



“I Didn’t Have to Go Abroad to Be Global”: Narrating Investment and Global Identity Formation in Vietnamese EMI

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the nonlinear journey of a Vietnamese student across different English-Medium Instruction (EMI) contexts. Drawing on Investment Theory, Poststructuralist Identity Theory, and Bourdieu’s concept of capital, the study uses narrative inquiry to examine identity construction through a critical case of educational withdrawal and reentry. The findings show that the participant initially invested in English as a pathway to opportunity, status, and global belonging. However, this investment weakened when institutional hierarchies, unequal language expectations, and English-only practices in a transnational joint program undermined her sense of belonging. During a liminal “silent year,” she rethought her goals, her relationship with English, and her understanding of what it means to be global. Her journey challenges linear views of EMI success by showing that becoming “global” is a negotiated process shaped by reflection, resistance, and change. Rather than treating withdrawal as a failure, the study conceptualizes reinvestment as a distinct phase of identity

	reconstruction. The findings offer a counter-story to the English-only fallacy and call for EMI pedagogies that better support students’ emotional and ideological struggles in Global South contexts. Keywords: investment theory, narrative inquiry, decolonial perspective, global identity reconstruction, Vietnam
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Introduction

“When I decided to withdraw from the EMI program, I didn’t feel like I was quitting,” Van recalled. “It was more like starting over. I just didn’t know what the new beginning would look like yet.”

This study explores the untold story behind that decision: a Vietnamese student who withdrew from an EMI Joint Program, took a gap year to reflect, and later reentered another program on her own terms. Her trajectory of disinvestment, reflection, and reinvestment offers a nuanced view of agency in Vietnam’s evolving EMI landscape.

Global rise of EMI and The Question of Identity

Over the past two decades, EMI has become a defining feature of internationalized higher education (Akıncioğlu, 2025). Universities worldwide have adopted English as the medium of instruction for nonlanguage subjects to attract international students, enhance institutional prestige, and improve graduates’ global competitiveness. However, scholars have noted that EMI is not merely a linguistic shift but also a social and ideological project that redefines knowledge, belonging, and identity (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2022). As students engage with English as a global academic language, they also navigate tensions between local selves and global subjectivities. For many, learning in English becomes a form of identity work as much as an educational endeavor (Block, 2017; Norton, 2013).

The Vietnamese Context

Vietnam’s adoption of EMI aligns with broader national goals of modernization and global integration. Since the early 2010s, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has encouraged universities to implement EMI programs, both domestic and joint programs with foreign partners, to cultivate globally competent graduates (Pham et al., 2025). These initiatives are positioned as pathways toward international recognition and employability. However, recent

research shows that the transition to EMI in Vietnam has been far from smooth (Tang et al., 2023). Students often confront challenges related to linguistic readiness, curriculum design, and classroom participation. While policy narratives celebrate EMI as a symbol of progress (Vu, 2022), students' lived realities reveal struggles with language proficiency, confidence, and belonging in English-dominated spaces (Hoang, 2025).

Despite growing attention to EMI in Vietnam, research has emphasizes implementation and teacher perspectives over students' lived experiences (Tri, 2021; Hoang, 2025). Existing survey-based studies often overlook the internal mechanisms of withdrawal and re-entry, leaving the full spectrum of student agency obscured. Theoretically, this study addresses the under-theorized mechanism of reinvestment by integrating Poststructuralist Identity Theory (Block, 2017), Investment Theory (Norton, 2013), and Bourdieu's (1991) concept of capital. Empirically, rather than seeking generalizability (Tri, 2021), we adopt a narrative inquiry approach to trace one student's critical transitions. This study aims to illuminate how the cycle of disinvestment and reinvestment reshapes the learner's agency and global self.

We propose three research questions as follows:

1. How does the participant invest or disinvest in EMI learning across different educational contexts?
2. How does the participant negotiate linguistic and cultural identities during these transitions?
3. How does the participant's reinvestment contribute to the reconstruction of her global identity?

Conceptually, this research extends Investment Theory by positioning disinvestment as a site of agency rather than a failure. Contextually, it enriches Vietnamese EMI scholarship by foregrounding the emotional labor often obscured by dominant narratives of linear progress. By offering a counterstory where withdrawal catalyzes critical self-redefinition, the study reveals that becoming "global" is a complex, negotiated process.

Literature Review

Investment, Capital, and Power

Reframing traditional motivation within social power relations, the concept of investment draws on Bourdieu's (1991) dynamics of capital (resources conferring status) and habitus (dispositions shaping self-perception). Norton (2013) adapts this sociological framework to examine how power and legitimacy fundamentally shape language learning and identity negotiation.

