Investing in English: Imagined Identities among Indonesian *Pesantren* Students

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on the author's doctoral research exploring EFL learners' identity and investment through arts-based intervention in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). Grounded in Bonny Norton Peirce's (1995, 2013) concept of investment, it examines how *pesantren* students imagine their identities as English learners and what motivates their investment in the language. The study involved 29 students (aged 16 to 18) from three senior high school *pesantren* in Depok, West Java. Data were collected mainly from focus groups and analysed using thematic and critical discourse analysis. Findings show that most students strived to become successful language learners, and some projected identities as proficient English users. Other participants lacked clear imagined identities despite expressing ongoing interest in learning the language for its symbolic values. Notably, a new form of 'virtuous investment' emerged, wherein students framed English learning as an act of religious duty aligned with Islamic teachings. This finding invites an extension of the investment framework to consider learners' religious beliefs or spiritual identities as another factor that shapes their aspirations and commitment to language acquisition. It also suggests that the concept of 'spiritual capital' should be included to extend Darvin and Norton's (2015) definition of 'capital,' which may be particularly relevant in educational contexts like *pesantren* where learners' faith plays a pivotal role in their learning trajectories. This article concludes by emphasising the need of recognising these diverse elements to assist educators develop more inclusive teaching strategies that appreciate learners as complex social beings and cater to the needs of various English language learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

What possibilities does English as a foreign language learning offer to learners outside the Anglophone world? While a significant body of research has explored language learners' imagined identities and investment in predominantly sociocultural contexts of the Global North, little is known about those learning English in other settings, particularly in religious contexts of the Global South. This gap calls for the need for future research on how English language learning is experienced in other sociocultural and institutional spaces such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia.

The present study is largely informed by Norton Peirce's (1995, 2013) concept of *investment* as well as Darvin and Norton's (2015) identity-investment-capital model. Drawn on Weedon's (1987) poststructuralist conception of identity as multiple, shifting, and a site of struggle, the notion of investment complements the psychological construct of motivation by positioning language learners within larger sociocultural, historical, and political structures. Norton's investment theory explains that when learners learn a new language, they are not only acquiring linguistic skills but are also attempting to access material and symbolic resources that shape their social positioning. Grounded on Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital, Norton further highlights that learners invest in the language with the expectation of enhancing their future opportunities and status.

Extending this theoretical framework through Anderson's (1983) notion of *imagined communities* and Wenger's (1998) theory of *communities of practice*, Norton (2001, 2010, 2013) introduced the concepts of *imagined communities* and *imagined identities* in language learning. According to Norton (2001), *imagined identities are* a sense of possible self that learners aspire to become in the future, and *imagined communities* are a desired community that learners hope to be part of. The two concepts help to explain how learners shape their commitment to language learning by imagining themselves as belonging to ideal future communities and roles that might go beyond their current circumstances. Although they are not tangible, these imagined constructs are powerful because they often have a greater impact on learners' investments than their immediate social environments. Several studies have shown that imagined

communities and identities can improve learner engagement (e.g., Kanno & Norton, 2003; Schwieter, 2013; Chang, 2016) although they may also cause ambivalence or resistance (Wu, 2017).

While studies on investment and imagined identities largely focus on learners in Anglophone or secular contexts, there is a growing body of research that began to address this imbalance by exploring how these constructs play out in other parts of the world. For example, Wu (2017) conducted a qualitative study of Taiwanese EFL university students and found that learners' imagined identities as English teachers, professionals, or prominent speakers significantly influenced their investment in language learning, while they could also lead to frustration or disengagement when they felt unachievable. These identities are shaped by personal and social factors, affecting their investment at various levels of learning. More recently, Nghia (2020) drew on autoethnographic reflections of his English learning experience in Vietnam. He described how his imagined identities as a student, teacher, and academic shaped his evolving investment in the language throughout time. He also asserted that higher social standing would affect the priority of his investments.

