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Negotiating identities: How successful Malaysian ESL learners shape their language learning experiences

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative multiple case-study examines how high proficiency Malaysian learners of English shape their learning over time through identity work and sustained commitment. Guided by Norton's theory of identity as a sociocultural framework, the study worked with twelve high proficiency learners (HPL) and used semi-structured interviews, reflective narratives, and observations of digital interaction. The analysis identified three related processes. First, learners built a secure sense of self as English users through repeated public performance and teacher or peer acknowledgement. Second, they moved across family, campus, and online spaces through context-sensitive language choice, keeping close ties in Malay and other languages while placing English at the centre of study, leadership, and everyday coordination. Third, recognition as users of English linked present effort to hope for membership in academic and professional communities. When this identity was acknowledged, learners participated more regularly, accepted uncertainty in speech, and used English steadily beyond assessment. The study offers a Malaysia specific account that grounds these claims in scenes from campus and home life. For teaching, curricula should affirm students' preferred identities, recognise translanguaging as a legitimate resource, and provide public moments of acknowledgement through feedback, peer response, and peer mentoring in class.

Contribution/ Originality: This manuscript presents original work that has not been published elsewhere nor is it under consideration by any other outlet. It contributes a Malaysia-specific account of how successful ESL learners enact identity to sustain investment, extending Norton's framework by detailing how recognition within family, campus, and online communities interacts with imagined futures to drive continued participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

English proficiency remains critically important globally, influencing employability, academic success, and intercultural communication (Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013). In Malaysia, English functions as a compulsory second language across all education levels, reflecting its strategic role within national development objectives (Azman, 2016). Despite substantial policy and curriculum reforms designed to enhance proficiency, recent reports highlight declining trends, with Malaysia dropping significantly in the global English proficiency rankings from 13th place in

2017 to 26th in 2019 (Education First, 2019). Additionally, nearly half of Malaysian graduates struggle to secure employment due to insufficient English proficiency (JobStreet Malaysia, 2020).

Research within English language teaching (ELT) often prioritises pedagogical strategies and classroom methods, frequently overlooking deeper socio-cultural factors influencing language acquisition, notably identity negotiation (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Identity, as conceptualised by Norton (2013) is dynamic, socially constructed, and central to learners' investment in language learning. While substantial research has explored identity in ESL contexts globally, studies explicitly examining how successful Malaysian ESL university students negotiate their identities remain limited, particularly within the diverse, multilingual Malaysian context.

This qualitative study addresses this gap by critically analysing the identity negotiation processes among successful Malaysian ESL university students. By foregrounding learners' identity experiences, this research provides insights into the socio-cultural dimensions influencing ESL acquisition, thereby contributing to more holistic language education practices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Orienting the Discussion: Identity as the Central Analytic Lens

English proficiency in Malaysia continues to attract scrutiny, and recurrent reforms have not eliminated persistent disparities in achievement, which indicates that explanations limited to teaching methods or individual aptitude are inadequate (Azman, 2016). Identity-oriented perspectives are therefore required to account for how learners position themselves and are positioned by others within unequal social fields where English carries symbolic value (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013). Identity is defined as how individuals understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how they see their prospects for the future (Norton, 2013). This definition foregrounds fluidity and multiplicity, rejecting essentialist views of the language learner and instead emphasizing negotiation within specific contexts (Block, 2003; Ortega, 2009).

Norton's construct of investment complements this definition of identity by explaining the socially situated desire to learn and use a language, a desire that is shaped by the distribution of power and access to symbolic resources (Norton, 2013). Unlike traditional approaches to motivation, which often treat the learner as an autonomous individual driven by internal rewards, investment highlights the historical and ideological conditions under which learners decide that speaking is worth the risk (Darvin & Norton, 2015; McKay & Wong, 1996). The concept of imagined communities further extends this framework by recognizing that learners orient themselves towards groups that are not yet accessible or tangible but that provide powerful images of membership and belonging (Anderson, 1991; Kanno & Norton, 2003). Communities of practice, in turn, illuminate how learning unfolds through participation in local social activity, thereby linking identity work to concrete practices and shared repertoires (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Together, these four constructs (i) identity, (ii) investment, (iii) imagined communities, and (iv) communities of practice provide a coherent lens for analyzing how successful Malaysian ESL learners shape their language learning experiences (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Gao, Cheng, & Kelly, 2008).