Norton (2013) conceptualizes investment as a learner's commitment of time, identity, and resources to language practices that yield symbolic or material

capital, framing learning as a political and ideological act rather than a neutral cognitive process. This framework was later expanded to integrate identity, capital, and ideology, positing that investment is contingent upon learners' perceived legitimacy within specific globalized contexts (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Consequently, when their identities are discounted, learners may engage in “disinvestment”—withdrawing participation as a form of resistance (Norton & Toohey, 2011)—a dynamic process that is rarely stable but rather fluctuates with access to networks, rewards, and emotional security (Wang & Jiang, 2024).

Poststructuralist Perspectives on Identity

Complementing Investment Theory, Block's (2017) Poststructuralist Identity Theory conceptualizes identity as fluid, fragmented, and discursively produced. Drawing on Foucault's theory of discourse and Bourdieu's sociology of power, Block contends that individuals are constituted through the social and linguistic practices available to them. Identity is therefore not a possession but a positioning, which means that it changes across time, place, and interaction.

In addition, poststructuralist scholars emphasize that language learning involves identity work, highlighting that learners continually negotiate who they are and who they wish to become in relation to others (Norton & McKinney, 2011). For EMI students, this means performing multiple subjectivities, such as a local citizen, an international learner, and a future professional, within competing discourses of modernity and nationalism (Akıncioğlu, 2025).

Moreover, identity construction is inseparable from emotion and power. Block (2017) later argued that globalization and transnational mobility intensify identity instability, making educational transitions fertile ground for identity reconstruction.

A Cyclical Process of Investment and Identity: A Conceptual Framework

This study integrates Poststructuralist Identity Theory (Block, 2017), Investment Theory (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013), and Bourdieu's (1991) concepts of capital and habitus. The integration of these frameworks is essential for challenging the prevailing view of EMI identity as a linear progression. While Investment Theory explains engagement through the unequal distribution of capital (Bourdieu, 1991), it currently under-theorizes the mechanism of reinvestment. We argue that reinvestment is distinct from mere persistence; it follows disinvestment (Norton & Toohey, 2011) and represents a reflexive transformation of habitus. By linking structural constraints with poststructural agency, this framework allows us to conceptualize identity reconstruction not as a failure of continuity, but as a generative, cyclical process.

Global Research on EMI and Identity

Recent EMI scholarship increasingly recognizes that content learning through English entails identity transformation. Studies from China, Japan, and Europe reveal tensions between global aspirations and local realities (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2022; Sukjairungwattana et al., 2025). Wang (2025) traced a pre-service teacher's shifting investment across EFL, EMI, and ESL settings, showing that identity evolves through transnational transitions. Rahaman (2025) analyzed a Bangladeshi learner's narrative, highlighting the role of ideology and capital in sustaining investment under constraint. These works affirm that learners in non-English contexts engage in ongoing negotiations of legitimacy and belonging.

However, most research foregrounds persistence and success, seldom examining withdrawal or re-entry (Wang, 2025). The notion of disinvestment is only beginning to surface, and longitudinal, single-case narratives remain rare. Moreover, the affective costs of participation in EMI spaces for Global-South learners—emotional labor—have received limited attention. Recent scholarship also challenges the persistent misconception that EMI must operate as an English-only space, emphasizing the pedagogical and ethical importance of multilingual practices and translanguaging (Li, 2018; Sah & Li, 2022). Li (2018) conceptualized translanguaging as a practical theory of language that captures how multilingual speakers draw on fluid linguistic and semiotic resources to make meaning. Similarly, Canagarajah's (2012) notion of translingual practice highlighted the negotiated use of language across repertoires rather than adherence to fixed language boundaries. At the same time, Sah and Li (2022) cautioned that such practices may still unfold within unequal languaging conditions, reminding researchers that multilingual flexibility does not automatically remove the symbolic privilege of English in EMI spaces. As Sukjairungwattana et al. (2025) note, understanding EMI requires moving beyond linguistic competence to explore how students feel and become.

English-Medium Instruction in Vietnam

Vietnam's higher-education reforms position EMI as both a symbol and an instrument of globalization. Since the early 2010s, universities have launched EMI joint programs with foreign partners in disciplines such as business, technology, and tourism (Tri & Moskovsky, 2019). Policymakers envision EMI as a vehicle for enhancing graduate employability and international recognition (Vu, 2022).

Empirical research, however, paints a complex picture. Investigating engineering students, Dong et al. (2022) identified significant struggles with disciplinary content and technical vocabulary. Consequently, the authors

advocate for flexible bilingual practices, emphasizing that recognizing linguistic difficulties and incorporating student feedback are essential for improving EMI effectiveness in Vietnamese higher education. Studies conducted by Vu (2022) and Dong et al. (2022) theoretically suggested that EMI participation and outcomes are shaped by unequal access to linguistic resources, institutional support, and intercultural opportunities, which supports this study's view of investment and global identity as negotiated rather than automatic.

