How Do EFL Learners Construct Identity and Make Investments in Multilingual English Classrooms? A Narrative Case Study

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Abstract
Multilingual English classrooms in Indonesia are seen as sites of identity struggles for the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. However, the extent to which learners construct identities and make investments in such classrooms remains unclear. To fill the lacuna, this narrative case study investigated how Indonesian EFL learners construct their multilingual identities and invest in English language learning within multilingual classroom contexts. Drawing on interview data from four EFL learners in an English Language Education program, the study revealed that learners negotiate their identities through a combination of English, national, and local languages in the classes. This highlights the use of translanguaging and local accents as expressions of identity, even as they strive toward native-like English proficiency. This evidence also reflects the tension between local realities and global language ideologies in ELT. Learners also invest in English through both academic and extracurricular avenues, which is motivated by professional aspirations and personal role models. The findings underscore the complex interplay between identity, language ideologies, and learner agency in multilingual English classrooms. This study calls for pedagogical practices that acknowledge and support multilingual learners' diverse pathways of language investment and self-positioning.
Key words: EFL context, investment, learner identity, multilingual English classroom

Introduction

English classrooms in Indonesian settings have increasingly been seen as sites of identity struggle for the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (Ubaidillah et al., 2025). One reason to explain this complexity may refer to the fact that Indonesia is a multilingual country where learners typically experience identity shifts in their choice of using local, national, and international languages (Andriyanti, 2019). Consequently, these learners bring with them rich linguistic repertoires and diverse sociocultural backgrounds, which serve as both resources and challenges in the English learning process (Wei & García, 2022).

In such contexts, English is not simply another language to be learned, but it represents a new cultural and ideological space that learners must navigate, often in ways that intersect with their existing identities and language practices. The coexistence of multiple languages in students' lives raises important pedagogical and theoretical questions, particularly regarding how learners make sense of their multilingual identities and how these identities influence their engagement or investment in English language learning (Fisher et al., 2020).

In light of this issue, two key questions arise: How do learners understand and value their multilingual richness? And how do they invest in English learning within this multilingual framework? The answers to the questions lead to the scholarly discussion of learner identity and investment (see Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2019). As Norton notes, identity refers to the way individuals understand themselves and their relationship with the world around them across time and space. She conceptualizes identity as a dynamic construct that pictures learners' learning profiles. In the same vein, identity is also closely linked to investment. In their efforts to learn foreign languages, learners invest symbolic resources in order to actively engage in the

language learning process (Norton, 2013). The construct of investment explains how learners' engagement and commitment to language learning are sustained, as they bring both symbolic and material desires to be recognized by society.

In exploring identity and investment in the context of English as a foreign language in Indonesia, ample studies have provided insights into how learners understand themselves in learning. For example, recent research by Ubaidillah et al. (2024) explored the intersection of learner identity and investment. The study revealed that learners' identity construction and investment practices are shaped by their prior learning experiences, perceptions of English in global communication, and participation in communities of practice. Similarly, Wirza (2018) revealed that learners' identities were shaped by negative or superficial associations with English as a school subject. Their investment in English was shown to be complex and evolving, influenced by shifting perceptions of the language and their positioning within learning environments. However, her study did not explicitly focus on learner investment as the primary variable.

Enacted in an underrepresented vocational schooling context, Annisa et al. (2023) observed that learner identity is intertwined with the use of English beyond the classroom, career motivations, reluctance, and future self-images, and investment was hindered by factors such as teaching methods, classroom environment, limited knowledge, family and peer influence, and part-time jobs. This suggests that future aspirations play a significant role in shaping learner identity and investment, as also highlighted in an earlier study (Ubaidillah & Widiati, 2021). Meanwhile, Al Mubarokah's (2021) study added important insights into how parental involvement influences learner identity and investment in English. However, despite the varied perspectives, studies on learner identity and investment in multilingual English classrooms in Indonesia have received little attention.

As a comparison, a growing body of research outside Indonesia has examined learner identity and investment in English language learning and teaching from diverse perspectives, including learners' personal narratives (Teng, 2019), English-medium instruction (Zhang & Huang, 2024), imagined communities (Bai & Mu, 2025), and the influence of neoliberal ideologies (Manan & Hajar, 2025). While these studies have provided valuable insights into how identity and investment are shaped by broader and global sociopolitical and institutional contexts, relatively few have focused on how learners in multilingual classrooms, such as in Indonesia, negotiate their identities and make investment decisions across both online and offline spaces.

