



NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND INVESTMENT THROUGH AI-MEDIATED ENGLISH COMMUNICATION: EVIDENCE FROM INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rapid proliferation of large language model (LLM)-based conversational AI tools in educational settings, their implications for learner identity remain insufficiently examined, particularly in postcolonial multilingual contexts such as Indonesia. This study aims to address this gap by examining how Indonesian EFL university students negotiate identity and investment in AI-mediated English communication through Norton's identity and investment framework. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant-shared AI interaction logs from 12 undergraduate students at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. It explores how learners position themselves as English speakers, how their investments in English shape engagement with AI, and what ideological tensions emerge from these interactions. The analysis identified four interrelated themes: imagined identity and aspirational investment, affective positioning and the non-judgmental interlocutor, contested legitimacy and native-speaker ideology, and agentive appropriation and its structural limits. The findings suggest that AI-mediated interaction functions as a site of identity negotiation, enabling learners to rehearse imagined futures, manage affective risks, and negotiate linguistic legitimacy. These findings contribute to emerging scholarship on AI-mediated language learning by illustrating how identity, investment, and agency are negotiated in AI-mediated English communication and by identifying implications for EFL pedagogy in Indonesian and comparable Global South contexts.

Keywords: Identity negotiation, Investment, AI-mediated communication, Indonesian EFL, Language learning

A. INTRODUCTION

Identity has long occupied a central position in second language acquisition (SLA) research. For language learners, speaking is never merely a communicative act; it is also a social act that positions the speaker within relations structured by power, history, and ideology (Norton, 2000). The question of who is granted the right to speak, in what language, and under what conditions has animated a substantial body of scholarship since the poststructuralist turn in applied linguistics. This scholarship has consistently shown that learners' investment in a target



language is inseparable from their sense of self. It is shaped by their current identities, imagined futures, and perceived access to legitimate participation in target language communities.

A new and rapidly expanding domain of language practice has emerged within this theoretical landscape: AI-mediated communication. The proliferation of large language model-based conversational tools, including ChatGPT, Gemini, and similar systems, has transformed how many EFL learners encounter and use English. These tools offer accessible, responsive, and linguistically sophisticated interaction, creating possibilities for sustained English practice that extend beyond the boundaries of the formal classroom (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Huang et al., 2022). Their rapid and largely unregulated uptake among EFL learners, frequently without institutional guidance, makes it urgent to understand what these encounters mean for learners' sense of self before such practices become further entrenched in everyday language learning. Yet the identity implications of these encounters have received limited attention through the theoretical lenses of identity and investment. When learners engage in extended English dialogue with AI systems, questions of selfhood, legitimacy, and belonging do not disappear. Instead, they are reconfigured in ways that identity and investment research has only recently begun to examine.

The Indonesian EFL context makes this gap particularly consequential. Indonesia is a highly multilingual nation with more than 700 living languages. Bahasa Indonesia serves as the national language, while regional languages remain central to everyday life (Sneddon, 2003). Indonesian EFL learners navigate multiple and intersecting pressures. These include regional and ethnic affiliations, national identity, and aspirations linked to globalised Anglophone culture. They bring these investments to every English interaction, including those mediated by AI. These dynamics make Indonesia a useful context for examining how globally developed AI systems intersect with locally situated language identities and investments.

Despite a growing literature on AI in language education, the identity and investment dimensions of AI-mediated English communication have received little sustained theoretical or empirical attention (Bori, 2023; Fryer et al., 2020; Kohnke et al., 2023). Existing studies have focused primarily on learning outcomes, system design, learner perceptions, and pedagogical applications. Far less attention has been given to the identity work learners perform when interacting with AI through a second or foreign language. This gap is important because, as Norton (2000, 2013) argues, identity negotiation is constitutive of language learning itself. Understanding how learners negotiate identity in AI-mediated encounters therefore remains analytically necessary rather than incidental.

This study addresses this gap by examining how Indonesian EFL undergraduates position themselves as English users, invest in AI-mediated English communication, and negotiate agency within these interactions. The study is guided by three research questions:

RQ1. How do Indonesian EFL learners position themselves as English speakers within AI-mediated interaction?

RQ2. How are learners' investments in English related to their engagement with AI-mediated English communication?

RQ3. What ideological tensions emerge in learners' accounts of AI-mediated English communication, and how do these relate to identity negotiation?



By addressing these questions, the study develops a theoretically informed account of identity negotiation and investment in AI-mediated English communication within an Indonesian EFL context. It also offers insights into how AI tools intersect with language learning in similar multilingual settings. To situate these research questions theoretically, the discussion below traces relevant developments in identity, investment, and agency theory before turning to digital and AI-mediated language learning research specifically.

The theorisation of identity in SLA has undergone substantial transformation since the early 1990s. Earlier cognitive and interactionist frameworks largely bracketed social identity. They treated learners as information-processing agents whose background characteristics—such as age, aptitude, and motivation—served primarily as input variables (Block, 2007; Firth & Wagner, 1997). This consensus was challenged by Norton Peirce (1995) and elaborated in Norton (2000) in ways that fundamentally altered the field's conceptual vocabulary. Drawing on poststructuralist theory, particularly Weedon's (1987) view of subjectivity as multiple, contradictory, and constantly evolving, Norton reconceptualised the language learner. Rather than a transparent agent pursuing linguistic goals, the learner became a socially situated subject with a complex and changing history. Their relationship with the target language was understood as inseparable from broader relations of power.