Phan et al. (2023) examine EMI in two Vietnamese university programs through interviews with teachers and final-year students. The study reveals that EMI creates considerable challenges: teachers struggle with linguistic and pedagogical demands, while students face language barriers, culturally ingrained passivity, and mismatched learning expectations. Despite these tensions, students gradually improve their English proficiency and gain access to multicultural disciplinary knowledge, thereby enhancing their employability. The authors situate these findings within Vietnam's sociocultural and institutional context, highlighting the intersection of language policy, internationalization at home, and graduate outcomes.

Tri (2021) analyzes EMI in Vietnamese higher education using a ROADMAPPING framework, drawing on policy documents and interviews with administrators, lecturers, and students. The findings reveal that EMI is ideologically positioned as a means of generating linguistic, cultural, economic, and social capital, supporting both national development and individual employability. However, this ideological glorification of EMI also reinforces the symbolic power of English while marginalizing Vietnamese as an academic language. The author calls for a critical inquiry into the language ideologies that shape EMI policy and practice in Vietnam.

More recently, student-focused surveys have begun to document learners' attitudes, highlighting perceived benefits in terms of employability and status. Nguyen et al. (2023) explore the motivation of Vietnamese university students enrolled in EMI programs through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Using open-ended survey data from 339 participants, the study reveals that students' motivation is primarily driven by intrinsic factors, rooted in their psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and social connection. However, the findings also show that academic stressors and workload pressures can weaken motivation over time despite students' strong autonomous orientation. The authors highlight the importance of creating supportive EMI learning environments that sustain intrinsic motivation and address emotional well-being alongside linguistic and academic goals.

Vu et al. (2025) examine how Vietnamese university students in EMI programs perceive the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Drawing on survey data from 315 participants, the study identifies varied perceptions of ICC outcomes, particularly in intercultural attitudes, knowledge,

and interaction skills, which are shaped by students' cultural, educational, and social backgrounds. Findings indicate that EMI supports ICC development unevenly, suggesting the need for stronger integration of intercultural learning objectives within EMI curricula. The authors recommend that educational policies in Vietnam incorporate ICC as a core component of EMI to enhance students' readiness for global engagement.

Research Gaps and Study Justification

However, these quantitative studies provide limited insight into how students narrate their personal transformations. Little is known about how a learner moves through multiple EMI programs, capturing the meanings attached to departure and return. Moreover, the affective dimension, including how students process frustration, shame, or empowerment, remains largely invisible. There is also limited understanding of how students negotiate the wider policy discourses and institutional expectations surrounding EMI, particularly in contexts where English is closely tied to internationalization, employability, and academic legitimacy (Akıncioğlu, 2025).

Given Vietnam's rapid expansion of EMI programs and the heterogeneity of its provision, there is an urgent need for qualitative, student-centered research. Such work can reveal the micropolitics of identity (re)negotiation within the broader national push for internationalization. It can also illuminate how students make sense of EMI not only as a learning environment, but as a policy-driven and socially valued project that shapes who they can become within and beyond the classroom.

Methodology

Research Design

Grounded in a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, this study perceives identity as fluid and negotiated through language, culture, and context, which is an orientation aligning with Poststructuralist Identity Theory (Block, 2017) and Investment Theory (Norton, 2013), both emphasizing the interplay of power, ideology, and identity in language learning. Guided by this worldview, the study employed a narrative inquiry design, which treats story as both phenomenon and method (Barkhuizen, 2022), enabling an in-depth understanding of lived experience across temporal, social, and situational dimensions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) to explore how a Vietnamese student constructs and reconstructs her global identities across shifting educational trajectories. Rather than seeking to generalize to a population, this design was chosen to unearth the complex, internal mechanisms of identity negotiation that

remain obscured in large-scale studies. Through co-constructed storytelling, the researchers sought to interpret how global identities are negotiated within EMI contexts.

The Research Context

The Vietnamese higher education context has witnessed a steady increase in EMI adoption over the past decade, reflecting broader policy aspirations for global integration (Tri, 2021). The study was situated within the heterogeneous landscape of a public university in Ho Chi Minh City that offers both Vietnamese-medium and EMI programs. To address the participant's multi-institutional trajectory, the research context encompasses two distinct settings.

First, the “EMI Joint Program” (Phase 2) operated through a partnership with a foreign university. Situated within EMI's rapidly expanding landscape in Vietnam, this program utilized strict English-only policies, imported curricula, foreign accreditation systems, and IELTS-based entry requirements.

Second, the “Domestic EMI Program” (Phase 3) was a locally developed track at a different public university. It attracted students who aspire to global exposure without the financial or logistical challenges of studying abroad. Unlike the Joint Program, this setting featured predominantly Vietnamese faculty and a more flexible linguistic environment. This dual context reflects broader policy aspirations for global integration while highlighting the structural differences students navigate.