In an Islamic context, Soltanian and Ghapanchi (2021) applied the advanced model of investment developed by Darvin and Norton (2015) to explore the factors influencing Iranian EFL learners' engagement with English. Their study found that Iranian learners made diverse investments in the language and their goals were mainly economically driven, such as pursuing education abroad, seeking promising employment, and engaging in international business networks. Besides these material goals, learners also aspired for symbolic investments, including learning about different cultures, achieving academic prestige, and elevating social standing. These findings aligned with Haghighi and Norton's (2016) earlier study, which examined how English language institutes in Iran facilitated learner investment through access to new identities and imagined futures. However, Soltanian and Ghapanchi (2021) also revealed tensions. They noted that learners' views on effective English instruction often diverged from institutional norms. They also found that sociopolitical forces, such as the country's preference for Arabic and Persian due to cultural scepticism toward Western culture, discouraged sustained investment in classroom practices. These findings demonstrate that English language investment in Muslim-majority settings is complex, shaped not only by learners' desires but also by ideological tensions and institutional dynamics. Nonetheless, they overlook the specific role of religious belief as a significant factor

of investment. Despite being conducted in Islamic contexts, neither study investigates the relationship between learners' faith and desired identities or future aspirations. This omission is noteworthy given that religion is often a fundamental component of identity, especially in Islamic education systems, where the intersection of faith and global language acquisition may have profound cultural, spiritual, and ideological implications (Baker & Miles-Watson, 2008; Block, 2014; Lepp-Kaethler & Dörnyei, 2013).

This intersection of language learning and learners' religious identity is particularly prominent in Indonesia. Approximately 20% of the nation's school-age population is educated at traditional Islamic boarding schools. These institutions have evolved to meet contemporary demands by integrating science, technology, and English language instruction alongside Islamic studies (Azra, 2014; Hidayati, 2016; Kingham, 2023). Since they draw more and more families who seek education that balances global competitiveness and religious foundation, it becomes crucial to understand how *pesantren* students view English, how they envision themselves using the language, and how their Islamic values shape their investment in the language.

However, to date, little is known about these dynamics. Although English is becoming increasingly important in Islamic schools, existing research has yet to investigate how students in Indonesian *pesantren* schools construct their imagined identities or what drives their use of the language. Therefore, this article, drawn from the preliminary study of my doctoral research, attempts to address this gap by exploring the following research questions:

1. How do Indonesian *pesantren* students imagine their identities as English learners?
2. What motivates their investment in learning English?

By focusing on a context often overlooked in mainstream SLA literature, this study aims to provide insight into how English language learning is incorporated into larger religious, sociocultural, and aspirational frameworks, particularly in a Muslim-majority country. This study adds to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of learners' identity and language learning investments beyond the Global North by cantering the discussion on learners' voices from a socioculturally diverse context.

METHOD

This article is based on a preliminary study that formed my doctoral research at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. The larger research explored language learner identity, investment, and agency in Indonesian *pesantren* school context using arts-based research design. This article reports on the initial phase, which employed a qualitative case study design (Stake, 1995). This methodology was selected to enable an in-depth exploration of learners' imagined identities and investment in learning English within three *pesantren* settings. As a bounded system, the case involved a specific group of multilingual students who fully resided and studied in these schools. The insights from this phase helped shape the design of a subsequent arts-based intervention.

1. Research Context

The study took place in Depok, a rapidly urbanising satellite city in West Java, Indonesia. I chose Depok based on two considerations. First, located on the outskirts of Jakarta, Depok reflects a unique intersection of ethnic diversity, religious influence, and postcolonial history, making it a rich site for exploring how such complexities may shape young people's experiences and perspectives. Second, while studies on Indonesian urban life predominantly centres on metropolitan areas, satellite cities like Depok have received relatively little scholarly attention (Irsam, 2017).

Depok is home to a mix of ethnic groups, primarily Betawi, Sundanese, and Javanese. This diversity can be seen in its linguistic landscape. Betawi is the most widely spoken local dialect, followed by Sundanese, and the Indonesian language is used as the lingua franca, especially in formal domains. English has replaced the Dutch after the country's independence and has grown in prominence since then as evidenced by the widespread of private English courses around the city.

Although Depok has seen significant economic growth, inequality endures, with approximately 2.53% of the population—equivalent to 64,360 residents—currently living below the poverty line (BPS-Statistics of Depok, 2023). Outside the city centre, there are still remnants of agricultural activity, coexisting with newly developed real estate and gated communities.

Religion plays a significant role in Depok's identity. With over 93% of its population identifying as Muslim, Depok promotes itself as a "religious city." Islamic education is mainly offered through Islamic

boarding schools which can be generally categorised into *salafi* (traditional) and *khalafi* (modern) types. Most *pesantren* in the city are affiliated with *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), a traditional Islamic organisation. Others are aligned with the modernist movement *Muhammadiyah*, or specialise in Qur'anic studies (*tahfiz*).