2.2. Identity: Dynamic, Situated, and Contested

Identity in second language learning is neither fixed nor singular but is continually produced and reproduced through interaction with people, institutions, and discourses (Norton, 2013). Learners carry multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities that are activated according to context and purpose (Block, 2003). Each act of communication positions the learner and is influenced by wider ideological formations that define what counts as legitimate language use (Bourdieu, 1986; Darvin & Norton, 2015). Classroom practices, peer relations, and family expectations all shape which identities can be claimed or must be suppressed at a given moment (Gu, 2008; Harklau, 2007). When learners perceive that their preferred identities are not recognized, they may withhold participation even when they possess the linguistic ability to contribute (McKay & Wong, 1996; Morita, 2004). Conversely, when interactional spaces

validate learners' desired identities, participation tends to increase, and proficiency develops through use (Fernsten, 2008; Norton, 2013). Digital environments can expand these spaces by providing alternative audiences and discourses that authorize identities unavailable in immediate surroundings (Black, 2006; Lam & Yeh, 2004).

Bourdieu's concept of linguistic and cultural capital helps explain why identity work is always entangled with value judgments about language varieties and accents (Bourdieu, 1986). Symbolic capital accrues when a community recognizes a linguistic practice as legitimate, and the same practice may be devalued elsewhere, which means that learners must read the social field to decide which identities are worth pursuing (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Gao et al., 2008). These negotiations are visible in multilingual Malaysia, where English coexists with Malay and other languages, each carrying different symbolic loads in family, academic, and professional domains (Azman, 2016; Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013).

2.3. Investment: A Socially Grounded Complement to Motivation

Investment addresses the question of why learners speak or remain silent in particular contexts, linking this decision to their hopes for the future and the capital they expect to gain (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013). Motivation research has long acknowledged integrative and instrumental orientations, yet it often treats these orientations as internal to the individual, whereas investment situates desire within social histories and power relations (McKay & Wong, 1996; Ortega, 2009). A learner may be highly motivated by test scores but still refuse to speak in class if the interactional norms threaten a valued identity or expose the learner to ridicule (Gu, 2008; Norton, 2013). Investment is therefore dynamic and sometimes contradictory, since learners can invest in one context and disinvest in another as conditions shift (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Teng, 2019).

Darvin and Norton (2015) model conceptualizes investment as the intersection of ideology, capital, and identity, which makes visible the macro-level forces that shape micro-level choices (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Ideology governs what is considered reasonable or possible within a given field, capital represents the resources learners possess and can exchange, and identity mediates how learners interpret both ideology and capital in relation to their goals (Bourdieu, 1986; Darvin & Norton, 2015). This triadic model clarifies why some learners persist despite barriers, while others with similar proficiency withdraw when recognition is absent (Gao et al., 2008; Gu, 2008).

2.4. Imagined Communities: Orientations Toward Elsewhere and Otherwise

Anderson's notion that nations are imagined communities because members will never meet most compatriots has been adapted to language learning to account for the powerful role of future-oriented affiliation (Anderson, 1991; Norton, 2013). Language learners often envision themselves as members of academic, professional, or pop cultural communities that are not immediately accessible, and this vision directs their present effort (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Song, 2010). Imagined communities provide a narrative that links current practice to future identity, making investment meaningful even when immediate rewards are slight (Gao et al., 2008; Norton, 2013).

Empirical studies show that learners with clear imagined communities persist in the face of obstacles and use every available channel to advance toward those communities (Black, 2006; Wu, 2017). Conversely, when learners cannot picture a desirable future community or feel that access is blocked by ideology or prejudice, investment wanes and identity becomes fragmented (Gu, 2008; Teng, 2019). The Malaysian context intensifies this dynamic because learners must reconcile local expectations with aspirations for global participation, often within families and schools that hold ambivalent attitudes towards English (Azman, 2016; Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013).