Participant and Context

The participant, pseudonymously referred to as Van, was a 23-year-old Vietnamese female student enrolled at a metropolitan university in Ho Chi Minh City. Van was selected as a critical case rather than a representative one. While she shared demographic characteristics with many peers, she was purposely sampled to illuminate the specific phenomenon of multiple transitions across educational and linguistic contexts within EMI programs. The purpose of selecting this single case was not to claim statistical representativeness, but to generate an in-depth and context-sensitive understanding of how disinvestment and reinvestment were lived, interpreted, and narrated across shifting EMI settings. In this sense, Van's trajectory was considered analytically significant because it brought together withdrawal, reflection, and reentry within one educational journey, thereby offering a particularly rich case for examining identity reconstruction in context.

Van's educational trajectory comprised three distinct phases. Phase 1 involved studying finance in a Vietnamese-medium undergraduate program at a local public university (University A). Phase 2 marked her participation in a

transnational EMI Joint Program in International Business offered through a Vietnam–Australia collaboration (also at University A). After completing Phase 1 of the joint program, she took a one-year break before entering Phase 3, a domestic EMI program in International Business at another Vietnamese university (University B). This trajectory reflects complex shifts across disciplines, languages of instruction, institutional settings, and, most importantly, her transformative agency. Van’s decision to withdraw from the joint program, take a gap year, and later reinvest in a new EMI program presents a unique opportunity to explore disinvestment and reinvestment as lived experiences within her educational journey.

Data Collection

We adopted narrative interviews as the primary method of data collection, as this approach offers a powerful means of documenting lived experiences and identity negotiation through story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Narrative inquiry enables participants to reconstruct and make sense of their experiences over time, providing insight into the social and emotional dimensions of learning within EMI contexts. This method was particularly appropriate for exploring the participant’s educational transitions and her shifting sense of self across programs.

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. The participant provided written informed consent, acknowledging her right to withdraw and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Data were collected over three months (June–September 2024) through three rounds of semi-structured narrative interviews and research field notes. The study aimed to elicit an in-depth retrospective narrative of the participant’s educational trajectory. Therefore, this three-month period was considered appropriate because it allowed sufficient time to build rapport, conduct multiple rounds of interviews, and trace the participant’s reflections across different stages of meaning-making while remaining feasible within the scope of a single-case narrative inquiry. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure authenticity and comfort of expression. Each interview lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes and was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English. The participant verified translations to ensure accuracy and preservation of intended meanings.

The first interview focused on the participant’s reasons for leaving the joint program, her sense of disconnection, and reflections during her gap year. The second interview explored her preparation for re-entry, including her efforts to rebuild confidence and prepare for university entrance examinations. The third interview investigated her reintegration into a new EMI program, and her renewed motivation and redefined academic aspirations.

In addition to interview data, we kept reflexive field notes immediately after each encounter to record contextual observations, non-verbal cues, and emerging analytic insights. To ensure credibility and ethical rigor, several validation strategies were employed. Prolonged engagement through multiple interviews facilitated rapport and deep contextual understanding. In addition, triangulation across interviews and field notes strengthened interpretive consistency. Subsequently, member checking allowed the participant to review excerpts and confirm interpretations. We used thick description to situate her stories within broader institutional and cultural contexts, enhancing transferability. Finally, an audit trail documented analytic and procedural decisions, ensuring transparency and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative and recursive process, drawing on Clandinin and Connelly's (2004) narrative inquiry framework and Saldaña and Omasta's (2016) coding strategies. In the first cycle, descriptive and value codes were applied to capture recurring topics (e.g., English prestige, belonging, pressure, freedom), and the participant's expressed beliefs and emotions. The second cycle involved pattern and axial coding to identify relationships among investment, disinvestment, and identity shifts.

Coded data were then mapped chronologically to visualize transitions across three educational phases, after which narrative vignettes were composed to maintain story coherence while embedding interpretive commentary.

The analysis moved fluidly between micro-narratives (specific events or decisions) and macroreadings (sociocultural and institutional contexts). Moreover, the analytic process emphasized co-construction, as meaning emerged through dialogue between the participant's reflections and the researchers' interpretations.

Member checking went beyond transcript verification; Van reviewed our interpretive vignettes to confirm theoretical resonance. For instance, she clarified that her gap year was not a "failure"—a preliminary theme—but a "necessary pause," prompting a revision of the analytic category.

Three analytic lenses guided interpretation: Investment lens, to explore symbolic and material resources sought or resisted; Identity lens, to trace positionings as student, daughter, and global citizen; Emotional lens, to reveal affective forces underlying withdrawal and reinvestment.