As part of a larger research project, this article aims to address the recent gap in EFL learner identity and investment in multilingual English classrooms in Indonesia by exploring how they construct identities and invest in English learning within such multilingual classrooms. This study is particularly significant in light of Indonesia's linguistic complexity and evolving educational landscape, where learners' engagement with English is mediated by local languages, global aspirations, and shifting digital practices. Two research questions guide the present study:

1. How do Indonesian EFL learners construct their multilingual identities in English language classrooms?
2. In what ways do learners invest in English language learning within the context of Indonesia's multilingual English classrooms?

Methodology

Design of the Study

Anchored in an interpretative paradigm, this study employed a narrative case study design to explore how Indonesian EFL learners construct their identities

and invest in English learning within multilingual classroom contexts. This narrative case study approach allowed for a nuanced and context-rich exploration of learners' lived experiences, as expressed through their personal stories, language choices, and aspirations. This design also enabled the researchers to capture how identity and investment are discursively constructed and negotiated through everyday narratives shaped by the multilingual influences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Yin, 2017).

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a private university in East Java, Indonesia, where English is taught and used alongside the local and national languages of the lectures and students. The university also attracts students from diverse ethnolinguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds throughout Indonesia. This situation offers a rich setting for studying multilingual language practices and learner experiences. Participants were four EFL learners (aged 18–22) enrolled in intermediate to advanced English courses (see Table 1). Using purposive sampling, the selection criteria included: (1) active enrollment in an English language class, (2) representation from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Javanese, Madurese, Bugis), and (3) willingness to participate in the interview process.

Table 1. Participants' Profiles

Participant	Gender	Age	Year of Study	Local Languages
P1	Female	20	2nd year	Javanese
P2	Male	21	3rd year	Ende
P3	Male	22	3rd year	Madurese
P4	Female	20	2nd year	Bugis

Data Collection

This narrative case study relied primarily on semi-structured interviews to explore how Indonesian EFL learners construct their multilingual learner identities and invest in English language learning. The interviews were conducted in either English or Bahasa Indonesia, depending on participants' preferences, and each lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Points of interview questions specifically include language learning history**,** identity negotiation**,** investment in English**,** classroom context, and future aspirations (Appendix 1)**.** These interview questions were informed by existing literature on learner identity and investment (e.g., Norton, 2013; Darvin & Norton, 2015; Ubaidillah et al., 2024). They were designed to elicit rich and narrative responses related to the topic investigated.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a narrative thematic approach, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model. Interview transcripts were first transcribed and read multiple times to identify key moments, patterns, and personal language learning narratives. Coding was conducted inductively, with particular attention to how participants storied their multilingual identities and investments in English learning. For instance, data such as *"I felt like someone else [when using English]"* and *"I preferred using Javanese" (P1)* were coded and categorized as learners' negotiated multilingual practices. Data such as *"I try to be like native speakers… even though I know it's impossible" (P2)* were coded and categorized as learners' aspiration for an ideal English proficiency. The final themes were then refined and interpreted using Norton's (2013) framework on identity and investment. This analytical approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how individual learners

position themselves in relation to language, identity, and power within the multilingual classroom context.

Ethical Considerations

To maintain ethical considerations in this study, the principal investigator prepared a consent form and requested that all participants sign it. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that their academic standing would not be affected by their involvement in the research.

Findings

This section presents the thematic findings emerging from the interviews with four EFL learners regarding their identities and investment in multilingual English classrooms. The findings are organized into four key themes: 1) Negotiating multilingual practices and local identities**,** 2) Aspiration for ideal English proficiency**,** 3) Securing personal and professional aspirations, and 4) Enacting social investment**.**

Negotiating Multilingual Practices and Local Identities

The participants' experiences reveal a constant negotiation between the use of English and their local or national languages. While English is seen as essential in formal academic settings, students often revert to Javanese, Bahasa Indonesia, or Madurese in informal interactions. This code-switching is not only a reflection of linguistic comfort but also of cultural identity. Participants acknowledge the value of local accents and languages as part of who they are, yet some express concern that mixing languages may hinder their full immersion in English learning. These accounts highlight the tension between embracing multilingual realities and conforming to monolingual expectations in English classrooms.