2. Participants

The study invited 29 students (aged 16-18) from three senior high school *pesantren*. Initially, ten students were recruited from each school, but one participant was unable to attend due to health reasons. The group was gender-balanced (14 males, 15 females) and represented a range of ethnic backgrounds: Betawi, Javanese, Sundanese, Bataknese, and Minangnese. Most participants came from lower-middle-income families. Their parents normally held high-school qualifications and worked as low-level employees, small merchants, and manual labourers.

Participants were highly multilingual. For most, Indonesian was the first language although many also used local languages at home and in informal settings. Within the *pesantren* environment, Arabic and English were required, and students occasionally switched between these languages and Indonesian depending on context. On average, participants had studied English for 7 to 9 years, beginning in elementary school. The majority had never taken private English courses, nor had they travelled to English-speaking countries. Only two students (one from Pesantren A and one from Pesantren C) reported overseas experience.

3. Data Collection

A wide range of data collection and analytic methods were employed to improve the validity and credibility of this study. Focus group interviews served as the main data collection method, supported by observations and informal interviews with principals, English language teachers, and curriculum coordinators across the three *pesantren* schools. Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews to make participants feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and to address ethical concerns related to a female researcher working with male students individually.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015), based on three basic criteria: (1) aged 16-18, (2) speaking at least two languages, and (3) full-time residents of the *pesantren*. Curriculum coordinators provided me with a list of

students who met this requirement and grouped them by gender. Each group included five students—large enough to gain diverse perspectives, yet small enough to maintain focus (Krueger, 1994). Written consent was obtained from all participants and their *wali* (parents/guardians) before the focus groups.

Focus groups were divided into two rounds to avoid fatigue and deepen discussion. The first round explored participants' language profiles in general. They were asked about their language use, preferences, and perceptions through open-ended questions and warm-up activities, such as listing the languages they spoke and ranking them by importance and difficulty. This helped situate their views on English within the broader context of their multilingual practices and identities (Aronin, 2019). The second round focused on their English learning experiences, aspirations, and imagined futures. Enabling techniques were used to help participants express complex thoughts (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Each focus group lasted 45-60 minutes and followed a semi-structured format to allow participants to describe their personal experiences in detail (Leavy, 2017). They were organised in a 'funnel' format, starting with broad questions and gradually moving to more specific ones (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015), making students feel more at ease when answering sensitive topics.

All focus groups were conducted in Indonesian to ensure ease of expression. They took place in private classrooms to minimise distractions and protect participants' privacy. Participants were seated around a table to facilitate interaction, and all sessions were audio-recorded with consent. All focus groups were performed in person, which allowed me to build rapport with the participants and observe non-verbal cues that enriched the data. To ensure their confidentiality, all names used in this article are pseudonyms.

4. Data Analysis Procedure

I transcribed the focus group recordings verbatim. Given the relatively small number of participants, coding and thematic analysis were done manually. The unit of analysis was the individual participant. I adopted an inductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), developing codes and themes from the data. The analysis focused on semantic content (what participants said) and latent meanings, such as ideas and assumptions. The thematic analysis followed six key steps:

1) **Familiarisation**: I read the transcripts multiple times to immerse myself in the data and gain the 'big picture' (Leavy,

2017: 147). This helped me identify emerging meanings and patterns.

2) **Data organisation**: I imported the transcripts into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis and structured the content by interview questions.

3) **Initial coding**: I reread the data, highlighted important excerpts, and assigned codes to key ideas. Excerpts with similar meaning were grouped under the same code, and new codes were added as needed. For example, in regard to the first research question on learner imagined identities, I adapted codes drawn from Wu (2017), such as *'successful language learners'* and *'proficient English users'*, and I added *'unclear imagined identity'*. For the second research question on learner investment, codes included: '*learning English to understand the lesson,' 'to pass school exams,' 'to pass university entrance test,' 'to get a good job,' 'to support future career,' 'to get acknowledgment from others,' 'to look cool,' 'to enjoy a wide range of entertainment,' 'to travel abroad,' 'to make parents/family proud,'* and *'to receive divine blessings and rewards.'*

4) **Review and refinement**: I revisited the initial codes and compiled all related excerpts to obtain a deeper understanding of how participants expressed similar motivations. Codes were revised as needed.