The consequences of this reconceptualisation extend beyond terminological preference. If identity is an ongoing negotiation rather than a stable attribute, research must examine the conditions that enable or constrain learners' access to desired speaking positions. Silence, withdrawal, and apparent disengagement may reflect not low motivation but strategic resistance to a marginalised subject position. Learners may reject positions they experience as demeaning or inauthentic (Norton, 2000). This insight has been substantiated across a wide range of empirical contexts, from immigrant women in Canadian language classes (Norton, 2000) to postcolonial EFL learners in South Africa (McKinney & Norton, 2008) and university students across East and Southeast Asia (Huang, 2018; Lamb, 2004).

Subsequent theoretical work deepened this account. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) extended the framework to multilingual contexts. They showed how identity negotiation becomes more complex when learners navigate multiple languages associated with different social positions, communities, and forms of cultural capital. Block (2007) brought the framework into dialogue with social class, arguing that the material conditions of learners' lives shape their access to target language communities in ways that purely discursive accounts of identity miss. Darwin and Norton (2015) further integrated Bourdieu's concept of capital with identity and ideology. Their model recognises that learners invest not only in communities but also in systems of value that define which language practices are considered legitimate. Collectively, these developments establish identity as a dynamic, socially situated, and ideologically mediated process, providing a conceptual foundation for the present study.

The concept of investment, as introduced by Norton Peirce (1995) and developed in Norton (2000, 2013), is explicitly positioned as a sociological rather than a psychological construct. Whereas mainstream SLA motivation research often treats motivation as a relatively stable individual attribute, investment foregrounds the social and historical conditions that shape language learning opportunities. Learners invest in a language because they believe it will provide access to valued resources. These resources may be material, such as employment and income, or symbolic, such as status, recognition, and belonging.



Investment is thus conditional and relational. It shifts as learners' circumstances change, new communities become imaginable, and the perceived costs and benefits of language participation evolve. Crucially, it is oriented toward the future as much as the present. Norton (2013), drawing on Anderson's (1991) concept of imagined communities, argues that learners invest not only in communities to which they currently belong but in communities they imagine themselves joining. Kanno and Norton (2003) extend this argument by showing that imagined identities can sustain investment even when immediate returns are uncertain or delayed.

Empirical studies of investment have traced these dynamics across diverse settings. Norton (2000) documented how immigrant women in Canada invested differentially in English depending on their readings of the value that investment would yield in particular social relations—with employers, neighbours, and language teachers. McKinney and Norton (2008) found that South African learners' investments were shaped by racialised histories of access to English, while Huang (2018) showed that Chinese international students in Canadian universities negotiated competing investments in English academic literacy and in Chinese peer networks. Pham (2011) demonstrated in the Vietnamese context that investment in English was often mediated by learners' projections of what English would mean for their futures, rather than by present classroom conditions alone.

What these studies collectively establish is that investment is always embedded in a specific social history and can never be read off from surface-level indicators of engagement or effort. These insights are particularly relevant to emerging contexts in which learners engage in target-language use through digital and AI-mediated environments. Examining investment in such contexts requires attention not only to learners' goals and imagined futures but also to how AI-mediated encounters may expand, constrain, or reconfigure access to valued forms of linguistic participation. Alongside identity and investment, learners' agency in negotiating these encounters merits theoretical attention, particularly given this study's interest in how learners actively shape their AI-mediated interactions.

Identity in language learning is shaped not only by structural conditions but also by learners' active negotiations within and against them. Agency is central to poststructuralist accounts of language learning identity. It refers not to unconstrained individual choice but to the capacity to act purposefully within structural constraints (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; van Lier, 2004). Agency is understood as constrained yet productive action within social structures, where learners may resist, appropriate, or rework available subject positions.

Positioning theory, as developed by Davies and Harré (1990) and extended by Harré and van Langenhove (1999), offers a microanalytic framework for tracing these negotiations. In conversational positioning, speakers assign and contest subject positions through the stories they tell, the discourses they invoke, and the interactional moves they make. In language learning contexts, this framework helps explain how learners are positioned—and position themselves—as competent, legitimate, or authoritative users of the target language (Menard-Warwick, 2005). This perspective is particularly useful for examining how learners interpret AI interactions and the subject positions they construct within them. Complementing this view, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice explains how access to participation is structured and how learners negotiate legitimacy and membership over time.



Resistance, in this framework, is not simply the refusal to participate; it may take the form of selective adoption, ironic reappropriation, or the construction of alternative identities that draw on resources outside the dominant discourse (Canagarajah, 1999). In postcolonial EFL contexts, such resistance often involves the negotiation of world Englishes—varieties that contest the hegemony of inner-circle norms and affirm the legitimacy of non-native speaker identities (Holliday, 2005; Kachru, 1992; Phillipson, 1992). Whether and how such resistance emerges in AI-mediated interaction, where the interlocutor embeds particular linguistic norms without the interactional flexibility of a human speaker, is a question this study takes seriously. These questions of agency and resistance have been explored extensively in research on digital and technology-mediated language learning, which offers further context for understanding identity work in AI-mediated interaction specifically.

The relationship between digital technology and language learning identity has attracted substantial scholarly attention since the mainstreaming of internet-based communication in the 1990s. Early CMC research often examined whether reduced social presence in textual, asynchronous interaction lowered affective barriers to participation and enabled more equitable language use (Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 2000). Later research challenged this techno-optimism. It showed that online spaces do not eliminate social hierarchies but instead reconfigure them, sometimes reproducing and sometimes disrupting existing power relations (Lam, 2000; Thorne, 2003).

Lam's (2000) landmark study of a Chinese immigrant adolescent who achieved a confident, cosmopolitan English identity through online fan-fiction communities demonstrated that digital spaces can provide learners with identities that classroom-based instruction denies. This finding has since been extended through research on social media (Black, 2006), online gaming (Thorne et al., 2009), and participatory digital literacies (Reinhardt, 2019). Collectively, these studies suggest that digital interaction constitutes a legitimate site of language learning and identity work, with its own affordances, communities, and norms.

