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LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND INVESTMENT: INSIGHTS FROM CAMEROONIAN PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN NORTHERN CYPRUS

Abbas Hadizadeh[1*] and Sharon Tasong[2]
[1]Cyprus International University, Türkiye
[2]Final International University, Türkiye
ahadizadeh@ciu.edu.tr[1] and tasong.sharon@final.edu.tr[2]
*correspondence: ahadizadeh@ciu.edu.tr
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Abstract
This study investigates the identities and investment of seven Cameroonian ELT pre-service teachers (four undergraduates, three graduates) at an international university in Northern Cyprus. In this setting, where African students remain underrepresented in research, English functions as both the subject matter and the primary medium of instruction and interaction, particularly for international students. Drawing on interviews, classroom observations, and audio recordings, the study finds that geographical relocation substantially reshaped the participants' identities, driven by the cultural and academic novelty of their new environment. The participants demonstrated strong investment in English, leveraging classroom and extracurricular opportunities for negotiation, self-expression, and growth. Informal social interactions further facilitated linguistic development and cultural adaptation. Nonetheless, the participants encountered linguistic alienation, cultural barriers, and institutional constraints that affected their confidence and identity construction. The graduate students, who navigated dual roles as both teachers and graduate students, reported additional pressures related to professional adaptation and accent modification within a diverse linguistic ecology. The findings underscore the interdependence of language, identity, and investment, showing how African students in multilingual EMI settings construct identities through both agency and adaptation. Implications of this study include fostering inclusive academic climates and addressing systemic challenges in English-medium instruction programs.

Keywords: Cameroonian students, English language, English-medium instruction (EMI), identity, investment

Introduction
Learning a second language (L2) is not merely a cognitive or affective undertaking; it is a deeply sociocultural process through which learners negotiate access, legitimacy, and imagined future trajectories (Norton, 2013). In English-medium instruction (EMI) contexts, particularly within teacher education, language learning can be closely intertwined with questions of identity and investment. Pre-

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service teachers are positioned simultaneously as students, future professionals, and legitimate (or marginalized) users of English, and these multiple roles shape how they engage with the language. Drawing on poststructural perspectives, research over the past two decades has demonstrated that pre-service teachers' engagement with a target language cannot be explained solely by motivation; rather, it is influenced by how they imagine their futures and how they are positioned and recognized within unequal relations of power (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013). From this perspective, identity and investment have emerged as central constructs for understanding why second language learners, especially pre-service teachers participate in, resist, or commit to language practices in EMI settings.

These identity–investment dynamics become particularly salient in international EMI contexts such as Northern Cyprus, where universities host highly diverse student populations, including a growing number of students from Africa (Yenidüzen, 2022), and where English functions primarily as a lingua franca rather than a native-speaker norm. The rapid expansion of EMI programs has intensified expectations for English language teachers to demonstrate not only high levels of linguistic proficiency but also strong disciplinary knowledge (Hadizadeh & Kanık, 2025). In practice, however, such expectations are often accompanied by limited institutional and pedagogical support, creating additional challenges for both students and teachers (Macaro et al., 2018). Within this context, African students and specifically Cameroonian pre-service English teachers navigate complex processes of identity negotiation and investment as they prepare for professional careers. Examining their experiences therefore goes beyond offering a localized account; it provides a lens through which broader questions of legitimacy, belonging, and professional becoming in EMI teacher education can be explored.

Although research on teacher identity has expanded in recent years, existing studies have tended to examine identity and investment as separate constructs, with comparatively little attention paid to how they are co-constructed in EMI teacher education contexts. In particular, while poststructural theories of identity and investment have been well established (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013), relatively little empirical work has examined how these constructs are co-constructed among pre-service English teachers in EMI contexts. This gap is especially evident in international EMI settings where English operates as a lingua franca and where teachers' professional legitimacy is continuously negotiated within racially, linguistically, and institutionally stratified environments. As a result, current scholarship offers limited insight into how identity and investment unfold relationally and dynamically under such conditions.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores the study-abroad experiences of seven Cameroonian undergraduate and graduate pre-service teachers enrolled in an EMI program at an international university in Northern Cyprus. Drawing on Duff's (2002) poststructural analytical framework, which foregrounds discourse as a central site of identity construction, the study examines how participants negotiate their identities and investments across academic and social spaces. By focusing on Cameroonian pre-service teachers whose racialized, linguistic, and professional positioning challenges dominant assumptions about English ownership and legitimacy, this study extends identity-investment theorization within EMI teacher education and contributes to a deeper understanding of language learning and

professional formation in international, lingua franca-mediated contexts. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Cameroonian pre-service teachers in Northern Cyprus negotiate their linguistic and professional identities within an English-medium instruction (EMI) context?
2. How is their investment in English expressed across classroom and informal social interactions?
3. How are identity and investment co-constructed within the sociocultural and institutional conditions of the EMI environment?

Literature Review

Identity and second language acquisition

Approaches to identity in second language acquisition (SLA) have shifted substantially over time, reflecting broader theoretical reorientations in the field. Early SLA research, prior to the social turn (Block, 2003), tended to conceptualize identity as a relatively stable individual attribute. In contrast, poststructural and sociocultural perspectives view identity as dynamic, relational, and continuously negotiated through social interaction, discourse, and institutional conditions.