5) **Theme development**: Related codes were merged into broader themes. For example, *'learning English to get acknowledgment from others'* and *'learning English to look cool'* were grouped under *'learning English for social recognition.'* Similarly, *'learning English to understand the lesson,' 'learning English for passing school exams,'* and *'learning English for passing university entrance test'* codes were merged into *'learning English for academic purposes'.*

6) **Theme refinement**: I examined these provisional themes iteratively, returning to the coded data to ensure each theme was well-defined and meaningful. This process resulted in three major themes: *'learning English for material/instrumental benefits,' 'learning English for social recognition,'* and *'learning English as virtuous actions.'* These themes were then interpreted in relation to the literature on language learning investment.

I documented the development of codes and themes after each round of focus groups, for a total of six rounds. The analysis began with Pesantren A, where an initial coding scheme was developed from the first group. I then refined and expanded the codes as I analysed subsequent groups within the same site. The process was repeated for Pesantren B and C. By the time I completed the analysis of Pesantren B's data, code frequency had stabilised, indicating data saturation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. *Pesantren* Students' Imagined Identities

Thematic analysis of the focus group discussions revealed that most participants envisioned themselves as *successful language learners*, and a few imagined themselves as *proficient English users.* Others lacked clear imagined identities while remaining interested in English for its symbolic value.

a. Becoming Successful English Language Learners

The majority of participants (n=14) strived to build competence in English, particularly for academic purposes such as understanding lessons and passing exams. They emphasised the need for building grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, and native-like pronunciations. All of which were key markers of English proficiency in their view. The participants frequently used Indonesian expressions like *'bisa,' 'dapat,'* and *'mampu'* ('able to'/'can'), which highlighted their intention to build language competence. They viewed success as achievable through consistent efforts rather than talent. As Soleh (Pesantren B, 17 years old) stated, 'Even though you have the talent, but you do not make it as a habit, the language will become rusty.' For many participants, English is the most difficult language due to its irregular grammar and varied pronunciation. Soleh likened it to "twisting the tongue." Despite these difficulties, Soleh saw English as a "benchmark" since mastering it would ease learning other languages.

While some participants enjoyed learning other foreign languages, such as Korean and Hindi for entertainment, English maintained greater importance due to its role in their education. Many participants stated that English was essential for understanding lessons and passing exams. Several participants also linked English competence to aspirations of studying abroad, even in countries where English is not the official language like Egypt and Turkey. Soleh,

for instance, was aware that many universities require proof of English language proficiency. He noted that 'I can have the world in my hands' if he succeeded in pursuing his education abroad. Others highlighted the continuing role of English use in higher education contexts such as for reading scholarly texts and accessing knowledge. In this sense, English was not merely a school subject but also a means for long-term educational attainment.

The participants' imagined identities echo Gil and Adamson's assertion (2011) that English is a gatekeeper to better education and opportunities. Their main instrumental motivation to learn English for academic advancement was in line with Soltanian and Ghapanchi's (2021) study in Iran, where English is associated with educational attainment. Similar to the Iranian learners, Indonesian students also encountered obstacles including lack of immersion that made English feel detached and challenging. While English may not be immediately useful for everyday communication, in *pesantren* contexts, English has symbolic power as it is envisioned for imagined futures including gaining scholarships and access to prestigious overseas education. Although there is still little actual English language practice in the *pesantren* setting, these imagined identities reflect learners' aspirations for language-based transformation.

b. Becoming Proficient English Users

Besides aspiring to become successful English learners, nine participants envisioned themselves as proficient English users. They acknowledged that English was not only a mandatory school subject but also an essential medium of communication within the *pesantren* environment. As Arya mentioned:

> 'Learning English is very important apart from Arabic because I live in a boarding school environment, and I have to speak foreign languages with teachers and friends. (…) English is the number one language in the world now because it is an international language. English is dominant, even in Arab countries.' (Arya, Pesantren B, 17 years old).