Research on MALL and intelligent conversational agents has begun to explore similar questions in AI-adjacent contexts, with some studies noting that learners engage affectively with AI-like systems and that the nature of the interlocutor shapes the identities learners can perform (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Sadler & Dooly, 2016). However, relatively limited attention has been given to identity and investment as primary analytical frameworks in studies of AI-adjacent language learning practices. Within this broader landscape of technology-mediated learning, LLM-based conversational AI represents a particularly recent and rapidly evolving development that warrants closer theoretical attention.

The emergence of LLM-based conversational AI has substantially expanded what is technically possible in AI-assisted language learning. Unlike earlier rule-based CALL systems, LLM tools generate contextually responsive language across a wide range of registers and domains. As a result, learners can sustain extended English dialogues without a human interlocutor (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Kohnke et al., 2023). The accessibility and scalability of these tools have made them rapidly attractive to EFL learners in contexts where human English interaction outside the classroom is limited.

The emerging research base on LLM tools in language education has focused primarily on learner attitudes, writing support, anxiety reduction, and accuracy of feedback (Fryer et al.,

2020; Huang et al., 2022; Kohnke et al., 2023). Related work has also begun extending this focus to specific skill domains, such as the theory-driven integration of AI into listening materials development for EFL learners (Sabir et al., 2026). Several studies have found that learners experience AI interlocutors as less evaluatively threatening than human interlocutors, suggesting potential benefits for learners with high communication apprehension (Fryer et al., 2017, 2020). Others have raised concerns about linguistic accuracy, the displacement of authentic communication, ideological implications of AI-generated language norms, and learners' over-reliance on AI-generated text (Bori, 2023; Godwin-Jones, 2022).

What remains underexplored in much of this emerging literature is the identity dimension of AI-mediated English use. Existing research has paid limited attention to how learners position themselves as English users in AI-mediated encounters. It has also largely overlooked what these interactions mean for investment in the target language and how AI-related language ideologies shape learners' sense of legitimacy as English users. This gap is particularly significant in postcolonial, multilingual contexts where the politics of English are already complex and where learners negotiate multiple, sometimes competing, linguistic identities. This gap is especially consequential within the Indonesian EFL context, given the multilingual and postcolonial dynamics outlined earlier.

Indonesia presents a richly complex setting for research on EFL identity. The national language, Bahasa Indonesia, serves as the medium of national unity in a linguistically diverse archipelago comprising more than 700 languages (Sneddon, 2003). Lamb's (2004) influential longitudinal study of young EFL learners in West Sumatra documented what he termed instrumental investment in English—a valuation of the language as a tool for economic and social advancement that did not require identification with British or American cultural communities. He found that this orientation coexisted with strong local and religious identities. Learners generally did not view English as a threat to these identities. However, these identities shaped the kinds of English-speaking selves they were willing to adopt. These findings have been echoed in later studies of Indonesian higher education. Such studies show that English-medium instruction can generate tensions between institutional language demands and the locally situated identities and values of teachers and students (Zacharias, 2013). Related research on multilingual EFL classrooms in Indonesian higher education has similarly documented strategic, context-sensitive language practices among lecturers, including selective use of students' first languages and negotiated forms of translanguaging under English-medium instruction policy constraints (Sabir et al., 2025).

More recent research on digital language learning has shown that social media and online communities can provide opportunities for identity experimentation and participation that differ from those available in formal classroom settings (Black, 2006; Lam, 2000; Reinhardt, 2019). These digital environments allow learners to explore alternative identities, engage with diverse audiences, and participate in forms of language use that may be difficult to access in conventional educational contexts. However, the specific dynamics of AI-mediated interaction remain underexplored in the Indonesian EFL literature. In particular, limited attention has been given to the distinctive interlocutor properties of AI systems, their embedded linguistic and cultural norms, and their responsiveness to locally situated forms of knowledge and identity.

Taken together, this body of theory and research indicates that identity, investment, and agency remain critical yet underexamined dimensions of AI-mediated English communication,

particularly for learners navigating the multilingual and postcolonial realities of the Indonesian EFL context. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how Indonesian EFL undergraduates position themselves as English speakers, invest in AI-mediated English communication, and negotiate agency and ideological tension within these interactions.

B. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative design situated within an interpretive paradigm. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate because the study examines how learners construct meaning through AI-mediated interaction, a process that is subjective and context dependent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interpretive paradigm aligns with the poststructuralist epistemology underpinning Norton's identity framework. It views meaning as socially constructed, knowledge as partial and situated, and the researcher as an active participant in meaning-making rather than a neutral observer. The study does not seek statistical generalisability. Instead, it aims for theoretical transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), generating conceptual insights that may be applicable in comparable contexts.

Researcher positionality was recognised as an important element of the analytic process. As a researcher working within an Indonesian academic institution, the lead researcher was familiar with the tensions learners navigate between local identities and English-language aspirations. This familiarity provided interpretive sensitivity but also created the potential for confirmatory bias. The lead researcher was not involved in assessing participants' academic performance and held no formal evaluative role in relation to them during the study. This tension was managed through reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and systematic attention to disconfirming evidence in the data. Reflexive notes documented assumptions regarding English learning, AI use, and learner identity throughout the research process so that their potential influence on interpretation could be critically examined.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia. The institutional name is withheld to protect participant confidentiality and minimise the risk of indirect participant identification. This setting was selected purposively because it serves students from diverse academic and socioeconomic backgrounds. English proficiency levels vary, access to study-abroad opportunities is relatively limited, and AI tools have become part of learners' informal English practice without formal institutional guidance. These conditions create a context in which identity negotiations around AI-mediated English use are likely to be visible and varied.