2.5. Communities of Practice: Learning Through Participation

Lave and Wenger (1991) define a community of practice as a group bound by mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire of tools and discourses (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Learning in this view is not the transmission of rules but increased participation in socially recognized activity, a process termed

legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Newcomers begin at the periphery where risk is low and gradually take on more central roles as competence and trust build (Wenger, 1998). Identity changes as participation deepens, since being recognized as a full participant alters how one sees oneself and how others see them (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

In second language settings, classrooms, clubs, online forums, and peer groups can function as communities of practice that either enable or restrict access to meaningful participation (Harklau, 2007; Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008). When norms reward only native-like accuracy, some learners remain peripheral despite strong communicative skills, which can discourage investment (McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 2013). Conversely, when communities value contribution over perfection, learners are more willing to practice, and identities shift towards confidence and ownership (Black, 2006; Lam & Yeh, 2004).

2.6. Intersections: How the Four Constructs Coalesce in Practice

Identity, investment, imagined communities, and communities of practice are analytically distinct yet deeply intertwined in lived experience (Darvin & Norton, 2015). A learner's imagined community provides a target identity that informs where and how to invest, while investment is enacted through participation in actual communities of practice that grant or deny recognition (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The identity that emerges from this participation feeds back into both imagination and future investment, creating a cyclical and iterative process rather than a linear trajectory (Norton, 2013; Wu, 2017). Ideology circulates through all stages by framing what is legitimate, while capital conditions what is possible; hence, the model must always be read against the backdrop of power (Bourdieu, 1986; Darvin & Norton, 2015).

In multilingual Malaysia, these intersections are particularly visible, since learners traverse home domains where Malay or other languages signal intimacy, academic spaces where English indexes scholastic prestige, and online venues where multiple codes coexist (Azman, 2016; Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013). High-proficiency learners in the present study appear to draw strategically on these domains, consolidating a confident English-speaking identity without severing ties to other linguistic affiliations (Black, 2006; Gao et al., 2008). Low-proficiency learners often lack supportive communities or clear imagined futures, which weakens investment and produces a fractured sense of self in relation to English (Gu, 2008; Teng, 2019).

3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employed a multiple case-study design to explore identity formation among high-proficiency ESL learners in Malaysian universities. The case-study method was chosen for its strength in providing deep insights into complex, real-life phenomena within their contextual settings (Yin, 2014). Specifically, a multiple case-study approach enabled a comparative analysis across several cases, capturing variations and similarities in identity negotiation and language learning experiences among high-proficiency learners.

3.1. Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, specifically maximum variation sampling, to provide a broad understanding of ESL learners' experiences. Learners were grouped by their Malaysian University English Test results, with high proficiency defined as Band 4 or above, which indicates competence and fluency in social, academic, and professional contexts (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2020).

An invitation was circulated by email through Google Forms to undergraduates from various degree programmes at a university in Perak, Malaysia. From the responses, twelve high-proficiency learners were selected to maximize variation, with no two learners from the same programme to reduce programme-specific effects. All participants provided informed consent, were fully briefed on the aims of the study, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. In line with research ethics and local practice, the names of the institution and programmes are

withheld to protect privacy and the integrity of the site. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw at any time, in which case their data would be deleted and excluded from the study.

3.2. Instruments and Data Collection

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, three qualitative approaches were used: (i) in-depth interviews, (ii) reflective written narratives, and (iii) observations of digital interaction. Interviews followed a semi-structured guide and were carried out through WhatsApp and Telegram. This format allowed participants to reply at their own pace and use their preferred language, either English or Bahasa Melayu. Each exchange was saved in full. Where voice notes were used, they were transcribed, and where needed, Malay content was translated into English with careful checking by the researcher. The interview guide covered each participant's background, such as their learning experiences, how their sense of self changed, and the effort they put into learning English.

Participants also wrote narrative reflections that traced their paths as learners, including family and schooling, key classroom moments, turning points in identity, reasons for perseverance, and the difficulties they faced. These texts complemented the interviews by slowing the pace and giving room for reflection. During the digital exchanges, the researcher kept field notes on language choice, sentence structure, and visible emotional cues such as hesitation, enthusiasm, or frustration. These observations supplied context for the words and supported the interpretation of how participants positioned themselves in online spaces. Read together, the interviews, narratives, and notes build a fuller picture of the learners' experiences and the identity work that supported them.