Foundational work in Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1974) conceptualized identity as deriving from individuals' membership in social groups, a framework later adopted in SLA to explain learners' positioning within linguistic and cultural communities. While SIT provides insights into affiliation and belonging, it has been critiqued for insufficiently addressing power relations, inequality, and learner agency factors that are particularly salient in second language contexts (Norton, 1997). Poststructural approaches respond to these limitations by foregrounding identity as socially produced and negotiated within unequal relations of power, where access to participation and legitimacy is unevenly distributed.

From this perspective, language learning is inseparable from struggles over recognition, belonging, and voice. As learners move across academic, social, and cultural spaces, their identities are continually reworked, often involving tension, marginalization, or transformation (Morita, 2004; Seloni, 2012). Norton (1997, 2000) emphasizes that identity is enacted through communicative practices, with each interaction constituting a site where learners position themselves and are positioned by others. Identity in second language acquistion is therefore best understood as fluid, multiple, and shaped by both inclusion and exclusion, including persistent feelings of "not belonging" (Erdmann, 2015).

Contemporary scholarship further conceptualizes identity as a relational process through which individuals understand themselves in relation to others and to their social worlds (Danielewicz, 2001; Hall, 1996; Weedon, 1996). Across these perspectives, identity is not treated as a stable essence but as something continuously produced through participation, representation, and social positioning (Ige, 2010). From a sociocultural standpoint, learning itself is an identity experience. As Wenger (1998) argues, individuals come to know who they are through participation in communities of practice, moving from peripheral to more central forms of membership (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Language plays a central role in this process, functioning both as a medium and an outcome of socialization (Ochs, 1993; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Second language socialization research

highlights how learners are inducted into particular roles, identities, and systems of meaning through sustained engagement in language-mediated practices (Duff, 1995).

However, participation in such communities is rarely neutral. Learners' trajectories are shaped by unequal power relations that regulate access to legitimate participation, recognition, and voice (McKinney & Norton, 2008). These conditions foreground the interdependence of identity and agency, as learners' engagement with linguistic and cultural practices is mediated by their capacity to act, make choices, and imagine future possibilities (Duff, 2012; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001).

Empirical research on second language learner identity consistently demonstrates that identity is dynamic, multifaceted, and contextually situated. Studies across diverse EFL and bilingual higher education settings show that learners actively negotiate their identities in relation to local affiliations and global aspirations. For example, Gu (2010) found that increased English proficiency among Chinese university students strengthened national identity while simultaneously fostering a sense of global belonging. Similarly, Anwarudin (2012) showed that Bangladeshi learners frequently positioned themselves as legitimate "users of English," associating English with privilege, mobility, and access to valued social spaces. These findings suggest that identity construction is shaped less by linguistic competence alone than by ideology, place, and imagined futures.

Other studies emphasize the situational and relational nature of identity negotiation. Vasilopoulos (2015) demonstrated that bilingual Korean English speakers enacted different identities depending on interlocutors and settings, aligning more strongly with L2 identities in professional or transnational contexts. Lou's (2022) narrative analysis of EFL students in a bilingual higher education program further reveals overlapping and sometimes conflicting identities shaped by classroom practices, institutional expectations, and opportunities for agency. Collectively, these studies underscore that L2 learner identity is continually negotiated through engagement with language practices, institutional structures, and sociocultural conditions (Duff, 2002; Morita, 2004).

The professional identity of L2 teachers has likewise received sustained scholarly attention, particularly given the need for teachers to legitimize themselves as competent and credible professionals within institutional and sociolinguistic hierarchies (Bowen et al., 2021). A secure professional identity has been linked to job satisfaction, resilience, and long-term commitment to teaching (Ruohotie-Lyhty et al., 2021). In international and English-medium instruction (EMI) contexts, however, identity construction is often complicated by heightened linguistic, pedagogical, and ideological demands.

Research indicates that teachers in EMI programs frequently face challenges such as limited proficiency in academic English, unfamiliarity with discipline-specific discourse, and constrained pedagogical repertoires (Bowen & Nanni, 2021; Hadizadeh & Kanık, 2025; Macaro et al., 2018). These challenges are further intensified by linguistically and academically heterogeneous student populations, which complicate teachers' pedagogical and professional positioning. As a result, both pre-service and in-service teachers are required to enact fluid, hybrid identities, continuously negotiating legitimacy as language users and professionals.

Empirical studies highlight the instability characterizing L2 teacher identity formation. Moonthiya (2024) shows that international preservice English teachers'

identities are shaped by persistent tensions across claimed, assigned, practiced, and imagined dimensions, reflecting mismatches between institutional expectations and personal aspirations. Similarly, Xu (2025) demonstrates that English for general purposes teachers' identities develop in non-linear ways, fluctuating across authority, agency, and vulnerability, and closely intertwined with emotional labor and pedagogical experimentation.

Collectively, this body of research establishes that L2 teacher identity particularly in EMI contexts is not a stable outcome but an ongoing, contested process shaped by discourse, power relations, and access to symbolic and material resources. While identity-focused research has deepened understanding of how teachers negotiate legitimacy and professional selfhood, it has paid less systematic attention to how these negotiations relate to teachers' sustained engagement with language learning and teaching practices. This limitation points to the need to consider identity alongside broader questions of commitment, participation, and access, which are central to the concept of investment in second language research.