Participants were 12 undergraduate students enrolled in English as a subject or English-medium content courses. Purposive sampling was used to ensure variation in gender, academic discipline, and self-reported English proficiency, as these factors were expected to shape investment and identity positioning. All participants had used at least one large language model (LLM)-based conversational AI tool, including ChatGPT, Gemini, or similar generative AI systems designed to produce interactive text-based responses. The sample size was appropriate for an in-depth qualitative study using reflexive thematic analysis, which prioritises rich contextual understanding over statistical representation. The sample of twelve participants was determined in advance on the basis of purposive selection criteria designed to ensure variation in disciplinary background, self-reported English proficiency, and frequency of AI use.

Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive approach, the adequacy of the sample was evaluated in terms of the richness and diversity of the data generated rather than through predefined notions of saturation. Recruitment was conducted through a combination of course announcements and voluntary expressions of interest. Students who met the inclusion criterion of having used at least one LLM-based conversational AI tool for English communication within the preceding six months were invited to participate. Selection was guided by the aim of achieving variation in disciplinary background, self-reported English proficiency, and frequency of AI use rather than representativeness. Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	Description
Number of participants	12 undergraduate students
Age range	19–24 years
Institutional setting	Private university in Central Java, Indonesia
Sampling strategy	Purposive sampling
Academic disciplines represented	International Relations, Economics, Engineering, English Education, Islamic Studies, and other disciplines
English proficiency	Mixed self-reported proficiency levels ranging from lower-intermediate to advanced
AI tools used	ChatGPT, Gemini, and other LLM-based conversational AI tools
Frequency of AI use	Ranged from occasional use to daily engagement
Inclusion criterion	Use of at least one LLM-based AI tool for English communication purposes within the six months preceding data collection

Note. Participant characteristics are reported in aggregate form to protect confidentiality while providing contextual information relevant to the study. Because the study involved a relatively small and potentially identifiable participant group within a single institutional setting, demographic information is reported in aggregate form to minimise the risk of indirect identification.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews supported by participant-shared AI interaction logs used as elicitation materials. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own terms while enabling the researcher to probe emerging issues in greater depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). AI interaction logs, including exported chat histories and screenshots, grounded interview discussions in concrete examples of participants' AI-mediated experiences. For the purposes of this study, an AI interaction log



referred to any participant-shared record of an AI-mediated English interaction, including exported chat histories, screenshot sequences, or saved conversation excerpts. Logs varied substantially in length and format, reflecting participants' own practices of storing and retrieving AI interactions. Although participant-selected logs may have privileged memorable experiences over routine interactions, this approach aligned with the study's focus on participant meaning-making rather than behavioural frequency.

Data collection took place between October and December 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 80 minutes and was conducted in a location of the participant's choosing to reduce power imbalance. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and English, with participants choosing their preferred language or mixing freely. This bilingual design was deliberate: requiring English-only interviews would have constrained the subject positions available to participants and potentially silenced complex or affectively charged experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. The interview corpus comprised approximately 14 hours of recorded interview data across the 12 participants.

Participants were asked to select and share AI interaction logs that they considered meaningful, memorable, or representative of their experiences using AI for English communication. The study did not impose predetermined criteria regarding interaction length, topic, or outcome, as the aim was to foreground participant interpretations of what constituted a significant AI-mediated experience. Shared logs were discussed during the interview, with participants asked to reflect on what they had been thinking and feeling during the interaction, what choices they made about language, and how the interaction related to their sense of themselves as English speakers. The primary analytical focus remained participants' retrospective accounts rather than the linguistic features of AI-generated texts themselves. Accordingly, the logs functioned primarily as elicitation materials that supported participant reflection and recall during interviews rather than as an independent corpus for discourse or interactional analysis.

The interview guide was organised around three domains corresponding to the research questions: (1) learner investment and orientation toward English and AI tools; (2) in-interaction experience, including affective responses, choices, and strategies; and (3) post-interaction reflection on identity, legitimacy, and self-positioning. Sample prompts included: Can you tell me about a time when you felt particularly confident—or particularly uncertain—using English with an AI tool? How do you feel the AI responds to your English? Do you feel you can be 'yourself' in English when you are interacting with an AI? Are there things you can say or try with an AI that you would not say or try with a human? The guide remained flexible throughout data collection, allowing participants to introduce issues they considered important rather than restricting discussion to researcher-defined identity constructs. The guide was piloted with two participants not included in the main sample and revised for clarity and cultural appropriateness.

At the time of data collection, institutional policy did not require formal ethics committee review for low-risk educational interview studies of this nature. Nevertheless, the study followed established principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, data minimisation, and participant welfare throughout the research process. All participants provided written informed consent prior to data collection and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All identifying information was replaced with



pseudonyms, and programme details and other potentially identifying information were removed or generalised. AI interaction logs were treated as sensitive personal data and stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The primary data corpus subjected to thematic analysis comprised the verbatim transcripts of the 12 semi-structured interviews, totalling approximately 14 hours of recorded data. AI interaction logs were used as contextual and elicitation material during interviews, as described above, rather than as an independently coded dataset. This approach was selected because it foregrounds the researcher's interpretive role, aligns with the study's poststructuralist framework, and is well suited to data centred on subjective experience and meaning-making. Unlike codebook or framework approaches, reflexive thematic analysis does not treat themes as pre-existing categories waiting to be discovered. Instead, themes emerge through sustained and theoretically informed engagement with the data.

Analysis proceeded through six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006): familiarisation with the data through repeated reading and preliminary annotation; initial coding that remained data-driven while being informed by the study's broader theoretical interests; construction of candidate themes by collating related codes; review of themes against the coded data and the full dataset; definition and naming of themes; and production of the analysis.