4. RESULTS

The qualitative data analysis revealed three prominent themes that shaped the identity formation processes of high-proficiency ESL learners: (i) Confidence and Self-Perception, (ii) Cultural Identity, and (iii) Language Use, as well as Validation and Recognition.

4.1. Confidence and Self-Perception

The concept of identities in language learning, as conceptualized by Bonny Norton, provides a profound framework for understanding how learners perceive themselves and are perceived by others within the context of their language learning journey. Norton's theory of identities explores the complex and dynamic nature of identity construction and negotiation among language learners. This theoretical approach delves into how learners' sense of self is shaped by their language experiences, social interactions, and the broader sociocultural context in which they learn.

For high-proficiency learners, the theme of confidence and self-perception frequently emerges as a crucial aspect of their identity construction. These learners often view their proficiency in English as a significant component of their self-identity, influencing their confidence levels and how they perceive themselves in various social and academic contexts. Their English language skills are not merely a tool for communication but are intertwined with their self-esteem and self-worth. This connection between language proficiency and self-perception plays a crucial role in their ongoing language learning journey, shaping their motivation and engagement.

This theme is deeply connected to Norton's theory, which suggests that learners' investment in language learning is closely linked to their evolving identities and perceptions of themselves within different communities. High-proficiency learners often experience a boost in confidence as they master the language, which, in turn, reinforces their positive self-perception. This positive feedback loop encourages them to continue improving their language skills, as they begin to see themselves as competent and capable English speakers. The following data from high-proficiency learners (interview data [IV] and written narrative [WN]) illustrate their experiences and perceptions related to confidence and self-perception in their language learning journey.

HPL4 (IV): "Sometimes I feel like a pro when I get to use good grammar to present my work in front of my lecturer and classmates."

HPL4 (WN): "…bad in grammar when I was in secondary school. I remember my teacher always helped to correct my grammar. Since then, I have been going to tuition classes, and I try my best to improve my English because I want to be able to speak good English."

HPL10 (IV): "With my EL proficiency now, I feel much more confident when talking with foreigners from other countries. I did try to make some TikTok videos, but I mostly saved them as drafts and didn't publish them."

HPL6 (IV): "When we speak English outside, other people will look at us. Mostly because we are loud, but I don't mind because it shows that we're confident in ourselves, and I feel great when I'm using English to communicate."

HPL6 (WN): "…in all-girls school, use different languages. I remember once that a group of girls called me 'foreigner' because I always use English, but I don't really care…"

HPL12 (IV): "I feel it's quite normal, no particular feeling since I've been speaking English since I was young. My friends told me that my English is good, and I feel happy about that. But I still feel that I need to improve my English."

HPL12 (WN): "I started to use English when I was young, and I rarely use Chinese with my family. Although they do speak to me in Chinese, they also speak to me in English sometimes. They don't mind at all, and that's how English became my first language."

Confidence and self-perception emerged as consistent themes in the learners' stories. They did not appear as fixed traits; instead, they developed through ordinary scenes of talk, study, and performance where effort was observed and acknowledged. In Norton's terms, the right to speak was not simply granted at the outset; it was earned and protected through small acts of participation that drew recognition. As recognition accumulated, investment became meaningful because each new effort appeared likely to be heard.

HPL4 shows the pattern clearly. In secondary school, she worried about grammar and held back. Extra classes and a careful teacher helped her settle the basic forms, and class presentations in university gave her room to try again. When her delivery went well and a lecturer pointed it out, she began to picture herself as a competent speaker. That picture matters. It is a form of capital that has value in the classroom community. With that value in play, she volunteers more often, asks for targeted feedback, and accepts the risk of being corrected. In the language of communities of practice, she moves from the edge to fuller involvement through recognised contribution rather than through status alone.

HPL10 places confidence on a wider stage. He writes and records short pieces for online platforms. Many do not get posted, yet the drafts still matter. The imagined audience is present enough to shape his choices, and the habit of rehearsal keeps his English active outside assessment. This is a quiet form of investment that builds reach over time. It also links present practice with a future role as a speaker who can address people beyond the campus. The imagined community is not fantasy. It is a concrete prompt that keeps attention on topic choice, tone, and clarity.