Investment and second language learning

The concept of investment is grounded in a poststructural understanding of identity as an ongoing process through which learners continually negotiate who they are and how they relate to the social world (Norton, 2000). Norton (1997) conceptualizes investment as learners' relationship to the target language, reflecting their commitment to particular goals, practices, and identities within unequal relations of power. From this perspective, learners' engagement is shaped not only by desire or motivation but also by the social conditions that enable or constrain participation. As Norton (2013) argues, motivation alone does not ensure investment, as learners may choose not to participate in language practices when these are structured by exclusionary ideologies such as racism, sexism, elitism, or other forms of marginalization (Norton & Toohey, 2011).

From this perspective, investment captures the often ambivalent relationship learners have with the target language, encompassing both their desire to participate and their resistance to doing so (Norton, 1997). Learners are thus understood as socially situated individuals whose engagement fluctuates as their identities, aspirations, and positions are renegotiated across contexts. While most research has examined investment from the learner perspective, the concept is equally relevant for understanding teachers, who negotiate identities not only as language users but also as mediators of learning. Accordingly, the following sections review studies on learners' investment before turning to research on language teachers' investment.

Several studies illustrate how investment operates in learner contexts. Norton and Gao (2008), for example, examined a weekly English-speaking club in Hong Kong and found that, although learners initially joined to improve speaking skills, participation fostered a sense of belonging and recognition, deepening cultural affiliation and engagement. Similarly, Chang et al. (2016) traced multilingual students' trajectories in a U.S. community college, showing that investment shifted across immediate and imagined communities, with selective participation in social discourses shaping learners' educational pathways. In contrast, Soltanian et al. (2018), drawing on survey data from 852 Iranian EFL learners, reported moderate overall investment alongside gendered differences, with male learners expressing

stronger commitment highlighting how sociocultural norms and structural inequalities mediate opportunities for investment.

Despite these insights, research has largely privileged the learner perspective, leaving less understood about how investment unfolds for language teachers, who simultaneously occupy the roles of learners and educators. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1982) concepts of cultural and social capital, legitimacy can be understood as access to resources, relationships, and codes of practice that enable participation and possible recognition within specific discourse communities. However, such access is uneven and context-dependent, particularly in international universities where English-medium instruction (EMI) is expanding in settings where English functions as a lingua franca.

Research has begun to extend the concept of investment beyond learners to illuminate language teachers' identity construction. Ryan (2012), for instance, demonstrates how attention to learner investment can reshape teachers' pedagogical practices and professional self-understandings. Comparing two adult education classes, Ryan shows that when teaching practices were redesigned to account for learners' histories, expectations, and aspirations, student participation and retention increased markedly. Crucially, this pedagogical shift also strengthened the teacher's own sense of legitimacy and professional accomplishment, illustrating how learner investment and teacher identity are mutually constituted.

Similarly, Afreen (2024) examines teacher investment in a heritage language program in Vancouver, focusing on how volunteer teachers negotiated emotional labor under constrained institutional conditions. Despite limited funding, organizational instability, and minimal training, teachers' sustained investment in promoting Bangla and supporting students' transcultural identities enabled them to manage emotional demands and maintain professional commitment. This study underscores that teacher investment extends beyond classroom pedagogy to encompass engagement with communities, ideologies, and institutional structures.

Taken together, these studies conceptualize investment as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between structural constraints and individual agency. They highlight how teachers' investments are continually renegotiated across institutional, cultural, and community contexts, with important implications for identity, legitimacy, and sustained participation in language education.

The interplay between identity and investment in second language studies

Identity and investment are closely intertwined constructs in second language learning and teaching. While identity foregrounds how learners and teachers understand themselves and are positioned within social, cultural, and institutional contexts, investment captures the extent to which they commit time, effort, and resources to language-related practices in pursuit of imagined futures (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013). From this perspective, investment is never neutral: it is shaped by power relations, language ideologies, and access to symbolic and material resources. Identity and investment are thus mutually constitutive shifts in identity influence willingness to invest, while investment opens or constrains opportunities for further identity negotiation (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2016).

Research on language learners illustrates how the interplay between identity and investment unfolds across contexts. Drawing on Norton's framework, studies

show that learners' investment is shaped less by linguistic competence than by imagined communities and future-oriented identities that promise access to symbolic and material resources. Lee's (2014) longitudinal case study, for example, demonstrates how participation in academic, professional, and religious communities triggered identity shifts that sustained learners' investment in English. Similarly, Hajar (2017) illustrates how Arab postgraduate students in the UK continually renegotiated identity and investment through interactions with supervisors, peers, and institutional structures. Sacklin (2015) further foregrounds the affective dimension of this relationship, showing how negative self-positioning can paradoxically sustain long-term engagement through learners' imagined possible selves. Collectively, these studies reinforce the view that investment is socially and affectively mediated, emerging through learners' positioning within multiple communities where legitimacy and recognition regulate access to meaningful participation.

Importantly, the identity-investment nexus is equally salient for teachers, particularly those positioned as both language users and pedagogical authorities. Teachers' professional investments such as engagement in professional development, pedagogical innovation, and institutional participation are inseparable from how they construct and are afforded legitimacy as teachers. Research suggests that teachers' identities as competent or marginal language users significantly shape how and where they choose to invest. For instance, Kong, Yong, and Lee (2022) show that in-service non-native English-speaking teachers strategically allocated their investments across language development, teaching practices, and professional advancement, while simultaneously disengaging from practices associated with deficit positioning, such as Western academic writing norms. These findings underscore how investment is mediated by power relations and language ideologies rather than by motivation alone.