Coding was conducted manually using iterative rounds of engagement with the transcripts rather than through automated coding software. Coding and theme development were conducted primarily by the lead researcher, with peer debriefing used to critically discuss developing interpretations and challenge emerging assumptions. Initial coding began with close reading of individual transcripts and the generation of descriptive codes that remained closely tied to participants' language. Examples included codes such as practising a future self, avoiding embarrassment, comparing self with AI output, questioning AI authority, and using AI strategically for professional preparation. As analysis progressed, these codes were compared across participants and gradually reorganised into broader interpretive patterns. Throughout this process, candidate themes were repeatedly revised, merged, separated, or refined in response to contradictory cases and alternative interpretations identified within the dataset.

Analytic decisions were documented throughout the process in reflexive memos that recorded emerging interpretations, theoretical connections, and alternative explanations. Following initial inductive coding, themes were examined through the theoretical lens of Norton's (2000, 2013) identity and investment framework and Darwin and Norton's (2015) capital-ideology-identity model, which guided the analytic interpretation without foreclosing inductive insight. Interviews conducted in Bahasa Indonesia were translated after initial familiarisation with the original-language transcripts and before final thematic interpretation. Translations were completed by the lead researcher and cross-checked by a bilingual research assistant to ensure translational accuracy and interpretive fidelity. The translation process focused on preserving participant meaning rather than producing literal word-for-word equivalence. In a small number of cases, wording was revised during cross-checking to better capture culturally specific expressions, implied meanings, and affective nuances.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Several strategies were used to enhance the transparency, depth, and reflexive quality of the analysis. These included participant feedback conversations with four participants selected purposively to reflect variation in disciplinary background, self-reported English proficiency, and patterns of AI use, the use of participant-shared AI interaction logs as contextual and elicitation materials, reflexive journaling maintained throughout data collection and analysis, and peer debriefing with a colleague experienced in qualitative SLA research. Participant feedback conversations were treated as opportunities for reflexive engagement with emerging interpretations rather than as procedures for validating thematic accuracy. These practices were not intended to verify a single correct interpretation. Rather, they encouraged critical reflection, consideration of alternative readings, and greater coherence in the final analytic account.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Analysis of interview data, supported by participant-shared AI interaction logs used as elicitation and contextual materials, generated four overarching themes: (1) imagined identity and aspirational investment in AI-mediated English; (2) affective positioning and the non-judgmental interlocutor; (3) contested legitimacy and native-speaker ideology; and (4) agentive appropriation and its structural limits. These themes are not mutually exclusive; they are analytically distinct but empirically interrelated dimensions of a complex set of identity negotiations. Each theme is discussed below with reference to participant accounts and, where available, to AI interaction log data discussed during interviews. Although identity and investment emerged as dominant patterns, contradictory and identity-neutral accounts highlighted important variation across participant experiences and informed theme development. All participant names are pseudonyms. Quotations originally produced in Bahasa Indonesia were translated into English by the researcher and checked by a bilingual research assistant. References to AI interaction logs are included where they informed participants' reflections. However, the analysis focuses primarily on participants' interpretations of those interactions rather than on the linguistic analysis of AI-generated texts themselves. A summary of the themes is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Themes Identified in AI-Mediated English Communication

Theme	Brief description
Imagined identity and aspirational investment	Learners used AI-mediated English communication to rehearse desired future identities and imagined forms of participation.
Affective positioning and the non-judgmental interlocutor	Learners experienced AI as a low-risk space that reduced embarrassment and encouraged experimentation in English.
Contested legitimacy and native-speaker ideology	AI-generated English served as a reference point for evaluating

	linguistic correctness, legitimacy, and ownership.
Agentive appropriation and structural limits	Learners used AI strategically while recognising its limitations in representing locally grounded identities and knowledge.

Theme 1: Imagined Identity and Aspirational Investment

Across the dataset, many participants described AI-mediated English use in relation to a future self rather than their current sense of identity. This orientation toward anticipated identity aligns closely with what Norton (2013) and Kanno and Norton (2003) term imagined identity: the sense of belonging to communities not yet accessed, and the investment of present effort in future membership. In the AI-mediated context, this future-directedness was particularly salient because the AI provided a space where desired identities could be rehearsed without immediate social consequences.

Dinda, a 21-year-old International Relations student, articulated this dynamic explicitly when reflecting on her habit of writing daily English journal entries using a chatbot:

"When I talk to the AI in English, I pretend I am already the person I want to be—like someone who works in a big international organisation and has to communicate across cultures every day. I know it is not real yet. But I am practising being that person. The AI does not know I am just a student. To the AI, I can already be her."

Dinda's account suggests that AI-mediated interaction may function as a space for experimenting with possible future selves. At the same time, her description reveals a degree of distance from that imagined identity. By emphasising that she is "just a student" and that the scenario is "not real yet," Dinda simultaneously constructs and questions her future professional self. The interaction appears to provide a temporary space in which this identity can be explored without requiring its full enactment in everyday life. Viewed through Norton's (2000, 2013) framework, this orientation reflects investment in an imagined future community while also revealing uncertainty about whether that future identity will be realised. The AI interaction log reinforced this interpretation, as Dinda repeatedly prompted the system to simulate communication scenarios in international organisations.

Notably, the imagined community Dinda invokes is not tied to any particular national Anglophone culture; it is cosmopolitan, professional, and internationalist. This finding echoes Lamb's (2004) observation that Indonesian learners frequently invest in a deterritorialised English identity—one that values the language for its transactional and aspirational power without requiring identification with British or American cultural communities.

Similar future-oriented positioning appeared in other participant accounts. Maya, a 20-year-old Economics student, described using AI conversation practice not primarily to improve grammatical accuracy but to prepare herself for future situations in which English would be required:

"I use ChatGPT because I want to become someone who can speak English naturally. Right now I still translate a lot in my head. But when I practise with AI, I can imagine

myself studying overseas or working with international people. It makes that future feel more possible."