Researcher Reflectivity

Reflexivity was integral to this study, acknowledging that researchers' experiences and positionalities influence interpretation. The two researchers

brought complementary perspectives to the process. The first author, a lecturer and doctoral researcher, occupied a dual insider–outsider position, sharing a linguistic and cultural background with the participant while analyzing her experience through academic and theoretical lenses. The second author, based in a different educational context, offered an etic perspective that provided analytical distance and enhanced objectivity. A reflexive journal was maintained to record assumptions, emotional reactions, and evolving interpretations. At the same time, ongoing dialogue among the researchers ensured that meaning was co-constructed rather than extracted, thereby enhancing the study’s trustworthiness and rigor.

Findings: Van – “Standing Like a Pine Tree”

Before the Leap – Dreaming Globally

When Van first spoke of her decision to transfer into the EMI Joint Program, her tone carried both excitement and conviction. *“When my family agreed to let me transfer, I was really happy. You know, it was like, ‘wow, I finally achieved what I wanted.’”*

Having studied for two semesters in a regular Vietnamese-medium economics program, Van viewed the English-taught International Business program as a portal to the world. She imagined it as both a symbolic and literal step toward mobility: *“I wanted to study abroad because I was still young and wanted to broaden my horizons and gain many perspectives.”*

English, for her, was not just a subject but a bridge to autonomy. She believed that studying in English would position her closer to the imagined global community. Even the name of her central, “International Business,” carried promise: *“Since it had the word ‘international,’ I thought that wherever I went, I could find a suitable job.”*

This early phase captures Van’s initial investment (Norton, 2013), which is an alignment of identity, aspiration, and linguistic capital. Her imagined future self—independent, adaptive, globally connected, and motivated—inspired her to cross institutional boundaries. However, as she later revealed, her investment was symbolic more than disciplinary; she sought global experience, not a specialized career. Such motivation exemplifies investment in symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). It was the pursuit of prestige, opportunity, and recognition promised by English.

Cracks in the Mirror – Disinvestment and Resistance

The first semester in the EMI Joint Program exposed Van to the hidden hierarchies of EMI. While she entered with confidence, she quickly encountered

linguistic inequalities: *“I felt a bit behind... the others already had IELTS for their entrance exams, while I had not learned anything about it.”*

Her sense of belonging wavered. The English she once associated with empowerment now became a marker of comparison and insecurity. However, Van’s self-awareness allowed her to question the ideology underlying EMI itself: *“To me, English was simply a tool to access knowledge. The same knowledge could be taught in Vietnamese and still be understood.”*

Her statement resists the assumption that English automatically confers globality or intellectual superiority. The EMI environment, designed to produce “global citizens,” did not always live up to its promise. *“I didn’t see any extracurricular activities that helped students prepare to integrate abroad. The program also lacked soft-skill training.”*

This realization marks Van’s disinvestment. It was not from learning itself but from the ideology of English as global salvation. Her withdrawal was emotional, not academic: she continued to perform well but began to detach from the narrative of global success. In Darvin and Norton’s (2015) terms, Van’s symbolic resources (English proficiency, international aspiration) were not reciprocated with institutional recognition, her investment field fractured. However, rather than surrender, she critically redefined English as a means rather than an end.

The Silent Year – Reflection and Repositioning

Completion of Phase 1 should have marked progress toward Australia. Instead, Van faced abrupt disconnection: *“There were family problems, so I couldn’t study abroad. I felt regret rather than happiness.”*

This turning point suspended her academic and emotional trajectory. She described the aftermath as *“starting from zero”*: *“I thought I had to retake the entrance exam, apply again, and start my student life all over from zero at the age of 21.”*

In the regular higher education program in Vietnam, students graduate at the age of 21, then embark on their stages of employability. However, things went wrong in Van’s case. She needed to take a year off to review and prepare for the university entrance exam. In narrative inquiry terms, this “silent year” was a liminal space. It was an interval of in-betweenness where identity was unsettled but profoundly generative. Van shared that this period was emotionally painful. She cried frequently and gradually withdrew from social interaction, avoiding her friends because she felt that they were moving forward while she had been left behind. At the same time, this withdrawal created space for inward reflection. She began writing in her diary, using it as a private place to process disappointment, uncertainty, and self-doubt. Reflecting on her experience, Van employed a striking metaphor: *“A pine tree can grow in many places; it is adaptable and can survive in different environments,”* she described. *“I think I was a pine tree, actually.”*

She smiled. A key turning point came through her father's advice to remain strong and keep going despite the disruption. His words did not erase her sense of loss, but they helped her slowly reframe the year not simply as a setback, but as a period of endurance and inner rebuilding.

The pine tree symbolizes endurance and solitude, a self-image rooted in quiet resilience. Through this image, Van narrated agency within vulnerability, transforming disinvestment into self-preservation (Block, 2017). Her withdrawal from the EMI Joint Program became an act of critical reflection rather than a failure. It was a reorientation toward self-defined goals.