Other studies further reveal how institutional and societal discourses shape teachers' investments. Ye's (2024) longitudinal study of Chinese EFL teachers demonstrates how differential recognition of cultural and social capital both enabled and constrained professional investment, sometimes producing tensions between teachers' desired identities and institutional expectations. Similarly, Zhang and Darvin's (2025) critical ethnographic work shows how gender ideologies shaped pre-service teachers' perceived legitimacy and constrained their investment in professional roles, despite high motivation and commitment. These studies collectively illustrate that teacher investment is a negotiated response to structural conditions, not merely an individual choice.

Across learner and teacher studies, a consistent pattern emerges: investment is a dynamic, socially situated process that reflects individuals' struggles over recognition, legitimacy, and access to valued forms of capital. While learners' investments are often oriented toward imagined academic or professional futures, teachers' investments encompass pedagogical practices, professional development, and identity positioning within institutional hierarchies. Yet, despite this growing body of research, relatively little attention has been paid to how identity and investment intersect in English-medium instruction (EMI) teacher education, where pre-service teachers are simultaneously positioned as language learners, future professionals, and legitimate (or marginalized) users of English.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how the identities and investments of seven Cameroonian pre-service English teachers unfold within an EMI program at an international university in Northern Cyprus a context where English functions primarily as a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2005). By foregrounding the mutual constitution of identity and investment under EMI conditions, the study seeks to illuminate how legitimacy, language ideology, and imagined professional trajectories shape pre-service teachers' engagement with English and their preparation for the profession.

Method

Design

This study adopted a qualitative multiple case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of how Cameroonian students navigate language learning, identity, and investment within an English-medium university. A case study approach was particularly well suited to this purpose, as it allows close attention to participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to them within a specific institutional and social context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2018).

Each participant was treated as an individual case, while the English-medium ELT department provided a shared context that connected these cases. Drawing on multiple sources of data including interviews, classroom observations, informal interactions, and audio recordings this design made it possible to trace how participants' identities and investments were negotiated and reshaped across both academic and social spaces over time.

The context of the study

This study was conducted at an international private university in Northern Cyprus, established in 2015. The university attracts students from over 70 nationalities, with international students comprising more than 50% of its 4,500-strong student body. While the exact number of African and Cameroonian students was not available, Cameroonian students form a notable part of the university's diverse community. Within the Faculty of Education's ELT department, approximately 13 Cameroonian students were enrolled at the time of the study. Of these, seven provided their informed consent to participate in the research (see Table 1).

Table 1. Study participants' profiles

Participant	Age	Gender	Country	Educational Level	Duration in Study Context
Diana	25	Female	Cameroon	Bachelor	4 years
Elsie	27	Female	Cameroon	Bachelor	4 years
Gaby	24	Female	Cameroon	Bachelor	3 years
Flora	24	Female	Cameroon	Bachelor	3 years
Anne	29	Female	Cameroon	Graduate	4 years
Clara	28	Female	Cameroon	Graduate	4 years
Bella	24	Female	Cameroon	Graduate	2 years

Data collection

A qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was adopted for this study. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university's administration and the ELT department. Cameroonian students in the ELT department were subsequently approached, and their informed consent was secured. A convenience sampling technique was employed to select participants, prioritizing accessibility and willingness to participate in the study.

Three distinct methods were employed for data collection: interviews, observations, and classroom recordings.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven Cameroonian pre-service teachers in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department (see Table 1): four undergraduates enrolled in the BA in ELT and three graduate students enrolled in the MA in ELT. In line with the university's policy of offering teaching appointments in its affiliated language schools to ELT graduates, all three MA participants were concurrently employed as English instructors in the School of Foreign Languages at the time of data collection, with 1-3 years of teaching experience. Regarding prior education, two of the MA participants completed their undergraduate degrees at the focal university, while the third completed her BA in Cameroon before commencing the MA and her teaching appointment in the same context.

A single round of interviews was conducted with the seven participants. Each interview was held face-to-face in a clean, comfortable, quiet, and safe environment on the university premises, lasting between 12 and 18 minutes. The interview questions explored the participants' language learning experiences in both their home countries and the target community, with a particular focus on their language development, identity, and investment within the English-medium university context. A total of twelve open-ended questions, adapted from previous studies on identity and investment, were used for this purpose.

Observations and informal chats

Observations focused on the students' classroom participation, interaction with peers and instructors, and use of English in both academic and social contexts. These observations took place both in the school setting (during breaks, group activities, and classroom interactions) and outside the school context (in informal gatherings, casual conversations, or campus activities). Alongside these observations, the second researcher, a graduate Cameroonian student teaching at the university, engaged participants in informal chats and conversations. These interactions, often occurring after class hours or on the school premises, provided additional insights into the participants' language practices, social relationships, and engagement beyond formal academic settings. Approximately six observation reports were compiled, each based on one or two sessions. While informal chats were not systematically recorded, reflective summaries were prepared immediately after the interactions.

Classroom recordings

Audio recordings of participants' classroom interactions were conducted over four weeks, totaling eight hours of data (two hours per week). These recordings documented participants' engagement in classroom activities, with a particular focus on their expressions and enactments of identity, as well as their investment in classroom discussions.

Data analysis

After transcribing the interviews and observations, the researchers conducted multiple readings of the data to identify emerging themes. Following Patton's (2014) qualitative research design, the analysis was guided by an inductive approach, allowing patterns and categories to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed a priori. This process involved open coding, memo writing, and constant comparison across data sources to refine the categories. Thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) was then applied to examine the transcriptions in detail, with careful attention to recurring concepts, expressions, and practices. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the two researchers compared and discussed the identified themes across participants, noting both convergences and divergences in the data. When discrepancies in coding or interpretation emerged, the researchers revisited the original transcripts and observation notes, discussed their interpretations, and refined the coding categories until consensus was reached.