HPL6 reminds us that confidence also involves resistance. She enjoys using English with friends in public even when strangers stare or when peers once called her a foreigner. She chooses to treat those moments as proof that she and her friends are brave and at ease with English. That reading is not naive. It is a deliberate stance that protects self-belief and keeps the door open to further talk. Here, the social cost is real. Face can be at risk. Yet she keeps participating, which shows how identity and investment work together when recognition is mixed or uncertain.

HPL12 offers a calmer scene. English and Chinese sit side by side at home, so English use feels natural rather than special. Compliments from friends are welcome but do not slow her down. She wants stronger control over form and a wider range of words. Home life here functions as a community of practice that makes English ordinary. The setting carries expectations and routines that do not need to be rehearsed in class, which frees effort for more complex tasks.

Across cases, confidence appears as a cycle. Public success, even a small one, raises belief in one's own voice. That lift makes the next attempt more likely, and it invites recognition from others. Recognition then has value as capital

in the group and feeds back into identity as an English user. When recognition is thin, learners manage exposure, speak less, or choose safer ground to protect ties and face, but they seldom stop. Teaching can support the cycle by giving regular short chances to speak, naming what went well with precision, and inviting reflection on how identity shifts across family, campus, and online spaces. These simple moves help turn participation into something that is expected and shared, which in turn sustains investment beyond the exam room.

4.2. Cultural Identity and Language Use

The exploration of cultural identity and language use offers a deeper understanding of how high-proficiency learners navigate their bilingual or multilingual environments. This theme examines the ways in which learners perceive their cultural identities in relation to their language use, particularly English. For many high-proficiency learners, English serves as a bridge to different cultural contexts and social circles, allowing them to negotiate their identities in diverse settings.

The relationship between cultural identity and language use is complex. Learners often find themselves balancing between different linguistic and cultural worlds, shaping their sense of self and belonging. This balancing act is influenced by various factors, including their personal experiences, social interactions, and the cultural norms of their communities. As they engage with English, these learners not only acquire a new language but also integrate new cultural perspectives into their identities.

This theme is closely related to Norton (2013), which emphasizes the dynamic nature of identity construction in language learning. According to Norton (2013), learners' identities are continuously reshaped through their interactions with others and their engagement with different communities. High-proficiency learners often develop a nuanced understanding of their cultural identities, recognizing the impact of English on their sense of self and their place in the world. The data from high-proficiency learners, as illustrated below, show how cultural identity and language use intersect, revealing the intricate ways in which these learners navigate their bilingual or multilingual realities.

HPL3 (IV): "Since I am used to the language, I feel it is normal. I do use Malay depending on whom I am speaking with (family)."

HPL1 (IV): "I don't particularly feel any connection to anyone when using any languages, probably because it's normal to be able to speak multiple languages here."

HPL1 (WN): "I learn to speak multiple languages, but I'm not good at them. I just learn for fun, like Japanese and Spanish. I learn Japanese because I watch anime a lot, and I can sometimes understand the Japanese language without English translation…"

HPL5 (IV): "... not really. I guess because I grew up in an English-speaking environment, it feels normal already, like when we use our mother tongue to speak with our family or friends."

HPL5 (WN): "…a rise in big cities, English is very common. Even though I use Malay language a lot, English is my second language, and I use it with my friends all the time. Sometimes I mix Malay and English, but that's how I am used to speaking in English."

HPL7 (IV): "I find it interesting when some actors or actresses in Korean dramas suddenly speak English. It shocks me because when they speak English, they have their own accent, and I'm fascinated by it. I try to develop an accent when speaking English, but I don't think I can."

HPL7 (WN): "I love watching dramas, especially Korean dramas. Since young, I like Korean culture because my sister introduced it to me… I learn Korean by using Google Translate and sometimes I try to use Korean language to post comments on websites to chat with Korean people, even though I'm not that good since I use Google Translate. But I'm happy because sometimes, people reply to me in Korean too."

High-proficiency learners navigate more than two languages; they also shuttle between the cultural meanings those languages carry. Each narrative reveals a learner fine-tuning linguistic choices to suit setting, audience, and

personal interest, confirming Norton's claim that identity work is never settled but continually renegotiated through practice.