Arya's references to English as a global lingua franca show his awareness of the globalisation discourse (Chang, 2016), where English occupies a central role in international communication. Other participants, such as Ahsan and Fatima, articulated a desire to connect with people from around the world, representing their desired identities as global citizens:

> '(…) I want to improve my English, so I will be able to interact with people from different countries, especially nowadays, there are many *bule*[1] like tourists and expats[2] (…). My father, for example, works as a driver for an expat family in Jakarta. (…) He told me to learn English. It will be useful when I meet with foreigners.' (Ahsan, Pesantren A, 17 years old)

> (…) Based on my experience, speaking good English may come in handy. My hometown of Magelang is always packed with foreign tourists during the holiday season. Sometimes these tourists get lost, so I help them find directions (…). (Fatima, Pesantren C, 17 years old).

It is clear from their comments that Ahsan and Fatima recognised the importance of learning English to become 'global multilingual citizens' (Norton, 2016). Their imagined identities and motivation to learn English were greatly shaped by local interactions and present-day realities.

Moreover, for some, English was regarded as a key to accessing global media and digital participation. For example, Salwa, Widya, and Ilham mentioned that knowing English allowed them to enjoy a wide range of entertainment and social media platforms:

> 'I like watching English films, and I wish I could do it without translation. (...) Also because my friends and I love listening to Western songs, we want to know the meanings. It's just fun when you understand the lyrics and sing them together.' (Salwa, Pesantren A, 17 years old).

> '(…) Many young people nowadays use social media like Instagram. If you know English, you can follow the trend.' (Widya, Pesantren C, 17 years old).

> '(…) For example, in an online game, if there is English [language] you can understand what it means.' (Ilham, Pesantren B, 18 years old).

In these cases, participants' imagined identities were partly recreational in nature, and they pointed to the symbolic power of English in granting them access to worldwide popular culture and digital spaces. Participants reported that they usually enjoyed this variety of entertainment during the semester holidays at home because internet access was restricted in the *pesantrens*.

c. Unclear Imagined Identities

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[1] '*Bule*' / bu-lé / is an Indonesian word commonly used to refer to white foreigners or Caucasians.

[2] '*Ekspat*' is a shortened form of '*ekspatriat*' /eks·pat·ri·at/ in the Indonesian language or '*expatriates*,' which refers to foreigners living in Indonesia.

While most participants could express their aspirations in learning English, six participants did not appear to have clearly defined their imagined identities. This finding suggests that Norton's framework may be less applicable for learners who have not yet developed clear future goals. Nonetheless, these participants still valued English for its symbolic prestige. Basim (Pesantren A, 18 years old), for example, wanted to be fluent in English so that one day he could brag about his skills to his neighbours:

> 'Honestly, I'm not sure what really makes me interested in studying English, but… I think the people around me, like my neighbours, have given me this idea that knowing English makes you smarter than others.'

Similarly, Hayya (Pesantren A, 17 years old) believed that speaking English would make her family proud:

> '(…) With English I can be successful in the future. So, I can make my parents proud. No one in my family speaks English.'

Basim and Hayya's opinions imply how English is perceived as a marker of intelligence and social status. As Manara (2014) and Lauder (2008) argue, English is seen as highly prestigious in Indonesian society, to the point that mastering the language has become synonymous with one's intellectual capacity and strong educational credentials. These symbolic values seemed to sustain their interest in learning the language even in the absence of specific educational goals.

2. *Pesantren* Students' Investment in Learning English

This section addresses the second research question: What motivates *pesantren* students' investment in learning English? Drawing on Norton Peirce's theory of investment (1995), the thematic analysis of the focus groups discovered three key forms of investment: *material investment*, *symbolic investment*, and what I term *virtuous investment*. While the first two align with Norton's original framework, the third is shaped by the religio-cultural dimension not previously theorised. In what follows, I will explain each form in turn, starting with material investment.

a. Material Investment: Economic Gains and Structural Constraints

In the focus groups, the participants unanimously agreed that English proficiency is a valuable asset for gaining a competitive edge in the job market, leading to a good job and a high-paying salary. For instance, for Arya, English proficiency is *'a plus value'* in his resume.

> '(…) *InsyaAllah* [if God wills] I want to work in big companies in Jakarta. Big companies will give me a good salary (…) Knowing English well can make it easier to work [in the company]. When tasks are given in English, I can easily get the job done.'

Realising that multinational companies nowadays prioritise candidates with a good command of English, Arya saw English as an economic asset. He associated learning English with the instrumental benefits derived from his 'imagined community' (Norton, 2001) of corporate professionals in Jakarta.