Moreover, triangulation of the data interviews, observations, and recordings was performed to reinforce and explain the findings (Patton, 2014). For the recorded classroom data, we analyzed instances of stance-taking, pronoun use, and the adjectives or adverbs participants employed to construct and negotiate their identities. In doing so, we applied Duff's (2002) analytical model for identity studies in second language learning, which foregrounds discourse as a key site of identity construction. The model highlights how second language learners express themselves, position themselves, or are positioned by others in social interactions, paying attention to the linguistic and pragmatic resources through which identities are indexed and enacted. Guided by this framework, we examined how participants' choice of words, pronouns, and evaluative language revealed alignments, resistances, and shifting identities within classroom discourse and peer interactions.

Data triangulation enhanced the reliability and credibility of the study, reducing research bias and ensuring a multi-faceted understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Patton, 2014). The correlation of insights from the different data sources strengthened the study's validity and contributed to a comprehensive understanding of participants' language learning, identity formation and investment.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Given that the participants in this study comprised individuals from two distinct educational levels and backgrounds, undergraduate students and graduate students (who were also teaching within the study context), their data were analyzed separately. The findings are presented in two sections: insights from undergraduate students and insights from graduate students.

Undergraduate students' insights

The combined analysis of undergraduate interviews, classroom recordings, and observations revealed how students adapted to the linguistic, cultural, and educational demands of their new environment. Their experiences clustered around four broad, interconnected themes: (1) language and social ıntegration, (2) navigating cultural and educational transitions, (3) ınvestment in learning and future selves, and (4) identity negotiation and transformation. The themes illustrate how undergraduates negotiated both learning and identity in the new context.

Language and social integration

The undergraduates reported significant growth in language skills, knowledge, and communicative competence, alongside challenges related to social integration. The participants described improvements in articulating their thoughts, engaging in communication, and monitoring their own linguistic development. Language adaptation often involved modifying accents and speech patterns to facilitate understanding and solidarity with peers from diverse backgrounds. One of the participants admitted:

> *I think my ability in the language has impacted my social life in that when I communicate now, socially, I spot errors in my communication or in the person who is talking to me. So I think, for the fact that I'm learning English, I spot more errors than I used to. … I try to speak like a native English speaker, but the one problem is my accent is so strong. …* (Gaby)

The study participants also became aware of cultural differences influencing communication and behavior. For example, Gaby expressed:

> *Yes, I see it even on teenagers, and it's not normal. Even the way boys shave their hairstyles in this university is different from Cameroon. School children here like going out for coffee and hangouts, but the case is different in Cameroon because the parents are strict…Another thing I also noticed…teenagers…smoke a lot. I used to think they would go to hell, but as time went on…my thoughts changed*. (Gaby)

Language barriers occasionally created feelings of alienation, particularly when interacting with locals or struggling with Turkish, the language spoken by the locals in northern Cyprus. Experiences of language shaming and anxiety to speak diminished willingness to engage in communication, affecting self-esteem and sense of belonging. This tension is illustrated in the account of one participant:

> *Because I don't really know it* [Turkish]. *I can understand, but when I speak it, they always laugh at me, so I don't speak it.* (Gaby)

Navigating cultural and educational transitions

Participants' experiences also highlighted adaptation to new cultural norms and educational practices. Interactions with lecturers were perceived as more open and supportive compared to the hierarchical structures in Cameroon, facilitating

engagement in learning and classroom participation. This contrast is illustrated in the account of one participant:

> *In Cameroon, the relationship between students and teachers is hierarchical. Teachers are considered demi-gods.* (Gaby)

Socialization outside formal education also supported personal growth, cultural adaptation, and language practice. Differences in teaching approaches, technology use, and assessment strategies were noted. Northern Cyprus classrooms were described as student-centered, incorporating visual aids, smart boards, and multiple learning styles. These differences are illustrated in the following accounts from two participants:

> *Back in Cameroon, I didn't see teachers using visual aids or smart boards. Here, I've incorporated many learning styles auditory, visual, and even YouTube for my learning, which has been very helpful.* (Diana)

> *When I came to Cyprus, I stopped my habit of memorization. In Cameroon, I would memorize and forget everything after exams. But here, I learned to understand the material, revise, and retain it.* (Gaby)

Participants additionally described Northern Cyprus as welcoming and inclusive, which facilitated their integration while maintaining elements of their homeland identities.