At home, everyday bilingual practice was clear. HPL3 kept Malay for family talk and used English when the context called for it, which made code-switching between languages feel normal rather than forced. HPL5's transcripts showed a similar balance. English was common in city life and among friends, while Malay language remained strong at home, and she often mixed both when that felt natural. These are not slips. They are skilled responses to setting and relationships that signal membership to the right audience while keeping family intimacy intact.

Interests pulled some learners into other cultural circles as well. HPL1 experimented with Japanese and a little Spanish because anime drew her in, and she sometimes followed stories without English subtitles. In her case, English stayed useful as a bridge, while the extra language added depth and a sense of belonging among global fans. HPL7 pushed further into Korean. She watched dramas, noticed accents, and tried short posts in Korean with the help of translation tools. The replies she received kept her trying new words and forms. This was not idle browsing. It was practice with an imagined audience that felt close enough to matter, and it fits the view that identity grows through links and participation rather than through one fixed group.

HPL7 shows how technology accelerates these journeys. Using translation software and fan forums, she ventures into Korean, posts comments, then receives replies that validate her effort. This digital relay captures the essence of Connectivism: knowledge is distributed, learning occurs through links, and identity coalesces around networks rather than fixed groups. The replies she receives convert abstract interest into a felt sense of community membership, encouraging further risk-taking with new vocabulary and pronunciation.

Across all four accounts, language choice is never a simple reflex. It is an act of positioning: preserving heritage ties, signaling cosmopolitan ease, claiming membership in transnational fan cultures, or experimenting with new voices online. Recognising this complexity matters for teaching. Classroom policies that ban codeswitching or treat popular culture as distractions miss an opportunity to connect curriculum with lived linguistic practice. Instead, tasks that invite students to analyse song lyrics, translate family stories, or moderate bilingual discussion boards can honour the full range of linguistic resources they already command.

In short, cultural identity for these learners is less a stable badge than a toolkit they reach for on demand. English figures prominently, yet it shares space with Malay, Japanese, Korean, and any language that carries personal value. That fluidity is not a sign of divided loyalties; it is evidence of agile, context-sensitive competence; a hallmark of twenty-first-century communicators.

4.3. Validation and Recognition

The theme of Validation and Recognition provides insight into how high-proficiency learners perceive their language learning journey and the impact of external feedback on their identity formation. This theme explores the significance of validation and recognition from peers, teachers, and family members in shaping learners' confidence, motivation, and self-perception. For high-proficiency learners, positive reinforcement and acknowledgment of their English proficiency not only boost their self-esteem but also reinforce their commitment to continue improving their language skills. The concept of validation and recognition is closely related to Norton's theory, which emphasizes the dynamic nature of identity construction in language learning. Norton (2013) stated that learners' identities are continuously reshaped through their interactions with others and their engagement with different communities. High-proficiency learners often experience a sense of validation and recognition that strengthens their linguistic identities and motivates them to achieve higher levels of proficiency.

The data from high-proficiency learners illustrated below demonstrate how validation and recognition play a vital role in their language learning experiences and identity formation. These narratives reveal the intricate ways in

which learners perceive and respond to external feedback, highlighting the importance of social affirmation in their journey toward English language proficiency.

HPL11 (IV): "It might sound weird, but I sometimes read out loud, trying to be in character. It's fun, but I only do it when I'm alone or I imagine myself talking in a certain way."

HPL2 (IV): "Sometimes it's awkward for me to speak in English when I am with people who are not proficient in English. I tend to use their mother tongue to communicate with them."

HPL1 (IV): "... my family relies on me to translate certain words or sentences for them in English. I feel happy that they can rely on me for that."

HPL1 (WN): "When we go on vacation overseas, I am the one who usually handles everything. My brother helps as well, but mostly I do the talking, and my family relies heavily on me…"

HPL8 (IV): "I'm always called to be the emcee for a program, since my friends think that my English is fluent, but I always tell them that my grammar is bad. They don't really care and still ask me to be the emcee. I feel great, but sometimes I get stressed because of my weak grammar."

HPL8 (WN): "...remember being involved in a lot of programs. I am an active person, and I like joining many activities. I remember my first emcee job in secondary school, and I was so nervous that I couldn't speak. But I learn from mistakes, and my teacher slowly guided me to become a good emcee."