The silent year also reveals a shift from external validation to internal grounding. During this period, Van no longer followed the imagined timeline of transferring abroad, and instead spent time preparing for the university entrance examination while reflecting on her earlier expectations of EMI and overseas study. The loss of her imagined overseas trajectory freed her to question the social narratives surrounding EMI. As she compared her past aspirations with her present circumstances, she gradually came to see that studying abroad was not the only path to growth or success. Eventually, she began to realize that "studying abroad" was not a singular measure of worth but a choice situated within context.

Reinvestment – Redefining Global Self

When Van decided to reenter higher education, she chose a domestic EMI program in International Business. It was her way of reinvesting, but in a different way. *"When I saw my result, I was very happy, but I also felt I deserved it. I'd worked hard for over ten months."*

Unlike her earlier symbolic investment, this reinvestment was practical and grounded. Studying in Vietnam now holds meaning beyond constraint. It represented continuity and agency: *"Studying in Vietnam, I don't face culture shock, and it's easier to make friends... I don't see any barrier to becoming a global citizen, even while studying in Vietnam."*

Her relationship with English also evolved. Instead of anxiety, she expressed empowerment through expression: *"When I speak English, I feel more certain. It is like a better version of myself."*

Through this shift, Van enacted reinvestment, a renewed engagement with English not as external capital but as an internal voice. The transition echoes Canagarajah's (2012) notion of translingual practice, in which language becomes a fluid resource for meaning-making rather than a marker of hierarchy.

In the new EMI environment, Van's confidence stemmed from relational belonging rather than imagined prestige. She reinterpreted global identity as adaptive competence rather than spatial mobility.

“When I first entered the new EMI program, I no longer thought that studying in English made me more ‘international’ or superior, like I used to believe in the joint program. Instead, I started to value how well I could connect with my teachers, classmates, even international partners, by being open, respectful, and adaptable.”

Van shared that she realized that being ‘global’ did not mean leaving behind who she was as a Vietnamese person. It meant being confident enough to bring her culture into conversations. She expressed her pride when working on a group project under the guidance of a foreign lecturer’s instruction. In the project, she suggested that her project-mates discuss Vietnamese ethical values in doing business. As a result, her group project received a high evaluation. She said:

“I felt that I didn’t have to go abroad to be global. I could live that identity right here, through how I learn and collaborate with others,” She continued. “A Vietnamese person abroad can still keep Vietnamese identity, patriotism, and tolerance.”

This hybrid positioning, both global and local, reflects what Block (2017) terms post-national identity: flexible, relational, and emotionally negotiated.

Seeing Through the Pine Needles – Critical Global Citizenship

Van’s understanding of global citizenship underwent a visible transformation. Initially, she defined it in utilitarian terms: “*A global citizen is someone who can live anywhere without worrying about income or language.*”

Later, she reframed it ethically: “*A global citizen is someone who can adapt, know how to seize opportunities, and do what is right without harming society.*”

Her words mirror the shift from soft to critical global citizenship education from mobility and privilege toward responsibility and moral awareness. This evolution also reveals an internalization of socio-emotional dimensions of GCE (UNESCO, 2015), empathy, self-reflection, and ethical action.

Van’s new stance: “*Kiến thức có thể tìm thấy ở bất cứ đâu*” (*Knowledge can be found anywhere*) represents intellectual humility and decolonial insight. She no longer measures globality through Western validation. Instead, she embraces what she calls quiet strength: growth from within, symbolized once again by the pine tree —firm, adaptable, and self-sustaining.

Her narrative reflects what we call relational global identity: a situated consciousness that values interconnectedness without erasing local belonging. She articulates cosmopolitanism not through travel but through perspective.

“Each country has its own strengths; a global citizen is someone who knows how to make use of them.”

This simple yet profound statement encapsulates her maturity. It transforms global citizenship from an abstract label into lived adaptability. In this sense, her story reflects Bhabha’s (1996) notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism, in which openness to the world remains rooted in local belonging rather than detached from it. It is a grounded cosmopolitanism anchored in context.

Discussion

Investment and Disinvestment Across EMI Contexts

Van’s experience reveals that investment in EMI is not linear but cyclical, fluctuating with aspiration, ideology, and emotion. Her initial decision to enter the EMI Joint Program illustrates symbolic investment (Norton, 2013). This is a commitment shaped by the imagined value of English as linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Like many Vietnamese students seeking mobility and prestige (Phan et al., 2023; Tri, 2021), she viewed EMI as a pathway to global identity, echoing positive observations in neighboring EMI contexts, such as Thailand (Laohavoravudhikul & Saengboon, 2025). This observation also echoes the findings of Nguyen et al. (2023), who observed that Vietnamese EMI learners’ intrinsic motivation is often intertwined with imagined global futures and social validation.