Investment in learning and future selves

Investment emerged as a multidimensional construct, reflecting participants' aspirations to develop socially, culturally, and professionally. Undergraduate students viewed English proficiency not only as a tool for communication but also as essential for future careers and teaching practices. They demonstrated proactive engagement in learning beyond the classroom, often leveraging online resources to acquire new skills. This proactive engagement is illustrated in the account of one participant:

> *Yes, expensive, so a year apart from making physical contacts, I interact online or learn things online. I want to learn how to… because if I work with the media in church, I want to learn how to edit videos, and I go and watch a video of how to do it…* (Gaby)

Students' investment was closely tied to their professional identities as future teachers. English was seen as indispensable for their teaching practice and broader life goals. This perception is reflected in the account of another participant:

> *It's very important in the sense that I'm a language teacher, so I need English in everything. Even though you are not a language teacher, you need to acquire that English language knowledge*. (Diana)

Identity negotiation and transformation

Undergraduates navigated complex processes of identity construction, balancing home-country practices with adaptation to the new context. Participation in academic and social practices facilitated identity development across multiple domains, including language proficiency, technological literacy, and adaptation to local educational expectations. These processes of identity negotiation and transformation are illustrated in the following accounts from the participants:

> *Interaction with international students, I try to watch more YouTube videos, try to do more research on what I do not know.* (Diana)

> *My English language skills when I came to Northern Cyprus, I think I've improved in fluency…since I got here, I really improved…due to the presentations and encouragement.* (Flora)

> *When I came to Cyprus for my first two years…I stopped this memorization habit…before I write the final, I can just revise, and I will understand…I can just do a summary because I know that the teacher did not want me to give exactly what he or she wants.* (Gaby)

> *Back in Cameroon, I did not see teachers using smart boards or visual aids…I have incorporated so many learning styles like auditory, visual, learned how to use YouTube for learning…these newly incorporated learning styles have played a great role in enhancing my learning.* (Diana)

All in all, these experiences illustrate a dynamic negotiation of identity, where students preserved elements of their original selves while adapting to new educational and social contexts, reflecting a deep investment in both language learning and professional development.

Graduate students' interview insights

The combined analysis of graduate interviews, classroom recordings, and observations revealed how participants navigated dual roles as students and teachers in an international EMI context. Their experiences clustered around four interconnected themes: (1) Language Adaptation and Identity, (2) Teaching in an International EMI Setting, (3) Negotiating Teacher Identities and Investments, and (4) Academic Socialization and Intertextual Positioning. Together, these findings illustrate how graduates' professional and academic trajectories were shaped by ongoing processes of identity negotiation and investment.

Language adaptation and identity

Graduate participants highlighted the centrality of English in their daily lives, reflecting both professional and personal investments. Language development, accent modification, and heightened awareness of linguistic practices were reported as integral to their identities as teachers and graduate students. This experience is illustrated in the account of one participant:

> *... since we mostly teach and ... interact with purely English speakers, I think my level of speaking English has increased more. My reading has improved ... my listening skills have increased. ... So I can say, I just want to gain experience ... it's fulfilling somehow.* (Bella)

Accent adaptation was also common, as participants adjusted their speech for international intelligibility, showing how language shaped their professional legitimacy and sense of belonging.

Teaching in an international EMI setting

The graduate participants faced significant challenges teaching in a multicultural EMI environment. Issues of respect, cultural differences, and classroom management frequently shaped their teaching practices and sense of professional identity. These challenges also intersected with race and gender, influencing how students perceived them. These challenges are illustrated in the accounts of two participants:

> *I have experienced, I do not know if it's general but as a black teacher ... I've experienced students disrespecting me.* (Bella)

> *... there's a kind of classroom management that you want to implement ... but here, it's difficult ... sometimes it's really difficult to manage in some cases.* (Clara)

Classroom observations confirmed these accounts, showing how teachers negotiated authority, discipline, and legitimacy while adapting their pedagogical approaches. This negotiation of classroom authority is reflected in the following classroom interaction:

> *This is your day, Altinia. ... Behza, I am going to change your sitting position, I do not want noise from you*. (Anne)

These experiences reveal how teaching in EMI programs in an international context required constant investment in pedagogical adjustment and identity negotiation.

Negotiating teacher identities and investments

Graduate students reflected on the dynamic and evolving nature of their teacher identities. Novice teacherhood, professional growth, and personal responsibilities all contributed to shaping their identities. Positive feedback from students reinforced their sense of competence, while financial and job insecurity complicated their investments in the profession. These experiences are illustrated in the accounts of two participants:

> *... the first day of teaching ... you don't yet have that absolute confidence. ... It will forever remain one of my memorable experiences, because it's from there, I had to build up something. .... The first one is*

> *seeing my students succeed and the second one is having something to take care of your family at the end of the day.* (Clara)

> *… If I move to where my university is located, half of my salary goes to accommodation. And the other half goes for bills, then what do I have at the end?* (Anne)

Participants' narratives show how identity and investment are inseparable: financial, emotional, and professional dimensions intersected with their desire to grow as teachers and secure a future through education.

Academic socialization and intertextual positioning

Beyond teaching, graduate students invested in their academic identities through classroom discussions, peer interactions, and engagement with scholarly texts. They positioned themselves as legitimate participants in academic communities by referencing prior knowledge and drawing on intertextual connections. This process of academic positioning is illustrated in the following classroom interaction:

> *… Hocam I think with the previous method, students are kind of like communicating as well, more than. … Yes Hocam I understand it but I'm struggling … Hocam looking at it actually I will say … Yes … Hocam you just confused me. …. If we remember from SLA last semester … we had the automatization, remembering, reconstructing. So the silent method as well deals with these aspects … acquiring, storing, retrieving information as well.* (Clara)

Such practices reflected both identity work (as graduate students sought to establish academic credibility) and investment (in developing expertise to support their professional futures). Collectively, the findings demonstrate how language adaptation, teaching in EMI, evolving teacher identities, and academic socialization represent interrelated dimensions of identity and investment. These experiences underscore the precarious yet transformative nature of graduate study and teaching in international contexts, where professional growth is inseparable from the ongoing negotiation of identities and investments in imagined futures.