Maya's account resembles Dinda's future-oriented positioning but differs in important respects. Rather than describing a clearly defined professional identity, Maya speaks more generally about becoming someone who can participate comfortably in English-speaking environments. Her account suggests aspiration, but also an awareness of current limitations, particularly her reliance on mental translation. The interaction with AI appears to make certain future possibilities feel more attainable, even though those possibilities remain hypothetical. This combination of aspiration and uncertainty resonates with Norton's discussion of imagined identities while illustrating the tentative nature of such projections.

This pattern was not uniform across the sample. Reza, a 22-year-old engineering student, described a more explicitly instrumental orientation that resisted the aspirational framing:

"For me, ChatGPT is just a writing assistant. I need to write emails for my internship applications in English. I use it to make sure my English looks professional. I don't think about identity when I do this. I just need it to work."

Reza's account reflects a primarily instrumental orientation toward AI-mediated English use, and his explicit rejection of identity-related framings is taken at face value as a meaningful self-description. It is worth noting that treating English as a functional resource is not theoretically separate from identity positioning; instrumental orientations are themselves a form of relating to the language. This observation is offered as contextualisation, however, not as a reinterpretation of Reza's account. His stance represents one end of a spectrum of orientations present across the sample and cautions against assuming that AI-mediated English interaction is experienced as identity-relevant by all learners.

Theme 2: Affective Positioning and the Non-Judgmental Interlocutor

A second, analytically distinct theme concerns the affective dimensions of AI-mediated English communication—specifically, the ways in which the absence of social judgment in AI interaction opened interactional and identity spaces that participants experienced as unavailable in human-to-human English encounters. This theme connects to well-established findings in CMC research about the relationship between reduced social presence and reduced communication apprehension (Fryer et al., 2017; Kern, 1995), but extends this line of analysis by attending to the identity consequences of that reduction rather than its effects on output quantity alone.

Siti, a 20-year-old student from a small town in East Java who described herself as having low spoken English confidence, offered a particularly detailed and affectively rich account:

"With people—even my classmates—if I make a mistake in English, they remember it. Maybe they don't say anything, but I know they notice. That feeling stays with me. With the AI, if I make a mistake, it just corrects me gently and we continue. It doesn't remember next time I use it. It doesn't build a picture of me as someone who can't speak English. So I can try things I would be too embarrassed to try with my teacher or in class."

Siti's account illuminates the relational conditions of investment. Norton (2000) argues that investment cannot be understood through motivation alone. In classroom and peer settings, speaking in English carries the risk of permanent reputational positioning—as competent or incompetent, fluent or limited—in relation to a known social audience whose judgments have lasting consequences. For Siti, the absence of perceived human evaluation reduced the social risks associated with experimentation in English. Participants did not describe this reduced risk as interaction with an inferior interlocutor. Rather, it created conditions that encouraged experimentation in English. However, Siti did not suggest that AI could replace human interaction. Her comments indicate that the value of AI stemmed largely from the temporary suspension of social judgment rather than from a belief that AI interaction was equivalent to communication with other English users. The interaction log she selected for discussion contained several exchanges in which she repeatedly revised messages after receiving corrective feedback, illustrating the low-risk experimentation she described during the interview.

However, other participants offered more ambivalent assessments of this same dynamic. Bagas, a 23-year-old student, identified a gap between the interactional world the AI simulates and the demands of actual English communication:

"The AI is always encouraging. It always tells you that was good, well done, keep going. But real conversations are not like that. People get impatient. They change the subject. They don't care about your English learning. So the AI gives me a kind of confidence that doesn't always transfer. When I go back to real English conversations I realise the AI prepared me for a world that doesn't quite exist."

Bagas's observation introduces an important qualification to the affective benefit identified by Siti. Although AI interaction fostered confidence, that confidence did not always transfer to human communication. This suggests that the benefits of AI-mediated interaction may be context dependent and insufficient preparation for the social demands of real-world English use.

Theme 3: Contested Legitimacy and Native-Speaker Ideology

The third theme concerns a more explicitly ideological dimension of participants' AI-mediated English experience: their evaluations of AI-generated English as a linguistic norm, and what those evaluations reveal about their underlying beliefs regarding legitimate language use. This theme connects to longstanding debates in applied linguistics about native-speaker ideology—the ideological construction of the native speaker as the legitimate authority on English, and the consequent positioning of non-native speakers as deficient or aspirational (Holliday, 2005; Phillipson, 1992)—and extends those debates into the AI-mediated domain.

Several participants expressed a response to AI-generated English that combined admiration with anxiety, framing the AI's output as an implicit standard against which their own production measured unfavourably. Nia, a 21-year-old English Education student, reflected on reading AI-generated writing that she had requested as a model:

"When I look at what the AI writes, I think: will I ever write like this? It sounds like perfect English. Like a native speaker, or even better. And then I look at my own writing, and I feel the distance between where I am and where I should be. It reminds me that no matter how hard I study, English is not really mine in the same way."

Nia's account illustrates a strong orientation toward highly standardised forms of English, which she associates with expertise and legitimacy. However, it is not entirely clear whether the source of this perception is the AI itself or broader language ideologies that predate her engagement with AI tools. The interaction appears to provide a highly visible benchmark against which she evaluates her own performance, but the evaluative framework may already have been present before the AI encounter. The data do not allow conclusions about whether AI intensified these beliefs, but they indicate that AI-generated language became a prominent reference point through which such beliefs were articulated.