However, once enrolled, Van confronted structural linguistic hierarchies and specific manifestations of institutional inequalities that limited her access to recognition. Specifically, the valorization of “native-like” accents and the marginalization of local knowledge created a form of monolingual privilege in which legitimacy was tied to IELTS scores rather than to intellectual contribution. Her peers’ higher IELTS scores served as markers of legitimacy, revealing how EMI reproduces unequal distributions of capital (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Such hidden hierarchies parallel those reported by Phan et al. (2023) and Doiz and Lasagabaster (2022) in which structural and linguistic barriers constrained students’ symbolic resources. This mismatch between symbolic aspiration and institutional validation led to disinvestment—not from learning itself, but from the ideology that positioned English as the sole path to global belonging. Unlike recent findings on minority students’ investment (Chen & Manosuthikit, 2025), which reveal that minority students invested in English for their future development, her reflection, “English is simply a tool to access knowledge,” signaled resistance to the dominance of English and a redefinition of value.

Van’s withdrawal exemplifies critical disinvestment (Norton & Toohey, 2011), through which learners reclaim agency by rejecting inequitable narratives.

Similar to Wang and Jiang's (2025) observation that EMI learners' motivation fluctuates under stress and inequity, Van's case demonstrates how emotional resistance can also function as a reflexive critique.

This interpretation extends Investment Theory by reframing disinvestment as part of a cyclical process of meaning-making rather than a rupture. Emotional disengagement, in this sense, becomes a reflective pause that enables future reinvestment. This concept is especially relevant in Global South EMI systems, where power and ideology are deeply intertwined. Unlike Tri's (2021) policy-level analysis that treats EMI as a linear path toward global competitiveness, Van's story foregrounds the micro-level affective and ideological tensions that accompany participation.

Pedagogically, EMI programs should recognize disinvestment as an opportunity for reflection rather than a failure, providing dialogic spaces where students can critique and reconstruct their motivations. Future research should examine how such cycles of participation and withdrawal function across diverse contexts and clarify how learners transform disinvestment into critical agency within the broader ecology of EMI learning.

Negotiating Linguistic and Cultural Identities During Transitions

Van's "silent year" illustrates how identity negotiation unfolds through reflection and repositioning. Her withdrawal from the EMI Joint Program created a liminal space for reevaluating her relationship with English and success. Through the metaphor of a pine tree—resilient, adaptable, and rooted—Van articulated a sense of endurance that resonates with Block's (2017) concept of identity as fluid and emotionally negotiated.

Crucially, this phase marks a transformation of habitus. Her dispositions toward English and global education shifted from seeking external validation to cultivating internal grounding. This transitional stage mirrors findings from Rahaman (2025), who showed that learners in non-Anglophone contexts often transform linguistic frustration into critical reflection, reframing what success means.

Upon reentering a domestic EMI program, Van's linguistic identity evolved from symbolic aspiration to authentic expression. English became a means of self-representation rather than a maker of prestige, aligning with Canagarajah's (2012) idea of translingual practice. By using English to communicate Vietnamese ethical values in her group project, she enacted a hybrid positioning that bridged local and global discourses. Her statement, "I didn't have to go abroad to be global," captures the emergence of what Block (2017) describes as a postnational identity, where global awareness coexists with national pride. This finding complements Akıncioğlu's (2025) and

Sukjairungwattana et al.'s (2025) accounts of hybrid identity formation in EMI, but illuminates the emotional and reflective labor that underpins such hybridity.

This negotiation extends the current EMI scholarship by illustrating that linguistic and cultural identities are not oppositional but intertwined. Van's identity work connects structure and agency: while institutional hierarchies shaped her early insecurities, her reflective agency redefined her sense of belonging on her own terms. In contrast to Phan et al. (2023), who noted student passivity in Vietnamese EMI classrooms, Van's narrative shows how agency can re-emerge through introspection and linguistic re-ownership. Theoretically, her story strengthens the link between Bourdieu's habitus and poststructural identity, showing that dispositions are not fixed but continually reconstructed through discourse.

Pedagogically, EMI programs should support such reflective repositioning by valuing bilingual and bicultural expression rather than privileging monolingual norms. This approach aligns with Li's (2018) view of translanguaging as fluid meaning-making and Sah and Li's (2022) argument that multilingual practices in EMI should be supported in ways that reduce unequal language rather than merely tolerate it. Future research could examine how translanguaging and identity negotiation interact across time, particularly in local EMI settings where students develop global competence without transnational mobility.

Reinvestment and the Reconstruction of Global Identity

This study conceptually distinguishes reinvestment from mere persistence. Van's reinvestment phase marks her transition from external aspiration to reflexive agency. Unlike persistence, which implies continuing on a path despite obstacles (maintaining the same habitus), Van's return was predicated on a fundamental shift in her terms of engagement. Returning to a domestic EMI program, she re-engaged not to pursue status but to redefine what it meant to be "global."