Discussion

This study offers insights into how the identities and investments of seven Cameroonian students evolved within the context of an international university in Northern Cyprus. The discussion is framed around the interrelated constructs of identity and investment (Norton, 1995, 2013), and four interwoven themes are highlighted: language adaptation, cultural and academic socialization, learner/teacher identity negotiation, and investment in imagined futures. In line with prior research, the findings reveal that identity is fluid, socially constructed, and continually negotiated (McKinney & Norton, 2008; Seloni, 2012), while investment operates as both an expression of learners' agency and a response to structural opportunities and constraints (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Across the themes, the voices of undergraduate and graduate participants are integrated, with

interview accounts, classroom recordings, and observations illustrating how identity and investment were dynamically constructed in this multilingual and multicultural setting.

Undergraduate students' insights

For the undergraduate students, identity and investment were closely intertwined across linguistic, cultural, and academic dimensions. Participants' accounts highlight how their identities shaped their investments in English and how these investments, in turn, reshaped their evolving sense of self a reciprocal relationship Norton (1997) identifies as central to the notion of investment. Their dual roles as learners and future teachers of English fostered linguistic competence, self-expression, and self-perception, reflecting the complex interplay between learner identity and professional aspirations (Varghese et al., 2005).

Participants reported adjusting their accents, simplifying or amplifying speech, and shifting between varieties of English to accommodate peers, lecturers, and multilingual interlocutors. These findings echo Jenkins' (2007) and Lou's (2022) observations that English as a lingua franca requires continual negotiation of linguistic norms and contributes to the construction of multilingual identities. The undergraduates' ability to move between "Englishes" reflects agency but also reveals the pressures of power hierarchies that privilege some forms of English over others (McKinney & Norton, 2008).

Cultural adaptation further shaped participants' identities. Practices such as adopting new norms (e.g., smoking) demonstrated how cultural and linguistic adaptation were entangled, supporting Lave and Wenger's (1991) view of learning as participation in communities of practice. These cultural adjustments often reshaped their self-perceptions and attitudes, highlighting how immersion in new linguistic and cultural contexts could transform their identities. Through these experiences, participants not only enhanced their linguistic proficiency but also developed international identities. Their journeys underscore the interconnection between identity and investment, illustrating how language learning and cultural engagement reinforce one another in multilingual and multicultural settings.

Yet these adaptations were not always smooth. Some students experienced shame and linguistic alienation, echoing Teimouri's (2018) findings that shame narrows attentional resources and undermines L2 confidence. These emotional responses complicate investment by showing that learners must navigate not only the desire for inclusion but also the risk of exclusion. Such experiences underscore the social risks involved in language use within multilingual and multicultural contexts, revealing the fluid and dynamic nature of identity formation among preservice teachers, which is shaped by competing discourses and contextual pressures (Moonthiya, 2024). Additionally, negative interactions not only diminished participants' willingness to communicate but also complicated their identity reconstruction processes. As Teimouri (2018) notes, "Shame narrows … attentional resources toward the source that threatens [L2] social identity," (p. 647), further illustrating the profound impact of shame on learners' emotional and social adaptation. This underscores the complexity of linguistic investment, which requires balancing aspirations for linguistic and social inclusion with the external barriers that may hinder these efforts. The tension between the participants' desire to engage and their fear of exclusion highlights how sociocultural hierarchies and

power dynamics shaped their experiences (McKinney & Norton, 2008). These hierarchies often dictated which linguistic practices were legitimized and valued, leaving participants to navigate a precarious landscape of inclusion and exclusion. As such, the process of identity negotiation within this context was deeply influenced by the participants' ability to navigate these power structures, reflecting the multifaceted and dynamic nature of identity and investment in English as a lingua franca setting.

At the same time, successful enculturation into international classroom practices such as open-door policies, student-centered learning, and technology-rich pedagogy allowed participants to redefine themselves as autonomous and capable learners. This newfound autonomy also reshaped their sense of investment in their roles as future language teachers, leading to a redefinition of their self-concept. These findings highlight the interconnected nature of academic practices, cultural adaptation, language, identity, and investment, aligning with Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice, where the practices of a community shape the identities of its members. This also supports Casanave's (2005) and Leki's (2017) arguments that socioacademic relationships and disciplinary practices are central to identity construction. Participants' evolving self-concepts as future teachers show how investment in learning was also an investment in imagined professional futures (Norton, 2013). In line with Lou (2022), their narratives highlight the emergence of multilingual identities that transcend monolingual norms, emphasizing both adaptation and resistance in shaping the self.

Additionally, the classroom recordings and observations reinforce the centrality of socioacademic relationships (Leki, 2017) and enculturation (Casanave, 2005) in identity construction. Students' incorporation of local academic terms (e.g., hoca, tamam) reflects both linguistic adaptability and the early stages of disciplinary enculturation, marking their movement into new communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Graduate students' insights in context

The first key finding from the graduate students' data was the linguistic transformations they experienced within the study context. These changes were influenced by frequent interactions with diverse speakers and their dual roles as teachers and students, which required extensive engagement with academic texts and classroom communication. A significant adaptation was the modification of their accents, reflecting the sociolinguistic realities of working in an international environment. Participants adjusted their accents to varying degrees, either aligning with native speaker norms or adapting to English as a lingua franca to enhance their communication and teaching effectiveness. This finding aligns with previous research on accent accommodation in globalized education, emphasizing how linguistic diversity shapes teaching practices in multilingual contexts (Jenkins, 2007; Norton, 2013) and, in turn, influences teachers' investment or disinvestment in their professional trajectories. It further underscores the interrelationships among professional identities, forms of capital, and societal ideologies (Ye, 2024). Another prominent theme was language depreciation, where the proficiency of English as a lingua franca varied due to differing levels of investment in the language by individuals in the study setting. This unevenness highlights what Norton (2013)

describes as the unequal value accorded to linguistic resources in globalized educational settings.