These accounts demonstrate that recognition does not manifest in a single form. It is experienced in private practice, within family trust, and through public roles. In Norton's terms, identity is constructed through use. When a contribution is acknowledged and taken seriously, the right to speak increases, and further effort becomes meaningful because it is more likely to be heard.

Validation and recognition operate along three overlapping pathways that together reinforce the linguistic confidence of high proficiency learners, namely solitary rehearsal, family reliance, and public endorsement. HPL11 illustrates the first pathway: she reads English texts aloud and slips into different characters when alone, transforming her bedroom into a rehearsal studio where she can refine pronunciation, intonation, and stance without fear of judgment. This private language play enlarges what Bakhtin describes as an inventory of voices, places the learner in a self-fashioned zone of proximal development, and confirms Norton's claim that investment in language learning is propelled as much by imagined audiences as by real ones. The sense of progress gained in these sessions becomes an internal source of validation that prepares the learner to re-enter actual discourse with renewed assurance.

A second form of recognition emerges in the family setting. HPL1 routinely handles hotel check-ins, restaurant orders, and travel inquiries during overseas trips, thereby acting as the household translator. Each successful interaction converts linguistic competence into symbolic capital, positioning the learner as a trusted mediator between the family and the wider English-speaking world. From the standpoint of communities of practice, the family forms an intimate circle in which English is associated with agency and care. The trust placed in HPL1 fuels pride, heightens responsibility, and deepens commitment to further study, demonstrating how even small, recurring acts of affirmation can consolidate a durable identity as a capable English user.

Public endorsement from peers and mentors provides a third strand of validation. HPL8 recalls being paralyzed with anxiety during her first emcee assignment at school yet recounts how patient coaching from a teacher and repeated invitations from classmates gradually transformed her into a confident host. Each successful performance offered tangible proof of competence while also exposing areas, such as grammar accuracy, that the learner wished to polish. In contrast, HPL2 tempers her English in social gatherings where friends feel less secure, opting for the mother tongue in order to maintain rapport. This choice reveals the delicate balance between showcasing proficiency and sustaining group harmony, underscoring Brown and Levinson (1987), view that politeness and face maintenance shape linguistic behaviour as surely as grammatical knowledge does.

Taken together, these pathways create a simple but strong cycle. Private rehearsal fosters a sense of readiness. Family trust converts skill into a valued role. Public invitations confirm membership in wider circles. Each step

provides a reason to keep investing, and each success invites the next attempt. Where affirmation is thin or mixed, learners manage exposure, shift language to protect ties, or look for safer ground, but they rarely stop. The point is not constant display. The point is steady participation that fits the place and the people present.

In summary, validation for these learners is ordinary and practical. A line read aloud in a bedroom, a request to translate for parents, a successful turn as host, or a tactful switch to the mother tongue can all anchor identity. When learners feel that English serves real purposes and is recognized by people who matter to them, they keep going. That steady movement is what sustains achievement beyond the exam room.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined identity among high-proficiency learners of English in Malaysian universities through the lenses of identity, investment, and imagined communities. Following Norton (2013), identity here is constructed in practice rather than being a fixed trait. It encompasses confidence and self-perception, cultural identity and language use, as well as validation and recognition. Learners establish a sense of right to speak through ordinary participation that garners acknowledgment from individuals who matter to them. According to the model proposed by Darvin and Norton (2015), this participation is influenced by identity, access to valued capital, and the ideologies that shape which choices are deemed acceptable in a given context. A community of practice perspective, as outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991), also aligns with the data, since membership is demonstrated through contributions recognized as useful by others. Learners did not begin with an assured voice. Confidence grew as they participated in public tasks and received feedback from teachers and peers. In Norton (2013), legitimacy as a speaker is produced in interaction and strengthens investment when others treat the contribution as worth hearing. The acknowledgement that followed a good presentation or a clear answer worked like symbolic capital in the sense described by Bourdieu (1991) because it had value in the group and could be used to enter the next activity. As learners drew on that value, they moved from peripheral to fuller participation in the sense outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991). This movement helps to explain why they kept volunteering even when accuracy still worried them. The pattern also matches work that ties clear aims to sustained effort, including Song (2010) and Gao et al. (2008), where imagined professional roles focus attention and keep practice going. Cultural identity and language use involve careful judgment rather than a simple switch. At home, Malay and other languages protected intimacy, while English entered when a task required it. On campus, English often marked readiness to lead, yet side talk returned to the mother tongue to keep ties warm. Online, learners wrote with audiences beyond Malaysia in view and shaped tone and topic accordingly. These choices reveal how identity, capital, and ideology intersect in Darvin and Norton (2015). Learners read power in the setting and selected the language that would keep doors open without damaging relationships. In communities of practice, terms from Lave and Wenger (1991), they displayed membership by speaking in ways that fit the place and the task. What classroom discourse might call translanguaging was, for them, ordinary practice. It allowed them to carry feeling, humour, and care while still using English for study and outreach. The Malaysian setting makes this visible because more than one language has everyday value. Validation and recognition formed three intertwined routes. Private rehearsal-built readiness, family reliance turned skill into responsibility, and public invitations confirmed membership in wider circles. Each route supplied reasons to keep investing. Where praise was mixed or thin, learners managed exposure, shifted language to protect face in the terms set out by Brown and Levinson (1987), or paused before the next public attempt. The movement across these routes fits a view of identity as negotiated rather than settled in Norton (2013). It also shows how recognition converts into capital that travels from one setting to another, in the sense of Bourdieu (1991) a process that helps to stabilize the identity of a capable English user.