Her new orientation reflects a shift toward critical GCE, grounded in adaptability, ethics, and empathy. Her statement regarding the definition of "a global citizen" illustrates the socio-emotional dimension of GCE (UNESCO, 2015), where learning becomes moral and relational. This evolution resonates with Wang's (2025) and Rahaman's (2025) findings that learners' sense of global identity matures through reflection rather than through physical mobility.

Through this reinvestment, Van developed what this study term's relational global identity: a grounded cosmopolitanism that values both Vietnamese heritage and intercultural openness. This interpretation resonates with Bhabha's (1996) notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism, which suggests that global openness can emerge from local attachments rather than from detachment

from one's own culture. This also resonates with Canagarajah's (2012) and Block's (2017) discussions of postnational belonging and identities shaped less by geography than by relational engagement.

Van's realization that "*knowledge can be found anywhere*" reflects a non-essentialist positioning, rejecting Western-centered measures of success and redefining global identity through local agency. Unlike the instrumental focus seen in Vu et al. (2025) and Nguyen et al. (2023), Van's stance highlights ethical and emotional maturity as central to EMI participation.

Theoretically, this narrative conceptualizes reinvestment as a distinct stage in the identity cycle, where learners re-engage after critical reflection with renewed purpose. Emotionally, reinvestment functions as a process of healing and empowerment that transforms symbolic loss into ethical awareness. This adds an essential GCE dimension absent from previous EMI identity studies in Vietnam.

While we do not claim that Van's experience represents all Vietnamese students, her story as a revelatory case challenges EMI success narratives that equate internationalization with physical mobility. It demonstrates that critical cosmopolitanism can be cultivated within local contexts.

Pedagogically, EMI programs can integrate reflective and intercultural components that help students link global competence with ethical consciousness. Policies should encourage locally rooted forms of global citizenship that validate non-Western pathways to global participation. Future research may explore reinvestment longitudinally, tracing how students' ethical and affective development evolves through cycles of withdrawal and return across more cases, disciplines, and diverse EMI systems.

Conclusion and Implications

This study explored how one Vietnamese student, Van, navigated cycles of investment, disinvestment, and reinvestment across different EMI programs. Anchored in Poststructuralist Identity Theory (Block, 2017), Investment Theory (Norton, 2013), and Bourdieu's (1991) concepts of capital and habitus, the research examined how language learning, identity, and ideology intersect in a Global South context. By tracing Van's transitions across institutional and emotional boundaries, the study illuminates how becoming "global" is not a linear progression toward proficiency or prestige but a dynamic, reflective process of meaning-making.

The findings reveal that Van's relationship with English and with herself evolved through three overlapping phases. Her initial investment was aspirational, driven by imagined mobility and the symbolic value of English as capital. Disinvestment emerged when institutional hierarchies and monolingual privilege undermined that imagined promise. However, this withdrawal was not

disengagement. It was a form of critical resistance that enabled reflection. Through reinvestment, Van redefined global identity as ethical adaptability rather than geographic movement. Rather than claiming generalizability, her story serves as a counter-story that challenges linear EMI narratives, illuminating that learners often construct global selves through emotional negotiation and ideological critique.

Theoretically, this study conceptualizes reinvestment as a distinct stage in the identity cycle. Distinguished from mere persistence, reinvestment functions as a generative pause, allowing learners to transform their habitus and reorient their sense of agency. By connecting Bourdieu's sociological lens with Block's poststructural view of identity, the study highlights the dialogic relationship between structure and agency: learners navigate the constraints of capital and ideology through reflective positioning. This integration contributes to a more nuanced understanding of identity work in EMI—one that accounts for emotion, interruption, and ethical growth as part of the learning process.

Pedagogically, the findings call for a humanized approach to EMI that recognizes affect and reflection as essential to learning. Educators and administrators should treat disinvestment not as a failure but as an opportunity for dialogue, enabling students to critique dominant ideologies and reconstruct their motivations. EMI curricula should incorporate critical cosmopolitan components, creating spaces in which learners can articulate their bilingual identities, express cultural pride, and connect language learning to social responsibility.

While limited to a single critical case, this study offers directions for future research on the emotional and ideological dynamics of EMI participation. Cross-case and longitudinal inquiries could explore how reinvestment unfolds among students from diverse sociolinguistic backgrounds, and how institutional structures might support it. Comparative studies across contexts in the Global South may also reveal how local ideologies of English intersect with global aspirations to shape learners' agency.

Ultimately, Van's story reminds us that identity formation in EMI is a deeply personal act of resilience. Like the pine tree she described—rooted yet flexible—her journey embodies the quiet strength of learners who redefine global citizenship from within. In this redefinition lies the essence of language, identity, and education: the ongoing human effort to belong, reflect, and grow across borders both visible and imagined.

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