> **Excerpt 1**
> "I tried hard to use English in my class, but every time I used it, I felt like someone else. So, I seldom used English for casual conversations with my friends. I preferred using Javanese, of course. However, when my teacher asked me to present materials in front of the class, I used English, although mixed with Bahasa Indonesia." *(Interview, P1, May 2024)*

> **Excerpt 2**
> "Yeah, here in my class, many students are from Madura. So, when I hear them speaking English, it sounds a bit funny. My classmates speak English with a Madurese accent. I think it's okay, the important thing is that I can understand what they're saying. It also shows our local identities. Do you agree with me?" *(Interview, P2, May 2024)*

> **Excerpt 3**
> "In principle, I think our lecturers allow us to use English mixed with Bahasa Indonesia, our national language, or even with our local/regional languages. But I think it distracts our learning process. It's like we don't have enough time to speak fully in English during class, right?" *(Interview, P3, May 2024)*

This finding illustrates that the participants enacted an affirmation of cultural identity, identity dissonance, and tensions between multilingual realities and learning expectations. These three points indicate that learners continuously negotiate

their positions by acknowledging local identities, multilingual realities, and conflicting identities as embodied in their multilingual English classroom context.

Aspiration for Ideal English Proficiency

Despite recognizing the influence of their multilingual backgrounds, the analysis showcases that the participants express a strong desire to attain a native-like command of English. This is evident in their efforts to mimic native speakers' pronunciation and usage. The perceived "ideal" English speaker remains tied to native-speaker norms, especially for those who associate English proficiency with academic success and personal achievement. This desire sometimes leads to support for English-only policies, even when such policies may exclude local languages.

Excerpt 4

"Using English only is the key to success in every English lecture. I believe this because I graduated from an Islamic boarding school where I had to speak English all day. So, I agree if the lecturers forbid us from speaking any language other than English." *(Interview, P4, May 2024)*

Excerpt 5

"I try to be like native speakers when speaking English. They're just amazing, even though I know it's impossible to imitate them perfectly." *(Interview, P2, May 2024)*

Excerpt 6

"I always try to copy how native speakers speak, especially their pronunciation. I use YouTube and try to repeat after them. Sometimes I record myself and compare. It's not perfect, but I want to sound like them." *(Interview, P3, June 2024)*

These themes reflect the participants' internalized belief that native-like English is the ultimate standard of success in language learning. Despite acknowledging their multilingual realities, the participants consistently express a strong aspiration to emulate native speakers, particularly in pronunciation and usage. This aspiration is not only linguistic but also deeply tied to their evolving identities as English language learners. This desire also shapes their learning behaviors, attitudes toward language policy, and their perception of what counts as "good" or legitimate English, which leads them to support English-only environments, even at the expense of their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Such patterns highlight how learners' language aspirations are entangled with broader identity negotiations in multilingual contexts.

Securing Personal and Professional Aspirations

English learning is seen as a strategic investment for future careers and life goals. Students link their English proficiency to aspirations such as becoming a diplomat, securing international scholarships, or following in the footsteps of family members. Some pursue additional language training beyond the university, demonstrating how English learning extends beyond formal education and into personal life planning. The language is not only a tool for communication but also a means for upward social and professional mobility.

Excerpt 7

"I enrolled in this program [English Language Education Study Program] because I want to master English and become an international diplomat.

You know, I even take courses at a prestigious English course here in Malang just to support my language skills. At least, if I can't reach my dream, I can still work using my English." *(Interview, P4, May 2024)*

Excerpt 8

"I now focus on learning IELTS because I want to apply for scholarships abroad right after graduating from this program. IELTS is a required level of English proficiency, so it's good to start learning it earlier. Besides that, I also attend English debate clubs to enhance my speaking skills." *(Interview, P2, May 2024)*

Excerpt 9

"My dream is to become an English teacher, just like my father. He was the one who asked me to choose English Language Education at this university. I used to follow him to school, so I know how he teaches English and speaks the language to students in class, and sometimes even to other teachers at school. I'm very motivated by my father." *(Interview, P1, May 2024)*

The analysis highlights how English learning is deeply intertwined with the participants' personal ambitions and long-term career goals. English is not merely seen as a subject to pass or a tool for classroom communication. It also reflects a strong sense of agency and goal-oriented motivation, showing how learners go beyond formal instruction to seek additional training that aligns with their life trajectories. Also, this shows how global language standards like IELTS shape learners' preparation strategies and how extracurricular activities are used as platforms for personal growth. Lastly, the analysis illustrates how learners' motivations are often relational, inspired by role models and personal histories.