Moreover, the data suggest that the participants' emphasis on the value of learning English to provide access and opportunities for economic advantages and advancement in life (Ushioda 2017) is closely tied to their socioeconomic status. They believed that English proficiency could serve as 'a golden ticket' to socioeconomic mobility, as Arya put it. This is vividly described in an elaborate comment from Ahsan.

> 'My parents bend over backward so that they will be able to send me to university. On weekends, (…) my father would work as a porter at the market, so we can earn more money and save it for my college tuition.'

Both Ahsan's parents were manual labourers. Deeply touched by their sacrifice, Ahsan hoped to earn a college scholarship through his solid academic record and English proficiency. He saw English as instrumental in securing high-paying jobs and improving his family's living conditions.

> 'I speak fluently both Arabic and English, *Alhamdulillah* [praise to God]. But for working in a company, English will be more useful. I want to work in a company to get a big salary, so I can help my parents fulfill everyday needs. *InsyaAllah* [if God wills], I can save some money to build them a house because now we are still renting.'

For Ahsan, socioeconomic constraints and precariousness did not lower his motivation to learn English. He believed that English plays a key role in assisting him to earn material investment through college scholarships, high-paying jobs, and asset ownership, all of which are

thought to make significant upward mobility. His case supports Darvin and Norton's (2015) argument that macro-level structural constraints can push a learner's agency and investment in English. This finding challenges prior studies (Fajaryani et al., 2018; Songbatumis, 2017), which associate *pesantren* students' lack of motivation in learning English with economic disadvantage. Instead, it supports Vandrick's (2014) view that learners' social class significantly shapes their language learning opportunities and outcomes.

b. Symbolic Investment: Social Recognition and Cultural Prestige

During adolescence, social recognition, or public acknowledgment of one's skills, talents, and achievements, is a prominent developmental concern (Karabanova & Bukhalenkova, 2016). In the context of language learning, such social recognition serves as a symbolic resource, potentially strengthening learners' commitment to finding their English learning goals (Darvin & Norton, 2016; Norton, 2013). Participants believed that they achieved social recognition when they were considered 'great,' 'cool', and 'smart' by others for their ability to speak English. For example, Ilham said that a student with a good knowledge of English would be considered a resourceful person by their peers and often favoured by the teachers due to their image as "a diligent student." Such credit represents symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), affirming learners' social status among peers and teachers.

Likewise, Basim hoped that one day he would be able to "show off" his ability to speak English to his neighbours. When I asked how he thought people would react if he talked in English, he said,

> 'Every time I speak in English like when I made a joke, people around me will be like, Wow!" You can speak English! What *pesantren* did you attend? You're so smart!'

Basim' experience portrays the sociocultural belief in Indonesian society that English proficiency enhances one's social image (Manara, 2014) while at the same time, revealing how English perpetuates social stratification. Living in a Betawi enclave, where most of his neighbours were uneducated farmers or small merchants, English conferred cultural prestige in his neighbourhood. English speakers were considered "intellectual," linking the language to a strong educational background and socioeconomic status.

It is important to note that participants' statements demonstrate how material and symbolic investment are occasionally entwined, particularly in aspirations for attending universities and obtaining bachelor's degrees, which promise both financial security and elevated social status. These utilitarian perceptions of success become the "yardstick" for imagining their future plans. For Ahsan, for instance, mastering English was not only a pathway to financial stability but also a means to elevate his family's social standing. Ahsan believed that economic mobility would lead to social recognition, showing how material and symbolic investments in English were closely tied.

c. Virtuous Investment: Religious Devotion and Filial Piety

Norton's (1995) concept of investment has such a strong utilitarian connotation in general, regardless of whether foreign language learning is intended to accumulate economic or symbolic capital. While Norton's theory mainly accounts for material and symbolic dimensions of investment, the finding here indicates a third category, which I term 'virtuous investment,' inspired by learners' religious devotion. In this light, the participants viewed learning English as a religious obligation as they sought spiritual rewards and moral purpose alongside worldly gains. To illustrate the interplay between material and virtuous investments, I shall now return to Ahsan's experience. In the focus group, Ahsan said that he hoped his success in the future would make him a devout son.

> 'I hope that if I succeed in the future, I will make my parents proud. I want to make them happy. They've worked hard to fund my education. So, I must be devoted to them.'

