced challenges in pursuing investment in ESL learning due to destructive feedback, examination pressure, unengaging teaching approach, and unclear L1 policies.

Destructive feedback

This study found destructive feedback as one of the challenges for ESL learners hindering their continuous investment in ESL learning as it could led to nervousness. Sara confessed that:

"Because one of my lecturers, the one who is kind of strict, directly pointed it out. If my idea doesn't quite fit what he wants, he would immediately say things like, 'Are you sure? Do you have another idea?' His expressions make me even more nervous, causing me to blank out and stutter" (SSIV4).

Destructive feedback from lecturers can negatively impact ESL learners' performance, leading to nervousness, mental blocks, and diminishing their effort to participate in learning.

Examination related pressure

This current study found that ESL learners often faced various challenges in related to their language performance. They expressed their frustration about low marks in the examination. For example, Azman expressed, *"Test, very, mostly I get a low mark"* (P1/FG4). During the classroom observation, the teacher asked the students if they could get full mark for their assignment with some students responded positively and vice versa. *Teacher asked further "Can you get full mark?" Some of the students replied yes loudly and few said no. She mentioned that 30% is easy for a simple task like writing email (Class A3-Lecture1).* This implies that completing assignment as a part of language assessment and getting good grade are given a focus. Thus, it leads to examination-related pressure as the complex examination questions require the ESL learners to struggle to achieve their desired English language performance.

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Unengaging English language teaching approach

This challenge covered the teaching approach employed in ESL learning. This study found that it was challenging for some ESL learners to continuously pursue their investment when the teaching approach employed was not interesting. George confessed about educators reading their teaching materials, as he said *"My teacher was not really teaching English that well. They teach in a not an interesting way causing me to lose my interest in learning English. I don't prefer when the teacher is just reading from a book"* (P3/FG1). Additionally, it was a challenge when the teaching process was focusing to accommodate low proficiency students. This came from Amrita as she shared that *"Our lecturer, or teacher actually lower the standard of the lesson where I don't get any new knowledge"* (P2/FG1). These findings highlight that unengaging teaching methods including lowering lesson standards pose significant challenges for ESL learners to continuously learn English language.

Unclear L1 policies: L1 restrictions in English language learning

This current study also found that ESL learners often felt confined and disadvantaged when their L1 was restricted in English classes. Faisal mentioned feeling as prisoned when unable to use his L1, emphasising its critical role in understanding English. Faisal said,

It's like we are being kept in prison if we cannot use our mother tongue in English class, because we don't understand at all. And what do you expect? We learn it by using English only. We need to use mother tongue" (SSIV5).

The findings enlighten that restricting the use of the L1 in English classes hampers ESL learners' comprehension, comfort, and engagement. This calls for a more inclusive approach in ESL teaching and learning.

Unclear L1 policies: L1 and national language incorporation in English learning

Conversely, this current study also found that to some ESL learners, it was a challenge when ESL instruction was not fully conducted in English. Amrita who was a proficient ESL speaker expressed frustration when teachers and classmates employed Malay language which was the national language instead of English. She shared that *"The challenges that I've experienced is when I'm in the class where everybody speaks in an English class and it's better Malay and they understand Malay better, and they don't really converse in English"* (P2/FG1). This illustrates that the use of L1 or national language might be able to cater the needs of certain students, but it might also hinder the investment and development of some other students.

Based on the above findings on challenges in ESL teaching and learning process, it could be summarised that the ESL learners faced academic challenges including destructive feedback that led to anxiety, examination pressure, unengaging teaching approach, unclear L1 policies that hinder their engagement due to conflicts on the employment of L1 in ESL learning.

Social challenges

English teachers and peers employed other languages

During the interview session, a few participants shared their struggles in using English language when surrounded by peers and teachers who predominantly use other languages, such as Malay, Mandarin, or Tamil in ESL learning. Ying confessed that,

"Same as Chinese, you might converse with them in Chinese. It feels awkward to speak to a person with the same race as you in another language. Unless that person grows up in a family where they only speak English and they're not that fluent in Chinese" (SSIV3).

This was likewise experienced by Zavir as he said:

"Okay, when it comes to friends, we usually communicate in English all the time during school and now during university, even in college. So, it's basically 24 hours a day, we are speaking in English mostly. And when it's the minority, it's just Malay and Tamil for me" (SSIV2).

These extracts highlight the linguistic challenges that the non-Malay ESL learners face. They must navigate between English and their peers' dominant languages, which often leads to limited opportunities for practicing English effectively.

Limited English use with family

Apart from that, some ESL learners did not use English at home particularly among the Malay families. Sara told that, *"Like with family, they rarely speak English. I rarely use it at home. Not with my siblings, no"* (SSIV4). Besides that, the ESL learners were aware of the appropriateness to use their L1 or English, which had to do with their identity regardless of their good English proficiency. Zavir shared his practice to speak his L1 at home when he shared that, *When I'm at home, I speak in Tamil with my family to explain any story. But at home, we speak in Tamil but a little bit of English too"* (SSIV2).