Enacting Social Investment

Participants actively engage in opportunities that allow them to use and improve their English in real-world contexts, despite potential insecurities around accent or fluency. This includes joining language clubs, taking leadership roles in campus events, and accepting encouragement from lecturers. These actions reflect learners' willingness to invest socially in their English development, often challenging linguistic hierarchies by asserting their right to use English in their own ways. Such engagements foster confidence, agency, and the sense of being part of a wider English-speaking community.

Excerpt 10

"Sometimes I feel shy when speaking English. My friends say that my English sounds Madurese. But I don't care. I always try hard to speak English with my local accent. I joined an English conversation club at another university. By doing this, I can learn how to use English and speak it with other people, no matter what our accents are." *(Interview, P3, May 2024)*

Excerpt 11

"I was often invited to be the Master of Ceremony for various English programs in my department. My lecturers supported this and frequently gave me more opportunities to participate in similar events. For example, a couple of weeks ago, I served as the moderator for a guest lecture organized

by my department. It was truly beneficial for the development of my English skills." *(Interview, P2, May 2024)*

The analysis highlights how participants go beyond the classroom to actively seek and create social spaces where they can use and develop their English. Despite insecurities related to fluency or accent, they demonstrate a strong sense of agency and ownership in their language learning journeys. Their actions represent not just linguistic practice but also a form of social investment**,** a willingness to participate in English-speaking communities, assert their presence, and challenge dominant norms of who gets to use English and how.

These findings illustrate that learners' English learning journeys are shaped by a dynamic interplay of linguistic aspiration, personal agency, and sociocultural context. While they strive toward native-like proficiency and associate English with academic and professional success, they also navigate complex multilingual realities that reflect their local identities and lived experiences. The tension between global language norms and local language practices points to the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches in English Language Teaching (ELT). Understanding EFL learners' investments, identities, and aspirations is important since lecturers can better support meaningful and equitable language learning experiences in multilingual settings like Indonesia.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how Indonesian EFL learners construct their multilingual identities and invest in English language learning within multilingual classroom contexts. The findings reveal nuanced patterns of identity negotiation and language investment that are deeply embedded in learners' sociocultural backgrounds, linguistic aspirations, and classroom practices. The data suggest that multilingual identity construction is a dynamic and negotiated process. Participants frequently switch between English, Bahasa Indonesia, and their local languages (e.g., Javanese, Madurese), depending on the social context, communicative purpose, and perceived expectations. This translanguaging practice reflects a hybrid linguistic identity that is shaped by both institutional norms and personal comfort zones to negotiate meaning in their multilingual classrooms (Rahman & Hu, 2025).

One participant (P1) of this study admitted to avoiding English in casual peer interactions, preferring Javanese due to feelings of inauthenticity when speaking English. However, she still used English, albeit mixed with Bahasa Indonesia, in more formal classroom situations. This finding highlights cultural identity in learners' multilingual English classroom negotiations, which has not been discussed in the previous literature on translanguaging practices and EMI settings (see He & Zhou, 2024; Jiang & Zhang, 2023; Lu et al., 2025; Saragih, 2023; Yuan & Yang, 2023). Another participant (P2) acknowledged the strong presence of regional identity in his English speech: "[M]y classmates speak English with a Madurese accent... It also shows our local identities." These findings align with Norton's (2013, 2019) concept of identity as multifaceted and dynamic across time and space, shaped by social relationships and power dynamics. Moreover, institutional tolerance for translanguaging practices, such as mixing English with Bahasa Indonesia or local languages, reveals both an inclusive pedagogy and a structural constraint. While students value this flexibility, some perceive it as limiting their exposure to immersive English use, highlighting a tension in the forms of identity conflicts and language development goals, as also found in the previous studies (Ubaidillah et al., 2025; Ubaidillah, 2018).

Despite the hybrid nature of their identities, the study unpacks that learners aspire toward an idealized version of English, often equated with native-speaker norms, and this evidence has been well documented in the previous research (see

Ubaidillah, 2018). They even expressed a strong desire to emulate native pronunciation and fluency. For example, one participant (P2) said, "I try to be like native speakers... even though I know it's impossible to imitate them perfectly." These aspirations reflect the ideological power of Standard English and the continued dominance of native-speakerism in EFL contexts (Seo, 2024). Learners also equate English-only environments with success and view full immersion as the pathway to competence. For instance, one participant (P4) praised her Islamic boarding school experience, where English was mandatory, and supported monolingual classroom policies.