Imagined communities and digital work link present practice with future roles. Drafting captions, recording short pieces, or reading aloud in private positioned learners for audiences that felt real even when they were not present. The imagined audience shaped choices about stance and pacing and kept practicing regularly between formal assessments, which aligns with a connectivist reading in Siemens (2005), in which knowledge and support are

distributed across networks and learning takes shape through links. Where support is weak, the risk of fragmented identity and reduced effort noted by Teng (2019) is easier to understand. Learners in this study sometimes held back display to protect relationships when recognition felt uncertain, yet they rarely withdrew from English altogether.

Placed within the broader literature, the results extend previous accounts in two significant ways. First, they demonstrate how recognition in family life and on campus provides the daily motivation that sustains imagined futures, adding detail to studies emphasizing aspiration, such as (Song, 2010) and Gao et al. (2008). Second, they illustrate how multilingual practice enables learners to balance care for their group with ambitions for broader reach, aligning with the interaction of identity, capital, and ideology discussed in Darvin and Norton (2015). Rather than abandoning Malay or other languages, learners utilize a wider set of resources to meet the demands of different contexts and audiences. This flexible control is central to how identity and investment are constructed and maintained, as outlined in Norton (2013). In sum, the discussion links the three themes to identity, investment, and imagined communities in Norton (2013) and to related ideas of capital, ideology and membership in practice from Bourdieu (1991); Darvin and Norton (2015) and Lave and Wenger (1991). Confidence grew when contributions were heard. Language choice managed power and belonging across settings. Recognition in private, family, and public scenes kept investment steady. The fit with prior studies strengthens the claims, while the Malaysian context shows how they work in a place where several languages have everyday value.

6. CONCLUSION

This qualitative multiple case study examined the formation of identities among high-proficiency ESL learners in Malaysian universities through Norton's theories of identity, investment, and imagined communities. Findings underscore the dynamic and positive linguistic identities constructed by these learners, significantly influenced by their confidence, validation from social networks, and clear future aspirations related to global imagined communities. High-proficiency learners consistently demonstrated a strong sense of linguistic competence, shaped profoundly by supportive social interactions, clear academic and professional goals, and intrinsic motivation, which collectively fostered sustained investment in language learning.

The study aligns closely with previous research, highlighting the critical role of supportive environments, clear identity aspirations, and positive reinforcement in language identity formation processes. Practically, these insights advocate for integrating identity-oriented pedagogical strategies within ESL curricula in Malaysian universities. Educators are encouraged to cultivate supportive and inclusive language learning environments that explicitly acknowledge learners' identities and aspirations, thereby fostering sustained engagement, motivation, and ultimately, higher levels of language proficiency. Future studies could expand on these findings by exploring identity formation across different proficiency levels, diverse educational contexts, and varied cultural backgrounds. Such research would further clarify the complex nature of identity negotiation processes and their implications for language education globally, enriching both theoretical and practical understandings of ESL teaching and learning.

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