Norton (2000) argues that native-speaker ideology structures the conditions of investment by positioning non-native speakers as always already inadequate: however much they invest, full legitimacy remains deferred. Nia's comment that "English is not really mine in the same way" may be interpreted as reflecting concerns about legitimacy and ownership that have been widely discussed in scholarship on native-speaker ideology. In these accounts, AI output appeared to make existing beliefs about linguistic proficiency and legitimacy more salient, although the data do not establish whether those beliefs originated from AI use itself.

Not all participants accepted AI-generated English as a legitimate norm without question. Fadil, a 22-year-old Islamic Studies student who had reflected carefully on the politics of language through his coursework, offered a notably resistant reading:

"I think the AI was trained mostly on American and British texts, right? So when it corrects my English, it is correcting it toward that standard. But I speak Indonesian English. I think in ways that come from my culture, from Arabic sometimes, from Javanese. Why should my English have to sound like an American? I use the AI's corrections when they help me be understood, but I don't accept that American English is the only right English."

Fadil's positioning exemplifies what Canagarajah (1999) describes as the critical negotiation of centre norms by periphery learners: an acknowledgment of the power of standard norms without total subordination to them, and a selective appropriation that distinguishes between communicative effectiveness and cultural capitulation. Such explicitly critical reflections appeared in a small number of accounts. Participants who articulated them often drew on prior experiences that had encouraged reflection on language, culture, or power, although the present study was not designed to examine these influences systematically. This finding has pedagogical implications: the capacity to engage critically with AI-generated linguistic norms may be cultivatable through explicit attention to language ideology in EFL instruction. Although not all participants explicitly discussed native-speaker norms, several participants described AI-generated English as a benchmark of correctness against which they evaluated their own language use.

Theme 4: Agentic Appropriation and Its Structural Limits

The fourth theme concerns the ways in which participants actively shaped their AI interactions to serve particular identity purposes and the structural limits they encountered in doing so. This theme adds an important corrective to accounts of AI-mediated language learning that position the learner as a passive recipient of AI-generated input and norms.

Several participants described deliberate and sophisticated strategies for using AI interaction to rehearse specific English-speaking identities. Putri, a 21-year-old student aspiring to a career

in international development, described constructing extended role-play scenarios with ChatGPT:

"I set up a scenario where I am presenting a policy recommendation in an international meeting, and the AI plays my colleagues who can ask questions or challenge me. I do this maybe three or four times a week. I know it is simulated. But what I am practising is not just vocabulary or grammar—I am practising how to be the kind of person who can do this. Who speaks with authority in English even in a room where English is the first language of everyone else."

Putri's account illustrates a highly intentional use of AI-mediated interaction consistent with Norton's (2013) discussion of investment and imagined identity. Through repeated role-play scenarios, she used AI-mediated communication to rehearse a desired professional self and to develop ways of speaking with confidence and authority in English. The role-play scenario was visible in the interaction log she shared, which included multiple rounds of simulated questioning and response practice. However, these performances occurred within a carefully structured environment whose responses remained broadly supportive and predictable. Although the interaction enabled rehearsal of a desired professional identity, the present data do not indicate how such rehearsed performances were subsequently enacted in human interaction beyond participants' retrospective accounts. The account therefore illustrates both the opportunities and the limits of AI-supported identity rehearsal.

Yet participants also encountered structural limits to this agentic appropriation limits that were often experienced as most constraining precisely when learners' local identities and knowledge were most relevant. Fadil noted:

"Sometimes I want to have a conversation in English about something that matters in my context—a concept from Islamic jurisprudence, or the way we understand community responsibility in Javanese culture. And the AI gives me a very generic answer. It does not really understand the concept, or it gives me a Western framework and calls it universal. So when I try to bring my whole identity into the English conversation, the AI makes part of me invisible."

Fadil's account points to a structural limitation of current AI systems that is particularly consequential for learners from non-Anglophone, non-Western contexts. For some participants, this was experienced as a meaningful constraint on the forms of self-expression they wished to enact through English. For learners who, like many Indonesian EFL learners, invest in an English identity that is simultaneously cosmopolitan and locally rooted who wish to participate in global English-medium discourse without surrendering their cultural particularity this exclusion is not a peripheral inconvenience but a fundamental constraint on the kinds of self-expression that AI-mediated English communication makes possible.

At the same time, Fadil's position was not one of complete rejection. He acknowledged regularly using AI suggestions when they improved clarity and communicative effectiveness. His account therefore reflects negotiation rather than opposition: he questioned the authority of particular norms while continuing to draw strategically on the linguistic resources the system provided.

Contradictory and Identity-Neutral Experiences

Although most participants described AI-mediated English interaction as connected to identity, investment, and future aspirations, not all experiences aligned fully with these patterns. Several



participants framed AI primarily as a practical tool for task completion rather than as a space for self-expression, identity exploration, or imagined future participation.

Similarly, a small number of participants reported frustration with AI-generated responses. These participants noted that AI occasionally produced generic feedback, misunderstood context, or generated language that felt disconnected from their communicative intentions. In such cases, AI interaction was experienced as limiting rather than empowering. Rather than increasing confidence or encouraging experimentation, these encounters sometimes reinforced participants' awareness of the boundaries of AI support and the continuing importance of human interaction.

Some participants also expressed ambivalence regarding the authenticity of AI-mediated communication. Although they appreciated the opportunity to practise English without fear of social judgment, they questioned whether successful interaction with an AI system carried the same meaning as successful communication with human interlocutors. For these participants, AI functioned as a useful learning resource, but not necessarily as a meaningful social space. These contradictory and identity-neutral experiences did not undermine the broader patterns identified across the dataset. However, they highlight the diversity of learner orientations toward AI and caution against assuming that AI-mediated English interaction is inherently identity-forming, empowering, or transformational. The significance of AI appeared to depend on how participants interpreted and incorporated these interactions into their broader language-learning trajectories.