Ahsan believed that by making his parents happy, he would get blessings (*riḍā*) and rewards (*pahala*) from God in return. His case illustrates how investment is not only economic or symbolic but also deeply tied to a learner's religious identity as a dutiful child and devout person.

Mariam (Pesantren A, 18 years old) elaborately explained this value:

> 'If our parents are happy, Allah will answer our prayers, forgive our sins, prolong our lives, and lead us to Heaven. Because Allah has said, [quoting a Qur'anic verse in Arabic meaning: 'You should treat and do good to your parents as best as possible].'

By quoting a Qur'anic verse, Mariam demonstrated how religious discourse can powerfully shape learner agency and investment. Her goal was fundamentally rooted in the notion of *'birrul walidain'*, a form of filial devotion to seeking divine grace in Islamic teachings. Unlike material or symbolic investment, this virtuous investment is guided by moral purpose, with rewards imagined in both the present life and the hereafter. This emerging theme suggests the need to expand Norton's (1995) framework by considering how learners' religious beliefs can provide a sense of purpose in language learning.

These findings can be integrated into Darvin and Norton's (2015) identity-investment-capital model, which argues that access to capital, ideology, and identity interact to shape learners' investment. Ahsan's and Mariam's experiences highlight the value of 'spiritual capital,' which refers to the moral, ethical, and theological resources used to make decisions in life (Baker & Miles-Watson, 2008). Virtuous investment can thus be defined as a spiritually driven endeavor that demonstrates learners' desire to match language acquisition with their moral principles and religious identity. These findings suggest that Darvin and Norton's concept of capital (2015) needs to embrace religious or spiritual aspects as a potential motivator in identity construction and language investment in addition to sociocultural and economic aspects. While symbolic and material capitals are crucial, for these learners, spiritual capital gained through acts of piety, such as making parents proud, also provides meaningful direction and moral justification for their learning efforts.

These findings on virtuous investment and spiritual capital further expand the understanding of why learners dedicate themselves to language study by demonstrating how their aspirations can transcend material or symbolic rewards because they can stem from religious convictions and spiritual pursuits. Furthermore, in this study, participants' desired future selves also had a significant impact on how they approached learning English, particularly in terms of where and how they invest their time and energy. Participants who envisioned themselves as English learners, such as Aisha and Maulana, made comparatively less investment. Most of their language practices were confined to the classroom. Conversely, participants who imagined themselves proficient English users, such as Salwa, Widya, and Ilham, tended to participate in more varied and self-directed activities. These included watching English films, listening to English songs, and using social media to communicate with English speakers from other countries. This finding supports Wu's (2017)

study on how imagined identities can influence language investments in formal and informal spaces.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that although participants imagined themselves as prominent English users and participated in some informal learning activities, their classroom participation remained low. According to a follow-up observation, most were still quiet during lessons and only used English when instructed by their teacher. While it is outside of the scope of this article, a careful examination of how the institutional, pedagogical, and discursive challenges might cause this classroom disengagement or disinvestment is covered in the following phase of this research.

Conclusion

Overall, this study has explored the complex interplay of material, symbolic, and virtuous investments that shape English acquisition among Indonesian *pesantren* students. While some participants valued English as a tool for economic mobility and social recognition, others viewed their learning objectives through a religious lens, seeing their efforts as spiritual devotion linked to divine rewards. These findings highlight how important it is to take into account learners' religious backgrounds when studying their motivation and investment in language learning. Acknowledging these aspects can help educators develop more inclusive teaching approaches to embrace the occurrence of a variety of English language learning environments.

The study also shows that students who envisioned themselves as capable English learners and prominent English users were more likely to invest in various self-directed learning activities, especially outside of the classroom. This result is consistent with Darvin and Norton's (2015) model, which underlines the dynamic interactions among identity, investment, and capital. Additionally, it indicates that the notion of 'spiritual capital' should be added to the definition of 'capital,' which could be particularly pertinent in contexts where education is strongly influenced by learners' faith, such as in the *pesantren* context.

Nevertheless, while this article focused primarily on learners' imagined identities and investments, it is important to note that these aspirations often coincide with institutional and pedagogical limitations as well as discursive tensions that were beyond the scope of this article. Future research should look more closely at how these

challenges facilitate or hinder the manifestation of imagined identities and language investment in classroom practice.

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