These explain that ESL learners' language use is influenced by their environment and identity, often hindering their English practice despite their proficiency.

The findings of this study explain that when the ESL learners face challenges to pursue their investment, it is related to the way they position themselves in their learning community, who they are and their identities. The challenges were also associated to the capital that they bring to the learning environment, and the ideology they hold regarding the correct version of English language.

DISCUSSION

When exploring challenges hindering investment, this study found that they were due to the identity as an intricate concept, teaching and learning process and socioeconomic status. Identity contributes to the varied investment behaviours exhibited by learners while supporting the development of complex identities that evolve as trajectories shaped by their unique circumstances (Li & Hou, 2024). This is parallel to the idea that grasping the complexities of investment necessitates considering the expanded opportunities for identity formation across various contexts and timeframes (Clément & Norton, 2021). Identity is complex not only from the sociological view, but the social-psychological perspective regarded the same that, identity is never constructed in a vacuum; it is fed by social memberships and experiences of individuals (Crocetti et al., 2023). Thus, the significant value placed on the English language has further amplified these dynamics, as it offers learners with economic, social, cultural, and symbolic benefits, motivating them to engage deeply in their language learning journey (Soltanian & Ghapanchi, 2021). Envisioning future identities of themselves can further motivate students to learn a language, emphasising the need for teachers to comprehend and harmonise students' present and envisioned identities within the learning environment (Lee, 2022).

Further discussing identity, the sociologist focuses on group membership and the integration of various social roles into a coherent collective identity, while the psychological view is concerned with how these identities impact personal well-being and self-esteem (Tragakis & Smith, 2010). Hence, studies have further associated social and psychological perspectives such as by exploring the role of gender in shaping investment behaviours. Female learners often navigated their identities throughout the learning process, and are often significantly invested physically, socially, and financially to learn English skills, as they recognise its growing importance in both personal and professional aspects of life (Sharif & Channa, 2022). English literacy is viewed as able to provide freedom and autonomy for female learners who have been labelled as an illiterate or marginalised woman and these learners will envision an identity as an independent and empowered woman involving both reconstructing the learners' past identity as a low-literacy woman and imaginatively shaping the learner's self-perception for the future (Al-Dhaif et al., 2022). Building on this understanding, research on gendered model of L2 investment (Sung, 2023b) outlines the intricate dynamics involving gendered capital, gender ideologies, and gendered identities that contribute to shaping L2 investments. It emphasises the significance of gendered agency, and the model highlights how it mediates the influence of gender ideologies and gendered identities on L2 investments, which merits exploration in various contexts. This is particularly relevant in the context of SDG 4.5 which is a target under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) that focuses on eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the intricate interplay of identity, socio-cultural norms, and educational contexts, to empower learners to overcome barriers and actively invest in their English language learning endeavours. Research explains that school environment is crucial for students' identity development as it is a site where learners negotiate their cultural, social, and personal identities (Lannegrand-

Willems & Bosma, 2006). In truth, low investment in English learning, seen in low enthusiasm and poor performance, is influenced by socioeconomic factors such as school location, classroom environment, and limited support from parents, family, and peers, along with the demands of part-time jobs (Muslim et al., 2020; Annisa et al., 2023). In certain contexts, economic factors and religious considerations were the obstacles (Mustafa & Hamdan Alghamdi, 2020). These diverse situations deserve investigations as learners come from various backgrounds as addressing the achievement gap for disadvantaged students is a very difficult problem (Alonzo et al., 2023).

However, targeted support and interventions can help mitigate these inequalities within the education system and broader society, fostering greater investment in learning among disadvantaged students (Yung, 2020). Ultimately, exploring these challenges is crucial because they shape how learners invest in their language practices, as they navigate complex identity constructions and strive for legitimacy within intersecting communities, often encountering inequitable power dynamics that influence their internal and external realities (Hignett & Barkhuizen, 2024).

Conclusion and Future Recommendations

As this study identified challenges hindering investment, such as socio-economic status and identity, but there is limited research on effective strategies to address these barriers across diverse educational and cultural settings. This restricts a comprehensive understanding of how different contexts influence learners' capacity to invest in language learning. Future research should investigate context-specific interventions to mitigate socio-economic and identity-related barriers. Studies should focus on the effectiveness of targeted support strategies, such as improving school environments, increasing parental involvement, and providing resources for disadvantaged students in various socio-cultural settings to enhance investment in English learning. It is important for educators to recognise that students' personal identities and the emotional facets of their personal lives are deeply intertwined with their school identities, affecting their overall engagement and investment in learning (Chang & Chiang, 2024).

Overall, this study highlights the complex and dynamic landscape of investment in English language learning, hindered by different challenges including identity as an intricate process, teaching and learning process and socioeconomic status. The findings underscore the need for targeted support and context-sensitive interventions to enhance investment, particularly among disadvantaged learners. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 focusing on "Quality Education", that may be as the targeted initiatives to marginalised groups through English literacy, promoting equity in education and society.

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