Discussion

The findings suggest that AI-mediated interaction may introduce additional considerations for identity and investment research. Viewed through Norton's (2000, 2013) framework, the findings suggest that investment may increasingly be enacted through interactions that are not directed toward immediate participation in human target-language communities. Participants frequently described AI-mediated communication as a space for rehearsing imagined futures, experimenting with linguistic identities, and pursuing forms of participation unavailable in their everyday environments.

These findings do not replace Norton's emphasis on imagined communities. Rather, they suggest that AI systems may function as interactional environments through which learners prepare for, anticipate, or negotiate access to such communities. In this sense, identity work may occur within technologically mediated spaces that are neither traditional communities of practice nor purely individual learning environments.

Participants oriented not only toward imagined human communities but also toward the affordances and constraints of AI-mediated interaction itself. The findings indicate that AI systems may be usefully considered within discussions of investment as interactional partners that shape opportunities for identity rehearsal and language use. When the AI consistently fails to recognise or appropriately respond to culturally specific knowledge, it may operate as a constraining interactional structure—not through social judgment, as a human interlocutor might, but through the structural boundaries of its training.

These findings resonate with, and in some respects extend, prior empirical work on digital identity and language learning investment. Lam (2000) demonstrated that digitally mediated

spaces can furnish learners with confident English identities that classroom instruction denies — a dynamic that parallels participants' accounts of AI interaction as enabling self-positioning unavailable in formal settings. A meaningful difference, however, is that Lam's participant gained identity resources through membership in a human community with genuine social stakes, audiences, and relational histories. The participants in the present study engaged with a non-human interlocutor carrying no equivalent social recognition. In Norton's (2000) framework, such recognition is constitutive of investment. Whether identity rehearsal with a non-human interlocutor can accumulate into genuine investment, or whether it remains preparatory and contingent on subsequent human validation, is a question future research should address directly.

The findings also converge with Lamb's (2004) account of Indonesian learners' deterritorialised investment in English — an orientation toward the language as a cosmopolitan resource rather than a marker of Anglophone cultural belonging. The aspirational, professionally oriented positioning described by Dinda and Putri closely echoes this pattern. This suggests that the deterritorialised investment Lamb identified among West Sumatran adolescents in the early 2000s persists, and is now being enacted through AI-mediated interaction, among Central Javanese university students two decades later. The present findings extend Lamb's account, however, by showing that this cosmopolitan investment coexists with ideological tensions around linguistic legitimacy — tensions his study did not foreground. This points to the importance of examining how native-speaker ideology operates within, and may be amplified by, AI-mediated language environments.

Although analytically presented as distinct themes, these patterns frequently co-occurred within individual accounts. Participants who described AI as a low-risk space for experimentation often also discussed imagined future identities, while concerns about linguistic legitimacy were frequently connected to broader questions of agency and self-expression. The themes therefore represent interconnected dimensions of identity negotiation rather than discrete categories of experience.

Taken together, the findings suggest that AI-mediated English communication functions as a complex site of identity negotiation for Indonesian EFL learners. Participants described using AI tools to rehearse imagined futures, manage affective risks, negotiate linguistic norms, and pursue meaningful forms of English use. At the same time, they encountered constraints associated with the design and perceived cultural assumptions of AI systems. Viewed through Norton's framework, these experiences highlight the continuing relevance of identity, investment, and agency in understanding emerging forms of AI-mediated language learning.

This study has several limitations that should inform the interpretation of its findings. The study was conducted in a single institutional setting, and the findings should be understood as contextually situated and intended to offer theoretical rather than statistical transferability. Participant-selected AI logs may have privileged meaningful or memorable interactions, which may underrepresent routine or less salient forms of AI use. The absence of real-time observational data—AI interaction logs were discussed retrospectively rather than analysed as naturally occurring interaction in their own right—limited the study's ability to examine moment-to-moment processes of identity negotiation during AI-mediated English interaction. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine identity and investment over extended periods of AI use. It should also include multiple institutional and regional contexts



within Indonesia and explore the differential ideological effects of specific AI systems. Comparative studies across Global South settings would further strengthen understanding of AI-mediated identity negotiation.

D. CONCLUSION

This study has examined how Indonesian EFL learners negotiate identity in AI-mediated English communication, using Norton's (2000, 2013) identity and investment framework as its primary theoretical lens. Four themes—imagined identity and aspirational investment, affective positioning and the non-judgmental interlocutor, contested legitimacy and native-speaker ideology, and agentic appropriation and its structural limits—suggest that AI-mediated English interaction functions not only as a site of linguistic practice but also as a site of identity work. Learners engage with AI tools through complex and often future-directed investments. Participants described AI systems as both enabling and constraining particular forms of English-speaking self-positioning.

The study contributes an empirically grounded account of identity and investment in AI-mediated English communication among Indonesian EFL learners. In particular, the findings suggest that identity, investment, legitimacy, and agency remain analytically relevant even when learners interact with non-human interlocutors. Rather than proposing a new theoretical model, the study extends existing identity and investment perspectives into an emerging technological context and highlights directions for future research on AI-mediated language learning.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that EFL educators should engage critically with learners' AI use rather than treating it as a private or inherently beneficial practice. EFL classrooms may provide opportunities for learners to critically examine the linguistic norms reflected in AI-generated English. They may also encourage learners to reflect on the identities they construct, the investments they make, and the structural limits of AI systems as cultural interlocutors. Without such critical engagement, AI-mediated language learning may inadvertently reinforce linguistic norms and assumptions that some participants associated with native-speaker authority and English-language legitimacy. As AI-mediated communication becomes increasingly embedded in language learning, understanding how learners negotiate identity, investment, and agency within these interactions will remain essential for both theory and practice.

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