Additionally, the graduate students' accounts highlighted a range of multifaceted challenges encountered in their teaching practices, reflecting the interplay of cultural, institutional, and interpersonal factors. These challenges were particularly pronounced in three areas: cultural differences, which influenced classroom management and teacher-student relationships, diverging significantly from their experiences in Cameroon; institutional constraints, such as rigid administrative systems and limited autonomy over teaching materials; and biases and discrimination, often related to their race or gender. Such constraints created systemic barriers to professional socialization, paralleling findings by Bimpong (2023) on African students in the U.S. These experiences highlight the structural dimension of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015), showing that even highly motivated learners may face limited returns on their investment when institutional or social conditions are inequitable. Unlike the undergraduates, the graduates' limited proficiency in Turkish further restricted their integration, underscoring how linguistic resources beyond English can mediate access to professional legitimacy.

Moreover, the graduate participants adapted to the professional environment through interactions with colleagues and students, which provided both motivation and challenges. While some were inspired to enhance their skills through peer interactions, others faced communication gaps that led to self-doubt. Adapting classroom practices to accommodate diverse student backgrounds further highlighted the complexities of teaching socialization. These findings illustrate how the international teaching environment fostered both learning and identity construction, echoing Hadizadeh and Vefalı's (2021) conclusion that sustained engagement in international discursive activities contributes to identity formation.

Despite these barriers, participants actively negotiated professional teacher identities by adapting pedagogical styles, building networks, and reflecting on feedback. Such practices resonate with Morita's (2004) and Seloni's (2012) analyses of graduate students' identity work, where teaching and learning simultaneously enable and constrain the development of professional selves. The graduate students' experiences confirm that teacher identity is not fixed but shaped by validation, adaptability, and ongoing negotiation within the academic community.

Moreover, the data from classroom recordings and observations revealed that graduate participants' identities were fluid, reflecting their roles as French speakers, Christians, international students, and novice teachers, aligning with Seloni's (2012) argument that academic identities are context-dependent and relational. Intertextual practices, such as referencing prior coursework and integrating peers' contributions, exemplify Morita's (2004) finding that academic credibility is built through discursive participation. These practices positioned participants as legitimate community members, even as they continued to grapple with the challenges of novice teaching.

The findings therefore underscore the view of identity as emergent, negotiated, and situated (Darvin & Norton, 2015). The participants' navigation of teacher-student dynamics, institutional structures, and cultural expectations reflects the multifaceted processes through which learners and teachers reconstruct themselves in international contexts.

The findings from the two graduate and undergraduate groups extend and complicate existing scholarship on identity and investment in multilingual academic contexts. They support Norton's (1995, 2013) conceptualization of investment as both personal agency and structural negotiation, while illustrating how power relations and sociocultural hierarchies (McKinney & Norton, 2008) can hinder or reshape learners' trajectories. They also highlight the importance of socioacademic relationships and communities of practice (Casanave, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Leki, 2017) in enabling participants to reimagine themselves as multilingual learners and teachers. By weaving together linguistic adaptation, cultural and academic socialization, and professional identity negotiation, this study demonstrates that identity is not a stable possession but a dynamic process continually mediated by learners' investments and the contexts in which they operate.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the intricate interplay between language learning, identity, and investment. Participants navigating the multicultural and multilingual context experienced significant transformations in their self-perceptions and sense of belonging. They developed hybrid identities neither fully rooted in their home cultures nor entirely assimilated into the host culture enriched by elements of both. Despite facing challenges, their dual roles fostered sustained motivation and resilience, enabling personal growth, social integration, and long-term academic and professional success.

This study offers novel insights in several ways. First, unlike prior research that predominantly examines students solely as learners or teachers, this study explored participants' dual roles as both language learners and preservice teachers. The tension between these identities provided valuable perspectives on professional identity formation in an international context. Additionally, the research unveiled a multidimensional understanding of investment, shaped by the participants' intersecting roles as teachers, students, and members of a multicultural academic community. Classroom recordings and observations further revealed the participants' acculturation into teaching practices, demonstrating the dynamic relationship between language and culture in shaping their pedagogical approaches.

The findings underscore the importance of creating supportive environments that address the barriers faced by international students. Inclusive and empowering spaces can help learners in Northern Cyprus navigate the complexities of language learning and identity negotiation more effectively. Future research could extend these findings by exploring similar dynamics in other EMI settings to better understand how linguistic and cultural adaptation influences identity across diverse contexts. Moreover, examining strategies to mitigate challenges such as language shaming and social exclusion would provide valuable guidance for educators and policymakers in supporting learners.

This study is not without limitations. All participants were female, as the only male student in the department under investigation had frozen his semester during the data collection period. This gender imbalance may have influenced the participants' identity development and investment patterns. Additionally, personal factors, such as motherhood, were not deeply explored, despite their potential impact on investment. Lastly, the study relied on a single interview with

participants, limiting the depth of insights into their experiences. Future studies could adopt a longitudinal approach to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics.

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