Such views point to a dual identity struggle in which learners simultaneously navigate their multilingual realities while internalizing global norms of English proficiency to a native-like standard. This is also evidenced by previous research, which showcases how the ambivalence of native-speaker ideology emerged among students and teachers in Indonesian multilingual English classrooms (Irham et al., 2022). This inconsistency is a core feature of identity construction in postcolonial, multilingual EFL settings like Indonesia (Anjanillah et al., 2021). In addition, Learners' investment in English is strongly tied to future goals, both personal and professional. As evidenced in the analysis, English proficiency represents a ticket to global mobility, such as studying abroad or working in international diplomacy. This is seen in the excerpt of the participant (P4) who mentioned that, "I want to master English and become an international diplomat," and described enrolling in a private English course as part of their investment strategy. As revealed in the previous research, this finding shows a reciprocal connection between learner identity and learner investment in language learning (Teng, 2019).

The study also indicates that the participants framed their investment in relation to family legacy and social mobility. For example, a participant (P1) shared how her father's profession as an English teacher shaped her career trajectory, revealing how identity and investment are intergenerational and affective. This finding corresponds to the previous research on the influence of family members on EFL learners' investment in English (Al Mubarokah, 2021). Theoretically, Darvin and Norton (2015) argue that investment is not only about language acquisition, but also the imagined identity and access to symbolic and material resources that English is believed to offer. One notable aspect that emerged from the present study is the role of family members in supporting learners' investment. This finding thus suggests that language learning may be influenced by the agency of family members who serve as role models.

Beyond formal instruction, the participants actively sought out opportunities to enhance their English through social engagement. This included joining conversation clubs outside their own institutions and volunteering for roles in campus events. One participant (P2) shared how becoming a Master of Ceremony and moderator in English-language events helped boost his language confidence and skill set. This active participation demonstrates how learners construct identities of competence and belonging through social practices (Norton, 2015). Even in the face of perceived linguistic stigma, such as having a "Madurese" accent, learners displayed resilience and commitment to participating in English-speaking communities. These extracurricular practices serve as forms of investment that are both social and symbolic, which enable learners to inhabit more empowered subject positions in the broader English-learning ecology within their community of practice participation, as also found in the previous research (Ubaidillah et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study explored how Indonesian EFL learners construct their multilingual identities and invest in English language learning within multilingual

English classroom settings. The findings reveal that identity construction among these learners is a complex and evolving process shaped by their interaction with local languages, personal aspirations, and sociocultural environments. Learners navigated between using English, Bahasa Indonesia, and local languages such as Javanese and Madurese, often positioning themselves fluidly depending on context and purpose. While many embraced local accents and multilingual expression as part of their identity, others aspired toward native-like proficiency, reflecting internalized ideologies of English as a global standard. Investment in English learning was driven by both instrumental and affective motivations. Learners actively engaged in both formal and informal learning environments to enhance their skills and align themselves with imagined professional and academic futures. These practices demonstrate learners' agency and their desire to gain symbolic and material capital through English. In addition, identity construction allows learners to connect learning with personal values, goals, and aspirations. Despite these, this study is limited by its small sample size and reliance on interview data from a single university. Future research should include more diverse participants, additional data sources such as classroom observation, and a broader institutional context to deepen understanding of multilingual identity and investment.

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Appendix 1. Interview Questions (Semi-Structured)

Language Learning Histories

1. Can you tell me about your experience learning English from childhood until now?
2. What languages do you speak at home, at school, and with your friends?
3. How did you first become interested in learning English?
4. Have you ever studied English outside school (e.g., courses, self-study, online)?

Identity Negotiation

1. How would you describe yourself as a language learner?
2. Do you feel different when speaking English compared to your local or national languages? Why or why not?
3. What does it mean to you to be an "English speaker"?
4. How do you think your identity as an Indonesian/Madurese/Javanese/etc. influences how you learn or use English?

Investment in English Language Learning

1. Why do you want to learn English? What motivates you?
2. In what ways do you use English outside the classroom (e.g., online, clubs, social media)?
3. Have you ever made efforts (e.g., joined clubs, participated in events) to improve your English? Can you describe them?
4. Have you ever felt challenged, discouraged, or empowered while learning or speaking English?

Classroom and Institutional Context

1. What language(s) do you usually use during your English classes?
2. How do your lecturers or peers respond when you speak English with a local accent or mix languages?
3. Do you think your university supports multilingualism in English learning? Why or why not?

Imagined Futures and Goals

1. How do you see English helping you in your future (career, education, personal goals)?
2. Do you imagine yourself using English in your job or personal life in the future?
3. What kind of English speaker do you want to become?